Jane Thomas

THOMAS HARDY, FEMININITY AND DISSENT

Reassessing the 'Minor' Novels

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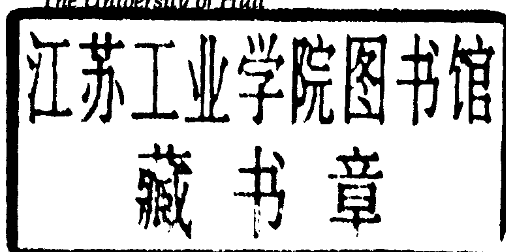

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Abbreviations

Unless otherwise identified, abbreviated forms of the titles of Hardy's novels refer to the New Wessex Edition of the novels, General Editor P. N. Furbank, published in fourteen volumes by Macmillan (London, 1974–75).

Letters: *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate in 7 vols (Oxford, 1978–1988), vol. 1: 1840–1892 (1978); vol. 2: 1893–1901 (1980); vol. 3: 1902–08 (1982); vol. 4: 1909–1913 (1984); vol. 5: 1914–1919 (1985); vol. 6: 1920–1925 (1987); vol. 7: 1926–27 (1988).

Life: *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, by Thomas Hardy, ed. Michael Millgate (1984): a revision of *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–91*, and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892–1928* published over the name of Florence Emily Hardy (London: 1928–30).

Literary Notes: Björk, Lennart A., (ed.), *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, vol. 1 (London: 1974); vol. 2 (London: 1985).

First Principles: Spencer, Herbert, *First Principles* (London: 1862).

Essays: Spencer, Herbert, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, 3 vols (London and Edinburgh: 1858).

Psychology: Spencer, Herbert, *Principles of Psychology* (1855), in 2 vols (London: 1884).

Biology: Spencer, Herbert, *Principles of Biology*, in 2 vols (London: 1864–67).

Education: Spencer, Herbert, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (London: 1861).

Subjection: Mill, John Stuart, *On the Subjection of Women*, in *Mary Wollstonecraft, The Rights of Women; John Stuart Mill, On the Subjection of Women* (London, 1929; 1974).

Enfranchisement: Mill, John Stuart, and Harriet Taylor, 'The Enfranchisement of Women', *Westminster Review*, 55 (1851), 289–311.

Nature: 'Nature' in Mill, John Stuart, *Three Essays on Religion Containing Nature, Utility of Religion and Theism*, with an introductory notice by Helen Taylor (London: 1874).

Liberty: Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty* (1867; first published London: 1859).

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Sexuality, 1: Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1976), trans. Robert Hurley (London, New York: 1978).

Sexuality, 2: Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure (1984)*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, New York: 1985).

Two Lectures: Foucault, Michel, 'Two Lectures', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: 1980).

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Introduction

The publication of Thomas Hardy's verse drama *The Dynasts* (1903–08) confirmed for many of his critics that his characters were 'helpless impersonal agents of the clockwork thought of a blind and unreasoning It'.[1] This conviction grew steadily throughout the early and middle years of this century until by 1965 the critic Roy Morrell could quite reasonably assert that Hardy's pessimism or fatalism was 'no longer something one questions' (Morrell, 1965, p. ix).[2] During the 1970s and 80s critics turned their attention away from the issue of cosmic indifference to focus on the role of the social process in determining the lives of Hardy's characters, paying special attention to Hardy's women. Hardy criticism in the 1990s has been marked by an increasingly sensitive and complex response to the issues of freewill and determinism informed by feminism, post-structuralism and a mutually supportive liaison between the two theoretical responses. It is now anachronistic to label Hardy as a crude pessimist.[3]

Roy Morrell's re-evaluation of the novels – *Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way* (1965) – marked a watershed in Hardy criticism in that Morrell insisted on the responsibility of the social system for the construction of Hardy's tragedies, rather than cosmic indifference, or a gloomy and uncomplicated pessimism stimulated by the mechanistic determinism of the evolutionary process as revealed by Charles Darwin.[4] Fate, Nature, Social Institutions: in each case the Hardyian subject is conceived as the victim of something external to him or herself, a prohibitive power which is, at best, indifferent to the fulfilment of individual desires or, at worst, positively antagonistic.

