Reconstructing Tess

OLIVER LOVESEY

The ideological unwieldiness of Tess of the d'Urbervilles can be explained only partly by the novel's blending of a cautionary tale of the fallen woman and a story about the late-Victorian confrontation with "the ache of modernism." Angel Clare somewhat bombastically renounces his father's Christianity, but he still stumbles on elements of traditional social morality. He bypasses the resurrection, but cannot negotiate around Tess's "un-intact state" (p. 389): a godless world he can accommodate, but Tess's absent hymen shakes him to his foundations. Angel paradoxically fashions himself into both a proselytizing apostate and a social iconoclast, as well as a guardian of the bourgeois family and the rights of inheritance. One of Tess's central conundrums is this emphasis placed on physical virginity in a novel of doubt, located within a context of modern skepticism.

Tess's virginal body is the focus of much of the extensive critical writing on the novel. Margaret Oliphant shrewdly noted the glaring improbability of the pure woman's ignorance of physiology and intimacy with Ezekiel. Significantly, Oliphant recognized that the Durbeyfields are "quite ready to sell the beautiful daughter for the benefit of the family." The representation of Tess's "purity" and the exact nature of her seduction/rape have continued to engage critical attention. The site of this interpretive uneasiness is the notoriously ambiguous and fragmentary incident in the Chase. The gaps in descriptive detail here, though possibly anticipated figuratively in the earlier strawberry eating, resemble the gaps in Tess herself. Beginning with Henry James, a number of critics have noted that her speech, decision making, sexual understanding, and even sense of self are characterized by a curious absence. The resulting gap in the reader's understanding

Oliver Lovesey is an associate professor at Okanagan University College. This essay is part of a larger project on Victorian religion and sexuality.
of Tess, ostensibly supplied by the narrator’s attempts at synthesis, produces a multidimensional, overdetermined ambiguity. The intensity of the narrator’s obsessively prodding and probing gaze on Tess’s body nearly renders the narrative a fantasy of procrasti-
nated rape. A number of critics interpret differently the opposition of sensuality and religion in Tess. Jan Jędrzejewski, for example, noting dogmatic Christianity’s sexual repressiveness in the novel, argues that Tess and Angel achieve independence by rejecting the Church. For Timothy Hands, however, Tess’s ingrained devotion to Christian self-sacrifice precipitates her tragedy; and, for Shirley A. Stave, Christian forces ultimately destroy the pagan Tess. Deborah L. Collins, however, in her study of the novel’s “Liturgy of Unbelief,” as she subtitles Thomas Hardy and His God, perceptively notes Tess and Angel’s mutual idealization and shared self-loathing. Each seeks in the other a “re-entry into innocence,” a sexual innocence for Tess, and an innocence both sexual and ideological for Angel. Collins somewhat less convincingly suggests a more strictly Christian accommodation in Tess’s glimpse of redemption and Angel’s final acceptance of grace.

Here I wish to suggest that Tess’s narrative logic or illogic attempts to resolve Angel’s religious dilemma through a sexualized reconstruction of the resurrection, extrapolated in a displaced religious allegory. Angel idealizes Tess, and the reconstruction of her virginity replaces the resurrection in his religion of unbelief. This demythologizing transmogrification resolves Angel’s anxieties about Christian doctrine in material terms. The symbolic reconstruction of Tess’s virginity, figured in the recuperative allegory of Tess’s mouth and in the person of her sister Liza-Lu, within the context of references to the rebuilding of the temple, allows Angel to retain his deified, homogenized view of women and to accept the benevolence of a natural order without God. The novel’s counternarrative of virginal reconstruction displaces the Christian resurrection in Angel’s heterodox philosophy and establishes a material, earthbound resurrection centered on a reconstructed Tess. Angel’s despair about renouncing faith is apparent in the way the expression of his doubt mimics Christian forms, and virginity plays a central role in his substitutions for faith.

ANGEL’S APOSTASY

The apostasy of Angel, the secular priest, that precipitates the reconstruction of Tess, is sketchily defined. Like Tess, we must take it on faith that he has inquired deeply into doctrines,
though we are given only a summary of his “crystallized phrases” (p. 371). Tess announces to Alec that Angel believes in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, but while his yen for judgment and punishment accords with the tally of rewards for righteous action in that sermon’s first part, it ignores the stern warnings about judging others, and, particularly in Matthew 7, about hypocritically condemning another for one’s own sins. While he first announces his love for what he perceives as the virginal Tess by selecting agreeable cows for her milking, he soon ushers her into a course of historical readings to furnish her mind for their future life together and to prepare her to negotiate his parents’ beliefs and prejudices. To discourage educated unbelief, the Reverend Clare has kept Angel from university, but Angel remains as serious and studious as he is troubled about his religious doubts. It is implied that he is more “devout” than either of his brothers (p. 153), “the most appreciative humanist, the most ideal religionist, even the best-versed Christologist” (p. 206); his doubt may well be of a higher spiritual order than his father’s zeal. However, he lacks his parents’ charity and compassion, and becomes seduced by a devotion to absolutes, a devotion that parodies the enthusiasm of his departed faith and finds expression in his outrage at Tess. His apostasy centers on an inability to subscribe to all of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the obstacle for Charles Reding, another clerical son, in John Henry Newman’s *Loss and Gain*. He is particularly opposed to article four concerning the resurrection, a doctrine of much importance in his relationship with Tess. Angel’s passionate idealism, established on the foundation of textual aporias, leads him to naively overvalue superficial signs of purity and wholeness in the world.

Angel’s apostasy influences his often paradoxical views on sexual morality and especially virginity, views that are framed by his Englishness. Angel objects to the exclusiveness of Christian claims to truth, allowing instead competing claims from different regions of the world and different discourses. Angel’s antipathy to Christian doctrine produces a devotion to natural laws and the rubric of geology, and a naive faith in the stability of such markings; he prefers “sermons in stones to sermons in churches” (p. 183). He searches for ideological assurances in nature. His idealization of women is established on the foundation of his apostasy, and his worship of female purity derives from a celebration of nature as a transcendental compensation for the loss of God. When he hears of Tess’s fall, he feels ruined and abandoned because his assurance in the stability of outward appearances is
shaken, and almost immediately he exiles himself to Brazil. Angel is torn between a commitment to idealized abstractions on the one hand and situational morality on the other. He reaches an interpretive impasse in South America. He conceptualizes the breakdown of his relationship with Tess in terms of geographical alienation, but he comes to realize the value of the English body only when he is standing on the foreign soil of the virginal “orient.” On a mule journey in Brazil’s interior, Angel confesses to another Englishman the truth about his marriage and learns that Tess’s “deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale and mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve” (p. 389). Rather than causing Angel anxiety, this other land’s irregularity and viscos-

ity, its physical and psychological geography, lead him to suspend his condemnation of Tess, based in part on the limitations of his imprinted Englishness. He is thus prepared to claim Tess in the “exotic” city of Sandbourne, a “fairy place,” a “new world in an old one” (p. 426).

