Rural History (2013) **24**, 2, 199–215. © *Cambridge University Press 2013*
doi:10.1017/S0956793313000083

Clothing the Landscape: Change and the Rural Vision in the Work of Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

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Abstract: This article considers the ways in which clothing is represented in selected work of Thomas Hardy in the context of wider social and economic change in nineteenth-century English rural society. While taking into account the difficulties of using fictional literature in this way, I suggest that it is precisely Hardy's subjectivity that makes his observations so compelling and that his perception of change lies at the heart of his representation of dress. I endeavour to show how in his writing, the perceived tension between an unchanging, idealised, countryside increasingly subjected to the influence of an urban culture is frequently expressed, either directly or metaphorically, in terms of clothing. The social and economic changes, including agricultural change, of which Hardy was so acutely aware, help to account for the disappearance of traditional features of rural dress, such as the smock-frock and the sun-bonnet. In their place were adopted styles influenced by notions of 'fashion' and made available through the process of mass production which Hardy associated primarily with towns. For Hardy, the influence of urban fashions alienated people from that individuality and speciality in dress which formed a link with their environment and ultimately their own past and history.

Introduction

How dry it was on a far-back day
When straws hung the hedge and around,
When amid the sheaves in amorous play
In curtained bonnets and light array
Bloomed a bevy now underground![1]

In an article published in *Costume* in 1983 entitled 'Clothes in Fact and Fiction', Anne Buck asks, with characteristic insight: 'Why should we turn to fiction when we have fact?' In spite of what the title of her article might lead the reader to assume, the piece is less concerned with trying to draw a clear demarcation between 'fact' and 'fiction' than with exploring the potential of the novel as a source for the dress historian. Not only does Buck illustrate that the novel can give 'factual and descriptive evidence', but, she observes that 'where dress is used to express character and illuminate social attitudes

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and relationships, it can give more. It then shows dress in action within the novelist's world.' Furthermore, she argues, 'the novelist's evidence may reveal the influences and ways of life which are expressed through dress'.[2] Continuing this theme in a later article, I attempted to illustrate how the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell can give information about 'unspoken assumptions and attitudes towards dress which exist within the society for which the author is writing'.[3]

In the thirty years since Buck's pioneering article, a number of scholars have further explored the potential of literary texts to provide insights into the role played by dress within the context of the action of the novel and to develop a further understanding of the culture and society in which a novel was written, or in which it was set, or both. Of these, mention should be made of the work of Penelope Byrde in relation to the writing of Jane Austen and in particular her fascinating discussion of the making and care of clothes as described in Austen's novels and letters.[4] Clair Hughes explores perceptively the role of dress in the work of a number of novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including Daniel Defoe, William Thackeray, George Eliot and Henry James.[5] 'My intention', claimed Hughes, 'is not to prove that dress is the hidden key to all the mysteries of these texts, but to show how an exploration of dress and its accessories can illuminate the structure of that text, its values, its meanings or its symbolic pattern'.[6] Analysing Hardy's work from the disciplinary perspective of literary studies, Simon Gatrell in his 2011 study *Thomas Hardy Writing Dress* adopts a similar approach, discussing the wide range of functions performed by clothing in Hardy's novels, short stories and poetry. He includes themes of the interconnections between dress, body and sexuality; the gendering of dress and cross-dressing; the symbolism of colour in clothes; dress conventions relating to death and the relationship of dress to identity. Gatrell argues that the latter theme 'is perhaps the one Hardy addresses with most persistence throughout his writing'.[7] Referring to Hardy's final novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Gatrell explains 'that reading the novel through dress brought into focus aspects of what Hardy achieved in it that I could have seen in no other way; it changed my understanding of the whole work'.[8]

Clothing is thus used by novelists to denote much more than merely outward appearance, a point well made by J. B. Bullen, whose observation, though referring specifically to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, could be applied more widely to Hardy's work:

> Within the text, the discussion of fashions, the numerous references to details of dress, and the persistent allusions to the sartorial appearance of other characters act as a constant reminder to the reader that clothing here has a significance which lies beyond appearances.[9]

For biographer Jenny Uglow, writing of the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell, 'a world can be evoked through a wardrobe'.[10] However, when it comes to the close reading and analysis of literary texts, subjecting them to the historian's scrutiny, we are faced with difficulties that cannot be easily dismissed. Notwithstanding these obstacles, some of which I address in this essay, French cultural and social historian Daniel Roche asserted in his 1994 study of dress and fashion in the *ancien régime* that:

> We have to accept the meaning delivered by the texts, since, like the artist, the novelist provides information about ways of life because he places objects in a context, so conferring on them a different truth from that discovered by the deciphering of archives [. . .] fiction achieves authentic

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effects both by the truth of the descriptions and by their location within a history which has a logic which reveals forms of reasoning and structures of the imagination of an age.[11]

What precisely we might understand by Daniel Roche's 'structures of the imagination of an age' could be the subject of general discussion without reference to particular writing and particular contexts, but that is not the primary aim of this article. It is my intention, however, to consider selected works of the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy in an attempt to make some sense of representations of clothing offered to us in a fictional context but in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the role of clothing in late nineteenth-century English rural society. While important work published recently investigates the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the second half of the nineteenth century is still relatively under-researched.[12] Part of the reason for this neglect may be because conventional sources for dress historians are less readily available or accessible for the study of poor working-class people in what was a period of intense social and economic change and upheaval.

