‘MARKET-FACES’ AND MARKET FORCES: [CORN-]FACTORS IN THE MORAL ECONOMY OF CASTERBRIDGE

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Questions of appropriate behaviour, mercantile integrity and market forces reverberate throughout Thomas Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge. This article attempts to analyse the ‘corn factor’: both the wife-selling self-destructive ‘hero’, and the ubiquitous presence of grain. Integral to almost every conflict or crisis in the creation, continuation or destruction of human bonds within the novel is the consumption or exchange of seeds, grain or the products and goods made from them. In tracing a path from furmity to skimmity, the article examines what Hardy reveals concerning the impossibility of restoring what has been spoiled. Concepts from the disciplines of political history and economic sociology, such as E. P. Thompson’s notion of ‘the moral economy’, or Mark Granovetter’s construct of ‘the strength of weak ties’, are applied to this market town to demonstrate that bread is simultaneously a staple and a symbol of what binds individuals and families together in society.

As the dust settles on the staleness of their relationship and while her husband is engrossed in his broadside ballad, Susan Henchard, deep in thought, displays ‘the hard half-apathetic expression of one who deems anything possible at the hands of Time and Chance, except, perhaps, fair-play’.1 Ironically, a central act of her life’s drama will shortly be played out in a tent at the tail-end of Weydon-Priors fair. This Wessex version of the famous Weyhill fair combines the sense of way, or weighed, down with all the temporal connotations of Priors, or the judicial ones of [nisi] Prius, to emphasise the antecedent burden of this prior ‘imprudent’ marriage, or even the provisional nature of that bond.2 As the turnip-hoer thinks, the important business of the day was over and, apart from the side-shows, all that remained was ‘the sale by auction of a few inferior animals’ (p. 8).

It is, of course, the sound of a horse sale that encourages the befuddled Henchard to think in the reductive terms of wife-selling, but other elements of the fair conspire to aid his self-obsessed self-destructive deracination. If Weydon tallied with Weyhill, the date was Michaelmas, specifically Old Michaelmas Day

1 Perhaps it was the ballad of the social-climbing ‘You Herchard of Taunton Dene’. The Mayor of Casterbridge, ed. Pamela Dalziel and Dale Kramer (Oxford, 2004), 6; subsequent citation noted parenthetically.

2 On the decline of Weyhill Fair; see Thomas Hardy’s Facts Notebook, ed. William Greenslade (Aldershot, 2004), 83–4. Susan is subsequently described as ‘this woman of prior claim,’ (p. 82). A ‘nisi prius court’ is a court which will proceed unless one of the parties objects.
(October 10), a ‘moving day’ when farmhands would change employment. The
harvest was more or less complete, and this fair was being held on one of the
quarter days of the English business year; it announced a new cycle of farming,
a time of rendering up accounts and of new beginnings—all of which might
have influenced the fetishising Michael Henchard as he wilfully misapplies the
principle of market exchange. He has been told: ‘Pulling down is more the nater
of Weydon’; its fair will prove an apt setting for the foul play in hand: demolition
of his family and ‘knocking down’ his wife to the highest bidder.

The notion of ‘fair-play’ is at the heart of this novel which dramatically begins
on a fair field and is centrally concerned with the operation of market forces upon
social relationships. Henchard’s words: ‘[I]f I were a free man again I’d be worth
a thousand pound’ confound human and monetary value, and his auctioning
of Susan displays a complete misunderstanding of the nature of freedom as
he abuses individual, marital and market integrity by imposing chattel status
upon his wife.

Adam Smith knew about markets and he knew about fair play; he was a moral
philosopher [The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759)] before he became a political
economist [Wealth of Nations (1776)] and in 1755, before the publication of either
book, he declared his belief in natural justice:

Projectors disturb nature in the course of her operations on human nature, and it requires
no more than to leave her alone and give her fair play in the pursuit of her ends that she
may establish her own designs.3

Henchard, in his egotistical project to beat all England in the hay business,
also disturbs the harmony of nature, symbolised by the loving intertwining of
the horses’ necks outside.4 He fails to see that self-interest must give way to
sympathy, that even self-love involves a sense of moderation and a sense of fair
play. In a passage which almost anticipates the dramatic physicality of Henchard’s
competitive commercial drive, Adam Smith points to the determining role of
the spectators:

In the race for wealth, and honours, and preferment, he may run as fast as he can, in order
to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should justle, or throw down any of them,
the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which
they cannot admit of.5

Hardy is fascinated by the play of market pressures and social constraints.
Adam Smith, with his Scottish Enlightenment belief in commerce as a
civilising process, had explored the ways in which market transactions might

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3 Dugald Stewart (ed.), Essays on Philosophical Subjects. By the late Adam Smith (London;
Edinburgh, 1795), 81.
4 Hardy, a greater believer in universal laisserz-faire than Smith, adds the rider concerning
‘all terrestrial conditions’ being ‘intermittent, and that mankind might some night be
innocently sleeping when these quiet objects were raging loud’ (p. 14).
5 Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (London; Edinburgh, 1759), 183.
unintentionally bring about social harmony. The weekly market, like the annual fair, encouraged solid bourgeois values such as reliability, thrift, honesty and even civic virtue. Those intending their own gain might be led by Smith's ‘invisible hand’ to promote not only self-interest but the good of society. The future corn factor’s behaviour at Weydon-Priors fair might well support a less auspicious picture of the market, whereby its tendencies and forces might be seen as dehumanising, productive of inequalities of power, of commodification and the fetishising of marketable goods.

As ‘fair’ is treated in this opening chapter as both substantive and epithet, so the word ‘good’ is made to slide between its evaluative and market signification. This both reflects the reifying treatment of Susan as a good, an object of market exchange and anticipates the crucial role that evaluation of marketed goods, such as the quality of wheat, will subsequently play in the deconstruction, if not the destruction, of Henchard’s commercial career. The initial and fateful choice of refreshment for the Henchard family is between more or less liquid goods, labelled as ‘good’: ‘Good Home-brewed Beer, Ale, and Cyder’ or ‘Good Furmity Sold Hear’. The red flags, the whiteness of the canvas or the quality of the spelling might all be significant signifiers to be ‘weighed’ up by the consumers at Weydon, but the fair-field’s offer of good quality grain-based goods contrasts with the later unavailability of good bread at Casterbridge.

By the operation of the fourth basin, the ‘high turn’ of the conversation involves ‘The ruin of good men by bad wives’ (p. 9), where self-praise is linked with a commercially counter-productive devaluation of Susan. By contrast the ‘good circles’ in which the former ‘groom or coachman’ had his ‘breedings’ help him testify to her ‘true cultivation’: “I can declare she’s got it—in the bone, mind ye, I say—as much as any female in the fair—though it may want a little bringing out” (p. 10). Adjudged comparatively by the standard of the fair’s ‘marriage-market’, Susan stands up well, as indeed she will shortly be instructed: “Now then, stand up, Susan, and show yourself”; this cruel parody of ‘coming out’ advertises her inherent potential for the prospective purchaser’s ‘bringing out’. Despite the intervention of the marketable good herself: “Michael, you have talked this nonsense in public places before. A joke is a joke, but you may make it once too often, mind!” which combines the revelation that Henchard’s marketing mood is not wholly an intoxicated aberrance with a warning concerning what she sees as a sick jest; and despite the distracting intervention of nature in the shape of the swallow, Henchard harps back to his ‘original theme’: “All I want is a buyer”. Although he seems incapable of ‘talking up’ his good: “The woman is no good to me. Who’ll have her?”, he is determined upon the market transaction, returning to it like a dog to its vomit: “Will any Jack Rag or Tom Straw among ye buy my goods?”

He recognises the need for an auctioneer, even ‘a short man, with a nose resembling a copper knob, a damp voice and eyes like button-holes’ can do a better job, it would seem. Henchard’s line is hay and, of course, it is significant that seeds—especially swelling wheat grains—should play such a seminal part in both his inflated rise to ‘gibbous’ dimensions and his prematurely germinated fall. Mrs Goodenough’s fair-trade is in ‘antiquated slop’ and her name says it all. Her good is good enough without the addition of rum, an adulteration accomplished not by the Smithian invisible hand but by the Goodenoughian under-hand. Her market angle and side-line is all about adding value in a dubious strengthening of a ‘weak’ but inherently nourishing good.

