From their first publication, the works of Thomas Hardy have been explicitly and obsessively associated with matters of gender. This is the case, not only because these texts confront and perpetuate ideas about sexual difference that were influential in Hardy’s own time, but also because his vivid, contradictory, and often strange representations of sexual desire, like a series of cultural Rorschach tests, have continually elicited from his readers intense and revealing responses: the act of interpretation exposes unspoken assumptions that circulate in the historical moment of the interpreter, and Hardy’s representations of sexuality are especially effective in making visible those particularized hermeneutical processes. Indeed, to study the changing responses to gender in Hardy’s published works from 1871 to the present is, in effect, to trace a fairly detailed history of the ways in which sexuality has been constructed within the British Isles and North America since the late-Victorian period. This essay will offer, therefore, only a schematic summary of what, in my own historical moment, I consider to be the most significant responses to representations of sexual difference in Hardy’s texts. To speak of understandings about sexuality is, by definition, to speak of gender: though sexuality may be seen to exist in the “real,” the experience of sexuality is always already mediated – and even produced – by culture. As Judith Butler has compellingly argued, gender is the performance of sexuality within culture.¹ So Hardy’s texts, as well as the readings of those texts over the last century and a quarter, are themselves gendered performances – continually shifting permutations of ideas about sexual difference.

Victorian notions of sexuality are intriguingly obvious in nineteenth-century reviews of Hardy’s fiction, beginning with the 1871 publication of the first novel, which provoked a set of responses that remained roughly consistent at least until the 1891 appearance of Tess of the d’Urbervilles. The Athenaeum objected to “an occasional coarseness” in Desperate Remedies, while the Spectator said that the novel was “disagreeable,” that
it portrayed “no display of passion except of the brute kind” (Cox, pp. 2, 5, and 3). These accusations of coarseness and brutishness – derived partly from Victorian social and scientific discourses about both the lower classes and “primitive” racial groups, as well as about women – were variously echoed, in both negative and positive directions, in reviews of Hardy’s work during the ensuing two decades. Repeatedly, reviewers saw Hardy’s treatment of sexual desire as sensational, violent, pagan, and bestial. Hardy’s female characters especially were seen as manifestations of, to use Julian Hawthorne’s quasi-scientific phrasing in the Spectator, an “inborn, involuntary, unconscious emotional organism” (Cox, p. 76). What provoked these responses in Hardy’s contemporaries was not simply the fact that he offered unusually explicit descriptions of female desire; more unconventional and troubling, perhaps, was his depiction of that desire as inconstant (as Tess makes clear, even the fallen woman was expected to remain fixated on her first sexual partner). These heroines were more like rapacious animals than like monogamous ladies, and their behavior digressed in disconcerting ways from the sentimental formula of love-at-first-sight-followed-by-engagement-and-marriage. Five years before Sue Bridehead horrified the British public with her sexual vagaries, James Barrie summarized Hardy’s plots in these terms:

> Mr. Hardy seems by the time he began to write to have formed a theory about young women, which ... amounts to this, that on the subject of matrimony no woman knows her own mind ... They think they would like to marry, but are not sure when they arrive at the altar. They hesitate about becoming engaged lest they should then cease to love ... They are seldom sure of their own love unless there is ground for believing that it is not returned, and the only tolerably safe thing to predict of them is, that first they will have two lovers and then marry a third. (Cox, pp. 163–64)

According to Barrie, this instability in Hardy’s heroines made them unappealing to a female audience, and he was not the only reader to think of them, in the words of the anonymous reviewer in the New Quarterly Magazine, as “men’s women” (Cox, p. 62). Indeed, the wavering desire of Hardy’s heroines seems to have made them attractive to many male readers, if only because it reassured them about their own comparative stability. Even Coventry Patmore, for example – best known as the author of a much-acclaimed poem about domestic virtue in wives – expressed condescending and self-congratulatory affection for the unvirtuous side of Hardy’s heroines: “each has the charm of the simplest and most familiar womanhood, and the only character they have in common is that of having each some serious defect, which only makes us like them more” (Cox, p. 148).
The superior and often clinical tone assumed by Hardy’s reviewers may have been a response to the technical language of the fiction itself, which was repeatedly compared to the published discourse of Herbert Spencer, an important popularizer of social Darwinism and of essentialist ideas about gender difference. In the light of this complexly intertextual relationship among post-Darwinian scientific texts, literary works by Hardy, and critical responses to Hardy, it should not be surprising that an important early interpreter of Hardy was Havelock Ellis, whose theories about gender were to become a formative part of the discourse of sexology, the new science of sexual difference during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1883, Ellis placed Hardy’s fiction – because of its “minute observation,” its “delicate insight,” and its “conception of love as the one business of life” (Cox, p. 104) – in the feminine tradition of novel-writing represented by such authors as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Ellis summarized an aspect of Hardy’s writing that was endlessly intriguing to Victorian readers: here was a male writer offering a style of writing and of plot construction that was considered to be exclusively female. Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, for example, whom Ellis invoked as contrasts to Hardy, did not confine their emphasis so exclusively to the courtship plot, especially to the woman’s position within that plot. In Ellis’s view, however, Hardy’s fiction was also different from that of his female models precisely because his heroines were more “instinct-led” – Ellis repeatedly used this term about them – than concerned with moral questions:

Morals, observe, do not come in … Mr. Hardy’s heroines are characterized by a yielding to circumstance that is limited by the play of instinct. They are never quite bad. It seems, indeed, that this quality in them, which shuts them out from any high level of goodness, is precisely that which saves them from ever being very bad. They have an instinctive self-respect, an instinctive purity … Even Eustacia Vye has no impure taint about her. One feels compelled to insist on the instinctiveness of these women. There is, in truth, something elemental, something demonic about them. We see at once that they have no souls. (Cox, p. 106)

Implicit in the language of this passage is a linkage of Hardy’s women with those racial and social groups defined as “primitive” by Victorian social theories, and later, in a consideration of the Wessex setting, Ellis directly articulated this idea:

It would almost seem that in the solitary lives on these Dorset heaths we are in contact with what is really a primitive phase of society … [and] that those qualities which we have found to be distinctive of his heroines, the absence of
moral feeling, the instinctiveness, had a direct relation to the wild and solitary character of their environment. (Cox, p. 130)

Here Ellis gave expression to the idea, suggested less clearly in many reviews, that Hardy’s construction of gender difference works in terms not of civilized, Christian codes but of post-Darwinian anthropological theories about social behavior: the “purity” of Hardy’s characters, especially his women, is that of the rural rustic, of the “instinctive” and amoral “primitive” races.

Perhaps because his own notion of purity was culturally and racially rather than morally based, Ellis was later to express impatience with the debate that ensued among Victorian readers of Tess about its heroine as “A Pure Woman Faithfully Depicted by Thomas Hardy.” Yet Ellis’s language often anticipated the terms of that debate, which emerged from the novelty of applying to a fallen woman the concept of purity in its moral sense. Indeed, in the characterization of Tess Durleyfield, Hardy’s unorthodox linkage of ideas about primitivism and about moral purity – perhaps his own visionary response to the negative or condescending focus on paganism in the early reviews – may well have accounted for some of the fury over Tess: the idea of a “primitive” or “pagan” instinctiveness is often used by the novel’s narrator to invoke sympathy for this character who stands out among Hardy’s heroines precisely for her lack of flirtatiousness and capriciousness, and this fact was a common focus for the reviewers.

Richard LeGallienne was not untypical when he declared Tess to be “the most satisfying of all Mr. Hardy’s heroines. She is by no means so empty-headed as they are wont to be, but, like her sisters, she is a fine Pagan, full of humanity and imagination, and, like them, though in a less degree, flawed with that lack of will, that fatal indecision at great moments” (Cox, p. 180). So the trait that led Ellis to say that Hardy’s heroines are demonic beings with no souls led LeGallienne to argue that they have the supremely moral traits of “humanity and imagination.” The same kind of thinking, it seems, led the Athenaeum reviewer to see Tess, again in terms of cultural or racial Otherness, as an “imperfect woman, nobly planned, who, like the geisha of the Japanese legend, has sinned in the body, but ever her heart was pure” (Cox, p. 184). Like Hardy’s other heroines, but to a much greater extent, Tess was seen, paradoxically, to be morally “pure” precisely because she was considered to be physically impure or naturally close to the earth: to be “instinct-led” was to be both more than and less than human.

Not surprisingly, Sue Bridehead was often viewed as simply the over-civilized and therefore hysterical and impure mirror opposite of the
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quintessentially natural and pure Tess. In the words of R. Y. Tyrell, Sue’s characterization involved a “minute registry of the fluctuations of disease in an incurably morbid organism” (Cox, p. 295). D. H. Lawrence then described Sue’s psyche as the battleground for a violent struggle between its primitive and civilized aspects: “One of the supremest products of our civilization is Sue ... And the duality of her nature made her extremely liable to self-destruction. The suppressed, atrophied female in her, like a potent fury, was always there, suggesting to her to make the fatal mistake. She contained always the rarest, most deadly anarchy in her own being.”

