

ACCUSATIONS OF A MALE CHAUVINIST PIG

P. K. Pehda

Here's to woman! Would that we could fall into her arms without falling into her hands.—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

The estimable Francis King in his criticism tends to lump the literary material at hand into any one of three categories: counterfeits, confections, and creations. Looking at the writing inspired by the women's liberation movement, one is tempted to add a fourth—caterwauling. In a recent *Mainichi Daily News* interview by Ann Nakano with the editor of Japan's *Feminist Magazine*, Mrs. Nakano elicited the information that the busy lady was now at work on six concurrent books. It would seem that is the usual way of creation by this particular type of lady writer.

The "war between men and women" goes back at least to Chaucer (I'll refrain from the temptation to mention the cause of Man's expulsion from the heavenly garden) but in literature the phrase itself is usually associated with modern-day humorist James Thurber, who specialized in depicting timid and harrassed males, huge and over-powering females, and sad-eyed dogs. The dog's mournful look was usually caused by the knowledge of man's best friend that man was *losing* (or had already lost) this perpetual war with the opposite sex.

It is debatable whether in Thurber's most famous story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," the more memorable character is the henpecked husband whose only recourse is in daydreams or his wife who somehow emerges so Formidable despite evincing no special characteristic that separates her from the average wife.

Some of Thurber's strongest ammunition went into his cartoons and fables. Who can forget the mammoth woman in the bowling alley who is about to throw the heavy ball down the lane somewhat in the manner that Mr. Kobayashi hurls a baseball for the Hanshin Tigers? "All right, all right," resignedly sighs the husband. "Try it that way! Go ahead and try it that way!" In his most famous fable, "The Unicorn in the Garden," the husband is sitting in the breakfast nook eating scrambled eggs when he first glimpses the unicorn. Significantly, his wife is in the bedroom, still asleep. When he wakes her to tell her of a unicorn cropping roses in the garden, she opens "one unfriendly eye," tells him the unicorn is a mythical beast, and turns her back on him. The man lies down among the roses and goes to sleep. The wife with "a gloat in her eye" telephones the police and a psychiatrist in an effort to have her husband put away, but in a rare Thurber ending the husband turns the tables on her and "they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution." The last line is almost anti-climactic: "The husband lived happily ever after." Similarly, in "The Shrike and the Chipmunks," the female chipmunk leaves her husband because of his insistence to arrange nuts in artistic patterns, which is more fun than just seeing how many he can pile up. She says if he gave up that

idea there would be room in their large cave for many more and he would soon become the wealthiest chipmunk in the woods. "What would you do without me?" she demands. One can almost see the shrug of his shoulders (if chipmunks have shoulders) as he responds, "Just go on living, I guess."

If one were to imagine that Mr. Thurber had an unhappy married life he would be half right. The first of his two marriages was something of a disaster. Althea Adams (who would be the first Mrs. Thurber) was five-feet-nine-inches tall and very large-boned. Though very popular at the same Ohio State University that Thurber attended, the boys liked to joke about her height and heft.¹ One mutual friend described her as "... the most unattainable woman. She was aloof, attractive, ambitious, worldly, and very social—all the things Jim wasn't, particularly."² Another friend remembers, "Jim had a project going to conquer Althea, which was quite a project since she was an Amazonian woman, both physically and mentally. I considered it remarkable that he finally captured her. A lot of us sat around thunderstruck, trying to figure out how he did it. They both had a passion for dogs. That was one thing, maybe."³ Jim's brother Robert took a different view of the match: "Althea was the one who grabbed Jamie. She was the domineering type, bossy and pushy, always wanting her own way. She hooked him, sure as anything. Why? I guess she saw something in him that was different from the others. She saw his possibilities..."⁴ There were immediate problems, including inevitable mother-in-law problems (Althea and Jim's mother). Inevitably, it didn't work out. As Thurber would later admit when he was in his cups and the subject would come up, "She always scared me."⁵

About humor, he once told Max Eastman, who published in his 1936 book *Enjoyment of Laughter* that his humor was really about one thing: "beaten-down married people. The American woman is my theme and how she dominates the male, how he tries to go away but always comes back for more, being romantic and everlastingly nice and having an almost religious feeling about marriage."⁶

