

The influence of social convention upon the publication and reception of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in Victorian Britain

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Abstract

In the sub-title to the first edition of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy asks the reader to view Tess as a 'pure woman faithfully presented'. However, this request does not sit well with the reading public as Tess engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage, and this provoked a moral outrage from various critics. This article will argue that social convention and the ideal of the pure woman in the nineteenth century, impacted upon the publication and reception of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. To demonstrate this, this article will explore the key differences and omission of sexual scenes in the serialised version of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* published in *The Graphic* from July to December in 1891, compared with the first edition of the novel published, with deletions restored, by Osgood, McIlvaine and Co. in November 1891. Secondly, this article will explore the reception of the novel by examining reviews which heavily criticised the presentation of Tess as a pure woman.

Key Words

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Victorian publishing, *The Graphic*, the pure woman, social convention.

Introduction

In the Victorian era society praised the 'pure woman', that is a woman who refrained from sexual activity until marriage and was secondary to the demands of her husband. Women who did not adhere to this were outcast and seen as a 'fallen women'. Indeed, even the idea that a woman would actively pursue a partner and take control of her own sexuality was frowned upon. Given this wider social context, Thomas Hardy had a difficult time trying to publish *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (henceforth *Tess*) given its subject matter that explores the theme of female sexuality outside of marriage.

This struggle is demonstrated by the fact that Hardy was rejected by numerous publishers including Macmillan, before he signed a contract for the publication of *Tess* with W.F. Tillotson & Son [Gatrell, 1986, p. 3]. However, this was signed before the publisher had seen the proofs and once they had read the first sixteen chapters, they expressed their outrage at some of the events in the story they had purchased. The contract was cancelled [Gatrell, 1986, p. 4]. Clearly, the fact that the novel was rejected at the very last minute highlights the repulse the publisher felt towards its sexual content and the fact that Hardy was supporting the fallen woman. It must be remembered that at this time, most editors and those working for publishing houses were men. Therefore, it could be argued that this patriarchal environment was preventing *Tess* from being published, as men did not want to support women's sexual independence and freedom from the binary between 'pure' and 'fallen woman'. This demonstrates the level of cultural power an editor had, as they acted as a gatekeeper and usually only accepted work which did not transgress social conventions.

Given the difficulty that Hardy faced getting *Tess* published in novel form, N.N. Feltes [1986, p. 61] in *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* argues that *Tess* had to be published in serialised form in a magazine or it would remain out of print. Technological developments such as the rotary action press in 1846 and the growth of the cotton industry, meant that there was a transformation in the production of novels [Feltes, 1986, p. 62]. There was a

greater possibility of writers such as Hardy getting published, given the growing number of magazines and periodicals which catered to a variety of tastes. Indeed, Walter Besant reminded young writers in 1899 that each periodical had 'its own clientele' [p. 228]. Hardy was able to use this to his advantage when *The Graphic* magazine agreed to publish a serialised version of *Tess* from July to December in 1891 [Chase, 1927, p. 46]. The editor of this magazine, William Luson Thomas's, policy was to confront contemporary social evils with uncompromising honesty [Victorian Web, 2012]. However, as we shall see it is clear that the serialised version of *Tess* was highly edited and modified so that it would not offend Victorian readers.

Key differences between the serialised version of *Tess* and the novel

On closer inspection, it is clear that there are significant differences between the serialised version of *Tess* in *The Graphic* and the first edition of the novel published by Osgood, McIlvaine and Co in November 1891 [Chase, 1927, p. 69.] However, in the explanatory note to the first edition of *Tess* Hardy tries to undermine this difference by asserting that:

The main portion of the following story appeared – with slight modifications – in the *Graphic* newspaper; other chapters, more especially addressed to adult readers, in the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Nationals Observer*, as episodic sketches [Hardy, 1891 as cited in Chase, 1927, p. 70].

Hardy's suggestion that there was only 'slight modifications' is refuted by Mary Ellen Chase in her book *Thomas Hardy From Serial to Novel* where she asserts that he had to make changes to the plot in order to meet 'the demands of *The Graphic* editor and the taste of *The Graphic* readers [1927, p. 70]. The most significant difference between the two publications is the omission of the seduction or rape of Tess by Alec D'Urberville in the serialised version, and instead an addition of a mock-marriage. This is one of the most important sections of the novel, and to omit it would undoubtedly have had an impact upon the structure of the novel and the reader's understanding of it. Indeed, Chase argues that these differences are 'unnatural in the extreme' and that the changes in plot and character 'lacked in itself sufficient motivation, consistency of character and literary merit' [1927, p.

