

Sheep and Shepherd: The Ambivalent Gender Politics of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Abstract: Some feminist critics have interpreted Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) through a lens of male domination, wherein the novel's heroine, Bathsheba Everdene, is figured as a helpless ewe-lamb, controlled by her male suitors. While I agree that Bathsheba is portrayed this way, I would like to argue that Bathsheba exhibits not only the weak but also the surprisingly powerful characteristics of the novel's sheep. In Bathsheba's relationship with Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba relies on Gabriel for her well-being. However, like the novel's sheep, Bathsheba influences Gabriel both economically and emotionally. This paper demonstrates that unlike Bathsheba's male-dominant relationships with Farmer Boldwood and Sergeant Troy, Bathsheba's relationship with Gabriel (both a literal shepherd on her farm and ultimately her moral shepherd) bestows power on both genders through Bathsheba and Gabriel's mutual reliance on one another.

In 1872, the London *Times* reprinted a Canadian newspaper's account of a thousand sheep falling to their deaths after jumping off a bridge in Upper Canada. When a drover tried to pass the sheep over a bridge, the flock's bell-weather "noticed an open window, and, recognizing his destiny, made a strike for glory and the grave." After he jumped, he "at once appreciated his critical condition, and with a leg stretched toward each cardinal point of the compass, he uttered a plaintive 'Ma-a!' and descended to his fate." The rest of the sheep followed, "imitating the gesture and remark of the leader" until the last sheep "waved adieu to the wick-

ed world” (“Sheep Strike” 9). The author does not mention any attempt by the drover to save the flock, but the sheep’s deaths indicate that the man was powerless to intervene. This article anticipates the representation of sheep in Thomas Hardy’s 1874 novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*. One of Hardy’s opening scenes features two hundred ewes running to their deaths off a cliff, helplessly herded by an overeager sheepdog. The ewes’ shepherd and the protagonist of the novel, Gabriel Oak, fails to prevent their unfortunate fate. Both the article and the novel portray sheep as simultaneously helpless and strangely powerful. In the *Times* article, the sheep lack the foresight to understand the deadly consequences of their actions, but their anthropomorphism grants them authoritative agency that thwarts the intentions of the drover. Similarly, sheep proliferate Hardy’s novel as foolish, helpless creatures that rely on Gabriel for their survival. However, they also profoundly influence Gabriel’s economic and romantic pursuits. The tragic loss of his two hundred ewes devastates Gabriel’s hopes of independent sheep-farming but draws him close to Bathsheba Everdene, the woman he marries at the end of the novel after earning her trust by working as a hired shepherd on her farm.

Deborah Denenholz Morse, Martin A. Donahay, and Grace Moore have shown that animals in Victorian literature illuminate character relationships, reflect gender implications, and offer moral guidance. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Sergeant Troy’s comparison of Bathsheba to a “ewe-lamb” implies that she is an inferior creature to be possessed by men (Hardy 173). Indeed, Linda Shires notes that feminist critics have typically interpreted *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a novel of male domination, pointing to Penny Boumelha’s *Thomas Hardy and Women* (1982; pp. 32–34) and Rosemarie Morgan’s *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (1988; pp. 30–57) as the most conspicuous examples of this tendency to read the novel as “predominantly a male discourse intent on taming the heroine” (Shires 163). Shires herself argues, however, that “gender and power are *not* permanently aligned in the novel” (164; my emphasis), a view that more closely aligns with

