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# How May We Interpret Tess's Story?

## Hardy and His Revisions

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In his keynote lecture Simon has shown Hardy's scrupulous efforts to choose "the right words" to describe Tess's story, referring to the process by which *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* came to be what it is. I will also be discussing the transformation of the novel, but the focus of my talk will be slightly different from Simon's, for my main concern is Hardy's more inconsistent revisions. Those revisions, I hope to show, are inconsistent in the sense that Hardy made changes to the earlier part of Tess's story but made no relevant revisions to the rest of it. Because of these inconsistent revisions, a certain amount of narrative slippage is created in the novel which complicates our interpretation of her story. While the narrative encourages us to accept a certain portrayal of her, some questions and/or even problems are invited by such slippage.

Let us begin with a brief overview of Tess's story. Tess, the eldest daughter of a poor family, works as a poultry keeper on the d'Urberville estate. Alec makes advances, and she, somewhat flattered by his attention, resists. But one night when his cast off mistress threatens violence against Tess, she allows herself to be rescued by Alec on horseback. He does not take her home, however, but rides at random until they reach some ancient woods called The Chase. Here, after Alec tells her that he has got lost and leaves on foot to look for help, Tess falls asleep beneath the coat he has lent her. The narrator avoids telling the reader the precise nature of what happens next:

D'Urbervilles stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt, and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears.

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel?<sup>1</sup>

Does Alec rape or seduce her? To what extent does she take part in the "incident"? The reader is left to ponder these questions, and thus the Chase episode has been the focus of critical debate for many decades. Juliet Grindle, for instance, referring to Hardy's creative process of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, demonstrates that his "purification of Tess"<sup>2</sup> ultimately resulted in blurring focus of the incident. Simon, examining Hardy's revisions for the later printings of the novel, points out that

1 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 102. Further quotations from the novel are from this edition, unless otherwise noted, and are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Juliet Grindle, "A Critical Edition of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*" (DPhil Thesis, Oxford University, 1974), p. xxii.

those revisions “inevitably rendered the impression of rape less powerful”.<sup>3</sup> Patricia Ingham also states that it is impossible to ascertain the precise nature of the incident, for the episode is portrayed as something between rape and seduction.<sup>4</sup>

The night ride in the Chase was originally set in “early September”<sup>5</sup> and Tess left Alec on “a Sunday morning in late October”.<sup>6</sup> This means that she had been his mistress for two months, or at least five or six weeks. For the publication of the one-volume edition in 1892, however, Hardy altered the words “early September” to “a Saturday in September” and added “some few weeks subsequent to the night ride in The Chase”.<sup>7</sup> Although he slightly shortened the period of her continuance at Trantridge, he maintained the situation up to the final version of the novel.

This narrative immediately raises questions. If the Chase episode is a case of rape or at least cannot be reduced to seduction, why does Tess not leave Alec soon after the incident? Why does she agree to stay with him for “some few weeks”? Has she reluctantly agreed to stay for the sake of her impoverished family? These questions bring us back to the original ones. What exactly happened during the night ride in the Chase? What was the precise nature of her relationship with Alec?

A recent critic condemns Hardy/the narrator, since “Hardy never gives us her version of the sexual encounter”, and hence “we don’t know what the incident means to her”.<sup>8</sup> A closer examination of the novel, however, gives us at least a fragment of “her version of the sexual encounter”. More precisely, in 1892 Hardy made significant changes to Chapter XII<sup>9</sup> so that now we have Tess/the narrator telling us “what the incident means to her”.

In Chapter XII the narrator shows us Tess as “another girl than the simple one she had been at home” (108), leaving Alec against his wishes. Up to the second edition, she says to him:

’Tis quite true. If I had gone for love o’ you, if I had ever really loved ’ee, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now! <sup>10</sup>

For the publication of the one-volume edition in 1892, Hardy made slight yet significant changes so that now we have:

’Tis quite true. If I had gone for love o’ you, if I had ever sincerely loved ’ee, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now! ... My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all.<sup>11</sup>

The line, “My eyes were dazed by you”, an addition to the one-volume edition, suggests that there had been some sexual feelings on her part despite the fact that she had not “sincerely loved” him; and this, in turn, suggests that because of her involuntary response to Alec, she now “loathe[s] and hate[s]” herself. Thus, the emphasis in the one-volume and subsequent editions is on her

3 Simon Gatrell, “General Introduction”, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

4 Patricia Ingham, *Thomas Hardy* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 87. See also Linda M. Shires, “The Radical Aesthetic of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 152. Here Shires points out that the night ride is “purposely ambiguous about Alec as well as Tess”.

5 Thomas Hardy, “Tess of the d’Urbervilles”, the holograph manuscript of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* held by the British Library, fo. 61; *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (London: Osgood & McIlvaine, 1891), I, p. 122; and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (London: Osgood & McIlvaine, 1892), I, p. 122.

