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Allegory and Allusion in Hardy's
"Heiress and Architect"

by FRANK R. GIORDANO, JR.

THOMAS HARDY'S "Heiress and Architect," which won immediate approval from reviewers and is consistently selected for anthologization, is a poem more generally lauded than understood. Not frequently interpreted, this seemingly simple work has proven a formidable challenge to the few critics who have tried to define its form and its essential meaning. J. O. Bailey, calling "Heiress and Architect" a philosophical allegory, makes some sensible remarks about the poem's decremental structure and usefully suggests its relationship to Romantic thought; but his speculation about Hardy's intention for writing the poem is not entirely helpful, and one may differ with him over his description of the poem's basic conflict.1 In the most thorough reading yet to appear, Paul Zietlow premises his interpretation upon the assumption that the poem is dominated, unhappily, by melodrama. He concludes that "Heiress and Architect" is ambivalent, for the positions taken by both figures—commitment to life versus self-protection—are finally discredited. Zietlow's concluding queries indicate the complex formal and thematic problems posed by "Heiress and Architect": "Is the result an absurd, dark, nihilistic comedy? Or is the melodrama a means of intensifying and structuring a profound vision? Is it farce or tragedy?"2

My own trials with this provocative, sometimes provoking, poem have not been unlike Zietlow's. In classroom situations, depending on whether a reader's sympathies center on the Architect or, as is usually the case, the Heiress, the poem's tone and meaning have been variously described. But the critical difficulties can be somewhat alleviated, I would suggest, if we recognize, first, that the nameless characters are figures in a moral allegory; and second, if we examine the sources of the attitudes they express. Like so many of the pieces in Wessex Poems, "Heiress and Architect" is deeply influenced in its language and meaning by Hardy's reading in his favorite poems; and a key to a coherent interpretation can be found if we can locate some of his sources for the poem. In the present essay, then, I shall re-examine "Heiress and Architect" by focusing my attention on its richly allusive language. There are


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numerous echoes of Keats, Tennyson, and Milton, which help us to identify the poem as a moral allegory and to locate it in relation to some perennial poetic traditions. In *Paradise Lost* and, closer to Hardy in time, in Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” and Tennyson’s “The Palace of Art” and “The Lady of Shalott,” there are variants on the ancient theme of the soul’s instinct to isolate itself in a special building, garden, or earthly paradise. In “Heiress and Architect” Hardy is concerned with the moral implications of this instinct; and in rejecting the proud and “God-like isolation” advocated by Tennyson’s maidens and Milton’s Eve, which attitudes are alluded to in the Heiress’ proposals, Hardy enlists the moral authority of Milton’s heavenly advisors from *Paradise Lost* to sustain his Architect’s criticism and judgment of the essentially sinful selfishness of the Heiress.

We can begin our analysis of “Heiress and Architect” by acknowledging its basically allegorical mode and by considering the questions this method naturally raises: what do the “Heiress” and “Architect” represent? And what do the Heiress’ proposed edifices represent? Hardy’s technique is to reveal their characters through the values they propound in their dialogue; and furthermore, the sources and quality of their values are established by allusions to literary works in which the same values are present. In all of his sources, i.e., the “lovely garden” and the earthly paradise traditions, especially as represented in the poems by Keats, Tennyson, and Milton, Hardy discerns a dominant architectural motif as the means for the creation of an ideal domain for the soul. In adopting this motif, he finds the key to his own formal method and a significant textual means of relating his poem to a tradition that is concerned with an enduring and problematic theme.

Let us consider first the buildings the Heiress describes. Initially, we know nothing of the kind of edifice she desires nor of the purposes for which “she planned to build.” But in stanza 3 she gives precise directions.

> “Shape me,” she said, “high halls with tracery
  And open ogive-work, that scent and hue
  Of buds, and travelling bees, may come in through,
  The note of birds, and singings of the sea,
  For these are much to me.”

