Thomas Hardy and Women:

Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form

Penny Boumelha
Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

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For Connie Burden and Katy Boumelha

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Preface

Throughout this book, except where a different edition or version of the text is specified, I have used the fourteen-volume New Wessex Edition of Hardy's novels, published by Macmillan in 1975–6, and the three-volume New Wessex Edition of the Stories (Macmillan, 1977). References to these editions are given in parentheses in the text. The short titles *Early Life* and *Later Years* refer, of course, to what is for the most part Hardy's autobiography, dictated to his second wife: that is, to *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–1891* (London, 1928) and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892–1928* (London, 1930), both published under the name Florence Emily Hardy.

During the years that I have spent writing this book, I have inevitably incurred more debts of gratitude than I can hope to settle here. I am particularly indebted to Mary Jacobus, of Cornell University, for generously sharing with me the results of her own scholarship and her critical acuity, and for her kindness and encouragement over a long period. Among the many friends who have assisted me by their interest, support, discussion, or invaluable help with childcare, I should like to thank Homi Bhabha, Maud Ellmann, Tadhg Foley, Felix Thompson, Helen Trilling, and Mary Wilkins. Finally, I must thank Susan Saunders, an understanding and expert typist.

Introduction

From the early stages of his career, Hardy was associated with the portrayal of female characters. Interestingly, it was as a misogynist – or, in the latter stages of his career, at least as an anti-feminist – that he was most often perceived and enlisted in one party or another. The rabidly anti-feminist Charles G. Harper, for instance, singles out Hardy for the accuracy of his portraiture of women. Edmund Gosse flatly asserts that 'Men have made Mr. Thomas Hardy, who owes nothing to the fair sex; if women read him now, it is because the men have told them that they must.' The feminist Clementina Black, reviewing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, gives Gosse the lie, and claims Hardy as 'one of that brave and clear-sighted minority' who have drawn a distinction between 'moral worth' and simple chastity in women.[1] A somewhat quaintly written piece in the *Westminster Review*, on the other hand, implicitly discerns the influence of Schopenhauer on Hardy's women (a comparison that will recur), and suggests that a more varied depiction could help to effect a transformation in the imperfectly evolved female nature:

> His women are always of the same order. Why is that? He has chosen a type of woman, too, which is not attractive. . . . Why does not such artist [sic] more devotedly study the woman-nature in its depth and fervour; expand the horizon of the womankind he portrays in completing his literary structures? There is a lack of tenderness, of strength, of passion, where you look for them the most! . . . Caprice, whim, irony, rivalry, jealousy as the sole leverage! Mr Hardie [sic] ought to know these most admirable traits of disposition are not the exclusive heritage and valued possessions of women. Granting the debatement that may be made, that women generally are defective in the ability of seeing and judging life broadly, therefore justly, in its multiform complexity, in view of that admission, we look to the artist as an effective teacher to aid in the adjustment of that deficiency.[2]

Elizabeth Chapman sees Hardy as a prime instance of what her essay calls 'The Disparagement of Women in Literature':

> [In] Mr Thomas Hardy – we find a general view of woman which is the reverse of exhilarating to believers in her advancing development and brighter future. I do not think it would be very wide of the mark to describe the abstract being masquerading in Mr Hardy's work as woman as a compound three-parts animal and one-part fay; or, as one might put it, with *Jude the Obscure* fresh in one's memory, three-parts Arabella and one part Sue.[3]

This extract illustrates very clearly how often exception is taken, above all, to what is seen as an excessive emphasis on sexuality (most often translated as 'sensuality') in his women. Richard Le Gallienne, reviewing *Life's Little Ironies*, finds Hardy unduly coarse in this respect:

> There is one fault in Mr Hardy's work that still jars in his *Life's Little Ironies*, but which he can hardly be expected to eradicate, as it is temperamental – a certain slight coarseness of touch in his lovemaking. There is always something of the sensualist about his heroes. When they are not cads they are apt to be prigs, and his women and men alike are always somewhat too obviously animal.[4]

Many of the more recent critics have followed one of two paths: either they have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views of women's character and sphere of action, or else they have remarked on his particular interest in and sympathy with women. It is perhaps not surprising that women predominate among the first group, and men among the second. Virginia Woolf anticipated the modern feminist criticisms in her comments on the basic conventionality of his concept of sexual difference:

> However lovable and charming Bathsheba may be, still she is weak; however stubborn and ill-guided Henchard may be, still he is strong. This is fundamental; this is the core of Hardy's vision, and draws from the deepest sources of his nature. The woman is the weaker and the fleshlier, and she clings to the stronger and obscures his vision.

