

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO HARDY

It may seem outlandish to compare the early novels of Thomas Hardy to the late plays of William Shakespeare, but reading *Far From The Madding Crowd* for the second time recently (the first was a long time ago) I had not got far before I was struck by its similarity to *The Winter's Tale*. Jealousy, innocence, the interplay of male and female sensibility, time and its influence on human affairs, rustic comedy, all these things come together in the first of Hardy's Wessex novels much as they do in Shakespeare's genre-defying late play.

There is no direct comparison between Leontes and Gabriel Oak other than the happy ending that awaits both of them and the patience with which each of them learns to endure the passage of time. A direct comparison would imply that Hardy took the play as his model, which is not what I'm suggesting. Gabriel Oak, like Hardy's other heroes, suffers through no tragic flaw of his own, but through the accidents of fate. There is as much of Hermione in him as of Leontes, more of Leontes perhaps in Boldwood. The point is that, in Hardy's novels as in Shakespeare's late plays, human action is always flawed, driven by greed or jealousy (the necessary correlatives of ambition and love), to be redeemed, if at all, only through patience and forgiveness.

Innocence has two meanings. It can refer to an action meant well but misunderstood, as Leontes misunderstands the show of affection between his wife and his friend, or it can mean a youthful naivety revealing itself in misplaced trust, like that of Bathsheba Everdene for Sergeant Troy. From the plays of his middle years, *Twelfth Night* on the one hand and *King Lear* on the other, to those of his last, innocence is one of Shakespeare's principal themes. The same is true of all of Hardy's work from start to finish. Wessex was his Illyria, his Garden of Eden, his land of lost content. In *Far From The Madding Crowd* he was willing and able to give the reader a happy ending, albeit with only a murder to thank for it and a variety of other possible endings still very much in view. After that it was all downhill to *Jude the Obscure*. Redemption, even the partial redemption to be achieved, if not in death then in something very much like it (a shipwreck, a lifelike statue), was beyond him.

The female characters in Shakespeare's late plays are either young and innocent or old and wise. Paulina, Leontes's nemesis in *The Winter's Tale*, manages somehow to be both. Shakespeare made her a proto-Prospero and gave her some of his best lines. For impotent fury she is second only to Lear himself. Bathsheba is not Paulina, but she does grow old ('Her original vigorous pride of youth had sickened,' we read in chapter 48) and, through deaths of one kind or another, grows wise too.

No writer has more to say than Hardy about the differences between men and women. His plots hinge on the misunderstandings and complications to which they give rise and, as he is a novelist, not a dramatist, he is able from time to time to give us his own views on the matter, as in chapter 56, when he writes: 'Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arise at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality.'

Time appears in person to introduce Act IV of *The Winter's Tale*, but is ever present, as it is in *Far From The Madding Crowd*. Time in both, as Shakespeare's chorus says, 'masks and unfolds error'. Or as Feste puts it at the beginning of Act V of *Twelfth Night*, 'Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.' Hardy's two central characters age and change, their

errors unmasked by time. The others are either, like Boldwood and Troy, deprived by death of the ability to change or, like the working men and women who make up the rest of Hardy's cast, freed from time by abandoning themselves to it. They are the chorus and Wessex is Bohemia, especially as Bohemia is really England and the people who live there are English shepherds, ploughmen and milkmaids. They are time and timeless. That is what makes them, in *Far From The Madding Crowd* and *The Winter's Tale*, both admirable and funny.

When Shakespeare presented 'rude mechanicals' or, as we would say, 'working men' on stage, it was at a time when agricultural labourers were rioting in protest against the enclosure of common land. You would never have guessed it from the plays he wrote.

Bohemia and the Forest of Arden, like Wessex, were literary representations of a golden age, partly historical, partly utopian. Neither Shakespeare nor any other Elizabethan dramatist had anything to say about peasant rebellions or religious sectarianism, though they were arguably the two defining events of their age. For that reason they had no place on the popular stage, let alone in performances at court. Though Hardy had more to say on the social issues of his age, he too was constrained by what publishers were willing to publish (and gave up writing novels for that reason).

Both Hardy and Shakespeare used the countryside (husbandry, traditional crafts, old songs, the seasons) to represent the good life, and the city (trade, the court, money, ambition) to represent the bad. Boldwood's moral decline is marked by his neglect of the land, Gabriel Oak's moral development by his refusal to allow his personal feelings to get in the way of his social obligations. Perdita was lost at the Sicilian court, found again in the Bohemian countryside. At the heart of Shakespeare's plays and Hardy's novels is, not history, but individual men and women whose conflicts are played out, not in any one social setting, but against the universal background of birth, life and death.

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