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Gender Matrix In Three of Hardy's Short Stories: The Lady Penelope, The Duchess of Hamptonshire, And The Honourable Laura

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Abstract: *A study of the tragedy in Lady Penelope's life caused by lies and gossip, the suffering of Lady Emmeline at the hands of her cruel husband, and the maturity attained by Laura after years of suffering.*

Index Terms – Strong Women, Cruel Men, Deceit, Individual Suffering, Personal Growth.

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 palpating 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 Penelope”, Dame the Eight, narrates the tragic life of a beautiful lady who “had been done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded” (209).

She is described as “a lady of noble family and extraordinary beauty,” (196) and that “her beauty was so perfect, and her manner so entrancing, that suitors seemed to spring out of the ground” (197). Due to her highly visible position in society she could never transcend the natural mistakes of her adolescence, her only fault being the “unseemly wantonness” and precipitancy that characterize youth. Her famous roguish quips— “have patience you foolish men! Only bide your time quietly, and, in faith I will marry you all in turn” (198) – to three gallant suitors, Sir John Gale, Sir William Hervey and Sir George Drenghard, with gossip and communal elaboration, ominously, began to shape her life and fulfil itself as a prophecy.

In course of time the position resolved itself and the beautiful Lady Penelope chose to marry the eldest of the three Knights, Sir George Drenghard owner of a big mansion and a pleasant man. But after a few months Drenghard died “of his convivalities” and left Lady Penelope alone as mistress of his house. Time passed, the second Knight came courting – John Gale. Subsequently, her marriage to Gale in part a response to the manipulative appeals of her jesting friends that she live out her “careless speech”, became dangerously distorted when it moved outside her circle of friends. At a deeper level, her second marriage was a frustrated response to her preferred lover, Sir William Hervey's reticence and hesitancy in approaching her – an expression of her pique – “at the backwardness of him she secretly desired to be forward” (180). So, Lady Penelope married the second Knight, just as William discovered her preference for him and was hastening to declare his “unaltered devotion” to her. On learning the sad truth, he left abruptly.

But Lady Penelope's marriage to John Gale proved to be an unhappy one. He soon revealed a disposition to retaliate upon her for the trouble and delay she had put him to in winning her. Subjected to constant cruel, verbal attacks Penelope lost her “mettlesome” spirit and wept “sorely”. William's unexpected visit, while Gale was ailing, confirmed the genuineness of the affection shared by the third knight and the lady. Amidst her “churlish” husband's insults, Lady Penelope realized: I began at the wrong end of them,” she murmured. “My God—that did I!” “What?” said he. “A trifle,” said she, “I spoke to myself only” (203). He died a fortnight later.

After this, Penelope decided to wait for the return of Sir William, for by then, she “had been cured of precipitancy.” He did return and soon the pair, destined to be together from the start, was finally united in marriage. But Penelope’s happiness and bliss was short-lived. The rumours started again, but this time grew more sinister by implication:

“Surely,” they whispered, “there is something more than chance in this!” ... Then they pieced together sundry trivial incidents of Sir John’s illness, and dwelt upon the indubitable truth that he had grown worse after her lover’s unexpected visit; till a very sinister theory had been built up as to the hand she may have had in Sir John’s premature demise. (206)

Sir William overheard these rumours and it was unfortunate that he believed them. Instead of confronting Penelope with the accusations and clearing up the air, he carried his knowledge within himself and then departed – a man who in a few days seemed to have aged prematurely. When the truth behind her husband’s departure reached Penelope’s precipitancy, the community’s gossip and William’s inaction and subsequent departure reduced Penelope from a “brave and buxom damsel” to a woman “dwindled thin in the face,” whose rings “fall off her fingers” and whose arm hang like the “flails of the threshers.” She died soon after, still protesting her innocence: “They suspect me of poisoning him, William! But, oh my dear husband, I am innocent of that wicked crime! He died naturally. I loved you – too soon; but that was all” (208).

A physician, who had attended the late Sir John, on hearing about the rumour arrived in Casterbridge and attested, on medical evidence to the fact that Sir John had died from natural causes.

