

**AN EXPERIMENT IN TRAGIC FORM: ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
RITUAL AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION  
IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES***

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**ABSTRACT**

“Sacred Spaces: Anthropological Ritual and Symbolic Representation in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*,” draws parallels between *Tess* and J.G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which Hardy discussed with Edward Clodd in 1890 and began reading in 1891. Like many of Frazer’s early and enthusiastic readers, Hardy was familiar from the mid 1870’s with such anthropological concepts as “survivals,” “animism,” “fetishism,” “solar myth,” and “vegetation spirit.” By the 1890’s, however, the traditional agricultural community with its long held customs based on direct contact with nature’s seasonal cycles – the culture defined by Hardy in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, for example – was rapidly disappearing, and references to primitive ritual no longer had a collective meaning in “modernized” Wessex. *The Golden Bough*, however, in revealing the psychological potency in the symbolic structure in primitive ritual, would point not only Hardy but a generation of writers in a new direction. Frazer supplied ethnography with a compelling narrative: a community, in order to ensure its survival, makes the ritual sacrifice of one of its highly positioned individuals at a designated time and place and participates in the guilt and benefits of that sacrifice.

If Frazer suggested the dramatic and narrative possibilities of primitive ritual and custom, Hardy’s 1890 reading of J.A. Symonds’s recently published *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* encouraged his experimentation with their symbolic employment in fiction. Together, Frazer and Symonds suggest the possibility of a fiction both realistic and tragic. Hardy would tell the story of rural Wessex’s decline as the struggle and sacrificial death of one of its ideal members, the symbolic representations of primitive Britain emotionally heightening an inherently tragic plot. Throughout the novel, a series of scenes – the May dance, the death of Prince, the Chase seduction/rape, the wedding mistletoe, the monolithic Cross-in-Hand, the novel’s powerful climax at Stonehenge, and Tess’s execution by hanging – establish a symbolic connection between Druid ritual and Tess as a sacrificial and tragic figure.

When Frazer begins by telling the story of the King of the Wood at Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that something strange and terrible is happening here. And that is the answer to the question “why is this happening?” Because it is terrible.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*

**I**

**Hardy, Frazer, Symonds**

On 4 July, 1891, the first of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*’s twenty-six weekly installments made its appearance in the *Graphic*. Three days later, Hardy recorded the following item in his literary journal: “*The Golden Bough*. J.G.Frazer, M.A. vol.I. This is a work on primitive superstitions & religion” (*Literary Notes*, vol. II, 45). Although his initial reaction was that Frazer may have “pushed the theory of the G. Bough too far,” further journal entries show that he was soon examining the book in some detail. By August 1891, when he began revising the serial manuscript of *Tess* for December book publication, Hardy’s written comments contain numerous descriptions and a careful summarizing of Frazer’s argument:

In the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis or Diana of the wood, near the town of Arica (the modern Aricia) grew a certain tree round which a strange figure prowled, drawn sword in hand. He was a priest and murderer. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed by slaying him, and having slain him, he held office till he was himself slain. (*LN* vol. II, 45)

Other journal entries, also drawn from *The Golden Bough* and recorded over the following weeks, comment on tree worship, sympathetic magic, inspiration by blood drinking (“blood of a lamb,” Hardy notes), May kings and queens, human sacrifices and eating taboos. In addition to citing numerous exotic customs, Hardy frequently referenced local Dorset folklore and beliefs that corresponded to those mentioned by Frazer:

-- - Instances of soul-absence (like the belief about Melbury Osmund & C. in Dorset) 125-8. (evidently the same superstition out of which I constructed the story about the “Miller’s soul” in *Life’s Little Ironies*).

-- - Cuttings of hair & nails prevented falling into enemy’s hand – cf. Dorset, about burning a drawn tooth. (*LN* vol. II, 45)

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While Hardy's fortuitous encounter with *The Golden Bough* in July of 1891 influenced a number of key revisions in the *Tess* manuscript, it is important to emphasize that he brought to his reading a mind already informed by Tylor and Lang, Müller and Pater.<sup>1</sup> His lifelong interest in myth, custom, and folklore had been rekindled the previous summer by his meeting and subsequent friendship with Edward Clodd, soon-to-be president of the British Folk-Lore Society. A banker by profession, Clodd was also a leading rationalist, writer on popular science and anthropology, and, in 1890, one of the most fervent champions of Frazer's new book. Like Hardy, Clodd was self-educated, with progressive views on a broad range of scholarly pursuits. The two corresponded frequently in the early 1890's on matters of folklore, anthropology, comparative religion, and ethics<sup>2</sup>. A gregarious and generous man, he introduced Hardy to The Golden Bough and to a growing cadre of scientific and literary men, including Frazer, who regularly gathered at Aldeburgh, his Suffolk home.<sup>3</sup>

Like many other early and enthusiastic readers of *The Golden Bough*, Hardy was already familiar with such anthropological concepts as "survivals," "animism," "fetishism," "solar myth," and "vegetation spirit." He was also knowledgeable about the myths and rituals Frazer had cited from classical and Celtic sources, and had previously drawn on much of this same material in writing *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*. By the 1890's, however, the traditional agricultural community, with its long held customs based on direct contact with nature's seasonal cycles, was rapidly disappearing. The references to primitive ritual and custom – the winter bonfires, mummer's plays, maypoles, and saturnalia that still structure village life in *Return* – no longer have a collective meaning in an increasingly standardized and no longer

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<sup>1</sup> These revisions occur mainly in Chapters Ten and Eleven, the Tantridge dance scene and Tess's subsequent rape in The Chase. See J.T. Laird, *The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hardy's journal entry for Dec. 18, 1890. "Mr. E. Clodd this morning gives an excellent neat answer to my question why the superstitions of a remote Asiatic and a Dorset labourer are the same – "The attitude of man," he says, "at corresponding levels of culture, before like phenomena, is pretty much the same, your Dorset peasants representing the persistence of the barbaric idea which confuses persons and things, and finds wide generalizations on the slenderest analogies" (LW 241).

