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British Reviews of Marriages

Nancy Topping Bazin

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BRITISH REVIEWS OF *SHIKASTA*

Continued from p. 9

says *Shikasta* "has much to say about the human (or Shikastan) race which is profound, relevant, and daring." Calling Lessing's cosmic fancies "mere decoration," Anthony Burgess declares that "the virtue of Mrs. Lessing's novel lies in its rage and its hope and, of course, its humanity." Despite Allan Massie's reservation about Lessing's use of bureaucratic language, he too senses the greatness of her achievement: he calls *Shikasta* "rich and provocative" and notes that "beside it, other things look fairly pale." He says she "has constructed a satisfying and coherent reworking of old myth, couched in new scientific terms." Looking at the novel as a whole, he states: "There are moments of extraordinary and audacious beauty, there is a genuine excitement in the great sweep of the book and one cannot fail to admire Ms. Lessing's intellectual grasp of her material."

In the *Spectator* (1/12/80) Alex de Jonge complains that Lessing's "strongly unified conception" fails to "come across on the narrative level"; yet overall he finds *Shikasta* "a highly imaginative and powerful piece of myth making." Reviewing for *Gay News* (11/17/79), Marsaili Cameron praises Lessing's "ability to juxtapose telling detail and visions of eternity." David Lodge's final statement about *Shikasta* in his *New Statesman* review might have been written about most of Lessing's novels: "But whether you like it or not, it certainly makes you think; and there are too few works of fiction around of which that can be said, not to be grateful." Jonathan Keates comments in *The Literary Review* (2/9-22/80): "she has had the courage, almost nonexistent among contemporary novelists, to underline the perpetual combat of good and evil, of the mindless or insensitive versus discriminating intelligence and active sympathy." He emphasizes that "*Shikasta* is not in fact a work of science fiction but a religious discourse, a prolonged, intricate parable." In the *Times* (11/15/79) Myrna Blumberg calls *Shikasta* "magnificent," "an astounding book that sets out to chronicle the whole works: the whole world of humanity, spirit, earth, stars, soul, resources, virtue, evil, pre-Eden, forever." Edward Campbell in the *Evening News* (11/26/79) calls *Shikasta* "truly astonishing" and describes it as "a novel with an undoubtedly subliminal effect." Campbell writes: "Doris Lessing—and this is where it gets eerie—somehow manages to suggest inside information. You feel she has had a glimpse of something outside imagination. If the something isn't instantly convincing, neither is it trivial or absurd." Perhaps the most surprising remark in the reviews is one by Lucille Redmond on a program entitled "Bookweek" for RTE Radio 1 (2/24/80). Redmond said, "I've never liked Doris Lessing's work before, always found it too talky and self-important, but *Shikasta* is fun to read."

The British reviews raise questions such as these, which scholars will be trying to answer: Does Lessing's science fiction format reduce free choice beyond what is acceptable? Does her use of archive material destroy the particularity essential to retaining our interest in the novel? Is the language of reports and letters a burden the novel cannot bear? Has Lessing crossed too far over the line that separates creative writing from essay writing or dramatic presentation from didactic prose? Has her despair at the prospect of a catastrophe and her loss of faith in human beings' ability to change made her blind to more positive developments? Is her Sufi concept of evolution giving her a false hope for the far distant future, and does this belief in our ultimate powerlessness encourage political apathy and the psychological paralysis that accompanies despair? By largely ignoring contemporary feminism, its revolutionary impact, and the hope it provides, is Lessing creating a serious blind spot in her vision? Whatever reservations one might hold about *Shikasta,* is it nevertheless the novel that presents most brilliantly and comprehensively Lessing's world view? As scholars become more familiar with this provocative work, they will spark new questions, but they will also be responding to the issues raised in these British reviews.

