

An Overture to the Text



Published in 2017 by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki on the occasion of
the exhibition *An Overture to the Text*
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki 3 May–8 November 2014

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Cover

Frederic Leighton, Joseph Swain
Studio of Swain
Drifting Away 1863
wood engraving
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of the relatives of Mr TV Gulliver, 1939

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An Overture to the Text

‘...I am quite convinced that illustrations can only form a sort of overture to the text. The artist who uses the pencil must otherwise be tormented to misery by the deficiencies or requirements of the one who uses the pen, and the writer, on the other hand, must die of impossible, expectations.’

– Letter to Frederic Leighton from George Eliot, September 10th 1862.¹

¹ Published in Mrs Russell Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, vol 2, George Allen, London, 1906, p 99.

Story Painters and Picture Writers: The Art of the Narrative in Victorian Britain

Emma Jameson

The creative forces of word and image, writer and painter converge in Frederic Leighton's illustrations for George Eliot's (Marian Lewes) novel *Romola*. A historical novel published in 12 monthly instalments in the popular *The Cornhill Magazine* between August 1861 and September 1862, the first edition of *Romola* encapsulates the mid-19th century passion for illustrated tales and narrative imagery.

The novel was first published during what is widely considered Britain's 'golden age' of illustration.¹ Illustrated books and periodicals such as *The Cornhill Magazine*, *Good Words* and *Once a Week* exploded in popularity in the 1860s and were avidly read by an increasingly literate urban population.² Several factors facilitated the rise of this popular entertainment. The abolition of paper duties in 1861 rendered publishing more profitable and affordable, while the improved steel-plate printing technology introduced in 1822 assisted the speed of production.³ These technical developments were complemented by the rise of a leisure-seeking middle class eager to spend their time reading novels, periodicals and middlebrow literature for pleasure.⁴

This context popularised and empowered the fictional narrative as an art form in its own right and a vehicle for potent creative expression. The increased readership and production of literature material generated critical debate about the role of the narrative, its substance, and the tools that the author could harness to most effectively inspire or move their readers.⁵ A predominant concern was the enlivening of prose through visual imagery and pictorial

1 Gregory Suriano, *The Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, Oak Knoll Press and British Library, London, 2000, p 23; Fraçoise Baillet, 'Texte et contexte dans les illustrations de *Romola* de George Eliot par Frederic Lord Leighton', *Sillages Critiques* 9, 2008, p 17.

2 Allen Staley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print: Etching, Illustration, Reproductive Engraving and Photography in England In and Around the 1860's*, Miriam & Ira D Wallach Gallery, New York, 1995, p 37.

3 As above, p 37.

4 Susie L Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Routledge, New York, 2012, p 142.

5 Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, Yale University Press, London, 1979, p 43; Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries*, Ohio State University Press, Ohio, 2005, p xix.

description.⁶ While the Renaissance elevated painting through comparisons with poetry, in the 19th century this was reversed: the widely disseminated and mass-produced literary material sought to align itself with the prestige that had been bestowed upon painting since the Renaissance.⁷ Consequently, reviewers in the Victorian period assessed the merits of literary works in accordance with the extent to which they 'painted' a story through incorporating knowledge of classical or contemporary art and painterly techniques.⁸ This interdisciplinary expectation manifests the close intertwining of art and literature in the mid-1800s. The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood comprised artists, poets and critics who visited each other's studios and workshops, travelled together and worked collaboratively on group projects.⁹ The indebted nature of this symbiotic relationship is encapsulated by the writer Aubrey Beardsley's description of 'story painters and picture writers' in 1864.¹⁰

6 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, pp 33, 35; Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, p xix.

7 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 34

8 Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, p xix.

9 Suriano, *The Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, p 33.

10 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 1.



William James Linton after Frederic Leighton
The Painted Record 1862
 wood-engraving
 British Museum 1875,0508.1357
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The Art of Looking: Romola's Painterly Prose

George Eliot vehemently believed in 'word-painting'; the power of verbally-described, visual imagery relating to direct experience, compelling emotions and vividly presenting objects, persons or scenes before a reader.¹¹ Close friends with the Pre-Raphaelite artists Edward Burne-Jones and William Holman Hunt, she was invited to a number of artists' studios and private collections and was a frequent visitor of the National Gallery, British Museum and National Portrait Gallery.¹² In addition, she was an avid reader of art-historical texts such as Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550) and reviewed volumes III and IV of William Ruskin's seminal art-theoretical text *Modern Painters* (1843–60).¹³ Her knowledge of art was reputed, as evidenced by author W J Harvey's comment that, 'George Eliot's mind is like the National Gallery; for every canvas on display there are two stored away in the basement.'¹⁴

Romola bears testimony to Eliot's assertion that, 'art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.¹⁵ Set in 15th-century Florence, *Romola* was developed during Eliot's tour of Italy in 1860 and 1861 and the novel is replete with references to the Renaissance art that she saw during this sojourn.¹⁶ This is never more evident than in Eliot's

11 Suriano, *The Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, p 35.

12 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 9; Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, p 99.

13 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 16.

