Vanity, Gender Politics, and Fate: Origins of Suffering in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and its Film Adaptations

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In the first chapter of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), Gabriel Oak looks out from behind a hedge and sees a beautiful young woman riding through the country on a wagon. Unaware that she is being observed, the woman, Bathsheba Everdene, chooses that same moment to take out a looking glass and admire her reflection in the sunlight. Smiling into the glass, she blushes "at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more" (12). After Bathsheba puts the glass away and drives off, Gabriel remarks that "she has her faults … and the greatest of them is—well, what it is always …. Vanity" (13). So begins Hardy's pastoral tale. Over the course of the novel, Bathsheba inherits a farm and attracts three suitors: Gabriel, whom she rejects at the beginning of the novel and later hires as a shepherd; William Boldwood, a neighbouring gentleman farmer who becomes smitten with her after she jokingly sends him a valentine card; and Francis Troy, a dashing young cavalry officer whose charm she is unable to resist. Determined to maintain agency in this contest for her hand, but too vain to act

wisely, Bathsheba makes a series of ill-advised decisions for which she and her suitors suffer. However, the novel is not merely a cautionary tale about the destructive consequences of human vanity; in addition to facing the repercussions of their actions, the characters must also grapple with Victorian gender ideologies and Hardian twists of fate that ultimately have deadly consequences. These external forces distort Bathsheba's moral trajectory into an interesting thematic paradox: she becomes increasingly less vain as she learns how little agency she has in the face of the gender politics and twists of fate that shape her life, yet her vanity is what gives her agency in the first place. This paradox allows Hardy to hold Bathsheba accountable for her acts of vanity while still advancing a fatalist perspective and a critique of Victorian gender ideologies.

Since *Far from the Madding Crowd* was published serially in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1874, it has been adapted into two major films: the first in 1967, directed by John Schlesinger and starring Julie Christie as Bathsheba; the second in 2015, directed by Thomas Vinterberg and starring Carey Mulligan. Both adaptations attempt to untangle this thematic paradox in the source material by simplifying the nuances of Bathsheba's agency in order to locate the origins of her suffering more decisively. Schlesinger gives her more agency, making his film primarily a cautionary tale about vanity that largely sidesteps

issues of gender politics and fatalism. By contrast, Vinterberg gives Bathsheba less agency, making his film less about Bathsheba's active contributions to her own suffering through acts of vanity and more about her as an innocent victim of gender politics and fate. As a result, Schlesinger's film envisions vanity as the origin of its characters' suffering, whereas Vinterberg's film envisions gender politics and fate as the origins of that same suffering. This essay will not, however, argue that one film is more thematically loyal to the source material than the other. Rather, I will demonstrate that because the novel itself ambivalently attributes Bathsheba's suffering to a combination of gender politics, fate, and her own vanity, both films seem comparably justified in their opposing interpretations.

In the novel, Hardy holds Bathsheba accountable for her actions by giving her enough agency to make bad decisions that have negative consequences for her. She "idly and unreflectingly" (98) sends an anonymous valentine to Boldwood as a kind of prank to get back at him for not admiring her beauty. Boldwood then traces the valentine back to Bathsheba, falls madly in love with her, and relentlessly courts her throughout the rest of the novel, much to her distress. She marries Troy to secure his affection (a vain attempt in both senses of the word) after he tells her that he loves someone even more beautiful than she. Troy then gambles away all her money, fakes his own death, disappears, and then

reappears a year later to demand more money from her. Thus, at the beginning of these relationships, Bathsheba commits an act of vanity against her better judgement and ultimately suffers for it, complicating our ability to assign blame—or, if not blame, at least agency—entirely to the men who mistreat her.

This issue of whether to blame Bathsheba for her own unhappiness is perhaps the most divisive question that the novel poses. Hardy even plays out this debate in a conversation between two of Boldwood's farmhands. The first farmhand says, "What a fool she must have been ever to have had anything to do with [Troy]! She is so self-willed and independent too, that one is more minded to say it serves her right than pity her." The second replies, "No, no. I don't hold with 'ee there. She was no otherwise than a girl mind, and how could she tell what the man was made of? .... 'Tis too hard a punishment, and more than she ought to hae [*sic*]" (358). In representing this debate within the novel, Hardy anticipates the same divided criticism that the novel received. On one hand, the initial reviewers of the 1870s tended to side with the first farmhand, one going so far as to call Bathsheba an "incorrigible hussy" whom "Gabriel Oak was not sufficiently manly to refuse" (*Observer* 35). On the other hand, the feminist critics of the 1980s tended to side with the second farmhand, viewing Bathsheba, as Linda M. Shires points out, as a "passive" and "trapped" victim of male desire (Shires 163).