✓ *British Reviews of Marriages*

by Nancy Topping Bazin

British reviews of Doris Lessing's second novel in her "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five,* were more favorable than those of the first novel, *Shikasta.* However, compared with comments about *Shikasta,* both negative and positive remarks about *Marriages* were less perceptive and more often blatantly inaccurate, perhaps because a novel dealing with male-female relationships draws forth in reviewers and other readers the multitude of misconceptions and prejudices that abound on this topic. Moreover, although reviewers obviously enjoyed reading *Marriages* more than they did *Shikasta,* their praise lacked the intensity and enthusiasm that characterized the praise of the first book. This could suggest that although *Marriages* is a better novel, it is not necessarily a greater one.

Among the least enlightening reviews of *Marriages* is Elizabeth Harvey's in *The Birmingham Post* (5/24/80). She complains: "Things happen, but there is a curious lack of drama and opaqueness, and the story is further complicated by the sudden appearances of the chroniclers who are reconstructing the facts from the old tales and pictures which glamourised them." Harvey's sympathies were with Ben Ata for having to marry the Queen of Zone Five; she does not even mention sympathizing with Al•Ith, the lonely outcast struggling to enter Zone Two! Writing for the *Sunday Telegraph* (5/8/80), Thomas Hinde finds "the core of message in this tale of kings and queens, soldiers and wise women, too slender" and, while admitting "a lot of it *is* lovely," adds rather snidely, "but I'm sure Miss Lessing's many admirers will enjoy every quaint and lovely syllable." He claims "Miss Lessing's real problem is that although she can conceive of a reconciliation between male and female values she cannot bring enthusiasm to the idea." A reviewer for *The Yorkshire Post,* Philip Thody, does not like

Continued on p. 11

BRITISH REVIEWS OF *MARRIAGES*

Continued from p. 10

"Lessing's exploitation of cliches about the difference between men and women"; missing the extraordinary subtlety of her analysis, he would prefer she write about "real people." Although Lessing herself considers *Marriages* a rather comic novel, Thody charges that Lessing lacks "any sense of humour."

By contrast, a writer whose work Lessing admires, Marina Warner, describes Lessing's style in *Marriages* as "glancing, amused, feline throughout." In *The Sunday Times* (5/11/80), Warner goes on to say, "Even the chronicler's solemn tone she adopts now and then is mischievous." About the language of the novel, Warner writes: "In 'Marriages' she has chosen the language of fairy tales in order to keep the memory of ordinary earthlings' sexual love, its antagonisms, its moments of bliss. For fairy tales are very reliable keepers of durable truths."

However, in the June 19-July 2 *London Review of Books,* Robert Taubman finds fables too simple; he claims *Marriages* succeeds only because much of the novel "works against the fable." He justly decides that "what the novel does is to dramatise all along an opposition between fable and reality": "The marriage of Al•Ith to Ben Ata—'this exemplary marriage' in the chronicler's first words—turns out in the telling to be not at all exemplary, but a tense, difficult relationship between two human beings who are aware of shifting senses of the self and capable of both love and hate—very like, in fact, what we hear of affairs and their sudden revulsions of feeling in Doris Lessing's more realistic novels." Preferring the contemporary reality to the visionary ideal, Taubman asks, "What would have been proved by a successful symbiosis of the male and female principles?" Taubman praises the "subtlety" of the narrative "in working against itself in this way": "It's remarkably flexible, both direct and dreamlike, managing time-effects that move from the present to a legendary past within a sentence, and especially effective with the unreal time-scale of Al•Ith's three return visits to her capital."

