

Women's Rights to Property: A Feminist Reading of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Abstract: During the Victorian period, women hardly enjoyed their rights because of the restrictive English laws of the nineteenth century. At the age, a woman could not make a decision nor own property unlike men who had all privileges both in the family and society. Hardy's strong and unusual female character questions these traditions and customs in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He reverses the oppressive system in favour of women's empowerment in society. By implementing close reading and liberal feminist critique, this paper demonstrates that Hardy is a human rights' activist who uses his main female character to castigate Victorian traditions, social class and forced marriage thereby reshaping the position of women in his time.

Keywords: Victorian culture, women, liberal feminism, financial power, patriarchal society

Résumé : Dans la culture victorienne, les femmes jouissaient difficilement de leurs droits en raison des lois anglaises restrictives du XIXe siècle. À cette époque, une femme ne pouvait ni prendre de décisions ni posséder certains biens contrairement aux hommes qui bénéficiaient de tous les privilèges tant au sein de la famille que dans la société. En mettant en scène un personnage féminin puissant et atypique qui remet en question ces traditions et coutumes dans *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy tente certainement de renverser ce système oppressif au profit de l'autonomisation des femmes dans la société. Mettant en œuvre la lecture attentive et le féminisme libéral, cet article démontre que Hardy est un militant des droits de l'homme qui utilise son principal personnage féminin pour fustiger les traditions victorienne, la classe sociale et le mariage forcé, modifiant ainsi le rôle des femmes à son époque.

Mots-clés : culture victorienne, femmes, féminisme libéral, pouvoir financier, société patriarcale

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, Victorian society was male-dominated. Its culture was extremely biased and prejudicial to women in terms of human rights' distribution since it "inherited an array of common, civil and ecclesiastical courts of law, and [its] legal system was complex" (S. Purchase, 2006, p. 89). While men were, for instance, entitled to all properties both in the family and society, women had almost nothing. They were expected to marry and serve their husbands in the private sphere according to the laws enacted at the age. In this light, D. Gorham (2013, p. 101) reveals that "The [. . .] role for which the Victorian [woman] was supposed to be preparing herself for was that of wife and mother." Yet, by the end of the century, feminist criticism started to emerge in many domains, especially in mainstream literature. It aimed to overthrow these discriminatory laws and customs by reconsidering the position of women in England. The goal of this outburst is doubtlessly to grant women as many rights as men. Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a text, which is inscribed in this dynamic since it serves as a social commentary on Victorian prejudicial traditions. For N. Saeed et al. (2020, p. 61), "Hardy attacked the Victorian standards where women had low status and were treated as inferior creatures."

Though the novel follows the third person narrative perspective, it blatantly deals with the harsh experiences of a woman named Bathsheba Everdene who grapples between cultural expectations and personal ambitions. In fact, being concerned with building a career and owning a lot of properties at the same level as men, Bathsheba violates the marriage institution of Victorian society. By rejecting several men who propose to her in the story, she ultimately achieves her purpose since she owns a farm and earns more money in her patriarchal culture. Early in the story, Bathsheba realizes that marriage can hamper a woman's ambition. Thus, she discards all her suitors' proposals by focusing on her dreams in life, which seems to be the only path through which she can reach self-realization. In this respect, the following questions are worth raising: in which ways does Hardy's novel serve as a catalyst for overthrowing Victorian customs and improving the woman's status? In other words, how is Hardy's female characterization challenging and empowering with regard to women's rights to property?

While many critics such as Mojdeh Mirzaee, Moshir Rahaman and Nusrat Nilufer refer to Hardy as a feminist writer, this contribution claims that he is probably not one. Regarding his female characterization, it is possible to label him as an advocate for the woman's cause as S. Manzoor (2015, p. 57) observes, "Hardy is a supporter of class and female liberation." Hence, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Hardy is a human rights' activist who coins the main female character, Bathsheba Everdene to castigate Victorian traditions, social class and forced marriage thereby reshaping the position of women. In his conception, both men and women deserve the same rights and opportunities. Under such circumstances, one group should not be favoured at the expense of the other. According to P. Davis (2008, p. 159), for "Thomas Hardy: nothing is worth believing [such as the discriminatory laws of Victorian society] unless it can overcome the obstacles, the objections, the sufferings that [he] [...] represents in his very existence."

