

Narrative, persona and performance: The case of Theresa May 2016–2017

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Abstract

A narrative and performance analysis of the period between the 2016 EU referendum and the 2017 general election makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to understanding personalised politics at the present time. This article contends that Theresa May's initial success proceeded from her rhetorical construction and performance of a persona founded on the archetypal healer, together with a narrative based on the myth of One Nation. However, her decision as Prime Minister to align herself with the pro-Brexit constituency and her neglect of the 'just about managing' called both her persona and narrative into question. The highly personalised general election campaign ensured the focus stayed on May, while the manifesto offered her a new 'flawed' narrative that resulted in the collapse of her early leadership image. By the time of the election, May was performing neither the narrative nor the persona; she was effectively absent from her own campaign.

Keywords

Brexit, Conservative Party, general election 2017, leadership performance, myth, narrative, One Nation, persona, rhetoric, Theresa May

This article examines Theresa May's prime ministerial performance between the EU referendum of 23 June 2016 and the general election of 8 June 2017. Through this case study, we offer a new way of appraising political leaders, and leadership in general, based on the concept of performance. In particular, we demonstrate that a leader usually performs two narratives: one about 'themselves', and the other the 'story' they purport to tell. The interpellation of these narratives constitutes leadership performance. We need to be precise in defining our terms because it is clear that those we will use – narrative, story, rhetoric, performance and even leadership – are employed vaguely and imprecisely in the media, public exchange and the academy. Saying that political leaders are storytellers who tell stories has become a truth universally acknowledged in politics but, in the absence of proper definitions, discussion remains at the level of cliché. By analysing a

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specific moment of May's premiership, we will demonstrate what these commonplaces really mean, and how and why they are so important in understanding the political.

This terminological imprecision was evident in the immediate comment on, and subsequent analyses of, the 2017 general election. Here, discussion focused on the failings of May and her advisors, the dichotomy of personality and policy (see, for example, Mcleod, 2017; Roberts, 2017), and emerging but ill-defined ideas about 'narrative' (see, for example, Gaber, 2017; Gerodimos, 2017). Most of these observations were pertinent, and all rightly identified the relationship between the Prime Minister and her party's manifesto as a focus for analysis. However, there was a widespread confusion regarding the distinct – and sometimes related – phenomena of 'presidentialisation' and 'personalisation' within UK politics. In brief, the presidentialisation thesis proceeds from the premise that there is a 'growing mutual autonomy between the chief executive and the legislature', which is manifested in a more 'leader-centred' style of politics (Webb and Poguntke, 2013: 650; see also Foley, 2000). Meanwhile, 'personalisation' finds expression in an 'increasing emphasis in the UK upon party leaders rather than election manifestos and policy commitments' (Dowding, 2013: 621; see also Langer, 2011). Uniting both models is their omission of the 'performance' of politics – here, the rhetorical performance of a persona (May) and a rhetoric-in-text (the manifesto) – and of the 'presidential' and the 'personal', and this is the focus of the article.

Recently, there have been major developments in the theorisation of political leadership and leadership performance, and of the rhetoric and narratives that accompany them (see *inter alia* Atkins, 2015a; Atkins and Gaffney, 2017; Bennister et al., 2017; Corner and Pels, 2003; Finlayson, 2002; Gaffney, 2001). The article extends this theoretical inquiry by addressing a series of questions: What is the nature of a political persona? How is a persona shaped by myths and archetypal figures? To what extent do perceptions of gender play a role in the construction of a persona? What is involved when a persona 'collapses'? If narratives inform the political, what are they and how are they performed? The article thus makes an original contribution to the scholarship on leadership and its performance, while offering a novel perspective on an extraordinary set of developments in UK politics between June 2016 and June 2017.

It is important to note that our analysis of May's persona and narrative is necessarily subjective. After all, 'we cannot escape or rise above mythology and we all carry ideologically driven perceptions and cultural influences on our interpretations of events and our attempts to understand society' (Kelsey, 2017b: 158). In turn, mythology and ideology shape our views about their positive or negative effects, and so preclude an impartial account of their functioning in contemporary politics (Kelsey, 2017b: 162). We begin the article by demonstrating how the performance of any narrative – but especially, a personalised one – is central to politics. Next, we examine three of May's key speeches: her declaration of candidacy (30 June 2016); the 'Number 10' speech (13 July 2016); and the announcement that she would call a general election (18 April 2017). These 'performances' are chosen because they frame May's premiership in the period under consideration and, furthermore, represent pivotal 'moments' in the construction and collapse of her persona and narrative. In addition, we briefly consider other addresses delivered in this time and some of May's media interviews during the election campaign. In doing so, we argue that, on becoming Prime Minister, May elaborated and performed a persona based on the mythological archetype of the healer. She also performed a narrative about her view of, and vision for, UK society. However, May's failure to perform her initial persona and narrative during the first year of her premiership ensured that both were in question by the time she

called the general election. Furthermore, they would be tested and seriously damaged during the campaign by her rhetorical performances of ‘herself’ and ‘her’ manifesto.

