

Embodied Visions

*"Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep:
Upon their mountains; in their valleys..."*

So begins Romantic poet William Blake's prophetic illuminated poem, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). Written at the time of abolition, the poem condemns slavery, but Blake extends the trope to blast the dominant culture of enlightenment Reason, which he saw as a misguided cult of power & control that sought to dominate & objectify everything in its path. His 'Daughters of Albion' are the women of England, embedded in the landscape, and his heroine Oothoon radically reises the 'fallen woman' story, exposing women's psychological and cultural enslavement.

Written one hundred years later, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* issues a similar challenge, in the form of a naturalistic novel. Both texts reveal how oppression of women and abuse of the land are parallel facets of a culture of domination, and challenge sexual double standards. The parallel triangles of characters has been remarked upon, but the connection between the texts has never been discussed in any depth, or in terms of both gender politics and environmental poetics. This project has aimed to address this territory, reimagining Hardy & Tess through the eyes of Blake.

Thus both texts break with the traditional 'fallen woman' narrative. Hardy explicitly uses nature to testify to Tess's powers of regeneration and break free from the traditional narrative's inevitable one-directional path to violent death. By making Tess part of cyclical nature, such as the life-filled spring surrounding her as she sets forth for a new life at Talbothorpe's dairy, Hardy breaks with the Christian view of the body as fallen and sinful, and the soul superior & separate.

The controlling violence of Alec Bromion and the narcissistic rejection & withdrawal of Angel-Theocormon are shown by both authors to be *Alpides* of the same cultural coin. Both view the female body in appropriative, utilitarian terms, where it exists to confer value upon them as possessor. Offered existence only as a medium for transaction between males, both Tess and Oothoon respond by challenging the cultures that create these ostensibly opposite but ideologically identical forms of oppression. Neither heroine is able to warp herself to the socialised expectations of her lover, which would mean becoming "the crafty slave of selfish holiness" (*Visions* 6.20).

While this enhances and demonstrates their courage and integrity, it creates an implacable obstacle between them and success in a conventional romantic narrative arc. The tragic aspect lies in how integrity and happiness have become mutually exclusive.

CULTURAL FEMINISM & ESSENTIALISM
In the sensuous, sensitive embodiment of their heroines, Blake & Hardy risk reinforcing gender stereotypes of women as emotional rather than rational, animalistic rather than civilised, and of the body rather than the abstract mind. In particular, the technique of paralleling domination of women and the land through a female protagonist who blurs into the landscape and is firmly part of the natural world, risks reinforcing the essentialism that excludes women from the privileged side of the dualism. Hardy, for example, calls Tess "a vessel of emotions rather than reasons" and *Visions* can in some ways be seen as Blake's corrective to his contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft's attempt to claim women's right to join "man's pre-eminence over the brute creation". Blake's alternative proposition of liberation through desire and sensuality is difficult.

Although *Visions* predates Darwin's transformative challenge to human narcissism and right to dominate the world, both connect domination of another human with domination of the natural world. Hardy's novel has a clear sense of post-Darwinian kinship rather than domination, and how humans have no right to harm and use creatures just to "gratify these propensities" (298). Similarly Oothoon affirms the integrity of things in themselves (subjects) rather than objects for appropriation, exclaiming "Everything that lives is holy!"

This celebration of unity through difference shows how Blake cuts across the universal-particular dualism. Hardy plays out a theatre of suffering caused by Angel's "hard logical deposit" - his dependence on universal, abstract principles and ideas - before Angel realises that his cruelty "had arisen from his allowing himself to be influenced by general principles to the disregard of the particular instance" (361).

Visions and *Tess* share a basic structure: the heroines Oothoon & Tess seek to engage with the world, yet their innocent is dangerous culturally prescribed ignorance. Both are preyed upon by rapacious male characters (Bromion & Alec) and are then rejected by a solipsistic, moralistic lover (Theocormon & Angel) as 'tainted goods'. In addition, both heroines are supported by an encouraging yet ultimately ineffectual chorus of female supporters - the Daughters of Albion, who 'hear Oothoon's woes, but can only "echo back her sighs"; and Tess's fellow dairymaids.

Both Blake and Hardy condemn the cultural standard that commodified and controlled women's sexuality, and saw the loss of virginity outside marriage as **ETERNAL RUIN**. Oothoon denounces the "hypocrite modesty" expected from young women, and redefines 'virgin' to mean divine openness to experience, "because the Soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away" (4.9-10). Hardy's *Subtle for Tess - A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* similarly redefines purity as moral courage rather than a puntanical use-by-date designed to seal the marriage transaction.

if the daughters of Albion are already allocated that denigrated, side of the mind-body dualism. Val Plumwood describes the problems when "some have endorsed the association between women and nature without critically examining how the association is produced by exclusion" and how conversely, others such as Wollstonecraft, have "equally uncritically... endorsed woman's ascent from the sphere of nature into that of culture or reason without remarking the problematic, oppositional nature of a concept of reason defined by such exclusions."

Thus analysis of both Blake and Hardy's primacy of the body needs to take into account how this might function as a critique of conventional dualisms - for example how Blake's concept of "Spiritual Sensation" (1793) arcs across the traditional mind-body dualism. Attention to how the 'visionary' aspect of both authors depends upon the embodied sensory experience of "being a body, and by extension, being in & part of the landscape" similarly challenges the tradition of dualistic logic and privileging.

Blake is typically seen as transcendental, anti-materialist, the only Romantic poet who hates nature. Yet he condemns this mind-matter dualism, writing that "First the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged," (E39) affirming instead an animated and subjective materiality: "And I know that this world is a World of Imagination & Vision... The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way... As a man is, so he Sees." (E70) Rather than denying the material, Blake's emphasis on perception instead reminds us that the world is inevitably filtered through the individual. This unites him with the supposedly realist Hardy, who similarly writes of Tess' unique perception that "the world is only a psychological phenomenon" (97).

CONCLUSION
Canonical stereotypes can obscure illuminating resonances between texts. Planned research re-imagining Blake's vision of the natural world will further stimulate this fertile ground.

Sources: Blake, William. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Ed. Robert N. Essick. San Marino, Huntington Library, 2002.
Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Oxford, OUP, 2004.

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