1 Neither tales nor short stories?

Issues of authorship, readership, and publishing in *A Group of Noble Dames*

*Graham Law*

While reviews of Hardy's later novels tended to divide along philosophical lines between conservative disapproval and progressive acclaim, the contemporary critical reception of *A Group of Noble Dames*, the author's second collection of shorter fiction, was exceptionally uncertain. As usual, notices in the British provincial press of the special Christmas number of the *Graphic* for 1890 gave more attention to the pictorial content of the journal, though there was generally brief applause on this occasion for the principal item of letterpress, the initial "six-dame" version of Hardy's collection. The *Yorkshire Herald* for example, welcomed it somewhat anomalously as a "very pleasant tale" ("Annuals" 6). On the other hand, the appearance as a single volume in late May 1891 of the revised version – doubled in length with the addition of four new "dames" previously treated independently in other periodicals – drew marked dissent from several influential metropolitan organs that had hitherto been broadly sympathetic to the writer's fiction. Predictably, the reactionary *Spectator* found a "nauseous element" pervading every story ("A Group" 164), while the independent *Saturday Review*, which had long treated Hardy's work with respect if not with uniform approval, this time wrote off the collection as a "literary freak" ("New Books" 757).1 Most striking of all, though, was the response of the (London) *Pall Mall Gazette*, the club-land evening paper that had committed early to investigative reporting, and fashioned itself under W.T. Stead's editorship as the leading exponent of the "new journalism." Unsurprisingly, given its notorious *exposé* in summer 1885 of child prostitution in the metropolis, the *Gazette* had remained sympathetic to Hardy's increasing demands to be allowed to deal candidly with the sexuality of his creations. On the appearance of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in 1873 it had hailed the author as "a man of genius" ("Pair of Blue Eyes" 12), and still recognized *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in late 1891 as "the strongest English novel of many years" ("Mr. Thomas Hardy's New Novel" 3). Six months earlier, though, the *Gazette* had attacked his latest book of stories as an abuse of the slackening of "external constraint" concerning sexual matters ("Merry Wives" Review
12. *Graham Law*

3). Likened to the work of Baudelaire, the second story in the expanded collection, was singled out as "a hideous, a hateful fantasy" (3), with particular distaste directed towards the conclusion focusing on the heroine's "obeisant amappiness towards a perverse and cruel man," in Hardy's words (*A Group*, Osgood, McIlvaine 104). This led to a fascinating exchange, at once comic and disturbing, between author and critic.

In a retort written on the day of the review but published two days afterwards, Hardy defended "Barbara" not only on the general grounds that a "good horror has its place in art," but also specifically on account of the device of the frame narrative, whereby "the action is thrown back into a second plane or middle distance" (Hardy, letter to *Pall Mall Gazette* 2). In addition, Hardy's letter made play with the class and gender of his audience. He claimed that the acceptability of the stories to "the genteel public" had been "fairly tested" by their being "told in drawing-rooms" to groups of society ladies without adverse reaction. Moreover, while acknowledging the "virility" of the journal and assuming that its reviewer was male, Hardy suggested that such a degree of disgust concerning "Barbara" could only be justified if the critic were "a highly sensitive and beautiful young lady, who herself nourishes an unhappy attachment to a gentleman in some such circumstances as those of the story" (2). The unidentified reviewer's response, published in the same issue, derided Hardy's use of the frame narrative as "old-fashioned and inartistic" ("Merry Wives" letter 2), as well as irrelevant to the moral effect of the individual tales, and laughed at the idea of the author's testing out shock value on a contemporary assembly of noble dames. Written throughout as by a woman — whether in jest or in earnest is unclear, though the latter seems more likely — it began, "Here has Mr. Hardy divined and published to the world not only my sex and my temperament, but my personal appearance!" and was signed, "Your Sensitive and Beautiful Reviewer" (2). However, it rejected any psychological parallel between critic and heroine, suggesting that, unlike the latter, the former would refuse to put up with a sadistic husband and instead drag him into the divorce court. Perhaps understandably there was no further response from Hardy, and this was the end of the conversation.

This inconclusive exchange will be illuminated by studying Hardy's collection from a book-historical viewpoint. Under consideration will be issues not only of authorship but also of publishing and readership, as representing the major stations on what has famously been identified as the "communications circuit," which constantly "transmits messages, transforming them *en route*, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again" (Darnton 67). The most productive investigations of Hardy's collection hitherto, notably those of Purdy, Gatrell, and Ray, have taken a textual studies approach that emphasizes the complex process of authorial revision between manuscript and published versions, whether within serials or in volume form. While building on this foundation of
meticulous bibliographical scholarship, I would like to question the sustain-
ing narrative that typically accompanies it: that of the heroic author fight-
ing single-handedly to resist the mutilation of his pristine creations at the
hands of prudish editors. Even Gatrell, who recognizes that the manuscript
of Noble Dames reveals “different layers of bowdlerization, some made
voluntarily,” characterizes the editorial interference of the Graphic roundly
as “The Dead Hand of Mrs. Grundy” (Gatrell 83, 81). Manifestly, Hardy
was pressured by the proprietors of the paper to make hasty alterations of
greater or lesser extent to each of the initial six narratives. But, as we shall
see, the sociological characteristics of the journal’s readers and commercial
pressures on the publishers also deserve consideration here, and this episode
is far from representing the whole of the story. The production, distribution,
and consumption of Hardy’s collection will be interpreted more broadly as
both reflecting and contributing to an unstable and uncomfortable transition
from traditional “tale” to modern “short story,” a process involving
developments in publishing format as well as fictional form.

