

WHAT THE MANUSCRIPT TELLS US: GRACE MELBURY IN *THE WOODLANDERS*

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Abstract: *This article focuses on Hardy's attempts to give Grace Melbury in The Woodlanders a new direction so that her story ultimately revolves around a dangerous subject for Victorian family magazines - that of a married woman being sexually attracted to two different men. Although it is believed that Hardy once expressed his indifference to Grace because of her being 'commonplace and straitlaced', a close examination of the surviving manuscript of this novel will reveal his attempts to add a subversive dimension to her character.*

Keywords: *Hardy, manuscript, textual alterations, variants, Victorian family magazines, The Woodlanders*

1. Introduction

For the past ten years, I have been working on Hardy's holograph manuscripts and have found that an understanding of his (re)writing process provides essential clues for the interpretation of particular texts. This article is concerned with what we can gain by examining the manuscript of *The Woodlanders*, which was originally written for serialisation in *Macmillan Magazine*. This novel is particularly interesting because, if you examine the early version of the manuscript, you can see that Hardy made specific adjustments to the character of Grace Melbury, and grasping his alterations is valuable in understanding her story.

In his essay, Dale Kramer (1971:195-230, 248-82) first outlined the revisions that Hardy made within the manuscript of *The Woodlanders*; what I hope to do here is to further explore the evidence Kramer presented and to illustrate Hardy's attempts to shape Grace's complex experience as a married woman. Although it is believed that Hardy once expressed his indifference to Grace because of her being 'commonplace and straitlaced' (Weber 1939:332), a close examination of the surviving manuscript will reveal his attempts to add the subversive dimension to her character. The purpose of my article is to focus on the revisions which enabled him to depict a married woman who is sexually attracted to two different men, a taboo subject for the Victorian family magazines.

At the outset, a note about quotations from Hardy's holograph manuscript is necessary. Throughout this article, added words and phrases within the manuscript are placed within strokes / / and cancellations are run through. All wording, spelling, and interior punctuation correspond with the original, even where unconventional (e.g. Hardy frequently omitted quotation marks enclosing dialogue and quotations).

2. Hardy's compositional changes

Let us begin with a brief overview of Grace's story. After finishing her education at a 'fashionable' school, Grace returns home to the woodland. Her father is no longer satisfied with the idea of her childhood sweetheart, Giles Winterborne, becoming her husband, for she has received a 'good' education. When a new doctor - an aristocratic and attractive young man named Edred Fitzpiers ('Edgar' in the manuscript and serial versions) - moves to the woodland, Grace's father persuades her to forget Giles and encourages her to marry the doctor. Although she loves her fiancé, Grace is nevertheless sexually attracted to Fitzpiers and eventually marries him. A few months after the honeymoon, however, he starts visiting Mrs Felice Charmond, a rich, beautiful widow.

In Chapter 28, there is a poignant scene in which Grace sees her husband riding off, and she is quite certain about the destination of his journey. The moment she can no longer see him, however, she re-encounters her former lover Giles 'with two horses and a cider-apparatus'. Fos. 278-79 detail Grace's spontaneous response to the sight of her onetime lover, who 'looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour', 'his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples':

Her heart rose ~~like~~ from its late sadness like a released spring; her senses revelled in the sudden lapse back to nature /unadorned/. The consciousness of having to be genteel because of her husband's profession, the veneer of artificiality which she had acquired at the /fashionable/ schools, were thrown off, & she became the ~~mere~~ /crude/ country girl of her latent, /earliest/ instincts.

Nature was bountiful, she thought. No sooner had she been starved off by Edgar Fitzpiers than another being, /impersonating bare & undiluted manliness,/ had arisen out of the earth, ready to hand. (fos. 278-79)

As you can see, the surviving manuscript leaves of *The Woodlanders* are fair copy, but many of them contain Hardy's revisions at the later stages of writing. On fo. 278, for instance, Hardy added 'unadorned' after 'nature' and 'fashionable' after 'schools', and he replaced 'mere' with 'crude', increasing the contrast between what Grace used to be and what she is, between what she used to value and what she values now, and thus highlighting her transformation into a 'crude country girl'. On fo. 279 he added 'impersonating bare & undiluted manliness' after 'another being', emphasising Giles's erotic dimension in Grace's eye and making explicit why her heart has risen 'like a released spring'. The final version of the manuscript firmly stresses the causal relationship between her (newly acquired) perception and her illicit feelings for Giles. Here, Hardy made an important feature of the episode more explicit in order to help the reader understand the nature of Grace's experience - the sexual arousal she feels at the sight of her former lover.