This article implements close reading method to assess Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, paying attention to specific aspects of the novel such as female characterisation, the plot and the narrative in order to unravel the underlying messages. According to D. Fisher and N. Frey (2013, p. 57), "In close reading, the reader has to develop a fairly sophisticated understanding of what the author actually said [...] Readers should develop an understanding of the author's words and bring their own experiences, beliefs, and ideas to bear on the text." In addition, the investigation deploys liberal feminism in order to demonstrate how Hardy's fictional work claims for women's rights in his gender-based society. Liberal feminists are mainly concerned with the social, political and economic position of women in society. They criticise female subjugation and confinement in the domestic space caused by patriarchal structures. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the leading liberal feminist figure, Mary Wollstonecraft focuses on "equal rights" between men and women. For her, women can only be independent when they are given "equal opportunities" as men to undertake and activate their potential in society. Thus, she claims that women are as "rational" (M. Wollstonecraft, 2014, Chap. I) as men, which means that they are capable of working and earning properties. By exploring the aforementioned concepts, the research points out how Victorian gender norms favour men at the expense of women. The article initially investigates how Hardy's main female character, Bathsheba challenges

Victorian customs and laws through her atypical conduct. Subsequently, it examines social convention versus Bathsheba's ambition, then eventually addresses the empowerment of Bathsheba through her high social position.

I. Bathsheba's Defiance of Victorian Customs and Laws

In the course of the narrative of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the reader is strikingly acquainted with how the bold female protagonist, Bathsheba challenges Victorian societal expectations placed upon women and acts on her own. According to Victorian gender norms, a woman of her age must marry and meet her husband's needs without questioning anything in the private sphere; yet her act of rejecting marriage proposals by three men in the course of the story seems to have shocked all Victorians. It seems that she early happens to realise the danger that lurks behind marrying in the context of her society; so, she delays it in order to reach a degree of freedom before dealing with this question. In the opening of the story, one of the suitors who urges Bathsheba to marry him is Mr. Boldwood, but she rebukes him because she is not ready to do so. Their conversation highlights it well:

“Mr. Boldwood, hesitation on so high a matter is honourable in any woman, and I don't want to give a solemn promise to-night. I would rather ask to wait a few weeks till I can see my situation better

“But you have every reason to believe that then— —”

“I have every reason to hope that at the end of the five or six weeks, between this time and harvest, that you say you are going to be away from home, I shall be able to promise to be your wife,” she[Bathsheba] said, firmly. “But remember this distinctly, I don't promise yet.”

“It is enough I don't ask more. I can wait on those dear words. And now Miss Everdene, good-night” (*Far from the Madding Crowd*¹, p. 189).

Indeed, through this exchange Bathsheba is cautious and wise. This suggests that she does not want to destroy her dream because of someone who is yet to rule it over her in the domestic space. For her, validating Mr. Boldwood's proposal on their first date might lead him to exert authority over her. So, she plays the game so that she can gain empowerment in the process before taking a final decision. In this perspective, one can share M. Mojdeh's (2025, p. 921) observation that “Bathsheba's exploration shows the

¹ Hereafter, all subsequent quotes from this novel are shown by this acronym 'FMC' followed by the page numbers

conflicts of women yearning for autonomy and self-identity, which make her a prominent personality in the realm of modern feminist literature.”