Angel’s apostasy is linked to sexual license. While he has advocated that his university education could be used for “the honour and glory of man” if not of God (p. 154), and has subjected himself to monastic austerities, the immediate effect of his apostasy is a loss of appetite for his studies and a lack of patience with social forms. In his disillusionment, Angel reacts by “balancing” his theorizing with sensuous experience (p. 155), a total immersion in the sexual excess of London, and a virtual entrapment by an older woman, possibly a prostitute and probably not a virgin. The crisis in his new antifaith, his sexualized dark night of the soul, comes with Tess and the threatening of his idealization of women. Just as Angel supplies the place of God with humanity in his new belief system, so he must somehow fill the rift in his idealism when the mythic female, his idealized Tess, is revealed as human. His zeal for heterodoxy has generated this idealization of the female that in turn interferes with his passions. Angel misreads the youth and beauty of Tess as cultural signs of virginity, and he naively assumes that in this virginity he discovers that which is pure, perfect, and stable, and which he has lost in his religious understanding. His misinterpretation of Tess as being virgo intaca disturbs his confidence in the accuracy of his reading of a world without God. For the rest of the novel the center point of Angel’s apostasy becomes not the disestablishment of the Church or even the transmogrified state of Christ after the resurrection, but the recovery of Tess’s lost virginity.
VIRGINITY AND THE VICTORIANS

In his essay “Candour in English Fiction,” published in 1890, Hardy calls for frank treatments of “the position of man and woman in nature, and the position of belief in the minds of man and woman”; he also deplores any exhibition of “lax views of that purity of life upon which the well-being of society depends.” Social purity, Hardy intimates, in terms similar to those questioned by social reformer and White Cross Army founder Jane Ellice Hopkins, is established on women’s virginal bodies, and in Tess the value and exchange of virginal rights are negotiated by women, both Joan Durbeyfield and, later, Angel’s mother. For the former, Tess’s innocent beauty is her “trump card” (p. 82), though when she goes to Trantridge Tess is “not much more than a child” (p. 78), despite her mature appearance; Mrs. Clare blesses virginity, placing it below few other things in nature. While Tess’s mother also highly prizes virginity, she more cynically and shrewdly estimates its exchange value and its recovery. Joan Durbeyfield, anticipating a wedding in exchange for lost virginity, perversely echoes the assessment of the High Church moralist and reformer Elizabeth Missing Sewell, who regarded the loss of innocence as not being “so ineffaceable, that the mind, once tainted, can never be restored to purity. God’s grace, and an earnest will, and an incessant watchfulness, will work marvels in the way of such restoration; but even then it will never be anything but restoration. The scars will always remain.”

Tess was begun in 1888 at a time when the late-Victorian obsession with virginity had turned into a mania due to revelations about child prostitution, an increase in prosecutions for child sexual assault, and a revival of the stereotype of the wicked, exploiting mother. While many works on Victorian sexuality refer to this mania, they often pass rapidly over the folk mythology and the scientific and social discourses of virginal reconstruction or vaginal refashioning. The late-Victorian period saw tremendous advances in plastic gynecology, the first operation for the complete reformation of the vagina taking place in 1870. The controversial Lawson Tait, a pioneer in gynecological surgery, reported in the early 1890s on an operation for repairing the lacerated genitalia of a child rape victim. He believed that child sexual abuse was exceedingly rare and signs of abuse were easily faked, though he provides a detailed account of the gynecological examination of young girls. Tait’s views were consistent with those in the period’s medical jurisprudence texts expressing uncertainty
about accurately reading signs of virginity or sexual abuse, especially in lower- and working-class girls. Moreover, in making such assessments, medical research was moving away from a focus on exceptional cases in favor of statistically significant samples—Tait classifies seventy cases—despite the continuing fascination of the popular press with the sensational. Charles D. Meigs had in 1848 already deplored popular fascination with medical intrusions into female modesty: “When I was young, a woman had no legs even, but only feet, and possibly ankles; now, forsooth, they have utero-abdominal supporters, not in fact only, but in the very newspapers!” Hardy composed Tess at a time when gynecology was being firmly established as a science and was dispelling popular beliefs that lingered in the new journalism, the writing of philanthropists and social reformers, and even pornography. Thus, Tess’s account of a young woman’s fall and reconstruction should be read in the context of the competing discourses of medicine, social reform, journalism, and pornography.

The Victorians deified female virginity and represented the woman as victim in ways bordering on the prurient and the morbid: reverence for female chastity reinforced the survival of the bourgeois family, but at the same time one “superstition” regarded intercourse with a child virgin as a cure for male syphilis, as Dr. William Acton, citing one M. Battel, had noted earlier, and this folk myth was cited in the eighteenth century as a mitigating factor in prosecutions of child rape. Up to one hundred pounds was paid in the nineteenth century for a virgin. “Social hygiene” became a watchword for the Victorian glorification of chastity and the repression of the moral miasma of prostitution. At the same time, campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, and the emergence of the “New Woman” galvanized the women’s rights movement and prompted calls for the suppression of radical women’s voices. Disgusted with “the strange Victorian taste for deflowering virgins, preferably children,” prominent feminist social reformer Josephine Butler rescued many victims and reported on an operation to enlarge the genitals of a young girl. Some brothels employed medical staff to repair lacerated young girls, presumably to enable them to be marketed again as reconstituted innocents, at a time when there was “a considerable trade in ‘second-hand virgins,’” though the lore of “renovated virgins” has a long anecdotal history. The focus of this anxiety about the trade in virgins and virginity both genuine and feigned was the popular perception of an alarming increase in child prostitution in the 1880s, though even in the
1860s its potential elimination was touted as an additional benefit of the Contagious Diseases Acts; the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Acts estimated in 1860 that about fifteen percent of the prostitutes in England and Wales were under the age of sixteen.26

