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## PRIMITIVE FEMINISM IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

### INTRODUCTION

In *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis leaves out Hardy with a rather condescending remark that he (together with Meredith) is “offered to us among the great novelists” even if he is “supposed to be philosophically profound about life” (Leavis 32). Because Hardy’s philosophical lens was anti-Victorian, it is no wonder then if Leavis endorses the views of one of his “greats” — Henry James — on Hardy: “The good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, which is chock-full of faults and falsity, and has yet a singular charm” (Leavis 33). It was characteristic of Victorian duplicity to merge rejection with flattery, if only to hide the fact that, as in this case, *Tess*’s “faults and falsity” actually signalled the turning point in a moral revolution that Victorians were denying. Both Leavis and James establish a hierarchical reading of English writers, which has provoked criticism of Leavis’s hypothesis. Hardy ridicules this denial through female characters who reveal disturbing traits of a primitivist quest for self-expression and fulfilment, as in *Tess*’s confrontation with a retarding morality. This iconoclasm is the context in which to read Hardy’s problematic representation with regard to how, for instance, revenge is insightful to primitive awareness when extended to the themes of death and fulfilment, where fulfilment itself brackets revenge and death as primitive synonyms.

Hardy’s unique inversion of Victorian ideals through suggestive projections of “primitive” / “civilised” paradigms distinguished him both as a pathfinder and a rebel. The strength of *Tess* partly rests on this duality as the novel energises anti-Establishment sentiments that were already threatening orthodox hierarchies. Hardy diagnosed Victorian ambiguities about right and wrong and anticipated the artistic turbulence that post-Victorianism was to witness, although, ironically, he was also precipitating his demise as a novelist. “A man must be a fool,” he wrote in his journal, “to deliberately stand up to be shot at” (*The Victorians* 249). As the predecessor of modernist radi-

cals, notably D. H. Lawrence, Hardy heralds a primitive discourse of the Victorian female alongside the scepticism that was to characterise modernist literature, the primitive being a questioning category that highlights the delicate fault lines of social convenience and approves Darwinian irreverence as a viable alternative to the orthodox. His rebellious female is partly the cause of this “surrender,” and not only resembles the *femme fatale*, but generally endorses the primitive as a self-expressive mood. According to Torgovnick, “[p]rimitivism inhabits thinking about origins and pure states; it informs desires for known beginnings and, by extension, for predictable ends. Primitivism is the utopian desire to go back and recover irreducible features of the psyche, body, land, and community — to reinhabit core experiences” (Torgovnick 5). Hardy shocked his complacent readers with his suggestive critique of Victorian objectification of social reality by distorting their notions of “known beginnings” and “predictable ends.” Social institutions are thus transgressed in Hardy through new, heretical utterances, against reductive values that were approved as formality. The Hardysque *femme fatale* is a construct that vindicates religious and legal inhibitions in particular. According to Mary Ann Doane,

[t]he *femme fatale* is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her, the most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbours a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable. In thus transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered, the figure is fully compatible with the epistemological drive of narrative, the hermeneutic structuration of the classical text. (Doane 1)

The tragedy of *Tess* lies in the fact that she is misunderstood and also forced into definitions that violate her own self-imagining. If she is finally represented communally as “the antithesis of the maternal” — because “sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishises production” (Doane 2) —, it is significant that Hardy instead reverses this mood to depict the barrenness of society through *Tess*’ recalcitrance. Her fertility, both mental and biological, exposes a moral bankruptcy that originates in her family and infects every other social institution. Her child is evidence of double

standards that purposely demonise her in order to uphold moral codes. Rosemarie Morgan has described the representatively palpable nature of Tess as a movement “within and beyond the physical world to discover inner powers [and] hidden essences” from which “she shapes form into feeling, into imaginative vision, into dreams of the new and strange” (Morgan ix). In a supposedly orderly society, Hardy’s work was inevitably interpreted as unconventional. His temporal intersection of conventionality and innovations elaborated and anticipated “primitive” influences on European art, in which Jung’s archetypal representations became the zone of an atavistic renaissance.

