

The Commodification of Literature and the Critic

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This article explores the impact of the publishing trade's commodification of Victorian literature. It looks at the trade's prescriptions on authors, and how this affected their work. It considers how an understanding of the effects of literature's commoditisation can help literary critics to analyse texts better. In order to examine this, the article uses particular examples of publishers' demands on authors—such as, censorship, novelistic, periodical, and editorial pressures—and the specific effects this had on individual authors. Assessing the impact of literature's commodification is important in enhancing literary critics' understanding of texts, which is imperative for analysing literature effectively.

Mid-nineteenth-century parliamentary reforms introduced the “cheap fiction” of a mass-market penny press (Springhall 568). These reforms included, for example, the removal of advertisement duty in 1853, stamp duty on newspapers in 1855, and paper excise duty in 1861 (Springhall 567). The 1870 Education Act, moreover, made primary education mandatory, making literacy widespread. These governmental ameliorations had a profound effect on the nature of literary production, and raised questions about literature's status as commodity versus art. In what ways did authors struggle to create literature which gratified publishers whilst remaining artistically satisfied? Furthermore, why does this matter? Why should literary critics consider the involvement of the publishing trade when analysing texts?

The commoditisation of the publishing trade meant authors had less, whilst publishers had more, control over texts and their production. Previously authors created texts and then sought a publisher, as literature became more commoditised publishers sought any writer willing to create what they thought would

sell (Darlow 334). Indeed, frequently publishers “endeavoured to persuade, even dictate, what an author should write” (Waller 668). Few authors, one lamented, were “able to write exactly what they like[d]” because “to descend to trade phraseology, they must follow the market” (Kemp 102). George Gissing, for example, ascribed the “fault” of his work's “superfluities” to “their having been written when English Fiction was subjected to the three volume system” (Gettman 253). The convention for three-volume novels “caused publishers to pad material by technical means or authors to work up copy to fill out the third volume” (Terry 46), often contrary to artistic judgement. Gissing hoped, “If ever I get the opportunity, I shall give all my books a vigorous revision, and cut them down” (Gettman 253).

Thomas Hardy particularly objected to Victorian literary culture's prescriptions. He deemed texts, for example, “much retarded by the necessities of periodical publication,” as “Artistic effort always pays heavily for finding its tragedies in the forced adaptation of human instincts to rusty and irksome moulds that do not fit them” (*Jude* xliii, xlv). For Hardy, the Victorian

“dispensation of fiction” degraded literature by enforcing arbitrary episodic structures which rendered texts unnatural and, hence, insincere (“Candour” 15-21).⁷ Prior to the first edition, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* had appeared as “episodic sketches” in various magazines (*Tess* 3). Upon *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*’ publication in novel form, Hardy was pleased “to piece the trunk and limbs of the novel together, and print it complete, as originally written two years ago,” as if periodical publication were akin to a dismembered body (*Tess* 3). There were other contemporary authors, however, who purposefully manipulated publishing forms for their own material ends, disregarding artistic integrity. Charles Lever, for example, considered “what characters & incidents *tell* best with readers” before embarking on subsequent instalments (Gettman 163).

Hardy was irritated by publishers’ panjandrumry: his first manuscript, *The Poor Man and the Lady* (1868), was rejected by Macmillan, however, their reader, George Meredith, encouraged Hardy to embark upon another text, *Desperate Remedies*, which was also later spurned (Sutherland 217). Hardy complained that *Desperate Remedies*, which “owed its existence to Meredith,” and was “quite foreign to my own instincts,” was still unacceptable (Ellis 244). Despite his evident dislike of tailoring texts to suit others’ desires, Hardy continued to attempt to produce texts that gratified public tastes. Of *The Woodlanders*, for example, Hardy wrote to Macmillan:

I cannot give you any idea as to the probable demand. I am expecting a good sale—on the other hand my last

story did not sell so largely as it might have done—owing, I was told, to the plot not being romantic, nor the accessories rural. As the reverse is the case with the present one we may anticipate better things. (Letters I:161)

He was subsequently “unable to understand,” therefore, its “debt” of “nearly £200” (*Letters* II:14).

Publishing was a perilous business. Publishers generally liked periodical publication as it provided “a fairly reliable guide to the print run for the next issue” enabling them “to forecast sales with some assurance,” thereby maximising profit (Springhall 570). Unlike books, moreover, periodicals could be revised as they went along. Anything readers found unfavourable, therefore, could be eliminated or explained away in later episodes. Even so, “any violation of decency would inevitably lead to such a falling off of circulation as would practically amount to ruin of the paper guilty of it” (Waller 652), which led to publications being “often...as innocent as sugared milk” (Thompson 84). Robert Louis Stevenson rightly observed, however, that even “the most imbecile production of any literary age gives us sometimes the very clue to comprehension we have sought long and vainly in contemporary masterpieces” (Waller 635). All literature, whether considered to be art or pulp, sprang from identical contemporary pressures. For literary critics, therefore, consideration of all texts, even those produced only for mercenary gain, is important, as it elucidates ways in which authors pandered to or thwarted literary expectations of their age; thus, giving an insight into their intentions. Jerome McGann states, the literary critic’s “object” is “to establish” what “most nearly represents the author’s original (or final) intentions” (15). It is imperative, therefore, for literary critics to be aware of contortions

⁷ Hardy contributed “Candour in English Fiction” to a symposium, which was printed in the *New Review*, January 1890, pp. 15-21. Reprinted in Harold Orel, ed., *Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings* (London: Macmillan, 1966) 125-33. All references to this symposium hereafter will be to “Candour” 15-21.

enforced upon authors, especially those which contradict artistic aesthetics, if they are to understand authors' intentions.

