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The Odd Women and the Foreshadowing of Jude the Obscure

by RICHARD BENVENUTO

WRITING TO Edmund Gosse in 1895, shortly after the appearance of Jude the Obscure, Hardy said it was “curious that some of the papers should look upon the novel as a manifesto on ‘the marriage question,’ ” and he thought that their view could be “accounted for by the accident that, during the serial publication of my story, a sheaf of ‘purpose’ novels on the matter appeared.” A number of reviews did connect Jude to the marriage-problem, new-woman novel which flourished in the 1890’s, and some, like that in The Morning Post for November 7, 1895, three days before Hardy wrote to Gosse, implied that Hardy’s work lacked originality: “Such themes as Mr. Hardy now deals with have formed the motives of scores of short stories and not a few full-bodied novels. . . .” The letter to Gosse is a rebuttal to this charge—there was an accidental convergence between Jude’s serialization, Hardy says, and the publication of a sheaf of marriage-problem novels. The implication is that Jude, already in print, could owe nothing to these others. What Hardy omits to say is that before Jude appeared, and while it was still being written, a number of marriage-problem novels and stories were already in circulation. The Saturday Review, in a favorable notice of Jude, points out that the marriage theme was on the wane in fiction at the time Hardy’s serial was running: “It is now the better part of a year ago since the collapse of the ‘New Woman’ fiction began. The success of ‘The Woman Who Did’ was perhaps the last of a series of successes attained . . . by works dealing intimately and unrestrainedly with sexual affairs.” It is possible that Hardy, who was never very interested in the fiction of his time, did not realize that for “three or four years preceding the publication of Jude,” as A. R. Cunningham observes, “the nerves of conservative readers and reviewers had been increasingly irritated by a series of novels” which attacked marriage conventions and sexual repression much as Hardy would in Jude. It is unlikely, however, that he would not

3. “The New Woman Fiction of the 1890’s,” Victorian Studies, XVII (December 1973), 177-78. The article does not mention The Odd Women. Hardy’s argument that his main interest in Jude was not with the marriage or sexual theme is unconvincing, and he knew at least two of the works discussed by Cunningham—The Heavenly Twins and Keynotes. He quotes from both in his notebook, which is available in microfilm among “The Original Manuscripts and Papers of Thomas Hardy” (East Arley, Wakefield, England: E. P. Microform Ltd., 1975).
have known of one of these novels, *The Odd Women*, the work of an old acquaintance.

Hardy knew Gissing at least as early as 1886, when the younger writer called upon him for "advice about novel-writing." Though never close friends, the two men apparently always thought well of each other and kept in touch with each other's work. Gissing often expressed great admiration for Hardy, which to some degree was returned, since Hardy invited Gissing to spend several days at Max Gate in September, 1895. By that time, critics had begun to associate Gissing's name with Hardy's and Meredith's—the three were present and each spoke publicly at the Omar Khayyam Club dinner for Meredith on July 13, 1895. In 1892, Gissing referred, with evident satisfaction, to an article in *The Bookman* which "stated, not long ago, that it was known that 'Mr. Thomas Hardy has a special admiration for the writings of George Gissing.' " Like most of Gissing's novels, *The Odd Women* was reviewed in *The Saturday Review*, a periodical Hardy read regularly, and it received wide notice as a novel dealing with marriage and the woman question. *The Odd Women* appeared in April, 1893, a year and a half before *Jude* began as a serial. This was the time, by Hardy's account in the "Preface to the First Edition," that he had finished the outline of the story, but had not begun to write the novel in full. On the basis of changes which Hardy made in his manuscript, John Paterson concludes that Hardy shifted his center of interest in *Jude* from the education theme to the marriage theme—a move which would indicate, despite his later remarks, that Hardy consciously joined the ranks of the marriage-problem novelists. Of course he did not have to read *The Odd Women* to make such a decision, but it would be wrong nonetheless to discount the connection which exists between Gissing's novel and Hardy's, and which consists of a number of similarities to *The Odd Women* that appear in *Jude*.

