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The Man Who Loved Women: Aspects of the Feminine in Eddison's *Zimiamvia*

Abstract

Discusses the strong female characters in Eddison's novels as personifications of the Jungian anima, and carriers of the themes of the works. Previously appeared in *Mythcon XVI*, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 1985. Ed. Diana Pavlac. Altadena: Mythopoeic Society: 1985. 85–94.

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The Man Who Loved Women

Aspects of the Feminine in Eddison's Zimiamvia

Verlyn Flieger

To present a paper on E.R. Eddison at a conference devoted to the Inklings may seem, if not an irrelevance, at least an unnecessary departure from Oxford and that circle which gathered around, or influenced C.S. Lewis. But by everything that made that gathering special Eddison belonged to it -- by virtue of his education, his tastes, his literary background, and his creative imagination. As a world-maker he is, for lovers of his books, the equal of Tolkien; his Zimiamvia has much of the earthy reality and unearthly beauty of Middle-earth. As a poet of the sensuous and strange he rivals the Lewis who imagined Perelandra's golden skies, floating islands, and bubble-trees. As a philosopher of fantasy he is as demanding as Charles Williams, although his philosophy takes a rather different direction. Add to this the fact that he was a friend (though not a close friend) and correspondent of Lewis, and attended one or two Inklings meetings at Lewis's invitation, where by all reports he liked and was liked by all.

But in spite of that he was, where it really counted, not like the others. James Stephens called him "the most difficult writer of our day," and characterized him as "a pretty lonely writer." [1] Both descriptions are accurate, as far as they go, and suggest why Eddison's work never reached the wide audience tapped by Lewis and Tolkien, and why he is even more an acquired taste than is Charles Williams. Those who read Eddison's books love them passionately. But we are a small group.

There are good and sufficient reasons for Eddison's limited popularity. To start with he is, even more than most fantasists, a man out of his proper time. Bodily, he belonged to the modern world,

but in mind and spirit he belonged in the time of the sagas, or at the swagger and opulence of the Elizabethan court. Add to that his prose style, which is at worst tortuous, at best splendid, but at all times artificial, decorated with the conceits, the turns of phrase, the archaisms of the Renaissance that we are more used to reading in Marlowe or Webster or Tourneur than in a modern fantasist, however in love with the past he may be.

But most of all, there is his subject, the theme of his Zimiamvian trilogy, *Mistress of Mistresses*. *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and the unfinished *Mezentian Gate*. It is a subject attempted by no other modern fantasist that I know of, a subject no one since Sappho has so successfully addressed: romantic, passionate, erotic love. James Stephens has described Eddison as "the only modern man who likes women." [2] This is putting it mildly. Eddison does not "like" women; he worships them, which is not quite the same thing. Eddison thinks women are terrific, and while his attitude toward them-- a combination of chivalry and aesthetic eroticism-- would not win any applause from today's feminists, he does at least give women pride of place in his novels. Nobody writes about women the way Eddison does, and no other fantasy does what his Zimiamvian books do: hymn the praise of women as cause, object, and personification of love.

Eddison's fantastic world and his fantastically beautiful women, and his treatment of both derive from his own private philosophy, a potpourri of neo-Platonism, the higher reaches of Greek mythology, and the aesthetic of George Santayana. From this combination he has evolved what he calls "the ultimate dualism... subsisting in the two supreme Persons, the

divine and perfect and eternal He and She, Zeus and Aphrodite." [3] But while Eddison talks of "He" and "She," the focus of his interest is clearly on the feminine half of the dualism, on "She," on Aphrodite. Too familiar, perhaps, with the "He" to appreciate its strangeness, Eddison is drawn to his unlike, to the feminine. What he wants to explore is female beauty, mystery, sexuality.

A simple list of his women's names is itself a kind of litany of adoration: Mary, Zenianthe, Amalie, Ravianna, Pantisilea, Antiope, Rosalura, Anthea, Campaspe, Fiorinda-- names evoking both the divine and the physical; delectable, mouth-filling names. They are in addition, a catalogue of as many variations on the theme of femininity as you are likely to find in any fantasy-- blondes, brunettes, red-heads; the knowing and the innocent, the maternal and the childlike, the refined and the beastly, the voluptuous and the virginal. If you are thinking that this sounds like typical male fantasy, you are right, but only partly right. For Eddison's women are as far removed from the merely lubricious as Homer is from Playboy.

I propose to ask, and hope to answer two questions; the first as to where Eddison found such women, and the second as to how he applied them to the uses of fantasy. To begin with the first question: certainly Eddison's women owe something to the women of literature. They partake-- each in her own way-- of Helen and Beatrice and Rosalind and Millamant and Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi. And yes, they owe something to the centerfold. But ultimately they are neither borrowings nor locker-room fantasies. They are not stereotypes, but archetypes, and they have the origin that all archetypes have-- the human (in this case the male) unconscious.

