Blue-eyed boy seeks blue-eyed girl

With the approach of St Valentine's Day it is perhaps appropriate to comment on recent research findings about the significance of eye colour in the development of romantic attraction between men and women.

According to an intriguing note in *New Scientist* for 20 January, a team in Norway has found that, when shown a series of photographs, men with blue eyes were much more attracted to pictures of women with blue eyes than to images of women with brown eyes. On the other hand, neither brown-eyed men nor brown-eyed women showed any preference for eye colour when they were shown photographs.

It appears that the distinction also holds in real life. Blue-eyed men are more likely to become romantically involved with women who have the same eye colour and choose them as partners, claim the researchers.

Blue eyes are acknowledged to be a recessive trait. Two blue-eyed parents should produce a child with blue eyes, whereas the parents of a child of any other eye colour cannot both be blue-eyed, the researchers say. Unconsciously knowing this, a blue-eyed man will tend to choose a partner of the same eye colour so that he is more likely to know if his partner's baby is the result of a liaison with another man.

A link between Faust and the Ancient Mariner

It is interesting to note that an early translation into English of Goethe's 'Faust', published in 1821 without disclosing its translator's name, is soon to be republished by the Oxford University Press with the translation now accredited to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the celebrated author of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

It is known that in 1820, when a collection of Faust engravings arrived in London from Germany, the publisher Thomas Boosey asked Coleridge to prepare a translation to accompany the engravings. It appears that Coleridge accepted the commission but was unable to put his name to the translation because he feared a lawsuit from another publisher who, several years earlier, had paid him an advance on a translation that he had failed to deliver.

Thomas Boosey is known to have revealed that Coleridge had worked on the translation, and Goethe himself stated in a letter that Coleridge was undertaking a translation of the work. Coleridge never admitted he was the translator and when he died in 1834 the mystery appeared to have died with him.

Coleridge was at the time heavily addicted to opium, which may explain much of the confusion.

However, James McKusick of the University of Montana is convinced that he has found Coleridge's fingerprints all over the translation by analysing the text using a new

computer-based technique called stylometric analysis. And statistical experts engaged by the OUP to examine McKusick's methods have stamped his findings with a high probability rating.

Some minor uncertainties remain to be resolved, but it is almost certain that Samuel Taylor Coleridge is to be credited with a translation of one of the world's most famous works.

Born at the wrong time

There has long been a sneaking belief that the time of year at which your birth takes place has a long-lasting influence on your health and your life span. This may not be merely superstition but may have some basis in fact, according to a comment in the 22 January issue of *New Scientist*.

It is claimed that the time of year at which you are born may have repercussions not only on personality but also on health, particularly the chance of suffering a serious mental illness. People born in the northern hemisphere in February, March and April apparently have a risk of developing schizophrenia between 5 and 10 per cent higher then those born at other times. Moreover, a recent study of suicides in England and Wales has shown that 17 per cent more had birthdays in April, May and June than at other times. Anorexics in the northern hemisphere are 13 per cent more likely to have been born between April and June. Those born in autumn show an 8 per cent increase in panic attacks.

However, too much reliance should not be placed on these figures. Mental illness has also been linked with other factors, such as hours of daylight. Genetic factors may also be involved. Levels of serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline have been linked with personality traits such as novelty seeking and reward dependence and the tendency to be active during certain hours of the night. Season of birth evidently influences the activity of genes that affect the neurotransmitters for mood.

Endeavouring to improve the relationship between science and society

An editorial commentary by Alan Leshner of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in the 12 January issue of *Science* traces some of the relationship between science and society.

Advances, he argues, are coming at an unprecedented pace and hold great promise for the improvement of the human condition. But while the public is happy about this, there is dissatisfaction over scientific fraud and financial conflicts of interest. Perhaps worse, some scientific issues may conflict with core human values and religious beliefs or with political or economic expediency. The tricky matters include embryonic stem cell research, the teaching of evolution in schools, evidence for global climate change and genetically modified foods. These call for a closer engagement of scientists with the public over issues that concern them.

The notion of public engagement goes beyond public education and calls for dialogue with fellow citizens over their concerns and how science affects them. Engaging the public effectively is an acquired skill for which scientific training programmes do not cater. Some scientists even think the attempt might be bad for their careers.

Academics might be rewarded for undertaking outreach programmes, and undergraduates and graduates, like postdoctoral students, should be offered training in public communication. This unfortunately would add to their professional training burden, but may be unavoidable. There is no alternative if science is to serve its societal function in the future.