

## Foreword

Mădălina Elena Mandici's *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* is a subtle and, I say it with no hesitation, refined book focused on an original topic – the identity investigation of the woman reader as she appears in the English novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Mutatis-mutandis*, the character explored by the author is, in fact, the woman intellectual, whose “exotic” appearance (in the mindset of the era, of course) is set against the backdrop of British industrialization. It is precisely due to industrialization that her presence is not fortuitous. The Industrial Revolution creates, through the abolition of traditional absolutism and the imposition of modern constitutionalism, the premises of the emancipation – or, better said, the surfacing – of identities previously deemed peripheral. Femininity, centuries upon centuries swept under patriarchal centralism, was naturally among the first to come to light.

The author of the book essentially deals with five iconic Victorian novels written by women, whereby the main characters are, evidently, women. These are not women cut from the same cloth as their Victorian sisters, shaped by the (still) rudimentary social and educational standards of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but women who read and, even more importantly, think with their own minds, unintimidated by the inevitable stereotypes of the historical moment (still) tending to refinement. The texts selected by Mădălina Elena Mandici – *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë), *The Mill on the Floss* (George Eliot), *Middlemarch* (George Eliot), *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë) și *Adam Bede* (George Eliot), arranged in this particular order by the author for reasons that will become clear below – draw immediate attention to their cultural significance. Thus, the book is concerned with three female writers and five masterpieces of the era. The selected texts support the topic and the goals of the present study, providing critical historical, cultural and, last but not least, psychological arguments which consolidate the typology of the woman reader and, equally, that of the woman intellectual. Both roles, it goes without saying, presuppose a common denominator: education. Herein lies the fundamental classification made by the author to the characters under scrutiny – formally-educated (institutionally-educated, that is) and informally-educated (thus, self-taught) women. Several historical and cultural considerations impose themselves in this case.

Industrialization paves the way for the so-called “formal, institutional education” of women. The Academies for Young Ladies – also known as “boarding-

schools”/pensions in the French-speaking world – were established throughout Western Europe. These were not, as was commonly believed, just fashionable schools putting a stamp upon the manners of the women who attended them, but veritable universities for young women (mostly belonging to families in the noble upper echelons of society, but not exclusively, as the history and literature of the time inform us, *Jane Eyre* being a strong example, along with another famous novel penned, this time, by a male author, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*) who were initiated into the humanities and the sciences. Upon graduation, female students with no significant inheritance lying in wait would receive an academic certificate bearing a social and economic value, which authorized them to become governesses or, more specifically, teachers for the school-aged children of the rich, eager for home-schooling (the education was conducted, at least for a while, at home). This detail demonstrates that many women in the industrialized world obtained, via education, honorable employment, which enabled them to gain social and financial independence (i.e., autonomy from the dominant male figure of the past). The governess, a ubiquitous character in the Victorian novel, is a pioneering figure and archetype of the female reader/intellectual. The author’s classification of institutionally- and self-taught women withstands, thus, historical and critical scrutiny.

The distinction between formally- and self-educated women allows the author to organize her analytical approach into three coherent parts. The first (comprising three chapters: *Female Authorship and Readership*, *The Novel in the Victorian Age*, *The Reading Debate in the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Arguments For and Against*) funnels the prejudices surrounding the woman reader and, alas, worse still, the woman intellectual in the Victorian era. The author pays attention to all levels of thinking which discredited such a feminine “identity”. A woman engrossed in her readings (other than the Bible) – a woman of unlike character *ab initio*, since illiteracy dominated the Victorian society, where the privileged classes enjoyed the monopoly of written culture and could exercise reading and writing – revealed something “morbid” in her biological constitution and, consequently, came to be regarded as social “ballast” (she neglected her family, appearing “immoral” and displayed a predisposition towards hysteria, disturbingly revealing her “sickness”). This distinction bore the stigma associated with political anarchy and social chaos. The irony, by the author’s own admission, remains that the woman reader/intellectual represented, at her core, an element of stability. She provided her children a better *paideia* and maintained indisputable harmony in the family, thus contributing to civilizational progress. It took decades for English society (and European society as a whole) to perceive this immense upper hand in a different light.