Taubman's distaste for the format of the fable is echoed by Nicholas Shrimpton's expression of distaste for allegory. Reviewing for the *New Statesman* (5/23/80), Shrimpton worries about Lessing's "recent move towards the more allegorical variety of contemporary science fiction." He says, "The problem is whether her characteristic gifts of domestic observation and interior acuteness can survive the mechanical procedures of the mode." He associates Zones Five to One with "a hierarchy of moral states" and with earth, water, air, fire, and pure spirit, in that order. Guessing at other analogies, he says, "Even if one resists the temptation to see Zone Five as Africa, it is hard not to see this system as a map of the author's own intellectual progress." His further interpretation of Lessing's intent is undoubtedly accurate, although it will certainly depress feminists who prefer the ways of Zone Three: "The two realms [four and three] operate as an image of heterosexual love, showing how men and women inevitably meet as foreigners, and suggesting

Continued on p 14

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Continued from p. 6

Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL 62026) prior to the convention. A cash bar sponsored by the Society will be held Dec. 28 from 5:15-7 p.m. in Cottonwood B, Hyatt.

• Claire Sprague, president of the Doris Lessing Society, will present a paper entitled "From Anna/Saul to Martha/Mark: Opposite Sex Doubles in Doris Lessing" at the MLA Special Session on "The Male/Female Double: Lawrence, Woolf, Lessing, Storey." The paper on Lawrence will be presented by Ellen Cronan Rose, long active in the Doris Lessing Society. The session will be held Dec. 28 from 9-10:15 p.m., Cedar, Hyatt.

• Dorothy Brewster, author of the first book on Lessing *(Doris Lessing,* Twayne, 1965), died April 17, 1979. Born on Sept. 8, 1883, she taught at Columbia University from 1908-11 and 1915-50, retiring in 1950 as professor emeritus. Author or editor of many books on modern fiction, she is best known for *Virginia Woolf's London* (1959) and *Virginia Woolf* (1962). Besides the entries in *Who's Who in America* and *Directory of American Scholars,* she was also listed in *Burke's Peerage* and other directories of the distinguished.

LESSING MEETINGS AT THE MLA
"Strategies for Reading Doris Lessing"
(Dec. 27, 9-10:15 p.m., Arbor I, Hyatt)

Discussion Leader: Claire Sprague (Brooklyn College, CUNY)

Anne Hedin (Indiana Univ., Bloomington): "Spatial Form in *The Golden Notebook* and the Later Fiction"

Roswell Spafford (Univ. of California, Santa Cruz): "The Politics of Pronouns"

Alvin Sullivan (So. Illinois Univ., Edwardsville): "Ideology and Form: Decentrism in *The Golden Notebook, Memoirs,* and *Shikasta*"

Dagmar Barnouw (Brown Univ.): "How to Enter an Alien World: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* and Joanna Russ' *The Two of Them*"

Respondent: Joseph Hynes (Univ. of Oregon)

"Doris Lessing and the Art of Science Fiction"
(Dec. 30, 10:15-11:30 a.m., Cedar, Hyatt)

Discussion Leader: Virginia Tiger (Rutgers Univ., Newark)

Marie L. Ahearn (Southeastern Masachusetts Univ.): "Why Doris Lessing's Move into Science Fiction?"

Betsy Draine (Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison): "Competing Codes in *Shikasta*"

Katherine Fishburn (Michigan State Univ.): "The Eye of the Storm: Narrative Technique in the Science Fiction of Doris Lessing"

Jeanne Murray Walker (Univ. of Delaware): "Reciprocity and Exchange in Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*"

Respondent: Terrell F. Dixon (Univ. of Houston)

OUTSIDERS

Continued from p. 4

ambivalence about the connotations, the word "alien" to describe Martha in *The Four-Gated City*. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the divine "She" in the rooms and gardens beyond the wall is described as "the exiled inhabitant; for surely she could not live, never could have lived in that chill empty shell full of dirty and stale air."[23] Does Lessing mean that "She" is the "alien" inhabitant of that shell, exiled from a better place, or that "She" is a former inhabitant now "exiled" (escaped?) from that shell (but still haunting its environs) because it has declined?

