“BLOOD WAVERING IN UNCERTAIN FLUX AND REFLUX”: READING THE BLUSH IN THOMAS HARDY’S A PAIR OF BLUE EYES AND FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

by

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Abstract

The two primary aims of this thesis are to position Thomas Hardy in a history of nineteenth-century literary blushing that has not, as of yet, included him, and to consider the extent to which his representations of blushing correspond with contemporaneous discussions of the embodied mind. Hardy’s longstanding interest in the extent to which external signs can communicate internal states and in the limitations of self-knowledge intersect with many of the questions about consciousness, bodies, and social environment central to nineteenth-century literary and scientific explorations of the blush. The 1870s in particular saw an exacerbation of interest in and conversation about the blush, related, in part, to the publication of Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* on 26 November 1872 — four months after Hardy started writing *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and seven months before he began seriously working on *Far from the Madding Crowd*. By tracing representations of blushing throughout these two novels, my thesis reveals Hardy’s growing distrust of the blush’s revelatory capacity and his more pronounced emphasis on the biological mechanism as an object of investigation and anxiety. My chapter on *A Pair of Blue Eyes* considers what or how much a blush can say about interiority, drawing primarily on the literary tradition, while my chapter on *Far from the Madding Crowd* considers what the blush can say about the body, suggesting that Hardy engages more self-consciously here with the physiology of blushing and the sexual politics of observation and exposure. The representations of blushing in both novels, however, incorporate both literary and scientific traditions as they explore how bodies absorb and reproduce discourses and narratives that repress or exploit them and how they resist such coercions, proving uncooperative or unreadable.
Lay Summary

The two primary aims of this thesis are to position Thomas Hardy in a history of nineteenth-century literary blushing that has not, as of yet, included him, and to consider the extent to which his representations of blushing correspond with contemporaneous discussions of the embodied mind. Hardy’s longstanding interest in the extent to which external signs can communicate internal states and in the limitations of self-knowledge intersect with many of the questions about consciousness, bodies, and social environment central to nineteenth-century literary and scientific explorations of the blush. After outlining the convoluted and often contradictory connotations that surrounded the blush in the nineteenth century, I consider how Hardy uses the blush for specific narrative effects, the extent to which he uses it self-consciously, and the extent to which his characters’ fluctuating countenances reproduce and/or undermine Victorian assumptions about gender, power, legibility, and expression.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished work by the author, Hilary Ball.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The reader of Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) initially encounters his heroine as she sits alone atop a waggon loaded with her possessions, secretly observed for the first time by her future suitor, Gabriel Oak. Surreptitiously unpacking a small looking-glass, Bathsheba Everdene smiles at her reflection, blushes, and seeing her reflection blush, blushes again (1: 7). It is a peculiar moment, and Hardy’s narrator’s insistence that “nobody knows” what possessed Bathsheba to “indulge in such a performance” is more peculiar still, given that several chapters later he will provide detailed reports of her thoughts and motives (1: 7). In fact, although the narrator allows himself briefly to speculate about the source of her “performance,” suggesting fantasies of “far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part — vistas of probable triumphs” (1: 8) — he immediately undermines his own conjecture with an acknowledgement of its status as “but conjecture,” leaving the meaning of her blush uncertain (1: 8). As such, Hardy positions his heroine’s shifting facial hue as a site of ambiguity and fascination that both invites and resists interpretation.

One of the most difficult human expressions to simulate or stifle, the blush has long been a source of cultural fascination and anxiety insofar as it suggests the body’s betrayal of the mind, a visible and involuntary expression of repressed or concealed feeling. Apparently circumventing the will entirely, the blush was often believed to mediate between the subject’s interiority and the surface of her body, thus making it a more reliable agent of truth than her lips, a more revealing window into the soul than her eyes. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors frequently employed the fluctuating countenance in their narratives as a mode of indirect communication between characters or between author and reader, exploiting both fantasies and fears of an
authentic self made legible via the mechanisms of the body. The blush seems, in fact, to adapt especially well to linguistic representation, for although it is a visual phenomenon, its temporality cannot be reproduced in painting or photography, and its spontaneity renders it nearly impossible to replicate on stage (Yeazell 77). Yet as Mary Ann O’Farrell argues in her book-length study of the blush in nineteenth-century literature, novelists often embraced the idea of somatic legibility with some degree of unease. On the one hand, in its involuntariness, the blush may be read as a subversive mode of self-expression that evades the restrictions imposed on well-behaved subjects, “an apparent sign of the body’s separable will and … willful intrusion into social order” (O’Farrell 15). On the other, it may be construed as evidence of the body’s implication in and exposure to the disciplinary techniques of the same social order it seems to disrupt. Thus, O’Farrell writes, the subversive blush can also be read as “an instrument by which the body is enlisted in the production of legibility in order to serve at surveillance’s creation of domesticable bodies” (6). Does the blush, then, connect the inside with the outside, revealing the psychological truth beneath the socially constructed layers of appropriate manner, voluntary expression, and fashionable garment? Or does it connect the outside with the inside, revealing the socially determined nature of emotion? And as a mediator between two “realms” does the blush reinforce the binary or undo it?

By the time Far from the Madding Crowd began its serialization in January 1874, the blush was becoming somewhat well-worn as a literary device, framed by a set of novelistic conventions no longer necessarily connected to the observed habits of actual human bodies. O’Farrell has convincingly argued that mid- and late-nineteenth-century authors were growing suspicious of the blush’s expressive capacity, their use of it increasingly self-conscious and troubled. She does not consider, however, the extent to which growing physiological interest in
the blush, and in intersections of expression and reflex more generally, may have influenced and even revitalized late nineteenth-century representations of this staple of the novel. An anonymous *Daily News* review of Charles Darwin’s new book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), for instance, suggests that fiction writers might learn something about the expressive human body from physiologists:

> Our authors of fiction have done a good deal to perpetuate error … , for only a very few writers really take the trouble to do more, when describing emotion, than to copy a description of somebody else. Nothing is more common in books than to hear of some heroine whose colour went and came, who turned from pale to red, and from red to pale several times in instant succession, although we venture to think that no one in real life ever witnessed such a phenomenon. We have at present in our recollection the heroine of a really eminent author who blushed so that the colour gradually overspread her whole frame; although the authority of the most experienced physicians has satisfied Mr. Darwin that only in very extraordinary instances indeed does the crimson colour spread below the upper part of the chest. People are not always correct as to the expression on their own faces, even when requested to consider the subject. (“Mr. Darwin’s New Book”)

Paul White has recently described the nineteenth-century blush as “suspended between two opposing models of expression, as a reflex mechanism and as a vehicle of narrative” (282-83). He suggests that this tension arises not from a discursive disparity between the two separate disciplines — science and literature— but from their convergences, new conceptions of affect requiring new representational techniques. As physiologists promoted more fluid and integrated paradigms of body, mind, and environment, a new set of questions emerged for authors who
wished to exploit the communicative potential of the blush in their fictions. If consciousness is embodied, what kind of “interiority” does the blush actually reveal? Does it “tell” us more about internal character — hidden circumstances, motives, desires — or about the inside of the body?

In an 1883 article for the *Westminster Review*, “Thomas Hardy’s Novels,” Havelock Ellis suggests that Hardy is “only willing to recognize the psychical element in its physical correlative” (133). His avoidance of the “subjective method,” Ellis goes on to explain, and his refusal to deal “directly with mental phenomena” represent “a feature in Mr. Hardy’s psychology which has left a strong mark on his art” (133). Twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism has generally supported Ellis’s observation, noting the rarity with which Hardy relies on free indirect discourse and introspective narrative modes. Suzy Anger claims, for instance, that in *The Woodlanders* (1887), Hardy’s narrator “frequently gestures at a character’s interiority through descriptions of actions and behaviour, as though discerning another’s mind from external signs, as we are normally constrained to do” (499). Hardy does not employ a strictly externalist narrative technique in his novels, leaving the reader only external signs with which to piece together the contents of his characters’ minds. In fact, as Suzanne Keen points out, he often exploits the reader’s greater knowledge of circumstance, motive, and affect for ironic effect — especially when his characters misread each other, as they so often do (65-66). Yet when Hardy’s narrator does turn his attention to subjective thoughts and perceptions, he tends to report on them analytically and from a distance, rather than infiltrating the fictional consciousness directly. George Levine describes his narrations as “distinctly Darwinian” insofar as they imply that “consciousness itself might be thought of as a thing, a product of natural processes, like rocks and tress” (*Reading Thomas Hardy* 87). The result is a ceding of authoritative knowledge
about the self from character to narrator and an emphasis on the subject’s limited awareness of her own mind.¹

The two primary aims of this thesis are to position Thomas Hardy in a history of nineteenth-century literary blushing that has not, as of yet, included him,² and to consider the extent to which his representations of blushing correspond with contemporaneous discussions of the embodied mind. As Jenny Bourne Taylor points out, “[t]he decade in which Hardy established his career as a novelist was crucial to the institutional establishment of psychology as a recognized discipline which focused on how the complex interconnections between mind, body, and brain shaped consciousness and unconscious mental life” (340). Hardy’s longstanding interest, noted by Taylor and others, in the extent to which external signs can communicate internal states and in the limitations of self-knowledge intersect with many of the questions about consciousness, bodies, and social environment central to nineteenth-century literary and scientific explorations of the blush. The 1870s in particular saw an exacerbation of interest in and

¹ See Chapter 2 of Keen’s Thomas Hardy’s Brains for a detailed breakdown of the different narrative modes Hardy uses to represent fictional minds: narrated monologue, quoted monologue, thought report/psycho-narration, externalized narration, and intermental or communal thought. Keen suggests that Hardy relies more heavily on thought report than his contemporaries do (64). See also Anger’s “Naturalizing the Mind in the Victorian Novel,” Levine’s “Thomas Hardy and Consciousness,” and Jenny Bourne Taylor’s entry on “Psychology” in Phillip Mallett’s Thomas Hardy in Context for details on Hardy’s engagement in psychology and neurology and its impact on his formal techniques.

² Notable contributions to the study of blushing in literature include Ruth Yeazell’s chapter on “Modest Blushing” in Fictions of Modesty (1991), which explores the blush in relation to female modesty, particularly as discussed in conduct literature of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century; and Mary Ann O’Farrell’s Fictions of Modesty (1997), which examines Jane Austen and her legacy, providing excellent readings of Gaskell, Dickens, Eliot, and James, although not of Hardy. More recent scholarship includes Kate Halsey’s article on ambiguous blushing in Austen, “The Blush of Modesty or the Blush of Shame? Reading Jane Austen’s Blushes” (2006), and Paul White’s “Reading the Blush” (2016), which examines tensions between narrative and physiological blushing and briefly discusses Austen and Eliot.
conversation about the blush, related, in part, to the publication of Darwin’s *Expression* on 26 November 1872 — four months after Hardy started writing *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and seven months before he began seriously working on *Far from the Madding Crowd*. By tracing representations of blushing through *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, I aim to reveal Hardy’s growing distrust of the blush’s revelatory capacity and his more pronounced emphasis on the biological mechanism as an object of investigation and anxiety. This is not to suggest that these novels are about blushing in any fundamental way; rather, my intention is to explore how Hardy uses the blush for specific narrative effects, the extent to which he uses it self-consciously, and the extent to which his characters’ fluctuating countenances reproduce and/or undermine Victorian assumptions about gender, power, legibility, and expression. This introductory chapter will trace the convoluted and often contradictory connotations that surrounded the blush in the nineteenth century — when it was variously interrogated as cultural fetish, literary device, and object of scientific scrutiny. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, I will ultimately suggest, are not only informed by these contexts, but hold them in tension, questioning what the blush means, why we want to know what it means, and what it means to know we blush.

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3 Hardy began writing *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in late July 1872 and sent the final chapters to *Tinsleys’ Magazine* on 12 March 1873 (Millgate 131, 136). It was serialized from September 1872 to July 1873. He turned his full attention to *Far from the Madding Crowd* on 2 July 1873, which was serialized by *Cornhill Magazine* from January to December 1874 (Millgate 141).
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BLUSHING: CULTURAL, LITERARY, AND SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES

In vain the bosom labours to conceal,
The wound which faithful hearts alone can feel;
The rising sigh — the tear, it may repress,
That none from these may know the heart’s distress.

But now, impetuous grow, the prisoner rushes,

To the fair cheek, and Love’s disclosed in blushes. (“The Blush” 140)

The literary blush, as this anonymous poem exemplifies, was consistently implicated in discourses of truth-telling or confession, especially when evoked in circumstances of repressed affection or desire. A tear or a sigh may be restrained or falsified, but the blush is an involuntary, inescapable, and apparently authentic expression of the blusher’s subjectivity. Consequently, it is a potentially indispensable instrument of the courtship narrative, wherein spoken word may be restricted between lovers and frank erotic content subject to censorship. An active complexion, as O’Farrell writes, evades “the limitations imposed on love in the system of manners” (15), or, as Kate Halsey puts it, “speaks a language of the heart, a language that the lips may be denied from uttering” (229). Before considering how mid-nineteenth-century physiological studies would complicate straightforward notions of interiority, I will explore the three overlapping yet sometimes conflicting ways in which authors and cultural commentators exploited the expressive potential and limitations of “eloquent blood”: as a guide to moral character, as a signifier of the erotic, and as a betrayal of intentionally concealed emotion.

