

Part II

Negotiating Relations

7 Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting “Women” and “Power” in the Same Sentence

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1 Introduction: Power Games

In writing a paper under the title above, an author must confront the ancient platitude that men are more comfortable with power than are women; that it is right and natural for men to seek and hold power; that for a woman to do so is strange, marking her as un-feminine and dangerous. This belief allows a culture to exclude women from full participation in any of its politics, not only in the most typical and specific sense of that word, “the art or science of government or governing”; but also in the more general sense I am assuming here, “the ways in which power is allocated and that allocation justified, among the members of a society.” In its latter definition, *politics* extends beyond government to other public (and private) institutions.

There has been a fair amount of writing exploring the links among language, gender, and power: for instance the contributors to Thorne and Henley (1975), who see the triangulation through the prism of “dominance” theory; and, from the other, or “difference” perspective, Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990). But there is much less on the role of gender in politics, from a linguistic perspective. For an example of the way gender has affected the linguistic possibilities of men versus women in a particular case, see Mendoza-Denton’s (1995) discussion of the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings (a very public and political sexual harassment case).

In their writings about the connection between gender and power, several usually insightful commentators have made surprising statements. Conley, O’Barr, and Lind (1979) and Brown and Levinson (1986) argue that an observed discrepancy between male and female behavior is due not to gender but to “power” – as though one were independent of the other. Perhaps these

statements must be interpreted as evidence that the collocation “women and power” still has the capacity to confuse us all.

Language reflects and contributes to the survival of the stereotype. To cite just a few examples, there are lexical differences in the way we talk about men with power, versus women with power. For example, we use different words to describe similar or identical behavior by men and by women. English (like other languages) has many words describing women who are interested in power, presupposing the inappropriateness of that attitude. *Shrew* and *bitch* are among the more polite. There are no equivalents for men. There are words presupposing negative connotations for men who do not dominate “their” women, *henpecked* and *pussywhipped* among them. There is no female equivalent.

Many proverbs and folktales function as instruction manuals for the young (and the not so young), warning women of the perils of assertiveness but encouraging it in men. In the fairy tale “Seven at a Blow,” the brave little tailor, having killed seven flies with one swat, embroiders himself a belt to that effect and wears it out into the world. He gets into trouble but eventually triumphs. The lesson: verbal assertion brings a man success. On the other hand, in the story “The Seven Swans,” a girl’s seven brothers are changed into swans. She can transform them back into men only by sitting in a tree for seven years sewing them shirts out of daisies. If she utters one word during this period, she will fail. She succeeds, despite terrible obstacles. The moral: silence and obedience are the path to success for a woman.

Furthermore, we have different expectations about the way men and women should (or do) conduct themselves linguistically. Men are expected to be direct, women indirect. While that distinction in itself does not necessarily create a disadvantage to women, it is the basis of a familiar double-bind. If a woman is indirect (i.e. a proper woman), she is variously *manipulative* or *fuzzy-minded*. If she is direct she is apt to be called a *shrew* or a *bitch*. Denying expressive power to women is a political act.

The organization of conversation reflects the power discrepancy between men and women, especially when we compare the empirical findings about the distribution of turns between males and females with the traditional stereotypes about who does more talking than whom. Floor-holding and topic control are associated with power in the conversational dyad. The traditional assumption is that women do most of the talking, usually about nothing. Yet Spender (1980) found that typically men hold the floor 80 per cent of the time. Further, even more surprisingly, when male active participation dips below about 70 per cent both men and women assess the result as “women dominating the conversation.” Other research shows that men generate most of the successful topics in mixed-group conversation: women’s attempts are ignored by both men and other women in the group (Leet-Pellegrini 1980). Fishman (1978) suggests that, in intimate relationships, women do the conversational “shitwork”: getting even minimal responses from men. Earlier research (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975) suggested that one way in which men maintain their conversational dominance is by violative interruption of women. More

recently these findings have been called into question (James and Clarke 1993), although the problems identified concern methodology and interpretation, rather than the existence of the phenomenon itself.

While both women and men are subject to constraint in the emotions that they may express, the constraint on both seems designed to intensify the pre-existing power imbalance between the sexes. Until very recently, men were not supposed to cry or express sadness; women were not permitted to express anger, including the use of swear words. But the expression of sorrow is an expression of powerlessness and helplessness; anger, of potency. So although these rules may seem to equalize the sexes, in fact they intensify male power and female powerlessness. When women do express anger, its power is denied ("You're cute when you're mad").

As women (and others formerly excluded, such as children) have asserted their right to use "bad" language, there has been increasing concern on the part of both right and left about the "coarsening" or growing "incivility" of the public discourse. While these words refer to different kinds of behavior, one very common use is to critique the increasing prevalence of formerly forbidden words. And while some objects of this critique are adult White males, I strongly suspect that one motivating force behind the complaints of "coarsening" is that the privilege of swearing – of expressing anger in undisguised form – has been extended to women, and with it the right to powerful speech more generally.

