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Pure Tess:
Hardy on Knowing a Woman

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I

From the title page, the reader knows Hardy's heroine as Tess of the
D'Urbervilles and as "A Pure Woman," in other words, as individual
and as pure abstraction. The novel's title and subtitle introduce a
dialectic of knowledge which is shown to generate both good and ill,
Tess's charm and her tragedy. This dialectic shapes theme, imagery,
and allusion, narrative structure, and dramatic interaction, and it also
makes itself eloquently felt throughout in Hardy's own language about
his heroine. It even permeates the language of critics responding to the
novel. At stake are Hardy's ideas about knowledge of the beautiful and
the beloved, and, as a novel about knowing a woman, Tess offers his
finest exposition of these ideas.

Hardy's post-romantic historical moment as well as his own reading
and temperament inducted him into the epistemological wars whose
battle lines are laid out by Hume and Kant. Kant takes up arms against
Hume's characterization of experience as a mere aggregate of percep-
tions and instead declares the power of the mind to legislate experience.¹
Hardy's fascination with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philoso-
phers of understanding and their notable literary heir, Shelley, has been
pointed out by Tom Paulin in his study of the writer's poetry. This
epistemological interest is well represented in a picture Hardy once
drew; sketching a landscape where he had danced with a girl, he
superimposed a pair of giant eyeglasses to depict the contingency of
reality upon the focal powers of the observer's eyes.² And he says in Tess

¹Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, rev. of Carus trans.,
²Tom Paulin, Thomas Hardy, The Poetry of Perception (Totowa, New Jersey:
that "the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what [things] seemed they were" (p. 108).²

Of abiding interest to Hardy is apprehension of the general in relation to the particular within the seeming that makes reality, and the way a woman is apprehended provides a measure of this dialectic which reveals its complexity. And so in Tess he explores the question: what happens when the object of knowledge is also the object of aesthetic response³ and of love? He finds what happens full of delight and danger.

The novel’s title names the particular and attaches it to the universal in the subtitle. Tess bears a proper name as a unique person, while she is universalized as a pure woman. In defending his controversial subtitle in the preface to the fifth and subsequent editions of the novel, Hardy suggests connotations of the word "pure" that critics had missed. He says, "They ignore the meaning of the word in Nature, together with all aesthetic claims upon it, not to mention the spiritual interpretation afforded by the finest side of their own Christianity" (p. viii). This whole statement is more provocative than clear, and I believe that the final reference to spirituality aims more at scoring a debater’s point than anything else, in that it allows Hardy to capitalize by means of irony on a meaning overlooked by his Christian critics. Many such critics had balked at attributing purity to a fornicator, unwed mother, sometimes religious skeptic, a wife who rejoins her former lover, a murderess. Tess failed to impress them with ethical purity, judged according to religious doctrine, erotic morality, or the law of the land.⁴ But, dissatisfied with commonplace understanding of his phrase, Hardy hints at wider, alternate meanings. In the case of this subtitle, signification does vary profoundly as a function of inflection. "A pure woman" does not equal "a pure woman" (while "a pure woman" may go either way). The first proclaims Tess a woman of certain character; the second proclaims her a woman, as though placing her within a natural and aesthetic class, as

³Kant’s thinking provides a remarkable analog to Hardy’s in that he locates "the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal" in the judgment, which is also the seat of aesthetic response—see Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), p. 15.
⁴See contemporary response to the novel in Laurence Lerner and John Holstrom, eds., Thomas Hardy and His Readers (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), pp. 58-102. See also Mary Jacobus, "Tess’s Purity," EIC 26 (October 1976):318-38. Understanding purity in the usual ethical/erotic sense, Jacobus argues that Hardy increasingly "whiteskins" (p. 336) his heroine in his revisions, creating a Tess who seems the less self-responsible for being presented as immune to what happens to her and who therefore strikes us ultimately as more victimized than tragic.
though linking her appeal to a general concept of woman's place in nature's scheme. In suggesting the connotation of natural and aesthetic purity in his preface, Hardy moves the meaning toward a new realm, that of the archetypal, essential, ideal, generic.

