

## HARDY'S RUSTICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CLASS

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IT WAS FOR MANY YEARS conventional in Hardy studies to treat his rustics — those minor working-class characters who flesh out rural communities, especially in the early novels — in terms that effectively muted their ideological significance: to consider them as literary conventions like the chorus of Greek tragedy or Shakespeare's clowns, for instance, or at best nostalgic details of local color (for examples, see Wotton 189–91). More recently, some Marxist critics have exposed the biases of such approaches, although at times oversimplifying in other ways the ideological functions of these characters.<sup>1</sup> My objective in this essay is to argue for what I see as the more complicated and more dialogic ways in which these minor characters function to focus issues of social mobility that are at the heart of Hardy's fiction. I am interested in the ways rustic characters function as agents of class rivalry, but more specifically in the ways their characteristic behaviors help to define by contrast the kinds of subjectivity that justify the higher social positions of the more central characters. Hardy's characteristic combination of this strategy with the more conventional one for advancing bourgeois values in the Victorian novel — by exposing the unworthiness of gentry and aristocrats — can be linked to his insecurities about his own class identity and the repressions involved in maintaining it. He sympathized with the resentments of the lower classes, yet was also invested in positioning them as different from those who, like himself, were constructed as implicitly meriting their higher level of social distinction by virtue of their internalization of middle-class standards of decorum and behavior. By the time Hardy published *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), his confidence in such strategies seems to have broken down; Tess's and Jude's endorsement of middle-class mores contributes to their victimization rather than to their success. This essay will trace Hardy's negotiations of class difference to the point at which that breakdown is foreshadowed in *The Woodlanders* (1887). In the process I hope to further the analysis of the ways in which Hardy both participates in and revises conventions in Victorian fiction that occlude the material bases of class difference by representing the sources of distinction as issues of moral and intellectual character.

Hardy's insight as well as his ambivalence about these kinds of class distinctions derive from his own humble roots in rural England. Thomas Hardy, Sr., was a master mason who in later years employed others as a small builder in the area around Bockhampton in Dorset, where Hardy grew up. His mother Jemima had worked as a servant before her

marriage. Her social ambitions for her first-born son provided a better than average education for the apt pupil, one that included early instruction in Latin at a Dorchester day school and that encouraged him to study literature and languages on his own. These studies were insufficient, however, to satisfy his early dream of attending university and pursuing a clerical career — goals that biographer Michael Millgate links at least in part to Hardy's desire for social advance (see Millgate 55, 91, 96). In 1856, at age sixteen, he was articled to a local architect and continued his training in London, beginning to write poetry and fiction in the late 1860s. With the completion of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874, he was able to marry the genteel Emma Gifford and (with her encouragement) to abandon architecture for what became a successful career as a novelist.

Hardy's rise from village boy to famous writer obviously contributed much to his understanding of the injuries inflicted by the class system and to his sympathies with meritorious characters struggling as he had to overcome these. But Peter Widdowson is surely correct in arguing that Hardy's self-fashioning as an urban, upwardly mobile man of letters considerably complicated his relationship to his rural roots. In Widdowson's shrewd reading, the covertly autobiographical *Life of Thomas Hardy* is shaped by numerous contradictions where class is concerned: in Hardy's elliptical handling of his own working-class origins and his sensitivity to slights from the more socially secure, in vaguely populist sentiments that stand side by side with expressions of contempt for the anti-intellectualism of the proletariat, in his insistence on his lack of ambition for social climbing in the midst of name-dropping validations of his own social prominence, in his professed indifference to monetary successes as a novelist while documenting the many compromises he made to insure them, in his retrospective construction of himself as a poet dedicated to Art, as opposed to the rather more tradesman-like writer of popular fiction (Widdowson, chapter 4). It is in light of this kind of ambivalence that Hardy's treatment of class issues in his writing must be considered.

Hardy's 1883 essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer," published in *Longman's Magazine*, provides his most explicit statement on the rural working classes and also corroborates attitudes that appear in the novels. Although there is some truth to K. D. M. Snell's charge that Hardy's portrait of the unreconstructed rural laborer in this essay simply perpetuates belief in his "animal indifference," a belief that conventionally served to mute the injustices of his treatment (388), Hardy's views of the rural economy are more complicated than this. The essay begins by taking condescending city dwellers to task for collapsing all agricultural laborers into the faceless, uncouth, inarticulate "Hodge" of conventional stereotypes. It also criticizes middle-class do-gooders for assuming that misery and immorality must characterize those cottagers who do not meet their genteel standards of cleanliness and propriety. Hardy is keenly aware that the source of rural suffering is economic, not moral. Snell is correct, however, in the sense that Hardy characterizes the problem in terms of a loss of job security and paternalistic protection for the laborer and not by the chronic poverty, low wages, and unemployment that Snell identifies as the most serious problems in later Victorian Dorset (380). Moreover, Hardy's reactions to these changes are ambivalent. While acknowledging that the increasing mobility forced on laborers also brought them better wages and more progressive ways of thinking, he is still nostalgic for the resulting loss of "community" and "individuality" ("DL" 262). That the picturesque "peculiarities" ("DL" 262) of the old ways involved implicit forms of deference and decorum is made clear in his lament that farm laborers were now little different than

factory workers in their knowing ways, their laxer morality, and their greater cynicism about “the duties of life” (“DL” 263); the “humourous simplicity” of the men had been replaced by a self-interested shrewdness and the “unsophisticated modesty” (“DL” 262) of the women by a scolding defiance of male authority (“DL” 268). Thus his admission that “it is too much to expect [rural laborers] to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators” (“DL” 262) is balanced by a lingering regret for what he views as a time of greater simplicity, social quiescence, and gender conformity.

