

## When Hope Unblooms: Chance and Moral Luck in the Fiction of Thomas Hardy

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How arrives it joy lies slain,  
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?  
--Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .  
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.  
--Thomas Hardy, "Hap"

Gambling is not a vice, it is an expression of our humanness. . . . You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play.  
--Jeanette Winterson, The Passion

Essential to any study of the ethics of Hardy's fiction is an understanding of chance and luck--personified in his poem "Hap" as the "purblind Doomsters": "Crass Casualty" and "dicing Time." Yoking such apparently contradictory concepts as luck and morality raises difficult, unsettling questions about moral responsibility. Philosophers who make the unequivocal Kantian claim that "morality is secure against the luck-sensitive issue of how things chance to turn out" (Rescher 171) have been challenged in recent years by Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and others who insist on a place for luck in our conception of ethics. Attention to the issues involved in this debate can lead us to a more precise way of thinking about the role of luck in the ethics of Hardy's fiction, just as attention to Hardy's narratives can provide us with subtler, more detailed examples of moral luck than those in the philosophical discussions. Hence, while moral philosophy can help us to read Hardy, such a reading in turn helps to validate the contested idea of moral luck.

As Virginia Woolf observed about Hardy, he was a writer whose works, for all their deliberate plotting, convey a sense of freshness and surprise, as if the best effects of his fiction are produced by chance. Reading his novels, Woolf sensed in them "a little blur of unconsciousness," a "margin of the unexpressed": "It is as if Hardy himself were not quite aware of what he did" (1:258-59). This is a haunting description of a quality in Hardy's writing that remained beyond his conscious control but nonetheless contributed to the ethics of his fiction. In his way of thinking about the world, Hardy stressed the involuntary and the emotional as mysterious forces that often get the best of will and conscious agency: "Events and tendencies are traced as if they were rivers of voluntary activity, and courses reasoned out from the circumstances in which natures, religions, or what-not, have found themselves. But are they not in the main the outcome of passivity--acted upon by unconscious propensity?" (Hardy, The Life 175; emphasis his). This skeptical question reveals Woolf's description to be in accord with Hardy's own sense that choices and actions, including the act of writing, are too often misrepresented as completely rational and controlled. The elements of fortune and luck discoverable in any chain of events carry implications for the moral assessment of the outcome of those events. Hardy's narrators make it difficult for us to disentangle luck and morality, as some ethicists would have us do, and his novels convey a characteristically late-Victorian view of agency as pressured and compromised. This understanding of agency implies an ethics that demands choice and responsibility accompanied by a necessary, though uncomfortable, acceptance of limited control over events.

### Moral Luck

Nicholas Rescher, who believes that courses of action only apparently acquire moral status that depends on luck, offers several brief narratives, including the following, to illuminate what philosophers mean by moral luck:

Consider the case of a bank's night watchman who abandons his post of duty in order to go to the aid of a child being savagely attacked by a couple of men. If the incident is "for real," we see the night watchman as a hero. However, if the incident is a diversion stage-managed as part of a robbery, we might well consider the night watchman to have been an irresponsible dupe. And yet from his point of view, there is no visible difference between the two cases. How the situation turns out for him is simply a matter of luck (153).

But the luck of how it turns out has implications for the moral assessment of his action, as unfair as this seems, given the man's good intentions in both hypothetical cases. A similar example is Thomas Nagel's story of the man who runs in to rescue a victim from a burning building. If, in the course of the rescue attempt, the man accidentally drops the victim from a window instead of bringing him out alive, our moral evaluation of him as a hero is bound to be different even though this difference is contingent upon luck. "Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck" (Nagel 26). Kant, who argued for the primacy of intentions, maintained that there could be no such thing as morality subject to forces beyond the control of the agent: a

will is good "only because of its willing" not "because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end" (qtd. in Nagel 24). This is a view that reassures us with its clarity and its bracing emphasis on our reasoned choices, and, as we shall see, it is a view that appealed to Hardy in his compassion for those who must choose and act in a haphazard world not of their own creating. Still, ready as always to take "a hard look at the worst," Hardy was equally compelled by the more troubling and ethically complex view that the outcome determines our understanding of what has been done. As Nagel notes, the Kantian argument offers an inadequate response to a basic problem in ethics for which there is no wholly satisfying solution (25). In novels that represent life tentatively, as "a series of seemings," Hardy views this problem from a multiplicity of angles, and though his fiction doesn't offer us the comfort of a single solution, it implicitly challenges the reasonable but reductive conclusion that there is no such thing as moral luck.

