



## Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /  
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-  
speaking world

2 | 2010

Voicing Conflict : Women and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Warfare

---

# Woman as Peacemaker or the Ambivalent Politics of Myth

Cyril Selzner

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1258>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1258

ISSN: 2108-6559

### Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

### Electronic reference

Cyril Selzner, "Woman as Peacemaker or the Ambivalent Politics of Myth", *Miranda* [Online], 2 | 2010,  
Online since 03 July 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1258> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1258>

---

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0  
International License.

---

# Woman as Peacemaker or the Ambivalent Politics of Myth

Cyril Selzner

---

- 1 Every 8 March, on the occasion of international Women's day, an ancient and by now world-famous classical comedy by the Greek playwright Aristophanes is given new life in many languages and contexts. *Lysistrata* tells the story of Athenian and Spartan women going on a collective and coordinated sex-strike to stop the bloody war between their two cities—an actual war still raging in 411 BC when Aristophanes was writing. Their action is surprisingly successful and their respective husbands have to agree to give up their war games when they face the threat of lasting sexual frustration, apparently a very effective deterrent. *Lysistrata* is of course a work of fiction, but we do have contemporary examples of such sex strikes with political motives, most recently in Kenya and in Colombia,<sup>1</sup> and they are more often than not inspired at least in part by this very play. Aristophanes' work is popular with both sexes today, not only due to its free language (at least in the new translations now available), the farcical side of its characters coming on stage in a visibly excited state (the actors did carry leather penises), and its variation on the “make love not war” slogan,<sup>2</sup> but also because it uses, exemplifies and reinforces one of the oldest stereotypes—in this case we would suggest the use of the word myth—about women, namely, woman as a peacemaker and a resolver of conflicts, especially between men.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 That there is indeed a special connection between women and peace is presupposed at least partly in a number of international and local interventions by groups of women in politics. In recent times, many long-lasting conflicts have spurred political movements, whether feminist or non-feminist in their inspiration and agenda, to make explicit use of the fact that their participants are women and, above all, mothers and wives, implying that peace and peacemaking were—morally and politically speaking—a sphere where women's voices should legitimately be heard as much as, and arguably more than, any other group of people involved. Such movements often primarily argue their position by recalling the fact that women (and children) now represent a large proportion of direct or indirect casualties in any conflict, while gender bias in political

and military power does not ensure adequate representation of their interests. No victimization without representation sounds reasonable enough. Usually, though, they tend to add another dimension to their line of argumentation: the inclusion of women as such could foster the cause of peace, tip the balance in favor of conflict resolution and ensure that resuming hostilities would appear less likely in the future. In the background frequently lurks the uncritical acceptance of the thesis of a greater male impulse to aggression, previously used to justify the exclusion of women from competitive and conflictual arenas such as the battlefield, the forum and the marketplace, as Anne Fausto-Sterling reminds us:

Earlier in this century feminists gave [this] theme—that of male bellicosity—a reverse twist. If women got the vote, some suffragists believed, there would be an end to war. When women entered politics their natural peaceableness would prevail, and men, unable without women’s help to control their primal destructive urges, would finally join the ranks of the civilized.<sup>4</sup>

3 Irenic influence, interest in peace and ability in maintaining relationships seems then to be attributed to women in part on the basis of their status, experience or even nature as women, and not only because of their contingent position as politically powerless victims of male strife.

4 United Nations Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security (October 2000), for instance, sometimes bears the clear imprint of this line of interpretation. Adopted in the wake of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), it reaffirms “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building” and accordingly:

[the resolution] urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

5 Studies are called for to study not only the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, but also “the role of women in peace-building and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution”. UNSC 1325 promotes the voice of grass-root women groups in peace matters, and women’s perspective in general, as part of its endeavor to implement equal consideration of women, but clearly more is at stake here. An official commentary on the resolution states that one of the main reasons why it was adopted was that “women have often demonstrated their ability to set up networks that transcend the dividing lines of conflict”.<sup>6</sup> Official UN documentation usually avoids—with good reason—controversial justifications and explicit metaphysical foundations, but we could suspect that more than naked fact is appealed to here.

