
Summer 7-15-1989

The Ouroboros Principle: Time and Love in *Zimiamvia*

Verlyn Fleiger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fleiger, Verlyn (1989) "The Ouroboros Principle: Time and Love in *Zimiamvia*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15: No. 4, Article 7. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



The Ouroboros Principle: Time and Love in *Zimiamvia*

Abstract

Analyzes the theme of return in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, noting its “haunting pattern of / and simultaneity.” Concentrates on the interrelationships of the male/female pairs on Earth and Zimiamvia.

Additional Keywords

Eddison, E.R. *A Fish Dinner in Memison*; Love in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*; Time in *A Fish Dinner in Memison*

The Ouroboros Principle

Time and Love in Zimiamvia

Verlyn Flieger

E.R. Eddison's best-known novel, *The Worm Ouroboros*, swings into action when the birthday celebration of Lord Juss of Demonland is interrupted by a trumpet blast and the announcement: "Lord, it is an Ambassador from Witchland and his train.... He craveth present audience" (WO 21). So begins a story of war and magic, high chivalry and low cunning. Some five hundred pages later, the Demons, having vanquished the Witches, belatedly realize that victory brings peace and peace brings boredom. No more war, no more challenge, no more fun. Their story is at an end. And that point a trumpet sounds and a servant announces: "Lord, it is an Ambassador from Witchland and his train. He craveth present audience." On this hinge, the whole book swings round to its beginnings so the action may re-commence. This is Ouroboros, the serpent that swallows its tail, the eternal return whose end is its beginning, whose beginning is its end.

The Ouroboros Principle is at its clearest in *The Worm*, but it is also at work in Eddison's Zimiamvian trilogy, which relies as heavily, although less obtrusively, on recurrence and return. This is especially true in the second volume, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, whose haunting pattern of *deja vu* and simultaneity is predicated on the interconnected circularity of worlds and times. And where return is the punch line of *The Worm*, it is the theme of *The Fish Dinner*, a theme hidden, for the most part, in seemingly peripheral, insignificant events.

A galloping horse, a portrait in oils, the click of castanets; these are clues to the simultaneous occurrence of separate but intrinsically identical events linking the two world—Earth and Zimiamvia—of *A Fish Dinner*. Seemingly unimportant events in one world become significant as they echo or mirror events in the other, though at times the mirror appears to be held at a slant. Carl Jung calls this synchronicity, wherein causally unrelated but coincidental events give meaning to one another. It is a function of time in which two schemes intersect and interact, even when, as in *A Fish Dinner*, the schemes themselves are of different worlds.

What ever the scheme, time in both worlds is governed by love. First, because it is lovers' time, seeming to run swift or slow according as lovers are together or apart. Second, because, as we will see, it is time literally created for Love in its feminine personification, time controlled by Her, from Her perspective, experienced by Her men. It is time both austere and erotic, strict and yielding, reminiscent of the contradiction inherent in those naive china figurines which used to grace drawing-room mantel-

pieces: demure but entirely naked young ladies with clocks in their stomachs, reminding observers that it is love that makes the world go round.

This saying, trite as it sounds, is the idea behind the *Fish Dinner*, but under Eddison's hands the triteness falls away to reveal a concept ambiguous in its presentation and disturbing in its ramifications.

A Fish Dinner begins with one love affair, parallels that with a second, and frames both with a third. All of them connect, and all of them (as we come to know by the end of the book) are the same love. The first lovers are Edward and Mary Lessingham, whose time of love is all on Earth, (or so it seems,) but who are counterpoint to their Zimiamvian selves: Barganax and Fiorinda and King Mezentius and Duchess Amalie. All six lovers are aspects of one another, parts of what Eddison describes in his unpublished notes as "duality in unity (Zeus & Aphrodite: Masc. & Feminine: Love & the Object of Love: Power & Beauty)."

