

## John Meade Falkner's Use of *Desperate Remedies* and *A Laodicean* in *The Nebuly Coat*

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John Meade Falkner was a friend of Thomas Hardy's and an admirer of his work. Hardy described Falkner's third novel, *The Nebuly Coat* (1903), as "an interesting romance of the old-fashioned sort". [1] What neither Hardy nor any subsequent critic seems to have noted is that *The Nebuly Coat* appears to have been strongly influenced by Hardy's novels *Desperate Remedies* and *A Laodicean*.

Like *The Nebuly Coat*, Hardy's first published novel *Desperate Remedies* is a tale of mystery and murder. The hero of *The Nebuly Coat* is a young architect, Edward Westray, and he shares a name and a profession with Hardy's hero Edward Springrove. Both men get caught up in murder investigations. Springrove loves Cytherea Graye, but she marries the illegitimate Aeneas Manston, later revealed as a murderer. Westray loves Anastasia Jollife, but she marries Lord Blandamer, who like Manston is both a murderer and illegitimate. Railway timetables are important in the unravelling of both plots.

Like Westray and Springrove, the hero of *A Laodicean*, George Somerset, is a young architect. Like Westray he is based in London, has his name to make, and is engaged in restoration work on an ancient building in the West Country - Stancy Castle in *A Laodicean*, Cullerne Minster in *The Nebuly Coat*. The appointments and activities of Westray and Somerset both arouse some resentment in the locality. Both men fall in love with a young woman, in each case an orphaned only child, in the course of their work - Anastasia in *The Nebuly Coat*, Paula Power in *A Laodicean*. Paula is rich, as she has inherited the wealth of her industrialist father, who has been a very important influence on her life. Anastasia is poor, but she should be rich, as she is the rightful claimant to the Blandamer estates. Her father's attempts to prove his claim, and his determination to educate her as a lady, have been the dominant factors in the shaping of her life. Both Paula and Anastasia are romantic in their attitudes, and both live with an aunt - Mrs Goodman (*A Laodicean*), Miss Jollife (*The Nebuly Coat*).

In both novels, the architect faces a rival suitor for the heroine's hand. Captain de Stancy in *A Laodicean*, who is aged about thirty-nine, and Lord Blandamer in *The Nebuly Coat*, who is



aged about forty, are both dark-haired, older men who are representatives of ancient families, associated with the buildings being restored. Both have spent a lot of time in foreign parts before returning to England. The two men, though to an extent villainous, both have a sense of honour. In both novels, the older suitor wants to marry the heroine for a practical as well as an amatory reason; Captain de Stancy needs Paula's money, and wants to return his ancestral home to his family; Lord Blandamer wishes to put an end to speculation about Anastasia's claim on his estates. Both Blandamer and de Stancy resemble ancestors in family portraits. But whereas Somerset marries Paula, it is Blandamer, not Westray, who marries Anastasia - though, like Westray, Somerset knows the pain of rejection before he is ultimately accepted.

Captain de Stancy is encouraged in his intrigues for Paula's hand by his illegitimate son William Dare. In creating Blandamer, Falkner appears to have combined aspects of Dare and de Stancy. Like Dare, Blandamer is illegitimate; like Dare, Blandamer has a considerable knowledge of architecture. Dare too, though young, has travelled widely. Dare and Blandamer both gain access to the architects' rooms without their knowledge. Both arouse the suspicions of policemen.

Several incidents in Falkner's novel recall events in *A Laodicean*. While working at Stancy Castle, Somerset falls, and is trapped for a period of time in a tower, although nothing serious comes of this. Westray, at the climax of *The Nebuly Coat*, is trapped in the tower of Cullerne Minster, which is about to collapse. The destruction of Cullerne recalls the devastation by fire of Stancy Castle at the end of Hardy's novel. Important incidents in both works occur in picture galleries: the fire begins in the gallery at Stancy Castle, while Westray makes his decision not to betray Blandamer in the picture gallery at Fording, Blandamer's home. In both novels, a mysterious picture or photograph is important to the plot: Dare (whose name may be seen as a contraction of Daguerre) fakes a photograph of Somerset apparently in a state of intoxication as a means of persuading Paula to break off her relationship with him; in *The Nebuly Coat*, the worthless daub painted by Anastasia's grandmother covers a stolen Blandamer family portrait, and the documents proving Anastasia's claim are hidden in the frame. Somerset's apparent intoxication, and the alcohol Dare gives to his father to stimulate his interest in Paula, have their equivalent in the drunkenness to which the organist Sharnall is prone in Falkner's

novel. Both novels contrast ancient buildings and landscapes with new, intrusive manifestations of technology like railways and the telegraph. The interaction of the historic past with the present is a pervasive theme in both works, as might be expected given the common antiquarian interests of Hardy and Falkner.

[1] Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate editors,  
*The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford, 1982),  
III, p. 87.