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"Lovers, not Fighters": The Body Politic and Its Restrained Libido

On November 9, 2012, David Petraeus, CIA director and former four-star general of the U.S. army, resigned from office, following an affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell. In his official resignation statement, Petraeus admitted to having shown "extremely poor judgment by engaging in an extramarital affair. Such behaviour is unacceptable, both as a husband and as the leader of an organization such as ours" (CIA Director 2012). He thereby acknowledged his story to tie in with a well-known narrative which has been overshadowing masculinities in the political sector for ages: powerful men who succumb to libidinal drives pose risks to national security and become liabilities, or rather: men unfit for office. Underlying Petraeus's own statement is a very commonplace view according to which the body politic must appear rigid and impenetrable so as to be kept clean of infiltration (Theweleit 1987). It remains open for debate whether this conundrum is more likely to result in a severe patronizing of men (like Petraeus, whose private life was exposed to newspaper readers across the globe) or of women (like Broadwell, who was mercilessly portrayed as a home-wrecker and cyberstalker in some media reports). Either way, partaking in the political game and being a lover seem to be mutually exclusive. Or, to quote a famous speech of King Henry II in James Goldman's play, *The Lion in Winter* (1966): "I could have conquered Europe, all of it, but I had women in my life." (Goldman 1966, 82)

The example of Petraeus demonstrates how much contemporary political discourse is still tied to an ancient rhetorical tradition that was not questioned for a long time, inasmuch as the study of men, to quote Michael Kimmel, meant studying them "as political leaders, military heroes, scientists, writers, artists", whilst deeming them "invisible as *men*" (2004, 6). Since the political arena has come under scrutiny in gender analyses, however, and since John Tosh's assessment that the political order "can be seen as a reflection of the gender order in society as a whole" (2004, 41) has inspired scholarship across a number of disciplines, the construction of masculinity in the discursive field of politics has invited a closer look as well. Following a short digression into the history of the body politic trope, this brief analysis will examine some audiovisual

narratives set in the political arena which bear testimony to the same unacknowledged rules that also governed the Petraeus affair. In the few select case-studies presented here, the focus will be on the body of the male politician, which comes to act as an allegory of the body politic at large.

The (Gendered) Body Politic

As I have laid down my thoughts on the gendered structure of the body politic trope in a different context (Schwanebeck [forthcoming]), these pages do not contain a detailed account of the exact same topic. Such an account would highlight the importance of ancient rhetoric, Cicero's use of the concept, and the role of Early Modern England's political discourse, especially William Harvey's research into the circulation of blood (*De Motu Cordis*, 1628), which proved ground-breaking—not just in medical terms but also because it provided a lasting metaphorical vehicle for one crucial fear: that the social organism be infiltrated by foreign enemies. However, a few brief remarks on the body politic and its underlying gendered, sexualised nature may prove fruitful for the discussion at hand, particularly with regard to the link between the body politic and the body of the politician.

The image of the body politic, which conceptualises the nation as a corporate entity, has become part of the everyday idiom to such a degree that we term it a dead metaphor, though it is a very vivid one at the same time. The parts of the anatomy which were most frequently emphasised in uses of the trope included the vital organs and limbs ("members of parliament"), but usually no genitals. The most prominent depiction can be found in Abraham Bosse's famous frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). The very masculine, fear-inducing figure of the Leviathan is cowering behind the landscape, and it is left to the viewer's imagination whether this ultimately stresses hidden potency, and what exactly we would detect if the Leviathan were to rise: a fully erect penis, or, quite on the contrary, the lack of one. Lacanian psychoanalysis would suggest the latter, of course, for the Lacanian signifier to represent the idea of power—the phallus—ultimately symbolises that which no one can have (Lee 1990, 67).

