Title: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Victorian Woman: Representation of Sexuality in Thomas Hardy's Last Three Novels and Balladic Poems

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Citation: Kyoto University (京都大学)

Issue Date: 2019-11-25

URL: https://doi.org/10.14989/doctor.k22131

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Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Victorian Woman:
Representation of Sexuality in Thomas Hardy’s
Last Three Novels and Balladic Poems

Akemi Nagamori

Abstract

Throughout his creative period, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) fought against Victorian sexual ideology and social structures. He continually tried to express men and women as they were to Victorian readers. His writing stance was clarified in his manifesto “Candour in English Fiction” (1890), which he published when he had already begun to draft *Tess*. In the manifesto, he attacked Victorian censorship and morality, which he called “Grundyism” and “respectability,” and also argued that no literature up to that point had been capable of truly conveying men and women as they were. His works written especially after the manifesto challenge the Victorian sexual ideology by going to new lengths to truly depict and express men and women.

This dissertation illuminates Hardy’s stance on women’s issues and his approaches to female characterization by featuring thirteen female characters in his balladic poems as well as his last three novels—*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and *The Well-Beloved* (1897). He produced these three novels on the verge of relinquishing writing novels and devoting himself to poetry. Furthermore, they share important themes related to gender with his balladic
poems. Concentrating on his later works, this dissertation explores his attitude toward women’s struggles in male-dominated Victorian society, taking his aesthetic stance into consideration.

Chapter 1 concentrates on Tess’s female sexuality through male observation in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), and argues that her “purity” is presented by her execution at the end of the novel. In *Tess*, Hardy’s masculine gaze objectifies Tess, and her unconscious and uncontrollable sexuality is clearly there. She cannot hide or control her innate sexuality; the male gaze of the masculine characters, including the narrator, exposes it. On the other hand, Angel and the narrator also spiritualize her mentality, and the male observers tease and minimize the heroine in the text, and deprive her of her autonomy. The author attempts to emphasize the “purity” of the heroine, and as a result omits to describe her sexuality as a flesh-and-blood woman. He closes the story with her execution and the connection between Angel and Tess’s younger sister Liza-Lu as the substitution of Tess. As she tells Angel in her last wish, Liza-Lu is “simple and pure,” which implies that she is not only a virgin but also she has Tess’s simple-heartedness. Seemingly, the heroine has both “flesh and spirit”; however, Hardy’s failure in depicting her “purity” is proven by her dying words and its accomplishment by Angel and Liza-Lu, a mentally and physically “pure” woman. Hardy brings the tragedy to a close by concentrating on her spiritual(ized) side. The author cannot describe Tess realistically, and she perishes in order to fulfill her “purity.”

Chapter 2 reconsiders the characters of Sue and Arabella in *Jude the
Obscure (1895), referring to analyses of them especially from the feminist viewpoint. In Hardy’s last-written novel, Jude, he sketches two female characters of very different types—Sue Bridehead and Arabella Donn. Sue is not completely presented as a New Woman; rather, she is depicted as a woman who finally conforms to the matrimonial system after her clumsy struggle to resist it. Besides, she incarnates for Hardy “a type of woman which has always had an attraction” (Hardy, Life 281), a woman in the late nineteenth century who bridges the gap between the conventional Victorian woman and a woman of the next period.

Arabella has long been focused on for the animal-like representation of her female sexuality; in contrast, her pragmatism has been overlooked. She is not just an embodiment of “flesh,” or “animal passion,” but a woman who takes advantage of the institution of marriage at a time when it was not meant to serve the interests of women. Sue, on the other hand, is broken by it. The end of the story, illuminating the Victorian double standard and cruel customs, means that even the “new” type of woman that Hardy intends to depict cannot thrive in the period. Therefore, ironically, the author clearly admits that in order to survive in the Victorian patriarchal framework, the feminine toughness to pragmatically do what is needed is necessary, as demonstrated by Arabella.

The focus of Chapter 3 is Hardy’s The Well-Beloved (1897). At the end of his career as a novelist, in The Well-Beloved written and serialized before Jude but published after it in book form in 1897, Hardy portrays the four levels of upbringing and education by three Avices spread over three generations and Marcia and considers how an artist should perceive the reality of the world
through Jocelyn’s pursuit of his ideal woman, the “Well-Beloved.” The work has been regarded as one of Hardy’s “minor” novels, but it should be taken account of as the work in which he bids farewell to male idealization or spiritualization of a female figure and proclaims the necessity for a man to see the reality of the world.

As a result of the loss of his artistic power caused by his old age and disease, Jocelyn acquires the ability to perceive the real world. *The Well-Beloved* portrays not only the three Avices and Marcia, but also Hardy’s aesthetic notion of how to recognize the reality of the world in the latter stage of his life.

