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Men, Women and Monsters: John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet* (1558)

Anne McLaren

Nature I say, doth paint [women] forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish: and experience hath declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faults have men in all ages espied..., for the which not only they have removed women from rule and authority, but also some have thought that men subject to the counsel or empire of their wives were unworthy of all public office. For thus writes Aristotle in the second of his Politics: what difference shall we put, says he, whether that women bear authority, or the husbands that obey the empire of their wives...? For what ensues [from] the one, must needs follow the other, to wit, injustice, confusion and disorder ...

What would [Aristotle] (I pray you) have said to that realm or nation, where a woman sits crowned in parliament amongst the midst of men [...] ... I am assuredly persuaded that if any of those men, which illuminated only by the light of nature, did see and pronounce causes sufficient, why women ought not to bear rule nor authority, should this day live and see a woman sitting in judgment, or riding from parliament in the midst of men, having the royal crown upon her head, the sword and scepter borne before her, in sign that the administration of justice was in her power: I am assuredly persuaded, I say, that such a sight should so astonish them, that they should judge... albeit the outward form of men remained, ... their hearts were changed from the wisdom, understanding, and courage of men, to the foolish fondness and cowardice of women.¹

John Knox (c1514–72) was one of the leading lights of the Protestant reformation in Scotland and England. He wrote voluminously and influentially, but *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment*

of *Women*, written in 1558, remains the work for which he is best known, if not, indeed notorious. Controversial at the time, it seems to us now to signal something important and revealing about attitudes towards women in the early modern period. In his opening salvo Knox claims that the empire of a woman is 'repugnant to nature' because of her inherent deficiencies:

For who can deny but it repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick, and impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and strong, and finally, that the foolish, mad and frenetic shall govern the discrete, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women, compared unto man in bearing of authority (10.v-r).

Men who accept or collude in women's rule are not simply misguided. They have become lower than 'brute beasts' or – worse still – 'slaves of Satan' (30r, 30v). These are strong words – hateful even. But was Knox a misogynist – a man who hated women – or did his fiery denunciation of female rule in the *First Blast* draw on entrenched patriarchal views and values?

To answer this question, we need to understand what the world looked like to Knox and other radical Protestant reformers in 1558. They saw themselves as a godly minority – prophets, even, like the Biblical figures of old – fighting the 'evil empire' that was the Roman Catholic Church. By the time Knox wrote, that empire seemed to be on the verge of eradicating Protestantism altogether from its strongholds in Scotland and England. In large measure its success resulted from dynastic chance. Both countries were divided between adherents of the 'old' and 'new' religions: Catholicism and varieties of Protestantism. It happened that two women who were proponents of the 'old' religion, the Catholic queens Mary Queen of Scots and Mary Tudor, had recently inherited the Scottish and English crowns. They then married the Catholic kings of what were at that time the two most powerful countries in Europe, France and Spain. The Scottish queen lived in France at the court of her husband, Francis II. In her absence, her mother, the Catholic Frenchwoman Mary of Guise ('that crafty dame', according to Knox's characterization), acted as regent on her behalf (48v). In England Mary Tudor gained the throne in 1553 after a failed Protestant coup. By 1558 she had re-established Catholicism in England and had married the Spanish king Philip II. Mary Queen of Scots, Mary of Guise, Mary Tudor – these were the three 'mischievous Marys' whom Knox excoriated in the pages of the *First Blast*; and we must remember that 'mischief', then, was associated not with gentle mayhem but with witchcraft and demonic possession, just as 'craft' denoted the deceit, guile and cunning commonly displayed by practitioners of the black arts (42v).

So the prospects for the survival of what Knox and his fellows regarded as the 'True Church' looked bleak. It appeared overwhelmingly likely that the Catholicism embraced by all three Marys would triumph in both kingdoms. This outcome would be confirmed when the marriages of the Scottish and English queens produced male offspring, if not before. The resulting Catholic line of descent would establish both realms as securely Catholic nations as well as satellites to those major Catholic European powers, whose military power could, if necessary, be mobilized to protect the new *status quo*. True, in England there was one Protestant hope: the last of Henry VIII's surviving heirs, Mary's half-sister Elizabeth Tudor. Should Mary Tudor die without issue, Elizabeth *might* inherit the English throne. But looking at the situation in 1558 this must have appeared to be a remote possibility. Mary Queen of Scots was young and likely to bear children to carry the line. Moreover she herself had a strong dynastic claim to succeed in her own right, in preference to Elizabeth.

