

CHAPTER 2

Hardy's Fiction, 1871-1886

In the Prefatory Note to *Desperate Remedies*, written some twenty years after the novel itself, Hardy describes himself in retrospect as a young author 'feeling his way to a method' (p. 35). And indeed, one of the most notable aspects of his earlier work is the diversity of forms and approaches which he attempts. Each novel emerges as a kind of corrective or a reaction against its predecessor, so that the minimally plotted and consciously archaic *Under the Greenwood Tree* follows the dense plot and contemporary setting of *Desperate Remedies*, and the ironic comedy *The Hand of Ethelberta* is succeeded by the ambitiously tragic *Return of the Native*. Hardy's process of experimentation is unusually overt. Yet throughout this feeling of the way there remains a consistent attempt to accommodate that which is unusual or innovatory to normative popular taste; for Hardy held strong preconceptions about public taste, not necessarily corresponding to the views of his actual or potential readership. With a bitterness in part self-directed, he repeatedly calls attention to this accommodation. His sensitivity to criticism is apparent from the first, and his reaction is commonly defensive rather than defiant, so that instead of writing or re-writing *The Return of the Native* to what he proclaims to be its correct austere ending, he merely adumbrates this alternative conclusion in a footnote; he follows the same procedure with the story 'The Distracted Preacher'; and he continually succumbs, with however bad a grace, to the exigencies of the family serial. He defends what may be controversial in his novels - *The Hand of Ethelberta*, or the end of *The Woodlanders* - by an indictment of public taste or of his failure to judge it correctly: *Ethelberta*, he writes, suffered 'for its quality of unexpectedness in particular', and he remarks in a 1912 addition to this Preface that the book, 'appeared thirty-five years too soon' (pp. 31-2). Hardy's fiction, then, is from first to

all but last shaped by his desire at once to challenge and to keep within the demands of the dominant form, the three-decker novel, with its established mode of publication: first as a serial in periodicals intended for middle-class family reading, then later in an expensive three-volume format which sold primarily to lending libraries, whose owners were enabled thereby to exercise a substantial degree of influence over the publishing houses.¹ Hardy's difficulties in his unsuccessful attempts to publish his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, show how the evidently radical political content of the work was undermined by the traditions of realism, allowing Alexander Macmillan to elide his political objection to Hardy's class-partisanship with that concern with verisimilitude which the idea of a mimetic realism invites. He praises the 'admirable' and 'truthful' account of the working-men's lives, but is scandalised and frightened by Hardy's presentation of the other characters:

But it seems to me that your black wash will not be recognised as anything more than ignorant misrepresentation. Of course, I don't know what opportunities you have had of seeing the class you deal with. . . . But it is inconceivable to me that any considerable number of human beings - God's creatures - should be so bad without going to utter wreck in a week.²

Hardy's adaptation of the challenging to his sense of the publicly acceptable takes various forms. One obvious instance is the sometimes strained emulation of authoritatively artistic models; his frequently *recherché* comparisons and heavily cultural allusions have on occasion been interpreted as the hallmark of the humourless autodidact, but they surely function rather as a kind of credential of the seriousness of the work, guaranteeing its attempt to place itself within the traditions of 'fine writing'. Another example is the presentation of sexual encounters in a manner so metaphorical or symbolic that they can be recuperated into the family serial: Troy's phallic sword-play, which leaves Bathsheba feeling 'like one who has sinned a great sin' (p. 206), still found a place in the novel, while Leslie Stephen, editor of the *Cornhill* where the serial appeared, raised gingerly objections to the account of Fanny's illegitimate child in her coffin. Similarly oblique, though notably less successful, is the way in which Cytherea Graye's sexual attraction towards Aeneas Manston, in *Desperate Remedies*, is conveyed through

her stirred response to his virtuosity at the organ in the middle of a thunderstorm. The explicit – however mild its erotic or sexual content – was subject to editorial censorship, while the implicit largely escaped. In Hardy's later works, this was to reach absurd proportions; so, as has been often remarked, the serial version of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* had to show Clare ridiculously transporting the female dairy-workers through the puddles in a handy wheelbarrow in order to obviate any suggestion of direct physical contact, but the imagery of phallic penetration and the transposed seduction scene in which Alex persuades the reluctant girl to take a strawberry into her mouth remained intact. A further, and interestingly ambiguous, form of this adaptation is recurrent: the tawdry equivocations over legal marriage – Viviette's unconsciously bigamous marriage with Swithin St Cleeve, or the falsified ceremonies in the manuscript of *The Return of the Native* and the serial version of *Tess* – are quite clearly a half-cynical obeisance to convention, which nevertheless scarcely disguise the illicit sexual nature of the relationships involved. By exercising this kind of imaginative pre-censorship of his own, Hardy managed on the whole to retain the sexual character of such episodes, while at the same time preserving the decencies of the three-decker. It is in those novels usually called 'minor' or 'failed' – those which Hardy himself placed in the categories 'Romances and Fantasies' and 'Novels of Ingenuity' – that the search for a form most evidently revolves upon the problem of the female characters. The originality and vitality of the central women in these novels provokes an uncertainty of genre and tone which unsettles the fictional modes in a disturbing and often productive manner. In the 'successful' earlier novels, by contrast, Hardy runs closer to the established genres of pastoral and tragedy.