6 The phrase was introduced in the first edition. See *TD* (1891), I, p. 145.

7 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (one-volume edition; London: Osgood & McIlvaine, 1892), p. 78.

8 Christine DeVaine, *Class in Turn of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James and Wells* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 101.

9 Some critics have drawn attentions to Hardy’s revisions of the one-volume edition in order to discuss the nature of the Chase episode. See Kristin Brady, “Tess and Alec: Rape or Seduction?” in *Thomas Hardy Annual No. 4* ed. Norman Page (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 132; Tim Dolin, “A History of the Text”, in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* ed. Tim Dolin (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. lvi–vii; and Patricia Ingham, *Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 145.

10 MS fo. 82; *TD* (1891), I, p. 149; and *TD* (1892), I, p. 149.

11 *TD* (one-volume edition; 1892), p. 95.

bewildering experience and the causal relationship between her later perception of what happened and her self-hatred.

When she arrives home at Marlott, Tess confesses the tale of her relationship with Alec to her mother, who bursts into “tears of vexation” because she has “not got him to marry” (116). Up to the second edition, the narrator describes Tess’s feelings in the following way:

But her poor foolish mother little knew her feeling towards this man. Perhaps it was unusual in the circumstances, unnatural, unaccountable; but there it was; and this, as she had said, was what made her detest herself. She had never cared for him, she did not care for him now. She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to him, and that was all.<sup>12</sup>

In 1892 this passage was revised:

But her poor foolish mother little knew her present feeling towards this man. Perhaps it was unusual in the circumstances, unnatural, unaccountable; but there it was; and this, as she had said, was what made her detest herself. She had never wholly cared for him, she did not at all care for him now. She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to a cruel advantage he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his flash manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run away. That was all.<sup>13</sup>

In the revised version the narrator clearly states that her relationship with Alec had begun with her victimisation by alluding to “a cruel advantage he took of her helplessness”. At the same time, however, he also suggests that it had been transformed into sexual collusion at a certain stage by mentioning that she had been “temporarily blinded by his flash manners”, and “had been stirred to confused surrender awhile”. Here, the narrator delicately suggests Tess’s sexual fascination with Alec.

These revisions are interesting, for they enabled Hardy to explore the complexity of female sexuality. It can be argued that the revision gives more depth to Tess’s experience because it implies that the story is about more than female victimisation. It is, however, these revisions that create the narrative slippage which complicates our interpretation of her story. From Chapter XIX onwards, the narrative focuses on the growing relationship between Tess and Angel Clare, an apprentice farmer, and her dilemma about whether to be honest with him about her past. It is in the narrator’s comments on her painful dilemma that such narrative slippage becomes explicit. In Chapter XXXI, for instance, he says:

It was no mature woman with a long dark vista of intrigue behind her who was tormented thus; but a girl of simple life, not yet one-and-twenty, who had been caught during her days of immaturity like a bird in a springe. (281)

Here the narrator emphasises her status as a victim by comparing her to “a bird in a springe”—which is true, as Alec had taken “a cruel advantage” of Tess. In Chapter XII, however, the narrator suggests that the power of her aroused feelings leads her to “confused surrender awhile”. Although the narrator here encourages us to feel for Tess, we nevertheless may sense a certain deception in his voice, as it is the narrator himself who suggests that the complex nature of her experience at Trantridge cannot be reduced to blatant female victimisation.

This kind of slippage also affects Tess’s voice. One example of this, I would say, is her

<sup>12</sup> MS fo. 89; *TD* (1891), I, pp. 159–60; and *TD* (1892), I, pp. 159–60.

<sup>13</sup> *TD* (one-volume edition; 1892), p. 102.

confession to Angel on the night of their wedding. The confession has often been condemned as Hardy's suppression of her experience, for Chapter XXXIV ends with "she entered on her story of her acquaintance with Alec d'Urberville and its results, murmuring the words without flinching, and with her eyelids drooping down" (318–19) and Chapter XXXV starts with "Her narrative ended" (323). Thus, Tess's confession to Angel takes place between two chapters, on the blank page which separates the two. Yet, Hardy does not allow her to remain a totally mute woman. When she asks for her husband's forgiveness, her words suggest how she regards her experience at Trantridge:

Angel! —Angel! I was a child—a child when it happened! I knew nothing of men. (329)

According to Tess, she was exploited, for she was "a child". Yet, her bewildering, sexual experience could be regarded as being incompatible with the traditional notions of being "a child". She nonetheless repeats the words, "a child", so that she finally seems to be suppressing the nature of her relationship with Alec. Although she admits her past simply because she wants to be honest with Angel, her words ironically undermine her intention. Here Tess has said, as the narrator points out, "things that would have been better left to silence" (329).

