



ZENIOBIA -

from "The Monk's Tale", Canterbury Tales, Chaucer

Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, as the Persians write concerning her glory, was so valorous and so bold in arms that no creature passed her in hardihood, nor in lineage or in other nobleness. 2251

She was descended from the blood of Persian kings; I do not say that she was the fairest of all women, but her form could not be amended. From her childhood I find that she fled to the woods from women's duties. With her broad arrows she spilled many wild harts' blood; she was so swift that she seized them quickly. 2259

When she was older she would kill lions and leopards, and tear bears to pieces and in her arms dealt with them at will. She dared seek wild beasts' dens and roam over the mountains all night and sleep under a bush.

Because of her true strength she could wrestle with any young man, no matter how strong he was. Nothing could stand against her arms. She kept her maidenhood against every creature and chose to be bound to none. 2270

At length her friends married her to Odenathus, a prince of that country, albeit she delayed them for a long time. (And you shall understand that he had much the same fancies as she.) But nevertheless, when they were knit

together, they lived in joy and felicity, for each held the other dear, except one thing: that she would never agree, in any way, that he should lie with her only once, for it was her full intention to have a child, to multiply the world; and as soon as she could tell that she was not with child on account of that deed, then she would allow him to perform his fantasy again, and only once, without doubt. 2286

And if she were with child at that time, she would play this game no more, until a full forty weeks were past; then she would allow him to do the same once. Regardless of whether this Odenathus were wild or tame, he got no more of her, for thus she said: it was lechery and shame for a woman, in any other case, if men played with them. 2295

She had two sons by this Odenathus, whom she brought up in virtue and learning. But now let us return to our tale. I say so worshipful a creature, so wise indeed and liberal without prodigality, so active and resolute in war, so courteous as well, was nowhere to be found in this entire world. 2302

Her rich array both in terms of precious vessels and of clothes could not be described; she was clad entirely in gems and gold. She spared nothing, even taking into account all of her hunting, to gain full knowledge of various languages when she had leisure, and the study of books was all her delight, and how she might spend her life in virtue. 2310

And, to treat this story briefly, so valiant were she and her husband that they conquered and held with strong hand many great kingdoms and many fair cities in the orient that had belonged to the majesty of Rome. Never could their foes put them to flight while Odenathus' days lasted.

Whoever wishes to read of her battles against Sapor the king and others, and how all these events were decided why she made her conquests and what title she had in that, and afterward of her woe and misfortune, how she was besieged and taken, let them go to my master Petrarch, who writes enough of this, I believe. 2326

When Odenathus died, she held the realm with her own mighty hand and fought so fiercely against her foes that there every king or prince in that entire region was glad if he found such grace that she did not make war

with him. With her they made treaties and alliances to live in peace and let her ride and sport at will.

Neither Claudius the emperor of Rome nor Gallienus before him, nor any Armenian or Egyptian, Syrian or Arabian, was so courageous as to dare fight with her in the field, lest she slay them with her own hands or put them to flight with her troops. 2342

Her two sons went in regal habit as heirs of all their father's realms; and Hermanno and Thymalao were their names in Persian. But ever Fortune mingles gall in her honey; this mighty queen could endure no long time. Fortune made her fall from her kingdom into wretchedness and misfortune. 2350

Aurelian, when the governance of Rome came into his hands, planned vengeance upon this queen, and took his way with his legions toward her land; and, to tell it shortly, made her flee, and at last seized and bound her in fetters with her two children, and won the land and went back to Rome.

Among other things that he won, this Aurelian, the great Roman, took with him her chariot all wrought with gold and gems, so that all might see it.

Zenobia walked before his triumphal chariot with golden chains hanging from her neck, crowned according to her station, and her habit loaded with gems.

Alas, Fortune! The whole rabble gawked at her who was once dreadful to kings and emperors. Alas! She that was helmeted in steel in stern onslaughts, and defeated mighty towns and towers by force, shall now, as it were, have a helmet of glass upon her head. She who bore a splendid scepter shall, in turn, bear a distaff.