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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/6157>

DOI: 10.4000/cve.6157

ISSN: 2271-6149

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Electronic reference

Catherine Lanone, « Exploiting Body and Place in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* », *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 90 Automne | 2019, Online since 01 December 2019, connection on 29 February 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/6157> ; DOI : 10.4000/cve.6157

This text was automatically generated on 29 February 2020.



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Exploiting Body and Place in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

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Catherine Lanone

- 1 Annie Escuret was a highly influential voice in French studies of British literature. Her work drew inspiration from Gillian Beer and Michel Serres; with indefatigable energy, she devised an epistemocritical method of reading that probed into connections between science and literature. Annie Escuret's illuminating, generous way of reading saw in science (including Darwinism and thermodynamics) a reservoir not only of metaphors, but of ways of thinking. She explored, for instance, the transposition of Darwin in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, from the extinct family of the d'Urbervilles to the sacrificial stones of Stonehenge, and traced the progression of entropy, transposing the laws of thermodynamics:

Comme dans les textes précédents, on observe un mouvement de perte puisque Tess est assimilée à un récipient qui se vide jusqu'à n'être plus qu'un point noir à l'horizon le jour de son exécution car nous ne pensons pas que le couple Angel/Liza Lu puisse symboliser une reprise (ou alors une reprise parodique puisque Liza-Lu est censée être une Tess sans corps). (Escuret 2007, 49)

- 2 It is tempting, today, to read such entropy and the importance of the second law of thermodynamics (materialized by the Industrial Revolution and steam-engine technology) by considering the way in which energy in *Tess* seems drained both from the women who work in the fields *and* from the countryside, as the steam-powered machines enter (and violate) the pastoral world of Wessex. Following Annie Escuret's reading, I wish to trace this joint enslaving of land and female body from an ecofeminist perspective. Indeed, agricultural work in *Tess* ranges from restorative, pastoral, communal activities to harsh hard labour crushing body and soul. Let us see how Hardy breaks new ground by representing the body of a woman at work, moving from pastoral integration to mechanical exploitation. The parallelism between animals

and Tess places her plight within the wider context of patriarchal violence towards both the human and the non-human, so that Hardy's vision of rural dislocation and female violation might be defined in terms of eco-grief.

- 3 Isabelle Gadoin, in 'Les Yeux de Tess', draws attention to the paradoxical representation of Tess's body, hovering between exposure and invisibility. For Rebecca Stott, this is partly due to Hardy's struggle against censorship, forcing him to find displaced ways of representing the body and hinting at the unpalatable scenes of gendered violence that could not be broached directly (Stott 163–99). Tony Tanner's landmark study of the dissemination of the colour red in the novel draws attention, for instance, to the motif of the pierced skin. Tanner reads the straw pricking the wrists of Tess or the rose thorn pricking her chin as symptoms connoting the unspeakable violation that takes place in the forest of the Chase, a moment which cannot be openly represented. The attention laid upon the body also highlights female desire, as Annie Ramel has shown, as when the skin becomes 'a sheaf of susceptibilities' (Hardy 149) as the blood rushes to Tess's fingertips when Angel touches her. Exposing the double standards and drawing attention to the (in)visible female body, Hardy clearly breaks new ground; but he also does so by going beyond pastoral clichés and lavishing attention on the female body at work in the fields, something which had never been done before.
- 4 Of course, Hardy had already represented rural farm-work in his 1874 novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba Everdene, the protagonist, was a strong woman, the mistress of her own farm; there were vivid scenes depicting rural activity, such as sheep shearing, saving the bloated sheep by puncturing their skin (a skilful deed performed by Bathsheba's faithful shepherd Gabriel Oak), or covering the ricks in the stormy night, a dangerous moment uniting Gabriel and Bathsheba against the unleashed violence of lightning, rain and wind.
- 5 Though the Wessex of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is more complicated than Bathsheba's relatively tranquil microcosm, Talbothays recalls the pastoral world of Hardy's earlier novel. It is pervaded by a sense of togetherness, which includes both humans and animals. With Dairyman Dick as a gentle leader rather than a patriarchal figure, the little world of the dairy functions as an organic community. As Angel gazes at Tess milking in the sun, she becomes 'a cameo cut from the dun background of the cow' (126). Such an image reflects Angel's desire; it also signals Hardy's determination to paint a dairymaid with the literary devices previously used for elegant ladies. Ordinary work becomes the stuff literature is made of, somewhat provocatively for the 1890s. This ordinary work is also detailed with a realism that reaches beyond the pastoral clichés inherited from Virgil or Romantic poetry. The milk '[fizzes] into the pail' when Tess's fingers press the udders 'so gently as to be a rhythmic pulsation only, as if they were obeying a reflex stimulus, like a beating heart' (126–27). The image functions both as an erotic metaphor and as a simple account of the rhythmical, tactile quality of such work. Angel woos Tess 'at the cow's side, at skimmings, at butter-makings, at cheese-makings, among broody poultry, and among farrowing pigs—as no milkmaid was ever wooed before by such a man' (153). Rather than read this list as humorous or ironic, I believe we should pay attention to all these activities. Tess churns butter, or falls asleep with 'the smell of the cheeses in the adjoining cheeseloft, and the measured dripping of the whey from the wrings downstairs' (96). Hardy also includes less pleasant details like the flies: in summer, the cows are 'maddened by the gad-

