

## **Medieval Max and *Zuleika Dobson***

by

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### **Medieval Max and *Zuleika Dobson***

There is an uneasy feeling among critics that **Zuleika Dobson** is not really a novel, though no other satisfactory word has been offered in its place, as far as I know. The characters in **Zuleika Dobson** are indeed as stagey and stiff, and the plot as unbelievable as the critics say.<sup>1</sup> Zuleika often talks in a very stilted way, and though Beerbohm makes a self-referential joke of this at one point, it doesn't really change the fact that Zuleika talks like a book, or at least like someone who has read a great many more than the two "reference works" that comprise her whole library, so that she is on a conversational level with the Warden of Judas or the over-talented and over-educated Duke. Novels with much pretence to "realism" attempt to avoid this sort of inconsistency. It is clear that Beerbohm is well aware of the incongruity, but not very concerned, presumably because he is not pretending to write a realistic novel.

Now look at the subtitle: "An Oxford Love Story". There is no love in this story ; no lust even. The whole thing is quite passionless. There is far more passion in a Shakespeare sonnet than in the whole of **Zuleika Dobson**. Indeed the opening words of sonnet 129 (with a tiny variant) might serve as a subheading for the book: "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust inaction". All these healthy young men are willing to die for love, but not as an Elizabethan hero might "die", expending his manhood in a surge of lust, even if he agonizes afterwards in a fire of remorse. The "love" that destroys a whole townful of youngsters could only occur in Oxford where almost the whole town is made up of semi-cloistered young men whose idea of love is not from the heart or loins but only from the head — cerebral, if that is the right word; though "bookish" might be better. They are in love with the Idea of Love, and healthy sexuality is notably absent.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the various essays, especially those by Edmund Wilson and W. Dupee in J. G. Riewald's book, **The Surprise of Excellence** (Hamden Connecticut: Archon Press, 1974). Beerbohm himself later wrote in a note for a re-edition of his book in 1946: "I myself had supposed it was just a fantasy; and as such I think it should be regarded by others." See the Signet Classic edition (New York: New American Library, 1966).

At the moment when the Duke of Dorset almost achieves a tremor of active lust, the object of desire herself dumps a jug of cold water upon him, and effectively douses any fire in those precincts. She wants not to be desired, but enjoys and exploits the fact that she is unutterably desirable; the would-be Lover must remain eternally the youth on the Grecian Urn: "O lover, lover, never canst thou kiss. . ." And yet this is Oxford, alive and young.

But this Oxford is also very old, medieval. Or rather, it is unreal, like the locus of action in medieval romances, which did not represent medieval society very well either. Nobody works here, except perhaps the only plebeian student in sight, poor old Noaks who is there only for the grotesque contrast he provides, a gargoyle between the graceful Gothic arches. The Oxford of **Zuleika Dobson** is not a real town with real people. It is an insecure amalgam of two conflicting medieval ideals: the romantic and the monastic. It is a cross between an upper class monastery and a medieval castle, each with its lovely enclosed garden.

The primordial garden of the romantic tradition is portrayed in the **Romance of the Rose**. Like this garden, Oxford is full of privileged young men of the knightly class who resemble their medieval counterparts: they have little to do but play aristocratic outdoor games. They joust on the river with lances, wide-bladed, but unlike their medieval predecessors they cannot play the indoor games of love duets or dance carolles. There are no women to arouse their passions. For in its mentality as well as in its architecture and landscape Oxford has partially realized another medieval image, this time the image dear to the minds of the celibate scholars who paradoxically gave birth to the place: the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden conducive to peace, study and contemplation, a monastic ideal that has had a long vogue as far from Oxford as the "seminaries" of nineteenth-century New England. The Oxford of the book, an unsuccessful blend of these two irreconcilable medieval ideals, is monastic without asceticism, and romantic without sexuality. Not surprisingly, then, the notion of love held by its inhabitants (or inmates) is comic without hilarity. It is not surprising either that "novel" fits so ill as a description of **Zuleika Dobson**'s genre. It might, therefore, be worth trying to read

the book in terms of another genre of fiction — the medieval Romance.