that of this study. Whereas Shires argues her case through semiotics, psychoanalysis, and narratology, this paper will demonstrate the ambivalence of gender politics in *Far from the Madding Crowd* by examining Hardy's representations of sheep and their allusive association with Bathsheba. The sheep's simultaneously helpless and powerful qualities offer insight into Bathsheba's relationships with her three suitors: Gabriel Oak, Sergeant Troy, and Farmer Boldwood. Bathsheba demonstrates an increasingly sheep-like weakness when she interacts with Troy and Boldwood and relies on Gabriel to run her farm. However, she demonstrates the powerful qualities of the sheep by influencing the same key aspects of Gabriel's life as the sheep do: the shepherd's financial and romantic ambitions. Bathsheba's relationships with Troy and Boldwood, defined by male power and manipulation, result in disastrous consequences. Only Bathsheba's friendship with Gabriel, characterized by mutual reliance and respect, results in genuine love and serves as a moral standard for male-female relationships. Thus, the ambivalence of gender politics in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, illuminated by Hardy's representations of sheep, condemns male domination and encourages gender equality.

Far from the Madding Crowd portrays sheep as pitiful creatures whose poor reasoning ability hinders them from making wise decisions and positions them at the mercy of those who help or hurt them. The fates of sheep are correlated with the skill of their caretakers. Gabriel, an experienced shepherd "from his youth," does not permit "a hireling or a novice" to tend his flock's newborn lambs, because he knows that the lambs are more likely to survive if he cares for them himself (Hardy 16). Unfortunately, Gabriel's less experienced sheepdog kills all two hundred of Gabriel's pregnant ewes by driving them off a cliff. The ewes do not have the reasoning capacity to save themselves; they merely travel in whatever direction they are driven. The novel's sheep-washing scene further evidences the sheep's lack of agency. Here, Hardy describes the creatures' actions with passive constructions. The sheep do not "enter" the water; they are "pushed into the pool" and "thrust under" (126).

Even when the sheep do perform actively, they make poor decisions because they fail to understand the consequences of their actions. Dozens of Bathsheba's sheep gorge themselves on clover, not realizing that the result—their subsequent bloating—will endanger their lives. Again, the sheep cannot save themselves: Gabriel heals them by piercing a precise spot in their side with “dexterity” comparable to a “hospital surgeon” (141). Bathsheba, responding to the clover crisis, expresses sympathy for the sheep's tendency to experience troubling circumstances: “Sheep are such unfortunate animals—There's always something happening to them!” (137). Without Gabriel, who delivers the sheep from their sufferings and cares for their basic needs, the animals would not survive.

However, though they rely on their shepherd immensely, the sheep also demonstrate enormous influence over two key aspects of Gabriel's life: his economic position and his romantic pursuits. When Gabriel's flock perishes at the beginning of the novel, Gabriel must sell all his possessions to clear his debt from the uninsured sheep. His hopes of independent sheep-farming crushed, “possibly for ever” (41), Gabriel resigns himself to the lowly occupation of a hired shepherd. The sheep's fates also affect Gabriel positively: his search for employment brings him through Weatherbury, the district to which Bathsheba moves after she rejects Gabriel's first marriage proposal. In Weatherbury, Bathsheba hires Gabriel as a shepherd. Had Gabriel's flock not perished, Gabriel would never have seen Bathsheba again, let alone had the opportunity to work with her so closely. Gabriel's superior shepherding skills earn him Bathsheba's trust: after she fires Gabriel for criticizing her treatment of Boldwood, Gabriel's successful treatment of her clover-engorged sheep convinces her to rehire him. Thus, sheep facilitate the development of Gabriel and Bathsheba's working relationship, which eventually leads to friendship and culminates in marriage. Just as the sheep are herded in directions they do not choose, they direct Gabriel's life in ways he cannot control. The creatures rely on Gabriel to survive, but Gabriel depends on the sheep for financial and romantic

success.

