

**'Jane C. Loudon's The Mummy!: Mary Shelley Meets
George Orwell, and They Go in a Balloon to Egypt'**

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Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!*:

Mary Shelley Meets George Orwell, and They Go in a Balloon to Egypt

Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!* was first published, according to its author, in 1827, though reference here is to the second edition of 1828, which is what is held in the Corvey Collection. From the outset, it is abundantly clear that the book owes a very significant debt to *Frankenstein*. The title-page of each of the three volumes displays the words 'Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up', 1 Samuel xxviii. 15, recalling the *cri de coeur* from *Paradise Lost* quoted on the title-pages of *Frankenstein*, 'Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?'. *The Mummy!* returns to the territory of *Paradise Lost* with Father Morris' reflection on Cheops that 'The eternal gloom which hangs upon his brow, seems to bespeak a fallen angel, for such is the deadly hate that must have animated the rebellious spirits when expelled from heaven',¹ and indeed *Frankenstein* might even have suggested the very idea of a mummy, since Victor observes of his Creature, 'A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch'.² Certainly Edric Montagu, the hero of *The Mummy*, traces a trajectory remarkably similar to Victor *Frankenstein*'s. The novel opens in 2126, when, after several revolutions, England is at peace under the absolute rule of Queen Claudia. It is also Catholic, as a result of which private confessors have become very influential, and it is one of these, Father Morris, confessor of the Montagus' friend and neighbour the Duke of Cornwall, who sets Edric along his path:

An idea, suggested by Father Morris in one of their conferences, as to the possibility of reanimating a dead body, took forcible possession of his mind. His imagination became heated by long dwelling upon the same theme; and a strange, wild, undefinable craving to hold converse with a disembodied spirit haunted him incessantly. For some time he buried this feverish anxiety in his own breast, and tried in vain to subdue it; but it seemed to hang upon his steps, to present itself before him wherever he went, and, in short, to pursue him with the malignancy of a demon. (I, pp. 32-3).

The term ‘demon’, the reanimation of a corpse, the pursuing monster – all point firmly in the direction of Frankenstein, as does the dream which Edric recounts: “Hold! hold!” cried Edric, shuddering. “My blood freezes in my veins, at the thought of a church-yard: - your words recall a horrible dream that I had last night, which, even now, dwells upon my mind, and resists all the efforts I can make to shake it off.” (I, p. 34). He thought, he goes on to explain, that in his dream ‘I saw a horrid charnel house, where the dying mingled terrifically with the dead’ (I, p. 35).

We are even offered an apparent explanation for Victor’s abrupt emotional volte-face at the actual sight of the being to whose creation he has so looked forward:

“Is it not strange,” continued Edric, apparently pursuing the current of his own thoughts, “that the mind should crave so earnestly what the body shudders at; and yet, how can a mass of mere matter, which we see sink into corruption the moment the spirit is withdrawn from it, shudder? How can it even feel? I can

scarcely analyse my own sensations; but it appears to me that two separate and distinct spirits animate the mass of clay which composes the human frame.”

(I, pp. 36-7)

This precisely describes the contrast between Victor’s anticipated delight and actual revulsion. This seems to be something that occupied Loudon’s thoughts, since she expands on it with two further returns to the idea of what might cause one to reject one’s own creature. First there is the general reflection that ‘People are thus often devotedly attached to their protégées, as they seem, in some measure, creations of their own, and lavish favours upon them with a profuse hand: but they often expect such devotion in return, that love withers into slavery, or changes into hatred, and what was once gratitude, soon becomes mortification’ (II, pp. 160-1); then, towards the close of the book, the comment on the story of Father Morris and Marianne that ‘he had, in fact, first led her from the paths of virtue, and, as is usual in such cases, he now hated the creature he had made’ (III, p. 281).

