Lingue e Linguaggi
Lingue Linguaggi 67 (2024), 375-388
ISSN 2239-0367, e-ISSN 2239-0359
DOI 10.1285/i22390359v67p375
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THOMAS HARDY'S 'IMPOSSIBLE MONSTERS' The Language of Desire in *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891)

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Abstract – This article explores the semiotics of desire in Thomas Hardy's short story cycle *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891). In its first section, it briefly contextualises the collection in terms of design and critical reception. The following section, focused on a selection of three emblematic stories, reads Hardy's characters as embodiments of the 'impossible monsters' he mentioned in the first entry of his *Literary Notes*. This section, drawing on James Phelan's rhetorical theory of characters and Charles Fourier's *The Passions of the Human Soul* (1851), investigates the effects of certain mechanisms of desire (gaze, idealisation, fetishisation, reification, jealousy, vindication-torture) on the characters' mimetic and thematic attributes. Furthermore, it points out how the characters' pathemic conditions and actions are often driven by bovaristic obsessions and mediated desires that originate in sociocultural microcosms pervaded by rigid social conventions and conformism. In some cases, these mediated passions are triggered by artistic and literary objects such as statues, paintings, and works of literature that function as simulacra of amorous desire. A final section summarises the main points discussed in the article and provides insights for further reflection.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy; Charles Fourier; semiotics of desire; mediated desire; simulacra

1. Introduction

From 1865 to 1913, Thomas Hardy published forty-nine short stories in various Victorian periodicals ranging from *The Graphic*, *The Illustrated London News*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and *Longman's Magazine*, and in American magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, *The New York Times* and *The Independent*. The majority of these stories were also collected by the author in four volumes: *Wessex Tales* (1888), *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), *Life Little's Ironies* (1894), and *A Changed Man and Other Stories* (1913).

The stories of *A Group of Noble Dames* deal with women of passionate spirit who struggle against class prejudices and the manifold structures of patriarchy and matriarchy: inheritance rights, marriage as a trade, and obsession with lineage. Hardy's social critique is expressed through a framing narrative in which the members of the Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club tell the stories and provide moral commentary on them. The club is "storm-bound" (Hardy 1988, p. 245) in literal and metaphorical sense: on the one hand, it is physically confined by an obstinate autumn rain in the museum of an unnamed Wessex town; on the other, its members deal with 'heart storms', namely "curious tales of fair dames, of their loves and hates, their joys and their misfortunes, their beauty and their fate" (Hardy 1988, p. 246).

In a 1891 letter to Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, Hardy described *A Group of Noble Dames* as "a frivolous piece of work, which [he] took in hand in a sort of desperation during a fit of low spirit" (Purdy, Millgate 1979, p. 239). This 'fit of low spirits' was probably due to the rejection of the first part of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* from *Murray's Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, and Tillotson and Son's on moral grounds.

Six stories of the collection were written for the 1890 *Graphic*'s Christmas issues; four more stories were added for the first volume edition, published by Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. in 1891. In order for them to be published, Hardy had to alter the stories for the *Graphic* at the request of the magazine's directors. In a letter dated 25 June 1890, the editor of the magazine Arthur Locker urged Hardy to revise some stories since their macabre and prurient plot details could offend the "delicate imagination of young girls" (Gilmartin, Mengham 2007, p. 53), the conformist taste of English paterfamilias, and the sensitiveness of young people not accustomed to read about indecent marital and sexual issues.

On a mimetic level, some of the stories are partly rooted in John Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (Brady 1984, p. 51). Francesco Marroni perspicaciously observes that their historical aspects reveal Hardy's "precise intention of presenting himself as the official interpreter of the legendary past of Wessex" (Marroni 1994, p. 34). By analysing this collection from a thematic perspective, what seems to emerge is Hardy's intention of presenting himself as a detached interpreter of human passions condensed within a peculiar chronotope – the *concrete*, *native*, and *static* (Bakhtin 1982, pp. 100-129) Dorset-Wessex of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – and a restricted sociocultural milieu, namely the refined world of nobility and squirearchy.

Some scholars have thoroughly examined the entire volume form of *A Group of Noble Dames*, focusing on Hardy's experimental narrative techniques, his dwelling on misrelation and gender struggles, and his overlapping of literary genres and modes such as realistic narrative, anecdote, romance[1], and the gothic. These include Kristin Brady in *The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy. Tales of Past and Present* (1982), Martin Ray in *Thomas Hardy: A Textual Study of the Short Stories* (1997), Sophie Gilmartin and Rod Mengham in *Thomas Hardy's Shorter Fiction* (2007), and Juliette Berning Shaefer and Siobhan Craft Brownson in *Thomas Hardy's Short Stories*. *New Perspectives* (2017). However, until now, scant critical attention has been devoted to the relationship between the somatics of passions represented in these stories (i. e. the male and female characters' pathemic condition in its corporeal manifestation), the narrator's description of their protagonists' inclinations, susceptibilities, and emotional states (Greimas, Fontanille 1993, p. 50) and Hardy's philosophical and psychological reflections on the dynamics of human passions in his *Literary Notes*. Furthermore, little has been written on the mediating function of cultural objects in the mechanisms of desire evoked in this short story cycle.