6 Indeed the scope of the myth seems to go well beyond the borders of humankind. The Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal, while studying peacemaking among primates, records an event having occurred at Arnhem Zoo which he made much of: a chimpanzee version of *Lysistrata*, in a sense. Male chimps usually display their aggressiveness by grasping stones and using them as weapons, but not before having staged an impressive show of anger (they stomp and strike the ground with their fists with threatening gestures and battle cries). The group of females usually either stays quiet or prepares to take sides in the upcoming battle. But not that time. A dominant female chimp approached the would-be warrior, made a few gestures of appeasement and indeed seduction (sexual invitations), and gently removed the stones from the male hand to throw them away, thus preventing a potentially deadly fight.<sup>7</sup> That looks like a fact. Why call it a myth? What has it to do with myth? First, we should note that Frans

de Waal is well known for his remorseless recourse to human analogies and vocabulary in describing chimp life (especially in his fascinating book and international bestseller *Chimpanzee Politics*). He has been relentlessly attacked for it. Second, it was a rather isolated event: why did it attract de Waal's attention so much if it did not confirm some deep-seated intuition or expectation within himself? *Chimpanzee Politics* develops the theme of the "mediating female" and offers several accounts of how a female chimp can manipulate her personal relations with male rivals—sometimes by seducing them—to achieve reconciliation between former enemies.<sup>8</sup> The myth is of course not in the recorded facts, but in what we make of the facts, and the emphasis we are prone to place on them. Primatology is an ideological minefield, mostly because it is perceived by the general public as dealing with human nature in the guise of our closest cousins in the evolutionary tree. Hence no interpretation of primate behavior can be completely neutral. Maybe that is the case here, as some critics have pointed out.<sup>9</sup>

- 7 By naming the recourse to the theme of a specifically female peacemaking ability a myth, I do not mean to argue that it is on the whole an illusion, and I am not calling Aristophanes nor de Waal deluded liars, although some critics might want to use such terminology. I do not intend to infer that particular women can never act as peacemakers in particular contexts, nor (which is of course a stronger point) that their specific position as women has nothing to do with their peacemaking actions, either in the form of direct motivation or as a tactical element. What I mean to suggest by using this term is that ultimately its appeal is much more than an empirical problem, and more than just a question of truth or falsehood. We could say that what belongs to myth goes far beyond and also beneath that level of questioning. A myth could be defined as a story or narrative using events and characters to build conceptual structures and emotional categorizations that help us make sense of life both on the individual and the collective levels. A myth structures our expectations, discourses and actions but it achieves this function in a transcendental fashion. It is beyond facts because it is what helps us make sense of facts. The best way to deal with a myth is not to start marshalling the facts and organizing a sober confrontation with reality, but rather confront the myth with two questions. First the genealogical question: "Where do you come from, from what historical or psychological depths within ourselves, where does your magical power over us come from?" (we could roughly call it Nietzsche's question); or we could ask the pragmatic—and foucauldian—question: "What are you or can you be used for?". I will offer a tentative account of some possible answers for that second question.
- 8 At first sight, we might be somewhat puzzled by the fact that the myth seems to be opposed to a more famous and well-established mytheme or mythical element, namely, that "woman is the seed of all conflict" and ultimately, of all disorder and evil.<sup>10</sup> The Bible, the Iliad and countless world mythologies articulate such a view in great detail and it has a rather obvious connection to patriarchy or at least to an andocentric world.<sup>11</sup> Greek culture contemporaneous with Aristophanes was, in particular, familiar with violent and dangerous female figures, as Pauline Schmitt Pantel reminds us.<sup>12</sup> But we need not be troubled by this apparent inconsistency: Lévi-Strauss and Freud, in different ways, taught us long ago that mythical logic, like that of the unconscious, can operate beyond the principle of contradiction on the surface. One myth does not flatly contradict the other. Their juxtaposition tells us, though, that there is a strong imaginary connection in many human cultures between woman and conflict. Psychoanalysis, of course, has produced a large body of works dedicated to illuminating

the ambivalent views on the links between women and peace, particularly as it relates to early mother-infant relationships and the construction of mother-figures, but in this paper I want to focus rather on the social and political side of the myth, on its uses and not its alleged origins in culture or the individual psyche.