Though Hardy hints at such factors in Tess's purity, I cannot claim that he usually uses the word "pure" with these connotations. His critics might have defended their interpretation by pointing to the author's habitual and quite ordinary presentation of purity as an erotic characteristic, as equivalent to maidenhood, the "pure and chaste" (p. 336). This meaning hovers behind Angel Clare's notion of the "spotless," "unsullied," that is, sexually "intact" state (pp. 337, 435). Alec D'Urberville shifts the meaning somewhat. As he sees it, Tess need not be physically intact to remain psychologically "unsmirched" by erotic experience (p. 411). Still, his meaning involves a notion of erotic morality. Indeed, J. T. Laird's study of the novel's development through manuscript and published versions reveals the easy interchangeability, for Hardy, of the words "chastity" and "purity." Hardy is undeniably concerned with the erotic issue in Tess's case. His revisions reveal such concern. For instance, in later versions he takes care to downplay the heroine's sensual responsiveness and culpability, while emphasizing Angel's attraction to her specifically virginal appeal. Hardy makes Tess an ever purer woman, in this sense. Critics might have claimed justification for their moral, and more particularly erotic standard of assessment.

Very few have apprehended purity in any other way. Among these few, D. H. Lawrence calls Tess a self-establishing aristocrat and in that sense "pure-bred." J. Hillis Miller calls parenthetical attention to the word "pure" and allows us to see that, like Lawrence's phrase "pure-bred," certain phrases of Hardy's such as "pure inadverence" and "purely the product of the writer's own mind" connote the entire, integral, and essential. In the novel itself the most significant sample of such a meaning appears in Hardy's description of Tess as "a field-woman pure and simple" (p. 357). The passage strips her of individuality to make her a figure in the landscape, and it departs from ethical/erotic signification. The phrase itself does not propose that a field-woman is pure and simple; it proposes that she is a field-woman and nothing but a.

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field—woman. It asserts very nearly the same thing as an early characterization of Tess: "she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more" (p. 14). In such a manner may the subtitle suggest the meaning—a woman and nothing but a woman, unspotted, unsoiled, unmarred by particularity—while the title specifies the particular woman by her own name. Tess presents the paradoxical spectacle of the "almost standard woman" (p. 114; emphasis mine). On the one hand, she is a being for whom "the universe itself only came into being . . . on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born" (p. 199). On the other hand, she is "a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (p. 167).

The novel's hero, Angel Clare, favors the latter, purist point of view. As we know, Hardy shaped Angel partly from his understanding of Shelley, as he did Jocelyn Pierston in The Well-Beloved (1897). It is worthwhile to look at Walter Bagehot's portrait of the poet since it made a strong early impression on Hardy and may well have influenced his presentation of these Shelley-like heroes, setting him to contemplate the sort of purity in women desired by such men. Admiring Shelley, Bagehot also criticizes him as an idealist and simplifier in love, as in his other passions, so that his poetry expresses desire for all women in one rather than for any one woman. In his analysis of the Shelleyan experience of love for a single, unvarying figure under many apparitions, Bagehot seems to point Hardy toward the novelistic fantasies of The Well-Beloved, with its Shelleyan epigraph (from Laon and Cythna), "One shape of many names." This novel follows its hero's infatuations with serial copies of his single idea of the feminine. Bagehot finds such a passion intense at the expense of complexity or potential for development. He perhaps seeds Hardy's mind with a definition of purity and a line of thought leading to Tess and its subtitle when he calls the beloved of a Shelley poem "the pure object of the essential passion." Here "pure" exempts the beloved not only from erotic but from any adulteration. As aesthetic and romantic object, she becomes generic for her gender.

II

"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" (p. 111). This is another way of calling her a field—woman pure and simple, and such a notion of

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*Paulin, p. 17, notes the importance for Hardy of Bagehot's 1856 essay, "Percy Bysshe Shelley."

purity enters into Hardy's fascination throughout *Tess* with loss of margin, that is, with diffusion of uniqueness in favor of generic status. Hardy examines the trade-off between gain and loss in this transaction. Thus he points out the field-woman's "charm" (p. 111), while the novel as a whole subjects the sources and consequences of such charm to a probing critique.

While a woman's release from personality to become a portion of the field, an "essence of woman," or "soul at large" (p. 167), is the most significant mode of marginlessness treated, there are a number of others contributing to the novel's theme. For example, alcohol breaks down margins and offers pleasing expansion beyond petty, everyday identity. The imbibers at Rollover's Inn find that "their souls expanded beyond their skins, and spread their personalities warmly through the room" (p. 27). In the same way, the Saturday-night revelers of Tantridge reel home liberated from the confines of self into harmony with natural forces, "themselves and surrounding nature forming an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other" (p. 81). In a lovely image, the moonlit, misty halos that wave round their unsteady heads, compounded of the light, the dewy air, and the fumes of their own breathing, spread these men and women abroad into the night. No longer Car Darch, Nancy, and their partners, they merge with the atmosphere, and nature "seemed harmoniously to mingle with the spirit of wine" (p. 84).