We have forgotten about furmity, a kykeōn-like mixture, whose fumes inspired well-being, and whose vessel inspired the proverbial simile ‘to smile/simper like a furmity-kettle’. Hardy mentions some of the ingredients: ‘corn in the grain, milk, raisins, currants and what not’, but it was perhaps the infinitely variable ‘what not’—including eggs and saffron, or spirituous liquors—that allowed the furmity-woman to cater for all markets. Contemporary receipts record that ‘creaved’ or softened corn was used; Hardy similarly emphasises that this is a whole food: ‘the grains of wheat, swollen as large as lemon-pips’ (p. 8).

Most importantly, this nutritious pre-Bircher-Benner mixture of seed and milk, which is instrumental in family separation, constitutes a symbolic mingling of male and female as in marriage and procreation. Joe Fisher compares the furmity-woman’s pot ‘in which seeds are stirred (and scraped, or potentially aborted) as if they were in a womb’ with a witch’s cauldron, but ‘haggish’ Mrs Goodenough is hardly bad enough for that; in the Wessex novel as in ‘the Scottish play’ the eponymous heroes bear responsibility.

7 Consider the description of Casterbridge market-men: ‘[W]hat these gibbous human shapes specially represented was ready money—money insistently ready—not ready next year like a nobleman’s—often not merely ready at the bank like a professional man’s, but ready in their large plump hands’ (p. 143).

8 Rather a drink than a food, kykeōn, made of water, barley and herbs, was imbibed at the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries; it was also drunk by Greek peasants. According to Margaret Anne Doody, ‘It is evidently in the nature of this holy dish to be impure, or adulterated: it is not one thing, but elements in mixture’, The True Story of the Novel (London, 1998), 437. Francis Grose, A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue (London, 1785), ‘Furmity, Froment’, q.v.

9 ‘I knew the clergy’s taste, the dandy gent’s taste; I knew the town’s taste, the country’s taste. I even knewed the taste of the coarse shameless females. But Lord’s my life—the world’s no memory; straightforward dealings don’t bring profit—’tis the sly and the under-hand that get on in these times!’ (p. 23).

10 ‘1876 Whitby Gloss., Creave, or Cree, to pre-boil rice or wheat so as to soften it for cookery purposes. ‘Creaving days’, those in the country when creaved wheat is prepared to sell in the town for Christmas frumity’, OED. There is a mordant irony in the fact that furmity was seen as a family Christmas treat. It was also associated with Mothering Sunday; see Gayla Steel, Sexual Tyranny in Wessex: Hardy’s Witches and Demons of Folklore (New York, 1993), 70–1.

11 Joe Fisher, The Hidden Hardy (Basingstoke, 1992), 122.
Fisher makes a subtler point about paternity: Henchard’s ‘business is to control, buy and sell other people’s seed, but he has given up control of his own’.\textsuperscript{12} If what Elaine Showalter has termed the ‘unmanning’ of Henchard involves ‘sever[ing] his bonds with this female community of love and loyalty’, it is less obvious to see that he has chosen ‘to define his human relationships by the male code of paternity, money and legal contract’; arguably his paternity lies, like Onan’s seed, amongst the ‘shed grains of wheat’ on the grassy floor of the tent.\textsuperscript{13}

He should have stuck to his wimble; seeds and roots lead to his downfall. In the tent his bid for divorce from human bondage is predicated on his boast of being “a good experienced hand in my line. I’d challenge England to beat me in the fodder business” (p. 10). It is as corn-factor that Henchard comes a cropper, and the derivation of creaved [‘a. F. crever to burst, split’, \textit{OED}] links the furmity-tent with the King’s Arms banquet. The swollen hulled grains of the furmity (‘as proper a food as could be obtained within the four seas’) prefigure the sprouted ‘grown’ wheat which has made such ‘unprincipled bread’ in Casterbridge. Henchard, perhaps, should not have diversified, but stayed in the fodder business.

We are reminded here of the ‘skilled countryman’ Henchard’s ‘obvious’ trade, that of the hay-trusser.\textsuperscript{14} His rush basket contains his tools: his hay-knife, and his wimble for twisting hay or straw to make hay-bonds, which he would use for binding up to 100 trusses, or bundles, or bottles [the French for hay-trusser is ‘botteleur’] of hay in a working day. His binding is not that of the harvester Tess ‘holding the corn in an embrace like that of a lover’, but the irony remains that Henchard, whose agricultural occupation involved binding and the manufacture of bonds, should—like some latter-day Lear or Oswald—destroy those bonds ‘Which are t’intrince, t’unloose’.\textsuperscript{15}

Significantly, the single voice of protest against this furmity-tent unloosening of bonds is that of the buxom staylace dealer, who displays in turn compassion (“Don’t, my chiel”), an outraged sense of morality (“Behave yerself moral, good man, for Heaven’s love!”), and a proto-feminist sense of solidarity

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid}.


\textsuperscript{14} The MS shows Hardy had rejected the trades of woodman, sawyer and stone-mason for Henchard.

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Her binding proceeds with clock-like monotony. From the sheaf last finished she draws a handful of ears, patting their tips with her left palm to bring them even. Then stooping low she moves forward, gathering the corn with both hands against her knees, and pushing her left gloved hand under the bundle to meet the right on the other side, holding the corn in an embrace like that of a lover. She brings the ends of the bond together, and kneels on the sheaf while she ties it, beating back her skirts now and then when lifted by the breeze’, \textit{Tess of the D’Urbervilles}, ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford, 1988), 94. \textit{King Lear}, II.i.72. Of course, Henchard’s necessarily sharp hay-knife can symbolise his severance of those bonds of blood.
(“I glory in the woman’s sperrit”). The lesson of that sullied canvas fair-tent is borne in upon those who had ‘countenanced an indefensible proceeding’: that the market may colonise human relationships. Bargains should be solemn and binding; subsequently Henchard will use Susan’s sincere belief in the ‘binding force of the bargain’ as evidence of her weak simple-mindedness.17

Years later the furmity-woman will be one of the key players in the Mixen Lane decision to organise a skimmington, which the ready money of Newson, fascinated—like Hardy—by folk culture, will facilitate. In response to Newson’s query concerning this regulatory community ritual, the landlady of Peter’s Finger explains: “tis a old foolish thing they do in these parts when a man’s wife is—well, a bad bargain in any way” (p. 241). Her euphemism, grounded in the language of the market, subtly connects these two elements of ‘old Wessex’: furmity and skimmity, providing further symbolic links between adulteration and adultery. The adulteration of the ‘mixture’ which is furmity leads to a wife-sale which inevitably leads to adultery on the part of all three parties. In Casterbridge, ‘for centuries an assize town’, there will be different species of social assize or assessment. The moral consensus of the community will offended by the corn factor’s flour, and the resultant bread, so offensive to the stomach. They will digest that with resentment, but their superiors’ moral lapses, viewed as hypocritical, will not be stomached, and the levelling ‘rough music’ and rough justice of the skimmington will be issued from the mixed motives of Mixen Lane.

The sad transaction of the furmity-tent reveals and prefigures questions of appropriate behaviour and market forces which reverberate in this novel: the morality and immorality of market exchange; the dangers of offending against what E. P. Thompson termed ‘the moral economy’; ‘the strength of weak ties’, to use Mark Granovetter’s formulation; and the corresponding weakness of strong ones.

Concepts from the disciplines of political history, economic sociology and cultural anthropology have, as I shall hope to demonstrate, a particular relevance for The Mayor of Casterbridge. By picking up Newson’s five guineas Henchard,

16 The disturbance of this (far from strait-laced) seller of laces or cords (for drawing together a woman’s stays or bodice) at witnessing ‘the holy cords’ of matrimony being torn asunder contrasts with the silence of the only other woman (apart from Susan) mentioned as present, the furmity-seller, whose rum-laced product helps facilitate this domestic tragedy.

