If Hardy’s interest in the theatre can be said to date from his years in London in the 1860s, his suspicion of its actual operations, and diffidence about his own work’s possible place there, have an equally specific origin: the circumstances consequent upon his collaboration in 1880 with the critic J. Comyns Carr on a dramatization of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The subsequent controversy when the managers of the St James’s Theatre, John Hare and William Hunter Kendal, first provisionally accepted it, later rejected it, and then staged Arthur Wing Pinero’s play *The Squire*, which seemed to owe more to the plot of the Hardy–Comyns Carr adaptation than coincidence alone would warrant, has been sufficiently well documented that the main facts of the exchange do not need elaborate rehearsal.¹ Hardy, prodded by an outraged Comyns Carr who in the early stages of the argument was trying to dictate Hardy’s correspondence on the matter (‘We will have a row about this: it will help the new copyright bill if nothing else’), felt sufficiently indignant to go uncustomarily public in letters to *The Times* and the *Daily News*.² But more important than the immediate furore was the lasting influence the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Hardy’s first dramatic venture were to have on his relationship with the stage.

During 1879, Hardy had dramatized the novel, ‘which I did alone and unassisted’, under the title *The Mistress of the Farm – A Pastoral Drama*. When J. Comyns Carr proposed something similar, Hardy submitted his version which, he claimed, Carr ‘modified ... in places, to suit modern stage carpentry &c.’³ This was the version submitted to Hare and Kendal which was eventually rejected in November 1880. After the argument sparked by the opening of Pinero’s *The Squire* on 29 December 1881, Comyns Carr came up with a revised version, under the title *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Liverpool on 27 February 1882. After a provincial tour that included Bradford,
Glasgow, Edinburgh and Newcastle, it opened at the Globe Theatre in London on 29 April 1882. The evidence suggests that Hardy's contribution to this version of the play was more than nominal, despite his statement in a 1910 letter that 'I had no hand in this beyond authorizing it', a claim made all the less plausible by his billing on the theatre programme as co-author of the play.4

In old age, Comyns Carr's wife looked back, with somewhat cloying self-reference, on the play's composition:

The 'youthful conceit' to which Joe was throughout his life so lenient as even to consider a virtue, led me presently to try my hand at ... no less than the dramatisation of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. I was quite unequal to the attempt, and I only mention it because it proved the beginning of Joe's dramatic work. He took the play in hand, refashioned the plot, only keeping portions of the dialogue as I had adapted it to stage necessity; and it was produced ... first in the provinces and then in London.5

Letters from Comyns Carr to Hardy indicate that Carr's taking over of the play involved some delicate negotiations. Writing to Hardy in January 1882, seeking his permission to use the novel's title for the play, Carr suggested a compromise in the indication of authorship to 'meet your views in not making your name or responsibility prominent'. The circumlocution ('adapted by J. Comyns Carr from the novel of that name in conjunction with the author Mr. Thomas Hardy') was not in the event used, but it was mooted so that 'in case of failure this description would quite relieve you of responsibility'.6 A later letter painstakingly explains why certain of Hardy's suggestions were not incorporated into the production. While the excuse given is that they arrived after the actors had already learned their lines, Carr has the confidence to defend his own judgements on theatrical grounds also: 'these other and later ideas could not have been embodied without rewriting the play ... and for my part I am still strongly of opinion that they would injure the play to a degree which you will hardly realize till you see it'.7

The only surviving copy of the Comyns Carr–Hardy *Far from the Madding Crowd* is the one submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office before the Liverpool production.8 It comprises both manuscript and emended print, the latter with the running title 'The Mistress of the Farm', from which one can safely assume that it is the lion's share of the original play submitted to Hare and Kendal. It