This chapter illustrates the complex relationship between *women* and *power* by examining examples from three major American institutions: academia, the arts, and politics proper. In academia, publication is the analog of election in governmental politics, the determinant of success. Who, or what, decides what is publishable, what is a fit topic of discourse? Who, or what, defines and delimits academic fields?

Usually these questions are fought out clandestinely, beneath the consciousness of the fighters. Seldom does the battle break into publication. So such a case forms a particularly delectable object of study. And when gender and its appropriate analysis form both text and subtext of the dispute, the case becomes especially relevant. In a series of papers (1997, 1998) published in *Discourse & Society*, Emanuel Schegloff argued against the use of all but a very restricted set of conversational transcripts in doing gender-based analyses (i.e. using the data of conversation analysis (CA) to investigate power relations between females and males in conversation). Arguably, if any living person has a right to delimit the research options of CA, that person is Emanuel Schegloff; but that is a big "if." Schegloff's arguments were quickly, and vigorously, contested by Margaret Wetherell (1998) and Ann Weatherall (2000). I will examine the debate as it stood at the time of writing (December 2000).

The arts are often seen as, ideally, apolitical in aim and function. But art can be used for political persuasion. The line between art and propaganda can be fuzzy; yet much of the world's great literature, from the *Aeneid* to *Richard III* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, has an avowed political aim.

David Mamet's *Oleanna* is distinctly political, its politics the politics of gender. *Oleanna* opened in the spring of 1992, about seven months after the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas contretemps and a bit less than a year after the premiere of the movie *Thelma and Louise*. Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) was still at the top of the best-seller lists. *Oleanna* is easily viewed as a response to these perceived threats to the gender of the play's creator. Not only was the play a smash hit on at least two continents; it became the basis of a veritable cottage industry of analyses, ripostes, defenses, and apocalyptic warnings (see, for instance Rich 1992; Lahr 1992; Holmberg 1992; Mufson 1993; Showalter 1992; Silverthorne 1993; and the exchange among several prominent discussants in the *New York Times*, November 15, 1992).

My third subject is politics proper: the treatment of women as voters and as people in the public eye, in particular the campaign and election of Hillary Rodham Clinton as Senator for New York. For eight years Clinton had functioned as a standard-bearer in the gender wars, a woman cast in a traditional role trying to redefine it and herself, and thereby womanhood. The peculiarly visceral hatred of both Clintons that culminated in the presidential impeachment hearings of 1998 can be explained at least partially by the fact that, singly and as a pair, they confused gender roles (cf. Lakoff 2000). So, too, in a very real way, Hillary Clinton's fight for a US Senate seat could be seen as a referendum on new gender options. Her opponent was a non-entity; the brunt of his campaign turned on his identification as the Anti-Hillary. Gender was very much a part of the discourse, especially the unspoken part, in this campaign. Both before and during her Senate campaign, Clinton was described as "scary." What was "scary" about her?

Women play other roles in contemporary American political discourse. There are the famous "soccer moms." There is what Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* (e.g. 1996) has derisively called the "feminization" or "pinking" of politics: concern with "compassion" and other "soft" issues. Why do commentators treat women voters and "their" issues as marked (and, therefore, often risible)? When women hold power, their treatment is equally curious, often including a peculiar attention to their sexuality (or seeming lack of it), their private lives, and their external appearance (Salter 2000).

The three cases have much in common. All are struggles over control of meaning, or interpretive rights. In the first case, the struggle centers on the definition or framing of an academic field: who decides what is appropriate subject matter, or correct methodology? In the second, one aspect of the controversy over *Oleanna* concerns who decides what it is about: is it an anti-feminist screed, or a bold attack on "political correctness"? What control does the writer of a work of art, or the creator of an academic discipline, have over the use or interpretation of that field or work? In the political arena, who decides how we, the electorate, are to perceive candidates – and other members of the electorate? What criteria are relevant?

Because the ability to make meaning is politically (in all senses) crucial, each of these cases passes what I have called the Undue Attention Test (Lakoff 2000):

each of the cases I examine below has attracted more than its normal share of commentary. Therefore the examination of the meta-texts – scholarly and popular media representations of the events described – becomes indispensable.

2 A Note on Method

How can language be gathered and analyzed to show how we create ourselves as members of a society? We can use conversation as a means of understanding the construction of individual identity and small-group cohesion. But how do we study the processes of larger-group identity and opinion formation?

These questions have been explored in other fields – political science, sociology, mass communication – using their methods (surveys, polls, focus groups), with results that are often salient. But the methods and theories of linguistics add valuable new data and a different dimension. Linguists can bring to the discussion the close and detailed analysis of language itself. What do specific choices – of topics, words, presuppositions, and other implicit devices – lead us all to believe? How do the media use language to create cohesive public meaning?

