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‘TO NAME THE UNNAMABLE’: THOMAS HARDY’S USE OF CLASSICAL MYTHS IN *TESS*

Abstract

Thomas Hardy, who had perceived life as a logicless riddle, unexplainable by science, reason or systematic philosophy, found in myth a way of articulating his puzzlement and wonder, agony and bewilderment at the mystery of human suffering. Often Hardy would evoke a known myth specifically by emphasizing his defamiliarizing twists of departure, and weaving it into a rich pattern of interpenetration with a gamut of other myths and the reality itself. It is Hardy’s way of ‘making it new’ (*à la* Pound) long before the modernist era, and thereby ‘naming the unnamable’ (Brooke-Rose 1971: 222) mysteries of life and suffering. Hardy uses mythical allusions towards creating an evocative pattern for the narration, – placing the story of individuals’ travails within ever-widening circles of evocations. Sometimes Hardy makes direct allusions to myths and mythical names; sometimes he evokes nuances of mythical events/anecdotes, albeit with his own subtle twists and fine departures from the source tales. Myth increasingly came to inform his image-pattern, ideational frame and plot-patterns, sometimes all in one go. *Tess*, a later novel, can be examined as a wonderful case in point.

Certain familiar myths can be seen operating behind the novel *Tess* in patterns of interpenetration and this pervades the narrative schema as well as textural fabric. Ancient myths and legends intersect, get layered upon, converge into, and interpenetrate one another on the site of the textual space in a rich pattern of intersection, departure and re-creation.

Key words

classical myths; interpenetration; narrative schema; intersection; departures; textual fabric; myths of kinship-cursed house-ancestral sin; Pluto’s chariot; mystery.

“...have not modern psychoanalysis, sociology and anthropology been obliged to turn wholly to these Greek myths in most of their nomenclature, in order to name the unnamable...?” (Christine Brooke-Rose 1971: 222)

A close look at Thomas Hardy's elaborate use of ancient myths in his novels so long before the advent of modernism in English poetry and fiction surprises us with the realization how superbly Hardy had anticipated the modern novel by using these ancient archetypes in order to create an additional dimension of meanings and evocations. The mythical allusions – either overt or implicit – are made to get interfused with the present reality (of the textual context) in his fiction, and in the process reality is made to embrace surreal and universal suggestions as the mythical pushes back the frontiers of realism and the two mutually lend relevance and significance to one another.

Hardy had to write (that too for serials which could not ignore the demand of popular taste) at a time when realism was the craze; yet he had glimpsed into the inexplicable surrealistic aspects of life. It may be recalled that in 1891, after giving up novel-writing, the novelist had said: “with our widened knowledge of the universe and its forces, and man's position herein, narrative to be artistically convincing, must adjust itself to the new alignment” (Orel 1967: 135). And after years of Hardy study Pinion confidently claimed: “Had Hardy found time to write fiction merely to please himself he might have experimented” (Pinion 1968: 146). Hardy had noted in August 1890 (*Tess* was being written between 1889–1891), “Art is a disproportioning (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities. Hence, ‘realism’ is not art” (F. E. Hardy 1970: 228–29). Indeed, even as early as 1881 Hardy had already expressed his preference for a “realism” that should be conditioned by “imaginative reason” (F. E. Hardy 1970: 147).¹

Myths provided him with one of the ways to grapple with the severe constraints of the realistic form and reach out to some space beyond the definable, palpable, plausible reality. Hardy's novels harnessed the mythical archetypes – generally from the ancient Greco-Roman sources, but also sometimes from the domain of Christian myths as well – to the ‘real’-life story in subtle patterns of interpenetration, a practice quite unusual in his times. Indeed, one could apply to Hardy's fiction with perfect validity what Tew observes about the overtly mythical English novel of the late twentieth century: “These ... structures respond to the constraints or crisis of the genre: that of the rationally based naturalist (realist) narrative structure ...” (Tew 2004: 118). That Hardy was adequately aware of a similar ‘crisis of the genre’, the constraints of a realistic narrative and its inadequacy for incorporating the vision of a chaotic world has been borne out by various admissions and confessions of the author from time to time, and finally by his farewell to fiction while still in the prime of creativity. Anyway, prior to the final farewell to fiction, Hardy had tried, for nearly two decades, to push back the limits imposed by the genre of realistic fiction by means of two poetic devices: one was an elaborate pattern of symbols and images, the other was an intricate network of mythical allusions and evocations.

