

Sarah L. Beams

Dr. Sophia Andres

ENGL 6323.793

15 December 2019

The Smile of the Medusa: Bathsheba's Undercover Agency in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

In the second volume of Thomas Hardy's personal literary notes, he tracks the development of gender roles from "early barbarism" to the "modern sex relations" of his time, through which "man asserted his supremacy," and "wife and children became his property, for use or for ornament, as he deemed fit" (*Literary Notebooks* 328). The "use" he speaks of here is a menial "life of toil" (329) to which women have been relegated, as "all the industrial arts involving risk, skill, and interest passed into male hands" (328). As Hardy puts it, "women were intellectually the losers" in the movement from barbarism to modernity, and so "the drudgery of ... routine alone was left to [them]" (*Ibid*). Aside from unskilled "use," a woman's other option for being was that of "ornament," which Hardy calls in his journal "a life of decorative idleness, supported and elaborated for the display of male power and wealth" (329). This display was certainly underscored by the fashion of his day; the metropolitan Victorian "female body was dressed to emphasise a woman's separation from the world of work" and to underscore "the physical constraints on her activities," with "corsets that made it hard to breathe and heavy fabrics that impeded movement" (Abrams).

Given Hardy's notes on woman as property, whether mindless laborer or decorative status symbol, it is no surprise that his Bathsheba Everdene character in *Far from the Madding Crowd* flies in the face of these very notions by pronouncing early on that she would "*hate* to be thought men's property" (*Madding Crowd* 34) and by taking on the traditionally male role of

owning and operating a working, rural farm—an occupation requiring intellect, practical clothing, and a distaste for idleness. Indeed, after firing her dishonest bailiff Pennyways, she “voluntarily impose[s] upon herself ... multifarious duties ... by dispensing with the services of a bailiff” (174). Clearly, Bathsheba is not one to *sit there and look pretty*, which often has been the function of woman—an object serving at the pleasure of a male subject’s eye, that is, the male gaze.

As Sophia Andres explains in “George Eliot’s Challenge to Medusa’s Gendered Disparities,” Freud uses the concept of the gaze to characterize “sexuality within gendered categories by defining looking or gazing as a process determined by gender,” and “he designates the male gaze as active and the female as passive” (Andres 27). Laura Mulvey echoes this analysis in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema:” “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female (Mulvey 1448).

This construct follows Hardy’s observations of a societal structure in which women hold no agency. Men are the property owners, the doers, the subjects; women are the owned property, the receivers, the objects. These “traditional dynamics of the gaze sanction[...] unequal power relations” between men and women, “designat[ing] the male as spectator and the female as spectacle, creating binaries of active/passive, subject/object” (Andres 27). This is particularly true of the Victorian Era, as Andres also notes: “Victorian Eros is inseparable from the politics of the gaze, for encounters between male and female characters (in many major Victorian novels) unfold through the dynamics of the gaze, regulated by the laws of the dominant tradition” (Ibid).

As a major Victorian novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is no exception. In “Narrative, Gender, and Power in *Far from the Madding Crowd*,” Linda Shires points out that Hardy has a “persistent fascination with the play of gazes,” and indeed the novel “provides a perfect example

of this fascination [as] many readers have commented on the repetition of gazing.” Notably, “[g]azing is most prominent in this novel when the male looks at the female.” This is evidenced by the numerous instances of intense gazing at Bathsheba by her three suitors, Gabriel, Boldwood, and Troy (Shires 167). Conversely and controversially, the novel also allows for looking on the part of Bathsheba, thus setting up the “the female as gazer” (Ibid). As Daryl Ogden highlights in “Bathsheba's Visual Estate: Female Spectatorship in *Far from the Madding Crowd*,” “Hardy (re)construct[s] Bathsheba Everdene as a subject rather than an object of the gaze,” becoming a “spectator of those same male characters” who gaze upon her (Ogden 2).

