MAZO DE LA ROCHE'S **DELIGHT:** *AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE*

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Delight, published in 1926, is the only novel by Mazo de la Roche, outside the Jalna series, that has received generally favourable criticism, even from those who are not attracted by her titillating fiction. The novel's appeal to these readers lies, of course, in its ironic treatment of those romantic themes that its author treats with deadly seriousness in her other stories.

Delight is the name of the chief character of the novel, a young woman of extravagant physical attractions who arrives suddenly, with her trunk and her Granny's tea-set, in the small Ontario town of Brancepeth. She stands the raw frontier community on its ears, arousing jealousy in the women because she fascinates all the men. Delight is amused by men, but she refuses to become engaged to one, although she has no scruples about extracting presents from her chief swain, young Jimmy. During his courtship, Jimmy walks Delight down to the lake, and his emphasis on the crows and their cries suggests that they are significant elements in the story. Delight has a Cinderella's triumph at the ball, outshining all the other hotel servants, but her triumph isolates her, so she is soon packed off in disgrace by the hotel's sinister manageress, Mrs. Jessop. A debonair dairyman, 'Fine Nicht' Kirke, saves Delight from banishment and takes her off to work on a farm near Brancepeth. The innocent Delight has no idea that the two old religious fanatics who own the farm hope to marry her to their adopted son. When this boy attempts to rape her, the robust Delight tosses him into a brook. She is rescued and returned to Brancepeth by the dairyman. After her return Delight works at the rival hotel, which prospers because all the men are her slaves again. Her old enemy, Mrs. Jessop, organizes the women, who lure Delight to the lake to punish her. Jimmy's crows raise noisy objections for Nature is on Delight's side. The men of Brancepeth race to the rescue, and when they find the width of the lake between them and the women, some of the more heroic even

attempt to swim to the rescue. They are forced to withdraw when the women pelt them with stones. Mrs. Jessop offers terms: the men can have Delight if one of them will marry her. There are many offers, but valiant little Jimmy, who has been away in York looking for Delight, arrives on the scene just in time to be the lucky man.

The plot is melodrama turned into comedy. There are all the ingredients of romance: the damsel in distress, the assaults on her virtue and her person, and portentous crows, the villainous gipsy (Mrs. Jessop), and the last minute rescues by rival swains. But in romance and fairy tale, the hero and heroine do not work as labourer and chambermaid, or if they do, their lowly station in life is a temporary affair. This Cinderella and her swain are destined to remain among the cinders, and the effect is to create a variety of low-life comedy that George Hendrick has described as "frontier humour."[1] The romantic, the grotesque, and the Gothic, Mazo de la Roche's favourite ingredients in her earlier fiction, are treated ironically and entertainingly.

Hendrick's label of "frontier humour" seems to sum up the only possible critical approach to *Delight.* Yet in a monumentally heavy-handed Introduction to the paperback edition of 1961, Desmond Pacey defends the novel from its critics by outlining what he deems to be its "merits" and "strengths":

> Delight in particular is a character creation worthy of Thomas Hardy, the embodiment of womanhood at its most attractive and disturbing. Notice how Miss de la Roche compares her, as does Hardy his Tess, with several of the great charmers of history and legend. . . . Three crises, occurring roughly each seventy pages, have the same structural function as is performed by the scaffold scenes in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter.* The firm structure of the novel is buttressed by the use of thematic symbols. . . . The crows . . . are the symbols of freedom, instinct, passion, and the primitive. . . . When Delight is set upon in the final section of the novel by the embattled forces of convention and respectability, the crows set up a wild clamour, beat their heavy wings, and utter cries of fear and rage. . . . Interest in wild nature comes out also in Miss de la Roche's similes, almost all of which involve nature or animals or birds. "Behind his calm brow fearful thoughts, like slow-moving shellfish, circled about."[2]

[1]*Mazo de la Roche* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), p. 51.
[2]Number 21 in the new Canadian Library series (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1961), pp. viii-x.

Pacey is convinced that Mazo de la Roche's intention in the novel is entirely serious, and that she has been ill used by those who prefer realism to romance in the treatment of Canadian fiction.