Hardy's keener interest, in this essay and in the novels, is less with the unskilled laborer per se than with that group just above the “workfolk” in rural society: the artisans, hagglers, tradesmen, cottagers, copy- and life-holders that make up the “more interesting and better-informed class” to which Hardy himself initially belonged (*Tess* 435; ch. 51). The other major source of economic instability that he stressed in “The Dorsetshire Labourer” was the loss of independence and livelihood for this middling group. As agriculture became increasingly centralized in the hands of large owners during the course of the nineteenth century, trade dwindled, lease holders were dispossessed, and their children were forced into an itinerant labor force (“DL” 255). Those belonging to this semi-independent segment of rural society had formerly given stability to village life and served as “the depositaries of village traditions” (*Tess* 436),<sup>2</sup> but as they too were forced out of the countryside, they “imbibe[d] a sworn enmity to the existing order of things” (“DL” 268). Hardy also noted that the often laxer morality afforded by their relative independence degenerated further when they joined others of like minds and situations in the towns (“DL” 269).

Although Raymond Williams and others have stressed the radical potential of this middling group in English history and identified it as the source of Hardy's own subversive attitudes toward the class dynamic in rural life (“Hardy and Social Class”), I want to argue for a more socially conservative Hardy, one who acknowledges the injustices of class difference in “Wessex” and who at times sharply registers the arbitrary power of wealth to shape status, but who is also invested in naturalizing the superiority of certain middling characters by demonstrating that they possess the emotional, moral, and intellectual distinction that justifies their upward social mobility from the border class in which they begin. I will concentrate for the most part on male characters here because I think that their class identities are contested in more overt ways than those of most Hardy heroines, for whom gender complicates class status in ways that have already attracted critical attention (e.g., Widdowson, chaps. 5 and 6). The social distinction to which these male protagonists lay claim rests on the same kinds of behaviors that operated more widely in the Victorian novel to consolidate the cultural power of the middle classes by implicitly replacing family, money, and titles with appropriate conduct as the justification for a character's claim to true gentility. As analyzed by a variety of recent commentators, this conduct involved the redefinition of the gentleman to emphasize traits like honesty, probity, and self-restraint over more material markers of status and the remodeling of the lady into the domesticated woman who could appropriately control her own and male sexuality. The novel tended to reward those who seemed least interested in advancing themselves, and to gratify those who demonstrated that they could police their own unruly desires and subdue the embarrassing physicality of the body, a physicality always implicitly at odds with the figuration of middle class superiority.<sup>3</sup> It translated the economic realities of social power into intellectual and emotional ones, distinguishing successful protagonists

by the finer moral and emotional discriminations of which they were capable. Hardy shifts this conventional Victorian dynamic downward somewhat to the border between the working and the lower middle classes, and for him it is more often the shortcomings of the working classes rather than the excesses of the upper classes that serve to illustrate by contrast the greater worthiness of his more bourgeois protagonists. Although Hardy's use of minor rustic characters does expand the social sympathies of the Victorian novel, the behavior typical of them also throws into greater relief the self-control, self-sacrifice, and appropriately regulated desire that manifest the seeds of that genteel subjectivity crucial to the social as well as the romantic success of his early rural protagonists.

Years before he wrote "The Dorsetshire Labourer," Hardy had already made good on his corrective analysis of the supposedly faceless "Hodge" by peopling the backgrounds of earlier novels with colorful, often eccentric, rustic types. He refutes the assumption that all rural working-class people are alike by endowing them with distinctive personalities: the differing temperaments of the Melstock choristers in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, from Leaf's simple-mindedness to William Dewy's devotion; the "fizzing" in William Worm's head and Mrs. Smith's trademark loquaciousness in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*; Joseph Poorgrass's trademark bashfulness or Jan Coggan's good-natured roguery in *Far from the Madding Crowd*; Christian Cantle's cowardice and his father's zest for dancing in *Return of the Native*. In rejoinder to those who would dismiss "Hodge" as an inarticulate oaf, Hardy celebrates the verbal creativity and humor of the rural working-class sensibility at every opportunity. Indeed, scenes that feature such characters are largely made up of dialogues in which characters talk for the sake of talking, communal performances in which local traditions and history are recounted and the peculiarities of individuals and their established roles in the group are rehearsed and reinforced.<sup>4</sup> These are, on the one hand, undeniably set pieces in which Hardy aimed to entertain his more sophisticated readers with dashes of local color and picturesque forms of local speech and humor. That the prejudices of such readers did indeed need correcting can be seen from the frequent criticisms among early reviewers that Hardy put words and attitudes in the mouths of his rustic characters that were quite beyond the mental capacity and education of such "illiterate clods" (e.g., Cox 19). A reviewer of *Under the Greenwood Tree* even objected to the verbal cleverness of an exchange between the schoolmistress, Fancy Day, and her gentleman farmer suitor, Mr. Shiner (Cox 10). Perhaps Hardy's success in creating a convincing picture of rural wit and humor can be measured by the growing tide of praise for his rendering of rural speech in reviews of later novels (e.g., Cox 84–85, 114, 135).