Philip Wenstein observes that in various literary works published between the late Victorian period and the first two decades of the twentieth century "the protagonistic self becomes less a figure defined by […] cultural value, and more one defined by desire, force, natural impulse" (Weinstein 1984, p. vii). Hardy's characters in *A Group of Noble Dames* partially match this paradigm: on the one hand, they are desiring subjects whose emotional identities are incompatible with their social roles; on the other, they inhabit a limbo between nature and culture. In this scenario, their tragic selves emerge when their passions and desires clash with established rules, prohibitions, and sanctions. As Rosemary Sumner observes, in each of the stories "a single psychological curiosity is isolated" (Sumner 1981, p. 18). However, as a whole, these stories seem to focus on two

[1] In the 1912 *Wessex edition* of Hardy's works, *A Group of Noble Dames* was categorized as "Romances and Fantasies".

perverted forms of what Charles Fourier defines as "love[ism]" and "familism" (Fourier 1851, p. x).

This article intends to discuss the semiotics of desire in three stories from *A Group of Noble Dames* by analysing the characters' mimetic and thematic attributes in relation to the pathemic structures of the narratives, and drawing connections between these attributes and Hardy's ideas on the role played by sociocultural factors and simulacra in orienting human behaviour. In his work *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (1989), James Phelan developed a poststructuralist analysis of characters based on their mimetic, thematic, and synthetic attributes. The mimetic level includes physical features, language and social status; the thematic dimension involves the function of characters as representatives of certain ideologies and worldviews; the synthetic component is the way characters emerge as made-up entities (Phelan 1989, pp. 2-3). The next sections will introduce Hardy's idea of 'impossibile monsters' as imaginary, perverse human beings created by an interplay of innate traits and environmental (sociocultural) causes.

2. The 'Impossible Monsters' of the Will, the Passions, and the Intellect

Hardy's first *Literary Notebook* opens with a pictorial representation of François Marie Charles Fourier's theory of passions, which he probably came to know through John R. Morell's *The Passions of the Human Souls* (1851), the first English translation of selected passages from Fourier's *Oeuvres complètes* (1841-48). According to Fourier, "passions are distributed like a tree, which, beginning from the trunk or focus, gives subdivisions progressive in numbers" (Fourier 1851, p. 1). In each individual, the focus or base of their passional tree can be "*luxism*, or voluptuousness" (Fourier 1851, p. xl, emphasis in original), that is a strive for happiness, health and richness rooted in the senses, "*groupism*, or sociability" (Fourier 1851, p. xl, emphasis in original), that includes ambition, friendship, loveism, and familism, or a combination of the two. Both luxism and groupism are oriented by "distributives" (Fourier 1851, p. 6), mental passions that are general wants of variety, refinement, and combination involving everyday pleasures and activities. The harmonic union of luxism and groupism, regulated by the three distributive passions, leads to "unityism", or "universal philanthropy" (Fourier 1851, p. 6), while its subversion is labelled "egoism" (Fourier 1851, p. 6). In loveism and familism, people can be kept together by both material and spiritual ties: when the parties that are conjoined are animated by a double inclination, love is complete; when they only come together for the sake of the material or the sexual ties, they experience "an insipid consonance, an incomplete love" (Fourier 1851, p. 348) that Fourier calls "hemigamy" (Fourier 1851, p. 348).

Hardy's 1863 drawing is a sketch of a tree named *Humanity* that grows out of three interlocking roots labelled *Intellect*, *Passions* and *Will*, and recalls Fourier's scheme of sensuous, societal, and distributive passions. The "Impossible Monsters" (Björk 1985, p. 4) originating from the corresponding three trunks are unnatural monades imagined by Hardy; they are artificial, literary embodiments of human passional and rational excesses, and are suggestive of several Hardyan characters in *A Group of Noble Dames*. Hardy's sketch can be read through the lens of Phelan's rhetorical theory of characters. From this perspective, the expression 'impossible monsters' can be interpreted as a reference to literary creation and to the synthetic dimension of characterization: Hardy's monsters are 'impossible' since they are authored "artificial constructs" (Phelan 1989, p. 9). According

to Brady, the stories of the collection deal with "some forms of suffering as the effect of injustice and prejudice rather than as an unalterable fact of life" (Brady 1982, p. 94). Indeed, Hardy's impossible monsters are creatures produced by their environment; they are embodied emanations of classism, patriarchy, and religious moralism. These monsters of the will, the passions, and the intellect often emerge against peculiar backcloths, such as walls dotted with family shields, galleries full of portraits of ancestors, curtains, and other backdrops charged with symbolic values.