I restrict my examination in this chapter to the print media because of its accessibility. Television (and radio) may reach a wider audience and have a more pervasive influence on their beliefs, but print journalism is an equally valid focus for media analysis.

3 Schegloff: Academic Politics isn't Just Academic

By “academic politics,” we normally refer to power struggles in university governance: the games we (or rather, anonymous colleagues) play on university committees or in department meetings. But similar games can be played for higher stakes within disciplines in the competition for status and definitional rights within disciplines. It is in this sense that Emanuel Schegloff’s paper “Whose Text? Whose Context?” (1997) is a highly political document; and it is no surprise that it has given rise to at least two responses, the first of which has, in turn, received a response from Schegloff (1998).

As the doyen of conversation analysis, Schegloff takes issue with one way in which conversational strategies (interruption and topic control) have been used to demonstrate inequalities among participants in conversations. Schegloff’s detailed and serious critique of such analyses merits close inspection. He has two major complaints.

First, these critiques start from a macro-analysis of political inequality, and only sometimes, if at all, move down to the micro-level of close observation

and analysis of actual conversational behavior. Schegloff argues that the reverse should be the case: start from the micro and work up to the macro, justifying the latter, if it is invoked at all, via the former. He attacks a discipline he labels as “critical discourse analysis” for not doing as he posits. He seems to assume that all CA done from a political (e.g. feminist) perspective is a form of “critical discourse analysis” – a field he does not define in any detail.

This criticism seems related to a larger complaint often leveled by conservative critics against “engaged” analysis in any academic discipline: that it necessarily loses the “objectivity” that otherwise is the norm in academic research, and that this loss is altogether negative. The assumption is that Schegloffian CA is neutral, objective, and apolitical; and that that is the only kind that is academically worthy.

These arguments have been so pervasive for so long that they achieve an implicit rightness, or at least an implicit unmarkedness and unquestionability. But on closer inspection, they turn out to be questionable, sometimes even dubious, once we identify and discard our “normal” presuppositions.

As both Wetherell (1998) and Weatherall (2000) note, Schegloff’s assumption that one must do *either* close micro-analysis *or* broader political analysis is flawed. A complete analysis requires both, and each level will inform and deepen the other. There is no reason (other than proprietary pride) to insist on purity without proof that the mixing of levels necessarily vitiates the analysis. Schegloff has not shown this; he gives no real examples of the disfavored approach, and certainly no evidence that it causes problems.

Second, Schegloff argues that an analysis must represent its subjects’ own conscious rationalizations of their behavior – or at least that the analyst’s explanation must involve an understanding that is accessible to the subject. So, if (let’s say) a male subject’s interruption of a female is not explicitly *intended* (and admitted) as a sexist move, it cannot be *interpreted* that way by the analyst. Only, says Schegloff, if a conversation explicitly mentions gender issues can it be used as grist for a gender-based interpretation. This of course radically cuts down the amount of conversational and other behavioral data available to feminist (or other politically based) analysis.

These may seem reasonable caveats, needed to keep academic discourse from becoming dangerously engaged and subjective. But examine them a little more closely.

Schegloff offers a sample conversational text (1997: 172–3) that, he claims, might be misinterpreted if analyzed from a political stance. The subjects are an estranged couple, “Tony” and “Marsha,” discussing their son “Joey.” Joey’s car has been vandalized while he was at Marsha’s house, and therefore he had to fly rather than drive to Tony’s. Immediately following the text are two paragraphs glossing it, which I reproduce below in full.

Tony has called to find out when Joey left, presumably so as to know when to expect him. It turns out that there is trouble: Joey’s car has been vandalized, and this has happened, as they say, on Marsha’s watch (as she puts it at line 18,

“Right out in front of *my* house”). [Italics EAS] What is worse, nobody has bothered to inform Tony. In the segment of this conversation before us, two issues appear to be of concern: Joey and his itinerary, and the car and *its* [italics EAS] itinerary. When Tony raises the latter issue (at lines 19–20: “an eez not g’nna [. . .] bring it back?”), Marsha gives it short shrift – providing the minimal answer (line 21: “No”) and rushing ahead into a continuation of the telling she has been engaged in (the “so” marks the remainder of the turn, which could have stood as an account of the “no”, as disjunctive with it, and conjunctive with her earlier talk). When that telling is brought to an analyzable conclusion (lines 29–33), Tony returns to the issue that he had raised before – the fate of the car (line 35). This is the segment on which we focus.

