

Women's Suffrage in Britain: From Chartist Exclusion to Pankhurst Radicalism

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Introduction

Breaking the Cage: The Respectable Woman's Rights

In an interview at Columbia University, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg addressed the phenomena of laws existing for the purpose of protecting women, stating,

The thought was that women are sheltered, that they are protected, that they are cared for by their men, so they're sheltered from working at night, they're sheltered from being police officers, firefighters [...] Men would think of themselves as good husbands, good fathers. And Brennan was responding to that [...] when he said, 'The pedestal on which women have been thought to stand more often than not turns out to be a cage.' That is, it confines what women can do.¹

In other words, laws designed to protect women can, ironically, have the adverse effect of trapping them. Though seeming to raise women to positions of superiority, whether moral, spiritual, or otherwise, they limit opportunity and further reinforce the image of women as unfit for certain roles. This concept is nothing new; it has been used throughout history as a means of justifying sexism and discrimination based on gender. In fact, the same reasoning was employed in late 19th-century Britain about women's rights. Compare the above passage with John Stuart Mill, who stated in his essay "The Subjugation of Women,"

[...] through the desire of men to shine in the eyes of women, [women's] feelings have great effect in keeping alive what remains of the chivalrous ideal—in fostering the sentiments and continuing the traditions of spirit and generosity. In these points of character, their standard is higher than that of men; in the quality of justice, somewhat lower. [...] But, with the present education and position of women, the moral principles which have been impressed on them [...] are, moreover, principally negative; forbidding particular acts, but having little to do with the general direction of the thoughts and purposes.²

¹ Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at She Opened the Door, Columbia University Women's Conference, interview by Poppy Harlow, February 11, 2018, 58:19-59:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQHxxnThDxg>.

² John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 21 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 329.

Although the language has changed somewhat, there remains a constancy in the way “moral principles” ultimately stifle opportunities available to women, keeping them on unequal grounds with men. Upper- and middle-class women were expected to maintain an increasingly Victorian sense of morality and respectability, ideals which ultimately were used as justification for refusing women the vote. This, then—extremely broadly—is the subject of my thesis: men have used morality as a tool to exclude well-to-do women from attaining the vote in Britain.

Many of the issues at hand surrounding women’s suffrage in 19th-century Britain—such as sexism, gatekeeping, and legal interpretation—are relevant today and will continue being relevant so long as morality plays a prominent role in politics. Sexism plays an important role in this thesis’s topic, a constant in the way women were treated from their early political involvement in Chartism to the final debates for suffrage. Integrally tied to this sexism is the male fear of feminine sexuality and, specifically, the fear of an imagined power that came with this sexuality, a power that had the potential to overturn the existing patriarchal hierarchies. During the Chartist years of the 1840s, women faced a form of gatekeeping in that the struggle for universal male suffrage was acceptable to male Chartists; however, participation by women was (in some instances) discouraged, with what was seen as radical female suffrage dismissed in favor of domestic family values. In addition, the interpretation of the law played a role in the women’s suffrage movement as progressives and conservatives argued over whether to view the language of existing suffrage bills as elastic or strict. Lastly, overwhelmingly at play is the issue of morality, especially of the family. Across the 19th century, opponents to women’s suffrage justified their opposition with appeals to conventional morality, arguing that granting the vote to women subverted traditional family values and pulled attention away from tasks more suited to wives. These factors are some of the prime reasons I have selected this topic: studying past

reasoning for denying basic rights to women can grant us context in contemporary conversations on human rights and is part of why history continues to be so important today.