For many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century readers, then, all of Hardy’s women were organisms in varying degrees of health, with an unstable relationship between body and mind. Female rather than feminine, they took readers back to the “primitive” roots described by Darwin and other scientific thinkers of the period. So Ellis’s analysis of 1896, particularizing in terms of racial groups the standard Victorian response to Hardy’s women, declared them to be “a type not uncommon in the south of England, where the heavier Teutonic and Scandinavian elements are, more than elsewhere, modified by the alert and volatile elements furnished by earlier races” (Cox, p. 306). This association of Hardy’s women with a primitive nature is found even in Virginia Woolf’s more poetic comments, made in 1928, that

> Vain might their beauty be and terrible their fate, but while the glow of life is in them their step is free, their laughter sweet, and theirs is the power to sink into the breast of Nature and become part of her silence and solemnity, or to rise and put on them the movement of the clouds and the wildness of the flowering woodlands.

Woolf also anticipated, however, an important emphasis of much feminist criticism during the last quarter of the twentieth century, for she noted a basic division in Hardy’s depiction of female and male characters: “However lovable and charming Bathsheba may be, still she is weak; however stubborn and ill-guided Henchard may be, still he is strong. This is a fundamental part of Hardy’s vision; the staple of many of his books. The woman is the weaker and the fleshlier, and she clings to the stronger and obscures his vision” (Woolf, Common Reader, p. 250).

Woolf’s emphasis on Hardy’s subjective “vision,” rather than on his fidelity to an objective truth, stands in opposition to much Hardy criticism written during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, which privileged realism and its premise that good fiction reflected accurately pre-existing external facts. Especially during the 1940s and 1950s, with the growing influence of New Criticism and its insistence on the integrity of the
text, Hardy’s treatment of gender was either silently accepted or praised as an integral part of the organically unified work of art. Historical, social, and generic issues – except when they were invoked as evidence for a work’s realism – were generally ignored, and credit for the “truth” of the text was given to the autonomous figure of the author, who was seen to have supreme control over his materials. In this critical climate, at a time when characters were seen as versions of real people, Hardy critics began focusing on intensely personal questions: whether or not Hardy had depicted realistic women, and whether or not he understood them, liked them, or was fair to them. Irving Howe thus confidently declared in 1966 that Hardy had a special knack “for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women,” that “[a]s a writer of novels [he] was endowed with a precious gift: he liked women.”

Howe’s comments were often endorsed by other critics, and many early studies of Hardy’s women continued the celebration of Hardy as a man with what Howe had called an “openness to the feminine principle” (Howe, Thomas Hardy, p. 109). So in 1976 Anne Z. Mickelson opened her book on Thomas Hardy’s Women and Men by arguing that Hardy “anticipates much of the thinking in the 1970s on men and women, especially women,” and that his approach to “the role of woman in society” is “often searching, sometimes speculative, frequently perceptive, and always compassionate.”

Three years later, Rosalind Miles praised Hardy for his ability to bring “his female characters so fully to life as women before us.” The terms of Miles’s praise are almost comical, not only for their excessive enthusiasm and their inconsistent use of metaphor, but also for their seemingly unconscious sexual innuendo: “Hardy succeeded in tapping the vein of trembling wondering love which had originated in him as a child, which had come to fulfilment in his love of Emma Lavinia, and which, though it by-passed her, never ceased to quiver and function.”

So Hardy’s desire for several women, according to Miles, made him supremely understanding of women in general and aided him in the sympathetic and vibrant depiction of his realistic female characters.

This kind of untheorized tribute to Hardy and his characters emerged as recently as 1988 in the judgments of Rosemarie Morgan, who saw Hardy as “transcending” the gender stereotypes of his time in order to create “active, assertive, self-determined women.”

Acknowledging that Hardy’s narrations are sometimes contradictory in their depictions of women, Morgan conveniently isolated and privileged the viewpoint she preferred: “I use the term primary narrator to mean the voice and perspective that, when distinguished from all others, proves to be recognisably coherent, consistent and stable, from the first chapter to the last” (Morgan, Women and Sexuality, p. xvii). An even more startling throwback to earlier
approaches to Hardy can be found in Robert Langbaum’s *Thomas Hardy in Our Time*, published in 1995, which, using Freudian psychology as an unquestioned standard, placed Hardy between George Eliot and D. H. Lawrence for his exploration of “the unconscious and sexuality.”