17 ‘The wife sale was invented in a plebeian culture which was sometimes credulous or superstitious, but which had a high regard for rituals and forms’, E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common (London, 1991), p. 444. Recently, a law student discovered the following account: at the Pied Calf alehouse in Stamford, Thomas Hand, a taylor, sold his wife Elizabeth to Thomas Hardy, a cordwainer, for five shillings, with the agreement of all parties, binding promises, and a written memorandum, The Times, 29 June 1786, 3. Hardy, whose maternal grandmother was Betty (or Elizabeth) Hand, would not have been amused; see http://www.hardysociety.org/newsandprojects.htm
the seller of Susan, was purchasing his freedom to be ‘worth a thousand pound’. The next time ‘Mrs Henchard-Newson’ sees him, this putter-away of wife and daughter appears firmly ‘embedded’ in the socio-cultural, economic and political networks of the county town and the market of Casterbridge.

The simple yet substantive meaning of economics associated with Karl Polanyi’s cultural approach, involves a study of how men and women make a living from their natural and social environment. Hardy, like Polanyi, is fascinated by ‘Great Transformations’; they share an interest in the ‘ache of modernism’, in the growth of modernity and of modern market economies. In his descriptions of Casterbridge organically enmeshed in its productive environment, ‘a place deposited in the block upon a corn-field’ (p. 34), of its market, physically and metaphorically at its heart, ‘the node of all orbits’ (p.155), and of its farmers’ ‘market-faces’ (p. 142), Hardy everywhere demonstrates ‘the extent to which economic action is embedded in structures of social relationships’. Polanyi describes the substantive economy as an ‘instituted process of interaction between man and his environment, which results in a continuous supply of want-satisfying material means.’

The most important ‘want-satisfying material’ within the market nexus of Casterbridge is bread, and Henchard, the chief corn-factor, has failed to ensure the continuous supply of good bread, the staple of the poor who generally consumed about 5 pounds per head per week. The repudiator of the marriage contract has now failed to honour an economic and social one. Henchard has made good bread as rare as ‘manna-food’ in the market town where he is mayor.

In a groundbreaking essay on the behaviour of crowds, E. P. Thompson demonstrated that their collective action displayed anger at the lack of principle with which ‘economic actors’ pursued their trade. According to Thompson’s insight, the ‘moral economy of the poor’ acknowledged traditional norms of reciprocal obligations: ‘[G]rievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc.’ The protests witnessed by Susan and her daughter supply a model instance of such moral outrage. The first Casterbridge inhabitants they meet

21 Good bread had a moral and religious dimension that is hard for us—in these tasteless post-Chorleywood Baking Process days—fully to comprehend.
effectively emblematised the no-nonsense aspects of Thompson’s ‘moral economy’ in operation:

In an open space before the church walked a woman with her gown-sleeves rolled up so high that the edge of her under-linen was visible, and her skirt tucked up through her pocket-hole. She carried a loaf under her arm, from which she was pulling pieces of bread, and handing them to some other women who walked with her; which pieces they nibbled critically (p. 29).

This open and semi-sanctified space might be seen to symbolise the public sphere of Casterbridge, the rolled and tucked up appearance of the key moral economist to presage effective action, and the collectiveness of the women’s empirical investigations to stress social cohesion. There is a clear them and us contrast of social haves and have-nots: “They can blare their trumpets and thump their drums, and have their roaring dinners” [...] “we must needs be put-to for want of a wholesome crust”.23

In many respects the whole object of an agrarian society such as Casterbridge was the production of bread, and social interaction was involved in all stages of the processes of its production. The complaints of the women about the quality of the bread are just, and they display a keen ‘sense of what individuals owed to the collectivities in which they were embedded’.24

‘Oh, ’tis the corn-factor—he’s the man that our millers and bakers all deal wi’, and he has sold ’em grown wheat, which they didn’t know was grown, so they say, till the dough ran all over the ovens like quicksilver; so that the loaves be as flat as toads, and like suet pudden inside. I’ve been a wife, and I’ve been a mother, and I never see such unprincipled bread in Casterbridge as this before’ (p. 30).

The anger reinforced by vibrancy of language is the product of Nance Mockridge’s sharp-eyed sociological analysis of market processes.25 The ‘moral economy of the poor’ clearly distinguishes between legitimate and non-legitimate; as the staylace vendor had denounced the tent-auction, these women stand up for market integrity; bread—like behaviour—can be principled

23 The brass-band accompaniment to the banquet implicitly foreshadows the later rough music of the skimmington. The rejoinder to Nance’s remark: “There’s less good bread than good beer in Casterbridge now” from a man with his hands in his pockets: “And less good beer than swipes [small beer]” might simply have been an adventitious grumble, for the Three Mariners ale conforms to ‘twelve-bushel strength’. However Arabella reminds us that beer was another staple that required market standards: “Adulterated—I can’t touch it!” She mentioned three or four ingredients that she detected in the liquor beyond malt and hops, much to Jude’s surprise, Jude the Obscure, ed. Patricia Ingham (Oxford, 2002), 41.


25 Modern science identifies the excessive activity of alpha-amylase enzymes induced by premature germination as responsible for the liquefaction of dough during baking, but it is clear from this vivid description that this woman and her friends know all about the effects of ‘sprouting’ on breadmaking quality.
or ‘unprincipled’. The issue here is the grown wheat. The purveyor of grown wheat has grown so powerful as to be elected mayor; now conceivably ‘worth a thousand’, his sense of social, political or economic responsibility has not kept pace with his monetary aggrandisement. The bloated effect of eating the bad bread “made all the poor folks plim like blowed blathers”—an ironic parody of the full bellies of the banqueting burghers, such as ‘that prominent burgess’, the ubiquitous Mr Benjamin Grower.

Even inside the King’s Arms, however, the voice of protest is soon to be heard. Significantly, it is occasioned by the mayor’s loud self-praise: ‘Henchard’s voice arose above the rest; he was telling a story of his hay-dealing experiences, in which he had outwitted a sharper who had been bent upon outwitting him’. Vaunted commercial acumen in one area of his business activities only reminds his audience of inefficiency in another. The criticism of his responsibility for the bad bread comes from the ‘lower end’ of the table, representing a middling public sphere demonstrating both ‘a certain independence of opinion’ and a corresponding public spiritedness undulled by their privilege as banqueters. It would seem that Henchard had been neglecting interpersonal relationships with the ‘minor tradesmen’ at the foot of the table whose desire to know about the bad bread, emboldens the ‘loungers’ outside the window: “[T]ell the story o’ that, sir!”

This interruption compels Henchard to respond:

“Well, I admit that the wheat turned out badly,” he said. ‘But I was taken in in buying it as much as the bakers who bought it o’ me.’ (p. 35)

Henchard’s stress upon the fact that he also was ‘taken in’ ignores both his supposed professional competence and his eminently superior position in economic, social and political terms. The respected mechanism of the Assize of Bread, which had until very recently controlled quality, weight and price of this crucial staple, was traditionally set by mayors or Justices of the Peace—Henchard was mayor, JP and corn-factor and is thus more than twice lacking in the eyes of the Casterbridge population. If a farmer has been duplicitous in not observing that ‘strict correspondence between bulk and sample, which is the soul of commerce in grain’ (p. 202), then it was Henchard’s responsibility to name and shame, if not prosecute, that greedy individual, not merely to wash his hands of the affair and of his own (unprofessional and uncivic) involvement in passing on the malfeasance to those least able to bear the results of such fraudulent profiteering.

The degree of Henchard’s ‘embeddedness’, apparently reflected in his mayoral office, fails to pass this elementary test of socio-economic or political trust.

26 Hardy had earlier played with the sexual significance of seeds and sprouting; Bathsheba had—in Poorgrass’s phrase—‘sowed the seeds of love’ and as these grew Boldwood’s wheat and barley sprouted—even the pigs turned from it in disgust: ‘Much of his wheat and all his barley of that season had been spoilt by the rain. It sprouted, grew into intricate mats, and was ultimately thrown to the pigs in armfuls’, Far from the Madding Crowd, ed. Suzanne B. Falck-Yi (Oxford, 2002), 322. Farfrae, like Gabriel Oak, is depicted as a saviour of grain.
As ‘the inharmonious man’ says from ‘outside the window’, displaying substantial social harmony according to the ‘moral economy’: “And it was the poor folk who had to eat it whether or no”. The truly ‘inharmonious’ figure is that of the mayor, who reacts—either drunk in a tent or sober at a banquet—like the Hobbesian individualist he is:

Henchard’s face darkened. There was temper under the thin bland surface—the temper which, artificially intensified, had banished a wife nearly a score of years before (p. 35).

