Myth And Mithraism in Hardy's *The Mayor Of Casterbridge*

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Abstract: What T. S. Eliot called the "mythic method," even in its modern form, was not an invention of Modernism. A significant precursor is Thomas Hardy, whose *Mayor of Casterbridge* has long been appreciated for its mythological structure and wealth of allusion. Here I suggest a new addition to mythological interpretation of the novel: the Greco-Roman deity Mithras and the iconography of the tauroctony. Extending a Frazerian reading of Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae as rival "corn kings," I suggest that each character successively takes on attributes of Mithras. In addition to strengthening the allegorical element of the novel, this reading coordinates the repeating taurine symbolism in the mythical narrative and offers some justification for certain scenes otherwise belied by their melodrama.

Keywords: *myth and literature, Mithras,* The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy, James Frazer*

In his influential discussion of Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot wrote that "no one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary" ("*Ulysses*" 177). Without denying the novelty and innovation of *Ulysses*, I suggest that there were nineteenth-century precedents for the "mythic method," Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* being a significant case in point. Allusions and comparisons to mythic and tragic heroes abound in the novel and multiply further in the critical literature. Within the novel, Michael Henchard is compared to Saul, Job, Cain, and Bluebeard, and critics have linked him with Oedipus, Faust, Lear, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, and Othello. To this long line of figures we need to add one more: Mithras, whose annual role of slaying the Cosmic Bull is symbolically taken up by Henchard and Donald Farfrae and relates to their succession in Hardy's mythic structure as rival "corn kings."

T. S. Eliot, no great fan of Hardy, praised *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as Hardy's "finest novel as a whole" but suggested it also most clearly exemplifies "a note of falsity" in Hardy, which for Eliot was a criticism more religious than literary (*After* 56).[1] And while he compares Hardy's short story "Barbara of the House of Grebe" to *Oedipus The King*, albeit unfavorably, Eliot seems to have missed what, two decades later, critic D. A. Dike found obvious: "Everyone, I suppose, would agree that Hardy's novel, *The Mayor of*

Casterbridge, imitates a tragic action. Its form is unmistakably analogous to that of Greek drama, most notably *Oedipus Rex*" (169).

A further irony in Eliot's characterization of *The Mayor* is that he does not seem to recognize Hardy's employment of the wasteland motif, which forms another parallel with *Oedipus The King.* The play opens with the citizens appealing to their king to do something about the wretched state of affairs, including "a blight on the fresh crops and the rich pastures" (160). The situation in Casterbridge is not so dire, but Hardy carefully sets up his mythic framework through Henchard's profession. Upon arriving in Casterbridge, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane learn that there has been trouble with the crops, <p. 36> resulting in the worst bread, as Solomon Longways tells it, in "these nine-and-sixty year" (35). Seated at the head of table at an official dinner, Henchard is beset by questions from the tradesmen inside and the poorer folk outside: "How about the bad bread, Mr. Mayor?" At the end of the episode, a question posed by "a baker or miller" suggests that the failed crop is to be read symbolically, with Henchard's transgression its cause: "But what are you going to do to repay us for the past?" (36).

Hardy read James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in 1891, and many have seen its influence in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Though it was published four years earlier than Frazer's landmark work, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* bears an even more striking relation to it. Frazer came to believe that all myth was agricultural in origin and focused on kings and gods as fertility figures that had to be periodically "renewed." He writes that "the belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilise the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been shared by the ancestors of all the Aryan races from India to Ireland, and it has left clear traces of itself in our own country down to modern times" (89).

Frazer does not make the connection, but the same principle is to be found in the legend of the Fisher King.[2] Hardy would later draw on Arthurian legend for tragic purposes in his play *The Queen of Cornwall*, but in *Mayor* he has a noteworthy parallel as well. In Sophocles' play, Oedipus has committed two transgressions, but the Oracle is clear that the cause of the blight and plague is singular: the murder of Laius. Henchard also has two transgressions behind him: the sale of his wife and daughter and the seduction of Lucetta. In the Arthurian versions, the king is either old or middle aged, and it is left to a younger knight, his successor, to heal him and restore the land. Farfrae makes a heroic entrance into Casterbridge, playing Perceval to Henchard's Fisher King and from the beginning acts as his savior. Yet the healing is only artificial—he restores

the grown wheat ("nearly"), but mythologically, the sickness is not in the land but in the king—restoring the grain only treats the symptom.

