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For

Geo Eliot's Romola

STAFF MEMORANDUM

~~Brundage~~
Nov 3-1930
from Wiles

From

Date

In these book reviews given each Monday by the Minneapolis Public Library, it is the avowed purpose of the reviewer to emphasize the finest books in our language which are worth reading and re-reading again and again. ~~We have already reviewed, Charles~~
~~Reade's Christy and the Heath,~~
~~Hackney's Vanity Fair, De Morgan's~~
~~Joseph Masson and Howell, Rise of~~
~~Silas Lapham.~~ Today we review a great work by a woman novelist. Romola by George Eliot.

George Eliot is the pen name of England's most famous woman novelist. She wrote ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ England about seventy years ago. She ~~was~~ ^{in the time} a contemporary of Queen Victoria.

(Reply over)

To

STAFF MEMORANDUM

From

Date

Dec. 12
Champlin

George Eliot is the pen name of England's most famous woman novelist. She wrote about seventy years ago in the time of Queen Victoria, in an age that produced a whole galaxy of great names. Thackeray and Dickens had just passed away and in the years just following George Eliot was universally accepted as the leading novelist. The times were very different from our own; the horse had no rival on the streets, women wore trailing skirts and crinoline. They were not admitted to the Universities; the day of Women Suffrage Societies had not dawned. Nevertheless, George Eliot was an independent thinker, and was a wonderful scholar of the classic languages as well as the modern languages. Probably no other novel writer had a tithe of her scientific knowledge. She was an accomplished musician and a brilliant talker. She had all the depth of intellect and the breadth of knowledge that the finest college course could have given. She had also an understanding of human beings,-- a rare intuition and a deep sympathy. A woman of wide culture, and yet a sensitive feminine temperament.

She began her literary career as assistant-editor of the Westminster Review and became intimately acquainted with

Spencer, Carlyle, Newman, and many others. She had the mind of a philosopher, and that together with her deep interest in religious matters is quite apparent in all of her work, even her novels. From her earliest literary work *on the Westminster Review* no one would have dreamed that she would ever write fiction.

~~But~~ Her husband encouraged her to try, but she was very distrustful of her ability. Her first story was written under a pen name, *because of her modesty* and she left her husband to negotiate with her publishers.

Her first attempt was "Amos Barton," which her husband felt was an unusual piece of work, and some critics believe that it was a piece of work which in all her after life she never surpassed. Charles Dickens, who did not dream of the authorship, wrote to her publisher: "The exquisite humor and pathos of these stories I have never seen the like of and they have impressed me in a manner that I cannot describe."

George Eliot had been brought up in the countryside, knowing well the simple country folk. Her first books concerned her own early experiences around her home, and having begun to write fiction, her first outpouring in the brief space of four years was a marvellous group of books.

Before we go on with Romola let us mention this series of novels. Adam Bede was the first long novel and when it came out its local earmarks were so plain that everybody asked, "Who wrote it." To protect herself and her publisher, George Eliot had to reveal her identity.

Her next work, ~~was~~ Mill on the Floss, will go down to posterity as a woman's autobiography. It is George Eliot's own spiritual life. Swinburne says of it, "Few or none would refuse to accept The Mill on the Floss as on the whole, at once the highest, the purest and the fullest example of her magnificent and matchless powers, for matchless altogether they undoubtedly are in their own wide and faithful field of work.

The next work was Silas Marner and it is received such criticisms as this from Henry James, "It is more nearly a masterpiece than any of her works." Mrs. Oliphant calls it, "Her most finished work." Oscar Browning says, "Men of letters, I believe, give the palm to Silas Marner; they are attracted by the exquisite workmanship of the story."

These novels, a wealth of fine workmanship turned out in a brief period, are considered George Eliot's most valuable contribution to English Literature and to English Social History. It established her fame to such

an extent that her publishers offered her £7,000 or \$35,000 for her next work, whatever that should be, and Romola was that next work.

In Romola she first went astray from her English background. All of her other books had come alive and breathing out of her life experiences. Romola is her only *novel, born out of much historical* historical research. In that sense, one critic says that it is manufactured rather than born. But if the author has departed from her previous style, she wins as great praise for this new venture. Robert Chambers says, "Romola is a highly finished eloquent artistic work, and by a select class is considered the greatest intellectual effort of the author.

