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# More Than a 'Mere Painted Scene': The Role of Theatricality and the Carnavalesque in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'

## **Abstract**

This essay examines the role of Thomas Hardy's scenes of community theatre, drawing examples from *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Only in such scenes from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* does Hardy employ Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, reversing the roles of the spectator and the creator of spectacle, the supporting cast and the lead actor, in order to magnify the fall of protagonist Michael Henchard.

## **Keywords**

Hardy, Henchard, Casterbridge, carnivalesque

## **Disciplines**

Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory | English Language and Literature | Theatre and Performance Studies

## **Comments**

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More than a 'Mere Painted Scene': The Role of Theatricality and the Carnavalesque in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Thomas Hardy's work has always been a popular candidate for adaptation, both theatric and cinematic, and for those who are familiar with his writing it is not difficult to guess why. Thomas Hardy's prose is famous for its poetic visual descriptions; whether he writes of the idyllic farms of Weatherbury or of the unforgiving expanse that is Egdon Heath, he presents his readers with a meticulously rendered backdrop for the story about to unfold. His style of description sets the stage and makes his work ripe for dramatic adaptation, but highly visual settings are not the only theatrical element therein; the relationships between Hardy's minor and major characters, between the community and the individual, between the spectator and the spectacle, also demonstrate a fascination with theatricality.

Why does Hardy so frequently in his novels present important interactions in such highly theatrical scenes? *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* especially feature important moments played out on a public stage: Troy's death, Eustacia's crossdressing, Henchard's sale of his first wife and loss of a former lover. Each of these scenes contain key plot points when considered in the scope of the corresponding novel's entirety, and each of these scenes can be understood as staged, complete with a backdrop, position markings, a cast of lead and supporting actors, and an audience. Hardy builds these

essentials of any stage production into the text itself by including bodily, spatial descriptions and varying amounts of interaction between characters who are acting and those who are watching.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, however, stands apart from previous examples. Unlike the staged scenes in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, Hardy writes these scenes in *Mayor* not just in the dramatic but in the carnivalesque mode, featuring lawless behavior and a role reversal that inverts the power dynamic between major and minor characters. Judith Bair observes that, in the *Mayor*, "The stage is enlarged to Casterbridge, Henchard's role aggrandized to the mayor, while the unexpected stranger appears in the form of a multitude of unanticipated intrusions that compound to divest the leading man of all of his roles, and to drive him off the stage" (13-14). This "unexpected stranger" is the so-called supporting cast, which, in this novel, Hardy grants more and more agency and significance while the lead, Michael Henchard, becomes an ineffective and insignificant laborer. Bair calls these theatric role-reversals "intrusions," and, as will be discussed later, J. Hillis Miller calls them "misfires," but ultimately they are moments when the carnivalesque mode is most potent and most threatening to Henchard. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy's style of staging allows community actors to transition from being spectators to being creators of spectacle in a carnivalesque inversion designed to magnify and make complete Henchard's fall: as he loses status socially, he also loses status functionally within this theatric narrative.

In order to comprehend Henchard's narrative function in the first place, these highly theatrical moments in Hardy's novels should be understood as instances of "community theatre." For the purposes of this analysis, three elements must be present to constitute a true community theatre scene: a stage-like writing style, two distinct categories of characters, and a melodramatic or even carnivalesque mood. The first element is most easily identified by the physicality of such

a scene's setting. In her examination of theatrical arts in Hardy's work, Joan Grundy observes that "however extensive the background, the scene itself usually occupies a fairly restricted area" (73). This circumscribed setting functions as a stage, and Hardy describes the positioning of his characters' bodies and any sound and lighting details as though writing stage directions. This staging features in both *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, but it occurs most frequently in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The second mark of the community theatre scenes in these novels is the presence of two distinct categories of characters: the main characters, or lead actors, and the minor characters, or the supporting cast. The leads are, simply, those with the most lines, those whose thoughts and actions the course of the novel most closely follows: Bathsheba Everdene and William Boldwood, Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright, Michael Henchard and Lucetta Templeman. Most frequently these leads are active creators of spectacle. The supporting cast is everyone else. These characters fill the empty space left on stage, most often acting as observers of the leads' actions or as messengers between them; Grundy notes that these characters, generally the rustics, play a "subordinate role in relation to the principals" like the chorus of Greek tragedy or opera (77). These minor characters—the people employed on Bathsheba's and Boldwood's farms, the others who live on Egdon Heath, the poor folk of Casterbridge—may or may not interact directly with the plot of their respective novels, but in one of Hardy's community theatre scenes they must be present, even if passive.