Carl Jung called the feminine archetype the anima, by which he meant the woman hidden within all men, the unrecognized, unacknowledged feminine tendencies in masculine nature. Pervasive in myth and literature, as well as in real life, the anima is the projection outward of these internal but un-assimilated tendencies into Helen of Troy or Scarlett O'Hara or the girl next door. In books so filled with, so focused on women as Eddison's, it requires no great effort to understand his beauties as anima-figures, outward embodiments of inner feminine qualities, some good, some not so good. Let us take a look at some of them.

Undoubtedly, the strangest of his creations are Campaspe and Anthea, two rather mysterious ladies-in-waiting. Campaspe is described thus: "Her eyes were beady, like some shy creature of the fields or woods. Her features, considered coldly one by one, had recalled strange deformities as of frogs or spiders; yet were they by those eyes welded to a kind of beauty. So might a queen of Elfland look, of an unfair, unhuman, yet most taking comeliness." [4] And here is Anthea: "slender as some cattish creature of the mountains," her fingernails "tapered to claws: her hair seemed as lighted from within with a sunlike glory: white-skinned she was, of a classic cold perfection of form and feature, yet with eyes the pupils of which were upright slits opening to some inside hotness of fire, and with scarlet lips which disclosed, when she smiled, teeth of a mountain lynx." [5] The animal-imagery here is not metaphor, but clue to the real nature of these unusual ladies; Campaspe is a water-rat and Anthea a lynx, in which shape at one point she kills and eats a man.

Cat and mouse, feminine images with a kind of perverse attractiveness, a dainty bestiality not ordinarily associated with the masculine. But these are secondary characters, minor variations on the theme. They are female; they are highly feminine, often dangerously so. But they are not really women, nor are we meant to take them as such.

Eddison's other feminine figures, by so much more as they are true women, are the more powerful, oftentimes moving characters. Of these, the two most accessible are Antiope and Mary-- Antiope one of the two heroines of Mistress of Mistresses and Mary one of the two heroines of A Fish Dinner in Memison. The other heroine in both books is Fiorinda, of whom more anon.

Antiope is young, "a girl gay and high hearted," with hair the colour of "netted sunlight." [6] All the images of her, all the things associated with her are light, virginal, springlike, pale but shining-- pearls, daisies, the moon an hour after sunset, when it has still a cast of pale gold. She is bright but fragile, a newly-opened flower unaware of her self or her own powers. She has the appeal of all young things, with the added attraction of an awakening sexuality still unsure of itself, eager to surrender entirely to the right man. And when she does, it is with these utterly unconscious, utterly seductive words: "I cannot give you myself: I think I have no self. I can give you All." [7] And she does.

But Antiope is only a beginning. By far the most appealing of Eddison's women is Mary Lessingham, the only one of them who inhabits Earth and not Zimiamvia. Eddison lavishes some of his most sensuous description on Mary, giving her "masses of flame-coloured hair; arms whose curves had the motions of swans in them, and the swan's whiteness; breasts of a Greek mould and firmness, dove-like, silver-pure, pointing their rose-flowers in a Greek pride," "the Grecian profile... eyebrows sweeping upward from the nose, then leveling; nose finely modelled, straight, pointed... lips like the lips of a Goddess, tranquil and cool, yet of a most quicksilver mobility," and, most attractive of all, near the corner of her mouth a sort of half-smile, a "diabolus" that "sometimes slept, sometimes stirred." [8] Mary is just plain wonderful; women love her and men adore her; she gently but firmly rejects suitors by the score, and when she finally accepts Edward Lessingham she becomes the perfect wife/mother/mistress combination that we are told men always want and never get. It is entirely to Eddison's credit that he makes Mary a genuine character-- never a type but always an individual, believable and really loveable. Her death near the end of the Fish Dinner is catastrophe, as great a blow to the reader as it is to Lessingham.

But the queen of them all, the unquestioned belle of this fantastic ball is Fiorinda, possibly the most enticing, capricious, alluring, unreasonable; desirable, seductive woman in modern literature, certainly in modern fantasy. Fiorinda is Aphrodite. She is "She" with a capital S. All other women in the books are simply aspects of her ("dresses of Hers" is Eddison's phrase) whether they know it or not. Antiope doesn't know it. Mary suspects it. Fiorinda knows it; indeed she takes it for granted. Fiorinda is quite a girl; she is the Dark Lady of the sonnets, the femme fatale of men's most extravagant fantasies, la belle dames sans merci. Fiorinda is beautiful beyond description. She is white-skinned, raven-haired, green-eyed, cold as ice, smouldering with passion. She

is also a first-class bitch. Unlike the Cinderella type who is as good as she is beautiful, Fiorinda is as beautiful as she is self-centered, which is totally. And why not? If you really are Aphrodite, She, All, what else is there to center on? She accepts worship as her birthright and men and worlds as her amusement.

