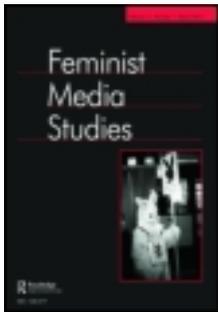


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MELODRAMA AND GENDERED MEDIATION: TELEVISION COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP "COUPS" IN NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIA

Linda Trimble

When they wrested party leadership positions from men in what is widely described as leadership "coups," the leadership challenges initiated by Helen Clark and Jenny Shipley in New Zealand and Julia Gillard in Australia were prime-time media spectacles featuring live television broadcasts and sensationalized opinion and analysis. This paper analyzes television reportage of these three leadership challenges and argues that while the news coverage was shaped by contextual factors, it also evidenced gendered mediation—news frames and evaluations that reflect gender-based assumptions about the performance of power. Television news scripted these events as prime-time melodramas, employing violent coup discourses and sensationalized plot lines to tell the stories. As a result, media coverage highlighted the threat of the feminine, reinforced the public man/private woman binary, and re-inscribed patriarchal norms of political leadership.

KEYWORDS women; melodrama; television; gendered mediation; political leadership

Introduction

When a woman topples a man from a party leader's position, it's big news. When her leadership "coup" secures her the prime minister's post, or puts her in reach of the top job, it's historic news. By unseating the leader of the official opposition in 1993, Helen Clark became the first woman leader of any major New Zealand political party and was touted as a likely prime minister. As it turned out, that distinction went to Jenny Shipley, whose 1997 "coup" made her New Zealand's first female head of government. However, Clark defeated Shipley in a general election a few years later and went on to win two more terms in office. Most recently, in June 2010, Julia Gillard upset a male leader to become the first woman to lead Australia, a job she held for three years. Thus it is not surprising that the political ascensions of Clark, Shipley, and Gillard were prime-time media spectacles featuring live television broadcasts and sensationalized opinion and analysis. Media coverage of such formative political events can be politically consequential because it introduces newly installed leaders to the public, branding their political personas in ways that reverberate throughout their political careers. Indeed, all three women have endured sexist media portrayals, with Shipley cast as a housewife, Clark labeled a "political dominatrix," and Gillard treated to misogynistic slurs about her character.

This article examines television news coverage of these so-called “coups” and demonstrates how television plays a significant role in constructing the gendered reality that is leadership. Since most citizens do not have any direct engagement with politics or politicians, political leadership is performed in and through the media. Television is a particularly powerful cultural form because of its popularity and authority as a news source and the resonances created by its visual representations of events and dramatic approach to storytelling. I focus on the meanings communicated by the narrative structure of television coverage of the three leadership transitions, which were largely melodramatic in tone and emphasis. I argue that, by narrating the leadership transitions as melodramas, TV news reflected gendered assumptions about norms of political leadership and the performance of femininity within these norms. As the analysis shows, when the myths and plot devices associated with fiction are used to construct television news about politics, women’s claims to political power are de-legitimized.

Women’s Leadership “Coups” in New Zealand and Australia

The major parties in Australia and New Zealand choose their leaders by means of a simple majority vote by members of the parliamentary caucus (William Cross and André Blais 2011, 7; Raymond Miller 2005, 130). Leadership transitions within these parties thus take one of two paths. One route is for sitting leaders to step down willingly, prompting a competition for the job and a caucus ballot to choose the new leader. Alternately, incumbent party leaders may be challenged through processes that are invariably so speedy and stealthy (Miller 2005, 130) they are consistently called “coups” regardless of the gender of the challenger.

Helen Clark sought the leadership of the New Zealand Labour Party in the immediate aftermath of the 1993 election. She was well positioned to go after the top job, having served as an MP since 1981, as a cabinet minister from 1987 to 1989, and as deputy prime minister for a few months prior to the Labour government’s defeat in 1990 (Linda Trimble and Natasja Treiberg 2010, 127). By 1993, Clark and her supporters were unhappy with the party’s second electoral defeat in a row and were concerned that Labour would not perform well in the 1996 election. On November 26, 1993, TV news stations reported that Clark had requested a leadership ballot. Labour leader Mike Moore was loath to relinquish the job and he engaged in a media-fueled campaign to swing support his way over the course of several days before a vote was held. Clark emerged victorious but had to deflect an unsuccessful putsch by Moore supporters prior to the 1996 election campaign. While Labour narrowly lost that election, Clark became prime minister with a successful campaign in 1999, won re-election in 2002 and 2005, and served as New Zealand’s prime minister for nine years, from 1999 to 2008.

New Zealand MP and cabinet minister Jenny Shipley was also identified as a strong candidate for party leadership but she kept her plans to unseat long-serving National leader and Prime Minister Jim Bolger firmly under wraps until the evening before the challenge was mounted (Christine Cessford 1997). According to a newspaper report, Bolger’s “lackluster” campaign against Clark in the 1996 election prompted Shipley and her supporters to make their move (*Evening Post* 1997). Upon his return from an overseas journey, advisors told the prime minister that Shipley had mobilized enough support from caucus to easily defeat him, so Bolger stepped aside before a vote could be held, though he continued serving as prime minister for a month after the “coup.” Shipley was sworn in as

prime minister of New Zealand on December 8, 1997 and held the post until 1999, when she was defeated in the general election by Helen Clark and the Labour Party.