His attempts at self-justification are weak in both commercial and human terms. The childish evasion is as unworthy as it is typical. As he had attempted to blame Susan for his behaviour in the furmity-tent, he now tries to shirk his own responsibility. The ‘allowances’ must be made by the poorest customers who are presumably made to feel a lot easier by being able to blame the weather:

‘You must make allowances for the accidents of a large business,’ he said. ‘You must bear in mind that the weather just at the harvest of that corn was worse than we have known it for years.’

The fact that he has resolved to advertise ‘for a thorough good man’ to manage his corn department demonstrates he is neither thorough nor good; the erstwhile hay trusser is mentally and commercially overstretched. He is, in effect and self-confessedly, a straw man. His exfenestrated interlocutor, in contrast, knows his flour, and his two essentially practical questions focus the attention of the Casterbridge spectators [one of whom is even more fully aware than us the readers of Henchard’s need to atone ‘for the past’] upon fundamental questions of compensation and restitution:

“But what are you going to do to repay us for the past?” inquired the man who had before spoken, and who seemed to be a baker or miller. ‘Will you replace the grown flour we’ve still got by sound grain?’

Henchard’s stern and stiff response: “If anybody will tell me how to turn grown wheat into wholesome wheat, I’ll take it back with pleasure. But it can’t be done”, demonstrates a stubborn refusal to make amends for his own incompetence. The mayor, whose store-yard was packed with ‘bursting wheat-sacks’ (p. 59), reveals an appalling lack of generosity to match his absolute lack of responsibility. The man of property knows as little propriety as the drunken hay-trusser. If, as Percy Shelley maintained, ‘The great instrument of moral good is the imagination’, then this tool, it would seem, is no longer in Henchard’s bag: ‘Let them eat Roast Beef!’ A man who has known hard times might be expected

27 This seems to be the word on the Casterbridge street: “Never a big dealing in wheat, barley, oats, hay, roots, and such-like in this county but Henchard’s got a hand in it. Ay, and he’ll go into other things, too; and that’s where he makes his mistake” (p. 34). Subsequently we learn from an anonymous gentleman that the sprouted corn affair is not an isolated incompetence: “Then the wheat—that sometimes had used to taste so strongly of mice when made into bread that people could fairly tell the breed—Farfrae had a plan for purifying, so that nobody would dream the smallest four-legged beast had walked over it once” (p. 100).
to empathise ‘intensely and comprehensively’, but the corn-factor’s growth has been economic not moral. Indeed his failure to connect economics with morality reveals that his conscience—despite the empty wine-glasses and his ‘gospel-oath’—has barely germinated. Relentless energy can achieve much, but his refusal to care for his reputation or position in society underlines his isolation.

Enter the carpet-bagging Scot, the man who embodies ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’. This construct, as developed by the American sociologist Mark Granovetter, is particularly useful in considering Donald Farfrae, a man on his way to ‘the great wheat-growing districts of the [American] West’. In exploring ‘the degree to which economic behaviour is affected by or submerged in social relations’, Granovetter has considered the role of ‘under-’ or ‘over-socialised’ conceptions of human behaviour, and developed his hypotheses concerning weak and strong ties. A network of weak social ties or acquaintances, he has argued, produces effective embeddedness and a robust economic and social structure. Such relationships would encourage trust and responsible trading, would make for principled bread, and safeguard the ‘moral economy’.

We have been considering Henchard’s apparent unconcern for the disastrous results of his corn-factoring; his arbitrary and arrogant behaviour everywhere reveals the mayor as inadequately ‘embedded’ within the society of Casterbridge. When he temporarily leaves the banquet over which he had been presiding he is not missed. Ironically the alcohol, which played such a key part in his breaking the strongest of ties at Weydon, is an element in cementing weak ties: ‘The corporation, private residents, and major and minor tradesmen had, in fact, gone in for comforting beverages to such an extent, that they had quite forgotten, not only the Mayor, but all those vast political, religious, and social differences which they felt necessary to maintain in the daytime, and which separated them like iron grills’ (p. 39). Henchard, occupying the pyramidal position of mayor, seems to lack the ability to make either weak or strong ties. His forceful and incompetent market practices have ridden roughshod not merely over the sensibilities but over the domestic economy of his neighbours. In many respects he is the epitome of ‘under-socialised’, even anti-social man; in the words of the narrator: ‘a vehement, gloomy being, who had quitted the ways of vulgar men without light to guide him on a better way’ (p. 107). The advent of Farfrae allows us to compare and contrast the social and market behaviour of two incomers: the ‘under-socialised’ Henchard as opposed to the ‘over-socialised’ Farfrae.

Whereas Henchard, like Hobbesian man, often pursues self-interest by means of force and fraud—one can consider his treatment of Susan, Lucetta, Jopp, Whittle and so on—Farfrae exemplifies the fact that, in Granovetter’s words, ‘the pursuit of economic self-interest was typically not an uncontrollable “passion” but a civilised, gentle activity’.28 From the outset, Farfrae shows himself sensitive to the community sociology, and skilful in the creation of interpersonal relationships. Interestingly for our purposes, the sociologist Rose Coser describes

28 Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure’, 488.
the plurality of roles created by the weak ties one forms as ‘a seed-bed of individual autonomy’. Even while the Three Mariners regulars wonder at the weakness of the tie Farfrae apparently has with the land he can sing about so soulfully, he is creating a strong network of weak ties with these Casterbridge folk. When Christopher Coney makes self-deprecating remarks about the locals’ lack of honesty or appreciation of ‘“flowers and fair faces”’, Farfrae shows reluctance to believe this, ‘gazing round into their faces with earnest concern’ (p. 50). Henchard, we subsequently learn, gazed ‘into the pupils of their eyes with the blazing regard which […] made them blink’ (p. 202). Unlike Henchard, who seems never to have valued a reputation for fairness as a business asset, Farfrae is anxious for their good opinions. His success may be judged by the extent to which ‘the philosophic party’ of the Three Mariners take a kindly interest in his career, and Mrs. Stannidge, the brewer’s wife, subsequently—and most aptly—comments on Farfae’s embeddedness by describing him as ‘a pillow of the town’ (p. 286).

Furthermore, weak ties connect us with a significantly wider world, enabling greater opportunities for mobility and for people to access ‘information and resources beyond that available in their own social circle’. Farfrae’s name and intended destination remind us of this and, of course, his relationship with new technology and science is the reason for his bringing himself to Henchard’s attention in the first place. He intends only to provide advice upon the partial renovation of grain, his motivation is completely selfless, and he wishes only to make a weak tie with Henchard, and be on his transatlantic way via Bristol.

Henchard, however, has different ideas; he passionately desires to create a strong tie, and the power of his will is temporarily insuperable. Ironically this wife-seller, who throws in his daughter to sweeten the bargain, is quintessentially a man of strong ties. As we have seen, he is almost incapable of socialising with acquaintances on anything other than an egotistical, loud or bullying basis.

Having inappropriately applied market values to the personal, there is a substantial blurring between his economic behaviour and social behaviour, both marked


30 The contrast between Farfrae’s socialising and Henchard’s comminatory singing is revealingly extreme; more typical is that between Henchard’s masculinist, individualistic greasy-pole climbing and Farfrae’s socialised and feminised, pole-less dance pavilion: ‘Farfrae had erected—the pavilion, as he called it—[…] a gigantic tent had been ingeniously constructed without poles or ropes’ (p. 99).


33 Marx, of course, argued in the first chapter of The Communist Manifesto that all family bonds and social ties would be subordinated under modern capitalism to the ‘cash-nexus’ as a prelude to the development of class consciousness.
by a crude domineering. Henchard, however, is not completely without self-knowledge and seems aware of the extremism of his ‘tigerish affection’: ‘I am the most distant fellow in the world when I don’t care for a man,” he said. “But when a man takes my fancy he takes it strong’ (p. 61).  