14 As above, p 9. W J Harvey was the editor of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1870).

15 As above, p 38.

16 As above, p 13; In describing the Convent of San Marco she refers to Fra Angelico's *Crucifixion*,

characterisation of Romola's artist friend, Piero di Cosimo, who is loosely based on Vasari's account of the 15th-century Florentine artist of the same name.

Such visual referents are extended at various points throughout the novel to become passages in which Eliot self-reflexively and playfully calls attention to the act of looking and reliability of visual appearances. This is particularly pertinent in her description of Tito, Romola's handsome yet dastardly husband who betrays not only his wife but Florentine society in general through his selfish pursuits in extra-marital love and treacherous politics. Tito is frequently described as St Michael, who was famed as much for his angelic looks as for his virtuosic triumph over Satan. Tito's actions, however, are most decidedly *unvirtuous*; rather his angelic looks conceal a nature readily turned to betrayal and deceit, rendering his behaviour all the more shocking and injurious.¹⁷

This discrepancy between appearance and reality, art and actuality is a reflection of Eliot's cognizance of contemporary art-historical theory. Prior to writing *Romola* she had read Anna Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), which described St Michael's beauty as being so great that it was 'severe', with the powers of evil.¹⁸ Such theorising undoubtedly was in part inspired by the increasing popularity of physiognomy, the equation of personality traits with physical appearance, in the first half of the 19th century. The querying of the relationship between appearance and reality is aptly conveyed in the novel by Piero, who states that:

A perfect traitor should have a face which vice can write no marks on – lips that will lie with a dimpled smile – eyes of such agate-like brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them . . . he [Tito] has a face that would make the more perfect traitor if he had the heart of one.¹⁹

In a subtle reversal of the principles of physiognomy, it is the *incongruence* of Tito's appearance and behaviour that is posited as a predominant feature constituting and influencing his character. This exploration of image production and projection is an integral component of not only Tito's characterisation but also the plot of *Romola*. Iconography is evoked throughout the novel to conjure tangible descriptions of places and personages and provide an imagery-rich narrative.

stating that Romola is 'just conscious that in the background there was a crucified form rising high and pale on the frescoed wall, and pale faces of sorrow looking from it below', George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Dorothea Barrett, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p 73.

17 Leonee Ormond, 'Angels and Archangels: *Romola* and the Paintings of Florence' in , *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1998, p 189.

18 As above, p 189.

19 Barrett, *George Eliot, Romola*, p 45.

Leighton's Word-painting: The Meeting of Word, Image, Artist and Author

The metaphors constructed through Eliot's intricate 'word-painting' are facilitated by Leighton's graphic rendering and embellishment of these references.²⁰ With the rise of illustrated magazines and novels, serial drawings became, for many readers and authors, *the* visual representatives of a fictional work and an apt manifestation of the period's intertwining of literature and art.²¹ Illustrations were a 'valuable aid', providing easily comprehensible portals through which a 19th-century reader could enter into and depart from the imaginative world presented by the written material.²²

Eliot and Leighton's mutual interests fostered an enriching harmonising of creative content. Like Eliot, Leighton was passionate about the Italian Renaissance. He had lived in Florence as a child, had trained as an artist in Rome as well as at the Florence Academy and his paintings of the 1850s predominantly featured historical subject matter from the Renaissance.²³ This background experience endowed him with more than the pre-requisite knowledge to illustrate an historical novel about Renaissance Florence. The close alignment between his and Eliot's interests was recognised by *The Cornhill Magazine's* editor George Smith, who nominated Leighton as illustrator in the initial proposal to serialise *Romola*.²⁴ As stated by Eliot, he was 'an invaluable man to have because he knows Florence by heart'.²⁵

Leighton and Eliot's relationship was for the most part collaborative: in addition to trading historical details Leighton also gave Eliot feedback about her use of Italian vocabulary in *Romola*, while Eliot in turn recommended historical art sources, particularly Ghirlandaio's frescoes at Santa Maria Novella, for Leighton's depiction of Renaissance costume.²⁶ The fruitfulness of this creative discourse is evidenced by Eliot writing to Leighton that, 'I appreciate very highly the advantage of having your hand and mind to work with me rather than those of any other artist whom I know'.²⁷

20 Shawn Malley, 'The Listening Look': Visual and verbal metaphor in Frederic Leighton's illustrations to George Eliot's *Romola*, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19, no 3, 1996, p 263.

21 Mark W Turner, 'Drawing Domestic Decline: Leighton's Version of *Romola*', in eds Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, Yale University Press, London, 1999), p 171.

22 As above, p 172.

23 Staley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, p 69; Suriano, *The Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, p 119.

24 Staley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, p 69.

25 As above, p 69.

26 Donald Hawes, 'George Eliot, Leighton, and Keene', *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, no 34/35, Sept 1998, p 80; Mrs Russell Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, vol 2, George Allen, London, 1906, pp 97, 100, 101.

