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An Ovidian Epigraph in Jude the Obscure

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AN OVIDIAN EPIGRAPH IN *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

EMILY A. McDERMOTT

IN PART FIRST of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, the hero undergoes a tragic, if unexceptional, peripeteia. Having set himself idealistically and single-mindedly on the path to intellectual advancement, he is filled with "a warm self-content" (31)¹ at his prospects of moving onward to university study, where his "present knowledge will appear . . . but as childish ignorance" (32). Progress toward Christminster, however, is halted abruptly when the innocent Jude Fawley falls prey to Arabella, that "complete and substantial female animal" (34). Suddenly, his Greek New Testament left open but unheeded, he plunges into a sordid spiral of seduction, entrapment, and imprisonment in a hopeless marriage. The story is a commonplace one, and the basic plotline of chapter one has comprised the sum total of the "tragedy" of many a lesser hero. But Hardy gives Jude a reprieve. The infamous Arabella decamps for the New World, and at the end of the chapter we, with Jude, taste the possibility of redemption. No less than he, we feel "a spark of the old fire" (62) lit in his soul by his rediscovery of the inscription chiseled on a milestone aimed Christminsterward: "THITHER JF."

If, at the end of this first section of the novel, the reader thinks back to its pseudo-Biblical epigraph, the thought presented there will seem a clearly apposite presage of the content of the chapter:

Yea, many there be that have run out of their wits for women, and become servants for their sakes. Many also have perished, have erred, and sinned, for women. . . . O ye men, how can it be but women should be strong, seeing they do thus?

I Esdras 4: 26, 27, 32
(9)

¹ Page references are cited from Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Norman Page (New York: Norton, 1978).

What could be more suited to the story of a "hoity-toity" scholar (32) felled by "commonplace obedience to conjunctive orders from headquarters" (34)? How else explain the force that has diverted Jude from his philological path toward "Livy, Tacitus, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes" (32) and enmired him in a relationship suitably inaugurated when he is smacked in the ear by a pig's pizzle?

The double epigraph to Part Second, however, is neither straightforward nor so easily evaluated. The first epigraph is a general assurance that one's fate depends on one's own inner self, taken from Swinburne's "Prelude" to *Songs before Sunrise*: "Save his own soul he hath no star." In the second, the author cites Ovid on the gradual growth of love: "Notitiam primosque gradus vicinia fecit; / Tempore crevit amor" (*Metamorphoses* 4.59-60). Both epigraphs at first glance seem rather vague, and not immediately informative. Inghram's unadorned summation—"The two epigraphs relate to Jude's academic aspirations and to his love for Sue"²—both states the obvious and reflects the mottoes' failure to provoke much interest. Even Gregor, who finds significance in several of the novel's epigraphs, finds none to note in Hardy's colorless quotation of Ovid.³

The critic who pauses over these epigraphs, however, trying to eke from them a more pointed message, may observe that they preside Janus-like over the gate between the first two chapters. The Swinburne reference reflects back on Jude's relationship with Arabella and points hopefully to a future in which Jude may progress in a self-willed direction, free of such influences. Because it follows hot on Jude's renewal of academic resolve at the end of the first chapter, it may be taken to hint (falsely) that Jude will succeed in this chapter in his quest for self-advancement in Christminster. Outside influences, it suggests, will be irrelevant to the hero's self-fulfillment; the suggestion is the stronger because the reference here to a "star" echoes Jude's resurgence of confidence, in the final paragraphs of the first chapter, that "he might battle with his evil star, and follow out his original intention" (62). There is Delphic ambiguity built into the epigraph, though. One of the lessons learned by both Jude and the reader in chapter one was surely that Jude the man was subject to the demands of body as well as mind. The outcome of his "following his soul" must, then, remain very much in doubt. Which side of his personality will determine his fate? Which

² Patricia Ingham, ed., *Jude the Obscure* (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1985), 436.

³ Ian Gregor, "An End and a Beginning: *Jude the Obscure*," in Harold Bloom, *Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure* (New York: Chelsea Hse, 1987); originally from Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). [All references to Gregor are from Bloom.] Gregor (43) sees irony in the Swinburne epigraph, given Jude's "naïveté" in pursuing his goals; for his comments on other epigraphs, see 48-49, 51, 54.

star, good or evil, will triumph?⁴ The question is posed, and not answered.