I have selected such a broad time period for this subject because of the cumulative nature of the suffrage movement in Britain. The political experience of women active in the Chartist movement led to increased interest in female suffrage once Chartist demands were met; the campaigning for the 1867 Reform Act led to the growth of national female suffrage movements; the failure to timely achieve universal suffrage led to the violent demonstrations and actions of those in the Women's Social and Political Movement led by the Pankhursts. My prime intention here is comparative, examining how suffrage goals changed over the decades can give insight we otherwise might not have found while studying just the Reform Act of 1867, for example. Additionally, as I detail in a brief literature review, historians have rarely analyzed the women's suffrage movement in Britain with a comparative lens, primarily focusing on shorter time periods, perspectives that I will reference and sometimes challenge in this broader timeframe. The Chartist movement is an excellent starting point for formal political involvement for women's suffrage. Following that, the 1867 Reform Act is a significant turning point for the movement and offers the first instance in which universal suffrage had the potential to become a reality, despite the narrow odds. Regardless, the debates surrounding this act provide a wealth of insight into the reasonings for and against truly universal suffrage. Lastly, the Pankhurst movement of the early 20th century frames a different narrative of the women's suffrage movement, invoking the issues of civil disobedience and political violence, which stood in stark contrast with many mainstream moral arguments surrounding women's suffrage and popular conceptions of Victorian women as nonviolent and submissive. Only together can these disparate

narratives afford us a complete picture of the evolution of the women's suffrage movement in Britain.

The existing scholarship on the women's rights movement in Britain is varied and has relatively recently moved away from Marxist interpretations of class conflict toward post-structuralist studies, cultural history, and comparative studies. For instance, Harrison's *Connecting Links* compares the American and British suffrage movements of the early 20th century, and *Defining the Victorian Nation* by Hall et al. deliberately provides a post-structuralist (defined as challenging "stable [individual], easily located through recognizable criteria [such as] socio-economic position or status") interpretation of the 1867 Reform Act, a key turning point in this narrative.³ However, most scholarship does not analyze and compare key moments from the Chartist Movement, the 1867 Reform Act, and the period leading to World War I as a whole, a gap in research that this thesis seeks to plug. The following brief literature review, then, examines existing scholarship on these three periods.

Anna Clark, in her article about Chartism and domesticity, argues that Chartists emphasized notions of domesticity both to detract from accusations against the moral character of the working class and to draw women into the Chartist cause. Male Chartist leaders pushed the belief that an extension of the vote to working men would produce happy homes with men no longer constantly drunk, instead guarding the interests of their families. However, as Clark points out, this patriarchal narrative requires the submission of women to the decisions of men, directly

³ Patricia Greenwood Harrison, *Connecting Links: The British and American Woman Suffrage Movements, 1900-1914* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000); Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7-33.

contradicting many Chartist women who wanted the vote extended to them, too.⁴ Kathryn Gleadle, although not directly commenting on Chartism and domesticity, argues that the mere presence of women within the political sphere was potentially very disruptive while describing an incident in 1840. Two hundred “unruly” Chartists burst into a public meeting room, interrupting an anti-slavery meeting, to harass the Tory-friendly organization—however, the most contentious fact about the whole affair was allowing the presence of women in such a hostile space.⁵ Sections of Gleadle’s book focus on specific female voices as they experienced vacillating inclusion and exclusion within the political realm, and the example above echoes the themes of Clark’s article in which Chartists might claim to seek female support in their cause only to applaud when the right of women to exist in a public space is challenged. Jane Rendall, on the other hand, dwells little on Chartism, describing the fight for female suffrage as beginning in earnest with Owenite utopians and radicals in the 1830s and 40s, broadening in the 50s to include some liberals and religious groups like the Quakers and Unitarians.⁶ Rendall—following the post-structuralist introduction of the book—purposefully doesn’t paint support female suffrage in simple terms of class or political party, but rather as a complex blend of nonconformist thought from many backgrounds. These secondary sources together provide a varied outlook on female suffrage of the 19th century, which acts as a backdrop for the parliamentary debates of the 1860s.

In many sources, the question of female suffrage within the 1867 Reform Act is a small blip within the larger narrative. Smith dedicates a whopping page to the subject, detailing John

⁴ Anna Clark, “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language, and Class in the 1830s and 1840s,” *Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1992): 74–79.

⁵ Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 249–54.

⁶ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 122–26.

