# Theoretical approaches to the construction of the heroine in Hardy's novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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My proposal to study what a heroine is in Hardy´s novel, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, is based upon a close reading of the text within the specific theoretical framework of Bakhtinian theories about the carnivalesque in literature. The Bakhtinian approach has provided me with the adequate frame to look into Tess´s nature. Tess, Hardy´s heroine, differs from traditional weeping heroines, from the type of women, Tennyson suggested in his long poem, "*The Princess:*"

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart:
> Man to command and woman to obey;
> All else confusion.
> Tennyson " *The Princess" 4 37-41)*

Tennyson´s lines illustrate the Victorian´s idyllic image of a feminine stereotype: a prudish, subservient angel of the hearth subjugated to the male.

Unlike this subservient angel of the hearth, the new type of heroine is an invigorating source of vitality, ready to counteract the forces that try to subjugate her. This new type of heroine is endowed with the power of rabelaisian laughter and carnival[1]. Popular tradition , according to Mikhail Bakhtin, celebrates the woman as a principle of regeneration:

> She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. (240)
>
> Therefore, carnival means, in these terms, a unique, vital power: the power of the natural embodied by women,. In carnival, laughter becomes the weapon to dismiss all authority, an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts. (Bakhtin Rabelais 92)

Tess is the female capable of laughing this way, of fighting back a deterministic male dominated world. Tess is presented to us as a "fallen" woman, an unmarried but "unashamed" mother that naturally



[1] See: Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Rabelais and his World.* Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984. Bakhtin views literary history in terms of carnival and popular festive forms. Carnival is in straight connection with laughter, and the presence / absence of laughter has been equated with liberation from or repression by dominant inhibiting forces.

suckles her baby—"the bastard gift of shameless nature" (75)—in front of the community of peasants. Unlike the conventional stereotypes of Victorian society, Tess is ruled by the laws of an agricultural and natural world. As Bakhtin argues, there can be nothing terrifying on earth, just as there can be nothing frightening in a mother´s body, with the nipples that are made to suckle, with the genital organs and the warm blood. (93)

No wonder that Thomas Hardy´s *Tess of the D' Urbervilles* (1881) ignited so much controversy among the most fervent devotees of the patriarchal codes of Victoria´s kingdom. The novel exhibited no emblematic figure of angelical purity and was branded as loathsome, degrading, disgusting, and vile (LaValley 4). The main character, Tess, represented what a Victorian audience considered filthy and vulgar in human nature and especially in a woman: an unmarried and passionate mother living in the rustic world of Marlott. Marlott, far from the fashionable world of London, hidden among a trackless and luscious wilderness, is closely connected with superstitious rituals, folk motifs, and carnivalesque forces that celebrate the body. There, in Marlott, Tess´s family particularly constitutes the epitome of the grotesque as opposed to the genteel atmosphere of the delicate and frail Victorian family. Her father, for example, is nothing like the virile head of the Victorian household who provides nourishment and secures his family´s welfare. He is, instead, a drunkard whose rickety legs can hardly take him home. Equally, her mother indulges herself at Rolliver´s tavern. There, she dismisses self-conscious thought and domestic duties to sit by her husband. As this grotesque household suggests, in Tess´s world there are no oppressive, social codes. Life in its most natural aspects is ruled by earth cycles, harvest time, domestic chores like the "afternoon skimming hour" (132), and the rest that the peasants take on Sunday nights to drink and rejoice. The division of the novel into phases confirms the endless cyclical movement of life and birth; harvest time and the regenerating power of the earth nourish Tess.



In the opening pages of the novel, Hardy initially captures the power of Rabelaisian , popular festive forms through the description of Old Jack Durbeyfield and his behaviour. It is evening time, in the latter part of May, and old Jack Durbeyfield staggers in the road, absolutely drunk, that is, full of wine-infused joy and vitality. The comic potential of the scene increases when a local parson rides up and tells Jack that the latter is a direct descendant of the noble, ancestral D'Urbervilles. Swelling at this prospect of nobility, Jack orders a cart to take him into Marlott where, swaggering and triumphant, he intrudes upon a club-walking pageant of women of the village[2] . Carnival and all it portends—food, laughter, merry-making, wine, triumph of the instincts—preside the novel all over from the beginning. After the procession, a May-Dance brings together young, middle-aged, and even elderly women. In carnival, the old and the young, the decayed and the flourishing join in folkloric gaiety—all dressed in white and exuding sexuality. Bursting upon this group, Jack resembles the carnivalesque, pagan god of wine, Bacchus, in his "carra navalis[3]," surrounded by the fair bacchantes or maenads. Whereas the women participate in the ensuing frolic and laugh, an ashamed Tess refuses to laugh. Nevertheless, she has partaken of the dance and joined the group of women.