Nagel outlines four ways that luck can affect morality (28). The first, which he calls "constitutive luck," refers to the kind of person one is, whether one is born, for example, with or without certain capacities, inclinations, and talents. The second, "circumstantial luck," describes the circumstances and problems that occur in a person's life. The third, "causal luck," is the luck inherent in the way antecedent circumstances affect choices and agency. The fourth, "resultant luck," is a term for the way one's actions turn out.

Martha Nussbaum's claim that moral luck is internal as well as external is especially relevant to Nagel's first two categories, and it has important implications for the novels because Hardy is fascinated by the relationship between destiny and character. As we see again and again in life as well as in Hardy's fiction, misfortune can be reversed in a minute, but its internal ethical effects--its effects on character--often take much longer to heal: "It takes a long time to restore to the slave a free person's sense of dignity and self-esteem, for the chronic invalid to learn again the desires and projects characteristic of the healthy person, for the bereaved person to form new and fruitful attachments" (Nussbaum "Luck and Ethics" 97).

To cite but one example of internal moral luck in Hardy's novels, I will turn briefly to The Mayor of Casterbridge. Given the novel's representation of historical as well as personal instability during the Victorian period, it should come as no surprise that this example portrays mobility in the British social class system not as a matter of determination and choice but as difficult to predict, control, or even trust. Elizabeth-Jane no sooner arrives in Casterbridge with her mother than she finds herself a prominent person, stepdaughter to the mayor. Yet she doesn't rejoice in her new social status or advertise it by buying herself fine clothes and knick-knacks because her childhood circumstances combined with her constitutive luck have shaped her fears, desires, and expectations and thus determined how she responds to this surprising circumstantial luck: "Her triumph was tempered by circumspection; she had still that fieldmouse fear of the coulter of destiny despite fair promise, which is common among the thoughtful who have suffered early from poverty and oppression" (158). Those who seek to deny the relevance of luck to morality have argued that we should focus on character and intentions, the internal rather than the external. But as we have seen, it is a mistake to assume that this is a realm protected from chance: "restricting the domain of moral responsibility to the inner world will not immunize it to luck" (Nagel 32). Hardy's novels make this point especially vivid.

Resultant luck, also prominent in Hardy's fiction, is a particularly controversial notion because of its implications for our theories of justice. Although Nagel resists the dangerously simplified view that any action can be justified or excused by history, he does maintain that actual results shape our ethical assessments: "That these are genuine moral judgments rather than expressions of temporary attitude is evident from the fact that one can say in advance how the moral verdict will depend on the results" (30; emphasis his). He illustrates this claim by pointing out that if one negligently leaves a baby unattended in its bath, we know in advance that if the baby drowns one is morally culpable, whereas if there is no dire result, the moral

assessment and self-judgment are more likely to be milder--in that case, "one has merely been careless" (31). There is, of course, something unsettling about the notion of responsibility that is not dependent on human control, but it's true that people take moral risks everyday, knowing that the outcome of their choice can make a tremendous difference to what they have done and to the consequences they will have to live with. In his compassion, Hardy baulks at the idea of assuming responsibility in a flawed, contingent world, where it is virtually impossible to live a good life--or even to act at all--without moral danger; his honesty, though, coupled with his respect for the complex particularity of the stories he tells, keep him from clean, rational propositions of the sort Rescher, for example, makes in his argument against moral luck: "If the significant evaluation at issue results from luck, the morality does not enter into it. And if it is moral through being in some way within our responsibility and control, then it is not a matter of luck" (Rescher 158). Studying Hardy's narratives, with their attention to the bizarre twists and turns of life, shows us that separating morality and luck in this way is not as easy as it sounds.

Morality is supposed to provide "a shelter against luck" (Williams, Making Sense 241). It is quite idealistic, though, to assume that human moral assessment can operate with godlike knowledge of a person's life, character, and intentions. Too lofty a conception of justice can lead to injustice, for it sets us up as the sort of judge none of us can possibly be, given our human limitations. Bernard Williams argues against the moral resistance to luck on these grounds: "Atheists say that in forming ideas of divine judgement we have taken human notions of justice and projected them onto a mythical figure. But also, and worse, we have allowed our image of a mythical figure to shape our understanding of human justice" (Making Sense 243). Instead of "purifying" morality by keeping it safe from luck, Williams proposes that it is more honest and just to realize that our choices and actions are always subject to forces beyond our control, and if we are ever to take responsibility, we must do so by considering the actual consequences of our actions, intended or not.

