The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel

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Edward Burne-Jones, the friend, admirer, and successor of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was recognized as the leader of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelites, who, starting in the late 1860s, created sensuous and dazzling paintings placing primary importance on form and color. Since his first exhibition at the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, Burne-Jones achieved unprecedented success and was recognized as the leader of the Aesthetic school. After a long absence from the London galleries, Burne-Jones exhibited eight of his most brilliant paintings in the new and striking Grosvenor Gallery: The Beguiling of Merlin (1873–1874), The Mirror of Venus (1870–1876), The Days of Creation (1870–1876), Temperantia (1872–1873), Fides (1872), Spes (1871–1877), A Sibyl (1877), and Saint George (1873–1877). At the same exhibit appeared paintings of his followers, Spencer Stanhope, J. M. Strudwick, Walter Crane, Marie Spartali, and Evelyn Pickering. “In other words, an entire school suddenly seemed to have emerged, with Burne-Jones as its undisputed leader. No other artist on display could compete. Overnight he was famous, the star of the Grosvenor and the doyen of aestheticism in its fully developed form” (Wildman 192).

Brainchild of Sir Coutts Lindsay and his wife, Blanche, a talented painter, the Grosvenor Gallery was intended as a challenge to the Royal Academy and as a venue for young artists, whom the Royal Academy might have rejected; nevertheless, Royal Academicians were also invited to exhibit. The astounding success of the Grosvenor Gallery was partly due to the lack of high-quality pictures exhibited in the Royal Academy at the time. Henry James, for instance, in his “Picture Season in London,” in 1877 commented, “The Royal Academy is, I believe, this year pronounced a rather poor academy; but such, I also believe, is the regular ver-
dict.” The reason for such failure, James believed, was partly the willingness of the academy to please an “unimaginative and unaesthetic” audience—“the British merchant and paterfamilias and his excellently regulated family” (147–48).

By contrast, the Grosvenor Gallery—with highly imaginative pictures such as Burne-Jones’s *Le Chant d’Amour* (1868–1877), *The Beguiling of Merlin*, *The Mirror of Venus*, *Laus Veneris*, and *The Days of Creation*—offered seductive alternatives and at the same time expressed and depicted the mood and the atmosphere of the Aesthetic movement by then prevalent in art and poetry. Such pictures lacked the detailed realism and narrative content of early Pre-Raphaelitism. “One of the most hauntingly beautiful works, the composition of *Le Chant d’Amour*,” John Christian explains, “moves beyond narrative: the musical theme, the emotional tension between the figures, the romantic landscape, and the evening light combine to create a mood of nostalgia and yearning which he [Edward Burne-Jones] often aims for but seldom captures in so intense a form” (Wildman and Christian 212). Rather than seeking the meaning of Burne-Jones’s paintings, admiring critics like Henry James celebrated their enchanting colors and the expressions of their figures. Referring to *Laus Veneris* and *Le Chant d’Amour* in his review of the 1878 Grosvenor exhibition, James declared, “As a brilliant success in the way of colour it is hard to know which picture to place first; each of them, at any rate, bears in this respect the great stamp—the stamp of the master for whom the play of colour is a freedom, an invention, a source of thought and delight.” As in the early Pre-Raphaelite paintings, expression rather than beauty was the distinct characteristic of Edward Burne-Jones’s figures. James singled out the expression of the main figures as the “strongest point” when he discussed *Laus Veneris*, for instance, and focused on “the grand weariness and, at the same time, absorption of posture of the medieval Venus, and the beautiful, rapt dejection of the mysterious young warrior” (“The Grosvenor Gallery” 163).

By the late 1870s the Pre-Raphaelite influence was not limited within the walls of art galleries but extended into the social realm. In 1879 Justin McCarthy noted the pervasiveness of the Pre-Raphaelite spirit in just about every aspect of Victorian culture and society: “We have now in London pre-Raphaelite painters, pre-Raphaelite poets, pre-Raphaelite novelists, pre-Raphaelite young ladies; pre-Raphaelite hair, eyes, complexion, dress, decorations, window curtains, chairs, tables, knives, forks, and coal-scuttles. We have pre-Raphaelite anatomy, we have pre-Raphaelite music” (1876, 725). Numerous critics, however, did not welcome the Pre-Raphaelite presence in social circles; instead, they resisted
and opposed such a prevalent influence that, they believed, destabilized moral values and gender boundaries.

Three decades after their first exhibition as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Pre-Raphaelites once again became the target of hostile critics who described in melodramatic terms the putatively deleterious effect of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on young and old viewers alike. Bewildered by unprecedented modes of representation, art critics of the late 1870s and 1880s, like their predecessors responding to the early Pre-Raphaelite exhibits, decried what they saw as the unintelligible, archaic, deviant style of the aesthetic phase of Pre-Raphaelitism. In response to the glamorous and spectacular 1877 Grosvenor exhibition, the *Times*, for instance, assailed the pictures in terms reminiscent of the vituperative attacks on the first exhibits of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: “To a great many . . . these pictures are unintelligible puzzles, of which they do not care to attempt the solution; to others they are occasions of angry antagonism or contemptuous ridicule. To a large majority of the crowd who will soon be thronging the Academy galleries, such pictures as these seem unaccountable freaks of individual eccentricity, or the strange and unwholesome fruits of hopeless wanderings in the mazes of mysticism and medievalism.”

Similarly, after tracing the roots of aestheticism to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Henry Quilter of *Macmillan’s Magazine* deprecated aestheticism for its corrupting impact on art and society. Ironically this critic recognized the early Pre-Raphaelitism, which initially was vehemently denounced by contemporary critics as a “healthy” attempt to reform art; by contrast, in his view, late Pre-Raphaelitism, by then identified with aestheticism, was a cause of “corruption”:

> Though pre-Raphaelitism, in its pure and original form, has passed away, its dead carcase is still left with us, and is a source of corruption which cannot be too soon fully understood. The claim of the modern gospel of intensity, and the critical theories of pure sensuousness which are proclaimed so loudly just now, have their curiously unfitting root in the pre-Raphaelite movement; and it strangely happens that the action taken by three or four clever art students, towards a reformation in art as healthy as it was needful, has ended in breeding phases of art and poetry, which embody the lowest theory of art-usefulness, and the most morbid and sickly art-results. . . . The evil is spreading from pictures and poems into private life; it has attacked . . . the decoration of our houses, and the dresses of our women. . . . If this hybrid pre-Raphaelitism has not yet erected itself into a rule of conduct, it has become in some sort effective as a standard of manners; and there may now be seen at many a
social gathering young men and women whose lackluster eyes, dishevelled hair, eccentricity of attire, and general appearance of weary passion proclaim them members of the new school.³