Theoretical considerations: Leadership persona and narrative

To capture and appraise May’s leadership as a ‘performance’, we need to consider persona and narrative. Taking these concepts in turn, we note three things regarding persona. First, the persona of a political actor may not correspond to the actual person.¹ Indeed, any large discrepancy between them only has political consequences if such is perceived (e.g. John F. Kennedy’s infidelities or Stalin’s neurosis). Normally, only the performed persona is politically relevant, a classic example being Margaret Thatcher. Her persona was widely ‘understood’: she was, for example, ruthless, courageous and uncompromising (Young, 1993), and she herself actively cultivated this public set of traits (Thatcher, 2012). Whether any of these qualities were ‘real’ is debatable; what is not debatable is that she was widely perceived in this way. In effect, this received view was created through a succession of performances of ‘self’ and narrative, and the re-telling of these by others (Moore, 2014). Here, it is worth highlighting that, although a politician’s ‘public’ characteristics may be relatively fixed, the value audiences attach to them is not. After all, ‘strength’ may be welcome at one moment, but seen as intransigence at another. Indeed, the ‘performing landscape’ is always changing and, moreover, a leader’s ‘capital’ tends to diminish over time (Bennister et al., 2017).²

Second, while persona is partly constructed by political advisors, its *reception* by different audiences is of greater importance.³ This latter is primarily shaped by the performance of the persona in speeches, media interviews and public appearances (Wheeler, 2012). In turn, such perceptions will contribute to a ‘received view’ of the ‘character’ of the persona, which will then constitute one of the main conditions of production of its subsequent performance. While the longevity (or brevity) of this ‘received view’ is to some extent attributable to the skills of the performer, we must also acknowledge the role of events and their potential to change audiences’ perceptions. A case in point is Gordon Brown, whose hesitation over whether to call an early general election caused irreparable damage to his public image as a strong, competent prime minister (Atkins, 2015b).

Third, to some extent, the performed persona corresponds to ‘recognised’ personae, archetypal cultural figures that the politician may intentionally or unintentionally emulate. Such archetypes include the warrior, the sage, the outlaw, the villain and the hero (Bodkin et al., 2009: 1019). Of particular relevance for our analysis are the archetypal figures of the healer and the ‘trickster’. For Lule (2001: 24), the trickster is ‘one of the most fascinating and complex mythological figures found in hundreds of societies’, given that it embodies such diverse qualities as cunning, playfulness and a desire to push boundaries (see Kelsey, 2017b: 43–44). The form these different archetypes take on is ‘largely dependent on context’ (Kelsey, 2017a: 24), so the characteristics of a hero figure, for example, will also reflect (narratives about) particular ideals and values that are present within a society (Kelsey, 2017b: 41; see Lule, 2001: 83). It is notable that most of these archetypes have traditionally been ‘male’ characters, and that arguably the more restricted range of female characters has performative implications. Moreover, stereotype takes up a larger part of a female performer’s persona, with the result that it is more fragile and has restricted performative freedom of movement (Butler and Scott, 1992; Fine, 2010; Gill and Scharff, 2013).

Regarding narrative, we can also make three points, the first of which is that narratives of leadership are *performed*. Consequently, narrative analysis and performance studies are equally valuable to our theoretical perspective. This is why we insist on the notion of ‘persona’ rather than ‘character’. In traditional leadership studies, the idea of character has been central, particularly as regards the development of trait theory in the post-war period. We, however, are not interested in the *real* character of May (or only inasmuch as it informs her public performance, her ‘*personnage*’) but in the *persona*, which is a perceived construction, a ‘character’ perhaps, but in the literary sense. The performance studies analogy (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995) is appropriate from a range of analytical perspectives: the role and use of setting (the ‘stage’), sequence, audience, drama, *mise en scène* and, of course, performance itself. There is a great complexity in a range of ‘characters’, in Shakespeare, for example. But for the most part, in the political persona (like most theatrical personae), the drive towards archetype, and therefore simplicity, is strong – particularly with regard to women. Archetype and simplicity are reinforced by repetition, a prerequisite to style that can both entrap and be a channel for agency. In May’s case, ‘performativity’ – the condition of performative repetition, development and change (Butler and Scott, 1992) – simultaneously offered possibilities and dangers.

Second, the performed narrative will be related to the persona performing it. Barring dramatic reversals in performance (e.g. General Nasser’s offer to resign after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war), the persona will narrate not only the self but also a narrative or ‘story’ that is compatible with and enhances the character. Thus, for example, a reassuring character will tell reassuring stories in a reassuring manner, and a bold character will try to tell a bold story. It is worth stressing that, in the present age of ‘personalised politics’, the storyteller is often the protagonist of the tale and, implicitly or explicitly, takes on the role of the hero (Gaffney, 2017); in short, the teller *is* the tale. Consequently, there must be two ‘tales’: one about the world, and another about the teller of the tale. These tales (narratives) are inextricably linked so, if any element of this rhetorical complexity falters, the persona becomes vulnerable.