The New Critical reading is often tautological, ahistorical, and self-referential in this way: if ideas about gender from Freud or from “the 1970s” can be imposed on Hardy’s texts, then Hardy’s genius had the remarkable capacity to anticipate those ideas; if portions of Hardy’s narrations are objectionable, then these parts of the text can be seen as separate from the primary, stable narration; if certain readers can find versions of themselves in Hardy’s fiction, then Hardy somehow had a prophetic vision of those same readers. Hardy, equated with his narrator, is thus given “universal” value, and his characters are seen to be representative of all women and men in all historical periods. Not all New Critical readings of Hardy and his characters were favorable, however. In 1975, Katharine Rogers suggested that Hardy’s characterizations of women were negatively biased, and in 1981, Mary Childers confronted Irving Howe by interrogating and complicating his assumption that Hardy *liked* women. Childers offered a salutary corrective to the simplistic notion that Hardy’s work could be reduced to the question of whether or not he was fond of women – whatever that might mean – and shifted attention instead to the important issue of masculinity. “In the assertiveness of Hardy’s pronouncements about the nature of women,” suggested Childers, “the possession of masculinity is secured.”

Childers ended her influential article with a caveat that might be seen to mark a crucial shift in studies of Hardy and gender. “One can call this negating gesture [in Hardy’s narrative technique] misogyny,” Childers commented, or “one can call it male psychology. The possibilities of both social analysis and rapprochement will be increased if we call it male psychology” (Childers, “The Man Who ‘Liked’ Women,” p. 334). Though Childers’s language may now appear somewhat dated, her desire to move away from the personal (and ultimately limiting) attack on Hardy’s “misogyny” in order to focus on the “social analysis” of his psychological position seems a gesturing away from the New Critical obsession with praising or blaming the author, who is assumed to transcend history and to have absolute control over his text, and toward poststructuralist analysis, with its insistence on both the historicity and the instability of the author, as well as on the cultural production of the text within a system of signs. In any case, such a poststructuralist approach certainly emerged in a sustained form with Penny Boumelha’s groundbreaking book, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, published in 1982.
Boumelha refused to think of Hardy's female characters as mimetic of actual women who are likeable or unlikeable, realistic or unrealistic, positive or negative stereotypes. Instead, aligning herself with Althusserian Marxism and so with an understanding of ideology as a framework of beliefs and social practices "representing as obvious and natural what is partial, factitious, and ineluctably social," Boumelha saw Hardy's women as cultural signs, representations of historical ideas about women and about gender. Rather than presuming that a fictional representation can be "natural" (or "unnatural"), Boumelha offered a historical analysis of how Victorians understood the "Nature" of "Woman," and she linked this "sexual ideology" to Hardy's use of conventional narrative structures, which themselves embodied particular ideologies. For Boumelha, then, "the radicalism of Hardy's representation of women resides, not in their 'complexity,' their 'realism' or their 'challenge to convention,' but in their resistance to reduction to a single and uniform ideological position" (Boumelha, *Hardy and Women*, p. 7).

This significant move away from concerns with positive or negative readings either of Hardy the man or of his characters has been pursued in recent years by a range of Marxist critics, many of whom include in their analyses ideas about gender. In these studies, attention is given, not simply to female characters, but also to the relationship between understandings of femininity and issues of power. In 1988, for example, John Goode explored the connections between, on the one hand, Victorian understandings of "nature" and gender and, on the other hand, the conditions governing book production; in 1990, Patricia Ingham isolated a "narrative syntax" in Hardy's fiction that used various gendered types – the fallen woman, the New Woman, the poor man, the artist – as its semantic elements; and in 1992, Joe Fisher offered an analysis of Hardy's working-class, and hence "feminine," relationship to the late-nineteenth-century fiction market. That work was followed by Laura Green's recent argument that "Hardy's oblique identification with the ambitions of his heroine is ... revealing of the feminized structure of the literary marketplace" and Linda Shires's fascinating analysis of Hardy's anxiety-fraught relationship to the image of George Eliot and her regional fiction. Many of these readings establish important connections between Hardy's class affiliations and his constructions of femininity – an approach that, like that of Ellis, but with different premises and conclusions, connects "Wessex" and Hardy's "rustic chorus" to issues of gender: if a difference of either gender or class can exclude an author or character from the privileges attached to the life of a gentleman, then those same categories can be seen as standing for each other in the fiction; the predicaments of a Cytherea Graye, an
Ethelberta Petherwin, a Bathsheba Everdene, a Tess Durbeyfield, or even a Sue Bridehead might then serve as fictional displacements of the struggles facing a mason’s son from Dorset trying to succeed in London’s literary marketplace.