In this political context of impending night, what were godly Protestant men to do? How were they to fight to secure the true faith? One answer was to use the power of the printing press to motivate the male readers – whom I think we can assume Knox addressed – to adopt, and act on, revolutionary ideas. This is what John Knox set himself to do in the *First Blast*. These ideas challenged the right to rule of monarchs who were deemed to be ungodly, even when their dynastic claims to kingship were impeccable.

In the sixteenth century this was indeed revolutionary. 'Touch not mine anointed' was the word of God and a ubiquitous mantra. All men knew that the office of kingship was ordained by God, just as His divine aura protected individual kings. Their pedigree – their birth and breeding – confirmed a status that was almost divine. From that eminence they functioned as both the embodiment and guarantor of social order. It did not require much imagination to fear that an assault on the authority of kings could easily segue into attacks on other kinds of 'divine right' that, in the view of the age, conformed both to the law of nature and God's revealed will: the power of the nobility, for example; even the authority of husbands over wives, or, more generally of men over women.

Knox was not alone in writing works that hammered out how it might be possible for men to stand up to their kings; ideas that we collectively denominate 'resistance theories'. But we can see immediately how difficult the task would be. For Knox and his fellows, ungodly rulers were those who refused to embrace Protestantism. But this was a minority view. Knox wrote in a society where

religious views, although hotly contested, were in flux, and where the generality of men remained wedded to the principle of hereditary succession, regardless of the ruler's faith. He could not, therefore, 'preach to the converted' – few in number on both counts – without running the risk of alienating many, perhaps most, of his readers. To be effective he had somehow to move beyond the narrow confines of anti-Catholic diatribe and make a more inclusive case. That case would have to persuade his readers that rebelling against certain rulers, even to the point of deposing or killing them, could be right and necessary, and, importantly, reassure them that acting against the Lord's anointed in this way would not inevitably unleash social anarchy.

This conundrum explains, I think, important features of the argument that Knox advances in the *First Blast*. First, it explains why he begins by launching a generalized assault on female rule as contrary to the word of God, before moving on to identify and demonize Mary Tudor and Mary Queen of Scots, the particular regnant queens he has in his sights. For everyone, Protestant and Catholic alike, could accept two propositions: first, that God's word should be law; and second, that women's inferiority was God-ordained, as was, in consequence, their subordination to men. As we shall see, it also helps us understand the next stage of his argument, as he moves to position the two Marys as so far beyond the pale of the generality even of women that they stand as exemplars of the ungodly rulers whom it would be laudable to kill.

It also explains why Knox does not restrict his argument to the word of God as revealed in the Bible. Biblical strictures predominate in his text, but he reinforces the universality of his case by drawing upon influential voices from classical antiquity. As we see in the extract quoted above, an important element of his argument is that women's inferiority has been recognized in all times and places. It is God-ordained, but it is also 'natural', and this is why the sages of classical antiquity (exemplified by Aristotle) could appreciate the enormity of women's rule despite living in a pagan age. And he again draws on Aristotle to hammer home the correspondence between the microcosm of the household and the macrocosm of the state – a truism of the age – in terms that privilege male authority absolutely. The ancients recognized the disastrous effects of female rule, but they were also alert to the dangers that lurked when women exercised control indirectly, by lording it over the men who should be their masters:

And these notable faults have men in all ages espied ..., for the which not only they have removed women from rule and authority, but also some have thought that men subject to the counsel or empire of their wives were unworthy of all

public office. For thus writes Aristotle in the second of his *Politics*: what difference shall we put, says he, whether that women bear authority, or the husbands that obey the empire of their wives ...?

The result in both cases is 'injustice, confusion and disorder'. '[I]lluminated only by the light of nature', the Greeks disallowed all varieties of female authority, he concludes (11v-r). The subtext here is that Knox's contemporaries, men who are privileged to live in the light of Christ, have even more reason than did the ancients to band together to preserve male hegemony, political and cultural.

