

In Defense of Ethelberta's Marriage

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Synopsis: What does Ethelberta's marriage to the aristocratic Mountclere family mean in Thomas Hardy's *The Hand of Ethelberta*? Her family is not penurious and does not need her help to survive. Nevertheless, she manages to contract a loveless marriage of convenience to an elderly man above her social standing in order to support her family financially and give them an opportunity of education by abandoning her lover. Her marriage is intimately related to the roles that she herself takes on in her family. She performs the roles of a surrogate father, a surrogate mother and a docile daughter in the Victorian era. This paper examines how she behaves to her family as surrogate father and mother, and how she enters into a marriage of convenience to an old man as a daughter in the Victorian era.

What is the significance of Ethelberta Chickerel's marriage in Thomas Hardy's *The Hand of Ethelberta*? Does Ethelberta's feeling of responsibility toward her family parallel that of Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* toward her improvident family? Tess gains financial support from Alec D'Urberville for her family, especially for her young brothers and sisters, at the expense of her virtue. Therefore, on one hand, she utilizes her sexuality in order to gain financial help from Alec, but, on the other hand, she is a victim of her sexuality. Tess's cohabitation with Alec, therefore, is very profitable for her lazy parents. Tess continues to be concerned about the fate of her family after her death, so she implores Angel Clare to marry her sister Liza-Lu. In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, there are different values at play from the perspective of Ethelberta's marriage to Lord Mountclere. Her father is working as a butler and "the remuneration was actually greater than in professions ten times as stately in name" (211). In addition, her elder brothers "Sol and Dan required no material help; they had quickly obtained good places of work under a Pimlico builder" (211). Unlike Tess's family,

Ethelberta's family is not penurious and does not need her help to survive. Therefore, Tess entered into a marriage to provide for her family, but why does Ethelberta contract a loveless marriage with an elderly man for money?

Hardy wrote *The Hand of Ethelberta* immediately after *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in which Gabriel Oak's success was won through Hardy's compromise with the patriarchal structures of his day. Oak's marriage to Bathsheba at the end of the story was the result of her "taming" brought about by three male characters, Oak, Boldwood, and Troy.² However, while Hardy made the male protagonist of *The Hand of Ethelberta* invisible, he made the female protagonist control much of the action. This reversal of the sexual foreground brings issues of social class, gender relations, and patriarchal structures into sharp relief through Ethelberta's marriage in the Victorian era.

1

It is important to remark on Ethelberta's role among her family. She is not responsible for supporting her family in any way. Her father, Chickereel, spends most of his life as a butler in Doncastle's mansion, and has no intention of quitting his job for the sake of his family's future: "He'll never give up his present way of life – it has grown to be a part of his nature. Poor man, he never feels at home except in somebody else's house, and is nervous and quite a stranger in his own. Such is the fatal effects of service!" (117). When Ethelberta requests him to change his profession, he makes a most self-centered announcement:

'Oh no, I'll stick where I am, for here I am safe as to food and shelter at any rate. Surely, Ethelberta, it is only right that I, who ought to keep you all, should at least keep your mother and myself? As to my position, that we cannot help; and I don't mind that you are unable to own me.' (215–216)

Chickereel's repeated use of the pronoun "I" reveals his lack of consciousness about his obligations to his family. He worries only about himself. Therefore, the lack of father's figure in the home necessitates the appearance of a surrogate father with the ability to control and provide for the rest of family; Ethelberta fills these shoes. Albert J. Guerard uses the phrase "the masculinity of Ethelberta" (109) to allude to Ethelberta's predominance over her suitors. This phrase means that she is freed from feminine weakness in the game of courtship and marriage. Her masculinity in courtship is related to her masculinity at home: her paternal role as surrogate father. Her father is too absorbed in his work and has neglected his family, and her two elder brothers ask her "to leave them themselves" (123). Therefore, Ethelberta feels that she must exercise her "masculinity" effectively at home and take upon herself the paternal role of provider for her large family. The fact that she must take over the helm of her family instead of her father and brothers not only poses a question about the patriarchal family but justifies her marriage.