On the other hand, these characters serve as more than just a local color backdrop; they play a significant role in fleshing out the complex class dynamics that underlie all of Hardy's novels. These rustics are far from the passive chorus of traditional criticism, and their apparent deference to their betters thinly cloaks a sharper consciousness of their own interests and how to forward them. Even when Hardy uses them as devices to advance the plot, we can often find them motivated by aims that run counter to those of the more central and higher status characters. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Joseph's desire to stay drinking at the Buck's Head instead of continuing with Fanny's corpse brings about Bathsheba's realization of Fanny's secret alliance with Troy. In *Return of the Native*, Christian Cantle's hope of winning enough money to attract a wife leads him to gamble away the Yeobright guineas and thus to intensify the antagonism between Wildeve, Eustacia, and Clym's mother. Michael Henchard makes the offer to which Donald Farfrae

responds when the working-class crowd outside The King's Arms embarrasses the mayor with a challenge about how he will make it up to the "poor folk" who have been stuck with his bad grain (*MC* 104; ch. 5). The introduction of Grace Melbury and Edred Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders* is effected by Grammer Oliver's "artful" and quite self-interested efforts to use Grace as bait to escape from her phrenological bargain with the young doctor (93; ch. 17). More overt kinds of class resentment also shape these plots. A retaliation on those who raise themselves above their proper station is at the heart of the skimmity ride in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which begins when Jopp, slighted by Lucetta, turns her love letters over to his neighbors at Peter's Finger. Eustacia Vye's patronizing exploitation of Johnny Nunsuch provokes his mother's attacks on her. The dismissed bailiff Pennyways collaborates with Frank Troy out of resentment over Bathsheba's slighting treatment of him, and Nance Mockridge exposes Elizabeth-Jane for having waited tables at The Three Mariners in retaliation for Henchard's contemptuous reference to Nance as a "common workwoman" (202; ch. 20).

In one of the more interesting recent analyses of their ideological functions, George Wotton follows a Bakhtinian line in noting how often the rustics champion the coarse pleasures of the unruly body, arguing that they in this way challenge the values of their social betters — the code of respectability that tries to erase the physical and locate middle-class subjectivity entirely in the higher desires of heart and mind. The furmity woman urinating on the church wall is perhaps the most graphic example of this kind of "degradation" of the high by the low, but when Joseph Poorgrass gets drunk instead of delivering Fanny's corpse or Christopher Coney steals the pennies off Susan Henchard's body in order to buy drink, they too flout the pieties of middle-class respectability (Wotton 66–67). Christopher Coney's skepticism about the sentimentality of Farfrae's attachment to the home country he has so easily left behind and Solomon Longway's contempt for the slight claims of Susan as Henchard's "new" wife are other instances of lower-class scorn for the idealizing of the more genteel characters. But I question Wotton's claim that this kind of Bakhtinian reversal in effect happens in spite of Hardy's conscious project in the novels (Wotton 60), or that such behavior is necessarily liberating in its results. Working-class retaliation often has conservative effects, particularly where women are concerned. The skimmity ride in *Mayor of Casterbridge*, targeted mainly against Lucetta, punishes her for an exercise of her sexuality outside the limits set by patriarchal society. The charivari is perpetrated by the denizens of the Peter's Finger, that criminal fringe of prostitutes, poachers, and dismissed gamekeepers whom the narrator is careful to distinguish from the more virtuous life-holders whose dispossession had forced them into a needy but respectable existence in Mixen Lane (*MC* 329–30; ch. 36). It is more respectable Casterbridge artisans like Solomon Longways and Christopher Coney who attempt to shield Farfrae from embarrassment by sending an anonymous letter to get him out of the way, although they hold Lucetta guilty by association with the scandal and leave her to her disastrous fate (*MC* 350; ch. 39). Susan Nunsuch justifies her attacks in *Return of the Native* by the belief that Eustacia is a witch, a pretext often used to discipline and control females who did not conform to society's limitations. Jopp's hostility against "one that stands high" like Lucetta (*MC* 332; ch. 36) and Pennyway's against Bathsheba are intensified by a frustrated male desire to command female attention.

Moreover, I would argue that it is precisely the rustics' alignment with the physical — their anti-intellectualism, their comic self-display, their scorn for the ideal, their inabil-

ity/unwillingness to defer physical gratification — that by contrast helps to explain and implicitly to justify the superiority of the novel's protagonists, several of whom begin only a few steps above their rural fellows in the social scale but follow an upward trajectory in class standing, or are at least treated sympathetically in their defeats. The novels in this sense follow a conventional pattern for eliding social with economic differences: that is, social behaviors that have been inculcated by economic necessity or that result from an implicit recognition that there is no point in bargaining away present satisfactions for what, given the constraints on working-class opportunities, can logically be viewed as unobtainable rewards, are then taken as evidence of intrinsic distinction and taste (or lack thereof) and used to rationalize the continued inferiority of those who behave this way (Bourdieu 177–83).

