From Bliss to Tragedy:
A Study of the Fates of Three of Thomas Hardy’s Noble Dames

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Introduction

Thomas Hardy’s talents as a writer and his central place in English literature during the Victorian era seem to have been established relatively early. As Norman Page notes, the first critical work based on Hardy’s fiction was written in 1894, less than thirty years after he wrote his first novel (ix). During the remainder of his life, Hardy ultimately produced a wide range of literary works. While he is best known for his numerous novels, he also wrote poetry and a considerable number of short stories. The setting for much of Hardy’s fiction, including his short stories, is his birthplace and childhood home, the region of Dorset, England, which Hardy refers to as Wessex. In addition to his apparent interest in the landscape and nature of this area, Hardy also shows a clear fascination with the history of the people of Wessex. As Page notes, Hardy “found especially appealing the way in which even a single human existence is capable of spanning a whole epoch of history” (2). We see the influence of both the setting and history of Wessex in the tales of Hardy’s A Group of Noble Dames, three of which will be considered in this essay.

Hardy’s short stories differ in a number of ways from the “modern short story” and are therefore better referred to as tales, according to Irving Howe (76). The tale, Howe says, moves at a slower pace than the short story and does not worry about pleasing impatient readers. It usually has the feeling of being “spoken before a fire in a pleasant country house” and it sometimes ends with “explicit moral or philosophical reflection” (79). In addition, the tale is usually told to a group that “forms a natural or social community” (78). The stories in A Group of Noble Dames fit Howe’s description of the tale in many ways. The narrators of the stories are members of the South-Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club and tell their stories to the well-acquainted club members. Thus, the frame of these stories is a club meeting at which the members are to visit the buildings of Wessex. When the meeting is postponed due to inclement weather, the men decide to stay inside telling one another stories around the fire.
The stories they tell are histories of women from Wessex which have been passed down partly by oral tradition, partly by written account. As is typical of a tale, they all include the reflections and judgments of the club members and/or narrator and seem to reflect Hardy’s background which, according to Donald Davidson, took place “where fiction was a tale told or sung” (13).

Three of the stories from *A Group of Noble Dames* will be studied in this essay, namely “The First Countess of Wessex”, “The Duchess of Hamptonshire” and “Barbara of the House of Grebe”. The three dames of these stories, Betty Dornell, Emmeline Oldbourne and Barbara Grebe, are similar in many ways. All are young, upper-class ladies influenced by parental interference in their love lives, and all are faced with the choice between a young, handsome lover of a lower class and an older, upper-class suitor. It will be shown that despite these similarities, the tone and outcome of these stories vary widely, ranging between comedy and tragedy or both. In addition it will be argued that these various outcomes are the result of the dames’ personal decisions and the role of chance in their lives.

This essay is organized in three chapters, one for each of the three dames, beginning with Betty’s story, moving to Emmeline’s and concluding with Barbara’s. In each chapter there will be an examination of the parental interference and the dame’s two romantic alternatives followed by an analysis of her choices and how these choices, along with chance or providence, lead to the story’s outcome. The first two stories presented are those with clear-cut tones of comedy and tragedy, respectively. In the last story we will examine how both comedy and tragedy are combined.

Though numerous critics have analyzed many of Hardy’s novels, very few have looked at his lesser-known short stories. I have only found two critical works that are fully devoted to Hardy’s short stories, both of which contain sections on *A Group of Noble Dames*. These are,
of course, more general studies of the stories, not focusing on any one particular aspect. Thus, the nature of this essay differs in that it specifically examines the fates of the dames and how their own choices and circumstances, along with chance, result in these fates.
”The First Countess of Wessex”: A Blissful Conclusion

“The First Countess of Wessex” is the opening story in *A Group of Noble Dames* and, according to Martin Ray, the story with the “most fully documented historical basis” (79). Inspired by *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* by John Hutchins, as well as stories passed down to him orally, Hardy forms the story of the young Betty Dornell of King’s-Hintock Court in Wessex (74). The story’s structure as a frame story is immediately hinted at by the narrator’s “turning over his memoranda for reference”, but not until after the conclusion of the inner story does the reader understand the setting of the frame story and the role of its narrator (Hardy 3). We learn that he is a club member and a historian, and though his role as a historian has no significant connection to the inner story, it is noteworthy that Hardy chooses the historian to tell the story with the most historical basis.

The story takes place in the first half of the eighteenth century and covers two periods of Betty’s life, first when she is thirteen and later when she is seventeen-eighteen. In addition to Betty, it is her parents and her two suitors who are the story’s main characters, though the point of view is primarily that of Betty and her parents. Initially, it is Mr. Dornell’s view that is prominent and the reader sympathizes with him as he suffers under a domineering wife. Gradually, Betty’s view becomes the primary focus, and finally Mrs. Dornell’s point of view comes to the forefront as she struggles with her new role as widow and single mother. The substantial focus on Mr. and Mrs. Dornell’s points of view make them more central figures in this story than the parents in the other two stories. The reader thus develops a degree of sympathy for these characters and their parental decisions, especially in Mr. Dornell’s case.

Mr. and Mrs. Dornell are loving parents who want their daughter to have the best life possible, but unfortunately their own interests fuel their interference in her future to a large degree. Both intensity and self-interest are seen in their love for Betty who is described as
“beloved ambitiously by her mother and with uncalculating passionateness by her father” (Hardy 5). Mrs. Dornell is a wealthy property owner and the “greatest heiress in Wessex” (5). Her “ambitious” love for her daughter makes her strive to unite Betty with a suitor of nobility who will in turn benefit from Betty’s wealth. Stephen Reynard is Mrs. Dornell’s choice of suitor due to his family’s influence at court and the probability that he will “get a barony” (4).

Betty’s father has his own plans regarding her suitor. Mr. Dornell is a country Squire with a more modest estate than his wife’s and he resents the power that her wealth gives her in their marriage. Because the couple’s initial argument over Betty’s future is told primarily from Mr. Dornell’s point of view, the reader initially sympathizes with his position. We side with him as he rejects Mrs. Dornell’s choice of a noble suitor, claiming that Reynard is too old and worrying that Betty would not be happy with “a man she had hardly seen” (Hardy 6). We also agree with his choice of Phelipson, the young son of a friend of his, as a better suitor for Betty. Phelipson’s youth, compared to Reynard’s ripe age of 30, as well as his “tenderness” and budding interest in Betty, convince both Mr. Dornell and the reader that he is the better choice (7).

