

University of Prince Edward Island

The Decentering of Moral Authority in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* and Thomas
Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Hailey Brake

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Supervisor: Dr. Esther Wohlgemut

Secondary Readers: Dr. Shannon Murray & Jarmo Puiras

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Introduction

The nineteenth century was a time of great instability in England's religious cultural landscape, "inaugurated" by "intellectual, social, and political revolutions" (Altholz). For the first time since the Protestant Reformation, there was a major political event that destabilized the cultural landscape as a whole. The century opened on the heels of the French Revolution, and with it, the advent of Romantic ideals in Britain. Given Britain's period of strict orthodoxy after the reinstatement of the Anglican Church as the state church in 1661, these Romantic ideals were especially revolutionary, prioritizing emotion over reason and "individual urgings of the spirit over orthodoxy" (White 10). Romanticism brought into prominence a competing system of beliefs that conflicted with orthodox religious teachings throughout the nineteenth century. As the Anglican priest Robert South noted during this period of time, the "enthusiasm" prompted by the emerging Romantic ideals was "that pestilent and vile thing, which, wheresoever it has had its full course, has thrown church and state into confusion" (White 10). Heightening the conflict between Romantic ideals and preexisting institutions was the fact that eighteenth-century Anglicanism "considered the democratic impulse [of Romanticism] specifically un-Christian, because democracy disorders the 'natural' hierarchies set by God" (White 4; 4-5). This conflict between new ideals and preexisting structures created further instability within England's religious cultural landscape that would continue through the 1800s.

Along with this conflict came further instability in the proliferation of sects and rise of other denominations. One such example of proliferation came with the Evangelical challenge of the early nineteenth century. Laura White notes that "Evangelicals such as Hannah More and John Bowles thundered against the luxury and idleness of the Church and its aristocratic and gentry supporters" in response to the "liberating possibilities of [French] revolution" (27). As the

century progressed, the growing Evangelical movement was joined by the English Catholic Revival, another large shift in religious thought, reaching prominence in the 1830s and continuing through the century (Altholz). The lessening of the “civil and political disabilities” on Catholic people at the end of the eighteenth century opened space for their presence and systems of belief to grow in the nineteenth century (Hexter 297). With this came even more instability as the growing Catholic presence attempted to negotiate space with the dominant frameworks of Britain’s religious cultural landscape. As Josef L. Altholz notes in his article on the Liberal Catholic movement of the nineteenth century, “The Catholic revival was therefore to be a two-sided process: the development of a greater sympathy towards Catholicism among the English Protestants, and a response by the Catholics to the challenges and opportunities of the new age” (Altholz). With this dialogue open between many different players in the religious landscape came a negotiation of doctrine and principle between different religious sects, further destabilizing consistency within the religious sphere.

This shifting religious landscape of nineteenth-century Britain raised questions as to how institutions of knowledge alter and prompted reassessment of religious authority. It follows then that instability within the religious cultural landscape served as the perfect opportunity for writers to bring into question traditionally accepted systems of belief and push at orthodoxy. As such, the instability of the religious sphere throughout the nineteenth century opened space for writers to engage with and respond to preexisting religious frameworks and competing ideals.

My thesis examines Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy’s responses to instability in the nineteenth-century religious cultural landscape. In particular, my interest lies in the relationship between religion and morality. Austen and Hardy both decenter traditional moral authority from religious institutions in their novels as a response to instability in the religious cultural landscape.

For both writers, this shift in authority further implicates questions of where morality exists and how it can be defined, central questions to their respective works. Where neither writer explicitly tells their audience what to do, writing novels, not sermons, both create highly insightful discussions in their writing of the role of institutional religion, clergy, and the individual in the nineteenth century.

My first chapter focuses on Jane Austen's response to the early nineteenth-century shifts in the religious cultural landscape. The Anglican Church in Austen's time was "rife with structural and moral problems," contributing to the general instability that Austen responds to in her writing (White 9). It is important to note that Austen was not explicit in her criticisms; rather, Byrne posits Austen as the "quintessential Anglican: spiritually sincere but undemonstrative" (204). Thus, Austen's approach to discussions of morality in her novels allows her audience to learn with her characters what is right or respectable, rather than the didactic techniques of some of her contemporaries. Austen teaches her audience through the progression of her novels, implicating in her proposed systems of religious and moral practice that personal responsibility is at the forefront of defining one's morality. In *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, Austen works to decenter the moral authority of clergy by proposing alternative characters who are equally, if not more, moral. The comparison that arises between the flawed or incomplete character that Austen criticizes and the "good" character posited as the alternative moral centre then characterizes what it is to be moral. Where in *Mansfield Park* Austen defines what it is to be a moral centre, in *Emma*, she demonstrates the shift of moral authority away from religious institutions.

The second chapter of my thesis examines Thomas Hardy's response to instability in Britain's religious cultural landscape. As with Austen, the general instability in Britain's religious sphere throughout the nineteenth century provided the opportunity for Hardy to discuss

the intersection of religious institutions and morality, especially since the rise in dissenters and non-Anglican denominations in Britain only rose as the nineteenth century progressed (Altholz). Like Austen, Hardy's teaching is not didactic and instead occurs through the recognition of new moral authority in his writing. Hardy explores questions of the quality of morality and where it exists in his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by decentering religious authority and proposing alternative moral centres. Accordingly, Hardy outlines his own definition of morality by contrasting morally refined and unrefined characters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Chapter I: Discerning and Decentering in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*

“For Jane Austen, it was not the business of writers to tell people what to do. It was their business to track the endlessly fascinating process of how human beings find themselves ‘feeling differently every moment’” (Byrne 202)

The unsteadiness within the Church of England in Austen's time afforded her the opportunity to respond to this instability in her writing. At this point in time, the competing liberal and conservative factions within Anglicanism were destabilizing uniformity in the Church, bringing into question ideas of tradition and change (Moore 314). Moore even notes that Austen's novels “register an interest in the pull of tradition and in maintaining a connection with England's pre-Reformation past and in the sorts of community it created” (322). With this instability, as well as the general instability throughout the nineteenth century in England's religious cultural landscape, Austen proposes her own values in her novels, especially in regards to the relationship between religion and morality and her representations of clergy.

As Paula Byrne writes, Austen did not believe it was the place of authors to preach to their audience and as such, did not employ explicitly didactic methods with regards to religious practice in her novels (202). While Austen was deeply religious, her desire was to avoid the sermon-style novels of other female writers of the time, such as Hannah More (Byrne 201). Interestingly, Byrne writes that Austen was “determined to dislike” Evangelicals such as Hannah More, referring to the title of More's novel, *Coelebs*, as “pedantry and affectation” (Byrne 201; 202). As such, Austen places herself in opposition to the didactic, Evangelical writings of the Clapham sect while remaining on the liberal side of the Church of England. Moore notes that “Austen blends the liberalism and conservatism of the period into her own unique form of belief, one that is more complicated and subtle than the rigid evangelical agenda” (Moore 315). With

this blend of a more liberal content and conservative form, Austen's writing serves as a presentation of ideas in response to instability in the religious landscape.