- 9 In recent times, as we have already seen, the “woman as peacemaker” myth has been used as a tactical weapon to back specific or less specific political actions and more generally to legitimate the claim to a greater involvement of women as such in politics. In many ways, it can be, and has been used as a countermyth in Albert Memmi’s sense. Memmi elaborated the notion of countermyth in *Le portrait du colonisé* and in *L’homme dominé* in order to account for the creation of positive resistance myths among colonized people, destined to oppose the negative myths the colonizers tried to force on them by subverting the negative judgment attached to them.<sup>13</sup> Myths they were, but for a time they were contextually and tactically useful in the ideological struggle. A countermyth enables the dominated group to reject derogatory typecasting by the dominant and it empowers them with useful cultural weapons with which they can fight the colonizer at the symbolic and intellectual levels. Frequently, elements of earlier negative myths appear in the countermyth, this time in a glorified fashion: they have been transvalued and reinterpreted. As Memmi was well aware, a countermyth can outlive its usefulness and become a full-blown myth, particularly when the struggle for liberation is over.<sup>14</sup> Its extreme structural dependence on the negative myth it was meant to fight against is hardly a sign that full independence has been obtained, and it can effectively hinder the necessary moves beyond the conceptual and psychological traps of the colonial situation.
- 10 In this case, women in general and militant feminists in particular can tap into the culturally acknowledged power of the woman as peacemaker myth—originally elaborated in a patriarchal context—and use it as a countermyth to fight back at what they perceive to be, at the conscious or the subconscious level, an excuse for patriarchy and male domination. As a component of a feminist strategy, such a move is closely connected to a general line of argumentation prominent in British and North-American feminism at least in the 19th century: using the idea of alleged superior moral qualities in women, granted by men in the private sphere of home and the family, to argue for their greater inclusion in the public sphere precisely by reason of these specific qualities that men do not possess, or not to the same degree.<sup>15</sup>
- 11 At this point, it is useful to examine in greater detail what the myth has to say in its dramatic form. In *Lysistrata*, as well as other related plays by Aristophanes such as *Assembly of women* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*, women claim that their special interest and expertise in peace is based on the fact they are the first victims of war because war cuts into the flesh of relationships by which they tend to define themselves. War affects them as wives, sisters, daughters and, above all, mothers. They are the ones providing the “material” (men and boys) necessary for warfare. We must remember that for ancient Greeks, childbirth could be assimilated with a patriotic battlefield where women suffered and shed blood for the good of the City as a whole: giving birth, in a sense, was their civic soldier’s work. Therefore, as the character Lysistrata reminds us, they stand to lose much more than men do: honor does not pay them back for the loss of their men’s lives and, contrary to men, they do not have a chance to marry again when their husband is killed in action. Therefore, their being excluded from the realm of political decisions and relegated to the private sphere of

home can be contested on the very basis of their interest in vital relationships. Everyone stands to gain from women taking over the political business and managing it wisely like a private *Oikos* (that much is the subject of *Assembly of Women*). The sexual division of labor and the separation of private and public spheres are thus challenged in the name of the greater good by women claiming that men have in any case mismanaged the *Polis*. This is probably the strongest feminist thread we can isolate in Aristophanes and one which has quite often been brought to the fore by contemporary productions of the play.<sup>16</sup>

- 12 Basic to the power of the myth of women as potential peacemakers is the implicit or explicit view that they are natural maintainers of relationships, primary providers of protection and nourishment, especially for weaker individuals within the family and, paradigmatically, for children. The feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, for instance, has extensively argued in *Maternal Thinking* in favor of the political potential of mothering and of what she calls “a feminist maternal peace politics” (Ruddick 1989, 245). Because mothers “have always been the custodians of the promises of birth” (Ruddick 1989, 251), they can develop beyond the care for their own children a discipline of attentive love, an attention to bodies and to whatever can harm them that is in direct contradiction to war. Indeed, “women tend to know, in a way and to a degree that men do not, both the history and the cost of human flesh” (Ruddick 1989, 186). Even though some mothers may fail to see the connection between their maternal experience and peace on a larger scale, it remains that peacemaking is woven into their day-to-day practice.