The Heiress desires a palatial dwelling in a “happy garden,” of the sort that figures in the medieval *Roman de la Rose*. Hardy adopts the ancient convention of associating a garden with perfect repose and inner harmony; and he permits the Heiress to try to fulfill her dream of ease by asking for the traditional trappings of a medieval garden of love: namely, the bright roses cultivated by Zephyr, chosen birds, fountains, and such sweet-smelling plants and trees as spikenard, cassia, and cinna-

3. Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 75-76. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and are cited as CP.
Pervading the passage are faint suggestions of Milton's descriptions of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (IV. 132-71, 246-66); later, the Heiress is more explicit in asking for "a Paradise." Also, the first two lines recall the "lordly pleasure house" in Tennyson's "The Palace of Art": the "great mansion . . . / So royal-rich and wide," with its "gilded gallery" around the roofs, a "light aerial gallery, golden railed," its "deep-set windows, stained and traced," and "shadowed grots of arches interlaced." Most prominently, though are heard the echoes of Keats's last stanza in the "Ode to Psyche," where the poet constructs in his mind a "fane" for the goddess:

And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight..."

Like Milton's Eve and Keats's Psyche, Hardy's Heiress requires "a Paradise / Wherein my Love may greet me, I my Love." In answer to this first request, the Architect focuses on the fanciful Keatsian character of the building and refuses to build it.

"An idle whim!"
Broke forth from him
Whom nought could warm to gallantries:
"Cede all these buds and birds, the zephyr's call,
And scents, and hues, and things that falter all,
And choose as best the close and surly wall,
For winters freeze."

The playful tone and rhyme here convey the Architect's impressions of her Romantic falderal. But his answer is serious nevertheless; in his insistence that "winters freeze," the Architect is aware of implications that, in her wish for the dreamful ease of a Golden Age or an earthly paradise, the Heiress may have overlooked. Though snowfall and frost are less appealing than the comforting west winds, one cannot always live in springtime with Zephyr, the Architect reminds the Heiress.

What does Hardy accomplish in this allusive pair of stanzas? Initially,
he associates Heiress with some traditional women in earthly paradises, in particular with Eve, Psyche, and the high-born maiden of Tennyson's "Palace of Art." In doing so, he introduces the issue for debate between his innocent Heiress, the "inheritor of the means for life" (Zietlow, p. 13), and her wise guide: the moral value of the soul's desire for isolation in a paradisal abode. And he enters upon what is to be a decisive, inexorable rejection of the unrealistic Heiress' ideals. For, just as there is a decremental structure to the Heiress' shrinking dreams (Bailey, p. 108), there is an incremental moralistic force in the Architect's progressive judgments. The stanzas, finally, require that we alertly reassess both Bailey's and Zietlow's descriptions of the Heiress' goals and the Architect's character. Does she build "to welcome nature's beauty, then joy, then love, and finally meditation" (Bailey, p. 108), or "to make the house a place of vital activity" since she wants "to live, to participate in the world, to expose herself, to love" (Zietlow, p. 13)? And is the Architect merely a "villain" who experiences a "malicious triumph" in crushing the Heiress' hopeful conceptions with his logic (Zietlow, pp. 13-14)?

With the Heiress' next request she reveals, or rather displays, an unpleasant narcissistic nature.

"Then frame," she cried, "wide fronts of crystal glass,
That I may show my laughter and my light—
Light like the sun's by day, the stars' by night—
Till rival heart-queens, envying, wail, 'Alas,
Her glory!' as they pass."

The Heiress, perceiving herself as a glorious celestial body, demands a heaven-like background against which to exhibit herself. It should be clear that this second request reiterates the first one: both are variants of an earthly paradise, with this resembling the castle built by Jealousy in the Roman de la Rose (Giamatti, pp. 60-63). The exhibitionism here reminds us that the medieval "secular" gardens of love, following the classical model of Claudian, may contain a fountain of Narcissus, the god of self-love; while the tone of the Heiress' request recalls the fact that other gods found there are License, Boldness, and Pleasure (Giamatti, pp. 50-51). Her instructions to the Architect, that is, imply far more about her desires than they directly reveal; once we identify her wishes for an earthly paradise, especially a secular and therefore pseudo-paradise, the Architect's responses are less likely to seem so venomous.