The ambiguity of Lessing's use of "alien" and "exile," together with her ambivalence about the advantages and disadvantages of being one or the other, may be placed in the large context of her ambivalence about the condition of the outsider figure that these words name: Does the outsider suffer exclusion or enjoy freedom? Perhaps Lessing is interested in the outsider figure (and plays with the words "alien" and "exile") precisely because of their inherent confusion, ambiguity, and ambivalence. The words, the figure itself, communicate a doubleness of meaning, both flexible and dynamic. Such words and such a figure give Lessing a way to write about infinite possibility, that is, a way to give form to creative chaos, without making it any the less chaotic itself. "We were in that place which might present us with anything," the survivor says at the very end of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, "as the last walls dissolved." But it is not clear which walls of which world are dissolving; nor if "dissolved" is being used synonymously with "folded up around her," that is, with "closing up"; nor if the survivor is an outsider (an alien, an exile) excluded or escaped from the new world or the old. Perhaps this is all just fuzzy writing. Or, perhaps, Lessing is finding a figure and a language "which might present us with anything." Like Charles Watkins' words in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Lessing's forms (characters, language, imagery, structures) are, increasingly, not a question of "either/or" but of "both/and."

NOTES

[1]"Preface to *The Golden Notebook*," in Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice*, ed. Paul Schlueter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 38.
[2]*In Pursuit of the English* (New York: Popular Library, n.d.), p. 7.
[3]*African Stories* (New York: Popular Library, n.d.), p. viii.
[4]"Being Prohibited," in *The New Statesman*, 21 April 1956, pp. 410, 412; rpt. in Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice*, p. 155.
[5]Lessing, interviewed by Barbara A. Bannon, "Authors and Editors," *Publisher's Weekly*, 2 June 1969, p 52.
[6]"An Ancient Way to New Freedom," *Vogue*, July 1971, p. 125.
[7]Florence Howe, "A Conversation with Doris Lessing (1966)," *Contemporary Literature*, 14(1973), 424-25.
[8]"The Small Personal Voice," in *Declaration*, ed. Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), pp. 11-27; rpt. in Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice*, p. 20.
[9]Howe, pp. 430, 431.
[10]Quoted by Paul Schlueter, *The Novels of Doris Lessing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 89.
[11]Howe, p. 433.
[12]Kate Millett, *Flying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 359.
[13]"The Small Personal Voice," p. 18; and interview with Barbara Bannon, p. 53.
[14]Frederick Karl, "Doris Lessing in the Sixties: The New Anatomy of Melancholy," *Contemporary Literature*, 13(1972), 32-33.
[15]*Ibid.*, p. 31.
[16]*Retreat to Innocence* (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1967), p. 174.
[17]*Ibid.*, p. 228.
[18]*A Proper Marriage* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 343.
[19]*Ibid.*, p. 339.
[20]*The Golden Notebook* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), p. 10.
[21]*The Four-Gated City* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 22.
[22]*Ibid.*, p. 23.
[23]*The Memoirs of a Survivor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 14.

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BRITISH REVIEWS OF *MARRIAGES*

Continued from p. 11

that such strangeness (not apparently provided by the wonderfully sympathetic, self-knowing, sexually skilled and subordinate men of Zone Three) is what provokes the heights and depths of traditional passion." He concludes that "this allegory-in-little holds emotions and ideas together in the manner for which Doris Lessing has always been so justly celebrated" but then adds, perhaps thinking of *Shikasta*, "The allegory-in-large, alas, shows worrying signs that they may be beginning to drift apart." Yet he rightly recognizes that Lessing's new "'sociological space fiction'" enables her to "build a bridge between her old social and political interests and her more recent concern with mysticism." As he says, "At one point, indeed, this book reads almost like a personal apologia. 'No,' we are told of the heroine, Al•lth, 'she does not turn her back on her realm . . . But it is as if she is already living, at least with part of herself, somewhere else.' "

Micheal Jacob, reviewer of *Marriages* for the June 1980 *Third Way*, labels this novel "an allegory of spiritual evolution." Unlike several people who reviewed *Shikasta*, Jacob accepts the superior role Lessing has assigned the Providers in the two books: "The realisation of true humanity and the necessity to obey the demands of the divine are common to all great religions, and their presentation here, while divergent from Christian theology, is nonetheless possessed of extraordinary power, not only echoing biblical themes, but also casting a fresh light on them." He finds that these two novels "complement one another perfectly—the social and spiritual diagnosis of *Shikasta's* broad canvas being microscopically focused in *The Marriages.*" In the *Glasgow Herald* (5/17/80), Alison Weir prefers the microscopic quality of *Marriages* to the larger scope of *Shikasta* "because its appeal is more immediate and direct, although its message is no less profound."

