
Authorial Error in *Wife to Mr Milton*

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In chapter nineteen of his novel *Wife to Mr Milton* (1943) when Robert Graves has Marie Powell trying to make herself cry preparatory to meeting Milton again, her writes (in her voice), ‘I dwelt in my mind upon all the saddest things that I could recall from histories and plays, as the death of Hector and the blinding of King Lear ...’. Graves obviously meant to write ‘the blinding of Gloster in the play of King Lear’.¹

This error was not picked up in Penguin editions of the novel from 1954 onwards, including the Penguin Classics edition of 2012.² The Carcanet edition of the novel (2003) also did not change or comment on the passage.

It is very unlikely that this passage is a deliberate error put into the mouth of the narrator. Graves’s technique in his historical novels is often to make the narrator, although located in the historical period in question and given the appropriate historical embedness the plot requires, the mouthpiece for views and opinions similar to his own. Throughout *Wife to Mr Milton*, Marie Powell sets out views on Milton’s personality and poetry that are similar to those expressed by Graves in his criticism, or passes on similar opinions of other characters in the novel. Putting an obvious error in her mouth would serve no purpose when nothing else in the narrative induces the reader to mistrust her account. Graves’s novels with male narrators, such as the Claudius novels, do allow the narrator to be unreliable, but there are no other textual clues that we should doubt Marie Powell’s knowledge or motives. Her views and judgement are the basis for Graves’s treatment of Milton in the novel.

If this novel is edited or reprinted in the future the editor should simply emend this passage as suggested with a note for the reasons given.

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NOTES

¹ 'Gloster' is the Quarto spelling, which Marie Powell is more likely to have than the First or Second Folio, in which 'Gloucester' appears.

² The typescript at Southern Illinois University have includes 'blinding of King Lear'. Graves's revision is simply to insert 'King' in front of 'Lear'.