

## Notes on the Effect of Mr. Max Beerbohm on a Woman Writer

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### Abstract:

Although Regina Barreca, the feminist comic theorist, has lamented the anxiety that supposedly keeps women from joking at the expense of those who have hurt them, Dame Rebecca West (1892–1983), the British novelist and critic, felt no such compunction. The laughter, moreover, that underpinned West’s “Notes on the Effect of Women Writers on Mr. Max Beerbohm,” from *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log* (1931), was very angry indeed, and its origins were both political and personal. Her comic assault on Max Beerbohm (1872–1956) was a defense of working women in general, and of professional female authors in particular, against his attacks on their wish to be self-sustaining and competent human beings, rather than anachronistic ornaments. It was also, however, a response rooted in private grievance, for West was both an avowed admirer and an emulator of Beerbohm’s satirical and fantastic narratives, and she deeply resented his failure to respect her as she respected him. Indeed, it is impossible to understand West’s modernist fiction, such as *Harriet Hume* (1929), without acknowledging its debt to Beerbohm and to his 1890s Aesthetic Movement male contemporaries, such as Oscar Wilde, from whom she derived many of her comic strategies.

It is the special hardship of women that it is their destiny to make gifts and that the quality of their giving is decided by the quality shown by those who do the taking. No matter how full their hearts may be of tenderness and generosity as they hold out their gifts, if the taker snatch it without gratitude, then the givers count as neither tender nor generous, but merely easy. (West, *Harriet Hume* 55–56)

1 To love and not be loved in return is never pleasant. To reveal one’s ardor publicly — indeed, in print—and then to be taken for granted or scorned is doubly humiliating. It does not matter whether the type of love expressed is romantic, erotic, spiritual, filial, or merely the admiration of a devoted fan. Being rejected hurts—all the more if, like Dame Rebecca West (1892–1983), the sufferer still bears a wound from childhood, inflicted by a father who inspired worship, then turned away from the family and vanished. Yet for an unhappy lover who is also a novelist, an essayist, and professional journalist with a regular column, vengeance is, quite literally, ready to hand. It can take the form of laughter at the one who has let her down; done successfully, it can make him not merely unlovable, but ridiculous.

2 In her “Introduction” to *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor* (1996), the feminist critic Regina Barreca laments the “misplaced anxiety” felt by most women, who “have been brought up to be so concerned with putting the welfare of others before our own that we can’t

let ourselves triumph with a great comeback” and who, therefore, refuse to engage in joking at the expense of those who have hurt them (8). That was never true of Rebecca West. The tone of the joking, moreover, that underpins West’s “Notes on the Effect of Women Writers on Mr. Max Beerbohm,” from her 1931 collection of essays and book reviews, *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log*, is very angry indeed. Hers is an essay that uses anger in the service of feminist politics and implies throughout that the narrator is laughing in support of women. The particular women whom she defends against the sneering remarks of a man, Max Beerbohm, are those in the literary profession. Her larger interest, though, is in asserting the “dignity” (73) of middle-class women in general who choose careers—those who wish to be modern, self-sustaining, and competent human beings, rather than anachronistic ornaments. We can find here an early and admirable example of what Frances Gray, in *Women and Laughter* (1994), would later urge every feminist to do, if “feminism is to change all that needs to be changed”: that is, to recognize and consciously to “harness” the “power” of humor, which can be akin to “nuclear energy,” and “to engage with laughter as a social force” in the service of a just cause (33)

3 Yet this political impulse is only part of the story, for the undercurrent of rage which fuels the ridicule in this essay also sprang from a personal source. It was the fury of the spurned admirer, who had made a public spectacle of her adoration for a figure from an earlier literary generation—not “Mr. Max Beerbohm” the man, but Max Beerbohm (1872–1956) the artist—and who had poured out as a gift her words of effusive praise of his work. In return, she had received nothing, or worse than nothing—merely a reminder from him that she was ill suited to offer such judgments about literature and art in the first place, because of her gender.