fly' (126), while the flies 'in the kitchen were lazy, teasing, and familiar, crawling about in unwonted places, on the floor, into the drawers, and over the backs of the milkmaids' hands' (126). With such sensory impressions, the reader shares the direct experience of daily life, or of a kind of work which is pragmatic, painstaking and fruitful. The text harps on its restorative quality as the sap rises in Tess's young body, which seems to bloom in the summer, attuned to the natural cycle of vegetation and the very rhythm of life.

- 6 Victorian newspapers circulated a clichéd version of peasants called 'Hodge'. In the novel, the term appears when male and female workers¹ search for garlic (garlic spoils the cows' milk and thereby the production of butter). Something mechanical creeps into the description; the tedious task forces the field hands to stoop, as with their aching backs, they form 'a curiously uniform row—automatic, noiseless; and an alien observer passing down the neighbouring lane might well have been excused for massing them as "Hodge"' (118). Yet Hardy rejects the cliché² that creates a timeless image³ and stresses the way in which the field hands, Tess included, are individuals: 'At close quarters no Hodge was to be seen . . . The typical and unvarying Hodge ceased to exist.' (100). In spite of the image of 'automatic' work, the dairy remains on the organic, rather than the technological side. The 'uniform' row is transfigured by a pictorial perspective: 'As they crept along, stooping low to discern the plant, a soft yellow gleam was reflected from the buttercups into their shaded faces, giving them an elfish, moonlit aspect, though the sun was pouring upon their backs in all the strength of noon' (118). The delicate study of light blends Tess with the group. In a conventional Victorian text, as a fallen woman, she might stand out like the garlic concealed among the grass. On the contrary, she is fully integrated, and Hardy depicts prosaic rural activity with a deftness that Victorian writers reserved for middle-class activities.
- 7 The vivid picture of Talbothays stresses the sense of community rather than the need for productivity; yet ultimately Talbothays hovers on the brink of economic mutation too. Technology is not there yet, but it is not entirely unconnected with it either. The train embodies the tentacles of modernity, that reach out and begin to encroach upon the countryside: 'Modern life stretched out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touched the native existence, and quickly withdrew its feeler again, as if what it touched had been uncongenial' (157). The mechanized circuit of distribution is still tentative, yet it severs the ties that previously existed between the consumer and the reality of production: Tess muses wistfully that the Londoners who will drink it for breakfast may never have seen a cow. The 'hissing' (snake-like?) steam engine is a swift intruder, and its light and the 'gleaming cranks and wheels' (157) flash upon Tess, frozen into the attitude 'of a friendly leopard at pause' (157). The paradoxical, exotic metaphor of the leopard enhances the sense that the train, rather than Tess, is out of place here; John Goode insists on the sense of estrangement, since, for him, the flashing light of the train seems to embody a cold gaze that returns Tess's, the gaze of 'our world, the world of the consuming reader who will not only drink milk without ever having seen a cow but consumes Tess's story without having to undergo it' (Goode 187). The steam engine, with its sense of speed, has somehow weakened her resistance, introduced urgency. It is significant that when Tess returns with Angel from the station, she should finally yield to his impassioned plea and acknowledge that she loves him too, attempting to tell him her full story, yet proving unable to do so.

