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"Damaged girl[s]": The Commodification of Female Protagonists in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys*

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Tess of the d'Urbervilles, by Thomas Hardy, and *We Were the Mulvaneys,* by Joyce Carol Oates, both present the female protagonists, Tess and Marianne, as commodities, or less-than-human goods to be exchanged among men. Regardless of the differences between the novels caused by time and geography, each of the novels supports a patriarchal system of beliefs that encourages the subjugation of women by presenting them as lacking any humanity, as merchandise to be bought and sold. This study of the commodification of women's bodies in the novels illuminates the static nature of the subjugation of women throughout Western history, specifically the last century. Precisely because of the differences in time and geography, one might assume (or hope) that the female protagonists would be presented differently in each of the novels. Yet, finding that both the novel from the 1890s and the one from the 1990s presents women as commodities is a distressing reminder that patriarchal thought is still pervasive in Western society. Much has changed in the century between the publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *We Were the Mulvaneys,* yet the commodification of women in literature remains.

"DAMAGED GIRL[S]": THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES* AND OATES'S *WE WERE THE MULVANEYS*

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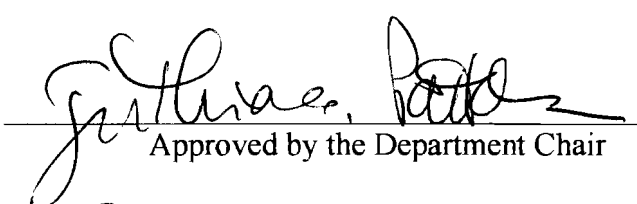

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Western culture is undeniably patriarchal at its core, with everything from language to familial bonds being centered upon a masculine viewpoint. In this culture, women are necessarily subjugated to ensure the continued success of male dominated society. One important tool patriarchy uses to suppress women and keep a firm grasp on its power is the commodification of women, where the female body is figured as property to be owned/sold/traded/used by men. Through this method, women are seen as merchandise valuable only in relation to men, with several factors that determine their value, or their "price," in the sexual exchange system. One of the most important factors is a woman's virginity or chastity, because a woman's sexuality, if left uncontrolled, can be threatening to the patriarchal system. By placing female virginity as a major "selling point" of women, the patriarchy effectively contains that danger. Thus, a deflowered or unchaste woman is presented as a damaged good, a spoiled commodity, while a virginal or chaste woman is seen as valuable property to be closely guarded. A woman's worth in the sexual exchange system is determined by her sexuality, a convenient way for the patriarchy to control women's bodies and fates.

Western literature reflects this notion of the commodification of women and the subsequent importance of virginity or chastity for women, as evident throughout the English canon. It is present in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale,* Milton's *Comus* and *Paradise Lost,* Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,* Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urvervilles,* Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys,* and countless other works. The presence of the theme of commodification of female bodies in Western literature is important, because, as cultural studies has made clear, literature not only reflects, but also

shapes, society. One of the many scholars who promotes this point of view is Louis Althusser, who writes that an individual's beliefs and worldview are shaped by "ideological State apparatuses," one of which is literature (1489). Therefore, the commodification of female bodies in classic literary texts not only informs readers about the social situation in past centuries, it also helps to form their current beliefs.

Because literature has such power to influence a society's ideology, the commodification of women in major literary works is disturbing; it not only mirrors past society, but, if left unanalyzed, also strengthens the notion that the commodification of women is natural. Two examples of female commodification in literature are Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys*, both of which revolve around the significance of female virginity. The novels differ on the surface, especially with the large span of time between the two; Hardy's book was first published in 1891, and Oates's book was published in 1996. Tied to this age difference are the cultural variances evident in the works; Hardy's novel is English and Oates's is American, and each deals with the varying class structures imbedded in those nations. Despite these seemingly irreconcilable differences, however, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *We Were the Mulvaneys* are remarkably similar in plot. Each novel begins with the tale of a naïve, beautiful young woman, with emphasis placed by the narrator and other characters on her virginity. Both of the young women have fathers who want to raise their rank or class status. In both of the novels the protagonists are brutally raped, and the collapse of each of the young women's families ensues. Both of the fathers are drunks who squander the families' money, and each eventually dies. The young women's families are forced to leave their homes, and the families dissolve. Both of the

young women are ostracized and banished from their homes, and each must find her way in the world alone, getting jobs and supporting herself.

The similarity in plot is not the only connection between the novels, however. Each also presents the female protagonists, Tess and Marianne, as commodities, as less-than-human goods to be exchanged among men. Regardless of the differences between the novels caused by time and geography, each of the novels supports a patriarchal system of beliefs that encourages the subjugation of women by presenting them as lacking any humanity, as merchandise to be bought and sold. Hardy scholars, such as Julie Grossman, Oliver Lovesey, Maggie Humm, and Janet Freeman, have recognized this commodification or objectification of Tess, but *We Were the Mulvaneys* has yet to receive much critical attention. This study of the commodification of women's bodies in the novels illuminates the static nature of the subjugation of women throughout Western history, specifically the last century. Precisely because of the differences in time and geography, one might assume (or hope) that the female protagonists would be presented differently in each of the novels. Yet, finding that both the novel from the 1890s and the one from the 1990s presents women as commodities is a distressing reminder that patriarchal thought is still pervasive in Western society. Much has changed in the century between the publications of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *We Were the Mulvaneys,* yet the commodification of women in literature remains.

Chapter 1: Methodology

To explore this notion of the commodification of Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Marianne in *We Were the Mulvaneys*, the works of Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, and Keith Thomas serve to illuminate important aspects of the sexual exchange system in which the women are trapped. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich questions the privileged status heterosexuality assumes in culture and examines why the patriarchy feels the need to erase the possibility of other choices for women. Rich begins her investigation by outlining the methods through which male power is enforced. She includes the exploitation of women's labor, the manipulation of their children, the confinement of their movement, and the refusal to grant them knowledge as factors through which "male power is manifested and maintained" (A. Rich 1767).

Patriarchal power also uses sexuality to suppress women. The first example of such a tactic is that male sexuality is forced upon women through rape, incest, prostitution, the "idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc.," and through customs like arranged marriage (A. Rich 1766). These practices "enforce heterosexuality on women," making many women never question the innate status heterosexuality is granted in society (A. Rich 1767). Rich writes that the unexamined and unquestioned heterosexuality of most women has been carefully constructed by the patriarchy and is a pervasive part of women's everyday lives. Women have been so brainwashed that many do not question society's mandates, even if they are unhappy: "Women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives" (A. Rich

1767). This privileging of heterosexuality as innate or natural disregards and marginalizes any other form of sexuality, denying women any options other than those approved by the patriarchy.

The second method through which male power is enforced is the "use of [women] as objects in male transaction," specifically as sexual commodities (A. Rich 1766). This can include the exchange of women as gifts, arranged marriage, prostitution, and the portrayal of women in the media (A. Rich 1766); "soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality—essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males" (1768). These facets of the media represent women as less than human, as devoid of any characteristics other than sexuality, and turn women into nothing more than objects to be bought and sold.

This notion of women being turned into sexual objects is closely tied to Luce Irigaray's notion of the commodification of women's bodies present in patriarchal society. In "This Sex Which is Not One," Irigaray writes that "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity" (368). Men see women solely as commodities to be bought and sold. In this type of human exchange system, where women are the merchandise and men are the consumers, a woman's value rests solely upon her relation to men and the value they assign to her: "Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men" (Irigaray 368). Women's bodies are seen as objects, as commodities to be branded and possessed. A woman is given no

identity other than the one created by this commodification, and is thus an empty shell devoid of any value other than her sexuality.

In this sexual exchange system, a woman's virginity or chastity becomes very important, the designator of female value. Keith Thomas, in "The Double Standard," explores the connection between the attitudes towards sexuality that have been "deeply rooted in England for many centuries" and a sense of commodification of female bodies; "unchastity, in the sense of sexual relations before marriage or outside marriage, is for a man, if an offense, none the less a mild and pardonable one, but for a woman a matter of utmost gravity" (195). One reason many scholars cite for this double standard is the protection against contamination of blood lines, yet Thomas believes that this is an incomplete answer at best. Instead, he argues that in the history of English sexuality, "female chastity has been seen as a matter of property; not however, the property of legitimate heirs, but the property of men in women. The language in which virginity is most often described should tell us this, for it is that of the commercial market" (Thomas 210). This is the link between Rich and Irigaray's notions of the commodification of female bodies and the importance of virginity in Western culture. Women are presented as little more than the property of men, and for a woman to be a marketable item for consumption, she must be a virgin: "In other words, girls who have lost their 'honor' have also lost their saleability in the marriage market" (Thomas 210). Without her virginity, a woman is unmarketable, defeating her sole purpose in life, which is to be traded among men.

These theories of commodification and the subsequent importance of virginity and chastity are exemplified by the history of Western civilization. From the Greco-

Roman society to sixteenth-century England, women were seen as marketable goods, their main value based on their virginity. While all periods of Western history seem to support the notion that women should be virgins or at least chaste, the reasons change according to the period.

The Greco-Roman world, before conversion to Christianity, did not favor the notion of virginity or continence, mainly because of laws requiring procreation that were based in the economic interests of the state. The first set of procreation-centered laws dealt with retaining power through population; in order for the Roman Empire to continue to grow and thrive, its citizens must produce children to populate its lands. Citizens were expected "to extend a requisite proportion of their energy begetting and rearing legitimate children to replace the dead," and it is estimated that in order to keep the Empire's population stable, the average woman would have needed to have had at least five children (Brown 6). Reproduction was the only way for the civilization to survive, and thus, concepts of life-long virginity or continence were frowned upon. In fact, the Greek physician Galen, in the second century A.D., believed that hysteria in women was *caused* by virginity or prolonged chastity: "His theory on hysteria caused by continence was based on the example of a hysterical fit cured instantly by an orgasm" (Rousselle 71). Virginity or chastity did nothing to enhance the state, and thus, it needed to be "cured instantly by an orgasm," denoting sexual activity that might involve the chance of procreation.