The blush’s ability to communicate effectively in any of these modes relies on its longstanding position in the Victorian cultural consciousness, and, in particular, in discourses of femininity. This is not to suggest that men do not blush, either within literature or outside it —
they do. But insofar as women have generally been presumed to blush more frequently than men, and insofar as a feminine flush has historically been fetishized as attractive and desirable, writers since the eighteenth century have tended to depict the blush as a natural feminine response and an aberrant masculine one — a paradigm that subtly feminizes men who blush. An 1878 essay on blushing in *The New Monthly Magazine*, for instance, begins with a statement about the universality of the phenomenon — “Who, indeed, has not had [the blush] exemplified in his own person, either from timidity during the sensitive days of boyhood, or from the consciousness of having erred in mature years?” — yet cannot altogether escape entrenched associations between a pink cheek and femininity (317). The author describes blushing as “an unsophisticated addition to beauty” (318); refers to women as “mistresses … of this art” (318); suggests that blushing “cannot, perhaps, be recommended to a man” (319); and concludes with “the expression of a hope, that this one of the most bewitching charms of the English maiden may continue to warm her cheek, and betray her purity of soul, and that it may ever become her as well as it becomes her now!” (319). Even Hardy’s novels, although by no means lacking in male blasers, often exhibit similar assumptions about the essential femininity of blushing. As *Far from the Madding Crowd’s* Jacob Smallbury suggests, “though ’tis very well for a woman, [

4 Although Darwin describes blushing as the “most human of all expressions,” he also claims that women blush more frequently than men (310), a finding that has larger cultural implications. As Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran note in the introduction to their recent interdisciplinary collection, *The Female Face of Shame*, “even as shame serves as a marker of humanity in Darwin’s view, it is, more accurately, a marker of female humanity” (2). In answer to what they call the “long-proven yet heretofore baffling finding by researchers that women are more shame-prone than men,” Johnson and Moran suggest that the ideologies that “damage, cripple, and distort female subjects” function predominantly as “shaming ideologies” (3). The blush, as we will see, can be read as indicating affects other than shame, but Johnson and Moran’s point is nevertheless an important one. In fact, the very discourses that insist on reading the female blush as something *other than shame* act on behalf of an ideology that would shame women for feeling ashamed in the first place.
Conceptions of the blush as a natural and even desirable decoration for the female countenance have roots in eighteenth-century discourses surrounding maiden modesty. Although, as White points out, by the early seventeenth century, “there was already a rich literature, from erotic and epic verse to medical diagnostics, linking the blush with shame, desire, high spirits, and vice,” by the end of the eighteenth it was predominantly linked with beauty and innocence — at least when suffusing a virgin face (281-82). In fact, as Yeazell has demonstrated in her survey of the period’s conduct literature, “there was scarcely a tribute to the modest woman that did not mention blushing, or that failed to identify both her virtue and her attractiveness with a certain transient coloring of her face” (65). While odes to blushing modesty were more prevalent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the 1870s they had certainly not disappeared. A brief paragraph in the “Ladies Pages” of an 1876 issue of Bow Bells, for instance, praises blushing by suggesting that, “instead of being a criterion of guilt, [it] is often a certain sign of innocence” (380). “Everything is beautiful in its natural order,” the author goes on to claim; “When a girl’s cheeks are suffused with vermillion, she is lovely; but nothing can be more ridiculous than an old woman blushing” (380). This notion of the blush as “natural” to feminine youth reinforces perceptions of modesty itself as natural, rather than as cultivated or performative. As an involuntary expression, the blush helps to ensure that modesty cannot be imitated, for unlike other visible signals of the virtue (“the downcast eyes, the head turned aside” Yeazell 72-73), it speaks independently of the subject’s intent. In fiction, therefore, a tendency toward blushing in female characters of the appropriate age could operate as a stable index of moral character, a shorthand for her modesty that communicates transparency, sincerity, and
marital eligibility to both characters and reader.  

The image of the modest blush nevertheless embodies many of the contradictions inherent in eighteenth-century definitions of modesty, a word which, Yeazell suggests, “conveys everything and nothing, a nearly universal ideal and a midpoint constantly shifting with the placement of the extremes” (6). Linguistically related to moderation, modesty is situated between prudishness and coquetry; the desirability of the modest blusher, therefore, hinges not only on her moral colour, and the rush of blood to her face, while still indicating sexual innocence, can also be read as revealing the amorous virgin’s dormant sensuality. This unspoken acknowledgement of an underlying eroticism in blushing may, indeed, hint at why the author of the Bow Bells piece would consider such a signal on an elderly woman to be “ridiculous.” Her visible blood erupting in defiance of mannerly restraint, the virgin’s blush was imagined to expose not only the currents of passionate feeling beneath her reserve, but also the body at work beneath her clothes, the blood beneath her skin. Far from signalling sexual knowingness through her blushes, however, the modest blusher occupied a delicate state of confusion as to the nature of her erotic display, aware neither of the cause for her colour nor of its insinuation. Her blush, Yeazell suggests, “appealed to conflicting wishes — its attraction not quite that of female

5 Halsey suggests that this was the case in works as varied as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740), Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749), Fanny Burney’s Evelina (1778), Mary Hays’s Memoirs of Emma Courtney (1796) and Hannah More’s Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1808) (228). 
6 As Yeazell writes, “Long before nineteenth-century science speculated openly about the physiological resemblance of a blush to other forms of sexual flushing and excitement, lovers of the modest woman read an erotic promise in her blushes — all the more so, no doubt, because so little other than her cheek was conventionally available for contemplation” (74). These erotic associations, while rarely handled explicitly in the fiction and conduct literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were nevertheless, according to Yeazell, “usually present — and sometimes not very far from the surface” (75). For more examples, see Fictions of Modesty, Chapter 5.
innocence or of innocence violated but of a seductive moment between, a moment in which innocent unconsciousness and erotic knowingness seemed briefly to fuse” (76). Authors could use the blush as a socially sanctioned image of erotic charge, yet in so doing, they could also gesture toward the dangers of female embodiment, for such a delicate balance between innocence and experience cannot be perpetually maintained.

It is therefore not surprising that, despite its status as a marker of virgin innocence, the modest blush was constantly haunted by its apparent opposite: the blush of shame. Within the tradition of advice literature, as Yeazell points out, “[a] woman’s ‘shamefacedness’ … could virtually be taken as proof that she had never done anything of which she might be ashamed” (69), but the lengths to which authors would go to banish shame from the modest consciousness seems to expose their anxiety. As much is evident in the rhetorical circularity with which the eighteen-century physician Dr. John Gregory addresses the problem in his popular 1774 conduct book, *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*:

Pedants, who think themselves philosophers, ask why a woman should blush when she is conscious of no crime. It is a sufficient answer, that Nature has made you to blush when you are guilty of no fault, and has forced us to love you because you do so. —Blushing is so far from being necessarily an attendant on guilt, that it is the useful companion of innocence. (13)

Even in his rebuttal against pedantry, Gregory cannot altogether erase the blush’s well-known

7 As the title suggests, Gregory wrote *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* specifically for his own daughters, and did not actually intend it to be publically released. His son James published it in 1774, after Gregory’s death, whereupon it became a significant commercial success and was republished in several editions and translations (Lawrence *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*).
association with guilt, and in insisting that a modest woman blushes because she has committed no crime, he inadvertently suggests the possibility that an immodest woman might blush because she has committed one. Insofar as a blush of shame might easily be mistaken for a blush of modesty, then, Gregory speaks to a prevalent yet uneasy binary between modesty and shame, positioning them as mutually exclusive moral states that happen to share an identical visual signifier. Complicating matters further, Yeazell suggests that, for all their anxiety about shame, conduct writers nevertheless seemed to value its efficacy and “praised the blush precisely as a sign of the young woman’s responsiveness to the judgments — and feelings — of others” (71); a woman’s tendency toward blushing was often described as a guard of her virtue, as if her fear of blushing too much might suppress immodest thoughts and feelings altogether. By this logic, then, is a woman who blushes frequently less likely to transgress for fear of betraying herself with more blushes? Or is the fact that she is blushing evidence that transgression has already occurred?

These tensions and incoherencies within the cultural tradition of the blush contributed to its potency as a narrative device. In some cases, an author may use the blush as a stable marker of character, indicating a heroine’s modest sensibility and dormant erotic potential. In others, the blush may imply concealment and intrigue, active eroticism, or guilt in relation to transgressive action, intention, or desire. By blushing the body may seem to speak, but the message conveyed remains ambiguous unless specified by an omniscient narrator. Observers of blushes within the

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8 Even the OED entry for “blush” defines it as “[t]he reddening of the face caused by shame, modesty, or other emotion” (“blush, n. and adj.”).
9 Thomas Marriott’s Female Conduct (1759), for instance, warns that the concealment of blushes is a potential danger when attending a masquerade: “There conscious Shame, fair Virtue’s best Defence, / Lost in a Mask, will yield to Impudence; / Mask’d Virgins, when their Blushes are conceal’d, / Grant Freedoms, which they would deny unveil’d” (178).
novel, then, may easily misinterpret the signs, mistaking guilt for embarrassment, interest for ardour. Kate Halsey suggests that authors like Jane Austen exploited the blush’s ambiguity to create a bond between narrator and reader, allowing them to share “privileged knowledge” of the blush’s trigger (230) — knowledge contingent either on the author’s explicit statement of the blusher’s emotional state or on “an acceptance of a particular set of assumptions that direct us, without telling us, to an assessment of the blush’s meaning” (231-32).\(^\text{10}\) This, my first chapter will suggest, is the case in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in which the difference between Elfride’s blushes before and after her secret transgression is evident only to Hardy and the reader. Her complexion does to a certain degree communicate, but not always to other characters within the novel, thus complicating notions of the blush as a stable guide to character or as the location of a readable self. While often drawing on conventional literary tropes of the “eloquent blood,” however, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* also sometimes undermines them, drawing attention not only to what the blush means — whether innocence or guilt or something in between — but also to how it comes to mean anything. This question, which will be increasingly important in my discussion of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, intersects with contemporaneous interest within scientific communities in automatic bodily processes and the embodied nature of mental phenomena.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) This is not to suggest that interpretation of the blush is always any more straightforward for the reader than for characters. Halsey suggests, in fact, that Austen often used the device as “an agent of misdirection,” intended to draw the reader’s attention toward her own reading habits (237). In *Emma*, for instance, in which the titular heroine consistently misinterprets the circumstances surrounding Jane Fairfax’s facial flushes, Austen’s free indirect discourse may seduce first-time readers into perceiving Emma’s interpretations as fact, not realizing until the end that they have been deceived in assuming “privileged knowledge” of Jane’s internal state (235).

\(^{11}\) See Roger Smith’s *Free Will and the Human Sciences in Britain, 1870-1910* for a detailed discussion of how conversations about reflex and volition were playing out in scientific communities at the time Hardy was writing these two novels. See also Thomas Dixon’s
Until the 1830s, the blush had primarily been theorized in conduct books, novels, and poetry\textsuperscript{12} but after Austen’s death it became the object of more rigorous scientific scrutiny, resulting, as White has suggested, in an increased emphasis on its status as a physiological response, rather than as a “key to inner character” (282). In 1839, the surgeon Thomas Burgess published *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing*, the first sustained scientific investigation of the blush, which characterized the phenomenon as a reflex response, originating in the human conscience, yet on a continuum with the “vital contractility” of plants and non-human animals (16). Drawing on physiological accounts of the sympathetic nervous system to explain the passage of emotional excitement through what he calls the “nervous circle,” Burgess describes in almost ecstatic detail how the blush feels for the blusher: an “irresistible drooping of the entire countenance,” a “fluttering sensation about the heart,” a sensation of intense relief, and, finally, a flush that “bursts forth upon the cheek like a ‘living blaze of blood’ . . ., now rolling through myriads of minute vessels that were hitherto invisible in the cheek” (173). Burgess thus reconnects the blush to its corporeality, conceiving of it not as a metaphor for authentic interiority, but as a mechanistic process, a movement of blood, a felt experience in the body.

Burgess does not altogether abandon the moral connotations prevalent in prior literary representations of the blush, for his natural theological perspective conceives of the “beautiful machinery” of the body as evidence of divine design (174). He accordingly construes the

\textsuperscript{12} Charles Bell, for instance, would not mention the blush until the third edition of *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* in 1844. See White for a brief overview of philosophical and scientific perspectives on blushing pre-Burgess (283-84). For an account of twenty-first century approaches to the blush, see W. Ray Crozier and Peter J de Jong’s *The Psychological Significance of the Blush*. 
phenomenon of blushing as a check on man’s conscience and a safeguard against deception, endowed by a wise and omnipotent creator. Burgess admits that not all blushes are indicators of shame, but he suggests that over-civilization has perverted the original intent of the blush, culminating in two distinct categories: the “True Blush” — bound to shame — and the “False Blush” — the result of excessive sensitivity, unrelated to morality. The maiden’s modest blush, according to Burgess, falls into this latter category of false blush. He writes:

   It may, indeed, be very interesting to see a young lady in a drawing room blushing for some trivial cause, as the blush invariably heightens the charms of beauty … [but] I am of the opinion that a blush is no test whatever of either purity or innocence, for many libertines and prostitutes may be seen to blush as deeply as individuals of the most exalted purity and virtue. (55)

Divorcing the maiden’s blush from its positive connotations, Burgess conceives of it instead as a morally arbitrary marker of a “diseased sensibility” (23). While retaining moral origins for the blush, therefore, he acknowledges its ambiguity.

The second most extensive nineteenth-century study of the blush after Burgess’s is the penultimate chapter of Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the reception of which, as Angelique Richardson points out, “was characterised by the dialogue between literature and science that was part of its make-up” (“The Book of the Season” 75). Darwin himself, in fact, cites and even corrects literary sources throughout *Expression*, claiming, for instance, that Juliet’s inability to blush in the dark is an error on Shakespeare’s part — blushing being possible not only in darkness but also in solitude (336). The phrase “book of the season,” usually reserved for fiction, was often applied to this scientific study, reflecting not only its extraordinary popularity but also what Richardson describes as “the hybrid nature both of the
Expression and its audience” (69). It is unsurprising, then, that reviewers, like the author of the Daily News article quoted above, expected Darwin’s study to be influential in literary as well as scientific circles. Darwin’s chapter about blushing in particular was often cited in reviews as the most successful and interesting section of the book and sometimes even extensively summarized. Hardy himself was a great admirer of Darwin, having claimed in his autobiographical Life and Works to have been “among the earliest acclamers of The Origin of Species” (158), and although no specific evidence indicates that he read Expression, the book was popular enough that I am assuming at least a basic cultural knowledge of the chapter on blushing, particularly given Hardy’s career-long interest in the externalization of internal states and the internalization of social shame.

In The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, as the title suggests, Darwin sought to establish continuity between human and animal expression. Challenging previous accounts of human expression as innate or designed, Darwin’s claim that expression has been

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13 For instance, an anonymous second notice review in The Examiner (7 Dec. 1872) describes Darwin’s account of blushing as “perhaps the most ingenious and satisfactory in his book” and provides a detailed explanation of self-attention (1206).
14 No specific evidence indicates that Hardy read Origin either; as Phillip Mallett suggests, “Evolutionary biology was in the air, and its presence can be felt in Hardy’s work from the 1860s on … but not, it seems likely, because of an early encounter with the Origin” (316). Nevertheless, studies of Darwin’s literary impact almost invariably discuss Hardy, including Gillian Beer’s Darwin’s Plots (1983), George Levine’s Darwin Among the Novelists (1988), and John Glendening’s The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels (2007). While these books all primarily consider the influence of The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man, it seems likely that Hardy would have been interested in Expression as well, and Richardson has suggested, in a 19 July 2017 email to Pamela Dalziel, that even if he did not read it, “he would definitely have been aware of the ideas in circulation.”
15 Darwin takes issue in particular with the celebrated physiologist Charles Bell’s assertion that “many of our facial muscles are ‘purely instrumental in expression;’ or are ‘a special provision’ for this sole object” (10). See Richardson’s “The Book of the Season” for a more detailed
acquired via habit and heredity positions it within an evolutionary framework. The blush, which he describes as “the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions” (310), presents an exception to his larger argument about human-animal continuity insofar as it derives from a more recent and human-specific evolutionary development he calls “self-attention directed to personal appearance, in relation to the opinion of others” (326). Conceiving of the blush as a physiological response to predominantly social phenomena, Darwin connects it to conscious emotional experience, thus differentiating it from pure sensation, while retaining its physiological basis as an involuntary reflex. As Richardson writes of Darwin’s overall theory of emotion, “[t]he expressive body responded to external stimuli, and the affected body in turn affected the mind” (64). The blush, in particular, would seem to highlight these intersections between body, mind, and environment.

