

The Amazon, the Rhetor, and the Priest: Feminism, Politics and Religion

Written by Darlene Juschka

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/10/16/the-amazon-the-rhetor-and-the-priest-feminism-politics-and-religion/>

DARLENE JUSCHKA, OCT 16 2010

The Amazon, Rhetor and priest are three iconic figures I employ to signify the authoritative and mythic dimensions of the narratives that shape and represent “feminism”, “politics” and “religion” respectively. When I say narratives, I mean how each of feminism, politics and religion are represented, perceived and engaged. What are these iconic figures and how do they shape our understanding of feminisms, politics and systems of belief and practice? It is my intention in this article to briefly entertain the iconicity of each, speak to how such representation shapes interaction between each of them, and finally how representations of and tensions between these narratives play out in our social body.

Iconic Figures

The Amazons of ancient Greek myth were a warrior people, but more than this, they were female warriors whose world was dominated by and for women. In Greek myth this female dominated world was placed outside the boundary of civilization, to a mythical south, or north, but always outside the boundary of human civilization. Aeschylus, a playwright of 5th century BCE Athens, provides a thread of the Amazon myth in his play the *Suppliants*. In a scene where the fifty daughters of Danaus come before Pelasgus King of Argos seeking refuge from marriage to the sons of Aegyptus, he comments to them:

Foreign maidens, your tale is beyond my belief—how can your race be from Argos. For you are more similar to the [280] women of Libya and in no way similar to those native to our land...had you been armed with the bow, certainly I would have guessed you to be the unwed, flesh-devouring Amazons (Aeschylus 2008).

The devouring of flesh, attributed to the Amazons, is another mark of occupying space in the wilderness beyond the bounds of civilization. They were held to hate men, choosing instead to remain unmarried. The Amazons turn up in many Greek myths, but more often than not, although they are brave, beautiful and strong they are like other mythic creatures of ancient Greek landscape; awesome, wild, and fascinating, but more than anything else a threat to an idealized order of civilization.

The signification of Amazon as threat to civilized order remains a primary meaning of the iconic figure of the Amazon in its multiple uses in art, fiction, philosophy, and politics. The feminist and women’s movements through the 19th and 20th centuries also drew on this iconic figure and the Amazon was used to signify feminist strength and rejection of patriarchal relations. Mary Daly envisioned the feminist as Amazon and maintains in her book *Amazon Grace* (2006) that women who connect with each other in their joyous resistance to oppression achieve “Amazon grace”.

The sense of female-to-female connection and the challenge to civilized order continues to signify as an aspect of the Amazon. Positively or negatively read, the Amazon remains outside the social order and a violent threat to it.

The icon of the Rhetor is one with a convincing tongue and cunning mind. Homer’s Odysseus was just such a man who, in the *Iliad*, spoke “an assertive masculine discourse of power and authority that represents itself as something to be believe and obeyed” (Lincoln 1999, 17). The Rhetor is eloquent with tongue and pen a master of language and gestures. The figure of the Rhetor is nicely exemplified by the politician who must convince us of her/his view of the

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world, the situation, and the problem. Now although I have used “her/his”, the Rhetor as figure, or idealized image, is masculine and those who occupy the space of the Rhetor must acclimatize to its masculinity, even if she should wear a dress.

However, the masculinity (and heterosexuality) of this figure, has been challenged since the 1960s by feminists in the Eurowest, and so too the icon’s whiteness, interestingly enough in the United States, if in no other Eurowestern country. Although (primarily white) women have occupied positions of political power, and some have even identified as important so-called women’s issues, they have yet to achieve a critical mass and it is critical mass that will represent a serious challenge to the masculinity of the figure of the rhetor/politician.

The iconic figure of the Priest is equally masculine. This does not mean there have not been female priests, there have been, but they have been largely designated as “priestess” and so separated from the category of Priest ensuring his masculinity. Although the Priest and Rhetor have access to power in their respective masculine hegemonies, how much power varies depends on the social organization of said hegemony. In the Eurowest the tendency has been to see our social organization as a split between State and Church with the State having political power and the Church having spiritual and moral power. The Rhetor and priest, then, have often been allies, but equally so the priest’s share of power has been lesser and this has been a source of conflict between them.

