

Marriage: Class and Gender in *The Hand of Ethelberta*

Kaoruko Sakata

Introduction

Critically, *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876¹) has long been regarded as one of Thomas Hardy's minor novels;² however, it expresses his interest in the class system — an interest that Hardy had had since his unpublished first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady* — and his interest in gender issues, which is distinctly indicated in his later great tragic novels such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). These two themes show themselves so clearly through the description of its heroine's marriage in this minor work that it should be appreciated as a work which enables us to understand Hardy's awareness of the issues that form the basis of his whole literary career. In fact, his choice of title induces us to expect that Hardy expresses his opinion through the relations between the sexes.³ The couples who get married or engaged at the end of the story are Ethelberta Chickerel and Lord Mountclere, and Picotee Chickerel and Christopher Julian, two unconventionally matched couples. Accordingly, this paper aims to reevaluate Hardy's attitude toward the class system and gender issues as depicted in the respective relationships of these two couples.

1. The Marriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere: Repudiation of the Class System

1.1. Antagonism between Classes

In Chapter 7 (64), in the rather early stage of the story, the narrator criticizes the class system whereby a man is born into a certain class and is impeded from using his talents to the full. In addition, if the revelation in Chapter 37 (282–83) that Ethelberta's first marriage with the late Mr. Petherwin has not changed her social position implies that a woman is also born into a

certain class and her marriage far above her social status is no guarantee of class mobility, we can suppose that Hardy was not so much interested in depicting whether a woman could rise in status by marrying above her station, but that he intended to convey some other message by having her remarried to Lord Mountclere.

The Hand of Ethelberta depicts class discrimination in a crude fashion. To take one instance, in Chapter 44, the reaction of Mrs. Doncastle when she becomes aware that Ethelberta comes from the working class uncovers the intensity of class discrimination harbored by the upper class toward the working class:

But such was the peculiarity of the case, that, though there was in it neither murder, robbery, illness, accident, fire, or any other of the tragic and legitimate shakers of human nerves, two of the three who were gathered there sat through the meal without the least consciousness of what viands had composed it. Impressiveness depends as much upon propinquity as upon magnitude; and to have honoured unawares the daughter of the vilest Antipodean miscreant and murderer would have been less discomfiting to Mrs. Doncastle than it was to make the same blunder with the daughter of a respectable servant who happened to live in her own house. (336)

From the viewpoint of Mrs. Doncastle, intermarriage seems a scandal equivalent to murder. The class antagonism in the work is so distinct as to make it impossible for the upper class and the working class to associate, each finding the other repugnant and hateful. Chapter 31 compares the difference between the classes to that of the creatures on earth and under the ground: “these men and maids, who . . . resembled nothing so much as pixies, elves, or gnomes, peeping up upon human beings from their shady haunts underground” (226). The upper class and the working class are almost different species who never meet in their natural habitats: “Separate and distinct from overt existence under the sun, this life could hardly be without its distinctive pleasures” (226). Moreover, just as Mrs. Doncastle’s prejudice shows the class discrimination of the upper class toward the working class, so the prejudice of Sol Chickereel in Chapter 46 (355) shows the class antagonism of the working class toward the upper class; their contempt for each other is portrayed in minute detail on

page 362.

Nevertheless, the story ends with the intermarriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere, a couple who come from the irreconcilable classes. If it is not his intention to emphasize her elevation in class, what was Hardy trying to symbolize through their marriage? The competition between the wild-duck and the duck-hawk in Chapter 1 (16–17) is often construed as the symbolic relation between Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere; many critics interpret the weak wild-duck as the working-class Ethelberta and the strong duck-hawk as the upper-class Lord Mountclere.⁴ On the one hand, as the duck-hawk drives the wild-duck into a corner, some insist that the competition anticipates the victory of the upper class; on the other hand, as the wild-duck succeeds in escaping, others assert that the competition foretells the victory of the working class. It would be wiser, however, to direct our attention to the fact that the competition does end with a tie, and to assume that the intermarriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere suggests mutual concessions and cooperation of the two classes. In order to assess this interpretation, we need to examine how each class is portrayed in the work.