Julia Gillard also replaced a sitting prime minister, Kevin Rudd. Gillard had championed Rudd's ascent to the Australian Labor Party's leadership in 2006, and she was appointed deputy prime minister when the party was elected in 2007. While her political ambitions were clear, Gillard was noted for her unswerving loyalty to Rudd (Mark Davis 2010). By June 2010, Rudd's popularity had plummeted and he was perceived to have bungled key issues such as climate change and mining taxes. After a long meeting with the prime minister late into the evening of June 23, 2010, Gillard told the press she would be a candidate for the party leadership in a ballot to be held the next morning. Rudd announced that he would contest the ballot, but ultimately withdrew his name before the vote. Gillard was sworn in as the country's first woman prime minister on June 24, and a few weeks later led the party into an election campaign. However, reverberations from the "coup" dogged Gillard during the campaign, which produced a tie between Labor and the Liberal/National coalition. Gillard was able to form a government with support from a Green MP and three independents. Rudd made several attempts to re-claim the prime minister's position, finally mobilizing enough support to defeat Gillard in a leadership ballot on June 26, 2013 (Joe Kelly 2013).

Although all three of the case studies for this project were deemed "coups" by party members and pundits alike, and each of the women went on to serve as prime minister as a result of securing the party leadership post, there are crucial differences between them. Shipley and Gillard were sworn in as prime minister as a result of their leadership challenges while Helen Clark served as leader of the opposition before winning office. Moreover, the men Shipley and Gillard challenged removed their names from the ballot before the vote could take place, while Clark's opponent refused to step down and five days of media coverage passed before the caucus vote was held. Clark's "coup," therefore, was the most melodramatic by all conventions associated with the genre. Yet all three of these events were mediated by television news reporting in ways that reflect gendered understandings of political leadership.

Melodrama and Gendered Mediation

The concept of mediation refers to the processes and techniques used by the press to transform events or issues into attention-grabbing news stories. These techniques include news selection, filtering, framing, and evaluation (Stuart Allen 2004, 4). Mediation is gendered when it reflects sex-based norms and assumptions, for instance the presumption that political leadership is an inherently masculine performance (Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt 1999, 48; 2003b, 210; Elza Ibroscheva and Maria Raicheva-Stover 2009, 111). As Karen Ross and Annabelle Sreberny (2000, 93) argue, and as the gendered mediation literature amply illustrates, the "way in which politics is reported is significantly determined by a male-oriented agenda that privileges the practice of politics as an essentially male pursuit." For instance, the application of gender markers, such as the "first woman" frame, draws attention to the novelty of a woman in a political leadership role (Caroline Heldman, Susan J. Carroll and Stephanie Olson 2005). Women politicians are further de-legitimized as political actors through news stories that highlight their sexed bodies and intimate relationships, thus reinforcing the public man/private woman binary. Media attention to the looks and personal lives of women politicians in Australia and New Zealand is well

documented (Susan Fountaine 2002; Judy McGregor 1996; Marian Sawyer 2012; Trimble and Treiberg 2010). Even when sex stereotypes or overtly sexist references are largely absent from news coverage, the conventional language of political news depicts women as outsiders to political competition, which is described through the metaphoric language of warfare. The pervasiveness of war-like imagery works to strongly associate masculinity with an authentic performance of political leadership (Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt 2003a; Trimble and Treiberg 2010).

Political events such as leadership challenges are mediated by the organizational needs and conventions of television reporting, which requires excitement and immediacy to hold the attention of viewers. As the former executive producer of NBC Evening News emphasized, "every news story should display the attributes of fiction, of drama" (quoted in Michael A. Milburn and Anne B. McGrail 1996, 614). Several genres of storytelling are available to media outlets, but television news is particularly keen on the sort of melodramatic scripts that reflect the emotional intensification and highly pitched polarizations typical of films, soap operas, and prime-time dramas (Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs 1982, 46–47). As a result, the social and political issues reported by TV news are often presented as melodramas (Milburn and McGrail 1992, 618). Notable examples include: coverage of the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings, which presented Hill's accusations against US Supreme Court nominee Thomas as a psychodrama (Lisbeth Lipari 1994); sensationalization of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident (Nimmo and Combs 1982); and signification of the United States as a "morally powerful victim" justified in seeking heroic retribution through reporting of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Elisabeth Anker 2005). Party leadership "coups" are ideal fodder for melodramatic news presentations because of their dramatic confrontations.

