
Reviews

Mary Beard: *Women & Power: A Manifesto*. London: Profile Books, 2018.

“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” (p. 8). The power of speech that is heard is not just a starting point but a central theme of the manifesto *Women and Power* by Mary Beard. The manifesto is divided into two parts, the first is entitled *Women’s Voice in Public* and the second *Women and Power*, which are closely intertwined. The 2018 edition of *Women and Power* (the first edition is from 2017) revisits the agenda a year after the beginnings of the #metoo movement (the “world’s most famous hashtag”, as noted by Mary Beard, p. 98) and in the Afterword reflects on new discourses on rape and sexual harassment.

Mary Beard thus unfolds cultural and historical moments from Greek and Roman antiquity to the American period of slavery and the present, all through the central theme of the power of women’s voice in public. But, at the same time, the enterprise does not slip into a simple collection of cases of the silencing and oppressing of women, which is not so uncommon for descriptions of overlooked women and their works, rebellion and history. At the end, such “collections” appear more as complementing the “main” history or as its decoration, exactly there where is the place for a woman, a place of silent decoration behind the glass cabinet. Mary Beard, on the contrary, with her scientific sharpness and essayistic narrative style points to elements which are crucial and common

to emancipation, which is the power (or weakness) of the female voice in public space. The struggle for women's emancipation is thus a struggle for this voice, to be heard and to be able to take over political power as well. Only then will women's voice not sink into the deafness of silence. As she writes "My aim here is to take a long view, on the cultural 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" (p. 8).

When Mary Beard thus takes us through countless stories and characters from the culture history and shows the attempts to silence women are so loud that the Meta from Ivan Tavčar's dystopian novel *4000*¹ simply cannot be overlooked. The scene where the father lieutenant complains to the father major about his "unbearable unfortunate" as a result of the new regulation, which imposes silence on women, is eloquent:

So, old Meta is with me and she is a good soul, and certainly a poor soul. Ever since Archbishop Martinus introduced the strictest regulation of Blessed Anton of Kal – now half a year since it is imposed – every speaking has been forbidden to women. You know that! My Meta hadn't uttered a word in six months, but she carries millions of words within her. These words, which are locked in her now, force out everywhere, from her eyes, from her ears. Oh, how she twisted, how she sighed, how she pursed her mouth, but she was not allowed to speak, if she did not want to take part in mortal sin and if she did not want to fall for the ruthless Inquisition against women's speaking! (Tavčar, 1948, p. 39)

Although the father lieutenant was afraid Meta would suffer a stroke and that she would be suffocated by talking, "which is certainly possible with a woman" (ibid., p. 39), he did not want to order the stretcher of the blessed Anton of Kal.² This device namely "successfully clogs the women's mouth" in such cases, but "it covers the woman's face too much and this is the most beautiful in a woman!" (ibid., pp. 39–40) and "wounds

1 Ivan Tavčar's satirical dystopian novel *4000* was published in 1891 and is mainly a reflection of the political and cultural conflicts between clericals and liberals in the territory of today's Slovenia, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The novel takes place in the year 4000 in Ljubljana, which is again named Emona (the Latin name for Ljubljana during the time of the Roman empire), and the territory of Slovenia is named Pope's Province number LII. The novel begins when the angel Azrael awakens a Slovenian liberal who died 2000 years before and shows him the orders and habits in Emona, which, naturally, are the image of the ideas spread in the then clerical circle in Tavčar's time.

2 The character of Blessed Anton of Kal is based on the most conservative leader of the cleric wing Anton Mahnič, who lived in Tavčar's time, wrote in Latin and as an educator preached about the danger and corrupting influence of the German and Slovenian poets, writers and philosophers being taught to students in public schools at that time.

and blisters occur on the neck which is also a beautiful thing!" (ibid., p. 40). The father lieutenant hence instead decided to ask for a dispensation, which he obtained through a formal request and a bribe. Meta was thus able to speak every 3 weeks for 1 day without "disengaging from the commandment of blessed Anton of Kal, by which a woman in eternal wisdom is forbidden any speech" (ibid., p. 40). The scene ends when the father lieutenant together with the father major are drinking wine in comfort and complaining about the "unfortunate" and Meta, who now has permission to speak after 3 weeks, suddenly interrupts them. She insults them both for being drunks and chases them away.

The story of Meta condenses all of the key elements of silencing a woman and woman's place in society. Tavčar, with the exact targeting of the misogyny and silencing of women in the figure of Meta, presents the whole dimension of this structure. On one hand, there is the silence of a woman and the importance of her beauty and, on the other, if a woman's speech is allowed (of course only in the domestic sphere), is the woman's speaking only the uproarious outbreaks of uncontrolled talking and Xantipe's grumpiness, which destroys pleasant hanging out with friends with a glass of wine?

