



Vol. 36 No. 6 · 20 March 2014

The Public Voice of Women

Mary Beard

I WANT to start very near the beginning of the tradition of Western literature, and its first recorded example of a man telling a woman to ‘shut up’; telling her that her voice was not to be heard in public. I’m thinking of a moment immortalised at the start of the *Odyssey*. We tend now to think of the *Odyssey* as the story of Odysseus and the adventures and scrapes he had returning home after the Trojan War – while for decades Penelope loyally waited for him, fending off the suitors who were pressing for her hand.¹ But the *Odyssey* is just as much the story of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope; the story of his growing up; how over the course of the poem he matures from boy to man. The process starts in the first book with Penelope coming down from her private quarters into the great hall, to find a bard performing to throngs of her suitors; he’s singing about the difficulties the Greek heroes are having in reaching home. She isn’t amused, and in front of everyone she asks him to choose another, happier number. At which point young Telemachus intervenes: ‘Mother,’ he says, ‘go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff . . . speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household.’ And off she goes, back upstairs.²

There is something faintly ridiculous about this wet-behind-the-ears lad shutting up the savvy, middle-aged Penelope. But it’s a nice demonstration that right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women’s voices are not being heard in the public sphere; more than that, as Homer has it, an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species. The actual words Telemachus uses are significant too. When he says ‘speech’ is ‘men’s business’, the word is *muthos* – not in the sense that it has come down to us of ‘myth’. In Homeric Greek it signals authoritative public speech (not the kind of chatting, prattling or gossip that anyone – women included, or especially women – could do).

What interests me is the relationship between that classic Homeric moment of silencing a woman and some of the ways women’s voices are not publicly heard in our own contemporary culture, and in our own politics from the front bench to the shop floor. It’s a well-known deafness that’s nicely parodied in the old *Punch* cartoon: ‘That’s an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.’³ I want to look too at how it might

relate to the abuse that many women who do speak out are subjected to even now, and one of the questions at the back of my mind is the connection between publicly speaking out in support of a female logo on a banknote, Twitter threats of rape and decapitation, and Telemachus' put-down of Penelope.

My aim here – and I acknowledge the irony of my being given the space to address the subject – is to take a long view, a very long view, on the culturally awkward relationship between the voice of women and the public sphere of speech-making, debate and comment: politics in its widest sense, from office committees to the floor of the House. I'm hoping that the long view will help us get beyond the simple diagnosis of 'misogyny' that we tend a bit lazily to fall back on. To be sure, 'misogyny' is one way of describing what's going on. (If you go on a television discussion programme and then receive a load of tweets comparing your genitalia to a variety of unpleasantly rotting vegetables, it's hard to find a more apt word.) But if we want to understand – and do something about – the fact that women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard, we have to recognise that it is a bit more complicated and that there's a long back-story.

Telemachus' outburst was just the first example in a long line of largely successful attempts stretching throughout Greek and Roman antiquity, not only to exclude women from public speech but also to parade that exclusion. In the early fourth century BC Aristophanes devoted a whole comedy to the 'hilarious' fantasy that women might take over running the state. Part of the joke was that women couldn't speak properly in public – or rather, they couldn't adapt their private speech (which in this case was largely fixated on sex) to the lofty idiom of male politics. In the Roman world, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – that extraordinary mythological epic about people changing shape (and probably the most influential work of literature on Western art after the Bible) – repeatedly returns to the idea of the silencing of women in the process of their transformation. Poor Io is turned into a cow by Jupiter, so she cannot talk but only moo;⁴ while the chatty nymph Echo is punished so that her voice is never hers, merely an instrument for repeating the words of others. (In Waterhouse's famous painting she gazes at her desired Narcissus but cannot initiate a conversation with him, while he has fallen in love with his own image in the pool.⁵) One earnest Roman anthologist of the first century AD was able to rake up just three examples of 'women whose natural condition did not manage to keep them silent in the forum'. His descriptions are revealing. The first, a woman called Maesia, successfully defended herself in the courts and 'because she really had a man's nature behind the appearance of a woman was called the "androgyne"'. The second, Afrania, used to initiate legal cases herself and was 'impudent' enough to plead in person, so that everyone became tired out with her 'barking' or 'yapping' (she still isn't allowed human 'speech'). We are told that she died in 48 BC, because 'with unnatural freaks like this it's more important to record when they died than when they were born.'