Nature, like wine, can gratify the soul by drawing it forth from its margin. *Tess* seeks out the hour between day and night whose balanced light lets loose the spirit and allows it to wander "an integral part of the scene" (p. 108). "Our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive," Tess says, and cultivates the feeling by gazing at the stars (p. 154). As dawn illumination makes *Tess* look like a "soul at large," and as a moonlit mist allows the Tantridge revelers to join with the night, other effects of light serve to blur the psychological edges. The dancers of Tantridge dim into the nebulousity of a warm atmosphere of candle-lit sweat and peat-dust. They merge with the natural scene amidst a sort of "vegeto-human-pollen," and become nature gods, figures of Pan whirling Syrinx, Lotus attempting to elude Priapus (p. 77).

Supporting the idea and imagery of marginlessness, a system of mythological allusions drawn from nature cults metamorphoses the particular into the general throughout the novel, as seen in the opening pageant of the Marlott club-walking. Here women of the village re-enact a timeless Cerealalia. Their white dresses unify them into group identity and release them to some extent from the "real" into the "ideal" (p. 11). Much criticism has been devoted to such mythic patterning, as well as to the animal imagery that assimilates *Tess* to nature. In the same vein, Angel and Tess converge like two streams at Talbothay's Dairy,
and the entire sequence is famous for its humano-natural convergences. The pair becomes by implication another generic "instalment" of young lovers like any other springtime "instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures" (p. 165).

In sex we see one of nature's strongest means of diffusing unique personality. Hence Hardy's strange narrative device of triplicating Tess in the other dairymaids who fall in love with Angel. According to "Nature's Law," "the differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called sex" (p. 187). It has distressed many readers, but Tess herself seems to be partly duplicated and replaced in Angel's heart by her surviving sister Liza Lu, in accordance with the abstracting law of love.

Nature's power of duplication, or triplication, figures elsewhere as temporal repetition. Hence the novel's preoccupation with history, especially in the form of D'Urberville family history. Like multiplication of those in love or loved, repetition of the doings of all who went before seems to erode autonomy, and Tess finds this loss of margin sad instead of welcome. Hardy makes repetition structural to his novel by introducing tales parallel to Tess's round Dairyman Crick's table, and many critics have stressed the ballad origin of her story.

Throughout the novel the marginless state takes different forms, both attractive and disturbing. In a landscape description on the final page marginlessness appears again. Here at the end Tess has symbolically lost her margin by suggested merging with the sister who takes her place at Angel's side. Just so, the landscape extends itself by means of a characteristically limit-dissolving light, and the pair gazes at "landscape beyond landscape, till the horizon was lost in the radiance of the sun hanging above it" (p. 507). This description of a boundless panorama oddly parallels a description of the mental viewpoint of the stranger Angel meets in Brazil, who persuades him to take the long view of Tess's moral breach: "to his cosmopolitan mind such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale and mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve" (p. 434). And in a comparable description Tess herself reveals panoramic possibilities, a unity of infinite extension like a limitless landscape, for her eyes do not confine themselves in color to black, blue, gray, or violet, but present "rather all those shades together, and a hundred others—, . . . shade beyond shade — tint beyond tint" (p. 114).

Of course, I must reach a turn in my argument with these examples of marginless vistas, for no one can forget the counter-examples of vividly localized landscapes created by Hardy in Tess. He describes closely hilled-in and utterly distinct valleys. Blackmoor Vale is intrinsically different from the Vale of the Little Dairies. The two dairy valleys could
not contrast more strikingly with the Chase and Flintcomb-Ash. Not
even the train joins these separate locales, and Hardy insists that “every
village has its idiosyncrasy, its constitution, often its own code of morality” (p. 75).

Just as Hardy closes in his boundless landscapes, so he indicates
constraints on each of the previously mentioned marginless states. With-
out alcohol souls again contract within their skins. Nature sometimes
refuses to intermingle and harmonize with the feelings and thus blur the
line dividing scene and figure, as when Tess’s arrival produces no
impression at all on Blackmoor Vale. Only approximately mythic, the
club-walking female votaries wear white gowns which a bright sun
reveals to be of noticeably different shades and cuts, and in these women
“ideal and real clashed slightly” (p. 11). Pans and Syrinxes resume
ordinary personal identities as Car Darch, Nancy, and other Tantridge
locals. Tess and Angel do not complete as standard an “instalment” of
nature’s springtime scenario as the birds and flowers do, for aberration
marks their love. The generalizing power of sex does not carry the other
dairymaids into actual equivalence with Tess, nor does Liza Lu ade-
quately replace her, as many readers have felt. Tess only partly recapitu-
lates stock family traits. She shares some of the fatalistic passivity of the
D’Urbervilles and seems destined to repeat their violence, but she does
not inherit her father’s foolish vanity nor her mother’s fecklessness and
cheer. While Tess’s history repeats traditional folklore materials, per-
sonal experience gives them very personal meaning——“What was com-
edy to [others] was tragedy to her” (p. 231).

