



Saul and the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Study in Shared Human Experience

KENT L. JOHNSON

Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

I came away from several previous readings of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*¹ with the distinct notion that the novel was based on the biblical story of Saul, the first king of Israel. I realize now, however, that that assumption may have been too simple. An introduction to the novel by Harvey Curtis Webster, for example, makes no mention of a link between the mayor, Michael Henchard, and Saul. On the contrary, Hardy appears to model his character after the father of his contemporary, Anthony Trollope.² Rather than revealing a direct relationship between Saul and Henchard, the similarities in the lives of the two men may be due to the faithful representation in each story of human experience common to us all. That is the thesis to be tested in this article.

¹The novel was written in 1866. References are to the 1959 edition, published in New York by Rinehard.

²Ibid., v-x.

The similarities between the two narratives are indeed striking. Both central characters

- are placed in positions of responsibility that eventually display their weaknesses
- act impulsively in the face of challenge, especially challenge to their own egos
- become obsessed by a relationship with a protagonist that begins in friendship but ends in anger and hatred
- come to despair, first turning to a medium for guidance and, when that fails, taking their own lives.

I. BEGINNINGS

At first glance, Hardy's Michael Henchard and the biblical Saul have little in common. Henchard is a disgruntled unemployed young man who thinks that an unfortunate marriage and a child have limited his opportunities for success. He is nothing if not ambitious, and angry that his ambitions have been thwarted. Saul is quite the opposite. He is a handsome young man, whom we first meet when he is out in search of asses that have gotten away from his father's corral. God directs Samuel, the last judge, to anoint him to be the first king of Israel. On the day of the coronation Saul hides, not seeking the glory and the responsibilities that will come with being king.

There are interesting parallels, nevertheless, in these dissimilar beginnings. Henchard is the last of his kind. He is a strong young man who depends largely on his brawn to get a job

done. He is a farm worker, and strength has always been the most necessary quality for success in this vocation. He has no idea that the world is changing around him and that new ways of planting and harvesting are already finding their way into the rural communities of mid-nineteenth-century England. Hard work is no longer sufficient for success. One must also know something to compete—especially something of the emerging world of agricultural technology. Eventually Henchard will discover that he no longer fits in the evolving world of his day.

Saul is the first of his kind—a king in Israel. Therein lies the problem. God gave Israel a king only under protest. Saul is there as a concession to Israel’s demand that they, like the nations around them, have a king to lead them in battle. The people are only dimly aware of what the monarchy will mean for their lives and their financial fortunes. When they find out, Saul will have to bear the brunt of their complaints. Like Henchard, Saul is a strong, healthy specimen who will serve his country well in battle. But his limitations won’t allow him to grow into the demands of his position. Gradually he will become aware that he can’t compete with others who are more astute, both in governing a people and in developing a strategy for war. Both Henchard and Saul find themselves in high positions where they might have succeeded at a previous time, or if they had not felt challenged by someone more capable than they. But, given their limitations and challenges, there seems to be little possibility that they can escape the tragedy that awaits them.

II. A CHARACTER FLAW

Saul and Henchard share a common flaw—they are impulsive. They take things into their own hands and act when they would be better off waiting. As Henchard’s story begins, he arrives at a small village fair with his wife and child. After drinking too much primitive cider laced with alcohol, he begins to bemoan his fate to those about him. One thing leads to another, and finally he announces that he will offer up his wife and child for sale. Tired of her husband’s abuse, the woman allows herself and her child to be bought by a sailor who immediately takes them away from the area. The next morning, awakening to what he has done, Henchard sets out in search of his wife and child, but is unable to find them. In consequence, he makes a vow not to touch another drop of alcohol for twenty years and sets out for a distant town, Casterbridge, to start his life over again, without wife or child. His flaw, however, goes with him.

Saul, after a minor successful battle with the Ammonites, is faced with a major conflict with the Philistines at Michmash (1 Sam 13:1-15). He is apparently not to enter the battle until Samuel has come to offer sacrifice and bless the armies of Israel. However, after seven days, during which Samuel does not come and Saul sees his army disappearing from camp, Saul takes things into his own hands: he offers sacrifice and enters the battle. When Samuel arrives, he is appalled that Saul should act so precipitously. Samuel pronounces judgment on the king he had earlier anointed: “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you. The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you” (1 Sam 13:13-14).