Cloister and the Hearth by Charles Reade is generally considered the best historical romance in the English language, but Romola is its rival. Bayard Taylor says that Romola is one of the finest historical novels in our language while Oscar Browning gives it an unrivalled place. His opinion is worth quoting: "Romola is perhaps the best historical novel ever written. Read it when you have never been to Florence, it will make you long to go there; read it when you have learnt to love Florence, it will make you love Florence more. Read it when you have studied the Renaissance which George Eliot

studied so deeply and you will feel its beauties as those feel the beauties of a symphony of Beethoven who know the score by heart."

George Eliot had visited Italy as a traveller and loved it. She wrote, "Oh the beautiful men and women and children here; as one drives along the streets sometimes one sees a Modanna and child at every third or fourth window." ^{*all through the story of Romola*} One can feel her love for Italy and Florence in particular. At Florence the artistic and historical interest stimulated her to an ambitious project,-- to write an historical novel of another country and age. She went back and wrote, Silas Marner which was already planned, Later she returned to Florence where she industriously foraged around old streets, in old libraries and old books, and old historic spots. Then home again to work. So hard did she work and so seriously that she herself said that she began Romola as a young woman and ended it an old woman, so much had it ploughed into her physical strength. She had many despairing moments while writing it, so seriously did she take the study which she felt was necessary for it. Mr. Cross in his life of George Eliot gives a list a page long of the books which she read and annotated, consisting of histories by Italian writers and Latin authors as well as English historical authors. It is

amazing to think of the manner in which George Eliot equipped herself to write Romola. It was as if she was about to write a complete Florentine History. That is why in reading Romola you feel the atmosphere of the very time and place.

But Romola is something more than an historical novel; it is a religious novel. This is more or less true of all of her novels. Her conception of life gives an ethical value to all of her writings, and there is not a single character of George Eliot's that does not stand for some ethical idea. They could never take so deep a hold on one, nor have impressed us so powerfully if they had not been great ideas incarnated in flesh and blood. So in Romola, George Eliot is the great seeker after truth especially in the character of Romola, as well as the true narrator of historical events.

Romola is the book of all her works which George Eliot herself loved most and gave the most out of herself in the writing. She made Savonarola, the great Dominican preacher live before us in all his personal magnetism and power. She created two clear-cut opposite characters, Romola, the stately, upright, proud patrician Florentine maiden, and Tito Melema, the Greek, charming, brilliant, false. Howells says, "I read it again and again with the sense

of moral enlargement. Tito Melema was not only a lesson; he was a revelation. His life in which so much that was good was mixed with so much that was bad made one feel how near the best and the worst were to each other, and how they sometimes touched without absolute division."

The scene of this tale is laid in Florence in the 15th century, a notable time in the history of Florence. Michael Angelo, Piero d' Cosimo, and Fra Bartolommeo were painting. Macchievelli was a young statesman. Lorenzo de Medici, had just died; two parties had spring into activity, those following Savonarola, the priest, and the other, the Medicians.

On the scene early one morning a Florentine merchant found a young Greek lying asleep in a portico with bedraggled clothing, but a rich ring on his finger. This merchant afterwards described the boy with his rich young beauty, his dark soft, velvety eyes, and the radiance of a sunny morning as needing only a myrtle wreath to make him a gifted Apollo. Later we learn of ^{Tito's} keen intelligence, of his gift of humor and mirth, and the personal charm that won this radiant youth friends in every group from the peasant folk, the painters' studio, the scholars' library, and the politician's office-- a winsome,

Waking him, he takes him to the market where Tito buys his breakfast of milk from little Tessa with kisses and from there takes him to Nello the barber who through the book is Tito's firm and admiring champion.

fascinating, gentle, scholarly young Greek, whom any one might love. *and whom nearly everybody did love.*

Before a shipwreck had tossed him on
His early life, as it is told later, found him an *Italian orphan* in the possession of a traveling minstrel who made his living from the boy's sweet voice and treated him cruelly. One day, Baldassare Calvo, a Greek scholar of some wealth, rescued him and brought the little boy, Tito, to his home and poured out all his love and care upon him and taught him all the riches of his own accumulated knowledge, and the boy blossoms into the graceful, beautiful youth. But because his pride is touched by the memory of his early minstrel life, he begs his father to sell his goods, leave his home and all his family traditions, the city in which he was born, and go to Italy. And so his father, who loved him so dearly, turned all that he owned into gold and gems, exacting only one promise, that when death came, Tito would bring him back for burial to the land of his fathers. But scarcely had they set sail when disaster overtook the ship, and in the shipwreck father and son were separated. So here was Tito, rescued and brought to Florence, with a share of the gems in his possession, Baldassare's gems, while the whereabouts of the father is unknown.