2.1. The First Countess of Wessex

The First Countess of Wessex deals with a young woman's struggle to acquire the maturity to choose the suitor who is truly devoted over the one who merely appears to be in love with her. The story opens with Squire Thomas Dornell and his wife Susannah fighting over an advantageous marriage for their 12-year-old daughter Betty. The ambitious mother, whose favourite suitor is 30-year-old Stephen Reynard, shows a cool disregard for Betty's own feelings, while the father is more passionate and sympathetic, supporting his daughter's early infatuation for young and handsome Phelipson. While arguing, they recognize and denounce each other's emotional monstrosity: in Susannah's eyes, Squire Dornell is an ingenuous sentimental man; in his eyes, Susannah is a ruthless plotter. When he accuses her of being herself in love with Reynard, she replies: "is it not *monstrous* for you to talk of my wickedness when you have a like scheme in your own head?" (Hardy 1988, p. 210, emphasis added). In Hardy's fictional world, each character sees the others as monsters based on their own ideas and *convenances*. The narrator also underlines that the union of Betty's parents is lesser spiritual than material: Squire Dornell asserts that he was seduced by his wife's "airs and graces" (Hardy 1988, p. 210) and declares himself bound to her and her manor by "the dictates of convenience merely" (Hardy 1988, p. 210). Once again, Fourier's reflections on *hemigamy* echo in the characters' discursive interaction. Fourier underlines that subversive ambition and "the *convenances* of civilization […] require that [love and familism] should work in contradiction to their properties" (Fourier 1851, p. 380, emphasis in original), being such properties a combination of unselfish fondness, mutual esteem, sincerity, and spontaneity. Susannah embodies the figure of the ambitious mother who deceives her husband to achieve her bovaristic social goal: as a monster of the intellect and the will, she arranges a secret marriage between Betty and Reynard "to enjoy vicariously her daughter's social triumph" (Brady 1982, p. 56). When Squire Dornell is informed of Betty's arranged marriage to Reynard, he has an apoplectic fit; once recovered, he feels "a sense of shame at having a heart so tender; a ridiculous quality" (Hardy 1988, p. 216) that his wife would despise because of her "town ideas" (Hardy 1988, p. 216), a literary synonym for Fourier's *convenances* of civilization[2]. Only at times, acknowledging her husband's distress, "a genuine tenderness and desire to soothe his sorrow […] well[s] up in [Susannah]" (Hardy 1988, p. 217), but her prevailing ambitiousness makes their couple gradually become estranged. Squire Dornell's love for Betty is similarly inseparable from his own moral aims, which characterise him as a monster of the intellect. Although he is described as a man driven by impulsive passions, he strongly wishes to prove his points regarding the most suitable husband for Betty. The idea of being right about the functioning of the world

[2] In Fourier's view, the magnification of spiritual love is "supremely *ridiculous* according to existing customs" (Fourier 1851, p. 293, emphasis added). Hardy's literary production is pervaded with Fourier's idea that *civilizees* basically disregard the importance of spiritual love or *celadonic* (sentimental) affinity.

of love is an intellectual disposition that turns out to be the real object of his desire. After Squire Dornell has paid a call on Betty with Phelipson, Susannah observes a change in her daughter and describes her as "*monstrous* close-mouthed" (Hardy 1988, p. 219). For Susannah, influenced by urban conventions, 'mostruous' is a daughter who is "busy with her own thoughts" (Hardy 1988, p. 220) instead of being blindly obedient to her mother. When Mrs. Dornell realizes that Betty and Phelipson meet in secret, she "groan[s] in spirit at such duplicity in the child of her bosom" (Hardy 1988, p. 222); she sees Betty as "a forward minx" (Hardy 1988, p. 222) and a "treacherous girl" (Hardy 1988, p. 223) since her ambition makes her unable to strengthen their "tie of blood" (Fourier 1851, p. 266) through spiritual affinities, which would allow her to identify Betty's paleness and taciturnity as physical signs of her sorrow. Mrs. Dornell's temporary change of mind is emblematic of her being a monster of the "slow and persistent [will]" (Björk 1985, p. 3) despite her being subject also to "rapid and temporary" (Björk 1985, p. 3) volition. The following passage exemplifies Hardy's reinterpretation of Fourier's "transitory moments" (Fourier 1851, p. vii) of human affectivity:

> The agonized appeal went too straight to Mrs. Dornell's heart for her to hear it unmoved. Yet, things having come to this pass, what could she do? […] Mrs. Dornell's sympathy with Betty's recalcitration began to die out. The girl's secret affection for young Phelipson could not possibly be condoned. (Hardy 1988, pp. 223-224)

Once Betty has realised that Reynard is coming to claim her as his spouse, "An idea suddenly energize[s her] apathetic features" (Hardy 1988, p. 225). Since she is a monster of the passions, "in a rash moment" (Hardy 1988, p. 226) she intentionally gets infected with smallpox as a means of repelling Reynard and keeping him at a distance. When Squire Dornell meets Reynard to inform him of his daughter's conditions, their opposite personalities emerge through a juxtaposition of their sociopsychological attributes: "The Squire, hot-tempered, gouty, impulsive, generous, reckless; the younger man, pale, tall, sedate, self-possessed—a man of the world" (Hardy 1988, p. 228). Reynard's "unemotional temperament" (Hardy 1988, p. 228) is related to his "urbanity" (Hardy 1988, p. 229), while Dornell's rusticity is synonym of short temper and impulsiveness. Through Reynard's words, which describe Dornell's attitude as an expression of "a *monstruous* cruel injustice" (Hardy 1988, p. 229, emphasis added), the semantic field of monstrosity is reintroduced in the text to underline the characters' incapacity to understand each other's intrinsic motivations.