Kathleen Rogers, in the same vein, concludes from her study of Hardy's women that 'these novels show the tenacity of sexist assumptions even in so humane and enlightened a man as Hardy'. Patricia Stubbs, though she introduces the idea of specifically fictional conventions, makes what is basically a very similar point:

> But though the overall tendency and meaning of his work is critical, even subversive in the depth of its alienation from orthodox values, Hardy's radicalism is often attenuated by the weight of received assumptions and literary forms. This is particularly the case in his portrayal of women, where his powerful moral iconoclasm is often in conflict with the use of essentially traditional character types, which either cannot comfortably accomodate his ideas or, alternatively, place a sharp limitation on his thinking.[5]

To set against this view of the insufficiently radical or pioneering Hardy is a second strain of critical comment, in which he figures as a novelist notable for his peculiarly acute empathy with women. Geoffrey Thurley has written of Hardy's 'feminine vision of sexual relations', inherited, he claims, from the Brontës, while Irving Howe has remarked upon Hardy's 'gift for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women' and his 'openness to the feminine principle'.[6]

More recent feminist critics have suggested that the 'women' in the works of a male writer find their significance primarily as a means to the representation of maleness. They can provide an image of what is missing, or lost, or repressed, in the acquisition of masculinity. This is most evident, as Elaine Showalter's persuasive reading has shown, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Michael Henchard, in selling his wife and daughter to the sailor Newson, repeats in a startlingly blatant form the definitive patriarchal act of exchange. More than this, however, he attempts in that act to extirpate at a stroke all the elements in himself that might be called 'feminine', the bonds of love and family loyalty and nurturance that fall outside the sphere of commerce. He enters, instead, into the 'masculine' world of contracts, competition, and technology, all of which are displayed in the arena of the marketplace that dominates the central part of the novel. But each of the women of the novel, from Susan to Lucetta to the furmity-woman, comes back; this return of the repressed initiates what Showalter calls an 'unmanning', as Henchard loses progressively all the signs and symbols of his ascent to power and authority (as mayor, as employer, as father). The women of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are at once the instruments for the probing of the significance of patriarchal power for the male, and 'idealised and melancholy projections of a repressed male self'.[7]

Rosalind Miles, rather similarly, concludes that Hardy's imagination was particularly fired by the eroticised appeal of the 'otherness' of an experience that eludes him:

> Hardy *used* women, fictionally, because of their combination of weakness with strength, fragility with capacity for suffering, endurance with so much to endure. . . . A woman in Hardy's hands could be made to bear a weight of suffering whose inflictions transcend the personal and move through human to sublime; he never found the same true of a male character.[8]

This notion of a sublimity of suffering draws quite evidently upon the long-standing convention of the moral superiority of women – a convention which, according to Patricia Stubbs, focuses a double-bind pervasive in Hardy's presentation of women:

> This is a contradiction which lies at the heart of the novel and of women's predicament in Hardy's society, for the very qualities which in contemporary belief made women morally superior, once internalized, as they are in Tess, also left them defenceless and vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Tess's whole history suggests that Hardy understands the crippling effect of such 'qualities' of character, but he never really rejects them.[9]

If, for some, Hardy's women are pre-eminently sublime victims, however, for others they are above all sexual destroyers: 'In his major novels Hardy ascribes much of the unhappiness of human life to the character of women, who more than men are "tools of the life force", and though destroyed are also the causes of men's destruction.'[10]

But from all the critical comments in this brief survey, there arise (all the more urgently in that they are not asked) a number of questions. What, first, is the relationship between the women that we are and the woman-as-sign that figures in the novels? How is it that 'received assumptions' and 'contemporary belief' – or, for that matter, a 'critical' and 'subversive' challenge to 'orthodox moral values' – enter into works of fiction? And – a related question – what is the status for his fiction of Hardy's personal views on such issues as the double standard, or the laws of divorce? What, more generally, can it mean for a male writer to represent 'women' in a novel? I cannot hope here to give full attention or satisfactory answers to these problems, but they will provide the starting-point for a brief outline of the critical presuppositions from which my analysis of Hardy's fiction proceeds.