The notion of an omnipotent yet abstinent body politic does not merely apply to sovereigns of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, whose legends are the stuff of Shakespeare plays and anecdotal history books. Contemporary political leaders in Western democracies (though not

exclusively there) must come to terms with a crucial double-bind: we perceive the political sector as an entirely male-dominated sphere that draws attention to its phallic nature on the one hand (Reeser 2010, 133), yet the body politic only exists on the condition of sublimation, for its virility amounts to a mere promise upon which the politician cannot actually deliver. Male politicians in particular thus find themselves in a void where they must present virile and potent figures, without being allowed to resort to their sexuality as proof of their virility. Evidently, this applies not only to men, but also to women, whose political performance is judged accordingly: as an example of female masculinity (Halberstam 2002), an inevitable consequence of the fact that within patriarchal society, political virtue is "conceptualised in masculine terms, in a discourse which reflects hegemonic conventions and practices." (Tosh 2004, 50) The politician who truly manages to reconcile all the contradictory demands of the body politic and the body private can only belong to the realm of the fairy-tale, or its modern-day successor, the romantic comedy, which usually refrains from detailed analyses of the political sector. A case in point would be the love-stricken Prime Minister played by Hugh Grant in Richard Curtis's episodic film, *Love Actually* (2003). This PM, named David, falls for a young Cinderella working in his office. Yet the film does not question the overall system and opts for the easy way out: a miraculous happy ending and jokes at the expense of the phallic woman. Following an unsuccessful flirt with the object of his desire, the PM looks up to a portrait of his predecessor Margaret Thatcher, contemplating whether she ever experienced the same kind of problem: "Yeah, of course you did, you saucy minx."

Phyllida Lloyd's Margaret Thatcher biopic, *The Iron Lady* (2011), similarly utilises the figure of Thatcher to reflect on the body politic conundrum: the film suggests that Thatcher's rise to power came at the cost of what the film's questionable subtext deems a healthy idea of femininity. Thus, we see Thatcher (Meryl Streep) adapting to the rigid, masculine body politic in order to become party leader: the brisk walk and the authoritative voice. By following the contradictory demands of public office, this version of Thatcher is ultimately transformed into the Freudian phallic woman, and the observer will remain torn between his fear that this woman might have a penis, and his secret, fetishist hope that she is indeed in possession of it (Ducat 2004, 142-3). *The Iron Lady* establishes another film as a point of reference which narrates a similarly melodramatic love story and which interrogates the dichotomy between body politic and body private, too: Walter Lang's 1956 adaptation of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I*. Streep's Thatcher resorts to the

tunes of this classic crowd-pleaser during her dementia, suggesting a return to the pre-symbolic state that precedes language (which, as the filmic subtext rather crudely puts it, is the more "natural" and blissful realm, and allows women to be nurturing mothers at best). Thatcher's body is thus subjugated to the traditional rhetoric surrounding the body politic: since it is conceptualised as a counterpoint to the body private (which is a pleasure-seeking body that drinks, digests, and fornicates), it creates political unity "based on the prohibition of unproductive pleasures." (Bertram 2009, 308) This rhetoric also affects other areas of the cultural imaginary, as a few select examples will emphasise.

The Passion of Olly Reeder

The Thick of It is a BBC-produced, satirical TV show whose highly successful run lasted from 2005 to 2012. The show chronicles the struggles of a government clearly modelled on the post-1997 Labour era, as well as the Coalition government headed by David Cameron. Characters like Machiavellian spin doctor Malcolm Tucker (Peter Capaldi), the unlikely, foul-mouthed cult hero of the show, who regularly gives staff members severe bullyings, embody the Leviathan principle of Hobbes's *bellum omnium:* this political arena runs on fear. Capaldi's memorable portrayal of Tucker, a genitalia-obsessed alpha male whose rhetoric constantly draws attention to the phallic structures permeating political discourse (Schwanebeck [forthcoming]), evokes the wolfish figure that Jacques Derrida traces in his seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign.* According to Derrida, the wolf permeates

> all the questions of the animal and the political, of the politics of the animal, of man and beast in the context of the state, the *polis*, the city, the republic, the social body, the law in general, war and peace, terror and terrorism, national or international terrorism. (2009, 9).

The wolf is invoked as a sexual predator here, whose "unique, stiff, rigid, solitary, absolute, singular erection" Derrida identifies as "an essential feature of sovereign power" (ibid., 215). At the same time, one needs to remember that the Leviathan's genitals only exist in the realm of the possible, a kind of phallic what-if that must never be put in practice. One of the unlucky ministers in *The Thick of It* reflects this conundrum when he voices his anger about public expectations towards politicians: "They should clone ministers, so we're just born at 55, with no past and [...] and no genitals." (Series 1, episode 3 [subsequently 1#3] 0:14:50)

Those who (symbolically) exhibit their genitalia amount to liabilities for the political party, as the body politic tries to avoid any risk of infiltration and of losing the privilege of being perceived as rational and celibate.