In the countryside which Hardy bequeathed to Lawrence, life was markedly different though not ideal. In his strong depiction of the country worker, Hardy makes it clear that the rigours of economic necessity were not different from those of his urban counterpart. According to Easton, the country worker “was seriously under-employed . . . in an economy where money had become a necessity even though some of his wants could be supplied from a small plot of land which he almost certainly rented and did not own” (Easton 578). The near destitution of the Dubeyfield family in *Tess* replicates this practice and partly pushes Tess into her misfortunes. Ironically, the representation of Tess takes place against a background of reform, the most prominent of which was individual freedom. Accordingly, “the idea of progress [and] individualism . . . fell quite naturally within Utilitarianism, and the idea of the French Revolution” (Batho and Dobrée 4). While liberty for the individual was projected as the main force behind economic progress, in which the Utilitarianism associated with Jeremy Bentham encouraged people to be self-interested, the progressive attitude came up against Victorian dogma. In a way, Dickens’s work is the most expressive instance in which dogma appears as a form of censorship or awareness of it; hence the need to circumvent its effects by playing with conservative convenience. Hardy opposed this approach because censorship was envisaged as a form of “protectionism,” that is, an institutionalised screen behind which the industrialist exploited the desperately helpless worker. This was done by combining Darwinian and utilitarian laws into a formula that describes human relationships and the manner in which they should be exercised, as a bargain

across the counter. This practical representation is the end of the road for Dickens and his ironic description of corrosive industrialism, but Hardy goes further to target the wedlock between this and other institutional forces. Albert notes how *Tess* together with *Jude*, which constitute Hardy's "last and greatest novels" are reputed for their "frank handling of sex and religion" and inevitably 'aroused the hostility of conventional readers.' He further argues that "[m]any writers protested against the deadening effects of the conventions' amongst which Hardy 'pull[ed] aside the Victorian veils and shutters and with the large tolerance of the master to regard men's actions with open gaze" (Albert 435, 368).

### CRASS CASUALTY AND THE PRIMITIVE

One indicative way in which Hardy signalled his position on the primitive and how this was bound to clash with Victorian optimism is his 1866 poem "Hap" in which he depicts man's helplessness in a world of malignant and indifferent "watchers." Hardy is searching imaginatively for the essence of this all-powerful force through primitivist dissent. The poem therefore questions "[h]ow arrives it joy lies slain / [a]nd why unblooms the best hope ever sown?" A plausible answer by the *persona* is to suggest that the frustrations of man result from the fact that he is the sport and fancy of "some vengeful god" who is "[p]owerfuller" than man. As such, "Crass Casualty" personifies a villain who obstructs "the sun and the rain" and, inevitably, "joy lies slain" and hope never blooms. This way of representing life justifies Swatridge's assertion according to which hostile criticism against Hardy was fostered by the fact that his apparently pessimistic voice raised in the heydays of Victorian prosperity (Swatridge 10). For Loeb, this attitude conflicts with a middle class "determin[ation] to perpetuate an invigorating sense of material possibility" (Loeb 3). One indicator of Victorian progressive thought is Darwin's *Origin of Species* whose publication is ironically reflected in Chesterton's assertion that Darwinism "made people to think that 'evolution' meant that we need not admit the supremacy of God [while making] them think that 'survival' meant that we must admit the supremacy of men" (Chesterton 93).

The centrality of “Hap” to an understanding of Hardy’s primitivism lies in its nuanced Darwinism and in its substitution of an “Immanent Will” — that is neither identical to Power or to Impulse, and is again “neither moral or immoral, but unmoral” (*Life* 320; 34) — for the traditional archetype. Reliance on the “Will” is insightful to Hardy’s eventual rejection of a simplistic theology, to his acceptance of Darwinism, and to his own growing identification of a certain vagueness in the Bible. On the question of child or adult baptism, for instance, Hardy is unable to get a satisfactory answer from Church officials and so he “decided to stick to those [beliefs] of his own side” (Gittings 51). This dissident strain resurfaces in Tess’ religious perversion and becomes more curious when Hardy still claimed to be “churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but insofar as instincts and emotions ruled” (*The Victorians* vol. VI, 242). In an explanatory note to the first edition of *Tess*, and in an attempt to ward off an already foreseen barrage of criticism, Hardy, quoting St. Jerome, remarked that “if an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed” (*Tess* 25).

Thus, Hardy’s agnosticism explains his primitivist inclination, although his rejection of Victorian optimism was not particularly atypical: Patrick M. Yarker cautions against regarding Hardy as a nineteenth century “philosophical sceptic” and even less as a “convert to agnosticism”: “His view of religion was not unconnected with his sense of the continuity of Dorset life since pagan times. The church had come, and given the familiar pattern of Christian worship to the land, but it had not altered the fundamental belief, chthonic and fatalistic, that governed the lives of the people” (*The Victorians* vol. VI, 242). This partly explains why Hardy’s women are controversially rooted to the past from where their restlessness, intellectual ambitions, self-critical, assertive, and sensitive emotions confounded Victorian “uprightness.” Aware of this split, Hardy also conceded that some anti-*Tess* critics raved against the novel “on grounds which [were] intrinsically no more than an assertion that the novel embodies the views of life prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century and not those of an earlier and simpler generation” (*Tess* 25).

