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James Mechem: The Gentyllle & Parfait Knight

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"Be quiet, I said."

"I know you said that, boss. But I want to know what the hell you think we're doing here."

"For the last time, be quiet."

I don't know. Everything is everything. Nothing is nothing. You should know what I'm telling you. Help is where your mother is. It gets harder and harder to tell you something. I'm crying. I'm pitiful . . .

James Mechem: The Gentyllé & Parfait Knight / Carol Bergé

MECHEM'S MECHEM-AS-HERO

James Mechem's writing persona is a swashbuckling romantic hero who evolves ritually from the fourteenth- to the eighteenth-century novels of manners and from the medieval romances. His step could be minuet or gavotte; the ritual is that of carrying a lace handkerchief in the visor before the joust. His hero-figure moves among women as Count Mechem of a radio soap opera or an MGM historical spectacular, replete with cape and heart-on-sleeve; he's Doug Fairbanks and Errol Flynn and J. Bond, quaffing Polish vodka, speaking in clear puns and ever bowing to the ladies, who are chauvinistically regarded as goddesses of a nearby planet and thus to be treated with awe, deference, and tweaking envy. The I of his writing is different from Steve Katz' or Fielding Dawson's, two of my other favorites: Steve's I moves in a future fantasy of transmutation and omnivorous glitziness; Fee's persona has power of total recall in boyish larger-than-life present and recent past, concerned with the aura of the Forties and Fifties—contemporary mores meticulously described and displayed like finds in an archeological dig. All these men use their hero-figure to shrive a dull youth and thereby create a mythos. Mechem's Mechem is as far as possible from the author's own workaday world of business computers and multi-kid family and long-term monogamy. His actual self writes names in bright, large flowing script on envelopes, covering love-letters of admiration to women he has not yet met or knows only professionally; sends volumes of love-poetry by earlier people to his admired woman-friends; picks up the phone in the middle of the night just to say his affection and greetings, from mid-country to any coast—Beau Geste in modern drag, courtly and in love with love as a classical way to be beautiful to each other. Mechem's

Mechem (always called James, never Jim, because it was run together when he was a boy: Jimechem, which he hates) is not ever a boy, has no past, has always been a man in history, is the fantasy world of a Scorpio boy raised Catholic and forbidden sensuality, hungry for a new ritual to explain & encompass the 'dark of the blood' between men and women—that which makes them godlike while human. Playing the nice mannerly Venetian nobleman, pure of motive, he sends through the mail a photograph of Leda and the Swan, elegant statue from the Archeological Museum, explicitly sexual, very classic. This Gentyllie and Parfait Knight says love is not temporal.

MECHEM'S STYLE

His language eschews complexity in favor of adornments particular to his instantly recognizable trademarks. His own name in his work is Henry or Bertie, but his heroines are called Zakiya, Sheba, Victorine, Cuba, Rauud, Madojane! He calls her "darling girl," comments on the marvelous size of her mammaries, and is afraid of her power. Consider this dialogue: " 'Come home and sleep with me,' I said, testing her. 'All right,' she said. 'Well,' I said, 'if you're that easy to pick up I don't want you. I don't want just anybody. You must have done it before to agree so readily.' 'I've never done it before—I go to church every Sunday. I took pity on you . . .'" They do make love, of course. The familiar virgin-or-whore conflict, and it occurs in most of his fictions. Nice girls are ladies, ladies don't put out. He makes love with Zinaida and with practically all the other heroines. A dry sense of humour based in hyperboles. The man's actions in the life often reflect the romanticism of the work; that is, he describes himself (in "An Interview with James Mechem," from *A Diary of Women*, a particularly sardonic tissue of half-truths designed to conceal as much as to reveal) as a bachelor. He writes like a bachelor and his love-letters are those of a courtly yet horny bachelor; the sheep in wolf's clothing; the pleasure principle heightened by exquisite guilt. Mechem courts and flirts, is lovable and surly and provocative, in the life as in the work; if there is a way to play the scene for dramatic content, he will chance it. Often, it works. One can recognize James' work without the signature. Consider these: Milady, endearments, yonder, falsely, stolen melody, delirium, snowbanks, couched, priest, shadows that surrounded, cruel, shivering, role—all in one short (2-page) story! He travels in the stories, too: in a piece published in *Center* which he calls "A Thousand-Page Thing About Some Platinum Haired Twin Heiresses The Richest Women in the World," which is one typewritten page long, he mentions Libya, Paris, Tokyo, polo, winter palaces, and mah jongg, and throws in three French phrases. But his tiny story "Sweet Witchcraft" begins: "The sign said TOPLESS NUN: ENTER AT YR OWN