Just one page after Hardy calls Tess a field-woman who merges with
the field and yields her own margin, he forcefully refines her within
herself. With her baby and no husband, she occupies those fields as a
“stranger and alien” (p. 112). Much of the book shows how far Tess
diverges from the field-woman pure and simple.

A parallel exists between this individuation of Tess and another
example of human individuation in the book, and in this parallel lies an
important commentary. Hardy presents in his rustics a seemingly collec-
tive “Hodge,” whose generic oneness disappears upon closer inspection.
We soon realize that each “walked in his own individual way the road to
dusty death” (p. 152). Explaining his convictions about Hodge in an
article on “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” Hardy observes of rustic laborers
that “the artistic merit of their old condition is scarcely a reason why they
should have continued in it . . . . It is too much to ask them to remain
stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators.”

"From Longman’s Magazine (July 1885):252-69. in Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writ-
question also appears in his poems “Drummer Hodge” and “The King’s Experiment”
from Poems of the Past and the Present (1901) in Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy

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This suggests the "artistic" appeal of generalizations about Hodge, thus illuminating Hardy's reference to the "aesthetic" dimension of purity in the preface to "Tess." Placing such purity in a problematical light, the statement provides a critical gloss on the "charm" seen in the field—woman who loses her margin to form part of the field. The "Dorsetshire Labourer" passage judges such artistically agreeable class grouping as the wrongful imposition of the spectator's eye, distorting in a way that does disservice to its object.

Thus "Tess," like Hodge, may lack a certain charm when viewed as only an individual, but when viewed as someone released from the margins of individuality into pure womanhood, she gains charm at a certain risk. That risk dominates the drama that unfolds between "Tess" and Angel Clare.

III

Certain statements by Hardy concerning perception serve to introduce his critique of Angel's attitude toward "Tess." On the one hand, Hardy lacks misgivings about the truth-value of perception legislated by the categories of the perceiver's mind. As may be inferred from his declarations of the impressionistic nature of his own work, he surrenders without protest the possibility of reliable mental access to things-in-themselves. On the other hand, Hardy does have misgivings about the impact on the "Tess" or the Hodge mentally modified in the name of the artistic, aesthetic, charming, and in this way made subject to another's subjectivity. Thus a striking passage in "The Well-Beloved" describes the rolling together into one composite essence of all the bones of the drowned in Deadman's Bay and the single roar made by these surf-rolled bones in the listening ear. Yet the passage makes the roar a shriek, for those joined in death seem to call out to some good god to disunite them from their grisly idealist oneness (pp. 12-13). No more than these dead men distressed by their loss of individuality in the minds of those who thrill to the composite music of their bones does "Tess" always relish or gain by being appreciated as a pure woman. Hardy examines the meeting point of epistemology, aesthetics, and love. He shows that knowledge of the beloved and the beautiful is liable to be specially

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11For instance, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," *Forum* (New York) (March 1888):57-70, in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, p. 119, states his preference for impressionism in art over photographic transcription. Though I use Kantian language here, I am aware that the fit is only approximate. Kant's categories imply universal frameworks of subjectivity, whereas Hardy attributes various viewpoints to various viewers, but linking Kant and Hardy is a notable lack of regret that we cannot know anything absolutely (as thing-in-itself).

compromised. He shows the special danger of appreciation, for it may dissipate the desire to know more.  