The icon of the Priest also has a long history, and aside from the official use of the term for an office – priesthood – and person occupying the office, the word priest, along with its conceptual apparatus, comes from the late Latin presbyter signifying “one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God” (OED). Since this figure, as it plays out in our location, is largely constructed inside Christianities and Judaisms, both of which insist on the masculinity of their deity and that such masculinity be equally met by a masculine intermediary, the idealized figure of the Priest is mature and masculine, often white, and “heterosexual”.

The masculinity of this figure has also been challenged by feminists, along with its assumed whiteness and heterosexuality. As systems of belief and practice multiply and/or schism in the social body and more humans marked by race, gender/sex, and sexuality enter leadership positions the figure of the Priest is changing, but generally not in mainstream institutions, e.g., the Catholic Church, or the US Southern Baptist Convention.

Measuring the tensions between the Amazon, the Rhetor and the Priest

Feminism has always understood that the political realm is a place women and feminists must enter. Therefore, as human beings equally interested in seeing to the welfare of themselves and those they care for, they dared to enter. However, in white settler society of the 19th and 20th centuries when political structures were being entrenched, the rule of men and Rhetor as masculine were taken to be normative. As normative, their views were understood to be representational of the ideal “human”, while the ideals proposed by them were represented as the best ideals of and for humanity. With such a history it is not surprising that women in general, and feminists in particular, have had a difficult time making inroads into the political realm and equal female representation has yet to be achieved in many locations, including my home country Canada, although certainly women have done exceedingly well in other countries such as Rwanda, Sweden, and South Africa.^[1]

However, since women managed to get the vote around the world, the Rhetor has had to take into account those voices he once ignored. Initially the effort was to determine and then pander to so-called women’s needs, but the Rhetor had a hard time figuring out what those needs were and so the Rhetor had to ally with one or two women inviting them into the political arena as political actors. The invitation, however, was offered begrudgingly, and lacked sincerity since the Rhetor refused to examine the political structure and organization put in place by him. Instead, the Rhetor insisted that women accept the traditional (masculine) model, along with its rules and measures, as “the best model” and “best practices”.

Nor was the Amazon greeted with open arms by the Priest, whose conceptualization of femaleness and femininity ricocheted between fear and loathing (the Amazonian witch), and love and desire (the bountiful mother). But, like the rhetor, the Priest was very much aware that more than half of those who supported his institutions were women, and

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so change must come – however that change was/is envisioned by these men. Women were invited to take up governance roles alongside men within a number of monotheistic institutions, but certainly not all.

The Priest also grudgingly extended the invitation insisting, as the Rhetor had, that the structures and organization exemplified the “best model” and “best practices”. If women wanted governance roles in religious institutions, they must conform to the rules and measures defined by and within the dominant masculinity held up and taken to be normative in said religious institutions.

In both instances when women moved into these domains they initially accepted the structures and made every effort to honour and obey masculine dictates. They accepted, for example, the view that women were the particular and men the universal. They also accepted the idea that any knowledge produced by and within feminist movements must be distanced from as this knowledge was not only particular to the female/feminine, it was tainted by the Amazon’s irrational hatred of men.

This was, and continues to be, the case for women in religious institutions, but not only was their rationality suspect making them problematic leaders, they were also morally problematic insofar as their sexuality, unconstrained and uncontrolled, was deemed a threat to good relations with deity. Such a response I think is clearly evidenced in the fact that around the globe all those humans marked as female continue to have to fight for their reproductive freedom within the majority of religious systems.

The Rhetor and the Priest did not like each other very much but agreed that this threat from the Amazon had to be contained. And so once again, they allied to ensure rule and organization of State and Church continued to be defined along the lines of a dominant masculinity which would, of course, continue to privilege those who uphold and support it. Suspicious of the Amazon, the Rhetor and the Priest set up barriers to ensure that she either would have to accept their structures or operate outside of them.

How representations of and tensions between these narratives play out in our social body

So having established the iconic aspects of each of my three figures, and speaking to the tensions between the Amazon, Rhetor and Priest, I now want to say a few things about how the perception of these iconic figures and their accompanying discursive frames feminism, politics and religion, shape how we citizens think and act in our respective social bodies.

