

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# John Adams Was a Hermaphrodite?

Maureen Dowd JUNE 4, 2016

LOS ANGELES — THIS is a town where scripts routinely come back to writers from entertainment executives with the same scrawled command about a female character: “Make her more likable.”

As Hillary Clinton fights up and down California to fend off Bernie Sanders and clinch the nomination, Democrats watch with clenched teeth. Sure, the Republicans are engaged in a hilarious performance of “The Taming of the Shrew” with their tart-tongued presumptive nominee.

But can plodding Hillary be, as Barack Obama famously put it, likable enough?

Or does it even matter?

Hollywood’s most famous icon of likability thinks not.

“Over the past months, I have heard the word likability used so frequently,” Sally Field said Friday at a Hillary rally here at a community college. “How Hillary Clinton is not likable. How she’s cold or shrill or an opportunist or just not someone you’d like to have a beer with. What is this? A high school popularity contest?”

Actually, it kind of is.

This was, funnily enough, the actress who had one of the most memorably needy moments in Oscar history in 1985, when she won her second statuette for “Places in the Heart” and marveled to the audience: “I can’t deny the fact that you like me right now. You like me!”

But Field, one of several actresses and women pols warming up the crowd for Hillary, was determined to make the case that unpopularity shouldn’t be disqualifying — especially for a woman.

“We don’t need someone who is nice,” she said. “And c’mon. Honestly. Women have spent the last hundred years trying to get out from under the expectation that they had to be sugar and spice and everything nice. We don’t need sugar and spice and everything nice.”

This is not an election where anyone needs to worry about an overdose of sugar and spice and everything nice. This is an election of vinegar and venom and endless nests of vipers.

You would think that Hillary Clinton would be used to maneuvering in a political landscape where the mud is flying. But it took her a year, several speechwriters and the example of Elizabeth Warren to figure out how to riposte Donald Trump’s peculiar combination of viciousness and playfulness.

You can’t do it the way Marco Rubio did, where you end up mired in absurd and self-defeating anatomical one-upmanship. And you can’t do it as Jeb Bush did, where you assume for too long that people will see Trump as a vainglorious vulgarian without you pointing it out.

You have to lob his own jejunosity back at him.

In a Trump takedown billed as a foreign policy address in San Diego on Thursday, Hillary scored several points.

Noting that he picked fights with everyone from the British prime minister to the pope, she mocked: “He says he doesn’t need to listen to our generals or our admirals or our ambassadors and other high officials because he has, quote, ‘a very good brain.’”

After floundering, her campaign has now settled on a strategy of painting the mogul as unhinged and thin-skinned, which always really gets under his thin skin.

“It’s no small thing,” Hillary said, “when he suggests that America should withdraw our military support for Japan, encourage them to get nuclear weapons, and said this about a war between Japan and North Korea — and I quote — ‘If they do, they do. Good luck. Enjoy yourself, folks.’ I wonder if he even realizes he’s even talking about nuclear war.”

With its typical arrogance, Clintonworld can go too far.

Madeleine Albright, who specializes in being unhelpfully helpful to Hillary, dismissed the email controversy on CNN: “She has said she made a mistake and nobody is going to die as a result of anything that happened on emails.”

That, of course, is an open invitation for Trump to recall that many did die in the Iraq war Clinton voted for and that the email imbroglio represented reckless judgment on her part. (Or, as Trump spells it in his tweets, “judgement.”)

She has not forthrightly taken responsibility or explained how she could stonewall the State Department inspector general. She’s still acting as though what she did was acceptable — “Well, it was allowed,” she says — even though the inspector general has made it clear that it wasn’t and that she never bothered to ask for permission to use a private email server. It was a request that would have been rejected had she made it, he said.

As usual with Hillary, she clearly feels the only problem was that people found out. It undercuts her claims that Trump is reckless when she can’t fathom how reckless she was.

She made a really good speech in San Diego. But even if she dispatches Sanders on Tuesday, Trump isn’t going to be easy. Given the slurs and punches and eggs and salacious, hellacious stuff flying around, this could be the wildest, meanest election in modern history.

Just look at Friday alone.

Trump was on a tarmac in Redding, Calif., recounting a story about a black “great guy” who slugged a protester at a prior rally. He interrupted himself to point at a random black supporter in the crowd, saying: “Oh, look at my African-American over here. Look at him.”

This followed an interview with CNN’s Jake Tapper in which Trump was unyielding in his insistence that he was not being racist when he said that the judge presiding in a lawsuit over Trump University was biased because “he’s a Mexican” and “we’re building a wall between here and Mexico.”

Tapper gamely tried to point out, more than once, that the judge, Gonzalo Curiel, was born and raised in Indiana. But Trump held his ground: “He’s proud of his heritage. I respect him for that.”

The latest installment in a nutty attack on the judge — coming more than a week after a nutty attack on New Mexico’s Republican governor, Susana Martinez — forced Paul Ryan, who had finally dragged himself over to Trump a day earlier, to start skittering away again.

Trump speculated at his rally that Hillary might share sensitive information with her aide Huma Abedin who might share it with her husband, saying: “I know Anthony Weiner. I don’t want him knowing anything. And I never, ever want him to tweet me.”

So, of course, Weiner tweeted immediately and incoherently: “Wait, is he talking to me. I’ll hit that guy with so many rights, he’ll be begging for a left.”

Naturally, Lin-Manuel Miranda of “Hamilton” fame provided the perfect kicker for the week in a new Rolling Stone interview, saying that this election is “no more bizarre than the election in 1800 wherein Jefferson accused Adams of being a hermaphrodite and Adams responded” by spreading rumors “that Jefferson died so that Adams would be the only viable candidate. He was counting on news to travel slow! That, weirdly, gives me hope.”

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