June 1945

"The Mayor Of Casterbridge" And Wife-Sale In England

C. L. Cline

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 1, no.11, June 1945, p.172-175

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Even in old age, Hardy's conversation gave no hint of the underlying pessimism and melancholy of his nature. He was cheerful, quietly humorous, and very much interested in life and human beings; and he was not in the least bucolic. He was essentially a finished and well-bred man of the world. He had very charming manners, warm and cordial, and not too formal. He always made me feel that he was really glad to see me, and invariably pressed me to return. I have known a good many of the big men of my day. There were few of them who did not disappoint, on a closer view. But Hardy never disappointed even an enthusiastic like myself. He always seemed to live up to my highest ideals of him, and did so, simply, naturally and without effort. He was much too great to pose.

"THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE" 
AND WIFE-SALE IN ENGLAND

BY C. L. CLINE

No one who has ever read The Mayor of Casterbridge can forget its startling beginning — the sale of a wife by her husband. That Hardy is not inventing an incident which had no counterpart in the social fabric of the period we have the novelist’s own testimony in the preface to the 1895 edition of The Mayor: “The incidents narrated arise mainly out of . . . the real history of the town called Casterbridge . . . [including] the sale of a wife by her husband....” Moreover the words of Henchard, the husband, “It has been done elsewhere — and why not here?” offer evidence that Hardy was aware that the Dorset incident was not an isolated one.

Students of social history know that, among the ignorant people of England in former times, wife-sale was a familiar
practice. J. Edward Vaux, in *Church Folk Lore* (London, 1902, 2nd ed., p. 147), cites two examples of wives sold by husbands during the nineteenth century. One was led to the market with a halter around her neck and sold for half a crown. According to Vaux, it was thought that the halter and the sale in the open market-place legalized the transaction. The purchaser led the woman home, a distance of twelve miles, by the halter, and she was reported as perfectly contented with the arrangement. The other woman was bought by a publican for a two-gallon jar of Plymouth gin. Vaux believed her to be still alive in 1902.

Rebekah Owen, Hardy's American friend, became interested in wife-sale as the result of her reading of *The Mayor*. Her copy of the novel, now in the Colby College Library, contains the records of ten actual or attempted sales of wives by husbands; but all except one, whose source is not given, date after 1850—well after the time of the action of *The Mayor*.

As a footnote to the social history of the period, I should like to add to Miss Owen's examples a sprightly account of a wife-sale which took place in Carlisle at about the time represented at the beginning of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—to be exact, three years later and eight years before Hardy's birth. There is no evidence that the novelist knew of this event, though it would indicate that in real life wife-sales were less unusual than most readers of *The Mayor* would guess.

The account of the Carlisle sale was printed in the *Lancaster Herald* for April 21, 1832, and was reprinted a week later in the *Bucks Herald*. It reads as follows:

**Sale of a Wife by Her Husband at Carlisle**

On Saturday the 7th instant, the inhabitants of this city and the adjoining districts, were highly amused during the greater part of the day, witnessing the sale, or rather auction of a wife, by her husband, which for the novelty it
created, as well as for the interest it excited in every be­
holder, induces us to detail the particulars for the gratifica­
tion of our readers and the public at large. Joseph Thomp­
son, the subject of our present remarks, resides in a small
village about three miles from this city. He rents a farm of
about 42 or 44 acres, and was married at Hexham, in the
year 1829, to his present wife. She is a spruce, lively, buxom
damsel, apparently not exceeding 22 years of age, and ap­
peared to feel a pleasure at the exchange she was about to
make. They had no children during their union, and that,
together with some family disputes, caused them by mutual
agreement to come to the resolution of finally parting. Ac­
cordingly, about 10 o'clock, they entered this city, and im­
mediately after, the bellman was sent round to give public
notice of the sale, which was to take place at 12 o'clock;
this announcement consequently attracted the notice of
thousands, and at the appointed time the market-place was
crowded to excess—all eyes anxious to catch a glimpse of
the object they came to behold. She appeared above the
crowd standing on a large oak chair, surrounded by many
of her friends, with a rope or halter made of straw, round
her neck; she was dressed in rather a fashionable country
style, and appeared to some advantage: she wore a leghorn
bonnet, trimmed with crimson ribbons, her hair in rich
ringlets, flowing underneath, a white muslin gown neatly
flounced and trimmed, a handsome pattern thread lace
cap, a bosom pin, with a rich silk Canton crape shawl. The
husband, who was also standing in an elevated position
near her, immediately proceeded to put her up for sale,
and spoke nearly as follows:—
"Gentlemen—I have to offer to your notice my wife,
Mary Anne Thompson, otherwise Williamson, whom I
mean to sell to the highest and fairest bidder. Gentlemen,
it is her wish as well as mine to part for ever. She has been
to me only a bosom serpent. I took her for my comfort, and
the good of my house, but she has become my tormentor, a
domestic curse, a night invasion, and a daily devil, (great
Colby Quarterly, Vol. 1, Iss. 11 [1945], Art. 5

Colby Library Quarterly 175

laughter). Gentlemen, I speak truth from my heart, when I say, may God deliver us from troublesome wives and frolicsome widows, (laughter). Avoid them the same as you would a mad dog, a roaring lion, a loaded pistol, cholera morbus, mount Etna, or any other pestilential phenomena in nature. Now I have shewn you the dark side of my wife, and told you her faults and her failings, I will now introduce the bright and sunny side of her, and explain her qualifications and goodness. She can read novels, and milk cows; she can laugh and weep with the same ease that you could take a glass of ale when thirsty: indeed, Gentlemen, she reminds me of what the Poet says of women in general—

Heaven gave to women the peculiar grace,
To laugh, to weep, and cheat the human race.

She can make butter and scold the maid, she can sing Moore’s melodies, and plait her frills and caps; she cannot make rum, gin, or whiskey, but she is a good judge of the quality from long experience in tasting them. I therefore offer her, with all her perfections and imperfections, for the sum of Fifty Shillings.”

After an hour or two spent in pleasantness of this sort, she was at last purchased by Henry Mears, a pensioner, residing in the suburbs of this city, for the sum of 20s. and a New Foundland dog. The happy couple immediately left town together, amidst the shouts and huzzas of the multitude, in which they were joined by Thompson, who, with the greatest satisfaction and good humour imaginable, proceeded to put the halter, which his wife had taken off, round the neck of his New Foundland dog, and then proceeded to the first public-house, where he spent the remainder of the day, indulging in the effusions of Bacchus, and repeatedly exulting in his happy release from bondage.