Tess is caught between ready participation and self-conscious seriousness. Thus, on the one hand, Tess feels attracted to popular culture, folklore and dialect which are natural (Lecercle 9). On the other, she faces the world of culture, synthesized in her elementary education: her sixth standard achieved at the National High School and her knowledge of the Queen´s English. She is equally caught between the synchronic time of the harvest, festivities and seasons; and the historical time of culture, the too conscious passage of time and dates that "she philosophically noted as they came past in the revolution of the year" (77). She is caught between her two names, "D´Urberville" and "Durbeyfield." Lecercle examines the components of both names and suggests that the first repeats the idea of civilization: "ville" repeats "urbs," while the second one is unstable and incoherent and hints at the world of nature, of fields and hedgerows (Lecercle 9). The natural world in which Tess

[2] Women and popular tradition are intrinsically linked. While men´s clubs are dwindling, women´s still preserve past glory. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to notice that these women are introduced as the unique preservers of Marlott´s folkloric legacy.

[3] Notice that "carra navalis" is connected etymologically to the word carnival (Bakhtin DI 99).

is integrated is also undergoing transformations as a consequence of the industrial revolution and technological advancements. Like nature, Tess also experiences the "ache of modernism" (98), an ache that jeopardizes her purity and naturalness. As a result, she must conquer her self-confidence to totally immerse in the body of the folkloric and popular.

It is precisely in contact with the unbridled atmosphere of the folkloric and popular that Tess feels strong and is true to her sexual feelings. In this world, her mother consults her oracle: The Compleat Fortune-Teller, and at Talbothays´ dairy the churners believe cream does not come butter when someone is in love. Dances are also part of the folkloric legacy of Tess´s community. Interestingly, the folk dances become emblematic of our heroine´s development to achieve unity of being in the community of folk and nature. In the dance, neither soul nor mind seeks any longer to tyrannize the body, for all are combined in . . . what might be considered an image for a new perception of the unity of the being, of indivisibility of the elements of our nature. (Gartrell 34)

At the hay-trusser´s dance, in Chaseborough, Tess, again, debates whether to immerse herself fully or to remain the timid, abstracted observer. Nevertheless, she remains to voyeuristically take solace in a highly eroticized moment. Debris from the hay mixes with the perspiration of the dancers "forming together a sort of vegeto-human pollen" (48). Men and women are reduced to "panting shades" (48), forgetting daily labour and human distress. Coughing, dancing, and laughing, the dancers exhaust themselves, often falling into a mixed undefinable heap. She walks back home with the revellers in the darkness of the night in which they become one with nature. A highly comic moment occurs when treacle slides down Car Darch´s back, and she becomes the butt of the folk´s laughter. Tess finds it irresistable to laugh, and she joins the rest of the work-people´s merriment. Car Darch finds Tess´s laughter especially annoying, because of its "soberer, richer note" (51). Indeed, Tess´s laughter is powerful, deriding and mocking like the Rabelaisian power of carnival. But her laughter is paralyzed by the presence of Alec D' Urberville, the truant who has previously seduced and impregnated her, to later abandon her.

Thus, the ominous presence of the masculine often curdles her laughter and paralyzes her potential to completly integrate herself within the community of folk. Tess´s heroic development consists, partly, in her strength to overcome the agency of patriarchal power without losing her purity as a woman. The carnivalesque knows no authority: embracing the carnivalesque means to accept a ritualistic necessity to uncrown the king, to reject static authority, to free oneself to understand life in all its gay relativity (Bakhtin 197). To uncrown the king means that Tess must unself-consciously debase and dethrone a patriarchy that marginalizes her.

The first step to displace the patriarch occurs at a symbolical level: she kills the family representative of the patriarchally dominant culture—her horse. Prince, becomes grotesquely the alternative breadwinner of the family. Ironically, as his name indicates, Prince is linked to the ancient D'Urbervilles. Driving Prince and the wagon load of beehives to the market, Tess falls asleep only to have Prince killed.

Interestingly, there is a similar incident in Rabelais´ Gargantua, when the fleeing and defeated king Picrochole kills his horse that has slipped and fallen. In carnival this means symbolic abuse of the uncrowned king (Bakhtin 198). But, whereas in carnival "death is followed by regeneration, by the new year, new youth, and a new spring" (Bakhtin 198), Tess is overwhelmed by the event and feels guilty. The horse´s death foretells the death of Alec—the most brutal representative of an empowered, male phallocentrism—towards the end of the novel. In contrast to her response to Prince´s death, Tess now exempts herself from any guilt.



