

PRESS & TELEVISION



H. L. Mencken let it be known that "rosy, healthy, appetizing" flappers (as immortalized by 1920s illustrator John Held, Jr.) were his feminine ideal. Was he, in fact, a "closet feminist"?

Courtesy of Mrs. John Held, Jr.

Smart Set, he praised works that supported women's cultural emancipation, such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*.

As a young man, Mencken had been discouraged by his father from entering the "feminine" world of literature and compelled to join the family cigar business. The experience, writes Martin, made him sympathetic to women's efforts to escape the roles that social convention imposed on them. (One result of the feminine experience, he believed, was a "cynical humor"—not unlike his own.)

Mencken was a conservative man. He lived in the Mencken family home until his marriage at age 50. He cherished many orthodox notions of femininity—wanting no "grotesque parody" of a man "smoking bad cigars, monkeying with his labor and vices." But he held that neither sex, "without some fortifying with the complimentary characteristics of the other, is capable of its highest reaches of human endeavor."

The Scoop Syndrome

"Rush to Judgement" by Martin Mayer, in *American Film* (June 1981), Subscription Service, P.O. Box 966, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Most Americans agree that network TV newsmen's finest hour came in the aftermath of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. TV coverage of the shooting of President Reagan last March, by contrast, was marred by rumor-mongering and major factual errors. Mayer, an *American Film* contributing editor, blames a post-Watergate suspicion of "official information" and a new breed of TV journalist.

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Newsmen in 1963 enjoyed some advantages. The official information from Dallas was essentially correct, while some initial statements from the Reagan White House erred—e.g., the word that the President had not been hit. Scare stories did circulate in 1963 (that the Vice President had been shot, that a plane carrying Cabinet members was in danger), but broadcast journalists generally stuck to facts. Rumors were reported only with confirmations or denials from official sources. Newsmen reassured the nation by accurately stressing the continuity of government.

Last March, however, several rumors were aired as “facts.” All three networks falsely “confirmed” the death of Press Secretary James Brady. From the hospital, NBC’s Chris Wallace reported that Reagan was undergoing “open heart surgery.” Back in the studio, his colleague Edwin Newman briefly raised the specter of conspiracy, noting that some of Reagan’s entourage had looked away from the gunman just before the shots.

Burned by a hostile Nixon White House, many TV newsmen in 1981 were “frantic with suspicion” of White House and hospital officials. But this only partly explains their willingness to transmit unchecked rumors. Television journalism, says Mayer, has passed into new hands. Most TV newsmen today lack newspaper experience prior to 1964—when the Supreme Court loosened slander laws in *The New York Times v. Sullivan* and removed most of the financial risk to news organizations of “getting it wrong.” Moreover, a television broadcast lacks the permanence of print. The false report over the air doesn’t linger to cause embarrassment; there is less incentive to curb the “scoop mentality.”

Mayer suggests that, during a crisis, news teams should cite their sources when relaying any information or interpretations of events. Journalists are not obliged to calm the nation, he concludes. But they do have a duty not to raise false alarms.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

***Jesus as
Psychologist***

“The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of ‘I’” by Erik Erikson, in *The Yale Review* (Spring 1981), 1902A Yale Station, New Haven, Conn. 06520.

Jesus’ sermons and parables reveal a concern with human psychology—as well as with moral instruction and spiritual transformation. So contends Erikson, a Harvard psychologist.

Jesus delivered most of his sermons in Galilee, a fertile, northern region of Roman Palestine with a mixed Jewish-Gentile population. Wedged between rival empires and ground underfoot by numerous conquerors, the populace had, by Jesus’ time, sunk into despondency, rallying only occasionally in response to messianic leaders. Jesus’ cures