The third essential element of Hardy's community theatre scenes—and the one most important to understanding those in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—relates to the peculiar mood. These scenes feature a shocking or bizarre turn of events on a public stage, which Grundy identifies as "melodrama in its crude popular sense, comedy, farce, burlesque" (96). This

description most directly applies to the aforementioned pivotal scenes in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*. However, in the *Mayor*, Hardy moves from presenting these theatrical scenes as merely melodramatic or theatric to presenting them in the carnivalesque mode. Philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque employs "the grotesque, exaggeration, and transgression in order to parody accepted beliefs and rules" and "reveals a universal levelling tendency, eradicating distinctions not only between classes but also between actor and spectator" (Makaryk 517). The carnivalesque encompasses unusual behavior, the subversion of norms, and chaos without consequence. Both the wife-selling scene and the skimmington ride scene invoke this atmosphere in multiple ways, but most importantly by overturning social laws through the role-reversal of those who have stature and those who do not: the leads and the supporting cast. This mode distinction is what sets the community theatre scenes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* apart from those in the other two novels.

In order to recognize Hardy's typical community theatre scene, one should start with his first celebrated novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The murder of Troy at Boldwood's Christmas party is the novel's climax and an exemplary moment of community theatre. In this scene, Boldwood has thrown a large party on Christmas Eve with the hope that Bathsheba will agree to marry him, now that her husband Troy is presumed dead. Not long after he pressures her into assent, Troy appears, alive, surprising both of them. Hardy's prose meticulously sets the stage for Troy's entrance: "There was no music or dancing in progress just now. At the lower end, which had been arranged for the work-folk specially, a group conversed in whispers, and with clouded looks. Boldwood was standing by the fireplace" (288). He describes everything

someone would see and hear if seated before this staging, including the positions of the lead (Boldwood) and the supporting cast, the "work-folk."

This scene maintains the expectation of the former acting and the latter watching; describing his supporting cast here, Hardy writes that the fatal gunshot "stupefied them all[...]. In bewilderment they turned their eyes to Boldwood" (289). All the minor characters who had names earlier (Tall, Laban, Samway) dissolve into a speechless, faceless audience. By the time any of them have names or distinct roles again, the only action taken, by "Samway his man" (290), is to stop Boldwood from killing himself, and this act hardly matters to the overarching plot because Boldwood's life essentially ended when his prospects with Bathsheba disappeared. If they had stopped him from murdering Troy, perhaps then their role could be considered greater than that of a "stupefied" audience, but they did not. Here the supporting cast is of little importance, silent and passive.

The scene of Troy's murder is indeed theatrical, but this upholding of actor expectations is part of the reason why it is merely melodramatic, not carnivalesque. As Richard Nemesvari points out, this scene embodies the "violated banquet" trope of melodrama (114).

The ballroom setting, the violent interruption, the woman holding the head of her dead lover on her lap or looking like "a shapeless heap of drapery on the floor" (Hardy 293) identify the presentation of this incident as stereotypically melodramatic. Grundy goes as far as to call *Far from the Madding Crowd* "Hardy's most complete and perfect melodrama," emphasizing that in this scene, its climax, "the guests crowd in or throng the stairs and the principals make a striking tableau in the centre of the stage" (90). This description of the scene's "tableau" consisting of only the principals or lead actors illustrates that, even in this shocking moment of lawlessness,

Hardy limits this novel to the melodramatic mode; the leads retain their position center-stage and no role reversal occurs.

