

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1991

Review of George Eliot's Midlands: Passion in Exile

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, "Review of George Eliot's Midlands: Passion in Exile" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 193.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/193>

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.

A.G. van den Broek

GEORGE ELIOT'S MIDLANDS: PASSION IN EXILE by **Graham Handley**

Allison & Busby, (1991). £16.99

Various biographies and critical studies argue that Mary Ann or Marian Evans's formative years in the Midlands influenced George Eliot's art. They do so by explaining that memories of Robert Evans contributed to George Eliot's conceptions of Adam Bede and Caleb Garth, that Cheverel Manor is Arbury Hall, that Amos Barton is largely based on the Rev. John Gwyther, the curate of Chilvers Coton whom Mary Ann knew as a child, that a good deal of autobiographical material went into the creation of Maggie Tulliver, and so on.

Is there a need, then, for Graham Handley's *George Eliot's Midlands* when at least many of these paths linking childhood, adolescence and fiction are so well trodden? The answer is yes, because this study explores those paths thoroughly and in a lively and readable way. In ten chapters, not counting the introduction and brief conclusion, the study analyses when and, more interestingly, how the Midlands of the author's youth is at once projected and altered in all the novels and stories, except, of course, *Romola*, *Daniel Deronda* and *The Lifted Veil*.

Handley's principal argument is that 'George Eliot's art derives from the personal and intellectual affiliations of her Midland years' (12), and so he necessarily rehearses the sort of biographical information referred to above. He collects the latter from various sources, and makes one or two emendations along the way. For instance, Gordon Haight identified the prototype for Caterina Sarti as Sarah Shilton and said that she was nine years old when Sir Roger Newdigate's nephew, 'the impossible Captain Wybrow,' married (cf. *George Eliot* 221). Quoting directly from Lady Newdigate-Newdegate's *The Cheverels of Cheverel Manor* (1898), Handley quietly corrects Haight by referring to Sally Shilton, adding that she 'was eleven years old at the time of the story's action' (52-4). And it appears that Haight was also wrong in saying that the Old Hall described in *The Mill on the Floss* is based on recollections of St. Mary's Hall in Coventry: 'in fact there was Gainsborough's Old Hall, which George Eliot, despite the brevity of her visit, certainly knew about' (72) - although here (as in a few other places, too) no authority is cited for saying so.

However, when Handley moves from literary detective work to criticism, by answering the question 'So what?,' his book really comes into its own. He is very good at demonstrating how the fictional Midlands of the novels is similar in spirit to the people, places, events, attitudes and prejudices known, visited, shared or experienced in real life. Using many long extracts from the novels - and more about that tactic later - Handley draws attention to Eliot's subtle and increasingly sophisticated conflation of real and imaginary worlds. In chapter 10, 'The Spoken Word,' for instance, he talks about her fine ear for dialects and points out that they vary from character to character not just because there are differences in social standing or because geography demands it but also because dialects sometimes serve as an appropriate shorthand for humour or as a 'social and moral commentary' on some character (223). Again, Dinah Morris is not given a dialect; she speaks like Mr. Irwine. Why? To help Eliot in 'establishing community of feeling, even a form of equality, between them' (226). But as Handley usefully points out, those effects are achieved at a price: 'Perhaps a greater emphasis on her dialect would have given Dinah a greater realism' (227). Thus we gain insight into the brilliance - and occasional flaws or weaknesses - of Eliot's art and its dependence on the Midland past.

There are also occasional weaknesses in Handley's arguments. In chapter 1, 'Facts and Fictions: Life and Self,' he says that it is possible to see a 'primary self' in 'many of [Eliot's] characters as well as the self who writes her books': she saw her own past with an 'anguished but occasionally ecstatic nostalgia' (16), which is often felt in her writing. Handley is on very firm ground when discussing Maggie Tulliver, since, with the help of the largely

autobiographical sonnet sequence 'Brother and Sister,' he ably identifies the anguish and ecstasy that Marian Evans and Maggie both experienced at the hands of their brothers. But in some of the discussions, like the one on Esther Lyon, for instance, the arguments are not as persuasive. How exactly does 'the whole rhythm of writing' link a passage to some instance or other in real life, specially when it is impossible to find a 'direct biographical connection with George Eliot'? (32). However, even in this chapter the good arguments outnumber the weaker ones, and throughout the book there is much to learn.

Finally, a word about the frequent and frequently lengthy extracts from the novels. Quotations usually run to a page and a half or longer, whereas Handley's comments on them are often much shorter. That will probably alienate some Eliot scholars, since academic convention demands the opposite. (Some will also note disapprovingly that there is no mention of recent critical theories to do with questions of influence.) But, as the introduction makes clear, *George Eliot's Midlands* is not just aimed at academics. And in any case, if the considerable taste of Eliot's fiction that you get from reading this book results in an acquired taste among newcomers to her works, or if veterans simply enjoy the many choice passages and are stirred to re-read the whole, then the decision to let Eliot do so much of the talking is more than justified.