Hardy's own form of Determinism, based on a structuring concept which he variously referred to as 'Necessity', 'Law', the 'First Cause', the 'Unconscious Will' and the 'Immanent Will', bears a curious correspondence to a more modern system of thought which stresses the role of power in the constitution of individual subjectivity – not as a force negatively applied from outside but as something which permeates the body and is itself embodied in

every thought, gesture and social interaction. Hardy developed the notion of the 'Immanent Will' over a period of thirty years from his first tentative philosophising in *Desperate Remedies* (1871) to his final full-blown examination of the phenomenon in *The Dynasts* (1903–08).[5] Viewed from a humanist standpoint which regards the individual as the origin and source of meaning, the material circumstances which shape the lives of men and women appear as manifestations of a monolithic system which has little or no regard for the rebel or the misfit. Hardy himself wavered between a reading of the circumstances of existence in which conscious, suffering humanity was persistently at odds with an amoral, unconscious 'Scheme of Things', and a peculiarly modern grasp of the process by which individual consciousness is constituted, and the role of the resistant subject. In pointing up the similarities between a postructuralist view of the human condition and Hardy's philosophic system I intend to develop new readings of his marginalised novels, centring on the analysis of female subjectivity and its construction at a time of social crisis and change, which demonstrate Hardy's insight into the shaping force of the discourses of gender and sexuality.

There is nothing new in drawing attention to the fact that Hardy's novels focus on the specificities of women's lives and the ways in which women illustrate a fundamental tension between the individual's perception of existence and the social, economic and cultural relations of the time. As early as 1977 John Lucas paid serious attention to 'the ways in which [Hardy] uses his fictional women to focus on precisely those issues of class and separation which his novels explore, and which give them their especial distinction' (Lucas, 1977; 1988: 20). Rosalind Miles demonstrates how 'Hardy the lover and collector of women was evolving into Hardy the social critic and even prophet, interpreting women to men, to society, and to themselves' (Miles, 1979: 38). However, she also suggests that this interpretation was informed by an intuitive insight into women's psyche, coupled with a strong element of sexual pessimism which, when combined with Hardy's native cynicism, amounts to an almost abiding misogyny. Patricia Stubbs examines what she sees as Hardy's frustration with the inadequacy of available literary and sexual images which results in a tension in his portrayal of women between ideal and received form: 'here there is an uneasy co-existence between an intensely modern, even feminist consciousness and what are essentially archetypal patterns of feeling and

relationship' (Stubbs, 1979: 59). It is this contradiction which, in Stubbs' view, produces some of the strengths and weaknesses of Hardy's fiction and his feminism. Mary Childers welcomes feminist readings which are concerned to identify 'conditions of representation that are psychologically, culturally and economically overdetermined' (Childers, 1981: 321). She suggests, however, that Hardy's statements about women are 'inadequate to the occasional if not constant complexity one can attach to the behaviour of his women characters' (p. 324). Hardy's female characters represent 'a frustration at the heart of discourse' which is a direct result of their 'powerlessness in speech': 'lacking any social or legal obligation to regard language as a contract or a public representation of themselves, lacking even any code of honour which would make them fetishistically loyal to their own words, women characters can blatantly dramatize the volatile relationship between identity and language' (Childers, 1981: 333). John Goode concentrates on the way in which the narrative mode exposes the ideology which motivates and shapes a text. He concludes that the narrator's various mediations between reader and heroine serve to objectify Tess, and claims that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is one of the most formally, and therefore the most politically advanced of the texts produced during the nineteenth century (Goode, 1976).[6]

Penny Boumelha's *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (1982) shifted the emphasis of feminist criticism to focus specifically on the radicalism of Hardy's portrayal of women and indicated the way in which his use of certain narrative devices offers a 'focus of contradiction' which centres on the female characters. In this way the specifically sexual ideology embedded in any one of the literary genres open to Hardy at the time is questioned and undermined. Boumelha also examines Hardy's relationship with and response to the 'New Fiction' written by women during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Boumelha, 1982). Rosemarie Morgan's *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (1988) sees the sexual vitality of Hardy's women characters as evidence of their 'frustrating struggle to define themselves in a world that would deny them the right to shape their own lives, control their own bodies, explore their own needs and express their own desires' (Morgan, 1988).

