

## Chapter 92

# The Public Veil: Two Millennia of Strong Women in Politics

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### ABSTRACT

*As women take on increasingly prominent roles in politics, it is critical to understand the gendered nature of public voice within the ideological messaging process as well as its historical roots. This chapter contends that, in order to gain a legitimate voice in politics, a field that continues to be dominated by men, females must project a public yet carefully “veiled” image that is both “strong” and “feminine” in their writing and speaking. They must appear to be “strong women”. To create this image, they must balance male expectations of authoritative appearance with male expectations of appropriate femininity. Based on a comparative analysis of ancient Greek and Roman writers alongside modern female political voices, this chapter illustrates how women achieve this balance using four strategies in their written and spoken texts: conveying a constrained sexuality; using masculine metaphors; addressing feminine themes; and employing gender inversion. These strategies can be characterized as “gender bilinguality” and this bilinguality has been present since classical antiquity.*

### INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC VOICE, THE VEIL, AND THE STRONG WOMAN

Political agenda framing and promotion depend on public voice as an important medium for ideological messaging (Rheingold, 2008). Public voice is the communicative potential for influence in the public sphere and can refer to the recitation of a speech, publishing of a poem or even posting of a status on a social media platform (Levine, 2006). As women take on more prominent roles in politics and social discourse, it is critical to understand the gendered nature of public voice within this ideological messaging process. The nature of expression in the public sphere is gendered based on an “ideological bias” against the voice of women. This stems from a long history of enforced gender binaries and prejudice against women who dared to venture out of the home (Gunn, 2010).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6912-1.ch092

To understand the biased nature of gendered public voice within the political sphere, it is vital to understand the historical roots of negative ideological associations with women's public voice. Mary Beard of Cambridge University, the noted scholar on ancient gendered culture, addressed this historical foundation in a speech she gave at the *London Review of Book's* Winter Lectures at the British Museum on "The Public Voice of Women" (2014). Beard begins her speech by referencing Homer's *Odyssey*. She cites a poignant moment between Odysseus' wife Penelope and their son Telemachus when Telemachus tells his mother "... 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." (Beard, 2014). Similarly, according to Greek essayist Plutarch, "... a virtuous woman's speech should be private; she should be modest and careful about saying anything in the hearing of people who aren't family since this would be exposing herself. For in her speech, her feelings, character and temperament are revealed" (Plant, 2004). Furthermore, it is common knowledge that Greek texts have been formulated over generations of Greek orators before ever being written down (Foley, 2007). These particular examples illustrate how the link between manhood and linguistic dominance over women was perpetuated, significantly, by generations of male public speakers (Foley, 2007).

While women in antiquity were forbidden in most cases to leave the privacy of their home and speak in public, they did so on occasion and, on these occasions, they always wore a veil to conceal their faces (Llewellyn-Jones, 2007). Thus, there are examples of ancient Greek and Roman women such as Aspasia or Maesia who achieved small degrees of public success, but only by speaking like men, and veiling their femininity. Aspasia, a *hetaira*, or courtesan to the notable Greek statesman Pericles, was thought to have written a funeral oration attributed to Pericles in which he addresses the women in the crowd, "... and greatest [glory] be hers who is least talked of among men" (Finley, 1951). And Maesia was only permitted to speak in court to defend herself because "she really had a man's nature behind the appearance of a woman and was called the 'androgynē'" (Beard, 2014). These were two "strong women" out of several prominent ones whose skilled attempts to enter the public sphere prefaced two millennia of women overcoming similar challenges. Similarly, modern female politicians remain a minority, and when women do enter the political sphere, they are expected to present an image that veils their femininity in many ways.

The narrative of this chapter, as evidenced by the title, focuses on the public image of the "strong woman". In this context, the phrase "strong women" refers specifically to women who project a "veiled" public image that is "strong" yet "feminine" in both their writing and speaking. With a keen awareness of the political domain, successful female politicians have become fluidly bilingual to achieve this "strong woman" image. The use of "bilingual" to describe this balance between masculine and feminine linguistic conventions originates in the work of Jack Winkler (1990) and Sylvia Shaw (2009). In an analysis of gendered linguistic trends in politics, Shaw (2009) referred to mastery of masculine and feminine conventions as "double voice." Mastering this balance is necessary for women in the public sphere (Griswold, 2007). If female politicians err on the side of a masculine image, they threaten masculinity and are rejected by a male audience. However, if a woman seeks respect in politics she must "partially remove femininity from her physical as well as her verbal sphere," in order to maintain an image of strength and credibility (Griswold, 2007). From the earliest and most acclaimed female writers of antiquity, to those in modern politics, there is evidence of women who display an intentional balance in masculine and feminine vocabulary. It is no coincidence that Winkler (1990) saw "bi-linguality" in the distinctly feminine and masculine vernacular of the famed poetry of Sappho. In the case of Sappho and

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