



Women & Power: A Manifesto

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"A modern feminist classic."—The Guardian

From the internationally acclaimed classicist and *New York Times* best-selling author comes this timely manifesto on women and power. At long last, Mary Beard addresses in one brave book the misogynists and trolls who mercilessly attack and demean women the world over, including, very often, Mary herself.

In *Women & Power*, she traces the origins of this misogyny to its ancient roots, examining the pitfalls of gender and the ways that history has mistreated strong women since time immemorial.

As far back as Homer's *Odyssey*, Beard shows, women have been prohibited from leadership roles in civic life, public speech being defined as inherently male. From Medusa to Philomela (whose tongue was cut out), from Hillary Clinton to Elizabeth Warren (who was told to sit down), Beard draws illuminating parallels between our cultural assumptions about women's relationship to power—and how powerful women provide a necessary example for all women who must resist being vacuumed into a male template.

With personal reflections on her own online experiences with sexism, Beard asks: If women aren't perceived to be within the structure of power, isn't it power itself we need to redefine? And how many more centuries should we be expected to wait?

Women & Power: A Manifesto Details

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From Reader Review Women & Power: A Manifesto for online ebook

Bookdragon Sean says

I question the intelligence and moral integrity of any man who does not consider himself a feminist, and I also question the fact that I am the only male in my friend's list to read this book. Books like this are so vitally important, important for both men and women. So go read it! I'm not trying to shame my male friends, but merely point out the imbalance in the readers of this book, at least, here on goodreads.

Why is this I wonder?

Mary argues that ever since the ancient Greeks women have been held back and their voices subsequently silenced. Are we not as men, in effect, silencing her by not reading her words? Food for thought.

Mary Beard often picks up on the small things, tiny details, but together they represent a cultural mind-set that is inherent and almost imbedded into the human psyche. Often objects of power are associated with ideas of masculinity, which is something women take on when they acquire power. She draws on modern examples, political leaders, who dress like men and take on other traits in order to be more persuasive. Her arguments are often generalised, though what she touches upon is something that cannot by its nature be accurately recorded.

So this is a rather compelling little book, but I can't help but feel that it is a wasted opportunity. She really could have expanded upon the ideas here and strengthened them by exploring them further. Although her arguments are intuitive, she only scratches the surface: she could have said so much more.

Ted says

4 1/2

the author

Beard, born in 1955, is the author of the popular *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (2015 finalist National Book Critics Award for non-fiction), and is Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge and the Classics editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. She makes frequent media appearances, gives many public lectures, and is active on social media. The Wiki article about Beard (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Beard) references many of the controversial statements she has made, the outrageous threats and abuse that these have generated (from men almost entirely), and the reasonable and forthright manner in which she has responded to the trolls and critics. She doesn't back down.

the book

This short book consists to two lightly edited lectures Mary Beard presented in the London Review of Books Winter Lecture series. The first part of the book is titled *The Public Voice of Women*, and was presented in 2014; the second part, *Women in Power*, in 2017.

In her preface, Beard writes, "Women in the West have a lot to celebrate; let's not forget." She then reflects on how times have changed since her own mother was born, when women did not have the right to vote in parliamentary elections in Britain. But, though many things changed during her mother's lifetime (she had both marriage and a career, as head of a large primary school), "She was often frustrated that her views and her voice were not taken as seriously as she hoped they would be."

Beard concludes the preface, "She was often in my mind when I was preparing [the lectures on which the book is based]. I wanted to work out how I would explain to her – as much as to myself, as well as to the millions of other women who still share some of the same frustrations – just how deeply embedded in Western culture are the mechanisms that silence women, that refuse to take them seriously, and that sever them (sometimes quite literally, as we shall see) from the centres of power. This is one place where the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans can help to throw light on our own. When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice."

loose threads of the lectures

The Public Voice of Women

Beard finds the paradigm view of women in the *Odyssey*. In the first book of that classic Telemachus, young and still scorned by the suitors, admonishes his mother (when she complains about a song being sung), "Go in and do your work. Stick to the loom and distaff... It is for men to talk...". She forwards a couple of millennia to the classic "Miss Triggs" cartoon:

This refusal to listen to women speak publicly is linked to traditions in both Greece and Rome, that "public speech" is a defining characteristic of the male. Why? Partly because of the "deep voice" which men have. Historically, when women have attempted to speak with authority, they must attempt to mimic maleness in some manner. When Elizabeth I addressed the troops at Tilbury in 1588, the words that have come down to us include, "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king." Beard comments that "she seems positively to avow her own androgyny."