Most often the adverse criticism of the Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism was not aimed merely at the lack of narrative content or the absence of a moral message. Like the art critics of the early years of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, reviewers of the 1870s often interwove their objections to aesthetic innovations with comments on morality, which, in turn expressed their anxieties over transgressions of conventional gender boundaries. Almost thirty years after the first Pre-Raphaelite exhibit, reviewers once again articulated their objections to subversions of gender boundaries in terms of physical and moral disease and deviance. Frederick Wedmore, for instance, reviewing Burne-Jones's pictures at the 1877 Grosvenor exhibit, felt compelled "to protest against and to bewail the prominence of the unhealthy type with which his work has familiarised us. "Laus Veneris" is an uncomfortable picture, so wan and death-like, so stricken with disease of the soul, so eaten up and gnawed away with disappointment and desire, is the Queen of Love at Grosvenor . . . . The type is to many an offensive, to most a disagreeable one, and the Venus is of that type the most disagreeable, the most offensive example. The very body is unpleasant and uncomely; and the soul behind it . . . is ghastly."⁴

Henry James, discussing the same painting, concurred, emphasizing the unhealthy state of figures. Venus "has the face and aspect of a person who has had what the French call an 'intimate' acquaintance with life; her companions, on the other hand, though pale, sickly, and wan, in the manner of all Mr. Burne-Jones's young people, have a more innocent and vacant expression, and seem to have derived their languor chiefly from contact and sympathy" (The Grosvenor Gallery" 162).

As in the early years of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, adverse criticism to Pre-Raphaelite art was often fueled by anxieties over the subversion of conventional gender constructs, already destabilized by then by sociopolitical movements and legislative measures. In reference to Laus Veneris, for instance, Wedmore underscored her androgynous nature: "and then the hips, narrow and straight—the exaggeration of a beauty which Greek art recognized—a beauty in which the one sex was not so very far removed from the other" (339). Similarly the critic of the Illustrated London News in 1879 expressed the same apprehension over Pre-Raphaelite transgressions of conventional gender constructs when he censured Burne-Jones's pictures of the Pygmalion series in terms of their blurring firmly established boundaries between femininity and masculinity. For the Illustrated London News, not only was the wholesome definition of gender constructs at stake
but the British national identity as well. Referring to the “ultra-sensual school” Burne-Jones’s pictures depicted, the critic proceeded to define it as “a school which in its worst development is the morbid outcome of weakly over-wrought physique—which every man who respects his manhood and every woman who values her honour must regard with disgust, and would destroy everything of value in the national character.”

It is interesting to note that the same critic ascribed the origin of Burne-Jones’s “super sensuousness” to Rossetti’s “queer ideal of womankind—with hollow cheeks and square jawbones, necks like swans . . . hair like Topsy’s, lips of the same race, ‘stung,’ therefore swollen, ‘with kisses.’ The young are apt to sicken to this sort of thing, like puppies to the distemper.” Like the early reviewers, those of the late 1870s equated unorthodox representations of gender with dis-ease and unhealthy states: “a sombre, joyless, unhealthy art,” as the same critic of the Illustrated London News labeled it (415). Similarly, Harry Quilter traced the putative lack of morality of Burne-Jones’s paintings to a disturbing absence of a distinction between masculinity and femininity: “One curious resemblance to Botticelli which belongs to Mr. Burne Jones’ work . . . is the assimilation of the types of male and female; it is difficult, if not impossible to tell, in many instances, in either painter’s work, the sex of the person represented.” In his response to the 1877 Grosvenor exhibit, Henry James was also puzzled over the lack of definite gender boundaries in Burne-Jones’s paintings: “Perhaps they are young men; they look indeed like beautiful, rather sickly boys. Or rather, they are sublimely sexless, and ready to assume whatever charm of manhood or maidenhood the imagination desires” (The Picture Season in London” 146–47). Referring to the knight in Le Chant d’Amour, James underscored his lack of masculinity and perceived him as characteristic of Burne-Jones’s representation of gender: “It must be admitted that the young warrior, with the swimming eyes, has a certain perplexing femininity of expression; but Mr. Burne-Jones does not pretend to paint very manly figures, and we should hardly know where to look for a more delicate rendering of a lovesick swain” (The Grosvenor Gallery” 164). Though James is perplexed by Burne-Jones’s unconventional gender constructs, at the same time he implicitly acknowledges their necessity, for he recognizes that certain emotional states cannot possibly be expressed by conventional representations of gender.

A fluid definition of masculinity and femininity that characterized the early Pre-Raphaelites also distinguished those of the second movement, especially the paintings of Solomon and Burne-Jones that at times transgressed and quite often eliminated gender boundaries. Their androgynous, sexless figures elided the ideological distinction between masculinity and
femininity in paintings such as Solomon’s Bacchus and Burne-Jones’s St.
George, The Mirror of Venus, and The Days of Creation, to mention but a
few. Henry James’s comment about the important role the viewer’s imag-
ination plays in determining the gender of the figures in Burne-Jones’s
paintings is highly suggestive. In his hazy and indistinct representations
of gender, Burne-Jones engaged his viewers in more problematic and puz-
zling ways than his Pre-Raphaelite predecessors, in whose pictures gender
identity was more readily understood. In seductive dreamscapes that seem
completely removed from the gender politics of his era, Burne-Jones prob-
lematizes gender constructs in indefinite and indeterminate androgyny.
As the spectators attempt to establish the subjects’ gender, they must, at
least temporarily, suspend their own notions of gender and collaborate
with the artist’s resistance to and transgression of the hegemonic gender
ideology. Thus the imaginary world with its suspension of gender bound-
aries represented in Burne-Jones paintings, though seemingly disengaged
from the social, is inextricably interwoven with it. As Francette Pacteau
points out, when she discusses the transgression of gender boundaries
androgyne represents,

