

# THOMAS HARDY: FOLKLORE AND RESISTANCE

Jacqueline Marie Dillion

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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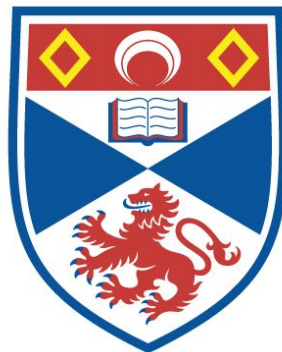
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# Thomas Hardy: Folklore and Resistance

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September 2013



## Abstract

This thesis examines a range of folkloric customs and beliefs that play a pivotal role in Hardy's fiction: overlooking, sympathetic magic, hag-riding, tree 'totemism', skimmington-riding, bonfire nights, mumming, May Day celebrations, Midsummer divination, and the 'Portland Custom'. For each of these, it offers a background survey bringing the customs or beliefs forward in time into Victorian Dorset, and examines how they have been represented in written texts – in literature, newspapers, county histories, folklore books, the work of the Folklore Society, archival documents, and letters – in the context of Hardy's repeated insistence on the authenticity of his own accounts of these traditions. In doing so, the thesis both explores Hardy's work, primarily his prose fiction, as a means to understand the 'folklore' (a word coined in the decade of Hardy's birth) of southwestern England, and at the same time reconsiders the novels in the light of the folkloric elements.

The thesis also argues that Hardy treats folklore in dynamic ways that open up more questions and tensions than many of his contemporaries chose to recognise. Hardy portrays folkloric custom and belief from the perspective of one who has lived and moved within 'folk culture', but he also distances himself (or his narrators) by commenting on folkloric material in contemporary anthropological terms that serve to destabilize a fixed (author)itative narrative voice. The interplay between the two perspectives, coupled with Hardy's commitment to showing folk culture in flux, demonstrates his continuing resistance to what he viewed as the reductive ways of thinking about folklore adopted by prominent folklorists (and personal friends) such as Edward Clodd, Andrew Lang, and James Frazer. This thesis seeks to explore these tensions and to show how Hardy's efforts to resist what he described as 'excellently neat' answers open up wider cultural questions about the nature of belief, progress, and change.

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I, Jacqueline Dillion, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2008 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in September 2009; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2008 and 2013.

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## Introduction

The English word ‘Folk-Lore’ was coined in 1846 when Thomas Hardy was six years old. But interest in popular antiquities – the forerunner to folklore studies – had been gaining momentum from the eighteenth century onwards, as traditional or folk culture came under pressure from increasing industrialisation and consequent social mobility. Spurred by the Romantics’ veneration of ‘the folk’, reference books like John Brand’s *Popular Antiquities*, first published in 1777, documented the customs of the common people and became increasingly popular among curious dilettantes and antiquarians ‘blessed with leisure and private libraries’.<sup>1</sup> But a turning point came in 1846, following the success of the second edition of Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*. William Thoms, editor of *Notes and Queries*, sent to *The Athenaeum* an article titled ‘FOLK-LORE’, proposing a new name and a new direction for the subject. Thoms intended this ‘good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore – *the Lore of the People*’ (Thoms’ italics) to denote ‘the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs &c. of the olden time’, or ‘what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities or Popular Literature.’<sup>2</sup> Thoms implored the *Athenaeum* readers to do more than read: he urged them to go out and collect folklore, and publish it in that magazine’s pages until some British Grimm ‘shall arise who shall do for the Mythology of the British Isles the good service which that profound antiquary and philologist has accomplished for the Mythology of Germany’.<sup>3</sup> Speaking practically, Thoms suggested that with the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History*, (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 18. Both Dorson’s work and Rosemary Sweet’s more recent *Antiquaries: the Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon, 2004) provide a useful overview of eighteenth and early nineteenth century antiquarianism, which set the stage for the birth of folklore studies in the middle of the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Folk-Lore’, *Athenaeum*, Issue 982 (1846), 862-863. Thoms wrote under the pseudonym ‘Ambrose Merton’; even thirty years later, in writing the introduction to the first edition of *The Folk-Lore Record*, he alluded to the ‘anonymous’ writer who had first proposed the word ‘folk-lore’ in the pages of *The Athenaeum*. He noted how much folklore ‘is now entirely lost’ but added that ‘much may be yet rescued by timely exertion’, p. 863; his phrasing is echoed in Hardy’s lament that ‘a vast amount of unwritten folk-lore’ ‘is sinking, has nearly sunk, into eternal oblivion’: H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), (1902), p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Folk-Lore’, *Athenaeum*, p.863. Thoms and his successors, in the tradition of Grimm, saw folklore and mythology as interrelated and not easily distinguishable. For the purposes of this thesis I will later delineate a working distinction between folklore

‘wide circulation’ of *The Athenaeum*, its readers might by acting together accomplish ‘ten times more effectually’ what had already been attempted in Brand’s *Popular Antiquities* and William Hone’s *Every Day Book* (1826).

In the same article, Thoms went on to anticipate the discovery of an overarching theory that, like Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*, would make sense of the

mass of minute facts, many of which, when separately considered, appear trifling and insignificant, – but when taken in connexion with the system in which his master-mind has woven them, assume a value that he who recorded them never dreamed of attributing to them.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Thoms’ plea was two-fold: that a new breed of amateur folklorists should now go out and collect these masses of ‘minute facts’, and that someone should then work these facts into a comprehensive systematic theory that would enable Britons to better understand their folkloric past.

The first part of Thoms’ plan was accomplished through the work of those who would eventually found the Folklore Society together with their network of collectors ‘on the ground’. These were to be discovered among ‘lawyers, doctors, and especially land-agents and gentlemen-farmers – people who, educated themselves, are yet brought by their professions into much contact with the uneducated’. Such people would be ‘much better able to help’ than the clergy, from whom, it was assumed, ‘the uneducated’ would shy away, withholding their true beliefs and practices, as they also would from outsiders coming into the area specifically to collect folklore.<sup>5</sup> The new ‘respondent method’ thus relied on direct contact between educated middle-class ‘collectors’ and the ‘folk’, before the information was recorded and reported back to the Folklore Society, and submitted to their classification procedures.<sup>6</sup>

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and mythology as they came to be understood in the late nineteenth century and as they feature in Hardy’s writings.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Folk-Lore’, *Athenaeum*, p. 863. Thoms’ wish would be answered by Edward Tylor’s theory of ‘survivals’: see Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871).

<sup>5</sup> *The Handbook of Folklore*, ed. by George Laurence Gomme (London: Folklore Society, 1890), p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Freeman, ‘Folklore Collection and Social Investigation in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century England’, *Folklore*, 116.1 (2005), 51-65 (p. 51).

In Victorian England, as Thomas Heyck has noted, science served as ‘the model for the acquisition and cultural functions of knowledge’,<sup>7</sup> and the procedures of the folklorists were intended to be ‘scientific’, in the newly current sense of that term, in emulation of the emerging sciences of human behaviour – sociology, psychology, ethnology, and anthropology – around the mid-century. Though leading figures in the Folklore Society such as George Gomme and Charlotte Burne accepted that the new discipline could not be ‘an exact science’, they sought to arrange all their data ‘in proper order, so as to bring out their true relation to each other, and to present our new science to the world as a harmonious and homogeneous whole’.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Gomme devised a classification system based on a biological model, with divisions of ‘groups’ and ‘classes’ corresponding to genera and species in botany. Burne even suggested that folklore was the foundational science, since ‘every branch of knowledge that we call scientific has been Folk-lore in its origin’.<sup>9</sup> As Gillian Bennett has observed, for those working in the field ‘European folklore was to the history of human civilization what the fossil record was to earth history.’<sup>10</sup> The new method by which folklore came to be collected paved the way for Hardy, who had a double allegiance to both the ‘folk’ and the educated world, to report folklore, but also to resist its classification according to the methods that came to dominate folklore studies in the late nineteenth century.

The creation of the Folklore Society in 1878, along with the establishment of their dedicated journal, *The Folk-lore Record* (later renamed *The Folk-Lore Journal*, then *Folklore*),<sup>11</sup> and their *Handbook of Folklore*, coincided with an increase in the number of National Schools following the 1870 Education Act. With this development, schoolmasters and teachers soon came to be viewed as among the best

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (London: Lyceum, 1982), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Burne, ‘The Science of Folk-Lore’, *Folk-Lore Journal* 3.2 (1885), 97-121 (pp. 102-3).

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Burne, ‘Classification of Folk-Lore’, *Folk-Lore Journal* 4.2 (1886), 158-63 (p. 161).

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Bennett, ‘Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and the Science of Folklore’, *Folklore* 105 (1994), 25-37 (p. 29).

<sup>11</sup> In this thesis I list each publication according to its name at the time of publication, as the titles have not since been consolidated (in digital catalogs and databases) under one name. *The Folk-Lore Record* ran from 1878-1882; *The Folk-Lore Journal* ran from 1883-1889. The name changed to *Folklore* in 1890 and remains so into the present day.

sources for obtaining folklore from their previously uneducated students (and by extension, those students' parents and grandparents). Folklore Society president Charlotte Burne, Charles Booth, and H. Rider Haggard all saw the potential for schoolmasters to record what folklore passed through their schools. Haggard believed, 'there is nobody who can be so well informed as the local schoolmaster, since all the youth of the village ... pass through his hands'.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, when folklore material was mediated through those charged with 'improving' the next generations, following what Hardy would later call an 'infinitely Revised Code',<sup>13</sup> it often acquired overtones of cultural development theory as well as hints of cultural imperialism. I will return to this idea and its implications later in this introduction.

Within the period of Hardy's own life (1840-1928), the effective definitions of 'folklore' and 'the folk' began to shift. While Thoms had repeatedly referred to folklore as belonging to 'the people', regretting that 'popular notions' had by mid-century become 'long neglected', he took it for granted that readers of the *Athenaeum* sympathetic to folklore studies would know who 'the people' were. His successors were more systematic with their terminology, and helpfully spelled out who were these 'people' who made up 'the folk'. Their delineations were increasingly based on lack of education and (perceived) lack of contribution to social progress. The opening pages of the first *Folk-Lore Record* (1878) drew on Brand's and Thoms' diplomatic use of the word 'popular' (denoting the populace), spelling out that the aim was the 'preservation and publication of Popular Traditions, Legendary Ballads, Local Proverbial Sayings, Superstitions and Old Customs (British and foreign), and all subjects related to them'.<sup>14</sup> But soon definitions began to clarify how 'the folk' might be distinguished from the rest of the population. Andrew Lang wrote in 1884 that the study of folklore examines

the relics of old races, the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are in our time but not of it. Properly speaking, folklore is only concerned with

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Freeman, 'Folklore Collection and Social Investigation', p. 57; See also Mark Freeman, *Social Investigation and Rural England: 1870-1914* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2003) p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, ed. by Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell, with an introduction by Penny Boumelha and notes by Nancy Barrineau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 29. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Hardy's fiction will be to the World's Classics editions listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Folklore Society Rules', *The Folk-lore Record*, 1 (1878), 8-9 (p. 8).



the legends, customs, beliefs, of the Folk, of the people, of the classes which have least been altered by education, which have shared least in progress.<sup>15</sup>

Lang's friend George Gomme developed this view in the first edition of the *Handbook of Folklore* (1890), affirming the privileging of education and progress, and explaining to the reader that those formerly referred to as 'the people' were in effect the 'least cultured inhabitants' of modern society: indeed, in Gomme's account, the folk did not merely have a different body of knowledge, but thought and felt in different ways, almost as if they were a separate species. They could be expected to continue to 'generate fresh belief' according to folk modes, until they too were educated in science and philosophy. He explains that folklore is to be found among

the least cultured of the inhabitants of all the countries of modern Europe [where] a vast body of curious beliefs, customs, and story-narratives which are handed down by tradition from generation to generation and the origin of which is unknown. They are not supported or recognized by the prevailing religion, nor by the established law, nor by the recorded history of the several countries. They are essentially the property of the unlearned and least advanced portion of the community.<sup>16</sup>

Gomme's definition was expanded by his successor Charlotte Burne in the subsequent edition of the *Handbook of Folklore* (1913). To Burne, the folk could be characterized not only by sharing 'least in progress' as before, but also by their mental 'backwardness', in spite of their various technical skills. This effectively hints at an atavistic strain existing among those 'more advanced peoples' who in the estimation of the Folklore Society composed turn-of-the-century Britain. For Burne folklore is the

generic term under which the traditional Beliefs, Customs, Stories, Songs and Sayings current among backward peoples or retained by the uncultured classes of more advanced peoples, are comprehended and included ... in short, it covers everything which makes part of the mental equipment of the folk as

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London: Longman, 1884), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Gomme, *Handbook of Folklore*, p. 3.

distinguished from their technical skill. It is not the form of the plough which excites the attention of the folklorist, but the rites practised by the ploughman when putting it into the soil ... Folklore, in fact, is the expression of the psychology of early man, whether in the fields of philosophy, religion, science, and medicine, in social organization and ceremonial, or in the strictly more intellectual regions of history, poetry, and other literature.<sup>17</sup>

These definitions determined the way educated readers came to think about folklore over the course of Hardy's lifetime.<sup>18</sup> By the beginning of his writing career (if not before), the terms 'folk' and 'folklore' were often used, even by folklore enthusiasts, with a pejorative suggestion. Who 'the folk' truly were, in the Victorian estimation, was a contested question: were they the living descendants (or 'survivals') of the idealized 'noble savage' who happily labored in a pre-industrial pastoral environment,<sup>19</sup> or was 'the folk' simply a euphemistic collective 'name for our

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<sup>17</sup> *Handbook of Folklore*, ed. by Charlotte Burne (London: Folklore Society, 1913), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> According to the definition endorsed by the twenty-first century Folklore Society, folklore is 'voluntarily and informally communicated, created or done by members of a group (which can be of any size, age, or social and educational level); it can circulate through whatever media (oral, written or visual) are available to this group; it has roots in the past, but also present relevance; it usually recurs in many places, in similar but not quite identical form; it has both stable and variable features, and evolves under dynamic adaptation to new circumstances. The essential criterion is the presence of a group whose joint sense of what is right and appropriate shapes the story, performance, or custom – not the rules and teachings of any official body (State or civic authority, Church, school, scientific or scholarly orthodoxy)'. See *A Dictionary of English Folklore*, ed. by Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 130-131; Simon Bronner stresses that a late twentieth-century view of folklore or folklife studies emphasizes that 'folk' is not a 'class or a caste of people; it is not even a style or design. It is an abstraction for customary ways of doing, making, and using things that individuals have in different forms and in diverse situations': see Simon J. Bronner, 'The Early Movements of Anthropology and Their Folkloristic Relationships', *Folklore*, 95.1 (1984), 57-73 (p.57).

<sup>19</sup> The legacy of this Romantic notion haunted twentieth-century anthropology, and Rousseau's notion of the noble savage informed Claude Levi-Strauss's decision to undertake an ethnographic survey in 1930s Brazil. His findings, however, determined the natives to be neither noble nor savage, as he later stated in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).

ignorance’, as Joseph Jacobs provocatively suggested at a Folklore Society meeting in 1893?<sup>20</sup>

The Folklore Society could discuss these labels and definitions the more openly in their handbooks, journals, and other publications, because they assumed that their audience were not members of ‘the folk’ themselves. To open a copy of the 1890 *Handbook of Folklore* is to find a long list of distinguished and influential thinkers, with titles and university degrees. The society president was ‘Andrew Lang, M.A.’, and the vice presidents included: ‘Edward B. Tylor, LL.D, F.R.S.’, ‘The Right Hon. Sir John Lubbock, BART., F.R.S., M.P.’, and ‘Lt.-Gen. Pitt-Rivers, D.C.L., F.R.S.’. Council members listed included: ‘J.G. Frazer, M.A.’, and ‘E. Sidney Hartland, F.S.A.’ as well as ‘Walter Besant, M.A.’. Hardy’s friend Edward Clodd was listed as the treasurer. The collected writings of these men represented the standard – as it were, the ‘best which was being thought and said’ – for the study of anthropology, mythology, and folklore in the late nineteenth century. Several of them were Hardy’s personal friends by this point (in 1890) – Besant, Pitt-Rivers, Frazer, and especially Clodd<sup>21</sup> – but Hardy had no university degree (not even a B.A.) or title at this time, or even by the close of his career as a novelist. These men were the experts in folklore, and they assumed that their audience, as they were themselves, was set enough apart from ‘the folk’ to study them objectively. The *Handbooks of Folklore* stressed a standardized method to be used at home and abroad. Inevitably individual members of the Folklore Society disagreed with each other, but the method

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Jacobs, ‘The Folk’, *Folklore*, 4.2 (1893), 233-238 (p. 236). Jacobs’ paper was considered contentious when read to the Folklore Society. He declared he was ‘at issue with Dr. Tylor and his followers’ and pronounced ‘the folk’ to be a ‘fraud, a delusion, a myth’ – arguing that so-called ‘folk tales’ like Cinderella and Puss in Boots must certainly have originally been the work of an artist and only later appropriated by ‘the folk’. Because the artist is unknown, the tales were said to have arisen among ‘the folk’, but the folk are by nature incapable of such creations. As such, he argued distinctions should not be made between folklore and literature and folklorists should look to literature and the music hall for what he considered ‘fresh’ living folklore (or non-survivals).

<sup>21</sup> Hardy had been an admirer of Lang, but turned against him following what he viewed as Lang’s harsh review of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in 1892 (after the first *Handbook of Folklore* was first published.) William Greenslade discusses the influence of these relationships in ‘Thomas Hardy and Friendship’, in *Thomas Hardy in Context*, ed. by Phillip Mallett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22-31.

they had agreed upon, and the use of a single editorial voice privileged the highly educated in explaining to the reader how ‘properly’ to think about folklore.

But for Hardy, whose parents and grandparents might well be considered members of the folk themselves, certainly by the Society, the distance between observer and observed was collapsed. Indeed, much of what Hardy calls ‘folklore’ he attributed to an ‘old lady’, who was almost certainly his mother. In order to represent ‘the folk’ in his fiction, Hardy had to know their ways, yet stand sufficiently apart to watch and record them. But his treatment of folklore is informed by an empathy that is palpably different from the way that folklore is recorded in *Notes & Queries*, *The Folk-Lore Record*, and *The Handbook of Folklore*. Hardy thus served as a conduit between a received folk tradition of intensely local experience and the position of his influential friends as they shaped the way that the next generation of antiquarians would come to think about folklore.<sup>22</sup>

This is not to suggest that Hardy thought himself to be immediately descended from ‘the folk’. Hardy’s own class position complicates the folk/non-folk divide, for he was born into the artisan tier of the labouring class, which he describes in his 1883 essay on ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’ and again in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*:

the village had formerly contained, side by side with the agricultural labourers, an interesting and better-informed class, ranking distinctly above the former – the class to which Tess’s father and mother had belonged – and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm-labourers; a set of people who owed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders like Tess’s father, or copyholders, or, occasionally, small freeholders. (372)

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<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to know quite what to call these folklore enthusiasts, many of whom were very interested in theorizing, but less so in collecting folklore, so the term ‘folklorist’, which mainly connotes collecting, seems less than ideal. In a recently published letter to Edward Clodd from 1891, Hardy refers to this group humorously as ‘the Loremongers’: see *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy: Further Letters*, ed. by Michael Millgate and Keith Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), p. 23. Subsequent references to Hardy’s letters are given in the form (CL 8: 23).

Raymond Williams has suggested that Hardy viewed this ‘interesting and better-informed’ class as the ‘bearers of a culture’,<sup>23</sup> and in that vein Hardy the writer has been viewed as an amanuensis for that culture, which he described as rapidly dying out as a result of rural depopulation. But to suppose that only the upper level of the rural population had a ‘culture’ worth transmitting would be to make an artificial generalization differentiating the ‘folk’ in terms of class and education. David Hopkin has pointed out the error in talking about a singular folk culture in this way; the identity of the group itself is always a ‘cultural creation’ that comes from without.<sup>24</sup> Hardy was conscious of the artificiality of these divisions and of the challenges in mediating them for an audience for whom folk culture represented, in Hopkin’s words, ‘a bourgeois version of the countryside and its residents’.<sup>25</sup>

Hardy treads carefully here, exploring tensions in the definitions and labels being promoted by his contemporaries, who wrote with the assurance of communicating to a group which was ‘not-folk’. Throughout this thesis the words ‘folk’, ‘primitive’, ‘barbaric’, ‘savage’, and other such terms frequently used in Victorian folklore discourse, will be employed with an awareness of their problematic nature. Though they were confidently and readily used by Victorian commentators, they carry within them values and class assumptions that privilege ‘high’ or ‘advanced’ culture over that considered ‘low’, ‘backward’ or ‘uncultured’. Throughout his work Hardy continually exposes the tensions within these dichotomies, blurring the line between the over-confident definitions.

Much has been written on Hardy’s creation of characters once commonly referred to as ‘rustics’. In fact, Hardy treats them with far more variety and diversity than a casual reading might suggest. As Raymond Williams, Peter Widdowson, and Rosemary Jann have shown, he examines social boundaries, and movement across these, as well as acknowledging individual personalities among the social group (or labouring class), which Victorians often reduced to the cultural stereotype called ‘Hodge’. With this in mind, it is helpful to consider some of the ways in which Hardy

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<sup>23</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Hardy and Social Class’, in *Thomas Hardy: the Writer and His Background*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Bell & Hyman, 1980), 29-40, p. 35. See also Rosemary Jann, ‘Hardy’s Rustics and the Construction of Class’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.2 (2000), 411-425.

<sup>24</sup> David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, p. 18.

himself employs ‘folk’ (or ‘folks’). Though ostensibly synonymous with the word ‘people’, the term is often used by Hardy to highlight divisions between ‘folk’ and ‘non-folk’, as in *The Return of the Native*, where it serves to draw a class distinction between Mrs. Yeobright and Clym and everyone else: as one of the mummings observes, ‘It is not one of her bettermost parlour-parties. She’s asked the plain neighbours and workpeople without drawing any lines, just to give ’em a good supper and such like. Her son and she wait upon the folks.’ (RN 130) But when Mrs. Yeobright is stung by an adder, her position is made level with theirs, as Christian Cantle worries that the snake may have the ability to ‘overlook’ (meaning that it has ‘the evil eye’): ‘There’s folks in heath who’ve been overlooked already’ (RN 285). Though a reader might assume that only ‘the folk’ would be subject to the evil eye, nevertheless Mrs. Yeobright ‘averted her eyes’ from the snake (RN 285); her social distance from ‘the folk’ is suddenly lessened with the snakebite and her dependence on their aid.

But while the *Return*, serialized in the year the Folklore Society was created, often uses ‘folk’ to suggest a simple binary, in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, published in 1891, ‘folk’ is employed more frequently to show diversity of social groups. Though it is still used to divide, it also implies a solidarity among the group now called ‘labourers’ who were once known as ‘workfolk’: ‘as they used to call themselves immemorially till the other word was introduced from without’ (372). *Tess* has the greatest frequency of the words ‘folk’ or ‘folks’ of any Hardy novel – at least thirty-seven usages – compared with the next highest (and most folk-loric) novel, *The Return of the Native*, where it is used twenty-nine times. But it is the many variants on ‘folk’ that stand out in *Tess*, showing a wide diversity of groups, in ways that both unify and divide: ‘workfolk’, ‘field-folk’, ‘dairy-folk’, ‘farm-folk’, ‘rough folk’, ‘common folk’, ‘genuine folk’, and ‘men-folk’ (which includes Alec d’Urberville in Tess’s categorization). The variations on ‘folk’ in *Tess*, written and serialized in the wake of the first *Handbook of Folklore*, serve to subtly challenge the notion that there can be any one group called ‘the folk’. Instead, there are many, including (perhaps teasingly) ‘London folk’.

In *Jude the Obscure*, a migratory novel where many of ‘the folk’ have left the countryside, the word is used less than a third as many times as in *Tess*, perhaps most strikingly in the pig-killing scene, where it is used to emphasize the differences in Jude’s and Arabella’s natures. Jude remarks:

‘Thank God! He’s dead.’

‘What’s God got to do with such a messy job as a pig-killing, I should like to know!’ she said scornfully. ‘Poor folks must live’ (*Jude* 59)

Here the implication is that ‘poor folks’ cannot afford the luxury of indulging in sympathy with living creatures – whether the crows in the opening of the novel, the pig, or the ‘human animal’ offspring born to Arabella. Jude and Arabella’s son, ‘Little Father Time’, is conceived by these ‘poor folk’, but his intense sympathy with marginalized living things brings about the end of this line of ‘folk’ in Hardy’s final novel.

Regardless of who the ‘folk’ were determined to be, in negotiating his own complicated class position Hardy often detaches his narrators from the scene of folkloric activity. This was inevitably a difficult manoeuvre. Andrew Lang, reviewing *Far from the Madding Crowd* in the *Academy* in 1875, noted: ‘The author is telling clever people about unlettered people, and he adopts a sort of patronizing voice.’<sup>26</sup> Hardy, who had written much of the novel at his parents’ home at Bockhampton, might well have been ill at ease with this. Almost a decade later, an uncomfortable association was suggested in a review of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where the reviewer (whom Hardy believed to be George Saintsbury) noted that:

the ‘skimmington’ or ‘skimmity’ ride will, we fancy, be a novelty to most readers, though the author has doubtless witnessed, or has excellent warranty for describing, this burlesque but forcible protest against what villagers regard as unseemly pre-nuptial conduct on the part of a bride.<sup>27</sup>

The reviewer’s distinction between the reader who will find the skimmington a ‘novelty’ and the author who has ‘doubtless’ witnessed one, hints at a class and cultural distance between author and reader. This in turn might prompt the reader to wonder whether Hardy, the now middle-class author, had watched a skimmington

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Lang, *Academy* xxxi.9 (2 January 1875), reprinted in *Thomas Hardy: the Critical Heritage*, ed. R. G. Cox (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 35-45 (p. 36).

<sup>27</sup> ‘Anonymous Review’, *Saturday Review*, 29 May 1886, lxi, p. 757; reprinted in *Thomas Hardy: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Graham Clarke, 4 vols (Robertsbridge, East Sussex: Helm, 1993), I, p. 144.

from an inside window, or from street level; or did he once participate long ago before he had the reputation of an aspiring gentleman to uphold? If the latter, this would put him in a sense closer to the less sophisticated narrator in his poem ‘The Fire at Tranter Sweatley’s’, who rather than denounce the skimmington as a ‘Demonic Sabbath’, as the narrator does in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (260), laughingly describes one that takes place on the heath near Hardy’s own family home, where the heathdwellers view it as merely a prelude to the marriage-to-be of the offending couple.<sup>28</sup> Such questions, perhaps only half-formed in his readers’ perceptions, influenced the diverse ways that Hardy and his narrators represent folklore in his writings.

Perhaps the most significant factor in Hardy’s struggle to do justice to his portrayals of folklore came from his actual lived experiences of local beliefs and customs. Hardy maintained that in writing he drew on ‘such folklore as came into [his] mind naturally’,<sup>29</sup> and that it was, crucially, authentic: ‘I may say, once for all that every superstition, custom, &c. described in my novels may be depended on as true records of the same (whatever merit they have in folklorists eyes as such) – & not inventions of mine.’<sup>30</sup> Hardy thus drew on an inherited body of folklore, as evidenced by his familial sources, by local friends and folklorists such as Herman Lea, as well as corroborative local records. In his recent thesis *Thomas Hardy and His Writings as a Source for the Study of Traditional Culture in Dorset*, Peter Robson took great care in methodically demonstrating that each instance of folklore in Hardy came from an established (and recorded) local tradition.<sup>31</sup> On one level he seems to have drawn on this inherited material and then let it develop ‘naturally’ within the narrative, establishing a basic plot and allowing the situations to ‘develop their own momentum’.<sup>32</sup> Personally charged with the ‘recording of unrecorded history’, as

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<sup>28</sup> ‘The Fire at Tranter Sweatley’s’ was later published under the title ‘The Bride-Night Fire’ and appears under this title in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> *CL* 5: 136.

<sup>30</sup> *CL* 2: 54.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Robson, *Thomas Hardy and His Writings as a Source for the Study of Traditional Culture in Dorset*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 193.



Simon Gatrell has described it,<sup>33</sup> Hardy sought to capture and preserve inherited family and community beliefs and traditions. But his simultaneous identities as a poet and an artist complicate viewing his representation of folklore as a definitive ‘record’, and from *The Return of the Native* onwards, his treatment of folk culture becomes more complex, multi-layered, and exploratory.

### **‘Instinctive and Resistant’ Portrayals of Folklore**

Perhaps because Hardy treats folklore in such a variety of ways, readers have tended to assume that he allowed himself a fair amount of artistic license, and subsumed his portrayals of folklore within wider patterns of metaphor and symbolism. While interpreting his use of folklore in this way often works well and makes for engaging literary criticism, to approach it in purely symbolic or purely literary terms is to neglect the implications of the authenticity that was evidently important to him. Throughout his life, in numerous instances he took pains to clarify that *specific* folk customs and beliefs were based on genuine local tradition. He did this explicitly with overlooking, hag-riding, (private) effigy burning, skimmington riding, mumming, Midsummer divination, May Day and Bonfire Night traditions; with two other traditions examined here (John South’s fixation on the elm tree in *The Woodlanders*, and the Portland marriage custom in *The Well-Beloved*) there is corroborative evidence that these too were authentic. If for no other reason, that Hardy insisted on the truthfulness of his accounts of folklore suggests that the reader should take the issues of accuracy and fidelity to perceived reality seriously.

This is an issue with far-reaching implications. The recent work *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* chronicles the many types of ‘contested authenticity’ of authorial voices in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, Lionel Trilling’s argument that sincerity and authenticity are ‘best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning’, seems to have established for many that this is a subject well left alone.<sup>34</sup> In applying a version of this reasoning to the use

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<sup>33</sup> Simon Gatrell, *Thomas Hardy’s Vision of Wessex* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. xiv.

<sup>34</sup> *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, ed. by Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 2.

of folklore in literature, Tom Nash has argued that once folklore enters fiction, it ‘becomes fiction’, and one must treat it as such, though he also acknowledges as an ongoing problem that ‘literary critics cannot identify items of folklore, and folklorists know too little about literary criticism’ – one of the concerns addressed in this thesis.<sup>35</sup> But there is good reason why a reader of Hardy should not regard the folklore in his works as simply the product of literary creation. Phillip Mallett has discussed Hardy’s thinking about ‘sincerity’, and the extent to which it might matter that a literary work has the quality of testimony; he suggests, for instance, that whatever the reader’s conscious position, he or she might feel differently about the poems of Wilfred Owen if it transpired that ‘Wilfred Owen’ was the ‘the pseudonym of an elderly spinster from Cheltenham’.<sup>36</sup> For most readers, the fact that a poet or novelist writes as a witness has an effect on how their work is read.

Nash’s argument that whatever enters a fictional text ‘becomes fiction’ seems a handy rule of thumb, but is evidently problematic if it is extended to the laws and social issues that appear throughout Hardy’s work: is it helpful to consider that the Corn Laws, rick burning, and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act were ‘real’, or can they too be regarded merely as fictional props because they appear in fiction? One of the convictions underlying this thesis is that just as readers find economic, social, and legal history useful in understanding Hardy writings, so too we should consider with some care the evidence of ongoing beliefs and customs. These too enable the reader to better understand the ‘real’ part of that ‘partly real, partly dream world’<sup>37</sup> which was ‘fast perishing’ in the face of Victorian notions of progress.

There is, however, a difficulty in approaching folklore in the same way that one might regard social or legal history, in that folklore more naturally crosses (and re-crosses) the boundaries between dream and reality. What seem like the relics of a nebulous ‘folk past’ often reappear in the present (and future) in Hardy’s works, as they did in the social life of Dorset from which he drew inspiration. It was never certain whether these ‘folk’ traditions were, to use Jocelyn’s words from *The Well-*

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Nash, ‘*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*: the Symbolic Use of Folklore’, *English Language Notes*, 35.4 (1998), 38-49 (p. 40). It is worth considering, that from a postmodern perspective, a similar kind of ‘fiction’ is created by the folklorist, depending on what school of folklore he or she subscribes to.

<sup>36</sup> Phillip Mallett, ‘Thomas Hardy and Sincerity’, *Thomas Hardy Journal*, 8.1 (1992), 45-54 (p. 51).

<sup>37</sup> Hardy’s words, in the 1895 Preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (3).

*Beloved*, ‘bygone barbarisms’ (*WB* 189), or if they continued (or still do continue) to operate, as Hardy insisted, ‘to this day’. Hardy explored these uncertainties and wrestled with them in revising his texts; while he was happy to submit items of folkloric interest to his friend Edward Clodd, later the President of the Folklore Society, he also resisted or at least complicated what he described, with at least a hint of irony, as Clodd’s ‘excellently neat’ answers to his queries.<sup>38</sup>

A further reason exists to explore the evidence of folklore in Hardy’s society, one that might provide justification beyond the recognizable benefit in studying social or legal history. There is a tendency among twentieth and twenty first-century readers (and readers of Hardy) to regard ‘folklore’ in terms of its second definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which states that ‘recently, in extended use: a popular fantasy or belief’; the twentieth-century usages listed under this definition demonstrate the frequent association of the word ‘folklore’ with figurative meanings or fantasy. Thus it would be understandable for a modern reader to approach folklore in Hardy with a natural suspension of disbelief, as one might do in reading fantasy literature. To discover instead that these instances of folklore in Hardy were not only ‘living’ and ‘real’, but that they affected the social history and working lives of those in nineteenth-century South West England, is to gain a greater empathy for those who practiced and interacted with folk custom and folk belief in Hardy’s world. Part of the aim of this thesis is to highlight the connections between Hardy’s writing and ‘beliefs’ such as hag-riding (the status of the word ‘belief’ in this context will also come under investigation). Rather than approaching folklore in terms of the way it was classified – asking, as Frazer encouraged people to do, where it ‘fits in the evolutionary Chain of Folk Lore’<sup>39</sup> – the aim here is to examine what meanings and implications these customs and beliefs had for those living in that society.

This kind of approach enables Hardy (and the reader) to explore the role of folk culture in his own society – to see the ways it functioned and interacted with ‘mainstream’ culture. Hardy’s use of the metaphor of the carpet is helpful here: ‘as, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by

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<sup>38</sup> *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Michael Millgate, (London: Macmillan, 1984) (hereafter cited as *Life and Work*), p. 241, in a note made in December 1890.

<sup>39</sup> The phrase is Hardy’s; he writes that Clodd and Frazer will be able to ‘classify’ a particular belief ‘no doubt, and & say exactly where it belongs in the evolutionary Chain of Folk Lore’ in *CL* 2:136.

following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone.<sup>40</sup> Hardy consciously chose to trace the ‘colours’ of folklore and folk culture through this part real, part dream world, in order to explore tensions within the folk tradition itself, and the way it could and did adapt over time. To take one example: to look at newspaper coverage of a local trial where the witnesses were forced to confront the state of belief in hag-riding, enables a modern reader to sense what it would be like to find oneself caught in a belief no longer accepted by official culture – all the more so, perhaps, when the official culture offers no alternative explanation for what the belief seems able to explain.

Hardy also explores how folk customs might (and do) evolve within culture. Writing of the mumming play in *The Return of the Native*, he suggests that the scene we are about to witness may have the ‘true ring’ of a ‘fossilized survival’. In doing so, he acknowledges Tylor’s new theory of survivals,<sup>41</sup> while at the same time showing that Eustacia and the boys are able to adapt the performance for their own purposes. It is not, then, a wholly ‘fossilized’ survival; it is evolving before our eyes. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders*, both written at a time when Hardy may well have read *Primitive Culture*, and had certainly come across discussion of Tylor’s ideas, he wrestles further with survivals theory and its implications. Folk customs in these later works become increasingly complex and less like simple ‘survivals’, since the community helps them to adapt and evolve.

To appreciate how Hardy engages with these questions, it is necessary to consider how his contemporaries thought about folklore and culture: Clodd, Tylor, Farrer, Lang, Frazer, Gomme, Burne, and other theorists about folklore and anthropology shared certain paradigms that informed their thinking. As David Hopkin has argued, their writings carry a heavy load of ‘ideological baggage’.<sup>42</sup> It will be argued here that Hardy resists portraying folklore in the categorical ways that they

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<sup>40</sup> *Life and Work*, p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> In *Primitive Culture* (1871), the evolutionary anthropologist E. B. Tylor defined ‘survivals’ as ‘processes, customs, and opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved.’ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), I, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, p. 20.

espoused, and often challenges their assumed privileging of ‘higher’ over ‘lower’ culture. While it might be of interest to compare Hardy’s use of folklore to that of other contemporary writers of fiction, and I have occasionally done so, the main point of comparison here is with the relatively unified group of folklorists and writers who were driving the ways that Victorians thought about folklore, anthropology, and cultural development. These people were known to Hardy both personally and professionally, not least through his membership of the Savile Club and the Athenaeum, and he implemented their models, their vocabularies, and their paradigms. But he also knew his parents’ home in Bockhampton, and from 1885 had his own home just outside Dorchester, and could cross the heath to listen to his mother talking about earlier times. When he told William Archer in 1901 that in nearby neighborhoods ‘you will find women *to this day* who will make an image of some enemy and either melt it before the fire or stick pins into it’<sup>43</sup> (emphasis mine), he revealed an ongoing and active participation in listening to and observing the beliefs and customs of the rural world. As he wove local customs and beliefs into his stories they became dynamic, revealing tensions within contemporary paradigms for thinking about folklore. Both within individual narratives, and within the whole body of his work, his representations of folklore challenged perceived hierarchies, and resisted contemporary assumptions about knowledge, belief, and progress. Part of the subject of this thesis is the subtle undercurrent of resistance running throughout his work.

### **Knowledge, Belief, and Cultural Progress**

When William Thoms first suggested the new compound ‘folk-lore’ in 1846, he left the exact meaning of ‘lore’ open to interpretation. In the eighteenth century the term had meant ‘teaching’ or ‘doctrine’ as well as ‘learning’, ‘scholarship’, or ‘body of knowledge’,<sup>44</sup> but it had since taken on an archaic connotation. In consequence, when the field of Popular Antiquities became reclassified as ‘Folklore’, the folk and their teachings or knowledge became, by association, relegated to the past. A statement of

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<sup>43</sup> William Archer, ‘Real Conversations’, in *Thomas Hardy Remembered*, ed. by Martin Ray (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 28-37 (p. 32).

<sup>44</sup> ‘lore, n.1’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, June 2013, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/110333?rskey=imvESK&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed August 12, 2013].

this working definition appeared in the *Folk-Lore Record*, when R. C. Temple, speaking on behalf of active folklorists, argued: ‘I think it is fair to say that “lore” nowadays, and at any rate in this connection, is learning of the kind that is opposed to science, meaning by “science” ascertained knowledge.’ He went on to say that ‘Unascertained knowledge is, of course, apt to be very wrong’; it is this kind of knowledge, according to Temple, that drives superstition, which he defined as ‘unreasonable and excessive belief’.<sup>45</sup>

With the emerging classification scheme of the Folklore Society, these ‘unreasonable and excessive’ beliefs could be catalogued and studied more methodically than before. Whereas the earlier field of Popular Antiquities had collectively emphasized old relics or *things*, with its reclassification as ‘Folklore’, an interest in vestiges of the past shifted to the people, with the implicit understanding that they and their ways were also archaic things – living ‘survivals’ of the past. The kind of knowledge accepted among the folk was not only considered substandard, it did not even constitute ‘learning’ in the eyes of some folklorists. One contributor to the *Folk-Lore Journal* voiced this view, explicitly establishing that the aim of Folklore was ‘the learning of the cultured about the folk’, since ‘the folk have no learning properly so-called [and thus] they do not learn, but *imbibe* knowledge’. Though Charlotte Burne took issue with this phrasing, arguing that it constituted an ‘arbitrary and unauthorised use of the word *learning*’ – a point of view with which Hardy would surely have been in sympathy – this definition revealed the tacit understanding among the educated that the Society’s ‘authorised’ approach to education was superior to the ‘oral teaching’ (as Burne described it) of the folk.<sup>46</sup>

This hierarchy informs the way an educated reader would understand the juxtaposition of Tess and her mother, as framed early in chapter three of the novel:

between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they

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<sup>45</sup> R. C. Temple, ‘The Science of Folk-Lore’, *Folk-Lore Journal*, 4.3 (1886), 193-212 (p. 194).

<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Burne, ‘Classification of Folklore’, *Folk-Lore Journal*, 4.2 (1886), 158-163 (p. 158).

were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (*Tess* 29)

Though the narrator does not explicitly say which kind of knowledge or which historical age is superior, the inference may be drawn. Superstitions were perceived to be one of the unfortunate hindrances of the ‘folk mind’ until they could gain standard knowledge. The same idea underlies a talk given by Edward Tylor to the British Association in which he spoke on the character of the ‘peasant mind’. He related an ‘amusing’ incident, in which the Anthropological Institute of Berlin commissioned a census among German schools in order to determine the number of fair-haired, blue-eyed children. According to Tylor, a kind of ‘modern myth’ (in today’s terms an urban myth) arose that the children were to be transported and given to the Sultan of Turkey who had won them in a card game. Tylor’s point was that the myth was far-fetched; what he did not acknowledge was that despite their ‘feeble-mindedness’, the German ‘peasants’ might indeed have had a legitimate albeit instinctive basis for their concern. Thus the label ‘superstition’ was used to stigmatize any belief which could not be backed by ‘science’, which was, of course, considered by the educated to be the main driver of progress.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the members of the Folklore Society, Hardy was able to empathize with superstitious tendencies. Throughout his work he undermines the assumption that rational, standardized knowledge is wholly superior to ‘imbibed’ knowledge. He was in a unique position to understand both of these worlds: as a youth he attended a National School, a Nonconformist School, and finally an independent ‘Academy’ run by Isaac Last.<sup>48</sup> Beyond these, a vigorous lifelong plan of self-directed study indicated a thorough dedication to the pursuit of intellectual knowledge.<sup>49</sup> But he was also

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Burne related this story in ‘The Science of Folk-Lore’, *Folklore*, 3.3 (1885), 267-269. While there are many examples of folklorists discussing superstition as a hindrance to science and progress, this episode stands out because a twenty-first century reader would sense the eugenic implications of this anthropological research (especially taking place in Germany), but the assumed cultural hierarchy of enlightened/educated/scientific versus superstitious/ignorant/peasant does not allow for the ‘peasant’ mind to be capable of knowing or sensing any kind of understanding on a deeper level.

<sup>48</sup> Hardy describes the education he received at these schools in *Life and Work*, pp. 21-30.

<sup>49</sup> See Jane Mattisson, *Knowledge and Survival in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2002). Mattisson discusses how knowledge as portrayed in Hardy’s communities has ‘limited local application’ compared to that of

aware of other kinds of knowledge that are easily lost with standardized education. In the case of the Durbeyfield women in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the implied loss will be the collective 'fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads', which will largely die with Joan. Here, superstition appears as part and parcel of the more desirable material of traditional ballads and dialect – material Hardy was prepared to use not only for fiction, but for poetry, which he considered the highest form of art. The passage suggests the question: if society wishes to be rid of superstition, must ballads go as well? But beyond what might be described as a kind of cultural whitewashing, and the loss that will come with it, is the eventual realization in the narrative that Tess's education has not prepared her to survive in her own culture.<sup>50</sup> It is not just that the National teachings and Standard knowledge do not prepare her, but they create a barrier that keeps her from understanding what have been called the 'folk ways of women'<sup>51</sup> – the kinds of rules that Arabella Donn's friends orally communicate in *Jude the Obscure*. Tess's National School education is not only inapplicable in understanding the rules of the folk culture, but it creates a false sense of knowing: she doesn't imagine that there are kinds of knowledge that her mother – like Arabella's friends – simply expects her to have. When Tess asks Joan if she should tell Angel Clare about her pre-marital experience with Alec d'Urberville, Joan urges her not to do so: 'many women have had a Trouble – some of the highest in the land' (*Tess* 210). While it is impossible that she would know the individual circumstances of aristocratic Victorian women

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educated characters, whose knowledge is 'more universal in scope and application' (p. 14). Mattisson shows that local forms of knowledge, which usually went unrecognized in formal education, were necessary for the survival of rural communities. See also Jane Mattisson, 'Education and Social Class', in *Thomas Hardy in Context*, ed. by Phillip Mallett, pp. 188-197.

<sup>50</sup> Like the Brangwen men in D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*, but unlike her more formally educated daughter, Joan Durbeyfield has an instinctive knowledge and understanding of the culture of reproduction: 'So much warmth and generating and pain and death did they *know* in their blood'; see D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> See T. F. Thistleton-Dyer's *The Folklore of Women*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1906), pp. 8-10, where he asserts the existence of many traditional beliefs within the culture of women, including that 'a trait of character [...] which women are proverbially said to their disadvantage to possess, is a lack of truth and reliability' (p. 9). Thistleton-Dyer seems uncomfortable with this assumption, but it accords with the ways and the code that Joan Durbeyfield advocates, and which Tess suffers from not following.



who had pre-marital relations, she sees how the custom of her own class of women might apply just as logically.

Tess's education offers her nothing that helps her social negotiation with the classes above her own, even while it attempts to foster in her middle-class values that divide her against herself. Jude Fawley's and Grace Melbury's educations similarly fail to help them understand the ways of the worlds they attempt to enter. The point is not that Hardy is saying it is better to have superstitions than education: rather, he suggests that education, improvement, and progress come with hidden costs. Collectively, this educational 'progress' not only causes 'the people' to lose a sense of culture and heritage but at an individual level standard education often offers no alternative for that which 'folk knowledge' had offered previously. With this in mind, and with the consideration that 'lore' means teaching and learning, a reader can approach the way Hardy presents folk culture as not necessarily inferior to standardized culture. Even when individual instances such as Joan Durbeyfield's decision to consult the *Compleat Fortune Teller* appear foolish when presented in the text, they form part of a greater network of tacit knowledge and understanding that cannot be easily substituted with standardized education.

## **Belief**

If the state of knowledge among the Wessex 'folk' is difficult to characterize, the varying states of belief are even more so. While folklorists were often quick to scatter words like 'superstition' and 'ignorance' throughout their accounts of recorded folklore, Hardy's neighbour and folklorist Hermann Lea was more cautious. He introduced his collected folklore with an admonishment that the reader should not 'rashly' assume that 'superstition goes hand in hand with foolishness or absence of commonsense, nor must it be looked on as a symbol of weak-mindedness'.<sup>52</sup> Lea even questioned the limiting (not to mention pejorative) nature of the word superstition, stating that though previously he would have used this word, he had since come to prefer the word 'belief'. Even if many of the rural beliefs seem strange in this 'century of advanced education and civilization', Lea continued to find them existing

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<sup>52</sup> Hermann Lea, 'Some Dorset Superstitions', *Memorials of Old Dorset*, ed. by T. Perkins and H. Pentin, (London: Bembrose, 1907), p. 349.

both among ‘many of the less sophisticated as well as in the intellects of some of the more thoroughly educated people’.<sup>53</sup>

Hardy captures this ever-present uncertainty as to the state of belief by portraying notions like hag-riding or the burning of waxen effigies in multiple and often seemingly contradictory ways, showing that no single version of reality or agreed belief exists in Wessex. In ‘The Withered Arm’, the character Rhoda Brook is portrayed as being ‘hag-ridden’ – that is, assaulted in spectral form – by Gertrude Lodge. Gertrude is the new wife of Rhoda’s employer who had previously fathered an illegitimate child with Rhoda. Desperate to be rid of the suffocating spectre who squats on her chest, Rhoda grabs it (or her) by the arm and throws her off. By daylight, Rhoda is unable to discount the experience as a dream, ‘affect as she might to ridicule her superstition’ (68). The material ‘proof’ of the nighttime confrontation appears when the living Gertrude finds an unexplained bruise in the form of a handprint on her arm. Her arm withers, and she is driven to desperate means to try and heal it.

After the story was published Hardy repeatedly defended it as ‘true’ and ‘based on fact’, as it was relayed to him by the woman who knew the ‘original’ Gertrude. In the story both Rhoda and Gertrude struggle to reconcile the ‘superstitious’ occurrence with a rational explanation – but none is given. But while it might be tempting to read ‘The Withered Arm’ as a ghost story, accusations of hag-riding continued to appear in Dorset courts into the late nineteenth century. The courts seemed appalled that witnesses still professed to believe in hag-riding, and took measures to curb the belief. The idea that there must be some rational explanation for the phenomenon also occurs in Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*, where a farm worker believes that the horses have been ‘hag-rid’, though the reader, who knows that Fitzpiers has been secretly riding them, would naturally conclude that ‘hag-riding’ is being exposed as unfounded nonsense.<sup>54</sup> Hardy’s portrayal of the act from a variety of perspectives challenges a single ‘rational’ view of belief. To privilege any one view of reality is to see an incomplete picture.

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<sup>53</sup> Hermann Lea, ‘Wessex Witches, Witchery, and Witchcraft’, *The Nineteenth Century*, 53 (1903), 1010-1024, (p. 1010).

<sup>54</sup> In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and ‘The Ruined Maid’ the term ‘hag-rid’ is used figuratively to mean the characters look exhausted, but the figurative use does not mean that the notion no longer existed.

