



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Gender Matrix In The Lady Icenway

Clarissa Sawian

Associate Professor, Head of Department

Department of English

Lady Keane College, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Abstract: A study of the Lady Icenway and her attempt to use her bigamous first husband to produce a fake heir for her second.

Index Terms – Bigamy, Deceit, Deception, Selfishness.

A Group of Noble Dames (1891), is a collection of short stories that portrays the lives of ten Women as narrated by members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian club, who are ensconced at an inn after a rainstorm delayed their outing. Thomas Hardy described the contents of *A Group of Noble Dames* as “I may say it is to be a Tale of Tales—a series of linked stories—of a somewhat different kind from the mass of my work of late” (Letters VII, 113). These stories are placed in “a contrapuntal structure” so that “with a few exceptions, each story can be seen as a re-patterning or ironic refutation of the ostensible moral of the one preceding it.” (Brady, 53)

In his Preface, dated June 1896, Thomas Hardy elucidates that the narratives contained in this collection have been derived from “the diagrams on pages of county histories” of the “pedigrees of country families.” By transforming “this dryness as of dust” into a palpitating drama through a careful comparison of dates alone, the frame work of the motives, passions and personal qualities of these extraordinary Dames, most of the stories have “arisen and taken shape.” These “curious tales of fair dames, of their loves and hates, their joys and misfortunes, their beauty and their fate” offer a rich quarry for a study of the gender matrix in Hardy’s shorter fiction.

“The Lady Icenway”, Dame the Fifth in the earlier edition, is a tale “about a woman hoping to use her bigamous first husband to produce a fake heir for her second.” But, according to Martin Ray, Hardy edits the end of the story to turn it into a “sentimental story about a woman wishing that she had stayed free to re-marry her first husband.” Kristin Brady states:

“The Lady Icenway” continues to explore the various aberrations that can exist in marital and parental affection when they are subject to the conventions of upper class life, and the complications that accompany the inheritance of wealth and title. When the central concern is disposing of one’s property by producing a “Lineal successor,” the sexual act becomes a practical means to a necessary end rather than an expression of love or passion. This attitude towards sex can produce such cold men as Uplandtowers and Icenway, who marry merely to produce an heir. The women who emerge from the same context display different types of dislocation, ranging from Barbara’s deranged servility to the selfishly possessive yet inconsistent passions of the Marchioness of Stonehenge and Lady Mottisfont. The Lady Icenway is still another variation of the type, and moves a step closer to complete subsuming of natural affection by pride and position (69).

Both Martin Ray and Kristen Brady have identified the problem faced by a woman like Maria Icenway, who, is struggling to adhere to the conventions of her time. The production of a “Lineal successor” being the sole aim of the institution of marriage at that time, failure to do so usually resulted in embittered and long drawn legal battles over property and title rights. Maria’s acute consciousness of her insulated social position, power and convention, dominates her actions throughout the narrative and debilitates, any capacity in her for warm, natural affection. She is, we can say, a typical product of her times.

We are introduced to her as a young woman of many talents and “exceeding great beauty” combined with an imperious temper and an arbitrary mind. As an orphan, raised by an old uncle, she was left very much to herself and her experience of the world was not as expansive as her demeanour suggested. She was not prepared for the exotic foreigner who entered her life. He was a Dutch, visiting the house of a neighbouring landowner. After the first chance meeting, a tender feeling sprang between the two and the amorous foreigner could little conceal the effect Maria had on him. Maria was thrilled by the sense of power she experienced in the face of his unabashed adulation of her person and beauty. The intimacy grew and the two were married before they left together to sail across the ocean to their new home in a foreign land. But her happiness was short-lived. Anderling’s sudden constraint and depression a few days into the journey led to a startling confession—he had made an unfortunate marriage to a woman of scandalous reputation in his youth, though long since separated from her, made his current situation a bigamous one. Tearfully and with passionate embraces, he begged Maria’s forgiveness and entreated her not to leave him. Maria’s reaction to his shocking revelation shows a remarkable psychological strength in one so young and inexperienced.

Thereupon the spirit of this proud and masterful lady showed itself in violent turmoil, like the raging of a nor'west thunderstorm—as well it might, God knows. But she was of too stout a nature to be broken down by his revelation as many ladies of my acquaintance would have been... “I put it to you,” says she, when many useless self – reproaches and protestations on his part had been uttered – “I put it to you whether, if any manliness is left in you, you ought not to be exactly what I considered the best thing for me in this strait to which you have reduced me?” (160)

She then requested him to allow her to return her home and declare him dead at sea. He readily acquiesced to her suggestion, springing as it did from the great love he bore towards her. He endowed her with bonds and jewels before she set sail on the next ship back to England. She reached home safely and apprised only her uncle about her fake widowhood. The humiliating experience which would have destroyed weaker women sadly turned an otherwise beautiful, strong young girl into a cold, proud and ambitious woman. Her pride intact she then proceeded to protect it at any cost in a way which “... though she had been innocent of wrong, [her] pride was of that grain which could not brook the least appearance of having been folded, or deluded, or nonplussed in her worldly aims” (161).

She led a quiet life, gave birth to Anderling's son and was respected by all as a widow of quiet dignity and reserve. No hint, however, is given in the narrative of any maternal affection she may have borne towards her son. Instead, she plotted, coldly and calculatively to accept the addresses paid towards her, by a man of noble birth and title, though much older than herself. She discerned in re-marriage, “a method of fortifying her position against mortifying discoveries” (162). So determined was Maria, in securing her position and honour in the social hierarchy that she gave little consideration to the fact, that, by marrying Lord Icenway, without disclosing her past, she was committing the very same adulterous act of bigamy that she had accused and left Anderling for. The deception complete, she left her uncle's home once again, to live with her second husband in a region where she was unknown.