The two novels have virtually the same theme: the arbitrariness and the destructive nature of the social conventions governing marriage and the roles of the sexes; and both express the need for greater freedom and respect for individuality in sexual attitudes and mores. While this is staple

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7. *Letters to Eduard Bertz*, p. 162. Sometimes the evidence is ambiguous. In 1898, William Rothenstein asked Hardy if he would supply illustrations from Gissing's work to accompany a sketch—Rothenstein admitting that he did not have the "requisite knowledge." Hardy replied, "Strange as it may seem, I have not the requisite knowledge either"; and he goes on to recommend Henry James, who had just written an article on Gissing (which Hardy enclosed) and Clement Shorter, who "knows Gissing very well." Hardy's letter is quoted in full by Carl J. Weber, "Hardy and James," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, XVI (January 1968), 21–22. With the crucial phrase, "requisite knowledge," left (purposely?) vague by Hardy, who knew he would surprise Rothenstein, and who seems well-informed about people who know about Gissing, the incident could mean any number of things.
material of the marriage-problem, new-woman novel, and probably re-

flects an influence on both Gissing and Hardy of a tradition of radical

thought concerning marriage and sexuality that goes back to Mill and

Shelley, the similarities between The Odd Women and Jude include more

specific instances of parallel methods and ideas as well—both, for in-

stance, set the major marriage theme against an important minor theme

of needed reforms in education. These more specific parallels reveal that

a significant portion of the material Hardy uses in Jude had already ap-

peared in The Odd Women.

Some of the resemblances are of minor import only. Rhoda Nunn and

Jude are both influenced, in the way they shape their goals, by an older

man they idealized in their youth. Both novels develop a relationship be-

tween main characters who are cousins—and Mary Barfoot admits to

having once been in love with her cousin, Everard. A more sustained and

significant parallel exists between Widdowson and Phillotson. Both are

middle-aged, very conventional men who marry women considerably

younger than they, whom they are unable to understand or control, and

in whom they arouse feelings of extreme aversion. Widdowson, con-

sumed with jealousy, keeps Monica under close surveillance; Phillotson

confesses to his friend Gillingham that he has spied on Sue and Jude. Phillotson allows Sue to leave him and be free to live with Jude—for a

time he acts nobly and independently against severe social pressure and

even his own accustomed norms (JO, p. 187). Though only for a brief

moment, Widdowson has a very similar illumination of what the nobler

course would be respecting his marriage to Monica. As their life together
deteriorates—Monica secretly plans to flee the country with Bevis—Wid-
dowson reflects with unusual clarity: “How many marriages were any-
thing more than a mutual forebearance? Perhaps there ought not to be

such a thing as enforced permanence of marriage. This was daring specu-

lation; he could not have endured to hear it from Monica’s lips. But—

perhaps, some day, marriage would be dissoluble at the will of either par-
ty to it. Perhaps the man who sought to hold a woman when she no

longer loved him would be regarded with contempt and condemnation”

(OW, p. 239). Both the moral confusion into which Widdowson is
thrown and the fact that by daring to speculate “he became more worthy

of his wife’s companionship than ever hitherto” are repeated in Phillot-

son. “I never was so near being in love with him,” Sue says of Phillot-

son, “as when he made such thoughtful arrangements for my being com-

fortable on my journey, and offering to provide money” (JO, p. 190).

Widdowson’s momentary insight into the immorality of forcing his wife

to remain in a married state that has become hateful to her—“Could

such a marriage as this be judged a marriage at all, in any true sense of the word?” (OW, p. 238)—is also the position Hardy takes in the “Post­script” of 1912: “My opinion at the time . . . was what it is now, that a marriage should be dissolvable as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties—being then essentially and morally no marriage” (JO, p. 5).