As it might be formulated both vernacularly and for the purposes of critically oriented analysis, we have here an interaction across gender lines, in which the asymmetries of status and power along gender lines in this society are played out in the interactional arena of interruption and overlapping talk, and this exchange needs to be understood in those terms. In this interactional contest, it may be noted, Marsha is twice “beaten down” in a metaphoric sense but nonetheless a real one, being twice induced to terminate the talk which she is in the process of producing (at line 37, “His friend”; and again at line 38, “his friend Stee-”), thereby indexing the power processes at work here. On the other hand, in the third interruption in this little episode (at lines 41–2), although Marsha does not this time yield to Tony’s interruptive talk, neither does Tony yield to Marsha’s. He starts while Marsha is talking, and brings his exclamation of commiseration to completion in spite of Marsha’s ongoing, continuing talk. One could almost imagine that we capture in this vignette some of the elements which may account for these people no longer living together.

In what is intended as a scholarly, objective text, there are a surprising number of lexical and syntactic choices that create tendentious readings. Tony’s motives are pure and uncomplicated: he calls “presumably so as to know when to expect [Joey].” “It turns out” is from Tony’s perspective: Marsha knew of the situation before the initiation of the phone call. So readers are already deictically situated with Tony. Schegloff notes that “nobody has bothered to inform Tony.” This sounds like grouching on Tony’s (or the writer’s) part: “Nobody has” really means “Marsha hasn’t,” and “bothered to” has a sarcastic edge: she could have and she should have. Marsha gives the beef “short shrift” – an expression implying that longer shrift would have been appropriate. I suggest that, while the analysis Schegloff argues against would be *overtly* political, his is *covertly* so – and therefore more compromised in terms of objectivity.

In the second paragraph, the politicization turns syntactic. Schegloff entertains the possibility that issues of gender and power might be producing some of the conversational strategies in the text. He refers to the conversation as an “interactional contest,” suggesting that a bilateral power struggle is an integral part of any full explanation (at least that is my interpretation of his discussion), which would make sense except that he has already disqualified this mode of approach as either “vernacular” or “critically oriented analysis,” that is, not scholarly CA. He notes in the paragraph immediately following that this kind

of analysis is “problematic on many counts,” precisely because its terms are not those that the participants themselves overtly recognize. This constitutes a bit of polemical sleight-of-hand; on the one hand (now you see it) an attractive bit of “critical discourse analysis” and on the other (now you don’t) a disavowal of it. Returning to the *explication de texte*, in the second paragraph Schegloff, in discussing Tony’s behavior toward Marsha, says that she is “twice ‘beaten down’ in a metaphoric sense,” “being twice induced to terminate the talk.” We note the use of two agentless passive constructions in quick order. (This paragraph is laden with such constructions, above and beyond even the academic norm: I count five in the first two sentences. Agentless passives often function as a way of avoiding responsibility and creating emotional distance between speaker and subject, or hearer.) To the same end, Schegloff imputes “metaphoric” status to “beaten down.”

Later in the paragraph Schegloff argues that interruption is not being used by Tony in the interests of disempowerment – that is, Schegloff offers this sequence as a counterexample to feminist analyses of interruption. But one non-conforming case hardly constitutes a counterexample to the theory, and in fact the example he chooses would surely not be identified by most contemporary conversation analysts as a violative interruption, but rather as cooperative overlap:

41 Marsha: ‘hhh Oh it’s disgusti[ng ez a matter a’f]a:ct.

42 Tony: [P o or Joey,]

(The identification of this distinction, by Tannen (1981) and others, is one of the reasons why James and Clarke (1993) have cast doubt on earlier analyses of interruption as diagnostic of male control of conversation.)

In these paragraphs Schegloff uses syntactically, lexically, interpretively, and punctuationally marked choices to avoid political involvement – a choice that is political in itself. I have used Schegloff’s preferred microanalytic strategy to demonstrate that his treatment is not as “neutral” as he believes. If Schegloff’s arguments seem neutral, it is because they depend upon presupposed beliefs supporting traditional assignments of status, authority, and power. But claims that the discourse Schegloff analyzes is apolitical, or that we can understand why the participants made the choices they made without resorting to a gendered explanation, conveniently ignore the fact that everything we do has some political basis, and that we have to account for why it seems normal (to Schegloff, anyway) for Marsha to be beaten down, metaphorically or otherwise, and for Tony to demand full shrift but not for Marsha to, by seeing that gender and power make meaning in conversation.

Let us turn to Schegloff’s second point, that analyses can only be based on concepts or constructs of which participants are in some sense aware. I’m not sure how seriously he means this: consider how many categories of CA are not normally accessible to subjects. Who is aware that a TRP (transition relevance place, or place in a conversation where a new speaker may take the floor) is

approaching as they speak? Who realizes that they are producing a dispreferred second or a presequence? Non-professional subjects are much more likely nowadays to be aware, if subliminally, of gender as informing their utterances than of their choice of CA gambits.

