

Dark and Fair: Character Contrast in Hardy's Fiddler of the Reels

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IN "The Fiddler of the Reels" Thomas Hardy is concerned with the irrational nature of sexual attraction. Mop Ollamoor is a romantic archetype of the dark, primitive, sexually powerful man who threatens the stability of conventional domestic life. Like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* or the gypsy in Lawrence's "The Virgin and the Gypsy," he represents a passionate, amoral approach to life diametrically opposed to that supposedly ordered control of the passions known as marriage. Such figures turn up in literature whenever courtship and marriage lack physical passion or fervor, in consequence of an undue subservience to a moribund social convention. As his name proclaims, Mop Ollamoor is "all *amour*," and hence closely related to Hardy's romantic men of uncontrolled passion — Sergeant Troy, Edred Fitzpiers, Damon Wildeve, Alec d'Urberville and, of course, to that other musical seducer, Aeneas Manston. Usually these figures are represented as dark-haired, of foreign extraction, and very often strange to the neighborhood in which the action takes place.

Frequently they have Byronic qualities. Although this is not true of Mop, the seductive-demonic nature of the man is obvious enough. He is a stealer of hearts. "Many a worthy villager envied him his power over unsophisticated maidenhood — a power which seemed sometimes to have a touch of the weird and wizardly in it" (p. 166).¹ He "had never, in all likelihood, entered a church at all. All were devil's tunes in his repertory" (p. 167). He is capable of magical appearances and disappearances: at the end of

the story he vanishes into the "dark heath-land . . . a place of Dantesque gloom" (pp. 183-184) with the child. Like the mysterious Baron Von Xanten in "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid," Mop seems demonic, but not quite the traditional demon-lover of ballads. Certain attributes imply a likeness to the elf or fairy: the kinship with animals, his association with music and dancing,² the "elfin shriek" of his fiddle. Other elements of folklore and fairy-tale add to Mop's glamor. He is the legendary child-stealing gypsy, "un-English" in appearance, "his complexion being a rich olive, his rank hair dark and rather clammy — made still clammier by secret ointments" (p. 166). There is something too of the Pied Piper of Hamelin in his power to move the village children; the hypnotic effect he has on the sensitive Car'line is similar to the impact of the Baron on Margery Tucker in "The Romantic Adventures."

In *Desperate Remedies* Aeneas Manston's use of music to acquire a hold over Cytherea is presented in more or less realistic terms, in keeping with the predominant atmosphere of the novel. In "The Fiddler of the Reels," however, the instrumentation becomes an "unholy musical charm" (p. 185) appropriate to the fantastic nature of the principal character. But in both fictions music represents sexual power. Mop's violin is blatantly phallic:³ the narrator speaks of the "saltatory tendency which the fiddler and his cunning instrument had ever been able to start in her" (p. 180). Next "Mop began aggressively tweedling 'My Fancy Lad', in D major, as the air to which the reel was to be footed . . . for it was the strain of all seductive strains which she was least able to resist" (pp. 180-181). The music contains a "pathos running high and running low in endless variation, projecting through her nerves excruciating spasms, a sort of blissful torture" (p. 181). Almost at the end of her strength, she "flung up the veil, and cast her eyes upon him, as if imploring him to withdraw himself and his acoustic magnetism from the atmos-

phere" (p. 182). "She thus continued to dance . . . slavishly and abjectly, subject to every wave of the melody, and probed by the gimlet-like gaze of her fascinator's open eye" (p. 182). Finally she collapses "in convulsions, weeping violently" (p. 183). Mop's extravagant virility, symbolized by his long, profuse, highly-scented black hair, stands in significant contrast to poor English Ned Hipcroft who, as Hardy tactfully phrases it, possessed "a nature not greatly dependent upon the ministrations of the other sex for its comforts" (p. 171). Unlike Margery Tucker, Car'line understands that a yeoman lover can make a tractable husband, but unfortunately for mankind sexual attraction is the demonic force that disrupts perfectly sound and rational matrimonial arrangements.

