March 1982

Thomas Hardy's First Novel: Women and the Quest for Autonomy

Judith Bryant Wittenberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.1, March 1982, p.47-54
Thomas Hardy's First Novel:
Women and the Quest for Autonomy

by JUDITH BRYANT WITTENBERG

Hardy has been repeatedly praised for what Irving Howe called his "openness to the feminine principle," his "gift for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women"; indeed, Elaine Showalter recently suggested that Hardy "wrote in what may be called a female tradition." When Hardy's first novel, Desperate Remedies, was published anonymously in 1871, the reviewer in the Athenæum guessed that the unknown author's "close acquaintance . . . with the mysteries of the female toilette would appear to point to its being the work of one of that sex." Some months later, a notice in the Saturday Review, probably written by Hardy's close friend Horace Moule, singled out the two major female figures as "studies of very unusual merit. None of the male characters come quite up to these protagonists." Although the novel as a whole has been criticized for its excesses of plot and for its uneasy admixture of realism and melodrama, not least of all by Hardy himself, who, in his 1912 preface, deemed it a "sensational and strictly conventional narrative," commentators continue to speak positively about Hardy's female characters: Albert Guerard, for example, said that "all the women in the book are alive. The experienced are as convincing as the innocent." What no one has yet explored, however, is the way in which Desperate Remedies reveals not only the overt strengths but also the less obvious problems in Hardy's depiction of women; the sympathetic portrayals are subtly qualified by elements that are more ambiguous and problematic.

Unquestionably, at the surface level, Hardy's exploration in Desperate Remedies of the psychological complexities and the socio-economic difficulties of women is remarkable. One finds in the text explicit commentary about, as well as the dramatization of, each of these facets of woman's condition. In one passage, Edward Springrove ruminates about the question of psycho-sexual difference, concluding that despite

4. Ibid., p. 6.
“the habit of exclaiming that woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse, the fact remains that, after all, women are Mankind, and that in many of the sentiments of life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree” (p. 206), a conclusion undoubtedly based on the same sort of thinking that led to Hardy’s conception of that unusual androgynous woman, Miss Aldclyffe. Elsewhere, the obviously masculine narrator comments on the “cruel satires that from the beginning till now have been stuck like knives into womankind,” adding that “surely there is not one so lacerating to them, and to us that love them, as the trite old fact, that the most wretched of men can, in the twinkling of an eye, find a wife ready to be more wretched still for the sake of his company” (pp. 332-33), a social “fact” behind not only the depiction of the pathetically Dickensian Mrs. Higgins, to whom the comment applies directly, but also that of Cytherea Graye, forced by family and economic pressure into marriage with the devious and destructive Aeneas Manston.

Miss Aldclyffe, the strong-willed and latently lesbian older woman, is perhaps the most interesting character in the novel and a singular figure in Hardy’s fictional corpus. Whether one regards her, as does C. J. P. Beatty, as a “tragic example of a woman deprived of the filial affection which should have been hers” and which she seeks to regain through her manipulations of her son and her dead suitor’s daughter, or as a “female stalking horse” behind whom the male author “hid” himself, as does John Fowles, she is certainly a compelling and problematic individual. First seen by the young Cytherea in the “burning glow” of the afternoon sun in a red-walled room, dressed all in black, Miss Aldclyffe appears like a figure from hell or from one of Turner’s late visionary paintings that Hardy admired so much. Indeed there is a hellish aspect to some of her subsequent treatment of the vulnerable young woman, but initially her response is quite sexual, much like that of a prospective lover. She thinks of Cytherea as “a creature who could glide round my luxurious indolent body” (p. 89) and in various ways she assumes a role which is essentially that of a suitor as well as that of an employer; her “masculine” tendencies are underscored by Hardy’s description of her as having a jaw with a “masculine cast” and later as weeping like “a man” (pp. 88, 219). Yet she had earlier experienced at least one prolonged period of intensely feminine passion, when she fell in love with Ambrose Graye and was also seduced and impregnated by her cousin. Now seeming fully androgynous, Miss Aldclyffe bears only slight physical traces of “womanly weakness,” controls aspects of her considerable inheritance with great firmness, and evinces attitudes toward the three younger people in her sphere, Cytherea, Edward, and Aeneas, that

