

Running Head: HARDY AND GOD

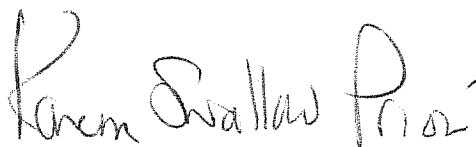
Hardy and God: Tess of the D'Urberville's Role as the Ultimate Pawn

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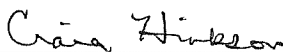
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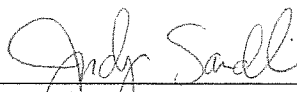
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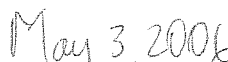
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Abstract

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has multiple competing claims which are difficult to reconcile within the schools of historical, feminist, or classical criticism. A better way to approach the novel is to look at Tess as a pawn within Hardy's own struggle with God. Hardy constructs God as the author of the multiple systems which lead to Tess' final doom: a flawed genetic line, a flawed sexual double standard, and a flawed system of justice. Tess, in Hardy's mind, becomes the victim of a God who is akin to the deity of Greek playwright Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, rather than the merciful and loving Christian God. This victimization justifies Hardy's assertion that Tess is a pure woman even though society holds her responsible for multiple sins.

Hardy and God: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*' Role as the Ultimate Pawn

Thomas Hardy wrote *Tess Durbeyfield*'s story with a passion that somehow makes coherent a book that should be collapsing into complete contradiction. Few of these contradictory elements are explicitly resolved by the story's end. They are contradictions which demand a critical study that can acknowledge and reconcile them. Hardy, for example, does make a strong statement against the double standard of sexual behavior for men and women, as he condemns Alec and Angel for their behavior and elicits the reader's horror at these men's treatment of Tess and judgments against her. Yet it is extremely problematic to accept the justification of Tess as pure which Hardy would seem to set up: Tess is pure, in this sense, only because she did not enjoy the sexual behavior forced upon her and does not define herself as sexual. While this definition of purity is broader than that of the strict *virgo intacta* which Victorian prudery demands, it is hardly a full liberation for women from the double standard. Yet the power of Hardy's insistence that Tess is pure seems stronger and fuller than merely the idea that Tess is pure merely because she does not enjoy sex.

More overt contradictions than this one threaten to pull apart the book. Hardy's language veers dramatically from a staunch Darwinian rhetoric (the inexorable force of heredity, for example, or a sterner Darwinism which he expresses in certain Malthusian turns of phrase) to an intensely religious use of tone, metaphor, and direct commentary. He says that God is sleeping when Tess is seduced or raped by Alec D'Urberville. This is Hardy's idea of God. This is a god whose notions of justice involve visiting the sins of the fathers onto the children, and whose blood lust is satisfied with the destruction of Tess. This religious tone also influences the classicism within *Tess*, which can be read as

a myth of regeneration, like Persephone, or, far more depressingly, as a type of a Greek tragic hero. Either kind of religious tone represents a contradiction with stern Darwinism which claims everything as a result of natural forces rather than casual interactions between God or gods and mortals.

Even the religious allusions have an internal contradiction, since an equal case can be made for *Tess* as tragedy, or *Tess* as myth of regeneration, or *Tess* as modernized Greek drama, or *Tess* as biblically bound indictment of the church. Such competing ideas represent intense contradiction: Does Hardy's God want Tess dead, or is she merely a worn-out specimen of a decayed genetic line who is to expire and let the strong survive? But, again, the strength of Hardy's passion overwhelms our sense of the contradiction. His anger, and his forceful defense of Tess, rests on some resolution of that conflict which we are a step behind in grasping.

Hardy also presents an extraordinary puzzle for feminist criticism to decipher. Tess herself is by turns victim and champion. She is victim when she is raped/forced by Alec D'Urberville; champion when she decides that society, not nature, causes her to shame. She is victim when Angel leaves her; and champion (of a sort) in her desperate attack on Alec. Thus her story can be read two contradictory ways: as a parable of the horrors of a patriarchal society, a society which inexorably ties her to her sexual purity and which presents no escape from her allotted role as the plaything of men and a masculine God; or as a parable of the triumph of woman's spirit in the face of oppression, whose spirit remains free even as her body is brought to the "justice" demanded by her world. Hardy makes it no easier for readers to determine which way to see Tess. His depictions of her lips (41), and her breasts (30, 35) force us to victimize her. She herself

is often ambivalent about her appearance or resentful at the attention she receives, as seen in her conflicted response to Alec's overt adoration of her face [304]). Yet Tess is not necessarily a passive victim. On occasion, she cries out against the injustice of her life with all the force more traditionally associated with a man.

Hardy, then, presents a work that would seem to be literally falling apart, a story of trailing themes and no conclusions. Yet, again, the sheer force of his power and of his vision compels us to ascribe a coherence—to end the work feeling dizzied, as if we are on the threshold of understanding some part of the tremendous thing that he is trying to say.

Perhaps the solution is to use existing schools of criticism as springboards, as illuminations for individual aspects of the work, but also to accept that Hardy speaks in his own indefinable and inimitable voice and to work to discover the source of the coherency that we have sensed. The main action of the story, an action that remains consistently woven throughout each of the individual elements which would be contradictory if presented alone, occurs in an unlikely place. This is not a story about Tess as such, but about Hardy, and about God.

The role of Tess is unequivocally the role of a pawn, buffeted by circumstance, heredity, and, in the end, destroyed. Yet we must question who wants her to fall and why. Society is not actively seeking her destruction, though it is willing to hurt her when she falls afoul of its mores. Neither of the men in her life can be granted the status of mastermind. Alec D'Urberville is a victim/pawn of his ancestral wickedness, filling the role of the rich urbane villain which we, the readers, know he will play from the moment that he calls Tess "Beauty" in that dastardly sneering way that rich despoilers always

have, and Angel Clare cannot gather his thoughts, emotions, and religiosity together long enough to exploit Tess in any but the weakest way.

Where then can we look for the enormous struggle which we sense as we read through Tess' life? We see signs of such a struggle everywhere. We see it within Hardy's frequent interruption of the narrative to diatribe against the injustice and the inevitability of his heroine's situation. We see it in Tess' frequently expressed feeling that she is not mistress of the situations into which she drifts. Most prominently, we see it in the statement, "The President of the Immortals had ended his sport" (314). This statement provides the clue to the true contest within *Tess*: Hardy, the self-proclaimed defender of Tess' virtue and as the champion of her situation, seeks (far more overtly than his heroine) to fight against her plight. This battle pits him against the author of the class inequalities, of the genetic determinism responsible for Tess' decayed gentility, the one who checkmates the narrator at every turn and who, in the end, wins the game: the ruthless God Hardy constructs, who has more in common with the pagan gods than with the God of the Bible. As Lionel Johnson says, "Some one, some thing, must be to blame. It cannot be Nature, because you cannot blame an abstraction: it cannot be Society, unless you would have it commit suicide: it must be God" (394).