The parents’ argument has a tragic element in its effect on Betty who, afterwards, “shrank into bed, where she cried herself to sleep”, but the overall tone of the scene is nonetheless lighthearted and comedic (Hardy 5). Mr. Dornell’s insecurities in his marriage appear as he attacks his wife’s wealth and creates a humorous illustration of the Dornells’ marital relations. “You crow and you domineer, mistress, because you are heiress general here . . . But let me tell ‘ee that if I did come here to you . . . it was done at the dictates of convenience merely. Hell! I’m no beggar! Ha’nt I a place of my own?” (4).

Following the argument, Mrs. Dornell makes the hasty decision to see Betty safely married to the man she considers “the best and finest man alive” (4). She secretly disappears
to London with Betty, and the reader later discovers, along with Mr. Dornell, that she has married the thirteen-year-old girl to Reynard without her husband’s consent. Though the couple is not to begin their life together until Betty is of age, we are nonetheless shocked by Mrs. Dornell’s actions. Mr. Dornell is, of course, devastated by the news and falls to the floor in an “apoplectic fit” (10). By presenting this episode solely through his point of view, the narrator again creates sympathy for Mr. Dornell.

Betty’s father does not let his wife get away with her deception. Though he is quiet for three to four years while Betty is away at school, he maintains his belief in the superiority of his suitor. When Betty returns at age the age of seventeen, Mr. Dornell plans his revenge, and we now see that his intentions are no better than his wife’s. He arranges for Betty to meet Phelipson and to pretend to show an interest in him. This he hopes will make Mrs. Dornell regret the marriage she has arranged. He ignores the consequences of his scheme for Betty should she truly develop feelings for Phelipson. As Kristin Brady points out, Mr. Dornell “often mistakes his daughter’s interest for his own” (56).

The reader gradually realizes the selfishness behind the actions of both of the Dornells and feels sympathy for Betty as her parents use her as a pawn in their marital conflicts. Though they love her dearly, their competitiveness prevents them from focusing solely on Betty’s well-being. This results in Mrs. Dornell joining Betty prematurely to a conventional suitor and Mr. Dornell later dangling a more youthful option before her eyes, despite her previous commitment.

Betty is now left with two alternatives to choose between. Stephen Reynard is the first prospect in Betty’s life and Mrs. Dornell’s choice for her daughter. Although he is thirty years old at the time of their marriage and Betty remembers him as “ugly and formidable”, Mrs. Dornell insists that he is perfect for her daughter (14). He is established, from a respectable
upper-class family and, most importantly, he has the possibility of receiving a noble title. According to Mrs. Dornell, Reynard is a “shrewd courtier and wise man of the world” and she insists that he is “noted for his excellent personal qualities” (12). We see this in his patience and respectfulness when he initially agrees not to claim Betty until several years after their marriage, as well as when he later agrees to postpone their union numerous times at the family’s request. This endless discouragement of Reynard’s union with Betty adds another comedic element to the story. As Hendrik Breuls notes, as the account of Reynard’s “predicament takes on a more and more ironical tone, the realistic impact diminishes” (215).

Reynard is also persistent and capable of standing up for himself when necessary. He corresponds with Betty throughout their years apart and as the time of their expected union approaches, he becomes more insistent that the event take place. After being put off multiple times, Reynard finally arrives to claim his bride. He does not back down, but defends himself with honor. In a calm and collected manner, Reynard explains to Mr. Dornell that “he had been willing to waive his rights, out of deference to her parents, to any reasonable extent, but must now, in justice to himself and her insist on maintaining them” (Hardy 29). Throughout the scene, Mr. Dornell’s “hot-tempered, gouty, impulsive” character forms a stark contrast to Reynard’s good manners and calm demeanor (28). The reader is left viewing Reynard as a respectable, mature and good-natured gentleman. Despite our hesitancy to accept his role in marrying the thirteen-year-old Betty, Reynard’s character is clearly admirable.

Betty’s second prospect is her father’s choice, Phelipson. According to Mrs. Dornell he is a “bumpkin”, a “petty gentleman who lives down at that outlandish place . . . Falls-Park” and one of Mr. Dornell’s “potcompanions’ sons” (Hardy 4). Mr. Dornell, on the other hand, believes that Phelipson would bring Betty the true happiness that Reynard cannot. Phelipson is a contrast to Reynard in several ways. He is young and attractive, “frank and impulsive”, a commoner, and certainly not an advantageous match for the well-bred, upper-class Betty (16).
Nonetheless, his youth and good looks make Phelipson the more romantic match of the two suitors. Mr. Dornell’s trusty servant favors Phelipson, and even Mrs. Dornell admits that he would have been the better match for Betty (17). Thus, the reader feels pulled toward this youthful suitor, despite Reynard’s respectable qualities.

Who, then, will Betty choose for her partner and will she make the right choice? By making Betty’s romantic choices for her from the start, Betty’s parents have forced a decision when she has neither the maturity nor the wisdom necessary to choose the right man. As Brady notes, “by pushing Betty prematurely into the position of a woman, the Dornells are inviting the possibility that she will always remain a child” (55). Indeed, Mr. Dornell acknowledges his daughter’s immaturity as part of his fear of her union with Reynard even though she is now eighteen years old. He insists that Betty is still too young to be claimed since she is still a girl “by nature” (28).

As hinted above, Mr. Dornell’s scheme to prove his wife wrong has consequences he fails to anticipate. His request that Betty pretend to be smitten with Phelipson during their meeting is unnecessary. Betty’s feelings for Phelipson are quickly sparked and it soon becomes clear that he is her first choice. The reader never witnesses the couple’s interaction, but through Betty’s mother we become aware of their secret romantic meetings. Mrs. Dornell’s exasperation with her husband for bringing Phelipson into the picture quickly becomes evident as her point of view comes to the forefront. Through her we observe Betty’s feelings for Phelipson as she pleads with her mother to postpone Reynard’s arrival. However, Betty’s pleas are in vain and Reynard’s arrival is imminent.

At this point we see the story’s first ironic twist. Betty is desperate to find a way to be with Phelipson and prevent her union to Reynard. During an afternoon drive with her mother, Betty impulsively decides to expose herself to smallpox in an attempt to keep Reynard away.
Her immaturity is evident here as she thinks only of her desire to avoid Reynard and fails to consider how her illness may also affect Phelipson, not to mention herself. At first things seem to work out in her favor and the story moves in the expected direction. Phelipson, unaware of her illness, heroically rescues her prior to Reynard’s arrival, and it seems the young lovers will ride off happily into the sunset. Instead, the scene is set for the crucial test of the two lovers.