Darwin points to shyness, shame, and modesty as the most common triggers of blushes, yet insofar as he collapses all three into the larger category of self-attention, he undermines not only Burgess’s distinction between true and false blushes but also the very link between blushing and interiority on which novelists and conduct writers often relied. Self-attention is perhaps an obvious concept through which to characterize shyness, which Darwin describes as “sensitiveness to the opinion, whether good or bad, of others, more especially with respect to

account of how Darwin’s study differs from previous nineteenth-century research on the emotions.

16 Darwin structures his argument around three principles of expression. 1) “The principle of serviceable associated habits” refers to habitual actions which are or have once been of service (28); 2) “The principle of Antithesis” refers to habitual actions which are the direct opposite of actions which are or have once been of service (28); and 3) “The principle of actions due to the constitution of the Nervous System, independently from the first of the Will, and independently to a certain extent of Habit” refers to reflex actions, like the blush, which produce effects we “recognize as expressive” (28).
external appearance” (332); shy people, he suggests, blush because they are sensitive to the idea of their appearance in others’ eyes, particularly strangers or members of the opposite sex. To align the blush of *shame* with self-attention, however, is potentially more disruptive, for it implies that people blush not because they *feel* guilt, but because they are conscious that others might think them guilty; the blush, as David Horn succinctly articulates it, is “a product of *consciousness* rather than *conscience*” (24). Unlike Burgess, for whom the true blush provides biological testimony concerning divinely sanctioned moral codes, Darwin understands blushing as an expression of social norms *as interpreted by the blusher*. In fact, he claims, while a given action might be “meritorious or of an indifferent nature, … a sensitive person, if he suspects that others take a different view of it, will blush” (334). Even when a person blushes in solitude (or in presumed solitude, as Bathsheba does at the beginning of *Far from the Madding Crowd*), the cause “almost always relates to the thoughts of others about us — to acts done in their presence, or suspected by them; or again when we reflect what others would have thought of us had they known of the act” (336-37). Thus *Expression* destabilizes the blush’s supposed moral expressivity, suggesting that it merely reveals the blusher’s perception of how she has been perceived.

Darwin’s discussion of modesty further disrupts notions of the blush as a stable index of (specifically female) character; in fact, although Darwin asserts from the chapter’s outset that “[w]omen blush much more than men” (311), his discussion of specifically “modest” blushing is significantly less gendered than the other accounts outlined above. Avoiding the topic of “feminine” modesty altogether, Darwin uses the word to denote the relatively disparate mental states of humility, on the one hand, and sensitivity toward indelicacy, on the other, both of which can elicit a blush in members of either sex. In the first sense of the word, a person called modest
might blush due to praise he deems excessive (335). In the second, he might blush when confronted with a breach of etiquette, such as, for instance, another person’s nudity (335). Insofar as standards of etiquette vary between cultures, however, the parameters of this category of modesty are fundamentally unstable. In some nations, Darwin notes, people “go altogether or nearly naked” (335), evidence that the degree to which a human body recognizes nakedness as shameful is socially constructed and culturally variable. Denaturalizing the larger category of modesty even further, Darwin suggests that the two meanings of the word — humility and delicacy — are so apparently unrelated that we would only seem to apply the term “modesty” to both “because in both cases blushes are readily excited” (335-36, my emphasis). The blush, this statement suggests, does not signify a unique psycho-moral state called modesty; rather, modesty itself might more accurately be identified as a tendency to blush. Thus Darwin collapses signifier and signified, once again undermining the blush’s expressivity and its reliability as a natural index of moral character.

Darwin’s frequent comments on the disparity between cultural notions of nakedness nevertheless evoke yet another meaning of the multifaceted word “modesty” — modesty in dress and corresponding anxieties about bodily exposure. Darwin does not directly address the tendency to blush at one’s own externally observed nakedness as modesty per se, but in his discussion of how far down the body a blush may descend, he does list a series of disturbing anecdotes in which mortified women blush while undressing (or undressed) before a clinically impassive male gaze. One of Darwin’s correspondents, for instance, the British physician and psychiatrist Sir James Crichton-Browne, describes how a married woman with epilepsy, newly committed to his asylum, flushed from cheeks and temples to ears when he and his assistants visited her in bed (314). As Crichton-Browne “unfastened the collar of her chemise in order to
examine the state of her lungs,” Darwin reports, “a brilliant blush rushed over her chest, in an
arched line over the upper third of each breast, and extended downward between the breasts
nearly to the ensiform cartilage of the sternum” (314). This case is “interesting” to Darwin not
only because it indicates that blushes can occasionally descend below the face, but also insofar
as the woman’s blushes extend downward as her attention shifts to each newly-exposed piece of
flesh, reinforcing his theory of self-attention. Another “interesting” case, recounted second-hand
by the surgeon Sir James Paget, concerns a young girl who, when “shocked by what she
imagined to be an act of indelicacy, blushed all over her abdomen and the upper parts of her
legs” (314); how her legs and abdomen came to be exposed Paget does not specify. In a third and
perhaps most uncomfortable example, Darwin cites the painter Gustave Moreau, who once heard
a story from another “celebrated painter” of “a girl, who unwillingly consented to serve as a
model” and blushed over her whole body “when she was first divested of her clothes” (314-15).
In all three cases, the blush exposes a vulnerable woman’s anxiety about her own body’s
exposure, and in sending blood to the surface of her naked skin, the blush exposes even more of
her than before. These stories, repeated to Darwin via a network of male authority figures,
present a troublingly gendered power hierarchy between those who blush and those who watch,
painting the act of provoking and observing blushes, even in the name of science, as a kind of
violation.

Adding to the unsettling quality of these anecdotes, moreover, is Darwin’s awareness of
the blush’s underlying eroticism. “It is plain to every one,” Darwin writes, “that young men and
women are highly sensitive to the opinion of each other with reference to their personal
appearance; and they blush incomparably more in the presence of the opposite sex than in that of
their own” (328). This is not to say that the blush itself was acquired as a “sexual ornament”
although Darwin, like Burgess, finds a feminine flush physically attractive and notes in passing that “Circassian women who are capable of blushing, invariably fetch a higher price in the seraglio of the Sultan” (338). Rather, the behaviours and anxieties that cause blushing — i.e., self-attention — are rooted in what White calls “the peculiarly human concern for facial beauty and attractiveness under conditions of mating” (289). In Expression, Darwin remains somewhat delicate about self-attention’s origins in sexual attraction, but in his earlier notebooks he was much more explicit: “Blushing is … sexual, because each sex thinks more of what another thinks”; “does the thought drive blood to surface exposed, face of man … upper bosom in woman: like erection”? (qtd. in White 289-90). The overall theory outlined in Expression does not align with a notion that blushing among members of the opposite sex might signify erotic attraction in any straightforward way; if the blush reveals a sexual consciousness, it is nevertheless mediated by the network of perceptions implied by self-attention. And yet Darwin’s awareness of the eroticism of blushing — or at least the perceived eroticism — codes these scenes of female stripping as not only medically but sexually invasive.

At the turn of the century, this notion of the blush as a sexual signal — relatively veiled in Darwin’s work — became more popular and explicit. American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, for instance, claims in A Study of Fears (1897) that most blushes are “directly or indirectly related to sex” (218). Like Darwin, Hall discerns a relationship between rushes of blood to the face and rushes of blood to the sexual organs, although unlike Darwin he considers the unifying factor behind all blushes to be fear rather than self-attention. “Even if these blushes are a widely irradiated or penumbral glow of sexual erethism,” Hall writes, “it is the inhibition of fear that must have been the chief agent in checking and irradiating or decentralized [sic] them far from acts or organs” (219); the blush thus indicates arousal mediated by fear — a diversion of the
sexual impulse from genitals to face. Hall attributes women’s greater tendency toward such demonstrations, moreover, to “an ancestral sex fear,” which also manifests itself in “[s]hyness, coyness, [and] maidenly modesty” (219). Ellis, in “The Evolution of Modesty” (1901), likewise aligns modesty with instinctive erotic fear, describing it as a more complicated manifestation of the female dog’s tendency, when not in heat, to squat “firmly down on the front legs and hind quarters” at the approach of an interested male (28). Mediated by conventions in behaviour and dress, modesty cannot, according to Ellis, be “properly called an instinct,” and yet, he suggests, “there must be some physiological basis to support it” (43). This physiological basis he ultimately locates in the vasomotor mechanism of the blush, which he calls “the sanction of modesty” (44): a manifestation of “a sex-fear — impelling to concealment” (44). Through this impulse of concealment, the body reveals; insofar as lovers and scientists alike track and interpret erotic excitement and anxiety on the female subject’s face, they implicate the flushing body in its own surveillance.  

What, then, of the invisible blush? As Horn points out, a major topic in nineteenth-century scientific conversations surrounding blushing concerned the question of whether the racialized other blushed, and whether the absence of a visible change on dark complexions indicated moral inferiority. Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt, for instance, asserted in 1818 that “it is only in white men, that the instantaneous penetration of the dermoidal system by the blood can take place; that slight change of the colour of the skin which adds so powerful an expression to the emotions of the soul” (229); and he goes on to demand, “How can those be

17 Ellis makes the blush’s essential eroticism even more explicit in a later edition of this same essay, in which he writes, “‘An erection,’ it has been said, ‘is a blushing of the penis’” (106-107) — attributing the quote to no one in particular, and thereby apparently indicating the common-knowledge status of the statement.
trusted, who know not how to blush”? (229). Burgess, directly challenging Humboldt, was among the first to insist that the absence of a visual signifier did not necessarily suggest a malfunctioning or non-existent blushing mechanism. As evidence, he describes a black servant he once observed whose face bore a white scar that reddened “whenever she was abruptly spoken to or charged with any trivial offence” (31). Although, he explains, the “negro’s face” may seem to have been “screened by a dark veil” (31), the example of the scarred servant proves that “the African is not incapable of blushing” (32); unscarred Africans may be inscrutable, but they are not consequently immoral. Darwin likewise addresses assumptions like Humboldt’s, and he includes in Expression a section on “Blushing in the various races of Man,” listing, in a brief tour of mortification around the globe, observations from his various international correspondents. As evidence “that negroes blush, although no redness is visible on the skin,” Darwin cites Burgess’s anecdote of the scarred servant alongside several other examples — such as “an albino negress, described by Buffon, [who] showed a faint tinge of crimson on her cheeks when she exhibited herself naked” (320). Blushing, Darwin concludes at the end of the section, regardless of visible changes in skin colour, “is common to most, probably to all, of the races of man” (321).

Burgess’s and Darwin’s shared understanding of the blush as a human attribute rather than a specifically white one is certainly more progressive than Humboldt’s conclusions about non-white moral inferiority; yet, as Darwin’s diverse and often troubling examples remind us, the practice of proving such a theory requires the repeated coercion of the inscrutable body toward mortification and exposure. Many of Darwin’s findings derive from a questionnaire he submitted in 1867 to Europeans residing abroad (“several of them missionaries or protectors of the aborigines” 17), the second question of which reads: “Does shame excite a blush when the
The colour of the skin allows it to be visible? and especially how low down the body does it extend?” (15). The answers to these questions, as O’Farrell points out, and the means by which they are acquired, “make of Darwin’s record of blushes ‘among all the races of mankind’ a record also of vigilance and accusation” (85). A visible blush, O’Farrell posits, enables a fantasy of possession whereby the blusher’s cheeks “offer themselves to the observer for reading” (84), whereas an invisible one disrupts this fantasy and inverts the hierarchy between observer and observed, transforming the blush into “an event felt rather than a thing seen” (84). The invisible blush, therefore, can be read as a potentially subversive inversion of “the observer’s primacy” (O’Farrell 84). Darwin’s project, more sinisterly, can be read as an attempt to correct the inscrutable dark-skinned body by forcibly inserting it into a system of red and white legibility. As such, Burgess’s example of the black servant with the scarred face provides a particularly potent image of the violence and exploitation inherent in these forced exposures; her body only becomes legible, her consciousness exposed, via a literal opening in her skin, the origin of which, like the reason for the albino girl’s nakedness, is left unspecified.

Adjacent to the question of non-white blushing was an augmented interest in the late nineteenth century in criminal blushing, criminals having long been aligned with “savages” as individuals deficient in ordinary affective aptitude. In 1888, for instance, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso recorded in his third edition of Criminal Man the results of a series of shaming experiments he conducted on criminals. Of the fifty-nine male criminals observed, Lombroso reports, only sixty-one percent blushed “in response to our reprimands, to reminders of their crimes, or to being fixed with a stare, in contrast with normal individuals” (210). Among two hundred and eleven criminal women, moreover, eighty-one percent failed to blush when reminded of their crimes or reprimanded, although, he adds, they did often redden “when asked
about menstrual disorders” (210). By means of explanation, Lombroso suggests that criminals are significantly less sensitive than normal individuals and that this sensitivity is often accompanied by a “weakening of the blood vessels” (209), confirming a longstanding cultural understanding of the absent blush as “a sign of dishonesty and immorality” (209).

Expanding on this notion of dangerously embodied otherness, the fifth edition of *Criminal Man* attempts to reassert the parallel between criminals and “savages” that Burgess and Darwin dismissed, awkwardly paraphrasing Darwin’s “*Blushing in the various races of Man*” to emphasize those races that supposedly blush less (qtd. in Horn 20). While this misreading undermines, for a modern audience at least, Lombroso’s methods and conclusions about both criminals and non-whites, Horn reads Lombroso’s use of Darwin as “another in a series of rhetorical moves made by Martius, von Spix, Prichard, and Darwin that positioned the othered body differently, but always in relation to a question of visibility and truthtelling, and always on the condition of a violent compulsion (undressing, accusing, cutting)” (25-26). The criminal body, like the racialized body, is subversive because it refuses to tell. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the late nineteenth century heralded the development of a variety of technologies aimed at tracking and recording blood flow and pressure, making it possible, Horn writes, to “imagine that one could measure and record traces of the emotions on both the surface and the interior of the body — that one could quantify an emotional potentiality or proficiency” (18). In what resembles a return to the literary tradition’s obsession with the eloquence of blood, the non-blushing body is forced to tell, to write itself so that it may be read.