There are times when defenders are worse than hostile critics. If Pacey could take the shellfish seriously, he must have taken this description of Delight's jealousy in the same spirit:

> When Pearl had gone, she [Delight] went to Jimmy's little trunk. She took out the jersey that still was curved to the form of his compact body. With her scissors she snapped a strand of yarn. She began to unravel. . . . Larger and larger grew the mass of crinkled yarn. Small and smaller, the shape of Jimmy, clinging desperately to her hand. At last she stood motionless gazing down at the last strand in her fingers with the fateful look of an Atropos. (p. 158)

It should be evident to either the most unhumorous or the most uncharitable of critics that Mazo de la Roche is in mock-heroic vein here. Almost equally clear is the same technique in the comedy of Delight's first morning as a waitress, although it may be obscured for younger readers who cannot remember the once-popular breakfast cereal, Force. Delight asks the men she waits on, " 'Oatmeal porridge or Forces?' " and " 'F-or-rces,' softly rolled each deep voice after hers" (pp. 26-27). And if there is any doubt about the shellfish, there should be none about the salmon that May is cleaning when she scuffles with her friend Delight after the fateful ball. May's false teeth are dropped and broken: "Delight, heavy with the catastrophe, picked up the two fragments. . . . The head of the salmon lay on the bench beside them, staring up with a look of shocked surprise" (p. 72).

The clearest evidence that *Delight* was conceived in an ironic spirit is the unmistakably mock heroic treatment of the men of Brancepeth racing to rescue Delight. If there is comedy at this point in the tale, when the heroine is in direst distress, the other episodes of comedy cannot be regarded as mere light relief in a seriously romantic novel:

> The tailor . . . sprang forward, tottering in a kind of anguished speed, like an autumn leaf in the gale. He was first into the hall, first out of the front door, first to round the corner by the Duke of York. . . . And in his train stout Lovering, rushing like a

> curly-polled bull; Kirke in angular leaps, like a deer; fat Beemer, waddling at the tail of a score of others.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Charley Bye was among the leaders when they started. His noble head thrown back, his chest inflated, he looked, in truth, like some classic runner. But his erratic legs played him false, he tripped over his own toes, fell to the road and lay there groaning while Kirke leaped over him, Bastien gave him a kick and, at last, fat Beemer trotted round him. . . . He sighed, brushed the dust from his legs, and, remembering that the bar was deserted, ambled back there and had a glass of gin and water in peace. (p. 163)

If internal evidence of Mazo de la Roche's intention fails to sway the sceptics, identification of one of her sources should clinch the point. Mazo de la Roche was not, of course, a plagiarist, yet like most popular writers, she took hints from previous fiction, particularly if it was successful. One of her sources for *Delight,* as Hendrick points out (p. 51), was her own short story, "Canadian Ida and English Nell," published in *The Metropolitan* in 1911. The other sources was also published in 1911, and it was a work of instant success whose popularity has never diminished. Heinemann's summarizing advertisement shows the essential similarity between the two stories:

> How Zuleika Dobson went to Oxford and became the Helen of an undergraduate Troy is described with all the piquant wit and light, subtle, cunning satire that in his caricatures and dainty essays have made "Max" the joy of the most fastidious public. From the Duke of ----- to the commonest commoner, all succumb to her fatal charm, and the final universal suicide of all Oxford, headed by the Duke in all his Garter robes, is one of the most delightful pieces of extravagant comedy in the world.[3]

There are many resemblances of detail between *Delight* and *Zuleika Dobson.* Here is Beerbohm's description of his heroine:

> Zuleika was not strictly beautiful. Her eyes were a trifle large, and their lashes longer than they need have been. An anarchy of small curls was her chevelure, a dark upland of misrule, every hair asserting its rights over a not discreditable brow. For the rest, her features were not at all original. They seemed to have been derived rather from a gallimaufry of familiar models. From

[3]Beerbohm included a cutting of Heinemann's advertisement in a letter to Reggie Turner, written on October 7, 1911. *See Max Beerbohm: Letters to Reggie Turner,* ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 206.

> Madame la Marquise de Saint-Ouen came the shapely tilt of the nose. The mouth was a mere replica of Cupid's bow, lacquered scarlet and strung with the littlest pearls. No apple tree, no wall of peaches, had not been robbed, nor any Tyrian rose-garden, for the glory of Miss Dobson's cheeks. Her neck was imitation marble. Her hands and feet were of very mean proportions. She had no waist to speak of.[4]

And here is Mazo de la Roche's description of Delight:

> [The hair] was a shining, pale gold, springing from the roots with strong vitality, waving closely over her head, and clinging in little curls about her temples and nape. But her skin was not blond. Rather the exquisite golden brown of some rare brunettes, with a warm glow on the cheeks, as when firelight touches the surface of a lovely brazen urn. Her eyes were an intense, dark brown, sleepy now, under thick lashes that seemed to cling together wilfully. . . . Her mouth . . . was the very throne of sweetness, as it curved with parted lips, pink as a pigeon's feet. (p. 17)

Like Zuleika, Delight is a wilful and independent heroine, who is impervious to love. Beerbohm's neater plot quickly turns the tables on Zuleika, at least for a time, when she falls in love with the haughty Duke of Dorset. It is his fancied disdain which enraptures her, and she promptly falls out of love with him when he declares his love for her.