Some twenty years ago my interest in the subject, alongside a search for alternative sources, led me to explore Hardy's writing in detail. I attempted to analyse the kinds of things Hardy was saying about clothing in relation to relevant surviving garments in museums, photographs and other visual and literary source material in order to attempt to 'validate' Hardy's descriptions.[13] Looking back on that work now, while I still largely support the arguments I put forward then, I am also more cautious and reflective about the way dress historians can and should use literary texts and it was this self-critical approach that made me look again at the context in which Hardy was writing and to consider the various agenda that lie beneath the surface of the texts. Surprisingly perhaps, this shift in my appraisal causes me now to re-emphasise the significance of Hardy's insights and opinions because it seems to me that they represent particular responses to a society in rapid transition from one that may broadly be defined as characterised by 'traditional' rural values, to an increasingly urban culture that is more familiar to us in the twenty-first century than the one that it replaced. Like leitmotifs in a musical composition, Hardy's preoccupations were repeatedly expressed in his work with reference to clothing.

Thomas Hardy and the discourse of change

Fifty years
Have passed since then, my child, and change has marked
The face of all things.[14]

In what is considered to be one of the first poems Hardy ever wrote, 'Domicilium', Hardy describes the cottage in Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester, Dorset, where he was born on 2nd June 1840 and where he spent the formative years of his life. About half way through the poem, he recalls walking with his paternal grandmother and asking her what the landscape was like when she and Hardy's grandfather first settled there. Her response, in the extract cited above, that 'change has marked the face of all things', seems to form a context for much of Hardy's later writing. Indeed, the fact that Hardy was born a short distance from Tolpuddle, a few years after the deportation of farm labourers who had

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come together to form a trade union, 'should remind us', observed Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, that Hardy was born into 'a changing and struggling rural society, rather than the timeless backwater to which he is so often deported':

> The Hardy country is of course Wessex: that is to say mainly Dorset and its neighbouring counties. But the real Hardy country, we soon come to see, is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change. There can be no doubt at all of Hardy's commitment to his own country, and in a natural way to its past, as we can see in his naming of Wessex. But his novels, increasingly, are concerned with change.[15]

The period from the 1840s to the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s, that is, the period from Hardy's childhood to the actual time of writing, forms the backdrop to his best known novels, including *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). The exception is Hardy's historical novel *The Trumpet Major* which is set in the period of the Napoleonic Wars. The earlier novels, such as *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd*, are based in the time of Hardy's childhood and are in general retrospective and nostalgic in tone, whereas Hardy's later novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, are much more concerned with contemporary issues of the 1880s and 1890s.

Over the second half of the nineteenth century as a whole, there was a sharp decline in the proportion of the population employed in agriculture and the percentage of the national income produced by agriculture, although there is some variation in historians' interpretation of census data. For example, G. E. Mingay argues that in 1851 agriculture employed more than twenty per cent of the occupied population and produced about the same proportion of the national income. Fifty years later, Mingay suggests, it employed less than ten per cent of the labour force and its share of the national income had fallen to less than 6.6 per cent, whereas Alun Howkins suggests that these figures should be six per cent and just over six per cent respectively.[16] In Hardy's later novels the lives of his characters are played out within a society experiencing the complex consequences of agricultural, economic and social changes. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* we are given insights into the precarious 'condition', insecurity of tenure and starvation wages suffered by many agricultural labourers and the encroachment of machinery into traditional tasks. In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy chronicled the constant shifting of 'home' and a desire for a sense of belonging as cause and effect of the dissolution of traditional village communities in favour of the large scale move towards urbanism and suburbanism. This was not only a consequence of new work patterns and the slow decline of agricultural employment but also a symptom of changing social aspirations and the quest for education. In these, his two final novels, Hardy thus articulated more forcefully than hitherto the tensions between traditional values and the shock of the new. In the essay 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' (1883) he encapsulated this contrast between the picturesque image of the traditional village life and its reality:

> The artistic merit of their old condition is scarcely a reason why they should have continued in it when other communities were marching on so vigorously towards uniformity and mental equality.