Edric also shares the grandioseness of Victor’s plans:

Driven from his father’s house, he would be free to travel – his doubts might be satisfied – he might, at last, penetrate into the secrets of the grave; and partake, without restraint, of the so ardently desired fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Nothing would then be hidden from him. Nature would be forced to yield up her treasures to his view – her mysteries would be revealed, and he would become great, omniscient, and god-like.

(I, pp. 86-7)

His companion Dr Entwerfen, exiled German scientist, agrees: ‘we shall animate the mummies, and we shall attain immortality’ (I, p. 113) (we come even closer to the geographical terrain of Frankenstein with the De Mallets, who are Swiss).

Edric shares not only Victor’s hopes, but also his fears:

“And what am I,” thought he, “weak, feeble worm that I am! who dare seek to penetrate into the awful secrets of my Creator? Why should I wish to restore animation to a body now resting in the quiet of the tomb? What right have I to renew the struggles, the pains, the cares, and the anxieties of mortal life? How can I tell the fearful effects that may be produced by the gratification of my unearthly longing? May I not revive a creature whose wickedness may involve mankind in misery? And what if my experiment should fail, and if the moment when I expect my rash wishes to be accomplished, the hand of Almighty vengeance should strike me to the earth, and heap molten fire on my brain to punish my presumption!” (I, pp. 202-3)

Nevertheless, although both he and Dr Entwerfen are horrified by the look of concentrated hatred on the face of the mummified Pharaoh Cheops, Edric goes ahead with his plan:

Worked up to desperation, he applied the wires of the battery and put the apparatus in motion, whilst a demoniac laugh of derision appeared to ring in his ears, and the surrounding mummies seemed starting from their places and dancing in unearthly merriment. Thunder now roared in tremendous peals through the Pyramids, shaking their enormous masses to the foundation, and vivid flashes of

light darted round in quick succession. Edric stood aghast amidst this fearful convulsion of nature. A horrid creeping seemed to run through every vein, every nerve feeling as though drawn from its extremity, and wrapped in icy chillness round his heart. Still, he stood immoveable, and gazing intently on the mummy, whose eyes had opened with the shock, and were now fixed on those of Edric, shining with supernatural lustre. In vain Edric attempted to rouse himself; - in vain to turn away from that withering glance. The mummy's eyes still pursued him with their ghastly brightness; they seemed to possess the fabled fascination of those of the rattle-snake, and though he shrank from their gaze, they still glared horribly upon him.

(I, pp. 218-9)

And when, like Victor, he is arrested afterwards and charged with a crime, he tries, like Victor (although without the same justification) to lay the blame on mistaken identity: 'We were in the Pyramid, it is true; but so was also this man, whom you have brought forward as a witness against us. Supposing it was the intervention of some human aid that roused the Mummy from its tomb – a fact, by the way, no means proved, why may not he be the agent instead of us?' (I, p. 237). Finally, like Victor, he has to admit his guilt and folly: "O God! how justly am I punished, by the very fulfilment of my unhallowed hopes! – even now the fearful eyes of that hideous Mummy seem to glare upon me; and even now I feel the gripe of its horrid bony fingers on my arm!" (I, p. 247)

Ironically, however, Edric need not feel quite such remorse, for the mummy he reanimates proves, like the Creature, to be preeminently a child of reason and

enlightenment, delivering carefully thought-through observations in measured Augustan periods:

“It does not appear to me,” said Cheops still more calmly, “that your endeavours to preserve him are at all likely to produce the effect you wish; for, as Lord Edmund already believes you love the prince, and as that belief is the reason of his hatred, your showing a violent anxiety for his welfare does not appear to me exactly the mode most calculated to destroy his suspicions.”