Alec D´Urberville and Angel Clare are next in Tess´s struggle to debunk the patriarchal figure. Both characters form images of Tess that do not correspond to her real nature and feel frustrated when they fail to impose their images upon her. Alec D´Urberville, the seducer, projects on Tess the figure of the lustful Eve, the female-whore that becomes the fetishized object of man´s lustful desires, and Angel Clare projects on her the pure ideal of the Madonna. Both images of Tess "are sexually inadequate: Alec being the victim of a rampant sexuality that controls and denies her . . . Angel the victim of a too exclusive trust and thoughts" (LaValley 11). Tess resists both men´s projections, revealing that she is neither exclusively a vessel of animal emotions nor a metaphysical vision. She is her own, active agent ready to counteract heroically any attempt to reduce her identity as a woman to patriarchal stereotypes.

Alec D´Urberville tries to disassociate Tess from the inexhaustible power of the full community and from the grotesque aspects of laughter. As Wright suggests, Alec desires to stamp Tess with his own desire, acting as a suppressant force against carnival time. In their first encounters, Tess submits naïvely and innocently to his kisses, but later faces and defies him: "she wiped the spot on her cheek that had been touched by his lips. . . . She had, in fact, undone the kiss, as far as such a thing was physically possible" (41). Tess develops her cunning more and more as she faces the devilish Alec. She also refuses, literally and metaphorically, the foul nourishment that Alec mercenarily offers her in exchange for her sexuality. For example, she eats "in a half-pleased, half-reluctant state whatever d´Urberville offered her" (29). She also refuses his help and his good intentions after she decides to abandon him.

While Tess symbolizes the genuine assertion of the natural body and of folk culture, Alec misappropriates the carnivalesque. He laughs, manipulates, and disguises himself to trap Tess, but the carnivalesque in him becomes just an end for his devilish purposes. For example, Alec feeds Tess with strawberries, and he watches her, but he does not participate in the banquet. The banquet, or festive eating, belongs to the tradition of carnivalesque celebrations in which everybody communally partakes. Alec becomes a mere spectator. Carnival knows no footlights, that is, no distinctions between actors and spectators; it is not a spectacle to be seen but to be lived (Bakhtin 7).



As a result, Alec´s relentless pursuit inevitably leads him to his own death. When Tess kills him, "her stabbing of Alec is her heroic return . . . into the folk fold, the fold of nature and instinct, the anonymous community" (Van Ghent 61). With Alec´s death, Hardy merges a number of primary blood images portrayed in the novel. For example, Prince dies from the sword-like thrust of the mail-cart´s pointed shaft, Alec feeds Tess with blood strawberries. Implicitly, there is the virgin blood exacted when he rapes Tess in The Chase wood. All these images come together with Alec´s death. Mrs. Brooks looks up from her chair, seeing a spot on the ceiling:

It was about the size of a wafer when she first observed it . . . [later] this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts. (30)

Tess ironically follows her mother´s earlier instructions to play her "trump card" (38). That trump card acquires literal shape in the blood-stained ace of hearts on the ceiling of The Herons where she murders Alec d´Urberville, the false harlequin of carnival.

Angel Clare constitutes the other male figure in the novel that tries to falsify Tess´s authentic nature through his aesthetic idealization of virginal purity: "What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is" (95). Angel´s name suggests his narcissistic impulse to find somebody who embodies the same characteristics emblematized in his name: a pure (clear / "Clare") angel of the hearth ("Angel"). Feminine in his extreme delicacy and with a "mouth somewhat too small and delicately lined for a man" (89), Angel tries to separate Tess from her sexuality by conceptualizing her as an ideal abstraction. But Tess, who bears the masculinized name of an ancestral Knight Conqueror (101), resists this false perception. His desire to redefine Tess corresponds with his equal scientific and intellectual approach to nature. His approach to nature depends upon a methodical study through books and not upon real, empirical contact. Angel´s scientific scrutiny of the natural world prompts him to read Tess in the same way. As Wright suggests, "Angel spends so much time studying the 'curves of those lips' that he 'can reproduce them mentally with ease'" (114).

Ironically, Hardy´s systematic use of eroticized language in the scenes between Angel Clare and Tess mocks Angel´s idealization of Tess that removes from her her sexuality, her essence as a pure woman. For example, he presents them together in the paradisiacal image of "Adam and Eve" (100) "who seemed to themselves the first persons upon the world" (100); or he suggests that Angel "little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side"(100). Both biblical images of Tess as Magdalen and Eve are connected to sexuality: Eve, expelled from paradise for tasting the forbidden fruit and aware of her sexuality, and Magdalen traditionally associated with the repentant prostitute of the Bible. By using biblical images, Hardy ironically juxtaposes the virginal purity of the Madonna that Angel sees in Tess with the overt sexuality of these other two types, sexuality htat Angel tries to ignore in Tess.

