

## THOMAS HARDY AND CHARLOTTE MEW: QUEERING THE BALLAD/ ISSUES OF POETIC IDENTITY

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Notions of “poetic identity” call up not only the writer’s own sense of his or her public identity, the concept of naming oneself as a “Poet” to the world – but also, and perhaps more importantly, the issue of *being so named* by a public. These notions are not necessarily reciprocal. In addition, the latter concept – recognition by a public – involves gradations on a historical time scale running from Then to Now. Reputations grow and die, poets disappear and are rediscovered. Even without any framework of postmodern destabilisation of the term, identity thus becomes a fluid concept which can alter endlessly over time, assuming different shapes at different historical moments. For example, Hardy was fifty-eight and had already published fourteen novels and more than forty short stories when *Wessex Poems*, the first of his eight books of verse, was published in 1898. His artistic identity, for better or worse, was well and truly established as a novelist by then, and all of his subsequent efforts to eclipse that reputation with his own preferred poetic identity were ultimately in vain. He had written poetry much earlier, in the 1860s, but had failed to get it published. Yet poetry was his first love and he always valued it much more highly than prose. Charlotte Mew’s reputation, on the other hand, though very much less than Hardy’s in terms of total impact in the last hundred years, had always ignored her prose publications and centred firmly on her poetry. Would she have minded? I believe not. She may even have agreed with the judgement of most readers that she was, primarily, a poet. For many Victorians, of course, poetry remained a more prestigious form than prose.

The waning of Mew’s reputation after her death until her rediscovery in the 1980s by feminist critics, as well as Hardy’s inability to rewrite his identity in the public eye as poet rather than novelist, may well be linked to the same factor: a certain mysterious and deep-seated unease their poetry generated in their contemporary readers. I want to argue in this paper that both writers share a poetic identity that is distinctively queer, in a sense that goes beyond the usual uneasy alliance of queer theory with gay and lesbian theory. I want to suggest that a reading which attempts to set aside the heterosexual/homosexual divide in favour of a recognition of a deeper layer of anxiety and obsession may come closer to decoding the perverse desires that inform and give strange granulation to the very texture of some of the most apparently simplistic, limpidly clear, ballad-like poems of these two otherwise very differently situated authors.

Charlotte Mew, born in Bloomsbury, London, in 1869, was one of seven children of a struggling architect and his wife. Three children died young, and two others were later institutionalised for insanity. This left only Charlotte and her sister Anne, to whom she was devoted, and both women determined to avoid marriage for fear of passing a hereditary taint of madness onto any children. Anne was artistic, Charlotte wrote, and in the 1890s Charlotte Mew was part of the group of bright young women surrounding John Lane and the *Yellow Book*, in which she published stories. After the Oscar Wilde scandal cast a shadow on the *Yellow Book*, and her favourite brother died insane, Mew turned to poetry. Most of her poems were written between 1900 and 1916, when her first slim volume, *The Farmer's Bride*, was published by Harold Monro at The Poetry Bookshop. It quickly went into a second edition the same year and was widely admired, particularly by other poets. Its title poem remains her most anthologised piece. She subsequently published an expanded edition in 1921, renamed *Saturday Market* in the American edition, and another volume called *The Rambling Sailor* appeared posthumously in 1929. After nursing her mother and then her sister through long illnesses in the 1920s before they died, leaving her alone, she became severely depressed, and in 1928 she admitted herself to a nursing home where she committed suicide in one of the more self-punishing ways, by drinking a corrosive disinfectant. After her death it was discovered by her friend and executor Alida Monro (wife of Harold Monro) that she had destroyed two trunksful of her manuscripts. From this we may conclude that her confidence in her poetic identity had been fragile, and had deserted her at the end. A highlight of her career had certainly been the friendship with Hardy and his second wife Florence, and on one of her visits to Max Gate (December 1918) it is recorded that she read aloud to him her powerful poem "Saturday Market" to great effect, as she was a splendid and dramatic reader of her own verse. Hardy described her as "far and away the best living woman poet – who will be read when others are forgotten" (*Collected Poems* xii).