There are only two main exceptions in the classical world to this abomination of women's public speaking. First, women are allowed to speak out as victims and as martyrs – usually to preface their own death. Early Christian women were represented loudly upholding their faith as they went to the lions; and, in a well-known story from the early history of Rome, the

virtuous Lucretia, raped by a brutal prince of the ruling monarchy, was given a speaking part solely to denounce the rapist and announce her own suicide (or so Roman writers presented it: what really happened, we haven't a clue⁶). But even this rather bitter opportunity to speak could itself be removed. One story in the *Metamorphoses* tells of the rape of the young princess Philomela. In order to prevent any Lucretia-style denunciation, the rapist quite simply cuts her tongue out.⁷ It's a notion that's picked up in *Titus Andronicus*, where the tongue of the raped Lavinia is also ripped out.⁸

The second exception is more familiar. Occasionally women could legitimately rise up to speak – to defend their homes, their children, their husbands or the interests of other women. So in the third of the three examples of female oratory discussed by that Roman anthologist, the woman – Hortensia by name – gets away with it because she is acting explicitly as the spokesperson for the women of Rome, after they have been subject to a special wealth tax to fund a dubious war effort.⁹ Women, in other words, may in extreme circumstances publicly defend their own sectional interests, but not speak for men or the community as a whole. In general, as one second-century AD guru put it, 'a woman should as modestly guard against exposing her voice to outsiders as she would guard against stripping off her clothes.'

There is more to all this than meets the eye, however. This 'muteness' is not just a reflection of women's general disempowerment throughout the classical world: no voting rights, limited legal and economic independence and so on. Ancient women were obviously not likely to raise their voices in a political sphere in which they had no formal stake. But we're dealing with a much more active and loaded exclusion of women from public speech than that – and, importantly, it's one with a much greater impact than we usually acknowledge on our own traditions, conventions and assumptions about the voice of women. What I mean is that public speaking and oratory were not merely things that ancient women didn't do: they were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender. As we saw with Telemachus, to become a man – and we're talking elite man – was to claim the right to speak. Public speech was a – if not the – defining attribute of maleness. A woman speaking in public was, in most circumstances, by definition not a woman. We find repeated stress throughout ancient literature on the authority of the deep male voice. As one ancient scientific treatise explicitly put it, a low-pitched voice indicated manly courage, a high-pitched voice female cowardice. Or as other classical writers insisted, the tone and timbre of women's speech always threatened to subvert not just the voice of the male orator, but also the social and political stability, the health, of the whole state. So another second-century lecturer and guru, Dio Chrysostom, whose name, significantly, means Dio 'the Golden Mouth', asked his audience to imagine a situation where 'an entire community was struck by the following strange affliction: all the men suddenly got female voices, and no male – child or adult – could say anything in a manly way. Would not that seem terrible and harder to bear than any plague? I'm sure they would send off to a sanctuary to consult the gods and try to propitiate the divine power with many gifts.' He wasn't joking.

What I want to underline here is that this is not the peculiar ideology of some distant culture. Distant in time it may be. But this is the tradition of gendered speaking – and the theorising of gendered speaking – of which we are still, directly or more often indirectly, the heirs. I don't want to overstate the case. Western culture doesn't owe everything to the Greeks and Romans, in speaking or in anything else (thank heavens it doesn't; none of us would fancy living in a Greco-Roman world). There are all kinds of variant and competing influences on us, and our political system has happily overthrown many of the gendered certainties of antiquity. Yet it remains the fact that our own traditions of debate and public speaking, their conventions and rules, still lie very much in the shadow of the classical world. The modern techniques of rhetoric and persuasion formulated in the Renaissance were drawn explicitly from ancient speeches and handbooks. Our own terms of rhetorical analysis go back directly to Aristotle and Cicero (it's common to point out that Barack Obama, or his speech writers, have learned their best tricks from Cicero). And so far as the House of Commons is concerned, those 19th-century gentlemen who devised, or enshrined, most of the parliamentary rules and procedures that we are now familiar with were brought up on exactly those classical theories, slogans and prejudices that I've been quoting. Again, we're not simply the victims or dupes of our classical inheritance, but classical traditions have provided us with a powerful template for thinking about public speech, and for deciding what counts as good oratory or bad, persuasive or not, and whose speech is to be given space to be heard. And gender is obviously an important part of that mix.

IT TAKES only a casual glance at the modern Western traditions of speech-making – at least up to the 20th century – to see that many of the classical themes I've been highlighting emerge time and time again. Women who claim a public voice get treated as freakish androgynes, like Maesia who defended herself in the Forum. The obvious case is Elizabeth I's belligerent address to the troops at Tilbury in 1588 in the face of the Spanish Armada.¹⁰ In the words many of us learned at school, she seems positively to avow her own androgyny: 'I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too' – an odd slogan to get young girls to learn.¹¹ In fact, it is quite likely that she never said anything of the sort. There is no script from her hand or that of her speech-writer, no eye-witness account, and the canonical version comes from the letter of an unreliable commentator, with his own axe to grind, written almost forty years later. But for my purpose the probable fictionality of the speech makes it even better: the nice twist is that the male letter-writer puts the boast (or confession) of androgyny into Elizabeth's own mouth.

