

**WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN THE
NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY**

Rosemarie Morgan

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THOMAS HARDY



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*to Adam, Ruthie, Mimi and Alice,
with love*

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ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this study I have used the fourteen-volume New Wessex edition of Hardy's novels, published by Macmillan in 1974-6. The exceptions to this are the following:

Far From the Madding Crowd (Macmillan, London, 1949)

The Return of the Native (Macmillan, London, 1943)

Jude the Obscure (Macmillan, London, 1971)

References to these editions are given in parentheses in the text and are abbreviated as follows:

Desperate Remedies DR

Under The Greenwood Tree UGT

A Pair of Blue Eyes PBE

Far From the Madding Crowd FFM C

The Return of the Native RN

Two on a Tower TT

The Mayor of Casterbridge MC

The Woodlanders W

Tess of the d'Urbervilles TD

Jude the Obscure JO

Florence Emily Hardy's *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (Macmillan, London, 1975) is abbreviated to *Life* and references to this text are also given in parentheses.

INTRODUCTION

For Hardy, the physical world holds within its form and structure as many meanings as the imagination of the observer has powers to encompass. The physical expression of things – the way the world looks and is looked upon – yields due significance to the acute observer but immeasurable significance to the imaginative poet whose endeavour, as Hardy saw it, should be to draw out the essential existence of things unseen and render them visible. This is also the part real, part imaginary world of the Wessex novels, a world shaped by an imaginative seeing into nature, human and pastoral, but a world bound no less by hard material fact, life as it is lived.

Life as it is lived by the characters in Hardy's novels, takes material, physical shape, colour, dimension, and form, from sense impressions, sense experience, the life of the senses, and even, on occasion, the sixth senses. Hardy speaks of Tess's existence as a structure of sensations; and indeed sensory experience, for Tess, not only intensifies the physical expression of things so that trees have inquisitive eyes – seeing into her innermost self as Angel cannot – but it also intensifies her mental powers: by fixing her attention on a distant star she moves mind out of body and transcends the material world altogether. Like the poet-Hardy, she moves within and beyond the physical world to discover inner powers, hidden essences and, again like Hardy, she shapes form into feeling, into imaginative vision, into dreams of the new and strange.

Visible essences – Tess's trees with eyes, or her own peony mouth (in form, tone, texture and mobility, the manifest expression of her sexuality) – are, by nature and definition, physical. But it is not so much the visibility as the palpability of female sensations that, with Hardy's women, gives expression to their physicality. Even the so-called 'ethereal' Sue Bridehead has a palpable flesh-and-blood presence: her spirit, Hardy says, could be seen 'trembling through her limbs'. This brings her (descriptively) close to certain other, rather more voluptuous

flesh-and-blood presences whom no one except Hardy would think to align (imaginatively) with the superficially sexless Sue: those earthy, hot-blooded milkmaids at Talbothays 'under whose bodices the life throbbed quick and warm'.

I lay stress upon the physicality of Hardy's women for two reasons. The first has to do with the Victorian critics' discomfiture with Hardy's women, which none perceived as an embarrassment with, or fear of, the female body, and which most couched in terms of moral censure. The second has to do with Hardy's less-than-typical Victorian view of female sexuality: his complete lack of puritanical censure, his complete faith in the healthy, life-giving force of free, unrepressed sexual activity, his complete commitment to active, assertive, self-determined women of the kind satirised in the pages of *Punch* as 'masculine', hag-like or gross.¹ In Hardy, the active, assertive woman appears in none of these guises. On the contrary, whether she appears as farmer (Bathsheba), or field-labourer (Tess), or text-illuminator (Sue), or as a highly competent head of household (Paula Power and Ethelberta), she is personable, desirable and by no means mannish or grotesque.

Victorian women were rarely offered fresh active fictions bearing imaginative possibilities of challenge, renewal and change. The tales of discovery, of travel, of work, of exploration, were men's stories where they were not the stories of fallen women – Little Em'ly, Hetty Sorrel. In Hardy's Wessex world the sphere is broadened yet kept well within the range of plausibility and possibility. Women work outside the home in both conventional and unconventional occupations, from teaching to negotiating the price of corn, from serving as barmaids to inaugurating telegraphic systems, from working as milkmaids to organising public readings. Women travel unaccompanied beyond the neighbourhood, embark upon enterprises of their own volition, initiate relationships. In other words, they struggle to shape their own lives with a vigour and energy and resilience that is, to the reader, the more remarkable for the fact that theirs is a struggle against all odds, a struggle in a world that, as Hardy says in *The Return of the Native*, is not friendly to women.

