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Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Demystification of the Eternal Triangle of Tennyson's Idylls of the King

By Judith Weissman

With two unobtrusive ironic lines borrowed from Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Thomas Hardy creates a complex parodic context within which we are to view Tess of the D'Urbervilles. His narrator says of Tess, that "there was hardly a touch of earth in her love for Clare," reversing Guinevere's declaration to Lancelot: "For who loves me must have a touch of earth." And then when Angel parts from Tess, after their wedding, the last line of the chapter is, "When Tess had passed over the crest of the hill he turned to go his own way, and hardly knew that he loved her still" (p. 324), echoing — and again, reversing — a line in Arthur's parting speech to Guinevere: "Let no man dream but that I love thee still" ("Guinevere," line 557).

These lines are inconspicuous; Hardy does not call attention to and identify them as he does his many other quotations in Tess of the D'Urbervilles — from Wordsworth, Whitman, Shakespeare, Browning, and others. Perhaps the reason for the difference in his presentation of these lines of poetry is that their meaning — unlike that of most of the others — is not limited to the specific context in which they appear. The lines certainly do have an immediate, specific, ironic meaning: the first accentuates Tess's inner purity in contrast with Guinevere's abandoned sensuality; and the second points up Angel's unforgiving rigidity in contrast with Arthur's Christian forgiveness. But the other lines of poetry are part of Hardy's learned, intellectual, often sardonic address to his readers; and these lines work in a more haunting, subliminal, less intellectual way. They touch the

1 Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Anniversary Edition of The Writings of Thomas Hardy in Prose and Verse, 1 (New York, 1920), 246. All subsequent references to Tess of the D'Urbervilles are to this edition.
2 "Lancelot and Elaine," The Poetical Works of Tennyson, ed. G. Robert Stange (Boston, 1974), 178. All subsequent references to The Idylls of the King are to this edition.
store of folk-tale and myth in our minds; they remind us of the best known tragic love triangle in English myth — Guinevere, Arthur, Lancelot — to which the triangle of Tess, her pure husband Angel, and her sensual, sinful lover Alec, has a superficial resemblance. Any story gains a kind of power and depth through association with a living myth, but here the mythic parallel, though it does enlarge Tess’s story, is itself attacked by Hardy’s book. The Arthurian legends, at least as retold by Tennyson, embody a set of values, a conception of sexual and social good and evil, and a theory of the innate qualities of men and women, on which Hardy casts a cold eye.

In the *Idylls of the King* Tennyson assumes that male, lawful civilization is in constant battle against the forces of disorder, especially female sexuality. The virtue of chastity and monogamy, and both the sinfulness of and the nearly irresistible temptation to adultery, are ideas which he does not question. They are implicit in the vow Arthur demands from his knights, and his explanation of it to Guinevere:

> To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
> To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
> And worship her by years of noble deeds,
> Until they won her; for indeed I knew
> Of no more subtle master under heaven
> Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
> Not only to keep down the base in man,
> But teach high thoughts, and amiable words
> And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
> And love of truth, and all that makes a man.
> (“Guinevere”, ll. 471-80)

The disintegration of the society of the Round Table begins almost immediately in Tennyson’s *Idylls*; the basic structural principle of the series of poems is the ever-growing power of lawless sexuality over the reign of virtue and order. The primary sexual villains — Vivien, Etarre, Isolt, and Guinevere — are women. The innocence of Enid and Elaine cannot be disputed, but it does not match, in poetic power, the innocence of Gareth, Galahad, Pelleas, and Arthur. Tennyson clearly does not accept any Victorian myth of female sexual passivity, but
returns to an almost Medieval, Christian, antifeminist image of the sinful, nearly uncontrollable sexual appetite of women.

Hardy attacks virtually all of Tennyson's assumptions about sex through his development of the characters of Tess, Angel, and Alec, and implicitly exposes and analyzes some of the causes which make human sexual behavior difficult, painful, perhaps even tragic. First, through his narrative comments, he says over and over that sex in itself is natural; and his own attitude is more like Rousseau's than like either Tennyson's or Wordsworth's (which he also attacks). Sex is morally neither good nor bad, neither something to be conquered by higher forces nor a fountain of moral lessons; and therefore the simple fact of sexual intercourse without the ceremony of marriage is of no inherent moral consequence. "She [Tess] had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (p. 108). One of the major causes of suffering in the book is that the facts of sex are kept secret, especially from young women. Tess has no idea of what to expect from Alec D'Urberville; and later Izz, Marion, and Retty are all tormented by the discovery in themselves of feelings which they do not understand: "They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law — an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired" (p. 187). Some of the attractive innocence of these four young women should really be called ignorance — an ignorance fostered by hypocrisy and productive of anguish.