Peacemakers create a communal suspicion of violence, a climate in which peace is desired, a way of living in which it is possible to learn and to practice nonviolent resistance and strategies of reconciliation. This description of peacemaking is a description of mothering. (Ruddick 244)

- 13 Ruddick’s position brings us to recent debates in ethics about what has come to be called the ethics of care, originating largely in the publication of Carol Gilligan’s 1982 work *In a Different Voice*, followed by Nel Noddings’ *Caring* in 1984, to mention but the pioneering works in what has since become a vast body of scholarship. What I am interested in is not so much these extremely valuable works in themselves as the ambivalence of their reception in and beyond academic circles. The extent to which the ethics of care represents an instance of feminine ethics as opposed to masculine views previously parading as universal and generic ethics is controversial, but is central to our assessment of the idea of a specific feminine ability in, and concern with peacemaking.
- 14 Gilligan started in the field of moral psychology by criticizing Jean Piaget’s and Lawrence Kohlberg’s scale of moral development in children and teenagers because while their experiments tended to show that girls lagged behind boys in terms of maturation, they were oblivious to the fact that their methods were themselves gender-biased (or so Gilligan claimed). Whereas boys usually come to understand problems of justice in terms of a calculation of rights and obligations, on a rather abstract level, girls are handicapped by what seems to be an impairment but need not be seen that way. They simply follow a different line of development, a different “voice” as Gilligan says, a voice whose overarching concern, in short, is maintaining relationships and caring for vulnerable and significant others rather than adjudicating abstract rights or acknowledging general rules of a moral game (Gilligan 1982, 98). Gilligan proves her point by analyzing the different reactions of boys and girls to the

story of Heinz introduced by Kohlberg. Heinz has to consider stealing a drug from a pharmacist in order to save his wife. He has no means to buy it and the pharmacist refuses to give it for free. What should Heinz do? Jake treats the dilemma as a conflict of rights and, since the value of life clearly overrides the principle of property, he concludes unproblematically that Heinz should steal the drug. Amy seems to be more confused: she is uncomfortable with the theft and suggests considering other means, such as engaging in further talk with the pharmacist.

Seeing a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules, she finds the puzzle of the dilemma to lie in the failure of the druggist to respond to the wife. [...] Thus she considers the solution to the dilemma to lie in making the wife's condition more salient to the druggist or, that failing, in appealing to others who are in a position to help. (Gilligan 1982, 29)

- 15 Boys seem ready to resort to violence—even physical violence if the pharmacist should try to resist the robbery—more easily because they live in a world where autonomy and responsibility in the sense of responding to abstract obligations are the dominant ethical values. They can view themselves and others as detached atoms and therefore feel they have a moral right to fight against the evil druggist: open conflict and ultimately war can thus easily appear justified and even become a legitimate duty. Girls, on the other hand, tend to view responsibility in a different way, as “responsiveness in relationships” (Gilligan 1988, 4). In girls’ moral reasoning, “the common thread [...] is the wish not to hurt others and the hope that in morality lies a way of solving conflicts so that no one will be hurt” (Gilligan 1982, 65). Gilligan’s studies apparently support the idea that peacemaking abilities can be connected to this predominantly feminine voice because of its relationship-oriented style. Women and girls tend to value mediation much more, and to be more concerned with the disrupting consequences of open conflict: peace-building is in this perspective an aspect of relationship keeping, mending or restoring.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, because they have a tendency to extend the perception of violence to many relation-breaking situations (deliberate silence, mutual indifference, neglect), women seem to pay more attention to the prevention of conflict than men do.
- 16 Gilligan is very careful even in her 1982 work not to imply that girls are intrinsically different beings, almost a different species from boys, with totally diverging patterns of moral reasoning. She does not explicitly state that girls are, because they are female, sensitive beings gifted with a form of empathy that boys supposedly lack, being endowed with reason rather than imagination.<sup>18</sup> She clearly avoids at least some of the pitfalls of essentialism, yet the fact remains that “Care focus dilemmas are more likely to be presented by women and Justice focus dilemmas by men” (Gilligan 1988, 82). Although “not gender specific, it [is] gender related” (Gilligan 1988, 8), pointing at least to a persistent gender-based difference in moral perspectives in our societies. Nel Noddings’ development of similar ideas is initially less agnostic on that matter—some would say less cautious—in claiming that the ethics of care represent a “feminine approach to ethics”, complementing the predominantly masculine approach of morality in terms of justice, autonomy and rights.<sup>19</sup> Many, in any case, have read Noddings and Gilligan as arguing in favor of expanding the classical and philosophical view of morality by including women, whose specific voices had almost always been repressed in a patriarchal society.

