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*SUMMARY*

# WOMEN AND SEXUALITY IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND: THE CASE OF THOMAS HARDY'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

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The burgeoning interest in women's sexuality in nineteenth century England has enriched our understanding and perception of the nature of women's lives in the Victorian period. The ideology of separate spheres served as a discourse which trapped women in a restrictive role within the home. In this context, female sexuality propriety was regarded as crucial to the safeguarding of respectability and family welfare. Debates on female sexuality were multifarious. Thus, while contemporary literature emphasized the value of female purity and submissiveness by purporting the ideal of womanhood through the image of the Angel in the house, the discussions surrounding the Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866 and 1869) triggered a palpable concern as to the disruptive nature of female sexuality. Amply discussed in medical literature, women's sexuality in the nineteenth century was perceived as either inexistent or excessive, an image which reinforced the depiction of women as divided between two different poles: angel/fallen woman, pure/whore. Trapped in an ideology which deemed the free expression of female sexuality as confined within the institution of marriage and obeying patriarchal authority, with the sole purpose of procreation, the Victorian woman had only one limited choice: that of submissively accepting a limited and constricting social role. This acceptance of a cloistering space was proliferated in the conduct books of the period which encouraged the Victorian woman to exercise the internalized modes of discipline that had created the docile female body demanded by the patriarchal system.

If free expression of female sexuality was suppressed, the same discourse of censorship was applied to the literary creations of the nineteenth century. Censorship extended to fiction; writers were forced to purge their texts of any sexual nuance. Out of this clash between excessive prudishness and overt display of bawdiness (pornographic literature, prostitution, perversions), between the writers' modifying their works as to attune themselves to the sensibilities of the blushing reading public, Thomas Hardy offered portrayals of dauntless, rebellious women in his novels, attacking at the same

time the institution of marriage and the double standards with such frankness that he was immediately accused by critics and straitlaced readers alike.

The thesis entitled *Women and Sexuality in Victorian England: The Case of Thomas Hardy's Female Characters* offers a thorough analysis of women's sexuality in nineteenth century England taking as case study Hardy's female characters in an attempt to demonstrate that the Victorian writer challenged the patriarchal views on female sexuality and gender by foregrounding through his portrayals sexually-assertive women who strive to find a voice of their own, to mould their identity disregarding the cloistered space in which they had to lead their existence. Thomas Hardy created in his novels a vast territory of struggles for power and dominance, where men seek to impose their will and force upon women who, more often than not, reverse themselves the dominant/submissive hierarchy in their struggle for empowerment. In a period in which it was "difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs" (Hardy, FFMC 327), Hardy emphasized the sexual impulses that govern the human being and challenged the prescribed ideas according to which women lacked passion and erotic drive. In order to grasp a thorough image of the Victorian woman's sexuality as reflected in Hardy's novels, we have chosen to undertake an in-depth analysis of the female characters in all his novels (*Desperate Remedies, Under the Greenwood Tree, A Pair of Blue Eyes, Far from the Madding Crowd, The Hand of Ethelberta, The Return of the Native, The Trumpet-Major, A Laodicean, Two on a Tower, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure, The Well-Beloved*).

Thomas Hardy's work has lent itself, over the years, to multifarious interpretations, as the explosion of critical theories offered fertile ground for the investigation and categorization of his female characters. Being well-served by a series of critical lenses, i.e. materialist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and especially feminist, there seemed little ground to be re-explored in his novels. This research has therefore used a critical approach which has been neglected in the investigation of Hardy's female character: the Foucauldian lenses.

Michel Foucault's notions of the technologies of power, the institutionalization of techniques of confinement, surveillance and discipline or the "repressive hypothesis"

have been thoroughly explored and applied to the reading of Hardy's novels. The lenses employed in this thesis are 'extracted' from Foucault's work – most predominantly the *History of Sexuality*, volume I and *Discipline and Punish*, together with collections of his interviews: Colin Gordon's *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977* (1980), Lawrence D. Kritzman's *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (1988), Sylvère Lotringer's *Foucault Live. Interviews 1961-1984* (1996), James D. Faubion și Paul Rabinow - *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* etc.

The first chapter entitled "*The discourse of Victorian sexuality: a Foucauldian interpretation*" presents and explains Foucault's theoretical tools, concepts which are used in the analysis of Hardy's female characters, starting with one theory which updated the field of Victorian cultural studies. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), volume I, Foucault challenged the "repressive hypothesis" according to which the bourgeois society, through its power/knowledge mechanisms, repressed sexuality. Foucault argues that the discourse of Victorian sexual repression had functioned as a pervasive cultural myth which shrouded the Victorians' attitude toward sex in silence and secrecy. Against this background of confined, repressed and suppressed sexuality, Foucault introduced another theory, according to which discourse about sex flourished in the nineteenth century. Hence sex, sexual drives desires, far from being muted, silenced, were transformed by the Victorians into a different discourse, so that the nineteenth century marked the moment when sexuality actually came into being and constituted itself as a power relationship. Foucault credited the Victorians and their sexuality with greater complexity than the repressive hypothesis had allowed.