Certainly Hardy is the author and thus, it would seem, the ultimate "Creator" because he is the writer of both Tess, Tess' world and circumstances, and the very God whose machinations, within his role as narrator, Hardy resents. Yet one important feature of Hardy's authorship, remarked by critics including, most famously, Virginia Woolf, is that Hardy barely seems to be the crafter of his stories (401). She compares him to Dickens and Scott, examples of "unconscious writers" who in their "moments of vision"

are swept up into the story, making the author a ubiquitous part of the narrative itself who has been given the task of telling the vision thus revealed, versus actually creating it.

From the title page he has established himself as her defender and as the story progresses he remains highly involved with her. His descriptions of her are those of a lover, not a clinically detached author. Although the examples of such rhetoric are too numerous to detail fully, a few include when he calls attention to her “flexuous” form [69], and to her immaculate beauty [74], or he ruminates on the causes of the color in her cheeks [81]).

This Tess that he loves, however, is repeatedly destroyed, and according to Hardy we must look to God for the source of her destruction. Tess thus becomes the symbol and the victim of Hardy’s accusations against God himself. This is why, while he “created” the God of his narrative as the pagan god that he sees, this god transcends the novelist’s authorship. It must happen this way, for there is no sense in which Hardy can defeat God and yet tell the story that has flashed into his vision. If his God is as cruel and unstoppable as Hardy claims that he is, then Tess cannot be rescued at the last moment. If this God relents, then Hardy has no grounds to be so bitter.

The intensity of this conflict between Hardy and God informs every aspect of the story and pulls coherence where there would seem to be only loose ends. The battle between God and Hardy explains the tensions between religiousness and Darwinism. God checkmates Hardy through the unbeatable systems such as heredity and natural selection which Darwin identified. To Hardy, they become personalized, the instruments of cruelty before which a human can only rage in futility and then die. In the context of this war, Tess as a woman becomes more fully realized. She is pure because the system of sin assigned by this God makes no sense. He forced the fall in malicious glee, then made sure

that “the woman pays” (*Tess* 178). The two strongest classical references in *Tess* both carry a sense of the injustice of the gods and imbue the book with the two examples of behavior which the myths all, at core, establish: in the face of the wickedness of the gods, one can give in and drift along the surface of the earth, trusting that one will be regenerated as the earth is regenerated. Or one can cry out even though there is no hope of answer or rescue, merely crying out against injustice because to do less is to endorse the wickedness of God. Tess takes the latter path, becoming more of a Persephone or something less than heroic, tied to the natural cycles of the earth, and it is Hardy who is the Prometheus, defying God and defending the innocent mortals.

An examination of *Tess* along these lines, then, breaks down into three sections, much in line with the three major subdivisions of contradiction that are most easily identified: an examination of Hardy’s Darwinist influences and statements and how those interact with the religious aspects of the story; an examination of Tess as a woman, and where the divisions between purity, femininity, strength and victimization occur as well as where the “faithful presentation” comes into play; and an examination of *Tess* as a classical myth which plays between the Persephone and the Prometheus/tragic hero traditions.

Hardy’s Battle Against a Powerful Indifference

Hardy’s cry against God is never more bitterly crystallized than in his statement, “The President of the Immortals had finished his sport.” The specific President of the Immortals spoken of by Aeschylus to which Hardy alludes is nowhere given the attributes of the Judeo-Christian God (such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience). Elsewhere Hardy will bring elements of the Judeo-Christian God into his portrait of his

enemy, such as his notation that this God believes in visiting the sins of the fathers on the children. However, he clearly sees few differences between the ancient portrayal of the president of the gods and the Old Testament God. For Hardy's Tess, there is no difference at all: God is deaf and helpless or too unkind to help her in her distress. He does not need to be even a strong and vengeful God. He can be as querulous and flawed as the Greeks portrayed him because he only needs to be a bit stronger than the mortals he crushes.

Much of Hardy's poetry is laced with references to this same God, a God whose cruelty lies in the combination of his maliciousness and his helplessness. Whether or not Hardy's God is powerful enough to reach down and break Tess' neck, the machines of cruelty he has caused into being are unstoppable and unbeatable.

The slow discovery of this unbeatable indifference/maliciousness underlies the major action of the story. The mortals, stricken by chance cruelty, pull the pieces of their lives together and begin to hope again, only to have that optimism crushed. For example, the initial poverty of the Durbeyfields is lightened by the sudden hope that they can claim kinship with the wealthy. The destruction of Prince gives way to an optimism that more earning potential is ahead for Tess as a D'Urberville employee. This optimism is brutally crushed, of course, by the events in *The Chase*, which Hardy specifically labels as a result of unbeatable hereditary forces (57). While not a D'Urberville by blood, Alec is cast as the instrument of genetic vengeance for Tess, which, combined with the beauty and voluptuousness that Tess has inherited from her mother, leaves odds too great for Tess to fight against. All lead inexorably to the scene in *The Chase* where Hardy must acknowledge that God has won a battle against Tess. Heredity has been mobilized against

Tess and, as Peter Morton explains:

Part of Tess' education (and ours) consists in Hardy showing her and us that her heredity is the thing 'inherent in the universe' which, valueless though irresistible, helps to destroy her; and this despite her dreams Hardy may well insist in a later intrusion that 'to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children . . . does not mend the matter' . . . then what does? For the tragedy can be traced back to Tess' inheritance of the qualities of her ancestors; to the fact that on her father's side she is an atavism . . . and that on her mother's side her fluorescent charms . . . are the source of her destructive sexual magnetism. (443)

Hardy's authorial intrusion, cited by Morton, indicates the source of his resentment:

Heredity does not "mend the matter" at all, nor is it intended to do so. Gillian Beer notes Hardy's connection to and expansion of Darwinian pessimism, "a sense that the laws of life are themselves flawed. That Hardy did feel this is undeniable" (451). She quotes a particularly bitter passage of Hardy's, which additionally echoes the cruel-God theme of Tess:

[A] long line of disillusioning centuries has permanently displaced the Hellenic idea of life . . . What the Greeks only suspected we know well; what their Aeschylus imagined our nursery children feel reveling in the general situation grows less and less possible as we uncover the defects of natural laws, and see the quandary that man is in by their operation. (451)

Yet despite all this, Hardy has not been brought to the ultimate defeat, and some

further hope is offered to Tess in the promise of a greater maturity, a womanliness, and a “liberal education” that the rape and Sorrow’s life and death provided, an education which will allow Tess to love Angel Clare more fully than she otherwise could have done. This too is only a false hope. Tess’ so-called education is regarded by Angel Clare with abhorrence and rejection, proving that the forces that this God has set in motion cannot be so lightly disregarded. Angel’s response combines religious Puritanism with the specific societal pressures of that society, pressure that creates the virginal bride as the proof of the virility and manliness of her husband, that romanticizes the countryside as Edenic in spite of the practical realism lived by the countryfolk themselves, and that calls rape a failure of a woman’s moral code. All of these forces cannot be beaten even by a very determined partisan of the injured woman, and Hardy must acknowledge his God’s victory yet again.