Schegloff's example of a putatively valid case is also questionable as a preferred basis for "feminist" analysis. In it two male and two female participants are at dinner. One of the males asks for the butter. A female asks if she can have some too, to which the male says "No," and then, "Ladies last." Schegloff considers this a case where gender is "relevant," because male power is explicitly invoked. But the last remark is intended as a joke – a kind of ironic put-down of male power assumptions. Rather than demonstrating the kinds of behavior that are the subjects of feminist critique, this male speaker seems to be taking, albeit indirectly, a feminist stance. The issue then is one of control. Those who have most to lose from "politicized" analysis use the vested authority they implicitly possess to attempt to invalidate any critique. By asserting, or rather presupposing, his right to define the terms and limits of his academic field, Schegloff (nor is he alone in this) is also attempting to maintain traditional power relations between the sexes and avoid overt examination of motives. The presupposition of neutrality for non-overtly political analysis is false: the denial of power games where they occur is itself a form of manipulative control.

4 *Oleanna*: Much Ado About Something

A few months after its premiere in Cambridge, Massachusetts, *Oleanna* was brought to New York, and thereafter to many other cities. Over the next few years it was a genuine phenomenon: a work of high culture that *everyone* knew about, talked about, fought over.

Yet rereading it, I wonder whether, if it were to be performed today for the first time, anyone would pay attention. Both its topic and its reception seem very much of a time that, happily or not, has passed. So perhaps we can look at *Oleanna* now with the dispassion that comes of distance, and of once-incendiary issues more or less defused.

Oleanna was written largely in the months directly following the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, and while the battle over "political correctness" was at its zenith in the United States. The play addresses both of these issues so directly and polemically that we may wonder whether it really constitutes literature, or – given the many deficiencies of character, plot, and construction that critics pointed to from the outset – a piece of political agitprop couched as melodrama.

Oleanna is about the intersection of gender and politics at two levels. The play itself is a discourse on power games between a male and a female; on the man's part, these games are more or less covert and essentially (in the playwright's

view) benign; on the woman's, overt, shocking, and evil. At the second level the audience is invited – indeed, compelled – to weigh in, to decide not only which of the play's two characters is “right” and “good,” but what the playwright intended, and whether his intentions were artistic and valid, or political and reprehensible. From opening night, opinions split drastically among both critics and audience members. The latter regularly left the theater in heated debate. Theaters presenting the play often scheduled post-performance sessions in which audiences were invited to listen to, and participate in, discussions with cast, director, and sometimes members of the larger cultural and intellectual community. These were remarkably well-attended and confrontational.

In the play, John is a professor at a prestigious research university. He is up for tenure, which at the outset he seems pretty sure of getting. He is about to buy a house; he has a wife and child. Carol is an undergraduate student in his class, from a lower social class, who has come to the university expecting it to enable her to move upward. But she has encountered trouble in the class, and goes to John's office to get some help understanding what he's been talking about.

In the first act, John does most of the talking, and Carol's contributions are mostly fragmentary and interrogative. John genuinely seems to mean well: he *wants* to help Carol, seeing in her a kindred spirit who like him comes from the working class. He wants to teach, to explain, to clarify. But he cannot get beyond his academic vocabulary and style of self-presentation: often pompous, heavily figurative, indirect. Carol's problem is that this is precisely her problem: she has not been entrusted with the decoder that would enable her to make sense of this “discourse,” much less the encoder that would let her speak this way herself. While John bubbles with ideas that Carol should “get,” he is of no help in enabling her to penetrate what the university, and John as its immediate representative, are really up to, what the game is and how it is played and won – which is what Carol needs to know, although of course she cannot articulate that even to herself.

Carol wants interpretations, but John won't, and probably can't, supply them: as a now middle-class White male, he is too much a part of the institution to penetrate its mysteries. John makes a few statements about how he “likes” Carol, suggests that if she will come to his office again he'll give her an A, and tells her what she's about: she's angry, she's like him, etc. Toward the end of the colloquy he embraces her – platonically, of course. None of this is what Carol bargained for, and at the end of Act I she leaves, still bewildered – in fact, doubly bewildered now.

In Act I John is the one with the power: to give Carol the passing grade she needs, and to induct her into the mysteries of the university and the middle class. Commentators have generally seen these powers, and the way John uses them, as legitimate and unremarkable – when they notice them at all, and often they do not: they are normal. Therefore, when Carol returns later, accusing John of bad faith and bad behavior, many commentators are frankly uncomprehending: how did the little ninny get these ideas put in her head? As

her detractors said of Anita Hill, she must have been put up to it by someone . . . someone smarter . . . someone with an *agenda*, which John and people like him certainly do not possess. They just *are*.