Other theoretically acute studies of Hardy's women characters include Patricia Ingham's *Thomas Hardy*, which interrogates the interpretation of the sign 'woman' by the multiple voices in Hardy's

texts. She concludes that in the early novels 'women begin, occasionally, to experience themselves as different from the models accepted by themselves as well as others, with a sense of enhanced, not diminished, self'. As a result a 'new and problematic space' opens up around the female signifier 'which is tentatively and varyingly mapped by each sex' (Ingham, 1989: 7).

In their concentration on the lives of women, Hardy's novels reveal the local and intimate operations of power. In addition they reveal a specific and privileged vantage point on power relations in general. My reading of Hardy's marginalised novels is offered as a supplement to existing feminist readings of his prose work which focus, most exclusively, on the canonical texts. It places his women characters in the context of those dominant nineteenth-century discourses of femininity which sought to establish the 'truth' of women in such a way as to confirm the class and gender hierarchy that structured mid-Victorian England. At the same time new and resistant discourses were emerging out of, and shaping, nineteenth-century feminism. In this respect, as Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby suggest, feminism corresponds to Foucault's notion of a 'reverse' discourse which, like homosexuality, 'began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified'.[7] The feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century helped to identify, and further widen, the gap between accepted modes of being for women and the satisfactory articulation of their desires. Hardy's female characters are caught in this gap of dissatisfaction – struggling to construct a resistant subjectivity in an environment where all such deviations from the norm were disqualified, marginalised and rendered liable to extinction, like some ill-adapted variation within a species. At this point metaphorical connections between the operation of power and the mechanism of natural selection begin to suggest themselves and it is Hardy's sensitivity to evolutionary theory and its implications for the social process that open up his novels to readings such as this.

I have chosen to focus on Hardy's neglected novels for a variety of reasons. Firstly they represent a significant percentage of his literary oeuvre that remains unrepresented in critical studies of his work. As Richard Taylor has indicated, Hardy's reputation as one of the best novelists in the English language rests on only half of his fictional output. Taylor's study of the neglected novels is motivated

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by the conviction that they deserve more serious attention than they have hitherto received. He suggests that 'it is surely wrong to isolate the lesser novels as separate and distinct, as aberrations and failures. They play an essential part in the dynamic process of the development of Hardy's fiction, and each stage of his career contributes to the integrity of the whole' (Taylor, 1982). However Taylor's reading of the neglected novels fails to attach adequate significance to the pivotal role of women. Likewise Paul Ward draws attention to 'the pernicious tendency among literary critics to make outright dismissals of "minor" works on no better grounds than the mere existence of more substantial and satisfying works by the same author', and calls for a critical evaluation of several of Hardy's lesser-known works including *A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Hand of Ethelberta* and *The Well-Beloved,* in their own right (Ward, 1971; 1972–3; 1975; 1978; 1984). However, his short, individual studies show little sign of an awareness of feminist issues. Other critics who have questioned the exclusion of a significant number of Hardy's novels from critical discussion include Penelope Vigar, Perry Meisel and Roy Morrell. Vigar singles out *Desperate Remedies* as worth more than 'a cursory glance or a dismissing comment' because 'by reason of its naivety and spontaneity, [it] is likely to reveal a great deal about its author' (Vigar, 1974: 61). *A Laodicean* is also sympathetically examined, yet Vigar fails to recognise the specificity of women's experiences as they are presented in these novels, and in particular the complex relationship between 'appearance and reality', as she terms it, in Hardy's portrayal of women. Perry Meisel rightly claims that Hardy's neglected novels repay serious examination because the world of the early books at least 'forms the fundamental structure of Hardy's entire production in prose'. 'It is as though Hardy's early work defines the distinctively individual aspects of his creations, while the later novels reflect the finally explicit and full-blown statement of the same mind after the experience of twenty-five years that saw the decline of the Victorian climate' (Meisel, 1972: 32). Meisel registers the fact that 'Hardy's conception of women is at the centre of what later becomes an obvious tension between worlds', but notes:

> The question of Hardy's conception of the nature of woman is an important but extremely difficult one, especially because of the pivotal importance of female figures in his novels. Whether he believed women to be inherently irresponsible and restive, or

only symbolic of a characteristic sensitivity either social or historical, remains an open question. (p. 56)

