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## ESSAYS

### HARDY'S HANDLING OF BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS IN HIS PORTRAYAL OF TESS IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

By John A. Anonby, Trinity Western College, B.C.

Hardy's depiction of his heroine in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has triggered an astonishing variety of critical responses since the novel's publication in 1891. One critic complained in *The Quarterly Review* (April, 1892) that Hardy's novel was a "clumsy sordid tale of boorish brutality and lust" in which "poor Tess's sensual qualifications for the part of heroine are paraded over and over again with a persistence like that of a horse-dealer egging on some wavering customer to a deal."<sup>1</sup> Another contemporary critic, Lionel Johnson, in his comprehensive study of Hardy's works, complained that Tess was "pitiable, but not admirable" and that "the apparent energies of will, regrets of soul, in Tess, were but as the muscular movement of a dead body."<sup>2</sup> This assessment of the character of Tess is reinforced by a recent critical comment on the "fatal passivity" of Tess.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to these negative evaluations of either the character or characterization of Tess are numerous expressions of sympathetic response towards Hardy's novel and its protagonist. Shortly after the publication of *Tess*, Hardy was praised in *The Athenaeum* for writing "a novel that is not only good, but great. Tess herself stands, a credible, sympathetic creature in the very forefront of his women."<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, although she recognizes how "absurdly ineffectual" all of Tess's efforts are, does not concur with Lionel Johnson that Tess is "pitiable but not admirable," but rather sees in the "dilemma of Tess . . . the tragic heroism and tragic ineffectuality of such consciousness in an antagonistic earth where events shape themselves by

accident rather than by moral design."<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, it becomes possible to agree with Trevor Johnson, who sees Tess as a timeless exemplar of "the indomitability of the human spirit."<sup>6</sup>

Such diversified responses towards the protagonist in *Tess* suggest that Hardy has either created a character of phenomenal complexity or has subtly shaped our attitudes towards his heroine by various artistic techniques. I cannot accept the former alternative. Tess is a simple country maiden whose futile efforts to alleviate the misery of her indigent (and indolent) family end in disaster to herself without appreciably alleviating the misery of the family in the process. Her powers of endurance are commendable, perhaps even admirable, but they are not astounding. Her propensity towards self-sacrifice (symbolized by her repose on the altar at Stonehenge towards the end of the novel) arouses our pity and--shall we admit it?--even exasperates us when she returns to the opportunistic Alec, her former seducer, in order to maintain her bereaved mother and siblings. Her prolonged search for genuine love, unrequited except for a few brief hours prior to her execution, is perfectly credible in terms of common human experience. In all of this there is nothing unusual, bizarre, or particularly complex. Even if we accept the verdict of *The Athenaeum* that Tess is a "sympathetic creature in the very forefront of his women,"<sup>7</sup> it is not because Tess is a more intrinsically fascinating figure than any other woman in Hardy's novels. Tess lacks the protean variety of such characters as Lucetta in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Sue in *Jude the Obscure*, the manipulative power of Arabella in *Jude*, or the brooding passion of Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*. Nevertheless, Tess eclipses these other characters almost as completely as she transcends her fellow milkmaids at Talbothays farm.

How, then, do we account for the magnetic attraction of Tess? Is it adequate to maintain with Trevor Johnson that "Hardy's genius in creating Tess" is in making her "a kind

of saint and martyr . . . a flawed saint, not a wax effigy of Virtue"?<sup>8</sup> Surely flawed sainthood is not incompatible with modern conceptions of heroism. Had Tess been depicted as an untarnished embodiment of Virtue, her credibility to the reader would have suffered irreparably. A more imaginative approach to Hardy's characterization of Tess has been suggested by Bayley, who argues that Hardy alternates "between one kind of Tess and another" and that this augments the power of the novel "to move us."<sup>9</sup> Bayley does not appear to be completely convinced by his own postulation, however, for he vacillates between his view that "Tess is a triumph of non-realization" and his admission that "the successive personae of Tess [begin] to operate against each other," with the result that Tess loses her "power to enchant"<sup>10</sup> at the time of her post-marital confession to Angel. Bayley's position, in short, does not adequately account for the strengthening of the bond between Tess and the reader in the final half of the novel.

