

Milk and Victorian Femininity in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract: This paper examines milk as a symbol of Victorian femininity in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), specifically as it relates to the female protagonists of these novels, Bathsheba Everdene and Tess Durbeyfield. Through historical research into the significance of milk in the Victorian period, combined with a formal analysis of representations of milk in Hardy's novels, I will argue that milk functions dually in both novels to symbolize a Victorian ideal of femininity while also problematically likening Bathsheba and Tess to farm animals.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) mentions milk a staggering one hundred and forty-two times, while his *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) mentions it only seventeen times (see the Gutenberg online editions; all subsequent citations refer to the print editions). As a result of milk's more overt presence in *Tess*, critics such as Jessica Martell and Alicia Carroll have devoted considerable attention to the role of milk in that novel, whereas little attention has been paid to the significance of milk in *Madding Crowd*. However, the function of milk in *Madding Crowd* equally merits contemplation, as milk still exists implicitly in the everyday lives of the characters of that novel. In the Victorian period, people's daily lives, particularly for those who lived on farms, revolved greatly around milk, due to its status as both a source of nourishment and a source of income. This reliance on milk is true for both Tess Durbeyfield working at Talbothays Dairy in *Tess* and Bathsheba Everdene on her

farm in *Madding Crowd*. Milking played a large role in the daily life of both milkmaids, such as Tess, and farmers, such as Bathsheba; it also nourished infants, both human and animal. In this essay, I will explore the role of milk in Victorian culture, specifically in the lives of women, as it relates to Bathsheba and Tess. Through historical research into the significance of milk in the Victorian period, combined with a formal analysis of representations of milk in Hardy's novels, I will argue that milk functions dually in both novels to symbolize a Victorian ideal of femininity while also problematically likening Bathsheba and Tess to farm animals. This duality simultaneously reveals what Victorians saw as desirable qualities in women while also demonstrating the alarming ways in which Victorians likened women to animals.

Milk served a multifaceted purpose during the Victorian period, especially in relation to women. According to scholars such as Alicia Carroll, William Cohen, Chantel Langlinais, Jules Law, Jessica Martell, and Jacob Steere-Williams, milk was seen by the Victorians as representing sustenance, youth, and motherhood. Furthermore, Law points out the controversial significance of breast milk in Victorian culture everywhere from debates about feeding it to babies to milk representing female agency in contemporary novels such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897; see Law ch. 3). Carroll notes the disparity between how people use human milk and cow's milk as more and more people feed their children milk that does not come from humans (172). Carroll's argument for milk's cultural significance demonstrates that milk's prevalence in Hardy's novels should come as no surprise, seeing as it affects every person's life whether or not they work on a dairy. Cohen goes as far to say that fluids such as milk are one of "the most important issues in Victorian literature and culture" as they are both an "inherent property of human bodies" and an "occasion for social regulation" (529). Indeed, Steere-Williams recognizes that milk also had a dark side in Victorian culture: the possibility of "widespread outbreak" created the "milk problem" that prompted increased regulation in the dairy industry (265).

Similarly, milk holds symbolic significance with both positive and negative connotations in *Madding Crowd* and *Tess*.

In both of these novels, milk illuminates characteristics of the ideal Victorian woman. Youth, beauty, and motherly qualities can all be traced back to milk as it appears in the novels. Langlinais argues that the ideal Victorian woman is represented in literature as angelic, an association that epitomizes beauty as being moral and virtuous (74). Angels are perhaps one of the most extreme ideals to aspire to as they exist in eternal youth, beauty, and absolute morality. Yet, Bathsheba and Tess are both depicted in this light in various illustrations, even though the novels were illustrated by different artists. In Helen Allingham's illustration "Bathsheba Carrying a Milk Pail," for example, the scene is dark save for Bathsheba's features, which are left in white, the surrounding shadow creating a halo effect around her head (fig. 1). This illustration, in which Bathsheba performs the mundane task of fetching milk, subtly illuminates her as angelic and beautiful, akin to the ideal that Langlinais suggests. Bathsheba also appears with her face and hands bright in contrast to her dark surroundings in Allingham's "Hands Were Loosening His Neckerchief" (fig. 2). This illustration depicts Bathsheba after she douses a sleeping Gabriel Oak with milk "as there was no water" following the fire in his hut (*Madding Crowd* 24). Bathsheba is portrayed as youthful, nurturing, and physically angelic—swooping in like a guardian angel to save Gabriel. Remarkably, this connection to angels includes the usage of milk in both illustrations and textual passages. The same is true for Tess in Joseph Syddall's illustration "He Jumped Up from His Seat, and Went Quickly Towards the Desire of His Eyes" (fig. 3): Tess kneels before a cow—milking it—her face illuminated in contrast to the surrounding shadow of the cow's side. Angel Clare lurches toward her as if compelled by her despite the dullness of her task. This image paints Tess as desirable for her beauty and her youth, a state that is implied by her angelic glow. The presence of milk in all three of these illustrations creates a subtle link between milk and the virtuous representations of Bathsheba and Tess in the novels.



Figure 1: "Bathsheba Carrying a Milk Pail," by Helen Allingham. *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1874. Image uploaded to the *Victorian Web* by Philip V. Allingham. www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/allingham/1b.html.



Figure 2: "Hands were Loosening his Handkerchief," by Helen Allingham. *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1874. Image uploaded to the *Victorian Web* by Philip V. Allingham. www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/allingham/1.html.



Figure 3: "He Jumped Up from His Seat, and Went Quickly Towards the Desire of His Eyes," by Joseph Syddall. London *Graphic*, September 1891. Image uploaded to the *Victorian Web* by Philip V. Allingham. www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/syddall/4.html.