Tales or short stories

Though it is routinely used today to refer to works of fiction written
throughout the Victorian era, “short story” did not emerge as a critical term
identifying a specific literary form until towards the end of the nineteenth
century. The key theoretical intervention was from American educator and
author Brander Matthews, who insisted on a “distinction between the Short-
story and the story which is merely short,” the former distinguished by a
“unity of impression” which linked it to the aesthetics of early modernism
with its preference for realism, irony, and compression (“Philosophy” 367,
366). At the same time, Matthews argued that the modern form was far
more likely to thrive in the American and French republics, where literary
periodicals had a license to explore the new, than in the United Kingdom,
still held back by the conservative demands of the circulating libraries for
luxurious multi-volume editions, which in turn reinforced a long-standing
preference for lengthy serial novels in magazines.

This is by no means to suggest that the collocation “short story” can-
not be found earlier in the century: Dickens, for instance, uses the phrase
with some frequency towards the beginning of 1850 when soliciting mate-
rial for his new weekly journal, Household Words (for example to Elizabeth
Gaskell, 5 Feb. 1850; Dickens, Letters VI: 29). But the reference is generally
relative to “long story,” indicating a full-length serial novel, and seems to fit
a novelette of 30,000 words in half a dozen installments just as comfortably
as a narrative of 5,000 complete in a single issue. In other words, it does
indeed indicate a “story that is merely short.” Instead, “tale” is the term
of preference among nineteenth-century editors and publishers: throughout
the Victorian era, the relatively rare occurrence in book titles of the phrase
“short stories” tends to suggest a juvenile readership, whereas hundreds of
volumes of shorter literary fiction are entitled XXX, and Other Tales. The initial appearance of a tale, though, was typically in periodical form, either serving as filler between the runs of installment novels or incorporated in the many special numbers and annuals of the Christmas season, which gradually emerged as the climax of the Victorian publishing year (Eliot 26–42). And, although not defined as precisely as Matthews’s “Short-story,” the tale did generate its own aesthetic norms, typically mimicking a traditional mode of oral delivery with narrator and audience both personalized, while combining a distinctly gothic fear of the uncanny with the consolations of hearth and home. As Plunkett has suggested in his study of the role of the periodical press in creating Victoria as the first “Media Monarch,” these norms dovetailed neatly with a Victorian ideology of royalty superimposing the images of bourgeois family and nation state (1–12). Inevitably, though he did not create it, Dickens played a major part in fostering this cultural formation, not only in annual Christmas books like A Christmas Carol (1843), but also with the special Christmas issues of his own weekly journals (Moore 1–7). From 1852 he began to gather together a “family” group of writers to contribute to “A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire,” and a couple of years later created “Seven Poor Travellers,” the first of a long series of extended-frame narratives for the yuletide collaborative collection of tales, along the lines of Boccaccio’s Decameron (Law, “Tale” 47–51). A number of mid-Victorian novelists created comparable frame narratives to give unity to their collected stories, including Wilkie Collins (with After Dark, 1856), Elizabeth Gaskell (with Round the Sofa, 1859) and Walter Thornbury (with Icebound, 1861), who had all contributed frequently to Household Words. While no other editor perhaps put the same personal passion into the special Christmas number as Dickens, the format remained popular throughout the Victorian period in a wide variety of miscellaneous magazines and newspapers. In the later decades, prestigious weekly pictorial papers like the Illustrated London News and Graphic probably made the most lavish commitment to the genre, including full-color plates and cartoon-style yuletide stories for the young (Moore 58–79). These were also among the many journals that from around halfway through Victoria’s reign began to issue parallel special seaside numbers during the summer holiday season. Such formats and forms were still thriving when Hardy began regularly to contribute short fiction to periodicals from the later 1870s, as indeed a decade later when Matthews’s modern conception of the short story began slowly to gain ground.

**Hardy the contributor**

Before the appearance of “Noble Dames” in the Graphic at Christmas 1890, Hardy had contributed shorter fiction, both solicited and volunteered, to a remarkably eclectic range of periodicals. Though he had already published full-length serial novels in the Cornhill (Far from the Madding
Crowd, 1874) and Macmillan's (The Woodlanders, 1886–1887), for example, the major monthly literary miscellanies had rarely provided a venue for his short fiction, with “The Withered Arm” in Blackwood's in January 1888 the most notable exception. At least half a dozen had appeared in popular newspapers, four commissioned by Tillotson's Fiction Bureau in Bolton and syndicated in a range of provincial weeklies, with two offered spontaneously to American big city dailies. A similar number were requested in London by modernizing new magazines that proved relatively short-lived. In addition to the New Quarterly Magazine, which refused serial fiction and preferred to carry a complete story in each issue, with a handful by Hardy, these included Robert Buchanan's weekly Light: A Journal of Criticism and Belles-Lettres (“written earnestly for earnest men,” “New Literary Journal” 368) and Harry Quilter's internationalist monthly, the Universal Review. A couple of stories were even written specifically for juvenile serials: a short tale for an English annual and a novelette in installments for the American weekly Youth's Companion. The largest number, however, were both written for and published in the high-class illustrated weeklies, with a novelette in special seasonal numbers of both the Illustrated London News and Graphic, as well as a full-length serial novel apiece, while Harper's Weekly, the equivalent New York journal, was the default option for the initial appearances across the Atlantic of Hardy's fiction both long and short. It was to this paper that Hardy submitted for Christmas publication in America the “Tale of Tales,” as he described the original version of “Noble Dames” to the US publishers (to Harper & Brothers, 7 Mar. 1890, Hardy, Collected Letters VII: 113).