That analysis will be largely concerned with the relation of Hardy's fiction to contemporary ideologies of sexual difference and of the nature of woman, and it is important, therefore, to

indicate briefly in what sense the term 'ideology' is used. It is to be understood, throughout this book, neither in the liberal sense of a body of more or less consciously held, overtly political beliefs, nor in the 'vulgar' marxist sense of 'false consciousness', illusion at the level of ideas, either deliberately fostered and manipulated by certain individuals, groups, or classes with the conscious motivation of self- or class-interest, or as 'a spontaneous precipitate of one's position within the class-structure', in Eagleton's phrase. Rather, 'ideology' will be used in the sense made familiar by Althusser and some subsequent marxist theorists: that is, as a complex system of representations by which people are inserted as individual subjects into the social formation.[11] Its role – which is not to say that is governed by any intention – is to offer a false resolution of real social contradictions by repressing the questions that challenge its limits and transposing, displacing, or eliding the felt contradictions of lived experience in a way that will permit of an apparent resolution. It is not illusory, for it is the condition of the way in which people experience their relation to the social relations of production; nor does it consist of a set of ideas. While ideology is real, then, in that it is compounded of lived experience, it is simultaneously 'false', in that it obscures the nature of that experience, by representing as obvious and natural what is partial, factitious, and ineluctably social. That is not to say that it 'expresses' or 'embodies' class-interest, nor does it stand in any direct or spontaneous relation to modes or relations of production. Eagleton has argued that ideology 'encodes the *class-struggle*';[12] in my use of the term, however, it will also encode other relations of power and dominance, and principally that of male dominance. But ideology is not a homogeneous and overarching unity which is somehow *imposed* upon a passive or an acquiescent working class, or female sex. Such categories are themselves constituted in ideology. There is, at any historical moment and in any domain of discourse, at least the possibility of a number of ideologies that may stand in contradiction or even conflict with one another, and it is in the confrontation and interrogation of these contradictions within and between ideologies that there inheres the possibility of change, as the primacy of the unified subject is unsettled by their evident partiality.

How, then, do these ideologies bear upon the literary text? The text does not 'express' ideology; rather, it produces, re-produces and transforms elements of ideology into its own literary effects. The 'history' of the text is not a reflection or a doubling of real history, but it represents an ideologically constituted experience of real history. In this will consist the ideological project of the work (which may or may not have some correspondence with the views and intentions of its writer). The classic, readable, realist text has as its project to effect an imaginary resolution of actual (but displaced) social contradictions. A hierarchy of discourses establishes a dominant perspective, and it is in the process of identification with that 'point of view' that the reader is called upon to become an ideological subject and to experience that resolution. But that does not mean that the text's project will be simply or uniformly fulfilled. There may emerge contradictions which cannot be reconciled, and the reader may be called upon to identify with conflicting perspectives that cannot be rendered coherent.

It is here that the importance of form, of genre and of narrative voice, comes into play. The writer does not make a free choice among 'empty' genres. While genre does not in itself determine that a text must be read in a certain way, it brings with it a history of reading, a set of conventions and of specifically aesthetic ideologies. The expectations engendered by the genre can enter into a relation of tension and opposition with the author's sense of an intention and, more significantly, with the project of the text, as Catherine Belsey has noted:

> There may be a direct contradiction between the project and the formal constraints, and in the transgression thus created it is possible to locate an important object of the critical quest. . . . The unconscious of the work (*not*, it must be noted, of the author) is constructed in the moment of its entry into literary form, in the gap between the ideological project and the specifically literary form.[13]

The formal coherence of the genre may be disrupted, ironised, or subverted by elements that cannot be contained within the limits of its ideology; in the case of Hardy, this can be seen most clearly in the anxieties and ambiguities of his relation to the pastoral mode.[14] In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, there is a relatively straightforward (if strained and uneasy) use of the pastoral. Progressively, however, the pastoral is thrown into