Women's bodies are not only twisted by the patriarchal beauty ideal, but also by the often emphasised authority of the deep male voice as opposed to the female one. This is exactly, says Mary Beard (p. 39), what Margaret Teacher did when she lowered her tone of voice with the help of special voice training, thus giving it an authoritative tone which, according to the counsellors, her high voice was lacking in. When listeners hear a female voice, they still do not hear a voice that connotes authority, they have not learned how to hear authority in it and they do not hear *muthos*. But it is not just voice, we can also add in a wrinkled face, which for a man indicates mature wisdom and for a woman that her date has expired (p. 31).

Namely, if a woman's voice is heard in public, it is because of »androgyny« or because it is a voice raised in support of women's causes, which is also not unimportant but, as Mary Beard points out, women's public speech has been pushed into this framework for centuries (p. 25).

On the other hand, many aspects of the traditional set of views on the general unsuitability of women for public speaking are still contain a premise of awkwardness with the female voice in public. When women speak in public, they are "strident", they "whinge" and "whine" (p. 29). "Do those words matter?", asks Mary Beard (p. 30), answering: "Of course they do" (p. 30): because they remove authority, force, and even humour from the female voice. This idiom actually effectively returns women back

to the domestic sphere (people whinge doing the dishes) trivialises their words or re-privatises them (p. 30). Such attitudes, assumptions and prejudices are hard-wired in us: not in our brains but in our culture, language and history (p. 33).

A few months ago, in an evening daily news programme on Slovenian commercial television,³ we were witnesses to such an attempt to silence the woman speaker. The guests in the show were the president of a right-wing populist party, who is also a member of parliament, and the president of the trade union that unites young employees. The union president, who is otherwise a very articulate speaker, successfully criticised the topic and defended the politician's constant attacks and attempts to silence her. He namely kept interrupting and discrediting her in an attempt to silence her with statements such as: "Stop blabbering on ... I pay taxes and you don't ... Lady, stop talking rubbish ... You have beautiful red hair, beautiful eyes, a charming smile ...". And after that, when the presenter of the show carefully reminded him to stop, he complained that he had only told her that she is beautiful and wondered what actually the problem was with this. At the same time, during the whole talk the presenter with almost no interventions actually enabled this situation. In short, the presenter was not trying to stop the politician; she left the trade union speaker to the gladiator's combat for the price of ratings?! The chatter, the "rubbish" talk of the woman, the remarks about her beauty are exactly the silencers of women's voices. It really does not take much, just a small remark about babbling and beauty, because the cultural-historical context is already in background and strong enough.

Mary Beard underlines a tradition of gendered speaking to which we are still directly, or more often indirectly, the heirs. Western culture does not owe everything to the Greeks and Romans (p. 20). "And those 19th century gentlemen who designed or enshrined, most of the parliamentary rules and procedures in the House of commons were brought up in exactly those classical theories, slogans and prejudices", continues Mary Beard. "Again, we are not simply victims or dupes of our classical inheritance but the classical tradition has provided us with a powerful template for thinking about public speech, and for deciding what counts as a 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" (p. 21).

Female politicians are still seen as a disturbing image and a threat to the orderly world, and so it is the good Amazon who can only be a dead Amazon. The beheaded Medusa remains a cultural symbol of resistance

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZFDVSrORtk>

and female power and most of the prominent female politicians are often associated with these characters as Mary Beard shows, they are Medusas, Clytaemnestres, Lizistrates etc. But not only women politicians in power are exposed to attacks. Marta Verginella (2019) in her preface to the Slovenian edition of *Women and Power* by mentioning Greta Thunberg and Carola Rousseff, two women who raise their voice not only for themselves but also for others, reminds us how they were immediately attacked *ad hominem* and labelled as problematic, insane, furious etc. – not because of what they did, but that they as women dare to speak and act in public.

At the end, it is important to again mention that Mary Beard's *Woman and Power* is subtitled *Manifesto*. *Woman and Power* is not a small essay, a booklet on women's public voice and their struggles, but a manifesto in the full sense of the word. The manifesto is a public statement of beliefs, aims and policies and is actually a written word in a public space. The book can also be read in the domestic sphere in the shelter of the home on the couch, but the only place of the manifesto is in the public square where it can also be heard and where a word becomes an act.

Literature

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Sara Ahmed: *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.

What's the Use? is designated as the third and final part of Sara Ahmed's trilogy concerning "following words" (p. 3) – tracing their intellectual and social history, stories of how words and ideas have been put to use. The first one, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), focuses on tracing happiness as an idea or even as an obligation (to be happy) that is accompanied by socially shaped expectations concerning what brings happiness. These expectations also serve as demands to be met in order to be happy. The