Gissing’s Rhoda Nunn anticipates Sue Bridehead, and the German reviewer that Hardy quotes in the “Postscript” would have been closer to the truth had he said that in The Odd Women, rather than in Jude, appeared “the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousands every year—the intellectualized, emancipat­ed bundle of nerves . . . who does not recognize the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession, and boast themselves super­ior people because they are licensed to be loved on the premises” (JO, p. 6). With minor changes, such as would take into account Rhoda’s stead­ier nerves and extremist zeal, the description fits Gissing’s heroine pre­cisely. Rhoda is a radical feminist who has devoted her life to the training of young women in fields that offer practical alternatives both to mar­riage and to the careers traditionally assigned to women. In fact, she is considerably more advanced in her thinking about the goals of the femi­nist movement than Sue is. 11 Both Rhoda and Sue espouse radical theories with respect to sex, and both defend the freedom which an enlightened sexual morality would allow. Sue lives openly with Jude; Rhoda consid­ers and ultimately proposes free marriage to Barfoot. Both are suspicious of the dampening or restrictive effect of formal marriage on the free ex­pression of love. Sue several times falls back on this fear as her major ob­jection to marriage with Jude. She asks him, “. . . do you think that when you must have me with you by law, we shall be so happy as we are now? . . . Don’t you dread the attitude that insensibly arises out of legal obligation? Don’t you think it is destructive to a passion whose essence is its gratuitousness?” (JO, p. 215). More calmly, but with similar misgiv­ings, Rhoda wonders if by constraining Barfoot “to legal marriage, would she not lower herself in his estimation, and make the endurance of his love less probable?” His love for her would depend on her being “a woman who, when she once loved, would be scornful of the formalities clung to by feeblere minds. He would yield to her if she demanded forms, but afterwards—when passion had subsided ??” (OW, p. 254).

The radicalism of both women breaks under intense pressure. Sue col­lapses totally into a strict conventionalism after the death of her children. Rhoda cannot overcome her deep allegiance to conventions when Bar­foot presses her to enter a free union with him. “Custom is too strong for us,” Rhoda admits (OW, p. 266). “We must conform,” Sue tells Jude

11. Gittings (Young Thomas Hardy; p. 94) persuasively argues that Sue, who is not interested in poli­tics or in opening the professions to women, represents “The Girl of the Period” [of] the 1860’s, rather than “The New Woman” of the 1890’s. In temperament, nevertheless, she is a contemporary of Rhoda’s.
Both women have from the beginning a puritanical aversion to sex, and feel a repulsion from sexual experience that conforms to their names, but contrasts with and complicates their theoretical position on sexual freedom. Sue jumps from her bedroom window to avoid Phillotson when he accidentally enters her room; she resists Jude sexually until she is afraid she will lose him to Arabella, and later she reproaches him, "We ought to have lived in mental communion, and no more" (JO, p. 279). Jude admits to Sue, "You were a distinct type—a refined creature, intended by Nature to be left intact" (JO, p. 271). Rhoda is an "unfamiliar sexual type" (OW, p. 21), who at her first meeting with Barfoot dresses in a severely plain, nun-like manner (OW, p. 78). She argues in her dispute with Mary Barfoot over Bella Royston, "I am seriously convinced that before the female sex can be raised from its low level there will have to be widespread revolt against the sexual instinct" (OW, pp. 60–61). Sue expresses a similar sentiment to Phillotson: "No poor woman has ever wished more than I that Eve had not fallen, so that...some harmless mode of vegetation might have peopled Paradise" (JO, p. 178). Rhoda's angry rejection of Bella Royston, an image to her of female sexuality, and her dislike and suspicion of Monica are as intense as Sue's aversion to Arabella and to the physical promiscuousness Arabella stands for in Sue's eyes.