Androgyne can be said to belong to the domain of the imaginary, where
desire is unobstructed; gender identity to that of the symbolic, the Law,
it is at the nodal point where symbolic and imaginary meet that resis-
tance occurs. The androgynous-looking figure presents me with an
impossibility, that of the erasure of difference, that very difference which
constructs me as a subject. From the instant my biological sex is deter-
mained, my identity is defined in difference—I am either a boy or a girl.
I shall consequently take up my position in society on the side of the sexual
divide, behave according to the genderized codes, reaffirm the differ-
ence. The androgynous “position” represents a denial, or a transgression,
of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given iden-
tity and to the system of social roles which define us. How can I recon-
cile the observation of threat with that of desire? . . . In this context the
wish correlative to the androgynous fantasy would be attached to archa-
ic memories of early childhood; the disavowal of sexual difference there-
fore represents the fantasized re-enactment of an early pleasurable
perception. (63)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, in his otherworldly paintings,
Burne-Jones transgressed the restrictive, forbidding gender boundaries and
reconciled threat with desire. His influence, along with that of other late Pre-
Raphaelites, extended beyond the galleries, for it moved from the aesthetic
into the sociopolitical. In his lightly facetious essay, “The Pre-Raphaelites in
England,” Justin McCarthy states that he was bewildered when it came to distinguish genders in their paintings: “[T]he hero has high cheekbones, the gaunt face, the red hair . . . and only for the dress, I doubt whether you would know one from the other.” No longer contained within the frames of paintings, he observes, these sexless Pre-Raphaelite figures can actually be seen in London: “But the strangest thing is that this gaunt, lank, and long-limbed damosel has actually stepped from the canvas into life and is to be found everywhere in certain circles of London society.” He poses a rhetorical question: “How did all these pre-Raphaelite girls manage to come to life so suddenly?” It is also interesting to note that this critic’s observations about the awkwardness of these figures, whether they be pictorial or human, are reminiscent of similar remarks in antagonistic reviews of early Pre-Raphaelite paintings that underscored the angularity of the figures: “[W]e cheer each other by interchanging illustrations of the stiff and lean young woman in various ungainly attitudes, and seeming to be all angles, joints, and fuzzy red hair.” Life imitated art, the Pre-Raphaelites had come full circle. As Bullen has already observed, the aestheticism of Burne-Jones’s paintings, which seemed to remove them from the sociopolitical realm, was actually directly engaged in gender politics, more specifically in the subversion of masculinity:

Burne-Jones’s paintings of the 1870s are also political in that they resist the polarized gender divisions of the culture. Meditative rather than active, they were accused of unmanliness; imaginative rather than real, they were accused of femininity. We know that Burne-Jones’s views were defiant ones—“the more materialistic Science becomes, the more angels shall I paint”—and knowing how “the Fleshly School” had already been received he must have realized in advance of the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery the likely consequences. In a period which was so fraught with sexual anxiety it is perhaps not surprising that the guilt, the horror, and the sense of personal impurity and national degeneracy, all associated with sexuality, should be projected onto forms of visual art which seemed to contravene the prevailing standards of robust, healthy manliness. (Bullen 1998, 216)

Since the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition of 1877 and the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878, Edward Burne-Jones was recognized as one of the most prestigious British painters whose paintings were highly esteemed during the 1880s and 1890s. Like the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Burne-Jones sought inspiration in literature, and quite a few of his paintings, such as The Beguiling of Merlin (1874), Sidonia von Bork, 1560 (1860), Love among the Ruins (1894), and Arthur in Avalon (1881–1898), made visible and palpable the verbal and unin-
hibited imaginings of literary artists. In turn, literary artists like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy redrew his highly symbolic and suggestive paintings in their own novels thus creating a common ground with the readers who had also been viewers of Burne-Jones’s masterpieces. In the process, these novelists also participated in sociopolitical issues of their era and engaged their readers in questioning prevalent gender norms.

Thomas Hardy and the Visual Arts

“If he had been a woman he must have screamed under the nervous tension which he was now undergoing. But that relief being denied to his virility, he clenched his teeth in misery, bringing lines about his mouth like those in the Laocoön, and corrugations between his brows.” Thus the narrator shapes Jude’s devastation into the form of a well-known classical statue, shortly after his lifelong dream of attending the university in Christminster has been shattered by a detached letter of rejection with “sensible advice”: “I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade” (120).

By the end of the nineteenth century the famous statue of Laocoön did not merely evoke the terror of Apollo’s priest carved in marble, but the sculpture had also become paradigmatic of Lessing’s distinctions between the boundaries of spatial and temporal arts. Furthermore, as we have seen, aesthetic distinctions were not simply based on the laws of genre but were also often dictated by the laws of gender. Consciously or unwittingly, the narrator in Jude the Obscure also interweaves aesthetic with gender boundaries in the preceding description, a tendency that is not limited to the aforementioned passage but pervades the entire novel. Throughout the novel allusions to contemporary paintings evoke conventional and unconventional gender boundaries. Convention is often represented only to be quickly undermined by the unique idiosyncrasies of Jude and Sue, who though representative of their era, continually struggle against the constraints conventional gender boundaries impose on them, yet are ultimately defeated and destroyed by them. As in his other novels, rather than maintaining the limitations between the different arts, in Jude the Obscure Thomas Hardy draws on their affinities, often relying on implicit and subtle allusions to contemporary paintings that express intense emotions or elide established gender boundaries.

In his last novel as well as his other works, Hardy quite often transforms painterly methods into narrative techniques in an attempt to express
intense emotions or as a way of engaging in contemporary debates on aesthetics and sociopolitical issues. In an entry in his Notebooks some of the goals of his narrative art and those of Pre-Raphaelite art, though he refers to Crivelli and Bellini, seem to dovetail, for he, like the Pre-Raphaelites, is interested in depicting intense emotion: “Jan 3 [1885]. My art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, & so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible” (Millgate, Life and Works of Thomas Hardy 183). In another entry the same year he talks about his efforts to make novels visible: “4th, March. Novel-writing as an art cannot go backward. Having reached the analytic stage it must transcend it by going still further in the same direction. Why not by rendering as visible essences, spectre, & the abstract thoughts of the analytic school?” (ibid.). In essence here Hardy seems to describe some of the goals of the Aesthetic movement in Pre-Raphaelite art, which often rendered visible, abstract concepts in paintings such as Burne-Jones’s Days of Creation, Temperantia, Fides, and Spes. In Pre-Raphaelite art Hardy must have seen the means of making his narratives memorable and meaningful to diverse audiences.

Allusions to paintings abound in Hardy’s journals and novels, reflecting his profound knowledge of paintings, which began in his early days in London in 1862, when he began visiting the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) and the National Gallery daily. He himself had a talent for sketching and drawing that he exhibited in his own illustrations of his Wessex Poems, published in 1898. Hardy’s contemporary reviewers often noted the intersection of the verbal and the visual in his novels. In June 1872 the Athenaeum, for instance, referred to the “graphic pictures of rustic life” in Desperate Remedies. In his review of Far from the Madding Crowd, R. H. Hutton of the Spectator discussed “the beauty of its descriptive sketches. Many of them are pictures of the most delicate and vivid beauty—watercolours in words, and very fine ones too.” Hardy’s knowledge of the visual arts has been extensively documented by several scholars. C. J. Weber, for instance, compiled a long catalog of thirty European artists with whose works Hardy was familiar. It is debatable whether any English novelist, Alistair Smart contends, “possessed so intimate a knowledge of the visual arts. Certainly no other writer of fiction has ever used such knowledge with equal skill or imagination” (263).