If the appeal of Tess to the reader is not to be found primarily in the personality of Tess herself, it must be accounted for by the manner in which she is presented to us by Hardy. How does Hardy manipulate us into identifying so closely with this fictional character that, as some critics have confessed, she seems more real to us than people we have known? This is particularly noteworthy when we recall that Tess is an adulteress and a murderess. Considering that involvement in murder and adultery are not normal activities even for "flawed" saints, Hardy's powers of maneuverability and his characterization techniques deserve further scrutiny. Three of these techniques, in order of increasing significance and subtlety, are authorial intrusion, description involving mythical or literary parallels, and skillful manipulation of biblical allusions. My focus is primarily on the third, but I shall briefly illustrate the first two.

Hardy's deliberate intention to shape the response of the reader appears, of course, as early as the subtitle of

the novel: "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented."<sup>11</sup> The citation from Shakespeare which follows, "Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed/shall lodge thee," is also an attempt to exonerate Tess prior to the reader's exposure to her moral transgressions. Such authorial intrusions were, understandably, labelled as "needless"<sup>12</sup> when the novel first appeared, an assessment with which even admirers of Hardy would be inclined to agree. Other forms of intrusion appear throughout the novel, such as Hardy's description of Angel shortly after he has abandoned Tess:

. . . he was not prophet enough to tell himself that . . . her moral value [ought] to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency. . . . In considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire.

(*Tess*, pp. 309-10)

To shape the reader's response by means of opinion expressed in dialogue between characters, or even to describe the thought processes of his characters, is the prerogative of the omniscient narrator. But to supply the reader with opinions which his character is *not* thinking about is an example of blatant manipulation.

Hardy's control of the response of the reader towards Tess is, fortunately, frequently more felicitous than this. Various details are employed to arouse or enhance our respect for Tess. The opening incident in the novel, in which the parson conveys to Tess's father that he is a descendant of an ancient knightly family, is not merely the activating circumstance that sets the plot in motion; it is a detail that forces us to see Tess as more than a mere peasant. Like Angel, we may pretend that it does not matter, but Hardy's intention has nevertheless been fulfilled: we now view Tess as a kind of aristocrat, a modern counterpart to the Perdita of *The Winter's Tale* or Pastorella of *The Faerie Queene*.

This ties in beautifully with Hardy's placing of Tess in the pastoral setting of the dairy farm at Talbothays. Viewing her through Angel's eyes, we see Tess not only as a

milkmaid (which in itself has timeless connotations of innocence, naturalness, and purity--as in Overbury's "A Fair and Happy Milkmaid") but as "a visionary essence of woman" (*Tess*, p. 170). She is a "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" who in the "luminous gloom" of early dawn becomes metamorphosed into Artemis and Demeter, the Greek goddesses of chastity and fertility, respectively (p. 170). The fact that Tess is no longer a virgin seems to evaporate from our memory as we behold Tess in the idyllic setting into which Hardy has placed her. The Perdita motif is reinforced as Tess emerges out of morning mists with "minute diamonds of moisture . . . [upon] her eyelashes, and drops upon her hair like seed pearls" (p. 171). When Angel later expresses his bitter complaint that he has been loving another woman in the shape of Tess, we simply do not believe him; Hardy, by means of his imagistic techniques, has already exculpated Tess completely from taint of moral blame.

The most pervasive characterization technique in the novel, however, is the adept manipulation of biblical allusions on Tess's behalf. Hardy is not content merely to present us with an innocent rural maiden, though there are, in the words of Mrs. Clare, "few purer things in nature than an unsullied country maid" (p. 305). His heroine has also been carefully named "Tess," a contraction of "Theresa," the name of a great Spanish Christian saint. By interweaving Scriptural references throughout the fabric of his novel, Hardy subtly implies that Tess, who is not even a Christian by either Victorian standards of morality or doctrinal orthodoxy, meets the biblical criteria for sainthood and perhaps even transcends them. Bayley's difficulty in discovering unity in Hardy's depiction of Tess may be a result of his assumption that Hardy's references to the Bible "impose no burden of significance on themselves or the reader."<sup>13</sup> Since the novel abounds in biblical imagery, citations, and allusions, it is presumptuous to dismiss them as being of little consequence. In his recent work on Hardy, Lance St. John

Butler makes the observation that "Christianity looms larger in *Tess* than in any previous Hardy novel,"<sup>14</sup> and attempts to sketch very briefly some aspects of Christianity in the work. My concern, however, is to select from the numerous Scriptural references in the novel the allusions which have particular relevance to our picture of Tess.