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It is only the old story that progress and picturesqueness do not harmonise. They are losing their individuality but they are widening the range of their ideas, and gaining in freedom. It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators.[17]

As Hardy's biographer, Michael Millgate reflected:

Hardy in his mature years was rarely tempted to indulge in indiscriminate nostalgia for the past. He was always deeply conscious, however, of the process of change itself and of the many relics, good and bad, of earlier days and ways which were constantly being swept away.[18]

This tension between the desire for stability and an imagined, idyllic past set against an experience of change seems to have preoccupied Hardy, as well as his contemporaries. For example, the correspondence generated by *The Daily News Survey of 1891*, whose Special Commissioner George Millin was appointed by the liberal newspaper to investigate 'the present conditions and future prospects of agriculture' in the counties of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, discussed in detail the state of villages, the level of wages and the general conditions of the life, including the state of clothing, of labourers living in the countryside and the reasons for the steady migration into towns.[19] The 'debate' continued well into the twentieth century. For example, the oral historian George Ewart Evans wrote of the Suffolk village of Blaxhall in the 1950s that:

Any attempt to 'fix' a village in the past, to preserve the old ways and customs artificially, is misguided romanticism, wrong in its conception and impossible of application. It cannot be stated too emphatically that there is nothing to be gained by bemoaning the passing of the old community. The village has never stood still; its form has never been constant; and although the speed of recent change is making village life today both uncomfortable and disturbing, it does offer in addition an interesting challenge to those who are convinced that the small rural village has a future and who are actively concerned with helping it to evolve a new form.[20]

But the perceptions of change are important here. For the dress historian, for whom chronicling shifting fashions is always problematic and especially although not exclusively so when studying non-elite clothing, making a meaningful correlation between the casting off of older styles or the adoption of new ones and broader social change can offer a new perspective on the past. I want to show how, in Hardy's writing, the tensions between a perception of a static, but probably idealised, countryside increasingly subjected to the influence of an urban culture are frequently expressed in terms of clothing, either directly or as metaphor. As he looks both forwards and backwards, Hardy seems to survey, Janus-like, the present, future and the past. His work offers us some valuable insights into rural working-class dress through descriptions of the physical, aesthetic and symbolic qualities of clothing.

A reliable source of study for the dress historian?

At the dates represented in the various narrations things were like that in Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive certain customs, just as they are shown doing in these pages [. . .] I have instituted inquiries to correct tricks of memory, and striven

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against temptations to exaggerate, in order to preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life.[21]

To emphasise the value of Hardy's work in this context is not to say that we can accept, unquestioningly, everything he wrote about the rural society he observed or to ignore potential pitfalls in approaching the novel when seeking a more nuanced narrative of the history of dress. Merryn Williams argues that Hardy was 'the first writer to achieve the necessary range and realism of the novel of English country life'.[22] On the other hand, historian Keith Snell rejects in the main 'the accounts which stress Hardy's originality as lying in his 'realism' and social verisimilitude'.[23] Snell does not dismiss Hardy's novels out of hand, but questions the methodology that uses literary texts without caution:

Social historians traditionally have been dependent on various forms of literary evidence, but have made virtually no attempts to set the bounds to what a writer may know and be able to express of his society and its social structure: to understand in what areas his knowledge is likely to be limited, occluded or distorted, and for what reasons. Nor is it always appreciated that some literary texts cannot be forced to yield information or 'evidence' that they do not intend, and are unable of themselves to give.[24]

Snell is severe in his criticism of over-reliance by social historians on literary sources without 'independent confirmation from other sources and a defined or properly limited social focus'. Rather, he calls for an approach which 'cross-verifies' quantitative and empirical evidence with literary statement and which explores the 'specific "questions" to which a literary work was [. . .] addressed [. . .] the senses in which the work formed a dialogue with its own history'.[25]

Although much of the detail of Snell's argument is not expressly relevant to my purpose here, it is useful to consider one interesting aspect of his critique. Snell discusses the social changes described by Hardy both in his essay 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' and the novels, placing them in their longer historical perspective. For instance, Snell questions whether inter-parochial agricultural mobility between 1780 and the 1870s was as extensive in Dorset as during an earlier period such as the eighteenth century.[26] Hardy, on the other hand, tends to look not much further than to a past remembered by his or his own parents and grandparents. Thus Snell concludes that 'the historical alienation from a 'primal', local sense of place which Hardy depicted as occurring in his own lifetime [. . .] was based on a nostalgic fiction of the past'.[27]

What we encounter here is a difference of perspective: Snell's is that of the historian analysing change within a longer timeframe and with the 'benefit' of hindsight; whereas the reactions to change experienced by Hardy are current, personal and subjective. Hardy, unlike the historian, is not intent on putting the changes into a broader historical context. However, I suggest that Hardy's reactions are no less valid for the fact that they are coloured by his own preoccupations and nostalgia. Rather, it is their subjectivity that makes them so compelling, especially when we appreciate that Hardy was not alone in his reservations about the apparent inevitability of the 'march of progress'.