Examples of mythic allusions – anecdotal, structural and mnemonic– abound through the fictional canon of Hardy, increasingly interpenetrating and/or overlaying the structure as well as interspersing the texture with their evocative

resonance; thereby creating a rich interwoven narrative schema. This is what partly accounts for the extraordinary intensity of Hardy’s novels, particularly the later ones.

Hardy uses mythical allusions towards creating an evocative pattern for the narration, – placing the story of individuals’ travails within ever-widening circles of evocations – rather than as an innovative technique like Joyce. Objective reality is thus made to acquire an added colour and aroma, so to speak. Sometimes Hardy makes direct allusions to myths and mythical names; sometimes he evokes nuances of mythical events/anecdotes, albeit with his own subtle twists and fine departures from the source tales. In any case, myth increasingly came to inform his image-pattern, ideational frame and plot-patterns, sometimes all in one go. *Tess*, a later novel, can be examined as a wonderful case in point.

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Major myth critics – Robert Graves, Francis Fergusson, Maud Bodkin, Richard Chase, Northrop Frye – have viewed individual plot-patterns as recurrences of basic mythic formulas. A look at the plot-pattern of the novel, *Tess*, brings out the rich mythic resonances that operate behind the complex interwoven interstices of the tragic plot. Furthermore, a richly interwoven pattern of mythical images and concepts support and enhance the suggestions evoked by the plot-pattern, thereby transporting the story from the mundane reality to the mythical plane, while reifying the mythic in the modern context. Hardy does not use myth just as an analogy; it becomes as it were alive in the experience of his persona, while lending an aesthetic unity to the very complex thematics of his novel.

Both *Tess* and *Tess* can be considered as site on which not just one myth, but a range of ancient myths intersect and coalesce. It is indeed fascinating to see how the various myths of Artemis, Persephone, Europa, Demeter, Niobe, Daphne, Iphigenia, Eurydice, Penelope, Cybele, Ceres, Lotis, Eve, as well as Pluto, Priapus, Mephistopheles, Antinous, Apollo, Orpheus, Odysseus – in addition to the myths of kinship, cursed house, ancestral sin – have been evoked in a rich interwoven and layered pattern. Identifying even just a few can be an exciting experience as shall be shown in the ensuing discourse.

Artemis

Artemis, “the lady of the wild things” (Grant 1962: 140), “the beautiful virgin huntress of the mountains” (Grant 1962: 141), is associated with hunting; at the same time she is also associated with small creatures, especially stags of whom she is fond. Artemis herself is a paradoxical figure like many a mythical figure. “Artemis, Apollo’s sister, . . . is the protectress of little children, and of all sucking animals, but she also loves the chase, especially that of stags” (Graves 1958: 82).

Fine threads of connection with the myth of Artemis – of course allowing for variations and departures – can be perceived in the novel. The theme of hunting runs central to the tragedy of Tess. Tess has been hunted down by fate – operating through Alec and society and its laws; and significantly all along, from the valley of her birth, to the vales of her undoing and finally of her death, the spatial loci have been specially indicated as age-old sites for hunting. The inn at Marlott is called the ‘White Hart’s Inn’ which actually calls back to a story of hunting in the locality which had taken place in some remote past: a white hart was so run down that the king had spared it out of kindness, but his hunting companions did not know, and killed it (*T* 33). This sets the stage for Tess’s tale. Tess too will be eventually run down like a delicate stag and killed by the hounds of society and law. The forest in which Tess is undone is called ‘The Chase’; here she is run down and then pierced – (an overt sexual metaphor) – by Alec. Again, during her escapade following Alec’s murder, miles and miles of walk “had taken them (Tess and Angel) into the depths of the New Forest” (*T* 434), which happens to be “an ancient hunting forest” (Trivedi 1988: 493). Like Artemis, who protects as well as kills, Tess is shown as the keeper of birds [at Trantridge] and also later a killer of birds in a superb scene. The description of Tess, ‘a hunted soul among hunted birds’, the tender murderer killing the wounded little birds out of kindness, “with her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly” (*T* 318), presents a wonderful scene, in which the divine and the human coalesce; Tess appears a helpless mortal Artemis.