Not surprisingly, Fiorinda is the hardest of all Eddison's women for many of his male readers and critics to accept. They can yearn over Antiope. They can love Mary. They can even find a kind of kinky fascination in Anthea and Campaspe. But they can't take Fiorinda. This attitude is not without justification; she insists on her own terms, which are autocratic and unreasonable. She scorns and mistreats two husbands, and finally has both of them killed. There is a perceptibly Borgian cast to her nature. Most of Eddison's own men friends hate her cordially. They couldn't understand what he saw in her, couldn't figure out why he worshipped her so blindly in spite of her obvious imperfections. They put up with her for his sake, but they never really liked her.

Eddison's greatest friend, George Rostrever Hamilton, who read and ably criticized the books in manuscript tried to like her, but couldn't make it. Gerald Haynes, another friend, who, like Hamilton, read the works in progress, could not conceal his irritation, and finally exploded "No: we really can't have her playing these impossible, selfish and sensuous goddess tricks on our long-suffering world... may all the male gods save us!" [8a] C.S. Lewis could not abide her or her ladies-in-waiting, and said "...if one of the real great heroines of romance walked into Memison wd. not Fiorinda and her crew look suddenly just vulgar-- furtive--naive.... One would notice that they hadn't washed behind their ears. One would see the snarling inferiority in their smiles." [9] It was Lewis, with his inimitable gift for a phrase, who summed up "Fiorinda and her crew" as "metaphysical mistresses, beatifically bona robas, hyper-uranian whoores, & transcendental trulls," a pronouncement which Eddison loved and quoted to a friend as a "piece of alliterative invective... worth gold." [10]

In spite of his friends, Eddison remained faithful to Fiorinda, and for the best of all reasons: he really loved her, and loved her not in spite of her faults, but paradoxically because of them. In a letter to Gerald Haynes he wrote "What I feel abt. Fiorinda... is not that her virtues outshine her vices, but that what in other women would be odious & damnable becomes adorable simple because it belongs to her," and in the same letter had the honesty to admit "Were I myself not in a manner in love with her, I cd. never have bothered to-- or been able to-- write the books." [11]

Such strong reactions, either of love or hostility, are characteristic responses to the anima-figure, and suggest that Fiorinda is the anima-figure to beat them all. As she is "She"-- All of the feminine-- she must of necessity embody all of those elements contained in men, who then will love or hate her according as they acknowledge or suppress whatever part of themselves she reflects.

So far we are talking about sources and audience reaction. Of greater importance to the books, indeed central to the judgement of any work of art, is how the women work within the fiction. What are they for? What do they do, and how do they do it? What they do is carry the theme, and they do so by being the

principal elements in a complex pattern designed by Eddison to explore the function and importance of the feminine to his men and to their world. He may or may not have known to what extent they were projections of his own anima (I strongly suspect he did) but he certainly meant them to work as such within his fiction-- as necessary anima aspects of the men who love them.

The pattern is complicated and involuted. It consists of pairs of lovers in parallel worlds-- Earth and Zimiamvia-- all of whom, both male and female, are aspects of one another. Three women-- Mary, Antiope, and Fiorinda-- are loved by three men-- the Lessingham of Earth, his Zimiamvian incarnation (also called Lessingham) and Barganax, the Duke of Memison. Antiope and Mary are avatars of Fiorinda, and all three are aspects of the feminine principle. Each is in a different state of self-awareness, ranging from the almost total naivete of Antiope to the complete self-knowledge of Fiorinda. To help his reader, Eddison has used a kind of color-coding to make the pattern clear. Women's hair-color traces an increase in self-awareness from blonde, innocent Antiope through red-haired, intuitive Mary to brunette, all-knowing Fiorinda. Hair color also matches men to their complementary women: black-haired Lessingham loves blonde Antiope in Mistress of Mistresses and red-haired Mary in the Fish Dinner. Red-haired Duke Barganax loves black-haired Fiorinda. The symmetry is clearest in the Fish Dinner, where the reds-- Mary and Barganax -- play against the blacks-- Lessingham and Fiorinda.