In the meanwhile, Betty and Phelipson run away, but when he realises that his beloved has got smallpox, he suggests giving up their escape plan, unveiling his "only skin-deep" (Hardy 1988, p. 238) kind of love. In this passage, Hardy thematises Fourier's distinction between spiritual and material love, this latter being a sensuous passion that alone can't bring happiness. Contrary to young and immature Phelipson, Reynard is characterised as a "contriving, sagacious, gentle-mannered man, a philosopher who s[ees] that the only constant attribute of life is change" (Hardy 1988, p. 240). His description reminds the reader of Karl L. Börne's assertion "Nothing is permanent but change", quoted by Hardy in his *Literary Notes* (Björk 1985, p. 179). The means Reynard uses to bring about a change in Betty's ephemeral feelings towards him are his "kindness, forbearance, even magnanimity" (Hardy 1988, p. 241), and his noble title as the future Earl of Ivell. Furthermore, he is aware of the fact that Betty's inheritance has influenced the king' decision to make him Earl. Drawing on Fourier's theory of passions, Raynard and Betty's union can be defined a harmonious combination of a gradual attachment of the heart and shared material interests. Reynard's strategy is a "mild, placid, durable way […] which, perhaps, upon the whole, tends most generally to the woman's comfort under the

institution of marriage, if not particularly to her ecstasy" (Hardy 1988, p. 241). Through the narrator's irony, the reader is led to sympathise with Reynard: his persistent will, imbued with tenderness, loses its monstrosity and merges harmoniously with his intellect and his will to result in marital accord.

2.2. Barbara of the House of Grebe

Barbara of the House of Grebe is set in the late eighteenth century, and deals with the story of Barbara Grebe, a young lady that falls in love with the handsome yet poor Edmond Willowes. Barbara's parents put pressure on her for marrying Lord Uplandtowers, a resolute and calculating nobleman who is obsessed with wining her over. Barbara runs away with her Adonis-like lover, but after several weeks of marriage she begins to regret their impulsive actions, grasping their cost in social terms. Finally, her parents forgive them and decide to send Edmond abroad, where he must study languages, history, and art to "bec[o]me polished outwardly and inwardly to the degree required in the husband of such a lady as Barbara" (Hardy 1988, p. 254). However, after over a year spent in Italy, Edmond is severely scorched while trying to save some theatregoers from a fire in Venice. His disfigurement horrifies Barbara, causing her to reject him and leading the poor man to leave England and die alone in a foreign country. Barbara eventually agrees to marry Lord Uplandtowers, but she fails to provide him with a successor. One day, a life-size statue of Edmond – realised by a Pisan marble artist when Edmond was in Italy – arrives at Lord Uplandtowers' manor. Barbara hides it in a secret tabernacle, and suddenly begins to leave her husband's side each night to stay with the statue, embracing it, kissing it on the lips, and whispering words of love in its ears. When Lord Uplandtowers discovers his wife's sinful secret, he devises a revenge and a 'cure': he commissions a local workman to reproduce the disfigurement of the man upon the statue, and forces Barbara to look at it until she develops an aversion towards Edmond's memory.

The first impossible monster that appears in the story is Lord Uplandtowers, whose mode of desire is not so much an amorous affection as a projected tension towards an existential trajectory. The trigger of his infatuation is described as a rational purpose: "It was apparently an idea, rather than a passion, that inspired Lord Uplandtowers' resolve to win her" (Hardy 1988, p. 247). Furthermore, the use of the verb *to win* expresses a reification of Barbara as an object of desire. Following Algirdas J. Greimas and Jacques Fontanille's semiotic theory of passions, the "modalization" of the desiring subject (Greimas, Fontanille 1993, p. viii) as a volitional subject precedes the introduction of an object of value. The "'shadow' that incites the 'presentiment' of a value" (Greimas, Fontanille 1993, p. 19) in Barbara can be traced back to Lord Uplandtowers' past: "His matured and cynical doggedness at the age of nineteen, when impulse mostly rules calculation […] owed its existence as much to his succession to the earldom and his accompanying local honours in childhood, as to the family character" (Hardy 1988, p. 247). Through a description of his temperament, he is characterised as a monster of the will and the ambition degenerated into pride. The narrator points out that this kind of cynical determination "was hereditary "sometimes for good, sometimes for evil" (Hardy 1988, p. 247), paving the way for Hardy's narrativization of Fourier's degenerated or subversive passions. Just as Reynard in *The First Countess of Wessex*, Lord Uplandtowers is characterised as a "philosopher" (Hardy 1988, p. 249) certain that his beloved's compliance is "only a matter time" (Hardy 1988, p. 249). However, his figure can be read as a gothic, evil subversion of Reynard's temperament: unlike Reynard, his obstinate determination is not tempered by "Engaging Manners, cultivated Mind, Adorn'd by Letters, and in Courts refin'd" (Hardy 1988, p. 228). While Reynard is a man of the world,

Lord Uplandtowers has received merely local honours in childhood, which prevented him from developing his passions harmoniously. A few lines later, we read a dialogue between Lord Uplandtowers and a friend of his, in which the latter asserts that Barbara is "not drawn to [him] by love" (Hardy 1988, p. 248) and that she is not able to calculate "a good match" (Hardy 1988, p. 248). In this passage, the reader can identify a reference to Fourier's theory of loveism: Barbara and Lord Uplandtowers are bound neither by spiritual nor by material ties. Lord Uplandtowers' mimetic attributes reflect his lack of affection towards his object of desire: he is "stultified rather than agitated" (Hardy 1988, p. 250) by Barbara and Edmond's elopement, and his despair is described as "frigid" (Hardy 1988, p. 250).

Regarding Barbara's family, they dislike Edmond Willowes because he is "very imperfectly educated" (Hardy 1988, p. 251) and his blood is "of no distinction" (Hardy 1988, p. 251); their classism and social prejudices are emphasized through a description of elements of the setting that convey symbolic meanings: the "four-centred arch bearing the family shields on its haunches" (Hardy 1988, p. 252) is the background against which Lord and Lady Grebe's emerge as monsters of the ambition, the will, and the intellect.