Third, narratives have a structure, a purpose, a grammar and a rhetoric. Just like the folk tale, a story about governmental efforts to create prosperity, for example, has both a morphology and a plot (McQuillan, 2000; Propp, 1968). These narratives usually follow a sequence (Bal, 2009) involving ideas such as: something has gone wrong; certain characters (‘they’) are responsible; I/you are not ‘them’; some of us have already begun to reflect upon redress; we shall undertake a task; it may be a difficult one; and, with effort/virtue/leadership, we shall restore harmony. This kind of narrative echoes the structure of folk tales analysed by the Russian Formalists (McQuillan, 2000), in particular Vladimir Propp (1968).⁴ It is important to emphasise that these ‘stories’ not only require a coherent plot, but that the protagonist must meet the expectations of their audience. If these conditions are not fulfilled, then the narratives will not persuade. Thus, if a designated ‘hero’ does not perform heroic deeds (or is perceived as not so doing), for instance, then the narrative – and its credibility – will collapse.

At the time she became Prime Minister, May simultaneously performed two narratives, one of which was about the type of person she is. This narrative enjoyed a ‘received view’ that *preceded* performance, according to which May was a dutiful, middle-class vicar’s daughter, who was provincial, quietly Christian and personally modest, and who had served as an equally dutiful, personally modest and effective Home Secretary. Such a character (in the sense of *personnage*) builds on one of the strongest female archetypes in the British/English imagination, its centrality cemented by the novels of Jane Austen and

Charlotte Brontë. The second, meanwhile, was the ‘natural’ narrative of such a *personnage*, namely a caring yet practical appeal to a One Nation Britain which came after a period of division and strife. Through performance, May could enhance or modify these two narratives. As we demonstrate below, she did the latter, but in dramatically the wrong ‘characterial’ direction.

The preface to the story

The preface to the story comprised two formative elements: the circumstances of May becoming prime minister and the ‘received view’ of her as a persona, such as it was. We should stress here that the ‘preface’ to the stories performed by May, and the received view of her persona in 2016, also contained formative elements that would shape the subsequent story told and performance performed.

First, regarding circumstances, was the political turmoil that followed the Brexit vote. David Cameron’s resignation as prime minister ushered in a leadership contest, which brought to the fore divisions between not only Leavers and Remainers, but also the pro and anti-Boris Johnson factions within the Conservative Party. The latter came to a head when, in ‘one of the most extraordinary political U-turns of all time’, Michael Gove stabbed Johnson, his pro-Brexit ally, in the back by putting himself forward for the leadership (Shipman, 2016: 534). These developments tumbled forward day after day, evoking myths of the fall from power and making the unexpected seem increasingly commonplace. The leadership campaign itself was characterised by the childish (and male) antics of those vying for power, ruthless disloyalties, and humiliation for Gove with his heavy defeat in the second ballot. Entering the final round were the two female candidates, Andrea Leadsom (Leave) and May (Remain). This contest was framed as ‘good woman versus bad woman’ following the ‘Mothergate’ row, when Leadsom suggested that she would be a better prime minister because she had children (Allen, 2018: 108). And all this took place against the backdrop of a sense of crisis – even disbelief – concerning Brexit itself. As May (2016c) herself put it, ‘this is not a normal leadership election held in normal circumstances’. It certainly was not; it was a narrative of sudden changes reminiscent of ‘moments’ in history, myth or tale where everything happens in rapid sequence ushering in a *dénouement*.

The second element of the ‘preface’ was May’s ‘received persona’. In 2002, she cemented her reputation for dutifulness with her warning that the Conservatives would not return to power unless they shed their ‘nasty party’ image, and she later proceeded to cultivate it as Home Secretary. May’s 6-year tenure in this post was viewed as evidence of her effectiveness, given the previous Labour administration had seen the departure of 4 Home Secretaries in 5 years, while her tenacity in securing the deportation of the cleric Abu Qatada in 2013 attracted widespread praise. Following this episode, May came to be known as ‘the practical home secretary that gets things done’ (Wintour, 2013). She was also regarded as a moderniser, due to her support for efforts to increase the number of female Conservative MPs and her liberal reform of police stop-and-search powers (Shipman, 2016: 545), while her ‘adventurous’ collection of kitten-heeled shoes contributed to an unstuffy, somewhat playful image set against her ‘seriousness’ (Prince, 2017).

Although she projected experience and competence, May was not personally popular, and indeed former colleagues described her as ‘ruthless’ and a ‘micro-manager’ (Shaw, 2016). However, a backhanded compliment came during the party leadership campaign, when Ken Clarke observed to Sir Malcolm Rifkind that May was a ‘bloody difficult woman,

but you and I worked for Margaret Thatcher' (BBC, 2016). Rifkind's agreement gave weight to this implicit comparison, which was extremely flattering to May. After all, Thatcher's strength (or 'difficultness') was manifested early in her premiership, notably in her belligerence towards socialism, the trade unions and Argentina during the Falklands War. This affirmation of May's toughness, together with her received persona as a 'safe pair of hands', served her well in the aftermath of the Brexit vote (Allen, 2018: 108). These elements constituted May's more or less 'understood' persona as she entered the Conservative leadership contest, a persona on which she elaborated through two central speeches.

