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Theatre of the Mind: Hardy the Dynasts and the Question of Form

Abstract

This essay analyzes Hardy's rarely discussed epic-drama, *The Dynasts*, especially in relation to trends in the early twentieth-century drama. Hardy's work is a hybrid of epic, drama, and lyric and was, at the time, thought to be unstageable.

Keywords

The Dynasts, Napoleonic Wars, Thomas Hardy

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Theatre and Performance Studies



Poster advertising Granville Barker's production of Hardy's *The Dynasts* (1914), Charles Ricketts

In November 1914, only months after the onset of the Great War, the Kingsway Theatre in London was the scene of one of the more unusual theatrical events of the period. Harley Granville Barker presented his version of Thomas Hardy's epic-drama of the Napoleonic Wars, *The Dynasts*, the only professional production ever attempted of this seemingly unstageable work.¹ Having gained the author's permission, Barker carefully edited the three-volume work into a three-act, twenty-seven scene script which yet retained the kaleidoscopic quality of Hardy's original.² Rather than a "well made play," *The Dynasts* proved itself to be in performance what the poet intended it should be mentally, a "spectacle."

The successful performance of *The Dynasts* in 1914 must have been something of a vindication to the septuagenarian poet who had endured a decade of mixed criticism since the work made its first appearance in print.³ In February 1904, Thomas Hardy betrayed his surprise at "the critics seeming to be puzzled" with the recently published Part First of *The Dynasts* (*Collected Letters*, III. 106). While a measure of their perplexity must be attributed to Hardy's focus on matters of national and historical rather than regional interest, the unusual presentation of his subject seemed also to signal a departure from his earlier works. Far from representing a break with the author's past, however, *The*

Dynasts is the natural culmination of Hardy's lifelong fascination with the ambiguous character of Napoleon and the international events which his ambition set into motion. Moreover, the work's unprecedented blending of epic and drama, poetry and prose, surrealism and realism in a framework of three parts, nineteen acts, and one hundred thirty-one scenes offers us new insight into the generic rebelliousness of a literary artist who has too often been simply categorized as a novelist-turned-poet.

Even before he had begun his career as novelist, Hardy made an early attempt to translate his interest in the Napoleonic Wars into literature. Soon after completing the manuscript of his first (unpublished) novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, Hardy turned back to poetry:

On June 9 [1868] he enters, "Finished copying MS.", and on the 17th is recorded at some length the outline of a narrative poem on the Battle of the Nile. It was never finished, but it shows that the war with Napoleon was even then in his mind as material for poetry of some sort. (*Life and Work* 59)

Through the remaining years of the nineteenth century, even while pursuing his career as novelist, Hardy pondered the "poetry of some sort" which might best contain his vision of the Napoleonic Wars.

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In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler suggests that "even rigid prescriptive genre theories" allow an author two choices. He may create "variations within a familiar genre" notwithstanding "progressively more detailed and demanding prescriptions for imitation." Or if he is a "free spirit," he may "transcend the limitations of previous examples" and thus "invent new kinds with rules of his own devising" (29, 31). Until the close of the nineteenth century, Hardy chose the first of these two options. Prose fiction – in the form of short stories, novellas, and novels – was the theme on which he created variations for thirty years. Throughout this period, however, the "free spirit" looking for greater artistic challenges can be seen in his "experimental" novels, such as *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) and *The Well-Beloved* (1897), his stage adaptations of novels and stories, and his essays.⁴ Yet it was the return to his first love, poetry, which gave Hardy the sense of freedom he sought. On Christmas day 1890, he wrote: "While thinking of resuming 'the viewless wings of poesy' before dawn this morning, new horizons seemed to open, and worrying pettinesses to disappear" (*Life and Work* 241). With economic pressures lifted by the popular success of his novels, Hardy was able finally to exercise the second option mentioned by Fowler, "to invent new kinds."

The new kind which Hardy created was, of course, *The Dynasts*. During the thirty-year germination of this work, however, Hardy considered a number of generic alternatives which combined elements of narrative, epic, ballad, and drama. Among those forms

which he contemplated but later rejected were: "a narrative poem," "an Iliad of Europe from 1789 to 1815," "a ballad, or ballad-sequence," "A Homeric Ballad," "a Great Modern Drama," and "A Drama of Kings" (*Life and Work* 59, 110, 117, 150, 152, 231). Yet Hardy sensed both the limitations of these various literary forms and the unique character of the work he wanted to write. He sought, above all, expansiveness: "I feel continually that I require a larger canvas" (*Life and Work* 231).