More recently, Thomas Hardy’s allusions to the visual arts have been the subjects of varied interpretations and critical controversies. Some critics, for instance, contend that Hardy is parading his knowledge (Gittings 141; Page 1977, 66). J. Hillis Miller points out that Hardy’s pictorial symbolism is “so blunt and unsubtle . . . that one hesitates to read anything into it”
(211). Other critics consider Hardy’s allusions to the visual arts as “incongruous and gratuitous,” for, they remark, Hardy suddenly refers to them in his texts and as quickly and without warning abandons them (Byerly 153). Most critics, however, fail to see that Hardy’s allusions to art become progressively more sophisticated in the course of his career. Whereas in The Woodlanders, The Return of the Native, and Far from the Madding Crowd, references to art appear suddenly and unexpectedly, in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Hardy represents ordinary people as artistic masterpieces. In both Tess of the d’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure Hardy does not merely allude to contemporary paintings but redraws them and in the process participates in contemporary debates on issues such as aesthetics, class, and gender, to mention but a few. As Bullen has already pointed out, Hardy’s pictorialism becomes more persuasive when the names of paintings are no longer mentioned in the text of his novels (The Expressive Eye 7). Some critics have briefly noted that several of the paintings Hardy reconfigures in his narratives are well-known Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces.11

**Hardy’s Suspension of Gender Boundaries in Burne-Jones’s Dreamscapes**

As his other novels Jude the Obscure is precariously balanced on an uneasy tension between an endorsement and a subversion of gender ideology. I locate this tension in Jude the Obscure in subtle reconfigurations of contemporary paintings by Edward Burne-Jones, whose androgynous figures are often cast in dreamlike landscapes, paintings of classical or chivalrous scenes, luxuriant images of a world that never was or could never exist. Contemporary and postmodern art historians have often described Burne-Jones as “a dreamer and a romantic in a prosaic and materialistic world” who “sought to transcend the limits of mundane reality by creating a rarified realm of beauty in his art” (Mancoff 1998, 7). Most critics would agree that his paintings possess “an irresistibly dream-like and often mysterious and detached quality” (Ash 10). Burne-Jones himself in a letter in 1872 remarked, “I mean by a picture a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be—in a light better than any lights that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire—and the forms divinely beautiful—and then I wake up” (ibid., plate 9). Like the subjects of Burne-Jones’s paintings, Jude and Sue often conjure a world of dreams, a utopian universe seemingly detached from constraining social conventions until conventions obliterate it. In fact, Hardy’s initial title for Jude the Obscure in its serialized version included the word “dreamer” as a possible choice: “The Simpletons / Part First / Hearts Insurgent / A
Dreamer" (Kramer 165). But unlike Burne-Jones’s dreams materialized in exquisitely beautiful canvases, Jude’s and Sue’s dreams are shattered by Victorian reality. It is interesting to note that as early as April 1883, Havelock Ellis, writing for Westminster Review about Hardy’s novels preceding Jude the Obscure, draws a parallel between Hardy’s narratives and the dreamy qualities of Burne-Jones’s paintings: “No one, who has once felt the charm of the dream-wrapt faces which Mr. Burne-Jones loves to delineate, has cared that the artist should seek for fresh types of loveliness, and it is equally easy to be content with the type of womanhood which Mr. Hardy gives us in all its delicate variations” (Cox 106).12

An entry in his Notebooks in January 1887 reveals Hardy’s awareness of the limitations of realistic art in meeting or representing the demands of the modern temperament:

I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don’t want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don’t want to see the original realities—as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings. The ‘simply natural’ is interesting no longer. . . . The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art—it is a student’s style—the style of a period when the mind is serene and unawakened to the tragic mysteries of life; when it does not bring anything to the object that coalesces with and translates the qualities that are already there—half hidden, it may be—and the two united are depicted as the All. (Millgate 1984, 192)

These statements could very well describe the two most important phases of Pre-Raphaelitism—realism and aestheticism. In the last four decades of the nineteenth century “abstract imaginings” had gradually replaced the intense and accurate representations of reality. By then Hardy had visited the Grosvenor Gallery and had met Edward Burne-Jones. Another entry in the January 1887 Notebooks also suggests the elision between dreams and reality, yet another feature of aestheticism: “I was thinking a night or two ago that people are somnambulists—that the material is not the real—only the visible, the real being invisible optically. That it is because we are in a somnambulistic hallucination that we think the real to be what we see as real” (ibid.). Three years later, on August 5, 1890, in an entry titled “Reflections on Art,” Hardy rejects realism for aestheticism: “Art is a disproportioning . . . of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in these realities, which, if merely copied . . . might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence ‘realism’ is not Art” (ibid., 239).
The poignant incongruity between soft romantic dreams and brutal reality is a theme on which Hardy's entire novel pivots. He alluded to this theme in a letter to Edmund Gosse on November 10, 1895, after several outraged critics attacked the novel for its alleged obscenity, some of them labeling it Jude the Obscene: “The ‘grimy’ features of the story go to show the contrast between the ideal life a man wished to lead, & the squalid real life he was fated to lead,” he explains. “The throwing of the pizzle, at the supreme moment of his young dream, is to sharply initiate this contrast. But I must have lamentably failed, as I feel I have, if this requires explanation & is not self-evident. The idea was meant to run all through the novel. It is, in fact, to be discovered in every body's life—though it lies less on the surface perhaps than it does in my poor puppets” (Letters 2:93).

Indeed Arabella's first appearance in Jude's life occurs as a disruption of the dream world Jude conjures, immersed as he is in his speculations about his progress in classical works, the knowledge of which he believes will qualify him to matriculate in Christminster: “And then he continued to dream, and thought he might become even a bishop by leading a pure, energetic, wise, Christian life. . . . Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Epictetus, Seneca, Antoninus. Then I must master other things: the Fathers thoroughly” (34). Engrossed in his dreamy musings, completely detached from the surrounding world, Jude “was now standing quite still, looking at the ground as though the future were thrown thereon by a magic lantern. On a sudden something smacked him sharply in the ear, and he became aware that a soft cold substance had been flung at him, and had fallen at his feet” (35).

Crass reality, in the form of Arabella's phallic missile, suddenly disrupts Jude's academic musings. Even more surprising than the disparity between idealism and sordid reality is Jude's response to Arabella. Though an idealist who repeatedly questions the hierarchical underpinnings of Victorian society, Jude nevertheless appears from the very beginning of the novel to be representative of the patriarchal society he questions and attempts to undermine. Such ideology is registered in his initial glance at Arabella, devoid of any idealism, highlighting gender and hierarchical binaries: “She whom he addressed was a fine dark-eyed girl, not exactly handsome, but capable of passing as such at a little distance, despite some coarseness of skin and fibre. She had a round and prominent bosom, full lips, perfect teeth, and rich complexion of a Cochin hen's egg. She was a complete and substantial female human;—no more, no less; and Jude was almost certain that to her was attributable the enterprise of throwing the lump of offal at him” (36).