The unbeatable forces of this God win yet again in the final battle when Tess attempts to reclaim happiness and life from the sort of deathly unhappiness in which she is living as Alec’s mistress. She is able to escape momentarily with Angel. Yet God will not be beaten, and Hardy bitterly indicates that the legal system which kills Tess is in fact the minion of God and also the instrument of his cruel victory over Hardy through Tess. The “obscure strain in the d’Urberville blood...had led to this aberration” (373). Even the d’Urberville coach legend which foreshadows of her crime implies a hereditary force beyond her control (345). All that is left is to proclaim to the readers and to the society at large that Tess is a victim rather than a villain, but this is a hollow victory for Hardy indeed, for the more victimized Tess is, the more God has won, by checkmating all attempts at happiness and victorious, self-assertive life.

Dorothy Van Ghent says, “The dilemma of Tess is the dilemma of morally individualizing consciousness in its earthy mixture. The subject is mythological, for it places the human protagonist in dramatic relationship with the nonhuman and orients his destiny among preternatural powers” (qtd. in Howe 420). The human protagonist Van Ghent speaks of, however, cannot be limited to Tess, because if so, then her diffidence becomes highly problematic. Hardy is the bitterer, the more vengeful for Tess than Tess ever is for herself. Even within the pivotal murder of Alec, Tess is described as a passive vessel. Her speech to Alec is not that of one who takes charge of her destiny and sets herself in opposition to the forces around her; it is rather the desperation of a trapped animal who turns to devour the foot that trapped it, as when she says, “I have lost him now forever . . . and he will not love me the least littlest bit ever any more—only hate me . . . O yes, I have lost him now—again because of—you!” (*Tess* 300). Although she expresses no repentance, she is nevertheless never moved from a very defensive, rather than offensive posture, and accepts with defeated resignation the knowledge that she has that “my life can only be a question of a few weeks” (*Tess* 309). It is Hardy who shakes his fist at the victory. In the next and last authorial interruption, his infamous characterization that “‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) has ended his sport with Tess. And the d’Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing” (*Tess* 314).

These two sentences explain the dual enemy, or rather the two faces or aspects of the enemy: the cruelty of God and the indifference of the natural forces such as heredity. Understanding that Hardy’s God is using the natural forces in order to torment mortals resolves to some degree the problems critics indicate between the rhetoric of vengeful

pagan God and the actual determinism of Tess' appalling circumstances. Morton explains that Hardy's vision of tragedy as that which is "'inherent in the universe'" leads him to describe Tess' enemy as a force which uses "instinct and inheritance" to augment the old "fate and hamartia" (438).

Much of Hardy's poetry provides an additional clue to the picture of God which we must focus on to understand this key antagonist: God sustains life, yet is helpless to provide any sort of justification for the existence he gives. This he details in his poem "New Year's Eve," saying "'I have finished another year' said God" . . . 'And what's the good of it?' I said, / What reasons made you call/From formless void this earth we tread . . . why shaped you us 'who in/This tabernacle groan' . . . Then he: 'My labours—logicless--/You may explain; not I' (1-16).

Hardy also suggested the unjust God within his description of the Malthusian nightmare in miniature that is the Durbeyfield household (*Tess* 15). God is malicious rather than truly powerful. His attitude toward humanity is characterized by a petty cruelty born of indifference and impotence, as indicated in both "Hap"'s ironic request for a powerfully vengeful deity (7-8), and in "The Drinking Song"'s statement "Here we are, in piteous case / Like butterflies / Of many dyes / Clinging to an Alpine glacier's face" (73-76). God is responsible for the flawed systems of regeneration and heredity. These systems render the lives of the inhabitants of this blighted star ones of futile raging against a machine which they cannot escape.

Tess' diffidence and passivity make her an unsuitable sort of person to shake her fist at God or to know the determinist forces of heredity which drive her life. It is Hardy who comments on the determinism of the rape or seduction in the Chase by hearkening

back to the ancestors of both, calling attention to Tess' dual role as peasant (through her mother) and D'Urberville (through her father) and making clear that those lives rehearsed this moment (*Tess* 57). Hardy, not Tess, notes the failure of Tess' religiousness and "simple faith" to help her in any way, calling the God who governs this circumstance an equivalent to the silent Baal of the Old Testament (*Tess* 57). Hardy shakes his fist at the deity and at the blind and unfeeling systems in a fatal or fatalistic defiance, and it is God who wins. This makes the story of Tess Durbeyfield a story of a battle of which the supposed protagonist is unaware—the story of Hardy and God.

Hardy and The Woman

Tess does not fit into Victorian conventions of female behavior. Although Tess is emotive and, perhaps, impulsive, she displays strength of character that allows her to evade (in spirit if not in body) the circumstances into which she is placed. While the plaything of God, Tess nevertheless has a force within her which defies attempts to eradicate her. Described repeatedly as part of the earth, she is nevertheless human enough to end her life as a poignant sacrifice to human institutions and the anti-human spirit of the President of the Immortals.

Such a contradictory (or complementary?) character begs the deeper question of Hardy's intention within the work. How are readers to understand the question of his ideas of Woman, particularly when the novel's subtitle sets up a provocative debate over the nature of a woman's purity? Hardy does not clarify how we should approach this question. Multiple approaches are possible: We could rethink why sexuality is a constrained function, attempt to make the sexuality of men and women equally sinful, or create a paradigm which makes sexuality irrelevant as a consideration of "virtue."