Throughout these years, Hardy was feeling his way towards a literary form which would release him from the limitations of realistic fiction without binding him to other, equally restrictive, generic conventions. His task was daunting. He faced the artistic dilemmas of presenting multiple perspectives, antirealism or surrealism, automaton-like characters as well as spiritual essences, while still narrating the actual historical events of ten explosive years. He required, and in fact created, a new genre which would be a loose aggregate of many genres.

Hardy's need to present a multitude of perspectives is related to his own propensity to view a person, a landscape, or a situation from many angles. The novel had allowed Hardy some measure of flexibility in this area. As omniscient narrator, he could move with ease from an aerial perspective which reduced men to animated shapes, to an internal perspective which explored the motivations of an individual character. For his treatment of England's clash with Napoleon, however, Hardy would require much more than the double perspective which he had used in his novels. Not even the multiple perspectives used thirty years earlier by Browning in *The Ring and the Book*, or thirty years later by Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner would have been sufficient for Hardy's purposes. Hardy wished to contrast the high and the low, the dynasts and the rustics, the controllers and the controlled. His narrative perspective would have to range from the unconscious superhuman forces which oversee human history to the innocent subhuman creatures trampled down by the march of that history. He needed to explore the significance of events which, as Harold Orel notes, "no mere human participant could appreciate" (Hardy, *Dynasts*, xviii). In Hardy's mind, the novel was too firmly rooted in realism to allow such latitude.

Besides this problem of expressing multiple and far-ranging perspectives, Hardy also wished to explore concepts far beyond the limits of the realistic novel. His own interests, he wrote in 1901, lay "largely in non-rationalistic subjects, since non-rationality seems, so far as one can perceive, to be the principle of the Universe" (*Life and Work* 332). This anti-realistic strain in Hardy's fiction can be glimpsed in his use of bizarre coincidence, spectre-haunted dreams, gothic descriptions, and hints of psychic or supernatural forces underlying human behavior.

In his treatment of the Napoleonic period, however, Hardy wished to explore his interest in "non-rationalistic subjects" further than he had in either his novels or stories. His early notions of *The Dynasts* included overtly supernatural elements. Napoleon, for example, was to be represented "as haunted by an Evil Genius or Familiar, whose existence he has to confess to his wives." When he abandoned this idea, Hardy conceived another, more

macabre concept in which "Napoleon by means of necromancy becomes possessed of an insight, enabling him to see the thoughts of opposing generals" (*Life and Work* 211-12). Although these ghostly ideas were quickly rejected, Hardy chose to replace them with others only slightly less bizarre. "Rational" explanations for human behavior would not suffice. As he explained to the theatre critic William Archer in 1901, the supernatural offered Hardy "another domain for the imagination to expatiate in" ("Real Conversations" 316).⁵

To view the world and its inhabitants from the perspective of spectral forces was, Hardy came to believe, beyond the scope of the novel. In 1886, however, he had considered the possibility of achieving this spectral viewpoint in the novel:

'4th, March. Novel-writing as an art cannot go backward. Having reached the analytic stage it must transcend it by going still further in the same direction. Why not by rendering as visible essences, spectres, &c. the abstract thoughts of the analytic school?'

Years later, armed with the gift of hindsight, Hardy commented on this notebook passage: "This notion was approximately carried out, not in a novel, but through the much more appropriate medium of poetry, in the supernatural framework of *The Dynasts*" (*Life and Work* 183).

After another decade of novel-writing, a decade which saw the rise of naturalism in both fiction and drama, Hardy became convinced that the genre was becoming increasingly "artless," that in fact it was becoming mired in the physical. He considered art a "disproportioning . . . of realities" which illuminated those features of a scene or object which the artist wished to highlight. "Hence 'realism' is not Art" (*Life and Work* 239). The reproduction he had sought in his novels could only be achieved "by seeing into the *heart of a thing* . . . by means of the imagination" (*Life and Work* 151).

The unsuitability of the novel for Hardy's purposes was due not only to his ideas of its generic limitations but to personal reasons as well. Having achieved financial security from his fiction and being moreover disgusted by the critical response to his final novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy was unwilling to continue modifying his artistic plans to please the novel-reading public. He recognized that the vision of history which he wished to present in *The Dynasts*— "a history of human automatism . . . an account of human action in spite of human knowledge" (*Life and Work* 158) — would never be accepted by a broad, middle-class audience. Hardy felt that verse would be a "much more appropriate medium" for this vision, in part because he believed that poetry's freedom from realism allowed the artist greater intellectual and creative latitude. As he neared the end of his career as a novelist, he advanced this hope:

Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion — hard as a rock — which the vast body of men have vested

interests in supporting. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.' (*Life and Work* 302)

While the "ideas and emotions" which Hardy expresses in *The Dynasts* may not be quite so revolutionary as Galileo's theories, they do represent "the modern expression of a modern outlook" (*The Dynasts*, Preface 5). And as Hardy had learned from the reception of *Jude*, the realistic novel was an imperfect vehicle for presenting "a modern outlook" to a Victorian audience.

