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Hardy and Comets

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Abstract:

Comets seem to have fascinated Thomas Hardy. This study begins with placing his interest in comets in the context of his times and of his lifelong interest in astronomy. Comets figure prominently in three of Hardy's works: "The comet at Yell'ham," a poem; Two on a Tower, a romance; and a headpiece, a drawing of a comet. Analysis of the use of comets in these follows, with particular attention given to Two on a Tower, Hardy's "astronomical novel." A discussion of what comets signify in Hardy's fictional world juxtaposes the narrator's view with those of the rustics. This is followed by a look at the eight cometary images in the other novels and poems as further evidence of Hardy's fascination by comets, a fascination that contributed to the shaping of his "idiosyncratic mode of regard."

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, astronomy, comets, Two on a Tower, portents, "The Comet at Yell'ham"

1. Introduction

Comets seem to have fascinated Thomas Hardy. This fascination can be accounted for by putting it in the context of his times and his own life. First, the nineteenth century was "Comet-Crazed": a century that "witnessed an unusually large number of spectacular comet apparitions, an unprecedented record that has not been matched since" (Olson & Passachoff, 1998, p. 109). Secondly, Hardy's interest in astronomy was lifelong (Ahmad, 1998, p. xi). As a child, he "used to lie / Upon the leaze and watch the sky" (Hardy, *Complete poems*, 1976, p. 886). The "telescope inherited from some collateral ancestor" probably contributed to the development of his sky-watching (Hardy, *Life and work*, 1984, p. 26), and so did the Optics section of John M. Moffat's *The boy's book of science* (1842), which is still among his books in the Dorset County Museum. At 15, he became "deeply interested" in *The popular educator*, which contained lessons in astronomy (Hardy, *Life and work*, p. 29). He bought Volume I and Volume II at Christmastide, 1855, and the third at Whitsuntide, 1856 (Millgate, 1982, p. 53). He read Richard A. Proctor's *Essays on astronomy* (1872) (Ahmad, 1998, pp. xix, 297-98). At the age of 80, he read Einstein's *Relativity: The special and the general theory* in a translation by Robert W. Lawson. His copy, published in 1920, is in the Dorset County Museum. It seems that he felt that some of Einstein's ideas were hard to grasp, as indicated by marginal comments and queries (on pp. 16 and 19). He expresses that feeling in the 8th verse of "A Drinking Song," which appeared in *Winter words*, his last collection of poetry, published posthumously in 1928 (*Complete Poems*, pp. 905-908). In the light of this lifelong interest in astronomy, it is no wonder that Hardy's persona in the fourth stanza of "Afterwards" wants to be remembered as "one who had an eye for such mysteries" as those of "the full-starred heavens that winter sees" (*Complete poems*, p. 562). Of all these mysteries, comets seem to have fascinated him the most.

2. "The Comet at Yell'ham"

Hardy's first recorded response to the observation of a comet was the early poem "The Comet at Yell'ham." Originally titled "The Comet at Yalbury or Yell'ham" (Purdy, 1954, p. 115), it was published in his second collection, *Poems of the past and the present* (1902). Of this poem, Hardy wrote on 24 October 1909: "[The comet] appeared, I think, in 1858 or 1859 – a very large one – and I remember standing and looking at it as described" (as cited in Purdy, 1954, 115). Weber (1965, p.133), Pinion (1968, p. 516), and Bailey (1971, p. 168) identified the comet as Encke's Comet, which appeared in 1858. But Ray argues that the comet was Donati's, giving two reasons: first, Encke's Comet is "too faint to be visible to the naked eye," and, secondly, "it has the shortest known orbital period of any comet, a mere 3.3 years" (Ray, 2002, p. 491). Discovered on 2 June 1858, Donati's was "one of the brightest and most visible comets of the nineteenth century" (p. 491). Hardy's companion, according to Bailey, "may have been either a boyhood sweetheart or his mother or sister" (1971, p. 168). Since his sister Mary, one year his junior, was close to him "in interests, enthusiasms, and sympathies" (Millgate, 1982, p. 17), the "sweet form" was probably hers. To watch the comet they walked to Yellowham "Height," between Puddletown and Dorchester (Pinion, 1968, p. 515), not far from their home in the hamlet of Higher Bockhampton.

