

Joseph Stein

THE NEW WOMAN AND THE DECADENT DANDY

Victoria survived into the twentieth century, but the spirit which bore her name began to languish long before the Queen's death. Max Beerbohm writes that "In the gradual years after the Queen-widow had withdrawn herself, ceding the supremacy to her eldest son, Society slipped into its old way."¹ The spirit of the Regency was revived, and an unhappy marriage made with the "new art", the "new paganism", and the "new hedonism": "Something vivid was desired. And so the sphere of fashion converged with the sphere of art, and revolution was the result" (WM, p. 38).

The Regency revival brought with it the reemergence of the most characteristic and enigmatic figure of that period — the dandy. But unlike his forebears of Carlton House, the masher of the 'eighties and 'nineties found that he was not alone behind the footlights of fashion and that his rival, the "new woman", was persistently edging upstage. More than a simple revolution of taste, this confrontation of the old and new was most fundamentally "a genuine revolution of thought and custom regarding the relative positions of male and female."² The outcome of the ensuing battle was never in doubt. All the dynamism and power of the future belonged to the "new woman", "that sardonic creature who looks as if she was always hungering for the sensation after next",³ while the strength of the dandy depended on "a handful of mannerisms retrieved from the past".⁴

Paradoxically, one must turn to the writings of the dandies themselves in order to comprehend both the decline of dandyism and the rise of feminism during the decadent era. Through their art, Beerbohm, Wilde and Beardsley continually attempted to explore the relationship between the effete dandy and his more vital antagonist, the

"new woman". Although Beerbohm was considerably younger than the other decadents, it is useful to concentrate on his writings, for he possessed both a sense of history and an awareness of his own period which many of his contemporaries lacked. In his essays, Max repeatedly contrasts the men and women of the 'nineties with those of the rest of the century, particularly the Regency. He compares the modern dandy with Brummell and D'Orsay and, finding the former lacking, he sighs. He compares the "new woman" with her Victorian grandmother and, finding her radically changed, he shudders.

For his basic definition of the dandy, Beerbohm turns to Carlyle and "perhaps, the only true words in *Sartor Resartus*" (WM, p. 14). Carlyle writes that "'A dandy is . . . a man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of clothes'" (WM, p. 14). For the type of this sartorial artist, Max turns, piously laying "one hand upon the brim of ... [his] hat, the other upon . . . [his] heart", to Beau Brummell, "the supreme king of the dandies" (WM, p. 15). He points to the Beau's simplicity of dress and superb taste, his avoidance of practical or physical activity and, above all, his artistic approach to fashion. To Max, the dandy was, first and foremost, an artist and, as such, compelled to assume "an oblique attitude towards life". Brummell, as the ultimate dandy, "turned full and square towards his art and looked life straight in the face out of the corners of his eyes" (WM, p. 16).

The mashers of the 'eighties, according to Max, had lost touch with Brummell's artistic and ascetic example: "Unlike the dandies of the Georgian era, they pretended to no classic taste" (WM, p. 44). Beerbohm pictures the fashionable ballrooms of the decade sprinkled with "half a score of comely ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands" (WM, p. 22). Dress, the once pure art of the dandy, had become florid and grotesque.

Perhaps even more distressing to Beerbohm was the modern dandy's involvement with pursuits outside the art of dress. Just as D'Orsay's painting of portraits relegates him to the second rank of fops, so Mr. Whistler can only be classified as among the painters "who wished to be dandies" (WM, pp. 10-11). Brummell was a dandy and nothing but a dandy, but Wilde and the other English decadents were also showmen, writers and critics. Significantly, the only true contemporary dandy described by Max is the fictitious Mr. Le V., whose "boots have outshone fifty sequences of summer suns" (WM, p. 27). Beerbohm

seems to imply that with the death of the aged Mr. Le V. the ascetic and artistic principles of dandyism will die as well. There are to be no new dandies. He envisions, instead, the rise of the man who does not "cultivate dignity in demeanour", but "merely slouches" (YA, p. 99).

The modern dandy's decline as an artist is chronicled by Beerbohm with humor; his more fundamental failure as a man is dealt with more sardonically. Max reveres George the Fourth as the paradigm for Regency manhood: "his life was a poem, a poem in the praise of Pleasure" (WM, p. 72). George understood women as thoroughly as he did wine and fashions and knew that in all aspects of life there is a time for the great and a time for the courtesan. He was, at once, the product and figurehead of a society where "every man had to shift for himself and, consequently, men were . . . manly" (WM, p. 50).