The stock, not to say stick, characters of the book would not be much out of place in the company of Lancelot, Guinevere, Elaine and their like, except that the medievals liked their sex active. The Duke displays the musical and linguistic skill of a Tristan, as well as that hero's vulnerability to a love potion. He has been brought up in nearly as sheltered an environment as Chretien's Perceval, and hence is an ingenu, but his over-education of the semi-monastic kind, has almost killed what has remained thoroughly healthy in Perceval—a good and unashamed sexual instinct. His mistakes, however, are rarely as gently amusing as the clumsinesses of uneducated Perceval. The Duke's excessive book learning acquired in purely male enclaves has provided him with no way of telling that the woman whom he think he desires is not Gottfried's and Tristan's passionate Isolde of Ireland; she is instead, appropriately enough for Oxford, someone more like Matthew Arnold's Isolde of the White Hands, if rather less retiring. Before he sets out for the river for the last time, the Duke conducts an elaborate "clothing scene" worthy of Sir Gawain, but since he is going to do no thrusting or foining with his spear, he dons, not the armor of the warrior, but the robes of the Garter, a chivalric fellowship that had long since given up such manly pastimes.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the hero of romance setting out from his castle, he is not going out to quest or to battle, but to head a children's crusade more crazy than the original one. And he is going to spoil his lovely clothes.

Somewhat more ironically, Zuleika has affinities to the heroines of that other major branch of medieval romance — the saint's life. She is not unlike the medieval Constance

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<sup>2</sup> The scene in the second fitt of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** will be familiar to most readers. Robert Viscusi draws our attention to the analogous arming of Achilles in the **Iliad** in his book **Max Beerbohm, Or The Dandy Dante: Rereading with Mirrors** (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 163. It was a reading of this provocative, graceful and witty book that provoked the present paper. For many other references to arming scenes see Derek Brewer, "The Arming of the Warrior in European Literature and in Chaucer" in **Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives** ed. E. Vasta and Z. Thundy. (Notre Dame, Indiana: U. of Notre Dame, 1979). The article is an excellent summary and commentary on arming and clothing scenes in literature from early times. Readers may find parallels with the scene in Beerbohm instructive or entertaining.

who survives impossible trials unscathed. Her unlikely celibate past rivals that of any impregnable virgin from the **Golden Legend**, that famous collection of hagiographic romances. If the fiery passions of the men of two continents have not seared her, monastic, celibate Oxford will not harm or even warm her. When Zuleika's Oxford tries to attain the more romantic fulfillment of the *Hortus* image — the love garden — it can do nothing better than give a denatured imitation of Amant going after the "unattainable" Rose. For Amant in the **Romance** is not especially interested in the Idea of Love. His aim is to deflower the rosebush, sow his seed, and beget more rosebuds for the Garden of Love. For him the god of gardens is indeed Priapus. By contrast, not a single amant in Oxford seems to have one lustful thought about Zuleika. To them she might as well be a Madonna of a perverse kind, to be worshipped from afar and without a possibility of becoming an alma mater.

In the **Romance of the Rose**, the rose's unattainableness is due, not so much to the disposition of the lady herself, but largely to social convention which makes her wary of fervent young men anxious to deflower her. In **Zuleika Dobson** the roles are comically reversed. It is the young men that social convention intends to protect — from fervent young women. Zuleika, of course is not fervent, but Oxford does not know that, and capitulates totally in its own daffy way, more absurdly than Aristotle to Phyllis in that sardonically comic medieval parable of the conquest of Learning by Lust.<sup>3</sup>

But, unfortunately there is no real Fall in the Garden of Oxford; there is just pretend. In the Garden of the Rose the Duenna (the Warden of the Rose) fully understands what Amant wants, and helps him against convention and in favor of lusty life; there is a productive Fall, a *felix culpa*. But the Warden of Judas does not know how to betray in the right way, and when he introduces a Belle Inconnue, a female Fair Unknown, into the garden, it is Namante the Loveless — presumably because the Warden no longer

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<sup>3</sup> See George Sarton, "Aristotle and Phyllis", **Isis** xiv (1956), 186-201. For illustrations see Google Images.

understands the difference between "dangerous" and "daungerous". He has been in the monastic part of the garden too long.

