



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Some Ambiguities About a Pure Woman

Author(s): W. Eugene Davis

Source: *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Mar., 1968), pp. 397-401

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932532>

Accessed: 06-03-2020 12:09 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*

script intended to introduce a repeat performance, and in no sense a master design conceived before composition began. While Thackeray must have been indebted to *Pickwick* and *Bentley's* for the connection between serial publication and performances, stage-managers, fairs, and "Shows" in general—perhaps partly in this way arriving at the central analogy of the novel—the puppet metaphor is something he did not think of until the end. That when the book was completed Thackeray fitted puppetry so skilfully into his final address to readers and set it at the opening of the book should not mislead us into giving it too much weight in critical discussion.

JOAN STEVENS

Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand

Tess of the d'Urbervilles:
SOME AMBIGUITIES ABOUT A PURE WOMAN

AMONG the several aspects of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to which readers of the 1890s objected, perhaps no other was more to blame for that indignant outburst than Thomas Hardy's seemingly innocent subtitle: "A Pure Woman."¹ We are inclined to scoff at this "old-fashioned" reaction and attribute it to the ubiquitous Grundyism of that era. After all, who objects to the subtitle today? People now seem to agree that Tess was a pure woman; pure, perhaps, in the sense that Henry Duffin used when he called Tess "unbroken, unspoilt, unadulterable, unflawed, perfect!"² Yet, one may take issue with this somewhat hyperbolic assessment, even if it does agree fairly well with the prevailing opinion of Tess, largely because of the decidedly ambiguous nature of Tess's affair with Alec. It is, of course, perfectly clear that she had intercourse with him, bore his child, and later felt guilty about her indiscretion; but her *purity* could easily pass such a supreme test if her motives are blameless, as Mr. Duffin's use of "unadulterable" suggests. To him, it would appear, Tess's motives are like

¹ New York, 1950. In the "Preface" to the 1912 edition Hardy noted that the subtitle was not part of his original conception of the novel, but "was appended at the last moment, after reading the final proofs, as being the estimate left in a candid mind of the heroine's character—an estimate that nobody would be likely to dispute" (pp. xx–xxi). Subsequent references to this edition of the novel are given in parentheses in the text.

² Henry Charles Duffin, *Thomas Hardy* (Manchester, 1937), p. 218.

some kind of invisible shield, protecting her from any taint of sin despite her affair with Alec and, apparently, her later murder of him. But this interpretation finds little support in the novel. Instead, Tess's motives and actions appear far from perfect, and Hardy's account of these actions is so uncertain and contradictory that we seriously question whether she may be called "pure." It remains, in fact, a wonder how the novel has survived Hardy's unsatisfying handling of the affair and what seems an almost ironic subtitle.

In order to discuss the impression this period of "some few weeks" (95)³ makes on the reader, one is forced to work from long range. Since Hardy chose, for whatever reasons, not to describe as the events happened either the night in *The Chase* or the period that followed, one is forced to infer what happened from information given later. The section of concern to us here contains these events: after nearly becoming involved in a fight with the Queen of Spades, Tess is rescued by Alec. He deliberately drives around until he has lost his way, and leaves Tess alone while he goes in search of directions. When he returns he finds Tess asleep. At this point Hardy "drops the curtain." When it lifts, "some few weeks" have passed, during which time Tess has gone on living at Alec's estate, and Tess is walking home. By not describing the events between Alec's return to the sleeping Tess and Tess's departure from the estate, Hardy left a great deal to our imagination. Was Tess raped or was she seduced?⁴ Did Tess and Alec live together as man and wife in the weeks that followed? Did Tess love Alec for a time? Why did she choose to remain with him? Was Sorrow⁵ (the child of Tess and Alec, born some months later) conceived in *The Chase* or in the weeks that followed?

³ Exactly how long a period Hardy had in mind it is impossible to say, but it might be as few as three weeks or as many as six or eight. Tess leaves Alec's estate on a Sunday in "late October" (95) and the incident in *The Chase* occurred on a Saturday in September (76). If we take "late October" to mean after the fifteenth, it is easy to see that more than a month may have elapsed.

⁴ One factor to be taken into account here is Tess's extreme fatigue. The walk from Trantridge to Chaseborough was "two or three miles" (75), and the encounter with the Queen of Spades was emotionally as well as physically tiring. While she is riding with Alec, Hardy says "She was inexpressibly weary" (86; see also 76–91). Hardy may have made her weary to mitigate her guilt. Could she be fully responsible if she was confused by extreme fatigue?

⁵ A real ambiguity clings to the story of Sorrow. The rustics who observe Tess suckling the child refer to "a sobbing one night last year in *The Chase*" (114), but there is no other reason to suppose that the child was conceived then at all. The facts are these: the ride in *The Chase* occurred some time in September; we are told Tess stayed with Alec until late October; Sorrow's birth is not recorded, but he is