Another interesting detail may not have been just coincidence. Tess is seen repeatedly, on special occasions as well as ordinary ones – i.e., the Maypole dance, the journey to Trantridge, the day of her wedding, or during the last journey towards Stonehenge – in white costume; she first appears in the novel as a “white shape” (*T* 39), and this persistent image of “her white shape” (*T* 75) is not only in tune with Tess’s inner self – pure as ‘snow’ and ‘fine as gossamer’ (*T* 102) – but also with the image of Artemis who is usually shown in white habiliments. However, Tess is no deity but only a helpless mortal; therefore her white dress is sprayed with the red of blood; Her early blood-bath while trying to stop the blood from Prince’s wounded bosom is proleptic; “In her despair Tess sprang forward and put her hand upon the hole, with the result that she became splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops” (*T* 55). Henceforth she will be repeatedly associated with blood-marks at every significant turn of her journey through life; her innate whiteness will be repeatedly assaulted by the shades of red, suggesting violation of her virginal purity by the forces of crude lust.

In following Tess’s tragedy it should be taken into account that Artemis, with whom Tess has been associated, is a “virgin goddess” (Rose 1965: 112). Tess ironically bears the stamp of virginity on her face and bearing in spite of her brief spell of motherhood. It is this aspect of her appearance that strikes Angel initially: “What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!”, he says to himself (*T* 152). It is precisely this quality that so attracts him toward her. “Nothing so pure, so sweet, so virginal as Tess had seemed possible all the long while he

had adored her” (*T* 271). Even after her sad confession Angel finds it hard to believe: “Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maidenhood upon Tess’s countenance that he gazed at her with a stupefied air” (*T* 274).

Again, Tess roaming fearlessly along wild tracts and fields, slopes and inclines, shrubs and wilderness, “walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough” (*T* 115) during her pregnancy, or walking alone happily over long miles to reach Talbothays from Marlott (*T* 132–133), or trudging alone through the countryside in search of work after Angel’s desertion, bears correspondence to Artemis who was called *Agroteria*, or ‘She of the Wild’.

Artemis’s terrifying act of killing Actaeon, son of Aristaeus, who “came upon her bathing naked” (Grant 1962: 141), has fascinated artists through ages; Hardy had certainly seen Titian’s famous painting of the scene. It is not unlikely that the anecdote should have cast its shadow upon Tess’s murderous act, which seems so strange considering Tess’s innate tender nature. Alec had forced himself upon Tess in her unprotected, defenceless (read naked) innocence; eventually she killed Alec with the impetuosity of a risen divinity.

Iphigenia

Behind the configuration of Tess there falls yet another shadow of an associated myth. In order to appease Artemis whom her father had offended, Iphigenia, though absolutely innocent herself, was sacrificed for the sake of her family. Iphigenia “was ... fetched from home under pretence of being married to Achilles” (Rose 1965: 119). Clytemnestra sent her off on that understanding. Joan, the foolish mother, dresses up Tess with particular care and sends her off to Trantridge with the fond assumption that she would be coveted and married by her rich ‘kinsman’. Tess is sent off as a sacrificial offering for the sake of the survival of her parents’ family. Tess has to go to Trantridge and continue there in spite of misgivings; because, like Iphigenia, her sacrifice had already been pre-decided – the considerations of the parental family being the compulsion. Tess is twice sacrificed for her parental family; the first time, like Iphigenia, as the innocent teen-age virgin daughter, and on the second occasion – like Electra – consciously embracing disaster for the sake of the family. Finally, she goes to her last sleep on the sacrificial stone of the sun-temple at Stonehenge prior to her capture and execution. The motif of mythic sacrifice has been wonderfully underlined in the context. After walking long miles through the dark night Tess and Angel finally stumble inside the Stonehenge ruins. Tess falls asleep by the age-old Stone of Sacrifice (*T* 433) for a few moments before the police close in. Angel appeals to them – ‘Let her finish her sleep’. Although “they all closed in with evident purpose”, “when they saw where she lay... they showed no objection, and stood watching her as still as the pillars around. ...” (*T* 443). An ancient sacrificial rite is, as it were, being reenacted at this grey hour – a ‘virginal’ girl being sacrificed

to the Sun God – while the priests and commoners stood in awed [as well as ruthless] reverence. Considered thus Tess's tragedy – like Iphigenia's – comes to embrace the unfathomable mystery of life and its 'monstrous' ways with an innocent girl.