The one character most severely affected by this conundrum is Olly Reeder (Chris Addison), a young political advisor who finds it hard to reconcile his own ambitions to rise on the career ladder with his private life. Theoretically, as an Oxbridge-bred, glasses-wearing geek with no experience in the "battlefield", Olly does not exactly correspond to the alpha male-demeanour exhibited in the centre of power, especially since he enjoys a reputation as a promiscuous lad who has no clout, and repeatedly receives a pat on the back and the advice to take it like a man. Interestingly, Olly's knack with women is not regarded as proof of virility, but rather as a sign of lacking professionalism (which may also hint at the ruling class's strategy of coming to terms with their own impotence). "Does nobody else ever shag anybody else?" a weary Olly asks at one point, failing to reconcile phallic rhetoric and practiced abstinence (2#4 0:00:15). That is why it comes as a surprise when he is granted access to Tucker's confidential circle at Downing Street No. 10. The reason for this unexpected change of heart is that Olly is dating a woman working for the opposition, and his superiors correctly assume that Olly may be willing to exploit this connection in order to get ahead. Tucker brushes Olly's moral qualms about spying on his girlfriend briskly aside and asks him whether he just wants to be "a prick that works here for a year and then joins a think tank" or, rather, "a soldier" (2#4 0:06:51). The irony is, of course, that Olly must show that he is a political soldier *by* using his prick. He gives in to his ambitions and sees his body private clash directly with his body politic, as Tucker repeatedly puts pressure on him to spy on the opposition—in his bedroom: .

> OLLY: I understand that there's this party *(points to his left hand)* and there's this party *(points to his right hand)*, and we're this party and they're this party, and therefore how can I influence that?
>
> MALCOLM: You take this *(points to his right hand)* and this *(points to his left hand)* and you put it onto your bird's breasts and you rub them and squeeze them very, very gently. You get her into the sack, you bang her fucking brains out, you make sure that she comes, and you just give her the policy. (episode "Rise of the Nutters" [subsequently "RoN"] 0:39:27)

The fact that this scene, like many others in *The Thick of It*, takes place by the urinals is telling, for, according to Judith Halberstam, the men's bathroom is *the* "space of homosocial interaction", but also of "homoerotic interaction" (2002, 368), where intruders—those who appear as not male enough—are identified as deviants. Nowhere does the paranoia to be found out and to be exposed appear more pronounced, so that Olly is in fact bullied into offering proof of his virility, to defend himself against Tucker's accusations of being a "Blue Peter-badge wearing ponce" ("RoN" 0:39:58): effeminate, weak, and infantile. Soon, Olly enjoys a reputation amongst Tucker's gang as "the guy that fucked the opposition" (2#4 0:06:08), but he is removed from the inner circle of power as soon as the affair peters out, back to being ridiculed as "a lover, not a fighter." (2#4 0:28:43)

Other examples from popular culture tell a similar story. There is one particular motif that sees political figures repeatedly run into difficulties as they try to reconcile the demands of state affairs with their romantic inclinations: the myth of the political impostor, which plays on the very same masculine fears of being found out and exposed as a fraud.

Political Impostors

When calling upon the figure of the impostor within a discussion of the political sector, I do not intend to give voice to popular prejudices against politicians as deceitful liars whose public persona masks their actual intentions. This kind of reading often permeates analyses of the political field as soon as the impostor trope is invoked,[1] and it may have led Ambrose Bierce to define the impostor as a "rival aspirant to public honors" in his satirical encyclopaedia, *The Devil's Dictionary* (1957, 174). My reading of the impostor character takes a different direction and interrogates the idea that the body politic is shadowed by an uncanny *doppelganger*. In addition, the impostor can help shed light on the performative nature of masculinities, for gender performance always entails mimicry and showmanship (two disciplines at which the impostor excels), even though masculinity has been traditionally linked to the notions of the authentic and the original. According to Kimmel, being perceived as masculine amounts to not being perceived as a fraud (Kimmel 1994, 130-1), and since impostors (who are usually male) are experts at corresponding to our stereotyped expectations, their mere existence points to the importance of unwritten rules in the gendered arena (Schwanebeck 2013, 97-103). When they appear in the political sector, the

same rules apply, and the increasing occurrence of spin doctor narratives (of which *The Thick of It* is a prominent example) shows that in politics, truth may be a highly relative concept—not least because the problem sketched here necessitates the occasional adjustment of the truth.