<sup>3</sup> Millgate dates Hardy's initial visit to Aldeburgh in June, 1891. He also notes that "Hardy's exchanges with Clodd, always eager in the pursuit of new ideas, may have done something to influence the direction of his reading that summer" (Millgate 315).

"local in feeling or manner" Wessex first described by Hardy in 1883's "The Dorsetshire Labourer" (*Public Voice* 50). In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy had used the mythic elements of Dorset folklore to suggest still living connections to the roots of a mythopoetic culture. What relevance, one could ask, could such now forgotten practices have in the face of traditional culture's rapid decline? Frazer's work would point not only Hardy, but a literary generation, in a new direction.<sup>4</sup>

Hardy, then, was one in a generation, not only of British folklore enthusiasts but also of writers and psychologists, influenced by Frazer to think about myth, ritual, and classical literature in a new light. His initial July 7 journal entry – "...a strange figure prowled, sword in hand. He was a priest and murderer..." -- offers one clue to the impact *The Golden Bough* had, especially on literary men like himself. For one thing, unlike Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, it told a story, cobbling massive amounts of ethnographic evidence into a compelling and dramatic narrative. Frazer himself was aware of this important aspect of his work. "I have given the book a certain dramatic feel," he wrote to his publisher when Macmillan had asked for a summary to appear in The Athenaeum:

I find it very difficult to state summarily the gist of the book without disclosing what I may call the plot...Hence I do not wish to announce the result beforehand, and for the same reason I have refrained from giving a full table of contents. To have done so would have been a mistake, it seemed to me, like the mistake of a novelist who should prefix a summary of the plot to his novel. (quoted in Fraser, *Making* 54)

"*The Golden Bough*," writes Robert Fraser, "is a novel of the intellect; suspense is of its essence" (*Making* 54).

The narrative, first articulated by Frazer in 1890 and elaborated through successive editions, was a compelling one: a community, in order to insure its survival, makes the ritual sacrifice of one of its highly positioned individuals at a designated time and place and participates in the guilt and benefits of that sacrifice. Frazer's priest of the grove, whom Hardy had mentioned in his notes,

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended study of *The Golden Bough*'s influence on modernist literature, see John Vickery's 1973 *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough*.

embodied the spirit of the wood. His function was to control fertility, and, in accordance with the principle of homeopathy (“like produces like”), he is the bridegroom of the female spirit, this “sacred marriage” causing the growth of vegetation. Although taboos exist to prevent damage to the priestly king’s potency, when he begins to weaken, he must be killed so that his power might be passed on undiminished to another – a symbolic sacrificial death and resurrection. For Frazer, primitive cultures

... pictured to themselves the changes of the seasons, and particularly the annual growth and decay of vegetation, as episodes in the life of gods, whose mournful death and happy resurrection they celebrated with dramatic rites of alternate lamentation and rejoicing. But if the celebration was in form dramatic, it was in substance magical; that is to say, it was intended on the principles of sympathetic magic, to ensure the vernal regeneration of plants and the multiplication of animals, which seemed to be menaced by the inroads of winter. (448)

Accompanying the old king’s death is the expulsion of all harmful influences threatening the community, now concentrated in the form of a scapegoat to be driven away. In addition, the spirit of fertility may be seen as actually dwelling in the grain – the corn-maiden or corn-mother symbolically killed at harvest time and resurrected in the spring.<sup>5</sup>

If *The Golden Bough* suggested the dramatic and narrative possibilities of primitive ritual and custom, another book Hardy read that summer would encourage him to experiment with their symbolic employment in his fiction. Again at Clodd’s recommendation, Hardy began reading John Addington Symonds’s recently published *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*.<sup>6</sup> “Myths,” Symonds wrote, “by reason of their symbolic pregnancy and spontaneity of origin, are everlastingly elastic,” and the modern artist was right “to employ the legends of past ages for the expression of thoughts and emotions belonging to the present.” When coupled with “true imaginative insight,” Symonds concluded, “there is no cause to fear lest the strain of modern adaptation should destroy their antique form” (313). Another passage from the same Symonds

<sup>5</sup> This summary is drawn from the account of *The Golden Bough* given by Robert Ackerman (52-53).

<sup>6</sup> See Millgate’s discussion of Clodd’s influence on Hardy’s 1890-91 reading (315).

text and copied out by Hardy verbatim into his notebook, also suggests the psychological power of the mythic symbol:

The range of human thoughts and emotions greatly transcends the range of such symbols as may be invented to express them and it becomes, therefore, the business of Art to use these symbols in a double way. They must be used for direct representation of thought and feeling, but they must also be combined by so subtle an imagination as to suggest much which there is no means of directly expressing. (*LN* II,43)

Frazer’s universal and systematic compilation of myth into a dramatic narrative structure, and Symonds’s assertion that the “symbolic pregnancy” of past legends could expressively reinforce modern thoughts and emotions both help shape *Tess*’s final form. Frazer reveals an inherently tragic plot embedded in ritual customs that date to prehistoric Britain; Symonds praises the emotional power released in their symbolic representation. Together they suggest the possibility of a fiction both realistic and tragic. Beyond the rural sociology of “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” Hardy would tell the story of rural and traditional Wessex’s decline as the struggle and sacrificial death of one of its ideal members, the symbolic representations of primitive Britain emotionally heightening a modern tragic plot.<sup>7</sup>

Like *The Return of the Native*, *Tess* opens almost immediately with the communal enactment of traditional ritual – the May-Day dance of the Marlott walking club. Hardy himself had witnessed the ceremony in 1877 at Marnhull (the Marlott of *Tess*) while gathering folklore in preparation for writing the *Return*. “The pretty girls, just before the dance, stand in inviting positions on the grass” he observed. “As the couples in each figure pass near where their immediate friends loiter, each girl-partner gives a laughing glance at such friends, and whirls on” (*LW* 118-19).

