MĂDĂLINA ELENA MANDICI, *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel*
(Bucharest: ProUniversitaria, 2023)

The study of Mădălina Elena Mandici originates in a doctoral project coordinated by Codrin Liviu Cuţitaru and defended at "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iaşi. It is no surprise, therefore, that the rich and well-chosen bibliography impresses the reader. But this is not the only quality of this study. Mandici is able to synthesize in a very convincing way her textual observations and can express her ideas in a refined language.

Female Readers in the Victorian Novel relies on a well chosen corpus of texts: *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) by George Eliot. Mandici had the opportunity to verify her conclusions several times as this book grew from several articles published before the defence of the thesis. I am particularly impressed that both Mandici and her advisor were not discouraged by the Romanian obsession with self-plagiarism, an unfortunate invention that only shows the fragility of some academic identities in the small but so proud Romanian academia. The interdiction to publish articles which will later become parts of the thesis only deprives the doctoral student of the chance to confront his thesis, chapter by chapter, with reviewers and readers that only (prestigious) journals can offer.

Although Mandici is only at the beginning of a scientific career that will probably be very successful, the analytical exercise is performed with a sure hand and impressive competence. The subject matter of her book is extremely topical and demonstrates that the three female novelists - Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot – are not out of fashion as they continue to inspire interesting, even provocative critical works. As a proof of my previous statement, it is enough to mention Azar Nafisi's 2003 novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which courageously and emotionally demonstrates the liberating power of literature by sampling eight women with various backgrounds who read several masterpieces of Western literature in a post-Islamic revolution Tehran and who are obliged to follow a strict religious and societal code. Reading becomes an exercise of empowerment and liberation. No wonder, therefore, that the position of the reader, reading practices, the analysis of the social, political, and cultural context of reading inspired Mandici in her critical exercise.

The book starts with an ample historical overview. Mandici presents the English readership's evolution from William Caxton in the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. Emphasis is laid upon the Bible as a reading material that should be available to all the members of society. It is common knowledge that the emphasis on reading the Bible had a revolutionary significance and effect in the societies where Protestantism dominated and not only. The book and printed word of God were and still are extremely important in Protestant societies.

Mandici insists upon this cultural peculiarity with the right emphasis and adequate intellectual balance. The reading of the Bible was and still can be a coercive reading practice but it can also lead to intellectual freedom and emancipation. By translating the Bible Luther and his ilk

gave an example and successfully broke a (cultural) monopoly of a religious and aristocratic elite. Although the number of women from among commoners who were literate significantly grew only after 1870, there were also quite a large number of women who read and wrote already in the seventeenth century. An interesting example, in this respect, is Agnes Beaumont, an ardent reader of the Bible and also the author of a famous autobiographical writing from the seventeenth century. In Tobias Smollett's eighteenth-century novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, female servants read and write letters even if their spelling is not perfect and their mistakes are a common source of humour. And these are just two examples…

After elucidating the importance of the translation of the Bible in creating the English readership, Mandici moves on to the importance of the eighteenth-century periodicals, particularly *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, in developing reading skills among the British upper and middle classes and finally reaches her target point: the Victorian Age. It is known that the *Married Women's Property Act* (1822) which allowed married women to own and control property in their own right also influenced women's reading practices of the time. More and more women had the time and the leisure to spend time reading, in other words do as they liked. Mandici catches very well the specificity of reading practices and their connection with education. During the Victorian Age education is meant to help you get a job. Reading is for spiritual and mental improvement. Consequently, reading is connected to social status. Upper class and middle class women had much more opportunities to read than lower class women. But for all Victorian ladies reading books was one of the most pleasurable and inspiring activities.

The heterogeneity of Victorian women's reading practices increased a lot as education became more and more accessible. One read for pleasure, but also for empowerment, or out of necessity. Mandici lays a very appropriate emphasis on the young girls' library in the Victorian Age as the *Elementary Education Act* of 1870 paved the way for the compulsory education of all children aged from 5 to 12 in England and Wales. Mandici also mentions the appearance and the growth of educational institutions for women. In 1848, the Queen's College was founded in London with the aim to improve the qualifications of governesses. The education of the women who educated the young generation was extremely important. The next year, in 1849, Bedford College was opened in London. It was the first higher education college for women. The process to give an educational chance to all, or at least to most members of society, was continued by the Education Act of 1944 which made secondary education available to all children and raised the age of school leaving to 15. Of course, by that time the Victorian Age was just a chapter in history books, but the basis for all these positive evolutions was laid during the Victorian Age.

In the analytical section of the book, I particularly appreciated the interesting interpretation of Maggie Tulliver's favourite reading: Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. Mandici deftly relies on Michel de Certeau's theory about the absolute reading (pp. 138-139). The passion for reading does not necessarily lead Victorian women away from their traditional domestic role. Two ardent readers finalize their fictional evolution in domesticity. Mandici justly notices that Jane Eyre marries "a redeemed Bluebeard" (110) and Dorothea Brooke marries "a young Apollo" (110). The evils of reading are also discussed with competence and wit connect literature and Antoine Wiertz's 1853 painting *The Reader of Novels*. The woman from this painting

is certainly not the Angel of the House. She is a very convincing proof that reading and especially too much reading can be harmful to woman. Equally fascinating is the daring comparison between Teresa de Avila and Dorothea Brooke which Mandici makes at page 246.

Undoubtedly, *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* is a rewarding reading but there are also some questions that are not answered. On page 81, Mandici says: "For most feminists, reading as an intellectual pursuit is not as highly influenced by gender as it is by other factors (such as cultural and social background, age and the state of mind of the female reader)". Which feminists did Mandici refer to? As she does not clarify this problem, the reader has no other choice but to wonder whether a feminist can disregard gender and about Mandici's definition of feminism. Also on pages 81-82 Mandici talks about Gothic prose being much more attractive for the female readership and its being authored by more female than male authors. In this respect, she also notices that "[s]ome men even use female pseudonyms to indulge in writing Gothic fiction" (82). What a pity that no examples are given! These cases would challenge one of the assumptions of feminism that women authors have much more difficulties to step into the public space inevitably associated with authorship. Another problem that Mandici does not deal with is whether the success of Gothic fiction among women should be related to the presupposition that the implied reader is female. Sometimes the reader of the thesis is dissatisfied with the excessive length of some quotations (see pages 248, 251-252, 259-260, 260). Probably they come from the timidity of a young researcher who wants to back up her statements with convincing quotations but forgets that the thesis must convince first of all through a sure and self-reliant authorial voice and not by excessively long excerpts from the authors under perusal.

I cannot end this review without expressing my conviction that a book must also be a beautiful object, not only a beautiful text. *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* is such an item. Unfortunately, nor the author of the book cover is mentioned, nor do we know the source of the image on the first cover: a beautiful woman dressed in blue reads while her back is turned towards the reader of the study. She is plunged into her own reading. But to be fair, this observation must be made to the publishing house and not to the author.

In conclusion, I want to make it clear that my observations are rather inspired by good will and the view that any human enterprise can and should be improved. Otherwise, my firm conviction is that this book is an interesting and competent Romanian contribution to Victorian studies and that Mădălina Elena Mandici will continue to offer serious and valuable surveys.

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