In the *Times Literary Supplement* (5/9/80), Eric Korn writes in a review entitled "Al•lth in Wonderland": "Doris Lessing has produced, for a modern sensibility, a radiant epithalamium" (p. 520). Writing for the *Observer*, Lorna Sage is glad to find that by now Lessing writes about the "sexual conflict" with "serenity." Sage evidently prefers the tone of the detached male observer to the emotional involvement of a victimized female protagonist: "The frontiers and barriers seem part of a system of divides (animal/human; human/daemon), no longer necessarily in the foreground, though they happen to be here." Sage says of Lessing: "She speaks through her 'Chronicler,' like a most humane and visionary anthropologist." In the May 8, 1980 *Times*, Gay Firth is similarly delighted to compare Lessing to Blake, saying that both want "a world sufficiently 'feminized' to bring men and women into a balance of loving influence, not of power" and that "each rings the alarm about a feminist movement which, as generally perceived, exhorts women to repudiate 'traditional feminine virtues' and adopt masculine ones." Such misinterpretations of the feminist position make one shudder, as does the attitude displayed by Hilary Bailey in this statement about Al•lth in

Continued on p. 15

BRITISH REVIEWS OF *MARRIAGES*

Continued from p. 14

the May 8, 1980 *Guardian:* "She may be understood as a valid woman of an earlier kind—gentle, ruling by intuition and a generous idea of people's needs and individualities, while the barbarian queen represents today's women—strong, naive, lacking the subtleties women developed previously to complement, control or counter the fierce manly qualities of those who must hew coal or fight in wars." We may also puzzle over Gay Firth's view of this novel as displaying Lessing's continued preoccupation "with the balance of dominance and need between the sexes" *(Times,* 5/8/80).

Of course, while Lessing's brilliance in observing male-female interactions endears her to feminists, at the same time, her ambivalent feelings (and occasionally even hostility) towards contemporary feminism endear her to anti-feminists. Marsaili Cameron in the May 15 *Gay News* rightly perceives the ambivalence and tension at the heart of *Marriages:* "At the heart of the novel lie unresolved the very questions which the book might be thought to be addressing: are male and female quite different ways of constructing and experiencing the world; if so, must they forever be associated with masculine and feminine; and must they always be linked, like light and dark, with mutual eclipse, rather than merging?" Unlike most feminists, Lessing evidently views male-female differences as more innate than cultural. Interviewed for the *New York Times Book Review* (3/30/80), Lessing commented on how different women are from men—as if the two originally came here from different planets (p. 24). And so in *Marriages* her female and male protagonists come together from different zones and learn to love one another as best they can.

Most of the British reviewers find this story and its setting charming. For example, *Guardian* reviewer Hilary Bailey praises *Marriages* for being a "sweetly told tale with its wide landscapes, its clear colouring and its air of melancholy and thoughtfulness" (5/8/80); and in the *Daily Telegraph* (5/8/80) Nina Bawden describes this novel [which Lessing wrote with unusual ease *(NYTBR,* 3/30/80)], as "a lilting and resonant tale of great charm and humour."

The British reviews overall suggest that although this story is charming and *seemingly* simple, the complexity, brilliance, and subtlety of Lessing's tragi-comic analysis of male-female relationships will not be readily understood. Because of readers' misinterpretations, because of Lessing's own ambivalence towards her subject matter, and because of the mystical elements towards the end of the story, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* will probably continue to provoke considerable controversy.

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