Title: Hardy's 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles.' (Thomas Hardy)
Author(s): Roger Craik
Document Type: Article
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When Joan Durbeyfield arrives at Roliver's Inn to join her husband, she declares to the landlady in her "public voice" so that the "nearly a dozen persons" gathered in the inn can hear her, "'Tis well to be kin to a coach, even if you don't ride in 'en" (Grindie and Gatrell 37). Although she then drops her voice to tell her husband her plan for Tess's claiming kin, the other drinkers at Roliver's catch enough snippets of the conversation (including the piped exclamations of Little Abraham who has crept into the room unobserved) to gather that Tess Durbeyfield, the Durbeyfields' "pretty eldest daughter," has "fine prospects in store" (38).

At this point Hardy has one of the "elderly boozers" observe in an undertone that "'Tess is a fine figure 'o fun, as I said to myself today when I zeed her vamping around parish with the rest. But Joan Durbeyfield must mind that she don't get green malt in floor." Hardy at once adds that "It was a local phrase which had a peculiar meaning, and there was no reply" (38).

Hardy would have been surprised to know that whereas the boozier's listeners grasp the "peculiar" (that is, "particular") meaning, most editors (including the most recent) understand only the general sense. Misled by the boozier's first sentence which has Tess as its energetic subject, they follow P. N. Furbank in glossing the phrase as "get herself pregnant," "herself" being Tess (453 n.). Hardy himself furnished a different explanation in 1926 when in reply to a readers query he pointed out that "'To have 'green malt in floor' means to have a daughter in childbirth before she is married... green malt meaning immature malt, and a floor of malt meaning the outspread malt for steeping. (...) there is hardly anyone in Dorset who would know the meaning of the saying, it having quite passed out of use" (Grindie and Gatrell 36 n.). Indeed Hardy was initially unsure of the phrase himself, and in his manuscript he wrote "flower," mishearing it for "floor" (36 n.).

Hardy's clarification makes plain that the warning that "'Joan Durbeyfield must mind that she don't get green malt in floor" means that Joan, not Tess, is wholly responsible for Tess's not becoming pregnant. This distinction is crucial to our understanding of Joan's role in Tess's fall. Until this vignette in Roliver's Inn, Hardy had presented Joan Durbeyfield as superstitious, faintly childlike, and essentially harmless, and he had remarked that between her and Tess "there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and Victorian ages were juxtaposed" (32). At Roliver's, by allowing us rather than Joan to overhear the village elder's warning and to observe the silence in which it is pondered uncontradicted before the conversation "became inclusive" (32), Hardy encourages us to be critical of Joan and to perceive her naivety as potentially dangerous to her daughter. It is in a more attentively judgmental frame of mind that the reader learns that "Joan's intelligence was
that of a happy child" (49), and that John Durbeyfield's "poor witless wife" (61) is a "light-minded woman" (63) whose very light-mindedness causes her to overdress Tess "to lamentable purpose" (72), making her irresistible to Alec d'Urberville. As the novel proceeds, and Tess is setting off for Trantridge a second time, Hardy has Joan evince "a slight misgiving" at Tess's departure, and although she resolves to "walk a little way--as far as to the point where the acctivity from the valley began its first sharp ascent to the outer world," the younger children "clamoured to go with her" (65). These natural details are so unobtrusive that Hardy at once takes pains to show us that they constitute Joan's last opportunity to counsel Tess: in bed that night Joan sighs out to her husband her doubts about Alec d'Urberville, wondering whether she should have found out whether Alec "is really a good-hearted young man." Sir John snores "Yes, you ought, perhaps, to ha' done that" (68). But by this time Tess is far away and beyond reach. When she returns pregnant five months later to be admonished by Joan (whom she now considers her "poor foolish mother" (116), Tess's agonized sense of injustice overrides her respect for her parent, and she bursts into passionate reproach: "'O mother, my mother! . . . How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!" (17). Joan may well be "subdued" by Tess's vehemence and the force of the accusations, but what she is grasping for the first time is her own responsibility for Tess's pregnancy, a responsibility which we readers have been observing since the scene in Rolliver's Inn when an elderly drinker cautioned that "Joan Durbeyfield must mind that she don't get green malt in floor.'"

ROGER CRAIK, Kent State University

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Abstract:

Joan Durbeyfield's role as mother to Tess in 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' is discussed in relation to the trope used by a village elder in Rolliver's Inn. Thomas Hardy, although not quite sure himself of the true usage of the phrase, uses the same to direct the reader's attention to Joan as an irresponsible mother. The reader's perception of Joan now judgmental, the silence with which she greets her daughter's reproach at not being taught about sex turns into Joan's realization of her own irresponsibility.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)


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