The most important scene in the play, to my mind, is not shown: how Carol moves from the inarticulate and uncomprehending child of Act I to the articulate and politically astute woman of the remainder of the play. By Act II it is Carol who is making the long, uninterrupted speeches and John who is questioning and expostulating in fragments. Some commentators see this as a flaw of character development: how does Carol achieve this command of language? (It is less often asked how John loses it.) The assumption of many analysts is that she is spouting the dialogue given her by the feminist "group" we never see, rather than that such notions might have been inchoate in her. While it is true that Carol, like virtually all Mamet's women, is a paper cutout (and John is not much more), if we see the ability to speak as a sign of potency, then once Carol has been provided with explanations and with a way to get power, articulateness might follow automatically. Similarly, deprived of his unquestioned power, John might lose his ability to speak.

By Act III it is Carol who is interpreting John, instructing him, telling him what he means and what he should or shouldn't do – just as he was doing to her in Act I. (Many commentators who don't notice John's behavior are upset by Carol's.) Finally, unable to take the reversal of fortune, he beats her up, onstage and brutally. Audiences, at least their male members, frequently applauded at this point, some yelling, "Serves the bitch right!"

The politics of interpretation operate in a couple of ways: between John and Carol, between the institutions they represent (the university and feminism); and between the factions in the audience and the reviewers and commentators, who see John's interpretations as justifiable and unremarkable, Carol's as out-of-line and deserving of punishment. The university is a proper institution whose members properly derive from their positions interpretive powers – over things and over subordinate people. Feminism is an improper institution, almost oxymoronic, since institutions by their existence offer power to their members, and members of feminist groups have no right to power. Just as Anita Hill was castigated for demanding, very publicly, the right to give the name to the behavior in which her boss had indulged – "sexual harassment," not "just kidding around" – with all that that entailed, so Carol deserves punishment because her speech – both its content and her very articulateness – is out of line, inappropriate for one like her.

Audiences responded as they did because, at that moment, the issues the play explored were seething in the real world: not just Thomas-Hill, but the movie *Thelma and Louise*, and the continuing battle over "political correctness." Mamet, criticized for the implausibility of his characters and plot, responded that the play was, after all, a fiction that should not be taken as realistic. But it was understood as literal commentary on a current hot-button issue. The play had its strong effect because audiences believed that the horrors that Carol visited on John could really happen at a major American university: a few

harridans making enough noise could ruin the career of an innocent, deserving man. Those who have spent any time in such institutions know that this is as mythic as the minotaur: vague, unwitnessed allegations based not on actual conduct but on interpretations of ambiguous conduct do not causes of action make. Remarkably, in all the writing about the play, this fact is barely mentioned at all.

So not only is the action of the play itself implausible in several ways, but the response of professional commentators is equally so. They let Mamet get away with murder, and his protagonist with mayhem.

Most needful of interpretation is the anger that seethed all around *Oleanna*: in the play, about the play, about the “realities” represented in the play. *Oleanna* offered a comforting oversimplification at a time when life seemed extremely complicated with its new roles and new rules. We can’t beat up our friends, bosses, or spouses (mostly); we can’t put the genie back in the pre-feminist bottle. But we can cheer when John beats Carol.

5 Real Politics, Realpolitik: Women as Political Animals

Finally we turn to more typical “politics”: how women are talked about, by the pundits and politicians, as voters; how women in prominent positions are discussed; and finally, a striking case in point, the media discussion of Hillary Rodham Clinton, former first lady of the United States and then senator from New York.

One might hope that, eighty years after achieving suffrage, women voters would have become unremarkable and unmarked. But the pundits’ obsession with women voters has only grown stronger in recent years. On the one hand, this is encouraging: those who matter are finally realizing that women do have power and cannot be ignored. But the way in which women apparently must be noticed is often distressing.

Once a group has been identified as having power and needs, intelligent politicians might be expected to address themselves to those needs. Occasionally this happens for women. The Democrats regularly pay obeisance to “a woman’s right to choose” (then avoid the topic when campaigning). Education, especially at the primary and secondary levels, has traditionally been considered a “women’s issue” in United States politics. Recently, though, male candidates for high office have begun to identify themselves as prioritizing education. Both candidates in 2000 wanted to be “the education president.” More often, appealing to the women is done by outright, and insulting, pandering: Al Gore’s decision to dress in earth tones; George W. Bush’s banter; the long kiss between Gore and his wife before his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, riposted by George W. Bush’s peck on Oprah Winfrey’s cheek. On that show Bush, asked by Oprah for his “favorite sandwich,” replied, “peanut

butter and jelly on white bread." Think about it: this is the favorite sandwich only of the preschool set. Bush's people have decided that infantilization is what women want.

Other groups are stereotyped and appealed to as blocs. But women alone are appealed to as children and airheads, interested not in issues but in clothes, sex, and childish things.

New York Times Op-Ed commentator Maureen Dowd wrote several columns during the campaign (e.g. Dowd 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) about the pandering to women by both sides and politicians' judgments about what women want. There has been much discussion of the "soccer mom," the suburban mother, recently updated as the "cell-phone mom," and her electoral preferences (but nothing about the "baseball dad").

