

Assimilation into Sex and History in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

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I

The mixed, singular, luminous gloom in which they [Tess and Angel] walked along together to the spot where the cows lay, often made him think of the Resurrection hour. He little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side. Whilst all the landscape was in neutral shade his companion's face, which was the focus of his eyes, rising above the mist stratum, seemed to have a sort of phosphorescence upon it. She looked ghostly, as if she were merely a soul at large. In reality her face, without appearing to do so, had caught the cold gleam of day from the north-east; his own face, though he did not think of it, wore the same aspect to her.

It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman — a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them.

'Call me Tess,' she would say askance; and he did.¹

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy's heroine is often reduced to the essential

stereotype of woman. Tess Durbeyfield, a unique human being, for whom the “universe itself only came into being . . . on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born” (183), is decharacterized here by Angel Clare who perceives her as a “soul at large,” a “visionary essence of woman — a whole sex condensed into one typical form.” At this moment even her name “Tess” is replaced with those of Greek goddesses. Tess, as Penny Boumelha has observed, is sexually typecast not only by Angel but by Alec d’Urberville.² Tess is, for Angel, representative of “a spiritualized version of her sex”;³ for Alec, on the other hand, she represents a peasant girl who “says what every woman says” (106), although he perceives her in one place as being “mighty sensitive for a cottage girl” (80).

Nevertheless, Angel’s penchant for sexual typing is described more emphatically than Alec’s throughout the novel. Angel is described as a figure who finds “corporeal presence . . . less appealing than corporeal absence” (270) and subdues “the substance to the conception, the flesh to the spirit” (270-71). Thus his gaze turned upon Tess often reduces her to the incarnation of “a woman’s soul” (198). Angel’s tendency to apotheosize Tess gives her an affliction because this disembodiment of her real presence intensifies her fear that he might not be able to accept the “real” Tess if he learnt her past affair with Alec. Tess makes her confession shortly after she is relieved with her discovery of Angel’s “eight-and-forty hours’ dissipation with a stranger” (252), which is, for her, “just the same” (252) as her past relationship with Alec. However, her worst fear is to be realized. After her confession he refuses to accept the “real” Tess who was deflowered by Alec, gave birth to Sorrow, and buried the child, for his commitment to Tess’s purity is so firm that he cannot admit her un-intactness.

Hardy suggests Angel’s potential for particularization while he is at

Talbothays Dairy. In one place he erases his image of the “conventional farm-folk . . . personified in the newspaper-press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge” (145). The narrator goes on to say:

Without any objective change whatever, variety had taken the place of monotonousness. His host and his host’s household, his men and his maids, as they became intimately known to Clare, began to differentiate themselves as in a chemical process. (146)

Indeed Angel, while he is in Brazil, alters his attitude, ascribing his mistreatment of Tess to his “allowing himself to be influenced by general principles to the disregard of the particular instance” (364). However, Angel, “the man whose name suggests an abstract essence of the human being,”⁴ does not cease to deparicularize Tess, this time offering a Biblical explanation for Tess’s experiences: “Was not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer?” (365)

II

Angel typecasts Tess into various types in terms of sex, nature, or family. For him she represents a “virginal daughter of nature” (148), a “new sprung child of nature” (259), and “the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy” (259). Kathleen Blake points out that “sexual typing” exercises the most powerful influence.⁵ Blake refers to *Tess* as the novel really scrutinizing “the sexual typing that plays havoc with a woman’s life.”⁶ Nevertheless, there is one further typing that victimizes Tess harshly — typing that assimilates her into certain historical or mythological prototypes. This assimilation into certain models, as a rule, torments Tess; for, when she is linked with earlier historical or mythological prototypes, she tends to think of herself as being doomed to

trace an unhappy life which has already existed and will exist somewhere. Her violation, for example, is certainly a specific event which has happened to a specific person, Tess Durbeyfield, in a specific place named The Chase. This fact alone, as we have observed, forces Tess to suffer a hideous tragedy — her constant fear of losing Angel and his rejection after the confession of her “history,” which she has struggled to obliterate. However, when this event is associated with historical or mythological precedents and thus deprived of its historicity, Tess is made to experience a tragedy again.