In considering this reconstruction, it is necessary to revisit Freud, who invokes the myth of the Medusa to illustrate what happens when a woman returns the gaze of a male beholder. His “interpretation of the Medusa myth ascribes to ... woman the annihilating, emasculating gaze” (Andres 27). “For Freudian psychologists...the fear of Medusa, whose head is seen as a symbol of the female genitalia, represents the male fear of castration” (Harris 283)—the ultimate emasculation of a man. However, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous challenges the longstanding view of Medusa as a mankiller “anchored in the dogma of castration” (Cixous 1460). According to her, “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly...she’s laughing” (Ibid). Cixous quickly dismantles ages of male fear of the female gaze by calling it completely laughable.

Nevertheless, the fear persists. Just as the Gorgon turned to stone men who looked at her straight on, the woman who returns the male gaze has a monstrous, destructive effect. She renders the man immovable and impotent; she wrests his masculinity. She herself becomes the “snake-haired Gorgon Medusa whose gaze emasculates men and turns them to stone” (Harris 45). She “undermine[s] the power hierarchy of the gaze by returning the gaze, that is, by

becoming the spectator” (Andres 27). The only way to overcome the monster is to find a man like Perseus who is “as clever as he is brave.” He “enters [Medusa’s] cave backward, look[s] into his shield (mirror) so he won’t have to look directly into the terrible face ...[and] cuts off Medusa’s head” (Harris 284). The monster must be beheaded to neutralize the threat.

Bathsheba can be viewed as a kind of Medusa/monster figure because she dares to look back at the men who gaze at her—often to their detriment. Indeed, two of her three suitors end up mad or dead. In the end, however, it appears that the monster is tamed when Bathsheba marries Gabriel. Ogden posits that the marriage represents “an ideological recontainment of the female gaze” because “once Gabriel marries Bathsheba, he possesses ... the formerly subversive young woman” (Ogden 13). However, Bathsheba’s final appearance in the novel suggests that she is not as contained as Ogden imagines—that she actually retains her subversive nature. She is still the Medusa, still the woman who holds agency and returns the male gaze; she is simply hiding it behind her smile.

Before reaching that conclusion, the heroine’s symbolic role as Medusa must first be established, and it can be seen from the outset of the novel. At Gabriel and Bathsheba’s first encounter, she holds his gaze as “the object of his contemplation” (*Madding Crowd* 9), but she only “carelessly glance[s] over him (10). At his next sighting of her, she is unaware that she is being watched, and he is unable to secure a good look at her. In lieu of a clear view of her features, Gabriel “draw[s] upon his fancy for their details.” As humans are wont to do, the narrator says, he “colour[s] and mould[s her image] according to the wants within him... [and] he paint[s] her a beauty” (18). It is a perfect example of the “determining male gaze project[ing] its fantasy onto the female figure” (Mulvey 1448). He sees what he wants to see.

At another meeting, Gabriel carefully considers Bathsheba's height, features, and figure, "look[ing] at her proportions with a long consciousness of pleasure" (*Madding Crowd* 22). Bathsheba, on the other hand, does not look directly at him but "cast[s] her eyes round" (23). When their gazes do finally meet, Gabriel has to "withdraw his own eyes from hers as suddenly as if he had been caught in a theft" (*Ibid*). He is arrested. Bathsheba has returned his gaze, and he turns to stone.

Like Gabriel, Boldwood also spends a great deal of time gazing at Bathsheba before she squarely looks back at him. After receiving her Valentine, he finds her at the Casterbridge market and, from afar, analyzes "her correct facial curves and profile ... her figure, her skirt"; he even notices "the shape of her ear" (*Madding Crowd* 128). "His eyes follow... her everywhere" (130). He even invites another male gaze to confirm his opinion of her beauty because "he could not assure himself that his opinion was true... He furtively [says] to a neighbour, 'Is Miss Everdene considered handsome?' 'O yes,'" the neighbor replie[s], "she was a good deal noticed the first time she came'" (to the all-male marketplace) (129). Once he knows that a number of men have gazed at her for their own pleasure, Boldwood is immediately confident in Bathsheba's beauty.