Looking at modern traditions of oratory more generally, we also find that same single area of licence for women to talk publicly, in support of their own sectional interests, or to parade their victimhood. If you search out the women's contributions included in those curious compendia, called 'one hundred great speeches of history' and the like, you'll find that most of the female highlights from Emmeline Pankhurst to Hillary Clinton's address to the UN conference on women in Beijing are about the lot of women. So too is probably the most popularly anthologised example of female oratory of all, the 1851 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech of Sojourner Truth, ex-slave, abolitionist and American campaigner for women's rights. 'And

ain't I a woman?' she is supposed to have said. 'I have borne 13 chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman ...'¹² I should say that influential as these words have been, they are only slightly less mythical than Elizabeth's at Tilbury. The authorised version was written up a decade or so after Sojourner Truth said whatever she said – and that is when the now famous refrain, which she certainly did not say, was inserted, while at the same time her words as a whole were translated into a Southern drawl, to match the abolitionist message, even though she came from the North and had been brought up speaking Dutch. I'm not saying that women's voices raised in support of women's causes weren't important, but it remains the case that women's public speech has for centuries been 'niched' into that area. Here, I suppose I should flag up – before someone else does – my own topic this evening. No one forced it on me. But it can hardly be a coincidence that I chose to talk on the 'public voice of women' rather than about, say, migration or the war in Syria. I probably have to confess to being in the niche too.

The truth is that even that area of licence has not always or consistently been available to women. There are countless examples of attempts to write women out of public discourse, Telemachus-style. Anyone who has read Henry James's *Bostonians*, published in the 1880s, will remember that one main theme in the book is the silencing of Verena Tarrant, a young feminist campaigner and speaker. As she draws closer to her suitor Basil Ransom (a man endowed, as James stresses, with a rich deep voice), she finds herself increasingly unable to speak, as she once did, in public. Ransom effectively re-privatises her voice, insisting that she speak only to him: 'Keep your soothing words for me,' he says. In the novel James's own standpoint is hard to pin down – certainly readers have not warmed to Ransom – but in his essays James makes it clear where he stood; for he wrote about the polluting, contagious and socially destructive effect of women's voices, in words that could easily have come from the pen of some second-century AD Roman (and were almost certainly in part derived from classical sources). Under American women's influence, he insisted, language risks becoming a 'generalised mumble or jumble, a tongueless slobber or snarl or whine'; it will sound like 'the moo of the cow, the bray of the ass, and the bark of the dog'. (Note the echo of the tongueless Philomela, the moo of Io, and the barking of the female orator in the Roman Forum.) James was one among many. In what amounted to a crusade at the time for proper standards in American speech, other prominent contemporaries praised the sweet domestic singing of the female voice, while entirely opposing its use in the wider world. And there was plenty of thundering about the 'thin nasal tones' of women's public speech, about their 'twangs, whistles, snuffles, whines and whinnies'. 'In the names of our homes, our children, of our future, our national honour,' James said again, 'don't let us have women like that!'

Of course, we don't talk in those bald terms now. Or not quite? For it seems to me that many aspects of this traditional package of views about the unsuitability of women for public speaking in general – a package going back in its essentials over two millennia – still underlies some of our own assumptions about, and awkwardness with, the female voice in public. Take the language we still use to describe the sound of women's speech, which isn't all that far from James or our pontificating Romans. In making a public case, in fighting their

corner, in speaking out, what are women said to be? ‘Strident’; they ‘whinge’ and they ‘whine’. When, after one particular vile bout of internet comments on my genitalia, I tweeted (rather pluckily, I thought) that it was all a bit ‘gob-smacking’, this was reported by one commentator in a mainstream British magazine in these terms: ‘The misogyny is truly “gob-smacking”, she whined.’ (So far as I can see from a quick Google trawl, the only other group in this country said to ‘whine’ as much as women are unpopular Premiership football managers on a losing streak.)

Do those words matter? Of course they do, because they underpin an idiom that acts to remove the authority, the force, even the humour from what women have to say. It’s an idiom that effectively repositions women back into the domestic sphere (people ‘whinge’ over things like the washing up); it trivialises their words, or it ‘re-privatises’ them. Contrast the ‘deep-voiced’ man with all the connotations of profundity that the simple word ‘deep’ brings. It is still the case that when listeners hear a female voice, they don’t hear a voice that connotes authority; or rather they have not learned how to hear authority in it; they don’t hear *muthos*. And it isn’t just voice: you can add in the craggy or wrinkled faces that signal mature wisdom in the case of a bloke, but ‘past-my-use-by-date’ in the case of a woman.