(III, p. 78)

Though the mummy appears threatening and fearful, what he actually offers people is help, and he also appears to possess a near-omniscience which allows him unfailingly to diagnose what kind of help is needed in each individual case. As with the Creature, appearances are against him – escaping from the Pyramid by balloon after his reanimation, he crash-lands it on Queen Claudia and is blamed for her subsequent death. However, at the end of the book we learn (as we might already have suspected) that the queen was in fact poisoned by Father Morris, anxious for the succession of his own supposed daughter Rosabella. It is true that the mummy abets Father Morris in scheming to bring this about, but this is only because he knows that the ultimate end of misery is bound to be wickedness, and he is equally active in saving the life of the other candidate for the throne, the virtuous Elvira, helping Edric’s cousin Clara Montagu to gain the love of the captive Prince Ferdinand of Germany, and bringing about the three happy marriages at the end of the novel. It is only Edric’s brother, the dashing general Lord Edmund Montagu, who really suffers from his dealings with Cheops, and this is because he is foolishly chosen to rely on his own strength and judgement rather than accepting the

mummy's proffered assistance. Finally, at the end of the novel, Cheops also tells Edric quite plainly that pursuing his quest to learn the secrets of the grave will bring him nothing but misery, and when Edric then renounces his desire, Cheops informs him that he can now sink back into lifelessness because he has at last met a rational man. Indeed the calmness of Cheops's general demeanour and the willingness of virtually everyone to enter into conversation with him and take his advice makes *The Mummy!* at times seem like a quasi-comic inversion of *Frankenstein* in which, so far from being ostracised, the revenant immediately becomes immersed in British political affairs. The mummy returns indeed!

Like *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy!* thus ends with the death of its revenant. Strong though the similarities with *Frankenstein* are, however, there are almost equally insistent parallels with Mary Shelley's second novel, *The Last Man*. Both novels represent visions of a quasi-apocalyptic future vouchsafed by magical agency to someone living in the present, and both reflect on the nature of the political and other changes which are likely to have taken place in the period between the present and their imaginary futures. In both novels, long journeys are undertaken by balloon, though there is of course an easily identifiable common source here in the recent spectacular successes of the Montgolfier brothers. In both novels, the hero has a niece named Clara, and in both there is plague in Constantinople; indeed in *The Mummy!* this plays so small a part, with the felucca owner merely remarking, 'I don't think there'll be a vessel going out to Constantinople for this week at least; for they've got the plague there' (II, p. 174), that it looks for all the world as though it is there merely to signpost the intertext with *The Last Man*. Both novels

seem to reflect on the 1817 death of Princess Charlotte, with the succession of childless dead queens in *The Mummy!* and its possibility of a German prince as suitor and Verney's interment of his dead wife in the royal vault at Windsor in *The Last Man*. In *The Last Man*, Adrian is the son of the last king and thus the rightful heir to the crown, but his republican principles forbid him to seek it, despite the pressure placed on him by his ambitious mother; in *The Mummy!*, the prince who is 'the lineal descendant of the late royal family' (I, p. 7) declines the crown, but his daughter volunteers to wear it. In both, then, a man hangs back from the crown while an ambitious woman pushes forward for it. Loudon even makes use of Shelley's favourite phrase, 'self-devotion' (II, p. 211), and chimes exactly with Shelley's ambivalence about Lord Raymond's military achievements when she observes that 'the heart of Roderick, though a mistaken thirst for glory had made him a conqueror, was kind and generous, nay even tender in the extreme' (II, p. 297).

There are also some very significant differences, however. The primary impulse of *The Mummy!*, despite its sensational title, is clearly satirical, and its humour tends towards the affectionate rather than the caustic. There are very few hints at anything resembling the ambiguities and emotional depths of *Frankenstein*. At one point Edric fails to listen to Dr Entwerfen's account of his prized collection of nineteenth-century ballads and thinks the doctor has been telling him 'about a man killing his own father, and putting his eyes out with a fork' (I, p. 125), but there is little else in the text to support the potentially oedipal reference (it is true that Cheops is eventually revealed to have killed his own father for love of his sister Arsinoë, but the information has more of the quality of an afterthought