mix in varying degrees somewhat maternal concern and repressively paternalistic control. Although she is at forty-six much older than Hardy’s many subsequent female protagonists who assume faintly masculine socio-economic roles or who evince confusion about their sexual propensities—Viviette Constantine, Bathsheba Everdene, Paula Power, Sue Bridehead, and Ethelberta Petherwin offer differing examples of these tendencies—and though she is more excessively drawn than any of them, Miss Aldclyffe is clearly their forerunner in crucial ways.

If the figure of Miss Aldclyffe represents androgyny pushed to such an extreme that her sexual identity is in question, a type which Hardy tempered in later novels, her responses to Cytherea Graye represent a highly sexualized version of what would become in several of his subsequent works warm female friendships. In the famous scene in which Miss Aldclyffe visits Cytherea’s bedroom late at night—a scene sufficiently disturbing to twentieth-century male critics that they use terms to describe it such as “chilling,” “appalling,” and “embarrassingly explicit”—she treats the younger woman almost precisely as would a seductive male. Though she cloaks her approach in a quasi-maternal guise, addressing Cytherea as “my own, own child” and kissing her with a “warm motherly salute” (pp. 112-13), Miss Aldclyffe’s jealous accusations, after discovering that her kiss is not the girl’s first, are like those of a demanding and purity-obsessed male lover such as Henry Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Intriguingly, the dream that Miss Aldclyffe has during the night she spends in Cytherea’s bed, though contextually and symbolically related to her father’s death, is also like a male castration fantasy; she confronts “Time, with his wings, hourglass, and scythe, coming nearer and nearer to me—grinning and mocking: then he seized me, took a piece of me only” (p. 121).

Despite the fact that this scene places the older woman in a male sexual role, as does her later attentive focus on the girl as an “object” (p. 147), there are other less highly charged aspects of their relationship that mark it as an instance of supportive female bonding—the fact that in their intimate moments restrictive and hierarchical social roles, such as those of mistress and maid, are cast aside, so that it is “woman and woman only” (p. 112) and the fact that Cytherea serves as an “influence for good over Miss Aldclyffe” (p. 145), at least temporarily. In later novels, Hardy would depict in a more controlled fashion emotional female relationships, relationships of a sort rarely duplicated by those between men. In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, Ethelberta Petherwin’s warm ties to her sister Picotee lead her to sacrifice her own romantic interest in Christopher Julian in order to champion her sister’s cause; in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Elizabeth-Jane Newson sees Lucetta Templeman as

8. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 35.
“her wraith or double,” immediately entrusts her with the story of her life, and moves into her house; in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, the eponymous heroine’s ties to her fellow female workers at Talbothays are enduring and characterized by mutual consideration; and Paula Power’s relationship with Charlotte de Stancy in A Laodicean is marked by sisterly kindness and “staunch partizanship” on both their parts, and acts of tenderness and generosity that Hardy designates as demonstrations of love. Of course there is obviously some sexual ambiguity in this last relationship, as there conceivably may be in the thwarted friendship between Grace Melbury and Felice Charmond of The Woodlanders—Grace refers to it with passionate disappointment, saying, “Ah, I loved her once . . . and she would not care for me then!” (Ch. 30). Whatever their level of implicit sexuality, the instances of female bonding are sufficiently prevalent in Hardy’s fiction that one would not have been surprised if Virginia Woolf made an approbatory parenthetical reference to him in A Room of One’s Own as she discussed the merits of seeing more novelistic examples of friendship between women.