Chapter I: May's declaration of candidacy

In making her pitch for the Conservative leadership on 30 June 2016, May (2016c) acknowledged that the EU referendum campaign had been 'bruising and often divisive' and that, following the vote to leave, the United Kingdom was facing a 'period of economic and political uncertainty' that needed to be 'addressed head-on'. This portrayal of the referendum's aftermath supplied the rationale for May's candidacy, as she alone could offer the 'strong, proven leadership' needed to steer the country through the process of leaving the EU. Not only that, May (2016c) continued,

We need leadership that can unite our Party and our country. With the Labour Party tearing itself to pieces, and divisive nationalists in Scotland and Wales, it is nothing less than the patriotic duty of our Party to unite and govern in the best interests of the whole country.

The central themes of division, instability and confusion called forth precisely the leadership qualities that May had earlier cultivated and 'performed', and which had become part of her received persona, namely strength, capability and a sense of duty. These traits – the antidote to 'chaos' – formed the basis of her leadership narrative.

At the root of the divisions over vision, strategy and personalities lay the issue of Europe. England and Wales had voted Leave while Scotland and Northern Ireland supported Remain (Allen, 2018: 111), and indeed the Conservative Party and Labour were split along the same lines. More broadly, the referendum result 'gave full expression to much deeper divides in Britain that cut across generational, educational and class lines', with those who were 'left behind' being more likely to vote in favour of leaving the EU (Goodwin and Heath, 2016: 331). Against this backdrop, May's agnosticism on Brexit was advantageous, as it enabled her to present herself as the unity candidate (Allen, 2018: 107). In doing so, May gave expression to the qualities of the archetypal healer to convey the message that, by bringing leadership and stability, she alone could heal the wounds inflicted by a bitter referendum campaign. As she told her listeners, 'The job now is about uniting the Party, uniting the country – securing the Union – and negotiating the best possible deal for Britain' (May, 2016c). It was through this combination of vision and practicality that May, as a healer, could comfort and reassure the nation at its time of crisis.

May's version of the healer archetype reflected the ideological tradition of One Nation conservatism. This thinking is evident in her pledge to implement a 'serious programme of social reform' to tackle the 'burning injustices' that scarred the country. More than that, May (2016b, 2016c) explained,

If you're from an ordinary, working-class family, life is just much harder than many people in politics realise . . . You can just about manage, but you worry about the cost of living and the quality of the local school, because there's no other choice for you.

In a jibe at the Cameroons (and others), she observed that ‘not everybody in Westminster understands what it’s like to live like this. And some need to be told that what the government does isn’t a game’ (May, 2016c). With this criticism, May depicted her rivals as archetypal tricksters, whose function in this instance was to ‘challenge orders and mix things up with chaos’ (Kelsey, 2017b: 143). These characteristics found their clearest expression in the decision to hold the EU referendum, and in the exaggerations, falsehoods and ‘mischief’ that marked the campaign (see Stone, 2017). The turmoil that followed the result provided the context for the construction and emergence of a healer figure, who would repair the damage wrought by the tricksters and restore a mythical state of order and harmony.

On 13 July 2016, May became prime minister. Speaking outside Number 10, she reaffirmed her belief in ‘a union not just between the nations of the United Kingdom but between all of our citizens, every one of us, whoever we are and wherever we’re from’ (May, 2016b). In practical terms, the achievement of this goal required government action to ‘make Britain a country that works for everyone’, and May (2016b) proceeded to address the ‘just about managing’ directly:

I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle. The government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours . . . When we take the big calls, we’ll think not of the powerful, but you.

Through these words and her demeanour, May again showed that she could ‘see’ the ‘just about managing’ and, as an ‘ordinary person’ herself, understood their circumstances. There is an implicit criticism of Cameron’s Britain here, a brand of conservatism that overlooked these people, whereas May’s did not; indeed, she was ‘returning’ to them, they were re-entering the leader’s landscape, and the vocative form dramatically enhanced the imagined relationship. Her vision for the country’s future was an evocation of arguably the strongest myth in British political culture – that of One Nation – which was used with varying degrees of success by generations of politicians since Disraeli, including Harold Macmillan, Tony Blair and Ed Miliband.

Overall, May’s declaration of candidacy built on her received persona as a strong, reliable and down-to-earth politician who was eager to get on with the job of governing. In both this address and the Number 10 speech she set out her vision of a fairer society, a Britain that works for everyone and not for a privileged few. Uniting May’s leadership narrative and her One Nation vision was her invocation of the characteristics of the archetypal healer, whereby she alone could provide the strong leadership required to heal the wounds of the body politic. The public’s initial reaction to May was positive, and the Conservative MP George Freeman summed up her appeal as follows: ‘She has John Major’s moderate and decent One Nation instincts with a touch of Maggie’s steel, and it’s a winning combination’ (quoted in Shipman, 2017: 243). Moreover, the appointment of Remainers and Leavers to her Cabinet served to reassure pro-Brexit MPs (Allen, 2018: 113), while making good on her pledge – at least in theory – to heal her divided party and the country. How she subsequently interacted with these two broad groups would prove strategically mistaken.

Chapter 2: The May government, 2016–2017

During her first year in office, the traits that May possessed or was perceived as possessing were vulnerable on three counts, each of which corresponds to our theoretical points concerning narrative, persona and action. They were: a lack of progress regarding

elements of her narrative; indications of mistakes in the ascription of qualities; and a failure to dispel the prevailing sense of confusion over the country's future direction and the government's intentions.

