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SOME LETTERS ON HARDY'S 'TESS'

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IN the J. Alexander Symington Collection of letters and manuscripts now in the Rutgers University Library,¹ there are four holographs that recall an exciting period in late-Victorian days when everyone in the world—at least in the literary world—was reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

On the first day of January in 1892, Edmund Gosse wrote to Thomas Hardy: "Your book [*Tess*] is simply magnificent and wherever I go I hear its praises. . . . Your success has been phenomenal." Soon, however, the heavenly radiance of this success faded into the light of common day; for on January 16 the *Saturday Review* published a bitter attack on *Tess* and Hardy's head was soon bloody.

In Chapter 25 of his novel he had remarked: "The magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements, but as to their subjective experiences. The impressionable peasant leads a larger, fuller, more dramatic life than the pachydermatous king." Even before 1892 Hardy had showed himself to be, albeit a king of novelists, by no means a pachydermatous one. And the events of 1892 did not change him. For more than thirteen years he had been a member of the Savile Club in London, having joined it in 1878. It was here that he had met William Dean Howells, when (on June 25, 1883) Howells

¹ See "The Symington Collection" by Leslie A. Marchand, in the *Journal* (XII:1, 12), December 1948.

WINDY GATE,
DORCHESTER

Dec 4. 1892,

My dear Dad:

Lany's article on "Tess" in
the New Review is, of course, Lany's.
If Andrew, ~~to~~ with his knowledge
of opportunities, had a heart instead
of a hollow place where his heart
ought to be, he would by this time
have been among the immortals
of letters instead of in the sorry
position of gnawing his quill
over my poor production. Or,
if accident forced him to this
business, he would have felt the

was entertained by Edmund Gosse. When Thomas Bailey Aldrich wrote Hardy that he was planning to visit London in the summer of 1886, Hardy replied from the Savile Club, saying that that was the place to which to address letters for him, "for I am here almost every day." Yet, after this long and happy connection with the Club, Hardy was (in 1892) terribly upset because there were at the Savile a number of men who wrote for the *Saturday Review*; and immediately after the publication of the attack on *Tess*, Hardy wrote to ask Walter Besant: "Would you resign membership in the Savile Club, if you were in my place?" Besant apparently advised the retention of membership and Hardy stayed on.

After the attack in the *Saturday Review*, he received a consoling letter from his friend Edward Clodd.² On January 20 Hardy replied: "Your letter is full of excellent criticism of *Tess*—generous, yet incisive at the same time. . . . That mean paper the S[aturday] R[evue] . . . alter[s] my preface, omit[s] the second title of the book. . . , and indulge[s] in innuendoes of indecent intentions on my part, which never entered my mind. . . ."³ When, then, another member of the Savile Club, Andrew Lang, made a fresh and equally painful attack on *Tess* in the February issue of the *New Review*, Edward Clodd again wrote to Hardy to express regret at Lang's harsh words. Hardy replied [I quote now from the original autograph letter in the Rutgers University Library]:

Feb 4. 1892

[No place mentioned, but presumably London,
and probably written from the Savile Club]

My dear Clodd:

Lang's article on "Tess" in the *New Review* is, of course, Langy. If Andrew, with his knowledge and opportunities, had a heart instead of a hollow place where his heart ought to be, he would by this time have been among the immortals of letters instead of in the sorry position of gnawing his quill over my

² The novelist spoke of this man as "a scientist." He lived in Aldeburgh, in Suffolk. Hardy visited him there on several occasions, one of the most notable being the 150th anniversary (in September 1905) of the birth at Aldeburgh of the poet Crabbe. Hardy afterwards gave Clodd the manuscript of the story "The Duke's Reappearance." A voluminous writer and friend of writers of the Gosse circle, Clodd was chiefly known for popular works on evolution and the origin of cultures and religions.

³ Quoted from page 35 of Colby College Monograph No. 9: *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Grolier Club Centenary Exhibition 1940 of the Works of Thomas Hardy*, by Carroll A. Wilson. Waterville, Maine: Colby College Library, 1940.

poor productions. Or, if accident forced him to this business, he would have felt the smallness of stooping to pick out the trivial accidents of a first ed[iti]o[n] of a book of 140,000 words, and have put his finger on the real and serious faults of the story, which not one of these gentry has had the wit to find out.

The only clear objection he makes to the novel is that it is tragedy; and every word he says against it in this respect tells with equal force against all the Greek tragic dramatists, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans. While his Christian (?) objection (I suppose it is meant to be Christian) to the words "President of the Immortals" &c., is evidently factitious—for I distinctly state that the words are paraphrased from Æschylus.

You will be glad to know that there is no check to the sale of the book. Mudie keeps ordering more and more—and others *pari passu*.

It is odd that nearly every adverse criticism is written by a fellow-Savilian.

Yours sincerely

Thomas Hardy.

P. S.

The supposed error in the baptismal rite is not really an error. It happened, for one thing. Moreover the refusal to bury is described as being the result of personal feeling in the parson, owing to his exclusion from the house.

T. H.

Hardy's comment on "the words . . . paraphrased from Æschylus" refers to the famous sentence which he inserted, as an afterthought, on the very last page of *Tess*: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess."

March went by, with mounting sales of *Tess* in both London and New York. Yet in spite of this phenomenal success, Hardy's wounds continued to smart, and in April the *Quarterly* poured salt into them. "If this sort of thing continues," he moaned, "no more novel-writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at." Everyone in the Savile Club—Clodd and Gosse excepted—seemed to Hardy to be aiming malicious darts at him.