Later on Jude's gaze travels from her eyes to her bosom, swiftly appropriating Arabella's body from a distance, reducing her to the object of his desire: “It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that till this moment Jude had
never looked at a woman to consider her as such, but had vaguely regarded the sex as being outside his life and purposes. He gazed from her eyes to her mouth, thence to her bosom, and to her full round naked arms, wet, mottled with the chill of the water, and firm as marble" (37–38). In this scene the gendered hierarchy of the gaze is underscored.

However, what is even more striking is not so much Jude's gaze, which moves within established gender boundaries, as Arabella's defiance of his gaze, her returning glance that transgresses those limits: “She brightened with a little glow of triumph, swept him almost tenderly with her eyes in turning, and retracing her steps down the broadside grass rejoined her companions” (38). Arabella's boldness unsettles and disturbs Jude's pleasure, paralyzing his will power and undermining his self-control. Indeed Jude seems to undergo the terrifying effects of Medusa's power evoked by her staring eyes, as he experiences the weakening of his resolution: “[T]he intentions as to reading, working, and learning, which he had so precisely formulated only a few minutes earlier, were suffering a curious collapse into a corner, he knew not how” (ibid.).

The first encounter between Jude and Arabella, replete with suggestive narrative hints, evokes the situation strikingly depicted in Edward Burne-Jones's Beguiling of Merlin (1873) (plate 15), which captures the catastrophic results of Nimue's “spellbinding gaze” and sharply registers the transgression of conventional gender boundaries. Appropriating Merlin's book of charms, a signifier of his intellectual, and traditionally masculine, power, Nimue rises above him intransigent and self-assured, whereas the feminized Merlin looks fearfully into space, averting her direct stare. Based on the Arthurian legend, the painting depicts Nimue, who has pursued Camelot's wizard into the forest, hoping to learn his secret spells. “Lulled into submission by her promise to satisfy his every desire, Merlin relinquishes his ancient book of enchantment. Nimue then betrays him, using his own magic to drain his powers and imprison him for eternity in the flowering branches of the hawthorn tree” (Mancoff 1998, 71).

Though depicted as a femme fatale, Nimue in this picture surprisingly lacks the alluring femininity associated with such a figure. Instead, her strong and tall fully clothed figure, the snakes in her hair, as well as her gaze, exude traditionally masculine power and control. In his review of this painting, F.G. Stephens commented on the reversal of traditional gender constructs in the picture: “Nimue looks while she works a spell.... [H]er face in its snaky intensity of malice is marvelous, not so the weak and womanish visage of Merlin.”14 Merlin's immobility, his entrapment within the hawthorn tree, is contrasted with Nimue's movement away from the claustrophobic scene, her left foot advancing on a stone bridge over a stream, a seemingly insignificant detail overtaken by the largeness of the
hawthorn tree that covers the entire canvas and even conceals the background opening of the horizon behind the two figures. Yet the bridge over the stream is about to separate Nimue from Merlin both physically and figuratively; it signifies Nimue’s eventual liberation from her mentor’s power, while the ensnared Merlin remains behind—abandoned.

Hardy's narrative reconfiguration of this painting includes the seemingly insignificant detail of the stream, which also separates Jude from Arabella and her companions when Jude first becomes aware of their presence: “On the other side of the hedge was a stream, whence, as he now for the first time realized, had come the slight sounds of voices and laughter that had mingled with his dreams” (35). Like Nimue, the narrator implies, Arabella trades her “love” for the power that marriage to Jude would provide her; she entraps the naïve Jude and abandons him, yet we are led to believe that he remains her entrapped victim to the very end of his life. No doubt the evocation of The Beguiling of Merlin is somewhat ironic, for Arabella is never interested in Jude’s books, often thinking instead that her husband ought to “stick to his trade, and throw aside those stupid books for practical undertakings” (57). Her insolent disregard of his books, when she indifferently smears them with hot grease and furiously tosses them on the floor, triggers Jude’s first outrage against his young wife (68).

From the beginning of the novel, when Arabella first meets Jude by attracting his attention through her phallic missile (the offal of a pig), she is associated with another classical enchantress—Circe. Through her scheming, that is, her feigned pregnancy, she induces the nineteen-year-old Jude to marry her and later through her wine to remarry her. Her merciless slaughtering of the pig at the beginning of her marriage alienates Jude from her completely. When Jude confronts Arabella about the deception of her pretended pregnancy and his consequent entrapment, he once again associates Arabella with swine (67). Like the mythological Circe, Arabella is throughout the book associated with deceit, the pigs of her father’s farm, and the wine that she uses to ensnare Jude. In The Wine of Circe, his 1869 watercolor, Burne-Jones represented Circe preparing her wine for Ulysses and his crew, whose ships approach in the distance. According to John Christian, Ruskin had initially commissioned this watercolor for his Munera Pulveris, a series of papers originally published in Fraser’s Magazine (Parris, The Pre-Raphaelites, 303–4). For Ruskin Circe represents “pure Animal life,” a comment worth considering in the context of Jude’s first description of Arabella as a “female animal.” Ruskin continues: “She is . . . indeed an Enchantress . . . but always wonderful. . . . [E]ven the wild beasts rejoice and are softened around her cave. . . . [T]he transforming poisons she gives to men are mixed with . . . wine, milk, and corn. . . . [I]t is their own fault if these make swine of them.”15
Unlike Arabella, Sue is portrayed as a vulnerable and sensitive, ethereal woman, yet because of her intelligence and sophistication she is presented as even more destructive than her sensuous opposite. On numerous occasions the narrator dwells on the putatively destructive effects of the female gaze, whether it be that of the voluptuous and mindless Arabella or that of the intelligent and highly sophisticated nonconformist Sue. In fact, the narrator implies, Sue's direct gaze galvanizes friendship into sexual desire, eventually destroying Jude's and her own life. When Jude visits Sue at Shaston, eight weeks after her marriage to Phillotson, she confides in him her utter unhappiness and misery: “‘I like Mr. Phillotson as a friend, I don’t like him—it is a torture to me to—live with him as a husband!’” (223). As in their other encounters, the evening Sue and Jude spend together confiding in each other is erotically charged; the magnetism between them is still intense the morning they part on the “lonely road to Alfredston. . . . They had stood parting in the silent highway, and their tense and passionate moods had led to bewildered inquiries of each other on how far their intimacy ought to go. . . . And then they had turned from each other in estrangement, and gone their several ways, till at a distance of twenty or thirty yards both had looked round simultaneously. That look behind was fatal to the reserve hitherto more or less maintained. They had quickly run back, and met, embracing most unpremeditatedly, kissed close and long. . . . The kiss was a turning point in Jude’s career” (227).

