

MASCULINITY AND THE POLITICS OF SEX SCANDALS

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It isn't often that you see someone stand up for an adulterer on national television. And yet, that's precisely what happened on a recent episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher* addressing the Anthony Weiner sex scandal. In the midst of the scandal, comedian Bill Maher invited Mr. Weiner, the former U.S. congressional representative, down to the studio for an interview and, surprisingly enough, gave him a very sympathetic reception. Not satisfied with merely consoling Weiner, Maher went further, raising a very provocative question: Why are we so critical of Weiner given that "what John F. Kennedy did was so much more dangerous and so much more consequential for the nation, and Clinton, too?" ("Bill Maher to Anthony Wiener"). The question is an excellent one and seemingly without an obvious answer. Those of us who have been following the media witch hunt of Weiner know that his "crime" was circulating embarrassingly sexual online messages along with pictures of his penis and bare chest. Not very flattering behavior, to be sure, but by most moral standards a lot more tame than the actual sexual infidelity committed by Kennedy and Bill Clinton.

Not only did Kennedy and Clinton have actual physical relations with a number of women while married, these men were presidents, politicians serving in our nation's highest office. And, for the most part, they got away with it. Clinton came out of the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and associated impeachment proceedings more popular than he went in (Saad). Even today, in 2014, he remains a popular and respected elder statesman (Saad). Kennedy, too, benefited from the same apparent generosity. His numerous and well-publicized sex scandals with the likes of Marilyn Monroe didn't end his political career; arguably, they added to his public stature and mystique. These men's sex scandals were admired, or at least tolerated. And yet, Weiner wasn't treated with nearly as much understanding.

The double standard identified by Maher is clearly a real and puzzling one. Why have we, the American public, decided to treat Weiner so differently? One possibility is that Kennedy and Clinton were more charismatic, successful politicians, and because we liked them more, we were willing to let them off the hook. Even so, it is a deeply unsatisfying explanation for how such a glaring double standard could be allowed to exist. For a politician, natural charm can go a long way, but we still view certain misdeeds as universally punishable. Adultery isn't supposed to be commendable for some and reproachable for others. What, then, could be going on?

One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in the realm of masculinity and male gender roles. Michael Kimmel, a sociologist specializing in gender studies, argues in his essay "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and

Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” that, in the words of David Leverenz, “ideologies of manhood have functioned primarily in relation to the gaze of male peers and male authority” (qtd. in Kimmel 24). Masculinity, in other words, is a “homosocial enactment,” a show of power meant primarily for the benefit of other men (23). In Kimmel’s conception, men are constantly attempting to signal their manhood to their peers, who “watch [them], rank [them], [and] grant [their] acceptance into the realm of manhood” (23). Successful enactment earns acceptance from male peers, while failure leads to emasculation and being “unmasked” as something less than a man. Precisely because of this constant environment of masculine performance, Kimmel observes, men are “under the constant careful scrutiny of other men” (23). Kimmel’s framework for understanding masculinity is meant to be broadly applicable to male social interactions. Arguably, it is particularly relevant to male politicians, who are under even more intense public scrutiny than most men. And, of course, few things bring more attention to a politician than a sex scandal.

Sex scandals, like most events in politics, are closely tied to optics and personal image. Accordingly, it makes sense to examine more carefully the relationship between masculinity, as understood by Kimmel, and appearances. Prominent art critic and scholar John Berger analyzes the link between gender and appearances in the third chapter of his book *Ways of Seeing*. His primary focus in that chapter is the depiction of nude women in European art, but many of his observations about male and female appearances are broadly applicable to the study of masculinity and femininity. Berger posits that “A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies” (45). When a man or an artistic depiction of a man is observed, characteristics such as vitality, power, and agency are associated with manhood. A woman, on the other hand, Berger argues, “has to survey everything she is and everything she does” (Berger 46). Because women’s bodies are constantly judged by men, Berger argues that they are commonly cast as objects under the gaze of another. Womanhood and femininity are therefore commonly associated with receptiveness and the presentation of oneself as an object, rather than as an actor. As Berger concisely puts it, the difference between the two is that “men act and women appear” (47).

Here, though, there appears to be a contradiction. Berger seems to claim that the defining difference between masculine and feminine imagery is that “men act and women appear” (47). But Kimmel argues that masculinity is characterized by “the constant careful scrutiny of other men” (23). If action is associated with manhood and being scrutinized with femininity, how does this square with the fact that men are constantly being watched and watching each other?

In spite of the apparent contradiction, in truth the two observations are intimately related. Berger’s assertion that “men act and women appear” is not stating that men aren’t the targets of scrutiny. Indeed, men are, as Kimmel points out, “under the constant careful scrutiny of other men.” Rather, what Berger is observing is that when

it comes to masculinity and femininity, the nature of the scrutiny is very different. The feminine is expected to “appear,” to cater to a (typically male) gaze. “Men survey women before treating them” (Berger 46), so the expectation is that women take the role of a surveyed object. Men under scrutiny, on the other hand, are expected to “act”—that is, to indicate agency, power, and masculinity. It is failing to meet these expectations that, as Kimmel notes, risks letting other men “unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (24). Berger’s observations about how men present themselves are just one example of Kimmel’s “homosocial enactment” of masculinity.