RISK. He entered and the topless nun put him to work in the kitchen making candy. He was her slave.” Really. And in the untitled piece in *Center* #4: Sheba “is a widow in her late forties . . . a beautiful vivacious woman . . . rustic simplicity in her plump, attractive figure . . . good-natured and open. Her disposition is unyielding. She takes charge. She is a commanding Madonna. She is never the suppliant but always the aggressor. She is direct and outgoing. She is a determined woman who does not like to be crossed . . .” This sketch goes on to define, in a pragmatic and precise series of sociological evidences, the life and time of a woman whom Mechem obviously admires and enjoys, a professional who possesses “serenity of spirit, zest for living, heart for living, independence of mind and action, complete adjustment to her life, contentment . . .” a woman who smokes Havana cigars, runs her office with a firm hand, and rules love rather than being ruled by it. He adores her. The narrator’s name is Balzac, if you please.

MECHEM’S PLACE IN HISTORY

Mechem, like most workers in the avant-garde, is testy of disposition and ambitious to be a mass-market producer, but chooses not to deal in the products that bring in commercial contracts. Instead, he edits an odd, off-beat collection of poetries which he calls *OUT OF SIGHT*, a phenomenon produced on a mimeo machine at his office on ordinary 8x11 paper and circulated limitedly among poets and other literary aficionados for the most part. Its pale purple ink usually disappears from the page within a fortnight of receipt, thereby making it a testimonial to the frailty of the printed word, and to our youth (you remember making “disappearing ink” with lemon juice?). Another magic trick from the Gentylle Knight. If his point of view were less romantic and idealistic, the stories would go into a high-class *Penthouse* or *Playboy*, if this country had such; they have the proper degree of chauvinism, sensuality, and textural language. They lack the disenchantment, conflict, and brutality of the sort of modern fiction that makes the slicks. Mechem works out of Wichita, Kansas. He travels, as often as possible, to attend CCLM and COSMEP and other literary conferences. He’s slender, fortyish, blue of eye and fair of skin, the skin very delicate of texture and the features sharp and agile. He is the fair male Scorpio, which you could have guessed by now. In the correspondences, he turns unexpectedly sharp, manufacturing hurts and offences done by the world or the friend, and is over the tantrum almost at once, to resume an affectionate dialogue, specific or general. Like another mid-country writer too little recognized, Hugh Fox, he keeps on keepin’ on, producing and distributing the writing and OOS, his love-objects, and continues to maintain his idealized love-affairs with as many beautiful women as possible, probably in the abstract. Margaret Mead says that “love is the inven-

tion of a few high cultures, independent, in a sense, of marriage—it is a cultural artifact . . .” Mechem’s skill is in defining and describing one aspect of the love artifact, and this he does very individually, and with a great deal of charm. For this he will be secure in history.

Sweet Witchcraft / James Mechem

The sign said TOPLESS NUN: ENTER AT YR OWN RISK. He entered and the topless nun put him to work in the kitchen making candy. He was her slave. How had this state of affairs come about? He suspected witchcraft—yes, witchcraft.

The topless nun came into the room. “Where’s that new batch of candy?” He gave it to her and she bit into a piece. “What a sweet tooth I have for this stuff.”

“We all have our hang-ups.”

“What’s yours?”

“Nipples.”

She boxed him upside the head. For the rest of his life he would not hear so good out of that ear.

“Look at what it got you, your hang-up,” she said.

“You feed on people with my hang-up,” he said.

“I batten on them.”

“You’re wicked,” he said.

The candy store was called THE TOPLESS NUN. She paid starvation wages. If he hadn’t needed a job in the worst way he never would have taken it. She was a stupid slave driver. She was also a witch to have such a good figure.

“What does that mean—Enter at Your Own Risk?” a customer asked her.

“Let the buyer beware,” she said.

“Beware of what?” the customer asked.

“Beware of my charms.”

The customer looked quickly at them. “Of course.”

A nun of the Order of The Sisters of The Most Precious Blood demanded, “Sister, have you got our marzipan ready?”

She came back to the kitchen. “Do you have the marzipan ready?”

“Marzipan? I don’t know how to make marzipan! What is it? Almond paste? Coconut? Tell them to come back tomorrow.”

“Can you come back tomorrow, Sister?”