In most cases Hardy seems to have been more than willing to tailor these stories to the nature of the occasion and/or the social character of the periodical audience. To the editor of the Youth's Companion in Boston, for example, Hardy promised to use his “best efforts to please your numerous readers,” at the same time committing himself to “a healthy tone, suitable to intelligent youth of both sexes” (to Perry Mason & Co., 5 Apr. 1883, Hardy, Collected Letters I: 116). A more ambiguous case in the same year is represented by his first contribution to the Graphic itself, “The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid” (a novelette of similar length to the initial version of the “Dames”) which appeared in the 1883 seaside issue. There, though towards the end of his life, the author suggested that the ending had been altered “to suit the requirements of the summer number of a periodical” from one where the milkmaid runs away with the baron; the state of the manuscript demonstrates conclusively that the original version had her returning faithfully to her proletarian husband (qtd. in Gatrell 71).

Quite a few of the stories in question, including a couple of those later incorporated into the longer version of Noble Dames, were designed for publication in various formats associated with the winter holiday season. In 1877 Hardy supplied the annual Father Christmas: Our Little One's Budget with “The Thieves Who Couldn't Help Sneezing,” a short comic tale suitable
for the young, while in 1881 and 1882 respectively, the special yuletide issue of the *Illustrated London News* and the annual *Harper's Christmas* received "What the Shepherd Saw" and "A Legend of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Four," both eerie pastoral tales of midwinter moonlight from the point of view of a young lad. And, as the table shows, both the opening and closing narratives of the "ten-dame" version of Hardy's collection were tales originally written for Christmas publication. With its opening and climactic scenes set in the mid-winter darkness shrouding the lonely mansion of King's-Hintock Court, "The First Countess of Wessex" was originally written as a "Christmas Story" for 1888, though the decision to have the work lavishly illustrated seems to have delayed its appearance until the issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for December 1889 (see to H.M. Alden, 7 Sep. 1888; and to James R. Osgood, 6 Dec. 1888, Hardy, *Collected Letters* I: 180–1). Towards the beginning of the same decade, "Benighted Travellers" began as "a short Christmas Story" commissioned by Tiltson & Son (see to them, 28 Jul. 1881, Hardy, *Collected Letters* I: 93). It was published first in a coterie of provincial weeklies on December 17, 1881, including the Christmas supplements of both the *Leeds Mercury* and Tiltson's own *Bolton Weekly Journal*, though it long remained on the syndicator's blacklist, where it was noted that "the reference to Christmas can easily be eliminated" (*Law, Serializing Fiction* 195). It reappeared, for example, as a serial in a daily paper in the northeast of England in the summer of 1886. Even when collected in the Osgood, McIlvaine volume as "The Honourable Laura" narrated by the Spark, the tale still opens with marital discord on "a cold and gloomy Christmas Eve" in deep snow, and closes in a similar season with the happy reunion of the long separated couple (Hardy, *A Group*, Osgood, McIlvaine 239).

The frame narrative

On December 6, 1890, the *Graphic* was to celebrate its twenty-first anniversary with a special "coming-of-age" issue; well before then it had established itself a strong rival as a deluxe pictorial paper to the *Illustrated London News* which reached its own half century in May 1892. Rather more elegant in its pictures and slightly more conservative in its politics, the *Graphic* may have just edged the circulation battle, steadily selling over 200,000 copies of its regular weekly issues and occasionally hitting half a million with the special holiday numbers (*Law, Indexes to Fiction* iv–x, 3–8). When in late March of 1889 Hardy began to make arrangements to contribute a "short novel" to appear in the journal's special Christmas number for the following year, and when in late November of the same year he had the "excellent idea, or what seems like one" of making the work a series of linked tales told at the gathering of a club of natural and local historians, he must have been well aware of the expectations aroused by this publishing format and fictional form (to Arthur Locker, 24 Mar., 1, 8 Apr., 29 Nov. 1890, Hardy,
Collected Letters I: 189–90, 203–4). When, after the submitted work had been set up in type early the following summer, William Locker, the editor's son and subordinate, expressed his dismay that a paper "with the peculiar clientele of the Graphic" should receive such a sequence of tales turning upon sexual relations and childbirth, the author must have been prepared for a reaction this kind (qtd. in Gatrell 81–2). When Hardy used the term "frivolous" on more than one occasion to describe the just-published volume edition of Noble Dames, he was likely thinking of the ambivalence of his own motives in the affair (to Alfred Austin, 14 Jun. 1891, and Lord Lytton, 15 Jul. 1891, Hardy, Collected Letters I: 238–9). Clues to these are suggested by the character of the frame narrative created for the various stories, and the changes made to it when the collection was expanded and reworked. Many of these, it is true, were mechanical alterations dictated by the changing of the order of the Graphic sequence or perfunctory additions necessary to connect the added stories. But there was also quite a number of substantive revisions that affect the significance of the narratives.