Zuleika lives out of trunks, as befits her itinerant existence, and an episode in her past is recalled, when as a humble governess she had taken her trunks and gone from her employers in the middle of the night. This episode has obvious similarities to Delight's nocturnal departure from Brancepeth with her trunk. Delight's precious basket containing her Granny's tea-set is clearly modelled on Zuleika's malachite casket containing the gold conjuring apparatus which was presented to her by a Russian Grand Duke. The conjuring set was an important element in Beerbohm's story, while the tea-set is something of a loose end in *Delight.* The author seems to anticipate some symbolic and thematic importance for it which is never realized. It seems likely that the tea-set was conceived in imitation of the conjuring set, but that it could not be fitted into a position in the plot important enough to justify the emphasis laid on it.

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[4]*Zuleika Dobson, or An Oxford Love Story* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), pp. 9-10.

Zuleika's father, son of the Warden of Judas, had been an "unhappy curate," but her mother was a circus rider (p. 95), and this interesting parentage is reflected in Delight's family. She confides in Kirke that her mother had been a stage-struck country girl who had gone to London to work in the chorus and had fallen in love with a Russian dancer (p. 139). The characterization of Zuleika is clearly responsible for the presentation of Delight as a virginal tease, who arouses jealousy and disapproval in other women and accepts valuable presents from her admirers while resenting any familiarity.

Apart from Delight's tea-set, another loose end in the plot of de la Roche's novel is explained by comparison to *Zuleika Dobson.* Delight's earrings, bought from the gipsy, seem destined for more emphasis in the plot than is ever developed. Their green colour is stressed, but its symbolic value is given lamely as "the colour of jealousy," and the earrings burn in response to "a tingling sense of the jealousy of the women" (p. 59), while the colours of Zuleika's pearl earrings change as a barometer of her love for the Duke, and the Duke's pearl shirt studs do the same. Beerbohm's pearls are not only thematic symbols: they are an essential element in the plot, since they serve as infallible indicators of the true state of their owners' hearts.

Jimmy's ominous crows and their cries seem to be the counterpart ot Dorset's family birds. He gives this account of them to Zuleika:

> On the eve of the death of a Duke of Dorset, two black owls come and perch on the battlements. They remain there through the night, hooting. At dawn they fly away, none knows whither. On the eve of the death of any other Tanville-Tankerton, comes (no matter what be the time of year), a cuckoo. It stays for an hour, cooing, then flies away, none knows whither. (p. 59)

There are even crows, or their near relations, rooks, in Beerbohm's description of the jealous female reaction to Zuleika's appearance at the races in Eights Week. The men are suitably reverent, "but the women with them were impelled by wonder to stare hard, uttering sharp little cries that mingled with the cawing of the rooks overhead" (p. 281).

The mock heroic is more thoroughly a part of Beerbohm's technique than it is of de la Roche's, and she has nothing to match his use of the busts of the Roman emperors round the Sheldonian.

Beads of perspiration on their stone brows provide the first awesome portent of the tragedy, and they survey each change in the situation with omniscient but helpless sympathy, awaiting the inexorable decree of fate. There is little scope for Roman emperors in Brancepeth, but the race of the men quoted above, clearly follows the heroic precedent set by Dorset and his fellow members in the Junta dining club:

> From the flower-box he sprang to the road beneath. (The facade of the house is called, to this day, Dorset's Leap.) Alighting with the legerity of a cat, he swerved leftward in the recoil, and was off, like a streak of mulberry-coloured lightning, down the High. . . . Oover . . . leapt heavily but well, followed by some uprooted geraniums. Squaring his shoulders, he threw back his head and doubled down the slope. There was a violent jostle between the remaining men. The MacQuern cannily got out of it, and rushed downstairs. He emerged at the front-door just after Marraby touched ground. The baronet's left ankle had twisted under him. His face was drawn with pain as he hopped down the High on his right foot . . . Next leapt Lord Sayes. And last of all leapt Mr. Trent-Garby, who, catching his foot in the ruined flower-box, fell headlong, and was . . . killed. Lord Sayes passed Sir John in a few paces. The MacQuern overtook Mr. Oover at St. Mary's, and outstripped him in Radcliffe Square. The Duke came in an easy first. (p. 139)