During her candidacy, May (2016c) famously coined the phrase 'Brexit means Brexit' to reassure her listeners that she would deliver on the referendum result. While this pledge afforded her an opportunity to define and shape Brexit in the first year of her premiership, it was one she failed to take. As a consequence, 'public debate dissolved into whether the UK would mimic Norway, Switzerland, Turkey or Canada' (Shipman, 2017: 3), while the reality of implementing Brexit raised numerous issues that had been overlooked in the campaign. Among them were the question of the Irish border, the impact on financial services and, inexorably, just about everything else. Thus, the post-Brexit debate presented May and her government with a plethora of unaddressed and possibly intractable problems, to which they seemed to offer no persuasive solutions. Also lacking was any dexterity or even eloquence, as May herself became increasingly 'wooden' in her appearances and performances. We return to this difficulty in our analysis of the election campaign.

By September 2016, May's reticence in elaborating her vision of Brexit led Leavers and Remainers to accuse her of 'dithering' (Shipman, 2017: 10). Moreover, Boris Johnson, formerly the champion of 'global' Brexit, had developed an idiosyncratic narrative that countered hers (Shipman, 2017: 30–31), making him appear not only as an ideological adversary but as a personal rival. Consequently, May's decision to appoint him Foreign Secretary increasingly came to be viewed as an error of judgement, rather than the master stroke it had appeared to some at the time (Shipman, 2017: 69–70). Taken together, these perceptions cast doubt on May's received characteristics of strength and competence, and therefore her ability to deliver on the referendum result. In a bid to assuage concerns about her leadership, May (2016a) promised delegates at the Conservative Party Conference that she would 'respect what the people told us on the 23rd of June – and take Britain out of the European Union', a process that would begin with the triggering of Article 50 by the end of March 2017.

In the same speech, May again linked Brexit to the plight of the 'just about managing', telling her audience that the vote was 'about a sense . . . that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them'. As such, she continued, 'we have a responsibility to step up, represent and govern for the whole nation . . . That means tackling unfairness and injustice, and shifting the balance of Britain decisively in favour of ordinary working class people' (May, 2016a). Here, May performed her strong, dutiful leadership persona, while simultaneously reaffirming the One Nation narrative she espoused on becoming prime minister. However, her commitment to healing divisions did not extend to those for whom the outcome of the referendum was 'simply bewildering'. Speaking directly to 'the public' or, more accurately, to Leave voters, she asserted that the 'well off and comfortable' find 'your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to your job security inconvenient' (May, 2016a). By doing so, May firmly aligned herself with the Leavers, thereby sacrificing an opportunity to 'put herself above both warring factions and stake a position as a national leader in a way that might have given her greater freedom of manoeuvre in the months ahead' (Shipman, 2017: 16).

Speaking at Lancaster House in January 2017, May (2017a) stated that 'after all the division and discord, the country is coming together'. However, this claim sat uneasily with her argument that 'No deal for Britain is better than a bad deal for Britain', through which she once more positioned herself against the Remainers and many Leavers too.

May thus became the potential author of a no-deal Brexit, crashing out of the EU with all the uncertainties this involved, and sowing confusion – particularly among the Leave constituency itself. Further undermining May's view of a nation healing itself was her government's failure to help, or even rhetorically 'imagine', the 'just about managing'. In the March 2017 Budget, this neglect was exemplified by the decision not to ease austerity or remove the welfare cap, and so to alleviate concerns about the rising cost of living (Chakelian, 2017). Instead, the Chancellor announced a one-off payment of £320 million for 140 new free schools, some of which could be used to expand selective education. For critics, this move risked creating or, rather, *re*-introducing an 'us and them' divide and, moreover, would do nothing to benefit disadvantaged children (Stewart and Walker, 2016). Despite May's claims to the contrary, therefore, her 'One Nation government' was entrenching – rather than alleviating – inequality, in 'reality' and narrative alike.

These were some of the reasons why May's persona and narrative were no longer in synchrony several months into her premiership. A further issue was that, between 2016 and 2017, she sacrificed her image as the healer of the divide within her party and the nation by becoming, performatively, the leading Brexiter, trying to manage and stay ahead of the antics of the tricksters. And May did so despite the fact that her 'healer' status had been the main reason for her easy victory and initial popularity. From a theoretical perspective, therefore, her failure to perform the Theresa May of June 2016 meant that her overall narrative was dissipated. And the mythical healer was not only unable to heal the Brexit wound, but on the domestic level – there was no time for legislation on anything else – failed to act on the One Nation promise of her declaration of candidacy and her Number 10 speech.

