

Far From the Madding Crowd (2015)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 3 Language 1 Sex/Nudity
3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*I will sing of loyalty and of justice; to you, O Lord, I
will sing. I will study the way that is blameless. When shall
I attain it?*

*I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; I will
not set before my eyes anything that is base*

Psalm 101:1-3

Although Thomas Hardy wrote almost three generations after Jane Austen's novels were published, their characters share a restraint of expression of feelings, especially love, that keeps us wondering about the two main characters—"will these two ever come together?" However Bathsheba Everdene (Carey Mulligan) is different from the Austen heroines. In *Sense and Sensibility* three fatherless daughters with no finances must find a husband to sustain them. In Hardy's novel Bathsheba, who declares that she has no need for a man, is fortunate in that she inherits a prosperous farm when her uncle dies. But can she take on what society considers is a man's job? And by doing so, does this foreclose love and marriage for her?

At the very start she comes close to losing a key portion of her new farm when fire breaks out in the barn at night. Gabriel Oak (Matthias Schoenaerts), passing by on the road, notices that everyone is running around helter-skelter, so he steps in and takes charge. His quick thinking saves the day,

or rather, the night. When a hooded character comes up to thank him, both are surprised that they recognize each other

While Bathsheba had been staying at an aunt's farm Gabriel was the shepherd next door hoping that the income from his flock would allow him to purchase the land he was leasing. Believing that if he joined that land to the small farm that Bathsheba and her aunt were living on, would be beneficial to them all, he had proposed marriage, but she refused. Shortly after that his inexperienced sheep dog slipped out of the house at night and so stirred up the flock that the sheep ran off in panic. Before Gabriel could stop them they plummeted over a cliff to their death on the beach below. Gabriel, losing everything, took to the road in search of work.

The day after the fire Bathsheba gathers the farmhands and tells them that she intends to run the business affairs herself. Aware of the general prejudice against a woman running anything, she asserts, "I am a woman. It is my intention to astonish you all." To show that she means business she fires the old manager, who apparently had been out drinking, and so was absent when the fire broke out. She agrees to take on Gabriel as her shepherd.

At the grain market Bathsheba is the only woman present, bringing the sacks with samples from her field. The merchants no doubt think that she will be easy to cowl into accepting whatever they offer. However she turns down the absurdly low price offered by the merchant who had done business with her uncle, telling him that the grain still was of just as good quality. As he stands by certain of her failure she persists, her self-confidence more than a match for the disdain of the men. At last she receives the price she demands. Held high, she walks through the crowd.

On the farm she is a hands-on mistress. When Gabriel and a helper are in thigh-deep water treating the sheep, he jokingly invites her to join them. She wades right into the water and

works with them. She also often labors in the fields with the farmhands.

Bathsheba's beauty draws the attention of her middle-aged neighbor William Boldwood (Michael Sheen), who woos her after she sends him a Valentine card as a joke. She toys with him, not accepting his offer, but telling him that she will think about it. Gabriel is so upset with her cruelty that he chastises her, whereupon she fires him. He leaves, but not for long, as you will see. She might not need a man for romance, but she does need an experienced shepherd for her sheep.

There soon arises a third man in Bathsheba's life, the dashing cavalry Sgt. Francis Troy (Tom Sturridge), upset when his intended bride stood him up at the altar because she went to the wrong church. Bathsheba is fascinated when she spies him practicing sword fighting in the woods, and he practices his skill on her, the scene filled with the eroticism of foreplay as he thrusts his sword at her, clipping a small lock from her hair. A handsome, suave man, she impulsively falls for his charms. Her decision to marry the scoundrel leads to tragic consequences for two of the three suitors.

Danish director Thomas Vinterberg, whose 2012 film [*The Hunt*](#) was my favorite foreign film when it arrived here a year or so ago, shows that he can handle an English language film as well. It is not as epic as John Schlesinger's 1967 film version—at two hours it is about 48 minutes shorter—and so a great deal of the novel has to be left out. We might have understood Sgt. Troy's anguish better had the part of the servant girl whom he had intended to marry was more than a cameo role. The film at times seems like a collection of highlights of the book rather than a full adaptation.

As it is, however, Carey Mulligan is fine as the strong-willed woman who resists Victorian patriarchy—and who almost loses true love in the process. Matthias Schoenaerts's Gabriel is the picture of taciturn fidelity who stands by the one he

loves until he is convinced that she no longer needs her. The actors playing the other two suitors Michael Sheen as William Boldwood and Tom Sturridge as Sgt. Francis Troy are also convincing in their parts.

The title is intriguing, taken from Thomas Grays poem "Elegy in a Country Churchyard:"

"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

Their sober wishes never learned to stray;

Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way."

Most critics surmise that Hardy ironically chose the title of his novel to go against the prevailing view that life in the country was simple and unharried compared to the "madding (frenzied) crowds" of city life. It is a view still offered by hundreds of Hollywood films that favor small town life over that of "the wicked city." (Pop music also reflected this, a song that often comes to my mind being, "Dear Hearts and Gentle People.") Even in this cut down version of Hardy's story we see that farm life can be just as "madding," especially for a woman wanting to be independent and who is pursued by three men. Human beings are flawed creatures, wherever they live, Hardy asserts.

For romantics the gorgeously photographed countryside and lovely costumes add to the story, making this a perfect date movie. People of faith might want to discuss the appropriateness of the Biblical name of the heroine. Did Hardy choose this, as well as his book's title, as an antidote to the endless line of Victorian romances featuring a heroine who is as pure as new fallen snow?

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of Visual Parables. A subscription to the journal

will also give you access to Lectionary Links, a feature for preachers that links a film to one or more lessons from the Common Lectionary.