After describing a typical day of Georgian drinking, driving and wenching, Max asks the inevitable question: "which of *our* dandies could survive a day of pleasure such as this?" (WM, p. 51). The answer, of course, is not a one. Beerbohm saw the 'nineties as a decadent age, but he did not use the term decadence as a synonym for dandyism. George was a voluptuary in the richest and healthiest sense of the word; his passions were robust, his virility unquestioned. With respect to his own contemporaries, however, Max bemoans the fact that "There is nothing but feebleness in us" (WM, p. 50). Whereas George, the Beau, D'Orsay and the rest were fiercely independent in their art as in their lives, Beerbohm observes that there are no individuals left. He implies that the vitality has been drained from the modern dandy; he has lost his individuality, and with it, his identity and his sex.

The theme of the loss of sexual identity is met with time and again in decadent art. Ellen Moers points out that "The blurring of the sexes had long been the preoccupation of the decadent movement in France."⁵ In the 'nineties this fascination drifted across the Channel. Beardsley's drawings, for example, feature starkly muscular women, feminine men dressed in gowns and sporting incipient breasts, and other curious creatures of no definite sex at all. Describing the minor poetry of the era, Holbrook Jackson suggests that "There was an unusual femininity about it, not the femininity of women, nor yet the feminine primness of men; it was more a mingling of what is effeminate in both sexes . . . a form of hermaphroditism."⁶

Berbohm acknowledged this trend, but he did not ascribe sexual assimilation to the influence of France or the immoral behavior of personalities such as Wilde. Rather, he felt that the confusion of roles was partly due to the loss of individuality as represented by the dandy and, perhaps more essentially, the scarcity of real old-fashioned women: "Women are becoming nearly as rare as ladies" (WM, p. 50).

Max's attitude toward the "new woman" was ambivalent. He seems to have felt, almost simultaneously, fear and fascination, admiration and contempt. He describes her immediate predecessor, the Victorian woman, as silly and feeble: "in those barren days what influence did women exert! By men they seem not to have been feared or loved, but regarded rather as dear little creatures . . . and in their relation to life as foolish and ineffectual as the landscapes they did in water-color" (WM, p. 82). Yet, for all this, Max finds the Victorian woman gracious; "she had a certain charm", and more importantly, "had not begun to trespass on men's grounds" (WM, p. 82). What is most pleasing to Max about the old-fashioned woman is that she refrained from action. It is the "new woman's" emphasis on activity which distresses him most.

Berbohm had a great respect for the feminine intellect. "Woman", he wrote, "is our mistress in the things of the mind" (WM, p. 84). Indeed, though Max could trade epigrams with Wilde and insults with Shaw, he is described at a party for literary ladies as "a white Chinese porcelain dragon . . . looking more 'perilously fragile' as more ladies arrived."⁷ Max felt that repose was necessary for the nurture of feminine grace and intelligence. Supine, a woman was a wise and charming companion; in the 'nineties she leaped off her couch much to the chagrin of the male population and (at least as far as Max was concerned) her own detriment: "so soon as ever she put her foot to the ground — lo, she is the veriest little sillypoop, and quite done for" (WM, p. 84).

Berbohm felt that the "new woman" had somehow escaped from her proper sphere of being. In the heady atmosphere of activity she became almost maniacal, given "to shriek with laughter; to fling . . . into a room and dash . . . out of it; to collapse on chairs or sofas; to sprawl . . . to slam . . . to hustle, to bounce, to go straight ahead — to be . . . perfectly natural in the midst of an artificial civilization" (YA, p. 97). But a maniac is threatening as well as comical. The she-demon who usurps man's starting time at the golf links, beats him to the tennis net

and steals his skate key, threatens his position as artist, dandy and male as well. Beerbohm views Ouida as one of the premier authors of the period, and by far the most virile: "it is indeed remarkable that she should . . . be endowed with force and energy so exuberant and indefatigable" (WM, p. 193). Likewise, the "professional beauties" of the 'eighties, women like Lady Lonsdale and Mrs. Langtry, challenged the mashers' position in the world of fashion. Indeed, Max confesses that "in this renaissance the keenest students of the exquisite were women" (WM, p. 44).

Beerbohm saw the emergence of women as a direct assault on the supremacy of the male and the reign of the dandy. He is only whistling past the graveyard when he declares that "the horrific pioneers of womanhood . . . are doomed" (WM, p. 83). He knows that the "new woman" is alive, well and destined to encounter and conquer the dandy and all he stands for.