This stanza, moreover, abounds in Miltonic implications which relate the Heiress to Eve. The line "Light like the sun's by day, the stars' by night—" manifests a highly presumptuous pride, "since God is Light" (P.L., III. 3); and it suggests the Heiress' fallen nature by linking her

8. See P.L. VI. 757 and 860, where Heaven is described as "a crystal firmament" and a "crystal wall."
with Lucifer, the light-bringing, brightest star in the sky (P.L. VII. 131-33). Moreover, in her efforts to set herself in glory above her peers, the Heiress follows Lucifer in the original archetypal rebellion (P.L. I. 39).9 Finally, her presumptuous superiority and her jealousy of “rival heartqueens” recall Eve’s perverse and selfish reasoning when, after she has eaten the fruit, she resolves that Adam shall “share with [her] in bliss or woe”; for should God punish her and Adam survive her death, it is intolerable to her that he should wed “another Eve” to “live with her enjoying” (P.L. IX. 816-30).

The Architect’s reply to this proposal links the Heiress with another “maid misled,” Tennyson’s high-born maiden in “The Palace of Art”:

Where shall abide the soul when, sick of glee,
It shrinks, and hides, and prays no one may see?

With his “facile foresight,” the Architect anticipates the Heiress’ fate should she persist in her vain and selfish exhibitionism: like Tennyson’s maiden, who sought a “God-like isolation” in a “great house so royal-rich and wide,” decorating it “to mimic heaven” in order to flatter to the height her “still delight,” and was struck with desperate soulsickness (“A spot of dull stagnation without light / Or power of movement, seemed my soul”) when her “serpent pride” had curled back on her, Hardy’s Heiress also would “fail and perish utterly.”

The Architect’s concern for the soul and its need for a place for repentance makes it quite clear that the Heiress’ choice of a setting involves much more than a matter of aesthetic taste. But in her third proposal, she seems to have learned little from her guide. For the first time she seeks to have other creatures join her, but her choices are not very encouraging. Nor is her selection of colors.

“A little chamber, then, with swan and dove
Ranged thickly, and engrailed with rare device
Of reds and purples, for a Paradise
Wherein my Love may greet me, I my Love,
When he shall know thereof?”

The “little chamber” done in red and purple recalls the “rosy sanctuary” in which Psyche was to receive her Love in Keats’s ode; it is a variant of Venus’ retreat, a garden associated with physical love (Giamatti, p. 50). The dove and purple engrailment, symbolizing the soul and spirituality, suggest the persistence of the Heiress’ Psyche-like aspi-

9. The contrast between the Heiress’ Satanic glory and Jesus’ is instructive about her basically selfish nature:

... this I my Glory account,
My exaltation, and my whole delight,
That thou in me well pleas’d, declar’st thy will
Fulfill’d, which to fulfill is all my bliss. (P.L., VI. 726-29)

At no point in the poem does the Heiress attempt to fulfill the Architect’s will, even though he speaks, as I demonstrate below, in the accents of God the Father.
rations; while the red engrailment and the swans, symbolizing passion, sentiment, and complete satisfaction of sexual desire, reinforce the identification of the Heiress and Venus.\textsuperscript{10} What Hardy's protagonist wants, in short, is an earthly paradise of sensuality, a spot sanctified not by the presence of virtuous souls, but by the presence of Venus, the symbol of physical and mechanical sexuality.\textsuperscript{11} Her lover, whoever he may prove to be, is idealized and divinized, like Psyche's Love; nymphs and cupids, of course, are traditional figures in gardens of love. In the proud condescension to admit a divine Love, she resembles Eve after her fall, anticipating the revelation to Adam of her godlike "change" and deciding to "give him to partake / Full happiness with mee" (P.L. IX. 816–19).\textsuperscript{12}

When this proposal is rejected, the Heiress faintly suggests "her last dear fancy" for the Architect's consideration.