The problem is, Angel's infatuated taste makes him dispense with further knowledge. Appreciating Tess "ideally and fancifully" (p. 260), he "subdue[s] . . . the substance to the conception" and "drops the defects of the real" in favor of an ideal (pp. 315, 312). Finding Tess lovely and loving her, he considers corporeal absence almost more appealing than presence (p. 312). He regularly renders her a type in his mind: archetypal milkmaid, "virginal daughter of Nature" (p. 155), "daughter of the soil" (p. 162), representative of primitive consciousness untouched by modern doubt, and perfect sample for his contemplation of "contiguous womankind" (p. 155). It is true, he sometimes thinks he delights in her for her very self rather than, for instance, the things he has told his family she represents (p. 211). One occasion shows his capacity to imagine Tess's apprehension of the world from within her own center of self, and, another time, he tries to project her viewpoint as one different from his own as that of a man (pp. 198–99, 278). However, the crisis of their relationship reveals his habit of generalization when it comes to Tess and his commitment to her purity in the erotic sense and as a being so summed up by his conception of her that she must remain pure of any particular experience worth mentioning. Seeing Tess as essence and type, Angel cannot admit the relevance of experience for her, and so he refuses to hear her confession about her past affair with Alec. Once confronted by Tess's un-intactness, Angel's penchant for generalization intensifies, and he casts the fallen Tess as the typical peasant woman and representative of a decadent family, in contrast to the idealized "new-sprung child of nature" (p. 297) and example of "rustic innocence" (p. 304) he had expected. Significantly, he inveighs against "womankind in general" (p. 308). Angel typcasts Tess in terms of class, family, nature, and sex, but sexual typing exercises the most powerful sway. The novel stresses it by making the drama hinge on the issue of erotic purity, which is definitive for women but not for men—Angel's own un-intact state bothers him very little. His horror of Tess's un-intactness bespeaks his allegiance to the purity of the generic as such, as well as to the feminine principle of erotic purity that furnishes the dramatic test.

Tess usually resists imposition of generic classification upon her specificity. Even though she does sometimes enjoy release from self, as in contemplating nature, she is no addict of the marginless experience. (She doesn't drink, for one thing, and dislikes repeating stock traits, hereditary or folkloristic.) She resents being understood as "every

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13It is worth noting that, for Kant, aesthetic judgment may involve cognition but adds nothing to it—see Critique of Judgment, p. 38. Hardy goes further in his critique here.
woman" by Alec and responds angrily by exclaiming, "Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?" (p. 97). Just so, when Angel perceives her as a "soul at large" and calls her by the names of female deities as if she presented a "visionary essence," a "typical form" of woman, Tess wants none of it: "'Call me Tess,' she would say askance" (p. 167). In successive revisions Hardy gives increasing point to this reply by making Tess speak it at first softly and simply but finally askance. She wants to be loved for herself and not for the image superimposed on her. Sadly she realizes, "she you love is not my real self, but one in my image" (p. 273), and this same thought gives rise to a moment of self-pity for ill use (p. 294). She comes to judge Angel's condemnation as reflective of his fastidious mind more than her own fault (p. 296).

For her own part, she is slow to consider people in absolute terms. Certainly, Hardy allows for some typing by Tess of Angel, of a man by a woman. She idolizes him during their courtship, though "Angel Clare was far from all that she thought him" (p. 246). And she exposes a set notion of masculinity when she values Angel for not fulfilling it (p. 247). However, Hardy distinguishes between the attitudes of hero and heroine by calling Angel's love more insistently idealizing, while Tess's exhibits more "impassioned thoroughness" (p. 260). She even prefers not to reduce her enemy to a type. One might suppose that Alec's offenses against her, the diabolism of the scenes in which Hardy places him, and his own Satanic self-references would invite Tess to view him as the devil, but she refuses to do so: "I never said you were Satan, or thought it. I don't think of you in that way at all" (p. 445). Reluctant to be the pure woman, Tess is reluctant to regard even the man who drives her to murder as pure devil.

_Tess_ is the greatest among a number of Hardy's works concerned with the loose fit between type and individual. For instance, the poem "The Milkmaid" treats the difference between the milkmaid's seeming embodiment of nature and her actual artificiality of spirit, and "The Beauty" treats the difference between the stock beauty of a woman's face and her personal sense of herself. Like Tess, the speaker in "The Pedigree" hates the thought that, while feeling "I am I," one only exemplifies hereditary traits. A similar thought dismayed the dead in "Intra Sepulchrum." In life they considered themselves unique, but once in the grave they realize that, to others, they must have appeared to be quite commonly fashioned. Typing by sex draws Hardy's attention in a number of novels. Whether to explain Paula Power's modesty by her sex or by her temperament, for example, gives the hero pause in _A

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"Laird, p. 56."
Laodicean (1881; p. 303). Hardy's distrust of sexual generalizations appears as early as in Far From the Madding Crowd (1874) in a passage on Boldwood's habit of "deeming as essentials of the whole sex the accidents of the single one of their number he had ever closely beheld" (p. 258).\(^{11}\) Hardy shows such distortion turning dangerous in Tess of the D'Urbervilles. In fact, he shows how dangerous it becomes just because it is so pleasant. Delighting to regard the particular Tess as an expression of the universal, Angel delays knowing better what pleases him so much, and the delay proves disastrous.