In a later battle with the Philistines, Saul impulsively vows that neither he nor any of his army will eat anything until they have vanquished their enemies. Jonathan, Saul’s son, who had

initiated the battle and done exceedingly well in it, does not hear of the oath and, becoming hungry, eats some honey. Later, sensing that God was not responding to his prayers, Saul reasons that someone must have broken his vow. He sets in motion an elaborate plan to discover and punish the culprit. It turns out, of course, to be Jonathan. Saul intends to kill him, but the people will not hear of it because of what Jonathan has done to win the battle (1 Sam 14:1-46). So much for Saul's vow. And, in time, Jonathan becomes the friend of the prince that God has appointed to replace Saul. On several occasions he saves David from his father's wrath. Henchard's vow, too, comes to work against him, once the twenty years have passed.

These are not the only times that Saul acts impulsively, making vows or acting contrary to God's commands. Because the Amalekites had refused to help Israel when they first came out of the wilderness, God had instructed Saul to destroy that people completely—including their king, their sheep, and their oxen. Saul engages them in battle and defeats them, but he does not totally destroy them.

He keeps back their king and the finest of their animals. Again, when Samuel discovers what Saul has done, he repeats the judgment against Saul—that his family will not inherit the throne in Israel.

III. THE ARRIVAL OF THE ANTAGONIST

Almost twenty years have elapsed since Henchard had sold his wife and child, when Hardy again takes up his story. Henchard is now the mayor of Casterbridge, where he has become a leading grain merchant. Other leaders have gathered at an inn to honor him for his many contributions to the community. Outside, however, the poor of the city are gathered in small groups complaining about their mayor. He has sold them grain that doesn't produce good bread. Henchard hears the cries of the people and acknowledges that the grain is poor, but says that he knows no way to make it more palatable. Everyone, including himself, will simply have to bear it.

In the crowd, a young Scotsman named Donald Farfrae hears the complaints of the people; he does know how to "make the grain right." He sends a note to Henchard explaining the process. Henchard immediately understands that this is a person he can use in his business. He goes to him that very night to invite him to work with him, and though Farfrae is not initially well-disposed to the idea, eventually he accepts.

Henchard's recognition of Farfrae's talents is all too accurate. At first, all goes well. Henchard is delighted with the energy, skill, and information that Farfrae brings to his business. Unfortunately, things go too well. Farmers who had at one time come to Henchard asking for advice, now pass his office to talk with Farfrae. Occasionally, Henchard overhears conversations at the inns and taverns: Henchard is a good man in his own way, they say, but he doesn't hold a candle to Farfrae. This begins to bother Henchard, and one day gets to be too much. A boy arrives asking that Farfrae come out to help his father with a problem with his animals. Farfrae isn't present, but Henchard is. He offers to come, but the boy resists. His father, he says, insists that he bring Farfrae and none other. This is more than the mayor can bear. From this moment on, Henchard is determined to be rid of the man who has done so much to improve his business.

David, the son of Jesse, is first introduced in 1 Sam 16:12. Samuel has anointed him to be

king after Saul. David first enters Saul's life not as a problem solver but as a soother. Saul has become a troubled man, tormented by an evil spirit. The young David is invited to court, to play and to sing, to soothe Saul's spirit. The effect is almost immediate, and Saul responds to David with love, taking him into his service and making him his armor bearer. Some time later, Saul and David are joined again as Israel is faced with a great menace. Again, the Philistines have challenged Israel, but this time they have a great champion, Goliath. Huge beyond all others, Goliath taunts Israel to send out its greatest soldier to engage him in combat. If Goliath wins, Israel will enslave itself to the Philistines. If Israel wins, the Philistines will do the same.

No one is willing to take up the challenge until David arrives on the scene. After setting aside Saul's armor, David goes out to meet Goliath and slays him, armed with only a sling and small stones. After this success, Saul will not allow David to return home. He makes him a member of his household. As with HENCHARD, however, the people will be David's and Saul's undoing. As the two return to the cities of Israel, the people sing their praises of Saul, but they sing even louder and more extravagant praises of David. Hearing their songs, Saul is angry and determines to keep his eye on the young man who has done so much to help him (1 Sam 18:8, 9).

IV. THE RESPONSE OF HENCHARD AND SAUL TO THEIR ANTAGONISTS

With their similar impulsive and defensive natures, it is not surprising that HENCHARD and Saul respond similarly to their antagonists. Once HENCHARD discovers the favor enjoyed by his helper, he determines to be rid of him—even though he is the one who could guarantee HENCHARD's continued success. On a flimsy excuse, he dismisses FARFRAE with the expectation that the latter will leave the country. To HENCHARD's surprise, the Scotsman does not leave. Instead, he opens his own business in competition with his former employer. As the people of CASTERBRIDGE predict, the fortunes of the newcomer prosper, mostly at the expense of HENCHARD. This angers the latter, and makes him all the more determined to demonstrate his own worth and power.

