

Power and Passivity: A Feminist Look at *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Dr. Craig Barrow

Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* focuses on one who has been called his "greatest and most tragic hero" (Hardy blurb), Michael Henchard. The lives of three women are enmeshed in Henchard's tragic fall: his wife, Susan; her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane; and his betrothed, Lucetta. Of these three, Elizabeth-Jane comes closest to being the heroine of the novel.

Elizabeth-Jane's desire to "better" herself by becoming a "woman of wider knowledge, higher repute" (Hardy 33-34), "her willingness to sacrifice her personal comfort and dignity to the common weal" (Hardy 51), her "great natural insight" (Hardy 91), her "reasonableness" (Hardy 92) are qualities Hardy seems to hold in high esteem. On the other hand, her passiveness in the face of Henchard's cruelty (Hardy 131+) and her willingness to be replaced by Lucetta in Farfrae's affections (Hardy 176-177) are characteristic emblems of what Patricia Spacks sees as the conversion of the feminine capacity for suffering into a feminine role for suffering (Spacks 39).

If Elizabeth-Jane is disatisfying as a heroine, it may lie less in Hardy's suppression of her because she is a woman than in the overall bleakness of his outlook. As he says of himself in 1882,

Since I discovered several years ago, that I was living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently. . . . I am content with tentativeness from day to day (Walcutt 436).

If Elizabeth-Jane is as "familiar with the wreck of each day's wishes as the diurnal setting of the sun" (Hardy 177), if her life was a long lesson teaching her that "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (Hardy 327), yet her "humorousness" in the face of pain (Hardy 177), her sense that life is less "a series of pure disappointments than . . . a series of substitutions" (Hardy 177), and her practice of making limited opportunities endurable, which she deemed to consist in the cunning enlargement, by a species of microscopic treatment, of those minute forms of satisfaction that offer themselves to everybody not in positive pain; which thus handled, have much of the same inspiring effect upon life as wider interests cursorily embraced (Hardy 326-327) reveal the best qualities in the face of life that Hardy believes anyone can possess, man or woman.

Where Elizabeth-Jane's passivity tends to slip outside the limited categories of masculine-feminine roles into the broader Hardiesque realities of humanity in the face of Nature, Lucetta Templeman reveals the penalty a woman incurs for refusing to passively accept the role society forces on her (Spacks 316-317).

From the moment she first appears in the story, Lucetta is portrayed as a victim. The scandal that arises over their being "careless of appearances" does Henchard little harm, but ruins her (Hardy 84). She is in constant fear of being exposed, and her only

escape is marriage to Henchard (Hardy 119-120). Falling in love with Farfrae, she wrestles with the conflicts between her own desires and the strictures of society. Forced by Henchard to agree to marry him (Hardy 194-196), she secretly marries Farfrae, further compromising her position and leaving her prisoner to Henchard's discretion with regard to their letters (Hardy 207-209).

Lucetta's behavior is condemned by Henchard (Hardy 208), Elizabeth-Jane (Hardy 211-213), and she fears will be by Farfrae as well (Hardy 245). The skimmity-ride becomes the means for making Lucetta's condemnation public. Contriving to get Farfrae out of the way, the locals parade the effigies of Henchard and Lucetta past her house. Overwhelmed, she falls in a swoon, and eventually dies (Hardy 272-275, 284). Lucetta, having refused to accept her proper place, is destroyed.

Lucetta fails in her attempts to resist the passive role society places on her. Hardy's Susan Henchard reveals a passivity in relationship carried to the extremes of masochism (Spacks 72-77), yet within that passivity exercises a power that helps lead to the fall of her husband.

Patricia Spacks writes of women who seek "misery not as an end in itself, . . . but as a necessary means to self-assertion" (Spacks 316). Hardy suggests that Susan is deceived into believing that her auction is valid because of her "idiotic simplicity" (Hardy 25), but her behaviour and conversation in connection with the auction suggest strong resentment (Hardy 16-20). As Henchard says, prophetically, the morning after the auction, "Meek--that meekness, has done me more harm than the bitterest temper!" (Hardy 25).

When Henchard is finally reunited with his wife, she will not forgive him (Hardy 80). Her forgiveness eventually comes, posthumously, but only with the revelation that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter (Hardy 127). Her "honesty in dishonesty" (Hardy 128) obliterates the forgiveness for Henchard.

"[W]hy should death rob life o' fourpence?" Christopher Coney asks as he digs up and spends at the Three Mariners the four ounce pennies that had weighed down the eyes of Susan Henchard (Hardy 122). "[H]er wishes and ways will all be as nothing!" Mother Cuxsom tells us (Hardy 123). But at the end of the novel, Elizabeth-Jane is dancing with Newson on her wedding day to Farfrae, and Henchard is dead, unforgiven by Elizabeth-Jane in life as he was by her mother (Hardy 318-326). Was Susan Henchard the blindly simple woman Hardy pictures her as (Hardy 78-79) or was she a "willful sufferer" (Spacks 316), deliberately blind, whose meekness was her own form of power.