The Immanent Will in Hardy, we understand, threatens every human endeavour; but while his notion of fate draws on the nature of this “Will,” it is

important to note that it is fate seen through human action. The situation becomes intriguing because ultimate success for the individual, as we shall see in the case of *Tess*, also implies responsibility and death. In choosing what to do, and how, the individual in Hardy also decides on his or her fate. The denial of the Christian God is compensated for by what was to be propagated as a search for strange gods. If Eliot's coinage referred to Lawrence specifically, Hardy can be seen as the immediate precursor to this "desire." Although Hardy has been described as "a true predecessor . . . of Joyce and Lawrence" (Williams 119), it will seem that the primitivism which he pursued in his works makes him more akin to Lawrence than to Joyce. Albert thus reminds us that "[l]ike Hardy, Lawrence used the novel to present to his reader his own interpretation of life; both writers were concerned with the basic problems of human existence, man's relationships with his fellows and with the universe beyond himself" (Albert 511).

Change in Victorian society was a vested implementation of patriarchal subjectivities institutionalised through the church. But moral uprightness also led to the construction of privileges that limited individual self-expression and indulgence. Elizabeth Archibald reminds us that Victorians' "attitude to adult sexuality [was] fraught and rarely devoid of hypocrisy" (Archibald 9). To Hardy, "prudery about the relations of the sexes was barring the way" to such expression so that only a "crash of broken commandments [was] necessary" in the eradication of this barrier (Blunden 218). No wonder too if public expectations which were aligned with this characteristic, also determined the nature of literary production. Edward Arnold could remark then, after rejecting the manuscript of *Tess*, that "[he] believe[d] . . . it is quite possible and very desirable for women to grow up and pass through life without the knowledge of . . . immoral situations [and their] tragedies" (qtd. from Gittings 60). This disapproval was again echoed by the editor of *Graphic Magazine* who quarrelled with the description of the scene in which Angel carries Tess and the other dairymaids in his arms across the stream. The editor was instead of the opinion that "it would be more decorous and suitable for the pages of a periodical intended for family reading if the damsels were wheeled across the lane in a wheelbarrow" (*Life* 240). Understandably, then, and apparently aware of these tensions, Hardy had to disguise some

episodes in *Tess* such as the seduction scene and the one dealing with the baptism and death of Sorrow before publishing the novel. Yet, he still insisted, ironically using Alec as his mouthpiece, on the necessity of awareness of such possibilities in life: “I say in all earnestness that it is a shame for parents to bring up their girls in such dangerous ignorance of the gins and nets that the wicked may set for them” (*Tess* 339).

Tess identifies Alec with the monstrosities of her society and her reaction against these makes her a strange phenomenon as regards the Victorian notion of womanhood. She feels betrayed by everyone around her and in her isolation, Tess relies on her instinct for survival and happiness. It is significant that Angel’s description of Tess following her confession of her tragic past to him draws on perceptions of social norms related to religious dogma, superstition, and the tyranny of relationships. Reprimanding Tess condescendingly and urging her not to argue, Angel declares : “Different societies, different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things. You don’t know what you say” (*Tess* 258). Associated with this con-ceited approach to differentiation stands the complicit attitude of the Church, which feminises sin as represented by the writer in biblical texts. The peripheral narration of womanhood is climaxed in Tess’s implicit denunciation by a retributive and unforgiving Church, which highlights a “thou-shall-not-commit” theology as one in which only the woman is fallible. Alec’s criminal life-style is hardly investigated into and therefore not a matter of moral concern, whereas Tess must be profiled as the violator. From this, one can argue that Victorian England was using a kind of *Sharia* morality in the justification of sexual deviance, where self and gender imaging became a patriarchal strategy. The Christian morality, by targeting clearly the female, indicates the extent to which such preaching neglects the roots of sin as defined by masculine immanence. In reply to Tess’s worry – “suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?” – the lay preacher points out that “[he] cannot split hairs on that burning query,” and instead “leave their application to the hearts of the people who read ‘em.” This is the hollow theology which Hardy rejected because in its superficial rationalisation, it represented a form of individual and communal victimisation.



Of course, this was generally the fate of the Victorian woman in particular, whose personality was exploited for diplomatic and colonial purposes. For this reason, she had to be seen and presented as untouchable since she was perceived as the purest breed of the colonising mentality. Her protection from corrupt influences made her haughty and vain, and then projected as an exclusive zone of contact with the Other. Otherwise, she was also used to ensure pacifist diplomacy between the ruling houses of Europe in particular, and was easily assimilable to the nation in terms of her delicate beauty. McClintock uses the image of the wagon in the colony as a symbol of “woman’s relation to the nation as indirect, mediated through her social relation to men” and from which, amongst many differentiating factors, “the women’s starched white bonnets signified the purity of the race, the decorous surrender of their sexuality to the patriarch, and the invisibility of female labour” ( McClintock 107). Tess violates this contingent narration of womanhood and upsets Angel’s colonial apple cart and, at the same time, confronts economic discrimination in the form of farm labour in order to attain self-fulfilment. Therefore, she attacks the cultural complicity with a hell fire theology that threatens her unbaptised and dying child:

She thought of the child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell as its double doom for lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy; saw the arch-fiend tossing it with his three-pronged fork . . . to which picture she added many other quaint and curious details of torment sometimes taught the young in this Christian country. (*Tess* 121)

Her overall attitude is a condemnation of the feminisation of national pride. Even when Angel plans to go to Brazil, Tess is not really imagined as a part of that harsh world; she only “reads the colony” from a distance and in this way remains a mediated victim of mediated knowledge. This is Hardy at his most satiric, from which Tess becomes conscious of the limitations of the “accepted social law” which she has broken — and by which her child is to be victimised — when it is juxtaposed with a “law known to the environment.” She identifies with the latter and thus adopts a logical Darwinian attitude in adjusting to social and religious ambiguities that privilege her decision to baptise her dying child, Sorrow, “in the name of the Father, and of

the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Tess is not only appropriating liturgy here: she is personalising it for her self-fulfilment and mental strength. It does not really matter to her then, when Sorrow dies “in the blue of the morning” and is “buried . . . in that shabby corner of God’s allotment where he lets the nettles grow and where all unbaptised infants, notorious drunkards, suicides and others of the conjecturally damned are laid” (*Tess* 101-02).

### LOVE AND THE BLIGHTED MAIDEN’S PLIGHT

In *Tess*, love seems to be a magnetic, yet elusive force; a desire-igniting object that also frustrates the participants differently. An attractive and destructive or unproductive force, love depends on the attitude of characters towards it. In justifying the title of their book, *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, April Harper and Caroline Proctor offer us an insight into the problematic characteristics of sex that is significant to the narration of love in *Tess*:

It is a word that is so often deliberately avoided and one that we wanted to emphasize. We realized, however, that “sex” was just as erroneous as any other term we were being pressured to use, for we were interested not only in the act but in how it was perceived, its role in law, literature, societies, cultures and religions, how it shaped the image of men, women, and their roles in society, how it determined the definitions of masculinity, femininity, gender, “normality” and “deviancy.” (Harper and Proctor 2)

Hardy’s emphasis on the sensual and the sexual was a shocking discourse in this direction and drew on the organic setting and its atavistic shade. Tess embodies this compositeness and her indulgence in love at first sight, together with the permanence that this flitting attitude celebrates, is un-Victorian. The narration of love into marriage, through her, is not in the conventional sense of a couple, but rather a continuous romance as lovers. She has seen her parents, particularly her mother, crumble under the guise of conventional moods, and throughout the novel, therefore, Tess resists formations that conscript her into this conformist frame. There is a degree of camouflage in the social configuration of love, whether marital, filial, or otherwise, which Tess observes in John Durbeyfield’s excitement about knowl-

edge of his ancestry. When the father goes off to celebrate this “uplifting” with his wife at Rolliver’s, and does so with “a dreaminess, a preoccupation, an exaltation” that is characteristic of their neglect of the children, Tess instinctively realises the need to insulate herself and the other children from the unrealistic dream. In Hardysque representation of cosmic forces and how they interact, the Dubeyfield parents become a “blighted star” on which the children must toil and suffer.

Ironically, Tess engages early adulthood by despising the indifference of her parents. Her suspicion against the institution of marriage already makes her a convenient target as a potential victim of rape. Angel realises this strain in her overall comportment and acknowledges that her mind was “shaping such sad imaginings” in her talk, “feelings which might almost have been called those of the age.” Angel is therefore startled by the wide range of her thoughts, and sees something incongruous in her contemplation. His condescending observation of Tess’s provincialism is revealing of her potential rebellion. Even if he recommends her to his parents as “brim full of poetry — actualised poetry,” an embodiment of “what paper-poets only write,” and “an unimpeachable Christian” (*Tess* 193), it is clear that Tess remains elusive to almost everyone who comes into contact with her.

What then explains the fact that as “a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience” at the start of the novel, Tess should radicalise into avant-garde primitivism? The answer lies in the evolution of the Marlott community as the anvil from which Hardy forges an enabling past that refuses subjugation to contemporary sophistication. The fall of the house of the Dubeyfields, which the novel narrates, responds to an urgent need to reassess cultural values at the intersecting point of the novel’s temporality. But for the past to be resurrected, it has to be more purposeful beyond the functional convenience of Tess’s parents and the potential danger implied. In the dying century, together with an emerging consciousness, aristocracy can no longer ride on past assumptions, lest such families and their aristocratic hangover become disdainful. Dairyman Crick suggests this by recalling Angel’s opinion of them: “He says that it stands to reason that old families have done their spurt of work in past days, and can’t have anything left in ‘em now . . . ; you could buy ‘em all up now for an old song a’most” (*Tess* 155). With

her unfortunate ancestry, Tess obviously possesses some residual traces of the primitive, which Hardy does not shy from or try to exaggerate its consequences.

