

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:
faithfully presented by Roman Polanski?

MARGARET HARRIS

There are many versions of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The work was first published in the *Graphic* from 4 July to 26 December 1891, in a bowdlerized version omitting the seduction, the birth of Tess's child, and its baptism.¹ In this serialization Tess went through a form of marriage with Alec d'Urberville in order that the morality of her liaison with him should be less disturbing for a family readership; and in the sequence where Angel Clare helps the churchgoing dairymaids across the flood, he was provided with a wheelbarrow to avoid the impropriety of carrying them in his arms. When *Tess* was published in three volumes in November 1891, Hardy incorporated these episodes, and continued to make modifications to the text of the novel at least as late as 1920.

He prepared other versions of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as well. During 1894-5 he wrote a dramatization in five acts "in the old English manner",² but this was not performed at the time because of its potentially offensive subject-matter. A much altered version was produced in New York in 1897 with great success; and there was an unauthorized adaptation performed in London in 1900.³ A revision of the 1895 dramatization was eventually performed at Dorchester and Weymouth late in 1924, though in putting it on the amateur Hardy Players had some misgivings since the reputation of *Tess* as immoral still seemed to be a problem. The misgivings proved unfounded, for a professional production followed in London in 1925, running for over one hundred performances. In 1929, the year after Hardy's death, the Dorchester actress Gertrude Bugler, billed as "Thomas Hardy's Own Tess", played in a revival at the Duke of York's Theatre.⁴

In addition Hardy authorized Baron Frédéric d'Erlanger to prepare an opera based on *Tess*, which was produced at Covent Garden in 1909. Hardy attended rehearsals, and "was present with Mrs Hardy at the first performance. Though Italianized to such an extent that Hardy scarcely recognized it as his novel, it was a great success in a crowded house."⁵

1 Though these episodes were also published in 1891: "The Midnight Baptism, A Study in Christianity", *Fortnightly Review*, May 1891 (that is, two months before serial publication began in the *Graphic*); and "Saturday Night in Arcady", *National Observer* (Edinburgh), 14 November 1891. See R. L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy a Bibliographical Study* (Oxford University Press 1954, repr. 1978), pp. 67-78; J. T. Laird, *The Shaping of 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* (Oxford University Press 1975), and Laird's later article, "New Light on the Evolution of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*", *Review of English Studies*, n.s. XXXI (1980), 414-35, for more detailed accounts of the variant texts of *Tess*.

Of readily available texts of the novel, that in the Penguin English Library, edited by David Skilton and with an introduction by A. Alvarez (1978), usefully lists variants between the 1912 Wessex Edition and the *Graphic* version, and is the edition quoted in this essay. Macmillan's New Wessex edition (1974) also prints the 1912 Wessex Edition text, and includes a descriptive "Note on the Text".

2 Purdy, p. 77.

3 Purdy, p. 307.

4 Purdy, p. 353; Robert Gittings, *The Older Hardy* (Heinemann 1978), pp. 197 ff.; Richard H. Taylor, ed., *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy* (Macmillan 1978), pp. 83-5 and notes.

5 Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (1928, 1930; 1 vol., Macmillan 1962), p. 347.

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There were film versions also. In 1913 Hardy attended the press review of a *Tess* made by The Famous Players Film Company, and ten years later an eight-reel version was made by the Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corporation (released 1924). Hardy was involved in this production to the extent of obtaining permission for filming to take place inside the Bindon Abbey enclosure, the site of the stone coffin into which Angel placed Tess.⁶

So Hardy countenanced dramatic, operatic and cinematic renditions of *Tess* in his lifetime—though it must be noted that in 1924 he expressed reservations. At the time of the Hardy Players' production he wrote that he had cast aside the "old dramatization . . . many years earlier, having come to the conclusion that to dramatize a novel was a mistake in art: moreover that the play ruined the novel, and the novel the play."⁷ Nonetheless there seems reason to assume that his shade would be more excited than affronted by the prospect of a three-hour film, with colour and sound—and such a one was released in 1980, directed by Roman Polanski.

The form of the title of the novel finally settled on by Hardy read

TESS
OF THE D'URBERVILLES
A Pure Woman
Faithfully Presented By
Thomas Hardy

This unusual formulation prompts the question, how faithfully is Hardy's *Tess* presented by Roman Polanski? My short answer is, not very. And like most short answers, this one needs qualification and elaboration.

The obvious acknowledgement should be made, that there are inherent difficulties in adapting any lengthy prose fiction for a film script. Usually it is not possible to fit in all the incidents of the novel; and difficult to decide to what extent the film can, or should, imitate visually the narrative techniques of the written text.