Under the Greenwood Tree, still often described in such terms as Irving Howe's 'a masterpiece in miniature',³ provides an example. Fancy Day conforms almost exactly to the unfavourable literary stereotype of female character in her vanity, fickleness, whimsical inconsequentiality, and coquetry. She lacks what this image would have her lack: personal sexual identity (as opposed to generalised gender identity), genuine feeling, independence of thought, consideration in the exercise of her will. Here, it should be noticed, Hardy is clearly

employing the stereotype as such; *Under the Greenwood Tree* is a consciously – even self-consciously – conventional work. Fancy Day is not the only type-figure in the book, for the male characters are just as generically pre-determined, and the patronising narrative tone extends beyond her to include all the 'rustics', as they are commonly – and here perhaps fairly – known. A sense of effort is evident behind this narrative condescension, in the proliferation of quaint names and odd appearances bestowed on these characters.⁴ After the cool reception of *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy seems consciously to have aimed at a work with a respectable lineage of genre. In a letter written to Macmillan while the book was on offer to them, he refers at length to reviews of the earlier novel before concluding that 'It seemed that upon the whole a pastoral story would be the *safest* venture.'⁵ Congruent with this urge towards the safe and respectable is the superior and yet ingratiating tone of the narrator; the novel's narrative voice is curiously and uncharacteristically masculine, perhaps denoting an over strenuous effort to insinuate into the confidence of the projected reader. The novel reader may be traditionally female, but the authoritative role of novel-narrator had so far been largely presumed male, as the male pseudonyms and assertively male tone adopted by so many mid-nineteenth-century women writers – the narrator in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* is an obvious example – would suggest.

Through her role in the plot of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Fancy Day also provides a near paradigm for Hardy's recurring central fable. The novel focuses on her choice among possible lovers, a choice made in relative freedom from the most tangible forms of female dependency, parental control and direct financial pressure. Differences in class and education among the various men accentuate the gap between the Fancy and the husband of her choice, and the later addition of Maybold to the roster of lovers may well have been intended to emphasise this element. These and other factors cause a series of hesitations, misgivings and recantations before the original choice is finally confirmed. What is unusual here is the resolution of the plot in a marriage clearly to be seen as successful, despite the mild threat of Fancy's 'secret she would never tell' (p. 192), which is rather a last irony at her expense than an equivalent to

the damaging sexual secrets of Elfride Swancourt or Tess Durbeyfield. This particular resolution is never reproduced in so unequivocal a form by Hardy, though (with the exception of *The Return of the Native*) marriage represents an ending in all but the last novels. The contrast between Fancy's marriage to Dick and the marriage of Ethelberta to Lord Mountclere reveals how uniquely close *Under the Greenwood Tree* runs to the sentimentalised happy ending of much popular fiction.

In the minor early novels, there is not the same authority of genre or confidence of narrative tone. Elements of sensation fiction, pastoral, romance, tragedy and even Meredithian social comedy, are superimposed upon the basis of realism. More significantly, there is a disruptive instability in narrative points of view. Irving Howe has found in Hardy 'a curious power of sexual insinuation, almost as if he were not locked into the limits of masculine perception, but could shuttle between, or for moments yoke together, the responses of the two sexes.'⁶ He identifies here the distinctive ambivalence of the earlier novels, a kind of androgynous voice which permits at the same time of aphoristic and dismissive generalisations about women – 'Woman's ruling passion – to fascinate and influence those more powerful than she' (*Blue Eyes*, p. 202) – and of an attempt to make the central female characters the subjects of their own experience, rather than the instruments of the man's. This narrative ambivalence can be seen in regard to Paula Power. Her relative independence in thought (her rejection of the Baptist religion of her father) and in action (her reluctance to marry) is expressed rather negatively, as a refusal (even literally) to take the plunge. In the latter part of the novel she pays for her rebellion, in the excessively protracted pursuit of Somerset by which she is brought to heel.

Similarly, Bathsheba Everdene's resistance to becoming '“men's property”' (p. 64) and her sense of marriage as being 'had', that glorying in the idea of her inviolate selfhood which finds expression in her original fierce chastity, and her perception of the fact that '“language . . . is chiefly made by men to express their feelings”' (p. 356), are given authority by her experiences in the novel. But at the same time, there is an undercurrent of sexual antagonism towards her, expressed both in the action of the plot and in direct narrative comment.