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Although Hardy eventually labelled *The Dynasts* an "epic-drama," over the years he referred to it as a "play," a "drama," a "dramatic epic," a "mental drama," a "vision drama," a "poetic drama," a "panoramic show," a "chronicle poem . . . under the similitude of a drama," and a "spectacular poem . . . resembling a stage-play." Clearly, the novel, for reasons of form and audience, could not contain the panorama which Hardy wished to present. Hardy must have believed that the shift to poetic drama as a more appropriate medium would offer him greater scope in perspective, subject-matter, and setting. Yet it must also be asked why all of Hardy's descriptions of *The Dynasts* are compound nouns. Hardy seems unwilling to be pinned down to any one set of generic conventions.

Drama is the word which appears most frequently in Hardy's references to *The Dynasts*. In casual letters to friends he alludes to the work simply as "the drama" (*Collected Letter*, III: 81, 94, 95, 99). Although Hardy called it a poem "resembling a stage-play" and "in the similitude of a drama," *The Dynasts* could not have been written with the stage in mind. Its three parts, nineteen acts, one hundred thirty-one scenes, and nearly three hundred speaking parts make this fact clear. As his admirer, the drama critic William Archer noted in his review of Granville Barker's production, "It was not without misgiving that even the warmest admirers of Thomas Hardy and Mr. Granville Barker heard of the projected presentation at the Kingsway Theatre of an abridged version of 'The Dynasts.' It seemed too gigantic a task even for Mr. Barker's energy and scenic skill" ("The Dynasts' on Stage" 753). Hardy was aware, however, of other qualities (besides unstageability) which made "drama" an unlikely definition of his work. He believed that organicism, or "the well-knit interdependence of parts," was an essential element of "the well-rounded tale." Hardy applied this theory, in his prose fiction, to "a regular structure of incident, accompanied by an equally regular development of character" (Hardy, *Personal Writings* 116). But this need for a well-ordered plot and realistically motivated characters was countered by Hardy's belief in the inorganicism of history, the untenability of historical causality.

Drama, in its conventional sense, presented Hardy with the same insidious conflict. By 1903, however, Hardy was enough of an artistic iconoclast, or "free spirit" to recall

Fowler's term, to change generic rules to suit his purposes. Thus in the preface to *The Dynasts*, Hardy makes no apologies for bypassing rules which govern standard drama:

It may hardly be necessary to inform readers that in devising this chronicle-piece no attempt has been made to create that completely organic structure of action, and closely-webbed development of character and motive, which are demanded in a drama strictly self-contained. (6)

Hardy wished rather to create "a rapid mental vision of the Napoleonic wars" (Hardy, *Personal Writings* 141). Thus the reader's own mind must provide the filaments which will allow *The Dynasts* to become, if not a "closely-webbed" structure, at least a loosely-woven tapestry. While every literary work requires the reader's mental participation, Hardy stresses the particularly active role which his work demands of the reader:

A panoramic show like the present is a series of historical "ordinates" . . . the subject is familiar to all and foreknowledge is assumed to fill in the junctions required to combine the scenes into an artistic unity. Should the mental spectator be unwilling or unable to do this, a historical presentment on an intermittent plan, in which the *dramatis personae* number some hundreds, exclusive of crowds and armies, becomes in his individual case unsuitable. (*Dynasts*, Preface 6)

The reader must be willing and able to fill in the gaps between each of the one hundred thirty-one scenes of *The Dynasts*.

The final sentence of this passage throws light on Hardy's changing ideas of audience. The need to misrepresent his own views in his novels had always exasperated Hardy. Thus, in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, he had attempted to define and thus limit his audience. In the 1895 preface, Hardy described *Jude* as "a novel addressed by a man to men and women of full age" (viii). This description serves as a warning, rather than an apology, to potential readers. Hardy had no illusions that theatre-goers and managers would be any more liberal than novel-readers and publishers. He had noted the shocked responses of English audiences and critics to Ibsen's plays. Thus in 1892, in a contribution to a symposium on the relative merits of fiction and drama, Hardy wrote that "the play as nowadays conditioned" was hampered by numerous restrictions:

parts have to be moulded to actors, not actors to parts . . . managers will not risk a truly original play . . . scenes have to be arranged in a constrained and arbitrary fashion to suit the exigencies of scenebuilding. (*Personal Writings* 139)

In his preface to *The Dynasts*, then, Hardy first dismisses the requirement of "organic structure" by placing the burden of connecting the work's disparate "ordinates" upon the reader. But he also forestalls the problem of audience acceptance by not only warning the potential reader of his task, but inviting the unprepared or lackadaisical reader to look elsewhere for more "suitable" reading.

