

A QUESTION OF NORM

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Cartoonist of the 'Cape Times'

"M'LORD, since this is the first prosecution under the Suppression of Undesirable Publications and Liquidation of Improprieties' Act, I think I should make it clear at once that the Crown case hinges entirely on the presentation of the advertisement on page four of the journal concerned, displaying certain—ah—articles of feminine apparel."

"Is the Crown case, then, entirely divorced from the publication, in the same issue, of certain criticisms of Government policy?"

"Absolutely and unreservedly, M'lord. The Crown is aware that a great deal of ill-conceived and inaccurate criticism has been directed at the Act, alleging, *inter alia*, that it is designed for the stifling of, shall we say, unsympathetic expression of opinion. To nail this canard, once and for all, M'lord, we shall confine our argument to the obscenity on page four."

"Counsel for the Prosecution may proceed."

"The unsympathetic criticism your Lordship referred to has not influenced the instigation of this prosecution one whit. Nor has the scurrilous suggestion, on page two, that a change of Government might conceivably be advantageous to the country. Nor, indeed, has the obscenity in a headline on page one."

"Obscenity?"

"The word 'Liberal' was used, M'lord, printed in bold, black type. However, the Crown chooses to disregard this veiled attack on the morals of the community and will concentrate on the more flagrant example of the—er—unmentionables I have already mentioned."

"I take it that the use of the word may, nevertheless, be taken into account in passing sentence, as an aggravating circumstance?"

"As your Lordship pleases. The Crown will call only one witness, M'lord—Mr. A. Verage Norm."

"Call A. Verage Norm!"

"Mr. Norm, you are aware of the grave responsibility which rests upon you in this case?"

"Indeed I am."

"Will you tell the Court what you are?"

"I am an Ordinary, Civilized, Decent, Reasonable and Responsible Citizen. In fact, at the risk of appearing conceited, I may say that I am *peculiarly* suited for my role in this historic trial."

"Let us examine your qualifications one by one, Mr. Norm. I shall list them, and ask you to elaborate to the Court. Now, you say that you are ordinary?"

"Oh, *very* ordinary."

"How did you first become aware of this?"

"Oh, in a most striking fashion. I happened to be wanted by the police for a trifling matter connected with the Immorality Act . . ."

"Surely, Counsel for the Crown, this is hardly the type of qualification. . . ."

"Oh, I assure your Lordship, a most common aberration. And becoming more common every day as your Lordship would realize if the newspapers were still permitted to publish the proceedings."

"Proceed, Mr. Norm."

"The police issued a description of me, which confirmed for me the impression that ordinariness was my destiny."

"What was that description?"

"It read, in part: 'Height: medium; Weight: medium; Colour: medium; Hair: medium; Eyes . . .'"

"I have taken your point, Mr. Norm."

"In that case, M'lord, we will proceed to the witness's second qualification. You are a civilized man, Mr. Norm?"

"Certainly."

"What proof have you of this assertion?"

"I should have thought that would be obvious—white skin, straight hair . . ."

"Ah, yes. At this point, M'lord, the Crown hands in Exhibits A to J, certified birth certificates of all the witness's forebears, in both the maternal and paternal lines, extending back for six generations. Well then, Mr. Norm, you say you are also a decent man?"

"Most assuredly, and I think I can prove it to the satisfaction of the Court. For one thing, there is my hobby."

"And what is that?"

"I have spent the last ten years revising the Song of Solomon. Your Lordship may be aware that there are certain passages

concerning twin roes and heaps of corn. Most distressing, I have, however, reduced the entire song to a single set of mathematical formulae of incontestable decency."

"Most commendable, Mr. Norm. And what else?"

"I am now tackling all those unfortunate passages about begatting."

"Begatting?"

"Yes, M'lord. 'Shem begat Aphos and Aphos begat Hum . . .'

There are pages and pages of them. Most demoralizing if one considers the implications. It is the sort of thing which it is almost impossible to render, even mathematically, without the basic indecency remaining obvious to the inquiring mind. I am considering excising the passages completely, but to a perfectionist like myself that smacks of admitting defeat. I am now working on a scheme for replacing all those accounts of lineage with extracts from the railway timetable."

"Just one more point, Mr. Norm. You read?"

"Voraciously."

"Books?"

"Only one book. I used to enjoy the Post Office Telephone Directory and, in fact, in a regrettable moment of enthusiasm, even lent a copy to a trusted friend. He returned it to me with certain names underlined in ink. I was appalled at the associations which such an innocent-looking book could conjure up. Now I confine myself to a study of an American publication intended for use in experimental cybernetics. It is entitled 'One Million Random Digits'."

"Thank you, Mr. Norm. Let us proceed. You are a reasonable man?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"Well, that certainly sounds reasonable. There remains only your claim to being responsible. Can you substantiate it?"

"Of course. Would the Censors have chosen me for this onerous task unless I were a responsible person?"

"I think we should explain to his Lordship that yours is a Government appointment. Mr. Norm, Your Lordship, has been officially appointed as official O.C.D.R. & R. Citizen to the Moral Selection Committee—by the way, Mr. Norm, please do not refer to your employers as the Censors, it gives an *entirely* wrong impression—and so he is responsible by definition."

"I take it Mr. Norm has a certificate of appointment?"

"Yes, M'lord. Signed by the Minister of Justice himself."

"In that case, why did he not simply produce it instead of going through this elaborate procedure? All the Court requires is a document certifying that A. V. Norm is an Ordinary, Civilized, Decent, Reasonable and Responsible Citizen and, if it is signed by the Minister, it cannot be questioned."

"As your Lordship pleases. We shall follow that procedure in future prosecutions."

"Now please get down to the pith of the case."

"Yes, M'lord. Mr. Norm—you saw the advertisement complained of?"

"I did."

"What did you do?"

"I averted my gaze."

"But, nevertheless, you saw enough of it to realize that it was immoral, undesirable and unfit for publication?"

"Yes. Only a child of two or less could have emerged unscathed from the sight. The advertisement, which was repulsively life-like and drawn with a disgusting regard for details such as hooks, eyes, clips, buckles, straps, clasps, hasps and adjustable fasteners, showed a brassiere. . . ."

"A brassiere! Good heavens, Mr. Norm, why didn't you say this at the beginning of your evidence instead of going through this preposterously long rigmarole? Surely it doesn't need a qualified O.C.D.R. & R. Citizen to prove that a brassiere is indecent! You may stand down, Mr. Norm. I find the defendant guilty as charged. The sentence of this court is that the editor of the journal be fined £1,000, removed from his post as editor, and forbidden to take employment in any branch of journalism for five years after completing a five year prison sentence. The journal's registration is hereby revoked, and it will cease publication immediately."