Elisabeth Anker defines melodrama as "a mode of popular culture narrative that employs emotionality to provide an unambiguous distinction between good and evil through clear designations of victimization, heroism, and villainy" (2005, 23). Four features of the melodramatic genre are relevant to gendered news representations of political events such as leadership challenges. The first, sensationalism, is fueled by spectacle. Political conflict is often intrinsically sensational, especially when it features brutal attacks and equally violent acts of retribution. These elements foster tension and a sense of urgency, drawing the audience into the story (Ben Singer 2001, 48). Emphasis on conflict highlights socially accepted and often taken-for-granted patterns of domination and exploitation (J. D. Connor 1997, 959), such as violent behavior that runs counter to traditional gender role expectations. As Gidengil and Everitt (1999, 2003a, 2003b) document in their analysis of reporting about Canadian election debates, television news coverage greatly exaggerates female leaders' aggressive behaviors because of the sheer novelty of a woman duking it out in the metaphorical boxing ring. In this context, characterizing women in "negatively charged and aggressive tones" suggests they are inappropriately engaged in political combat (Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 50–51).

The second trademark of melodrama is emotion, and events are positioned as incidental triggers to the personality clashes and poignant conflicts that prompt audience identification with the characters (Lynne Joyrich 1988, 138; Lipari 1994, 302). By putting human emotions on display, melodrama brings the gender regulations associated with the public/private binary into stark relief. Women are conventionally regarded as passive, submissive, and emotionally overwrought, while men are viewed as active, dominant, and coolly rational. When the real life characters in a melodramatic rendering of a political event

fail to conform to type, a focus on emotionality is likely to heighten the disjuncture between the performance itself and hegemonic gender expectations (Singer 2001, 253). Heightened emotions develop the third feature of melodrama, pathos, represented as pity for an undeserving victim (Anker 2005, 23–34). This plot device also underscores gendered power relationships, as women are culturally more likely to be understood as helpless and submissive victims, in need of rescue by a gallant male. When men are victimized they are rarely regarded as completely passive or powerless. Indeed, male victims invariably fight back.

That characters are portrayed starkly as virtuous or wicked illustrates the final key element of melodramatic storytelling, moral polarization: simplistic and absolutist identifications of characters as villains, victims, or heroes (Lipari 1994, 302; Elaine Roth 2004, 51). Melodramatic news thus frames events according to culturally resonant and familiar myths (Milburn and McGrail 1992, 617). In politics, as Liesbet van Zoonen observes, the hero is central to mythical narratives and heroism is invariably typed masculine (2005, 76). Femininity is associated with the domestic, the emotional, sexuality, and the body. Yet dominant metaphors of political power feature hyper-masculine men heroically facing their enemies in battle (Jane Parpart 1998, 202), consolidating the “conventional association of public political power and strong leadership with masculinity” (Heather Nunn 2002, 13–14). There are few historical models of women as fighters, revolutionaries, or saviors (Judy Motion 1999, 64). Thus the discursive positioning of leadership challenges as “coups” invokes deeply rooted patriarchal myths, including tropes of heroic warrior masculinity and subjugated femininity. Consider the synonyms for coup: revolt, insurgency, revolution, rebellion. The lexicon of the coup is militaristic and violent. So when “real life” women perform the roles traditionally reserved for men, as in the cases of the Clark, Shipley, and Gillard “coups,” clichés and stereotypes about women and political power are evoked (Lipari 1994, 299).

Melodrama’s narrative conventions, particularly its tendency to dramatize and oversimplify events, render ideologies of gender both “visible and watchable” (Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson 2003, 11). But while the melodramatic approach to storytelling has the potential to disrupt social constructions of gender, Roth argues that melodrama is unable to fundamentally challenge patriarchal power structures because it “ultimately remains trapped within dominant ideology” (2004, 61). Melodramatic narratives are likely to articulate “the threat of the feminine” by exploring issues of female subjectivity (Joyrich 1988, 139). Moreover, media studies show that a “cultural fear of feminine strength” becomes visible when women gain power in the public realm (Karrin Vasby Anderson and Kristina Horn Sheeler 2005, 17). Media characterizations of women’s desire to rule as unseemly and even dangerous evidences discomfort with women in powerful political positions (Anderson and Sheeler 2005, 11–34; Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose 2010, 200; Trimble and Treiberg 2010, 129). In summary, melodramatic television news coverage of women’s ascension to political positions typically held by men can reveal the deeply gendered underpinnings of mythical constructions of political leadership.

Method

Since “television has become the preeminent, if not overwhelmingly dominant, source of national and international political news for the majority of the population” (Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan 2000, 42), this study examines television news

coverage of the leadership challenges. A census of TV news stories for each case was analyzed, including “regular” news stories, updates and news specials, and interviews with Clark, Shipley, and Gillard. For New Zealand, television news programs from the two networks operating at the time—state-owned TV New Zealand’s (TVNZ) One Network News and private broadcaster TV3’s Three National News (TV3)—were retrieved from the Chapman Archives at the University of Auckland.¹ For the Australian case study, I focused on all televised coverage by the state-owned broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), because of its public service mandate and continued audience appeal.² Coverage was accessed through the ABC’s website (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/video>) as the story unfolded. There were twenty-nine television news stories about the Clark challenge broadcast between the rumors of a “coup” on November 26, 1993 and the leadership vote on December 1. Coverage of Jenny Shipley’s ascension was presented from November 3 to 4, 1997, followed by reports of her swearing-in as prime minister on December 8, 1997, for a total of twenty-three television news stories. Australia’s ABC news broadcast twenty-two news stories about the Labor leadership transition between June 23 and 25, 2010, the day after Julia Gillard was sworn in as prime minister. In total, seventy-four television news stories were analyzed for this study.

