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**Barbara Hardy, *Dorothea's Daughter and Other Nineteenth-Century Postscripts*
(Victorian Secrets, 2011), pp. 150. ISBN 978 1 906469 24 5.**

This book is the fruit of many years of thought about nine great novels. Barbara Hardy does not present us with a series of sequels, though we do learn of things that happened after the action of the novels ended. Rather, she offers a set of conversations in which two (or, in some cases, three) characters from each novel reflect on the past. This formula allows her to focus on aspects of the stories that intrigue her, or that frustrate her wish to have a full understanding of fictional people who, it is clear, move and interest her as much as real human beings.

Some of the conversations crackle with tension. Emma calls on Jane Fairfax (or, rather, Mrs Knightley calls on Mrs Churchill). Jane's aunt Miss Bates has died, and Emma's shame about the Box Hill insult resurfaces. She is anxious to offer Jane hospitality, and to end the chill between them ('do not call me Mrs Knightley, let us be Emma and Jane'). But Jane remains unfrozen. Without trying to ape Austen's style, Hardy makes us feel that these are the characters we have known, only older and wiser.

Another dramatic encounter is between Mr Dombey and his second wife, Edith. He is asking to be forgiven, and when she forgives, and calls him 'Paul', it is extraordinarily moving. At the same time, the repentant Dombey is such a latecomer in the novel, and so unlike the Dombey who has amused and appalled us for most of the book, that it is hard to believe we are listening, here, to a Dickensian character. Hardy was inspired to write it by the (often forgotten) scene in the novel where Edith speaks to Dombey about her dead son and offers him the possibility of reconciliation – a scene, she feels, more like Henry James than Dickens.

The most tempestuous exchange is between Mr Rochester, now minus one hand and only gradually regaining sight in his remaining eye, and Jane, now his wife, and mother of their baby son James. The cause of the friction is Adele Varens, daughter of Rochester's 'opera mistress'. She has been sent away to school, but Rochester cannot bear having her in the house, even for a brief holiday. It torments him when she plays with baby James. He hates the thought that he may be her father. Jane remains firm and sensible throughout his tirades, insisting that the two children must be brought up together. It is an ominous, uncomfortable episode, and endorses the feeling, conveyed by the novel, that neither we nor Jane really understands Rochester.

Though each conversation is self-contained, there are themes that bind them. Amy Dorrit, now Mrs Clennam, is visited by Harriet Beadle (once Tattycoram). Rather disappointingly, she says nothing of her relationship with Miss Wade, which has intrigued many readers. Harriet is now employed by the Gowans in Italy, and she brings greetings to the Clennams from Mrs Gowan (once Pet Meagles). She brings a gift, too – a silver bracelet engraved 'For my dear daughter', which was specially made for Mrs Gowan's baby daughter, who died, and which she would now like Amy's little daughter to have. For Amy this is upsetting and intrusive. She remembers, only too vividly, her husband's love for Pet Meagles, and suddenly her neat house in Fulham, with the children asleep in the nursery upstairs, seems less substantial than it did.

Something similar happens to Fanny Price. Now married to Edmund, and the mother of two children, she receives a visit from her sister Susan, who has succeeded her at Mansfield Park. Susan's chatter sets Fanny thinking about her time there, and about the Crawfords – Henry, who wooed her, and Mary, whom Edmund loved. The thought chills her, despite her

present happiness and security. It is like 'a black shadow – of the never-to-be but might-have-been'.

The theme that recurs most often, though, is the cultural revolution that, within half a century, was to transform the Western world – the emancipation of women. It is already present in Fanny's interview with Susan. For Fanny inoffensively looks forward to Susan finding a husband, and Susan is affronted. Having watched her own parents and the Bertrams, she has no high opinion of marriage. Many married women lead 'useless and most miserable lives', and she is far from thinking the life of an unmarried woman cannot be 'active and fulfilled'. This strain sounds again when Lucy Snowe, from *Villette*, is visited by Paulina, now married to Graham Bretton. Lucy lives alone and runs a girls' school (Paul Emmanuel, we assume, perished at sea) and Paulina admits that she expected to pity Lucy's solitude. But she now sees that Lucy's life is creative 'in the way a man's life can be rich and creative', whereas her own life is entirely absorbed by husband and children.

The two novels of George Eliot that Hardy chooses, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, are natural sounding boards for this motif. Lucy Deane, shocked and sobered by Maggie and Tom's drowning, rejects Stephen Guest's marriage proposal, repents of the trivial life she has led hitherto, and takes a job teaching English and music at a school run by a woman friend in Brussels. Her talk with Philip Wakem is perhaps the finest piece of writing in the book, which is saying a lot. In the title story Margaret Ladislaw, now in her twenties, has turned down several offers of marriage and tells her mother that she wants to be 'different, to be busy, to read more, to know more', and to do some good in the world.

A young woman's choice of a career rather than marriage is the subject, too, of the last story, where 'Liza-Lu Durbeyfield and Angel Clare are alone together after Tess's hanging, and Angel tells her it was Tess's last wish that he and 'Liza-Lu should marry. She quickly tells him it is unthinkable, and delivers a wonderfully passionate eulogy of her dead sister. Angel yields, and agrees to pay for her to be educated so that she can become a pupil teacher.

These stories are subtle, thoughtful, knowledgeable, civilized and incisive. The one pity is that the book's back cover, in silly mimicry of current hyperboles, calls them 'stunning'. If you feel stunned after reading a short story you should see a doctor.

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