When he calls on her later, Boldwood tells Bathsheba that he has been transformed from a "confirmed bachelor" to a husband hopeful and that his "change, in this matter, came with seeing [her]" (*Madding Crowd* 139). They speak face-to-face when he makes his ardent offer of marriage, and she tells him that she respects him but cannot accept. "This giving back of dignity for dignity" (her equaling him) "open[s] the sluices of feeling" in Boldwood (*Ibid*), and he pleads with her all the more to marry him. She asks him to wait for an answer, "and then she turns away." "Boldwood "drop[s] his gaze (from Bathsheba) to the ground, and [stands] long like a

man who [does] not know where he [is]" (141). Again, a man is frozen in place after looking directly into the Medusa's face.

Shortly thereafter, Bathsheba meets Troy. In this case, their eyes meet during their first encounter, but Bathsheba recoils. She cannot hold his gaze because it is "too strong to be received point-blank with her own" (*Madding Crowd* 177). In fact, Troy is the only suitor who actually comes close to re-doubling the Medusa's destructive effects back on her. At his meeting with Bathsheba at the hollow amid the ferns, Troy takes up his "reflecting blade" to demonstrate his elite swordsmanship, an exercise which requires Bathsheba to "stand as still as a statue" (201). Reminiscent of the mirror Perseus uses "so he won't have to look directly into the (Medusa's) terrible face" (Harris 284), Troy's reflective sword makes him metaphorically capable of turning Bathsheba to stone.

Nevertheless, Bathsheba is charmed by the sergeant and decides to marry him, but only after he tells her he has "seen a woman more beautiful than [she]" (*Madding Crowd* 274), that is, when she feels his gaze towards her slipping. Despite the marriage, she is unable to hold his gaze, as he is truly in love with Fanny, whose death drives an irreparable wedge between the married couple. As Fanny's coffin is resting in a sitting-room at Weatherbury Farm, Bathsheba suspects that Troy's child may be in the coffin as well, so she resolves to pry it open and find out for herself. She peers inside and, to her horror, sees the child, as well as Fanny's face. In that moment of "heated fancy, (Fanny's) innocent white countenance expressed a dim triumphant consciousness of the pain she was retaliating for her pain," and Bathsheba instantly "indulge[s] in contemplations of escape from her position by immediate death" (320-321). Once again, Troy nearly turns the Medusa's destructive gaze back on Bathsheba, this time through Fanny's face as a mirror-reflection of Fanny's pain back onto her.

Troy soon leaves Weatherbury Farm, but after making “a precarious living in various towns” (*Madding Crowd* 366), he decides he should return to his former, more comfortable life on the farm with his wife. However, this time, the Medusa does not recoil. Even in a weakened state, with “her dark eyes fixed vacantly upon him,” Troy is quickly killed. Even though it is at the hands of Boldwood, Troy’s death occurs under Bathsheba’s gaze; he is literally stopped dead in his tracks.

In each of these examples, Bathsheba returns the gaze of her suitors, and in each case, the man is paralyzed, whether metaphorically by emotion or literally by death. Her function as a Medusa figure is evident because her beholders suffer when she becomes, as Ogden states, the “subject rather than an object of the gaze” (Ogden 2).

For Ogden, however, Bathsheba’s agency as a subject is short-lived, cut off by her marriage to Gabriel: “Once Gabriel acquires Bathsheba, he possesses ... the formerly subversive young woman [and] and reassert[s] male scopic and social hegemony” (Ogden 13). It would seem that the Medusa has been vanquished, and the patriarchy has been restored. However, a closer reading of the text reveals that the monster has, in fact, not been beheaded by Bathsheba’s marriage to Gabriel; she has merely been hidden away.

To understand this assertion, it is necessary to return to Bathsheba’s first appearance in the novel—to the first time her gaze is activated. Indeed, it is not directed towards Gabriel or any other man, but towards herself. In the wagon on the road to her aunt’s farm, she takes up “a small swing looking-glass ... in which she proceed[s] to survey herself attentively...part[s] her lips and smile[s]...a real smile” (*Madding Crowd* 8). The narrator speculates about the cause of her looking at herself and smiling, and seems to foreshadow Bathsheba’s upcoming struggles in love and relationships:

There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part—vistas of probable triumphs—the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won (9).