This interweaving of personae, this unity in multiplicity set in Eddison's larger than life world, conveyed in his immense prose, confers sublimity on the trite saying, taking time and love away from the naked china lady and giving them back to the Gods. Where other authors take love as their theme, Eddison weaves it into his thesis. His contention is simple in concept, complex and various in execution: the essence of Creation is contained in the mutual but dissimilar needs of Lover and Beloved: it is a magic circle in which Love cannot exist without an Object, which Object cannot exist without that Love. It is a kind of Worm Ouroboros. In that energy all is engendered; from that dynamic all proceeds.

Not until the end of the book are we permitted to see and appreciate Eddison's design in all its fullness and complexity. Not till this is it made clear that surrounding and containing all secondary partnerships is the formal and formative relationship of Mezentius and Fiorinda, who never touch, but who are the ultimate Lover and Beloved in whom and for whom all Creation exists. Eddison's particular genius is to project this interplay of God and Goddess onto their lesser selves, separated aspects through whom the supreme Self and Co-Self can know and delight in one another.

But to reduce this to a thesis is to do violence to Eddison's imagination. he has written a novel, not a dissertation. Thesis is implied, never stated, and so clothed in

the sensuous interaction of lovers that argument dissolves into poetry. It is first hinted in the opening chapter, "Aphrodite in Verona" wherein two apparent strangers—Edward Lessingham and an unnamed Dark Lady—have a curious conversation. The setting and the situation promise romance: A Spring evening, an outdoor cafe in Italy, a handsome, unattached man, a beautiful, unattached woman. But the promise is not fulfilled. Instead of following the rules for flirtation, the conversation slides sideways into philosophy.

The Lady addresses a remark to on one in particular: "Can't amuse." It amuses me. Questioned by Lessingham as to what is so amusing, she describes with a wave of her hand "this clockwork world... operated by Time," which, she continues, "if you consider it, works with so ingenious a simplicity, so perfect a machine" (FD 3). The trouble with clockwork, Lessingham points out, is that it runs down. Her answer is a question. If you were God, she asks him, would you wind it up again? "If I were God Omnipotent," he replies, "...I would wind it up to my turn," thus claiming God's authority over Time. The Lady, however, refuses to accept his authority, having the clock wound up again, she permits no fiddling with the hands. "I think, sir," she insists, "that I would desire you, even so, to play the game according to its strict rules" (FD 8-9).

Whereupon she takes her leave and walks out of his life, his time and his world, out of nighttime Verona into daylight Zimiamvia. Here begins the alteration of worlds, the silken flow and shift of time and place and personality which gives the book its structure. This is Eddison's most inventive technique, one which leaves his reader, like an unsatisfied lover, teased, tantalized and wanting for more. The Dark Lady, whose true name is in the chapter title, but whose name in Zimiamvia is Fiorinda, has a Goddess's prerogative to be whoever she wants, wherever she wants, whenever she wants. She will not appear again on Earth until almost the end of the book, by which time we may recognize her sovereign right to set the clock and make the rules and be amused.

In the meantime, Eddison has introduced the real heroine of *A Fish Dinner*, Mary, and with her the theme of doubling which correlated the narrative structure. For all that one is brunette and the other a red-head, the Dark Lady bears a haunting resemblance to Mary. "She was tall: Mary's height to an inch as he looked down at her: incredible likeness to Mary: little turns or neck or hand, certain looks of the eye, that matter of the mouth (a thing surely unknown before in living woman)" (FD 9). Through the Dark Lady Lessingham remembers his first meeting with Mary, his proposal and her unexpected refusal, followed by the banishment in hope of reprieve which has brought him to Verona.

What we do not know, what Eddison takes care that we should not know until the last chapter, and then though a glass darkly, is the real relationship between these people

and these worlds. The banquet which is the book's climax, the fish dinner from which it takes its name, provides the answer, but such is Eddison's art that it explains the relationship without solving the mystery. At that dinner, King Mezentius creates, at Fiorinda's directions, a world, brought to life under his hands: "a sphered thing... balanced as it had been a somewhat heavy bubble, a foot, maybe, in diameter, upon the table," "with no meddling finger of God to ruffle the serenity of [its] unfolding," "where all must be pre-determined and like a clock-work: (FD 268-9).