In her implicit structure, Austen affords her audience the opportunity to consider the proposed ideas for themselves. Where Austen holds a "confidence in human effort" in the growth and progression of her heroines, so too does she hold confidence in her audience's ability to learn for themselves (Moore 315). Thus, Austen's implicit approach and belief in human development allows both her characters and readers to undertake the process of maturity, allowing her audience to consider her proposed systems for themselves and internalize the morals presented. While Austen does not explicitly criticize or endorse, her novels do operate in ideals, where she presents a model character or behaviour for other characters (and the audience) to learn from. As such, Austen's characters are presented as right or wrong, allowing freedom both for the recognition of improper behaviour and the possibility of its correction in her exploration of where morality exists, what morality looks like, and who is rightfully termed a moral centre. With this, Austen's presentation of ideals refrains from the explicit, didactic methods she condemned in her contemporaries while still fostering improvement and teaching discernment in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*

In *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, Austen's presentation of the qualities of moral centres and decentering of clergy as moral authority operates through the contrast of idealized characters who are moral with flawed characters who are not, and characters who are able to discern and learn for themselves the qualities of morality through the progression of the novel. In her comparison of characters who are morally flawed with those who are morally complete, Austen establishes two equally important components of what defines a moral centre: how one views the self, and how one views and interacts with others. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen defines what it is to

be a moral centre through models of Fanny and Edmund who demonstrate two important components: their ability to discern right and wrong for themselves and right and wrong for others. In *Emma*, Austen shifts to defining what it is to be a moral authority, and in doing so, decenters moral authority from religious institutions to individuals. This authority is similarly made up of two components in the self and other, but rather than focusing on the ability to discern right and wrong (as with the moral centre), Austen defines a moral authority as having a duty to uphold right and wrong to oneself and others.

“We all have a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be”
(*Mansfield Park* 412)

Jane Austen’s exploration of what constitutes a moral centre in *Mansfield Park* focuses on Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram. Where Fanny serves as the ideal or model from the outset of the novel, Edmund’s morality develops over the course of the novel as he, like the audience, begins to understand what moral behaviour actually entails. With Fanny as the model and Edmund as the learner, Austen establishes her structure of ideals while giving room for progress, allowing for the capacity of human growth that she believed was possible for both her characters and her audience. For *Mansfield Park*, Austen’s definition of a moral centre has two important components: the self, referring to the individual themselves, and the other, referring to what one is able to discern in others. This idea of an “inner guide” as raised by Fanny embodies what is essential of a moral centre: that they are capable of discerning right and wrong both in themselves and in others. Austen defines what it is to be an ideal moral centre through her presentation of Fanny as a model and Edmund as a progressing character, who, although morally unrefined at the outset of the novel, becomes a complete moral centre.

Austen demonstrates that Fanny fulfills the “self” component of being a moral centre through her selfless, disciplined, and pure character. It is clear throughout *Mansfield Park* that Fanny is Austen’s proposed moral centre and is the ideal character. As M. W. Fosbery notes, for Fanny “to come into possession of [a happy ending] she doesn’t have to learn the moral lessons,” unlike some of Austen’s other heroines (113). With regards to Fanny’s inner morality, Austen illustrates Fanny’s ability to discern right and wrong for herself even from childhood at the outset of *Mansfield Park*. For example, when Edmund takes Fanny’s horse so Mary Crawford can ride, Fanny accepts this without complaint, even though Edmund goes on to realize how he erred in this situation and how Fanny was undeserving of this treatment (*Mansfield Park* 74). This quality

of selflessness is consistent through Fanny's life and her characterization as a moral centre. Later in the novel, when considering Thomas Bertram's moral fall into drinking and illness, the narrator notes in Fanny's reflection on Thomas' life that "the purity of her principles added yet a keener solicitude, when she considered how little useful, how little self-denying his life had (apparently) been" (428). In this instance, Fanny recognizes that important to a life of morally sound behaviour is an avoidance of self-indulgence and serving others, two traits upheld by Fanny, which Austen rewards by emphasizing Fanny's "pure principles." Austen even describes Fanny's "every feeling of duty, honour, and tenderness," further contributing to the establishment of Fanny as fulfilling the sound sense of self that is essential to being a moral centre (386). Austen cements Fanny's soundness of character when Henry says to Fanny, "you have some touches of the angel in you" (344). With this connection between Fanny and the angel, implicating not just religious imagery, but concepts of the Victorian "angel in the house," Austen emphasizes Fanny's purity, indicating her moral completeness. Thus, Austen solidifies Fanny as an ideal moral centre based on her sound sense of self.

Equally important to Fanny's status as a moral centre is her ability to distinguish whether the behaviour of others is moral. Throughout the novel, Fanny is highly consistent in her application of judgment. For instance, Fanny's correct discernment of Mary is a thread throughout the novel. After meeting Mary Crawford, Fanny notes that she was "ungrateful" and "ought not to have spoken of her uncle as she did" (63). Fanny is immediately able to recognize the wrong in Mary's behaviour and stands by this judgement throughout the novel. Austen reiterates Fanny's correct view of Mary in a later example, as Fanny notes, "If there was a woman of character in existence, who could treat as a trifle this sin of the first magnitude, who could try to gloss it over, and desire to have it unpunished, she could believe Miss Crawford to

be the woman” (441). Thus, Fanny remains constant throughout *Mansfield Park* in her morally sound perception of character, solidifying her own inner morality. Furthermore, Austen establishes Fanny’s clear perception of Mary’s character even when other characters’ opinions do not align. For instance, Fanny says of Edmund that “he was deceived in [Mary Crawford],” and that she “could not subdue her agitation; and the dejection which followed could only be relieved by the influence of fervent prayers for his happiness” (264). This example establishes both that Fanny is correct in her judgement and that Edmund is deceived, with Fanny’s clarity in perceiving the intent of others solidifying her, rather than Edmund, as a sound moral centre at this point in the novel. With this, Austen establishes Fanny’s ability to properly discern not just what is right for herself, but what is right in others, cementing her status as a clearly defined moral centre.

It is Fanny’s moral goodness and ability to discern this in others that places her as the pinnacle of morality for the novel. Important too is that Fanny’s opinions of characters ultimately matches Austen’s characterization, as Fanny’s view of the Crawfords as morally unrefined ultimately aligns with their status at the end of the novel; Austen solidifies Fanny’s judgement as accurate and the ideal to aspire to. In this, Austen is further able to present behaviour as right or wrong through how it is perceived by Fanny. Though Fanny is static in development, it is only because she is already Austen’s ideal moral centre, understanding what is right and wrong both for the self and other. With this, Austen establishes for the audience a model of good judgement and moral centre against which her other characters can be judged.