question as other genres and modes of writing enter more deeply into the fiction. The pastoral is disrupted by tragedy, and the tragedy subverted by elements of realism that cannot be stabilised within its mythical perspective. With *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, realism in turn is pushed against its limits by the disintegration of the cohering power of character and by the radical dissonances of narrative voice and point of view. The disjunction of such varied modes resists the organisation into a hierarchy of discourses that would endorse a particular ideological position. Hardy was experimental as a novelist, not only with genres and modes of narration, but also with the ways in which they could be made to confront and play off against one another. They enter into a relation of interrogation that refuses not only closure, but also enclosure by the authority of a 'placing' discourse. I shall go on to argue, in the course of this book, that the formal dislocations and discontinuities are at their sharpest and most unsettling in the depiction of sexual and marital relationships, and that the radicalism of Hardy's representation of women resides, not in their 'complexity', their 'realism' or their 'challenge to convention', but in their resistance to reduction to a single and uniform ideological position. The experimentalism of Hardy's novels would make it all too easy to see him as a lonely pioneer in the field of fiction, or, equally, to assimilate him into a distinguished company of (male) 'major' writers who turned to the exploration of women's experience at this time. His novels display their textuality in an unusually overt fashion, in their quotations, allusions and echoes of the traditions of 'fine writing', and in what has been called their thematic obsession with literary culture.[15] The open dialogues in which his texts engage (with Arnold, Shelley, and Wordsworth, among others), and the patient transcribing of extracts into his Notebooks, to some degree demonstrate Hardy's anxious and displaced relation to his own sense of a predominantly metropolitan and intellectual literary culture (and audience). But for all that, he did not altogether serve this distinction between 'major' and 'minor' fiction, and was always aware of the developments in fiction during the period of his own writing career. Although Hardy was cautious in his public comments on the New Fiction, it nevertheless proved an enabling and

fruitful development for him as a novelist, in both its formal experimentation and its increasingly explicit concern with sexual and marital themes.

But if Hardy's radicalism is to be read correctly, it must be situated historically: that is, not in a context of simple contemporaneity, but in relation to the shifts and mutations of contemporary ideologies which the fiction itself produces and transforms. The 'sexuality', the 'women', the 'marriage' and the 'non-marriage' which it represents are all constituted in an ideology of sexual difference that was transformed, at this period, by the impact of biologistic interpretations of Darwinism (itself, of course, constituted within a 'science' that was not the objective and incontrovertible discourse it proclaimed itself to be). This book is an attempt to examine Hardy's fiction, not as the product of personal temperament or sensibility, nor in the light of his own sexual pathology, his unfortunate marital history, and his personal views concerning women, or sex, or marriage and divorce, but in the historical situation that was a vital determination of his radicalism.

NOTES

1 See respectively, Charles G. Harper, *Revolted Woman: Past, Present, and to Come* (London, 1894), p. 19; Edmund Gosse, 'The Tyranny of the Novel,' *National Review*, 19 (1892), 163–75, rpt. in *Questions at Issue* (London, 1893), p. 14; and Clementina Black, rev. of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Illustrated London News*, 9 January 1892, p. 50.
2 'E. V. Ingram' [Caradoc Granhim], 'Art Literature,' *Westminster Review*, 142 (1892), 399–400.
3 Elizabeth R. Chapman, *Marriage Questions in Modern Fiction, and Other Essays on Kindred Subjects* (London, 1897), p. 80.
4 Richard Le Gallienne, *Retrospective Reviews. A Literary Log II 1893–1895* (London, 1896), pp. 80–3.
5 See, respectively, Virginia Woolf, 'Thomas Hardy's Novels,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 January 1928, p. 33; Kathleen Rogers, 'Women in Thomas Hardy,' *Centennial Review*, 19 (1975), 257; and Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880–1920* (Brighton, 1979), p. 81.
6 Geoffrey Thurley, *The Psychology of Hardy's Novels: The Nervous and the Statuesque* (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1975), p. 23; Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (London, 1968), p. 109.
7 Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics,' in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London, 1979), p. 27. See also her 'The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge,' in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (London, 1979), pp. 99–115.

8 Rosalind Miles, 'The Women of Wessex,' in *The Novels of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Anne Smith (London, 1979), pp. 38–9.
9 Stubbs, *Women and Fiction*, pp. 82–3.
10 Clarice Short, 'In Defense of *Ethelberta*,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 13 (1958), 50.
11 See, particularly, Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1970), pp. 121–73; Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London, 1978); Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1976); and Steve Burniston and Chris Weedon, 'Ideology, Subjectivity and the Artistic Text,' in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 10 (1977), rpt. as *On Ideology*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London, 1978), pp. 199–229.
12 Terry Eagleton, rev. of *Truth and Ideology*, by Hans Barth, *Notes and Queries*, NS 25 (1978), 362.
13 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, New Accents (London, 1980), pp. 107–8.
14 Cf. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, pp. 94–5.
15 Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 131.