When Hardy was writing his controversial endorsement of Tess’s purity, the popular perception of the fallen woman had changed. In the 1880s, the stereotypical fallen woman was much younger than before, partly because the idealization of virginity fueled a demand for child prostitutes.27 In the 1880s and ’90s, public perception of the responsibility for seduction into prostitution was reversed. Butler’s and Acton’s earlier emphasis on the economic and social causes of prostitution was being replaced by a growing acceptance of female depravity, delinquent mothers, and increased freedom for women in public as the critical factors.28 Child prostitution was increasingly viewed as a manifestation of working-class female sexual precociousness, unwanted pregnancy, and juvenile masturbation (for which clitoridectomy sometimes was suggested as a cure).29 This shift in attitude clearly informs in part at least Tess’s willingness to blame herself for Alec’s initial seduction/rape and for her return to him later. Alec has read Tess’s economic position as well as her mature body as signs that she cannot be a virgin. Some Victorians also blamed women who took economic advantage of a trend toward later marriage—“where vain worldly women trifle with serious men’s affections”—with the resulting increase in the number of young unattached men, like Alec and Angel, at a time when the pathology of prolonged celibacy for men and women was hotly debated.30 One conjectured result was the virgin’s disease, morbus virgineus or chlorosis, the wasting condition which Henry James may have considered the fate of Milly Theale in his 1894 notes for The Wings of the Dove.31

In 1875, the age of female consent was raised from twelve to thirteen, but the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 raised it to sixteen. The furor about child prostitution that propelled passage of the bill largely grew from popular outrage throughout the nation at four scandalous articles by self-styled social reformer W. T. Stead in the Pall Mall Gazette entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” Stead’s well-known sensational treatment of the white slave trade focuses on urban prostitution, but Hardy clearly exploits links between Tess’s story and the object of popular outrage. Some of those involved in the white slave trade, moreover, were recruited in rural areas, and it was widely believed
that heterogeneous overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions degraded moral standards in industrial and agricultural areas. The popular narrative that Stead embellished concerned country girls enticed to London with the promise of domestic work and then locked up in brothels in either London, Paris, or Brussels. Tess commences what was perceived as the fallen woman’s inevitable downward spiral when censorious neighbors eject her from Marlott and she begins her uneasy life as a kept woman in the “pleasure city” of Sandbourne (p. 426), near the garrison towns where the Contagious Diseases Acts operated. Tess earlier went to Trantridge to prevent her siblings from being contaminated “by her example” (p. 138), and for Angel, Tess’s hesitation to marry mimics the behavior of “a coquette of the first urban water” (p. 217). Tess is seduced/raped by her “cousin,” and the notion of child prostitution that Stead used to inflame the public may have been a Victorian euphemism for widespread child sexual abuse by family members. Moreover, Hardy’s tale of peasant fallenness concerns an aristocratic peasant’s encounter with metropolitan unbelief, and the novel laments the destruction of pastoral pieties resulting from the proliferation of the industrial and the urban.

Stead’s articles, as Judith Walkowitz has demonstrated, blend elements of Gothic melodrama, the fairy tale, and pornography. Fraser Harrison and James R. Kincaid have remarked on a similar resemblance to pornography in aspects of Tess. Drawing on the parallels Steven Marcus finds in My Secret Life and Charles Dickens’s novels, Harrison traces a similarity between Tess and the transactions of “Walter,” author of My Secret Life, particularly regarding the assumptions about working-class girls that underlie Alec’s “wheedling and bullying” of Tess. Kincaid demonstrates how the reader of Tess is complicit in enjoying Angel’s sadistic, pornographic images of the childish Tess. Before returning to Stead, it will be useful to briefly examine two samples of the literature of the Victorian underworld. Together with Stead’s articles, these works illustrate the extent of the obsession with virginity and its reconstruction in the period in which Hardy was contemplating Tess. They demonstrate a persistent anxiety about the instability of virginity and its signs, and the difficulty of locating and reading it. These texts indicate, as Angel discovers, that virginity is not stable and demonstrable, save in the moment of its violation.

The author of My Secret Life, composed in the 1880s, a probably fictional narrative nevertheless interesting as social history, justifies his exploitation of young women by class-based refer-
ences to the economics of sexual exchange.\textsuperscript{37} Child virgins offer
him a species of “sensuous delight” both mental and physical, and the sight of a virgin’s blood is aphrodisiacal.\textsuperscript{38} Presumably
due to the great demand for virgins and also as he says to girls’
“cunning,” he is advised by a retired major at his club to beware
of feigned virginity and to test for intactness with “your eye, your
finger, and your cucumber” (p. 118), and in a number of scenes
the author conducts close examinations by candlelight. Once
assured, he attacks, in one particularly gruesome instance vio-
ently raping a ten-year-old orphan (p. 132). He deplores the moral
depravity and financial improvidence of the working poor, among
whom “a virginity was a rarity at fourteen years old” (p. 160). He
legitimizes his activities by referring to the sexual precocious-
ness of poor youth that causes an economic deflation of the ar-
ticle of sexual exchange: “street boys cannot appreciate the
treasures they destroy. A virginity taken by a street boy of six-
ten, is a pearl cast to a swine” (p. 280). His purse, false prom-
ises, and anonymity protect him from prosecutions for rape. In
an illustration of circumstances similar to Tess’s at Flintcomb
Ash, the danger of a “field-girl” threatening to go to the local mag-
istrate is dismissed: “[Y]ou can always have a field-girl, nobody
cares” (p. 127). His so-called erotic philosophy sanctions any
sexual act by his own pleasure. He writes for his own “secret
pleasure” on rereading (p. 385), though he bizarrely justifies an
inserted essay on genitals and procreation because it might stimu-
late domestic desire when read “after evening family prayers . . .
by older members of the family” (p. 264) and provide sex educa-
tion for boys and girls of twelve to fifteen. The narrative is a
fantastical erotic autobiography that traces the seemingly inevi-
table downward spiral of the rake’s progress. He confesses that
an overheated imagination leads to a desire for increasingly ec-
centric and “abnormal pleasures” (p. 444) in homoeroticism and
sadism, but he never designates his “letch” for raping young vir-
gins as requiring any apology.