Through benevolent irony, Barbara and Edmond are characterised as relatively innocent monsters of the passions. The narrator ironically compares their pathemic development to "the earth in its geologic stages […] first a hot coal, then a warm one, then a cooling cinder, then chilly" (Hardy 1988, p. 252). The evolution of their desire is reduced to a natural process since they are subject to sensuous passions that merely follow the rules of the natural world, without being disciplined by intellect and will. Regarding their physical appearance, they recall figures painted on 18th-century works of art: Edmond has large dark eyes, and "a figure that could scarsely be surpassed" (Hardy 1988, p. 253); Barbara has a "fair young face" (Hardy 1988, p. 253), and her irregular features are "almost infantine as you may see from miniatures in possession of the family" (Hardy 1988, p. 253). Through a subtle similitude, Barbara is represented as one of her family's miniatures, a little portrait to be displayed as part of a larger collection, a family heritage in which sociocultural values are embedded. Her attributes anticipate one of the key themes developed in the story, that is the aestheticization and fetishization of human beings in a world pervaded by patriarchal structures and conformism. In such a world, desire is always a mediated feeling.

In *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977), Roland Barthes analyses a kind of mediated love in which the loved being is a mere tool of a 'desire of desire' and otherness is annulled (Barthes 2001, pp. 32-33). In their study of the semiotics of passions, also Greimas and Fontanille observe that in many narratives, "the impassioned subject eludes the control of his Sender, a passional disposition having been substituted for the Sender's making-to-do" (Greimas and Fontanille 1993, p. 31). In their view, this passional disposition is a subjective tension influenced by cultural and social elements. In *Thomas hardy. Distance and Desire* (1970), Joseph Hillis Miller has underlined that in Hardy's narratives "love […] is a projection outward from a man's affective nature, not a response to anything objectively present as a spiritual essence in the loved one" (Hillis Miller 1970, p. 118). It is usually the look that "causes the sudden flowing out of stored-up emotion" (Hillis Miller 1970, p. 119).

In *Barbara of the House of Grebe*, Edmond seems to function as a projection of Barbara's "passional surplus" (Greimas and Fontanille 1993, p. 32), namely her love for beauty induced by her family's obsession with *belles-lettres* and fine arts. He is characterised as "one of the handsomest men who had ever set lips on a maid's" (Hardy 1988, p. 253) also in the eyes of Barbara's mother. The pivotal role played by the eyesight as a catalyst for passional development and identity formation in Barbara's sociocultural

world is underlined by her parents when they urge Edmond to "apply himself to the study of languages, manners, history, society, ruins and *everything else that c[o]me under his eyes*" (Hardy 1988, p. 254, emphasis added). Like Jude in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Edmond is "a mild and civil man confused by the words and promises of others" (Weinstein 1984, p. 131). On the one hand, Barbara's amorous desire is configured as a subjugation to the sense of sight that seems to correspond with Fourier's luxism; on the other, it is partly regulated by the distributive passions of variety, refinement and combination that pertain to the sphere of the intellect. It is mediated not only by internalised images of classic beauty acquired through an aristocratic education, but also by material simulacra such as letters, paintings, and sculptures. When Edmund is sent to Italy and writes love letters to Barbara, she can see in those letters "the development of her husband's mind" (Hardy 1988, p. 254) in accordance with her family's cultural expectations. However, the separation of the spouses causes a "growing coolness in herself" (Hardy 1988, p. 255), since Edmond is "no longer *in evidence* to fortify her in her choice of him" (Hardy 1988, p. 254, emphasis added). Since their material tie is not stimulated by the sense of sight, it gradually dissolves, bringing to the fore the couple's "*mésalliance*" (Hardy 1988, p. 255, emphasis in original). On an emotional level, Barbara's mismatched marriage implies a state of passional discord reminiscent of Fourier's idea of *hemigamy* or incomplete love (Fourier 1851, p. 348): Barbara is bound to Edmond by a material – sensuous – tie that is not supported by an authentic spiritual affinity. The ideal, mediated nature of Barbara's feelings is unveiled when "she pray[s] for a warmer heart" (Hardy 1988, p. 255), invoking the return of her love instead of her lover's. In a desperate attempt to act faithfully, she writes to Edmond and begs him to send her his portrait "ever so small, that she might look at it all day and every day, and never for a moment forget his features" (Hardy 1988, p. 255). As Massimo Fusillo observes, "the most frequent role played by the object in literature is to reactivate memory" (Fusillo 2017, p. 33). In *Barbara of the House of Grebe*, the portrait miniature is conceived as a substitute for the absent person; it is a fetishisation of the beloved that inscribes him in a cultural and aesthetic custom pertaining to 18th-century aristocracy[3].

After the fire accident in Venice, Barbara is informed of Edmond's serious injuries and prepares for the worst while waiting for her husband's return. However, when she finds herself faced with his disfigured face, she is passed through by a "spasm of horror" (Hardy 1988, p. 261). Edmond' transformation violates Barbara's transcendental image of him as the embodiment of beauty. What she sees is a "dreadful spectacle, [a] human remnant, [an] *écorché*" (Hardy 1988, p. 261). *Écorchées* are anatomical models – drawn, painted, or sculptured – of the human body with the skin removed to display the musculature. The narrator uses this technical term to render Barbara's perception of Edmond as a dehumanised entity and a dreadful artistic object. Instead of a miniature representing her beloved's beauty, she receives the visit of "an apparition" (Hardy 1988, p. 262), a human being "metamorphosed to a specimen of another species" (Hardy 1988, p. 262). The somatics of passion clearly emerges in the narrator's lexical choices: Edmond "tremble[s]" (Hardy 1988, p. 260), and Barbara "shudder[s]" (Hardy 1988, p. 261). Despite their semantic similarity, the verb *to tremble* represents an action usually associated with fear, anxiety, and excitement, while the verb *to shudder* expresses feelings of fear and revulsion. Edmond's words explain in a philosophical way – reminiscent of

[3] According to Jean Baudrillard, "fetishism is not the sanctification of a certain object or value […] It is the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system" (Baudrillard 2007, p. 92).

