

Fanny Robin's Role in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Synopsis: Many critics have considered Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but they have hardly referred to Fanny Robin as a character in this novel. The reason is that she is described not as a character but as a fragment as if she were one of Troy's belongings. She is marginalized and fragmented as Troy's possession, despite the fact that she plays an important role in the narrative. She has the power to destroy the marriage between Troy and Bathsheba Everdene. This paper examines how Fanny functions in this narrative and why the death of her baby who is described as a Fanny's fragment is indispensable to this narrative.

Introduction

Although many critical essays have considered Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, they have hardly pondered Fanny Robin. Those critics who do refer to her do so alongside Troy Francis: "Fanny Robin, the victim of Sergeant Troy" (Cox 25), "Sergeant Troy's conduct to Fanny Robin is at least consistent with his character and bearing" (Cox 32), or "Fanny is his victim not only because he has seduced her but because he is oblivious to the natural rhythms in which she, as a woman, is inexorably caught" (Garson 31–2). Even these critics tend to focus more on Troy's cruel conduct toward her than on Fanny herself. However, in Hardy's story, she plays an important role in which she has the power to irreparably destroy the marriage between Troy and Bathsheba Everdene. Despite this fact, Fanny appears only five times in this story, and in most scenes, in which she does appear, she remains unnamed. Why is she marginalized in this way?

Fanny's eventual death is complicated by the fact that her baby

dies as well. Is the death of Fanny and child an essential event in Hardy's story? The cover of the coffin in which the mother and child are placed has only the words "*Fanny Robin and child*" (283 italics original) inscribed on it. Despite the fact that the death of only Fanny would have opened a deep fissure between Bathsheba and Troy, Hardy cruelly adds the death of her baby to the narrative. Considering that Fanny's death greatly affects the married life of Bathsheba and Troy, and that Leslie Stephen, the editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, in which Hardy's serialized story initially appeared, gingerly raised objections to the account of Fanny's illegitimate child lying in a coffin, Hardy's decision to describe the death of Fanny's baby takes on certain significance. Why did he choose to do this? This paper seeks to determine both Fanny's *raison d'être* in this story, and the role her baby plays.

1

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Fanny is always described in a fragmented manner. Compared, for example, with descriptions of Gabriel Oak, those of Fanny are notably limited. Consider how Hardy describes Oak when he first appears in the story:

In his face one might notice that many of the hues and curves of youth had tarried on to manhood: there even remained in his remoter crannies some relics of the boy. His height and breadth would have been sufficient to make his presence imposing had they been exhibited with due consideration. (10)

While the above gives a rich picture of Oak's physique and deportment, the description given of Fanny when she first appears in the story is drastically less developed: she is "a slim girl, rather thinly clad" and her "voice [is] unexpectedly attractive: it [is] the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance; common in descriptions, rare in experience" (53).

This nameless girl is neither a field woman nor a pastoralized milkmaid. She has no identity, and this description of her thus leaves her shrouded in mystery and makes her a source of suspense. She seems to serve as a tool in the kind of narrative process David Lodge defines:

Narrative consists essentially in the representation of process. It obtains and holds the interest of its audience by raising questions in their minds about the process it describes, and delaying the answers to those questions, or raising new questions as others are answered. The questions are basically of two kinds: what happens next? which generates suspense; and what happened in the past, and why? which generates mystery. (146)

At the time of her initial appearance, Fanny compels the interest of the reader by raising questions—*what happens next* and *what happened in the past?* However, Hardy soon introduces her proper name, Fanny Robin, and reveals that she has run after her lover. The reader files away Fanny's story, expecting it to become significant, but it turns out to be part of the frame for the story rather than part of the story itself. Hardy does not portray Fanny as a well-rounded character but instead, by sketching her traits fragmentally, as a "flat character" (Forster 73), who can be described with a single sentence such as she wishes to belong to Troy.