In the first instance, I shall argue in this book that Hardy sets at odds those social and literary conventions which mutually

reinforced the culturally based induction, in Victorian England, of a sexual 'amnesia' in women. From infancy women were kept in ignorance of their own bodies to experience puberty, defloration and sexual intercourse as *mystery*. Necessarily, the fullness of woman's physical and sexual experience is bound, in Hardy, by his own observations and empathy and, of course, by the censor – dubbed by Hardy, the 'Grundyist'² – but demystification there is, no less. His women toil and labour, for example, and bear the marks of their physical activity; if they weep, their skin blotches, their eyelids puff, redden and ache; if restless and hot in sleep, they sweat; if ill-tempered or depressed, their features slacken; and the physical reality of exhaustion leaves woman as it leaves man – visibly 'jaded' and 'fagged' (*TD*, pp.382, 383). The important point here is that neither the marks of toil nor, indeed, any visible signs of the body's functioning, of physical exertion, of stress or fatigue, renders any of Hardy's women less than worthy, less than noble, less than womanly for their imperfections, or their soiling in the world of work. Hardy begins where the majority of Victorian novelists left off, with 'real', flesh-and-blood women; and he begins with radical verve: the soiled and soiling world of work was not, or so many Victorians argued, a suitable place for noble womankind. •

In the same radical spirit, Hardy not only acknowledges, or gives due recognition to female volatile emotions, female sensations, but he also treats them with the same devotion to physical detail as he gives to the male. Hence the potential for the physically active life (as opposed to passive), the active struggle, the active experience, is not reserved exclusively for the hero; and the life of the senses, *women's* senses, does not elude the reader's powers of visualisation and is not, therefore, rendered invisible, or beyond the bounds of common experience.

Hardy's women experience their bodies in ways that drew shudders from his critics, which one of the more outspoken among them, Mrs Oliphant, did not try to hide. Her feelings ran high about *Jude* in particular, whose 'grossness, indecency, and horror' lay, she felt, at the door of the women: the 'revolting ... disgusting' Arabella, more 'brutal in depravity than anything which the darkest slums could bring forth', and the

'indecent' 'other woman', who 'completes the circle of the unclean' by 'keeping the physical facts' of life 'in constant prominence by denying . . . them'.³

This brings me back to the second of my reasons for stressing the physicality of Hardy's women. Whereas critics reviled their voluptuousness, Hardy kept firmly to his practice of celebrating the life of the senses and, most important, of presenting the voluptuous woman, the sexy woman, as neither dumb nor loose in morals. To bring moral seriousness and sexiness together in the single female form was not only to fly in the face of current convention, code and belief, it was also subversive. The Victorian conceptual bifurcation of woman (madonna and whore) may seem to the modern mind to be primarily iconographical, but it carried sufficient influence within society to generate its likeness in form: notably, the concept of two types of women, one fit for sex and the other for wife. The social usefulness of this bifurcation in a male-dominated society is that it consolidates division, not only between the sexes – for there is no equivalent among men of the madonna/whore polarisation – but also between women themselves, in that they are divided against their own kind. In every sense of the word they are divided against their own sex. Hardy, then, in presenting Victorians with female models who did not conform to the stereotypes, not only offended against proprieties but also threatened the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of society itself.

It is not simply that moral seriousness and sexiness come together, subversively, in Hardy's more noteworthy heroines, where current belief upheld the view that the latter undoubtedly negated the former, where the prevailing conviction was that the voluptuous woman was by definition morally degenerate. More substantially, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, the fusion of these qualities in the single female form brings forth, in Hardy's novels, a set of fit and healthy, brave and dauntless, remarkably *strong* women. The sexual vitality which infuses their animate life generates vigour of both body and mind; from thence springs intelligence, strength, courage and emotional generosity, and that capacity so many Hardy heroines possess for self-exposure expressing both daring and intimacy – the ultimate intimacy which demands facing the

fear of ego-loss in those moments which call for abandon.