Another reason the Greco-Roman world objected to perpetual virginity or continence was because of laws of inheritance; in order to receive a legacy, a male citizen was required by law to be married and father legitimate children (Rousselle 79). Thus,

male citizens "needed children, for since Augustus's time the law obliged them to have children, unless they chose not to receive any legacy or inheritance but were willing to see relatives who had children receive half of the estate that should have come to them from a relative who had died leaving a will or estate" (Rousselle 36). Just having children did not make a male citizen eligible for inheritance, however. His offspring could not be produced by a woman such as a concubine or a prostitute: "Only marriage and the production of legitimate heirs entitled one to inherit, so fathers forced reluctant sons into arranged marriages" (Rousselle 36). The emphasis here is on "legitimate" heirs, a notion born out of the need to keep private property within one's family. The Emperor himself was reported to champion this idea, and it was written that "because of the Emperor, marriages are chaste and fathers have legitimate offspring" (Brown 16). This link between "chaste" relationships and "legitimate offspring" is an important extension of the laws dealing with inheritance. Not only did the laws make it necessary for men to have several children, they also made it plain that those children had to be legitimate in order to keep wealth and property concentrated, and bloodlines pure.

Male citizens' need to produce legitimate offspring in order to receive inheritance had a major impact on women, both on their lives and on the way they were thought and written about. In Greco-Roman society, the most valuable act a woman could undertake was to give birth to a legitimate child, for she was not only continuing the Empire and ensuring her husband his inheritance, she was also uniting two powerful families together politically (Rousselle 76). With all of these factors impinging on legitimate heirs, the pressure to produce fell on women. Medically, this meant that a physician's chief concern with a woman was whether she was fertile and chaste. The physicians Soranus

and Rufus of Ephesus of the second century A.D. "considered . . . carefully how to chose a girl who, if she had not reached puberty, showed signs of being fertile" (Rousselle 37). For a young woman, being infertile meant being useless; her only major role in society was to produce legitimate heirs.

A young woman needed to be fecund in order to compete in the sexual exchange, but she also had to refrain from tapping into her fertility until she was bound in a legal marriage. The education young women received reflected these dual ideals:

> As young people emerged from childhood, the method of their education changed, and girls and boys were treated in different ways. As far as girls were concerned, the main fear was that they might not be married as soon as they were of marriageable age. Their sexuality was cause for anxiety. It was thought that badly brought up girls felt sexual desire before they had menstruated, and it was also believed that sexual intercourse made menstruation easier. (Rousselle 59)

Males feared the sexuality of women, because without women's cooperation in the sexual commerce, the Empire and the economic system it produced would crumble. If a young woman was not married off as soon as she was "of marriageable age," there was the potential that her sexuality could break outside of the narrow confines her society placed upon her, creating illegitimate children and wasting her potential (in the eyes of male citizens). Thus, while virginity or continence were not favored as life-long endeavors, the virginity of unmarried women and the chastity of the Empire's married women was crucial to its success.

The possibility of illegitimate children, threats to the Empire because they weakened the system of inheritance and family ties, led the society to impose strict penalties on women who were unchaste. Augustus's laws on adultery had serious consequences, some as harsh as the death penalty. While men could be charged with adultery as well as women, the laws seem to "have been designed principally to prevent husbands from allowing their wives a degree of sexual freedom which they themselves enjoyed" (Rousselle 87). Thus, women were the focal point of the adultery laws because by cheating on their husbands, women could have illicit children, giving their husbands illegitimate heirs. This would threaten the entire economic system of the Empire, so women were penalized harshly for indiscretions which their husbands practiced regularly. In this way, the virginity of young women and the chastity of married women was crucial to the economic stability of Greco-Roman society.

By the second century A.D., the rise of Christianity with its various radical sects brought about a totally new significance to virginity and chastity. Rather than being economic issues, as they had been in pre-Christian Greco-Roman society, virginity and chastity took on new religious meanings. One was that through virginity one exercised power over death: "A small number of prominent Christian men and women used their bodies to mock continuity, through the drastic gesture of perpetual chastity. . . . for them the continent body stood for a principle of reversibility: the flow of life itself could be halted" (Brown 64). Through permanent virginity or chastity these men and women were taking themselves out of the reproductive cycle upon which society was based, stopping the life cycle. They believed that doing so brought them closer to God: "the renunciation of sexual intercourse came to be linked on a deep symbolic level with the reestablishment

of a lost human freedom, with a regaining of the Spirit of God, and so, with man's ability to undo the power of death" (Brown 86). By denying their bodies, these Christians were essentially denying their mortality, believing themselves to be more closely linked with God and therefore more powerful than death. These ideas held important social implications, because if mature, fertile adults chose to remain virgins rather than procreate, the stability of society would be put in danger.

If the belief that continent men and women could overturn the reproductive cycle was disturbing to society, then the notion that perpetual virginity could give women social equality must have been even more radical. In Christian thought, women, through sexual abstinence, were given the chance to be equal to men: "In the struggle against desire, which was distinct from procreation, women became men's equals and were accorded a new dignity" (Rousselle 4). In a misogynistic, male-dominated society, women could now prove themselves just as competent as men in the fight to deny the body. The arena of sexual continence gave women the space not only to prove their equality, but also to grasp social mobility: "As Christians, women and the uneducated could achieve reputations for sexual abstinence as stunning as those achieved by any cultivated male. Total chastity was a gesture that cut through the silken web of decorum that swathed the public man: here was 'philosophical' restraint at its most drastic, now made open to all" (Brown 61). Because perpetual virginity or chastity was something that all people could do—women and men, rich and poor—it opened up the doors of equality in a revolutionary way. No longer were social hierarchies immutable: "Asceticism seems to have made available . . . a wild card in the game of social ranking, a claim to elevated moral hygiene which could advance its bearer's standing in the

group" (Cooper 85). Through virginity and chastity, women could incur great prestige, giving themselves the rare chance at social mobility.

The most radical Christian idea about perpetual virginity or chastity, however, was that through continence women could actually become men. Porphyry, a third century Christian, proclaimed that "virginity, and failing that continence, allows a woman to arrive at the stage where there are no women and no men" (Rousselle 187). A second century Valentinian teaching explains how this metamorphosis from female to male can occur: "the fluid female . . . would be given form by the dominant male . . . All that was other to the spirit must be absorbed back into it: the polarity of male and female itself would be abolished. The female would become male" (Brown 113). It is important to note the sexism embedded in these proclamations of change; according to the teachings, the lowly woman, through perpetual virginity or chastity, can transform herself into the higher form of being, a man. However, while they are offensive to twenty-first century readers, these teachings are important because they show the power early Christians placed in continence as a truly life-changing force.

From the fourth century on, perpetual virginity or celibacy was more socially accepted, and less a radical statement than an ideal. The idea of celibate priests started to gain ground, and orders of monks and nuns flourished (Brown 203). However, even with this public reverence of continence, lay people were not ready to apply the stringent guidelines of abstinence to their own lives. They were more than happy "to settle for little more than a morality of sexual discipline," and looked to the Church to give them guidelines in this area (Brown 206). Therefore, Christianity was structured as "a religion of two 'ways,'" celibate and sexually active (Brown 205). While all Christians were not

expected to remain virgins, the Church did set up a hierarchy to show its members the heights to which they should strive:

> Virginity represented the pinnacle of Christian achievement: virginity, in monks as well as in nuns, was 'the foundation of the Church.' This did not mean, however, that the life of the married laity was drained of all warmth and meaning . . . The ascetic transformation of the few demonstrated the extent of the perfection made available, by the power of Christ, to human beings. (Brown 254)

Virginity, in this context, is figured as an ideal to which all Christians should aspire. It was recognized that most would not be able to endure perpetual virginity, however, and married life was condoned, yet there was always the notion that one should strive for the "perfection" of virginity.

By the twelfth century, the reverence of virginity had reached new heights, specifically for women. Conduct books sung the praises of virginity for women, and, in contrast to earlier thinking, warned women of the horror and potential sinfulness of marriage: "Marriage was made lawful within Holy Church, as a bed for the sick, to catch the weak who cannot stand on the high hill and so near heaven as the virtue of virginity" (Millet 19). Marriage was looked upon as a "bed for the sick," a way for the morally weak to avoid going to hell for their inability to control their sexual urges. Sexual desire was one of the main pitfalls of marriage, being a sinful act that women should strive to avoid; it was described as "that indecent heat of the flesh, that burning itch of physical desire before that disgusting act, that animal union, that shameless coupling, that stinking and wanton deed, full of filthiness. (It is, nevertheless, to be tolerated to some extent

within marriage . . .)" (Millet 9). Through passages like these, women were taught that marriage and sexuality were base activities, turning them into nothing more than animals. Marriage was only for the weak, for women who could not control their bodies or minds.

In contrast to the negative image of marriage, the conduct books glowingly supported virginity as an alternative to the marriage bed. They praised virginity and the women who maintained it, telling women of their potential honored places in heaven: "For in it [virginity] and through it, maiden, you earn the right to be the equal of angels in the eternal bliss of heaven" (Millet 11). Better than the subjugation of marriage, a woman who remained a virgin was accorded equality with angels. The conduct books even described a virgin's experience in Heaven, showing women the rewards that would come to them if they just remained pure:

> Their robes are so bright and shining above all others, because they always walk next to God wherever he goes. And all who rejoice in heaven are crowned with a victor's crown, but the virgins have, over and above what is common to all alike, a circlet shining brighter than the sun, called *aureola,* in Latin. . . . So many privileges show very clearly which are virgins there, and distinguish them from the rest with so many honours to all eternity. (Millet 21)

This passage entices women to remain virgins by appealing to their earthly sense of class and rank. Even if a woman is a poor commoner, if she remains a virgin, she will have unimaginable wealth and prestige in Heaven. It is interesting to note that a virgin's Heavenly experience is described in the language of commerce and social placement, linking a woman's sexuality to economic issues once again.

