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Nature's Rule over Self in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

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Various powers, like those of nature, fate, and men, rule over the heroine of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, her subjection to these powers culminating in the motif of her victimization. The motif of victimized Tess, in turn, through its recurrence and the polysemous usages of "nature," sets off both the multiplicity and the interrelations of those powers ruling over her.

In this article, firstly I will remark the linkage between the d'Urbervilles and the selfishness of nature, arguing that Tess's lineage is intended as an expression of nature's rule over her. Later, I will examine symbolical references to mistletoe noticed by Elliott B. Gose, Jr (159, 164). These references suggest Angel Clare's resemblance to Alec d'Urberville as rulers, and this resemblance of theirs most markedly shows Tess's subjection and victimization. Furthermore, men's rule over her is connected to the motif of Tess's sacrifice to the sun, which the narrator deems masculine. The sun, the universal source of life, is also equated to nature, which in turn is linked to fate, a synonym of nature in this novel.

The polysemous usages of "nature" in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can be criticized as ambiguity,[1] yet they interrelate themes of Tess's

subjection to various powers. One of the usages is nature as fate, as is seen in a resigned comment of Tess's mother, "Tis nater, after all" (64; ch. 12), which winds up her rebuke to Tess who returned home without marrying Alec. Such "fatalistic convictions" (159; ch. 32) as hers are also held to be "common to field-folk and those who associate more extensively with *natural* phenomena than with their fellow creatures" (emphasis added).

Capitalised as in "Nature's holy plan" (15; ch. 3), quoted from Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring," "Nature" also means the Creator. Likewise, with "Nature" meant as "the Creator," the narrator comments, "Nature does not often say 'See!' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing" (31; ch. 5). Also as the Goddess of Nature, "Nature" is dubbed "Dame Nature," as in the passage, "Yet such is the vulpine slyness of Dame Nature that till now Tess had been hoodwinked by her love for Clare into forgetting it might result in vitalizations that would inflict upon others what she had bewailed as a misfortune to herself" (191; ch 36). Etymologically connected with "birth," "Nature" as "the (feminine) Creator" and "Dame Nature" relates itself with the theme of being born into a hard life.

Nature's influence over Tess is antithetical, both aiding and agonizing her.[2] While nature gives strength to Tess in the rally from her first hardship, it tortures her, by its self-seeking urge, balking her self-abnegating intention, and, as fate, it never ends its sport with her until her death at the gallows. Such influence of nature over Tess can be thought as one form of the rules over "self" by the outside world,[3] and her tragedy lies in her victimization by those rules over her.

I

The beginning of *Tess of the d' Urbervilles* emphasizes both the pagan inclination and the ancient lineage of the heroine. Tess first appears in "club-walking," a relic of the ceremony in honor of Ceres, and at the beginning of the novel, her father, John, is informed of his lineage which can be directly traced back as far as Sir *Pagan* d'Urberville of the eleventh century.

In considering the meaning of Tess's lineage, what seems to be of great importance is a comment of Angel's on ancient families including the d'Urbervilles:

> I should have been glad to know you to be descended exclusively from the long-suffering, dumb, unrecorded rank and file of the English nation, and not from *the self-seeking few who made themselves powerful at the expense of the rest.* (emphasis added, 148; ch. 30)

As we will see later, nature urges self-abnegating Tess to act self-seekingly; selfishness is shown as an important trait of nature, and with this trait the d'Urbervilles are linked. The d'Urbervilles are also paganistic, and in this novel paganism is presented as closer to nature than Christianity is. Both selfishness and paganism of the d'Urbervilles connect them to the intensity of the power of nature. Angel also mentions the "fierce, domineering, feudal renown" (146; ch. 30) of the d'Urbervilles. Fierceness and domineering selfishness are common to the wild power of nature. Tess's murder of Alec can be thought as a flare-up of that fierceness attributed to the family. As

is seen in these connections between the family and nature, Tess's lineage is, it should be noted, intended as a symbolic expression of nature's rule over her.