Similarly, Hardy challenges the reader with different ways of viewing the concept of ‘overlooking’, the term for belief in the evil eye. In *The Return of the Native* Christian Cantle’s belief that ‘there’s folk in heath who’ve been overlooked’ (285) might sound like a humorous superstition that the reading audience can easily dismiss, but it is framed within another folkloric custom, applying fresh adder fat to an adder bite. For a reader with an awareness of folkloric traditions, the application of adder fat to bite might recall the old idea of the ‘powder of sympathy’, widespread in the seventeenth century, in which a healing ointment was applied to the weapon that had caused the wound, and this was supposed to help the wound heal. Not surprisingly, this idea was ridiculed by Enlightenment thinkers. In *The Return of the Native*, the use of adder fat as a remedy appears in the same social and cultural context as overlooking, as does the ‘sympathetic magic’ that Susan Nunsuch will practice later with the waxen figure of a Eustacia; in fact, it is Susan who helpfully fries the adder fat. The educated and progressive Clym Yeobright expresses ‘doubts’ about what he views as an outmoded remedy, a view that might easily be shared by Hardy’s readers when they first encounter it. But that the local doctor affirms that the ‘ancient’ remedy might be of value indicates how difficult it is to know which seemingly outlandish folkloric beliefs and practices might nonetheless have some basis in truth: if one seemingly folkloric custom is partly attested to by more or less recent science, perhaps the same might be true of other folkloric ideas and beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

Similar strains of uncertainty as to what might be possible run throughout Hardy’s work. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, those who visit the ‘conjurer’ Mr. Fall, who has a reputation as a weather prophet, profess to do so merely ‘for a fancy’, though in fact, ‘very few of them were unbelievers in their secret hearts’ (173). The narrator calls Henchard ‘superstitious – as such headstrong natures often are’, but Mr. Fall’s predictions turn out to be broadly correct: the harvest weather is poor, as he has said it would be. Henchard is reluctant to admit belief in the powers of the conjurer, but he wonders if someone has been roasting a waxen image of him: ‘I don’t believe in such power; and yet – what if they should ha’ been doing it!’ (177). This might sound like a paranoid delusion, but his fears will resonate with readers familiar with the ending of *The Return of the Native*, where Susan Nunsuch is shown roasting Eustacia Vye’s waxen effigy. The subsequent ambiguity of Eustacia’s death by

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drowning, which follows Susan's act, would trouble a rational reader's assumption that magic is 'malicious but ineffective'.<sup>56</sup> In *The Mayor*, Henchard's fear that someone might surreptitiously be working him harm seems not unreasonable, given that this is precisely what is done by such characters as Susan Nunsuch in *The Return of the Native*. The mere possibility that his fear is justified draws the reader into the uncertain state of belief that haunts both town and country in Hardy's Wessex.

### **Progress and its Discontents**

The Victorian notion of progress, and the language of progress adopted by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer (both of whom Hardy certainly read and admired) and by anthropologists like Tylor, with whose ideas he was at least broadly familiar, often appears in Hardy. The shared assumption was that individual cultures move away ('progress') from a starting point of 'primitive culture' and move through successive stages of savagery and barbarism towards civilization. Hardy frequently alludes to these stages, but it is often with a resistance to privileging the state of civilization – the stage that most of his readers were used to seeing so highly praised in works like Clodd's *The Childhood of the World*, James Anson Farrer's *Primitive Manners and Customs* or James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, as well as in leading magazines and periodicals of the day. But when Hardy uses these terms, it is often to question the assumed hierarchy. As Gillian Beer has shown, it is in *The Return of the Native* that Hardy begins to question the notion of these succeeding phases, which were largely taken for granted by the leading anthropologists and sociologists. Discussing the melting of Eustacia's wax image, and her subsequent death, Beer writes:

Here, as so often, Hardy establishes contiguous routes to the overdetermined theme: through coincidence and witchcraft, or at the same time, through psychological motive and independent event. Neither form of explanation drives out the other. ... Present and past belief systems coexist. They do not follow an ordered succession.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> This is Gillian Beer's phrase in 'Can the Native Return?' in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Beer, 'Can the Native Return?', p. 43.

The novel's thematic challenge, as described by Beer, serves to refute the kinds of confident statements made by Hardy's contemporaries, that the development of society had been characterized by 'constantly accelerating progress from savagery to culture'.<sup>58</sup>

The language of cultural progress is questioned again in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, when Alec is quick to abandon his new-found Christian faith, and Tess tries to explain to him the difference in 'theology and morals', which modern thought has confused but 'in the primitive days of mankind had been quite distinct' (*Tess* 350). The primitive/civilized hierarchy is further challenged in the description of the natural world, which offers Angel a brief respite from 'the chronic melancholy, which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power' (*Tess* 134). Similar alternative strains run throughout Hardy's oeuvre as a whole, questioning the onward drive towards progress and exploring the cultural losses that will come as a result. While his portrayals of folk culture are not value-free, Hardy's stance as a whole shows resistance to accepting the 'standard' view of cultural progress.<sup>59</sup>

In *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy's final statement in novel form, the language of progress directly engages with folk ways and traditions. In representing the 'Portland Custom', where a man and woman must conceive a child together before they may marry, this language comes under increasing pressure during the revision of the serial version of 1892, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, prior to the volume publication of *The Well-Beloved* in 1897. What was a 'betrothal' in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* (60) becomes a 'primitive betrothal' in *The Well-Beloved* (233), and the middle-class male protagonist who in the serial version wishes to follow the custom, in the later

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<sup>58</sup> James A. Farrer, *Primitive Manners and Customs* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1879), pp. 314-315; This work appeared months after *The Return of the Native*, thus demonstrating that Hardy's resistance to this way of thinking was timely and relevant.

<sup>59</sup> A more humorous example of Hardy subverting this language of progress occurs in *Far From the Madding Crowd* where Cain Ball is called a 'navigator' in venturing from rural Weatherbury to the 'Kingdom of Bath', the cultural capital of Wessex. Here he observes the residents of Bath 'swallow down' the mineral water, which is described as 'a barbarian practice enough to us, but I daresay the natives think nothing o' it' (*FFMC* 219). The playful suggestion of one of the 'folk' as imperialist explorer, recording the 'barbarian' ways of the 'natives' of the fashionable city that most readers would associate with an Austenesque world of gentility, toys with the assumed cultural hierarchy of gentry over labouring class, Georgian city over rural farm, etc.

hardback version is horrified that what he had believed to be a ‘bygone barbarism’ might still be practiced among middle class Portlanders. Instead he chooses to follow what he views as propriety rather than island tradition, and the marriage he had planned with Avice Caro is thwarted. The refusal to fulfill the custom launches an obsession which lasts for three generations, as Jocelyn seeks to marry the daughter, and then the granddaughter of the first Avice. Having forgone the ‘primitive’ custom, this Avice is forced to marry her inferior quarryman cousin and work as a laundress, a task for which she is physically unfit; she dies prematurely, survived by a daughter who is represented as a degenerate version of the mother. In his final work of fiction, Hardy brings folk custom head-to-head with two contrasting sources of cultural anxiety, the cost of progress and the fear of degeneration, as he challenges the reader to question reductive thinking about what may be considered ‘folk’, ‘peasant’, ‘primitive’, and ‘civilized’.

### **Historical Precedents of Customs and Beliefs**

It would be much easier for the researcher if folk customs and beliefs had suddenly appeared on the scene in nineteenth-century Dorset. Instead, they generally existed for centuries before in Dorset and elsewhere. Knowing how to approach nineteenth-century folklore often proves difficult, because Victorian folklorists believed that most, if not all of their folk customs were, as David Hopkin puts it, not just old, but ‘very, very old’,<sup>60</sup> and could be mapped in a fashion similar to the fossil record. But often there are very few if any hard-and-fast records of customs that date back beyond the Middle Ages or even the Renaissance. Because what sources do exist often refer to the custom in their current incarnation, hundreds of years after the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity, the attribution of pagan origins (which became increasingly popular from the late nineteenth century onwards) is now usually regarded as tenuous at best. Recent folklorists and historians are wary of attributing pagan origins to customs when there is no substantial evidence, and they tend to dismiss nineteenth-century sources which simply assume a pagan origin, often for

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<sup>60</sup> Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, p. 22.

little better reason than that such theories were becoming fashionable.<sup>61</sup> For each of the customs and beliefs explored in this thesis, I trace extant historical precedents, to reveal how much multi-layered historical meaning haunts the Hardyian scene. For each of these, I try to establish some historical examples leading up to the nineteenth century, before looking in more detail at nineteenth-century sources to see how the custom or belief was understood in Hardy's day, and how these interpretations often came to change.

### **Folklore and Myth**

It is necessary here to establish an effective distinction between folklore and myth, as this affects the nature of sources that I draw from. In the nineteenth century the two fields overlapped, and often appeared interwoven together in literature, and to some degree this continues into the present day. Definitions of folklore have been established above, but a more practical way of distinguishing folklore from myth as it appears in Hardy's writing<sup>62</sup> is to ask whether characters in Hardy's Wessex from among the 'folk' would recognize if the word or concept held any current meaning for them or their community. If, say, Christian Cantle or Abel Whittle were asked if they recognized 'overlooking' or 'hag-riding' or 'skimmington riding', the answer would be yes. But if one were to ask either of them if they were familiar with 'Prometheus'

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<sup>61</sup> See Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of Folklore*; Ronald Hutton *Stations of the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ronald Hutton, 'How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?' [The Katherine Briggs Memorial Lecture, 2010] *Folklore*, 122 (2011), 235-239; Simon J. Bronner, 'The Early Movements of Anthropology and Their Folkloristic Relationships', *Folklore* 95.1 (1984), 57-73; Steve Roud, *The English Year* (London: Penguin, 2008); and David Hopkin, *Voices of the People*.

<sup>62</sup> 'Mythical method' readings of Hardy have long been popular, and they are useful, in looking at the text in symbolic terms. See as examples J.M. Stedmond, 'Hardy's *Dynasts* and the "Mythical Method"', *English*, 12 (1958), 1-4; Felicia Bonaparte, 'The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 5.3 (1999), 415-431; Tom Nash, 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles: the Symbolic Use of Folklore', Andrew Radford, *Survivals of Time*; Andrew Radford, *The Lost Girls: Demeter-Persephone and the Literary Imagination: 1850-1930* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), and Michael Zeitler, *Representations of Culture: Thomas Hardy's Wessex & Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

or ‘Loki’ or ‘The Fisher King’, the interlocutor would most likely be met with a puzzled look.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Tess would recognize the concept of a May Day dance, but not the name ‘Demeter’.<sup>64</sup> The importance of this is that these myths played no part in the consciousness of Hardy’s characters as they learn to work through their problems, as their familiarity with folklore did, or at least might. To describe *The Return of the Native* as an Olympian drama on the theme of Promethean rebellion may be helpful in interpreting a modern reader’s experience of the novel, but it gives no account of what the characters in the text felt were available courses of action for them. A mythic account of Eustacia as a Promethean over-reacher would be of no help to Susan Nunsuch when she finds her child pining away; instead, she wonders if he might have been ‘overlooked’, and uses the only means known to her to fight back, by making and destroying an image of the person she believes has wounded him. When Angel Clare ‘half-teasingly’ calls Tess ‘Demeter’, it irritates her, and she responds ‘call me Tess’ (146). It is not that she is incapable of understanding the myths about Demeter or Artemis that recent critics have drawn upon in discussing her story; it is just that they will not help her solve her problems.<sup>65</sup> They will not help her replace the horse that she has accidentally killed or feed the baby that she has accidentally conceived, and these kinds of concerns are what drive the actions of Hardy’s ‘folk’ characters. So the folk beliefs and customs examined in this thesis are those which shaped the lives of Hardy’s Wessex characters, and indeed those of the real people of South West England, and not those ‘mythic’ patterns which an educated reader might recognise as informing the structure of at least some of the novels.

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<sup>63</sup> J. Hillis Miller would call these kinds of mythological references ‘characteristic Hardyan learned allusion[s] dragged in by the narrator’. He points out ‘the rustic characters would have never thought of such a parallel’ in ‘Individual and Community in *The Return of the Native: A Reappraisal*’, in *Thomas Hardy Reappraised: Essays in Honour of Michael Millgate*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 154-173 (p. 158).

<sup>64</sup> This ‘test’ would not apply in the case of fantasy writing, which was more self-consciously constructed around borrowed literary folklore motifs. For each of the subjects I examine, evidence exists that the belief or practice extended into nineteenth-century Dorset social life, so the few Hardy works that could conceivably be classified as ‘fantasy’, such as ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’ will, by definition, be excluded from this study.

<sup>65</sup> The use of the mythical references here also serves to highlight the class and cultural differences between Angel and Tess. Angel is seeking his own personal virginal ‘goddess’, not a flesh-and-blood woman like Tess, who might conceivably find herself the target of a skimmington ride.



For similar reasons, it is also important to carefully consider what words we use to describe folk customs. For instance, when Andrew Radford equates the Portland Custom in *The Well-Beloved* with ‘the superstition of handfesting’, it is necessary to spell out in reply that neither handfesting nor the Portland Custom was a ‘superstition’. Handfesting, in practice, meant that a man and wife could have a trial run at marriage and could separate after a year if they did not enjoy being together. With the Portland Custom, there is also no ‘superstition’: either Jocelyn and Avice follow Portland code – that is, try to conceive a child together, marrying if they are successful but retaining the right to separate if they are not – or they can follow the Victorian middle-class code of courtship that expects them to marry first, and only then attempt to conceive a child. Their decisions in respect of whether to follow the custom (differently nuanced in the two versions of the text) affect the sequence of events in the novel. Critics have properly drawn attention to the many mythical references worked into *The Well-Beloved*, but these have little bearing on the immediate question of how Avice and Jocelyn should negotiate the shifting territories of old ‘folk’ and modern ‘standard’ customs. Hardy constructs his narratives in a way that allows them to be read in terms of myth, but their folkloric elements are rooted in daily reality, in a way that can be corroborated by written and material records.

### Sources

The interdisciplinary nature of folklore – especially folklore as it appears in literature – raises questions about the nature of sources and ‘evidence’. In considering records about ‘the folk’, who had no platform from which to reply, it is clearly necessary to consider the social context of these created texts and their biases. However, useful insight can still be gleaned from other sources (though these bring their own problems of interpretation), such as the newspaper coverage in the *Dorset County Chronicle* of a trial in 1871, in which the defendant claimed to have been hag-ridden. The questions raised by the trial will be examined more fully later: it cannot be used to prove that the defendant actually believed in hag-riding (he could be using it like an insanity plea), but we can conclude that the judge’s refusal to countenance such a plea, reported in the paper, would have sent a clear message into the community (and not only to its literate members) that this belief would not be tolerated.

In order to consider as many perspectives as possible on the nature of folklore in Hardy's world, I have aimed at breadth in the types of sources cited: these include periodicals, folklore reference books, folklore journals and magazines, diaries, letters, 'apotropaic' objects (that is, objects reputed to have the power of averting ill-luck or the evil eye), as well as sources that resist tidy categorization. Inevitably, there remain gaps. While more sources may yet appear, there seems to be less in the way of first-hand accounts of the Portland marriage custom that is generally assumed, and little too about the kind of 'paranoia' John South experiences about the elm tree in *The Woodlanders*. In these instances, I have simply drawn on what 'evidence' does exist, as Hardy's treatment of these 'folkloric' practices and episodes is too interesting to ignore.

Increasingly in folklore studies, researchers are looking to archives for source material that shows people, especially those from the working classes, representing themselves in their own voices. David Hopkin draws on this archival approach, though he notes that those who wrote at all (even in diaries) were already mediating their voice in one way or another – whether with an awareness that their future selves might be reading it, or looking back late in life with a perspective that glosses over issues that would have been treated more earnestly if written in the present. Such concerns re-confirm the importance of having a wide assortment of sources. But the archive is still of value, and for this reason I have attempted a thorough survey of the archival materials in the Dorset History Centre (and record office) as well as in the Dorset County Museum which might be expected to have any reference or cross-reference to do with folklore. In order to do so I relocated to Dorset for two years: no doubt my own reading of the material was shaped in turn by the experience of living (and writing) for a time in Hardy's home at Max Gate.

Chapter 2, 'Belief', examines four topics in particular: 'overlooking' or the evil eye; sympathetic magic, or the use of apotropaic objects; hag-riding; and John South's quasi-fetishistic fixation on the elm tree in *The Woodlanders*. In each case, it explores the status of the 'belief', and what it reveals about the community in which it appears. Chapter 3, 'Acts of Disapproval: Skimmington Riding' examines the use of this form of popular justice (akin to 'rough music', or 'charivari') in relation to more official forms of judgement, with particular reference to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. It questions the degree to which the custom was still prevalent and the cultural assumptions about it, and traces the links between external forms of justice and the

issues of crime and punishment as these work themselves out within the character of Michael Henchard, and in other and complex ways within *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Chapter 4 'Acts of Approval: the Portland Custom', explores Hardy's treatment of this betrothal custom in the two different versions of his story, the serialized *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and the volume edition, *The Well-Beloved*. It argues that the importance of the issue in the novel has been underestimated, and examines its relation to central concerns of the 1890s, implicit in such words as progress, atavism, and degeneration. Chapter 5, 'Winter Customs: Bonfire Night and Mumming', addresses two forms of seasonal celebration in *The Return of the Native*, and illustrates the multiple layers of meaning buried in each, and explores the reasons for their survival. In doing so, it also examines Hardy's conscious employment of, and resistance to, anthropological theories current in the 1870s. Chapter 6, 'Summer Customs: May Day and Midsummer Divination', examines both the survival of May Day traditions and their self-conscious (and sanitised) revival under the influence of John Ruskin in particular, as well as Hardy's exploration of divination as a means to predict both death and marriage. The Conclusion reviews the two concerns which structure this thesis: the value of Hardy's work as a means to examine folkloric custom and belief, and the ways in which a closer understanding of this material enriches a reading of the stories, poems, and novels.

## Chapter Two: Belief

### Overlooking, Sympathetic Magic, Hag-riding, and South's Tree

The status of folkloric beliefs in Hardy's Wessex is frequently as doubtful for his characters as it is for the reader. His texts resist fixed or stable ways of viewing folklore that would allow for what many nineteenth-century readers would expect: a 'pleasant reading' of folklore.<sup>66</sup> Instead, he creates a shifting world of varying beliefs, which reflects that of nineteenth-century Dorset. In *The Return of the Native*, for instance, when Mrs. Yeobright has just been bitten by the adder, the assembly of heathdwellers cautiously observe the snake as it watches them. But only Christian Cantle questions aloud whether it might have the power of the 'evil eye', or in his words the power to 'overlook'. On the surface, Christian's musing may be read as a throwaway comment, made by the village idiot and signifying nothing, but taken in a wider context his statement reflects a larger network of beliefs and half-beliefs which only come to fruition later in the novel, or in other of Hardy's stories. Overlooking, the burning of waxen images, hag-riding, and skimmington riding<sup>67</sup> all appear and reappear in his texts, presenting themselves in slightly different forms each time. What may seem harmless, distant, or figurative in one work, often becomes harmful, manifest, and literal in another. When the characters casually allude to these folkloric ideas, they rarely need explaining to their neighbours: their meaning is tacitly understood by those within the community. Even John South's elm tree fixation, which seems more anomalous, is recognized as having a local precedent; as his daughter admits, 'Others have been like it afore in Hintock' (*Woodlanders* 93). But even so, nobody is quite sure how to handle South's obsession; while Hardy's characters have an unspoken understanding of this or similar beliefs as part of their inherited 'folk' culture, the extent to which they credit the belief is often uncertain. It is with this in mind, that one can approach thinking about belief in Hardy's texts.

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<sup>66</sup> This phrase is Max Müller's. He advocated serious scholarship and the study of languages, warning against engaging in merely 'pleasant readings' of folklore in *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, I, 5, 23-24; quoted in Dorson, *British Folklorists*, p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> The skimmington ride fits this paradigm, but because it is more of a public performance than a 'belief', it will be considered on its own in Chapter 2.

## Overlooking

‘Look at his eye – for all the world like a villainous sort of black currant. ’Tis to be hoped he can’t ill-wish us! There’s folks in heath who’ve been overlooked already. I will never kill another adder as long as I live.’

(*The Return of the Native* 285)

The notion of ‘overlooking’ – the local or dialect version of looking on with the ‘evil eye’ – stands as a perfect example of uncertain belief, and Hardy revisits it in several texts. He draws on local examples known to him, but slightly reworks the portrayals each time so as to resist the neat categorization or conclusions provided by Clodd, Frazer, and other folklorists. Overlooking is first introduced in *The Return of the Native*, and then later appears in ‘The Withered Arm’, and in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*. Hardy also refers to it in a letter to Edward Clodd and in his conversation with William Archer. Often glossed as meaning ‘to bewitch’ or ‘to look upon with an evil eye’, the idea is vaguer and more open to interpretation than either of these definitions would suggest. Outside of Wessex, though, the practice was (and still is) typically referred to by its more standard non-gerund form, ‘the evil eye’, the term which Hardy uses in his interview with Archer. In that conversation Hardy confesses that while many may imagine the ‘superstition’ to be obsolete, the belief was still common in rural Dorset – even then, in the early twentieth century. Ralph Elliott has observed that the word ‘overlooked’ was standard usage in older literary texts, such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Merchant of Venice*, but only survived into the nineteenth century as a dialect form.<sup>68</sup> As the word became relegated to the recesses of dialect, so did the belief become marginalized within the confines of ‘out-step’ rural communities.

As a number of antiquarians have established, the evil eye was a common feature in the ancient world, and it is frequently referred to in Greek and Roman texts. Belief in the evil eye has remained a feature throughout history, and even in the twentieth century still persists, particularly around the Mediterranean. In the British Isles, Helmut Schoeck argues, belief in the evil eye is most prevalent in Ireland and Scotland, while English counties with a ‘substratum of Celtic population’ are more

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<sup>68</sup> Ralph Elliott, *Thomas Hardy’s English* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 217.

prone to believe in it than elsewhere in England'.<sup>69</sup> In the early nineteenth century English audiences would have encountered belief in the evil eye in John Brand's *Popular Antiquities* and William Hone's *Every Day Book*. Hone adds that in the South of Ireland the evil eye is considered most dangerous on May-Eve, when it is believed to have 'more than its usual vigilance and malignity; and the nurse who would walk in the open air with a child in her arms, would be reprobated as a monster.'<sup>70</sup> While Hone leaves the reader to wonder about the degree of belief in the evil eye in England, the Dorset poet and philologist William Barnes brought the idea nearer to home for Hardy, recording the local dialect word 'overlook' as meaning 'to bewitch or look upon with the "evil eye"'.<sup>71</sup>

The Somerset writer F. T. Elworthy expanded Barnes' definition, stating in *The Evil Eye* that 'the stories that might be adduced of the constancy of the belief in a blighting power of influencing other persons, and of controlling events injuriously to others, even in these days of boardschool enlightenment are almost infinite'.<sup>72</sup> He goes on to give accounts of two instances from 1883 and 1887, of local children who were thought to have been overlooked, and in spite of traditional medical care, continued to 'pine away' until they died. He suggests that these are not isolated cases, arguing that the belief seems to be 'universal among the lower classes' of Somerset. Of the 1883 case, he says the girl's mother told neighbours that the hospital had starved her consumptive daughter, but these neighbours only humoured her, 'knowing' that really the girl had been overlooked.<sup>73</sup> Here, modern medical diagnosis is consciously rejected in favour of the belief in the evil eye.

Writing in the year of Hardy's birth, George Roberts, a future mayor of Lyme Regis as well as an historian, gives an account 'drawn from the author's own

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<sup>69</sup> Helmut Schoeck, 'The Evil Eye: Forms and Dynamics of a Universal Superstition', in *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 192-200 (p.195); this originally appeared in *Emory University Quarterly*, 11 (1955), 153-161. See also Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye* (London: John Murray, 1895).

<sup>70</sup> William Hone, *The Every-Day Book or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements*, 2 vols (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1826), I, p. 297.

<sup>71</sup> William Barnes, *Glossary of the Dorset Dialect with a Grammar of its Word Shapening and Wording* (Dorchester: Case, 1886), p. 47, p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> Elworthy, *The Evil Eye*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>73</sup> Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The West Somerset Word-Book of Dialectal and Archaic Words and Phrases Used in the West of Somerset and East Devon* (London: Trubner & Co, For the English Dialect Society, 1886), p. 548.

observation' of an epileptic boy, the son of a shoemaker, whose seizures were agreed by 'all' to be the result of his being '*overlooked, or looked upon, that is bewitched.*' But the 'all' here seems to refer to the family's social circle only, since he explains that 'by 1840 the upper and middle classes, with only a few exceptions, were too enlightened to entertain any such superstition'.<sup>74</sup> Roberts, like Elworthy, is quick to identify class distinction as a variable in the belief (or acknowledgement of belief) in overlooking; the same view is usually implied by other writers and folklorists.

More immediately within Hardy's geographical area, Hermann Lea describes interviewing 'numbers of people who have been overlooked' and 'who have given me detailed descriptions'.<sup>75</sup> He records one account given to him by a woman aged ninety, who related two stories from sixty to seventy years earlier, when her neighbours at Riverton, Dorset, concluded they had been overlooked when their horse and pigs died and the cow would not give milk. They believed that Nancy Bridle, a seventh daughter of a seventh child, was responsible; only when they hung a mare's heart stuffed with pins in Bridle's chimney, did their animals recover, while Nancy herself died. This form of retaliatory defence will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. H. Colley March recorded another instance of overlooking in Dorset in an investigation made for the Ethnographical Survey Committee of the British Association. In this instance, a woman living near Cerne Abbas fell ill, and was told by a 'wise woman' that she had been overlooked. Her husband was advised that the first person who 'accosted' him the next morning would be the ill-wisher. This turned out to be their neighbour, who 'then became suspected'.<sup>76</sup>

'Ill-wisher' is often a misleading term, however, as many instances have been recorded of accidental overlooking, or of people with the power to overlook who would shield their eyes to protect their neighbours. In a story in *The Celtic Magazine*, the writer asserts that even more dreaded than witches were those who were believed

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<sup>74</sup> George Roberts, *The Social History of the Southern Counties of England*, (London: Longman, 1856), pp. 528-529.

<sup>75</sup> Hermann Lea, 'Some Dorset Superstitions', *Memorials of Old Dorset*, (London: T. Perkins and H. Pentin, 1907), reprinted in *Monographs on the Life, Times and Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by James Stevens Cox (St Peter Port, Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1969), 60, p. 349. It is worth noting that the term 'superstitions' probably points to an earlier usage by Lea, since he later said that while he would formerly have used the term 'superstition', he was now more inclined to call it 'belief': in Hermann Lea, 'Wessex Witches, Witchery, and Witchcraft', p. 1010.

<sup>76</sup> H. Colley March, 'Dorset Folklore Collected in 1897', *Folklore*, 10.4 (1899), 478-489, (p. 480).

to have the evil eye, but did not know that they had it. Such people were a ‘constant danger to their neighbours, and their evil eye could even take effect upon their own property at times’. The writer notes that in addition to humans and animals (especially cattle), even inanimate property, such as furniture, weapons, or food material, could be affected.<sup>77</sup>

The Dorset-based medical practitioner E.A. Rawlence was suspicious, noting that the belief could easily be exploited. He reports the story of a woman in North Dorset, who said a farm worker ‘had an evil eye on me because I didn’t gee’ him enough cider’, and subsequently consulted a wise woman. But Rawlence, perhaps because of his profession, dismissed the efficacy of the ‘wise woman’, arguing that ‘suggestions about an evil eye and flourishing the willow wand are only adjuncts to play on the ignorance of her patients.’<sup>78</sup> He goes on to suggest that those who believe in the evil eye may be mentally weak, claiming that his examples give an ‘idea of the psychological condition of mind of those who imagine themselves subject to spells’. He describes one case known to him of ‘H.’, a dairyman from Bishop’s Down in the Blackmore Vale, who, believing he had been overlooked, sought out a wise man at Yeovil to tell him who was his enemy. The wise man replied:

‘Now I’ll tell ’ee who he be,’ and pointing his finger at H. said, ‘You be the man. You be zo anxious about yer stock that yer overlooks what yer ought for to do and does what yer ought not to do. Yer overheats yer curds and that makes ’em too zoft, zo that when yer puts it into the press it spews out. Yer gets up in the mornin’ and runs out in the dark to veed yer pigs and don’t do it properly. Now yer must be more quiet like and careful. Have a cup o’ taa and zomethen to ate when yer gets up and don’t go out we’ an empty stomach.’<sup>79</sup>

Rawlence’s version of the story shows the wise man as ‘diagnosing’ anxiety and employing the dialect word ‘overlook’ in an ironic, didactic sense (‘you overlook

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<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, ‘The Evil Eye’, *The Celtic Magazine*, 12 (1887), 415-418 (p. 415).

<sup>78</sup> E.A. Rawlence, ‘Folk-lore and Superstitions Still Obtaining in Dorset’, *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 35 (1914), 81-87, (p. 86).

<sup>79</sup> E.A. Rawlence, ‘Sundry Folk-lore Reminiscences relating to Man and Beast in Dorset and the neighbouring Counties’, *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 37 (1914), 56-65 (p. 66).



what you ought to do'). He also records him advising the man to nourish himself in order to be fit for the day's task. But this same story, or one very much like it, was mentioned by Hardy in a letter to Clodd, and then rendered again, slightly differently, in *The Life*. These versions further complicate the nature of overlooking.

In the letter to Clodd, Hardy notes the potential to 'overlook' between man and tree:

If you plant a tree or trees, & are very anxious that they shd thrive, you must not go & look at them, or look out of the window at them 'on an empty stomach.' There is a blasting influence in your eye then, which will make them pine away. And the story is that a man, puzzled by this withering of his newly planted choice trees, went to a white witch to enquire who was the evil-worker: the white witch, after ascertaining the facts, told him it was *himself*.<sup>80</sup>

Significantly here, as opposed to Rawlence's version, it is not that the anxious man's morning hunger causes him to make clumsy mistakes and fail to perform his tasks 'properly.' Hardy explains that an empty stomach causes a 'blasting influence in your eye' that will harm the trees should you merely 'look at them' – even through a window. Perhaps because a long tradition of the blasting influence of the eyes has been recorded in English texts,<sup>81</sup> Hardy frames this story to Clodd in cultural evolutionary terms, adding: 'You will be able to classify this no doubt, & say exactly where it belongs in the evolutionary Chain of Folk Lore.'<sup>82</sup> Hardy's capitalization hints at the Great Chain of Being, the ideological basis of and forerunner to the Victorian anthropological model of civilization, which underpinned and shaped folklore studies in Hardy's day and well into the twentieth century. While Hardy eagerly supplied the information (apparently unsolicited), he left the interpretation and folkloric classification to Clodd, who then read the account before James Frazer at a meeting of the Folk-Lore Society on 17 November 1896.<sup>83</sup>

Clodd noted the role of hunger and asserted that the explanation lay in the

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<sup>80</sup> *CL* 2:136; Hardy's emphases.

<sup>81</sup> See John Aubrey, *The Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme* (London: Folklore Society, 1881 reprint).

<sup>82</sup> *CL* 2:137.

<sup>83</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 137.

‘hungry man looking at the trees, which thereby became sympathetically starved’,<sup>84</sup> thus interpreting the episode according to the premises of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (published five years previously), and Frazer agreed noting:

The superstition you mention was unknown to me, but your explanation of it seems highly probable. As explained by you, the superstition is a very interesting example of the supposed sympathetic connection between a man and a tree. As you say, it bears very closely on my explanation of the connection between the priest of Diana at Aricia and the sacred tree, he having to be always in the prime of health and vigour in order that the tree might be so too. I am pleased to find my theory (which I confess often seems to me far-fetched, so remote is it from our nineteenth-century educated ways of thought) confirmed by evidence so near home.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps in resistance to what seemed to him an all-too-easy Frazerian interpretation, confidently affirmed by the Folklore Society, Hardy recorded a slightly different version in *The Life*, which refers to livestock, as opposed to a tree, which too readily fit Frazer’s by then well-known ‘sacred wood’ theory. This version in *The Life* also uses the dialect words ‘overlooked’ and ‘dew-bit’, which firmly places the account in a local (and oral) context, without assigning the more generic term ‘evil eye’ as he had done earlier with William Archer. Dating the episode to ‘1888’, Hardy writes:

Heard a story of a farmer who was ‘overlooked’ [malignly affected] by *himself*. He used to go and examine his stock every morning before breakfast with anxious scrutiny. The animals pined away. He went to a conjuror or white witch, who told him he had no enemy; that the evil was of his own causing, the eye of a fasting man being very blasting: that he should eat a ‘dew-bit’ before going to survey any possession about which he had hopes.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> J. B. Andrews and James G. Frazer, ‘Neapolitan Witchcraft’, *Folklore*, 8.1 (March 1897), 1-12 (p. 11).

<sup>85</sup> J. B. Andrews and James G. Frazer, ‘Neapolitan Witchcraft’, p.11. James Gibson says that Frazer later recalled Hardy telling him that this may have been the reason his own trees at Max Gate did not thrive: *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by James Gibson (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999), p. 72.

<sup>86</sup> *Life and Work*, p. 213; Hardy’s emphases and square brackets.

This constant uncertainty as to exactly who or what has the power to overlook surfaces in *The Return of the Native*. When Mrs Yeobright is stung by the adder, the assembly bring a live snake in order to procure a remedy of fried adder fat. The company present note the adder's eye:

The live adder regarded the assembled group with a sinister look in its small black eye, and the beautiful brown and jet pattern on its back seemed to intensify with indignation. Mrs Yeobright saw the creature, and the creature saw her: she quivered throughout, and averted her eyes. (RN 285)

Christian Cantle, after musing on the biblical role of the snake, wonders aloud: 'Look at his eye – for all the world like a villainous sort of black currant. 'Tis to be hoped he can't ill-wish us! There's folks in heath who've been overlooked already' (RN 285). Whether or not an actual tradition of animals overlooking humans existed, Christian's fear spreads beyond the snake itself: the suggestion that 'there's folks in heath who've been overlooked already' indicates an unknown being or beings possessed of this ability. This is where the form 'overlooked' suggests a wider but less definite fear than the identifiable 'evil eye', for those who have been 'overlooked' do not know who has overlooked them – or whether that person (or animal?) consciously means harm – or whether they have accidentally 'overlooked' themselves. The idea that it is much more unsettling to be looked at by an unidentified than a known watcher aligns with Hardy's portrait of the heath as a kind of panopticon, as Tiffany-Anne Elliott has argued.<sup>87</sup> As with Foucault's description of the paranoia that follows from the *possibility* of being watched, so too the 'overlooked' do not know their enemy – or if there even is one: if 'there's folks in heath who've been overlooked already', who are they, and who has overlooked them? The question of overlooking suggests – like Thomasin's dread of the skimmington ride (RN 48) – a latent fear that may become a reality at any time. This episode demonstrates that pervasive anxiety: while the heathdwellers *hope* the snake does not have this ability, they do not know who has the

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<sup>87</sup> Tiffany-Anne M. Elliott, 'Social Surveillance and the Death of the Deviant: Panopticism in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*', *Hardy Society Journal*, 5.1 (2009), 39-46. The snake's eye, 'like a villainous sort of black currant', seems to concentrate the hostile 'watchful intentness' of Egdon Heath (RN 9).

power to overlook, ill-wish, or look on with the evil eye. They only see the results – or think they do.

Hardy returns to the topic of ‘overlooking’ in ‘The Withered Arm’, when after Gertrude’s arm withers, the story is spread that her mysterious complaint is a result of her having been ‘overlooked’ by Rhoda Brook. Here, the overlooker seems to be known – or at least suspected by the community – but Gayla Steel argues that Rhoda’s son seems to be the one who has first overlooked Gertrude, staring at her on the road ‘as though he would read her through and through’, ‘his hard gaze never leaving her’ (*WA* 332). He watches her at church, too, though his ‘stare’ is hidden amidst the faces of the congregation (*WA* 333).<sup>88</sup> But whether the (unnamed) son or Rhoda has consciously or unconsciously overlooked Gertrude, can never be known – either by the dairy folk or by the reader – and this ambiguity recalls the uncertainty in the instances of suspected overlooking which Hardy recorded from real life. Kristin Brady’s notes to ‘The Withered Arm’ rightly emphasize the assertions made by both J.S. Udal and Charlotte Burne, that the power to overlook may be involuntary, as Hardy himself suggests in the *Life*. Brady quotes Burne’s careful admonition to folklore collectors in her edition of the *Folklore Handbook*: ‘It must be noted that it is not a matter of “art-magic” or “witch-craft” but a supposed natural power inherent in certain persons, whether voluntarily or involuntarily exerted.’<sup>89</sup>

Burne illustrates this with an early nineteenth-century example (rendered in Yorkshire dialect) from Carr’s *Craven Glossary*:

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<sup>88</sup> Gayla Steel, *Sexual Tyranny in Wessex: Hardy’s Witches and Demons of Folklore* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 87.

<sup>89</sup> *The Withered Arm and Other Stories*, ed. by Kristin Brady (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 392; J.S. Udal in *Dorsetshire Folk-lore* describes many cases of ‘overlooking’ in the region, and draws on reports from the *Bridport News*, *Dorset County Chronicle*, and other local newspapers and personal sources to offer a range of stories of people who believed they had been overlooked and the various remedies they sought. Perhaps the most striking remedy, reported in the *Bridport News* in 1884, described a woman who had been seriously ill and was diagnosed by a gypsy as being ‘overlooked’. The gypsy ordered the cure of putting her indoor flowers outdoors, and as the flowers withered, she healed: *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, with a Fore-Say by William Barnes (Hertford: Stephen Austin & Sons, 1922), p. 206. It is possible that this unusual story with its repeated use of the word ‘withered,’ reminded Hardy of the ‘original’ of the ‘Withered Arm’ story, which he would write within the next three years. Hardy also uses this word ‘withered’ in his descriptions of overlooking in the letter to Clodd and in *The Life*.

Look sir, at that pear tree, it were some years back, sir, a maast flourishing tree. Ivvry morning, as soon as he first oppans the door, that he may not cast his e'e on onny yan passin' by, he fixes his een o'that pear-tree, and ye plainly see how it's deed away.<sup>90</sup>

Alan Dundes has confirmed that in many cultures this condition is seen as a 'personal affliction, a misfortune, not the result of evil volition. Where this belief prevails, the effects of evil eyes usually are not deadly. ... the person with the evil eye may try to protect his fellows by shielding his eyes with his own hands in critical situations.'<sup>91</sup> Burne's and Dundes' insights explain Rhoda's condition, in which she has not previously been aware that she had 'powers', and did not intend to use them malevolently. Burne's example of the man who would voluntarily look at the pear tree in order to spare his neighbours, shows the complexity of the phenomenon and its effects.

In spite of the multi-faceted nature of the problem, one standard characteristic is regularly cited. In his essay 'Of Envy', Sir Francis Bacon traces his interpretation of the evil eye as rooted in envy back to scripture. Freud builds on this, and his twentieth-century psychoanalytic explanation seems quickly to have become a standard reference in modern evil eye discourse. As his famous definition in 'The Uncanny' states:

Whoever possesses something at once valuable and fragile is afraid of the envy of others, in that he projects on to them the envy he would have felt in their place. A feeling like this betrays itself in a look even though it is not put into words; and when a man attracts the attention of others by noticeable, and particularly by unattractive, attributes, they are ready to believe that his envy is rising to more than usual heights and that this intensity in it will convert it into effective action. What is feared is thus a secret intention of harming

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<sup>90</sup> Burne, *Handbook of Folklore* (1913), p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> Alan Dundes, *The Evil Eye: A Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), p. 195. For measures on how to prevent one's own blighting powers of the evil eye, see also R.C. MacLagan, *The Evil Eye in the Western Highlands* (London: David Nutt, 1902), pp. 70-75.

someone, and certain signs are taken to mean that such an intention is capable of becoming an act.<sup>92</sup>

Among human subjects Freud's explanation seems convincing, and this interpretation certainly fits the Rhoda-Gertrude relationship in 'The Withered Arm'. Indeed, many readers have interpreted this relationship in Freudian terms, including Kristin Brady, who notes that 'Freud called overlooking one of the most uncanny and wide-spread forms of superstition.'<sup>93</sup> But perhaps not insignificantly, it was 'the evil eye' – not 'overlooking' – that Freud described. It is important to distinguish that Freud spoke in general, 'universal' terms, which diagnose the condition. Whereas the experience of the evil eye may manifest itself in similar ways, whether in Southern Italy or in the West of England, Hardy's descriptions of 'overlooking' ground the experience in a local and intimately known context. Through collective family memory and social experience, he understood what it felt like for a heathdweller to wonder quite who was watching whom, and who (or what) *might* have the ability to overlook. He captured this sense in the limited language of Christian Cantle or Rhoda Brook, who have no access to psychoanalytic theory or Freudian explanation.

As Hardy entered his last years, local stories of overlooking and instances of the evil eye continued to surface in the courts and newspapers in the West of England. So by recording in the *Life* a version which subtly challenges the Freudian as well as Frazerian interpretations, the eighty-year old Hardy continued to demonstrate active involvement in folkloric (re)presentation. By that point he had the blessing of the by now pre-eminent Frazer, who by the 1920s was the force behind the growing popularity of what became known as the Cambridge Ritualists school. In spite of this, Hardy resists analyzing the instance in anthropological, cultural evolutionary, or psychoanalytic terms. In life and in after-life, it seems Hardy continually challenges contemporary theory with the slightest suggestions that phenomena and 'life in general' may be more complex than can be understood by any one diagnosis or interpretation.

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<sup>92</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, XVII 1919; (Reprinted London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), p. 240.

<sup>93</sup> Kristin Brady, *The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 23.

## Sympathetic Magic

Late in Book Fifth of *The Return of the Native*, Susan Nunsuch decides to take action against Eustacia:

She took a few pieces of fresh turf from the chimney-corner and built them together over the glow, upon which the fire had brightened. Seizing with the tongs the image that she had made of Eustacia she held it in the heat, and watched it as it began to waste slowly away. And while she stood thus engaged there came from between her lips a murmur of words.

It was strange jargon – the Lord’s prayer repeated backwards – the incantation usual in proceedings for obtaining unhallowed assistance against an enemy. Susan uttered the lugubrious discourse three times slowly, and when it was completed the image had considerably diminished. As the wax dropped into the fire a long flame arose from the spot, and curling its tongue round the figure ate still further into its substance. A pin occasionally dropped with the wax, and the embers heated it red as it lay. (*RN* 343)

This scene of Susan Nunsuch burning the waxen image of Eustacia Vye may work as a grotesque theatrical device in the novel, but Hardy (through the narrator) assures the reader that this ‘was a practice well known on Egdon at that date, and one that is not quite extinct at the present day’ (*RN* 342). While the date to which Hardy refers is sometime in the 1840s, he recognises that the ‘present day’ for his readership will extend beyond the story’s publication date, as did such actions as Susan’s. But Hardy knew that it was not just on the Egdon Heath of the novel, but throughout Dorset and the West Country that this practice and its variants continued on into the twentieth century. For the reader who wonders what records exist that corroborate Hardy’s claim, this section surveys the tradition and the forms of evidence that shine light on the many forms of this practice.

In nearly every recorded instance in the nineteenth century, this kind of action was defensive: a desperate last resort after the failure of other attempts to cure a loved one, or livestock, from undiagnosable symptoms usually vaguely described as ‘pining away’. Such a course of action was usually taken only after more legitimate methods such as consulting a doctor or parson had failed to work. In 1834 George Roberts of

Lyme Regis said resignedly of the continuance of this tradition, ‘no one now likes to own a belief in evil spirits or witches, but considers it would be a pity to receive harm from neglecting so easy a precaution.’<sup>94</sup> This approach reflects a tendency in human nature to perform whatever ritual is necessary in times of personal desperation when ‘acceptable’ methods fail to work.

It is difficult to pinpoint any one particular source of inspiration for the Susan Nunsuch scene, such as excerpts in Hardy’s *Facts Notebook* or *Literary Notebooks* indicate with other practices like the skimmington ride. Geoff Doel has argued that Hardy found a ‘model’ for the scene in Harrison Ainsworth’s *The Lancashire Witches*.<sup>95</sup> While Hardy did admit to having been a great admirer of Ainsworth as a boy,<sup>96</sup> the references to the waxen images in *The Lancashire Witches* are brief, and lack the intricate description and vitality of *The Return of the Native*. Furthermore the novel is set in the early seventeenth century and well away from Wessex. More to the point, Hardy had more immediate nearby sources of inspiration for Susan Nunsuch. In asserting in 1901 that, ‘You will find women to this day who will make an image of some enemy and either melt it before the fire or stick pins into it’,<sup>97</sup> Hardy admitted the continued existence of this tradition into twentieth-century Dorset.

If one wanted to place Susan’s actions in a Dorset context, a natural starting point might seem to be William Barnes’ oft-quoted ‘Fore-Say’ in Udal’s *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*. In this preface, written in 1885 just before his death, Barnes asserted that ‘there are still, I believe, in Dorset many folk who believe that they have been or may be somewhat the worse for witchcraft.’ For the reader who has just learned that in 1885 many people in Dorset still believed in the power of witchcraft, Barnes’ extended description that follows sounds troubling:

From an old deposition on witchcraft in Dorset, we find that at some meetings which the witches held at night on a common they made a waxen man-shape

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<sup>94</sup> George Roberts, *History of Lyme Regis, Dorset, from the Earliest Periods to the Present Day* (London: Langdon & Harker, 1823), p. 261. Robert’s understanding of this ‘folk’ reasoning echoes Hardy’s mother’s view on infant baptism, that ‘there was no harm in it, and she would not like her children to blame her in after-life for leaving any duty to them undone’: quoted in Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 497.

<sup>95</sup> Doel also claims that the opening bonfire scene ‘clearly’ derives from Ainsworth’s novel. Fran Doel and Geoff Doel, *Folklore of Dorset* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), p. 32.

<sup>96</sup> *CL* 4: 272; Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> William Archer, ‘Real Conversations’, p. 32.



and christened it (*christened* it, forsooth!) with the name of some unhappy man who was to be bewitched; and thereafter he was to be bewitched and his likeness was to be pricked with pins, which would give him the pangs of thorns in his flesh; or his waxen other self was to be holden before a fire, so that at the melting of it he himself would pine away.<sup>98</sup>

It is unclear from this passage quite how ‘old’ the old deposition is, but in a separate paper read to the Dorset History and Antiquarian Field Club, Barnes gave the date of this same ‘old deposition’ as 1650, during the Dorset and Somerset witch trials.<sup>99</sup> Barnes is often regarded as a natural source for Dorset folklore, but in fact, in nineteenth-century accounts, there is very little evidence of witches communally gathered (in a coven), initiating pain against seemingly innocent victims.. Instead, almost all recorded examples tend to describe ‘sympathetic magic’ practiced by people who believed that they themselves, or their family or livestock, were the real victims, and were driven to retaliate against a known or unknown threat. This point is significant in that it blurs the boundaries of belief and resists clear-cut distinctions between ‘witch’ and ‘non-witch’, ‘culprit’ and ‘victim’.<sup>100</sup>

A contemporary instance of the fashioning of wax effigies that demonstrates this kind of desperation was recorded by Hardy’s friend Hermann Lea, describing a specific case with which ‘I am very familiar, and the truth of which I can vouch for’. In this instance a woman’s pigs died one by one of a mysterious illness which baffled the veterinarian; then her fowls died, and lastly her daughter was taken seriously ill with a disease that confounded the doctor. Lea writes:

it was at this juncture that her mother who had hitherto scoffed at the notion,

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<sup>98</sup> William Barnes, ‘Fore-Say’, in Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> William Barnes, ‘On the Maze, or Miz-maze at Leigh, Dorset’, *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 4 (1882), 154-157 (p.156). Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England: 1640-1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), provides further information about the seventeenth century witch trials.

<sup>100</sup> While I would not argue that there were no extant covens in nineteenth-century Dorset, there is no substantial evidence to the effect, as Ronald Hutton and Jacqueline Simpson have established. The point here is that there seems to have been no nineteenth-century ‘witch conspiracy’ of the sort that appears in Hawthorne’s short story ‘Young Goodman Brown’, though Barnes’ example, when not qualified as being from the seventeenth century, might seem to suggest otherwise.

took it into her head that the girl was bewitched, with the result that she paid a visit to a 'wise-woman' with whom I was also well-acquainted, and sought her advice.

The remedy prescribed was for the daughter to wear underneath her clothes a 'small lump of wax, roughly modeled into the form of a woman, the face bearing a distinct likeness to the accused "witch" (her neighbour) who sickened as the girl grew well.' The waxen figure was to be burned as soon as the girl was well in order to complete the ritual.<sup>101</sup> Since Lea lived near to Hardy, it is likely Hardy knew the individuals, especially as Lea sent him a draft of this article in 1903, to which Hardy responded: 'it is singular how these old beliefs survive, though even so long ago as when I introduced some of them into *The Return of the Native*, & other stories, people would hardly credit them as facts.'<sup>102</sup>

Waxen effigies might be used if the supposed perpetrator was known to the victim, but if not, a less specific variant was to stick a candle with pins and melt it in the same way.<sup>103</sup> More frequently, when making an effigy was impossible, animal hearts specifically those of the horse, cow, bullock, pigeon, and pig are all recorded as having been used, though in substitution for a pig's heart bacon could also suffice.<sup>104</sup> Clearly, for some people obtaining an animal heart could rouse suspicion, especially in a small village where nearly everyone knew each other.