27 Quoted in Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, vol 2, p 100.

‘The broad sameness of the human lot’: Victorian Mythopoeics for the Modern Age

Eliot's and Leighton's shared interests were not restricted to Italian history. Both were ardent advocates for the relevance of classical mythology to the modern age, a belief that permeated 19th-century society. England's purchase of the Elgin Marbles in 1817 and the Greek revolution of 1821 brought ancient Greece to the forefront of the public imagination, catalysing a fascination with antiquity that would endure for the remainder of the century.²⁸ This interest, two-fold and diametrically opposed in nature, was a response to the rupturing of pre-existing moral, social and economic norms triggered by 19th-century modernisation and industrialisation. On the one hand, Greece was revered for its past cultural achievements and was perceived as a model to which the 19th century should aspire in order to restore order and cultural glory.²⁹ On the other hand, the violence, lust, and tragedy pervading ancient epics like the Battle of Troy was viewed as symptomatic of an archaic sensuality linked to the irrevocable moral depravity of the industrial modern age.³⁰

These beliefs were precipitated by scholarship concerning the historical accuracy of Greek myths. A plethora of texts critically analysing antiquity and its histories were published in the first half of the 19th century. These texts, which revealed chronological discrepancies between Homer's lifespan and the dates on which his chronicled events occurred, challenged the 18th-century belief in the historical reliability of Homer's epics.³¹ Seminal among this critical discourse was George Grote's *The History of Greece* (1846), which argued that myths 'do not take their start from the realities of the past, but from the realities of the present, combined with retrospective feeling and fancy . . . What proportion of fact there may be in the legend, or whether there be any at all, it is impossible to ascertain and useless to inquire'.³² The value of Greek epics and myths resides, Grote argued, in their imaginative and emotional qualities – their 'mythopoeics' – which connect civilisations across the expanse of history in their evocation of the general human spirit.³³ The British scholar A H Sayce exemplified this in 1875 by stating that 'the myth takes its colouring from each generation

28 Sharyn Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination*, Ohio University Press, Ohio, 2008, p 6.

29 Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism*, p 11.

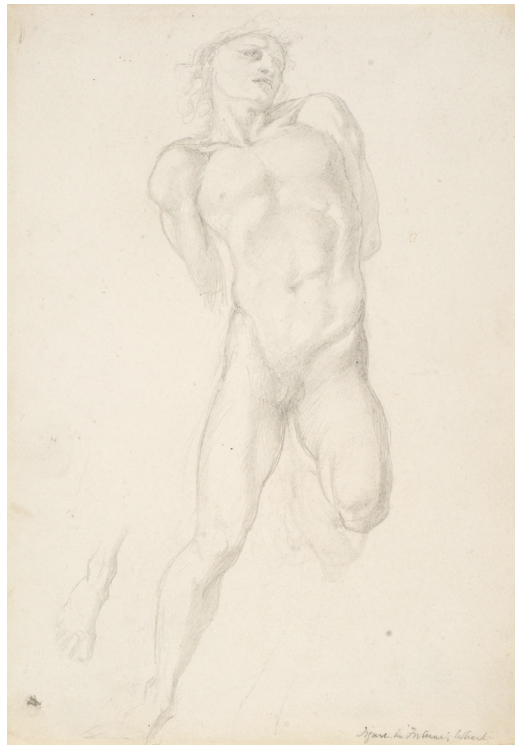
30 As above, p 14.

31 Robyn Asleson, 'On Translating Homer: Prehistory and the Limits of Classicism' in eds Baringer and Prettejohn, p 68.

32 Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism*, p 120.

33 F Bonaparte, 'Review: Ancient Paradigms, Modern Texts: Classical Keys to George Eliot's Mythologies', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 8, no 4, Spring 2002, p 592; James Kissane, 'Mythology', *Victorian Studies* 16, no. 1, Sept 1962, p 12.

Edward Burne-Jones
Sketch for Figure in 'Fortune's Wheel'
 circa 1871–1885
 pencil
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
 purchased 1955



that repeats it, and clothes it with the passions and the interests and the knowledge of the men in whose mouths it lives and grows'.³⁴ Thought to embody eternal truths about human nature, ancient myths presented a vehicle to mediate, dissect and express the daily theatre of life.³⁵

These trans-historical connections attempted to counteract the period's instability by anchoring the 19th century in a temporal continuum and providing an outlet to mediate social concerns and anxieties. Greek literature and mythology permeated 19th-century popular culture and occupied an important role in shaping the Victorian awareness and projection of identity across all social strata.³⁶ Greek epics were performed as popular socio-critical burlesques for the lower middle class³⁷ and introductory collections of Greek literature such as A J Valpy's *Family Classical Library* (1830–34) were marketed to young readers.³⁸ It is noteworthy that more than half of the total numbers of translations of Greek texts printed between 1484 and 1916 were published in the 1800s.³⁹

The classics formed an integral part of the symbolic vocabulary through which Victorians conceived their universe and their art.⁴⁰ Eliot and Leighton were among several artists and authors who turned to the classics for creative expression in their fervent belief in the 'broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main heading of its history . . .'⁴¹ Both were advocates for the need to examine the past in

34 Quoted in James Kissane, 'Mythology', *Victorian Studies* 16, no 1, Sept 1962, p 12.

35 Bonaparte, 'Ancient Paradigms, Modern Texts', p 592.

36 Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism*, p 4; Edith Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5, no 3, Winter 1999, 340.

