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Disturbing Femininity

By Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen

Abstract

When Helle Thorning-Schmidt in 2011 became the first female Prime Minister in Denmark, this "victory for the women" was praised in highly celebratory tones in Danish newspapers. The celebration involved a paradoxical representation of gender as simultaneously irrelevant to politics and – when it comes to femininity – in need of management. Based on an analysis of the newspaper coverage of the election, I argue that highlighting gender (in)equality as either an important political issue or as something that conditions the possibilities of taking up a position as politician was evaluated as a performative speech act, i.e. an act that creates the trouble it names. Ruling out gender equality as relevant was, however, continually interrupted by comments on how Thorning-Schmidt and other female politicians perform gender in ways that fit or do not fit with "doing politician". These comments tended to concern the styling of bodies and behaviour and followed well known – or sticky – gendered scripts.

Keywords: Gender, gender equality, politics, performativity, performance, celebrity, Danish newspapers.

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Introduction

> She will stand there, the woman who has survived more character assassinations than a cat has lives. 173 brilliant centimetres that after six years on high heels between win or disappear stepped out of the misrepresentation of her as candidate for a night and into Danish history as the one, who crowned 100 years of equality politics by becoming the first female Prime Minister in Denmark. (Hergel 2011)

This rather high flown eulogy appeared on the front page of the daily *Politiken* the day after the last general election in Denmark on the 15th of September 2011. Under the headline (in war types) "The first" the journalist Olav Hergel's portrait of the new PM, the Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt, took up most of the front page and page 4. The framing of the article is that "we" (the journalist and the readers or perhaps the nation) are waiting for Thorning-Schmidt's arrival to receive the applause of her fellow party members gathered to celebrate the victory on election night. The new PM is, Hergel repeatedly writes, "slender as a whippet, unbreakable as a silk thread" (ibid). While Hergel's article belongs to the decidedly enthusiastic end of the spectrum, there was an overall celebratory tone in many of the other papers as well. The usual accounts of the election specifics (votes, seats, and persons) and comments to the political situation were topped with articles on Thorning-Schmidt's firstness, her gender performance and occasionally also references to gender equality.

There was a "yes we can'ish" feel to the moment which was communicated by both the journalists and the experts consulted by them to comment this "victory for the women" as the headline of another article reads (Klingsey 2011). While I was also initially caught by the feel of the moment, this was quickly replaced by a more puzzled reaction to what I saw as a paradoxical representation of gender. Firstly, there was an overall agreement that gender had in no way been an issue in the election campaign, a fact that was generally applauded, since this would have been "vulgar" as one comment suggests (Libak 2011). And secondly, many articles contained stereotypical accounts of the femininity/politician-intersection; these were often preoccupied with the (potential) disturbances of femininity. This framing rests on an unmarked masculine toning of the normative figure of the politician, which has been recurrently observed in feminist studies of political institutions in a wide variety of national settings (cf. Puwar 2004; van Zoonen 2006; Crawford & Pini 2010; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012; Hammarlin & Jarlbro 2012). The modalities (justifications and hedges for instance) used to communicate these representations are, however, also more specifically tied to a Danish (and more generally Nordic) resistance to feminism, which seems to be claiming with progressive force that as a general political topic gender equality is not relevant anymore (Borchorst, Christensen & Siim 2002; Dahlerup 2011:81 pp).

Taking the coverage of Helle Thorning-Schmidt's election victory as my focus, I analyse the paradoxical signification of gender as simultaneously unimportant as

a political issue *and* something that – when it comes to femininity – requires management. The dismissal of gender is explored through an analysis of the use of the metaphor "the gender card". This metaphor seems to be a way of making gender obsolete without *directly* saying so, that is characteristic also of newspaper articles that do not use the metaphor. The question of disturbance and management is discussed through an analysis of what, according to the newspapers, the ingredients of a balanced performance (of politician and femininity) are, and how this notion of balance is established through specific discursive constructions of femininity. The analysis is theoretically framed through the conceptualization of gender as performatively installed in a foundational sense, and politics (or rather "doing politician") as a specific kind of public performance. Hence performativity and performance are employed in both a constitutive sense and in a sense where it relates to scripts that are drafted in a social domain at a specific point in time. Through the analysis I aim to contribute to an understanding of how gendered scripts are produced and reproduced in a self-declared "post-feminist" political context where gender equality is seen as already obtained and therefore outdated as a political issue.

Performing Politician – Theories and Context

In what follows, I present both the theoretical framework of the analysis, and research that I lean on in order to contextualize the study. The latter with, has been chosen in a continuing dialogue with the analysis of the newspaper articles; hence the contextualization presented is both based on the analysis and contributes to the framing of it.

I have constructed the study in a way that will help me discuss *some* questions related to gender and politics. Thus I for instance circumvent the theoretical question of how "the political" in a broader sense is constituted (including how feminist political philosophers have dealt with this question) by focusing on representations of femininity associated with a specific political institution, i.e. the parliament. I claim that actors included in this institution "do" politics, not that this institution define or empty out "the political". The study is conducted through an analysis of media-texts, but even if I also draw on feminist media studies to some extent, I do this rather selectively, since it is not primarily the media or the relation between media and politicians, I aim to discuss. Hence, I use the media-texts as a contemporary archive of representations of gender in parliamentary politics.

