

Leading from the Fringes: Women's Paths to Political Power

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The scarcity of prominent women in historical records has kept us from seeing the various ways in which women have led from the sidelines, exerting (and rising to) power through husbands and lovers, brothers and sons. These methods of leadership can be found in historical records, in literature, and in research by scholars who are uncovering the multitude of ways these women exerted influence, from the distance past to the present day.

Women have found ways to exert influence and gain power through their relationships with men, even during times in which there were legal, social, and religious barriers to their achieving any independent public position. By looking at women's hidden or informal influence, we go beyond the view that women associated with powerful men were merely royal breeders, glorified servants, or sex workers, and acknowledge that they sometimes were, within the bounds of their time and place, leaders. And some women associated with powerful men rose in their own right to the pinnacles of power.

In the Tang dynasty, for example, a minor concubine used her intelligence, steely determination, and remarkable political acumen to become Wu Zetian (624–705), the only female emperor in the history of China. Other women have stayed on the sidelines, without official position and sometimes barely known in their own time, but nonetheless played a vital role in national and world affairs.

This is a universal phenomenon. Women have striven for status and influence across the world and throughout history: concubines became empresses, courtesans directed kings, and salonnieres were the center of intellectual and political life in Enlightenment France and in London at the height of the British Empire. In the twentieth century, there were Washington hostesses who wielded power behind the scenes, and some recent national leaders, including Park Geun-hye (b. 1952) of South Korea and Cristina Elisabet Fernández de Kirchner (b. 1953) of Argentina, who came to power through a male relative.

Women who exert political power from the sidelines generally gain this power as a result of marrying a powerful man or being born into a powerful family without a strong male claimant. Sisters Song Qingling (1893–1981) and Soong Mei-ling (1898–2003) came from a well-connected Chinese family and married men who

became world-famous leaders, Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. Others created a platform for themselves by using not only physical beauty but intelligence and artistic talents, even wit and social networking skills.

Of course women's looks and sexuality have often been central to their roles on the sidelines of power. Attractive women have sometimes achieved positions of power that would not have been available to other women. More importantly, women's ability, or inability, to bear (usually) male heirs has often shaped their destinies. For courtesans, some of whom, in both Europe and Asia, achieved considerable status, wealth, and influence, skill in lovemaking was prized, but in general women's sexuality was considered risky: Elizabeth I (1533–1603) of England was probably a more effective leader as the Virgin Queen.

Mothers have been even more important, and influential, than wives or other sexual partners. The mothers of kings or prospective kings have exercised both official and unofficial power, generally to benefit their sons but occasionally not. Irene (c. 752–803), mother of the Byzantium Constantine VI, “decided that her only child, Constantine VI, was not competent to rule . . . She had him blinded and then ruled in her own right” (Walthall 2008, 77).

The classic pattern was a beautiful or sexually attractive woman who used her personal attributes to attract or “catch” a man and thus to rise in the world, first by obtaining wealth and status but then by exerting power through her husband. Such women have often been regarded as mere gold-diggers, or as proxies for their husbands or families. They have been criticized and denigrated when they, like Edith Wilson (1872–1961), who took over many of husband Woodrow Wilson's executive duties as president after he suffered a stroke, claimed they were only carrying out their husbands' wishes—and, of course, maintaining their husbands' position and power. But the reality is that they often exerted their own ideas, and influenced the men whose names we know while theirs have faded from history.

In the twentieth century, there have been influential wives and daughters, some of whom became politicians themselves. Most notable among them is Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962), perhaps the wife who was most successful in achieving her own place in history, campaigning and participating in public policy during her husband Franklin's presidency and serving as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly after his death. Beautiful young women like Imelda Marcos (b. 1929) or actresses like Madame Mao (1914–1991) or Eva Perón (1919–1952) are in the tradition of the ambitious concubine. Indira Gandhi (1917–1984), India's third prime minister, and the former Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra (b. 1967) rose to power in countries that had previously been led by male family members.

Today, more and more nations are led by women. In Europe, they have generally risen without the help of a father or husband, but in Asia and Latin America it remains common for women to become leaders as a result of their relationships with a man, often following a husband or brother into office.

Women's Capacity for Leadership

A common English-language expression is that “behind every great man there's a woman.” These women have been largely invisible, praised for their self-effacement and their tolerance of the sometimes less-than-admirable behavior of their great

men. The British writer Edna Healey (1918–2010), herself the wife of a well-known politician, Dennis Healey, wrote a biography of the wives of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and David Livingstone, exploring the price women pay for loving a man with driving ambition or a sense of vocation that transcends ordinary concerns such as supporting a family or even being at home from one year to the next. Her own marriage, she wrote, was a perfect partnership, and her own ambition was satisfied by being a help-meet to her husband.