Further on, the chapter analyses the theory of the body as revealed by Foucault's works, articles and essays. The close reading of his theories has shown that Foucault charted the body as a site of surveillance, conceptualized in and shaped by discourse, an object of sexual observation and control, created by society. Reinventing the body as a sort of device operated and controlled within a system of power/knowledge, Foucault conceptualized the body as being constantly surveilled and manoeuvred, controlled and disciplined, similarly to a complicated machine that could be dismembered, analyzed and re-assembled.

Foucault's theory on the body has proved useful in the further analysis of the Victorian woman's sexuality, as it revealed the reading of the female body and the woman's sexual desire as regulated, investigated, under constant surveillance. According to Foucault, the medicalization of the female body in the nineteenth century and its reconfiguring into an object of study was typical for the veil of hypocrisy that characterized the Victorian society.

Before investigating women's sexuality in the nineteenth century and, by extension, Hardy's female characters, other Foucauldian lenses have been analyzed in this chapter: the discourses of surveillance and power. Sexuality and surveillance are interdependent in the context of a thorough analysis of the Victorian female body. According to Foucault, surveillance consists of a series of processes concerned with the close examination of people and of the spaces they inhabit. Furthermore, surveillance is enacted via a disciplinary dispositif, a sort of laboratory where individuals can be trained, corrected and where their behaviour is attuned through disciplinary techniques, which turn the body into a docile one. In Foucault's line of thinking, the techniques which allow the surveillance of the operations enacted upon the body are called disciplines. Taking as a model the prison imagined by Jeremy Bentham, Foucault uses in his work entitled *Discipline and Punish* the term Panopticon, through which he reveals the tendency of modern societies to observe, investigate and examine the body. Punishment is also transformed, reconfigured: thus, it changes from an atrocious spectacle, i.e. the punishment of the body, to the punishment of the soul via a series of surveillance and punishment techniques. Taking these coordinates into consideration, the thesis has envisaged the Victorian society as a sort of panopticon. By extension, this metaphor has also been used in the analysis of the woman's status in the Victorian period. Thus, through a strict mechanism of disciplinary techniques and methods of surveillance, the Victorian woman was cloistered and her body was enclosed, recognized as inferior, as other, hence a target of disciplinary practices. The metaphor of the Panopticon has therefore served as the appropriate medium for the investigation of the Victorian woman, whose behaviour was constantly under surveillance as to establish whether the female body transgressed the norms of Victorian morality or not.

Further on, Foucault's notion of power as productive of discourse and pleasure enables us to challenge the characterizations of the repressive forces that supposedly

operated in the Victorian era. For instance, the regulations around female sexuality in Victorian England should not be envisaged as simply repressive but, according to Foucault's concept of power, they should also be understood as productive and positive. Foucault defined power as circulating and articulating itself in a network and he refused any specific localization of power suggesting that it can be found everywhere. Power, in Foucault's line of thought, does not belong to someone, to a dominant class or a sovereign, but on the contrary, power is to be perceived as a phenomenon which circulates among the dominant and the submissive as well. Being assigned to the private sphere diminished the woman's role in the society, but it also created woman her own space of power with significant social and domestic roles and functions. To demonstrate this, a corpus of texts from the Victorian period has been used in the analysis of the Victorian woman: documents, conduct books, essays and letters. Moreover, Foucault's examination of power relations has revealed the ways in which these relations of power produce particular types of identities. The investigation of power relations in Hardy's novels has offered spectacular effects of altering and reversing the dominant/submissive, master/slave relations.

The three main coordinates which have been used in the investigation of Hardy's female characters are sexuality, power and surveillance. Together, these Foucauldian lenses have revealed the sexual dynamics present in the Victorian author's novels and the fact that both sexuality and surveillance of the body generate power relations which set the characters into a continuous struggle of defining their role in the society. More often than not, female characters in Hardy's novels manage to reverse the oppositional pair dominant/submissive, presenting traits which have been traditionally associated with the masculine side; however, this fissure they enact into the rigid structure of the patriarchal system brings about their punishment and, in most of the cases studied, their death.

The next four chapters constitute themselves into a thorough analysis of Hardy's female characters using the Foucauldian lenses. Foucault's theories on sexuality, power and surveillance have been moulded as to reveal Hardy's actually challenging the patriarchal views on female sexuality and his exploration of the feminine identity and female sexual desire.