They don’t tend to hear a voice of expertise either; at least, not outside the traditional spheres of women’s sectional interests. For a female MP to be minister of women (or of education or health) is a very different thing from being chancellor of the exchequer (a post which no woman has ever filled). And, across the board, we still see tremendous resistance to female encroachment onto traditional male discursive territory, whether it’s the abuse hurled at Jacqui Oatley for having the nerve to stray from the netball court to become the first woman commentator on Match of the Day, or what can be meted out to women who appear on Question Time, where the range of topics discussed is usually fairly mainstream ‘male political’. It may not be a surprise that the same commentator who accused me of ‘whining’ claims to run a ‘small light-hearted’ competition for the ‘most stupid woman to appear on Question Time’. More interesting is another cultural connection this reveals: that unpopular, controversial or just plain different views when voiced by a woman are taken as indications of her stupidity. It’s not that you disagree, it’s that she’s stupid. ‘Sorry, love, you just don’t understand.’ I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve been called ‘an ignorant moron’.

These attitudes, assumptions and prejudices are hard-wired into us: not into our brains (there is no neurological reason for us to hear low-pitched voices as more authoritative than high-pitched ones); but into our culture, our language and millennia of our history. And when we are thinking about the under-representation of women in national politics, their relative muteness in the public sphere, we have to think beyond what the prime minister and his chums got up to in the Bullingdon Club, beyond the bad behaviour and blokeish culture of Westminster, beyond even family-friendly hours and childcare provision (important as those are). We have to focus on the even more fundamental issues of how we have learned to hear the contributions of women or – going back to the cartoon for a moment – on what I’d like to call the ‘Miss Triggs question’. Not just, how does she get a word in edgeways? But how can we make ourselves more aware about the processes and prejudices that make us not listen to

her.

SOME of these same issues of voice and gender have to do with internet trolls, death-threats and abuse. We have to be careful about generalising too confidently about the nastier sides of the internet: they appear in many different forms (it's not quite the same on Twitter, for example, as it is under the line in a newspaper comment section), and criminal death threats are a different kettle of fish from merely 'unpleasant' sexist abuse. Many different people are the targets, from grieving parents of dead teenagers to 'celebrities' of all kinds. What is clear is that many more men than women are the perpetrators of this stuff, and they attack women far more than they attack men (one academic study put the ratio at something like 30 to 1, female to male targets). For what it's worth (and I haven't suffered anything like as much as some women), I receive something we might euphemistically call an 'inappropriately hostile' response (that's to say, more than fair criticism or even fair anger) every time I speak on radio or television.

It's driven, I'm sure, by many different things. Some of it's from kids acting up; some from people who've had far too much to drink; some from people who for a moment have lost their inner inhibitors (and can be very apologetic later). More are sad than are villainous. When I'm feeling charitable I think quite a lot comes from people who feel let down by the false promises of democratisation blazoned by, for example, Twitter. It was supposed to put us directly in touch with those in power, and open up a new democratic kind of conversation. It does nothing of the sort: if we tweet the prime minister or the pope, they no more read it than if we send them a letter – and for the most part, the prime minister doesn't even write the tweets that appear under his name. How could he? (I'm not so sure about the Pope.) Some of the abuse, I suspect, is a squeal of frustration at those false promises, taking aim at a convenient traditional target ('a gobby woman'). Women are not the only ones who may feel themselves 'voiceless'.

But the more I have looked at the threats and insults that women have received, the more I have found that they fit into the old patterns I've been talking about. For a start it doesn't much matter what line you take as a woman, if you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway. It's not what you say that prompts it, it's the fact you're saying it. And that matches the detail of the threats themselves. They include a fairly predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder and so forth (I may sound very relaxed about it now; that doesn't mean it's not scary when it comes late at night). But a significant subsection is directed at silencing the woman – 'Shut up you bitch' is a fairly common refrain. Or it promises to remove the capacity of the woman to speak. 'I'm going to cut off your head and rape it' was one tweet I got. 'Headlessfemalepig' was the Twitter name chosen by someone threatening an American journalist. 'You should have your tongue ripped out' was tweeted to another journalist. In its crude, aggressive way, this is about keeping, or getting, women out of man's talk. It's hard not to see some faint connection between these mad Twitter outbursts – most of them are just that – and the men in the House of Commons heckling women MPs so loudly that you simply can't hear what they're saying (in the Afghan parliament, apparently, they disconnect the mics when they don't want to hear the women speak). Ironically the well-

meaning solution often recommended when women are on the receiving end of this stuff turns out to bring about the very result the abusers want: namely, their silence. ‘Don’t call the abusers out. Don’t give them any attention; that’s what they want. Just keep mum,’ you’re told, which amounts to leaving the bullies in unchallenged occupation of the playground.

So much for the diagnosis: what’s the practical remedy? Like most women, I wish I knew. There can’t be a group of female friends or colleagues anywhere in this country (maybe the world) which hasn’t regularly discussed the day-to-day aspects of the ‘Miss Triggs question’, whether in the office, or a committee room, council chamber, seminar or the House of Commons. How do I get my point heard? How do I get it noticed? How do I get to belong in the discussion? I’m sure it’s something some men feel too but if there’s one thing that we know bonds women of all backgrounds, of all political colours, in all kinds of business and profession, it’s the classic experience of the failed intervention; you’re at a meeting, you make a point, then a short silence follows, and after a few awkward seconds some man picks up where he had just left off: ‘What I was saying was ...’ You might as well never have opened your mouth, and you end up blaming both yourself and the men whose exclusive club the discussion appears to be.