Where Fanny is a stable ideal and serves as a moral centre throughout *Mansfield Park*, Edmund’s status as moral centre develops throughout the novel. Austen establishes that Edmund is solidly capable of discerning his own behaviour, though his ability to discern character in

others is far less stable than Fanny's at the outset. Like Fanny, Edmund has a sound sense of internal morality and ability to discern right and wrong for himself, though unlike Fanny, he must learn how to discern this in others. This initial soundness of the "self" component of being a moral centre is made clear in other characters' observations of Edmund, with Fanny remarking that he is "an example of every thing good and great" and Mary noting "his sincerity, his steadiness, his integrity" (37; 65). Austen further establishes this integrity of Edmund's character in his recognition of his own behaviour as right or wrong. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes that "Vexed as Edmund was with his mother and aunt, he was still more angry with himself. His own forgetfulness of her was worse than any thing which they had done" (74). Edmund is fully capable of holding himself accountable and perceives the rightness and wrongness in his own action and character.¹ Thus, Austen demonstrates that Edmund fulfills the "self" component of morality.

While like Fanny, Edmund possesses the ability to discern what is right for himself throughout the novel, his ability to reliably evaluate the morality of others is lacking at the outset of *Mansfield Park*. For example, when discerning Mary's behaviour at the beginning of the novel, Edmund is far more forgiving of Mary than Fanny. When Fanny comments on Mary's behaviour, Edmund responds to Fanny's description that "Ungrateful is a strong word...I do not censure her *opinions*; but there certainly is impropriety in making them public" (63). The conflicting views of Fanny and Edmund here is significant, as Fanny is more correct than Edmund in her perception of the severity of Mary's misdoings, as revealed later in the novel. This moment indicates who truly is a moral centre, as where Fanny uses more severe language than Edmund, she recognizes—more than he does—the flaws in Mary's action and is therefore a

¹ While this quote solidifies Edmund's ability to discern his own behaviour, it also introduces the idea that Edmund holds himself to a different standard than others, which while beneficial for his own behaviour, leads to lapses in his fulfilling the criteria of moral centre.

better discerner. Edmund's tendency towards gentle labelling continues as he describes Mary's misbehaviour as "little errors" (270). Thus, where Mary Crawford serves as proof of Fanny's constancy and ability to properly discern right and wrong in others, for Edmund, his overly gentle and incorrect perception of Mary indicates that his ability to correctly discern behaviour in others is not complete. With this, Austen models Edmund's development through how he reacts and engages with Mary Crawford and indicates that though Edmund is sound in self, his ability to discern character in others limits his status as a complete moral centre.

Interestingly, Edmund's inability to correctly discern the misbehaviour of others compromises his own morality, as his soundness of self deteriorates under the influence of Mary Crawford. Fanny describes that "Edmund was so inconsistent. Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing. She had seen her influence in every speech" (156). Fanny, as the moral centre and sound discerner of the novel, establishes that Edmund has lost his constancy and his own ability to discern action for himself as a result of his interactions with Mary Crawford. This idea continues later, as Fanny describes that by participating in the play as a result of Mary's pleading, "Edmund had descended from that mortal elevation which he had maintained before, and they were both as much the better as the happier for the descent" (158). The specific reference to moral elevation flags how Edmund's inability to discern behaviour in others has led to negative impacts on his own status as moral. Thus, Austen presents that being a moral centre is dependent on both discerning the behaviour of others in addition to oneself, and that the inability to correctly label and discern in others can cause a deterioration of one's own moral status; there is a danger in not only not attending to oneself, but allowing others to proceed in an incorrect manner.

However, Edmund's ability to reliably discern morality in others evolves throughout *Mansfield Park* and the completion of this second aspect solidifies his status as a moral centre by the end of the novel. Edmund's shifting language towards Mary, as well as his discussion of the difference between thought and action, signals the progression in his ability to discern. For instance, approaching the end of the novel and after the incident between Edmund's sister, Maria Bertram, and Henry Crawford, Edmund realizes the true faults that lie in Mary's character. Edmund describes to Fanny that "The evil lies yet deeper; in [Mary's] total ignorance, unsuspectingness of there being such feelings, in a perversion of mind which made it natural to her to treat the subject as she did" (456). Edmund's strong language in describing Mary as "evil" is in line with Fanny's earlier comment of Mary's "sin," aligning Edmund's ability to discern with Fanny, and thus, characterizing it as sound. This change in Edmund's language works to further illustrate his personal evolution as he is now able to label her behaviour with adequate severity. Edmund's improved discernment is not only directed towards Mary, but to other characters too. Edmund speaks of his intended "plan of education" for his sisters, but recognizes that he was unable to properly right and wrong them. He remarks:

"Something must have been wanting *within*, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they never had been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments...could have had no useful influence in that way, no moral effects on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition" (463).

Edmund's recognition of his error demonstrates his development and ability to properly discern right and wrong in others, adequately perceiving the severity in thought as well as in action. With his ability to discern moral behaviour in himself and in others, Edmund assumes the status of moral centre as defined by Austen.

Thus, in her portrayal of Fanny as an ideal and Edmund as an evolving character, Austen establishes two components to being a moral centre: the ability to discern right and wrong behaviour in oneself and the ability to discern this behaviour in others. For Austen, there is a difference between simply being good and being a moral centre, where the latter has a component of discernment towards both oneself and others, as Austen establishes through Edmund's progression. As Fosbery writes, "Fanny is ready for Edmund Bertram—it is he who has come to appreciate her and this he can do only when he has appreciated the world of the Crawfords" (114). When Edmund develops his ability to discern right and wrong in others in addition to himself, Austen solidifies his status as a complete moral centre, reinforcing the importance of both self and other in being a moral individual.

“Silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way. Wickedness is always wickedness, but folly is not always folly. It depends upon the character of those who handle it.” (*Emma* 153-154)

Where Austen establishes the qualities of an ideal moral centre in the characters of Fanny and Edmund in *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* explores how morality actually exists. Through a system of gentle reproofs and in contrasting the non-ideal Elton with the idealized Knightley, Austen defines what constitutes a moral authority and decenters authority from religious institution to community. Like her models of moral centres in *Mansfield Park*, serving as a moral authority comprises two distinct components: the self and the other. However, differences arise between moral centres and moral authorities in that moral centres possess the ability to discern what is right and wrong for themselves and others, while moral authorities have a duty to uphold what is right and wrong to self and other. In *Emma*, Austen contrasts Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley through whether they uphold their duties to themselves through their internal motivation and their conduct in front of others. Austen then contrasts the two through whether they uphold their duties to others in their role as a leader and attitude towards other characters. With this, Austen also uses Emma’s character development and recognition of moral authority through religious diction to reinforce the migration of moral authority from Mr. Elton to Mr. Knightley.