A feminist discourse analysis of all the television news stories about the three leadership “coups” was performed, situating each in its particular political context. Feminist discourse analysis is a qualitative approach which explores “the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Michelle M. Lazar 2007, 142). Because television news relies on plot devices, lexical choices and visual images to tell stories, the texts are complex and require a three-step qualitative coding process (Jared J. Wesley 2011, 350–352). For the first stage, I transcribed the dialogue, recorded the images shown, and noted the ways in which images and dialogue intersected to communicate meanings. To investigate the relationship between melodramatic storytelling and gendered mediation, I used the technique of tagging—“categorizing specific phrases, events or passages” (Wesley 2011, 351). Finally, selective coding, the process of combing through the notes to ensure that the analytical categories are comprehensive and complete, and discrepancies are noted and explained, was used to confirm the interpretation of the texts.

Prime-Time Melodramas

Helen Clark: “Come Helen High Water”

Leading the news tonight: *the conspiracy to topple* Mike Moore. The Deputy who would be leader: Helen Clark and her supporters keep a low profile as they *plot a leadership coup*. (Emphasis mine; TVNZ November 27, 1993)

This was the teaser for a story about the Clark challenge, broadcast on November 26, 1993, the night the story broke. Violent coup discourses abounded throughout the coverage. Sensationalized descriptors included the words and expressions threat, conspiracy, battle, power play, simmering revolt, betrayal, and takeover. Occasionally, less brutal lexical choices, such as challenge, roll, and spill, were deployed in the TV news stories, but, more

typically, the language was forceful and war-like. The coup was depicted as an ugly business, nasty, bitter and intensely bloody. In deploying all of the elements of melodramatic storytelling—sensationalism, emotion, pathos, and moral polarization—television news coverage of Clark's ascension to the leader's role invoked deeply held gender norms, especially the fear of women who exercise power in the public realm.

As with any melodrama, which makes clear distinctions between good and evil, no doubt was expressed about the victim of this real-life TV production, which was narrated as a tragedy for Mike Moore. When the story broke, Moore was described as "the embattled leader" who was "clinging on for dear life against Helen Clark" (TVNZ November 28, 1993; December 1, 1993). "Come Helen High Water" read the deliberately provocative on-screen title for the lead story broadcast the night before the caucus vote (TV3 November 29, 1993). According to this script, Clark's ambitions represented Mike Moore's hell. That Moore made very public emotional appeals to supporters through the media while Clark refused to speak to the press about the challenge until three days after the story was revealed allowed Moore to build sympathy for his plight. In interview after interview Moore maintained he had been unjustly challenged and was "not going down without a fight" (TVNZ November 26, 1993; November 28, 1993). That Moore was willing to battle to the bitter end shored up ideals of aggressive masculinity; but it wasn't a "fair fight," according to the besieged leader, as the "ringleaders of the coup" refused to come out of hiding and address the issue "face to face" (TVNZ November 26, 1993; November 28, 1993). Reporters echoed this narrative, showing images of Clark meeting with constituents and going about her everyday business while declaring she was "maintaining silence" and "refusing Moore's offer of a peace conference" (TVNZ November 29, 1993). In contrast, TV news broadcasts emphasized that Moore was well liked in the electorate, "a man in touch with his people" (TVNZ December 1, 1993) and announcers and interviewers alike expressed incredulity that Moore was "fighting for his political life" at this juncture (TVNZ November 30, 1993). Thus much of the coverage suggested that Clark was plotting a stealthy, mean-spirited, and unjustified challenge to an authoritative and highly popular leader.

Television coverage further cast Clark as the undisputed villain by asserting that she deliberately and calculatedly knifed her opponent in the back. For example, Clark's post-victory television interview was introduced with this teaser: "Next, in the studio with *Mike Moore's blood still fresh on her hands*, the new leader of the Labour Party, Helen Clark" (emphasis mine; TV3 December 1, 1993). The very first question posed to Clark in this interview reiterated the accusation of treachery: "Helen Clark, I can't see any blood on your hands, but what's it like to knife a leader in the back like that?" (TV3 December 1, 1993). Moore was thus represented as the undeserving victim of Clark's unruly political ambitions. Pathos and moral polarization drove the storyline. After Clark's victory in the caucus vote, news stories sustained sympathy for Moore while communicating contempt for Clark. Moore's accusation of personal betrayal was reinforced with images of his loyalists declaring their shock, disgust, and dismay with the result of the leadership challenge and voicing their anger towards the Labour Party (TV3 December 1, 1993). Person-on-the-street interviews expressed indignation with the party's behavior toward the former leader and Clark was called a "double-crosser" (TV3 December 1, 1993). An interviewer described Clark's ascension as "a victory for the politics of conspiracy and betrayal" (TVNZ December 1, 1993). She was accused of plotting to wrest the leadership from Moore as early as 1990 and certainly as scheming during the 1993 election campaign: "You used Mike Moore during the campaign, knowing that you would dump him immediately afterwards" (TVNZ December 1, 1993).