Frye mentions the stories of Andromeda and Iphigenia as "the two best-known myths of female sacrifice" (Frye 1963: 35). However, Andromeda, the beautiful innocent daughter of king Cepheus, offered to a sea-monster in order to expiate for her mother's offence (Grant 1962: 395), had been rescued in the nick of the time by Perseus whereas Tess is less fortunate and finds no saviour in her hour of crisis.

Demeter

Tess, the rural girl, is also associated with a cluster of Earth deities: Demeter, Cybele, Ceres. Angel, during his courtship at Talbothays, calls her Demeter, Artemis. In the early hours of dawn Tess's face seemed to be gleaming in the cold light from the north-east. "It was then... that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly..." (*T* 162) Although Tess feels disturbed at this, and implores, 'Call me Tess!', the associations have been unmistakably put across. Tess, like Demeter, is all along associated with activities close to nature – harvesting, milking, threshing, making field-fire, etc. Tess has been projected as the Ceres figure in "a local Cerealia" (*T* 33) as Hardy describes the Club-walking scene at Marlott. Ceres, "an Italian corn-goddess ... was identified with the Greek goddess Demeter..." (Guirand 1959: 218).

Proserpine/Persephone

Again an alert reader can catch fine echoes of the abduction and entrapment of Proserpine by Pluto between the interstices of Tess's story. Pluto in the myth had come up in a golden chariot from a great black cavern to catch the poor girl unawares; he "snatched the poor child from the ground and placed her on the seat by his side. Then he whipped up his horses and drove away at a furious rate" (Hyde 2003: 25). On her way to Trantridge to join the job of a maid, Tess is about to board the spring-cart when Alec arrives with his smart gig; Tess is hesitant; but then a look back at her relatives at the bottom of the hill, and the remembrance that 'she had killed Prince' decides her (*T* 75), and she steps up. The following description precisely underscores the reckless speed of the ride. He "immediately whipped on the horse..." (*T* 76).

Down, down, they sped, the wheels humming like a top, the dog-cart rocking right and left, its axis acquiring a slightly oblique set in relation to the line of progress ... Sometimes a wheel was off the ground, it seemed, for many yards; sometimes a stone was sent spinning over the hedge, and flinty sparks from the horse’s hoofs outshone the daylight. ... the two banks dividing like a splitting stick; one rushing past at each shoulder.

The wind blew through Tess’s white muslin to her very skin, and her washed hair flew out behind” (*T* 78).

One would be reminded of Steel Savage’s illustrations of ‘The rape of Persephone’³ and ‘The rape of Europa’⁴, both showing the hair and robe of the hapless girls flying out behind as they are carried off by their inexorable abductors in great speed. The “inexorable” (*T* 79) Alec, driving the carriage, ignores all her frantic appeals to slow down and gives the helpless girl “the kiss of mastery” (*T* 79).

Tess is twice compelled to take a lift from Alec, first time in his carriage, second time on his horseback. Interestingly, both the occasions also carry echoes of the rape of Europa in addition to Proserpine. Zeus approached Europa, a beautiful young virgin maiden of Tyre, in the form of a fine bull. As soon as “the princess ... was seated on the bull’s broad back, ... the bull suddenly sprang triumphantly to its feet and with no warning dashed off across the meadow terrace... The bull was running too swiftly for her to think of leaping to the ground” (Goodrich 1960: 55). Europa, “did not notice that the bull was taking her farther and farther away from home...” (Hyde 2003: 39). Alec on horseback, leading Tess further and further away from the main road into the forest is the tricky bull; the suggestion is apparent. “... it struck her they had been advancing for an unconscionable time – ... and that they were no longer on the hard road, but in a mere trackway” (*T* 99). In dismay she implores to be set down so that she can walk home. Alec gloats: “You cannot walk home, darling... We are miles away from Trantridge” (*T* 99).

