

Return to Senders

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“He lifts the lifewand and the dumb speak” (*Finnegans Wake* [FW], p. 195) — Is Joyce mocking here the hubris of Shem (“Shem was a sham” — FW, p. 170) or is he (also) declaring something of his own aims?

In *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner explores fairy tales as tales told by the silenced, the servants and nursemaids, the stepdaughter reduced to servitude in her father’s house. In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Stephen sees the “cracked lookingglass of a servant” as a symbol of Irish art: Ireland, once the land of saints and sages, is forced to wear the mantle of its English conqueror.

Remember, maid, thou dust art powder but Cinderella
thou must return ... (FW, p. 440)

Irish writers have long claimed the English language as their own and made it live as a popular tongue. English, too, is an amalgam. After the Norman conquest, the language of politics and learning was Latin or French. English was ignored, left to evolve as a spoken tongue only. The Anglo-Saxon of Old English underwent a simplification of its grammar at the same time as an elaboration of its spelling and vocabulary. When Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, “Middle” English had travelled far from its Germanic roots. And there it essentially stopped, fixed by the poet’s pen. Chaucer’s grammar, with its mix of old and new verb forms, for example, is almost wholly the same as today’s English.

Then the Hundred Years War ended England’s ties to France, and the ruling class started to use the tongue of their subjects, filling it, however, with the vocabulary of their own. Thus English became uniquely dual in nature: a simplified Germanic grammar with a mixed Anglo-Saxon and French vocabulary.

And dual nature (“doublin their mumper all the time” — *FW*, p. 3) is what *Finnegans Wake* is all about, in both theme and method.

In another matter of dual natures, Marina Warner connects Mother Goose with the sibyls, the wise women of ancient Greece. In medieval Europe, the Sibyl was associated with the Queen of Sheba (partly by the similarity in name) as well as with the Sirene and Venus (as in Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*). Aphrodite, the Greek Venus, was sometimes said to ride on a goose. Thus the wisdom of these women was popularly devolved to mere sex (though still a dark mystery, at least as far as civilized man’s relation to it, necessary, sacred, and bestial). Their tales became the cackling of gossip — women’s talk during women’s work.

But raising children was also women’s work, and a certain wisdom or view of life continued to be taught — through nursery rhymes and fairy tales.

What is thus hidden, what deformities of spirit that must be cloaked in nonsense and fantasy?

I loved her frail, white, little hands through which you
could see the light, her bird-like foot which scarcely
touched the ground, her figure which a breath would
have broken, and her pearly shoulders, little developed as
yet, which her scarf, placed awry happily disclosed.
(*Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Théophile Gautier)

Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane’s and
pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned
itself as a sign upon the flesh. ... Her slate blue skirts were
kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. ...
The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the
silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of
sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither ... (*Portrait of the
Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce)

Tight boots? No. She’s lame! O! (*Ulysses*)

I do drench my jolly soul on the pu pure beauty of hers past.

She is my bestpreserved wholewife ... with incompatibly
the smallest shoenummer outside chinatins. They are jolly
dainty, spekin tluly. (*FW*, p. 533)

In Arab tales of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (“solomn one and shebby, cod and coney” — *FW*, p. 577), Solomon creates a river of glass in his palace, so that Bilqis, as she is named, would raise her skirts to walk across and thus reveal the truth of reports that she had a hairy or ass’s foot, which became a goose’s foot as the story was retold in Europe (*pes anserinus* instead of *pes asininus*). She does not, but the belief that she did is defended by asserting that her foot was fixed, cured, purified upon her accepting Solomon’s religion.

Freud explained foot fetishism as about what the foot supports, namely, the road to the secret cave of the Sibyl, her genitalia (“theirs hayair” — *FW*, p. 4). Thus in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce finds pairs of shoes on the beach on page 14 (“swart goody quickenshoon and small illigant brogues” (like those left behind upon startling a leprechaun at work (“she convorted him to the onesure allgood and he became a luderman” (*FW*, p. 21; the Leprechaun is *lucharman* in Ulster), “decent Lettrechaun” (*FW*, p. 419)) or Cinderella’s tiny glass slipper (originally French *pantoufle en vair*, squirrel fur, not *verre*) after the dance). In the Irish telling of Cinderella, “Fair, Brown, and Trembling”, which also includes a whale on the beach, as on page 13 of *Finnegans Wake*, Trembling is dressed (for church) by the henwife (see below). And Joyce draws a diagram/map of ALP’s bottom (“her sheba sheath” — *FW*, p. 198) on page 293 — by circles with “a daintical pair of accomplasses” (*FW*, p. 295). (Thus Shem becomes author of himself as a sham (German *scham* = vulva).)

Little Women, by Louisa May Alcott, is, like *Finnegans Wake*, circular. The pattern is a favorite of the self-conscious artist, who not only draws from her own spiritual and emotional life for the matter of her tales, but also knows that the teller is an intrinsic part of the tale, the creator that is created by her own creation. The tale is about the creation of the teller of the tale of the creation of the teller.

This is likely as true for *Finnegans Wake* as it is for *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Shem is merged into Shaun to become HCE who merges with ALP ... that it may all start again, birth and death, death and birth, the book of Líf.