One immediate advantage of linking Mew's name with Hardy's is that it makes clearer the reasons why she can best be read within a Victorian context, or at least, without discarding it; despite having only published her first book of poems in 1916. Like Hardy the poet, she is hard to classify as to period, mixing Victorian with modern, drawing from the past while experimenting with her own modulations. But it was the Victorian age which shaped her mind, and Victorian attitudes which terrified her with the thought of her own genetic propensity for insanity, as Jessica Walsh has recently argued (Walsh 2002). Although attempts have been made to argue the case for reading Mew as a Georgian poet or even as a modernist, they remain unconvincing (Day and Wisker 1995). One of Mew's most prominent critics, Angela Leighton, on the other hand, makes a strong, though oddly negative, case for reading her as a Victorian: "Although she did not die until 1928, in spirit Charlotte Mew is one of the last Victorians. Untouched, in life, by the sexual and political emancipations of the twentieth century, or, in her art, by the obvious thematic

freedoms of modernism, she remained imaginatively tied to the symbols of a past age" (Leighton 1992, 266). Is Victorianism a style or a period? Leighton does not distinguish the two. Her comments on Mew could apply, without undue disparagement, to Thomas Hardy, who also died in 1928. Thirty years her senior, he was far less conservative in his views than Mew, but he too "remained imaginatively tied to the symbols of a past age." Curiously, his is a name completely omitted in Leighton's chapter on Mew. She prefers instead to focus attention on Mew's debt to women poets, in particular to Christina Rossetti. Of course, this is a legitimate political strategy, Leighton's work being part of the toilsome but invaluable feminist project of reclamation of forgotten women writers undertaken by many of us during the last three decades of last century. Charlotte Mew's re-emergence from dusty neglect in the 1980s is entirely owing to feminist literary revisionism. As Jeredith Merrin remarked in her article on Mew in *Modern Philology*, "as one might expect, Mew's feminist supporters were caught up with demonstrating how her writing revealed (or did not reveal) her sexual preference, or how it related to actual life events or lent credence to various strands of feminist literary theory" (Merrin 1997, 200). I would say that this is fairly accurate, but let us hope interest in Mew does not end there; her talent is as rare as it is authentic. Acknowledging her reclamation by feminism should not prevent us re-inserting her into the Victorian historical context also inhabited by the much more well-known figure of Hardy.

Despite Leighton's silence on the matter, other critics, both earlier and later, have not been slow to make the comparison with Thomas Hardy. However, the purpose seems to have been primarily in order to demonstrate a certain kinship in worldview between the two writers. It is taken for granted that the scales are not evenly balanced between them, with the weight of Hardy's oeuvre dwarfing that of Mew. Mew herself referred to Hardy as "the continuing giant in a pygmy world" (Davidow 437). I have no desire to argue with such a judgement or try any Herculean efforts at its reversal. I will only say that Mew's most famous poem, "The Farmer's Bride," for me, will always stand proudly alongside any of Hardy's best. Although I would agree that the two did share a tragic worldview based on the centrality to existence of human suffering, I want to put forward the suggestion that an examination of some of Charlotte Mew's unique qualities may incline us to return to her larger contemporary with a slightly changed eye.

By this I mean to hint that there may well be some deeper affinity running in a more hidden channel between the two than merely a kinship in pessimism. I do *not* subscribe to the theory that they had a love affair. Mary Davidow, whose unpublished dissertation on Mew in 1960 argued that they did, has itself been disproved. One hopes that by now this rumour, based on the most tenuous evidence, has been well and truly laid to rest. Jessica Walsh deals with it sensibly (Walsh 2002). However, it is worth mentioning that its currency in 1940 was widespread enough for the then Curator of Poetry and Special Collections at the Buffalo campus of the State University of New York to purchase their extensive holding of Mew

manuscripts entirely on its basis. The lasting benefit from the currency of this myth is thus the preservation of a valuable collection of Mew papers.