Far from the Madding Crowd is not only the story of the education of Bathsheba; her moral and emotional growth are paralleled by the breaking of her spirit. Images of taming pursue her. Her relationship with Troy is marked by instruments of violence, begun with the spurs, consummated by the sword, and ended by the gun. The scenes in which Oak jealously nips the ewe he is shearing in the groin, and in which Troy, after their marriage, walks beside her gig, holding reins and whip, lightly lashing the horse's ears as he walks, are a kind of surrogate for the physical punishment of Bathsheba herself. The stress on the humiliation to which she is subjected by Troy culminates in his repudiation of her before the dead bodies of Fanny Robin and her child.

T. S. Eliot wrote of Hardy that 'the author seems to be deliberately relieving some emotion of his own at the expense of the reader. It is a refined form of torture on the part of the writer.'⁷ The comment seems almost justified here, but the 'torture' is rather at the expense of Bathsheba than of the reader. Every expression of her independence or strength is opposed by a stress on the 'taming' that she must undergo. The process by which she is made into a fitting wife for Oak involves not only growth, but also loss. Her initial rejection of Oak is partly due to his lack of masterfulness: '“I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know”' (p. 66). But this feeling is given in relation to the way in which she experiences her sexual identity, and that is primarily as the object of male desire. Richard Carpenter has written of Bathsheba's behaviour as subconscious rape-provocation, betraying her need to be dominated and possessed.⁸ And indeed, throughout Hardy's novels, women experience attraction to a man as a feeling of being hypnotised, paralysed, rendered will-less. However, this must be related to the way in which they require the confirmation of a man's desire to authorise their own sexual feeling. Bathsheba's coquetry with Oak and her sending of the Valentine to the previously indifferent Boldwood are both ways of simultaneously taking and concealing the sexual initiative. It is not to rape that she seeks to provoke them, but to desire, which alone will make her visible to them. George Wotton has described this process:

She becomes the *observed subject* whose very existence is determined by her reactions to the conflicting acts (of sight) of the *perceiving subjects* by which

she is beset. Living in the ideology of femininity, the woman demands to be seen by men. But each of the men by whom she is surrounded demand [sic] that she should be seen only by him and treats her according to his vision of her.⁹

As Hardy's formal experimentation continues it will be through the manipulation of this structure of perceptions – the woman's, the narrator's, the desiring man's, those implied by Biblical or literary parallels or allusions – that the novels throw into question those generalisations and aphorisms which bear the weight of contemporary ideologies of femininity and of the womanly nature. The submission of such ideologies to conflicting and contradictory points of view and narrative voices will test them to their limits, and in doing so will make those limits apparent.

In these earlier novels, Hardy moves towards an attempt to depict the woman as self-perceiving sexual subject, and at the same time give the external or erotic response of the male observer. At the beginning of his career, the text itself is implicated in the process of sexual reification; Fancy Day is presented for much of *Under the Greenwood Tree* only as an object. She enters it as the object – her boot – of communal discussion; she then figures as 'a picture' (p. 53), ironically compared by Michael Mail – the name is surely not idle – to "ræle wexwork" (p. 53); as 'The Vision' (p. 58) to Dick Dewey; as a 'comely . . . prize' (p. 67) at the Christmas dance. The narrator's term for her, 'a bunch of sweets' (p. 124), typifies her role as the object of desire, envy, or rivalry. Here, the woman herself provides no focus of contradiction. She shares in this view of herself, offering Dick a kiss as if handing him a gift: "Now that's a treat for you, isn't it?" (p. 166).¹⁰ In the light of this continual reduction of Fancy to object-status, there is some irony in the inscription on the card Dick hands to Parson Maybold when announcing his engagement to her: 'Live and Dead Stock, removed to any distance on the shortest notice' (p. 175).

A Laodicean is a novel in part concerned with ambivalence, both as ambiguity of class – the whole complex of meanderings and hesitations between aristocracy and bourgeoisie – and of sex. Dare, as well being the one to "exercise paternal authority" in his relationship with his father (p. 172), and

having no discernible age or nationality, wears his hair 'in a fringe like a girl's' (p. 168). Paula in the gymnasium looks like "a lovely young youth and not a girl at all" (p. 181), and her friendship with Charlotte de Stancy is described as "more like lovers than maid and maid" (p. 75). In this context, Paula Power marks a first attempt at what Hardy will later do with Sue Bridehead – to create by the interposition of commentators and interpreters a female character who will resist the appropriation of the narrative voice. The manipulation of points of view, however, lacks the subtlety and assurance of the later work, and Somerset never acts as a mediating consciousness in the way that Jude will do. The retention of the omniscient narrator gives equal authority to the comments on both characters. Consequently, Paula's 'Laodicean' hesitations, instead of conveying the sense of a logic and motivation not available to the narrator, remain empty enigmatic.