When women state views that are different from men's, there is a frequent impulse to tell them, if not to shut up, that they are simply showing their stupidity or ignorance – *yes, dear, this is a very hard thing to accept, but your words show that you don't understand.*

Women in Power

I had more difficulty with the second lecture. Beard bookends this with detailed reference to a novel published a century ago, *Herland*, about an all-female society "discovered" by male explorers, who interact with the women there in ways that demonstrate their mild (or more so) misogyny. Perhaps the relevance of these references were more obvious in the spoken lecture.

Anyway, Beard makes observations about things like:

the fact that we have no "template" for what a powerful woman looks like, "except that she looks rather like

a man. The regulation trouser suits, or at least the trousers, are [besides perhaps other advantages] a simple tactic – like lowering the timbre of the voice – to make the female appear more male, to fit the part of power."

the idea that when women are expressly attempting to obtain a position traditionally thought of as a powerful one (whether bishop, president, prime minister or chairman of the board) they are engaged in a "power grab", and can be so referenced in media.

Beard again relates the views she's talking about back to the Greeks. Women that exert *power* are seldom referred to in a positive manner. Of course there aren't very many examples from classic times of women exerting power. The few there are typically exert this "power" by committing a heinous crime, such as murdering their children, or their husband. Well, what about the Greek female immortals, the goddesses who inhabit Olympus? Here the primary one who exerts almost unfettered power is Athena – Athena born not through an act of godlike insemination of a female by a male god, but by some fantastic childbirth directly from the head of her father, Zeus. Athena, often portrayed as sheathed in armor, as almost androgynous (again), with the almost unlimited types of power she is able to exert. And then there's Medusa.

On most images of the goddess [Athena] at the very center of her body armour, fixed onto her breastplate, is the image of a female head, with writhing snakes for hair. This is the head of Medusa, one of the three mythical sisters known as the Gorgons, and it was one of the most potent ancient symbols of male mastery over the destructive dangers that the very possibility of female power represented. It is no accident that we find her decapitated – her head proudly paraded as an accessory by the decidedly un-female female deity.

(both of these appear as illustrations in the book.) (view spoiler)

In the last part of the lecture, Beard reflects about what can be done. She ventures that it is power that needs to be redefined, not women. Though it is true that in contemporary times women have achieved much more "power" as traditionally defined – political power, for example – she notes that women's political power is rather curtailed, in the sense that women's speaking on political issues is accepted with little qualification only when the issues spoken of are "women's" issues. Day care, equal pay, domestic violence. Financial regulation is still felt by some to be outside their field (see Warren). Power is still treated as something elite, "coupled to public prestige, to the individual charisma of 'leadership'."

You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means decoupling it from public prestige. It means thinking collaboratively, about the powers of followers not just leaders. It means, above all, thinking about power as an attribute or even a verb ('to power'), not as a possession. What I have in mind is the ability to be effective, to make a difference in the world, and the right to be taken seriously, together as much as individually.

Example? Few people know the names of these women.

They are the founders of Black Lives Matter.

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Previous review: Genesis: Memory of Fire #1

Next review: The Waning of the Middle Ages

Older review: The Eye in the Door

Previous library review: Cotton Tenants *Agree*

Next library review: Planet of Slums

Ariel says

“But my basic premise is that our mental, cultural template for a powerful person remains resolutely male.”

I read this text because I thought it might be useful to my investigation of our treatment of instapoets. Adapted from two speeches that Beard made in 2014 and 2017, she tracks what women's relationship with power has been, from ancient myths to current twitter discourse. I personally think a third essay was missing - it would have been great to have an essay of conclusions and solutions. I'm also not sure if it should be called a manifesto, it felt more like A Few Interesting Thoughts.

But overall I really enjoyed it, I underlined so many passages from it, and I really liked thinking more about our understanding of power!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This is a very thought-provoking read, as long as you understand what it is - the texts of two speeches Mary Beard has given in the 21st century. Honestly, I do wish she'd used them as a starting point and written a much longer book about the topic, because I think she is drawing some connections I have not seen before - between classical imagery and modern politics, the cultural precedents for the oppression of women in the oldest literature, etc. She completely blew my mind about incorrect information I had internalized as part of my education, about Elizabeth I and Sojourner Truth, and it just makes me wonder what else she knows that I don't.