- 8 Whereas the steam engine is merely peripheral at Talbothays, other machines loom large in the text and become ominous landmarks along Tess's journey. Whereas work brings pleasure at Talbothays and allows Tess to rebuild her sense of self, at Flintcomb Ash work becomes a relentless force of fragmentation.
- 9 The reaping machine first appears at Marlott, an ominous contraption with broad arms of painted wood, forming a 'revolving Maltese cross' (73) that seems 'to have been dipped in liquid fire' (73). However, the machine is drawn by horses and the pace is not yet inhuman: the women wear cotton bonnets with flapping wings to protect themselves from the sun; they must pick up the ears of corn and tie them into a sheaf, but such strenuous work is alleviated by pauses for breakfast and for lunch, and by brief moments of rest.
- 10 On the contrary, the steam engine at Flintcomb Ash demands ceaseless work as if it were a greedy ogre, an 'insatiable swallower', a 'buzzing red glutton' spitting straw like '*faeces*'. The image of endless consumption suggests that place, people and local culture are being digested:
- By degrees the freshest among them began to grow cadaverous and saucer-eyed. Whenever Tess lifted her head she beheld always the great upgrown straw-stack, with the men in shirt-sleeves upon it, against the gray north sky; in front of it the long red elevator like a Jacob's ladder, on which a perpetual stream of threshed straw ascended, a yellow river running uphill, and spouting out on the top of the rick. (276)
- 11 Automatic motion is unnatural, as signalled by the image of water running uphill, or by the 'upgrown' straw-stack, growing with inhuman speed. The apparatus and the engineer are emissaries from the industrial North. The machine reconfigures the rural microcosm, replacing the ash-tree with a dark chimney that produces another kind of ash and soot:
- The long chimney running up beside an ash-tree, and the warmth which radiated from the spot, explained without the necessity of much daylight that here was the engine that was to act as the *primum mobile* of this little world. (269)
- 12 The threshing machine glows and creates a constant motion that seems to replace the natural order of the world. The Latin term adds to the sense of crisis or alienation. This is the 'motor' defined by Annie Escuret (Escuret 39). The industrial contraption emits 'radiating warmth'; it is characterized by heat:
- Pour donner un sens non équivoque à la métaphore thermodynamique, nous dirons qu'une *société chaude* est un système de production qui *transforme le monde* en utilisant massivement et de façon privilégiée la puissance motrice du feu dans des machines propres à développer cette puissance. La révolution carnotienne instaure les pertinences thermodynamiques, la recherche des écarts de température, de différences de potentiels, la recherche du *rendement* et la production d'entropie. (Grinevald 69)
- 13 Such heat requires coal (and an engineer that feeds the coals into the machine). The description dehumanizes the engineer, 'a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness' (269); this is a rather odd expression (one would expect a tall embodiment of soot instead). The engineer and the chimney are doubles, they both intrude upon the landscape to bring pollution; hence the contrast with pastoral clarity, the 'pellucid smokelessness of this region of yellow grain and pale soil' (269). The circumvolution ('pellucid smokelessness' for transparency) adds wistful nostalgia and a sense of helplessness before such progress, or 'the ache of modernism' (105). The heat

is hellish, the machine is made of 'hot blackness', ready to unleash speed: 'His fire was waiting incandescent, his steam was at high pressure, in a few seconds he could make the long strap move at an invisible velocity' (270).

- 14 Bringing pollution to mar the landscape, the agricultural machine is also used to torture the female body: it is a patriarchal instrument, a 'red tyrant' (269) that '[keeps] up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves' (269). One might expect the machine to alleviate the harsh labour of Flintcomb Ash, but the exact opposite happens. This time there is no pause, lunch is hastily eaten where they stand, without leaving their positions. As the 'inexorable wheels' spin (270), the sound seems to pierce the women's bones to their marrow (270). Because Tess is a good worker, she is placed on the threshing machine, untying sheaf after sheaf without stopping, lest the thresher might increase its sound unbearably if not fed properly. Thus, the machine is used to entrap the female body, which becomes a cog in the system, ceaselessly performing the same gestures while being shaken and plagued by noise and smoke. Agriculture is becoming inhuman and the machine breeds a sense of abjection.
- 15 The images associated with the 'red tyrant' are significant. The engineer has come to this region 'to amaze and discompose its aborigenes' (269); he hardly has any intercourse with the 'autochthonous idlers' or 'natives' (270). He travels from farm to farm but serves only fire and smoke: 'He was in the agricultural world, but not of it.' (270). The use of such terms brings to mind colonization and the Empire. It is clear that for Hardy, the machine is beginning to colonize the rural South. And in so doing, it also colonizes the woman's body, creating a proto-ecofeminist association between the countryside and the female worker's body. Just as the landscape must respond to new notions of productivity, all year long, work is part of sexual harassment. Farmer Groby selects Tess for such particularly harsh work because she has resisted him on the road to Flintcomb Ash; and it is no surprise that Alec should reappear and watch her as she toils on the threshing machine. The machine makes the patriarchal system worse, instead of making women's work a little easier.
- 16 The extreme heat of the machine does not create a balanced, long-lasting system of warmth. The counterpart of incandescence is the extreme cold that plagues the girls during the even harsher winter. As the colonial terminology leads us to expect, the work also turns into sheer slavery:
- Amid this scene Tess slaved in the morning frosts and in the afternoon rains. When it was not swede-grubbing it was swede-trimming, in which process they sliced off the earth and the fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use. (239)
- 17 As if digging swedes in the frozen earth were not harsh enough, the fields are full of stones, loose flints in phallic shape, in keeping with the dismal name of the place, Flintcomb Ash. The stones spell out Groby's harshness and gendered aggressiveness. Oppression appears in different guises. The women are forced to work outside in all temperatures, and to live in unhealthy abodes. Snow blows into Tess's bedroom, through chinks in the wall. Wrapped in shapeless pinafores, the girls suffer in the fields, and Hardy literalizes the cliché, to be chilled to the bone: the cold '[chills] their eyeballs' (240) and affects 'the surface of the body less than its core', 'penetrating to their skeletons' (240). Farmer Groby taunts Tess that she has not worked hard enough when reed-drawing or cutting off the ears of corn in the barn; his allusion to his inability to seduce her on the road makes the scene a clear instance of sexual