What song this siren sang and what name she assumed when she displayed herself among the men are not really matters of conjecture here. Only the name, indeed only part of the name, is exotic. The seducing song -- her "beauty" -- is commonplace; but that has always been enough for castaways, odyssean voyagers and inhabitants of cloisters. That Oxford falls en masse for this tawdry old song and this queerly-named siren merely demonstrates how much it knows about love, women, passion or beauty.

As for Beerbohm's subtitle "Oxford Love Story", the only scenes that approach or involve love occur outside the walls of the Enclosed Garden of college and University — in and near Mrs Batch's house. Mrs Batch's claim "I'm a mother myself" may be a hencluck, but it is a fact: she has conceived and borne two children, one of whom is the only young person in the book to show anything like genuine devotion or affection for anyone else. It is only outside the walls of the monastery-castle that there is any hope of real sexuality and fertility. The girl is willing to be bound to marriage even by an iron wedding band in the hope that it is given by a real man and not by a member of a society all of whom have taken vows of chastity of a sort. But Noaks can only follow his "betters" to pointless death rather than to the little death of the medievals and Elizabethans. He is, after all, a member of their society, if a marginal one, and proves unable to rise above the foolishness he has learned or contracted from them. Life and common sense remain with Mrs Batch and her children.

C. S. Lewis remarked (with mild inaccuracy, I think) that in Spenser's "Bower of Bliss" — a perverse, romantic variant of the Hortus Conclusus —, no kisses are exchanged. Spenser wanted to portray a haven of sex without affection — lust impure and simple. Beerbohm also seems to want to show us a *locus amoenus*, a charming place, but empty of both love and lust. There is one kiss in the whole book; the Duke kisses Mrs Batch's daughter outside her house, as close as he ever comes to an expression of affection to or

from anyone.

The Oxford of this story is an upper-class monastery school with daft or dated views of love and chivalry. It offers no instruction in what Mrs Batch and her daughter know without instruction. They work, they feel genuine emotions, they breed. Oxford University does none of these things. The students get a bad case of "hereos", a lover's malady that afflicts the heroes of medieval romances, and sometimes turns into "manie" (mania) as with Arcite, Tristan, and Lancelot on different occasions, none of whom produces a family.

As for the teachers, the Bump Supper goes on as if the absence of the students didn't matter. No, as if it were an improvement — the final perfection of male monastic peace, without women or children, where men are free to enjoy their port after supper and the delicious aperitif of Pedby's graceless Latin before — a Paradise of married Bachelors, invaded by a maid in her successful attempt to produce a Tartarus of Lovers; a Paradise capable of producing little but pedantic mirth about Latin quantities. Mrs Batch's house, by contrast, is noisily excited by the events, and overflows with neighbors willing and eager, unlike the dons, to talk about them, exorcize them, and get on with the business of life.

My reading mitigates, I think, the problems which arise when we bring to the book the usual expectations that we bring to novels, including those subtitled : "A Love Story". For there is something outdated about the genre of **Zuleika Dobson**, something as deliberately outdated as the institution it is poking fun at. This is not savage indignation, to be sure, but satire nevertheless, though of an affectionate kind.<sup>4</sup> The attachment to

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<sup>4</sup> In spite of the slightly ambiguous note that the author himself appended to the re-issue of the novel in 1946, where he disclaims any intention of writing a "satire on such things as the herd instinct, as female coquetry, as snobbishness, even as legerdemain." See note 1 above.

the anachronism of Oxford that Beerbohm professes elsewhere is here being gently turned inside out or upside down or mirror-imaged.<sup>5</sup> I take it that he is here saying, among other things, that Oxford is as outdated in its mental and social ways as medieval romances, secular or sacred; that it does not know how to shed the ideals embodied in those old ways; and that when it tries to wed the two ideals, the result is the absurd comedy of the book. Those opening words of the novel about the medievalism of Oxford station are not really (or only) a mockery of pseudo-medievalism but of a genuine medievalism that is basic to the mental set of the place even after the arrival of the steam engine and the motor-car.

**End of article**

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<sup>5</sup> See the two quotations from Beerbohm's theater reviews cited in Robert Viscusi's book p. 191-192.