An example of an animal's heart used in this way, though it is not specified what kind of animal, appeared in the *Western Gazette* in 24 March 1882. The writer begins: 'the continued existence of superstition among the working classes has been strikingly instanced by a recent occurrence in Wells [Somerset].' As a last resort before a local woman was sent to a lunatic asylum, 'several' of the woman's friends suggested the remedy of first roasting an animal heart in a midnight fire, then leaving it to slowly rot in the chimney. Though the act was carried out the effects are not reported. The writer notes how:

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<sup>101</sup> Hermann Lea, 'Some Dorset Superstitions', pp. 343-346.

<sup>102</sup> *CL* 3: 48.

<sup>103</sup> Abraham Colles, 'A Witch's Ladder', *Folk-Lore Journal*, 5.1 (1887) 1-5, (p. 4).

<sup>104</sup> Roberts, *History of Lyme Regis*, p. 261.

it is surprising, on enquiry, to find the large number of persons who, in this enlightened nineteenth century, believe in the power of certain individuals to exert a spell or ‘cast an evil eye’ on others, and it is still more surprising to find that many of these believers in ‘witchcraft’ occupy respectable positions.<sup>105</sup>

In a time as late as this, 1882, the readers of this story might just as well substitute ‘worrying’ for ‘surprising’, regarding those in ‘respectable positions’. This reserved comment stands in contrast with the strong message in a *Dorset County Chronicle and Somerset Gazette* story that appeared some ten years earlier in 1871 (this will be discussed in the next section on hag-riding).

The bullock’s heart was another variant named by Udal who explains that when placed in the chimney the heart wards against witches, and the efficacy is made more palpable if it is studded with ‘prickles of thorns, nails or pins,’ with the most efficacious being ‘maiden’ thorns – that is, thorns picked in the year that they were first grown. Udal describes one such smoked and almost ‘mummified’ bullock’s heart found in a chimney in Bridport in 1884, and exhibited at a meeting of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club in 1889. He goes on to cite a report in a 1901 edition of the *Bridport News*, where a local chimney sweep discovered his fourth bullock’s heart in recent years.<sup>106</sup> Given the possible stigma attached to being caught with such an ‘effigy’ in one’s chimney, it is likely that householders would remove such a potentially incriminating object before calling the chimney sweep. Assuming this, one wonders how many more hearts would have hung in chimneys when sweeps were not present.

While Udal cites many examples of ‘sympathetic effigies’, none are as rich as one recorded by H. Colley March involving a cow’s heart. Hardy helped edit March’s article, helping him better represent the dialect, though it is difficult to know to what extent he was involved beyond that. It is worth recounting in some detail. The source was Mrs Astell of Piddlehinton, who told how ‘Mitchell’, the village blacksmith, angered his neighbour Mrs Harte, when his wife ran out of milk before Mrs Harte could buy any. Mrs Harte, whose husband was the local policeman, cursed her and walked away muttering, and thereafter the Mitchells’ cow refused to give milk. The

<sup>105</sup> ‘Superstition in Wells’, *Western Gazette*, 24 March 1882, p. 7, col. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 213.

local gardener noted that ‘ther were summat more than common about thic cow’; its condition resembled that of his own cow, who was ‘sarved’ the same way. He then described how when his ailing cow died, he had ‘stuck eleven pins in un, and burned up ... and they that hurted the poor wold beast were took bad and died’. Though the Mitchell family doubted the gardener’s remedy, when their own cow died they summoned him to burn their cow’s heart in the same way. Special three-headed nails were constructed by another blacksmith, who commented: ‘I’ve made many for such work often in the middle o’ night, to make un, for they that comed for un.’ The heart was then bound in wire and hung from the nails,<sup>107</sup> and the windows obstructed with ‘sack-bags’ so that ‘nobody shouldn’t see in’.

Despite the blackened windows, as soon as there ‘busted a spout o’ blood out o’ the heart sort o’ sideways, right out on the kitchen floor’, the family heard ‘the awfulest screechs and noises that ever anybody did hear, just outside our front door’. The screeches belonged to Mrs Harte who then begged Mitchell’s family to come outside and attend to her baby which had suddenly taken ill. When the family entered her house, however, they found the baby sleeping peacefully, attended by her husband, who apologized, explaining that he told the wife she ‘were a fool, and there warn’t nothing the matter’. The Piddlehinton community concluded that Mrs Harte was panged by the burning heart and used the baby as an excuse for the family to leave off the burning ritual; however, Mitchell remained unconvinced, until his wife was taken ‘bad same as the cow,’ as though ‘someone were a pinching o’ her from the inside out’. They then found Mrs Harte lurking on their property repeating something like a charm.

At this point, in desperation, Mitchell consulted a wise-man farmer some twenty-five miles away in Yeovil, who, like Hardy’s conjurors, refused to be paid, despite being reputed to ‘stop a lot of mischie’. When Mitchell arrived the conjuror told him that he ‘knowed what ’twere all about so soon as ever he sot eyes on I’. His prescription was to braid a new hemp cord with strands of red silk and to bind his wife’s pained area with this. This apparently worked, and the wife was said to be better from the same hour onwards, though the Piddlehinton villagers still filed a

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<sup>107</sup> See the Appendix for examples of apotropaic objects with hooks to allow them to be hung in chimneys, etc.

formal complaint against Mrs Harte to the magistrate, who took the matter seriously enough to ensure that Mrs Harte's husband was transferred to another area.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to cows' hearts, a pigs' hearts were sometimes used, according to one Reverend J.C. Mansel-Pleydell, who advised that the heart should be:

stuffed as full of bright, new pins as possible, [then] hung up in the chimney, sufficiently high to escape the chance of being consumed summarily by the flames and to be gradually dried up; when the last pin has dropped out the witch is supposed to have no further hold on the victim.<sup>109</sup>

The need for the pins to be new reaffirms and adapts the underlying idea behind 'maiden thorns' being the strongest, or the 'specially made' nails being required for the ritual.

It is difficult to determine how many of these animal hearts belonged to sick or malignly affected animals. Where hearts were not available, vegetables were sometimes used as an alternative. Edward Tylor had the good fortune to discover a small quantity of onions hidden in the Barley Mow Pub chimney one Sunday afternoon near his home in Wellington, Somerset. At the Second International Folklore Congress he described the incident as it had occurred nearly twenty years before, where, following a gust of wind down the chimney,

a number objects rolled into the room. The men who were there knew perfectly what they were, caught them up, and carried them off. I became possessed of four of them, but three have disappeared mysteriously. One which has gone had on it the name of a brother magistrate of mine, whom the wizard, who was the alehouse-keeper, held in particular hatred as being a strong advocate of temperance, and therefore likely to interfere with his malpractices, and whom apparently he designed to get rid of by stabbing and

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<sup>108</sup> H. Colley March, 'Dorset Folklore Collected in 1897', *Folk-Lore Journal*, 10, (1899), 478-489. Mrs Astell, the source for the story, was the wife of Major General Charles Astell, who served as a Justice of the Peace for Dorset from the 1870s onwards, and is listed along with Hardy as a county magistrate in 1895 about the time the story was recorded. Hardy was cautious about its literal accuracy, writing to Clodd before it was published in the *Folklore* journal, 'who reports the story is, I think, an Irish lady: hence the inaccuracies, no doubt' (CL 2: 202).

<sup>109</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 211.

roasting an onion representing him. My friend, apparently, was never the worse, but when next year his wife had an attack of the fever, there was shaking of heads among the wise.<sup>110</sup>

The onion that Tylor exhibited with this passage was pierced with numerous pins and a label bearing the name ‘John Milton’, who was a shoemaker in the village. Tylor goes on to relate how he had heard of similar discoveries of animal hearts recently found in Wellington chimneys, but that this was ‘the first time of my having ocular proof of such things being still done in England’.<sup>111</sup> The onions were later exhibited at a lecture at the Royal Institute in London in April 1872. As Hardy was working in London at the same time, he could have heard about Tylor’s lecture, which was featured in *The Illustrated London News*.

Tylor was naturally pleased with the timing of this discovery, which followed on the heels of his landmark work *Primitive Culture*. In his own county of Somerset, he had now found direct evidence that ‘the old sorcery of the dark ages still lingers in England’.<sup>112</sup> In the years that followed, he found many such objects around Somerset, Devon, and Dorset, and several of these are still on display in the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford. They constitute a useful form of material evidence that corroborates written accounts of the practice, since by the very nature of the custom a waxen image or effigy will melt or be destroyed, leaving no evidence. Thus the surviving animal hearts offer a better sense of how the practice persisted into the nineteenth century. Three types of these ‘sympathetic’ objects – including one of Tylor’s onions – are pictured in the Appendix of this thesis.

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<sup>110</sup> Tylor’s ironic use of the word ‘wise’ here plays on the understanding that his educated readers would actually regard the villagers’ belief as very foolish and that the villagers who might be insulted would not be reading the proceedings of the International Folklore Congress.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Exhibition of Charms and Amulets’, in *Second International Folklore Congress 1891: Papers and Transactions*, ed. by Joseph Jacobs and A. Nutt (London: David Nutt, 1892), 387-93.

<sup>112</sup> According to Chris Wingfield in ‘Is the Heart at Home? E. B. Tylor’s Collections from Somerset’, *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 22 (2009), 22-38, Tylor was originally from London and moved to Somerset at aged twenty five when he married Anna Fox. Her family owned many homes, and this one at Wellington, was ‘substantial’, with its size and position indicating a strong degree of ‘social distance and hierarchy’. Thus, Tylor’s relationship to the Somerset ‘natives’ was much more distant than Hardy’s relation to the locals of Higher Bockhampton or Egdon Heath.

In acknowledging the adaptability of the custom, it is also important that in *The Return of the Native* the effigy burning is not Susan Nunsuch's first course of action. Udal suggests that since Susan first acts against Eustacia in church (when she stabs her in the arm with a stocking-needle), she is assuming that a divine influence will help her cause, and she readily defends her son as 'a God-fearing boy' (312). But when divine powers fail to intercede on her behalf and her son's illness worsens, she turns to a last resort in calling on 'unhallowed assistance' in counter-charming Eustacia (343). She inverts the Christian order in reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards. The practice of using the Lord's Prayer against a witch was still advocated in Victorian Dorset; Geoff Doel has recorded how Mrs. Stanley Wrench recalled as a child being warned by her nurse, a Dorset woman, to avoid a certain 'wizened old woman in her village who spent her days herb-gathering' who was 'in league with the devil'. The nurse recommended that whenever she came across the witch, she should repeat The Lord's Prayer backwards 'in order to avert evil'. Mrs. Wrench says she remembers working herself into a 'frantic state of fear' trying to remember how to work the spell whenever she came across the woman.<sup>113</sup> What remains unclear, however, is whose help one is seeking in invoking this 'counter-charm'. Wrench's claim that the charm is to avert evil sounds as if holy scripture is working as magic, while Hardy describes the same recitation as invoking 'unhallowed assistance'. This apparent paradox is symptomatic of the complicated nature of the belief.

Perhaps the dubious question of which higher power one is calling on helps to explain why Susan has no qualms about stabbing Eustacia with a needle in church, but is more private about the counter-charm she works at home. As the effigy becomes 'permeated' with pins (343), rainwater begins to penetrate Eustacia's body. Soon after 'the effigy of Eustacia was melting to nothing' (344), the real Eustacia drowns in the weir. The reader is never told of Susan's reaction to the drowning, or of any community intelligence about the parallel between the waxen image and the death. This follows an accepted tradition of silence surrounding many such acts, as Rawlence explained in 1914:

a great deal of superstition and folk-lore still lingers amongst the old

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<sup>113</sup> Doel and Doel, *Folklore of Dorset*, p.113.

inhabitants, but the difficulty is to get behind the scenes in order to find it out, there appears to be a subconsciousness that such dealings are unorthodox, and possibly some fear ridicule. In some cases a saying will only drop out when it just illustrates the circumstance.<sup>114</sup>

Susan's silence is understandable. She may have suffered some ridicule as a result of her unorthodox behaviour in the church; she is also threatened with prosecution by Captain Vye. If he had not dropped the suit, how plausible would her defence have looked to an educated judge in the county town? She might have been mocked, as happened in real life to the hag-ridden defendant and his witnesses discussed in the next section.<sup>115</sup> Accordingly, she consciously chooses to act in secret. The reader never sees her character resolved, or changed: indeed she may well be among 'the number of heath-men and women reclining or sitting at their ease' who humour Clym's Blackbarrow 'Sermon on the Mount' at the end of the novel. Given the framing devices employed, with Clym finally replacing Eustacia as the lone figure atop Blackbarrow and the 'rustic chorus' of the opening chapters returning to Blackbarrow for the final scene, Susan should be present. Richard Jefferies writes in *The Toilers of the Field* of the 'double life' of rural communities:

Not one word of superstition, or ancient tradition, or curious folk-lore, can a stranger extract. The past seems dead...But...this silence is not change: it is a reticence purposely adhered to. By mutual consent they steadfastly refrain from speaking in their own tongue and of their views to strangers or others not of the countryside. They speak to strangers in the voice of the nineteenth

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<sup>114</sup> E.A. Rawlence, 'Folk-lore and Superstitions Still Obtaining in Dorset', *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 35, 81-87, (p. 81).

<sup>115</sup> The equivocal status of belief in the power of effigy burning reappears in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where Michael Henchard wonders if someone is 'roasting a waxen effigy' of him 'or stirring an unholy brew to confound [him]' (177). What at first sounds like paranoia manifests itself in the next chapter as the furmity woman returned; she was previously seen stirring an 'unholy brew' in the form of the rum-laced furmity which prompts Henchard to auction off his wife and child. When she appears in court, she exposes Henchard's past sin, and 'on that day – almost at that minute – he passed the ridge of prosperity and honour, and began to descend rapidly on the other side' (202). Soon after the one with the 'unholy brew' appears from his past, he does find an effigy of himself, which if the skimmington ride had gone as planned would have met a fiery finish.



century, the voice of newspaper, book, and current ideas. They reserve for themselves their own ancient tongue and ancient ideas, their traditions, and belief in the occult. Perhaps this very reservation tends to keep up the past among them. There is thus a double life – the superficial and the real.<sup>116</sup>

The juxtaposition of Susan's continuing life on the heath with the dark secret of her night-time actions is an apt illustration of such a 'double-life'.

### **Hag-riding and 'The Withered Arm'**

But the figure which had occupied her so much during this and the previous days was not to be banished at night. For the first time Gertrude Lodge visited the supplanted woman in her dreams. Rhoda Brook dreamed – since her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed – that the young wife, in the pale silk dress and white bonnet, but with figures shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age, was sitting upon her chest as she lay. The pressure of Mrs Lodge's person grew heavier; the blue eyes peered cruelly into her face; and then the figure thrust forward its left hand mockingly, so as to make the wedding-ring it wore glitter in Rhoda's eyes. Maddened mentally, and nearly suffocated by pressure, the sleeper struggled; the incubus, still regarding her, withdrew to the foot of the bed, only, however, to come forward by degrees, resume her seat, and flash her left hand as before.

Gasping for breath, Rhoda in a last desperate effort, swung out her right hand, seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm, and whirled it backward to the floor, starting up herself as she did so with a low cry.

'Oh, merciful heaven!' she cried, sitting on the edge of the bed in a cold sweat, 'that was not a dream – she was here!'

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<sup>116</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Toilers of the Field* (London: Longmans, 1892), pp. 242-243. Since Jefferies tended to side politically with the masters rather than the toilers, he may indeed have been regarded as a 'stranger' in the community.

She could feel her antagonist's arm within her grasp even now – the very flesh and bone of it, as it seemed. She looked on the floor whither she had whirled the spectre, but there was nothing to be seen.<sup>117</sup>

'The Withered Arm' has often troubled readers both with its portrayal of belief within the story and the kind of belief required by the audience. One of the first people to observe this was Leslie Stephen. It was he who had first suggested that Hardy should write 'an exceedingly pleasant series of stories' which would be, what he called, 'short sketches of Hodge and his ways'.<sup>118</sup> Hardy followed this advice, writing short stories throughout the 1880s, including 'The Withered Arm'. But Stephen was not prepared to accept the way that Hardy presented folk belief in the tale, and it bothered him that it did not conform to accepted literary conventions of suspension of disbelief. Stephen advised:

I don't think that you have exactly hit off the right line of belief. Either I would accept the superstition altogether and make the wizard a genuine performer – with possibly some hint that you tell the story as somebody told it; or I would leave some opening as to the withering of the arm, so that a possibility of explanation might be suggested, though, of course, not too much obtruded. Something, e.g. might have happened to impress the sufferer's imagination, so that the marks would be like the stigmata of the papists. As it is, I don't know where I am. I begin as a believer and end up as a sceptic.<sup>119</sup>

But suspension of disbelief is not the same thing as belief, and Stephen's insistence on a 'right line of belief' troubled Hardy, who viewed this as a 'dull and unimaginative

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<sup>117</sup> *The Withered Arm and Other Stories*, ed. by Brady, p. 335. This is the passage as printed in the serial. Hardy later changed one key phrase, discussed below. Additionally, he titled this section of the short story 'A Vision'; this choice of words undermines the notion that what Rhoda experienced was merely a dream.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from Leslie Stephen to Thomas Hardy, 19 November 1880 (Dorset County Museum), quoted in *The Withered Arm*, ed. by Brady, p. xxiv.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Leslie Stephen to Thomas Hardy, 10 January 1888, in *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, ed. by Frederick William Maitland (London: Duckworth, 1906), pp. 393-394.

example of gratuitous criticism'.<sup>120</sup> He sensed that the sort of approach Stephen urged on him would too easily explain away a folk belief that was drawn from life and that continued into his day. By way of concession to Stephen, he did make five small changes that heighten the internal conflict Rhoda feels in admitting to herself that the experience actually happened. The smallest, but perhaps the most significant of these saw the original line in the serial changed from 'Rhoda Brook dreamed – if her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed', to 'since her assertion ... was not to be believed.'<sup>121</sup> Thus the potentially questionable state of belief in the dairy community becomes more dismissive in the *Wessex Tales* version. As he had done earlier with *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Stephen again succeeded in colouring the portrayal of rural working life in Wessex to suit educated audiences in urban Middlesex. But the effect of the story as a whole is such that even after revision, the nature of belief in Hardy's world is still shown to be uncertain and open to interpretation.

Most recent interpretations of 'The Withered Arm' have employed Freudian or Jungian readings that focus on sexual jealousy. Hardy's ability to drive the psychological elements of the story naturally warrants such readings, but Suzanne Johnson has rightly addressed the issue of approaching the story too symbolically: 'While Rhoda's jealousy is certainly intense, perhaps even pathological, this interpretation does not address the physical marks on Gertrude's arm nor the loud noise heard by the son at the precise moment of Rhoda's "vision"'.<sup>122</sup> Hardy wanted people to know that the story was 'true' and 'based on fact', writing to his publisher William Blackwood: 'I may add that the cardinal incidents are true, both the women who figure in the story having been known to me.'<sup>123</sup> Later he repeated this statement to Florence Henniker, Lady Margaret Wallop, and Rebekah Owen, among others.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> This description comes from a conversation S.M. Ellis (Meredith's nephew) had with Hardy, quoted in Martin Ray, *Thomas Hardy: A Textual History of the Short Stories* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>121</sup> Martin Ray lists and discusses each of these in *Thomas Hardy: A Textual History*, p. 38. I read these revisions slightly differently from Ray, and suggest that they show Rhoda struggling more with questions of reason and belief than in the serial.

<sup>122</sup> Suzanne Johnson, 'Metamorphosis, Desire, and the Fantastic in Thomas Hardy's "The Withered Arm"', *Modern Language Studies*, 23.4. (1993), 131-141 (p. 139).

<sup>123</sup> *CL* 1: 168.

<sup>124</sup> *CL* 2: 172, *CL* 3: 151; Carl J. Weber, *Rebekah Owen and Thomas Hardy*, (Waterville, Maine: Colby College, 1939) p. 70; see also Carl J. Weber, *Hardy and*

Finally, he sought to let his reading audience know the original circumstances of the event, which inspired the story, stating in the 1896 preface to *Wessex Tales*:

Since writing this story some years ago I have been reminded by an aged friend who knew ‘Rhoda Brook’ that, in relating her dream, my forgetfulness has weakened the facts out of which the tale grew. In reality it was while lying down on a hot afternoon that the incubus oppressed her and she flung it off, with the results upon the body of the original as described. To my mind the occurrence of such a vision in the daytime is more impressive than if it had happened in a midnight dream. Readers are therefore asked to correct the misrelation, which affords how imperfect memories insensibly formalize the fresh originality of living fact.<sup>125</sup>

By insisting that these are ‘facts’ which happened ‘in reality’, Hardy sought to further complicate – rather than explain away – the objections felt by readers like Leslie Stephen. But Stephen’s skepticism is entirely characteristic of educated middle-class thinking of the kind which informed how ‘hag-riding’ was approached in the courts of law and the periodical press in nineteenth-century Dorset.

In his *Glossary of the Dorset Dialect*, William Barnes defined ‘hag-rodde’ or ‘hag-ridden’ as a condition wherein ‘the nightmare [is] attributed to the supernatural presence of a witch or *hag*, by whom one is *ridden* in sleep.’ Hermann Lea expanded on this definition in his famous guidebook, *Thomas Hardy’s Wessex*, which offered insight into how hag-riding was understood locally and in ‘The Withered Arm’:

The story brings before us vividly one of the old-time superstitions, which are now fast dying out. The dream, which came to Rhoda, is an incident by no means uncommon, and similar occurrences have been repeatedly brought before the writer of this Guide. By a certain class of people it would perhaps be referred to as a nightmare; amongst the less literate such a dreamer would

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*the Lady From Madison Square* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1952), p. 238.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Preface’, *Wessex Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

describe herself as being ‘hag-rod,’ i.e. hag-ridden.<sup>126</sup> Numberless cases could be quoted where such visitations have occurred, sometimes by day, but generally by night; and doubtless the recorded instances would be much more common, were it not that the sufferers are chary of mentioning the facts, save to those who will be more likely to show sympathy than skepticism.<sup>127</sup>

Given Hardy’s close collaboration with Lea on this work, this description of how hag-riding was viewed in his own culture is likely to have informed the way Hardy thought about portraying it in ‘The Withered Arm’.

Hag-riding was thought to afflict both humans and horses. With horses, the effects of the supposed night-time hag-riding would normally be found in the morning when the horses appeared sweaty and exhausted, as if they had been ridden all night. While hag-ridden horses were often attributed to supernatural causes, as in numerous examples cited by Udal, Lea, and March, the traditional belief could be exploited for illicit purposes. In *The Woodlanders* Fitzpiers is responsible for the horses’ exhaustion, when he covertly travels to see Mrs Charmond at night. Here, the supposedly inexplicable exhaustion of the horses ‘was sufficient to develop a whole series of tales about equestrian witches and demons, the narration of which occupied a considerable amount of time’ (243). That Hardy gives a realistic (though illicit) solution to the puzzle fits with another illicit use of horses which was excused by supernatural ridings: smuggling. Peter Robson and Jeremy Harte have both noted C.V. Goddard’s diaries in the Dorset County Museum which suggest the ‘supernatural’ belief of horses nightly ridden by *fairies* was a ‘euphemism rather than a real deception since farmers were coerced into helping smugglers in the way by threats of rick burning and worse.’<sup>128</sup> Even if those involved in covert operations exploited this belief, importantly, the genuine belief and fear persisted nonetheless.

The belief in hag-riding with people is more complex as there are so many personal accounts that have been recorded. In his article ‘The Nightmare Experience,

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<sup>126</sup> It is worth noting that the ‘kind’ of people who believe in hag-riding would use both the dialect term, and hag-‘rid’ instead of hag-‘ridden’; with skimmington riding, the narrator says ‘skimmington’, but the people who participate (or who personally fear it) say ‘skimmity’.

<sup>127</sup> Hermann Lea, *Thomas Hardy’s Wessex* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 150.

<sup>128</sup> The passage is from the diary of C. V. Goddard, in Packet 3 of the Chideock box, in the Dorset County Museum.

Sleep Paralysis and Witchcraft Accusations’, Owen Davies has traced examples of ‘hag-riding’ throughout the centuries until it would come to be classified as a form of sleep paralysis in the twentieth century.<sup>129</sup> But even into nineteenth-century Dorset, people accused each other of hag-riding, and these accusations were documented in court records and newspapers. One prominent case involving hag-riding was brought to trial in 1871 Dorchester, and the newspaper coverage may well have informed how it would be viewed in the world of ‘The Withered Arm’; the trial caused a ‘little sensation’ and according to the *Dorset County Chronicle* the courtroom was ‘crowded throughout the trial’.<sup>130</sup> The story ran for four columns, and even readers who did not finish the full article would have gleaned from the opening paragraph the prosecution’s strong message, stated in boldly pejorative language: ‘evidence would be given of superstition the prevalence of which could hardly be credible in these days. The case would reveal the grossest ignorance possible.’

In the trial, John Bird, a twenty-three year old farmer from Batcombe, Dorset, was charged with beating Charlotte Griffin, an eighty-five year old woman whom he accused of hag-riding him: ‘I used to see her come into my bedroom window as plain as I can see you now.’ Neighbours testified that Bird had been making violent threats against the woman for some time for having hag-ridden him; finally, angrily stating that ‘she has hag-ridden me three times’, he sought her out in broad daylight in someone else’s house and beat her violently with a stick. Witnesses seemed reluctant to deny the grounds for his actions, and the defence counsel, a Mr. Collins, uneasily explained to the judge: ‘A good many people, I suppose, complain of being hag-ridden.’ This comment angered the judge who exclaimed: ‘You are not going to set up hag-riding as a fact, are you Mr. Collins!’ Mr. Collins replied ‘Well I won’t set up any opinion.’ The judge stated ‘Then we will give it for you’, and made it clear that there was no tolerance for this belief in the county town or the county court.

At this point, the defence changed their approach and suggested the accused was delusional, even calling on Bird’s father and a doctor, who attributed the hag-

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<sup>129</sup> Owen Davies, ‘The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations’, *Folklore* 114.2 (2003), 181-203. Tony Fincham discusses the story from a medical perspective in *Hardy the Physician: Medical Aspects of the Wessex Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 141-5. Narcolepsy was first described medically in 1877.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Singular Superstition – the Bewitched Young Farmer’, *Dorset County Chronicle*, 27 July 1871, pp. 4-5.

riding sensation to ‘delirium’ and ‘weak intellect’ due to an abscess and low-grade fever. The judge became impatient at this, and strongly denounced Bird:

It would never do to allow such an excuse as that you believed this old woman to be a witch; it is gross and ridiculous nonsense, ... I myself doubt very much whether you do believe in it. You have shown no symptoms of a weak intellect, and if I listened to such evidence I should be countenancing nonsense, which it is asserted people believe in this county. I give no countenance to it; I do not believe in any such monomania.

Eventually Bird was found guilty by jury, and the judge strongly affirmed the court’s position: ‘the jury would have neglected their duty if they had found any other verdict than that they have given’; the prisoner was then sentenced to six months hard labour and branded with ridicule.<sup>131</sup>

Given that Hermann Lea and Hardy’s contemporaries continually asserted that ‘many people in this county still believe’, and that the verdict created a sensation in court, it seems probable that Bird’s ‘contemporaries’ – that is, fellow farmers and agricultural labourers – would understand the verdict as a stern warning that such beliefs would not be tolerated, however strong they remained at the local level. Bird’s closing testimony, as reported in the newspaper, sums up this message: ‘This will be a lesson to me. I will never beat her any more whether she hagrids me or not.’ And readers of this story would no doubt come to the same conclusion. But though the judge in the Dorchester court case hoped to effect a change in belief, he may have merely silenced it, making it more difficult to determine how long it endured. In *Tess*, set in the years immediately following Bird’s sentencing, Marian says to the physically exhausted Tess ‘- as if you’d been hagrode!’ (348) While it is unclear from the remark whether Marian believes in hag-riding or merely uses the expression figuratively, the very idea would have carried a stigma. Labourers such as Tess and

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<sup>131</sup> Peter Robson notes this in his thesis on ‘Traditional Culture in Dorset’, but concludes that ‘from the laughter frequently reported in court and the scathing references by the lawyers it seems that belief in hag-riding was not shared by many of Bird’s contemporaries’. But the fact that people laughed does not mean that they or others did not still believe in hag-riding. Significantly, however, the laughter reported in the press in relation to this and comparable cases will have served as a warning to readers: believe in hag-riding and you could be held up to public ridicule, mocked, and punished. Robson, ‘Traditional Culture in Dorset’, p. 151.

Marian, working only a few miles away from Bird's village of Batcombe, would have likely heard (or understood) that belief in hag-riding was now not to be admitted or acted upon.<sup>132</sup>

However, if largely hidden, it was not extinct. As late as 1935 hag-riding was still in living memory, as evidenced by a story told to Marianne Dacombe by the 'late Mrs. Fudge of Marnhull':

As I was standing by my door ... I saw a woman coming down the hill who was a witch or a hag. She saw me laugh at her. After I went to bed that night I felt a weight on my legs, which gradually went upwards to my chest. I screamed, and my son came into the room. As he opened the door, the lump fell off, and I distinctly heard the hag walk down the stairs and out of the door.

Dacombe observes: 'This is an instance of a belief which used to be widely held in the West.'<sup>133</sup> The fact that old Mrs. Fudge came from Marnhull (the model for Tess's village), and was recollecting experiences from a time contemporary with the setting of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, suggests that Marian's comment is more than a merely figurative expression.

Evidently, then, some people continued to believe, but understood that they must keep silent. Someone of Rhoda Brook's class would understand that she could not take action against Gertrude. Similarly, in *The Return of the Native*, when Susan pricks Eustacia with the pin, if Captain Vye had pressed charges – as he originally threatened to do – her defence in a court of law would have looked much like John Bird's did. Faced with the threat of punishment, Susan, and presumably others like her, turns to private and unofficial means of defense. In Rhoda's and Gertrude's cases, since neither the legal system nor conventional medicine would recognize their

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<sup>132</sup> An interesting figurative use of the word occurs in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when Henchard demands Elizabeth-Jane adapt her language to reflect her education: 'when she had not slept she did not quaintly tell the servants the next morning that she had been "hag-rid," but that she had suffered from indigestion.' While this establishes a figurative use of the word, it also hints that Elizabeth-Jane implicitly understands that being 'hag-rid' is not an acceptable belief within the class of society for which she is being groomed. Even if she had been 'hag-ridden' in the very manner that Rhoda Brook had been, Elizabeth-Jane understands the expected social code: that she must attribute the sleeplessness to something socially acceptable like indigestion.

<sup>133</sup> Marian Dacombe, *Dorset Up-Along, Down-Along* (Gillingham, Dorset: Women's Federation Institute, 1935), p. 113.



concerns, whether about the hag-riding or the withered arm, they were forced to turn to desperate ‘folk’ remedies, leading to the grisly climax of the story in the courtyard of the ‘COVNTY GAOL’.

### South’s Tree

‘How long has he complained of the tree?’ asked the doctor of Marty.  
 ‘Weeks and weeks, sir. The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock.’ (*The Woodlanders* 93)

Like Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, the elm tree that causes the death of John South in *The Woodlanders* is introduced in the opening chapter of the novel. But unlike the ‘untameable, Ishmaelitish thing’ that is Egdon Heath, the tree is first described in such innocuous terms that the reader would hardly imagine that the dramatic structure of the novel will hinge upon it. The tree first appears innocently enough: ‘half a dozen dwellings were passed without result. The next, which stood opposite a tall tree, was in an exceptional state of radiance, the flickering brightness from the inside shining up the chimney and making a luminous mist of the emerging smoke’ (9). However, this luminosity is the result of Marty South’s nocturnal labour, undertaken because of her father’s incapacity, exacerbated by an obsession with this very tree. John South reasons, ‘I should be all right by to-morrow if it were not for the tree!’ and ‘the tree will do it – that tree will soon be the death of me’ (14). Throughout the first volume of the three volume edition, South’s ‘craze’ as Marty calls it, worsens and worsens, culminating in a self-fulfilling prophecy of regret and doom:

Ah, when it was quite a small tree, he said, and I was a little boy, I thought one day of chopping it off, with my hook to make a clothes-line prop with. But I put off doing it, and then I again thought that I would; but I forgot it, and didn’t. And at last it got too big, and now ’tis my enemy, and will be the death of me. Little did I think, when I let that sapling stay, that a time would come when it would torment me, and dash me into my grave. (91)

When Fitzpiers, the new doctor, is summoned, ‘so modern a man in science’ (145), he deems the condition ‘an extraordinary case’, though Marty says that ‘Others have been like it afore in Hintock’ (93). It seems that Hardy based his account of South’s fixation on some real occurrence known to him. Henry James Moule, director of the Dorset County Museum, mentioned in a letter to Hardy the recent killing of a certain hare in Dorchester, and the folk belief that punishment was fated to follow (which it supposedly did). Moule continued: ‘I can imagine you taking this very strange occurrence up, as you did with South’s elm-tree totem in *The Woodlanders*.’<sup>134</sup> Evidently Moule, who came from a Dorset family and had grown up with the culture of the county, recognized this kind of incident as having some traditional basis. There seems to be no letter from Hardy identifying the source for the elm story, but Moule’s implication that there was indeed such a source corroborates Hardy’s claim that ‘every superstition, custom, &c., described in my novels may be depended on as true records of the same ... & not inventions of mine.’<sup>135</sup>

Moule’s use of the word totem perhaps owed something to J.F. MacLennan, who popularized the term in an article on ‘The Worship of Animals and Plants’ which appeared in two parts in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1869-1870. The term was further popularized with Frazer’s monograph *Totemism*, published in the same year as *The Woodlanders* (1887). Both of these works were in turn indebted to Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*; Moule’s use of the term ‘diagnoses’ South’s condition in contemporary anthropological terms. Andrew Radford has followed Moule’s line of reasoning, and views the relationship of South and tree according to a Frazerian definition: ‘a totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relationship.’ Radford goes on to read South’s condition as exemplifying Tylor’s description of the ‘tree-worship [that] stubbornly persists in remote rural settlements’.<sup>136</sup> But it is important to notice that South does not worship the tree: he regards it with suspicion and later dread, but he takes no actions in the text which can be construed as ‘worship’. Furthermore, in spite of Moule’s perhaps casual use of the term ‘totem,’ Frazer’s definition would mean all elms (‘every member of

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<sup>134</sup> *The Personal Writings of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Harold Orel (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 71.

<sup>135</sup> *CL* 2: 54.

<sup>136</sup> Radford, *Survivals of Time*, p. 146.

the class’) should hold sway over South. In ‘The Worship of Animals and Plants’, MacLennan went on to explain that a totem is any animal or plant with a special relationship to ‘every one in that family’. But no one else in South’s family has a similar fixation. Taken together, that South’s condition does not fit the ‘totem’ definition, that Marty says there have been others with similar conditions in Hintock, and that Henry Moule assumed Hardy must have based it on a real-life example, makes it seem likely that Hardy was writing about a genuine local case, rather than drawing from work by MacLennan or other anthropologists.

Critics have tended to view South’s condition in symbolic terms, in which his thinking represents an outmoded, irrational way of seeing the world. Mary Jacobus has described his relationship to the tree as an obsessive *idée fixe* that characterises life in Little Hintock: ‘where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises, and results in inferences wildly imaginative.’<sup>137</sup> Building on Jacobus’ premise, Sinead Garrigan-Mattar has suggested that South’s condition represents a fetichistic fixation – similar to Henchard’s fear that someone is roasting his effigy – rather than an example of any supernaturalism.<sup>138</sup> Andrew Radford reads it as a ‘parody’ of Giles’ communion with the trees.<sup>139</sup> But while it is clear that Hardy has not suggested a literal element of supernaturalism, it is important to consider that South’s obsession is not unfounded, but stands in an a long-established tradition of fear of elm trees that continued into Hardy’s day.

Traditionally, elm wood has been used since the Middle Ages in building coffins and gallows, so that Richard Richens, elm historian and former director of plant breeding and genetics at Cambridge, has claimed ‘the association of elm with burial has become irrevocable’.<sup>140</sup> Coupled with this macabre association, a traditional fear of elm trees is rooted in the elm’s natural tendency to shed heavy branches unexpectedly, which not infrequently fall on humans or animals sheltering underneath,<sup>141</sup> and Ritchens has observed that the English elm is particularly noted for

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<sup>137</sup> Mary Jacobus, ‘Tree and Machine’, *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Dale Kramer (London: Macmillan, 1979), 116-134, (p. 125).

<sup>138</sup> Sinead Garrigan-Mattar, ‘The Return of the Native: Animism, Fetichism, and the Enchanted Heath’, *Thomas Hardy Journal* 24 (2008) 4-22 (p. 7).

<sup>139</sup> Radford, *Survivals of Time*, p. 147.

<sup>140</sup> Richard H. Richens, *Elm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 102.

<sup>141</sup> Donald Watts, *Elsevier’s Dictionary of Plant Lore* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), p. 135.

this.<sup>142</sup> In folk culture, this ominous tendency was attributed to an innate quality of the elm of being sinister and hostile, as illustrated by the proverbs: ‘Ellum hateth man and waiteth’ (a line which Rudyard Kipling incorporated into his poem ‘A Tree Song’), with a later variant: ‘Every elm has its man.’ The spirit of these proverbs appears throughout folklore and literature, where elms are portrayed as lying in wait, pre-meditating their ‘kill’. In Richard Jefferies’ children’s book *Wood Magic*, which appeared six years before *The Woodlanders*, one character warns: ‘elms are so patient, they will wait sixty or seventy years to do somebody an injury.’ He goes on to say, ‘I have known a tree, when it could not drop a bough, fall down altogether when there was not a breath of wind, nor any lightning, just to kill a cow or a sheep, out of sheer bad temper.’<sup>143</sup>

The folkloric tradition of elms – and ‘sympathetic’ trees generally – is rich and varied. In her seminal work on *The Folklore of Somerset*, Ruth Tongue writes of an elm in North Somerset growing from the burial mound of a Saxon chieftain who died in a particularly bloody battle. As a result, if cut with a knife this uncanny elm supposedly ‘bleeds’, but if cut incorrectly it is said that the assailant will soon die himself.<sup>144</sup> Another elm in Credenhill, Herefordshire, known as the ‘Prophet’s Elm’, was reputed to have shed a limb in anticipation of the death of each member of the Eckley family,<sup>145</sup> though other types of trees have been associated with this belief as well. Ruth Firor writes of an earlier instance of such ‘lifeindex’ trees: when Lady Jane Grey was beheaded, her oaks at Bradgate Hall are said to have died in consequence, and J.S. Udal recorded the Dorset belief that when bee swarms settle on the dead branch of a tree this portends death.<sup>146</sup>

While elm has a reputation for hostility towards humans and animals, it has been said to have sympathy with other elms. Ruth Tongue records the belief in Muchelney, Somerset, as late as 1953, that ‘elm is believed to pine for its fellows. If

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<sup>142</sup> Richens, *Elm*, p. 121.

<sup>143</sup> Richard Jefferies, *Wood Magic: a Fable* (London: Longman, 1907), p. 51.

<sup>144</sup> Ruth L. Tongue, *Forgotten Folktales of the English Counties* (London: Routledge, 1970) p. 222.

<sup>145</sup> Richard H. Richens, p.121; Ella Mary Leather, *The Folk-Lore of Herefordshire* (London: Norwood, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> Firor, Ruth. *Folkways in Thomas Hardy*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931; repr. New York: Perpetua, 1962). p. 278; Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 246.

two trees out of four are cut down the remaining two will die.<sup>147</sup> A sympathetic quality of elms is their purported ability to heal: elm trees have been found with hair and nails ('soul substance') hammered into them in order to effect a cure for ague or similar ailments.<sup>148</sup>

Given this cluster of association with elms, and their tendency to suddenly drop fatal boughs, South's fear is grounded in a respect for a genuine natural process. Though the tree was just a sapling when he was a boy, now it has grown so large that it stands at a distance of 'two-thirds its own height' from the house (91), so that if the tree or any branches do fall, they are in a position to pierce the thatch or protrude through the windows – possibly even impaling South in his window-seat. The story begins in late autumn or early winter, and a few snowflakes threaten 'imminent winter' (50). Freezing temperatures will only increase the real likelihood for the tree's boughs to freeze and snap or cave under the weight of snow. That the elm has gone so long without injuring anyone only adds to the ominous possibility of the inevitable invoked by Richard Jefferies: that elms may wait sixty or seventy years before acting. South is fifty-five, and like Tess Durbeyfield, he sees a 'long line of tomorrows' leading up to the increasingly inescapable.

The only way to keep this from happening is to poll the elm, or cut off the highest branches that could fall and do harm. But South has become so preoccupied with the possibility of danger and Marty so preoccupied with her enforced role as breadwinner, that while the tree should be polled, Marty is instead. Hardy uses the word 'poll' three times to describe Marty's head after her haircut (37, 58, 83) and he also refers to 'pollards' – trees that have been polled (31). William Barnes' *Glossary* defines 'polling' as referring to a tree 'having its head polled or shorn off,' and as an example he quotes Ezekiel 44:20: 'They shall only poll their heads.' But, since the Ezekiel context is about Israelite priests, Barnes here 'animates' the trees by association. His poem, 'Vellen o' the Tree', also animates the elm tree in an anthropomorphic way. First published in the *Dorset County Chronicle* in the year of Hardy's birth, it may have even influenced or reaffirmed Hardy's own sense of the kinship between man and tree:

Ees, we took up a rwope an' we tied en al' round

<sup>147</sup> Tongue, *Folklore of Somerset*, p. 26.

<sup>148</sup> 'Beaumont's Tree', *Folklore* 56.3 (1945) p. 307 (no author given).

At the top o'n, wi' woone end a-hangin to ground,  
 An' we cut, near the ground, his girt stem a'most drough,  
 An' we bent the wold head o'n wi' woone tug or two;  
 An' he sway'd all his limbs, an' he nodded his head,  
 Till e' vell away down like a pillar o' lead:  
 An' as we did run vrom en, there, clwose at our backs,  
 Oh! his boughs come to groun wi' sich whizzes an' cracks;  
 An' his top wer so lofty that, now he is down,  
 The stem o'n do reach a'most over the groun'.  
 Zoo the girt elem tree out in little hwome-groun'  
 Wer a-stannen this mornen, an' now's a-cut down.<sup>149</sup>

Beyond the folkloric traditions, though, a more psychological route to South's condition is the suggestion of the gaze. *The Woodlanders* opens with the unsettling possibility of the gaze: the narrator describes the 'physiognomy of the deserted highway' (5). Thus the face of the road itself is being watched and studied. Adjacent to the road, according to the narrator, one would not feel lonely, but 'to step into the deserted thoroughfare – and pause amid its emptiness for a moment, was to exchange by the act of a single stride the simple absence of human companionship for an incubus of the forlorn' (5). Thus the mere possibility of being watched on this empty 'face' of a stage brings an oppressive sensation like that caused by an incubus – an unbodied non-entity with the ability to gaze. But the elm is embodied in a way that the psychological sensation on the thoroughfare is not. As a child, South is vaguely aware of the threat associated with the tree, and he 'thought one day of chopping it off ... But I put off doing it, and then I again thought that I would; but I forgot it, and didn't. And at last it got too big, and now 'tis my enemy, and will be the death of me' (84). His resulting pathological condition, which is diagnosed by the narrator as 'apparently' a 'fear ... rather than any organic disease' (84) could be characterized by the general symptoms often described as pining away – the phrase used when one becomes inexplicably ill and refuses food, but no medical cause can be determined. As has been argued above, when in nineteenth-century Dorset people and animals were found pining away the cause was thought to be that they had been overlooked by

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<sup>149</sup> *William Barnes, the Dorset Poet*, ed. by Chris Wigley (Wimborne: the Dovecote Press, 1984), p. 67.

someone, whether the overlooker intended harm or not.<sup>150</sup> South, transfixed, returns the tree's gaze, refusing to 'look anywhere else but out the window, and [will] scarcely have the curtains drawn' (93), so that the elm tree may be 'overlooked' by him as he is by the elm. They appear to have entered a symbiotic relationship: as South pines away, growing weak and gaunt, so too does the elm, first as winter wears on and then after Giles has shrouded it: 'Taller the tree certainly did seem, the gauntness of its now naked stem being more marked than ever before' (91).

Ironically, because of South's submission to the gaze of the elm, he becomes the object of the medical gaze in the form of Fitziers. Fascinated by his condition, the non-native Fitzpiers views it as an 'extraordinary case', unaware of the local precedents that Marty remembers (93). Ostensibly, Fitzpiers' order to cut down the tree comes from a desire to cure South, but considering the calculating strategies he adopts to acquire brain tissue, a reader might wonder if his careless action is driven by an underlying desire to acquire a brain more expediently than the one he has bought from the still living Grammer Oliver.

South's death as a result of the tree (and exacerbated by Fitzpiers) 'weighs upon [Grammer's] mind' and brings about a psychosomatic illness similar to South's, as she confesses: 'John South's death of fear about the tree makes me think that I shall die of this' (109). Fitzpiers' medical gaze follows South to the cellular level, studying his brain tissue under the microscope (133); meanwhile Grammer Oliver in her turn pines away, and begs Grace to nullify the ominous compact, pleading 'If you only knew how he do chevy me round the chimmer in my dreams you'd pity me' (109).<sup>151</sup> Fitzpiers teasingly frames Grammer's fear in Faustian terms: 'You think there was something very fiendish in the compact, do you not Miss Melbury?' But he fails to recognize the ominous power of the medical gaze – the 'unessential observer' (117) – that drives Grammer's paranoia.<sup>152</sup> Even Fitzpiers' rebuttal (as she imagines it) is couched in the language of observation: 'A lonely person like you, Grammer, 'er woll say; "what difference is it to ye when the breath's out of your body?"' (109) The

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<sup>150</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 205, Firor, *Folkways*, pp. 83-94.

<sup>151</sup> Fitzpiers' pursuit of Grammer in her dreams recalls hag-riding, though Fitzpiers, as a member of a 'highly respectable class', would not be suspected in literal hag-riding.

<sup>152</sup> There is a class element here that suggests an accepted premise of observation and for scientific or 'social scientific' enquiry: Fitzpiers can freely gaze at Grammer because she is of 'the folk.'

implication is that since she is alone, no one will 'see' her remains donated to science. But the thought of Fitzpiers' medical gaze following her after death is enough to make her beg for Grace's help: 'If I were a young lady and could save a poor old woman's skellington from a heathen's chopper, to rest in a Christian grave, I would do it, and be glad to' (110). In reclaiming her tissues from 'science', Grammer ensures that she will not be subjected to the gaze against her will, especially by a man who laughingly invites eyes other than those belonging to scientists or doctors to gaze upon South's brain tissue, all under the unlikely guise of reconciling the 'study of physiology and transcendental philosophy' (119).

Hardy interweaves this folkloric elm tradition with more immediate tensions within folk culture. The progressive man of science does not have the right kind of knowledge for survival in Hintock, and this lack of knowledge ultimately destroys John South. If the people of Hintock had sought the council of a white witch or conjuror (of the kind Hardy had alluded to in his correspondence with Clodd about the 'blasting influence' of the eye), South might have overcome his paranoia about being 'overlooked', or at least combatted it according to traditional methods. But for Hintock, outgrowing its 'earlier incarnation of village civilization', the old conjuror is replaced by the new man of science, and with him go not only the old ways, but John South, the elm tree, Giles, and eventually Marty.



### Chapter Three: Acts of Disapproval: Skimmington Riding

‘What do they mean by a skimmity-ride?’ he asked.

‘Oh, sir’, [...] ’tis a foolish old thing they do in these parts, when a man’s wife is – well, not too particularly his own. But as a respectable householder I don’t encourage it.’ (*The Mayor* 241)

Skimmington rides in Hardy’s Wessex often arose as public manifestations of private fears. Frequently Hardy’s characters worry just who might be watching, judging, or cursing them. Those who were uncertain quite how they were viewed within their community lived with an awareness that the skimmington ride could become a reality at any time. It stood as a ready tool for social censure – a way for neighbours to band together and mockingly denounce those who were supposed to have transgressed the boundaries of public decency in some way.

In nineteenth-century Dorset, skimmington rides typically featured effigies and rough music (cacophonous banging on pots and pans) and they continued to appear from time to time until at least 1917.<sup>153</sup> In other parts of the country, isolated versions of the skimmington ride persisted well into the twentieth century – as late as 1930 in Woodley, Berkshire, with later, modified versions taking place in the 1950s and ‘70s, ‘80s, and even ‘90s in other areas.<sup>154</sup> Historians and folklorists generally consider the skimmington ride as descended from the medieval charivari, though some have traced its roots to the ancient world.<sup>155</sup> Versions of this custom exist under various names: ‘rough music’ (referring to the ride itself as well as the music that accompanied it), ‘riding the stang’ (a term primarily used in the North of England and Scotland, a ‘stang’ being a wooden pole or beam), ‘hussitting’, ‘ran-tanning’, ‘tin-canning’, ‘stag hunt’, and ‘skimmington ride’ or simply ‘skimmington’ as well as

<sup>153</sup> Samuel Chew, *Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist* (London: Longman, 1921), p. 113.