The easy smiling face and liquid voice find friends at once. In Nello's barber shop he meets notable people; Nello, the genial barber, interests himself and promises to introduce him to Bardo de Bardi, the blind scholar. All the laws of gratitude would have impelled Tito to seek at once for his father. Tito, seeing fortune smiling, raises money temporarily on his father's ring, and begins negotiations to sell his father's gems on this very first morning of landing. His swift hope of advancement tempts him to postpone his immediate search for his benefactor father, and to hide the circumstances and doubtless, he told himself, Baldassare was even now dead.

Within the first week, through the efforts of Nello, he has had an opportunity to teach Greek to the sons of a rich family, an invitation to become Secretary in the Scala palace, and has been engaged to help the blind scholar Bardo, the father of Romola. No one but George Eliot, the scholar, could have drawn so sympathetically the picture of Bardo in his library. Bardo belonged to an ancient and proud family; the remnant of his family fortune has been spent in collecting a valuable library which he desires above all things to be kept intact for Florence after his death, as the Bardi library.

His only son whom he had fondly hoped would be his aid, has left him to become a monk and he has bitterly ordered that his name be never mentioned. He has trained his beautiful daughter to be eyes and hands to him. *Read page 47*

Into this scene Tito is introduced and employed. Patiently and kindly he works with the golden haired Romola, and wins the esteem of Bardo for his scholarly knowledge. He has not mentioned his father ^{to them} and he is trying to put from him a sense of his obligation to him. He tells himself that when he can sell the gems, he will go in search of his father. ^{when} But the gems are sold, and having kept his secret thus far, he invests the proceeds for himself. He begins even to think that old Baldassare might be a weight and hindrance. He is making friends and winning position; why should he drop it and search for his father. Now Tito was kind by nature; he wasn't a bad man; he appreciated what was fine and noble. He did not intend deliberately to do an evil deed. He wanted everybody about him to be happy. He was just evading an unpleasant task which meant self sacrifice, ^{and so took the first} *Steps of his gradual deterioration*

Tito was gay and bright and sunny, and coming into Romola's quiet life, he brought youth and love and adoration. His handsome face and radiant spirit win the

heart of this proud shy girl, and a calm, serene happiness fills her days. They become betrothed with Bardo's consent for he feels that he has acquired a scholarly and sympathetic son. Harder yet, it now becomes to use Baldassare's gems to search for him. He keeps ^{on} postponing it.

But in the brightest moment ^{of his love} when Tito ^{finally} has put away all thought of duty toward his father he meets a monk who gives him a packet addressed to "Tito Melema, Age 23, with a dark beautiful face, long dark curls, the brightest smile and a large onyx ring on his right forefinger." Inside the message said, "I am sold for a slave; they are going to take me to Antioch; the gems alone will ransom me." Here was a chance for Tito again. He had said to himself, "If I were sure that Baldassarre were alive and I could free him, I would go at once," but now he knew that his father lived and again his selfishness refused to give up his new found love and position.

He was much terrified when he found that the monk who delivered the package was Romola's brother and that he, in extreme illness, ^{and that she had gone to him} had asked for Romola. All that night he fairly shivered with fear lest the monk tell

Romola the facts in the packet. To ease his mind he wandered out to the peasants' fair, where he met again the pretty little Contadina Tessa with whom he had had several encounters. She clung to him as they wandered through the rough crowds and in sport he went through a mock marriage which to little Tessa was real.

The next morning found the monk dead, and Romola, not dreaming of Tito's unfaithfulness the night before nor the worry that had kept him in terror, met him with the same sweet confidence and love. Again his spirits rebounded and his way was clear and all unpleasant thoughts put away. He decided also to sell his ring, for why should he now feel any link to the past, or further obligation to his father. The monk was dead and no one else knew. He was safe and would put away all unpleasant thoughts. At first only weak, he was gradually stilling his impulses toward right.