It is important to observe that Hardy is attempting to produce, in his depiction of Tess, a saint who is able to function in a universe devoid of moral direction. In his handling of the crucially important scene in which the sleeping Tess is about to be violated by Alec, Hardy asks:

Where was the providence of her simple faith?  
Perhaps, like that other god of whom the  
ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or  
he was pursuing, or he was sleeping and not  
to be awakened. (p. 107)

By means of this somewhat obscure reference to I Kings 18:27, Hardy implies that Tess's Hebraic-Christian God is just as much a figure of the imagination as the idol Baal was to his misguided and fanatical devotees. Hardy then immediately suggests an alternative: Tess may be suffering for the sins of her ancestors. This, of course, would allow for the possibility that God exists, but Hardy makes it clear that

though to visit the sins of the fathers upon  
the children may be a morality good enough  
for divinities, it is scorned by average  
human nature; and it does not therefore mend  
the matter. (p. 108)

This allusion to Exodus 20:5, right out of the Ten Commandments, makes Hardy's agnostic position clear; if there is a supreme being in the universe, he acts capriciously.. It is in this context that Tess's attributes as a saint must be measured.

Hardy's utilization of Scripture in his depiction of Tess is frequently characterized by a fascinating combination of boldness and subtlety. Most students of Scripture, for instance, would agree that Moses, Job, and Paul are among the most highly revered figures in the Scriptures. Hardy, therefore, draws parallels between Tess and these exemplary

individuals. Tess's longing for death subsequent to her mistreatment by Alec is compared by Hardy to the suffering of "the man of Uz" in his period of suffering and desolation (p. 163). When her baby, Sorrow, is dying, Tess is so concerned for the infant's salvation that she exclaims, "O merciful God, have pity. . . . Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!" (p. 129). This kind of intercessory prayer echoes Moses' willingness to endure God's wrath on behalf of the Israelites (Exodus 32:32) and Paul's willingness to be accursed for the sake of his brethren (Romans 9:3). Such references may seem to be incidental, but they nevertheless shape our response towards Tess, who is continually suffering for the sins of others.

Perhaps more obvious than these are the comparisons Hardy draws between Tess and biblical female figures, of which I shall select four examples: Eve, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31, Mary Magdalene, and the scarlet woman of Revelation 17 and 18. Even this brief selection, however, introduces an immediate complication. What do Eve and Mary Magdalene have in common? How can Hardy with any kind of consistency compare Tess both to the model wife of Proverbs and the allegorical figure of evil described in the Apocalypse? Is this why Bayley feels that "the successive personae of Tess . . . operate against each other"?

To resolve this dilemma, it is necessary to see each reference in its proper context. There are actually four references to Eve in the novel. The first two are employed by Hardy to describe Clare and Tess in the halcyon period of their courtship at Talbothays. Working together in the early dawn, "they seemed to themselves the first persons up of all the world . . . as if they were Adam and Eve" (pp. 169, 210). Hardy does not mention the word "Paradise" here; it would be superfluous. The last two references to Eve emerge from the mouth of Alec. He, too, is attempting to court Tess. The atmosphere, however, has completely changed. Having just renounced his recent "faith" because of his

passion for Tess, Alec blames her for his apostasy. He labels her as a "temptress" with the "most maddening mouth since Eve's" (p. 370). Not long afterwards, when Alec suddenly emerges, fork in hand, out of the smoke and fire during the period of weed-burning, he jocularly compares himself to "the old Other One" (Satan) and Tess to Eve, and states that "this is just like Paradise" (p. 397). This does not strike Tess--or us--as at all humorous; figuratively, Tess is on the threshold of Hell. In the conversation that ensues, Alec tempts her on her most vulnerable point by offering to support her family in exchange for the resuscitation of their relationship. The comparisons of Tess to Eve appear to take us in opposite directions. She is, on the one hand, the "essence of woman" (Clare's view), or in Milton's terms, the "mother of mankind"; she is also the *femme fatale*, the primordial temptress of mankind, and, from Alec's perspective, the "witch of Babylon" (further described in Revelation 17 as "the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth").

This paradoxical presentation of Tess suits Hardy's intentions perfectly, for whether we look at Tess through the eyes of Clare or Alec, her impact on us is the same in one profound respect: she has achieved a stature far beyond that of a simple rural damsel. She represents femininity on a grand scale. Hardy has, however, accomplished more than this. By strategically placing the pastoral courtship of Angel prior to Alec's sordid suit, Hardy so transfixes us with Angel's view of Tess that we are unable to jettison it for any other. This is little short of remarkable, especially when we recall that Hardy has not attempted to conceal the "real" Tess from us. He has clearly indicated that Clare's visionary Tess is sustained only by the phosphorescent mists of dawn and that Alec's more formidable Tess is clouded by smoke from the fires at night. Like the transformed Mary Magdalene, whose stature in the popular imagination has transcended the few cryptic details given in the

Gospels, and to whom Tess is also obliquely compared by Hardy (p. 170), Tess has been metamorphosed into a figure of timeless significance.