After some awkward days of estrangement, Tess suggests that they separate and starts working on a starve-acre farm called Flintcomb-Ash. One day, on her way back from an abortive visit to Angel's family, she re-encounters Alec, who has been (rather questionably) converted to Christianity. Soon after their re-encounter he begins persistently trying to persuade her to be his mistress: "here I am, my love, as in the old times!" (451). In Hardy's holograph manuscript, Chapter XLVII of which offers the following response from Tess:

"Not as then—~~not~~ /never/ as then—it is different!" she cried. /"And there was never warmth with me! O why didn't you retain your faith, if the loss of it have brought 'ee to speak to me like this!"<sup>14</sup>

Tess is right in saying that "never as then—it is different!" for she is now married to Angel and her words reveal a strong sense of her defiance as Mrs Clare. She confronts Alec with the whole of her being, which is a counter-balance to her surrender at Trantridge. At the same time, however, the line, "there was never warmth with me", an addition to the final version of the manuscript, creates a problem for the reader of the one-volume and subsequent editions. For, as we have already seen, Tess in Chapter XII has perceived her own complex, sexual feelings towards Alec, and her words, "there was never warmth with me" suggest a lack of honesty on her part.

When the repentant Angel returns and seeks her out, Tess at first tells him he has come too late, for she has yielded to Alec's persuasion and has become his mistress for the sake of her impoverished family. Then, however, she murders Alec and hurries after her husband, hoping she will win his forgiveness. In the manuscript she says:

I felt /feared/ long ago, when I struck him on the mouth with my glove, that I might do it some day/ ~~for his mockery of holy marriage with me, in my simple youth.~~<sup>15</sup>

The words, "for his mockery of holy marriage with me, in my simple youth", were meant for the serial version, in which Hardy substituted the Chase episode with a mock-marriage in order to comply with the *Graphic's* scrupulous moral standards. He cancelled the words, however, and in

14 MS fo. 434. In all quotations from the manuscript, cancelled words and phrases are run through —, and additions are placed within strokes // . All wording, spelling, and interior punctuation correspond with the original.

15 MS fo. 507.

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after you are dead: do that, & it will be a bad thing for you, I can't  
 warm up. ~~to you~~. Hang it <sup>any more</sup>, I am not going to feel responsible  
 for my deeds & passions, ~~of which I am not responsible~~  
 & if I were you, my dear, I would it either <sup>Well - never mind - he resumed.</sup> ~~So~~ here I am, my love,  
 as in the ~~best~~ old times!" ~~he resumed~~  
 "Not as then - <sup>never</sup> as then - it is different!" she said. "O why  
 didn't you retain your faith, if the loss of it have brought me to  
 speak to me like this!"  
 "Because you've knocked it out of me; so the evil be upon  
 your sweet head. Your husband little thought how his teaching  
 would recoil upon him. Ha-ha - I'm awfully glad you have made  
 an <sup>opposite</sup> ~~contrast~~ of me, again, all the same... Tess I am more taken  
 with you than ever X. (see back of this)  
 She could not get her morsels of food down her throat; her  
<sup>& she was ready to choke.</sup> lips were dry, & the voices & laughs of the workfolk eating & drinking  
 under the eaves came to her as if they were a quarter of a mile off.  
 ¶ She tried to argue, & tell him that he had mixed in his dull  
 brain two distinct matters, ~~namely the wrong~~, which had nothing  
 in common ~~by~~ but long association. But owing to Angel's  
 reticence, & to her being a vessel of emotions rather than reasons,  
 (to her absolute want of training) ~~she could not~~ she could  
 not get on.  
 "It is cruelty to me!" she said. "How-how can you treat me to  
 mistalk!! ~~so~~, if you care ever so little for me?"

its place the serial reads, "for the wrong he did to me in my simple youth".<sup>16</sup> On the publication of the Wessex edition in 1912, Hardy made a further attempt to stress Tess's perception of herself as a victim by replacing the phrase with "for the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me."<sup>17</sup> Now we see a parallel between what she says and what the narrator had said ("a bird in a springe"), a verbal echo that assimilates her thoughts with his comments. In the final version of the novel, what characterises both Tess and the narrator is their simplification and modification of her past at Trantridge.

16 Thomas Hardy, "Tess of the d'Urbervilles", in the *Graphic* (26 December, 1891), p. 760.

17 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 491.

Briefly, by way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on how Hardy's revisions directly related to our interpretation of Tess's story. As I have pointed out earlier, in 1892 Hardy went out of his way to emphasise the complexity of female sexuality by revising Chapter XII. Curiously enough, however, he made no relevant revisions to the rest of her story, and this inconsistency creates two different pictures of Tess: on the one hand, a woman who perceives that she once has had some sexual feelings for a man she did not wholly care for, and on the other, a woman who denies such feelings and attempts to simplify her past. While this inconsistent presentation can be seen as an expression of Hardy's own ambivalence about Tess's relationship with Alec, the results are not so simple in terms of the narrative. Her conflicting responses towards the past undermine her own words, inviting a rereading of the episodes concerning her reflections on the past and even of the narrator's defensive comments on her.