4 This blow landed in a spot already tender from previous injuries. Certainly, these were due to many experiences which had taught her, as she put the matter decades later in an interview for the *Paris Review*, that “people . . . feel much softer towards the man, even though he might be a convicted criminal,” whereas they always had been “very rude” to her, “just because they’d heard I was a woman writer” (qtd. in Plimpton 85). But the snub she encountered in the late 1920s from Max Beerbohm, who had been her object of recent praise, also registered in terms of class. It was a slight from someone who had enjoyed all his life the easy privileges of the upper-middle-class rank to which West felt she was entitled by birth and from which she had been wrongly shut out by circumstances (especially, by the familial poverty resulting from her father’s desertion of his wife and young daughters). That Beerbohm not only failed to take her seriously as an artist, because she was a woman, but

expressed disapproval of her for seeking a career and supporting herself financially by writing, was intolerable, and she hit back. She did so, moreover, in a way perfectly designed to show that her talents were equal to his in the same genres at which he excelled—parody, satire, caricature, and also lyrical, nostalgic invocations of the past. To do so was more than a face-saving measure; it was a way actively to put her own work in conversation and even in competition with his, as she had also done a year earlier, through her fantasy novel about love, death, and London—*Harriet Hume* (1928)—which responded to his classic 1911 comic fantasy about love, death, and Oxford, *Zuleika Dobson*.

5 West's article about her encounter with Max Beerbohm at a literary occasion—a dinner party at London's Carlton Hotel for Du Bose Heyward (1885–1940), American author of the 1925 novel *Porgy*—may be familiar to some now through its republication in 1931 in *Ending in Earnest: A Literary Log*. It first appeared, however, under the title “Mr. Beerbohm and the Literary Ladies” in one of her monthly “A London Letter” columns for the June 1929 issue of the *Bookman*, a magazine issued in the United States that also circulated in Britain. But the origins of this article lay in an earlier review (which was never reprinted), from 14 October 1928, for the *New York Herald Tribune*, of Max Beerbohm's volume, *A Variety of Things*. Beerbohm's book was, as its title implied, a collection of miscellaneous pieces, some of them dating back to the 1890s, the time when he first appeared on the London literary scene as a witty, dandified young contributor to the *Yellow Book* and a member of Oscar Wilde's circle of friends and acquaintances. Several of the stories in *A Variety of Things*, such as the wry portrait of an imaginary politician named T. Fenning Dodworth, were in the style of Beerbohm's more famous *Seven Men* (1919). Others, including a fantasy about the dawn of civilization, “The Dreadful Dragon of Hay Hill,” showed the influence of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic, yet also biting satire, late-Victorian fairy tales. *A Variety of Things* was, however, a disparate and rather slight volume, especially when compared with the more focused and wittier *A Christmas Garland* (1912), which had skewered one contemporary author after another with brilliant parodies of their work.

6 Yet no one who came upon West's rapturous review, titled “On Not Telling All that One Knows,” on the front page of the *Tribune*'s Sunday “Books” section, would have suspected that the publication of *A Variety of Things* was anything less than an event of major proportions, of the sort to shake the foundations of the transatlantic literary world. West began her appraisal of it by invoking Shakespeare, describing his retreat from London to Stratford-upon-Avon and from playwriting, while alluding to Beerbohm's self-exile from England to Rapallo, Italy: “[Shakespeare] knew more about the universe than the rest of us, and the effect

of that knowledge was to make him turn his back on all opportunities either to extend it or share it with his fellowmen” (West, “On Not Telling” 1). By the end of her review, she had compared Beerbohm favorably with Shakespeare as a visionary and philosopher; she had, even more remarkably, found in Beerbohm’s manner, when encountered in person, a quality that she also attributed to Shakespeare: “For one noticed that in . . . [his] face there gleamed just such an enamel of determined reserve of dogged blandness, as surprised us in the well known bust of Shakespeare. Here was another who had determined not to tell all he knew; and who knew so very much that his determination made the hair stand up one’s head” (12). What was it that Beerbohm, like Shakespeare, supposedly “knew”? According to West’s review, it was the very thing that West herself claimed to apprehend and wished to impart to others, both through her fiction and through her criticism—the essence that she called “reality”:

Max Beerbohm . . . [is] not only a person (as we had known) of exquisite taste but of a positively Titanic comprehension of art. One felt that the infallibility with which he knew . . . [which] avenue . . . leads straight to comprehension of reality and the perpetuation of the comprehended truth came from the most powerful grasp of the nature of reality. He knew as well as any man what is between the earth and the sky. His mind was as wide as the earth, [and] it was as tall as the sky (12).

7 In this 1928 review, West paid Beerbohm the ultimate compliment. She aligned his work with what she had defined that very same year, in a long essay titled “The Strange Necessity,” as both the deepest human impulse and the force that drove the greatest, most daring art of the present, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: the “immediate necessity,” inherent “from man’s earliest moments,” to “know what it is all about” (West, “Strange Necessity” 59), with “it” referring to the secret of existence. To make such exalted claims on behalf of Beerbohm was a bold move indeed and one that put her at odds with many of her modernist peers, in whose eyes his comic writings and caricatures were an amusing but irrelevant survival of 1890s aesthetic modes.

8 The form in which she presented this paean was, moreover, itself a tribute to Beerbohm. Breaking with the conventions of the book review as a genre, she reached back to the humorous aesthetic essay as Beerbohm had practiced and perfected it for over three decades. Instead of merely discussing the volume at hand, she related an anecdote about “my first meeting with Mr. Max Beerbohm. It was an extremely agreeable meeting because of the absolute identity between his private personality and the personality (surely the most graceful in the world) which one had learned to know from his writings.” The occasion was their joint attendance at a play by Ibsen featuring “a famous foreign actress” who, twenty years before,

had persuaded an earlier generation “that she represented the absolute of the dramatic art” (West, “On Not Telling” 1). From these details, it is possible to identify the actress as Eleanora Duse and to date West’s first encounter with Beerbohm as having occurred in June 1923, when Duse “went to London for a brief engagement at the New Oxford Theatre,” in the role of Ellida in Henrik Ibsen’s *The Lady from the Sea* (Winwar 316). West narrates her meeting with Beerbohm in a comic framework and does so while putting aside any feminist solidarity with the woman performer, whom she describes not as acting, but merely as “exultantly wailing.” So

we asked Mr. Beerbohm for enlightenment. . . . He had seen her . . . in the years when she established this name for perfection. Wouldn’t he tell us if she had ever deserved it? Mr. Beerbohm . . . exposed her pretensions, and the pretensions of all bad artists, in a sentence so good that one immediately forgot its words and absorbed only its meaning (12)

Beerbohm’s assessment of the actress to West in 1923 appears to have echoed the uncharitable comments he had published in a 1907 review, where he had lamented that “air of listlessness” of “Signora Duse, who, in this as in every other part that she plays, behaved like a guardian angel half-asleep at her post over humanity” (Beerbohm, “Hedda Gabler” 281–82)

9     In this review, West not only appropriated Beerbohm’s witty voice, but replicated his facility with Wildean aesthetic prose, echoing lines about the moon from Wilde’s play *Salome*, as she discussed one of the selections from *A Variety of Things*: “You will have to read it once for nothing but its good looks[,] for the phrases that are shining and delicate as a new moon, and once for its subject, which has something of the chill of moonlight” (12). But she had just performed a similar feat in her novel *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy*, which also dates from 1928. There, she had turned the plot of Beerbohm’s 1911 comedy, *Zuleika Dobson: Or An Oxford Love Story*, on its head. As in *Zuleika*, the mystical connection between its protagonists inspires a suspension of what is usually called reality. Instead of the pearl studs and earrings that, in Beerbohm’s fantasy, inexplicably alter their color in response to the passions of Zuleika and the Duke of Dorset, West creates an indissoluble link, in life and in death, between Harriet Hume and Arnold Condorex that results in Harriet’s seemingly paranormal ability to hear all of her lover’s thoughts. The major change, however, that West works upon Beerbohm’s novel is a feminist one. For Beerbohm’s Zuleika, the coldhearted, delicately beautiful *femme fatale* who is untalented as a professional conjuror, but who inspires hundreds of male undergraduates to kill themselves, West substitutes a coldhearted and murderous *homme fatale* and a delicately beautiful woman

musician, who successfully works magic upon the piano, from which she can elicit sounds merely by speaking to it.

