4 A New View of Bathsheba Everdene

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It has become commonplace among critics of Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) to say that Bathsheba Everdene, the novel’s heroine, develops through misfortune and suffering from a vain, egotistical girl into a wise, sympathetic woman.¹ There is something to this view, for apparently at least Bathsheba changes for the better between the beginning and end of the novel. She learns to sympathise with Fanny Robin, seeks to make amends to Farmer Boldwood, and marries the exemplary Gabriel Oak. However, there is much in Bathsheba that this view does not account for. Take for example the following passage, typical of others:

Bathsheba was no schemer for marriage, nor was she deliberately a trifler with the affections of men, and a censor’s experience on seeing an actual flirt after observing her would have been a feeling of surprise that Bathsheba could be so different from such a one, and yet so like what a flirt is supposed to be.

She resolved never again, by look or by sign, to interrupt the steady flow of this man’s [Boldwood’s] life. But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible. (xviii; p. 140)

One thing here is in basic conflict with a ‘transformist’ view of Bathsheba; she is an un-deliberate, inadvertent, unconscious agent of evil. Her actions are not within her control. This suggests that with her, moral growth, if possible, is always problematical. And Hardy’s view of her is that of the surprised censor: he sympathises with her infirmity (for which she is not responsible) at the same time as he deplores her irrationality and its consequences.
The view of Bathsheba as one who progresses toward wider sympathy has gone unchallenged, probably because she is often described as an unambiguous character rendered in broad, sure strokes. ‘Bathsheba’, writes Douglas Brown, ‘dominates the novel, not as a human personality created and explored with the searching art of the classical novelist, but as someone present to a balladist’s imagination, confidently taken for granted as what she seems to be, recognized by the gesture of the hand, the inflexion of the voice; even the gradual transformation of her nature under the impress of suffering Hardy reveals in broad dramatic strokes.’ Hardy’s alleged lack of interest in the subtler psychology of Bathsheba’s career, deplored by Henry James in one of the first contemporary reviews of the novel, has come to be attributed to Hardy’s preference for the art of the romance against the craft of the novel. For several reasons then, not the least of which is the assumption on the part of most critics of the novel that Hardy accepted uncritically the developmental psychology prevalent in the fiction of his day, two closely related issues have been overlooked. First, little attention has been given either to Hardy’s ambivalent attitude to Bathsheba (especially a misogynistic side to it) or to the ambiguous nature of Bathsheba’s career. Second, an obliquity in Hardy’s way of showing her at crucial moments in her career has gone unexamined.

Since an analysis of Bathsheba’s career demands discussion of Hardy’s method, by way of beginning I should mention the problems of delineation. First, Hardy’s abbreviated handling of Bathsheba’s childhood thwarts any attempt to understand her motives at the beginning of the novel. Our uncertainty about her motives is compounded by the nature of her career, which is not a gradual process of self-conscious growth, but exposure, sudden and violent, to murder, death, fatal disease, fire, storm, and uncontrolled passion. Third, there is Hardy’s use, always ironical, of literary allusions to depict Bathsheba at the two most critical moments of her career — her recovery in the swamp after opening Fanny Robin’s coffin and being rejected by Troy, and her recovery at Weatherbury after Troy’s death. These problems, as well as one other — the dominance of Oak in a novel centrally concerned with Bathsheba’s career — may be seen as emanating from Hardy’s view of her as one infirm in nature. Oak’s prominence is best seen, I think, as a function of Bathsheba’s imperfection. Oak’s ability to observe the defects of non-human nature (the loss of his flock, the fire, the storm, the bloated sheep) and to contrive amendment fits him to observe, minister to, and finally to