

faithful (1 Corinthians 11:5-10). Following anthropologist Mary Douglas's "insight that the human body is par excellence the symbol of the social body," she argues that St. Paul would have required women to wear veils as a sign of subordination. Yet as historian Aline Rousselle points out in "Body Politics in Ancient Rome" (in *A History of Women*), veils and head coverings in fact served as a protection, warning men that these women were untouchable under Roman law.

Kraemer's avowedly feminist perspective tends to make the women she studies more independent or self-assertive than they may ever have wanted to be. In particular, Kraemer seems determined to present Jewish and Christian women as equal in power to their pagan counterparts, and she argues that certain anomalies in certain Jewish rituals preserve aspects of lost "goddess" cults. She tries hard to believe that anonymous texts that pay some attention to women were written by women, though of course no one can prove that they were (or were not).

I wish she had listened more closely to one voice of a religious woman that has come down to us, that of St. Perpetua of Carthage (martyred A.D. 203). Perpetua is

in fact allowed to speak the final words in *A History of Women*. Like her pagan predecessors, she derived honor and glory from her religious service without ever defying the men in her religious community or the dominant values of her society. In the text of her martyrology, which preserves part of her diary, Perpetua describes her imprisonment and trial by the Romans and her rejection of her family. But for all her independence and determination, Perpetua obeys and respects her male deacons. Although she dreams that her faith can transform her into a man who is capable of defeating the devil in single combat, she never questions the monotheistic male-dominated faith that caused her to abandon her baby and die a horrible death in the arena. Ultimately, neither feminist theory nor abstract behavioral grids can explain her decision to die. Like the men who died in the arena with her, she was a convert, a religious fanatic who believed that her faith could lead her away from her present troubles to a new and more glorious life.

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OTHER TITLES

History

DIDEROT: A Critical Biography. By P. N. Furbank. Knopf. 524 pp. \$30

Aufklärung, lumières, the Enlightenment—so the various European languages name the rational and secular development of 18th-century thought that made the modern world literally

"thinkable." But only in English is the definite article affixed to imply a uniform historical movement. Nothing can refute the monolithic image of the Enlightenment better than the example of Denis Diderot (1713–84). Voltaire was crusadingly and invariably right; Montesquieu, admirably logical and a bit dull; Rousseau, dependably contrary. But Diderot's mind, as biographer Furbank shows, was like fireworks go-

ing off in all directions at once.

The son of a master cutler in Langres, Diderot was destined for the Church or the law. Both fates he eluded by escaping into the literary bohemia of Paris, where until his early thirties he barely managed to support his disorderly existence. (Though an atheist, he wrote sermons for missionaries for 50 *écus* each; a pornographic novel dashed off in two weeks earned him temporary lodgings in prison.) In 1746, a publisher commissioned him to oversee the translation of Ephraim Chamber's *Cyclopaedia*. The simple work of translation be-



came a labor of 15 years and eventually resulted in 60,000 articles either written or commissioned by Diderot on an unprecedented variety of subjects. As Voltaire observed, they passed "from the heights of metaphysics to the weaver's loom, and from thence to the theatre." Of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Thomas Carlyle said that "only the Siege of Troy may offer some faint parallel."

Furbank makes rather short work of Diderot's fascinating life—including his comic quarrel with his royal patron, Catherine of Russia—condensing it all into a few chapters. Furbank also makes the *Encyclopédie* seem almost a

waste of his hero's time. What interests Furbank is "not so much what he [Diderot] 'represented' as what he achieved," that is, "the works he will live by, *has* lived by." After all, few readers today seek out the *Encyclopédie*. Furbank concentrates on those works by Diderot that were little-known or unpublished while he was alive: novels such as *Rameau's Nephew*, philosophical speculations such as *D'Alembert's Dream*, plays, paradoxical dialogues, polemical tracts, and scientific research. In such works, Diderot seems at times to have anticipated nearly the entire future world—Darwin's theory of evolution, the *nouveau roman* of the 20th century, the Braille system of writing, and the cinematic montage of Sergei Eisenstein. He was the first art critic, the first modern thinker to suggest the molecular structure of matter, and his theory of dreams would later influence Freud. In his *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage,"* Diderot registered an early protest against colonialism, on the then-odd grounds that civilization should not be imposed on those who are free of repression. His last words were, supposedly, "The first step toward philosophy is incredulity." For all the originality that Furbank reveals in them, however, Diderot's works still seem united by the common Enlightenment faith that, if men could be made to think more clearly, they might then live more peaceably.

THE SUBVERSIVE FAMILY: An Alternative History of Love and Marriage. By Ferdinand Mount. Free Press. 282 pp. \$24.95

Ferdinand Mount's alternative history of the family may not quite live up to the publisher's claim that it is one of "the most influential works of social history in recent times." But since its publication in England (1982), it has seriously challenged the progressive view that the nuclear family is a distinctively modern development. Mount, the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, provides not so much a history as a set of essays elaborating a central proposition: A conspiracy of "family-haters"—among them he numbers Jesus, Plato, Marx, Hitler, and radical feminists—has attempted to replace the family's key role in society with various ideologically motivated organizations. But