An obsession with virginity also figures in \textit{The Sins of the Cit-
ties of the Plain, or the Recollections of a Mary-Ann}, published in
1881. The author, Jack Saul, a male prostitute, relates a litany of
sexual encounters in the homosexual underworld, arguing for
sodomy’s classical precedents and its widespread practice and
for its origins in boys’ isolation, overcrowding, public schools,
and an addiction to ever-accelerating sensual pleasures. To re-
tard the inevitability of the rake’s decline and to maintain his
professional form, he practices occasional abstinence. He shares
his clients’ and colleagues’ predilection for virgins, male and female; in both cases he relishes “virgin spends” and “maiden behinds.” A fellow prostitute, George Brown, informs him of his “particular speciality[†] for turning the pederastic vice to account.” Brown earns twenty-five pounds by taking “a little girl of about fifteen to a certain house in Paris; in fact, they will give me an extra fiver for every year she is under that age, so that a girl between eleven and twelve is worth forty pounds and all expenses paid. Now and then I get them a boy for a change, as they are in great demand for the rich visitors to Paris, especially for the Americans, who are nearly all sodomites” (2:70–1). Brown admits that some of the disappearances mentioned in the papers are explained by this traffic in virgins. Brown sells for one hundred pounds a boy of thirteen from a Ragged School Refuge, not long after their first sexual encounter: “my fancy was awfully excited at the idea of having his virginity” (2:79). Part of Jack Saul’s purpose in relating such scenes is to indicate “how the sin of Sodom was regularly practised in the Modern Babylon” (1:90), but, while stressing the normalcy of same-sex desire he simultaneously deplores its depravity. Saul’s account is punctuated with references to scandals and trials, and he clearly caters to the popular perception of the sex trade as a growth industry and of sex-trade workers as increasingly juvenile.

Stead’s aim in “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” published in July 1885, was raising the age of consent. The articles resulted from a highly unorthodox journalistic investigation, bordering on the voyeuristic, into the traffic in virgins in England, for which Stead was prosecuted. Framed by allusions to Daedalus’s Labyrinth, the articles address the middle classes, but were as widely popular as sensation fiction. The law, he claims, offers more protection for hunted grouse than for pursued “bipeds in petticoats.” Indirectly, he also undertakes an evangelical “social revolution” as he terms it in the first part of the series, exposing the exploitation by wealthy powerful men of destitute girls, whose parents, like Tess’s mother, even facilitate their ruin, regarding maidenhood as “a realizable asset.” When Tess visits Trantridge, she displays the sexual ignorance that Stead castigates in Victorian girls that allowed them to enter into exploitative contracts with procurers. He reveals the prevalence of belief in sexual folk myths, fostering this kind of myopia, that may have influenced Tess’s mother to deliver her daughter to Alec, such as the notion that a first sexual encounter cannot result in pregnancy, similar to the belief that pregnancy never followed rape.
which was not a capital crime after 1841. Stead’s account estimates the high value placed even on reconstructed virginity within this sexual economy and indicates the persistent anxiety about the instability of outward signs of virginity. Though medical certificates of virginity were readily obtained by procurers, there was a considerable trade in girls “tricked out as a virgin,” who are also referred to as “damaged virgins” or “second-hand articles.”43 The market in such “vamped-up virgins” however was influenced by the ready supply of “the genuine article,” making the “manufacture” of virgins a questionable business venture.44 Nevertheless, the skill of procuresses “passing off as virgins those who had long before bade farewell to the estate of maidenhood” was regarded in the trade as a “remarkable achievement.”45

THE ALLEGORY OF TESS’S VIRGINITY

In Tess, written just a few years after the “Maiden Tribute” controversy and the raising of the age of consent, in the atmosphere of the social purity movement, there is a similar morbid obsession with lost virginity and fantasies of reconstruction. While Tess, who for Alec resembles the “witch of Babylon” (p. 370), is obviously not a prostitute, her mother does regard the sacrifice of her virginity when she has just reached the age of consent as a somewhat risky investment that will lead to marriage, and Tess herself, when meeting Angel at Sandbourne, says in the 1892 edition that Alec “bought” her. The novel’s obsession with virginity and reconstruction is focused on the nearly pornographic story of Tess’s body and particularly the story of her mouth, which has received much critical attention and which has a central role in the novel’s displaced religious allegory.46 The sexualized mouth is also used in Hardy’s first published novel, Desperate Remedies, to intimate the instability of external signs of virginity and the anxiety caused by their misreading. In the famous “lesbian” scene in Desperate Remedies, Miss Aldclyffe, herself a fallen woman, expresses her intense longing for Cytherea Graye until she learns that the object of her desire has been “kissed by a man” and is thus “sullied” and no longer “innocent”; she continues in a shrill apostrophe, like Walter in My Secret Life, to deplore the rarity of virginity: “Find a girl, if you can, whose mouth and ears have not been made a regular highway of by some man or another! . . . you can hardly find a girl whose heart has not been had—is not an old thing half worn out by some He or another. If men only knew the staleness of the freshest of us! that nine times out of ten the
‘first love’ they think they are winning from a woman is but the hulk of an old wrecked affection, fitted with new sails and refused.” 47 The signs of virginity are as deceptive to Miss Aldclyffe as they are to Angel, and she feels she has been betrayed into thinking that the “dusty highway” is really “a fresh spring meadow.” 48 Tess’s equation of the state of the mouth with signs of sexual experience is more complex, linking the unintact state, not merely with sexual knowledge, but also with the void of an unbeliever’s hell.

Tess’s mouth almost needs separate billing, as if it were an independent player in the novel’s dramatis personae. In the course of the narrative, Tess’s mouth is transformed from a fully formed flower—and the flower traditionally has been a figure for the hymen—to a terrifyingly silent, dumb round hole and then finally returned to a half-formed flower. It indexes either a prelapsarian garden of delights or the gaping void of a godless hell. In many ways the novel is the story of Tess’s mouth and her reduction to being merely a sexualized body. Her mouth begins the novel as a “mobile peony mouth” (p. 41), though at the dance when Angel first sees her it is unformed: a “pouted-up deep red mouth . . . [which] had hardly as yet settled into its definite shape” (p. 42). At this early stage in Tess’s fortunes, her mouth is described in floral terms, but soon its illicit sexual quality appears. Alec trains Tess to make an O with her “holmberry lips” for whistling (p. 85). In the time of her pregnancy, her lips are described as being thinner than regular country girls’ though she retains her “flower-like mouth” (p. 126). After the birth and death of her child and her departure for Talbothays, the sight of Tess’s mouth initiates Angel’s search for superlatives: “her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening” (p. 190). Now, her mouth is a source of temptation and Angel regards “the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake’s” (p. 210). Now demonized and rejected, her “ripe” mouth grows “tragical” (p. 214) though for the scrupulous Angel, perhaps even more than his father a believer in absolute depravity, the mouth displays “a roguish curl” (p. 223).