"The Fiddler of the Reels" lends itself to psychological interpretations. The two rivals represent different aspects of Car'line's psyche. On the one hand Ned Hipcroft, as his surname may imply, stands for home, cozy domesticity, and security. In his Lambeth lodgings he moves about "with the facility of a woman, doing his own cooking, attending to his stocking heels" (p. 171), and nothing suits him better than the roles of husband, father, and provider: "The ready-made household of which he suddenly found himself the head imparted a cozy aspect to his room, and a paternal one to himself" (pp. 175-177). Car'line is only too pleased to find these qualities in Ned, though it is clear she does not find him personally attractive.

Mop, of course, is quite the opposite to Ned. He is the romantic, instinctive man well able to sweep a girl off her feet, but quite incapable of sustaining and providing for her, even should he want to. His attitude to women is exploitative, as his treatment of his daughter shows: it is rumored that he has trained her as a dancer "to keep him by her earnings" (p. 185). He is the fatal man, fatal at any rate to Car'line's virtue and reputation. In short, Mop is Car'line's animus, the negative, destructive side of

her psyche that threatens her happiness, peace of mind, and very health.

Readers may wonder if Mop was intended to be a symbol of the artist, for Hardy grants him Orphic qualities: "There was a certain lingual character in the supplicatory expressions he produced, which would well-nigh have drawn an ache from the heart of a gate-post. He could make any child in the parish, who was at all sensitive to music, burst into tears in a few minutes by simply fiddling one of the old dance-tunes he almost entirely affected" (p. 167). The narrator says of Mop's fiddling that "There were tones in it which bred the immediate conviction that indolence and averseness to systematic application were all that lay between 'Mop' and the career of a second Paganini" (p. 166). Yet the qualification is as important as the comparison. Mop seems more devoted to love than to music, and he is far from martyring himself for art. If he is a pariah, it is by choice, not from public disapprobation or persecution. Nor is Mop a creator; if anybody has that function it is the unlikely Ned Hipcroft, an artisan-mechanic who was "in his small way, a central man in the movement" to construct the "huge glass-house" of the Great Exhibition (p. 171). The hypothesis that the story contrasts artist to artisan runs counter to one's feeling about Hardy's practice. When Hardy creates an artist figure he usually does so explicitly. We have, for example, Egbert Mayne the novelist (*An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress*), Robert Trewe the poet ("An Imaginative Woman"), or Jocelyn Pierston the sculptor (*The Well-Beloved*), but these figures are mild and somewhat Shelleyan in cast, quite different from the audacious Mop Ollamoore.

More integral to the totality of the story is its theme of change. On the face of it, the events of the story could as easily have been fitted into the exhibition of 1862, which Hardy knew well from first-hand observation, as into the exhibition of 1851, which he knew only by hearsay. It would seem, therefore, that he deliberately chose the year

1851 to mark the time when, in his opinion, the new urban industrial civilization of Victorian England began radically to affect the old rural way of life.

At the beginning of "The Fiddler of the Reels" the old narrator looks back upon 1851 as a significant date: "For South Wessex, the year formed in many ways an extraordinary chronological frontier or transit-line, at which there occurred what one might call a precipice in Time. As in a geological "fault", we had presented to us a sudden bringing of ancient and modern into absolute contact, such as probably in no other single year since the Conquest was ever witnessed in this part of the country'" (p. 165). In its emphasis on the place of industry in the nineteenth century, the exhibition is an appropriate symbol of the new forces at work. Hardy fills the tale with background allusions to the passing of the old way of life. Several of the references have to do with the railway. Near the beginning, when Ned decides to leave Stickleford, the narrator observes that "The railway to South Wessex was in process of construction, but it was not as yet opened for traffic; and Hipcroft reached the capital by a six days' trudge on foot" (p. 171). However, four years later, when Car'line comes to join him in London she does so on the new excursion train. The next year the couple return to Stickleford by train, and Car'line enters the village all too ready to display her newly acquired town ways before her former neighbors (p. 178). Hardy thus dramatizes a point he makes elsewhere, that by bringing town close to country the railway served to break down rural isolation and to erode traditional culture. But most interesting are the complex associations of Mop and Ned. Like Michael Henchard, the hero of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Ollamoor stands primarily for the old, natural world — ancient, mysterious, physical. Ned, on the other hand, is like Farfrae — allied with what is new, urban, and industrial: "He was a respectable mechanic, in a far sounder position than Mop the nominal horse-doctor" (p. 170). The new