A rather melodramatic scene occurs in chapter twenty-nine, when Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane happen upon an escaped bull—"an old one, too savage to be driven"—which chases them into a barn (203). The door swings shut behind the bull, who repeatedly charges at the women until, in the nick of time, Henchard appears, subdues the bull, and carries out a hysterical Lucetta in his arms. The novel is episodic in structure, and one function of this scene of action and suspense is to vary the tempo. But why a bull, and why Henchard—or, as Lucetta puts it, "how—comes it to be you—you?" (205). The bull is usually taken as a symbol for the brute, uncompassionate forces of nature, of Henchard's uncontrollable passions and tempers, or as a plot device which allows Henchard to regain some of the reader's sympathy. If D. H. Lawrence were writing this scene, or Freud reading it, its import would <p. 37> invariably be sexual.[3] But that is not what is going on here—Henchard may be a passionate character, but, as a self-described "woman hater" who has "found it no hardship to keep at a distance from the sex" (76), whatever libidinous impulses he has seem conflicted and directed, at least partially, toward Farfrae.

The bull, rather, represents himself. Hardy repeatedly emphasizes Henchard's size and strength, and he is brutish toward a number of characters in the novel—Susan, Abel Whittle, Jopp, Elizabeth-Jane and Lucetta. Given his recent aggression toward the latter two, the bull can be seen as a stand-in for himself. The association is further strengthened by Hardy's description of cattle-drives in Casterbridge, which echo the "rough music" of the skimmington: "the Casterbridge tradition was that to drive stock it was indispensable that hideous cries, coupled with Yahoo antics and gestures, should be used, large sticks flourished, stray dogs called in, and in general everything done that was likely to infuriate the viciously-disposed and terrify the mild" (203). Yet, as this association suggests, the bull represents not only Henchard's passions and tempers, but his mythological role in the story.

In the Greco-Roman cult of Mithras, the central icon is the tauroctony, in which Mithras, in the role of corn god, yearly slays the Cosmic Bull. From the Bull's blood grow vines; from his spine, wheat; and from his sperm, animals. Often in depictions, wheat stalks emanate from the Bull instead of blood. We find related imagery in the novel not only in the scene of Henchard and the bull, but at the center of Casterbridge, where there is a large square called "Bull Stake," containing a stone post to which oxen were tied for the purpose of bull-baiting. This practice, wherein dogs (bulldogs were especially bred for

the purpose) would run at the bull and attempt to subdue it by biting down on its snout and would be tossed in the air by the bull's horns, was a form of entertainment of enduring popularity and was also thought to tenderize the meat of the bull. In the myth of Mithras slaying the Bull, he is accompanied by his dog, which is pictured in most depictions of the tauroctony. The custom is attested in medieval England and likely goes back to more distant, ritualistic origins. Anthropologist Mari Womack suggests that "bull-baiting in England was almost certainly influenced by Mithraism," which was introduced into Britain by the Romans (63).

Henchard is twice described observing Lucetta's house from the entrance to Bull Stake, and it is here that the accident between Henchard and Farfrae's hay wagons occurs. The latter is a rather obvious symbol of the conflict between the two corn kings, but Hardy gives a more subtle dimension to a later scene when Henchard greets the royal visitor. As he approaches, waving his miniature flag and extending his hand, Farfrae springs into action: "He seized Henchard by the shoulder, dragged him back, and told him roughly to be off. Henchard's eyes met his, and Farfrae observed the fierce light in them, despite his excitement and irritation. For a moment Henchard stood his ground <p. 38> rigidly; then by an unaccountable impulse gave way and retired" (263). The animalistic tension here is palpable. Describing the experience later, Henchard says that Farfrae "drove me back as if I were a bull breaking fence" (266). Farfrae may technically already be mayor, but this is the true moment of succession. The subsequent fight between the two is a foregone conclusion: Henchard can physically overpower Farfrae, but he does not because he has already lost. Henchard successfully subdues (symbolically kills) the wild bull in the barn scene, following the mythic duties of the fertility king/god, yet it is too late: the crops are damaged for a second year in a row (193). It is Farfrae now who plays Mithras, and Henchard the bull. Hardy's mythic method is one of rich pastiche, yet the mythic logic shows through in its simplicity: the old king is replaced by the new.

Notes

[1] Eliot's *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* is a collection of lectures/sermons published in 1934. It is in the context of discussing Hardy that he most succinctly expresses his guiding theme/dogma: the "Evil" that can operate even "through men of genius of the most excellent character" and the necessity of knowing and accepting "the doctrine of Original Sin" (57).

[2] The connection is made later by Jessie L. Weston in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which Eliot cites as a significant influence on *The Waste Land*.

[3] Lawrence does, in fact, rewrite this scene in the 'Water-Party' section of *Women in Love*.

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