Hardy suggests that Tess’s violation occurs as a repetition of similar ones which have already happened to countless women as well as to the peasant girls deflowered by her aristocratic ancestors:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d’Urberville’s mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. (101)

By transforming the relation of Alec and Tess into that of “the wrong man” and “the woman,” or that of her mailed ancestors and peasant girls, the narrator deprives Tess’s violation of its particularity and thus makes this event interchangeable.

Joan Durbeyfield, Tess’s mother, and Tess’s female companions in Marlott, as does the narrator, typecast her violation into certain prototypes. In her

letter to Tess, Joan says: “Many a woman — some of the Highest in the Land — have had a Trouble in their time” (220). Her female companions insinuate to her banteringly that her violation is a common affair by “throwing in a few verses of the ballad about the maid who went to the merry green wood and came back a changed state” (120). Certainly Hardy’s portrayal of Marlott is not always laudatory. His disapproval of the inhabitants of the village, for instance, appears in his implication that it is the inert disposition of Tess’s parents that makes the Durbeyfields’ livelihood unstable. However, this assimilation into prototypes, it is true, enables them to revive their spirits quickly, as is represented in Joan’s remark when she learns that her daughter has come back in a changed state: “Well we must make the best of it, I suppose. ‘Tis nater, after all, and what do please God!” (111).

Whereas this affiliation to earlier historical or folkloric prototypes enables these Marlottians to create themselves anew, it makes Tess see herself as a hapless victim of fate inescapably caught in a series of repetitions. On her way home pregnant with Alec’s child, Tess finds the Biblical prototype of her sin in the inscription, “THOU, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT — ” (109), and her semiotic status imposed by the itinerant preacher agonizes her.

In reality, when Tess assimilates her life or the events which have happened to her to certain prototypes, deep despair usually takes hold of her. In one place Tess expresses her deep fear of tracing someone’s life which has already existed somewhere in the past:

‘what’s the use of learning that I am one of a long row only — finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that’s all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings ’ll

be like thousands' and thousands'.' (153-54)

As the novel goes on, this pessimistic outlook that a seemingly specific event that has taken place in her life is nothing but a reproduction in a long chain of similar events becomes increasingly noticeable. Tess learns from Angel the legend of the d'Urberville coach which she thinks she "must have seen it in a dream" (241). At this scene Tess ceases to ask further about the detail because Angel is unwilling to tell this "rather gloomy" (241) legend. In the later part, however, she tries to obtain more detailed information on the legend as if to make sure that her life is trapped in a sequence of repetitions, this time by questioning Alec: "Now you have begun it, finish it." (377)

It is interesting to note that Tess is often linked with earlier historical or mythological models at crucial moments of her life. When Tess murders Alec, Tess is associated with Ixion who suffered punishment in the Inferno by being fastened to an eternally revolving fire wheel by Zeus. At Stonehenge where she is seized by the policemen, she is linked with "the Stone of Sacrifice" (417). All these associations, in fact, make us see her life as being inescapably caught in a series of repetitions.

It would be worth noting Hardy's view of history here. In his autobiography *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy remarks:

History is rather a stream than a tree. There is nothing organic in its shape, nothing systematic in its development. It flows on like a thunderstorm-rill by a road side; now a straw turns it this way, now a tiny barrier of sand that.⁷

Such a speculation that understands history as being unsystematic reminds us of Claude Lévi-Strauss's remark in *The Savage Mind* that there is "a sort of fundamental antipathy between history and systems of classification."⁸ According to Lévi-Strauss, the great civilizations of Europe and Asia, or what

for convenience he calls “hot” societies, “have elected to explain themselves by history and . . . this undertaking is incompatible with that of classifying things and beings (natural and social) by means of finite groups.”⁹ Historical factors are in themselves unsystematized, but what Lévi-Strauss calls “cold” societies tend to typecast them into classificatory systems because they seek to “annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium and continuity in a quasi-automatic fashion.”¹⁰

Hardy seems to be aware of this difference in outlook on historical factors between “hot” and “cold” societies, as he remarks in *The Life*:

London appears not to *see itself*. Each individual is conscious of *himself*, but nobody conscious of themselves collectively, except perhaps some poor gaper who stares round with a half-idiotic aspect.