* A Pair of Blue Eyes and *Far from the Madding Crowd* were both written long before these contributions by Hall, Ellis, and Lombroso, and neither novel deals explicitly with racial anxieties or criminality. What can be traced through both, however, is an engagement in how
bodies absorb and reproduce the discourses and narratives that repress or exploit them and how they resist such coercions, proving uncooperative or unreadable. Both novels exhibit, moreover, an anxiety about the position of the observer that Hardy scholars have described as characteristic of his work as a whole.\textsuperscript{18} In turning attention from the watched to the watcher, I will argue, Hardy reveals both the violence and the inherent futility of a culture’s obsession with scrutinizing complexion. While my chapter on \textit{A Pair of Blue Eyes} considers the question of what or how much a blush can say about interiority, drawing primarily on the literary tradition, my analysis of \textit{Far from the Madding Crowd} considers what the blush can say about the body and reads Hardy as engaging more self-consciously with the physiology of blushing and the sexual politics of observation and exposure. All of these themes and concerns, as I have outlined in this brief history of the blush, would continue to play out throughout the rest of the century, within various scientific disciplines and on different kinds of bodies, some more resistant than others.

\textsuperscript{18} See, for instance, Levine’s “Shaping Hardy’s Art: Vision, Class and Sex.”
Chapter 2: (Mis)Reading the Blush in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

In a blush doth a tell-tale appear
That speaks to the eye, quite as plain
As language itself can convey to the ear,
Some tender confession of pleasure or pain;
What thoughts we should never impart,
What secrets we never should speak,
If the fountain of truth in the heart
Did not rise in a blush to the cheek.

As the blossom of spring on the bough
Is promise of fruits yet unseen,
So the colour that mantles thy beauty just now
May be but prophetic of hopes but yet green.
How vain is each delicate art
Of concealment when nature would speak,
And the fountain of truth in the heart
Will arise in a blush to the cheek!

(“A Blush. ‘The Eloquent Blood.’” 277)

The phrase “eloquent blood” is prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings about blushing, echoing the memorable lines from John Donne’s “Of the Progress of the Soul”
“her pure and eloquent blood / Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought, / That one might almost say, her body thought” (244-46). Mary Wollstonecraft’s preface to The Female Reader (1789), for instance, claims that “a blush is far more eloquent than the best turned period” (qtd. in Yeazell 66), and a “Biographical Notice” by Henry Austen for his deceased sister (1818) describes how Jane Austen’s “eloquent blood spoke through her modest cheeks” (qtd. in Yeazell 67). Complexion, according to these writers, is articulate, a notion reiterated in the anonymous poem “A Blush” (1866) — subtitled “The Eloquent Blood” — which suggests that a blush “speaks to the eye, quite as plain / As language itself can convey to the ear” (2-3). In fact, the blush speaks more clearly and honestly than language, for, aligned here with “nature,” it circumvents the “delicate art / Of concealment,” revealing the authentic truth beneath the deceptive social layers of pretense and contrivance (13-14). What exactly does the language of the blush reveal so eloquently? Secrets, forbidden thoughts, concealed hopes, the author suggests, but of a “tender” variety (4), for the “unseen fruits” promised by a flushing cheek expose merely a “green” and undeveloped erotic consciousness, not a transgressive or threatening one.

A much-quoted passage from George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876) provides a compelling counterpoint to accounts of complexion as eloquent:

[Deronda], like others, happened to be looking at her, and their eyes met—to her intense vexation, for it seemed to her that by looking at him she had betrayed the reference of her thoughts, and she felt herself blushing … Her annoyance at what she imagined to be the obviousness of her confusion robbed her of her usual facility in carrying it off by playful speech, and turning up her face to look at the roof, she wheeled away in that attitude. If any had noticed her blush as significant,
they had certainly not interpreted it by the secret windings and recesses of her feeling. A blush is no language: only a dubious flag-signal which may mean either of two contradictories. (391)

Like the author of “A Blush,” Eliot figures Gwendolyn’s shift in complexion as an exposure or betrayal of private thought. In her confusion, Gwendolyn’s proficiency in “playful speech” deserts her, and she is unable to distract her audience from her unwilling display. Her blush can thus be read as a signal of inner feeling, visible through the surface of her artfully constructed social identity, which momentarily disables the artificial lightness of her typical interactions; as in “A Blush,” any attempt at concealment is in vain. And yet Eliot almost immediately undoes the clarity of the revelation written on Gwendolyn’s face by suggesting that, although her observers might notice her blush, they lack the access to Gwendolyn’s interiority — the “secret windings and recesses of her feeling” — necessary to a nuanced interpretation of its meaning. “A blush is no language,” Eliot determines: without context, its communicative potential is limited, for, vulnerable to misreading, a blush may appear to convey two contradictory messages simultaneously.

By calling the blush “no language,” Eliot seems to be responding to a long tradition, in which the 1866 poem participates, of suppressing or ignoring what Halsey calls “the innate ambiguity of the blush” (227). Gwendolyn’s blush is still “significant”; it means something, but the specifics of its significance are not communicated to her observers within the novel. Its authenticity is not in question, but its legibility is. Eliot’s adoption of the “flag-signal” as a more accurate metaphor than language, however, does not exactly clarify how or how much the blush communicates. Is she suggesting that any blush has only two possible meanings and that observers of the blush have a fifty percent chance of getting it wrong — mistaking guilt, for
instance, for innocence? The image of Gwendolyn’s interiority as place of secret windings and recesses would seem to indicate that blushes and their triggers are more complex than such a dualistic approach would allow. Is it, then, the case that the pre-existing discourses surrounding blushes limit the number of possible interpretations to only two contradictories? And if so, does the innate ambiguity of the blush ultimately shelter the blusher from invasive outside access to her private thoughts, or does it make her vulnerable to potentially damaging misreadings?\(^{19}\)

Moreover, insofar as Eliot is responding to a tradition of writings that not only liken blushing to language but also depict it via language, it is important to consider the two separate levels on which the blush communicates — to observers within the novel, who access a visual signifier, and to readers of the novel, who access a linguistic one, a blush transformed into language. Is Eliot, then, lamenting the blush’s lack of expressivity on an interpersonal level or a metafictional one? For whom is the blush no language?

Eliot’s challenge to the relationship between blushing and language is a more self-conscious and explicit manifestation of the ambivalence Hardy was beginning to exhibit about communicative complexions several years earlier in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Hardy does not overtly meditate on the signifying capacity of the blush in this novel, but I would argue that his depictions of blushing, whether intentionally or not, raise similar questions about what a blush may mean and what it can actually say. The narrative interest of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* surrounds a usually honest and transparent young woman’s attempt to keep what she deems to be a shameful

\(^{19}\) See O’Farrell for a fascinating analysis of this passage, in which she suggests that by pronouncing the blush no language, Eliot “cannot find the *not* in the unconscious, performing with her declaration the conversion of her blush into a festival and a nightmare of signifiatory excess, the blush into language” (122).
secret from the man she hopes to marry. Her hyper-active complexion, therefore, like a “fountain of truth in the heart,” seems to reinforce conceptions of the blush as a means of somatic confession, acting as a mediator between internal authenticity and external artifice, between the “secret windings and recesses of her feeling” and the social surface that envelops and masks such feelings. Hardy also, however, exploits the ambiguity of the blush in this novel, frequently dramatizing its misinterpretation. Insofar as Elfride Swancourt blushes both before and after her transgression, the “two contradictories” primarily activated by her complexion are, conventionally enough, innocent embarrassment and guilt. Yet insofar as her actual innocence exaggerates her internalization of shame, heightening the appearance of her guilt, these supposed “contradictories” start to collapse and intertwine. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* draws attention not only to the blush’s limited ability to function like language, but also to the limitations imposed by language on the blush, thus undermining its expressivity even while employing it for specific expressive purposes.

“A GIRL WHOSE EMOTIONS LAY VERY NEAR THE SURFACE”

Hardy begins *A Pair of Blue Eyes* with an emphasis on his blue-eyed heroine’s innate legibility, introducing her as “a girl whose emotions lay very near the surface” (7). The surface of what, exactly, Hardy does not specify, but his ensuing description of Elfride’s immaturity encourages us to read the surface as a thin barrier of manner and sophistication that might, if more developed, mediate between her emotions and the world. On the cusp of a culture of womanly contrivance, this country-raised nineteen-year-old has, we learn, the “social consciousness” of “an urban young lady of fifteen” (8); she lacks both social arts and social artifice, her freedom of emotional expression not yet inhibited by the conventions of reserve. In
fact, in this novel and elsewhere Hardy consistently aligns social sophistication with the suppression of authentic emotional expression. As such, Elfride may be read in these early scenes as presenting an attractive image of natural feminine authenticity, honesty, and innocence: a girl whose “secret windings and recesses of feeling” are not so secret after all.

Strikingly, however, Hardy seems intent in this opening passage on de-emphasizing the expressivity of Elfride’s material body:

As a matter of fact, you did not see the form and substance of her features when conversing with her; and this charming power of preventing a material study of her externals by an interlocutor originated not in the invisible cloak of a well-formed manner (for her manner was childish and scarcely formed), but in the attractive crudeness of the remarks themselves. (8)

Elfride’s physicality, this passage suggests, does not contain the clues to her psychology; rather her self-expression is so vivid that it obscures her physicality altogether. In fact, the only feature on Elfride’s face that Hardy insists is worthy of note is her eyes, in which, he claims can be seen “a sublimation of all of her” (8). Yet these eyes, in which Elfride supposedly lives, are expressive in a poetic rather than in a physiological sense, their blueness the subject of a whole paragraph of similes. Particularly of note is Hardy’s description of “[a] misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked into rather than at” (8). While Elfride’s body may be part of the surface, a container for her authentic self, her eyes, in the clichéd sense, are

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20 Consider, for instance, Elfride’ stepmother’s dissection of the London elite and their meticulously positioned features: “Look at the pretty pout on the mouths of that family there, retaining no traces of being arranged beforehand, so well is it done. Look at the demure close of the little fists holding the parasols; the tiny alert thumb, sticking up erect against the ivory stem as knowing as can be, the satin of the parasol invariably matching the complexion of the face beneath it, yet seemingly by an accident, which makes the thing so attractive” (141).
windows in the body through which her soul can be glimpsed. Her legibility in the novel’s early scenes, therefore, seems to depend on her lack of certain surfaces altogether — such as the “invisible cloak of a well-formed manner” (8), a clothing metaphor that presents “manner” as a layer of social fabric worn over the body, which in is turn worn over the “self.” Elfride’s emotions may be visible through the surface, but the surface is not in itself expressive.

Hardy’s reliance on the blush as an emotional marker would seem to complicate this emotion/surface binary that he has established. Although he does not specifically mention the blush in this initial passage, the image of Elfride’s emotions residing “near the surface” may certainly be read as evoking movements of blood beneath the surface of the skin — especially insofar as he goes on to figure Elfride’s emotional life as liquid, a “deeper current” of which sets in around the time of her first encounter with the young architect Stephen Smith (8). Throughout the rest of the novel, blood will suffuse and flee Elfride’s transparent complexion with extraordinary rapidity, vividly mirroring fluctuations in her mood. As a metaphor for interiority or emotional life, the image of the blush reinforces notions of a separable inner self; it can rise to the surface of the skin, but nevertheless remains contained by that surface. Yet, while not leaky in its corporeality — like, for instance, menstrual blood — the blush nevertheless partakes in the materiality of the body, thus making it also a part of the surface, a physical correlative for the psychical element, to use Ellis’s terminology. While seeming to spring authentically from within, moreover, social meaning is not only incessantly imposed upon the blush from without, but can also be absorbed by the body, as O’Farrell’s Foucauldian study suggests. The blush can therefore be read as occupying a space of liminality — mediating between mind, body, and society and thereby potentially collapsing the distinction between emotion and surface.
Insofar as Elfride’s emotional authenticity in the novel’s early scenes depends on her detachment from both urban life and the materiality of her body, however, her blushes seem to echo conventional representations of “eloquent blood” as a signal of feminine modesty and sincerity. Richardson reads Elfride as a “well-packaged product of her society’s construction of womanhood,” who “pouts and blushes when she ought” and “weeps in the right places” (“Some Science Underlies all Art” 308). As one cannot learn to blush when one ought, the uncultivated appropriateness of Elfride’s blushes reinforces notions of modesty as natural rather than acquired. Elfride may be a well-packaged product, but it is Hardy who has packaged her so appropriately, allowing her to embody a social standard without access to the society that sets the standard. Within the modest heroine tradition, in fact, as Halsey points out, the “natural rose of a country girl’s cheeks is frequently contrasted to the artificial rouge used in the inauthentic world of the fashionable or the depraved” (229). A Pair of Blue Eyes makes a similar move when Elfride’s step-mother, commenting on the artifice of the London elite in the Drive and Row, draws attention to a passing lady with fake flowers in her bonnet, suggesting derisively that “the pink of the petals and the pink of her handsome cheeks are equally from Nature’s hand to the eyes of the most casual observer” (141). The pink of Elfride’s unpainted cheeks, by contrast, which ebbs and flows with her mood, is natural and emotive, revealing, rather than masking, her interiority.

Simon Gatrell points out that “[t]here is hardly a moment of erotic significance in the novel during which Elfride does not blush” (Thomas Hardy Writing Dress 75), yet in the early chapters, in which she falls in love for the first of two times, her active complexion evokes an innocently confused desire rather than a threateningly embodied craving. When blushing, Yeazell writes, “people are idiomatically said to be ‘covered with confusion’” (76), an apt
description of Elfride’s initial forays into love-making with Stephen Smith — forays characterized by the “rapid red” that fills her cheeks when he asks to kiss her (58), her flustered first declaration of love (62), and, most humorously, her “confused manner of receiving” the kiss Stephen eventually dares to plant upon her lips (62). Like the delicate blush of the modest heroine, her red face can be read as signalling her susceptibility to erotic impulses (the modest heroine is not a prude) but simultaneously her lack of experience and understanding (the modest heroine is not a coquette). Confusion, in fact, especially as represented by the blush, was, in discourses of the modest heroine, considered an ideal mental state for the female consciousness, for it allows her to inhabit a delicate space between innocence and experience, unknowingness and knowingness, frigidity and desire. As both an index of character and a signal of erotic charge, therefore, Elfride’s eloquently uncomplicated blush can be read as supporting her affinity with an easily recognizable feminine type: naïve, sincere, emotional, worthy of love.