The second chapter, entitled "*Woman as a de-sexualized object*", has proposed an analysis of Hardy's female characters starting from Foucault's use of the term *de-sexualization* in one of his interviews. In Foucault's line of thought, the movement of de-sexualization emerged in the nineteenth century and represented a fissure in the dominant discourse regarding women's status, a fissure which actually triggered the empowerment of women, thus being considered a strategy of resistance. Therefore one interpretation of Hardy's female characters perceived as de-sexualized has stressed the ways in which women empower themselves in order to interact, to speak the same language as the other sex. However, taking into account the discourse of prudishness and sexual repression which permeated the patriarchal Victorian society, the term has also been used to investigate the Victorian woman as passive, perceived as lacking a sexual body, submitted to male control, hence a docile body.

The first aspect analyzed in this chapter has been the way in which de-sexualization leads to the social victimization of women and hence their being portrayed as victims of patriarchal oppression. Treated as a commodity, as an object in which money had been invested, the female body is trained to become docile and is moulded on the patriarchal model, Hardy revealing at this point women's difficulty in thinking or acting outside the dominant discourse. Manipulated into submissiveness, the female body was regularly put to the test of discipline and had to constantly prove its usefulness.

Grace Melbury's life is regulated from within the patriarchal community as she is ascribed throughout the novel a fixed place by her father and by her two suitors. Lucetta Templeman and Felice Charmond are perceived as de-sexualized in connection to their obsession with the transformations of their ageing bodies, interpreted by the two women as no longer useful, no longer practical and unable to serve the society, hence abnormal and unacceptable. Viviette Constantine's body is also re-configured by the male gaze as de-sexualized and desensualized. Arabella Dunn transforms herself into a de-sexualized, repugnant object, with a body that lacks discipline. Elfride Swancourt is yet another woman who is constructed by her lover as undisciplined, hence in need of being tamed.

The second aspect analyzed in this chapter is represented by Hardy's female characters who resort to self-mutilation in order to regain control over their bodies by

de-sexualizing it. Sexuality becomes, in this context, a burden for women, who reinvent their bodies through punishment or disfigurement. Marty South cuts and sells her hair and thus recreates a ritual of punishment. Equating her physicality with tragedy, Tess Durbeyfield opts for an imposed disfigurement by mercilessly nipping her eyebrows off, recreating her body from an object of admiration to one of ridicule. Further on, Tess willingly undertakes a form of physical and psychological torture, exhausting herself through work and returning to Alec as his submissive mistress. Both Sue Bridehead and Elfride Swancourt are configured by men as infantilized, lacking a sexual body, hence eliciting a paternalistic behaviour.

The last aspect discussed in this chapter provides a reading of de-sexualization as a strategy used by women to gain agency. In the process, the woman may be interpreted as 'masculine' because she finds within herself a repository of energy and resilience to struggle (which is mostly a male prerogative) against the social injustice and hence to shape her life. Ethelberta Petherwin breaks down the public/private divide by using a subterfuge in order to penetrate a male-dominated arena and thus she reconfigures her identity and becomes visible. Assuming the role of the patriarchal father in her family and forging herself an alternative identity, the woman transgresses the boundaries and takes on the masculine attributes that characterize the public sphere, thus becoming an/other, an abnormal type of woman for the society in which she lived. Sue Bridehead, constantly reconfigured by Jude as a child, hence perceived as de-sexualized by him, represents Hardy's most ferocious voice in his attacks of the institution of marriage. Hence she encapsulates both interpretations of the term de-sexualization: the de-sexualized woman as sexless and the de-sexualized woman as empowered.

These analyses have shown that the female body in Hardy's novels is reconfigured by male characters as de-sexualized in order to maintain their control and power over them. In a society dominated by men, the restrictions imposed unto the female body restricted women's freedom. Female sexuality was controlled and any excess of sexuality was perceived as an aberration. By appropriating Foucault's theory of the docile body, the analysis of the female characters has revealed that a de-sexualized body is more often than not powerless, easy to manipulate and train into internalizing the prerequisites of the patriarchal norms. Subjected to a process of inferiorization, control and treated as a commodity, the female body becomes a site of

male domination. However, de-sexualization, as Foucault pointed out, also represents a method of empowerment, an image present in Hardy's novels through those female characters who struggle to gain agency and penetrate the public sphere.

The close reading of Hardy's novels has shown that the woman has to pay the price of this empowerment and her movement from the private sphere to the public one, through unhappiness or death. Written in a period witnessing women's struggle for equality and emancipation, Hardy's novels have proved to contain crystallizations of women who threaten to destabilize the stable patriarchal power structure.