Presenting these scenes directly would certainly have prevented some of the ambiguities. They might also have been avoided if Hardy had effectively utilized the *ex post facto* explanation. Unfortunately, however, after reading these explanations, we are as uncertain as before about Tess's motives. One account is offered when Alec gives Tess a ride as she is going home. They fall into a conversation about her motives in coming to his estate and her reasons for leaving. Tess, obviously bewildered by her conflicting emotions, says "If I had gone for love o' you, if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now! . . . My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all" (97). So hesitant, so filled with "ifs," so equivocal is this reply that we are unable to form a clear idea of her true emotional response to Alec, although that phrase "if I loved you still" is strongly suggestive. Tess's later account to her mother must have been clear enough, judging by her mother's lecture (103), but Hardy did not choose to record the confession itself. Instead, he supplied this bit of authorial exposition: "She had never wholly cared for him, she did not at all care for him now. She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run away. That was all" (104). Yet it cannot be "all," for the phrase "that was all" has two quite different meanings in the two contexts. In the former, "all" seems to include some affection, but there is no trace of such "weakness" in the latter. The second explanation builds a vivid picture in our minds: "dreaded," "wincing," "succumbed," "blinded," "confused surrender"—all suggest a helpless, insensate animal, surely not a woman who felt the slightest twinge of love. Yet the subtle suggestiveness of Tess's account contrasts sharply with the loveless brutality of Hardy's; Tess returns to that word "love" like a man who keeps putting his tongue on a sore tooth, thereby confirming its presence.

Hardy's "explanation," then, seems like some kind of *ex cathedra* pronouncement about what Tess should have felt and

still a baby the next August. September—August=11 months; October—August=10 months. The baby might, therefore, have been conceived any time during those few weeks. Did Hardy deliberately avoid fixing too firmly the chronology of Sorrow's conception and birth in order to heighten our curiosity about Tess and Alec's relationship after the night in *The Chase*?

how she should have behaved, yet her own words and actions point to another conclusion: in consenting to Alec's desires, Tess did not so much succumb as cooperate willingly. St. Francis has said that "Purity of soul cannot be lost without consent." If one may phrase that insight in the affirmative and apply it to Tess it seems clear that she must be stripped of that misleading label "A Pure Woman," for whether or not she consented in *The Chase* she certainly did consent to stay for quite a long time with Alec, and seems to have left his estate in a very confused state of mind.

If one grants the existence of a contradiction between the title-page Tess and the real protagonist of the novel, between the Tess Hardy tried to create with his account and the real Tess who tells her own story, an interesting question arises: how is it that the novel remains triumphantly alive despite this flagrant violation of unity and coherence? Novels may, as Percy Lubbock observed, "triumphantly live down" ⁶ serious formal aberrations, but is not this flaw of characterization so serious that we can no longer regard the novel quite so highly as before? One might rush to defend *Tess* with a variety of arguments: the flaw does not bother most readers because they accept Hardy's explanation without seeing the contradiction between statement and actuality; or, we sexually emancipated moderns are more willing to forgive Tess's sins than our grandparents were. Such defenses are, however, weak. The essential reason that the flaw does not disturb us very much is this: we see and believe in the Tess that Hardy created and we accept her creator's lame apologies and reticent explanation as well-meant but extraneous authorial commentary. In a sense, we throw his view of Tess out of focus, keeping our eyes focused instead on the woman herself. We choose to remember Tess as an *active* being, capable of willing and doing. We therefore reject Hardy's view, which suggests weakness, passivity. And, as I have tried to show, Tess was by any sensible definition of the term "impure," but Hardy's view of her stresses her purity. Is it not, then, the strong, passionate, impure Tess we understand and love? The novel lives because the heroine lives—not as some sort of ethereally pure creature but as an intensely human woman, even though, I suspect, her creator could not be quite candid about the character he had fashioned.

⁶ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London, 1960), p. 10.

It is interesting to note that Hardy was willing, at least once, to grant that Tess might not be completely worthy of the subtitle. He conceded, in a discussion with Edmund Blunden, that she lost "a certain outward purity on her last fall [her return to the arms of Alec late in the novel]" but he maintained that she retained her "innate purity" to the end.⁷ He may have meant by that phrase a certain unassailable virtue, an impregnable goodness that might not be destroyed. Perhaps "a pure woman" is not, however, the best description of a woman whose impurity makes her human and makes her actions in the novel credible.

W. EUGENE DAVIS

Purdue University

ROBERT A. COLBY, *Fiction with a Purpose: Major and Minor Nineteenth-Century Novels*

DAVID HOWARD, JOHN LUCAS, JOHN GOODE, *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*

CHARLES A. HOYT, ed., *Minor British Novelists*

THESE THREE BOOKS range through and beyond the fiction of the nineteenth century; they range also in their aims and achievements. The volume edited by Hoyt in the "Crosscurrents" series (Southern Illinois: \$4.95) has the simplest aim, a collection of introductory essays linked only by the presupposition that a student may know little or nothing of their subjects. The selection of novelists (Burney, Edgeworth, Peacock, Surtees, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Machen, Williams and Rose Macaulay) appears to be arbitrary. The essays are uneven in quality and approach as well as in the amount of information offered; for example, W. B. Coley's survey of Maria Edgeworth's achievement is succinct and includes an excellent, brief discussion on the distinction between historical and regional novels, whereas Charles Shapiro cheerfully admits—and his essay demonstrates the point—that he would hate to be an authority on Mrs. Gaskell.

The two remaining volumes merit closer consideration. They are interestingly similar in method, which illustrates perhaps the extent to which continuing emphasis on the socio-literary background of fiction has influenced criticism. Each book consists of chapters organized round the close examination of individual works; each has a controlling theme which shapes a fresh analysis

⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Thomas Hardy* (London, 1941), p. 79.