17 The critics of the ethics of care, particularly on the feminist side, have sometimes insisted on the point that it could turn out to be a new and ambivalent way to defend an old-fashioned, indeed Victorian idea that women are, on the whole, morally superior to men. Claiming that women are qualified on this basis to intervene in public matters could therefore backfire and spell regress, not progress for the feminist cause. A number of feminist thinkers have pointed out long ago how pedestals can work ambivalently as effective means of exclusion, and that exalting a supposedly natural female quality can serve as justification to segregate women and relegate them to menial or devalued tasks. In the classic, seminal work of John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, we find one of the early critiques of the moral idealization of woman as a self-sacrificing, self-effacing saint always “at the beck and call of somebody, generally of everybody” (Mill 1986, 77). According to Mill, this moral ideal is highly artificial and should be considered, rather than a natural quality, a product of intense socialization in a patriarchal world:

All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (Mill 21)

18 Precisely because women are expected to behave more altruistically than men, they are excluded from the competitive and “dirty” realms of politics, economics and science. They are too pure and too moral to take an active part in public spheres that too often necessitate an aggressive stand, or can force “dirty-hands” dilemmas on men, and therefore they are carefully and wisely kept within the private sphere of the family where their qualities are useful, and where they are sheltered from the corruption of the world. And so it occurs that, according to Mill, “we are perpetually told that women are better than men, by those who are totally opposed to treating them as if they were as good” (Mill 47). Conscious and unconscious assignments of identity, we should now know, are more efficient than direct restraint and oppressive rules. In this case, the popular view that women will behave altruistically because it is what they are, sets a dangerous yet easy trap. Claiming a room of one’s own becomes indeed difficult when it means relinquishing the desirable virtues associated with what one is taught to consider one’s natural character. Any woman who refused to incarnate and act out what women are universally celebrated for would lose at the same time the basis of her self-worth and her identity as a woman in such a cultural context.<sup>20</sup>

19 Many feminists have developed this line of critique by targeting the way the myth of the altruistic, affectionate and caring woman upheld a separation of private and public spheres that historically and effectively barred women from social and political power. Susan Okin, in *Justice, Gender and the Family*, showed how the role women were assigned within the family, both in theory and in practice, was the “linchpin of gender”, by which she meant “the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference” (Okin 1989, 6). Feminism, in her view, should be about the deconstruction, even the destruction of gender.<sup>21</sup> Her early work *Women in Western Political Thought* was dedicated to analyzing how “it was the philosophers’ attitude toward the family, above all else, which has determined their conclusions about the rights and the social role of women” (Okin 1992, 237). If women have to remain the angel in the house, that is, homemakers and pillars of the family, which in turn represents for men a “haven in a heartless world”, then their peace-building abilities are best kept within the confines of the private sphere. Sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim, who introduced the distinction between community and society, Jacques Commaille



reminds us, have also deplored that women should enter society and its contractual relationships, hence destroying the warm community of home which compensated for the toughness of public life.<sup>22</sup> We might also recall how the debates during the French Revolution at times revolved around the idea that partaking in politics would destroy the “moral empire” of women, thus becoming an effective means to exclude them from political action in the guise of extolling their specific virtues (Fraisie 1995, 166sq). Okin sternly concludes that “the capacity of reactionary forces to capitalize on the 'different moralities' strain in feminism is particularly evident” (Okin 1989, 15).