In the two-quatrain poem, what fascinates the two watchers, as they "stand and regard" (i.e. gaze at), is the tail of the comet, "the fiery train." Donati's Comet of 1858 had a strikingly long triple tail measuring about 45 million miles (Ray, 491). The speaker describes it as bending or curving over the plain, a detail that would support Ray's identification, since the "curved tail is a variety which is generally seen in the great spectacular naked-eye comets" (Comets, 1977, p. 70). One can imagine Hardy's great excitement at that impressive spectacle. Such experiences are etched in memory. The word "swim" that he uses in the last line of

the first quatrain ("So soon to swim from sight") is used by Keats in his sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," where the speaker compares his feeling of wonder and excitement to that of "some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken" (Keats, 2008, p. 32).¹ It is as if Hardy's thrill made him remember Keats's sonnet. Unlike Keats, however, Hardy uses the verb for the heavenly body's going out of sight in its orbiting the sun (or becoming invisible to the naked eye). The second quatrain opens with "It will return long years hence"; Donati's orbital period is about 2000 years (Ray, p. 491). On its return, "its strange swift shine" will find Yellowham, but not the speaker's companion. Comets come back, and hills remain, but human beings pass. What a sad contrast! According to Bailey, the "poem, in comparing the comet's return 'long years since' with the brevity of human life suggests a theme of *Two on a tower*" (1971, p. 168; Pinion, 1968, p. 171).

3. Two on a Tower

It was with another companion that Hardy watched Tebbutt's Comet twenty-three years later.² On the night of 25 June 1881, he and his wife Emma saw this new comet from the conservatory of Llanherne, their rented house in Wimbourne in East Dorset (Hardy, *Life and work*, 1984, p.154). Known as the "Great Comet of 1881" and also as "C / 1881 K1," it was discovered by the Australian amateur astronomer John Tebbutt (1834-1916) on 22 May (Ahmad, 1998, p. xii; Orchiston, 1999, p. 33). According to the *Annual Register for 1881*, "[i]ts splendid appearance in our night sky during June and July will live in the memory of everyone who ever regards the celestial vault" (as cited in Ahmad, 1998, xii). Like other great comets, it was impressive with its "overall majesty": a "naked eye" spectacle, trailing a "long prominent" tail (Orchiston, 1999, 33). It was probably then that the idea of an "astronomical novel" occurred to Hardy. His aim, according to the Preface he wrote for the 1895 edition, was "to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men" (Hardy, 1998, p. 3). Calling the novel "off-hand by the title *Two on a Tower*" (Hardy, *Life and work*, 1984, p.155), he accepted in October an invitation for a serial from Thomas Bailey Aldrich, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and agreed in January 1882 to start publication in the May issue of the magazine (Purdy & Millgate, 1978, Vol. 1, p. 101; Ahmad, 1998, pp. xviii-xix).

There is some disagreement about which comet Hardy had in mind when creating his fictional one. Gossin thinks that Weber and Gittings are mistaken in believing that the comet in the novel is drawn from Tebbutt's (2007, p. 184). She argues that the comet in the novel is identifiable with Donati's of 1858, which Hardy "observed" (pp. 184-185). Her argument, however, is marred by inaccuracy, particularly with regard to textual evidence. As expected, she gets the scientific facts, generally, right; for example, Donati's comet "was visible in Italy in June and was at its brightest in England in September and October and remained visible into the early months of 1859" (Gossin, p. 185; compare, however, Bortle, 1998, para. 26). But in the next sentence, based on the text, she gets it only partially right: "These dates approximate the early summer to late autumn visibility of the comet in *Two on a Tower*." The facts of the text give a different date of the fictional comet's visibility. In chapter 9, the "March rain pelted" the despairing Swithin "mercilessly"; and Viviette, upon learning the news "about ten days after this unhappy occurrence" (Hardy, 1998, p. 69), hastens to visit the dying astronomer and kisses him (p. 71). It is on the "evening of the day after the tender, despairing, farewell kiss" that old Hannah tells Swithin about the new comet (pp. 72-73), as detailed below. Thus, the start date of the comet's visibility is sometime between late March and early April. Of course, this is early spring and not early summer, as Gossin states. In addition, Gossin misreads the text when, on the basis of the below-quoted exchange between Swithin and Hannah, she writes: "Hardy describes the comet as *not* 'Gambart's . . . Charles the Fifth's, or Halley's or Faye's,' but as the largest in fifty years" (Gossin, 2007, p. 184; emphasis added). Besides, Gossin does not explain why Hardy should use, as a model, a comet he had seen in 1858, perhaps no more than once, and not the Great Comet of 1881, which he had seen, probably many times in June and July, and which his readers would remember. It is significant that the comet episode (chapters 10-15) appeared in the number of the *Atlantic Monthly* for July 1882 -- as if Hardy wanted to remind his readers of the Great Comet of the year before. Perhaps one should not be a stickler for accuracy here. Hardy was probably eclectic, drawing on many comets for the features he includes in the text. It is noteworthy that he does not provide a name or a technical description of the comet, keeping to general statements that could apply to many comets. For example, this is the first narratorial description of the new visitor:

Compared with comets, variable stars, which he had hitherto made his study, were from their remoteness uninteresting. They were to the former as the celebrities of Ujiji or Unyamwesi to the celebrities of his own country. Members of the solar system, these dazzling and perplexing rangers, the fascination of all astronomers, rendered themselves still more fascinating by the sinister suspicion attaching to them of being possibly the ultimate destroyers of the human race (Hardy 1998, pp. 73-74).

There are two more general passages on the comet on pages 81 and 99. It is as if Hardy were reminding his readers that *Two on a Tower* is a work of fiction and not a book on astronomy. Indeed, the narrator, in describing the Transit of Venus expedition, in which Swithin participates, refers readers interested in scientific details to the publications of the Astronomical Society: "To speak of their doings on this pilgrimage, of ingress and egress, of tangent and parallax, of external and internal contact, would avail nothing. Is it not all written in the chronicles of the Astronomical Society?" (Hardy, 1998, p. 263).

In the plot of *Two on a tower*, the apparition of a comet is pivotal thematically and structurally. It probably saves the life of the astronomer-protagonist. In chapter 9, Swithin is seriously ill as a result of an attempt to commit suicide in a moment of despair when he finds that his astronomical discovery concerning variable stars has been forestalled. He is believed to be dying, but, as the editorial omniscient narrator comments tongue-in-cheek (in chapter 10), he does not die, "a fact of which, indeed, the habituated reader will have been well aware ever since the rain came down upon the young man in the ninth chapter, and led to his alarming illness" (Hardy, 1998, p. 72). This is how his recovery is effected. One evening, Hannah, the old servant, tells Swithin that "there's a comet, they say" (p. 73). This piece of news makes "the dying astronomer" start up on his elbow and, in the manner of amateurs who show off their learning, ask:

"Well, tell me, tell me!" cried Swithin. "Is it Gambart's--is it Charles the Fifth's, or Halley's, or Faye's, or whose?" "Hush!" said she, thinking St. Cleeve slightly delirious again. "'Tis God A mighty's, of course. I haven't seed en myself, but they say he's getting bigger every night, and that he'll be the biggest one known for fifty years when he's full growed. There--you must not talk any more now, or I'll go away" (Hardy, 1998, p. 72).

Since comets, of all celestial phenomena, have excited Swithin the most, as the narrator tells (Hardy, 1998, p. 73), the dying astronomer has now a reason to live. This "strenuous wish to live" and watch the new comet gives Swithin "a new vitality" and effects "a turn for the better" and a quick recovery. "The comet had in all probability saved his life" (p. 74). This case, says the editorial omniscient narrator, "affords another instance of that reflex rule of the vassal soul over the sovereign body" (p. 72).