Some political impostor narratives date back to antiquity (ibid., 27), and some continue to tickle the public imagination. The most well-known cases include that of the false Nero, the Dmitriy myth, or the legend of the emperor Louis Napoleon, who may have been the 'real deal', but whose reputation as an inferior, degenerate copy of his famous uncle earned him a reputation as a *faux napoléon* (Carpenter 2009, 50-53). He was also the original target of Karl Marx' famous observation that historic facts and personages always appear twice: "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." (2008, 9) The satirical narratives which portray the national-socialist regime as one of ham actors and impostors belong to the same tradition;[2] however, it is the story of the false Dmitriy which may have inspired the biggest number of spin-offs and adaptations—not only has the myth of the impostor who claimed the Russian throne been adapted in plays and operas, but the story has also inspired several popular "romps" which have been classified as the "Cardboard Kingdom" novels (Watkins 2009, x), the most enduring of which is Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894). The book tells the story of lazy English heir Rudolf Rassendyll, whose uncanny resemblance with the king of (fictional) Ruritania gets him involved in a political cabal. The ensuing swashbuckling tale of adventure and romance emerged as one of the most popular and, subsequently, most frequently adapted texts of the Victorian Age. Rudolf's successful performance as the king prevents him from enjoying the conventional happy ending; he has no future with Flavia, the princess who is duty-bound to marry the true king. Instead of going to England with Rudolf, she must follow "where her duty to her country and her House led her", with her public performance as a loving, dedicated wife required to unite the country (Hope 2009, 173).

Characters torn between political office (the official mission) and love (the private mission) are, of course, ideally suited for the big-screen treatment, as the classical syuzhet of the Hollywood film usually "presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere—work, war, a mission or quest" (Bordwell 1995, 157). Inevitably, American directors have milked the body politic conundrum for plots, and they did not limit themselves to archaic tales of kings and queens.[3] In contemporary films, it is senators, Presidents and Prime Ministers who defend their country and have their hearts broken. The demands placed

upon the political players are so strong that they even lead to a partial suspension of the conventions of the mainstream film, where the demands of the personal and of the official mission are usually reconciled in the end (ibid., 159)—the Prisoner of Zenda and his successors, however, fare not so well.

In their Frank Capra'esque *Dave* (1993), for instance, screenwriter Gary Ross and director Ivan Reitman suggest that a performance of political masculinity, in order to be deemed successful, must inevitably lead to corruption. The contaminated body politic (in this case, that of US President William Mitchell, played by Kevin Kline) falls prey to sickness, yet it is hidden from the public to wither behind concrete walls. When a stroke hits the President mid-coitus (needless to say, he is not with his wife, but with his secretary), his political advisors hire his double, a likeable everyman named Dave Kovic (also played by Kline). "I'm the government," he cheerfully announces in front of his best pal shortly after having taken over the role (*Dave* 0:53:20), and his growing enthusiasm for the role he has been hired to play also bears the promise of a political rejuvenation for the United States. Although Dave is not allowed to remain President, he gets involved in a plot which allows America to wash away its political sins when the diseased body of the true President finally perishes. In retrospect, the film seems somewhat prophetic of the unlikely rise of Barack Obama, not just because of Dave's sheer messianic qualities and of his insistence on American virtues ("because we can!", *Dave* 1:20:50). *Dave*'s ironic subtext suggests that an impostor may well be more capable of bringing authenticity to the office and of restoring confidence in the voter than the actual President, for the latter's every gesture, smile and speech are scripted and rehearsed. He preaches family values whilst cheating on his wife, and cuts the funding for children in need whilst trying "not to look like a prick." (*Dave* 0:04:42) The film does not insist on abstinence as firmly as traditional Dmitriy adaptations (there is a romantic happy ending for political virgin Dave and the former First Lady, but only on the condition of his removal from the Oval Office), yet it suggests that the rise to power comes with the inevitable alienation from spouse and marital bed. The fact that the protagonist bears the same first name as the PM in *Love Actually* suggests a biblical genealogy of Davids who struggle to fight their very personal Goliaths: their libido. At one point it looks like *Dave* may be headed for an early *dénouement* when the First Lady (Sigourney Weaver) confronts Dave in the shower, believing him to be her much-hated, no-good husband—but she does not recognise the imposture.