Margaret Urban Walker similarly claims that there are positive implications for our ethical lives if we embrace the concept of moral luck rather than fear it as an unruly contradiction in terms. Those who deny the existence of moral luck seek to protect what she and Williams call "pure agency": "Pure agents are free, on their own, to determine what and how much they may be brought to account for by determining the intentional acts and commitments they will undertake, and recognizing the limits to their control beyond these" (Walker, "The Virtues of Impure Agency" 245). The consequences of this view of agency are that if a person makes a commitment but refuses to take responsibility for the unexpected possibilities that the commitment entails, carefully separating voluntary agency from luck, there is likely to be greater suffering for others as well as a loss of integrity for the agent. For example, a woman may decide to have a child but not be prepared for the bad luck of caring for an ill and unusually difficult child, or a man may enter voluntarily into a lighthearted friendship and unexpectedly find himself burdened with the responsibility of coping with the grief of a friend who is suddenly also a bereaved husband (245). How well we deal with luck is a mark of our goodness. In a sense, Walker suggests, moral luck brings such virtues as integrity and grace into being: "If integrity is the capacity required to deal morally with the impurity of luck-ridden human agency, its general absence should be a disfiguring of human life in ways broad and deep. For the same reason, a way of conceiving agency that attempts to banish the impurity that gives integrity its point should produce under examination an alien and disturbing picture of moral life" (243).

In Hardy, the characters who accept the impurity of their agency come closest to achieving wisdom and virtue. Ironically, Tess of the d'Urbervilles proclaims in its subtitle that Tess is a "pure woman," when actually her impurity and the impurity of her world bring into being her virtues of compassion and integrity. Hardy is no less paradoxical when he leads Henchard to recognize that Elizabeth-Jane, his stepdaughter whose morality is so beautiful to him, has her origins in the impurity and immorality of the wife-sale and the subsequent illegitimate union of her parents. Henchard is

disturbed by Nature's "contrarious inconsistencies" and by the "odd sequence" of events, but Hardy encourages us to see that just as virtuous intentions can result in disaster, moral luck can follow in the wake of recklessness and evil.

As judges and guides of judgment, Hardy's narrators are fascinating in their responses to moral impurity. Their perspective characteristically oscillates from distanced to intimate, and they themselves are in that sense godlike: at once remote and involved. But Hardy's narrators rarely assign blame, aware as they are of the unpredictable messiness and vulnerability implicit in the lives of even the most rational and ethically scrupulous of his characters. The very fact that these careful moral deliberators are as likely to bring about pain and undesirable consequences as are the less aware and conscientious of Hardy's characters demonstrates his belief that morality cannot be protected from luck and hazard.

Much has been written about chance in Hardy.<sup>1</sup> But these studies don't directly consider the role played by luck in the ethics of Hardy's fiction, a topic that merits attention, especially given the extensive examination the issue of moral luck has recently received in philosophy. As different as they are in the stories they tell, *A Laodicean* (1881), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) share a concern with the ways that knowledge, time, and timing--all subject to luck--affect moral choice and judgment. Characters' attitudes toward the past are as ethically significant as their intentions regarding the future, and their concern for personal history is amplified thematically by Hardy's own preoccupations with history conceived more broadly as ancestry and the past of Wessex. Although one would think the past would be more stable and determinate than an uncertain future, in Hardy's fiction it is as subject to change, chance, and unpredictability as anything else. The novels suggest that life is like a game of chance, and therefore suspense, risk, and hope are inevitable for those who play and even for those who would rather sit on the sidelines and watch. This analogy between life and gambling reveals that, for time-bound humanity, agency is always impure. Nevertheless the analogy also enables Hardy to explore his characters' passionate but thwarted desire for control, for pure agency.

In *A Laodicean*, William Dare, one of the few wholly unsympathetic characters in Hardy, attempts to study and manipulate the odds as a way of winning the game; his hunger for control and his determination to plot a future for himself backfire, though, revealing the dangers of the calculating, scientific approach to life so prevalent in an age when technological progress and faith in science were supplanting faith in God and his providential plotting of human lives. More sympathetic characters who take this approach appear in the other novels: Lucetta Templeman and Angel Clare both seek power and control as moral agents but pay a price for underestimating the importance of the unforeseen. All three novels include episodes that will help us clarify the concept of moral luck. Perhaps even more important, Hardy's narratives compel us to practice ethical assessment under the most difficult conditions. And in that way literature tests and extends the project begun by moral philosophy.