Mary Davidow later went on to involve herself in a debate about Mew's alleged lesbianism, taking a rearguard position by arguing strenuously against all the evidence of Mew's having nourished a series of unrequited loves for other women writers including Ella D'Arcy and May Sinclair (Davidow 1978). For later critics, the idea of a lesbian poet was much less alarming. One reason why Leighton emphasised the influence of women poets on Mew, while ignoring that of Browning and Hardy, could well have been as a conscious corrective to critics like Davidow, who had gone on to publish a detailed study of aspects of Mew's poetic affinity with Hardy. Davidow's focus, predictably, was all on Hardy's influence on Mew, pointing out, for example, the similarities between the epicene nature of Sue Bridehead and the reluctant fearful girl who shrinks from her young husband's advances in "The Farmer's Bride." Mew could not have imagined her poem without such an illustrious precedent as *Jude*, she argues (Davidow 440) This claim may well be true, but it is not easy to prove or disprove. Other connections of like kind can also be made, in particular, I think, between *The Return of the Native* and Mew's only play, *The China Bowl* (1953)<sup>1</sup>, a fierce and starkly written piece about the power struggle between a beautiful bold young wife and her ageing impoverished mother-in-law over the handsome young fisherman husband/last-remaining-son. The young wife thoughtlessly sells her mother-in-law's last cherished possession, the china bowl of the title, to a passing collector, an act which precipitates the final catastrophe. In fact, Mew's play goes much further than the Clym/Eustacia/Mrs Yeobright triangle of *The Return* in its raw harshness of dialogue and action in which the three characters torture each other emotionally in a style almost as searing as that used by the recent Irish playwright Martin McDonagh in his award-winning *Beauty Queen of Linnane* (first performed 1996). It offers an astonishing insight into the darker recesses of Mew's imagination.

To return to Davidow's argument, and her chief evidence for pressing the claim of Hardy's major influence on Mew: the ambiguous sexual nature of the Bride herself, which she takes as an echo of Sue Bridehead. Possibilities in language are constantly modified and reinvented from one writer to the next, and, as we know, any study of a writer's literary context helps to illuminate the possibilities he or she was able to envisage for their own work at the time of its production. However, it seems more than a little far-fetched to locate the origins of the fay country waif in Mew's poem with the intellectually advanced tragic heroine of *Jude the Obscure*. I prefer to seek affinities of quite a different order between the works of the two writers, and it is in Hardy's poetry, not in his novels, that they are to be found.

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a story version of *The China Bowl*. It differs in some crucial respects from the play.

My current ongoing project involves a re-reading of the major Victorian poets in the light of both feminist and queer theory, not with the simplistic aim of “outing” Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and the rest – though I believe Hopkins and Swinburne both outed themselves long ago – but rather, with the aim of disrupting certain habituated reading practices that incline us to read “straight” when it might be more appropriate to read “bent.” For this reason, I am particularly interested in locating the *intersection* of gay and straight, queer and non-queer, in the works of Victorian poets, and using these sites of textual disruption as fulcra for shifting the weight of received interpretations and blinkered assumptions. It is only by exploring the edges of a territory, where definition falls under challenge, that one begins to perceive some of the truly ambiguous effects of that territory in the first place. Tod E. Jones, for example, was probably the first to argue the case for a reading of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a narrative of homosexual desire, thus placing this novel within a new kind of paradigm (Jones 1994). But once one begins to ask questions about such a reconfiguration, the whys and wherefores, the picture desimplifies. As with the naively rendered lesbian couple in Hardy’s early novel *Desperate Remedies*, for example, one wonders how much he saw and how much he knew.

However, it is not the tracking down of homosexual characters in Victorian fiction that engages me here. Instead, it is the more subtle feeling of strangeness one gets in reading Hardy’s poetry, in particular, the wonderful series of love poems he wrote to his recently dead first wife, *Poems 1912-13*. Here, Hardy seems to me to be at his most straight and his most queer at one and the same time. Hardy has generally been seen as straighter than many of his contemporaries. Not “straight” in the sense, say, of a Coventry Patmore, famous for upholding patriarchal values in the “separate spheres” ideology of his long poem “The Angel in the House” (1854-60), but straight in the sense of manifesting an apparently heterosexual man’s fascination with attractive women. By no means an orthodox Victorian patriarch, he was a true appreciator of women for their own sakes, a creator of believable, even lovable, heroines. I don’t want to deny any of this, but I would like to problematise such a view by suggesting that it might not have been his unquestioned heterosexuality that enabled his deep appreciation of women but, on the contrary, his more likely *celibate bisexuality* – or at least, *queer sexuality* – that helped him to abandon received paradigms and adopt his well-known radical position. The danger with this suggestion of course, is that it places Hardy at once in an identity category that begins to circulate discursive effects which are immediately beyond my control and may well be beyond my intention. This is not a paper about what Hardy did (or did not do) in the bedroom, although it may be worth remarking that many of his closest male friends were homosexual, from Horace Moule, who committed suicide at Cambridge during Hardy’s early years, to later friends like T.E. Lawrence, Siegfried Sassoon, J.M. Barrie and others. His two marriages were both in their different ways decidedly odd, and not particularly happy, certainly for the women involved. I only mention these things to open the possibility that perhaps Hardy was

not so straight as commonly supposed. In fact, if I can utilise a term that appeals to me from queer theory, he might best be described as a “*straight queer*”:

The term “queer” [is impossible to define] [. . .] its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics. (Jagose 1) Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire [. . .] queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. (Jagose 3)

“Are all geniuses perverts?” This was the rather plaintive question put by Catharine Dawson Scott, later to become founder of the eminent writers’ club PEN, to her Diary, after meeting with Charlotte Mew in 1916. “Charlotte is evidently a pervert [. . .].” (Raitt 3). Mew’s queer sexuality, once known about, could be fairly easily picked up in her poetry. Yet in his own way, I would suggest, Thomas Hardy is just as far from the conventional norm, just as queer. “Queer are the ways of a man I know” prophetically begins his poem “The Phantom Horsewoman,” spoken by the projected ghost of his dead wife Emma. Hardy always claimed, “Love lives on propinquity, but dies of contact” (F.Hardy 220), so ghostly disembodiment must have carried a special charm for him.

I want to turn now to “The Farmer’s Bride” and compare it very briefly with a poem of Hardy’s, “The Haunter,” also from *Poems 1912-13*. Both poems adopt the speaking voice of the opposite sex from that of the real-life poet. Hardy’s poem, published in 1913, the year before Mew’s, has not been criticised for this fancy, as far as I know. Mew’s was: her friend Sydney Cockerell (director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge) took care to let her know he agreed with the criticism put forward by poet Wilfred Scawen Blunt, that old-fashioned sexist and notorious adulterous womaniser. Blunt wrote:

The difficulty of getting at a complete understanding of the position [ie point of view within the poem] is increased in Miss Mew’s case by her writing sometimes as a man & sometimes as a woman which also I consider a great mistake as it always takes away something of the poems’ full sincerity. A woman ought *always* to write like a woman notwithstanding the temptation there doubtless is to invert the roles – It is an axiom with me that sexual sincerity is the essential of good emotional work. (MS letter to Sydney Cockerell, July 20, 1918, NYPL Berg Collection)

Blunt completely misreads Mew's intent in her gender-play, I believe. What she most admired and tried to emulate was a rare quality she found in Emily Bronte. As Suzanne Raitt points out:

The emphasis in Mew's essay [on Bronte] is on her isolation, her reserve and her passion. Mew draws attention to the unearthly element in some of her poems, and in *Wuthering Heights* [. . .] Mew commented on the strangely disembodied quality of her vision: "It is said that her genius was masculine, but surely it was purely spiritual, strangely and exquisitely severed from embodiment and freed from any accident of sex." (Warner 363 cited in Raitt 6)

This sense of a disembodied voice "freed from any accident of sex" is certainly what we find in Mew's work. Her eerie poem, "The Changeling" is one in which the sex of the speaker is simply made irrelevant in the face of the urgent poignancy of the poem's theme: the pain and disjunction of not belonging, not conforming, not feeling "right" in one's given context. Elsewhere, Mew adopts the strategy used by other lesbian poets (notably Amy Levy) in adopting a male voice in a pseudo-heterosexual love poem in order to covertly play out the forbidden role of a lesbian lover of women. "The Farmer's Bride" is one of these, and it is precisely the focalisation through the farmer and the voicing of his frustrated desire for his child-bride that gives it its special poignancy and enables Mew to avoid any excessive victimisation of the female figure in the poem.

In Hardy's case, as an established great writer and a man, critics may have allowed him more latitude in gender-play (they did not carp at his adoption of the female viewpoint in "The Haunter," for example) but they did often register a sense of unease with the timbre of his work. In fact, they continued to question his entitlement to the identity of Poet. Reviewers of the volume *Satires of Circumstance* – containing the group *Poems 1912-13* – regarded it as overly melancholic, some querying "[. . .] whether one who dwelt so consistently on 'the seamy side of things' had any right to be called a poet at all [. . .]" (Millgate 501). Hardy hated such criticism, but Mew, curiously, took a more robust attitude, and could never understand Hardy's sensitivity. "I don't know why a Thomas Hardy should flatter the critics with an apologia" she informed Cockerell somewhat tartly in 1922 (MS letter of June 5, 1922, Berg). Hardy was already in late middle age when he abandoned prose for poetry in the 1890s, and as Philip Larkin once remarked, "I don't think Hardy, as a poet, is a poet for young people" (Motion 141). Neither is Mew. Yet when Hardy published *Wessex Poems* in 1898 he was the age Mew reached at the time of her death: he was himself approaching old, she merely wrote as if she were.