<sup>7</sup> Many critics have noted Hardy’s use of landscape to heighten emotion, “defining a mood without ever mentioning it,” in Alvarez’s phrase (16). For Dorothy Van Ghent, “*Tess* has a wrought density of texture” in which “symbolic depth is communicated by the physical structure of things.” Jeanette King notes that Hardy “relies on the unspecified, but often archetypal associations conjured up by symbols” (61). These symbols, I will claim, are anthropologically based in the connections drawn by Tylor, Frazer and others between myth and primitive ritual.

As were the folk customs in the earlier novel, the village May dance ritual is clearly defined in Tylor's terms as a "survival" from "Old Style days – days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average" (*Tess* 49). Although the ceremony is, like the Guy Fawkes fires, a survival, the landscape itself, unlike the *Return's* Egdon, is also a survival. While Egdon Heath is timeless and immortal, the Vale of Blackmoor, "within a four hours journey from London," reveals only hints of a darkly wooded prehistory:

... till comparatively recent times, the country was densely wooded. Even now, traces of its earlier condition are to be found in the old oak copses and irregular belts of timber that yet survive upon its slopes, and the hollow trunked trees that shade so many of its pastures. (*Tess* 49)

Frazer had made a similar contrast between Britain's forested past and present May survivals in *The Golden Bough*. "In the England of today," he explains, "the forests have mostly disappeared, yet still on many a village green and in many a country lane a faded image of the sacred marriage lingers in the rustic pageantry of May Day" (175). Hardy's early emphasis on the disappearance of all but traces of the ancient forests, however, signals a major shift from the traditional world of the *Return*. The world of *Tess* is a world largely cut off from its past, and while the symbolic residues of primitive ritual remain, this May dance is the last -- and only -- community enactment of a traditional ceremony in the novel.

For Hardy, the Vale of Blackmoor's primitive past is symbolically identified with the surviving remnants of its ancient oak forests – the same forests that are central to Frazer's argument in *The Golden Bough*. Drawing largely from Pliny and other ancient historians, Frazer had deduced that the worship of the oak tree or of an oak god had been common throughout prehistoric Europe. "The Druids," he wrote, "esteemed nothing more than the mistletoe and the oak on which it grew; they chose groves of oaks for the scene of their solemn service, and they performed none of their rites without oak leaves ... The very name of Druids is believed by good authorities to mean no more than 'oak men'" (185-86). Frazer's King of the Wood is a tree spirit, an anthropomorphic representation of the sacred oak, and the Marlott May dance, which Hardy names "a local Cerealia" (*Tess* 49), a survival of the primitive

ritual reenacting the sacred marriage to ensure fertility and the continuation of the community.<sup>8</sup> Even the willow wands and flowers carried by Tess and the others are survivals from Druidical practices meant to ensure fertility and ease of childbirth (Frazer 147). "The names May, Father May, May Lady, Queen of May, by which the anthropomorphic spirit of vegetation is often denoted," Frazer notes, "show that the idea of the spirit of vegetation is blent with a personification of the season at which his powers are most strikingly manifested" (147).<sup>9</sup>

At the center of the May rites is the "sacred marriage" of the vegetation spirits, anthropomorphized as the King and Queen of May. *The Golden Bough* describes numerous ceremonies exhibiting strong parallels to the Marlott dance, with "girls dressed in white and wearing the first spring flowers, as violets and daisies, in their hair, [who] led about the village a girl who is called the Queen and is crowned with flowers.... None of the girls may stand still, but must keep whirling around continually and singing" (151). If Queens of May are typically sexually desirable, virginal yet potentially fecund, and of elevated community standing, Tess would seem an ideal choice. A "fine and handsome girl," as yet "untinctured by experience" with "large innocent eyes" (*Tess* 51), she is also descended from a noble line – the D'Urbervilles. That she is not chosen by Angel immediately establishes the declining potency of traditional Wessex and its ritual survivals:

He [Angel] took almost the first that came to hand, which was not the speaker, as she had expected; nor did it happen to be Tess Durbeyfield. Pedigree, ancestral skeletons, monumental record, the d'Urberville lineaments, did not help Tess in her life's battle as yet, even to the extent of attracting to her a dancing partner over the heads of the commonest peasantry. So much for Norman blood unaided by Victorian lucre. (*Tess* 54)

The Marlott May dance is a survival in two analogous yet distinct ways. First, the ceremony is a piece of traditional Wessex coexistent with, if no longer functioning in, modernity. Historically doomed, its fate is tied to a rapidly disappearing population. Less than twelve hours after she and Angel fail to

<sup>8</sup> The word "Cerealia," was substituted for "Vestal," which appeared in an earlier draft of the novel. For a discussion of Hardy's substitution as a response to Frazer, see Gallagher (427).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Lang, in the February 1892 *New Review*, was the first to praise Hardy's "exquisite" anthropological study of the May dance ritual, which he compares to the rites of Demeter, the Thesmophoria (Clarke I 188).

connect as partners on the village green, the death of the Durbeyfield horse, Prince, begins for Tess a series of calamitous events that will uproot her from the familiar Wessex Hardy had been exploring for two decades and render her essentially itinerant and homeless, a forced exile not just spatial but epistemological. For Tess, leaving the Vale of Blackmoor means leaving the traditional world of “old association,” in which “every contour of the surrounding hills was as personal to her as that of her relatives’ faces,” for a standardized modernity where she finds herself “dependent on the teaching of the village school” (*Tess* 75). Thus, while Tess, more than any other of Hardy’s characters, gives shape to Wessex as a continuous space, her wanderings are always an exile’s desperate attempts at assimilation.<sup>10</sup> This state of being native, rural, and traditional, yet nevertheless alienated from both living community and past traditions characterizes Tess and contemporary Wessex itself. Hardy had described such a condition sociologically in “The Dorsetshire Labourer ” and would elaborate on it more forcefully in the Preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, written a few years after *Tess* (or, more significantly, after the Wessex novels as a whole), in 1895:

The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which had led to a break in continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folklore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation. (49)

In performance, the May dance is no longer a force for community cohesion; it has lost its meaning as traditional Wessex disappears. It is also, however, a survival in another sense – a survival from prehistoric Britain, its seasonal fertility rites embedded in a symbolic chain of sacrifice, death and rebirth. As a survival of primitive culture’s psychological response to the natural world – the connection implied by Frazer -- its symbolic, if unconscious, power remains vital. “Present day culture,” Angel admits, has only affected the “mental epiderm”; it has failed to “elevate the involuntary and even unconscious instincts of human nature” (*Tess* 226). The aesthetic (and historical) challenge

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<sup>10</sup> More than any of Hardy’s previous characters, Tess is associated, not with one locale – Mellstock, Egdon Heath, Casterbridge, or Little Hintock – but with Wessex as a whole.

posed by *Tess* is whether these symbolic fragments of pagan ritual will degenerate into mere antiquarian survivals or remain, as in Greek tragedy, regenerative forces. Hardy found in myth and ritual the potential to counteract the impact of modern scientific thought on human consciousness.

## II

### Anthropology and *Tess*: The Scapegoat

Among the notes Hardy took from his 1891 reading of *The Golden Bough* are references to “instances of soul absences,” an example of a primitive worldview which he had immediately connected to that of the Dorset peasantry (*LN* II, 43). Primitive man, Frazer explained, believes the soul gives life to the body and associates death with its permanent absence, for if “the soul should be permanently detained away from the body, the person thus deprived of the vital principle must die” (211). In a bodily state weakened through sleep, illness, age, or the work of demons or enemies, the soul may escape, unable to return. This anthropological reference finds its way into the novel at an auspicious moment – Angel’s first real notice of Tess. Over breakfast, Angel overhears the Cricks’ new dairymaid testifying to this same piece of folk wisdom that Frazer had explored at length in *The Golden Bough*. “I don’t know about ghosts,” she was saying, “but I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive” (*Tess* 175). Such a condition is apparently common for Tess, and Hardy’s narrative foreshadows the connection between this vulnerable and weakened mental state and her fate. As dairyman Crick turns toward her, “his eyes charged with serious inquiry, and his great knife and fork ... planted erect on the table, like the beginning of a gallows,” Tess continues her description: ‘A very easy way to feel ’em go ... is to lie on the grass at night and look straight up at some big bright star; and, by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds o’ miles away from your body, which you don’t seem to want at all’ (*Tess* 175).

Tess’s first-hand account of soul-absence, looking at the stars and feeling miles away, recalls a similar, equally crucial, scene earlier in the novel – her ill-fated ride with Abraham, seeing the “blighted star,” and falling asleep, unable to prevent their horse Prince’s death. Hardy’s account of the forces that, in an analogous, anthropological sense, “steal” Tess’s soul, combines both universal and biographical elements. Natural features of the landscape move her to

reverie as they become “attached to fantastic scenes outside reality, and the occasional heave of the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, conterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time.” In this trance-like state, “she seemed to see the vanity of her father’s pride, the gentlemanly suitor awaiting herself in her mother’s fancy; to see him as a grimacing personage, laughing at her poverty, and her shrouded knightly ancestry” (*Tess* 70). She awakens only to find the soul leaving the dying horse, “the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him” (*Tess* 72). Immediately accepting responsibility for the death of Prince and the Durbeyfield’s now imminent economic downturn – “‘tis all my doing – all mine!’ the girl cried, gazing at the spectacle. ‘No excuse for me – none’” -- Tess regards herself “in the light of a murderess” (*Tess* 72-73). The question of fate, raised by Abraham’s question, “‘tis because we live on a blighted star, and not a sound one, isn’t it, Tess?” is answered only by silence.

Symbolically, Prince’s death also functions within a ritual structure given wide notoriety by *The Golden Bough* – the scapegoat. In answer to the question as to why a dying god should be chosen to take upon himself the sins of the community, Frazer recognized in such rituals a combination of two distinct customs – the killing of the divine animal or god in order to save its spirit from weakening through age, and the need for a general expulsion of evil (667-68). Prince, who has an aristocratic name and is the family’s main source of income, is growing weak. The “bread-winner,” (*Tess* 73), he is a symbolic substitute for the father, Jack Durbeyfield, who fancies himself Sir John, yet is too drunk to meet his financial and familial responsibilities. For her part, Tess has so far failed in connecting to a potent source of revitalization. That she returned from the May dance partner-less is emphasized in Joan Durbeyfield’s comment to Tess before she embarks on her fateful mission that, instead of her father, “some young feller, perhaps would go? One of them who were so much after dancing with ‘ee yesterday” (*Tess* 68). As a scapegoat, standing in the place of the D’Urbervilles’ aristocratic lineage, Prince is made to bear the ancestral guilt of their past acts of sexual aggression. More pointedly, Prince dies while Tess’s soul is absent, lost in disturbed reveries of her father’s vanity and pride, her mother’s fancy of a “gentlemanly suitor,” and her sexual fears of such a suitor’s “grimacing personage” (*Tess* 70).