In terms of presenting a revisionary reading of Hardy's texts, or, within the specific context of female sexuality, of treading in his narrative footsteps, one has to begin, I think, with the reaction of Victorian critics and their disciples speaking today in literary publications and academies. Aside from possible fears of, or embarrassments by, confrontations with the physical, flesh-and-blood reality of women's lives, it seems to me that even while shuddering at the voluptuousness of Hardy's women Victorian critics shielded their eyes or, at any rate, did not fully expose the picture they had before them. For example, Hardy's most sexually passionate heroines, Bathsheba and Tess, conveyed nothing whatsoever, to contemporary readers, of their erotic ecstasy and orgasmic rapture – as, for instance, in those scenes where first the one sinks blissfully in the throes of ecstasy, her 'blood beating . . . stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet', 'enlarged', 'swamped', liquidly streaming, stung to tears (Ferns episode), and where the other ecstatically undulates on her orgasmic plateau, beyond 'consciousness of time and space', in 'exaltation', with 'tears in her eyes' (Garden episode). Certainly reviewers vilified the voluptuousness of both these women but, significantly, critical hostility was not activated by these passages but by Hardy's *literal* presentation of the heroine's physical contact with the male body, notably Bathsheba's first ensnarement by Troy in the plantation scene, and Tess's trip across the flooded lane in Angel's arms. This critical perspective, in so far as indecorum is measured solely in relation to male/female body contact, speaks of far more than delicacy of mind or a distaste for things physical. It speaks of total obliviousness to, or ignorance of, female sexuality: outside or beyond the physical presence of the male, beyond his compass, a woman's erotic life did not exist.

In an age that placed a high value on reticence, self-restraint, and certain 'feminine' qualities such as delicacy of health, a retiring disposition, a physical and intellectual timidity, and so forth, Hardy's women, with their admixture of qualities – transcending the stereotypes of madonna and whore – must have confused many readers caught with mixed feelings of admiration and alarm. Indeed, for removing the paragon from her pedestal and for raising the fallen woman from the gutter,

for presenting humanly imperfect but lovable heroines, Hardy was, to his hurt and indignation, charged with misrepresenting womankind. The charge was unanswerable for, in a sense, his critics were right: the representative model, as personified by Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House, or Ruskin's Stainless Sceptre of Womanhood, was, in the amalgam, and in Victorian eyes, the most desirable, the most perfect of all representations.

Models of perfection are, however, in their very unattainability, tyrannical. And since women like men must fall short of perfection, their 'fall' and ensuing experience of guilt, shame and self-hatred inevitably ensured the continuance of their suffering and subordination and, ultimately, the perpetuation of sexual inequality and female bondage. It may well be for these reasons alone that Hardy abhorred what he called the 'perfect woman in fiction'. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of his conceptual framework is that he presents no perfect women in his fiction. On the contrary, his heroines' best faculties are presented in the context of their less-than-perfect natures in a less-than-perfect world not yet ready to take them at face value. But that the worthy and desirable must acquire angelic proportions if they are to remain worthy and desirable, that the world is unable to dispense with the sexual double-standard, that female sexuality still presents a threat to the dominant culture which refuses to grant women the opportunities granted to men, becomes, for Hardy, a tortuous theme of increasing importance to his work. The 'prosaic reality' in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, where two aspiring farmers rise to prosperity but only the female contender is denied legal rights and privileges, constitutes a primary motif modulating into a dominant theme in the darker work of *Jude the Obscure*. This motif finds its true parallel in the iniquitous Victorian marriage and divorce laws, in *Jude*, which are seen to be more intransigently ratified by secular law.⁴

Hardy relished the company of women and expressed no reservations about their powers, moral, intellectual, sexual, emotional, psychic; but he was not drawn to the liberal feminism of his day. While many liberal feminists agitated for equal rights with men, with which Hardy was in full sympathy, and while many others were divided, as was Hardy, over the question of enfranchisement and the problem of the under-

educated voter, the majority of liberal feminists joined with the prominent emancipationist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, in upholding the view that woman's true destiny lay in fulfilling the role of wife and mother. Indeed, liberal feminists regarded marriage as woman's highest vocation, as in a calling to the religious life with complete abdication of the self to the institution.

