

Thomas Hardy Revisited: New Perspectives on an Old Story

Pearl Hochstadt

Ralph Pite. 2007. *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press. 522 pp. + viii. Illus.

Claire Tomalin. 2007. *Thomas Hardy*. New York: Penguin. 489 pp. + xxv. Illus.

When the story of a subject's life has already been told numerous times, what prompts an author to undertake yet another version? Roughly a dozen substantial biographies of Thomas Hardy have appeared since the two-volume *Life* ghost-written by Hardy himself was published posthumously under his second wife's name. The two most recent, Ralph Pite's *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life* and Claire Tomalin's *Thomas Hardy*, offer two different rationales for their enterprise: Pite sees himself as undertaking the task of correcting the relatively serene and dispassionate self-image deliberately fashioned in that early work; Tomalin is simply committed to writing a lively, accessible introduction to an author whose work she esteems highly. The events they recount are, not surprisingly, largely the same, yet there are notable differences in emphasis and interpretation.

Certain themes are inevitable: the particular circumstances of Hardy's origins as a child of a lower class family in a backwater rural area of

England; his struggle to overcome the disadvantages of that background; his intellectual development; the rocky path of his career as an author, full of setbacks and reversals but finally crowned by the highest public honors; and the unhappy trajectory of his first marriage and the less painful but still unsatisfactory nature of his second.

There is good reason to see the story of Hardy's first marriage as far more central to his overall history than is the case with most biographical subjects. It can even be said that it was the making of him. It was Emma Gifford's loyal support that allowed him to abandon his original career as an architect and to launch himself on the uncertain path of authorship. At the same time, issues of class difference and temperamental difference were there from the start and, as Pite and Tomalin both make clear, they bore the seeds of the inevitable disintegration of their early romance. The class differences were the most immediate difficulty. Both families opposed the marriage, and only one brother of Emma's and her uncle, who officiated, attended the wedding, while no one from the Hardy family was there. Yet, although Emma was nominally a member of the gentry while the Hardys were at best yeomen, the differences in their circumstances were not that great. Both were provincials and both were poor. Indeed, Tomalin points out that before Emma went to join her older married sister in Cornwall, both women had briefly worked as governesses. Her sister's marriage at age thirty was to an elderly widowed clergyman, and when Hardy showed up to do some church restoration, Emma was also pushing thirty. The young architect who had actually been to London (while she had not) was a rare and glamorous prospect.

Both biographers acknowledge that the two quickly fell in love, but they differ in their accounts of Hardy's emotional life up to that point. Their lists of the young women for whom he expressed a passing interest are largely the same. What differs notably is the weight that Pite gives to one of them, Hardy's cousin Tryphena Sparks, the youngest daughter of his mother's sister. Tomalin notes the friendly attentions he paid her in the 1860s before she left to study at a teacher's training college in London but concludes that "there is no evidence she and Hardy met in London, and the friendship or flirtation cannot have lasted long" (94). By contrast, Pite insists, despite the lack of any evidence, that "like many other things in [Hardy's] life, the affair with Tryphena was both outwardly unremarkable and profoundly significant" (142). He goes on to create a lengthy and purely speculative scenario in which Hardy's mother Jemima is imagined as perhaps encouraging a match between them for a host of reasons supported

only by the “evidence” of the novels. And he pushes his speculations even further by suggesting that Tryphena was a substitute for and “replica” of his “dearest childhood friend,” his sister Mary, now living as a schoolmistress some miles from home. “She came to represent the innocent, vibrant country world—the not-London—that he associated with Mary, remembered so vividly and feared that he might have lost” (147). Finally, Pite claims that “through 1868 and 1869, they were involved in a deeply felt love affair, with even some thought of marrying” (148). This is impressionist biography carried to an extreme. Not a single document is cited to support his claim, and this is not the only example one might note.