### The Moral Melodrama of Hardy's Gamblers

Coincidence, that hallmark of Victorian fiction, can be seen as a function of luck, contingent on the timing of separate events by a force beyond human control. As Gillian Beer has pointed out in her reflections on coincidence in George Eliot's fiction, readers may object to coincidences in novels but they are everywhere apparent in life: "Coincidence is in large measure a matter of paying attention. We are surrounded continuously by coincidences. We observe them only when they challenge, confirm, or play into our preoccupations. It is for that reason that the level of coincidence rises sharply when we fall in love" (128-29). Moreover, falling in love is a vivid reminder of contingency--two people meet who might not have met--and of all that is beyond our control at a time when we most care to orchestrate events and the feelings and actions of another. In Hardy's love stories and his narratives in general, timing is crucial; his narrators allude to a superhuman presence that has planned everything perfectly only to botch the

plan while putting it into practice. Because his characters also have plans, dreams, and intentions, they suffer when they experience the "awryness" of life: they are plagued by the sense that either God or cosmic randomness causes events in their lives to take place at the very moment when these events would be most likely to interfere with their own wishes or intentions. Thus they often experience bad timing as bad luck. The narrator of Tess, for example, reflects bitterly on Tess's inopportune meeting with Alec d'Urberville:

In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. Nature does not often say "See!" to her poor creatures at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply "Here" to a body's cry of "Where?" till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game. . . . it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment: a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing strange destinies. (46)

This worldview is clearly not in accord with the traditional religious view that "God does not play dice with his world" (Rescher 122), that "in everything God works for the good" (Romans 8:28). The first two sentences of the passage, however, suggest a belief in some sort of higher power--referred to later in Tess as "the President of the Immortals," here as "Nature," and in "Hap" as "dicing Time," one of the forces of randomness that govern the universe. Hardy could not accept the existence of a god who was at once omnipotent and good. In his notebook entry of February 5, 1898, he jotted a reminder: "write a prayer, or hymn, to One not Omnipotent, but hampered; striving for our good, but unable to achieve it except occasionally" (Hardy qtd. in Jedrzejewski 41). What hampers such a god if his intentions are good? Luck? Hardy wavers between a conception of a random world, in which God is a gambler as subject to chance as his creatures are, and a conception of a world ruled by a malicious practical joker. As the speaker of "Hap" insists, the latter is actually the less disturbing view because at least then life would make sense and we would have someone to blame.

Hardy exhibits a restless obsession with agency characteristic of the fin de siècle, provocatively attributing tyrannic, uncertain, or even paralyzed agency to God. By raising these questions about chance and luck in his novels and poetry, Hardy knew that he was challenging the views of his religious readers, whose attitudes about gambling were clear. In their eyes, it was an immoral activity because, as Rescher explains, gambling abandons the uses of God-given reason and bases a decision on the mediation of chance or fate. Indeed, there is something impious about thinking that there are any 'casual' or 'chance' occurrences. It is only from our human point of view that 'casual events' exist at all; an omniscient God keeps track not only of the flights of sparrows but of the toss of a coin as well. (121)

Some philosophers and many theologians believe that there is no such thing as ontologically grounded chance: "There is merely epistemic chance, grounded in the imperfections of human knowledge" (Rescher 132). Hardy is more attracted to the possibility of a god who is imperfect but compassionate. And he repeatedly personifies Gaming and Chance, granting them an undeniable reality instead of suggesting that they could be explained away if only we knew more, if only we could see the bigger picture.

Hardy's complex, shifting worldview cannot, of course, be reduced to the cliché that life is a crap-shoot. Such a reduction does nothing to account for the beauty inherent in the idiosyncratic yet elemental and resonant insights of Hardy's fiction and poetry. In The Melodramatic Imagination Peter Brooks offers a useful way to understand this beauty and intensity through his theory of melodrama, a nineteenth-century mode too often misunderstood and vilified. Focusing primarily on Balzac and Henry James, Brooks does not include Hardy's novels among his examples, but given their coincidences, their boldness and aesthetic risks, and above all their dramatic staging of moral dilemmas, it's easy to see how the novels correspond to Brooks' definition of this mode of imaginative expression. As a prelude, then, to my discussion of A Laodicean, one of Hardy's more melodramatic works, I will briefly consider what Hardy gains through his creative experiments with the conventions of melodrama.