A consideration of some specific examples can illustrate how such constructions of class operate in the novels. *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) functions as a kind of preliminary sketch for relationships Hardy will return to in *The Woodlanders*: a country girl educated above her class by an ambitious father, struggling to choose between more and less cultivated lovers. Geoffrey Day, gamekeeper and steward to the local earl (*UGT* 92; pt. 2, ch. 6), has schooled his daughter Fancy with the intention of marrying her to a gentleman, but she promises herself to Dick Dewy, the tranter's son, first. Dick's membership in the Melstock parish choir groups him with the other rustic characters, but he is also distinguished from them in significant ways. Despite some bumptiousness in his behavior as the love-sick swain, he is not marked by the comic eccentricity that constitutes Hardy's usual technique for creating his rustic types. The essentials of this technique are on display in the opening chapters of the novel: each tradesman is given just enough individuality to allow him to function as a predictable type; by characteristic turns of phrase, for instance (Penny's "Od rabbit!," Reuben Dewy's "my sonnies") and mannerisms (Reuben's self-deprecating good nature, Leaf's bumbling half-wit). There is almost always a sense of comic condescension in Hardy's treatment of the self-importance assumed by these characters: the "carefully cautious" determination of Michael Mail never to appear to be taken by surprise (*UGT* 19; pt. 1, ch. 2, 75; pt. 2, ch. 3), for instance, the sententiousness of Mr. Spinks, whose claim to be the village scholar are based on his having once kept a night school, or the social vanity of Mrs. Dewy, who prides herself on the "niceness" of being taught to say "taters" instead of "taties" like common work-folk (*UGT* 60; pt. 1, ch. 8). These rustic characters are all distinguished by their alignment with the physical, demonstrated by their highly elaborated analyses of food and (especially) drink (as in the drawing of the new cider in part 1, chapters 2 and 3, and in the party scenes of chapter 7) and by the physical grotesqueness so often associated with their bodies: Penny's round-shouldered slump, Leaf's slack-jawed bumbling, or the sweat and other kinds of physical grossness Reuben's wife is always criticizing him for (*UGT* 18; pt. 1, ch. 2, 47–48; pt. 1, ch. 7).

Dick, on the other hand, is largely silent in these opening scenes, and absents himself early on (*UGT* 86; pt. 2, ch. 4) from the choir's later interview with Vicar Maybold, which ends with Penny and Reuben calling persistent and embarrassing attention to the vicar's bleeding chin and offering him lint off their own hats to staunch it (*UGT* 87–88; pt. 2, ch. 4). This last incident, a version of a stock comic situation in which working-class characters embarrass the higher by failing even to recognize, much less to respect, the limits that genteel politeness would place on attention to the body, is a good example of the kind of Bahktinian analysis Wotton offers. However comic his love-making may be, though, Dick

is never coarse in this way. Like several of the younger generation country folk in Hardy's novels, he has been given a superior education at "a school so good that 'twas hardly fair to the other children," as his father puts it (*UGT* 108; pt. 2, ch. 8). His speech is much freer of the dialect and colloquialisms of his parents and the other rustics, and his superior courtesy to Fancy wins her as a dance partner from the more genteel (but also more condescending) Mr. Shiner (*UGT* 50; pt. 1, ch. 7). It is his "educated modernness," in Simon Gatrell's words (xvii), that assures us of his plausibility as a suitor for Fancy.

And as Gatrell also notes, the final question of whether Fancy was "too good" for Dick involves competing definitions of status. Although Geoffrey Day points to Fancy's education and accomplishments as evidence of her superiority to Dick, it is clear that he values these not in themselves, but for the wealthy husband they could attract (*UGT* 153–54; pt. 4, ch. 2), just as Dick's father sees Fancy as a good catch because her father was "rather better in the pocket than we" (109; pt. 2, ch. 8).<sup>5</sup> In keeping with idealizing romantic conventions, however, Dick is above such mercenary motives and loves Fancy for herself — unlike Fancy, who almost throws Dick over not just for the "refinement of mind and manners" that Vicar Maybold possesses, but for the elegant lifestyle he could provide for her (*UGT* 176; pt. 4, ch. 7). Although Fancy makes the right choice in the end and stands by her first love (although only after the vicar does the gentlemanly thing and allows her to recant her second engagement), her moral failings are clearly intended to even the social balance between her and Dick, as the narrator indicates in describing her as "too refined and beautiful for a tranter's wife, but perhaps not too good" (*UGT* 188; pt. 5, ch. 1). Moreover, even her "refinement" is somewhat trivialized by being reduced to her hectoring her father and father-in-law about not using "thee" and "thou" or wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands at the wedding breakfast (*UGT* 193; pt. 5, ch. 2).

Also worth noting here is Hardy's subtle resentment against the condescension of Vicar Maybold, the only representative of the conventional gentleman in the novel, who, like Edred Fitzpiers and Angel Clare after him, is willing against his better judgment to offer his hand to the charming country girl, but assumes that she will have to be isolated from her friends and polished up by some travel with him to become a fully presentable mate (*UGT* 172; pt. 4, ch. 6). It seems that the affectionate condescension to country people by one who had lived among them was for Hardy clearly in a different category from the kind of snobbery shown by those to the manner born. I would argue that the end result of these conflicting versions of status is to leave only Dick's transparent honesty and fidelity (key traits in constructing middle-class superiority) untarnished as a measure of merit, even though the ironic ending suggests that he is a fool to believe in Fancy.