37 Edith Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5, no 3, Winter, 1999, pp 344, 339, 355.

38 iske, *Heretical Hellenism*, p 6.

39 As above, p 6.

40 Bonaparte, 'Ancient Paradigms, Modern Texts', p 590.

41 George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p 3.

order to understand the present and were respected within their context for their knowledge of antiquity and Greek literature.⁴² Eliot was fluent in Ancient Greek and her knowledge of the Greek lyric poets Homer, Vergil, Plutarch and Pliny was reputed.⁴³ Similarly, Leighton compared German translations of Greek epics to their originals.⁴⁴ This knowledge granted him the privilege of holding prestigious and influential positions within the field. He was a Fellow of the Society of Dilettanti, an exclusive social club sponsoring archaeological field research and in the 1870s served in an unofficial advisory capacity to Charles Thomas Newton, Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum.⁴⁵

The similarity of these scholarly pursuits translated into a congruence of appreciation for classical art. Both Leighton and Eliot admired the grand, statuesque female forms of Greek sculpture⁴⁶ and the classicising figures of Michelangelo, whom they perceived as constituting a crucial connecting link between the ancient Greek and modern world.⁴⁷ Considering this shared appreciation of classicising forms, it is not surprising that Edward Burne-Jones, whose art was heavily indebted to Michelangelo, enjoyed the support and friendship of both Eliot and Leighton. Leighton championed Burne-Jones for election into the Royal Academy in 1885,⁴⁸ while Eliot compared the artist to the Greek dramatist Euripides in a letter in which she stated that his art 'makes life larger and more beautiful to me . . . [it] has . . . a deeper sense of the tremendous outer forces which urge us than of the inner impulse towards heroic struggle and achievement'.⁴⁹

42 Of note here is Leighton's statement that, 'the gathered experience of past ages is a precious heritage and not an irksome load [. . .] Nothing will better fortify [. . .] future and free development than the reverent and the loving study of the past', quoted in Barrow, 'Drapery, Sculpture and the Praxitelean Ideal', p 49.

43 Bonaparte, 'Ancient Paradigms, Modern Texts', p 589. Indeed Richard Jenkyns states that 'no novelist can compare with George Eliot in fervency of enthusiasm for the ancient world'. Jenkyns refers to John Fiske, who states that she 'seems to have read all of Homer in Greek too. [. . .] Talked of Homer as simply as she would of flat-irons'. See Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1980, p 113.

44 Asleson, 'On Translating Homer: Prehistory and the Limits of Classicism', p 68.

45 As above, p 75.

46 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 89; also Rosemary Barrow, 'Drapery, Sculpture and the Praxitelean Ideal', in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, eds Barringer and Prettejohn, pp 61–2.

47 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 22; Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'The Apotheosis of the Male Nude: Leighton and Michelangelo', in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, eds Barringer and Prettejohn, p 117.

48 Stephen Wildman et al, *Edward Burne-Jones, Victorian Artist-dreamer*, MetPublications, New York, 1998, p 198.

49 Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, 99.

Frederic Leighton
Melittion 1882
oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of Moss Davis 1927



Ancient Heroines, Modern Exemplars: Leighton and Eliot's Mythmaking of Romola

The illustrations for *Romola* pivot around Leighton and Eliot's shared passion for the mythopoeics of classical art and mythology.⁵⁰ *Romola*'s prose is replete with allusions to classical mythology that infuse the novel with the dramatic and expressive overtones of the Greek epics of Homer and Virgil.⁵¹ The intricate interweaving of Eliot's extensive knowledge of antiquity is particularly evident in the characterisations of Romola, her husband Tito and their tumultuous marriage. Romola is repeatedly identified as Ariadne, the mythical heroine who marries Dionysus/Bacchus after her first husband Theseus deserts her on the island of Naxos.⁵² Tito is in turn cast as Romola's Bacchus, and initially seems to provide a happy escape for Romola from the sheltered confines of her father's home. On the event of their marriage, Tito commissions a painting from Piero di Cosimo that depicts them as their mythological counterparts (Ariadne and Bacchus). Tito, however, requests that Piero depict the moment in Ovid's tale

50 This in-depth examination of *Romola*'s illustrations in the context of Leighton and Eliot's shared interest in classical mythology is, to my knowledge, an original argument. Fiske and Turner briefly discuss Eliot's characterisation of Romola as Ariadne while O'Malley and Baillet analyse Leighton's quotation of classical heroines in his illustrations for *Romola*. None of these discussions, however, consider Eliot and Leighton's scholarship of classical mythology in detail, nor place this within a wider context of the 19th-century interest in antiquity.

51 Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism*, p 119. In the first instance, the organisation of the novel in three parts recalls the tripartite structure of Homer's *Iliad*. See Dorothea Barrett's introduction in *Romola*, p xv.

