

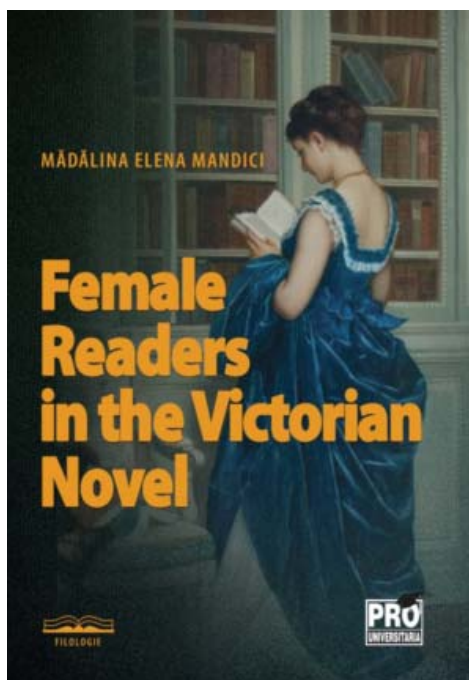
Mădălina Elena Mandici (2023). *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel*

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The ascription of the status of ‘phenomenon’ to women’s reading in the nineteenth century can be a productive starting point for cultural historians. Contemporary debates, voiced in sermons, medical writings, and period journalism, often cast female reading as a threat. However, in *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* (Pro Universitaria, 2023), Dr. Mădălina Elena Mandici of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași demonstrates that, while Victorian women’s reading was indeed treated as novel and alarming by contemporaries, it must be understood within specific social and cultural contexts, where it carried complex, paradoxical, and not always emancipatory histories. Through detailed analyses of the reading practices undertaken by Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke, Catherine Earnshaw, Nelly Dean, and Dinah Morris, the book shows how fictional female readers destabilize stereotypes of passivity, creating instead figures of interpretive authority and intellectual ambition. Distinguishing between formally-educated and self-educated heroines, the author maps out the opportunities and limitations each category entails. She combines literary analysis with historical documentation, drawing on a wide variety of contemporary sources.

The book is divided into three major parts, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Part I, *Female Intellectuality and Readership in Victorian Britain*, lays the ideological and cultural groundwork. It begins with *Female Authorship and Readership*, continues with *The Novel in the Victorian Age*, and concludes with *The Reading Debate in the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Arguments For and Against*, thus capturing the tensions surrounding women’s access to books and the social anxieties it provoked. Part II, *Fictional Embodiments of Nineteenth-Century Formally-Educated Female Reader*, deals with heroines shaped by institutional learning. It opens with *Formal Education in Victorian Britain*, then moves to case studies: *The Governess and Textual Reinterpretation: Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre”*; *Resistance to Auctorial Intentions: The Case of Maggie Tulliver*; and *Searching for Heroes of Erudition in “Middlemarch”: Female Readers between Apprenticeship and Bovaryism*. Each chapter traces how formal schooling both enabled or constrained female intellectual ambition. Part III, *Fictional Embodiments of Nineteenth-Century Self-Educated Female Readers*, addresses women who fashion their own forms



of learning. One chapter is devoted to *Readers on a Social Spectrum in "Wuthering Heights"*, focusing on both Catherine Earnshaw and Nelly Dean as well as some of the male readers of the novel (Lockwood, Heathcliff, Edgar Linton), and another to *The Reverential Female Reader in "Adam Bede": Preaching and Domesticity*, dwelling on Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel as contrasting figures of discursive empowerment and vulnerability.

The opening section of the book reconstructs the ideological and cultural framework that shaped nineteenth-century debates on women's literacy. The author outlines how female authorship and readership were discussed in the period, situating the novel at the crossroads of social anxiety and moral expectation. She reviews arguments voiced in sermons, medical treatises, periodical essays, and caricatures, where women's reading was alternately denounced as a cause of hysteria and moral weakness or defended as an instrument of domestic stability and cultural continuity. The Victorian novel emerges here as a genre peculiarly suited to reflect bourgeois values, offering a testing ground for anxieties about what women read, how they read, and how that practice might affect their place in society.

The second section of the book investigates how nineteenth-century novels imagined women shaped by formal education. The author situates Victorian schooling options for women on a continuum. On one side of the continuum, the author places "ornamental" training (meant to render young women "marriageable"). On the other, she situates more rigorous, historically attested programs opened by pioneering institutions. Within this context, she deals with three emblematic figures: Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (a governess of marginal status) and George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver (a brilliant, dark-haired heroine torn between passion and social/religious constraints) and Dorothea Brooke (an upper-class heroine pining for erudition, who reads individuals and events through the spectacles of books). The third part shifts attention to heroines whose literacy develops outside institutional frameworks. Here Dr. Mandici discusses the subtleties of self-education through a close reading of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Catherine Earnshaw's subversive writing on the margins of the Bible, together with Nelly Dean's narrative authority grounded in acquired literacy in the library of her masters, exemplify how Victorian women fashion interpretative power without official sanction. The last heroine dealt with in the third section of the book is Dinah Morris, who knows the Bible by heart and is defined by self-renouncing acts of sympathy, in stark contrast with the illiterate Hetty Sorrel, who acts fatally on behalf of her desire to marry above her station.

The volume ends on a note that is at once critical and personal, focusing on the sense of continuity and interconnectedness that reading fosters across time and space. Exposing the social deficiencies that made forms of Bovaryism and Quixotism possible, the conclusion rejects any attempt to define the Victorian woman reader in singular terms. The woman reader, it appears, is multifaceted, sometimes resistant, sometimes complicit, but always situated at the crossroads of cultural and intellectual negotiation. As the author herself writes, "[i]t is still harder to submit simple labels for the female readers trapped inside such novels' pages and, more importantly, for their significance as a cultural phenomenon... The only certainty of the period is the uninterrupted surveillance and policing of the content and practice of women's reading" (Mandici, 2023: 33). What emerges is an interpretative framework with contemporary implications. In an age where debates about women's access to education and intellectual recognition remain pressing, Dr. Mandici's study resonates beyond Victorian studies. It invites present day readers to reflect on how cultural anxieties about gender and knowledge persist and how fictional representations can both reveal and challenge these anxieties.

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Considered as a whole, *Female Readers in the Victorian Novel* (2023) is a work of impressive erudition, which can inform both the scholar and the graduate student. It combines meticulous historical research with literary interpretation, drawing on a wide array of sources and weaving them into a coherent narrative. For academics, lively discourse and insightful scholarship abound to enrich existing debates on gender, education, and the history of reading; for students, it models how to integrate close textual analysis with broader cultural frameworks; for general readers, it offers a lucid exploration of how fiction engages with pressing social issues. Above all, the study reminds scholars, students, and bibliophiles that cultural history is incomplete if it neglects the interior dimension of reading: the emotions, tensions, and intellectual energies awakened in the encounter with texts, which this book recovers through its sustained attention to fictional female readers.