Given the "circumstances of this leadership coup," this interviewer demanded, "How can we trust you?" The trope of the unruly woman, who makes a spectacle of herself by dominating men and disrupting expectations of feminine behavior (Anderson and Sheeler 2005, 28), was clearly evident in these representations of Clark.

Clark's gender was marked both directly and indirectly by the TV coverage. An announcer's observation that "the other woman in Mike Moore's life proved his undoing," suggested female duplicity is mobilized from the private realm, in the manner of a mistress seeking revenge (TV3 December 1, 1993). By saying Clark "dumped" Moore, broadcasters invoked images of a personal relationship gone sour. The coverage was gendered in its evaluations of Clark as well. TV3 explicitly drew attention to the consternation incited by a woman in a leadership position by proclaiming that: "*her gender is causing problems for the party's Maori MPs*" (emphasis mine; TV3 December 1, 1993). Even more prevalent, and destructive, were depictions of Clark as callous and emotionally detached, thus fundamentally unwomanly. TV interviewers circulated this theme repeatedly. For example:

I don't mean to be cruel ... [but] the perception of you by the public polling methods that are done is that you are cold, you are an intellectual; you are not a warm person, you are not the kind of person who attracts public support as a leader. (TV3 November 30, 1993)

TVNZ's interviewer said: "You have a rather cold and remote image. Now, you're also seen to have blood on your hands. That is surely going to deepen public hostility ..." (TVNZ December 1, 1993). That Clark was consistently represented as aloof and emotionally out of touch, "neither liked nor loved" (TVNZ December 1, 1993), illustrates the discomfort she provoked by transgressing the boundaries of normatively feminine behavior. Melodramatic storytelling thus constructed Clark as villainous, cruel, heartless, and power-hungry, a sufficient threat to the dominant social and political order to be criticized and even reviled for her actions.

Jenny Shipley: "Jim's Gone and Jenny's In"³

If New Zealand broadcasters were hoping the governing National Party's leadership transition would provide another sensational, prolonged, and bloody "battle" they were surely disappointed, as the challenge was played out quickly and surreptitiously. Jenny Shipley's plan to contest the party leadership was reported on November 3, 1997, and Bolger's resignation and the simultaneous ascension of Shipley to the leadership took place the next day. Attempts to hype the leadership upset by focusing on classic coup themes of acrimony and duplicity included this breathless opener: "Bitterness in the Beehive, Bolger's betrayed, and Shipley says 'shift out, I'm leader'" (TV3 November 3, 1997). But the outcome was never in doubt. Any chance of a lengthy and bloody contest evaporated when Prime Minister Bolger, presented with irrefutable evidence that he would lose the vote, agreed to gracefully depart from the leader's office.

While it was called a coup, a shake-up, and a take-over, there was little opportunity to evoke pathos for the vanquished government leader. Even though television news broadcasts stressed Bolger's emotional reactions, for instance by describing him as "close to tears" (TV3 November 4, 1997), TV newscasters were hard pressed to portray him as a deeply wounded victim. Bolger was widely acknowledged to be gracious in defeat. Moreover, the woman who "caused his downfall" offered a heartfelt tribute to the former

prime minister, praising him for being a “wonderful leader of this country in the last ten years” (TV3 November 3, 1997). TV news reports never accused Shipley of plunging a metaphorical dagger into her opponent’s back. For instance, TV3’s John Campbell, who is generally much more acerbic, said Shipley was “being seen almost as a meanie” (TV3 November 4, 1997). As a result, Shipley was portrayed as commanding but kind, nurturing in her ability to effect a smooth leadership transition.

Even though Shipley wasn’t cast as a ruthless villain, TV news coverage certainly dramatized and sensationalized the event in ways that revealed gendered norms and assumptions. The television reports played up the uniqueness of a woman in the top job. “A world first and *a coup for women*: that’s how political analysts are describing National’s leadership shake-up” said an announcer (emphasis mine; TVNZ November 4, 1997). This first woman framing, albeit admiring in its tone, highlighted the novelty of a woman in power. For example, images of Shipley in action were interspersed with adulatory quotes from politicians and regular folk, narrated to the tune of Helen Reddy’s feminist anthem, “I Am Woman.” Moreover, a spectacle was created and melodrama’s need for conflict was met by re-drawing the battle lines. TV news coverage declared that Shipley’s fight was not with the man she replaced; instead, it was with another woman, Labour leader Helen Clark. When news of the coup leaked the night before the official announcement, the announcer said Shipley’s victory would “wreck Helen Clark’s dream” (TVNZ November 3, 1997). Another reporter rather gleefully echoed the view that Clark was the real casualty of Shipley’s victory: “Helen Clark’s tutu has been crushed quite severely by this because that great prize of being the first woman prime minister in New Zealand has actually been taken quite swiftly away from her” (TV3 November 4, 1997). These representations feminized and infantilized Clark by characterizing her as a young child whose dreams of political power were akin to those of a girl imagining herself a prima ballerina. Clark’s hopes were thus metaphorically crushed by Shipley’s rise to power. Even more titillating to the press was the prospect of two women going head-to-head in an election “battle.” As a political reporter declared, “you could sell tickets to this, it’s sort of like going from the male boxing to the female boxing. It’s *sort of a spectacle* . . .” (emphasis mine; TV3 November 4, 1997). Indeed, the New Zealand press characterized the resulting electoral contest between Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark as a “catfight” between two “Xena princesses” (Susan Fountaine and Judy McGregor 2003, 4).