To achieve this transformation, Hardy has also boldly endowed his exemplar of sainthood with attributes taken from biblical passages of exceptional evocative power. When Tess is experiencing emotional turmoil because of her inability to confess her past to Angel, he attempts to alleviate her distress by expressing his conviction that she is "numbered among those who are true, and honest, and just, and pure and lovely, and of good report" (p. 237), an adaptation of Philippians 4:8. He is undoubtedly reminded of this, after he has abandoned her, when his father reads from Proverbs 31: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies . . ." (p. 308). Hardy quotes at length here, and even has Mrs. Clare pointing out to Angel how the passage seems to fit his earlier description of Tess. This Hebraic model of womanhood, which Tess so clearly exemplifies, is supplemented in other parts of the novel by excerpts from I Corinthians 13, the best known of all biblical passages on the essential characteristics of Christian love. Tess "sought not her own; was not provoked; thought no evil. . . . She might just now have been Apostolic Charity herself returned to a self-seeking modern world" (pp. 255, 284).

It is not surprising that Hardy, who employs so much Scripture in his shaping of our image of Tess, also finds it very much to his purpose to draw comparisons between Tess and the supreme model of love and selfless devotion, Christ himself. Hardy's Christological allusions and images, however, are frequently handled with even greater subtlety and obliqueness than we have detected up to this point. Like Jesus, who was born and raised in obscurity even though he was of the royal house of Judah, Tess had descended from an ancient illustrious line of ancestors. Furthermore, Angel's choice of a maiden from Talbothays Dairy is compared by Mrs. Clare to Christ's emergence from the insignificant village

of Nazareth, an allusion to John 1:46, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Hardy pays particular attention to biblical details connected with the trial of Christ. (This is certainly appropriate, considering that Tess's life was little more than a trial from beginning to end.) The extreme brevity of Tess's period of joy after her marriage to Angel is foreshadowed by the crowing of a rooster on the very afternoon of the wedding day. The dairyman's wife dismisses the incident as merely signifying "a change in the weather" (p. 258), but the fact that the rooster crowed three times is clearly reminiscent of Peter's denial of Christ. Shortly afterwards, the atmosphere of the novel changes drastically, and Angel antagonistically declares that Tess is not the person he has loved but "another woman in [her] shape." Although he uses different words in each instance, Angel makes his point three times. A more oblique allusion to the sufferings of Christ, which editors of Hardy appear not to have noticed, is that of the betrayal. Having determined to go to Brazil, Angel has a few final duties to perform, but "what he had to complete he wished to get done quickly" (p. 312). This description echoes Christ's words to Judas at the last supper in John 13:27 ("that thou doest, do quickly"), and it reinforces our impression that Angel's abandonment of Tess is tantamount to a betrayal of her trust in him, as it prepares the way for the forces that will destroy her. He has left her with nothing but a "thorny crown" (p. 188) of painful memories and a meaningless marriage, even though she "would have laid down her life" for him (p. 315), as Izz admits in terms which echo the words of Christ on the eve of the crucifixion.

Perhaps the most complex parallels between Christ and Tess appear in Hardy's use of serpent imagery. Just prior to his proposal of marriage to Tess, Angel sees Tess coming down the stairs yawning, and he observes the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake's (p. 210). On this occasion Angel is entranced by her beauty. The next time

she appears like a serpent is immediately after his three-fold denial of her on their wedding night. Her shock at his bitter words metamorphoses her into a lamia. She turns pale, and "her mouth had almost the aspect of a little hole" (p. 272). She has been transformed from the quintessence of loveliness to a figure of evil. We can now appreciate more fully Bayley's difficulty in harmonizing "the successive personae" of Tess. Nevertheless, Bayley might have resolved this dilemma had he allowed biblical references to "impose" a "burden of significance"<sup>16</sup> on him at this point. Hardy soon refers to Tess's mouth again in his account of the widening estrangement that takes place after Angel's rejection of Tess:

She took everything as her deserts, and hardly opened her mouth. . . . (p. 284)

This allusion to Isaiah 53:7 moves us from serpent to lamb imagery. Like Christ, who "is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth," Tess is being prepared for sacrifice. Serpent and lamb imagery are only superficially incompatible here, however. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). God made Christ "to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). He is also the sacrificial lamb who "taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The spotless lamb can also be viewed as a serpent; it all depends on one's perspective. There is a parallel here to Hardy's portrayal of Tess. From one point of view Tess can be despised and rejected as the chief of sinners. She is an adulteress and a murderess who deserves to be hanged for her crimes against society's moral codes. This is not, however, how we feel about Tess at the end of the novel. We feel, in fact, that we would have behaved exactly like Tess in similar circumstances--but by so responding to Hardy's sympathetic treatment of Tess we become accomplices in her guilt. Aware of our own propensities, we are made to feel that we cannot cast a single stone.