\ldots "O, contive some way—
Some narrow winding turret, quite mine own,
To reach a loft where I may grieve alone!

The themes of isolation and pride (note the pun in the phrase "To reach a loft") and the image of the "narrow winding turret" recall again Tennyson's high-born maiden figure, in both "The Palace of Art" (the palace is reached by a "winding stair") and "The Lady of Shallott" (the lady immures herself in "four gray towers" on a silent isle).\textsuperscript{13} Now both maidens in Tennyson are ultimately redeemed when they descend from their lofty abodes to rejoin the community of man. Contrarily, the Heiress forfeits her chances for restoration to life when she insists on grieving alone in "a loft." The Architect cannot honor even this last fancy, for the character of the Heiress' life, from start to finish, will not admit of elevation. Thus, instead of "a loft," she must prepare to occupy a coffin and be haled "adown."

Such is the fate of the Heiress, Hardy's inheritor of the means of life. What does she make of these means? Rather than building to welcome nature's beauty, joy, love, and meditation, she would build for sensual indulgence, narcissistic gloating over her physical gifts, sentimental idolatry, and self-pitying grief. For the conduct of this fanciful selfish life, uninterrupted by humanity and the realities of the outside world, she desires splendid isolation in a paradisal garden of earthly love, accompa-
nied only by her swans and doves, and, perhaps, her godlike Love! Contrary to Zietlow's opinion, the Heiress shows no inclination to participate in the world; and if there is a dubious validity in his judgment that she desires "to live, . . . to expose herself, to love," does not the poem's form call her conceptions of life and love into question, and strongly imply that her wish to expose herself is both vain and insolent?

Surely Hardy's technique in alluding to the tradition of the earthly paradise and in comparing the Heiress to Psyche, Eve, and Tennyson's maidens is intended to provide standards of behavior against which she is to be compared and contrasted. What can never be forgotten about the earthly paradise is that it is absolutely unobtainable, that it is irrevocably lost (Giamatti, p. 80). While it is a normal instinct to yearn for a lovely garden, one must finally accept the impossibility of attaining the ideal. This poem's situation, which dramatizes the human predicament of being torn between what one desires and what one can attain, has perennially been exploited by European poets. The ideal of the earthly paradise is ultimately false: as setting and symbol it embodies the gap between what seems and what is. For man, the paradisal longings have worth if they teach him that his inner wishes are illusions; and if they provide the occasion for his realization that the only "true" earthly paradise is in his achievement of an inner harmony (Giamatti, p. 85).

Now the agent charged with disillusioning the erring young maid is the Architect; it is his responsibility to register the negative judgments called forth by her futile yearning for an inaccessible and false domain. And, quite understandably, the Architect is rarely seen as an engaging figure. In Bailey's philosophical reading, he is the spokesman for the cruel Darwinian philosophy, arguing against the Heiress' "assumption that life open to nature will bring happiness" (p. 108). Zietlow, seeing him as a melodramatic villain, associates him with calculation, coldness, and death (p. 14); Zietlow also asserts that the Architect's views result "in a form of self-entombment, of death in life" (p. 13). The chief impediment to these critics' objective estimation of the Architect is their sympathy for the, to them, innocent and Romantic Heiress.

The text of the poem, however, does not oblige us to be unsympathetic to the Architect, even though the function he must perform in judging the Heiress is neither a pleasant nor an easy one. Hardy's adaptation of a poetic tradition that flourished in the Middle Ages and through the Renaissance, a tradition that exposed what the good life was not through its rejection of the false ideal of a paradise dedicated to earthly love and pleasure, must be taken into account if we are adequately and fairly to judge the Architect. Actually, we misread this moral allegory, with its deeply medieval texture of language, images, and values, if because of excessive sympathy for the Heiress we overlook the ultimate illusoriness of her ideals and her repeated refusals to heed the Architect. What happens to the secular or allegorical gardens of the
Middle Ages and Renaissance, gardens that are associated with the earthly paradise, is exactly what happens in “Heiress and Architect”: “they are condemned as false in spite of (or perhaps because of) their metaphorical relationship with the earthly paradise. They are condemned, as the garden of the Rose is, by the laws of Christianity” (Giamatti, p. 64).