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Albeit in a different context, Susan Pearce alerts us to the value of an individual's perception of 'loss, gain or indifference', adding that all these perceptions share an equal validity.[28] Furthermore, she argues that 'the distinction between narrative as 'historical' writing, which claims to 'tell the truth about the past' and narrative which is 'fiction', like a novel or a poem, becomes increasingly flimsy the harder it is looked at'. Rather, she concludes, 'both are equally 'true' in the sense that they set out a view of the human social past as conceived by the writer in his day'.[29]

Snell's critique is significant because it highlights the complexity of the issues at stake and warns against any literal translation of a literary text into historical evidence or 'document'. Nonetheless Snell concludes that although 'Hardy by-passed many of the important but transient rural issues of his day', 'in his choice of signification, in his artistic emphasis on problems of personal alienation and marital estrangement, he was firmly embedded in and responsive to the social history of the period'.[30] The significance of Hardy's work for the historian, then, may be found in the ways in which the author's work, in Snell's words, 'forms a dialogue with its own history'. If the novel is to be of value to the dress historian, as to the historian, it is important to understand the deeper preoccupations of the author and to whom the author addressed the work, difficult though that may be. It is useful here to be reminded of art historian Martin Kemp's advice, that a source needs to be 'respected for what it was; that is to say judging the reasons for its own production, what its originator was aiming to communicate, and who was the intended recipient of its message'.[31] If this axiom is applied to Hardy and to Hardy's work, it will lead to an exploration beyond the surface of the text itself and may penetrate some of Hardy's wider concerns in his writing. Snell, for example, accounts for what he considers Hardy's non-engagement, in the earlier novels, with the social and economic concerns of the Dorset agricultural labourer, such as class antagonism, low wages, unemployment and other issues surrounding the 'condition' of the agricultural labourer, as a result of pressures exerted on his art by the constraints of his readership. Hardy's first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, was rejected by Macmillan explicitly because of its attack on the middle classes, and Hardy was forced to adopt a measure of tact in order to be published in *Longman's*, *Blackwood's*, *Cornhill* and the other magazines where much of his work first appeared.[32] Hardy's desire for acceptance by a middle-class audience and all the accompanying insecurities of a self-taught writer trying to eschew his working-class roots, removed him, perhaps, from the world of the agricultural labourer. However, having gained credibility as a novelist, the mature Hardy was able, in his later novels, to free himself to some extent from the dictates of his audience so that the dialogue with his readership took a quite different path from his previous works. Unlike the almost arcadian rural world of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, there are passages in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that almost exactly reproduce concerns about rural depopulation and the precariousness of tenure experienced by the agricultural labourer as expressed in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'.[33] Furthermore, on issues such as marital estrangement and the justification of an alternative sexual morality to that espoused by Victorian society, Hardy overturned convention and aroused controversy. Indeed after the furore over the publication of *Jude the Obscure* Hardy abandoned writing novels and turned exclusively to poetry.

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Thomas Hardy and changes in rural styles of dress: fashion and the urban

Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smock-frock, by the breadth of a hair.[34]

Elsewhere I have discussed how Hardy uses references to clothing to set a scene or provide a contemporary or historical context, and how these references are woven into the narrative for the purpose of advancing the plots of the novels. Descriptions of clothing and accessories are also employed for the purposes of characterisation, to emphasise individuality or conventionality for example, or to denote occupation.[35] But how can my earlier claim, that Hardy uses a narrative of clothing to articulate and define change, be substantiated? While I would agree with Simon Gatrell that Hardy is not especially interested in changes in fashionable dress and that he 'didn't put changes in fashion to much significant work in his writing',[36] this does not contradict my assertion that Hardy concerned himself with change which he narrated using descriptions of clothing more generally.