Bathsheba displays the reliant and pitiful qualities of the sheep in her interactions with her suitors. Initially content to remain single, Bathsheba rejects her first marriage proposal, from Gabriel, and asserts herself as fully capable in the male world of farming. When Bathsheba begins interacting with Boldwood and Troy, however, she displays the helpless, foolish qualities of the novel's sheep. Bathsheba exercises poor judgment when she gives Boldwood false hope of her romantic affections by sending him a valentine and when she pursues Troy despite numerous warnings regarding his poor character. Bathsheba's marriage to Troy is reminiscent of Gabriel's sheep being herded off a cliff or her own sheep gorging themselves on clover: she marries Troy mindlessly, hopelessly driven by "jealousy and distraction" (249), and she fails to understand the negative consequences of her actions. After Bathsheba marries Troy, she (like her sheep) suffers one misfortune after another: the dilapidation of her farm; Troy's cooling affections and supposed death; Boldwood's increasingly disturbing obsession with her; and, finally, Troy's reappearance and Boldwood's murder of Troy. Bathsheba's servant Liddy comments on the effects of these tragic events on Bathsheba's welfare: "Poor thing: her sufferings have been dreadful: she deserves anybody's pity" (375). Liddy's remark parallels Bathsheba's earlier statement regarding the misfortunes of sheep. As Bathsheba becomes increasingly sheep-like, she desperately needs Gabriel to manage her farm. Distracted at Gabriel's plans to move abroad, Bathsheba expresses her desire for him to stay and help her instead. At the beginning of the novel, free from romantic relationships, Bathsheba is "too independent" (36); at the end, a victim of Troy and Boldwood and utterly reliant on Gabriel, Bathsheba is, like the sheep, "more helpless than ever" (379).

Despite Bathsheba's weakness, in her relationship with Gabriel she holds more power than her "sheep" status might seem to indicate. Bathsheba is by no means inferior to the shepherd. When Gabriel brings her a lamb to raise as a gift, he invites her to become a shepherd, his equal. For

the majority of the novel, Bathsheba's socioeconomic status is actually higher than Gabriel's: she is an independent farmer, and Gabriel is merely her employee. Furthermore, like Gabriel's literal sheep, Bathsheba profoundly influences Gabriel's financial and romantic aspirations, both as his employer and as an active participant in their courtship. Before Gabriel proposes to her for the first time, he resolves that if Bathsheba does not accept him, he will be "good for nothing" (30). Gabriel's response to Bathsheba's rejection indicates that his desire for her remains his most significant ambition: "I shall do one thing in this life—one thing certain—that is, love you, and long for you, and keep wanting you till I die" (35). Later, as Gabriel's employer, Bathsheba can hire or fire Gabriel as she pleases, so he relies on her for his financial well-being. Bathsheba also takes the initiative for their eventual marriage. Gabriel dares not propose to her a second time, believing that Bathsheba views the idea of their marriage as "too absurd" (382). Correcting him, Bathsheba says it is merely "too soon" after Troy's death and encourages Gabriel to propose to her a second time (382). Gabriel does initially appear more powerful than Bathsheba because he is her figurative shepherd, a caretaker of a helpless sheep; however, Gabriel is also Bathsheba's literal shepherd—an employee of an independent farmer. Their relationship, therefore, is characterized by a balance of power that allows Gabriel and Bathsheba to rely on one another for their respective needs.

Mutual reliance does not characterize Bathsheba's relationships with Sergeant Troy and Farmer Boldwood, who render Bathsheba powerless and emotionally manipulate her for their own purposes. Troy's charm makes Bathsheba incapable of refusing any of his demands, from his initial scandalous invitation to an unsupervised meeting to his proposal at their (even more scandalous) rendezvous in Bath. When Bathsheba hesitates to accept Troy's marriage proposal, Troy reacts selfishly and does not demonstrate any empathy toward her; he exploits Bathsheba's jealousy and fear by threatening to leave her for a woman "more beautiful" than she (249). Bathsheba does have some influ-

ence over Boldwood, as she does not return his affections. However, Bathsheba's rejection of Boldwood causes her to feel that she is "inherently the weaker vessel," a sentiment that ultimately bestows the greater power on Boldwood (201). Eventually, Boldwood's manipulation and obsessive persistence weakens any power that Bathsheba initially holds in their relationship. After Troy supposedly drowns, Bathsheba does not wish to remarry, because she intuitively perceives that her husband is still alive. However, Boldwood manipulates Bathsheba into accepting his engagement by demanding her answer right before he hosts a large party celebrating her acceptance. Bathsheba, pitying Boldwood severely and fearing his humiliation should she refuse him, agrees to marry Boldwood in seven years if Troy does not reappear. Boldwood, like Troy, cares little about Bathsheba's wishes or well-being; both men abuse their power over the woman for the sole purpose of attaining her as a wife.