Jenny Shipley’s leadership challenge was also gendered in the conventional manner experienced by women politicians, through attention to her domestic roles and intimate relationships. Because Shipley stepped into the exalted role of prime minister, TV news featured a coronation theme in much of the reporting about both her “coup” and the swearing-in ceremony held a month later. Coronations evoke pride in a nation’s cultural heritage, “provide reassurance of social and cultural continuity,” and invite admiration for the person accepting the crown (Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz 1992, 37), and in this instance cultural stability was maintained by presenting the new prime minister as a mother and housewife. Several stories featured images of Shipley’s husband and children (TVNZ November 4, 1997; December 8, 1997). An interviewer even asked Shipley about her husband Burton’s role in the new regime (TVNZ December 8, 1997), thus inscribing cultural norms of femininity which situate powerful women as extensions of their husbands (Anderson and Sheeler 2005, 16). Emphasis on Shipley’s motherhood and traditional family life branded her political persona as maternal and thus fundamentally unthreatening (Roth 2004, 57).

The threat of the feminine was further extinguished in Shipley's case because her gendered identity was positioned as an impediment to an effective and authoritative performance as New Zealand's head of state. Although the new prime minister was described in TV reports as strong, capable, and tough, indeed as "New Zealand's Iron Lady of politics" (TV3 November 4, 1997), her capacity to govern was questioned because of her gender. For example, TV3's political reporter Jane Young noted: "Some in the party *say they don't want to be led by a farmer's wife*" (emphasis mine; TV3 December 8, 1997). Shipley further attenuated the threat she posed to dominant power structures by expressing a lack of confidence in her own abilities, confessing that she was "a bit overwhelmed" by her new position (TV3 November 4, 1997). A more subtle, though no less de-legitimizing, message was conveyed by playing the song "Dreams are Ten a Penny" as the musical backdrop to Shipley's scenes in a video montage of the new prime minister:

Jenny, Jenny, dreams are ten a penny
 Leave them in the lost and found
 Jenny, Jenny, dreams are ten a penny
 Get your feet back on the ground.⁴

The lyrics suggested Shipley's dream of holding the prime minister's post was merely a flight of fancy. Melodramatic scripting thus positioned her femininity as unthreatening but antithetical to an authoritative performance of political leadership and any enduring claim on the levers of power.

Julia Gillard: "She Marched to Glory and Into Leadership"

Julia Gillard's last minute challenge to Kevin Rudd's leadership of the Australian Labor Party caught the media off guard due to the speed with which it developed and the surprise element of Gillard's move. "Leadership rumblings" were announced on June 23, 2010, but even as late as the 7:30 pm news the "Labor leadership spill update" was inconclusive, with ABC unable to confirm that Gillard was planning to contest the party leadership (ABC June 23, 2010). By the 10 pm broadcast, ABC was remarking on the "extraordinary night" that was unfolding, with "right-wing factional bosses" plotting against Rudd, planning to unseat him with or without Gillard's candidacy (ABC June 23, 2010). Therefore Gillard was, from the beginning, positioned as a "puppet" of these factional bosses, an instrument of their power and control over the Labor Party. At 10:22 pm, Kevin Rudd held a brief press conference, announcing that a vote would be held the next morning and that he would be contesting the leadership (ABC June 24, 2010). However, Rudd ultimately withdrew his name from the ballot and Gillard was "elected unopposed" (ABC June 24, 2010). Gillard was sworn in as prime minister in the early afternoon of June 24 and the entire transition was done and dusted in well under twenty-four hours.

The media were agog. "What a moment in Australian political history," said the lead in to one of the stories broadcast at the end of what ABC called "a staggering and historic day" in Australian politics (ABC June 24, 2010). Gillard's ascension was viewed as an extraordinary turn of events. In a story titled "First Female PM" the announcer declared: "The Gillard ascendancy is remarkable in so many ways. But the achievement of becoming the nation's first female prime minister is what's resonated here and across the country" (ABC June 24, 2010). As with Shipley, the first woman frame underscored the novelty of a woman climbing to a position of power. Moreover, Gillard's feminine identity was placed firmly in the