Further examination of Hardy’s narrative reveals numerous correspondences between his handling of Prince’s death and accounts of the

scapegoat found in *The Golden Bough*. In ancient Rome, Frazer informs his readers, a horse was sacrificed in the Arician grove as the embodiment of the vegetative god, Viribus (553). In another example, Frazer notes the sacrifice of a horse as a purification of the land (661). Representing the corn spirit in the form of a horse, he indicates, is clearly present in modern Europe, where, in France, for example, the first sheaf harvested is called the horse, and the last one embodies the corn spirit of the following year. A weary French harvester is said to have “the fatigue of the horse” (532). Frazer also makes reference to widespread taboos surrounding the spilling of the scapegoat’s blood. Especially relevant are those prohibiting the now sacred blood from touching the ground or the sacrificer (265-66). In the former case, the ground often becomes itself taboo and barren. In the latter, the victim’s ghost may continue to haunt. Prince’s death is ill-omened on both counts. Not only is the horse’s blood “spouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss on the ground,” but Tess, too, is “splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops” (*Tess* 71). Tess’s staining with the ritual and sacrificial blood looks backward to the staining of her white dress during the May dance, and forward to the novel’s other scenes of symbolic sacrifice – the red of Alec’s strawberries, the blood drawn by the thorns in his gift of roses, the blood that drips from the ceiling after Alec’s murder, the shadows on Tess’s dress caused by shafts of sunlight on the wedding night and at Stonehenge. Like the fertility rites standing in back of the May dance, the sacrificial rites symbolically represented in Prince’s death evidence Hardy’s efforts to awaken “the tragical mysteries of life,” and go beyond the “simply natural” to discover in the scene the symbol that “coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there – half hidden it may be – and the two united are depicted as the All” (*LW* 192).

Throughout the events that follow immediately upon Prince’s death, Hardy continues to make symbolic use of anthropological materials relating to rites of ritual sacrifice. As in Frazer, the communal need to revitalize vegetative forces symbolized in the May dance or sacrificial scapegoat parallels the elder Durbeyfields’ attempts to mate Tess with a younger, more potent, branch of the family. Prince is sacrificed and symbolically reborn as Alec D’Urberville, who in each of his key early scenes appears aristocratically on horseback (and who will later send a replacement horse to John Durbeyfield). “He’ll marry her, most likely, and make a lady of her,” Tess’s mother hopes, “then she’ll be what her forefathers was.” Her father, although somewhat more reluctantly, agrees

that Alec “mid have serious thoughts about improving his blood by linking on to the old line” (*Tess* 87).

Hardy’s use of anthropological elements, however, makes Joan Durbeyfield’s matchmaking quite different from the wishful thinking of an Austen mother finding suitable husbands for her daughters and more in line with Frazer’s accounts of sacrificial offerings. Before sending her to service at the D’Urbervilles, Joan dresses the reluctant Tess again as the May Queen, deliberately adding more adult and sexually suggestive embellishments of the club-walking white frock. Frazer makes frequent reference to similar preparations for symbolic ritual marriages between virginal victims and human or animal representations of vegetative spirits (168-69). Joan Durbeyfield’s efforts to decorate her daughter in the spirit of the May Queen are continued by Alec, who, on their first meeting, plies Tess with fruit and flowers. The strawberries he hand feeds her are “British Queens,” and, entering the garden, “the two passed round to the rose trees, whence he gathered blossoms and gave her to put in her bosom. She obeyed like one in a dream, and when she could affix no more he himself tucked a bud or two into her hat, and heaped her basket with others in the prodigality of his bounty” (*Tess* 81).

As he did in describing the death of Prince, Hardy uses the symbolic structures of primitive ritual in narrating Tess’s first leave taking from Alec. He again emphasizes her admitted susceptibility to what Frazer had called “soul absence.” Tess obeys Alec “like one in a dream,” and he, in turn, observes her “pretty and unconscious munching.” The remainder of the sentence connects female innocence, May blooms, blood, and sacrifice:

“... and Tess Durbeyfield did not divine, as she innocently looked down at the roses in her bosom, that there behind the blue narcotic haze was potentially the ‘tragic mischief’ of her drama – one who stood fair to be the blood-ray in the spectrum of her young life” (*Tess* 81). A short time later, as Tess takes her seat in the van to return home, the images are repeated. Once again, she appears absent-minded, walking “inattentively,” and finding her seat without attention to her surroundings. Finally made self-conscious of the flower bedecked spectacle she presents, Tess pricks herself on the thorn of a rose, drawing blood and, with it, a tragic premonition: “Like all the cottagers in Blackmoor Vale, Tess was steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions; she thought this an ill omen – the first she had noticed that day” (*Tess* 84).

Upon returning home from her initial visit to the D’Urberville manor, The Slopes, Tess clearly views a return to service there as a self-sacrificial act – a punishment, an expiation of guilt for the killing of old Prince: “I killed the old horse, and I suppose I ought to do something to get ye a new one. But – I don’t quite like Mr. d’Urberville being there” (*Tess* 87). As Tess leaves to return to The Slopes, the family soon comes to a similar foreboding that they have offered her sacrificially. After separating from her daughter, Joan admits to her husband, “perhaps it would have been better if Tess had not gone”:

‘Well, tis a chance for the maid – Still, if ’twere the doing again, I wouldn’t let her go till I had found out whether the gentleman is really a good-hearted young man and choice over her as his kinswoman’

‘Yes, you ought, perhaps, to ha done that,’ snores Sir John (*Tess* 93).

What the Durbeyfields view as the potential revitalization of an old aristocratic stock, Hardy’s description of the D’Urberville estates reveals as an unstable juxtaposition of primeval Britain and nineteenth-century money. The Slopes, the D’Urberville’s newly acquired estate at Tantridge Cross, sits on the edge of The Chase:

... a truly venerable tract of forest land, one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primeval 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. All this sylvan antiquity, however, though visible from The Slopes, was outside the immediate boundaries of the estate (*Tess* 77).