The conduct books even go so far as to describe the precise mathematical amount of a woman's reward in Heaven: "Of these three states—virginity and widowhood, and marriage is the third—you can tell by the degrees of their bliss which one is superior to the others, and by how much. For marriage has its reward thirtyfold in heaven; widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity, with a hundredfold, surpasses both" (Millet 21). Marriage, the choice of weak, sinful women, has the least reward, and widowhood, because the woman once gave in to the temptation of sex but now remains chaste, has a larger reward. The greatest reward, however, goes to the virgin, because in her denial of her mortal body she has proven herself "superior to the others." It is interesting to note that a woman's reward in Heaven is presented as having ties only to her sexuality; it does not matter whether a woman was a selfless caretaker who worked to make other's lives better, or whether she was a cruel and mean spirited mistress. If the kind woman had sex within the marriage bed, she was sentenced to the smallest reward, yet, as long as the cruel woman remained a virgin, she was given immense riches in Heaven.

These notions of the superiority of virginity over chaste marriage changed after the Protestant Reformation, which culminated with Martin Luther in 1517 and was made English law by Henry VIII in 1534. With the establishment of the English church, all nunneries and monasteries were abolished and the reverence of perpetual virginity was replaced by the Protestant reformers' proclamation of the virtues of married chastity as the proper destiny of women. Virginity and chastity remained the chief virtues of women, but the emphasis was placed upon female virginity only before marriage, as a temporary rather than life-long pursuit, and then wifely purity after marriage. For example, Thomas Becon, in the 1564 *Catechism*, exhorts young women to remain

virgins, but makes clear the reason behind such actions: "Virginity once lost, what remaineth safe and praiseworthy in a maid? The highest, best and greatest dowry that a maid can bring to her husband is honesty" (27). Like earlier Christian thinkers, Becon sees women's value lying only in their possession of virginity. However, in contrast to the earlier Christian notion of perpetual continence, Becon speaks of female virginity in relation to marriage; without virginity, what "dowry" could a woman bring to her husband? In this system, the virgin body is presented as a higher form of currency to buy a husband. This reconfiguration of female virginity as a necessary precursor to compulsory marriage signals interesting changes in the history of Western thought on virginity. With the Protestant Reformation, the revolutionary power of perpetual virginity (such as the ability of women to be equal to men or actually metamorphosize into men) was banished. In its place, Protestant theology promoted marriage as a woman's sole destiny (Aughterson 166).

With the change of theory regarding female virginity and chastity, the conduct books of the Protestant Reformation, unlike the Catholic proclamations of the evils of the marriage bed, supported marriage and taught women how to be proper wives. *A Godly Form of Household Government,* a conduct book written by Robert Dod and John Cleaver in 1598, outlines the duties of a good wife: "First that she reverence [sic] her husband. Secondly, that she submit herself and be obedient unto him. And lastly that she do not wear gorgeous apparel, beyond her degree and place, but that her attire be comely and sober, according to her calling" (80). Ultimately, a wife is expected to know her place, being careful to acknowledge her subservience in everything from her relationship with her husband, to her actions, and even to her clothing.

According to Dod and Cleaver, another important characteristic of a virtuous wife is her place within the private realm: "A modest and chaste woman that loveth her husband, must also love her house, as remembering that the husband that loveth his wife, cannot so well like the sight of any tapestry, as to see his wife in his house. For the woman that gaddeth from house to house to prate confoundeth herself, her husband and her family" (Dod and Cleaver 81). A proper wife should stay in the house, taking care of domestic duties and staying out of the reach of gossips. There are only four reasons a woman should venture out of the house: to go to church, to visit the sick, to do necessary household chores, and to accompany her husband (Dod and Cleaver 81). These strict limitations on women's movements are ultimately linked to the need to control women's sexuality, treating women as merchandise to be kept under lock and key: "Paul biddeth Titus (Tit. 2.5) to exhort women that they be chaste and keeping at home: presently after *chaste,* he saith, *keeping at home,* as though home were chastity's keeper" (Smith 83). In order to keep women chaste, they should be kept in the house, cloistered in domesticity rather than the nunnery of pre-Reformation days.

In keeping with the Protestant veneration of married chastity, the earlier Christian notion of the hierarchy of women, from virgins to widows, was revised. Rather than married women having the lowest position while widows and then virgins were accorded the most status, Protestant physicians proclaimed that wives were better than virgins or widows: "Wives are more healthful than widows or virgins, because they are refreshed with the man's seed, and ejaculate their own, which being excluded, the cause of the evil is take away" (Fontanus 61). While this hierarchy is expressed in the form of a medical treatise rather than a theological text, the complete reversal from the pre-reformation

hierarchy is astonishing. It underscores the importance the Protestant church attributed to married chastity. Rather than a perpetual virgin being the ideal woman, a good Protestant woman was a wife: "a good woman should be a home housewife" (B. Rich 96).

This trend continued into the nineteenth century, with emphasis placed upon female marriage rather than life-long, independent celibacy: "The importance of marriage and the family to the understanding of the Victorians cannot be overestimated; they were the stable features in a sea of change. It was understood that it was the principle aim of women to get married, and a woman who remained unmarried, was, by definition, a failure" (Pearsall 8). Deprived of the option of "overcoming" their sex or gender through virginity or chastity (as early Christian women believed they could do), the majority of Victorian women fulfilled their roles by becoming wives and mothers, and those unable to do so were labeled spinsters or old maids, "failure[s]" at womanhood. According to Martha Vicinus, the majority of married women managed the household while their husbands left the home to work, and it was up to these women to uphold the standards of the day: "The perfect lady under these conditions became the woman who kept to her family, centering all her life on keeping the house clean, the children well disciplined and her daughters chaste" (xiv). These demands are no small order, entailing much hard work and careful planning, and the last characteristic of a "perfect lady" is especially interesting. Mothers were charged with guarding their daughter's chastity, one of the most important characteristics a young female could have:

> Chastity was essential, and chastity meant physical virginity; suitors did not want a damaged packet. Daughters could not be put under glass domes like wax flowers, but the next best thing was to keep them in a state

> of suspended antisepsis. Books were censored so that daughters would not be contaminated; opera had to be vetted in case there was a ballet (in which people showed their legs); going out alone was strictly prohibited; a staunch etiquette was rigorously enforced. They had to be fresh for their sacrificial rites, modest and decent. (Pearsall 10)

Keeping a daughter chaste was a full time job, but mothers could at least be comforted by the knowledge that it was only a temporary duty. As Pearsall's description points out, a female's chastity was only important in light of her future marriage (the bridegroom did not want a "damaged packet"), and the mother's duty would be suspended upon her daughter's nuptials.

The emphasis on female purity before marriage is important to note, because most Victorians did not favor the notion of lifelong abstinence for males or females. Instead, sexuality contained within marriage was supported: "In Protestant England the centre of gravity of Christian moral thinking was shifted somewhat back in a pro-sensual direction by an almost universal distaste for chastity as a deliberate and dedicated condition (and especially so in a climate in which . . . members of both sexes consciously valued heterosexual marriage for its erotic satisfactions)" (Mason, *Sexual Attitudes* 17). Celibacy was not disliked simply because of its Catholic background; it was also avoided because healthy married sexuality was encouraged.

Like the Greco-Romans, this denouncing of celibacy in favor of fecund married sexuality has important social ramifications. In fact, many Victorian doctors declared that female abstinence was not just socially damaging, but physically damaging as well:

> It was a natural if not strictly necessary corollary of uterine physiology that sexual abstinence was damaging for the woman. No doctor in the country—again, according to the *Lancet,* would have judged that a chaste woman could be healthy: the editors agreed that it was damaging for a woman to suppress her drives. The professional belief in the 'ravages' that could be caused by enforced chastity was often echoed by more popular medical authors, who said it could cause hysteria, of course, but also cancer and syphilis, and generally shorten a woman's life. (Mason, *Sexuality* 217)

The doctors' pronouncement that female continence could cause major diseases is very different from the early Christian notion of getting closer to God through celibacy. Rather than abstinence giving a woman closer communion with God, it now meant death (ironically, perhaps from syphilis). These medical opinions seeped into the popular belief system, and in Victorian England "there are many lay voices, of many different types, who endorse the belief that a woman can seriously or even fatally damage her health if her sexual needs are not fulfilled" (Mason, *Sexuality* 225). Everyday people believed female continence caused disease or death, reinforcing the institution of marriage, the legally and religiously sanctioned vehicle for female sexuality.

There was never a consensus that female abstinence damaged women's health, however, and there are many Victorian sources which argue for the merits of perpetual chastity: "several writers were prepared to argue that there was nothing physically or mentally defective about lifelong women celibates, or 'Old Maids.' The outstanding statement of personal anti-matrimonial convictions by a woman of the day is Mary

Smith's *Autobiography* (1892)" (Mason, *Sexuality* 225). Other Victorian proponents of continence include J. F. Scott and Sir James Paget, who argued that sexual intercourse is comparable to "theft or lying," an interesting parallel to the medieval Catholic conduct books which compared sex with a "stinking and wanton deed" (Pearsall 14).

Despite these and other defenders of abstinence, the notion of perpetual chastity was generally disliked in Victorian England, as Michael Mason points out in his definition of "classic moralism," which was the system of beliefs generally promoted by the "major institutions of established power" (Hall 31). According to Mason, this doctrine declares that "celibacy is an evil, but so are all expressions of sexuality other than permanent monogamy; prostitution, concubinage, and divorce are all vicious; if they were encouraged they would be exploited mainly by men, who are much less chaste and modest than women" (*Sexual Attitudes* 51). There is still an emphasis on chastity (especially the female variety), but the notion of complete abstinence is frowned upon as much as prostitution and divorce.

Chastity, as noted by Mason, was thought to be a kind of natural quality that women possessed, especially in contrast to men's more passionate natures. Society in general promoted this view, and "women were educated to believe that they were, on the one hand, morally superior to men in their lack of sexual drive, and, on the other hand, inferior because of their weaker natures" (Vicinus xiv). This belief served men quite nicely, because the only way women were superior to them was in their "lack," a diminished superiority at best. In fact, Ronald Pearsall suggests the emphasis on female chastity was primarily driven by male interests: "Respectable men wanted unmarried women to be chaste largely for selfish reasons; when they or their sons married they

wanted the package entire, without the seals broken. This sentiment could be easily rationalized as a reverence for innocence," however, "by a shift in emphasis, reverence for innocence became obsession with virginity" (34). The description of women as "package[s]" parallels the notion of the commodification of female bodies, bringing into full focus Victorian male's desire for chaste wives and daughters. Female chastity was not really about upholding moral codes. Instead, it was about securing male interests in female bodies.