Are we warranted, then, in considering the Architect a malicious killjoy who hounds the Heiress inexorably to her death? Should we not instead see him as the Great Architect of the Universe, an image of God the father that goes back into the Middle Ages and is often represented in illustrated Bibles? Throughout “Heiress and Architect,” he functions first to advise and then to judge a woman whose every desire is tainted by her post-lapsarian ideals and her presumptuous grasping for divine status. Whether she is arrogating the fane of the goddess Psyche, or revelling in her celestial glory like the fallen Eve, or aspiring to a godlike isolation like Tennyson’s maidens, the Heiress never considers that she is mortal, that she must die, that as inheritor of life she also inherits death. Accordingly, the Architect must advise her how to live a virtuous life, loving according to Nature and God; and how to value and employ the means of life which are her inheritance. From the evidence of the first two stanzas, particularly the allusions to Paradise Lost, he is well-suited for the task; for Hardy’s Architect is a composite allegorical figure, characterized in language from Milton’s epics that describes original man’s celestial advisors, God the Father, the Son, and the Archangel Michael. The advice he gives, while it has affinities with a conservative Christian viewpoint, is also compatible with Hardy’s own meliorist outlook, which advocates taking a full look at the worst as a means to alleviating and bettering the human lot.14

Hardy’s Architect, like Milton’s Father and Son, has seemed a cold, unattractive, even unsavory figure. This is understandable, not only because stern judges naturally intimidate and often alienate fallible mortals, but also because in his language and judgments he nearly resembles Milton’s figures. Like the “sovran Architect” (P.L. V. 256; see also P.L. VIII. 72, “the great Architect”) who was Adam’s first guide (P.L. VIII. 298 and 312), Hardy’s “arch-designer”15 is of “wise contrivance” (see P.L. IX. 938 and X. 889 for the Creator wise; and P.L. III. 680 and 889)
X. 7, for God who is wise in all things) and “skilled / In every inter­volve of high and wide” (see P.L. V. 623, where the orderly movement of the planets is described as “Eccentric, intervolv’d, yet regular.” The passage continues, in the next few lines, to emphasize God’s pleasure in order and regularity). The second stanza emphasizes his clarity, pru­dence, and allegiance to established order, as well as his willingness to build whatever the Heiress plans, so long as it is reasonable and does not thwart “the law of stable things.” Hardy reiterates the “cold, clear” qualities of the Architect’s voice and view. They are “cold,” but not in a completely negative sense; linked to the line “Whom nought could warm to gallantries” in the third stanza, the coldness suggests the Archi­tect’s unflatteringly moralistic and realistic bias; and it distinguishes him from Satan, who, in his advising Eve, could warm to gallantries. Unlike the Romantic poet Keats, Hardy’s builder must house a mortal against “such vicissitudes as living brings”; for this, caution, objectivity, and moral direction, not gallantry, are required. His view or vision is “clear,” in the sense of true or perceptive, and it is well-articulated; be­cause of his godlike clarity (see P.L. V. 733 and VIII. 336), the Archi­tect is indeed “Well fit to be her guide.”

