Revisiting the Nineteenth-Century Novel: Review of Barbara Hardy, *Dorothea's Daughter and Other Nineteenth-Century Postscripts*

Amy L. Montz
(University of Southern Indiana, Indiana, USA)

Barbara Hardy, *Dorothea's Daughter and Other Nineteenth-Century Postscripts*
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The strength of Barbara Hardy's *Dorothea's Daughter and Other Nineteenth-Century Postscripts* certainly lies in its knowledge of the nineteenth century and the literatures on which these stories are based. These nine stories, ranging from afterwords on the works of Jane Austen to those of Thomas Hardy, all concern themselves with a scene or idea taking place after the respective novels ends, staying true, as Hardy says, to "the authors' conclusions – the deaths, marriages, births and reconciliations which form the grand finales" (p. 9). Hardy's Preface also notes that her stories are not intended to rewrite or change authorial intentions for these novels – specifically, in order, *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), *Dombey and Son* (1848), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), *Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and *Tess of the D'urbervilles* (1891). In 'Mrs. Knightley's Invitation', for example, Emma Knightley meets with Jane Churchill upon the death of Miss Bates, and the two discuss, in the most polite terms, their strained relationship. 'Dorothea's Daughter', the titular story, presents a conversation between Dorothea Ladislaw and her daughter, Margaret, over both of the women's rather impetuous personalities, and the potential for happiness – or unhappiness – in a marriage.

Instead, Hardy argues for her stories as "drawing the eye to artistic detail, or drawing out loose threads in the original fabric to weave a little new material" (p. 9). This "little new material" gives an afterword to these novels that was heretofore untold, and, like all good neo-Victorian literature, concerns itself most with the writing style, even more so than with the subject. The successes of *Dorothea's Daughter* come when the collection speaks through the voices of these novelists (Austen, Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy), a feat many authors have attempted – for how many Jane Austen 'rewrites' exist today? – but have, ultimately, not succeeded at.

The most successful stories of the collection are those based on Charlotte Brontë's writing. 'Adèle Varens', the third story in the collection, reconsiders the child's story not through her eyes, as some writers may have done, but instead sees it through the eyes of the protagonist, as Bronte's novel does: through the eyes of Jane Rochester née Eyre. Through this recognition of an orphan's longing for family, the short story examines what Adele's role has been in Edward Rochester's life, and how his marriage and child with Jane changes who he is and how he approaches the idea of children. When he tells Jane, "You must understand that she – Adele – is no flower but a thorn in my flesh, a reminder of her mother. My opera-mistress" (p. 51), he confesses that Adele is, most likely, his child, a point later validated when he attributes his open dislike of Adele to the likelihood that she, rather than his son with Jane, is his firstborn (p. 53). Jane begs him to consider that she is "not jealous of her mother" but rather sees Adele as "like me, a motherless child" (p. 54). The familiar language that permeates this story makes it the strongest of the collection, as for readers conversant with *Jane Eyre*, it will seem the most akin to its source. That is to say, this story *reads* like Brontë's novel, and what makes it a successful neo-Victorian story is that it is so faithful in tone and linguistic register to its Victorian source material.

I keep using that phrase again and again, a 'successful' neo-Victorian story and collection, but I do so because Hardy creates for herself a very clear thesis and objective goals in her Preface. She wants not to retell or re-imagine, as perhaps a Steampunk story would, but rather build upon the material already existent. She argues, "I call them postscripts rather than sequels because although they enter into dialogues with the original narratives by dwelling on suggestions not developed in the novels […] they respect the authors' conclusions" (p. 9). Ultimately, she says, "These

postscripts do not quarrel with the novelist, but reflect a little on the endings" (p. 10). They are, in the end, charming stories that help to think past the original novels and move forward with the characters. While not fan-fiction, specifically, as the quality of the writing is far removed from such a designation, these are clearly fictional stories written by a *fan*, as only someone who loves these tales as much as Hardy does could write them with such a delicate and careful hand.

But this is not a self-fulfilling prophecy for all of her stories, particularly those based on George Eliot's novels. Her titular story, for example, "turn[s] on the problems of being a woman" (p. 12) almost too much beyond the end of *Middlemarch*. Twice in the collection, Hardy's rewritten characters reminisce that "women who don't marry can only teach, nurse or write" and "when [they] try to think what [they] could do, teach or write or nurse" ('Lucy Deane', p. 104, p. 128), the decision comes down to "the thought of writing" ('Dorothea's Daughter', p. 128). In this vein, the reflections thus become more feminist than the source material, passively reflecting on the problems rather than presenting the problems head on. When Susan of Austen's *Mansfield Park* remarks to Fanny Price that she is "'not of the opinion that all marriages are good, nor indeed that an unmarried woman cannot lead an active and a fulfilled life'" (p. 27), she seems to echo Austen's own life rather than artistic sentiment. While the reader sees Austen, she should see instead Susan and Fanny. The self-awareness evident in this moment is too transparent, and the thesis does, just a tiny bit, fall apart.

All in all, however, this is a highly successful collection, and a highly enjoyable one. Seeing these familiar characters interact in ways their original authors may have intended allows the reader a glimpse beyond the world of the novel. All the stories, in the end, have the same function: to open a window beyond the end of the novel and catch a glimpse into the future of the tale. 'Lucy and Paulina: The Conversation of Women' best expresses the collection's ideology when Paulina declares upon Lucy finding time for her, "Lucy, you have not changed. You are still Lucy Snowe" (p. 58). Indeed she is still Lucy Snowe, because Hardy has ensured she, and the other rewritten characters, remain thus.