52 This is by no means implicit – *Romola* contains a chapter entitled 'Ariadne Discrowns Herself'.

when Bacchus manages to escape enslavement on the ship that takes him to Ariadne.⁵³ The focus of Tito's vision is therefore not on his happy union with Ariadne (Romola), but rather his personal triumph, a selfish preoccupation that foretells his subsequent egocentric actions. Eliot deftly manipulates mythology to foreshadow an alternative, tragic ending and underscore the self-centred nature of Tito's character.

Classical female figures like Ariadne were a concurrent and apt interest of Leighton's at the time of *Romola*'s publication. The 1860s mark a turning point in his career, after which he focused less on depicting group historical scenes and increasingly concentrated on depicting solitary female figures derived from biblical and classical texts.⁵⁴ This interest is correlated (and, as will be demonstrated later, perhaps anticipated) with the illustrations for *Romola*, which provided him with ample opportunities to vary the pose, expression and drapery of a solitary female figure linked to classical antiquity. Shortly before illustrating *Romola* he was commissioned to produce an accompanying illustration for Thomas Davidson's poem *Ariadne at Naxos* in *The Cornhill Magazine*.⁵⁵

Drifting Away is the apotheosis of Leighton and Eliot's fusion of mythology with the modern world. The scene depicts Romola's departure from Florence after learning of Tito's adulterous affair and illegitimate child. The location of this escape and its related emotional dilemmas on the Mediterranean Sea are by no means incidental. Rather, the description and visual depiction of the water undeniably rely and play upon the 19th century association of water with desire, female moral pollution and suicide. The symbolic alignment of water with love, desire, fear and death originates from Greek mythology, as exemplified in stories of Eros/Amor the god of love escaping on the sea, the turbulent waves a metaphor for the tumultuous emotions he symbolises.⁵⁶

This association was interwoven into the 19th century conscious through the mythological trope of the 'Fallen Woman', which was developed in response to moral anxiety about the role and expectations of women. Female sexuality was at the crux of 19th-century social anxiety. Thrust into the public sphere through legal and social reform measures such as the Divorce Act of 1857, female sexuality was perceived as a dangerous force challenging

53 Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p 580.

54 Malley, 'The Listening Look', p 264.

55 See letter dated 30 November 1860, published in Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, vol 2, p 91.

56 Marie-Claire Anne Beaulieu, 'The Sea as a Two-Way Passage between Life and Death in Greek Mythology', PhD Diss, University of Texas at Austin, 2008, p 75, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/3822/beaulieum87289.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, accessed 4 April 2016.



Frederic Leighton, Joseph Swain
Studio of Swain
Drifting Away 1863
 wood engraving
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
 gift of the relatives of Mr T V Gulliver, 1939



John Millais
Ophelia 1851–52
 oil paint on canvas
 © Tate London, 2017

the permanency of marriage, the sanctity of domesticity and perpetuating the instability of modern life.⁵⁷ Compounding this was the publication of literature such as George Drysdale's *Physical Sexual and Natural Religion* (1855), which established and normalised the concept of female sexual desire in the public realm.⁵⁸ Female sexuality was both a source of fascination and fear and was repeatedly addressed in art and literature of the period. The figure of the prostitute or the scorned woman was frequently characterised as a victim of the perils of modern society who, like Eve, would inevitably fall to demise and ruin after succumbing to immoral temptation. This demise was frequently envisaged as suicide by drowning, recalling water's role as a passageway to the Underworld and an agent of purification in Greek mythology.⁵⁹

Eliot was by no means exempt from this fascination; drowning is a recurrent feature in her novels and is used as a vehicle to express the pensive self-reflection of her characters. This is exemplified in *Janet's Repentance* (1860) in which she states that, 'the drowning man, urged by the supreme agony, lives in an instant through all his happy and unhappy past'.⁶⁰ This trope is similarly employed in *Romola*. While sailing on the Mediterranean Sea, Romola despairs over the failure of her marriage and seems to be drawn towards a seemingly inevitable fate: 'The clear waves seemed to invite her: she wished she could lie down to sleep on them and pass from sleep into death.'⁶¹ For 19th-century readers *Drifting Away* would undoubtedly have recalled images of the legendary maidens Lady of Shalott and Ophelia, whose romanticised watery deaths were popularised in illustrations and paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais.⁶²

Eliot and Leighton recall commonly understood symbolic allusions and imagery of 19th-century mythology to create narrative suspense – as the penultimate illustration in *The Cornhill Magazine*, readers would have to wait another anxious month to learn of Romola's fate. *At the Well*, published in the next instalment, would have reassured and perhaps even surprised the reader in its portrayal of Romola as a confident, morally virtuous woman relinquished from the burdens of her past. Visualised as a headstrong and stoic Virgin Mary, Romola provides a lasting impression of an ideal femininity to which they could have aspired.

57 Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1995, p 51.

58 Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*, B Blackwell, New York, 1988, p 20.

59 Beaulieu, 'The Sea as a Two-Way Passage between Life and Death in Greek Mythology', pp 1, 2.

60 Quoted in Edward T Hurley, 'Death and Immortality: George Eliot's Solution', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24, no 2, Sep 1969, p 223.