Despite Woolf's praise for the effects Hardy seems to achieve without full awareness, I agree with Peter Widdowson that Hardy was well-aware of many of his fictional strategies, including bizarre, anti-realist aspects of his novels which critics are often too quick to write off to authorial carelessness. Widdowson quotes a telling passage from Hardy's autobiography to demonstrate this awareness:

Art is a disproportioning--(i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion)--of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art. (228-29)

Oscar Wilde makes a similar case against realism in "The Decay of Lying," and, as I have already argued, New Woman writing was deliberately anti-realist. This late-century new aesthetic was accompanied by a new ethic. The melodramatic mode, in contrast to realism, articulates what Brooks calls the "moral occult," "the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality" (5). According to Brooks, melodrama came into being with the French Revolution and its aftermath:

This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society and the invalidation of the literary forms--tragedy, comedy of manners--that depended on such a society. (115)

Such a characterization may seem extreme, but a melodramatic imagination such as Hardy's finds truth in extremes because they satisfy a craving for a bold reinvention of ethics. Hardy's characters and narrators mourn the erosion of traditions and communities that had sustained families for generations, and yet the novels neither succumb to nostalgia nor embrace new utilitarian philosophies and technological conveniences to replace what has been lost; instead, they offer a potent, hyperbolically charged vision of an interrelated past and present to compensate for the lost God-filled universe. "Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue" (Brooks 20). This new, post-Enlightenment world, from which God had withdrawn, could not be for Hardy--nor for James or Eliot or Wilde--a world without ethics, moral drama, and spiritual presence of some sort. Melodrama enabled Hardy to recreate God as a gambler, to speculate about the new gods of Chance and Luck, to explore ultimate confrontations between good and evil within a world where so much is uncertain and mixed, and to do justice to emotional, elemental, and even spiritual truths that realism blunts or misses altogether.<sup>ii</sup> There is thus a paradox at the center of Hardy's need to disportion realities in order to tell the truth, and the irony Brooks observes about melodrama can lead to a deeper appreciation of this form of truth-telling in late-Victorian fiction: to avoid the melodramatic and the risks this mode entails is "to oversimplify in the manner of a Flaubert, to misestimate what life is really about and art is really for" (159). For Hardy, to make life subject to reason alone, without accounting for chance, emotion, uncertainty, and all that is beyond agency, is indeed to misestimate what life is really about and to comfort ourselves with false security rather than with life's--and art's--intimations of forces that transcend what we can know and control.<sup>iii</sup>

### Luck and the Presence of the Past

Yet to focus almost exclusively on the future and the gambler's or moral agent's attitude toward it is to ignore the past, a force that is nearly as crucial to the ethics of this novel as it is to the ethics of The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess. The past is associated with constitutive luck, for instance, since it makes the characters who they are. Dare, for example, has the crucial bad luck of illegitimate birth; his immoral choices spring from this luck, and it is unlikely that they would be the same without it.

Sophie Gilmartin's study of ancestry in nineteenth-century British literature shows how, repeatedly in Hardy's work, "narrative is built upon a foundation which is palpable, material, layered with seams of generational and geological history" (198). This perspective on the past in Hardy's fiction and poetry is valuable in part because it illuminates the value--the ethics even--of memory for Hardy. To forget is to betray. The active effort to remember--to remain connected to one's personal past, to ancestors, and to history--has for Hardy both moral and aesthetic implications. Reflecting on memory, sense impression, and loss, Hardy wrote in a journal entry of 1897: "Today has length, breadth, thickness, colour, smell, voice. As soon as it becomes yesterday it is a thin layer among many layers, without substance, colour or articulate sound" (qtd. in Gilmartin 223). But this elegaic impulse with its aesthetic longing and ethics of constancy (so visible in the romantic devotion of characters such as Gabriel Oak, Diggory Venn, Marty South, and Tess herself) is counterbalanced in Hardy's novels by a very different orientation toward the past: the need to forget. Only through forgetting and escaping the weight of ancestry and heredity does agency become available to Hardy's characters, who often express a concomitant need to erase past events that hamper forward movement and free choice.