10 The strongest bond, however, between West's novel and Beerbohm's is through their shared attitude toward time and place. Beerbohm's tale is indeed "An Oxford Love Story"—a lyrical ode to his love for Oxford, which is inhabited by the spirits of the Classical Greek past, who are always alive, watching, and speaking, sometimes to comic effect. So, too, West's *Harriet Hume* is a love song to London, in which the fantastic, animate, and humorous presences of both Neo-Classical works of art and their eighteenth-century makers, such as the Adam Brothers, are essential parts of the daily scene. In *Harriet Hume*, West illustrates her own unshakable attachment to what she had identified, in the essay "The Dead Hand," as "this English habit of wandering into the past as a refuge from the distressful present"—a habit also brought to the peak of artistry by Max Beerbohm (West "The Dead Hand" 39). Both writers celebrated what, in *Harriet Hume*, West had her female protagonist describe as the "'in-and-out work between the centuries,'" a principle of temporal interdependence that enabled creative figures, in particular, to find ways of "'slipping through time'" (West, *Harriet Hume* 133).

11 Did Max Beerbohm recognize the homage West had just paid him in her 1929 companion fantasy about an English city? Did he thank her for her effusiveness of her praise of *A Variety of Things*? Did he appreciate how she had gone out on a limb, in setting her judgment of him against that of her contemporaries, the younger generation of British modernists, for whom Beerbohm was little more than a historical curiosity? Quite the contrary. Only a few months after West's review appeared, they met again at the fateful party for Du Bose Heyward given by his British publisher and, as West records in "Notes on the Effect of Women Writers on Mr. Max Beerbohm," Beerbohm insulted her, not once, but twice. Looking around the room "with distaste," as "his eye was lighting on members of my own sex, on members of my own profession," he had turned to her confidentially: "He confessed it, in his gentle courteous voice . . . he did not like literary ladies. He did not mind saying as much to me, since I was of course an exceptional woman. . . . Yes, he repeated, having ventured the bland proviso, he did not like literary ladies" (West, "Notes" 67).

12 How foolish of Beerbohm not to have anticipated the consequences of speaking this way to such an auditor. From 1898 to 1910, he had the benefit himself of a regular journalistic platform, as drama critic for the *Saturday Review*. Should he not have anticipated that West would use her own column in the *Bookman* to advantage and vent her outrage in public? For that is indeed what she did. She responded in a way that not only subjected him to ridicule,

but employed his own weapons of satire and, moreover, of physical caricature, for Beerbohm was of course one of the greatest visual artists of caricature who ever lived. Here is her word-painting of his appearance:

He presented himself at the party, looking extraordinarily like one of those little Chinese dragons which are made in the porcelain known as *blanc de Chine*. Like them he has a rounded forehead and eyes that press forward in their eagerness; and his small hands and feet have the neat compactness of paws. His white hair, which sweeps back in trim convolutions like one of these little dragon's manes, his blue eyes, and his skin, which is as clear as a child's, have the gloss of newly washed china. He is, moreover, obviously precious, and not of this world, though relevant to its admiration: a museum piece, if ever there was one. (West, "Notes" 66–67)

Gone from her description of him is any likeness to the bust of Shakespeare. In its place is the portrait of a tiny monster—an artificial and anachronistic monster at that—as Beerbohm himself might have drawn it of someone else, in one of his verbal or visual caricatures.