The second part of the book, the meatiest and the most enduring, exegetically, of all three, is dedicated to formally-instructed protagonists and has four chapters: *Formal Education in Victorian Britain*, *The Governess and Textual Reinterpretation Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*, *Resistance to Auctorial Intentions: The Case of Maggie Tulliver* și *Searching for Heroes of Erudition in Middlemarch: Female Readers between Apprenticeship and Bovaryism*. The characters within this segment – Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke – are, indeed, captivating female intellectuals, and Mădălina Elena Mandici subtly and coherently traces the specificity of their identity (singular, unmatched in the literature of the time), setting up a high hermeneutic standard. The exploration of the readings of these three characters is especially noteworthy and constitutes a critical endeavor deserving of praise. A psychological detail, however, is worth considering more closely for a moment. George Eliot's heroines (Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke) have a tragic structure, while the character of Charlotte Brontë (Jane Eyre) is, by far, a classic melodramatic figure. Eliot had, no doubt, a compulsion for dual nature, stemming perhaps from the very intellectual upbringing of her female characters who come to be split between their intellectual superiority and their somewhat marginal cultural and mental state. This antagonism pushes both of them into paradoxical situations – one is destined for suffering (Dorothea), the other for self-sacrifice (Maggie).

Jane Eyre is structured differently: she is an intellectual, yet unidirectional female character from any conceivable perspective one can possibly adopt, much like the heroes of melodrama. In the *Preface* to the second edition of the novel, Charlotte Brontë – frustrated by the critical reaction of some Victorian puritans, who saw in the rebellious nature of the heroine the demystification of a *taboo* – observes that the morality of an era should not be confused with its conventions. The former (reduced, ultimately, to the distinction between good and evil) is everlasting, while the latter is transitory and subject to change (every generation enforces its social values and, consequently, its conventions). Ultimately, even if the author herself does not elaborate on this in her brief literary manifesto, we can discern here a demarcation line between *natural* and *social*, between *nature* and *society*. If the former includes and affirms a certain “eternity” or “immuability” of the human condition throughout history, the latter refers concretely to the arguments separating one generation from another, one century from the other. In the tapestry of his natural, intimate, profound core, the individual has remained, technically speaking, unchanged, from the dawn of time to the present day. However, in his social dimension, man is consumed by an unrelenting obsession with change. It becomes evident that “nature” constitutes here the content and “society” the form. While the latter can undergo any modification, being merely an “appearance”,

the former must remain constant, since it is “real” and its transformation would cause the deterioration of the very notion of humanity. Charlotte Brontë thus requests that her critics perceive the character of Jane Eyre in its eternal, human, unmediated, natural significance, not in its perishable, conventional, stereotypical, social significance. The heroine is self-sufficient. She does not undergo changes of any kind, choosing, riskily, not to embrace the world but to be embraced by it. Believing in truth and violently refusing compromise, even if her rebellious attitude oftentimes puts her in danger, Jane stays true to herself, not to the social prejudices of her society. This detail inevitably turns her into a unidirectional character of melodrama rather than a dual, tragic one, like Eliot’s protagonists.