In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, while Lord Mountclere the viscount does not have any grace or dignity, the working-class Ethelberta seems graceful by nature. It is true that Tess Durbeyfield was also born with grace, but this is to remind readers that she comes from a family of the ancient lineage.⁵ It is a satire that gibes pointedly at the upper class and the class system in general in the way that Ethelberta who is nothing but a daughter of a working-class family should be praised as the most refined person in the work. In Chapter 29 (200), it is only Ethelberta who can discuss and understand the poetry of Milton. In contrast, Chapter 42 (322–23) depicts the degeneration and demoralization of the upper class through the figure of Lord Mountclere who is of the highest rank in the work. The broad disparity between appearance and reality at Lychworth Court, the estate of Lord Mountclere, in Chapter 40 (296–97) hints at the emptiness, shallowness and deceitfulness of the upper-class people who gather there.

While the upper class is the target of harsh criticism, at first sight, the working class seems to be described in a relatively favorable way. In contrast to the negative image of degeneration that accompanies the descriptions of the

upper class, the rise of the working class is remarkable. In Chapter 10 (80–81), the aspiration of the working class is implied; while in Chapter 39, Knollsea is introduced as a town symbolic of the success of the “professional gentlemen” (290). In Chapter 40 (300), when Lord Mountclere, finding fault with his own class, speaks highly of the working class, he knows that he has to admit that the shift of the class system caused by what the narrator calls “metamorphic classes of society” (312) is no longer avoidable. Mr. Chickerel, who is depicted as a professional expert in Chapter 7 (62–64), presents a striking contrast to the leisured classes and their idle pursuits (56–62). It seems that the gentlemanly Chickerel requires readers to understand that working-class people are so much more sincere than so-called gentlemen of the upper class, and it is working-class men who are gentlemen in the true sense of the word. In addition, Chapters 37 (281) and 48 (376) present the pride of Sol and Dan Chickerel in their skilled workmanship in a favorable light.

In Chapter 31 (226) Menlove the maidservant tells her own life story in which she figures herself as the heroine. This episode reminds readers that even a working-class woman can be a heroine in her own life, and moreover assures us that the novel has a daughter of a working-class family as its heroine. Thus, the word “comedy” in “Comedy in Chapters”, the subtitle of the work, is not related to Restoration comedy with which the work is often compared, but is used in the sense of “comedy” whose purpose is to show the lives of ordinary people in contrast to Greek tragedy whose main interest is in the downfall of kings.

In fact, as Hardy admitted in both prefaces in 1895 and 1912 (3–4), the viewpoint of this story is that of the working class. In this work, working-class people observe upper-class people closely and describe them critically. More pages are given to show what and how working-class people really think and feel than to find out the real intention of the upper class. If we ignore the first three paragraphs of the story, we can see that the story opens with a conversation between working-class people (between a hostler and a milkman), and from that point on is almost always told from the viewpoint of the working class. By comparison, although there are quite a few servants in the works of Jane Austen, almost all of them are nameless and voiceless. In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, however, the servants are never shy of expressing their opinion

and sometimes dare to criticize their employers. Accordingly, *The Hand of Ethelberta* may even be appreciated as a socialist novel which promotes the working class.

1.2. What Intermarriage Symbolizes: Was Hardy in Praise of the Working Class?

If the notion that *The Hand of Ethelberta* should be read as a socialist novel which sets out to censure class antagonism and to raise public awareness of the working class is available, how should we interpret the intermarriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere as an extension of this idea? Are we expected to read their marriage as a representation of the regeneration of the aristocracy through the cooperation of the working class? Let us consider how far it is effective to interpret that Hardy might have counted on the new power of the working class to reconstruct English society.