As Pearsall notes, this "reverence for innocence" could become a fixation on female virginity, the physical manifestation of innocence. The Victorian emphasis on female virginity had mixed results: "The Victorians deified female virginity . . . but at the same time one 'superstition' regarded intercourse with a child virgin as a cure for male syphilis" (Lovesey 4). The contrast between reverence and complete viciousness towards female virgins illuminates an interesting dichotomy in Victorian thought about virginity; female virgins were idealized, yet this glorification simultaneously transformed them into less-than-human objects. Another result of the fixation on virginity was the large trade of child prostitutes. Rape of virgins was common in Victorian pornography, and "unfortunately virgin-taking was not restricted to dirty books; it was a minor industry in the Victorian underworld" (Pearsall 38). Rich men could "buy" virgins for twenty pounds or less, and they usually required medical proof that the girl was in fact a virgin (Pearsall 40). Some entrepreneurial handlers circumvented this step by creating the illusion of physical intactness: "they evolved elaborate means to simulate virginity *in perpetuo,* using broken glass in the vagina, blood-soaked sponges, and leeches" (Pearsall 39). The fact that people would go so far to simulate the blood of a first sexual encounter

highlights the immense demand created by men eager to have sex with virgins. The men's motivation was not just lust, however; the fact that they specifically wanted to have sex with virgins underscores their desire to "possess" the female body. By being a woman's first sexual encounter, a man showed control or ownership over her; the man "buying" a female virgin owned her for the hour.

The lust to deflower virgins was not relegated to just the seedy side of Victorian society, however: "The urge to destroy virginity was part of the make-up of man as a sexual creature, the bridal night was a ravishing of a virgin bride" (Pearsall 35). The obsession with having sex with virgins crossed from the lairs of prostitution into the bridal chamber, creating a bridegroom's lust to have sex with his intact bride. Pearsall notes that when a husband roughly took his wife's virginity,

> pleasure at inflicting pain was tempered by aftermath—regret, guilt and shame. The urge to deflower a virgin might be satisfied, but when the ex-virgin is still about the premises, as wife or lover, there were complications; it was impossible to visualize the woman as an object, to be used once, and discarded. An obsession with virginity necessitated the depersonalization of the virgin. (38)

Pearsall highlights the connection between an obsession with virginity and the commodification of women, noting that a woman who is used for her virginity must undergo "depersonalization" to become an object which can be used and "discarded."

Thinking of women as objects to be possessed and stripped of virginity is not unique to Victorian England, however. The process is present in Western history from the Greco-Roman period up until the present day. Pearsall (writing in 1976) declares that

"the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 raised the age of consent to sixteen. But not until the present century did virgin-taking . . . lose its popularity" (39). I find fault with this statement, because while the sport of "virgin-taking" might be less visible in twenty-first-century life than it was in past periods, it is still present. Although there are variations in thought according to what time period one is dealing with, a woman's chief virtue in Western history remains her virginity or chastity. Each of the time periods gives different reasons for the importance placed upon virginity or chastity, but at the core of all of the theories is the commodification of female bodies. Whether it was to populate the Empire, to become equal to a man, or to be the perfect wife, female virginity and chastity always figured the female body as merchandise to be used by or withheld from men. The pervasive nature of this attitude can be seen in literature throughout the centuries, from the traditional canon of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Hardy, to the novel of Oates. The theories of Rich, Irigaray, and Thomas help to illuminate this commodification, providing insights into the residual nature of Western history's obsession with female virginity and chastity.

Chapter 2: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies": Commodification and Virginity in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* revolves around female possession of virginity and the masculine conquest of it, and the subtitle, *A Pure Woman,* underscores its importance to the novel. There has been much critical debate about what Hardy means by the word "pure," but Kathleen Blake notes that "J.T. Laird's study of the novel's development through manuscript and published versions reveals the easy interchangeability, for Hardy, of the words 'chastity' and 'purity'" (691). This explanation of the word "pure" indicates that Hardy intends to bring attention to Tess's sexuality, not just her morals, through the subtitle. This message, which describes an unwed mother and murderess as chaste and "pure," was difficult for many readers to understand, and Hardy faced sharp criticism from his contemporaries. A reviewer from *The Quarterly Review* of April, 1892 decreed that Hardy, "in his own interests, has gratuitously chosen to tell a coarse and disagreeable story in a coarse and disagreeable manner," depicting sexuality for no apparent reason other than to sell copies of the novel (qtd. in Grossman 2). Others took issue with the novel's message about religion: "fate is allowed an undue predominance over human will," the 1892 *Atlantic Monthly* announced ("Recent" 1). Still others disagreed with Hardy's portrayal of reality. Margaret Oliphant questions Hardy's knowledge of peasants, saying that his depiction of Tess as utterly naïve is inaccurate: "a girl brought up in the extraordinary freedom and free-speaking of rural life would scarcely be entirely ignorant of evil" (2).

In response to these criticisms, Hardy revised the novel until 1912 and tried to defend himself in the novel's many prefaces. In the preface to the fifth edition, Hardy

defends the subtitle of the novel, and writes that his critics suffer from an "inability to associate the idea of the sub-title adjective with any but the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization. They ignore the meaning of the word in Nature" (37). Hardy believes that notions of virginity put forth by civilization are "artificial" and "derivative," based on man-made religious values, and that there is a true form of purity found in nature which is free from civilization's synthetic rules.

From these statements, Hardy's notion of virginity seems progressive in relation to the dominant thought on the subject at the time, and one would assume that the novel reflects his privileging of a natural definition of virginity as opposed to the "artificial" definition society poses. In fact, many critics cite the novel as a forward-thinking attack on Victorian values:

> In Tess . . . basic moral assumptions of the Victorian age come in for barbed criticism: the cruelty of a 'moral' code which condemns the innocent *victim* of a seducer (perhaps a rapist) to ostracism while he goes scot free; the double standard that enabled Angel to palliate his own sins while condemning Tess. . . *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a frontal attack on some of the bastions of Victorian *mores*. (Carpenter 2)

Other critics argue that the novel expresses feminist viewpoints: "Choosing a woman as the medium for his message suggests, at the least, that new conceptualizations of temporality and philosophical notions of history must accommodate both sexes" (Campbell 5). Each of these views present the novel as a ground-breaking endeavor, challenging not only the values of Victorian England, but also the patriarchy.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles does in fact question "Victorian *mores*" and women's roles, yet, the novel ultimately fails to be a radical re-examination of society. Bernard J. Paris argues that "it is ironical that the argument for Tess's purity based upon the goodness of her intentions, while it gives the appearance of a radical revision of 'the old appraisements of morality,' is in reality founded upon thoroughly conventional values" (61). Paris has identified the "radical revision" Carpenter and Campbell notice in the novel, but he declares that it is only the "appearance" of revolutionary notions. Upon close inspection, the novel reverts back to "conventional values," upholding "Victorian *mores*" and the subjugation of women, showing that while Hardy questions the dominant social order's notion of virginity, he ultimately supports its decrees of female commodification. In the novel, Tess is commodified by her family, the men in her life, and even herself. The most interesting commodification comes, however, from Hardy; after all of the rhetoric about "natural" purity and Tess being free from societal boundaries, the novel ends with Tess commodified yet again, an exchangeable object in relation to men.

The origin of Tess's commodification is within her family. In the book's opening, Tess's father learns that his ancestors are the "ancient and knightly family of the d'Urbervilles" (43). This causes jubilation in the impoverished, alcoholic home of the Durbeyfields, and Tess's parents soon come up with a plan to capitalize on their new-found nobility. Joan, Tess's mother, remembers that a rich family with the name of d'Urberville resides nearby, and outlines the family's plan of action: "my projick is to send Tess to claim kin," she decrees (65). Tess is not being sent to beg for money only,

however; Joan has bigger plans: "likely enough 'twould lead to some noble gentleman marrying her" (65).

The Durbeyfields' scheming illuminates their belief in women's commodification; Tess is thought of as a trade good to be exchanged with the rich relatives for financial gain. Oliver Lovesey notes that Joan fully participates in the effort to commodify her daughter: "While Tess's mother. . . highly prizes virginity, she more cynically and shrewdly estimates its exchange value and its recovery" (3). This echoes Irigaray's notion of women being nothing more than pawns in exchanges between men; Tess has value only in the respect that she can be traded between men (368). Joan's plan to marry Tess off to a "gentleman" can also be seen as the arranged marriage spoken of by Rich; Tess's value to the family is only how much she can earn in the sexual exchange system of the marriage market.

It is interesting to note, however, that Tess resists this commodification and tries desperately to find a way out of her family's plan: "I'd rather try to get work," she tells them (74). By choosing a job rather than her mother's match-making, Tess tries to support her family without entering into the sexual economy. She does not want to act as an objectified trade good for her family, but, in the end, the job hunt is unsuccessful and she agrees to go. She tells her mother: "I suppose I ought to go do something. I don't mind going and seeing her, but you must leave it to me about asking for help. And don't go thinking about her making a match for me—it is silly" (75). Tess agrees to go and claim kin, but even in her acquiescence she remains resistant to her commodification; she tells her mother to forget about marriages, she is going to get work, not to find a man. Tess's resistance to commodification at the hands of her family shows an effort by Hardy

to transcend the dominant social order's decree of female objectification, yet this endeavor proves difficult to sustain.

On the day of Tess's departure for Trantridge, the place where the d'Urbervilles reside, Tess dresses in her normal work clothes. When Joan sees her, she tells Tess to change into her Sunday best: "I think it will be wiser of 'ee to put your best side outward," Joan advises her (89). Even though Tess has clearly been resistant towards the idea of her commodification, Joan still insists on Tess looking "presentable." This effort signifies Joan's attempt to make the commodity (Tess) marketable, to dress it up for a higher trade value. Similarly, after Tess has left, Joan tells her husband that Tess "ought to make her way with 'en, if she plays her trump card aright. And if he don't marry her afore he will after" (93). When Jack asks what her "trump card" is, Joan informs him that it is Tess's face (93). Again, Tess's beauty is figured as her selling point, as a way to enter into the sexual economy. Joan's coded mention of marriage reveals that she is sending her daughter into the world with the full knowledge of how Tess the commodity will be consumed; Joan assumes that a man will have sex with Tess and marry her eventually. Joan's scheming exemplifies a character type prevalent in the novel's time period: "*Tess* was begun in 1888 at a time when the late-Victorian obsession with virginity had turned into a mania due to revelations about child prostitution, an increase in prosecutions for child sexual assault, and a revival of the stereotype of the wicked, exploiting mother" (Lovesey 3). Joan fulfills this negative stereotype, sending Tess out into the world to use her sexuality for financial gain, regardless of the consequences.