In those novels set in the time of Hardy's childhood, such as *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy referred to clothing as relatively static in style, to 'snow-white smock-frocks, embroidered upon the shoulders and breasts in ornamental forms of hearts, diamonds and zig-zags'.[37] Of the labourers on Bathsheba Everdene's farm coming to receive their wages, he wrote: 'some were, as usual, in snow-white smock-frocks of Russia duck, and some in whitey-brown ones of drabbet - marked on the wrists, breasts, backs and sleeves in honeycomb work'.[38] Fine linen (Russia duck) and, in particular, drabbet (a coarser twilled fabric, either of cotton, or a cotton and linen mix) were the usual fabrics used for smocks in the period. Hardy had first-hand knowledge of traditional smock-frocks, including those worn by his father. Claire Tomalin points out that in 1918 Hardy lent his father's working smocks to the boys in the 'Mellstock' cast, a group of local amateur players, for a production based on *Under the Greenwood Tree*.[39] However in his later work, Hardy sometimes refers to change in straightforward descriptions of one style of clothing replacing another, a process which he saw as occurring in his own lifetime, following a long period of stability. Clearly his own personal preferences were for what he saw as 'traditional' rural life, which he particularly associated with the decades of his childhood in the 1840s and early 1850s, before the onset of change and it is significant that this was the period in which he set *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. It is as if life at this time becomes the measure against which all later experience is compared, symptomatic perhaps of the natural tendency to look back nostalgically to one's formative years. Hardy thus discusses the evolution of styles of clothing and fabric as part of broader, far-reaching changes in society and his observations are shaped by what he sees around him: the result is an emphasis on the changes occurring in his own lifetime rather than the longer historical perspective.

Although he presents the changes taking place in the 1880s as based on direct and objective observation, both here and elsewhere in his novels and poetry, his comments seem to be coloured by an implicit, and sometimes explicit, ambivalence towards the dissolution of tradition. While it may be overstating the case to speak of his 'philosophy'

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of dress, Hardy's own preferences and pervasive nostalgia for the past affect the way he represents dress. It is, however, in this regard that he engages with wider issues of his day and that his writings can be said to form 'a dialogue with their own history'. Interestingly, to the proof copy of his 1895 preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy has specifically added a reference to smock-frocks: 'The practice of divination by Bible and key, the regarding of valentines as things of serious import, the shearing supper', (Hardy has here inserted 'the long smockfrocks') 'and the harvest-home, have, too, nearly disappeared in the wake of the old houses'.[40] With these considerations in mind I want to discuss the changes Hardy describes in his ostensibly factual essay, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' (1883).

In the following extract, Hardy's observations focus on the hiring-fair 'of recent years', an event that was becoming obsolete. Significantly, he makes the comparison with the hiring-fair of the 1850s and 1860s:

> The hiring-fair of recent years presents an appearance unlike that of former times. A glance up the high street of the town on a Candlemas-fair twenty or thirty years ago revealed a crowd whose general colour was whity-brown [*sic*] flecked with white. Black was almost absent, the few farmers who wore that shade being hardly discernible. Now the crowd is as dark as a London crowd. This is owing to the rage for cloth clothes which possess the labourers of to-day. Formerly they came in smock-frocks and gaiters, the shepherds with their crooks, the carters with a zone of whipcord round their hats, thatchers with a straw tucked into the brim, and so on. Now, with the exception of an occasional old shepherd, there is no mark of speciality in the groups, who might be tailors or undertakers' men, for what they exhibit externally. Out of a group of eight, for example, who talk together in the middle of the road, only one wears corduroy trousers. Two wear cloth pilot-coats and black trousers, two patterned tweed suits with black canvas overalls, the remaining four suits being of faded broadcloth. To a great extent these are their Sunday suits; but the genuine white smock-frock of Russia duck and the whity-brown one of drabbet, are rarely seen now afield except on the shoulders of old men [. . .] That peculiarity of the English urban poor [. . .] - their preference for the cast-off clothes of a richer class to a special attire of their own - has, in fact, reached the Dorset farm folk. Like the men, the women are, pictorially, less interesting than they used to be. Instead of the wing bonnet like the tilt of the wagon, cotton gown, bright-hued neckerchief, and strong flat boots and shoes, they (the younger ones at least) wear shabby millinery bonnets and hats with beads and feathers, 'material' dresses, and boot-heels almost as foolishly shaped as those of ladies of highest education.[41]

Hardy's comments, in particular those regarding the demise of the smock-frock and the sun-bonnet (or 'wing bonnet') accord with the observations made by other writers and commentators. For example, the naturalist Richard Jefferies (1848–1887) was born in the same decade as Hardy but, in contrast to Hardy, rarely referred to clothing in his writing. He does, however, make a similar point about the decline in the wearing of smocks, commenting that 'If the race of men have not changed they have altered their costume; the smock-frock lingered longest, but even that is going'.[42] Likewise, W. H. Hudson (1841–1922) describing the 'usual type' of Hampshire labourers in 1902 observes that 'The one change they have made is, alas! in their dress – the rusty black coat for the smock-frock'.[43] In his fictional writing, Hardy brought home this point in his description of Alec d'Urberville appearing on the village allotments dressed in a smock-frock. Alec's plan, to appear to Tess in the unlikely disguise of an agricultural labourer, exploits the

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popular visual association between the labourer and the smock-frock. Ironically, however, Alec's desire for authenticity and his superficial attempt to communicate with Tess on her terms in this episode fail: Alec's understanding of the agricultural world is so flawed that he has not noticed that the smock-frock is now being worn only by older men. Hardy thus creates a wonderful sense of dramatic and sinister irony:

> The unexpectedness of his presence, the grotesqueness of his appearance in a gathered smock-frock, such as was now worn only by the most old-fashioned of the labourers, had a ghastly comicality that chilled her (Tess) as to its bearing. D'Urberville emitted a low, long laugh.[44]

The impact of the passage upon the reader depends on appreciation of the fact that Alec looks grotesque because at the time when the novel was set, probably no earlier than the 1880s, young labourers would no longer be wearing smock-frocks.