Fourier's considerations on spiritual and material love – that Barbara's way of love is mainly sensuous: "I was aware that no *human* love could survive such a catastrophe. I confess I thought yours *divine*; but, after so long an absence, there could not be left sufficient warmth to overcome the too natural first aversion" (Hardy 1988, p. 263, emphasis in original). After Edmond has left, she feels guilty for having been "slave to mere eyesight, like a child" (Hardy 1988, p. 263), and expresses her contrition in a bovaristic way: she plays the role of a philanthropist, planning "to build a church-aisle, or erect a monument, and devote herself to deeds of charity for the remainder of her days" (Hardy 1988, p. 263). Arboreal similitudes are used to compare plants and human beings: both are subject to unconscious natural forces that influence their behaviour. As a detached observer, the narrator uses the language of nature to biologize the characters "intermittences of the heart" (Hillis Miller 1970, p. 146): since "human hearts are as prone to change as the leaves of the creeper on the wall" (Hardy 1988, p. 264), Barbara accepts the attentions of Lord Uplandtowers. The narrator adds that "Barbara did not love him, but hers was essentially one of those sweet-pea or with-wind natures which require a twig of stouter fibre than its own to hang upon and bloom" (Hardy 1988, p. 265). The choice of a new husband is not intentional but is induced by survival instincts since Barbara is too weak to survive alone.

Regarding the neoclassical statue of Edmond, it embodies the cultural and aesthetic values that oriented Barbara's falling in love with her early suitor, "a specimen of manhood almost perfect in every line and contour" (Hardy 1988, p. 267). If the Edmond of the past is described as an artistic object – outlined through lines and contour – rather than a real man, his Canovesque copy acquires first a fetihistic and then a simulacral[4] dimension that obliterates the traumatic memory of the man's disfigured body: when Barbara first sees the life-size statue, she stands in trance "before the first husband" (Hardy 1988, p. 267). She does not acknowledge that she is standing before a representation, since she considers the statue a "perfect being [that] was really the man she loved" (Hardy 1988, p. 267). As Marroni observes, in Barbara's mind "fiction becomes the true reality whilst the real world […] becomes unreal" (Marroni 1994, p. 37). In this fiction, Barbara herself is turned into an artistic object in the eyes of her second husband, who secretly observes her embracing the statue of Edmond: "The shawl which she had thrown round her nightclothes had slipped from her shoulders, and her long white robe and pale face lent her the balanced appearance of a second statue embracing the first" (Hardy 1988, p. 269). Lord Uplandtowers' jeaolousy towards "Phoebus-Apollo" (Hardy 1988, p. 267) is triggered by a figurativized passional simulacrum that reminds the reader of Antonio Canova' sculpture *Venus and Adonis* (1795). Suffering from mimetic desire, he confuses the marble copy with an actual rival, and resorts to a drastic solution to defeat him: he makes a local artisan disfigure and paint the statue to reproduce Edmond's real appearance after the fire accident since "[a] statue should represent a man as he appeared in life" (Hardy 1988, p. 270). Tracy Hayes asserts that "Edmond essentially dies twice, corporeally, and then metaphorically" (Hayes 2020, p. 87); what is obliterated is an aesthetic ideal of beauty and virtue, a simulacrum of the Vitruvian man. Lord Uplandtowers places the mutilated statue in their bedroom and forces Barbara to stare at it for three consecutive nights until she has an epileptic fit. Once recovered, "a considerable change seem[s] to have taken place in her emotions" (Hardy 1988, p. 273): she expresses

[4] According to Thomas A. Sebeok, when a fetish is turned into a model, it becomes a simulacrum (Sebeok 2001, p. 154).

her repugnance toward the image of Edmond and swears her eternal love to Lord Uplandtowers.

Brady underlines that it is Barbara's "'infantine' quality that allows Uplandtowers to coherce her affection" (Brady 1982, p. 61). Her childish emotional state is a consequence of Lord and Lady Grebe's parenting, of their "ignoble ambition" (Hardy 1988, p. 274), and of "the conventions of the time" (Hardy 1988, p. 274), which consisted in treating young women as 'female miniatures' to sell to the highest bidder. Instead of using "the simple stratagem of constant tenderness" (Hardy 1988, p. 269), a stratagem wisely adopted by Reynard in *The First Countess of Wessex*, Lord Uplandtowers takes advantage of Barbara' infantilism by turning her into a servile wife through psychological torture. However, this resolution proves itself to be ineffective since Barbara develops an insane mania towards him, and has a series of miscarriages that are the result and the symbol of their perverse and hemigamouos marital union.