And yet Elfride’s very naturalness — her lack of social and sexual sophistication — is also potentially threatening to the normative models of femininity her characterization seems to support. When, for instance, Mr. Swancourt forbids Elfride to marry Stephen, both her decision to elope and her last-minute refusal to see the elopement through indicate a disregard for social appearances and consequences that may be perceived as erotic recklessness. Elfride’s second lover, Henry Knight, will eventually speculate that the very naïveté which initially drew him to Elfride might be responsible for (rather than antithetical to) the transgressive behaviour he suspects colours her past; her natural “unreserve,” might actually mean “indifference to decorum” (340). Ellis seemingly shared this view of Knight’s, and, in his 1883 article, he describes all of Hardy’s heroines, Elfride included, as “instinct-led women” (117) — “untamed children of Nature” — who, when they do conform to moral codes, do so almost involuntarily
Elfride’s decision to elope, Ellis suggests, is not of an altogether different moral quality than her last-minute refusal to do so, for throughout the novel she alternates between impulsiveness and irresolution, the “line of least resistance” coinciding only accidentally with “the line of right conduct” (121).

The image of the blush, especially in moments of erotic significance, is similarly fraught with anxieties about “natural” or instinctive femininity, despite the link moral writers obsessively drew between blushing and modesty. As Halsey points out, dating back to the early eighteenth century, writers often depicted the blush a signal of potentially transgressive erotic knowledge. Consider, for example, this 1818 poem by John Keats, which imagines a multiplicity of meanings for blushes that have little to do with innocence:

O blush not so! O blush not so!
Or I may think you knowing;
And if you smile the blushing while,
Then maidenheads are going.

There’s a blush for want, and a blush for shan’t,
And a blush for having done it;
There’s a blush for thought, and a blush for nought,
And a blush for just begun it. (1-8)

Within a spectrum of knowingness and unknowingness, the poem suggests, how is one to identify with any certainty the intensity and appropriateness of the emotion that precipitates a sudden rush of blood? Even within the conduct genre, as Yeazell points out, the incessant discussion and codification of consciousness and countenance denote a larger cultural concern
that “a woman’s ‘natural’ modesty must be strenuously cultivated, … lest both sexes fall victim to her ‘natural’ lust” (5) — as if her body might behave in ways her mind, however innocent, does not understand or consent to. These concerns would be exacerbated by physiological studies like Burgess’s, which situated the blush within the language of reflexes and automatic processes, not only emphasizing the materiality of eloquent blood but also undermining its fixed moral status, revealing whole a range of sensitivities and sensibilities of which a reddened cheek might be a product.

In Elfride’s case, the “hectic flush” that consumes her face as she plans her elopement reflects a shift toward a more complicated, secretive, and embodied emotional life, yet this shift, although accessible to the reader, is not apparent to other characters within the novel, such as her father (100). This is, in fact, the first time in Elfride’s previously honest and candid life that she has had “an inner and private world apart from the visible one around her” (105) — the first time that she has kept anything so important from her only surviving parent. Insofar as her blushes betray her anxiety about concealment, they are still products of the sincerity and transparency that make her a conventionally attractive protagonist. Yet as the messages written on her cheek become increasingly complex, they also become more troublesome to read, less overtly communicative. The day before Elfride meets Stephen for their elicit nuptial, for instance, she asks Mr. Swancourt whether he would accept Stephen’s poor hereditity were he already irrevocably in the family. When Swancourt asks whether she means by marriage, Elfride blushes, and Hardy writes, “[t]he accumulating scarlet told that was her meaning, as much as the affirmative reply” (107). Her blush communicates this affirmative reply to her father, thus to some degree still functioning like language, and yet the distracted vicar, unaware of her scheme, does not recognize the secret guilt the accumulating scarlet also signals. Having lost access to his
daughter’s inner life and the hidden recesses of feeling therein, he lacks the contextual information necessary to interpret her complexion with any nuance.

By the time Elfride meets Knight, not only has her inner life expanded around her secret, but her social consciousness, which was almost non-existent when she first met Stephen, has also been refined through her father’s successful marriage to a wealthy widow. Despite, or perhaps because of, this increased distance between Elfride’s inner and outer lives, her emotional blood beats harder than ever against her newly solidified social surface. Elfride’s “artless anxiety” to impress is, to a certain degree, part of her naïve charm (177), and yet even Knight, ignorant of her past with Stephen, situates her intense self-consciousness as a precursor to more threatening forms of female self-fashioning. For instance, several days after Knight chastises her for risking her life on a parapet, Elfride discovers the following entry in his notebook, evidently inspired by her recent precarious performance:

Aug. 7. Girl gets into her teens, and her self-consciousness is born. After a certain interval passed in infantine helplessness, it begins to act. Simple, young, and inexperienced at first. Persons of observation can tell to a nicety how old this consciousness is by the skill it has acquired in the art necessary to its success — the art of hiding itself. Generally begins career by actions which are popularly termed showing-off. … An innocent vanity is of course the origin of these displays. ‘Look at me,’ say these youthful beginners in womanly artifice, without reflecting whether or not it be to their advantage to show so very much of themselves. (176)

These notes, casually scrawled and nearly forgotten and which the writer plans to “[a]mplify and correct for [a] paper on Artless Arts,” position Elfride as the unknowing test subject of Knight’s
pseudo-psychological observations, an artless and highly visible example of her gender’s craving to be seen (176). Yet despite Knight’s apparent confidence in his ability to read Elfride, his depiction of self-conscious teenage girls as “beginners in womanly artifice” — visibility as a precursor to concealment — further muddies the distinction between innocent and guilty complexions. A desire to be thought well of is only a few steps away from an active manipulation of one’s image, and Elfride is already farther down the path toward concealment than Knight realizes.

Although Elfride’s cheeks continue to flush just as actively during her second courtship as during her first, therefore, her blushes can no longer be quite so easily classified as the innocent confusion of a girl new to romance. Insofar as she is significantly more self-conscious in these scenes than she was with Stephen, her blushes expose an intense awareness of how she is perceived and an insatiable desire to be perceived more favourably. In fact, her relationship with Knight, whom she first encounters through his scathing review of a novel she has written, is characterized by red-faced mortification both before and after they meet face to face: she flushes violently when she reads his criticism of her writing (153); when he rescues her from falling off a parapet (166); when he thrice beats her at chess (169); and when he mocks her feminine weakness for pretty earrings (183). Insofar as she is more erotically experienced at this point in the narrative, moreover, her emotiveness draws more significant attention to the seething materiality of her body, the movements of her literal blood. During her humiliating second loss at chess, for instance, Elfride not only looks red but “warm,” an adjective that emphasizes the sensation of her blush as well as its visual appearance (169). When she goes to bed that night, her mind feels “as if it would throb out of her head” (169), and she wakes the next morning looking pale and ill, as if having exhausted her supply of facial blood. While playing yet another game of
chess with Knight before breakfast, her heart beats so violently that she sets “some flowers on the table throbbing by its pulsations” (171), and upon losing again, she turns her face away from Knight and escapes to her room, where her father finds her “lying full-dressed on the bed, her face hot and red, her arms thrown abroad” (172-73). The healthy blush of the novel’s earlier scenes has transitioned into an excessive and uncontrollable flush, as if the product of illness.

Some of Elfride’s most erotically expressive blushes surround the first gift she receives from the newly impassioned Knight: a pair of earrings, accompanied by a revision of his previously declared disdain for women who value “jimcrack jewelry” over the elevating effect of music (184). In response to this first attempt at a romantic gesture, Elfride turns “to a lively red,” and looks “half-wishfully at the temptation, as Eve may have looked at the apple” (194) — a Biblical reference that, as Richardson suggests, positions the earrings as “a symbol of entry into sexual relations, facilitated by the blush they induce” (“Some Science Underlies all Art” 309).

The author of Genesis does not mention Eve blushing, but Paradise Lost does, and Yeazell suggests that conduct writers often referred to John Milton’s Eve as evidence that a blush might pre-exist not only shame but sin (69). Milton’s Eve blushes, in fact, both before and after the Fall, the suffusion of her cheeks with blood signifying her pre-lapsarian erotic innocence in her wedding bower and later her new-found capacity for self-consciousness and irritation. While it is by no means evident that Hardy is referring to Paradise Lost rather than to Genesis in this passage, in Elfride these two distinct meanings of Milton’s Eve’s blush can nevertheless be said to merge; she longs to penetrate the flesh of her ears with the forbidden fruit of Knight’s gift, and yet, in a sense, she has also already eaten of it, having lost a previously prized earring during her first frantic embrace with Stephen. The erotic significance of the earrings and Elfride’s conflicted emotional response to them increases after she refuses Knight’s gift and later finds it lying on her
dressing-table. Elfride inserts the earrings into her ears, looks in the mirror, blushes red at her reflection, and puts them away again, her feverish excitement tinged by shame at the thought of Stephen and his prior claim (197).

Because she is a novice in “womanly artifice,” as Knight’s essay notes suggest, Elfride’s capillary vessels constantly press her inner world to the surface of her outer one, betraying simultaneously her desire to hide and her inability to do so, and so revealing her newfound impulse to conceal. Knight, who she soon learns has never been kissed, is obsessed with the idea of being the “first comer in a woman’s heart” (190), and will only accept a wife who shares his own “raw state” (292). His attraction to Elfride is in large part an attraction to his own assumptions about her purity and inexperience. She is, in his eyes, an “unseen flower” (293), and he is confident that she “hardly looked upon a man till she saw me” (190). Knight is, moreover, an avid scrutinizer of the feminine complexion; not only is the “vermillion red” of Elfride’s cheeks the first of her physical features to attract him (“Knight could not help looking at her” 161), but he also cannot tolerate the thought of her blushing for anyone else. Indeed, he has long been determined not to marry any woman unless he can be absolutely certain “no bow and blush to a mysterious stranger casually met, should be a possible source of discomposure” (190). After Elfride breaks her promise to Stephen, therefore, and agrees to marry Knight, she becomes increasingly nervous that her complexion might expose her secret, and not without reason. When Knight asks if she has ever had a lover before him, Hardy describes Elfride trying “desperately to keep the colour in her face,” convinced “that getting pale showed consciousness of deeper guilt than merely getting red” (299) — a moment that suggests both Elfride’s and Hardy’s acknowledgement of an unofficial signifying system connected to flows of blood in and out of the countenance. Terrified that Knight might discard her if he knew the truth yet ashamed to
keep it from him, Elfride accepts the weight of a guilty conscience out of proportion with the actual gravity of her behaviour with Stephen, betraying her anxiety in dramatic blushes and blanches.

Yet despite Knight’s interest in and frequent comments on Elfride’s complexion, he proves throughout much of the novel just as inept at interpreting it as Mr. Swancourt, thus drawing attention to the limitations of the blush as eloquent signifier. When Elfride and Knight encounter Stephen, for instance, at the tomb of the recently deceased Lady Luxellian, Knight comments on her sudden pallor, expressing concern that she is not well enough to mount her horse. When Stephen does not expose her, Elfride becomes simultaneously pale and red: “A vivid scarlet spot now shone with preternatural brightness in the centre of each cheek, leaving the remainder of her face lily-white as before” (265). Once again, Knight recognizes her change in colour as significant but misreads it, scolding her for the “unwomanly weakness” of allowing herself to be overwhelmed at the sight of death (265). Stephen is, in fact, exactly the sort of “mysterious stranger casually met” that Knight worried, earlier in the novel, might embarrass a hypothetically impure wife. However, lacking the insight and context necessary to properly translate the complexion he regularly scrutinizes, he jumps to an assumption of Elfride’s innocent frailty. Even as Knight becomes more suspicious of Elfride later in the novel, he alters his story of the “mysterious stranger” to allow for a more generous interpretation of the wife’s blush:

    If a man were to see another man looking significantly at his wife, and she were blushing crimson and appearing startled, do you think he would be so well satisfied with, for instance, her truthful explanation that once, to her great
annoyance, she accidentally fainted into his arms, as if she had said it long ago, before the circumstance occurred which forced it from her? (317)

Knight acknowledges here that the blush is a product of circumstance as interpreted by the blusher: her crimson face may seem to tell a story of elicit pre- (or extra-) marital activities, when it really alludes to little other than a small breach of propriety, embarrassing yet essentially blameless. As such, he admits the limitations of attempting to decipher shifts in complexion, given the potentially contradictory meanings they may signal.

Knight’s cautionary tale, however, still reduces the moral valence of the blush’s trigger to one of only two contradictories — condemnable guilt or innocent embarrassment — leaving little space for nuance in between. Moreover, it reveals his expectation that a good wife will counteract any potential misreading of her complexion by supplying her husband with all pertinent contextual information in advance. As Jane Thomas writes, “[t]hrough the transformation of desires into language, and the confession of her ‘sins’, Elfride is forced to articulate the ‘truth’ about herself and acknowledge the identity produced out of that ‘truth’ by Knight” (Thomas Hardy, Femininity and Dissent 83). In other words, she is expected to transform the blush into language before it has even passed across her cheek. Demanding “privileged access” to her inner world, Knight seeks to make legible the movements of her blood so that he may appropriately classify her in one of the two contradictory female identities his ideology accommodates: virtuous or fallen. When Elfride is reluctant to provide the access he requests, therefore, his limited reading of all her blushes as innocent shifts to an equally limited reading of all her blushes as guilty. “The man of many ideas,” Hardy writes, “now that his first dream of impossible things was over, vibrated too far in the contrary direction; and her every movement of feature — every tremor — every confused word — were taken as so much proof of
her unworthiness” (335). The blush continues to communicate to the reader, as Hardy generally provides sufficient information to trace Elfride’s facial fluctuations to specific emotional ones — the “privileged access” Halsey describes. Yet for outside observers like Knight her cheek becomes the location of increasingly conflicting and illegible messages, an insufficient medium for representing the complexity of her feeling.

Unsurprisingly, Knight can no more coherently compress his diverse perspectives of Elfride into a fallen paradigm than into a virtuous one; nor does Hardy encourage the reader to try to define her via either essential state. Elfride’s past transgression is certainly more compromising than an inconvenient fainting fit: she did intend to elope with Stephen and spent an unmarried night with him on a train, although sexually they never passed beyond the threshold of kissing. As Hardy repeatedly points out, however, “[t]he actual innocence which made her think so fearfully of what, as the world goes, was not a great matter, magnified her apparent guilt” (311). Her excessive shame is thus a product of her relative innocence. Knight, moreover, cannot identify whether Elfride’s transgression and subsequent deception is a product of contrivance or of naïveté. Immediately after reading Mrs. Jethway’s condemnatory letter, for instance, he glances through a window into the dressing room where Elfride is regarding herself in the mirror, producing an unpleasant impression of vanity and calculation in her unseen observer (331). By contrast, in a moment I referred to above, he later considers that the childlike trust and ingenuousness that first drew him to her may have contained the seeds of sexual looseness (340). In this second characterization, Elfride’s guilt can once again be understood as the product of her innocence, thus destabilizing the dualisms that constrict Knight’s vision of her. And yet, while he can hold Elfride up as simultaneously innocent and guilty, naïve and calculating, virtuous and fallen, he cannot discard these “contradictories” altogether. The
changes in Elfride’s complexion, therefore, although responses to complex circumstances and conflicting affects, appear on her face like Eliot’s flag-signals, thrusting her into an interpretive framework over which she has little agency. Her blushes, like Gwendolyn’s, continue to “mean” something, insofar as they are imbued with narrative significance, but they are by no means eloquent — not just because they are vulnerable to misinterpretation, but because whatever two contradictories they may seem to express are inadequate, limited, pre-determined by men like Knight.