Hardy's comments regarding the demise of the sun-bonnet are similarly accurate. This change in style can be at least partly explained by the shift away from agricultural employment into domestic service. Although considered picturesque, these garments were becoming increasingly obsolete and symbols of a vanishing culture, as a result of changing tastes combined with the fact that women no longer needed the protection to their faces from the sun that these garments afforded during outdoor work.[45] Describing the Oxfordshire hamlet of Lark Rise in the 1880s, Flora Thompson observed that only the older women wore sun-bonnets away from the fields. Old 'Queenie', for example, 'represented another phase of (the hamlet's) life which had also ended and been forgotten by most people [...] She seemed very old to the children, for she was a little, wrinkled, yellow-faced old woman in a sun-bonnet'.[46] While noting their decline, Hardy also acknowledged their picturesque quality when referring to Tess the dairymaid in 'the print gown of no date or fashion and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow' and in Alec's taunt to Tess: 'You field girls should never wear those bonnets if you wish to keep out of danger'.[47]

But beneath the surface of what seems straightforwardly descriptive, Hardy was constructing a sort of dialectic in his work between perceptions of modernity and more traditional values which reflect his own ambivalent attitude expressed both in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' and elsewhere. What is notable is that his comparisons are described specifically in 'dress terms'. In the lengthy extract quoted above, Hardy compared the labourers at the contemporary hiring fair with a 'London crowd' because their clothing is 'as dark', observing that there is no longer any 'mark of speciality in the groups', such as 'the shepherds with their crooks, the carters with a zone of whipcord round their hats, thatchers with a straw tucked into the brim, and so on'. He also alluded to the 'rage for cloth clothes' and the preference of the English urban poor for 'the cast-off clothes of a richer class to a special attire of their own'. Here he is presumably referring to a desire for ready-made versions or imitations of middle class styles and fabrics, and suggests that this has filtered down to working people in villages and small or provincial town communities. This process, of the emulation of one class by another, was undoubtedly assisted by improved communications brought about by the coming of the railways and new trends in advertising. By making the comparison with London crowds Hardy is drawing on his own personal experience, having lived and worked in

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London in his early to mid twenties (1862–7), and as a newly married man (1874–5). He also continued to make frequent visits to London even after he moved back to Dorset permanently. For Hardy, London was the quintessence of urbanism, although by the end of the nineteenth century it was very different from northern urban centres whose recent growth was associated predominantly with manufacturing and industrialisation. In 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' the essential point is that agricultural workers are imitating 'urban' trends and thereby denying the individuality in dress that had distinguished specific groups in the past. This suggests an implied criticism of the new processes of the making and manufacture of clothing, and although he does not refer to it specifically by name, it amounts to a critique of the whole ready-to-wear system which, by the late nineteenth century, had taken hold of the production of 'mass fashion'. Hardy sees this as running counter to individual style related specifically to a person's occupation. That Hardy was not alone in his opinions is apparent if we turn once again to the writing of Flora Thompson:

> The smock-frock was still worn by the older men, who declared that one well-made smock would outlast twenty of the new machine-made suits the younger men were buying. The smock, with its elaborately stitched yoke and snow-white home laundering, was certainly more artistic than the coarse, badly-fitting 'reach-me-downs', as they were sometimes called.[48]

But Hardy goes further than Thompson in his analysis, insisting, for example, that clothes should in some profound way be related to the wearer. Thus in *The Woodlanders*, Hardy laments that 'there can be hardly anything less connected with a woman's personality than drapery which she has neither designed, manufactured, cut, sewed, nor even seen'.[49] On one level, this could certainly be read as a reaction to the complex changes described above and in particular to the tendency towards mass produced, ready-made clothing that was becoming more readily available from retailers in provincial towns. But it can also be construed as a way of linking the individual, physically and emotionally, to their environment. Clothing, Hardy seems to be suggesting, should be related in some way to the wearer and therefore be an expression of herself or himself and the environment of which s/he is a part. Clothing thus becomes an essential link between the wearer and their physical environment such that some aspect of the landscape or the natural world is represented as clothing and vice versa. At the same time Hardy emphasises the psychological need of the individual to be at one with that landscape. For example, Tess is 'a figure which is part of the landscape; a field woman pure and simple, in winter guise'.[50] In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy describes how Clym Yeobright, once he has taken to furze-cutting on Egdon Heath, 'appeared of a russet hue, not more distinguishable from the scene around him than the green caterpillar from the leaf it feeds on'.[51] In the same novel, the gloom is presented as 'funereal: all nature seemed clothed in crape'[52] and in *The Woodlanders*, the trees are clothed in 'jackets of lichen and stockings of moss'.[53] In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy likens 'soft brown mosses' to 'faded velveteen'[54] and in *Jude the Obscure* the fresh harrow lines of a field 'seemed to stretch like the channellings in a piece of new corduroy'.[55]

