**Literary Puzzles**

**The Wife of Bath & Frankenstein**

**A refreshing and unusual angle on literary texts, from the master of literary puzzles, Professor John Sutherland.**

**The Wife of Bath**

Generally the Wife of Bath, she of the many husbands, is regarded as the most rounded of the pilgrims. She has the longest prologue and is a main player in what critics have called ‘the marriage debate’. As a self-made, extremely prosperous businesswoman – someone who has crashed through any number of medieval glass ceilings – she is of great socio-historical interest. It’s not that easy, even in 2011, for a woman to become a captain of commerce, even in the rag trade. There remain, however, enigmas about this fascinating woman, for all her torrent of self revelation.

**Puzzle 1**

Why did the Wife of Bath (for whom Canterbury is a mere walk in the park) make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, as we are told in the General Prologue? And do we believe that ‘thries hadde she been at Jerusalem’?

Answer

As histories of the Crusades make clear journeys to the Holy Land were arduous, and life-threatening, in the fourteenth century. If we believe her (and it could be a tall tale) it testifies to the success she has made of her Bath clothing business – none of her five husbands has enriched her and pilgrimages to Jerusalem (which would require bodyguards all the way) are only for the rich. But the question remains: she is not a notably devout woman (something that enrages the Clerk). Why did she make these three trips? The answer, plausibly, is that although she has had five husbands – at least one of whom must have been fertile – she has no children. She made the trips so that God, in his goodness, would make her a mother, as well as a wife, of Bath.

**Puzzle 2**

Can the Wife Of Bath read?

Answer

I have asked many leading Chaucerians this question and, invariably, a cloudy look comes over their faces as they search for an answer. It is hard to be sure. Obviously she could not have run her business without some skill in tallying (‘keeping the firm’s books’) and some knowledge of what the written names of cloths, dealers, customers and so on looked like on paper. But could she make head or tail of the big scholarly names she throws around: ‘Tertulan, Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys’ for example (Trotula, by the way, is a little Chaucerian joke – she was a specialist in female disorders, infertility among other things)?

What does one deduce from the following description of her highly literate fifth husband:

Now wol I seye yow sooth, by Seint Thomas, Why that I rente out of his book a leef, For which he smoot me so that I was deef. He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day, For his desport he wolde rede alway; He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste, At which book he lough alwey ful faste.

She watches him reading, she does not read herself, or read with him. My guess is that like many women until the Universal Education Act of 1870 she was semi-literate.

As a secondary little puzzle, why did she tear a page out of his book? Either as kindling, or as toilet paper. It explains his rage, but does not excuse his criminal battery and maiming of her. She is ‘somdeel deaf’ for life. It is not something that would make anyone a book lover.

**Puzzle 3**

What connects the Wife of Bath with Levi 501 jeans?

Answer

We are told in the General Prologue that:

Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt She passed them of Ypres and of Gaunt

From which we gather that she specialised in the kinds of tough textiles used for working clothes. France led the way with what we now call ‘denim’ (i.e. toile de Nimes – named after the French town). Bath was evidently not far behind and ahead, as we are told, of Ypres and Ghent.

**Frankenstein**

Traditionally Frankenstein films (of which there have been almost a hundred) are quite clear about how Victor creates life in his ‘creature’ (a creation, like God’s creation of Adam – not a ‘monster’). A complex electrical apparatus – involving lightning – is employed. The novel is less explicit as to manufacture. It is ‘the secret which I alone possessed.’ He does, however, divulge a few details.

**Puzzle 1**

What is puzzling about the following, much quoted, passage?

I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials.

Answer

The word ‘filthy’ resonates. What is also striking – and never reflected in those hundred films – is that Victor has procured ‘many of my materials’ from the animal slaughter house, or ‘abattoir’. One can see why. He could get those materials while still warm. Exhumed corpses would be cold and in many cases decomposed and it would be difficult to smuggle out, say a leg, from his university anatomy department. But what parts of the ‘creature’ (eyes? limbs? heart?) are animal, and what human. Shelley gives us no clear answer or image.

**Puzzle 2**

Why does Victor Frankenstein construct a body out of different parts? Why doesn’t he just purloin an intact corpse?

Answer

There are two possible explanations. The first is to be found in the epigraph from Milton’s Paradise Lost on the novel’s title page:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee From darkness to promote me?

Mary Shelley’s novel conforms closely to Milton’s epic as source text (she wrote it in a Swiss villa, by Lake Geneva, where the poet had once stayed). In Paradise Lost we are not shown how God makes Adam from his constituent clay. But it is quite clear how He creates that lesser order of creation, Woman. He (God) takes a body part – Adam’s rib – and out of that body part creates the second sex. It is that process which Victor follows.

The other explanation is psychological. There were, in Mary Shelley’s time, many accounts of criminals who had been hanged, ‘died’, and revived (because, clearly, they had been taken down too soon). But these reanimated corpses did not come back as newborn babes, but as their former selves. Shelley did not want ‘reanimation’, or ‘resurrection’, but ‘creation’. It was necessary to dissolve any pre-existing personality. For Shelley’s preoccupation with ‘new born’ see the next puzzle.

**Puzzle 3**

Why, on first seeing what he has made, is Victor consumed with disgust? It was already one in the morning, the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open. It breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?

Answer

One needs to delve into biographical background to answer this puzzle. As commentators (particularly feminist commentators) have noted, the creation scene and Victor’s disgust can be read as an allegory of postnatal shock and depression. In February 1815, aged 17 (a few months before writing her first version of the tale), Mary Wollstonecraft (as the unmarried author then was), gave premature birth to a daughter – Clara – who died a few days later. In January 1816 (shortly before writing) she gave birth to a son. She and the poet Shelley married when she was completing Frankenstein in May 1817. It was possible because Shelley’s pregnant wife drowned herself. Mary was pregnant with a third child. She knew, even at her young age, about natal depression and was familiar with the often yellowish physical appearance of newborn children.

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