So many modern short stories of life in suburbia (when one thinks of the contemporary short story AND suburbia, one almost automatically thinks of *The New Yorker*, with which Thurber was synonymous for more than two decades) remind one of Thurberdom. John Updike, the best-known of the current *New Yorker* employees, in response to the question, "What book made you decide to become a writer and why?" answered as follows:

I'm not sure I ever did decide to be a writer; in my mind I'm still just trying it out. A book, however, that remains there bathed in a numinous glow was James Thurber's "Men, Women and Dogs," published by Harcourt, Brace in 1943, and costing \$ 3. I, age 11, had asked it be given to me as a Christmas present, and so it was, and eagerly unwrapped, and read right there on the floor, in smelling distance of the Christmas tree and the little blue Lionel train that went around and around, emitting a whistling noise and a dear little scent of hot lubricating oil. It was a

book of cartoons but more bookshaped than this genre usually is, with an introduction by Dorothy Parker, a dedication to Andy White and an index of captions. What I made, in my prepubescent state, of captions like "Le coeur a ses raisons, Mrs. Bence, que le raison ne connait pas" and "My wife wants to spend Halloween with her first husband," I don't quite remember. But the volume spoke to me of New York, of sophistication, of amusing adult misery, of carefree creativity (I could see that Thurber had a lot of trouble fitting his furniture around his people but hadn't let it bother him), of nervous squiggles given permanence and celebrity by the intervening miracle of printer's ink. This struck me as a super way to live, to be behind such a book."

Actually, Updike female characters do not make one think of Thurber women or Thurber cartoons. In his beautiful story, "Museums and Women," he compares the two words: "Both words hum. Both suggest radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty."⁸ Is there also a suggestion here that just as Museums house ancient things that are no longer in use, so, too, are these qualities now obsolescent in regard to women? Updike, the master of rhetoric, often solves his characters' problems with divorce as witness the supposedly semiautobiographical Maple stories.

John Cheever, Updike's good friend, and a writer also closely associated with *The New Yorker* (he admits that Harold Ross, the magazine's founder and most famous editor, has always been a father-figure to him) is quite another matter: he has a whole gallery of unforgettable females one would hope do not exist other than in Thurber-like cartoons, but the evidence is otherwise. Another writer, Irwin Shaw, says of Cheever, that the surface is not his thing: "he's a prober of the hidden."⁹ He also states, "Cruelty is anathema to him, and lack of charity, and the manipulation of one person by another. The absence of love is a destruction of the soul and its presence the only salvation."¹⁰ In no other Cheever story that I know is his message—a warning—more clearly given than in the tale of the suburban housewife, Bertha, who, when the children were old enough to go to school, got a job teaching Social Studies in the sixth grade. "This kept her occupied and happy and she said she had always wanted to be a teacher." An interest in amateur theatricals leads her to audition for a nude show in New York called *Ozamanides II*, undressing for the inspection of four men who inform her that she would be nude throughout the played performance and to be expected to simulate or perform copulation twice during the performance and participate in a love pile that involved the audience. She gets the job (breaking her teaching contract) and loves her work: "Oh, how wonderful and rich and strange life can be when you stop playing out the roles that your parents and their friends write out for you. I feel like an explorer." She takes a hotel apartment near the theatre and hires a housekeeper to take care of things back home. The husband consults a divorce lawyer who tells him there are no precedents for simulated carnality in public as grounds for divorce in New York State and no lawyer

will take a divorce case without a precedent. The husband finally goes to see the show in which the sex is general: there is one scene in which Ozamanides writes something obscene on Bertha's buttocks. At the end of the show, the cast lines up and urges the audience — commands them — to undress and join them. The husband relates what happened:

This seemed to be my duty. How else could I approach understanding Bertha? I've always been very quick to get out of my clothes. I did. However, there was a problem. What should I do with my wallet, wristwatch, and car keys? I couldn't safely leave them in my clothes. So, naked, I started down the aisle with my valuables in my right hand. As I came up to the action a naked young man stopped me and shouted — sang — "Put down your lendings. Lendings are impure."

"But it's my wallet and my watch and the car keys," I said.

"Put down your lendings," he sang.

"But I have to drive home from the station," I said, "and I have sixty or seventy dollars in cash."

"Put down your lendings."

"I can't, I really can't. I have to eat and drink and get home."

"Put down your lendings."

Then one by one they all, including Bertha, picked up the incantation. The whole cast began to chant: "Put down your lendings, put down your lendings."

