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MARY BEARD

WOMEN & POWER

A MANIFESTO

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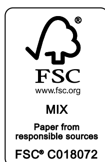

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PREFACE

WOMEN IN THE WEST have a lot to celebrate; let's not forget. My mother was born before women had the vote in parliamentary elections in Britain. She lived to see a female Prime Minister. Whatever her views of Margaret Thatcher, she was pleased that a woman had reached Number 10 and proud to have had a stake herself in some of those revolutionary changes of the twentieth century. Unlike generations before her, she was able to have a career and marriage and a child (for her own mother pregnancy necessarily meant the end of her job as a teacher). She was a strikingly effective head of a large primary school in the West Midlands. I am sure that she was the very embodiment of

power to the generations of girls and boys in her charge.

But my mother also knew that it was not all quite so simple, that real equality between women and men was still a thing of the future, and that there were causes for anger as well as for celebration. She always regretted not going to university (and was selflessly pleased that I was able to do just that). She was often frustrated that her views and her voice were not taken as seriously as she hoped they would be. And, though she would have been puzzled at the metaphor of the 'glass ceiling', she was well aware that the further up the career hierarchy she went, the fewer female faces she saw.

She was often in my mind when I was preparing the two lectures on which this book is based, delivered, courtesy of the *London Review of Books*, in 2014 and 2017. I wanted to work out how I would explain to her – as much as to myself, as well as to the millions of other women who still share some of the same frustrations – just how

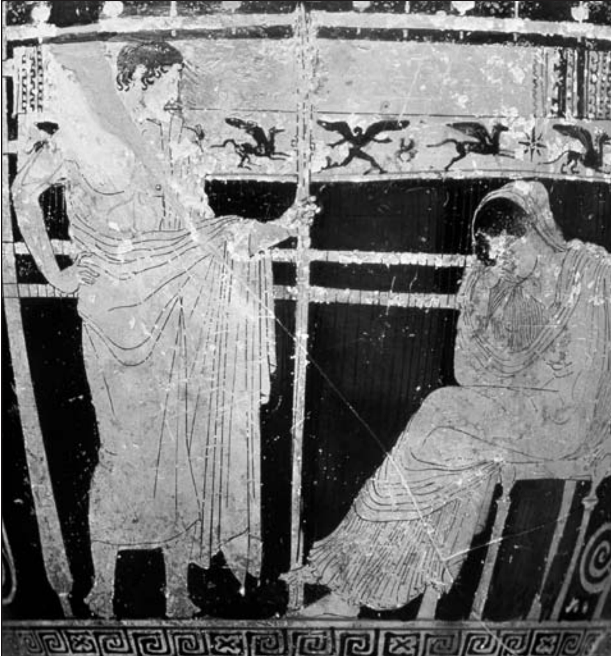
deeply embedded in Western culture are the mechanisms that silence women, that refuse to take them seriously, and that sever them (sometimes quite literally, as we shall see) from the centres of power. This is one place where the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans can help to throw light on our own. When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice.

THE PUBLIC VOICE OF WOMEN

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 am thinking of a moment immortalised at the start of Homer's *Odyssey*, almost 3000 years ago. We tend now to think of the *Odyssey* as the epic story of Odysseus and the adventures and scrapes he had returning home after the Trojan War – while for decades his wife Penelope loyally waited for him, fending off the suitors who were pressing to marry her. But the *Odyssey* is just as much the story of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope. It is the story of his growing up and how over the course of the poem he matures from boy to man. That process starts in the first book of the poem when Penelope comes down from her private quarters into the great hall

of the palace, to find a bard performing to throngs of her suitors; he is 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.

There is something faintly ridiculous about this wet-behind-the-ears lad shutting up the savvy, middle-aged Penelope. But it is 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



1. On this fifth-century BC *Athenian pot, Penelope is shown seated by her loom (weaving was always the mark of a good Greek housewife). Telemachus stands in front of her.*

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 this classic Homeric moment of silencing a woman and some of the ways in which 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 is a well-known deafness that’s nicely parodied in an old *Punch* cartoon: ‘That’s an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it’. I want to reflect on 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

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

2. Almost thirty years ago the cartoonist Riana Duncan captured the sexist atmosphere of the committee or the boardroom. There is hardly a woman who has opened her mouth at a meeting and not had, at some time or other, the 'Miss Triggs treatment'.

decapitation, and Telemachus' put-down of Penelope.

My aim here 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 am 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 need to recognise that it is a bit more complicated and that there is a long back-story.

Telemachus' outburst was just the first

case 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, for example, 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 by the god Jupiter into a cow, so she cannot talk but only moo; while the chatty nymph Echo is punished so that her voice is never her own, merely an instrument for

3. David Teniers' seventeenth-century painting shows the moment when Jupiter gives poor Io, now in the shape of a cow, to his wife Juno – to allay any suspicion that his interest in Io might have been inappropriately sexual (which, of course, it was).

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 – the original 'narcissist' – has fallen in love with his own image in the pool.

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.'

4. In John William Waterhouse's striking dreamy version of the scene (painted in 1903), the semi-clad Echo gazes speechless at her 'narcissist' preoccupied with his own image in the pool.