Hardy was moving in a completely different direction. Early on in his career he had studied, taken notes and made diagrams of, Charles Fourier's⁵ work. The French socialist and philosopher held, amongst other things, strong anti-marriage views, but while the extent of his influence on Hardy has yet to be fully documented, one thing is clear: Hardy was deeply opposed to the liberal feminist's idealisation of marriage. Tending, instead, towards socialistic views and the abolition of marriage in its current institutionalised form, he was more readily drawn to the radical feminist fringe as, for example, in his support of the singular activist and anti-marriage campaigner, Mona Caird.⁶

Yet, while the lone anti-marriage campaigner, as embodied in Sue Bridehead, arrives late on the scene in Hardy's novels, she is nascent in earlier incarnations of his more dissident, rebellious women. Bathsheba's views on marriage, for example, while more tentative than Sue's, spring from a shared ideology and a shared feminine consciousness which hotly denounces the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of a woman's sexuality.

The lone campaigner inevitably drew Hardy's immediate interest for he was one himself. Indeed, his intense feelings of isolation, his deep sense of alienation from the Victorian middle-class world he had entered as a popular, if controversial, novelist, must have urged him to a close understanding of the condition of women, in so far as he and they felt, sorely, the impact of the society's institutionalised values; in so far as each had to struggle to be heard, to gain recognition; in so far as oppression by either class or sexual division was the experience of both. Not only did Hardy identify with the oppressed classes, seeing himself (to use his word) a 'misfit' in the society, and not only did he have to bowdlerise his own texts to tailor them to the Victorian drawing-room where public readings were

encouraged in polite company, but he was also constantly, painfully, at loggerheads with critics. Such perpetual censure, such unremitting condescension on the part of critics, such a sense of suffocation, frustration and humiliation must surely have intensified what is in my opinion his acute sensitivity towards, and sympathetic insight into, the plight of women curbed and bound to 'fit' the world of men.

Yet critical opinion does not favour Hardy as a champion of those women, who, as critics would have it, 'disrupt' the community, the social order, the status quo. These disruptive women evidently unsettle more worlds than their own, and Hardy stands, I would argue, firmly behind them. From Elfride's embattled sexual confrontations with Knight to Sue's outrage at the notion that a married woman should be regarded as man's property, Hardy's platform remains consistent and forthright: the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women, is to be, on his terms, the loser.

Opinion can be, even while one disagrees with it, opinion-shaping. At the same time, while discovering in Victorian criticism on Hardy an underlying troubled spirit, an understandable resentment at his iconoclasm, a rancour, even, at his intimate knowledge of women in an age that left intimate knowledge of women to women, so it seems to me that twentieth-century criticism in so far as it reflects and perpetuates the doubts and fears of Victorians on matters of female sexuality, has long outlived its usefulness as an opinion-shaping force.

My aim, in this book, is to present a revisionary study of Hardy's treatment of female sexuality, a new vision of his work, reshaping our impression of him through the refracting lens of his view of women. There was a consistency in his thinking on the condition of women, although he was forced, at first, to hide or disguise his views. The disguise is not, however, impenetrable, provided we follow Hardy closely, perceptively, and adjust our outlook to his phenomenalist view of the world, to look keenly into and beyond the physical expression of things – reading both their ostensible and their hidden meanings. In other words, we need to read Hardy's prose as we read his poetry, that is with an acute sensitivity, not simply to imagery, structure and language, but also to perspective and voice.

The re-reading here is a question of emphasis which turns

upon Hardy's own emphases: his skill in intercepting his own text with contrapuntal narrative voices, his poetic complex of metaphorical structures, his elaborate configuration of points of view. Closely interpreted, these poetic devices permit the reader access to an authorial perspective which can, and should, be differentiated from that of the principles.

The all-knowing, omniscient narrator has a range of approaches from which to choose. The principle ones are dramatic – recording actions, speech and gestures – and expository, revealing the characters' inner thoughts and feelings and commenting on the story as it progresses. Narrative point of view does, of course, all too often, fall between the two – between the dramatic and the expository. And with Hardy, given the subtlety and complexity of his narrative shifts, it becomes particularly important to differentiate between the perspectives of the primary and alternative narrators, whose points of view frequently diverge,¹ and just as frequently conflict. I use the term primary narrator to mean the voice and perspective that, when distinguished from all others, proves to be recognisably coherent, consistent and stable, from the first chapter to the last.