The second motto clearly points forward to the development of a new romantic relationship, and—given the nature of Jude's past attachment to Arabella—sits a bit uneasily with the first. The reader may feel a flick of apprehension, undercutting the hopeful tone of the Swinburne tag, that the appearance of another woman in Jude's life may inspire recidivist failures in his resolve.

The complications in the meanings of the two epigraphs, however, have just begun as one enters the glossed chapter; they can be fully appreciated only retrospectively at its close, and again at the close of the novel. The reader of this chapter will see Jude's infatuated arrival in Christminster and watch as his hopes for integration into the scholarly community dissolve. In this chapter, Jude will become increasingly obsessed with his cousin Sue, will unwittingly create the triangle of himself, Sue and Phillotson, and will eventually withdraw from the field of competition, back to Marygreen. "Jude is as frustrated by Sue, his ideal, intellectual woman, as he is by Oxford, his equally shining ideal of the intellectual life," says Alvarez. "Frustration is the permanent condition of his life."⁵ By the end of the chapter, Jude will be overwhelmed by hopelessness, "deprived of the objects of both intellect and emotion" (97) and thrown into "'the hell of conscious failure,' both in ambition and in love" (101). The chapter's progress, finally, will occasion a fascinating reversal in the apparent meaning of its double epigraph.

The key to the reversal lies in the primary context of the Ovidian epigraph. Many a reader, both then and now, would immediately locate these lines as quoted from the familiar story of Pyramus and Thisbe in *Metamorphoses* 4. This is a tale of star-crossed lovers, a prototype for the double suicide of Romeo and Juliet. The lines of the epigraph describe the beginning of the relationship between the two young neighbors, whose love grows despite their parents' opposition. The content of these lines is quite neutral: "Proximity made them meet; love

⁴ The very fact that it is Swinburne he is quoting from may hint at a tipping of the scales toward the carnal. The sensuality of Swinburne's first collection of *Poems and Ballads* was attacked by contemporary critics for "feverish carnality." In light of Hardy's portrayal of carnality as pig-related, it is interesting that Swinburne himself was characterized by *Punch* (10 Nov. 1866) as "SWINE-BORN" and satirized in a review-article of *Poems and Ballads* as inviting his readers "to go hear him tuning his lyre in a sty" (John Morley in *Saturday Review of Literature*, quoted in Donald Serrell Thomas, *Swinburne: The Poet in His World* [New York: Oxford U Pr, 1979], 125); the full "Swine-born" quotation appears in Thomas, 136.

⁵ A. Alvarez, "Afterword" to Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 405; also as "Jude the Obscure," in Albert J. Guerard, *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 112, 122.

grew over time." Not only is the sentiment a bit insipid, but its specific applicability to the situation of Jude and Sue is somewhat askew. It is not chance proximity that makes Jude and Sue meet; rather, it has been Jude's interest in the picture of Sue on his aunt's mantelpiece that has provided the "ultimate impulse" (63) for his departure from Marygreen. The idea of love growing naturally over time is also inconsonant with the fact of Jude's instant (and uncousinly) preoccupation with the kinswoman he has never met. In fact, the uncited Ovidian lines immediately following those of the epigraph might seem a more pertinent comment on the relationship to come between Jude and Sue: "taedae quoque iure coissent, / sed vetuere patres; quod non potuere vetare, / ex aequo captis ardebant mentibus ambo" (*Met.* 4.60-62). With the fathers' opposition taken metaphorically as equivalent to the kinship and existing marriage that preclude Jude from wooing Sue, these lines are a fitting encapsulation of the luckless love between the two: they are inexorably drawn to each other but will later prove psychologically incapable of marrying even when a double divorce has cleared their path for "taedae . . . iure."