The sense of being unwanted has always been for me acutely painful. I suppose some clinician would have an explanation. The sensation is reverberative and seems to attach itself as the last link in a chain made up of all similar experience. The voices of the cast were loud and scornful, and there I was, buck naked, somewhere in the middle of the city and unwanted, remembering missed football tackles, lost fights, the contempt of strangers, the sound of laughter from behind shut doors. I held my valuables in my right hand, my literal identification. None of it was irreplaceable, but to cast it off would seem to threaten my essence, the shadow of myself that I could see on the floor, my name.

I went back to my seat and got dressed. This was difficult in such a cramped space. The cast was still shouting. Walking up the sloping aisle of the ruined theatre was powerfully reminiscent. I had made the same gentle ascent after *King Lear* and *The Cherry Orchard*...¹¹

What is the title of this moral tale? *The Fourth Alarm*. The hero tells about a

movie of his childhood with that title — it would seem to have been *The Towering Inferno* of its day. He had seen this film again and again. To the reader, however, the title suggests the waning of Updike's *radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty*. All the old values are going up in flames. Here is the handwriting on the wall — and, significantly, Cheever does have a short story in the same collection entitled "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*," the Biblical words that did appear in the Old Testament story about the handwriting on the wall. Another link with Updike's "Museums and Women" is that an occasional baby-sitter the husband has sometimes used is *Mrs. Smithsonian*, who "is seldom in the mood these days."

The title of Cheever's best-selling novel *Falconer* refers to a prison where Ezekiel Farragut is sent for the murder of his brother (seemingly, more a case of Abel's killing Cain). In flashbacks, one is at first reminded of Thurber cartoons but they ring all too true and undoubtedly help set up the rage that loses Farragut his freedom. In one flashback that takes place on a Saturday morning, he says to his wife, "Good morning, darling." Her response is "Shit." She puts on her wrapper and goes to the kitchen where he hears her kick the refrigerator and then the dish washer. She shouts, "I hate you broken-down fucking second-rate appliances. I hate, hate, hate this fucking dirty old-fashioned kitchen. I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls." Once he'd asked, "May I have eggs for breakfast?" "Do you expect me to prepare breakfast in this House of Usher?" she had asked. "Could I cook myself some eggs?" he asked. "You may not," she said. "You will make such a mess in this ruin that it will take hours for me to clean it up."¹³ Telling her husband that he is the biggest mistake she has ever made, she carries on a lesbian relationship with an old girl friend who has been married three times and in each case received a large settlement. Farragut, too, finds a genuine love in prison with the young Jody he meets in the shower, and at the end of the novel when by a miraculous ruse Farragut is able to escape from the prison, one realizes that to remain free he will have to give up contact with his family, heartbreaking in the case of his son Peter, but in the case of Marcia, his wife, one is reminded of the unicorn-viewing husband in Thurber who "lived happily ever after."

Cheever's most famous short story, at least the one that has been most often anthologized, is "The Country Husband," which offers more material over which to ponder. At a dinner party his wife and he attend, the hero, Francis Weed, recognizes the French maid as a girl he had seen as a G. I. publicly chastized in a small French town for having lived with the occupying German Commandant during the Occupation. As her head was shaved, the women in the crowd had jeered: the men were still.¹⁴ Even more significantly, Francis keeps the knowledge of his discovery to himself: "he could not count on his wife's discretion."¹⁵

Also occurring in this story is one of the most poignant scenes in all Cheever. As Francis has missed his regular train and is waiting for the 8:02 on the platform, an express train — night train from Buffalo or Albany — comes down the tracks, and in one of the sleeping compartment windows he glimpses an unclothed woman of exceptional beauty seated and combing her hair. She passes like an apparition through

Shady Hill combing and combing and combing her hair — and Francis follows her with his eyes until she is out of sight. For Shady Hill's Walter Mitty, the elusive ideal (radiant, mysterious) ... never to be obtained.