The problem with Betty’s plan soon catches up with her. As the couple dismounts their horse to rest and Betty removes her cloak, Phelipson’s shock at the sight of her face, marked by smallpox, is an unexpected twist in the romance. Now Phelipson’s immaturity and superficiality are revealed. Only minutes after having rescued his love, he is full of worry about how the smallpox will affect her appearance. He changes his mind about the entire situation saying, “I am thinking if it is quite right for us to do this . . . with this terrible sickness coming on, perhaps you had better let me take you back, and – climb in at the window again” (Hardy 40). We are left disappointed in the true character of Betty’s first love as his once seemingly sincere passion for Betty has proved short-lived. As Gilmartin and Mengham note, his response “encourages the reader to dismiss Phelipson as an unworthy and immature lover” (59). However, rather than creating a tragic situation, Phelipson’s abrupt change of heart and the sudden pragmatic nature of his solution have a comical effect on the story. The humor in his actions prevents the reader from taking the scene too seriously and instead leaves us chuckling at this reversal of the elopement. Once again, the potential for drama dissolves into comedy, if not to say farce.

This scene is significant not only due to its ironic twist in the story’s plot, but also because of the change in Betty seen here. Rather than collapsing into a tragic heroine as we might have expected given her naivety up to this point, Betty reacts to her rejection with maturity and sensibility. She agrees to Phelipson’s practical solution of climbing back into the
window and returns home without tears or recrimination. “Though she had reproached Phelipson, she was staunch enough not to blame him in her secret heart for showing that his love was only skin-deep” (Hardy 41). Phelipson’s rejection becomes a turning point for Betty. It is the beginning of her transition from girl to woman, which will influence her interactions with Reynard.

It is now Reynard’s turn to be tested. Back at home, Betty meets her husband, whom she has not seen since their wedding. Reynard is first shocked by Betty’s appearance, but due to his age and maturity he quickly recovers and proves the sincerity of his feelings. He risks his own health in a gallant gesture we would normally associate with a romantic young lover. Reynard goes to Betty, planting “a deliberate kiss full upon her mouth saying, ‘May many others follow!’” (42). Reynard’s affection, along with the narrator’s praise of him as a “contriving, sagacious, gentle-mannered man, a philosopher who saw that the only constant attribute of life is change” helps us shift our preference to him (43). Likewise, Betty’s insight due to Phelipson’s rejection helps her own affection for Reynard grow in response to his kindness. Following his kiss, she is “secretly pleased at his hardihood” and now he seems to fill the role of the romantic lover left empty by Phelipson (43).

Just as Betty’s feelings for Reynard are finally developing, however, she is faced with another ironic turn of events. Mr. Dornell dies and now Betty’s mother ironically takes on a new loyalty to her husband. This becomes one of the most humorous circumstances of the story as Mrs. Dornell “zealously embraced his [Mr. Dornell’s] opinion about delaying Betty’s union with her husband, which she had formerly combated strenuously” (Hardy 44). Betty must again go behind her mother’s back to meet her lover, only this time it is her husband Reynard. Mrs. Dornell is now shocked and grieved to discover their secret meetings upon noticing Betty’s pregnancy, but Betty’s ultimate choice is made and she transfers her loyalty
from her mother to Reynard, thereby assuring her future title as the First Countess of Wessex (48).

Betty’s choice of Reynard proves successful. The narrator tells us that he grows “to be truly in love with Betty . . . in that way which perhaps, upon the whole, tends most generally to the woman’s comfort under the institution of marriage, if not particularly to her ecstasy” (44). We learn that they have a long life together and a “numerous family”, but despite this, the narrator’s final opinion of Betty’s affection shows his ironic judgment as he comments, “Such is woman; or rather (not to give offence by so sweeping an assertion), such was Betty Dornell” (48).

Even though she has had a shaky beginning, Betty has nonetheless matured and made wise decisions for her future. In addition to the success of her choices, chance has also been in Betty’s favor. It is providential that her impulsive decision to contract smallpox to avoid Reynard actually leads her straight into his arms and it is equally providential that Reynard turns out to be a kind and sincere lover that brings Betty happiness. Betty has indeed been fortunate, for, as the narrator notes, her childhood marriage shows “the small count taken of the happiness of an innocent child in the social strategy of those days, which might have led, but providentially did not lead, to great unhappiness” (48). Yes, this lady’s story certainly ends on a happy note, but what will be the fates of the two remaining dames?
“The Duchess of Hamptonshire”: Tragedy Through and Through

“The Duchess of Hamptonshire” is the ninth story of the collection, but only the second short story ever written by Hardy. The first version of the story was written in 1878 but was then altered considerably during the following years and several different versions were printed. In this story, which seems to have been inspired by a personal incident experienced by his brother-in-law (Ray 147), Hardy creates the tale of the young dame, Emmeline Oldbourne. The narrator in this case is another club member, the “quiet gentleman”, who is an appropriate choice to tell the story of the shy and timid Emmeline (Hardy 188).

In contrast to Betty’s story which is set in the first half of the 1700’s, this tale takes place just fifty years prior to its telling, that is around 1860. The role of the narrator is no more significant in this story than in the first, though here a greater portion of the story is told from his perspective. This focus on the narrator’s perspective throughout the story keeps the reader further removed from the characters here than in the previous story and therefore conjures up less sympathy for them, especially in the cases of Emmeline’s father and her noble suitor. The sympathy we do experience is naturally focused on those characters about whom we learn the most, Emmeline and her poor suitor Alwyn. The story has three sections. The first section of the story has no dialog and is primarily told from the narrator’s point of view, although we get some second-hand information regarding the characters’ perspectives, especially Emmeline’s. We learn that Emmeline is seventeen years old and, along with the other characters, lives in the neighborhood of Batton in the county of Hamptonshire (Hardy 191). The brief second section gives us the first-hand perspectives of Emmeline and one of her romantic alternatives, Alwyn. The time-span of these two sections is a matter of several months. The setting of the story then changes in the final section as Alwyn sails to America where he remains for ten years before returning to England. The focus is now solely on
Alwyn and his life throughout the rest of the story. Again, this section is primarily told from the narrator’s perspective, but with second-hand information about Alwyn’s own point of view.

This second chapter will follow a slightly altered structure from the first, though the focus will be on the same aspects as in Chapter One. We begin by presenting Emmeline and her initial romantic interest, which is established prior to the story’s onset. Next we continue by analyzing the role of parental interference in Emmeline’s life, which in this case involves the interference of only one parent. We then move on to an evaluation of Emmeline’s two romantic alternatives. Finally, we see how the dame’s personal choices and the role of chance result in a strikingly different outcome than in the first story, this time an outcome of overwhelming tragedy.

Emmeline is a sweet and simple young woman who grows up largely unaware of her exceptional beauty. Furthermore, she is raised without much contact with the outside world, which leads her to feel “troubled and confused” by the men she encounters (Hardy 193). She struggles desperately with this problem as we see when the narrator tells us that she sat outside alone each time her father had a visitor “ridiculing her [own] weakness in apostrophes, but unable to overcome it” (193). She is also an extremely virtuous lady with a “natural inappetency for evil things, which to her were as unmeaning as joints of flesh to a herbivorous creature” (193). Emmeline’s innate goodness and her simple nature lead her to choose the equally virtuous curate Alwyn Hill as her lover, a choice made prior to the story’s onset.

