

LITERARY HUMDINGERS: THROUGH A CLASS DARKLY

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One of the bittersweet pleasures of teaching classics of the earlier days to university students is collecting examples of their sometimes wayward exposition of just what might be going on—to say nothing of the picturesque spelling in which their exposition is frequently rendered. For years, in a course in which we read selections from the Bible, ancient Greek and Roman literature, and a handful of medieval and Renaissance texts, I accumulated a shoebox of wondrously refracted gems of perception and orthography that arose in the labyrinthine corridors of my students' minds. I never get very far in reviewing the contents of this stash before I am in the off-center paradise of helpless laughter. Spare me a few minutes, and I'll take you with me. [Sic], of course, is always implied.

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For starters, we can review a few simple misspellings: “Noah’s arc”; Adam and Eve’s two boys, “Cane and Able”; “Mosses, the leader of the Jews”; “Java,” God’s personal name (to which another gave the risible spelling of “Yeehah”); and “Maintain,” the French essayist. Then there was Samson, “who killed the lion with his bear hands.” Of course, any of these might charitably be noted as simple slips of the student pen in alien territory.

But examples of spelling errors raised (lowered?) a notch or two involve the treatment of names and titles, which admittedly do pose problems for the modern student. In this dispensation we get “Saphcolis’ *Oedipus*,” “The Devine Comedy by Dant,” “Niebeniumelieg,” “Chanson de Jeste,” and the faintly pharmacological Arthurian romance, “Dristan and Isolde.” One student knew of an underworld piece of philosophy, the “*Phaedo* by Pluto”; another of the

“Pellapponnesian War,” gaily doubling almost all consonants in reach; yet another of “Sir Godwin and the Green Night,” suggesting a tornado in progress. Another scholar deflated Odysseus (so to speak) by declaring that it was “Colapso” who directed the intrepid Greek hero to Hades, while a reader of Chaucer came up with the anatomical oddity of “The Nun’s Priest’s Tail.”

But of all the spelling catastrophes in my experience, none can quite match that of a determined student who was struggling with the last book of the New Testament, The Revelation of Saint John the Devine, which she knew was an “apocalypse.” First, she wrote “Apogolepse,” then crossed it out and wrote “Apocolipts” with a more determined hand, then crossed that out with a heavier stroke and tried “Apothelectus.” Rage now rising (as I suppose), she crossed that one out with a stroke heavy enough to cut the paper and, abandoning the pesky word altogether, triumphantly wrote “Resolutions!” (exclamation point and all). Some days, as Thurber’s City Mouse found out, there are no more busses going anywhere.

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Beyond problems of spelling, there are short circuits in the literary hook-ups. Here, we learn that “the orchestra was the choral accompaniment to the Greek plays,” that “Agamemnon killed Aeschylus for having an affair with his wife,” that Oedipus’s last name was “Rex,” and that “Socrates died in a cup of hemlock” (some cup!). Moreover, “Epithet was Hector’s brother”; when Agamemnon returned from the war, “Clytemnestra antagonized him” (a certain wisdom here, considering Sophocles’s play); and, summing up *Oedipus Rex*, a student ventured that “the worst thing that could happen is to marry your mother etc” (etc.?!). A remarkable gymnastic is involved in the disclosure that “Brunhilde hung Siegfried on the wall where he tried to make love to her,” while the blandness of this report is exquisite: “Oedipus thinks everything is ok, but Jocasta feels something has gone wrong.”

I once got pretty rattled when I asked for the context of Oedipus’s horror-tinged question, “Did not Polybos beget me?” and one student responded by saying that “King Lear says this to his little dog, Polybos.” That’s so far out that I feared not only for the student’s equilibrium, but also for my own. Had I forgotten that King Lear had a dog with a Greek name? . . .

Another time, I asked the students to write down as many of the Ten Commandments as they could remember. Two sublime responses made my day, as Ronald Reagan would have said: “No. 10: Thou shalt not convent thy neighbor’s wife” (thank goodness!), and “No. 3: Thou shalt not take the Lord’s name in vein,” suggesting that the drug culture may be older than hitherto surmised.

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No collection of this kind would be complete without at least one mixed metaphor, and I have a “beaut”: “Socrates believed in going beyond the crust and find out how it ticks”—an early form, one ventures, of “time bake.” But my all-time favorite student response was a bibliographical entry for the Bible. Entered in impeccable scholarly form among the sources listed at the end of a paper—and meticulously alphabetized under the letter “C”—it went like this:

Christ, Jesus. The Holy Bible. Philadelphia: Witherspoon Press, 1962. And you can’t hardly get piety like that no more. . . .

I was not, myself, in the habit of entering the margins of my students’ papers to make droll comments on their foibles. But I cannot forbear reporting a choice temptation that one of my teachers was led into (despite Matt. 6.13). A student had been asked to write an essay on the subject of what he had done during the summer vacation. This young dude had been to the Grand Canyon, where, he wrote, he had “gone down into the Canyon on a burrow.”

Seeing the supererogatory “w,” the professor at first steeled himself; but then, seeing an opportunity that might knock but once in a lifetime, he wrote in the margin a slang saying, the gist of which may be more discreetly conveyed by the saucy entry for “**burro, burrow**” in *The UPI Stylebook*: “A *burro* is an ass. A *burrow* is a hole in the ground. As a journalist you are expected to know the difference.”. . . You know, to be honest I don’t think I could have resisted, either.

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