Hardy does little to upend this status quo in the community theatre scene in *The Return of the Native*: the mummers play of Book Second. In this scene Eustacia dons the costume of the Turkish Knight, a man's costume, in order to gain access to Bloom's End as one of the evening's performers. For her the exploit is a success, as she finally meets the much talked about Clym Yeobright, her future husband. It is not merely the fact that the scene includes an actual play that qualifies it as a scene of community theatre. First of all, Hardy again introduces the event with detailed spatial description: "The room had been arranged with a view to the dancing, the large oak table having been moved back till it stood as a breastwork to the fireplace. At each end, behind, and in the chimney-corner were grouped the guests" (118). This description puts every set piece and prop in place before the entrance of the mummers, just as Hardy prepares Boldwood's hall for the entrance of Troy.

Secondly, through the duration of this scene, Hardy occasionally refers to his lead, Eustacia, as the Turkish knight, but she is the only mummer who retains her true name in the narration; here the supporting cast members, the rustics, are only ever called by the generic names they have adopted for the play: "the Doctor," "the Valiant Soldier," "the Saracen," and "Father Christmas" (116). There is no mention of the supporting cast at all, by true name or otherwise, during the climax of the scene in which Clym confronts the disguised Eustacia. Of these minor characters in *The Return of the Native* J. Hillis Miller observes, "Hardy's rustics seem to have little in the way of separate interiorities" and most often function "as the means by which the main protagonists learn about one another" ("Individual and Community" 157, 164). This observation applies to the mummers play scene, as Hardy seems to have included the



supporting cast here only to facilitate Eustacia's introduction to Clym. The rustics are passive, unindividuated, and unimportant—little more than moving scenery.

Hardy's limiting of the supporting cast's importance here is just one restriction that keeps this scene from claiming the carnivalesque mode, despite the presence of some elements that could, if employed differently, create quite the topsy-turvy atmosphere. At least when compared to the textbook-melodramatic community theatre scene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, this mummers play scene seems a promising candidate for the carnivalesque. As Robert Squillace points out, mummers plays have long been associated with a subversive nature akin to that which Bakhtin saw in carnival: "The two large books on English folk customs available to readers in the 1870s[...]both connect the origins of the mummers' plays with the Saturnalia, the Roman festival of disguise and misrule" (174-175). Looking back at how folk customs were conceived in the decade Hardy published *The Return of the Native* shows the mummers plays were connected to "disguise and misrule," two ideas that could easily help develop the lawless chaos of the carnivalesque mode. Hardy clearly includes disguise in his mummers play scene, but does he include misrule?

Because the mummers play essentially goes as planned, Eustacia's dramatic cross-dressing disguise is the only real opportunity for carnivalesque misrule to enter into this scene, most likely as a role reversal. Without the disguise, Eustacia is a beautiful woman, as Hardy goes to great lengths to describe at the novel's beginning. In this scene, with the disguise, she appears to be a man, and yet she carries out a rather similar attractive role. Sheila Berger explains this cross-dressing event in terms of its larger function in Eustacia's and Clym's relationship: "that she is a woman disguised as a mummer/man is both restrictive and fascinating[...]Her presentation of herself in ambiguity and unfamiliarity here on the heath that is so absolutely

'known' to Clym deflects any wariness of the unusual and places her as a stimulus to dreams" (77). This "fascinating," expectation-flipping masquerade might have qualified as carnivalesque if it were more than a perfunctory role reversal, but it evolves no further than that. Eustacia's temporarily ambiguous state still attracts Clym and "places her as a stimulus" to his dreams, an end result that is hardly different from what one might assume would have happened if Clym had first interacted with Eustacia in her usual form, a beautiful woman. Eustacia's role reversal is short-lived, superficial, and does not change any established hierarchy or law; she remains a seductive woman, a lead actor who is the center of attention. Though mummers plays and cross-dressing may seem apt to develop the carnivalesque mode, their employment in this particular scene of community theatre is merely dramatic. As can be concluded from this limited use of the scene's more interesting elements as well as from the limited role of the supporting cast, Hardy did not intend this community theatre scene—or that of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for that matter—to be stylistically subversive.