Suggestion of paganism is also discernible in a passage which describes John who, "declining from his sitting position, luxuriously stretched himself out upon the bank among the daisies" (3-4; ch. 1). A daisy, etymologically the day's eye, is a symbol of heliolatry. Apprised that he has a heathen, aristocratic ancestor, John reposes among symbols of heliolatry. Or, the daisies crushed under his back may augur the fate of Tess, who will be likewise crushed under the unhappy series of events originating from the enlightenment about her lineage.

Prompted by whim, Parson Tringham says sir to John, which leads to John's questioning the parson of the reason. Having drunk too much, elated by the knowledge he has acquired, John cannot deliver beehives to the retailers in Casterbridge, so Tess and her brother do it instead. During this midnight errand, Tess passes "the little town of Stourcastle" (20; ch. 4). Earlier on the previous evening, when Angel was among dancing girls at Marlott, Felix, a brother of his, said to him, "Come along, or it will be dark before we get to Stourcastle, and there's no place we can sleep at nearer than that" (9; ch. 2), which suggests that Tess and Angel are at this moment of midnight experiencing their second proximity.

This second proximity unperceived by the two is not without meaning. Later when Tess is made to accept Alec as a lover in the Chase, the narrator comments that Tess's guardian angel, or the Providence of her simple faith, was, "like that other god of whom the

ironical Tishbite spoke," "sleeping and not to be awaked" (57; ch. 11). This phrase, which refers to Kings 18: 27 in which Elijah the Tishbite mocks the followers of Baal, a pagan god, is one of many passages which relate Tess with paganism. Much later, Tess paganisitically idolizes Angel, but here at the night of her disastrous errand, Tess's prospective idol is asleep and, without heeding the proximity and the fate which awaits her, lets her pass on to her ordeal.

When Tess herself is slumbering during the errand, the only horse of the family is killed by a traffic accident. Blaming herself for impoverishing her family, Tess allows her mother to send her to work for the d'Urbervilles in hope that a rich relative would marry her. But the d'Urberville family turns out to be a spurious one which arrogated the seemingly extinct name, and Alec, the young heir of the family, makes Tess his mistress. Loathing the situation, Tess leaves him about a month later, though she has already conceived his child.

By the sequence of diverse chances which originated in a whim of a parson, Tess is led to her destruction. Her voluntary choices are also made indeed, but they are made invariably in the way which brings about unwelcome results. So forcibly, the novel emphasizes the rule of fate, or the rule of nature as fate, over Tess.

For about two years since the death of her newborn child, Tess remains in Marlott, and then on "a thyme-scented, bird-hatching morning in May" (79; ch. 16), she leaves her home, this time, to work in a dairy which seems far enough to keep her past unknown. The "pulse of hopeful life still warm within her" (78; ch. 15) urges her to this new departure, and the midsummer ebullience of the power of life in the dairy's nature whips up the love between Tess and Angel, both

enrapturing and tormenting her.

II

Though their former experiences of proximity led to nothing, in Talbothays Dairy, Tess and Angel become attracted to each other. The passage, "Tess and Clare unconsciously studied each other, ever balanced on the edge of a passion, yet apparently keeping out of it. All the while they were converging, under an irresistible law, as surely as two streams in one vale" (101; ch. 20), illustrates how their conscious distancing is inevitably overwhelmed by their mutual, unconscious attraction. That this attraction is generated by the power of nature is most forcibly emphasized in the often analyzed scene in which Tess secretly approaches Angel who are playing the harp amid flying pollen (96-97; ch. 16).

Even more noteworthy is the scene of Angel's first embrace of Tess, which followed his gaze on her lips (117-18; ch. 24). Being aware of their class disparity, Angel has been hesitating to go forward in the relation with Tess. Yet his desire stirred by her physical charm overrides his sober judgment. Only from this incident of his sudden embrace, did ensue the avowal of his love to Tess and his courtship. Though Tony Tanner, appropriately enough, takes notice of the spiritual trait of Angel's love (133, 135), it would be wrong to ignore its corporealness. As was the case in her relation with Alec, Tess enthralls Angel by the physical magnetism with which she is endowed by nature.

