

tem of benevolent hypocrisy—most often referred to as good manners—what did we have left? We found crudeness, boorishness and, in too many instances, violence and savagery. That Ms. Alther thoroughly approves of this shift is best illustrated in the contrast between the militant Donny and his long-suffering Aunt Jemima-ish grandmother, who, like all the characters, are crude stereotypes.

Fortunately we, that is American society, seem to be slowly emerging from

the quagmire of the 60's and 70's. Lisa Alther, so highly touted by the sophisticates in the literary press for her assorted condemnations and exposures, is beginning to look a trifle dated. It takes the Manhattan cognoscenti a while to catch up to the rest of the country, of course, but one hopes that by the middle of the 80's they will have caught the direction of the drift. Then will come the mad scramble to catch up, and perhaps there will be a few novels which attempt to show how traditional certitudes can make life nice. □

ence. They talked as if the idea that the brain led the way in human evolution were as reasonable as the knowledge that our ancestors of four million years ago walked about on their hind legs. But it is not. There is an enormous difference by the test of science, which is the test of evidence. You cannot show physical evidence to document the belief that the earliest humans had brains more powerful than those other animals, but you can easily observe that they walked on just two feet at a time when their brains were no larger than those of chimpanzees. These authors in front of their keyboards write of a scientist named Thomas Henry Huxley, who is supposed to have used arguments about evolution to lend support to feminist positions. But they apparently failed to read, or, reading, failed to believe, the same Huxley's statements about girls being not so well balanced as boys, their being naturally timid and born conservatives. If Huxley truly held these views, then that was his opinion. That is truly subjective, for

Beyond Nature: Sexual Aesthetics and Politics

Marilyn French: *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*; Summit Books; New York.

William Leach: *True Love and Perfect Union*; Basic Books; New York.

by Robert B. Eckhardt

At the outset of this essay I offer all due apologies to Gilbert Keith Chesterton, whose key paragraph in "The Ethics of Elfland" (from Orthodoxy, 1908) I have paraphrased here. In this case, the limitation is sincerely meant to be a form of homage; while I cannot in conscience share all of Chesterton's views, he stands as one of this century's most energetic and versatile writers in the English language.

There are certain viewpoints or explanations (cases of one set of phrases following another) which are, in the true sense of the word, preferences. Such are certain philosophical positions or literary tastes. We in science (who are the most imaginative of all creatures) accept those interpretations and preferences.

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ences. For instance, if the Prince considers Cinderella to be more beautiful than her sisters, then it is necessary that he believes the ugly sisters to be . . . uglier . . . than Cinderella. There is no getting out of it. A Hegelian may talk

"... she is quite dazzling. Her reading of 'Hamlet' . . . seems to me brilliant and far more coherent than Ernest Jones's or T. S. Eliot's."

—New York Times

as much fatalism about that fact as he pleases: it really must be. If as a boy Darwin roamed the fields rather than studying in classrooms, then young Charles preferred bright beetles to dull lessons. The warmth of a boyish collector's passions decreed it from an inscrutable heart, and we in science submit. If a lad tracks a beetle, then he learns firsthand whether two legs in pursuit are swifter than six legs in flight: that is an experience grown out of preference, and science is full of it. But as I peeked over the disciplinary hedge into the world of letters, I observed an extraordinary thing. I observed that learned authors at their typewriters were writing about the actual facts of biology—human anatomy, physiology, evolution and so on—as if these were matters of choice and prefer-

it is difficult to conceive the extent of evidence needed to support such sweeping judgments. But we can easily conceive other statements of opinion, ones which might be better supported by factual evidence; we can document physical and physiological differences on the average between the sexes which are not mere matters of opinion. We must always in science keep this sharp distinction between evidence, which can really be observed, and matters of taste, in which there is no test of experience, but only subjective judgments. We believe in freedom of opinion, but only where subjective preferences do not contradict objective evidence. We believe that much of the evolution of our species took place in the absence of firsthand observations; but that does not at all confuse our convictions about

which reconstructions the evidence allows and which it rules out.