*A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) is farther from being a novel of rustic life than the others discussed here, but it makes use of similar alignments between class and social behavior. Many commentators have noted the autobiographical parallels between Hardy and Stephen Smith, the son of a mason and a dairymaid (*PBE* 33, 73; ch. 4 and 8) whose parents scrimped to have him educated at a National School and later trained as an architect (against the advice of the local aristocrat).<sup>6</sup> Stephen meets Elfride Swancourt when sent by his architectural firm back to his home village to supervise the renovation of the old church. A perfect example of a central Hardy character — the individual caught between class identities, unable to fit into the village culture he has left behind, but not yet securely in possession of the kinds of genteel status that professional expertise could provide — his situation focuses in useful ways the contradictions of class ideology in the

later nineteenth century. Once again Hardy's portrayal of the cottager culture from which Stephen has come helps to distinguish Stephen's superior sensibilities. The Hardy narrator again demonstrates his resentment of the gentry's condescension to characters like John Smith, remarking sardonically that the mason's injury "might possibly have been considered a far more serious case if Mr. Smith had been a more important man" (87; ch.10), and chiding "women of old family" like Elfride for being unable to understand "that a fine soul may wear a smock-frock" (248; ch. 27). But his own portrayal of the Smiths and their circle of friends highlights their vulgarity and sharpens Stephen's distance from their values. Even his mother offers embarrassed apologies to him for the extended discussion of pig character and pig slaughtering that greets him upon his return home in chapter 23 (228). She is motivated by loyalty to her class as much as to her son when she earlier dismisses Stephen's fears that Elfride was too superior to be his wife, but her evidence for the way she "keeps herself up" by not talking to journeymen for more than a minute deflates her comic pretensions to status (89; ch. 10). Like Dick's father in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, she measures the woman's suitability in essentially material terms; she patronizingly approves of Elfride for being "a perfect little lady" but thinks that Stephen could do better than "a bankrupt pa'son's girl" (90–91; ch. 10). She cannot fathom the contradictions of one in her son's declassé position, who prefers tolerating the indifference of the gentry to enduring the "distaste" aroused in him by the socially inferior families who would consider a "country lad" such as himself a great catch (89; ch. 10). This is a position that Hardy clearly understood, the position of the social "chameleon" enabled by the spread of education to absorb the ideas and assume the "higher and more artificial tone" of the higher reaches of society laid open by that education (92; ch. 10).

His narrator's declaration that Stephen's pretensions to marry Elfride were "far from absurd" if somewhat premature suggests Hardy's support for measuring status by one's behavior (93; ch. 10), but the narrative also demonstrates the practical complications of this definition of distinction, especially in its examination of the relationship between character and money at the other border of the new gentility, that between the rising professional and the older gentry. Stephen's correspondence-course versions of chess and Latin suggest how difficult it is for one in his position to carry off gentlemanly accomplishments with the natural ease that is so crucial to their value; on the other hand, the Reverend Swancourt's belief that "an unedified palate [shown by Stephen's ignorance of sauces and wine] is the irrepressible cloven hoof of the upstart" trivializes genteel taste as a weapon of upper-class snobbery (85; ch. 9). When Elfride protests to her father that Stephen's "graceful manners" make him a gentleman regardless of his origins, Rector Swancourt objects precisely because he too recognizes Stephen as a kind of social chameleon, one who has learned merely to mimic the manners of his betters (83; ch. 9).<sup>7</sup> The real issue here is that Stephen's manners are worthless in Reverend Swancourt's eyes without the "well-to-do friends, and a little property" that the rector had simply taken for granted in one he assumed to be a London professional (83; ch. 9). The irony of such objections is intensified by the fact that the Smiths are better off financially than the Swancourts, and that the rector himself frankly schemes to marry a woman he does not love for the sake of her property — the perfect way, he explains, for a "gentleman with no brains at all" to make a fortune "without soiling his fingers" (86; ch. 9).

Particularly when compared to the hypocritical values of the gentry in this way, Stephen's own claims to merit acquire more weight. In addition to being a hard-working



professional (in contrast to the gold-digging rector whose daughter writes his sermons), he demonstrates precisely the kinds of restraint and compunction that distinguished the true gentleman in Victorian ideology. He does not suggest the elopement until Elfride has made the first move, for fear of being accused of trying to entrap a “girl better in the world than” himself (98; ch. 10). He chivalrously defends the “delicacy and honor” of the faithless Elfride (131; ch. 13, 238; ch. 25), who, like Fancy Day, proves to be inferior to Stephen in constancy (and to Henry Knight in honesty), despite her higher social origins. Indeed, when Stephen avoids exposing Elfride after she has jilted him, the narrator credits him with a “tact in avoiding catastrophes” that was “the chief quality which made him intellectually respectable,” as well as being a quality in which “he far transcended Knight,” her new fiancé (254; ch. 27). Although Knight functions in the novel as the more typical version of the new gentleman — one distinguished from the old style dandy by possessing a “well-finished mind” rather than just well-finished clothing (141; ch.14) and endowed with a depth of intellect and a “thoroughness and integrity” far superior to Stephen’s or Elfride’s (257; ch. 27), he is ultimately disabled by being (like Angel Clare) too fastidious in his desire for ideal purity in his beloved (293; ch. 30, 333; ch. 35). In the ironic end, of course, neither men’s virtues win them romantic success, as Elfride allows herself to be married off to the local earl to benefit her family (368) and dies shortly afterwards in childbirth. By this point, however, Stephen has already secured the kind of professional acclaim as a rising architect that will solidify his status as a gentleman.

*Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) returned Hardy to a more self-contained rural society where issues of merit and mobility are again played out at the border of the laboring and the middle classes. Gabriel Oak is the protagonist in flux here, and as the novel opens he has moved from being first shepherd, then bailiff, to becoming “farmer Oak” with the purchase on credit of his own flock of sheep. Their loss demotes him to shepherd again, although his own skills and Boldwood’s favor have already made him a tenant farmer before his marriage to the genteel Bathsheba assures his social fate at the novel’s end. The appropriateness of his eventual restoration to a higher class is prepared for by his alignment with implicitly genteel standards of sensibility, a sensibility thrown into greater relief by the contrasting behavior of his rustic fellows. Take for example the function of the rustics’ comic self-importance. Where Gabriel is characterized by the “quiet modesty” of one who realized “he had no great claim on the world’s room” (*FMC* 52–53; ch. 1), Joseph Poorgrass exaggerates his trademark timidity when he realizes that it makes him “an interesting study” to his listeners (107–08; ch. 8). Gabriel’s efforts to find out more about Bathsheba in this scene are repeatedly derailed by the rustics’ recurrence to favorite stories about their own antics, just as his anxiety to know what happened to her in Bath is later frustrated by Cainy Ball, who almost chokes in his desire to command the center of attention as the only eye-witness (ch. 33). It is scenes like these that convince Wotton that Hardy’s rustic characters function to flout the self-importance and rectitude of those (like Oak) who align themselves with bourgeois values, but I think this argument is undercut by Hardy’s tendency to treat the rustics’ self-importance as comic, too. When the rustics preen themselves on their peculiar claims to fame — the maltster’s vanity over his extreme age (116; ch. 8) and Henery Fray’s conceit over the supposed subtlety of his wit (201–02; ch. 22), for instance — one can’t help sensing an air of patronizing amusement as the Hardy narrator trots out his rustic types to enact another predictable display of their trademark foibles.

Oak's superiority is established in other ways. His book learning of course distinguishes him from his semi-literate fellows, but despite the fact that they, too, have spent their lives outdoors, they also lack Gabriel's ability to tell time by the stars or to read the signs of approaching tempest in animal behavior. Gabriel's serious study of the Bible (203; ch. 22) is contrasted with Joseph's rather histrionic piety (110, 115; ch. 8), his moral seriousness with the cynicism of Jan Coggan, for whom getting into heaven is a matter of luck (110; ch. 8). Of great importance in tacitly justifying Oak's eventual advance is his very disinterestedness in promoting it. While Henery Fray fumes at being overlooked as bailiff, the far more capable Oak accepts his humble demotion to shepherd without complaint (159; ch. 15). Most significant here is his repression of his own desire for Bathsheba and his willingness to serve her interests unselfishly for most of the book. It is Oak who chivalrously curbs Mark Clark's disrespectful levity about Bathsheba's physical attractions, and has the gentleman's "manly resolve" to endure her indifference to his own merits (200; ch. 22). Oak's fidelity of course also distinguishes him from Troy, who represents the outdated version of gentleman as rake, and his mental balance allows him to succeed where the obsessive Boldwood fails. Because Oak shows that he has internalized the code of conduct appropriate to his social betters, his eventual installation as gentleman farmer seems natural. The rewarding of his selflessness with material advance is, in John Goode's words, "a bourgeois fantasy" fulfilled (28).

Diggory Venn offers interesting parallels to Oak's experiences in *Return of the Native* (1878). He, too, spends much of the story in a liminal social state, having given up dairy farming after being turned down by Thomasin Yeobright. The trade of reddleman represents a conscious (and voluntary) rejection of respectability but also guarantees him isolation from other itinerant laborers and thus allows him to maintain the social and economic superiority that he never relinquishes, despite his bizarre appearance (*RN* 131–32; bk. 1, ch. 9). Like Oak, he possesses an "acuteness" (132; bk. 1, ch. 9) that sets him apart from his fellows. He demonstrates a "delicacy" (89; bk. 1, ch. 4) of feeling lacking in the other heathfolk (86; bk. 1, ch. 4), tactfully turning his eyes away from the sleeping Thomasin when he brings her back home after her abortive wedding with Wildeve (89; bk. 1, ch. 4), and surprising Eustacia by not behaving with the physical gaucheness of "an ingenuous rustic" when he approaches her on Thomasin's behalf (143; bk. 1, ch. 10). Where the other rustic characters judge marriage solely by its practical effects in securing a woman a home (74; bk. 1, ch. 3), Venn remains the steadfastly self-sacrificing lover, willing to further Thomasin's happiness at the expense of his own (134; bk. 1, ch. 9). His ability to discipline his desire marks him as superior to Wildeve, the professional gentleman who has lost his social position and never regains it. By his own report, Hardy had not intended to end the story with the conventionally happy marriage of Venn and Thomasin (464n; bk. 6, ch. 3).<sup>8</sup> Diggory's new status as an increasingly prosperous dairyman in part makes this possible, although Clym and Thomasin both deceive themselves in thinking that Mrs. Yeobright's only objection to Venn was his reddleman's trade (463; bk. 6, ch. 3); despite being the wife of a small farmer herself, Mrs. Yeobright's pretensions as a curate's daughter (83; bk. 1, ch.3) led her to want Thomasin to marry higher than that from the beginning (133; bk. 1, ch. 9). Clym is finally willing to accept Diggory on the merits of his good character — his honesty and astuteness — and Thomasin rejects Clym's suggestion that she should exploit her ability to move up in the world as the wife of an urban professional by arguing that she is "too

rural” and “countrified” to leave the heath (462; bk. 6, ch. 3). In a novel in which the escapist fantasies of Eustacia and Wildeve lead to tragedy, the happiest characters are those who reject what have been portrayed as the false values of the urban world of social climbing, although they are nonetheless rewarded for their surrender of ambition by being left at the top of the genteel hierarchy on the heath.