The tempting floral mouth is transfigured into a consuming void, for Angel an image of hellish power, and the focus of his myriad sexual anxieties that are associated with his apostasy. This change begins on Tess and Angel’s wedding night, with the exchange of sexual initiation narratives, heated confession be-
fore sexual sacrament, Tess’s necessitated by her explanatory letter’s getting stuck under the lip of the carpet in Angel’s room. Shocked by Angel’s silence after her confession, Tess’s face is transformed into a caricature of her “un-intact state”: “her cheek was flaccid, and her mouth had almost the aspect of a round little hole” (p. 272), the sight of which makes Angel’s presumably equally flaccid flesh creep. He is appalled at “the sunk corners of her mouth” (p. 286). Witnessing a sign of sexual experience, in light of his knowledge of Tess’s evident desire for him, and his own probably physical and psychological devastation after he “plunged into” his sole sexual encounter (p. 267). Angel experiences a type of displaced castration anxiety, lamenting that this knowledge about Tess has “already swallowed up his happiness, and was now digesting it” (p. 278). His own first sexual experience followed his troubled acceptance of apostasy.

Angel’s grief at losing his idealized image of Tess and misinterpreting cultural signs of purity is exacerbated by her face’s retention of a virgin caste. Despite Tess’s open mouth and sagging cheeks, Angel is “stupified” to see the “trickery” which sets “a seal of maidenhood upon Tess’s countenance” (p. 280). Angel’s inherited social restraint, his sexual anxieties, and his idealizing temperament—all of which are exaggerated by his principled apostasy—make Tess appear to him as a picture of deceit. Body and mind divided, Angel wishes for “a lie from her lips” (p. 280). Still, for Angel, Tess is now a different woman, and he is no longer the man who once used “to brush crumbs from her lips with his own” (p. 260). Now Tess can only recall that in the past he said “gaily that her mouth and breath tasted of the butter and eggs and milk and honey on which she mainly lived, that he drew sustenance from them” (p. 285). Ironically, after Tess and Angel separate, his mother refers to the purity of “rosy-mouthed” country girls (p. 307), whereas Tess’s parents no longer accept her word. For them, Tess does not resemble the pure woman of Proverbs 31:26 (KJV), to whom Mrs. Clare refers, who “openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.” Cold-mouthed, she merges with the desolate Flintcomb Ash, a landscape resembling a face without features; Tess now has internalized Angel’s revulsion at her open mouth and she feels she sins merely by “inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature had endowed her” (p. 357). Until he again sees her mouth, which resembles Eve’s, Alec claims he has had moral firmness. He even refers to a type of sexual “resurrection” effected upon the “corpses” of his old passions (p. 371). Tess is contracted to Farmer
Groby till Lady-day (the anniversary of the annunciation, when a silent, virginal Mary hears of her momentous transformation), but she leaves early, beginning the fallen woman's downward spiral to shame and death. The final downturn she feels is impelled by her passionate striking of Alec's face, which causes his mouth to bleed. The possibility of reestablishing her reputation and virtue and reconstructing her virginity appears forever lost.

“Angel’s intractability” in confronting Tess’s past relates to his sense of being spiritually “impotent,” and the novel abounds with images of impotence and castration anxiety, that may have an essential relationship to Angel’s feelings of “nostalgia” about female virginity.49 Such fears are awakened early in the novel when the drunken John Durbeyfield expresses a desire to eat lambs’ fry or testicles; in Jude the Obscure, Arabella’s flippant handling of the castrated boar’s pizzle also provocatively and dangerously throws down the sexual gauntlet. At Talbothays Angel is made restless hearing the story of the threatening old woman who imprisons her daughter’s faithless lover Jack Dollop not between powerful thighs but in the equally threatening butter churn. Angel is made the sexual object of the gaze of the unsubtle Izz, Marian, and Retty, three graces of the dairy prepared to compromise maiden honor. His disdain for Tess at Wellbridge is reinforced by the “slinister design . . . a concentrated purpose of revenge on the other sex” that he reads in the faces of Tess’s ancestors (p. 277). Soon after Angel decides against a sex-and-sin tour of the new world with Izz Huett, Tess accompanies Marian to bleak Flintcomb Ash, lopping off penis-shaped turnips to Marian’s shrieks of laughter. On his final journey in search of Tess, Angel passes the Cross-in-Hand, the symbolically castrated “stump” of what was once a “complete erection” (p. 357), where Tess acknowledges her power to tempt Alec. The opposite pole of Angel’s debilitating idealization of Tess is Alec’s fervor for sexual congress. However, Alec too is rendered symbolically impotent. The easily overpowered Alec is shortly mastered by Tess in bed and stabbed with the carving knife, which in the manuscript is graphically left “sticking up in his heart.”50 Angel is a strident but anxious and guarded young man. His homosocial relations with his father and brothers and even the men at the dairy are characterized by either distance or deference. In Tess, it is older women who negotiate sexual exchange. Despite the sexual diffidence that surrounds him, and his much-vaunted heterodox in social relations, he still kisses “the pedagogic rod of convention” (p. 314) in his refusal to countenance the equality of male and female vir-
ginity, even relating his intransigence to that bugbear of debates over chastity and marriage, the property rights of offspring.

Angel’s obsession with Tess’s open mouth and her “corporeal blight” is clearly linked to his stubborn refusal to accept the Church and particularly the doctrine of the resurrection (p. 163). Angel’s confession on his wedding night of a two-day sexual marathon with a “much older” seductress may have replaced Hardy’s original plan for a strictly religious confession, but this scene also exploits links with the account of the resurrection in John’s Gospel.\textsuperscript{51} Tess has idolized Angel and longed “to call him her lord” (p. 254), but like Mary Magdalene, the first to acknowledge Christ in the garden after the resurrection when turning from the angels in the tomb, Tess may not touch the broken-hearted Angel. Angel refuses to forgive the penitent Tess, a refusal perhaps anticipated earlier at Talbothays when Angel and Tess walk at dawn in the “luminous gloom” which “often made him think of the Resurrection hour. He little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side” (p. 170).\textsuperscript{52} At Talbothays Angel adored Tess as “a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form” (p. 170), but after her confession she is “[a]nother woman,” a fallen one (p. 272).

