
Review: Mistress of Mistresses

As a wren twinkles in and out in a hedge-row, the demurest soft shadow of laughter came and went in Lessingham's swift grey eyes. "What, were you reading me good counsel? Forgive me, dear Amaury; I lost the thread on't. You were talking of my cousin, and the great King, and might-a-beens; but I was fallen a-dreaming and marked you not."

review by Jerry Stratton, Wednesday, February 23, 2005

I have just finished reading "Mistress of Mistresses", technically the second volume in E.R. Eddison's Ouroboros trilogy. This is an incredible work. The further along I read, the more I needed to finish it. Eddison's fantasy sweeps from strange to romantic, war to love, in a high-fantasy style that is both wordy and readable.

Author: E.R. Eddison

Year: 1935

Length: 393 pages

Rating: 6

Recommendation: [Possible Purchase](#)

In "The Worm Ouroboros" Eddison used a half-framing device that many, including myself, found annoying and confusingly pointless. After reading "Mistress of Mistresses" I'm no longer so sure of that judgment. Here, a very similar half-frame is the philosophical foundation upon which the story is built. Where, in Ouroboros, the introductory narrator appears in the first few chapters and then seems to disappear completely, in Mistress the different worlds of narrator and story intertwine deeply beneath, within, and above the story.

The main character of Mistress is that narrator who appeared forgotten in Ouroboros. Here, however, he is master of his destiny and takes an active role in the dream-like fantasy story. Despite the fact that this time, he starts the story dead. We end up having a *different* framing character who never shows up again. In this case, though, given the parallel nature of the fantastic and mundane worlds, the framing character may well have had a parallel that went unaddressed.

There is a certain dream-like quality to the "real" world in Mistress. Even the real world is a world where an adventurer can create his own nation and define his own death. The dream world intrudes upon the real world, and the real upon the dream. These appear to be different levels of reality, dispersed not only in time and space but in some level of consciousness as well.

I'm calling it the dream world, but only because it is the closest name I can think of for the fantasy world where most of the action takes place. It might just as well be "limbo" or "nirvana". The book's full title is "Mistress of Mistresses: A Vision of Zimiamvia". He calls the area of the dream world where this takes place *Zimiamvia*. The land of the glorious departed.

Here again we have the plethora of naming schemes, though not quite so varied and fantastic as in Ouroboros. Eddison lists English, French, Italian, and Greek as the source of the names of his characters in Mistress.

Mistress also has magic, but the magic is not nearly so overt as in Ouroboros. Nor are there the strange creatures of fantasy that the heroes of that earlier work needed to contend with. Here the enemy is other men. The sorcerer, while integral to the story, is not so much a part of the story as

the sorcerers of Ouroboros.

As with his other works, the writing appears uneven, at least to modern readers. But once you get into the rhythm it is poetic and breathtaking. And every once in a while you run into a passage of simplicity and beauty such as the opening quote in this review.

The story itself begins with the death of the hero: an unnamed friend attends Lessingham's funeral. An unknown, yet familiar, woman attends the funeral. The friend tells the story of how he met Lessingham in a rural church, in a valley due to be flooded and turned into a reservoir. He laments the passing of Lessingham and Lessingham's works.

Then I heard her say, in her voice that was gentler than the glow-worm's light among rose-trees in a forgotten garden between dewfall and moonrise: *Be content. I have promised and I will perform.*

And from there we go to Zimiamvia, where King Mezentius has recently died. The Vicar, Lord Horius Parry, is not well-liked in the kingdom; yet for the moment the kingdom is divided politically between the Vicar, the king's bastard son Duke Barganax, the High Admiral Jeronimy, and the king's young but legitimate son King Styllis.. The Vicar is Lessingham's cousin. Lessingham is the Vicar's warrior and envoy. So Lessingham, against his advisor's judgment, plans to support his cousin should the new king bring war to the Vicar.

But the Vicar has his own ideas about how to handle upstart kinglings.

Most of the story is Lessingham's. To a lesser extent it is Duke Barganax's but that is a strange thing as you will see when you read it. According to the opening sequence, Zimiamvia is some sort of death-dream or spirit-land. Eddison does a wonderful job of granting the story a dream-like quality just as it is most unexpected. Much of this centers around Duke Barganax's advisor, the doctor Vandermast. Vandermast has created a magical garden for Barganax, where it is always golden afternoon. But Vandermast is more and less than a sorcerer. What he is never becomes completely clear, but he knows more than the others about what Zimiamvia really is, and who the Duke and Lessingham truly are.

If you enjoy intricate high fantasy and stratospheric language, you will probably enjoy *Mistress of Mistresses*. But this is more than that. It is a statement of philosophy on the passing of greatness. I heartily recommend it.

For more information:

Buy *Mistress of Mistresses* at Amazon

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=034527220X/negativespaceA/>)

A fascinating fantasy story writ upon several layers of telling. If you enjoy the florid prose, I cannot recommend this highly enough.

Buy *Zimiamvia: A Trilogy* at Amazon

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=0440503000/negativespaceA/>)

As unfortunately unavailable as the rest of Eddison's works (I have never seen it), this huge book collects *Mistress of Mistresses*, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and *The Mezentian Gate*. It also footnotes many of the references that Eddison makes, which ought to be very useful.

E.R. Eddison (<http://greatsfandf.com/AUTHORS/EREddison.shtml>)

An interesting overview of Eddison's great works of fantasy.

Classics of Fantasy: The Worm Ouroboros by E.R. Eddison
(<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=books/main/classicworm>)

A very insightful review of “The Worm Ouroboros” and an interesting overview of how Eddison fit in with other fantasy authors of his time.

Related articles about E.R. Eddison:

The Worm Ouroboros (<http://www.hoboes.com/Mimsy/?ART=94&preview=1>)

This book does everything wrong; under no circumstances would it be published today, except perhaps as a self-published venture, and then it would be used as an example of why self-publishing is wrong. And yet, it’s a wonderful novel.