



## His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art

By Wendy Lesser

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Wendy Lesser counters the reigning belief that male artists inevitably misrepresent women. She builds this case through inquiry into many unexpected and delightfully germane subjects - Marilyn Monroe's walk, for instance, or the dwarf manicurist Miss Mowcher in "David Copperfield", or the shoulder blades of Degas's bathers. Placing such particulars within the framework of Plato's myth of the divided beings and psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism, Lesser sets before us an art that responds to and even attempts to overcome division. By following a developmental, rather than historical, sequence, the book uncovers startling correspondences and fresh insights. It begins by considering Dickens, Lawrence, Harold Brodkey, Peter Handke, and John Berger on the subject of mothers; turns to Degas and the Victorian novelist George Gissing to examine the figure of woman alone, and then to Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock for their perspectives on the battle between the sexes; and then looks at the poetry of Randall Jarrell, the fashion photographs of Cecil Beaton, and the range of artworks inspired by Marilyn Monroe to investigate the central idea of woman as the artist's mirror and secret self. A chapter on Barbara Stanwyck returns us to an essential premise - that art transcends gender boundaries, that the masculine and the feminine coexist within each individual psyche.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This is an interesting assortment of revisionist feminist essays on literature, painting, photography, and film. From her Freudian stance, Lesser denies charges of gender-theory stereotyping--i.e., misogyny--in works by Dickens, Gissing, Degas, Lawrence, Henry James, Cecil Beaton, Jarrell, Hitchcock, Brodkey, and Sturges: "There is no single meaning that women have for men, no single manner in which men use the feminine in their art." The chapters on Degas, Marilyn Monroe, and Barbara Stanwyck are more successful. Hard-line feminists understandably will dismiss many conclusions here since Lesser entertains the premise that gender differences are somehow to be related to the romantic myth of the divided selves told by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. But the book has much to recommend it.

- Mary Hamel-Schwulst, *Towson State Univ., Md.*

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### Review

This is a wonderful book...lucid, cultivated, amiable...[*His Other Half*] is a model of the kind of flexible, interdisciplinary culture criticism that is desperately needed to bridge the gap between the general reader and the academic ghetto. Lesser, moving with graceful ease from literature and art to photography and cinema, is concerned with the image of woman as refracted through male imagination...Wendy Lesser has made an important contribution. (Camille Paglia *Washington Post Book World*)

Wendy Lesser bases her group of essays on the idea that certain male artists are in search of their own lost or hidden female selves, and that the success of their search can be measured by the way such rescued selves are freed by the artist and given independent life in his works of art...Ms. Lesser is excellent on the force of Dickens's sentimentality...Her discussion of Degas's nudes is very moving...[and] her discussion of Alfred Hitchcock is really magnificent. (Anne Hollander *New York Times Book Review*)

[A] stimulating collection of essays...*His Other Half* is an arresting work of criticism. Lesser writes with volatile wit, an eager, almost breezy confidence and a palpable pleasure in reading and looking and analyzing--and in the suppleness of her own cleverness. She ranges from Henry James to Alfred Hitchcock, with chapters on Cecil Beaton's photographs, Degas's pastels, Barbara Stanwyck as *The Lady Eve* and *Stella Dallas*, and shows the kind of zapping glee throughout that recalls the wisecracking heroines of screwball comedies. (Marina Warner *Times Literary Supplement*)

In this wise and generous book, Lesser enables her readers to go further than they might have expected, both in looking at the artists she has written about and in searching internally for their points of resonance. (Katharyn Eaton *San Francisco Chronicle*)

About the Author

**Wendy Lesser** is editor of *The Threepenny Review*.

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