Feminist critics such as Boumelha and Morgan follow the general critical consensus in concentrating largely on the 'major' texts. Boumelha dismisses Hardy's fiction from 1871 to 1886 in one chapter and devotes a chapter each to *The Return of the Native, The Woodlanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure.* Morgan, however, devotes an entire chapter to *A Pair of Blue Eyes.* A welcome exception to this trend is Margaret R. Higonnet's collection which includes essays on *A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Hand of Ethelberta,* and *The Well-Beloved* (Higonnet, 1993). Higonnet's aim is to 'examine historically the codes of both masculinity and femininity inscribed in Hardy's texts' in order to assess the degree to which Hardy's recognition of the social construction of the self points towards reconstruction (Higonnet, 1993: 1).[8]

The most challenging work on the neglected novels has been done by Peter Widdowson, George Wotton and Roger Ebbatson. Both Wotton and Widdowson are concerned with deconstructing the ways in which the literary critical industry reproduces Hardy's writings in line with certain social and ideological premises. Roger Ebbatson's unconventional critical approach involves the exploration of precariously maintained class and gender positions which are articulated and, more importantly, unconsciously inscribed in a selection of those Hardy texts which have been 'systematically marginalised by critical and educational conformity' (Ebbatson 1993: 7). Ebbatson's revealing readings of *Desperate Remedies* and *The Trumpet Major* are accompanied by discussion of four of Hardy's shorter works including *An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress* (1878) and one of his stories for children 'Our Exploits at West Poley' (1883). He also considers Hardy's short article on 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' (1883).

George Wotton has indicated how the techniques of separation and evaluation used to separate 'minor' from 'major' works are based on a norm of realism (Wotton, 1985). The more a novel diverges from this norm the further down the scale it appears. Following Macherey Wotton concludes that 'what is involved here is not an empirical reality but an ideological "reading" of reality' of which Realism is a reflection (Wotton, 1985: 147). He claims that 'for well over half a century the production of "Thomas Hardy" was in the hands of a distinctly definable group – the metropolitan bourgeois

intelligentzia' (Wotton, 1985: 150). This group has shaped 'Thomas Hardy' as a 'flawed genius': 'great when he realistically represents some essential quality of humanity or of Englishness associated with the country'. However, it is precisely because he was a countryman that his genius was 'flawed', marked by the primitive, unsophisticated gaucheness of the 'peasant' (Wotton, 1985: 150). The 'major' Novels of Character and Environment reflect Hardy's 'natural' genius, whilst the 'minor' Novels of Ingenuity and the Romances bear witness to his failure and his ill-advised attempts to extend his artistic vision beyond his 'natural' environment.

Peter Widdowson examines how criticism, education, publishing, the media and the film industry have collaborated to construct 'Hardy of Wessex', inserting him into a conventional English national culture (Widdowson, 1989). 'Modern Hardy criticism,' he concludes, 'generally reproduces a "Thomas Hardy" whose lines were drawn early: a tragic humanist-realist, marred by "flaws" but represented by six or seven "masterworks" which rank, in their grasp of the (universal) human condition, with other great literature in English' (Widdowson, 1989: 43). He picks up Ian Gregor's point that ignoring the 'minor' novels has a 'homogenizing' effect on Hardy's writing. Until the publication of the New Wessex Edition of Hardy's works in 1974–5 the 'minor' novels simply didn't exist for the vast majority of readers 'and in terms of public accessibility Hardy featured solely as the novelist of "character and environment"' (Widdowson, 1989: 45). Widdowson's point is that reinstatement of the 'minor' novels would produce a very different 'Hardy' from the one we are accustomed to. As he suggests, once 'the entire naturalized edifice of established critical orthodoxy collapses... a vast unfamiliar landscape opens out in front of us' (Widdowson, 1989: 4).

The six novels generally regarded as 'minor' are *Desperate Remedies, A Pair of Blue Eyes, The Hand of Ethelberta, A Laodicean, Two on a Tower*, and *The Well-Beloved*. I have chosen to focus specifically on these in order to explore areas of this strange terrain which have yet to be persuasively mapped. At the same time, these marginalised texts provide new and sometimes more blatant manifestations of the interrogation of the Victorian ideology of gender which has been so exhaustively investigated in those texts favoured by the literary critical establishment.