Contemporary Marxist criticism has thus been useful in expanding our understanding, to adapt Ingham’s metaphor, of how issues of gender might be seen as crucial inflections in the “syntax” of Hardy’s fiction. The Marxist emphasis on economies, fiscal and symbolic, has also prodded readers to abandon the ideals of transcendence and universality in order to historicize Hardy, his authorial image, and his fiction. Hardy is no longer the artistic genius actively creating texts that manifest his complete understanding of actual women; he, as well as the texts he produced, is an unstable conduit for the proliferation of various and conflicting discourses about power and gender. This poststructuralist conception of the author is also important for those studies of Hardy that concentrate on his narrative structures, point of view, and voice. Such studies are significant for their potential to focus on issues that affect, both consciously and unconsciously, even the late-twentieth-century reader who is not informed, as a Marxist critic would be, about the position of women in nineteenth-century England, Hardy’s class status, or the Victorian literary marketplace. For Hardy’s fiction – in large part because its narrative technique both depicts and enacts complicated gendered relationships – still draws fascinated readers, and the dynamic of that fascination is an important topic for literary and cultural analysis.

One of the first critics to look at Hardy’s narrative technique in relation to questions about gender was Elizabeth Langland, who argued in 1980 that in *Jude the Obscure* “Hardy lets the perspective of a single character, Jude Fawley, dominate the story. To complicate matters further, it is not clear to what extent Jude’s perspective is judged by the narrator, or even ... to what extent Hardy himself is involved in his narrator’s and character’s perspectives.”13 Though Langland’s case might have benefitted from such narratological concepts as focalization and free indirect discourse, which allow for precise analysis of how a supposedly “omniscent” narrator can articulate the visual and ideological perspective of a character, her basic observation, that Sue’s notorious inconsistency is a function of the narrator’s close identification with Jude, is important and useful, for it leads into a recognition of the extent to which Hardy’s narrative technique, however much it may overtly sympathize with women, assumes a male perspective. Characterizations cannot be isolated from narrative technique, in other words, and Hardy’s narrative technique is distinctly masculine. Another critic who paved the way for explorations of the gendering in Hardy’s narrative technique is Judith Bryant Wittenberg, who in 1983 examined the
“almost pathologically voyeuristic” perspective assumed by both Hardy’s characters and his narrator in the early novels. She argues of Desperate Remedies, for example, that “there is in all of Hardy’s fiction no more overtly sexual depiction of the male gaze as a weapon that threatens vulnerable females than in the portrayal of the eye of Aeneas Manston.”

A similar approach—pursued this time in terms of a complex psychoanalytic understanding of the male gaze—characterizes the influential study of Tess by film critic Kaja Silverman, who in 1984 examined the novel’s “libidinal economy” in terms of the narrator’s contradictory impulses toward fetishization and sadistic control, the two standard responses provoked by male castration anxiety: “The assimilation of [Tess’s] form into her surroundings attests to her viewer’s or maker’s nostalgia for an ‘intact state’ of things—for a moment prior to differentiation. Her construction as image, on the other hand, speaks to her viewer’s or maker’s desire for visual control.”

Silverman’s essay provided the groundwork for an ongoing series of responses to Tess that focus on the violence performed by the text on the heroine’s body—and, implicitly, on the bodies of women. In 1989, for example, Jean Jacques Lecercle offered a structuralist reading of the novel that saw its style as reinforcing a “violence/woman/language nexus,” and in 1993 Elisabeth Bronfen considered the ways in which Tess, as well as other Hardy heroines who die in the text and so become corpses, serves as a trope that “betrays” the ways in which “the inevitable turn to the rhetorical can also engender or be founded on instances of real violation.” Also in 1993, Lyn Pykett, providing a valuable historical contextualization for the problematic characterizations of both Tess and Sue, theorized the close relationship in Hardy’s last three novels between the operation of the gaze and their construction of physical bodies: “these works tend both to focus on women as bodies, and to constitute the body (especially, although not exclusively, the female body) as a problem.” For Pykett, Tess, Jude, and The Well-Beloved all participate in late-nineteenth-century debates about sexuality, and represent Hardy’s own conflicted response to that debate: “Hardy’s narrative gaze must, it seems, either look at or away from the female body. It must appropriate the female body, or risk appropriation by it.” In the same year, my own essay on Hardy’s “Textual Hysteria” similarly saw the responses by Hardy’s narrators in both the early and the late fiction as attempting to evade “by a process of projection and dissociation [their] own uneasiness about the body.”