Accordingly, the mother figure is challenged through Tess's assumption of maternal responsibility against contemporary pretences, thereby endorsing Carolyn Denver's rather alarmist statement that "[t]he ideal mother is the ghost that haunts the Victorian novel" (Carolyn xi). It is not only the generational differences that manifest here, but also Joan Dubeyfield's functional attitude toward the maternal in which traditional domesticity corresponds to the hierarchical economic functions of the period. Communally acceptable as a "cradle-rocker," Mrs Dubeyfield's vanity however perturbs Victorian rationality. Education which forms the basis of difference between mother and child, also formulates their visions with opposing consequences. Mrs. Durbeyfield speaks the dialect while Tess "who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke . . . the dialect at home [and] ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality" (*Tess* 12-13). While Mrs. Dubeyfield adopts an illusive aristocratic pose in denial of the past that she craves for, Tess instead evolves through a sceptical consciousness that defines the age by embracing the past. Mrs Dubeyfield's attitude anticipated a situation when "industry, professionalism and the march of technology circa 1900 shaped family arrangements" and made it "increasingly difficult to pinpoint the ideal Victorian mother's function" (Archibald 22). Although Archibald's analysis targets the evolution of lesbian relationships in particular, we also understand from this how mothering urged Tess into a blind date with fate.

In his quasi-redemptive mood, Alec is in many respects a spoilt Byronic hero, whose rascally intentions are exposed in his first description: "an almost swarthy complexion, with full lips, badly moulded, though red and smooth, above which was a well-groomed black moustache with curled points" (*Tess* 64). Reflective of the arrogance and cunning with which Alec is to negotiate his waywardness throughout the novel, we are nevertheless aware of his presence as a man of sensual desires, a "civilised" version of Lawrence's Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. Alec first appears to Tess with an irresistible sense of power in much the same way as Morel, with "his red,

moist mouth," ruddy cheeks and hearty laugh (SL 17) is initially perceived by Gertrude. Just like Tess, Gertrude had "never . . . met anyone like him" before. From his "kiss of mastery" over Tess, Alec ensures his physical and psychological dominance over her. While it has been argued that Alec's crime against Tess is one of "casual wrong" (Klingopulos 425), it is important to note that the social structure in which the characters operate cushions such violations. Exploiting Tess' inferiority, Alec becomes the "tragic mischief of her drama" by first appearing as a conventional lover. He woos her good intentions by posing as a polite and civilised gentleman. On her first visit to "The Slopes," Alec refers to her repeatedly as "my Beauty," "my dear," "my pretty girl," and "my pretty coz." Playing the courtly lover, he also gathers fruit and flower specimens for her. Even in this guise, Alec's sexual aggression and death are foreshadowed when Tess is pricked by one of the roses. When the conventional pose fails, Alec resorts to intimidation, especially when he is carrying her in his "spick-and-span-gig" to Trantridge and causes the horse to be reckless down the hills. This eventually culminates in the diabolic act of altering their course on the night of their return from the Chaseborough Fair, a diversion that ends in the seduction of Tess and creates "[a]n immeasurable social chasm" between Tess and her community (*Tess* 102).

### REVENGE AND PRIMITIVISM

It is in Tess's seduction to revenge that we see her primitivism manifesting as analogous to anti-Victorian representations:

Tess remained where she was a long while, till a sudden rebellious sense of injustice caused the region of her eyes to swell with the rush of hot tears thither. Her husband, Angel Clare himself, had, like others, dealt out hard measure to her, surely he had! She had never before admitted such a thought; but he had surely! Never in her life — she could swear it from the bottom of her soul — had she ever intended to do wrong; yet these hard judgments had come. Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently? (*Tess* 296)

