

In the air

# The monstiferous empire of women

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**Those of you who are aware that today is Women's Day and see no cause for celebration may well recognise the above quotation from the book by Protestant theologian and reformer John Knox: *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*.**

In this well-known scholarly rant of 1558, Knox is defending his view that the rule (regimen) of women „for causes so manifest that they cannot be hid“ is against the will of God and human nature.

„For who can denie“ he writes „but it repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to leade and conduct such as do see? That the weake, the sicke and impotent persons shall norishe and kepe the hole and strong? And finallie, that the foolishe, madde and phrenetike shal governe the discrete and give counsel to such as be sober of mind. And such be al women, compared unto man in bearing of authoritie. For their sight in civile regiment is but blindness; their strength, weaknes; their counsel, foolishnes; and judgment, phrensie, if it be rightlie considered.“

Knox was moved to write *Monstrous Regiment* by the terrible oppression inflicted on his fellow Protestants by Mary of Guise, acting as Regent for her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots (whom Knox would later harangue on the evils of Catholicism for hours on end). He cannot simply be dismissed as a pathological woman-hater: the truth is much worse. Although he expressed himself in a forceful language all his own, he was merely repeating convictions that were commonplace for his day and based on a venerable history of opposition to women in positions of power: the list of religious and secular authorities he cites - Bible, Church Fathers, classical philosophers and the rest - is lengthy and impressive.

This fundamental opposition to women was not confined, at least as far as the Christian Church was concerned, to their wielding power, but was more general, misogynist rather than phallocratic.

Knox was doubtless familiar with the famous *Hexenhammer*, *Malleus Maleficarum*, written 70 years previously by the Dominican Heinrich Kramer, in response to Pope Innocent VIII's infamous Bull of 5 December 1484 on witches, *Summis desiderantes affectibus*.

The Church had been persecuting „witches“ - for witches read women - in Europe since the 14th century, but the Bull gave a new authority to the enterprise. Kramer's contribution was to present an overview of existing opinions on witchcraft and to „justify“ them using „scientific arguments“.

Here are two examples: the word *femina* derives from the Latin terms for faith (*fides*) and less (*minus*); women are more prone to witchcraft than men because they are sexually insatiable and are forced to be intimate with demons (*incubi*). And so on *ad nauseam*.

The *Hexenhammer* was a bestseller: by the 17th century it had run to 29 editions.

Prejudices like these that have put down millennial roots in the human psyche do not just wither overnight. They are hard to fight, because in ages and societies where they are no longer generally acceptable they are forced underground and remain buried under a topsoil of apparently rational discourse.

But what has happened to all the hatred - and fear - of women so deeply embedded in human thought and feeling?

It is true that society has evolved overall in the last 450 years, but it has done so in some areas more than others. And with organised religion still wielding so much influence - with the fundamentalist elements gaining power - one seriously wonders whether the notion of the „monstrous regiment of women“ has really ridden off into the historical sunset ...

... Or whether it is not still lurkingly present, informing, consciously or unconsciously, certain attitudes towards women.

Even today, commentary by both men and women on events ranging from the important to the trivial often contains a phallocratic and/or misogynist subtext.

Take the upcoming presidential elections in the United States and France. Despite the fact that there have been - and are - a number of perfectly competent women leaders, female capacity to exercise power still seems to be an issue for many.

Read reports of Hillary Clinton's bid for the White House: her ability to run the country is discussed in terms not of her policies, her considerable political experience and her proven competence but of her gender. Opinions on the subject range from chauvinist horrors on the Web and in the redneck media to apparently rational discussion in „informed“ circles.

The issue of gender is often tackled directly, framed of course in terms that will not offend against political correctness, such as: „Are the American people ready for a woman president?“ But it is also raised in more subtle, insidious ways: her authority is undermined by referring to her as „Hillary“, or she is trivialised in discussions about her hair and clothes.

Debate in the French media is generally more sophisticated, politically and intellectually. Even so, you still hear Madame



John Knox haranguing Mary

Royal referred to as Ségolène (or „Ségo“) and her wardrobe analysed - although, this being France, more usually from a semiotic rather than an aesthetic point of view

Both women are criticised for being too vague in their declarations - not because they are, but because that is the female stereotype they are assumed to conform to.

This, in fact, is one of most wearying realities of women's everyday experience: being constantly up against chauvinistic stereotypes and the misogyny latent in many people's use of language. And we mostly have to grin and bear it, or run the risk of being dismissed as humourless harridans.

But this is Women's Day, so let's end on a „lighter“ note. The English paper I read decided recently, apparently in order to strike a blow for professional equality between the sexes, to refer to all men and women appearing on stage or screen as „actors“.

Why, I wondered, does the paper assume the word „actress“ contains connotations of professional inferiority. It can't surely be all those dreadful old „jokes“ about the bishop and the actress?

While other languages possess or coin feminine forms for professions, it seems perverse to apply a resolutely masculine form to women - especially in an area where a high degree of equality has been achieved.

For the record, the paper has already had to admit its new rule doesn't always work - after eyebrows were raised at Carlo Ponti being described in his obituary as having had a „good eye for pretty actors“.

I'm sure his widow, actor Sophia Loren, would have raised more than an eyebrow.