These anxieties in Hardy’s narrators are not confined to depictions of female characters, or even of human bodies. For in Hardy’s Fables of Integrity: Woman, Body, Text, an astute and original Lacanian reading of

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the major novels, Marjorie Garson demonstrated in 1991 that Hardy’s anxious concerns “about integrity and wholeness – both psychic and bodily – inform and distort” not only the depiction of “actual human characters,” but also the “figurative language which may make the earth, the sky, the heath, the town, the college, the barn, or the house into bodies as well.” Garson’s analysis uncovered the gendered dimensions of even those seemingly poetic and descriptive passages in Hardy that are generally considered to be gender-neutral. So, for example, the famous “Unfulfilled Intention” outburst by the narrator in *The Woodlanders*, like many other passages in the fiction, contains an “imagery of the exploded body which plays an increasingly insistent role in Hardy’s fiction” and “is connected with the eventual disappearance from it of characters like Oak, Clym Yeobright, and Giles Winterbourne, nature’s interpreters.”

Garson’s canny observations about the rhetorical effect of Hardy’s language lead to the surprising perception that Grace Melbury, in spite of the narrative’s overt sympathy with her, can be viewed, in the deep structure of Hardy’s plot, as an agent of dismemberment, an exploder of male bodies. All of these readings about Hardyan narration thus have one idea in common: in its focus on women and on female bodies, whether literal or metaphorical, Hardy’s fiction manifests a complex combination of arousal and anxiety, of pleasure and unpleasure.

The extent to which a reader is implicated in this conflicted erotic response was confronted directly in 1990 by James Kincaid, who called *Tess* “a titillating snuff movie we run in our minds.” Invoking both Havelock Ellis and Algernon Swinburne on the conjunction in sadomasochism of pleasure and pain, Kincaid provocatively asserted that Hardy’s novel, by aligning the perspectives of Alec, Angel, Hardy, and the reader, destabilizes the opposition of “normal” and “perverse”: “we all wish to create images by distancing, even or especially if that distancing means annihilating. We are all sadists producing images or cadavers to induce sexually titillating pain.” Kincaid elided male and female readers in this paradigm, however, a strategy that evaded the problematic position of the female reader in this sadomasochistic model. Does she identify masochistically with Tess, sadistically with Alec and Angel, or both? Or none of these? These are the kinds of questions addressed most directly by Judith Mitchell’s clearheaded and informed analysis, published in 1993, of the contradictory position occupied by Hardy’s female reader, who, torn between explicit content and the subliminal effects of narrative form, is led to feel “a peculiarly ambivalent kind of pleasure”: “Hardy’s female reader ... will undoubtedly continue both to applaud his feminism and to deplore his sexism, sensing simultaneously in his novels their ‘narrative grammar,’

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which empathizes so deeply with the plight of the culturally marginalized female, and their 'scopic economy,' in which male consciousness is explored subjectively while female consciousness is quietly and systematically elided.”

Finally, a reader response that draws together these two possibilities was explored by Margaret R. Higonnet, who suggested in 1993 that a tension in *Tess* between feminine and masculine discourses “exposes the perpetual displacement of woman as figure.”

Looking back on this selective history of responses to issues of gender in Hardy, one can see immediately that our terms of analysis increasingly have become both technically and ideologically complex. We no longer have a one-dimensional understanding of Hardy’s authorial role, nor do we assume that his texts are perfectly unified. Hardy, his characters, his plots, his language, his images, his narrative devices, his actual and inscribed readers – not to mention his relationships with other texts and with pressing issues of his own time – all are seen to operate in an association of conflict and contradiction: Hardy’s texts like women and dislike them; they depict and evoke both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety; they are the source for female readers of frustration and fascination. What more, then, is to be said about Thomas Hardy and matters of gender? Do Hardy’s texts continue to function, in Mitchell’s words, as “one of the richest and most complex sources of feminist commentary in the realist novel” (Mitchell, “Hardy’s Female Reader,” p. 186), or have we exhausted their potential (or they ours) to make us think again about sexual difference? My prediction is that they have not, precisely because, as Boumelha argued, they cannot be reduced to any single idea. Hardy’s historical position is also a crucial one for our own understandings and performances of gender: publishing his fiction in the years when post-Darwinian theories of sexuality were beginning to take hold, when sexology and then Freudian psychology were being developed, they are an intriguing part of that proliferation of discourses which Michel Foucault saw as helping to form our own late-twentieth-century constructions of sexuality.

Where, then, are we headed in our readings of Hardy and matters of gender?