Chapter 3: The general election campaign of 2017

On 18 April 2017, May (2017b) announced her intention to call a general election. She opened her statement with a reminder that, in the wake of the EU referendum, 'Britain needed certainty, stability and strong leadership, and since I became Prime Minister the Government has delivered precisely that'. With this reference to her record in office, May displayed the traits of dependability and strength that were central to her received persona. Drawing on the preface to the story, she returned to the theme of unity, which she believed was necessary at 'this moment of enormous national significance'. After all, May claimed, 'the country is coming together, but Westminster is not'. Here, she invoked the healer archetype to suggest that, under her premiership, the nation was recovering from the bruising experience of the EU referendum. However, she continued, 'division in Westminster will risk our ability to make a success of Brexit and . . . cause damaging uncertainty and instability to the country'. For May (2017b), then, a general election afforded a means for healing these wounds and preventing further injury to the nation, presumably by increasing the Conservatives' parliamentary majority. She thus challenged her opponents (here ostensibly Labour), who once more were characterised as tricksters, 'to show you mean it, to show you are not opposing the government for the sake of it, to show that you do not treat politics as a game', and let the people decide.

May's announcement came as a surprise, especially given her oft-repeated assurances that she would not call an early election. So, in a bid to pre-empt criticism of this U-turn, she claimed she had concluded 'only recently and reluctantly' that 'the only way to guarantee certainty and stability for the years ahead is to hold this election and seek your support for the decisions I must take' (May, 2017b). Implicit here were the following two

assumptions: first, that the Conservatives would increase their majority and, second, that May personally would steer the country through the Brexit process. This raised the question of the confused aim of this unnecessary election. While it pretended to the reconciliatory goal of June 2016, its actual purpose was to push through Brexit, seemingly (though not unequivocally) against Labour but, in reality, against the cacophonous criticism of the Conservative hard Brexiters. Indeed, it was in this vein that May (2017b) presented the election as a straightforward choice between ‘strong and stable leadership in the national interest, with me as your prime minister, or weak and unstable coalition government, led by Jeremy Corbyn’. Once again, however, these ‘immediate’ assumptions pertained to a year earlier. In terms of narrative, May was still performing mid-2016 as if the ensuing 10 months had not happened.

As regards the persona being performed, and expanding on the theme of leadership, May (2017b) personalised the campaign to a remarkable degree, asserting that

Every vote for the Conservatives will make it harder for opposition politicians who want to stop me from getting the job done. Every vote for the Conservatives will make me stronger when I negotiate for Britain with . . . the European Union.

In so doing, May placed herself *above* her party, offering herself as the embodiment of her particular style of leadership rather than of her brand of conservatism. This effect was heightened by her failure even to mention ‘her vision for post-Brexit Britain or her wish to transform society for the benefit of those left behind’ (Shipman, 2017: 196). In essence, May had thrown off the ideological moorings of the One Nation narrative and would fight the election on the basis of her persona alone. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the campaign slogan ‘Strong and Stable’, which referred to the election’s intended outcome of a Conservative government with a clear majority (Shipman, 2017: 249), came to be about May herself (hence, the rapidly spread antonymous ‘Weak and Wobbly’) and, by implication, the supposed deficiencies of Corbyn (Harmer and Southern, 2018: 237–238). The result was that, at the start of the campaign, May *lacked a compelling narrative*. In theoretical terms, it is clear that a fundamental mistake of the ‘personality politics’ school is to forget that it is rarely about personality *per se*. Rather, it is concerned with the performance of a narrative about both the person and a culturally shared vision. Not only that, the acute personalisation of a leader without such a narrative makes them vulnerable to one of the strongest negative political myths, that of the leader who is alone, who has forgotten the vision, and taken wrong counsel from misguided and obsessive courtiers who have cut them off from reality.

While the opinion polls pointed to a Conservative victory, the political case for an election was less straightforward. May’s assertion that the Opposition was trying to jeopardise Brexit was clearly absurd because, at the time, most Labour MPs and the leadership accepted that the result of the referendum had to be upheld; indeed, the parliamentary party had supported the Bill triggering Article 50 at its Third Reading by 179 to 52 (Tonge et al., 2018: 3). Moreover, it carried the deeply undemocratic implication that ‘the best outcome of an election is the elimination of inconvenient dissent’ (Behr, 2017). The absurdity was also an irony, for the real divisions constraining May’s persona and narrative were not created by Labour – the ‘enemy without’ against whom she positioned herself as a strong leader – but were within the Conservative Party itself. Here, May’s 12-seat majority left her and her Brexit strategy ‘vulnerable to the whims and demands of her own backbenchers’ (BBC, 2017), notably the pro-Brexit European Research Group.

Rather than seeking to placate this ‘enemy within’ by offering the hardest of Brexits and calling an early general election, May arguably would have done better to tackle them head-on. After all, ‘in offering a risible, implausible basis for the country going to the polls, the Prime Minister neutered her potential assets of reliability and trustworthiness from the outset’ (Tonge et al., 2018: 3). These traits were, of course, central to her received persona, and without them she would founder.