Unfortunately, Ethelberta must also play the role of her sick mother, and care for her young sisters and brothers because her elder sisters work away from home; she tucks them into bed, and sits up to repair "the damage alluded to by cutting off half an inch of the skirt all round and hemming it anew," (182) and she worries about their education while they sleep; Ethelberta adopts a maternal attitude toward her invalid mother and tries to provide her working brothers with an opportunity for education by conducting them on tours through the Royal Academy. "Ethelberta did everything" (133) for her family through her "motherly guard over her young sisters" (162). In fact, she only agrees to marry Lord Mountclere on the condition that he should do everything in his power to facilitate a marriage between Picotee and Julian Christopher: "That little figure is my dearest sister. Could you but ensure a marriage between her and him she listens to, I would do anything you wish!" (314). The reader is also able to clearly decipher Ethel-

berta's self-sacrificing nature from Picotee's conversation with Ethelberta, on the eve of her second marriage:

'Berta, I am sometimes uneasy about you even now, and I want to ask you one thing, if I may. Are you doing this (marrying to Mountclere) for my sake? Would you have married Mr. Julian if it had not been for me?

'It is difficult to say exactly. It is possible that if I had had no relations at all, I might have married him.' (349)

What is notable about this conversation is that Ethelberta thinks it is important to value her family above herself. Eventually, Ethelberta manages to get Picotee to marry Julian, with a large dowry. Not only her family but "Picotee obeyed orders with the abstracted ease of mind which people show who have their thinking done for them and put out their troubles as they do their washing" (133). Her family's dependence upon her requires Ethelberta to play the paternal and maternal roles. Evelyn Hardy describes her as having "earned a kind of sexlessness" (149); that is, she is sexless at home as well as in matters of courtship. Therefore, at the end of the story, she will have borne no children because she rationally chooses to marry a man who is probably too old to procreate. It can be said, then, that Ethelberta has fathered and mothered a large family even before her marriage. "As is often the case in nineteenth-century, a female character's choice of husband is the equivalent of a choice of identity" (Nemesvari 166). Ethelberta is very aware of this, so she assumes responsibility for her family's future as both father and mother. Finally, as Lady Mountclere, she becomes "my lord and my lady" (399) of estate management instead of a sex object.

2

Shanta Dutta argues that "Ethelberta is unique among the Hardy

sisterhood in the sense that she is apparently in total control of her own destiny” (23). However, in this study, I put forth a contrary viewpoint. Her father’s selfish disregard for his family and her mother’s inability to protect them unfortunately shape Ethelberta’s destiny: the question of whom she will marry. Ethelberta refuses to yield to her mother-in-law’s demand to suppress her published poems; in doing so, she destroys any hope of a financially independent future. The only way in which a woman at that time could ensure her social position was to marry, so she could be reliant on her husband. This necessity justifies Ethelberta’s pursuit of marriage because she bears responsibility for her family: “I have brought mother and the children to town against her judgment and against my father’s . . . we must not be poor in London.” (171)

Penny Boumelha remarks that “Ethelberta takes the pursuit of marriage . . . quite literally as her career” (247), and that “Ethelberta’s ambition must be accepted for what it is, not as disguised self-sacrifice, but simply as ambition” (250). If Ethelberta were only an adventuress, she would not suffer from a choice of a marital partner. Ethelberta’s desire to expose her deception to attain a good marriage partner is persistent right until her marriage to Lord Mountclere:

‘I have decided to give up romancing because I cannot think of any more that please me. . . . I will never be a governess again: I would rather be a servant. If I am a school-mistress I shall be entirely free from all contact with great, which is what I desire, for I hate them, and am getting almost as revolutionary as Sol. Father, I cannot endure this kind of existence any longer. I sleep at night as if I had committed a murder: I start up and see under false pretences – all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. Mother’s suggestion about my marrying I followed out as far as dogged resolution would carry me, but during my journey here I have broken down; for I don’t want to marry a second time among people who would regard me as an upstart or intruder. I am sick of ambition. My only long-

ing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace.' (284–285)