The frame narrative in the Graphic version is set at "about Christmas time," with evening falling early and snow settling thickly outside, thus brightening the members of the club gathered in the town museum and giving a reason for whiling away the time telling tales by firelight (Hardy, "A Group," Graphic 4). In the volume edition, since the season is forwarded to autumn and the meeting planned from the outset as a two-day affair, this justification is abandoned, though the cancelling of an afternoon excursion due to a sudden storm provides a less convincing motive for the impromptu round of stories (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, Milvaine 56–9). Perhaps Hardy assumed that the collection would be published in two parts – in fact it appeared in a single slightly cramped volume – because he divided the narratives into two halves by rather artificially having the members disperse for dinner in the middle. These changes to the frame– tale leave the seasonal setting and atmosphere of the added opening and closing stories rather incongruous, perhaps helping to explain why the Pall Mall Gazette reviewer picked out the latter as "no way above the level of Christmas annual fiction" ("Merry Wives" Review 3). The social setting is also rather out of keeping with the Victorian tradition of the frame–narrative. In both versions of the collection, it is true, the "inclusive and intersocial character" of the club membership is flagged (Hardy, "A Group," Graphic 4, and A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 56), but only in the Graphic version is there any explanation of why the gathering is exclusively male. There, we are told simply in the "Preliminary" remarks that "unfortunately, no lady-members had come that day," which provides a justification for making the vagaries of "the sex" the subject of the anecdotes (Hardy, "A Group," Graphic 4). There also, the gathering suggests from the outset the social character of a club smoking-room. With the volume version, in contrast, tobacco and alcohol make their appearance only after dinner when the Rural Dean and other more fastidious members fail to return, and we are given no specific reason either for the absence of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First pre-Graphic issue</th>
<th>Other pre-Graphic issue</th>
<th>First US issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>The Lady Caroline &gt;</td>
<td>The Lady Caroline &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12q</td>
<td>2q</td>
<td>2q</td>
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<tr>
<td>By the Churchwarden, 12,300w</td>
<td>By the Sentimental, 5,300w</td>
<td>By the Sentimental, 3,900w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connective 5q</td>
<td>Connective 3q</td>
<td>Connective 3q</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>1q</td>
<td>4,100w</td>
</tr>
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**Table 1.1 Early Serial and Volume Publication of the Ten Noble Dames Stories**
5 Squire Petrick's Lady
*Harper's Weekly* (13 Dec. 1890) 2,500w

5 Squire Petrick's Lady
*Harper's Weekly* (1 Dec. 1890) 3,600w

6 Squire Petrick's Lady
*Harper's Weekly* (20 Dec. 1890) 5,800w

6 Squire Petrick's Lady
*Harper's Weekly* (1 Dec. 1890) 2,500w

The Lady Penelope
*Longman's Magazine* (Jan. 1890) 7 Anna, Lady Baxby

The Lady Penelope
*New York Times* (NY) *Buffalo Courier* (2 Feb. 1890) and so on

(19 Jan, 1890)

The Lady Penelope
*Independent* (7 Feb. 1884) 7 Anna, Lady Baxby

The Lady Penelope
*Independent* (6-13 Apr., 1878) 7 Anna, Lady Baxby

Benighted Travellers
*Bolton Weekly Journal*, etc. (17 Dec. 1881) 8 The Lady Penelope

Benighted Travellers
*NE Daily Gazette* (14-17 Jul. 1886) By the Man of Family

Benighted Travellers
*NE Daily Gazette* (10-17 Dec. 1881)

8 The Lady Penelope
By the Man of Family 3,600w

Connective 1¶

9 The Duchess of Hamptonshire
By the Quiet Gentleman 4,900w

Connective 1¶

10 The Honourable Laura
By the Spark 8,500w

Connective 2¶

Conclusion 4¶

TOTAL = 34,000w

Conclusion 4¶

TOTAL = 69,000w

Source: Graham Law 2015

w = words

>> = Order unchanged

VW = Back in order

^v = Forward in order

Notes. ¶ = paragraphs.
Figure 1.1 Graphic Christmas Cover 1889

Source: Graham Law 2015
women or for the fact that the vacant agenda is filled by “curious tales of fair dames” (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 151–2, 58). In fact, the volume version begins without any preliminary remarks, and those following the Local Historian’s tale of “The First Countess of Wessex” merely note that the remainder will follow its precedent. Moreover, the conversations reported in the connective narrative there tend to accentuate the ironic detachment of the male analysts from their female objects of study. Where the Graphic simply has the Old Surgeon “apologising for his tale ["Barbara"] as being a little professional” (Hardy, “A Group,” Graphic 4), the volume adds that the “crimson maltster winked to the Spark at hearing the nature of the apology” (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 59). And, while the serial version simply has the Colonel, in the preamble to his tale of “Anna, Lady Baxby,” provoking laughter by his comparison of the contrary courses of women’s conduct to the action of a mangle (Hardy, “A Group,” Graphic 12), the volume prefaces the exchange by having the gathered members agree, “now that psychology [i]t is so much in demand,” that the stories told represent fittingly instructive studies for “members of a scientific club” (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 185–6). This more apparent air of the dissecting table in the frame narrative is obviously reinforced by the restoration of the material expurgated from the stories in the Graphic version, but at the same time it sits increasingly strangely with much of the earlier material incorporated into the collection, which often retains the ambience of gothic romance. Here Hardy is surely mistaken in claiming that the aesthetic impact is somehow mitigated by the frame narrative, with the action conveyed “by a character to characters, and not point-blank by author to reader” (Hardy, Letter to Pall Mall Gazette 2). If the author’s intention in the volume version was to revert to an original modernizing conception that had been mutilated by the reactionary demands of the serial publishers, his signals seem to have become strangely mixed.

