

---

# GEORGE ELIOT

## AT THE LONDON LIBRARY

One hundred and fifty years ago, Eliot wrote *Romola*, a story of fifteenth-century Florence, using the Library's collections. [Jonathan Clarke](#) records the novel's genesis and the extensive research required to realise this ambitious project.

George Eliot's *Romola* was published 150 years ago as a serialisation in the *Cornhill Magazine*, with the first instalment appearing in July 1862. The opening line, placing it in a historical context 'more than three centuries and a half ago', announces a thoroughly researched novel. We should celebrate the novel's anniversary, all the more because Eliot used the London Library collections in her research. Today the Library has many editions of *Romola*, as well as the complete 115-year run of the *Cornhill Magazine*.

'If I could do as I pleased I would much rather become myself a subscriber to the London Library,' Eliot wrote in 1853 (*The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 1954–78). But, working as an assistant editor on the *Westminster Review*, she knew that she could not 'go to any expense in the matter'. The success of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), together with the relative security offered by her relationship with George Henry Lewes, meant that by 1860 she could afford libraries and travel.

The day after submitting the *Floss* manuscript she and Lewes left for Italy. Lewes recorded in Florence that 'while reading about Savonarola it occurred to me that his life and times afforded fine material for an historical romance'. Girolamo



George Eliot by M. D'Albert-Durade.

Savonarola (1452–98) was the radical cleric of his time, critical of the rich and powerful, who was excommunicated and hanged. Eliot and Lewes visited the San Marco monastery where he had been Prior. As a woman Eliot could only see the chapter house, while Lewes was shown the interior. Within a week she was 'stimulated to entertain rather an ambitious project' (*The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, 1998).

That ambitious project was *Romola*, which has both romantic and historical characters. As Savonarola's puritanism clashes with the powerful of fifteenth-century Florence, Romola cares for her father Bardo, a blind scholar who has spent his wealth on books. She is seduced by Tito, a man so faithless that he would

not rescue his adoptive father from slavery. Romola attempts to flee Florence and Tito rather than face up to him, and Savonarola himself stops her, while Tito's schemings are hatched with none other than Niccolò Machiavelli. Perhaps it is too much that a sculpture mentioned in passing is 'modelled by a promising youth named Michelangelo Buonarotti'.

Bardo's library is not just a setting but a motivation, a defining source of conflict. The father dreams of establishing his library as a resource for future scholars: 'For men, as I hear, will now spend on the transient show of a Giostra [merry-go-round] sums which would suffice to found a library, and confer a lasting possession on mankind'. On her father's death, Romola thinks endowing a library is a 'sacramental obligation', but Tito sells the books. Romola finds out and says 'when you were sure his ear was deaf, and his hand stiff, you robbed him'.

Eliot knew that such a novel would 'require a great deal of study and labour'. She read histories, guide-books and diaries, books on superstition, gems and surgery, in English, French, Italian, German and Latin, using different libraries for her research as well as books she purchased. 'If I had Aladdin's lamp I should certainly use it to get books served up to me at a moment's notice,' she wrote in her journal.

.....

‘Eliot writes the original bonfire of the vanities, as the rich are shamed into handing their trinkets to Savonarola’s followers’

.....

This would have relieved Lewes of some drudgery, as he felt himself ‘a sort of Italian Jackal, hunting up rare books in all the second hand bookstalls of London’.

On the afternoon of 8 November 1861, for example, Eliot went shopping at Redmayne’s, a silk merchant on Bond Street (now a Burberry store), and then ‘to the London Library where I looked through Selden’s Titles of Honour and brought away Monteil, XVth century’. On the evening of 10 November she ‘read Monteil – a marvellous book: crammed with erudition, yet not dull or tiresome’. That was praise from a woman who considered Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) ‘not impressive, from want of luminous and orderly presentation’. The volume of Amans-Alexis Monteil’s five-part *Histoire des Français des Divers Etats* (1843) she borrowed is in the stacks, at H. France.

Eliot wrote that ‘Approximate truth is the only truth attainable but at least one must strive for that, and not wade off into arbitrary falsehood’. In striving for truth, she conducted careful research into the French troops led by Charles VIII that laid siege to Florence in 1494, and into towns devastated by plague. She writes the original bonfire of the vanities, as the rich are shamed into handing their trinkets to Savonarola’s followers. She uses Italian sayings like ‘I can tell peas from paternosters’, and ‘I know how many legs go into one boot’. The wealth of detail allowed Victorian tourists to trace her scenes around the streets of Florence. But Eliot introduces an anachronism or two.



Filippino Lippi’s *The Virgin Appearing to St Bernard*, c.1480.

Romola enters the church of the Badia Fiorentina and sees Filippino Lippi’s *The Virgin Appearing to St Bernard* (c.1480). Unfortunately, that painting came to the church only in 1529.

The publisher of the *Cornhill Magazine*, George Smith, wanted to publish Eliot’s as yet unfinished novel and to tempt her away from her current publisher, John Blackwood, but she felt ‘hurried and flurried’:

‘26 February 1862: I have written about 60 pages of my romance. Will it ever be finished? Ever be worth anything?’

27 February: George Smith made a proposal ... it is the most magnificent offer yet made for a novel.

1 March: The project is ... finally abandoned.’

Eliot did not give up on *Romola*, and nor did Smith. By May, terms ‘handsomer than any ever offered to a writer of fiction’ were agreed. Eliot corresponded with the artist Frederic Leighton, chosen by Smith to illustrate the serialisation. She responded to Leighton’s sketch for the first picture, of Romola and her father, by saying: ‘I meant the hair to fall forward from behind the ears over the neck, and the dress to be without ornament’; her

directions were not followed because, by the time she wrote, the sketch was already being engraved.

Eliot’s struggle to finish the manuscript continued right up to the last instalment in August 1863. On 7 June she was ‘ill with hemicrania, unable to do anything all day’, and the next day she wrote that she was ‘still suffering from my cough and headache’. Yet on 9 June she ‘put the last stroke to Romola. Ebenezer!’

Borrow *Romola* and read it. At 227,000 words you may not finish it quickly, but you can still be ready for next year’s anniversary of its first publication as a book. Be prepared to return the volume if another reader wants it. We know that Eliot was caught out by a hold request letter. While away in Hampshire in June 1871 she had to write to Lewes’s son, asking him to search her bookcases for The London Library copy of Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795). As she said: ‘All wrong-doing strikes the innocent more than the guilty, and so in consequence of my mistake you are bothered.’ Read *Romola* and celebrate how The London Library serves you now and helped George Eliot 150 years ago. ●