Emmeline’s father, Mr. Oldbourne, is the widowed parish rector who is “over stiff and stern for a clergyman” and who shows no “sympathetic traits whereon depends so much of a parson’s power to do good among his fellow-creatures” (Hardy 192). Unlike in the first story,
we get no direct information whatsoever regarding his relationship to or feelings for Emmeline, except that he has raised her in solitude and isolation (193). Whereas Betty’s parents clearly adore their daughter and ultimately desire her happiness, we are left uncertain as to Mr. Oldbourne’s motives concerning Emmeline. It is only based on his actions and the narrator’s description of him that we can assume his primary goal is seeing Emmeline married to a well-established, conventional suitor regardless of her own feelings.

Mr. Oldbourne’s ambitions for Emmeline are satisfied when the Duke of Hamptonshire proposes. The Duke is from an established family in the area which “before its ennoblement, had numbered many knightly and ecclesiastical celebrities in its male line” (191). Furthermore, like Mrs. Dornell in the first story, Mr. Oldbourne wastes no time taking things into his own hands to ensure his daughter’s union to the Duke. However, though Betty’s parents are manipulative in the treatment of their daughter, they are nonetheless gentle and loving. They truly do care about Betty’s own wishes. Mr. Oldbourne, on the other hand, shows no sign of compassion for his Emmeline. Instead he proves “cold, hard and inexorable” as he drives Alwyn away from the parish with “bitter and hard words” in order to make room for the Duke, an action that will ultimately result in Alwyn fleeing England for America in his sorrow (194). Though we receive no further details surrounding the union of Emmeline and the Duke, we can only assume that Mr. Oldbourne fiercely coerces his daughter into marriage with the man she hardly knows.

Thus, Emmeline is left with two suitors. Like Betty’s suitors, one is young and romantic while the other is rich and noble. However, Alwyn Hill and the Duke of Hamptonshire differ in several ways from the men of the first story, as we will see below. As mentioned, Alwyn is Emmeline’s first choice of suitor. He is a humble curate and clearly inferior to the Duke in Mr. Oldbourne’s eyes, but despite his low status he is very handsome with “dreamy eyes”, “a complexion as fresh as a flower, and a chin absolutely beardless”
At twenty-five years of age he looks only nineteen. Alwyn is this story’s counterpart to the young, romantic lover of our first story, Phelipson; but there is one significant difference between them. Whereas Phelipson’s character proved immature and superficial, Alwyn’s is sincere and good. He is “a favourite” among the lower-class parishioners who think of him as a “gentle young man” (194). Alwyn’s innocence, goodness and romantic good looks allow the reader to see him as the perfect match for Emmeline.

The Duke of Hamptonshire, on the other hand, is “incontestably the head man in his county” (Hardy 191). He comes from a family with much history and numerous monuments in the parish church. Outwardly, he is thus similar to Betty’s noble suitor, Reynard, but unlike Reynard, the Duke’s character is highly questionable. He could “close the mouths of his dependents by a good bomb-like oath, and he argued doggedly with the parson on the virtues of cock-fighting and baiting the bull” (191). He is thus harsh and aggressive and has none of the good-natured, respectful qualities of Reynard. Physically, the Duke has an impressive quality about him with his sturdy frame and the fact that he always carries a walking stick or spade wherever he goes (191-192). In addition to his personal traits, the Duke’s castle also gives us insight into the type of person he is. It is “surrounded by dusky elms” and employs “ghostly housemaids”, which leave us imagining a dark, mysterious inhabitance. It is also highly ornamented, filled with portraits of the Duke’s noble ancestry and sits in the middle of “ten thousand acres of good, fat, unimpeachable soil”, showing us the magnificence of his wealth (192).

To make matters worse, the Duke’s love for Emmeline seems solely based on physical desire. After first being struck by her beauty, the Duke suddenly realizes the importance of his own beautiful female ancestors and the role they have played in the “evolution of the Saxelbye race” (193). As Angelique Richardson suggests, the “language of evolution” is
present here and it is clear that the Duke is interested in Emmeline only for her physical attributes and the benefits she can therefore bring to his lineage (§15).

Torn between her father’s pressure and her own desire, who does Emmeline choose? We see her love for Alwyn as she mourns his departure from the parish with “beseeching sobs” (Hardy 194). Nonetheless, her choice reflects her role as a victim not only of Mr. Oldbourne’s current cruelty, but even of his forcing her to grow up in solitude. This solitude leaves her shy and fearful in the presence of new acquaintances and creates in her “no resistant force of character” (193). This shyness combined with her seemingly obedient and respectful nature keeps Emmeline from standing up for herself either to her father or his chosen suitor. Thus, Emmeline unhappily makes the Duke her second choice.

Emmeline’s life with the Duke proves to be the first great tragedy of the story. Emmeline is miserable in her new role as the Duchess of Hamptonshire. She often sheds “stupid scalding tears at a time when a right-minded lady would have been overhauling her wardrobe” (195). She spends her time praying alone in the church and takes no pleasure in the luxuries of her new life such as “eating and drinking out of crystal and silver” (195). To make matters worse, the Duke is soon convinced that Alwyn is the cause of Emmeline’s melancholy. This leads to a gradual progression of abuse which begins with the Duke taunting Emmeline and develops into his accusations that she is still in contact with Alwyn.

Despite Emmeline’s unsuccessful marriage, her fate is not sealed yet. Out of desperation, Emmeline finds the courage to resume contact with Alwyn in the hope that he will take her back. She pleads that he allow her to accompany him on his ship to America, insisting that her current life is worse than death and that “nothing short of cruelty” would have brought her to this point (196). She explains that she has been tortured and molested by the Duke and believes that her life is in danger if she does not get away from him (196).
Alwyn is moved by Betty’s claims of abuse, finding them difficult to take in (196). However, even though he loves Emmeline tremendously, he is first and foremost a religious man who will not do what is “forbidden in God’s law” and thus refuses her request (197).