This heavy bubble is our world. Zimiamvia is the real world, our world a caprice, created at a Goddess's whim for the entertainment of the guests at the fish dinner. At that dinner Mezentius and Amalie dare to enter the bubble world and its time, and live out the lives of Mary and Lessingham. Fiorinda makes a cameo appearance as the Dark Lady of Verona, and the full meaning of that cryptic first conversation becomes clear. It is Fiorinda as the Dark Lady speaking to Mezentius as Lessingham. She knows. He doesn't. And she will have "no meddling finger of God" to change her rules.

But let us return to the galloping horse, the oil painting, the castanets. Where and how do they fit in? The galloping horse is the first clue to the link between the worlds, but typically, its introduction is made to seem unimportant: The scene is a garden in Zimiamvia, where Mezentius reminds Fiorinda that he met her "this morning, on a white horse, galloping, at the first spring of day as I rode up though [the] oak groves..." Her reply is characteristic: "I had supposed rather that your highness thought my horse had ta'en command of me: so swift you rode him down and had him by the bridle" (FD 14). This is both a clue and a red herring. It is a red herring first, since it promises more than it fulfills. In myth and literature horses are often sexual symbols, and this pursuit and capture on horseback call for surrender. We are ready for more; but we do not get it. Not yet. Mezentius and Fiorinda are not lovers, nor do they become lovers. Indeed, Mezentius subverts our hopes by appointing Fiorinda lady of the bedchamber to his mistress, Duchess Amalie (a red-head, incidentally, like Mary). This early morning chase on horseback leads up a blind alley, and disappointed, we dismiss it.

And consequently are not prepared when it reappears as a clue in the next chapter. For one thing, we are back on Earth, watching a cricket match. Not a horse in sight. But a bystander mentions having seen Edward Lessingham "galloping south" "this morning" (FD 26). Either Lessingham or his double, someone else replies, whereupon a knowledgeable listener remarks "Antipholus of Ephesus... Antipholus of Syracuse." This reference to the *Comedy of Errors*, which seems dragged in the ears, re-introduced the doubling theme. Thus, when Mary remembers Lessingham "half past seven this morning... to ride [me] down like that: if anyone had seen [us]... And Tessa is a pretty good little mare: showed him a clean pair of heels for a mile

or so," we remember more than she does, and begin – still not knowing why – to make connections (FD 35).

But the connections are tenuous, and complicated by deliberate disparities. The horse are different; Fiorinda's horse is a white gelding, Mary's a black mare. The emotional situation is different; Fiorinda and Mezentius are not in love; Mary and Lessingham are. What is the meaning of this skewed comparison? The answer is hidden in Mary's recollection of Lessingham's words to her that morning: "Then that's settled, *Senorita Maria*. I carry you off tonight" (FD 34). Here is the abduction we were promised but didn't get in the last chapter. The pattern breaks to emerge: these are not parallel events, but the same action given different resolutions in different worlds. Lessingham and Mezentius are doubles (a fact brought out by their physical likeness to one another) and action in one world reverberates in the other.

Reverberation, not repetition, a factor which makes it difficult to apprehend the design all at once in all its parts. Synchronicity is not sameness. Eddison continually builds our expectations and just as continually and quite deliberately frustrates them. Accepting Lessingham and Mezentius as doubles, we naturally assume that Mary and Fiorinda are doubles as well, all four linked by the galloping horse. Yes and no, and herein lies the elusive, now you see it now you don't quality that distinguishes Eddison as a writer. The mirror is held at a slant, and the reflection, like the relationships, is oblique.

Mary's true double is Duchess Amalie; Fiorinda is not her double, but her counterpart – red matched to black. Black-haired Lessingham, Mezentius's double, is the counterpart of red-haired Duke Barganax, Amalie's son and Fiorinda's lover. Again red is matched with black. (If you are in doubt about relationships in Eddison, pay attention to people's hair-color. Like color signals a parallel; unlike color signals opposition, both in love and love's counterpart, war.)