More pertinently, though, Hardy's adoption of a tag from the very start of Ovid's tale of Pyramus and Thisbe serves to call the story as a whole to the reader's mind. An alert reader might well guess that the author is foreshadowing a doom for Jude and Sue analogous to that which afflicted Ovid's young lovers.⁶ Yes, but it is only the most generalized doom that is presaged: there is no exact or meaningful correlation between the serial suicides of Ovid's romantic principals (caused by Pyramus' tragically misguided assumption that Thisbe has been killed) and the murder-suicide of Jude and Sue's poor children, "done because we are too menny" (266). There is, on the other hand, a distinct symbolic identification between the wall that divides Ovid's two young lovers and the barriers that prevent Jude from realizing his intellectual ambitions.

The most notable characterizing element of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is the garden wall that separates their two homes, a concrete symbol of the impediment presented by their parents' disapproval. The lovers live in an ambiguous relationship with this anthropomorphized wall, concomitantly cursing it ("invide paries") as the obstacle which prevents them from contact and blessing it for allowing some measure of contact through a slender crack (*Met.* 4.73-77). Surely no educated Briton could be reminded of the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe without also recalling this wall to mind—whether from his own school-day forays

⁶ Alexandre Dumas uses Ovid's story in just such a way in his *Comte de Monte Cristo*, by titling a chapter concerning two young lovers "Pyrame et Thisbé"; see Emily A. McDermott, "Classical Allusion in *The Count of Monte Cristo*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 8 (1988): 95-97.

into the primary text, or from Shakespeare's wonderful spoof, where the "vile," "sweet," "lovely," "courteous," "wicked," "sensible" wall (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.132, 174, 176, 178, 180, 182; Riverside Edition) is represented by an actor costumed in loam and plaster (and speaking, entering and exiting), or from Sir Edward Burne-Jones's 1861 painting of Thisbe stretching out her hand dolorously to the "tenuis rima" (*Met.* 4.65) through which she communicated with her lover, or from a multitude of other sources.⁷ The wall is the element in the Pyramus and Thisbe story which, I shall argue, fully explains Hardy's choice of this epigraph from Ovid—for Jude too lives in an ambiguous relationship with walls.

As a stonemason and a scholar of antiquarian taste, Jude is immediately enamored of the Gothic architecture—the "reverend walls" (65)—of Christminster. Again and again as he first enters the city, his eye is drawn to architectural details: "spires and domes" (63), "crocketed pinnacles and indented battlements" (64), "porticoes, oriels, doorways of enriched and florid middle-age design" (64). He thirsts, as he later phrases it, to "become imbued with the genius loci" (94). His exploration is not only visual but tactile: "when the gates were shut, and he could no longer get into the quadrangles, he rambled under the walls and doorways, feeling with his fingers the contours of their mouldings and carving" (64). Like Pyramus and Thisbe, he too has a tendency to anthropomorphize. His first (and premonitory) impression of the town is gained when the lamps "[wink] their yellow eyes at him dubiously" (63); entering a college gateway, he begins "to be encircled as it were with the breath and sentiment of the venerable city" (64). He fancies the walls "haunted" by the souls of past scholars: "The brushing of the wind against the angles, buttresses, and door-jambs were as the passing of these only other inhabitants, the tappings of each ivy leaf on its neighbour were as the mutterings of their mournful souls, the shadows as their thin shapes in nervous movement, making him comrades in his solitude" (65). It is through his communion with the architecture that Jude achieves his mystical conjuring of the multitude of scholars who had peopled the university (65-68). Although he gains no commerce with the *living* denizens of the town, "the saints and prophets in the window-tracery, the paintings in the galleries, the statues, the busts, the gurgoyles, the corbel-heads—these seemed to breathe his atmosphere" (70).

⁷ One indication of just how familiar the story of Pyramus and Thisbe would have been to Hardy's contemporaries can be found in the fact that the list of artistic representations of it compiled by Jane Davidson Reid in *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1993) extends over five single spaced pages (2: 962-965).