Alwyn’s rejection is not based on superficial grounds, as was Phelipson’s. Indeed, he is sensible and true to his profession in not allowing Emmeline to accompany him on his journey. In his goodness, Alwyn wisely bases his decision on “his recognition of her legally and morally binding marriage” (Brady 83). He tries to protect both Emmeline and himself from the possible consequences of such a betrayal of the Duke. Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons for his rejection, Alwyn is not the romantic hero we had hoped for. As George Wing puts it, Alwyn “deserts Emmeline . . . when she most needs him” (§11). It is frustrating that despite his education in religion and philosophy, Alwyn still “resorts to the most conventional position” in his refusal of Emmeline (Gilmartin 88). Furthermore, the reader cannot help but feel that this is a greater tragedy than that Betty suffered at the hands of Phelipson since Alwyn’s love was in fact true, which we see in his heartfelt final words to Emmeline. Following her insistence that her “life is wrapped up” in her desperate request, Alwyn stands firm in his decision, saying, “Though I die, though you die, we must not fly together” (Hardy 197).

Hence, Emmeline’s courageous attempt ends in failure. Not only has her wealthy, titled husband brought her misery and despair, but now she is faced with the even greater tragedy that “neither of her suitors can fulfil her sexual and emotional requirements” (Brady 81). The reader feels sympathy for Emmeline’s tragic situation as we leave her in a state of confusion and despair over the tragic results of what she believed, in naivety, to be wise decisions. “I was doing no harm, injuring no one, helping many people, and expecting happiness; yet trouble came. Can it be that God holds me in derision?” (Hardy 197).
At this point the story’s focus shifts to Alwyn and our sympathy for him grows as we see how tragedy follows him on his journey to America and during his life there. While on board the ship to America, Alwyn performs the duties of a clergyman, which significantly include officiating at a funeral. Though his journey is haunted by thoughts of Emmeline, he creates for himself a set of rules to lessen the regret he feels over her (198). In America he is so “distracted and weakened in his beliefs” by his experience with Emmeline that he gives up his position as a minister and instead begins working in education (199). Furthermore, he is only able to keep going by a “conscientious determination to do his duty” and he spends his solitary winter evenings writing poetry about Emmeline entitled “Lines to an Unfortunate Lady” (199). In short, Alwyn’s life has lost its spark without his beloved Emmeline.

However, the story’s first ironic twist gives us hope that the tale will now take a more positive turn and Emmeline’s attempt to improve her situation will not have been in vain. After nine years in America, Alwyn learns of the Duke of Hamptonshire’s death in England and the survival of his widow. His spirits surge and he is hopeful of a reunion with his long-lost love. To the reader’s satisfaction, Alwyn proves ready to return to Emmeline and re-establish the romance he so tragically lost after her marriage.

Unfortunately it is not long before further ironic twists force us to abandon all hope of a happy ending. Firstly, upon return to England, Alwyn soon learns that the surviving widow of whom he read is not Emmeline. He discovers that Emmeline secretly disobeyed his orders not to follow him onboard the ship to America ten years earlier. Instead, driven by her own hopes of changing his mind, she did indeed board the ship. If this is not enough of a shock for poor Alwyn, he learns shortly thereafter that the funeral he performed during his journey to America was Emmeline’s. Though Emmeline had likely planned to reveal herself to Alwyn “as soon as she could muster courage to do so”, her death had preceded her courage (206). Thus, Emmeline’s ultimate show of courage results in the story’s greatest tragedy, her death.
This tragedy is made all the more poignant by the now ironic title of Alwyn’s poems, “Lines to an Unfortunate Lady” (Ray 149) as well as the irony in Alwyn’s over confidence in being reunited with Emmeline: “If she has continued to love me nine years she will love me ten . . . every day will favour my return” (Hardy 200).

“The Duchess of Hamptonshire” is undoubtedly a story of tragedy through and through. Its tragedy and cruelty are emphasized by the comment made by a club member at the end of the previous story that Emmeline’s fate “ought to be recognized as a chastisement” (188). Rather than receiving sympathy for her suffering, Emmeline is thus condemned for her betrayal of the Duke. Why, however, is this dame’s fate so different from that of the first? As Brady notes, both stories present an “impressionable and impulsive girl poised between an attractive youth and a wealthy titled man” (80). One crucial difference is that Emmeline, perhaps being more mature than Betty initially is, bases her first choice of suitor on character rather than appearance. Thus, Alwyn is indeed a good match for Emmeline making the loss of this relationship especially tragic. Another difference lies in the dames’ parents. Despite Betty’s rocky start due to the premature interference of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dornell love Betty and ultimately desire her happiness. Therefore, though she is married off at a young age, she is never forced into life with Reynard against her will. She is given the time and space to finally make this decision herself. Though Emmeline is older at the time of her father’s initial interference, he is cruel and forceful and given the expectations put on a dutiful daughter at this time, Emmeline has no choice but to obey him. Though she finally summons the courage to break free from her victimization and seek a life of happiness, her marriage to the Duke makes her unavailable to any other man and thus ensures her oppression.

Additionally, whereas Betty had providence on her side, Emmeline certainly does not. She is unlucky in that the suitor she naively agrees to marry turns out to be a monster. She is also unlucky that the lover she hopes will save her instead turns out to be too loyal to his
conventional morals to accept her plea. Hence, Emmeline ultimately suffers at the hands of all three men in her life. “Betrayed by Oldbourne and maltreated by Hamptonshire, she looks for succour and romance to the young curate . . . but . . . Alwyn Hill just does not measure up” (Wing §13). Finally, chance takes control over Emmeline’s final and most courageous attempt to alter her fate, thus ending her life. In the end, the thoroughly tragic destiny of this dame is again a combination of the way in which she responds to her situation and the role of chance in her life. How, then, will our third dame fare?
“Barbara of the House of Grebe”: Comedy and Tragedy Combined

“Barbara of the House of Grebe” was originally the first of six stories that made up Hardy’s *A Group of Noble Dames* in 1890 (Ray 86). Though Hardy based the character of the wealthy young Barbara Grebe on a historical figure from Hutchins’s work, the prominent details of the plot are fictional (87). This time we get the complicated details of the dame’s romances from a surgeon, whose significance is implied by the medical aspects of the story and who admits the perhaps “too professional” nature of his tale even before telling it (Hardy 51).

The story takes place “some twenty years before the end of the last century” placing it in the late 1700’s (56). This story, like the previous one, has three sections. The first section spans a little more than a year, starting when Barbara is seventeen. The middle, and longest, section seems to cover a period of at least three years. Finally, the brief closing section covers a period of nine years ending with Barbara’s death. Barbara and her two suitors, Edmond Willowes and Lord Uplandtowers, are the primary characters in the story; Barbara’s parents, Sir John and Lady Grebe, have smaller roles than did Betty’s parents in the first story, but far more extensive roles than Emmeline’s father in “The Duchess of Hamptonshire”. Though the perspectives of the narrative shift continually throughout the first section of the story, it is mostly Barbara’s point of view that the narrator first focuses on, creating an initial sympathy for her. The perspectives of both Barbara and Edmond during the second section of the story then shift our sympathy to Edmond. Finally, the last section of the story focuses on the perspectives of Barbara and Lord Uplandtowers, this time resulting in our final sympathy for Barbara.

