

# Literary Wastes of Shame

by Hazel K. Bell

I do try to deserve the blandishments of writers like Dickens and Kipling who address me in such terms as Gentle Reader or Best Beloved. I willingly suspend my disbelief at the request of Coleridge, morality on the suggestion of Lamb, to peruse poetry or Restoration Comedy.

But oh, why can I not suspend my sense of domestic economy in reading *anything*? The most satisfactory state of empathy I have achieved with fictional characters is with the narrator of *Cranford*, as she cherishes together odd lengths of string and Miss Matty, "chary of candles"; and the elderly Misses Sayers in Antonia White's *The Lost Traveller*. These worthy ladies "practised a minute economy"; "Old cotton reels were painted and converted into blind-cord tassles; ... corrugated paper was cut into strips, varnished and made into frames for pictures cut from the Christmas annuals." When they are given a box of chocolates, "The paper shavings were kept for packing flowers, the ribbons trimmed their hats or tied back their lace curtains and the box itself did duty for years." These are rare refuges of literary frugality.

"... lucent syrups, tinct with  
cinnamon;"

Other authors allow their characters to squander abominably, forfeiting all my sympathy and absorption in their tales. Keats is the worst offender. At the besotted Porphyro's request, Angela the old in *The Eve of St. Agnes* agrees to stock Madeline's wardrobe with food and him. Well may she premonish him, "I scarce dare on such a catering trust my dizzy hand" – (a motto we all might do well to mutter in the supermarket). For a stanza Keats dwells with relish on the sumptuous goodies spread out by Peeping Porphyro:

"  
A heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and  
gourd;

With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And the lucent syrups, tinct with  
cinnamon;  
Manna and dates ... spiced dainties ...'

And we happily wait for Madeline to wake up, clap hands and fall on the feast with true dorm-at-midnight gusto. But no, the ungrateful girl dispenses not only with grace before meat, but with meat before disgraceful conduct; licks not one syrup; leaves the lot untouched on its blanched linen and sets off into the storm; - and this after she had retired "supperless to bed", with her only prospect now of a home to offer a good meal off "o'er the Southern Moors".

To be fair, Madeline had known nothing of this mighty preparation, and if consulted might practically have suggested packing the food for a pic-nic instead. How much more at fault is Dickens's Florence Dombey, lying abed all day watching Captain Cuttle lovingly prepare roast fowl, egg-sauce, gravy, potatoes, sausages, only to announce when all is at last ready, no, thank you, she's not hungry today. Now, she tells him. By the time the poor man was sufficiently recovered and resigned to eat on his own, "The fowl and sausages were cold, and the gravy and egg-sauce stagnant". For the rest of the chapter, Florence grieves over her father's cruelty, the Captain over Florence's sorrows, and I over all that wasted dinner.

Then, for heedless regard of the finer domestic skills, look at that silly girl Elaine in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. With Lancelot's shield in her charge, "Fearing rust or soilure", she "fashion'd for it/ A case of silk" and embroiders it. To judge by the intricacy of the design – she

"... braided thereupon  
All the devices blazon'd on the shield  
In their own tinct, and added, of her wit,  
A border fantasy of branch and flower,  
And yellow-throated nestling in the nest'

- she must have spent months working on it; while the shield remained exposed to oxidation. Then, when Lancelot collects his shield, she "stript off the case and gave the naked shield" – so that her handiwork could no longer fulfil its function, let alone receive its due acclaim. (It does, however, come in handy later as a pall.) But what can be said in defence of Fanny Assingham in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, wantonly shattering the bowl, which could usefully have held fruit, simply to accord with some whimsical symbolism?

Gray's flowers may waste their sweetness on the desert air free of my censure. No one is in that case at blatant fault, no fiscal canons infringed. But oh, Madeline, Florence, Elaine, prospective

brides all, you should learn better!

At least those prodigals were all the creatures of male authors. Come, thrifty sisters, let us take up our pens and our purse-strings, and, with canny Mrs. Gaskell as our patroness, found a further, expert genre in the Kitchen Sink school of literature.

Hazel Bell is a professional indexer, journal editor and writer, as well as a qualified teacher who has taught English Language and Literature both in schools and adult education. Currently she edits the journal of the Barbara Pym Society, *Green Leaves*. Details of her publications can be found on her website <http://www.aidanbell.com/html/hkbell.htm>