Of course, Larkin has not been alone in seeking to revive the reputation of Hardy the poet, and the spate of editions of his verse which appeared in the second half of the twentieth century testifies to the respect in which he is now held. Mew's big breakthrough came in the early 1980s with the publication of Val Warner's excellent edition of her *Collected Poems and Prose*. Apart from Wilfrid Blunt's critique, Mew's most famous poem has certainly been widely appreciated for its unique power from the time of its first publication in *The Nation* (1914). Quite recently (1997), Jeredith Merrin has claimed that:

Mew's personal knowledge of frustrated sexual desire – in her case, unrequited lesbian desire – finds depersonalized expression in one of the most powerful of her storytelling lyrics [. . .] Mew at her best is a skilled manipulator of traditional forms, and “The Farmer's Bride” modifies even as it utilizes ballad structure. (Merrin 206)

Both Hardy's and Mew's poems draw on the traditional ballad, modifying its form but retaining a certain quality of eerie other-worldliness through an apparently artless simplicity. Nature, the season, the weather, animals as embodied spirits of the countryside – both poets use these traditional devices. Mew's poem makes particularly effective play with the seasons, with the summer's hasty wooing (so as not to interfere with harvest), the autumn's rueing (“One night, in the Fall, she runned away”), and the long winter of frustrated yearning that the farmer is left with at the end of the poem. Again, Cockerell had urged Mew to alter the farmer's final *cri de coeur*, but she flatly refused, saying, if she was wrong in that, she was wrong in everything – although it is worth noting that “the author,” for Mew, was always gendered male: she would have viewed this as a proper dignity.

I could only change my Farmer by making him someone else – as, so far as I had the use of words, they did express my idea of a rough country man seeing & saying things differently from the more sophisticated townsman – at once more clearly & more confusedly. I am afraid, too, that the point you touch on is more than merely technical – as it seems to me that in the “cri de coeur” (I use your phrase) one either has or has not the person, and if the author is not right here he is wrong past mending [. . .] (MS letter July 10th, 1918, Berg)

This is how she had written it:

. . . Oh! My God! The down,  
The soft young down of her, the brown,



The brown of her – her eyes, her hair, her hair!

As in Mew's poem, with its "Shy as a leveret, swift as he," Hardy too evokes the "shy hares" that "print long paces" in "The Haunter." In both poems the shy hares defeat their more powerful pursuers by remaining forever mysteriously out of reach even when, as in Mew's bride's case, grimly "fetched home." But in his poem, the yearning but out-of-bounds love expressed by the female haunter is explicitly other-worldly: it issues from a spirit world beyond and invisible to the real. Unlike his poem "The Voice," where the "woman much missed" so poignantly calls to him, this poem achieves its haunting by the voiced voicelessness of the imagined ghost of Emma:

Always lacking the power to call to him,  
Near as I reach thereto!

Hardy's persona imagines the ghost of his dead wife/lover would presume what is patently *not* true – that he "does not think" of her nightly haunting. Not only does he *not* "not think," he has in fact dreamed up the whole scenario, rendering this a quintessentially disingenuous remark. As the poem unfolds, the uncanny feeling arises that there is no change in the woman from how she was in life:

Hover and hover a few feet from him  
Just as I used to do

– even in death she is unable to attract his attention. Now, she is a wraith who haunts him but still cannot initiate contact however hard she tries. At the same time, the reader is well aware that she is only a construct, a figure projected from the speaker's own haunted imagination, testament both to the futile impotence of remorse and to its transforming power.

In Mew, the expression of the farmer's love achieves poignancy through a similar invocation of a non-human otherness about the beloved which sets an impossible barrier against any fulfilment of physical desire. Instead, desire becomes anguishingly intensified (the "cri de coeur") and lives on unfulfilled, transcending time. He has desired her fruitlessly for three years already when the poem opens. He married her as a virgin child-bride – and this is what she remains; he finds that, despite his superior physical strength, he has no power to effect any change in her toward himself – instead, she has the faery power of the "fay" and, it is suggested, is not really quite human – she haunts him, always remaining just out of reach.