There is, throughout Hardy's fiction, a radical split in women's consciousness between self-perception and perception by others; it is this latter which gives birth to self-consciousness and to that concern with the judgment of others which is common to the female characters: 'as without law there is no sin, without eyes there is no indecorum' (*Crowd*, p. 56). These female characters merge together their identity and that of the objects around them; Hardy repeatedly remarks that women's clothes seem a part of their bodies by virtue of their incorporation into the woman's sexual awareness. Bathsheba in the Corn Exchange seems to have 'eyes in [her] ribbons' for Boldwood's lack of interest in her (*Crowd*, p. 120); and Cytherea Graye experiences a sexual *frisson* at the slight touch of her dress against Manston's coat: 'By the slightest hyperbole it may be said that her dress has sensation. Crease but the very Ultima Thule of fringe or flounce, and it hurts her as much as pinching her. Delicate antennae, or feelers, bristle on every outlying frill' (*Desperate Remedies*, p. 155). Geraldine Allenville, in *An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress*, typifies the division. Early in the novel, young and inexperienced, she is nonetheless aware of a conflict in her relationship with Mayne between her dominant class role and the submissive, acquiescent part assigned to her by sex. This conflict leads to her

confused, covert initiatives towards the teacher, and leads him into an equally bemused state:

Geraldine had never hinted to him to call her by her Christian name, and finding that she did not particularly wish it he did not care to do so. 'Madam' was as good a name as any other for her, and by adhering to it and using it at the warmest moments it seemed to change its nature from that of a mere title to a soft pet sound.¹¹

Later, she becomes more conscious of the division between what Mayne sees as 'the fashionable side' and 'the natural woman' – though neither fashion nor nature can be adequately invoked as origins of the conflict of class and sex expectations. The two 'sides' predominate in turn in Geraldine's emotions, and she is able to generalise the significance of the 'fashionable side' to her experience as a woman: "'To be woven and tied in with the world by blood, acquaintance, tradition, and external habit, is to a woman to be utterly at the beck of that world's customs'" (p. 93). The conflict is rendered less acute by Mayne's social rise to a more evenly-matched level – a resolution which the later Hardy will repudiate, preserving the class-difference in all its sharpness in, for instance, the relation between Grace Melbury and Giles Winterborne. In *An Indiscretion*, however, the blunting of the dilemma allows Geraldine to enter into a clandestine marriage with Mayne, in flight from the fashionably brilliant proposed match with Lord Bretton.

Geraldine Allenville, in a book which shows in relatively unsophisticated form many of Hardy's characteristic preoccupations and plot-motifs, is the first in a line of women undermined or destroyed by the conflict between their feelings and their strongly internalised sense of conventional social values, a conflict suggested in his repeated use of a quotation from Browning's 'The Statue and the Bust':

The world and its ways have a certain worth:

And to press a point while these oppose
were simple policy; better wait:

We lose no friends and we gain no foes.¹²

Hardy's women are rendered particularly vulnerable to destruction by such conflict by their entrapment at the point where individual and physiologically determined experience interact. Hardy, who claimed to have been an early convinced

Darwinist,¹³ shows in his fiction the tracks of that biologicistic determinism which became dominant in the last quarter of the century. He seems to have shared with Schopenhauer and others a notion that women, by virtue of their physiological organisation and their biological or social role as mothers, were closer to the operative forces of evolution, natural and (more particularly) sexual selection. In *Tess* this will develop into an almost Zolaesque naturalism, when the girl workers at Talbothays are to be found in sultry high summer writhing 'feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law', their individuality extinguished into 'portion of one organism called sex' (p. 174). In *Jude the Obscure*, he will draw back from such naturalism; writing of Jude's attraction towards Arabella, he replaces his original naturalistic statement – 'in the authoritative operation of a natural law' – with a jocularly masculine militaristic metaphor: 'in commonplace obedience to provocative [?] orders from head quarters' (ms. f. 37). It seems that naturalism, in Hardy and elsewhere, corresponds most satisfactorily to the similarly organicist dominant ideology of femininity, and that its inadequacies become apparent faced with the exploration of male sexuality.

The conflict of feeling and convention is present in Hardy's men also, most notably in Giles Winterborne, but usually in a less destructive form. Women, for Hardy, have an inherent physical weakness which makes them more vulnerable to mental conflict. This susceptibility would probably be explained by Hardy in terms of female nervous organisation, as Grace Melbury suffers because of her combination of 'modern nerves with primitive feelings' (*Woodlanders*, p. 309), and Sue Bridehead because of her 'ethereal, fine-nerved, sensitive' character (*Jude*, p. 235). This was a prevalent presupposition of the medical establishment when dealing with middle-class women; hysteria, neurasthenia, and chlorosis, the three great diseases of the Victorian bourgeois woman, were all commonly diagnosed as 'nervous disorders' arising from some frequently undefined disturbance to the all-determining reproductive system.¹⁴ Such an interdependence of physical and mental processes is the motive force of the plot in, for example, 'An Imaginative Woman', where a sensitive woman conceives

a child with her husband, but in the likeness of a young poet for whom she has developed a wholly imaginary passion. Hardy was not alone in believing this a genuine medical possibility, the grounds on which he defends the story in his Preface to *Life's Little Ironies*; it also appears in the famous 'spiritual adultery' in Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. It is clearly related to telegony, a respectable medical phenomenon of the nineteenth century, in which a woman's cells are impregnated in some way by her first lover so that her child by any subsequent sexual partner could resemble the first – an idea important in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*.¹⁵