It is also the comet that leads to the change in the relationship between Swithin and Viviette. Upon returning from his first visit to the observatory following his recovery, Swithin is told by Mrs. Martin, his grandmother, that Lady Constantine has called in his absence, wishing "to observe the comet through the great telescope" on her own: "She did not require him to attend" (Hardy, 1998, p. 82). Swithin sends Hannah with the key to Welland House the following day. But, doubting if Viviette can handle the telescope alone, he joins her on the tower late in the evening. "His unpracticed mind never once guessed that her stipulations against his coming might have existed along with a perverse hope that he would come" (Hardy, 1998, p. 82). For him, she is not a female, an object of desire, but a patroness, to whom he is loyally devoted because of her "goodness" to him (p. 83). When she banters with him that she has lost her hold on him because she has been impoverished, he, "poor innocent" (as the narrator comments), swears that he has "but two devotions, two thoughts, two hopes, and two blessings in this world," herself and the "pursuit of astronomy" (p. 84). The sexual truth only dawns upon him when he listens to the rustics' comments on the comet and Sir Blount's death. He has promised to let them look at the comet through the telescope, and he sees them approaching the tower when Viviette is "looking at the nucleus of the fiery plume, that now filled so large a space of the sky as to completely dominate it" (p. 85). Alarmed, Viviette insists that they must not come up, because "[t]hey mistakenly suspect my interest to be less in astronomy than in the astronomer, and they must have no showing for such a wild notion" (Hardy, 1998, p. 85). She is not telling the truth. Readers remember her moan of suffering, "I am too fond of him" in chapter 9 (p. 68), and they remember how, upon hearing that he is dying, she "in a paroxysm of sorrow kissed him" (p. 71).

Thinking that the astronomer is not there when they find the door locked, Hezzy Biles, Haymoss Fry, Sammy Blore, and Nat Chapman are ready to wait for "Master Cleeve." They make themselves comfortable, sitting on a bench and lighting their cigarettes. They discuss the latest news of Sir Blount's death.

"And have the dead man left her nothing? Hey?--and have he carried his inheritance into's grave?--and will his skeleton lie warm on account o't?--hee-hee!" said Haymoss.

"'Tis all swallered up," observed Hezzy Biles. "His goings on made her miserable till 'a died, and if I were the woman I'd have my randys now. He ought to have bequeathed to her our young gent, Mr. St. Cleeve, as some sort of amends. I'd up and marry en, if I were she; since her downfall has brought 'em quite near together, and made him as good as she in rank, as he was afore in bone and breeding."

"D'ye think she will?" asked Sammy Blore. "Or is she meaning to enter upon a virgin life for the rest of her days?"

"I don't want to be unreverent to her ladyship; but I really don't think she is meaning any such waste of a comely carcase. I say she's rather meaning to commit flat matrimony wi' somebody or other, and one young gentleman in particular."

"But the young man himself?"

"Planned, cut out, and finished for the delight of 'ooman!"

"Yet he must be willing."

"That would soon come. If they get up this tower ruling plannards together much longer, their plannards will soon rule them together, in my way o' thinking. If she've a disposition towards the knot, she can soon teach him."

"True, true, and lawfully. What before mid ha' been a wrong desire is now a holy wish" (Hardy, 1998, p. 87).

Having listened to this dialogue, Swithin experiences a sudden awakening with an earth-shattering impact. In describing it, the narrator uses the biblical allusion to the conversion of Saul (St. Paul) (Acts 9:18, Authorized Version): "The scales fell from Swithin St. Cleeve's eyes as he heard the words of his neighbours" (Hardy, 1998, pp. 87-88).³ He goes up the spiral "with an electrified heart" (p. 88), converted from an astronomer to a lover. Later, the narrator describes the transformation as a rapid alchemical process: "The alchemy which thus transmuted an abstracted astronomer into an eager lover--and, must it be said, spoilt a promising young physicist to produce a commonplace innamorato--may be almost described as working its change in one short night" (p. 92).

The apparition of the comet in chapter 10 has an adverse effect on Swithin and Viviette. It is true that it probably brings Swithin back to life to resume his astronomical pursuits, but it also leads indirectly to the eruption of his sexual awakening and to the serious interruption of his promising scientific career. The "lover had come into him like an armed man, and cast out the student" (Hardy, 1998, p. 99). Similarly, Viviette's situation becomes worse. The time of the comet's apparition coincides with her reception of the inaccurate news of the death, in Africa, of her violently jealous husband. The news comes in chapter 11 at the moment that she has nobly resolved, upon serious reflection, to "eradicate those impulses towards St. Cleeve which were inconsistent with her position as the wife of an absent man, though not unnatural in her as his victim" (Hardy, 1998, p. 77) and to provide for him "a suitable helpmate" that "would preclude the dangerous awakening in him of sentiments reciprocating her own" (p. 78). The news of Sir Blount's death makes her abandon her noble scheme, with serious consequences to Swithin and herself. Financially also, she becomes, completely impoverished as a result of her husband's death: Sir Blount's "personalty was

swallowed up in paying his debts, and the Welland estate was so heavily charged with annuities to his distant relatives that only a mere pittance was left for her" (p. 81). Indeed, she has become so poor that she has not paid Anthony Green, her servant, his wages for two months (p. 90).