The opposite is the case in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The *Mayor* features multiple community theatre scenes, and although Hardy writes these scenes in a different mode than that in which he writes the scenes of Boldwood's party and the mummers play, the narration still strongly evokes the stage. The first of these scenes in the *Mayor* is the opening scene: the wife-selling. Looking for work, Michael Henchard walks across the countryside with his wife, Susan, and their child. They come across a fair, and as Henchard becomes drunk on rum-spiked furmity he initiates an auction to sell Susan, which is only taken seriously once someone offers to buy her. For a considerable portion of this opening, Hardy only refers to his actors by their titles or roles; for example, Henchard is simply the "husband" or the "trusser" until his name is finally

spoken aloud by Susan: "Michael, how about our lodging?" (8). Regarding this narrative choice at the beginning of the *Mayor*, Bair observes:

As if viewing a stage performance, the reader learns nothing of the characters except what he perceives through appearance and gesture, until the dialogue begins. Hardy gives us no clues as to their past or to their thoughts, describing them as a 'casual observer' would perceive them. (12)

Hardy's reader discovers the characters' names through dialogue just as an audience watching a play would be forced to. He further cultivates this theatricality by calling attention to the reactions of those who witness the wife-selling: "But with the demand and response of real cash the jovial frivolity of the scene departed. A lurid colour seemed to fill the tent, and change the aspect of all therein. The mirth-wrinkles left the listeners' faces, and they waited with parting lips" (12). Hardy frames the wife-selling as a performance with spectators, and his emphasis on the immediate, general effect of Henchard's actions emphasizes the dichotomy between lead actors and supporting cast members.

However, unlike in the aforementioned community theatre scenes, these minor characters do not remain silent spectators. Although they have no names, the people watching Henchard bear distinct qualities and, more importantly, speak. The "staylace vendor" says, "Serves the husband well be-right," and the "man who had seen high life" remarks, "He's without doubt a stranger here" (13). Unlike their counterparts in the prior novels' scenes of community theatre, specific members of the supporting cast assert their presence through dialogue.

Additionally, this scene shows the transition of such a character from background to center stage: Newson, the sailor. Henchard, the lead, is the center of attention until Newson speaks up and steals his audience: "All eyes were turned. Standing in the triangular opening which formed the

door of the tent was a sailor[...]A dead silence followed his affirmation" (11). Here Hardy allows one of his minor characters to step forward and intervene in the scene's main event, an event that has permanent consequences and will set the entire novel in motion. Berger asserts that after he speaks, "The sailor is now the central actor[...]Henchard has been turned from subject to object; he has been tossed off the stage" (110). Newson upstages the lead actor in this scene, taking on Henchard's role of creating spectacle. In the wife-selling scene, Newson is the exemplary active minor character.

Hardy sets this role reversal in an already carnivalesque environment. The fair is comprised of tents, like a circus, within which the bizarre (the wife-selling) occurs. Ruth A. Firor points out that while wife-sales were not unheard of, they were still shocking and unusual (237); she states, "Henchard's sale of his wife has a grim humor: the place and the manner of the deed are grotesque enough" (235). When Henchard first begins his performance, onlookers do not take him seriously and encourage his babbling, but as soon as someone steps forward to make a real exchange, the "mirth-wrinkles" disappear. The scene is both funny and horrifying, and, in containing both of these aspects, grotesque.