For the sake of simplicity I shall speak of the primary narrator, throughout this book, as Hardy. For despite the constant re-alignment of perspectives and vantage points in his texts, a clearly defined, increasingly dominant Hardyan point of view does emerge. I say increasingly dominant because with time, experience, and a heightened reputation, he rapidly learned to exploit certain literary devices that allowed him to circumnavigate Mrs Grundy, thus gaining confidence in asserting his own voice – the iconoclastic voice we hear resounding loud and clear in *Tess* and *Jude*.

It is important, then, to an accurate reading of his texts, to trace perspectival shifts just as one traces patterns of images and tracks the rhythmic foot. Through this approach, of clarifying points of view and differentiating narrative discourses, of letting Hardy and his characters speak in their own voices, of separating surface text from underlying meanings and getting back to and beyond the physical expression of things, we will uncover hidden essences and new significations beneath the most darkly veiled utterance.

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I



THE HERESY OF PASSION:

A Pair of Blue Eyes

In the post-Freudian age sexuality inheres in the psyche, or soul, whose guardians are the analyst and sexologist. In terms of professional focus the shift from Victorian physic to twentieth-century psychoanalytic is little more than a minor shift in emphasis from body to mind. A greater shift is evident in the sphere of professional influence. The monopolism exercised by the Victorian medical profession over scientific, biological, moral, ethical and empirical concerns scarcely finds its parallel today in what has become a profession of high specialisation and fundamentally scientific interest. We do not expect, these days, to have moral issues raised by our general practitioner, and emotional or sexual problems seem to belong, not so much to the surgery as to the guidance counsellor's office.

Mid- to late-Victorian medical theorists held that all serious discussion of female sexuality should properly be confined to the medical journals where, under the heading of pathological disorder, it would be addressed in terms of malfunction. In so far as all aspects of the subject – physical, moral, psychological – were confined to professional investigations into physical and mental abnormalities, a close association inevitably grew up, in the cultural imagination, between the two areas: the malfunctioning organism and female sexuality.¹ And as *The Saturday Review* (1896) inadvertently reveals in a review of *Jude*, this close association had become, by the late century, fully assimilated into critical thought. In common with other critics, the *Saturday's* 'Unsigned Reviewer' looks favourably upon *Jude's*

sexuality but brings in the word 'malignant', more than once, in speaking of Sue's. The writer goes on to say that,

The respectable public has now got to rejecting books wholly and solely for their recognition of sexuality, however incidental that recognition may be . . . No novelist, however respectable, can deem himself altogether safe today from a charge of morbidity and unhealthiness.²

It is, of course, 'morbidity and unhealthiness' together with 'malignant', that reveal this author's attitudes while, no doubt, reinforcing those of the general reader.

Even as late as 1906, with the publication of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which shifted dialogues away from a clinical context, or from scientific discourses, into the oral histories of everyday men and women, members of the reading public were shocked at finding themselves exposed to 'unhealthy' issues now expressed in lay terms hitherto obscured by medicalese.

Some decades earlier, in the 1870s, Hardy, too, had felt the impact of this proscription as critics, reflecting the views of the medical theorists, accused him of misrepresenting women by making his heroines too voluptuous. In a mood of bitter reflection upon censorship and prudery he later observed that even the imagination had become the slave of stolid circumstance. It was conditioned, he said, by its surroundings like a river-stream. He was hitting back at his critics whose fidelity to social expedients, as he saw it, prevailed over what he called an honest portrayal of the relations between the sexes. And vitally important to that portrayal, to Hardy's mind, was the very real fact of female desire, sexual understanding, erotic love, none of which had any connection, as far as he was concerned, with physical or moral infirmity, with mental or moral derangement.

Hardy was not only struck by the manner in which critical fidelity to social expedients enslaved the creative imagination, he was also concerned about the social expediency of enslaving women by denying them a sexual reality. He was clearly on dangerous ground here, and, in every practical sense, had no choice but to disguise his oppositional views while patiently negotiating the proprieties – avoiding 'unhealthy' topics as best he may. I do not doubt that he must have found a certain