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The Changing of the Guard: Men Flock to the Frivolous in Academia

By Richard Leader

Those who tune their televisions to The Hitler Channel—sometimes referred to as The History Channel—can often learn an interesting lesson in vocabulary. I discovered this myself during a session of late night viewing: it was one of those popular montages about the exploits of our favorite serial killers, where lurid dramatizations are interspersed with occasional quips by seated experts of various sorts (whose grave pronouncements on the elemental human condition too often end up resembling magnetic poetry), all designed to convince us that we're being educated in addition to entertained. The word in question: Ripperologist. While not listed in most dictionaries, one can surmise that it indicates "one who studies Jack the Ripper and his victims." Studies, mind you, as opposed to someone who merely masturbates to the thought of murdered prostitutes every night—we're talking serious scholars here. Guys who occasionally call Scotland Yard and get put on hold for an hour: "Press 5 if you don't know the extension of your party and would like to speak with an operator. Press 6 if you are a sick demented fuck who has found a way to vicariously live your twisted desires through a pointless obsession in a crime that took place over a century ago. Thank you."

Sure, The History Channel needs this kind of content to attract viewers: The motto, “All Hitler, All the Time,” can only take them so far in the quest for ratings. Indeed, they must carefully balance their simultaneous investments in getting their trademark on the boxes of various blood-soaked videogames (typically budget releases such as *The Alamo: Fight for Independence*) with the more sizeable contributions they make in order to push the banality of their brand name within the hallowed halls of the Smithsonian. But Ripperologist? That just screams of Trekkie and even those folks are growing testy these days, demanding something a bit more respectable. (One must admit that the “Trekker” alternative just reeks of desperation.) Beyond that, the question of how The History Channel deals with the authorities they employ is an interesting one.

Different eras and events require different levels of credibility. A show on gladiators or the building of the pyramids will have guest experts whose every appearance is greeted by an extended paragraph of educational institutions and conferred degrees, their mother’s maiden name, and exactly how many of their ancestors were filthy rich and had vassals back in the old country. This information flashes up on screen after just about every subsequent disembowelment with a gladius—just in case you missed it the first thirty odd times around. Still, from a strictly male-perspective, this process can at times be remarkably democratic, where competing and complementary masculinities are reigned in for the greater good of patriarchy: a professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and a football player like Howie Long being equally at home for this

purpose. Each is a favored recipient of the legacies of the past, their meaning and power, in a way that no woman can be.

On the other hand, a Civil War historian is merely a Civil War historian (writing a book for a vanity press can at times be sufficient) and there is seldom any point in beating the audience over the head with this information. There’s no need to advertise their CVs on the screen more than once: after all, they might as well be an expert in alien abductions given the credibility—at least the kind that leaves a distinguished paper trail—they often bring to the table. Anyone can round up a few friends and recreate the War of Northern Aggression; building catapults to scale in one’s back yard is indeed a more esoteric hobby, although one that many are now finding equally pedestrian given its incessant inclusion on basic cable. While classism can often explain the substantial difference in pedigree between Classicists (the most successful of which tend to start off early in parochial schools) and Civil War scholars, so-called “military experts” are a breed apart.

Evidently, the only qualification needed for the job is to wear a constant subtitle reminding the audience that they are, in fact, a military expert. Prior service in the armed forces can be a plus (as is a current subscription to *Soldier of Fortune*) but is not truly necessary, though looking tough and having a few scars can certainly lead to future job opportunities. Looking good is important, a lesson we all learned during the initial days of the war in Iraq as we watched every former two-star general march across the CNN studio to give the same speech on the new and improved Patriot missile that any fourteen

year old videogame player could have delivered in greater detail. Remember, this is how Wesley Clark became a household name and Michael Moore's favorite among the 2004 Democratic hopefuls: he comes with a real life subtitle. "General," like "President," is an honorific that lasts for a lifetime, not unlike Papal authority, a reminder of the good old days of patriarchy.