One day when in the historic entry of the French *Charles VIII* King into Florence, a prisoner escaped from one of the soldiers, this prisoner clutched Tito by the arm, and he turns to find himself face to face with his adopted father, Baldassarre. Baldassarre has seen Tito's ring which he had sold, on the hand of a Genoese merchant, and is prepared for Tito's ingratitude. But he isn't prepared

for Tito's utter denial of him, when, facing him, Tito says, "He is some madman surely." Tito when too late wished that he had thrown himself into his father's arms and brought himself through this crisis. He knew that it was still possible to turn back, to confess everything to his father and to Romola, but his conscience was too deadened to think of that. Baldassarre was weak and old, with his faculties dimmed from hardships, *from now on* but he turned into the very incarnation of vengeance. *Twice he attacked him with a dagger.* Tito felt obliged, thereafter, to wear a coat of mail to protect himself. One evening Tito was guest of honor at the palace. When the festivities were at their height, Baldassarre enters.

(Read P. 332)

But perhaps we are spending too much time on Tito. *whose gradual deterioration of character is a wonderful psychological study.* He is not the only strong character in the book. Florence, at this time, is struggling between two political parties, the party of Savonarola, the great monk, and the Medici party. Tito who has gained the goodwill of many powerful Florentines, now allies himself underhandedly with both parties, and prospers greatly. *He is sent on embassies, he is a skillful diplomat* But his need for money is great. His tastes have become extravagant. Tessa and her two babes cost, and he decides on an act of treachery to Romola. *Bardo has died and contrary to her known wish* He ^{secretly} sells the Bardo

library which Romola expected to leave to the people of Florence. *as her father had long desired.*

Romola, the soul of rectitude and honor, is speechless at the cold and calculating spirit of Tito. Her love dies, and she scorns and despises him. When he argues, *while he is gone on an embassy* she replies that she cannot live with him and in the garb of a nun she flees from Florence. On the way as she flees, she meets the great Savonarola, ^{p 65} who orders her to return and reluctantly she obeys him. From being an unbeliever, she henceforth becomes the devoted follower of this great Dominican preacher, who is throughout the book the central moving force. She returns to Florence and in the days that follow, she ministers to the hungry and sick of the city. In this capacity she ministers to old Baldassarre and learns of Tessa, Tito's innocent little mistress.

But Tito's days are numbered. He has become the slave of terror, and determines to leave Florence and Romola. Brightly starting out one morning to begin life anew he meets on the bridge an angry mob. Quickly jumping in the river, he swims on from bridge to bridge until feeling safe, he creeps up to shore. But Baldassarre has seen him and following along the bank, he leaps upon him, and together they found them, the old man's clutch still upon the other's throat.

We cannot give time to the historical setting,
nor to the great figure of Savonarola, his preaching, his
arrest and torture. Nor have we given enough time to the
~~usual development~~
most interesting figure in the book, the beautiful,
austere, but high-minded Romola. Could the situation for
Tito have been saved, if Romola had been more yielding
and tried harder to keep her love and win a confession
from Tito. But Romola wasn't of that nature; she
loathed lies and insincerity. *And Tito thought even to
take the easy way through lies & deceit*
After Tito's death, Romola seeks out Tessa and
Tito's children, deserted and miserable, and takes
them to live with her, and to Lillo, the son she
gives this summary of Tito:

Last page -

LIST OF SLIDES

George Eliot

Florence: 1450

Florence: Present

Florence: Cathedral

Ponte Vecchio

Lorenzo the Magnificent

" " "

Tito and Tessa

Florence: Old Market Place

Romola reading

Romola and her father

Entry of Charles VIII.

Tito denies Baldassarre

Armourer's Shop

Savonarola, painted by Fra Bartolommeo

Cell of Savonarola in San Marco

Savonarola preaching

Church of San Marco

Corridor of San Marco

Fra Angelico - Annunciation

San Lorenzo

Bargello - outside

Bargello - courtyard

Palazzo Vecchio

Romola meets Savonarola

Execution of Savonarola

Romola at the well

Romola and the children

Bartolommeo, Pieta

Michael Angelo

Jeremiah, in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican

Holy Family