The descriptions of Fanny that would serve to establish her as a well-rounded character, especially descriptions of her psychological state, are significantly restricted. In fact, the text treats her even more insensitively than it would if she were merely a flat character. As one critic notes, "[w]hen Fanny Robin next appears, outside Troy's barracks, . . . she is definable neither as kinswoman, servant, wife, mother, nor whore" (Henson 134). When Fanny calls Troy's name, she is herself visibly illegible, a "blurred spot in the snow . . . a mere shade upon the

earth" (87). Similarly, Marjorie Garson defines her as "Fanny, who is a barely visible 'form', 'shape', or 'spot', glimpsed only in culturally coded fragments (a lock of hair, a rapid pulse, a plaintive voice), and who finally, in childbirth, splits into two and expires" (37).² These critics regard Fanny not as a character, but as a dismembered being. Their descriptions of her treatment, such as Garson's reference to her as "culturally coded fragments," further emphasize her status as less than a full character. Multiple instances in the story support this reading of her, when Boldwood, who does not know about the secret marriage between Bathsheba and Troy, urges Troy to part from Bathsheba and marry Fanny. However, as soon as Boldwood realizes that Bathsheba is deeply in love with Troy, he persuades Troy to marry Bathsheba at once. Their conversation proceeds as follows:

"But about Fanny?"

"Bathsheba is a woman well to do," continued Boldwood in nervous anxiety, "and Troy, she will make a good wife, and indeed, she is worth your hastening on your marriage with her!"

"But she has a will—not to say a temper, and I shall be a mere slave to her. I could do anything with poor Fanny Robin."

"Troy," said Boldwood, imploringly, "I'll do anything for you, only don't desert her—pray don't desert her, Troy."

"Which, poor Fanny?"

"No—Bathsheba Everdene. Love her best! Love her tenderly!" (228–9)

It is important to note that, in the above conversation, Boldwood, who was kind enough to help orphaned Fanny enter school, never even refers to Fanny by name and instead directs all his concern toward Bathsheba. Troy refers to Fanny only to tease Boldwood. That is, no one worries about Fanny as a character because she is only "a spot."

Moreover, Fanny's history, from the time Troy abandons her to her

death, is hardly described in the novel. When he comes to Bathsheba to report the news of Fanny's death, Joseph simply informs Bathsheba about Fanny's "having lived by seampstering in Melchester . . . and that she walked therefrom at the end of last week, passing near here Saturday night in the dusk" (272). Her life history is thus condensed into a few short lines. No one explains that she worked as a seamstress and then she was actually branded a "fallen woman" and dismissed after the discovery of her illegitimate pregnancy. As a result, she was suddenly reduced to extreme poverty. Despite the fact, no villagers care to sympathize with her as a victim of Troy's behavior.

In Chapter 40, "On Casterbridge Highway," when Fanny, heavily pregnant, struggles down a country road toward the Casterbridge lights on a moonless, starless night, no other characters than her are present. Nonetheless, the text still refrains from identifying her by name. By anonymizing her here, Hardy generalizes the fate of fallen women, transforming Fanny's story into a universal one applicable to all women. Like Hetty in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, who is in a similar situation, Fanny wanders for a period; Eliot describes Hetty awakening to new sensitivity as a character, but Hardy does not describe Fanny's feelings or sensitivity at all. Fanny's physically painful journey to Casterbridge is emphasized over her psychological growth as a character.

2

Why is Fanny marginalized in this story? An answer can be found in the narrative role she plays. Fanny highlights one particular characteristic of this story: she acts as a "mark" which means that someone or something always belongs to someone. Specifically, Fanny's *raison d'être* in this story is to show that she has already belonged to Troy. Because Boldwood, Oak, and the reader recognize Troy as Fanny's former lover who has deserted her, Boldwood and Oak object to

Bathsheba's marriage to Troy. In her very absence from Weatherbury, Fanny serves to mark Troy's flirtatiousness. This story is filled with such "marks," each-attached to different characters. For example, in a scene at the beginning of the story, Oak, having lost his sheep and property, looks for a job at a hiring fair in Casterbridge:

At one end of the street stood from two to three hundred blithe and hearty labourers waiting upon Chance . . . carters and waggoners were distinguished by having a piece of whip-cord twisted round their hats; thatchers wore a fragment of woven straw; shepherds held their sheep-crooks in their hands; and thus the situation required was known to the hires at a glance. (43)

Each job hunter marks himself with his respective tools so that a potential employer will know at first glance which type of a job he wants. Bathsheba's sheep are also examples of such a mark:

Oak took from his illimitable pockets a marking iron, dipped it into the pot and imprinted on the buttocks of the infant sheep the initials of her he delighted to muse on—"B. E.," which signified to all the region round that henceforth the lambs belonged to Farmer Bathsheba Everdene, and to no one else. (113)

In this story, such marks as these examples signify characters' identities and subjections.