If sexuality is viewed merely as a natural function beyond societal control, in the way that the peasants around Tess view it, then the problem of the double standard does evaporate, but it leaves intact the question of morality. Hardy does not call Tess “non-impure,” but “pure,” which implies an ethical vindication beyond a delinking of sex and society. Hardy also is not necessarily trying to achieve an equality of sin. Although Hardy calls attention to the irony of Angel’s reaction to Tess, in light of his own sexual sins, he cannot just strive to make their level of sin equal, because then Tess cannot justifiably be called by Hardy’s descriptor of “pure.” Instead, Hardy’s project would seem to include redefining woman’s nature in order to make sexual responsiveness irrelevant to questions of true purity.

One problem with arriving at this redefinition is Hardy’s failure to let Tess define herself. She never tells the reader her story. We have no idea of what she felt during the rape—or was it a seduction? We never get to parse the finer points of sexual politics, or ask those questions which attempt to draw contemporary lines between violence and pleasure: Did she sigh and lay passive? Did she fight? Did she invite without realizing the full implications? Did she enjoy herself? Did she suffer pain? Was she drugged or too sleepy to realize? Was there some magic at work by some mischievous Pan or conniving Oberon? Did the woods themselves betray her?

Ellen Rooney claims that Hardy’s silence on this topic stems from his inability to choose whether he should make Tess a human subject, capable of the multilayered emotions a woman faces in sexual activity, and making her a victim, in order to rail against her death. For Tess to speak risks her confession of complicity:

Hardy’s effort simultaneously to assert Tess’ purity and to revise the

meaning of purity itself traps him in the opposition between rape and seduction, because the unambiguous violence that would guarantee Tess' purity in even the most patriarchal codes and the ambiguous and thus less pure space of complicity, desire, and reading, where a female subject might emerge. Once he selects the opposition between rape and seduction as the mechanism for articulating Tess' purity, Hardy's text is constrained by the problematics of consent. Ultimately, the meaning of purity hinges on the relation between seduction and rape; as Hardy attempts, without success, to clarify that relation, and Tess' body is textualized . . . and the relation between her body and her desire become the focus of intense representation anxiety. The impossibility of resolving that anxiety while preserving her purity is the impossibility of representing Tess as a desiring or speaking subject. The figure of the seductive woman is thus enormously important for any reading of Tess. (465)

Hardy repeatedly exhorts us to desire Tess, which implies that she is the archetypal sensual woman who encourages such desire. Yet he also notes that Angel (and, by extension, judgmental readers) should read Tess' face as the true evidence of her purity (186). We as readers are placed in an impossible bind. We are forced to make the judgment of Tess as if her body were the only evidence, laid on a stone slab before us, without any sort of testimony of hers upon which to base our decision. We hear only Hardy's voice, Hardy's angry, passionate, lover-like voice, and thus we are in as much danger of ignoring the truth as those who run up the black flag over her. This only matters, however, if our judgment is truly the important issue here, if we are being asked

in sincerity to make a decision about Tess, rather than solicited to love her and hate God.

However, we can love her only if she is a pure woman, which creates a dilemma. If God punished a whore, a tramp, is he truly unjust or cruel? In such a situation, the vehement bitterness of the narrator against God would have little appeal. The destruction of the innocent is tragic, and is Hardy's main rallying point as he urges us to decry the cruelty of his God. Yet to call Tess innocent, Hardy collides with definitional difficulties. Ellen Rooney describes Hardy's bind: if Tess is to speak at all, she may betray desire. However, if she is silent, she risks seeming as though she has no potential for desire at all, which would not permit her to be virtuous. Therefore,

Hardy is blocked in both directions. To preserve Tess' purity, he must insist on her passivity, situating her firmly in the problematic of consent: a subject who does not speak, her silence guarantees our sympathy. Thus at three crucial moments in the plot, we find elisions in the text: the sexual encounter in *The Chase*, Tess' misplaced letter, and her confession to Angel . . . the impossibility of presenting Tess as a speaking or desiring subject forces Hardy to figure her as the 'seductive woman', a victim of her 'own' mute sexuality, which is summed up in her seductive appeal. Tess embodies rather than acts desire, but in the problematic of the seductive woman, all feminine behavior is seductive. (466)

Here Rooney states the dilemma admirably: If Tess is merely animal, she is not pure, but merely incapable of sin and guided by instinct, as animals are. If she were a full self, she would be a speaking self. Yet if she were to speak, perhaps she would speak of desire or of some level of what (in Victorian minds) would be considered impurity, rendering

Hardy's defenses useless.

There is another possibility for Tess' silence. Perhaps Hardy is demanding that we believe in her purity without making such purity contingent on the virgin/whore dichotomy. Tess' testimony would prove disastrous to such a project, as noted above, and would also give the audience the ability to sit in judgment upon her, evaluating her testimony rather than accepting Hardy's blanket assertion of her purity.

Instead of reading Hardy as a mere silencer, as a man with no category for a woman between virgin/whore, Adrien Poole interprets Hardy's women as ultimate examples of the play between the oppositions, as examples of Hardy's mocking of man's need to reduce woman to a quickly legible stereotype:

The trouble and excitement Hardy's woman cause is their refusal to be accommodated by . . . men's words as they cross and recross that middle distance between the vague and the coarse. The threat they pose is the ability to suggest that this middle-distance frontier is a no man's land which exists in men's minds and men's words. As Tess expresses it to Angel: "It is in your own mind, what you are angry at, Angel; it is not in me." (476)

Hardy's conflicted explanation of the text of Tess' body could be another example of this insistence on Poole's "middle-distance frontier." The masculine need to resolve Tess into a virgin or a whore would be settled by the reader's own arbitration and the reader's own understanding of desire and victimization. Defying such attempts to proclaim purity, Hardy perhaps deletes Tess' story, not because he desires to render her nonhuman, but because he chooses to indict our being unable to "know for sure."

Angel Clare's reaction to Tess is specifically explained as the result of his own preoccupations, rather than any true fault within Tess. This further supports Hardy's indictment of masculine stereotypes and Hardy's insistence that Tess will transcend those stereotypes. Angel, who has replaced the stern religiosity of his upbringing with an even harsher demand for an idealized humanity to replace God's empty throne, creates Tess as the virginal and natural goddess who embodies his idealized paganism (Lovesey 915). Tess' revelation places Angel in a crisis of the soul, so to speak: she presents him with a face that seems entirely virginal, and yet she has "fallen." She is not the pure ideal that he assumed she was and desired her to be. His discovery of this dual nature, of Tess' ability to appear spiritually innocent and yet be physically deflowered, distresses him in the way that Poole claims Hardy always distresses his male characters. Angel "naively assumes that in this virginity he discovers that which is pure, perfect, and stable, and which he has lost in his religious understanding. His misinterpretation of Tess as being *virgo intacta* disturbs his confidence in the accuracy of his reading of a world without God" (Lovesey 916). Tess' dual body (both testament of purity and textualized guilt) confounds both man's inherent need to make purity a sexual test and confounds man's need to make a god of purity, perfection, and stability. Life, as Hardy shows within *Tess*, defies those simple categorizations.

