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IT'S NOT A MATTER OF MESSENGER BUT OF MESSAGE: HARDY'S SUPPORT FOR MILTONIC PRINCIPLES IN *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

BY **KARLEY ADNEY**

Thomas Hardy once referred to his masterpiece *Jude the Obscure* as 'tragedy, told for its own sake as a presentation of particulars containing a good deal that was universal' (Daiches, 1081-82). Although the novel was roundly criticised upon its publication for dealing explicitly with issues like divorce and adultery, it was through these issues that the novel dealt with the universal, as Hardy would have put it. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy was concerned with more than marriage and divorce laws, yet it is his discussion of these laws that deserves close attention due to his frequent allusion to, and reworking of, principles from John Milton's *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. What is most significant about Hardy's use of Miltonic principles in *Jude the Obscure* is that they are voiced by Sue Bridehead, the most inconsistent character in the entire novel. No critical attention has previously been paid to the possible ramifications of this choice on Hardy's part.

It is widely known that Hardy was well read in Milton. Dennis Taylor provides a close analysis of the way in which Hardy's vocabulary was informed by Milton; in one article, Taylor, working alongside Dayton Haskin, suggests that 'Hardy's choice of materials suggests that he was responsive to strains in Milton's verse' (72), specifically considering the poem 'Epitaph by Labourers' and how it uses diction similar to Milton's 'How My Light Was Spent' and 'On the University Carrier' (71). Joan Grundy also observes that there is not only a similarity in diction between the two authors, but that Hardy makes direct allusion to Milton's material (329).[1]

Some have found fault in these allusions to Milton, and accuse Hardy of simply reworking pre-existing material. For instance, Haskin and Taylor fully appreciate Hardy's work, but simultaneously claim that he merely provides an 'interesting reworking of the literary tradition' (72). Grundy is more explicitly complimentary, suggesting that '[Hardy] came to see himself as challenging the succession from Milton, and thus to make a careful re-reading of him' (329), thereby providing a better excuse for why he might echo Milton so blatantly. Yet what this study is concerned with most are the links and echoes between Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and Milton's *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, and the way in which Hardy adapts Miltonic principles in his work.

On the topic of principles concerning divorce in *Jude* and Milton's divorce tracts, Grundy offers that:

> Even more striking than these agreements in argument, however, is the common passion, and compassions, that informs them. With a fervour born in part of their own unhappy experience, Hardy and Milton both insist on the priority of the individual's right to happiness, and in particular, where marriage is concerned, of their right to find happiness in a true 'conjugal fellowship' (Milton's phrase), a union of the souls. The single precept that Milton insists on, and with eloquence, throughout his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is that of *charity*.
>
> (Grundy, 340)

Once again, Grundy praises Hardy's work as a successor in the tradition of lively literary debate. But not all critics are as favourable. John Goode is unfairly accusatory considering Hardy's allusions and re-working of Milton's principles: '[T]he novel bedecks itself with precedents either by quotation, or allusion or direct comparison [...] The novel not only ruins the prospects of interpretation by explicit discussion but also offers its own system of literary allegiances, which makes it difficult for the critic to determine influences or place it in a tradition (though this has not deterred many critics from doing it)' (97). In essence, Goode claims that *Jude* is so seeped in Milton's work that one cannot establish Hardy's own voice or purpose. This is completely unfounded. A careful reader would first acknowledge that Milton himself pulled heavily from the works of others, whether it be from Church Fathers or his authoritative text, the Bible; but more importantly, the careful reader would be able to appreciate exactly what Hardy does with Milton's material. Hardy proves that it is not a matter of messenger but a matter of message concerning Miltonic principles on marriage and divorce, because those which are considered as real truths can stand as such, no matter who articulates them.

Miltonic principles concerning divorce are most clearly present in *Jude the Obscure* during 'At Shaston' (Part Fourth). This part opens with a direct quote from Milton's *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*: 'Whoso prefers either Matrimony or other Ordinance before the Good of Man and the plain Exigence of Charity, let him profess Papist, or Protestant, or what he will, he is no better than a Pharisee' (Hardy, 209). It is clear, then, that Milton helps to set the tone for the entire section of 'At Shaston'. Eric Christen reinforces that:

> Hardy was impressively familiar not only with Milton's verse but also his prose works. An edition of *English Prose Writings of John Milton* appeared in 1889. It contains his pamphlet, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, which he wrote in 1643, a few months after the awkward beginnings of

> his marriage to Mary Powell, who returned to stay with her parents after a few weeks. Milton's strong argument in favour of divorce is singularly modern, for he stresses the importance of real intellectual and spiritual partnership between husband and wife. (Christen, 71)

