The Short Stories of the 1890s

The short stories of Hardy really constitute the neglected area of his protean literary oeuvre. Although marginalized by readers and critics alike, some of these stories are significant in representing ideas in embryo, in tentative rehearsing of themes to be fully explored in the later novels. Thus, 'The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid' (1883), with its comic denouement, is an anticipation of *Tess* (1891) where 'Hardy looks unconditionally at the worst contingencies' because 'Tess is Margery carried to a frighteningly right conclusion'.1 The writing of *Tess* seems to have sensitized Hardy to the pain and pathos of a woman's position in patriarchal society where it is always the woman who is forced to 'pay'. Despite modern critical readings of unconscious betrayals of voyeurism in Hardy's treatment of Tess, it is surely transparent to the average (and less sophisticated) reader that Hardy's emotional investment in Tess is both sincere and unalloyed. Hardy confessed to George Douglas: 'I am so truly glad that Tess the Woman has won your affections. I too lost my heart to her as I went on with her history';2 to Thomas Macquoid he lamented, 'I am glad you like Tess – though I have not been able to put on paper all that she is, or was, to me'.3 This is not merely the expression of a common artistic regret of execution failing to match the original brilliance of conception; it also reveals a personal commitment to Tess, who becomes for Hardy not just an imaginative fictional construct but an intimate flesh-and-blood acquaintance.

The experience of writing *Tess*, more than any other novel, helped Hardy emotionally to transcend gender boundaries; and in the wake of its (partial) composition,4 he seems to have been left with a powerful, residual, intuitive sympathy for women which spilled over into the six short stories that he wrote for *Graphic*. These six stories ('Barbara of the House of Grebe', 'The Marchioness of Stonehenge', 'Lady Mottisfont', 'The Lady Icenway', 'Squire Petrick's Lady' and...
‘Anna, Lady Baxby’), along with four other previously published stories, were later gathered together as *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891). Although the ostensible narrators of these vignettes of the aristocratic past are the male members of the Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club, a powerful feminine point of view does emerge from these women-centred stories. This is hardly surprising in the context of a remarkable statement made by Hardy in his letter of 21 October 1891 to W. E. Henley, in response to the latter’s editorial request for a story: ‘Now – would you not rather wait till some time (late) next year? I am pregnant of several Noble Dames (this is an unnatural reversal I know, but my constitution is getting mixed) – I mean I have thought of several more sketches of that sort’ (my italics). For a male author to use the metaphor of ‘mothering’ a text is very unusual indeed because, as Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, ‘all-pervasive in Western literary civilization’ is ‘the patriarchal notion that the writer “fathers” his text just as God fathered the world’, ‘through the use of the phallic pen on the “pure space” of the virgin page’.

In a majority of the stories of *A Group of Noble Dames* and *Life’s Little Ironies* (1894) Hardy’s major preoccupation is with the theme of marital incompatibility and the consequent loneliness and frustration of women trapped in emotionally sterile marriages. Having no other avenue of self-fulfilment, marriage becomes the be-all and end-all of a woman’s existence. Sometimes, as in the case of Betty Dornell (‘The First Countess of Wessex’), she is pushed into marriage by her ambitious and scheming mother at the tender age of 13 when she is too ignorant of its full implications. Even with the relatively maturer heroines, marriage seems to be a pressing economic necessity that does not take into account individual predilections. Revealing the naked economic compulsion beneath the decorous surface of love and romance (in a spirit that recalls Jane Austen) the narrator in ‘An Imaginative Woman’ tries to analyse Ella Marchmill’s unthinking mismating. The dreamy poetic Ella has married the unsentimental ‘gunmaker’, William Marchmill, because:

the necessity of getting life-leased at all cost, a cardinal virtue which all good mothers teach, kept her from thinking of it at all till she had closed with William, had passed the honeymoon, and