One growing area of concern involves questions about how masculinity is constructed in Hardy’s works. Significant attention has always been given to Hardy’s central male characters, but only in recent years, with the rise of feminist and queer theory, have critics begun to look at masculinity itself as contingent and changing rather than as normative and stable. A standard work in this new tradition of focusing on masculinity rather than solely on male characters is Elaine Showalter’s 1979 essay on *The Mayor of*
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_Casterbridge_, well known partly for its attack on Howe, who, in addition to celebrating Hardy for liking women, also himself liked – for reasons that do not celebrate women – the description of Henchard selling his wife:

To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of a woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to escape not by a slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold at a fair; and thus to wrest, through sheer amoral willfulness, a second chance out of life – it is with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that _The Mayor of Casterbridge_ begins.\(^\text{22}\)

Showalter quickly demonstrated the extent to which Howe, while bringing "an enthusiasm and an authority to his exposition of Henchard's motives that sweeps us along," in fact "transforms the novel into a male document" (Showalter, "Unmanning," pp. 102–03). Having exposed a characteristic male bias in this _reading_ of the text, she then went on to demonstrate how Hardy's novels, and _The Mayor of Casterbridge_ in particular, treat issues of masculinity: "Through the heroes of his novels and short stories, Hardy ... investigated the Victorian codes of manliness, the man's experience of marriage, the problem of paternity. For the heroes of the tragic novels ... maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, an identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their own deepest selves" (p. 101). Showalter's essay was thus important both for its exposure of sexism in a major work of Hardy criticism and for its insistence that feminist analysis consider the issue of masculinity. Its weakness, however, lay in its New Critical assumption, not altogether unlike that of Howe, that the effectiveness of Hardy's fiction depended on the author's own conscious thoughts about gender issues. Hardy "understood," Showalter argued, "the feminine self as the estranged and essential complement of the male self" (p. 101). In spite, however, of this rather simplistic gender model of essential and balancing opposites, Showalter's essay has had an important impact on Hardy studies: the issue of masculinity is no longer an invisible or neutral one, and, in recent years it has become a crucial topic of analysis.

Since Showalter's essay, Susan Beegel in 1984 presented a New Critical defense of Gabriel Oak's male sexuality in _Far from the Madding Crowd_, and in 1991 Annette Federico offered a historicized reading of Hardy's (and Gissing's) treatments of masculinity as exploring "how notions of masculine identity were beginning to evolve from the solid, monolithic patriarchal role of the mid-1800s to more malleable, less confident styles of manhood." It is also intriguing to see Elizabeth Langland in 1993 building on the perceptions of her 1980 essay about the identification of Hardy's
narrator with Jude Fawley's point of view. In “Becoming a Man in Jude the Obscure,” Langland again saw the characterization of Sue as secondary to the text's obsession with its male protagonist: “This interpretation of Jude the Obscure turns attention away from questions of the authenticity of Sue's character – where it has often focused – and queries instead Sue's place in the construction of Jude's masculinity, her role as catalyst for the text's trenchant critique of gender and class paradigms.”

Again – and here it is on account of Jude's internalization of contemporary ideas about masculinity – inconsistency is seen by Langland to reside in Jude rather than in Sue, who exists in the novel only as a reflection of “Jude's psychosocial investment in her” (Langland, “Becoming a Man,” p. 39).

Some of the most adventurous recent explorations of masculinity in Hardy criticism have emerged in relation to the growing and influential field of queer theory. In 1990, for example, Richard Dellamora considered the characterizations of both Jude and Sue in the context of the Wilde trial and the rise of sexology in the 1890s, and in subsequent years he traced the relationship of Jude to “Hardy's subliminal inability to deal with the wandering desires of a man like [Horace] Moule,” Hardy's mentor who is thought to have made sexual overtures to Hardy and who committed suicide when they were both young men. Dellamora gives particular meaning to a passage, spoken by Jude, which did not appear in the first edition of the novel, but which is part of the holograph manuscript:

“When men of a later age look back upon the barbarism, cruelty & superstition of the times in which we have the unhappiness to live, it will appear more clearly to them than it does to us that the irksomeness of life is less owing to its natural conditions, though they are bad enough, than to those artificial conditions arranged for our well being, which have no root in the nature of things!”