61 Eliot, *Romola*, p 509.

62 Turner, 'Drawing Domestic Decline', p 184.

This positive conclusion of *Drifting Away* usurps and challenges the myth of the 'Fallen Woman', underscoring the harmful implications of Tito's wrongdoing and Romola's virtuousness in the face of this.⁶³ Romola's consideration of suicide was not brought on by her own sexual promiscuity, as per usual 19th-century narratives, but rather that of her husband.⁶⁴ Innocent of any wrongdoing, Romola emerges from her ordeal unscathed and empowered with a stronger sense of self. She has broken free from the doubts and burdens plaguing the chrysalis of her youth and has emerged a self-assured, spiritually empowered woman.

Frederic Leighton, Joseph Swain,
Studio of Swain
At the Well 1863
wood engraving
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of the relatives of Mr T V Gulliver, 1939



The disruption of the 19th-century myth is counterbalanced by the subtle integration of Greek mythology. The negation of the 'Fallen Woman' trope leaves the way for Romola's associations with classical heroines to come to a satisfyingly rich, nuanced fruition. Empowered with the knowledge of Romola's transformation after landing ashore, the sea in *Drifting Away* is purified of its morbid 19th-century allusions. It instead reverts back to its significance in classical mythology as a passage between life and the Underworld, a transition between life stages fostering self-discovery, maturation and heroization.⁶⁵ This symbolism is employed in the myths of Danae and of Ariadne. Locked in a wooden chest by her father and cast into the sea, Danae survives her ordeal and lands ashore in a new community as a mature woman. Water similarly symbolises rebirth in Ariadne's tale.

63 As above, p 184.

64 As above, p 185. Tito's acts do not go unpunished: he is eventually murdered.

65 Beaulieu, 'The Sea as a Two-Way Passage between Life and Death in Greek Mythology', p vi.

Although abandoned by her husband Theseus on the island of Naxos during a sea voyage to Crete, she is rescued by Bacchus/Dionysus and embarks on a new life with him. Eliot subtly inverts these mythological significations to enrich Romola's characterisation. As stated previously, Romola and Tito are initially visualised as the joyous couple Ariadne and Bacchus. Romola's distress in *Drifting Away* indicates, however, that Tito is not in fact Bacchus but is rather Ariadne's treacherously selfish first husband Theseus.⁶⁶ What is significant about this alteration is the power invested in Romola as a result. Unlike Ariadne, Romola is not abandoned by her husband Tito on an island; rather she seeks a new life for herself of *her own accord*. Whereas Ariadne's new life was precipitated by the arrival of Bacchus, Romola's new journey is a solitary endeavour guided by her own moral intuition and virtue.

Leighton's illustration is integral to this visualisation of Romola as an empowered Ariadne. As indicated in the illustrated publication of Thomas Davidson's poem 'Ariadne at Naxos' in *The Cornhill Magazine* (1860), the story of Ariadne was well-known in the 19th century and readers of subsequent issues of the magazine would have been aware of its referents in *Romola*. Writers and artists, however, generally focused on Ariadne's abandonment at Naxos as it enabled them to depict the tragic female form in a languorous state of sleep.⁶⁷

Leighton's visual interpretation of Eliot's Romola-as-Ariadne is markedly different. Romola is not in a languid state of helplessness, but is rather in charge of her own fate. The interlocking diagonal and horizontal lines in the composition anchor Romola in the composition and visualise her resolve as she pulls the boat's taut ropes. The line of the sail leads our eyes from the bottom left-hand corner to the top right, creating a sense of movement and progression which is reiterated in the direction of Romola's gaze. Positioned in profile to the viewer, the contour of her face recalls the stoic female figures from ancient sculptures. She is not the swooning female figure so commonly associated with 'Fallen Women' but is rather in control of the conclusion of her own Homeric Epic.

66 Malley, 'The Listening Look', p 268.

67 One such example is Leighton's painting *Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus*, 1868, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.



Alexander Runciman
Ariadne circa 1774
 etching
 Mackelvie Trust Collection
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Antonio Salamanca
 after Marco Dente da Ravenna
Amor, God of Love, On the Sea c. 1542
 engraving
 Mackelvie Trust Collection
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Leighton's Romola: An Overture to the Text

The classically idealised figure of Romola in *Drifting Away* evidences the infiltration of Leighton's artistic tendencies in the illustrations for Eliot's novel. As previously stated, the illustrations marked a turning point in Leighton's career: concurrent and subsequent to the novel's publication in *The Cornhill Magazine* he focussed his attention on depicting solitary female figures from antiquity. Several illustrations for *Romola* anticipate or recall Leighton's paintings. *The Visible Madonna* is remarkably similar to *Sisters* (1862) [External, Sisters], while Romola's pose in *Coming Home* not only echoes Théodore Chassériau's *Apollon et Daphné* (1846), which Leighton would undoubtedly have been aware of⁶⁸ but also foreshadows the poses that Leighton would later employ in *Odalisque*.⁶⁹