I was glad to see that she included a long list of additional readings and resources, but I *still* think there is work for Mary Beard herself to do in this arena.

The focus of this book is politics and history in the UK but of course there is a healthy dose of the USA in there, as well of some mentions of other world leaders.

It is making me want to go back and read her well-loved book, SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome, because if anyone can bring it to life, surely it is Mary Beard.

The publisher provided a copy of this book through Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

Lisa says

We've come a long way.

If we compare our lives today with any earlier time and our place here in Northern Europe with any other place, we should celebrate. And there is nothing wrong with celebrating either, for example by reading an entertaining volume on the voice and power of women - written by one of the many women who have used the luck of time and place well - to become a professor with a clear and loud, and female voice.

So, let's celebrate.

But... there is still so much to do.

How often is a wish for more equality in the contemporary power distribution met with a condescending comment referring to "how grateful we should be to have achieved so much already", thus silently telling us to shut up and stop fighting for more, to be pleased with having almost reached equality? Almost.

As long as power and masculinity are paired, there is no natural place for women within power. And Mary Beard argues beautifully that the target must be to change the structure and definition of power rather than woman.

With funny but disturbingly accurate examples from classical times to our present political atmosphere, she shows the reality women face when they try to empower themselves. Either they turn into hybrids like Antigone, Clytamnestra or Medea, powerful by the male attributes they acquire at a high cost, or they face the ridicule and abuse of those who identify power as a male concept per se, and try to push women back into the private or sexual sphere in order to control their voices.

A thought experiment made it vividly clear to me, myself a privileged, well-educated woman in a liberal democracy: closing my eyes and imagining a professor or a successful politician - I saw a man. An old man. A baby boomer man. A white baby boomer man. How can I blame anyone else for the lopsidedness of perceptions of power if that is what I see?

Naturally, that is not what I WANT to see, necessarily, so I force myself to imagine a staff picture at a Cambridge university department or in a government of any random country, and I try hard to imagine it in all possible colours and shapes and age groups.

And I know why I see what I see before my inner eye when I imagine intellectual or political power. We are not there yet. And we are not done until we are there.

We have a voice. And we will use it. And we have had time since Antiquity to get used to the abuse following a woman's voice speaking up for humanity!

Mary Beard has a voice that deserves to be heard and respected for her intellectual power and emotional courage.

Let it be heard!

Tiffany Reisz says

Damn, women have it tough in this world. Good thing I'm not a...what was that? I am? Shit.

Becky says

I will get straight to the point, with no ladylike silly shally.... this is bloody brilliant.

Nicola says

I pretty much wanted to underline the whole thing. Review coming in The Big Issue soon.

Paul says

4.5 stars rounded up

This brief book is based on two lectures, one from 2014 and one from 2017 by Mary Beard. Beard is a classicist and historian, a very good one. The primary subject is female voice and silence and is very much concerned with misogyny and links to the abuse Beard and others have experienced on social media. Given the recent revelations relating to Harvey Weinstein and the current social media landscape it is a much needed wake up call.

Beard looks at the origins of misogyny and being a classicist she takes as her starting point Greece, Rome and the Ancient world. In fact the starting point is Telemachus telling his mother Penelope to shut up in the Odyssey. It is essentially an analysis of the silencing of the female voice and the humiliation of those few females who dared to speak out. Beard knows her stuff and the examples from the classical era are penetrating and very apposite. She looks at the way the female voice is characterised, for example by the word whine. Beard also focuses on the famous Punch cartoon by Riana Duncan about "Miss Triggs". It shows a woman at a meeting with five men in suits. The chairman is saying: "That's an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it." Which neatly caricatures a particular attitude of mind. Beard throws in an analysis of Herland by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Amazons myth.

The first lecture is an analysis of why culture silences women and the second looks at how culture prevents women from achieving equality and looks at the nature of power. Beard expresses herself frustrated at gradualist solutions, although she does admit some progress has been made. She does make some very prescient points about what needs to happen:

"I would like in the future to think harder about how exactly we might go about re-configuring those notions of 'power' that now exclude all but a very few women, and I would like to try to pull apart the very idea of 'leadership' (usually male) that is now assumed to be the key to successful institutions."

She is right about leadership theories and we need to look at more “feminist” ideas about leadership. Of course men need to get used to the idea that they need to give up power and think differently about public space. My only niggle is that these were lectures, I would like Beard to follow up with something longer and more detailed.

