Satirizing the Reader in Thomas Hardy’s *The Hand of Ethelberta*

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“[Ethelberta] is one of those people who are known, as one may say, by subscription: everybody knows a little, till she is astonishingly well known altogether; but nobody knows her entirely.”

—*The Hand of Ethelberta*, p. 79.

*Illustration for The Hand of Ethelberta*  
by George Du Maurier.  
Uploaded to the Victorian Web by Philip V. Allingham.  

*Portrait of Thomas Hardy*  
by William Strang.  
Oil on panel, 1873.  
#2929, National Portrait Gallery.

**Introduction**

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) is well known today for the trenchant social critique of novels such as *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895–96), which scandalized their initial readers by subverting Victorian sexual double standards and class hierarchies. These novels have become so well known for the political nature of their subversiveness, however, that they have overshadowed a contrasting type of social criticism in Hardy’s fiction that has gone largely unstudied: Hardy’s satire of Victorian reading practices and literary institutions.

To bring further attention to this more lighthearted side of Hardy’s social criticism, this research project analyzes the novel in which that lightheartedness is most apparent: Hardy’s underappreciated comedic novel *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1875–76), which I argue is valuable not for the trenchant social critique we have come to associate with Hardy but rather for its coy satire of its own readers.

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**Reading Ethelberta as a Satire of Readers**

The *Hand of Ethelberta* figures its heroine, Ethelberta Petherwin, as both an author and a text herself, figuring the other characters as both a literal and a figurative readership that Hardy satirizes for being unable to read Ethelberta effectively. See, for example, the illustration above, which shows Ethelberta deceiving her audience with one of her stories; see also the quotation above, in which a character describes Ethelberta as an enigmatic text. The most conspicuous example of a character “reading” Ethelberta occurs near the end of the novel, when after finding out that Ethelberta will marry Lord Mountclere against her father’s wishes, one character exclaims, “The times have taken a strange turn when the angry parent of the comedy, who goes post-haste to prevent the undutiful daughter’s rash marriage, is a gentleman from below stairs, and the unworthy lover a peer of the realm!” (Hardy 338).

Moreover, the novel itself combines generic elements of comedy, sensation, and melodrama to deliberately confound its own readers. The novel is ostensibly a comedy (it is subtitled “A Comedy in Chapters” and superficially follows the plot structure of a nineteenth-century comedy of manners). Yet, as Andrew Radford notes, the novel also “takes from the sensation school … an obsession with masters and servants, social imposture, sleight of hand and femininity itself as a densely textured, even encrypted ‘performance’” (Radford 5; emphasis in original). In addition, as Richard Nemersari observes, Ethelberta’s relationship with Lord Mountclere “reproduces a version of the melodramatic plot in which a dissipated nobleman pursues a virtuous and helpless serving-girl” (Nemersari 169).

**Conclusion**

By seeming to be a comedic text but refusing to confine herself to the generic boundaries of comedy, Ethelberta the character becomes analogous to Ethelberta the novel. Ethelberta frustrates her acquaintances by encouraging them to develop expectations of her that she refuses to satisfy. Similarly, *The Hand of Ethelberta* declares itself to be “A Comedy in Chapters” but disrupts its own generic status by introducing elements of sensation and melodrama. By sustaining this analogy between Ethelberta the character and Ethelberta the novel, Hardy fashions a novel that becomes an allegory of its own negative reception. This project aims to recover Ethelberta from that negative reception by drawing attention to the novel’s brilliant satire of the readers who condemn it.

**Works Cited**