A town festival presents HENCHARD with an opportunity to achieve his purpose. He invests heavily in an outdoor activity, resplendent with free food to be served in an open-sided tent. No one, he reasons, will be able to match what he has to give. The day of the festival dawns bright enough, but the weather changes dramatically before the festivities begin. A cold wind blows into CASTERBRIDGE, bringing with it a driving rain. Before the first plates of food can be served, all but the poorest of the townspeople desert the fairgrounds, seeking a drier place in which to celebrate. They leave HENCHARD to wonder why the fates seem to be so ranged against him.

Later that evening as he walks through the town, HENCHARD passes a tavern from which he hears the sounds of music. Coming closer, he peers through the window to see his former employee singing the ballads of his home country to the admiration of many. He determines then and there that he will not be satisfied with restoring his own prestige in the community. He has to destroy his enemy. He chooses to use his wealth to monopolize the grain market to accomplish his purpose. From that day on, no matter what price FARFRAE offers for grain, HENCHARD offers more. When grain is to be sold, he sells cheaper than his competition. He begins to gamble on the grain futures market, anticipating the possibilities for a good or bad crop. In almost every case he guesses wrong. Finally, not sure if he has made the right decision on one last gamble on the weather, he disguises himself and goes to what could be called CASTERBRIDGE's version of the

Farmers Almanac, a medium who has a reputation for accurately predicting the weather. The disguise does him no good, for he is recognized immediately. Nevertheless, the weather

prediction is given, and Henchard is relieved to learn that he has made the right decision. At first, the prediction seems to be completely accurate, and Henchard's hopes run high. Then, when the weather appears to change, Henchard sells all the futures he has bought, thinking the prediction is wrong. When the weather changes again, he is financially ruined. He is forced to sell his fine home and business. The one who buys both is none other than Farfrae, who seems unable to make a mistake where business is concerned. Not long after, the once proud mayor is reduced to working as a laborer for his former employee. Even that is not the bottom of the cup of bitterness that Henchard is forced to drink. A woman Henchard has hoped to marry becomes enamored with Farfrae, and he with her. When that relationship doesn't end in marriage, Farfrae is attracted to the young woman whom Henchard thinks to be his daughter. The two people in his life that Henchard loves, in his way, love his enemy. Remarkably, in all this Farfrae seems to be less than fully aware that Henchard has made him his enemy, for he can't see that anything he has done could cause his former employer to hate him.

Despite his obvious intelligence and leadership abilities, David, too, does not seem to be able to figure out why Saul hates him so much. That Saul hates him, David has to know. Not long after hearing the lavish praise of the crowds for David's prowess, Saul throws a spear at him (1 Sam 18:10-11). That starts along string of attempts by Saul to ensnare his enemy. He sees a marriage between his daughter Michal and David as a way to get at him, only to discover that his daughter, loving David, protects him from her father's wrath. Saul lays traps for David, giving him assignments in battle that are especially dangerous, hoping that Israel's enemies will kill David so that he will not have to. Eventually, Saul leaves no doubt that in his own mind David is the enemy who must be killed, whatever the cost. Throughout, David either succeeds in the difficult tasks Saul gives him or eludes him. He will not attack the king. Strangely, he can't figure out why Saul treats him the way he does. He says to his friend Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?" What is the sin? He succeeds too well, and enjoys too much favor with the people. Had Saul the capacity to realize it, David is the soldier or leader who could strengthen his royal house and assure his military success. Turning against David, he not only loses his finest soldier, but also finds himself fighting against his own people and family.

It is a tragic Saul that we meet in 1 Sam 22:6. He comes to the conviction that members of his own tribe of Benjamin, people who have done well by Saul's good favor, have taken the side of David. He complains bitterly: "No one discloses to me when my son makes a league with the son of Jesse, none of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as he is doing today." Saul's anger multiplies as he calls in priests who he thinks have conspired against him by taking the side of David. Ahimelech, one of the priests, says to him, "Who among all your servants is so faithful as David? He is the king's son-in-law, and is quick to do your bidding, and is honored in your house. Is today

the first time that I have inquired of God for him? By no means! Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any member of my father's house; for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little" (1 Sam 22:14-15). The priest understands no more than David why Saul is responding the way he is. In any case, what he says is not what Saul wants to hear. Saul orders the death of Ahimelech and the priests with him, and when his own soldiers will not do it, he commands Doeg, an Edomite ally, and the deed is done.