The statue goes through a process of refunctionalisation that reflects the degeneration of Barbara's pathemic condition from passional attachment to fear and detachment, and that can be read through the lens of Francesco Orlando's categories of obsolete objects (Orlando 2006): first, the statue is created to ignite Barbara's amorous feelings through the sense of the sight; subsequently, it becomes a repository of affective memory that corresponds with Orlando's category of "reminiscent-affective" (Orlando 2006, p. 123); then, as a result of Lord Uplandtowers' sadistic tortures, it is turned into a source of terror, embodying a merging of the categories of "sinister-terrifying" and "sterile-noxious" (Orlando 2006, p. 169)[5]; finally, when the mutilated statue is buried and later mistaken for a relic of classical art, it falls into the category of the "desolated-disconnected" (Orlando 2006, p. 123).

2.3. The Duchess of Hamptonshire

As noted by Brady, *The Duchess of Hamptonshire* raises some issues already developed in *The First Countess of Wessex* and in *Barbara of the House of Grebe* (Brady 1982, p. 80). What emerges in these narratives are monstruous social conventions and their monstrous outputs, involving the "clash of man's logic and nature's" (Hillis Miller 1970, p. 13). The story is about Emmeline Oldbourne, a young lady forced by her parents to marry a man she does not love – the Duke of Hamptonshire – because of his social prestige. Emmeline is secretly in love with young and handsome curate Alwyn Hill, who is nevertheless unable to save her from a dreary life.

Regarding the heroine of this story, she is described from the outset as a potential object of mimetic desire: Emmeline was "of so sweet and simple a nature that her beauty was *discovered*, *measured*, and *inventoried* by almost everybody in that part of the country before it was suspected by herself to exist" (Hardy 1988, p. 341, emphasis added). Not only has everyone in the county *discovered* her beauty, but they have also *measured* and *inventoried* it, endowing it with some profit according to local social conventions. The verb *to inventory* also recalls the museum exhibits that surround the members of the Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club, drawing a connection between the reification of human and nonhuman living beings. Emmeline's transformation in an object of mediated collective desire is also suggested by the narrator's use of a metaphor rooted in Homeric epics: "Her charms of person, manner, and mind had been clear for some time to the

[5] Considering the mental and physical deterioration of Barbara, the category of sterile-noxious allows to interpret her sterility and related dysphoria as a result of her infatuation with a nonliving object.

Antinous in orders" (Hardy 1988, p. 341). The Duke of Hamptonshire is one of these Antinous; however, while the Homeric Antinous praises Penelope for her intelligence, great artistry and skill, the duke "takes fire to a degree that [is] well-nigh terrible at sudden sight of Emmeline" (Hardy 1988, p. 341) only after the county's community has made Emmeline a myth. In other words, he desires what others potential suitors would desire. The first time he sees her, he goes home "like a man who ha[s] seen a spirit" (Hardy 1988, p. 342), as if Emmeline were the embodiment of a feminine beauty ideal:

> He ascended to the picture-gallery of his castle, and there passed some time in staring at the bygone beauties of his line as if he had never before considered what an important part those specimens of womankind had played in the evolution of the Saxelbye race. He dined alone, drank rather freely, and declared to himself that Emmeline Oldbourne must be his. (Hardy 1988, p. 342)

The duke's amorous desire is also triggered by the vision of portraits of ancestors, 'bygone beauties' immortalized on canvas. His desire is therefore aroused by two mediators: the local community and works of art that function as emblems of lineage identity. In this context, Emmeline is turned into a simulacrum of 'those specimens of womankind' that guarantee generational continuity. Basing on Fourier's studies, the duke is attracted by Emmeline only on a material level, being spiritually petty and mean. Indeed, regarding his mimetic attributes, he is described by the narrator as "scandalously ignorant of dainty phrases" (Hardy 1988, p. 341), displaying "clumsy manners towards the gentle sex" (Hardy 1988, p. 341). Furthermore, like Lord Uplandtowers, he is characterised as a monster of the will: obsessed with his idea, he declares to himself that Emmeline 'must be his', as if she had no desires of her own.

Once the wedding has been celebrated, Emmeline expresses her despair "by shedding *stupid* scalding tears at a time when a *right-minded* lady would have been overhauling her wardrobe" (Hardy 1988, p. 343, emphasis added). What emerges in this passage, which introduces the point of view of the duchess' maids and men, is a trivial idea of marriage as a contract based on material rather than spiritual ties. By contrast, the narrator sheds light on "the real dimensions of Emmeline's misery" (Hardy 1988, p. 343), entering her life in an omniscient way, and describing her husband's brutality in his attempt to eradicate her memories of Alwyn. The polyphonic structure of the story corresponds with the author's ability to perceive the "contrasting side of things" (Hardy 1967a, p. 49) and the compresence of comedy and tragedy in human life depending on the observer's intellectual or emotional perspective.