The bad effect of Hardy's fictional comet seems also to have affected some of the criticism of *Two on a Tower*. In her study of the novel, Gossin devotes a section to the comet, entitled "A Comet Injects Energy into the System," saying in a footnote that "Newton, Halley, Whiston and others had all seriously considered that God might send comets into our solar system as a way to fine-tune planetary orbits and maintain the equilibrium of their complex and interrelated motions" (2007, p. 182). In her discussion, she quotes the ending of chapter 10, in which Swithin, still recovering from his serious illness, sees Viviette, Lady Constantine, from his bedroom window, coming towards the house. He feels happy, thinking that "she must be coming to see him on the great comet question" (Hardy, 1998, p. 75). To his surprise, she stops, turns, and goes back. Gossin introduces the long quotation as follows: "Hardy builds carefully toward the recognition by first having Swithin see Viviette in a new light – as a comet – an object that he (unlike Boldwood) knows how to observe" (Gossin, 2007, p. 182). Then she comments on the passage: *The pattern of Lady Constantine's approach, turning and retreat, and change of speed, would no doubt remind an astronomer such as Swithin of the long elliptical orbit of the comet he has been observing. Until this point in the book, Swithin has not really "seen" Viviette as she is, but only as his benefactress. The next time they meet, they observe the comet together for the first time and Swithin, "the scales [fallen] from his eyes" (97) and with a "sudden sense of a new relation with his sweet patroness" (101), confesses that he now has "two devotions, two thoughts, two hopes and two blessings in this world"— astronomy and Lady Constantine (93)" (Gossin, 2007, p. 183).*

Two points are noteworthy here. First, though metaphorical, the interpretation, seeing Viviette as a comet, an object, is not only unwarranted by the text but also far-fetched and dehumanizing. Actually, the "pattern" of Viviette's movements is dictated by her troubled conscience, as the narrator explains in the opening of the next chapter, "A misgiving had taken sudden possession of her. Her true sentiment towards St. Clevee was too recognizable by herself to be tolerated" (Hardy, 1998, p. 76). Secondly, as seen above, Swithin's confession comes before his awakening or his "conversion." The jumbled quotations seem to indicate that Gossin rearranges the chronology of the facts of Hardy's text to suit the purposes of her argument. It looks like tampering with the evidence. Here is a clear example of this unacceptable practice. In chapter 14, the narrator describes what Swithin is doing: *One afternoon he was watching the sun from his tower, half-echoing the Greek astronomer's wish that he might be set close to that luminary for the wonder of beholding it in all its glory, under the slight penalty of being consumed the next instant (Hardy, 1998 p. 93).*

This is how Gossin reads the passage:

Indeed, Hardy suggests a specific parallel between Swithin and the comet by mentioning the comet as approaching the sun at its closest point just as Swithin is glancing from the sun to Lady Constantine with this emotion, half echoing the Greek astronomer's wish that he might be set close to that luminary for the wonder of beholding it in all its glory, under the slight penalty of being consumed the next instant. (103)

Without explicit statement, Hardy makes it clear with the juxtaposition of Swithin's two objects of desire that the youth is nurturing a dangerously consuming passion (Gossin, p. 183).

As any common reader can see, there is no mention, explicit or implicit, of any comet in Hardy's sentence, let alone the detail of "approaching the sun at its closest point." Nor is there one in the outdated 1895 edition, which Gossin uses for an inexplicable reason.