<sup>154</sup> Graham Seal, ‘A “Hussitting” in Berkshire, 1930’, *Folklore*, 98 (1987), 91-94; Jacqueline Simpson, *Folklore of Sussex* (London: Batsford, 1973), p. 93-94; Graham Seal, ‘Azaria Chamberlain and the Media Charivari’, *Australian Folklore*, 1 (1987), 68-95; E.P. Thompson reminds readers that in Britain processions featuring the burning of effigies are ‘by no means extinct today’, in ‘Rough Music Reconsidered’, *Folklore*, 103 (1992), 3-26 (p. 19).

<sup>155</sup> Violet Alford, ‘Rough Music or Charivari’, *Folklore*, 70 (1959), 505-518 (p. 507). Alford cites Plutarch’s description of an adulterous woman forced to ride a donkey through town as shaming punishment.

‘skimmerton’, ‘skymyty’, and ‘skimmity.’<sup>156</sup> The common function with all these forms was to serve ritualistic punishment for actions that violated social decorum, according to the judgment of the ‘folk’ community; the skimmington thus stood as an available alternative to the uncertainty and expense of recourse to the law, or in cases where no legal redress was possible.

Centuries before Jeremy Bentham would design his formal model of the Panopticon – with its ability to effect good behavior simply because inmates might *think* that they were being watched – the church had accomplished much the same thing through admonishing parishioners to keep a watchful eye on their neighbours. Ronald Hutton has described fifteenth and sixteenth-century church court archives as strongly embodying a sense that

unorthodox religious or moral beliefs by individuals threatened the whole community to which they belonged, by tempting divine wrath. It was therefore the duty of residents to spy upon their neighbours and to report any reprehensible activities or word of theirs in order to maintain the safety and health of all.<sup>157</sup>

One instance of this, which occurred in 1539 Bristol, Hutton describes as ‘entirely typical’: a young woman, Margery Northall, was sued for breach of promise in her engagement. Though the couple had thought that they courted privately, witnesses appeared as if from nowhere, who had observed every aspect of the courtship and determined that the woman was in the wrong.<sup>158</sup> Thus the collective watchful eye of her neighbours functioned to uphold the ‘morality’ of the community. But whether the community’s feared outcome was merely a disruption in the stability of the social order or in the more alarming possibility of divine wrath, the ‘tool’ – that is, the communal watchful eye – remained the same.

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<sup>156</sup> It is necessary to know the local name for the practice. If one seeks to find evidence of ‘skimmingtons’ in Somerset, for example, very little evidence will appear when looking through digitized British newspaper databases. But if one realizes that they are called (and recorded as) ‘skimmertons’ in Somerset, many reports of the practice in that county will turn up.

<sup>157</sup> For this statement Hutton draws on several historical studies in ‘How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?’, *Folklore*, 122 (2011), 235-249 (p. 240).

<sup>158</sup> Hutton, ‘How Pagan Were Medieval English Peasants?’, p. 240.

It is within this context that the skimmington ride flourished. Many examples from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries show that the church and government sanctioned or at least tolerated these shaming processions as a sort of ‘rough justice’ that served to strengthen communal values. Historically, the majority of occasions that warranted these processions had to do with shrewish wives who publicly disgraced their husbands, often by beating or publicly upbraiding them. In theory then, the skimmington punished this behaviour, but even then skeptics had noted how instead, they further humiliated an already weak husband, rather than strengthening him, without publicly chastening the ‘shrew’,<sup>159</sup> since typically the husband alone was made to ride the stang or pole, and paraded around the town or village. Not only the husband, but also a male next-door neighbour could become the target, if he did not intercede when his neighbour’s wife upset the social order; many observers were dismayed that the ‘perpetrator’, the woman, typically went unpunished. One example of this sixteenth-century approach is recorded in John Brand’s *Popular Antiquities*:

If this be all the punishment your wives have, that beate their simple husbandes, it is rather a boldning them than a discouraging of some bolde and shameless dames to beate their simple husbandes, to make their neighbours (whom they spite) to ride on a cowle-staffe, rather rejoising and fleating at the riding of their neighbours than sorrowing or repenting for beating their husbandes.<sup>160</sup>

Criticism that this would embolden, rather than tame the shrew, while at the same time humiliate the men, perhaps led to the ritual being adapted, and the replacement of the living victims with effigies. A visual representation of this sixteenth-century approach, involving the neighbor, is still on display at Montacute House, Somerset, built by Sir Edward Phelips, Speaker of the House of Commons, in 1580.<sup>161</sup> A frieze in the main hall depicts a skimmington procession taking place over a series of panels,

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<sup>159</sup> John Brand, ‘Skimmington Riding’, in *Popular Antiquities: Faiths and Folklore: A Dictionary*, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt, 2 vols (London: Reeves & Turner, 1905) II, p. 551; C.R.B. Barrett, ‘Riding Skimmington and Riding the Stang’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, New Series, 1 (1895), 58-68, (p. 64).

<sup>160</sup> Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, II, p. 551.

<sup>161</sup> M.J. George, ‘The Skimmington Ride Revisited’, *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 10 (2002), 111-127 (p. 12).

showing the basis for the ride, and then the victim paraded around the town. In 1908 the owner Edward Phelps described the scene to the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club on their visit to the house:

the master of the house [is] helping himself to beer with one hand, while with the other he nurses the baby. His wife is just about to chastise him with her shoe, while an interested neighbour is watching the proceedings from the background. The sequel is also shown, when the poor man is paraded round the village, exposed to public ridicule for his inability to keep his wife in order.<sup>162</sup>

It is unclear whether the neighbour is interested because he is offended and plans to report the couple, or whether he is worried that because he has been unable to keep them in check he might receive the punishment of the skimmington ride himself.<sup>163</sup> At any rate, it is significant that the neighbour *sees*, for this is what warrants the ride – offending the sense of public decency and setting a bad example for the youth of the community.

Skimmington rides remained popular in both urban and rural locations throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with many having been recorded as occurring in London. By the nineteenth century, however, their popularity had begun to wane, and antiquarians (and later, folklorists) began to record and catalogue the qualities of the skimmington and the circumstances that warranted it. In 1822, Sir Walter Scott explained in a footnote in his novel *The Fortunes of Nigel*, which was set in seventeenth-century London, that skimmington riding had been ‘long discontinued in England.’<sup>164</sup> Scott’s brief comment emphasizes the discrepancy between what seemed to have been ‘long discontinued’ in London and what continued in the outlying counties, particularly in the West of England.

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<sup>162</sup> See Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 196. A full version of Phelps’ speech appears under the title ‘Montacute House’ in the *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club* (Winter Session, 1907-08), where he jokingly likens the shrew in the frieze to a twentieth-century suffragette.

<sup>163</sup> Hardy visited Montacute House in 1903, years after he had portrayed the skimmington ride in *The Mayor*. See *CL* 3: 74-75.

<sup>164</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, ed. by Frank Jordan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 232 (Ch. 21).

Scott's misapprehension provoked George Roberts, of Lyme Regis, Dorset, to write to him, explaining that 'skimmington riding has never grown into disuse in the West of England but takes place whenever occasion for so salutary an example is a public sense and so disgraceful a punishment for the individual is afforded.' Roberts' letter, written in 1828 and based on West Country examples, describes at length the kinds of conditions that warrant a skimmington ride, how they were staged, and the effects of a skimmington ride on the community. Having personally witnessed many such rides, and interviewed participants who had cumulatively participated in over fifty of them, Roberts admitted that the custom is 'a great moral agent not perhaps so much in restraining the vicious as in causing them to avoid public observation.' Roberts was aspiring to hold public office, and it is interesting to note his reasoning as to how a mayor or someone responsible for local law enforcement should approach this form of unofficial rough justice. He goes on to describe to Scott how the skimmington 'brands with infamy' and 'exposes to lasting ridicule' those who are the object of it. 'A skimmington makes many laugh, but the parties for whom they ride never lose the disgrace which it attaches.'<sup>165</sup>

In reply, Scott admitted familiarity with the similar practice he called 'Riding the Stang': 'We had, or perhaps I might say still have a similar ritual of popular interference in Scotland, in case of gross scandal or nuptial transgressions and public quarrels in a household.'<sup>166</sup> His uncertainty as to whether the custom still existed or not may be owing to the ability of the skimmington to lie 'dormant' for some time – as it had apparently done for ten years in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, prior to the one staged in the novel, and was to do so again for some thirty years in 1930s Berkshire.<sup>167</sup> Nearly seventy years after Scott's initial claim that the custom had been 'long discontinued', it was again claimed, this time by C.R.B. Barrett at a meeting of

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<sup>165</sup> George Roberts, 'Letter (draft) from George Roberts to Sir Walter Scott', Dorset History Centre County Archives. D.1/OV/1. 1828. George Roberts was mayor of Lyme Regis in the 1840s and 1850s and died in 1860; there are no records of correspondence between him and Hardy.

<sup>166</sup> As reprinted in Udal's *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p.194. Original letter from Scott to Roberts dated 2 August 1828. National Library of Scotland. Ref. 7740. <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/scott/full.cfm?id=21714>. Additionally Elizabeth Gaskell provided background information on 'Riding the Stang' for Howitt's *The Rural Life of England*. See Carol A. Martin, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Contributions to the Works of William Howitt', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 40 (1985), 94-100.

<sup>167</sup> Seal, 'A Hussitting in Berkshire', p. 91

the British Archaeological Association in 1895, to be a ‘now obsolete custom’.<sup>168</sup> Barrett’s assumption may have been in part due to court rulings of 1882 that apparently determined the skimmington ride to be illegal under the 1835 Highway Act,<sup>169</sup> but though the Highway Act was amended several times by Parliament, including in 1882, none of the amendments address gatherings like the skimmington ride,<sup>170</sup> so it is possible that many of those people who continued the tradition were unaware of whether they were breaking the law, especially given that many local authorities apparently tolerated the custom.

While hardly obsolete, the skimmington ride lived on within a culture far removed from that of the British Archaeological Association. But its public profile had begun to diminish by the nineteenth century, and though instances continued, Victorians began to express concern over their effect on their communities. In 1884 one official from Okeford Fitzpaine, Dorset was quoted in the *Dorset County Chronicle* as saying that a recently staged skimmington indicated ‘a very discreditable state of things in the village’.<sup>171</sup> Other Victorian accounts expressed similar disapproval and a sense of anxiety about the continued role of skimmingtons in their areas. Perhaps one cause of the growing tension was the development of the use of effigies rather than the actual victims, who had originally formed the living centrepiece of the mocking procession. For the victim to ride the stang, or plank, physical aggression was required by the mob to force the victim into this position, and for the victims to keep their balance in spite of painful chafing (or worse) suffered as a result.

With the substitution of effigies, however, even as the intended victim escaped physical injury, the possibilities for psychological injury grew, as the non-living effigy could be ‘tortured’ and even ‘executed’ while the living victim watched from a distance. Perhaps the most common trait shared by nineteenth-century skimmington rides was the burning of the effigy. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the *Dorset County Chronicle* issues that Hardy studied for source material contain numerous references to effigy burning. William Greenslade has noted one remarkable

<sup>168</sup> C. R. B. Barrett, ‘Riding Skimmington and Riding the Stang’, p. 68.

<sup>169</sup> Firor, *Folkways in Thomas Hardy*, p. 241.

<sup>170</sup> ‘Highway Act of 1835’, [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk), *The National Archives*, 1835 Chapter 50 5 and 6 Will 4, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Will4/5-6/50?timeline=true>, 31 August 1835.

<sup>171</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 196.

story that appeared next to a newspaper article transcribed into Hardy's *Facts* notebook, though this entry seems to have been excised.<sup>172</sup> The account reads:

Last week, the wife of a seaman at Sunderland chastised a stepson rather severely, and the neighbours were in consequence about to burn her in effigy. As the figure was approaching her house, a person informed her of the circumstance; which so affected the woman, that she fell down in a fit of apoplexy, and expired. She was advanced in pregnancy, and the child was extracted, but it lived only a short time.

The similarity to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is evident: the pregnant Lucetta, on seeing her effigy in the skimmington, also suffers from an epileptic fit and soon dies, and Greenslade has convincingly argued that this story formed the basis for Hardy's account.<sup>173</sup> That the woman in the newspaper account was so advanced in her pregnancy indicates that her neighbours knew she was pregnant, but even so were not willing to exempt a woman with child. The painful association with mother, child, and burning effigy also recalls *The Return of the Native*, where Susan Nunsuch collaborates with her son in roasting Eustacia Vye's effigy. Thus whether willing or not, children became accomplices, in the spirit of the communal understanding of the ominous biblical verse invoked in *Far From the Madding Crowd*: 'the sins of the parents are visited upon the children' (82).<sup>174</sup>

A more local account in the *Dorset County Chronicle* in 1827 describes a man named Taylor who had reported a fellow villager for selling cider without a license. He was apparently disliked by the community, and they made their feelings known.<sup>175</sup> The account states: 'A mob in consequence assembled, (among whom the prisoners were prominently active) who shouted out before Taylor's house, threatened destruction upon all informers, and burnt Taylor in effigy.' In this instance, Exeter Assizes supported the law rather than local rough justice, and sided with Taylor. Even

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<sup>172</sup> *Thomas Hardy's 'Facts' Notebook*, ed. by William Greenslade (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 338: hereafter cited as '*Facts' Notebook*.

<sup>173</sup> '*Facts' Notebook*, p. 338. Tony Fincham suggests that Lucetta suffers an eclamptic fit, in which such symptoms as 'ringing in the ears' and 'a sense of terror' echo the description of the skimmington-rise: see *Hardy the Physician*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>174</sup> Hardy also quotes this verse in the seduction scene in *Tess*, p. 82.

<sup>175</sup> The date is given in the Appendix as 1826; in the main text it is correctly stated as 1827. 'Exeter Assizes', *Dorset County Chronicle*, 2 August 1827, p. 3, col. 3.

as Hardy was studying these historical accounts for source material for *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, skimmington rides and effigy burnings were still taking place in 1880s Dorset. One of the most prominent of these occurred on 5 November 1884, and involved three villages in the parish of Whitchurch Canonorum, three miles west of Bridport. *The Bridport News* reported at length on it, and because of the high level of detail the entire extract is reproduced:

On Wednesday the 5<sup>th</sup> inst., this usually quiet parish was in a state of some excitement, owing to a demonstration of a peculiar character, not immediately connected with the day, which, however, was selected for the purpose of the superior judgment of the promoters. About six o'clock in the evening, just as darkness was beginning to reign, a strange noise was heard as of the sound of trays, and kettles, and it was soon found that a 'skimerton-riding' was in progress, such a thing not having been known for some years in this parish. Three grotesquely attired figures were to be seen escorted by a procession consisting of persons dressed in various queer and eccentric costumes, and who paraded the parish, also visiting Morecombelake and Ryal. The figures alluded to appeared to the villagers to represent three personages who were very well known to them, there being a male and two females, whose past conduct had caused them to be made the subject of this queer exhibition. The two female characters were conveyed on the backs of what are celebrated 'Jeruselems', which certainly seemed pretty well to enter into the joke, for one of them had particularly displayed his innate agility in a surprising manner. One of the females was represented as having an extraordinary long tongue, which was tied back to the neck, whilst in one hand she held some note-paper, and in the other pen and holder. Those forming the procession were literally 'wetted' at the various inns, and after their perambulations were concluded they repaired to a certain field where a gallows was erected, and on which the effigies were hung and afterwards burnt, having previously been well saturated with some highly inflammable liquid. Nearly two hundred people assembled in the field, and a flaming light was maintained by torches. The extraordinary proceedings terminated with a fight, in which black eyes and bloody noses were not absent. However the Riot Act was not read, the military



was not called out, and the crowd dispersed about midnight, when the village resumed its wonted quietude.<sup>176</sup>

Additionally, in a scenario not unlike the dual stagings of Henchard and Farfrae's rival festivities in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, an official fireworks display for the Bridport community had been planned for the same night, but it was postponed due to an 'unfavourable state of the weather'. Yet the skimmington ride still took place over a distance of three villages, with two hundred people assembling to light a bonfire which apparently survived the rain, as it successfully burned the three effigies. The fireworks finally took place the following week, and the subsequent newspaper account of the display lauded it as a 'grand success', which it attributed to

the exertions of a few of the townspeople ... who were in common with many others, desirous of seeing a termination put to the disorderly and dangerous scenes which have in years past disgraced the streets of the town on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November.<sup>177</sup>

It is unclear if the reference to 'disgraceful' scenes applies only to anti-Catholic demonstrations on November 5th, a growing problem in the 1880s that Hardy would later address in his *Times* piece 'Maumbury Rings' (he avoids it in *The Return of the Native*, an omission which Peter Robson has suggested may be due to a sense of shame at lingering anti-Catholic sentiment in Dorchester).<sup>178</sup> If the reference is also to the skimmington ride, then the fact that the fireworks were delayed and the skimmington was not, suggests the possibility that the official event gave ground to the unofficial one, rather than try to compete with it.

For a tiny village like Whitchurch Canonorum, such proceedings (with such numbers) as the skimmington previously described might seem extraordinary, but

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<sup>176</sup> 'Whitchurch Canonorum', *Bridport News*, 14 November 1884, p. 2, col. 2. It is likely that Hardy was aware of this skimmington ride, which occurred while he was composing the *Mayor* and living nearby in Dorchester. Udal does not gloss the term 'Jerusalems', but from the context and visual representations of other skimmingtons, these would seem to be ponies or donkeys (*OED* sense 2).

<sup>177</sup> 'The Fifth of November Demonstration at Bridport', *Bridport News*, 14 November 1884, p. 3 col. 3.

<sup>178</sup> Robson, *Thomas Hardy and His Writings as a Source for Traditional Culture in Dorset*, p. 171.

mock executions and mock funerals were not uncommon in Hardy's day. Four years later in 1888 in Uphill, Somerset, another newspaper account reported effigies that were sombrely paraded around the town at dusk to the accompaniment of the Dead March. Similarly, the Dead March was also played at a skimmington in Gloucester in 1892. E.P. Thompson has noted extreme cases where following the mock execution and mock funeral, an actual funeral bell was knelled and the effigies were buried. Thompson describes the ceremony as the 'the ultimate in excommunication' from the host village.<sup>179</sup>

This theme of social death manifests itself in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Early in the novel, Lucetta shows herself uneasily aware of the power of the communal gaze, as she contemplates which of two dresses to buy. When Elizabeth-Jane cannot understand the nature of her anxiety, she explains:

'But settling upon new clothes is so trying. ... You are that person' [she said] (pointing to one of the arrangements), 'or you are that totally different person' (pointing to the other) 'for the whole of the coming spring; and one of the two, you don't know which, may turn out to be very objectionable.' (155)

This over-identification with dress, which makes Elizabeth-Jane uneasy, will also alienate Lucetta, once she becomes the mayor's wife, from the townspeople. In Mixen Lane they view her as a 'proud piece of silk and wax-work' that they would 'like to shame' (239). They lament that the new mayor, Farfrae, married her for no better reason than that 'folk do worship fine clothes'. The Mixen Lane group resent this. Nancy Mockridge admits: 'I do like to see the trimming pulled off such Christmas candles. I am quite unequal to the part of villain myself, or I'd gie all my silver to see that lady topped ... And perhaps I shall soon' (248). Thus the hostility that the Mixen Lane crew feel as individuals builds collectively to produce the skimmington ride.

In her role as wife of the new mayor, Lucetta is uncertain how she is viewed by the people of Casterbridge, but when her old love letters to Henchard become public knowledge, the Mixen Lane crowd establish grounds to shame her. What was previously latent social surveillance around the town becomes, in the form of the

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<sup>179</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', *Folklore*, 103 (1992), 3-26 (p. 5, p. 7).

skimmington, a concentrated, collective gaze, which mocks her outside her own window. Lucetta sees her ‘self’ in the effigy, which is dressed in identical clothes: ‘She’s me – she’s me – even to the parasol – my green parasol!’ (260). When she sees this, she understands that she has lost any chance of being accepted in Casterbridge. And knowing that she has been thus irrevocably excommunicated, she cannot continue living. Even so, for a moment she is unable to prevent herself looking on with horror as her garish double gazes back at her, with all the laughing eyes of the Mixen Lane openly mocking her. When Robert Barnes came to provide the illustrations for the serial, rather than attempt to capture the skimmington as a spectacle, he focused on its devastatingly destructive psychological power, and the moment of Lucetta’s realized horror, as she watches, fear-stricken, out of the framed window of her home. By destroying her social standing, the skimmington destroys her. The garish chiaroscuro of Barnes’ illustration (reproduced in the Appendix) almost suggests the light a bonfire would cast.<sup>180</sup> Spotlit against the night, and up-lit almost in the pose of one burned at the stake, the illustration captured in the moment of Lucetta’s spiritual death suggests the funereal skimmingtons in Bridport and Somerset.

Henchard has a very different experience with the skimmington, which has been designed particularly with the intention of satirizing Lucetta, who, as the mayor’s wife, is in a position to fall socially. But the revelers seem not to actively taunt Henchard, as they do Lucetta, perhaps because his social alienation is already accepted. Henchard does not even appear in the climactic skimmington drama of chapter thirty-six, but in the following chapter, the narrator relates how Henchard only happens to see the ride in passing:

When he stood at the bottom of the street a procession burst upon his view, in the act of turning out of an alley just above him. The lanterns, horns, and multitude startled him; he saw the mounted images and he knew what it all meant.

They crossed the way, entered another street, and disappeared. (264)

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<sup>180</sup> For Barnes’ approach in illustrating the serial publication of the *Mayor* see Philip Allingham, ‘A Consideration of Robert Barnes’ Illustrations for Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as Serialised in the *London Graphic*: 2 January-15 May, 1886’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 28.1 (1995), 27-39 (p. 33).

The fact that the procession does not stop to harass Henchard reaffirms his social insignificance, which he also interprets as a kind of social death. He wanders away, 'lost in grave reflection' (264). Rather than follow him, the skimmington concludes at Lucetta's house, before quickly retreating to its 'hiding place' in Mixen Lane. Unlike traditional West Country skimmingtons, which ended in fantastic bonfires, 'executions,' and 'funerals', this one ends 'not with a bang but a whimper' – with the jingling of the tambourine quickly concealed in an oven, the oven itself a chastened synecdochical allusion to the expected bonfire.

Unaware that the skimmington has vanished into Peter's Finger, Henchard would have expected the effigies to be burned, as they traditionally were. Earlier in the novel he is haunted by the idea of someone 'roasting a waxen image' of him (177), so it is fitting that he would expect the skimmington to culminate in a burning of his effigy. This theme is further suggested in David Giles' 1978 film adaptation of the novel, where Conjuror Fall fashions the effigy faces of Henchard and Lucetta, and though he wishes not to hear details of the skimmington ride, he says he can 'smell it in the air – as clear as woodsmoke.'<sup>181</sup> This re-writing of the film script seems to be an effort to connect the ride to the tradition of bonfire and burning. Additionally, having Conjuror Fall create the effigy faces (in the film, though not in the novel) suggests an uncanny element in the roles of the effigies that both Lucetta and Henchard regard as themselves (260, 276). This modern addition continues in the mode of Hardy's revision, in which the servant girls describe the male effigy as wearing a 'mask' in the first volume edition, but a 'falseface' in the Wessex edition (258). It also reaffirms the idea of Lucetta the woman as a mere 'piece of silk and wax-work' (239). Here the combination of Lucetta as wax-work and Henchard's fear that someone is roasting his 'waxen image' together seem to foreshadow fire as the natural conclusion for their skimmington effigies.

If Henchard then (or a reader familiar with effigy-burning practices) assumes his image will be consumed in a fire, it is all the more significant that Henchard finds it in water, cast away in the weir. Both Lucetta's and Henchard's doubles are thus 'drowned', in an inversion of the usual burning. Hencard's uncanny floating 'double' may be read with an added significance in that it has been cast off by the community – not ceremonially destroyed or drowned – but discarded, as the living Henchard feels

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<sup>181</sup> *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, dir. by David Giles (BBC, 1978).

he has been. Yet the fact that the effigy floats, as if rising from a baptismal rebirth, prompts Henchard's sensation that perhaps 'even I be in Somebody's hand' (278), a hope that saves him from drowning himself in the weir.

While the *Mayor* almost obliquely recalls fire in connection with the skimmington ride, Hardy's other two works that allude to skimmington rides feature fire more explicitly. Hardy's first published poem 'The Fire At Tranter Sweatley's', tells the story of Barbree, forced by her uncle to marry the tranter (or carrier); on the wedding-night Sweatley starts a fire with a candle-snuffer, and destroys the house, and himself. Barbree escapes, but is found wandering in her nightgown by Tim, the young man she loves, and it is this that warrants a skimmington ride in the closing lines of the poem. The ride is marked by 'rout, shout, and flare', suggesting that along with the spectacle, the heathdwellers of the poem celebrated with fire.<sup>182</sup> And in the *Return*, Thomasin's fleeting alarm that she might be the target of 'skimmity-riding' (47) is also framed by a night of fire, Bonfire Night. Returning home unmarried from an ill-fated would-be wedding, Thomasin, a native herself, knows the ways of the country people, and that skimmington rides were often staged on Bonfire Night.

In renaming 'The Fire At Tranter Sweatley's' as 'The Bride-Night Fire', Hardy connects the house-fire of the first (unconsummated) wedding night, to the flare-filled skimmington that must precede the heroine's realized 'bride-night'. Hardy published three different versions of this poem, first in bowdlerized form in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1875, then restored to the original in Lionel Johnson's *The Art of Thomas Hardy* in 1894, and finally again in *Wessex Poems* in 1898. Hardy changes the participants with each revision, but though their loyalties vary in each version, in each case he represents the community as bound to keep the 'custom' of the skimmington. That a happy public wedding follows shows the couple has not been shunned as others often were, and yet the community still feels bound to keep the custom. Thus, the skimmington seems to have a dual nature: it can act both as a force to socially extinguish, and as a kind of ritual that 'cleanses' or purifies the village, so that the offending couple may stay as welcome members of the community, as they seem to be at the end of all three versions of the poem. Considering fire as an ancient symbol of purification, sacrifice, and renewal, Hardy's revised added emphasis on 'Fire' in the title further suggests this relationship between fire and the skimmington

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<sup>182</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'The Fire At Tranter Sweatley's', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, November 1875, 552-555 (p. 555).

ride's role in purifying the community and purging it (and the shamed parties) of guilt.

But the tone of this, Hardy's first published poem, is comic: Norman Arkans calls it 'light-hearted and amusing [and ] belonging to one of Hardy's earliest phases.'<sup>183</sup> His later treatments of skimmington rides (including in further revisions of 'Tranter Sweatley') grow more complex, suggesting a parallel with a progression of civilization. Unlike the community in all versions of 'The Bride-Night Fire', who are bound to follow the 'custom kept round' even as a prelude to a happy marriage, in the *Mayor*, though Hardy describes the skimmington as 'satirical mummery', the fact that none has taken place for some ten years indicates that it is not the sort of routine and relatively joyless act as the mumming in *The Return of the Native*. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the Peter's Finger crew thoughtfully consider 'grounds' for the skimmington (239), actively interpreting its role; they are not merely re-enacting it as a survival. This tendency to develop beyond folk-survival enabled the skimmington to endure as long as it did, E.P. Thompson has argued.<sup>184</sup> In the *Mayor* distinct voices argue over the justification and the effects of the skimmington, and rather than being the 'custom kept round' as in the poem, in the novel it is now referred to as a 'foolish old thing' (241), that has lain dormant for some ten years. Even then it is only revived by the 'Mixer Lane' demographic of Casterbridge rather than the whole community of the heath, as in the first two versions of 'Tranter Sweatley.'

### ***Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure***

Perhaps the legacy of the skimmington in its final stages may be found in *Tess* and *Jude*. Hardy understood that social censure can manifest itself in diverse ways, and these novels are almost haunted by the cultural memory of the skimmington ride. But here he resists any close definition of the custom; instead, he explores how 'folkloric' tradition endures and reinvents itself, so that the spirit, if not the spectacle, of the skimmington endures.

Many accounts of historical skimmingtons (and their variants) include statements where villagers express their hope that the perpetrators will leave the

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<sup>183</sup> Norman Arkans, 'Hardy's Narrative Muse and Ballad Connection', *Thomas Hardy Annual*, 2, (1984), 131-156 (p. 145).

<sup>184</sup> Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', p. 14.

village. In Theo Brown's account of one occurrence in Devon around 1875, one participant said that following the communal ritual everyone hoped that the person would then leave the town.<sup>185</sup> In the Berkshire account of 1930 one of the older villagers said of the ceremony 'In this case we hope the man and his people will leave the village.'<sup>186</sup> It is important to consider that in both these statements and others like them, the villagers *hope* but do not force the intended to leave the community. Thus the skimmington almost has a dual nature in that it functions as a statement of communal disapproval that shows the victims that aberrant behaviour will not be tolerated. Through the ritual skimmington act the village 'washes its hands' of the perpetrators – 'cleanses' itself so that if the perpetrators choose to stay, they are aware that they must conform to what is considered 'decent' by the village.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's characters transgress the bounds of social propriety in ways that offend their communities. Yet in these self-consciously modern novels, the communities seem to have 'advanced' beyond the stage of civilization in which a skimmington ride would occur, according to Tylor's model as described in *Primitive Culture*. But in both *Tess* and *Jude* the vestiges of the skimmington remain as a sort of modified survival – without the pomp and circumstance – but now with the literal forcing of the supposed perpetrators to leave.

The expulsion of the Durbeyfield family after Tess returns pregnant from Trantridge may seem to reflect one reason of skimmington-riding, the discovery that 'a man's wife is – well, not too particularly his own' (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* 241). But the broader target of skimmington rides were those women and men who refused to uphold the natural spirit of patriarchy – often women who beat their husbands and the men who succumbed to beatings.<sup>187</sup> On this basis, Tess's greatest failing, according to her own community, is not her loss of virginity (as it is for Angel), but her refusal to accept the patriarchal code that required her, once impregnated by Alec, to seek marriage with him. This situation was described by Richard Jefferies in his essay 'Field-Faring Women':

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<sup>185</sup> Theo Brown, 'The "Stag-Hunt" in Devon', *Folklore*, 63.2 (1952), 104-109 (p. 105).

<sup>186</sup> Seal, 'A "Hussitting" in Berkshire, 1930', p. 92.

<sup>187</sup> In the manuscript of the *Mayor*, the immediate precedent for the 'skimmity-ride' is one designed to shame 'Jane Criddle', who 'used to beat her husband with the mop-stem' (*Mayor*, manuscript folio 374, now in the Dorset History Centre).

The number of poor girls, from fifteen to five-and-twenty, in agricultural parishes who have illegitimate offspring is extremely large, and is illustrated by the fact that, out of the marriages that take place – and the agricultural poor are a marrying class – scarcely any occur until the condition of the girl is too manifest to be any longer concealed.<sup>188</sup>

Jane Thomas expands on this attitude toward pregnancy: ‘marriage automatically eradicated any stigma, and if the man refused to marry the pregnant girl she could sue for breach of promise. This state clearly informed Hardy’s treatment of Arabella, and Joan Durbeyfield’s and Alec’s attitude to Tess.’<sup>189</sup> Tess’ mother understands these unwritten rules of their society, and she never wavers in her insistence on Tess playing by these rules.<sup>190</sup> When Tess refuses to seek marriage with her impregnator, Joan Durbeyfield understands the ‘Plan B’ of social acceptance, and she reasons that it is the universal expectation to keep silent, warning Tess that it is not just field-faring women who have dealt with this, but:

Many a woman, some of the Highest in the Land, have had a Trouble in their time; and why should you Trumpet yours when others don’t Trumpet theirs? No girl would be such a fool ... J [sic] shall answer the same if you ask me Fifty Times. (*Tess* 210)

By disobeying this sound advice, Tess violates the order which expects her to keep silent for the sake of her husband’s honour. Though Tess’s transgression is two-fold, both offend the accepted role of patriarchy in their society. Tess’s father, fulfilling the role as patriarch of the Durbeyfields, acts as a temporary stay for the punishment of Tess’s actions, and while he lives (as life-holder tenant) the family is left alone. It is the sight of the unwed Tess recognizing her illegitimate baby’s grave that proves grounds for the family’s expulsion:

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<sup>188</sup> Richard Jefferies, ‘Field-Faring Women’, quoted in Jane Thomas, ‘Introduction’, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000), p. xxiv.

<sup>189</sup> Jane Thomas, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiv.

<sup>190</sup> Jane Mattisson discusses Hardy’s treatment of the ‘rules of the game’, a notion critical to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’. See *Knowledge and Survival in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, p. 32.



she had been observed almost immediately on her return by some people of scrupulous character and great influence; they had seen her in the churchyard, restoring as well she could, with a little trowel, a baby's obliterated grave.

(373)

Here is the collective village as Panopticon: Tess *had been observed* (passive voice) by some people of influence – gone are the lively individual characters of *The Mayor's Mixen Lane*: the Mother Cuxsom, Nance Mockridge, Christopher Coney, and others whose faces '[burst] into naturalness' in planning the skimmington (241). Yet these nameless, faceless people are all the more dangerous in their 'scrupulous' Victorian 'character' in that they omit the 'folk-warning' of the skimmington. Instead, with the father's sudden death, they immediately act on their right to expel the family. Hardy makes it clear that the punishment has been planned:

Ever since the occurrence of the event which had cast such a shadow over Tess's life, the Durbeyfield family (whose descent was not credited) had been tacitly looked on as one which would have to go, when their lease ended, if only in the interests of morality. (373)

Surely 'the event' refers not to Tess's pregnancy but the birth of the baby while unwed, since as Jefferies says rural marriages do not as a rule occur until the condition of the girl is too obvious to be *concealed* (emphasis mine.) So if the crime is offending public decency, it is therefore the *sight* of an unmarried pregnant woman that warrants social punishment. Though Hardy goes on to catalogue the family's offences: 'The household had not been shining examples either of temperance, soberness, or chastity. The father, and even the mother, had got drunk at times, the children seldom had gone to church, and the eldest daughter had made queer unions' (373), it is still Tess's 'event' and her 'queer unions' that warrant expulsion, for the narrator comments that had she not come home 'her mother and the children might probably have been allowed to stay on as weekly tenants' (373). It is implied then, that, despite 'the event', had Tess either married Alec or remained married to Angel and kept silent, her family would not have been expelled as punishment for her past actions.

Like the cleansing ritual function the skimmington plays in ‘The Bride-Night Fire’, here too, as the narrator puts it, ‘By some means the village had to be kept pure’ (373). The Durbeyfields’ expulsion shares many qualities of the typical staged skimmington: it is preceded by communal judgment, it is associated with a feast day (Old Lady Day), the removal procession begins at night, and even the idea of the double is suggested: a carter with a large family will replace the Durbeyfields (372-3). Even the illustration in *The Graphic* from December 12, 1891 recalls a skimmington minus the spectacle: a shamed Joan sits on top of a cart while Tess’s hand shields her embarrassment and unhappiness (see the illustration in the Appendix).

In *Jude the Obscure*, Phillotson too is punished for what the community deem an impropriety: that a husband would willingly let his wife leave him for another man. At first when Phillotson’s peers believe Sue has ‘secretly’ eloped with a lover, they sympathize with him, but when they understand his wife has left with his sympathy and ‘blessing’, this is deemed unconscionable. Phillotson recognizes that his actions depart from the expectations of his role as a Victorian husband: ‘She has gone away under circumstances that usually call for condolence with the husband. But I gave my consent’ (237). The chairman and the Committee are disturbed by Phillotson’s voluntary emasculation, and they determine that his domestic situation is not only his personal decision, but that it lies in their ‘sphere of control, as it touched the morals of those he taught’ (239). The School Committee’s reasoning accords with what Martin Ingram has argued is the underlying logic of the skimmington:

Because political and domestic authority were conceived to be mutually validating, disturbances in the hierarchy of the family implied a threat to the whole social order; and it was precisely this which justified the communal action.

Ingram understands skimmingtons to have been ‘destroyers of privacy’ as ‘they asserted the validity of a system of collective values which were stronger than the vagaries of individuals, and established that in the last resort relations between husbands and wives were a social, not a personal matter.’<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Martin Ingram, ‘Ridings, Rough Music, and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England’, in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. by Barry Reay (Oxford: Routledge, 1985), pp. 166-197 (p. 177-178).

The School Committee's decision to condemn Phillotson is thus exactly in accordance with the value-systems that lie behind the traditional skimmington, but, inspired by the modern, National School standards that they represent, they approach the situation with all manner of methodical procedure. Thus, first the Chairman approaches Phillotson individually, then they call an orderly meeting asking him to quietly resign. Phillotson's friend Gillingham recommends resignation, warning that if the matter 'get[s] into the papers ... you'll never get appointed to another school' (238). This idea echoes the traditional stigma of the skimmington, its ability to 'brand with infamy'<sup>192</sup> those who warrant it. The School Committee officially dismisses Phillotson by written letter, against which he appeals, and they grant him a public meeting at which they maintain their position. Though he is treated with all semblance of Victorian decency, his social fate has already been determined: the narrator explains, 'All the respectable inhabitants and well-to-do fellow-natives of the town were against Phillotson to a man' (239). It is almost as if the figurative descendants of the 'decent' crowd in 'The Bride Night Fire' whom Hardy describes as not participating in the skimmington but instead standing 'in a stare', have found a way to uphold the values that the skimmington protected, while maintaining the appearance of decency through an ordered system of procedure. After all, if appearances are what the skimmington protects, then it is fitting that the spirit of the skimmington adapts and moulds itself to represent a Victorian society that has moved on from the system of rough justice of centuries past.

But society's need for regular spectacle – the kind of spectacle palpably absent in the scene of the Durbeyfields' expulsion – reasserts itself here. Following the School Committee's verdict, a counter-cultural crowd assembles, made up of 'a curious and interesting group of itinerants, who frequented the numerous fairs and markets held up and down Wessex during the summer and autumn months' (239). Hardy goes on to catalogue the motley assembly who represent distinct identities as opposed to the faceless (but capitalized) 'School Committee':

two cheap-jacks, a shooting-gallery proprietor and the ladies who loaded the guns, a pair of boxing-masters, a steam-round-about manager, two traveling

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<sup>192</sup> George Roberts' phrase in the 'Letter to Sir Walter Scott', cited above.

broom-makers, who called themselves widows, a gingerbread stall-keeper, a swing-boat owner, and a ‘test-your-strength’ man. (239)

Ironically, this lively group shakes hands with Phillotson and comes to his defence with such energy that a scuffle breaks out where ‘many black eyes and bleeding noses were given’; the passive voice here echoes the *Bridport News* account of the scuffle in the field after the skimmington, ‘in which black eyes and bloody noses were not absent’.<sup>193</sup> Thus the alternative crowd brings back the physical and imaginative energy absent from the School Committee’s muted version of the skimmington, thus seeming to restore a lost ‘art’ of spectacle with all its problematic anti-Victorian behaviour. Yet when the affair gets out of control and a rector is hit, Phillotson is filled with grief at the ‘untoward and degrading circumstances’ that have arisen. The characterization of the event here echoes that of the Victorian moralist quoted earlier, who regarded the skimmington as evidence of ‘a very discreditable state of things in the village’. Finally Hardy describes the whole episode as ‘farcical yet melancholy’ – a description that recalls the same dichotomy that the skimmington represents: an event which can be described as both ‘the funniest thing under the sun’ as well as a ‘Daemoniac Sabbath’ within the same text. (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* 241, 260).

In *Thomas Hardy and the Survivals of Time*, Andrew Radford has suggested that Hardy did not regard folk beliefs with an easy, ‘Barnesian’ nostalgia, arguing that ‘it could scarcely be maintained, for example, that his portrayal of the garish skimmity ride in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* records a cherished relic of peasant folk culture or makes a heartfelt plea for the perpetuation of that culture.’<sup>194</sup> But aware as Hardy was of problematic folk practices like the skimmington ride, it seems unlikely that he would have viewed their modern counterparts in *Tess* and *Jude* as preferable. Hardy is fully aware that in spite of the Victorian promise of education and progress, people will always be watching each other, and that in every supposed stage of civilization humanity will manifest its need for surveillance and collective communal action.

If the skimmington may be viewed as a kind of folk version of the Panopticon, then the virtues of Bentham’s economized, Enlightenment-inspired model apply in much the same way. Just as Bentham’s plan required very few staff, comparably few

<sup>193</sup> ‘Whitchurch Canonorum’, *Bridport News*, 14 November 1884, p. 2, col. 2.

<sup>194</sup> Andrew Radford, ‘Introduction’, *Survivals of Time*, p. 21.

resources and operating costs, so did folk communities use the threat of the skimmington to keep watch on each other and administer justice efficiently at no cost to government, and only a small cost to community members. George Roberts claimed that Dorset communities believed in the value of the skimmington so much that they were willing to contribute to a maintenance fund from their own pockets.<sup>195</sup> Bentham's clever offer – 'I will be the gaoler. You will see ... that the gaoler will have no salary – will cost nothing to the nation' – had already, in essence, been realized long before, with local officials unofficially leaving justice in the hands of individuals willing to stage the skimmington.<sup>196</sup> Members of the folk community thus functioned like Bentham's famous watchmen, who, since they cannot be seen, or at least cannot be identified, need not be on duty at all times. Effectively, the duty of watching is left to the watched.

This ambiguity makes the skimmington ride all the more powerful. Foucault has demonstrated that modern punishment has developed away from delivering physical harm in favour of exerting intrusive psychological control.<sup>197</sup> Accordingly, whereas in the past charivaris and riding the stang physically hurt the victim, nineteenth-century skimmingtons did not touch or administer bodily harm, but the psychological effects were enough to kill both the real-life woman in Sunderland, and Lucetta in the novel, both of whom die of shock – or shame. While the use of effigies may seem to have been a preferable alternative to the physical harm inflicted in earlier centuries, the psychological effect of the nineteenth-century skimmington is critical: for how can people recover their standing in the same community where they have been burned, hanged, or watched their own funeral? Thus the invisible threat of the skimmington, along with its lay and anonymous enforcers, together with its ability to appear, disappear, and reappear out of nowhere, marks the skimmington as a fluid and adaptable version of the architectural structure that Bentham envisioned as the machine of modern punishment.

But the skimmington delivered more than just punishment. Foucault has also shown how the entertainment factor of traditional state punishment was lost with its

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<sup>195</sup> Roberts, 'Letter to Sir Walter Scott', p. 4.

<sup>196</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 11 vols., ed. by John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-43), volume 10, *Memoirs and Correspondence*, p. 269.

<sup>197</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 104-131.

modern reformulations. This need for entertainment is preserved within the spirit of the skimmington. Hardy captured the tension of this dichotomy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by juxtaposing the skimmington with the visit by the Royal Personage (based on Prince Albert) – the embodiment of Victorian gentility and control. But Henchard alone upsets the royal visit, his jealousy fueling him to make a mockery of the proceedings. But the rest of the folk community understand that while on the surface they must temporarily accept the controlled, modest presence of the Victorian royal gentleman, their collective spirit of resistance can resurrect the skimmington as soon as he departs. In a world that was quickly losing its right to enjoy public hangings,<sup>198</sup> the people of Casterbridge and Dorchester understood that if they wanted garish and violent entertainment, it would be up to the folk community to supply it. Thus the skimmington survived, reconciling both an ancient need for spectacle with a (seemingly) modern approach to surveillance.

As nineteenth-century readers continued to read Scott's popular Waverley novels, those who encountered his footnote about the skimmington being 'long discontinued in England' might have been intrigued to find Hardy challenging this view – breathing new life into that which was thought to be extinct. What George Roberts had vividly described to Scott in a private hand-written letter, Hardy brought to life in *The Mayor*, so much that the *Saturday Review* was convinced the author must have witnessed a skimmington himself. Readers might well wonder if skimmington rides were still taking place in the nineteenth century, or could arise in modern society, or they might ask a more radical question: what type of social censure exists in 'modern' society, and how far is it a more suitable and more 'civilized' response? Hardy explores these questions, both by refusing to assure his readers that the skimmington ride is simply a thing of the past, but also by inviting them to ask how far the impulses that lay behind them remained latent in the social subconscious.

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<sup>198</sup> The setting of this part of *The Mayor* is around mid-century, so in the world of the novel public hangings were soon to be extinct; the last public execution in Dorchester took place in April 1863 (see *Dorset County Chronicle* 2 April 1863).

#### Chapter Four: Acts of Approval: The Portland Custom

‘I have fancied that my seeing you again and again lately is inclining your father to insist, and you as his heir to feel, that we ought to carry out Island Custom in our courting – your people being such old inhabitants in an unbroken line. Truth to say, mother supposes that your father, for natural reasons, may have hinted to you that we ought. Now, the thing is contrary to my feelings: it is nearly left off; and I do not think it good, even when there is property, as in your case, to justify it, in a measure. I would rather trust in Providence.’ [...]

Jocelyn, having read [this] letter, was surprised at the naiveté it showed, and at Avice and her mother’s antiquated simplicity in supposing that to be still a grave and operating principle which was a bygone barbarism to himself and other absentees from the island. (*The Well-Beloved* 189-90)<sup>199</sup>

*The Well-Beloved* is perhaps Hardy’s most experimental novel, with its exploration of the protagonist’s pursuit of what he believes to be his ‘Well-Beloved’ – a quality or spirit that seems to inhabit the bodies of different women, and compels his love. Jocelyn Pierston is a native of the Island of Portland, who has since risen to become a prominent sculptor in the Royal Academy. He remains devoted to his Well-Beloved, seeking ‘her’ through a series of incarnations. It is the nature of this, Jocelyn’s ‘delicate dream’, as Hardy describes it, (173), and the associated themes of neo-platonism and aestheticism, that have attracted most critical attention. In consequence, the ‘Portland Custom’ and its significance has generally been overshadowed. Yet interwoven with the theme of the Well-Beloved is Jocelyn’s pursuit of three generations of Portland women, all named Avice, and with each of them the idea of the Portland Custom, that is, having pre-marital sexual relations in order to ensure that the union will produce children, haunts the courtship. Most readers seem to have

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<sup>199</sup> While all other Hardy texts in this thesis are based on the Oxford World’s Classics editions, this chapter relies on the Penguin edition, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1997) as it contains both the serial *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which will be cited in the notes as by ‘PWB’ and the novel version, *The Well-Beloved*, which will be noted as ‘WB’. If two page number references appear together parenthetically, then I am quoting the phrase as it appears in both versions.

agreed with the reviewer in *The Athenaeum*, who said that while ‘doubtless interesting from an anthropological point of view, it has really no influence over the action of the story, and need not have been even alluded to’.<sup>200</sup> Far from this being the case, however, it will be argued here that the novel’s plot is actually built around the Portland Custom, and through it Hardy explores and challenges questions of cultural development over generations of island life.

Like *Jude the Obscure*, *The Well-Beloved* is set in a location in which Hardy would have been considered an outsider. The axis of Jude’s action is Christminster, a world which the non-native Jude is both drawn to and excluded from, and Hardy, like Jude a non-native who never attended university, could identify with the point of view of his protagonist. But in both the serial *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and the novel version *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy writes as an outsider attempting to capture the identity of a very exclusive island people and the soul of a protagonist he calls ‘a native of natives’ (‘Preface’, 171, 173). Whereas he knew Egdon Heath from direct experience, having grown up there, for this novel, and the portrayal of the Portland Custom, Hardy had to rely on traditions that he had heard about, as well as the descriptions recorded in sources known to him. Perhaps because of this social as well as geographical distance, in this double-text (the serial and the novel with their differing plot lines), Hardy was able to explore more fully how the life cycle of the folk custom is affected by notions of cultural progress.

It is difficult to know how much Hardy knew about Portland: Michael Millgate has stated that though he knew the island from childhood, ‘it is not clear to what extent Hardy may have drawn upon personal memories in presenting the Portland episodes’ of *The Well-Beloved*.<sup>201</sup> Hardy would have come to know Portland originally through family tradition. As he was descended from a line of ‘master masons’,<sup>202</sup> he would probably have heard about the culture of Portland through his great-grandfather’s dealings there, where he sourced the flagstones for the construction of the family cottage in Bockhampton. Later on, his father would have had contact with the local Portland stone industry, and he and Hardy together incorporated Portland stone into the building of Max Gate in 1885.

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<sup>200</sup> ‘Anonymous Review’, *Athenaeum*, 19 April 1897, p. 471, col. 3.

<sup>201</sup> Michael Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 303.

<sup>202</sup> *CL* 1: 89.



Hardy may have visited Portland earlier than 1869, but in that year he was living in Weymouth and is known to have visited the Cozens sisters, originally from the nearby Frome Valley, who were running a Ladies' School on the island, which perhaps formed the idea for the sort of modern ladies' education that is imposed on the native Avice. Hardy also had cousins who worked as warders at Portland prison, and apparently he was on fairly close terms with one Harry Patten, an insurance agent at Fortuneswell, Portland, to whom he showed the (rejected) manuscript of his first attempted novel *The Poor Man and the Lady*.<sup>203</sup> In *The Life*, Hardy recalled visiting Portland in 1879, when he seems to have been recording oral accounts of the disastrous gale of 1824; later in *The Life* he fondly remembered that he never tired of watching the goods trains carrying Portland stone, and wondered if this would some day change the shape of the isle.<sup>204</sup> And perhaps in preparation for the Wessex edition of *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy carefully bound an article about geological aspects of Portland stone into his personal copy of Hutchins' *History of Dorset*.<sup>205</sup> At any rate, Portland appealed to Hardy's artistic sensibility, and he would continue to visit and study Portland for the remainder of his life.