Indeed, while Bathsheba causes much of her own suffering, Hardy nevertheless subjects her to undeserved suffering at the hands of Troy as part of a wider effort to criticize Victorian gender politics. Hardy effects this criticism by presenting Troy as a man who thoughtlessly ruins and abandons the women around him simply because his culture's laws and sexual ideologies allow him to do so. As a sexually experienced bachelor, Troy can court Bathsheba aggressively and skillfully, winning her over despite her initial attempts to resist him. As a man, he can walk away from his romantic indiscretions unscathed, marry Bathsheba, and leave his former lover, Fanny Robin, to die delivering his child in a workhouse. And as Bathsheba's husband, he gains complete jurisdiction over her farm, which he nearly bankrupts, abandons for a year, and then comes back to claim. Importantly, Troy does all this entirely within the bounds of the law. Hardy's criticism, then, is leveled not only at Troy but also at the legal system that condones his behaviour. However, Hardy does not content himself with merely *criticizing* an unjust society, as he does in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891); he doles out his own artistic justice by killing Troy, freeing Bathsheba from the gendered oppression that she experiences as his wife and punishing him for his moral transgressions.

In addition to holding Bathsheba accountable for her actions and criticizing the society in which

she lives for its gender inequalities, Hardy uses his narrative to advance a fatalist perspective by subjecting Bathsheba and other characters to accidents and twists of fate that function as commentary not on specific social conventions but rather on the unpredictable nature of life itself. Bathsheba inherits her uncle's farm unexpectedly; Gabriel's sheepdog then runs his flock off a cliff, leading Gabriel to seek work on that same farm. Bathsheba tosses a hymn book to decide whom to send her valentine to—fate chooses Boldwood. She seals the letter with a seal that she cannot read until it is affixed—it happens to read "MARRY ME" (98). Fanny goes to the wrong church to marry Troy and never gets a second chance. Troy's spur gets caught in Bathsheba's skirt, and they meet and fall in love instead of walking past each other in the dark. Troy is swept out to sea and rescued by sailors but presumed dead on land. Finally, when Troy reappears, Boldwood shoots him to death and is sent to prison, freeing Bathsheba to marry Gabriel and live a modest and wholesome life. These twists of fate direct the characters' lives as much as—if not more than—human agency or social convention, and Hardy uses them to tutor his characters, particularly Bathsheba, in what seems to be, for Hardy, the greatest human virtue: humility.

In Schlesinger's film, however, this interest in fatalism and gender politics takes a back seat; with the glamorous Julie Christie as its star, this adaptation is all

about Bathsheba. In order to be all about Bathsheba, the film magnifies her vanity to the point of hubris and gives her more agency to act on it than she has in the novel. When Gabriel initially proposes, Schlesinger's Bathsheba laughs at him, blithely proclaiming that "I don't love you a bit!" (a line that appears in the novel, but without an indication of how she says it). When she tells Liddy about the proposal, she narcissistically giggles that "he wasn't good enough for me." In Hardy's text, the line is, "He wasn't quite good enough for me" (77), and, as the line is untagged in the novel, Hardy once again does not allow readers access to Bathsheba's interiority at the time or tell us how she says it. Later, when Schlesinger's Bathsheba finds the valentine, she decides on her own to send it to Boldwood instead of tossing a hymn book as she does in the novel. When Troy arrives, she encourages his advances by flirting back instead of resisting him. Then, as events progress and she begins to suffer the consequences of her actions, she loses her vanity but never gains anything from her newfound humility. She simply withers away. By the time Troy dies and she marries Gabriel, she has become a hollowed-out version of her former self, resigned to living a quiet life with Gabriel but showing no sign of her former vitality. By focusing on Bathsheba's moral trajectory and characterizing her as excessively vain for the first three quarters of the film and excessively subdued for the fourth quarter, the film both celebrates and condemns

Bathsheba's vanity: celebrates, because while her vanity gives her joy and satisfaction, her learned humility apparently gives her neither; condemns, because the film nevertheless presents her vanity as the primary origin of her suffering.

