

# The Public Voice of Women

By 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 immortalized 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. 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.

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.’ 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 of 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 recognize 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; 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) 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 "androgynē"'. 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.'

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