The power of nature is also emphasized in the descriptions of the vehement passion on Tess's side. The famous passage, "they writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by

cruel Nature's law — an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired" (115; ch. 23), well expresses the forcible power of nature which even homogenizes individual women into the archetypal woman. Yet, in stark contrast to this passage which denotes the individuality-erasing power of nature, a short speech of Tess in the scene of the dairy folks' search for a garlic shows the power of nature which engenders self-seekingness. At a time during this toilsome search, Tess tries to call Angel's attention to the prettiness of other dairymaids who she thinks are worthier to be loved by him on account of their spotless past. Yet when Angel instantly acknowledges their prettiness, Tess says, devaluing what she tried to commend, "Though, poor dears—prettiness won't last long" (110; ch. 22). Though the narrator does not comment on it, this speech illustrates how the power of nature frustrates Tess's altruistic strivings.

Overwhelmed by nature, Tess marries Angel, without confessing to him her past with Alec, and afterwards Angel severely chastises her for that secrecy. Yet the depth of her agony over the secrecy attests to the sincere altruism of her intention, which Hardy seems to defend with the novel's subtitle, "A Pure Woman." Likening Tess to a wild animal living in nature, the narrator attributes the cause of her secrecy to her instinct, "her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour" (148; ch. 30). The narrator also names the drive which balked Tess's altruistic intention "the appetite for joy" (quoted from Robert Browning's *Paracelsus*, as Tim Dolin notes, 435) and justifies her acceptance of Angel's marriage proposal:

> The "appetite for joy," which pervades all creation; that

> tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose, as the tide sways the helpless weed, was not to be controlled by vague lucubrations over the social rubric. (149; ch. 30)

Though the novel forcefully depicts the utmost eagerness of Tess's self-abnegating intention, it also depicts that even those strivings of hers are irresistibly swept away by the torrent of nature's power. So helplessly is Tess subjected to nature, and, furthermore, a series of untoward happenings, such as the carpet of Angel's room hiding Tess's letter of confession, makes us see her equally helpless subjection to fate.

III

It was the news of the attempted suicide of one dairymaid, another instance of the untoward happenings, that made Tess resolve to confess her past to Angel, though otherwise she might have kept quiet about it. From her confession on the wedding night, estrangement ensues, and during Angel's absence, Tess becomes Alec's mistress on account of her family's destitution. When, a couple of months too late, Angel returns from Brazil, Tess murders Alec and after a short life on the run with Angel, she is arrested at Stonehenge, to be put to death by hanging.

In this series of events after Tess's marriage too, fate forcibly rules over her, with small accidents and ever-untoward decisions successively driving her into further straits. Describing these ordeals of Tess's, the narrator emphasizes her intended faithfulness to Angel, though in achievements she is forced to become faithless. Yet her

devotion to Angel, while it reflects her deep affection to him and seems to be approvingly described as her "purity," is also set in the framework of the men's dominance over her. Not only by nature and fate but also by men, Tess is direly dominated and, in descriptions of that masculine dominance, references to mistletoe are noteworthy.

Some of these references were first noticed by Elliott B. Gose, Jr. As he analyzes them, of crucial importance in those references is the connection between mistletoe and Druidical rites of sacrifice, which were performed under an oak parasitized by mistletoe. The proceedings of those rites are minutely described in the chapter 95, volume 16 of Pliny's *Natural History*. As Pliny stated there, the word "druid" contains, etymologically, "the oak" in it; so important in the Druidism was the oak upon which mistletoe grew.