As Liddy indicates by remarking that "[m]en be such a terrible class of society to look at a body" (93), the male gaze is at play in the novel, an aspect often discussed by critics. Some argue that the male gaze leads the independent Bathsheba down the road toward marriage.³ However, I must emphasize the marking role the male gaze plays. Before he proposes marriage to Bathsheba, Oak reveals his voyeuristic impulse by peeping at Bathsheba through a crevice in a field-hut.

Although she looks around to be sure no one is watching, Oak escapes detection and is able to observe the spectacle of her unorthodox activities: she swiftly lies down so that she is riding supine on a pony's back to avoid a low branch. It is important to note not that Oak watches her unobserved, but that he later lets her know he saw her performance on the horse. She becomes angry when he confesses his voyeuristic activity:

His want of tact had deeply offended her—not by seeing what he could not help, but by letting her know that he had seen it. Without law there is no sin, and without eyes there is no indecorum; and she appeared to feel that Gabriel's espial had made her an indecorous woman without her own connivance. (24)

Earlier in the story, Oak marks Bathsheba for her “[v]anity” (13), but this time it is Bathsheba, not Oak, who marks herself as “an indecorous woman” through her own behavior. However, it is Oak who actually shames her for this behavior. Rosemarie Morgan points out that “[a]s an effective means of controlling and subordinating woman, guilt and shame served the interests of a society in which male supremacy was, at any costs, to be maintained” (47–8). Troy, in particular, employs an effective method for marking, controlling and subordinating women. In the novel's famous sword-play scene, Troy kisses Bathsheba for the first time. He uses a sword to demonstrate his skills to her, and then imprints his kiss on her lips, signifying his possession of her. The sexual shame she feels as a result gives her the sense that she has “sinned a great sin” (185). She experienced her first kiss alongside such guilt-ridden distress. By kissing her, he marks her as his possession.

Boldwood's marking is not as effective a means of controlling women as Troy's. Troy disappears after Fanny's death and is presumed drowned. About a year after Troy's disappearance, Boldwood forces Bathsheba to wear his ring at a Christmas party as evidence of their

secret courtship, a mark of ownership that does not differ greatly from the brands on the flanks of her sheep. After his arrest, Boldwood's room is found to be filled with his obsessive collection of women's clothes and jewelry, which he bought seven years ago in advance and marked with Bathsheba's married name: "Bathsheba Boldwood" (373). This discovery emphasizes his sense of her as an object he owns. However, his marking does not succeed because he does not openly confront Bathsheba as her owner and she refuses to behave as if she were his possession.

3

Hardy's story details the process through which three men—Oak, Troy, and Boldwood—"tame" (36) Bathsheba, who thinks, "I *hate* to be thought men's property" (33 italics original) and "I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding if I could be one without having a husband" (35). In other words, the story poses the question: who possesses Bathsheba? Fanny's presence is meant to support the three men who lead Bathsheba down the road toward marriage. In the days in which Hardy's story is set, most women's *raison d'être* was to marry and bear children. Women could not truly live unless they belonged to a man, just as Bathsheba cannot manage her farm without Oak. Relatedly, Fanny's marriage to Troy is the only outcome that can bring her happiness: her *raison d'être* is condensed into the fact that she belongs to Troy. Because Fanny shows throughout the story that she is only an accessory of Troy's, Hardy has no need to describe her mental state and render her a well-rounded character.