The core stories

With the six dame-narratives initially written for the Graphic, there is ample documentary and textual evidence of the process of expurgation at the insistence of the proprietors. It is also likely that the absence of illustration when the tales finally appeared in the Christmas number is related to this conflict. While pictorial accompaniment to the special holiday issue novella was by no means universal in the Graphic at this time, when Hardy was commissioned to write the Christmas story, he was clearly convinced it would receive similar treatment to the four elegant, full-page cuts for “The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid” in the 1883 summer special (see to Harper & Brothers, 10 Jan. 1890, Hardy, Collected Letters I: 207). While engaged in writing up the sequence in the early spring, he had suggested to the editor, “I think you will find it well suited for illustration to any extent. The artist should be one who is accustomed to last-century costumes, & old
manor-house architecture" (to Arthur Locker, 5 Mar. 1890, Hardy, *Collected Letters* I: 210). The failure of these plans to materialize may have been due to the delay in completing the work or to the unwillingness of the proprietors to draw further attention to material they still considered unsuitable. Be that as it may, as Gatrell has shown in detail (80–96), the plots of three of the tales were subject to major cuts, while there were more minor excisions of phrasing deemed improper in the remaining three. According to William Locker, who passed on the demands to the author, all that the latter needed was “slightly chastening,” but “Anna, Lady Baxby” required an ending other than the heroine’s “discovery of her husband’s vulgar amour,” while “Squire Petrick’s Lady” demanded the suppression of “the hysterical confession by a wife of an imagined adultery,” and “Lady Mottisfont” that of the business where the “husband foists upon his wife the offspring of a former illicit connection” (qtd. in Gatrell 81–2). In these last two cases, the offensive material was so central to the plot in Locker’s view that he initially recommended the substitution of new stories, though he was later able to accept the author’s compromises.

However, as shown in detail by both Gatrell (80–96) and Ray (86–140), the establishment of the text of these six stories for the first book edition was by no means simply one of restoration by the author of the original manuscript version. Not only were a few unique, uncancelled variants in the manuscript overlooked, but quite a number of substantive revisions and additions were made for the Osgood, McIlvaine edition. The latter in particular again shed light on the ambivalence of Hardy’s thinking concerning the process. Some of the new material represented a form of broad sexual comedy— a “quite Bocaccian humour,” according to the critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (“Merry Wives” Review 3)— that would obviously have been unacceptable to the *Graphic*. Towards the end of “Squire Petrick’s Lady,” for instance, a brief conversation is added between the squire and the doctor who alerts him to the fact that his wife’s family has a history of hysteria and that her confessed adultery with an aristocratic lover is merely imaginary. There, on realizing that he is in fact the father of the supposed bastard child for whom he is beginning to feel a perverse form of affection, the supposed cuckold describes himself as “[a] bit unmanned” (Hardy, *A Group*, Osgood, McIlvaine 183). Again, towards the beginning of “Lady Mottisfont,” in proposing marriage to the plain squire’s daughter, the baronet asks her to pay attention to a little dependent girl. In the manuscript the child is described as “a little waif I found one day in a bed of wild thyme” (Hardy, “A Group” Manuscript folio 116), while in the 1891 volume edition the italicized phrase becomes the much less coy, more explicit “patch of wild oats” (Hardy, *A Group*, Osgood, McIlvaine 132), thus leaving the maiden from the outset in no doubt of the relationship. Yet passages such as these also serve to increase the ironic distance between the characters in the individual tales and the club members of the frame narrative as a group, at the same time discouraging sympathetic engagement on the part of readers.
Proof

Neither tales nor short stories? GND 23

The highest concentration of new material, however, is found in the closing stages of “Barbara of the House of Grebe,” which so annoyed the Gazette reviewer, and serves to clarify the growth of the heroine’s “obsequious amateness” in response to the cruelty of her second, aristocratic husband. As the review suggested, these scenes are less amusing than chilling in their effect (3). Earlier in the story, in contrast, in all of the versions in question, the waning of the physical passion between Barbara and her humble first husband is described in the materialist language of natural science by the cynical Old Surgeon, who comically suggests that “a lover’s heart after possession [is] comparable to the earth in its geologic stages, as described to us sometimes by our worthy President; first a hot coal, then a warm one, then a cooling cinder, then chilly...” (Hardy, “A Group” Graphic 71). The longest single additional passage comes after the three consecutive nights of torture (entirely omitted in the Graphic version) that Barbara suffers in being forced to look constantly at the grotesquely mutilated image of her first husband. There, “dreading lest the scourge should be applied anew,” she promises to give her love to her current husband, never again harboring a “single thought that seems like faithlessness to my marriage vow” (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McLvaine 103). The Old Surgeon summarizes the result: “The strange thing now was that this fictitious love wrung from her by terror took on, through mere habit of enactment, a certain quality of reality. A servile mood of attachment to the Earl became distinctly visible in her contemporaneously with an actual dislike for her late husband’s memory” (103). Here there is no recourse to incongruous metaphor; instead the stern determinism seems to derive directly from the incipient science of behaviorism with its theories of classical conditioning. While these troubling issues of mind and body undoubtedly represent legitimate lines of inquiry for a modernizing artist, the way they are explored sits uncomfortably with the comic sense of camaraderie encouraged by the frame narrative and the seasonal setting.11