Pluto’s Chariot

Pluto’s chariot of death has been evoked in the novel through various other hints: the shaggy house-cart, drawn by Prince, Alec’s smart gig, the big wedding carriage, the d’Urberville family ‘coach’ of the weird lore of the locality, Alec’s ‘trap’ waiting under the threshing machine (*T* 373), the uncouth wagon transporting the d’Urbervilles to Trantridge – all point, covertly or overtly, to Pluto’s chariot, as these lead the poor girl from disaster to disaster.

Pluto

Alec, a tall man of “swarthy complexion”, coming forth “from the dark triangular door of the tent” (*T* 62) to meet Tess and the reader for the first time, carries

unmistakable suggestions of Pluto, the dark god of death. Tess has been all along haunted, as it were, by forces of darkness, emblemizing Pluto's dark world. It is perhaps not insignificant that Prince is killed by an accident that takes place in the darkest hour prior to dawn, and proves instrumental in eventually compelling Tess to go to Trantridge to meet her doom. The dark forest of 'The Chase', where Tess is undone in a very dark night when the moon has gone down, – "darkness and silence ruled everywhere around" (*T* 101), and "the Chase was wrapped in thick darkness" (*T* 101) – connects to Pluto's dark domain. During her last journey towards capture and execution Tess is enveloped by the darkness of a "night that grew dark as a cave" (*T* 439).

Alec acts as a deadening Plutonic force in Tess's life. While with Alec she lives a death-in-life, dissociating her mind from the body and watching it indifferently as a drifting corpse. Significantly, Kingsbere, which is the age-old family vault for Tess's ancestors, provides the stage for this final and fatal return of Tess to Alec (*T* 410). After this she sinks into a death-in-life existence. The 'fulfilment' can follow only when she can kill the agent of death; but that too proves only a last brief flaring up to life before perpetually succumbing to the final death.

In this context Alec emerges unmistakably as the Pluto figure, – the dark inexorable king/deity of death with dark intentions, gloominess, fierceness; whatever he touches is marked for darkness and death. When Tess is forced to return to Alec for the sake of her family's survival she has already been dead in a way. Angel realizes this vaguely – "that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers – allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will" (*T* 425).

In the Greek tale Mercury had persuaded Pluto to release Proserpine; "but before she sprang to the chariot's seat, he craftily asked her if she would not eat one of the pomegranates that grew in his garden. Proserpine tasted the fruit, taking just *four* seeds" (Hyde 2003: 29). The sexual suggestion is apparent. Similarly, the strawberry pushed by Alec through Tess's lips during Tess's first visit to Trantridge, – with the obvious sexual connotation – calls back to the pomegranate seeds eaten by Proserpine. And like Proserpine she can never permanently escape Pluto/Alec, with whom she had initially stayed for '*four* months' and eventually has to return to after her brief respite. Tess strikes her departure from Proserpine though, by killing Alec.

Tess as Persephone has been trapped by Alec/Pluto; Tess comes back from Alec the first time, but already she carries the 'seeds' in her womb, which will brand her forever; The infant named 'Sorrow' dies soon after its birth. But metaphorically, 'sorrow' does not leave her. Tess remains marked for 'sorrow'. So, after her brief 'rally' she has to lapse back to 'sorrow' again and return to the domain of Pluto, the source or root cause of her 'sorrow'. Edith Hamilton in *Mythology*, her sensitive study of the ancient Greek myths, mentions Demeter and Persephone, this mother and child, as goddesses in whose stories "the idea of *sorrow* was foremost" (Hamilton 1957: 35).

Orpheus – Eurydice

Fine resonances of the Orpheus – Eurydice myth can be heard between interstices of the plot-pattern and sequences. The unconsummated doomed marriage of Tess and Angel is ill-omened like the marriage of the mythic pair, when instead of bringing joy Hymen's torch smoked and brought tears into their eyes. The ill-omens attending Tess's marriage – the vision of the ancestral coach, the crowing of the cock – offer close parallel. Eurydice was coveted by another after her marriage because of her beauty. Tess had been coveted prior to, and again after, her marriage because of her physical beauty. Eurydice, in her desperation to evade the advances of lust "trod upon a snake in the grass, was bitten in the foot..." (Bulfinch 1993: 230). Metaphorically Tess had also been caught by a snake unawares: "Little did she know that the serpent hissed where the birds sang (*T* 104).