In *Newsweek* (Estrich 2000), Susan Estrich, an adviser to Democratic politicians, discusses her difficulties getting the Gore team to understand what at least one woman wanted: the presence of women (plural) at "the table," where campaign decisions were discussed. A member of the team finally got back to Estrich with the news that, among many men, there was one woman – so she should be satisfied.

Then it should be unsurprising that the public perception of powerful women is ambivalent. Powerful women are variously sexualized, objectified, or ridiculed. An item in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Garchik 2000) would be amusing if we didn't consider the consequences. Garchik reports on South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Jung Bin's response to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright after her visit. "Albright and I are of the same age," says Lee. "So we are both feeling intimate with each other. . . . [Upon hugging her, I found she was] really buxom . . ."

A prominent woman who, by behavior or appearance, does not function as a male sex fantasy is apt to be recast as a lesbian, as was the case with Attorney General Janet Reno as well as Hillary Rodham Clinton herself. Political males are sometimes seen as sex objects, but we should not be misled by the apparent parallels: sexual conquest enhances a man's power, but weakens a woman's (compare the connotations of *stud* and *slut*).

Even more than sexualization, objectification via elaborate discussion of appearance, usually negative, is disempowering. It is true that men in the public eye can be criticized for their looks (Al Gore's incipient bald spot; Bill Clinton's paunch; George W. Bush's "smirk"). But these barbs are both less frequent and less prominent directed at men than at women. Further, comments about looks are much more dangerous to a woman's already fragile grasp of power than to a man's: they reduce a woman to her traditional role of *object*, one who is seen rather than one who sees and acts. Because this is a conventional view of women, but not of men, comments about looks work much more effectively to disempower women than men, and are more hurtful to women, who have always been encouraged to view looks as a primary attribute – as men usually have not. Being the passive object of the gaze is presupposed for women, never for heterosexual men.

During the prolonged electoral debacle of November and December, 2000, Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris got her fifteen minutes of fame. A great deal of the discussion centered around her looks, dress, and make-up, with New York/Washington media sophisticates sneering at the taste of Florida hicks. After a few days the media turned on themselves (Salter 2000; Scott 2000; Talbot 2000): was it *right* to spend so much energy on a woman's looks? It was as if the pundits were discovering the phenomenon for the first time, and had not seen the same sort of discussions about (to name a few) Sandra Day O'Connor, Dianne Feinstein, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Janet Reno, Monica Lewinsky, or Linda Tripp. But at least the discussion entered the public discourse.

Public women are much more subject to erosion of the wall between their public and private personae than are men, with anything unconventional about their private lives leaching into judgments of their public performance. Thus Hillary Clinton, both as first lady and as senatorial candidate, got relentless criticism largely from women about her failure to end her marriage after the Monica Lewinsky imbroglio. Not only did women respond with this critique to questions about how effective she might be as a senator; although the innocent party in the affair, it was her reactions and her private decisions that were faulted by other women.

During Clinton's first ladyship she received an extraordinary amount of media attention, immensely varied, from effusively positive to virulently negative, as was true of no modern first lady other than Eleanor Roosevelt, who was damned and praised on similar grounds.

In deciding to run for the Senate from one of America's biggest and most culturally important states, Clinton created some of her own current problems. The first ladyship, while having no official duties, functions as a symbol of ideal contemporary American womanhood (cf. Lakoff 2000). The traditional first lady mostly stays out of the limelight except for photo opportunities and virtuous deeds. She stands beside her husband and defends him when necessary, but does not speak for herself. Clinton violated these rules when she agreed to chair the health care program early in her husband's first term. Yet her approval ratings, at least for the first several months, were very high. Only after the plan failed was she castigated as "ambitious," a charge that dogs her to this day.

It is odd to find "ambition" used as a criticism of prominent women. Americans generally see "ambition" positively, as embodying the American virtues of get-up-and-go, self-esteem, and independence. A (male) politician who appears to have insufficient ambition is dismissed as lacking "fire in the belly": the expectation is that he will not be successful. Yet a woman who seeks or holds high office is called "ambitious," intended as a disqualification for the position. Early in the Clinton presidency Michael Deaver, Ronald Reagan's former press secretary, is quoted as saying of Clinton: "This is not some kind of a woman behind the scenes who's pulling the strings. This woman's out front pulling the strings" (Pollitt 1993). Since Deaver's boss's wife, Nancy

Reagan, had received some criticism for being the power behind the throne, it is clear that Deaver does not mean what he says as a compliment.