By emphasizing Bathsheba's vanity as the primary cause of her own unhappiness, Schlesinger's film engages less than the novel does with Victorian gender politics and loses the sense of fatalism that runs through the novel. To be sure, the film retains the same plot points as the novel. However, because Schlesinger's Bathsheba resists Troy less, Troy simply seems less predatory. Rather than envisioning him as a man who ruins her, the film presents him as an opportunity for Bathsheba to ruin herself, which she does with minimal encouragement. This 1967 depiction of Bathsheba is perhaps not surprising, since it predates the feminist critical attention that the novel received in the 1980s. Conversely, Vinterberg's 2015 film, which depicts Bathsheba as a victim of Victorian gender politics, is a testament to the legacy of that same feminist scholarship.

Schlesinger's film also, as Graham Fuller notes, makes "little attempt to render cinematically Hardy's psychological use of landscape," though Fuller argues that Schlesinger captures "much of human complexity and Hardy's irony and fatalism" by including more of Hardy's plot than Vinterberg's film does (14). I would

argue, however, that in altering Hardy's psychological use of landscape, Schlesinger actually de-emphasizes the fatalist qualities of the novel by instead suggesting through cinematography that Bathsheba and the other characters have the agency to dominate the natural environment. Schlesinger styles his film's rural landscape as sparse and empty, giving it the effect of a blank stage upon which characters perform their lives rather than of a complex natural world that is indifferent to human suffering. It is as if when the characters are not there to experience their individual struggles, nothing happens in the world.

By contrast, Vinterberg's film portrays Bathsheba as having very little agency or vanity. Rather than laughing at Gabriel when he proposes, as Schlesinger's Bathsheba does, Vinterberg's Bathsheba deprecates herself to make him feel better, joking that "you would grow to despise me." When Liddy laughs about the incident later, imagining that Bathsheba had thought something to the effect of "kiss my foot, sir; my face is for mouths of consequence," Vinterberg's Bathsheba quickly responds that "it wasn't like that." Liddy's line appears in the novel—Bathsheba's assertion does not. As in the novel, Bathsheba tosses to decide whom to send the valentine to, allowing fate to guide her. Then, when Troy arrives, she evidently wishes to resist him. Finally, when she learns humility at the end of the film, she seems the better for it. She and Gabriel even

kiss in the final scene, a cinematic assertion of their mutual compatibility that notably does not occur in Schlesinger's film. Of course, the novel does not end in a kiss, which is perhaps why Schlesinger's film does not either, since that film is strenuously faithful to the original plot. However, the absence of a kiss is more significant in the visual medium of film than in the written medium of fiction. Thus Vinterberg's *addition* of a final kiss between Gabriel (the moral compass of the novel and both films) and Bathsheba reinforces that film's vision of Bathsheba as an ultimately moral and humble character.

Because Vinterberg's film portrays Bathsheba as a moral character who lacks agency, it emphasizes the issues of gender politics and fatalism that the novel raises. Like the novel, the film criticizes Troy's predatory treatment of Bathsheba and the Victorian gender politics that empower him. In the film, however, Troy becomes even more predatory than he is in the novel because Vinterberg's Bathsheba unambiguously tries to resist him and is clearly an inherently virtuous character. Vinterberg's film also reflects Hardy's fatalist perspective by emphasizing Bathsheba's lack of agency and by using its cinematography to achieve the reverse effect of Schlesinger's film. Unlike in Schlesinger's film, the landscape in Vinterberg's film is lush and complex, and characters often look out at it in long shots and extreme long shots that remind the audience of the

characters' powerlessness and physical smallness in relation to the natural world. In this way, Vinterberg's film aligns itself, through its wild and seemingly boundless *mise en scène*, with Hardy's insistence on the virtue of humility, since Hardy often contemplates his characters' insignificance in relation to their natural surroundings in order to tutor both his readers and his characters in humility.

Despite these stark differences between the two film adaptations, neither film stands in particularly stark opposition to the source material. Rather, Hardy's novel lends itself to both interpretations by holding Bathsheba accountable for her actions while still insisting that she exists at the mercy of an imperfect society and of fate itself. Like the novel, both films attempt to pin down the origins of human suffering: Schlesinger traces suffering back to an internal human vice—vanity; Vinterberg traces it to external circumstances—society and fate. Hardy, however, leaves the question open to his readers, suggesting that suffering stems from a combination of both internal and external forces and allowing his text to be adapted and interpreted in two radically different ways.

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