We might imagine the blush as a messenger from the twisting recesses of the authentic inside, which hardens into a crude and artificial shape upon contact with the body’s surface — as if the body, and the discourses surrounding it, get in the way of expression. The reader is then better equipped than the characters are to “read” blushes, having acquired through Hardy’s narration greater access to the circumstances, motives, and affects informing them. And yet, of course, the blush communicates successfully to the reader only insofar as it has already been transformed into language — a language that, as we have seen, often relies on the very tropes and discourses that make nuanced reading of blushes difficult. Such a reading retains, moreover, a more dualistic approach to inside and outside, emotion and surface, than I think the novel ultimately allows. Several scholars have read A Pair of Blue Eyes as a novel about gender acquisition, including Thomas, who suggests that in it Hardy reveals “how disciplinary techniques create desires which are integral to specific identities and establish norms by which bodies and behaviours may be policed and self-regulated” (“Growing up to Be a Man” 127).²¹

²¹ See also Mary Rimmer’s close reading of the chess matches against Knight, which, she suggests, “bring Elfride into direct conflict with her oppressively gendered world for the first time” (208).
Insofar as Elfride’s blushes become both increasingly embodied and increasingly self-conscious as she matures, we may read them as self-disciplining: expressions of sexuality mediated by internalized restrictions on feminine knowledge and behaviour. As Darwin was to imminently articulate, the blush is a physiological response to social phenomena — not a glimmer of authentic, disembodied truth about the self. Much of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was already written by the time Darwin published *Expression*, but Hardy’s use of the blush nevertheless gestures toward a more fluid relationship between consciousness, body, and social environment than his initial figuration of Elfride’s emotional life — flowing “near the surface” — might have indicated. This fluidity will be more self-consciously explored through Bathsheba’s blushes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. 
Chapter 3: Undressing Complexion in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

A perception caused him to withdraw his own [eyes] from hers as suddenly as if he had been caught in a theft. Recollection of the strange antics she had indulged in when passing through the trees, was succeeded in the girl by a nettled palpitation, and that by a hot face. It was a time to see a woman redden who was not given to reddening as a rule; not a point in the milkmaid but was of the deepest rose-colour. From the Maiden’s Blush, through all varieties of Provence down to the Crimson Tuscany, the countenance of Oak’s acquaintance quickly graduated; whereupon he, in considerateness, had turned away his head. (*Far from the Madding Crowd* 1: 30)

Often observed and interpreted from several directions at once, sometimes explicitly discussed by characters, blushes *seem* important in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which Hardy began writing shortly after the release of Darwin’s *Expression*.22 Indeed, one of the most obvious indications that Hardy was self-consciously interrogating his use of the blush in this text is his strange insistence that his female protagonist, Bathsheba Everdene, is not actually a blusher. O’Farrell notes a similar move made by George Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871), which

22 On November 30 1872, four days after the publication of *Expression*, Leslie Stephens wrote to Hardy with praise for *Under the Greenwood Tree* and the suggestion that he publish his next novel in the prestigious *Cornhill* magazine (Millgate 135). At this time, Hardy was still writing *A Pair of Blue Eyes* for *Tinsleys’,* but he already had the title *Far from the Madding Crowd* in mind (135). He began researching and planning the novel after submitting the final chapters of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* on 12 March 1873, but Millgate suggests he did not turn his full attention to the project until 2 July 1873 (141).
differentiates Dorothea Brooke from her sister Celia via the comparative rarity of her blushes, despite the fact that Dorothea does blush, and not infrequently (119-20).\(^{23}\) O’Farrell reads this inconsistency as Eliot’s attempt to use the blush in the very ways she feels it has been overused — primarily as a tool of the marriage plot — while simultaneously asserting the difference in her use of it, as if to say, “these blushes (Eliot’s, Dorothea’s) … mean something” (121). A similar argument might be made of Hardy’s description of Bathsheba as a woman “who was not given to reddening as a rule” (24), for leading up to her first marriage Bathsheba is as chronic a blusher as Elfride Swancourt, and her suitors watch her cheek as obsessively as Knight, desperate to locate the legible messages of love below the surface of her skin.

Unlike in A Pair of Blue Eyes, however, Hardy seems far less concerned here with what or how much a blush can say than in the physiological mechanism and its effect upon the body. In fact, the novel perhaps most evokes Expression through its fixation on the humiliations borne of bodily exposure and its engagement in the politics of viewing, triggering, and interpreting such exposures. Consider, for instance, the moment with which I opened my introduction, when Bathsheba smiles and blushes twice at her reflection while secretly observed by her future lover, the voyeuristic farmer Gabriel Oak:

What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and unperceived farmer, who were alone its spectators — whether the smile began as a factitious one to test her capacity in that art, nobody knows: it

\(^{23}\) Eliot, like Hardy, notes the rarity of Dorothea’s blushes in a moment in which she is blushing: “‘I did not say that of myself,’ answered Dorothea, reddening. Unlike Celia, she rarely blushed, and only from high delight or anger” (15).
ended certainly in a real smile. She blushed at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more. (1: 7)

Whereas Elfride’s blushes generally do point beyond themselves to circumstances or emotions interpretable by Hardy’s narrator (if not by her admirers), Bathsheba’s here are just as ambiguous to the narrator as to her spying suitor, leaving the reader, like Oak, with only a physical correlative by which to guess at her psychological state. Insofar as Bathsheba blushes at her own change in colour, moreover, her double blush directs us not into the recesses of her mind but back toward the surface of the skin, exposing Bathsheba’s own awareness of her body’s capacity to expose itself. Emphasizing self-consciousness rather than conscience, exposure rather than the thing exposed, this chapter will explore how Hardy incorporates of the blush into *Far from the Madding Crowd*’s larger preoccupation with the gender and power dynamics of observation.

“**She Blushes at the Insult**”

Insofar as Bathsheba’s most dramatic and closely scrutinized blushes coincide with her three courtships, they can potentially be read, like Dorothea’s and Elfride’s, as products of the courtship narrative and in the tradition of the modest blush. Significantly, Bathsheba blushes far less frequently after she gains sexual experience by becoming Mrs. Troy, and while tensions in her marital relationship do induce facial redenings of anger and pain, not only are these flushes decidedly unerotic but Hardy’s narrator is also much more willing to assign them to specific affects. After her marriage’s collapse, moreover, Bathsheba’s complexion is consistently
described by characters and narrator alike as having lost its colour,\textsuperscript{24} a colour that returns around her engagement to Oak at the end of the novel. She flushes as she confides of her engagement to Liddy (2: 338), and on her wedding day she appears with “incarnadined” cheeks, resembling again, to Oak’s eyes, the girl he met on Norcombe Hill (2: 339).\textsuperscript{25} Yet, no longer a virgin, she is not that girl anymore, not exactly, and the narrator’s designation of “repose” as the cause for her cheeks’ return to redness reduces their eroticism and gestures subtly back to the exhausting events that have preceded her second marriage (2: 339). Truly fresh cheeks, the narrative arc suggests, are reserved for the innocently marriageable. As such, we might, like O’Farrell, approach Bathsheba’s “rare” blushes in the novel’s early scenes with some degree of suspicion, for while seeming to claim significance in excess of the marriage plot, they still follow its conventional trajectories.

If, however, Hardy’s representation of Bathsheba’s complexion adheres to the tropes of literary courtship or evokes conventional paradigms of virginal modesty, it does not naturalize

\textsuperscript{24} In the moment in which she learns of Troy’s encounter with Fanny on the turnpike road, for instance, Hardy writes, “No gem ever flashed from a rosy ray to a white one more rapidly than changed the young wife’s countenance,” and Joseph Poorgrass, who witnesses this transformation, exclaims with concern that she looks “like a lily — so pale and fainty!” (1: 130). When Bathsheba flees from Fanny’s coffin to hide in the fern brake, Liddy finds her the next morning “beautiful though pale and weary” (2: 176); when she learns of Troy’s supposed death, Boldwood perceives her as looking “pale and unwell,” (2: 214); and in the summer, after Troy’s actual death, Hardy writes, “None of the old colour had as yet come to her cheek, and its absolute paleness was heightened by the jet black of her gown, till it appeared preternatural” (2: 318-19).

\textsuperscript{25} In \textit{A Pair of Blue Eyes}, Elfride disappears from the narrative after Knight abandons her, and only reappears at the novel’s end in a coffin, her cheeks forever cold. And yet, through her disappointed suitors’ conversation with her maid Unity, Hardy implies that Elfride’s complexion is similarly tied to the courtship narrative, having gone pale at the loss of her marital prospects, and ambivalently returned under Lord Luxellian’s attentions. When Luxellian buys Elfride a bracelet, for instance, Unity remembers how “[t]he old roses came back to her cheeks for a minute or two then” (379) — indicating both the previous departure of such “roses” and their short-lived nature now.
them. Rather, I would argue, Hardy uses the blush to highlight the artificial process by which such conventions are absorbed by and inscribed upon the body. Simultaneously subversive, excessive, and ideologically bound, the blush in this novel represents a site of slippage between manners and biology, echoing the fluidity of Darwin’s theory of expression, in which, as Richardson explains, “individual expression developed through a welter of habits, instincts and, crucially, social relations” (“The Book of the Season” 55). Departures from social convention in Hardy’s narratives are not, George Levine points out, usually painted as morally wrong, but they almost always have consequences, both within the community and within the subject; Hardy’s protagonists, he writes, are “damned by respectability and by resistance to it, for convention is not merely outside them like a police force but inside them like a conscience” (“Shaping Hardy’s Art” 534). And yet, Levine goes on to suggest, the culture of Hardy’s novels is predominantly one of shame, not guilt, and for many of his characters the possibility of being seen to transgress is more troubling than the transgression itself. Even Bathsheba, for all her self-proclaimed “independence” (36), cannot escape the vision of herself in others’ eyes, especially given how closely she is watched throughout the novel. Her blushes, then, may testify to her body’s implication in gender-inflected discourses of respectability, without necessarily indicating either her conscious acceptance of such discourses or Hardy’s authorization of them.

Specifically, Bathsheba exhibits throughout the novel an instinctive adherence to standards of modesty in dress, and her blushes often point toward an anxiety about bodily exposure reminiscent of the mortification experienced by the women undressed by Darwin’s correspondents. Back at Norcombe Hill, for instance, as Oak ogles Bathsheba’s bare wrist moments before their first interaction, Hardy writes, “From the contours of her figure in its upper part, she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders, but since her infancy nobody had ever
seen them” (1: 28). The narrator goes on to claim that if Bathsheba had ever been “put into a low dress, she would have run and thrust her head into a bush” (28). And yet, he suggests, “she was not a shy girl by any means; it was merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns” (28). Hardy’s use of the word “instinct” may be read as an attempt to naturalize modesty in dress, yet he immediately qualifies it by revealing Bathsheba’s modest “instinct” to be subject to social convention: if she had been a town girl, she might have worn her dress lower. As she is not a town girl, however, her concern to remain covered is only exacerbated by her interactions with Oak, whose gaze is both invasive and, apparently, inescapable.

Hardy’s emphasis on his heroine’s modest sense of style helps to contextualize Bathsheba’s “rare” blush in the passage with which I began this chapter, a response to Oak’s admission to having seen her on her pony without a hat, riding habit, or side saddle. Gatrell points out that “fashionable mid-Victorian riding habits differed primarily from day-dresses by being particularly long in the skirt and of heavy material, draping over the foot so that there would be little chance of ankle emerging” (“Reading Hardy through Dress” 188). Without one, in other words, Bathsheba may have inadvertently allowed Oak an invasive glimpse of her petticoat or ankle, and, given her unconventional posture on the pony, may have revealed more still. The very fact that Bathsheba insists on riding to Tewnell Mill without the proper accoutrements indicates a certain disregard for convention, but to be seen actively disregarding it — and to be seen to know she has been seen26 — is intolerable. In response to Oak’s admission,

26 Oak interprets Bathsheba’s humiliation as having less to do with being seen than with his tactlessness in telling her what he saw: “Without law there is no sin, and without eyes there is no indecorum; and she appeared to feel that Gabriel’s espial had made her an indecorous woman
therefore, her face graduates slowly and painfully “[f]rom the Maiden’s Blush through all varieties of the Provence down to the Crimson Tuscany” (1: 30). Having internalized certain standards of modesty specific to her geographical location — to draw the line between the seen and unseen quite high — Bathsheba’s body responds dramatically to any observed departure from those standards, real or, as we will see, imagined.

Hardy’s most peculiar representation of a blush in this novel — and, perhaps in any of his novels — also pertains to bodily exposure, although in this case the blush itself takes place not on Bathsheba’s cheek, nor on any human body, but on the flank of a sheep that Oak sheers while she watches:

[Gabriel] put down the luncheon to drag a frightened ewe to his shear-station, flinging it over upon its back with a dexterous twist of the arm. He lopped off the tresses about its head, and opened up the neck and collar, his mistress quietly looking on.

‘She blushes at the insult,’ murmured Bathsheba, watching the pink flush which arose and overspread the neck and shoulders of the ewe where they were left bare by the clicking shears — a flush which was enviable, for its delicacy, by many queens of the coteries, and would have been creditable, for its promptness, to any woman in the world. (1: 244)

Bathsheba’s classification of the ewe’s colour as a blush, triggered by its (strikingly erotic) undressing by Gabriel is, in a sense, blatantly un-Darwinian insofar as Darwin classed blushing without her own connivance” (24). Although, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Oak’s interpretations should not always to be taken at face value, his reading of the situation nevertheless points toward the complexity of Bathsheba’s self-consciousness and her simultaneous desire to hide and to be seen.
as “the most human of all expressions” (Darwin 310), absent in animals and even very young children. And yet, of course, the moment also evokes the larger project of Expression and its argument for human-animal continuity. In attributing to the ewe a human and specifically female reaction to nakedness, therefore, Bathsheba may be read as revealing her own uncomfortable identification with the stripped sheep, an identification made even more conspicuous when a farmhand stamps her initials, B.E., onto its behind (1: 246). Following Bathsheba’s observation, moreover, Hardy reiterates the parallel between shearing and undressing: the original ewe, for instance, he describes as “looking startled and shy at the loss of its garment which lay on the floor” (1: 245), and, having been stamped, it is sent to join “the shirtless flock outside,” made up of sheep that had “duly undergone their stripping” (1: 246).