But the past is seductive. Although the lure of the presently unattainable past apparently has nothing to do with moral luck, Hardy's novels prove otherwise. Luck has shaped his characters' lives in ways they long to reverse; this longing to "go back" imbues the novels not with nostalgia but with a poignant desire for the impossible, for, in other words, a different past, or a present interpenetrated by a past that is living rather than static or irrevocable. Conversely, Hardy's fiction also represents the role of luck in the desire to escape one's past, to wipe the slate clean. Exploring both the beauty of the past that seems alive and malleable in the present and the nightmare of the inexorable, unlucky past that will not die, A Laodicean, Tess, and The Mayor of Casterbridge hold out the possibility of ethical agency only to show how this dazzles and deludes those who are actually very much at the mercy of time and luck.

For reasons other than illegitimacy and greed, Paula shares Dare's desire to be a De Stancy, and her willingness to believe the worst of Somerset is partially determined by her attitude toward the past. The novel's ending is not unequivocally happy for Paula because she remains obsessed with a past she will never have--the past as represented by the historic, romantic De Stancy clan who once inhabited the castle that her industrialist father's money enabled her to own and that is reduced to ruins by the end of the novel. The last words we hear her say to Somerset are "I wish my castle wasn't burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy!" (431). Hardy, who was himself fascinated by old families, doesn't allow us to dismiss Paula's wish as merely a whim. Some of the most striking descriptions in the novel capture the strangeness and beauty of a past that lives on in the present.<sup>iv</sup> For example, De Stancy impresses Paula and his sister by entering a portrait of one of his ancestors; he dons ancestral armor, picks up a sword, and stands in front of the painting's frame. He asks them what they think. "He looked so much like a man of bygone times that neither of them replied, but remained curiously gazing at him" (189). While De Stancy embodies the past, Somerset merely studies it through his work as an architect; still, whether she wants to or not, Paula falls in love with Somerset. On one level anyway, we are encouraged to see this as her bad luck. Pursuing him across Europe by seeking out places of architectural interest, she enters a street in Lisieux that transports her to the Middle Ages, especially when she gazes at a house covered with ancient carved figures "cloaked with little cobwebs which waved in the breeze, so that each figure seemed alive" (399). An old woman pokes her head out of the window and Paula witnesses with fascination the blurring of the line that separates present from past, as she did when saw De Stancy in the picture frame: the "old woman's head . . . was so nearly the colour of the carvings that she might easily have passed as a piece with them" (400). Paula's desire to merge with the past despite her ties to the modern world is more eccentric, more a quirky Hardyian dimension of the novel, than the destructive plotting of the illegitimate son so traditional in literature, but the luck of birth shapes the attitudes and ethical choices of both heroine and villain.

A Laodicean repeatedly evokes fascination with the persistence of the past in the present. Most broadly, as Widdowson notes, the novel's project is "to examine the mentalité of a contemporary society in transition between 'the ancient and the modern'--a phrase it uses more than once" (97). The past is known and comforting compared to the present, which is dominated by the almost frightening potential of new technology such as photography and telegraphic communication, both of which play important roles in Dare's impish tricks. The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess are also narratives obsessed with the relation of past and present, luck and choice. They focus on characters admirably intending to turn a new leaf, to replace a guilty past with a redeemed future. This intention proves futile, though, because of the persistence of the past. Chance and bad timing frustrate good intentions so that the ethics of these novels is strongly anti-Kantian despite the narrators' attraction to Kant's idea that the good will "sparkle[s] like a jewel in its own right" regardless of how things turn out (Kant 366).

In Tess Hardy offers us different models of moral assessment, his narrator's being the most prominent. Angel Clare, for a time, offers a rival model to that of the narrator even though by the end he and the narrator are similarly compassionate to Tess and forgiving of what the world finds sinful in her behavior. Not surprisingly, given the "hard logical deposit" in the depths of his constitution (237), Angel initially aligns himself with the censorious, Victorian morality of that world and judges Tess severely for not living up to his ideal of purity. But later, in a Kantian moment, he revises his judgment: "Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay not among things done, but among things willed" (328-29). He has learned that Tess had a child out of wedlock, and though he hears the story from her, she tells him after their wedding despite her intention to tell him before. Hardy shows us Chance actively thwarting this moral intention at every turn (the most memorable instance being the written confession she puts under Angel's door only to discover that it accidentally slid under the rug). I agree with H. M. Daleski that Tess is not merely "a hapless victim of forces beyond her control" (151), for at no point does Hardy make our assessment of responsibility that easy. Still, Daleski's characterization of Tess as a "tragic agent" is apt. As he points out when discussing the famous instance of the letter under the rug, there is still time before the wedding for Tess to talk to Angel after she finds the unopened letter. The tragic dimension of her choice, as I see it, lies in the power of circumstance to pressure her to make the choice she would, on one level anyway, rather not make.<sup>v</sup>