The third chapter, entitled "*Woman as a surveilled object*", has used Foucault's theory of the gaze and the panoptic society in an attempt to demonstrate that Hardy's female characters were depicted as being trapped in a regime of surveillance and confinement. Hardy's Wessex and its inhabitants have been reconfigured in the present thesis as a Panopticon which inscribed women's behaviour by inspecting, judging and disciplining their transgressions. Female characters are more often than not depicted as inmates in the Panopticon, vulnerable 'prisoners' in the matrix of surveillance, expected to obey social codes. Using the Foucauldian lens, the male sexual gaze has been reconfigured as endowed with a power/knowledge relation that confers power to the gazer. The main characteristic of the male sexual gaze is that it dominates; domination implies control over the female body, which is thus transformed into an object of contemplation.

The first aspect related to the gaze discussed in this chapter is represented by the sexual gaze, which penetrates the object of its examination and hence it becomes a tool used by men to objectify the female body. The dissecting gaze of desire engulfs both the watcher and the watched in Foucauldian spirals of power and pleasure, thus triggering a powerful schema of control in which seeing, watching, inspecting and being seen, examined represent the main ingredients in the characters' struggle for power. Grace Melbury and Elfride Swancourt are constantly reconfigured by the male gaze, be it paternalistic (their father's) or lustful (their suitors') as mere spectacles; however, the woman may also reconfigure herself as an observer by reversing the dominant/submissive relation when she internalizes herself the power of the gaze and manages to use it. Bathsheba Everdene exposes her body in a male environment and thus

becomes the target of either a lustful or a disciplining male gaze. The male gaze sexualizes Tess Durbeyfield's body to the point of erotic ecstasy. Becoming a public spectacle, Tess's body is oppressed by the gaze cast upon her and is depicted as a site marked by masculine dominance. Hardy offered spectacular effects triggered by the power of the gaze in his first novel *Desperate Remedies*, whose female protagonist, Cytherea Graye, internalizes the male gaze which anesthetizes her to the point of total surrender. Paula Power's body is configured by those who are watching her, but with the three men who are peeping at her body, the reader feels the intrusion of another pair of eyes, i.e. his own, as the reader becomes himself a spy in a series of spies.

The second aspect discussed in this chapter deals with Foucault's concept of the mirror gaze, according to which the mirror itself becomes a site, a space of both surveillance and control. Felice Charmond internalizes her own gaze as cast in the mirror in which her younger counterpart Grace Melbury was also reflected. By entering what Foucault calls a "placeless place" (Foucault, Different Spaces, 179), the woman reconstitutes her own self and ends up by dominating it. Grace Melbury occupies two different positions in her watching posture: that of a subject who sees and dominates the man, reconfiguring him as an object of contemplation (and thus inversing the dominant/submissive relation) and that of an object of contemplation herself, when she internalizes the man's gaze and thus losing her initial position of control and domination. In this reading, visibility becomes a trap which encloses women in the male's reflection. Cytherea Graye and Elfride Swancourt become entrapped in a different type of reflection, i.e. the one provided by the surface of the water. Water becomes a sort of mirror and the two female characters helplessly become part of a structure that implies their presence both inside and outside the medium of their objectification. The mirror may also act as a site of punishment, such as in the case of Arabella Dunn, who is gazed at by Jude while exhibiting her moments of artificiality. Elizabeth Jane casts the gaze in a mirror upon her own body and thus exercises surveillance over herself, reconfiguring herself as a docile, obedient body.

The last feature of the Foucauldian gaze discussed in this chapter is represented by its disciplinatory nuance. In Hardy's novels, discipline is also enacted through the gaze of the community, of the villagers who inspect and seek to punish any transgression of the individual who is trying to jeopardize the solidity of the respectable society. The

'deviant' female characters discussed in this chapter are perceived as threats by the villagers who consider that it is their unwritten obligation to regularize, discipline and punish any abnormal infringement. Eustacia Vye is recreated through the gaze of the heath dwellers as a witch, i.e. a non-woman, an anomaly that threatens to disturb the calm of the community. Trapped in her own panopticon (represented by Egdon Heath), she is the perfect embodiment of Foucault's perception of the body as regulated by a disciplining gaze which seeks to transform her into a docile body. Elizabeth Jane acts as part of the community when casting her disciplining gaze on Lucetta, on her father and on the man she loves. She is the watcher in the central tower of the panopticon as she is often depicted as gazing at the world from her window.