Performativity

Performance and performativity are key concepts in the theoretical framing of the analysis – both with respect to gender and to politics. Performativity in the constitutive sense refers to Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender. Following her, I

understand gender as inhabited and embodied (as sex) through performative reiterations of the binary divide between male and female – and the heterosexual matrix associated with this division (Butler 1990; 1993). Performativity is hence both "culture bound" and productive of culture (rather than "merely" representing culture). For Butler there is no performer prior to the performative act and in that sense the act is singular; but there is, on the other hand, a binding and enabling history of enactments. This is a history of specific delimitations, a history of institutional arrangements, and a history where gender is performed in concert with other universal (-ized) and situational categorical distinctions. In the institutional field of politics, "doing politician" is hence enabled and constrained by the available discourses regulating both what counts as political and how the position politician can be acquired. Gender is one distinction that intersects with politician in significant ways. Hence some bodies slide comfortably into this position, while other bodies need to compensate in order not to stand out too much. Nirmal Puwar (2004) evocatively refers to women and racialized minorities as "space invaders" in her interview based analysis of the British Parliament; and describes the relation between appropriate and inappropriate bodies as follows:

> The female body is an awkward and conspicuous form in relation to the (masculine) somatic norm. This is precisely why for women the political costume is (a): ill-fitting; and (b) unbecoming. A sedimented relationship between the masculine body and the body politic has developed. This historical link between specific sorts of social bodies and institutional positions is, though, at the same time a performative accomplishment that requires constant repetition in order to be reproduced […] Hence it is open to change and variation – usually, though, within limits. (Puwar 2004:78)

Butler's conceptualization, which is also referenced by Puwar, captures the way sex is retroactively constituted as ontologically (usually dressed as biologically) given, and productive of gender, as well as the potentially subversive gaps left open by the reliance on repetition. The gendered relations that delimit access as well as acting in parliamentary institutions are historically and culturally sedimented, and even if they are not immutable, they are not easily done away with.

Performance and Representation

In my theoretical framework, I use the concept of "performance" in order to zoom in on the specific set up of the political scene I am studying. While the actors in the parliament are always already gendered in a constitutive sense that can be captured through Butler's concept of performativity, they also perform on this stage in a self-conscious and self-reflexive way. Their acts are in addition received by a variety of audiences (the party, the voters, their electorate, the people, the media etc.) *as* amongst other things performances. This means that parliamentary politics can be conceptualized as performance in a "theatrical" sense, referring to the specifics of how the contemporary institutionalization of parliamentary politics is scripted. Based on this, I deliberately use metaphors associated with theatre (script

and stage for instance) in my discussion of the discourses governing parliamentary politics.

Representing ones electorate is not a straightforward matter that can be read off from a supposedly neutral ideal of politics and secured through the proper formal channels of election procedures. The link between representation and representativeness has been a focal point within feminist political science, where – among other things – the relation between numerical and substantial representation of women in politics has been debated. It has been suggested that women, once present in sufficient numbers, will act in the interest of (all) women or that women bring a voice of their own into politics since they represent different skills and values as well as a different knowledge than men (see Mackay 2004 for an overview of these debates). The political strategies built on these analyses are often referred to as identity politics or the politics of difference, and have been widely accused of treating social categories as essential and homogeneous entities (cf. Crenshaw 1991/2006; but see also Phillips 2010: 69; Ahmed 2012: 141). While – partly – agreeing with this critique, I adopt a different perspective towards representativeness through my focus on performance; hence I follow John Street's suggestion that "[…] the representative claim has to be analysed as a performance which reveals and establishes certain qualities and values." (Street 2004:447) This means that political representation is (at least partly) constructed through the culturally scripted performance of politicians. This aligns political representation with the cultural studies notion of representation as a signifying practice (Hall 1997). Liesbet van Zoonen, who – in contrast to Street – is also interested in how gender becomes involved in these performances, argues how the process of turning representativeness on its head works:

> […] I wish to focus on the different conceptualizations of "constituency" necessitated by the present disappearance of traditional electorates. Political parties and candidates now have to produce their constituencies on the basis of their appeal rather than relying on already existing social commonalities. (van Zoonen 2005:59)

This is not necessarily entirely new (something van Zoonen also points out; 2005:71), but leaving aside this question, both van Zoonen and Street are interested in how representativeness is obtained through the articulation of politics and popular culture – or what they call celebrity politics.

Taking her cue from John Corner (2003), van Zoonen argues that taking up the position politician sucessfully involves a performance on several stages: Firstly the stage of political institutions and processes, secondly the stage of private life, but thirdly also the stage of the public and the popular (notably TV), which "[presents] the qualities of the persona in the political field and the stage of private life […] in concert to a wider audience" (van Zoonen 2005:75). Proceeding from this, I will in the next paragraphs take a closer look at these three stages.

Pure Politics or "the Suit"

Estimating whether a politician – male or female – does the job appropriately, involve norms designating what proper politics amount to. In the media texts I analyse in this article, the norm is usually unmarked but never the less present through representations of actual or potential transgressions. Hence the norm itself is taken for granted and emerges not as a specified content but through its limits.