Following the launch of the Conservative manifesto on 18 May 2017, the consequences of the personalised campaign strategy became clear. A full month after her general election statement May at last had a narrative, but its fundamental flaws meant it could not lend her rhetorical support. Not only that but, because of the acute and deliberate personalisation we have stressed, she rapidly became (seen as) solely responsible for the campaign as it imploded. Our aim here is not to itemise these failures, but to examine their role in the ‘story’ that emerged in the run-up to the election. We should add that the unhappy list of manifesto proposals did not address the crucial unanswered question concerning what the government was doing about Brexit, the apparent reason for the election itself. Our concern is with the *performance* of the manifesto – what was said and the messages that were disseminated, retained or deformed through poor performance – rather than with the document itself. Indeed, much of the 2017 manifesto lay unread, but the parts that were retained were so *in the context* of the knowledge that a full manifesto existed. Such awareness was politically consequential because, beyond the narrative expression of the manifesto, there was the implicit assumption that the document reflected a specific doctrine. In part, it was the belief that May’s position on foxhunting, school meals, social care and public sector pay were reflective of an underlying ‘true’ Conservative ideology – one that now was closer to ‘Old Toryism’ than to One Nation – that made them so damaging (see Ross and McTague, 2017: 193). Let us examine four key elements in the campaign ‘story’ related to the manifesto.

The first of these moments centred on the Conservatives’ promise to ‘grant a free vote, on a government bill in government time, to give parliament the opportunity to decide the future of the Hunting Act’ (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017: 26). May affirmed this policy in a speech in Yorkshire on 9 May, where she told her listeners that ‘personally I have always been in favour of foxhunting and we maintain our commitment’ (quoted in Mason, 2017). While the promise sat uneasily alongside a pledge to ‘continue to take action to improve animal welfare’ (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017: 26), the negative symbolic weight it carried was considerably more important. Foxhunting is widely seen as a sport of the rich, and yet May (2016b) had claimed in her Number 10 speech that her government would serve ‘ordinary working people’ and not the ‘privileged few’. The issue was a major topic of conversation on the doorstep, and ‘potential urban switchers began to think that the prime minister was the same as any other Tory’ (Shipman, 2017: 368). In the words of one voter: ‘It’s not a big thing, but why would you want it back so very much unless you’re quite bloodthirsty?’ (Maltby, 2017). The narrative of the manifesto, therefore, contradicted May’s ‘caring’ persona and the inclusive message of One Nation, and so cast doubt on her credibility. Simply put, hunters do not hunt and kill animals for sport, and the heralds of One Nation do not call an unnecessary election to facilitate this.

A second – more serious – controversy erupted on 20 May, in response to the manifesto pledge to scrap free school lunches for all but the poorest children in their first 3 years of primary school (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017: 51–52). Though the Conservatives planned instead to give all children up to the age of 11 a free school breakfast, opponents claimed the move would have a deleterious effect on the ‘just about

managing', whose interests May had previously promised to protect (Savage, 2017). There was an explicitly gendered dimension to the public criticism of the prime minister, which was exemplified by the claim of a finalist on the TV programme *Masterchef* that 'May would not have introduced this policy if she had children', and the left-wing media's description of her as the 'lunch-snatcher' (Harmer and Southern, 2018: 239). The latter has obvious echoes of Thatcher's 'milk-snatcher' nickname which, though it predated her premiership, contributed to – and, crucially, was congruent with – the 'Iron Lady' myth. By contrast, the discrepancy between the pledge on school meals and May's healer persona further undermined the narratives of her leadership and of One Nation, and ultimately that of the campaign itself. This issue – like foxhunting and the two we consider below – also countered the received view of women's greater compassion, itself perhaps a myth but no less persuasive for that.

Third was the furore over the proposal that 'the value of an individual's house (over and above £100,000) should be included in the calculation of assets used to determine their contribution to the bill for their social care' (Bale and Webb, 2018: 51). This pledge was swiftly labelled the 'dementia tax' and, in conjunction with commitments to end the 'Triple Lock' on pensions and means-test Winter Fuel Payments, it came to be seen as an 'assault on pensioners' (Shipman, 2017: 290). Following a storm of criticism, May announced a U-turn on the social care policy at a press conference on 22 May, and proceeded to inform her incredulous audience that 'nothing has changed'. The damage wrought by this episode was considerable. Not only did the U-turn show political weakness, it also tarnished May's image as the trustworthy leader who would never go back on her word (by calling a general election, for example). Furthermore, the 'dementia tax' itself was 'portrayed as evidence that May was cold and out-of-touch with ordinary voters' (Harmer and Southern, 2018: 239). Here, the central elements of May's received persona – strength, capability and ordinariness – were countered by a rival narrative of 'weak and wobbly' leadership in the story of the election campaign. In short, the Thatcher-like 'steel' for which she had been praised on becoming prime minister was compromised by the idea that she was 'for turning' after all.

The fourth pivotal moment came on 2 June, when May appeared on the BBC's *Question Time Leaders' Special*. Here, she fatally damaged her 'caring' persona and her One Nation narrative by responding to a nurse's question about public sector pay with the words: 'There isn't a magic money tree that we can shake that suddenly provides for everything that people want' (Bale and Webb, 2018: 48). This incident again cast doubt on her previously performed concern for the 'just about managing' and, 'for many watching, it confirmed May's transformation from a caring Tory into a distant leader lacking the human touch' (Shipman, 2017: 349). In essence, the performed narrative of the manifesto pointed to a different version of conservatism from that which she portrayed in the two founding speeches of her leadership, namely the declaration of candidacy and her Number 10 address. This in turn reinforced the suspicion that May herself was a trickster, defined here not as a disruptor in the mode of Johnson et al. but as the embodiment of 'doubleness and duplicity' (Hyde, 1998: 7); her vision of One Nation was merely a façade behind which lurked the 'nasty party' of old (ironically, her own expression from 2002). Effectively, May was *becoming* the negative persona she had constructed as her adversary and, on a rhetorical level, had adopted the narrative she had previously rejected.