By so manipulating the emotions of the reader, however, Hardy has insidiously devised a stratagem of momentous moral significance. His double focus technique has, in effect, blurred or even obliterated the distinction between good and evil. It is Tess *qua* saint who finally emerges, phoenix-like, from her role as adulteress and murderess. By his skillful manipulation of our deeply rooted sense of compassion for an "innocent victim" Hardy has blinded us to the otherwise obvious point that, if she is to have any genuine stature as a person, Tess cannot be completely devoid of a will of her own. And Hardy has not, in fact, deprived her of volition. It is with powerful determination that Tess exclaims "I shan't come back" (p. 111) when Alec unsuccessfully attempts to coerce her to return to his home after her early morning escape several weeks after the initial seduction scene. Furthermore, it is with open eyes, though under emotional and financial duress, that Tess eventually makes her injudicious decision to return to the rogue who has consistently marred her life. The extent to which she asserts her will is, however, a valid measure of her personal responsibility. Tess, therefore, is neither completely "innocent" nor is she merely a "victim," regardless of how Hardy makes us *feel* by the end of the novel.

It is in this light that Hardy's imagistic techniques should be viewed. The parallels Hardy draws between Tess and such biblical figures as Eve and Mary Magdalene, though slightly audacious, are not entirely incongruous; these characters, like Tess, had checkered careers. In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, Eve is contrastingly addressed by Adam as "Daughter of God" in her prelapsarian state and as "Serpent" after the fall (IV, 660; X, 867). Hardy's brief allusions to Moses, Job, and Paul in his delineation of Tess as a paragon of self-sacrificing virtue are also credible, considering that even these biblical figures had some identifiable human weaknesses. The extensive Christological imagery connected with Tess, however, is an entirely different

matter. Almost imperceptibly, Hardy has moved from a few transparent allusions to events in the life of Christ to oblique parallels which have sacrilegious implications. The blending of serpent and lamb imagery in his depiction of Tess, though it has biblical counterparts, is profoundly inappropriate (though I believe intentional) on Hardy's part. Tess is not completely innocent and cannot therefore be regarded as a spotless lamb qualified, like Christ, to bear vicariously the sins of society. Neither can she be viewed as the redeeming serpent in the wilderness as she is herself, as Alec discovered too late, an agent of death. Hardy has so transmogrified Tess that by the end of the novel the image of the lamb has obliterated that of the serpent. Through his imagistic techniques, Hardy has attempted to exonerate Tess so completely that her moral culpability is all but forgotten; we are left with an amoral world view in which distinctions between good and evil are determined by social reaction or individual response. With great subtlety and profound irreverence, Hardy has infused his late nineteenth-century masterpiece with the trappings of Scripture to reinforce his view of a morally relativistic and ultimately meaningless universe.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>From *The Quarterly Review* (April, 1892), reproduced in Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 383-4.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 396-7.

<sup>3</sup>Lance St. John Butler, *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 98.

<sup>4</sup>From *The Athenaeum* (January 9, 1892), cited in Norton, p. 378.

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 198, 205.

<sup>6</sup>Trevor Johnson, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1968), p. 144.

<sup>7</sup>From *The Athenaeum*, Norton, p. 378.

<sup>8</sup>Trevor Johnson, p. 151.

<sup>9</sup>John Bayley, *An Essay on Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 180.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 170, 174.

<sup>11</sup>Unless otherwise specified, references to the primary text are from the New Wessex Edition of Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>From *The Athenaeum*, Norton, p. 378.

<sup>13</sup>Bayley, p. 181.

<sup>14</sup>Butler, p. 114.

<sup>15</sup>Bayley, p. 175.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 181.

POINT

*I am not merely this mutable mind  
falling face first  
and feet behind  
on the temporal sidewalk  
where all glasses are broken  
and all bodies lie.*

*Nor am I simply a sign  
planted in concrete  
on a dusty road,  
pocked by shotgun pellets  
and bleeding "stop"  
into unhearing eyes.*

*I am a city,  
destination,  
point on a map  
larger than cosmos,  
more intricate  
than gray, electric cells.*

--Hubert E. Hix