However, Bathsheba's reasons for looking in the mirror and smiling are actually unclear. The narrator even dismisses the speculation as "conjecture," noting that "the whole series of actions was so idly put forth as to make it rash to assert that intention had any part in them" (*Madding Crowd* 9). In truth, she probably is not thinking of men or love at all. Given her aversion to marriage and her inclination towards traditionally male behaviors, it is possible that she is looking at herself and smiling at her own agency—at her unconventional boldness in striking out on an adventure. It is later revealed that Bathsheba is "an excellent scholar [who] was going to be a governess once...only she was too wild" (32). It is possible that she is smiling at herself for seeking a life more suited to her preferences. It is possible that her smiling at her own gaze is not vanity at all, as Gabriel suggests, but satisfaction with herself for doing what she pleases, despite traditional gender roles and expectations.

Bathsheba's smile also appears later in the novel when she again is asserting her agency, this time with Boldwood. At his first proposal of marriage, she tries to "preserve an absolutely neutral countenance" by "closing lips which had previously been a little parted" (*Madding Crowd* 138). It appears that she is trying to keep from smiling in the face of Boldwood's "solemn simplicity" (*Ibid*). After more of his pleas, Bathsheba can no longer maintain her composure. As she tells the suitor that she is not in love with him, she "allow[s] a very small smile to creep ...

over her serious face [showing] the white row of upper teeth” (140). She cannot avoid smiling in a sober moment because she is pleased with herself for claiming her agency and turning down yet another opportunity to become a man’s property.

Later, Bathsheba’s smile is seen yet again when talking to her servant and companion Liddy about Troy’s reputation as a cad. Liddy tells her mistress that, when she is angry, she “seem[s] to swell so tall as a lion”; Liddy “fanc[ies she] would be a match for any man when [she is] in one of [her] takings” of anger (*Madding Crowd* 217). While Bathsheba feels “some anxiety” about seeming like “a bold sort of maid” who is “mannish,” she also reacts to Liddy’s statement with a smile—“slightly laughing” at her friend’s assessment of her as lion-like (*Ibid*). Again, Bathsheba finds pleasure in the thought of her agency in acting like a man’s equal, rather than his subordinate.

The significance of Bathsheba’s smile is signaled by the fact that it figures so prominently in her first appearance in the novel; however, its significance is further underscored by the fact that a smile also marks her last appearance. At the end of the novel, as the Weatherbury Farm workers are celebrating Gabriel and her marriage, the narrator says that Gabriel “laugh[s], and Bathsheba smiles,” noting that “she never laugh[s] readily now” (*Madding Crowd* 434). It appears that the hardships of her experiences with Troy and Boldwood have worn her down, and she is no longer able to truly enjoy life and laugh easily.

However, Bathsheba’s behavior that very morning belies the narrator’s note. When Liddy questions the propriety of her plans to dine with Gabriel alone later in the day, Bathsheba whispers to Liddy about the upcoming wedding and “laugh[s] with a flushed cheek” (*Madding Crowd* 432). Clearly, Bathsheba still laughs readily and with pleasure, but apparently only with other women. Around men, she contains her laughter, opting to smile instead.

This is where the challenge to Ogden's thesis comes into play. He states that Bathsheba's marriage to Gabriel renders her powerless—that it is “an ideological recontainment of [her] female gaze” (Ogden 13). As such, the Medusa is symbolically beheaded, and the threat is neutralized. In reading the last few pages of the novel, Ogden would seem to be right. Bathsheba appears to have been tamed. She looks composed and closed up, “as though a rose should shut and be a bud again (*Madding Crowd* 432). She even acquiesces to “Gabriel's request” to “arrange... her hair...as she had worn it years ago on Norcombe Hill” where they first met (*Ibid*). She seems to be no longer the subversive woman but the submissive wife.

However, in reality, the Medusa is still alive and well within Bathsheba. Even after the wedding, she is seen smiling in the presence of her husband and his friends. Given the previous examples that connect her smile with her agency, it is safe to assume that her final smile of the novel achieves the same effect. It acts as a quiet assertion of her agency, not a wholesale surrender of it, as Ogden suggests. Unlike Cixous' Medusa, Bathsheba may not be openly laughing, but she is still smiling.

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