Mike Nichols's adaptation of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-prize winning play, *Angels in America* (1993), into a miniseries bearing the same title (2003), shares the motif of the disease-ridden body politic with *Dave*, yet it plays a variation on the impostor trope: its fictionalised portrayal of notorious attorney Roy Cohn is not that of a classical impostor, yet by living a lie (a gay-bashing political conservative in the public eye, a closeted homosexual in private), Cohn leads a schizophrenic existence rivalled only by the unlikely (yet true) story of Asa Carter, the white supremacist who, under a pseudonym, also wrote a moving account of a young, nature-loving Cherokee (*The Education of Little Tree*, 1976). Al Pacino's performance as Cohn in the last few months of his life—he is dying of AIDS—depicts him as another specimen of the Derridean, predatory political beast on the one hand, yet a tragic, broken character (whom even his gay nurse Belize eventually takes pity on) on the other. One scene sees Cohn openly articulate the corporeal dimension of the political business in a raging fit:

> What the fuck do you think this is, Sunday school? This is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids. This is intestinal, is what this is. Bowel movement and blood-red meat. This stinks. This is politics, Joe. (Episode "Millennium Approaches", 1:27:30)

In the second part of *Angels*, Cohn (as a patient) is eventually stripped of his suit and tie that signal his omnipotence and his (deceitful) performance of invincible masculinity, and it does not even take Belize's solemn declaration that what lies in Cohn's hospital bed is, in fact, "America: terminal, crazy, and mean" (Episode "Perestroika", 1:28:40), for the viewer to realise that it is not just the body private that is perishing.

Though Cohn refuses to act the repentant victim of his own sinful life—the sin being, of course, not his homosexuality but his various hypocrisies, his lack of tolerance and his vicious attacks on political opponents—, his demise inadvertently acknowledges the deathly consequences of his own politics. Cohn's body is infiltrated by a disease which he claims is liver cancer, and his insistence on consuming liver—the organ supposedly meant to cleanse the body from foul elements—merely underlines that he is another example of a political dignitary who refuses to acknowledge the body politic's sexuality and libidinal drives. Consequently, Kushner's play and Nichols's film suggest that the American body politic

> may only be diagnosed as healthy when it finally embraces all of its citizens, all of its selves, not simply those endowed with the kind of *de*

facto immunity achieved by circulating themselves within a straight and narrow political and sexual economy. (Ogden 2000, 258)

Conclusion

It would appear that the tale of the politician who falls in love (or who tries to follow his libido) is one destined to end unhappily. And wherever the story does appear to have a happy ending—as in the case of Bill Clinton, who emerged as a more popular President from his affair with Monica Lewinsky—it reeks of outdated machismo, for it still manages to reaffirm the patriarchal framework: Clinton's remasculinisation occurred at the expense of his wife, the "castrating woman" in this narrative. (Ducat 2004, 150-167)

A few days before his resignation, General Petraeus had contributed a short article to *Newsweek* magazine in which he laid down "General David Petraeus's Rules for Living". Rule number ten, in particular, reads like an inadvertent foreclosed comment to his own case (and to other politicians similarly afflicted): "Stay fit to fight. Your body is your ultimate weapons system." (Petraeus 2012) It would appear that Petraeus's own body armour was not and will not remain the only one unable to withstand infiltration, for unless the body politic is reconceptualised and manages to shake off some of the contradictory demands which were not noticed as long as masculinity acted as an invisible norm, his resignation letter is unlikely to remain the last of its kind.

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Notes

[1] A recent example is Bruce Bartlett's account of the political legacy of George W. Bush, simply entitled, *Impostor* (2006).

[2] A list of the most popular and well-known comedies on this topic would include Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942), the Alan Johnson-directed remake of that film (1983), or Dani Levy's *Mein Führer* (2007).

[3] The numerous examples of this small sub-genre of the impostor film include *The Phantom President* (dir. Norman Taurog, 1932), *The Magnificent Fraud* (dir. Robert Florey, 1939), or *Moon over Parador* (dir. Paul Mazursky, 1988).