The structure of this final chapter will be that of the first. We will begin with parental interference, move to the dame’s two suitors and conclude by looking at how Barbara’s
choices, as well as the role of chance in her life, create a story that begins in comedy, moves to tragedy and ends in a strange mixture of the two.

In contrast to the previous two stories, both of Barbara’s parents are wealthy, titled landowners. The size of their land is considerable and the details of their residence are evidence of their high social class. They have a “kitchen of vast dimensions” and entertain their guests in the forecourt with “French horns and clarionets” (Hardy 57). Unlike the conflict of interest seen between Betty’s parents, both Sir John and Lady Grebe have a clear desire to see Barbara married to a titled, conventional suitor. Their choice is Lord Uplandtowers, a wealthy nineteen-year-old Earl. However, Barbara’s mother seems even more interested in this match than her father. We see, for example, how Lady Grebe pleads with Lord Uplandtowers to stay at the couple’s ball despite Barbara’s absence (58). Later, we also learn that Sir John’s primary interest, more important than a conventional match, is that Barbara be happy: “Sir John Grebe, if the truth must be told, loved his daughter’s happiness far more, poor man, than he loved his name and lineage” (62). However, despite these slight differences in the parents’ interests, they are united in their desire for Barbara to be appropriately joined to Lord Uplandtowers.

In Sir John and Lady Grebe, however, we see neither the premeditated interference of Betty’s parents nor the cruel forcefulness of Emmeline’s father. In fact, we get no details regarding the couple’s plans to unite their daughter with Lord Uplandtowers. Their interference is thus of a more passive nature. However, though Barbara is not forced into an unwanted premature marriage as are the first two dames, her fear of her parents’ plans causes her to take things into her own hands before it is too late by impulsively eloping with her first lover, the young Edmond Willowes.
Barbara’s two romantic alternatives, then, are the wealthy, titled Lord Uplandtowers and the lower-class Edmond Willowes. Edmond’s unfortunate status in the eyes of Barbara’s parents is the result of him being a “widow-woman’s son” whose grandfather was a glass-painter (59). Physically speaking, Edmond is certainly among the upper ranks. We learn that he is “one of the handsomest men who ever set his lips on a maid’s” (63). He is also very good-natured and obviously very much in love with Barbara. We see this in his tender glances (63), his anxious willingness to live with her in a house “no bigger than a sedan-chair” and “the more lonely the better” (64) and his willingness to make amends for the elopement. This combination of the strapping good looks of Phelipson and the gentle manner of Alwyn makes the reader form a favorable impression of Edmond up to this point. He clearly fills the role of Barbara’s young, romantic lover.

Lord Uplandtowers is wealthy and noble and can provide Barbara with the life to which she is accustomed, thus making him an ideal match in the eyes of her parents. However, his premature inheritance of his title at the age of twelve, along with his “family character”, causes him to have a “matured and cynical doggedness” by the time he is only nineteen (Hardy 55). He also shows an unattractive rationality in relation to Barbara. His interest in her is more “an idea, rather than a passion”, and he pursues her with the determination characteristic of his lineage “sometimes for good, sometimes for evil” (55). When a friend of his reveals his suspicion that Barbara is not interested in the lord, his “equanimity [is] undisturbed” as he proceeds to her parents’ ball to woo her (56). He lacks the romantic, good nature of Edmond in his “phlegmatic dislike of dancing for its own sake” (58) and his feelings for Barbara are hardly noble when he angrily responds to her disappearance: “’Damn her!’ said Lord Uplandtowers . . . ‘Damn her for a fool!’ – which shows the kind of love he bore her” (60). Indeed, the reader questions Lord Uplandtowers’ character from the outset. As Wing points out, he is the “melodramatic equivalent to the Duke of Hamptonshire” though in
this case he is more “arrogant than villainous” (§10). Clearly, we do not get a good first impression of Lord Uplandtowers and as we will see throughout the remainder of this chapter, the quality of his character does not improve.

Like Betty Dornell, and in contrast to Emmeline, Barbara’s immaturity and her passionate love for Edmond cause her to make the impulsive choice to escape with her lover, but unlike Betty’s situation, Barbara and Edmond’s romance seems to have real potential. They succeed in getting married, are “intensely happy” at first and seem to have every intention of remaining true to their vows (Hardy 61). The reader feels a real sense of hopefulness for them. Of course, as the narrator ironically points out, their impulsive young love is on a “descending scale”, changing from a “hot coal” to a “cooling cinder” and they soon realize that they need more than passion to live on (61-2). Therefore, they ask Barbara’s parents for forgiveness and return home with the intention of continuing their marriage there.

Sir John and Lady Grebe’s comical reactions to the couple’s marriage enhance the story’s lighthearted tone up to this point. Upon first receiving confirmation of Barbara and Edmond’s marriage, Barbara’s parents groan about the situation while sitting next to their “four-centered arch bearing the family shields on its haunches” (61). Sir John’s complaint that such an awful thing should happen to them at their age gets a sharp reply from his wife: “’Speak for yourself!’ she snapped through her sobs, ‘I am only one-and-forty!’” (61). Nonetheless, Barbara’s parents make the best of the situation. They are slightly pacified by the news that Edmond is distantly related to a deceased aristocrat, while Lady Grebe further warms to the young man’s striking good looks. Finally, Edmond agrees to Sir John’s humorous offer to send him off on a year of educational travel in Europe to make him worthy of Barbara. The family has made amends and Barbara’s future looks promising. With her family’s wealth and a handsome husband by her side, what could go wrong?
Unfortunately, it is not long before Barbara’s immaturity begins to get the better of her. Despite the loyalty Edmond shows through his numerous love letters, Barbara begins to doubt her feelings for him when he is “no longer in evidence to fortify her in her choice of him” (Hardy 65). She also resents her friends’ comments that she is a “swain’s wife” and evidently begins to feel ashamed of Edmond’s humble background (65). Her misery becomes so intense that she begs Edmond to send a picture of himself to rekindle her passion. He replies that he will do even more and have his sculpture sent. Instead of a sculpture, however, Barbara soon receives the devastating news that will lead to the story’s first ironic twist and the beginning of her tragedy.

Barbara faces a difficult dilemma with the news that her beautiful Edmond has been mutilated while heroically rescuing victims of a fire in Italy. Though her initial instinct to go to Edmond’s side shows promise of a newfound maturity, she is quickly discouraged by Edmond’s tutor. Lady Grebe is no more helpful as she comments that the disappearance of Edmond’s one desirable quality, his good looks, “leave[s] ‘ee no excuse at all for your conduct in the world’s eyes” (68). However, Barbara struggles on and as her feelings for Edmond go back and forth she tries to conjure up the maturity necessary to face her difficult situation. On the one hand, she assures Edmond that she has “submitted to the decrees of Fate and [will] welcome him in any shape” (68); on the other hand she is unsure of how she will react to the man from whom she has been parted far longer than united.

