

## MOVIES

# Review: 'Far From the Madding Crowd,' the Rom-Com

**Far From the Madding Crowd** | Directed by Thomas Vinterberg | Drama, Romance | PG-13 | 1h 59m

By A. O. SCOTT APRIL 30, 2015

Bathsheba Everdene — if the last name sounds familiar, that's because she's an acknowledged feminist foremother of the "Hunger Games" heroine — is faced with a series of complicated choices. Really, though, her predicament is simple: She wants to live on her own terms in a society where a woman's freedom is tightly circumscribed by custom and expectation. As she tries to figure out what she wants to do and who she wants to be, the world keeps pushing her to answer a different question: Which man will she marry?

When Thomas Hardy first brought her to life in 1874 in his novel "Far From the Madding Crowd," Bathsheba was both a bracingly modern character and part of a lively literary sorority going back at least to the novels of Jane Austen. When the book was brought to the screen in 1967, in a slower-moving, sexier version directed by John Schlesinger, Bathsheba was played by Julie Christie, one of that era's great incarnations of youthful glamour and freedom. The latest adaptation, probably not the last, is a swifter and more superficial movie, directed by Thomas Vinterberg and starring Carey Mulligan. Her Bathsheba is brisk and practical, frank and friendly, and a little impatient with the trio of suitors who admire her moxie even as they compete for the honor of suppressing it.

They are not bad guys. Well, one of them may be, but he's also the only one

who appeals to Bathsheba's less rational side. All three, however, are satellites orbiting the planet of her will, which makes "Far From the Madding Crowd" feel like an unusually fresh and surprising romantic comedy. That's not quite what Hardy or the filmmakers (David Nicholls wrote the script) intended: The story calls for two fatal gunshots and two more tragic and untimely deaths, and the musical score (by Craig Armstrong) swells with melodramatic portent. But for all that — and for the requisite lingering over landscapes and livestock; the scenes of peasant heartiness and genteel reserve; the frocks and hats and Victorian facial hair — there is some fun to be had on this carefully decorated merry-go-round.

"Far From the Madding Crowd" passes a kind of reverse Bechdel test: Nearly every time two or more men converse, they are talking about a woman. When they talk to her, she often responds like one of the women in Mallory Ortberg's hilariously captioned online surveys of Western art history, who generally have better things to do than listen to men. When Gabriel Oak, a farmer played with understated but unmistakable virility by Matthias Schoenaerts, proposes to Bathsheba shortly after they have exchanged glances over a rustic fence, she brusquely refuses.

Not because she doesn't like him — it's clear that she likes him best — but because the prospect of marrying makes no sense to her.

At that point, Gabriel (though for obvious reasons everybody prefers his last name) is relatively prosperous and Bathsheba is penniless. After he loses his small farm and she inherits a much bigger one from her uncle, an awkward gulf opens between them. She hires him to tend her sheep, and he watches as she toys with the affections of William Boldwood (Michael Sheen), a neighbor with an even bigger farm and an even manlier last name. (When it comes to the evocative christening of his characters, Hardy rivals Dickens and Shakespeare himself.)

Bachelor No. 3 is a military officer named Francis Troy (Tom Sturridge), who in a scene with no Freudian implications whatsoever impresses Bathsheba with his skilled swordsmanship. He has a former sweetheart (Juno Temple) and a fondness for vice that alarms Oak and intimidates Boldwood.

The narrative conspires to make Bathsheba choose and choose again until she gets it right, and her mistakes and spells of indecision are engaging without feeling terribly consequential. The mood of the film is less Hardy-esque than vaguely Hardy-ish. He rooted his chronicles of desire and its thwarting in a closely observed world of agricultural labor and ancient custom, an earthiness conveyed here by the occasional shot of a toad or a snail and a few bouts of hearty off-key singing. Hardy's interest in the operations of accident and caprice — in the “purblind Doomsters” who governed human fate — is reduced to a few plot points. A feckless dog chases a flock of sheep over a cliff. A bride goes to the wrong church on her wedding day. It all feels a little flimsy.

Through it all, Ms. Mulligan smirks, sighs and snuffles, Mr. Schoenaerts smolders, Mr. Sheen scowls and Mr. Sturridge enjoys his mustache. They are all fun to watch, though only Mr. Schoenaerts seems interested in testing the deeper currents of longing, shame and pride that course beneath the surface. The most obvious thing to say about “Far From the Madding Crowd” is also the most bizarre, given the source material. It's buoyant, pleasant and easygoing. That's a recommendation of sorts, and also an expression of disappointment.

*“Far From the Madding Crowd” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Sighs, smirks, sexy swordplay.*

**Far From the Madding Crowd**

**Director** Thomas Vinterberg

**Writers** Thomas Hardy, David Nicholls

**Stars** Carey Mulligan, Matthias Schoenaerts, Michael Sheen, Tom Sturridge, Juno Temple

**Rating** PG-13

**Running Time** 1h 59m

**Genres** Drama, Romance