Hardy's fiction in some ways seems to lend itself quite readily to adaptation for film. The affinity of his habits of visualizing with cinematic techniques has frequently been discussed—for example, P. N. Furbank has some pertinent and pithy remarks in his introduction to the New Wessex edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; Joan Grundy in *Hardy and the Sister Arts* (Macmillan 1979) has a chapter on "Cinematic Arts" which ranges over the poetry and the novels, giving most attention to *The Dynasts* but leaving a great deal of scope for intensive discussion; and David Lodge has an essay, "Thomas Hardy and Cinematographic Form", which concentrates on *The Return of the Native*.⁸ Lodge's piece takes up the argument of an article by Alan Spiegel, "Flaubert to Joyce: Evolution of a Cinematographic Form",⁹ in which cinematographic form is identified with the evolution of the modernist or symbolist novel. Lodge demurs: "There seems to be a problem, or at least a paradox, here, for in most respects film, as a narrative medium, has more in common with the traditional realistic novel than with the modernist or symbolist novel."¹⁰ Later in the essay he amplifies this observation:

6 Taylor, *Personal Notebooks*, pp. 262 and n. 787, 63 and n. 249.

7 Taylor, *Personal Notebooks*, p. 83.

8 *Novel*, VII (1974), 246–54.

9 *Novel*, VI (1973), 229–43.

10 "Thomas Hardy and Cinematographic Form", *loc. cit.*, p. 246.

Let me venture to suggest that film is a comparatively weak and limited medium for handling complicated or highly fluid time-schemes, and for rendering subjective consciousness—both features of the symbolist novel. It is a strong and effective medium for telling a story that is based on action and movement rather than thought, in which moral and emotional conflict is displayed fairly obviously in behaviour, and in which there is a significant or striking relationship between the human figures and their physical environment.¹¹

This observation is worth considering in relation to Hardy's *Tess*. Of all his novels it strains hardest against realist assumptions; of all his novels it has most resisted critical categorization. Convenient testimony to the difficulties *Tess* has occasioned critics is to be found among the crop of books on Hardy published in 1978, the fiftieth anniversary of his death. In a rather reductive introductory study of Hardy, Lance St John Butler shows how *Tess* "can be seen as a love story, a pastoral romance, an allegory of man's progress through the world, and a study of late-nineteenth century agnosticism in its impact on a Christian or supposedly Christian society."¹² Butler does not leave the novel in pieces but claims that these four "levels" are combined, that "Hardy succeeds in integrating the personal emotions of an obscure girl with an intense study of nature and an overall view of the cosmos and the meaning of man's existence."¹³

In the most important recent discussion of Hardy, always challenging both the author and his readers, John Bayley is much tougher with *Tess* than Butler is. His argument, like Butler's, locates disparate elements in this novel, but does not seek to unify them. Rather Bayley sees both the character of Tess Durbeyfield and the character of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in terms of separateness and discontinuity. "It is the lack of placing, of fixity, in Tess which constitutes her power and attraction," he declares, "both for us and for the characters she comes in contact with."¹⁴ And he goes on to demonstrate the extent of Hardy's innovation in *Tess*, developing the gnomic proposition that "The novel's form is Tess's own discontinuity."¹⁵

Bayley's reading is not the only one which rejects the appropriateness to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* of Jamesian notions of unity: there are other critics who have developed their accounts of the novel from recognition of its apparent irresolutions and disjunctions. I am thinking particularly of Ian Gregor's fine discussion of the notions of unity and continuity in *Tess in The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (Faber 1974), of John Goode's difficult but rewarding pages on this novel in his essay "Woman and the Literary Text" in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Penguin 1976), and of John Lucas's views in the chapter "Hardy's Women" in *The Literature of Change: Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel* (Harvester 1977). I am invoking their arguments to draw attention to the idiosyncrasies of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, particularly in its modes of "rendering subjective consciousness" (to recall Lodge's phrase). Whether *Tess* may relevantly be seen as a symbolist or a modernist novel is a separate issue, and I wish merely to use Lodge's suggested criteria to emphasize that the nature of

11 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

12 *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge University Press), p. 96. Earlier discussions have made similar points—cf. e.g. Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy His Career as a Novelist* (Bodley Head 1971), pp. 268–9.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *An Essay on Hardy* (Cambridge University Press 1978), pp. 169–70.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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Hardy's experiment in form makes *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* a particularly unsuitable case for film treatment.