Here we (scientists) apparently part company with such writers as Marilyn French, even though her approach is empirical and inductive (so she tells us).

This book is a study of the gender principles as I see them existing in Shakespeare's work. I did not bring my theory to the work; rather, the work of Shakespeare, when contrasted with the work of some twentieth-century authors . . . brought me to see as I do.

What are these gender principles, the foci of her book? They are described by the author as polar opposites, or at least the ends of a spectrum of sexual attributes; moreover, these end-points are imbued with values: maleness equates with aggression, power and the like; femaleness with compassion, nurturing and so on. Some lines of this sort can be drawn, but who has done it? The book's title, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, suggests that the allocation is the bard's, but at one point Dr. French states: "This is not to say that Shakespeare thought in terms of a feminine or masculine principle, but he did unquestionably think in terms of men and women . . ." There's more than a little difference between the two conceptions of how our visions of the world are organized along sexual lines. Males and females can be seen: people and the roles they play are matters of observation—of evidence. Masculine and feminine principles are abstractions, requiring interpretation of what is seen (or read).

Ms. French, no doubt, believes her conception of herself as a scholar is that of a literary Linnaeus, discovering the division that the creator has ordained in his world of plays. However, I can't shake the feeling that the "species" she sees are, in good part, arbitrary creatures of her own world view. To continue the above quotation, she holds that "Shakespeare . . . did unques-

tionably think of men and women . . . not as similar members of a single species, but as very different creatures, subject to different needs and desires. . . ." Fortunately, Ms. French absolves Shakespeare of any *personal* responsibility for such a view, for, while joining in the "almost universal derogation of women," he is only continuing traditions which have prevailed since the dawn of our species.

The fundamental split in human thinking is not gender but a perception of humans as separate from, different from nature. This perception was probably responsible for the survival of a species lacking the special physical or perceptual equipment possessed by other surviving animal species. Humans, rooted in and subject to natural environment and natural processes to the same degree as other animals, stood up on their hind legs,



and used what they had—a brain more powerful than those of other animals, and a retractile thumb—to attempt to control an environment they were not especially adaptable to.

Even if we leave aside the peculiar syntax and the whiff of biological determinism for which Robert Ardrey or Konrad Lorenz would have been roasted mercilessly, this hypothetical sketch is simply wrong. It is contradicted by the facts. Fossil bones and clear human footprints over four million years old attest to the fact that at a time when our ancestors were walking around on two legs as we do, they were equipped with brains no larger than those of living chimps. We have here, then, a tragedy in the sense of Herbert Spencer: a beautiful theory killed by an ugly fact. Perhaps it would be nice if certain things were true, but not all issues can be judged by authorial preferences; facts will intrude now and again.

In the final analysis, I suspect that this book will be used more for its abundant, if terse, plot summaries. These comprise the bulk of the work, and college students taking their first course in Shakespeare will no doubt find them useful. I only hope that these readers won't take too seriously the brief introduction and conclusion from which they might be led to believe that Shakespeare is morally neutral (!) as well as antiwoman.

There is less need to worry that many readers will be misled—or led anywhere for that matter—by William Leach's *True Love and Perfect Union*. I'd wager that few of the readers tempted by its extravagant dust-jacket raves will even finish the book, which provides ample ammunition for those intellectuals within and without academe who maintain that doctoral dissertations rarely, if ever, make good books. Incidentally, I should note that I virtually knew this book began its existence as a dissertation simply because it read like supply in search of demand. After all, what publisher would have gone looking for a history of the social ideas of the American feminist movement, 1850-1875? Although there's no mention of the book's genesis in the Acknowledgments (or anywhere else), a

quick look in *Dissertation Abstracts International* confirmed my hunch. *True Love*, etc., had been a 1977 dissertation at Rochester before being rewarmed, with abundant foundation support, for serving again in 1980.