Coldly reflecting on “the harrowing contingencies of human experience” (p. 277), Angel regards his lost image of Tess as he regards his departed faith. Once he believed there was “[n]othing so pure, so sweet, so virginal as Tess . . . but The little less, and what worlds away!” (pp. 277–8). The reference to Robert Browning’s “By the Fire-side” here plays on the connection between the poem’s remote chapel, from which the cross and altar cloth have been removed, and the desecrated Tess. The confession scene at Wellbridge, near the ruins of the Cistercian abbey, has the atmosphere of a desecrated Eucharist. Tess and Angel’s wedding supper is interrupted and “the two glasses of wine . . . remained on the table untasted. This was what their Agape had come to” (p. 273). For Angel, the hope of the resurrection, enacted in the Eucharist that was associated with the Agape meal, has been lost, though his dream of Tess, who earlier resembles “Apostolic Charity” (p. 284), “leading him to Heaven” perhaps indicates his subconscious desires (p. 293). Moreover, when their “covenant” is enacted (p. 288) and he parts from Tess in Blackmoor Vale, Angel reflects bitterly on God’s absence.\textsuperscript{53} Just as his stubbornness “blocked his acceptance of the Church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess” (p. 284). Angel cannot believe Tess can regain the virtue of purity, just as he refuses to accept that, in the
words of article four, “Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of Man’s nature.” While denying the resurrection, Angel wants a type of positivist religion based on ethics and principles, but there is no room for compassion and charity in his creed, and his idealizing tendencies interfere with his rationality and his passions. As Timothy Hands points out, "Hardy could not forgive his Evangelical past for arousing beliefs that loss of faith left not just unfulfilled but destroyed beyond hope of reconstruction." Like Hardy, perhaps, Angel is impelled toward reconstruction but seems to find no way to accomplish it. He cannot accept the promise of the resurrection, though Hardy indicates that given some physical prompting he, like Alec, might experience a sexual resurrection of the flesh that would draw him to Tess.

TESS’S RECONSTRUCTION

The possibility of a demythologized, material resurrection is suggested in the novel’s closure and especially in its references to eschatology. Just as apostasy in the novel is associated with lost virginity, the absence of God with the lost hymen, so too the resurrection is related to the possibility of a fleshly reconfiguration. As Angel says earlier, discussing his inability to become a priest because of the stumbling block of article four, “My whole instinct in matters of religion is towards reconstruction” (p. 154). Tess has speculated on such a material reconstruction, the creation of a secondhand virginity, after the climactic upheaval of her disgrace. She shares the fateful instinct for “self-delight” that impels regeneration in the natural world, and the “silent reconstructive years” before she goes to Talbothays witness a revival of the optimism that continues even after Angel’s rejection to be “obstinately recuperative” (pp. 136, 138, 286). Before her departure for Talbothays, Tess speculates about renewable virginity: “Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? she would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil by-gones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone” (p. 135). In the final passage of free indirect speech here, Tess in her own solipsistic world grasps something resembling the religious dilemma that torments Angel, and she anticipates a solution to the problem of lost maidenhood. In the manuscript of the novel, Hardy made the fatal consequences of this final resolution even dearer, hav-
ing Tess acknowledge that “To carry out her once fond idea of teaching in a village school was now impossible” (p. 105). Her commitment to a premodern ethos is reinforced. For Tess, contact with Angel, image of nobility and purity, may enact the recovery of her lost innocence, though it will destroy her in the process.

The first sign of reconstructed virginity appears in the New Forest, at a great symbolic distance from the Chase, the oldest wood in England, where Tess lost her virginity. This New Forest romance will inaugurate the narrative’s “recovered Edenic sexuality,” acting like a peaceful aura that anticipates a catastrophe.55 We return here to the closure of the story of Tess’s mouth. On the sixth day of Tess and Angel’s stay in the deserted house, the caretaker spies them asleep through the partial opening of their bedroom door, one of the novel’s many carefully constructed frames. Tess and Angel are asleep at a period nearly parallel to that of the world’s creation in Genesis. In their prelapsarian doze, the caretaker sees “Tess’s lips . . . parted like a half-opened flower” (p. 442). Tess and Angel, husband and wife, are observed in bed, but they are not discovered flagrante delicto, but rather in the posture of a tableau of recovered innocence. Tess’s half-opened lips seem to index the reestablishment of her virginity. The recovery of maidenhood renews Tess’s assurance in a pre-Christian ideology focused on an organic principle of natural regeneration. From this point on, a more spiritualized and assured Tess moves in an otherworldly dream state, finally accepting her sacrificial doom at Stonehenge enfolded in a tranquil virgin sleep, one which awes even the arresting constables.

The association of reconstructed virginity and Angel’s demythologized religious reconstruction is indicated in the novel’s closing scenes, which posit a kind of sexual eschatology, a future life with erotic characteristics. As Michael Mason points out, Victorian fascination with sexual expression in the afterlife was shared by a number of millenarian religious sects, and attracted the interest of individuals as diverse as Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Brontë.56 This fascination with the possibility of a heavenly consummation of a deeply sensual love, elucidated in the Reverend G. D. Haughton’s On Sex in the World to Come (1841), may derive from “the Swedenborgian belief in the sexuality of the resurrected body.”57 Such an eschatology appealed to a broad range of religious confessions. The existence of an erotic life in the hereafter was one of the hopes of the Roman Catholic poet Coventry Patmore, who in “To the Unknown Eros”
also suggests that in the future state virginity could be regained: "'Tis there your Hymen waits!" For Patmore, all those who love God are heirs to the Palace of Virginity: "Love makes the life to be / A fount perpetual of virginity." Such eschatological assumptions sometimes took bizarre forms in the presence of a charismatic leader. The heightened sensuality awakened in revivalistic religious experience found expression in utopian aspirations, and in a mixture of license and asceticism. Mason recounts the messianic influence of John Wroe, who engaged in wild sexual excess, and then, at the end of his spiritual career at midcentury, "taught a message of millenial abstinence: for the last thousand years of the world's history the chosen people were to propagate by virgin births. At some point the Wroeites invented a bizarre ritual called the 'Law of Christ' which well expressed their ambivalence about sex. It was notionally a form of punishment for male Wroeites, but took the form of a spanking by a naked woman who held the victim's genitals, and perhaps masturbated him." Angel, who is also ambivalent about sexual matters, demands a similar "millenial abstinence" from Tess. In Tess's ecstatic language, Angel is a charismatic saint, but he enforces a disciplinary scrutiny over Tess and even over her devotion to him. Tess wishes to regain her virginity mainly for his sake.