Mew's and Hardy's love poems are uncannily similar in the bizarre manner in which feelings about death constantly mesh with, excite and at the same time inhibit, feelings about sex, with the result that the body is often wished away altogether. The strongest, most intense passions are felt for the bodiless, the unattainable object, the

already dead; and the desire of the poet seems to implode in an ecstasy of celibate wholeness. Of course, as we know, passion fulfilled rarely makes poetry: it makes love. To live passion in and through poetry, for both of these poets, meant to explore the sado-masochistic ecstasies of anguish. Loss, separation and death: these were the necessary impediments which brought out the fullness of passion for Mew as well as for Hardy. Hardy's biographer Michael Millgate has observed of *Poems 1912-13* that:

[. . .] what gave Hardy pain was precisely what provided the fuel for his art. (Millgate 488) [. . .] there is a sense in which regret for Emma [. . .] flourished in a condition of deep melancholy which was to some degree willed, deliberately cultivated – (Millgate 489)

An awareness of the biography cannot help but colour our reading of both poems. In Mew's, her thwarted lesbian desire becomes discernible through the anguish of the frustrated bridegroom repulsed by his terrified bride:

When us was wed she turned afraid  
Of love and me and all things human;  
Like the shut of a winter's day.  
Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman—  
More like a little frightened fay.

After the runaway is brought back and placed under lock and key, the poem accrues a sense of guilt in acknowledging a desire that seems increasingly inappropriate. It shows, for example, in the attempt at justification in the farmer's appeal to the reader's sympathy in his wish for children in the house at Christmas-time. But this attempt at rationalisation is immediately torn apart by the final anguished stanza which articulates his sexual longing. The barely hatched fledgling chick, the freshly furred baby softness of a leveret, conjured up in the sensuality of the farmer's feelings for his bride, give an almost paedophilic emphasis to his desire.

In Hardy's poem, the situation is of course different. The speaker is a female ghost – his dead wife – who is imagined to be anxiously trying to communicate her love, so thwarted in life, but nevertheless surviving her death – to her grieving but maddeningly impercipient spouse. The technique provides a way of articulating complex emotions of remorse and longing without, in a sense, the poet's owning them. In "The Haunter," as in others of this powerful set, the perversity of a man who was callously neglectful of Emma while alive only to become obsessively desirous of her after her death would be unpleasantly necrophiliac if it were not for the disembodied effect achieved with its ballad-like eeriness of ghosts and spirits replacing any sense of real bodies. Indeed, to accuse the poetry of the kind of offensive perversity displayed by the poet, would be to miss its point entirely.

Nonetheless, this perversity hangs about our reading with its own ghostly intensity, giving the poems what I term their queer effect.

Similarly, with "The Farmer's Bride," the uncanny effect of the apparitional lesbian haunting the poem (to draw upon Terry Castle's thesis 1993) underwrites the reader's unease. However, this feeling has been differently interpreted in an article by Dennis Denisoff on what he terms Mew's graveyard poetry. To Denisoff, the poem is about abuse; the farmer is abusive of his frightened girl-bride (Denisoff 137). Despite the fact that the girl is in a sense her husband's prisoner, and despite the hints of paedophiliaic desire, I find this reading quite inappropriate to the tone of the poem, which to me "renders what Pound called 'an emotional complex' [. . .] in the simplest language" (Merrin 207). The complexity comes from there being no clear victim, no clear cruelty. The farmer is as sympathetic in his pain and anguish as the bride is in hers. In fact, it strikes me as rather far from abuse in that the farmer did not simply rape his bride under the banner of conjugal rights. Denisoff does however make one point I do find illuminating: he comments that the girl's retreat to her lonely bed in the attic makes it akin to a grave, thus rendering her almost as among the dead (Denisoff 131).

This rings true, and it points to a stronger link between the two poems: both address disembodied others who are simultaneously dead and not dead, both frustratingly unattainable. Both are love poems which manage to confound the traditional love poem concept, partly by perverse choice of point of view and subject-matter, partly by overlaying the structure of a love lyric with echoes of the colder harder form of the ballad. One reason why Hardy's *Poems 1912-13* gave (and continue to give) many readers such uneasy feelings may have been because he, like Mew, was gifted with the perverse power of queering conventional romance and looking at love and life from the sinister side.

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