- 20 As far as the ethics of care are concerned, such criticisms prompted attempts to dissociate its defense from the myth of the affectionate, naturally caring woman. Joan Tronto, trying to build a political concept of care, moved away from its sentimentalization, its naturalization and its association with gender, in favor of a democratization and universalization of care.<sup>23</sup> This meant in effect a critical view of the ambivalence of feminist positions trying to argue women’s inclusion in politics from the standpoint of a specifically feminine morality based on a supposed peacemaking capacity. Jean Bethke Elshtain, more sympathetically, has documented the way suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, heralding a “new evangel of womanhood” used this strategy to overcome the opposition to political inclusion:

The Suffragists’ ultimate conclusions were that private morality could be applied to the public level; that public persons ought to be judged by the rigorous standards of the private sphere; that the public (im)moral qualities men exhibited were probably innate to the male character, but that men, too, could be transformed as could public life by the entry of women into it; that the qualities women exhibited were innate and were not merely an outgrowth of their enforced domesticity; that these same qualities were the qualities that would invest the political sphere with a sanctified aura. (Elshtain 238)

- 21 Yet even Elshtain records the failure in overcoming the obstacles barring women from politics by resorting to an argumentation that presupposed a strongly gendered public/private dichotomy. “The assumption that women were to stay pure and to purify politics at the same time” (Elshtain 239) could only trap these feminists into a double bind and give fuel to their opponents. In France, some similar arguments supporting the newly implemented *parité* (meaning equal numbers of women and men) at many levels of political representation have been attacked even within the paritarist side for precisely this reason, and supporters of *parité* have taken great care not to confuse their cause with the idea of a superior and distinct feminine morality, as Joan Scott has noted.<sup>24</sup> One of the reasons is the perception of the ambivalence of such arguments, and their relative failure in the long run, because, as Tronto states, “despite its longevity and its great appeal, the strategy of women’s morality cannot be counted as very successful” (Tronto 1).
- 22 What I have attempted to argue is not that Mill is right and other feminists are wrong—including the feminists who argued for *parité* in French politics on the basis that women could contribute a different style or voice in debates on social justice, one less exclusively based on the liberal fiction of the autonomous individual devoid of attachments and vulnerability.<sup>25</sup> That would suppose that public discourse can and should be rid of all mythical elements, and could be made to consist of purely rational processes of argumentation, which, I would suggest, is a rather utopian view. Furthermore, given the massive evidence that on a global level, women’s inclusion in politics is far from achieved even in democratic states and that feminist arguments,

though gaining ground, are still not accepted nor even understood by large segments of population worldwide, even in developed countries, resorting to shared myth could be an interesting strategy, at least to begin with.<sup>26</sup> Politics is about change, even radical change, but it could also be compared to sailing: it is an art of the possible in which we control the sails, not the winds. If appealing to myths that can be heard and accepted by everyone in a patriarchal society—such as “women are natural peacemakers”—can promote women’s participation in politics, why should feminists allow their hands to be tied and not make use of them? Whenever we use a myth in a political or ideological context, though, either because we believe in it or for tactical reasons within a given cultural context, we should acknowledge the fact that a myth, even a countermyth, is always ambivalent, open to many interpretations and uses, including some we would never want to condone. Therefore, I would suggest, our political judgment of them should itself remain ambivalent.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristophanes. *Birds—Lysistrata—Women at the Thesmophoria*. Jeffrey Henderson trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 2000.
- . *Frogs—Assemblywomen—Wealth*. Jeffrey Henderson trans. Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Ballmer-Cao Thanh-Huyen, et al. *Genre et politique*. Paris : Gallimard, 2000.
- Brugère, Fabienne. *Le sexe de la sollicitude*. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2008.
- Commaille, Jacques. *Les stratégies des femmes*. Paris : La Découverte, 1992.
- De Waal, Frans. *Chimpanzee Politics*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982.
- . *Good Natured*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- . *Primates and Philosophers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Dauphin, Cécile and Arlette Farge (ed.). *De la violence et des femmes*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1997.
- Elstain, Jean Bethke. *Public Man, Private Woman*. 1981. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Myths of Gender*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Fraisse, Geneviève. *Muse de la raison*. Paris : Gallimard, 1995.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. 1982. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Gilligan, Carol, et al. *Mapping the Moral Domain*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Held, Virginia (ed.). *Justice and Care*. Oxford: Westview Press, 1995.
- Memmi, Albert. *Portrait du colonisé*. Paris : Buchet/Chastel, 1957.
- . *L’homme dominé*. Paris : Editions Payot, 1973.

- Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. 1861. New York: Prometheus Books, 1986.
- Molinier, Pascale, et al. (ed.). *Qu'est-ce que le Care ?* Paris: Editions Payot, 2009.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring*. 1984. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- . *Women and Evil*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.
- Okin, Susan. *Women in Western Political Thought*. 1979. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *Justice, Gender and the Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking, Toward a Politics of Peace*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. *Parité! Sexual Equality and French Universalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries*. London: Routledge, 1993.

## NOTES

1. In 2006 some women called for a sex strike, called *la huelga de las piernas cruzadas* (literally, the strike of crossed thighs/legs) in order to stop gang violence in Colombia. In 2009, Kenyan women at the call of the Women's Development Organization vowed a week-long abstinence targeting male politicians and decision-makers to prevent renewed civil strife. Rukia Subow, chairperson of the WDO, declared that the strike would bring peace through men's pressure on government, and that they were ready to pay prostitutes not to work during that week.
2. In that case, as is often said about *Lysistrata*, the interesting variation would be: "do not make love in order to stop war".
3. We should note that the peacemaking woman is only one among many other gender stereotypes the play makes use of. Another one of them would be that sex is essentially a service delivered by women in favor to insatiable men in return for food and protection: a male sex strike would make less sense in that respect.
4. Fausto-Sterling 1992, 124. Anne Fausto-Sterling gives a very critical review of the popular theory of male "hormonal aggressiveness" and of its scientific credentials in her study (see esp. chapter 5).
5. The text of the resolution is available online.
6. See the Message of the inter-agency task force on Women, Peace and Security.
7. See De Waal 1996, 39. De Waal declares that he was able to observe such behavior of female mediation "several times".
8. See De Waal 1982, chapter 2. De Waal notes that female chimps as a group have a direct interest in maintaining peace among males, especially dominant ones, since it critically affects their security.
9. For a critical point of view on that topic and de Waal's answer, see De Waal 2006, Annex A.
10. Even enlightened philosophers like Spinoza or Kant were not immune from the power of the myth of the dangerousness of women. Spinoza famously claimed that achieving gender equality would bring war, not peace. See Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, "La mixité dans le politique" in Ballmer-Cao et al. 2000.
11. Nel Noddings, among many other feminist thinkers, has finely dealt with that side of the myth in her work *Women and Evil* (see Noddings 1989, esp. chapter 2).
12. See Pauline Schmitt Pantel. "De la construction de la violence en Grèce ancienne : femmes neutrières et hommes séducteurs", in Dauphin et al. 1997. She emphasizes, though, that the

representation of male violence towards women far exceeds the number of violent female figures in mythology, literature and iconography. We could add that no one has ever claimed that Greek civilization was particularly woman-friendly, as it was clear even in antiquity—Plutarch, for example, sharply contrasted Greek and Roman civilizations in that respect.

13. The first occurrence of the ideas of “contre-mythologie” and “mythe positif” can be found in Memmi 1957, 180.

14. See Memmi’s comments on Malcolm X and his theories in *L’homme dominé*: “S’il s’agit de mythes, ce sont plutôt des contre-mythes, des réponses délirantes aux délires de l’accusation” (Memmi 1973, 20).

15. Hence the frequent association of early British and North American feminisms with political issues bearing strong moralizing overtones, such as slavery and the fight against alcoholism. This is obviously true of nineteenth-century feminism, but this distinctly moralizing style is perceptible even today when compared, say, with the mainstream of French feminism.