The description of Lychworth Court in Chapter 40 is symbolic of Ethelberta's way of living. Her remarkable skill in acting like a lady and hiding her origins corresponds to the dubious magnificence of Lychworth Court:

To the left of the door and vestibule which Ethelberta passed through rose the principal staircase, constructed of a freestone so milkwhite and delicately moulded as to be easily conceived in the lamp-light as of biscuit-ware. Who, unacquainted with the secrets of geometrical construction, could imagine that, hanging so airily there, to all appearance supported on nothing, were twenty or more tons dead weight of stone, that would have made a prison for an elephant if so arranged? The air which produced this illusion was questionable, but its success was undoubted. (296)

Lychworth Court whose visitors cannot know that "the external walls, apparently of massive and solid freestone, were only veneered with that material, being, like the pillars, of brick within" (296) mirrors Ethelberta who, although she appears to be a lady, is nothing but a daughter of a working-class family. The coexistence (though in disharmony) of the old and the new in Lychworth Court (295–97) implies that it is always ready to tolerate the possibility that a working-class girl will get married into a traditional English aristocratic family. In this sense, Lychworth Court is where Ethelberta is destined to enter, and

would seem to receive her as she is without forcing her to adapt herself to its traditions.

The broad disparity between appearance and reality at Lychworth Court works as a satire on the emptiness, shallowness and deceitfulness of the aristocrats; however, it is noteworthy that it is working-class workmen who lend a helping hand in the deceptions. We can see on pages 296 and 297 that it is workmen like Sol and Dan who have repaired the estate and enabled the Mountcleres to keep up appearances. Readers might be invited here to observe an English social structure wherein it is lower-class people including workers who support the declining aristocracy. If Vivien Jones (xxx) is right in her assertion that in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Austen connected Fitzwilliam Darcy from the upper class with Mr. Gardiner, the tradesman, through the mediation of Elizabeth Bennet of the gentry, then it might be possible to assume that Hardy might have brought the aristocracy (Lord Mountclere) and the working class (Sol and Dan) closer to each other through Ethelberta's marriage. As the intermarriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere is compared to "a truce-flag between the blood of noble and vassal" (372) in Chapter 47, their marriage should be considered to put an end (at least for the time being) to class antagonism between the upper class and the working class or between the ruling class and the ruled. Sequel (400) shows how skillfully Ethelberta handles the household budget at Lychworth Court. Although only two and a half years have passed since she got married to Lord Mountclere with his wasteful habits, his financial situation which was said to be on the verge of bankruptcy has already taken a turn for the better thanks to her marvelous economics. Hardy might have hinted at a possible future for English society wherein the working class helps the aristocracy.

1.3. The Negative Description of Sol Chickerel the Workman: Harsh Criticism of the Working Class?

Hardy cannot be said to praise the working class without reserve. As some critics suggest,⁶ while *The Hand of Ethelberta* criticizes the conservative upper-class society, it is also critical of the "inverted" class consciousness of the working-class people who get involved in socialism. This explains why Sol and Dan are not always depicted in a favorable way. Sol's sense of belonging to his

class occasionally makes him go to extremes. It is true that the reason for his dislike for the upper class lies in their contempt for the working class, but we cannot deny that his censure of his own sister Ethelberta for her intermarriage when he calls her “a deserter of your own lot” (376) is too harsh. On the one hand, Hardy adopts a determinedly critical stance toward class discrimination by portraying the contemptuous attitude of the upper class toward the working class as ugly; on the other hand, he does not make the complacency of the workmen look agreeable either. For example, what Chapter 43 where Mr. Mountclere visits Sol’s workshop brings to light is not the detestable snobbery of Mr. Mountclere, but the insolence of the workmen to the outsider. In addition, Chapter 31 (222–28) gives a minute explanation of how the servants at Mr. Doncastle’s in London indulge in noisy merrymaking without regard for their position. Hardy does not seem to criticize the upper class indirectly by making the servants imitate their employers, but rather his motive in depicting their behavior lies simply in disclosing the insolence of the working class. Although *The Hand of Ethelberta* seemingly shows its sympathy for workers who suffer prejudice and discrimination, judging from the fact that criticism of socialistic solidarity is not entirely absent, Hardy seems not to wholly side with the working class.