In Tess the second sign of reconstructed virginity appears at the very end of the narrative. In one of their last conversations, just after she demands that Angel marry Liza-Lu, who is "so good and simple and pure" (p. 445), Tess pleads for an assurance that she and Angel will be reunited after death. He answers with a kiss, possibly the establishment of a new covenant or a final open acknowledgment of betrayal. His refusal to answer—"He kissed her to avoid a reply at such a time" (p. 446)—mimics Christ's silence in the face of the chief priests' search for false testimony regarding the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of the temple (Matthew 26:62). Angel's kiss and his ensuing silence seem to deny a reunion with Tess in the afterlife, though the novel's ending, pointing to the implications of its religious counterallegory, does suggest a different kind of rebuilding of the "fleshly tabernacle" as Tess calls it (p. 357). Having denied or ignored Tess's request for the certainty of a meeting after death, Angel similarly does not respond to her request that he wed Liza-Lu, who resembles Tess physically, save for being sexually inexperienced, and fulfills Tess's earlier prophetic utterance about Angel's love being for "one in my image; the one I might have been" (p. 256). Looking at the distant prison, in the novel's final scene, Angel
and Liza-Lu watch a black flag raised to indicate Tess’s hanging on the gallows, another “blot” on the beauty of the landscape (p. 449). Angel and Liza-Lu kneel together, perhaps not indicating a Christian pieta, but rather their grief for the departed Tess and their celebration of a new Tess reconstructed in the virginal younger sister, who is “a spiritualized image of Tess” (p. 448). Tess and Angel and Liza-Lu will not meet in heaven in a kind of spiritual ménage à trois, though Tess has promised “I could share you with her willingly when we are spirits!” (p. 446). Instead, Liza-Lu’s body becomes the rebuilt tabernacle of Angel’s religion of unbelief, the sign of a material resurrection in the world. With this second and final reconstruction, marking the possibility of a naturalistic, earthly resurrection, the rift in Angel’s ideology is repaired. We don’t require the assurance of another chapter detailing the couple’s future life to ensure this displaced resurrection of Tess and consequently we are spared the sign of secular resurrection in a miniature Angel and a beautiful little girl who answers to the name of Tessy. The novel ends with sexual reconstruction and a demythologized, earthbound resurrection repairing torn ideology.

Angel and Liza-Lu’s kneeling together in a final ceremony of reverence approximates a prayer for the departing spirit. Of course, perversely, Liza-Lu is to be Angel’s reward for his forbearance and his devotion to a vexed heterodoxy. She acts as his compensation for the loss of God. The child—and Liza-Lu is little more than one at the end of the novel—is an emblem for the sense of innocence, purity, and privacy that the Victorians feared they had lost in their “de-sacralised world.”62 The fallen Tess must die but the man she ostensibly has wronged is provided full “reparation,” a term Hardy used in 1892 for the closing’s poetic justice.63 Hardy said that his female readers in particular demanded such an outcome, and, in his novel, older women control the rights and regulate the exchange of virginity. Just as Tess’s mother has expected that after the virgin sacrifice, Alec will provide social reparation within the domain of marriage, so in the novel’s close near Stonehenge, on the land of her mother’s ancestors, Tess provides physical and spiritual reparation for Angel in the body of Liza-Lu. Tess’s final catastrophe has been inevitable from the novel’s inception due to the combination of restrictive social laws, anatomical ignorance, the determination of gender and genre, and old-fashioned bad luck. Tess herself has willed and orchestrated this union of her godlike lover and her sister, and Angel will be the preserver of the chastity of the reconstructed Tess. As
we learn earlier, when, reflecting on the irregularity of Sorrow’s christening and the baby’s ultimate fate, Tess reasons “that if Providence would not ratify such an act of approximation she, for one, did not value the kind of heaven lost by the irregularity” (p. 131). The novel’s final act of approximation reconstructs a lost heaven on earth with a reestablished humanity. Responding to the earthly consolation afforded a husband through marriage to his wife’s sister,\(^6\) the novel attempts a substitution of traditional social norms for religious tenets.

The representation of virginity in Tess indicates the late-Victorian attitude to sexual purity and the strange accommodations some were prepared to make to police the public and safeguard the private domains near the turn of the century. In the anatomized body of Hardy’s text, we may locate the reconstructions necessitated by social demands for female purity and rational belief, and Tess’s reconstruction bears a curious similarity to what Hardy called his “reconstruction” of the text of the “mutilated” novel after the rejection of the manuscript in its “[un]intact” state.\(^6\) Furthermore, the attempt to construct a material and sexual replacement for abandoned religious faith creates a somewhat bizarre consolation. The reconstruction of Tess’s virginity in the New Forest and in the person of Liza-Lu compensates Angel for his lost faith. The liminal body of Hardy’s reconstructed “pure woman” substitutes for the numinous body of the transcendent, resurrected Christ. Tess’s narrative logic or illogic leads to this final material substitution, a seemingly improbable and impossible conclusion demonstrating the contortions demanded by the genuine angst of Victorian apostasy.

NOTES

1 Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d’Urbervilles, A Pure Woman, New Wessex Edition pbk. (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 163. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text, as will references to the MS of the novel housed at the British Museum (British Museum Additional MS 38,182).


3 Oliphant, p. 205.


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5 Dianne Fallon Sadoff, for example, argues that “the scene of ‘defloration’ is central, regardless of whether it is narratively ‘seen’ or figured by synecdoche” (“Looking at Tess: The Female Figure in Two Narrative Media,” in The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993], pp. 149–71, 155).


7 Fraser Harrison and James R. Kincaid have explored the connections between Tess and Victorian pornography, though they do not consider this material’s anxiety about misreading or reconstructing virginity [Harrison, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality [London: Sheldon Press, 1977], and Kincaid, Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture [New York: Routledge, 1992]].

8 Jan Jedrzejewski, Thomas Hardy and the Church (Houndmills UK: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 105, 154.


11 Hardy’s later revisions rendered Tess a more passive victim and gave theological weight to Angel’s position, shaping him as a more introspective and articulate apostate (see Jacobus, pp. 328–32), but the revisions widened the gap between the tale of peasant fallenness and the epic meditation on apostasy.


13 Jane Ellice Hopkins deployed the notion of prostitution as a necessary safeguard for the purity of home and hearth, attacking women’s acceptance of such an amoral compromise based on the myth of the ungovernable male libido. She warned of “the deep inner debasement of accepting the degrada-
tion of other women as a safeguard to our own virtue and of basing the purity of the Christian home on the ruined bodies and souls of the children of the poor." Evoking the figure of the hortus conclusus, or the enclosed garden of virginity, Hopkins advocated a new ideal of the virginal woman: "not the old sheltered garden, but a strong city of God" (qtd. in Susan Mumm, "Ellice Hopkins and the Defaced Image of Christ," in Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers, ed. Julie Melnyk [New York: Garland, 1998], pp. 165–86, 177–9).