According to van Zoonen a modernist understanding of politics designates that:

> […] politics will absorb all communicative repertoires to its own benefit, but will hear and allow only one proper political mode of expressing public concerns and conflict, which is characterized by *informed judgment, impersonal reaction and rational debate*. (van Zoonen 2005: 16; emphasis added; see also Adcock 2010:138)

I argue that this understanding (which I call "pure politics") travel through the representations of femininity and politics in the newspaper articles as a regulatory discourse or script. As such it takes part in delimitating what counts as a proper performance of politician. In Signe Hedeboe's interview-based analysis of the Danish Parliament conducted as part of the state sponsored Danish Democracy and Power Study (1998–2004), pure politics is referred to through the metaphor "the suit". This metaphor is frequently used by her informants to summarize the politician's professional capacity as a communicator of political messages. According to the politicians, this style of communication contributes to a display of authority, which is a necessary ingredient in "performing politician" appropriately (Hedeboe 2002: 45). Hedeboe is not particularly interested in how the suit as a metaphor as well as the style and practices it summarizes is gendered. The association between the ideal of pure politics and hegemonic masculinity is, however, amply pointed out in feminist research into parliamentary politics and media representations of female politicians (cf. Puwar 2004; van Zoonen 2006; Crawford & Pini 2010; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012; Hammarlin & Jarlbro 2012). The metaphor manages – at the same time – to refer to pure politics and to the somatic norm associated with this ideal. Hence it points towards bodies and the embodied character of the position politician. Media reporting on female politicians is often (if not always, see Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012) preoccupied with sartorial matters (cf. Ross & Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997; Adcock 2010; van Zoonen & Harmer 2011; Ross et al. 2013). While male politicians may also occasionally be portrayed in terms of their stylishness (or lack of it), the suit still folds comfortably around them as an inconspicuous piece of garment.

The Human Being Behind the Suit

The authority associated with mastering the scripts of pure politics is, however, not enough when it comes to performing politician appropriately. Signe Hedeboe points out, that while the suit may contribute to a display of authority, it also un-

dermines credibility and legitimacy; therefore, according to her informants, as a politician you need to "step out of the suit" and expose the human being behind it (Hedeboe 2002:45). As one of her female informants puts it: "It is not sufficient to be a talking suit on the TV screen" (Ibid).

Displaying the human being behind the suit is about establishing a position that (partly) breaks away from authority and underlines similarity: politicians are "just like us" – and this is why they can establish themselves as representative of "us". The demand to display one's "private self" is not in itself gendered, but the possibilities of doing so without compromising the necessary amount (and quality) of authority follows a clearly gendered pattern. van Zoonen notes that there is a current tendency for male politicians "to explicitly and publicly claim time-outs for their family" and this "contributes to their overall image of integrity, and adds a sense of them being modern men." (van Zoonen 2005: 91). This is, however not the case for female politicians, since they and their families are rather exposed as pitiable, especially by the celebrity press. Motherhood is one recurring theme appearing in the media coverage of female (especially top-) politicians. Iñaki Garcia-Blanco and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) for instance analyses the media coverage of the appointment of a majority female cabinet after the 2008 general election in Spain. Carme Chacón who was appointed minister of defence – and was in an advanced state of pregnancy when she was appointed – not surprisingly attracted a lot of media attention. The authors conclude that:

> In a lose-lose situation, Chacón was not only deemed unsuitable for being in charge of a ministry due to her gender and her pregnancy, but was also constructed as a questionable mother. (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012: 434).

Closer to home Mia-Marie Hammarlin and Gunilla Jarlbro point out the importance of motherhood in the representations of Mona Sahlin in the Swedish press following her (mis)use of an office credit card (in 1995) for private purchases. Sahlin could not, according to several commentators, be a mother of three *and* a minister – without being "sloppy" in both capacities (Hammarlin & Jarlbro 2012: 123 pp).

The Public and the Popular

As mentioned above, the third main stage politicians need to perform on is the media. TV plays a prominent role here, but in recent years social media (facebook, twitter etc.) are gaining importance as well. In the public and mediated performances of politicians, genres and scripts originating in popular culture intertwine with the suit and the human being behind the suit. Not all politicians acquire the status of celebrity politicians, but performing politician adequately is still partly associated with models of masculinity and femininity originating in celebrity culture. van Zoonen argues that celebrity culture is predominantly based on Hollywood scripts. For feminine bodies, this entails four main scripts: "femininity as

enigmatic and threatening, femininity as nurturing and caring, femininity as sexuality and femininity as bodily practice." (van Zoonen 2005:93).

Getting the mix between pure politics, private life and popular culture right or perhaps rather mixing in a coherent way is vital for a convincing performance, but the feminine celebrity scripts are not easily articulated with the necessary element of pure politics. van Zoonen argues that the ultimate aim of a good performance is building up authenticity, and as such it is vital that the performance is not detected as such (van Zoonen 2005: 75). However, as I have noted above, top politicians' self-presentations are constantly evaluated by the media and the electorate *as performances* (directed by spin doctors, personal assistants and what not), often judging whether "the play" or "the role" is a good choice or acted well.