To apply the concepts of homosocial masculinity and masculine display to the case of Weiner, it is necessary to reexamine the differences between his behavior and the behavior of other adulterous politicians. Whereas Clinton and Kennedy had actual physical relationships with their partners, Weiner’s actions were limited to sending explicit messages images of himself to the women he was involved with. As Maher contemptuously remarks in one of his other segments on Weiner, “Edwards and Clinton banged butterfaces, and that’s embarrassing enough, but [Weiner] just came up with [his] hand” (“New Rule: Hand Solo” 0:40-0:53). At first glance, this statement seems as if it should be an argument for lenience towards Weiner in comparison to Clinton, former U.S. senator John Edwards, or Kennedy. In reality, the exact opposite occurred: Weiner was ostracized and Clinton and Kennedy lionized.

It is through the lens of masculinity and masculine display that the important difference between Weiner’s sexual misdeeds and those of Clinton or Kennedy becomes apparent. Although adultery by politicians is almost universally frowned upon, this does not mean it is unaffected by expectations of masculinity. As Maher rather succinctly puts it, “If you’re going to be the pathetic laughingstock of a tawdry, lie-riddled sex scandal, at least get laid!” (“New Rule: Hand Solo” 0:00-0:12). Although both Weiner and Clinton succeeded in conducting adulterous relationships, Weiner failed when it came to the expectation of masculine display. He didn’t get physical with the women. Rather, he sent images of his naked body to his partners for their viewing pleasure. His behavior was certainly sexual, but Berger and Kimmel would argue that it failed to meet the “true” masculine standard for sex. And this is reflected in what Maher jokingly says about him. “[Weiner’s] name shouldn’t even be Weiner, wieners are for closers! [Weiner’s] name should be hand, congressman Anthony Hand” (“New Rule: Hand Solo” 0:53-1:06). Instead of taking the active role of inducing and participating in physical intercourse, Weiner stopped short at sending nude photos: from the perspective of homosocial masculinity, a resounding failure.

In some ways, this verdict seems peculiar given that the penis, which Weiner photographed and flaunted, is presumably the most masculine organ of all. Although it isn’t quite as powerful a display of masculine agency as physical intercourse, sending pictures of one’s penis to women seems as though it should constitute, to some degree, a successful display of masculinity. Applying Berger’s criteria of masculinity makes it

apparent why this is not, in fact, the whole story. As Berger notes, the very idea of images and one's being viewed has a significant gendered component. Instead of taking on the traditionally male role of acting, Mr. Weiner made himself the object of a woman's gaze: he made himself a sight and exposed himself. In doing so, he allowed his masculine sense of self to be "supplanted by a sense of being appreciated . . . by another" (Berger 46), traditionally a female role. Within Berger's framework, willingly displaying oneself is an act of femininity, not masculinity. Although Mr. Weiner himself undoubtedly derived some pleasure from sending those pictures and being appreciated by his partners, the act of being sexually objectified by a viewer is fundamentally contrary to the masculinity described by Kimmel and Berger. On top of the obvious moral transgression of adultery, Weiner crossed a further line by exposing himself in a way that was distinctly "non-masculine."

This is precisely why Weiner compares unfavorably with the likes of Clinton or Kennedy in the public eye. As morally reprehensible as their actions were, in the context of masculinity, they behaved in a way that affirmed their manhood: actively seeking sex and using their public stature as a tool in sexual conquest. In fact, when it comes to evaluation of masculinity, sexual conquest is considered praiseworthy, not shameful. As Kimmel notes, "moments of heroic conquest of women carry, I believe, a current of homosocial evaluation" (24). Even as their behavior lowered voters' opinions of their personal morality, it affirmed their masculine credentials. It is exactly this view that Maher is playing off of when he points out with admiration that "Say what you will about Bill Clinton, but at least when he whipped out his dick on a woman, she didn't have to wait for it to start buffering" ("New Rule: Hand Solo" 3:30-3:37). Maher draws a clear distinction between Weiner's presentation of his penis as an object for appreciation and Clinton's use of his penis for physical intercourse. It is important to note that Maher doesn't deny the sense of disgust and guilt associated with Clinton's behavior. He acknowledges it by prefacing his statement with "say what you will." Within that framework, though, he indicates that as a fellow man, he was impressed by Clinton's masculine ability to "score" and disappointed by Weiner's failure to do so.

It's difficult not to feel that there is something very wrong with a standard that suggests that sexual misconduct is OK, as long as you nail the girl. Unfortunately, our traditional view of masculinity is not easily done away with. We can hope, though, that attitudes of masculinity, like so many others, will change and evolve with time. Hopefully, we will eventually see the day when sexual misconduct by our political leaders is no longer punished arbitrarily and irregularly. Then, finally, we will be able to hold all of our elected representatives to the same high standard. That is not to say, of course, that all we can do is wait and hope. Even before that day comes, we should make every effort to ensure that we aren't subjecting our politicians and our democracy to a harmful double standard. Politicians, like everyone else, make mistakes, and if, as a forgiving nation, we were willing to let JFK and Clinton off the hook, maybe we owe

the Weiners of the world another chance, too. As Bill Maher put it: “This country needs to grow up a little. We are losing too much talent” (“Bill Maher to Anthony Wiener”).

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