Furthermore, Chapter 4 shows Hardy’s creative stance on the artistic process both as a novelist and as a poet can be shown in the link between the story “To Please His Wife” (1891) and the poem “The Sailor’s Mother” (1918). “To Please His Wife” tells the tale of a woman’s unfulfilled wish, as she waits for the return of the sailors—her husband and two sons—who she sent to sea out of her vanity. The story also emphasizes her covetousness and pride. The typical nineteenth-century notion of marriage as a means of social success triggers her ambition toward a wealthier marriage. In “The Sailor’s Mother,” the adoption of the traditional motif of “the return of a sailor” shows how Hardy altered and retraced his earlier prose story in poetic form and added a new ending to the anguish of the sailor’s mother by means of his poetic imagination, with the sea fog/mist. It also appears in the original short story, and symbolizes the woman’s sorrow for her son in the poem.

The link between the story and the poem also clarifies Hardy’s aesthetic stance as an artist, rooted in the nature of artistic perception: he attempted to delineate “the deeper reality” or “abstract imaginings” through the filter of the artist’s
“spiritual eye,” and found the possibility of poetry, whatever form he used in writing.

In several poems considerably concerned with women, Hardy used a balladic form and motifs, and completed them with his poetic imagination. “The Dance at the Phœnix,” included in his first poetry collection *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (1898), is discussed in Chapter 5. The temporary recrudescence of an old woman’s female sexuality and her death after the dance are ironically symbolized by the phœnix, the bird legendary for being reborn from its own ashes. Regeneration, or life circulation, is one of the major concepts of this ballad, which conveys how Jenny’s female sexuality, or metaphorically, feeling of life, is revived through the dance. Recalling Hardy’s attitude toward female sexuality and morality in *Tess*, he manages to depict a realistic female character and her femininity in it. The main female character attempts to be a “pure and just” wife according to the then-current moral code, and cares about her reputation after her death. At the same time, she tries to be liberated from her suppressed conditions of life and from Victorian morality. Hardy succeeds in conveying her pathos by weaving the effect of the dance and the legend of the phœnix into the ballad form.

In Chapter 6, analyses of Hardy’s two balladic poems, “The Satin Shoes” and “The Inscription,” demonstrates that repressed female sexuality triggers the heroines’ insanity. Hardy depicts a pair of female characters with important similarities in “The Satin Shoes,” in *Satires of Circumstances: Lyrics and Reveries* (1914), and “The Inscription,” in *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922). The women are bound by their mentality, symbolized by satin shoes and a brass inscription,
respectively, which represents their emotional turmoil and madness. In “The Satin Shoes,” satin shoes are not just a symbol of the heroine’s yearning for matrimony but also a symbol of a burden on her mind; in “The Inscription,” although the brass and the inscription of her on it seemingly consolidate the lady’s eternal love for and loyalty to her husband Sir John, they ultimately represents her refusal to be alive. The only sign showing that she is a living woman is the lack of the year and date of her death in the inscription. She pledges her loyalty to Sir John after his death, but falls in love with a young man. She tries to resist her emotion, and then the encounter with the young man unsettles her mind day by day. As a result, she is driven insane by her self-restraint, symbolized by the inscription. In this way, female madness in these balladic poems is the result of repressed femininity.

Chapter 7 argues “The Woman I Met” and “The Chapel·Organist,” which convey the voices of the socially vulnerable women using the image of Mary Magdalene. Hardy believed that the world could be better, and noted that “as a meliorist (not a pessimist as they say) I think better of the world” (Life 397). Additionally, after giving up writing novels, Hardy expressed his thoughts on poetry and the poet’s role in “Apology,” the preface to Late Lyrics and Earlier: “[i]f way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (CP 557). For the poet in his later years, “a full look at the Worst” meant paying attention to the socially vulnerable and disadvantaged, as shown in “The Woman I Met” and “The Chapel·Organist” in Late Lyrics and Earlier. The two poems describe women disgraced for their sexuality under Victorian moral ideology. Hardy tries to place
these fallen women in the image of Mary Magdalene, and conveys their voices while examining the social issue of prostitution in the poem.

Thus, Hardy repeatedly manifested his critique of the sexual ideology surrounding women in the Victorian age through his depictions of female figures not only in prose but also in verse (where it has received less attention). Furthermore, behind the discussions of the thirteen female characters presented in this dissertation, we can see Hardy’s imagination-oriented aesthetic stance, which has again previously mostly been argued based on his novels and biography, not his poems. Hardy as “perceiver,” ultimately ceased to write novels but continued to write poems, in pursuit of a better way of expressing his aesthetic philosophy and rendering his perspective on the situation of Victorian women.