The make-up of both women leads them to assert a form of moral authoritarianism that is at variance with the radical, free-thinking spirit they identify with. Hardy plotted his novel so that Sue develops in a reverse direction from Jude—towards the Christian moral code that Jude gradually leaves behind. "Our life has been a vain attempt at self-delight," Sue tells Jude near the end. "But self-abnegation is the higher road." Shocked at the turn-about of a once fearless mind, Jude asks Sue what has come over her—she now conforms to the strictest Victorian notion of obedience to the law: "We ought to be continually sacrificing ourselves on the altar of duty! But I have always striven to do what has pleased me. I well deserved the scourging I have got" (JO, pp. 272–73). The absolutism that has surfaced in Sue shows up early in The Odd Women, in Rhoda's attitude towards Bella Royston. The dispute over moral priorities between Sue and Jude follows the pattern of the argument between Mary Barfoot and Rhoda. Bella has acted with eyes open, Rhoda insists, and to let her return to the school as if nothing had happened would be "anti-social." The judgment, coming from someone who professes independence from the conventional moral code, surprises Mary, who asks, "Why is it anti-social?" Rhoda answers, "Because one of the supreme social needs of our day is the education of women in self-respect and self-restraint. There are plenty of people...who cry for reckless individualism in these matters. They would tell you that she behaved laudably, that she was living out herself—and things of that kind" (OW, p. 56). Rhoda eventually develops a more liberal notion of duty and self-
expression, while Sue, who had been one of those who advocated living out oneself, embraces the rigid dogmatism that initially characterizes Rhoda. Sue’s line of development, that is, intersects Rhoda’s in much the same way it intersects Jude’s, and the moral orthodoxy that threatens to undermine Rhoda’s radical views has a total and devastating effect on Sue’s.

Sue is also paralleled by Monica Madden. Both women marry older men they do not love or feel sexual attraction to, in the hope of escaping a troublesome or distressful situation (a scandal has attached to Sue, who is dismissed from the training school, and Monica is revolted by the life of her sisters). They quickly learn their mistake, and recoil from the presence of their husbands. Monica realizes she cannot even pretend to love Widdowson: “Every day the distance between them widened, and when he took her in his arms she had to struggle with a sense of shrinking, of disgust. The union was unnatural; she felt herself constrained by a hateful force when he called upon her for the show of wifely tenderness” (OW, p. 200). Sue in the same predicament is able to find some relief by confessing to Jude: “... though I like Mr. Phillotson as a friend, I don’t like him—it is a torture to me to—live with him as a husband” (JO, p. 168). She rebels against the same hateful constraint to show wifely tenderness, in almost the same terms: “What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes . . .” (JO, p. 168).

Both Monica and Sue perceive that it is immoral, and not just hateful, to live with husbands who arouse no sexual inclination in them, and that it is better, more truly moral, to revolt against the conventional code. Monica reflects, “it was dishonour to live with a man she could not love” (OW, p. 202), and she pleads with her lover, Bevis, “It is wrong even to go back to-day. I love you, and in that there is nothing to be ashamed of; but what bitter shame to be living with him, practising hypocrisy.” She ought to have left Widdowson, and so should every woman leave her husband who feels as she does: “It is base and wicked to stay there—pretending—deceiving—” (OW, p. 229). Sue agrees entirely. She says to Phillotson, “For a man and woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal” (JO, p. 176). Afterwards, with Jude, her feeling is that marriage would corrupt their relationship and spoil its moral purity through the degradation of legal forms. The careers of the two women of course are very different—Phillotson lets Sue go to Jude, whereas Widdowson hires a detective to follow Monica. Yet Monica at one point says about Widdowson, “I have often wished that he might die and release me” (OW, p. 229), and Sue, standing with Mrs. Edlin outside the door of Phillotson’s

12. Both Monica and Sue at one time admit that their only complaint against their husbands is that the men persuaded them into marriage.
silent bedroom, says, "Perhaps he's dead! . . . And then I should be
free" (JO, p. 315).

Did Hardy read *The Odd Women* in 1893, or when it was reissued in
1894, when he was thinking about *Jude* and writing the final draft? I
think it is probable that he did. The evidence is not conclusive, but it is
suggestive, and the similarities between *The Odd Women* and *Jude*
do show that Gissing directly anticipated both the element in *Jude* which
had the greatest notoriety in 1895-96 and the character who has since
been recognized as one of Hardy's most provocative and best—*Jude's*
views on marriage and the psychology of Sue. We can attribute the simi­
larities to coincidence or to the ambience that surrounded the marriage­
problem novel of the '90's. Or without having to discount either entire­
ly, and without at all questioning the greater achievement of *Jude*, we
can postulate the likelihood that Hardy, who knew Gissing well, would
have read *The Odd Women* and would have been affected by it.

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