These metaphors and similes are much more than just literary device. In Hardy's memorable depiction of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, the narrator moves

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from portraying the heath in an 'antique brown dress' with its 'venerable one coat', which is at odds with 'a person on a heath in raiment of modern cut and colours', to adopting a philosophical stance about how we *should* dress in such an environment 'in the oldest and simplest human clothing'. J. B. Bullen observes that the clothes metaphor that Hardy develops in the following passage was inspired by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*:

> Civilisation was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation. In its venerable one coat lay a certain vein of satire on human vanity in clothes. A person on a heath in raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.[56]

In this passage, Hardy suggests that the wearing of modern or fashionable dress by working-class people is indicative of their being at odds either with their environment, or, more significantly, with themselves. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* Lucetta's acquisition of a fashionable Parisian appearance betrays her artful and devious character.[57] In *The Woodlanders* we are told that Grace Melbury's 'modern attire look[ed] odd where everything else was old-fashioned'.[58]

The theme of country girls adopting clothing above their station is criticised by Hardy not because he shared the desire to keep the classes in their 'rightful' place that was the primary motivation behind the sumptuary legislation of the past, but because he despises the fashions that were being imitated. Indeed references to fine clothing worn by country girls are Hardy's way of suggesting that they have suffered seduction. After her time at Trantridge, Tess returns home to have her baby and makes clothes for her sisters and brothers 'out of some finery which d'Urberville had given her, and she had put by with contempt'.[59] Then, towards the end of the novel, believing that her husband Angel has definitively abandoned her and having finally been worn down by the attentions of Alec d'Urberville, she is represented as a lady of fashion whilst living with Alec at Sandbourne (Bournemouth). She tells Angel that 'these clothes are what he's put upon me: I didn't care what he did wi' me!'[60] The fashionable clothing that Alec has 'put upon' Tess is symbolic of her ultimate moral degradation, not because she conforms to society's definition of a 'fallen woman', but because she has succumbed to the desires of another, and of someone whom she does not love but loathes. In his poem, 'The Ruined Maid', which was probably conceived when living in London in the 1860s, Hardy explores a similar theme as the following stanzas illustrate:

> 'O Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!
> Who should have supposed I should meet you in town?
> And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?'
> 'O didn't you know I'd been ruined?' said she.
>
> 'You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
> Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;
> And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!'
> 'Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined,' said she.

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Melia's interlocutor replies:

'I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!'-
'My dear - a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined,' said she.[61]

A superficial gaiety, created by the jaunty metre and language of the poem, disguises the tragedy of what was considered the moral ruin of country girls who, like Tess, were exploited by their employers in domestic service, or fell victim to the attractions and materialism of the town. Daniel Roche's study of eighteenth-century French literature highlights how 'clothing evokes dissolute seduction, sexual display and the dangers of city life for virtuous girls'.[62] Hardy adds his own complex version of this theme to his work.

Contempt for fashionable, town clothing is voiced, as we have seen, in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' when Hardy describes young country women in the early 1880s as 'pictorially, less interesting than they used to be', wearing 'shabby millinery bonnets and hats with beads and feathers, "material" dresses, and boot-heels almost as foolishly shaped as those of ladies of highest education'.[63] Conversely, Hardy asks derisively of London high society women, 'if put into rough wrappers in a turnip-field, where would their beauty be?'[64] His awareness of the transformative power of elegant clothes is illustrated by the descriptions of Tess as a lady of fashion towards the end of the novel and we are asked to consider their possibilities in *Jude the Obscure*, when we are told of Sue Brideshead's plain clothes: 'a matter of ten pounds spent in a drapery-shop which had no connection with her real life or real self, would have set all Melchester staring'.[65] In fact, a complex dialectic of the values of the countryside versus those of the town, the traditional versus the modern, echo throughout Hardy's final novel, *Jude the Obscure*. In this respect, if not in all others, Hardy had the preoccupations of his urban readership very much in mind and he captures the general ambivalence and concern seen elsewhere about urban values replacing those of the countryside. As Michael Millgate observes, 'Hardy saw clearly that his career as a writer was founded upon his capacity to mediate between essentially rural material and a predominantly urban audience'.[66] As a mature writer, Hardy himself acknowledged that 'the town man finds what he seeks in novels of the country'.[67]

Nevertheless, Hardy's negative comments about the corruptive influences manifested in urban fashions were perhaps more extreme than his readership found acceptable. After his marriage to Arabella, Jude discovers, to his horror, that his wife wears false hair:

A little chill overspread him at her first unrobing. A long tail of hair, which Arabella wore twisted up in an enormous knob at the back of her head, was deliberately unfastened, stroked out, and hung upon the looking-glass which he had bought her.