Knox begins his attack on female rule in a subsection entitled 'The First Blast to Awake Women degenerate'. By 'degenerate' Knox does not *primarily* mean that women are morally depraved, although undoubtedly he plays on the word's ambiguity. Instead, in the first instance he uses it to remind men about the consequences of the fall of humankind as recounted in the pages of Genesis. No orthodox Christian would deny that humankind had 'degenerated' – that is, fallen from their original glory – when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. Similarly, no orthodox Christian of that time would deny that Eve, in seducing Adam to eat the forbidden apple, bore the primary responsibility for that primal act, or that the punishment that God then set Eve remained in force for all women, and would do until the second coming. Even before the fall, '[i]n her greatest perfection woman was created to be subject to man', Knox reminds us.

But after her fall and rebellion committed against God ... she was made subject to man by the irrevocable sentence of God, pronounced in these words: ... With sorrow shalt thou bear thy children, and thy will shall be subject to thy man: *and he shall bear dominion over thee* (14v).²

What does this mean if not that God 'hath dejected all woman [*sic*] from empire and dominion above man'? he demands (14v).³

But Knox must address a problem that arises with this line of attack. For the Bible also provides instances where women not only exercise political authority, but do so with God's approval. Famous examples include Huldah and Deborah, Old Testament professed prophets who guided their people at God's behest. Might not these instances of divine intervention justify female rule? Might not either or both of the Queen Marys be one of those exceptional women, singled out by God for His special providence? In a Bible-centred society, where monarchs were regarded as nearly allied to God, this was a powerful counter-case – one that was to fuel the effusive identification of Elizabeth Tudor with Deborah when she succeeded Mary to the English throne (1558).

Thus Knox is forced to acknowledge that the Biblical strictures he cites are not categorical. 'I except', he says, 'such as God by singular privilege, and for certain causes known only to himself, hath exempted from the common rank of women' (10r-v). But he then uses the ambiguity of 'degenerate' to dismiss this objection by focusing on the character of the English and Scottish queens. It is at this point that his attack on female rule moves from the general to the particular, as he conflates and demonizes the two Marys. Mary Tudor is a 'wicked woman, yea ... a traitoress and bastard' (2r). She and her cousin Mary Queen of Scots are 'degenerate' in the sense of morally debased, made kin twice over through their commitment to wickedness. They have compounded their inheritance as daughters of Eve by wilfully following the example, not of Huldah and Deborah, but of the Old Testament tyrant queens Jezebel and Athaliah. Jezebel and her daughter Athaliah were regarded as witches, hence at war with God. By the time Knox wrote both had become bywords for monstrous tyranny and God's immediate protection: both were executed by godly men following God's decree.

Executed – but not, finally, eradicated. Rather, Knox finds that they have come to life again, housed in the bodies of Mary Tudor and Mary Queen of Scots, in whom 'we ... find the spirit of Jezebel, and Athaliah' (41.v). For Knox, this immediate identity confirms that the English and Scottish queens are, like them, tyrants rather than legitimate rulers, 'monsters' rather than women. Moreover, it powerfully reveals the necessity for men who would be godly to similarly act against 'these Jezebels'. They must emulate the example of the Old Testament prophets and rid the earth of the 'mischievous Marys'. For in the Bible is it not written 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'? (*Exodus* 22:18).

So was Knox a misogynist? I think the answer to that question must be no. There is no evidence that he hated women. Indeed, Patrick Collinson has shown how warm and cordial his relations with women in his church congregations were, even how at points he looked to them for spiritual enlightenment and consolation.⁴ However, there is no denying that in the pages of the *First Blast* he drew on and powerfully amplified misogynist views. At the extreme such views depict women as 'monsters' or witches: less than human beings who are allied to the devil in an ongoing war against God and man. Looking for ammunition to persuade men of all religious opinions to disallow the rule of ungodly kings, Knox focused on these ideas rather than on the two queens' Catholicism to ground his argument. Arguably the consequences of this 'turn' are still discernible in English-speaking polities, both in how women in power are presented – and, more tellingly, the terms in which they are attacked.

Like the majority of humankind throughout history, Knox and his contemporaries inhabited a profoundly patriarchal world. That world turned on the rooted conviction that men were superior to women in every way, and that all good order, familial and political, depended on them holding the reins of power. These linked beliefs reach back at least to classical antiquity. They changed form with the introduction of Christianity, but they survived, and maintained their predominance during the early modern period, when Knox wrote. The line between patriarchalism and misogyny can be a fine one and very much depends on cultural circumstance. In the pages of Knox's work we can see an influential instance of one shading into the other, as Knox tries to rouse his fellow men to follow the trumpet of God.