The weakness of strong ties is nowhere better illustrated than much later in the novel where Henchard, no longer capable of ‘unflinching’ economic rivalry, attempts physically to ‘justle, or throw down’ Farfrae from the cat-head door of the granary. The physically superior and skilled trusser Henchard has tied one arm to his side but, although he overcomes the Scot, he himself is overwhelmed:

So thoroughly subdued was he that he remained on the sacks in a crouching attitude, unusual for a man, and for such a man. Its womanliness sat tragically on the figure of so stern a piece of virility (p. 254).

Grown wheat brings these economic actors together; Henchard has ‘some hundreds of quarters of it on hand’ (p. 45), so Farfrae’s renovation process is a matter of some economic and financial consequence. The mayor straightforwardly admits his ignorance to the young Scot: ‘My business, you know, is in corn and in hay, but I was brought up as a hay-trusser simply, and hay is what I understand best, though I now do more in corn than in the other’. Farfrae’s diversity and adaptability is skills-based, skills no doubt acquired from a variety of ‘weak ties’ and, although ‘curing bad corn is not the line’ he plans to take up on the prairies, there is little he doesn’t know about wheat. This Scot, whose meanness at a critical point in the narrative was later notched up by a tinkering Hardy, generously initiates Henchard (who wishes to pay for the knowledge) into the mystery of renovation; he is kinder to a stranger than Henchard has been to his neighbours.

The real mysteries of this novel are not to be found in Mrs Goodenough’s furmity-kettle, or in Wide-oh’s stewpot, but in Farfrae’s carpet-bag where an inscrutable procedure is performed upon some sample grains: ‘The click of a lock followed, and there was a sifting and rustling; then a discussion about so many ounces to the bushel, and drying, and refrigerating, and so on. [...] some operation seemed to be intently watched by them both’ (p. 45).

What exactly Farfrae has done to substantially improve this sprouted wheat must remain shrouded in obscurity. A translation of an eighteenth-century French ‘remedy’ for sprouted corn published in the Gentleman’s Magazine, and reprinted in the Annual Register, simply involves the more mundane solution of kiln-drying. One of the most helpful responses I received to a query

34 Arguably Henchard makes such strong and emotional ties in comparatively rare moments of weakness, either physical, as in Jersey, or commercial, as with the sprouted wheat affair.
35 I refer to the later insertion of ‘and that will make a hole in a sovereign,” said Farfrae’, added in the 1887 single volume edition.
36 ‘Observations on grown or sprouted Corn, from an ingenious Pamphlet lately published in France, occasioned by the last wet harvest’, Gentleman’s Magazine, 53 (April 1783), 304–5; Annual Register for 1783, (1785), 88–90.
concerning this incident was from Dr John Flintham, a wheat geneticist, who detected a certain whiff of Scotch mist about Farfrae as ‘techno-fairy godfather’. Flintham’s use of the term ‘adulterant’ provides another means of connecting the furmity-tent with Farfrae’s room in the Three Mariners; adulteration by rum had assisted in achieving separation, Farfrae’s ‘magic’ adulterant effected partial renovation of these sprouted grains. It is possible that the adulterant Hardy was thinking of was magnesium carbonate, but the novel is more concerned with the symbolic possibilities of renewal; the grain, like the past, cannot be entirely restored:

‘Quite enough restored to make good seconds out of it,’ said the Scotchman. ‘To fetch it back entirely is impossible; Nature won’t stand so much as that’

And the fact that these words of Farfrae, the agent of restoration, are being overheard by the eavesdropping mother and maid, two patient deservers of reparation, links these three ‘mariners’ (a pair of returnees from, and one intending emigrant to, the New World) in the strength of their past and future ties with Michael Henchard. They hear the mayor pondering upon strong bonds, of how Farfrae reminds him of his poor dead brother, and refusing strong drink with a confession to an alcohol-induced deed “which I shall be ashamed of to my dying day” (p. 46). Across, and on one side of, the wall-papered door two are drawn to two.

The following morning Elizabeth-Jane ruefully observes the apparently departing Farfrae walking through Casterbridge with Henchard ‘till they were small

37 ‘There is still no remedy for the persistent and world-wide problem of pre-harvest sprouting damage, which has been the subject of ten international symposia from 1975 to 2004. Farfrae’s mysterious treatment appears to involve addition of some ‘ounces’ (of adulterant) to the ‘bushel’ (of wheat) combined with drying and cooling; the result being judged by tasting the treated grains. If the treatment could be rediscovered it would be worth a considerable fortune, but I am inclined to believe that this episode was a flight of fancy on Hardy’s part, for the following reasons. The alpha-amylase enzymes are exceptionally robust, and are only slowly denatured by heating; which is why they cause damage during baking. Refrigeration does not decrease the enzyme’s activity; heating of dry grain causes other serious damage to grain quality before any appreciable effect on amylase occurs. […] The assessment of the results by taste is particularly dubious. Chewing grain to assess gluten protein strength was a standard test for grain quality, but this is completely separate from sprouting damage. Very badly sprouted grain would taste sweet from sugars released by hydrolysis of grain starch by amylase, however no treatment that neutralised the sugary taste could remedy the actual damage, which is due to the breakdown of long chain starch polymers during subsequent baking of the dough. Lastly, might there be a literary clue, in the name ‘Farfrae’ itself? This mysterious, alien, techno-fairy godfather appears with a pinch of magic powder in the nick of time? Refrigeration as a bulk treatment for grain does indeed seem precocious for 1850, perhaps the reference only applies to the small-scale experiment described in the text, but I cannot be sure on this point,’ Dr John Flintham, email of 15 July 2004.

38 Eliza Acton [The English Bread-Book (London, 1857), 65] cites a Professor Donovan who has ‘proved from a series of experiments that the addition of from 20 to 40 grains of the carbonate of magnesia of the shops to a pound of the flour of germinated wheat, “materially improves it for the purpose of making bread.”’

39 “To be sure, to be sure, how that fellow does draw me!” he had said to himself. “I suppose ’tis because I’m so lonely. I’d have given him a third share to have stayed!” (54).
as two grains of corn', but distance elides difference. If sprouting grain had brought them together, the insidious force of a germinating seed evades even Elizabeth-Jane's scrupulous gaze while she wonders at the remarkable strength of their strong male tie:

She looked from the window, and saw Henchard and Farfrae in the hay-yard talking, with that impetuous cordiality on the mayor's part, and genial modesty on the younger man's, that was now so generally observable in their intercourse. Friendship between man and man; what a rugged strength there was in it, as evinced by these two. And yet the seed that was to lift the foundation of this friendship was at that moment taking root in a chink of its structure (p. 91).

This seed was, of course, their public disagreement about the punishment of Abel Whittle. Here anger at one employee for repeated lateness is transferred to another, his manager Farfrae, who publicly countermands his order that Whittle should go to work without his breeches.40 This is indeed a breach over breeches; the dispute concerning whether Whittle will wear his to work that day will be instrumental in determining who will be master or 'wear the breeches' in the Henchard–Farfrae relationship. The clumsy and insensitive attempt to cure Whittle's over-sleeping perfectly illustrates the contrast not merely between Henchard's arbitrary and Farfrae's sympathetic techniques of man-management, but the radical difference between these men as makers of human bonds.

Farfrae's hyperborean moral sensibilities seem almost as offended as those of Whittle by the nature of Henchard's punishment. Certainly it is the Scot who is triumphant in this battle of wills, having attempted to modify his hard line (it is for him a potential resigning matter: "He either goes home, or I march out of this yard for good"), with a quiet aside to Henchard: "Come, you know better than all this, sir. It is tyrannical and unworthy of you".

Quiet asides do not come naturally to Henchard; as Whittle later observes to Elizabeth-Jane, an employee's life is better under Farfrae, despite the lower wages:

'We work harder, but we bain't made afeard now. It was fear made my few poor hairs so thin. No busting out, no slamming of doors, no meddling with yer eternal soul and all that; and though 'tis a shilling a week less I'm the richer man; for what's all the world if yer mind is always in a larry, Miss Henchet?' (p. 205)

The day before, Whittle had earnestly but unsuccessfully attempted to make Henchard understand about his sleeping problems, but the corn-factor merely roared and threatened:

'But let me clear up my points, your worshipful—'

Henchard turned away.