Consider an extraordinary statement by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, after Clinton's election to the Senate: "When this Hillary gets to the Senate, if she does – maybe lightning will strike and she won't – she will be one of 100, and we won't let her forget it" (Rosenberg 2000). Leaving aside the violation of ordinarily expected collegial courtesy, the statement boils over with resentments: *this Hillary*, the emotional deictic *this* signifying emotional connection with its subject via contempt (Lakoff 1974); the first-name reference, unilateral intimacy (such as is permitted traditionally to men for women, but not vice versa – a reminder that, in Trent Lott's Senate, the Old World Order is still in effect). I pass over the death-wish as beyond comment. And by *we* does Lott mean, "the other 99 Senators"? "all the male Senators"? In any case it is deliberately exclusive and meant to hurt: "you don't belong here, woman!"

At least as upsetting is the treatment of Clinton by women, echoed by the pundits, during her Senate campaign. Newspaper and television reports kept alluding to women's suspicions of her: "She has so much baggage," a woman voter is quoted as saying (Harden 2000). "She must have known what people would be talking about. Yet she still ran. I think she thinks a lot of herself."

The last sentence seems discordant: I would have expected instead, "She really has guts." But in this case, Clinton's guts metamorphose into nerve, reminiscent of what Oprah Winfrey has referred to as women's tendency to say of other women in positions of prominence, "Who does she think she is?"

Clinton is often referred to in these reports as "deceptive." The exact nature of the deception is seldom made explicit. Mrs. Patricia Hooks (an Alabama woman at a fund-raiser for Rick Lazio, Clinton's opponent) is quoted (Harden 2000) as saying that she had "seen through" Mrs. Clinton the first time she saw her on the television show "60 Minutes" in 1992. Clinton is, she says, "a woman who wants power, who wants control, who wants to be on the national stage." What deception has Mrs. Hooks "seen through"?

Clinton's private life is also grounds for disqualification. In the same article a professional woman, a pediatrician, is quoted as saying: "I want to like her, but I can't. I lost respect for her when she stood by him during Monica." Yet her ratings were at an all-time high during the impeachment period. And although the papers continually reported on Clinton-hating women, in the end she won election by a huge 12-point majority: women voted for her after all. The quotations might mean that women were struggling with their own personal questions, doubts, and uncertainties, using Clinton as a test case: could I, should I, do this? In the end, many must have recognized that *she* was *us*.

It is tempting to suggest that we all are using Clinton as litmus paper, Rorschach (as she has suggested), or stalking horse: a referendum on *our* marriages at the millennium, whether we're right to stay in them or leave them, who we are besides (or instead of) helpmates.

Finally, Clinton is best understood as the confluence of a set of paradoxes which women are not yet able to unravel. Many claim to hate her, but in the end show up on her side (if sometimes with misgivings); they fear her ambition, but give her high ratings when she is at her most powerful. They criticize her for standing by her man, but also give her her highest ratings when she does. Male politicians seldom have to make these delicate and dangerous choices.

6 Conclusions

A great many, perhaps most, human activities have a significant political component – that is, in some way involve the allotment of power and influence among participants. In some, the politics are interpersonal: for example, we can understand many of the structures and rules of the conversational dyad as arising out of competition for a valuable resource, floor time. In others, political concerns are institutionally organized, intra- and extra-organization. Thus within the university, intra-institutional politics is involved in tenure decisions, graduate admissions policies, and resource allocation among departments (to cite a few examples). Extra-institutional politics is manifested currently (in public universities in America) in negotiations for funding with state legislatures, and in the development and growth of public relations offices in universities to enhance the prestige of those institutions in the public eye (again, just a couple of examples).

Traditionally, discussions of “politics” have focused on the public, institutional understanding of that word and of course in particular on the workings of governments. In these frames political discourse has often been identified as a male domain, with women excluded or at best relegated to the role of interloper. One thing I have tried to do here is extend the definition of “political discourse,” in terms of where it occurs, who does it, and for what purpose it is done.

In this chapter I have examined three institutions in which traditional male-only “politics as usual” are being supplanted by the entrance of women into the discourse, causing novel and in some cases rather strange reorganizations of discourse possibilities: the worlds of academia, the arts, and government. In each of these, the new roles of women are perceived by some traditional members of the institution as a threat, and the conventional language practices of the institution are channeled into new forms, or new functions, in an attempt to dispel that threat or render it innocuous. The ability to perceive what is happening in each case that I describe as a power struggle – between the proponents of the status quo, and the harbingers of the new – is often affected by the unmarkedness of male-only language forms in the institutional discourse, making it easier to view female moves toward full participation as incompetent, inappropriate, or unintelligible – and therefore worthy only of

ridicule, punishment, or inattention. But the increasing numbers of women achieving speaking power in these and other public institutions are likely to render those responses non-functional before very long. In many institutions the new situation has caused confusion and dissension: how do the unspoken (and spoken) rules and assumptions of the institution bend to effect necessary change? Since institutions survive by adherence to tradition, any change is often grudging.

But as the examples above attest – change is coming. None of the cases I have examined would have been perceptible – or even imaginable – thirty years earlier. The way we talk about the relation between women and power is a language of new, tentative, but very real possibilities.

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