But I promised you a portrait, and castanets. They occur in sequence, and hard on the heels of the galloping horse. The portrait first. It hangs over the fireplace in the drawing-room of Mary's home, where, on the night following that early morning chase on horseback, Mary and Lessingham stand talking. The occasion is a dinner and dance to honor Mary's twentieth birthday. The portrait is a Reynolds, but curiously untypical of that most English artist. It is he head and shoulders of "a lady with smooth black hair... a slightly eastern cast of countenance, with a touch of the Japanese and a touch of the harsh Tartar" (FD 46). She is a Mrs. Anne Horton, aged about nineteen when the portrait was painted in 1766, and she is inexplicably important to Mary, for as the twentieth century woman looks on the eighteenth century as these comes "a subtle alteration in her whole demeanour, as when, with some gay inward stirring on the sympathies, friends looks on friend" (FD 47). Some kinship of the spirit links Mary and

Anne Horton, though neither Mary nor the readers knows what it is. Nor are we enlightened by Mary's remark about the portrait "She's certainly not very eighteenth century. Curiously outside all dates, I should say." Nor by Lessingham's cryptic reply: "Or inside," one of those remarks that seems to make sense until you look at it closely. Mary's comment probably means simply that the picture is timeless, a common enough dictum about works of art. But how can a woman – or a portrait – be "inside" all dates? (FD 47).

In his usual oblique fashion, Eddison spaces out the clues. Not until the next chapter do we learn that Fiorinda, in Zimiamvia, is having a birthday on the same day as Mary's on Earth. She too is nineteen. All three, Mary, Fiorinda, and the lady in the portrait are around the same age. We still don't know why this is significant. And like the galloping horse, it is at first appears to go nowhere. And then, in what is perhaps the most startling, certainly the most uncanny moment in the book, we see Fiorinda, in Zimiamvia looking down at Mary though the eyes of the portrait, and realize that all three are somehow the same person. Timeless, nineteen-year-old Anne Horton is the bridge, Anne Horton who is "inside" all dates, whether of Earth or Zimiamvia, who is Fiorinda who is Mary, is the vehicle by which self can contemplate self though the painted eyes of the eighteenth century.

He is where the castanets come in, played at Mary's party in England, resounding in the fields and gardens of Zimiamvia. They have their own chapter, "Castanets Betwixt the Worlds," the most explicit indication until the last chapter of the interaction of identities and worlds. With one or two exceptions, the narrative alternates worlds from chapter to chapter, but the "Castanets" chapter swings from world to world between paragraphs, between sentences, and sometimes, as in the vision of Fiorinda looking at Mary and Lessingham, within sentences. And indeed, castanets are a proper accompaniment to such rhythmic, syncopated alternation, keeping time in both worlds. Listen as they begin to play in the drawing-room where Mary and Lessingham are listening.

Lessingham sat iron-still. The music started once more...the castanets awoke again...and...began to gather strength, as if horse-hooves should begin to draw nearer and nearer at a gallop from very far away. Here, no doubt, in this present drawing-room...was the physical sound of them...this old clicking music dear to the goat-footed wood god. But the inward springs or being of that music took a further reach...Northward twenty miles beyond Memison...King Mezentius rode...Iron-still was the King's countenance...and the beat of [his] horse-hooves...was the beat of the castanets, dear to goat-footed Pan. But in Lovely Memison, where...the Duchess looked upon the revels...this inside secret music touched the sense less unpeaceably...And now that same peace settled about Mary...(FD 64-5).

Three independent but interrelated lines of tension are braided by the music of the castanets. The first is that of

Mary and Lessingham, who have given themselves to one another, though she is not yet ready to declare it. The second is implied in the hoofbeats as Mezentius rides away from the Duchess, stretching the time as well as the distance between them. The third is only implicit in the above quote, contained in the word "revels," the ball given by the Duchess where Barganax and Fiorinda meet for the first time with a duel of glances that proclaims them antagonists as well as lovers.

In all three cases, Time and Love are crucial elements, time and the tension generated by impulses and desires held in check, governed by time. And in the time of this book – which is twenty-five years on Earth, one month in Zimiamvia – the three love stories play themselves out, weaving over and under and around one another. The one we follow most closely is that of Mary and Lessingham, all unaware of its involvement with that of Mezentius and Amalie until the making of the bubble world. Then we see but do not understand Amalie's fear of that world as she sits at the banquet-table, "dreadless on the brink of fate," and whispers to Mezentius "Stay for me. You and I... we are noosed: we are limed. We're in it" (FD 271).