Indeed, because Pite is committed to “revealing” the harsh truths suppressed in the ghostwritten life, speculation figures as well in his presentation of someone whose importance for Hardy’s early development is less controversial. Horace Moule was eight years Hardy’s senior and the fourth son of a local clergyman of formidable gifts and character. All seven Moule brothers were intellectually gifted and several went on to have distinguished careers. But Horace, though acknowledged to be the most brilliant son, never even took his university degree and eventually committed suicide at the age of 41. There is some disagreement between the two biographers as to when Hardy first met the man who was to become his closest male friend and his intellectual mentor. Tomalin says the sixteen-year-old Hardy met Moule in 1856, the same year that he began his apprenticeship to the Dorchester architect John Hicks; Pite suggests that it was 1859. In any case, it was a friendship that was to last until Moule’s death in 1873. These were the years during which Hardy’s intellectual horizons broadened significantly, and Horace Moule played a key role in that broadening. Skeptical of his family’s unquestioning evangelical piety, he introduced Hardy to the disturbing findings of geology and the heretical ideas of Auguste Comte’s Positivism (which were also being absorbed by George Eliot). Tomalin emphasizes Moule’s intellectually liberating role, while Pite is more concerned to demonstrate that Moule was actually torn between his family’s values and beliefs and the findings of contemporary scholarship. In this instance, Pite offers some credible evidence, most notably the prize essay Moule wrote and dedicated to his father, which lauded the value of simple fervor over rhetorical sophistication. But in tracing Moule’s descent into alcoholism and despair, he suggests, on the slimmest of evidence, that suppressed homosexuality was also a factor. Again, Tomalin prefers not to subscribe to so tenuous a claim.

Both authors note one important point about Moule. He lectured about the growing opportunity for men of working class backgrounds to get a university education, but he discouraged Hardy from pursuing such a dream. It would be more “prudent,” Moule maintained, for Hardy to abandon the study of Greek and concentrate on his architectural career. Once again, class differences were a stumbling block. No surprise then that *The Poor Man and the Lady*, Hardy’s unpublished first attempt to write a novel, made those differences its central theme, nor that they were to remain an abiding concern that burst forth with long-suppressed passion in *Jude the Obscure*, the work whose iconoclastic depictions of both the class structure and the power of sexual neediness provoked the outcry that effectively ended his career as a writer of fiction.

On the other hand, Moule supported Hardy’s efforts to find a publisher for *The Poor Man and the Lady* and wrote favorable reviews of the two published works that succeeded it. Yet by the time of his death, his relationship to his former disciple was reversed. The young author was making his way in the world both financially and in his reputation. It was a reversal that would be repeated over a much longer period with Emma. As Hardy’s reputation grew, he had less need to turn to her for advice or encouragement. And as he was taken up by the London literary and intellectual establishment, the intimate companionship of their early days was diluted. Increasingly, her provincialism made her look awkward and behave awkwardly in those circles. In any case, the clubs that Hardy joined were male-only establishments. And so they drifted apart. It was a development that only accelerated when Hardy returned to Dorsetshire to build his home, Max Gate, and found himself divided in his loyalties between Emma and his mother and sister, still hostile to her.

Again, Pite and Tomalin perceive that development somewhat differently. Pite expresses deep sympathy for Emma, saying that “Hardy’s coldness to her in middle age and beyond was decided, absolute and cruel” (60). He notes the contempt with which Hardy treated his “silly wife” in many instances, most notably during a visit from Sir Henry Newbolt and W. B. Yeats to present him with a medal from the Royal Society of Literature on his seventy-second birthday. Tomalin sides with Hardy: “Emma must have exasperated [him] beyond endurance for him to have treated her as he did on that occasion” (307). Was Emma mad? Various observers, most notably Hardy’s sister Mary, seemed to suggest that she was. Both biographers disagree but also agree that loneliness and bitterness encouraged eccentric behavior on her part. Tomalin talks of her “open display of hostility towards

Hardy" (290). Pite claims that by 1896 she had begun behaving punitively towards him, and yet "she had not stopped loving Hardy, far from it, and if Hardy had been more self-aware he would have seen the obvious reasons she had for being angry with him" (371-72).

The most obvious reason for the Hardys' estrangement is well documented by both biographers. In the early 1890s, Hardy developed a roving eye. Moreover, as a highly regarded man of letters, he became the object of other women's interest. Pite treats this development more fully than Tomalin does. Characteristically, he spins an elaborate theory about how one of these episodes, a flirtatious affair initiated and ended by a socially daring young poetess, Rosamund Tomson, had a "profound" (a favorite word) effect, causing him to register once again his disgust with sophisticated insincerity. According to Pite, the history of this affair "dovetailed" with his resentment of a different form of insincerity, the censorship practiced by "society's prudish moral guardians" (311), and led to the publication of his essay "Candour in English Fiction." For once, Tomalin's much briefer account of the affair focuses on Emma's pain.

There were to be two other women who became important rivals. In 1893, Hardy fell in love with Florence Henniker, another writer, who at first seemed to Hardy to be as emancipated as Rosamund Tomson. They spent much time in each other's company, but in the end she remained loyal to her husband. Still, their friendship persisted up until her death in 1923, and one of its unhappy consequences for Emma was that, starting with the writing of *Jude the Obscure*, Florence replaced her as the person Hardy consulted about his work in progress.