Hardy’s anthropomorphizing depiction of the sheared ewe sheds light on a blush of Bathsheba’s that almost immediately follows it, and to which we have access only via Gabriel’s observation of it. This second blush is apparently instigated by William Boldwood, Bathsheba’s second and more eligible suitor, who unexpectedly enters the shearing barn and begins a private conversation with her. Gabriel, perpetually watching, wonders whether they are talking about the flock, and guesses that this is probably not the case:

   Gabriel theorized, not without truth, that in quiet discussion of any matter within reach of the speaker’s eyes, these are usually fixed upon it. Bathsheba demurely regarded a contemptible scrap of wool lying upon the ground, in a way which

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   27 Hardy’s novels often draw links between animals and humans, and Far from the Madding Crowd is especially invested in the lives of dogs and sheep. For readings of Hardy’s longstanding sympathy with animals and the shifts in his characterization of them throughout his writing career, see Elisha Cohn’s “‘No insignificant creature’: Thomas Hardy’s Ethical Turn,” and Anna West’s Thomas Hardy and Animals.
suggested less ovine criticism than womanly embarrassment. She became more or less red in the cheek, the blood wavering in uncertain flux and reflux over the sensitive space between ebb and flood. (1: 247-48)

Assuming that her wavering blood indicates her attraction to Boldwood, Gabriel becomes “constrained and sad” as he continues to shear (1: 248). Bathsheba, apparently having been invited by Boldwood for a ride, exits the barn and returns fifteen minutes later in “her new riding habit of myrtle green which fitted her to the waist as a rind fits its fruit” (1: 248). Yet without confirming or denying her attraction to Boldwood, this series of incidents also gestures back both to the sheep’s blush, moments before, and to her humiliation back at Norcombe, when Oak saw her riding without the proper attire. The fact that Bathsheba has clearly invested in a beautiful new riding-habit since inheriting money, and the image of her emerging in it after blushing over the sheep’s discarded garments in the shearing barn, highlights not only the intensity of her mortification in the earlier scene, but signals once again both the standards of respectability that move her blood and the exposures her blood in turn generates by inconveniently drawing attention to the body she has been taught to conceal.

Hardy’s description of Bathsheba’s new riding habit fitting her waist “as a rind fits its fruit” suggests that she is on some level comfortable showing off her figure, at least in socially sanctioned ways. As a simile, however, it also invites us to imagine her clothing as a second layer of skin, growing out of her body like the sheep’s garment of wool, which can be removed only through shearing. This intimate enmeshment of biological material and social fabric evokes what Gatrell perceives as a theoretical generalization consistent throughout Hardy’s oeuvre: “that women’s bodies extend into their dress, and that in being put on their clothes become an integral part of their nervous system, as they do not for men” (“Reading Hardy through Dress” 178). *Far
from the Madding Crowd abounds in images and statements that confirm Gatrell’s thesis, such as the narrator’s assertion that “[a] woman’s dress [is] a part of her countenance, and any disorder in the one [is] of the same nature with a malformation or wound in the other” (1: 123). This word “countenance” marks the dress, like the blush, as a socially acceptable mode of non-verbal communication for women, although unlike the blush, of course, dress is a form of voluntarily-constructed expression — a means for a woman to scrupulously control what her body says and how it is perceived. Yet more than just a layer she applies over her body, dress, as Hardy consistently depicts it, is an extension of body; as Gatrell writes, “a torn skirt is a malformation of the identity a woman presents to the world, but to her it comes with the physical pain of a slash to her face” (178). Bathsheba’s green riding-habit fitting her like the skin of a fruit is another formulation of this same idea: like the skin of a fruit or the wool of a sheep, her clothing is a part of her, and its removal requires an act of violence.

This violence inherent in undressing, both of sheep and of women, is made even more explicit when Oak, distracted from his shearing duties in his continued attempt to spy on Bathsheba and Boldwood, accidentally cuts his ewe in the groin, drawing blood. Several critics have interpreted this slip of the blade as a jealous act of phallic aggression on Oak’s part, and insofar as Oak blames Bathsheba for the ewe’s wound — “because she had wounded the ewe’s shearer in a still more vital part” (1: 249) — both he and Hardy seem to view the wounded sheep as a figure for Bathsheba, who receives punishment in her place. Insofar as Bathsheba also seems to be viewing the naked ewes as surrogates for her own body, however, her exclamation of

28 For negative readings of Oak in this moment, see Penny Boumelha and Rosemarie Morgan. For a more positive depiction, see Shires, who suggests that the efficiency with which Oak stops the ewe’s bleeding “speaks to the routine with which he stops his own desire,” signalling his return, after a moment of phallic aggression, to “the role of healer” (170).
dismay at the sight of the sheep’s blood suggests a more personal emotion than mere annoyance at Oak’s carelessness. While the idea of nakedness causes, for Bathsheba, a rush of blood to the face, that blood nevertheless remains safely contained beneath her skin. But if the dress is an extension of her countenance, its removal, like a removal of skin, will result in the release of that contained blood — as in the case of the sheep, whose undressing coincides with a genital wound. Bathshaba’s fear of bodily exposure, therefore, can be read as an unacknowledged fear of her insides literally being made visible. The blood that colours her face at the thought, moreover — both response to exposure and exposure in itself — betrays her by drawing attention to exactly that which she seeks to keep hidden and contained: the body beneath her dress, the blood beneath her skin.

Immediately following the sheep-shearing dinner, Bathsheba will meet the man under whose gaze she will blush the most frequently and sensually: her third suitor, Sergeant Troy, whom, significantly, she first encounters when their clothing becomes entangled, his spur catching in a decoration on her skirt. More than either Gabriel or Boldwood, Troy draws Bathsheba’s attention to her own status as a visual object of desire. Upon seeing her for the first time, for instance, he thanks her “for the sight of such a beautiful face,” causing Bathsheba to blush and to reply that her face was “unwillingly shown” (1: 273). He seems in this early encounter to pose a larger threat than either Oak or Boldwood to the self-containment of Bathsheba’s body within her clothes, as is suggested by her suspicion that he has wound his phallic spur deeper into the vulnerable cloth of her dress to keep her by his side (1: 275). In her initial desire to escape him, she considers “whether by a bold and desperate rush she could free herself at the risk of leaving her skirt bodily behind her,” but, characteristically, she finds the thought “too dreadful” (1: 274). The prospect of being glimpsed without the skirt is unappealing
enough, and, as Gatrell suggests, “abandoning the skirt of her dress would be like leaving a part
of her body behind in the hands of the soldier with the twinkling eye and the strong sexuality”
(179-80). Yet, I will argue, although Troy’s persistent advances cause Bathsheba to colour
repeatedly with embarrassment and anger, he is also the only one of her three suitors capable of
rousing in her a corresponding feeling of desire, stronger than the internalized restrictions
imposed by her impulse to appear respectable. Although the impropriety of it paints her face
scarlet, for Troy she will allow herself to be seen; she will allow herself to be undressed.

In what is arguably a re-enactment of the sheep-shearing scene, Bathsheba’s sexuality is
memorably awakened in a “hollow amid the ferns,” while Troy demonstrates, with a series of
near-fatal thrusts, his prowess with the “sword.” Here, Troy, rather than Oak, wields the phallic
blade on Bathsheba, rather than on a sheep — his sword, which always seems on the point of
cutting into her flesh but never does, clearly evoking Gabriel’s “skilful shears, which apparently
were going to gather up a piece of the flesh at every close, and yet never did so,” and his removal
of a piece of Bathsheba’s hair recalling Gabriel’s lopping of sheep “tresses” (1: 244). More
than signalling what Penny Boumelha considers a common phallic aggression among
Bathsheba’s suitors (33), however, this evocation of the shearing in the hollow amid the ferns
also codes Troy’s performance as a symbolic undressing of Bathsheba, which Hardy
immediately follows with the first sexual encounter of his heroine’s life: a kiss, which “brought
the blood beating into her face, set her stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet, and
enlarged emotion to a compass which quite swamped thought” (1: 313). Here, as in the shearing
scene, the undressing triggers a rush of blood and a release of bodily fluid — in this case “a

29 For other readings of the similarities between these two scenes, see Boumelha (33), Morgan
(37-39), Shires (170-71), and Schapiro (21).
stream of tears” (1: 313). Bathsheba, however, unlike Oak’s wounded sheep, does not bolt from the man who undresses her — she marries him.

Even in her euphoria, the blush that floods Bathsheba’s features as Troy’s mouth dips toward her signals not only her arousal but also her shame; her social instincts are not eradicated by pleasure, and Hardy writes, “[s]he felt like one who has sinned a great sin” (1: 313). Bathsheba’s face will remain flushed and embarrassed until she passes through the threshold of matrimony, and her desire gains social legitimacy. “Eros,” Hardy suggests, has “coloured her whole constitution” (1: 314), and in more than a merely figurative sense. The novel’s thirtieth chapter, in which Bathsheba confesses her passion to Liddy, is entitled “Hot Cheeks and Tearful Eyes,” and begins with a description of Bathsheba’s face burning with “the flush and excitement which were little less than chronic with her now” (1: 326). Troy, we learn, has kissed her a second time, ignoring her modest refusals and objections. Through his erotic candour, in fact, Troy seeks to topple her inhibitions altogether, for, as he tells her the second time they meet, he would not “lie about a beauty to encourage a single woman in England in too excessive a modesty” (1: 286). Yet, for all her wildness and unconventionality, Bathsheba cannot so easily overcome the modesty Troy claims she possesses in excess, and her hot cheeks indicate her lingering social instincts. Even as she chases Troy into increasingly improper situations, the perception of stricture tints her desire with discomfort and paints both desire and discomfort upon her cheek for all to see. Bathsheba’s blushes, then, testify to her body’s absorption of socially determined standards for appropriate (female) behaviour and desire, and, by making her body more visible, expose her to the disciplinary techniques of interested observers, like the ever-watchful Oak.
I want now to consider more carefully Oak’s position as an observer of blushes. This position, I will suggest, aligns him uncomfortably with the male authority figures in Darwin’s *Expression*, whose accounts of mortified and unclothed female bodies gesture toward the invasiveness and even violation inherent in scrutinizing complexions, in coercing the body toward legibility. Although Oak does not, of course, at any point physically undress Bathsheba, his proclivity for spying (over hedges, through holes in walls) suggests his voyeuristic inclinations — his desire to peer beneath surfaces, to glimpse the arms beneath sleeves, the ankles beneath skirts. By spying, moreover, not only does Oak deny Bathsheba the chance to consent to being seen, but he also denies her the ability to see him while he watches, taking on the role, both at Norcombe and at Weatherbury, of the invisible “officer of surveillance” (1: 267). Frequently read as a disciplinary agent of censure and control, Oak is, of Bathsheba’s lovers, the most obsessive scrutinizer and interpreter of her complexion; her face, to him, is “as the uncertain glory of an April day,” and he is “ever regardful of its faintest changes” (1: 205), often reading signs of transgression in these changes for which to chastise her. When, for instance, Boldwood appears on the edge of a meadow in which Oak and Bathsheba are tending to an orphaned lamb, Oak instantly discerns on Bathsheba’s face “the mark of some influence from without, in the form of a keenly self-conscious reddening” (1: 205). Seeing Boldwood, Oak connects “these signs” with the incriminating valentine Boldwood showed him earlier, and he

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30 In an early scene, Oak watches Bathsheba carrying a pail in one hand while holding the other arm out to balance, thus exposing enough of the arm “to make Oak wish that the event had happened in summer, when the whole would have been revealed” (26).

31 Morgan, for instance, describes Oak as “a figure of decorum and an observer of appearances” whose vision of Bathsheba significantly differs from Hardy’s (25).
immediately suspects Bathsheba “of some coquettish procedure” (1: 205). Later calling her conduct “unworthy of any thoughtful and meek and comely woman,” he will cause her face to colour again, this time “with the angry crimson of a Danby sunset” (1: 223). Oak and Bathsheba’s eventual marriage, therefore, as Nemesvari suggests, signals the plot’s movement “toward the internalized acceptance of psychologically disciplined control” (118). By surveying, interpreting, and triggering blushes, Oak attempts to enlist Bathsheba’s complexion into his corrective project.

Yet although Bathsheba’s body does seem to participate in its own objectification by making itself more visible in moments of perceived transgression, its visibility, as with Elfride’s in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, does not necessarily translate to readability. I do not, therefore, want to overstate Bathsheba’s status as passive female object of male observation, nor do I want to exaggerate Oak’s competency as an observer. Consider again, for instance, the novel’s first dramatization of the act of observation, in which Oak spies Bathsheba’s waggon from behind a hedge and watches her unpack a small looking-glass and blush at her reflection as she waits for her waggoner to return. This image of a man secretly observing a woman observing her reflection recalls the similar moment in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* when Knight watches Elfride through her dressing room window, and in both cases the mirror-gazing woman provokes male anxieties about female artifice and the potentially contrived and even practiced nature of expression. Hardy writes:

A cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have been. There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her
motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of
Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though
likely dramas in which men would play a part — vistas of probable triumphs —
the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined lost and won.
(1: 8)

From a Darwinian standpoint, it is not unlikely that men might be on the blushing maiden’s
mind, for the solitary blusher, by his account, blushes not from reflecting on her appearance, but
from reflecting on how her appearance appears to others. By this reading, Hardy has vividly
themselves being looked at. … The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female”
(41). Even in presumed solitude, Bathsheba surveys herself through men’s eyes and blushes
under their imagined gaze.32 Yet the narrator’s refusal to definitively endorse this interpretation,
presumably accepted uncritically by Oak, suggests that Bathsheba’s blush may not be so easily
(and patronizingly) classified as a sign of “[v]anity” (1: 10).

Rather, Hardy’s repeated assertion of the ambiguity of the moment encourages doubt
about Oak’s reading and allows space for readers to imagine alternatives of a less cynical and
heteronormative variety. While the narrator suggests that the first smile may have begun “as a
factitious one to test her capacity in that art,” he also insists that “nobody knows” for certain (1: 7),
and immediately following Oak’s “cynical inference” he undermines his position further by
suggesting, “this was but conjecture, and the whole series of actions were [sic] so idly put forth

32 See Ogden for a discussion of Bathsheba as exhibitionist, capable of achieving visual mastery
primarily through “the acquisition and ‘feminized’ peripheral perception of the ‘masculinized’
gaze of men” (6).
as to make it rash to assert that intention had any part in them at all” (1: 8). Rosemarie Morgan, responding to the sensuality of Hardy’s language in this passage, reads Bathsheba’s two blushes as auto-erotic, suggesting that “[a] dawning is clearly taking place and not only in the morning skies” (24). Oak’s assumption of vanity and feminine frailty, by this reading, completely overlooks the vitality and pleasure of the moment. Instead, Morgan argues, “artifice, vanity, have no place here,” for Bathsheba does not “adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape,” but rather, “simply observe[s] herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind” — and, Morgan adds, “relish[s] it” (25).

