

# *A Blonde in Science*

**Gail F. Eaton**

*Writer's comment: My father was a wonderful writer. He could string words together, weaving pictures as vivid as photographs, making you laugh yourself silly or moving you to tears. All through my childhood, I never cultivated my writing ability, and therefore it was never more than a tool to me. Perhaps I was unwilling to step into my father's arena.*

*After his death in 1989, I tried to grasp onto everything that he was, but each day his memory seemed to slip further from my mind. It was not until my English 103A class that I was able to feel close to my father and to begin to understand him for the first time. Writing for the class was a chore to me at first, and I am sorry to say that my first essay was a dismal failure. But with each assignment, writing became less of a chore. I began to anticipate each assignment, eagerly refining my essays, arranging the words—finding the best way to communicate to my reader exactly what I was thinking or feeling*

*"A Blonde in Science" was the essay I had the most fun writing. Being both a geologist and a blonde, I had no trouble finding the material for the essay—I just took it from everyday life. But I always was thinking of my reader: of Rebecca, my instructor, and my family and friends or you—you who may be about to read this essay for the first time. But most of all I was thinking of my father. At times I felt he was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder as my fingers ran rapid-fire over the computer keys.*

*Writing has not only brought me closer to my father, but it has given me an avenue for creative expression that is sometimes hard to find in the scientific world. But now that I have found that I can write—open the gates and let the words flow!*

*-Gail F. Eaton*

*Instructor's comment: In assigning arguments, I always encourage students to search for topics that are personally significant. I don't want students to choose without conviction set topics of the day—abortion, gun control, or nuclear energy—and then to march readers dutifully over well-trodden terrain and past weary platoons of arguments. And so I was delighted in English 103A to discover Gail Eaton's essay, a lively and original argument—original because Gail argues with herself as she tries to explain her response to stereotypes. In "A Blonde in Science," Gail particularly caught my attention with her confident voice: her ready use of her training as a scientist to provide an approach to her argument (data-gathering and hypothesis-testing), her varied sentences and risk-taking diction, and her final call for self-acceptance.*

*-Rebecca Gaudino, Lecturer, English Department*

Did you see the movie *Top Gun*?

You know the movie, that piece of fluff about macho jet pilots, winging their way into the hearts of the weaker sex. Something bothers me about that movie. No, it isn't the violence, the lousy dialogue, or the tongue-dominated love scene. What really bothers me about *Top Gun* is the blonde astrophysicist in seamed stockings, strutting between two rows of fighter pilots, knocking these pilots out with her intellect as well as her beauty.

The ad campaign, "Smart, beautiful, Maybelline," also bothers me—beautiful women, wearing high-fashion clothes and layers of make-up, succeeding in high-powered jobs. I fight the urge to change the television channel whenever one of these commercials airs. Most recently, as I was searching frantically for the T.V. remote control—with that blessed mute button—I suddenly stopped and watched a Maybelline commercial. Why does this bother me? I asked myself. Am I not a blonde woman who wears make-up, and am I not successful in my career? Why, then am I uncomfortable seeing women, like myself, portrayed as both beautiful and smart?

Sitting back in my chair, thinking about this negative reaction to—excuse me for sounding circular—myself, I began to explore the stereotypes I had suddenly touched upon, wondering if I myself held these views. The stereotypes I am referring to will, no doubt, be familiar to you. We know them well. The dumb blonde, concerned only with the status of her sex appeal, and the scientist: brilliant, bespectacled, and male. Women fortunate enough to become scientists fit another stereotype: the drab, mousy, asexual bookworm.

That I might be as guilty as the rest of society in harboring these stereotypes is, to me, shocking. After all, I am a blonde-haired female scientist. So why would the image of a beautiful, stylish, blonde astrophysicist, which renders invalid the stereotypes mentioned before, bother me? Is it because the blonde astrophysicist breaks the stereotypes I am conditioned to believe in, or have they grown so familiar to me that I just accept them as being true, unable to accept any new idea contradicting them?

Using my scientific experience and tenacity, I have delved into the problem to form a hypothesis. Why would a blonde female scientist be unwilling to relinquish the same stereotypical views she has fought to disprove? One answer could be that she doesn't see herself so much as a blonde female, as she does as a female scientist who does not fit into any of these stereotypes. My success as a scientist has, of course, shifted my values—I am not as reliant on my physical attributes, having found confidence in the mass of gray matter resting between my ears. I thus have removed myself from the image of the ditzy blonde, having contempt for my unfocused, golden-tressed sisters. But I have also retained my femininity, refusing to succumb to the drab, mousy image.

However, any decent scientist finds fault with a hypothesis in the attempt to prove its validity, and this answer is too simple. Why would I become removed from the ditzy image while still clinging to those stereotypes? By not fitting into any of those old stereotypes I can't really believe in them because, if I did, I would either be a ditzy blonde or a drab scientist. So I must be asking the wrong question. I do not hold these stereotypes, so there must be another reason the beautiful blond astrophysicist makes me uncomfortable.

And so I introduce a second hypothesis that requires me to look even more closely at my subject—myself. Becoming a scientist is difficult, and for women, even more difficult. I base this observation on personal experience, for in every class, I find that the expectations of me are lower, evidenced by the surprised reactions I get from my professors each time I earn the high score on an exam. But why shouldn't I do well in my classes? I study diligently, rarely miss class and ask questions to clarify those concepts I find difficult to understand. But still the surprise. These observations are the basis for my second hypothesis as to why the concept of beautiful women scientists bothers me: I do not find the image of smart, beautiful, flashy, blonde female astrophysicists plausible. Why? Because I, along with the rest of society, am forced to accept the premise of the smart, beautiful woman based on insufficient evidence.