IV

However, the novel incurs a danger comparable to the one it exposes. That is, many critics complain about Angel in terms roughly like mine in the last section,\(^{14}\) but should we also be complaining about his creator? Hardy generalizes about Tess and women almost as incautiously as Angel does. After all, he is the one who calls Tess a field-woman pure and simple and maintains that such a woman loses her margin to form part of the landscape while a field-man remains a personality afield. And he is the one who calls such a woman charming. His imagery and allusions assimilate Tess to nature and nature myths as animal and goddess. As a case in point, Hardy and not Angel "apotheosizes" Tess as a "divine personage" in the famous baptism scene. He presents her to the view of her brothers and sisters, and the reader, by the light of a candle that "abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed," "transfiguring" her, rendering her regal and divine, purifying her into "a thing of immaculate beauty" (pp. 119–20). Of course, he does remind us that Tess's apotheosis involves seeing by a certain light quite as much as it involves Tess-in-herself. And Hardy may be said to de- apotheosize his heroine in the treatment immediately following. When he describes Tess's burial of the infant, homely little blemishes return. Tess garnishes the grave with a bunch of flowers in a container in no wise abstracted or transfigured, a "Keelwell's Marmalade" jar (p. 123). Throughout the novel Hardy alternates between idealizing and particularizing Tess. By alternating in this way while also calling attention to it, he may be said to exhibit while also examining the epistemological sources of her tragedy.


\(^{14}\)For instance, Rosemary Sumner in Thomas Hardy, Psychological Novelist (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. 139, is exceptional in her call for sympathy with Angel.
Yet in his own language Hardy can seem more intrepid than self-examining. He often generalizes about women surprisingly for a man who had pondered the fairness of it in earlier novels, who had analyzed the potential distortions in a comment on Boldwood and dramatized the real harm that could be done through the story of Angel and Tess. Without apparent self-consciousness Hardy refers in *Tess* to “the woman’s instinct to hide,” to “feminine loss of courage,” to “feminine hope” that is obstinately recuperative, to the usual “feminine feelings of spite and rivalry” (pp. 250, 384, 311, 378). Sentences such as the following appear: “like the majority of women, she accepted the momentary presentment as if it were the inevitable”; “let the truth be told—women do as a rule live through such humiliations”; “she had gathered . . . sufficient of the incredulity of modern thought to despise flash entusiasms; but, as a woman, she was somewhat appalled” (pp. 312, 135, 419). As phrases, “like the majority of women” and “women do as a rule” clearly generalize. The last-quoted sentence does so more subtly and equivocally. Does “as a woman, she was somewhat appalled” assign her feeling to her as a representative of her sex or as a particular individual who happens to be female? Imagine an apparently parallel sentence reading, “he had gathered sufficient of the incredulity of modern thought to despise flash entusiasms; but, as a man, he was somewhat appalled.” Parallelism is only apparent here, for “man” would signify either a particular individual who happens to be male or else a representative of the human race. The word “man” and the masculine pronoun are often said to function generically. But in standing for mankind as well as for a single man, they do not implicate masculinity. Unless strongly conditioned by context, these words do not act as gender generics since their ambiguous reference vitiates their power of specifically sexual generalization. But “woman” and “she” undergo no such vitiation.

Hardy gives signs of some awareness of the shaping or constraining force of language upon apprehension. For instance, he cites with interest Comte’s statement concerning the difficulty of expressing new ideas in existing language, that is, the vehicle for existing conceptualization.17 The conventional may be so conveniently expressed as to discourage more original response, which inspires Hardy’s amusing characterization of Angel Clare’s conventional brothers as men who express more than they observe (p. 205). Hardy’s sensitivity to the power of labels appears in his dislike of the word and concept Hodge and in his bemusement over his own creation of a concept in creating (or re-creating from

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ancient usage) the word Wessex. His seriousness about the need for a new language to express new thoughts appears in the striking coinages and syntactical inventions of his poetry. And he indicates critical awareness of the sexual concepts built into language in this observation of Bathsheba’s in *Far From the Madding Crowd*: “it is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs” (p. 405).