The tragedy in *The Woodlanders* (1887) springs quite directly from the social striving and dislocation of its characters and offers an anticipation of the pessimism about social advancement that will color Hardy's final novels.<sup>9</sup> George Melbury's determination that his daughter Grace marry well is driven by class shame; his decision to educate her springs from his humiliation as a child by the parson's son, who laughed at him for not recognizing an allusion to the *Iliad* (*W* 23; ch. 4). He values her expensive education not for its own sake but for the wealthy husband it might attract, and he treats her as a “mere chattel,” an investment that will pay off by advancing his family's status (67–69; ch. 12). He is crassly triumphant over Grace's supposed enticement of Fitzpiers and urges her on him against her will, unable to see past the snob value of the “venerable” Fitzpiers name to understand how the doctor's own failings have contributed to his lack of success in the world (121; ch. 22).

Grace demonstrates that she is inherently worthy of the status that her finishing school education has conferred upon her; she was made of “good material” (118; ch. 22) to begin with and possesses the “brains and good looks” to do justice to the investment her father has made (91; ch. 16). She has the delicacy to be offended by her father's crass social climbing (68; ch. 12), and for her, the chief attraction of marriage with Fitzpiers is not his material or social standing in itself, “but the possibilities of a refined and cultivated inner life, of subtle psychological intercourse” (124; ch. 23) that his companionship offered. Even Fitzpiers can almost forget her class roots, “so unerringly at his level in ideas, tastes, and habits” did she operate (136; ch. 25). Grace has been viewed as shallow and unsympathetic by some critics (e.g., M. Williams 165–67), but there is a real poignancy in her dilemma as one caught between classes. She can embrace neither the “rough” life (134; ch. 25) of Giles Winterbourne nor the corrupt sophistication of Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond: as Peter Widdowson puts it, “her trance-like state throughout the novel, and her passivity in the face of all the social exploitation she is subject to (cf. Tess), are the product of the impasse of class relations she experiences in her displacement” (211). Betrayed by Fitzpiers, she longs to slough off the burden of being genteel, the “vener of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools,” but she cannot return to being a “crude country girl” so easily (*W* 156; ch. 28; see also 168; ch. 30). The refined tastes cultivated by her life with her husband cause her to recoil in spite of herself from the rough tavern meal that Giles later arranges for her (214; ch. 38), and the “cruel propriety” of what she later brands her “selfish” correctness contributes at least indirectly to his death (235; ch. 42).

Giles too is caught between classes, having lost his chance at prosperity with the property he controlled and being forced after John South's death to live in a hut and become a traveling cider-maker. His bachelor faux pas at his Christmas party play a significant role in raising fears in Mr. Melbury's mind that he would lower Grace socially as her husband, although it is Robert Creedle and the serving boy who are responsible for the most embarrassing of these disasters — oil left on the furniture and splashing soup, for instance. Creedle fills the role typical of Hardy's colorful comic rustic here, preening

himself on his worldly wisdom, wondering why the guests couldn't just re-use the same plates "as we bucks used to do in former days" (57; ch. 10), and remaining comically insouciant about the boiled slug that winds up in Grace's dinner (61; ch. 10). Creedle in one sense satirically deflates the airs put on by Mr. Melbury, but his insensitivity is typical of the portrayal of other rustic characters in the novel. We are meant to condemn Fitzpiers for feeling that he belongs to a completely different "species" than the laboring classes (136; ch. 25), but the narrator's own comments also underscore the distance between Fitzpiers's level and theirs: the denizens of Hintock are characterized by the "curious mechanical regularity of country people in the face of hopelessness" (93; ch. 17), and the auctioneer's fanciful behavior proves to be the result of simple absence of mind (42; ch. 7). The narrator also describes Tim Tang as "naturally" incapable of appreciating the complicated feelings Fitzpiers has for his estranged wife (261; ch. 46). The country folk immediately interpret Fitzpiers's experiments as a sign that he has sold his soul to the devil (7; ch. 1, 24; ch. 4) and could not get past their own "conventional errors and crusted prejudices" to appreciate his genuine medical skill (237; ch. 42). They are also consistently hostile toward women who step out of their subordinate roles, censuring Felice Charmond's self-display (21; ch. 4), thinking that Grace deserved "a good shaking" for following her own desires, and condemning her for "queening it" over the repentant Fitzpiers (274–76; ch. 48).