Foucault's theory of the gaze as a disciplinary tool endowed with power posits that the viewer, the watcher is a representation of power. In the panopticon, the object of the gaze is represented as incarcerated and entrapped, while both watcher and watched, viewer and viewed are drawn into a relation of power and subjugation. The Victorian society was par excellence a patriarchal one, characterized by an asymmetrical, unequal system of power relations between men and women. Despite his living and writing in this environment, Hardy criticised throughout his novels the patriarchal system which marginalized women, denying them any sexual autonomy. By endowing his female characters with the gaze, i.e. with a representation of power, Hardy challenged traditional stereotypes concerning femininity. Even though his female characters are constantly subjected to a disciplining and objectifying gaze, he also offers instantiations in which some women resist its power and even objectify men in their turn. Empowered with the gaze, the female characters are depicted as challenging the system of binaries, as reversing the established power structures, inspecting in their turn a society which limited their actions. However, these situations are only transitory: the female characters are depicted in a position of power for a limited time, a short moment which does not allow them to overthrow, to reverse the panopticon which entraps them. Women cannot fully escape their role of objects of contemplation and they can only attain a role of power momentarily. Hardy presents them as capable of revolting against the limits they had been imposed, as able to resist the invisibility in which they had been cast, however he acknowledges that the 'rule of the father', i.e. the patriarchal system does not permit

transgressions of any kind. The woman cannot escape the Eye of power which is bound up with male control.

The fourth chapter, entitled "*Woman as a dismembered body*" has taken the metaphor of symbolical *dismemberment* as an extension of the effect of text fragmentation, alteration, modification, hence dismemberment to which Victorian writers were subjected in order to purge any sexual connotations and nuances from their works as to turn them palatable for the reading public. Hardy did not escape the censorship of the period and he was forced to bowdlerize his novels for serial publication. Therefore the metaphor of dismemberment has been used in the analysis of Hardy's novels and revealed, through its use, a double interpretation of the female character: on the one hand, as agent, initiator of symbolical dismemberment, the woman is perceived as a threat by men and by the community at large due to her insatiable, predatory sexual nature. On the other hand, the woman may be herself symbolically dismembered, which leads to the fragmentation of her own self. As more often than not these two perspectives intertwine in Hardy's novels, we may say that the metaphor of dismemberment has perfectly revealed the characters as permanently negotiating their boundaries and struggling to achieve the dominant position. Perceived as a threat by the patriarchal society, the woman's sexual desire may turn her into an aggressor who is constantly transgressing the limits and is forcefully initiating the power struggle, whereas the one in the position of the submissive struggles to maintain the control or regain his/her initial position.

The woman as agent of dismemberment simply refuses to remain passive in a world which deems her as subordinate to man. However, renunciation of the status of passivity leads to punishment, translated in Hardy's novels through the death of the heroine, a moment which re-establishes order within the patriarchal system. Starting from Foucault's discussion on public executions in *Discipline and Punish*, which emphasized the idea that the dismembered body parts of the victim were assigned a certain meaning and that they represented instruments for communication within the 'spectacle' of the scaffold itself, the first aspect discussed in this chapter is related to those instantiations in which female characters in Hardy's novels transgress the norms of Victorian morality and act as sexual predators that devour the man to the point of his emasculation. Viviette Constantine performs *le supplice* at the level of the man's head

when she cuts a lock of hair, symbolically depriving him of his manhood as the man is asleep and the woman had penetrated his masculine space. She enacts the ritual upon the head, generally associated with reasoning, thinking and knowledge, thus informing an imbalance of power. Gender roles are reversed, as the woman becomes herself the instigator, the one who reconfigures the male body into an object of contemplation and who furthermore participates in the man's sexual awakening. In this reading the woman becomes the active agent, whereas the man steps on the other side of the binary opposition as the passive one. However, Viviette is one woman who transgresses the norms, hence she is punished, emotionally dismembered by her lover's lack of interest and finally the balance of power is redressed through her death. The man also enacts the ritual of dismemberment upon Viviette's body when constituting it from parts, fragments. Eustacia Vye stands for 'various persons' and hence she is configured as fragmented into a series of identities (witch, jealous lover, rebellious woman). She participates in Clym's physical dismemberment by fragmenting and ultimately depriving him of his sight. Another series of agents of dismemberment is represented by Lucetta Templeman and Felice Charmond, who use their sexuality to entrap the men of their choice. The metaphor of the chess game, interpreted by Foucault as a strategy in which the players try to overpower each other, has also served at revealing the way in which Hardy emphasized the transformations inherent in power relations in his novels. Elfride Swancourt and Anne Garland plunge, unconsciously, into a battle of sexual instincts, as they are both exercising power over their male counterparts for a limited time, trying to overrun each other, but the next moment they are being dominated.