Those who do manage successfully to get their voice across very often adopt some version of the ‘androgyne’ route, like Maesia in the Forum or ‘Elizabeth’ at Tilbury – consciously aping aspects of male rhetoric. That was what Margaret Thatcher did when she took voice training specifically to lower her voice, to add the tone of authority that her advisers thought her high pitch lacked. And that’s fine, in a way, if it works, but all tactics of that type tend to leave women still feeling on the outside, impersonators of rhetorical roles that they don’t feel they own. Putting it bluntly, having women pretend to be men may be a quick fix, but it doesn’t get to the heart of the problem.

We need to think more fundamentally about the rules of our rhetorical operations. I don’t mean the old stand-by of ‘men and women talk different languages, after all’ (if they do, it’s surely because they’ve been taught different languages). And I certainly don’t mean to suggest that we go down the ‘Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus’ route. My hunch is that if we’re going to make real progress with the ‘Miss Triggs question’, we need to go back to some first principles about the nature of spoken authority, about what constitutes it, and how we have learned to hear authority where we do. And rather than push women into voice training classes to get a nice, deep, husky and entirely artificial tone, we should be thinking more about the faultlines and fractures that underlie dominant male discourse.

Here again we can usefully look to the Greeks and Romans. For, while it is true that classical culture is partly responsible for our starkly gendered assumptions about public speech, male *muthos* and female silence, it is also the case that some ancient writers were much more reflective than we are about those assumptions: they *were* subversively aware of what was at stake in them, they were troubled by their simplicity, and they hinted at resistance. Ovid may have emphatically silenced his women in their transformation or mutilation, but he also suggested that communication could transcend the human voice, and that women were not

that easily silenced. Philomela lost her tongue, but she still managed to denounce her rapist by weaving the story into a tapestry (which is why Shakespeare's Lavinia has her hands, as well as her tongue, removed). The smartest ancient rhetorical theorists were prepared to acknowledge that the best male techniques of oratorical persuasion were uncomfortably close to the techniques (as they saw it) of female seduction. Was oratory then really so safely masculine, they worried.

One particularly bloody anecdote vividly exposes the unresolved gender wars that lay just below the surface of ancient public life and speaking. In the course of the Roman civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, Marcus Tullius Cicero – the most powerful public speaker and debater in the Roman world, ever – was lynched. The hit-squad that took him out triumphantly brought his head and hands to Rome, and pinned them up, for all to see, on the speaker's platform in the Forum. It was then, so the story went, that Fulvia, the wife of Mark Antony, who had been the victim of some of Cicero's most devastating polemics, went along to have a look. And when she saw those bits of him, she removed the pins from her hair and repeatedly stabbed them into the dead man's tongue. It's a disconcerting image of one of the defining articles of female adornment, the hairpin, used as a weapon against the very site of the production of male speech – a kind of reverse Philomela.¹³

What I'm pointing to here is a critically self-aware ancient tradition: not one that directly challenges the basic template I've been outlining, but one that is determined to reveal its conflicts and paradoxes, and to raise bigger questions about the nature and purpose of speech, male or female. We should perhaps take our cue from this, and try to bring to the surface the kinds of question we tend to shelve about how we speak in public, why and whose voice fits. What we need is some old fashioned consciousness-raising about what we mean by the voice of authority and how we've come to construct it. We need to work that out before we figure out how we modern Penelopes might answer back to our own Telemachuses – or for that matter just decide to lend Miss Triggs some hairpins.

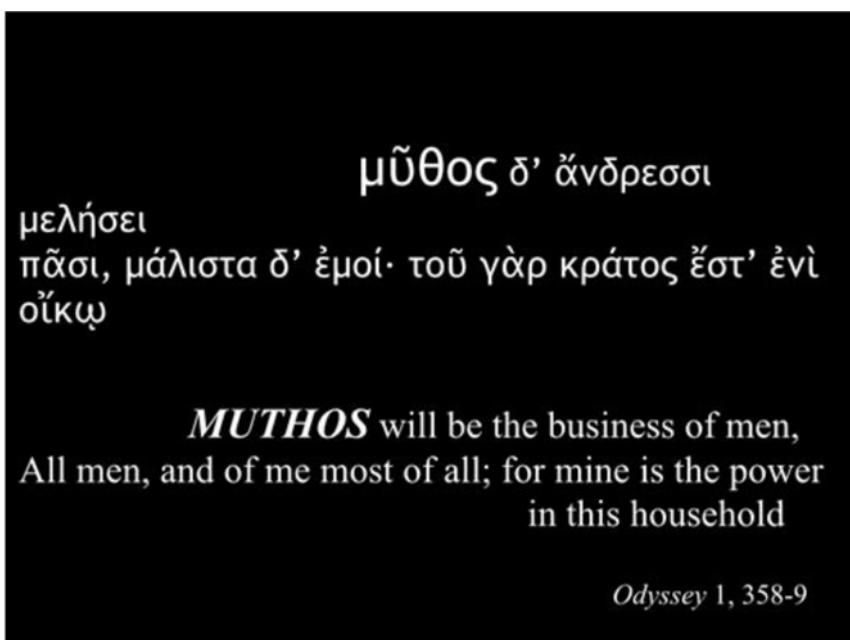
Footnotes

1



Penelope at her loom, from a Greek pot (c.440 BC).