(quoted in Dellamora, “Male Relations,” p. 471)

These words, according to Dellamora, provide “another instance of the censored and at times self-censored speech of men in nineteenth-century England who realized the need to attend to questions of masculine desire” (Dellamora, “Male Relations,” p. 471). Dellamora is not clear, however, about whether or not these “questions of male desire” definitely include homosexual relationships, and Hardy's own reticence on the subject makes certainty impossible. A more productive approach – because it focuses on the effects of Hardy's texts rather than on Hardy's personal thoughts or intentions – was taken by Kincaid, who in 1993 theorized the ways in which Jude the Obscure constructs a “reader-as-pornographer/pervert.” Kincaid focuses on the scene in which Farmer Troutham beats Jude and argues, as he had in his earlier essay on Tess, for a technique that blurs the

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boundary between “normal” and “perverse”: “We are allowed to enjoy the eroticism and also flatter ourselves with our superior sensibility, allowed to identify with and take the pleasure of Farmer Troutham and see him as a beast.” Crucial to Kincaid’s argument about *Jude* is the fact that Sue is distanced from the reader in a way that Jude is not, and that, as a result, “[i]f Jude is the subject of uninhibited sadism, Sue is caught by the much fiercer monsters of voyeurism” (Kincaid, “Girl-watching,” p. 143). Kincaid’s analysis, then, finally takes us back to the disturbing dynamic of the sadistic gaze: “We control Sue not with our spanking hand but with our powerful eyes” (p. 145).

The work of Dellamora and Kincaid is opening up valuable new approaches to Hardy’s depictions of sexuality. Importantly, both critics point to the ways in which Hardy’s fiction simultaneously depicts and elicits sexual responses that are transgressive, not only for their failure to conform with standard rules governing courtship and marriage, but also for their failure to subscribe exclusively to the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. In this field, however, there remains much to be done. In her groundbreaking book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes only brief mention of the Henchard–Farfrae relationship as subliminally erotic, but Hardy’s fiction offers great potential for an analysis of a gender framework in which women are the mediating link between men. Homoerotic relationships are pervasive in Hardy, and little has been done with this interesting topic. More ignored still is the subject of female same-sex desire in Hardy, which made an amazingly explicit appearance, complete with a lovemaking scene in bed, in the Cytherea–Miss Aldclyffe relationship of *Desperate Remedies*. Analogous to this is the scene in *The Woodlanders* where Grace Melbury and Felice Charmond, sexual rivals in their respective relationships with Edred Fitzpiers, cling to each other when lost in the woods at night. In these scenes and others (even those involving the milkmaids at Talbothays), Hardy presents physical and emotional ties between women that seem, in the eyes of the twentieth-century reader, startlingly explicit. Yet no one has thoroughly dealt with these relationships or with the broader question of how lesbian desire and/or female same-sex bonds operate in Hardy’s sexual economy. A perplexing and intriguing issue is the potential connection between Sue Bridehead and those aspects of the New Woman that were thought to be sexually perverse. Dellamora made the interesting suggestion that in *Jude* the “careful hedging of Sue from intimacy with other women has a valence within the male homosocial economy of the book since Hardy was aware that her wish to retain control of her own body was liable to be construed in contemporary sexology as a
sign of sexual inversion. His concern accounts for an imbalance in the sympathy with feminism that one finds in the book” (Dellamora, “Male Relations,” pp. 461–62). Yet the very need for Hardy to protect Sue so vigilantly from charges of “inversion” – consider his carefully phrased letter to Edmund Gosse, in which he protests that there is “nothing perverted or depraved in Sue’s nature” and that her “abnormalism consists in disproportion: not in inversion” (Letters 2, p. 99) – suggests that the book has intertextual connections with a contemporary discourse of lesbian sexuality.

Much also remains to be added to the treatment of sexuality in the “minor” fiction and in the poetry; another rich area of investigation is the presence in Hardy’s work of a gendered colonial discourse, which has been dealt with most interestingly in Daniel Bivona’s fascinating analysis, published in 1990, of “Jude’s self-division” as “an arena for cultural conflict between civilization and the primitive past.” This sort of study, in fact, might return readers to the original reception of Hardy’s work, when his “bestial” women were both celebrated and demonized for their “instinct-led” primitivism. It is Havelock Ellis, after all, who was attracted to Hardy’s supposed primitivism and who, some twenty years later, published a book on Sexual Inversion, and this strange conjunction once again draws attention to the complex relationship Hardy’s texts bear to a whole range of cultural discourses that continue to shape our own constructions of sexual difference. For this reason alone, readers in the twenty-first century will no doubt persist in reading the works of Thomas Hardy for their conflicted and contradictory engagement with matters of gender.

NOTES
Thomas Hardy and matters of gender

19 Judith Mitchell, “Hardy’s Female Reader,” in *The Sense of Sex*, pp. 185–86.
23 Susan Beegel, “Bathsheba’s Lovers: Male Sexuality in *Far from the Madding Crowd*,” in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. Don Richard Cox (Knox-


**FURTHER READING**


Thomas Hardy and matters of gender