Methodological Considerations

In this article, the media coverage in the days after the September 2011 election is for analytical purposes constructed as a cut or a crystalizing point, from where I follow selected leads in time and space. My own puzzlement is the point of departure for this construction – hence I am not claiming that this *is* a watershed event. I do argue, however, that the "firstness" of Thorning-Schmidt – the "yes we can" atmosphere – means that gender is foregrounded in an explicit manner that is rarely the case in media reporting on parliamentary politics in Denmark. My analysis below concentrates on how Thorning-Schmidt's performance as top politician is *received, evaluated and communicated* to a wider audience by the Danish newspapers. Hence I address how the media represent Thorning-Schmidt's gendered performance, and not directly how she navigates in the political space.

Initially, I did a complete reading of the coverage of the 15th of September election on the 16th and 17th of September in all (15) newspapers (dailies or weeklies) with a national circulation. Zooming in on the articles that dealt with gender (26 articles), my analysis focused on the discursive constructions of gender in these articles – including the linguistic modalities used to communicate these constructions. I would undoubtedly have found gendered constructions in the articles that did not explicitly deal with gender, but since I was interested in how gender is represented when explicitly mentioned, I did not go into these articles. The analysis of the balanced performance of gender is based on these 26 articles.

The 15 newspapers in national circulation cover a variety of political orientations and include tabloids as well as broadsheets. Although the two tabloids (*BT* and *Ekstra Bladet*) in the sample also comment on gender, most of the substantial articles appear in the broadsheets, something which is also reflected in my analysis. The articles in my sample belong to different genres. Only a few of them are straight forward news articles, framed and written by journalists. On the contrary, the articles to a large degree consist of interviews, articles mainly based on expert comments, and comments that are not written by journalists. Even if all

news coverage amounts to analysis (i.e. based on a framing, a choice of what to in- or exclude etc.), it differs if articles *are presented* as analyses or not. Most of the articles in the sample are partly or predominantly presented as analyses, and this means that I analyse analyses made by others, including – as will be seen – gender researchers, authors, politicians, and spin doctors. This is interesting, since it means that the journalists in this way establish a distance to issues of gender: they deal with it through quoting others. Besides this, I do, however, not distinguish between different genres in my analysis; I mainly use the newspaper coverage as a contemporary archive of discourses on gender and (parliamentary) politics.

One initial finding in the first phase of analysis was the centrality of the gender card metaphor as a way of diffusing gender as politically important. This both led me back to elaborate on the idea of pure politics theoretically and contextually and it led me to pursue the metaphor itself. Hence, I both searched globally for research articles, and locally (in Denmark) for media uses (in the Infomedia database and in the same 15 newspapers with a national reach) of the metaphor going back to the 1990 start of Infomedia's records. This resulted in 39 articles.[1] Which is, of course, only a very rough indication, since I have not included electronic media (TV, radio, blogs or social media). Hence I cannot say anything about how *much* the metaphor is used. I do, however, think that I can give an indication of *how* the metaphor is used (what it "means").

In the analysis that follows below, I focus on how gender is discursively constructed, including aspects of how these constructions are communicated. For instance the affinity between the journalists and the statements communicated indicates if these are seen as controversial or, on the contrary, evaluated as "natural". The theoretical and contextual framework leads me to a focus on when, how and in relation to what different aspects of performing politician are highlighted (and evaluated) in the gendered representations of Helle Thorning-Schmidt.

The Gender Card

One corner stone in the media representations of Thorning-Schmidt in the days after the election is the recurrent use of the gender card metaphor. The metaphor is interesting in several respects. Firstly, it introduces politics as a game where politicians and their parties play their cards or withhold them based on what wins – not on (the idea of) pure politics or political results. Secondly, it seems to be a way of introducing gender and negating it at the same time, since the point is that Thorning-Schmidt has won the election (at least in part) because she *did not* play the gender card. A typical use of the metaphor appears in this statement by the author Hanne-Vibeke Holst,[2] who is consulted as an expert by the daily *Politiken*:

> She has at no point during the election campaign played the gender card, spoken about gender equality or made specific appeals to a female electorate. On the contra-

> ry, she has toned down anything that could indicate that "here stands a female politician" […] Thorning and her advisors have seen that the Social Democrats would lose votes if they spoke about the struggle for gender equality. (Politiken 2011)

The gender card is here associated with policies related to gender equality and appeals to female voters, and as such it points towards the identity-political assumptions regarding representation mentioned above. There is no direct reference to the bodily signs or the gender performance of Thorning-Schmidt in the quotation above, but it seems to be taken for granted that it takes a woman to play the gender card, and as such it is associated with feminine bodies. This is repeated in another daily, *Information*, where the journalist states that: "She is not known to be playing the gender card, and this goes for Thorning's party as well, they have neither used her femininity nor the question of gender equality in the election campaign." (Klingsey 2011)

Playing the gender card is clearly not a proper thing to do – it amounts to foul play – and the meanings associated with the gender card (gender equality as a policy area; appealing to female voters) also indirectly become illegitimate by association. Even if the dominant view in Denmark is that gender equality is something "we" (i.e. the white Danish women) have obtained (cf. Borchorst, Christensen & Siim 2002: 260; Magnusson, Rönnblom & Silius 2008) and hence that struggling for it is a thing of the past, gender equality is never *directly* stated to be an illegitimate (or obsolete) policy issue. The ambiguous status of gender equality in the public debates in Denmark is reflected in an article entitled "The minor difference" by Anna Libak in the last edition before the election of the weekly paper *Weekendavisen*. According to Libak, you should not ask "women" if it makes a difference whether the PM is a man or a woman:

> If you do, most of them react emotionally almost aggressively: "No, why? Of course I haven't had gender in mind, when I voted." Or: "Listen, I grew out of that kind of feminism long ago." This is probably why the Social Democrats in the bygone election campaign avoided pointing out that Helle Thorning-Schmidt could be the first female PM in the almost 100 years since women were granted the right to vote. (Libak 2011)

The journalist distances herself through the imagined conversation with "Danish women": This is not something, *she* is saying or concluding, but a widespread opinion in the population. Libak subsequently quotes a male Social Democrat, who states that it would have been "vulgar" to draw attention to gender: "as if she was trying to give herself an unmerited advantage. But, still, she *has* let her hair down; it just hasn't been used as an argument" (ibid). In this statement, as well as (on closer inspection) in the two previous quotations, a split between gender as a speech act (talking about – or saying that – gender matters) and doing gender (the hair that has been let down) stand out. Further it appears that giving voice to "gender talk", is negatively evaluated even if gender is *there* embodied in Thorning-Schmidt's femininity. The ease with which stereotypical views of the

constituents of femininity go along with the rejection of gender as relevant in the craft of politics is notable.

Freedom of Choice

According to Erika Falk (2012), the metaphor "gender-card" first appears in the US media in the beginning of the 1990s while "race-card" has a longer history of use. I have not been able to establish more precisely when race-card is first used, but according to the BBC homepage, it emerges in the UK sometime in the 1960s.[3] Both metaphors, though in different ways, are linked to the notion that all political players are equal in opportunities: "[…] the American myth of the free and equal democratic society where anyone can get elected without regard to race, class, or gender." (Falk 2012: 11). As pointed out by Lee & Morin (2009:378) with regard to the race card, this in itself dates the metaphor as a phenomenon of the post-civil rights era, since racism was openly supported before this. Falk analyses the use of the gender card metaphor in US media taking Hillary Clinton's campaign to be nominated as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in 2008 as her point of departure. Falk summarizes her analysis as follows:

> If we combine the meaning of playing the gender card as argued above with the implicit connotation that it is a strategic and tactical move that confers advantage on the candidate, then we can see the following arguments are implicit in the metaphor and reveal some subtle premises of our culture. Women candidates who choose to (a) draw attention to their gender as women, or (b) argue that people should vote for a woman to remedy current underrepresentation, or (c) campaign on issues that women are more likely to support, or (d) express concern about sexism in the campaign or (e) mention that women face discrimination in the public sphere will help their campaigns. (Falk 2012: 10)

In addition, she points out that the tactical character of the metaphor implies that gender would not be a constituent of politics or culture for that matter, if women did not play the gender card. Or, to return to the point made earlier, if they do not speak (ab)out gender. Falk refers to this as "freedom of choice", but it corresponds to what I have called "pure politics". According to Falk, the idea of freedom of choice in Hillary Clinton's case meant that the US-media predominantly used the metaphor to denigrate Clinton (Falk 2012:11). Since the reference to politics as a play is central in this metaphor, I argue, that it will necessarily or at least predominantly be used to raise doubts about the motives of the one who is accused of playing it. It comes to connote a politics that is contaminated by issues which may be declared essentially irrelevant. This observation can also be supported by the fact that playing the gender card belongs to the world of commentators: nobody seems to state that they are playing the card themselves.

"The Hypocrisy of the Female Whiners"

In the Danish newspapers with a national circulation, the total number of articles using the phrase "gender card" in the period 2007-2012 amounts to 39 (see note 1); Thorning-Schmidt is one of the main protagonists in 27 of these. 2010 is the year with most hits (20) and out of these 16 are associated with the same media event: An interview with Hanne-Vibeke Holst in *Politiken* headlined: "The witches of our time" (Højbjerg 2010a). In the interview, Holst comments on two of the summer 2010 high profile media issues: The accusation of Thorning-Schmidt – or rather her husband – for evading tax payment in Denmark and the non-participation in an arctic top meeting of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs from the Conservative Party, Lene Espersen. Espersen instead went on holiday with her family.

Both of these "cases" involves family – the stage of private life. Tax evasion is particularly compromising for Thorning-Schmidt as the leader of the Social Democratic Party, where tax is linked to solidarity. But it is in addition associated with her family life in that her husband (Stephen Kinnock) has a top manager job in Geneva, which means that he is mostly in Denmark during weekends. Hence a busy top politician, and a mother of two children, is married to an absent father – this provides fruit for speculation in the media. The case has developed into something of a political scandal, which is still in full bloom as I am writing this article, mainly because of suspicions concerning political pressure (by the former minister of tax and his top administrative staff) on the Copenhagen tax authorities. One – seemingly – very odd offspring is that the case involves rumours concerning Kinnock's sexual orientation. The rationale of this rumour is not quite clear, but one interpretation in the media is that if Kinnock is bi- or homosexual, this would question his attachment to his family and to Denmark, and hence also his obligation to pay tax (Astrup 2012). It seems that tax, national attachment and family become articulated in ways that are not quite consistent with the normative (family) framework.