This strange, theatric setting and the fact that the scene turns on a wife-selling, of all the other possible methods of estranging his two main characters here, is "grotesque enough," but Hardy manages to make it even stranger. Miller identifies the wife-selling as "doubly irregular," because it is illegal and Henchard is drunk when he carries it out, and yet "Henchard's wife-selling is nevertheless performatively efficacious" ("Speech Acts 50). The wife-selling transgresses multiple social laws, toppling the expectation that a "doubly irregular" act like Henchard's should be ineffective or impotent. Rather, in this ridiculous, carnivalesque environment it is the first effective action and the most important one, as everything that follows

in the novel can be seen as a consequence of this single act; the fulfillment of said act (Henchard trying to sell Susan) is enabled by a minor character who stepped into the spotlight (Newson agreeing to buy her). As with the mummers play scene, here Hardy incorporates a subversive act into a setting that inherently lends itself to the carnivalesque mode; however the active role of the supporting cast is what ultimately distinguishes the first scene in the *Mayor* as carnivalesque.

The wife-selling scene is not the only dramatic staging in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; the scene at the novel's climax, the skimmington ride, also exhibits all the qualifications of one of Hardy's community theatre scenes. The skimmington ride begins as the poor folk of Casterbridge (the Peter's Finger crowd, specifically) decide it is time to use their knowledge of Lucetta's previous indiscretion with Henchard to publicly embarrass her. They carouse through the streets with effigies of the previous lovers; when Lucetta sees this, she assumes her husband, Farfrae will see it and she becomes so upset she has a violent seizure and miscarriage and ultimately dies. Again Hardy sets the stage for the dramatic event about to unfold: "It was about eight o'clock, and Lucetta was sitting in the drawing-room alone. Night had set in for more than half an hour, but she had not had the candles light[...]. She was leaning back in her chair" (209). He positions his lead, Lucetta, as the lone, reclining figure against the backdrop of the drawing-room—another circumscribed setting—and describes how this space is (not) lit. Hardy's theatric visual description prepares the scene for the entrance of the rest of the cast.

The entrance of characters other than Lucetta brings with it the skimmington ride and the most significant role played by the supporting cast in any of Hardy's community theatre scenes. Here the poor folk of Casterbridge receive narrative treatment most similar to the lead actors: they all speak and they all have names. Charl, Joe, Jopp, and Nance initiate the skimmington ride and each vocally claim their innocence immediately after: their responses to the burgess's

investigation vary, from protesting, "No; we haven't seen anything" and "Oh no—nothing, sir," to claiming, "I've been here this last hour" (213-214). Not only do these supporting cast members have names and distinct voices—unlike those in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*—they take highly efficacious action. The folks from Peter's Finger set out to embarrass Lucetta, to bring her low—as Nance says, "I'd gi'e all my small silver to see that lady topped. . . . And perhaps I shall soon" (202). They accomplish this and more. By the end of the whole incident Lucetta is dead. The supporting cast directly brings about these repercussions, and they control which characters the stunt does or does not affect. Even those who do not participate in the skimmington ride exert this control: Longways and others of Farfrae's men trick Farfrae into leaving town to spare him the shame of the imminent performance, but "For poor Lucetta they took no protective measure, believing with the majority there was some truth in the scandal, which she would have to bear as best she might" (209). The entire community of minor characters organizes the skimmington ride and decides who witnesses it and who does not, which turns out to be a decision of who lives and who dies; in Miller's words, "It is a fatally effective performative gesture collectively performed by lower-class members of the community" ("Speech Acts" 49). The supporting cast carries out all of the primary actions in this scene, creating a spectacle with permanent, fatal consequences that the lead actors can only watch and suffer through as best they might.

In addition to this quintessential role reversal between character groups, both the skimmington ride itself and the way Hardy employs it in this scene qualify as carnivalesque. In her discussion of this incident, Firor highlights "the grotesquerie of the spectacle," and praises Hardy for maintaining "the effigies, the 'rough music' and the swift, mysterious dispersal" of the real folk custom (240-241). Like real skimmington rides were, Hardy's is grotesque, designed to

