

THE ANTIDOTE—CLASSIC POETRY FOR MODERN LIFE

A Reading of 'When Icicles Hang by the Wall' by Shakespeare

By CHRISTOPHER NIELD

When Icicles Hang by the Wall

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
"Tu-whit,
Tu-who!" — a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
"Tu-whit,
Tu-who!" — a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

There are certain characters in poetry that once read are never forgotten. There is the bucktoothed Wife of Bath, the eerie Ancient Mariner, the lovelorn Lady of Shallot sighing over her magic mirror. And then there is greasy Joan.

In this song from Shakespeare's comedy, "Love's Labour's Lost," she stands at the hearth, while all around her the world turns to ice. Something about her is unfathomably familiar: we feel we've seen, heard, even met her before.

Every line of the song is filled with the harsh realities of winter, complete with howling winds, frozen milk and runny noses. In the first stanza, the icicles hanging from the roof set the scene, followed by the sight of every Tom, Dick and Harry doing their bit to keep themselves warm—and alive. The shepherd "blows his nail"—breathing on his hands—while his helpmate, rather more usefully, hauls wood into the house.

Brooding over everybody is the "staring owl" whose



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ghastly visage seems as far from "merry" as it's possible to be. It symbolizes the spirit of winter itself, this creature of mournful cries and darkness. The reference to its "merry note" is likely to strike us as sharply ironic, although the less than serious wordplay of "tu-whit tu-who!" is also likely to bring a smile to our face.

How do we understand this combination of suffering and sweetness, with a tinge of the supernatural? I

think there is a sense of the never-say-die cheerfulness that keeps us going when times are at their most testing. When "blood is nipped and ways be foul," what is there left to do but whistle a tune? The poem's rhythm and rhyme certainly help to put an extra spring in our step.

It is in the refrain that we meet greasy Joan herself, protectress of the all-important pot. To "keel the pot" is to

prevent it from boiling over, perhaps by giving it a good stir or adding cold water. She may be taking it off the stove to pour a round of tea, or making sure the family stew doesn't burn. Her brow may be filmy because she hasn't washed for days—or even months!—or simply because she has been slaving over the fire.

The second stanza is full of unpleasant noises, such as the wind blowing round the house while "coughing" drowns the parson's droning "saw" or sermon. The misery of physical sickness seems to contradict the preacher's earnest, book-bound creed.

The hissing of the "roasted crabs" is a wonderful touch, really bringing us into the scene, although it's always slightly disappointing to learn these are, in fact, not crustaceans but crab apples. These sour fruits are life's bittersweet lessons.

Poor Marian—who seems to have strode in from Sherwood Forest—looks somewhat pathetic, her nose "red and raw." I see her as a rather wan figure, pretty but dopey—no doubt attractive to Tom and Dick, but scornfully ignored by the heftier Joan, with her sleeves rolled-up, wooden spoon in hand, and no time for sentiment.

When considering her significance, it is worth noting that Love's Labour's Lost begins with a band of men promising to lock themselves away to pursue philosophy and become the "heirs of eternity"—forswearing anything as distracting as the love of women. "The mind shall banquet though the body pine," declares one. In the romantic intrigues of the play, this lofty scheme is shown to be gloriously doomed to failure. Implicitly, therefore, the image of greasy Joan represents everything they cannot turn their backs on.

With her curious affinity with the "staring owl" hooting across the snows, greasy Joan is both the archetypal homemaker and neighborhood witch. Her pot is the heart of life in the frosty household and a cauldron from which she conjures the enchantments of the kitchen. She casts the practical magic that helps us survive another winter—and look forward to the coming spring.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. Christopher Nield is a poet living in London.

Sony's Stringer Says E-reader to Stay a Book Device

NEW YORK (Reuters)—The way Howard Stringer sees it, Sony's digital e-readers should focus on the printed word and making reading "comfortable," even though the consumer electronics giant could turn it into a multimedia machine.

Stringer, Chief Executive of Japan's Sony Corp, admits there is a lot of "energy" behind Amazon.com's Kindle, which is seen as the leader in a burgeoning market for portable reading devices.

As speculation grows that Apple Inc may introduce a tablet-style computer that could also address the e-reader market, Sony could differentiate itself by adding more powerful chips, displays and media features to the pocket sized readers.

But Stringer says that, given the nascence of the market, it is smarter to wait and see how consumer warm to the current makeup of the devices.

"The consumer will tell us if this format is comfortable and helpful and convenient and all those things before you start plowing on a thousand apps," or making the "Vaio Reader" Stringer said.

Sony, Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble Inc are in a heated fight over who will emerge with the best-selling electronic reading device, each beefing up their devices with exclusive content or high-tech features.

Sony struck a deal with News Corp that will make The Wall Street Journal, MarketWatch, and the New York Post available on its electronic reader, the latest shot fired in an intensifying battle with Amazon.com Inc's popular Kindle device.

Sony said subscriptions would be available shortly from its e-reader website, with monthly prices set at \$14.99 for The Wall Street Journal, \$10.99 for MarketWatch and \$9.99 for the New

York Post. The publications will be jointly marketed by the companies.

At an event to announce the deal, Sony described sales of the e-readers as "phenomenal," but did not disclose any figures. Executives also said they did not know how sales stacked up against the Kindle, one of the top names in the e-reader category.

And while Stringer called the competition a "horse race" he noted that the e-reader will sell to a very wide demographic, leaving no need to make it into a reader that is also a Walkman or a portable video device.

"I think there is plenty of audience to go around," he said. "I think it will be interesting to see if this is the reader of choice, particularly for older audiences who don't need a million other applications. There is a whole generation that may learn to love this. We might as well let them find out."

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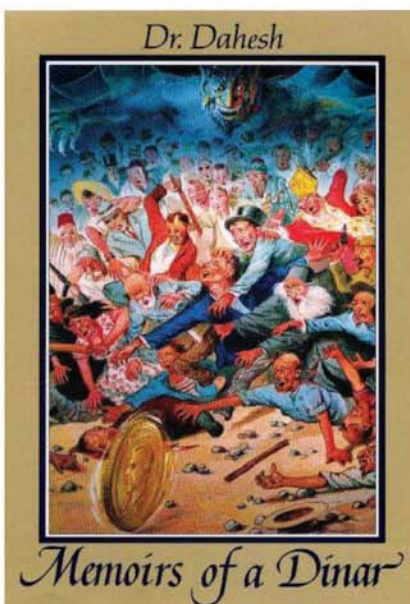
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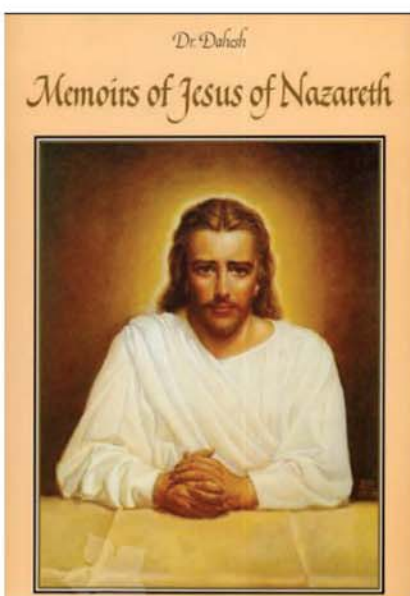
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