Another writer one usually associates with *The New Yorker* though much more emotional than his fellow writers, J. D. Salinger, offers several heroines most parents would be happy to see their sons marry (interestingly, they're usually someone's SISTER), yet in his most famous short story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," the picture of a modern wife, Mrs. Seymour Glass, is such that we fully comprehend the story's climax, the suicide of her husband. One could argue that Muriel Glass is not evil, only stupid and insensitive, but these are qualities difficult to excuse in one of her well-favored background — and where does insensitivity leave off and evil begin? Waiting for the long long-distance telephone call from her mother that constitutes half of the story's length (and proves Salinger can be Updike's and Cheever's equal in effective irony), she uses her time well, we are told :

She read an article in a women's pocket-size magazine, called "Sex is Fun—or Hell." She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit. She moved the button on her Saks blouse. She tweezed out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole.¹⁶

Poor Seymour! Poor world! One can easily envision Muriel at Seymour's funeral dressed in Bergdorf's best black outfit. Some of the tears she sheds may even be sincere.

Saul Bellow (is it gossip or significance that he is the father of four children, each by a different wife?), America's most recent Nobel Prize winner in literature, has a whole galaxy of women one would hope not to meet in this lifetime (read *Herzog*). At various times he has expressed admiration for the styles and writing of Updike, Salinger, and particularly Cheever, though somewhat decrying the restrictions created "by wearing the livery of a magazine and (being) too thoroughly identified with it,"¹⁷ yet one of Bellow's best short stories, "A Father-to-Be," was written for the pages of *The New Yorker*, and offers a heroine, Joan, who is very much like another version of Muriel Glass. She shares an apartment with her cousin, a young divorcee, extremely wealthy. Her dog's name is Henri. She also has debts her lover, Rogin (victim?), is helping her to pay—she isn't working :

She was looking for something suitable to do. Beautiful, well-educated, aristocratic in her attitude, she couldn't clerk in a dime store ; she couldn't model clothes (Rogin thought this made girls vain and stiff, and he didn't want her to) ; she couldn't be a waitress or a cashier. What could she be? Well, something would turn up and meantime Rogin hesitated to complain. He paid her bills—the dentist, the department store, the osteopath, the doctor,

the psychiatrist. At Christmas, Rogin almost went mad. Joan bought him a velvet smoking jacket with frog fasteners, a beautiful pipe, and a pouch. She bought Phyllis a garnet brooch, an Italian silk umbrella, and a gold cigarette holder. For other friends, she bought Dutch pewter and Swedish glassware. Before she was through, she had spent five hundred dollars of Rogin's money. He loved her too much to show his suffering. He believed she had a far better nature than his. She didn't worry about money. She had a marvelous character, always cheerful, and she really didn't need a psychiatrist at all. She went to one because Phyllis did and it made her curious. She tried too much to keep up with her cousin, whose father had made millions in the rug business.¹⁸

Rogin has all sorts of complaints he plans to air, but arriving at Joan's apartment, she soon is giving him a shampoo in the bath room. Bare-chested, he sits with his head in the rounded sink (one critic has compared it to the mother's womb) and Rogin is oblivious of anything but pleasant sensations as Joan works on his scalp.

Woman's liberation? It is obvious that in America it is the MALE who needs liberating. Willingly or unwillingly, wittingly or unwittingly, the pages of *The New Yorker* have often been associated with the male artillery in the constant war between the sexes. Much of the female firing seems to be centered in *Cosmopolitan* magazine ("the Cosmopolitan Girl" has connotations all its own), less so in *Playgirl*, which offers token fireworks but seems to concentrate on male nudes. Both aim at "the sexually-liberated woman." Great writers have always offered radiance (Updike?), antiquity (Bellow?), mystery (Cheever?), duty (Salinger?). There is a current school of females that advocates a life style to match its prose and poetry: raunchiness, stridency, mindlessness, discord.

If only Thurber were still alive...!

The suggestion that is being made here, I suppose, is that in the field of mores, manners, and morals, the female has deteriorated far faster than the male. Man has a saving camaraderie that Woman can but envy (though such magazines as *Cosmopolitan* and *Playgirl* make an obvious attempt to emulate such a mood or condition). This camaraderie is the element that makes real war — wars between nations — bearable. Man certainly does form a club to which Women are excluded by something that Women possess — or lack — in their very nature, something that is related to possessiveness. Fathers-in-law are rarely a problem in any society — but *mothers-in-law*? One is reminded, too, of the apocraphyl comparison between the two sexes that occurs when viewing a lovely meadow filled with beautiful flowers. The man is content to take with him a MEMORY of that scene — or paint a picture — or write a poem — but the woman must PICK THOSE FLOWERS.