For all its complexities, the pattern follows a simple principle: one love story is acted out in two worlds by three pairs of lovers, all of whom are aspects of Zeus and Aphrodite, and all of whom are aspects, counterparts, positives and negatives of one another. They all weave in and out of one another's lives and one another's world, reflect one another, even, at times, become one another. In outline this sounds dry and diagrammatic, as well as impossibly complicated (and I have simplified a great deal and omitted one whole pair of lovers). It needs Eddison's prose and Eddison's magic of time and space to make it live, to capture its mystery, to tease the reader with that elusive but insistent sense of deja vu which is the books' delight. All the lovers know yet do not know one another, and the men in particular have from time to time an uncanny sense of recognition of themselves in the women, of themselves in each other, of the women in one another's male selves.

Here, for example, is Lessingham looking at Antiope and seeing his unlike in her "look of friendship, mere, unalloyed, unconscious, fancy-free, as of his own inward self companioning him from withoutward," [12] which, I need hardly add, it is a function of the anima to do. A more complicated moment occurs when Lessingham and Duke Barganax confront one another as opponents:

As they so stood, handfasted... it was as if a third stood with them, not perceivable in distinction of bodily presence, yet with a strange certitude made known to each in the other.... But to the Duke the black beard and masculine presence of Lessingham were become as a cloak only, cloaking but not hiding... that which [was] to the Duke familiar but ever new, unseizable as some flower dreamt of by God.... So too to Lessingham was the Duke become... [13]

and again:

Barganax and Lessingham...now faced one another as if, for all their company about them they stood alone, and a third presiding: a third perceived by them alone; and scarcely, indeed, to be named a third, as being present strangely to the Duke in the person of Lessingham, and to Lessingham in the Duke. [14]

The mysterious third presence for each man is his mistress— for Barganax Fiorinda and for Lessingham Antiope. Each perceives in his male opponent a feminine "other." This is Eddison's acknowledgement and realization of the presence and power of the feminine within the masculine. It is important to recognize that Eddison is not saying male and female are interchangeable, but trying to show that sameness in difference which makes them separate and the same time draws them together.

This round dance of self with other, and particularly the need of the masculine to recognize its feminine self, is both the medium and the message of Eddison's work. Psychologically it is reflected in the interweavings and interactions of the characters. Artistically it is reflected in the interpenetration of the two worlds of Earth and Zimiamvia. Technically it is reflected in the silken ease with which (especially in the Fish Dinner) Eddison's prose moves the reader from one world to another and back again with scarcely a perceptible transition, as if to say "You can only know it through the differences, but through them you must recognize that it is one and the same.

What this all comes down to is the well-known fact that fantasy is a most effective vehicle for communicating ideas, be they psychological, philosophical, or what you will. For the fantastic mode has by its nature a vitality and a vividness not accessible to expository prose. It is perfectly possible to read and be instructed by Jung's essays on the anima. You will learn a lot. But you won't see it or feel it or be in it as you will by going to Zimiamvia with Eddison. Or you can read Plato on the unhappy division of male and female from a primal unity, and learn how each half continually and instinctively seeks to rejoin its other. You will probably be able to imagine a sort of movable geometry— two halves of a circle rolling awkwardly about and bumping into each other in all the wrong places. But you won't learn anything about love. Or hate. Better to experience Mary or Antiope through Lessingham's eyes, or see Fiorinda as Barganax sees her. Or even as C.S. Lewis saw her. You will see yourself in the process. That's what fantasy is good for.

Notes

- [1] James Stephens, "Introduction," A Fish Dinner in Memison (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941), p. xi.
- [2] Fish Dinner, p. xiv.
- [3] E.R. Eddison, "Letter of Introduction," Fish Dinner, p. xxvi.
- [4] E.R. Eddison, Mistress of Mistresses (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 103.
- [5] Fish Dinner, p. 176, p. 141.
- [6] Mistress, p. 223, p. 227.
- [7] Mistress, p. 274.
- [8] Fish Dinner, p. 43, pp. 135-6.
- [8a] Bodleian Library Collection (hereafter B.L.C.),



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Glen GoodKnight

Tales Newly Told, continued from page 6

nature of memory, of personality (Latro's personality is well-defined and attractive, although he has no focused sense of identity), and even on that of the gods. The book is dedicated "with the greatest respect and affection, to Herodotus of Halicarnassos", and Latro's matter-of-fact observations do convey much of the charm of Herodotus' own style. As one has come to expect from Gene Wolfe, this first volume raises many questions and answers few of them, and leads smoothly to a cliffhanger, which makes one anxiously await the publication of the remaining "scrolls".

E.g. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 64.

- [9] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 44.
- [10] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 233, Folio 79.
- [11] B.L.C., Eng. lett. c. 230/1, Folio 49.
- [12] Mistress, p. 239.
- [13] Mistress, p. 176.
- [14] Mistress, p. 358.

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