'He asked me and he questioned me, and then a' wouldn't hear my points!' said Abel, to the yard in general. 'Now, I shall twitch like a moment-hand all night to-night for fear o' him!' (p. 92).

40 Significantly, in this novel much concerned with ties, bonds and cords, Whittle's over-sleeping is generally remedied by a string attached to his big toe and left hanging out the window for his friends to tug.
The reader’s sympathies in this incident are governed by the fact that Henchard's manager does hear Whittle's 'points'; Farfrae's ability to listen and to empathise elicits the labourer's profoundly fatalistic and potentially tragic determination:

‘Yes—I'll go to White Hart Vale half naked as I be, since he do command; but I shall kill myself afterwards; I can't outlive the disgrace; for the women-folk will be looking out of their winders all the way along, and laughing me to scorn. You know how I feel such things, Maister Farfrae, and how forlorn thoughts get hold upon me. Yes—I shall do myself harm—I feel it coming on!’

The cart-ride, taken in obedience to the command of ‘his worshipful’, to White Hart Vale in his shirt-tails would have been no comedy to Whittle; the shame of such a public exhibition would have provided a parodic prefiguration of the later skimmity-ride and proved equally fatal. In effect Henchard's remedial attempt to ‘cure’ his employee's problems is monumentally misjudged; had he heard Whittle's ominous decision he would surely have relented. But that is the point, Henchard is no listener; Whittle's words are heard by Farfrae and by the reader, and the information learned by both that 'Henchard had kept Abel's old mother in coals and snuff all the previous winter' represents insufficient compensation.

And yet (for there is always an ‘and yet’ when considering Henchard), the action underscores the ties that bind master and man. This bond is antecedent to that of hiring-fair or labour-market; in an almost mediaeval sense the corn-factor owns Whittle even when he has left his employ.41 In all his reckless obsessiveness and feudal possessiveness he would seem to inspire dog-like devotion, to have that in his countenance which Whittle ‘would fain call master’. Whittle is no Kent, but he will be there at the end as memorialist and hench-boy to Henchard, playing the ‘wittol’ to his Lear.42

Heavily emblematic of the growing breach between medieval master and modern manager is the exhibition of the brightly painted horse-drill in the market-place. The seed-drill dated back to 1701 and Jethro Tull, but the horse-drawn drill was finally acquiring state-of-the-art efficiency about mid-nineteenth century. From the description provided by similarly brightly painted Lucetta (who had chosen her cherry-red dress): ‘“Why, it is a sort of agricultural piano”’ (p. 156), this would seem to be a ten or twelve rowed seed drill, capable of doing the work of fifteen men.43 It deposited seed in accurate lines, and at a uniform

41 Elaine Scarry makes some interesting points about owning/disowning; see ‘Work and the body in Hardy and other nineteenth-century novelists’, Representations, 3 (Summer, 1983), 90–123, 114–5.

42 The onomastics of Whittle are wide-ranging: the principal sense of ‘wittol, n. b. transf. (? with pun on wit-all) One who has little sense; a half-witted person; a fool; is complemented by ‘whittle, v.’ II. 4. intr. To worry or fret; and complicated by ‘whittle, n.’ shawl or blanket; and ‘whittle, v.’ trans. To ply with drink, to make drunk, OED.

43 ‘A day’s delay in sowing by hand has lost many a season, whereas one horse-drill does the work of fifteen men’, ‘The progress of English agriculture’, Quarterly Review, 103: 206 (1858), 390–436, 422.
depth which produced consistency in both crop and sample. Some idea of the complexity of the machine can be gained from this description of a 12-row seed drill made by S.A. & H. Kell, Gloucester & Ross, 1856–77:

As the wheels move, a series of cogs turn a rod in the seed box. The rod holds small spoons which pick up the seeds and drop them into metal tubes. The seeds fall from the tubes into the ground. A blade or a coulter in front of the tubes cuts a groove for the seeds and weights behind cover them with earth.44

Farfrae is fully aware of the technological leap: “It will revolutionise sowing hereabout!” In 1851 the Royal Agricultural Society announced: ‘The sower with his seed-lip has almost vanished from southern England, driven out by a complicated machine, the drill, depositing the seed in rows and drawn by several horses.’45 Careful readers of the 1886 two volume edition of Smith, Elder & Co. will recall that in pre-1846 Casterbridge there was still market demand for seed-lips available from the cooper’s, and that one could purchase ‘corn-drills and winnowing-machines at the wheelwright’s and machinist’s’.46 This might seem to indicate the co-existence of old and new techniques and bode well for the traditionalist/technologist tie of Henchard and Farfrae, but it must be remembered that such corn-drills were comparatively primitive machines, dating from an era when ‘horse-drill’ referred to cavalry manoeuvres. It is one thing to lament, as does Elizabeth-Jane, ‘the romance of the sower’; Henchard’s unbelieving scorn: ‘The thing—why ’tis impossible it should act’’ is pre-[agricultural] Luddite, it indeed belongs to ‘the days of the Heptarchy’.

Farfrae’s intimate connection with this horse-drill for the efficient insertion of fertilised seed (he emerges from it as a kind of Eros ex machina) obviously stresses both his sexual and commercial potency, but the fact that his bodily emergence from the ‘agricultural piano’ is announced by his singing of a romantic ballad concerning ‘The Lass of Gowrie’ and her ‘braw new gown’ underscores his previously noted harmonious attractions: ‘Hyperborean crispness, constringency, and charm, as of a well-braced musical instrument’ (p. 147). The romance of the sower is far from departed; it is alive and well and living in a seed-drill, which we might almost term ‘a clean machine’.47

44 This is object LB411 in the Cotswold Museum’s collection; for a photograph see: http://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/museum/Agriculture/LB411a.jpg
45 The Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (1851), 600; for illustrations, see 602–6. In America Farfrae’s praise for its efficiency was being echoed: ‘the seed-drill, which, by horse power, leaves every seed in its proper place’, John Gregory, School Laws of Michigan (Lansing, MI, 1859), 83.
46 The Mayor of Casterbridge, 2 vols, (London, 1886), 1: 52. Hardy subsequently changed what might be purchased at the wheelwrights to ‘carts, wheel-barrows, and mill-gear’ (p. 31).
47 The climax of the maternally engineered assignation of Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae at the Dummerford Hill granary features the dustier aspects of agricultural technology. Her abstracted turning of a winnowing machine handle leads to a shower of corn husks and to the eroticism of expiration: ‘As Elizabeth neither assented nor dissented, Donald Farfrae inflated his mouth and began blowing her back hair, and her side hair, and her neck, and
In fact the concept of a singing seed-drill is a master stroke. Even as Farfrae’s familiarity with the latest technology advertises both his commercial acumen and his facility for making those weak ties from which new information flows, his powers of harmony, so effective for making acquaintances in public houses, are busily forging very strong ties with our two fair heroines. As if to confirm Farfae’s dual skills and explain what enables them, the narrator has vouched for the opinion of one of them:

Whether its origin were national or personal, it was quite true what Lucetta had said, that the curious double strands in Farfrae’s thread of life—the commercial and the romantic—were very distinct at times. Like the colours in a variegated cord those contrasts could be seen intertwined, yet not mingling (p. 149).48

As we have seen throughout the novel the ‘corn factor’ predominates. At virtually every point of conflict or crisis in the continuation or creation of old or new ties, both weak and strong, there is a significant involvement of seeds, grain or the products and goods which are made from them. It is as if bread itself is both a binding of its constituent grains and a social bond between those who break it daily and together.49

A key example revealing Henchard’s growing irritation with Elizabeth-Jane on learning that she is not his seed is when he censures her for taking out ‘a cup of cider or ale and bread-and-cheese’ to Nance Mockridge in the hay-yard.50 This incident specifically links the newer and older aspects of Henchard’s trade as Nance (the earlier bread-nibbling moral economist) is actually employed to wimble hay-bonds, and Elizabeth arranges two trusses of hay as a table for Nance’s snack.51 His anger is directed at someone with whom he thought he had a tie of blood, but his contempt for a common worker—who is wimbling

the crown of her bonnet, and the fur of her victorine, Elizabeth saying, “Oh, thank you,” at every puff’ (p. 89). This incident is recalled by their subsequent assignations on the Budmouth Road, whither widower Farfrae walks ‘for a twenty minutes’ blow on that rather windy highway—just to winnow the seeds and chaff out of him before sitting down to tea, as he said” (p. 283).