It can be argued that this desire for vengeance is the realm of the *femme fatale*, whose need for self-knowledge and fulfillment violates conventional mores. As Tess recuperates from her sense of social injustice, we see her taking on a more empowering role even if the consequence is predictably terminal. As a character who mediates and justifies revenge, the context for this is obviously “pre-civilisation” Wessex in which retaliatory tendencies are often justifiable. The naturalistic state of Wessex reflects the mindless forces that destabilise Tess’s ambitions. In this way, Tess’s dilemma is very similar to Hamlet’s, if we disregard the fact that she is not a privileged Wittenberg scholar, nor of royal ascendancy, deficiencies that in no way make her inferior. Rather, they situate her at the intersection of the primitive / civilised binary as more naturally aligned with these than Hamlet who fights back by denouncing intellectual niceties and motherly expectations in order to regain a semblance of his primitive instinct. Thus we are expected to see Tess’s action and reasoning as adequately reflective of the context in which her consciousness is rooted, that is, characteristic of a primitive set-up. Tess is denied the privilege of knowledge which Hamlet is endowed with, although the endowment is also at the root of his archetypal indecision. However, Hamlet ends up by denouncing the “civilised” instinct when he fulfils his father’s wish in an instance of instinctive reaction. Whether it is Hamlet the son, the scholar, or the (mad) philosopher, Shakespeare offers us a perception of the human mind and its disposition to the “primitive” / “civilised” paradigm that is as insightful as it is conflicting. It is this mood that Tess emerges from as a more rational, if victimised, Victorian woman who anticipates the debates of gender and power relations more than any other Victorian heroine.

Self-responsibility is part of the assertiveness that accompanies personal action in this context. As such, understanding the full extent of revenge is impossible without responsibility. Tess’s instinctive resolve, which culminates in the stabbing of Alec, compounds this. Her reason for killing Alec — that he “[came] between us” — reveals a functional disposition toward revenge. But it also provides a glimpse into an uncanny trait in Tess against the chauvinistic establishment. “Society” thus avenges itself against Tess through what can be considered a retaliatory act to the humiliation of all the

variants and attributes of womanhood. In this way, Hardy, like Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, examines Puritan double standards towards ethical questions. In Hawthorne's novel, Hester Prynne refuses the humiliating and self-denying alternative of leaving the country, and emerges as a more convincing citizen, though branded, than the rest of her compatriots. Her refusal to be exiled also challenges the consciousness of deportation that had characterised the English legal system and helped to people the colonies. In both Hardy and Hawthorne's novels, the unwanted child is the symbol of a constructed shame, with authorial intentionality captured through the names of the children. Hester's child, Pearl, is the embodiment of defiance, and collocates the mother's moral affirmation against her community. The ethical question which the act of adultery and the illegitimate child announce, can be defined by the very ambivalence that characterises American society. For people who had fled from all forms of persecution in Europe only to re-enact these in the new country, the essence of judgement cannot be understood and appreciated without considering vested loyalties. Pearl thus becomes a new moral frontier challenging the very foundations of American civilisation and suggests the need for a more introspective assessment of what is right and what is wrong.

On the other hand, Tess names her child Sorrow in what amounts to a personal declaration of war against the immanence that threatens her. The baptism ceremony transforms Tess's room into a church and her siblings into the congregation. This domestication of such an institution also insinuates a redefinition of sin. Tess exposes the hypocrisy of the Church when the child archetype, identified as Christ as a metaphor for salvation, is instead condemned to the hottest corner of hell because it cannot be baptised. Tess's maternal sympathies are awakened and her desperate act of baptism is also an attempt to reclaim salvation for the child. For a child whose conception was dramatised at night away from the lights of upright behaviour, it is logical that the attempt to save her should also be at night. Hardy's exploration of this intersection of consciousness reveals the transitional significance of the novel hankering after childhood ideals and parallels Romantic visions in which innocence also evokes the primitive. In baptising her child, Tess exhibits the same arrogance which Hardy indulges in when he subtitles

*Tess* as “A Pure Maiden.” Like the *sorrow* which in Hardy’s world represents a pitiful backlash in doctrinal activities since Darwin, the association of purity with conventionally defined waywardness becomes a deliberate attack on codes with political undertones. Hardy draws his battle lines in “naming” but without claiming moral ascendancy. For instance, Tess’s weaknesses are obvious enough, but they are also human and therefore understandable, whereas when these are pigeonholed conventionally, it becomes the Pandora box of beliefs which Tess unveils.

That Victorian England was distancing itself from such “retarding” representations is enough reason to attribute primitive characteristics to Tess. She is a child of nature caught in the intricacies of culture, and her inability to really adhere to the latter indicates the later days Victorian split in social consciousness which Hardy was concerned with. As an important characteristic of the typical Wessex psyche, superstition, one component of this split, has no place in progressive Victorian consciousness, while religion is regarded as a concept which “has well nigh dropped out of contemporary life” (*Tess* 186). These two components correspond to “primitive” and “civilised” characteristics respectively. The vegetation, with its “truly venerable tract of forest land . . . of undoubted primeval date” approximates the context which Hardy proposes for a proper understanding of Tess’s metamorphosis. Accordingly, the primitive is Darwinian shorthand for the blind forms of authority which Hardy configures as the Immanent Will to which Tess is condemned at the end of the novel. When she wakes up from the Stonehenge altar and realises that the Law had caught up with her, she declares in an almost fatalistic tone, but also one that reflects Christ’s own final utterance before expiration on Golgotha: “It is as it should be.” This conclusion recalls Hardy’s rhetorical worry in “Hap” of “joy being slain” and “hope unbloomed,” concerns that are central to the writer’s philosophy of a blind, uncaring God-force. The unpredictability of life juxtaposed with its expectations underlines Tess’s earlier lament that “the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving.” Already, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Elizabeth-Jane (who could be said to have been replicated in the image of both Tess and Liza-Lu) had evoked the philosophical context for such ambiguous and ironic insights by declaring that “[h]appiness is but the occasional episode in the general dra-



ma of pain" (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* 420). Hardy's overall pessimism countered expected adherence, especially as he empowered the female into rebellion.