The added stories

In marked contrast to the core six tales, however, there is no satisfactory evidence of forced expurgation with regard to the four added ones that were revised for the collection from earlier periodical publications. There are few variations of any significance between the serial and volume versions of “The Lady Penelope” and “The Honourable Laura,” while the many in the case of “The Duchess of Hamptonshire,” originally written as “The Impulsive Lady of Croome Castle” in 1878 for Buchanan’s Light in Britain and Harper’s Weekly in America, can hardly be described as bowdlerization. As shown in detail by Ray (146–56), in 1884 Hardy willingly expanded the story for the New York Congregationalist journal the Independent, at the same time changing the title to “Emmeline; or, Passion versus Principle” to reflect a shift of balance from psychological/sexual impulses to moral/
religious imperatives in motivating the action. Moreover, as Ray allows (154–5), by no means all of the original emphasis was restored in the volume version of the Dames.

With the substantial plot alterations to the final third of the narrative between the Harper's New Monthly version and the volume editions from both Osgood, McLlwaine in London and Harper & Brothers in New York, "The First Countess of Wessex" thus requires the closest attention. In either version, the tale represents an ironical reworking of the theme of Romeo and Juliet, whereby the young heroine Betty has a different partner pressed on her by each of her warring parents, and gives herself to both in turn: first Phelipson, the poor but handsome youth preferred by her father, and then Reynard, the staid nobleman to whom she is married off by her mother while still a child. While suggesting that the changes "may easily represent a return to an original unboudlerized version," Purdy notes that "evidence is wanting" (63–4). Here we should note not only the lack of any clarifying authorial correspondence and the unavailability of the manuscript, but also that there is no record or suggestion of Harper & Brothers requiring the wholesale expurgation of sensitive content in the many other works by Hardy that they had published, including, of course, the initial six "Noble Dames" stories which so offended the owners of the Graphic. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why, around the same period, the Harpers should have required expurgation of a story in their monthly literary miscellany restricted to an adult readership, but have permitted equally sensitive material to run in their weekly pictorial paper reaching a broader family audience. All the same, Ray remains confident that the serial version of "The First Countess of Wessex" is "thoroughly bowdlerized," and thus assumes that the volume text represents a restoration of the author's original intentions (81–2). With "no elopement, no kiss, no secret meetings and, above all, no pregnancy" in the closing stages of the magazine narrative, Ray claims that "any appearance of impropriety" has been removed.

Yet this is simply not the case. Instead of the volume version's interrupted elopement between Betty and Phelipson, who, on learning that his companion has deliberately contracted small-pox in order to repel her husband, returns her to her home without even "imprinting the expected kiss" (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McLlwaine 47), the magazine account has Betty engaging in surreptitious intimacy with her lover within her own bedchamber. When her father's servant overhears "a sobbing, interspersed with masculine whispers" through the open window, he assumes that he is witness to a rape by the husband — encouraged by Betty's mother, who knows that the recalcitrant girl, "if not captured unawares, could not be captured at all" — whereas the reader is led to understand that the sounds represent consensual sex with her lover (Hardy, "First Countess" 38). Hardy is insistent on the intimate details of the encounter between Betty and Phelipson: she is dressed in a "long white night-gown" (40), while his greatcoat hangs nonchalantly from one of the lower rungs of the ladder by which he climbs to
her window (38). The mother succeeds in concealing "the extent of the lover's success" from the household and Reynard, though she recognizes that such a scene of "passionate intrigue" has likely occurred on other occasions (41, 43). And while it is true that the magazine version lacks the emphasis on the sexual detail of the gradual transference of Betty's affections to her wedded husband (the first kiss, the secret meetings resulting in her pregnancy), the psychological effect is more complex than Ray allows. There, due to the misdirected actions of her father's servant, the young girl's passionate encounter with her lover is the prelude to the latter's sudden and violent death in descending the ladder, leaving the girl "in a dead swoon" (40). Yet both this dramatic incident and the subsequent scenes where Betty is reconciled with her husband, are described briefly and with ironic detachment, the only motivation offered for the change of heart being considerations of wealth and status. This is in contrast to the parallel scenes in the book version, which are presented in more leisurely fashion with a good deal of dialogue, undermining Phelpson's romantic image as he prevaricates in the face of Betty's signs of sickness, and instead engaging the reader's sympathies with her growing affection for the bolder Reynard. Though both texts come to the same conclusion ("Such is woman . . .," Hardy, "A Group," Graphic 43, and Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 56), the message of the volume narrative is that feminine passion is not always most fittingly directed towards masculine youth and beauty, while the magazine version rather suggests that female desire is by no means as constant or legitimate as males prefer to imagine. In other words, the American magazine version of "The First Countess of Wessex," with its depiction of extramarital sex, is likely to have proved rather more provocative to Mrs. Grundy than that appearing in volume form nearly eighteen months later.