48 It is, of course, that very intertwining which brings tears to his ‘market face’, making him hire the young courting carter and his old shepherd father, thus ‘taking the crust’ with ‘the crumb of the bargain’: ‘[Y]es, he’ll not be very expensive, and doubtless he will answer me pairrose somehow’ (p. 151). Hardy’s approximation of accent nicely stresses that the solution posed is emotionally satisfactory to two pairs.

49 Its religious symbolism also has significance here: ‘Bread, itself the union of many grains into a single substance, when broken into fragments and divided amongst many, becomes a symbol of life shared, of a society at peace with itself, of a family bound together by a common faith,’ E. S. Drower, Water into Wine (London, 1956), 44.

50 This occurs shortly after her handwriting fails to approximate to that of Princess Ida: ‘In such a hand as when a field of corn/Bows all its ears before the roaring East’ (p. 122).

51 On the occasion of Henchard’s remarriage to Susan, ‘a windless morning of warm November rain, which floated down like meal’, it is Nance Mockridge who observes: ‘She’ll wish her cake dough afore she’s done of him. There’s a bluebeardy look about ‘en; and ‘twill out in time’ (p. 80).
hay-bonds exactly as he once did—also reveals total incompetence at creating those weak ties which Elizabeth-Jane makes so effortlessly and which are symbolised by her industrious netting:

‘Why do you lower yourself so confoundedly?’ he said with suppressed passion. ‘Haven’t I told you o’er fifty times? Hey? Making yourself a drudge for a common work-woman of such a character as hers! Why, ye’ll disgrace me to the dust!’ (p. 123)\(^{52}\)

In another key, the economic and sexual rivalry of Lucetta’s two suitors is lent a certain mock-epic ridiculousness in the battle of the slice of bread:

‘More bread-and-butter?’ said Lucetta to Henchard and Farfrae equally, holding out between them a plateful of long slices. Henchard took a slice by one end and Donald by the other; each feeling certain he was the man meant; neither let go, and the slice came in two (p. 170).

The slice of bread symbolises not only control of the Casterbridge corn-trade but, by a sacramental parody, ownership of the body of Lucetta, broken by the fervent desire of both men to create an exclusively strong tie.\(^{53}\) The commercial and romantic strands of their rivalry are now fully entwined and, even while Farfrae’s besottedness somewhat uncharacteristically unbalances him: “‘Yes—yes. Market—business! I wish there were no business in the world’” (p. 152), Henchard’s market-face is set, his ‘market-mind’ is crystallised. Fighting his corner, Henchard’s attempt to corner the market will involve cut-throat competition:

‘By fair competition I mean, of course,’ Henchard continued. ‘But as hard, keen, and unflinching as fair—rather more so. By such a desperate bid against him for the farmers’ custom as will grind him into the ground—starve him out. I’ve capital, mind ye, and I can do it’ (p. 171).\(^{54}\)

Such fair-play/naked capitalism will also involve Henchard’s coming directly into conflict once again with traditional ideas of what might be seen as legitimate. Farfrae’s growth has been achieved by ‘small profits frequently repeated’, a canny playing of the markets and of a system in which greedy farmers had traditionally

\(^{52}\) His outburst provokes Nance to reveal that “‘[S]he’ve waited on worse!’” and Elizabeth’s honest confession of working in the Three Mariners (ironically foreshadowing Henchard’s admission of the truth of the furmity-woman’s claim) provokes his ‘positive distaste for her presence’.

\(^{53}\) ‘Henchard left the house with a ton of conjecture, though without a grain of proof, that the counter attraction was Farfrae’ (p. 170). In the subsequent collision between hay-waggons Lucetta’s partiality become clear.

'hang'd [themselves] on the expectation of plenty.' 

Henchard's speculation, in contrast, is a direct attack upon the moral economy.

E. P. Thompson describes the time-honoured prejudice in favour of open dealing and 'pitching' markets, whereby wheat would be transported direct from farm to be sold at open market. 

In the beginning of the nineteenth century J. S. Girdler referred disparagingly to 'the modern practice of selling by sample' which 'deprives the middle and lower classes of the people, and indeed everybody else, of the means of purchasing Corn in small quantities, which in former times, when Pitching Markets were in general use, were never refused by the sellers.' Since Edmund Burke had successfully brought about the repeal of Tudor legislation forbidding forestalling (buying goods before they reach the general market), engrossing (buying in bulk with the object of enhancing the price) and regrating (buying with the intent to resell in the same market) in 1772, there had been a protracted debate between those free traders who followed Adam Smith and Lord Mansfield in deeming statutory restrictions on market practices regressive, and jurists such as Lord Kenyon and Lord Eldon who wanted to control immoral speculators.

Forestalling, engrossing and regrating remained offences under the common law, although prosecutions became rarer. What also remained well into the 'hungry 1840s' was considerable consumer suspicion of middlemen, speculators or 'corn-jobbers', especially those who speculated in the precious staples of life.

55 "You see that man with the drab kerseymere coat? I bought largely of him in the autumn when wheat was down, and then afterwards when it rose a little I sold off all I had. It brought only a small profit to me; while the farmers kept theirs, expecting higher figures, yes, though the rats were gnawing the ricks hollow. Just when I sold the markets went lower, and I bought up the corn of those who had been holding back, at less price than my first purchases. And then," cried Farfrae, impetuously, his face alight,"I sold it a few weeks after when it happened to go up again! And so, by contenting myself with small profits frequently repeated I soon made five hundred pounds—yes!"—(bringing down his hand upon the table, and quite forgetting where he was)—"while the others by keeping theirs in hand made nothing at all!!" (pp. 148–9). Macbeth, II.iii.4–5.

56 Thompson, 'Moral economy', 83–7. Thompson chose the following for the epigraph to his article: 'He that witholdeth Corn, the People shall curse him: but Blessing shall be upon the Head of him that selleth it.' Proverbs xi. 26.


58 'The Corporation [of London] had let it be known where it stood when it came to those who sought to speculate in a commodity as precious as the roast beef of old England,' Susan Brown, 'A just and profitable commerce': moral economy and the middle classes in eighteenth-century London, The Journal of British Studies, 32: 4 (1993), 305–32, 312. Public prejudice against restrictive market practices continued to re-emerge in times of famine and bread-riots which certainly continued after the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws; see Geoffrey Doye, "Throw out your bread, throw out your Tommy": the Torquay Food Riots of 1847, Southern History, 25 (2003), 62–84, 79. In riots at Exeter, 'The majority of the mob were middle-aged elderly women who would not have been found in the streets clamouring against provision mongers had there not been dreadful want at home,' The Times, 17 May 1847, 7. Jersey was also involved in food riots in that month, with a substantial involvement of women in an attack on a flour-mill; interestingly, the Riot Act was read by a Constable Le Sueur; see The Times, Thursday, 20 May 1847, 5. There is no 'Bread or Blood' riot in Casterbridge, but Henchard offends against both.
Whether or not there is a deliberate echo of the ‘jobber’ in the name of Henchard’s ‘unsafe colleague’, Joshua Jopp, it is clear that lingering prejudices against profiteering labelled corn-factors ‘knaves in grain’.\(^{59}\) Whereas Farfrae’s manoeuvrings and market-face represent the ‘acceptable face of capitalism’ within Casterbridge, Henchard may be clearly seen as motivated by grinding enmity. His offences against the moral economy constitute a potentially devastating mixture of forestalling and engrossing: ‘Much of the corn he had never seen; it had not even been moved from the ricks in which it lay stacked miles away’ (p. 176).