That same refusal to collapse into stereotypes might inform his descriptions of Tess, which Ellen Rooney castigates for their contradictions: Hardy declares that Tess' body can be "read" as evidence of her self and yet, in "the scene of sexual violence, Tess and the female subject all remain radically unreadable figures" (466). There is a possibility of continuity within the descriptions, however, if we recall Hardy's focus on

the inescapability of genetic heritage. Tess' so-called seductivity is a genetic curse which she has no control over, as the reader hears from Hardy's mention of her "too-tempting mouth" (164). Adam Gussow also illustrates this:

Tess' lips--deep red, warm, kissable, defining features of a mouth Alec d'Urberville calls "maddening"--get her into repeated trouble by the simple fact of her being their possessor. "Poor Tess' sensual qualifications for the part of heroine," sniffed Mowbray Morris in an anonymous 1892 review of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, "are paraded over and over again with a persistence like that of a horse-dealer egging on some wavering customer to a deal, or a slave-dealer appraising his wares to some full blooded pasha." [2] (442)

In addition, Hardy takes pains to describe Tess' lips' effect on men as if they were divorced from her actual self: "[T]o a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her top red lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening" (163). If Hardy spends so much time emphasizing Tess' unwitting sexuality, can he expect us to blame the young man who is maddened, distracted, infatuated for the actions he commits against the possessor of such a mouth, or can we even blame the owner of these deadly lips for their silent provocation? These lips can be read as one of the weapons of God for her destruction, a birthright burden which sends signals to men over whom she desires no control.

Yet despite these paraded "sensual qualifications," Hardy stresses that she remains pure in the ways which her soul could manifest itself within the falsely "seductive" flesh: her eyes, her expressions, her honest expression. The textualizing of

Tess' flesh rather than the vocalizing of her declarations of purity becomes necessary if we are to see Tess beyond her own point of view, as a pawn of genetics.

Another factor in the silencing of Tess' account may be Hardy's desire to place the scene in the Chase in his own context, as he addresses the reader. To assume that Tess must be the one to narrate her tragedy ignores the major focus of the action, which takes place between Hardy and God. The most pointedly ironic commentary surrounding that fateful night in The Chase is not something Tess would say even if she did speak to us. Only Hardy can speak with bitterness about the failure of God, the cruelty of God, the inevitability of heredity. Tess only gropes toward this anger. She castigates her mother for having failed to warn her about the ways of men, for example, but her conception of God is rather benign. She disavows the sign-painter's notions of the vengeful, wrathful deity and replaces the Old Testament God with a kinder, more forgiving personage who is perhaps faintly connected to Angel Clare's parents' God, but otherwise bears no resemblance to any other theological concept in the book. Thus, Tess is not the narrator who can put the events of her life in the context Hardy wishes them to be placed. While this may be condescending of Hardy, it is nevertheless consistent with the original plot.

Perhaps Tess' non-participation in the act of speech is indeed indicative of Hardy's inability to articulate a notion of proper sexual mores, but then again, if Tess could speak her truth or say her piece to us as the readers, she would in some way be taking command of her destiny. She would be the Prometheus, shaking her fist at God. If narration is an act of rebellion against the chaotic systems of nature, if narration asserts the primacy of the human in a world of random chance events which would otherwise submerge the self completely, then Tess cannot ever be narrator. Tess has never claimed

a destiny. Instead, she is a wanderer along country roads searching for shelter. God is the aggressor; Tess is not even a defendant but merely the one upon whom he acts.

Thus Hardy's silencing is less a reinscription of the docility of the female than a commentary on the universally depressing and victimized human condition. Hardy's narration is never smug. He does not say, as one might expect, that the silly woman is incapable of putting her thoughts and reactions into the order which one could expect from an omnipotent *man*. He offers no hope for the rebel, nor does he specifically gender the rebel. He merely invites the reader to participate with him in mourning the cruelty of the God who is not there, and in keening with him over the pain of seeing an inoffensive woman condemned before her birth for the sins of her fathers.

If Hardy is the only source for our knowledge of Tess' purity, then we must look to his descriptions and hints within the text in order to understand what precisely he means by "purity." Rooney suggests that Hardy conflates "purity" with "earthy" and "natural," noting that "Tess is the least human of Hardy's protagonists . . . repeatedly compared to animals: birds, snakes, a leopard, a fly . . . by the novel's end her breathing is . . . 'that of a lesser creature than a woman' [382] . . . persistently engulfed by the vegetation of the natural world" (475). Hardy does cast Tess as intrinsically tied to the earth and part of the earth (as the discussion below on the Persephone references in *Tess* will illuminate). Yet the animals of the earth are amoral, certainly not to be considered as pure or impure, and therefore Tess must have another dimension.

Although Tess' animal similarities do not completely declassify her "sin," since she is still perceived as somewhat human, two aspects of her identification with the natural world do contribute to her eventual vindication. One is that genetics, not choice,

rules the natural world. Animals are acted upon and are not responsible for their actions. Hardy's focus on heredity elsewhere in the text can certainly be located in his discussion of Tess' purity as well. Another vindication for Tess perhaps satisfies the prurient. There is no consensual sexual activity in the animal world. Even passivity does not equal pleasure. Animals act as commanded, stripping the sexual act of implications for Tess, who is again acted upon rather than acting.

Tess' animal similarities also allow us to understand Hardy's refusal to situate her as the traditional Enlightenment human subject. Instead of being the rebel against nature, she is the drifter, the dreamer, part of the natural world with its inexplicable and inescapable forces (Gussow 442). Tess' association with the natural world only makes her plight more poignant. When he chooses to destroy Tess, Hardy's God is not picking an opponent who is defiant or capable of engaging in the battle. When Hardy loses Tess to the forces of God, we do not pity him, even though he claims to have been bitterly wronged by the deity. He and God are in a clear battle. But Tess the Dreamer, only one step removed from the natural world, seems an ill-fit target for God's cruelty. He bullies his plaything, rather than demolishing his enemy.