than of a thematic concern, and incest is one of the few possibilities not touched on in the novel's dizzying realignments of its various couples). Moreover, whereas Frankenstein does seem to play on the always latent mother / mummy pun, situating its reference to mummies immediately after Victor's dream about his own dead mother, *The Mummy!* is more interested in a twice-repeated pun on 'mummery' when the reanimated Cheops rather improbably dresses up as a minstrel (III, p. 210). In fact the novel generally finds its revenant funny rather than terrifying: a mummy is only chosen for reanimation in the first place because Edric is nervous about touching a dead body, and when he objects that 'mummies are so swathed up', Father Morris reassures him,

“Not those of kings and princes. You know all travellers, both ancient and modern, who have seen them, agree, that they are wrapped merely in folds of red and white linen, every finger and even every toe distinct; thus, if you could succeed in resuscitating Cheops, you need not even touch the body; as the clothing in which it is wrapped, would not at all encumber its movements.” (I, p. 39)

The mummy here becomes paradoxically a reassuring rather than a threatening object.

The Mummy! also has more of an interest in technology than either of Shelley's novels: we are actually told in some detail how the reanimation of the mummy is accomplished – by the use of a galvanic battery – and at one point Loudon even anticipates space travel, when Dr Entwerfen remarks that he has brought 'elastic plugs for our ears and noses, and tubes and barrels of common air, for us to breathe when we get beyond the atmosphere of

the earth' (I, p. 179). She takes time to to imagine the abolition of stays and how at the court of Queen Claudia

The ladies were all arrayed in loose trowsers, over which hung drapery in graceful folds; and most of them carried on their heads, streams of lighted gas forced by capillary tubes, into plumes, fleurs-de-lis, or in short any form the wearer pleased; which jets de feu had an uncommonly chaste and elegant effect.

(I, p. 258)

And there are numerous pauses in the plot for the introduction of astonishing contraptions such as the steam-powered automata surgeons and lawyers (who speak briefs fed into tubes in their bodies) and the delivery of letters by cannon-balls shot into large nets erected in each village.

There is also a large cast of comedy servants with names like Evelina, Cecilia and Abelard, and it is one of Loudon's most persistent jokes that all the lower classes are too overeducated to take orders, to serve in the army, or even to be intelligible, since they all talk like grotesque parodies of Jeeves. Sometimes, too, comedy and technology combine, as in the scene where Dr Entwerfen inadvertently galvanises himself (I, p. 111), when he reveals in the balloon that he has also brought 'laughing gas, for the sole purpose of keeping up our spirits' (I, p. 177), or where, offered his freedom if he can cure a general from palsy by the use of galvanism, he misunderstands Spanish electrics and burns the general to a crisp.

Most importantly, Loudon's political and philosophical agenda are very different from Shelley's. The daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and the wife of Percy Shelley could be little other than a radical, and both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are clearly pleas for social change and warnings of what may happen if it is not forthcoming. Loudon has no illusions about the limitations and problems of absolute, hereditary rule – she knows perfectly well that Lords Noodle and Doodle ‘were both counsellors of state as well as their illustrious host, and had attained that high honour in exactly the same way, viz. they had both succeeded their respective fathers’ (I, p. 178), and displays a clear-sightedness and cynicism in her vision of future political developments which at times make this seem more like 1984 than *The Last Man*³ – but nevertheless it is ultimately clear that she endorses it. She paints a picture of a Britain which has undergone such turmoil that it must find peace, and peace is best to be had where one person rules, and where there is no competition over who that person should be, since voters are so fickle and so easily swayed. (Elvira is elected queen on the sole grounds that she is unable to speak at all during her election address, and merely sobs instead.) After all, ‘the liberty of the republican Spaniards did not extend to the tolerance of any opinions except their own’ (II, p. 194), and as the alcaide scathingly observes, ‘all is not liberty which is called so, and...a mob can occasionally be as tyrannical as an emperor’ (II, p. 195).