Interestingly enough, the first man Tess meets is Alec d'Urberville, a rogue who lives up to Joan's dreams of a man using her daughter. Alec treats Tess as a commodity

much as her family does, and the first time he and Tess meet, "Alec looked at Tess as he spoke, in a way that made her blush a little" (80). Alec assumes the position of male consumer, and looks at Tess like an object he's considering buying; he has secured a sense of possession through the gaze. The narrator comments on this gaze, and laments, "had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man" (82). Through this foreshadowing, Hardy presents Tess as an object to "be seen and coveted" rather than as a subjective human being.

Readers learn the reason for the foreshadowing later on in the novel, after Tess has stayed at Trantridge for three months. Late one night as she is coming home from a fair Alec rescues Tess from a fight, and offers to give her a ride home. He conveniently gets "lost" and leaves Tess in the forest so he can get directions. As he is leaving, he says, "By the bye, Tess, your father has a new cob to-day. Somebody gave it to him" (117). Alec is buying Tess, the commodity, by giving her family gifts. Tess responds with gratitude, but feels the "awkwardness of having to thank him just then" (117). Tess feels uncomfortable because she is alone in an isolated area with a higher class man to whom she is in debt. She recognizes her position as an object in the sexual economy, and feels awkward because as a commodity she has little power to protect herself or take herself out of the exchange. Her vulnerable position is magnified by her class status, because in Tess and Alec's relationship, "there is a close relation between economic dependence and the sexual expectation conditional upon that support" (Humm 44). In fact, in other literature of the time (even pornography), the exploitation of working-class women by aristocratic men was common. For example, "the author of *My Secret Life*,

composed in the 1880s, a probably fictional narrative nevertheless interesting as social history, justifies his exploitation of young women by class-based references to the economics of sexual exchange" (Lovesey 5). Because "the economics of sexual exchange" favor Alec not just as a man, but as an *aristocratic* man, Tess is left in a very vulnerable position.

Tess's powerlessness is underscored by the novel's subsequent events. By the time Alec returns, Tess has fallen asleep, and Alec rapes her. The rape is an integral part of Tess's story, yet there has been much critical debate over whether Tess was in fact taken by force or whether she was merely seduced: "the precise nature of the assault upon Tess Durbeyfield's innocence has been debated by Hardy's readers for a century" (Davis 221). While some scholars (such as Kristen Brady and W. Eugene Davis) contend that Tess was seduced rather than raped, this view is in the minority. Convincing proof that Tess was raped comes from William A. Davis's analysis of Tess's experience in the context of the late-Victorian legal system. He points out that Tess is asleep when the episode begins, and "the legal premise that a sleeping woman is incapable of consenting to sexual intercourse was routinely upheld in Victorian courts" (229). In fact, "to an alert Victorian reader, . . . these details would have confirmed rather than introduced the idea of rape" (Davis 223). For Hardy's contemporaries, then, there would have been no doubt that Alec rapes Tess.

Due to his society's aversion to explicit sexuality, Hardy omits the scene of the rape, but notes that "doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards the peasant girls of their time" (119). This notion of rape as a commonplace action whereby

aristocratic men can possess lower-class women without consequences is disturbing, yet it highlights the cyclical nature of abuse; lower-class women in past centuries have been raped in the same manner as Tess, and no end to the violence is in sight. The passage also underscores the place rape has in the commodification of women. Through rape, a man (in this case an upper-class man) is able to not only "covet" the commodity he sees, he is able finally to possess it, even if it is by force. Alec's rape of Tess exemplifies this notion, and later in the novel Alec reminds Tess, "I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man's wife you are mine" (412). Clearly, by raping Tess Alec feels as though she is his possession, his commodity. He declares that Tess is his natural wife because of their sexual experience, and then equates marriage with being the wife's "master." Alec thinks of these experiences (rape, marriage, and slavery) as being interconnected; for him, "possessing" a woman through sexual intercourse makes her your possession as a wife, which is equal to being her sovereign.

While Alec sees Tess as nothing more than an object to be possessed, Tess rejects this definition of herself, as she did with her family. A few weeks after the rape, Tess decides to leave Trantridge, but Alec interrupts her efforts and pleads with her to stay: "I did wrong—I admit it . . . Only you needn't be so everlastingly flinging it in my face. I am ready to pay to the utmost farthing. You know you need not work in the fields or the dairies again" (125). While this speech shows that Alec feels something towards Tess, it also highlights how he still thinks of her as a commodity. He says he is "ready to pay"; he has exploited Tess the commodity, and now is saying that he will pay for what he has used. According to Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, Alec's attitude was not too uncommon among nineteenth-century upper or middle class men:

> The use of working girls by certain middle-class men . . . recalls feudal serfdom and suggests that the professional duties of maids sometimes extended, unofficially, to the sexual servicing of another class. . . . Certain masters regarded these practices as their due. Almost invariably, when forced to acknowledge what had happened, they offered compensation in money, showing at the very least that domestic service and sexual services had become confused in the master's mind. (49)

Alec does exactly this, offering Tess money in exchange for the "use" he has gotten out of her, highlighting his extreme confusion between "domestic service" and "sexual services." For Alec, there is no difference between the two; he does not see Tess as an agentive subject trying to earn a living, but as a working-class female, a non-human, a commodity to be consumed at will. This attitude highlights the relationship between class structure and patriarchy as presented in the novel; the two support each other, effectively subjugating women for their continued preservation.

Tess scorns Alec's offer of payment, rejecting his commodification of her: "I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not—I cannot! I *should* be your creature to go on doing that, and I won't!" (125). Tess realizes her place in the system of sexual exchange, and refuses to be Alec's "creature," his possession, by accepting his offer of payment. It is important to remember that by this time three months have passed since the rape, long enough for Tess to discover that she is pregnant. The fact that Tess still rejects Alec's offer of financial support underscores her determination to remain free from the web of sexual commerce.

Tess's resistance to commodification comes to a surprising halt, however, when she meets another young man, Angel Clare. Angel objectifies Tess by seeing her not as an individual, but through the lenses of stereotypes: "He regularly renders her a type in his mind: archetypal milkmaid, 'virginal daughter of Nature,' 'daughter of the soil,' representative of primitive consciousness untouched by modern doubt, and perfect sample for his contemplation of 'contiguous womankind'" (Blake 697). His refusal to acknowledge Tess's unique characteristics and agency is also evident after he has convinced Tess to marry him. While planning the wedding, Angel decrees to Tess that "since you will probably have to leave at Christmas, it is in every way desirable and convenient that I should carry you off then as my property" (268). Tess responds positively to this blatant statement of commodification, telling Angel that she "will fix the day when I will become yours for always!" (268). Tess now is happy to be thought of as a possession, and looks forward to being Angel's property. This sudden change seems out of place, and Margaret Oliphant writes that "her creator has forced the role upon her," meaning that Tess's sudden embracing of commodification does not fit with the rest of the novel (5). In Oliphant's opinion, Hardy has forced Tess to abandon her rejection of commodification for the sake of the story line, whether it is believable or not. While Oliphant's observations are valid, I also believe that Tess gives in to commodification because she is unable to withstand the pressure of her society; she truly loves Angel, and does not feel the need to reject commodification any longer.

The blissful commodification comes to a screeching halt, however, when Tess tells Angel about her rape. Angel has just finished confessing to having a love affair when he was younger, so Tess feels like she can tell him about her past without shame;

he is not a virgin either. As soon as she tells him about the rape, though, Angel's feelings about her change: "the woman I have been loving is not you," he declares, and he "looked upon her as a species of impostor: a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one" (299). Finding out that Tess is not a virgin has completely transformed Angel's feelings for her; actual reality has collided with the image of Tess that he had built up in his mind. Because Angel loved the Tess that he had created as a perfect object, he cannot handle this evidence of her individuality: "Seeing Tess as essence and type, Angel cannot admit the relevance of experience for her, and so he refuses to hear her confession about her past affair with Alec" (Blake 697). Tess begs for his forgiveness, and says "I have forgiven you the same," but Angel does not see the correlation (298). He declares that "forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person; now you are another. My God—how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque—prestidigitation as that!" (298). After learning about Tess's past, Angel feels like Tess is not the same person. In his pain and anger he references the complete double standard of the necessity of virginity for women but not for men. Because Tess is a deflowered woman, she holds no value for Angel or society as a whole; the female commodity needs virginity to be marketable in the sexual exchange system.

Angel puts absolute faith in this double standard, and lectures Tess on the importance of female virginity rather than male. He becomes so blunt that he describes to Tess the two characteristics that create a valuable woman: "I thought—any man would have thought—that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence as surely as I should secure pink cheeks" (308). According to Angel, a woman is valuable only if she

is of high birth or if she is a virgin. He laments his situation because by not marrying an aristocratic woman, he fully expected Tess, the peasant, to be a virgin. Throughout the novel, Angel has taken pride in his lack of prejudice towards lower-class people, but his statement shows that his prejudice was only covered momentarily: "Although Angel thought that he was freeing himself from class prejudice by marrying a peasant, he confirms the gender and class prejudice that labels working-class women as lustful animals and middle-class women like Mercy Chant as sexless angels" (Shumaker 1). These characteristics of valuable women are required for the commodification of women. In the sexual economy, a woman must have either rank or virginity to attract buyers. Tess, who has neither, is damaged goods.