The idea of the “power couple”—an intimate partnership that pairs two people’s strengths and weaknesses and enables one partner, and the couple, to achieve things he or she could not have achieved alone—goes back through the ages. There are numerous accounts of weak or sickly leaders bolstered by strong mothers, wives, or lovers. A 1885 collection of biographies entitled *Queenly Women, Crowned and Uncrowned* (1885), explains that “Josephine was exactly the partner [Napoleon] needed. Her courtly magnificence, her urbanity of manner, and her fascinating talents contributed scarcely less than his victories to the advancement of her husband.”

But the woman was always subordinate, and in many cases there was no acknowledgment of the possibility of female leadership. In *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, author James Davidson cites the example of the orator Apollodorus addressing a court: “Hetaeras we keep for pleasure, concubines for attending day-by-day to the body and wives for producing heirs, and for standing trusty guard on our household property.” But Davidson also points out that reality did not square with these neat divisions—women often stepped outside the boundaries set for them.

Women leaders often provoke accusations of weaknesses and susceptibilities, and questionable loyalties. In *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, editor Anne Walthall points out in the introduction that, “For commentators around the world, women and power constitute an unholy mix. Women, it is assumed, do not know how to use power; they play favorites, corrupt officials if not the king, squander the state’s financial resources, and lack the courage to resist enemies.” Attacks on female rulers were often personal; gossip about female rulers’ sexuality—from Catherine the Great to Hillary Clinton—has often overshadowed attention paid to their policies.

And stories about the incapacity of women are rife. The great Chinese military strategist Sunzi, to whom *The Art of War* is attributed, proved his methods to the King of Wu by using the king’s two favorite concubines as commanders in a military drill. They were directed to lead 180 concubines but giggled instead of following Sunzi’s orders; he therefore insisted that the king execute them. Two more concubines were chosen to lead the troops. All the “soldier” concubines then followed orders precisely. This fact convinced the king to appoint Sunzi as a general; if his rules would work with women, they would work with any common soldier.

On the other hand, there was a belief that women’s taste, elegance, manners, and artistic accomplishments had a civilizing effect that wasn’t only beneficial in the drawing room but in business and politics too, as Walthall (2008, 17) points out: “The historical sociologist Norbert Elias claimed that court societies are responsible for what he called the civilizing process, by which people learn to negotiate increasingly complex sets of interdependencies that require self-restraint and careful planning.”

Women have often been seen as adept at what we now call social networking. In terms of political leadership, this networking focused on building alliances, soothing

grievances, cementing loyalty, and sometimes encouraging intrigue. The traditional role of the female spouse of a male leader in Western countries has included acting as a hostess, not only as a social role model to other women, but as a help in building personal connections and promoting common feeling between distant leaders.

Influential Women in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Europe

Women who led in other domains also came to prominence through men: fathers, husbands, and, occasionally, mentors. The French political philosopher Madame de Staël (1766–1817) was the daughter of a prominent minister. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), whose anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* “started this great war” according to Abraham Lincoln, was the daughter and sister of renowned preachers Lyman Beecher and Henry Ward Beecher.

Salons run by women were an important part of social, intellectual, and political life in pre-Revolutionary France. Salonnières, especially in Paris during the French Enlightenment, and also in Russia and in England, played an active role in intellectual and public life. Prominent salonnières include Madame Geoffrin, Princesse Mathilde, Empress Joséphine, Madame du Deffand, and Madame de Staël. Madame de Staël lived during the reign of Napoleon in the late 1700s. Her father was a rich banker, one of the richest men in France, and she was in her own right, as a writer and salonnière, one of the women in French post-Revolutionary history with the most political influence.

The French Sun King's mistress, courtesan Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764), was also a salonnière. She brought together great writers, artists, and the philosophers of the day, and cultivated discourse between influential men and women. As author and political scientist Susan Herbst (1994, 60–61) puts it in *Politics at the Margin*: “It would be an exaggeration to say that the salonnières—even those as famous as Madame Geoffrin—had power in the classic sense: It is not clear that they were able to make public men do what they otherwise would not do. What the salonnières did have was influence. . . Through the salons, women were able to set the discursive agenda, steering the conversation to subjects of interest to them. They set agendas by choosing whom to invite to their gatherings, encouraging certain lines of argumentation, and by promoting young men whose thought they favored.”

Leadership in Literature

Literature is full of women rising due to their wits, charm, or pure goodness as Jane Eyre does in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Other women in fiction suffer when they break conventions—Hester Prynne, for example, in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. They also suffer because of their powerlessness. In English literature, for example, there is Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Strong female characters also appear in much earlier works, including Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*; Hua Mulan 花木蘭, a fabled woman warrior in ancient China; and of course Shakespeare's ambitious Lady Macbeth. Most often, however, fiction shows women as

happy followers of the status quo, with feisty characters like Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet happily marrying a very powerful man by the end of *Pride and Prejudice*.