Hardy does not entirely free himself from masculine language, but his generalizations about women grow less casual and copious as novel follows novel. Practically every folly of Bathsheba Everdene manages in the telling to reflect on her sex. On just one page, she “had too much womanliness to use her understanding to the best advantage,” and “she loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance” (p. 214). In contrast, Sergeant Troy is allowed to represent only himself by his sins. Even in *Far From the Madding Crowd* Hardy passes glancing judgment on the validity of typecasting by sex, but *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* really scrutinizes the sexual typing that plays havoc with a woman’s life. In his verbal habits Hardy only partly separates himself from Angel’s mental ones, while the irony of the overlap draws attention and actually extends the novel’s interest as a commentary on the heroine as pure woman. It dramatizes the author’s susceptibility to an outlook shown to be dangerous in the hero. I believe *Tess* must have prepared the way toward the more fully feminist *Jude the Obscure* (1896). This work still hazards generalizations about women; it speculates as to whether Sue Bridehead succumbs to womanly conventionality, or lack of courage, or irrationality. But the novel renders these generalizations so multiple and contradictory as to throw each other into question if not to cancel each other out.*

V

This is not to say that Hardy condemns generalization altogether. In his literary notebook he cites Herbert Spencer on biological classification. To group particular organisms into general groups is distortive, yet such grouping is useful and necessary “so long as the distorted form is not mistaken for the actual form . . . giving to the realities a regularity which does not exist.”* In his essay on “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” Hardy disdains an art of merely photographic particularity and values creative transformation of the subject more than the subject itself. He shares Taine’s approval of “imaginations which create and

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*Literary Notes*, pp. 93–94—citing Spencer’s *Principles of Biology*. 

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transform." In fact, according to the preface to *The Dynasts* (1903), he relishes an essence-abstracting art such as mumming and aims at parallel effect by means of "dreamy conventional gestures" and an "automatic style." In any dramatization of *The Dynasts* "gauzes or screens to blur outlines might still further shut off the actual." This hypothetical stage direction recalls various treatments of marginlessness in *Tess* and indicates Hardy's penchant for departicularization. Similarly, Florence Emily Hardy's biography records his speculations on a future fiction that would delineate visible essences and abstract thoughts, "the Realities to be the true realities of life, hitherto called abstractions. The old material realities to be placed behind the former, as shadowy accessories." These opinions reveal a devotee of the ideal like Jocelyn Pierston and Angel Clare.

As a matter of fact, Hardy believes that two of the best things life has to offer, both love and art, depend on idealization. Florence Emily Hardy cites a very interesting note of Hardy's about love: "It is the incompleteness that is loved... This is what differentiates the real one from the imaginary... A man sees the Diana or the Venus in his Beloved, but what he loves is the difference." This formulates a dialectic of the general and the particular in the lover's understanding. The general may be said to initiate the experience rather than derive from it, since the type must be viewed in the woman for her departure from type as an individual to be known and loved. Hardy brings this formulation to life in his novel through the attraction of his hero, himself, and, by invitation, his reader toward *Tess* as the "almost standard woman." As the almost pure woman she commands love.

Such cognitive dynamics in love make it unstable and even treacherous, and Angel Clare's example might seem to recommend letting the

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19 "Preface" to *The Dynasts* (1903), in *Hardy's Personal Writings*, p. 43.


21 Hardy resembles Kant in his belief in the mental legislation of experience through a priori principles (such as thinking the particular as contained under the universal, in Kant's terms). And, for both, such inevitable epistemological contingency may have its own value. For Kant, though we cannot ultimately apprehend noumena, we cannot rest satisfied with phenomena, and the limits of knowledge define the opportunities of faith, the realm of the "as if" discovered by the mind in discovering its own limits—see *Prolegomena*, pp. 103–106. Hardy's view bears comparison but differs in part. For him, love and the beautiful, more than metaphysics, thrive in the realm of the "as if." He is also more aware of the dangers that attend the attractions of this realm.

22 Florence Emily Hardy, p. 314 — citing a notation of 28 October 1891 (the period of *Tess*).
standard go and relieving Tess of the painful consequences of only almost fulfilling it. But *The Well-Beloved* shows that not only is love lost but aesthetic response, too, in the loss of a standard. Its Shelleyan hero is finally cured of his mainly disastrous erotic idealism. The single, absolute image of the well-beloved meets extinction in the course of Pierston's symbolic illness, and afterwards he finds himself able to respond to a woman in her manifold particularity, frailties and all. He enters into her situation and viewpoint and takes an interest in her for herself as he has never done before. However, loss attends this gain, for he finds "I can no longer love" (p. 212). Besides that, he finds himself losing artistic inspiration as a sculptor. According to Hardy, then, response to loveliness as well as love itself depends on idealization, which may, in turn, prove over-dominant and destructive. This helps to clarify his prefatory comment on Tess as pure woman, aesthetically understood.