Hardy’s exploration, through the characterization of Miss Aldclyffe, of a woman’s potential for androgynous behavior and for intimacy with members of her own sex is impressive in many ways, considering the author’s maleness and the fact that he was both relatively young and quite inexperienced when he wrote Desperate Remedies, but it has aspects that reveal some of the less obvious problems in Hardy’s depiction of women. Miss Aldclyffe becomes a demoniacally manipulative figure controlling the fates of her relatively helpless “dependents,” Cytherea, Edward, and Aeneas, in ways that exhibit some peculiar mix of prurience and sadism, and she dies of a mysterious malady at the end of the novel. Of course these developments are partly the result of Hardy’s using the conventions of the sensation novel, which required that evil deeds be punished in kind, and of his inability to be consistent in his treatment of Miss Aldclyffe to the point of completing her “redemption” at the tender and innocent hands of Cytherea. At the same time, however, they forecast a recurrent pattern in Hardy’s fiction—his tendency to “punish,” either with death or with chastisement, women who reveal somewhat masculine urges and a need to rebel against a purely feminine role, or who have extra-marital sexual experiences. A number of Hardy women, such as Viviette Constantine, Sue Bridehead, Bathsheba Everdene, Tess Durbeyfield, Fanny Robin, and Eustacia Vye, fall into one or both of these categories and suffer extreme humiliation or death, fates not fully consonant either with their “hubris” or their “crimes.” Granted that their fates reflect to some degree the exigencies of plot and prevailing Victorian attitudes about women; nevertheless, when one considers the reprieve from hanging George Eliot gave to her selfish murderess Hetty Sorrel, one who in essence “deserves” to die more than does any of Hardy’s heroines, one realizes that Hardy’s much
vaunted sympathy for women is covertly undermined by narrative developments in the respective novels in which they appear.

If Hardy's depiction of Miss Aldclyffe manifests his interest in exploring—along with difficulties created perhaps by his unconscious attitudes toward—less-than-usual tendencies in women's psyches and behavior patterns, his portrayal of Cytherea Graye serves to delineate the socio-economic plight of a more-or-less normal young woman left without resources in Victorian England. She, far more than Miss Aldclyffe and more than any subsequent Hardy heroine except Tess Durbeyfield, dominates the novel, 11 and she is, within the limitations imposed by her youth and inexperience, an admirable and engaging character. Orphaned and impoverished, she confronts a predicament similar to that of earlier Victorian heroines such as Jane Eyre and Esther Summerson, and she shares with the first of these an urge to be self-determining and to find employment that can engage her ability and interests, but an urge whose fulfillment is frustrated by a rigidly structured society that is generally inhospitable to the ambitions of women and that fails to train them to do things that can be usefully translated into economically rewarding employment. Cytherea's problems are reflected clearly in the advertisements which represent her gradually lowering job expectations, from governess to companion to lady's maid, and more subtly in the fact that she is presented visually as a woman-in-the-window, looking out yearningly but limited in her capacity to participate in the world without. Typical of several such moments is the early one in which she spends an afternoon "looking out of the window for she scarcely knew whom, and hoping she scarcely knew what" (p. 74). Hardy's novels contain a great many such women-in-the-window, casting longing eyes on the streets or fields below or being looked at desirously by men: in his presentation Hardy may have been influenced by his viewing of fensterbilder, or window pictures, but in filling his fictional windows specifically with women he created a potent visual analogue for their social condition.