"And what does the comet mean?" – to re-write Haymoss Fry's question in standard English. In *Two on a tower*, one can distinguish between two views with regard to comets: the workfolk's and the narrator's. Hannah, in the scene quoted above, identifies the comet as "God A'mighty's," echoing the view of the Church, "which was pleased to regard comets as signs from God" (Ridpath, n.d., para. 8). This view is also echoed in the workfolk's discussion of the meaning of the new comet in chapter 13:

"And what do this comet mean?" asked Haymoss. "That some great tumult is going to happen? or that we shall die of a famine?" "Famine -- no!" said Nat Chapman. "That only touches such as we, and the Lord only consarns himself with born gentlemen. It isn't to be supposed that a strange fiery lantern like that would be lighted up for folks with ten or a dozen shillings a week and their gristing, and a load o' thorn faggots when we can get 'em. If 'tis a token that he's getting hot about the ways of anybody in this parish, 'tis about my Lady Constantine's, since she is the only one of a figure worth such a hint" (Hardy, 1998, pp. 86-87)

Haymoss, "the scholar" among the workfolk (p. 86), reflects the traditional belief about comets as portending wars and famines. "[C]omets are well known as harbingers of doom" (Baker, 2012, para. 3). According to Ridpath, *A comet looks like a portent, and it is not surprising that people regarded them as such. Writing 2000 years ago, the Roman astrologer Marcus Manilius, summed up the prevailing opinion. "Heaven in pity is sending Earth tokens of impending doom". Included in his list of cometary ills were plighted crops, plague, wars, insurrection, and even family feuds. In short, anything could be blamed on comets, and usually was (Comet lore, n.d., para. 2).*

In contrast to Haymoss, Nat Chapman, like Hannah, abides by the view of the Church, but he thinks, irreverently, that God discriminates on the basis of class, favouring the rich and powerful when sending comets as tokens. Perhaps Hardy, when writing this, had in mind the words of Calpurnia in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "When beggars die, there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (as cited in Emerson, 1910, p. 37).

The educated narrator, on the other hand, finds the comet both "dazzling and perplexing" (Hardy, 1998, p. 74). A member of the solar system (p. 74), travelling around the sun, "trailing its luminous streamer, and proceeding on its way in the face of a wondering world" (p. 81), it retains for him an element of mystery. It is "the fascination of all astronomers" (p. 74), dazzling and amazing beholders by its impressive tail, but at the same time making its watchers worried and baffled. As one astronomer puts it, "The tails of great comets may extend half-way across the sky, exciting alarm and superstitions" (Comet, 1973, p. 70). In addition, comets, according to the narrator, render "themselves still more fascinating by the sinister suspicion attaching to them of being possibly the ultimate destroyers of the human race" (p.74).

Of the perils of comets, Edmund Halley was the first to write (Emerson, 1910, p. 113). He calculated that the Comet of 1680 had approached the orbit of the Earth "within four thousand miles": "If so large a body with so rapid a motion were to strike the earth, a thing by no means impossible, the shock might reduce this beautiful world to its original chaos" (as cited in Emerson, 1910, p. 113). Indeed, scientists think it possible that the disappearance, 65 million years ago, of 70% of all living creatures on our planet, including the great dinosaurs, was because of the disruption to the environment resulting from the impact of a collision with a "a comet about 10 kilometers in size" (Comet facts, fact 5, para. 1). It is reassuring to read that NASA thinks that "the probability" of a comet colliding with the Earth is "quite small." "In fact, as far as we can tell, no large object is likely to strike Earth any time in the next several hundred years (Comet facts, fact 5, para 3). This reassurance would have allayed the doubts and fears of the narrator and his creator.

4. Comets in Hardy's other novels

In Hardy's other novels, there are six references to comets. Used figuratively, all six serve to broaden the scene-setting, adding to it a cosmic dimension. They also indicate that the spectacular comet of 1858, which Hardy gazed at, standing on Yellowham Hill, had a lasting hold on his imagination. Retained in deep memory, it is translated into imagery. In *A pair of blue eyes* (1873), Mrs Smith's dress is described as "a cotton dress of a dark-blue ground, covered broadcast with a multitude of new and full moons, stars, and planets, with an occasional dash of a comet-like aspect to diversify the scene" (Hardy, 1965a, 255). The narrator in *Far from the madding crowd* (1874) uses the apparent characteristics of comets to explain Farmer Boldwood's attitude towards women in chapter 17:

To Boldwood women had been remote phenomena rather than necessary complements— comets of such uncertain aspect, movement, and permanence, that whether their orbits were as geometrical, unchangeable, and as subject to laws as his own, or as absolutely erratic as they superficially appeared, he had not deemed it his duty to consider (Hardy, 1965b, 133).

