

The Social Role and Treatment of Women in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) brings to light the harsh reality of Victorian society's treatment of women. This aspect of the novel may be illustrated by comparing present-day society's conditions for and attitudes towards women with how characters in the story treat Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman, and Elizabeth-Jane Newson.

Elaine Showalter of Princeton University points out that "The Mayor of Casterbridge begins with a scene that dramatises the analysis of female subjugation as a function of capitalism: the auction of Michael Henchard's wife Susan at the fair at Weydon-Priors" (56). Henchard's auctioning off his wife to the highest bidder at Weydon Fair in the first chapter (page 10 of the Macmillan edition) verifies that in early nineteenth-century England women of her class in rural districts were regarded as little more than stock to be disposed of at their owners' whims: "it has been done elsewhere" (12) affirms that such sales were not uncommon. After awaking from his drunken sleep and realizing that Susan has indeed left with the "genial sailor" (Ch. 4, p. 26), Henchard rationalizes that Susan's "meekness" and ignorance--her "idiotic simplicity" (Ch. 2, p. 17)--has led her to acquiesce in the transaction, and does not look further than the spiked furrity for what drove him to sell her. His "introspective inflexibility" (Ch. 12, p. 89) makes it impossible for Henchard to see beyond his wife's gullibility and his own alcohol abuse to the real cause of the sale, his stubborn pride. He thinks his having sold her is a delusion--until he finds her wedding ring on the grassy floor and the five shillings and the bank-notes in his breast-pocket.

Eighteen years later, when Susan returns to Henchard destitute after Richard Newson's being reported lost at sea off the coast of Newfoundland, Henchard attempts to make amends. Although he may have been signalling his desire to be forgiven, he encloses with a note to his former wife five pound notes and five shillings, in total the same amount for which he had sold her.

He sat down at the table and wrote a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five-pound note, which he put in the envelope with the letter, adding to it, as by an after-thought, five shillings. [Ch. 10, p. 78]

Although conducted in his library rather than in his business office, this act looks suspiciously like another cash transaction on the part of a merchant who makes his living by buying and selling commodities, and knows to a penny what it will take to make a purchase. Even the narrator notes that Henchard's gesture of enclosing the bank-notes and coins "may tacitly have said to her [Susan] that he bought her back again" (Ch. 10, p. 79).

The remarriage of Michael and Susan Henchard is the product of what Hardy terms "business-like determination" (Ch. 13, p. 93) and "strict mechanical rightness" (93) in Henchard's conscientious thinking. Henchard courts Susan as if he were going to work or performing a civic duty: "The visit was repeated again and again with business-like determination by the mayor" (93). Outside the church on their wedding day the

common people's reaction to the event is negative; the average Casterbridger feels that the Mayor is degrading himself. In the eyes of the townsfolk he is "lowering his dignity by marrying so comparatively humble a woman" (95). To extrapolate from this statement, women were (and still are) regarded as status symbols, just as the right make of car is today. For many people even today, female currency remains beauty; in these terms, Susan is regarded as "bankrupt." People in Casterbridge are mystified at Henchard's choice, for Susan has neither the social status, nor physical attractiveness, nor money necessary for one who wishes to marry a merchant-prince.

As Bert G. Hornback of the University of Michigan remarks, "there are striking parallels" (25) between Susan and the second woman from Henchard's past, Lucetta. "She tries to break from the bonds of her past, and this destroys her" (25). What destroys Lucetta are the attitudes of society. For much of the duration of Lucetta's existence in the novel she is the subject of ridicule. When word is circulated throughout her native Jersey about her intimacy with Henchard, it is she and not Henchard who suffers disgrace. This intimacy, when revealed in Casterbridge, leads to her social downfall (signalled by the Skimmington) and subsequently her death.

Elizabeth-Jane, on the other hand, is not subjected to the public ridicule and mistreatment to the same extent as Lucetta. Henchard appears to be the main instigator of her worries. From the beginning of Henchard's remarriage, Henchard takes it upon himself to see that Elizabeth-Jane conforms to the manners, fashion, attitudes, and general lifestyle expected of the Mayor's daughter. First, he assumes that Elizabeth will take his name without objecting: "You shall take it as if by choice" (Ch. 19, p. 141).

If Elizabeth-Jane were male, Henchard would not have been as domineering in his request since a man's name is "sacred." The next imposition of Henchard upon Elizabeth-Jane involves her style of handwriting; "Henchard's creed was that proper young girls wrote ladies'-hand" (Ch. 19, p. 150). He makes her feel ashamed at not having written "a line of chain-shot and sand-bags" (the narrator is reading Henchard's mind here) rather than a proper Lady's Hand. Henchard naturally assumes that, since Elizabeth is female, her writing will reflect her relation to him. This, however, was not the case. Essentially, she had been raised as a fisherman's daughter; Henchard somehow expected that his marrying her mother would transform her into a well-bred lady.

Present-day society's conditions and attitudes have been compared to the treatment of Susan, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy attempted to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment of and attitudes towards women. He achieves this through the chief female characters of the novel, as well as through such minor figures as Mrs. Goodenough (the furmity vendor), Nance Mockridge, Mother Cuxsom, and Mrs. Stannidge, the genial publican of the Three Mariners Inn. Whether of high or low estate, women are consistently revealed either as insignificant workers or as pawns in male power-games in this late Victorian novel.