The other woman, also named Florence, was to become Hardy's second wife. About Florence Emily Dugdale, both writers are in essential agreement, and their portrait is scarcely flattering. She was one of the many women who made overtures to Hardy, a man almost forty years her senior. Interestingly, she eventually also made overtures to Emma and to Florence Henniker as well, offering them the same services as an amanuensis as she was already performing for Hardy. Deviousness is the hallmark of her relationship to both, a deviousness that Hardy shared. After meeting her in 1905, he arranged frequent clandestine meetings, which continued even after she introduced herself to Emma five years later and became her deferential "friend." Making herself more and more useful to both, she was an obvious candidate to look after the aging author when his wife died in November 1912. Two years later, she became the second Mrs. Hardy. Pite claims she loved him; Tomalin disagrees. In any case, she was to experience

some of the same pangs of jealousy as her predecessor, especially when Hardy poured out a series of poetic tributes to Emma in the aftermath of her death, and then later and more fiercely, when he seemed to be smitten by a young actress who played the role of his favorite heroine, Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

Florence Hardy confided to a friend, Sydney Cockerell, that “all the poems about [Emma] are a fiction, but a fiction in which their author has come to believe” (qtd. in Tomalin, 337). It is an interesting variation on an earlier complaint by Emma that her husband “understands only the women he *invents*—the others not at all” (qtd. in Pite, 355). Both observations paint a portrait of an artist for whom the world of his imagination was the primary world. And they lead us to the central issue: who was the man around whom these peripheral characters played their supporting roles? Thomas Hardy is essentially the same person in both Pite and Tomalin’s accounts. They both describe the external stresses of his need to make his way in an initially hostile environment and to accommodate reluctantly to forces of which he strongly disapproved; they both present the internal battle between his intellectually advanced views and his emotional attachment to the simpler pieties of his youth; they both note the contradiction between his repressed ferocity and his shy demeanor. And both see the contrast between his free thinking and his conventional behavior, even when fame eventually allowed him a freer voice. They also note the bouts of depression from which he suffered in the early stages of his career—and how the high-spirited Emma helped him to weather them. And they agree about his unhelpful strategy of silence, perhaps learned from his father, in the face of Emma’s latter-day complaints. They note too how, in contrast with his emotional entanglements with women, the adult Hardy didn’t develop any intimate male friendships—potential rivalry being the most obvious explanation. Instead, when he was old enough to be a revered sage, he attracted worshipful young admirers in the post-war generation.

Where the two biographers diverge is in their estimate of Hardy’s stature as an artist. Tomalin has no hesitation in declaring his greatness, and she locates that greatness in a poetic sensibility as evident in his novels as in his verse. Pite is less enthusiastic, claiming without demur that “Hardy’s reputation in the academy remains equivocal” (469). Their differing assessments are mirrored in the framing devices each uses to tell Hardy’s story. Tomalin introduces her subject by invoking Emma’s death as “the moment when Hardy became a great poet” (xvii). For Pite, Wessex is the all-important key to understanding his subject. “Hardy territory” is described

in both his opening and closing chapters. Moreover, to the extent that he endorses any of Hardy's values, he locates them "perhaps" in "his belief in loving kindness" (474), qualities he identifies with *The Woodlander's* Wessex worthies, Giles Winterbourne and Marty South, as well as with the Wessex poet-schoolmaster William Barnes, whom Hardy knew in his youth. This is a stretch. Or rather, it is a case of severe selectiveness. There is no reason save a lack of sympathy to reduce Hardy's rich and varied achievement to so narrow a sphere. And his invocation of Barnes as a tutelary presence is just another of his unfounded assertions.

If I had to choose only one of these books at the expense of the other, it would have to be Tomalin. She does far more justice to Hardy the artist, considering the fiction and poetry not simply as clues to the character of the man but as works that still reward our attention (though I disagree with a number of her assessments). Moreover, besides the merits of her keener appreciation and more judicious avoidance of speculation, her scholarly apparatus is somewhat more impressive and error-free than Pite's, even though his book is published by Yale University Press. Yet for a serious student of Hardy, I would recommend both books. Both are well written and full of details that complement each other. For instance, Pite presents a useful extended discussion of the influence of Swinburne on Hardy, and Tomalin has a fascinating chapter on Sydney Cockerell, the aggressive "Friend from Cambridge," who entered Hardy's life in its last decades and effectively took over the management of his literary estate. There are other examples too numerous to mention.

Finally, I must add one minor cavil. Both books include maps, an important feature for the biography of a writer whose life and works have such strong regional associations. But neither is satisfactory. Pite's six maps are blurry and almost impossible to read. Tomalin's single map is much clearer, but for once her version doesn't do justice to Hardy's range.