In terms of the narrative, this episode seems to be a decisive moment. After the re-encounter with Giles, Grace realises that ~~she took a violent~~ her early

interest in Giles Winterborne had become revitalized ~~with her widening perceptions~~ into luxuriant growth by her widening perceptions of what was ~~truly~~ great & little in life.' (fos. 296-97). She says to her father, 'I wish you had never sent me to those fashionable schools you set your mind on. [...] If I had stayed at home I should have married—' (fo. 300). The narrator stresses Grace's awareness of her own illicit sexual feelings, noting that she is 'too conscious of the late pranks of her heart' and 'could not behold him calmly' (fo. 317). (It is worth noting parenthetically that Hardy at first wrote 'knowing the late pranks of her heart' and later replaced 'knowing' with 'too conscious of'.) At the same time, the narrative brings to the fore her growing indifference to her husband; she is shown to be 'amazed at the mildness of ~~her~~ the passion ~~at~~ which the suspicion /engendered in her:/ She was but little excited, & her jealousy was languid /even/ to death' (fo. 275). The narrator goes out of his way to mention that she is mortified, rather than wounded, upon learning the sexual nature of her husband's relationship with Mrs Charmond, for 'Fitzpiers's hold upon her heart was slight' (fo. 330). The narrator also comments on the 'absence of hot jealousy' when she realises that her husband, spending the night with Suke Damson, had lied about her (fo. 283). It is then understandable that the re-encounter episode has been generally interpreted as a moment of 'epiphany' for Grace, 'a moment of truth' for her (Lodge 1975:20).

Yet, the matter becomes complicated, for Hardy revised Chapter 35 in such a way that Grace's feelings for Fitzpiers and Giles become bewilderingly complex. In Chapter 34, we have seen Fitzpiers learning with much surprise that Grace has abruptly left home without letting him know, and deciding to go out himself, as he is unable to remain alone. Fos. 346-47 have Grace returning home by the carriage her father has hired for her. The original version of the manuscript read:

Mrs Melbury had told her as soon as she arrived that her husband had returned from London. He had gone out, she said, to see a patient as she believed, & he would soon be back, since he had had no dinner or tea. Grace would not allow her mind to harbour any suspicion of his whereabouts, & her step-mother said nothing of Mrs Charmond's fright that day.

So the young wife sat by the fire, waiting silently. (fos. 346-47)

In revising this part, Hardy may have realised that he did not depict Grace's feelings and reasons behind her sudden visit to her acquaintance at Shottsford-Forum. In the final version, he added the following passage after 'So the young wife sat by the fire waiting silently':

She had left ~~home~~ /Hintock/ in a turmoil of feeling, after the revelation of Mrs Charmond, intending not to be at home when her husband returned. But she had thought the matter over, & had allowed her father's influence to prevail and bring her back; & now somewhat regretted that Edgar's arrival had preceded hers. (fo. 346v)

Although the narrator (in the manuscript and serial versions) says

'Fitzpiers's hold upon her heart was slight' (fo. 330), it is difficult to take his words at face value, and indeed, Hardy (1887b) rightly added 'just now' after 'her heart' for the first edition (vol. II, p. 327). In Chapter 35, Grace admits that she has left home impulsively because of 'a turmoil of feeling' or her 'aversion' to his infidelity, which suggests that she is far from being indifferent to her husband. And, this in turn suggests that 'Fitzpiers's hold upon her heart' is still strong; thus, she regrets that she did not come home earlier to receive him. Although Hardy's additions on the verso leaf of fo. 346 comprise only two sentences, they delicately convey her inner realities. This is a good example of the subtlety with which Hardy approached Grace's feelings for Fitzpiers.