While Tess resists commodification earlier in the novel, fighting against the sexual exchange system she knows is wrong, she ultimately accepts this categorization of herself as damaged goods, unable to transcend the system. Before Angel convinces her to marry him, Tess states that she "could never conscientiously allow any man to marry her now" (194). Because of her lack of virginity, she views herself as a damaged commodity, one that should be taken off the shelf of the marriage market. Similarly, when Angel is trying to persuade Tess to marry him, he asks her why she keeps refusing. She tells him "I am not good enough—not worthy enough." "How?" he asks, "Not fine lady enough?" "Yes something like that," Tess answers (237). Again, Tess views herself as spoiled merchandise which is not good enough for the noble Angel. When Tess voices these concerns Angel thinks she is talking about class, an interesting mistake considering his view of the two characteristics that make a woman valuable, rank and virginity. He is

able to laugh off her concerns because he thinks she is simply worried about her class status. As long as she is a virgin, she holds value for him.

Because all of these characters present Tess as a commodity (including Tess herself), the prefaces to the novel where Hardy defends Tess seem odd; he did not bother to write a story line where she becomes free from the sexual exchange system, so why should he care so much about her now? Yet, despite what happens in the actual novel, the Hardy of the prefaces seems very sympathetic to Tess's plight:

> This novel being one wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist, or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes, it was quite contrary to avowed conventions that the public should welcome the book, and agree with me in holding that there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe. (37)

Hardy refuses to think of Tess as a commodity, as damaged goods once she has been raped. He insists on the validity of her story, and on the validity of her role as the heroine even though she has lost her virginity. He proves that being raped is not "fatal" to Tess's function as a heroine, and seems to criticize his society's perception of rape as something that should be covered up in a shroud of silence and shame.

The narrative persona, who seems to echo Hardy's sentiments in the preface, also presents Tess as more than a damaged commodity. After Tess has been embarrassed in church because of whispers and stares, the narrator declares:

> It was they who were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges . . . she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (135)

The narrator is underscoring the dichotomy between man-made society which says that Tess is immoral and the natural world where she fits right in. As Tess looks upon herself with shame and disgust because she is a spoiled commodity, the narrator points out that her commodification is a symptom of "accepted social law," and that she is, in fact, "in accord" with natural law.

These sentiments, and others expressed throughout the novel, indicate that Hardy does not see Tess as a "damaged commodity" because of her rape. The end of the novel, however, paints a very different picture. After Angel leaves her, Tess eventually becomes Alec's mistress, thinking that Angel will never come back. When Angel reappears, Tess wants to be with him so badly that she stabs Alec to death. She and Angel run away together, but they are eventually caught and Tess is put to death. On the day of her execution, readers see Angel with an unknown young woman, "a tall budding creature—half girl, half woman" who turns out to be Tess's younger sister, 'Liza-Lu (488). In an instant, Tess has been replaced by another, her "spiritualized image," a woman who looks like her, but with one major difference (488). 'Liza-Lu is "budding," she is young and green, symbolic of virginity. Tess, the raped, spoiled commodity has

been conveniently disposed of, and her virginal sister, a chaste carbon-copy, has taken her place seamlessly. Other scholars have noted the commodification this scene exemplifies, and Oliver Lovesey notes,

> The child—and 'Liza-Lu is little more than one at the end of the novel—is an emblem for the sense of innocence, purity, and privacy that the Victorians feared they had lost in their 'de-sacralised world.' The fallen Tess must die but the man she ostensibly has wronged is provided full 'reparation,' a term Hardy used in 1892 for the closing's poetic justice. (11)

Tess is clearly commodified in this scenario, transformed from a human being into currency to pay "reparation" for her deeds.

While Hardy tries to present Tess as more than a commodity to be exchanged between men, he ultimately fails. In Tess's death, she is replaced effortlessly by another, signifying each of the women's commodification. Both Tess and 'Liza Lu turn out to be transferable goods in the sexual exchange system, a system Hardy tries to denounce, but is unable to do so. Perhaps Hardy accepted Tess's commodification in the same way that Tess eventually embraced it; Tess saw that the sexual economy was unjust, but was unable to transcend it. In the same way, Hardy rebels against the notion of the female body being currency between men, but is unable to fully remove himself from the oppressive system. The commodification of Tess by her family, Alec, Angel, and herself ultimately seems too hard for Hardy withstand. Tess dies without freedom from objectification, stifled by a system where she is nothing more than an object to be traded between men.

Chapter 3: "Damaged Girl": The Commodification of Marianne in *We Were the Mulvaneys*

Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys*, written in 1996, presents a haunting picture of American family life from the 1970s to the present. It details the rise and fall of the Mulvaney family, investigating specifically the only daughter's rape which sets in motion the family's downward spiral. There is little critical analysis of the novel, but Oates's large body of previous work has elicited mixed reviews from feminist critics: "Oates occupies a controversial position in the history of feminist criticism," with scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Marilyn C. Wesley declaring that Oates's work is feminist, and critics like Gayle Green arguing that her work is not (Daly 83). There has been no consensus, but Brenda Daly traces Oates's work from its beginning to the 1980s, and writes that "throughout her career, though with increasing effectiveness in the eighties, Oates has been a feminist writer whose fiction has been attentive to the potential of narrative to transform gender roles" (85). With this in mind, one might assume that *We Were the Mulvaneys* would fall into this category of feminist work, serving to "transform gender roles" through its message. The novel seems to portray Marianne, the raped daughter, in a positive light rather than a condemning one, showing her inner turmoil and pain, and giving her a bright future at the end of the novel. This optimistic treatment indicates that the novel presents women as agentive subjects with real feelings, characters who can overcome even the most heinous setbacks, and Oates herself seems to believe that this is what her novel is doing. She comments on the fate of Marianne in the novel, who (after being raped, banished from the family, and having bounced from job to job/town to town) suddenly finds a loving man, gets married, and has a child:

> It was a matter of accepting herself as not despoiled, a matter of her coming to like herself once again. She was fortunate to find just the right man to appreciate her, shrewd Whit West with his background of treating wounded and abused animals. Whit was canny enough to know how to love her without scaring her off. ("An Interview" 2)

However, rather than prove how women are portrayed favorably in her novel, Oates's statement foregrounds an important but overlooked subtext of the novel, the commodification of Marianne. Oates describes Marianne as "despoiled," her body a perishable commodity, and also likens her to an "abused animal" who is *lucky* to have found a master. This rhetoric of commodification is not only present in interviews about the novel, but in the actual novel as well. Therefore, the novel fails to live up to Brenda Daly's analysis of Oates's previous work, lacking the "potential. . . to transform gender roles," and instead serving to solidify them (85). While *We Were the Mulvaneys* seems to encourage sympathy or empathy for the young female protagonist, Marianne is ultimately presented as a commodity, a less-than-human thing to be traded among men.

The first instance of this commodification is the Mulvaney family's preoccupation with Marianne's beauty. Marianne is often portrayed physically, with her almost perfect beauty being of the utmost importance. Marianne's mother Corinne remembers fondly the moments before Marianne left for the prom: "Marianne was so lovely of course. Slender, high-breasted, with those shining eyes, gleaming dark-brown hair of the hue of the finest richest mahogany" (84). This statement attesting to Marianne's beauty, noticeably absent from a description of the male siblings, underlines a young woman's true status in patriarchal society. Corinne is proud of Marianne's beauty not because she

finds pleasure in the familial resemblance, but because she knows Marianne's beauty will help her in the sexual exchange system. Her blazon of Marianne's features could be read as an auctioneer's sale flyer, advertising Marianne's marketable characteristics.

Her family's acute awareness of her virginity also exemplifies Marianne's commodification. Patrick, one of Marianne's older brothers, knows that Marianne "was considered one of the 'good, Christian' girls. Virgins of course. But virgins in their heads, too" (38). Not only is Marianne sexually inactive, she is also a pious Christian who is devoid of licentious thoughts. In fact, she is described as innately good: "'Button' [Marianne] Mulvaney was so sweet, so sincere, so pretty, so—what, exactly?—glimmering-luminous—as if her soul shone radiant in her face—you could smile at her, even laugh at her, but you couldn't not love her" (37). Marianne is innocent and pure, not just a virgin, but a young woman who is so chaste that she is "radiant." Her family is very aware of her reputation of purity, and feels a sense of possessiveness towards it:

> Patrick never told his parents how he dreaded one day discovering Marianne's name in a school lavatory. Whenever he saw obscene or suggestive words, nasty drawings, above all the names or initials of girls he believed he knew, Patrick rubbed them off in disgust if no one was around, sometimes inked them over with a felt-tip pen. (38)

Upon first reading, Patrick's actions might seem rather chivalric, but upon closer inspection they are revealed to be a manic guarding of Marianne's spotless reputation. Patrick does not have feelings of sympathy towards the slandered girls whose names he erases, nor does he seem enraged at the macho behavior of his classmates. Instead, Patrick "dread[s]" Marianne's reputation becoming tarnished. She is presented as a

possession to be guarded, and Patrick is on the front lines of the battle for her chaste reputation.

This attention paid to Marianne's virginity is reminiscent of Thomas's notion of the link between chastity and the commodification of women. Because Marianne is a woman, she is figured as the property of men, and her value "is immeasurably diminished if . . . at any time [she] has sexual relations with anyone other than her husband" (Thomas 210). To keep Marianne the commodity's value high, her whole family, even her brothers, strive to protect her innocence and her reputation.

In addition to presenting Marianne as a virginal possession to be guarded by her family, *We Were the Mulvaneys* also figures Marianne as an object for the viewing pleasure of males. Marianne is a cheerleader at Mt. Ephraim High School, an indication of her upbeat demeanor as well as her popularity at the school. As a cheerleader, Marianne performs at pep assemblies as well as at sporting events, something that embarrasses her brother Patrick:

> He squirmed having to watch her with the other varsity cheerleaders at assemblies before games—the eight girls in their maroon wool jumpers that fitted their slender bodies snugly, their small perfectly shaped breasts, flat bellies, hips and thighs and remarkable flashing legs. (37)

Patrick's discomfort at seeing his sister's body so publicly displayed ties in with the family's jealous guarding of Marianne's virginity and reputation. He knows that others are seeing the same thing that he sees, and wants to prevent it.

