easy. But if "anatomy" varies from culture to culture and period to period, then the study of sex—adding history to sociology and biology—becomes so complicated that even a scholar like Laqueur has trouble sorting out all the strands.

Through most of Western history, Laqueur believes, anatomists were either establishing or responding to a philosophical debate over man's dominant position in society. The one-sex model, first popularized by the Greek anatomist Galen and later refined by Aristotle, posited that the female sexual organ was merely an interior version of the male's. "The one-sex model," Laqueur argues, "displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: *man* is the measure of all things."

Until the Renaissance, anatomists followed the lead of their classical forebears in interpreting genital structures. Then, in 1559, matters became problematic when Renaldus Columbus "discovered" the clitoris. The significance of this discovery, Laqueur says, was that "the relationship between men and women was not inherently one of equality or inequality but rather of difference that required interpretation."

For the next three centuries, a great controversy about conception, orgasm, and passion was waged in order to preserve the one-sex model. Anatomists resorted to dubbing the clitoris a "female penis." Even after scientists gave in to the two-sex model, there was little doubt about which sex was "first." In 1865, for example, the urologist William Acton wondered whether "the majority of women are not much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind." Sigmund Freud transferred the female orgasm from the clitoris to the vagina, and, not surprisingly, was left with the question, "What does woman want?"

Laqueur's history of sexuality seems slightly too uniform to be entirely convincing. There is evidence that people long before the 18th century were aware—how could they not be?—of men and women as separate beings; even passages in Aristotle suggest this. What Laqueur fails to acknowledge is how differences between the sexes were formerly expressed in metaphysical and even cosmological terms, which were as persuasive then as biological and scientific facts are now. The real nature of the revolution in the 18th-century thinking was that biology and medicine began supplying evidence for what had been previously understood on a spiritual level.

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY. *By David Cannadine. Yale. 832 pp. $35*

Last Christmas, British newspapers were running an acid little story about Mrs. Thatcher's final "honors list." Mrs. Thatcher wanted to use aristocratic honor to reward new-made wealth and loyal party service. So she proposed to make the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch a knight and pot-boiling novelist Jeffrey Archer a lord. But she had to withdraw their names after the committee that scrutinizes the lists on behalf of the Queen objected. This minor fracas nicely illustrates the fact that aristocratic title still maintains a complex symbolic presence—a spectral afterlife of prestige without power—in British political life. Behind such contradictions lies the century-long social transformation that British historian David Cannadine traces in this exhaustively researched book.

One hundred years ago, the landowning classes were Olympians: stupendously wealthy, immensely privileged, the arbiters of taste and politics alike. Their decline began in a distant and unlikely place, the American Midwest. There, farming began to be practiced on such a large scale that the English landlords could not compete. In England agricultural prices fell, as did the landlords' rents from property. In the century from 1880 to 1980, they were gradually forced to sell off much of their landholdings. Today there are still around 2,000 landed estates, but a century ago they covered half the land in Britain and now they cover only a quarter. The reduction of the great aristocrats' estates—such as the Duke of Devonshire's from 133,000 acres to 40,000 acres—is of less significance, though, than the disappearance of almost the entire class of lesser landlords. Of the

the squirearchy of 1880—those gentlemen who owned from 1,000 to 10,000 acres and who propped up the whole system—only 16 percent have descendants who possess land today.

The aristocrats' social decline paralleled their slide from economic affluence. Tocqueville had predicted that democracy would undermine aristocracy everywhere, and in England electoral reform loosened the great landlords' hold on national power. Today, a few hereditary nobles are still immensely wealthy; the Duke of Westminster's worth is estimated at anywhere from 400 million to one billion pounds. Most aristocrats, however, long ago found themselves unable to keep up their great houses, let alone imitate the influence of their ancestors.

Along this melancholy trail, Cannadine dwells on the multifarious individuals' reactions to their decline. On one side are renegades such as Jessica Mitford and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, who renounced the values of their class for various socialistic creeds, although often with aristocratic disdain for the plutocrats who were emerging as the new power brokers. On the other side is an amazing panorama of diehards and doomed grandees, patricians who fought a long and hopeless battle against the 20th century. In between are all the diplomats and lord-lieutenants, governors of colonies, chancellors of universities, mayors and local worthies who, with all the dignity they could muster, settled into the positions of ornamental figureheads. Today some of them claim the role of custodians of the national heritage and open their houses to the paying public. Reduced, in effect, to living as tenants in their own ancestral properties, "the lions of yesteryear" (in Cannadine's words) "have become the unicorns of today."

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MYTH AND METAPHOR: Selected Essays, 1974–1988. *By Northrop Frye. Edited by Robert D. Denham. Univ. of Va. 386 pp. $35*
WORDS WITH POWER: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature. *By Northrop Frye. Harcourt, Brace. 342 pp. $24.95*

On January 24, the most famous literary critic in North America died.

For nearly 60 years, in 23 books and 850 articles, Northrop Frye had consistently argued that reading was not merely an intellectual activity but also an act of moral self-definition. This is hardly a popular attitude in the current academic establishment, where "deconstruction" and the "new historicism" foster a criticism in love with its own theoretical intricacies. While Frye is aware of the postmodernist style wars—a quarter of the essays in *Myth and Metaphor* allude to deconstructionist kingpin Jacques Derrida—he calmly insists on what we can learn from the basic, enduring myths.

"Myth" is the term that has been most closely associated with Frye ever since his revolutionary overview of literary theory, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). To Frye, *any* work of literature is a variation or incarnation of mythic thinking. By "myth," Frye does not mean mere fantasy or even folktales—and certainly not the overvaluation of the primitive associated with Joseph Campbell. He means *mythos*, a story or narrative which relates basic human needs to things their hearers need to know about their religion or their society. The primary question about a myth, Frye writes, "is not Is it true? . . . . The primary question is something more like Do we need to know this?"

In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), Frye—above all else, a teacher (at the University of Toronto) and an ordained preacher—admitted that this was the book he had been trying to write all along: a discourse on the Book of Books as a lesson in reading mythic narratives. Now, in *Words With Power*, the sequel to *The Great Code*, Frye concludes his argument about how the Bible can teach us how to read all books. "The organizing structure of the Bible and the corresponding structures of 'secular' literature," he says, "reflect each other." The Bible contains a finite number of myths (creation, fall, exodus, destruction, and redemption) and also a limited number of metaphors (e.g., garden, mountain, cave, and furnace), and these are the principal myths and metaphors of secular literature, *too*. The myths deal primarily with events in time, the metaphors arrange them in space—which is why learning to decode both is so valuable a skill. "I come up against the fact that our ordi-