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The Question of ‘Woman’

Among the questions agitating men’s minds in this age of transi­
tion between the old world of thought and faith and custom, so
rapidly disappearing, and the new world scarcely yet visible in its
rudiments beneath the tide of change and destruction, there are
none that go deeper to the very roots of our social life than those
touching the relations between the sexes, and the position
assigned to women in the family and in the State. For centuries
those relations had been considered fixed as the law of nature
itself and too sacred to be touched by profane hands; but, of late
years, they have shared the fate of other revered institutions and
have become open questions, to be tried as freely as any others in
the ruthless crucible of doubt and analysis. (Grey, 1879: 672)

The period of Hardy’s writing career is dominated by a battle
over the signifier ‘Woman’ or what came to be known in the popular
press as the ‘Woman Question’. Central to the issue of the ‘Woman
Question’ was the recognition that the word ‘Woman’, in common
with other previously ordained and fixed versions of reality,
was itself a question, an interrogation so composed as to elicit
answers, an absence waiting to be filled. New sets of material
relations – such as were established by the changing economic,
social and political position of women during the second half
of the nineteenth century – offered the possibility for the constitu­
tion of new feminine subject positions which challenged those
established by the essentialist discourse of sociobiology and opened
up a gap of dissatisfaction between the interests of individual
women and the position of subject offered by the dominant
discourse of femininity. The proliferation of meanings surrounding
the signifier ‘Woman’ was symptomatic of the increasing insistence
on the part of the large section of the population whose subjectivity
was constructed by the term to generate new definitions and possib­
ilities – new answers to the question ‘Woman’ – which challenged
those already formulated by nineteenth-century patriarchal
value structures.1

J. Thomas, *Thomas Hardy, Femininity and Dissent*
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Anti-essentialist manifestations of feminism challenged and interrogated contemporary notions of a singular identity or ‘true self’ based on innate gender characteristics through the production and deployment of the subjugated and devalued knowledge of women which was seen as marginal to the discourses which constructed femininity. The feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century was engaged in two mutually dependent processes: taking advantage of new opportunities for women in order to posit different ways of understanding femininity; and fighting for an even greater extension of rights, justice and liberties to women in order to facilitate that process. Activists like John Stuart Mill, Mona Caird and Millicent Garrett Fawcett focused not on Natural Law but on the power of the social process to determine gender and recognised that men’s domination of that process had shaped femininity according to a definition of truth that supported a patriarchal order. Hardy’s Literary Notebooks show that periodicals such as the Saturday Review, the Fortnightly Review and the Nineteenth Century provided him with an endless fund of information, opinion and anecdote. These periodicals functioned as a forum for debate on subjects related to the general emancipation of women as well as containing reviews and notices of works such as John Stuart Mill’s On the Subjection of Women and articles clearly informed by the ideas of leading contributors to the ‘Woman Question’. In this way, Hardy’s literary intervention in the question of ‘Woman’ can be seen to be shaped by the prevailing crisis in femininity itself.

The dominant evolutionary discourse derived from Darwin and Spencer regarded the social order as an extension of a fixed natural order whose telos was the continuing progress of the human species. Consistent attempts were made to fix gender identity in a way that fully supported patriarchal capitalism, through an appeal to ‘Natural Law’. Darwin advanced his theory of sexual selection in The Descent of Man (1871) where he displayed a tendency to construct ‘Woman’ in the light of anthropological evidence. This tendency was imitated by those concerned to prove that her apparent inferiority to man was a necessary condition of progress. Ignoring woman’s limited educational opportunities, Darwin concluded that ‘man’s decided eminence over women in many subjects’ was sufficient evidence of an inherent mental and intellectual superiority in the male which had been preserved and augmented by natural selection (Descent, 2: 329). Women were compensated by their greater tenderness and altruistic tendencies which were directly