These similarities are by no means incidental. Rather, it is apparent that Leighton used the illustrations as a conduit through which he formulated and tested compositional motifs for paintings produced contemporaneously or subsequent to the novel's publication.⁷⁰ This opportunistic approach to illustrations was not uncommon in this period. Publications like *The Cornhill Magazine* guaranteed the mass readership of an educated audience and consequently presented enticing avenues through which artists could gain repute and recognition.⁷¹ In addition, illustrations were, in the public's mind, inevitably intertwined with the reputation of respected authors like George Eliot and Charles Dickens, which in turn conferred prestige on the artist.⁷² Esteemed artists like Millais, Rossetti and Burne-Jones produced illustrations for poems and novels, which consequently increased the status and interest in illustrations as art forms in their own right. In addition to being reviewed in the magazine *Athenaeum*, illustrations were also published without accompanying text in separate compendiums and were displayed in galleries.⁷³ This was the case for Leighton's illustrations for *Romola*. As well as being published in *The Cornhill Gallery* (1865), a collection of 100 wood engravings from the magazine reprinted without text, and also *Twenty Five Illustrations by Frederic Leighton, A.R.A* (1866), Leighton's illustrations were also displayed at the Royal Academy in the 1860s as part of an exhibition of the engraver Joseph Swain's prints.⁷⁴

68 Baillet, "Texte et context dans les illustrations de *Romola*," par. 16.

69 Malley, "The Listening Look", p 268.

70 Francoise Baillet, "Texte et contexte dans les illustrations de *Romola*", par. 13.

71 Saley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, p 37.

72 As above, p 37.

73 As above, p 37.

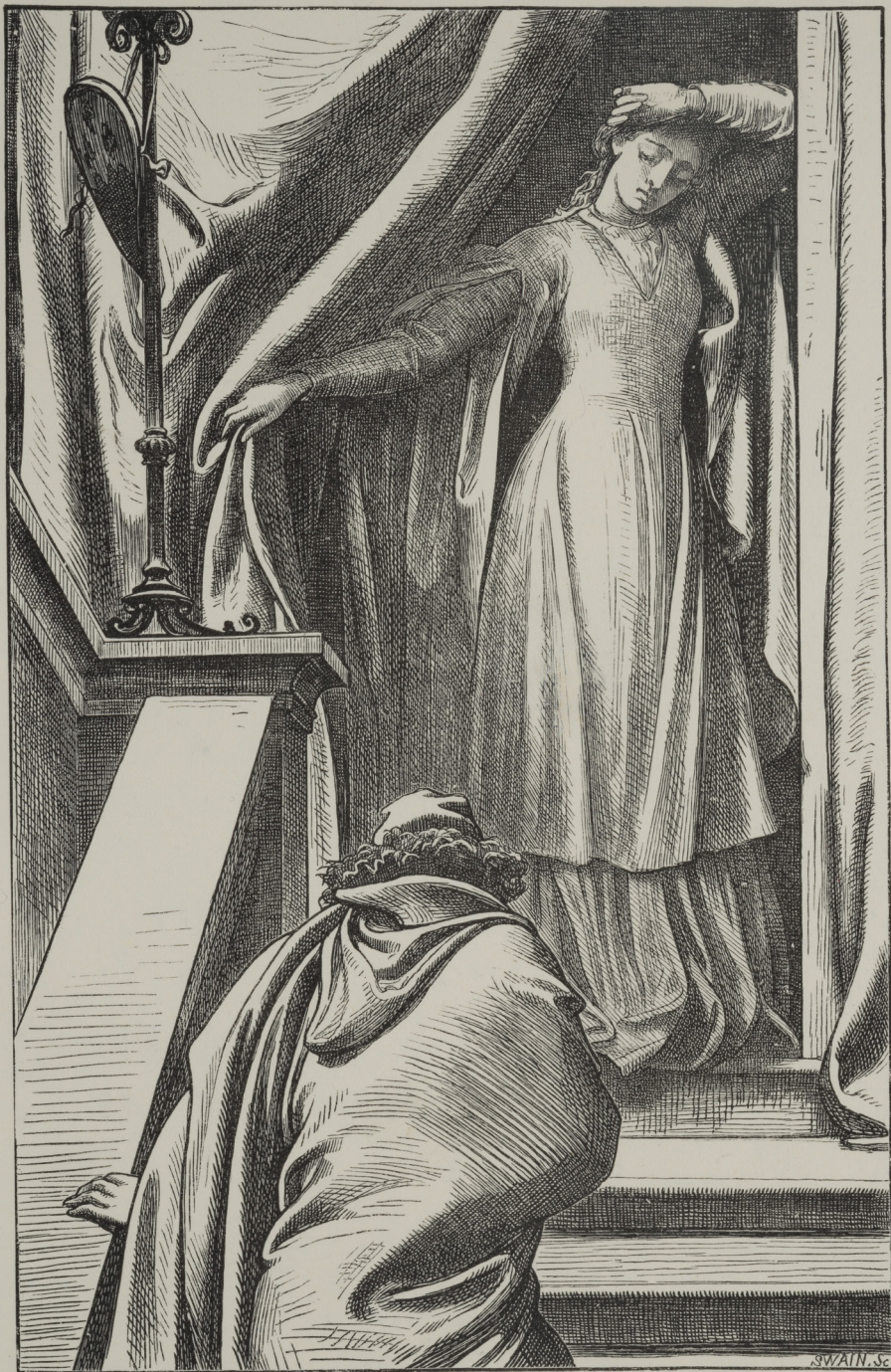
74 Ibid; Suriano, *The Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, p 23.