The reappearance of Anderling, momentarily, threw Maria off-balance but she quickly recovered her steely composure and her self-possession which by then, were the dominating traits in her; this cold lady remained unmoved. She discovered that he could no longer ignite the passion she once had for him and so she coldly informed him about her re-marriage to a man— “an excellent man of ancient family and possessions, who had given her a title, in which she much rejoiced” (163). In the presence of such a passionless statement of the fact, Anderling's ardour cooled down rapidly and his heart withered within him, yet loving her the way he did, he gallantly, if sadly, agreed to leave her again. The obvious changes wrought in her character over such a short period of time shocked him deeply. He had returned expecting to find her waiting for him, [he had informed her about his return through a tender epistle], after witnessing the certain death and burial of his first wife in Quebec. All his hopes and romantic vision of reunion with his family were dealt a harsh blow by Maria's position and so the honourable gentleman departed “much sadder in his heart than on his voyage to England” (163).

Not a word passed from this close-mouthed Lady, about her encounter with Anderling, to her noble unsuspecting husband. Although she had dismissed her first husband peremptorily enough, yet now and then, she would study the child of her “so-called widowhood” to discover how many traits of his father he possessed. This action does not display any strong maternal bond with the child but rather underscores the mother's obsession with self-preservation and social honour. So completely had she subsumed all natural and human feelings of warmth and affection, in her quest for honour and social acceptance, that Maria had forgotten how to be normal or tender or cheerful. On one winter's day, Anderling returned but it was plain from his appearance that all was not well. He disclosed to Maria how he had gambled away all his fortune, after her rude and cruel dismissal. Yet this time he had returned not for her sake but for “one thing in the world” that remained his—his son. The intrusion was borne out of a deep yearning to look upon his child and to be acquainted with him. To this appeal, the lady demurred on condition that their past remains concealed. The haughty severity which had become part of her character and which her elevation to the rank of peeress “had rather intensified than diminished” (165) comes across in this meeting with the broken-hearted Anderling. Her cold indifference to her child and his father is contrasted sharply with the genuine affection Anderling felt for the son he had hitherto never met and the woman who had ceased to love him. His warmth and capacity to love sharpened Maria's total lack of feeling—her coldness and inability to love. She resembled an automaton programmed to protect what she had achieved in term of social position, at whatever costs. This lady was never stirred by maternal affection, as seen in Lady Caroline and the Countess, and her actions are dictated only by a heightened and consuming sense of self-preservation and self-aggrandizement. If the system could boast success it is Lady Icenway.

Anderling, however, becomes the hapless victim of the world represented by Maria and as the tale progresses the reader's sympathy is swayed towards him. An honourable man, whose only mistake was a rash and reckless marriage in his youth, he stands above Maria in character and principle. To him, honour, meant an inner integrity without any regard to formalities, to Maria it was an outward show acknowledged by the peers. For him the contract of marriage was the means of acquiring license to follow one's passion; for Maria it was not a means but an end.

The scene, where Anderling met his child for the first time, is at once tender and piteous. His love for his son is described in terms more genuine—uncluttered by the language of any convention—than his adulation for Maria:

The unfortunate father, whose misdemeanor had recoiled upon his own head in a way that he could not have foreseen, promised to adhere to her instructions, and waited in the shrubberies till the moment when she should call him. This she duely did about three o'clock that day, leading him in by the garden door, and upstairs to the nursery where the child lay. He was in his little cot breathing calmly, his arm thrown over his head, and his silken curls crushed into his pillow. His father, now almost to be pitied, bent over him and a tear from his eye wetted the coverlet... He kissed the child without waking him, turned, gave him a last look and followed her out of the chamber... (166)

But this remedy for his sadness at being a stranger to his son had the effect “of intensifying the malady” (167), for it earlier he had loved his son vaguely and imaginatively he “now became attached to him in flesh and bone as any parent might” (167). But his chivalrous respect for Maria held him back from disclosing his identity to his son. He suffered mournfully and eventually offered himself for the post of gardener to Lord Icenway before the lady knew anything of the matter. Silently, from a distance, he pensively studied the traits and movements of his son. For two years he was nothing than ‘the gardener’ to the youngster though once or twice the boy said, “The gardener’s eyes are so sad! Why does he look so sadly at me?” (168).

Lord Icenway, meanwhile, complained excessively and roughly of his fate to her—the inability of Maria to give him a linear successor, “All will go to that dolt of a cousin! He cried. I’d sooner see my name and place at the bottom of the sea!” (169). Always an opportunist, Maria decided to visit Anderling in his hut, to use him to fulfil an ambitious desire to produce an heir for Lord Icenway. But Anderling was too ill to oblige her. Her seemingly “softening heart” was shocked at his condition, not out of compassion, but because she regretted his inability to carry out the role for which she had selected him. Anderling died and a stained glass tribute to his memory was erected by Maria in the name of “his grieving widow.” She regretted the passing away of Anderling not because she loved him but rather because his utility was not obvious soon enough for her to take advantage of it. Her final words with Icenway reveal all the absurd implications of her supposed grief:

“Tis a very odd thing my lady, that you could oblige your first husband and couldn’t oblige me.”

“Ah! If I had thought of it sooner!” she murmured.

“What?” said he.

“Nothing, dearest,” replied Lady Icenway (171).

REFERENCES

1. Hardy, Thomas. *A Group of Noble Dames*. 1st Literary Society, 2004.
2. Brady, Kristin. *Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender: Cambridge Companion to Hardy*. ed. Dale Kramer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
3. Ray, Martin. *Thomas Hardy: A Textual Study of the Short Stories*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1997.