As the plot builds further, Bathsheba fiercely claims for equality with men in her environment. This is seen through her obsession with the outside world rather than the house where she is expected to stay and serve a man. Indeed, the guts Bathsheba has to speak out to men around her shape her as an atypical female character. At her time, very few women could dare open their mouths before men who were regarded as masters; yet in chapter X entitled ‘Mistress and Men’, the reader is struck by the way Bathsheba gives orders to male characters and they obey her instantly. For instance, concerning the management of her farm, she takes firm resolutions before the male workers as the narrator accounts for it:

Now before I begin, men,” said Bathsheba, “I have two matters to speak of. The first is that the bailiff is dismissed for thieving, and that I have formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with my own head and hands.”

The men breathed an audible breath of amazement. (FMC, p. 91)

By having the power to speak her mind and taking decisions, Bathsheba courageously steps out of the snare of Victorian definition of femininity. She tears off the dress of the angel in the house, pre-empting thus the image of the new woman as N. Rahaman and N. Nilufer (2017, p. 35) insightfully argue:

Bathsheba really shows what she’s made of when she decides to fire her farm’s manager and to run the place herself. For men working under her, this is an unthinkable thing to do. But again, [she] is ready for the challenge, telling them. She goes on to do a very good job of running the farm, which makes pretty freaking ahead of her time.

In the context of Victorian society, Bathsheba’s rights to inheritance can be perceived as a challenging and subversive act. According to the laws of the time, under marriage, Bathsheba herself is to be taken as a property by her husband since:

On Marriage, the control of woman’s real property and income from woman’s real property, that is property held in the form of freehold land, passed under common law to her husband, though he could not dispose of it without her consent. Her personal property, that is, money from earnings or investments, and personal belongings such as jewellery, passed absolutely into his control. (A. Chattopadhyay, 2011, p. 24)

Yet, in Bathsheba’s case, having cancelled premature marriage gives her the possibility to make justice for herself through her entitlement to properties just as men. It is, therefore, hard to deny that through Bathsheba, Hardy seems to condemn the English

laws of the time, especially regarding its unfair treatment of women in favour of men as M. L. Shanley (1944, p. 4) points out, “Victorian [novelists] [. . .] took it as their task to expose the falsity of the idealization of marriage and to show how repressive marriage and family life could be for women.” This is certainly the reason why many critics view Hardy as a feminist writer since his works consistently highlight the constraints placed on women as well as portraying female characters with depth, autonomy and moral prestige. However, it would be more accurate to identify him as a broader human rights’ advocator. His critique extends to all individuals suffering under social injustice, rigid conventions and unequal power structures. His empathy is not limited to gender, but encompasses anyone oppressed by societal norms.

II. Social Convention Versus Bathsheba’s Ambition

In this story set in the nineteenth century, Bathsheba eagerly yearns for independence. Her desire for autonomy is revealed through her implication in the public sphere. Rather than serving as a domestic figure throughout her lifetime, she strongly defies authorities and shapes her own fate. Markedly, it is Bathsheba’s self-determination that provides her with the necessary means to forge her destiny. Despite being a woman, she is able to make up her mind, which helps her build her career, especially in farming where she employs Gabriel Oak to supervise her properties as the narrator unveils:

The wheat when threshed would average about thirty quarters to each stack; the barley, at least forty. Their value to Bathsheba, and indeed to anybody, Oak mentally estimated by the following simple calculation [. . .] Seven hundred and fifty pounds in the divinest form that money can wear—that of necessary food for man and beast: should the risk be run of deteriorating this bulk of corn to less than half its value, because of the instability of a woman? Never, if I can prevent it! said Gabriel. (FMC, p. 290)