So it is that the interaction of dominant, but largely unrecognised, sexual feeling and apparently independent feeling or action creates in Hardy's women a predisposition towards intense physical response to mental or emotional conflict; hence Elfride's feverish illness after Knight defeats her at chess, Mrs Yeobright's limited resistance to fatigue and illness after her estrangement from Clym, Viviette's death from joy at St Cleve's return, Lucetta's death after the skimmity-ride, and Geraldine Allenville's fatal haemorrhage when she revisits her father after her clandestine marriage. The quasi-scientific nature of such ideas does not disguise, of course, their place in a prescriptive diagnosis of physical weakness and emotional susceptibility for women; similar medical 'facts' were used by opponents of higher education for women and of the suffrage campaign.

Furthermore, as Patricia Stubbs has remarked, there are among Hardy's women *femmes fatales* – 'emotional vampire[s],' she calls them – whose potential for self-destruction and for destroying others arises from their excessively literal application of the idea that women's proper sphere is that of the emotions and, pre-eminently, of romantic love.¹⁶ Work rivals relationships for the attention of the male characters; as Barbara Hardy says in her interesting introduction to *A Laodicean*:

Hardy's men are generally all too willing to sacrifice intellectual and professional aspirations to . . . sexual appetite . . . , but Hardy's women reflect the limited conditions of their time and place in having nothing to do except choose a husband.¹⁷

The working-class women are rendered vulnerable to direct economic exploitation in conjunction with their sexual oppres-

sion, but are shown as less dependent on the vagaries of emotion. Even Tess Durbeyfield, who is at the point of conjuncture of economic and sexual exploitation, can withstand the deprivations and pressures of her working life until she is threatened by a more distinctively sexual pressure from Clare and d'Urberville. The difference is remarked after the departure of Alec from Farmer Groby's field:

. . . the farmer continued his reprimand, which Tess took with the greatest coolness, that sort of attack being independent of sex. To have as a master this man of stone, who would have cuffed her if he had dared, was almost a relief after her former experiences (p. 343).

For most of Hardy's middle-class women, by contrast, work is a dilettantish thing, like Elfride's romance-writing, or a means of filling in the time until marriage, like Fancy's teaching. In *The Return of the Native*, both Mrs Yeobright and Eustacia Vye are able to confer significance on their lives only through the roles they adopt in relation to men. Mrs Yeobright and Clym enact a struggle of reciprocal oppression through emotional dependence and guilt; Eustacia can conceive of no fulfilment other than an extravagantly romanticised passionate love which will confirm her sense of herself as a "splendid woman" (p. 357). It should be noticed that in neither case is there a simple dichotomy between man as oppressor and woman as victim; these situations are mutually destructive for mother and son, mistress and lover. Yet the sexual and social power which lies behind the personal strength of the men gives them at least a wider range of alternatives. Emotional struggles do not place their whole existence at stake; Clym, however debilitated by his experiences, will survive with a residual sense of purpose and possibility. For the women a life outside the closed circle of personal relationships is all but unimaginable, as Clym's unlikely plan for Eustacia's future career – to become matron of a boy's boarding-school – suggests; from this confinement to the womanly sphere there results a distinctively feminine vulnerability. Even when women possess social advantage or economic power, it is so closely bound to this circumscribing sphere of the emotions that it is frequently exercised in a fashion that appears damagingly capricious: Bathsheba dismisses Oak from his employment in pique at an imagined slight to her feelings, and Geraldine Allenville is

prepared to have an old man evicted from his cottage because she has been kissed by his nephew.

It is here that the originality of Hardy's use of his 'Poor Man and the Lady' motif is most striking: while the class-relation – taking most often the form of disparity – between lovers is always important, it never takes on a primacy that would make of the sexual relationships merely a symbol, or a displacement, of class relations. Rather, and more interestingly, the variations on the theme of class-difference permit a searching examination of the articulation of class and gender. For there is one notable and significant oddity common to many of Hardy's bourgeois women: their lack of a father. In some cases the absence of the father is never really remarked – Tamsin Yeobright, for example, or Bathsheba Everdene – while in others, he disappears, once with extraordinary violence, at the point where the women accedes to marriageability – Paula Power, for instance, or Cytherea Graye, whose father plunges to his death before her eyes. Geraldine Allenville and Grace Melbury are the only conventionally fathered daughters in the novels. The result is to liberate these characters into an illusion of free subjectivity. It has been written of Charlotte Brontë's similarly orphaned female characters that:

the devised absence of the father represents a triple evasion of . . . class structure, kinship structure and Oedipal socialisation. Its consequences are that there is no father from whom the bourgeois woman can inherit property, no father to exchange her in marriage, and no father to create the conditions for typical Oedipal socialisation.¹⁸

