

Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard as a Conflicted Protagonist

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Thomas Hardy would initially seem to be violating Aristotelian conventions and Victorian propriety in shaping the tragedy of a man of character around an alcoholic, wife-abusing, out-of-work hay-trusser. However, when the reader encounters Michael Henchard some years after the wife sale, Henchard is — at least outwardly — a changed man. Whereas Mrs. Goodenough, the firmity-woman, has plummeted in the social scale, Henchard has risen to be the mayor of a considerable social unit, a prosperous country town in the period just prior to the repeal of the Corn Laws. His gloominess, his enthusiasm, his attempts to justify his handling of the grain crisis, and his quick temper (despite his stalwart adherence to his earlier pledge to abstain from alcohol), however, connect the politician at the King's Arms banquet with the itinerant rural labourer in the firmity tent. In both social circumstances he is acutely conscious of the impression he creates on his audience.

If he has an Aristotelian tragic flaw it is surely his impulsiveness combined with his desire to save face — even though a conservative drama critic might argue that an itinerant labourer cannot afford the luxury of having a face to save. Barely literate, Henchard miraculously makes good use of his skill at assessing grain into a significant business in the trading of grain and root products; although his approach to business is hardly along the modern, progressive, scientific lines of his foil, the astute Donald Farfrae (whose arrival as a wayfarer in the town is suggestive of Henchard's own many years before), his sheer determination, his will to power and public prestige, has apparently carried him to the highest rung of civic society. Ironically, his fall from greatness, from economic and political influence, begins with his determination to do the right thing by his former wife and the young woman whom he erroneously takes to be his own child. Sometimes he behaves in a manner consistent with the behaviour of the villains of Victorian melodrama, extorting, exploiting, and manipulating, but Henchard is hardly a figure of misanthropy. Indeed, Hardy renders his protagonist both complex and conflicted, as we see in his handling of Lucetta's correspondence. Henchard's morality, his essential decency despite the unfairness of chance, his ardent desire to do the right thing, is evident time and again in the story, as when he refuses the opportunity to shield even so personal a piece of property as his pocket-watch from the grasp of his many creditors. What is tragic about Henchard is how others, even those as near to him as Elizabeth-Jane, consistently misunderstand his character and misconstrue his motives, in which sad fate he is one with Shakespeare's King Lear. Like the grand old ruler of the ancient British cornlands, Henchard is often filled with resentment, but ultimately places his concern for his true daughter above his anger at his mistreatment at the hands of time and chance. Angry at the injustice of the universe and unpredictability of fate, Henchard sees at one time or another Newson, Farfrae, and Lucetta as embodiments of that principle of unfairness, but at the crucial juncture always does the right thing, for example, in the wrestling match with Farfrae.

In the Hardy-sanctioned illustrations executed by realist Robert Barnes for the London Graphic (January to May 1886) in weekly parts, Henchard is the dominant figure, appearing consistently throughout the series as dignified and manly in his figure and manner. Significantly, Barnes depicts Henchard, his wife and child meeting the turnip-

hoer as they approach Weydon-Priors, but does not show him inebriated, and does not depict what is arguably the novel's activating circumstance, the wife sale. Barnes depicts a stern and occasionally gruff Henchard, but not one who is mean-spirited, irrational, and vindictive. Thus, the original serial reader would likely have been able to identify with Henchard, Elizabeth Jane, and Farfrae equally. Barnes reveals much about Henchard's more positive character traits in such scenes as the wrestling match and his interview with Elizabeth Jane on her wedding day. Barnes does not realise Henchard's fits of anger or drunken loutishness, but does emphasise his deep depression when he stands on the bridge, contemplating suicide, and encounters Jopp.

Like Lear, Henchard is a stubborn exemplar of a rural society who has but scantily ever known himself. Hardy characterises him in the phrase "introspective inflexibility": he cannot see himself as others see him, and cannot with cool detachment appraise his own actions and motives. Impulsive, jealous, and quick to anger, Henchard feels rejection acutely and rigorously attempts to be true to his own moral code; he is, indeed, what Hardy proclaims him in the novel's subtitle, "A Man of Character." He loves intensely (witness his attachments to both Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane) and wallows in self-pity, but he admirably bears his wrongs and rebuffings with resilience, and even pride: "My punishment is not greater than I can bear." Like Lear, he is driven by the desire to love, but does not understand precisely how to love. His tenderness towards the fool, Abel Whittle, is the final master stroke in Hardy's compelling readers in spite of themselves to side with Henchard at the last — and to recognise Donald Farfrae's emotional limitations. As he enters Casterbridge just as the women from Henchard's past arrive, Farfrae is the musical and poetic Scot, a traveller who can enjoy the "warming" effects of Casterbridge ale without any fear of overindulging. He is as moderate as his employer is excessive, allowing for the changes of the weather in organising his entertainment whereas Henchard gambles all on good weather for his — and loses (a scenario that anticipates his visiting the weather prophet, Fall, to determine whether the harvest will be spoiled by late summer rains). Farfrae is moderation personified, but, despite his charm and good looks, he fails to engage the reader's sympathies as the immoderate, irrational Henchard does. Although he is entirely rational in his approach to labour relations as he is to business in general, the modern Farfrae lacks the traditional Henchard's depth and authenticity of feeling. Stubborn to the last, he dies on his own terms, and curses himself in his final will and testament. The spelling of "flours" underscores how miraculous was his rise from hay-trusser to corn merchant. The General Education Act of 1870 has guaranteed that we shall not see such a self-made man again, but English society (suggests Hardy) will be the poorer for the loss of such a man of the soil.

Reference List

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