This passage reveals Ethelberta's mental conflict between her simple wish to give her family greater security and a better opportunity for development and her ardent desire to return to an earlier self. Although she eventually enters into a marriage of convenience to secure her family's future, she is also determined to hold her family together at any cost. She must resignedly choose her marriage partner because there is no suitable alternative for "a defenseless young widow" (302) of Sir Ralph Petherwin's son. Indeed, she secretly visits Alfred Neigh's desolate estate at Farnfield in order to estimate his material worth as one of her potential suitors because her decision undoubtedly depends on the financial situation of her suitor.

Dutta remarks that "[t]he success of her schemes for her family's improvement depends on possessing a 'cold heart'" (27). In her social climb from Berta Chickereel to Lady Mountclere, her second marriage represents the victory of reason over passion. By enduring her mental conflict about her choice of husband, her character can develop rationally, and she emerges as the family protector. Picotee's closing remarks are symbolic of her continued child-like dependence on Ethelberta as rational and reliable sister. The very idea of Ethelberta who manages to marry for money is reminiscent of one of Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, who "wished to raise the class at the expense of individual rather than individuals at the expense of the class" (171). Ethelberta's inability to engage in profound communication with her elder sisters, Gwendoline and Cornelia, reinforces her decision to provide the remaining children with a good education. Her marriage to Lord Mountclere enables her to fulfill this duty although her heart aches at the "sense of disloyalty to her class and kin" (166). Therefore, she explains to her ex-lover Julian that she must engage in a marriage of convenience in order to support her family, and his uncertain prospects as a struggling musi-

cian make an engagement to him impractical, in spite of the fact that “I (Ethelberta) have never seen a man(Julian) I hate less” (54). Although Ethelberta’s runaway marriage to young Petherwin is very vaguely narrated at the beginning of the story, it is safe to assume that her relationship with Julian predated it: “she jilted me (Julian) and married the son” (26). The disunion of Ethelberta and Julian arose because of his economic constraint as a man lacking in ambition and having no inherited wealth. For Ethelberta, love interest was secondary to the interests of her beloved family.

3

Why does Ethelberta opt for a mercenary marriage just to support her family? As already mentioned, she voluntarily accepts, on behalf of her parents, the role of caretaker for the family. As Peter Widdowson notes, “she is presented as the creation of circumstance” (193); Ethelberta’s complicated circumstance makes her choose Lord Mountclere as her husband. This begs the question, “what is the circumstance?” In the Victorian era, “[f]amilies were taking a much more active role in their daughter’s courtship” (Gillis 256). However, Ethelberta’s family, especially her father and brother Sol, express strong objection to her marriage. Aware of this opposition, Ethelberta does not make public the news of her engagement to Lord Mountclere. Her father, Sol and Edgar, Lord Mountclere’s brother, undertake the journey to prevent the impending wedding. Even after she discovers the fact that her husband has a mistress living on his estate, her family refuses to aid her in her subsequent flight from Enckworth Court. In fact, Sol is violently resentful of her hasty marriage into the aristocratic Mountclere family:

‘Berta, you have worked to false lines. A creeping up among the useless lumber of our nation that’ll be the first to burn if there comes a flare. I never see such a deserter of your own lot as you be!

. . . I am ashamed of 'ee. More than that, a good woman never marries twice.' (376)

Ironically enough, her marriage, which she entered into to keep her family together, alienates her most completely from them. She makes a marriage of convenience within the system of Victorian marriage while her father and brothers, who should force her to marry a rich man, opposes her marriage. This inconsistency foregrounds issues of Victorian marriage systems.