While Hardy's women often do inherit property (Bathsheba Everdene's farm, Paula Power's mediaeval castle and modern wealth), the other two paternal absences remain crucial. These women are freed to negotiate their own re-entry into the family through their choice of a marital or sexual partner – a choice which equally marks their re-assimilation into class-structure. The effect of this is to highlight the modes of oppression specific to their gender; all the privileges of economic power are undercut by the marginality of women to the processes of production. The only freedom granted them by the absence of the father is the freedom to choose a man; it is only by a voluntary re-subjection to the patriarchal structures of kin that women find any point of anchorage in the social structure at all.

As Melbury will remark in *The Woodlanders*, “‘a woman takes her colour from the man she's walking with’” (p. 114). So it is, for example, that Paula Power – whose very name draws ironic attention to the significance of this theme – is relieved of all the outward appearances of dependence in a way that serves primarily to emphasise the sterility of her 'freedom'. Her money, her property, and her education all serve solely to enhance her value as a marriage-partner.¹⁹ Similarly, Viviette Constantine, despite the extra latitude granted her by her maturity and her supposedly widowed status, can only benefit vicariously from her wealth and leisure by making St Cleeve's career her own vocation.

But while the father himself is largely absent, the patriarchal law that he embodies is frequently displaced on to a pseudo-father, usually a male relative – Viviette's brother, Elizabeth-Jane's step-father, Sophy Twycott's son, even Sue Bridehead's elderly husband. So it is not merely the tie of blood that confers authority upon the father: paternal (patriarchal) power is diffused, but this does nothing to limit its effectivity. Yet while it may not be escaped, it may be evaded; and this is the case of Ethelberta Chickerel, who, paradoxically, has not only a present father, but also several brothers. Ethelberta usurps the authority of the father in order to become the regulator of her own exchange: she takes on the paternal role in the family by supporting her mother and sisters, and also acts as her own 'father' by investigating the financial suitability of her suitors and ensuring that she does not sell her sexual commodity below market price. *The Hand of Ethelberta*, which is among the most experimental of Hardy's earlier novels, interestingly foreshadows Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* in its creation of a structure of comment and observation (discussion among her friends, interpretation by her family, public gossip, newspaper reviews, the generalisations of the narrator) that prevents her rebellion from becoming a Utopian fantasy of social transcendence.²⁰ Ethelberta, like Meredith's Diana, is a writer of sorts, and this too is important. It bestows upon her 'The charter to move abroad unchaperoned, which society for good reasons grants only to women of three sorts – the famous, the ministering, and the improper. . .' (p. 241). It also gives a congruence to her creation of her own best, if least plausible,

story – the romance of free choice and action. She tells her sister “‘But don’t you go believing in sayings, Picotee: they are all made by men, for their own advantages. Women who use public proverbs as a guide through events are those who have not ingenuity enough to make private ones as each event occurs”” (p. 153). Faith Julian and the other women who rebuke Ethelberta’s lack of womanliness speak the public proverbs that consolidate male advantage, while Ethelberta’s story-telling is a unique case of the private saying made into a spectacle. She takes speech for herself, and in doing so transgresses all the determinations of class and kin. And yet it is evident from the first that her power of free choice is confined within limits that cannot forever be evaded. The free subject is a fairy-tale, which takes on a most ironic inflection when her chosen suitor proves more frog than prince. An elderly aristocrat with a resident mistress in tow, Lord Mountclere is an almost parodically exaggerated instance of the patriarchal male. It is a mark of the subversiveness of Ethelberta’s case – and, equally, of Hardy’s experimental blend of romance and social comedy – that Ethelberta is able to repeat her act of usurpation within a marriage which allows her to become “‘my lord and my lady both”” (p. 387). The drying-up of her story-telling power proves to be only a hiccup in her prolonged act of speech; marriage does not silence her, for at the end of the novel she is writing an epic poem. The power of her dispassionate female sexuality escapes the entanglements of womanliness and subverts the authority of the patriarch by exploiting his dotage of desire.