The second aspect analyzed in this chapter has envisaged the idea that in a patriarchal society, a woman is seldom whole, and the female body is reconstructed from pieces, fragments. Starting from Foucault's idea that power relations become relations of domination when freedom is eliminated from the equation, we may say that Victorian women, as submitted to the patriarchal system that left them no opportunities to make themselves visible, internalized this state of domination and participated in their own objectification. Elfride Swancourt willingly participates in her own symbolical dismemberment when she elicits from the man her reconfiguration from a series of ingredients (body parts) which act as a collection of items which need reassembling. By participating in her own process of objectification together with the man who

decomposes her, Elfride recreates herself as incomplete, as fragmented and as the submissive product of the patriarchal society which deemed her as such. Elfride, the woman who had previously occupied the position of the dominant, internalizes male objectification and assumes another identity, another self. Tess Durbeyfield lessens her body's sexual attributes in an attempt to evade the tragedy and suffering they brought unto her. Reconfiguring her body by depriving it of its sensuousness, Tess partakes into a process of physical and mental torture and renders her body docile, allowing the two men in her life to re-member her, i.e. to put her pieces together, which they both fail in doing so, as they do not succeed in reconfiguring her as a whole (Alec dismembers her physical body through rape, whereas Angel dismembers her spiritual self from her sensuous, sexual self). Eustacia Vye is also fragmented, torn to pieces by her repressed desires which do not find closure with either man in her life.

The last feature analyzed in the metaphor of dismemberment draws on Foucault's theory related to the technologies of the self, which are manoeuvred by the individuals themselves and allow them to perform transformations of their bodies and souls, conduct and thought, in order to reach a state of happiness, perfection or immorality. Living in a patriarchal environment, female characters in Hardy's novels are depicted as partaking into a process which renders their bodies useful, hence they participate in their own dismemberment by creating an alter identity, another self in order to enhance their prospects as commodified, marketable bodies. Felice Charmond, Lucetta Templeman, Arabella Donn and Fancy Day display themselves as objects of consumption and they resort to artificial apparel to enhance the value of their bodies (Felice buys Marty's hair, Lucetta orders dresses from expensive fashion houses, Arabella wears false tresses and fakes dimples in her cheeks, Fancy resorts to fancy dresses to create an artificial space of her own). These female bodies are subjected to and imprisoned by the economic and social prerequisites of the market force; hence these female characters become prisoners of their own selves with their trained-into-fashion bodies. The clothed body becomes, in a Foucauldian interpretation, a docile body, a spectacle which awaits the evaluation and analysis of the others. Elizabeth Jane is however aware of her possible transformation into a commodified self and she recomposes her identity searching for new meanings, for a new therapy (books in her case) which helps her restore her previous self. Hardy's last novel has also offered a reading of the woman as a dismembered self through the

latter's representation as recomposed through three different women, all named Avice (mother, daughter and granddaughter) with whom the main protagonist falls in love in various stages in his life. Each Avice represents the male character's attempt to create his feminine ideal, therefore the woman Avice is depicted as a series of fragmented selves, created and re-created in the male's imagination from illusions of womanhood and thus representing Hardy's most accurate expression of bodiless, dismembered female character.

With small exceptions, the woman who threatens via her sexuality the male order is depicted in Hardy's novels as being punished through death: Viviette, Felice, Lucetta, Elfride, Eustacia, Tess pay for their 'daring' to destabilize the order of the male system. The undisciplined female body always pays the price of her transgression and outburst of passion. Hardy's female characters perform their actions of sexual transgression in a social world in which female sexuality was a matter of debate and speculation, where woman was equated with weakness. The reading of these female characters through the lens of dismemberment has revealed that women were crushed if they engaged in tasting the forbidden fruit, in transgressing patriarchal moral norms. Hardy sympathized with the plight of women and he portrayed his female characters as often struggling to shape their own lives with a great amount of energy, however, as the writer himself remarked in one of his novels, this was a battle which took place in a world which was not friendly to women (RN 60). The investigation of female characters has shown that when appropriating 'masculine' traits such as sexual aggression, women are branded as abnormal, unnatural and ultimately punished. Hardy attacks the Victorian diagnosis according to which women were seen as not being troubled with sexual feelings or if they were, they represented deviations from the norm. Hardy depicted in his novels the physicality and sensuousness of his female characters, thus emphasizing the existence of the woman's *sexual* body. In a culture in which the function of the female body was mainly reduced to its reproductive attribute, Hardy revealed in his novels woman's victimization by the sexual double standard inherent in the Victorian society.

The fifth chapter, entitled "*Woman as a silent agent of change*" has been configured following another Foucauldian lens – that of silence, whose function resides at the border between the spoken and the unspoken, between the said and the unsaid. Foucault depicted silence as both repressive (as an effect of domination and oppression)

and productive (as freedom from coercions to speak). Lack of voice equates with lack of power and this has been applied to the analysis of Victorian women: silence was ubiquitous in their lives, being cloistered to the domestic sphere and impeded from actively participating in society and politics. In a society in which men learned language and women had to train themselves into keeping silent, the Victorian woman became gradually an absence as opposed to the figure associated with active participation (man). Female characters in Hardy's novels are silenced, mute(d) because they are denied the possibility to vocalize their own self in a male-dominated society. Silence has been interpreted in this chapter as a prison where woman's consciousness was trapped.