The fearful storm that accompanies Delight's disgrace and expulsion from Brancepeth seems to have its origin in *Zuleika Dobson.* At the tragic climax beside the river, thunder and lightning provide the appropriate accompaniment, but again Beerbohm is not content simply to satirize the pathetic fallacy: He weaves it into the action, and it galvanizes Dorset, clad in his velvet Garter robes, into taking his last heroic leap:

> Rain! His very mantle was aspersed. In another minute he would stand sodden, inglorious, a mock. He didn't hesitate. "Zuleika!" he cried in a loud voice. Then he took a deep breath, and, burying his face in his mantle, plunged. (p. 187)

Mazo de la Roche does not imitate the mannered Latinate inversions of Beerbohm's style, but she follows his lead in using deliberately incongruous imagery. The ludicrous shellfish simile quoted by Pacey is a creditable attempt at the style that attains perfection in the opening passage of chapter three in *Zuleika Dobson:*

> The clock in the Warden's drawing room had just struck eight, and already the ducal feet were beautiful in the white bearskin hearthrug. So slim and long were they, of instep so nobly arched, that only with a pair of glazed ox-tongues on a breakfast table were they comparable. Incomparable quite, the figure and face and vesture of him who ended in them. (p. 24)

Mazo de la Roche makes no reference to her reading of *Zuleika Dobson,* but her strong literary interests would make it likely that she would read such a successful work of light fiction fairly soon after its publication. Unless she had a particularly retentive memory, she must have had a copy of Beerbohm's story at hand when she wrote *Delight.* In her autobiography, de la Roche says twice that her only sources in writing *Delight* were her own early fiction, based on the stories of a woman who had been a cook in a hotel.[5] She lays particular emphasis on the point: "As for books of reference, I had only one source. That was Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* in two bulky volumes" (p. 203). This somewhat disingenuous disclaimer is understandable and in character. In *Ringing the Changes* Mazo de la Roche frequently throws dust in the eyes of her readers.

The author's reticence means that the spirit in which Mazo de la Roche approached *Zuleika Dobson* has to be interpreted from *Delight* alone. She was an intelligent writer, and there can be no doubt that she fully understood the nature of Beerbohm's achievement and the polished mockery of his fantasy. She was wise enough to know that she could not match either, even though many of his devices might help to flesh out a romantic comedy of her own.

As Mazo de la Roche no doubt foresaw, the reader who notices the similarities between *Zuleika Dobson* and *Delight* is bound to make comparisons that reflect unfavourable on *Delight.* Comparison shows how poorly de la Roche's irony is sustained. The great ironists preserve the integrity of their ironic vision. Dorset and Zuleika are both as incapable as Gulliver of understanding their own or another's absurdity. Zuleika would never see men as "funny creatures" as Delight does (p. 23). If Zuleika had not taken men seriously, the tragic heights of Dorset's leap would have been impossible, and there would have been little satisfaction for Zuleika in planning her trip to Cambridge.

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[5]*Ringing the Changes: An Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), pp. 141 and 203.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with Mazo de la Roche's decision to give her hero and heroine the conventional happy ending. Such an ending is entirely appropriate to comedy, and particularly to her low-life characters. Had she been able to maintain the integrity of her irony throughout the novel, she might well have achieved a success like that of Stella Gibbons in *Cold Comfort Farm.*[6] The episode on the farm shows promise in the same direction. The problem for Mazo de la Roche seems to have been that irony was not her natural mode, and she could not prevent herself from slipping into the romantic vein that came naturally to her, even while she was engaged in satirizing it. Consequently one ironic episode after another peters out, until the novel itself subsides from the mock heroic climax of the war between the sexes into a cloyingly romantic conclusion:

> Dim as a cathedral aisle the path lay through the wood, and in the tallest pine, like a garland, hung the moon.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The older men, and the sadder, had drifted away, but the young, light-hearted ones hung about while succeeding boatloads of girls landed and imperceptibly group melted into group. What was the use of holding spite? And on a night like this, warm with the last kiss of summer? They merged together. Soon a game of hide and seek was in progress. Dark forms holding hands darted among the willows. Faint cries were uttered. The great red moon, shining on the racecourse, transformed the white dust to gold, so that it resembled a huge wedding ring couched on the velvet of the turf. (pp. 172, 174)

There is clearly a natural reversion to type at work, and try as she might, Mazo de la Roche was not an *ironiste manquée,* who might, with proper recognition from the critics, have realized a *métier* in satire, but a romantic lady novelist, destined to please all the kindred souls in the marketplace of popular fiction.