Tess's innocence leads to her original affair with Alec D'Urberville, the external fact which links her to the adulterous Guinevere. Tennyson does not analyze why Guinevere has an affair with Lancelot; he assumes that she is sexually passionate and also that Lancelot's strength and brooding, sorrowful character will be attractive to women. Tess, on the other hand, is driven to Alec in the first place not by sex, but by economic need. Having accidentally killed her family's horse, their means of livelihood, she feels compelled to follow her mother's advice.
to seek employment with their supposed relatives. Her family's poverty also keeps Tess from leaving after Alec's first advances; no mysterious, irresistible sexual attraction motivates her. The narrator tersely sums up her first affair with him: "She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run away. That was all" (p. 104). And she feels no more passionate attachment to him in her second affair than in her first. Once again a desperate economic situation drives her to him: her family has lost their home, even their lodging, and have no income — except what Alec offers them. Tess is his natural victim, for her entire economic class, the village workers, is the victim of his, the new bourgeoisie who become rich enough to buy land. Tess cannot resist Alec, but not because he is irresistibly attractive; she is in his power first because she is his employee; and she is his employee because she and her class are poor, and getting poorer.

Alec himself is an utterly debased version of Lancelot, who is an extremely attractive character, even to Tennyson. Lancelot, like Guinevere, is the victim of his own passions; his guilt and suffering, and eventual striving for holiness give him tragic grandeur. Hardy, however, does not present Alec's passions as mythic or archetypal. He is physically rather gross, and his seductions are clearly exploitive. He enjoys conquering women for the sake of conquering; Tess remains an object of desire for him, as Clarissa does for Lovelace, because she never desires him, and thus is never really conquered. Hardy sees clearly that power, not sex, is the true basis of seduction. Before his conversion Alec feels no remorse, but he does accept, and even pride himself on, a conventional moral judgment of himself: "I suppose I am a bad fellow — a damn bad fellow. I was born bad, and I have lived bad, and I shall die bad in all probability" (p. 98). He is not an advocate of sexual freedom, but believes in sin as much as Lancelot does, and consequently is as psy-
chologically ready for conversion as Lancelot is for his quest for the holy grail. But conversion is another fine old Christian tradition about which Hardy is less than enthusiastic. Even before Alec’s backsliding he is hardly winning — he is pompous, irrational, self-righteous. The idea of being saved keeps him from any true understanding of himself as much as the idea of being bad does. Saints and sinners are both part of a Christian psychological system which Hardy questions.

It is impossible, really, to understand Alec without understanding Angel, Hardy’s priggish parody of Arthur. Tess is passionately attached to this fair, intellectual, almost ethereal man, not to her earthy, sensual, lover; but Hardy does not let even this love escape his analysis. It is not simply a spontaneous, pure, spiritual attachment, though Tess herself sees it that way. From the first time that Tess sees Angel, at the May dance, it is clear that her attraction to him — and to the whole idea of intellect and spirit — is partly class aspiration. The narrator tells us that Angel and his brothers are “three young men of a superior class” (p. 14) and Tess, who has already found out in school that rising from her village class means learning another language, “had no spirit to dance again for a long time, though she might have had plenty of partners; but, ah! they did not speak so nicely as the strange young man had done” (p. 18). After she meets him again at the dairy she continues to worship him as a source of intellectual and spiritual light; this is Hardy’s version of Guinevere’s late realization of her love for Arthur — “We needs must love the highest when we see it” (“Guinevere,” l. 657). He does not, of course, completely dismiss Tess’s spiritual yearnings or her love for Angel, but neither does he share her view of them. For Tess, as for Tennyson, the Platonic ideals of wisdom, purity, and goodness are absolute values; Plato’s own association, at least in the Republic, of these values with the political power of the highest class in a stratified society, has been lost. Hardy believes that Tess has, to some extent, been hoodwinked. Angel’s upbringing gives him certain qualities which Tess associates with absolute goodness, but
which are actually merely evidence of his class. Hardy sees that Tess’s love for Angel and her victimization by Alec are both partly the results of class relations in late nineteenth century England.