In the preface to the 1897 novel edition, Hardy describes the Portland islanders as a 'curious and well-nigh distinct people, cherishing strange beliefs and singular customs' (171, 173). The singular custom that features most prominently in the story is so ubiquitous as to be known only as 'The Portland Custom' both in the novel and in historical accounts. This custom of socially-sanctioned premarital relations to formally 'ratify betrothal' would have made many Victorian readers (like the *Athenaeum* reviewer) uneasy. But for those readers interested in the recorded history of this custom, several accounts offer helpful cultural contexts.

Recently Andrew Radford has equated the Portland Custom with 'the superstition of handfesting: the ratification of betrothal by sexual relations before marriage – a widespread tradition of which Hardy himself may have been a product.'<sup>206</sup> Radford's precedent for aligning the Portland Custom with the traditional practice of 'handfesting' or 'handfasting' comes from John Brand, who in *Popular*

<sup>203</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>204</sup> Hardy, *The Life*, p. 164, p. 262.

<sup>205</sup> 'Portland Stone', *The British Architect*, December 1907, was bound into Hardy's copy of *Hutchins* in his Max Gate library collection, now in the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection. Dorset County Museum.

<sup>206</sup> Radford, *Survivals of Time*, p. 216

*Antiquities*, viewed the custom as having descended from the ancient Danes. Brand declared that ‘strong traces of this remain in our villages in many parts of the kingdom’, and he goes on to highlight the continuance of this on Portland, stating that he has been:

more than once assured from credible authority on Portland Island, that something very like it is still practiced there very generally, where the inhabitants seldom or never intermarry with any of the main-land, and where the young women, selecting lovers of the same place (but with what previous rites, ceremonies, or engagements, I could not learn) account it no disgrace to allow them every favour, and that too from the fullest confidence of being made wives the moment such consequences of their stolen embraces begin to be too visible to be any longer concealed.<sup>207</sup>

Brand seems to be the only non-fictional primary source to liken the Portland Custom to handfasting: neither John Hutchins (discussed later) nor Hardy does. ‘Proving’ may be the better word to use here, as Hardy uses this term rather than ‘handfasting’ in connection with the Portland Custom in *The Well-Beloved*. In this novel Avice II confesses that her (secret) husband, Isaac, ‘courted me, and led me on to island custom’. Jocelyn subsequently asks Avice II why she married Isaac, and she replies ‘I was obliged to, after we’d proved each other’ (104-105). In his study of the history of British marriage traditions, John Gillis considers the Portland Custom to be essentially the practice of ‘proving’, but upheld exclusively among Portlanders. He cites historical examples of proving from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with one by Jonas Hanway in 1770 that clearly spells out the meaning: ‘if a woman *proves*, as they term becoming pregnant, then the parties marry by a kind of honour and decency.’<sup>208</sup> In the storyline of *The Well-Beloved*, after Avice II admits that they have ‘proved’ each other, she is next shown giving birth to her daughter by Isaac, so Hardy seems to have had this working definition in mind.

While Brand, writing in the late eighteenth century, connected handfasting to Portland, George Gomme in the *Folklore Handbook* of 1890 named ‘handfasting’ as a

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<sup>207</sup> Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, p. 87.

<sup>208</sup> John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 127.

Scottish form of betrothal, which he grouped together with ‘bundling in Wales’.<sup>209</sup> Gomme is representative of most late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sources who describe ‘handfesting’ (or ‘handfasting’ or similar variants) as a Scottish tradition and do not mention Portland. But even the tradition of handfasting in Scotland has been widely disputed. The topic apparently gained recognition in the early nineteenth century with Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley novel *The Monastery*, set on the eve of the Scottish Reformation. Scott’s character Baron Avenel explains that though the woman with him is not his wife, she is honourable through the ‘rite’ of handfasting, which serves as a sort of trial marriage. He explains:

We Border-men are more wary than your inland clowns of Fife and Lothian – no jump in the dark for us – no clenching the fetters around our wrists till we know how they will wear with us – we take our wives, like our horses, upon trial. When we are handfasted, as we term it, we are man and wife for a year and day – that space gone by, each may choose another mate, or, at their pleasure, may call the priest to marry them for life – and this we call handfasting.<sup>210</sup>

Scott’s footnote following this passage links the custom to Portland:

This custom of handfasting actually prevailed in the upland days. It arose partly from the want of priests. While the convents subsisted, monks were detached on regular circuits through the wilder districts, to marry those who had lived in this species of connexion. A practice of the same kind existed in

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<sup>209</sup> Gomme, *Handbook of Folklore*, p. 95. Though Gomme does not define ‘bundling’ here, this custom, which was popular in Ireland as well as Wales, is wholly distinct from the Portland Custom (or ‘proving’ exclusively among Portlanders) in that with bundling, young courting couples were allowed to lie together only on the condition that they were separately ‘bundled’ so tightly with blankets and wrappings that they were unable to have any physical contact. What they did gain was the sense of being in bed together in an intimate way, so that the wedding night would feel less foreign. See Linda May Ballard, *Forgetting Frolic: Marriage Traditions in Ireland* (Belfast: Queen’s University of Belfast Press, 1998).

<sup>210</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Monastery*, Chapter 25. Scott’s description does not mention pregnancy or ‘breeding’ as do the descriptions of ‘proving’ and the Portland Custom (subsequently discussed). Rather, Scott seems to emphasize the question of whether the husband and wife are suited for one another through a trial marriage. Still, one may presume that a year of ‘trial marriage’ would often result in pregnancy, which would lead to legal matrimony.

the Isle of Portland.<sup>211</sup>

Though Scott, as an antiquarian, may have made this connection through Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Hardy would probably have taken note of his remark. The link to Portland may have appealed to him even as a boy, as he and his mother were both avid readers of Scott.<sup>212</sup> Hardy's epigraph from *The Monastery* on the title page of *Desperate Remedies* indicates an interest in the novel early in his career, perhaps even when he was germinating the idea for *The Well-Beloved*, which he claimed was sketched when he was 'a comparatively young man', possibly even when he was living in Weymouth, writing *Desperate Remedies* and making visits to Portland.<sup>213</sup> Hardy's annotated set of the Waverley novels in the Max Gate library further indicates a lifelong interest in Scott's work and the likelihood is that this early connection to Portland would have resonated with him.<sup>214</sup>

A.E. Anton, an historian of Scots law, has explained that the practice of joining hands to represent betrothal lent the name 'handfasting', and that though this was common practice in medieval Scotland, it is impossible to conclude to what extent it was recognized by the law or the church.<sup>215</sup> While there seems to be much examination into the Scottish tradition of handfasting, probably because Scott had featured it, relatively little exists about a Portland version. Besides Brand's unidentified 'credible authorities', John Hutchins seems to be the other primary eighteenth-century source to refer to the custom. In the first edition of Hutchins, published in 1774, the Portland chapter introduction reads: 'they have a peculiar custom called Portland Custom, that the man never marries till his intended wife is pregnant, and it was hardly ever broke [sic] in the memory of man, but when the woman falsely assures the man that she was breeding.'<sup>216</sup> That the local practice has a name, 'Portland Custom,' which Hardy subsequently adopts, suggests that it had

<sup>211</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Monastery*, Chapter 25.

<sup>212</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 42.

<sup>213</sup> F. B. Pinion, 'Hardy and Scott', *Thomas Hardy Journal*, 10.1 (1994), 71-76 (p. 72).

<sup>214</sup> Michael Millgate, 'Thomas Hardy's Library at Max Gate: Catalogue of an Attempted Reconstruction'.

<sup>215</sup> A.E. Anton, "'Handfasting" in Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review*, 37.124 (1958), 89-102.

<sup>216</sup> John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, ed. by William Shipp and James Whitworth Hodson, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 4 vols (Westminster: John Bowyer Nichols, 1863), II, p. 582.

greater credibility than the de facto practice of premarital relations on the mainland.

The other known eighteenth-century source is John Smeaton's *The Building of Eddystone Lighthouse*, first published in 1791. Smeaton recorded what he called 'The Portland Way of Courtship' as described to him by a Mr. Roper, a Londoner who had apparently lived on Portland for many years:

The air ... though very sharp, from our elevated situation, is very healthy to working men; yet, if you knew how these men are produced you would wonder the less, for all our marriages here are productive of children. Our people here, as they are bred up to hard labour, are very early in a condition to marry and provide a family; they intermarry with one another, very rarely going to the main land to seek a wife; and it has been the custom of the island from time immemorial, that they never marry till the woman is pregnant... The mode of courtship here is, that a young woman never admits of the serious supposition of a thorough probation. When she becomes with child, she tells her mother; the mother tells her father; her father tells his father; and he tells his son, that it is then proper time to get married. If the woman does not prove with child, after a competent courtship, they conclude they are not destined by Providence for each other; they therefore separate; and it is an established maxim, which the Portland women observe with great strictness, never to admit a plurality of lovers at one time, their honour is in no way tarnished, she just as soon (after the affair is declared to be broken off) gets another suitor as if she had been left a widow, or that nothing had ever happened but that she had remained an immaculate virgin.

Smeaton asked about the interference to the island tradition when men began to come from London to work on Portland:

They were ... much struck and mightily pleased with the facility of the Portland ladies; and it was not long before several of the women proved with child; but the men being called upon to marry them, this part of the lesson they were uninstructed in; and on their refusal, the Portland women arose to stone them out of the island; inasmuch that those few who did not choose to take their sweethearts for better or worse, after so fair a trial, were in reality

obliged to decamp. On this occasion only one bastard was born, but since then matters have gone according to custom...<sup>217</sup>

Nearly every subsequent source throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries quote Smeaton without commenting whether the custom continued into their own time; regrettably they seem to offer no other records or sources besides Smeaton or Hutchins, as Peter Robson has observed.<sup>218</sup> One short account has recently surfaced, which does corroborate the custom as supposedly in practice at the time of writing in 1811, though the recorded description appeared in 1829 in an issue of the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*. The writer admits to having long heard of the ‘remarkable custom’ but ‘set it down as an idle tale’ until personally spending a ‘fortnight’s residence’ on the island and then determining that

Consequent enquiries establish it as a fact with me, that to this day, the practice is universal; and is considered as respectable and completely satisfactory to all parties. The women never admit a plurality of lovers at one time: bad women are unknown here; and the records of the island of 150 years, have only one instance of a child’s being born out of wedlock!<sup>219</sup>

The source is useful, as it claims to rely on firsthand evidence and establishes the continuity of the custom in the early part of the nineteenth century, a generation or two before the setting of *The Well-Beloved*. While the writer has evidently read Smeaton, borrowing his phrase ‘the women never admit a plurality of lovers’, he does personally confirm the authenticity and continuity of the custom after spending time on the island. It is not likely that Hardy would have seen this extract, as he did not systematically search through old Devon newspapers as he did with the *Dorset County Chronicle*. It is helpful, though, if the accuracy is accepted, in that over the course of the century the practice went from being ‘universal’ (as stated above) to being ‘nearly left off’ as Hardy described in *The Well-Beloved* (189). Hardy would probably have encountered written evidence of the tradition in one of his favourite

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<sup>217</sup> John Smeaton, *A Narrative of the Building and a Description of the Construction of Eddystone Lighthouse with Stone* (London: J. Smeaton, 1791), p. 152.

<sup>218</sup> Peter Robson, *Traditional Culture*, p. 172.

<sup>219</sup> ‘Isle of Portland’, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 25 July 1829, p. 2, col. 1.

sources for local history, the third edition of Hutchins' *History of Dorset*, which added Smeaton's famous description to Hutchins' original statement (cited above.) In the version that Hardy used, the writer expanded on the original passage, describing marriage following the custom:

the first child at the end of a few weeks is talked of with as much ease as the next; and the only disgrace in Portland is having no child; and it may be said that the instances of infidelity amongst the common people are very rare, and jealousy little known. For many years a woman's being left to bewail her misfortune was unknown; but one of the Westminster Bridge masons having proved false hearted, as the phrase was, and run off, it was looked on as a heinous crime, and more especially as the child was born deaf and dumb; the story is spoken at this time as the marking finger of Providence, a story that the females will not neglect to hand down.

Later in this same chapter the writer goes on to describe the natives of the island as a 'stout muscular race', 'fit for the hard labour which the quarries require.' He suggests that this hard labour created a 'succession of generations congenial with the constitution of the people by which that labour is inherited. We talk of a breed of race-horses, why should we suppose any absurdity in a breed of quarry-men?'<sup>220</sup> Thus the third edition of Hutchins suggests a Darwinian influence, as it hints at a biological determinism ensuring the survival of the island 'race' of people. Hardy would have encountered this idea, and this same language finds its way into the revised 1897 *WB*: 'What so natural as that the true star of his soul would be found nowhere but in one of the old island breed?' (232)

Then Hutchins refers to the Smeaton account, and describes the Portland custom as a 'singular circumstance', phrasing that Hardy echoes in alluding to the 'singular customs' in the *The Well-Beloved* introduction of 1897.<sup>221</sup> While Portland is known for having many other unusual customs including tithing with the reeve pole,

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<sup>220</sup> Hutchins, *History of Dorset*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 809, p. 811.

<sup>221</sup> Hutchins, *History of Dorset*, p. 811.

land bequest through ‘church gift’,<sup>222</sup> and equal distribution of property among children including females, none of these other customs is featured in the story in the way that this one is: that is, the failure to fulfill the Portland custom launches a three-generational obsession that follows on from Jocelyn and Avice I refraining from native tradition. The generational significance of the custom continues, in that if Avice II had *not* followed native tradition, she would have been free to marry Jocelyn, which they both wished to do. And Jocelyn (through the narrator) later considers the Portland Custom as having held the potential to alter his life’s course, believing that: ‘the consequence of that meeting would have been the old-fashioned betrothal or island custom — discontinued in these days — from which he could not have receded. It might — nay, it must — have changed the whole current of his life’ (128).

Thus, while the *Athenaeum* reviewer may have been correct in intimating that Hardy could have employed another plot device, rather than this custom, to propel the action forward, it is clear that Hardy was interested in how the ‘real’ workings of this custom could affect island life. To borrow his own analogy in *The Life*, the writer’s task is to trace the colour in the carpet ‘which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe’, and to describe the particular pattern which emerges, and this is the pattern which concerned him.<sup>223</sup> Shortly before rewriting *The Well-Beloved* he felt the need to insist that ‘every superstition, custom & c. described in my novels may be depended on as true records of the same [...] and not inventions of mine’ (CL 2: 54). To substitute another sort of plot device in place of the Portland Custom would have compromised his sense of authenticity and artistic integrity, as he sought to record and preserve the custom in its waning stages, albeit less as a methodical folklorist than as an intrigued artist.

But like the folklorists Hardy was influenced by pervasive anthropological thought, and as Gomme explained in the opening chapter of the first *Handbook of Folklore*, when a social group or tribe advances from ‘one stage of culture to another’ the change in customs is ‘rarely accepted in its entirety by a whole people. Change of belief or change of custom would arise — in the stages of progress before that of a

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<sup>222</sup> This was a wooden pole on which were recorded the rents due to be paid by each tenant. The practice of ‘church gift’ refers to a system of inheritance operating through the church rather than through the courts.

<sup>223</sup> Hardy, *Life and Work*, p. 158.



settled civilization to which, for instance, Europe is accustomed.’<sup>224</sup> Gomme’s successor in the Folklore Society, Charlotte Burne, reiterated this, albeit more bluntly: ‘wildly separated stages of progress may coexist in the same country at the same time.’<sup>225</sup> Accordingly, in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved*, when the returning native Jocelyn visits the island for the first time in many years, the first Avice quickly defends the Portlanders as having become ‘quite intellectual now’.<sup>226</sup> But with this societal advance comes the implicit (and problematic) leaving off of the ‘old custom’, as the next chapter of the novel reveals (16, 184). The tensions surrounding this cultural shift inform both versions of the text, as Hardy experiments in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved* with two different scenarios in which the Portland Custom exists. This double text allows for greater exploration, in the sense that William Greenslade has established with other works: ‘what a particular writer does with an available discourse can constitute a test, not only of the defining angle of vision, but of its “truth”.’<sup>227</sup> Comparison of the 1892 serial version with the 1897 volume edition (including the 1907 and 1912 revisions where these are relevant)<sup>228</sup> illuminates these tensions, and the varying representations of the beliefs and viewpoints surrounding the custom. It also draws attention to possible influences from contemporary sources, as well as their implications for Hardy’s readership.

In *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, when Jocelyn has to return to London following his engagement to Avice, he thinks of the old custom ‘which had prevailed in both his and her family for centuries, both being of the old stock of the isle. The influx of “kimberlins” or “foreigners” ... had led in a large measure to its discontinuance’ (18). Jocelyn entertains the idea of participating in the custom, and he wonders if, despite Avice’s modern education and intellectual aims, she expected ‘a formal ratification of their betrothal, according to the precedent of their sires and

<sup>224</sup> Gomme, *Handbook of Folklore*, p. 2.

<sup>225</sup> Burne, *Handbook of Folklore*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>226</sup> Avice’s full statement, ‘O but we are quite intellectual now, in the winter particularly’ stands in marked contrast to the description of winter behaviour in *RN*, where ‘intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness’, and man’s ‘instinct’ is of spontaneous ‘Promethean rebelliousness’ (21). Avice as a public orator performing in the ‘lighted hall’ on the ‘long straight street’ (17) is committed to helping Portland society overcome the primal winter instincts described in *The Return of the Native* and hinted at in the portrayal of Dead Man’s Bay in the following scene (18, 186).

<sup>227</sup> Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*, p.10.

<sup>228</sup> No manuscripts survive of either version.

grandsires' (19). He asks her about the custom, though insisting that he only wants to know her desires as to the terms of the engagement. Not knowing how far she 'respected the island's history,' he 'felt bound to mention it; though urge it he did not' (19). By respecting the woman's views and seeking permission for consensual relations, Jocelyn's approach in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* aligns him with other Portland traditions relating to women. Historically women could hold office, including as the manorial 'Reeve', the official whose duty it was to collect all rents (including the royal rents) and produce this evidence at court. And whether single or married, Portland women could own and bequeath property, which, as Hutchins explained, 'they are very tenacious of parting with'.<sup>229</sup> When considered in this context, the courtship rules of the Portland Custom seem more open and more widely known by both parties than the unwritten code that Tess experiences, in which Alec feels entitled to take her against her will, implicitly following a centuries-old tradition dating back to Tess's 'ruthless' 'mailed ancestors' (82).

Out of respect for Avice's uncertainty, Jocelyn does not initially 'urge' fulfillment of the custom. She lingers 'uneasily', conscious of the traditions of island courtship, and Jocelyn proposes a plan where they might ratify the betrothal the next night, before he leaves for London. Perhaps it is this jarring juxtaposition of the old-world custom paired with his flight to the 'civilized' capital, that makes her feel uneasy, as she states that she will 'ask mother if I ought to and decide. ... I fear it is heathen and ungodly' (20). If Avice does ask her mother, she does not say so in her reply in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, and instead of meeting him the next night she sends a letter apologizing that she must 'put an end to' the 'old pagan custom (or whatever it is)' (21). Thus Avice speaks firmly as the 'modern young woman' Jocelyn considers her to be (19), asserting the middle-class Victorian standard of decorum cultivated through her education. She reasons that he, as a like-minded educated London transplant, will 'think the better of [her] in times to come' (21).

But in *The Well-Beloved* version of this same letter, Avice chooses to involve both their parents as well as the community at large:

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<sup>229</sup> Hutchins, *History of Dorset*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 809; See also Robert Douch, 'Customs and Traditions of the Isle of Portland', *Antiquity*, 23 (1949), 140-152 (p. 143); J.H. Bettey, *The Island Royal Manor of Portland: Some Aspects of its History with Particular Reference to the Period 1750-1851* (Weymouth: Sherron, 1970), p. 28.

mother supposes that your father, for natural reasons, may have hinted to you that we ought. Now, the thing is contrary to my feelings: it is nearly left off; and I do not think it good, even when there is property, as in your case, to justify it, in a measure. (189)

Avice's language here echoes the Portland chain of familial communication recorded by Smeaton, which Hardy would have encountered in Hutchins: from daughter to mother, thence to father, then to the future father-in-law, then to the future husband.

The involvement of the family in island courtship was affirmed by Clara King-Warry, a native of Portland, who wrote in her diary of the important role local society played in the wedding tradition: 'a Portland wedding must have been more of a tribal than family affair'.<sup>230</sup> This sentiment is demonstrated in *The Well-Beloved* where Avice expresses concern for her public reputation in the community. She writes to Jocelyn: 'it is best that I should not come — if only for appearances — and meet you at a time and place suggesting the custom, to others than ourselves, at least, if known' (189). Although the narrator has previously described the manners of even the 'well-to-do' on the island as 'primitive' (14), Avice intuits that conforming to the custom would represent a retrogression from the island's cultural progress, in which she has a vested interest that predates her relationship with Jocelyn.

Avice's differently nuanced responses in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved* parallel Jocelyn's opposite stances in the two versions. In *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, Jocelyn seems gloomily disappointed with her decision to refrain, and hopes that she has changed her mind when he later sees a female figure approaching him. When this woman turns out to be Marcia Bencombe instead, he feels lonely, rejected and vulnerable. In spite of his attraction to Marcia's 'dignified', 'classical' form, he still feels 'bound to marry Avice' and it is only his acquiescence to the influence of the Well-Beloved that keeps him from returning to Avice (28-29). But in *The Well-Beloved*, it is not Jocelyn but Avice who first alludes to the custom, even though in doing so she discourages it. But the very idea that the act could take place repulses him, and the reference to family and social expectation in Avice's

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<sup>230</sup> Clara King-Warry, *Old Portland: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Memoirs of Island Life*, ed. by Jean M. Edwards and Rodney Legg (Sherborne: Dorset Publishing, 1983), p. 66. King-Warry's diaries were published after her death under this title. In the extract quoted above, she describes a traditional Portland wedding procession of 1809, in which nearly seventy couples walked behind the bride and groom.

argument, both undercuts her image as a ‘modern young woman,’ and insults him in presuming that he would still advocate this ‘bygone barbarism’ (189-190).

‘Bygone barbarism’ here is not a simple derogatory phrase: in Edward Tylor’s terms, ‘barbarism’ denotes that intermediate phase of society’s development after ‘savagery’, but before ‘civilization’. Tylor warns in *Primitive Culture* that

the onward movement from barbarism has dropped behind more than one quality of barbaric character, which cultured modern men look back on with regret, and will even strive to regain by futile attempts to stop the course of history.<sup>231</sup>

This kind of regret appears in *The Well-Beloved*, when upon parting Jocelyn thinks of the native custom ‘which had prevailed in his and her family for centuries’ (187) and wonders if ‘she regretted the changing manners which made unpopular the formal ratification of a betrothal, according to the precedent of their sires and grandsires’ (187). While Jocelyn dreamily ponders this regret, crucially, he does not voice these thoughts. In keeping with what Hetherington calls the ‘more sophisticated character’ of this later Jocelyn,<sup>232</sup> his approach to modern Victorian courtship precludes him from admitting even the possibility of ratifying the betrothal. Though he has silently thought about it, when he sees that Avice has written it out in the letter, he is ‘vexed’ at what he views as a backwards cultural movement. Edward Gibbon had previously described the social expectation that drives such a feeling: ‘it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.’<sup>233</sup> Avice’s insistence on not practicing the Portland Custom keeps it alive in the collective cultural consciousness in a way that greatly unsettles Jocelyn.

In the 1897 *The Well-Beloved*, the Portland custom is portrayed as a survival of a supposedly bygone era. Its effective relegation is reaffirmed when Jocelyn later recalls it not merely as a would-be ‘betrothal’, as in 1892 (60), but as a ‘primitive betrothal’ (233) — added in the 1897 version and kept in 1912 — further emphasizing its backwardness and by implication the cultural regression of those who

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<sup>231</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, p. 26.

<sup>232</sup> See his Introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel (1986), p. xx.

<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 30.

practice it. The narrator's previous assessment of island manners as being 'primitive and straightforward, even among the well-to-do', paired with Avice's subsequent insistence that 'we are quite intellectual now', indicates that notions of cultural progress have been only recently established here. What is said of Christianity on the island may equally be said of modern ideas of civilization: 'Christianity had established itself precariously at best' (186). As Radford has pointed out, Frazer doubted whether society could truly civilize the peasantry: their civilization 'is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing the solid core of paganism and savagery below'.<sup>234</sup> But on Portland, where all levels of society revolve around the common industry of quarrying, there is no clear demarcation of 'the peasantry'. If those in Avice's and Jocelyn's position had previously practiced the Portland Custom, then they are similarly implicated in Frazer's allegation. Those of Hardy's readers who knew their Frazer might well have registered that the same language is applied to Avice's cultured upbringing: 'under the veneer of Avice's education many an old-fashioned idea lay slumbering' (18, 187).

To the more 'sophisticated' Jocelyn of *The Well-Beloved*, Avice, who formerly represented civilization, now suggests an atavistic shift. Though suggestions of atavism might seem anachronistic in the 1850s, the period at which this part of the novel's action takes place, they would have resonated with Hardy's audience in the 1890s. Having thus fallen — in Jocelyn's eyes — from her former 'modern' status to an indefinite, precarious position, Avice is caught between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. She grasps at civilization, but shows her hand as being still shackled to the old world — in Jocelyn's perception at least.

In addition to the taint of the custom itself, Avice's dismissive assertion in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* that 'some of the working quarriers kept it up, but nobody else' (19), suggests that were Jocelyn to practice the custom it would signify a move down the social ladder.<sup>235</sup> While Avice's argument here is framed to appeal to their shared modern identities, the form of her statement serves to diminish the fact that a

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<sup>234</sup> Andrew Radford, 'Hardy and Scientific Humanism' in *The Ashgate Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Rosemarie Morgan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 253-268, p. 267.

<sup>235</sup> Though this statement does not appear in *The Well-Beloved*, Jocelyn would have known through his family history with the quarries that regardless of at what point the custom became extinct, the last vestiges of the 'survival' would most likely be found among the working quarries, a class element that was previously foreign to the island where even the 'well-to-do' had 'primitive' ways.

large number of people on the island evidently did still ‘keep it up.’ In the early part of the nineteenth century, nearly eighty per cent of the male population on Portland was engaged in the stone trade, according to *Stevenson’s Agricultural History of Dorset*.<sup>236</sup> If, as Avice says, ‘some’ portion of the eighty percent of the overall island population (for the men require women for the Portland Custom) were practicing the tradition, this suggests that there existed a much more substantial group of those carrying this on than Avice (in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*) wanted to admit. The likelihood that the custom was more widely practiced on the Portland of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* than she wishes to acknowledge presumably explains her belief in *The Well-Beloved* that Jocelyn’s father — albeit a stone merchant rather than a working quarryman — would ‘insist’ on their carrying out the Island Custom (189). Jocelyn cannot endure the suggestion, and in *The Well-Beloved* this immediately prompts him to cast off the sense of being ‘bound to marry’ her that he felt in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*. Instead of suggesting that he feels ‘bound’, the same paragraph in *The Well-Beloved* finishes with the ominous and unforgiving idea: ‘But he, in fact, more than she, had been educated out of the island innocence that had upheld old manners; and this was the strange consequence of Avice’s misapprehension’ (197). As soon as he has dismissed Avice from his mind, he settles on the more socially promising Marcia Bencombe.

In spite of what may seem like insensitivity, Jocelyn is intuitive in sensing what may be read as atavism in Avice, even degeneration. Themes of family degeneration were quickly noted by readers of *Jude the Obscure*, and Phillip Mallett among others, has explored Hardy’s interest in his contemporaries’ growing anxieties about moral and physical degeneration.<sup>237</sup> Degeneration, as defined in 1880 by Ray Lankester, denotes ‘a gradual change of structure by which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life.’<sup>238</sup> While Lankester, as a zoologist, had drawn his conclusions from animal studies, the suggestion of

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<sup>236</sup> Quoted in Bettey, *The Island Royal Manor of Portland*, p. 52.

<sup>237</sup> Phillip Mallett, ‘Hardy and Time’ in *Reading Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Charles Pettit, (London: Macmillan, 1998), 157-171 (p. 163).

<sup>238</sup> Quoted in Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, p. 202. Richardson has noted Hardy’s visits with Lankester at dinners and society meetings in London in the early 1890s, which he describes the *Life*, pp. 269-270, Richardson, “‘Some Science Underlies All Art’: the Dramatization of Sexual Selection and Racial Biology in Thomas Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Well-Beloved*”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 3.2 (1998) 302-338 (p. 330, endnote 9).

degeneration and atavism in human populations quickly gained currency and escalated in the years leading up to the compositions of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved*.

In spite of Avice's promising education and personal aims towards progress, she ends her years prematurely as a labouring laundress, unable to withstand the physical conditions required for island survival. Early on, Avice's life prospects had seemed promising: her marriage to Jocelyn would represent a slight, but appropriate social climb of which the islanders approve (20, 188).<sup>239</sup> But after being refused by Jocelyn, Avice succumbs to the island's endogamous 'genetic propensity', as J.B. Bullen has called it, in marrying her cousin, and the result is ultimately a failure.<sup>240</sup> Avice's daughter, Avice II, seems embarrassed to admit that 'poor mother married her cousin' (67, 237), and in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* the islanders observe a degenerative turn in Avice's life on her return to the island, 'since when she began to falter' (56). In *The Well-Beloved* Hardy heightens the emphasis of this line, which is revised to 'since when she faltered and faltered' (229). The revision more clearly indicates the contrast to her former 'maiden days': downward progression and degeneration that ends with her death. There is a similarity here with the report of Darwin's first 'painful' re-encounter with 'Jemmy Button', which Gillian Beer examines in 'Can the Native Return?'. Darwin viewed Button as being ashamed at having been seen 'reverted' back to his native ways; so too the collective social awareness of Avice's thwarted prospects renders her life on Portland socially shameful and 'very sad' (80, 250).<sup>241</sup>

Avice's inability to cope with the physical labour required to sustain her family after her cousin-husband's financial ruin, stands in marked contrast to the usual representation of Portland natives, who are repeatedly praised for the heartiness of their 'breed' and their ability to withstand decades worth of grueling labour. In

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<sup>240</sup> J. B. Bullen, 'Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, Sex, and Theories of Germ Plasm', *A Spacious Vision: Essays on Hardy*, ed by P.V. Mallett and R.P. Draper (Newmill: Patten Press, 1994), 79-88, p. 81.

<sup>241</sup> Gillian Beer explains that eventually the crew of the *Beagle* conceded that Button was reintegrated into native society and even taught English to his fellow natives, though such a move would have been viewed by Victorians as having been seen to have 'reverted' back to the ways of the tribe in 'Can the Native Return?', p. 40. But the shock and shame of Darwin's initial first impression are significant, and are more in line with Avice I's experience as she seems not to have passed learning on to her daughter, as Button did with his countrymen.

addition to Smeaton's and Hutchins' descriptions of Portland fitness previously discussed, a contributor to *The Penny Magazine* of 1838 cheerfully described the robustness that characterizes Portland workers: 'A night's rest cures all. One old fellow upwards of seventy years of age, who was doing the work of the strongest, told me, that through that long period of time he had never known sickness.'<sup>242</sup> While the men worked the quarries, the fields were worked almost 'exclusively' by the women.<sup>243</sup> Hardy's own '*Facts*' *Notebook* records how 'Portland People — have been during the memory of man, almost destitute of medical assistance, the emoluments among so poor a class not being sufficient [to] remunerate a professional man.'<sup>244</sup> Thus the physical labour required, together paired with the lack of medical care available, warranted a sort of health imperative for the 'breed' of Portlanders, which, as a whole they were expected to uphold.

### **Avice II and Avice III: Degeneration and Regeneration**

Though Avice may be 'local to the bone' (18, 187), and may contain within her genetic makeup 'some mysterious ingredient sucked from the isle' (232), she is unable to adapt to a station below that for which she was groomed. Perhaps she had encountered concerns raised about the marrying of cousins, as Darwinian anxieties gained momentum in the 1860s, and she may have intimated this sense of shame to her daughter. For Hardy's readers in the 1890s, this cousin marriage would have resonated even more, particularly with publications like S. A. K. Strahan's *Marriage and Disease*, published the same year as *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which warned of the dangers of close relatives marrying.<sup>245</sup> When her daughter, Avice II, admits 'Poor mother married her cousin', Jocelyn quickly reassures her (in *The Well-Beloved*, though not in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*): 'As everybody does here' (237). In doing so, however, he acknowledges both that Avice I had reverted to the (inbred) endogamous island community, and the price that Avice II pays for her mother's breeding below her station. Progress has been halted, and Avice II appears

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<sup>242</sup> 'Isle of Portland', *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 17 February 1838, p. 69.

<sup>243</sup> Stuart Morris, *Portland: An Illustrated History* (Wimborne, Dorset: Dovecote Press, 1985), p. 58.

<sup>244</sup> Greenslade, '*Facts*' *Notebook*, pp. 253-4.

<sup>245</sup> Greenslade discusses this in *Degeneration*, p. 170.



as a degenerate version of Avice I: ‘more matter-of-fact, unreflecting, less cultivated than her mother had been. This Avice would never recite poetry from any platform, local or other, with enthusiastic appreciation of its fire. There was a disappointment in his recognition of this’ (238). Hardy explores the resulting ‘taint’ that comes with breeding with a lower order: ‘that brightness in her mother’s mind which might have descended to the second Avice with the maternal face and form, had been dimmed by admixture with the mediocrity of her father’s’ (272-3). But this Avice, the uneducated laundress, who has been bred up for hard labour, refuses to be physically hurt by the laundry wringing as her physically weaker, but intellectually superior mother was (67, 237).

If there is ‘disappointment’ in this degenerated second-generation Avice, it is worth comparing her skills to that of the mother’s when she was the same age: ‘[Jocelyn] found that [Avice I] could not only recite poetry at intellectual gatherings, but play the piano fairly, and sing to her own accompaniment’. Furthermore:

He observed that every aim of those who had brought her up had been to get her away mentally as far as possible from her natural and individual life as an inhabitant of a peculiar isle; to make her an exact copy of tens of thousands of other people, in whose circumstances there was nothing special, distinctive, or picturesque; to teach her to forget all the experiences of her ancestors; to drown the local ballads by songs purchased at the fashionable Budmouth music-sellers and the local vocabulary by a governess-tongue of no country at all. She lived in a house that would have been the fortune of an artist, and learned to draw London suburban villas from printed copies. (18, 186)

None of these skills that Avice I has been made to cultivate translates into anything helpful to sustain life on Portland; she was groomed for a comfortable marriage only, and when she falls on hard times she cannot withstand a labouring life.

While the decline of Avice I represents degeneration in terms of cultural potential, the social implications of this represent something far worse. Tylor in *Primitive Culture* spelled out the danger of such a backwards move:

We may sadly acknowledge that we have in our midst something worse than savagery. But it is not savagery; it is broken-down civilization. ... Thus the

savage life is essentially devoted to gaining subsistence from nature, which is just what the proletarian life is not. Their relations to civilized life – the one of independence, the other dependence – are absolutely opposite.<sup>246</sup>

Thus, it is not merely shameful or objectionable to retrogress from a civilized state to a lesser state, it is a drain on the system as a whole and a mark of cultural failure. Tylor's comparison of the noble savage with the late nineteenth-century proletariat bears on the events in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved/The Well-Beloved*. Not only were Portland fields controlled by the women, but women were credited with enterprising crop innovations, especially the revival of arrowroot cultivation in the early nineteenth century.<sup>247</sup> Had Avice I returned to the fields (as Tess does at Flintcomb Ash), her cultural retrogression would at least be a return to 'subsistence from nature' in Tylor's view. Instead, her appearance as a laundress, a washerwoman, would probably recall, to Hardy's readers, Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) and its degenerate laundresses crushed under an oppressive, unnatural system.

The inherited fate of Avice I's daughter is hinted at even before she is conceived. Hetherington has noted the revisionary progression of Jocelyn's thought-process regarding the Portland Custom: 'the betrothal would have taken place' in 1892 was revised to 'the *primitive* betrothal would probably have taken place' in 1897, and then to 'the primitive betrothal, *with its natural result*, would probably have taken place' in 1912 (emphasis mine).<sup>248</sup> The effects of these revisions is to suggest — in a period where the fear of degeneration was rife — that the primitive custom would draw the participants backwards. But the addition 'with its natural result' frames that result, the human offspring, as a manifestation of the primitive, backwards movement.

Yet Hardy resists any simple conclusions about the relationship between degeneration and progress. Avice II appears intellectually degenerate, but she is physically superior to her mother; she is more 'fit' for her environment, for life on Portland, and so far as this is construed as a 'lower' way of life, she is degenerate in the sense in which Lankester uses the term. The portrayal of her character causes the reader to question, which is preferable: intellectual superiority or local knowledge and

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<sup>246</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 38.

<sup>247</sup> Morris, *Portland: An Illustrated History*, p. 58.

<sup>248</sup> Hetherington, Introduction, p. xix.

‘fitness’? After all, her mother’s intellect was, from infancy, molded to fit a generic European model rather than one closely suited to the needs of the island. In the early scene where Avice I recites poetry, the reader does not see any individual faces — there are no Christopher Coneys or Granfer Cantles lit up in the darkness. Instead we see a faceless ‘audience’ (17, 185). And yet this image of Avice entertaining the masses of Portland — in the way that Ethelberta did in London — is the standard by which Avice II is measured: ‘she would never recite poetry or anything else from a platform.’ The fate of Avice I recalls Jude’s academic aspirations: ‘his whole scheme had degenerated to, even though it might not have originated in, a social unrest which had no foundation in the nobler instincts; which was purely an artificial product of civilization’ (102-103). Avice I, if not passionate about education the way that Jude had been, did have a vested interest in the improvement of the island, but when that role is taken from her, through her abandonment by Jocelyn, leaving her to marry her quarrier cousin, she was left with the same dissatisfied, ‘degenerated’ scheme for improvement. Her failure manifests itself intellectually in the form of her daughter Avice II, who is left to fend for herself.<sup>249</sup>

But physically, Avice II is stronger, more resilient, more suited to island life, because Avice I’s ‘germ plasm’, as August Weismann termed it, is reborn in Avice II. Bullen and Greenslade, among others, have insightfully discussed the implications of Hardy’s readings of Weismann in 1890. Greenslade’s study focuses on the implication of his ideas in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, and he has shown how the concept of the germ plasm ‘powered the rather rigid structure of hereditary determinism’ that drives the narrative of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved/The Well-Beloved*.<sup>250</sup> Though the ‘admixture’ from the father coupled with a lack of cultivation leaves Avice II degenerated intellectually, and full of ‘defects’ in Jocelyn’s eyes,<sup>251</sup> it is her genetic makeup that redeems her, and draws him to her

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<sup>249</sup> The degeneracy of the second Avice is apparent in the way she is fitted to a lower social level, as a laundress who marries a quarryman; the degeneracy of Little Father Time in *Jude* simply unfits him for life. Both, in their different ways, reflect the failure of their parents.

<sup>250</sup> Greenslade, *Degeneration*, p. 159.

<sup>251</sup> Greenslade has discussed how literature of the 1890s often focused on how children, through hereditary transmission, paid the price of the parents’ poor choice of marriage partners. But in *PWB/WB*, the sadness Jocelyn feels is intensified by the recognition that the child that might have been born to the first Avice would have

through what Bullen describes as ‘his intuitive genetic love for her’ since Jocelyn ‘knows the perfect and pure quarry she was dug from’.<sup>252</sup> He is thus able to rationalize her ‘defects’ as merely temporary aberrations in an otherwise stable family line; he even finds himself believing that ‘her limitations were largely what he loved her for’ (246), so much that he wishes that ‘instead of having an artist’s reputation, he could be living here an illiterate and unknown man, wooing, and in a fair way of winning, the pretty laundress in the cottage hard by’ (68, 238). For the Jocelyn of *The Well-Beloved*, repulsion and attraction are in sharper contrast than anything his character experiences in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*. But while civilization and degeneration thus stand opposed, his longing for Avice is simultaneously an atavistic desire to cross the line between culture and degeneration. Hardy’s deliberate emphasis on the word ‘primitive’, along with other phrases charged with the idea of cultural evolution forces the reader to confront this.

While Avice II represents degeneration in terms of cultural potential, she also demonstrates what might be seen as another and more complex form of degeneracy through her personal obsession with her own ‘Well-Beloved’. Avice II’s incessant quest, like Jocelyn’s, functions as a kind of decadent, selfish impulse, of a kind that was usually associated with European artists of the fin de siècle, as described by Max Nordau in *Degeneration*, first published in German the same year as *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*:

Each single figure strives visibly by some singularity in outline, set, cut or colour to startle attention violently, and imperiously to detain it. Each one wishes to create a strong nervous excitement, no matter whether agreeably or disagreeably.<sup>253</sup>

Jocelyn, with his unceasing pursuit both as a man and an artist of the ideal he names the ‘Well-Beloved’ is by association implicated in Nordau’s group of degenerates, but his same obsessive symptoms are shared by Avice II who as an illiterate laundress would be considered closer to the working classes that Nordau praises. That Avice II

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been (presumably) of a higher breed than Avice II, the product of Avice I and her cousin.

<sup>252</sup> Bullen, ‘Hardy’s *The Well-Beloved*, Sex, and Theories of Germ Plasm’, p. 82.

<sup>253</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895; reprinted Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 9.

as a labourer is driven by the same craze as the Royal Academician is significant: it demonstrates that what seems to be an decadent trait among the elite may be also found in ‘the folk’. This undermines the idea of ‘the folk’ as idealized model for the rest of the nation to admire, as representatives of what Georgina Boyes describes as ‘a better and more natural state’.<sup>254</sup> Similarly, Nordau in *Degeneration* praises ‘the folk’ or the ‘peasants’: ‘the peasant population, and a part of the working classes, and the bourgeoisie, are sound. I assert only the decay of the rich inhabitants of great cities and the leading classes.’<sup>255</sup> By presenting Avice as an illiterate laundress who is nonetheless afflicted with the same fin-de-siècle ‘sex-mania’ as Jocelyn, Hardy challenges conventional interpretations of ‘folk’, ‘decadent’, ‘primitive’, and ‘civilized’, especially for the reading audiences of the two great metropolises implicated by Nordau: Paris and London.

In spite of Jocelyn’s recognition of Avice II as a degenerated version of Avice I, and in spite of recognizing her shortcomings as ‘defects’ (68, 238), this encounter with the cultural ‘other’ in the form of Avice II begins to awaken Jocelyn’s own ‘primitive instinct’ (72, 242). He begins to fall for the girl (now possibly inhabited by the Well-Beloved as well as in search of it) who ‘while enrapturing his soul, simultaneously shocked his intellect’; he recognizes that ‘a change, perhaps, had come’ (72, 243). But Avice II has ‘primitive’ instincts too, and haunted by her mother’s sense of lifelong unhappiness at having failed to keep the Portland Custom (80, 250), Avice II is quick to give in to her own ‘primitive instinct’, allowing ‘Nature’ to ‘work her plans for the next generation’ by marrying with one of her own kind. But even this decision she regrets, and she soon feels ‘very miserable’ at having married ‘that horrid Isaac Pierston’ (104, 274). Jocelyn too feels that, like her mother, Avice II has ‘throw[n] [herself] away upon such a commonplace fellow as that quarryman!’ (101, 271). Yet in another complication of the language of progress and degeneration, the Portland custom that has compelled her to marry Isaac brings forth an Avice III who, like her grandmother will ‘with one hand [touch] the educated middle-class and with the other the rude and simple inhabitants of the isle’ (129, 299).

While Avice II is portrayed as a degenerated version of her mother, she is not,

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<sup>254</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival*, second edition (Leeds, No Masters Co-operative Limited, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>255</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 2 footnote 1.

like Jude and Sue, ‘painfully conscious of [her] debased value’<sup>256</sup> as her mother seems to have been. Avice II rather accepts her inherited status, whether degenerate or not, and asserts that she will not suffer as her mother did the conscious rejection of social aspiration. Jocelyn’s view of her as ‘clay’ to be moulded by him into a fit wife (251) is exemplified in the scene where she is shown barefoot in the kitchen, setting mousetraps and speaking in dialect. Watching her, Jocelyn suddenly exclaims, ‘A girl like you to throw yourself away upon such a commonplace fellow as that quarryman! Why do you do it!’ (101, 271). The incongruity of his compliment with the image before him suggests to Avice that she contains the potential for something more. She might well wonder what ‘a girl like you’ means in such circumstances, as she stands before him as an illiterate, barefoot, dialect-speaker catching mice.

But he views her as the raw material for betterment, if these accidental circumstances can be changed and the qualities innate within her — as he perceives it, the raw material of which she is made — can be cultivated in the next generation, and so he takes action in uniting her with her husband, for the good of propriety, family lineage, and island civilization. Avice II follows his lead in consciously cultivating her daughter, Avice III, for whom she provides ‘the best education that masters could give her’ at fashionable Sandbourne High School on the mainland. Here Avice III studies French and learns to play the piano. Recreating and advancing on the kind of education her own mother had, Avice II pushes for her daughter to marry the aged Jocelyn (thus consciously forgoing the Portland Custom) as a means of reinstating the upward social mobility and cultural improvement she rejected long ago.

Though Avice III has been conceived through the Portland Custom, this tradition stops with her. The custom which Jocelyn continues to view as being ‘ridiculous and out of date nowadays’ (in *The Well-Beloved* only, 275), seems ended:

the three Avices, the second something like the first, the third a glorification of the first, at all events externally, were the outcome of the immemorial island customs of intermarriage and of prenuptial union, under which conditions the type of feature was almost uniform from parent to child through generations: so that, till quite lately, to have seen one native man and woman was to have seen the whole population of that isolated rock, so nearly cut off from the

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<sup>256</sup> This is Greenslade’s phrase in *Degeneration*, p. 180.

mainland. (124, 294)

This passage is nearly identical in both the 1892 and the 1897 versions of the text. That the Portland Custom is left off in the same way, at the same time, in spite of Jocelyn's very different views and decisions in the two texts, suggests a sort of cultural determinism for the death of the custom and for the island's future progress — regardless of Jocelyn's beliefs or actions. But even this is a suggestion or, in Hardy's words, a 'seeming'; the point Greenslade makes about *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* applies with equal force to *The Well-Beloved*:

What Hardy seems to resist is any simple sanction or law which would lend stability to the relationship between human purpose and that order. Neither Spencer's evolutionary naturalism, nor Galton's laws of 'natural' inheritance, nor Huxley's recasting of evolutionary ethics is adequate to Hardy's purpose.<sup>257</sup>

At the same time, Hardy may be suggesting that Portland society is little better for having left off the Portland custom Michael Zeitler writes of *Jude the Obscure*: 'Rather than viewing contemporary marriage laws and religious rites as the culmination of cultural evolution, Hardy sees them as dysfunctional survivals that turn women into sacrificial victims.'<sup>258</sup> If 'sacrificial victims' seems too strong a term for the women in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved/The Well-Beloved*, certainly Zeitler's conclusions about *Jude* are equally relevant to the double-text of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved/The Well-Beloved*: 'What Hardy does challenge is the idea that cultural evolution is synonymous with moral progress.'<sup>259</sup>

There are, however, further ironies. Both Hetherington and Richardson have commented on the calculated 'formal symmetry' of the novel's time cycles.<sup>260</sup> This is exemplified by the three generations of Avices, and what might be seen as their qualified progress. If so, this takes the form of a kind of Comptean 'looped orbit'. Gerard Dollar has established Hardy's recurring use of this concept, summarised in

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<sup>257</sup> Greenslade, *Degeneration*, p. 156.

<sup>258</sup> Zeitler, *Representations of Culture*, p.130.

<sup>259</sup> Zeitler, *Representations of Culture*, p.129.

<sup>260</sup> Hetherington, 'Introduction', p. xxii; Richardson, 'Some Science', p. 323.

the ‘Apology’ to *Late Lyrics and Earlier* as the supposition that ‘advance is never in a straight line, but in a looped orbit, we may, in the aforesaid ominous moving backward, be doing it pour mieux sauter, drawing back for a spring.’<sup>261</sup> The events in the life-story of Avice I that seem to presage degeneration in her descendants eventually lead to a sort of progress for Avice III — at least in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* where she is released from an unhappy engagement to marry Henri Leverre, the young Frenchman she loves. The serial ends at this point, but in revising the text for the volume edition Hardy added a further complication. As soon as Avice III marries the man she loves, they separate over the bizarre claim that ‘He said if he were to die I — I— should be looking out for somebody with fair hair and grey eyes, just — just to spite him in his grave, because he’s dark, and he’s quite sure I don’t like dark people!’ (336). Angelique Richardson views this as indicative of the turn-of-the-century obsession with racial purity.<sup>262</sup> After all, the quasi-eulogy to the Portland Custom affirmed the racial stability that the Custom ensured: ‘to have seen one native man and woman was to have seen the whole population of that isolated rock’. Avice III is thus the first in a long line having to negotiate a relationship outside the island ‘race’.