The shift in emphasis from ironic detachment to sympathetic engagement in the revised narrative which opens the expanded volume collection of the Dames is also reflected to a greater or lesser extent in both the tone and viewpoint of the other added stories which close the collection. In turn the final three tales in the volume exhibit an increasing degree of empathy with the sufferings of their respective noble heroines. Despite her youthful rashness in offering herself to all three suitors in turn, the narrator concludes that "The Lady Penelope" has been "done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded" (Hardy, A Group, Osgood, McIlvaine 213–4). "The Duchess of Hamptonshire" is physically abused by her sensuous husband and abandoned by her too pious lover, and, "like a poor pet animal that will not be driven back," follows the latter to a lonely death (234), leading the Gazette reviewer to describe the story as the "one really pretty and pathetic legend in this quaint collection" ("Merry Wives" Review 3). Finally, experience transforms "The Honourable Laura" from thoughtless flirt to patient Griselda, who in the end is rewarded with the return of her wandering husband. The first two partake of the tragic, while the last, like the revised version of "The First Countess of Wessex," moves towards a
comic ending, reflecting the Spark’s desire for a lighter tale to conclude the evening where “long-separated lovers [are] ultimately united” (235). The four added tales of sentiment which form the crust and mantle of the volume collection thus stand in striking tonal contrast to the six bitterly ironic tales at its core. These jarring disparities of viewpoint and tone which characterize the expanded version of A Group of Noble Dames clearly help to account not only for the specific distaste of the Pall Mall Gazette reviewer but also for the general air of unease pervading the contemporary reception of Hardy’s second collection of stories.

This contrasts with the relatively enthusiastic responses of more recent commentators on Hardy’s collection, notably those seeking to address thematic issues relating to Hardy’s depiction of women. Among other twenty-first-century critics anxious to defend Hardy from earlier accusations of misogyny,14 Gilmartin and Mengham have recently described A Group of Noble Dames as containing “striking examples of experimental ideas about sexual politics, including an effective reversal of the stereotypical male gaze” (ix), while Dutta goes even further in claiming that, despite the narratorial voices being uniformly masculine, “a powerful feminine point of view does emerge from these women-centred stories” (89). However, these attempts at recuperation appear much less convincing when the volume is read in the material context of its publishing history.

Conclusion

A Group of Noble Dames represents the only occasion that Hardy attempted to use the old-fashioned device of the frame narrative to unify a collection of shorter fiction.15 As the Victorian form of the title might suggest, his fourth and final collection, A Changed Man, and Other Tales (1913), was little more than a miscellany of pieces overlooked in previous projects, the earliest, “What the Shepherd Saw,” dating back over three decades. In contrast, his first and third collections both aimed for a more modern style of thematic unity. The Wessex Tales (1888), though, tended to retain the traditional narrative features of oral delivery and gothic style, while Life’s Little Ironies (1894), composed entirely of recently written stories, looked forward towards the territory to be explored by the likes of Gissing in Human Odds and Ends (1898) and Joyce in Dubliners (1914). The transference as late as 1912 of three stories from Life’s Little Ironies to Wessex Tales, “where they more naturally belong” (Preface, Hardy, Life’s Little Ironies vii), indicates Hardy’s long-term commitment to the form of thematic integrity earlier articulated by Brander Matthews. Though A Group of Noble Dames shares modernist concerns through its materialist themes of gender and sexuality as well as its manipulation of alienated viewpoint and ironical tone, both its initial publishing format and residual literary form urge it in a counter direction. In this way the collection is fractured by the unsettled and unsettling development from traditional “tale” to modern “short story.”
The review of Noble Dames in the Pall Mall Gazette had begun in hostile fashion by noting that Hardy was among "the novelists who raised a plaintive wail, some time ago, over the shackles imposed on their genius by Anglo-Saxon prudery," arguing instead that "no artist worthy of the name" could be prevented from producing a masterpiece by the "mere tyranny" of the literary marketplace ("Merry Wives" Review 3). The reference was to a symposium on the freedom, or otherwise, of the Victorian novelist to treat sexual themes, which had appeared in the January 1890 issue of the New Review, where Hardy had started from the premise that "[e]ven imagination is the slave of stolid circumstance" (Hardy, "Candour" 15). By this he meant generally that literary creation itself is subject to material determination, and specifically that due to the hegemonic control of the family magazine and the circulating library over new work, the "great bulk of English fiction of the present day is characterised by its lack of sincerity" (15). Instead he called for a radical reconsideration by both the publishing industry and the reading public that would allow authors the freedom to represent "catastrophes based on sexual relationship as it is," the "honest portrayal" of which requires a "procedure mainly impassive in its tone and tragic in its developments" (15-7). It is not difficult to read a collection of short stories like Life's Little Ironies, as indeed the novels Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, as consistent efforts to carry out such a program. The conflicted character of A Group of Noble Dames, in contrast, suggests that under the stolid constraints of the conventional Victorian frame narrative linked to the conviviality of the Christmas season, such a modernizing goal was beyond reach.

Notes

1 Early in Hardy's literary career, his mentor Horace Moule had been a reviewer for the paper (Millgate 65-70, 83-4), and, near the end of his life, on its seventieth anniversary, Hardy described himself as "among its earliest readers still living" (Hardy, Letter to Saturday Review xiv).

2 Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) was a French poet and critic. He is known for his controversial works and behavior.

3 Hardy's letter, though not the original review or the reviewer's response, is reprinted in Hardy, Thomas Hardy's Public Voice 110-11.

4 Orel's Victorian Short Story (1986) was the pioneering effort in the now flourishing field.

5 Matthews had made an earlier sketch of the territory in 1884 with the unsigned article "Short Stories" in the Saturday Review. He also revised the argument to some extent in the volume The Philosophy of the Short-story (1901).