The negative side of Jude's relations with the architecture of Christminster, however, becomes evident soon after their thrilling beginning. Jude's thwarted desire to make himself part of the university's scholarly community will be systematically presented by Hardy in terms of walls, both visible and invisible. Jude quickly finds himself stymied by his lack of access to the knowledge he craves: "Only a wall divided him from those happy young contemporaries of his with whom he shared a common mental life; men who had nothing to do from morning till night but to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Only a wall—but what a wall!" (70). The privileged sons of Christminster "did not even see him, or hear him, rather saw through him as through a pane of glass" (70). Yet he still remains hopeful that, while "for the present he was outside the gates of everything, colleges included: perhaps some day he would be inside. Those palaces of light and leading; he might some day look down on the world through their panes" (70-71). The image recurs when Jude decides to turn to a more active strategy for winning his way inside the colleges, by writing their masters for advice: "This hovering outside the walls of the colleges, as if expecting some arm to be stretched out from them to lift me inside, won't do!" (92).

Jude's utter failure to penetrate to the inside of university life is made doubly clear by the reduplicated wall and barrier imagery of his return to Christminster in the final chapter of the book. When the academic procession that Jude and his family are witness to begins, the "expectant" (255) common people gather close, while the scarlet-robed Doctors process through a passageway "kept clear through their midst by two barriers of timber" (256). Jude cannot take his eyes from the "red and black gowned forms passing across the field of [his] vision like inaccessible planets across an object glass" (259). Despite everything, he still has a moment of hope that he may share in the meaning of the procession: "'I wish I could get in!'" he said to [Sue] fervidly. 'Listen—I may catch a few words of the Latin speech by staying here; the windows are open'" (259). But then, even as he nominally renounces any further interest in the place ("Well—I'm an outsider to the end of my days! . . . I'll never care any more about the infernal cursed place, upon my soul I won't" [259]), he still cannot help rejoicing in lodgings which adjoin the college:

a spot which to Jude was irresistible—though to Sue it was not so fascinating—a narrow lane close to the back of a college, but having no communication with it. The little houses were darkened to gloom by the high collegiate buildings, within which life was so far removed from that of the people in the lane as if it had been on opposite sides of the globe; yet only a thickness of wall divided them.

Sue, in musing on Jude's inability to rid himself of his obsessive dream, notes that "even now he did not distinctly hear the freezing negative that those scholared walls had echoed to his desire" (263). It is only after the death of his children and the beginning of Sue's mental collapse that he finds that he can "[mount] to the parapets and copings of colleges he could never enter, and [renew] the crumbling freestones of mullioned windows he would never look from, as if he had known no wish to do otherwise" (272). In a gloomy coda to his lost dreams, it seems that the only gate which will open to him "on application" (286) is the gate to the cemetery, where Jude and Sue seek a farewell from each other and from their dead children.

The Pyramus and Thisbe epigraph to Part Second prefigures the function of walls in Jude's life, as objects of longing and frustration. Thus, an epigraph which upon first reading seems to refer exclusively to the coming personal relationship with Sue ends up equally (and even more pointedly) emblematic of his intellectual relation to Christminster. This switch emphasizes the strong interrelation between the respective objects of Jude's emotional and intellectual longing. From his childhood Jude's feelings for the university town have been couched in erotic as well as academic terms: "He was getting so romantically attached to Christminster that, like a young lover alluding to his mistress, he felt bashful at mentioning its name again" (21). Danon notes that these feelings "prefigure his attachment to Sue"⁸; she also sees the converse, that Jude "approaches [the buildings of Christminster] sensually, as if he were approaching a lover,"⁹ and aptly concludes that from the moment when Jude first sees Sue's picture, "Sue and Christminster are linked; she is inseparable from the ideal of vocation."¹⁰ Alvarez likewise appreciates the intertwining of Sue and Christminster: "In the beginning, both Sue and the university seem objects of infinitely mysterious romance; both, in the end, land Jude in disillusion. Both seem to promise intellectual freedom and strength; both are shown to be at bottom utterly conventional. Both promise fulfillment; both frustrate him."¹¹ The identification is hammered home by the Ovidian epigraph which seems first to pertain to Sue, and so to Jude's emotional side alone, but in the end proves to reflect equally on his frustrated passion for the learning to be gained inside the walls of Christminster.