For the ‘Poor Man and the Lady’, the articulation of dominance in gender and class frequently takes the form of contradiction, but in the inverted relationship (the ‘Gentleman and the Poor Girl’ theme, perhaps) the sexual dominance of the man is reinforced by his economic power. There is often a pre-existing relation of employer and worker in such couples, which clearly shapes the sexual relationship: Mr Twycott, the vicar in ‘The Son’s Veto’, marries his parlourmaid Sophy largely because she is ‘a kitten-like, flexuous, tender creature . . . the only one of the servants with whom he came into immediate and continuous relation’ (*Life’s Little Ironies*, p. 36), and she in turn accepts his proposal out of ‘a respect for him which almost

amounted to veneration . . . she hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august in her eyes’ (p. 37). In such a case, the otherness of the woman’s class-experience provides a focus for the man’s emotional fantasies or needs. This is clear in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, where the desire of the two men for Tess crystallises their relation to her class. Alec, idly living on the profits of his capital, slips into the role of local squire, superimposing upon his origins in urban manufacturing capitalism his local situation as mock-aristocrat. He is crassly exploitative, alternating an acquisitive greed with an unthinking open-handedness. Angel Clare, in his fantasy of Tess as the unspoilt and incorruptible country girl, adopts a romanticising patronage which clearly reveals his class-situation. He, as much as Clym or Jude, is a study in the difficulty of class-mobility; the simple abjuration of economic advantage cannot in itself bring about a change in consciousness. He may question religious orthodoxy (though doubt, as opposed to disbelief, had itself by this time acquired a certain respectability as the mark of intellectual integrity), but the sexual ethic so closely related to it remains firmly rooted in his consciousness. That he exploits Tess as much as Alec does, and in much the same way, is stressed in their momentary transposition of roles in the middle of the book, when Alec takes up a particularly virulent form of dissenting religion, and Clare first unthinkingly invites the devoted Izz to go to Brazil with him, and then as thoughtlessly changes his mind.

Class-disparate couples are commonly shown caught up in unhappy and mutually destructive relationships. Sophy Twycott lives out a wretched widowhood, despised by her public schoolboy son, forbidden by him to marry her former lover, a market-gardener. Tess is ultimately destroyed by the complementary forms of exploitation of her two lovers. Giles Winterborne dies for decorum’s sake, and Grace returns to an unsatisfactory marriage. The exceptions – Bathsheba and Oak’s practical *camaraderie*, Fancy and Dick’s idyll under the greenwood tree, Ethelberta’s unconventional but prosperous union with Lord Mountclere – are all in novels whose genre enforces a happy – or at least a non-tragic – ending. This could be seen as the mark of a deep conservatism, a glorified version of knowing your place and sticking to it, but this is surely to

misread Hardy. It suggests, rather, a complex understanding of class differences that sees further than simple variations in manners or grammar – the boiled slug in Grace's salad, or Sophy Twycott's 'confused ideas on the use of "was" and "were"' (p. 37). The distrust of sexuality shown by Clare and by Knight is not the product of some temperamental vagary, but an integral part of their situation as bourgeois intellectuals. Clym Yeobright's attempt to change the face of Egdon through doctrineless preaching is a futile attempt to alter consciousness while leaving untouched material conditions – an act of pure idealism which the heath-dwellers at once see through.

But the class content of relationships cannot be isolated from the contemporary ideology of sex differentiation which exerts a significant pressure on their form. The relative passivity of some of Hardy's heroes – of Oak, for instance, or of John Loveday – has sometimes been 'explained' by speculation over Hardy's own sexual pathology. It serves, rather, to point up the entanglement of the women characters in an ideology of romantic love that calls upon them to experience their sexuality rather in being desired than in desiring, and this is obviously related to their confusion of sexual passion and aggression – a confusion characteristically echoed by Desmond Hawkins in his claim that it is 'a fineness of perception', some mystic Lawrentian call of blood to blood, which motivates such choices.²¹ Bathsheba's prolonged reluctance to see in Oak more than a capable shepherd contrasts with her rapid seduction by the glamorous military patina and forceful sexuality of Sergeant Troy; similarly, Anne Garland is vulnerable to the cavalier charm of Bob Loveday and unresponsive to the quiet worth of his brother. In both cases, the point is underlined by the introduction of a second female character, the comic Matilda Johnson in *A Trumpet-Major*, and the pathetic Fanny Robin in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Troy is the prototype, for Hardy, of the sexual adventurer. While Fanny is obviously and straightforwardly a victim, the situation is rendered more complex by the counterpointing of her life with Bathsheba's, explicitly remarked in the novel,²² which leads eventually to a temporary reversal of their status. Bathsheba, the legitimate wife, is spurned and deserted, and becomes the outcast, however briefly, during the night spent in her personal slough

of despond. Fanny's physical sufferings are balanced against Bathsheba's grief as she gradually realises the truth about her husband. Fanny dies in misery, but is translated after her death into a kind of triumph, while Bathsheba is eclipsed. The chapter in which she discovers the truth is called 'Fanny's Revenge', and represents a formal acknowledgement of the crossing of the curves of their fortunes:

The one feat alone – that of dying – by which a mean condition could be resolved into a grand one, Fanny had achieved. And to that had destiny subjoined this rencounter tonight, which had, in Bathsheba's wild imagining, turned her companion's failure to success, her humiliation to triumph, her lucklessness to ascendancy; it had thrown over herself a garish light of mockery, and set upon all things about her an ironical smile (p. 306).

