



In Defense of Women

H. L. Mencken

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“A man's women folk, whatever their outward show of respect for his merit and authority, always regard him secretly as an ass, and with something akin to pity. His most gaudy sayings and doings seldom deceive them; they see the actual man within, and know him for a shallow and pathetic fellow. In this fact, perhaps, lies one of the best proofs of feminine intelligence, or, as the common phrase makes it, feminine intuition. The mark of that so-called intuition is simply a sharp and accurate perception of reality, an habitual immunity to emotional enchantment, a relentless capacity for distinguishing clearly between the appearance and the substance.”

The prophetic and controversial classic.

In Defense of Women might well be considered a libertarian compliment to George Bernard Shaw's Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism. As with Shaw's book this volume is an admixture of feminism tinged with masculine concern for the survival of marriage and love in a twentieth century already witness to rapid change and the social breakdown of conventions that accompany such changes. Hardly a paeon of praise to women, it is more an interpretation that the natural advantages of being a female can translate into psychological traits that are hardly admirable.

American author, critic, and journalist, H. L. Mencken maintained that "the average woman, whatever her deficiencies, is greatly superior to the average man. The very ease with which she defies and swindles him in several capital situations of life is the clearest of proofs of her general superiority." Ever the iconoclast, Mencken viewed gender relations as a battlefield. His deference to female supremacy is that of a soldier awed by an opponent's overwhelming skill and cunning: "There was no weakness of man that she did not penetrate and take advantage of. There was no trick that she did not put to effective use. There was no device so bold and inordinate that it daunted her." In Defense of Women was written during World War I and first appeared in print in 1922, only a few years after American women had achieved the right to vote. Nearly a century later its topics, ranging from monogamy, polygamy, and prostitution to the double standard, employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and declining birth and marriage rates, remain of vital interest to modern readers. Written in Mencken's characteristic no-nonsense manner, this volume crackles with controversy and caustic wit.

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