

A PAIR OF PEARS POSERS

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In the May 1995 issue of *Word Ways*, I drew your attention to one of the problem words of the English language, SERICON, and proposed a tongue-in-cheek solution. Now, wearing a more serious hat, I wish to mention two other literary grey areas and appeal to you for help in clarifying the situation. In addition to the mystery of SERICON, Pears *Advanced Word-Puzzler's Dictionary* (Pelham Books, 1987) also confessed ignorance in two of its other entries; I quote directly from pages 574 and 749, respectively.

ROMAN NUMERALS Apart from I, V, X, L, C, D, M which are still in use today, there were, in mediaeval times, others. The complete alphabet of Roman numerals is as follows: A 50 or 500: B 300: C 100: D 500: E 250: F 40: G 400: H 200: I 1: K 250: L 50: M 1,000: N 90 or 900: O 11: P 400: Q 500: R 80: S 7 or 70: T 160: V 5: X 10: Y 150: Z 2,000. The addition of a stroke above a letter gave it a multiplying factor of 1,000 as C 100,000. This is also true of A taken as 50, S taken as 70 and applied to both values of N. The exception is B. B 3,000. This curious exception raises the intriguing possibility of a mediaeval error being repeated by two of today's respected works of reference [*Chambers Dictionary*, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*], from which this alphabet has been compiled. Was B also 3, or should B really mean 300,000?

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT The following two words have been left to the last to provide you with an apt word-puzzle.

chimera n a fabulous creature of Greek myth variously described as having the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent or of having three heads, those of a lion, a goat and a serpent: any grotesque monster comprising the parts of different creatures: a fearful phantasm (*fig*).

mariche n a Cambodian creature described in all seriousness as having the face of a maiden and the tail of a scorpion. The history of this word is that an Essex vicar, Samuel Purchas, mentioned the existence of mariches together with lions, tigers and ounces (not necessarily snow leopards) in the forests of southeast Asia in his book, *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered from the Creation unto this present*, first published in 1613 [*Oxford English Dictionary*]...Purchas is considered 'neither a faithful editor nor a judicious compiler' [*Dictionary of National Biography*]. Could, therefore, we find ourselves the victims of a literary hoax? After all, **mariche** is the perfect anagram of **chimera**.