Trish says

This book is two lectures modified and dispensing the understanding of a classicist with regard to “The Public Role of Women,” the very title of the first lecture. My markers are all in the second lecture, delivered in March 2017 and titled “Women in Power.” Mary Beard applies her knowledge of ancient languages and civilizations to uncover for us the origins of our notions of sexuality and power. It is not all she knows. It is merely her opinion of what she knows.

As though in a long, amusing conversation with a friend, Beard argues and then changes her mind as she makes her argument, rethinking her earlier teaching of Aristophanes’ comedic play *Lysistrata* as not just about girl power—“though maybe that’s exactly how we *should* now play it.”

I have recently found myself willing to modify my thinking on #MeToo: I opposed young women deciding, precipitously I thought, which behaviors went too far when some we clearly agreed did meet criterion for harassment. Those younger women will probably succeed in modifying men’s behaviors when earlier generations did not. They are the ones who have to live with success or failure of their guidelines.

The conclusions Beard shares with us at the end of the second lecture are especially trenchant: that power should be recognized as within each of us—within our reach—if we would only seize that power and exercise it. Power exercised does not have to be attached to celebrity, and perhaps is best if it is not so glorified and so removed from each of us. Beard gives an example of this non-celebrity notion of power by pointing to the three women (whose names many of us still do not know) now credited with beginning the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

If power is attached to celebrity, it is interpreted narrowly, circumscribing and controlling that power. The current structure of public prestige is male-dominated and will forever resist the fundamentally different understanding of power as collaborative and diffuse—not a possession but an attribute or a verb. I am excited by Beard’s acknowledgement of power as something quite different than what we have come to accept, for power is individual, and within each of us.

The dignity we gain in light of that realization is very affirming. It entirely works when thinking of oneself in a democracy, for instance, but also as an employee, family member, a member of any group, sect, or religion. Individuals hold the actual power in a society, and it is only our transfer of attention and currency to celebrities that gives them power. When we notice and state publicly “the emperor has no clothes,” well then...it’s over for the emperor.

Beard wishes she’d had the foresight to defend women’s *right to be wrong* without collapse of women’s privileges and rights as leaders, spokespeople. This notion parallels the notion of acceptance of people of color as described by Ibram X. Kendi in his groundbreaking work, *Stamped From The Beginning*:

“Kendi himself has concluded the only way black people would not be discriminated against in some way is if everyone recognize that blacks are at least as talented or flawed as whites and should be treated accordingly, that is to say, with the same amount of attention and acceptance

of their potential talent, as for their potential for error. Anything less is racist."

There is more in Beard's manifesto, for instance "if women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is the power we need to redefine rather than the women." We are reminded that the structures of power may need modification if not dismantling. Beard reminds us there will be winners & losers in this scenario, but these concepts have been a long time coming. I won't be sorry to see the old ways go.

I loved the little joke Beard included in her discussion of current female leaders being heralded early in 2017 in a headline, "Women Prepare for a Power Grab in Church, Police and BBC." Beard reminds us that only Cressida Dick, the commissioner of the Met, actually succeeded, surely a comment on who is perceived to have the equipment to lead.

Beard begins her first lecture with a reminder of the earliest example of a man exerting control over the right of women to plead her case or to speak in public: a teenaged Telemachus silencing his mother Penelope in the beginning of *The Odyssey*. The view of women in the western world has followed on from those earliest myths.

Subtle differences in interpretation of the language of those myths is now giving us new ways to look at sexuality, at women and power. That ancient text has been recently translated by a woman, Emily Wilson for the first time, and the resultant work has differences from earlier versions. It is wonderfully accessible and thrilling to read, so make sure you give it another go round with this new version.

Thomas says

A splendid start to the discussion about the silencing of women and how patriarchy precludes them from gaining power. Mary Beard traces the roots of this hatred against women back to Greek and Roman mythology, and she connects these historical examples to the modern-day mistreatment of women like Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton. My favorite part of this book: how Beard argues that instead of trying to make women powerful like men, we should change the structure of power to value more traditionally feminine traits. A passage that exemplifies this:

"You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means decoupling it from public prestige. It means thinking collaboratively, about the power of followers not just of leaders. It means, above all, thinking about power as an attribute or even a verb ('to power'), not as a possession. What I have in mind is the ability to be effective, to make a difference in the world, and the right to be taken seriously, together as much as individually."