However, it's these macho men who often fill in the details for the viewers of such fare as "Tales of the Gun," cheap content designed to fill airtime and convince advertisers that the station owns a viable masculine demographic. These shows demonstrate that there are simply not enough interesting people in history—male ones anyway—that we must instead focus our attention on inanimate objects, preferably on those with a phallic association, just as ESPN has used fat men playing poker, dueling with dour sunglasses and manly bluster (the cunning Odysseus to the Achilles-like athletes of the world), in order to continue to displace women's sporting events and keep them off of the air. Still, it's hard to blame The History Channel. Even the United Nations fell for the tough guy persona when they hired the US nominated Harvey John "Jack" McGeorge as a weapons inspector under the aegis of Hans Blix. While the Jacko in question was once a Marine, not only did he not have a shred of training (academic or military) in searching for or analyzing weapons of mass destruction, he was also the head of a sadomasochism society, the Leather Leadership Conference; even Iraqi warlords thought there was something a trifle odd about the fellow.

Masculinity is itself the ultimate form of credentiality. Given the crisis imposed by its rendering as problematic by feminist critics, pseudo-classical constructions such as "Ripperologist"—designed to draw upon historic legacies of male power—should be expected. It is not even a new process in American history, although the Mock-Latinate expressions of pundits on FOX News are fairly stolid (words such as "bloviate" for "blowing hot air") compared to the riotous constructions of the 19th century, with favorites such as "absquatulate" meaning to depart and squat elsewhere. Indeed, for his mastery of such language, Ian McShane received an Emmy nomination for his portrayal of Al Swearengen on HBO's gritty Western, *Deadwood*.

Given the diversity of knowledge today, it seems only natural that new fields of inquiry are gaining their own identities and trappings, where self-proclaimed Ripperologists can be viewed as consummate experts on their own small area of study. However, this process of fracturing and crystallization has also lowered the bar in the traditional sense: one of the most prominent Ripperologists achieved his level of status as a mere undergraduate at the University of Delaware, given his aptitude with the internet. While the time-honored "ladder" or "totem pole" schematic of vertically oriented patriarchy seems to have dissipated for Ripperologists and UFOlogists alike, what all of these neologisms have in common is that they are a reflection of males and their interests, interests which have been deemed important enough to have experts in the first place—not so for historically female pursuits.

Despite the fact that many public universities and trade schools have been offering courses on videogames for years, they were always treated as purely vocational subjects (outside the small number of sociologists who have conducted an assortment of meaningless polls in order to win mainstream media attention for themselves); it took institutions like Princeton that have a larger allotment of traditional patriarchal authority to introduce the subject as a purely academic one, treating their hobby with all the kid-gloves that postmodernism affords. These Ivy League frat boys even termed their new discipline “Ludology,” a name that *should* immediately conjure the political motivations behind the original “bread and circuses,” something a far cry from the highbrow artistic aspirations these elite men envision for their pastime. Though conservatives have sometimes railed against the rise of such flakey curricula—as if it all hails from those homosexual bastions in California—their liberal peers have worked to ensure that when women do get to participate in these reindeer games, it is only to speak on sex as sexual objects. Prostituted women are now “Sexologists” and the sex of prostitution is the sex to which all humans should aspire; shades of Baudelaire’s manic pronouncements in his *Fuses*.

As a consequence of this, the bar has actually been raised for women, who are still forced into the antiquated academic track: They need a far more impressive résumé and an actual position at the Smithsonian (something that male corpo-

rate interests such as The History Channel have simply been able to buy their way into) before they can speak with the same authority on Late-War Japanese firearms as a man who is simply an avid collector and armchair historian. While men fled from academia in the late 1990s for lucrative jobs in Information Technology, they still maintained the ability to become pundits in all subjects (often as “one book experts” who have read a single volume on a topic), given the importance granted to their hobbies and the social networks that they use to engage in them. Now, as the technology bubble has burst, these same men are returning to universities in droves. It seems likely enough that they will carry this ethic back with them, transforming every field of study into a smattering of television sound bites obsessed with pop culture. In a strange twist, women will be given the musty task of taking up the banner of the old guard—carrying on the thankless role of the stodgy 20th century professional—as their male peers gallivant about, dilettantes fashioned after the great men of the 19th.