Stuart Mill's speech arguing for the inclusion of women to the extended franchise as well as the subsequent voting down by the House.⁷ Rendall devotes far more attention to this; on top of going into the specifics of Mill's speech and his arguments, she reveals the numerous petitions for women's suffrage in the months before, as well as those who voted for the amendment and news coverage of the incident.⁸ While Rendall expounds deeper on the subject of women's suffrage, both secondary sources are citing from the same primary source (*Hansard*, the verbatim record of Parliamentary proceedings), revealing different sets of priorities toward what is deemed important about these sources. Catherine Hall expands the perspective of the 1867 Reform Act by considering questions of empire and race, stating that "Irishness and blackness" directly factored into the issue of who to enfranchise. Subjects in Jamaica ultimately did not achieve any representation, remaining under the complete control of London in the wake of civil unrest, and it was feared that "representative institutions could never be re-established." However, the Irish—"part of the brotherhood of Britain," however unequal they were perceived—would be enfranchised.⁹ Hall's discussion of race sheds light on a largely ignored topic; Smith makes no mention of Jamaica and doesn't consider Irish enfranchisement as central to the Reform Act. This reflects a broadening interest in the Act's implications on those existing outside the predominantly English and male working class, and transitions into my extensive focus on feminine respectability within the debates, as well as the morality-focused campaigns suffragists undertook in the late 19th century against what they viewed as the corrupt aristocratic elite. Additionally, sexuality has received very little attention in studies on both Chartism and the 1867 Reform Act; this thesis makes headway into this underrepresented topic.

⁷ F. B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 204.

⁸ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 135–38.

⁹ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, 221–28.

The early years of the 20th century have received the most research about women's suffrage in Britain, partly because the highly public and confrontational strategies of the militant suffragette Pankhurst family received widespread coverage. One source from the 1980s, *Feminism and Democracy* by Holton, argues that class played a significant role in the movement, while incorporating "new women's history" and politics.¹⁰ However, this book focuses primarily on the first two decades of the 20th century, and delves into the political alliance between suffragists and the Labour Party. *Connecting Links*, by Harrison, offers a freshly comparative look between the American and the British women's suffrage movements. The study goes beyond simple comparison, however, and analyzes the specific connections and points of inspiration each movement took from the other. Kowal's article "One Cause, Two Paths" similarly compares these two movements, yet Kowal also postures *why* the British suffrage movement was much more militant than the American, comparing the influence of the French Revolution in Europe to influential Quakers in the early women's rights movement in the U.S.¹¹ Lastly, Kent takes a unique focus on sexuality in *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, a subject this thesis will contribute to. Kent primarily highlights conversations within the women's suffrage movement about sexuality, which partly resulted from the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act and was eagerly discussed among the youngest suffragists in the movement. This text analyzes suffragist arguments within a feminist interpretation and downplays the role of working-class women, compared to authors such as Holton.¹² These sources help demonstrate continuity in the broader narrative of female suffrage throughout the late 19th century.

¹⁰ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1-8.

¹¹ Harrison, *Connecting Links*; Donna M. Kowal, "One Cause, Two Paths: Militant vs. Adjustive Strategies in the British and American Women's Suffrage Movements," *Communication Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2000): 240-55.

¹² Susan K. Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 16-21.

This thesis is broken up into three chapters: the first chapter, entitled “The Man’s Charter: The Exclusion of Women in the Chartist Movement,” compares male and female experiences in the Chartist political movement of the 1840s. This chapter is divided into four sections: the first on men in the movement (beginning with the background of the People’s Charter), the second on moral rhetoric in the Chartist movement and how that impacted expectations of its women, the third on the women who pushed back against these expectations—the early suffragists of the budding feminist movement, and the fourth on public perceptions of both the male and female Chartists who fought for universal suffrage. This chapter provides context for the women’s suffrage movement, a point of contrast for later events and attitudes, and information on a male-centric political movement compared to future female-centric suffragists.