Mr. Elton’s failed duty as a moral authority to himself is often exemplified by his corrupt internal motivations. Austen characterizes Mr. Elton to be vain and self-centered, putting his status as moral authority into question. In one example, Emma comments that “Mr. Elton was proving himself, in many respects, the very opposite of what [Emma] had meant and believed him—proud, assuming, conceited; very full of his own claims, and little concerned about the feelings of others” (99). This condemnation outlines the primary faults that contribute to Mr. Elton’s inability to uphold moral conduct in himself. In another instance, Austen describes Mr.

Elton as “almost too gallant to be in love,” establishing that Mr. Elton is so vain and invested in his own interests that he is unable to perceive anything outside of himself (*Emma* 35). This selfishness continues in his action, like when he assumes “himself the right of first interest” to Emma, deeply offending Mrs Weston and requiring a “reproof” from Mrs Weston to “restore him to his senses” (92). This foppish behaviour, as a result of selfish motivations, only solidifies Mr. Elton’s inability to discern right and wrong for himself and act morally, failing to fulfill a central component of moral authority.

Austen further characterizes Mr. Elton’s corrupted sense of self through his artificial conduct in front of other characters. For instance, when Emma presents her portrait of Harriet to Mr. Elton, he flatters her to no end, and when other characters introduce valid criticism of the portrait, Mr. Elton tells them, “Oh, no—certainly not,” reiterating to Emma that her work is perfect (34). Given the other reactions to the painting, it is clear that Mr. Elton is being superficially complimentary. In a similar example, Emma notes that Mr. Elton “does sigh and languish, and study for compliments” (35-36). There is a sense that nothing Mr. Elton does is ever natural. That he is always practiced, even in trifling instances like the practiced compliments, highlights a much larger issue with his character: if he cannot be genuine in his interactions with others, when is he ever genuine? Another example of Mr. Elton’s practiced and superficial air arises from John Knightley, as he describes to Emma that “I never in my life saw a man more intent on being agreeable than Mr. Elton. It is downright labour to him where the ladies are concerned. With men he can be rational and unaffected, but when he has ladies to please, every feature works” (82).² While the reference to “labour” indicates that Mr. Elton puts work into his conduct and that his presentation is not natural, the example becomes immoral

² This detail about Mr. Elton’s “every feature” only condemns him further, as it is shown that he will employ anything he can to manipulate how he is perceived by others, to the effect that nothing about his character can be viewed as true or real.

when considering that Mr. Elton uses his affect to different ends and with different individuals, altering himself so greatly around women that his social mis-steps take on an air of cunning. As such, Austen draws further question to Mr. Elton's role as a moral authority in her criticism of his superficial conduct.

Austen exemplifies Mr. Elton's inability to uphold his duty to others through his superficial fulfillment of his clerical role. While Mr. Elton is present for many of the central social interactions of *Emma*, the audience has a limited sense as to who he is as a clergyman. Moreover, the few instances where Mr. Elton is described within the context of his role as vicar are incredibly superficial. For instance, Harriet claims to Emma that "Mr. Elton is so good to the poor!" despite there not being any description of Mr. Elton's interactions with the poor throughout the entire novel (111). In a similar example, Harriet comments that Mr. Elton is "a man that everybody looks up to, quite like Mr. Knightley" (56). It is interesting that the comparison of the two is established so early on, but Mr. Elton is only superficially recognized to be like Mr. Knightley due to the similar positions they are meant to uphold in the community. Any praise of Mr. Elton is never actually proven, and only serves as a representation of the false praise that is given to those in clergy. Austen writes later in the novel that a parishioner goes to visit Mr. Elton to "seek relief from the parish" (279). Austen is making an important distinction here, as it is not Mr. Elton being sought, but the institution that he represents. In a time of need, he is not wanted for moral support or guidance, but for whatever economic support the church as a whole can provide. It becomes clear that Mr. Elton is only recognized for surface-level support. While Mr. Elton will take advantage of the rewards associated with his position—such as attending dinner parties and other social occasions—he is incapable of fulfilling any of the spiritual or moral responsibilities required of a true moral authority. Mr. Elton serves as a

representative of clergy who “pursue[s] church careers largely out of necessity” and “lack[s] spiritual vocation” (Moore 317). Thus, Austen criticizes Mr. Elton for assuming a role he has no intention of adequately fulfilling and as such, does not recognize him as the moral authority of Highbury as his position would typically necessitate.

Mr. Elton’s pretentious and inconsiderate attitude towards others in his community further discredits his status as a moral authority. In fact, the way Mr. Elton speaks of Harriet directly opposes this sense that he is kind or good to those less fortunate than himself, as he tells Emma, “Everybody has their level; but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!” (97). While there exists a solid basis for his not wanting to marry Harriet, the callous way Mr. Elton describes her as being so solidly beneath him and how he would have to “despair” to address himself to her is needlessly cruel. In another example, Mr. Elton refuses to dance with Harriet, with the narrator noting that “[Mr. Knightley] was warm in his reprobation of Mr. Elton’s conduct; it had been unpardonable rudeness,” and Mr. Knightley himself noting that Mr. Elton’s actions were “wounding” (240). Though Mr. Elton’s role as a clergyman is as a leader and model of behaviour for his community, he is evidently rude and improper, destabilizing his position as a moral authority based on his lack of duty or care towards others in his community. Mr. Elton’s disregard for his duty to self and others is especially important since he is a member of clergy, demonstrating Austen’s broader decentering of moral authority from institutions.

Where Mr. Elton clearly has no sense of moral duty to himself, Mr. Knightley is the exact opposite, with his internal motivations presenting as sensible and selfless in stark contrast to Mr. Elton’s vanity and selfishness. Even from his name, Austen establishes Mr. Knightley as a humane man who is thoughtful and considerate. In one example, Emma describes Mr. Knightley

as “upright justice and clear-sighted good-will” (303). Austen associates Mr. Knightley with justice itself, implying both his clear moral code and his application of it through action. As James Bennett notes in his article on Mr. Knightley, “He is almost always kind, tolerant, generous, dignified, resolute, right in his judgements, and clear about his own motives—a man to respect and even love” (250). Moreover, Mr. Knightley does not just demonstrate this duty to himself, he is aware of the duty too. Mr. Knightley tells Emma that “There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chooses, and that is, his duty” (107). It is this understanding, in addition to his upholding his sense of duty which sets Mr. Knightley apart from other characters of *Emma*. As such, Mr. Knightley’s genuine selflessness and sound internal motivations cements his sense of moral duty to himself as he possesses both the ability to discern right from wrong in himself and apply it.