2



3



*"That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs.
Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it."*

4



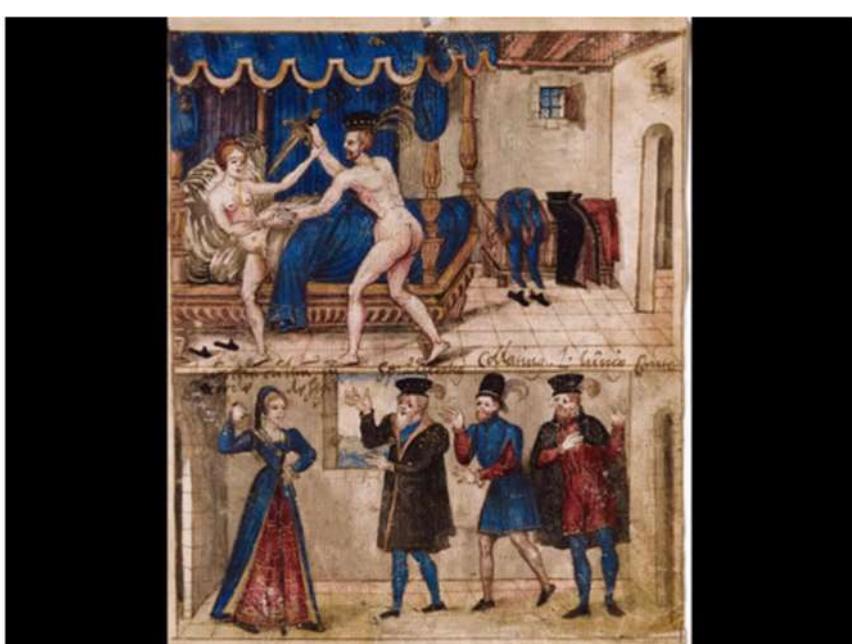
'Io, transformed into a cow' by David Teniers (1638).

5



'Echo and Narcissus' by John William Waterhouse (1903).

6



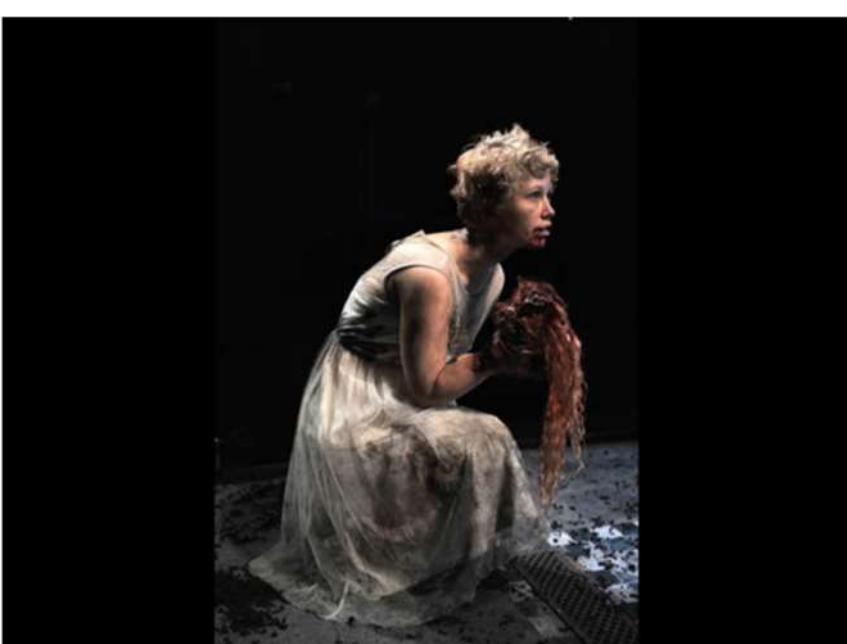
Lucretia's rape by Sextus Tarquinius and her suicide, from a 16th-century manuscript.

7



Tereus cutting off Philomela's tongue, from a 16th-century edition of the 'Metamorphoses'.