Resenting publishers' tendency to "exalt numbers above quality" (*Letters* III:233), Hardy contended that publishers, by "acting under the censorship of prudery," excluded subjects which formed "the bases of the finest imaginative compositions since literature rose to the dignity of an art" ("Candour" 15-21). Such censorship is evident, for example, in publisher George Bentley being dissuaded from publishing Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well* in 1865, because "It will not do you any credit—indeed people will wonder at a House like yours bringing out a work so ill calculated for the reading of decent people" (Gettman 195). The Victorian author, therefore, was faced with the perpetual dilemma:

he must either whip and scourge...characters into doing something contrary to their natures, to produce the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances, or, by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head, not to say ruin his editor, his publisher, and himself. ("Candour" 15-21)

This "struggle with the literary conscience" presented itself in the American serialisation of *Jude the Obscure* ("Candour" 15-21). Although its original conception "would not bring a blush to a school-girl's cheek," upon the text's creation "the characters had taken things into their own hands" (Harper 164, 165). After only a few instalments, therefore, Hardy offered to withdraw it from publication (*Letters* II:103). His publishers refused, but insisted on numerous alterations:

we fully appreciate the annoyance you must feel at being called upon to

modify work conscientiously done, and which is best as it left your hands, from an artist's point of view....It is a pity that you should touch a word of the story, but you have been very good to lend yourself so kindly and promptly to our need, when the task is in itself so ungraceful. (Purdy 90)

Putting aside flattering obsequiousness, it is clear Hardy's publisher was concerned with material rather than artistic considerations. Despite, therefore, being "not aware" of "anything...to which exception can be taken" (Preface *Jude* xliii), for the sake of "the Grundyist and subscriber" ("Candour" 15-21), "the magazine version was...an abridged and modified one" (Preface *Jude* xliii). Hardy commented in his diary, furthermore, "On account of the labour of altering *Jude the Obscure* to suit the magazine, and then having to alter it back, I have lost energy for revising and improving the original as I meant to do" (Purdy 90). It may never be possible, therefore, to determine what Hardy's final intentions were, which might be said to limit our ability of ever understanding *Jude the Obscure* as a finalised work of art.

According to McGann, literary critics must assess "the history of a text's transmission with the purpose of exposing and eliminating errors" (15). Not only must one consider influences upon authors' creative processes, therefore, but publishers' interferences made after authors have submitted manuscripts. Of *Jude the Obscure's* publication as a novel in America, Hardy relented, "I sh[oul]d prefer that my version be adhered to, but I w[oul]d consent to a reasonable modification, if indispensable to its production" (*Letters* II:110). Even if an author was around for publication, therefore, this cannot guarantee a text's authority.

In some cases, moreover, changes were made without the author being aware

of them. In *The Return of the Native's* original serialisation, for example, Hardy ensured “every provision was made” to “spare the sensibilities of the magazine reader,” therefore, the nature of Eustacia and Wildeve’s relationship “was never absolutely cleared up” (Beach 634-35). In Hardy’s later revisions, however, their involvement becomes explicit. In the earlier serialisation, on Bonfire Night Eustacia chastises Wildeve by remarking “I have had no word with you since you—you chose her...as if I had never been yours” (Beach 637). Subsequently, however, Hardy intended Eustacia’s outpouring to finish, “as if I had never been yours body and soul so irretrievably” (*Native* 72). Although this was published verbatim in Harper’s 1902 New York edition, Macmillan’s London edition discreetly replaced “body” with “life,” seemingly to avoid any outcry at “the indelicacy of the word body in such a connection” (Beach 639). The confirmation that Eustacia and Wildeve were physically intimate, evident in Harper’s but missing in Macmillan’s edition, has a decided impact upon the reader’s interpretation of events as they unfold. In assessing a text, therefore, it is important to determine any potential “intervention by a publisher or his agents between the author’s manuscript and the published text” which bears on the text (McGann 20).

As Hardy elucidated:

Even the imagination is the slave of stolid circumstance....It is conditioned by its surroundings like a river-stream. (“Candour” 15-21)

Much as literary critics might like to imagine texts as art unbesmirched by physical considerations, it is essential to remember the material nature of publishing and the inescapable effect this has on texts; not only on emendations publishers deem necessary to enable their production, but on the creative process itself. Understanding these effects contribute to literary critics’

perceptions of an author’s intentions, which allows them to get closer to the envisaged text and thus enables them to analyse it more thoroughly.

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