Among the different forms silence may take, the first one discussed in this chapter is represented by secrets, which form an inherent part in the matrix of silence. Tess Durbeyfield is constructed throughout the novel as absence and she is not allowed into the dominant system of articulation. Silence oppresses Tess and the confession she makes to the man she loves on their wedding night deepens her oppression. According to Foucault, the confession represents a disciplinary device, a ritual which presupposes the listener's acquisition of power over the speaker, who is dominated by the listener. By applying Foucault's theory of the confession to the reading of Tess's body, the analysis has revealed that the woman invested the man with power over her, thus participating in the process of her own objectification. Whether she resorts to silence (secrets) or breaks the silence, Tess is oppressed. Tess Durbeyfield and Lucetta Templeman both hide sexual secrets, but the difference resides in their power to confess these burdens. While Tess takes confession as an act of setting herself free from the chains of oppression, Lucetta perceives it as the end of her oppression, which she internalizes and accepts so that she would not lose the man she loves. Women also use silence in an attempt to show their superiority when occupying the dominant position: Bathsheba Everdene is empowered through her economic status and she barely answers the shepherd's questions; however, when paired with the sergeant, the sexual predator, she is rendered speechless because she loses her initial position of power. When sexually trapped, physically aggressed, both Tess and Bathsheba are anesthetized to silence.

The second aspect discussed in this chapter relates to Hardy's female characters who use their speech as a method to achieve power. In order to make themselves heard, women are depicted as reversing the relation of dominance/submission which relegates

them to the unfavourable right side of the slash. In this context, the analysis of the female characters under scrutiny has revealed that these women use resistance in order to break the silence and clearly differentiate themselves from the passive, powerless role to which they had been framed. In Foucault's line of thought resistance represents a process of constant creation and recreation of the individual, a process which implies active involvement.

By appropriating male language, women are seen as positing a threat to the patriarchal system as they sabotage its order by actually using the power of speech. Bathsheba Everdene penetrates the male world and manages to impose herself and gain the respect of her farmers. Loathing the idea of being thought men's property, as she confesses, she is constantly trying to attune her behaviour in order to be accepted in the public arena, while at the same time preserving her femininity in an effort to avoid the system of sexual subjugation in which the male discourse would definitely prescribe her. Even though Eustacia Vye struggles to gain agency and escape the oppressive world of the heath, her voice is powerful and is condemned to remain as such within the walls of the panoptical enclosure in which she lives. No matter how forcefully she voices her inner desires, expectations and passion, Eustacia is an inmate, a prisoner without escape. Sue Bridehead's voice is presented throughout the novel as trembling, similarly to her sexually repressed self. Yet Sue becomes vocal when attacking the institution of marriage which she regards as a torture chamber, an idea shared by Ethelberta Petherwin and Thomasin Yeobright, who also struggle against being constrained in a conventional relationship. Tess Durbeyfield is another representation of a woman who tries to redefine her identity, previously constructed and reconfigured by men. Constantly oppressed and denied the right to speak, Tess decides towards the end of the novel to speak in a completely different way: to kill. Through her voice, Hardy nuanced the plight of women who became preys to male aggression.

The last aspect discussed in this chapter is represented by another form of speech used by Hardy's female characters, i.e. the written one, as silence creates texts that speak. Sometimes the spoken words fail them, hence they resort to the process of writing to express the things they feel unable to voice. Foucault considered that writing about oneself is similar to a confession and that through self-writing, the individual becomes personal with and cultivates his own self. The female body becomes again objectified: as

he receives Eustacia Vye's letter, Wildeve interprets the object as the woman's body and tears it apart, a function he performs symbolically in Eustacia's case. Marty South's letter in which she discloses the truth about Felice Charmond's hair acts, in a Foucauldian reading, as Marty's actually inflicting the specific rituals of torture on the female body. Tess Durbeyfield's letter to Angel or Lucetta Templeman's letters to Henchard represent missed opportunities to confession and they bring tragedy in these women's lives. Silence, in Hardy's novels, may represent meaning without the concrete utterances of the female characters. Whether she hides a secret or she refuses to speak, whether she expresses her passion by lighting bonfires at night or writing long letters, Hardy allows his female characters to find a way to make themselves heard. By the same token, writing silences a woman and forces her to create another identity, such being the case of Ethelberta Petherwin or Elfride Swancourt, who embody the Victorian woman writer's condition to assume another identity in a male-centered literary tradition.