Though Pliny may not be the direct source of Hardy's knowledge of it, that he knew it is quite certain, as is seen in his using the phrase "Druidical mistletoe" in the description of the Chase, the primeval forest far behind Alec's mansion:

> (. . .) one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primæval date, wherein Druidical mistletoe was still found on aged oaks, and where enormous yew-trees, not planted by the hand of man, grew as they had grown when they were pollarded for bows. (26; ch. 5)

As Gose remarks, it is in the Chase that Tess is forced to have, or reluctantly accepts, the physical relationship with Alec, and, though mistletoe is not mentioned in the scene, the narrator's paired reference

there to both oaks and yews — "Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase" (57; ch. 11) — strongly connects this scene with "Druidical mistletoe." A similar reference to oaks and yews is also to be remarked in the description of the prison where Tess is executed: "It was somewhat disguised from the road in passing it by yews and evergreen oaks, but it was visible enough up here" (314; ch. 59). Oaks may happen to grow in many places, but the reference to them coupled with yews suggests a symbolic connection between the oaks at the site of Tess's execution and those of the Chase parasitized by "Druidical mistletoe."[4]

Both Tess's death at the gallows and the beginning of her intercourse with Alec are thus symbolically identified as her sacrifice and victimization. Tess's arrest at Stonehenge, a heliolatrous site where sacrifice is supposed to have been made, and the narrator's comment on her execution, "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess" (314; Ch. 59) express, more evidently, the theme of Tess as a sacrifice to gods and a victim of their sportive torment. References to oaks and mistletoe are less perceivable, but equally significant, expressions of that theme.

Another important reference to mistletoe is an episode of Angel's hanging one to the tester of their nuptial bed in the Wellbridge farm-house. Though, as Gose remarks, their marriage is not consummated on the bed, the mistletoe hung there symbolically denotes the similarity between Alec and Angel as Tess's victimizers. In hanging the bough of mistletoe in "his zest and his gaiety" (183; ch. 35), Angel seems to think only of the custom at Christmas when a man may kiss a woman under mistletoe. But the mistletoe he hung suggests that,

even for him, the beginning of physical relationship with a woman signifies the establishment of his possession of her as it signifies for Alec, who is much more blatantly possessive and domineering.

The symbolical significance of this mistletoe over the bed is further enforced by other episodes. It is under the mistletoe, as is confessed to Angel, that Tess thinks of committing suicide, which, if actually committed, would be verily a sacrificial death. Later, when he revisits the Wellbridge farm-house to adjust its rent, he momentarily feels that he was too harsh toward Tess, and significantly it is at the moment he takes away the mistletoe that he regrets his attitude to her for the first time. The mistletoe is thus again connected to Angel's cruelty to Tess.

The narrator comments on Angel's harsh attitude toward Tess: "With all his attempted independence of judgment," he "was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings" (208; ch. 39). The conventional thought to which he is enslaved may be summarized that women should not lose their virginity until their marriage. Yet by the recurrent references to mistletoe, the novel denounces the notion, which lies at the bottom of Angel's conventional thought, that a woman is possessed by a man through the establishment of their physical relationship.

Only by understanding this notion of Angel's, can we see what is behind his despair which is deepened on hearing from Tess that Alec is still alive:

> "Is he living?" Angel then asked.
> "The baby died."

> "But the man?"
> "He is alive."
> A last despair passed over Clare's face. (186; ch. 36)

Unconsciously Angel is entrapped by the notion that a woman who had sexual relation with a man in the past remains his possession, precluding any other man from possessing her as long as the first possessor is alive. It is not only due to the shock of knowing that Tess is not a virgin that Angel despairingly deserts her, but also due to his conformity to the code in behaviour, or the norm, which that notion enforces.

While Tess is thus victimized by those who conform to that code, the depth of her tragedy is further emphasized by her own conformity to it when Angel returns from Brazil. Noteworthily, she asks him to go away and never to come any more, and only after murdering Alec, she tries to join up with him. Her speech to Angel, "I thought as I ran along that you would be sure to forgive me now I have done that" (303; ch. 57), also presupposes that Alec's death will enable her to be possessed by Angel.

Tess's murder can be thought of partly as a flare-up of the fierceness of the d'Urbervilles, or partly as evidence of her strong affection to Angel. Yet its essence is her conformity to the code which endorses men's possession of women. Firstly "possessed" by Alec, and secondly repulsed by Angel on account of the existence of the first "possessor," Tess has been doubly tormented by the notion of men as possessors of women. Even her long-wished-for union with Angel is achieved only by her conformity to that notion, which costs her her own life.