If she isn't fully responsible for the deception, is she responsible for her sexual relationship with Alec? Hardy gives us enough evidence to believe that what happens to her in the Chase Woods is rape, but he also has Tess continue to live with Alec and say to him, "My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all" (83), suggesting that Alec takes advantage of her in different ways, some more her responsibility than others. My approach to what has become an interpretive crux in discussions of the novel, is to acknowledge that Tess is indeed raped by Alec (she is manipulated, she is asleep when it happens, the villagers hear a struggle and the sound of her cries coming from the Chase); after the rape, however, she yields to Alec's seduction, and she takes responsibility for the choice to stay with him. The responsibility is not hers alone, however. When she returns home, Tess poignantly (and uncharacteristically) blames her mother: "Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk?" (87). Joan Durbeyfield, who becomes almost a procuress in her avidity to get her daughter married, clearly deserves some of the blame, though she too acts with good intentions. In his condemnation and then complete exoneration of Tess, Angel swings from one extreme to the other. By contrast, the narrator loves Tess and believes in her purity from beginning to end, even as he calls attention to her impure agency and the circumstances and consequences that constrain her will.

Are we, as readers, to follow the narrator's lead? In a sense we do, since most of us find Tess very easy to love and, as a victim of bad moral luck, hard to blame. "Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself" (38); her self-blame becomes another model of moral assessment--and an important one

because Tess is clearly the most virtuous character in the novel. What makes our ethical response to her so complicated is that Tess is admirable for taking responsibility for the consequences of her actions despite their discordant relationship with her intentions. She blames herself, and by doing so, paradoxically gives narrator and readers all the more reason not to blame her. Hardy's novel makes a point about moral luck similar to Margaret Urban Walker's claim that impure agency is what makes integrity possible: Tess does not intend or deserve the consequences that befall her, but she takes responsibility for them. "She would pay to the uttermost farthing," she thinks before her confession (220). At the same time, those readers who admire Tess for her integrity do not want her to suffer, and it seems an injustice that she should. In its complex, double ethical vision, the novel thus offers as a model of moral assessment the self-judgment of its principled heroine whose morality is not completely overruled by the generous, compassionate spirit of forgiveness represented by the narrator of her story.

As if to test our capacity to judge mercifully, Hardy makes Tess's acts more extreme at each stage of her story and more inextricably entangled with events from the past. She goes from killing a horse (accidentally, while asleep) to killing a man (deliberately but out of the bewilderment of unreturned, unrewarded love for another man who would benefit from this one's death--in other words, with good intentions and with the pressure of the past upon the present made visible by Angel's sudden reappearance). She goes from being raped, to being seduced, to becoming what she vowed she wouldn't become: Alec's "creature." Angel realizes that it is the strength of Tess's love for him that "extinguish[es] her moral sense altogether" (372). As he sees it, her body is now drifting "in a direction dissociated from its living will" (366). For most readers (and ultimately for Tess herself, who understands that she must "pay" for the murder as she has paid for all her choices), Tess must be judged guilty by the end of the novel, but passing such a judgment is difficult because we know so much about her goodness. We are like Izz Huett, who cannot speak badly of Tess even when there are reasons for doing so: "the fascination exercised over her rougher nature by Tess's character compelled her to grace" (264). Hardy's representation of Tess similarly compels his readers to grace.

In her letter to Angel, Tess slips into wishful thinking: "What was the past to me as soon as I met you? It was a dead thing altogether" (325). The trouble is that the past will not die. After Tess's confession, Angel is quick to suggest that her character is tainted because of her d'Urberville lineage, and as Gilmartin observes, Tess's aversion to studying history--"Because what's the use of leaning that I am one of a long row only"--is related to her desire to avoid thinking about her ancestral past and thus "retain at least the illusion of individual will" (229). Her murder of Alec represents a desperate, final attempt to kill the past that has prevented a fresh moral start. That, too, backfires. Chance has always prevented Tess's will from being in accord with her actions. After the murder, Angel says, "Ah--it is my fault." And yet Hardy doesn't allow us to shift the blame that easily. Angel's musing about Tess's ancestral past--"what obscure strain in the d'Urberville blood had led to this aberration" (372)--calls attention to the unfairness of constitutive luck and the determinative influence the past can have on present moral choices. But the novel leaves us neither squarely in the Kantian position of judging Tess by her good intentions alone (how can we do so as Alec's blood seeps through the ceiling?) nor prepared to think of her execution as just. The phrase "moral sense" has become ironic in Hardy's world of chance, for it doesn't make sense that a woman as gentle, loving, and ethically scrupulous as Tess should be punished so persistently. Without completely abandoning normative ethics, then, the novel leads us to question our assumption that a rational understanding of moral principles can lead us to fair moral assessment. It does so by making us acutely aware of the powerful and unruly force of Tess's bad luck.