Orpheus had been given one condition for having his wife restored to him: that he must not "turn round to look at her..." (Bulfinch 1993: 231). Ironically, Angel got Tess back, however briefly, because he had turned back; after learning the terrible truth of Tess's return to Alec, Angel trudges away from Sandbourne. "He had traversed the greater part of this depression ... when, pausing for breath, he *unconsciously looked back. Why he did so he could not say, but something seemed to impel him to the act. ... as he gazed a moving spot intruded on the white vacuity*" (*T* 431; emphasis added). Tess runs up breathlessly to report to him, 'I have done it'. Thus he repeats the Orpheus gesture with apparently obverse result; the estranged couple is reunited in a most wiry, extraordinary situation. Anyway, ultimately, like Orpheus, he wins her back from Pluto only to lose her for ever – this time to no mortal but to grim perpetual death. Before long Tess has to bid him farewell like Eurydice to Orpheus. Like the mythic couple, they journey through darkness, and on the eve of dawn she is snatched away again, this time for ever. "Just as he (Orpheus) could ... see the glimmer of a sunbeam reflected on the rocks, he felt at once as if Eurydice were not there. ... (and) turned his head..." (Hyde 2003: 118). Tess too is captured/snatched away "just before day" with "the band of silver paleness along the east horizon" (*T* 442). Both the girls bid their final farewell to their husbands in the twilight at the end of a dark tunnel and a metaphoric 'dark cave' (*T* 439) respectively. Thus the sad experience of Tess's marriage, and particularly the ending of the novel, can be considered in the light of an imaginative layering upon the Orpheus–Eurydice myth, thus lending the grandeur of timeless sadness attending the plight of mortal love as it is threatened and doomed by separation, loss and death.

Penelope

Tess, waiting for Angel's return, hoping against hope, becomes Penelope at this stage – the faithful wife waiting for her husband's return in the face of all odds – including the pressure of a most formidable 'suitor'. In a sense Alec is also Tess's

Antinous, Penelope's ardent lover during Odysseus's absence, and the 'meanest', "the most shameless of the entire company" (Graves 1958: 732), whereas Angel plays the Odysseus – going across seas, coming back to his wife after his travails in the outer world, comes back like a beggar too, metaphorically speaking, begging for forgiveness from his wronged wife.

Tess, however, emerges to be a failed Penelope. It was not possible for her to indulge in the luxury of weaving and un-weaving the never-ending tapestry; life was too tough and demanding for her. So Angel's homecoming too proves sadly at variance with Odysseus's eventually happy restoration to the home and hearth he had left behind. Angel, a broken man from his voyage across the seas to alien lands, comes back to find no Ithaca to settle in.

Apollo

Alec, on mounting his renewed pressures upon Tess says once; "You say you have a husband... Well, perhaps you have; but I have never seen him... and altogether he seems a mythological personage..." (T 373). Alec is, in fact, wiser than he knows when he says this. If Alec corresponds to the dark deity of mythology Angel represents his counterpoint, the luminous god. Angel is an Apollo figure. Lest the reader missed the hint the author makes it unambiguous; during their last journey Tess devotedly looks up to Angel: "he was still ... *her Apollo*" (T 443; emphasis added).

Angel, who would sometimes feel a distinct preference for the Hellenic heritage to the Palestinian (T 190), is meant to be cast in the image of Apollo, "the acknowledged god of music" who "played on his seven-stringed lyre while the gods banquet" (Graves 1958: 77); who "refuses to bind himself in marriage" (Graves 1958: 78), though he had many affairs. Apollo, can serve as a point of reference for Angel on the aspects of sheer physical beauty, association with joy and light (in the early phase), love of music and dancing, lover-like manners. Angel's defiance of and separation from his father's ways too tallies with Apollo's little tiffs with his father.

Apollo is also envisioned in the Hellenic myths as a god tending white cattle and playing on a lyre. Angel, working in the Talbothays dairy among the cattle during the day, and playing his harp in the evenings is seen by everyone as a dignified luminary who had just playfully opted for this life for a while; "Mr. Angel Clare – he that is learning milking, and that plays the harp... Yes, he is quite the gentleman-born" (T 145), – so would the dairy-maids discuss him.