There is no consciousness here of where anything comes from or goes to — only that it is present.¹¹

Hardy suggests that people in London, like those in “hot” societies, do not think of themselves collectively, thereby failing to link historical factors with earlier historical or mythological precedents. In London each historical factor is likely to be considered to have its own existential independence. On the other hand, the inhabitants of Marlott, as people in “cold” societies do, usually typecast historical factors into classificatory systems through the juxtaposition of past and present, and thus render them indistinct. For example, Joan Durbeyfield thinks of her daughter’s violation as something similar to “a wet holiday or failure in the potato crop” (282), or something which repeats like the recurrence of annual seasons, by referring to similar events. Joan and Tess’s female companions also have a prototype of women’s violation, which tells them that the best way is to remain silent. In her letter to Tess Joan writes: “Many a woman . . . have had a Trouble in their time; and why should

you Trumpet yours when others don't Trumpet theirs?" (220). At Talbothays Dairy, Beck Knibbs, a married helper, supports Jack Dollop's wife who married him without telling him "the true state of things" (209) beforehand. On the other hand, Tess, who is carefully set up as a figure bound to suffer from the "divisiveness of consciousness which separates her from her parents,"¹² cannot think of the event as a common affair. She then decides to explain her history to Angel to obtain his forgiveness, which turns out to be a failure. We see the fundamental conflict between "hot" and "cold" societies in Tess's decision to explain herself by history and Joan's admonition to be dumb, or in Tess's constant oscillations between unveiling and silence. Tess, as we have observed, sometimes typecasts her life or events into classificatory systems, but this typecasting usually results in her pessimistic outlook that she is doomed to trace an unhappy life which has already existed somewhere. Thus Tess's violation, whether historicized or dehistoricized, makes her experience a tragedy.

III

Tess, as Kathleen Blake rightly points out, "usually resists imposition of generic classification upon her specificity."¹³ When Angel perceives her as a "visionary essence of woman" (158), she resists this abstraction by saying: "'Call me Tess,' she would say askance" (158). She refuses to be seen as "every woman" by Alec and retorts: "'Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?'" (106). Yet impersonalizing forces do not always appear in the form of typing. Hardy creates such impersonalizing force as helps Angel or the narrator to impersonalize Tess by sexual or historical typing. To show this, it will be of use to consider the

scene where Tess is deflowered by Alec again. As I have argued earlier, the narrator dehistoricizes this event by transforming the relation of Alec and Tess into that of “the wrong man” and “the woman,” or that of her aristocratic ancestors and peasant girls (101). Furthermore, as Angel links Tess with Artemis or Demeter, the narrator associates her specific — if any—guardian angel with the “other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke” (101). What is equally important in this scene is that Tess falls asleep at this critical moment. Curiously enough, Tess’s consciousness, as Boumelha has observed, is all but edited out at almost all important scenes: “Tess is asleep, or in reverie, at almost every crucial turn of the plot,”¹⁴ for example, at the time of her violation by Alec, when Angel finds her at a lodging-house called the Herons where she murders Alec, and when she is seized by the police at Stonehenge. That Tess’s self-consciousness is edited out at these scenes, where she is equally departicularized, is very important because a state of unconsciousness or semi-consciousness usually impersonalizes an individual, which reminds us of Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious common to all human beings.

This obliteration of consciousness strongly encourages Angel or the narrator to impersonalize Tess: the moments where Tess’s consciousness is blurred are very suitable for Angel, who regards corporeal absence more appealing than presence, to decharacterize her; Tess’s being unconscious or semi-conscious is extremely convenient for the narrator to assimilate her into certain prototypes, which isolate her from her corporeality. Hardy’s scheme to offer Angel or the narrator a chance to decharacterize Tess, her life, or the events that have happened to her by blurring her consciousness is evident elsewhere. On the day Angel first proposes marriage, he is drawn to Tess who has just woken from a nap. The narrator tells us how Angel perceives her:

The brim-fulness of her nature breathed from her. It was a moment

when a woman's soul is more incarnate than at any other time; when the most spiritual bespeaks itself flesh; and sex takes the outside place in the presentation. (198)

It is, in fact, at this drowsy moment that Angel's desire for Tess's corporeal dissolution is increased. Tess's being semi-conscious allows Angel to apotheosize her too strongly to restrain himself from holding her and whispering, "Dear, darling Tessy!" (198).