Bathsheba's tending of Fanny's grave represents at once an atonement and a tribute. The two women are made equal in their exploitation and humiliation by Troy.

However, it is not only the adventurer, his exploits endorsed in the name of virility, who proves destructive, as the idealising Angel Clare will illustrate. Clare is prefigured by Henry Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, who adopts the official mid-Victorian view of women as creatures of effortless sexual immaculacy. In contrast to Clare's relatively crude application of the double standard in the later novel, Knight takes chastity as a principle to which he adheres equally in his own conduct. His prudish over-prizing of his virginity contrasts with Elfride's franker and more impulsive sexuality. This overthrow of convention is part of an interesting series of role-reversals in the novel, at once evoking and ironically undermining the romance paradigm; for example, Elfride – author, it must be remembered, of a pseudo-mediaeval romance – rescues her Virgin Knight in distress from the Cliff without a Name by means of a rope of knotted underclothes. The rigidity of Knight's moral standards, and his fastidious distrust of sexuality, lead him to a repudiation of Elfride which again prefigures Angel Clare, but which employs a wholly different narrative tone. While the scene in *Tess* is replete with tragic ironies, Knight's rejection is most decisively conveyed in the disturbingly literal, curiously humourous, image of detumescence as the 'strong tower' crashes to the ground (p. 311). The whole suggests the inadequacy of the figure of the Virgin Knight, and of his chivalrous

ethic of chastity, to the complexities of sexual relationship.

This exploration of the destructive power of contemporary ideologies of sex difference and sex roles presses the novels increasingly towards an analysis of relationships in breakdown, where a wedding in the last chapter cannot adequately resolve the tensions and contradictions set up in the course of the novel. This, in turn, will lead Hardy away from irony and pastoral towards two modes of writing whose problematic articulation is to become the chief formal characteristic of the late major novels: that is, towards tragedy and realism. *The Return of the Native* is the first of Hardy's attempts to bring the 'fine writing' of tragedy to bear upon the sexual realism of his material, and I propose now to examine the novel from that point of view.

NOTES

- 1 See Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (London, 1970); and J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (London, 1976).
- 2 Charles L. Graves, *Life and Letters of Alexander Macmillan* (London, 1910), pp. 289-92.
- 3 Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (London, 1968), p. 46; cf. Richard Carpenter, *Thomas Hardy* (London, 1976), pp. 42-8.
- 4 Cf. Robert Draffan, 'Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*,' *English*, 22 (1973), 55-60.
- 5 'To Malcolm Macmillan,' 7 August 1871, *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy; Vol. 1: 1840-1892*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford, 1978), p. 12.
- 6 Howe, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 109.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London, 1934), p. 56.
- 8 Richard Carpenter, 'The Mirror and the Sword: Imagery in *Far from the Madding Crowd*,' *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 18 (1964), 331-45.
- 9 George E. Wotton, 'Ideology and Vision in the Novels of Thomas Hardy,' D.Phil. Oxford, 1980, p. 227.
- 10 Desmond Hawkins accurately comments that this is precisely the kind of dialogue that Hardy's later novels will render impossible: *Thomas Hardy* (London, 1950), pp. 31-2.
- 11 *An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress*, ed. Terry Coleman (London, 1976), p. 70.
- 12 'The Statue and the Bust,' 11. 138-41, quoted at varying length and with varying degrees of accuracy in *An Indiscretion*, p. 72; *Desperate Remedies*, p. 257; 'The Waiting Supper,' *A Changed Man*, p. 232; *Jude the Obscure*, p. 368.

- 13 *Early Life*, p. 198.
- 14 See Lorna Duffin, 'The Conspicuous Consumptive: Woman as an Invalid,' in *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London, 1978), pp. 26-56; and Karl Figlio, 'Chlorosis and Chronic Disease in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Social Constitution of Somatic Illness in a Capitalist Society,' *Social History*, 3 (1978), 167-97.
- 15 See Frank Finn, 'Some Facts of Telegony,' *Natural Science*, 3 (1893), 436-40; and Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming-of-Age* (Manchester, 1896), p. 22.
- 16 Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Brighton, 1979), pp. 58-87.
- 17 Barbara Hardy, Introduction, *A Laodicean* (New Wessex ed., London, 1975), p. 15.
- 18 Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, 'Women's Writing: *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, *Aurora Leigh*,' in 1848: *The Sociology of Literature*. Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature July 1977, ed. Francis Barker and others (Essex, 1978), p. 188.
- 19 Cf. Barbara Hardy, pp. 17-18.
- 20 See John Goode, 'Woman and the Literary Text,' in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 241-7.
- 21 Hawkins, *Thomas Hardy*, p. 77.
- 22 E.g. on pp. 217 and 303.