spotlight by showing the new prime minister embracing her partner, with the narration describing "Australia's new first bloke" as "a hairdresser turned real estate salesman" (ABC June 25, 2010). This story went on to remind viewers that Gillard had been judged unsuitable for high political office because she was "deliberately barren" (ABC June 25, 2010). But for TV news coverage, the spectacle was more than merely the anomaly of an unmarried, childless woman in the top job. This had all the hallmarks of a melodramatic political event. As a news announcer put it, "No one here's seen anything like it. A first-term prime minister dumped, a female prime minister sworn in, all after a political mugging that was ruthless, swift and effective" (ABC June 24, 2010). Although the word "coup" was rarely used, vivid and indeed violent language was strewn throughout ABC's commentary. Rudd was toppled, brought down, dumped, overthrown, and vanquished. The maneuver was deemed a challenge, plot, crisis, overthrow, spill, political mugging, and swift and ruthless dispatch, and opposition leader Tony Abbott described it alternately as a scalping and a political execution (ABC June 26, 2010). One report even called it the "Gillard revolution" (ABC June 26, 2010).

Melodrama's need for high emotion was also met by this particular "coup." Kevin Rudd performed the poignant scenes well beyond media expectations when he paused several times, teary-eyed, in an effort to gain control during his post-defeat news conference. Moreover, Rudd drew attention to his own tears: "What I'm less proud of is that I have now blubbered" (ABC June 24, 2010). These scenes were replayed in several news reports, often in close-up, and narrated with repeated references to the high emotional stakes (ABC June 24, 2010; June 25, 2010). ABC's political editor Heather Hewitt judged these tearful moments "excruciating to watch" (ABC June 24, 2010), thus underscoring widely held social discomfort with men exhibiting behaviors traditionally stereotyped as feminine. Rudd's public weeping violated norms of hegemonic masculinity. However, close-ups of his tears and references to the "sheer brutality" of his dispatch from office (ABC June 25, 2010) did not entirely serve to represent the former prime minister as an undeserving victim, a core requirement of pathos. The bulk of the television coverage described Rudd as the author of much of his own misfortune. According to ABC coverage, the "writing was on the wall" for Kevin Rudd (ABC June 24, 2010). Labor's poor standing in the polls was highlighted in several stories, as were Rudd's policy missteps and off-putting leadership style (ABC June 24, 2010). Rudd's culpability was punctuated with this assessment: "It's not difficult to work out how the ground swell of caucus support for Julia Gillard grew yesterday. There's been a genuine fear Labor could lose the election and concern that public perception of Kevin Rudd was the real problem" (ABC June 24, 2010).

There was no disguising the fact that Kevin Rudd went unwillingly. His removal from the party leader's post was called a ruthless and brutal betrayal and a "spectacular fall from grace" (ABC June 25, 2010; June 25, 2010). But the Labor Party was represented as the primary villain, not Julia Gillard. She was called the coup leader in only one report (ABC June 26 2010). More importantly, the "stabbing your colleague in the back" metaphor was mobilized just once and even then very feebly. In a lengthy interview broadcast on the ABC's 7:30 report, Gillard was asked how hard it was to "plant the knife" but the interviewer quickly dropped this line of questioning (ABC June 24, 2010). Instead, Gillard was consistently described as a faithful deputy and a reluctant challenger, unwilling to push Rudd out of the post: "She remained loyal to Kevin Rudd right up until yesterday, repeatedly dismissing speculation about a threat to his leadership" (ABC June 24, 2010).

In short, the party was blamed for Rudd's removal from office; Rudd was, according to one interviewer, "shafted by his own party" (ABC June 25, 2010).

Even better for Gillard, the television news coverage presented her as a heroic figure for women and for the country as a whole. Long touted as a prime minister in the making, her ascension seen as inevitable, Gillard's "rise to the top" was celebrated in several stories, with lingering shots of the swearing-in ceremony, interviews with proud family members and pleased constituents, and adulatory summaries of Gillard's successful political career (ABC June 25, 2010). But this was more than a coronation; as one report asserted, "she marched to glory and into leadership" (ABC June 24, 2010). "She's made it," said another (ABC June 24, 2010). However, these images of Gillard as the valiant redeemer did not successfully reconfigure the norm of heroic warrior masculinity because she was described as "brought to glory" not by her own initiative and fortitude, but rather by the factional leaders within the Labor party. ABC news maintained that a wave of pressure from the party's "right-wing factional bosses" carried Gillard into power (ABC June 25, 2010). Indeed, it was this "cabal of factional warlords" who "helped destroy" Kevin Rudd's career and deliver the prize to Julia Gillard (ABC June 25, 2010). Although this narrative served to exonerate Gillard in the "midnight assassination" of Kevin Rudd (ABC June 25, 2010), it also situated these "factional bosses," all of whom were identified as men, as the real power behind the throne. One news story described Gillard as a "factional *puppet*" and asserted "even senior Labor insiders share some concerns about the circumstances of her rise" (emphasis mine; ABC June 24, 2010). Puppets do not rule on their own authority; rather they dutifully submit to the exercise of power by men (Anderson and Sheeler 2005, 19). The implication was that Gillard, as a woman, could serve merely as the standard-bearer for the party, holding power at the behest of the backroom boys. The assumption of male domination and female subservience thus undercut the seemingly heroic characterization of Gillard.

