

THE NEW WESSEX EDITION

The Complete Poems
of
THOMAS HARDY

EDITED BY

James Gibson

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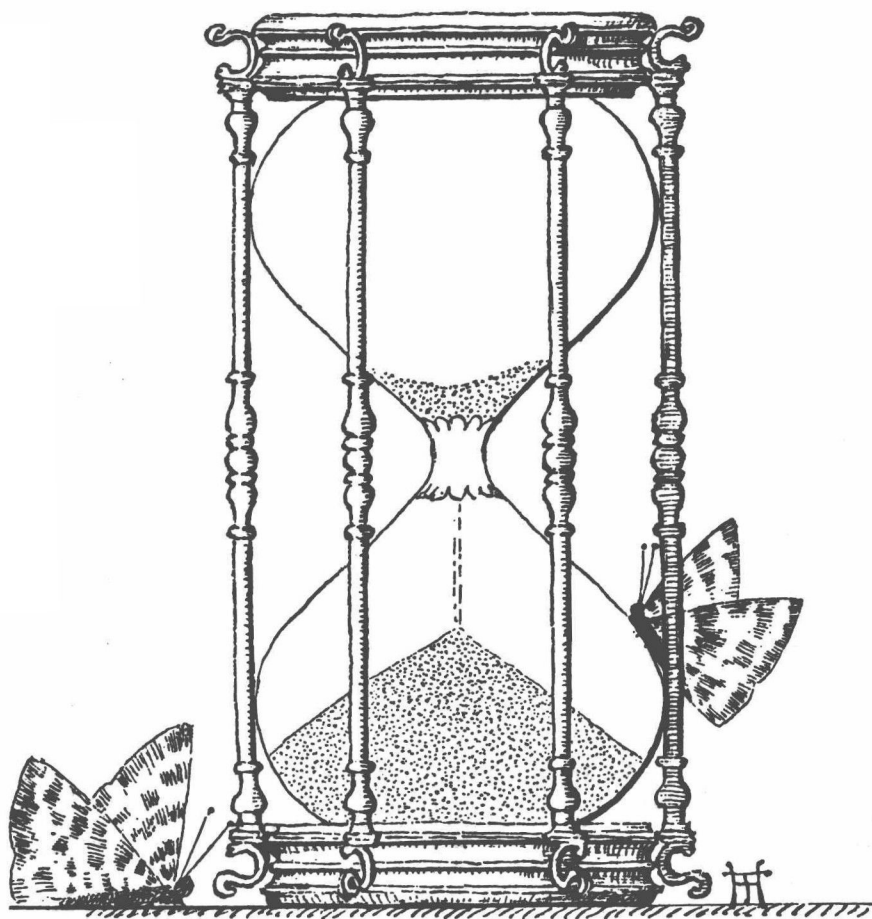
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The hour-glass which illustrated 'Amabel' (page 8) in Wessex Poems

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS HARDY was fifty-eight and had already published fourteen novels and more than forty short stories when *Wessex Poems*, the first of his eight books of verse, was published in 1898. He tells us in *The Life of Thomas Hardy* that he had been writing poetry in London in the 1860s but had failed to get any of it published. In the 1890s, a man of independent means, he could afford to return to his first love and ignore the adverse criticism of reviewers who deplored his move from prose to verse. *Wessex Poems* was followed by *Poems of the Past and the Present* in 1901, *Time's Laughingstocks* in 1909, *Satires of Circumstance* in 1914, and *Moments of Vision* in 1917. The first edition of *Collected Poems* appeared in 1919 and it included every poem which had been printed in these five previous books. A second edition, which added *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922), was published in 1923; a third edition, which added *Human Shows* (1925), was published in 1928; and there was a fourth edition in 1930 which rounded off this remarkable period of creative activity by adding the posthumous *Winter Words* (1928). The eight books contain no fewer than 918 poems, and all of them are to be found in the 1930 *Collected Poems*. It is a tribute to Hardy's distinction and success as a poet and to the greatness of this book that the fourth edition has been in print almost continuously for nearly fifty years and that there has been a noticeable acceleration in the frequency of reprints during the past decade.

The publication of the New Wessex Edition of Hardy's works provides an opportunity of adding to *Collected Poems* all the previously uncollected poems, some of which have not been easily available to readers, and it seems appropriate that the title should be changed to *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. I have included among the extra poems six extracts from *The Dynasts* to which Hardy himself gave the status of separate poems by including them in his *Selected Poems* (1916). The extra poems and the fragments are variable in quality but include some of Hardy's finest work. They are arranged in a roughly chronological order of writing. This can be no more than approximate because of difficulties of dating which result from Hardy's practice of working on a poem over a long period of time.

The opportunity has been taken of checking the 1930 text. In his will

Hardy asked that his complete poetical works should be available 'at a reasonable price so as to be within the reach of poorer readers'. His publishers did keep the price of this lengthy book as low as possible but this was done partly by continuing to use the original printing plates. Inevitably this led to some serious print deterioration which has now been corrected. A small number of errors overlooked by Hardy, and by those who checked the 1930 edition, has also been corrected.

There are many variant readings to the poems, particularly in those published before 1917. Manuscripts exist of almost all the poems, and the amount of revision is larger than is generally realised. About 160 of the poems had newspaper or journal publication before they appeared in book form. Further revision took place at this stage. Yet further revision took place in the early books of the Wessex Edition which began to be published in 1912, and there are still further changes in *Selected Poems* (1916). There are even small changes to be found between the different editions of *Collected Poems*, with one or two verbal changes taking place, rather mysteriously, between 1928 and 1930, subsequent to Hardy's death. There is plentiful evidence here to support Florence Hardy's comment that her husband was artistically unable 'to rest content with anything that he wrote until he had brought the expression as near to his thought as language would allow. He would, for instance, often go on revising his poems for his own satisfaction after their publication in book form.' No one can study Hardy's poetical texts without being aware of this.

I have provided a selection of notes which aims to give an idea of the nature of Hardy's revisions and to help with initial difficulties of understanding, but their scope is necessarily limited by the wish to keep the book available to the general reader. An academic edition of Hardy's poetry with full critical apparatus and variant readings must wait for another time. I hope, however, that such notes as it is possible to give will be found interesting and helpful. For a more detailed commentary I would refer the reader to Professor J. O. Bailey's *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (1971). I must also express a debt of gratitude to Professor R. L. Purdy, whose *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (1954) is essential reading for Hardy scholars; to Mr F. B. Pinion, whose *A Hardy Companion* (1968) is invaluable; to Professor Harold F. Brooks; and to Mr Roger Peers, Curator of the Dorset County Museum.

19 March 1975

JAMES GIBSON

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