

2005

Review of Our Daughters Must be Wives: Marriageable Young Women in the Novels of Dickens, Eliot and Hardy

Britta Zangen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Zangen, Britta, "Review of Our Daughters Must be Wives: Marriageable Young Women in the Novels of Dickens, Eliot and Hardy" (2005). *The George Eliot Review*. 481.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/481>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Britta Zangen, *Our Daughters Must be Wives: Marriageable Young Women in the Novels of Dickens, Eliot and Hardy* (Peter Lang, 2004)
pp. 391. ISBN 3 631 52976 7**

Adopting the '1st Gent's' maxim from the epigraph to chapter ten of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: 'Our daughters must be wives/ And to be wives must be what men will choose:/ Men's taste is women's test [. . .]', Britta Zangen sets out to test the accuracy of this epigram throughout the Victorian period. The book is ambitious in scope, placing analysis of the marriageable woman in the complete works of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, within a thorough socio-historical framework which details shifting attitudes to the Woman Question from the 1840s to the 1890s. These weighty sections of historical 'context' are perhaps the most successful element of the study, providing an invaluable starting point for scholars of Victorian conceptions of femininity. Here Zangen combines a wealth of secondary sources with some primary material to come up with such gems as her observation of the paradox of 'conduct-books': 'The role now expected from women does not seem to come as naturally as the writers of manuals would have it. The fact that they wrote such manuals at all testifies to the opposite' (p. 46). Similarly effective is the inclusion of publication details and readership figures for each author, facilitating valuable comparison of their immediate popular success. Zangen's historical framework suffers, however, from an overly simplistic conception of separate spheres (undermined in the last decade by figures like Amanda Vickery, who is uncited here) and patriarchy. Zangen too often pits resistant women against a singular conception of 'the men' (p. 18), omitting acknowledgement of the diversity of Victorian masculinities fissured along lines of class and sexuality, amply discussed by recent critics such as Herbert Sussman, Martin Francis, and John Tosh (none of whom is referenced). On the penultimate page Zangen finally hints that images of appropriate masculinity may have proved similarly constraining, but this does little to redress the book's dominant conception of 'the men' as a monolithic oppressive mass (p. 352).

Elsewhere in the study breadth of coverage comes at the cost of analytical sophistication. Zangen typically discounts the possible 'irony inherent' in her titular quotation, instead returning to her unshakeable conviction that throughout the nineteenth century 'marriage *is* young women's only future and the taste of the buyers on the marriage market *does* determine the constituents of marriageability' (p. 203). This unambivalent position is maintained through a highly selective reading of the novels, which only takes in instances of 'marriageable young women', and thus avoids discussion of all those independent women who are not presented as marriageable. Whilst Zangen does provide some interesting insights into Dickens's work (notably her lively reading of Pecksniff as serial sexual predator, p. 110), her methodological blind-spot is perhaps most apparent in the discussion of *Oliver Twist*, in which Nancy is entirely excluded by Zangen's 'good girl' criteria. By failing to compare the angelic Rose Maylie to her fallen double Zangen is able to conclude that in Dickens's fiction 'devoting oneself to others while sacrificing oneself at the same time are recognisable as the Victorian ideals for perfect womanhood' (p. 93). Whilst Rose's 'self-sacrificing love' is 'rewarded with a marriage to the man she loves', Zangen fails to mention that a parallel self-sacrifice on the part of Nancy is repaid with brutal murder, an alternative outcome which suggests Dickens's much more ambivalent 'subscription' to wider ideas of marriage as a woman's best reward.

Similarly, although Zangen briefly observes the scarcity of happy marriages in Dickens's fiction (one thinks of all the unhappily married, or marriage resistant, female characters – Betsy Trotwood, Mrs Sparsit, Louisa Bounderby, Miss Wade, Edith Dombey, etc. – who are either mentioned minimally, or simply not included) she concludes that Dickens's oeuvre was committed to 'never letting anyone doubt a marriage's propensity for happiness' (p. 348).

Zangen's often somewhat soporific stroll through the novels of each author in chronological order precludes cross-comparison and lends itself to an outmoded division of these careers into early and late phases. Her similarly pedestrian final summary links the increasingly tortured fictional approaches to female marriageability to the century's progressively more vociferous debates on the Woman Question, leading her to the convincing (albeit predictable) conclusion that in and out of novels 'the messages to young women readers became less uniform' (p. 347). Though solid in literary content with some valuable historical material, overall this feels like a book that has been some time in the making (understandably given its scope), and which has sadly been left some way behind.

Holly Furneaux
Birkbeck College, University of London