

**IN DEFENSE OF
WOMEN**

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In defense of women by H. L. Mencken

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H. L. MENCKEN

**IN DEFENSE OF
WOMEN**

A STAR BOOK

IN DEFENSE
OF
WOMEN

By
H. L. MENCKEN



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INTRODUCTION

As a professional critic of life and letters, my principal business in the world is that of manufacturing platitudes for tomorrow, which is to say, ideas so novel that they will be instantly rejected as insane and outrageous by all right-thinking men, and so apposite and sound that they will eventually conquer that instinctive opposition, and force themselves into the traditional wisdom of the race. I hope I need not confess that a large part of my stock in trade consists of platitudes rescued from the cobwebbed shelves of yesterday, with new labels stuck rakishly upon them. This borrowing and refurbishing of shop-worn goods, as a matter of fact, is the invariable habit of traders in ideas, at all times and everywhere. It is not, however, that all the conceivable human notions have been thought out; it is simply, to be quite honest, that the sort of men who volunteer to think out new ones seldom, if ever, have wind enough for a full day's work. The most they

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can ever accomplish in the way of genuine originality is an occasional brilliant spurt, and half a dozen such spurts, particularly if they come close together and show a certain co-ordination, are enough to make a practitioner celebrated, and even immortal. Nature, indeed, conspires against all such genuine originality, and I have no doubt that God is against it on His heavenly throne, as His vicars and partisans unquestionably are on this earth. The dead hand pushes all of us into intellectual cages; there is in all of us a strange tendency to yield and have done. Thus the impertinent colleague of Aristotle is doubly beset, first by a public opinion that regards his enterprise as subversive and in bad taste, and secondly by an inner weakness that limits his capacity for it, and especially his capacity to throw off the prejudices and superstitions of his race, culture and time. The cell, said Haeckel, does not act, it reacts—and what is the instrument of reflection and speculation save a congeries of cells? At the moment of the contemporary metaphysician's loftiest flight, when he is most gratefully warmed by the feeling that he is far above all the ordinary air-lanes and has an absolutely novel concept by the

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tail, he is suddenly pulled up by the discovery that what is entertaining him is simply the ghost of some ancient idea that his school-master forced into him in 1887, or the mouldering corpse of a doctrine that was made official in his country during the late war, or a sort of fermentation-product, to mix the figure, of a banal heresy launched upon him recently by his wife. This is the penalty that the man of intellectual curiosity and vanity pays for his violation of the divine edict that what has been revealed from Sinai shall suffice for him, and for his resistance to the natural process which seeks to reduce him to the respectable level of a patriot and taxpayer.

I was, of course, privy to this difficulty when I planned the present work, and entered upon it with no expectation that I should be able to embellish it with, at most, more than a very small number of hitherto unutilized notions. Moreover, I faced the additional handicap of having an audience of extraordinary antipathy to ideas before me, for I wrote it in war-time, with all foreign markets cut off, and so my only possible customers were Americans. Of their unprecedented dislike for novelty in the domain of the

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intellect I have often discoursed in the past, and so there is no need to go into the matter again. All I need do here is to recall the fact that, in the United States, alone among the great nations of history, there is a right way to think and a wrong way to think in everything—not only in theology, or politics, or economics, but in the most trivial matters of everyday life. Thus, in the average American city the citizen who, in the face of an organized public clamour (usually managed by interested parties) for the erection of an equestrian statue of Susan B. Anthony, the apostle of woman suffrage, in front of the chief railway station, or the purchase of a dozen leopards for the municipal zoo, or the dispatch of an invitation to the Structural Iron Workers' Union to hold its next annual convention in the town Symphony Hall—the citizen who, for any logical reason, opposes such a proposal—on the ground, say, that Miss Anthony never mounted a horse in her life, or that a dozen leopards would be less useful than a gallows to hang the City Council, or that the Structural Iron Workers would spit all over the floor of Symphony Hall and knock down the busts of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms—this citizen is