Tess could have followed Angel without murdering Alec and might have been accepted by him, but that was not her choice. Her murder reveals that her union with Angel is, despite the intense happiness it gives her, nothing but a pitiable transition from under the dominance of Alec to that of Angel. Tess's tragedy lies not only in her death, but also in her inability to act against the norm of masculine dominance. The novel thus depicts how Tess is victimized not only by those two male characters but also by that norm which binds both the men and herself.

IV

Angel's resemblance to Alec and his figure as a victimizer are rather subtly expressed, yet Alec as a victimizer is much more clearly verbalized. Referring to Tess's quick, resolute breaking away from him, he uses the word "victim" for her: "so there is one victim in the world for whom I had no contempt, and you are she" (ch. 46).[5] Tess also refers to herself as his victim in two passages: "Once victim, always victim: that's the law" (261; ch. 47); "O, you have torn my life all to pieces . . . made me a victim, a caged bird!" (ch. 56).[6]

Tess's sacrificial victimization and men's dominance over her are also expressed by the motif of Alec's mastery over her. His first kiss on her is called "the kiss of mastery" (40; ch. 8), and when she lets him kiss on her way to Marlott, she says, "See how you've mastered me!" (60; ch. 12). When they happen to meet after he begins preaching, his "bold rolling" eyes are said to have "flashed upon her form in the old time with such mastery" (239; ch. 45). Or, after quitting preaching, he says to her, "Remember, my lady, I was your master once; I will be

your master again" (261; ch. 47).

Even Farmer Groby at Flintcomb-Ash boasts of his mastery over Tess: "we'll see which is master here" (228; ch. 43). Unlike Alec, he does not make advances to her, yet it is at his farm that she engages in the hardest work during Angel's absence. The farmer's boast of his mastery over her denotes that the essence of Tess's hardship lies in her subjection to some mastering power.

On the surface, Tess's first hardship, her succumbing to Alec, seems to be his violation of her virginity, yet the novel shows that the true hardship of that experience of Tess's is her sacrifice, victimization by men and her subjection to men's rulership. The novel also shows that Tess's second hardship, the sudden change of Angel's attitude to her, has as its basis the notion of men as possessors of women. For such subtle expressions of the depth of men's dominance over women, *Tess of the d' Urbervilles* is remarkable.

Yet, at the same time, it should be noted that the novel shows Tess's devotion to Angel in rather too attractive a light. The novel's various expressions of Tess's deep affection toward Angel verge on idealization of women's meek attitude to men. Or the narrator repeatedly states that women are more closely related to nature, as in a passage: "women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematized religion taught their race at later date" (81; ch. 16). Though such statements idealize women in contrast to the artificial, conventional men, there seems to be some problematic similarity between those statements and the misogynic thought in the fin-de-ciècle art and literature which,

as Bram Dijkstra remarks in *Idols of Perversity*, despises and abhors women as inferior, atavistic beings.

The novel's emphases on Tess's submissiveness and her closeness to nature are thus problematic, yet those emphases are not simple praise or approval. Instead they denote that Tess's tragedy lies in her excessive submission to men, and her closeness to nature is a part of the theme of nature's dominance over her, which, together with the theme of men's dominance, is within the framework of the theme of the rule of various powers over Tess.

V

"Theresa," a variant of "Teresa," the unabridged form of "Tess," derives from Greek, "therizo" (to reap), as Hideo Adachi remarks to corroborate Tess's symbolical connection with Ceres (65, 161). This etymological connotation of "Tess" is also related to the recurrent motif of reaping. As if in accord with the proverb, "As a man sows, so shall he reap," Tess has to pay for her concealment of her past with Alec from Angel, though it is Angel who is to blame for her ensuing hardship, and she also pays by her own life for her murder of Alec. Or, like Death with his scythe, she reaps Alec's life, and she in turn has her life reaped.

When Tess is described as an agricultural labourer, she is more a reaper than a sower. At Flintcomb-Ash she harvests turnips and threshes wheat, and the first job after her childbirth is also to assist in harvest. These emphases on her name's etymological connotation through the motif of her reaping also throw into relief her symbolical connection with Ceres.