One of the characteristics of drama which, however, was very much to Hardy's purpose was its division into acts and scenes. Comparing the "order of natural recital and the order of theatrical utility," Hardy saw little significant difference: "to write Scene so-and-so, Time so-and-so, instead of Once upon a time, At such a place, is a trifling variation that makes no difference to the mental images raised" (*Personal Writings* 142). Hardy had attempted early in his career to incorporate theatrical divisions into the novel. *The Hand of Ethelberta* is subtitled "A Comedy in Chapters," and each chapter title gives the setting and time of action, as in a stage-play. Yet an actual drama permits a greater freedom of division than the novel. Drama is not subject to the often artificial divisions necessitated by serial publication of novels. Scenes can last a few seconds or many minutes. Spatial leaps are also more credible in a drama. Rapid-fire scenic shifts from cosmic to rustic, England to France, tragedy to irony allowed Hardy the juxtapositions he needed. Thus to present a "kaleidoscopic" image of Europe, with multiple shifts of temporal and spatial perspective, drama was the genre of choice. As Hardy insisted, "there was available no such other form that would readily allow of the necessary compression of space and time" (*Personal Writings* 143).

As for the surrealistic impression which Hardy wished to convey in *The Dynasts*, the drama offered both limitations and advantages. "As nowadays conditioned," plays were, in Hardy's opinion, too heavily weighted down with realistic scenery. He advocated, instead, paring down the stage to the bare essentials and allowing the imagination to supply the rest. "After all," he wrote in 1891, "scenic perfection . . . only banishes one plane further back the jarring point between illusion and disillusion. You must have it *somewhere*, and begin calling in 'make believe' forthwith, and it may as well be soon as late – immediate as postponed – and no elaborate scenery be attempted" (*Life and Work*, 243). The theatre was, Hardy knew, heading in this direction. In the preface to *The Dynasts*, he noted that "gauzes or screens to blur outlines might still further shut off the actual, as has, indeed, already been done in exceptional cases" (8). Not surprisingly, in his review of the production, William Archer drew comparisons between Granville Barker's staging and techniques of both the Elizabethan and the Japanese stage.

It is interesting to note that while Hardy was planning and then writing *The Dynasts*, August Strindberg was writing and attempting to produce *A Dream Play*.⁶ This great expressionistic play, like *The Dynasts*, explores man's relationship to supra-human forces and asks the meaning of human suffering and misery. More importantly, however, both writers seek to escape the traditional time-bound and space-bound conventions of dramatic naturalism (in Strindberg's case) and novelistic realism (in Hardy's case). In his "Explanatory Note" to *A Dream Play*, Strindberg asserts that in his dream play,

Everything can happen; everything is possible and likely. Time and space do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blending of memories, experiences, free inventions, absurdities, and improvisations. (19)

The play's opening stage directions then state: "*Cloud formations resembling castles and citadels in ruins on crumbling slate hills form the backdrop. The constellations Leo, Virgo and Libra can be seen, and among them is the planet Jupiter shining brightly*" (19-20). The Prologue consists of a dialogue between the Hindu God Indra and his daughter.

The parallels between *A Dream Play* and *The Dynasts* are striking. Hardy begins his epic-drama in the heavens, or more specifically, "The Overworld," where the speakers are the Phantom Intelligences who comment upon the human action below. Towards the close of this "Fore Scene," the stage directions move the scene from the cosmic to the painfully human:

The nether sky opens, and Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs, the peninsular plateau of Spain forming a head. . . . The point of view then sinks downwards through space, and draws near to the surface of the perturbed countries, where the peoples, distressed by events which they did not cause, are seen writhing, crawling, heaving, and vibrating in their various cities and nationalities. (I, Fore Scene, 27)

This striking image of a writhing Europe is hardly less surrealistic than that of the chrysanthemum blooming out of the castle's roof at the end of *A Dream Play*.