As Tess and Alec advance toward their fated meeting in the forest, Hardy again sustains a tragic mood through the symbolic use of objects and landscapes that again suggest Tess as a sacrificial victim. The Chase into which they wander, is connected to primitive British culture -- “the oldest wood in England” and dark with “primeval yews and oaks.” When Tess leaves with Alec, the assembled women look knowingly, and their ominous prediction, “Out of the frying-pan, into the fire!” suggests for her a fate similar to that of the Druids’ victims. Tess again wears (and Alec again notices) her best summer dress. Most importantly, Hardy repeats the anthropological scapegoat pattern

previously introduced by Prince's death. Tess lapses into a dreamlike state, an "absent-mindedness (114) or "reverie" (118). Her sacrifice is now self-consciously connected to the family's immediate survival, for Alec tells Tess of his gifts – a horse for her father, toys for her siblings – and she understands that these are not gifts, but debts to repay:

'I'm grateful,' she reluctantly admitted. 'But I fear I do not – ' The sudden vision of his passion for herself as a factoring this result so distressed her that, beginning with one slow tear, and then following with another, she wept outright (*Tess* 117).

Then, too, Hardy informs us there is the expulsion of evil, "the possibility of a retribution" in Tess's fate. "Doubtless," he writes, "some of Tess D'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time" (*Tess* 119).

### III

#### Mistletoe: Beyond Classical Paganism

In the opening chapters of "Phase the Second: Maiden No More," Hardy offers a view of paganism in contrast to the narrow moralism of contemporary Christianity. On her return home from Tantridge Cross, Tess had encountered an itinerant sign painter whose evangelical message struck her with "accusatory horror." His words, "THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT" – represent a "poor Theology," Hardy remarks, "a hideous defacement ... the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time," and whose "staring vermilion words shone forth" against "the peaceful landscape" and "the blue air of the horizon" (*Tess* 128). In disregard of civilization's morality and guilt-based religion, there is an alternative, an older one based on the human experience of the natural world:

The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression. His present aspect, coupled with the lack of all human forms in the scene, explained the old-time heliolatries in a moment. One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky. The luminary was a golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, gazing down in the vigor and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him. (*Tess* 136)

Such a view of a living paganism's advantages over an outworn Christianity is repeated in the novel, when Hardy informs his readers that "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 a later date" (*Tess* 158). This view is connected to Tess's healing, her ability to chase away "moral hobgoblins" out of harmony with the natural world (*Tess* 135). It is also identified in the novel with Angel, who would have Greece rather than Palestine as the source of modern religions and who has abandoned the clerical career his father wished for him in order to experience "the aesthetic, sensuous, pagan pleasure in natural life" (*Tess* 218). For Angel, paganism is nature worship and the milkmaid, Tess, is an Artemis or Demeter (187), a "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" (176).

Yet, for all his Hellenic idealism, Angel's embrace of the pagan spirit is, in J.P. Bullen's words, "romanticized, one-sided, and dangerously incomplete" (*The Sun is God* 196). While Bullen acknowledges that Hardy attributes Apollonian characteristics to Clare, the harp player and herdsman, and that Angel is worshipped by Tess as her "Apollo" (*Tess* 475), nevertheless, he writes, "In stressing the Apollonian elements, the 'sensuousness' and 'naturalism' of the pagan way of life, Angel Clare forgets the violence, the bloodshed, and the retributive elements inherent in Greek mythology" (*Sun* 196). These were exactly the darker ritual dimensions stressed in contemporary anthropological studies of primeval Britain, the Druidical symbols of sacrifice, which function in the novel to challenge Angel's simple dichotomies of Pagan vs. Christian, natural vs. civilized, or primitive vs. modern.

Angel's romanticized version of the paganism he associates with nature and with Tess as a child of nature is most directly challenged by her wedding night retelling of her troubled history. Tess was one thing to Angel's theories; after her narration, she becomes another. "I repeat," he tells her, "the woman I have been loving is not you" (*Tess* 299). Although her narrative is personal, Hardy takes care to put her story into larger historical contexts. One such perspective is family history. The ancient coach hired to carry them from the church to Wellbridge Mill causes Tess to tremble and Angel to begin – and quickly halt – narrating the legend of the d'Urberville Coach:



A certain d'Urberville of the sixteenth or seventeenth century committed a dreadful crime in his family coach; and since that time members of the family see or hear the old coach whenever – But I'll tell you another day – it is rather gloomy. Evidently some dim knowledge of it has been brought back to your mind by the sight of this venerable caravan (*Tess* 280).<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Angel had arranged for the wedding night in an ancestral home of the d'Urbervilles, where portraits of exaggerated, cruel, and arrogant variations of d'Urberville physiognomy uncomfortably distort what are, unquestionably, Tess's facial features.

Beyond the centuries of d'Urberville aristocracy, however, stands pagan Britain, and Hardy makes use of the clearest possible symbol to connect this tragic marriage to ancient Druidical rites of sacrifice. Hanging from the white dimity canopy of the wedding bed she will not share with Angel, Tess discovers Frazer's Golden Bough, the mistletoe:

In removing the light towards the bedstead its rays fell upon the tester of white dimity; something was hanging beneath it, and she lifted the candle to see what it was. A bough of mistletoe. Angel had put it there; she knew that in an instant. This was the explanation of that mysterious parcel which it had been so difficult to pack and bring, whose contents he would not explain to her, saying that time would soon show her the purpose thereof. In his zest and gaiety he had hung it there. How foolish and inopportune that mistletoe looked now (*Tess* 304).