In the course of his reflection on ethics, time, and timing, Hardy concludes, in both Tess and The Mayor of Casterbridge, that it is simply not possible to learn from experience.

"By experience," says Roger Ascham, "we find out a short way by a long wandering." Not seldom that long wandering unfits us for further travel, and of what use is our experience to us then? Tess Durbeyfield's experience was of this incapacitating kind. . . . She--and how many more--might have ironically said to God with Saint Augustine, "Thou hast counselled a better course than thou hast permitted." (Tess 103)

### Merit, Desert, and Luck

The characters in A Laodicean, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and The Mayor of Casterbridge are all gamblers and impure ethical agents. This is as true of those who are calculating as it is of those who are reckless. It is as true of those who relish the game and throw the dice defiantly as it is of those who understand the power of Chance and would rather not play. In his pessimism, Hardy believed that much that is good in humanity is not allowed the opportunity to bloom. A pervasive theme in his novels is that we deserve better. Despite Rescher's case against moral luck, on one point he and Hardy would agree: "how we deserve to be treated is something that, in the final analysis, lies wholly within our power. . . . Luck manages to decouple fate from desert. But no force can decouple merit from desert" (169). Rescher also argues that "our fate is not within our power, but our character is" (169). Here Hardy would disagree. We can strive to make our moral characters what we want them to be, but in this realm of life, like all others, too often hope unblooms. In Nussbaum's words, "much that I did not make goes toward making me whatever I shall be praised or blamed for being" ("Luck and Ethics" 78).

Hardy's focus in these novels on the intervention of chance in our lives significantly shapes the ethics of his fiction. His novels stress that there is indeed such a thing as moral luck and clarify the value of acknowledging its existence. If we admit that contingency shapes who we are and what we do, we are less likely to be arrogant and controlling; more likely to consider a variety of possible consequences when making a choice and to take responsibility for that choice even when our resultant luck is bad, even when our intentions were good; and most importantly, given Hardy's ethics of love and fellow-feeling, acknowledging moral luck will lead us, perhaps, to judge others with greater compassion.

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### End Notes

<sup>i</sup>. These studies include Albert Pettigrew Elliott, Fatalism in the Works of Thomas Hardy (New York: Russell, 1935); Roy Morrell, Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaysia Press, 1965), and Bert G. Hornback, The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1971). For a recent, brief discussion of this issue in Hardy studies, see Mary Rimmer, "Club Laws: Chess and the Construction of Gender in A Pair of Blue Eyes" in The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy, ed. Margaret R Higonet (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 203-04..

<sup>ii</sup>. In The Ethos of Romance at the Turn of the Century, William J. Scheick describes another late-century fictional mode that offered an alternative to realism--romance. The dynamics of one form of this genre--"the simultaneous intimation and concealment of some ultimate insight" (59)--reveals it to be akin to melodrama as Brooks defines it.

<sup>iii</sup>. As Charles Taylor argues, though, even those who advocated rational freedom in the nineteenth century did so with evangelical fervor, espousing "a kind of heroism of unbelief, the deep spiritual satisfaction of knowing that one has confronted the truth of things, however bleak and unconsoling" (404). Hardy's melodramatic position sometimes strikes this note, but ultimately the romantic depth of his major novels offers richer emotional satisfaction than the bleak truths and amorality of fiction by Flaubert, Gissing, or the late-Victorian naturalists.

<sup>iv</sup>. J. Hillis Miller has recognized as one of the characteristic features of Hardy's work the "irresistible coercion of history" (103).

<sup>v</sup>. For some readers, an ethical reading of Tess's agency is undermined by Hardy's melodramatic imagination and his presentation of Tess as an elemental force, captured at Stonehenge to signify her association with ancient patterns of death and rebirth. This symbolic dimension of the novel is undeniable, but equally undeniable, in my reading anyway, is Tess's moral personhood and her convincing reality as a tragic agent.

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