The third part, which marks the close of the book, considers the self-taught women – the two Catherines (and, most notably, the first one, Earnshaw) in *Wuthering Heights* and the unique (from a typological standpoint) Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* – who are no less intriguing. The third part brings together two chapters: ***Readers on a Social Spectrum in Wuthering Heights și The Reverential Female Reader in Adam Bede: Preaching and Domesticity***. I highly commend the hermeneutics of the characters’ readings and ideas, which brings me, once again, to a methodological distinction between tragedy and melodrama. Eliot’s heroine, Dinah Morris, is *par excellence* a character who effortlessly attenuates her dualities (as suggested by the title of the last chapter itself – the smooth transition of the protagonist from high theological culture to small-scale domestic life). By way of contrast, the “first” Cathy (Catherine Earnshaw) is *par excellence* the personification of absolute duality, which is by definition tragic. As opposed to Dinah, she finds herself in the midst of an identity crisis from the outset. Lockwood discovers her little diary (written on the pages of an old Bible), in which she signs her name, symbolically, in three different ways: Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, and Catherine Linton. While Earnshaw is her father’s surname, Heathcliff and Linton are the two men between whom Catherine oscillates until her own personality disintegrates. Here lies a common confusion among commentators. It is believed that Cathy’s love for Heathcliff possesses a transcendental quality (probably due to the novel’s melodramatic ending, where the lovers are reunited *post-mortem* and *in aeternum*), while her connection with Linton seems to maintain the monotonous, dull air of domestic coexistence. In reality, the construction of the character throughout the text leaves no room for such a conclusion. Catherine is annihilated volitionally by Heathcliff and Edgar Linton as she becomes not just an erotic “dispute”, but an “appendage” to the identities of the two men. The heroine enters, tragically, a perfect dissolution.

Without a doubt, the author of *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* is a subtle hermeneutician of the psycho-cultural nuances of literature. Starting from the investigation of five major novels of the period, she writes a complex work on the act of reading and, by extension, on female intellectuality in the Victorian era.

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# Introduction

The image of the Victorian woman reader – as portrayed in advice manuals for married and unmarried women, literary and medical studies, educational works, as well as in sermons, religious tracts, reviews and newspapers – is controversial. The queen of the hearth or the future mother of civilization and culture, instead of being subsumed to a wide range of household tasks (cleaning, maintenance, feeding and tending the children and her spouse, looking after the education of her offspring), is shown to take on a dangerous occupation: reading. Her mind and decorum are apt to be corrupted by inappropriate reading – a useless occupation for members of the society without a high-level job or the prospect of ever attaining one. Victorian female readers, thus, get a bad press in contemporary print matter for being prone to hysteria and madness, staled by study, easily corrupted by clichéd language and degraded representations of reality, bent on too much recreational solace and deaf to their immediate environment. Such claims, however, as this book argues, reflect long-standing male anxieties rather than a faithful representation of contemporary reality. Radical novels with characters vulnerable to false judgement and individualism, light, trashy works and second-rate literature, the sensation fiction of the 1860s, as well as the ‘New Woman’ fiction of the last decade of the nineteenth-century did attract a part of the Victorian female readership, not because women were trying to get involved in sedition and riot and to subvert gender roles, but simply because nineteenth-century education (especially before the 1870s) was unsystematic, random, and aimed at a wealthy, male group.

Patterns of literacy in the Victorian age – the golden age of reading, which underwent a printing revolution between 1800-1840, when paper production increased, prices decreased and the printing machine took over – were, paradoxically, not uniform. Illiteracy and literacy are, in this age of economic, political and educational instability, inextricably mixed from a social point of view. Though during this period education is associated with equipping individuals (men in particular) for a job, while reading, an intensely spiritual exercise, is related to soul-saving purposes in Protestant environments, women’s intellectual and moral worth are gauged by universal standards. Since the act of reading does not generally leave historical traces behind, my research labors under the hope that turning to excerpts describing scenes of reading and textual allusions from nineteenth-century novels will show that historically-attested Victorian

women nurtured their intellect and imagination through reading and gained, apart from solace and pleasure, the capacity for social analysis and judgement, self-awareness, a sense of identity, critical, reflective thinking skills, as well as the drive to write, on their own, their personal autobiographies. Indeed, novels cannot be granted the status of historical evidence and cannot be equated with reality. They do speak, however, to the wide-ranging debates about what, how, when and if women needed to be allowed to read in Victorian Britain. This is not to argue against historical evidence proper, but to make available to the reader a breadth of evidence drawing on a fusion of theory and practice, interspersed with literary models and reader-response critical tools. My aim is to show that female reading is not a clandestine, passive activity flowing in the face of men, but a highly self-conscious practice whereby women construct power and get access to material for self-instruction and a sense of identity outside the family circle in print matter that does not encourage a predilection for bourgeois life, but on the contrary, mocks uncritical, unthoughtful reader identification.