Grant conjectures that perhaps Apollo, initially 'a god of herdsmen', had eventually come to represent the 'essential symbol' of the Hellenic ethical ideal: "Within Apollo's province, too, was the approval of codes of law inculcating high moral and religious principles" (Grant 1962: 137). It is this point at which Angel gets explicitly conflated upon Apollo, the merciless, stern god (Grant 1962: 133), and which precisely accounts for the devastation of his marriage, by

making him the rigid votary of an orthodox snobbish social ethics. As he remains unmoved to Tess's frantic appeals and intense suffering, the author explains: "It would have won round any man but Angel Clare. Within the remote depths of his constitution, so gentle and affectionate as he was in general, there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in a soft loam, which turned the edge of everything that attempted to traverse it" (*T* 278). Tess is shocked to discover his 'cruel consistency', "such determination under apparent flexibility" (*T* 279), and gives up her hope for "forgiveness" (*T* 279).

Eventually Angel mellows as he learns better; and this development too sends back its tentacles to the myth. Angel, towards the end, is like Apollo in a later period – meek, gentle, kind – the god who brings benediction to the devotee in the long run. Just as Tess would receive some residual comfort from the sun which had left the stones – her last bed – "warm and dry, in comforting contrast to the rough and chill grass around" (*T* 441), so does she receive some comfort from the warmth of Angel's love, in contrast to the hostility and persecution of a rough insensitive world around, during her brief 'Fulfilment' before death.

Apollo is also the 'Cleanser', to whom one must go for cleansing after killing a 'kin'; it is only Apollo who can offer this benediction; "he was the purifier" (Grant 1962: 137). After killing a 'kin' Tess runs up to Angel. And Angel accepts her, with the benediction of 'Fulfilment' (albeit brief). Indeed, Angel, in his initial buoyancy, his eventual sternness, and final tenderness towards Tess, seems to embody the essential ambivalence⁵ of this Greek deity.

Tess has all along looked up to Angel as a devotee looks up toward her god – obediently, admiringly, worshipfully as if he were really a deity. "He was ... *her Apollo*..." (*T* 443; emphasis added). Finally, it should be taken into account that Stonehenge, where at the altar stone Tess is clearly made out to be a sacrificial figure, was a sun temple, thus implicitly connecting with Apollo, the Sun-god.

Ancestral sin

Again, the theme of killing a 'kin' sends back tentacles to the grim tales of kinship and bloodshed in the ancient myths. Blood-bath, Blood-rites are elaborately evoked on the various occasions when Tess receives a blood-bath or is implicitly associated with bleeding, bloodshed, or the scarlet colour of blood staining her whiteness, literally and metaphorically. The motif of ancestral sin has been made to overlap here with the hints of blood-rites. The motifs of ancestral sin and cursed house, so common in the Hellenic myths, also get woven into the plot. As Tess is undone in the primitive wood Hardy makes a series of anguished utterances of pained bewilderment, – as to why this had to happen. One of the possible logics that could be cited, he admits, was that of ancestral sin;

One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rol-

licking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. (*T* 102)

But he himself would dismiss its validity. “But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it ... does not mend the matter” (*T* 102).

Zeus

The bitter opening sentence of the terse last paragraph of the book (composed of four sentences) which has become a cliché – ‘about the ‘sport’ of the President of Immortals’ – also unambiguously places Tess’s tragedy in the Greek world of myths in which Zeus plays the supremo to the other Olympians. “‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals ... had ended his sport with Tess” (*T* 446). This is Hardy’s own translation from Aeschylus’s play *Prometheus Bound*. The comment alludes to the question of the Chorus addressed to Prometheus: “Who of the gods is so hard of heart as to make thy misery cause of exultation? Who feels not with thee the pang of thy woes – save only Zeus”.⁶

Biblical Myths

The Marys

To describe and plead for his heroine Hardy would also occasionally draw upon Biblical myths. Apart from the ‘Immaculate’ image of Virgin Mary to describe the unwed mother (*T* 125), [the image as well as the epithet “immaculate” calling back to one “faultless, sexually pure, as was the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ” (Trivedi 1988: 470), who represents the paradoxical conflation of motherhood with virginity], an implicit connection between Tess and Mary Magdalene is suggested more than once; as Tess and Angel walk together in the early hours of dawn and Angel think of the Resurrection hour, the author comments: “He little thought that the Magdalene might be at his side...” (*T* 163). Connecting Tess with Mary Magdalene also seems to clinch the issue of ‘purity’ or impurity, as *The Bible* claims Mary Magdalene, supposed to be a ‘fallen’ or sexually impure woman, to have been so divine as to be the first to witness the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. Also Tess and Marian working on the desolate field of Flintcomb, in harsh weather are connected with the Biblical ‘pure’ / ‘fallen’ women: “The pensive character which the curtained hood lent to their bent heads would have reminded the observer of some Italian conception of the two Marys” (*T* 325).