18 Tait, pp. 228–9.


22 Deborah Anna Logan, Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 82.

23 Attention to the economic and class-based anxieties surrounding discussions of sexuality has predominated in more recent Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian accounts of Victorian sexuality. This third phase of writing about Victorian sexuality follows the initial Bloomsburyite debunking of Victorian repression, which was updated in the 1960s and ‘70s. See, for example, Lynda Nead’s account of visual representations of cultural patterns in Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), and Michael Mason’s statistically detailed


27 Judith R. Walkowitz, Prostitution, p. 246.


31 See Caroline G. Mercer and Sarah D. Wangensteen, “Consumption, heart-disease, or whatever’: Chlorosis, a Heroine’s Illness in The Wings of the Dove,” Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 40, 3 (July 1985): 259–85, 259–60, 263. While James’s notes express disgust at the vulgar notion of a sexual remedy for Milly’s illness, the novel suggests some accommodation of the sexual and the spiritual in that illness. Kate believes Milly craves love, and the vulgarity of Kate’s moral compromise in the pursuit of Milly’s wealth is significant partly by her offering Densher her own maiden-
hood on the eve of his final seduction of Milly. Kate and Densher know “how ill a man, and even a woman could feel” from “prolonged and exasperated” sexual longing (James, The Wings of the Dove, ed. John Bayley [1902; rpt. London: Penguin, 1986], p. 253), but the sexual act effectively ends their relationship, whereas the foreclosed consummation of Densher’s growing love for Milly heightens his regard. After her death, the idea of seizing her money is debasing for Densher and it becomes a fee for services rendered, and the embodiment of Milly’s virginity. Densher will not accept the implied violation in Milly’s money, and embraces instead the intimations of the spiritual dove. (Such intimations, an awareness of a survival of human consciousness after death, James wrote about in “Is There a Life after Death?” in In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life, by W. D. Howells et al. [New York: Arno Press, 1977], pp. 199–233.) Like Tess and Angel, Kate and Densher have resembled “children of a supercivilised age” (p. 379), “an age so proud of its short way with false gods” (pp. 105–6). In this age of transition, like Angel, Densher, who is the son of a British chaplain, locates religious wonder in the numinous form of the aesthetized female. Densher in future we assume will meditate on the white, virginal form of the departed and her never-to-be-read words of acknowledgment.

32 Jackson, pp. 16, 42.


34 Harrison, pp. 268–71, 270.

35 Kincaid, pp. 320–38.


38 My Secret Life, p. 129. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

39 [Jack Saul], The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, or the Recollections of a Mary-Ann, with Short Essays on Sodomy and Tribadism, 2 vols. (London: Privately Printed, 1881), 2:83. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.


42 Simpson, p. 104.


45 Stead, “The Maiden Tribute.—II,” p. 3.

According to Penguin, Kaja Silverman, “History, Figuration, and Female Subjectivity in Tess of the d’Urbervilles,” Novel 18, 1 (Fall 1984): 5–28, 27. I am indebted to Silverman’s argument in this passage. Angel’s sexual anxieties may also be a consequence of other factors. Angel exemplifies Acton’s “semi-continent” man who has mixed self-denial and self-indulgence (Functions and Disorders, p. 17). According to Acton’s pathology of desire in his popular Functions and Disorders, Angel may suffer the ill effects of early sexual excess, intellectual overapplication, and impure thoughts. Angel’s forty-eight-hour erotic encounter with a stranger would constitute for Acton the type of severe “sexual shock” that depletes and disorders the reproductive system, stimulating still more destructive erotic imaginings (Functions and Disorders, p. 98). Furthermore, Angel may be predisposed to one of the enervating effects of “hard study” in spermatorrhoea, or uncontrolled semen loss (Functions and Disorders, p. 147). Finally, his erotic fantasies about Tess during their belated engagement may have adversely affected him, because long engagements and “[d]isappointment in love or misplaced affections are frequently attended with most painful sexual consequences” such as physical weakness, morbid anxieties about lost virility, and impotence (Functions and Disorders, p. 143).

Collins, p. 135. On images of impotence and castration anxiety see Kaja Silverman, “History, Figuration, and Female Subjectivity in Tess of the d’Urbervilles,” Novel 18, 1 (Fall 1984): 5–28, 27. I am indebted to Silverman’s argument in this passage. Angel’s sexual anxieties may also be a consequence of other factors. Angel exemplifies Acton’s “semi-continent” man who has mixed self-denial and self-indulgence (Functions and Disorders, p. 17). According to Acton’s pathology of desire in his popular Functions and Disorders, Angel may suffer the ill effects of early sexual excess, intellectual overapplication, and impure thoughts. Angel’s forty-eight-hour erotic encounter with a stranger would constitute for Acton the type of severe “sexual shock” that depletes and disorders the reproductive system, stimulating still more destructive erotic imaginings (Functions and Disorders, p. 98). Furthermore, Angel may be predisposed to one of the enervating effects of “hard study” in spermatorrhoea, or uncontrolled semen loss (Functions and Disorders, p. 147). Finally, his erotic fantasies about Tess during their belated engagement may have adversely affected him, because long engagements and “[d]isappointment in love or misplaced affections are frequently attended with most painful sexual consequences” such as physical weakness, morbid anxieties about lost virility, and impotence (Functions and Disorders, p. 143).

Jacobs, p. 334.


Angel negates the lines of Pippa’s famous song of praise in Robert Browning’s “Pippa Passes”: “God’s not in his heaven: all’s wrong with the world!” (p. 298). Angel’s emendations emphasize the lines’ ironic context, following as they do Ottima and Sebald’s discussion of their passionate crime, and preceding Sebald’s sudden revulsion at his lover’s face: “the blank cheek hangs listless” (Robert Browning, “Pippa Passes,” in The Poems of Browning, vol. 2, ed. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin [London: Longman, 1991], pp. 17–105, 41). Like Angel, Sebald asserts his devotion to purity and his disdain for the pretense of virtue: “Though I be lost, / I know which is the better, never fear, / Of vice or virtue, purity or lust, / Nature, or trick” (Robert Browning, p. 42).

Hands, p. 114.

Sadoff, p. 157.

Mason, Attitudes, pp. 27–8.


Patmore, p. 334.

Mason, Attitudes, p. 136.
Angel earlier informed his father, quoting from the Letter to the Hebrews 12:27, of his disdain for the temporary and fallible in favor of “those things which cannot be shaken” (p. 154). The passage from Hebrews, however, stresses the unshakable kingdom of heaven and the supremacy of faith in the new covenant established on the promise of the resurrection. Angel’s commitment to absolute principles and ideal presences, the “hard logical deposit” in his belief system (p. 284), centers on an admiration of “spotlessness” and purity (p. 267), but unshakable, spotless purity rests for the religious skeptic Angel in the real presence of physical virginity. The reestablishment of his covenant with Tess must be corporeal and material, a “corporeal presence” and not the “corporeal absence” he seems to prefer (p. 287).


Marriage to a sister-in-law was illegal until passage of the Deceased Wife’s Sister Act of 1907 (Boumelha, pp. 125–6).