As capitalist and corn-factor—even as superstitious supernaturalist—Henchard cannot get it right. He had consulted Conjuror Fall as a fetishistic traditionalist, but such is his incompetence in human relationships that he fails to trust him. Though it smells delicious, he will not share Fall’s stew; even ‘sitting down to hob-and-nob there would have seemed to mark him too implicitly as the weathercaster’s apostle’. Henchard has ‘backed bad weather’ and might have made a killing,\(^{60}\) but the nerve of this cut-throat capitalist gives way, he lacks the courage to play out his hand. Instead he consolidates his own fall, by breaking another weak tie in dismissing Jopp. The mercantile middleman Henchard is a destructive and incompetent operator in commercial and human negotiations; the incompetence aids his self-destruction. It is as Raymond Williams has suggested:

Henchard is not destroyed by a new and alien kind of dealing but by a development of his own trade which he has himself invited. It is Henchard in Casterbridge who speculates in grain as he had speculated in people; he is, in every sense, within an observed way of life, a dealer and a destructive one; his strength compromised by that.\(^{61}\)

Henchard’s descent is accelerated by his Petty Sessions honesty regarding his long-disguised but ‘rather tall wild oat’; ‘the heavy failure of a debtor [another victim of the wet harvest] whom he had trusted implicitly’; and the misplaced devotion of an unnamed employee (might it have been misguided Whittle?) who had ‘picked over the sample of an enormous quantity of second-rate corn which Henchard had in hand, and removed the pinched, blasted, and smutted grains in great numbers’ (p. 202). The ‘great unwisdom’ of this ‘renovation’ or ‘improvement’ of the sample, which parodies the scientific technology of Farfrae’s renovation, represents the ultimate offence against the ‘soul of commerce

\(^{59}\) On this pun, see Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1788) q.v. Compare ‘The bold monopolist, and jobber sly,/Resum’d—the farmer-gentleman laid by)/The varied wiles of avarice are tried,/And the forestallers’ subtlest engines plied; Regraters, dealers—an insidious train!/Middle and mealmen yield the soul to gain;/Bakers and badgers—each inferior slave,/The humble drudges of a prouder knave’, Samuel Jackson Pratt, *The Poor; Or, Bread. A Poem* (London, 1802), ll. 585–95.

\(^{60}\) ‘A bad harvest, or the prospect of one, would double the price of corn in a few weeks; and the promise of a good yield would lower it as rapidly. Prices were like the roads of the period, steep in gradient, reflecting in their phases the local conditions, without engineering, levellings, or averages’ (p. 172).

in grain’. When corn is no longer brought to an open ‘pitching’ market, the newer moral economic models of marketing dictate that the sample bag must honestly reflect the condition of the bulk.

Mark Granovetter’s thesis argues that weak ties are far more likely to prove ‘local bridges’ between individuals in any commercial or social network. Henchard’s inability to build such bridges in a market town called Casterbridge is emphasised by his gravitation to its more remote grey stone bridge. It is on this bridge that he learns that Farfrae has bought his Corn Street house and contents: ‘My furniture too! Surely he’ll buy my body and soul likewise’ (p. 208). But it is also on this bridge that Farfrae, the roles reversed, attempts to repair his tie with his former employer, urging him not to emigrate, but stay in part of his former home.

It is beer, the product of deliberately sprouted grain, that causes the ‘banded teetotaller’ Henchard, the term of the binding oath having expired, to bully the half-pint-indulging church choir to sing the ‘Comminatory Psalm’. They had wanted to practise Psalm Four, with its emphasis upon putting trust in the Lord, and whose seventh verse announces: ‘Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.’ The poker-wielding Henchard horrifies his mild-mannered neighbours not merely on account of the threat of violence but by his vehement dedication of David’s words to Donald Farfrae:

> ‘His seed shall orphans be, his wife
> A widow plunged in grief;
> His vagrant children beg their bread
> Where none can give relief’ (p. 215)

This verse (the first of his selection from Psalm 109), with its rebarbative reminders of the curse he visits upon himself in the furmity-tent and of the former unavailability of wholesome bread in Casterbridge, might seem intensely double-edged. In terms of self-reflexive impact, however, the final couplet he chooses, and chooses to repeat:

> ‘And the next age his hated name
> Shall utterly deface.’

anticipates the self-erasing starkness—for all its implicit tragically self-assertive absurdity—of ‘Michael Henchard’s Will’, signed by Michael Henchard:

> “& that no man remember me.
> “To this I put my name.”
> “Michael Henchard.”” (p. 309)

63 Solomon Longways had described Henchard’s sprouted wheat as ‘“that growed out that ye could a’most call it malt”’ (p. 35). The initial stage of malting involves the controlled germination of grain. It was also Longways who thus referred to Henchard’s oath, adding: ‘“that if any of his men be ever so little overtook by a drop, he’s down upon ‘em as stern as the Lord upon the jovial Jews”’ (p. 34).
Latterly, in Henchard’s ‘little retail seed and grain shop, not much larger than a cupboard’ something germinates that had long lain dormant. A strong tie, made weak, grows strong again; ‘the girl, who was his only friend’ (p. 285), subdues him, entangles him within the subtly delicate network of her netting. He is crocheted into his corner chair, a ‘netted lion, anxious not to pique her in the least’ (p. 281). Too late is the growth of love in a now-dependent Henchard. When her father returns, Henchard abjures ties, responding with ‘stolid’ and ‘dogged’ lies. Newson’s later idiomatic reference to this: “Now, it never crossed my mind that the man was selling me a packet” (figuratively, ‘a packet of lies’; p. 293), underscores the fact that Henchard still turns a hard mercantile face even to those to whom he is tied by the closest of bonds. His ‘mad lies like a child, in pure mockery of consequences’ compel him to leave: “I don’t care about shops and streets, and folk—I would rather get into the country by myself, out of sight, and follow my own ways, and leave you to yours” (p. 289).

Hay-trusser for a third and final time, circumnavigating Casterbridge, Henchard’s ‘soul in its half-formed state’ is prey to the opposing forces of love and loathing. Elizabeth-Jane has taught him to love, but utterly failed to socialise her ‘fangless lion’. The narrator’s cynicism concerning divine fair-play: ‘the ingenious machinery contrived by the gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum—which arranges that wisdom to do shall come pari passu with the departure of zest for doing—stood in the way of all that’ (p. 297) provides too positive a picture of Henchard’s spiritual growth—he lacks the wisdom as well as the zest. The seeds of love have sprouted in his heart, but it is a selfish and possessive love, leading to nothing beyond itself, seeking only the strongest of ties ‘To bind another to its delight’. Though he once sold her mother, he still wants to monopolise, exclusively to own Elizabeth-Jane. There is little amelioration in this recidivist: Henchard the cereal engrosser is a serial engrosser:64

Sneering at himself for his weakness, he yet every hour—nay, every few minutes—conjectured her actions for the time being—her sitting down and rising up, her goings and comings, till thought of Newson’s and Farfrae’s counter-influence would pass like a cold blast over a pool, and efface her image. And then he would say of himself, ‘O you fool! All this about a daughter who is no daughter of thine!’ (pp. 296–7).

It is no accident that the caged goldfinch reminds us of Lear’s ‘We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage’, or that Henchard’s last words: ‘“What, Whittle,” he said, “and can ye really be such a poor fond fool as to care for such a wretch as I!”’ hint at realisation come too late, or even the blurring of the Fool and Cordelia/E-J. Ultimately, the relation of these last words and of following Henchard’s last journey through the night is given to Whittle. Its elegiac impact marks it out as more than ‘a tale told by an idiot’, certainly Farfrae’s response of “Dear me—is it so!” hardly seems adequate. Part of that impact derives from

64 ‘Engross, v. 5b. Of an object of thought or feeling: To draw entirely to itself, occupy exclusively, absorb (the affections, attention, mind, time, etc)’ [OED].
the organic simplicity and dialect strength of Whittle's language which unintentionally echo the grain and tools of Henchard's trade: “in the blue o’ the morning, when ’twas hardly day, I looked ahead o’ me, and I seed that he wambled, and could hardly drag along”. In the same way, Henchard's poor spelling “& that no flours be planted on my grave” recalls both the word's original meaning: ‘the “flower” or finest quality of meal’ [OED], and his contrasting ‘grown flour’, which prompted an unanswered and unanswerable question of a nameless miller:

‘But what are you going to do to repay us for the past?’

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