As an anti-Victorian "feminist," Tess resorts to revenge in the conscious enactment of a crime of passion that challenges the structured Victorian barriers. She is pushed by emotional and economic necessities to administer vengeance in the hope of attaining a degree of satisfaction, if only as a desire to take back what has been denied to her. We see a similar tendency in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, but whereas Heathcliff is more selfishly possessive and metaphysical in his resolve for revenge, Tess's sense of purpose guides her towards a formal end that also anticipates the demise of Victorian pretences towards the end of the century. The two characters who are targeted by her annihilating desire also represent contradictions in Victorianism. For example, Alec camouflages an ancestry that depends on a middle-class ascendancy in violation of traditional and natural values. His ambition and arrogance also make him vulnerable to what is coincident to the antithetical spirit that characterises the development of the English novel. And that Alec is complicit with Angel in his maltreatment of Tess is no mere coincidence: English aristocracy, both genuine and groomed, profited from and encouraged a religious veiling of atrocities that were not unconnected to the quasi-immoral base of the Anglican Church.

Tess is therefore a typically un-Victorian female who threatens the stabilising assumptions often accorded her sex. These assumptions transform the woman into a passive participant domesticated both at home and in the continent. From her unorthodox description in the subtitle, Hardy already introduces a controversial nomenclature to the supple notion of the Victorian female, and exposes his own representation at the same time. Tess is to be raped, consequently have a child out of wedlock, defile Christian ceremony, and finally murder a would-be gentleman. In her reading of Medieval sexual landscape, Archibald asserts that "rape is as much about power as about sex" (Archibald 103). Angel becomes a convenient target for Tess's retribution because of his indecision and hypocritical posture in this game of power. Having confessed his own shameful past to Tess on the eve of their wedding and then listened to hers, he adopts a chauvinistic attitude that can only

be explained through a hierarchical conformism, by declaring that he had all along loved a different woman in Tess. At this point, both Alec and Angel constitute the false values that victimise Tess and from which she struggles to disentangle her representative consciousness. For she is not only the embodiment of Hardy's anti-establishment articulations, but also the mouth-piece of what could be described here contextually as the Victorian subaltern. Thus, while Angel strays from the Christian path of his upbringing in order to find his fulfilment along the sideways of Victorian affluence, Alec instead drifts towards a religious authentication of his waywardness. Tess constitutes the connection of these shifts and helps us to situate the associative relationship between the primitive (revenge) and the civilised (Christianity). Ironically, it is Alec who describes the meeting point of his act against Tess and her initially unconscious response as vengeful: "What a grand revenge you have taken! I saw you innocent, and I deceived you. Four years after, you find me a Christian enthusiast; you then work upon me perhaps to my complete perdition" (*Tess* 352). If "[t]he seduction of the old . . . by the young bewildered the Victorians and Edwardians who saw it less as a branch of criminology than biological and moral degeneration" (Archibald 20), then it helps us understand Alec's self-vindication in *Tess* when he repeatedly paints Tess as a seductress against whose charms he fights in vain. It is also insightful to the way society handles the matter by implicitly siding with the culprit while the victim is ostracised. Alec's defence is an excuse for his exercise of power over Tess and is endorsed by the institutionalised framework in which Tess is the representative victim.

While this confession is an excuse that is not genuine, it also foreshadows Alec's death and foregrounds the irony of his Christianity against an originary worldview. On the surface, religious fervour intends to humble Alec from his bourgeois arrogance, even if he is perhaps genuine in his pursuit of change. But it runs contrary to the naturalistic environment of which he and Tess constitute significant components. Angel in a way craves the "primitive" and abandons the more sophisticated world of his parents and withdraws into one that is intimate to his recalcitrance. Dairyman Crick's description of Angel as "one of the most rebellest rozums you ever knowed" makes it necessary to note that his rebellion is against the celebration of an aristocracy

that ends up enslaving the individual conscience. Otherwise, that past constitutes part of the relapsing which Tess craves. The three of them represent the points of a tragic triangle which Tess criss-crosses both as a participant and victim. In other words, a duality characterises Hardy's representations – whether as a narrative or thematic device – and his characters offer us the best way of understanding this complexity. Hardy's primitivism, even in its articulation of a gender politics, is not evolutionary: it is not a phase that is eventually transcended or even meant to be transcended by and into a sophisticated stage in life. Rather, the brutality of that state is “static,” even in its ability to foreshadow rational and global essences beyond the twentieth century. It is a state that can be managed and lived with as a component of the human duality that becomes problematic if violations and impositions are allowed to bear on it according to other hierarchical considerations.