In planning a film of *Tess* there are at the outset daunting problems of casting the central character. The description of the heroine at her first appearance is objective enough:

She was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others, possibly—but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment. (p. 51: more of the red ribbon presently)

But later, the narrator offers a less straightforward account. Tess is nursing her baby:

she sat there, with her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor gray nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises—shade behind shade—tint beyond tint—around pupils that had no bottom; an almost standard woman, but for the slight incautiousness of character inherited from her race. (pp. 140-1)

Perplexity about the meaning of “an almost standard woman” is intensified when later still Tess is seen by Angel Clare as “a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form” (p. 187). This, however, seems to be the interpretation of Tess which Polanski attempts to realize, setting aside the subtleties and complexities which arise from the fact that most frequently Tess is presented through another character's perception of her, or by a rendition of her own perception of self.

The appearance of the German-born actress Nastassa Kinski fits well enough the descriptions of Tess, though she's not the Tess in my mind's eye. While Ms Kinski's English is generally good, her two languages aren't those of Tess—who “spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality” (p. 58)—a bilingualism which is both a symptom and a cause of many of her tensions. A good deal happens to Tess, but much of it is inner action which doesn't register on Nastassa Kinski's face, or in other elements of Polanski's film.

As well as being a limited medium for rendering subjective consciousness, film is limited also, Lodge suggests, in “handling complicated or highly fluid time-schemes”. The time-scheme of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is in one sense straightforward: there are no flashbacks or dislocations of the chronological progression of the narrative. But time is important in *Tess*: one of the subjects of the book is Tess's attempt to orient herself in time, time as recorded and measured not just by the clock, nor even by the calendar, but by local traditions, folklore and pagan and Christian legends.¹⁶ Hardy divides the narrative into seven Phases which describe Tess's evolution from “The Maiden” of Phase the First to the “Fulfilment” of Phase the Seventh. Attention should be paid to the literal passage of time; the period covered by the book is roughly five years (a period which does not visibly age Ms Kinski). Moreover, John Goode observes that “the

16 Any discussion of the problem of time in Hardy must confront J. Hillis Miller's claim that one of the two “most important presuppositions which underlie Hardy's work . . . is the assumption that time is an illusion” (*Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, Harvard University Press 1970, p. xi). More specifically, see Rosemary Eakins, “Tess: The Pagan and Christian Traditions”, in *The Novels of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Anne Smith (Vision 1979). Lucille Herbert, “Hardy's Views in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*” *ELH*, XXXVII (1970), 77-94, includes perspectives of time among those adopted by Hardy in the narration.

lapse of time in the novel is much greater within the phases than it is between them".¹⁷ For example, the lapse between the fourth and fifth Phases is only the time it takes Tess to confess to Angel, but is momentous for each of them. Ian Gregor discusses this

important point in our reading experience of the novel, as we move across the blank page which separates the fourth from the fifth section. The fourth section ends:

. . . pressing her forehead against his temple she entered on her story of her acquaintance with Alec d'Urberville and its results, murmuring the words without flinching, and with her eyelids drooping down.

The fifth section opens—"Her narrative ended". For Tess, 'her story' has continuity, it is very much *her* story. The tale and the teller are one. For Angel, however, the gap which divides the beginning of her narrative from its end is total, so that he can only murmur numbly, 'You were one person; now you are another.'¹⁸

The actual words Tess speaks, her story, are omitted: "For Tess, the story is no longer there, for her it is a mere recital of events belonging irretrievably to the past; for Angel, the story is not there in its substance, only in its effect, which is to destroy the Tess he thought he knew."¹⁹ The experience of duration and discontinuity here is complex, and I am not implying that Polanski, in the film version, should have felt himself called upon to try to reproduce these formal effects of the novel. In this instance Angel's recoil is shown quite tellingly. But in general the film does not register many features of the text in which the awareness of Time as well as of the passage of time are of peculiar significance.

Place even more than time is important in the novel. Hardy claimed to have created the region of Wessex, but can be demonstrated to have endowed it with many features transposed from Dorset or neighbouring counties known to the Ordnance Survey. To complain that Polanski's film does not actually show us Wessex is to be unreasonable. (It is now notorious that he was unable to film in England for fear of extradition, so *Tess* was shot on location in Normandy.) For much of the time the countryside, fields and lanes and hedgerows, is so consonant with what Hardy describes, and so lusciously photographed, that I willingly suppressed my querulousness that I wasn't seeing the real places. Disbelief could not be suspended, though, for the buildings which are for the most part uncompromisingly French. And the crucifix behind which Tess hides her thick boots when she goes on her fruitless expedition to see Angel's parents would never have survived Oliver Grumble in an English village (in the book she stuffs her boots "into the hedge by the gate-post"—p. 374).

