

*Tess of the Road, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and #MeToo: Dismantling "Rape or Seduction?"*  
and Other False Binaries

*Tess of the Road* was published in February 2018, just a few months into the #MeToo movement. It speaks to this cultural moment with unexpected force, even as its fantasy-medieval setting emphasizes that the debate is an old one indeed. Despite the congruence of the titles and some striking plot similarities, *Tess of the Road* is not a direct adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but Rachel Hartman admits to a "strong unconscious undercurrent" of influence. Both Hartman's and Hardy's novels center on the personal growth and development of a naïve female protagonist, question misogynistic ideals of feminine purity, expose religious hypocrisy, and explore the profound damage done by caddish suitors who manipulate, coax, and push women to let down their boundaries. Literary critics have asked for decades whether Tess Durbeyfield was *raped* or *seduced* by Alec D'Urberville; cultural commentators today ask how men can tell the difference between desired and undesired advances, complaining disingenuously that #MeToo is "killing romance." Offering no simplistic answers, Hartman's novel takes its time, over more than five hundred pages, in order to reveal in exquisite emotional depth something that Hardy's novel also implies: the binary proposed by the question itself, "rape or seduction?", is a false one. In my talk, I will place Hartman's novel in the context of a long-standing cultural debate about sexual assault; I will show how it dismantles the binaries that restrict and punish women, including the virgin-whore dichotomy and the gender binary, and ultimately offers empathy and healing from trauma.