We might wonder whether Hardy would have considered writing *The Dynasts* as an actual stage-play had he been aware of the possibilities opened up by Strindberg's expressionistic plays. As it was, however, Hardy decided to dispense with the limitations of that medium since, given the theater of his time, "a freedom of treatment was attainable in this form that was denied where the material possibilities of stagery had to be rigorously remembered" (*Dynasts* 7). Hardy realized that any physical presentation of *The Dynasts* would limit the work's surrealistic dimension. A "mental performance," on the other hand, allowed Hardy to "look through the insistent, and often grotesque, substance at the thing signified" (*Dynasts* 7). He could retain for his work the novel's ability "of producing a representation . . . by sheer imaginativeness" (*Personal Writings* 142), while escaping that genre's reliance on temporal and spatial realism. Hardy had always been concerned with presenting the "abstract realities" which lay beneath ordinary experience, and *The Dynasts* would be his most ambitious attempt in that direction.

Perhaps because of this goal, Hardy was particularly impatient with the questions of generic definition which he correctly anticipated would greet *The Dynasts*. If he was taking liberties with standard literary forms (and he was), then he believed his work was a

clear example of the ends justifying the means. As he had done before in his novels, Hardy attempted to forestall the critics' objections in his preface:

Some critics have averred that to declare a drama as being not for the stage is to make an announcement whose subject and predicate cancel each other. The question seems to be an unimportant matter of terminology. (6)

Ian Gregor has written, in relation to Hardy's fiction, that "a novelist must choose from the literary forms that are available to him" (20). But by 1903, Hardy was no longer a novelist, and the preface to *The Dynasts* is his declaration of independence from formal strictures. Generic classification is an area which he will no longer consider important:

To say, then, in the present case, that a writing in play-shape is not to be played, is merely another way of stating that such writing has been done in a form for which there chances to be no brief definition save one already in use for works that it superficially but not entirely resembles. (7)

Behind these passages from the preface to *The Dynasts*, we sense Hardy's intolerance of generic terminology which limits his freedom as an author. They recall a notebook entry of thirty years earlier: "The irritating necessity of conforming to rules which in themselves have no virtue" (*Life and Work*, 114). By the time Hardy completed Part First of *The Dynasts*, he had ceased to accept such rules – including those which dictated the form of a literary work – as binding upon him. In a letter of February 2, 1904 to the *Times Literary Supplement* in which he defended the form of *The Dynasts*, Hardy wrote: "The artistic spirit is at bottom a spirit of caprice, and in some of its finest productions in the past it could have given no clear reason why they were run in this or that particular mould, and not in some more obvious one" (*Personal Writings* 141). As both an epic-drama in verse and a staged panoramic production, *The Dynasts* confounded readers and audiences who were accustomed to a well-knit narrative, realistically presented. For those willing to suspend such expectations, however, Hardy's Napoleonic spectacle offered a new way of envisioning human history and human experience.

Notes

1 For a complete history of Barker's production, including his arrangement of scenes from *The Dynasts*, see Maguerite Roberts' *Hardy's Poetic Drama and the Theatre: The Dynasts and The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*.

2 For Hardy's letters to Barker concerning the London production, in which he took a great interest, see *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, V: 51-63.

3 *The Dynasts*' three parts were published separately in 1904, 1906, and 1908.

4 Many of Hardy's novels and stories were dramatized and even filmed in his lifetime. He wrote his own dramatization of his 1883 short story, "The Three Strangers" in 1893,

changing the title to "The Three Wayfarers." This one-act play was performed at Terry's Theatre in London in June 1893 as part of a quintuple bill. *The Times* review described the play as "unquestionably the best piece of the evening." Several years later, Hardy wrote a dramatization of his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was performed in New York at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in March 1897 and again in London in 1925 and 1929 (Purdy 77-9). The texts of both plays can be found in Marguerite Roberts' *Tess in the Theatre*.

5 It is interesting that in the same interview, Hardy confessed to Archer that, although he would "give ten years" of his life to see a ghost, he had never seen "the ghost of a ghost. Yet I should think I am cut out by nature for a ghost-seer. My nerves vibrate very readily. . . . my will to believe is perfect" (313).

6 Written 1901, given a prologue 1906, produced 1907. According to *The Readers Encyclopedia of World Drama*, "the play has gradually established itself on the stage as the theater has been able to rise to its extraordinary technical demands" (187). In his 1978 Introduction to *The Dynasts*, Harold Orel contends that Hardy's "novel way of treating European vistas" remains not only unstageable, but "still defies the technical resources of the cinema" (Hardy, *The Dynasts* xix). I would suggest that the cinema, with available CGI wizardry, has now risen to the "extraordinary technical demands" of Hardy's epic-drama. While *The Dynasts* may now be *technically* within the scope of current cinematographic art, the length and cost of such a project still makes it virtually unimaginable.

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