Mr. Knightley’s sound sense of duty to himself is further established in his genuine presentation of self and his awareness of the performativity of others. An example where both of these characteristics are present is when Emma is presenting her portrait of Harriet to Mr. Knightley and Mr. Elton. While Mr. Elton flatters Emma to no end and declares her portrait of Harriet to be perfect, Mr. Knightley comments that Emma has actually “made her too tall” (34). Where Mr. Elton acts only in ways that work to his benefit, Mr. Knightley values accurate judgement and does not care for the consequences if it means he is doing what is right.³ Mr. Knightley demonstrates the ability to discern right and wrong but also takes the corresponding action that is essential to serving as a moral authority. While she establishes Mr. Knightley’s genuine conduct, Austen also establishes his ability to discern when conduct is artificial in others; the narrator comments, “there was one spirit among them not to be softened, from its

³In this contrast between the supplanted moral authority in Elton and Austen’s proposed alternative in Knightley, she solidifies both Mr. Knightley’s genuine conduct in front of others and Mr. Elton’s artificiality.

power of censure, by bows or smiles” (149). Mr. Knightley is immune to charm and assesses people on a deeper level, establishing him as the voice of reason through both his contrast with and recognition of Mr. Elton’s behaviour. As such, Austen gives Mr. Knightley a reliable edge as he fulfills a sound understanding of moral duty to oneself.

With regards to the moral authority’s duty to others, Mr. Knightley also fulfills this requirement in his strong sense of duty and responsibility for others. In fact, Austen positions Mr. Knightley as a natural leader of the community. When at the picnic, Austen writes that Mr. Knightley is “placed to see them all,” with reference to his position in relation to the other characters of Highbury. With this, Austen establishes that Mr. Knightley literally and metaphorically sees all; he is the judge of the community, rightly and naturally assuming a position of guidance over others. Emma herself remarks of Mr. Knightley that “He is happy as possible by himself; with his farm, and his sheep, and his library, and all the parish to manage” (163). Austen includes the community in with Mr. Knightley’s own everyday duties, relating to the audience that his responsibility for the parish is just as real as any responsibility to himself, a harsh contrast to the selfishness of Mr. Elton. As such, Mr. Knightley is not “trifling or silly” and adopts his role as leader of the community with graciousness, as his sensible nature and sense of responsibility towards those of his community allow him to fulfill this duty to others (154).

Also relevant to Mr. Knightley’s stance as a moral authority is his balanced and caring attitude towards all members of Highbury, even irrespective of class. For instance, throughout the novel, Mr. Knightley serves as a counsellor and even as a friend to Robert Martin, providing advice and respecting his voice (43). Moreover, Mr. Knightley recognizes the limitations wealth places on individuals, describing of Miss Bates that “were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance; I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of

manner...She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to...Her situation should secure your compassion” (273). This example is particularly relevant as Mr. Knightley recognizes that any error in character of the poorer characters is not attributable to them, but to their status in society, affording them forgiveness for what they cannot control and treating them with the utmost respect.⁴ Thus, Mr. Knightley’s clear understanding of and respect for all members of Highbury as demonstrated through action further cements his status as the true moral authority of the community.

Austen solidifies the contrast between Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley and the status of the latter as a true moral authority through Emma’s recognition and ability to discern the difference between the two. With Emma’s perception mirroring that of the audience’s, Austen completes the migration of moral authority from Mr. Elton and religious institutions to Mr. Knightley and the community. Addressing Emma’s perception of Mr. Elton, while Emma initially likes and even respects Mr. Elton, she gradually loses her regard for him as the novel progresses. While previous examples of Emma’s view of Mr. Elton as “proud” and “conceited” are cited in previous paragraphs, the most severe condemnation of Mr. Elton comes from Emma after the ball. When Mr. Elton refuses a dance with Harriet, Emma remarks that “Mr. Elton was not the superior creature she had believed him. The fever was over...the evil feelings of the Eltons” (241). Interesting in this quote is the reference to illness and evil, as though the Eltons are a plague upon the community of Highbury. This severe language only reinforces that Mr. Elton is not the proper centre of authority for Highbury, as Emma’s development throughout the novel corresponds to the shifting of moral authority away from their automatic attribution to clergy.

⁴ This stands out in sharp contrast to Mr. Elton, whose derisive comments of Harriet regarding her class characterizes his pretentiousness and condescending view towards others.

Directly opposing Emma's realizations of Mr. Elton's impropriety are her realizations of Mr. Knightley's greatness and her desire to fulfill his expectations of her. Emma's spiritual and moral development is strongly prompted by Mr. Knightley's comments on her behaviour, and she ultimately reports to him. For instance, Emma remarks that she "supposed she must say more before she were entitled to [Mr. Knightley's] clemency" (311). In introducing the spiritually charged "clemency" to Emma and Mr. Knightley's interaction, Austen reinforces that Mr. Knightley is the moral authority, with this spiritual connotation only reinforcing Mr. Knightley's authoritative position. Austen also writes that Emma "worship[s]" Mr. Knightley, further illustrating the recognition of Mr. Knightley as the true leader in the community (328). In both of these moments, the religious diction cements the shift in moral authority from the traditional, religious representative in Mr. Elton, to the community in Mr. Knightley. As such, Austen demonstrates that a more stable and unified community is not upheld by clergy, but by an upstanding member of the community.

Thus, through her characterizations of Mr. Elton as flawed and Mr. Knightley as refined and with Emma's recognition of these characteristics, Austen shifts authority from those who may only hold it out of a superficial label or associated role to those who truly understand and fulfill the duties required of a moral authority. In Mr. Elton, the audience sees a critique of religious action done for non-spiritual ends, and while his mistakes are simple and foppish, Austen does draw attention to the severity in his action. While not an explicit critique, viewing Mr. Elton through the lens of what a spiritual leader should be and contrasted with the moral centre of Mr. Knightley, it becomes clear that Mr. Elton is a vain and disingenuous man who highlights the flaws in adopting a role without considering a sense of duty. While Mr. Elton appears silly and trifling, he is representative of a larger issue of men who adopt the role of

clergy without truly becoming what is expected. As such, Austen's characterization of Mr. Elton creates unsteadiness in viewing clergy as moral centres and so begins the migration of guidance and responsibility to individuals outside of the institution. Austen establishes that Mr. Elton—and the unrefined clergy he represents—often receive unearned recognition as leaders or moral authority based purely on their association with religious institutions. Instead of upholding this authority, Austen decenters morality from religious institutions and posits Mr. Knightley as the true leader of the community and moral authority of the novel. For Austen, the church is no longer the sole authority on what is right or wrong, destabilizing previously accepted moral traditions and introducing new ideals for individuals to consider in upholding their duty to themselves and others.