One day, while Clodd was standing with Andrew Lang in the clubrooms and talking about birds, Hardy entered. Seeing that Clodd was in the company of the man who had written the offensive article in the *New Review*, Hardy avoided joining the two and gestured to Clodd; whereupon Clodd abruptly left Lang and went to speak to the thin-skinned novelist. Hardy explained his fear at being brought face to face with the reviewer of his book. Clodd later wrote a note to Lang in explanation of his abruptness in leaving him,

and on the next day he received the following reply [here quoted from the original in the Rutgers Library]:

1 Marloes Road,
Kensington, W.

Sunday, 1/5/92 [i.e., May 1, 1892]

Dear Clodd,

Mr Thomas Hardy's manoeuvre was rather a failure. I did not know that he was in the room, nor who it was that you deserted me for. As to his novel, it is not to my taste, not all of it, and I particularly and sincerely dislike his reference to the "President of the Immortals" for the reason I gave. Apparently he thinks me a hypocrite about this, but I have surely a right to my own opinions, like another. If I missed the point of his book, it is through stupidity, but I don't think I did. I spared his grammar! Of course I am sorry he takes criticism so much to heart; my word, we should cultivate a little stoicism. And is this "confidential"? I burn to confide it to Allen.⁴

I can't find the book on "Wordsworth's Birds," nor recover the name of the author. You would find it excellent on the cuckoo. Also I have lost an article I wrote on it, chaffing Allen. I hope *he* would not cut me!

Yours very truly

A Lang.

The next day Lang wrote again:

1 Marloes Road

May 2./92.

Dear Clodd

The Enemy (if it was he, but I know nobody by sight) nodded to me in quite a friendly way today!

Of course I knew it was Æschylus, besides he says so. An admirer from New Caledonia (!) writes me a long letter on *Tess*.

Yours very truly

A Lang.

[P. S.] Where is Allen? He ought not to play tricks with me busy.

But if Hardy did nod to Andrew Lang "in quite a friendly way" in the Savile Club, he did not let him off so easily. For in a new edition of *Tess* he inserted a new preface, in which he paid his respects to the "gentleman who turned Christian for half-an-hour the better

⁴ The identification of this name is made difficult by Lang's handwriting, but he was probably referring to [Charles] Grant Allen (1848-1899). Hardy afterwards met Allen at the home of Edward Clodd at Aldeburgh.

to express his grief that a disrespectful phrase about the Immortals should have been used." This time it was Andrew Lang who took offence. In the November (1892) issue of *Longman's Magazine* he "ventured" once again "to say his say," this time commenting on Hardy's "petulant expression of annoyance" at criticism, and stating that Tess, whose "behaviour does not invariably seem to me that of 'a pure woman'," and "the atrocious cad" (the villain Alec) and "the prig Angel Clare seem to me equally unnatural, incredible, and out of the course of experience." "For all these reasons," said Lang, "*Tess* failed to captivate me."⁵

This time Hardy had the sense to suffer in silence, and five years later he gave up novel-writing altogether.

In the fall of 1912, Hardy sent Edward Clodd tickets, so that he could attend the London performance of a dramatization of Hardy's novel *The Trumpet-Major*. The adaptation was the work of A. H. Evans, father of the Shakespearean actor Maurice Evans. The play was given in London on December 5. Hardy's gift of tickets in 1912 makes it likely that he again supplied tickets a year later, when the Society of Dorset Men in London sponsored a performance of another Hardy play at the Cripplegate Institution. On Monday, December 8, 1913, Edward Clodd attended the performance of *The Woodlanders* and immediately thereafter wrote to Hardy to express his pleasure at having seen the play. Hardy's reply is here quoted from the original letter now in the Rutgers Library [with notes by the present writer]:

Max Gate [Dorchester],
10: 12: 1913
[i.e., December 10, 1913]

My dear Clodd:

I am pleased to hear that you liked the play.⁶ I have had nothing to do with it,⁷ and have not seen it, the days of performance here⁸ having found me with a sore throat, which has now disappeared. The company is to perform

⁵ Lang's article in *Longman's Magazine* was reprinted in Albert Mordell's *Notorious Literary Attacks* (New York, 1926), pages 221-231.

⁶ Some subsequent owner of this holograph attempted to identify "the play" by writing "Tess" in the margin of the letter. This is not correct; the play was "The Woodlanders."

⁷ The dramatization had been done by A. H. Evans.

⁸ The play was given in Dorchester on November 19 and 20, 1913.

again at Weymouth, so I may be able to see their rendering there.⁹ Marty is the pretty daughter of a baker here.¹⁰

An American film company has produced "Tess"—and it is being shown at a picture-palace near the Marble Arch, and elsewhere in London probably. You would be amused to see an Americanized Wessex Dairy.¹¹ However, it *doesn't* matter to me or to the book how they represent it.

Sincerely yours
Thomas Hardy.

The reader will have to do his own deciding as to whether the last sentence in Hardy's letter is a reliable indication that twenty years' experience in suffering from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune had developed in him a pachydermatous indifference to the fate of his works of fiction, or whether the letter merely records the weary observation of a seventy-three-year-old author for whom almost everything had become an old story.

⁹ The performance at Weymouth took place on January 22, 1914.

¹⁰ According to the program, the part of Marty South was played by "Miss G[ertrude] Bugler," who has survived two World Wars and still remembers her early association with the Hardy Players.

¹¹ Those who wish to share the amusement should consult the so-called "Photoplay Edition" of *Tess* published by A. L. Burt Co. (New York, 1923), in which scenes from the "movie" are used to illustrate the novel. Blanche Sweet appears as Tess, and Conrad Nagel as Angel Clare. The scene at Stonehenge is even more "Americanized" than the Crick dairy-farm.