

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1986

Book Reviews: Female Friendships and Communities; A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barabara Leigh Smith Bodichon; George Eliot and Blackmail

Graham Handley

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



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

Handley, Graham, "Book Reviews: Female Friendships and Communities; A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barabara Leigh Smith Bodichon; George Eliot and Blackmail" (1986). *The George Eliot Review*. 43. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/43>

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.

BOOK REVIEWS

By Graham Handley

Female Friendships and Communities - Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell by Pauline Nestor (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985).

A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon by Sheile R. Herstein (Yale University Press, 1985)

George Eliot and Blackmail by Alexander Welsh (Harvard University Press, 1985)

Pauline Nestor's book traces the prominence, the emergence of women writers by the mid-nineteenth century, and the making of a community available to themselves. As she puts it, they were banding together, for 'women were no longer merely victims of the pen, but were wielding it themselves.' She comments particularly on Mrs Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Bronte and the unifying power of maternity in her fiction. In the essays of the period there was a 'prolonged discussion of women's capacity for friendship'. Pauline Nestor is particularly strong on Mrs Gaskell, tracing her modesty and grace, her ability to get on with other women writers and, unlike Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, she asked for advice and judgment about her work. A sense of female solidarity is to be found in her fiction, and there is a fine social, moral and sexual analysis of Lennox's proposal to Margaret in North and South. Even better is the tracing of Lois's manipulation in Lois the Witch, and of Holdsworth's intrusion upon Phillis in Cousin Phillis. With Charlotte Bronte she examines her 'sisterly self-sufficiency' and the

collaboration of the sisters, goes on to look at Charlotte's solitariness over Villette, her responses to Harriet Martineau and her falling out with the latter. She looks closely at Charlotte's friendships with Mrs Gaskell and Ellen Nussey and her deep respect for Mary Taylor. There is a very interesting focus on Miss Taylor's novel Miss Miles (the reader feels moved to try and find a copy), while Ms Nestor observes that 'Bronte remained a defiant apologist for single women' highlighting, of course, the plight of governesses in particular. There is an interesting analysis of Jane Eyre and its anti-maternal imagery, while she regards Shirley as the novel which best typifies friendship among women. The section on George Eliot is interesting but largely unsympathetic. She rightly stresses the importance of the move to London and the work on the Westminster Review and of the nature of her isolation (a) because of her liaison with Lewes and (b) his protection of her. She found 'social obligations a torment' (did she, later on, in view of those many Sunday afternoons?). George Eliot's friendships from Sara Hennell and Cara Bray right through to the slobberings of Edith Simcox are traced, but I suggest that the stories have been told many times before. At the same time, there are some interesting analyses of the women in her fiction, the note on the ending of Romola in particular. This is a very worthwhile book, filling a needful gap.

Sheila Herstein's book is thorough and stimulating. Barbara Bodichon was one of George Eliot's closest friends, always generous of her talent, but she had a much greater sense of public commitment than George Eliot had in both the social and educational spheres. The history and the examination of this 'tabooed family' is superbly done, researched in detail and indicating the formative influences on Barbara's development. Best of all, the whole book is given perspective and sequence, so that we come to realise Barbara Bodichon's dedication to whatever she undertook, as well as the sheer range of her interests. The peak of course is reached with the founding of Girton College, but what comes over from this study is the warmth and personality of the subject. Brave,

independent, conscious of responsibility, bold in ideas and battling in execution, Barbara Bodichon remains one of the greatest women of the nineteenth century, and this book is a tribute to her power and to her achievement.

I have left Alexander Welsh's book until last because in this group of books it is easily the most distinguished and easily the best. This is no denigration of the other two, but anyone familiar with Professor Welsh's The City of Dickens will look forward to seeing what he has to say about George Eliot. Good criticism should be a refreshment; this is a banquet, mainly because Professor Welsh is his own man and strikes out areas of interest with individuality and originality. After the definitions of blackmail – and these in themselves are compelling reading – there is an examination of Hitchcock's film in some detail before we get to the sensational novel by Miss Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret. These preambles to George Eliot are worth the reading time, since she used in her novels the common sensation material of her less distinguished – but often good selling – contemporaries. There is a brilliant examination of George Eliot's life and the 'blackmail' situations in it like, for example, Liggins's claim to be the author of Scenes and of Adam Bede. Another interesting focus is on the 'sportive' narration of 'Brother Jacob' together with some anticipations of Middlemarch. The analysis of Romola is splendid, and Welsh rightly states that 'Romola is not merely an interruption in the series of novels about English life' but that the writing of this novel with its new perspectives was productive of the novels to come. These are 'much more efforts of representation than projection'. For this reader the section headed 'Murdering Grandcourt' is the most compelling treatment of the blackmail theme and its complexities. The final chapter of this major book examines The Scarlet Letter and Bleak House in passing in relation to Freud. The range is impressive, the style and treatment incisive and positive. It is a must for all students of George Eliot's art.