In the interview with Hanne-Vibeke Holst that gets the gender-card-ball running in 2010, Holst accuses the media of disproportionately "going after" female top politicians. But she adds that the two women have had a hand in the matter themselves, since they have been "playing with fire":

> The media love to expose beautiful and photogenic women like Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Lene Espersen. And they have both used this in their career moves. They have not been sufficiently aware of how dangerous it is to let the media eat you all up. For below the media fascination an age-old hatred of women is smouldering. This is let loose when these women show signs of weakness and crisis. (Højbjerg 2010a)

Thorning-Schmidt and Espersen are depicted as politicians who because of their good looks have privileged access to the media; and hence also privileged access to the voters. The ideal of pure politics is in circulation, since the implicit point of

departure is that a political career should not be built on looks – this, it seems, draws politics too much into the arena of celebrity scripts, where the media take over control. While Holst is critical of the media, she also goes along with the dominant discursive repertoire to some extent. Playing with fire is for instance a well-worn trope in relation to female (and male) sexuality (women "coming on" to men, but not wanting to fulfil the "promise") – an interpretation that is supported by the fact that the media in Holst's account are depicted as a stand-in for men, who "come to suffer from castration anxiety when they are challenged by strong women in the arena of power" (Højbjerg 2010a). In this context, it is however not the interview as a single event that is most interesting, but rather the explosive reaction to it. In the days after the interview was published, media representatives squarely denied that gender had anything to do with their representation of the two politicians, and Holst herself was verbally abused, often using a language loaded with gender stereotypes (for instance the headline: "You are a cry-baby [Da: tudefjæs], Holst; Højbjerg 2010b). In addition, there is an interesting slide in signification: in the interview with Holst, the journalist Rushy Rachid Højbjerg states that *Holst* is playing the gender card – but in several of the subsequent media reactions this is rearticulated so that it instead is Espersen and Thorning-Schmidt, who are guilty of playing this card. A former Member of Parliament for the Social Democrats, Torben Lund, writes in a comment in *Berlingske Tidende*:

> Get off this ridiculous and tiresome female whining [Da: kvindeklynk]. Even my grandfather's generation has long passed this stage. Five out of eight parties in the Parliament are led by women. It is pathetic and undignified, when female politicians play the gender card – both in election campaigns and when they are criticized. (Lund 2010)[4]

Again, the denial of gender as a distinction that makes a difference in doing politics is stated very loudly and in a language that is full of gender stereotypes ("female whining") which suggest that the female whiners are not managing their gender performance adequately. Even if Holst also have a few supporters in this 2010-debate, the overall trend is a total rejection of her suggestion that taking up a position as a (top) politician is difficult for women.

Sara Ahmed has argued in relation to "overcoming" identity politics and going beyond categories like gender and race, that: "Those who point to restrictions and blockages become identified with the restrictions and blockages they point to, as if we are creating what we are describing." (Ahmed 2012:180) This captures neatly what the accusation of playing the gender card amounts to in contemporary Denmark. Gender inequality is a thing of the past, and those who cry out about restrictions and blockages are creating these themselves – they are speaking them into existence. "The hypocrisy of the female whiners" [Da: Kvindeklynkernes hykleri], as Lund headlines his commentary cited above.

Precarious Balancing Acts

As already indicated the use of the gender card metaphor and other denials of the importance of gender, is accompanied or interrupted by evaluations of female corporeality. And here highly stereotypical notions or sticky signs, as Sarah Ahmed calls them (2004), are in circulation. In what follows I turn to these accounts of femininity and to the potential disturbance it carries.

The Necessary Balance

The disturbing or inappropriate features associated with femininity in politics are, according to the several experts consulted by the media: girlishness, "which many find difficult to align with the idea of a statesman", loose hair, sweetness, high pitch (Hanne-Vibeke Holst in Bonde, Crone & Thonbo-Carlsen 2011); "the feminine, emotional and fluttering" (Birgitte Dam Jensen, personal advisor in the Parliament; Ibid). The other way around, it is (in the same article) pointed out that Thorning-Schmidt has managed to become "rational, cool and controlled" (Hanne-Vibeke Holst) and business-like in her appearance (Birgitte Dam Jensen). In addition, the journalists state that the main theme of the election – economy – meant that women were disfavoured in advance, since this is a masculine policy area. The descriptions of a femininity that is "too much" are all written against an unstated masculine appropriateness. Thorning-Schmidt is praised for her ability to occupy a position defined by this appropriateness; she is business-like in appearance, rational, cool and controlled in her behaviour; and she navigates the intricacies of the economy. The authority associated with pure politics is foregrounded here.

However, it is also directly apparent in the media coverage of the election that it is necessary to enact a balance between the opposed poles of "too feminine" and "too masculine" – or perhaps: "not feminine enough" (Staunæs & Søndergaard 2008). Hence Thorning-Schmidt's business-like appearance is in *Information* – under the headline "Low key in stilettos" – described as a successful balance:

> The new PM manages at one and the same time to appear very feminine in skirt suits and very high heels […] and on the other hand to dress so soberly that her clothes do not attract attention. And this is wise, Ritt Bjerregaard points out: "we women – even if it gets better the older you are – are consistently evaluated with reference to our looks and clothes. She has decided not to waste time on this." (Klingsey 2011)