I only wish that this book had been longer and geared more toward creating solutions. Essentially, how do we change a society that glorifies traditionally masculine ideals of competition, dominance, and achievement instead of traditionally feminine ideals of connection, caring, and nurturance? Other books explore this idea more in-depth, such as *Appetites* by Caroline Knapp, *All About Love* by bell hooks, and *The Mother of All Questions* by Rebecca Solnit. I also wish Beard has discussed how some women oppress other women, like how white women and White Feminism harms women of color. Still, a good start and quick read for those interested in gender studies and history.

Monika says

There's really nothing new here, but Mary Beard does a wonderful job bringing classical history/misogyny into the 21st century. My biggest complaint is that it just didn't go far enough. I would have loved a full length book on the subject, and she did raise some really interesting comparisons. It just wasn't fleshed out enough for me, and I think it's a better pick for readers just getting started with feminist texts.

Hannah says

I don't have all that much to say about this book which is why my review will be rather on the short side (quite like the book). This book collects two speeches Mary Beard has given, one called "The Public Voice Of Women" and one "Women & Power" and as speeches I am sure this worked wonderfully. As a book however, it really fell a bit short for me. I might not be the target audience and this might work better as an introduction to feminist thinking but for me, while I agreed with Mary Beard and appreciated her expertise in history, it just did not blow my mind.

I do like her emphasis on changing structure to really be able to achieve change and I think that social structure is too often ignored in feminist analysis. There are so many things we just take for granted that Mary Beard shines a light on. But I also thought that her dialectic use of "male" and "female" is too easy and her examples are often too neat to be all that convincing.

Raymond says

"When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice." -Mary Beard

Beard's Women & Power is a collection of two lectures that she gave in 2014 and 2017 both on the subject on how women are treated and perceived in the public sphere and the historical roots of this treatment. Beard shows through her lectures that the silencing of women as well as the way we view women in power has its roots in Greek and Roman mythology. In many ways this book reminded me of a book I read earlier this year Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America about the history of racist ideas in America. I always knew that misogyny existed but was not fully aware of its roots. This book is essential reading.

Ina Cawl says

It is a shame for women to be loud

I don't know who told me this this stupid wisdom and I don't remember
Maybe in my school or maybe in my house but nevertheless I feel guilty for believing it.
Why some men or most of traditional men are scared of women talking loudly, what about women does those feel irritated by it ?

Lack of public speaking to group of people was curse that befell on women for most of time and still now that right to speak in public place (usually men's areas) .

For many centuries and centuries women in many countries and continents were usually forbidden or discouraged from speaking in public area to group of people.

Mary Beard which is very important historian and Author of many historical book

Has tried to understand why misogyny and men's fear of women being in power came to being, and why this irrationally still haunts to this day.

Since the author is a lot of experience in greek roman history and usually that is the historic origin for most of European traditions and norms.

The book starts with Homer and if you read you remember this scene when

«Telemachus intervenes: 'Mother,' he says, 'go back up into your quarters, and 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»

There is some tragicomedy in this scene on how a young boy can order his mom like that and how can his mom allows him to order her like that

This scene teaches us a lot about what is to be a man in that era

Mostly being capable of speaking in public and simultaneously disempowerment and subjecting household women to men's order.

Miss trigg's example

What happens when women in a group of men tries to voice her opinion on the subject

(that's excellent suggestion, miss triggs , perhaps one of the men here would like to make it.)

Even after voicing her opinions what usually occurs after a few awkward silence is either dismiss it and the men continue from where they were talking or outright ignore her.

The lucky women who survived the abomination of public speech were either the victims or martyrs .

Even if women were allowed to speak in classical era they were usually allowed to speak for her own gender and nothing else

Public speech and the choices women have

Even if women were allowed to talk in front of many people there were not many subjects to talk about excepts women's issues or family issues,I know this is important subjects to talk about but even so to minimise women role of defending only to this issues and relegating all other subject as men profession is hidden sexism that contaminates every society then and still now

Modern internet troll and women speech

Watching youtube and sometimes reading the comments down below the amount of hate speech directed toward is quite mind boggling and disturbing at least

I don't want to generalise but the amount of troll rape threat men send toward far exceed many times the amount of trolls threats women send toward men

Eventually with coming of 2018 and with so many women speaking against sexual harassment in workforce in media in hollywood and in politics also

The leeway men got with their outrageous behaviour are coming to end and society for now listens and takes women opinions and thought seriously