Marriage is only one element in a man's life while the woman, from childhood, aims at that end. An end? Basically, isn't the current women's lib movement an

attempt to enter man's club? To do so — the shock tactics — in this eternal war between men and women, she now belittles marriage and the role of the mother, and in a variation of Lysistrata (who denied sex but couldn't deny love) allows sex but denies love.

Much of the strident writing done by these women — the caterwauling — is involved with sex. If one had to choose a representative writer among these noise-makers, I suppose it might well be Erica Jong, whose Chinese name came from her young Asian husband, who, after the inevitable divorce, tried unsuccessfully to have her refrain from the usage (formidable weapon!) of his honorable family name. (As ironic as a Thurber cartoon is the fact her maiden name is *Mann*!) An example of Mrs. Jong's poetry (in the language of Shakespeare and Spenser):

Beware of the man who denounces women writers ;
his penis is tiny & cannot spell.¹⁹

Of course she wants to have her cake and eat it, too — or maybe it's considered "humor" when in the same poem she also states.

Beware of the man who praises liberated women ;
he is planning to quit his job.²⁰

A typical novel of this school of writers is Gael Greene's *Blue Skies, No Candy*, which consists of various explicit sexual encounters of the insatiable Kate Alexander. The book does have an unintentionally memorable opening :

Skin flick, My skin. Open scene inside my head. Deep nothing.²¹
I've not made that up. The cover of the paperback edition has a female hand with very long and red-lacquered fingernails (as if the hand had been scrounging in someone's entrails) unzipping the fly of a pair of blue jeans that probably belong to a male. Among the blurbs encouraging one to buy this "honest book" is *Playboy's* comment that "Greene has successfully outtraunched Erica Jong." Most of the other quotes offered are by the ladies :

Read this book. You'll enjoy it and you'll see that male reviewers have reviewed themselves. — Gloria Steinem

...elevates Ms. Greene from her place at the head of the food-writing list into the Erica Jong pantheon of sexually liberated fictionalists. — Liz Smith

It's new and fun to read an erotic book written by a woman, about a woman who takes extraordinary joy in sex. — Betty Friedan

Sex is fun as many women have always known — and now Gael Greene says it for all of us. — Lynn Caine, author of "Widow"

A literary landmark ! One enters a promised land of emotional elation, knowing the last hold-out of any inequality between the

sexes has been tastefully, entertainingly attacked and vanquished.

— Diane Judge

The wail of the Banshees is heard in the land! Is this noise a distraction to offset the fact that a certain type of woman has been revealed by the Thurbers, Updikes, Cheevers, Bellows, and Salingers?

The war rages on.

Emily Dickinson remains one of the world's greatest poets (I'm highly tempted to write "the world's greatest poet"); Emily Bronte and Jane Austen wrote great novels; Katherine Anne Porter is one of the world's greatest short-story writers; Stevie Smith is my favorite poet of this era; Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Woolf, Iris Murdoch, Lillian Hellman, Elinor Wylie—the list is endless. These women need no apologies. My plaint is that in this war between men and women with the modern media dictating "equal time for all" (besides which, it sells!), Mrs. Walter Mitty has taken to writing marriage manuals, Marcia Farragut is writing fiction, and Mrs. Seymour Glass is writing poetry. Is it art?

SOURCES

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10. *Ibid.*
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13. *Ibid.*
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19. Daniel Halpern, editor: *The American Poetry Anthology*, "Seventeen Warnings in Search of a Feminist Poem," by Erica Jong (New York, 1975), p. 208.
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Accusations of a Male Chauvinist Pig

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Though the "war between men and women" goes back at least to Chaucer, the phrase itself is usually associated with James Thurber, who for over two decades contributed his unique humor to the pages of *The New Yorker*. Thurber always maintained that his humor was about one thing: "beaten-down married people. The American woman is my theme and how she dominates the male, how he tries to go away but always comes back for more, being romantic and everlastingly nice and having an almost religious feeling about marriage." Many modern writers, especially those connected with the aforesaid *New Yorker* (Updike, Cheever, Salinger, and even Nobel Prize-winning Bellow) have followed in Thurber's footsteps although not necessarily in a humorous way. These writers would like to associate Woman with Updike's phrase, "radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty." Alas, the women's liberation movement has brought a new school of women writers best exemplified by Erica Jong that can only suggest "raunchiness, stridency, mindlessness, discord." One wonders if it is art.