For Loudon, radical change is never really possible because human nature is unchanging: as the three-thousand-year-old Cheops casually observes, ‘Human nature is still the same even in this remote corner of the globe’ (II, p. 45). Revolution, as its etymology

suggests, will thus inevitably end back where it began, and the symbol of the French Revolution is made starkly symbolic of irrationality when the Egyptian crowd cries that Edric and Dr Entwerfen are “Sorcerers! wizards! demons in disguise!...Down with them! burn them! guillotine them! destroy them!” (I, p. 230). It is, therefore, of no avail whatsoever that ‘our happy island had been long blest with a race of people who thought prisons should be made agreeable residences, and had gone on improving them till they had ended in making them temples of luxury’ (III, p. 90), since bad people will always stay bad.

Nothing can really bring about change. Travel doesn’t, as Dr Entwerfen observes:

[A]ll the English travel. I never knew a young Englishman in my life who was not fond of it. The inhabitants of other countries journey for what they can get, or what they hope to learn; but an Englishman travels because he does not know what to do with himself. He spares neither time, trouble, nor money; he goes every where, sees every thing; after which, he returns – just as wise as when he set out.

(I, p. 113)

Literature certainly doesn’t. Dr Entwerfen is very proud of his collection of old ballads, including the ‘Tragical end of poor Miss Bailey’ and ‘Cherry Ripe’ (I, p. 120), and he has a letter addressed to Sheridan, a tailor’s bill of Byron, and a doodle by Sir Walter Scott (I, pp. 126-7), but unfortunately they have all lost their meanings. Ironically, indeed, this is in fact what they are prized for: Dr Entwerfen explains to Edric, ‘In the works of an ancient author, whose poetry was doubtless once esteemed very fine, since it is now quite

unintelligible, we find the following passage:- ‘And Hodge stood lost in wide-mouth’d speculation’” (I, p. 174). This is actually from the satirist Peter Pindar (1738-1819), ‘Sir Joseph Banks and the Emperor of Morocco’, and is a slight misquotation – the line is in fact ‘Where Hob stood lost in wide-mouth’d speculation!’ – but it might even be part of Loudon’s point that its form has not survived, since its meaning is so irrevocably gone. By implication, of course, the literature which incorporates the radical vision of Mary Shelley will also perish.

One kind of literature is exempt from this general ephemerism, however. Loudon’s conservatism is interestingly illustrated by her dependence on Shakespeare. Shelley of course uses Shakespeare too, but she uses him as she uses Milton: he is to be engaged with, not to be listened to uncritically, as is clearly seen in the contested nature of the Paradise Lost narrative as it is reworked in Frankenstein or of the story of Milton’s daughters as it is alluded to in Valperga, and, though of course Loudon could not have been aware of this, in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830) Shelley would contradict outright Shakespeare’s entire narrative of events in *Richard III*. For Loudon, though, Shakespeare represents unquestionable authority. The names of the characters in *The Mummy!* include an Edric, an Edmund, an Edgar, and a duke of Cornwall, and these function as a reliable pointer to the fact that the novel is indeed structured by rivalry between two sets of brothers, and will culminate, Lear-like, in a scene in which a previously mad father is roused to sanity by the need to defend his daughter from her attackers. Similarly, we might well guess that the history of Rosabella will eventually reveal wife-murder and accusations of adultery from the number of references to *Othello*

that cluster around her, from Marianne's suggestion that in the matter of Edmund and Elvira, 'your jealousy may have given weight to trifles not worthy of serious attention' (I, p. 95) to Cheops' Iago-like advice to Father Morris on how to secure Rosabella's succession: 'Do not attack Elvira openly, or assert broadly that she loves another; but hint it darkly, so that your victim cannot misunderstand, and that the damning certainty may flash upon his mind with greater force than mere words can give' (II, p. 119). And like Iago's, of course, this advice will work in the short term – 'It seemed a confirmation "strong as proofs of holy writ" of all that had been urged against the Queen' (II, p. 168) – but fail in the long term; Shakespeare never fails as a guide to meaning and to likely future developments.