Angel, despite his high opinion of himself, is no Arthur, in Hardy’s eyes. He is limited, not elevated, by his cold purity and imaginative idealism, which make him cold and even cruel. He is also very consciously a class snob. When Tess tells him about Alec, he reproaches her not in terms of absolute morality, but in terms of the class difference between them. When she says that her mother has told her of cases “where they were worse than I, and the husband has not minded it much — has got over it, at least,” he answers: “Don’t, Tess, don’t argue. Different societies, different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman, who has never been initiated into the proportions of social things” (p. 297). His great fondness for country life disappears with remarkable speed: “I thought — any man would have thought — that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence as surely as I should secure pink cheeks” (p. 304). He apparently thinks that she especially owes him virginity since her class cannot possess much else of value to his class.

Arthur’s values, for Tennyson, are absolute: order, law, chastity, monogamy, are eternally good. Angel’s values, for Hardy, are an artificial conglomeration of the strict Pauline Christianity of his father, and both the syllogistic logic and the snobbery of late Victorian intellectuals. “With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings” (p. 338). This sentence is dominated by nouns which imply that Angel’s values must be understood historically rather than absolutely.

Angel and Alec are, finally, spiritual brothers — as Hardy indicates by having Alec converted, temporarily, by none other
than Angel's father. Alec's debaucheries would lose their thrill if virginity were not valued by men like Angel; Angel would not consider virginity so precious if he did not know that the world was full of men like Alec who could tempt virgins to their doom. They are, to some extent, like Bromion and Theotormon in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, one a rapist, the other denouncing the raped woman as a whore. But Hardy's view of the hypocrisy and cruelty of a sexual ethic which victimizes women is different from Blake's, for Blake creates semimythic characters who are not particular to the nineteenth century. Hardy's characters partake of the mythic quality of both Tennyson's and Blake's characters: all of the pairs of male characters are the products of the contradictions inherent in the traditional Christian view of sex and virginity, of men and women. Tennyson accepts the contradictions; Blake attacks them as eternally wrong without analyzing them historically; Hardy both says that Christianity itself is a passing creed and analyzes its contradictions in terms of the particular class situation of late nineteenth century England which produces this particular triangle.

Hardy's presentation of the two men elevates Tess. She, not the supposedly pure husband, is the innocent and injured one. She is a victim both because of her sex and because of her class. Any culture which places an absolute value on female virginity and assumes that female sexuality is a force of positive evil when not rigidly checked by rules, necessarily makes life very difficult for women. And Tess is not only a woman, but a village woman; she is part of a culture which is being destroyed by economic and social forces which she cannot even begin to understand. When her family is forced from their home after her father's death Hardy comments as bitterly and as politically as his contemporary Kropotkin, another believer in village life, could have: "These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositories of the vil-
large traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centers: the process, humorously designated by statisticians as 'the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns,' being really the tendency of water to flow up-hill when forced by machinery" (p. 449). If Tess had been part of a stable and secure village culture, she would not have been the victim of the fraudulent squire, Alec, and would not have married or been judged by the fraudulent free-thinker, Angel. Her mother, as Hardy's narrator says early in the book, is Elizabethan, while Tess is Victorian; and it is the Victorian sexual ethics of Angel Clare which destroy Tess, more than the lechery of Alec — which she could have survived in the village culture that produced her mother.

Tess herself is not conscious of her place in the social and economic history of England; she sees herself, until close to the end of the book, as the legendary tainted woman. As she tries on her wedding gown, "then there came into her head her mother's ballad of the mystic robe —

That never would become the wife
That had once done amiss,

which Mrs. Durbeyfield had used to sing to her as a child... Suppose this robe should betray her by changing colour, as her robe had betrayed Queen Guenever" (p. 263). If she had not shared many of the values of Victorian England, she could not have been victimized by Angel; she would not have had to live through years of suffering before she could finally write to him, "It is all injustice that I have received at your hands!" (p. 454). None of the main characters in the book is sufficiently detached from what is happening to understand it. They all, in some way, share the beliefs embodied in Tennyson's version of the story of Guinevere, Arthur, and Lancelot. But Hardy, speaking through his narrator, clearly does not share those beliefs, and possesses, throughout the book, the kind of cultural perspective that Angel Clare begins to glimpse in Brazil. His version of the story of an eternal triangle, and a battle between light, purity,
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goodness and darkness, sensuality, and sin, becomes a story of economic exploitation, class aspiration, class snobbery, and arbitrary moral codes.

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