Hardy's scheme to blur Tess's consciousness also appears at Flintcomb-Ash, where almost everyone is reduced to certain metaphysical meanings: Farmer Groby, the owner of Flintcomb-Ash Farm, is called "he" (349) by his employees; the engineman, "a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness, in a sort of trance, with a heap of coals by his side" (348), calls himself "an engineer" (349). At this farm where names — signs of personal identity — take on little significance, Tess almost loses her consciousness:

A panting ache ran through the rick. The man who fed was weary, and Tess could see that the red nape of his neck was encrusted with dirt and husks. She still stood at her post, her flushed and perspiring face coated with the corn-dust, and her white bonnet embrowned by it. She was the only woman whose place was upon the machine so as to be shaken bodily by its spinning, and the decrease of the stack now separated her from Marian and Izz, and prevented their changing duties with her as they had done. The incessant quivering, in which every fibre of her frame participated, had thrown her into a stupefied reverie in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness. (356-57)

Tess, as we have observed, sometimes generalizes her life, too. On her way to Casterbridge with her brother Abraham, she tells him that they are living on a "blighted one" (56). At this moment, it should be noted, she falls

“more deeply into reverie than ever” (56). In this place where the narrator generalizes the natural scene by expanding its spatial and temporal dimensions (“the occasional heave of the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, conterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time” [56]), she loses her consciousness gradually: “Everything grew more and more extravagant, and she no longer knew how time passed. A sudden jerk shook her in her seat, and Tess awoke from the sleep into which she . . . had fallen” (57).

When Tess expresses her pessimistic view of her life being doomed to trace someone’s unhappy life, one is likely to believe that at this moment she retains so acute a consciousness as to make Angel perceive this expression as “the ache of modernism” (152). A little later, however, we are told that she has been in reverie during this complaint:

When he was gone she stood awhile, thoughtfully peeling the last bud [of the lords and ladies]; and then, awakening from her reverie, flung it and all the crowd of floral nobility impatiently on the ground, in an ebullition of displeasure with herself for her *niaiseries*, and with a quickening warmth in her heart of hearts. (154)

On her way towards the village of Chalk-Newton, Tess flees from a native of Trantridge, who was once knocked down by Angel, into the woods where she makes a nest of the dead leaves to get some sleep. Half awake from her “naturally fitful” (301) sleep in the dark shade, she thinks of “her wasted life” (301), and mechanically repeats, ““All is vanity”” (301), the words which were attributed to Solomon “more than two thousand years ago” (301).

Of equal significance is that Tess often faces the peril of being impersonalized by Angel or the narrator when she drops from sight of those watching her. When Angel reduces Tess to a “visionary essence of woman”

(158) at Talbothays Dairy, she is almost invisible at the “dim inceptive stage of the day” (157). At “these non-human hours” (158) when “the faint summer fog” (158) spreads about the meadows, Angel apotheosizes Tess extremely. As the day grows “quite strong and commonplace” (158), however, she begins to lose “her strange and ethereal beauty” (159).

As critics have frequently pointed out, Tess is withdrawn backstage at several crucial narrative moments — her loss of virginity, her return to Alec, her murder of him, and her execution.¹⁵ At these moments we are not allowed access to Tess’s actual presence or her consciousness, but this inaccessibility to the “real” Tess also allows the narrator to align her with certain historical or mythological types. For example, Tess’s murder of Alec is associated with the historical prototype, “the family tradition of the coach and murder” (408). We are presented only with the gigantic ace of hearts, the sign that Tess has murdered Alec, instead of physical descriptions. Tess’s murder of Alec is almost stripped of its present existence because of their corporeal absence, and thus, as J. Hillis Miller has remarked, this event becomes “a design referring backward and forward to a long chain of similar events through history.”¹⁶

IV

Most critics who are concerned with the motif of the heroine being jeopardized by deparicularization or typing praise the “real” Tess who refuses to be assigned to representative roles. In her essay “*Tess of the d’Urbervilles: The Move towards Existentialism*” Jean R. Brooks, for example, sets great store by Tess’s refusal to subordinate personal self-awareness to essence-abstracting or dehumanizing forces.¹⁷ Brooks also remarks Hardy’s antipathy

to impersonalization, from which Tess is forced to suffer throughout the novel. Indeed Hardy's antipathy to departicularization or typing is evident in *The Life*, too. To cite an instance, Hardy condemns collectivism which neglects an individual existence: "Society, *collectively*, has neither seen what any ordinary person can see, read what every ordinary person has read, nor thought what every ordinary person has thought."¹⁸ He also refers to society with evident sarcasm as consisting of "Characters and No-characters—nine at least of the latter to one of the former."¹⁹

Nevertheless, Hardy does not altogether criticize an essence-abstracting art. In *The Life* he expresses his fictional aesthetic:

I don't want to see landscapes, i. e., scenic paintings of them, because I don't want to see the original realities — as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings.²⁰

Furthermore, we see Hardy's notable tendency toward classification in the autobiography. For instance, he classifies varied positions of society into five types:

Discover for how many years, and on how many occasions, the organism, Society, has been standing, lying, etc, in varied positions, as if it were a tree or a man hit by vicissitudes.