With her exploration of what it is to be a moral centre in *Mansfield Park* and her decentering of moral authority in *Emma*, Austen responds to the religious cultural landscape at her time of writing by shifting responsibility from the institution to the individual. Even having Fanny as the ideal and not Edmund, the clerical representative of *Mansfield Park*, indicates that Austen is beginning to destabilize institutional authority, placing emphasis on the “inner guide” and shifting focus from a spiritual leader to oneself. Moral authority becomes a duty not to others, but to oneself, as Austen centers listening to, developing, and using one's inner guide as the ideal. As such, Austen places individual development at the centre of a moral practice and places one's accountability not to the church or clergy, but to one's community. Austen's focus is on “the individual's solitary, unmediated journey to grace, enlightenment, and understanding,” where one's duty is not just to spiritual leaders, but to oneself and those in their community (Moore 317). Much like the characters of Emma and Edmund, Austen's audience learns through her presentation of ideals to model oneself after and flawed or incomplete representatives to

learn from. Where the faults of Austen's flawed characters "owe more to unsatisfactory education than original sin," it follows that she allows her audience the opportunity for a satisfactory education through her writing (Moore 316). In her implicit approach to morality, Austen mirrors in her audience the learning of her characters, allowing for a subtle yet effective instruction of what it means to be moral, where morality can exist, what duty one owes to others, and most importantly, what duty one owes to oneself.

Chapter II: Moral Authority Lost and Gained From Institution to Individual in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

“We enter church, and we have to say, ‘We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep’, when what we want to say is, ‘Why are we made to err and stray like lost sheep?’ Then we have to sing, ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord’, when what we want to sing is, ‘O that my soul could find some Lord that it could magnify!’ Till it can, let us magnify good works, and develop all means of easing mortals’ progress through a world not worthy of them.”

—Thomas Hardy (Florence Emily Hardy 332)

Thomas Hardy's discussions of religion in his writing were likely influenced by his own experience with and observation of religious practice altering over time. As Florence Emily Hardy relates in her biography, Thomas Hardy's experience studying architecture under Raphael Brandon lends an archeological appreciation for physical religious spaces (77). From a young age, Hardy's interest in how physical spaces mediate interactions—especially religious ones—was apparent. His exposure to restoration most likely imbued him with the historical importance of religious structures, an idea he would come to explore more in his adult writings. As his own experience with religion changed over his lifetime, Hardy's fascination became more concerned with how these religious spaces conflict with religious teachings, and to a larger extent, how an evolving society begins to grow away from religious spaces, religious teachings, and God Himself. Hardy even notes a change in the focus given to certain areas of scripture. He notes that Christianity in his time was solely focused on Christ, and that it “limits itself to the religion of emotional morality and altruism that was taught by Jesus Christ” (FE Hardy 333). This focus on fragments of scripture contributes greatly to not only the expectations of religious practice, but to societal expectations, extending its effects from religious practice to what behaviour may be deemed appropriate or moral by communities as a whole. Hardy's more cynical approach to Christianity becomes clearer when reading his comments on other religions, as he notes that “Other moral religions within whose sphere the name of Christ has never been

heard, teach the same thing!” (FE Hardy 333). That Hardy is capable of noting potential flaws that exist within the typical religious teachings of his time period reflects a great change from his boyhood and becomes relevant in the recognition and exploration of whether the nineteenth-century application of religious teachings in England are appropriate. Moreover, his recognition of morality in more than one religious sphere with his reference to “other moral teachings” implicates a movement or changing existence of morality in the nineteenth century, an idea that underpins his writing.

Hardy’s historicization of religious spaces can be seen as an influence on his historicization of religion in his writing, tracking how religion has become separate from or conflicts with life in the nineteenth century. Hardy writes, “We say the established words full of the historic sentiment only, mentally adding, ‘How happy our ancestors were in repeating in all sincerity these articles of faith!’” (FE Hardy, 332). With this, it becomes clear that to Hardy, religion is only practiced out of a sense of historical obligation, becoming a routine that was done previously and must still be done at present, but recognizing that sincerity has changed as time progressed. Where there is instability in Christian teachings and instability between these teachings and other religions, Hardy is able to challenge his time period’s understanding of religion and morality in his writing, considering different definitions of what may be right or moral. Important to note is Hardy’s insistence that his novels are not intended for moral instruction (Collins 102). With this, any discussion of Hardy’s writing must be viewed with the understanding that Hardy is not definitively proposing a system of belief, nor is he arguing for a particular interpretation. Rather, Hardy presents a wide range of ideas for the reader to consider, allowing for an exploration of topics that may approach truth. It is therefore through this non-didactic approach that Hardy responds to the instability of his religious landscape through an

exploration of the relationship between religion and morality in his writing, and especially in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

“I would ask any too genteel readers, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St Jerome’s: If an offence comes out of the truth, better it is that the offence come than that the truth be concealed” (Thomas Hardy 5)

Hardy’s quote, used in the explanatory note for *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, perfectly embodies the novel as a whole as an exploration of religion and its relationship with morality. Hardy opens the novel with a call for truth, indicating that what is to come is a revelation of all possible details to allow audiences to better understand and inform their own opinions of the relationship between religion and morality. In his descriptions of these ideas and demonstration of experience in his novel, Hardy poses questions to an audience and gives them the right to answer for themselves using the information provided. With regards to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* in particular, Hardy notes that “Though the novel was intended to be neither didactic nor aggressive, but in the scenic parts to be representative simply, and in the contemplative to be oftener charged with impressions than with convictions, there have been objectors both to the matter and to the rendering.” (Thomas Hardy 7) Given this, it is especially important to refrain from interpreting Hardy’s writing as any form of instruction, though Hardy’s description of the “matter” and “rendering” of his text draws insight to how he creates a dialogue with his audience. As Tess says to her vicar, “Don’t for God’s sake speak as saint to sinner, but as you yourself to me myself,” Hardy treats his audience with enough respect so as to not preach to them, but allow them to form their own conclusions (115).

Hardy navigates the relationship between religion and morality by creating a highly interwoven, complex conversation that creates impressions on the reader, allowing individuals to learn with Hardy’s characters what it means to be moral and where morality can exist. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Hardy delineates the relationship between religion and morality in three distinct (though strongly interrelated) ways. First, Hardy decenters moral authority away from

religious institutions through representations of conduct in church and the application of religious doctrine by individuals. Secondly, Hardy presents a new, alternative moral centre in his heroine, Tess, through characterizing her as pure, demonstrating her selflessness, and associating her with religious imagery. Thirdly, in using Angel as a learner and audience stand-in, Hardy solidifies the decentering of authority from religious institutions and presentation of a new moral authority in having Angel progress from recognizing traditional moral authorities to Tess.

Hardy decenters the moral authority of the church in part through a critique of vanity in how individuals conduct themselves in church. The narrator directly describes the Lord's day as "this day of Vanity, this Sun's day, when the flesh went forth to coquet with flesh while hypocritically affecting business with spiritual things" (165). Hardy establishes an explicit association between vanity and churchgoing, with the use of "flesh" further invoking a biblical sense of sin with this practice. That vanity is a component of the mortal sin of pride further demonstrates the moral deterioration within religious institutions. In another example, the narrator describes Dairyman Crick's "double character as a working milker and buttermaker here during six days, and on the seventh as a man in shining broad-cloth in his family pew at church," along with the rhyme, "Dairyman Dick / All the week: / On Sundays Mister Richard Crick" (127). With this example, Hardy demonstrates not just vanity, but the compulsion of individuals to live double lives and elevate themselves to a higher (albeit false) status when in church. The overall impression is that how one behaves in church is artificial, as Hardy further complicates the relationship between religious institutions and morality with his criticism of vanity. As Hardy demonstrates, where religious institutions no longer foster moral behaviour, so too do they no longer serve as moral authorities.

