

Fragments of Zenda





I. Princess Flavia was probably a prime example of whom Deborah meant when she complained of “those ‘lady’ roles” that MGM began to typecast her in.

In The Prisoner of Zenda, though she has equal billing with Stewart Granger, she has far from equal time, or equal range. I remember my impatience at age 11 when the movie veered away from her. “When do we get back

to Flavia?! Unfortunately, not till the very end after eons of derring do.²

Still, she was breathtakingly beautiful, in the fairy-princess sense. But so young! so yet unformed, unknowing, her smooth face showing how much she had yet to live.

Yet who would not want once in her life to look like that? To get to wear those great costumes. To fit into them! To have red-gold curls clustered like Greek sculpture. To have that face, those eyes. That presence! To waltz. To evince all the self-respect that being a Princess could bring.

And there was some range. When she did get to be angry, she was funny and eloquent. And elegant. “Elegant” can mean ruffles and such; at the same time it is used of mathematical proofs to denote certain qualities; simplicity, clarity, insight.

II. When Deborah Kerr was given an Oscar for lifetime achievement, Glen Close, who introduced her, said what a “lady” she was. “Oh, dear,” I said to Mom, who was watching



with me, “it always got her goat to be called a lady.”

“I don’t even own a pair of white gloves!”
Deborah once exclaimed.

“Lady” is a concept much out of fashion among nearly everyone, certainly including feminists. Yet I remember when it was a term of honor for a woman, and I don’t want us to forget what was good about ladies, and the kind of lady Deborah Kerr has played, has stood for.

Part of what’s problematic about “lady” is its link to class. We have a lot of words that connect good qualities with social class. “Noble” and “gentle”, for instance, were once indicators of rank. “Classy” itself means something on a spectrum between “indicative of wealth and good taste” and “done in an honorable, admirable way”.

But the thing is, often it has been access to social class that has made possible the development of certain good qualities.

In European history it was only noble women, or increasingly less, nuns, who knew how to read and write, to understand the languages of the scholars.

And rank could impart a kind of self-respect. Margaret Cavendish, for instance, an English philosopher of the 1600's, wrote that at least it was clear to her that she knew more and was



smarter than uneducated men she knew.

It is sad that her suspicions of the universal superiority of men came to her because of being higher in the class system. On the other hand, thank goodness “Mad Madge” found those suspicions somewhere, had some way to come to self-respect. (Wouldn’t it have been fun if Deborah had played Margaret Cavendish sometime?)³



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III. I suppose it's true that Flavia gave up too much for her country. It was "long-suffering"⁵, to let the love of her life leave her to a life-long, loveless marriage with the look-alike alcoholic King. But that was only at the end.⁶

IV. Once when Sandra and I were trying to give words to what our commitment to each other was, I told her, "I'm willing to be faithful, in the ordinary course of things.

But I've got to admit it, if Deborah Kerr should ever call, I would go."

"Oh," she laughed, "don't ever be lovers with anyone who wouldn't let you ride off into the sunset with Deborah Kerr.

They couldn't possibly love you."

She did. Ours was no perfect love, but one of the only kind there is past the sunset, made of equal parts cherishing and the gritty mystery of our otherness to each other. But when heaven is not at stake, of course there is more room for risk, for play. For example, I explored more with her sexually than I ever would have with, say, Flavia. Though most things made us laugh as much as they turned us on. ...Like the night she bound my wrists with a thick black silk cord, and looking into my eyes, murmured, "Now you're The Prisoner of Sandra!"

¹ From the Prisoner of Zenda, © MGM

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³ [Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)

⁴ Deborah Kerr and Stewart Granger still for The Prisoner of Zenda, © MGM

⁵ Deborah has characterized her roles of the time as being “white gloved and long-suffering”. Find quote.

⁶ The 1951 movie Prisoner of Zenda is set in a mythical 1890s small European kingdom. An Englishman vacationing there is discovered by some local nobles, who notice he looks almost exactly like the soon-to-be-crowned king. The real king is kidnapped just before his coronation; evil Prince Rupert knows that the public will assume he is too drunk to come to his crowning, he’s well known to be alcoholic. The nobles talk the Englishman (Stewart Granger) into standing in for the King. At the coronation he meets Princess Flavia, destined from childhood to be his bride. She hasn’t seen him for years, accepts the impostor as king, and the two fall in love. In the end, the King is rescued, hopefully having learned his lesson, and the Englishman and the Princess do the noble thing.