82]. Taking Chase's point further, it clear that Hardy as a professional writer must have been aware that these changes impacted upon his narrative but was constrained by his editor and wider societies' expectations. As we have seen earlier, Hardy could not publish the original version of *Tess* at this time, as the sexual scenes alongside the presentation of Tess as a pure woman was seen as distasteful to the reading public.

Therefore, in order to ensure publication Hardy had to remove the sexual scenes. As I discussed earlier, although there was a variety of magazines that catered to different tastes, Hardy still had to adhere to *The Graphic's* demands. Catherine Delafield [2015] argues that work which was published in a nineteenth-century periodical was done so in a controlled space. It was controlled by the financial sponsorship of the publisher and the editorial choices which marked the style and tone of the periodical [2015, p. 48]. Taking this point further, given the form of the periodical which contained a selection of chapters from a variety of authors, this made the editorial control over Hardy's work even more oppressive. This is because the editor would have to ensure that all of the writer's contributions had a similar tone and style and would be suitable to be published together. Significantly, Laurel Brake has observed that the authorship of a serial is 'collective through intertextuality and editing' [2001, p. 9]. It is clear that Hardy did not have full authorial control as his editor controlled the space in which his text was placed. Indeed, the series has been described as a 'distinct form of control' [Feltes, 1986, p. 48].

This editorial control meant that certain sections of *Tess* had to be omitted which included the aforementioned seduction scene but also the birth of Tess's child. As Hardy asserts in the preface to the first edition of the novel, both of the scenes were published as episodic sketches. The birth of Tess's child was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in May 1891 under the title of "The Midnight Baptism, A Study in Christianity" [Gatrell, 1986, p. 4]. This is significant as it was published before *Tess*, therefore the reading public would be unaware of the connection between the two. In addition, the seduction scene was published in a special literary supplement of the *National Observer* in November 14 1891, under the title of "Saturday Night in Arcady" [Gatrell, 1986, p. 5]. However, the connection between this

episodic sketch and *The Graphic* serial was also not made apparent. Indeed, names of characters were changed and the title bears no connection to *Tess*. Chase argues that the readers of *The Graphic* were 'deprived' as they were unaware that this episode belonged to *Tess* [1927, p. 45]. Taking Chase's point further, by omitting such as crucial stage of the plot, this meant that Hardy had to make further changes to the structure of the novel and the characterisation of Tess. These changes undermined Hardy's authorial reputation as the quality of his writing was affected.

The editor's desire to ensure that Tess was presented as innocent as possible is extended to the use of illustrations in *The Graphic*. As Gerard Genette [1997] asserts in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* items secondary to the text itself such as illustrations, front matter and back matter can influence the meaning and the reader's interpretation of the text [1997, p. 76]. It is important to note, that many of these items including illustrations are not created by the author. This is significant as in some cases, the illustrations override what was said in the text. For example, during the episode published on 26 September 1891 which describes Tess and Angel's courtship, Tess is depicted through the illustrations as an object of male desire, rather than a conscious agent [Feltes, 1986, p. 72]. Feltes argues that the illustration presents not Tess's perspective on Angel [which was included in the text] but rather a 'view of Tess by candlelight at the top of the stairs, from a vantage point behind Angel's back' [1986, p. 73]. This depicts Tess as an object of a male gaze and thus not an active participant in her relationship with Angel. Therefore both the illustrations and the omission of sexual scenes from the serialised version in *The Graphic* serve to present Tess as innocent. This is because the editor of *The Graphic* and its readers could only accept that Tess is a pure woman if she remains innocent, thus altering Hardy's intention for the work.

Critic's response to *Tess*: A Pure Woman?

One of the reasons Hardy was unable to publish *Tess* in its original form was that the editor of *The Graphic*, and perhaps Hardy himself, feared offending the reading public. This fear was proved to be founded when *Tess* was published with the deletions restored, by Osgood,

Mcllvaine and Co. in November 1891, as many critics attacked the sexual nature of the novel and Hardy's insistence that Tess is a pure woman [Gatrell, 1986, p. 4]. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore in depth why Osgood, Mcllvaine and Co. decided to publish the novel, but it would appear that once *Tess* got into general circulation [even in serialised form] it generated a great deal of attention, as demonstrated by the vast numbers of reviews and letters Hardy received [Hardy, 1930, p. 3]. However, although the early reviews were largely positive, later critics attacked the novel. For example, in *The Spectator* on 23 January 1892, the critic's main vehicle for attacking the novel is that Tess is declared by 'Mr Hardy to be a pure woman.' Indeed, they go on to assert that *Tess* 'is very difficult to read, because in almost every page the mind rebels against the steady assumptions of the author' [*The Spectator* as cited in Lerner and Holmstrom, 1968, p. 71]. Here we can see that Hardy's assertion that Tess is a pure woman despite having had sexual relations outside of marriage is problematic for many readers, as it 'rebels' against societies fixed binary between the 'pure' and 'fallen' woman.