Barbara does not have to wait long to be put to the test. When Edmond returns wearing a mask, Barbara is shocked by hardly being able to recognize her husband. She forces herself to assure him once again that she can handle seeing his face, saying, “What has happened to you is our misfortune; but I am prepared for it” (73). However, Barbara’s attempt at maturity cannot weather the removal of the mask. After forcing herself to consider Edmond’s horrid appearance several times, and in response to his demands that she make her decision then and
there, Barbara cannot bear the sight of Edmond and pleads for time alone to regain her old feelings.

As Gilmartin and Mengham note, we have here a reversal of the traditional male-female roles seen in the first story. Whereas Betty is Phelipson’s object of sexual desire whom he rejects upon seeing her diseased countenance, here it is “the humbly-born young husband, Edmond Willowes, who is the object of the gaze” (62). In her immaturity, Barbara’s primary interest in Edmond has been his good looks, and she is now unable to accept this “human remnant, this écorché” (Hardy 74). Like Phelipson, she therefore rejects her lover based only on his physical appearance. However, in contrast to Phelipson’s actions, Barbara does in fact make a noble effort to face the devastating situation with maturity. As Brady notes, she spends the night thinking in the greenhouse, “attempting in this place where infant plants are nursed to early adulthood to force herself to the maturity her predicament demands” (59). Unfortunately, she is not allowed to reap the benefits of her effort. Upon her return to the house the next morning, Edmond has fled. Just as Alwyn and Phelipson both failed their lovers in times of need, so Edmond fails to give Barbara the necessary time to adjust to such a life-altering situation. Both lovers are thus wounded through the encounter and the story’s comedic tone is now replaced by a tragic one.

Barbara struggles with guilt over her treatment of Edmond, and Gilmartin and Mengham point to Barbara’s subsequent attempts to accept his presumed death and so achieve some maturity, though these attempts are again thwarted (64). The parson refuses Barbara’s request to give something to the church in memory of Edmond and Lady Grebe and Barbara’s friends insist that the situation with Edmond “is for the best”, encouraging Barbara to forget about Edmond and move on (Hardy 77). Thus, when Lord Uplandtowers re-enters Barbara’s life, she is no more mature than she was to begin with and her “sweet-pea” nature is in need of “a twig of stouter fibre than its own to hang upon and bloom” (Gilmartin 78). Additionally,
Barbara has come to believe that Lord Uplandtowers’ social status will make him a more suitable husband than did Edmond’s good looks. Despite her lack of love for him, she therefore agrees to marry Lord Uplandtowers, making him her second choice of suitor.

Our negative first impression of Lord Uplandtowers is revived by his reaction to Barbara’s misfortune. He “chuckled like a caustic fogey of threescore when he heard of Barbara’s terror and flight at her husband’s return” (Hardy 77-78). Just as Barbara remains immature after being thrust into a premature marriage from fear of the alternative, Uplandtowers remains emotionally stunted after being “propelled into manhood before ever going through the natural stages of youth” (Brady 59). His unpleasant nature seen at the beginning of the story is still present years later and continues in his marriage to Barbara. He quickly loses his patience with his wife’s lack of affection and begins to “[conduct] himself towards her with a resentfulness which led to her passing many hours with him in painful silence” (Hardy 79). Consequently, his harshness to her, combined with her own immaturity, keeps her from overcoming her guilt regarding Edmond.

Further dysfunction develops in the marriage when Edmond’s statue, which was promised to Barbara during their marriage, finally arrives and quickly becomes an emotional and physical substitute for her current husband. As Jeanette Roberts Shumaker notes, “her attachment to the statue is a way to compensate for the lovelessness of her marriage to Uplandtowers” (§21). Barbara enshrines the statue in a locked closet of her private room and visits it each night when she believes her husband is asleep. She embraces the statue, murmurs her apologies and vows her present faithfulness. In this way, Barbara also uses the statue to compensate for her unkind treatment of Edmond (Shumaker §18). The middle section of the story is thus characterized by a growing sense of tragedy seen not only in Barbara’s unfortunate marriage, but also in the fact that her only happiness seems to come from a
fantasy world where she escapes her dreary reality. At the same time, however, there is also a sense of comical absurdity in Barbara’s secret worship of the statue.

Unfortunately, the tragedy of the situation soon outweighs the comedy. Upon the discovery of her “affair”, Lord Uplandtowers’ selfish and sadistic tendencies reach new heights. His fury increases with the belief that it is Barbara’s passion for the statue that prevents her from bearing him a child and thus “threatens to cut off his line” (Richardson §17). In contrast to Reynard who paves the road to maturity for Betty through his compassion and patience, Uplandtowers “never thought of the simple stratagem of constant tenderness” (Hardy 84). Instead, he carefully plans his revenge for Barbara’s betrayal. He secretly arranges to have Edmond’s statue mutilated until “what the fire had maimed in the original the chisel maimed in the copy” (85). He then proceeds to torture Barbara night after night by forcing her to stare into the statue’s terrible face while she cries, “have mercy – I cannot bear it – O, in pity, take it away!” (88). These scenes of abuse, as Breuls notes, are full of Gothic elements, such as the wax candles shining eerily on the statue’s face and Uplandtower’s demented laughter in response to Barbara’s fear, which add to the feeling of misery and tragedy that permeates the story’s second half (220).

Unlike the second story, however, this story does not end with the cruel tragedy of Barbara’s torture. Uplandtowers’ method of “calculation without kindness” and “self-mastery without sympathy for others” has an effect that even he did not expect and thus we see the story’s second ironic twist (Brady 59). While Uplandtower’s goal is simply to shift Barbara’s gentle affection for the statue to himself, he goes too far. Not only does Barbara transfer her love and affection to him, but she is so affected by the torture that she seems to lose her senses. After having an epileptic fit while viewing the statue, Barbara is suddenly full of passionate love for Uplandtowers and equally full of hate for Edmond and “his memory” (Hardy 89). Her attachment to her husband increases to the point that, according to the
narrator, “the cure became so permanent as to be itself a new disease” (90). Indeed, Barbara’s obsession with Uplandtowers seems even more severe than her previous obsession with the statue and, ironically, her husband now finds her affections are a burden that cause him “to curse and swear” (90). Strangely enough, Barbara seems to have found some sort of sincere, though dysfunctional, love for her tyrant husband that remains to her dying day. She bears him eleven children in nine years, after which she dies “worn out in mind and body” (90). The fact that only one of them survives further indicates that, in contrast to Betty and Reynard, Barbara and Uplandtowers are, in fact, not a good match. This odd combination of cruelty, fear-induced love and biological dysfunction leaves the reader unsure of what to make of this story and how to classify it.