There would be found these periods:—

1. Upright, normal, or healthy periods.
2. Oblique or cramped periods.
3. Prostrate periods (intellect counterpoised by ignorance or narrowness, producing stagnation.)
4. Drooping periods.
5. Inverted periods.²¹

Let us now return to *Tess*. Hardy's attachment to typing or departicularization appears in his implication that Tess's spirits revive when her female companions insinuate to her that her violation is a common affair by singing the ballad. At this scene Tess is, as in Flintcomb-Ash Farm, deeply immersed in her work "with clock-like monotony" (117) and her own corporeality dissolves into nature: "A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it" (116). Equally significant is that Tess also rallies from the loss of virginity by subordinating her lost maidenhood to nature which she believes has a recuperative power:

Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? she would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil by-gones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone. (127)

Nonetheless, Tess's spirits revived by her female companions droop again because "cold reason came back to mock her spasmodic weakness" (113). Similarly, her rally through assimilation into organic nature is destabilized by "an intellectual remembrance" (223). As Brooks has observed, in reality, we find in Tess's resistance to imposition the existentialistic theme of human self-assertion against impersonalizing forces. At the same time, it is true, we see Tess fluctuating between her commitment and non-commitment to departicularization or typing. The fluctuation must be the effect of Hardy's own irreconcilable attitudes toward departicularization or typing. In *The Life* Hardy remarks:

Men endeavour to hold to a mathematical consistency in things, instead of recognizing that certain things may both be good and mutually antagonistic: e. g. patriotism and universal humanity. . . .²²

“Patriotism” seems to be very abstract, but when we place it in juxtaposition with “universal humanity,” we may translate the relation of the two concepts into that of the particular and the general, or commitment and non-commitment to departicularization or typing.

Nevertheless, the coercive power of impersonalization or typing, it is true, seems to surpass its opposite overwhelmingly. Even after Tess becomes unable to resist imposition because of her execution, the narrator still seeks to typecast her. A lot of marks have been imprinted upon Tess, “blank as snow as yet” (101), until her death — Alec’s “kiss of mastery” (80), which she wipes out with her handkerchief, her violation, the inscription, and erotic male gaze, all of which have contributed to typecasting Tess by sex or history. At the moment of her death, the eyes of the two gazers — Angel and ‘Liza-Lu—rivet themselves upon a black flag, the sign that Tess has been executed. This is the final mark imprinted upon her life, which reduces her to “one blot” (420) — sign which will tempt the narrator to typecast her again. The narrator, in fact, links her fate with its earlier fictional prototype, tempted not only by this sign but by the *complete* absence of her corporeality — her death: “‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess” (420).

Notes

- 1 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (The New Wessex Edition; London: Macmillan, 1975), 157-58. Hereafter references to *Tess* are given in parentheses in the text.
- 2 Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 131.
- 3 Boumelha, 131.
- 4 Jean R. Brooks, “*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: The Move towards Existentialism,” *Thomas Hardy and the Modern World*, ed. F. B. Pinion (Dorchester: The Thomas

- Hardy Society Ltd, 1974), 48.
- 5 Kathleen Blake, "Pure Tess: Hardy on Knowing a Woman," *Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles,"* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 95.
- 6 Blake, 98.
- 7 Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1989), 179.
- 8 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 232.
- 9 Lévi-Strauss, 232.
- 10 Lévi-Strauss, 234.
- 11 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 215
- 12 Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 181.
- 13 Blake, 95.
- 14 Boumelha, 121.
- 15 See for this point J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 116-46. See also Boumelha, 121-22.
- 16 Miller, 120.
- 17 Brooks, 58.
- 18 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 235.
- 19 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 222.
- 20 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 192.
- 21 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 150.
- 22 Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, 299.