Lady Penelope’s story reveals the destructive power of gossip and the weaknesses apparent in a man she had loved the most.

“The Duchess of Hamptonshire”, Dame the Ninth, re-examines the questions raised in the first two stories of *Noble Dames* like Betty Dornell and Barbara Grebe, Emmeline – a girl of “sweet and simple nature” – is forced into marriage by a parent who places wealth and social prestige over affection and sexual passion. But Emmeline’s story differs in that the two suitors in her life fail to fulfil her sexual and emotional needs.

The Duke of Hamptonshire is depicted as a cruel and selfish husband who had “never before considered what an important part those specimens of womankind had played in the evolution of the Saxelby race” (213). After the marriage, Emmeline’s distress and unhappiness was evident to all. The reason being, besides her unhappy marriage, her true affections for the young Reverend Alwyn Hill. Her life became—“worse than death” (215). Treated cruelly by an indifferent cold and perverted husband she pleads with Alwyn to take her away from the Duke’s castle:

“You must not go away with me,” he said. “Why?” “It would be sin.” “It CANNOT be sin. For I have never wanted to commit sin in my life; and it isn’t likely. I would begin now, when I pray every day to die and be sent to Heaven out of my misery!” “But it is wrong, Emmeline, all the same.” “Is it wrong to run away from the fire that scorches you?” (217).

But Alwyn, adhering stubbornly to his principles refused to rescue Emmeline from her torturing husband’s hands. Alwyn, too, failed Emmeline and this failure represents a subtler form of egoism. The men in this story are typical of the patriarchal attitude towards women in nineteenth century England. While the Duke was a typical product of his time, in his display of male arrogance and insensitivity, Alwyn possessed social and moral law – or rather the appearances of conforming to them – above Emmeline’s well-being and happiness, even after knowing that the Duke was ill-using her. In his moral rigidity, youthful beauty and general fastidiousness, he foreshadows the typically hypocritical Stockdale in “The Distracted Preacher” and when these attributes assumed a more sinister form – Angel Clare in *Tess of the D’urbervilles*.

Emmeline’s death, was therefore caused as much by a state of grief and frustration at being left alone, defenceless and fearful, with the Duke, as by the rigours of her journey. Her final plea to Alwyn: “O, if you only knew how much to me this request to you is – how my life is wrapped up in it, you could not deny me” (197) becomes both an anticipation of her fate as well as an expression of her despair. Ironically, Alwyn unwittingly buried Emmeline during his journey on the Western Glory, and became to some degree responsible for her death.

“The Honourable Laura” published in 1881, is a fitting last story for *A Group of Noble Dames* because of its happy marriage achieved after years of penitential suffering. This optimistic conclusion parallels the ending of “The First Countess of Wessex”. It also represents references to tricycles and railway stations making the story “more modern in [its] date of action” (206) than the previous narratives. As Brady maintains, “this late nineteenth century setting points to the similarities rather than the differences between past and present: as in the earlier centuries, the heroine’s fate is decided by the men who lay claim to her (she does not even know of the duel). Her predicament is a version of that of the other noble dames – here expressed in the contemporary mode of stage melodrama. But because no explanation is given either for Laura’s transgressions or her sudden turn from pouting tantrums to mature contrition, the story remains an unsatisfactory conclusion to the collection as a whole.” (84).

In *A Group of Noble Dames*, Hardy presents a picture gallery of hauntingly beautiful women, whose very essence is highlighted by a masterstroke of their creator. Painted with a profusion of colours, bold mixed with darker shades; Hardy’s portraits depict the nature of woman in all her glory and shame, boldness and timidity, arrogance and humility, rebellion and submission, and her misery and happiness. In *A Group of Noble Dames*, we encounter the tragedy in Lady Penelope’s life caused by lies and gossip; the suffering of Lady Emmeline at the hands of a cruel husband and a fastidious lover, and finally, the maturity attained by Laura after years of suffering. In all these women, we behold the sympathy, keen insight and sensitivity of a male author – uncommon in the Victorian period – whose concern with gender matters establishes him as a writer in the feminine tradition.

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