Within the novel, there are different settings for the successive phases of Tess's life. As Andrew Enstice remarks, "Each setting becomes an arena, its peculiar character contrasted with the others, in which Tess acts out a part of her life."²⁰ The contrasts between rustic Marlott and the opu-

17 "Woman and the Literary Text", in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (Penguin 1976), p. 253.

18 *The Great Web* (Faber 1974), p. 199.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Thomas Hardy: Landscapes of the Mind* (Macmillan 1979), p. 116. This is an uneven study, frequently rather literal; but there are some interesting suggestions—e.g. that in *Tess*, specific descriptions like those of the Durbeyfield cottage and Rolliver's inn are scanty compared with similar descriptions in earlier novels. Enstice claims that this arises partly from Hardy's increasing independence of actual geographical locations in creating landscape in the fiction.

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lence of The Slopes at Trantridge, between the lushness of Talbothays and the bleakness of Flintcomb Ash, between the artifice of Sandbourne and the massive mystery of Stonehenge, are adequately caught by Polanski. But no more than that. The problem again is that the novel nearly always projects landscape in shifting perspectives, often through a character's sensibility: a classic instance is in chapter 16, as Tess goes to Talbothays, or in the sequence at Talbothays where differences between Tess's perception of a situation and Angel's perception of the scene are set up (as in chapters 19 and 20).

Just as Polanski glosses over the passing of time, he glosses over distance. Hardy dwells on the accounts of her journeyings to and fro—for example in the details of the stages between Marlott and The Slopes, or in Tess's walk of fifteen miles each way in midwinter to see the Clares, or in her wanderings with Angel at the end of the book—and frequently alludes to the *Pilgrim's Progress*, as a reminder that her quest is partly spiritual. Polanski only nods towards the physical strenuousness in her journeying, and appears not to recognize that she is restless because she cannot find permanent assurance and repose, not simply because she is harried. Tess cannot completely relate to any one place, or is not allowed to. This restlessness and dislocation is an individual—and extreme—manifestation of changes pervading the whole society. While I do not in fact think that Hardy's emphasis in this novel falls on the destruction of a rustic community by the encroaching of technology, such changes are among the pressures which give rise to Tess's "ache of modernism" (p. 180: the phrase in the *Graphic* version reads "approximating to the spirit of modernism"—p. 507). But if Polanski's Tess expresses pain, those watching the film rarely have a clue as to its source.

This is perhaps the point to declare baldly that I consider the film to provide a partial reading of the novel, and certainly not a new one. This is William Watson, reviewing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in the *Academy* (6 February 1892):

There is one thing which not the dullest reader can fail to recognize—the persistency with which there alternately smoulders and flames through the book Mr Hardy's passionate protest against the unequal justice meted by society to the man and the woman associated in an identical breach of the moral law. In his wrath, Mr Hardy seems at times almost to forget that society is scarcely more unjust than nature. He himself proposes no remedy, suggests no escape—his business not being to deal in nostrums of social therapeutics. He is content to make his readers pause, and consider, and pity; and very likely he despairs of any satisfactory solution of the problem which he presents with such disturbing power and clothes with a vesture of such breathing and throbbing life.²¹

The only two people I've talked with who've seen the film but not read the book both saw the film in just the terms used in the first sentence quoted. And rightly, for I think Polanski is offering Tess to the more or less liberated ladies of the 1980s as an ancestress. Hardy certainly gave the 1890s a kind of "New Woman" in Sue Bridehead (in *Jude the Obscure*), in some sense a descendant of Tess; and clearly the plight and place of women is a major issue in the story of Tess Durbeyfield. But not the only one. It is commonplace to discuss *Tess* in terms of Tess's attempts at self-definition, but others in the book, her male oppressors Alec and

21 *Thomas Hardy, The Critical Heritage*, ed. R. J. Cox (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970), p. 202.

Angel among them, are in different ways also seeking to establish their identities. They may lack Tess's fluidity: indeed, Goode speaks of their rigidity, of Alec in terms of *Welllust* and fanaticism, Angel in terms of theoretical unconventionality and appropriative morality.²² Nonetheless, it is largely through her relationships with these two that the evolution of Hardy's Tess proceeds, an evolution which does bring her to a kind of fulfilment not hinted at by Polanski. For I think Phase the Seventh is truly one of "Fulfilment".

Because the film has concentrated on how Tess is exploited as a woman, her surrender to the police at Stonehenge is presented as yet another submission in her role as victim. Polanski has 'Liza-Lu' rather arbitrarily appear with Angel, and it is by no means clear how they are associated. What is clear is that they survive, Tess doesn't; and this is a plausible conclusion to the version of Tess's story which has been presented.