Although the glance is mutual, Jude attributes to Sue’s gaze the dramatic change in his life. That evening, left alone to his musings, he contemplates women’s destructive force (originating in their returning gaze): “Strange that his aspiration—towards academical proficiency—had been checked by a woman, and that his second aspiration—towards apostleship—had also been checked by a woman.” Once again Jude sees Sue as his captor. In this sense then, Sue, like Arabella, in Jude’s perspective, represents a femme fatale to whose power he surrenders with resignation, without any protest or resistance. “‘Is it,’ he said, ‘that the women are to blame; or is it the artificial system of things, under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springs to noose and hold back those who want to progress?’” (228).

At no time in his musings does Jude recognize the weakness of his own resolution. His passion for Sue, he reasons, is opposed to his new goal to become a minister. In a sacrificial ritual that night, he burns all his theological and ethical works: “Lighting some loose pamphlets to begin with, he cut the volumes into pieces as well as he could. . . . They kindled, and lighted up the back of the house, the pigsty, and his own face, till they were more or less consumed” (ibid.). Thus Jude once again sacrifices his
own aspirations, this time to that “aerial being,” the ethereal goddess of his life (227). At no time in his life does he assert his own will power against the spell of the femmes fatales, who paradoxically become such only through the power Jude invests in them.

Known for her iconoclastic views of religion and convention, Sue, since the novel’s publication, has been the subject of critical controversy; indeed, she is the most problematic and elusive of Hardy’s characters, resisting classification or containment. Contemporary and recent critics have often treated her like a patient desperately needing a diagnosis that might elucidate her problematic psyche. In his review of the novel in *Cosmopolis* on January 4, 1896, Edmund Gosse, for instance, refers to Sue as “the neurotic, semi-educated girl of hyper-sensitive instincts” whose “*vita sexualis* is the central interest of the book, and enough is told about it to fill the specimen tables of a German specialist” (Cox 264, 268). Later in the same review he concludes, “She is a poor, maimed ‘degenerate,’ ignorant of herself and of the perversion of her instincts, full of febrile, amiable illusions, ready to dramatize her empty life, and play at loving though she cannot love” (ibid., 269).

Surprisingly even recent critics dwell on Sue’s “frigidity,” one of them believing that it “entangles three men, causes the death of two and the moral corruption of a third,” diagnosing Sue’s condition as an Attention Deficit Syndrome: “Sue is thus distractible and unfocused in her sexuality” (Taylor xxv, xxvi). Yet even a Victorian critic, Havelock Ellis (himself a psychologist), could perceive the absurdity of the various diagnoses of Sue’s seemingly aberrant psychology. In his October 1896 review of *Jude the Obscure* he contends, “Sue is neurotic, some critics say; it is fashionable to play cheerfully with terrible words you know nothing about. ‘Neurotic,’ these good people by way of dismissing her, innocently unaware that many a charming ‘urban miss’ of their own acquaintance would deserve the name at least as well” (Cox 311). Surprisingly, Hardy also spoke of Sue’s “abnormalism” in a letter to Edmund Gosse on November 11, 1895, but instead of clarifying and specifying the term made it even hazier, thus opening it to further speculation: “There is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue’s nature,” he states. “The abnormalism consists in disproportion: not in inversion, her sexual instinct being healthy so far as it goes, but unusually weak & fastidious (Letters 2:99). Yet his comments also reveal Sue’s desperate efforts to be treated as her male partners’ equal:

[T]hough she has children, her intimacies with Jude have never been more than occasional, even while they were living together (I mention that they occupy separate rooms, except towards the end), & one of her reasons for fearing the marriage ceremony is that she fears it wd be breaking faith
Sue’s wish to withhold herself at pleasure is yet another one of her ineffectual attempts to be treated as an equal. A free spirit like Sue experiences even more acutely the social constraints of the patriarchal institutions of Victorian society, including that of marriage, which reduces her, even in the most intimate moments of her life, to an inferior deprived of any power to assert her subjectivity. Again and again she struggles to train her male admirers to treat her as an equal, but each time she fails, for her male pursuers insist on a physical relationship with her. However, Sue is aware of the fact that even the erotic is regulated by established gender boundaries that threaten her autonomy and ultimately destroy her.

When she confesses to Jude her repugnance for Phillotson, she poignantly articulates the humiliation she experiences each time she has to submit to his desire irrespective of her own wishes. Though rebellious against and resistant to the distorted laws that hierarchical gender relations impose on people, Sue has internalized their force and sees her wish to be treated as an equal as “wickedness.” “But it is not as you think,” she tells Jude. “There is nothing wrong except my own wickedness, I suppose you’d call it,—a repugnance on my part, for a reason I cannot disclose, and what would not be admitted as one by the world in general! . . . What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is morally!—the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way, in a matter whose essence is its voluntariness!” (223). Caught in a labyrinth of ideological incongruities, Sue struggles alone to resolve them but is ultimately defeated.

A close reading of the narrative reveals that Sue can by no means be held accountable for the death of two men as some critics maintain. When she escapes from the training school for teachers in which she has been persecuted, following her assignation with Jude, she shares with him the story about her relationship with the undergraduate at Christminster. What initiates and propels her friendship with him, Sue explains, is his willingness to treat her as an equal: “We used to go about together on walking tours, reading tours, and things of that sort—like two men almost. He asked me to live with him, and I agreed to by letter. But when
I joined him in London. I found he meant a different thing from what I meant. He wanted to be my lover, in fact, but I wasn’t in love with him—and on my saying I should go away if he didn’t agree to my plan, he did so’” (153). Even though quite young at the time, only eighteen, Sue knows what she wants and reaches an agreement with her roommate, but he later reneges on his promise. Yet it is Sue who has been blamed by contemporary and recent critics alike for her sexless cruelty. She herself is aware of the image she projects and, anticipating Jude’s judgment, defends her behavior: “‘People say I must be cold-natured—sexless—on account of it. But I won’t have it! Some of the most passionately erotic poets have been the most self-contained in their daily lives’” (154). Indeed Sue resembles Burne-Jones’s figures, described by contemporary critics such as Henry James “like beautiful, rather sickly boys. Or rather, they are sublimely sexless, and ready to assume whatever charm of manhood or maidenhood the imagination desires” (“The Picture Season in London” 146–47). Or she is very much like the “gaunt, lank, and long-limbed damosel” Justin McCarthy discusses who “has actually stepped from the canvas into life and is to be found everywhere in certain circles of London society” (727).