Barbara’s story is indeed a complex one. She first succeeds where Betty fails. She manages to temporarily escape her fate and successfully elope with her lover enjoying a brief period of bliss. However, unlike Betty and Emmeline, Barbara fails to conjure up the courage and maturity necessary to make a brave and wise decision regarding her injured lover. Partly due to her own weakness and partly due to Edmond’s impatience, Barbara does not mature through her experience with Edmond as Betty did with Phelipson. She focuses on Edmond’s beauty both in his presence and absence, and she tragically fails to see that he is a “man of steadfast nature, bright intelligence, and promising life”, as the narrator later reveals (91). Because of this, the narrator ultimately judges her as “tender, but somewhat shallow” thus presenting a rather ambivalent judgment of Barbara and her story consisting of both pity and condemnation (91). Barbara also fails to break free from her parents’ influence and that of Lord Uplandtowers following Edmond’s presumed death. She remains, as Uplandtowers later calls her, “a baby” unable to stand on her own and take charge of her life (86). In addition, unlike Betty, Barbara does not have providence on her side. Her noble lover is cruel and impatient and, like Emmeline’s Duke, responds to her needs with brutality rather than
compassion, which further prevents her from attaining maturity and happiness throughout the remainder of the story.

Though we can safely say that the general tone of this final story is tragic, the story as a whole can be seen as a mixture of the comedy and tragedy of the first two stories. As Wing notes, there are two distinct sections to this story. The first “raises the excitement of a swiftly unfolding romantic melodrama with glorious exploitation of foreign heroism” while the second analyzes the “domestic torture to which Barbara is subject over a sustained period” (§15). Thus, the story’s initial lighthearted tone is followed by the tragedy of Barbara’s abuse and unhappiness. Additionally, I propose that the story’s conclusion can be seen as a third section which is itself a mixture of these opposing tones. Barbara seems to have found some degree of happiness with Uplandtowers in the end, but it is a false happiness full of obsession and dependency. The conclusion therefore leaves the reader, like the narrator, feeling ambivalent about Barbara’s fate. Should we be angry that she has suffered so severely, or thankful that her life ends with some degree of happiness?
Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to examine the fates of three of Hardy’s noble dames, Betty, Emmeline and Barbara in “The First Countess of Wessex”, “The Duchess of Hamptonshire” and “Barbara of the House of Grebe”. The argument was that despite the dames’ similarities, their circumstances, personal choices and the role of chance in their lives result in their different fates ranging from comedy to tragedy to both.

All three of these dames were shown to have the similar circumstances of being members of the upper class and having significant parental interference in their lives. However, they did not all respond to these circumstances in the same way. Chapter One showed how Betty’s ultimate maturity, as well as her luck in having loving parents and a compassionate noble suitor, led to her blissful fate complete with a happy marriage and a large family. Chapter Two explained Emmeline’s very different situation. Despite her ultimate act of courage, the bad luck of a domineering father and an abusive husband, combined with her inability to stand up to them, led to her tragic downfall. Finally, Chapter Three showed how Barbara’s fortune in having understanding parents and a sincere romantic first husband, combined with her failure to mature and her misfortune in having a cruel second husband led to her fate of both comedy and tragedy.

What, then, is the moral of the stories discussed here? What lesson, if any, are we to learn from the fates of these dames? All three dames are clearly victims of their class, gender and the time period in which they live. They are controlled, manipulated and even abused by their parents and the men in their lives causing the reader to develop a great deal of sympathy for them. We therefore find ourselves shocked by the coldness and harshness of the narrator’s and club members’ judgments of these women. Betty is received with irony, Emmeline is seen as deserving of her punishment and Barbara is viewed with ambivalence. We can safely
say that Hardy intends for the reader to react negatively to these judgments. He clearly presents these dames’ lives in a way that we feel compassion for their hardships. Therefore, the sense of unjustness that accompanies the women’s experiences is a part of the message that Hardy wants to express.

However, if we compare the plots of the stories we find that there is no pattern in how these dames deal with life’s situations and why one succeeds where another fails. For example, as shown, all three of the dames are the victims of parental interference. This ultimately works out for the best in the first story, is disastrous in the second story and does not have a significant effect on the third story. Likewise, all three stories present both rich and poor suitors with no consistent pattern of success with regards to the dames’ choices. We also see varying levels of maturity among the dames, but this does not seem to be a consistent determiner of their outcomes. Betty starts out a child with childlike ways and gradually gains some degree of maturity, Emmeline is fairly mature from the start and Barbara struggles to attain maturity without success. What are we to make of the lack of consistency between these dames’ circumstances and the outcomes that result? Disappointing as it may first seem, it appears that the very unpredictability and lack of consistency that seem to keep us from discovering Hardy’s message, is in fact his message.

Thus, the fates of these dames are, as we have discussed throughout the essay, largely dependent on that which we have alternately referred to as chance and providence. Indeed, as Wing points out, chance is often “the essential fulcrum on which the turning of the tales is totally dependent” (§5). He also notes the significant role that chance plays in Hardy’s novels, often to an even greater extent than in A Group of Noble Dames (§5). Chance seems to be a frequent theme for Hardy and the ironic twists brought about by chance are typical of his work. For instance, in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, a series of ironic twists show how the role of chance leads to the main character’s unfortunate life and her heartbreaking death. Therefore,
by more fully exploring three of Hardy’s short stories, we can clearly see the connection between Hardy’s shorter fiction and his better-known works.

Though the three stories are all set in the limited geographical context of Wessex, England, as is most of Hardy’s fiction, Hardy nonetheless explores a very universal and timeless theme within this setting. By subjecting his characters to the role of chance and/or providence, Hardy presents the reader with one of the most central and often troubling aspects of every person’s life: the lack of control that we ultimately have over our own destinies. Hardy’s stories leave the reader pondering his characters’ fates and struggling to make sense of their often tragic endings. We find ourselves wondering if there is anything they could have done differently, anything that would have resulted in an alternative outcome. As with life, the answer is both yes and no. Just as the fate of every human being is the result of a unique combination of choice and chance, so it is with Hardy’s characters. One different decision or one altered plan has the potential to lead to a different outcome, though ultimately chance or providence has the final say. Through the tales told around the fireside by the members of the South-Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club, Hardy’s *A Group of Noble Dames* thus leaves us wondering about our own destinies and how choice and chance will determine the unfolding of each of our lives.
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