The inevitability of a showdown between the dandy and his arch rival was recognized by the leading figures of the decadent movement. Beardsley's unfinished novel, *Under the Hill*, recounts in decadent terms, the legendary liaison between Venus and a dandified Tannhauser. Two of his major projects as an artist were the illustrations for *Lysistrata* and Wilde's *Salome*. In all of these works the female is portrayed as dominant and, in the case of Venus and Salome, deadly to the male.

In his plays and poetry, Oscar Wilde composed variations on the basic theme of the antagonism between modern women and the dandy. Wilde's females seem to fall into two broad categories: the diseased femme fatale and the all too healthy "new woman".

The narrator of Wilde's long poem, "The Sphinx", fearfully cringes under the terrible, but nonetheless feminine, gaze of the Sphinx. He is unmanned by her awful patience: "Inviolable and immobile she does not rise, she does not stir."⁸ But, though he is enthralled by her repose, he is petrified by the thought of her latent ferocity and power. She represents the essential female principle, a force too overwhelming to have intercourse with men. Her mates are gryphons, giant lizards and gods. But even these potent males are subdued by the ferocity of the Sphinx: "Couch by his side upon the grass and set your white teeth in his throat/ And when you hear his dying note, lash your long flanks of

polished brass.”⁹ The Sphinx’s effect on her host is not so violent, but it is equally destructive, for she infects the mind of the student like a tropical disease: “you wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be.”¹⁰ His only defence is his own feeble male god, a “pallid burden sick with pain.”¹¹

Salome is sister to the Sphinx. To gaze on her is to court destruction: “You must not look at her . . . Something terrible may happen.”¹² And yet no one can resist her appeal. The Syrian dandy is driven to suicide by her indifference to his advances. Herod’s fascination for his step-daughter leads to Jokanaan’s execution and precipitates his own madness. It is not until the end of the play that Herod realizes the tremendous influence exerted by Salome. “She is monstrous”, he declares. However, her influence would not have been so devastating had it not met with such impotent male resistance. Neither the Syrian nor the page of Herodias who gives him “a little box of perfumes and ear-rings wrought in silver”, display any masculine characteristics. Herod is taunted by his wife as lacking virility. “It is you who are sterile”, she argues.¹³

In both *Salome* and “The Sphinx”, the femme fatale overpowers and destroys the male with little difficulty. In *An Ideal Husband*, the evil Mrs. Cheveley seems on the verge of subduing Robert Chiltern until the dandy, Goring, intervenes to save the day. But Goring’s is not an unqualified victory, for he is, in turn, secured by the other element in Wilde’s female equation: the “new woman”. Mabel Chiltern is energetic and self-assertive. Her major attraction for Goring is that she can trade epigrams with him as well as any man. Furthermore, she has no ideals. Unlike the essentially Victorian Lady Chiltern, Mabel sees her man for what he is — a thirty-four-year-old dandy — and views her own capabilities realistically: “All I want is to be . . . a real wife to him”.¹⁴ With poise and energy, Mabel masters the aging master dandy.

In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*, a similar pattern develops. In these two plays the dandies, Darlington and Illingworth, are both aging and disreputable if not evil. Both are conquered by the surprising moral strength evinced by the women in the plays. Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester all grow during the course of the action. Mrs. Erlynne learns what it is to be a mother. Hester and Lady Windermere discard their rigid codes

of morality. But the dandies, cynical, stifled and defeated, never alter. They remain, "Man, poor, awkward, reliable, necessary."¹⁵

Looking back from the twentieth century, Beerbohm created his own parable of the clash between the dandy and the "new woman". Set in Oxford, *Zuleika Dobson* relates the encounter between the super-dandy, Duke of Dorset, and the quintessence of new womanhood, Zuleika. Superficially, Dorset is the Regency dandy magnified and reborn. Greater than Byron, he has swum the Hellespont not once but twice. "He was adroit in the killing of all birds and fishes, stags and foxes. He played polo, cricket, racquets, chess, and billiards as well as such things can be played. He was fluent in all modern languages . . . and was accounted . . . the best amateur pianist this side of the Tweed" (ZD, p. 37).