Discussion and Conclusions

While coverage of Clark, Shipley, and Gillard was shaped by contextual factors, in all three cases melodramatic scripting of the story highlighted and reinforced dominant archetypes of political power and authoritative leadership. Moreover, some of the characterizations produced by television news coverage of their "coups" resonated throughout these three women's political careers. The challenge posed by Helen Clark to Mike Moore in 1993 was truly a made-for-TV melodrama. Dramatic intensity was sustained throughout the event. Pathos was elicited when Moore took to the airwaves to fight for his job, and moral polarization rendered Clark the villain, brutally and single-mindedly pursuing her political aspirations by knifing Moore in the back. That this was treachery, not heroism, was amplified by the assertion that a "normal" woman would not so ruthlessly and unfeelingly dispatch her opponent. TV news fashioned the specter of a disloyal, scheming woman willing to kill her colleague's political career to advance her own unruly ambitions. By casting Clark's challenge as cruel and destructive, the television coverage invoked the threat of the feminine. Such characterizations circulated through subsequent news coverage of Clark, with epithets like "political dominatrix" and "Helengrad" underscoring negative evaluations of Clark's political persona and governance style (Karen Ross and Margie Comrie 2011, 6–7; Trimble and Treiberg 2010, 129).

In contrast, while coverage of the Shipley and Gillard challenges was certainly melodramatic, with considerable sensationalism and emotionality, neither woman was presented as a villain. A key factor underlying the more adulatory depictions of Shipley and Gillard was that their ascensions vaulted them into the illustrious and dignified role of prime minister. Not surprisingly, a coronation theme echoed through the television coverage, particularly of their swearing-in ceremonies. Yet the novelty value of the first woman to soar to the prime minister's post was highlighted in TV news stories, and the first woman frame so frequently applied to both Shipley and Gillard marked their presence in the political field as anomalous. As well, neither Shipley nor Gillard was written into the melodramatic script as an authoritative political leader. Even though Shipley was described as tough, determined, and strong, her traditional performance of femininity was highlighted by the coverage to articulate doubts about her ability to successfully hold the reins of power. Shipley's femininity was similarly emphasized in news coverage of her first, and only, electoral competition as prime minister by foregrounding her husband and children and contrasting her domestic "normality" with Helen Clark's childlessness (Fountaine 2002, 14–16; Trimble and Treiberg 2010, 125).

Melodramatic renditions of Julia Gillard's rise to power reinforced norms of male dominance and female subjugation even while it seemingly celebrated her heroism. Gillard was portrayed as the loyal deputy to the man she deposed, thus as a reluctant Queen. But it was the Queen-makers, the men who held the power behind the throne, who were accused of installing Gillard as their "puppet." ABC news reporting of the "Gillard revolution" in Australia thereby invoked tropes of female subjugation by pronouncing Gillard's victory as a result of behind-the-scenes maneuverings by the "factional warlords" in the Labor Party. Thus, underlying the adulatory reports of Gillard's remarkable political achievements was a cautionary tale; women's presence in political leadership roles is enjoyed at the bequest of powerful men. Gendered representations of Gillard reverberated throughout her three year term as prime minister. Her political authority was undermined during the 2010 election by what Sawyer (2012, 257) calls an "extraordinary level of scrutiny" of her private life. Also, when a surfeit of sexist comments and accusations lobbed by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott impelled Gillard to give a fifteen-minute speech to parliament decrying sexism and misogyny in political and media discourses, Gillard was accused of inciting a "gender war". (Dennis Shanahan 2012).

My analysis has shown that, by scripting the Clark, Shipley, and Gillard leadership challenges as melodramas, television coverage presented highly mediated accounts of these political events. Particular "facts" were selected, organized, framed, and emphasized to create compelling storylines. In this way, melodramatic news storytelling creates "real fictions" (Nimmo and Combs 1982, 46). For all three women, the use of melodramatic, and often violent, coup discourses by television news heightened the drama and made gender both visible and constitutive of the very nature of the "battle." Melodrama is, therefore, "not merely a type of film or literary genre, but a pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse" (Anker 2005, 23). Even though Clark, Shipley, and Gillard succeeded in vanquishing men, discourses of rebellion and conquest, villain and victim, revolts and plotters, evoked a masculine battlefield on which women's very presence is anomalous, thus disruptive. By highlighting the threat of the feminine and reinforcing the masculine/feminine binary, TV coverage of the Clark, Shipley, and Gillard victories reinscribed patriarchal norms of political leadership.

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NOTES

1. I wish to thank the Chapman Archives and especially archivist Tim Gordon for allowing me access to the videotapes during research trips to Auckland in April 2009 and October 2010.
2. See <http://www.throng.com.au/abc/abc-tv-shows-audience-growth-through-2010>, accessed March 22, 2010. For instance, ABC's 2010 election coverage was watched by more Australians than was any other network's coverage.
3. The quotation describing Shipley's ascension is from a caller to a talk radio program.
4. Lyrics for "Dreams are Ten a Penny" by John Kincade were accessed from <http://www.lyricsmode.com/> on October 15, 2010.

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