Tess sees both Alec and Angel simply as “men” and her struggles against these creatures are also a lesson on how to live with their excesses, if not tolerate them. After killing Alec, she confesses to Angel: “He has come between us and now he can never do it any more.” Arguably, Alec, the man, is merely a component of “man” whose own componential duality strives to seek out a corresponding component from that embodied in “woman.” This complex juxtaposition becomes clearer in Tess's desire to know from Angel whether “we shall meet again after we are dead.” Ironically, she is imagining a Christian transcendental from a primitive or pagan slab. Unable to have evidence of the celestial assurance that she seeks while still on earth, she hopes to be satisfied in that which she knows is transcendental in man. This is personified by her kid sister, Liz-Lu, who is now called upon to pursue this new path with Angel. Even in death, Tess remains a primitive iconoclast against social norm and suggests that any doctrine which is ethical while denying individual fulfilment is not worth considering. The possibility of marriage between Angel and Liza-Lu in the aftermath of both Alec's and Tess's deaths translates social morality from individual preference. Hugman rejects such a possibility of marriage, citing Angel's contextually feeble and rather desperate statement : “If I lose you I lose all! And she is my sister-in-law” (Hugman, 14). But Tess confesses that she “could share [him] with her willingly when we are spirits!” not only because Liza-Lu is the purer of the two

but also because “[p]eople marry sister-laws continually about Marlott” (*Tess* 416). If Tess and Liza-Lu embody a single personality, it is also plausible that in her rehabilitation of Angel, he also constitutes a comparative duality with Alec. This coupling of the living and the dead evokes gothic elements that were still struggling to impose themselves on the rationalisation of the age. Perhaps, too, Hardy, like Emily Bronte, already anticipated the difficulty of pigeonholing human consciousness that was to be foregrounded by Freud.

### CONCLUSION

*Tess* can thus be read as a celebration of defiance, and in its narration, Hardy depicts a retarding conservatism that was about to be humbled by a momentum that *Tess* initiates. Every social institution in Victorian England is implicated in Tess’s fate, where the Law for instance becomes a Dickensian toy for the pleasure of the rich. Incapacitated by the social capital that also victimises Stephen Blackpool in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Tess is probably unable to report Alec’s trespass on her to the authorities. When she administers revenge as an existentialist strategy, she is eventually condemned for the obvious reason of having taken the law into her hands in the first place. Analysing the law to which Tess submits at the end of the novel, critics refer to “the avenging Furies of conventional opinion” (Scot-James and Lewis, 8-9). While this relates to Hardy’s own reference to the President of the Immortals whom he claimed is an embodiment of forces “allegorised as a personality” (*Life* 244), it also opens up a debate about what protection was available to Tess. In effect, Tess and the President of the Immortals are not different from each other insofar as their acts are concerned, even if their intentions differ. Tess’s goes beyond revenge as an end in itself and presents her as one whose quest is endangered by the object and victim of her wrath. Here, the act of revenge becomes a means to self-fulfilment.

On the other hand, the Law which finally overcomes Tess seems to ignore its own caution of leniency based on mitigating evidence. This instability and dominance of the Law reflects a similar unpredictability in the larger naturalistic setting of the novel and reveals Hardy’s mocking attitude towards

the effect of such a combination. To him, there can be “no reconciliation between love and the law . . . The spirit of love must always succumb before the blind, stupid, but overwhelming power of the law” (Hall 156). In the novel, then, Tess resorts to revenge as a healing process, but after realising its ineffectiveness in the end, she propels herself toward death in a self-sacrificial mood. In doing so, she exposes the “quasi-civilised” society as heretical to its own propaganda, when justice is done that is not actually justifiable. Orwell offers an explanation to this in his definition of revenge as flawed by a cowardly adherence to one’s instincts: “Revenge is an act which you want to commit when you are powerless and because you are powerless: as soon as the sense of impotence is removed, the desire evaporates also” (Orwell 4). Orwell was of course aware of post World War II politics that had built up in his own imaginative construction from *Animal Farm* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Hardy can be read as ancestral to this representation, one in which Tess becomes a composite *locus* for the understanding of why the post-Victorian world suddenly experienced such a dramatic collapse, because the propaganda of change had been more intellectual than realistic in its assessment of what was acceptable.

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