Suggestively, in view of the ultimate revelation of *The Mummy!* – which I shall discuss shortly – the concept of reanimation is particularly strongly associated with Shakespeare. Dr Entwerfen speculates that 'We may be decreed to revive their mummies, and force them to reveal the secrets of their prison-house' (I, p. 40), and the laying of the plan is greeted by a storm of positively Lear-like proportions:

The attention of all present was directed to the sky as he spoke. It was indeed become of pitchy blackness, a general gloom seemed to hang over the face of nature; the birds flew twittering for shelter, a low wind moaned through the trees, and, in short, every thing seemed to portend a storm.

(I, p. 46)

The pathetic fallacy, with its suggestion of supernatural control of the elements, is clearly well and truly at work here, and is the first of many signs that a higher intelligence may

be at work, for though Edric declares, Edmund-like, that ‘Nature is the goddess I adore’ (I, p. 77), he also confides to Father Morris,

“If I recollect rightly, the ancient Egyptians did not imagine the souls of their dead remained in their bodies, but that they would return to them at the expiration of three thousand years.”

“And it is now about three thousand years since Cheops was entombed.”

“It is strange,” continued Edric, musing, “what influence your words have upon my mind: whilst I listen to you, the racking desire I feel to explore these mysteries becomes almost torture; and I muse upon it till I fancy it an impulse from a superior power, and that I am really selected to be the mortal agent of their revelation to man.”

(I, p. 106)

Dr Entwerfen, of course, disagrees with this viewpoint, opining

Do not all philosophers agree that we receive ideas merely through the medium of the senses? And can our senses be operated upon otherwise than through the influence of the nerves? Ergo, the nerves alone convey ideas and sensations to the mind – or rather, the nerves alone are the mind.

(I, p. 240)

Dr Entwerfen believes that no-one can come back from the dead after the irremediable decay of the nerves – but if we remember our Shakespeare, we know better. We will, therefore, be properly prepared for the final revelation of the novel, and the thing which sets it furthest apart from Frankenstein. For the wife of the atheist Percy Shelley, there is no God, and life is a material condition which Victor Frankenstein has successfully –

albeit unwisely – succeeded in controlling. For Jane Loudon, there is a divine power, and it is this, not Edric, which has effected the reanimation of Cheops, and for an ultimately benevolent reason, as the mummy himself explains:

Permitted for a time to revisit earth, I have made use of the powers entrusted to me to assist the good and punish the malevolent. Under pretence of aiding them, I gave them counsels which only plunged them yet deeper in destruction, whilst the evil that my advice appeared to bring upon the good was only like a passing cloud before the sun; it gave lustre to the success that followed.

(III, pp. 309-10)

Edric has some difficulty grasping this, and asks ‘Was it a human power that dragged you from the tomb?’, but the mummy confirms that ‘The power that gave me life could alone restore it’ (III, p. 311), before sinking once again into lifelessness. The final phrase of the novel, ‘no mortal could ever more boast of holding converse with THE MUMMY’, hammers home by its resonant use of ‘mortal’ that all things are indeed to be considered *sub specie aeternatis*. God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world; the good end happily and the bad end unhappily, that is what fiction means – or at least that is what Jane Loudon’s sensational but ultimately pious corrective to the pessimism and atheism of Mary Shelley means.

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Notes

¹ Jane C. Loudon, *The Mummy!: A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Colburn, 1828). 3 vols. II, p. 24.

² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, 1818 text, edited by D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Ontario: Broadview, 1999), p. 86. I quote throughout from the 1818 rather than the 1831 text since it is the one with which Loudon will be familiar; all subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

³ Interestingly, Orwell's original title for 1984 was in fact *The Last Man*.