Mephistopheles

That Alec is a Mephistophelian figure has been put across through several hints; he has been seen early as a Satan persuading an innocent Eve to take the fruit. Years later, the poor deserted wife of Angel Clare is seen working at a field-fire with a preoccupied mind and does not know when 'an unknown silent man' has come so close to her that the same fire-beams are reflected by the tongs of both. As the fire flares up "the unexpectedness of his presence, the grotesqueness of his appearance in a ... smock-frock" 'chill' her with a feeling of "ghastliness" (*T* 393); and Alec emits a low laugh, claiming his Mephistophelian identity in this 'Paradise': "You are Eve, and I am the old Other One come to tempt you in the disguise of an inferior animal..." (*T* 393).

In addition to all this thematic-structural-textural interpenetration there are frequent allusions interspersed in the text to mythical names, places, anecdotes, which lend a kind of unique atmospheric quality to the narration; Olympus, and Israel too, seem to enter the skeins of the Wessex landscape and the contours of the rustic personae. Thus the invocation to the "golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, gazing down with the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth" (*T* 115) during the harvest scene; Angel, on waking up in the morning that follows the sleep-walking night, "like a Samson shaking himself" (*T* 288); even the alien mechanic at the modern steam threshing engine being working "against his will in the service of his Plutonic master" (*T* 367). The list could be long indeed! The valleys, forests, mountains and tracts of the spatio-temporal map of *Tess* are indeed made to imbibe the radiance and aroma, mist and mystery of another imaginary world of "the story of the story of the story"⁷.

Tess's suffering is better understood when seen in the light of these pagan myths which help Hardy to infinitely widen the horizon of meanings and significances of apparently macabre, gruesome or even melodramatic detail of a rural tale. Even an apparently incongruous scene or event in the novel does not seem incongruous when placed in the mythic context. By means of evoking a wide range of ancient myths in a rich pattern of intersection, departure and re-creation Hardy achieves "the metamorphosis of meaning and understanding"⁸.

Myth is not logical, but intense and epiphanic in effect; hence K.K. Ruthven's notion "that writers are somehow possessed by the myths they recount (or invent) by virtue of some unique ability to think 'mythically' in an age which has aspired since Socratic times to think rationally" (Ruthven 1976: 73). Hardy, who perceived life as a logicless riddle, unexplainable by science, reason or systematic philosophy, found in myth a way of articulating his puzzlement and wonder, agony and bewilderment at the mystery of human suffering.

Often he would evoke a known myth specifically by emphasizing his defamiliarizing twists of departure, and weaving it into a rich pattern of interpenetration with a gamut of other myths and the reality itself. It is Hardy's way of 'making it new' (*à la* Pound) long before the modernist era, and thereby 'naming the unnamable' (Brooke-Rose 1971: 222) mysteries of life and suffering.

Notes

- 1 The issue has been discussed at length in my article ‘Hardy-Pierston: The Breakdown of Fiction’.
- 2 In *Canto 8* Pound juxtaposes the Malatesta family with the Atreides, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.
- 3 Printed in Edith Hamilton’s book, p. 51.
- 4 Printed in Edith Hamilton’s book, p. 80.
- 5 As Karl Kerényi puts it: “In Apollo sublimest clarity and the darkness of death face one another, perfectly poised and equal, on a border-line” (in Grant 1962: 137).
- 6 Lines 160–1; tr. David Grene, 1956; cited in Trivedi (1988: 494).
- 7 Margaret Atwood defines myth thus in “Nightingale”, her rewrite of the Philomel myth, *The Tent* 138.
- 8 Tew (2004: 130).

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[* all textual references to Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* are from this edition, cited as ‘T’.]

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