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Grandmother, witch... or a politician getting on with the job?

Why do we still fall back on tired tropes to describe women in power?

In the age of Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, it's never been easier for politicians of both genders to market themselves and their image on social media. Yet the mainstream media still perpetuates clichés and archetypes when it comes to depicting women in power.

There are 'mothers of the nation' such as Maria Theresa of Austria or Louise of Mecklenburg-Strelitz and 'crown princesses', seen to benefit from the largesse of their masculine forebears. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, was depicted as Helmut Kohl's protégée during her early career.

The 'glamorous left' is another popular trope – examples include Germany's Sahra Wagenknecht and the former head of the Austrian Green Party, Eva Glawischnig. Then there's the post-war archetype of the *Trümmerfrau*, a woman who arrives to clean up the political mess left behind by the men who came before her.

Finally we have the 'witches' – strong, emancipated women such Hillary Clinton who ran for US president in 2017.

Far-right femininity

Right-wing populists use femininity to soften their masculine, authoritarian image. When Marine Le Pen took over the French National Front in 2011, she gave the far-right party a friendlier, more feminine face. She's even appeared to venture into feminism, complaining about the 'rollback' of women's rights during a first-of-May speech, and emphasising men and women's 'equality' during her election campaign.

However, Le Pen's 'feminism' is in reality no more than a smokescreen for intolerance. Following the New Year's Eve attacks on women in Cologne two years ago, Le Pen claimed to be 'scared that the migrant crisis will signal the beginning of the end of women's rights.'

Across Europe and the US, women on the far right talk the feminist talk, but push an extreme form of chauvinism. Frauke Petry, former chair of the Alternative for Germany (AfD); Siv Jensen, Norwegian finance minister and leader of the right-wing populist Progress Party; Beata Maria Szydło of Poland's Law and Justice party (PIS); and Anke van Dermeersch, a former Miss Belgium and now an MP for the far-right Vlaams Belang party, have all used 'feminist' statements to advance a darker agenda.

Contrast that with the treatment of card-carrying liberal, Hillary Clinton. Countless op-eds from America's right-wing press cast her as calculating, scheming, overambitious, ice-cold – in other words, a witch. It's a modern version of an old medieval trope: any woman that exercises significant power over a man must be suspect, un-natural even.

Divorced, beheaded, died...

The American sociologist Susan Bordo sees parallels between Clinton and Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn (1501-1536). In order to marry her, Henry VIII split from the Catholic Church and founded the Church of England. Anne subsequently fell from favour and was beheaded on grounds of alleged adultery and high treason.

Like Anne Boleyn, Clinton is harangued by the right-wing press as a traitor. In her essay, 'The Invention and Destruction of Hillary Clinton', Bordo argues that Clinton was not the wrong candidate, but was made to seem that way – not only by the Republican-controlled press but by her Democratic rival Bernie Sanders. He may not have painted Hillary as a liar, but he disparaged her as the candidate of Wall Street.

One of the key moments in the campaign was a case of pneumonia, which Clinton did not immediately admit to publicly. This led to accusations that she was once again trying to engage in a cover-up. 'If only they would have shown her more human side,' filmmaker and activist Michael Moore later criticised. There she was again: Clinton, the woman without human qualities.

Cleaning up the mess

By contrast, the *Trümmerfrau* who arrives to clear up the debris gets a better deal. Isn't that strange? The bigger the problems facing a country or a party, the more often women are given their chance. British Prime Minister Theresa May is a good example. She initially came across as common sense personified, the only adult willing to sift through the wreckage of the wild boys' party and see what could be salvaged.

Women from the current generation of leaders do break through the glass ceiling because feminism has triumphed, because gender quotas have had the desired effect, or even because they are the best person for the job. (All of these factors will have helped to propel them into the second or third tier of the political ranks, of course.) It's their pragmatism that draws people to them in times of uncertainty. 'Look,' we say, 'a practical woman, the very opposite of eccentric – she'll sort things out for us!'.

The term *Trümmerfrau* was coined for those women who, in the aftermath of the Second World War, cleared up the rubble left behind by Allied bombs in the cities of the former German Reich.

There was a simple reason why this task fell to women: at the end of the war, men were either soldiers on the front or detained as forced labourers in concentration camps. Some of those who cleared up the debris did not do so willingly; rather, the Allies forced them to on account of their having sympathised with the Nazis.

The *Trümmerfrauen* picked up the pieces when the men were otherwise occupied. After the war, they were compelled to return to their traditional roles of housewife and mother. The same is true of their political counterparts. They are transitional figures – and a successor is invariably waiting in the wings. A successor who is, of course, a man.



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