In fact, when Marianne is raped later in the book, Zachary Lundt, the rapist, tells her "*Love you in that cheerleader's costume. Last Friday. You didn't see me I guess.*

But I was there" (69). Lundt thinks of Marianne as an object on display, a piece of meat waiting to be consumed. This objectification of the cheerleaders' bodies can be thought of as similar to what Rich writes about the media turning women into objects: "soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality—essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males" (1768). Cheerleading has put Marianne on display for the male gaze, including Lundt's, and she is presented as "devoid of emotional context," a sexual object to be consumed. Through the male gaze, Marianne, much like the women in advertisements that Rich speaks of, is presented as less-than-human, a commodity broken up into her body parts: her breasts, belly, hips, and thighs, ready to be consumed (Rich 1768). Because she is devoid of any characteristics other than her sexuality, Marianne is reduced to an object to be bought and sold (or violently "stolen") in the sexual exchange system; she is effectively commodified.

The presentation of Marianne as an object is brought into even sharper focus by her rape. Rich writes that rape is a tactic of the patriarchy to force male sexuality upon women, and one can also think of rape as the ultimate display of male "possession" of the female body (1766). Such notions of power and commodification tie directly to Marianne's experiences, where her attacker, a high school party boy, expresses his wish to be in control: "*You're not hurt, you wanted it. Stop crying. Don't play games with me, O.K.? I'm not the kind of guy you're gonna play games with*" (71). By physically attacking her, Lundt has control over Marianne, and he finally feels like he has power over something, even if it is a body he took by force.

It is interesting to note that the power Lundt feels while raping Marianne stems at least in part from damaging her family's reputation. Lundt whispers "*Nobody's gonna hurt you, Marianne. 'Marianne Mulvaney'—hot shit. You're pissing me off, you know it?*" (88). Lundt comes from an upper-middle class family while Marianne's family is shifting from the working-class to middle-class. Lundt seems to feel that by raping Marianne he is taking her down a peg, taking the "hot shit" Mulvaney daughter and turning her into just another body to ejaculate into, teaching her and her family a lesson to stay in their place. This behavior is not that uncommon, according to Myriam Miedzian: "When dominance and power define masculinity, men rape as a way of putting 'uppity' women in their place" (155). While this behavior is sickening and frightening, it also shows the correlation between a woman's sexuality and her status as a commodity in a sexual exchange system dominated by men. Raping Marianne is an insult to her family because she is thought of as the family's property, and Lundt knows it. Therefore, he gets a twisted pleasure out of not only overpowering Marianne and proving his masculinity, but also out of damaging someone else's possession, making her worthless in the sexual economy.

One of the worst outcomes of the rape is that Marianne believes Lundt's message of her worthlessness. She blames herself for the rape, and suddenly becomes stringently religious. After a depiction of the horrific rape, readers see Marianne's religious reaction to it as she is:

> brought to the LaPortes', slipping in quietly in stealth and shame and guilt and in the sparkling hot water scrubbing herself sobbing and murmuring to herself and even laughing, giggling—biting her lip to keep from making

> too much noise, waking Trisha and her parents. A secret, and a revelation. *Blessed be they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.* (144)

Marianne seems to be in shock, "laughing" and "giggling" like what has just happened to her could not have been real. Before she gives herself a chance to reflect upon or remember the rape too well, however, she latches onto a "revelation": Christianity, turning her horrific experience and suffering into a "blessing."

This religious response continues, and Marianne, after telling her mother about the rape, refuses, on religious grounds, to obey her parents' wishes to point the finger at her attacker. Over and over again Marianne states things like "I was drinking. I was to blame. I don't remember. How can I give testimony against him!. . . I can't bear false witness" (142). Marianne blames herself for the rape, believing that she was at fault for being at a party and unwittingly accepting an alcoholic drink. Echoing Biblical passages, she refuses to blame Lundt. Marianne feels that this is the right course of action, because she has been enlightened by God: "Opening her heart to Jesus as she'd never done before—oh, never! He had instructed her in the way of contemplation; of resisting the impulse to rage, to accuse" (142). Marianne refuses to "rage" and "accuse" her rapist on specifically religious grounds, and instead believes that she is the one to blame.

These Biblical sounding refusals are important to analyze, because they show how deeply Marianne has internalized Christianity's message of forgiveness. Carol J. Adams believes that this core notion of forgiveness is often skewed to support patriarchal culture:

> Twisted Biblical interpretations seem to confirm women's subjugation to abuse as well. In a search for the meaning of her abuse, the victim may

> see Jesus' suffering as a model for her own and think that she must accept her cross. . . She may conclude that forgiveness is required by her toward all who have hurt her. (69)

Marianne seems to have done this, feeling that she deserves to suffer in emulation of Christ and believing that in order to be a true Christian she must forgive her rapist. Therefore, she refuses to charge Lundt with any crime, and she falls into a strange mental tailspin, punishing herself physically for the rape that she believes was her fault.

The first instance of this self-inflicted violence is revealed when Marianne has a flashback to the night of the rape. Readers learn that after sneaking into the LaPortes' house after the assault, Marianne took a bath not just to cleanse her body, but to scour her psyche: "Her soul she'd scrubbed, scrubbed, scrubbed as, in the hot, hurting water at the LaPortes', she'd scrubbed her offended flesh. And if there was pain in such abrasion, there was satisfaction, too. Even a muted joy" (143). Marianne is taking pleasure, "joy," in the "pain" of cleansing her mind while hurting her body, a behavior that is rooted in her Christian belief system. Christianity, following Jesus' example, holds high the notion of bodily suffering as a way to overcome the sinful body. Marianne, like many other victims of sexual abuse, feels that if she just denies the body enough, makes herself suffer enough, she will be worthy of redemption (Adams 70).

All of Marianne's Christian-centered reactions to her rape are directly linked to an understanding of the commodification of women in patriarchal culture. Marianne's feelings of worthlessness, blame, and suffering highlight the fact that she sees herself as a sacrificial body, a notion that evokes commodification, turning an independent human

being into a piece of meat to be disposed of. In fact, in Marianne's mind, she can transform her worthlessness, her sinfulness, into value by becoming a sacrificial figure.

According to Carol J. Adams, this notion is not uncommon among religious victims of abuse:

> Our culture encourages the sacrifice of wives and mothers. . . The perceived Christian emphasis on sacrifice as something good matches the way girls are taught to consider others rather than themselves, to be self-sacrificing in a social situation. *The religious meaning of sacrifice is thus layered on top of the social view of women as sacrificial.* (69)

This mixture of Christian teachings and social views of women as sacrificial reinforces the sexual exchange system, where women are perceived as merchandise to buy or sell. If a woman is a sacrifice, she is an object to be disposed of or taken advantage of. Once a woman has internalized this message of commodification, she begins to think that her subjugation is natural and deserved because she is a less-than-human object worthy of nothing more.

In fact, Marianne believes so strongly in Christian mores that she forever sees herself as totally worthless, a damaged commodity. Several years after the rape, Marianne moves into a commune and several men fall in love with her. To one of them, a young man named Hewie, Marianne makes a desperate attempt to try to show him how unworthy she is of love:

> I'm not what you'd call stable, or reliable. Nothing like you. I make mistakes, errors of judgment. I'm immature, and careless, I disappoint

> people. My family especially. My Dad, and my Mom. I've hurt them and there's not much I can do to make it right, now. (342)

Marianne still feels that the rape is her fault, and that she is the one who has "hurt" her parents. The reason she feels this way is because she has bought in to the notion of the commodification of women's bodies; by losing her virginity, regardless that she was raped, she has ruined her worth in the sexual exchange system. She has let down her parents because "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men," and without virginity, Marianne can be exchanged for nothing (Irigaray 368).

Marianne's belief that she is damaged merchandise is echoed by other characters in the novel, most notably her parents. Her mother, Corinne describes Marianne as "a hurt girl, a damaged girl" after she knows of the rape, talking about Marianne's physical and mental state as well as her value as a commodity (118). This added concern is emphasized when Corinne tells Michael, Marianne's father, about the rape. Corinne tells him that Marianne is safe and healthy, but that "something has happened to her" (133). Immediately, Michael knows what has occurred: "That sick, sinking look in Michael Mulvaney's face. He was a man, he knew. The father of a seventeen-year-old daughter. He knew" (133). The fact that Michael automatically knows what has happened to Marianne highlights the commodification of women in this society and the subsequent importance of virginity or chastity. Michael realizes Marianne has been raped because it is the one thing that could happen of any consequence to a seventeen year old girl, and, "he was a man," so he knows what men do to women. There is an emphasis on virginity, because he knows something has happened sexually to Marianne.

Michael continues to treat Marianne like a damaged commodity, and cannot bear to even be in the same room with her: "For his eyes shifted uneasily in his sockets when she appeared. If she entered a room in which he stood or sat, he would shortly leave" (147). His seemingly callous treatment of Marianne could be explained by his inability to deal with his emotions; his daughter, someone he loves dearly, has been viciously attacked, and he can do nothing about it. Yet, Michael's actions have deeper implications, because other things he does indicate that his reaction to her is also based on the severing of his male relationships as a result of Marianne's rape.

An example of this rupture of male relationships is Michael's ordeal with the Mt. Ephraim Country Club. The disowned son of a large Catholic working-class family, Michael has worked very hard to build his roofing business from the ground up, and seeks respect from other townspeople. He is very conscious of his social status, and has great ambitions to raise his social standing. Years before the rape, his greatest ambition was to become a member of the Mt. Ephraim Country Club: "For more years than he would have wished to acknowledge (at least fifteen) he'd wanted very badly to be invited to join the Mt. Ephraim Country Club which was the most 'selective'—the most 'prestigious'—certainly the most expensive—of all; where the richer, more prominent and influential of local citizens belonged" (100). Michael does not just desire a membership, however; he feels that he *deserves* one: "He deserved the privilege of playing golf there if he wished, of bringing his family to the Sunday brunch buffet, of having dinner in the elegant atrium dining room" (101). Michael believes that he is just as good as any other resident of Mt. Ephraim, and feels that he has earned the higher social ranking which the country club membership would confer.