When Cytherea receives no responses to her job advertisement, the "pictures" of the family who will hire her are replaced in her imagination by visions of potential suitors and husbands (pp. 54-55); here, too, Hardy offers visual indices of the almost inevitable displacement of vocation by romance for a young Victorian woman with limited possibilities. Yet Cytherea has an assertive streak; she tacitly refuses at some points to be passively complicitous in her fate, as in the moment in which she leaves the window out of which she has been gazing longingly and goes out into the street so that she may "accidentally" encounter Edward Springrove, with whom she has become infatuated. Particularly

11. Michael Millgate says, "'[Hardy's] imagination seems scarcely capable of encompassing the thoughts and feelings of the other characters except insofar as they impinge upon Cytherea and her situation.'" Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 32.
in the early pages of *Desperate Remedies*, Cytherea shows a desire to assert herself as an individual at some level, and initially Hardy gives her a degree of intellectual freedom. In her early encounters with Springrove, Cytherea offers quips and aphoristic rejoinders that mark her as cerebrally the equal of the man who is both a poet and an architect, and in her initial confrontations with Miss Aldclyffe, Cytherea reveals a spirited desire to preserve some measure of psychic independence. She dislikes the idea that servitude may necessitate "quenching all individuality of character in herself" (p. 98) and responds to her employer’s petty cruelties with "absolute defiance" (p. 107). Still later, her passionate speech pleading that the world recognize and respect her "single opportunity of existence" (p. 272) and her willingness to research details of the first Mrs. Manston in back issues of the *Casterbridge Chronicle* reveal that both rhetorically and behaviorally she is motivated by a desire to be acknowledged as an equal and as a contributing participant in her small world.

Nevertheless, a series of factors, not all of which we can rationalize contextually, conspire to confine and subjugate her. First among the plausible ones is pressure from without, the financial and social demands that she marry, and marry well. Both Miss Aldclyffe, who wants to see Cytherea united with her own illegitimate son, and Cytherea’s brother Owen, who sees marriage as her only escape from her life as a servant and as her means of securing material comforts that will aid him as well as her, coerce her into a marriage about which she is deeply ambivalent. Coupled with this social pressure is the force of her own emotions: her infatuation, first with Edward, then, in some more troubling way, with Aeneas, makes of Cytherea, like so many later Hardy heroines associated with vulnerable birds, a "captured sparrow" (p. 82). The coercive power of one’s own irrationality to subvert reason and good sense, which plays such a potent role in all of Hardy’s fiction and manifests itself most frequently as strong sexual attraction, makes its first appearance in Cytherea Graye as she vacillates between sense and sensibility. Though her decision to marry Manston seems at one level to gratify both the outward pressure from her family (a category in which one might place, albeit uneasily, Miss Aldclyffe) and the inward pressure of her attraction to the man of penetrating eyes, her deep-seated dis-ease with the prospect is revealed by her disturbing, masochistically sexual dream of “being whipped with dry bones suspended on strings” by Manston (p. 263), a dream that she has on the eve of her wedding.

Quite clearly, fathers in both the literal and the broadest sense are the source of Cytherea’s social and psychological struggles—as they obviously are of Miss Aldclyffe’s and Edward Springrove’s, both of whom encounter difficulties imposed by their own fathers and the larger patriarchal society. The financial improvidence and emotional detachment of Cytherea’s own father have left her impoverished and psychologically
unequipped to deal with her emerging sexuality, while the male-domi­
nated nineteenth-century society allows her neither freedom to develop
her talents economically and intellectually beyond the realm of marriage
nor the latitude to acknowledge fully and to confront her sexual desires.
Even the man she ultimately marries, the gentle Edward Springrove, in
what is as close to an “ideal” union as one finds in a Hardy novel,
patronizingly refers to her as a “pet lamb” (p. 277) and shows a discon­
certing concern with the “earthly realization of his formless desire” (p.
207) that links him with the perniciously solipsistic Jocelyn Pierston of
The Well-Beloved; one is led to question the likelihood of Edward’s of­
fering Cytherea the full-fledged regard and intellectual equality she ob­
viously desires.