Where should we ascribe Sol and Dan’s limitations? According to Chapter 16 (112–14), Sol and Dan make it a rule not to exchange greetings with Ethelberta and Christopher as they assert “how unpleasant it is for a high sort of man to have rough chaps like us hailing him” (114). Sol claims that this agreement is necessary because Ethelberta and Christopher are “lofty” (112), but it seems that they persist in this agreement partly because they disparage themselves. Their complaint about her being “lofty” that she does not speak to them in the street is truly inconsistent with their agreement that Ethelberta, Sol and Dan should take no notice of each other if they should meet in the street. Moreover, in Chapter 47, when it is obvious that Ethelberta did not inform her family of her marriage only because she was afraid that they would not approve of her intention, Sol firmly believes that she did not let them know only because “she is a lady and we what we always was” (374). His misunderstanding seems to originate in his self-disparagement. It is not Ethelberta who is ashamed of Sol, but it is Sol himself who is ashamed of his birth, and

he blames his inferiority complex on his sister: “No, I won’t come in It would disgrace her, for one thing, dressed as I be; more than that, I don’t want to come in” (374). At first glance, he seems to take no heed of class distinction; however, in reality, Sol is not free from classism either.

In *Sequel* (404), it becomes clear that it is with Ethelberta’s financial aid that Sol and Dan succeed in starting their own business. While owing the starting capital to Ethelberta, Sol behaves as if he has been compelled to accept her help and insists on paying her back the money with interest in order not to have to feel indebted to her. It seems that the pride which Sol insists that he sees in Ethelberta should be found in Sol himself. Sol’s self-hatred, which is caused by the circumstances that elder brother as he is, he is under the patronage of his younger sister who also takes care of his parents and other brothers and sisters, shows itself as a harsh criticism to Ethelberta. It is no wonder that few readers should sympathize with Sol’s stubborn ingratitude. By depicting Sol the workman negatively, Hardy, while showing his hopes for the working class through the intermarriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere, never fails to impress his readers with his neutral position, or reservations toward the working class.

2. The Marriage of Picotee and Christopher: Repudiation of Gender Bias

2.1. Ethelberta and Picotee: The Ideal Femininity

What does the other marriage, which the story’s closing chapter makes readers expect to take place between Picotee and Christopher, symbolize? In order to get the answer, it is necessary to think about the position that Picotee, who is said to be both the double and the opposite of Ethelberta, occupies in the story. Therefore, let us first look briefly at Ethelberta. Ethelberta is depicted as a rebel against the Establishment. She defies class and sexual discrimination openly in spite of her social disadvantage that she is a woman of low birth, and succeeds as a mistress of Lychworth Court and matriarch of the Chickerels. The story ends with the completion of the reversal of gender roles by Ethelberta as the head of both households. As is endorsed by a number of critics who discuss her “masculinity”,⁷ Ethelberta, who protests against sexual discrimination and challenges the male-dominated society, widely deviates

from the contemporary ideals of femininity. For example, although *The Hand of Ethelberta* was written in an age when it was openly argued that it was only men who possessed self-control and women who lacked it, Ethelberta is able to regulate her emotions by her self-control. To take another example, although it was thought unwomanly to write and publish a book as is hinted in Chapter 11, Ethelberta publishes a collection of poems, and to make matters worse, those poems are written in defense of womankind (26). It is likely that the narrator “I” who appears disguised as a man in her story-telling in Chapter 15 (100–102) symbolizes Ethelberta herself who tries to survive in the male-dominated patriarchal society.

Her success, however, is accompanied by “a price to pay” (377). By having gone too far above her original class, she becomes estranged from her class and as a result, she is banished from her family. Since this work extols allegiance to one’s original class (66, 137–38, 371–72), we can infer that Hardy does not wholly approve of Ethelberta’s succeeding socially through the reversal of gender roles. It seems that it is Picotee who makes up for Ethelberta’s deviation from femininity. Picotee always loses self-control (158) and lets her emotions show (92). When agitated, she is quick to have an attack of anemia (54) or to faint (307). In contrast to Ethelberta, Picotee is unquestionably the (negative) embodiment of the ideals of womanhood of those days.⁸