The implications of these stanzas, then, is that the Architect is a will­ing and worthy advisor, in harmony with the natural order of things; like God Himself, he speaks with a high authority that it is perilous to deny. Nor does he forfeit the Heiress’, or our, respect by any alteration in his serious tone or moral assumptions. In fact, though he criticizes her proposals throughout, he continually tries to improve her judgment and advises her to consider the vicissitudes of life. Thus he speaks “sternly,” just as did the Creator when with “clear aspect” He warned Adam of the bitter consequence of disobedience (P.L. VIII. 333-36). His “facile foresight” in addressing the “maid misled” recalls the Son’s strategy (Paradise Regained I. 221-26) of persuading, by winning words, those unwillingly misled and only subduing the stubborn. Hardy’s choice of the word “facile” supports this reading, for in por­traying the Architect in Miltonic diction, Hardy’s “facile” conveys the sense Milton meant in P.L. VIII. 65: i.e., its Latin meaning of “gracious.”17 That his foresight should have “pierced her dire” is more a reflection upon her willful disobedience than on his stern, but gracious demeanor; nevertheless, “dire” foreshadows the terrible justice of the Son of God that awaits the Heiress (P.L. I. 94).

As the Heiress reiterates her proud objectives and confirms herself in defiance, the Architect becomes a more baleful figure to her. Like the fallen, despairing Eve, obsessed with the spectre of Death (P.L. X. 1008-09), the Heiress is swayed by her guide “like a shade.” This figure is revealing of the Heiress’ spiritual condition: it is the “mount of God,
whence light and shade / Spring both” (P.L. V. 642–43), but for the Heiress there is no light. Also, as the “shade” or shadow of Sin is Death (in P.L. IX. 13), the ambivalent figure foreshadows the Heiress’ final destiny.

The moral evolution in the poem is completed in the final stanza, where the “man of measuring eye”\(^\text{18}\) passes judgment on the recalcitrant Heiress. True to his medieval vision, the great Architect of the Universe has kept his cold clear eye fixed on death while he was advising the Heiress how to live. For, to the medieval mind, it is no paradox to say that life is a preparation for death; moreover, the grim fact that at any moment one’s life might be suddenly snuffed out could neither be ignored nor concealed. These crucial attitudes must inform our reading when, at the dramatic climax of the poem, the Architect decides what kind of structure he will build to house the Heiress: because of his orderly nature, he fashions according to rule and builds a coffin for the Heiress. Presumably the “rule” is the rigorous moral calculus of Christianity, which brooks no thwarting of “the law of stable things.”

And when the Architect tells the Heiress that she will die for her obdurate, persistent, selfish pride in ignoring his advice, her fate is sealed for all eternity; for upon one’s spiritual state at the moment of death depends his happiness or misery forever. Her death is not simply the common fate of all; the haling downwards, which perhaps alludes to P.L. II. 596, where “harpy-footed Furies hal’d” all the damned to their destruction, invests the Architect’s and the poem’s last line, “For you will die,” with a judgmental intensity that suggests it is the final comment on the moral quality of the Heiress’ life. For her false desire for an inaccessible earthly paradise, she brings upon herself the penalty of Eve (see P.L. IX. 713 and 763). In “Heiress and Architect,” as often throughout Hardy’s moralistic works, one’s character is, inexorably, a chief determinant of one’s fate.

Hardy’s drawing for “Heiress and Architect” would seem to support my reading of the Heiress’ fate, especially in its use of motifs that pervade medieval works of art. In the Middle Ages, when King Death’s terrible dominion over man’s fragile existence was a momentous reality, artists and moralists were constantly mindful of the end of life. The morbid and apparently obsessive concerns over mortality and judgment, kept vividly before man’s eyes in the artistic use of skulls, cadavers, caskets, Dooms, and devils, were for medieval man considerations of prudence. For, while Death might be horrible, it was nothing in comparison with the torments that befell those who forgot or ignored its coming (Evans, p. 204). Hardy’s Heiress, whose concerns throughout are to

\(^{18}\) See P.L. XII. 553–64. Because Adam permits himself to be “Greatly instructed” after the fall, he departs from Paradise “Greatly in peace of thought,” even though he is now subject to “such vicissitudes as living brings.” The Heiress’ refusal to be so instructed leaves her vulnerable to the final vicissitude, eternal death.
seek pleasure and disregard death, can be seen in his drawing (see fig.) as a victim of her own willful ignorance. As the subject, she is being carried to her grave in a coffin. As in traditional medieval “mortuary” art, the faces of the mourners carrying the casket are hidden. The nude figures who haul her adown are themselves dead, resembling the figures, in numerous tympana on medieval cathedrals, who have risen from the grave. But the movement downward on the stairway, which suggests the “Ladder of Salvation” whose bottom is in Hell, reveals that she will not be taken into Abraham’s bosom or received by God.