Soberly feminine seems to be an appropriate corporeality. One that allows you to perform politician without being disturbed by undue audience attention to sartorial matters. The expert confirming the description is Ritt Bjerregaard, a Social Democrat with a long and high profile political career behind her (she has been a minister several times, a member of the EU-commission and mayor of Copenhagen). Also adhering to this logic of the necessary balance, gender researcher Karen

Sjørup is in an article in *Politiken* quoted for saying that Thorning-Schmidt has managed to strike the difficult balance:

> […] between neither being too caring and mothering nor too masculine and hard. Or for that matter relying too much on sex. She has found the balance and this is perhaps her asset, in contrast to Ritt Bjerregaard and Lene Espersen, who fell to each their side in this divide. Feminism has finally reached the top. (Politiken 2011)

It may be that the quotation is pieced together from an oral conversation that did not proceed in the same way as it is presented in the paper. But the causality established as the quotation stands is nevertheless that "feminism" (rather than "a female politician") has reached the top *because* of the proper balancing act.

The explicit attention to gender as important to politics in the election coverage is strongly associated with bodily signs and embodied behavioural scripts, and they follow a well-known repertoire constructed over a mind-body binary: The statesman (who apart from the name, of course, is left unmarked with respect to gender) is hard, rational, business-like and controlled. Femininity, in contrast, is (potentially) associated with emotionality, fluttering, care, mothering, sweetness, high-pitched voices and bodies that signal sexuality. As pointed out in the introduction the disturbances of femininity and the opposite poles that need to be balanced correspond to what feminist research of political institutions in a variety of national contexts has pointed to as the gendered scripts that constitute blockages and restrictions for female bodies (cf. Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012; Hammarlin & Jarlbro 2012; van Zoonen 2006; 2011). They are also ingredients in the four Hollywood scripts described by van Zoonen (2005). These are *potential* disturbances in the sense that not all female politicians will be received as disturbing by their audience (be it the electorate, the media or other politicians), but since the association between femininity and these signs are strong or sticky, female politicians are always up against the potential of being stuck with one or the other; and judging from interview based research, they are very aware of this (Ross & Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997; Ross 2002; Puwar 2004; Crawford & Pini 2010).

On the Art of Balancing in Stilettos

The descriptions of Thorning-Schmidt above focus on her appropriateness in relation to the statesman position; and most of the accompanying photos depict her in one of the often brightly coloured tight skirt suits (referred to above as "sober"); but there are exceptions to this rule. In "On high heels in Europe" (Kongstad & Mariessa 2011), a European perspective on the election result is presented. While the article only sporadically touch on gender and is more preoccupied with the relation between "red" and "blue" in the EU after the Danish election, the headline points in another direction – and the same goes for the statement, that: "[in Europe] the good looks and the fact that she will be the first female PM in Denmark takes precedence over Helle Thorning-Schmidt's plans for Europe" (ibid).

The distinction between political plans (pure politics) and looks is apparent here, but is described as something "the others" (the Europeans) establish. The comments from Europe and the article itself are grouped around a whole page picture of Thorning-Schmidt – hair down and mouth in a slight smile – wearing a long and very red party dress and golden stilettos. Her arms (golden clutch in one hand) reach out towards the viewer (is she balancing perhaps?), and the eyes are turned down towards the floor. There is something decidedly "celebrity-walking-the-red-carpet-to-the-Oscar-awards" to the picture. According to another article in the same genre (comments from abroad) Thorning-Schmidt is welcomed to Europa under her old nick-name "Gucci-Helle" (Bostrup, Lauritzen & Wiwel 2011).

The picture and especially the nick-name, which was allegedly coined by a fellow party member, are reminders of a previous less favourable evaluation of Thorning-Schmidt's enactment of balance (as also seen in the analysis of the gender card metaphor above). Her particular brand of celebrity style is expensive and refined, and this has threatened to become a breach in the coherence of her performance of representativeness. It sits uneasily with the ideal working class image of a Social Democrat. One may note in passing, that the suit – here understood not as a metaphor but as the politician's working attire – blur the visibility of class for her male colleagues. But there is a difference between stepping into the position leader of the Social Democrats and the position statesman. Representing the nation (abroad) is not a class issue in the same way as representing the party (in the Parliament and the public). So, balancing the enactment of femininity in politics is an on-going business, which always involves other distinctions that intersect in specific ways – and changes over time.

The stilettos are, as indicated several times above, almost routinely associated with Thorning-Schmidt. They refer to her femininity, but also to balance, celebrity, and occasionally they also have a slight edge of danger to them. As is the case in this sole example of a neutral use of the gender card metaphor in my sample. In the article from 2007 Fredrik Preisler from the communication bureau Propaganda is quoted for saying that the leader of the Social Democrats doesn't seem to be afraid to play up the gender difference between her and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the PM in office at the time:

> When she was asked last Wednesday whether she was ready for the [2007] election campaign, her answer was that lately she has slept with her stilettos on, and then the camera, of course, zoomed in on her elegant legs and the skirt, that efficiently descended the stairs. Fogh, on the other hand, always speak about "putting on the work-wear", which is a dark suit. (Thorup 2007)

The article further suggests that Fogh is not particularly eager to meet Thorning-Schmidt, and that this exposes him as a supporter of a patriarchy and hence someone who is not comfortable with the modern woman. Apart from the oblique mentioning of patriarchy, the reasoning above is entirely dedicated to a display of

Thorning-Schmidt as a flashy and slightly dangerous celebrity in contrast to the dull dark suit.