Christen appears to be in favour of a biographical reading when attempting to explain Milton's discourse on divorce, and goes on to suggest that Hardy may have been suffering similar unhappiness to Milton, due to his own marriage. In this respect, one might read the following passage as an homage to Milton's situation, when Sue Bridehead asks:

> If I were unhappy it would be my fault, my wickedness; not that I should have a right to dislike him! He is considerate to me in everything; and he is very interesting, from the amount of general knowledge he has acquired by reading everything that comes in his way ... Do you think, Jude, that a man ought to marry a woman his own age, or one younger than himself – eighteen years – as I am than he? (Hardy, 223)

While this connection may be more than merely coincidental, and while there is merit to some biographical interpretations, the majority of scholarship devoted to studying Hardy's use of Miltonic style or principles would suggest that Hardy admired Milton's talents, and did not simply feel empathy with the man. Scholars like Grundy propose that Hardy is building from Milton, rather than echoing him based on personal connections: 'In this case it seems clear that Milton provided Hardy with a welcome piece of background reading' (330). To further her point, Grundy, who quite obviously has done the most work on the connections between *Jude the Obscure* and Milton's divorce tracts, states:

> [T]he need of loving-kindness is the message of that bitter book [*Jude*], as it is equally of Milton's Divorce pamphlets. [...] [W]hat can be shown is that almost every idea on marriage and divorce that Hardy expresses whether through dialogue or through the action or narration has its counterpart in Milton – with the important exception that Milton never questions the institute of marriage itself, as Hardy does. Hardy is in this respect an even more radical thinker than Milton, though both were far too radical for their day. Even if Hardy's dependence on Divorce pamphlets is not [...] complete [...], he must at least have found them wonderful grist to his mill. (Grundy, 339)

As Grundy notes, 'almost every idea on marriage and divorce that Hardy expresses whether through dialogue or through the action or narration has its counterpart in Milton'. Unfortunately, she fails to provide any examples, and even more importantly, she fails to note by whom the Miltonic principles are related: Sue Bridehead.

When Sue and Jude meet for the first time in the schoolroom at Shaston, their meeting is strained with sexual tension, and plagued by a sense of convention. It is as follows:

> 'I can't talk to you any longer, Jude!' she said, the tragic contralto note having come back as of old. 'It is getting too dark to stay together like this, after playing morbid Good Friday tunes that make one feel what one shouldn't! ... We mustn't sit and talk in this way any more. [...] Now you must go. I am sorry my husband is not at home.'
> 'Are you?'
> 'I perceive I have said that in mere conversation! Honestly I don't think I am sorry. It does not matter, either way, sad to say!' (Hardy, 215)

Within this short exchange between the lovers, one of Milton's great concerns as expressed in the divorce tracts appears: the danger of custom, and the way in which it forces people to act. Milton writes, 'so it happens for the most part that custom still is silently received for the best instructor' (696), and complements that statement with others such as 'custom being but a mere face, as echo is a mere voice' (697), and especially, 'it is that error supports custom, custom countenances error; and these two between them would persecute and chase away all truth and solid wisdom out of human life' (697). Milton issues these comments immediately in his divorce tract, and likewise, Sue's comments on convention come immediately after she and Jude meet in the schoolroom. Sue acknowledges that she is acting out of custom, and consequently, that her actions do not really matter, because they are not truly her own but are merely required. But like Milton, she looks for a way to slip from the 'dreadful contract' of marriage (Hardy, 224) and the accompanying stifling grasp of custom: 'I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one had done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women; only they submit, and I kick ...When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what *will* they say!' (Hardy, 226-27). With this statement, Sue obviously projects Milton's feeling that custom is so barbarous that it might even 'chase away all truth and solid wisdom out of human life'.

Further refutation for blindly obeying custom comes when Sue refuses to

sleep in the same bed as Richard after her heartfelt and core-shaking conversation with Jude. When Richard says she should not treat him in such a manner, she says she knows she shouldn't, but that she can't help it, and that she is not the only one to blame for the situation. When Phillotson asks who else is to blame, Sue offers, 'The universe, I suppose – things in general, because they are so horrid and cruel' (Hardy, 233). Here is yet another echo of Milton's disapproval for custom, of the world continuing to turn while necessary custom holds it on its axis. But perhaps Sue's strongest and most resounding echo of Milton's dislike for custom comes in her well-known and often-quoted statement, 'that the social moulds civilisation fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns. I am [...] but a woman tossed about, all alone, with aberrant passions, and unaccountable antipathies' (Hardy, 216). Sue's 'social moulds' were carefully crafted by habit, and unfortunately do not fit a creature of passion such as herself. This revulsion is also present in her conversation with Richard, when she asks his permission to leave him:

> 'But I do ask it! Domestic laws should be made according to temperaments, which should be classified. If people are at all peculiar in character they have to suffer from the very rules that produce comfort in others! [...] What is the use of thinking of laws and ordinances,' she burst out, 'if they make you miserable when you know you are committing no sin?' (Hardy, 234)

Sue's exclamations here seem entirely informed by Milton's own cry of 'O perverseness! that the law should be made more provident of peace-making than of gospel!' (712). Sue's questions also echo Milton's further sentiments that marriage should be a 'covenant the very being whereof consists not in a forced co-habitation and counterfeit performance, but in unfeigned love and peace' (711), rather than an empty and unfulfilling union in which those contracted to stay do so because it is their duty, instead of their wish.

Another important Miltonic principle that Sue voices is that a real marriage should satisfy one's soul and make one happy and content: 'But all ingenuous men will see that the dignity and blessing of marriage is placed rather in the mutual enjoyment of that which the wanting soul needfully seeks than of that which the plenteous body would joyfully give away' (Milton, 710). She expresses this most clearly when she states, 'though I like Mr Phillotson as a friend, I don't like him – it is a torture to me to – live with him as a husband! – There, now I have let it out – I couldn't help it, although I have been – pretending I am happy' (Hardy, 223). And Sue is so completely repulsed by remaining Richard's wife that, when the idea of adjusting to her unhappy situation occurs,

she says that it would be 'much like saying that the amputation of a limb is no affliction, since a person gets comfortably accustomed to the use of a wooden leg or arm in the course of time' (Hardy, 224). Sue's marriage to Richard in no way satisfies her, but like that wooden limb, is completely lifeless and fake.

Her unhappiness is clearly unbearable, since she even reveals her plight to Jude, of which she is entirely ashamed:

> 'Is it wrong, Jude,' she said with a tentative tremor, 'for a husband or wife to tell a third person that they are unhappy in their marriage? If a marriage ceremony is a religious thing, it is possibly wrong; but if it is only a sordid contract, based on material convenience in householding, rating, and taxing, and the inheritance of land and money by children, making it necessary that the male parent should be known – which it seems to be – why surely a person may say, even proclaim upon the housetops, that it hurts and grieves him or her?' (Hardy, 220)

The tenet that marriage should satisfy one's soul is not the only Miltonic principle at work here: Sue also wonders about the Church's responsibility in the institution of marriage, when she asks 'if a marriage ceremony is a religious thing'; Milton also questions the Church's involvement, when he refers to the 'ceremonies of the church' and their 'superstition' as one of the 'greatest [burdens] in the world' (699). Sue may not be as explicit as Milton concerning her feelings on Church involvement in marriage, but her distaste at the idea is hinted at. She knows all too well that is it only superstitions that hold some husbands and wives in place, even if they are unhappy, and consequently lonely. Sue is indeed fighting here for what Milton referred to as the 'pining of a sad spirit wedded to loneliness' that 'deserves to be freed' (708).

These are only a few of many examples of Sue using Miltonic principles to justify her feelings about marriage and divorce. Sue makes well-supported arguments based on Miltonic principles; she is ultimately successful and is 'released' from her marriage with Richard (for the time being) and leaves with Jude. When Sue and Jude meet for the first time after she has left Richard, they are headed to Aldbrickham, whereat Jude has booked a room for them. Sue asks if he had booked only one room, and when he affirms this, she says, 'I thought you might do it; and that I was deceiving you. But I didn't mean that!' (Hardy, 252). Jude is shocked at her reservation in sharing a room, though, and says "But – I understand it like that ... Is this a sudden change of mind?' (Hardy, 252). This small exchange between the lovers is a key point in the narrative, concerning both character development and Hardy's rhetoric. As for character development, readers see that even though she has left her husband and has joined with her