Michael is eventually voted into the country club, and despite his best efforts to conceal his emotions, is very pleased. He becomes an active member, serving on numerous committees and socializing with the other members over golf or drinks. Once Marianne is raped, however, his acceptance at the club changes. Michael becomes an angry drunk, and the country club eventually revokes his membership. Marianne's rape has damaged his connections with other men: "Michael was sick not just with *it*, with what had happened to Marianne, but with what he felt to be the betrayal of their Mt. Ephraim friends" (174). Michael has lost all of his upper-middle class friends and business partners as a consequence of the rape; Mr. Lundt (the rapist's father) is also a country club member, and the members side with him. As another result of Marianne's rape, Michael begins to drink heavily, falling behind in work and alienating partners. He blames Marianne for not being the proper "exchange between two men," because instead of strengthening his relationships with other men, Marianne's rape has severed them (Irigaray 368).

Another reason Michael might be uncomfortable in Marianne's presence could be because of the way he treated women in the past. During a flashback to Michael and Corinne's first meeting, readers get a glimpse of the younger Michael's mind set: "He'd have to admit: his attitude towards females, especially college females, was predatory . . . All he had to be cautious of was knocking up a girl, otherwise just take and enjoy, take what you can while you can" (126). Clearly, the younger Michael saw women as objects, commodities to be "take[n]" and "enjoy[ed]." The consumers, in his view, are always males. This perspective becomes evident in his speech to Corinne, then his girlfriend: "Honey, what a guy does, what men do—it isn't anything like what a girl like you—your

quality—does, or even wants to know about" (129). According to Michael, men can sleep around, it is just "what men do." Women, on the other hand, have to be sheltered from this reality, and must preserve their virginity to stay of a certain "quality." These past opinions would be very hard for Michael to reconcile with the fact that *his* daughter, his property, is now the one being used as a commodity or seen as prey.

Eventually, the situation becomes too strained for Michael, and he and Corinne decide to send Marianne away. This action is the ultimate evidence of the belief that Marianne is a damaged commodity, because Marianne is clearly being treated as exchangeable merchandise. Michael tells Corinne, "I wish to God I never had to lay eyes on her again . . . God forgive me! It's so" (185). With that, Corinne makes arrangements and ships Marianne off that very day to live with a second cousin. Corinne telephones once every week, but rarely goes to visit Marianne, and will not allow her daughter home for a visit. This unforgiving treatment exemplifies Corinne and Michael's treatment of Marianne like a commodity, and a damaged one at that. Marianne is packed up and shipped away in a day, something that should happen to a parcel, not a human being. Their perfect, virginal daughter is no more, so they push her away, send her back, like a gallon of spoiled milk.

Even after Marianne has been sent away from home like unwanted merchandise, the male members of the family are fixated on avenging her honor. This obsession is rooted in the notion of Marianne being property that is owned by the men of the family. By seeking revenge, the men are trying to safeguard their possession or get vengeance on the person who has damaged their property. Right after the rape Michael visits the District Attorney, and decrees "I want the fucker punished! I want justice! I see this kid

around town, my daughter has to see him in school, and my son—*he's getting away with it, with the hurt he inflicted on us*" (184). Michael is furious that Lundt is "getting away with it," getting away with damaging his property without any repercussions. Later, to Corinne, Michael admits "Always I'd be thinking *I would kill for her, my baby girl.* But- . . . I'm not strong enough, I'm a coward. How can I live knowing that! God help me Corinne, I can't bear the sight of the girl any longer" (185). Seeing Marianne is a reminder of Michael's emasculation at the hands of Lundt. By raping Marianne, Lundt has proven that Michael is unable to protect *his* women, which are his property in the sexual exchange system.

Marianne's brother Patrick also expresses the need to revenge Marianne's rape, revealing even more clearly the connection between the commodification of women and the desire for revenge. Patrick believes that his sister's rapist deserves to be punished, and that it is the men of the family's responsibility to do so: "The Mulvaney men had long shirked their responsibility, that was it, and it was unsaid," Patrick thinks (294). It is important to note that Patrick specifically targets the men of the family; he says nothing about his mother or sister's desire to exact revenge. This omission reveals Patrick's masculinist notion of the commodification of women; Patrick believes that men have the responsibility to protect their possessions, in this case, his sister.

Patrick is the only Mulvaney male to eventually exact his revenge upon Lundt. He kidnaps the rapist as he is leaving a bar, noting that the abduction is easier than imagined; Lundt is "easy prey" (294). Patrick has turned the tables on Lundt, making him the hunted, the commodified object, for a change. This commodification is important in the overall message of Patrick's revenge; by turning Lundt into "prey,"

Patrick has figuratively emasculated him because in the patriarchal system only women are commodified. Since Lundt is transformed into a piece of meat, he has lost his masculinity, and is now nothing more than a body for Patrick to terrorize.

The emasculation of Lundt continues in the rest of the attack, where Patrick forces him at gunpoint to drive to an isolated bog. Lundt is terrified, and urinates in the seat, much to Patrick's surprise: "Zachary Lundt, whom he'd so long despised and in a way feared, was no more than this trembling whimpering boy who'd wet his jeans" (297). Lundt has been reduced to a terrified "boy" in the presence of Patrick's gun, a phallic symbol denoting masculinity and power. Once at the bog, Patrick forces Lundt to wade out into the muck, planning on watching him drown. Lundt is described as a "giant slug, a mud-creature, feebly flailing, its head and face mired in mud," a weak, "feebl[e]" object devoid of humanity, like Lundt's view of the women whom he rapes (302). However, just as Lundt seems to be collapsing into the sludge, Patrick has a flash of pity and rescues him, saying, "'I let you live, fucker. I could have let you die and I let you live—remember that'" (304). Even when saving his life, Patrick has emasculated Lundt, showing him that he holds no power over the situation. Patrick can control whether he lives or dies, giving Lundt no power, and thus, no masculinity.

Lundt's emasculation during Patrick's attack has a significant symbolic value. By stripping Lundt of his masculinity, Patrick has effectively revenged his sister's rape. He has re-established his and his family's masculine identity, proving that they *can* protect their women, their property. Just as Lundt terrorized and possessed Marianne, Patrick has turned Lundt into a commodity to be possessed and controlled. Figured as the

feminine object in the attack, Lundt is emasculated by Patrick, who strips him of the power to harm Marianne, or any other woman, again.

Once Marianne's rape has been avenged, the novel seems to come to a quick and tidy close. Michael has left the family and eventually drinks himself to death, sick that he could not protect his only daughter. Corinne, the corner post of the family, weathers all of the family's tribulations and eventually starts her own business with her partner. Patrick, after letting go of his obsession for revenge, happily backpacks around the West Coast and finds the love of his life. The strangest turnaround, however, comes from Marianne. Throughout the novel she has bounced from town to town, living with a relative, at a commune, with an invalid, and then at an animal shelter. She has formed no meaningful relationships in any of the places she has stayed, yet, by the end of the novel, she is married to a successful veterinarian with whom she has a baby.

This sudden happy ending seems too convenient; the trauma caused by Marianne's rape and subsequent banishment are no longer mentioned, and instead, the remaining family members seem to get along well. However, this atypically happy ending could have its roots in the commodification of women, continuing the whole novel's theme of Marianne being property to be exchanged or protected. The novel's ending is a happy one because Marianne has finally entered the sexual exchange system; by marrying, she has finally been passed from her father to her husband, a necessary shift for the sexual economy to function (Irigaray 368). Marianne has fulfilled her role as a commodity and now safely resides within the bonds of matrimony. Thus, Oates can close this heart-wrenching, emotional novel peacefully.

This ending, which is seemingly a positive one, actually underscores the whole theme of the commodification of Marianne in the novel. Throughout *We Were the Mulvaneys,* Oates presents Marianne as a commodity, and this dehumanizing notion is believed by her parents, her brother, her rapist, and even herself. The theories of Rich, Irigaray, and Thomas help to illuminate this commodification, yet, ultimately, there is no helping Marianne. Oates condemns her to eternal commodification, valorizing and romanticizing her status as merchandise. Oates's espousal of patriarchal ideals is interesting, showing readers a female author underscoring the theme of the commodification of women's bodies. This seemingly illogical act shows how deep patriarchal notions are entrenched in Western culture. Whether realizing it or not, Oates supports the very system the novel attempts to undermine, sending the message that as long as women play by the rules of the patriarchy, becoming men's property and playthings, women will live safely and happily; all one needs to do is look to the example of Marianne, the "damaged girl" (118).

Conclusion

In each of these novels, the female protagonist is presented as a commodity, even though the authors seemingly want to portray them in a different light. The similarity is important to analyze, because it reveals the residual nature of the importance of female virginity and the commodification of female bodies in Western culture. Both Tess and Marianne are stripped of humanity, presented as objects to be used and exchanged. Even the different endings of the two novels are symbolically the same, with Tess being put to death and Marianne getting married and having a child. Just as Tess is replaced by her younger sister Liza Lu, the miserable, repressed Marianne of the majority of the novel is replaced by a totally different Marianne, a cheerful wife and mother who has no connection to the pain and loss the earlier Marianne went through. Each of the women symbolically die, with Tess being put to death by the penal system, and the old Marianne being executed by the institution of marriage. Each of the women is reborn as a virginal or chaste, patriarchy-approved form, Tess through Liza Lu, and Marianne through marriage. Once the women's sexuality is controlled, by execution or matrimony, the novels can end on a hopeful note.

Neither Tess's nor Marianne's story is obsolete, and it is important to continue to study the commodification of women in literary as well as cultural texts. In the future, I would like to expand this project into a larger study, examining the commodification of women in other texts such as the Maury Povich Show. My goal is to illuminate the ways contemporary texts present women as commodities, proving that the commodification of women is not dead, and exploring why it still thrives in our society of supposed equality. By exposing the everyday commodification of women, I believe that awareness can be

cultivated, and Western civilization can ultimately be changed. Women should be looked at as humans, not as merchandise to be guarded or exchanged. The fact that a novel written in the twentieth century presents the same treatment of women as a novel written in the nineteenth century demonstrates that much of Western society's notions about female sexuality are residual, with attitudes towards women as commodities enduring to the present day. By discussing this commodification, however, I believe that society can be changed, and ultimately, I hope that no more women will identify themselves as "damaged girl[s]."

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"Damaged girl[s]": The Commodification of Female Protagonists in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys*

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