One of the primary mediums of representation, and the most significant mode for the dissemination of the icons of Amazon, Rhetor and Priest is the media, including the news media.

There is much one can say about the news media, but this would require another discussion altogether and so for the moment I will simply say that it is neither objective nor value-neutral. There may have been efforts in the past to achieve this (see Sheedy 2010) and continued efforts in the present, but I am convinced by Noam Chomsky, among other scholars working in the fields of mass media and popular culture, that in the market driven world we now occupy the so-called anonymity of the market does not translate into objectivity. The news, like other forms of media, is driven by profit and not the truth. Possibly, I am too harsh in my statement, but my own limited experience has led me to this conclusion as well.

The media is a primary site for the circulation of the iconicity of feminist as Amazon, politician as Rhetor and Priest as divine mediator. In other words, the way they each have been represented in and through the media, the media itself declined in and by the masculine, has shaped how we understand them.

The news media, often but not always, has shared a love-hate relationship with the rhetor, challenging and upbraiding him, but always centered on him; it gives the Rhetor his great man status. Presented in this light, what we have is the great man narrative and even when the Rhetor fails having been caught, for example, profaning the oval office, we the public can only stand in awe receiving the dimensions of his greatness or his weakness; both larger than life for he is the great man. Politics, then, is about great men, great white elite men mostly, and all others,

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particularly women, can only be interlopers.

Having had to adapt to a structure and organization of political governance declined in the masculine (but said to be declined in the human), women do not stand much of a chance of looking anything but awkward and out of place, let alone looking like a great man. Represented in the news media, the female/feminine does not occupy the space of the political arena comfortably; she is sexualized and therefore awkward and out of place as it is a space unbefitting anyone but a man.

The Priest and the media is another story and indeed, there is nothing the media enjoys more than a good fight between the Priest and the Rhetor. They love to present the antics of these two antagonistic friends, sometimes siding with one and sometimes with the other. But both are worthy of the attention of the media, while both are refracted through the lens of the great man narrative. The Priest, like the Rhetor, is of concern to the media and so we believe he is of concern to us. The Priest, like the Rhetor, has power and status conferred upon him and we the populace receive his greatness with awe. The greatness is not so much about the “man” as the office I am told; it is the office that confers on the man this kind of authority. However, what happens when you put an Amazon in the office, does it confer the same kind of authority? Is this even possible in light of the kinds of structure and organization found in institutions of governance and religion?

As with the masculinized space of Rhetor, the Amazon does not occupy the space of the Priest with comfort. She as female/feminine is the particular, he as male/masculine the universal, and so when she stands there mediating for, and/or representing, a very male/masculine deity, she once more appears sexualized, and therefore strange, and out of place.

And what of the Amazon, how does she fare in media representation? Most of us would say ‘not so good’. The iconicity of the feminist as Amazon, the scary flesh eating kind, is a mainstay in the media. The Amazon is someone to be feared, and of course hates men. She hates men because as female/feminine she cannot achieve critical rationality and therefore everything with her is personal. She is contrarily angry and overemotional, cold and unfeeling and although some good came of her movement it is time to put it to bed since women are now equal.

Concluding comments

Having stood in awe of the Rhetor and the priest, even as some of us may secretly deride them, we stand in contempt of the Amazon, although some of us may secretly admire her. We know that through feminist efforts women as a demarcated group made social gains and were better positioned to contribute to and benefit from the social body. Still, it would seem that the Amazon remains uncomfortably located in our social body since there is a refusal to see her for who she is; our mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, ourselves and even some of our fathers, partners, sons and brothers. Feminists are everywhere even if we are not aware of it.

In order to move beyond these iconic images that distort the social field, I might suggest we resist the representations of Amazon, Rhetor, and Priest and instead examine the actual constitution of the group or groups and reflect on the issues and concerns they raise or support. Furthermore, rather than allowing ourselves to be mesmerized by these iconic figures we might better examine the structures behind them and ask are there better models and practices that would allow all to thrive?

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^[1] According to the “Is the Parliament open to women: An appraisal” conference report, Rwanda comes in first at 56.3% (2008), Sweden second at 47.3% (2006) and South Africa third with 44.5% (2009) (n.a. 2010, 23) For a full breakdown by country see <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.