lover, Sue still wants to live respectably. Apparently, she wants to retain her virtue (the most important quality, by far, for Milton) and in behaving properly, demonstrate that she has indeed done the right thing in leaving her husband. What is even more striking about this moment in the narrative, however, is that Hardy begins to seriously manipulate the Miltonic principles that had otherwise earlier been stated so clearly and rationally. Because even when the way to marriage is cleared for both Sue and Jude nearly a year later, Sue ignores some of the most important principles in Milton's divorce tracts. The two are afforded the opportunity to marry, yet do not; instead, they falsely live as man and wife, and within a matter of time, parents. Milton surely would have considered a feigned marriage even more appalling than just fulfilling one's carnal desires, because they compounded their adultery with a vicious lie. In living in this manner, Sue ignores one of Milton's most emphatic points in his divorce tract: 'First, we know St. Paul saith "It is better to marry than to burn." Marriage, therefore, was given as a remedy of that trouble' (709). Yet, based on her earlier behaviour, we can expect no more from Sue, whom Jude himself calls 'ridiculously inconsistent' (Hardy, 222). Hardy's narrator informs the reader that, 'Sue's logic was extraordinary compounded, and seemed to maintain that before a thing was done it might be right to do, but that being done it became wrong; or, in other words, that things which were right in theory were wrong in practice' (Hardy, 229-30). Sue's inconsistency has been commented on by countless critics; Robert Heilman observes that:

> [Sue's] inconsistency of act is the inconsistency of being. She goes this way, and then that way, for no other reason than she cannot help it. She acts in terms of one impulse that seems clear and commanding, and is then pulled away by another that comes up and, though undefined, is not subject to her control. On the one hand, she freely puts conventional limitations behind her; on the other, she hardly comes up to conventional expectations. She has freedom of thought, but not freedom of action and being. (Heilman, 217)

And although both Sue's inconsistent nature and Hardy's use of Milton's divorce tracts in *Jude the Obscure* have been widely discussed, no critic has attempted to reconcile the fact that it is inconsistent Sue whom Hardy chooses to act as the voice of (Miltonic) reason: what, exactly, is Hardy's point?

Hardy obviously respected and admired Milton; studies provided by scholars like Taylor and Haskin demonstrate Hardy's careful study of, and admiration for, Milton; repetitive allusion to, and imitation of, Milton in both Hardy's poetry and prose proves his respect for Milton. Hardy clearly identified with Milton and must have seen some of Milton's principles, specifically those on divorce, as

certain and real truths. As Grundy comments, '[Milton] may have provided the "machinery of the tale"' (339), and based on Hardy's respect for Milton, he would have considered that machinery solid foundation for his own narrative, not just a weak starting point to play upon. Therefore, Hardy's use of Sue Bridehead as a mouthpiece for the Miltonic principles he revered becomes quite complicated; we cannot, for instance, assume that Hardy dismissed or disagreed with the principles himself simply because at one point Sue chose to. Rather, Hardy performs a unique and difficult rhetorical act, in placing principles he respects in the mouth of one who ultimately acts less than respectfully. By doing this, though, Hardy only amplifies the degree of truth he sees in Milton's own principles. Perhaps Hardy agrees so whole-heartedly with Milton's arguments he feels that even having them voiced by Sue Bridehead cannot take away from their ultimate truth. For Hardy, it is not a matter of messenger but a matter of message[2]; even coming from inconsistent Sue, the principles make sense. The greatest truths will remain as such no matter who uses them to argue on their behalf.

In performing this strategic rhetorical act, Hardy becomes even more like Milton, who was known for breaking with, and in turn surpassing, established forms. He experimented with sonnet, pastoral elegy, and epic forms to produce highly sophisticated masterpieces, many of which Hardy imitated and borrowed from (see Grundy). Hardy may have taken it upon himself to manipulate rhetoric in such a way that readers would have no choice but to appreciate Sue's arguments, despite her incredibly inconsistent nature; perhaps readers would not condone her actions, but they would see the sense and validity in her arguments, because in them was great truth that was both acknowledged and welcomed, especially by Hardy.

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[1] For purposes of this study, it is necessary to prove not only Hardy's familiarity with Milton's material, but his knowledge of divorce practices as well. Cedric Watts clearly establishes Hardy's knowledge of divorce practices; for further information, please see Watts's 'Appendix G: Divorce in *Jude the Obscure*' in his edition of *Jude the Obscure*, Broadview Press, 1999.

[2] Under the assumption that the message matters more than the messenger to Hardy, one should also consider Alec d'Urberville in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, who quotes directly from Milton. Fittingly, Alec quotes Satan's temptation of Eve. What is worth noting, however, is that the message is once again more important than the messenger himself, because the advice should be heeded, even if issued by someone as untrustworthy as Alec. After all, Alec quotes Milton to Tess only 'as a thing that you might have supposed or said quite untruly, because [she thinks] so badly'of him (343). In reality, the message should be attended and not simply dismissed as a passing comparison, as Alec suggests.

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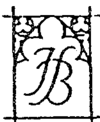

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