In his account of the legend of Nemi, Frazer described how each aspirant to the title of King of the Wood had to pluck the golden bough that grew high in the sacred tree. This tree he identified with the oak, and the golden bough was a sprig of mistletoe. Because the mistletoe remained green – it did not seem to “die” each winter as did the deciduous oak – Frazer reasoned that primitive man viewed it as the sacred tree's “seat of life,” a sign that “the divine life which had ceased to animate the branches yet survived in the mistletoe, as the heart of the sleeper still beats when his body was motionless” (772). It was, like Tess, a

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<sup>11</sup> The coach's driver, too, is a victim, albeit a nineteenth-century victim, of aristocratic abuse. A “venerable ‘boy’ of sixty,” he suffers rheumatic gout, in part, because of “excessive exposure” in youth, and bears a “permanent running wound on the outside right leg, originated by the constant brushings of aristocratic carriage poles” (*Tess* 278).

soul capable of absence from the body. The immortal soul of the sacred oak resides apart in the mistletoe, which must be preserved even as the tree itself is ritually sacrificed. Great care must be taken, therefore, and the mistletoe was only gathered with great ceremony. Frazer quotes from Pliny:

After due preparations have been made for a sacrifice and a feast under the tree, they [the Druids] hail it as the universal healer and bring to the spot two white bulls ... A priest clad in a white robe climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloth. They then sacrifice the victims, praying that God may make his own gift to prosper with those upon whom he has bestowed it (764).<sup>12</sup>

Hardy's symbolic representation of the Wellbridge honeymoon scenes in terms of current anthropological theories of ritual sacrifice repeats the patterns of soul absence, ornamentation and staining established by his earlier descriptions of the May dance, Prince's death, and Alec's seduction. Once again there are references to Tess's passivity and absence of mind. She approaches the wedding “without a sense of will,” a fatalism Hardy associates both with primitive cultures and incipient tragedy.<sup>13</sup> Tess, Hardy explains, shares “the fatalistic convictions common to field folk and those who associate more extensively with natural phenomena than with their fellow creatures” and, by her nature, often drifts into a “passive responsiveness” (*Tess* 269). Accordingly, she enters the Wellbridge cottage “absent mindedly” (*Tess* 285). Again, Tess is ornamentally clothed, not with flowers now, but with the Clare family diamonds, and, as she enters on her history, “each diamond on her neck gave a sinister wink” (*Tess* 293). Repeated, too, is the symbolic staining by the grass from the May dance, by Prince's blood, and by Alec's strawberries: “The sun was so low on that short afternoon of the year that it shone in through a small opening and formed a golden staff which stretches across to her skirt,

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<sup>12</sup> Pliny's remarks on the Druids and mistletoe were familiar to Victorian readers well before they were quoted in *The Golden Bough*. James MacDonald, in the 9<sup>th</sup> ed. of the *Britannica*, for example, stressed the importance of mistletoe to the Druids and drew heavily on Pliny (“Druidism”).

<sup>13</sup> A note in Hardy's 1878 journal later included in the autobiography argues that “A plot, or Tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by said passions, prejudices, and ambitions” (*LW* 123).

where it made a spot like a paint-mark set upon her” (*Tess* 284).<sup>14</sup>

Aspects of Frazer’s detailed account of Druidical mistletoe rites also give symbolic significance to one of Hardy’s strangest scenes – Angel’s sleep walking. First, only the white clad priest, who must not let it touch the ground as he carries it to the site of sacrifice, must pluck the mistletoe. More specifically, the plant, called the “all healer” by the Druids, was especially connected to the cure of epilepsy, a state in which the soul seems to leave the body. Mistletoe was recommended, Frazer informs us, as a remedy for the “falling sickness” by medical authorities in England and Holland into the eighteenth century: “As mistletoe cannot fall to the ground because it is rooted on the branch of a tree high above the earth, it seems to follow as a necessary consequence that an epileptic patient cannot possibly fall down in a fit so long as he carries a piece of mistletoe” (767). Angel, approaching Tess in a somnambulistic state, incanting “Dead, Dead, Dead ... My wife – dead, dead!” carries her out of the house, across the narrow footbridge with the waters rushing dangerously underneath, and sets her down in the ancient abbot’s coffin, all the while unconscious, yet somehow magically protected from falling. Angel’s antithetical, contradictory emotions toward are Tess reflected by her associations with oak and mistletoe. That which is to be sacrificed is separated from that which is immortal. In his sleepwalking, his civilized, moralizing soul, wanders from the body, allowing its primitive and pagan component to remain true. Tess contemplates a self-inflicted, sacrificial death: “If they could both fall together into the current now, their arms would be so tightly clasped together that they could not be saved; they would go out of the world painlessly, and there would be no more reproach to her, or to him for marrying her” (*Tess* 319). It is her second suicidal thought since arriving at Wellbridge; the first, too, was also connected to the rituals of ancient Britain:

‘Oh, then I ought to have done it, to have done it last night! But I hadn’t the courage. That’s just like me!’

‘The courage to do what?’

‘Of putting an end to myself.’

‘When?’

She writhed under this inquisitorial manner of his. “Last night,” she answered.

‘Where?’

‘Under your mistletoe’ (*Tess* 309).

## IV

### The Stone of Sacrifice

On August 24, 1899, as rumors of the possible sale of Stonehenge to wealthy Americans brought calls for its purchase by the British government, the *Daily Chronicle* published an unsigned interview with Hardy entitled “Shall Stonehenge Go?” together with the Stonehenge episode from *Tess*. For Hardy, the need to retain the ruins was “beyond dispute,” and the bulk of the article centered on a number of practical methods to counter the effects of time and weather. Toward the end of the interview, he was asked to speculate on the monument’s past – its origins, date, and purpose. Hardy replied that, with proper techniques these questions could perhaps soon be settled. Nevertheless, he added, “Personally, I confess to a liking for the state of dim conjecture in which we stand with regard to its history” (*Public Voice* 155). To peel away the centuries of accrued Stonehenge legend, myth, local folklore, and tradition in the name of scientific historicism, Hardy implies, would be, in its own way, a defacing of history. Better not to know, keeping alive the mythic power and mystery still embedded in the competing narratives.