As these illustrations suggest, gendered labour involving milk further helps to depict Tess's and Bathsheba's respective desirability. Carroll associates this desirability with

increasingly gendered farming practices: women's physical traits (such as their smaller hands) were thought to be "well suited to dairy work" (Carroll 168). Through this lens, working women are deemed attractive for their ability to work on farms. Indeed, Angel idealizes Tess through references to milk when he describes the perfect wife: according to Angel, the ideal wife should "milk cows, churn good butter, [and] make immense cheeses" (*Tess* 174). Therefore, Tess's ability to perform well as a milkmaid makes her valuable to Angel and desirable as a wife. This scene parallels Syddall's illustration of Tess milking a cow: Angel is again drawn to Tess due to her association with milk. Similarly, when Gabriel beholds Bathsheba for the first time as she tugs a pail of milk toward him, he is immediately struck by the "desirability of her existence" (*Madding Crowd* 22). This scene prompts the beginning of Gabriel's love for Bathsheba, despite the mundanity of Bathsheba's task. The act of carrying a pail of milk is not intrinsically desirable, but it is milk's cultural significance that draws Gabriel's attention to Bathsheba's attractiveness and youth. Equally as striking a scene is the moment wherein Bathsheba saves Gabriel from the fire in his hut by dousing him with a pail of milk (*Madding Crowd* 26). Here, milk functions as a means for Bathsheba to demonstrate her more caring qualities. Indeed, as a shepherd, Gabriel is familiar with the nourishing and vitalizing power of milk, at one point himself nursing his own "helpless" lambs (*Madding Crowd* 110), who have been separated from their mother and for whom milk is their only form of sustenance.

However, although milk illuminates Bathsheba's and Tess's virtues, it also problematically likens them to farm animals. When Gabriel initially meets Bathsheba, he describes her presence through her milking schedule. As soon as "the cow had ceased to give milk for that year ... Bathsheba Everdene came up the hill no more" (*Madding Crowd* 29). Hardy's description of Bathsheba collapses the distinction between her and the cow, as if her milking practices equate her to the actual animal. Similarly, when Gabriel peeks into the barn late at night he observes "two women and two cows" (*Madding Crowd* 19), the parallel syntax suggesting

that Gabriel views Bathsheba and her aunt in the same way as he views the animals in the barn. This pattern of comparison continues as Gabriel grasps Bathsheba's wrist and feels her pulse beat the same way the "femoral artery of his lambs [do] when overdriven" (*Madding Crowd* 54). Gabriel's direct comparison of Bathsheba to a lamb is astonishing in itself with its implications of domesticity, inferiority, and innocence. Yet, the effect of milk is magnified when it is compared to Gabriel feeding his baby lambs: as Gabriel sees a resemblance between Bathsheba and these helpless animals, he implies that Bathsheba is again only one of the animals. Gabriel then describes Bathsheba as a "slight and fragile creature," similar to the "helpless" lambs he feeds (*Madding Crowd* 55, 110). Such parallelism at the level of diction and syntax in these scenes clearly paints Bathsheba as a helpless, weak animal who is unable to take care of herself. Unlike milk's original function in equating Bathsheba to a figure capable of care (e.g., when she saves Gabriel from the fire), milk seems here to have a reverse function of infantilizing Bathsheba as well.

Hardy's narration of Tess similarly portrays her connection to milk in a disempowering way. For example, Hardy narrates a scene at the dairy where the cows "[troop] towards the steading": "their great bags of milk [swing] under them" and "Tess [follows] slowly in their rear" as if she herself is a cow (*Tess* 123). Again, parallelism plays a role in implying that Tess is one of the animals. Just as he does with Bathsheba and the lambs, Hardy describes Tess as mirroring the physical actions of an animal in order to suggest similarity. Furthermore, Angel observes Tess at breakfast as if she were one of the farm animals. When she realizes she is being watched, Tess "[traces] ... the tablecloth with her forefinger with the constraint of a domestic animal that perceives itself to be watched" (*Tess* 137). Here, Tess is not only watched as if she were one of the farm animals, but she is also described explicitly as a farm animal. Despite the fact that she is merely eating breakfast with the other workers and ostensibly has no connection to milk, what springs to Angel's mind as he watches Tess is what a "fresh and vir-

ginal daughter of Nature" she is (*Tess* 137). Even when Tess eats breakfast, Angel connects her to nature as if he cannot help but associate her with the farm. Moreover, as Tess milks, Hardy describes "her temple pressing the milcher's flank" (*Tess* 162). This image suggests a physical connection to the cow she is milking, recalling the mentions of Tess behaving as a farm animal would. Syddall's "He Jumped Up from His Seat, and Went Quickly Towards the Desire of His Eyes" echoes this sentiment as Tess is portrayed with her head on the cow's flank, hunched over as the cow itself is. In both of these examples, milk is the connector, just as it is in *Madding Crowd*. Despite milk's connection to Tess and Bathsheba displaying desirable characteristics, its second symbolic function connects Bathsheba and Tess to the animals that they work with as if they themselves are animals.

Milk had a prevalent cultural significance to the Victorians, both as a means of sustenance and as a symbol for various aspects of women's identity. Analyzing the function of milk in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* creates a lens through which Tess and Bathsheba are celebrated for their femininity and yet gazed upon as inhuman for that very femininity. Thus, through analysis of Hardy's two novels, I demonstrate milk's function as illuminating Victorian perceptions of women. While milk portrays women as ideal in their beauty, youth, and motherly qualities, it also fosters a narrative atmosphere in which milk is used to portray Bathsheba's and Tess's likeness to animals.

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