This extract accounts for Oak’s jealousy of Bathsheba’s earnings from the farm. At the same time, it presents her as a strong woman whom men like Oak cannot dispossess of her wealth as she is so clever to protect it. L. Shires (1991, p. 166) highlights it thus “Oak’s story is that of the loss and regaining of power and masculinity. With his initial failure at shepherding, he loses all stakes in a better life and must start over, humbling himself, as it turns out, before Bathsheba. He becomes, in fact, a servant to the woman farmer.” In the eyes of all Victorians, Bathsheba’s fame is extremely shocking and she needs to be disciplined because of her unwillingness to conform to the sphere defined

for her. As a woman, she is supposed to yearn for a wedding instead of competing with male figures in the public sphere since “Victorian social structures and institutions tried to impose a single version of ideal femininity, much at odds with women’s own sense of their experience” (M. Moran, 2006, p. 35). Regarding these circumstances, it is possible to state that Bathsheba’s freedom results from her economic empowerment in spite of the strict gender norms of the age designed for humbling female lust for the outside world.

Furthermore, the protagonist Bathsheba has a strong sense of business. Her idea of business is highlighted when she is left to run the properties of her deceased uncle, which she has done so perfectly. Remarkably, when she senses that male managers are likely to waste her inheritance due to their mismanagement, she takes the responsibility to run it herself, telling them, “[she] [has] formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with [her] own head and hands” (FMC, p. 91). This excerpt throws light on Bathsheba’s ability to undertake and thrive just as men in society. Her managerial skills align with Wollstonecraft’s view that women are as rational as men in the public sphere, disavowing Victorian prejudicial laws. On this matter, L. Yue (2016, p. 60) asserts, “Bathsheba has an avant-garde view of career. She relies on herself and strove for her own dignity. [She] made money on her own, because she knew that financial independence supported the spiritual independence.”

In this narrative, it also appears that Bathsheba’s knowledge and skills in supervising the male workers on her farm are striking. Despite the large number of workers she directs, when time comes to pay their salaries, she proves lucid and sharp since she carefully calculates their payments and solve them out without any problem. Her exchange with her employees is revealing:

“How much do I owe you— that man in the corner— what’s your name?” continued Bathsheba.

“Matthew Moon, ma’am,” said a singular framework of clothes with nothing of any consequence inside them, which advanced with the toes in no definite direction forwards, but turned in or out as they chanced to swing.

“Matthew Moon, mem,” said Henery Fray, correctingly, from behind her chair, to whoch point he had edged himself.

“Matthew Moon,” murmured Bathsheba, turning her bright eyes to the book. “Ten and twopence halfpenny is the sum put down to you, I see?”

“Yes, mis’ ess,” said Matthew, as the rustle of wind among dead leaves.

“Here, it is, and ten shillings. (FMC, pp. 92-93)

This dialogue gives a clue that Bathsheba is a good economist since she is as rational as men in the sphere of work. She skillfully calculates her workers' salaries and pays all of them. Her example thus illustrates that Victorian gender norms tend to be prejudicial to women, labelling them as irrational and domestic figures. According to A. Chattopadhyay (2011, p. 23), "Hardy's women toil and labour, the physical reality of exhaustion leaves woman as it leaves man. Hardy begins where the majority of Victorian novelists left off, with real, flesh-and-blood women: and he begins with radical verve."

III. Portrayal of Bathsheba's Empowerment

In the story of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba can be seen as an emergent woman. Her emergence stems from the fact that she can make personal decisions. As discovered through the novel, had she failed to decide on her own, she would have ended up into early marriage. This kind of marriage can threaten the career of a woman; and Bathsheba, it seems, is quite aware of this danger. The narrator unravels her story thus:

The news which one day reached Gabriel, that Bathsheba Everdene had left the neighbourhood, had an influence upon him [. . .] It may have been observed that there is no regular path for getting out of love as there is for getting in. Some people look upon marriage as a short cut that way, but it has been known to fail [in Bathsheba's case]." (FMC, p. 41)

This passage sheds light on Bathsheba's cleverness as she attempts to escape from Victorian domesticity by prioritizing her well-being and future life. Moshir Rahman and Nusrat Nilufer corroborate this idea when they argue:

The spheres of women in Hardy's world are wider yet remained well within the area of possibility and plausibility. Going against the social code, the women, in Hardy's world, worked outside the home both in conventional and unconventional occupations. They travelled alone from the neighbourhood, got on upon enterprises starting relationships of their own choices. (M. Rahman & N. Nilufer, 2017, p. 35)

What is also outstanding about Bathsheba is that she owns the necessary properties, which allows her to stand on an equal footing with men since "[her] property in wheat was safe" (FMC, p. 293). In the scene of Weatherbury, inheriting her uncle's farm and hiring her suitor, Gabriel Oak to work for her represent two actions that strongly shake Victorians. At the same time, these acts highlight that she achieves

equality with men who can no longer dictate her things as L. Yue (2016, p. 65) insightfully observes:

Bathsheba was creative and bold in many ways. She expected to work outside of home and support herself decently, so she took over her uncle's farm and swore to make a difference; she dreamed for a totally different management system in her farm, so she discarded the old model and dismissed the steward; she yearned for keeping up with the trend, so she wore fashionable clothes and learned popular manners, Bathsheba's dream showed that she was willing to accept new things and willing to change herself with the process of society, which was a valuable quality compared with the relatively conservative mass in Victorian period. (L. Yue, 2016, p. 65)

Finally, Bathsheba's resilience is also highlighted through her meticulousness and wisdom. Willing to control her properties and protect them from robbery, she decides to manage them herself instead of hiring a bailiff. She declares that she needs "no bailiff at all, [she wants] to manage everything with [her] own head and hands" (FMC, p. 91). Her assertion reveals her intention to save her fortune. In this framework, Bathsheba's economical skills are unearthed, demonstrating her ability to sort out work issues independently. All this sums up her full autonomy in Victorian patriarchal society as Mojdeh Mirzae accurately writes:

Bathsheba's supervision of her own farm is anti-feminine, as it illustrates an unending quest for women's emancipation in male dominated society. Her resolve is conspicuous in her interpersonal relationships in which she is challenging institution of marriage which has gone awry and shows the ownership of her farm. (M. Mirzae, 2025, p. 923)

As highlighted, Bathsheba gains true agency and empowerment through her commitment and unwillingness to submit to traditional gender roles in Victorian society. In the public sphere, which was long denied to women in her culture, she proves to be as skilful as men. Hence, she emerges as a new woman and a role model for many young women who need to emulate her example for their own emancipation.

Conclusion

This article has proven women's rights to property in Victorian society through the example of Thomas Hardy's female protagonist, Bathsheba Everdene. As discussed, even though most women were prevented from working outside the domestic sphere at the age, Bathsheba proves to be different. Her difference is displayed through a number of challenging acts, which come as follow: she initially condemns Victorian institution of marriage by turning down three men's proposals in the story. Subsequently, she goes against the gender norms of the time that define home as the only sphere of work for

women. In proceeding so, she breaks out of the domestic snare and engages in farming, which guarantees her economic power. Ultimately, the fact of being able to take decisions and manage her own stuff helps Bathsheba increase her earnings and properties, culminating in her growth and self-esteem. This also makes it possible for her to employ male workers and pay them on her own term.

Through the heroine, Bathsheba, Hardy seems to proclaim women's managerial skills and independence. Thus, he pre-empted modern feminist critics, writing in favour of gender equality and the new woman. His over concern with gender justice in the world aligns with Mary Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism, which requires equal opportunities for men and women in society. Yet, it should be recalled that Hardy is not a feminist, but "a supporter of female liberation" (S. Manzoor, 2015, p. 57). In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, setting Bathsheba free to express herself, Hardy gives her the possibility to reveal her talent and potential, especially through running her enterprise. She is able to supervise her farm, employ workers to work on it and accurately sort out their monthly salaries. In this respect, she stands as a self-assured and empowered woman in whose footsteps women can walk in order to vindicate and protect their rights. Wrapping up everything, it is possible to maintain that Hardy portrays Bathsheba as the symbol of hope, strength and success for all women across the globe.

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