2.2. The Negative Description of Picotee Chickerel as Ideal Woman

In order to understand Hardy’s intention behind granting Picotee happiness with Christopher, we need to know her limits as an “ideal” woman. It is well-known that those who cannot adapt themselves to the raw natural environment rank rather low in Hardy’s works; therefore, Chapter 45 (344) describing how Picotee detests unfavorable weather hints at her inconsistency. Picotee seems an innocent country girl but is frivolous enough to yearn for the glamour of the city for its own sake, whereas Ethelberta is tainted with urban vices but has never parted from her instinct to adapt herself to the raw natural environment. Picotee, strongly attracted by upper-class people (52), comes to have a low opinion of her own class. In Chapter 47 she cannot help feeling ashamed of her brother Sol, a true workman: “You need not come near the front apartments, if you think we shall be ashamed of you in your working

clothes. How came you not to dress up a bit, Sol?" (374). While Ethelberta never feels ashamed of her family, Picotee, after having observed the upper-class life as Ethelberta's maidservant, comes to feel as if she has become a member of the upper class (so that, identifying with Ethelberta who becomes Lady Mountclere, she uses the personal pronoun "we") and finds Sol in his working clothes disgraceful. This episode reveals that it is not Ethelberta but Picotee who is snobbish⁹ and shallow-minded.

Picotee's limitations, which are hinted at by this kind of inconsistency, lie in her self-centeredness and her emotional dependence on her family. Chapter 16 contrasts Ethelberta and Picotee by describing them as "independent" (113) and "quite the other way" (113) respectively. Picotee comes to rely entirely on Ethelberta, and so much so that it sometimes seems as if she were a parasite living off her sister. In Chapter 17 (117) Picotee wants to go to London only because Christopher has moved there, but does not or will not understand the deficit in the living expenses of the Chickerels, and complains that it is unfair that she should stay behind in Sandbourne. In spite of the fact that her elder brothers and sisters work hard to make up for the deficit, Picotee, "quite an unreasoning animal" (133), will not contribute to the family budget to support her younger brothers and sisters of tender years, although she is old enough to earn her own livelihood, only to trouble Ethelberta. If Picotee had suffered homesickness and could not bear to live away from her family, there would have arisen some reward in Ethelberta's sacrifice; however, since Picotee is hopelessly egocentric and self-absorbed in her scheme to be near the man she loves (and, to make matters worse, loves unrequitedly), she makes a striking contrast with Ethelberta who does not mind denying herself for the sake of her family.

It is truly ironical that although it is Picotee who is egotistical and willful, her elder brothers appreciate her as their darling little sister, gentle and obedient, and overprotect her, while accusing Ethelberta of being "lofty" and "independent". What is more, although she has never known any substantial cares except for the heartache of unrequited love, nor sacrificed anything for the family, Picotee is allowed to get engaged to the man she loves at the end of the story, while Ethelberta is compelled to marry a morally corrupt and ugly old man. Is this meant to be a punishment to Ethelberta for having upset the class

system and gender roles by trying to succeed financially to help the Chickerels? Is Picotee, then, rewarded for remaining the ideal woman who weeps, swoons, and is wholly dependent on the people around her, with her engagement to the hero of the story as if she were a heroine? If Ethelberta is a villainess like Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) and Picotee is worthy of being called a heroine, as some critics suggest,¹⁰ the ideal required of women is highly superficial. Viewed from a different point, however, if Picotee is rewarded with a happy ending for meeting the contemporary womanly ideal by remaining helpless, then perhaps the ending points to a rather harsher critique of society.

Hardy's ambiguity, which prevents him from taking sides with either the upper class or the working class, can also be found in his attitude toward gender roles. It is surly undeniable that Ethelberta, who deviates from the feminine ideal, is not treated in a favorable light. This explains why the ending of the story gives readers the impression that although she succeeds materially, Ethelberta does not feel mentally satisfied at all. On the other hand, however, Picotee the ideal woman is also depicted in a disagreeable way. Hardy does not approve of either the so-called womanly woman or a woman who deviates from the feminine ideal which people force on her unilaterally. Hardy's non-committal attitude can also be found in his description of male characters. Many of the male characters of the work are effeminate, and Christopher, the hero of the story, is no exception. He is notably inactive and indecisive as if he has swapped gender roles with Ethelberta.¹¹ As for the manly men, they are not always attractive either, but rather ruthless and inconsiderate. Neigh is high-handed and Sol is a hardhearted socialist. Here again, Hardy does not approve of either the so-called manly man or a man who deviates from the masculine ideal which people force on him unilaterally. Hardy's attitude to gender issues, as well as the class system, seems noncommittal and reluctant to pass judgment.