More than any other novelist, the British Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) made women and political leadership a central thread, most notably in the six novels usually referred to as the Palliser series. The action takes place in and around the British parliament at the height of the British Empire, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although all the politicians are men and his female characters eschew what was then called "rights for women," the plots are sometimes driven by women who are in the thick of political life, consulted by friends in government as well as by their own relations. Trollope was a realistic novelist, conventional in his politics, and he considered marriage and motherhood a sufficient and fulfilling career for women. But his female characters come close to breaking with the author who created them. One can imagine that Trollope was portraying the women of his time, who like the *hetaeras*, concubines, and wives in ancient Greek society, did not stick to the roles that the authorities of the day had defined for them. Alice Vavasor, the heroine of *Can You Forgive Her?* the first novel in the series and set in the 1860s, breaks off an engagement because her fiancé wants a quiet country life. She cannot bear the idea of retreating from London and public life. In fact, she is often teased for her political interest. Another character, Lady Laura Standish, persuades her father to join the government. "That women should even wish to have votes at parliamentary elections was to her abominable, and the cause of the Rights of Women generally was odious to her; but, nevertheless, for herself, she delighted in hoping that she too might be useful,—in thinking that she too was perhaps, in some degree, politically powerful."

In an unusual twist, Trollope also had a prominent male character, for whom two books in the series are named, who has particularly close relationships with women and rises in large part because of his beauty and charm. Using one's gifts, whatever they may be, when trying to succeed without advantages of birth or position, is not reserved only to women, even in Victorian England.

Wives, Hostesses, and Politicians in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century

After women gained the right to vote, in 1920 in the United States, they began to run for office. Yet women with no position except that of wife (or sometimes daughter) to a powerful man remained central to the Washington political scene until late in the twentieth century. Some were ambitious only for status and influence, while others were more policy oriented. Katharine Graham (1917–2001) became both a hostess and a powerful businesswoman after taking over the *Washington Post* after her father and husband died. Other famous hostesses include Pamela Churchill Harriman (who married three influential men), Evangeline Bruce (wife of Ambassador David Bruce), and Lorraine Cooper (wife of Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky).

Few people rise to influence without help from someone they are intimately connected to, whether a marriage partner or a wealthy family connection. But more and more we see women leaders who have worked their way up in the same way men have traditionally done. By 2016, a growing number of the world's countries are or

have been led by a woman—including Angela Merkel (b. 1954) of Germany and Tsai Ing-wen (b. 1956) of Taiwan—with few sharing the path to power of so many female leaders of the past: the result of their connection with a man. That pattern, however, is far from absent in the twenty-first century, especially in Latin America and Asia. Even Hilary Clinton (b. 1947), the Democratic candidate for president in 2016, is the wife of a former US president. Indeed, after the Indiana primary vote in 2016, she was referred to by an MSNBC reporter as “the former first lady.” And yet Clinton’s success has created a surprising question for twenty-first-century women, as shown when reporters asked First Lady Michelle Obama, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, if she planned to run for president.

The story of business leader and philanthropist Teresa Heinz (b. 1938), on the other hand, could have come straight from a Trollope novel: She married a Republican senator and inherited much of his family fortune, then went on to marry the rising politician John Kerry. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) married a wealthy older man who called her “The Boss” and funded her early political campaigns.

Another phenomenon garnering considerable attention in popular culture is that of the “power couple,” in which two educated, ambitious professionals combine forces. This term can be used admiringly, or it can be a way to denigrate a relationship as almost unnatural, because warm love and sexual intimacy are supposed to determine our choice of life partners. One such power couple is central to the television series *House of Cards*, in which a beautiful and clever wife has devoted herself to making her husband a political success. Once he becomes president, however, she demands to be appointed to a position that she deems herself qualified for through having been at her husband’s side and intimately involved in his work behind the scenes. Pillow-talk power and frustrated female ambition is one of the dramatic threads. (In 2016, in fact, a husband and wife, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, were elected president and vice president of Nicaragua.)

The ways in which women have sought and achieved power over the past millennia offers a more expansive perspective on women and leadership than we get from merely looking at the handful of women who have attained the kind of positions that characterize any standard list of male leaders in history. Long before the murmurings of “rights for women,” individual women in all walks of life were demonstrably strong, intelligent, and effective. Some achieved positions of real power from the sidelines and demonstrated true leadership. These women were of their time and ahead of their time, too: women who wanted to live to their fullest capacity. One of Trollope’s politically inclined fictional heroines, Lady Glencora Palliser, wife of the prime minister, wants “a niche for herself in history.” Women have often sought a niche in history and a bigger world for themselves, as well as the ability to control their own destiny, and to manage the destiny of their family, tribe, or nation, and did so long before the women’s movement of the twentieth century opened a much wider door to leadership

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