Suspecting, without foundation, that Emmeline is secretly communicating with Alwyn, the duke tries to extort a confession of infidelity from her by means of torture. Behaving like Lord Uplandtowers, he tries to obliterate Emmeline's ideal of romantic love through perverse "plans [she] dare[s] not describe" (Hardy 1988, p. 344). One night, Emmeline meets Alwyn and implores him to flee together to America, but he rejects her plea by invoking Christian morality: he can't save her because "it is forbidden in God's law" (Hardy 1988, p. 345). Emmeline and Alwyn's spiritual affinity reveals to be illusory, being Emmeline a creature of passion and Alwyn a creature of intellect and will. Alwin's moralised rationality manifests itself as an act of will on the ship that brings him to America, where "he mechanically endeavour[s] to school himself into a stoical frame of mind" (Hardy 1988, p. 345). During the sailing-passage, he immerses himself in philosophical texts in a ridiculous attempt to obliterate his epicurean drives, while nature – embodied by the sea's murmuring water – constantly reminds him of Emmeline's voice. The "deadly war waged between flesh and spirit" (Hardy 1967b, p. 32) in Jude's soul is experienced also by Alwyn, who establishes "rules of conduct for reducing to mild

proportions the feverish regrets which […] occasionally arise and agitate him" (Hardy 1988, p. 345). Drawing on Fourier's terminology, it can be stated that Alwyn's passional outbursts collide with his persistent will. Once arrived in Boston, he realises he can no longer be a minister of religion and becomes a professor of rhetoric and oratory. Turning to poetry, he "passe[s] his winter evenings in turning sonnets and elegies, often giving his thoughts voice in 'Lines to an Unfortunate Lady'" (Hardy 1988, p. 346)[6]. Alwyn conceives sonnets and elegies as simulacra of his tragic amorous experience and of his ideal of a pure womanhood: Emmeline's immorality is redeemed through the poetic language; her impulsiveness is transfigured in another code that turns the treacherous woman into a victim of the circumstances. When, nine years later, Alwyn reads on a journal that the Duke of Hamptonshire is dead, he decides to come back to England to rescue the heroine he has idealized through literature. He can no longer "bind himself down to machine-made synecdoche, antithesis, and climax, being full of spontaneous specimens of all these rhetorical forms" (Hardy 1988, p. 347). However, such forms are only apparently spontaneous, since they are the result of Alwyn's prolonged immersion in poetry. Basing on Barthes, it can be asserted that Alwyn's discursive site is unidirectional: he speaks "within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object) who does not speak" (Barthes 2001, p. 3, emphasis in original). His love is unable to express itself outside a prison of the imagination; it is a sterile feeling that is nourished by ghosts and poetic, romantic ideals. In some way, Hamptonshire and Alwyn are similar to each other: in the beginning, they act as monsters of the intellect and the will, being fired by mediated desires that are triggered by cultural items and conventions, respectively portraits of noble women, local myths, and religious precepts; later, they become monsters of the passions, the former mistreating his wife, the latter daydreaming on his missing love. Once Alwyn arrives in England, he discovers that Emmeline has died in a vain attempt to follow him in his journey to America. The narrator's words underscore how Alwyn's way of loving is nourished by bovaristic and solipsistic dreams doomed to remain unfulfilled: "Thus the ten years' chapter of Alwyn Hill's *romance* wound itself up under his eyes" (Hardy 1988, p. 351, emphasis added).

3. Conclusion

This article has explored the semiotics of desire in three stories from Hardy's collection *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891). By drawing on Fourier's theory of human passions, which Hardy summarised through a sketch in the first volume of his *Literary Notes*, and James Phelan's rhetorical theory, it has read the characters represented in the stories as 'monsters of the intellect, the will, and the passions'. To carry out this analysis, the article has drawn connections between the mimetic attributes of the characters and the thematic dimension of the narratives, focusing on the relationships between sociocultural conventions, pathemic structures, mediated forms of amorous desire, and Hardy's literary language. Special attention has been given to the fetishistic and simulacral dimensions of art and literature by focusing on some 'cultural objects' that either trigger or embody the characters' desires. In this investigation, the passional dominant seems to control Betty

[6] The title of this elegy is reminiscent of Alexander Pope's *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* (1717), and covertly introduces the theme of death and unmournability: like the lady in Pope's poem, Emmeline dies lacking the due attention of those once dear to her. Indeed, Alwyn celebrates a funeral on the ship that is sailing to America without knowing that the dead body is Emmeline's.

Dornell, Barbara Grebe, and Emmeline Oldbourne, young women who are relatively constant in their emotional character despite the psychobiological 'intermittences of their hearts'. By contrast, mature female and male characters such as Susannah Dornell, Squire Dornell, Lord Uplandtowers, the Duke of Hamptonshire, and Alwyn Hill are discontinuously driven by their passions, intellect, and will, as if the 'convenances of civilisation' caused an endless struggle between flesh and spirit within their souls.

The three stories selected as case studies – *The First Countess of Wessex*, *Barbara of the House of Grebe*, and *The Duchess of Hamptonshire* – are emblematic of Hardy's narrativization of those perverted and incomplete forms of loveism that Fourier identified as 'hemigamy' in *The Passions of the Human Soul* (1851). In the collection, other stories including *The Lady Icenway*, *Squire Petrick's Lady*, *Anna, Lady Baxby*, and *The Honourable Laura* can be read as variations on the themes of subversive (hemigamous) love and mediated desire. In his study, Fourier identified four main social affections: loveism, friendship, familism and unitysm or corporate association (Fourier 1851, p. 266). In his literary production, Hardy thematized each of these socioemotional ties, representing them in their comic and tragic dimensions. Therefore, the semiotic analysis offered in this article, combined with historical contextualization and biographical criticism, could be applied to other works by Hardy to investigate how he used language to represent subversive forms of sociability nourished by classism and gender-based constraints. Any critical study that aims to follow the elusive contours of Hardy's fiction with a focus on the theme of desire might benefit from this approach, which explores the pathemic narrative structures in relation to the monstrous interplay of human passions, intellect and will.

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