

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2015

Review of Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel

Barbara Hardy

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](#)

Hardy, Barbara, "Review of Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel" (2015). *The George Eliot Review*. 677.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/677>

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.

Barbara Hardy, ed., *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 192. ISBN 978 1 4725 14400 (HB)

This book is a reprint of the 1967 edition published by the Athlone Press, one of '56 classic works of literary criticism' that Bloomsbury is reprinting from Athlone Press. This opportunity to revisit and reassess works that were highly regarded in their day should be welcomed and one hopes that the archives of other academic publishers may also be subject to similar treatment. It is not good for the health of literary criticism if significant studies of the past are not easily accessible to readers and critics in the present.

I remember reading this book fairly close to when it was first published. The 1960s was an interesting time for George Eliot studies. Criticism of Eliot seemed to have stabilized. The decline of her reputation evident in the first decades of the twentieth century and, some time later, criticism drawing on Jamesian ideas about the nature of fiction, which influenced the New Criticism in its generally negative attitude to the Victorian novel, had kept Eliot's literary status fairly low even if critics were not as dismissive of her work as Edwardian critics such as Edmund Gosse and George Saintsbury had been. Notable post-Second World War studies by F. R. Leavis and later by Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey, however, significantly turned the tide in her favour so that Eliot could no longer be tenably described as moralistic and artless. Hardy in *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (1959) and Harvey in *The Art of George Eliot* (1961) in particular defended Eliot persuasively from the strictures of Jamesian-influenced formalist objections to various aspects of her fiction. During the 1960s one had a sense that it was no longer necessary to defend Eliot from the negative assessments of critics in the first half of the twentieth century. Critics could now focus on her writing in itself in the assurance that she was a significant literary figure whose work was worthy of study and interpretation. This 1967 collection of essays is the product of that sense of assurance. A whole book is devoted unapologetically to *Middlemarch* by a variety of critics who accept virtually unreservedly its greatness and who subject it to critical scrutiny from different points of view. The essays that make up the book are more various than I had remembered. There is coverage of textual matters, intellectual background, the novel's contemporary reception, and its artistic achievement. W. J. Harvey's essay on its contemporary reception was particularly interesting for though some reviews now seem to be wrong-headed, one can't help but be impressed by the many serious and detailed discussions devoted to the novel. The contrast with reviewing of serious fiction at the present time is striking. British critics are in the majority in this collection but an American New Critical perspective is included. Mark Schorer, one of the few New Critics who had a serious interest in Victorian fiction, in an earlier essay of 1949 had been fairly critical of the form of *Middlemarch*, arguing that the book had the wrong kind of unity despite the intricacy of its construction, but though he still has some worries in this later essay, his view of the novel is much more positive: 'it produces a nearly coherent vision, as well as a unified one' (p. 20). This suggests a shift towards a more positive view of Eliot even on the part of American critics influenced by New Critical concepts.

Barbara Hardy in her introduction believes that the essays are linked by a sense of 'tentativeness' (p. 4). At times, however, I felt some of the critics were not tentative enough in their judgements, being rather too assured in their views of what is morally right or wrong or what is successfully or unsuccessfully realized. Ladislav in particular is singled out as clearly an artistic failure, an unworthy partner for Dorothea. I was especially amused by a comment

by Jerome Beaty, who remarks that despite Eliot's revisions to the text with regard to Ladislaw, his 'effeminacy' is 'still offensive to many critics' (p. 53). Beaty seems to think this is a defensible response. Leaving aside whether one ought to find effeminacy in men offensive, for critics in the 1960s to find such an attribute in a Romantic aesthete with a Shelley-like temperament artistically objectionable and inappropriate is rather odd.

Though all of the chapters in this book are worth reading, the essays that stand out and are particularly worth the attention of readers of Eliot now are the three essays that focus on Eliot as artist: Derek Oldfield on the role of language in regard to the characterization of Dorothea, Hilda M. Hulme on imagery, and Barbara Hardy on a detailed analysis of a chapter, virtually chosen at random she says. The language of Eliot is revealed persuasively as always at work in artistic terms: it is never just telling the story or merely reflecting reality in a passive way. What makes *Middlemarch* stand apart from most fiction is that if one opens the text casually and reads a paragraph almost certainly the language will have artistic force relatively independent of serving the plot or narrative. Eliot is a novelist of ideas, interested in ethics, politics, religion, and numerous other matters, but the pleasure of the text in itself is not neglected or of lesser importance and this is powerfully communicated in the essays by Oldfield, Hulme, and Hardy. One should note that Martin Amis, often regarded as the major prose stylist among contemporary novelists, not only regards *Middlemarch* as the greatest novel in English but it may be a factor in his view of Eliot as the 'greatest writer in the English language ever'. It may also be significant that a leading literary theorist and critic, J. Hillis Miller, who has argued that 'Good Reading is Slow Reading', demonstrates how applicable that is to reading Eliot, especially *Middlemarch*, in his recent book *Reading For Our Time*.

Of course the stabilization I mentioned in regard to Eliot in the 1960s was short-lived. There followed a period of turmoil in criticism that particularly affected her. Various 'isms' objected to her writing in different ways. Neo-marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism identified her with 'the classic realist text' which was seen as ideologically and politically conservative, feminism had problems with her lack of overt support for feminist causes and her failure to provide sufficiently positive representation of women in her fiction, post-colonial criticism believed her writing was compromised by an implicit support for imperialism and colonialism. Paradoxically this generated debate kept Eliot at the centre of critical discussion, provoking counter-arguments, and that discussion continues and moves on. But though Eliot criticism in the 1960s may seem to have been left behind by these developments, as I have suggested this book has still much to offer, especially in regard to its discussion of the texture of Eliot's prose and the nature of its artistic power.

Ken Newton
University of Dundee