Being a female scientist, I know the difficulty of attaining this goal—I have had to prove myself over and over—but the media experts expect you-me-us to accept the premise with no questions asked. In the movie, *Top Gun*, the blonde scientist never discusses the physics of flying in the depth necessary to illustrate her proficiency as an astrophysicist. Instead, she behaves according to that distasteful stereotype—the blonde sex object concerned only with capturing her quarry, a super-macho fighter pilot. Her status, then, is not based upon her education, but on her ability to “get the guy.” By not showing us her command of astrophysics, we never really accept the fact that she is what she says she is, a highly educated scientist. We have no *proof*.

Examining the Maybelline commercials gives us results similar to those of our analysis of *Top Gun*. We observe successful women, from scientists to Wall Street bankers, gaining the admiring glances of their male colleagues—while doing the job of twelve people. Where is the proof that these women do what they say they do? Where are the real-life examples that might refute my second hypothesis?

But my second hypothesis, though it seems valid, still does not accurately explain my deep aversion to the media-hype of the smart, beautiful woman. Why should female scientists be required to prove their expertise while their male counterparts are automatically accepted as being qualified? We automatically accept the fact that the super-macho fighter pilot in *Top Gun* is qualified to fly his plane, but we roll our eyes and whisper “give me a break” when the concept of a beautiful female astrophysicist is presented to us. That the beautiful female scientist would have to prove her qualifications begins to invalidate my second hypothesis, since I'm not really questioning her qualifications. Being a scientist and having many female colleagues in science, I know that women are entirely capable of becoming astrophysicists.

However, based on the difficulty presented to any person desiring a career in science, I find it hard to believe that a woman with a Ph.D. in astrophysics would find the time, or have the inclination, to drop by Nordstrom's for a pair of seamed stockings. Proving my own proficiency in science has been a time-consuming endeavor, and my sense of fashion has suffered, but I do not feel in any way deprived. So the premise of the smart, beautiful woman is not far-fetched, only the premise that such a woman would have the time or the inclination to spend the vast number of hours needed to maintain the look of a high-fashion model.

So, I will put forth a third hypothesis. I do not like the pressure, induced by media images, to be smart *and* beautiful. Now I think I am getting somewhere. But even though I am no Christie Brinkley, I am not exactly the asexual bookworm either. I do find the time to style my hair (somewhat) and apply enough mascara to make my transparent eyelashes noticeable. But my assortment of eyeshadows, eyeliner, lipsticks and blush is terribly neglected, and my curling iron sits in a drawer collecting dust. So maybe I resent the pressure to be smart and beautiful because I don't have the *time* to do both of these things well.

Time, then, must be the key. We women are not incapable of being both beautiful and smart, but we don't have the time to have a career, clean the house, do the laundry, feed the kids, get the dog to the vet, read a book, see a movie, (have a life), *and* be drop-dead gorgeous. I suppose that if we blonde female scientists had a live-in housekeeper (essentially a wife) at home to conquer all these tasks, we could be drop-dead gorgeous as well as smart. Any of you who might tell me at this point that you know of a smart, beautiful female scientist who possibly refutes my third hypothesis, let me just pose a few questions to you. Is she wealthy? Do she and her husband (if she is married) have a combined income large enough to allow them to employ a full-time housekeeper? Does she have children, and if she does, can she afford a nanny or daycare? Does she have any hobbies (a life)?

Again, drawing from my personal experience, I find that most scientists are academics, employed by major universities. These universities require them to complete vast amounts of research, teach classes and sit on various committees—for minimal pay when compared to the magnitude of their responsibilities. Those scientists who do work for industry are expected to put in long hours, enduring great amounts of stress, to justify their salaries. In addition to these duties, they often have long commutes to their jobs and must attend several scientific seminars a year, keeping current with the latest innovations in their field.

I find it difficult to disprove my third hypothesis. Poring over the evidence and drawing upon personal experience, I find that the image of the beautiful, blond, female astrophysicist isn't plausible, not because it is impossible, but because it is improbable. I put forth, then, that these super-human wonder women can exist, but only if they are provided with the support—financial, emotional and otherwise—to do both things well, that is, be beautiful and smart. I am a blonde female scientist, without children, who is often so wrung out by the end of one of my typically long days that I can't imagine getting up at the crack of dawn to apply layers of make-up, curl, style and spray my hair into molded perfection—and put together a stylish

outfit. This would assume that I have time to read the fashion magazines to find out what is currently in style (more research!). It would also assume that I have the time, and the patience, to battle the style-frenzied masses at some nameless shopping mall for the latest in designer outfits.

You bet I resent the image of *Top Gun's* wonder-woman. Yes, Maybelline's smart, beautiful woman makes me uncomfortable, but only because I know that I cannot attain this goal. Scientific fashion models are not plausible because they would have to be extremely wealthy, or sacrifice sleeping, to maintain this media-styled image. They would literally have to be super-human. Furthermore, even though I find our stereotypes—the ones we wear so comfortably, like old shoes—distasteful, I find the alternative even more distasteful: that I must sacrifice those things that ensure my happiness and health, such as sleeping and having a family, so that I can maintain an unreal image forced upon me by the media. There must be common ground between these extremes, and this common ground is that women shouldn't have to sacrifice beauty for brains, or brains for beauty. It is our media-imposed stereotypes that we must abandon—women don't have to be ditzy blondes or mousy bookworms, or scientific fashion models. Women should be able to be successful and attractive, but only within the limits they themselves choose.