13 Midway through these "Notes" on how the presence of women writers distresses the little "dragon," however, comes a bravura performance of a different sort. Claiming to be possessed of Beerbohm's spirit and "to have passed over to his state of mind"—that is, to his idealization of the past, especially of "the thing which seems to him most beautiful . . . the society which died with the 'nineties"—West's narrative persona produces a gorgeous passage of imitation Aesthetic-movement prose. In it, she details for the reader a memory of seeing her own mother enrobed as a decorative and useless object—just the sort of image of femininity that Beerbohm admires—in turn-of-the-century dress: "On a waved plethora of hair, I remember, a large hat road like a boat, with a bird's wing for its sail." With her "minute waist," "her sleeves" that are "vast bells," and "her skirts" made into "a vaster bell under which flounces and flounces of stiff silk rattled like silver shrapnel" (West, "Notes" 70), West's mother becomes, in this fantastic picture, the image of Zuleika Dobson.

14 West saves the best for last, however, with a punchline to her essay equal to that of the ending of Beerbohm's famous comic story "Enoch Soames," from the volume *Seven Men*. There, the figure of Satan injures the Max-Beerbohm-like narrator's pride by cutting him in the street, to signal that, though he may fancy himself an important artist, he is a mere nobody. In her "Notes," West reports gleefully that, at the party for Du Bose Heyward, one of the very modern "literary ladies" who represented the type that Beerbohm despised—the novelist G[ladys]. B[ertha]. Stern (1899–1973)—met and attempted awkwardly to make conversation with this embodiment of the sexist past: "Thus it was she came to turn to the most famous living caricaturist and asked him in accents so clear that there could be no possible mistake about what she said, 'Did you ever learn to draw, Mr. Beerbohm?'" (73).

The parody of the conclusion to one of Beerbohm's own stories is deft, subtle, and killing. As Irving Berlin's Annie Oakley once put it, "Anything you can do, I can do better."

15 West's *coup de grâce* to Beerbohm's smugness illustrates, moreover, a principle about the operations of comedy in a gendered context that Virginia Woolf (West's slightly older contemporary) had already articulated in a 1905 essay titled "The Value of Laughter." Women, according to Woolf, were the "chief ministers of the comic spirit," for they were unlikely to be impressed or taken in by the "affectations and unrealities" associated with masculine power. The service they could perform, through their laughter directed at men in general and at powerful men in particular, would be both a difficult and a necessary one: "All the hideous excrescences that have overgrown our modern life, the pomps and conventions and dreary solemnities, dread nothing so much as the flash of laughter which, like lightning, shrivels them up and leaves the bones bare" (Woolf 60).

16 Whether Beerbohm felt himself—or any part of himself—shriveled from the effects of West's laughter, history does not record, nor do we know how he felt about seeing her competing with him successfully on his own literary turf. What we do know is that time and circumstances allowed her to have the last and very mixed word. In her 1982 memoir and meditation on events of the year 1900, she summed up her estimation of her onetime literary hero and later antagonist in a single, complex sentence that turned upon itself with an irony comparable to that of one of Beerbohm's own pronouncements: "If one bought *The Saturday Review* [in 1900], one could recognize the early, delicate, surprising talent of Max Beerbohm, who expressed himself with a swooning air, as if he doubted whether he would live till next Thursday, though he was to live fifty-six years into the next century and become one of the best broadcasters who ever spoke over the air, introducing elegance into a raw new technique" (West, 1900 138).

17 The point with which I will end is that Rebecca West *wanted* to do what Beerbohm did and to do it better. We misrepresent her, if we define her—as some critics have done—as *sui generis*, unaffected by or uninterested in her immediate literary predecessors of the 1890s. Her relations with these predecessors were complicated and painful, as they were with all father figures, both actual and metaphorical. The ones she loved treated her badly in return. Yet they were also enormously influential, and we cannot understand her use of fantasy, of narrative voice, of nostalgia for place, of elaborate visual descriptions, or especially of comedy, unless we also recognize, within the modernist woman writer whose mind was as wide as the sky and as tall as the earth, a precious little dragon.



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