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A Protean Work

ANTHONY BURGESS, *MF*, Knopf.

MF (mill finish? microfarad? *mezzo forte?* Master of Forestry?) is a misleading title. The hero's mother is left out entirely. It's his sister. His sister and an incredible situation: how do you put a character into such a position that he must knowingly marry his sister?

The book begins with our hero Miles Faber functionally naked, making love with a girl in front of the library as a "yummy protest" against it-does-not-matter-what. It does not matter for the novel, either. It is, in fact, merely a *fortissimo* to engage the reader's attention. I mention it myself only to keep you reading the review. ("Yummy" used to describe sensations other than those of taste is one of the many neat metaphors in this book, incidentally.) Next, Faber is off questing for the unpublished poems of Sib

Legeru, which are known to be on the Isle of Castita, but to get the wherewithal to reach Castita, he is obliged to commit adultery, a paradox which prefigures the theme of the book.

Burgess's love of language is becoming proverbial, and this novel is a philologist's delight. Many of the words he uses as English are to be found in neither first, second, nor third edition of the unabridged. Browsing through dictionaries, including Classical Greek dictionaries, is part of the fun of reading this book, and was presumably part of the fun of writing it. It is crammed with significant names and with riddles, the first of which would have pleased the Sphinx, the answer to which is ingenious enough to be Oedipal. But this m.f. survives incest with his eyes still in his head, and open.

The significant names, with explanations, are a bit obtrusive. The hero's is partially explained in the first chapter. The reader has to know what one name means, and it is so recherché that Burgess must outrightly explain it at the dénouement. The diligent Burgess reader would rather have enjoyed searching it out, but we are at least spared the learned "explications de texte" in the *Explicator.* Fortunately, though, the author of *Language Made Plain* was capable of restraint with the best significant name in the book. It remains unexplained, with only slight attention drawn to it. The book is learned enough, however, so that the reader knows that Burgess must know what it means in Classical Greek as well as in American slang. I leave it to delight the discovering reader.

MF also manages to be a book about poetry; it is, in short, a Protean work which all lovers of language will have to read. The only flaw is that a single, offhand sentence in the epilogue changes the complexion of the entire book. Are such clues as may exist a fair preparation for the reader, or did Burgess cheat and decide as an afterthought to bomb the reader with a cheap surprise? The book should be read carefully, no matter what the answer to the question.

THOMAS WINTER