harassment: Tess works until she faints. The blast of arctic weather seems the counterpart of the heat of the steam machine, emblemizing the entropy of the system evoked by Annie Escuret. Tess and Marian are lost between the sky and the earth when grubbing swedes, as if the sky were an immense livid face and the earth an immense brown face; the faceified landscape turns and stares (*dévisage*, in Deleuzian terms), and the two inhuman faces of sky and earth seem to crush Tess and Marian between them like flies (238).

- 18 The intensive culture of swedes was a staple feature of the late Victorian age. In *Tess*, instead of resting in winter, the earth is dug up and forced to produce, just as Tess is forced to work until she drops. Hardy's text suggests that women and nature have been mutually devalued, and exploited, by the growing, patriarchal exploitation of the land. This suggests a kind of proto-ecofeminist logic.⁴ The image of the leopard and the flies (Tess and Marian crawling over the earth 'like flies' at Flintcomb Ash (238)) are similes. But the text also draws upon a more subtle kinship between Tess and the animals. Tess's tragedy begins when her father fails to bring the hives to the market. Dazed by the revelation that he is a descendant of the d'Urbervilles, he has preferred to hire a cart and drive home in style before getting drunk at the local inn, wasting the money and the energy that he does not have. Tess takes it upon herself to do a man's job and bring the hives to the market. Dozing off in the dark night, lulled as she is by the cart's slow motion, Tess is awakened by an awful sound: the shaft of mail-cart has mortally wounded the family horse, Prince. The driver of the mail-cart soon rushes off, because he is 'bound to get on with the mail-bags' (27). Expecting no other vehicle at such an ungodly hour, Tess had drifted to the wrong side of the road. The mail-cart is part of the economy of speed and modernity (the Postal system had begun to deliver mail at regular hours four times a day, thanks to the railway and a system of local mail-carts). This leaves no space for slow pace and error. Helplessly placing her hand on Prince's chest to try and stop the blood, Tess, for Anna West, is less facing the animal than engaging in skin-to-skin intimate contact. There is an implied parallelism between the sword-like shaft that pierces Prince and the deflowering of Tess. Tess feels overwhelmed by guilt, but both the horse and the girl are the actual victims of her father's erratic behaviour, what Annie Ramel calls in Lacanian terms, the collapse of the Symbolic order.
- 19 Another significant motif is built by the machine 'with a grasshopper sound' (73), the 'unerring reaper' (74) that mows round the field. Its circuit leaves a smaller and smaller central area; the rabbits, snakes and mice, that is to say the animals that have sought a refuge there—friends and foes huddled together in 'a more and more horrible narrowness' (74)—are then put to death by the harvesters. But Tess too is caught in narrowing circles, their orbits bringing her back towards Alec (and his avatars, the man with the pot of paint or Father Groby); Groby and Alec, whom she seeks to escape yet meets again by chance, wear her down and seal her doom.
- 20 The closest association between Tess and the animals occurs when Tess is walking towards Flintcomb Ash. When farmer Groby drives by on the road and recognizes her, she runs away 'like a hunted soul' (231) and lies down among the trees, gathering a heap of leaves to make a kind of 'nest' (231). She is disturbed by gurgling sounds during the night, and wakes up to find twitching pheasants lying nearby, 'their rich plumage dabbled with blood' (232). To put them out of their misery, Tess forces herself to wring their necks. Isabelle Gadoin stresses the symbolic dimension of the scene:

... Tess doit mettre à mort de ses propres mains les faisans blessés agonisant symboliquement dans le sous-bois où elle a trouvé refuge—image proleptique de sa propre mort en sacrifiée, qui peut donc se lire sur un plan diégétique, mais aussi sur le plan symbolique, comme le noyau de condensation de toutes les métaphores associant le destin de Tess à ceux d'oiseaux en cage, d'oiseaux blessés, de hérons accueillant sa venue dans le val de Blackmoor, ou d'oiseaux migrateurs revenant des pôles, une lueur glacée dans le regard. (Gadoin 2010, 109)

- 21 The birds are part of a network of images foreshadowing tragedy; Hardy also draws a deep kinship between the woman and the bird as victims of the men's wayward chase. The text ironically compares the hunters, respectable men though they may be, 'to inhabitants of the Malay peninsula' (232), subverting the codes of Empire. For Anna West, the novel binds the woman's plight and the birds':

Ironically, Hardy's narrator describes the hunters who shot these pheasants as 'so unmannerly and so unchivalrous towards their weaker fellows in nature's teeming family', a statement that, while reading humorously, gestures towards concepts typically related to the female domain in trivialization of the sex: manners, chivalry, and feminine weakness (298). Here, it is the narrator who moves between the human and the animal world, using irony to address boundaries set in place by patriarchal humanism. (West 148)

- 22 Hunting, for Hardy, is made more scandalous as the birds are bred to be shot, and unable to flee properly.⁵ Although Tess considers herself more fortunate than the birds, and poignantly explains, 'I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding' (233), she is indeed trapped too by the system.
- 23 Hardy ironically represents destiny, with its mistiming and misleading coincidences, as a faulty mechanism, and wonders whether human technology will fix it one day; the question is ironic (note the tautology, 'acme and summit') and suggests a *contrario* that technology makes things worse instead of improving them:

We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the social machinery than that which jolts us round and along; but such completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible. (35)

- 24 Paradoxically, progress brings greater instability. The Stoke-d'Urbervilles have bought the title, whereas the true descendants are degraded and only bear the name of Durbeyfield. Speculation and money-lending are the source of Alec's family's money, and they occupy a brand-new house: 'I thought we were an old family, but this is all new!' muses Tess (31) The link to place, animals and the community is perverted. Not only does old Mrs Stoke-d'Urberville choose to ignore Alec's womanizing, but she is literally blind, and asks for the hens to be brought to her, to be petted as if they were babies. The hens occupy a house covered with ivy, 'the chimney being enlarged by the boughs of the parasite to the aspect of a ruined tower' (47). The mock romantic, oddly picturesque view symbolizes the parasitic relation of the impostors to the land. For this house was once occupied by people:

... it had been in their possession for several generations before the d'Urbervilles came and built there, was indifferently turned into a fowl-house by Mrs Stoke-d'Urberville as soon as property fell into her hands according to law. 'Twas good enough for Christians in grandfather's time', they said. (47)

- 25 There is a clear contrast between the ancestral occupation of places and the new legal rights to property, defined by money only. The treatment of the hens is a metaphor for dispossession and eviction. Tess is also made to whistle to the bullfinches to teach them

to sing better, an unnatural reversal; she is taught by Alec, who delights in watching her mouth as she learns, once more equating work (even such a strange task as whistling to birds) with sexual domination. Displacement is the new law of the land. Old Lady-Day has become the day when the tenants are evicted, and there is an overall sense of dislocation. Tess's predicament, as she is pursued by Alec, is to be placed within the wider context of a kind of mechanical motion, the 'flux and reflux' (291) implicitly reflecting not only the agricultural depression of the 1880s, but what Hardy saw as the breakdown of previous patterns of attachment and relationship to place. Seasonal work is described in terms of 'migration' (291) or Biblical exodus: 'The Egypt of one family was the Land of Promise to the family who saw it from a distance, till by residence there it became in turn their Egypt also; and so they changed and changed' (291–92). Reversibility shows how absurd the new pattern is. For dislocation is not merely associated with seasonal work, but also with rural exodus. Hardy discards sociological discourse and figures:

. . . the process, humorously designated by statisticians as 'the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns', being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery. (292)