'What - it wasn't your own?' he said, with a sudden distaste for her.

'O no - it never is nowadays with the better class.'

'Nonsense! Perhaps not in towns. But in the country it is supposed to be different. Besides, you've enough of your own, surely?'

'Yes, enough as country notions go. But in towns the men expect more.'[68]

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Here and elsewhere, Hardy associates fashion with 'artfulness' and scheming. Arabella's deception of Jude by wearing false hair can be read as a sign of the deeper dishonesty of leading Jude to believe she is to have his child to make him marry her. In Hardy's work, as J. B. Bullen observes, '"art" - whether it is the art of the fashion-designer or even the skill of the painter - is always associated with "artfulness", with false appearances, personal cunning, and ultimately, moral duplicity'.[69]

Hardy makes no excuses for challenging the conventions of fashion. While in *Jude the Obscure*, his weakest and most superficial characters generally conform to its dictates (Arabella), his most complex and intelligent character (Sue Bridehead) does not. Hardy offers a barely veiled challenge to one of the most rigid codes of Victorian fashion, the etiquette of mourning, in which fabric, including its texture, appearance and colour, is specified depending on the relationship of the deceased to the bereaved and the length of time that has elapsed since the death.[70] Following the death of her second husband, Mr Cartlett, Arabella wears the most conventional and popular of mourning fabric, black crape, made into a 'sombre suit of pronounced cut'.[71] Jude, after the death of his three children, also wears black crape. Sue, however, does not conform to dress codes: her 'coloured clothing, which she had never thought of changing for the mourning garb he [Jude] had bought, suggested to the eye a greater grief than the conventional garb of bereavement could express'.[72] Hardy makes a similar point in his poem, 'She at his Funeral':

> Unchanged my gown of garish dye,
> Though sable-sad is their attire;
> But they stand round with griefless eye,
> Whilst my regret consumes like fire.[73]

The point being made, of course, is that grief is not to be measured by the clothing adopted and that therefore the etiquette of dress is no more than a convention if it is worn without feeling genuine grief and regret. Hardy's comments might sound commonplace to a contemporary readership but to challenge late Victorian dress codes would have been radical in his own time. On the other hand, by the 1890s there was some loosening of the strictures of Victorian codes of etiquette and in this respect it could be argued that Hardy was engaging with current issues and debate: his writing can certainly be described as forming 'a dialogue with its own history'. Hardy's voice was not a lone one. Dress reformers and followers of the Arts and Crafts Movement also questioned what they saw as the absurdities of fashion, such as the dangerous and constrictive lacing of the female corseted torso demanded by the dictates of fashion.[74] Thus in the context of wider issues of dress reform, Hardy's novels can be seen as a product of their time, engaging with a number of current concerns, and, in particular, with the extremes of fashionable dress.

In conclusion, Hardy's perception of radical change as occurring in his own lifetime lies at the heart of his representation of rural dress. The social and economic changes of which Hardy was so acutely aware account for the disappearance of traditional features of rural dress like the smock-frock and the sun-bonnet, in favour of styles that were

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influenced by notions of 'fashion' and the availability of mass-produced clothing which Hardy associated primarily with towns. As Hardy perceived things, the influence of urban fashions alienated people from that individuality and speciality in dress which formed a link with their environment and ultimately their own past and history. That clothing should play such a central part in this transition is highly significant: not only do we see, to use Anne Buck's words, 'dress in action in the novelist's world', but we also encounter one aspect of the way in which clothing became incorporated in the construction of an idealised rural past invested with a strong folk culture in England from the second half of the nineteenth century. The history of rural working-class dress is not simply a history of the physical characteristics of clothing, but a complex of different representations. It must encompass the history of people's reaction to change, their perceptions of the past in comparison with those of the present, of nostalgia, tempered in Hardy's case, with a degree of realism. A novel or a piece of poetry can provide us with significant insights into a writer's perceptions and attitudes. But like the reflection in a hall of mirrors, that image can be blurred or distorted in relation to what we might call objective reality, however that is defined. Hardy's voice, while it may not constitute 'fact', is one that recognises the importance of dress as signifier and gauge of many things and not least of wider cultural and social change.

Notes

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