lower a person or two in an outrageous public performance that requires evading the "executors of the law" (213), the burgess and the constable. True to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, the act is transgressive, and, from a certain angle, comedic. Although the practice is deathly serious for the party targeted by it, it is funny to those who engage in it and who exert power through it: Hardy's narrator attests, "the rigid wildness of Lucetta's features were growing yet more rigid and wild with the nearing of the noise and laughter" (211). While the participants laugh, Lucetta watches from above and repeats, "it will kill me—kill me!" (211), and it does. When they first conceive of the skimmington ride, it is not the intent of the supporting cast to bring about Lucetta's death. Miller recognizes this unexpected outcome as a pattern in the *Mayor*, contending, "What is peculiar about most of these speech acts, however, is that they are in one way or another anomalous. It is not that they do not make something happen, but that they do not bring about quite what they intend" ("Speech Acts " 48). Like the shocking, suddenly serious and permanent consequence of the wife-selling, the efforts of the skimmington ride are effective in unanticipated ways; Miller calls these "anomalous" acts "misfires," but they may be recognized as carnivalesque upsets. All reasonable expectations are off the table in the carnivalesque mode, as they are in Hardy's staging of the skimmington ride.

Ultimately Hardy's use of the carnivalesque in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* gives his supporting cast the opportunity to upstage his lead, Henchard. In the wife-selling scene, Henchard's proposed action is only efficacious because it is validated by Newson, and in the scene of the skimmington ride Henchard is barely present, able to inhibit neither the community's actions nor the consequences of those actions. The community theatre scenes show the supporting cast rising in visibility and power while Henchard, once a lead actor, loses status and potency, slowly fading into the background. Berger asserts, "Henchard does come very late in

the novel to an understanding that life is 'a mere painted stage [*sic*].'<sup>1</sup> The reader is made aware of this—or is at least shown it—much earlier" (109). Indeed, the opening scene provides a condensed preview of Henchard's fading that will play out over the course of the novel as he descends from the position of revered mayor to rejected laborer. However, Berger's argument that Henchard is only ever "the *potential* tragic hero" because minor characters are consistently "stealing the scene" from him ( 110) is flawed. If anything, the fact that Henchard's tragic fall is not only present within the aforementioned narrative arc but is also demonstrated through the very style of narration itself magnifies his plight.

To conclude, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy's scenes of community theatre use a carnivalesque inversion of spectator and creator of spectacle, lead actor and supporting actor, to make Henchard's fall complete; his is a decline both social and functional. All of Hardy's community theatre scenes incorporate a style of narration similar to stage direction, two distinctive types of characters (lead actors and supporting cast), and a peculiar atmosphere defined by an unusual or shocking event; however, only in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* does this atmosphere achieve carnivalesque status. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy presents the climactic Christmas party at Boldwood's estate as a community theatre scene. The presentation is certainly melodramatic but not carnivalesque, as the supporting cast is silent and does not intervene in the most important action: Boldwood's shooting of Troy. The community theatre scene in *The Return of the Native*, the mummers play, at first appears to be fertile ground for the carnivalesque, but Eustacia's cross-dressing functionally subverts little immediately and even less when considered in terms of the entire novel. Hardy reserves the carnivalesque mode for the *Mayor*, as demonstrated in the wife-selling and skimmington ride community theatre scenes. The carnivalesque allows for these public, transgressive events that change the course of several main

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<sup>1</sup> Berger misquotes Hardy; this phrase should appear as it does in the novel, "a mere painted scene," not "stage."



characters' lives—events enacted by the minor characters. As the likes of Newson, Jopp, and Nance assert their power socially in the world of Casterbridge they gain greater significance in the narrative structure, inverting the expectation that the supporting cast can only watch as the lead actors perform. The character of Michael Henchard experiences the opposite, gradually losing his cherished position center-stage, the object of his young ambition, until he no longer desires it; Hardy's narrator tells the reader, "He had no wish to make an arena a second time of a world that had become a mere painted scene to him" (241). When presented in the carnivalesque mode, Hardy's theatric narrative style has the ability to empower and to demote both major and minor characters, and, as Henchard discovers, even a lead actor, the protagonist, can fall so far as to wish he dies unremembered, just another unnamed body in the background like so many minor characters.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christina Vahaly". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial 'C' and 'V'.

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