

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1988

Book Review of Intellectual Women

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 Review of Intellectual Women" (1988). *The George Eliot Review*. 100.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/100>

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.

Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy. *By Deirdre David.* Macmillan Press 1987.

This is a very well documented and impressive study of Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. It is more than that: it is directly inspirational, stimulating one to re-read and re-assess in the light of Miss David's analyses. There are glancing but important references to Ruskin and the significance of his 'Of Queens' Gardens', his views being 'the essence of patriarchal thought'. There is the weighted idea that 'education disfigures - and makes it difficult for girls to find husbands.' But it is when Deirdre David gets down to the individual writers under examination that her insight and sympathy becomes clear to the reader. She traces Harriet Martineau's 'need of utterance' and defines her 'auxiliary usefulness to a male dominated culture'. She read Milton at the age of eight, but turned from poetry to political economy (of course much later). She went to America and tellingly exposed the position of women there. Elizabeth Barrett is self-tutored in the male classical tradition. She read widely, from Greek literature to shocking contemporaries like Eugene Sue and George Sand. Miss David focusses most strongly and rightly on Aurora Leigh, noting that its main concerns are Victorian society and the Victorian poet. Elizabeth Barrett daringly for her time also deals with prostitution and rape. She recalls that Thackeray rejected one of her poems for The Cornhill magazine which attacked male hypocrisy. Miss David notes that Elizabeth Barrett Browning foreshadows the ending of Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles in her emphases.

On George Eliot Miss David is particularly interesting: 'her career is a narrative of self-creation, the story of a powerfully intelligent woman graced with an impressive ability to discipline and expand her intellect through sustained scholarly study.' Yet of course she was subject to the same conflicts as other women. Miss David succeeds in placing her firmly on political and historical ground. She analyses the dubious praise George Eliot received for (supposedly) not thinking like a woman, and notes that she has acquired too the reputation of being a 'timid feminist'. Thomas Pinney's evaluation of George Eliot is given a just prominence. There follows an invigorating and expansive investigation of Romola and Felix Holt (there is much fresh interpretation here), while for Miss David The Mill exemplifies 'the sad containment of female intelligence by male morality'.

In conclusion, let me say that I found Miss David's own retrospect on her early critical experience both touching and endearing. When she submitted an article on some of Conrad's short stories she was addressed as 'Mr David Deirdre'. She observes, 'I wrote like a man - therefore I thought like a man'. This man wishes that he had the gift to write as well as Miss David does about her investigations. There is in her book a feeling for period, political, social and, above all, intellectual, and it is this feeling, an imaginative and sympathetic affinity, which is impressive and warming to read. There is a generosity about Miss David's judgments, a wisdom about her appraisal, a complete involvement with her chosen area which transcends the often imposed limitations of criticism. In her final paragraph she observes 'I would like to think a male critic could have written this book.' So would I, but I have serious reservations about a male critic's ability to do so. I will not use either feminine or feminist labels here. This is above such categories - Miss David's book is a brilliant, sustained, sympathetic and compelling series of studies.