ways are replacing the old, but as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy shows a keen awareness of the deficiencies of the former and the values in the latter. Mop is a rogue, but he is passionate, virile, and romantic. Ned is what follows logically from the break-up of old Wessex, as described in Hardy's essay, "The Dorsetshire Labourer". He leaves the country for the city, where he leads a life that is essentially rootless and anonymous. He is not unhappy: "In London he lived and worked regularly at his trade. More fortunate than many, his disinterested willingness recommended him from the first. During the ensuing four years he was never out of employment. He neither advanced nor receded in the modern sense; he improved as a workman, but he did not shift one jot in social position" (p. 171). In the future too he will earn enough to live adequately, but his life will lack personal significance; he will have Car'line, but no children. Ned's sterility hints at an inability to be fully creative. Mop, like Henchard, cannot withstand the economic forces that are changing society. But he can at least refuse to submit to them. By defying conventional morality he asserts his own freedom. He lives a life of instinct, passion and romance, but he will always in a sense be on the run from forces more powerful than himself.

It is not really possible in a tightly-knit story like "The Fiddler of the Reels" to discuss characterization independently of theme and symbol. This is to Hardy's credit, and a sign of his fine craftsmanship. It is clear, however, that Hardy does not depart from his basic methods of characterization. Mop is another dark-haired villain-hero, a mysterious stranger linked by the imagery with the demonic and the Mephistopholean. Ned, on the other hand, despite his profession and subsequent departure for the city is of country origin, as his name implies. Like many another Hardeian young man he appears decent and respectable, but diffident and unpractised in the ways of women and hence easily overshadowed by the vital, amorous

villain. Similarly, Car'line Aspent has much in common with other Hardeian heroines. She is a country maiden standing between the charismatic fatal man and the mild, decent country lad who offers her a safe and secure, although unromantic, existence. Like Fanny Robin or Tess Durbeyfield she has to face the consequence of her seduction. But the differences are important. In this tale, Hardy is primarily interested in Mop and his contrast to Ned, so despite Car'line's fall, Hardy resolutely avoids any tragic or pathetic touches which might distract the reader from the central theme. He stresses Car'line's hysterical nature, her tendency to spasms and convulsions, thus achieving his aim of making her character appear credible within a basically improbable plot situation.

The story admirably reveals Hardy's abiding fascination with the nature of human passion, evident from the time of his first ventures into prose fiction. In the earlier *Desperate Remedies*, however, Cytherea found herself pitted between the evil of the urbanized Aeneas Manston and the virtue of the poetical, countrified Edward Springrove. Hardy apparently realized that in this oversimplified, almost trite use of character opposites there lay the possibility of a much more significant contrast. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the original contrast is virtually reversed: the alien, disruptive (though well-meaning) man is the blond Farfrae, who introduces new business methods, and the man who gradually steals our sympathies is the dark, passionate, violent Henchard, symbol of the old way of life. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in "The Fiddler of the Reels" (1893) the fair-haired country lad is again the instrument of the new forces, while the dark passionate man is linked to the natural and traditional way of life. Indeed, the supposedly decent young men and women of fair complexion are in the later fiction as likely as not to be associated with sterility (Ned), rigidity (Angel Clare), nervous debilitation (Sue Bridehead), or death (Giles Winterborne), and the dark men (Fitzpiers, Mop)

are, as often as not, associated with passion, energy and fertility.

Nevertheless, the tension between sexual fulfillment on the one hand and security on the other remains constant in Hardy's fiction. This contrast is invariably dramatized by the choice the heroines must make between the romantic "bad" man and the passionless "good" man. Sooner or later, Hardy's heroines usually opt for the second. They may not always be completely fulfilled in him, but he does seem preferable to the uncertainty and destruction associated with the romantic man. For Hardy the romantic is ever attractive, but hardly to be trusted. Invariably he takes an anti-romantic stance.

NOTES

¹Paranetical page numbers refer to Hardy's "The Fiddler of the Reels" in the Macmillan Wessex Edition (1912-31) of *Life's Little Ironies*.

²The last of the reels Mop plays to Car'line at the inn is "The Fairy Dance" (182).

³Hardy presumably took the idea from the ballads. In "The Soldier and the Lady", for example, the soldier makes love to the maiden, playing on his "long fiddle" until she hears "the nightingales sing." Cf. the phallic display of swordsmanship in *Fur From the Madding Crowd*. Troy is another ballad soldier with a ready and "cunning instrument".