- 26 There is nothing 'humorous' in the sociological cliché; Hardy is the one who is being ironic, suggesting that this is no natural 'tendency' but an enforced dynamic, and that depopulation breeds poverty both in the countryside and in towns. The image (water running uphill) challenges so-called progress.
- 27 To conclude, Thomas Hardy breaks new ground by daring to depict not simply sexual violation but the constant displacement or dislocation upsetting rural equilibrium, and by exposing the exploitation of women's bodies through a kind of work that is becoming mechanized and inhuman. Work is a kind of *pharmakon*, both a liberation allowing the process of individuation in the case of Talbothays, and an instrument of sexual domination and exploitation at Flintcomb Ash as steam machinery replaces community with productivity. Hardy has been called nostalgic or conservative, but his entwining of the woman's body with the exploitation of animals and land adds to the transposition of the model of thermodynamics a proto-ecofeminist perspective, which should be read today as innovative and proleptic instead.

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NOTES

1. Gendered boundaries are blurred as men and women work together. So are social divisions; Angel Clare, the middle-class gentleman learning to become a farmer, has certain privileges (such as eating apart) but he also joins the others to perform the work at hand.
2. He had already attacked it in his essay entitled 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'.
3. Timelessness is the argument used by Said to debunk Orientalism; Hardy astutely sees a similar construct at home.
4. Carolyn Merchant argues that to rebuild a livable, sustainable world, new social, scientific and spiritual approaches must be devised to transform the human relationship with nature.
5. Note the way in which the young Jude, at the beginning of *Jude the Obscure*, runs into trouble for being unable to chase the birds from the field he is supposed to protect, because he feels that they are hungry and need the seeds to. Hardy was a passionate believer in animal rights. He longed to extend 'altruistic morals' to the 'whole animal kingdom', as he put it in a 1910 letter to the Humanitarian League.

ABSTRACTS

Drawing upon Annie Escuret's epistemocritical method of reading, and on her vision of energy and entropy, this paper considers how, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, agricultural steam machines begin to colonize the countryside and seem to violate and dislocate the female body. Whereas Talbothays still offers a pastoral community, Flintcomb Ash is a cold place of abjection where both the land and the women are ruthlessly exploited. This creates a kind of proto-ecofeminist logic, as colonial metaphors are applied to the landscape but also to Tess's enslaved body, while she toils on the machine, relentlessly exposed to the male gaze. Her kinship with animals goes beyond mere metaphor to connect the plight of doomed birds, mice and snakes and of the vulnerable woman. Tess's plight may be exceptional, but the exception is part of a wider meditation on instability and seasonal flux, as mutations tear the rural social fabric. Far from being merely pastoral and nostalgic, the novel breaks new ground by engaging with gendered and technological strategies that distort the biotope of Wessex.

Cet article s'inspire de la méthode épistémocritique proposée par Annie Escuret, et de son analyse de l'énergie et de l'entropie, pour explorer la façon dont l'intrusion des machines agricoles à vapeur menace de coloniser à la fois l'espace rural et le corps de la femme dans *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Alors que Talbothays reste l'espace pastoral d'une communauté qui persiste, Flintcomb Ash n'est plus que l'aire glacée de l'abjection où l'on exploite à outrance la terre et l'ouvrière agricole. Dans cette logique proto-écoféministe, les métaphores coloniales s'appliquent autant au paysage qu'au corps de Tess; la jeune femme est forcée de travailler jusqu'à l'épuisement, mais aussi se trouve exposée sans répit, sur la machine, au regard masculin. De même, le lien avec les animaux va bien au-delà de la métaphore et met en parallèle le sort de la femme et celui des oiseaux blessés et des souris et des serpents voués à la destruction, dans une même interrogation éthique de la vulnérabilité. Enfin, si Tess fait aussi figure d'exception tragique, sa destinée s'inscrit dans une forme systématique d'instabilité qui généralise les déplacements liés au travail saisonnier, en une série de mutations qui déchirent le tissu social. Loin d'être purement nostalgique, le texte met l'accent sur les stratégies d'exploitation technologiques et sexuées qui défont le monde rural et agressent à la fois le corps de la femme et le biotope du Wessex.

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Keywords: animal, ecofeminism, epistemocritical, exploitation, Hardy (Thomas), sexual harassment, pastoral, steam machine, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, work

Mots-clés: animal, écoféminisme, épistémocritique, exploitation, harcèlement sexuel, Hardy (Thomas), pastoral, machine à vapeur, Tess, travail

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