Even so, the couple’s seemingly trivial disagreement (over fair versus dark) serves to undermine the implied looped orbit metanarrative of progress within the novel, if not civilization itself. Though Avice III has escaped not only Portland Custom, but also her mother’s attempt to engineer her marriage to Jocelyn, there is little promise of progress, as the relationship between her and the kimberlin Henri seems plagued by tensions connected to race. Silly as it appears to be, the language seems to hint at the eugenic movement that would quickly gain momentum in the years following the first publication of the story in 1892. Hardy kept the episode in the 1912 revision of *The Well-Beloved*, which appeared five years after the establishment of the Eugenics Society and the same year as the First International Eugenics Conference. One wonders how much more these seemingly foolish words spoken by Avice III resonated in the wake of these developments.

*The Well-Beloved* demonstrates how folk custom, here the Portland Custom, does not exist as a fossilized relic, but struggles to survive in a rapidly changing

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<sup>261</sup> J. Gerard Dollar, ‘“The Looped Orbit” of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 19.3 (1983), 293-308, p. 293.

<sup>262</sup> Richardson, ‘Some Science’, p. 330.



world. Like Hardy, the folk customs of Wessex (and Portland) are also ‘time-torn’ as they either adapt or become obsolete. Perhaps Hardy wondered about the potential for customs to reinvent themselves in a society convinced that it was progressing to higher stages of development. After all, Tylor had proclaimed that ‘progress, degradation, survival, revival, modification are all modes of the connexion that binds together the complex network of civilization’.<sup>263</sup> And Galton himself, the founder of eugenics, suggested that new identities are not created, but that we must instead see new life as a ‘segregation of what already existed, under a new shape’.<sup>264</sup> Perhaps this eugenic reinterpretation of *The Well-Beloved*’s Shelleyan epigraph ‘One shape of many names’ would have intrigued Hardy. And one wonders to what extent the spirit of the old custom with its basis of good breeding for the island ‘race’ would reappear, reconceived in the ‘rational’ and quasi-scientific terms of the eugenics movement for the good of another race, before it too would become (truly) ‘barbarous’ and obsolete. Perhaps this is why Hardy, in a ‘Prospero-like burning of his books’,<sup>265</sup> left the brave new world to the scientists and retreated to the past through his return to poetry.

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<sup>263</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p.16.

<sup>264</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Life and Letters of Francis Galton*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924 edition, reprinted 2011), p. 376.

<sup>265</sup> The phrase is Michael Millgate’s in *A Biography Revisited*, p. 355.

## Chapter Five: Winter Customs: Bonfire Night and Mumming

It was as if these men and boys had suddenly dived into past ages and fetched therefrom an hour and deed which had before been familiar with this spot. The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now. Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground, and duly had their day. Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of men when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery, and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light. (*The Return of the Native* 20-21)

In *The Return of the Native* Hardy introduces the inhabitants of Egdon Heath alongside a multi-layered exploration of Bonfire Night. His depiction of the heath blazing with the ‘lineal descendants’ of more ancient fires kindled by early men, would have appealed to a readership increasingly interested in Max Müller’s idea that ‘under the microscope of the etymologist every word almost discloses traces of its first metaphorical conception.’<sup>266</sup> This chapter will begin by establishing some of the etymological traditions associated with the word ‘bonfire’, before looking at portrayals of the seasonal bonfire in antiquarian and historical literature as they developed into the Christian and post-Reformation manifestations that Hardy would come to know personally in the nineteenth century. Hardy draws on all these traditions to suggest complex levels of resistance.

Hardy knew that bonfire traditions went back much further than ‘Bonfire Night’: folklorists Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud have pointed out that

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<sup>266</sup> Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1861-1864), II, p. 354.

‘throughout recorded history, it has taken very little persuasion to get English people to make a bonfire.’<sup>267</sup> The earliest recorded usages show the compound word ‘bonefire’: the edition of the 1483 *Catholicon Anglicum* prepared for the Early English Text Society glosses the original entry of ‘banefyre: ignisossium’ as ‘a *very* literal translation of the English bonfire’, though the editor offers no further insight into the nature or function of ‘banefyres.’ Unfortunately this text’s predecessor, the mid-fifteenth century *Promptorium Parvulorum*, considered to be the first English-Latin dictionary, does not list the word at all.<sup>268</sup>

The functions of early ‘bonefires’ seemed to be diverse: they are documented as having been lit at midsummer (later called the feast of St. John), but even these carry faint vestiges of earlier incarnations, in which they were once thought to ward off dragons (the dragons being repulsed by the stench of burning bones). John Mirk, a fourteenth-century monk of Lilleshall Abbey in Shropshire, alludes to this old belief, explaining that in ‘olde tyme’, apparently at midsummer, parishioners would come to church at night to participate in a wake, but they would often fall into ‘lechery’, ‘gluttony’, and ‘sin’ and so ‘torned the holynesse to cursednesse wherefore holy faders ordeyned the people to leue the wakyng’ and go and fast at home. The parishioners thus worshipped St. John by waking ‘at home’ where they made:

all maner of fyers. One was clene bones and noo wood & that is called a bone fyre. Another is clene wode and & no bones & that is called a wode fyre, for people to syt & wake thereby. The third kind is made of wode and bones and it is called saynt Iohannis fyre.

Mirk goes on to relate these fires to a former belief in dragons. When ancient armies believed that they were under threat from dragons, they made fires of bones, knowing ‘well that dragons hate nothyng more than the stanche of brennyng bone’, ‘and so with the stanche therof they droue away the dragons’. To express their thankfulness once the dragons were repelled, the armies apparently would make a second fire of

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<sup>267</sup> *Dictionary of English Folklore*, p. 30.

<sup>268</sup> The Early English Text Society’s edition of the *Catholicon Anglicum* spells ‘ignisossium’ as one word, though the OED lists it as two separate words. *Catholicon Anglicum: an English-Latin Workbook, dated 1483: from the MS 168 in the Library of Lord Monson, Collated with the Additional MSS 15, 562, British Museum*, ed. by Sidney J. H. Herrtage (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1882), p. 20.

wood in order to bring light and to serve as a ‘token’ to St John, who was a ‘lanterne of lyght to the people.’<sup>269</sup>

Mirk’s description may have been in the mind of early eighteenth-century antiquary Henry Bourne, whose elaboration on this relationship between dragons and bonfires perplexed his successor John Brand. In his 1725 *Antiquitates Vulgares*, Bourne had related how in ‘ancient times’ ‘heathens’ believed they were threatened by dragons, which

being incited to Lust through the Heat of the Season, did frequently, as they flew through the Air, Spermatize in the Wells and Fountains. By this means the Water became infected and the Air polluted; so that Whoever drank the Waters, was either tormented with a grievous Distemper, or lost his Life. As soon as the Physicians perceived this, they ordered Fires to be made about the Wells and Fountains, and those things, which occasioned the noisomest Smell to be burnt, knowing that thereby the Dragons would be driven away.

Bourne conjectured that because this custom was observed around the time of the feast of St John, ‘the bonfire’ tradition became associated with his feast day and was, at the time of his writing in the early eighteenth century, ‘therefore still observed among some people’. He goes on to say that any time the making of such ‘bonfires’ is ‘attended with any such superstition’ in the present day, they should be censured; on the other hand, if they are kindled ‘as Tokens of Joy, to excite Innocent Mirth and Diversion’ then they ‘deserve no Censure.’<sup>270</sup> Fifty years later, in incorporating Bourne’s content into the first edition of *Popular Antiquities*, John Brand offered this comment on Bourne’s description, firmly staking his own perspective in the age of enlightenment: ‘I have nothing to observe here concerning Mr. Bourne’s lustful Dragons ...!’ ‘Our modern Philosophers are wiser than to attribute any noxious

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<sup>269</sup> *John Mirk’s Festial*, ed. by Susan Powell, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), I, p. 167. Hutton cites this source as *Mirk’s Festival*, ed. by T. Erbe (Early English Text Society, 1905), sermon 182, p. 496; the OED lists it as *Festyvall*.

<sup>270</sup> Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares* (Newcastle: J White, 1725), p. 212, p. 215; Bourne’s sources for this ‘bonfire’ tradition were the medieval writers Durandus and Belithus.

Qualities in Water to Dragon's Sperm.'<sup>271</sup> While Bourne does not discuss whether this belief still persisted into the seventeenth century (in which he was born), his silence on the current state of belief seems to have prompted Brand to distance himself, and claim the superior wisdom of his own era's 'modern philosophers'.

This cleansing or purging of infected air (albeit without dragons) had also been alluded to previously in the early sixteenth century by John Stow, who wrote that bonfires represented 'goodamity amongst neighbors that, being before at controversy, were there by the labour of others reconciled, and made of bitter enemies, loving friends, as for the virtue that a great fire had to purge the infection of the air.' This spirit of 'goodamity' appears in another early sixteenth-century account, which describes one wealthy inhabitant of Suffolk who staged a small feast before a blazing bonfire, and welcomed to it 'some of the friends and more civil poor neighbours'. It was perhaps because of these increasingly communal associations that Stow apparently understood the 'bon' in bonfire to be derived from the French *bon*, rather than 'bone'.<sup>272</sup>

More recently Alan Gailey and G. B. Adams have discussed the confusing etymology of 'bonfire' in English. They argue that no other European equivalent word for 'bonfire' includes a root word meaning 'bone'. They have, however, recorded two nineteenth-century instances where bones were (apparently) placed on bonfires, in Desertagney parish and Clonmany parish in County Donegal, Ireland.<sup>273</sup> They have also noted two twentieth-century sources who, on being asked why the bonfires were lit, both refer to bones. The first, a group of children in Portnablagh, County Donegal were recorded in 1950 as saying the bonfire lighters were 'burning the Protestants' bones', while the source in Londonderry understood the bonfires to be 'commemorate[ing] the burning of Protestant bones.' Gailey and Adams have further noted that there are similar recorded examples of twentieth-century Irish Catholics and Protestants alluding to 'bones'. Even so, they concede that etymologists remain baffled by the root word of *bonfire*.<sup>274</sup>

While the 'bone' aspect of bonfires may have still been in living memory (or at least in public perception) in comparatively modern times, from the Tudor period

<sup>271</sup> John Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, p. 271, p. 281.

<sup>272</sup> Quoted in Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 313.

<sup>273</sup> Alan Gailey and G. B. Adams, 'The Bonfire in North Irish Tradition', *Folklore*, 88.1 (1977), 3-38 (p. 17).

<sup>274</sup> Gailey and Adams, 'The Bonfire', pp. 34-37.

onwards historical records indicate that communal bonfires increasingly came to be staged for national celebrations. John Brand recorded accounts of Henry VII and Henry VIII commissioning royal bonfires, and Brand's contemporary Joseph Strutt in *Sports and Pastimes* also traced them from the reign of Henry VII onwards, explaining that these spectacles were 'instituted for the diversion of the populace.' Strutt's statement seems to represent an eighteenth-century view of bonfires as celebratory occasions rather than rites of worship, as they had formerly been (or were assumed to have been).<sup>275</sup> Ronald Hutton has agreed with Strutt, suggesting that the making of bonfires by the Tudor period seems to have become a 'national custom'.<sup>276</sup> But the vestiges of Catholic ritual were still associated with bonfires, and in 1541, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Henry VIII cancelled payment for the usual royal bonfire, and the practice was never reinstated during his reign.<sup>277</sup> Hutton views this move as a concerted effort to rid the people of the Catholic connotations of the fires, associated as they were with the feast of St John. With the onset of the Reformation, records show that midsummer bonfires seemed to die out first in the urban centers of Southern England, and then in Dorset (in Lyme Regis and Dorchester) as well as in Somerset and Herefordshire following the reign of Elizabeth I.<sup>278</sup>

But while the midsummer bonfire tradition seemed to die out, a new custom of November bonfires emerged during the reign of Elizabeth I. David Cressy has established that prior to Elizabeth I, there is no (known) record of late autumn or early winter national bonfires in mediaeval or Tudor England – in 'striking contrast' (Hutton's phrase) to those of midsummer.<sup>279</sup> But from the reign of Elizabeth I onwards, her accession day, November 17th, came to be celebrated with bonfires, pageants, and celebrations, which were kept up by the queen until her death in 1603.<sup>280</sup> The day continued to be celebrated well into the seventeenth century, though

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<sup>275</sup> Joseph Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London: Methuen, 1801), p. 293.

<sup>276</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 313.

<sup>277</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 315.

<sup>278</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 316.

<sup>279</sup> David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989), pp. 57-58.

<sup>280</sup> Sir Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Pimlico, 1977).

David Cressy has documented a growing aspect of anti-papal spectacle to the accession day bonfires following the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. He has noted a ghastly scene that took place in 1677, where Charles Hatton recorded seeing

Mighty bonfires and the burning of a most costly pope, carried by four persons in diverse habits, and the effigies of two devils whispering in their ears, his belly filled with live cats who squalled most hideously as soon as they felt the fire.<sup>281</sup>

In spite of anti-Catholic overtones, the burning and bonfire traditions that became associated with Elizabeth's accession day were in some respects continuing and reaffirming a long-established Martinmas tradition of November being the 'blood month', or 'blod-monath', that Bede had written about centuries before.<sup>282</sup> Bede's designation 'blod-monath' signified that livestock were slaughtered in November in order to reduce the number that had to be fed through the winter. In pre-Christian centuries, these slaughtered animals were thought to have been offered as sacrifices, though it remains uncertain to what extent this was a religious rite in pagan Britain, and to what extent it was part of necessary agricultural practice.<sup>283</sup>

In Christian Britain, this time of slaughter coincided with the medieval feast of St. Martin on November 11th, so early November had come to be a time of preparation for feasting and celebration. Hutton has documented this in many places in the West of Ireland, where records show that it was considered lucky to kill an animal (usually a cock) and sprinkle its blood on the threshold of the house, though this tradition is not known to have existed in England.<sup>284</sup> While in the medieval period Martinmas had stood as the last widespread festival before Christmas, under Elizabeth the anniversary of her accession took on the form of national Protestant holy day. As 'national' bonfires during the midsummer period had now died out, Elizabeth's accession, soon followed by the date of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, offered a timely occasion to keep, or even revive a tradition of bonfire celebration on a national day,

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<sup>281</sup> Quoted in David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells*, pp. 177-178, and in J.A. Sharpe, *Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Gunpowder Day* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 98.

<sup>282</sup> Steve Roud, *The English Year*, p. 469; Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 386.

<sup>283</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 362.

<sup>284</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 386.

which at the same time fulfilled the kind of primal need for a bonfire tradition at the ‘winter ingress’, as Hardy describes it in the opening chapters of *The Return of the Native*.

But because the ‘Queen’s Night’, as Elizabeth’s accession day was often called, was not an official holy day, that is, a day free from work, the celebrations and bonfires necessarily had to take place after work – at night – and records show that church bells similarly were rung in the evening.<sup>285</sup> Following Elizabeth’s reign, the day (or night) took on a more rebellious tone when James I’s wife converted to Catholicism, and the celebrations which had once been for Elizabeth became increasingly defiant, though they were still sanctioned by the church, as parish records show bells were enthusiastically rung around the country, including at ‘fiercely protestant Dorchester’.<sup>286</sup>

At the same time, ‘Bonfire Night’, as November 5th would soon come to be called, had been granted a ‘perpetual anniversary’ by Parliament a year after its narrow escape in 1605. Under Cromwell, Bonfire Night stood as the only feast not outlawed,<sup>287</sup> and the anti-Catholic traditions that were formerly associated with accession day now came to centre exclusively on the Fifth. Even after the Restoration, the celebrations of November 5th ‘far surpassed’ that of the new Restoration Day,<sup>288</sup> though it is unclear whether this is to do with momentum having built up around the Fifth, or whether a post-war populace identified more with the spirit of rebellion than they did with a sense of royal allegiance. The idea of mass identification with a night that celebrates the triumph of the English people, rather than the monarch, suggests the appropriation of Bonfire Night in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a night of rebellion, as Trish Ferguson has established in ‘Bonfire Night in Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*’.<sup>289</sup>

As a child, Hardy witnessed at least one kind of these November 5th events, which had a high level of local participation. The scene made a strong impression on him, as he described in *The Life*:

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<sup>285</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 390.

<sup>286</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 391.

<sup>287</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 394.

<sup>288</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 396.

<sup>289</sup> Trish Ferguson, ‘Bonfire Night in Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 67.1 (2012), 87-107.



When still a small boy he was taken by his father to witness the burning in effigy of the Pope and Cardinal Wiseman in the old Roman Amphitheatre at Dorchester during the No-Popery Riots. The sight to the young Hardy was most lurid, and he never forgot it; and when the cowl of one of the monks in the ghastly procession blew aside and revealed the features of one of his father's workmen, his bewilderment was great.<sup>290</sup>

While Hardy here writes as a mature man of eighty describing the impressions of a child, Dennis Taylor has pointed out that he seems to show no sympathy with the anti-Catholic point of view.<sup>291</sup> Hardy had previously described the same scene in a piece titled 'Maumbury Ring' that appeared in *The Times* in 1908, and in this longer piece he called the effigies 'highly realistic'. He describes a procession of figures including 'priests, monks, nuns' who march from Fordington Hill around the town before reaching that 'wicked old place' Maumbury Ring. Here, effigies were 'slung up' and made to burn on 'a huge rick of furze with a gallows above', and 'the fire blazed till they were blown to pieces by fireworks contained within them'.<sup>292</sup>

This experience probably formed the basis for his portrayal of the destruction of the effigy of Napoleon in *The Dynasts*, which is hung and burned on Durnover Green (Fordington Green in Dorchester.) In his work on *The Dynasts* Glen Wickens has read this scene as asserting a sense of communal – even carnivalesque – rebellion.<sup>293</sup> J. S. Udal briefly alludes to the same kind of violence in Dorchester, and names one occasion 'thirty or forty years ago' where 'the military had to be called out in order to assist the civic authorities in quelling the riots.' This would place the event in the late nineteenth century; unfortunately, he does not elaborate on what exactly warranted this intervention or how people viewed the military interference.<sup>294</sup>

Peter Robson believes that Hardy's descriptions in *The Times* and in *The Life*

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<sup>290</sup> *Life and Work*, p. 26.

<sup>291</sup> Dennis Taylor, 'Jude the Obscure and English National Identity: The Religious Striations of Wessex', in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 345-363 (p. 351).

<sup>292</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Maumbury Ring' in *The Times*, 9 October 1908, p. 11, reprinted in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, ed. by Harold Orel (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 225-232.

<sup>293</sup> Glen Wickens, *Thomas Hardy, Monism, and the Carnival Tradition: the One and the Many in The Dynasts*, p. 110.

<sup>294</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 48.

are ‘entirely consistent’ with contemporary accounts of events at Dorchester on November 5th, even if they do not mention the violence customary at the time. Robson has questioned why the ‘peaceful’ bonfires lit by the inhabitants of Egdon Heath on November 5th bear no resemblance to the anti-social Bonfire Night activities that Hardy had witnessed as a child. Robson argues that this discrepancy ‘cannot entirely be explained by his portrayal of the Heath as remote from the nearest town’,<sup>295</sup> and in explanation suggests that perhaps Hardy was so ‘ashamed’ of the violent practices that were still ‘in full swing’ in 1870s Dorset that he simply chose to ignore them. But by the time of writing the *Times* piece in 1908, local November 5th celebrations had calmed, so, in Robson’s he could ‘safely indulge in personal reminiscence’.<sup>296</sup>

Besides the possibility of Hardy being ‘ashamed,’ the portrayal of the heath dwellers in *The Return of the Native* as tamed ‘lineal descendants’ of pagan forebears better suits and complements the novel’s opening vision of anthropomorphic Egdon. In the Bonfire Night scene, a living version of the ‘fan of time’ is revealed on the barrow, with the characters acting as perpetuators of a tradition resembling Samhain. In a time where imaginative explorations (and excavations) of Celtic and Saxon identities were of increasing interest to the reading public, Hardy’s description also suggests a mythological context in line with the current ideas of Max Müller and Edward Tylor. This ‘bonfire survival’ is more than mere myth, as it stands as both an ‘instinctive and resistant act’ – a phrase which hints at the dichotomy between acquiescence and resistance to authority that has characterized Bonfire Night for centuries.

Ronald Hutton has established that the beginning of November seems to have been a major festival-time in pagan Britain, in all areas which had a ‘pastoral economy’.<sup>297</sup> The name ‘Samhain’ designates this festival period (on the cusp of October and November), when ‘tribal assemblies’ gathered for meetings, games, and feasting, though Hutton adds the qualification that no known medieval records furnish evidence that November 1st was still an ongoing ‘pan-Celtic festival’, mostly likely because by the time these medieval records were written, centuries after Christianization had occurred, these writers were unaware of what the pagan rites had

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<sup>295</sup> Robson, ‘Traditional Culture’, p. 178.

<sup>296</sup> Robson, ‘Traditional Culture’, p. 171.

<sup>297</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, pp. 369-370.

been. Similarly, from the perspective of late twentieth-century historical scholarship, Hutton says ‘an Anglo-Saxon counterpart is difficult either to prove or to dismiss completely.’<sup>298</sup>

Perhaps because of the lack of reliable historical information about pagan Britain, in the eighteenth century antiquarians began to focus greater attention on Druids, and articles on Druidism began to regularly appear in British weekly magazines. This trend continued into the nineteenth century with titles such as *Celtic Researches*, *Tour of Wales*, and *Antiquities of Ireland* often emphasizing the surviving Celtic characteristics to be found among modern Britons, particularly in the ‘Celtic Fringe’ areas: South West England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Of the Welsh, Joseph Cradock had determined that ‘in observing the manners and customs of this people, some idea may be formed of their ancestors, the ancient Britons. They have preserved themselves almost intirely [sic] distinct from all other nations.’<sup>299</sup> Perhaps inspired by this collective interest, Hardy taps into this desire to locate (or imagine) the vestiges of Celtic heritage that remain in the latter-day surviving descendants.

Hardy may have been aware of one famous description by the seventeenth-century Irish antiquary Jeffrey Keating, which described how ‘the Druids of Ireland used to assemble on the hill of Tlachtga on the night of Samain and kindle a sacred fire’. While Hutton has questioned Keating’s historical accuracy, describing him as ‘completely unreliable’ by late twentieth-century standards,<sup>300</sup> Keating’s description was cited often and popularized as part of the growing influence of Celtic studies in the 1870s, led by the Welsh philologist Sir John Rhys. Rhys’ legacy would later be continued by Frazer, who also wrote Rhys’ entry for the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Frazer contended that Samhain had been a pagan feast for the dead, working backwards from the inference that the All Souls/All Saints Christian holy days must merely have been superimposed on a pre-existing festival.<sup>301</sup>

Frazer further popularized the long-standing antiquarian view that considered formerly ‘Celtic’ areas to be still practicing a form of fire-festivals or lighting of ‘protective’ bonfires. These ideas had previously been brought to the British reading public with Thomas Pennant’s *Tour in Scotland* (1776) and Brand’s first edition of

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<sup>298</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 362.

<sup>299</sup> Sweet, *Antiquaries*, pp. 132-138.

<sup>300</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 361.

<sup>301</sup> Hutton, *Stations*, p. 364.

*Popular Antiquities* (1777), and they continued into the late twentieth-century with folklore writers such as Bob Bushaway. Bushaway popularized a similar bonfire tradition believed to have been practiced on Portland, in which Portlanders would jump over the flames for good luck, or lift and pass their children high over the flames for similar purpose. On closer consideration, it seems he had worked from Udal's description of the same custom in *Dorsetshire Folklore*, which cites a MS notebook lent to him by his friend Rev. W. K. Kendall.<sup>302</sup>

This interest in a 'Celtic'-inspired bonfire tradition even surfaced at the royal level, as Queen Victoria commissioned a large bonfire at Balmoral Castle in 1874, ostensibly on Hallowe'en, perhaps to honour the bonfire season without offending Catholic tastes, as would have happened had it been staged on November 5th. The Balmoral celebration was widely covered in the national newspapers during the first week of November 1874, by which time the newly married Hardys had returned from their honeymoon and set up house in Surbiton.<sup>303</sup> The newspapers reported on the occasion as the preservation of a custom 'which is fast falling into neglect'.<sup>304</sup> This may have appealed to Hardy's growing awareness of customs (and their decline) of supposedly Celtic and Saxon origins, an interest shared by his friend William Barnes, with whom he increasingly communicated after moving to Sturminster Newton where he would write *The Return of the Native*.<sup>305</sup>

Hutton has argued that writers and folklorists have long conflated Samhain (of which pre-Christian rites are still as yet unknown) with the rites of Beltane (with its midsummer fires), but this scholarly consensus did not come until later in the twentieth century. In *The Return of the Native* Hardy would have been drawing on a more established antiquarian perception of Druids kindling sacred bonfires on hilltops, a notion kept alive in the popular consciousness by the influence of figures like Brand, Rhys, and even Queen Victoria. When Hardy makes the statement that it is 'pretty well known' that such bonfires owe more to 'jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies' than 'the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot' (21), he invokes a popular perception about the lighting of fires in this late October/early November period. In doing so, he prepares the ground for a dichotomy

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<sup>302</sup> Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony, and Community in England: 1700-1800* (London: Junction, 1982), p. 66; Udal, *Dorsetshire Folklore*, p. 48.

<sup>303</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 154.

<sup>304</sup> 'The Court at Balmoral', 05 November 1874, *Morning Post*, p. 5, col. 5.

<sup>305</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 173.

between ‘survival’ and ‘revival’ that he explains later in the novel, and which is considered further in this chapter. Bonfire Night is thus seen as a modified form of a much more ancient practice, bringing together concepts of Celtic, Saxon and Greek faiths and culture, and even, by extension, Zoroastrian and Parsi. In the 1860s Max Müller continually traced modern words to their ancient origins, and he actively defended ‘modern’ nineteenth-century Parsis as more than ‘fire worshippers’, which he argued would ‘place them on a level with mere idolators.’ Instead, he argued that the fire has only symbolic significance, as ‘an *emblem* of the Divine power’ (emphasis mine.)<sup>306</sup> In *Primitive Culture* Tylor expanded on this idea, affirming that while ancient Zoroastrian ancestors did indeed worship fire, their nineteenth-century Parsi descendants, as well as other ‘European races’, belong to a stage of culture in which these ‘fire-rites’ are symbolic, rather than actual ‘acts of direct worship to a Fire-god’.<sup>307</sup> Tylor explains that the classification of ‘fire worship’ is complex and problematic, and it must be ‘borne in mind that rites performed with fire are, though often, yet by no means necessarily, due to worship of the fire itself’; he goes on to argue that the overlapping of cultural stages, combined with an inclination on the part of many writers to ‘class them as acts of fire-worship without proper evidence as to their meaning in any case, have added to the perplexity of a subject not too easy to deal with, even under strict precaution’.<sup>308</sup> Andrew Radford asks the insightful question whether Hardy’s views in the 1870s reflect ‘Farrer’s confidence that a mass of pagan ideas might lie totally uninjured beneath the surface of nineteenth-century life’, or whether he felt closer to Tylor’s ‘more considered position’ (as established above). Radford’s answer, that *The Return of the Native* indicates Hardy’s ‘unresolved and fascinated musing’ over these ideas, both accords with Hardy’s portrayal of the complex meanings of the bonfires for dwellers on the heath,<sup>309</sup> and raises suggestive possibilities for the varied implications of survivals theory.

Barnes’ poem ‘Guy Faux’s Night’, published forty years earlier in 1844,<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, quoted in Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, II, p. 257.

<sup>307</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, II, pp. 257-258.

<sup>308</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, II, p. 252.

<sup>309</sup> Hardy’s account is far more nuanced account than Barnes’ assessment of Dorset folk as ‘more fire worshippers’ than anything else’; Barnes, ‘Fore-Say’, in Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 5.

<sup>310</sup> Barnes, *Poems of Rural Life, in the Dorset Dialect* (London: John Russell Smith, 1844), p. 169.

paints a more rollicking version of Bonfire Night than that in *The Return of the Native*, in that all the participants become covered in soot when they accidentally build the bonfire too high. The poem has a playful tone, much like the first version of Hardy's poem 'The Fire at Tranter Sweatley's', and mentions nothing of 'fire worship.' Only when Barnes wrote his 'Fore-Say' shortly before his death in 1885, following the influence of Müller's writings, *Primitive Culture*, and even the *Return*, did he allude to the 'fire-wielding youths' of November 5th who appear more as 'fire-worshippers than politicians'.<sup>311</sup> This changing perception suggests that contemporary views of folklore and anthropology influenced how Barnes came to understand his own culture.

Ruth Firor also addresses the theme of 'fire worship' in somewhat problematic terms, describing a 'distinct race' of 'round-headed people' who in contrast to the 'long-headed folk' 'burned their dead', and who still 'survive in certain racial English types today'. Firor asserts that 'the prehistoric bonfires of Egdon go back to a people who were in England by at least 2,000 BC, and probably much earlier', but the only source cited is T. D. Kendrick's *The Axe Age*, and Kendrick only states generally that prehistoric man in Britain may have come from Breton or possibly from Central Europe.<sup>312</sup> Firor's claim could lead a reader to suppose that such bonfires were documented on Egdon (or in Dorset) in ancient or medieval times, but in fact her recorded examples all date from after 1605.<sup>313</sup> Thus, as Hutton has argued, there is no documented evidence of 'Samhain-like' bonfires in medieval or Tudor Southwest England. Firor does usefully point out that these fires for Hardy's characters represent a 'timid act of rebellion',<sup>314</sup> a theme Trish Ferguson picks up and places in a context of both the French Revolution, and the growing social unrest among the agricultural labourers of Southwest England in the 1830s and 1840s.

Andrew Radford has noted that Strutt's 1801 *Sports and Pastimes* confidently proclaimed that:

it has been customary in this country, from time immemorial, for the people, upon occasions of rejoicing, or by way of expressing their

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<sup>311</sup> Barnes, 'Fore-Say' in *Dorsetshire Folklore*, p. 5.

<sup>312</sup> T.D Kendrick, *The Axe Age* (London: Methuen, 1925), p. 120.

<sup>313</sup> Firor, *Folkways*, p. 147-148.

<sup>314</sup> Firor, *Folkways*, p. 150.

approbation of any public occurrence, to make large bonfires upon the close of the day, to parade the streets with great lights, and to illuminate their houses.<sup>315</sup>

But Radford sees the Bonfire Night in the *Return* as standing in stark contrast to Strutt's 'great rejoicing' or 'parading the streets': he argues that the bonfire here stands as a 'feeble, ossified relic', which casts a ghastly light on the Egdonites, who bring gloomy subjects before it, such as 'the ageing process; the unfortunate outcome of many marriages; how human ambitions are regularly thwarted; and the unfortunate outcome of many marriages.' They attempt in vain to bring humour and delight, but as Radford sees it their 'whirling' is closer to a 'dance of death'.<sup>316</sup> This representation also stands in contrast with the youthful Bonfire Night characters evoked by Barnes first in his poem 'Guy Faux Night' and later in his 'Fore-Say', which also speaks of powerful sounding 'fire-wielding youths'. Radford's reading is also opposed to Trish Ferguson's interpretation, which views the bonfires as living, contemporary symbols of rebellion. Perhaps the Egdonites on Bonfire Night should be considered in terms of Hardy 'paradoxical' vision of seeing 'beauty in ugliness', a theme which opens *The Return of the Native*, and which he reaffirms in *The Life*. Just as he prefers a 'beloved relative's old battered tankard to the finest Greek vase' he takes great interest in these battered old relics of life on Egdon.<sup>317</sup>

In laying the imaginative framework of the scene, Hardy first suggests that there had once been 'Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies' practiced on this spot, but he then focuses the reader's attention on the specific Promethean story. This technique follows that which Marion Gibson has noticed with other authors. She has suggested that from the 1860s, under the impact of Darwinian thought, British writers felt increasingly unsure about 'credibly' portraying specific British pagan deities, and instead tended to find it 'much safer to turn to the deities of classical Greece and Rome'.<sup>318</sup> This is much the same pattern that Hardy follows: he offers evocative hints of 'jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies' (but no specific name or story), and then lets the reader conjure up her own imagination of prehistoric culture. No two

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<sup>315</sup> Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London: Methuen, 1801), p. 293.

<sup>316</sup> Radford, *Survivals*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>317</sup> *Life and Work*, p. 124.

<sup>318</sup> Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), pp. 83-85.

readers' mental image will be quite the same. But with the evocation of Prometheus, Hardy focuses the reader's imagination on that familiar, *specific* story of instinctive rebelliousness: myth and folkloric memories are interwoven. While Eustacia is aligned with the high gods of Mount Olympus, the heathdwellers are firmly planted on earth. But this is not to assume that Hardy writes ironically about them. The folk are not passive survivals wasting away in darkest Dorsetshire; instead they collectively summon the instinct of quiet resistance that characterizes life on Egdon. Clym may have radical reforms in mind for them all, but they do not await his enlightenment. Like the Heath itself on which 'time makes little impression', Hardy has invested them with a deeper sense of identity that instinctively resists the outside urge towards cultural development.

In choosing the bonfire, Hardy employs a trope that functions as a symbol of community, a community that his heroine is largely excluded from; it is used to identify Eustacia as an outsider. The heathdwellers come together round their bonfire, while she commissions her own – and for selfish reasons, which will undermine the stability of the Egdon community, through her attempted seduction of Wildeve, whom she believes to be married. Wildeve, after all, runs the only public house on Egdon Heath, and offers the only regular meeting place for every other night of the year besides Bonfire Night. Her manipulation of the custom, which will lure and distract the 'publican' Wildeve, thus threatens to disrupt the whole social fabric of life on Egdon Heath. As she will do next with the mumming, she manipulates folk customs for her own gain, here employing the darker, outdoor custom for the illicit relationship, while the indoor, Christmas pageant custom is reserved for the socially acceptable one. But Eustacia's manipulation of the bonfire is shrewd, and it follows in a tradition of greater, powerful figures who also used the bonfire as a tool of manipulative persuasion. As noticed earlier in this chapter Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Oliver Cromwell all employed the bonfire to their own ends. Eustacia considered her 'high gods' to be 'William the Conqueror, Strafford, and Napoleon Buonaparte, as they had appeared in the Lady's History used at the establishment in which she was educated' (69). But her 'high gods' are masculine figures from history, who chose political power over any romantic desire to be 'loved to madness.' Hardy suggests here that Eustacia's masculine tenacity has been thwarted both by her 'lady's education' (it is a 'Lady's History' she was made to read) and her complicity in sublimating her desire into one of the few forms that women were allowed: romantic



love. But in choosing to be loved to madness, she burns her symbol of resistance in vain, and lets the flames of wasted desire consume her.

The symbolism of the bonfire invites such a reading, which complements the historical and social meanings that were real and ongoing. Hardy portrays Bonfire Night as an actual custom, drawn from life, and as a powerful image that carries with it a cultural history of resistance to unknown enemy forces: dragons, conspirators, the Catholic Church – perhaps even the President of the Immortals. These multi-dimensional meanings remain buried within the bonfire, like the ‘undisturbed’ ashes ‘in the barrow beneath their tread’ (20). Winter life in Dorset was (and still is) often characterized by a long succession of cold, lonely, dark nights. So it is natural for the people of Egdon Heath to want to come together one evening and exchange the monotony of their solitary evening chores for the warmth of the more social bonfire. Hardy suggests that people have always done this, but that they do it now, not on November 3rd or 4th, but according to the ‘custom of the country’, on November 5th. It is a muted, acceptable, Egdon Heath form of Promethean resistance.

### **Mumming**

Of mummers and mumming Eustacia had the greatest contempt. The mummers themselves were not afflicted with any such feeling for their art, though at the same time they were not enthusiastic. A traditional pastime is to be distinguished from a mere revival in no more striking feature than in this, that while in the revival all is excitement and fervor, the survival is carried on with a stolidity and absence of stir which sets one wondering why a thing that is done so perfunctorily should be kept up at all. (*The Return of the Native* 120)<sup>319</sup>

Edward Tylor had coined and popularized the notion of ‘survivals’ in *Primitive Culture*, published seven years before *The Return of the Native*, and had formally defined the term as denoting the

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<sup>319</sup> Gillian Beer has observed in ‘Can the Native Return?’ that ‘unweeting’ is itself a survival, as a word already archaic except in poetry. This passage is the latest prose citation in the *OED*.

processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved.<sup>320</sup>

While Hardy would invoke Tylor's term, he offers no hard and fast definition of 'survivals' in *The Return of the Native*. Nor, indeed, would he ever wholly endorse Tylor's position, or that version of it which informed the editorial voice of the Folklore Society, in which the modern and 'civilized' is unquestionably superior to the old or the 'folk'. These were issues to which he would return in later novels, from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* onwards, in which he was increasingly willing to set his understanding of folk culture against that of Tylor, Clodd and those he humorously referred to as 'Loremongers'.<sup>321</sup> Here, however, before the mummers ever perform, he instructs the reader in how to 'distinguish' a 'traditional pastime' from a 'mere revival': the latter is performed in an atmosphere of excitement, while the former is done 'perfunctorily':

Like Balaam and other unwilling prophets, the agents seemed moved by an inner compulsion to say and do their allotted parts whether they will or no. This unweeting manner of performance is the true ring by which, in this refurbishing age, a fossilized survival may be known from a spurious reproduction. (*The Return of the Native* 120)

Hardy's familiarity with the mummers' play through family tradition gave him an inherited sense of entitlement in identifying this 'true' survival. As a boy he had observed his Sparks family relatives organize the mummers' play in nearby Puddletown, where they held rehearsals in an adjacent barn. This seems to be the model for the fuel-house ('as roomy as a barn') in which the mummers practice in the novel (*The Return of the Native* 121).<sup>322</sup> Peter Robson has established that Hardy at one time possessed a written copy of the old 'mumming play of St George' that was

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<sup>320</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I: 15.

<sup>321</sup> *CL* 8: 23 (24 July 1891?, to Edward Clodd; the date is conjectural).

<sup>322</sup> Robson, 'Traditional Culture', p. 119.

probably the basis for this Puddletown mummer's play.<sup>323</sup> Hardy recalled the village mummers of his childhood, telling William Archer, that they 'flourished well into my recollection – indeed they have not so long died out'. He described how 'they would go to the farmhouses round, between Christmas and Twelfth Night doing some four or five performances each evening, and getting ale and money at every house.'<sup>324</sup> The performances must have 'flourished' long enough for Hardy to have been able to vividly recall the details of the mummers' costumes, as he sketched them for Arthur Hopkins to refer to in illustrating the *Return of the Native* serial.<sup>325</sup> In addition to his own childhood memories, Hardy seems to have a sense of knowing the mummers' play through family memory, as he told Florence Henniker in 1920 that they were then (at Max Gate) staging an 'exact reproduction of the Dorset mumming of 100 years ago' – placing the play around 1820 – more than twenty years before the young Hardy would have seen them.<sup>326</sup>

Thus, even as a child, Hardy apparently had a sense of the mummers' play as something of a survival, decades before Tylor's concept had been introduced. In the 1878 text, though presenting the reader with the 'excellently neat' dichotomy between survival and revival, Hardy simultaneously presents the play both as survival and not-survival. As soon as he introduces the mumming in contemporary anthropological terms, its status as a 'fossilized' survival seems undermined by the boys' willingness to let Eustacia reinvigorate the play within the heath community. Ostensibly Hardy establishes a binary opposition between survival and revival (or true and false), even offering an easy 'test' to tell the observer how, 'in this refurbishing age, a fossilized survival may be known from a spurious reproduction' (*The Return of the Native* 120). Describing the mummers' play in Darwinian and manufacturing (even antiquarian) terms, Hardy frames it as an artifact. But can one search for 'fossils' within human culture? Once Eustacia enters the play, it is no longer a 'fossilized survival', yet neither is it the kind of fashionable (if 'spurious') type of revival that Hardy and his audience increasingly encountered as 'folk' revivalism increased in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>323</sup> Robson, 'Traditional Culture', p. 126.

<sup>324</sup> Martin Ray, *Thomas Hardy Remembered* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 32.

<sup>325</sup> *CL* 1: 54-55.

<sup>326</sup> *CL* 6: 57.

It is unclear whether Hardy had read *Primitive Culture* by the time he composed *The Return of the Native*. Andrew Radford assumes in *Thomas Hardy and the Survivals of Time* that Hardy knew the work, while Sinead Garrigan-Mattar argues that there is no evidence that he read it until some time later, judging by the dates in his *Literary Notebooks*, though it was so widely discussed in the journals and reviews Hardy is known to have read that it can be assumed he at least came across Tylor's ideas.<sup>327</sup> His understanding of the survival/revival dichotomy works in terms of both custom and belief, though it appears to be only the aspect of custom that Hardy presents in *The Return of the Native*. But he would have understood that in piquing his reading audience's interest with this brief survival/revival 'test', some of them would naturally turn to Tylor's definitions to learn more. It is likely that Hardy did this as well, whether or not he formally read the whole two-volume work. The index to the first edition, to which he would have had access, has only one entry on revival: 'Revival, in culture'. This section, which runs for several pages, explains how:

Studying with a wide view the course of human opinion, we may now and then trace on from the very turning-point the change from passive survival into active revival. Some well-known belief or custom has for centuries shown symptoms of decay, when we begin to see that the state of society, instead of stunting it, is favouring its new growth, and it bursts forth again with a vigour often as marvelous as it is unhealthy. And though the revival be not destined to hold on indefinitely, and though when opinion turns again its ruin may be more merciless than before, yet it may last for ages, make its way to the inmost constitution of society, and even become a very mark and characteristic of its time.<sup>328</sup>

This somewhat vague definition suggests that Tylor is talking about something more than folk revivals in the sense of mummers and maypoles. After all, what would be so 'unhealthy' in a revived Christmas mummers' play that helps preserve a sense of cultural heritage? It soon becomes clear that Tylor is speaking not so much about

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<sup>327</sup> Sinead Garrigan-Mattar, 'The Return of the Native: Animism, Fetichism, and the Enchanted Heath', *Thomas Hardy Journal* 24 (2008) 4-22.

<sup>328</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, p. 124.

innocent revivals of folk custom, and more about the revival of spiritual belief. Tylor writes:

our own time has revived a group of beliefs and practices, which have their roots deep in the very stratum of early philosophy where witchcraft makes its first appearance. This group of beliefs and practices constitutes what is now commonly known as Spiritualism.<sup>329</sup>

This is a rather puzzling way to deploy the concept. Hardy offers a helpful ‘test’ to distinguish the survival from the revival, and his readers picked up on this as a useful way of determining vestiges of ‘authentic’ folk culture that might be recorded and preserved. But Tylor’s account, which sees witchcraft ‘revived’ in the form of spiritualism, suggests a different way of thinking about belief in Hardy’s Wessex. What in the lives of Rhoda Brook, Michael Henchard, or John Bird (the defendant in the hag-riding trial) might be regarded as witchcraft is for them shameful, a superstitious and outmoded system of belief that demands they keep silent for fear of ridicule or punishment. There is a world of difference between this and the fashionable (if also sometimes meaningful) spiritualist ideas taken up by many of Hardy’s agnostic readers. Yet the association between the two ideas has some affinities with *The Return of the Native*. The Dorset family who hung an animal heart in their chimney because their cattle were pining might be seen as acting in an ‘unweeing’ manner; the Kensington fancy dress party where guests engage in table-rapping might be viewed as the ‘spurious reproduction’, yet both come from the search for a belief which will explain the inexplicable. The older one is perhaps the more sincere and desperate, even though it is more imminently faced with extinction, because it is also unfashionable (and often ungovernable.) Hardy understands the culture behind the ‘unweeing’ performance, and writes in a way that leads the reader to open *Primitive Culture* and see the connection between the novel and Tylor’s theories. With this in mind, the reader may turn from the question of distinguishing between survivals and revivals, to broader questions about the nature of belief and the cycles that drive its development in culture.

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<sup>329</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 128.

One newspaper article that appeared in the same month that the *Return of the Native* serial was concluding described mumming alongside customs such as caroling, which were said to have been practiced ‘from the earliest times’, but ‘during the last few years, [have] been most extensively revived, and [are] becoming each year more popular in our country villages’.<sup>330</sup> Hardy’s claim for the superiority of the survival seems based on personal experience; he told William Archer in 1903 that mumming ‘went on in some neighbourhoods till 1880, or thereabouts. I have heard of a parson here and there trying to revive it; but of course that isn’t at all the same thing – the spontaneity is gone.’<sup>331</sup> So it seems as if Hardy was aware of local attempts at revival and was able to draw on this experience.

The claim that the survival was superior to the revival was echoed by a contributor in *Notes and Queries* who praised the mumming scene in the *Return*: ‘no better account than Mr. Thomas Hardy’s can be found of the rehearsals, as well as the public performances, of the Christmas mummers.’ The article goes on to accept Hardy’s claimed survival as the real thing, stating that ‘these still surviving country festivals speak more satisfactorily to us than can any pretentious sham of revival.’<sup>332</sup> Other reviewers too appreciated Hardy’s way of delineating survivals and revivals and recorded their pleasure in experiencing the ‘true’ version. But challenging this in the narrative itself is the interfering role of Eustacia, with her character representing what will become a kind of Hardyian trope: the outsider whose unlikely participation in the ‘survival’ enables it to adapt and remain relevant in the present. Eustacia prefigures such characters as Newson with the skimmington ride in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Fitzpiers with the Midsummer divination in *The Woodlanders*, and Jocelyn with the Portland Custom in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*. Each of these characters enters the community, interacts with the survival, and in so doing brings a

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<sup>330</sup> ‘Christmas Folk-Lore’, *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 26 December 1878, cols. 1 and 2.

<sup>331</sup> Martin Ray, *Thomas Hardy Remembered* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 32.

<sup>332</sup> J. S. Ebsworth, ‘A Garland of Christmas Carols, with an Overture of Christmas Mummers’, *Notes and Queries*, S.X. 5, 21 December 1878, p. 485; the preceding article in *Notes and Queries* by T. F. Thiselton-Dyer, a curate and folklorist based in Cornwall, records that ‘in Dorsetshire the mummers still go round, and in some parts, too, of Cornwall they may be seen’ in *Notes and Queries* S.X. 5 21 December 1878, p. 484; this corroborates Hardy’s statement to William Archer that Dorset mumming lasted ‘till 1880 or thereabouts’: Martin Ray, *Thomas Hardy Remembered*, p. 32.

new element that keeps the customs from being reduced to either ‘fossil’ or ‘revival’. Their interference brings about far more dynamic results.

Outside the scope of the novel, Hardy was aware of the tendency for the mummers’ plays to adapt and take on additional, anachronistic historical characters such as Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Buonaparte, and Lord Nelson. In many versions St. George becomes King George and in others the Turkish Knight appears as the son of Father Christmas.<sup>333</sup> J. S. Udal describes two transcripts of West Dorset mummers’ plays that were in his possession in 1874, which had been given to him by an ‘old lady long since dead’. In one of these King George appears (instead of St. George) in what Udal calls a ‘modern innovation’.<sup>334</sup> Thus, in Dorset and elsewhere the mummers’ plays continued to adapt at least into the nineteenth century, though there seem to be no examples of plays including Queen Victoria or Prince Albert. The ease with which they were adapted hints at the impossibility of any one version representing a ‘fossilized’ survival.

The nature of revival became even more complicated in 1918 when Hardy was asked to write a mummers’ play to help raise funds for a war charity. Unable to find the written copy of the play that he once had, Hardy wrote to Udal asking for two Dorset-based versions of the play, previously published in *Folklore*. The charity event was cancelled, and it appears that Hardy did not transcribe what he was sent. Robson has established that in his 1920 version Hardy does not quote or paraphrase Udal’s material, but instead seems to have re-worked an old version familiar to him – probably having tried to recreate the old lost version he sought.<sup>335</sup> The 1920 version was re-written for the Hardy Players to enact in their dramatisation of *The Return of the Native*, performed in Dorchester, London, and at Max Gate on Christmas Night, 1920. The surviving typescript from this performance seems to soften the distinctions between Christian and Turk, perhaps reflecting an added degree of sensitivity

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<sup>333</sup> Venetia Newall, ‘The Turkish Knight in English Traditional Drama’, *Folklore* 92.2 (1981) 196-202 (p. 196, p. 197). Newall also traces the portrayal of the Turkish Knight in many non-Western forms including ‘Black King of Morocco’, ‘Prince of Palestine’, and ‘Black Morocco dog’ – all of which represent an Islamic opposition to Christianity; Firor also names variant manifestations of the Turkish Knight as the ‘King of Egypt, the ‘Indian King’, or ‘Alexander’.

<sup>334</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 85; in Udal’s article ‘Christmas Mummers in Dorsetshire’ he notes the character ‘Prince George’, which appeared in a version in Hone’s *Every Day Book* of 1866.

<sup>335</sup> Robson, *Traditional Culture*, pp. 126-130.

informed by Hardy's loss of his cousin Frank George at Gallipoli. According to Millgate, Hardy had considered Frank George to be 'about the only, if not the only blood relative of the next generation in whom I take any interest', and Hardy had envisioned that he would one day inherit Max Gate.<sup>336</sup> In the wake of this personal sadness, as well as the collective war losses, and the fall of Ottoman Turkey, Hardy seems to have treated the themes in 1920 with an added degree of care.