Long before the 1880’s, the association of Stonehenge with the Druids had been firmly established in the popular imagination. John Aubrey, reviewing the literature and examining the site itself in the seventeenth century, had determined Stonehenge and other ancient stone circles might well be “Temples of the Priests of the most eminent Order, viz, Druids” (Chippendale 70). Eighty years later, Aubrey’s hypothesis was revived and popularized by Dr. William Stukeley, whose 1740 *Stonehenge* repeated the Druid connection with increased emphasis on the stones as sites of human sacrifice. His account would serve as the main source for scholarly reference as well as tourist guidebooks for the next century (Atkinson 180). James MacDonald’s “Stonehenge” article in the ninth (1875-84) edition of the *Britannica* also reiterates the direct connection between Druidism, human sacrifice, and the Stonehenge ruins. “Writers of authority,” he states, “are generally agreed that it is of Druidical origin, although there are differences of opinion as to its probable date, some placing it at one hundred years before Christ and others in the fifth century” (576). MacDonald also mentions the “Stone of Sacrifice” – a “large prostrate stone on which it is supposed the victims were immolated” (576). Although Hardy does not directly mention Druids, the association of Stonehenge with the growing body of

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller account of Hardy’s symbolic use of color, see Tanner, 9-23.

anthropological data concerning primitive sacrificial ritual is clearly in evidence, and the juxtaposition of these dark, symbolic images with the sense of well-being the landscape creates in *Tess* provides much of the scene's dramatic tension.

For the uprooted *Tess*, Stonehenge is a homecoming – a return to something “older than the centuries; older than the d'Urbervilles” (*Tess* 484). “Can't we bide here?” she asks, as she flings herself onto the alter stone, still warm from the afternoon's sun. “One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it,” she tells Angel, “And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am home” (*Tess* 484).

What is “home” to *Tess* is also a place of sacrifice, although not to God, as she assumes, but to the sun. “That lofty stone set away by itself,” Angel explains, “is in the direction of the sun, which will presently rise behind it” (*Tess* 485). Angel's response is an educated one, informed by the three decades of interest in solar myth initiated by F. Max Müller in 1856. Hardy had been long aware of Müller's theories, having copied into his notebook Müller's remark that “when, in tracing Greek, Roman, and Vedic myths back to their original source, we always found that they apply to the sun in his ever varying aspects” (cited in Bullen, *Expressive Eye* 209). During the period immediately preceding the composition of *Tess*, however, Müller's solar theory had come under fierce attack. In 1885-86, *The Nineteenth Century* carried a series of well-publicized articles and rebuttals on the issue, with contributors including Müller, Lang, Huxley and Gladstone. By 1890, the solar mythologist position, which, on the basis of comparative philology, saw myth as a “disease of language,” was in retreat. While Lang, Tylor, Frazer and the so-called “savage folklorists” did not deny the existence or importance of solar myths, evolutionary anthropology now saw them as survivals of primitive animism, and, thus, directly connected to the chain of sacrificial images Hardy puts to symbolic use in the novel: “The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway” (*Tess* 486). It is the sun that will awaken the sleeping *Tess* – the sun that “do shine on the just and unjust alike”: “Soon the light was strong, and a ray shone upon her unconscious form, peering under her eyelids and waking her” (*Tess* 487). With the light of day, the primeval stone pillars give way to the representatives of British justice who have been

silently waiting, interspersed among them. The ritual sacrificers are no longer Druid priests, but police.

The ‘President of the Immortals’ ends his sport with *Tess*, not on the Druid Stone of Sacrifice, but in Christian Britain's Wintonchester prison, making her a victim, not of primitive ritual, but of the modern state. The sharp contrast between the powerful and tragic tone evoked by the primeval, moonlit Stonehenge landscape and the harsh, modern “ugly flat-topped octagonal tower” of the prison heightens the irony of the final “Justice is done” pronouncement. What in Frazer's account had been a sacrificial death and resurrection ensuring the community's continued prosperity, is now an execution – rational, modern, but no longer of any benefit to a doomed rural culture.

Hardy, nevertheless, symbolically reinforces the novel's sacrificial theme in the Wintonchester prison scene. Harking back to The Chase forest and the wedding mistletoe, the prison, as a ritual site, remains connected to primitive tree worship and the Druids. It stands “disguised from the road in passing it by yews and evergreen oaks” (489). At Stonehenge, Angel recalled, *Tess*'s pagan ancestors had once sacrificed to the sun, and on the morning of her execution, “the sun's rays smiled on [Angel and Liza-Lu] piteously,” their horizon “lost in the radiance of the sun hanging above it” (489).

Although Hardy, in describing the scene outside of the Wintonchester prison, again evokes images from Britain's primitive past, they remain only ironic reminders of the modern world's savage inheritance.<sup>15</sup> Oaks and yews only hide the prison's ugly but efficient modernism. Angel and Liza-Lu will leave Wessex, not revitalize it. *Tess*'s sacrifice secures no benefit, and her question, “why the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike,” remains unanswered.

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<sup>15</sup> In a 1908 article on the archaeological excavation of the Maumbury Ring outside Dorchester written for the *Times*, Hardy directly connects modern executions with ancient forms of human sacrifice. He retells the history of Mary Channing's hanging and torture (he had previously mentioned it in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), emphasizing that the ancient Roman Ring had also been a possible site of Neolithic sacrifice. In the Mary Channing narrative, he declares, “we touch real flesh and blood, and no longer uncertain visions of possible Romans at their games or barbarians at their sacrifice (*Public Voice* 287). “Was ever man ‘slaughtered by his fellow man,’ he asks, “during Roman or barbarian use of this place of games and sacrifice in circumstances of greater atrocity?” (*Public Voice* 289).

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