This inability for critics to see beyond this binary, is used as a moral standpoint to attack Hardy's work time and time again. For instance, when discussing *Tess* in an essay titled 'Culture and Anarchy' published in *The Quarterly Review* in April 1892, the writer's only concern is the aforementioned dilemma. The critic begins the essay by asserting that 'compliance with the request' to read *Tess* as a 'pure woman faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy' is a 'strain upon the English Language' [*The Quarterly Review* as cited in Lerner and Holmstrom, 1968, p. 75]. This notion is taken further in an article in *The Independent* in February 1892 when the critic argues that the theme of adultery and female sexuality has no place in novels. Indeed, they question Hardy's motive by asserting 'what is this fascination which is drawing novelists to adultery as the one most desirable subject?' [*The Independent* as cited in Lerner and Holmstrom, 1968, p. 80]. However, it would appear that the critic's ultimate problem with *Tess*, similar to the aforementioned critics, is Hardy's defence of Tess's actions in his subtitle. He argues that *Tess* 'is a story of depravity despite its sub-title: A Pure women Faithfully Presented' [*The Independent* as cited in Lerner and

Holmstrom, 1968, p. 81]. It is clear that Hardy's declaration that Tess is a pure woman did not appease the reading public, instead it was precisely this which attracted criticism.

Hardy's view and response to critics

Eugene Williamson [1985, p. 350] argues that Hardy felt angry and bitter towards the level of criticism that he faced after the publication of *Tess*, and this led to his later decision to write only poetry. Despite Hardy's irritation with the criticism, it would appear that he did foresee it. In his explanatory note to the first edition Hardy appeals directly to the readers by:

ask[ing] any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome's: If an offense come out of the truth, better it is that the offense come than that truth be concealed [Orel, 1968, p. 26].

Here we can see that Hardy is taking a moral standpoint in defending the actions of Tess but also perhaps alluding to the fact that prior to this his story was 'concealed.' He is also fighting for the freedom to be able to present his characters in the style and manner which suits his narrative. By using a religious quotation that it is better that an 'offense come out of the truth' he is attacking religious hypocrisy that condemns the fallen woman regardless of the 'truth' of her actions. Significantly, it could be interpreted that Hardy viewed it as an 'offense' to his own integrity that the serialised edition was concealing the 'truth'.

After the publication of *Tess* and the heavy criticism that followed, Hardy was disillusioned and angry that critics could not see past social convention and judge his work on its literary value alone. This is demonstrated in Hardy's preface to the fifth edition of *Tess* in July 1892, as he mocks the critic who 'objected to such vulgar articles as the Devil's pitchfork, a lodging house carving-knife, and a shame-bought parasol, appearing in a respectable story' [Hardy as cited in Orel, 1969, p. 28]. Here we can see that in Hardy's view social convention are ruining novels, as his every word is put under the microscope. This is something that Hardy explored further in his essay titled 'Candour in English Fiction' which was published in 1890

before the first edition of *Tess*, whereby he criticises editors for their stringent censorship and critics for their inability to view his work on its literary value alone. Indeed, he argues that in light of this he has to change the actions of his characters and in doing so 'belie[s] his literary conscience' [Hardy, 1890, as cited in Orel, 1968, p. 10].

Conclusion

Overall, as we have seen Victorian social conventions surrounding the ideal of the 'pure woman' impacted greatly upon both the publication and reception of *Tess*. The edited serialised version published in *The Graphic* demonstrates how powerful social convention was at this time as it forced Hardy to delete and alter sexual scenes. The subsequent publication of *Tess* in its original form brought with it a surge of criticism and moral outrage at Hardy's depiction of a pure woman. This demonstrates the fragile relationship between a writer's integrity and freedom to challenge social conventions, alongside the need to get work published and be well-received. This is an area of study that could be researched further within the context of Victorian writers and their publishers.

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