Even Tess' instances of defiance are far from threatening and exhibit a sort of misguided spirit of defiance against circumstances generally. She never explicitly locates a source for her wrongs, or acts coherently against that source. For example, Tess baptizes her baby in defiance of religious tradition, yet submits to the central idea of religion at the same time, because she still believes that there is a heaven which her baby gains admission to upon the religious rite of baptism. It is an act of defiance in miniature, yet, if we are to believe Hardy, it is not the minister who has abandoned her; it is not the

minister who is “mean”—it is the God who was asleep or on a journey, whose guardian angel ignored the calls of her simple faith. Defying the minister, then, does nothing to change or challenge the injustice of her condition.

A similar reasoning dismisses her other semblance of destiny-grasping: her murder of Alec. After her seduction/rape and subsequent pregnancy, she has arrived at the conclusion that she had committed no sin, no crime against God or man in reality, and she has dismissed the condemnation of society as artificial. Tess’ hesitations as to her fitness to become Angel’s wife postdate her realization that she has violated society’s laws rather than nature’s, and they seem to be misgivings about Angel’s feelings toward her rather than true self-loathing. If she accounted herself truly wicked, she would have been less relieved to discover his youthful lapse (177) and less prone to think things like “on an Australian upland or Texas plain, who is . . . to reproach me or you?” (191). Thus, Angel’s dismissal of her is not related to Alec’s actions at all. It is a display, instead, of his own conservatism. When she becomes Alec’s mistress, it is as the cast-off and despised wife of Angel. To blame Alec rather than Angel, to kill Alec rather than Angel, seems possible only because she blindly adores Angel and reacts blindly, again unable to see the true villain.

As an example of a strong female character, then, Tess is certainly no hero. Readers such as Laura Green accuse Hardy of refusing a female hero due to misogyny: “Tess’ consistency as a character is maintained partly by her essential passivity and Hardy’s fetishistic focus on her physical presence . . . suggesting the difficulty, for Hardy, of finding a language and an attitude adequate to the presentation of female heroism” (341). Yet Hardy has never presented any heroes. His own anger toward God and his own

defiance are not presented as victorious. He loses with Tess' death, and neither of the male characters is an example of a heroic, self-realized human. The very inequality of the human battle with the universe suggests pity for Tess: the innocence of the bullied rendering defensible her desperate actions.

Hardy bases his ultimate reevaluation of the term "pure woman" on the unsuitability of society and God to set the moral codes. Society's qualifications to judge Tess are destabilized by all of the other elements in his presentation of her. Tess' connection to the natural world, a world which would acknowledge the pain of the night in *The Chase* but strip it of moral connections; the textualized purity of her soul in comparison to the false genetic signals responsible for her destruction; and her lack of full defiance of society or of God all qualify her as beyond the scope of the standards society has set. If she, clearly human and clearly worthy of our pity, is victimized for no good reason by the blind machine of such societal constructs as "Justice," then we the readers must ask whether the rest of us are adequately addressed by the supposedly infallible moral code.

Hardy's ultimate point in his indictment of society is of course the supposed moral center of society: God and his laws. If God's pronouncements of justice are flawed, as Hardy declares them to be when he angrily decries the law that visits the punishment of the fathers on the children, then society's cruelty can be reversed by rejecting those cruel laws. Tess' confrontation with the sign painter (62) encapsulates Hardy's point:

The sign painter's second inscription breaks off at a moment of fundamental undecidability, requiring the participatory energies of its reader, here Tess in our place . . . to fill in the admonitory blank: 'THOU,

SHALT, NOT, COMMIT----.' [100] . . . the bulk of Hardy's plot lies latent in that ominous ellipsis. Between any unchaste behavior in a broad theological understanding of 'adultery' [in Tess' case more like rape] and a renewal of that liaison with Alec in the stricter form of marital adultery [Tess by then wed to Angel] is a space virtually coterminous with the collapsed distance between sexual transgression and that other sin of 'commision' for which the punishment is mortal: namely, murder. (Stewart 540)

Hardy's own interpretation of the verse from Peter calls it "the last grotesque phrase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time" (*Tess* 62). Hardy also criticizes the law's inability to account for the innocent, as seen in the scene between Tess and the preacher: "'Suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?' He shook his head. 'I cannot split hairs on that burning query . . . I have walked hundreds of miles . . . painting these texts'" (*Tess* 62). The injustice of the law is never addressed by its proponents, Hardy suggests—society salves its conscience when it simply hand its victims another verse. If neither of Tess' sins was of her own seeking, then the law has nothing to say to her. Here is Hardy's strongest case for a rejection of such a moral code. If we reject society's moral code, then Tess would be pure because, like the woman caught in adultery whom Christ forgave, no one could raise a stone against her.

Hardy's Multilayered Classicism Within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

The character of Tess is steeped in multiple, competing classical myths. While she can be read as connected to the earth and as a symbol of nature's fecundity, Hardy also demands that we see her in the larger context, as the sport of the angry deity who attacks

both humans and the earth. She is the fertile and beautiful earth destroyed by both human systems and Hardy's God's inherent viciousness. Two competing classical traditions coexist within *Tess*. She herself exemplifies elements of the fertility myth, following in the tradition of Hardy women whose mystical earth-centeredness is a fairly consistent and obvious theme, and her story exemplifies elements of the tragic dramatic tradition. Hardy uses aspects from Greek tragedy and from Greek mythology to strengthen his basic presentation of the force within the world as primarily cruel.

Before beginning any exploration of the classical themes within *Tess*, it is key to recall that Hardy, while drawing upon elements of classical tradition, is also presenting his own ideas of the world and God, ideas which combine the pessimistic science of his day with the vengeful deities of old. *Tess*' classicism serves to present examples of the viciousness of the world toward its human occupants. Catherine Gallagher emphasizes this. Hardy's classicism is more an evocation of the continuity of the narratives of human suffering than it is a classical myth dressed in pretty new clothes. *Tess* moves from a celebrator of fertility to the sacrificial victim at Stonehenge, and her fecundity is the basis for both images. "The narrator of *Tess* . . . relentlessly strips decorum from the classics and shakes the venerable cloak of monotheism off of the Hebrew Bible. He is intent on making us see that our literary heritage . . . is full of savagery" (427). To understand *Tess* as the timeless sacrificial victim, who is merely the most recent casualty in a world which has never been kind, is to understand why Hardy characterizes her as both victim and yet heroine.

Tess' connection to nature is always bound by the sense that nature is both beautiful and deadly. In the same paragraph in which Hardy implies that she is "brimful"

of a “spiritual beauty,” he notes “the red interior of her mouth, as if it had been a snake’s,” thus introducing a jarring undercurrent: is Tess the serpent in Angel Clare’s Garden of Eden? Nature and the earth can be celebrated as ideals, but the last person to see a snake’s red mouth is probably the mouse about to be swallowed, and this is also a part of Nature.