6 As Keating has noted (39), it was widely argued at the turn of the twentieth century that the short story was an American invention; see, for example, Harte, "Rise of the 'Short Story,'" and "Editor's Study."

7 These were: "Destiny in a Blue Cloak," New York Times 4 Oct. 1874: 3-23, and "Ancient Earthworks and What Two Enthusiastic Scientists Found Therein" (later "A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork"), Detroit Post 15 Mar. 1885: 13 (see Purdy 294, 153). In contrast, Hardy seems to have made no arrangements to
send advance sheets of "The Lady Penelope" to the United States. The story's appearances in the Buffalo (New York) Courier 19 Jan. 1890: 11, the New York Times 2 Feb. 1890: 18, and many other American newspapers not listed in the table, were clearly unauthorized reprints from Longman's Magazine in London. This was common practice before the passage of the Chace Act by Congress in 1891 (see Law and Morita 221–3).

Though written in 1833 for publication in the Youth's Companion, "Our Exploits at West Pole" did not in fact appear until 1892–1893 in a sister Boston publication, the Household (Purdy 301–3). The novelette is reprinted in Hardy, Excluded and Collaborative Stories 169–214.

The story is reprinted in Hardy, Excluded and Collaborative Stories 59–65.

This description suggests that Hardy might have had in mind the two artists who provided the illustrations for "The First Countess of Wessex" in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, where several architectural plates (including the headpiece) were provided by Alfred Parsons, who had visited the author in Dorset in order to view the houses in question (see to him, 20, 24 Jan. 1889, Hardy, Collected Letters 1: 186–7), and four dramatic scenes by Charles S. Reinhart, who had earlier supplied the Graphic with pictures for "Adventures of a Milkmaid."

See, for example, Richardson's discussion of the "biologization of romance" in A Group of Noble Dames.

See Purdy 65: "The manuscript of 'The First Countess of Wessex'... was sold in New York by the Anderson Auction Company 29 May 1906 (Lot 319). Its present whereabouts is not known."

Ray's misreading of the differences between serial and volume versions is followed closely by Widdowson, who also assumes that the story was "probably self-powdered" (371–2).

As exemplified by the attack in the Spectator review on the author as "a cynic who takes a low view of women" ("A Group" 164).

See Brownson's discussion of the serial version of "A Group of Noble Dames" as a precursor of the twentieth-century short story cycle rather than as a belated example of the traditional frame tale. See also Mink's Chapter 7 in this collection where she examines "connecting narrative voice" in A Few Crueted Characters.

Hardy's contribution to the symposium is reprinted in Hardy, Thomas Hardy's Public Voice 95–102.

Works cited


Neither tales nor short stories? GND 29


30 Graham Law

Contents

Figures vii
Contributors ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

PART 1
Periodical publication 9

1 Neither tales nor short stories? issues of authorship, readership, and publishing in A Group of Noble Dames 11
GRAHAM LAW

2 "Moonlight nights" Hardy, Christmas, and the Illustrated London News 31
SIOBHAN CRAFT BROWNSON

PART 2
Gender relationships 51

3 "Getting life-leased at all cost": marriage in Hardy's late short stories 53
SUZANNE J. FLYNN

4 Pregnant by a portrait: the dynamics of desire for Hardy's "imaginative woman" 68
DEBORAH MANION
PART 3
Community relationships

6 Hardy and humor: the mores of Wessex
JULIETTE BERNING SCHAEFER

7 Love, deception, and disguise in A Few Crusted Characters
JOANNA STEPHENS MINK

PART 4
Narrative technique

8 “To correct the misrelation”: reading Hardy’s Wessex Tales
NEELANJANA BASU

9 Representations of the body in Hardy’s Life’s Little Ironies
CAROLINA PAGANINE

10 Hardy’s mercurial narrator: “breaking the frame” in “A Changed Man”
KEITH CALLIS

Index
Figures

1.1 *Graphic* Christmas Cover 1889
   Source: Graham Law 2015
   20

2.1 “The Son’s Veto”: He Made Her Swear
   Illustration by A. Forestier
   *Illustrated London News*, Christmas Number,
   December 1891
   Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas
   Hardy Association
   46

3.1 “On the Western Circuit”: It Was a Most Charming
   Little Epistle
   Illustration by Walter Paget
   *English Illustrated Magazine*, December 1891
   Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas
   Hardy Association
   58

5.1 “On the Western Circuit”: I Wish He Was Mine
   Illustration by Walter Paget
   *English Illustrated Magazine*, December 1891
   Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas
   Hardy Association
   89

6.1 *A Few Crusted Characters*: “Absent-Mindedness in a
   Parish Choir”
   Illustration by Charles Green
   *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, May 1891
   Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas
   Hardy Association
   119

7.1 *A Few Crusted Characters*: “The History of the
   Hardcomes”
   Illustration by Charles Green
   *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, March 1891
   Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas
   Hardy Association
   130

9.1 “The Son’s Veto”: Ned [Sam] Came and Stood under
   Her Window
   165
viii  Figures

Illustration by A. Forestier
*Illustrated London News*, Christmas Number, December 1891
Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas Hardy Association

9.2  "The Fiddler of the Reels": She Chanced to Pause on the Bridge
Illustration by W. Hatherell
*Scribner's Magazine*, May 1893
Source: Reproduced courtesy of The Thomas Hardy Association

10.1  Oriel Window: Site of W. H. Fox Talbot’s First Photographic Image, Lacock Abbey, 1835
Source: *Traveller 858*, 2015
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