Part I of this book roots novels with predominantly formally-educated women readers – *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Middlemarch* (1871) – and novels with largely self-educated female readers – *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Adam Bede* (1859) – in this particular order, not in a chronological fashion, in a sociohistorical and literary context, laying the groundwork for parts II and III, which investigate the actual representation of the Victorian woman reader in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. These novels, as the next sections will show, open an aperture on the controversial image of the Victorian woman reader. The introductory part rekindles the reading experience of the Victorian age and calls the popularity of novels in Victorian England into question, addressing what it is meant, in the age of the novel, by ‘authorship’ and ‘readership’, and helping to center what had been deemed marginal before and after Queen Victoria came to the throne: female intellectuality. The aim of this historical overview of women’s reading and writing practices – in an age which associated novel-reading more with entertainment and escapism, with an impetus for women’s subsequent voyeurism, exhibitionism, passivity, rebelliousness and even infertility or lifelong celibacy, and less with a tool for the instruction of an increasingly literate society – is to show that intelligent women, women who adopted a less lady-like profession to earn their bread, literary women gradually accepted by the society as a different genus, women of mind from the working classes make up a multivalent figure. Though for much of the nineteenth century the working population of Britain did not have access to literacy and the reading of middle- and upper-class women was denounced vigorously, novels of the period challenge the arguments used by fiction’s disparagers as ammunition.

In an age in which an obedient woman's personal history was linked to her wifely and motherly duties, the alleged dangers of her commitment to fiction and careless reading practices were defined symptomatically as a symbol of an intellectual malady gradually taking over the body of the 'angel in the house'. Reading was not considered a conceptual operation of the mind, but rather a harmful habit which turned docile companions into querulous and passive social creatures. Too often, alas, Victorian commentators expressed anxiety concerning women's use of leisure time and self-instructive desires, a position persistently found in novels, medical journals, etiquette manuals, as well as domestic magazines and almanacs. Such texts were now, without doubt, available to larger audiences. The woman's reading absorption resulted in a general oblivion of what was going on around her, in her leaving the house in a state of dilapidation and her distressed husband and children on their own, as George Cruikshank's caricature on a plate in an almanac of the 1840s explicitly shows. Cruikshank's caricature illustrates the portrait of an unwary female reader – also a mother and a wife – exhausting herself with dangerously useless reading and failing to attend to the duties of the home in which God had placed her. Cruikshank's visual parody provides an appropriate and useful introduction to my investigation of the fictional woman reader in the Victorian period, early or late. The woman with a self-imposed intellectual discipline does not want to face consciously what she already knows unconsciously, but she is betrayed by her body language. Reading – a perverse thief of time – hampers the woman's social usefulness: instead of being engaged in household tasks, the woman vulnerable to the appeals of fiction stretches her interests outside the family circle and spends her resources on superficial pursuits. Her domestic life likewise resists her attempts at self-improvement. The caricature allows the viewer to see the fragmented consumption of Victorian women readers, for it pivots on the very shift from intensive practices of communal reading to the private perusal (at least intentionally so) of a single text, constantly haunted by the possibility of interruption, family obligations, the potential remonstrances of the husband.

Paintings of the period also served didactic purposes and sometimes even challenged and mocked the belief that women were uncritical readers surrounded by deluding texts. Representations of the woman reader inspiring male action or prompting the male gaze cast a cloud over women's search for guidance and direction. The aim was two-fold: to idealize the gentle, virtuous woman of the past, untarnished by leisure activities or, the reverse, by manual labor, but also to discourage women's search for and access to the written word, seen as a symbol of temptation, and to warn especially against women's engagement with novels, the