Ethelberta's ambitions to join the aristocracy are utterly repugnant to her family, especially her father and Sol, who bitterly reproach her. But she nonetheless involves herself in her own mission. Ethelberta overrides her family's objection to her marriage; this act is important from the perspective of the role assigned to daughters in Victorian society. John R. Gillis remarks that "[t]he decision to marry was influenced by a variety of factors, not the least of which was the cost of bringing up a family" (112). When a daughter in the Victorian era decides to marry, she must fully consider the prospects for both her own married life and the life of her family. Ethelberta is very aware of this: "Here were bright little minds ready for a training, which without money and influence she could never give them. . . . Would not a well-contrived marriage be of service?" (182) In addition to this, Gillis makes the following remarks about the daughter-family relationship:

 Laboring people, dependent themselves on wages, had no way to endow their children. . . . It was now in the interests of parents to encourage the independence of their children, sending the girls into service in their early teens, encouraging the boys to migrate or to marry as soon as they could earn their own bread. (114)

The Chickereels dispatched young Ethelberta as a governess to Sir Ralph Petherwin's mansion so that she could earn her keep; once there, she

married Sir Ralph's son. Her marriage was the result of the compelling circumstances of the Victorian family convention about marriage. In the words of F. M. L. Thompson, "[s]pecial scorn was reserved for daughters who formed attachments, or actually married, beneath themselves" (99). Therefore, Ethelberta, as Mrs. Petherwin, could not contract a second marriage with poor Julian, who was beneath her social standing.

Faced with the choice of giving her hand without love to acquire wealth and social status, or marrying one she loves with no hope for wealth, Ethelberta makes her choice by turning for guidance to the pages of John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. Upon reading that one should choose the greatest good for the greatest number, she accepts this doctrine as a principle and vows "to marry for the good of her family" (289) the sly viscount Mountclere. Ethelberta justifies her commercial view of marriage not by obedience to parental wishes, but by attachment to Victorian social thinking about marriage, which was created by men. When Ethelberta talks to Picotee about Julian, she warns Picotee about various sayings about courtship and marriage: "So, it is, for the man's purpose. But don't you go believing in sayings, Picotee: they are all made by men, for their own advantages" (145). This warning applies to Ethelberta herself. Mill's words as well as Victorian views on the institution of marriage were all created by men for their own advantages. Clarice Short remarks that "Ethelberta's will and reason, rather than her feelings, control her action" (53); therefore, her will to enter into a marriage of convenience could have been implanted in her mind by Victorian social principles about the marriage of daughters. Although some critics affirm Ethelberta as a New Woman, she is, after all, confined by the institution of marriage created by men for men. She strives, in vain, to make her living as a poetess and storyteller, but she recognizes women's social weakness and that she must depend on a marriage of convenience as a means of obtaining a living:

. . . would the advantage that might accrue to her people by her

marriage be worth the sacrifice? One palliative feature must be remembered when we survey the matrimonial ponderings of the poetess and romancer. What she contemplated was not meanly to ensure a husband just to provide incomes for her and her family, but to find some man she might respect, who would maintain her in such a stage of comfort as should, by setting her mind free from temporal anxiety, enable her to further organize her talent, and provide incomes for them herself. (210)

Ethelberta's "saleable originality" (210) functions effectively as a curious attempt to conceal her identity and as a way of securing a marriage partner superior to her own status. Because she is merely a woman, she must choose not a means of supporting herself but a means to depend entirely on a man through marriage in order to make a living. In the process of her choosing one of her suitors, she needs to consider someone who can support her family financially; this is intimately associated with her strong will and rationality, which have been culturally implanted. In other words, her marriage is the means by which she can fulfill her role as a daughter to manage to marry above her status in a structure of marriage that was created by men for men, while she must enter into a marriage of convenience in order to support her family as surrogate father and mother.

However, Hardy makes Ethelberta after her marriage invisible and leaves the doubt of whether she is happy or not. Hardy might criticize the Victorian discourses about the marriage institution to which Ethelberta is always faithful through the ambivalence of her marriage ending.

Notes

¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Hand of Ethelberta* (ed. Tim Dolin. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1997). All further quotations from this work will be identified by page number of this edition.

² See Shires 50–51.

³ See Short 55–56.

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