In the 1878 version in the novel, the cultural and religious distinctions between Christian and Turk also serve to challenge the binary 'polarity' (to use John Paterson's term) between Christian and pagan that has often been discussed. For readers viewing the mumming play as arising out of a suppressed pagan subconscious, Hardy's description in the preface to *The Dynasts* might seem also to hint at this irrepressible utterance:

taking the shape of a monotonic delivery of speeches, with dreamy conventional gestures, something in the manner traditionally maintained by the old Christmas mummers, the curiously hypnotizing impressiveness of whose automatic style – that of persons who spoke by no will of their own – may be remembered by all who ever experience it.<sup>337</sup>

The preface identifies a hypnotic element in the mummers' 'inner compulsion to say and do their parts whether they will or no'; both these descriptions have been cited as indicative of 'pagan instincts' presented under the acceptable guise of Christian tradition. John Paterson contends that the play's 'Christian veneer [a Frazerian term, though Paterson does not here identify it as such] scarcely conceals its pre-Christian character as fertility rite celebrating the death of the year and its resurrection in the spring.'<sup>338</sup> James Gindin also interprets the play in these terms, calling it 'originally a pagan celebration of the New Year, worshipping the return of the sun and the imminent death of winter'.<sup>339</sup> Ruth Firor views it in similar terms, but suggests it was more than pagan worship with a Christian 'veneer': 'it is not all St. George and the

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<sup>336</sup> Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, p. 465.

<sup>337</sup> Preface to *The Dynasts* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. xi.

<sup>338</sup> John Paterson, 'The Return of the Native as Antichristian Document', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 14.2, (1959), 111-127, p. 122.

<sup>339</sup> James Gindin, 'Hardy and Folklore', in *The Return of the Native* ed. by James Gindin (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 396-401 (p. 396).



Dragon; it is not all anything, but an amalgam of primitive ritual with many different elements.<sup>340</sup> Firor's, Gindin's and Paterson's readings were all strongly influenced by the legacy of Frazer's *Golden Bough* and the theories of pagan origins that dominated folklore studies in the early to mid-twentieth century. More recently, however, Jacqueline Simpson of the Folklore Society has sought to undo many of these assumptions, arguing of the mummers' play that from the time of Frazer onwards it has been

the most consistently misrepresented and misunderstood of English calendar customs. The assumption that the mumming play is a relic of pre-Christian fertility ritual has bedeviled writing on the subject ... with 20<sup>th</sup> century writers moving the start-date back from the Crusades to an earlier period, using phrases like 'pre-Christian', 'pagan', and 'fertility ritual'. The central problem for all of these theories is the stunning lack of support for them... the first clearly identifiable references to the mumming play as we know it are in the middle to late 18th century – 500 years after the Crusades, and a thousand years after the English were converted to Christianity.<sup>341</sup>

Even before Simpson had raised awareness on the subject, Robert Squillace had come to conclude that Hardy had most likely been unaware of the play as having pagan origins,<sup>342</sup> and in none of Hardy's letters that discuss mumming does he ever hint at any pagan interpretation hiding beneath the surface – even in his many references to mumming written after reading *The Golden Bough*, a work whose influence was pervasive among Hardy's circle.

That the mummers' play lacks the more overt pagan suggestions of Bonfire Night, August gypsying, and May Day, serves to blur what John Paterson views as the 'pagan-Christian polarity' of the novel. Eustacia's role as the Turkish Knight might seem to link her with paganism (or at least Islam) 'against' Christianity, in the interpretation that Paterson argues; at the same time this link opens up more nuances – instead of Christianity pitted against (pre-Christian) paganism, we have (potential)

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<sup>340</sup> Firor, *Folkways*, p. 203.

<sup>341</sup> Simpson and Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore*, p. 253.

<sup>342</sup> Robert Squillace, 'Hardy's Mummers', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41.2 (September 1986), 172-189.

vestiges of paganism, Islam, and Christianity conflated, as too are the roles in the mummings' play – with male playing female,<sup>343</sup> female playing male, Western playing Eastern – with no absolute sense of the triumph of Christianity, for though West defeats East in the play, all the characters are 'curiously' (in Hardy's words) 'invariably brought to life again'.<sup>344</sup> This blurring of lines and roles also challenges the notion of a unilinear progression of development: the 'pre-Christian' impulse that Eustacia represents, according to Paterson and Gindin,<sup>345</sup> is, in the form of the Turkish Knight 'post-Christian' (as well as anti-Christian), and suggestive of an alternative that disrupts the hierarchical pattern of 'pagan instincts' as giving way to 'civilized Christianity'.<sup>346</sup> Unlike even his most resolutely agnostic contemporaries, Hardy was unwilling to divide forms of belief simply into 'Christian' and 'anti-Christian', or pagan; one is reminded of his suggestion that given the failure of Christianity perhaps 'the civilized world' should try some other religion, such as Buddhism.<sup>347</sup> Though Squillace argues convincingly that there is no evidence of Hardy being aware of any clearly pagan origins to the play, it seems that Hardy leaves the scene open for multiple interpretations, thus making the novel's stance more ambiguous than the 'antichristian' document that (as Paterson argues) he may originally have intended.<sup>348</sup>

Early in his writing career, Hardy invites the reader to think about folklore through the (then) contemporary framework of the survival and revival. But his own experience of 'collocating and revising'<sup>349</sup> the play in 1920 shows this notion

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<sup>343</sup> Hardy says 'the [female] Fair Sabra was always played by a boy' (Ray, *Thomas Hardy Remembered*, p. 32).

<sup>344</sup> Ray, *Thomas Hardy Remembered*, p. 32. In a more comic sense, too, the women's competition with the costumes cause the Christian and Muslim fighters to appear equally: 'the result was that in the end The Valiant Soldier, of the Christian army, was distinguished by no peculiarity of accouterment from the Turkish Knight; and what was worse, on a casual view Saint George himself might be mistaken for his deadly enemy The Saracen' (RN 120).

<sup>345</sup> James Gindin, 'Hardy and Folklore', p. 397.

<sup>346</sup> The 'civilized Christian' in opposition to savages and barbarians is a phrase that appears in multiple editions of the *Handbook of Folklore*, including the first *Handbook of Folklore*, p. 57.

<sup>347</sup> CL 2: 249.

<sup>348</sup> While I am borrowing John Paterson's terminology, the *Return of the Native* MS does have a number of revisions that indicate a conscious effort on Hardy's part to tone down passages that could be read as 'antichristian.'

<sup>349</sup> Hardy referred to the 1920 finished product as a 'recension of the "Play of St. George"' in CL 4: 232, and in the typescript version he subtitled the mummings' 'Play

becoming still further complicated as he, a survival himself by that point, both revived the 'original' folk play and adapted it to make it unifying and inclusive for the post-war audiences of Dorchester as well as London. Like the Egdon Heath bonfires, the mummers' play has a multi-layered history and cultural presence within Hardy's Wessex. The play's texts remain both fossilized – like the ashes within Blackbarrow – as well as living, through the evolving 'truth' of (re)production for those for whom it still holds meaning. To suggest, as Squillace does, that 'the world of folk beliefs, having once been overturned by scientific knowledge, is essentially irrecoverable'<sup>350</sup> is to ignore the endless process of adaptation which allows apparently dying customs to survive. Hardy challenges the reader, through a multi-layered, imaginative process of excavation to seek alternative routes in thinking about folk culture and cultural change.

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of St. George' as 'based on the version in *The Return of the Native* and completed from other versions, and from local tradition, collocated and revised by Thomas Hardy' in *Mumming and the Mummers' Play of St. George*, ed. by J. Stevens Cox, (Guernsey: Toucan Press, 1970), p. 446.

<sup>350</sup> Squillace, 'Hardy's Mummers', p. 188.

## Chapter Six: Summer Customs: May Day and Midsummer Divination

The May-Day dance, for instance, was to be discerned, on the afternoon under notice, in the guise of the club-revel, or ‘club-walking’, as it was there called.

[...]

The club of Marlott alone lived to uphold the local Cerealia. It had walked for hundreds of years, if not as benefit-club, as votive sisterhood of some sort; and it walked still. [...]

The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns – a gay survival from Old-Style days, when cheerfulness and Maytime were synonyms – days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average.

Their first exhibition of themselves was in a processional march of two and two round the parish. (*Tess* 19)

Within living memory, May Day with its iconic maypole seems to have become the most ubiquitous of all British folk customs. It is, perhaps more than anything else, the representative example of ‘Merrie England’, as E.P Thompson and others have established.<sup>351</sup> But the idea of the May Day tradition as a living memory is problematic, for as Roy Judge has argued ‘the ordinary person might well feel a misplaced confidence that he was well-informed about May Day while the reality was that he was simply accepting an established repertoire of material created by romantic imagination’.<sup>352</sup> In part, this misplaced confidence comes from the fact that historically, according to Essaka Joshua, while there seems to be no ‘single dominant version of the May celebration’<sup>353</sup> a dominant May Day image has arisen in the last two centuries. There exists what Roy Judge has called a ‘May-Day repertoire: a body of allusions of dubious authority that occur with regularity in the material used by folklorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’.<sup>354</sup> Coupled with this was the active propagation in the same period of May Day celebrations staged by National

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<sup>351</sup> E.P. Thompson, ‘Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History’, *Indian Historical Review*, 3.2 (1978), 247-266 (p. 250).

<sup>352</sup> Roy Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, *Folklore*, 102.2 (1991), 131-148 (p. 134).

<sup>353</sup> Essaka Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 16.

<sup>354</sup> Joshua, *The Romantics and May Day*, p. 7.

Schools according to an approved model developed at Whitelands College.<sup>355</sup> This quickly established a pattern that lasted well into the twentieth century; many now elderly people will recall having experienced the same sorts of school May Day celebrations, and will often view their experience with some skepticism as to how far it is a continuing rather than a restored folkloric tradition. Understandably, being taught ‘how to be jolly’<sup>356</sup> felt contrived after the communal May Day celebration of earlier generations had been left off, rather as Dickens described in ‘The First of May’: ‘many years ago we began to be a steady and matter-of-fact sort of people, and dancing in Spring being beneath our dignity, we gave it up, and it descended to the sweeps.’<sup>357</sup> While Dickens recognized this in the London of the 1820s and 1830s, William Barnes, born in Dorset in 1800, also noted the change, and observed later in the century that ‘Dorchester folk were wont in olden time [...] to go forth to [Poundbury’s] flowery and airy sward a-maying.’<sup>358</sup> ‘Dorset formerly had its maypoles’, Barnes lamented, but ‘now’ [in the 1880s] ‘Shillingstone may now be the only Dorset village which keeps up the tall token of a merry May Day.’<sup>359</sup>

If May Day was already in such decline in the middle part of the nineteenth century, then Thomas Hardy’s childhood understanding of the traditions of a former May Day time would have come in part through his family: through his grandmother, as recorded in the poem ‘One We Knew’, but also through his own childhood experiences, as he described to William Archer, H. Colley March, and A.M. Broadley (each discussed later in this section).<sup>360</sup> Hardy’s descriptions of the May celebrations in *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (and by extension, ‘One We

<sup>355</sup> Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, p. 139; J.S. Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 39.

<sup>356</sup> Anonymous, ‘Teaching People How to be Jolly,’ *EFDS News*, 2.18 (1928), 126-127 originally from the *Evening Standard* and reprinted in *EFDS News* and in Georgina Boyes’ *The Imagined Village*, p. 94, p. 113.

<sup>357</sup> ‘The First of May’, in *Sketches By Boz: Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*, ed. by Thea Holme (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 169, reprinted in Essaka Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 70.

<sup>358</sup> J.S. Udal (quoting Barnes), *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, by J.S. Udal, (London: Stephen Austin, 1922; repr. St PeterPort: Toucan Press, 1970), p. 41.

<sup>359</sup> Barnes, ‘Fore-Say’, in J.S. Udal, *Dorsetshire Folklore*, p. 4.

<sup>360</sup> William Archer, ‘With Mr. Thomas Hardy’, *Real Conversations* (London: W. Heinemann, 1904), pp. 29-50, p. 33, reprinted in *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 68; ‘Revision of Article in Folk-Lore’, *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice*, ed. by Michael Millgate, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 156; ‘Letter to A.M. Broadley’, *CL* 4: 68.

Knew' and 'The Fire at Tranter Sweatley's') might be read as suggesting nostalgia for survivals from an earlier time, but also, to an audience which in the last quarter of the century was beginning to experience these practices again through revival, they might connote a familiar sense of 'Merrie England'. In order to distinguish the impressions of May Day prior to Hardy's time, this chapter will consider historic May Day representations through the eighteenth and early nineteenth century and then examine the role of revivals, their agenda, and their implications. With this in mind, the May Day scenes in Hardy will be considered in a context that his readers would have recognized.

Historian Ronald Hutton traces the earliest references to May Day in England to about the year 1240 where the Bishop of Lincoln complained of priests participating in 'games which they call the bringing-in of May'. Hutton also notes several other records through to the fifteenth century that mention collecting money and volunteers to carry 'le May' in Launceston, Cornwall in the 1430s, or a platform being needed for 'a May' in Exeter in 1441; later, John Dryden noted in 'The Flower and the Leaf' (1700) 'the merry crew who danced about the May'. Hutton points out that it is unclear what exactly 'the May' entailed in some cases, but it seems to be 'shorthand for flowers and young foliage' used as a centrepiece for May Day celebrations'.<sup>361</sup> Other literary portrayals of May Day celebrations appear in Chaucer, Polydor Vergil, Malory, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Herrick. Samuel Pepys also recorded watching milkmaids (that is, young women who delivered milk to urban houses) dancing with garlands as a sign of the First of May.<sup>362</sup> Later Romantic writers would reify May traditions as an idealized time when man communed with nature on a 'green and pleasant isle'.

Outside of the literary tradition, Ronald Hutton records Elizabeth's Protestant nay-sayers who warned of expected May Day debauchery, complaining of 'ten maidens who went to set May, and nine of them came home with child'. A less exaggerated version of this sentiment appears in a comment by Phillip Stubbes frequently evoked by antiquarians that speaks of a group of maidens of whom 'scarcely the third part of them returned home again undefiled'. One anonymous writer wrote a generation later of May Day being a time when 'divers dirty sluts'

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<sup>361</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 226.

<sup>362</sup> Roud, *The English Year*, p. 222.

wandered the countryside, getting into clinches with their lovers in ditches.<sup>364</sup> But John Brand suggests (albeit later) it was not just ‘dirty sluts’ wandering outside, rather ‘it was anciently the custom of *all* ranks of people to go out a-maying early on the first of May’ (italics added). While the restored May Day celebrations were aimed at the young, Kingsley Palmer notes that they derive from ‘much older customs of an adult nature, which Cromwell suppressed years earlier.’<sup>366</sup>

As early Protestants and later Puritans disapproved of these celebrations, records show their displeasure with ‘mixed-gender dancing, drunkenness, and Sunday merry-making’.<sup>367</sup> Hutton has traced the banning of maypoles throughout Middle and Southern England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, though many records show continued use in rural areas throughout the early seventeenth century, and maypoles apparently reappeared quickly throughout the south, seemingly in defiance of the Puritan Commonwealth as soon as the Restoration looked to reappear.<sup>368</sup> These Cromwellian restrictions have been traced by H. Colley March, and Geoff Doel draws on March’s account in noting that the churchwardens’ accounts at Cerne Abbas, Dorset for 1635 recorded the maypole being dismantled: ‘Paid Anth. Thorne and others for taking down ye maypole and making a town ladder of it.’<sup>369</sup> But the Cerne maypole is thought to have been reinstated soon after and to have remained a fixture until the nineteenth century. March and Doel go on to describe an account given by ‘Childs, the former sexton’ who, in 1897, said that he

well remembers the maypole at Cerne. It used to be set up in the ring just above the giant. It was made from a fir-bole and renewed every year. ‘It was raised in the night,’ It was decorated with garlands, &c. The villagers went up the hill and danced round the maypole on May 1. Nothing of the sort is now done. [...] The maypole was set up, not as is usual elsewhere, in the town, which possesses two convenient spaces, formerly, no doubt ‘village greens’,

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<sup>364</sup> Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, p. 228. Hutton goes on to explain that this traditionally-accepted belief that a steep rise in conceptions came as a result of May Day frivolity persisted until overturned by twentieth century demographic historians.

<sup>366</sup> Kingsley Palmer, *Folklore of Somerset*, (London: Batsford, 1976), p. 101.

<sup>367</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 236.

<sup>368</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 236, Roud, *English Year*, p. 222.

<sup>369</sup> Doel and Doel, *Folklore of Dorset*, p. 32.

but a good way off, on the top of a *very steep hill*, immediately above the giant [...].<sup>370</sup>

If Cromwell and the Puritans sought to suppress the sinful practices they associated with May Day, the traditions that returned in the Restoration period seemed to strike some people as more of a nuisance than vice. Hutton records sources in the seventeenth century who were kept awake by people getting up after midnight to ‘ramble abroad, make garlands, strew flowers etc.’ as well as ‘blow cows horns and hollow caxes all night’<sup>371</sup> About the same time, a May Day procession in 1672 Kent was met with a press gang,<sup>372</sup> and newspapers throughout the eighteenth century record May Day processions being disrupted also by gangs of villagers stealing maypoles from each other, with violence ensuing. The *Derby Mercury* of 1772 records young people dancing round the maypole and celebrating ‘with Festivity the Return of the Summer Season’ until ‘a Body of young Fellows from Loughbro’ formed a Plot to carry off the Maypole; which they executed at Night, and removed it to the Middle of the Market-Place at Loughbro’ [...] which may be the Cause of Mischief and Bloodshed [...]’<sup>373</sup> Ten years later, the ‘mischievous’ violence seemed to have escalated when in Gloucester one group attempted to carry off a maypole, and others ‘armed themselves with dangerous Weapons, so that a dangerous Fray ensued, wherein one of the Barton-Street Men had his Arm almost cut off, and several others were much wounded’.<sup>374</sup>

Because May Day festivities seem to have deteriorated as they became increasingly associated with ‘hard-drinking and fighting morris dancers’,<sup>375</sup> the day itself fell into decline with fewer and fewer people celebrating it at all around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such annually ‘ritualized’ violence seemed to be a degenerated form of an earlier, idealized May Day, with many towns, villages, and communities beginning to leave off the celebration altogether, romantic writers and idealistic journalists started to idealize what had been lost in the process. Essaka

<sup>370</sup> H. Colley March, ‘Dorset Folklore Collected in 1897’, *Folklore* 10.4 (1899), 478-489 (p. 482); Doel and Doel, *Folklore of Dorset*, 56.

<sup>371</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 229.

<sup>372</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 229.

<sup>373</sup> ‘Derby, May 21’, *Derby Mercury*, 22 May 1772, p. 4, col. 2.

<sup>374</sup> ‘Gloucester, May 22’, *Derby Mercury*, 31 May 1733, p. 1.

<sup>375</sup> Simpson and Roud, *The Dictionary of English Folklore*, p. 236.



Joshua has traced the beginning of this idealization and revival of May Day in *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, and names Coleridge as the first of the Romantics to address the May Day-Whitsun period. This was in an unsigned note entitled ‘The Origin of the Maypole’, which appeared in *The Monthly Magazine* of February 1796:

Not till after the Norman conquest, the Pagan festival of Witsuntide fully melted into the Christian holiday of Pentecost. Its original name is Wittentide, the name of choosing the Wits or Wife Men to the Wittenagemotte. [...] The vassals met upon the common green round the May-pole, where they elected a village Lord, or King, as he was called, who chose his Queen. He wore an oaken, and she a hawthorn wreath, and together they gave laws to the rustic sports, during these sweet days of freedom. The MAY-POLE then is the English TREE OF LIBERTY! Are there many yet standing?<sup>376</sup>

Joshua points out here the confluence of two apparently competing ideas: the ‘subversive’ popular festival with the ‘idealistic fantasy of a legitimately governed Merry England’ in which the festival ‘temporarily enfranchises the people’.<sup>377</sup> As Joshua notes, this extract has been reproduced in full as it appeared in *The Monthly Magazine*. A month later though, the gentle-voiced, educational section of this piece appeared verbatim in *The Bath Chronicle*, but without the romantic battle cry about the tree of liberty. *The Staffordshire Advertiser* followed suit, while the *Chester Chronicle* printed the whole piece intact. Over the next few decades this piece would surface as a stock-piece, appearing even in the unlikely month of August under such an un-romantic heading as ‘Jottings for the Curious’.<sup>378</sup> Thus Coleridge’s quasi-antiquarian note and summary of May Day traditions was disseminated and

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<sup>376</sup> Joshua, *The Romantics*, p. 65.

<sup>377</sup> Joshua, *The Romantics*, p. 65

<sup>378</sup> Joshua makes no mention of this repetition of Coleridge’s piece in the periodical press, but it became evident to me in looking at May Day coverage in newspapers through use of the British Newspaper Archive. Many more newspapers may have reprinted this story with no hint that Coleridge was the author. The newspapers listed are ‘The Origin of the Maypole’, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 10 March 1796, p. 2, col. 1; ‘Origin of the May-pole’, 12 March 1796, *Staffordshire Advertiser*, p. 4, col. 2; ‘Jottings for the Curious’, 12 April 1879, *The Alnwick Mercury*, p. 3, col. 5.

perpetuated in a way that would underscore the reading public's impressions of May Day for subsequent decades and generations.

Opposing perspectives on the May festival period often appeared in tandem, such as when the *Dorset Country Chronicle* printed an editorial on the May Fair in Poole, Dorset: 'This is almost a nominal affair, and when we say "so much the better" we think we hear our readers say "and so say all of us," for there is no doubt but that nine days' real fair is an unbearable nuisance.' But further down in the same column another writer takes up a more Coleridgean stance, and idealizes May celebrations of the past in 'May Day '63':

The day that was wont to be looked forward to by our forefathers as a day of happiness and enjoyment has passed by, and we were scarcely made cognizant of the fact that it was May day; with the exception of two or three garlands carried about by a tribe of children the day was allowed to pass unnoticed. There was no procession of the young with 'green branches and May flowers, singing songs of joy and gladness;' and even the sweeps went about their avocation seemingly unconscious of the fact that while they were at work many of the same employment in other towns were bedecked with sweet flowers of spring, dancing around the May-pole, as during the days of 'Merrie England.'<sup>379</sup>

Thus the 'positive' traditions of May Day seemed to have disappeared along with those more unpleasant types of activities Henry Bourne had encouraged people to leave off a century before in *Antiquitates Vulgares*, the book on which Brand's *Popular Antiquities* was based.<sup>380</sup> Brand's revised editions of *Popular Antiquities* reflect the antiquarians' growing recognition of potential interest in May Day and their desire to chronicle its history, even as its contemporary practice was beginning to wane. Richard Dorson points out that the 1813 edition of Brand's *Popular Antiquities* enlarged the coverage of May Day from seven pages and ten sources in 1777, to twenty-five pages with over fifty sources. This indicates how, within less than a century, a marked difference occurred in the antiquarians' approach: whereas Bourne in 1725 had advocated the leaving off of 'unseemly' customs, by 1813 the

<sup>379</sup> 'May Fair' and 'May Day 63', *Dorset County Chronicle*, May 7, 1863, p. 6, col 2.

<sup>380</sup> Bourne, 'Preface', *Antiquitates Vulgares*, p. x.

Brand-Ellis edition seemed eager to preserve what was being lost, or had already been lost, even though, as Dorson admits, their authorial position remained unclear, and ‘no smooth essay emerges from these half hundred references.’<sup>381</sup> While Brand sought to chronicle the May Day of years past objectively, readers of *Popular Antiquities* began thinking about reviving it. Romantic writers such as William Howitt, like Coleridge, while lamenting what had been lost, questioned whether people could return to this earlier ‘state’, and challenging the early revivalists of the 1830s: ‘Can they make the nation young again? Can they make us the simple ignorant, confiding people, living in the present, careless of the future, as our ancestors were?’<sup>382</sup>

Despite this skepticism, authors like Washington Irving with *Bracebridge Hall* (1823) and Sir Walter Scott with *Queenhoo-Hall* (1808)<sup>383</sup> were recommended to readers for their demonstration of the ‘entire manner’ in which May Day festivities had been ‘anciently’ performed,<sup>384</sup> and indeed borrowing Brand’s term for how May Day was ‘anciently’ celebrated. This backward-looking impulse was readily seized on by revivalists in the Southeast of England in the 1830s and 1840s. Judge calls the 1840s a time ‘rich in revivals which drew their inspiration from this kind of [Merrie England] background’, and goes on to cite such May Day festival revivals as those at Enfield organized by the local clergy, and those in Kent organized by the Viscount and Viscountess Campden. The festival in Kent was described as a ‘rustic fete’ where one hundred and sixty children attended a church service, and ‘the religious duties of the day having been observed, the afternoon was devoted to cheerful recreation’.<sup>385</sup> Judge names three other festivals staged in a similar fashion in Southeast England, but the question remains whether revivals had made their way into the Southwest, particularly into Hardy’s immediate geographic area during his childhood. When H. Colley March mentioned to him a maypole that was formerly set up in Piddletrentide, Hardy added ‘and at many other villages in my childhood’.<sup>386</sup> Later on, asked by

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<sup>381</sup> Dorson, *The British Folklorists*, p. 19.

<sup>382</sup> Joshua, *Romantics*, p. 70.

<sup>383</sup> Scott finished and published *Queenhoo-Hall*, but the story and the writing was largely the work of Joseph Strutt, called by many ‘the father of English antiquaries’ in Dorson, *British Folklorists*, p. 30, most famous for his seminal work on popular antiquities *Sports and Pastimes* (1801).

<sup>384</sup> Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, p. 133.

<sup>385</sup> Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, pp 134-135.

<sup>386</sup> *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice*, p. 156.

William Archer ‘whether you can yourself remember many of the old customs – the relics of paganism – that you have described,’ Hardy answered:

Oh yes. They survived well into my time. I have seen with my own eyes things that many people believe to have been extinct for centuries. For instance, the maypole was familiar to me in my childhood – the flower-wreathed pole, with what they called the garland at the top (that is to say, two intersecting hoops of flowers) round which the people danced.<sup>387</sup>

That Hardy sees his childhood May Day experience as a ‘survival’ of customs that many would have thought already ‘extinct’ implies that revivalists were not responsible for these. Hardy’s comment does not indicate whether the maypole event as he remembered it included the sort of ‘ribbon dance’ that was introduced by professional choreographers and teachers from about the 1830s – in the Southeast anyway – which would ‘mark’ it as being a revival, but given his previous interest in distinguishing between a revival and survival, his view of May Day as having ‘survived’, along with the implication that the maypoles of his childhood were a ‘village’ feature rather than a school activity, strongly indicates that his childhood May Day experiences in Dorset were indeed pre-revival celebrations—or at least, that they seemed so to him.

At the same time confusion as to what was actually being experienced – especially by children – appears in J. S. Udal’s *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, where Udal records the crowning of a May Queen and accompanying maypole dance that took place at a National School in Bridport in 1918. He indicates that he (or the audience) might not have known otherwise, but states that he

has since been told that this was not a genuine folk-lore survival, but rather a sham revival, having been introduced from Whitelands College by the National Society of School teachers, taught by Ruskin. The recitation of Tennyson’s *May Queen* would seem to confirm this; but even if this be so, it is a decided improvement upon the usual School Board methods of recent years, which tend to destroy all traces

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<sup>387</sup> Archer, ‘With Mr. Thomas Hardy’, reprinted in *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*, p. 68.

of local folk-lore in the young people of the present age.<sup>388</sup>

If Udal, as a folklorist and active member of the Folklore Society, had to be told that this was a revival, how many others were unaware that this revival was creeping back in through the children, albeit in a ‘completely transformed’ fashion as Simpson and Roud would have it?<sup>389</sup> By 1918, the Whitelands model, begun in 1881, had been going for more than thirty years, and as Judge points out the schools’ encouragement of the involvement of parents, created a sort of ‘self-perpetuating mechanism, with the queens from one period becoming the mothers and organizers of the next, and then the grandmothers and upholders of the one after that’.<sup>390</sup> Judge explains that Whiteland’s first model May Day celebration was held in 1881, and was described three years later by the headmistress as ‘redolent with freshness and sympathetic feeling...the most unique, complete, and shall we say, poetical of the pretty [May Day] pageants.’<sup>391</sup> The Whitelands model, which will be discussed more fully later in this section, was called both ‘Mr Ruskin’s pet scheme’ and the ‘restoration of the May Queen rite, one of the oldest in the world’.<sup>392</sup> The possibilities for expanding the burgeoning revival cultivated a sense of nostalgia for people like George Lansbury who ardently expressed that he ‘long[ed] to see Maypoles once again on the village Green’.<sup>393</sup> This sense of longing for an earlier time informed the way that Hardy portrayed May Day in *The Return of the Native*.

Hardy’s distinction between a survival and a revival in the mumming scene in *The Return of the Native* indicates that he had seen revivals or was at least aware of their existence prior to 1877. By extension, the reader may assume that the novel’s description of May Day on Egdon is also such a ‘survival’, lingering from the days of ‘merry England’,<sup>394</sup> so it is worth considering Hardy’s understanding of pre-revival May Day and his portrayal of it for a revival-era audience. Hardy’s description of the May Day scene at the end of *The Return of the Native* may be rooted in the

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<sup>388</sup> Udal, *Dorsetshire Folklore*, p. 39

<sup>389</sup> Simpson and Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore*, p. 236.

<sup>390</sup> Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, p. 144.

<sup>391</sup> Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, p. 139.

<sup>392</sup> No title, *Gloucester Citizen*, 30 April 1897. No page number. col. 3.

<sup>393</sup> Quoted in Georgina Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 144.

<sup>394</sup> Hardy’s spelling, perhaps in resistance to the self-conscious archaism of ‘merrie’; see *RN* p. 369.

recollected impressions his grandmother described to him, that he evokes in the poem ‘One We Knew’:

She showed us the spot where the maypole was yearly planted,  
And where the bandsmen stood  
While breeched and kerchiefed partners whirled, and panted  
To choose each other for good.<sup>395</sup>

Though written in 1902, his poem is subtitled ‘M.H. 1772-1857’, and thus establishes Mary Hardy’s experience of May Day while still a young woman as an ‘authentic’, pre-revival experience, and her retelling of it to Hardy, may be viewed as such. Even in ‘One We Knew’, though, the maypole represents an antique way of life that is juxtaposed against news of revolution in France, the Terror, and the years of Napoleonic warfare, which temporarily if not permanently transformed Dorset life, as Hardy chronicles in *The Trumpet-Major* and *The Dynasts*. The maypole stands as a symbol here of the old world and an old way of life, as it does in his first published poem ‘The Fire at Tranter Sweatley’s’,<sup>396</sup> where the opening of the ballad happily proclaims the couple ‘had long met o’ Zundays – her true love and she – / And at junketings, maypoles, and flings’ (CP 48). ‘Tranter Sweatley’, ‘One We Knew’, and *The Return of the Native* are all set on Egdon Heath in a younger incarnation of ‘Wessex’ – the Egdon of the turn of the century<sup>397</sup> – the period of ‘fifty years’ earlier that Hardy’s grandmother recalls: ‘so wild it was when first we settled here’ (‘Domicilium’, CP 1).

In spite of Egdon’s seeming timelessness, as described in *RN*’s opening sequence, the action of the novel seems to be set in the 1840s, when Hardy would have been growing up there, and with the way of life much as when Hardy’s

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<sup>395</sup> *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 1976, reprinted 2001) poem 227. Hereafter references from this work will appear as internal citations denoted by CP and the poem number. In both ‘Tranter Sweatley’ and ‘One We Knew’ Hardy originally wrote ‘May-pole’ before changing it to ‘maypole’, as noted in *Complete Poems*.

<sup>396</sup> Written in 1866, published in 1875, later revised and retitled ‘The Bride-Night Fire’.

<sup>397</sup> Michael Millgate has established that Hardy’s grandparents Thomas and Mary Hardy moved from Puddletown to the cottage adjoining the heath in 1800 in *Biography Revisited*, p. 12.

grandmother lived there – conscientiously in a former time – and at an earlier time than *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Hardy's decision to set the maypole scene in *The Return of the Native* close to the location of his own family's cottage is suggested in a manuscript revision, where in the line 'the impulses of all such out-landish places are Pagan still' he amends 'places' to 'hamlets', thus suggesting the more intimately known (to him) hamlet at Higher Bockhampton.<sup>398</sup>

Ruth Firor seems to be convinced that the rendering of the maypole scene in *The Return of the Native* is 'authentic', as she states that the May festival which is 'now practically extinct in England today, lives for us in *The Return of the Native*'.<sup>399</sup> Firor's Dorset source for this statement is H. Colley March, who describes only one specific instance of the maypole tradition being left off in Cerne Abbas (described above) as well as Hardy's added comment that there were maypoles set up in many villages in his childhood. This does not mean, however, that May festivals are 'now' (at the time of her writing in the 1920s) practically extinct. Firor does not acknowledge here that May festival revivals had been gaining momentum since the early part of the nineteenth century, though her other cited source for this claim, E. W. Wright's *Rustic Speech and Folklore* (1913), is careful to distinguish that it is the 'original May-day sports and observances [which] have long been dead and gone, leaving only scattered traces' from the revivals, which at 'the present time' 'are being taught in Board Schools' 'so that we have consequently to beware of mistaking a revival for a survival.'<sup>400</sup>

While Firor was aware of this culture of revivals, her failure to distinguish between the two could cause confusion to a twentieth or twenty-first century reader of Hardy who, having grown up with May Day traditions or having heard of their parents or grandparents having done so, might be unaware of them as 'revival' traditions. This would seem to negate Firor's comment about May Day being 'extinct', the significant distinction being Wright's word 'original'. By the 1920s, the Merrie England Society was responsible for the proliferation of May festivals around

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<sup>398</sup> 'The Return of the Native': *A Facsimile of the Manuscript with Related Materials*, ed. by Simon Gatrell (New York: Garland, 1986), f. 407, p. 460.

<sup>399</sup> I am using this word in a figurative sense: Firor does not use the word, but she implies it. I am suggesting that the construction of the maypole scene is more complex than a vision of the past that 'lives for us' as she says (p. 135).

<sup>400</sup> E.W. Wright, *Rustic Speech and Folklore* (London: H. Milford, 1913), p. 296, italics added.

the country, and it is important to distinguish that while the (original) May festivals Firor refers to seemed to have waned in the middle part of the nineteenth century, their revival means that twentieth-century readers of Hardy would be able to identify with the concept of May Day, albeit in the later, artificial form.

The maypole scene forms the last of a series of ‘rural rituals’ running throughout *The Return of the Native*, and as Simon Gatrell describes:

Hardy wrote of these rituals as part of his own day-to-day experience as a young man. Their anthropological significance interests him less than their endurance, revealing long human roots in the soil, even of ‘haggard Egdon, so indifferent to man’, and Hardy’s narrator sees Egdon with the eyes of a child, as limitless. More than any other place he adopted in his writing, the heath on which Hardy played as a child, across which he walked as an adolescent, over which he courted as a young man, is quintessential Wessex [...] a place and culture that permeated his life.<sup>401</sup>

But as Gatrell had argued earlier in *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*, the narrative voice in *The Return of the Native* displays a ‘curious relationship between the childlike and the sophisticated’.<sup>402</sup> Embodied within this Victorian ‘sophisticated’ voice is the ethnographical interest of Hardy the observer,<sup>403</sup> informed by Hardy’s interest in anthropological writing of the 1870s, including Tylor, as Andrew Radford, Michael Zeitler, Sinead Garrigan-Mattar and others have established.<sup>404</sup>

The May Day scene is introduced in the context of Diggory Venn’s dramatic cultural change: the former red nomad has now settled down and become ‘white’ ‘exhibiting the strangely altered hues of an ordinary Christian countenance’ (*RN* 68).

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<sup>401</sup> Simon Gatrell, ‘Wessex’, *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 19-37 (p. 23).

<sup>402</sup> Simon Gatrell, *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>403</sup> Hillis Miller discusses this inner conflict of the narrator who is at once an ‘expert on the ways of his community’, who simultaneously ‘speaks as an outsider who sees those ways from an ironic distance’ in ‘Individual and Community in *The Return of the Native*: A Reappraisal’ in *Thomas Hardy Reappraised*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 154-173 (p. 158).

<sup>404</sup> See Andrew Radford, *Survivals of Time*, Michael Zeitler, *Representations of Culture*, and Sinead Garrigan-Mattar, ‘The Enchanted Heath’.



Gillian Beer has described how in Victorian anthropological terms, the two distinct categories were the ‘settled’ and the ‘nomadic’ tribes, with ‘civilization’ arising from the settled. While Beer has noted that Hardy portrays the heath dwellers as occupying a third space as they are ‘constantly on the move within the confines’,<sup>406</sup> Diggory’s conscious and calculated leap from nomadic existence to settlement and civilization with his ‘eighty cow dairy’ seems to reaffirm the cultural binary; this so strikes Thomasin that she regards it as almost ‘supernatural’ that he now ‘looks human again’ (368). This reference to the dominant cultural form is linked with May Day, which Venn introduces in a ‘civilized’ manner to ‘Mrs. Wildevé’ (Thomasin): ‘’Tis Maypole-day to-morrow, and the Shadwater folk have clubbed with a few of your neighbours here to have one just outside your palings in the heath, as it is a nice green place’ (369). The description of the preparations follows:

It was a lovely May sunset, and the birch trees which grew on this margin of the vast Egdon wilderness had put on their new leaves, delicate as butterflies’ wings, and diaphanous as amber. Beside Fairway’s dwelling was an open space recessed from the road, and here were collected all the young people from within a radius of a couple miles. The pole lay with one end supported on a trestle, and women were engaged in wreathing it from the top downwards with wild flowers. The instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition had attached to each season were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still: in these spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, have in some way or other survived medieval doctrine.<sup>407</sup> (369).

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<sup>406</sup> Gillian Beer, ‘Can the Native Return?’, p. 519.

<sup>407</sup> ‘Medieval doctrine’ originally read ‘medieval Christianity’ in the manuscript, so the emphasis is changed from the possible interpretation of religious ‘truth’ to that of an established teaching or tradition that more evenly parallels the Egdon community’s folk traditions, in ‘*The Return of the Native*’: *A Facsimile of the Manuscript*, f. 407, p. 460. John Paterson and Jane Bownas have both discussed this revision but not in terms of folk culture: see John Paterson, ‘*The Return of the Native* as an Anti-Christian Document’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 14.2 (1959), pp. 111-127; Jane Bownas, *Thomas Hardy and Empire: the Representation of Imperial Themes in the Works of Thomas Hardy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

As Tony Slade has noted, this ‘uncritical pastoral tone’ is in marked contrast to both *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and the mummers in *The Return of the Native*.<sup>408</sup> However, both the word ‘instinct’ and the phrase ‘merry England’ carry a good deal of cultural freight, and Hardy is alert to the implications of both. He is writing for a literate, middle class audience – the group George Stocking says was most defined by the idea that ‘human instinct had to be overcome by foresight’ and also for whom the ‘liberation of human reason from the forces of instinct had progressed furthest’.<sup>409</sup> The term ‘instinct’ in Hardy’s passage suggests an earlier stage of development more aligned with the days of ‘merry England’ – itself a nebulous former time, which as Keith Thomas has famously said, was always ‘the day before yesterday.’<sup>410</sup> But these instincts,<sup>411</sup> like the customs of Egdon, existed ‘yet’: instincts themselves are a kind of survivals, which like Diggory Venn must adapt or die out. Diggory – now white, and in the role of the leader who facilitates the preparation for the maypole events – does not identify with the ‘folk going crazy round a stick’ (*The Return of the Native* 369). He has repressed or at least brought under control his sexual as well as his nomadic instinct. In so doing, he has followed the admonitions of a number of writers whose work Hardy knew. In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), a work which in opposing the modern emphasis on ‘conduct’ with the Hellenic delight in beauty may have influenced the contrasting presentations of Clym and Eustacia in *RN*, Matthew Arnold warned against ‘the dangers of “bodily senses”, [advocating that] instincts were to be

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<sup>408</sup> See his Penguin edition of the novel, p. 426, note 5.

<sup>409</sup> George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 35; Note also that Lady Gomme, wife of George Gomme, author of *the Handbook of Folklore*, applied this ‘reason’ to May Day, saying ‘May Day, without a reason for its ceremony and festivity, does not appeal to me, but with that reason made apparent it becomes a beautiful and poetical festival, and the loss of its teaching is to be regretted’ (quoted in Roy Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, 142).

<sup>410</sup> Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England*, The Creighton Trust Lecture 1983 (1983) quoted in J.F. Merritt, *Imagining Early Modern London: Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype: 1598-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 27.

<sup>411</sup> ‘Instinct’ first appears at the bonfire lighting as the ‘instinctive and resistant act’ of ‘Promethean Rebelliousness’ (*RN* 21). ‘Instinct’ also appeared in the manuscript at the East Egdon dance: Jane Bownas describes the cancellation of the suggestive phrase: ‘they adored none other than themselves and [their own natural instincts]’. This reference was struck through in the manuscript for being too suggestive. Bownas, *Thomas Hardy and Empire: the Representation of Imperial Themes in the Works of Thomas Hardy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p. 99.

expunged, “the obvious faults of our animality” to be subdued.<sup>412</sup> While Darwin acknowledged that instincts might be the basis of a moral sense, Thomas Huxley and John Stuart Mill argued that morality depended on overcoming instinct; Mill, for example, ‘habitually’ dismissed sexual instinct, describing it as ‘a degrading slavery to a brute instinct’,<sup>413</sup> and in his essay ‘On Nature’ makes explicit ‘how little worthy is the instinctive part of human nature’.<sup>414</sup> Thus in *The Return of the Native* we see no figures like Fitzpiers or Suke Damson giving into the ‘natural instincts’ traditionally associated with the maypole. The most notable lover present, Diggory Venn, is shown standing alone by the maypole in the moonlight, and he represents part of the ‘inevitable movement onward’ of overcoming instinct, which will propel civilization forward at the expense of ‘merry England’.<sup>415</sup>

The obvious point of comparison is with the bonfire scene at the opening of the novel, where the heathdwellers exhibit in Promethean fashion ‘the instinctive and resistant act’ of humankind to battle against winter darkness (21). Where in this scene the heathfolk are seen as individuals, in the maypole celebration scene no faces or personalities are shown. Instead only abstract groups are named: ‘a lot of folk’ (369), ‘people’ (370), ‘May party’ (371), ‘so many people (371), and Hardy makes no attempt to fully describe what happens at the maypole during the celebrations; as Ruth Firor has pointed out, the August East Egdon dance or ‘gypsying’ comes nearer to what we would expect the maypole scene to be like. Though the reader is *told* this vitality still exists on Egdon, that the May scene passes without our experiencing it creates the effect of it already being a past affair, of which we have only a distant recollection. It is in keeping with this suggestion that when Hardy was asked if he recalled May Songs, he replied that he had ‘only a vague idea of hearing fragments when [he] was young’.<sup>416</sup> The fleeting impression the reader has of May Day

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<sup>412</sup> Quoted in Angelique Richardson, ‘Hardy and the Place of Culture’, *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) pp. 54-70, p. 62, p. 61.

<sup>413</sup> Phillip Mallett, ‘Hardy and Philosophy’, *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 21-35, p. 27.

<sup>414</sup> Quoted in Phillip Mallett, ‘Hardy and Philosophy’, p. 28.

<sup>415</sup> Note however that Kristin Brady has observed that in *Tess* Hardy associates ‘primitivism’ with a positive ‘instinctiveness’ over cultivated civilization; Kristin Brady, ‘Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender’, in Dale Kramer, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>416</sup> ‘Letter to A.M. Broadley’, *CL* 4: 68.

festivities on Egdon makes it seem as if the visceral scenes of folk custom that opened the novel are already retreating into the recesses of memory.

Even though these ‘instincts’ remain as ‘yet’, culture on Egdon is changing before our very eyes. Hardy thus chronicles a transitional period in the development of culture that prefigures and suggests Freud’s arguments in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929): as William Greenslade notes, in the fiction of the 1890s age-old oppositions – ‘civilized and brutish, higher and lower, mind and body, reason and instinct’ – were more sharply defined than ever before.<sup>417</sup> These also become central issues in *Jude the Obscure*: instinct, artificially suppressed by civilization, is the cause of degeneration not only for Jude, but for ‘thousands of young men’ like him.<sup>418</sup> If, as Stocking has noted, ‘progress consisted not simply in a growth in reason, but in a repression of sexual instinct’,<sup>419</sup> then it is no accident that Egdon, at the heart of Wessex as a ‘realm of instinct, that which alone remains natural in man’, as Percy Meisel describes it,<sup>420</sup> is nowhere near Jude’s world, as he wanders on the outer fringes of Wessex always half in sight of the city of ‘dreaming spires’.

If in 1878 Hardy was looking backward to the beginning of the nineteenth century and forward to the fin de siècle, then so was his audience. For a self-consciously progressive middle class readership of the 1870s, a nostalgic idea of ‘Merry England’ increasingly represented the world that had been lost as part of the inevitable price to be paid for ‘onward moving’ progress. In response to this sense of loss, the 1870s also saw an increasing activity in the revival of maypole celebrations, albeit in a bowdlerized, child-friendly form – or as Georgina Boyes sardonically describes it, ‘upper middle class propagators’ instructing groups of children to ‘trot mechanically round “Olde Englishe maypoles”’.<sup>421</sup>

Hardy’s use of the phrase ‘merry England’ while he is describing May Day and the maypole, can be seen on one level as a subtle commodification of Egdon for an 1870s audience that understands May Day through both a nostalgic and revived sense, as well as a conscious placing of Egdon and indeed his whole body of work, in a backward-looking ‘Merry England’ tradition. The phrase ‘Merry England’ was

<sup>417</sup> Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel*, p.73.

<sup>418</sup> *Jude*, p. 133; see also Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel*, p.178.

<sup>419</sup> Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 220.

<sup>420</sup> Percy Meisel, *Thomas Hardy and the Return of the Repressed: A Study of the Major Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 75.

<sup>421</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village*, p. 113.

perhaps most popularized by Scott in *Marmion* (1808), which for Hardy was the ‘most Homeric poem in the English language’, as well as the poem his mother preferred ‘to any of Scott’s prose works.’<sup>422</sup> J. F. Merritt has chronicled the impulse to look back to ‘Merry England’ throughout English literature, with John Stow being the first prominent example, though he did not use the precise phrase.<sup>423</sup> The element of nostalgia seems to have increased with Scott, as prior to *Marmion* the recorded uses of the phrase ‘mery Yngland’ or ‘mery England’ or ‘Merry England’ seem to refer more generally to the England of the time, as in ‘The crown of mery Yngland’ (circa 1450)<sup>424</sup> or ‘You Ladyes all of Merry England’ (from 1680).<sup>425</sup> But Scott’s usage at the beginning of the nineteenth century firmly locates Merry England in the past, and specifically the Tudor period, with Scott telling the reader: ‘England was merry England, when Old Christmas brought his sports again.’<sup>426</sup> *Bentley’s Miscellany* followed suit, running an article titled ‘Merrie England in the Olden Time’ that describes a former era when ‘May-poles were in their glory and fountains ran with wine.’<sup>427</sup> Hardy’s usage then later in the century also locates an England in the past, but with the phrase ‘yet’ simultaneously suggests to an 1878 audience that the culture, is still in a period of transition, with the implicit question: ‘but at what cost?’ For the Egdon community as well as the national audience comprising Hardy’s readership, there is more than a suggestion that despite their nostalgic instincts it will be impossible to return to the ‘childhood of the world’<sup>428</sup> from whence they developed.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Life and Work*, p. 51; ‘Inspired Paragraph about Jemima Hardy’, *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice*, p. 208.

<sup>423</sup> J. F. Merritt, *Imagining Early Modern London*, p. 27.

<sup>424</sup> ‘Siege Calais’ (Galba), in *T. Wright, Political Poems & Songs* (London: 1861) II. 156.

<sup>425</sup> Earl of Rochester, ‘Signior Dildo’, *Poems*, 1680, l.

<sup>426</sup> Sir Walter Scott, ‘Introduction to Canto VI’, *Marmion: a Tale of Flodden Field*, (Edinburgh: Constable, 1808), p. 303.

<sup>427</sup> Mr. Ingleberry Grisken, ‘Merrie England in the Olden Time’, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, 5 (1839), 98-108, p. 98.

<sup>428</sup> This is Edward Clodd’s phrase in *The Childhood of the World: a Simple Account of Man in Early Times* (London: Macmillan, 1873).

<sup>429</sup> Cf. Peter Widdowson’s remarks on ‘a literary culture in which there is a complex relationship between forms of romanticism and patriotism, and the formation of a pastoral myth of rural England – often recalling a past more glorious heritage – which is the true “essential England” of national identity’: Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 16.