As I am writing this – more than a year after the 2011 election – the popularity ratings of Thorning-Schmidt and her government are poor. While this no doubt has to do with the political choices made by the government, the media evaluations of Thorning-Schmidt have frequently insinuated that her alleged shortcomings are (also) associated with her gender. It seems that the evaluation of Thorning-Schmidt's performance as perfectly balanced in the immediate aftermath of the election was rather short-lived. Perhaps it relied mostly on the fact that she, or rather the red coalition of which she was the PM candidate, (narrowly) won the election; and that this in turn meant that she became the first female PM in Denmark.

Don't Mention it; Just do it Right!

So what can I, based on the material I have analysed, say about the production and reproduction of gendered scripts in a self-declared post-feminist context? And in what way is the oscillation between explicit representations of gendered relations as an irrelevant policy issue *and* the continuing policing of femininity related to this context?

The dismissal of gender (in)equality as a relevant political topic seems to be associated with the widespread withdrawal from "identity politics" – for which the gender card metaphor can be seen as a short hand – in public debates as well as in academia. The (necessary) de-essentialisation of the category "woman" thus seems to be accompanied by the idea that gendered power relations have disappeared altogether. Thus, as noted above, those who point to gendered restrictions and blockages are accused of creating these themselves in order to gain unmerited advantages. In the media texts I have analysed there is, however, a recurrent hesitation when it comes to how this is communicated. The distancing moves – imagined conversations, quotations, use of expert statements – observable in how the journalists arrive at a dismissal of gender as an obstacle or even just relevant in politics, point towards this not being a quite safe terrain. Gendered inequality is admitted to *have been* a pertinent feature. In addition the rearticulation of gender equality to the nation means that modern Danishness has become represented as the epitome of gender equality (something Denmark shares with the other Nordic countries; Magnusson, Rönnblom & Silius 2008). Thus gender equality has become an export commodity (in development aid for instance) or something that white majority Denmark need to administer to – especially female – ethnic and racialized minorities. Gender equality is not totally off the agenda, but it is on it in a very specific way.

The dismissal of gender talk is accompanied – at the other end of the oscillation – by readings of gender that rely on a performative register not associated

with "talk" but with corporeal enactments. The doings of gender are visible to the audience and commented upon, using sticky associations between bodies and scripts as interpretive repertoires. Further, the corporeal scripts are presented by the media in a matter-of-fact way and stated by an array of commentators, some of whom make a living out of advising on the right scripts (the personal advisor) and others who make a living out of scrutinizing these scripts critically (the gender researcher). This was one reason for my initial puzzlement: the required balancing acts of some bodies are in the aftermath of the 2011-election presented with no critical edge whatsoever, even if some of the commentators in other circumstances would be criticizing gendered power relations. Hence the applause is – for lack of better word – innocently cheering at Thorning-Schmidt's perfectly balanced or coherent performance of female politician. The audience is knowledgeable when it comes to the scripts *and* satisfied with the performance. My argument is *not*, that these representations are naïve, i.e. it is not that they ignore, or are ignorant of, years of feminist critique. I suggest, instead, that this is related to "the post-feminist context" in another way. Hence, there is no doubt that the range of available options of enacting gender – and the partial break down of the binary between femininity and masculinity – has proliferated over the last several decades. Gendered scripts have broadly come to be *understood as* a playground, even if in practice the play or the ground is usually limited. van Zoonen, referring to Madonna as her example, points out that in the arena of popular culture, "[…] female celebrities have subverted myths of femininity by explicitly playing with them and reinventing them." (van Zoonen 2005:93). The problem for Thorning-Schmidt and her female colleagues is, however, that this play is not easily transferred to the arena of parliamentary politics, where a masculine somatic norm and the associated ideal of pure politics need to be addressed in concert with the requirement to "step out of the suit". While "Gaga-feminism" (Halberstam 2012) should not be underestimated, the different domains of society are not equally receptive to this repertoire of (subversive) gendered enactments. It seems that in the arena of parliamentary politics rather than subverting the well-worn stereotypes, they are reinforced through the intertwining with popular culture.

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Notes

1 http://www.infomedia.dk/. My initial search took place on 6-5-2012 using the words "kønskort(et)" (gender card) and "kvindekort(et)" (the female card) – these two versions of the metaphor seems to be used synonymously in Denmark. The result was 38 hits. A supplementary search for the period between 6-5-12 and 15-10-12 revealed only one more hit for 2012.

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Hits	3	4	0	20	10	2	39

2 Hanne-Vibeke Holst has amongst other books written *Kronprinsessen [The Crown Princess]*, *Kongemordet [The Murder of the King]*, and *Dronningeofret [The Sacrifice of The Queen]*. All three books are located in Sweden and deal with the political intrigues in the Swedish Social Democratic Party – and include gender-issues as well. They have, in addition, been turned into a TV-series produced by Swedish Bob Film and sent between 2006 and 2010 in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

3 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/02/99/e-cyclopedia/1292973.stm

4 Excerpts, i.e. the punchiest formulations, from Lund's comment are recirculated as short quotations in several other papers (*BT*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, *Information*) the next day 26-8-2010.

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