8



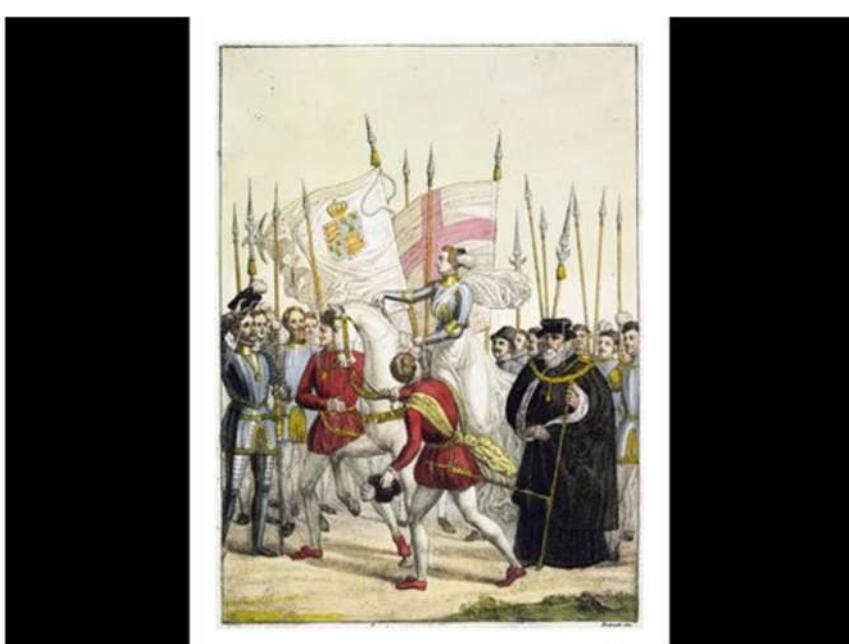
Rose Reynolds as Lavinia in the RSC's 'Titus Andronicus', 2013.

9



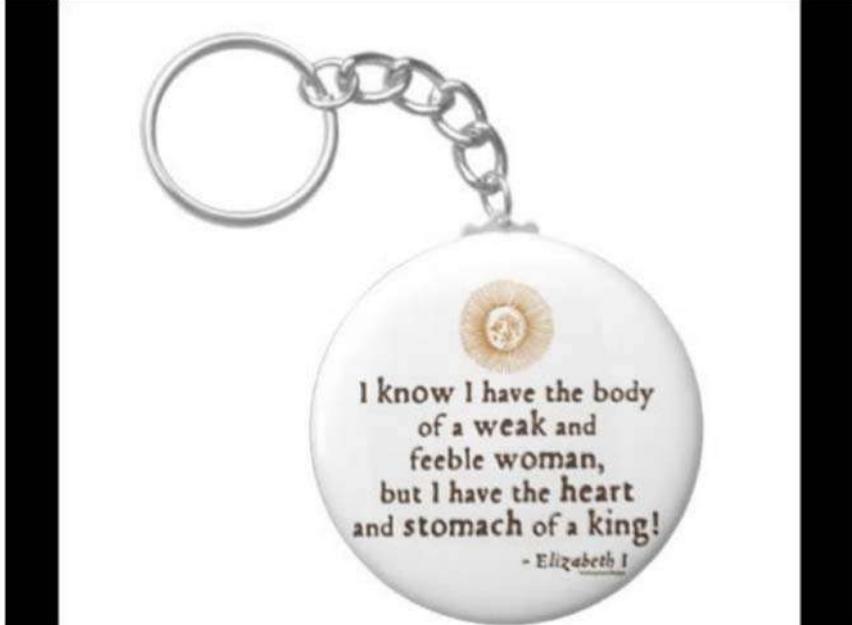
Hortensia speaking to the triumvirs, from a 15th-century woodcut.

IO

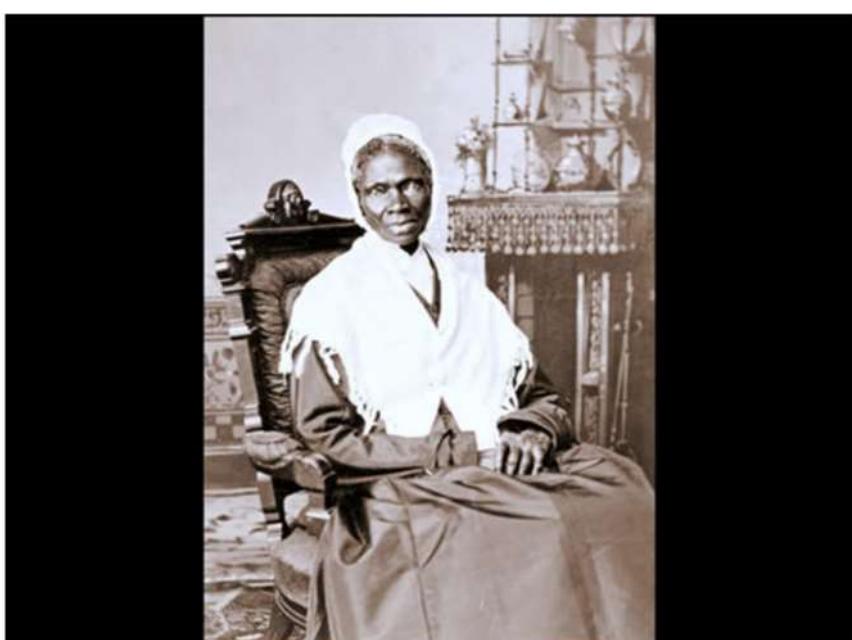


'Elizabeth I rallying the troops at Tilbury' by Antonio Bramati (c.1820).