Like earlier rural protagonists, Giles has virtues that set him apart from his rustic fellows. Like Gabriel Oak, he possesses a mastery of country life that only Marty South rivals. And like Gabriel, he is consistently self-effacing and loyal, "too manly" to condemn even Felice without giving her a second chance (173; ch. 31). It is Grace who most clearly acknowledges his real merits when she realizes the full extent of his chivalry in letting her have his hut: she finally fathoms "the purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy" (236; ch. 42). Giles has the moral traits that characterize the truly gentle soul, in pointed contrast to the faithless and undisciplined Fitzpiers, the conventionally loose gentleman as rake, who gives in not only to the sophisticated enticements of Felice Charmond, but who also cannot resist the cruder sexual pleasures offered by the work woman Suke Damson. That Giles's very scrupulousness causes his death, while the worthless Fitzpiers recovers wife and status, is an index of Hardy's increasing pessimism about the value of such moral distinction, for his two final novels will also feature rural protagonists who become victims by virtue of the very delicacy of their feelings. Tess Durbeyfield's idealizing devotion to Angel and Jude Fawley's chivalrous deference to women's needs<sup>10</sup> play important roles in preventing them from successfully completing the social move upward that their educational and emotional strengths might have secured in an earlier novel.

This kind of ambivalence about class identity — the insistence on the neglected cultural value of the rural working classes combined with a patronizing superiority to their colorful eccentricities, a sympathizing portrayal of their resentments against their betters in plots that ultimately reward those whom we might call the potentially (if not yet) genteel — is what we might expect given Hardy's own declassé position. Hardy's complicated treatment of class issues in the novels arises not just from the more generalizable conflict between educated and customary ways of life that Raymond Williams analyzes (*Country and City* 198–202), but also from more particular (and more Victorian) constructions of class sensibilities. The Victorian novel frequently naturalized the innate supe-

riority of the bourgeois protagonist by awarding material success to those who appeared least active in promoting their own self-interest, and romantic fulfillment to those best able to repress their desires. Like other Victorian novelists, Hardy implicitly contrasts the purer motives of his “middling” protagonists with the shallower values of the gentry, but strikes a more complicated balance in distinguishing them as well from the classes from which they have sprung. Characters like Stephen Smith and Grace Melbury may lament the alienation from their origins caused by the “artificiality” of their educated manners, but they are also keenly aware of the ways that being “natural” is also implicated in the crudeness and physicality that conventionally stereotype the rustic lower classes — in Hardy’s fiction as much as in popular imagination. Hardy may resent this stereotyping, but has too much invested in distancing himself from it to be able to dispense with it. Hardy’s refusal to reward Giles Winterbourne’s chivalrous self-denial with success signals perhaps a clearer acknowledgment of the ideological contradictions implicit in Victorian constructions of class. This realization would bear final fruit in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, novels in which Hardy confronts more directly (if still with ambivalence) the potency of physical desire, the hypocrisies of respectability, and the brute power of money in destroying even the most worthy desires for self-improvement in his rustic protagonists.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, “Hardy and Social Class,” Merryn Williams, and Wotton. Widdowson provides more nuanced views of the centrality of social mobility to Hardy’s fiction.
2. The characterization of village life in chapter 51 of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* closely echoes the analysis Hardy offers in “Dorchester Labourer” (268).
3. Among many useful treatments of the construction of middle-class sensibilities, see Ferris for a good summary of the new Victorian gentleman and Gilmour for a detailed analysis of how this redefinition was shaped in the Victorian novel. Armstrong analyzes analogous processes for the domesticated woman. Eagleton’s study of the Brontës offers a useful case study of strategies for advancing bourgeois characters seemingly in spite of themselves, and Kucich offers a penetrating psychological analysis of the uses of repression in constructing the enhanced interiority of the bourgeois protagonist in Charlotte Brontë, Eliot, and Dickens. Stallybrass and White analyze the refiguring of the physical as an aspect of class identity during the later Victorian period. Bourdieu provides a useful, if not historically contextualized, study of the functions of taste and conduct in constructing class identity.
4. Although I agree with Wotton that such conversations reinforce the unity of working-class community, I think he idealizes the extent to which this language is oppositional because it is “non-conceptual and experiential,” as well as the extent to which bourgeois speech is universalizing and hegemonic (69–72).
5. Gattrell interestingly notes that Hardy substituted a financial for a social distinction by replacing “better in the world” with “better in pocket” when he revised this passage in 1912 — as if to argue that Dick’s inferiority to Fancy was only a matter of money, not of intrinsic social merit (Gattrell xvii).
6. Tellingly, Hardy protested that he was really like the more socially polished (and unequivocally genteel) Henry Knight; see Florence Hardy 74.

7. A similar contempt for arrivistes is evinced by Mrs. Swancourt when she chides Elfride on using the term “gentleman”: “We have handed over ‘gentlemen’ to the lower middle class, where the word is still to be heard at tradesmen’s balls and provincial tea parties, I believe” (138; ch. 14).
8. According to John Patterson, Hardy’s decision to turn Eustacia’s story into a tale of Promethean longing required a rise in class status among secondary characters. See his analysis of the stages by which Diggory rose in class origins through successive editions of the novel (30–31, 48–59).
9. Millgate speculates that in an effort to avoid being stereotyped as a local colorist, Hardy set aside the scenario he had developed for what later became *The Woodlanders* after the success of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (173); see also Florence Hardy 102.
10. See Langland for an insightful analysis of the ways in which Jude is hindered by espousing a chivalric code of romantic love belonging to classes above his own (35–36).

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