I seek here to trace some of the implications of the sociology of money for a reading of Hardy’s fiction, focusing specifically on a novel of the 1880s, *A Laodicean*. My aim is to deploy some of the issues raised in sociological accounts of money and modern culture from the period to enable a reading of Hardy’s text centring upon its treatment of financial relations and its own status as a cultural commodity in the late Victorian literary field. But we may begin with a poem, also from the 1880s, entitled ‘In the Old Theatre, Fiesole’:

I traced the Circus whose gray stones incline  
Where Rome and dim Etruria interjoin,  
Till came a child who showed an ancient coin  
That bore the image of a Constantine.

She lightly passed; nor did she once opine  
How, better than all books, she had raised for me  
In swift perspective Europe’s history  
Through the vast years of Caesar’s sceptred line.

For in my distant plot of English loam  
’Twas but to delve, and straightway there to find  
Coins of like impress. As with one half blind  
Whom common simples cure, her act flashed home  
In that mute moment to my opened mind  
The power, pride, the reach of perished Rome.

(Hardy 1982-95, 1. 134)

The Roman coin proffered by the child to the poet serves, not in a system of exchange, but as an artefact redolent of imperial power and decline. Constantine was the first Christian emperor, and the poem may hint at Christ’s
allusion to the coins bearing the emperor’s image. As Marx observed, ‘a coin is a physical object which in this sense has an existence independent of men’, and it is only transmuted into money when it ‘forms an element within a definite set of social relationships’ (cited in Giddens 1971, 10). Hardy is always alert to this distinction, and nowhere more tellingly than in the incident in The Mayor of Casterbridge where the four ounce pennies left by Susan Henchard as weights for her eyelids after death are dug up by Christopher Coney, a ‘cannibal deed’ denounced by Mrs Cuxsom (Hardy 1997b, 118), but one which restores the coins to their exchange function. Money, both physical and metaphysical, proves to be a defining concern for Hardy’s fiction as it registers the transitions from an agrarian to an urban economy, and I would like to explore here his treatment of this theme in relation to German sociological writing of the period.

It was Georg Simmel, writing at the turn of the century, who made a significant contribution to this debate, in a number of essays and in his massive study, The Philosophy of Money, first published in 1902. In his 1896 essay, ‘Money and Modern Culture’, Simmel discerns a contrast between a communal feudal society and a modernity that offers the individual unparalleled freedom whilst draining life of colour and personality. Thus he suggests that a medieval guild was a living community which absorbed the ‘entire person’, but the money economy offers an association based entirely upon ‘spending and receiving money’. This process was to elicit what Simmel designates ‘impersonality and colourlessness’ (Simmel 1997, 245)—precisely the features complained of in early reviews of A Laodicean, and a notable aspect of the change from Henchard’s dominance to that of Farfrae in The Mayor of Casterbridge. Money, in Simmel’s argument, brings into existence ‘a community of action of those individuals and groups who stress their separation and reserve at all other points’ (245). Before we lament the alienating effects of monetary transactions, Simmel urges, we need to be reminded that money ‘creates an extremely strong bond among members of an economic circle’ because ‘it refers people to others’ (246): the modern individual is therefore dependent upon a complex network of connections, and will perish, like Henchard, if he or she seeks isolation from this network. Paradoxically, money opens up ‘a particularly wide scope to individuality and the feeling of personal independence’ (247), a scope explored in radically dissimilar ways by both Paula Power and Michael Henchard. Modern culture elicits, at once in Simmel’s sociology and Hardy’s fiction, two seemingly antipathetic tendencies: first, a tendency towards equalization and ‘levelling’; and secondly, a trend towards the elaboration of individuality. Simmel treats this development objectively, but in Hardy it contains the potential for satire (as in A Laodicean) or tragedy (as in The Mayor). Simmel observes: ‘With money in our pocket, we are free, whereas previously, the object made us dependent on the conditions of its conservation and fructification. But how often does this very freedom simultaneously mean a vapidity of life and a loosening of its substance!’ (248).