Hardy continues the thread of immoral conduct within church through his representation of superficial understanding and action when attending church. The superficial understanding of religious practice is evidenced in part by characters like Izz, who remarks “I’ve always a’ ear at church for pretty verses,” implying that a superficial understanding of verse is all the attendees are capable of (102). Hardy’s representations of superficial action in church often take the form of gossip, as Hardy writes when Tess enters the church that “The people who had turned their heads turned them again as the service proceeded; and at last observing her they whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more” (102). That this event occurs within what should be a sacred, spiritual practice is all the more relevant as it demonstrates the moral deterioration of religious spaces, with the church becoming a base location for gossiping. Also important to note is that the institution and the people in it are alienating, further reinforcing the decentering of moral authority from these spaces. As such, the criticism of superficial understandings and action within the church only further demonstrates the decreasing moral authority of the religious sphere.

Hardy further criticizes religious authority in different characters’ applications of religious doctrine. In particular, Hardy’s descriptions of how man enacts punishment out of a sense of religious obligation characterizes the deterioration of moral authority associated with religious institutions. An interesting example of the application of religious teachings comes with the sign painter Tess encounters on her travels. Tess sees a sign that reads, “THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT”⁵, and proceeds to ask the painter, “suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?” (96). The painter replies, “I cannot split hairs on that burning query,”

⁵ With the improper use of punctuation here, it is clear that Hardy is in some way criticizing the sign painter’s representation of doctrine. If it is grammatically incorrect, so too may it be morally incorrect.

demonstrating no nuance to the painter's application of the biblical quote, creating a singular harsh understanding of a complex issue (96). Even when Tess remarks that the signs are "horrible," the painter replies that "That's what they are meant to be!" (96). Through the sign painter, Hardy demonstrates that man's interpretation of religion has become such that it is wholly focused on an erroneous deliverance of punishment, further decentering the moral authority typically held in religion. In another example, when Tess confronts Alec after his so-called reformation, she says, "You, and those like you, take your fill of pleasure on earth by making the life of such as me bitter and black with sorrow; and then it is a fine thing, when you have had enough of that, to think of securing your pleasure in heaven by becoming converted!" (351). In this instance, Hardy establishes the central hypocrisy in man's application of religion, as certain individuals are permitted forgiveness while others are sentenced to alienation and a damnation that slumbereth not. The uncompromising, rigid interpretation of doctrine that is applied by man is alienating, unforgiving, and, within the context of *Tess*, wrong. Thus, through his criticism of the application of religious doctrine in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy further decenters the moral authority of the traditionally recognized religious sphere.

Hardy establishes Tess as a new moral centre through demonstrating her purity. As the subtitle of the novel explicitly states, Tess is a "pure woman," immediately positing her as a positive figure. Hardy himself even notes in the introduction to the novel that the subtitle is "the estimate left in a candid mind of the heroine's character—an estimate that nobody would be likely to dispute" (10). As Lynn Parker notes, "By placing a moral evaluation of Tess at the very beginning of the novel, Hardy invites his readers to judge and evaluate Tess as well," to the effect that Hardy's claim of Tess as a "pure woman" solidifies her stance as a moral authority throughout the novel (273). It is undeniable that, as Hardy so neatly puts it, Tess is "a

fieldwoman pure and simple” (318). As critics note, Tess represents the “demythical” fallen woman, with Hardy constructing a “morally purged model of victim and survivor” (Auerbach 32). Since Hardy still defines Tess within the confines of morality, Auerbach’s label of “morally purged” may be strong, but there is no denying that Tess is a subversion of the sinned against woman who, for once, is able to regain her purity in the status of those around her. As Auerbach notes further, “Tess towers over the arbitrary conventions that label her as sinner” (42). Thus, Hardy’s characterization of Tess as pure imbues his heroine with a regained sense of morality, establishing her as a new moral centre that convention may have not recognized previously.

Tess’ selfless attitude further contributes to Hardy’s portrayal of his heroine as a new centre of morality. Tess’ behaviour is consistently moral, and especially so given her ever-present inclination to consider others before she considers herself. In an especially harrowing and emotionally-charged scene, upon the death of her child, Tess cries, “O merciful God, have pity; have pity upon my poor baby...Heap as much anger as you want upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!” (111). Not only is Tess selfless, but she embodies perfectly the ideal mother figure who would wish herself in the place of harm to protect her child. Tess does the same in her role as wife to Angel, choosing not to tell her family “the sorriness of her situation” in Angel leaving her, as “it might have brought reproach upon him” (322). Tess’ inclination for guilt also indicates her careful consideration of others and correspondingly selfless attitude, as Hardy describes that “Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself” and that she appears as a “figure of Guilt” (41; 103). Tess’ careful and constant consideration for others stands in stark contrast to the other characters of the novel, and as such, establishes her as a moral centre on the basis of her selfless behaviour.

Hardy solidifies Tess' status as a moral centre through her associations with religious imagery and status as a martyr. With regards to the former, Hardy describes Tess as "celestial" and the "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature," tying into her characterization as pure while adding depth to her morality as it takes on a divine status (244; 142). The narrator also directly acknowledges Tess' martyrdom, remarking that "This question of a woman telling her story—the heaviest of crosses to herself—seemed but amusement to others. It was as if people should laugh at martyrdom" (209). That Tess is comparable to Jesus cements the view of her as a truly moral being; there exists no better comparison to epitomize her as completely morally pure. That Hardy co-opts religious imagery when describing Tess is further significant as it marks the transition of moral authority from religious institutions to individuals like Tess. The association of Tess with Christ-like imagery continues with her death, as the narrator says of Angel and 'Liza-Lu that "They moved on hand in hand, and never spoke a word, the drooping of their heads being that of Giotto's 'Two Apostles'" (450). In cementing Tess' martyrdom in her death and taking care to illustrate the apostles of Angel and 'Liza-Lu, Hardy creates an inextricable link between his heroine and the most moral figure of Christian tradition. As such, Hardy completes the transition of moral authority to Tess, demonstrating that moral authority can and does exist independently of traditionally recognized institutions.

With Angel, Hardy introduces an arc of a character who actually experiences the process of decentering moral authority, as Angel's opinion of Tess shifts from condemnation to recognition of her as a moral authority. Interestingly, Angel learns through his experiences with Tess, mirroring what Hardy does with his audience as both learn through the progression of the novel what constitutes morality and where it exists. When Tess first reveals her past to Angel, he is unable to accept her behaviour and views the assault on Tess as a reflection of her impurity.