In chapter 4 of *The hand of Ethelberta* (1876), Christopher Julian, the musician, watches Ethelberta, "again crossing the field of his vision like a returned comet whose characteristics were becoming purely historical" (Hardy, 1960, p. 39). Later in the same novel, after the meeting of the Imperial Association at Corvsgate Castle, individuals wander at will, "the light dresses of the ladies sweeping over the hot grass and brushing up thistledown which had hitherto lain quiescent, so that it rose in a flight from the skirts of each like a comet's tail" (p. 266). In *The mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the rays of the early morning sun make the shadows thrown by the fellow of each wheel of the Waydon Fair vans "elongated in shape to the orbit of a comet" (Hardy, 1964, p. 16). In *The woodlanders* (1887), Grace regards the dying Giles, whose "soul seemed to be passing through the universe of ideas like a comet -- erratic, inapprehensible, untraceable" (Hardy, 1981, p. 291).

5. Comets in Other Poems

The woodlanders was published in 1887. Ten years later, Hardy, after the savage critical reception of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the obscure*, decided to abandon fiction for poetry, his first love (Hardy, *Life and Work*, 1984, p. 309). The following year, 1898, saw the "Phoenix-like re-emergence of the poet from the ashes of the novelist" (Millgate, 1982, 384), with the publication of *Wessex poems and other verses with thirty illustrations by the author* (Purdy, 1954, 96). The illustrations "serve . . . as a pleasant reminder of Hardy's architectural training and his skill as a draughtsman" (Purdy, 105-106). The headpiece of the 12-stanza poem "A Sign-Seeker" is "a drawing of a comet and a few bright stars flaming in a black sky over what seems to be the rooftops and towers of Dorchester" (Bailey, 1971, p. 85). The illustration refers specifically to the fourth stanza:

I learn to prophesy the hid eclipse,
The coming of eccentric orbs;
To mete the dust the sky absorbs,
To weigh the sun and fix the hour each planet dips. (Hardy, *Complete poems*, p. 49)

Comets are "eccentric orbs." The lines show how much astronomical knowledge the speaker (i.e. Hardy) has accumulated by direct observation and book learning.

In the Preface to *Wessex poems* (*Complete poems*, 1976, p. 8), Hardy reveals that it was his practice, in the years of novel-writing, to turn his poems into prose and print them as such. Lines in the first stanza of his poem "Days to Recollect" seem to offer an example of the reverse process:

Winged thistle-seeds which hitherto
Had lain as none were there, or few,
But rose at the brush of your petticoat-seam
(As ghosts might rise of the recent dead),
And sailed on the breeze in a nebulous stream
Like a comet's tail behind you (Hardy, *Complete poems*, 1976, p. 811).

The cometary image here is a more detailed version of that in the passage quoted above from page 266 of *The hand of Ethelberta*. Comets' tails apparently dazzled Hardy, and so did "comet-comings." In "A Maiden's Pledge (Song)," the speaker tells her lover: "Your comet-comings I will wait / With patience time shall not wear through" (Hardy, *Complete poems*, 1976, p. 610). A moving image, it is given more emphasis by the use of alliteration. It is sad that the maiden's waiting time will be quite long indeed, since even a short-period comet has a period of about 150 years (Illingworth, 1979, p. 61).

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Hardy's novels and poems offer ample evidence that he was fascinated by comets. He wrote a poem in response to watching a great comet, devoted a number of the serial of *Two on a tower* to the apparition and effect of another, and made a drawing of a third for *Wessex poems*, his first collection of poetry. Comets also figure figuratively in a number of his other novels and poems, showing that the 1858 experience of Donati's comet had a lasting hold on his imagination and contributed to the shaping of his "idiosyncratic mode of regard"—to use his own phrase (Hardy, *Life and work*, 1984, p. 235).

7. References

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8. Notes

1. Hardy uses the same expression "swim into his ken" (without quotation marks) in chapter 23 of *A pair of blue eyes* (1873), where we read: "Whilst he [Stephen Smith] meditated upon the meaning of this phenomenon, he was surprised to see swim into his ken from the same point of departure another moving speck" (Hardy, 1965, p. 253).
2. Some astronomers misspell the name "Tebbutt." Martin Beech writes it "Tebutt" (1990, p. 185), and Rupert Baker writes it "Tebbut" (2012, para. 4).
3. Ahmad has not identified this biblical allusion in his Explanatory Notes (1998, pp. 292-315)