VI

Whereas Hardy points out the charm as well as the clash that may be seen in the interplay of ideal and real, critics of the novel tend to focus on ideal or real. Actually, most express a preference for a real Tess and judge Hardy according to his failure or success in embodying her, while a number of them simultaneously betray their own attraction toward an ideal Tess in their language about her. Suspicious of Hardy's sexual generalizations, Ellen Moers condemns him for basing his novel on a cultural stereotype, an "all-purpose heroine," a "fantasy of almost pornographic dimensions." John Bayley takes a milder tone but also observes that a "male fantasy" plays a part in the creation of Tess. He credits Hardy with only involuntary insights into his heroine's subjectivity. Taking the other side, Arnold Kettle and Dorothy Van Ghent praise Hardy for particularizing Tess. According to Kettle, he displays "mistrust of . . . all ways of thinking that give abstract ideals or principles . . . priority over the actual needs of specific human situations," and, according to Van Ghent, he shows artistic commitment to "the concrete body of experience," "body of particularized life," and "concrete circumstances of experience, real as touch." Van Ghent contrasts interestingly to Bayley, for while he finds stereotype-shattering insights

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into Tess's uniqueness occasional and unintended, she considers abstracting, philosophical passages to be the intrusions. The two agree, though, and exemplify much critical response in their predilection for a Tess made to seem real.

Irving Howe also appreciates the "real" Tess and he exonerates Hardy from a charge of molding his heroine to fit male preconceptions. Yet he himself indulges more freely in sexual generalizations than he is quite willing to admit Hardy does. After praising Tess's individuation by Hardy, Howe reminds us always to remember that "she is a woman." While claiming that Tess represents herself and not an idea, he all but counters the claim in the way he puts it: Hardy's purpose is "not to make her a goddess or a metaphor, it is to underscore her embattled womanliness." Here the critic, like the author on occasion, falls afool of the generic implications of the word "woman."28

Comparable tension between statement and implication appears in Jean Brooks's chapter on Tess. In her view, Hardy finds idealizing perception such as Angel's the projection of a "lifeless image," distorting, betraying, and entirely "inadequate." As evidence that Hardy condemns depersonalization, she cites the two harvesting scenes. One assimilates Tess to the machine she services—she loses independence of action or will. One assimilates her to the natural scene—she loses her margin and becomes a portion of the field. Brooks follows Hardy in disapproving of the first mode of assimilation and finding charm in the second, but fails to point out that both dissolve the margin of distinct personality. Brooks's preference for personalization over depersonalization begins to look like preference for one sort of depersonalization over another. In fact, in celebrating Tess's uniqueness, Brooks's own language stresses the heroine's womanhood in a way that transforms the individual woman into an abstraction: she praises Tess's "vibrant humanity, her woman's power of suffering, renewal, and compassion."29

John Lucas and Rosalind Miles are two more critics who applaud Tess's effort to live as a fully real individual, while the conflicts found in the language they employ to express their view are especially striking. Lucas himself recognizes certain stereotypical and demeaning connotations of the phrase "a pure woman."30 Still, he goes ahead to use this phrase. He admires Tess's striving not to be fixed by images of purity and

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27Van Ghent, p. 49.
30The Literature of Change, Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel (Sussex: Harvester; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), p. 178 — Lucas briefly associates the subtitle description with other conventional images of Tess as toy, child, virgin to be deflowered, and "standard woman."
womanhood, and actually points out the irony of the subtitle—it invokes one of the standardized identities men seek to pin on her. But in his admiration for Tess's individuality, he pins this identity on her himself: "Simply, Tess is a pure woman." Hard-beset by male-imposed labels, according to Lucas, she is determined to live "from some center, some awareness of herself as pure woman, purely a woman."31 Similarly, according to Miles, while Hardy gives Tess representative status, he never loses sight of her personal uniqueness, "as a woman, and a woman living in that time and place." It is strange but not unusual that she should cite in admiration of an individualized Tess the passage that describes her as a figure forming part of the landscape, "a field-woman pure and simple."32

In covert re-introductions of gender generics into discussions of Tess even by those who declare Hardy's and their own respect for individuality, we see paradoxically dramatized the delight-giving, dangerous dialectic of knowledge that the novel is about. In fact, the subtitle of my own essay may seem correspondingly equivocal—because of the usage of the word "woman" in our language. But I mean to equivocate. "Hardy on Knowing a Woman" means "Hardy on Knowing a Woman as Individual and Sexual Abstraction." The way a woman is known reveals the complexity of knowing. That is, Tess invites but frustrates over-simplification. It is easy to say that Angel wrongs Tess by perceiving her not just as herself but as an essence and type of womanhood, harder to face the ultimate force of the fact that he also loves her because of it. So does Hardy. So do we, if he has his way. Object of desire and also aesthetic object as the preface hints, Tess as pure woman is beloved and beautiful, inspires love, inspires art by the same token that she suffers misapprehension and misuse. Finally she really does lose her margin, her life.

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