He lifts the lifewand and the dumb speak. (*FW*, p. 195)

A common event in fairy tales is the fool, often literally a braying ass, revealed to possess wisdom for those who would hear it (“if an ear

aye sieze what no eye ere grieved for” — *FW*, p. 482; as Bottom says in William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen ... nor his heart to report ... what my dream was”; and as Paul wrote in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear hear, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him”). As Marina Warner shows in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, this follows a direct line to ancient tales of wise women outside of mainstream society. Even Solomon is suspicious of Bilqis (“A reine of the shee, a shebeen quean, a queen of pranks” — *FW*, p. 68), a woman as wise as he, and thinks she might be a demon (with a tell-tale deformed or nonhuman body part). He is pleasantly surprised (either way, perhaps) and they get on famously.

... but I, poor ass ... (*FW*, p. 405)

The ass is typically masculine, the goose feminine. When they talk, we are reminded of our animist past (as in tales of hearing the speech of farm animals — and their secrets — on Christmas Eve), when the hills and rivers and trees were alive with spirits, spirits with which we were kin. And so *Finnegans Wake* follows the Liffey river’s circuitous route (“riverrun” — *FW*, p. 3) to the sea and to the hill of Howth. The river is personified as ALP, which is German (whence much of Ireland’s fairy lore, via the Vikings) for *mountain* but also for *elf*, and the latter also came to mean *nightmare*. When Germany became Christian, names with Alp in them switched it to Engel (as Shaun dominates the latter half of *Finnegans Wake*). Alp the incubus then, is a demon only by reference to Christ (as the reverse might also be said). She is in fact a voice still heard if only in sleep, free from the filters of the day’s demands and distractions — thus is *Finnegans Wake* a night book, its language reflecting the mingling of worlds, of the people inside the hill (the *shee*) and the people who have built atop the hill, of giants and elves and talking animals and quotidian history.

One animal in particular appears in *Finnegans Wake* to uncover what is hidden: “a cold fowl behaviourising strangely on that fatal midden ... and what she was scratching at the hour of klokking twelve looked for all this zogzag world like a goodish-sized sheet of letterpaper originating by transhipt from Boston (Mass.)” (*FW*, pp. 110–111; the tale of “Fair, Brown, and Trembling” was published in Boston);

“henservants” (*FW*, p. 432); “henwives” (*FW*, p. 128). We may view the hen as a stand-in for Mother Goose, and thus for the Sirene, the Sibyl, and the Queen of Sheba, because she is an actor for ALP, the hill-elf who may be said to be telling her story (or inspiring it to be told). It is her letter that Shem copies and Shaun delivers (“you will now parably receive, care of one of Mooseyeare Gooness’s registered andouterthus barrels” — *FW*, p. 414; note that in Messr. Guinness (brewer) here, *Mooseyeare* evokes ass as *Gooness* evokes goose), and it is her voice speaking at the end of the book. Coincidentally, the Greek for goose is χήνα, pronounced *hinna*. And *hana* in Arabic means bliss; it is also Old English for cock. Hen in German is *henne*.

... the secretary bird, better known as Pandora Paulabucca, ... indiscriminatingly made belief mid authorsagastions from Schelm the Pelman to write somewards to Senders about her chilikin puck, laughing that Poulebec would be the death of her ... (*FW*, p. 369; Latin *paula bucca* = little mouth, to *poolbeg* = little hole; Irish *Poulaphuca* = Puck’s, the Pouka’s, hole, a (laughing) waterfall of the young Liffey — compare “Pukka Yurup!” (*FW*, p. 10); *poule bec* is hen-beak, echoing *chilikin puck* as chicken peck; *Senders* is Cinders, i.e., Cinderella — see also “repeating himself and telling him now, for the seek of Senders Newslaters and the mossacre of Saint Brices [see below], to forget the past” (*FW*, p. 389–390))

The hen is also a manifestation of Brighid, the mother goddess of old Ireland who was christianized to St. Bridget. She was also known as Bride and Brid, which is a variant of *bird* that was common in Old and Middle English. But the centrality of Brighid in *Finnegans Wake*, particularly the rape of her abbess on “31 Jan. 1132 A.D.” (*FW*, p. 420), is another story, already told elsewhere by the late Clarence Sterling, although it is very much a part of this one. And vice versa. (It should also be noted that Brighid was a brewer — see *Mooseyeare Gooness*, above.)

... with a queeetle cree of joysis crisis she renulited their disunited ... (*FW*, 395)

I sate me and settled with the little crither of my hearth ...
(*FW*, 549; Irish *crith*, pronounced *cree* = tremble, i.e.,
Cinderella)

Or all of these are avatars of the one “bird” closest to Joyce: his partner Nora Barnacle, from Galway in the west (like Grace O’Malley, a source for the Prankquean of pages 21–23), whose name is also that of a goose well known to parts of Ireland (particularly the west) and thought to grow in the sea from driftwood or barnacles.

Well, you know or don’t you kennet or haven’t I told you
every telling has a taling and that’s the he and the she of
it. (*FW*, p. 213)

Ah ess, dapple ass! He will be longing after the Grogram
Grays. (*FW*, p. 609)

She. Shoe. Shone. (*FW*, p. 441)

References

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