There is, however, yet another, if less visible, controlling male figure
in the novel who serves to keep Cytherea in her place, so to speak—the
Hardyan narrator. Granted, the narrative manipulations of Cytherea
are rather less marked than those of the heroines in some of Hardy’s
subsequent novels, especially in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, with which
Desperate Remedies has been compared,¹² but because they are harbin­
gers, and because they constitute what is perhaps the major contraver­
sion of Hardy’s consciously sympathetic concern for women, they are
worth noting. The most striking of these are the narrator’s intrusive
generalizations about women, some few of which are obviously ground­
ed in compassion, but most of which seem condescendingly designed to
reduce the struggles of Cytherea and the other female characters to the
stereotypically female and thus to undermine the reader’s regard for
them as individuals. There are perhaps a dozen of these scattered
throughout the novel, the majority of them within the first half, as if
introduced to control the reader’s initial responses. For example, com­
ments such as the one that “a woman never seems to see any but the
serious side of her attachment” (p. 79), or that “the brighter endurance
of women . . . owes more of its origin to a narrower vision that shuts
out many of the leaden-eyed despairs” (p. 84), or that “so much more
important a love-letter seems to a girl than to a man” (p. 92) all appear
as commentary on events experienced by Cytherea and serve somehow
to belittle them—and her. Of course they are not inappropriate, given
her youth, and many of them are obviously the product of a young male
writer attempting to sound worldly and knowledgeable about women—
but such generalizations are, like the repeated comparison of Cytherea
to birds and lambs by other characters, reductive. Moreover, they con­
tinue to appear in the fiction Hardy wrote even when he was in his
fifties, betraying a persistently problematic attitude on his part.

If these comments serve to distance us from Cytherea’s experiences,

¹². Ibid., p. 33; Lawrence Jones, “Tess of the d’Urbervilles and the ‘New Edition’ of Desperate
still others seem to control her fate in ways not fully consonant with her character as initially presented. Her complete acquiescence to Miss Aldclyffe’s essentially sexual requests in the night scene, and the moment in which, standing in a meadow as Manston presses his suit, “the stillness oppressed and reduced her to mere passivity” (p. 252) so that she allows Manston to take her hand, seem faintly implausible, given her previous spirited rebellion against different sorts of threats to her integrity. Admittedly these moments are sexual and thus may exert greater sway over Cytherea’s emotional reactions, but such utter passivity on her part is in some sense less than fully probable—and seems to portend the equally troubling passivity into which Tess Durbeyfield lapses after her rejection by Angel Clare and which appears discordant with her earlier sprightly defiance of Alec d’Urberville. Another problematic characterological moment in *Desperate Remedies* occurs when Cytherea, after completing the initial newspaper research into the mystery of the supposedly deceased first Mrs. Manston, announces that she cannot “take any further steps towards disentangling [it]” (p. 324) and lets the men take over the planning and implementation of the detective work. Again, considering her previous concern for justice for herself and others, this resignation of a crucial role in determining her own fate seems somewhat unlikely. Moreover, the fact that she had earlier shown a willingness to leave her spectatorial position to act on her own behalf in the opening phases of her relations with Edward Springrove makes it troublingly improbable that she would now let the men do all of the legwork when her very future is at stake.

To be sure, these are minor inconsistencies, and obviously can be attributed to Hardy’s inexperience at thinking through his characterization. Yet they are significant insofar as they look forward to Hardy’s greatest novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, where an equally apparent sympathetic concern for a woman and her plight is seriously countermanded by a whole series of narrator-controlled elements—generalizations, physical perspective, imagery, forecasting, and unlikely behavior on the heroine’s part—that combine to create a predetermined trap from which Tess cannot escape into the fullness of her characterological selfhood. The problems are, without question, much less pronounced in Hardy’s first novel: his female protagonists quite richly reveal the author’s interest in and sympathy for the condition of women in English society. But the portents are there of the manipulative, even faintly sadistic narrative stance that would undermine his most splendid portrayal of a woman in difficulty—Tess Durbeyfield. Hardy’s compassionate recognition and effective dramatization of women’s psychological and socio-economic quest for autonomy is subtly contravened by a covert need, revealed by aspects of his narrative method, to control and, not infrequently, to punish them.

*Simmons College*, Boston, Massachusetts