Fanny's baby is undeniable evidence that she belongs to Troy. The death of this baby plays an important role in the taming of Bathsheba. Standing before the open coffin, Bathsheba and Troy are both plagued by their real feelings toward Fanny. Bathsheba envies Fanny for her baby and Troy honestly loves Fanny. With both Fanny and her baby lying before them, Bathsheba's status as Troy's legitimate wife is called

into question. The death of Fanny alone, and not her baby, may have merely provided evidence of the loss of Bathsheba's sexual appeal for Troy. The inscription on the tombstone, which reads "Erected by Francis Troy in Beloved Memory of Fanny Robin" (312), suggests this. Troy's use of the word "Erected" rather than "placed here" implies that Fanny could "erect male desire" (Fisher 59). Seeing the baby in the coffin alongside its mother, Bathsheba becomes jealous of Fanny for usurping her role as the bearer of Troy's child and deems the baby "the conclusive proof" (289) of Troy's past involvement with Fanny. The presence of the baby, thus, emphasizes that the child belongs to Troy and Fanny rather than Bathsheba, and that Bathsheba doesn't belong to him. When Troy confides his unsurpassable love for Fanny, whom he impregnates without a marital contract, he kisses Fanny and her baby as he kissed Bathsheba in the sword-play scene. He then says to Bathsheba, "I shall not kiss you" (293). His refusal to kiss his legitimate wife indicates that he no longer considers Bathsheba his possession. Furthermore, by choosing to kiss Fanny, Troy signifies that she, not Bathsheba, is his true wife who can bear a child. Bathsheba's complicated encounter with the corpses of Fanny and her baby symbolically "stages a scene of castration of the female, which marks the female as lack" (Shires 59–60). Fanny's dead baby marks Bathsheba as a useless woman who cannot bear her husband's baby, despite the fact that she is his legitimate wife.

Although Troy places flowers on Fanny's tomb, the rain washes them away, as if washing Fanny and her baby out of his life and into oblivion. In contrast, the flowers that Bathsheba places on the tomb are never washed away. For Bathsheba, the death of Fanny and the baby marks the pain of her married life with Troy. John Goode remarks that "Fanny Robin loses [Troy] because she does not appear in the right scenario at the right moments" (25), but Fanny's death forces the independent Bathsheba to recognize that women must belong to men. While Fanny remains insignificant because of her inability to appear at

the right moment during life, her death becomes a significant moment in Bathsheba's life. This is "FANNY'S REVENGE" (284).

The question of whether Fanny's baby is essential to the story has considerable implications for both Bathsheba and Fanny. On the one hand, the baby marks Fanny as the bearer of Troy's child. On the other hand, it marks Bathsheba, who cannot produce patrilineal heirs, as being "nothing" (293) to Troy. The baby proves Fanny's identity as a true wife of Troy and its mother.

As Garson argues, "[b]y the end of the novel Bathsheba has lost the visual presence which distinguished her from Fanny, and turned (as Troy complained) into a plaintive voice, finally into a moral emblem" (40); in other words, after the death of Fanny, Bathsheba takes on Fanny's role as a mark. In the text, Bathsheba comes to be only a mark of a man's possession: "[i]t was such an unexpected revelation of all women being alike at heart, even those so different in their accessories as Fanny and this one[Bathsheba]" (293). As Coggan remarks in the narrative, after Bathsheba's marriage to Oak, "[t]he man[Oak] hev learnt to say 'my wife' in a wonderful naterel way" (389), and Bathsheba comes to be identified as Farmer Oak's wife. Ultimately, Hardy has not given readers the satisfaction of a convincing moralistic narrative that depicts a woman's immorality, her punishment, and redemption. What he has done instead is to ensure that, as a woman, Bathsheba must take over the role Fanny previously played, becoming almost invisible by the story's end.

Conclusion

The fact that Fanny is extremely marginalized and is only an appendage of Troy in the narrative shows that a woman must belong to a man in Victorian society. Fanny forces Bathsheba to regard herself as "men's property." Her baby reminds Bathsheba of a woman's role in the society that she must bear children for her husband. In addition to

three men, Oak, Troy and Boldwood, Fanny the woman plays a role of taming Bathsheba through her death. Bathsheba finally accepts the position of Oak's wife, instead of managing her farm by herself.

Notes

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (ed. Suzanne B. Falck-Yi. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002). All further quotations from this work will be identified by page number of this edition.

² For detailed arguments on the representation of fragmented Fanny, see Brooks, p.172.

³ For detailed arguments on the male gaze, see Grossman, pp.619–638.

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