Certainly, Sue’s ethereal appearance is reminiscent of Burne-Jones’s dreamy, androgynous figures situated in an imaginary and fragile universe. When Sue for instance argues that marriage smothers passion, Jude retorts, “But you, Sue, are such a phantasmal, bodiless creature, one who . . . has so little animal passion in you, that you can act upon reason in the matter’” (272). When she goes to visit the sick Phillotson, she enters his room “in light spring clothing, and her advent seemed ghostly—like the flitting in of a moth” (262). At the agricultural exhibition, we are told, Sue went along by Jude’s side “as if she hardly touched the ground, and as if a moderately strong puff of wind would float her over the hedge into the next field” (306). When Arabella sees her then, she remarks to her husband, “‘He’s charmed by her as if she were some fairy!’” (307). Further, when Jude tries to soothe her anguish following the children’s suicide, he exclaims, “‘you are absolutely the most ethereal, least sensual woman I ever knew to exist without inhuman sexlessness’”(364). Such descriptions charged with emotional intensity lack the detailed realism of the Pre-Raphaelite reconfigurations drawn by Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, or George Eliot. In his redrawings of Burne-Jones’s figures and paintings Hardy follows more closely the principles of aestheticism rather than realism as he concentrates quite often on conveying a mood rather than the physical appearance of the characters and their surroundings.

Sue’s intense desire for autonomy and equality is often described as an aspect of her androgynous character. It is for the chance of achieving such
equality that Sue becomes involved with Jude. Frequently during her relationship with him she calls him none of the affectionate names lovers often use but chooses instead the word “comrade” for its strong connotations of equality. On the night she confides in him about the undergraduate, for instance, she explains what has attracted her to Jude: “But I did want and long to ennable some man to high aims; and when I saw you, and knew you wanted to be my comrade, I—shall I confess it?—thought that man might be you. But you take so much tradition on trust that I don’t know what to say” (158). Even when she is distraught over the death of her three children, she still holds on to the ideal of equality: “O my comrade, our perfect union—our two-in-oneness—is now stained in with blood!” (357).

People around Sue and Jude are often struck by the extraordinary affinity between them and their regard of each other as equals, certainly a unique relationship for the patriarchal standards of the time. When Phillotson, for instance, confides in his friend George Gillingham about his troubled marriage, he exclaims: “I have been struck with these two facts: the extraordinary sympathy, or similarity, between the pair. He is her cousin, which perhaps accounts for some of it. They seem to be one person split in two!” (240–41). Even Arabella, when from a distance she sees Jude and Sue holding hands and walking at the agricultural exhibition, discerns their unique attachment: “That complete mutual understanding, in which every glance and movement was as effectual as speech for conveying intelligence between them, made them almost the two parts of a single whole” (306). Such allusions direct our attention to Plato’s Symposium, in particular to Aristophanes’ comic narrative of the origin of Eros, which he situates in the beginning of the universe when, in his opinion, there were not just two genders but an additional one—the androgynous. At the time, Aristophanes explains, “The sexes were three in number, not, as they are now, two, male and female; there was also as a third the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word ‘androgynous’ is preserved as a term of reproach” (229). He continues with the well-known story of the round, primeval humans, “their backs and sides forming a circle” until the gods, threatened by the strength of these creatures, cut them in half, and since then each half has been desperately seeking the other (230–33). It is interesting to note that Aristophanes locates the origin of heterosexual love in the androgynous: “Now men who are a section of that double nature that was once called androgynous are lovers of women” (231). Hardy’s allusions to Plato also evoke several of Edward Burne-Jones’s representations of Cupid and Psyche, most notably Cupid Finding Psyche, Cupid Delivering Psyche,
Psyche, Holding the Lamp, Gazes Enraptured on the Face of the Sleeping Cupid; Psyche Kneels, with Arms Held Out in Supplication, as Cupid Flies Away through the Doorway, pictures in which the two deities are depicted as a dyad, two halves of a circular configuration. As we have already seen, Sue is described in spiritual rather than physical terms, as a “phantasmal,” “ethereal,” “ghostly” figure, a personification of the soul, as it were, the Greek meaning of Psyche’s name. Jude defines her as such when he says, “‘you spirit, you disembodied creature, you dear, sweet, tantalizing phantōm’” (256), and Sue herself directly identifies with Psyche when she asks him to say “those pretty lines from Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion,’” meaning in Greek “On the Subject of the Soul.”

In 1864 William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones decided to produce a lavish, illustrated folio of Morris’s long narrative poem *Earthly Paradise*, the first poem of which is “The Story of Cupid and Psyche.” Burne-Jones designed seventy subjects from this story. Beginning in the 1860s, when he drew his first watercolors, *Cupid Finding Psyche* and *Cupid Delivering Psyche*, this theme preoccupied him for the next thirty years, and *The Wedding of Psyche* (1895) is one of his last paintings on the subject (Wildman and Christian 119). In these paintings, gouaches, and oils Burne-Jones depicts a sequence of love, betrayal, and rescue, resembling the phases of Jude’s and Sue’s love story.

When Sue escapes from the Training School for Teachers, she comes to Jude’s apartment soaked from her walk through the river. Seeing her in the darkness, Jude “palpitated at the thought that she had fled to him in her trouble as he had fled to her in his” (149). The allusion to Cupid and Psyche is embedded in Jude’s thinking and action: “What counterparts they were! He unlatched the door of his room, heard a stealthy rustle on the dark stairs, and in a moment she appeared in the light of his lamp. He went up to seize her hand, and found she was clammy as a marine deity, and that her clothes clung to her like the robes upon the figures in the Parthenon frieze” (ibid.). Jude’s lamp casts an enchanting light on Sue’s sudden appearance and evokes a similar event in the Cupid and Psyche story. Moreover, lest we missed the allusion to Cupid and Psyche, this important chapter concludes with Jude leaning over the sleeping Sue, observing that “a warm flush now rosed her hitherto blue cheeks, and felt that her hanging hand was no longer cold. Then he stood with his back to the fire regarding her, and saw in her almost a divinity” (150). This scene reconfigures the subject of Burne-Jones’s *Cupid Finding Psyche* (1865) (plate 16), which shows Cupid gazing affectionately at the sleeping Psyche, her left arm loosely hanging in the foreground, the two figures forming two halves of a circular configuration. Originating in an illustration of Morris’s “Story of Cupid and Psyche,” this watercolor depicts the
Plate 16. Edward Burne-Jones, *Cupid Finding Psyche*, 1865. Watercolor, bodycolor, and pastel mounted on linen, 27\(\frac{7}{8}\) x 19 in (70.3 x 48.3 cm), Yale Center for British Art. Reproduced by permission.
beginning of the story when the goddess Venus has sent Cupid to destroy Psyche, but instead he falls in love with the sleeping princess. The following lines from Morris’s tale correspond with the watercolor and the aforementioned scene in the novel:

As Love cast down his eyes with a half smile,
Godlike and cruel, that faded in a while,
And long he stood above her hidden eyes
With red lops parted in god’s surprise. (Wildman and Christian 121)

Startled by Sue’s unanticipated appearance, Jude asks in bewilderment: “‘Whatever have you done, darling?’ he asked, with alarm.” Sue retorts, “‘walked through the largest river in the county—that’s what I’ve done! They locked me up for being out with you; and it seemed so unjust that I couldn’t bear it, so I got out of the window and escaped across the stream!’” (149). Sue emerging from the water in search of Jude evokes yet another painting of the story of Cupid and Psyche, *Pan and Psyche* (1872–1874), which represents Psyche emerging from the water after trying to drown herself following Pan’s desertion. Burne-Jones exhibited this painting in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1878, an exhibition that, as we have seen, Hardy had attended.