As both Wotton and Widdowson state, one of the reasons why these novels were dismissed as 'minor' lies in the fact that they fail to endorse the ideological reading of 'reality' which constitutes

realism. Hardy drew attention to this in his classification of his novels in the 1912 General Preface to the 'Wessex Edition' of his work. The critically acclaimed novels are placed in the group he calls 'Novels of Character and Environment' which contain 'one or two which, whatever their quality in some few of their episodes, may claim a verisimilitude in general treatment and detail' (Orel, 1967: 44). Hardy deliberately distances the six least successful texts by placing them in the category of 'Romances and Fantasies', and 'Novels of Ingenuity' or 'Experiments' which 'show a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events' (Orel, 1967: 45). Hardy's relationship to the Realist form was always an uneasy one. Like the aesthetes of the 1890s he was keen to emphasise the difference between 'realism' and Art. 'Art,' he claimed, 'is a disproportioning – (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) – of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence "realism" is not Art' (*Life*, p. 239). Hardy's most experimental novels – *Desperate Remedies, The Hand of Ethelberta* and *The Well-Beloved* – are to be found among these six. In addition, as Widdowson suggests, *The Hand of Ethelberta, A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Well-Beloved* self-consciously engage in the debate concerning the relationship of writing, or Art in general, to life. I would claim that *Desperate Remedies* and *A Laodicean* also participate in this debate. Both novels self-consciously employ theatrical metaphors to examine the relationship between female subjectivity and language and draw attention to the inadequacy of prevailing feminine modes of being. At the same time *Desperate Remedies* participates in a more general investigation of available forms of representation and articulation of the feminine self.

Hardy's seriously underrated novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) extends the interrogation of conventional female subject positions and demonstrates the role of discourse – in particular the discourse of sexuality – in the constitution of womanly identity. Here the game of chess can be read as a metaphor for the disciplinary techniques through which subjectivity is produced.[9] *The Hand of Ethelberta* examines the extent to which the resistant female subject is able to re-invent her self within the confines of a nineteenth century patriarchal formation through the publication of subjugated or marginalised knowledge. Here the game of Poker emphasises the extent to which feminine identity is an achievement rather than an innate

tendency. The analytical and resistant subject is able to misrepresent her self through the techniques of contrivance and bluff, in order to achieve a satisfactory social emplacement, whilst at the same time endeavouring to construct new forms of self-articulation concomitant with her own desires.

A Laodicean (1881), with its focus on the notion of 'self-staging', isolates gender as a crucial determinant of the self and investigates the crisis in gendered subjectivity of which the feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century was both a cause and a symptom. *Two on a Tower* (1886) demonstrates how the discourse of sexuality relentlessly channels desire into conventional forms and militates against its articulation in freer and less morally trammelled modes.

The Well-Beloved, Hardy's final novel, is his most self-conscious text in that it is thematically obsessed with the moulding and delineation of the female form and draws a startling comparison between the operation of patriarchal discourse and the activities of the male artist – in this case the sculptor Jocelyn Pierston and, by association, Hardy himself. At the same time *The Well-Beloved* suggests the iconoclastic potential of the 'New Woman' to break the mould of those forms of feminine embodiment valorized by the Victorian social formation.

In their insistent focus on the resistant female subject Hardy's novels consistently emphasise the historically specific determinants of identity itself and, more importantly, its unstable and temporary nature. Far from being the sport of the 'President of the Immortals', Hardy's women characters are positioned in a complex web of determinations whose intersections are potentially variable and mobile. The examination of the impulse to fashion and re-fashion the self suggests a more dynamic relationship between the individual, in this case the individual women, and the social structure. The power relations that shape individual subjectivity are not reducible to a single determining source. Although gender, sexuality and class are privileged in Hardy's texts they are not the sole subjective practices that constitute the self. As Lois McNay suggests, 'social structures are constituted by human agency, and are also the very medium of this constitution. The relationship between structure and agency must be grasped as dynamic, not static; existing structures are reproduced by human agents who modify and change these structures to differing degrees as they are shaped by them' (McNay, 1992: 60). This relationship was recognised by Hardy and the evolutionary thinkers whose ideas profoundly shaped his philosophy.

The investigation of the dynamics of structure and agency in Hardy's novels – especially where the resistant female subject is concerned – opens them up to flexible and productive readings which stress the interactive relationship between the individual and the social structures in which she is enmeshed rather than the inevitable determinisms of Fate, Biology or the Evolutionary Process.

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