If the May Day scene in *The Return of the Native* represents traditional culture on the verge of decline, the May dance scene in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, set at a later period, shows further decline. But as Andrew Radford has suggested, it also interweaves many eras into one, suggesting a 'bravura thought-adventure through prerecorded history (the remains of a primeval oak forest), Romano-British (Cerealia fertility rites) and medieval periods. He points out that the 'glaring absence of men from this yearly event reveals that Christianity has neutered the *Old-Style* May-Days and Maypole'.<sup>430</sup> A number of scholars have traced the emergence of the theme of Demeter and Persephone from the 'moment' Hardy substituted 'local Cerealia' for 'Vestal rite' in the manuscript, and have followed this throughout the novel. These discussions have generally incorporated ideas based on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published early in 1890, though the earliest record of Hardy's reading *The Golden Bough* is in July 1891,<sup>431</sup> the month *Tess* began serial publication in *The Graphic*. Both Radford and Michael Zeitler have recently examined the combined influences of Walter Pater's essay 'The Myth of Demeter and Persephone' (1876), John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873-1876), as well as a long-running debate on comparative myth between Max Müller and other 'anthropological luminaries' that appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* in the 1885-1886 period. The influence of the Demeter-Persephone myth in the conception and reading of *Tess* has thus been well established.<sup>432</sup> What seems not to have been

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<sup>430</sup> Radford, *Survivals of Time*, p. 157.

<sup>431</sup> J.T. Laird has established that this revision to 'local Cerealia' was made in January 1891. Laird goes on to suggest that Hardy was familiar with the themes in *The Golden Bough* (having been published earlier the following year) and may have read the work before returning to it and jotting these notes in his *Literary Notebooks*. Cited in J.T. Laird, 'New Light on the Evolution of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*', *R.E.S., New Series* 31 (1980): 425-428.

<sup>432</sup> See Catherine Gallagher, 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Hardy's Anthropology of the Novel' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, ed. by John Paul Riquelme, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism Series (Boston: Bedford, 1998) pp. 422-440; J.B. Bullen, 'Thomas Hardy and Mythology,' *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature, and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J.B. Bullen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), Felicia Bonaparte, 'The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*' *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5.3 (1999): pp. 415-431, Tom Nash, 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles: the Symbolic Use of Folklore', *English Language Notes* (1998): pp. 38-48, and Andrew Radford, 'Hardy's *Tess*: the Making and Breaking of a Goddess' in *The Lost Girls: Demeter and Persephone in the Literary Imagination, 1850-1930* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) pp. 87-137, as well as Radford's *Survivals* and Zeitler's *Representations* previously cited.

noticed is a further link to the Demeter-Persephone myth through the Queen of May and May Day celebrations at Whitelands College, prompted by John Ruskin, which Hardy attended in May 1891.

Ruskin's interest in the Demeter-Persephone myth and treatment of it in *The Queen of Air* (1869) has been established by Dinah Birch and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman.<sup>433</sup> Ruskin became involved with Whitelands College following the appointment of the new principal (and clergyman) John Faunthorpe in 1874. In 1881, Faunthorpe was seeking a prize for an examination competition among the young female students, and suggested awarding Ruskin's forthcoming book *Proserpina*. Ruskin 'indignantly' refused on the basis of a 'deep and increasing sense of wrong of all prizes and of every stimulus of a competitive kind', but instead, continuing in the same letter he went on:

so while I intensely dislike all forms of competition, I believe the recognition of an uncontending and natural *worth* to be one of the most solemn duties alike of young and old. Suppose you made it a custom that the scholars should annually choose by ballot, with avowed secrecy, their Queen of May? and that the elected queen had, with other more important rights, that of giving the 'Proserpina' to the girl she thought likeliest to use it with advantage?<sup>434</sup>

Thus the May Queen Festival was instituted in 1881, in the form of a ceremony based on the 'enactment of the Persephone myth'<sup>435</sup> in which the students would pick, in Ruskin's words, 'the likeablest or nicest girl'.<sup>436</sup> As a writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* observed, the ceremony characterized 'in a very quaint and pretty fashion many of [Ruskin's] "romantic impossibilities" about education'.<sup>437</sup> The festival continued throughout the 1880s and in the 1890s maypole dancing was introduced, not just to

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<sup>433</sup> Dinah Birch, *Ruskin's Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999). See also Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>434</sup> 'Letter 95' from *Fors Clavigera*, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed by E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912) 39 vols, XXIX, p. 496.

<sup>435</sup> Malcolm Cole, 'Be Like Daisies: the Cultivation of Beauty at Whitelands College', (London: Guild of St George, 1992) pp. 1-37 (p. 29).

<sup>436</sup> 'Letter 95', *The Works of John Ruskin*, p. 496.

<sup>437</sup> 'A May-Day Festival', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 May 1885, quoted in Sara Atwood, *Ruskin's Educational Ideals* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) p. 156.

Whitelands but ‘to England’, since the Whitelands model was exported nationally as the students graduated and took up places in National Schools ‘throughout the country’, thus bringing a ‘spiritual and stimulating an influence’ to combat the ‘deficiencies of our national curriculum’.<sup>438</sup> While the Whitelands May Day model was taken up by local groups throughout the country, it was often not recognised as having come down from Whitelands; more often it was assumed to be an ongoing tradition or ‘survival’, as established by Udal and Judge (discussed above): if not quite a ‘sham’, at the least an event in which the self-conscious and artfully new was subtly interwoven with the received and traditional.

Hardy would have been aware of the growing influence and popularity of the Whitelands May Day ‘rite’ which Ruskin ‘restored’ to its full glory, as the festival received heavy news coverage in the London and national newspapers throughout the 1880s. In 1885, for example, it was extensively covered in two columns of *The Pall Mall Gazette* (quoted above), which Hardy regularly followed, since reviews of his works regularly appeared there. He was in any case aware of Ruskin’s presence throughout the 1880s: in 1886 he recorded passages from *Modern Painters* into his *Literary Notebooks*, and earlier in 1883, after responding supportively to Mary Christie’s scheme to ‘encourage a feeling for art in National schools’, he was listed alongside Matthew Arnold and Ruskin in the *Journal of Education* as giving ‘general approval’ for the scheme<sup>439</sup>. In *The Life* Hardy quotes from Ruskin in 1885 and 1887, that is, during the years of Ruskin’s connection with ‘Whitelands’ and immediately prior to the composition of *Tess*.<sup>440</sup>

It is important to establish Hardy’s ongoing awareness of Ruskin’s work and the Whitelands May Day ceremony, since this version of May Day, which was soon to creep into Dorset, informed the way Hardy approached Tess’s perspective, and indeed that of the other girls, both in the May Day dance and in the rest of the novel. Crucially, at different times they are the ones not picked. In spite of their ‘beauty’ and ‘likeability’ and everything else celebrated in Ruskin’s conception of the May Queen

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<sup>438</sup> ‘A May-Day Festival’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 May 1885, p. 4, col. 2. The article adds, with an obvious echo of Tylor’s language: ‘Of late years there has been a tendency to revive this rural custom, which appeared at one time likely to become extinct.’

<sup>439</sup> ‘Letter to Mary Christie’, 11 April 1883 (*CL* 1: 116-117).

<sup>440</sup> *Life and Work*, p. 207.



rite, they are continually marginalized as redundant women<sup>441</sup>, in a ceremony, if not narrative where they are simply ‘too menny’.

The justification for this reading is a powerful description in *The Life of Hardy's* visit to the Whitelands May Day festival in May 1891. As Hardy also visited Stockwell College, where his cousin Tryphena Sparks had trained as a teacher, at around the same time, probably in preparation for the teacher training scenes in *Jude the Obscure*, the visits to both colleges seem to have been planned. Hardy's description of the visit to Whitelands on May 1<sup>st</sup> suggests that the festival was known to him before visiting. The visit makes a strong impression, and his reaction is strongly emotive. The extract is quoted in full:

Hardy's friend Dr (afterwards Sir) Joshua Fitch took him over Whitelands Training College for schoolmistresses, where it was the custom in those days, and may be now, to choose a May Queen every year, a custom originated by Ruskin. Hardy did not, however, make any observation on this, but merely: ‘A community of women, especially young women, inspires not reverence but protective tenderness in the breast of one who views them. Their belief in circumstances, in convention, in the rightness of things which you know to be not only wrong but damnably wrong, makes the heart ache, even when they are waspish and hard... You feel how entirely the difference of their ideas from yours is the nature of misunderstanding... There is much that is pathetic about these girls, and I wouldn't have missed the visit for anything. How far nobler in its aspirations is the life here than the life of those I met at the crush two nights back! (246-247)

Hardy's reaction to this ‘custom’, ‘originated by Ruskin’, in which a May Queen is ‘chosen’, stands in stark contrast to the gushing tones that usually describe the Whitelands ceremony in the periodical press and by revivalists interested in propagating the model. He seems to pick up on inherent and contradictory tensions within the May Day festival: if Ruskin had initially felt that the element of competition was wrong, how does his concession to this beautified, mythologized

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<sup>441</sup> Mid-Victorian England saw an excess of women over men of about half a million.

form of ‘natural’ selection<sup>442</sup> to which he gave his blessing, now invest it with what the *Pall Mall* called ‘innocent pleasure’?

As part of the same May Day programme the girls were preached a sermon teaching them that they were a ‘chosen generation.’<sup>443</sup> But if they were chosen, there remained the unchosen: the Tess Durbeyfield who had hoped to be a teacher (and had she become one, might herself have been inculcating the Whitelands view of May Day), the Jude Fawley who had striven to be part of the ‘chosen’ at Oxford, as well as ‘thousands of young men’ [and women] like Tess and Jude. Hardy seems to view this ceremony with some concern about a message propagated in the name of ‘innocent pleasure’. In the May Day address given by the principal the girls ‘were *taught* to regard [Ruskin] as one of the major *prophets*, as doing for this age what Plato, Aristotle, and Bacon have done for others’ (emphasis added).<sup>444</sup> Thus Hardy witnessed the girls being indoctrinated with an understanding of the ‘natural *worth*’ of the one girl being selected and celebrated, while the others were not. This is the supposed admiration of innocence masking a patriarchal world, where a ‘prophet’ Ruskin or an ‘Angel’ Clare establishes a formula whereby only one girl may be picked, while the others are left to feel rejected. Clearly the occasion unsettles Hardy, and fills him with an (albeit vain) sense of ‘protective tenderness’ towards them. That he claimed he ‘wouldn’t have missed the [Whitelands] visit for anything’ suggests that he was moved and provoked by the implicit message in this revived ‘custom’. With this in mind, in the opening ‘May-day dance’ scene in *Tess* and throughout the novel Hardy works to show beauty in the many girls who are not chosen but who are full of natural worth.

### Midsummer Divination

Midsummer Eve divination occurs in three of Hardy’s works: *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *The Woodlanders* (1886), and ‘The Superstitious Man’s Story’ (1891). Though it was published last, ‘The Superstitious Man’s Story’ may be set the earliest, as it is based on events which took place in Melbury Osmund, Dorset around the year

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<sup>442</sup> I am quoting Ruskin’s description of this recognition of a selection which will recognize ‘natural *worth*’ (italics his) in ‘Letter 95’ from *Fors Clavigera*, *The Works of John Ruskin*, p. 496.

<sup>443</sup> Malcolm Cole, ‘Be Like Daisies’, p. 16.

<sup>444</sup> ‘A May-Day Festival’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 May 1885, p. 4, col. 2.

1820, as told to Hardy by ‘an old lady’ (most likely his mother).<sup>445</sup> In the story a woman observes her husband walk out the front door and fail to return. Later she finds him upstairs asleep in his bed, apparently never having left the house. Seeking to explain what she saw, she learns that some members of the parish had upheld the Midsummer Eve death divination tradition of gathering in the church porch to see the ‘faint shapes’ of those who would die in the coming year entering the church.<sup>446</sup> Three days later, when her husband lies down for a nap, a ‘miller’s-soul’ or miller moth flies out of his mouth and he is found dead. At the same time, his bodily form is observed two miles away at the place of his son’s death years earlier. Hardy explained that the belief in the miller moth as representing the soul flying out of the dead body ‘is or was a belief of this county’ and he sees this belief validated in *The Golden Bough* as Frazer discusses ‘instances of soul-absence’, which Hardy noted was ‘evidently the same superstition out of wh. I constructed the story about the “Miller’s soul”’.<sup>447</sup> Herman Lea corroborates this, stating that:

William Privett’s midnight visit to the church porch brings before us a custom or superstition still believed in by some of the older people in the less sophisticated parts of Wessex, and the present writer has met several people who firmly believed in the custom, and who, according to their own showing, had proved its outcome to be true.<sup>448</sup>

While Hardy’s familiarity with the tradition is evidently local and inherited, it accords with the Midsummer Eve description given in Chambers’s *Book of Days* that ‘the Irish believe that the souls of all people on this night leave their bodies, and wander to [their place of death]. It is not improbable that this notion was originally universal’ and that this led to the tradition of ‘watching or sitting up awake on St. John’s Night’ (Midsummer Eve) in an effort to curtail the soul ‘going upon that somewhat dismal ramble.’ The *Book of Days* goes on to record the belief that anyone fasting and standing in the church porch would see those in the parish who would die

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<sup>445</sup> Martin Ray, *Thomas Hardy: a Textual Study of the Short Stories* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997) p. 243.

<sup>446</sup> Thomas Hardy, ‘The Superstitious Man’s Story’, *Life’s Little Ironies* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 182.

<sup>447</sup> *CL* 6: 251-252; *Literary Notebooks* II: 45.

<sup>448</sup> Herman Lea, *Thomas Hardy’s Wessex*, p. 144.

in the coming year, stating though that this ‘*was* believed in England, and possibly other countries also’ subtly suggesting an ongoing state of belief in Ireland, while establishing that the associated belief has now died out in England (emphasis mine).<sup>449</sup> In Dorset however, this custom of church porch divination was ‘still firmly believed in’ in 1881 as recorded in the ‘Folk-lore’ column of the *Dorset County Chronicle*.<sup>450</sup>

While ‘A Superstitious Man’s Story’ is constructed around death divination, *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Woodlanders* feature two different approaches to marriage divination. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* Mrs. Penny’s personal reminiscence of practicing marriage divination as a young woman has a wistful quality, as it is told many years later. Mr. Penny, Hardy wrote, was based on family accounts of his relative Robert Reason who was born in 1763 and died in 1819, so Mrs. Penny’s telling of her Midsummer divination experience as ‘truth’ that she practiced and witnessed evokes an earlier time. Mrs. Penny attests that she conjured up the form of her husband by setting out certain foods according to instructions given in the ‘witch’s book’ on Old Midsummer Eve:

Yes: never was I in such a taking as on that Midsummer-eve! I sat up quite determined to see if John Wildway was going to marry me or no. I put the bread-and-cheese and beer quite ready as the witch’s book ordered, and I opened the door, and I waited till the clock struck twelve, my nerves all alive and so strained that I could feel every one of ’em twitching like bell-wires. Yes, sure! When the clock had struck, lo and behold I could see through the door a *little small man* in the lane wi’ a shoemaker’s apron on [...]

Now John Wildway, Mrs. Penny continued, ‘who courted me at that time, was a shoemaker you see, but he was a very fair-sized man, and I couldn’t believe any such a little small man had anything to do wi’ me – as anybody might. But

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<sup>449</sup> *The Book of Days: a Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar*, ed. by R. Chambers, 2 vols, (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1863) I, p. 815. Chambers’s approach seems to be more sympathetic than the earlier *Every-Day Book* (of 1838) that had previously recorded this same notion of church porch divination as being believed by ‘the ignorant’. *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, ed. William Hone, 3 vols (London: T. Tegg, 1838).

<sup>450</sup> J.S. Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 47. The source for this information lived within five miles of Melbury Osmund, but she stated this prior to Hardy writing ‘A Superstitious Man’.

on he came, and crossed the threshold – not John, but actually the little small man in the shoemaker’s apron – [...] in he walks and down he sits, and O my goodness me, didn’t I flee upstairs, body and soul hardly hanging together!  
(51)

While Ruth Firor questions whether Mrs. Penny would have used an actual book such as *Mother Bunch’s Closet Newly Broke Open*, or whether she merely alludes to ‘traditional witching doggerel passed orally from generation to generation’,<sup>451</sup> instructions for this kind of marriage divination were commonly found in a number of fortune books popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Owen Davies has recorded such examples from *The True Fortune-Teller*, *The Universal Book of Fate*, *A New Fortune-Book*, and *Mother Bunch* (alluded to by Firor),<sup>452</sup> all of which feature variations on setting out food and drink (and sometimes clothing) at night in an effort to ‘summon’ the future husband. The advice given in *Mother Bunch* sounds like a variant of what Mrs. Penny encounters:

You that desire to know it this way must wait till Midsummer Eve, then at night three or four of you, or more or less, must take your smocks and dip them in fair water, then turn the wrong side outwards, and hang them on chairs before the fire, and have by you a vessel with drink in it and lay some salt in another before the fire, and be sure not to speak a word whatever you hear or see. In a little time the likeness of those persons you shall marry will come and turn your smocks, and a drink to you; now if there be any of you that will never marry, they will hear a bell, but not the rest but whoever hears this bell none of my authors is positive that she will dye [sic] a maid.<sup>453</sup>

Similar instructions given in Chambers’s *Book of Days* sound more like that of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and perhaps Hardy drew on this in his account:

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<sup>451</sup> Ruth Firor, *Folkways in Thomas Hardy*. p. 43.

<sup>452</sup> Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture*, p. 133. Davies says that *Mother Bunch* claimed to be based on a wise ‘old woman who lived at Bonny Venter in the West’; the earliest version of it was printed in 1685 and it continued to be printed into the late nineteenth century.

<sup>453</sup> Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture*, p. 135.

It was supposed that if an unmarried woman, fasting, laid a cloth at midnight with bread and cheese, and sat down as if to eat, leaving the street-door open, the person whom she was to marry would come into the room and drink to her by bowing, after which, setting down the glass with another bow he would retire.<sup>454</sup>

This same notion (but with the ‘*best beer*’) is also described in the Brand-Ellis 1849 edition of *Popular Antiquities* (1849). The common factor in all of these instances is the hopeful expectancy of the ritual meal drawing forth the potential husband from outside into the female domestic sphere.

With this interpretation in mind, Mrs. Penny’s experience with the ‘witch’s book’ is echoed in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* with Joan’s *Compleat Fortune Teller*, the book by which Joan attempts to divine Tess’s future. But in the later period in which *Tess* is set, the book has degenerated into a survival in itself. It offers no helpful advice, and instead of being associated with nourishment and the symbolic feast (bread and beer) it is now associated with the decomposed and the scatological in being relegated to the outhouse: Joan ‘wipe[s] her hands’ of it and with a kind of ‘fetishistic fear’ sends it outside the domestic sphere, where it stays (29). The *Compleat Fortune-Teller*, the title of which Hardy revised from ‘Complete’ to ‘Compleat’<sup>455</sup> to emphasise its origins in previous centuries, is used to illustrate the cultural gap between Joan and Tess as well as suggest a progression of cultural advance from the days of *Under the Greenwood Tree*:

between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (29)

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<sup>454</sup> *The Book of Days* I: 816. *Chambers’s Journal* was the first magazine Hardy published in (‘How I Built Myself a House’), and it is likely he was also familiar with Chambers’s *Book of Days*, which was published in the years leading up to the composition of *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

<sup>455</sup> *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Variorum edition, ed. by Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 31.

This dichotomy between Tess and her mother privileges Tess and the progress she represents in Victorian social terms: educated, sober, maternal, she stands in for both parents at home as they drink at Rolliver's 'dismissing all thought and care' of their responsibilities. In *Tess*, Joan's book and its divinations suggest a 'fearful' and 'fetishistic' past (29), with fetishism used in its Comtean sense, carefully noted by Hardy in several entries in his *Literary Notebooks* (754-755), to designate an earlier phase of culture from which modern society has progressed.

In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy returns to the memory of the Midsummer divination meal, but the former magic is gone. In Book III, immediately after Sue's marriage to Phillotson, Jude waits alone at midnight hoping that instead of going home with her new husband she will return to him. Though he mimes a 'phantom' of the ritual, 'nobody comes':

His supper still remained spread; and going to the front door, and softly setting it open, he returned to the room and sat as watchers sit on old-Midsummer eves expecting the phantom of the Beloved. But she did not come. (169)

Rather than the divination practice here being portrayed as a survival, the reference to Sue's 'phantom' suggests her own spiritual death through marriage to Phillotson. There is some appropriateness in Ruth Firor's suggestion that 'Midsummer Eve is the time when ghosts of dead lovers appear' in describing what happens to Jude.<sup>456</sup> While there seems *not* to be an actual established folkloric tradition of Midsummer Eve as a time when 'ghosts of dead lovers appear', in *Jude*, Hardy synthesizes these seemingly opposing Midsummer customs: that of marriage divination and death divination (at church, as in 'A Superstitious Man') to heighten Jude's alienation in a world where marriage no longer stands as a rite to be divined and death is no longer a communal event where watchers come together to witness who will die in the parish. Jude is left to die alone, forsaken by his wife, his parish, and the church city of Christminster.

If Midsummer divination in *Under the Greenwood Tree* looks back to a time in Hardy's family's past when belief was a 'living thing' (as Angel Clare would describe it), marriage divination in *The Woodlanders* seems to represent a later

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<sup>456</sup> Ruth Firor, *Folkways*, p. 51.

‘incarnation of a phase of village civilization’, to borrow Edmund Gosse’s phrase.<sup>457</sup> The communal hemp-sowing that the Hintock girls practice had been recounted much earlier by William Barnes in Hone’s *Year Book* of 1832:

Midsummer Eve, however, is the great time with girls for discovering their husbands; why it is so, more than any other, I cannot tell, unless, indeed, the sign Gemini, which the sun then leaves, is symbolical of the wedding union. But, however that may be, a maiden will walk through the garden at midsummer, with a rake on her left shoulder and throw hemp-seed over her right, saying at the same time: ‘Hemp-seed I set, hemp-seed I sow, The man that is my true-love come after me and mow.’<sup>458</sup>

While Barnes in 1832 had described hemp-sowing as an actively practiced custom, for Grace Melbury, the native returned, this communal ‘black art’ makes her feel as if ‘she had receded a couple of centuries in the world’s history’ (132). But in the mid-century setting of *The Woodlanders* the husband-forms ‘conjured’ are actually the young men of the parish, manipulating the custom for their own gain (and no doubt for that of ‘divers dirty sluts’). Hardy thus portrays the divination act as simultaneously survival and not-survival, in showing it as adaptable to the changing needs of the community, as the ‘survival’ mummer’s play is adapted by Eustacia and the boys of Egdon Heath to fit her designs. In *The Woodlanders* the young men seem to be aware of Midsummer Eve’s ‘special relaxation of moral rules’, as Frazer would describe it, believed to result in ‘children born of more or less promiscuous intercourse’.<sup>459</sup> Fitzpier’s and Suke Damson’s resulting behavior (and possibly that of others in the wood) would seem to conform to an ancient precedent.

A faint hint that this ‘black art’ was less permissible than that of Mrs. Penny’s actions with the ‘witch’s book’ is suggested by Fitzpiers’ landlady, who deems it ‘ungodly’ (130) and one of the girls participating worries that ‘It is too much like

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<sup>457</sup> ‘New Novels’, *Saturday Review*, 2 April 1887, 484-485; Gosse also sees *The Woodlanders* as a successor to *UGT* writing in the same review: ‘We have not found ourselves in exactly the company we meet with in *The Woodlanders* since he published *Under the Greenwood Tree*’ (484).

<sup>458</sup> J.S. Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-lore*, p. 45. Udal also notes how Barnes drew on such a description in his poem ‘Mrs. Mary’s Tale’ in Erwin and Linda, in his *Poems of Rural Life in National English* (1846).

<sup>459</sup> Quoted in Michael Zeitler, *Representations of Culture*, p. 89.



having dealings with the evil one to try and raise their forms' (131). In the middle of the divination act the girls do encounter a figure (whom the reader never sees) and they flee, with one girl explaining to Giles Winterborne 'with solemn breathlessness' that they saw 'Satan pursuing us with his hour-glass. It was terrible!' (136). But this claim is undercut by Giles' subsequent discovery of the 'gentleman' he believes the girls might have mistaken for Satan: 'a short stout man in evening dress, carrying on one arm a light overcoat, and also his hat, so awkwardly arranged as possibly to have suggested the "hour-glass" to his timid observers – if this were the person whom the girls had seen' (136). Although the man is described as having a 'curious and altogether alien aspect' (he is an 'Italianized American') it remains a leap to confuse a stout gentleman holding a hat for Satan with an hour-glass. Whereas *Under the Greenwood Tree* and 'A Superstitious Man'<sup>460</sup> provide no alternative explanation for what the divination act 'conjures up', in *The Woodlanders* Hardy thus provides a rational explanation for what the girls' saw. At the same time, his remark 'if this were the person whom the girls had seen' leaves a note of ambiguity.

That the 'rational' explanation is undermined by the hint that the gentleman from South Carolinian was not the one they saw – perhaps even a faint 'hope it might not be so' – suggests the incongruity of their old world being disrupted and uprooted without hope of something better. As Andrew Radford describes it, Giles's usurpation by Fitzpiers, the 'town' man, emphasizes that 'few things in this secluded region can be "natural" any more' – and emphasizes the 'deathliness of rapidly encroaching metropolitan manners which is Hardy's preoccupation'.<sup>461</sup>

Fitzpiers has usurped Giles, but Fitzpiers' behavior in joining in what was considered a relic of pagan tradition may be read as atavistic; yet his promiscuous behavior (which will continue in marriage) goes unpunished under modern law: the Matrimonial Causes Act (or the progressive-sounding 'new law' of the novel) does not give Grace grounds to divorce him.<sup>462</sup> In a world where Satan does haunt the

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<sup>460</sup> It is worth noting Hardy's revision in 'A Superstitious Man' from 1894 to 1912 where the 'rational explanation' of the bell going heavy in the sexton's hand (foretelling death) is removed, so as not to undermine the 'superstitious' element of the ill omen (Martin Ray, *Short Stories*, p. 244).

<sup>461</sup> Andrew Radford, *Survivals of Time*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>462</sup> For a discussion of the role of the Matrimonial Causes Act in the novel, see William A. Davis, *Thomas Hardy and the Law: Legal Presences in Hardy's Life and Fiction* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses) pp. 125-134. See also Trish Ferguson, *Hardy's Legal Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

wood, a reader would sense that Fitzpiers' behavior and deception would be (ultimately) punished: justice would be done. But in this emerging world the modern law fails to offer the natural justice that Giles, Grace, and the reader instinctively seek. Thus, Hardy explores the trade-off in exchanging what Angel Clare would term 'medieval Christianity' for a moral no-man's-land, where folk tradition and modern law either converge or operate simultaneously. This is some distance from the view of 'constantly accelerating progress from savagery to culture' that many of Hardy's contemporaries, such as James A. Farrer and Edward Clodd, were promoting in the years leading up to *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.<sup>463</sup>

The changing customs of Midsummer Eve and May Day allow Hardy to explore how folk customs continue to become redefined and reinvented in successive generations and 'stages' of culture. But particularly with Midsummer divination in *The Woodlanders* and the May dance in *Tess*, Hardy shows how these customs are not strict 'survivals' relegated to the 'peasant world' (as Clodd and his contemporaries would suggest) but that they intersect and interact with the worlds of the professional and middle classes. Edred Fitzpiers, Angel Clare, and John Ruskin, through their modern ideas would seem to represent 'progress', but instead they reaffirm old patriarchal notions under the guise of modern law and institutions that trade old survivals for new ones.

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<sup>463</sup> Farrer, *Primitive Manners and Customs*, pp. 314-315.

## Conclusion

In 1846 William Thoms first made the case for the serious study of what would henceforth be known as Folk-Lore. In 2013, the case perhaps still needs to be made for the study of folklore in Hardy. At an early stage in writing this thesis, it was suggested to me that folklore was all about ‘dancing round the maypole’. That is indeed one of the topics raised in this thesis, but as was argued in the chapter on May customs and ceremonies, more is at stake than simply having a good time. Hardy records that on Egdon the ‘instincts of merry England lived yet’. But the idea of a ‘merry England’ as a time anchored in the past was essentially a nineteenth-century construction made popular by a Scottish novelist. The word ‘instincts’ had begun, by 1878, to carry a heavy freight of meaning, including its usage by evolutionary biologists such as Darwin and Huxley – who were divided over whether instinct was at the root of our moral sense, or at odds with it – and by cultural observers such as Arnold and Mill, who felt that instinct, which they tended to equate with sexual instinct, should be repressed. The ‘instinctive’ nature of the custom on Egdon is set against Diggory’s transformation of himself from the mysterious reddleman – a figure who belongs both to history and to folk memory, as the bogeyman used to frighten children – into the respectable dairy farmer, who asks permission to raise the maypole in a ‘civilized’ manner. Rather than witnessing the wilder and cheerfully sexual midsummer ceremonies of an earlier time, we see Diggory using the moonlight to look for a lost glove, almost like a knight wishing to serve his lady. Evidently Hardy views the ‘instincts of merry England’ with some irony, but at the same time he does not discount the idea that life on Egdon really is more instinctive, and more traditional, than his mainly urban, middle-class audience might ever have imagined. ‘Folklore’, after all, also includes the bonfire, with its multitude of meanings, as well as the ancient idea of ‘overlooking’; and the novel has, as one of its concerns, Clym’s attempt to move the true ‘natives’ of the heath from an older view of the world into one closer to the modern and self-consciously progressive view of – for example – the people who in Victorian England began the formal study of folklore and custom.

In 2011 I was fortunate to be the ‘scholar in residence’ at Hardy’s home in Max Gate, courtesy of the National Trust, and some parts of this thesis were tested in the form of talks given at a number of local societies. They were interested, but weren’t sure how far the ‘folk’ beliefs and customs I described in Hardy’s work were

‘authentic’. In the late nineteenth century, there existed simultaneously Victorian ‘regenerated’ treatments of May Day, as well as older ‘folk’ versions. By the early to mid-twentieth century, it was not always easy to distinguish ‘survivals’ from ‘revivals’, to employ the terms introduced by Tylor in the very year which Hardy began publishing fiction. Hardy’s commitment to recording unrecorded history allows him to argue that ‘things were like that in Wessex’, and one aim of this thesis has been to compare his treatment of the folk custom with what else can be discovered, from a variety of sources – newspapers, court reports, articles published by the Folklore Society, and the like – about how things were in Wessex. Hardy famously wrote of Wessex as a ‘part real, part-dream country’, and scholars have debated the boundary between the real and the dreamed. K. D. M. Snell, for example, has objected that Hardy makes the ‘real history’ of agricultural life in Dorset subordinate to his fictional aims; others, such as Peter Widdowson and Roger Ebbatson, have argued that Hardy’s treatment of Wessex life was inevitably skewed by his own class position<sup>464</sup> – and indeed by his ambition to achieve a different one, appropriate to a professional writer. But this thesis has shown that in dealing with folk belief, he was deliberately addressing ‘real’ Wessex life; his representation of it in the novels is an aspect of what Clifford Geertz has termed ‘thick description.’ So in exploring folk lore, I hope also to have been exploring at least an aspect of ‘real history’ or ‘real anthropology.’ Significantly, Hardy’s ability to provide such a description derived partly through his family’s deep roots in south-west England; as his consciousness developed, he became aware of an intensely rich local environment, which seemed to him to be ‘scored with prints of perished hands’.<sup>465</sup> These were experiences he had ‘imbibed’, to use the terminology of the Folklore Society. But he always understood, perhaps even as a boy reading Sir Walter Scott, that he would first have to prove himself as a writer – even a good hand at a serial – before he could write these stories. Later, he understood that he would have to speak or at least engage with the current language of the Royal Anthropological Society or the Folklore Society in order for them to respect his rendering of the thick description of Wessex as ‘authentic.’

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<sup>464</sup> See among others K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Roger Ebbatson, *Hardy: The Margin of the Unexpressed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>465</sup> ‘On an Invitation to the United States’, *CP* 75, p. 110.

Hardy's thick description works on several levels. Two very different scenes provide examples. The shearing supper in *Far From the Madding Crowd* is created as a contribution to pastoral: the narrator remarks that 'the shearers reclined against each other as at suppers in the early stages of the world', as they listen to Bathsheba singing to the accompaniment of Gabriel's flute. But alongside this deference to genre, there are signs that this is a real community. Bathsheba as the employer sits at the head of the table, which reaches into the room so that she does not directly mingle with the men; they call her 'Mistress', 'Miss' and 'Ma'am' – even during the meal. She requires Gabriel to change his place, to make way for the socially superior Boldwood. We also see (a nice example of thick description) that the way they use their plates, turning them upside-down in order to have a clean surface for dessert, stands as a marker which distinguishes the labourers' 'folk ways' from Bathsheba's – or at least when she is acting as hostess. This method, handed down from their 'fathers before them', and good enough in their homely cottages, suddenly feels out of place to Gabriel as he sits at Bathsheba's 'top table' (153). By contrast, the pig-killing in *Jude the Obscure* is as harsh as the supper is comforting. Here too the scene is shaped to meet the needs of the novel, and its sense that the injustice of man to man, and of men and women to each other, is matched by the cruelty of humankind to animals. But it is also the case that Hardy provides the reader, all too graphically, with step-by-step instructions in how to starve, secure, singe and kill a pig in the preferred Wessex manner, as the blood splashes across the snow.<sup>466</sup>

Both the shearing supper and the pig-killing scene serve the purposes of the novels in which they appear. At the same time, they also illustrate how Hardy goes to great lengths to render as faithfully as possible the ways and customs of the different communities: as he put it in the General Preface to the 1912 edition, 'things were like that in Wessex.' Hardy's treatment of folk custom and belief follows the same

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<sup>466</sup> Hardy's own personal thick description of lived experience comes to mind here. Around the time of writing *Jude* he became involved in multiple animal protection societies and even offered the 'pig-killing scene' from *Jude* to be reprinted in the journal *The Animal's Friend*. These views did not keep him, however, from later claiming that one of his favourite foods was bacon, prepared the way his mother used to cook it. Even on his death bed, he asked for a rasher of bacon to be grilled on the open fire of his bedroom in Max Gate – in just the way his mother used to do in the living room of their family cottage. Millgate discusses this, and this folk way's appearance in *Under the Greenwood Tree* in *Biography Revisited*, p. 126, p. 244, and p. 531.

principles. Henchard's double role as corn merchant and mayor ensures that he must put bread on the tables of Casterbridge if he wants to survive in that town – the only world which has ever validated his true potential as more than an itinerant hay-trusser. It is with this sense of desperation that he reluctantly visits Conjuror Fall to ask about the harvest weather. Publicly, he would feel the need to deny seeking the conjuror's counsel. Even privately, he is uncertain; he can neither believe or not believe. When the thought occurs to him that his misfortunes may be caused by someone roasting a wax image of him, he rejects it: 'I don't believe in such power; and yet – what if they should ha' been doing it!' (177) On one level, the episode forms part of a pattern of wrong choices made by Henchard throughout the novel; the folklore element is made to fit into the theme of a self-destructive individualist. But it also allows Hardy to explore and probe what lies within the 'secret hearts' of the people of Wessex: information that Hardy as one who had grown up in the region could uncover, but which the collectors of the Folklore Society – doctors, lawyers, schoolmasters – might never find. His lifelong commitment to understanding the lived experience of Wessex men and women – Wessex folk,<sup>467</sup> as they might have called themselves – gave him access to deeper channels of thought and patterns of behaviour than friends like Edward Clodd or reviewers like George Saintsbury were ever likely to recognise. One of the convictions that shapes this thesis, then, is that Hardy gives us a fuller understanding of the nature and function of both the individual folk custom, and what (to adapt Raymond Williams's term) might be called the structures of feeling within which these individual customs exist and intersect: what people believed, how far they believed it, and how they represented these beliefs to themselves and others. A second conviction is that the study of other sources of information about folk custom and belief can enhance and enrich our reading of Hardy's novels.

*The Return of the Native* is the first novel in which Hardy engages seriously with folk belief. Christian Cantle's fearful comment that 'there's folks in heath who've been overlooked' is more than a comic instance of local colour – an outburst from the village idiot. It has its place in a continuum, in which numerous characters feel the power of what Foucault and Lacan have encouraged us to term the 'gaze'. Susan Nunsuch is persuaded that her son has been overlooked by Eustacia, and

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<sup>467</sup> And as Hardy himself called them, in the title written in the manuscript of 'A Few Crusted Characters': see Richard L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study*, ed. by Charles P. C. Pettit (Oak Knoll Press: The British Library, 2002), p. 84.

attacks her with a needle as if she were a witch; Mrs Yeobright tells her son that he has been ‘bewitched’ by Eustacia, and later she in turn is haunted by the memory of Eustacia’s face gazing at her from a window; when on her return journey from her attempt to see Clym she meets young Johnny Nunsuch, her ‘white face’ prompts him to ask ‘Have you seen an ooser?’ – the Dorset dialect name for a bogeyman. Johnny himself recalls how when looking for ‘effets’ (newts) ‘I seed myself looking at myself, and I was frightened’. When Clym cross-examines the boy, he shrinks ‘away from the gaze of his questioner’; later, when Clym has discovered Eustacia’s supposed part in his mother’s death, his eyes, ‘fixed steadily on blankness’ are ‘vaguely lit with an icy shine’.<sup>468</sup> When he parts with Eustacia, he refuses to look at her, even as they stand face to face. Meanwhile, Egdon Heath remains full of a ‘watchful intentness’, at times literally embodied in the form of Diggory Venn, hidden beneath its turves to spy on Wildeve and Eustacia. Throughout the novel, the power of the gaze – in Christian’s terms, ‘overlooking’ – resonates in the lives of all the major characters.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* it is a folk custom. Still prevalent in Victorian Dorset, rather than a folk belief that engages Hardy’s attention. Nance Mockridge first suggests the skimmington ride in chapter 36 of the novel; Lucetta’s death, in its aftermath, occurs at the end of chapter 40. On one level, it sets up opposing ideas of justice: official against popular, legal against carnivalesque, contained against unrestrained. In doing so, it picks up on questions of what can and cannot be judged or punished: Henchard’s sale of his wife and daughter, for example, or the sale of grown wheat. ‘But what are you going to do to repay us for the past?’, demands ‘a baker or a miller’ (36). The skimmington takes place in answer to a popular feeling that someone must ‘pay’, even if the courts and official systems cannot administer the collective need for rough justice. Lucetta is too naïve to anticipate that she might be a target for the disaffected and dispossessed of Mixen Lane; Henchard, already troubled by guilt at his past, understands instantly, in one of Hardy’s great sentences: ‘The lanterns, horns and multitude startled him; he saw the mounted images, and knew what it all meant’ (265). In the later stages of the novel, he enacts what the skimmington riders seek, when he decides to banish himself: ‘I – Cain – go alone as I

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<sup>468</sup> *The Return of the Native*, p. 312; for the 1912 edition Hardy added here a reference to the blind Oedipus, with a suggestion of punishment by the gods for a sin against his mother.

deserve – an outcast and a vagabond.’ (291) In tracing the movement from the folk custom of the skimmington ride, to Henchard’s self-judgement, Hardy is also exploring the shift from a social and external form of justice towards an internal self-discipline, in a way that Foucault would have recognised.

The attempt to put the study of folk belief and custom on a scientific footing was a significant part of Victorian culture. But for Hardy, whose early years had been spent among ‘the folk’, the subject was too important to be left to those whom in 1891 he ironically described to Edward Clodd (who was one of them) as ‘Loremongers’. Three years earlier, in his essay on ‘The Profitable Reading of Fiction’, he had distinguished between ‘views *about* life’, which were necessarily open to debate, and ‘representations of life’, which depended for their effect on ‘intuitive conviction’. The modern reader might still return to the ‘views about’ developed by anthropologists, cultural theorists, and the earnest members of the Folklore Society. But Hardy’s ‘representations’ of the ‘folk’ – their beliefs and customs, some on the verge of becoming extinct, others enduring with unexpected vigour – carry the conviction of ‘one who knew’.



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### Appendix: List of Illustrations

1. Bull's Heart Pierced with Nails and Thorns, Provenance: Somerset, 1892, Accession Number: 1917.53.600, with kind permission from the Pitt-Rivers Museum.
2. Toad Pierced with Thorns, Provenance: Somerset, 1892, Accession Number: 1917.53.601, with kind permission from the Pitt-Rivers Museum.
3. Onion Stuck with Pins (Tylor's Onion), Provenance: Somerset, 1891, Accession Number: 1917.53.776, with kind permission from the Pitt-Rivers Museum.
4. 'Hudibras Encounters the Skimmington' by William Hogarth, illustration to *Hudibras* by Samuel Butler, Recto, Plate 7, Etching and Engraving, British Museum, S.2.12.AN167992, with kind permission from the British Museum.
5. Montacute House Skimmington Frieze (detail one), with kind permission from Peter Clarkson, Open University.
6. Montacute House Skimmington Frieze (detail two), with kind permission from Peter Clarkson, Open University.
7. Montacute House Skimmington Frieze (full), with kind permission from Peter Clarkson, Open University.
8. 'Lucetta's eyes were straight upon the spectacle of the uncanny revel', by Robert Barnes, illustration to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (serial), *Graphic*, 1 May 1886, Issue 857, p. 477.
9. "You be the woman they call Mrs. Durbeyfield, I reckon?" he said to Tess's mother, who had remounted', by Daniel Albert Wehrschmidt, illustration to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (serial), *Graphic*, 12 December 1891, Issue 1150, p. 693.
10. May Day at Whitelands, 1889, with kind permission from Whitelands College Archive.
11. Jessie Hutton (May Queen) and Her Court, 1891, with kind permission from Whitelands College Archive.
12. May Day Procession, Date Unknown, with kind permission from Whitelands College Archive.

Fig. 1





Fig. 2



Fig. 3







Fig. 5





Fig. 6





Fig. 7



Fig. 8

MAY 1, 1886

THE GRAPHIC

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DRAWN BY ROBERT BARNES

"Lucetta's eyes were straight upon the spectacle of the uncanny revel."

## THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

By THOMAS HARDY,

Author of "Far from the Maddening Crowd," "A Pair of Blue Eyes," &amp;c., &amp;c.

### CHAPTER XXXIX.

WHEN Farfrae descended out of the loft, breathless from his encounter with Henchard, he paused at the bottom to recover himself. He smiled at the yard with the intention of putting the horse into the gig himself (all the men having a holiday), and driving to a village on the Budmouth Road. Despite the fearful struggle he decided still to persevere in his journey, so as to recover himself before going indoors and meeting the eyes of Lucetta. He wished to consider his course in a case so serious.

When he was just on the point of driving off Whittle arrived with a note, badly addressed, and bearing the word "immediate" upon the outside. On opening it he was surprised to see that it was assigned. It contained a brief request that he would go to Weatherbury that evening about some business which he was conducting there. Farfrae knew nothing that could make it pressing; but as he was bent upon going out he yielded to the anonymous request, particularly as he had a call to make at Mellstock which could be included in the same tour. Thereupon he told Whittle of his change of direction, in words which Henchard had overheard; and set out on his way. Farfrae had not directed his man to take the message indoors, and Whittle had not supposed to do so on his own responsibility.

Now the anonymous letter was the well-intentioned but clumsy

contrivance of Longways and other of Farfrae's men, to get him out of the way for the evening, in order that the satirical mummery should fall flat, if it were attempted. By giving open information they would have brought down upon their heads the vengeance of those among their comrades who enjoyed these boisterous old games; and therefore the plan of sending a letter recommended itself by its indirectness.

For poor Lucetta they took no protective measure, believing with the majority there was some truth in the scandal, which she would have to bear as she best might.

It was about eight o'clock, and Lucetta was sitting in the drawing-room alone. Night had set in for more than half-an-hour, but she had not had the candles lighted, for when Farfrae was away she preferred waiting for him by the firelight, and, if it were not too cold, keeping one of the window sashes a little way open that the sound of his wheels might reach her ears early. She was leaning back in her chair, in a more hopeful mood than she had enjoyed since her marriage. The day had been such a success; and the temporary uneasiness which Henchard's show of civility had wrought in her disappeared with the quiet disappearance of Henchard himself under her husband's reproof. The floating evidences of her void marriage with him had been destroyed, and she really seemed to have no cause for fear.

The reverie in which these and other subjects mingled was dis-

turbed by a hubbub in the distance, that increased moment by moment. It did not greatly surprise her, the afternoon having been given up to recreation by a majority of the populace since the passage of the Royal equipages. But her attention was at once riveted to the matter by the voice of a maid-servant next door, who spoke from an upper window across the street to some other maid even more elevated than she.

"Which way be they going now?" inquired the first with interest.

"I can't be sure for a moment," said the second, "because of the maller's chimbley. Oh, yes—I can see 'em. Well, I declare, I declare!"

"What, what?" from the first, more enthusiastically.

"They are coming up Corn Street after all! They sit back to back!"

"What—two of 'em—are there two figures?"

"Yes. Two images on a donkey, back to back, their elbows tied to one another's. She's facing the head, and he's facing the tail."

"Is it meant for anybody particular?"

"Well—it may be. The man 'as got on a blue coat and kersey-mere leggings; he has black whiskers, and a reddish face. 'Tis a stuffed figure, with a mask."

The din was increasing now—then it lessened a little.

"There—I shan't see, after all!" cried the disappointed first maid

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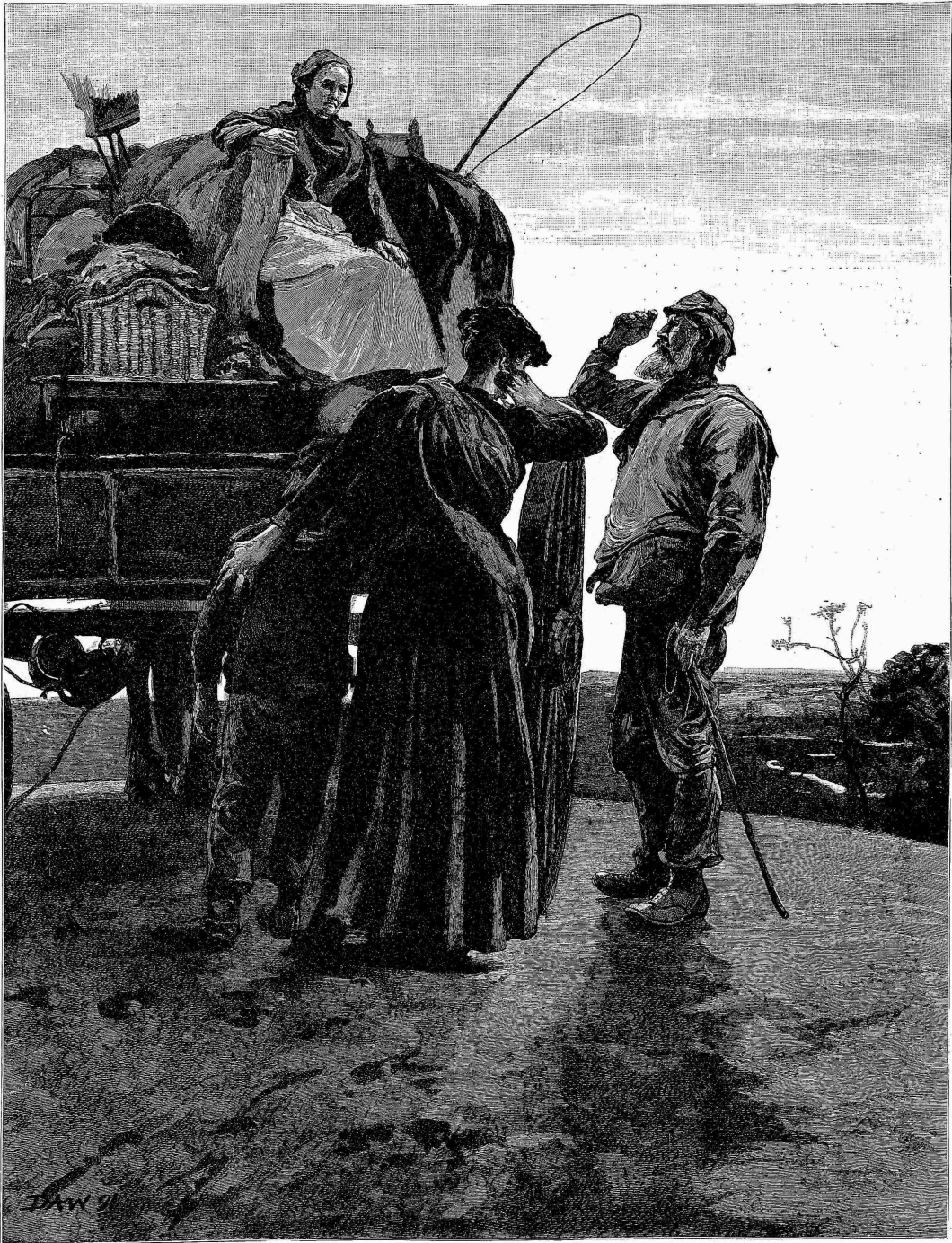
ILLUSTRATING MR. THOMAS HARDY'S STORY, "TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES"

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Fig. 9

THE GRAPHIC, DECEMBER 12, 1891

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“‘You be the woman they call Mrs. Durbeyfield, I reckon?’ he said to Tess’s mother, who had remounted.”  
 ILLUSTRATING MR. THOMAS HARDY’S STORY, “TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES”



Fig. 10





Fig. 11





Fig. 12