Though Ceres is a goddess, here I would like to note the narrator's comment which deems the sun in heliolatry to be a god. Before the scene of Tess's first job after her childbirth, the narrator comments on the rising sun: "The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious, sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression" (67; ch. 14). This especial emphasis of the narrator's on the masculinity of the worshipped sun symbolically connects Tess's sacrifice to the sun at Stonehenge with her victimization by men, Alec and Angel.

As the sun is the source of all life, it can be the symbol of the power of nature, which, etymologically, also derives from "giving birth." It should be noted here that a life giver is, for Tess, far from the object of gratitude. As is repeatedly described, Tess loathes her birth into this world, and her murder of Alec can be conceived as a suicidal revolt against the harshness of the world into which she was born. On account of their essential function as life givers, too, the sun and nature are both oppressors for Tess.

*

Tess's murder of Alec should be thought as a kind of revolt, yet it is so apparently suicidal that it even resembles a resigned acquiescence. In a passage which describes her submission to Angel, the narrator refers to "that reckless acquiescence in chance too apparent in the whole d'Urberville family" (199; ch. 37). Besides the pagan inclination and the fierce selfishness, Tess's d'Urbervilles lineage also emphasizes her submission to fate.

Yet though Tess suffers under the oppression from nature, fate,

and men, nature is not simply an oppressive power for Tess. Nature in this novel is also the ground for Tess's vindication, as is seen in a comment of the narrator on her conception of Alec's child: "She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (67; ch. 13). For the full appreciation of this passage, we must suppose another meaning of Tess's intercourse with Alec, which is antithetical to his victimization of her, that is, a female's enticing and accepting a male.

About Tess's first intercourse with Alec, it is not clearly described whether it resulted from Alec's physical violence on Tess, or her resigned acceptance of him. Alec's trick of giving a soporific to her in the serialized version is discarded later. This introduction of vagueness to the description of that first intercourse seems to be intended to give room for the two antithetical meanings. Irrespective of her intention, Tess's extraordinary sexual attractiveness draws Alec to her, and her becoming his mistress is, though it may be deemed immoral in "an accepted social law," nothing but a female's *natural* acceptance of a male. It is at least partly because she is a personification of the workings of nature that Tess is vindicated as "A Pure Woman" in the novel's subtitle.

Antithetically again, Tess is also vindicated on account of her resistance to the workings of nature, which, as "the appetite for joy" (149; ch. 30), urged her to accept Angel's marriage proposal. She resisted also her fate, which successively inflicted untoward happenings and forced her to become Alec's mistress again. Though she failed in both attempts at resistance, the novel emphasizes the importance of intention, instead of achievements.

Nature, fate, and men all inordinately racks Tess, and verily because of those powers which rule over her, what she seeks to achieve is of more importance in judging her than what she is forced to do. While the novel deprecates conventional morality and exalts nature as the appropriate criterion, it also depicts the devastating power of nature, which even calls forth a sheer criminality, making Tess a murderess. Tess as a victim is an expression of the strength of the rules of outside powers over one's "self," and also its tragic figure which suffers under those powers.

Notes

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** Some of the ideas in this paper are based on those in my presentation at the 59th general meeting of The Kyushu Branch of The English Literary Society of Japan, in October 2006.

1. For a comment on the ambiguity of "nature" in this novel, see Gregor 175-77.
2. For other discussions on the antithetical aspects of nature's influence on Tess, see Tanner 141 and Lodge 151-52.
3. For a discussion from the point of view of separateness, rather than subjectivity to outside powers, of selves, see Pettit 172-90.
4. I owe this remark on the "yews and evergreen oaks" at the prison to Hiromi Harada, an undergraduate student of my seminar on *Tess of the d' Urbervilles* in the spring of 2006.
5. It is in the first edition that the word "victim" is used here. Later Hardy substituted "petticoat" for it. See Dolin 323 and Hardy 253.
6. This quotation is from the first edition. Later Hardy changed the latter part of this passage to "made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again!"

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