Then, how are readers expected to interpret Christopher who forsakes Ethelberta, a spirited self-reliant woman, and instead chooses Picotee, a womanly dependent woman, as his partner? Christopher's cruelty stands out in *Sequel* where he has overcome his disappointment in love and now feels a strong loathing for the woman whom he once loved intently: "He stood a long

time thinking; but he did not wish her his. In this wholesome frame of mind he proceeded on his way, thankful that he had escaped meeting her, though so narrowly" (401). As the statement, which hints at persecution complex in his psychology, shows, Christopher puts all the blame on Ethelberta: "The perpetual snubbing that he had received from Ethelberta ever since he had known her seemed about to be continued through the medium of her dependents" (401). Since Hardy concludes the story by making Christopher resolutely break off relations with Ethelberta, while forbidding Ethelberta to talk, the final impression given to readers is inevitably that of criticism of Ethelberta. If we are to take the word "wholesome" literally, which justifies Christopher's decision, we feel like suspecting that Hardy meant to criticize Ethelberta. Nevertheless, as becomes clear on pages 405 and 406, the marriage of Christopher and Picotee can be realized thanks to Ethelberta's arrangement with Lord Mountclere. Although some critics believe that Picotee is rewarded for being true to her first love,¹² it is Ethelberta's money that can materialize Picotee's happiness, all the same. The unpleasant aftertaste of the ending where Ethelberta plays the part of the loser and Picotee has the good fortune to marry the hero must have been provided by Hardy intentionally; and accordingly, the harsh criticism of Ethelberta on page 401 may be aiming at the reverse effect. Hardy might have been critical of those who find fault with Ethelberta one-sidedly and have objected to the view that encourages us to regard Christopher and Picotee as an ideal couple.

At first glance, unlike Ethelberta who seems a classist intent on marrying far above her station, Christopher is seemingly true to his love, but his limitations loom up in his choice of Picotee. For him, Picotee is actually nothing but a substitute for Ethelberta. According to the narrator in *Sequel* (403), what Christopher sees in Picotee and finds attractive are her expressions and tone of voice which make her resemble her sister. In other words, Christopher is attracted to the Picotee who has absorbed the upper-class culture and acquired its manners and demeanor as Ethelberta's maidservant. As compared with his attitude when he took no interest in the Picotee whose manners and behavior clearly indicated that she was a working-class girl, his attraction to Picotee in *Sequel* betrays the fact that what he pursues is a lady-like woman who is well-acquainted with the upper-class culture. Chapter 15 (99) has already shown

readers how deeply Christopher is impressed by Ethelberta's lady-like appearance, demeanor and way of talking. He is proud of his "lady", Ethelberta, who he believes looks completely different from those country dwellers who embody natural characteristics such as simplicity and unaffectedness. Christopher, who does not necessarily detest artificial urbanity or admire natural beauty, worships Ethelberta who can remain graceful as an embodiment of civilization and urbanization among unsophisticated rustics. His admiration tells us that what he pursues as his ideal is a woman who incarnates the upper class, that is, sociability, grace and sophistication. Christopher looks for this ideal of his in Ethelberta and later in Picotee. His image of the ideal woman implies that he wants to find in women what can connect him once more to the upper class, and hopes to retrieve his former place and class. He does not love Picotee in the flesh and blood; and what is more, it can be said that he did not love Ethelberta as a flesh-and-blood woman either. In his choice of Picotee, we can glimpse the real drawback of his class consciousness. It is asking too much, therefore, to tell us to believe that the marriage of the "hero" whose action is restricted by his own limitations and the "ideal" woman whose capacity of becoming a heroine is limited is blessed by Hardy as a happy ending. In the same way as he objects to the class system by the marriage of Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere, he must have meant to protest against gender bias by the marriage of Christopher and Picotee.