Frederic Leighton, Joseph Swain,
Studio of Swain
The Visible Madonna 1862
 wood engraving
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
 gift of the relatives of Mr TV Gulliver, 1939



Frederic Leighton
Sisters c. 1862
 oil on canvas
 Private Collection. By courtesy of Julian Hartnoll/
 Bridgeman Images



Coming Home.

Frederic Leighton, Joseph Swain
Studio of Swain
Coming Home 1863
wood engraving
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of the relatives of Mr T V Gulliver, 1939

Considering this interest and esteem for illustrations, it is not surprising that there were frequent conflicts between authors and illustrators. It was not uncommon for illustrators to depict the more obscure and abstract moments from novels so that they could more freely exercise their creative interpretation and display their imaginative talents.⁷⁵ This often ran contrary to the expectations of the author, who wanted their more detailed scenes to be brought to life through enriching imagery.⁷⁶

Leighton and Eliot's relationship was not exempt from the professional quibbles afflicting other collaborations of author and artist. Although their relationship started amiably enough, it deteriorated once Eliot's expectations of a mimetic visual translation proved futile.⁷⁷ Although for the most part satisfied with Leighton's visualisation of her text, she repeatedly requested minor alterations in the depiction of Romola's hair and the positioning of characters' heads.⁷⁸ She does, however, eventually concede that there is an 'inevitable difficulty – nay, impossibility of producing perfect correspondence' between her intention and the illustrations.⁷⁹

Coming Home exemplifies the liberties taken by Leighton. The illustration paints a bleak portrait of Romola and Tito's relationship 18 months into their marriage. The specific moment that Leighton depicts is described by Eliot as follows: 'Romola heard the great door of the court turning in on its hinges and hastened to the head of the stone steps. There was a lamp hanging over the stairs, and they could see each other distinctly as he ascended.'⁸⁰ Leighton's illustration extends this description to encompass the ramifications of this moment for the couple's marriage, demonstrating his artistic interpretation of the emotional implications of Eliot's prose throughout the rest of the chapter: 'The next time Tito came home she would be careful to suppress all those promptings that seemed to isolate her from him . . . The great need of her heart compelled her to strangle, with desperate resolution, every rising impulse of suspicion, pride, and resentment . . .'⁸¹ Romola's anguish is conveyed through her up-thrown arm and closed eyes. Foreshadowing Leighton's later interest in melancholic classical heroines, the pose characterises Romola as a tragic classical heroine and immortalises her emotional plight in a narrative lineage derived from ancient Greek tragedies. She

⁷⁵ Saley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, p 37.

⁷⁶ As above, p 37.

⁷⁷ Malley, 'The Listening Look', p 262.

⁷⁸ As above, p 262.; Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, vol, 2 p 97.

⁷⁹ Barrington, p 96.

⁸⁰ Saley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, p 69.

⁸¹ Eliot, *Romola*, p 251.

stands both literally and metaphorically higher than the deceitful Tito, the horizontal lines of the stairs emphasising the distance (both actual and symbolic) between them. By effectively employing compositional motifs and figure types, Leighton does not simply illustrate a particular scene but rather coalesces the emotional implications of the chapter into an expressive, easily readable image. The illustration is as much a product of Leighton's art practice as it is of Eliot's prose.

Leighton's artistic insight undeniably introduces 'an overture' to a text already layered with external references and allusions. Indeed, the illustrations are in many instances as much a product of Leighton's imagination as they are of Eliot's. The illustrations are empowered with an expressive force that is garnered from not only their relationship with the text, but also the aesthetic connections forged across the illustrations, the other artworks in Leighton's personal oeuvre, and the quotation of commonly understood iconography from Eliot and Leighton's social context.⁸² The effects of these influences do not exist in a vacuum, however, but rather reflect back onto the text itself, creating a reciprocal relationship of influence, embellishment and imagery. As Joseph Hillis Miller states, 'the pictures are about the text; the text is about the pictures'.⁸³ Eliot and Leighton's *Romola* is testament to the period's interest in 'story painters and picture writers', in which word and image combine to produce oscillating overtures of meaning.

82 Malley, *The Listening Look*, pp 262–4.

83 Joseph Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank*, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Oakland, 1971, pp 45–6, quoted in Baillet, 'Texte et context dans les illustrations de *Romola* de George Eliot par Frederic Lord Leighton', par 28.



Frederic Leighton
Odalisque 1862
oil on canvas
Private Collection
Photo © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.