The sliding reference of the second epigraph is balanced by a similar switch in the first: "Save his own soul he hath no star." The words, as previously noted, while ambiguous, at least seem to refer surely to the

⁸ Ruth Danon, *Work in the English Novel: The Myth of Vocation* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 161.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹¹ Alvarez (above, note 5) 406.

goal of intellectual advancement that drives Jude to Christminster. But the apparent certainty of this reference too is muddled by the imagistic progression of the chapter. An idealized Sue—who early on, elevated to Jude's mantelpiece in photographic form, is imagined by him "to look down and preside over his tea" (69)—is gradually metamorphosed into "a kindly star, an elevating power, a companion in Anglican worship, a tender friend" (74).¹² Jude's own, independent soul, it turns out, is not sufficient "star" after all. His long-term academic ambition is not, in the long run, enough to effect his departure from Marygreen; he leaves, finally, only under the impulse of knowing that Sue lives there. Once at Christminster, his academic obsession is overshadowed by his erotic one: "it was also obvious that man could not live by work alone; that the particular man Jude, at any rate, wanted something to love" (80). The soul which proves Jude's true "star" is somehow an amalgam of his own and Sue's. As Phillotson says, "They seem to be one person split in two!" (183). Yet Sue—like so many elements in his life—stays bafflingly outside of Jude's control. Jude ultimately fails Swinburne; or else Swinburne proves too simplistic for Jude.

By novel's end, of course, it is clear that there has been almost vicious irony in Hardy's application of the Swinburne tag to Jude. The antitheist Swinburne had composed in his *Songs before Sunrise* a paean to man's power over his destiny. The hopeful tone of his words here in the "Prelude" is echoed and redoubled in the "Hymn of Man" later in the collection: "His soul to his soul is a law, and his mind is a light to his mind. / The seal of his knowledge is sure, the truth and his spirit are wed"; or, more hyperbolically, in its final lines: "Glory to Man in the highest! for Man is the master of things."¹³ Yet it is one of Hardy's clearest thematic intentions to portray "things"—or events—as masters of Jude: "Jude abandoned by Sue for Phillotson, following the death of the children; Jude tricked and made captive again by Arabella; Jude catching his fatal illness through an abortive visit to Sue in the forlorn hope that she might return to him; Jude dying, alone, reciting the curses of Job, while the university which rejected him is *en fête* outside his windows."¹⁴ Above all, Jude was thwarted on every front by the conventions of society: "Hardy's imaginative effort, as his fiction progressed, was directed toward seeing the individual will and the judgment of

¹² Sue's acute intellect is twice compared to a star (270, 317). She herself also implicitly assumes star-like characteristics in lamenting that "the social moulds civilization 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 called Mrs. Richard Phillotson. . . . But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson" (163).

¹³ A. C. Swinburne, *Songs Before Sunrise* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1892), lines unnumbered.

¹⁴ Gregor (above, note 3) 58.

others in a constant interplay."¹⁵ D. H. Lawrence shows a spirit more akin to Swinburne's when he deprecates Hardy's "pathetic rather than tragic" characters for their failures of will: "Yet they were all cowed by the mere judgement of man upon them, and all the while *by their own souls* they were right [emphasis mine]."¹⁶

Much of the novel's final gloomy effect is presaged by the workings of the double epigraph on Part Second. By invoking the larger, unspoken context of his Ovidian epigraph, the author effects a transformation in two bland-seeming mottoes, the first pointing toward Jude's intellectual goal, the second toward his erotic destiny. Through identification of Pyramus and Thisbe's wall with Christminster's walls, the Ovidian motto comes to apply equally to Jude's would-be intellectual relation with the university. The switch becomes complete when Swinburne's "star" is imagistically associated with Sue, and with the emotions which rob Jude of self-sufficiency. The net effect is to reinforce the emphatic identification of Sue and Christminster throughout the novel as objects of Jude's desire and sources of his ultimate frustration.

In a different context, Sue denigrates the vapid explanatory (and expurgatory) synopses affixed by scholars to the chapters of the Song of Solomon: "You needn't be alarmed: nobody claims inspiration for the chapter headings. Indeed, many divines treat them with contempt" (122). But vapid chapter headings are not necessarily contemptible. My purpose in this study has been precisely to claim inspiration for two of Hardy's own choices in *Jude the Obscure*.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ The first quote is from D. H. Lawrence, "Hardy's 'Prédilection d'artiste,'" reprinted in *Guard* (above, note 5) 50; the second is quoted in *Greene* (above, note 3) 57.

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