To indicate briefly how I see fulfilment constituted in the closing chapters of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The rituals of sacrifice associated with Stonehenge—and Tess seems knowingly to commit herself to acting out an equivalent ritual—are a long way in time and distance from the rituals of the May-Day festivities at the beginning of the novel. But where at the outset Tess's resistance to conformity, signified by her red ribbon, is apparently instinctive, by the time she reaches Stonehenge her innocence has become experience and she acts with an awareness of completion and exhaustion. Her relationship with Alec has been lived out, and she kills him. There is living out, also, of her relationship with Angel before Tess is herself executed. She must pay society's price for killing Alec, but in living with him she has ensured her family's material well-being, the upstart Stoke-d'Urbervilles supporting the erstwhile noble Durbeyfields. Where she has saved her family materially, she saves Angel spiritually: the account of his repentance in Brazil (pp. 420–4) is crucial here, though Angel's vision of her should not be read as a definitive one. In their last days there are no barriers of concealment or misinterpretation between Tess and Angel, and in the fullest sense their relationship is consummated since Angel's view of Tess and Tess's view of herself effectively coincide. For once Tess can live in the time present of her choice, though she has not willed the events of the past which have determined that present, and though she cannot evade the absence of a future for herself any more than she could evade her d'Urberville ancestry. The time with Angel is not simply a snatched idyll; she is not at the end a passive victim. Tess has been long since condemned to death, and Angel is condemned to live on with 'Liza-Lu'. The echo of *Paradise Lost* in the last sentence of the book carries with it the reminder of an ineradicable succession of the generations doomed to sin and err.

My principal objection to Polanski's treatment of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is not that he offers a partial reading of the novel. Rather, what I react against is his ignoring so much of the novel pertinent to his particular reading of *Tess*. The most obvious instance is the colour symbolism in the novel, the imagery of the redness of blood and passion contrasting with the whiteness of purity and innocence, which would seem likely to

22 Goode, *loc. cit.* There is a pertinent discussion in Leon Waldoff, "Psychological Determinism in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*", *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Macmillan 1979).

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transpose directly to film images. The classic demonstration of the centrality of colour in the novel is Tony Tanner's essay "Colour and Movement in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*", where he traces the modulations of the contrast of red and white. I quote only a summary couple of sentences:

More than make us judge, Hardy makes us see; and in looking for some explanation of why all this should happen to Tess, our eyes finally settle on that red ribbon marking out the little girl in the white dress, which already foreshadows the red blood stain on the white ceiling. In her beginning is her end.²³

But Polanski doesn't even show us a red ribbon.

There are other wanton changes. The truncation of the courtship of Angel and Tess at Talbothays may have been necessary, but as presented they fall in love and come together involuntarily and somewhat ridiculously. The vacillation on both sides which is such a significant element in the novel is omitted. And why take away Angel's harp (one of Hardy's great audacities) and leave him instead a Pan-like pipe? And why give Angel a volume of Marx as bedside reading? (The answer to this question may perhaps be found on p. 196 — my emphasis: "Angel Clare, who *communistically* stuck to his rule of taking part with the rest in everything . . .". Assuming the novel to be set in the 1880s, Angel was unlikely in any case to have been reading Marx in English.) Why edit the honeymoon so? The book again depicts vacillation, with Angel trying to keep up appearances for some days before they part; and the omission from the film of the sleepwalking scene loses an opportunity to depict the power of instinct and passion in Angel, and to underscore the theme of Tess's thralldom to her d'Urberville ancestry. Alec's conversion is vital in the novel, but omitted from the film.

Against all of this, it must be said that Alec and Angel are both splendidly cast. And some of the awkward moments of the novel—the episode in which Tess's letter to Angel goes under the carpet, in particular—are done with casual conviction. And some additions to the novel, like the scene where Alec tries to gain admission to Tess's bedroom at The Slopes, convey dramatically what is suggested discursively in the text—in this case, the very real attraction to Tess of the material comforts of her position, and the probability that her liaison there with Alec was of some months' duration. The depiction of Tess herself is generally strongest in sequences with Alec—nowhere better, I thought, than at Sandbourne, where Tess is seen in the trappings of the kept woman.

The 1980 film, then, is at the very least a plausible rendering of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. It could hardly offer more violence to Hardy's text than must have been done by the early silent versions. But this version is properly advertised as Roman Polanski's *Tess*.

23 *Critical Quarterly*, X (1968), repr. in *Hardy: The Tragic Novels: A Casebook*, ed. R. P. Draper (Macmillan 1975), pp. 205–6.