Tess cannot be disassociated from her sexuality and the use of language constantly reveals this. For example, while Angel is angelically playing the harp whose sounds rebound within the claustrophobic

space of his room, Tess listens to him in an overgrown garden, rich with images of fertility:

> *gathering cuckoo-spittle* on her skirts, *cracking snails* that were underfoot, *staining her hands* with thistle-milk, and slug-slime, and *rubbing off* upon her naked arms sticky blights which . . . made madder stains on her skin. (96)

They are images of fertility that stain Tess in highly sexual connotations. If Tess tries to kill Alec (phallocentrism), she tries to reform Angel. Tess tries to drag Angel into her natural realm, "into the mist," where nothing but life in its human potentiality exists. Tess´s hopes are short-lived, her wedding-night is a reversal of connubial bliss, a grotesque displacement of all the ethereal idealizations Angel projects. Tess´s exaggerated submissiveness to Angel becomes disproportionate, a mockery of her image as an angel of the hearth. The very hearth, center of the Victorican household, does not invite to placid reflections, but its lurid embers look devilish and menacing.

The untouched wine, emblem of festivity, foretells tragedy here and the inert recovers life of its own: the diamonds on Tess´s neck seem to wink sinisterly like a toad (177). The carnivalesque and the grotesque coexist in this scene and, like the diamonds, wink triumphantly at Tess to proclaim the glory of the body. When Tess discloses her past life, Angel immediately rejects her. Tess has been heroically brave to assert, pronounce, and celebrate her sexuality, her past life. Angel´s self-constructed illusion has been dissolved by Tess´s belated but frank disclosure. He now faces the threshold of choice: to choose openly the natural world Hardy has so carefully described in terms of Tess, or to choose his artificially constructed world of books and learning.

Fatally, Angel chooses to abandon Tess. He must go and suffers in exile before he will understand that he must accept Tess in her natural purity. Remaining apart from Tess, there is only the emptinesse that produces all isolation. There are only empty rituals: "he sat down over breakfast staring at nothingness. He went on eating and drinking unconsciously" (302); there is no merriment, no gay truth, no interaction with the world (Bakhtin 281). He is still a victim of a disintegrated spirit of carnival. In carnival time, banquet scenes "are indissolubly linked with festivities, comic scenes and the grotesque body" (Bakhtin 280). Interestingly, when he comes back, his reluctant consumption of food is transformed into a frantic desire for it: "he soon returned, with food enough for half-a-dozen people and two bottles of wine, enough to last them for a day or more" (305). Angel now embraces the unofficial: the body, Alec´s crime, and the food as universal communion with the natural and physical.

But Tess deprives Angel from this bliss when she decides upon her own death. Her death restores her to the earth where she belongs to, in a ritualistic celebration among the monoliths of Stonehenge. Connected with the earth and with the supernatural forces of the natural world, the gigantic monoliths and triliths belittle the artificial constructs of men, including those of morality. Death and life, darkness and light (she is discovered at dusk), the heated energy of the day stored in the stone—these images during the Stonehenge incident constitute the ambiguous images of carnival time. Whereas the music that emanated from Angel´s harp at Talbothays was "dim, flattened, constrained in its confinement" (96), music is now the sound of the wind "playing upon the edifice" (310), and it "produces a booming tune, like the tone of some gigantic one-stringed harp" (310). Here at Stonehenge, Tess becomes apotheosized as the goddess she was early prefigured to be "towering and awful, a divine personage" (75).



Tess has chose her own destiny, she has engraved her own meaning. She passes from the position of sensual or idealized object to that of subject who inscribes and molds. Deviating from the stereotyped and artificial, womanly ideal of Victorian literature (Ingham 68), Tess becomes a pure woman, a heroine who succeeds in harmony with the pervading forces of nature and ancestral traditions of the folkloric. Therefore, as part of this primitive, agricultural world, Tess represents what the subtitle of the novel suggests, "a pure woman faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy." The word "pure," in this context does not mean the Victorian archetype of chastity and purity (Blake 206); it suggests Tess´s truly unadulterated essence, that is, the essence of a human nature divested from the trappings of conventionality and hypocrisy. "Pure" refers to Tess´s pure integration with the forces of the landscape, with the carnivalesque, with the grotesque, and with the lower bodily stratum.

At the end of the novel, with dark humour, Hardy leaves the reader with a provocative image:

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were rivetted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag. (314)

Death, punishment, a grim justice emblazoned to the world? Or a grotesque joke, a sexual double-entendre that turns the serious world upside down? Creeping up the phallic shaft waving its triumphant sign in the breeze is the irrepressible sign of the woman´s lower bodily stratum that "continued to wave silently" (314). The sexual and potent energy of the heroine is left beckoning, a potential sign that we can choose to accept life in all its ambiguous vitality.

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