Dorset reveres the ascetic example set by such dandies as Beau Brummell. Much sought after by fortune-hunting mothers and romantic daughters, the Duke could have become a Don Juan. However, to become a victim of passion would be to deny his dandihood: "The dandy must be celibate, cloistral . . . with a mirror for beads and breviary" (ZD, p. 40). The Duke successfully shuts himself off from temptation, and this iron code of purity is reflected in his very features: "bronze-coloured hair rose in tiers of burnished ripples; the large steel-coloured eyes, with their carven lids; the carven nose and the plastic lips" (ZD, p. 35). Most significantly, his heart has read Pater and changed to "a bright hard gem" (ZD, p. 62).

But cloistered virtue is powerless against the onslaught of the dynamic Zuleika who "would have gone mad in a nunnery" (ZD, p. 28). Unlike the Duke, Zuleika actively seeks love and, though she lacks the Duke's classic features, Russian royalty, American millionaires, and schoolboys literally prostrate themselves at her feet. Consequently, among all mankind there was "not one upright figure which she could respect" (ZD, p. 28). As with the ravenous women of Beardsley, Wilde's Sphinx and Salomé, the elemental nature of Zuleika is too potent to be quelled by the sterile modern man. Like her sisters, Zuleika leaves a trail of suicide behind her.

Zuleika is at first deceived into thinking that the Duke will be indifferent to her and so she briefly falls in love with him. But having never faced temptation, the Duke becomes an easy victim to Zuleika's charms: "The cold classicism of his face had been routed by the new

romantic movement which had swept over his soul" (ZD, p. 63). He sacrifices every dandaical form and tradition for the love of a woman. "What care now," he sighs "what use of deportment!" (ZD, p. 205). Yet it is the Duke's deportment, his icy, dandaical indifference which had attracted Zuleika; he alone among millions had not made a fool of himself. His veneer cracked, his mirror forgotten, the Duke loses Zuleika and his dandihood simultaneously.

Beerbohm implies that the Duke's naive asceticism and his consequent submission to passion is symptomatic of the frailty of the decadent dandy. Humphrey Greddon, who appears briefly as the ghost of an eighteenth-century fop, cannot understand the Duke's relationship with Zuleika. He too had become infatuated with a girl, but he had simply "adored her, and had done with her" (ZD, p. 132). Zuleika treats Dorset in a like manner and the Duke, like Greddon's love Nellie, drowns himself. Thus, the basic roles of the sexes have been reversed. The once weak and submissive female no longer clings; now she seizes her own destiny. The once vital and carefree male has become an insipid prig who initially decides to die because it is "the thing to do", and takes the final plunge because "In another minute he would stand sodden, inglorious, a mock" (ZD, p. 295).

The Duke dies enveloped in dead traditions — symbolized by the elaborate gowns of the Order of the Garter. Zuleika stands triumphant above the river which harbors the corpses of an Oxford student body too enfeebled to withstand the force of her presence. She is the epitome of the "new woman", "draining the lees of such homage as had come to no woman in history recorded" (ZD, p. 300).

In her book, *The Dandy*, Moers contends that "fin de siècle dandies survived on the bounty of good-natured women or more often the sufferance of ill-natured women."¹⁶ The decadents, Beerbohm, Wilde, Beardsley, would have disagreed. The dandy, in their view, was not suffered to survive; rather he was hounded off the stage and into his grave by the dynamism of the "new women". "Nowadays", writes Max, "there is no care for appearances . . . any care for appearances is regarded rather as a sign of effeminacy" (YA, p. 99). The common man of the 'nineties saw his legal, social, and political supremacy undermined; the dandy lost his art.

Footnotes

1. The following texts by Max Beerbohm have been used in this essay; each will hereafter be cited in the text and abbreviated in the following way: WM, *Works and More* (1930; rpt.

- Grosse Pointe, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1952); YA, *Yet Again* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1910); *Zuleika Dobson* (New York: Random House, 1926).
2. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 308.
 3. Holbrook Jackson's description of "The Beardsley Woman", in *The Eighteen 'Nineties* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1922), p. 100.
 4. Moers, p. 314.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
 6. Jackson, pp. 162-63.
 7. Described by Rebecca West in John Felstiner's *The Lies of Art* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1972), p. 212.
 8. Oscar Wilde, "The Sphinx", in *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Richard Aldington (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 573.
 9. *Ibid.*; p. 583.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 585.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 585.
 12. Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, in *Five Plays by Oscar Wilde* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 273.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
 14. *The Ideal Husband*, p. 208.
 15. *A Woman of No Importance*, p. 79.
 16. Moers, p. 314.