Juxtaposed with Bathsheba's relationships with Boldwood and Troy, Gabriel and Bathsheba's allegorical relationship of a shepherd and a sheep serves as the novel's best model for male-female power dynamics. Animals in Victorian literature occasionally exemplify a moral standard (Morse and Donahay 1), but Hardy's sheep and their shepherd serve an even higher spiritual lesson. In the Bible, Christ is referred to as the "good shepherd" of his sheep, the church (John 10.11). This biblical allusion elevates Gabriel, the only shepherd in the novel, above Troy and Boldwood and positions his relationship with the ewe-lamb Bathsheba as the model that Victorian society should emulate. Gabriel's care for Bathsheba is characterized not by the emotionally manipulative power of Boldwood and Troy but by the "pastoral power" of a shepherd over his sheep. "Pastoral power," a term coined by Michel Foucault, is the power of compassionate "care" rather than "biopolitical domination" (Kreilkamp 475). Gabriel tends his flock with kindness, valuing his ewes' lives over his own. When his sheep perish, Gabriel's "first" thought is not of his ruined financial position but of "pity" for the premature deaths of the ewes and their unborn lambs (Hardy 41). Similarly, after

Bathsheba rejects Gabriel's first marriage proposal, Gabriel continues to care for her selflessly by tending her farm and preventing her employees from gossiping about her. Unlike Troy and Boldwood, Gabriel prioritizes Bathsheba's welfare over his desire to marry her. He would rather see Bathsheba wedded to another man than suffer a tarnished reputation: when Gabriel believes that Troy has compromised Bathsheba sexually, he offers Troy money to marry her, not realizing that the two have already exchanged vows. Boldwood's and Troy's manipulative power over Bathsheba does not lead to lasting love but to disastrous consequences: Boldwood's murder of Troy, Boldwood's incarceration, and Bathsheba's psychological trauma, which takes such a physical and emotional toll on her that her old acquaintances "wouldn't know her" (375). Only Gabriel's pastoral power leads to a marriage born of true friendship. Thus, Hardy's moral standard for gender relationships is that of sacrificial love rather than male domination.

Arguably, the shepherd-sheep relationship between Bathsheba and Gabriel is patronizing and, by extension, demeaning to women. Bathsheba cannot possibly attain the position of Gabriel, a symbolic Christ. However, the biblical allusion does not comprise the whole of Hardy's moral argument but rather lends it powerful moral significance. Hardy's model for successful male-female relationships extends beyond a shepherd's selfless care for a pitiful sheep. Hardy's sheep influence Gabriel immensely by pivoting him between wealth and poverty, between love and loneliness. Bathsheba also possesses the power to develop or to decimate Gabriel's economic position and life goals. Furthermore, Gabriel does not view Bathsheba as an inferior sheep. His gift of the lamb and his respect for the woman's position as his employer prove that he sees Bathsheba as his equal. Bathsheba may occasionally be helpless, but her dependence on Gabriel is balanced with his reliance on her. Unlike Bathsheba's relationships with Troy and Boldwood, Bathsheba's friendship with Gabriel is characterized by mutual respect rather than an imbalance of power. This is the standard for male-female relationships in *Far from the Madding*

Crowd. By positioning Gabriel and Bathsheba's relationship as the novel's only successful one and by bestowing it with religious significance, Hardy's novel encourages its readers to embrace the moral standard of gender equality.

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