Hardy sets his peculiar blend of Romanticism/Realism in contrast to Angel Clare’s untempered idealizations. Angel Clare’s fatuous statement, “What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is” (*Tess* 95) is irritating because through Hardy we have seen that ‘Nature’ is a harsh place in which virginity does not figure, and freshness arouses men’s baser desires. Earlier, Tess’ experience in The Chase has been referred to by her mother as “natur, after all, and what do please God” (*Tess* 64). While sexuality and fertility are functions of the idealized earth and thus not criticized by Hardy, the cruel side of nature is revealed in the vicious mating act which is also implied in Mrs. Durbeyfield’s statement of “what do please God.” Hardy is extremely sensitive to the folly of a Romantic like Angel Clare, who ignores the vicious side of the natural:

Hardy is prepared to accept what Tennyson had in ‘In Memoriam’--

actually nine years before Darwin--called ‘nature red in tooth and claw.’

The novel often . . . records the actions of a universe indifferent to human existence at best and openly hostile to it at worst. Yet neither is Hardy prepared to embrace the mechanistic view of nature Darwinism seems to entail . . . Hardy seems to feel in nature a living, enigmatic force . . .

Hardy does see a vitality, in the etymological sense--and uses that word in describing Tess [XIX]--both in the natural world around him and in the

natural self within. It is this vital, natural force, an ‘appetite for joy,’ as he calls it, by which all ‘creation’ is pervaded [XXX], he embodies in

Persephone. (Bonaparte 86-98)

This explanation allows us to begin to reconcile the opposing elements of the mythic Tess. She conveys the vitality of the earth, a vitality which Hardy alludes to indirectly through his depictions of her fertile body, and directly when he speaks of her as having “the ‘appetite for joy’ which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose” (199). Yet Hardy’s recognition of the painful viciousness of “natural” systems and behaviors stops him from veering into the rhetoric of Angel Clare. She is a “daughter of nature”, indeed, but Hardy expresses to us that, for Tess, to be the earth is to be both powerful and victimized.

Hardy’s God appears to have little control over the animating power of the earth which Tess embodies. That is, God can destroy Tess but cannot call into being or arbitrate the energy of the world itself. The ancient Greek gods, specifically those portrayed in *Prometheus Bound*, seem to become aware of humans rather than to be actively engaged, from the beginning, in their creation and sustenance. Here Hardy’s revamped paganism fits into his Darwinism. As Gillian Beer explains, he wants to give nature a human face and spirit and yet views nature as transcending the human. “Like Darwin, an ambiguous anthropomorphism pervades his writing--an anthropomorphism which paradoxically denies human centrality and gives the human a fugitive and secondary role in his system of reference but not in his system of values” (458). Hardy’s poetry is laced with this same ambivalent attitude toward the world: personifying it as if it were filled with animating force (Nishimura, *Inanimate* 899), yet also characterizing

the earth mechanistic, into the systems which govern it. He completes this mission through linking Tess to the earth, the human of our story and yet the animal, as noted in section two—the creeping Tess, the earth-centered and natural Tess, the fertility goddess Tess. All such incarnations became ways to place the human within the natural world.

Hardy's version of Darwinism interacts with his contemporaries' interpretations of classical myths, interpretations which revived the more sordid elements of history (Gallagher 428). Gallagher also explains Hardy's specific context for his reinvented Persephone—the "enigmatic force of the earth" encompasses both savagery and joy, and his presentation of Tess is linked to both. She points out that Hardy refers to ancient times via bloody myths rather than a sweet and clean idealization of classical times such as Angel Clare visualizes. His understanding of ancient times would paint the people not as higher than ourselves, but merely more honest about the brutality of their world than we are with our unwarranted optimism about our condition. Angel Clare misreads the pagan world, seeing it as the exclusion of "the bloody agonistic tumult of the primitive" (Gallagher 427). When he calls Tess Artemis, he has a specific and far cleaner image in mind than the actual Artemis, whose worship included violent cruel sacrifice of strangers (Gallagher 428). Thus Hardy's mythologizing of Tess as Persephone plays between the savage and the idealized, much like his understanding of the natural world.

Hardy's use of classicism allows the story he tells to transcend its modern themes. Although Hardy uses situations specific to his time, such as the conflict of agrarianism and industrialization, to provide the setting for his characters' dislocation from the positive force of the earth, he emphasizes the true timelessness of this dislocation. Despite Hardy's perennial depiction of the moderns' dislocation from the soil

(Siebenschuh 775), he hints at a more deep-seated alienation which has taken place among all people at all times. Hardy sees the realities of city versus country, of industrialization versus nature, and does deplore them in other writings, but in *Tess* this dislocation of individuals is more deep-seated.

The profound disturbances that Hardy records cannot then be seen in . . . the contrast between country and town. The exposed and separated individuals, whom Hardy puts at the center of his fiction, are only the most developed cases of a general exposure and separation” (Williams 470).

As Siebenschuh notes, Hardy’s individuals are caught in a continual sense of dislocation and alienation because they believe that God has abandoned them. This is a dislocation of the soul, and it creates the conditions for the relationships they form with each other.

“Hardy’s treatment of desire—[is] the projection of inner needs on another person--as a way of attempting to deal with the emptiness and lack of direction love deludes and fails to provide Hardy’s great tragic characters with stability or an antidote to their emptiness” (785). Such themes are not specific to modernism. They can be regarded as timeless, coexisting with the classical references without contradicting them.

Even Hardy’s description of *Tess* as a sufferer of “the ache of modernism” denies that this ache is specifically modern: “[H]e reflected that what are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in *logy* and *ism*, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries” (140). Far from being merely the casualties of a change in culture, Hardy’s characters are the symbols of the victimization of people by the universe through all time,

and the classical allusions and symbolism contribute to the feeling that this cruelty is perennial, not modern.