Conclusion

As stated in my introduction, *The Hand of Ethelberta* was never considered one of Hardy's masterpieces, and has still been regarded as one of his minor novels. The factors cited as shortcomings are numerous: the burlesque story line, the characters' lack of depth, and so on. Nevertheless, as has been argued above, if Hardy's purpose lay in his criticism of the class system and gender bias, we are expected to interpret each character less as an individual human being than as a representative of a certain class and gender, playing a role which exaggerates a certain characteristics of their class and/or gender. Ethelberta plays the part of a working-class woman who protests against the class system and biased gender roles; Lord Mountclere represents the degenerative aristocracy; Sol is the working-class socialist; and Picotee is the "ideal"

woman. Even if such characterizations lack depth and the plot is too unnatural to be regarded as realistic, this is not due to Hardy's lack of ability as a novelist; rather, these flaws should be tolerated as a necessary means Hardy used in order to accomplish his purpose. It is true that compared with Hardy's so-called masterpieces, *The Hand of Ethelberta* does not have much of a presence, but when we appreciate that it plainly shows us his interest in the class system and gender issues, two themes which form the bases of his works, it is surely a work whose shortcomings should be seen in perspective and whose worth as a novel bears renewed attention.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper in Japanese was presented at the 81st general meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan on 31 May 2009. I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Gallimore at Japan Women's University for his helpful comments and suggestions on my draft of this essay.

1 Thomas Hardy, *The Hand of Ethelberta* (London: Penguin, 1996). In quoting from the work, the page of the Penguin Classics Edition published in 1996, which is based on the two-volume first edition of 1876, will be shown in parentheses.

2 See Clarice Short for her concise summary of the novel's critical history. It seems that the severest criticisms of *The Hand of Ethelberta* are those of Richard Carpenter and Harvey Webster. Moreover, it is interesting that Robert Gittings sounds so harsh in his "introduction" to Macmillan's New Wessex Edition of 1975, which is based on The Wessex Edition of 1912, as to make us wonder if he is not overdoing it.

3 For the interpretation of the "hand" in the title, that of Gittings (*Young Thomas Hardy* 290) is well-known. Some references to the title are also found chronologically in Gittings ("Introduction" xxi–xxii), Peter Widdowson (170), Patricia Ingham (34), Joe Fisher (76), Penny Boumelha (245), Michael Millgate (110), Tim Dolin (xxiv–xxv), Tess O'Toole (115), Jane Thomas (94–5) and Barbara Hardy (9).

4 For the interpretation of the wild-duck and the duck-hawk, see Peter Casagrande (122), Richard Taylor (64), Boumelha (251–52), Millgate (110–11), Dolin (xxiii) and Shanta Dutta (29–30).

5 O'Toole (121) compares Ethelberta's grace with that of Tess.

6 Some critics such as George Wing (572), Taylor (68) and Dutta (26) point out Sol and Dan's "inverted snobbery".

7 Critics who consider Ethelberta to lack in "femininity" and call her "masculine", include Albert Guerard (109), Carpenter (54–55), Millgate (108–109), Dutta (24) and Joanna Devereux (37).

8 Such critics as T. R. Wright (54–57), Boumelha (245), Dutta (23) and Devereux (37–38) compare Picotee to the contemporary ideal woman.

9 Dutta refers to Picotee's "snobbery" (34).

10 For instance, Short (55) and Carpenter (56) compare Ethelberta to Becky Sharp, while Dolin compares her with successive "villainesses" (xxii) in English fiction. It is said to be in 1881's *British Quarterly Review* where Ethelberta was first likened to Becky Sharp. This review is now available in R. G. Cox's *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* (78–94). On the other hand, Millgate (109) states that Ethelberta is closer to Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) rather than Becky Sharp, and Dutta (27) insists that Ethelberta is not a Becky Sharp type.

11 Devereux (33–37) analyzes Christopher's "femininity" in detail.

12 To take an example, Wright (54, 57) believes that Picotee's happiness should be strictly ascribed to her pure love for Christopher.

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