The author's problem in stabilizing her irony is reflected in the reader's difficulty in distinguishing what is meant seriously from what is meant ironically. On one side, Pacey seems to incline to an unduly solemn interpretation in his Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, but on the other hand, the modern reader, fifty years on from the date of composition of *Delight,* may see an irony that

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[6]London: Longmans Green, 1932.

was unlikely in 1926. It is easy, for example, to misunderstand the comedy of Delight's finding comfort in her Granny's teapot:

> She had seen Granny drain the last drop from its curly spout, her head in its frilled cap thrown back, both hands clasping the pot. Cautiously she undid it from its wrapper. *Not a chip!* Safe. Darling old teapot. Darling teapot. . . . She could not bear to part with the pot tonight. She would lay it on the other pillow, next the wall where it could not roll off. It would be company, a bedfellow, almost. She placed it snugly on the pillow, smiled at it tenderly, blew out the light, and got in beside it. It really was company in this lonely place. She laid one warm hand on its shiny fluted belly. Its spout curved toward her parted lips. She thought: "I am so happy I cannot sleep." And, in a moment, she slept. (p. 128)

Before congratulating de la Roche on a hilarious parody of literary uses of Freudian symbolism, the reader should recall other examples of sexual suggestion in *Delight* which indicate that the author's intention, though comic, was not ironic. There is the episode of the earrings, when Jimmy pierces one of Delight's ears, at her request, but cannot bear to do the other one. Kirke comes to the rescue:

> With pitiless precision he pierced the ear, tied the thread in a neat knot, and patted Delight's shoulder. "Good geerl," he said. "If you had as many ears as a field of corn I'd pierce them for you." (p. 51)

Kirke is contemptuous of Jimmy's failure, and when Delight makes the excuse that Jimmy is too tender, Kirke tells her pointedly, "Well, a tender man's no good to you." The sexual suggestion is clearly stressed, but there is no intended irony: Kirke is one of the author's favourite male types, a foxy and domineering fellow of the same breed as Rennie of Jalna. And a straightforward bawdy comedy is plainly de la Roche's intention in the episode of the schoolmaster. Like a pair of naughty children, Delight and May sneak up to peer in at his window:

> "Oo, May, I think he's lovely. Look at his white hands, and his long pointed thumb—"
>
> "Ho!" snorted May. "Admirin' of a man's thumb! I never heard the like."
>
> They both shook with smothered laughter.
>
> "I don't care," persisted Delight. "I think he's lovely. That

> black lock like the letter J on his forehead. I wish he'd come out into the rain with us. It'd do him good."
>
> "Ask him, then. Run in and tap on the pane and say — 'Come along out, schoolmaster!' I dare you."
>
> In the mild darkness of the night, in the intimate rain, anything might be dared. The blood in their veins was filled with unnamed desire. (p. 79)

This earthy and vulgar humour does well enough in a comedy of low life, but it has no place in ironic comedy, since it is itself too vulnerable to irony.

Certainly Delight did not learn her coarse sense of humour from Zuleika. It would be interesting to have Max Beerbohm's reaction to his heroine's country cousin in Canada, but there is no evidence that he ever read *Delight.* Its author maintained her discreet silence, and no critic seems to have noticed the relationship. No doubt *Delight* would have proved to be little to Beerbohm's taste, though parts of the novel might have entertained him. He would not have resented the kinship thrust upon Zuleika, judging by his charitable comment on the borrowings of his friend Oscar Wilde. Perhaps this comment may be borrowed in turn and allowed to stand as the last word on Mazo de la Roche's indebtedness to *Zuleika Dobson:*

> After all, the chief weapon of the critics, the brazen serpent by which all literary excrescence shall be cured, is the charge of plagiarism. . . . I cannot see that it matters. So long as the writer has assimilated all his material in a right way and presents it to us attractively, we have no cause to complain. *Les lettres, c'est l'esprit des autres,* and we must not . . . . be over-particular. That which is good in literature let us accept "with no questions asked."[7]

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[7]See *Letters to Reggie Turner,* Appendix A, "Oscar Wilde," by Max Beerbohm masquerading as an American (p. 291). Rubert Hart-Davis comments in a footnote to the title, "So far as is known, this was Max's first published article."