Although I found Leach's work mostly just boring, occasional aspects of it were downright silly. One of these was the apparently central idea that much of the progressivism to be seen in American culture has its roots in feminism. The author does offer evidence that many progressive ideas were held by feminists (though a good few of their notions were absurd, such as advocating clothing described as "a grotesque blend of Turkish and Quaker,"

or worse—such as active admiration of German "eugenics" laws). However, to demonstrate logically and convincingly that the one movement not only followed, but followed *from* the other it would be necessary to demonstrate not only that some feminists held progressive ideas, but also that there were not any significant numbers of progressive nonfeminists. In failing to do this Leach's arguments giving retrospective value to the earlier feminist movement seem quite unconvincing. *True Love*, as a result, stands as a not-terribly-interesting catalogue of curious customs—rather like those 19th-century tracts on the ways of life of the world's curious savages. Perhaps that's why the designer chose a purple dust jacket . . . □

Clichés as Merchandise

Thomas Fleming: *The Officers' Wives*; Doubleday & Co.; New York.

by Otto J. Scott

One reward for watching old movies on late-night television is that one can see how the passage of time and changes in fashion cruelly expose the artifices of writers of the past, making outmoded assumptions appear both remote and ridiculous. Much the same can be said of aged novels. In recent months some long-held fashionable attitudes have undergone a seemingly abrupt change, and arguments once assumed to be contemporary have, nearly overnight, been rendered faded and antique.

This shift in intellectual fashion has caught, among others, Thomas Fleming's *The Officers' Wives*. When initially conceived, it must have impressed the editors at Doubleday as being a sure-fire hit, to use the jargon of the trade. First, it would be aimed at women, who buy most of the novels.

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Second, the women in the book would be better than the men, who would not be worthy of such fire, passion and sacrifice (with the possible exception of one intellectual rake, who would be irresistible while harboring all the fashionably liberal positions). Third, virtue and courage would be rewarded, and bastards would be punished, but not in a fashion too crude for credibility. Fourth, there would be many marital scenes in which sex would appear, but not in ugly language. Finally, the author, with ten previous novels and eight previous nonfiction works in print, would be able to provide such verisimilitude that Hollywood scriptwriters would have virtually no problem in turning this 645-page opus into a film.

Unfortunately the country changed between the time of conception and the printing of the novel. A book intended for the continuation of Carterland has appeared during Reagantime. And that shift in the attitudes of this nation make the artifices of author Fleming and his novel seem not only awkward and distorted, but also the very paradigm of what, for so long, has been

wrong with so many American novels.

Although it was published in 1981 with a 1950's setting, when three recent West Point graduates marry three widely assorted women in the famous Chapel, *The Officers' Wives* echoes the attitudes of the 1920's, more specifically those made famous by Sinclair Lewis. Each of the officers, with one exception, is a Babbitt working for a huge and ridiculous corporation called the U.S. Army, in which promotion is gained by any means except honorable. The women in the novel are all, with one exception, Carol Kennicotts (*Main Street*): superior to the men, literate if not literary, brave and essentially honest, able—through second sight and intuition—to see through the foibles of men and society alike. All are entwined in marriages that should not have been formed and are essentially unhappy. The women face up to this problem; the men—in the main—do not. Only one of the men is literate in the true sense, which means that he leans toward Zen, extramarital affairs with the wives of his friends and rebellion against the Pentagon. He comes to a predictably bad end and his widow—a simpleton—turns to Jesus for comfort. The heroine, the author's favorite among his female characters, struggles bravely to be independent, even as an army wife, and teaches school. She repudiates a Catholicism that is depicted as narrow and stupid, and is rewarded by widowhood when her obtuse but brave husband is killed in Vietnam. This enables her to marry again and gives the brave woman a second chance to snare a major-general. Thus does life reward virtue.

There are other subplots and persons, of course, but these are sufficient to demonstrate the author's penchants. Innumerable sketches, scenes and observations make it clear that the novel depicts a nation sans subtlety of feelings, sans honor among men, and pictures women as suitable for better men from a better culture. That message, however, like many other themes in