Morgan’s detection of a masturbatory quality to Bathsheba’s admiration of her reflection positions the watched woman not just as a self-conscious object of male observation and desire, but as an active observer and desirer herself. In fact, insofar as the “crimson jacket” Bathsheba wears when she blushes at her reflection prefigures the one Troy wears when he brings “the blood beating into her face” in the hollow amid the ferns (1: 131), Troy would seem to succeed Bathsheba’s own crimson-clad reflection as the object of pleasure and desire. As such, Troy and Bathsheba’s encounter in the hollow can be read as mirroring this earlier moment on the waggon, red jacket reflecting red face in another example of Hardy’s intimate intertwining of clothing and countenance. Oak’s immediate impulse to construe her pleasure as vanity, moreover, exposes his own underlying anxiety that a woman’s sexuality might exist independently of marriage or, worse still, of men. His insistence on alerting Bathsheba to the invasive reach of his gaze can therefore be read as an attempt to correct her behaviour, to convert her appreciation of “the desirability of her existence” into “self-consciousness” (Hardy 1: 26, 28). When Oak finally has the chance to speak to Bathsheba rather than ogle her from afar, he almost immediately mentions having seen her engaged in yet another unconventional display, which he has spied through a
loophole in his hut: appearing on horseback without a riding habit or side saddle. As a result, when Bathsheba blushes in Oak’s presence for the second time, her flush of self-pleasure is replaced by the “rare blush” with which I opened this chapter, a flush of mortification so intense that Oak feels obligated to look away “as if caught in a theft” (1: 30).

Despite Oak’s efforts to survey and manipulate Bathsheba’s complexion, her changes in colour do not always conform with his expectations and desires, especially in these early scenes at Norcombe. During their first conversation, for instance, his gaze seems to have “a tickling effect” upon her pink face, which she brushes with her hand, “as if Gabriel had been irritating its pink surface by actual touch” (1: 28). This fantasy, however, of visibly altering the surface of her skin with his eyes — of a gaze that translates into touch —— collapses when he finds himself blushing, and she “not at all” (1: 28). His own blush, as Nemesvari points out, “which indicates a shameful awareness of his own impropriety in stalking Bathsheba and spying on her, also reveals an embarrassment about his surveillance that undercuts its efficacy as a mode of control” (90); in other words, Oak reveals himself to be self-conscious about his own position as an observer. After his first aborted attempt at a proposal, when Oak sees Bathsheba chasing him up the hill, once again his own colour deepens, and hers seems at first to mirror it, but the narrator drily notes that her flush is not “as it appeared from emotion, but from running” (1: 45). Later in this same scene, moreover, when Bathsheba unexpectedly takes offense at his forwardness, Oak accuses her of purposefully making “your colours come up on your face” (1: 52). Unable to accurately predict or interpret her changes of colour through a framework of matrimonial potential, he assumes she has voluntarily summoned them to spite him, thus investing her complexion with a subversive incompliance.
Although Hardy does narrate large sections of the novel from Bathsheba’s perspective, he presents almost all of her most dramatic blushes from Oak’s, thus denying the reader the kind of privileged access to their “meaning” or source that he often provided in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. By staging Bathsheba’s blushes as observed bodily events, Hardy not only emphasizes their visibility and corporeality but also engages with the late nineteenth century’s larger movement toward behaviourist understandings of the human mind. As Anger writes, “That consciousness itself cannot deliver accurate knowledge of the self is an idea that becomes central in later Victorian fiction. The observer who knows the truth about the workings of the mind is no longer, as on the common-sense view, the inward looking I” (498). And yet, of course, as we have seen, Oak is no more adept a reader of blushes than Knight, his interpretations no less restricted and restrictive. The observer of Oak, moreover, Hardy’s third-person narrator, while a more objective authority than Oak himself, often draws attention to the limitations of his own omniscience. As such, Hardy simultaneously privileges observation as a mode of knowing about the world and about others while thematizing both its violence and its failures. “Seeing does not necessarily empower,” writes Levine, “but it frequently wounds” (536). Oak both sees and does not see what Bathsheba’s body both reveals and resists revealing, but his scrutiny of her body’s surface, while perhaps not providing the inner access he craves, nevertheless draws blood.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

An analysis of Hardy’s intervention in the discourses surrounding the blush provides a convenient entry point into larger discussions of his ambivalent treatment of gender throughout his fiction. Hardy’s attitude toward women is always conflicted, and while his novels, as Shanta Dutta suggests, do on the one hand express “his sympathy for the wronged, exploited, or marginalized woman,” on the other they also reveal “some of his fears, uncertainties, reservations, and tensions: the natural inheritance of patriarchal ideology and a predominantly male literary tradition” (ix). Especially in early novels, like the two I have been discussing here, Hardy’s narrator is famously prone to generalizations about woman’s natural inferiority, and although these statements lessen significantly midway through his career, they do complicate critical attempts to conceive of Hardy as a proto-feminist.33 Yet even in his earliest novels, Patricia Ingham contends that Hardy’s disparaging generalizations “constitute one discourse among several and so are set in a context that creates unease with the stereotype of ‘woman’” (132). This is certainly the case in both *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, wherein Elfride’s and Bathsheba’s blushes straddle the line between involuntary mechanism and learned behaviour, erotic signal and chaste impulse, subversive expression and instrument of surveillance, self-conscious quirk and key to consciousness. Whether intentionally or not, the blush, as Hardy invokes it, reinforces traditional notions of “natural” femininity while simultaneously exposing them as culturally contingent, thus situating gender itself, like the blush, at a site of indeterminate biological and social convergence.

33 See Mitchell for an overview of recent critical approaches to gender politics in Hardy’s fiction.
This project has primarily focused on discourses that link the blush to femininity, but it would be an over-simplification to suggest that Hardy only concerns himself with masculine scrutiny of feminine blushes. While his men do not tend to blush as dramatically or as elusively as his women, they do blush, and not infrequently. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, for instance, Hardy indicates Stephen Smith’s effeminacy and immaturity by introducing him as having “a boy’s blush and manner” (16) — “his complexion as fine as Elfride’s own; the pink of his cheeks as delicate” (16). Hardy signals, moreover, the silliness of Elfride’s middle-aged father’s amorous escapades by describing him as looking “rather red and abashed, as middle-aged lovers are apt to do when caught in the tricks of younger ones” (123). Even the austere Knight reddens slightly when Elfride points out certain defects in his physical appearance, despite having just disparaged her for self-consciousness and vanity (177). In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as we have seen, Oak’s blushes seem to signal his unease with his own position as an observer. The exhibitionist Seargent Troy, by contrast, blushes in moments when he loses control over the terms of his own self-conscious performance; during his attempt to marry Fanny, for instance, a slight flush mounts in his cheek as he strides up the church aisle under the curious eyes of a predominantly female congregation, his embarrassment “more marked … by the determination upon his face to show none” (1: 189). In all of these cases, I would argue, the male blush signals conditions outside the gendered or erotic ordinary: Stephen’s effeminacy, Swancourt’s middle-aged love affair, Knight’s body-consciousness, Oak’s discomfort with his own gaze, Troy’s subjection to female gazing. Discomfort with normative models of masculinity is characteristic both of Hardy’s characters and of Hardy himself, and Thomas points out that his autobiography and novels often depict “a masculine subject profoundly ill at ease with itself; dis-eased we might
say: displaying symptoms of a split or loosely integrated sense of self” (Growing up to be a Man” 118).

Thomas’s identification of a dis-eased or diseased masculine subjectivity in Hardy’s novels brings us to another prominent male blusher worthy of note: Far from the Madding Crowd’s pathologically blushful Joseph Poorgrass, one of the more memorable yet under-analyzed of Bathsheba’s farmhands. Initially described by Hardy as “a very shrinking man in the background,” Poorgrass is extraordinarily self-conscious about his own self-consciousness (1: 93). Blushes, he claims, “hev been in the family for generations” (1: 94), and he has even taken active (albeit failed) steps to relieve himself of the affliction, evoking Burgess’s story, cited also in Expression, of a family “consisting of father, mother, and ten children, all of whom, without a single exception, were prone to false blushing, to a most painful degree” (182). An expert in embarrassment, Poorgrass knows what kinds of scenarios trigger his own blushes, knows when to ask his friends if his colours are rising, and is even familiar with the blushing habits of other members of his community — such as Cainy Ball’s grandfather, of whom he states “’Twas blush, blush with him, almost as much as ’tis with me” (2: 35). In fact, as one of Hardy’s only characters to openly talk about his own blushes, Poorgrass provides perhaps the most convincing evidence that Hardy was actively thinking about blushing while writing this novel.

As with the other male blushers I listed above, Poorgrass’s perpetually fluctuating colours set him outside conventional restrictions of demonstrative masculine affect. Specifically, Poorgrass’s proclivity for blushing seems, like Oak’s, to intersect with his unease as an observer, and, in particular, as a male observer of female bodies. Early in the novel, for instance, he explains that he has been trying desperately to avoid looking at Bathsheba, and admits that “when I seed her, ’twas nothing but blushes with me” (1: 93). That Poorgrass’s blushes are
related to his observer status is moreover evidenced by the voyeuristic nature of his attempt to
cure himself of blushes altogether:

They took me to Greenhill Fair, and into a grate large jerry-go-nimble show,
where there were women-folk riding round — standing upon horses, with hardly
anything on but their smocks, but it didn’t cure me a morsel — no, not a morsel.
And then I was put errand-man at the Women’s Skittle Alley at the back of the
Tailor’s Arms in Casterbridge. ’Twas a horrible sinful situation, and altogether a
very curious place for a good man. I had to stand and look wicked people in the
face from morning till night; but ’twas no use — I was just as bad as ever after all.
(1: 94)

Like the children of the blushing family described by Burgess, Poorgrass has been sent “into the
world” to have the embarrassment embarrassed out of him — as if by blushing enough he might
lose the capacity altogether.34 Especially significant, then, is the fact that the prescribed remedy
seems primarily to have involved looking at women in various states of undress and exertion.
This anxiety about looking is, apparently, baffling to his friends: Jan Coggan describes the
affliction as “a curious nature for a man” (1: 93); the malster calls it “terrible bad for a man” (1: 93); Jacob Smallbury suggests that “though ’tis very well for a woman, dang it all, ’tis awkward for a man like him” (1: 94); and even Oak agrees, “’Tis — ’tis, … Yes, very awkward for the

34 In the serialization and first edition of the text, the maltster asks, “Did ye ever take anything to
try and stop it, Joseph Poorgrass?” — implying an ingestible cure — to which Joseph responds
with his story of travelling to the Greenhill Fair. In the Osgood McIlvaine edition (1895),
however, Hardy changes the maltster’s question to “Did ye ever go into the world to try and stop it, Joseph Poorgrass,” apparently indicating his understanding of travel as an obvious cure for
such an affliction (65)
man” (1: 95). Through their repetition of the phrase “for a man,” his friends insist on diagnosing blushing as a form of gender divergence or abnormality.

As with Burgess’s blushing family, the cure fails and Poorgrass remains as conspicuously embarrassed after his adventure as before; and yet, I would argue, the act of pathologizing his affliction — of drawing attention to himself as an object of medical curiosity — would appear to be part of how Poorgrass copes with the affliction in the first place. In fact, the incessant commentary on his own blushes, from himself and others, seems to have a calming effect on his otherwise mortified constitution — “his shyness, which was so painful as a defect, just beginning to fill him with a mild complacency now that it was regarded as an interesting study” (1: 93). Later in the novel, for instance, when Bathsheba requests that Poorgrass sing to her, he asks Coggan to “eye my features and see if the tell-tale blood overpowers me much,” diffidently explaining, “I always tries to keep my colours from rising when a beauty’s eyes get fixed on me. … But if so be ’tis willed they do, they must” (1: 258). While it is unclear whether Bathsheba overhears this exchange, Poorgrass’s invitation to Coggan (and perhaps also to Bathsheba) to scrutinize his face for blushes allows him to reclaim his complexion, thus setting the terms by which it is viewed and interpreted. Sometimes, in fact, he even seems to take a peculiar pride in his bashful sensibility, and flatters himself for his own meek humility: “But under your bushel, Joseph! — under your bushel with you! — A strange desire, neighbours, this desire to hide, and no praise due. Yet there is a Sermon on the Mount with a calendar of the blessed at the head, and certain meek men may be named therein” (2: 36). Having refined his hereditary shyness nearly to the level of a self-conscious performance, Poorgrass thus transforms the involuntary physiological mechanism, the source and evidence of his anxiety, back into a product of discourse, thus returning the blush to language, but a language of his choosing.
Mid-nineteenth-century medicalization of the blush, the case of Joseph Poorgrass demonstrates, while not severing the relationship between blushing and language, provides a new set of discourses and narratives with which to interpret it, judge it, and potentially reclaim it. Yet as what Darwin calls the most human expression, the blush continues to be implicated in the question of how to be human correctly. To blush too much is to risk being marked effeminate, immature, or even diseased; to blush too little or not at all may be seen to indicate immorality, criminality, or a stunted affective capacity. New methods of coercing the body (one’s own or another’s) toward legibility, partake, therefore, in longstanding impulses to classify it against an ever-shifting category of “normalcy” — whether gendered, erotic, racial, or psychological. In the twentieth century, as White recounts, Sigmund Freud would trace one of his patients’ tendency toward excessive blushing back to suppressed memories of childhood sexual abuse and an intense attachment to a sister who protected him. Freud’s account not only once again feminizes the blush, reading it as a displaced erection which renders the blusher female, but also positions the psychoanalyst, “author of the case history,” as a kind of narrator, one who “disclose[s] the hidden thoughts and feelings in the blushing characters of novels” (White 297). “The novelist is a psychologist who is also an artist,” writes Ellis (“Thomas Hardy’s Novels” 115), and it appears that the reverse is also potentially true: the psychologist may operate like a novelist or borrow the novelist’s tools. Representations of blushing in A Pair of Blue Eyes and Far from the Madding Crowd can, therefore, be read as evoking not only the collision but also the entanglement of an inherited literary tradition and a newly popularized scientific one — traditions that would continue to inform each other over the following decades. As a physiological phenomenon, the blush may not in itself be eloquent, but it attracts eloquent storytellers nevertheless.
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