The narrative contradictions present in the story of the campaign resulted in the collapse of May's initial leadership persona. She was now performing an un-narrated persona, one that was either incomprehensible or remote, uncaring and 'just like the others'.

To an extent May's image problems were related to unspoken assumptions about gender, as her 'inability to empathise with various voters who expressed concerns about cuts to social security and the NHS' transgressed the traditional view of women as 'compassionate' (Harmer and Southern, 2018: 238). However, we have shown that May also failed to perform the traits and tasks of the healer persona she projected in 2016. The four campaign 'moments' discussed earlier did not manifest the qualities of empathy and compassion that are commonly associated with healers and, if anything, served to deepen the idea of the division between 'the many' and 'the few'. Compounding this impression was the fact that there was 'little sign in the manifesto of much being done either directly or indirectly for the so-called "just about managing", or the public services they relied on' (Bale and Webb, 2018: 51). Clearly, May's persona and her vision of One Nation had been jettisoned as performed narratives.

To portray *only* a strong leadership 'self' in April–June 2017, and then to withdraw that 'self' from the election narrative and in reality was a strategic disaster for May. This retreat was exemplified by her apparent efforts to avoid unscripted encounters with members of the public, while her decision to send the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, to the BBC leaders' debate on 1 June reinforced the belief that May was fearful of taking part herself. In performative terms, she had developed 'stage fright'. However, it is worth noting that May's refusal to attend was compounded by Corbyn's last-minute announcement that he would participate. After all, as Prime Minister she could not countenance the accusation that the Leader of the Opposition had forced her to take part in the debate against her will. Nevertheless, as polling day approached, the overwhelming impression was that May was absent from her own campaign, that she was performing *neither* the narrative *nor* the persona.

Conclusion

Our focus in this article on persona, narrative and performance yields a novel perspective on the workings of personality politics. We have shown that the Theresa May who entered the Conservative leadership contest in 2016 was regarded as a strong, down-to-earth politician who would heal the divisions wrought by the EU referendum. However, her failure as prime minister to articulate a vision of Brexit led to accusations of weak leadership, while her neglect of the 'just about managing' cast doubt on her healer credentials and on the One Nation narrative. In short, the conditions of failure were present even before May called the general election. The collapse of her leadership narrative during the campaign had significant political consequences. May's aloofness and awkward manner ensured that her nickname, 'the Maybot', gained traction with news organisations both in the United Kingdom and internationally, and so diminished her credibility (Crace, 2017). Furthermore, 'the qualities that made people like her over the first months of her time in office receded in importance' (Denver, 2018: 27) as 'strong and stable' transmuted into 'weak and wobbly'. May's poor leadership performance thus contributed to the decline of her approval rating between late April and 1 June 2017, and ultimately to the loss of the Conservatives' majority (Denver, 2018: 27–28).

More broadly, our analysis highlights the importance of archetypes and myth in contemporary politics. Given that archetypal figures 'do not carry a monolithic form or set of characteristics and values' (Kelsey, 2017b: 41), they can be adapted to different times and circumstances, and also to the qualities and ideological standpoint of the political actor. As such, the comparisons we discussed earlier between May and Margaret Thatcher

suggest there exists an ‘Iron Lady’ archetype in British politics. This figure is a ‘mythic recreation of the legendary Boudicca’ (Charteris-Black, 2011: 167), the Warrior Queen, which itself is a female form of the hero archetype (Lule, 2001: 83). While Thatcher compellingly performed the intransigence and bellicosity associated with the Iron Lady, May’s attempts to do so on Brexit and by calling an election to disarm her opponents were antithetical – indeed fatal – to her healer persona. What the article makes clear, therefore, is that reality is underpinned by a deep structure comprising folk tales, pantomime, tragedy and narratives, and that this informs the political far more than is generally assumed.

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Notes

1. Here, we are not analysing ‘self’ in a Freudian sense, or what might constitute personality or individual identity. This is why we use the term ‘persona’ rather than ‘character’. As our claims are performative not substantive, so we adopt Jung’s conception of persona as ‘a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual’ (quoted in Kelsey, 2017b: 42).
2. We are grateful to Reviewer 1 for making this point.
3. Given the limits imposed by an article of this length, we are not here analysing audience (or rather multiple audiences), audience expectation-disconfirmation or the reception of a performance, though we recognise their importance to rhetorical analysis. Nevertheless, we should emphasise that for May, and for us analytically, there are two ‘imagined’ audiences: the ‘just about managing’, and a more affluent but generous-spirited ‘us’ who observe her constructed persona with approval and sympathy. These audiences – like those among the supporters of other parties and indeed the electorate as a whole – will have different perceptions of May’s persona and narrative.
4. We recognise that the debates around plot, narrative and story, and what constitutes each and their relationship to one another, are more complex than we are depicting here. For the purpose of analysis, we take ‘plot’ to be the underlying narrative logic and meaning of a story.

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