In view of the poem’s associations with the traditions of the earthly paradise, and in particular its echoes of and allusions to Paradise Lost, I have identified it as an allegory of the moral consequences of presumptuous pride, unreasoning self-will, and unregenerate defiance. To ignore the Heiress’ culpability for her fate is to be unattentive to Hardy’s allusive artistry; and to assail the Architect as vicious is seriously to misconstrue both the quality of his advice and the nature of his role in opposing the Heiress. To argue on behalf of the Heiress that “To live is to suffer; to avoid suffering is to thwart life,” (Zietlow, p. 13) is both to miss the point of the Architect’s wisdom (for it is he who knows of and prepares the Heiress to face life’s vicissitudes) and to overlook the Heiress’ refusals even to admit the existence of suffering. More important, it ignores Hardy’s career-long preoccupation with man’s capacity to ameliorate his lot, however incompletely, by disciplining his will so as to preserve himself from the remediable ills of life. Not only does the Heiress refuse to temper her pride and attend reasonably the advice of her able guide, but she even refuses to shelter herself from freezing winter, to preserve her privacy, and to found her love on a less perishable footing than her fading looks. To all of this sound advice, the staples of Hardy’s meliorist philosophy, she responds with one fanciful proposal after another; what is first an “idle whim” becomes, when defiantly reasserted against the Architect’s advice, a matter of the gravest moral importance. Finally, the Heiress’ unwillingness to live in terms of her human mortality leads, both literally and morally, to her death.

“Heiress and Architect” is an early poem by Hardy, but it displays many of the characteristics that inform (and sometimes deform) all of his work: there is the formal conscientiousness and prosodical symmetry; the ambivalence of tone that results from his search for both serious and comic, sublime and grotesque effects; the pervasive themes of...
Thomas Hardy. Illustration for "Heiress and Architect" from Wessex Poems and Other Verses (1898). Colby Special Collections.
Time and Change and the weakness of the human will. Also, the poem reveals how fully Hardy apprenticed himself for his career as a poet while he was a young man; and, particularly, what poets and what traditions most engaged him. More fully than we have yet realized, Hardy is, like his friend and fellow poet William Barnes, a "literary" and "academic" poet, who went regularly to school to, among many others, Milton, Keats, and Tennyson. In his many, though frequently veiled and vague, allusions to these poets, he gives abundant evidence of his sensitivity to and regard for their verbal and rhythmic acumen. Equally importantly, "Heiress and Architect" demonstrates Hardy's characteristic ambivalence of feeling whenever he dramatizes a conflict between fancy and duty within the rebellious individual. Though essentially Romantic in temperament, Hardy was too much of a realist not to recognize the limitations and moral irresponsibility of certain Romantic aspirations and instincts; and he was too honest not to subject those aims and impulses to criticism. Thus "Heiress and Architect" may be read as Hardy's contribution to and criticism of those Romantic poems which examine the soul's impulse to retire from the vicissitudes of life into the earthly paradise of sensuality. In "Heiress and Architect" he finds the Keatsian gallantry of creating a temple for the Soul-in-Love, an "idle whim." Similarly, Tennyson's maiden's impulse to attain god-like isolation in her palace of art, living indifferently to the needs of her own soul and her fellow mortals, is also rejected. But where Tennyson fails to highlight the relationship of one's choices to one's ultimate fate, and mars his poem by effecting rather arbitrarily his maiden's conversion and then providing a sentimental reprieve, Hardy, with his tragic view of character and fate, insists on the Heiress' paying the wages of sin. Finally, Hardy invokes the moral authority and the timeless language of his favored Milton, a peer into whose soul the iron had also entered, in his moralistic insistence on the Heiress' judgment and death.

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