Following his attack on his own people out of his hatred for David, Saul initiates more than one search for the enemy he is intent on killing. On each occasion it is David who finds Saul in a situation where he could be killed, but David refrains. Saul learns how close he has come to death, and that it is only David's forbearance that has saved him. Learning of his enemy's prowess could not have done much to lighten the hatred Saul held for him. Graciousness in one's enemy can taste most bitter. Each reprieve only intensifies Saul's desire to destroy David.

V. THE CONCLUSION OF THE NARRATIVE

Amazingly, Henchard is able to make some peace with his altered situation. He finds a cottage on the heath and continues to work as a laborer, keeping his distance from the citizens of Casterbridge. Free from his vow of more than twenty years, he finds solace in alcohol.

Eventually, Henchard hears that Elizabeth-Jane—a young woman he had thought to be his long-lost daughter, but who he has now learned is not—is to marry Farfrae. He decides to make an effort to rebuild a relationship with her. As the novel concludes, he comes to her home with a wedding gift. A maid admits him, but forgets to tell Elizabeth that he is there. After waiting a long time, he concludes that he is being deliberately snubbed and returns to his cottage on the heath. There, believing that life holds nothing for him, Henchard resolves to die, leaving the following will:

That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.
 & that I be not buryd in consecrated ground.
 & that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
 & that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
 & that no murners walk behind me at my funeral.
 & that no flours be planted on my grave.
 & that no man remember me.
 To this I put my name
 Michael Henchard³

The Philistines, undoubtedly seeing Saul's preoccupation with his internal enemy, choose such moments to take the initiative, forcing Saul to give up his search for David in order to defend Israel. Finally, as one would expect, Saul has so

³Ibid.,336.

exhausted his resources that he finds himself unprepared to do battle with the Philistine armies

attacking him on Mount Gilboa. Seeing the strength of his enemy, Saul finds a medium and seeks a word of hope, supposedly from Samuel. The word he receives, however, is one of judgment. It is not long before the forces of Israel are laid waste on Mt. Gilboa. Wounded, and with his sons dead around him, Saul asks his armor bearer (the role that David had once filled) to kill him. And, like David, this armor bearer will not. In despair, Saul—the once young and handsome strong one who had been anointed by Samuel to be king—takes his own life.

Unlike the people of Casterbridge who allowed Henchard to pass out of his earthly life with no recognition that he had lived, both Saul's enemies and his friends take care to observe his death. His enemies, the Philistines, when they find him dead on Mt. Gilboa, cut off his head, carry off his armor to be displayed in one of their temples, and nail his body to the wall of Beth-shan. His friends, when they hear what has been done to Saul, come by night to Beth-shan and take his body and those of his sons, bringing them to a place where they can be burned. They bury the bones and fast for seven days (1 Sam 31:8-13).

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Despite the many similarities in these stories, the writer of 1 Samuel and Thomas Hardy saw their characters differently. Saul's besetting sin is his disobedience. He is not faithful to God's command nor to God's servant, Samuel. Living in a strained relationship with God, Saul cannot be at peace—not with God, David, his family, himself, and not with his role as king of Israel. He had barely begun to rule when it became clear that his reign and his life would end tragically.

In most of his novels, Hardy's tragic characters seem to be caught in an unforgiving and unrelenting web of fate. If anything bad can happen to them, it will. Good intentions are thwarted by misunderstood communication, and positive purposes fenced in by unrelenting limitations. Henchard is such a person. He wants to do well, but he becomes his own worst enemy when he perceives that he is unable to realize his own best intentions. In both narratives, family members, or ones thought to be family members, are the source of greatest pain. The relationships among the characters are confusing and unpredictable.

The narratives of Saul and Henchard arise from different historical, philosophical, and religious contexts. The stories share an authenticity, however, that breaks those contextual boundaries—the authenticity of common human experience. Both stories revolve around expectations that are not realized. We can recognize that experience in ourselves and others. It is found in the bitterness of competition and the feeling of not being able to measure up to the achievements of peers. It is found in the realization that what has served us well in early life is no longer adequate to keep pace with younger persons who have new knowledge and different perspectives. It is found in the passion to fight back and defend the self against all comers, in a vain attempt to prove one's worth in ways that the world no longer honors. It is experienced at the very core of life when family members—

sons and daughters, parents and children, husbands and wives—betray their love and responsibility for the sake of following their own dreams or loves.

This human authenticity provides all the more reason to know and explore the story of the first king of Israel, for in that exploration there is the real possibility of finding the images and

reflections of people today who wrestle with the same human experiences. The common human experience shared by us and by figures in biblical stories encourages us to read diligently—to meet not only Saul and David in their encounter with God but also ourselves and those we know in our own similar encounters.