In this chapter, silence has been equated to lack of power. Hardy emphasized in his novels that women are silenced because they need to be reconfigured as listeners, and not producers, of male speech. By reducing the woman to powerlessness, by silencing her, the male constitutes the woman as an object. However, by applying Foucault's concept of power, silence has been read as both oppressive and productive. In this last instantiation, silence becomes an attribute of power. It is through their voice that female characters in Hardy's novels struggle to construct, to shape their identity in the patriarchal system. Throughout his novels, Hardy depicts his female characters as sometimes stepping out of their passive object representation. However, he demonstrates that when women speak up and rebel against the social system or against their mistreatment, men silence them.

After the close analysis of Hardy's female characters, it may be concluded that Hardy's novels represent a good means of investigation using the lenses offered by Foucault's works. Envisaging Wessex, the fictional territory created by Hardy, as a Panopticon, the analyses have revealed that Victorian women and by extension Hardy's female characters may be considered as inmates in the prison constituted by the patriarchal system. Trapped inside the rigid walls of Victorian conventions, women were hardly allowed a space of their own.

The Foucauldian lenses applied to the Victorian female body as reflected in Hardy's novels have 'magnified' the idea according to which the woman had a limited space and limited options in order to make herself visible. Moreover, daring to transgress the norms of Victorian morality ended in punishment and in the reconfiguration of the woman as an outcast, as abnormal, as an/other. In this context, sexually-charged women in Hardy's novels pay the price of their overt display of sexuality, which may be read as a fissure in the rigid wall of the patriarchal view of women in the nineteenth century, who were supposed to be as discrete as possible, accepting their position in the private, domestic sphere. This view was extracted from the conduct books, letters, essays written by Victorian women and from medical documents which purported the idea of the female domestic ideal, i.e. a woman devoid of passions and interested in safeguarding the peace and tranquillity in the home.

The texts mentioned above allowed the reading of the female body as docile, constantly trained by disciplinary techniques as to erase any traces of indiscipline, indecency or immorality that may surface and destabilize order. Indeed, Victorian middle class women were captive in the panoptic system of surveillance by both cooperating and being subjected to it. However, during the 1860s many women began to find the role of domestic woman constrictive. Women became vocal and challenged the deep-seated patriarchal system by questioning the institution of marriage, along with debates regarding their legal rights. The same struggle between conformity to traditional norms and means to gain agency reflects itself in Thomas Hardy's novels. Women in his novels are indeed depicted as oppressed, punished, manipulated, abused, objectified, yet Hardy allows them temporary passages to unleash their sexuality, to voice their plight and to reveal their sexuality.

In a culture where it was preposterous even to conceive of female sexual agency when women were actually deprived of agency in other essential areas, any sexual transgression was perceived as a sin if committed by a woman, who was consequently regarded as abnormal and in need of discipline and punishment. In this context, Thomas Hardy emphasized the sexual impulses which govern the human being, thus destabilizing the preconceived ideas according to which women were devoid of passion and eroticism. Moreover, the Victorian writer created in his novels the grounds for power struggles,

where men seek to impose their will and force upon women. However, in their fight to empowerment, women manage to reverse the dominant/submissive pair in their favour.

The analysis of Hardy's female characters has demonstrated that the Victorian writer created the portrait of women who tried to overcome the limits which had been imposed on them by the patriarchal system. Read and interpreted through Foucauldian lenses, the novels have revealed that they contain more than the image of the woman depicted as a prisoner of her domestic, private sphere or struggling to pave the way for a collective feminine consciousness. Thus, it would be appropriate to say that Hardy's novels reveal a series of methods through which women do obtain power: the power to express their inner feelings, passions and sexual instincts. In this light, we may say that Hardy's novels bear the echo of Foucault's insisting that no person is devoid of the attributes of power, except those cases in which the individual himself decided to do so. By approaching the theme of power through the oppositional pair dominant/submissive, the analyses of Hardy's female characters have revealed the fact that the writer challenged the traditional roles performed by women in the Victorian society. The 'exile' of the woman in the domestic space and her valorisation in terms of reproduction and maintenance of the institution of the family gave birth to feelings of alienation in the Victorian woman. In this context, Hardy's female characters are depicted as resorting to a series of strategies which reverse the dominant/submissive roles, women becoming thus themselves dominant agents of discourse and reconfiguring, even though temporarily, the mechanisms of masculine domination. Hence, Hardy's novels reveal woman's struggle to earn her right to speak and free herself from the barriers imposed by the patriarchal supremacy. Analyzed through Foucauldian lenses, Thomas Hardy's novels open up new paths in the investigation of nineteenth century literature and the examination of women's status in that period.

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