The cruelty of the universe which Hardy describes also takes the form of a more active force for destruction. The world is cruel not merely because God, the moral center, is absent, but because God, the destructive force, is present. Hardy's use of elements from classical Greek tragedy follows the same theme of the indefinable, uncontrolled, yet ever-present role of fate, force, or whatever the cause of animated life can be labeled. Satoshi Nishimura, in a study of the role of the speech act within *Tess*, makes an aside which references this same force, claiming that Hardy makes his "'Immanent Doer'" a personification of the blind forces of the universe and ties that force to human acts. The characters are involved in their own destruction through willing something else (*Irrevocability* 208). This is irresistibly reminiscent of the role of fate, a force that no one really causes, something more than that willed specifically by the gods. Nishimura calls attention to the role of tragic flaw within fate as "an unpredictable . . . process that she . . . set into motion in willing something else" (*Irrevocability* 208). This same description could be applied to the so-called tragic flaws of famed tragic heroes: to Oedipus, intending to kill an aggressive stranger, yet setting in motion the destruction of his household; or to Creon, intending to punish one disobedient against the state and yet setting into motion the deaths of his niece, his son, and his wife. The flaw is tied to choice, in a way, but goes far beyond choice in the scope of its destruction. Arguably Tess' tragic flaw is, as Angel indicates, the character of her decaying family, which gives her the passivity to fall into situations such as the fateful night in *The Chase*, but something far beyond her control operates in her life and destroys everything.

The pivotal scene with Angel, as Nishimura explains, is one of those scenes of a destruction far beyond Tess' particular flaw. Angel is so devastated, so incapable of forgiveness, because unbeknownst to Tess her entire identity in his eyes is destroyed with this revelation (*Irrevocability* 214). Angel says, "You were one person; now you are another. My God--how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque--prestidigitation as that!" (232). Tess has willed something else; she has willed that Angel love her as she is, yet beyond her will she is met with Angel's unfortunate need to sentimentalize her, which makes her "sin" bring into his imaginings a touch of reality that he cannot accommodate. Events such as Angel's Romanticism, which she cannot control and yet as set into motion merely by her appearance and manner, lead to her destruction.

Hardy's argument for Tess as pure woman is partially based on this idea of her non-responsibility for the events spinning out of her control. *Tess* makes arguments about the nature of morality that the Greek tragedies did not explicitly state—fate, instead of being the classical unknowable, irresistible force which renders amoral all actions (because they are willed—could Oedipus have done other than kill his father?), becomes for Hardy a wicked force, a symbol of the destructive power of the universe, and tied to his conceptions of God. Nishimura explains Hardy's radical reevaluation of ethical action in this way:

The novel is a study of justice and injustice that is no longer 'Victorian,' a skeptical one that challenges the traditional ethical as well as narrative assumption that reward is for the good and punishment for the evil. To some degree Tess is aware of what is at stake, saying to Angel, 'I shouldn't mind learning why--why the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike'

(137). It might even seem that nobody or nothing can prevent Tess' life from tending fatally toward its end in her execution. As William A. Madden says of Tess, 'The guilt is not man's [sic] but rests with the "circumstantial will" of the cosmos' It would not be enough to say, then, that Tess' misery lies in the fact that what she does or what happens to her reveals itself to be in one way or another unforgivable despite her innocence or integrity. More problematic still is the replacement of divine providence by some unfathomable, impersonal force very often in Hardy's world an act or event, once it has occurred, not only proves irreversible or unforgivable but also opens up an endless chain of occurrences independently of the intention or expectation of the one who is responsible for the initial act or event. (*Irrevocability* 219)

If the guilt rests within the will of the cosmos, Tess' personal integrity and not her actions become the true testimony to her innocence or guilt. Yet the dilemma brought to light is the impossibility of one human judging another human without reference to glaring faults such as murder and adultery which we have deemed to be destructive to the fabric of our society. Perhaps this is why Hardy makes so many appeals to Tess' face and eyes, appealing to our intuitive sense of who is good and who is bad. We also see her terrifying indecision, not her will to destroy or hurt, and insofar as we sense her mistreatment at the hands of the famous "'Justice'," we lay the blame at the feet of the destructive cosmos, the destructive and angry God.

If Tess herself has elements of the tragic hero or the fertility myth, this still does not completely explain Hardy's pivotal reference to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Who is

the Prometheus here? Prometheus, as the play reveals him, is a being who is a degree more powerful than the humans he pities, yet still subject to and tormented by God because of his attempts to ameliorate the cruel and unjust suffering which the humans face. Prometheus has no hope of release. He can only shake his fist at God and witness to the horror of the human condition. Unlike the humans, from whom he concealed knowledge of their fate, Prometheus has no hope (Kohl 46). All of this seems to point most clearly to Hardy's authorial voice, the shadowy otherworldly character in but not of the book.

Hardy's immense capacity to pity humanity is similar to the story of Prometheus. Hardy, like Prometheus, while suspending belief in the kindness of the cosmos, maintains a faint optimism that beings within this universe can show each other kindness instead of mirroring the cruelty of the gods. Louise Dauner examines the religious elements of Hardy's poetry and comes to this conclusion:

In an interview in January 1901 he said, "My practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but a plea against man's inhumanity to man--to woman--and to the lower animals?"

Abstractly, theoretically, generally, he could only see an incomprehensible and probably meaningless universe; concretely, practically, specifically he cared deeply about the human condition, perceived value in individual lives, supported humanitarian causes, and thought that things could and indeed did get better. (3)

Within the specific scope of the novel, Hardy clearly intends some kind of action as a result of the emotional response the readers will feel at the detailing of Tess' sufferings at

the hands of God and fate. While the possibility of rebelling against fate is not glorified, even Hardy's own rebellion is ultimately doomed. There is also the possibility of rethinking the ways in which our own societal structures are complicit in God's scheme. The novel indicts Tess' society as a contributing factor to the "harshness of the 'cosmic process'.... Thus, *Tess* challenges the linking of the ethical and the natural as well as the social structures which are validated by this link" (Caminero-Santangelo 47). Yet while he destroys the previous ethical center, Hardy offers a small hope of redemption as he creates "a community of careful readers who could emulate Tess' awareness of injustice within the fabric of society and nature, and her corresponding willingness to challenge social convention and law" (Caminero-Santangelo 47).

Hardy, like Prometheus, gives mortals hope as he implies that our doom does not have to be imminent, that *Tess*, as a fable, can spur some level of change. Hardy's own battle against God may be lost, but (again like Prometheus) God cannot necessarily take away the gifts Prometheus gave to the people, who have now more hope of survival.

Conclusion

Reading *Tess* as a story which goes far beyond the usual implications of societal change, female nature, or literary development allows the reconciliation of diverse themes throughout the book. If Hardy is indeed staging *Tess* as the scene of his battle with God—if Hardy is personalizing the drama he presents, then we can understand the book as his explanation of the cruelty in the world. Tess' downfall is the result of the God the pagans feared, a God whose kindness and mercy are mythical attributes entirely unjustified by any ancient or modern understanding of nature and its systems.

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