As in several of Burne-Jones’s paintings, the male figure, in this case Cupid—in a flowing classical drapery resembling that of Psyche, his features as feminine as those of Psyche—appears androgynous. Thus the painting extends and transgresses conventional gender boundaries. Hardy, however, in his narrative reconfigurations of the Cupid and Psyche story casts Sue, not Jude as an androgynous figure. Her androgyny is particularly emphasized in the scenes described earlier that reconfigure Burne-Jones’s Cupid and Psyche paintings. When Jude’s landlady unexpectedly comes to his room and sees Sue in Jude’s clothes sleeping by the fireplace, she mistakes her for “a young gentleman” (151). Later on, when Sue asks Jude to be her comrade, Jude “looked away, for that epicene tenderness of hers was too harrowing. . . . If he could only get over the sense of her sex, as she seemed to be able to do so easily of his, what a comrade she would make” (159). In that fleeting moment of the suspension of gender boundaries, Jude sees Sue as his equal, his other half from which he may not be separated under any circumstances: “She was nearer to him than any other woman he had ever met, and he could scarcely believe that time, creed, or absence, would ever divide him from her” (ibid.). The next morning as he gazes at Sue asleep, once again he seems to cherish her androgyny, “looking warm as a new bun and boyish as a Ganymedes” (ibid.).
Scholars interested in situating Sue within a chronological context have debated whether she is representative of “the Girl of the Period” of the 1860s or the “New Woman” of the 1890s. The girl of the period and the English girl of the past, “a creature generous, capable and modest,” Eliza Lynn Linton declared in March 1868, have nothing in common. The girl of the period is characterized by “her love of pleasure and indifference to duty” and by “her dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful work; in a word, to the worst forms of luxury and selfishness, to the most fatal effects arising from want of high principle and absence of tender feeling.” Men are afraid of her and prefer “the simple and genuine girl of the past.”

Like the Girl of the Period, the New Woman of the 1890s usurped traditional gender boundaries and sought equality in professions, sports, and relationships. S. R. White’s sarcastic tone in “Modern Mannish Maidens” seems representative of the period. Like Linton, he laments the replacement of ideal womanhood with the modern woman known for her “mannish ways”: “In former days the sex were wont to appeal to men from their softer, gentler, weaker side. Now, it is the reverse. They appear to aim at meeting men on their own platform, and consorting with them as like to like,—from a man’s standpoint rather than from a woman’s.”

After a brief overview of the scholarly debate over the novel’s temporal setting, Dale Kramer concludes, “If we accept that the novel’s two possible times are the 1860s (when Hardy was a young man in London) and the 1890s (when Hardy was moving through a restless stage in his marriage), we can link a psychological involvement with the historical . . . ; but more importantly we can see that substantive issues are not defined by a single time and place” (171).

By reconfiguring in his novel the androgynous figures of Burne-Jones’s paintings, Hardy engaged in contemporary debates over the destabilization of gender constructs the women’s movement had created since the 1860s. Through the representation of androgynous figures, Burne-Jones suspended gender boundaries in his classical-subject paintings, compelling his critics and viewers to question gender boundaries within not only his paintings but their social sphere as well. As in the dreamscapes of Burne-Jones’s paintings peopled by androgynous figures, Thomas Hardy’s experiments in the suspension of gender boundaries take place in Jude’s and Sue’s “dreamy paradise” until crass reality completely annihilates their
dreams and their lives. Yet Sue’s androgyny raises questions that still puzzle critics today. Is absolute equality possible only in the suspension of gender boundaries that androgyny invites? Does Hardy imply that absolute gender equality is impossible? That once lovers, a man and a woman cannot be comrades? Or does Hardy mean that those women who seek perfect and absolute equality lose their femininity and become androgynous in the process of acquiring the power patriarchal society grants to men, thus alienating men?

In the 1912 postscript to *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy once again revisits the issue of Sue’s androgyny when he refers to a letter he received from an “experienced reviewer” from Germany (when the novel was published there as a serial story), who claimed that Sue “was the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousands every year—the woman of the feminist movement—the slight, pale, ‘bachelor’ girl—the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities as yet: who does not recognize the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession” (*Jude the Obscure*, xxxviii). Hardy’s response to this reviewer is as evasive as his reactions to contemporary critics of the novel, once again leaving the character open to interpretation: “Whether this assurance is borne out by dates I cannot say. Nor am I able, across the gap of years since the production of the novel, to exercise more criticism upon it of a general kind than extends to a few verbal corrections. . . . And no doubt there can be more in a book than the author consciously puts there, which will help either to its profit or to its disadvantage as the case may be” (ibid., xxxix). Though unwilling to reveal the temporal setting of the novel or to concede to this reviewer’s interpretation of Sue’s character, yet he singles it out of the vast criticism the novel received and once again alludes to Sue’s androgyny—“the bachelor girl.” Through Sue’s intellectual power and her depiction as an androgynous figure, Hardy sustains feminism, yet through her stereotypically feminine breakdown and eventual capitulation to convention he subverts it.

Unlike Edward Burne-Jones, who suspended gender boundaries by representing both male and female figures as androgynous, thus destabilizing conventional gender constructs, Hardy, in his reconfigurations of Burne-Jones’s paintings, represents only Sue as androgynous. As Laura Green remarks, “Hardy seems to imply that women are more able to achieve and maintain an androgynous ideal partly for that most Victorian of reasons—their lesser sexual impulses” (127). Through Jude’s masculinity, albeit passive, Hardy holds on to the gender stability that Sue’s anarchic nature has threatened and, if we think in terms of the accomplishments of the feminist movement, has forever changed. Yet Sue’s sudden change into docile...
femininity at the end of the novel comes too late. By then the readers of *Jude the Obscure* and viewers of the androgynous figures of Burne-Jones's paintings, which the novel evokes, have already questioned the validity of the established gender boundaries and have toyed with androgyny and its implicit reconciliation of threat and desire and its elusive promise of equality.