16. In order to get an immediate objection out of the way, it would be necessary to recall that Aristophanes himself could hardly be labeled a feminist in any case. He was addressing an all-male audience and *Lysistrata* is first of all a comedy toying with carnivalesque ideas of inversion of the traditional and “proper” order of things (male monopoly on political power, to which Aristophanes of course subscribed). Such comic inversions were common considering the original bacchic context in which these comedies were played, and the development of inversion into subversion plainly belongs to contemporary interpretations of this ancient work. Furthermore, it has long been noticed that customarily and temporarily turning the world upside down can reinforce traditional order instead of subverting it, as was generally the case for slavery in antiquity: allowing slaves to play master for a short time during a festival hardly ever challenged the institution of slavery, for example.

17. Hence some thinkers, like Virginia Held, have claimed that feminist ethics do a better job at taking these aspects into account than dominant moral theories: “Instead of an individual man and his projects or attachments [...], feminists tend to focus on relationships that contrast with impersonal impartiality and that are at least partially constitutive of the individuals in them.” (Virginia Held, “Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future” in Held 1995, 158).

18. In fact, she thinks that the voice is there in boys, has always been there but has been repressed early on by education and socializing.

19. Noddings has recently acknowledged that “‘feminine’ pointed to a mode of experience, not an essential characteristic of women, and I wanted to make clear that men also share this experience.” (Noddings 2003, preface 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. xvi)

20. See Marilyn Friedman, “Beyond Caring: the De-Moralization of Gender” in Held 1995, for a critique of Gilligan’s position as too culturally situated. Friedman usefully reviews the scientific evidence for and against the ‘different voice hypothesis’.

21. She is straightforward concerning this point: “A just future is one without gender” (Okin 1989, 171).

22. See Commaile 1993, 126sq.

23. See Tronto 1993, esp. Part three. See also Layla Raïd “Care et politique chez Joan Tronto” and Patricia Paperman “D’une voix discordante : désentimentaliser le care, démoraliser l’éthique” in Molinier et al. 2009.

24. On the dilemma of “differentialism” and “universalism” as it relates to the *parité* debates, see Scott 2005, esp. chapter 3.

25. For a qualified account of this position, see Brugère 2008.

26. Sara Ruddick, for instance, taking into account some of the criticisms mentioned earlier, heartily bites the bullet and accepts the fact that “maternal peacefulness is a myth” (Ruddick 217), but she goes on to argue in favor of a revisionist view of the myth on the grounds that “the

contemporary mythmaker can point to the usefulness of mothers and maternal thinking to peace politics” (Ruddick 220).

---

## ABSTRACTS

Feminist arguments in favor of an increased participation of women in the public and the political spheres have sometimes resorted to the thesis of an alleged superior ability of women to take into account the relational dimension of human life, whether acquired in the private experience of family life or considered to be an innate feminine disposition. In this context, the myth of woman as a peacemaker has gained visibility and indeed has sometimes functioned as a countermyth in feminist politics. This paper examines the occurrences and uses of this myth from Aristophanes to the debates surrounding the ethics of care, through the suffragist movement, as well as the critiques that have been addressed to it.

Certains arguments féministes en faveur d'une participation accrue des femmes à la sphère politique ont mobilisé le thème de la capacité supposément supérieure des femmes à prendre en compte la dimension relationnelle des rapports humains, acquise dans le cadre privé de la vie familiale et parfois considérée comme une disposition innée. Dans ce cadre, le mythe de la femme pacificatrice a gagné une certaine visibilité et a pu fonctionner comme un contre-mythe dans le contexte des luttes féministes des deux derniers siècles. Cette contribution examine les traductions et les usages politiques de ce mythe depuis Aristophane jusqu'aux débats autour de la parité et de l'éthique de la sollicitude, en passant par le mouvement suffragiste du début du siècle dernier, ainsi que les critiques qui lui ont été adressées.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** conflit, contre-mythe, éthique de la sollicitude, féminisme, paix, politique, publique/privé

**Keywords:** conflict, countermyth, ethics of care, feminism, peace, politics, public/private

## AUTHORS

**CYRIL SELZNER**

Doctorant

Université Paris I-Sorbonne

cyrilselzner@hotmail.com