Chapter 35 ends with an extra-numbered leaf (fo. 352a), and it is fairly clear from their state that fo. 352a should be what was once fo. 352, and that it was replaced by the current fo. 352, which was inserted between fo. 351 and fo. 352a. In the preceding pages (fos. 347-50), Mrs Charmond and Suke, alarmed by the news of Fitzpiers's injury, make secret nocturnal visits to Grace. Fo. 351 to fo. 352a describe Grace's strong emotions for Fitzpiers - feelings which possibly arise from her meeting with her rivals - and her anger against her father, who has quarrelled and assaulted her injured husband. In the earlier cancelled version, however, none of these emotions was mentioned:

"Yes - it was as we were coming home together," he said. He was inclined to say more to tell her the whole story of the encounter; but it would have distressed her greatly, & he desisted. "You had better lie down - you are tired," he added, & with that he left her.

The household went to bed, & a silence ~~came over~~ fell upon the home, too, broken only by the occasional skirr of a halter from Melbury's stables. Despite the father's advice Grace still waited up. But nobody came. (fo. 352a)

This is not clearly appropriate as an episode following the highly charged, emotional scene in which Grace cannot help but feel sympathy towards Mrs Charmond and Suke as she contemplates their relationships with Fitzpiers, which are as close, and as unhappy, as her own. For the final version, Hardy rewrote and expanded this part:

"Yes - it was as we were coming home together," he said.

Something had been swelling up in Grace while her father was speaking. "How could you want to quarrel with him!" she cried suddenly. "Why could you not let him come home quietly, if he were inclined to? He is my husband; & now you have married me to him surely you need not provoke him unnecessarily. First you induce me to accept him; & then you do things that divide us more than we should naturally be divided!"

"How can you speak so unjustly to me, Grace!" said Melbury, with indignant sorrow. "I divide you from your husband, indeed! You little think—"

He was inclined to say more - to tell her the whole story of the encounter, & /that/ the provocation he had received /had lain entirely/ in hearing her despised. But it would have greatly distressed her; & he forebore. "You had better lie down - you are tired," he said /soothingly/ "Good-night."

The household went to bed, & a silence fell upon the dwelling, broken only by the occasional skirr of a halter in Melbury's stables. Despite her father's advice Grace still waited up. But nobody came.

It was a critical time in Grace's emotional life, that night. She thought of her husband a good deal, & for the nonce forgot Winterbourne. "How these /unhappy/ women must have admired ~~him~~ /Edgar/!" she said to herself. "How attractive he must be to everybody - &, indeed, he is attractive." The ~~probability~~ /possibility/ is that, piqued by rivalry, these ideas might have ~~modulated~~ /been transformed/ into their corresponding emotions ~~at~~ /by/ a show of the least reciprocity in Fitzpiers. There was, in truth, a love-bird ~~in course of~~ /yearning to/ fly~~ing~~ from her heart; & it wanted a lodging badly. (fo. 352)

This is completely different from the earlier cancelled version: anger against muteness, sensual feelings against subdued feelings. Although the last sentence - 'a love-bird yearning to fly from her heart; & it wanted a lodging badly' - is rather obliquely expressed, its sexual implication is clear enough. We now see Grace forgetting Giles and craving her attractive husband. The final version of the manuscript makes a decisive difference, for the reader can no longer be comfortable with the traditional interpretation of the re-encounter episode, which implies that if she had married Giles, all would have been well in their relationship. There is now room for doubt whether that moment is really a moment of 'epiphany' for Grace, given the fact that she cannot help but yearn for Fitzpiers and his charm. The final version of the manuscript delicately suggests the nature of 'a critical time in Grace's emotional life': while she has illicit feelings for her faithful lover, she is nonetheless sexually attracted to her unfaithful husband.

3. Conclusion

Briefly, by way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on how Hardy's revisions directly relate to our interpretation of Grace's story. As I have pointed out, Hardy made changes to Chapter 28 in order to emphasise Grace's illicit feelings at the sight of her old lover; at the same time, he also made additions to Chapter 35 in order to convey her sensual feelings for her husband. Significantly, Hardy went out of his way to make both revisions in order to depict Grace's complex female sexuality and her bewildering experience: a married woman could have sexual feelings for two different men at one time - undoubtedly a dangerous subject for the Victorian family magazines. *The Woodlanders* offers a good example of the kind of changes and adjustments Hardy was able to make: a series of alterations whose cumulative effect is, as we have seen, the subversive dimension added to Grace Melbury.

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