II



12



Sojourner Truth (c.1870)

13



'Fulvia with the Head of Cicero' by Pavel Svedomsky (1880).

Letters

Vol. 36 No. 7 · 3 April 2014

Thank heavens for a woman's voice that carries as Mary Beard's does today (LRB, 20 March). It is salutary to hear ancient misogyny echoing in modern culture, and to be reminded that Miss Triggs still awaits her moment. But the voices of women before and after antiquity also deserve a hearing. There were pre-classical examples, and Jewish and Christian ones too, often poets singing. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Beard writes, was 'probably the most influential work of literature in Western art after the Bible'. But it was precisely in the Bible that women's voices rang out feistily. 'Sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph!' Miriam declaimed after the crossing of the Red Sea, followed by women dancing to the sound of her tambourine (*Exodus* 15.21). Deborah, prophet and judge, sang of the triumph of Jael, who slew the enemy commander: 'I will sing, I will sing to the Lord ... Hark the song of the players striking up in the places where the women draw water ... She [Jael] stretched out her hand for the tent-peg, her right hand to hammer the weary. With the hammer she struck Sisera, she crushed his head ... So perish all thine enemies O Lord!' (*Judges* 5.31). Judith, the widow men praised for her wisdom, killed Holofernes to save Israel, and then began a hymn of praise and thanksgiving 'in which all the people joined lustily: "Strike up a song to my God with tambourines, sing to the Lord with cymbals: The Lord is a God who stamps out wars"' (*Judith* 16, in the Apocrypha). The tradition continues in the New Testament, in the Virgin Mary's Magnificat. These songs of women resounded in the voice of Joan of Arc, and in the many voices of women prophets in medieval and early modern Europe who believed themselves instruments of the Spirit. Elizabeth I's speech at Tilbury may be apocryphal but her contemporaries recognised in her voice the voices of Deborah and Judith.

Jinty Nelson
London SE15

Paradoxically, religions, usually so crucial in silencing women, did give them the means of entering the public debate on political matters through the mask of female prophecy. Until the onset of the Enlightenment women prophets were occasionally given audience by male rulers, though it's true that their interventions were almost always disregarded in the end.

Sandra Browne
Arminghall, Norfolk

Vol. 36 No. 8 · 17 April 2014

Mary Beard's study of the silencing of women through the ages reminds me of another tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (LRB, 20 March). Phoebus (better known as Apollo) is overcome with lust – the word he uses is 'amor' but the description is of sexual pursuit – for the bare-armed nymph Daphne. To his great surprise ('Don't you know who I am?' he cries), Daphne is not up for it. As he pursues her through the brambles, Daphne, in desperation and exhaustion, calls on the gods to intervene. She is duly turned into a tree, both silenced and saved from Phoebus' desires. But he doesn't stop there. As in Miss Triggs's case, the man must have the last word. Phoebus surveys

her new form and sees her leafy head nodding. Reading this silent gesture as consent, he plucks her leaves to make a laurel wreath and places it on his head. This wreath becomes a symbol of prowess and victory in Augustan Rome.

Laura Janes
London W12

Mary Beard might like to listen to a few speeches by Angela Merkel, and to note the style and presentation. Rhetoric and political oratory in general have a bad name in Germany, and politicians since 1945 have gone to great pains to present their arguments in unvarnished, unemotional terms. Konrad Adenauer's style was austere to a fault; Ludwig Erhard tried the jovial paternal approach but was torpedoed by Adenauer at every turn. Willy Brandt is the only postwar German chancellor who has been able to appeal to the emotions and win support by the strength of his rhetoric.

Angela Merkel has a remarkable gift for public speaking. At the beginning of her career she was derided as an East German bluestocking, but she showed great skill in dealing with the men who pawed the ground waiting to succeed Helmut Kohl as party leader. Her contributions to debates were concise and clear, her sentences simple and short. Her voice is a clear contralto and she avoids flights of rhetoric. She uses humour very sparingly, and all the more effectively for that, and has a very downbeat way of dealing with hecklers, quick-witted but never sarcastic. (Sarcasm was Gerhard Schröder's major tool.) You never forget that Merkel is a woman, but this has seldom led to discrimination, diminution or the kind of dismissal that Mary Beard has experienced in her public appearances.

Geoff Roberts
Oberursel, Germany