The next chapter realizes her fear, for it shows us Lessingham's agony at Mary's death in a railway accident after their fifteen years of marriage. The movement of the narrative from world to world becomes hallucinatory at this point, as transitions occur with a dreamlike unreality and we see how Mezentius inhabits Lessingham, Lessingham Mezentius. The two are one, on Earth and in Zimiamvia, but only Mezentius knows it. At the climax Lessingham on Earth remembers and sees in a dream Mary, naked at her dressing-table, and recognizes her as Aphrodite. In the same moment, as Mezentius in Zimiamvia, he takes the Duchess's hand and call s her Senorita Maria. She, who as Mary died before he as Lessingham, whispers "It did not hurt, did it? – the coming out?" "Not the coming out," he answers, "but the not knowing...there, that for you it did not hurt. Fifty more years I endured it there, remember, wanting you" (FD 308).

They look for a minute at the bubble world still quivering on the table before them. And then, as the dinner ends and the guests depart, Fiorinda takes a pin from her hair and idly pricks the bubble. It bursts, leaving a damp spot on the table.

That moment between the bubble world's creation and its destruction is both the center and circumference of the action of *A Fish Dinner* – it encompasses all of the Earth chapters which enclose the Zimiamvian chapters. The clear message that our material world is a bubble made to amuse a woman is unsettling to say the least. It is, if you wish, an acting-out of Gloucester's dark epiphany in *King Lear* – "As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. They kill us for their sport." In light of this, the decision of Mezentius and Amalie to descend into that world and live in it becomes an act of enormous courage.

The bubble moment, as well as being the center of the *Fish Dinner*, is the lynch-pin on which the whole trilogy turns, for it leads directly to Mezentius's death in *The Mezentian Gate* which in turn sets up the political situation which moves Mistress of Mistresses. In his unpublished "Notes on the Zimiamvian Myth" Edisson makes explicit what he wants his story to imply. In brief, it is that Mezentius's decision, at the fish dinner, to go down into his created world, allows him, as God, to taste death. And that taste awakes in him a wish to push his power to the utmost – to risk dying, As God, to prove that God cannot die. Edisson writes:

In making (in his Zimiamvian incarnation, at the fish dinner, by her setting on) a world that was not good, viz. this world of ours, he did no great harm. It was made and abolished as if it had never existed. (*Sub specie aeternitatis* it probably never has). But, in that Zimiamvian incarnation, he had, by that creative act, tasted not indeed a power beyond God's (which is impossible and inconceivable) but a power which God ... refrains from exercising, refrains as naturally and automatically as a man shaving refrains from cutting his throat from ear to ear.

That power is the power to die. But Edisson suggests another motive, "namely the desire, by dying, to forget, and so be able to revisit Zimiamvia (or a better world if better can be, or if not, another as good) freed of his impracticable omniscience, and so enjoy his world as new."

This is the final purpose of synchronicity: to show all time implicit in each single moment, all action implicit in each separate action, all humanity implicit in each individual. This is Edisson's last refinement of the Ouroboros principle – the worm swallowing its own tail – the eternal renewal, whose end is its beginning, whose beginning is its end.

Notes

All citations from the novels are taken from the Ballantine paperback editions.

Edisson's unpublished papers are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.



☆☆☆ Art Submissions ☆☆☆

Mythlore welcomes the submission of new artists to its pages. Both full page and column pieces are encouraged. Full page art should be 7.25" wide x 9.25" tall – it may actually be larger, but in the same proportions. Column art should initially be 5" wide x 6 to 8" tall, which can be photographically reduced to fit the printed size of the columns and pages. Material inspired by or illustrating the works of Tolkien, Lewis, or Williams is especially sought, but other mythological and fantasy inspired artwork is also welcome. Write directly to the Art Editor, Sarah Beach. See page 2 for her address.