

DOBSON'S CHOICE

She boasts unquantifiable beauty, conquers the world with charm and cunning, and the men she meets (and even those she doesn't) fall at her otherworldly feet. No, not Taylor Swift, but Zuleika Dobson, the anti-heroine of Sir Max Beerbohm's 1911 satire. In fact, Zuleika might be the ultimate femme fatale.

RAKE
INCARNATE

by **ed cripps**

Zuleika Dobson belongs to a very English strain of magic realism, the same class-blushed, taboo-clouded orchard as Saki, Dahl, Hitchcock and modern masters-of-the-uncanny Pemberton and Shearsmith. It's a freak of literature, the only novel that Oxford wit Sir Max Beerbohm wrote between the doodles and the one-liners, and a deadpan fantasy admired by everyone on the feminist spectrum from Virginia Woolf to Evelyn Waugh. Its titular lead is also the female rake *par excellence*.

Archetypes of the *femme fatale* have battled varied shades of misogyny over the ages, some better disguised than others: pig-converter Circe, the Marquis de Sade's torture-savvy nympho-murderer Juliette, and even the inverted 'female gaze' of Oscar Wilde's Salomé tap into cautionary patriarchal fears tempered by each era. But *Zuleika Dobson* feels different, a deceptively potent class-and-gender satire in the robes of campus farce. Even the name embodies the novel's blend of fantasy and social realism, the exoticism of Potiphar's wife earthed to Anglo-Saxon stolidity.

Enter Zuleika, whom Beerbohm introduces in a whirl of deliberate cliché and anti-convention. She sleeps, vampirically, before sunset. A scavenger and a chancer, in the early picaresque passages she fleeces a magician and becomes a celebrity by using his props. Even her beauty is thief-like, derivative of classical ideals ("No apple-tree, no wall of peaches, had not been robbed, nor any Tyrian rose-garden, for the glory of Miss Dobson's cheeks"). As her fame metastasises across Europe, she tries her luck at Oxford University, where her grandfather is Warden of Judas College. Vaunted as the prettiest 'witch', she meets her match in the Duke of Dorset — absurdly handsome, bland in his brilliance — and starts to fall for him because he's the first man who doesn't immediately profess his love for her. When, predictably, he does, she goes off him and he hurls himself (along with his entire academic year) into the River Isis.

Gracián wrote that to excel and to know how to show it is to excel twice. Zuleika — like every Instagrammer under the sepia sun — is a "spectator of her own wonderful life", a chaste recursion of endless mirrors. The fable of a narcissistic overachiever — her amateur fumbles with the Demon Egg Cup for randy blokes; the curated solipsism ("Nobody must know I knew what was going to happen. Promise to shout my name"); the petulant greed ("she wanted all Oxford to see her, to see her now") — spans from the myth of Eurydice via *All About Eve* to the state-of-the-art self-promotion of, say, Kim Kardashian.

Under the playful allure, however, blows the fume and fret of horror. Zuleika's repeated request that the Duke "say my name before you die" is grimly coital, the *Peeping Tom* fusion of sex, death and vanity. She is a pseudo-divinity (superficially grateful, never sated), and, in their desperation to impress her, they sacrifice themselves in a Jonestown-esque massacre.

But the most acute, discussed resonance of the novel is how



the mass suicide foreshadowed the first world war. The tableau in the quad where the dons wait for the triumphant Judas College First VIII to return, as a generation of undergraduates drowns in mud-frothed waters, is horribly moving, as moving as the dons' decision to get on with dinner is funny, as moving as Beerbohm's cut from the Duke's submerged face in the river to Zuleika's bobbing head in the bath is manipulative, filmic and ingenious.

Is Zuleika the ultimate *femme fatale*? None of the literary tropes usually meted out to 'difficult women' (marriage to the Duke, remorse, public humiliation, the nunnery) can stop her. The way she sniffs out and picks off Noaks, the one student who refused to kill himself for her, has a chilling completism, and she is the complete anti-heroine. From her, you can distil in the next literary generation, for example, the sports-day ruthlessness of Evelyn Waugh's Margot Beste-Chetwynde, Wodehouse's black-battered opportunists, and (most of all) the hypnotic Pamela Widmerpool from Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

But Zuleika, crucially, *does* derive joy. Her peerlessness — like the novel's — lies in the combined lightness and darkness of touch, an optic lagoon where the light meets the dark, a shadow pool with an inch or two of extra play. If Laclous's Valmont toughened his masculinity with effeminacy, Zuleika does the reverse. She reappropriates the worst kinds of maleness as armour: the swagger, the opportunism, the itch for conquests and to boast about those conquests. She is more attractive to those men because she reflects bits of themselves back at them, or even the bits of women that men have fetishised and enshrined; they, in a way, are more Narcissus-like than her. She is, to reverse-mansplain it, Dom Juan without the libido, epiphany or comeuppance, a finer remorse-feigner, spared rather than condemned by a benevolent statue-like dignitary. The greatest joke of all is that Zuleika gets away with it, to Cambridge, desperate for a few more notches on the mausoleum. In the fog of sexual stereotype, over a hundred years later, she is an infinite bridge of sighs. ■