The narrator notes that “there lay hidden a hard logical deposit...It had blocked his acceptance of the Church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess” (275). This reference to “acceptance” is particularly of note as it does not contradict Tess’ position as a moral authority, only Angel’s perception of it. Hardy establishes Angel’s actions as flawed at this point in the novel in part because of his failed recognition of Tess as a moral authority—even after Hardy has clearly demonstrated her to be pure and wholly moral—but also because of Angel’s own flawed moral code. After Tess tells Angel her history, he immediately (and hypocritically) propositions another woman, cementing Angel’s recognition of morality and where it exists at this point in the novel as incomplete. Although Angel’s recognition of morality at this point in the novel is flawed, it does still allow for growth, as the “blockage” implies that Angel’s miseducation can be dislodged or modified. As such, Hardy begins Angel’s arc with a refusal to accept Tess’ status as moral authority but leaves space for Angel to learn and alter his views.

As the novel progresses, Angel himself begins to question the qualities of morality and where morality exists, indicating further movement in the individual’s ability to recognize new centres of morality. The turning point for this process occurs when Angel is travelling in Brazil. Angel begins to question the qualities and existence of morality himself:

Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but things willed. (385)

Even more pertinent is that Angel concludes this reflection with, “How, then, about Tess?” (385). In Angel, Hardy demonstrates a complete reassessment of morality and the ability to come to

new understandings when faced with experience. Angel's questioning of whether morality lies in action or in intention continues, as he "asked himself why he had not judged Tess constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed?" (420). In another example, Angel addresses not just the recognition of Tess as moral, but the punishment delivered to her, reflecting, "Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?" (404). Both quotes address Angel's shifting perception of morality and increasing questions in the wake of Tess' revelation. Thus, Hardy demonstrates that an individual possesses the ability to reconsider the qualities of morality, especially in response to experience.

Hardy solidifies the migration of morality away from religious institutions to individuals like Tess through Angel's eventual recognition of her status as a moral authority by the end of the novel. Angel's redemption is completed when the two reunite near the close of the novel. Angel tells Tess, "I did not think rightly of you—I did not see you as you were..I have learnt to since, dearest Tessy mine" (430). That Hardy introduces "rightness" and learning to Angel's admission only solidifies Tess' status as a proper moral authority with Angel's admission. Moreover, rather than blaming Tess for returning to Alec as he had previously blamed her for her impurity, Angel simply tells her that "it is my fault" (432). Far from the man who blamed her for his assault, Angel, through his exposure to information and experience deliberating, reforms his sense of morality and is able to recognize Tess as the faultless and pure moral authority she is. As previously addressed as evidence of Tess' status as a moral centre, the description of Angel as an "apostle" upon her death solidifies his recognition of her as a truly moral individual (450). With his use of Angel as a learner and stand-in for the audience, Hardy completes the migration of moral authority to Tess in the recognition of his heroine as a moral authority in the wake of

experience, cementing for his characters and his audience the ability to reach new understandings of the qualities and existence of morality.

Thus, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy explores where, with the passage of time, morality exists and what qualities it represents. With his decentering of traditional moral authority, presentation of an alternative in Tess, and demonstration of learning in Angel, Hardy illustrates that with an unstable religious cultural landscape, the relationship between religion and morality can change, and accordingly, morality itself. As the opening quote to the novel suggests, Hardy allows for the reader to approach and develop their own understandings of what religion, morality, and truth mean and what place they may hold. In a way, Hardy's approach to teaching morality in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* mirrors the experience of Tess herself, where the reader begins as a "mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience" and by the end of the novel has been provided with enough information to decide for themselves (21). Promising for Hardy's audience too is Angel's process of unlearning previous authorities and recognizing new ones through the revelation of detail, as Hardy emphasizes that one is not at fault for what they believe, but they do possess the ability to grow and evolve as standards change. There is no denying that with his exploration of the conflict between cultural and natural morality (as embodied by Tess herself) in response to an unstable religious cultural landscape, Hardy, like Austen, impresses upon his characters and his audience the individual power to recognize, define, and uphold morality for oneself.

Conclusion

Where the religious cultural landscape is characterized by its instability, so too is literary criticism of this landscape. Accordingly, critical approaches to Austen and Hardy's discussions of religion and morality also evolve, opening space for reassessments of their approaches as time progresses. Reflecting on the literary criticism of Austen and Hardy, consistent to both is that critics often attribute too much of their personal background to their writing, impacting the framework in which the novels are read. Also similar to the two is that critics undervalue the instability of the landscape in which the writers lived, limiting the view of Austen and Hardy's writing as responses to changing religious cultural landscapes. For Austen, critics like Laura Mooneyham White recognize the landscape Austen writes in as unstable but attributes much of Austen's personal experience to her writing. So, while White establishes the changing historical context for Austen, she also argues that Austen writes "within the context of her religious inheritance and preoccupations" and that the "challenge" is to "place" Austen's craft within this framework (4). On the other hand, Valerie Shaw notes that Austen's landscape is stable but allows for Austen's response to it outside of her personal experience. In regards to landscape, Shaw writes that Austen is a "rational comedienne of manners who delineates social surfaces and measures comic aberrations against the stable moral norms of a civilization in whose values she has supreme confidence," placing emphasis on the stable moral norms (282). However, Shaw allows for a freedom in Austen's response, writing that "If one accepts that she is critical of her own society's conventions, one is free to notice that as an artist too she examines convention, periodically experimenting" (282). With Hardy, critics often align in much the same way, with some recognizing the shifting landscape but believing Hardy's writing to be largely representative of his own view, while others allow for his writing to be free of personal

experience yet chain it to historical context. Florence Emily Hardy recognizes that Hardy responds to instability in the landscape by noting the “other moral religions” that “teach the same thing” as the Anglican faith, yet his “nebulous” and “transmutative” view of religion is inextricably linked to his writing (333). Directly opposing this criticism is Deborah L. Collins’ view that Hardy is responding to singular events in the landscape through characters that have “experienced terrible alienation resulting from God’s withdrawal from the world,” yet allows for freedom of Hardy’s personal experience from his writing, arguing that Hardy is not the “naturalist,” immoral, or categorically unreligious individual that his writing often makes him out to be (103).

My thesis is a more measured approach to Austen and Hardy, recognizing their historical landscape and personal experience as important influences on their writing but still allowing the texts to speak for themselves. Where one critical view of Austen places culture as stable but the writer as pushing boundaries and the other as an unstable landscape but Austen adhering to her inheritances, I place my thesis in the middle, allowing for both cultural instability and Austen’s response to this. As with my approach to Austen, my writing on Hardy allows for the influence of his personal experiences and instability in the cultural landscape while allowing *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to exist separately from Hardy the man. Approaching these texts with that balance of influence and response is central to reading not just the religious landscape of nineteenth-century writings, but nineteenth-century literature as a whole. By allowing space for a writer’s experience to influence but not define their works, we can best understand the context for and practice of their teachings, allowing their existence and relevance to extend far beyond the time and place where they originated.

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