Chapter Two, entitled “The Reform Act of 1867 as a Trigger for the Female Suffrage Movement,” examines the titular event as a turning point in the possibility for suffrage. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first on the Act’s background as well as the arguments for and against extending the vote to all men, the second on John Stuart Mill’s relationship to women’s suffrage, his late wife, and the events in which this extension of the vote was denied, and the third on the moral crusades suffragists undertook after 1867 as they campaigned against a corrupt male elite. This chapter identifies the 1867 Reform Act as a key moment in the battle for suffrage—after the passage of the act, female suffrage seemed like the next logical step to a number of progressives, and as the movement progressed this act gained significance in the minds of suffragists.

Chapter Three, entitled “‘Splendid Ammunition’: Suffrage in Opposition, Moderation, and Militancy,” focuses on the period from the late 19th century up until the passing of the first

suffrage bill in 1918. This period was marked by struggle between the leadership of the militant Pankhurst family and the more moderate constitutionalists averse to political violence. This chapter is also divided up into four sections: the first section on the female leaders who were opposed to women's suffrage, the second on the moderate suffragists as embracing the establishment and rejecting the militants, the third on the Pankhurst suffragettes as militants opposed to the establishment and willing to commit violent acts, and the fourth on the impact of the First World War on the female suffrage movement, detailing how ultimately, devotion to the Empire mattered more than anything.

This thesis draws from many useful primary sources, most of which have been published and need not be accessed through their archives. Although a full primary source list can be found at the end of this thesis, a few of the most useful are the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* by the University of Toronto Press, the *Women's Source Library* collection published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, the British Library's publicly available "Votes for Women" collection online, and Helen Blackburn's 1902 book *Women's Suffrage*, an indispensable eyewitness source for the suffrage movement of the late 19th century.

The British women's rights movement, from its inception to its electoral success in the late 1910s, revolved around notions of respectability. The women supporting the Chartist movement of the 1840s were expected to maintain a sense of domesticity in their actions, helping to exemplify the respectable working-class family against accusations of male licentiousness and drunkenness. When the reform debates of the 1860s came about, progressives like John Stuart Mill employed arguments for women's suffrage that hinged on the respectability of middle class women, emphasizing their morality, and when suffragist organizations fought against legislation attacking sex workers in the late 19th century, they pointed to the degenerate behavior of male

elites, at odds with the supposedly respectable upper class. In the early 20th century, the militant suffragettes—the Pankhursts—sought to overturn these entrenched ideas of feminine respectability, provoking the violence of the state against women, which in turn provoked outrage by a British populace furious that women were being tortured for relatively minor crimes against the government. Respectability, then, was at the core of the women's suffrage movement in Britain, and informed parliamentary debates, suffragist strategies, and public views toward women fighting for the right to vote.

Chapter One

The Man's Charter: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Women in the Chartist Movement

Inspired by the example set by the French—in which working-class folk, through popular action, could enact political change against an entrenched elite in both 1789 and 1830—Chartists closed the 1830s with high hopes. Although their first National Petition had failed in 1839, the publication of the People's Charter—simple demands designed to render England more democratic—as well as numerous Chartist newspapers bolstered the hope that the English middle class and aristocracy might be receptive to moral, family-based arguments in favor of working-class suffrage. However, this focus on the family led to occasionally stifling restrictions on women, constructing an idealized vision of a female Chartist upholding homely domesticity. Many working-class women pushed against such restrictions, demanding that the Charter include female suffrage, a demand its authors had deemed too tactically risky to include. Although most male Chartists did not forbid women's political involvement—it was, in fact, encouraged by many—men determined the terms of their inclusion, requiring a stringent domesticity that some women pushed against in an early drive for female suffrage.

Chartist Beginnings: By Men, For Men

The Chartist Movement developed as a result of serious poverty among the working classes and longtime political inequality and corruption in the British parliamentary system, problems systematically unaddressed by those in power. Decades before the Chartists published their manifesto for universal suffrage, thousands agitated for reform in massive meetings, crying for universal suffrage and annual Parliamentary elections, key Chartist demands. At one such meeting—famously known as the Peterloo Massacre, after the battle of Waterloo four years

prior—over fifty thousand men and women alike gathered at St. Peter’s Fields to listen to reformist orator Henry Hunt speak only to be forcefully disbanded by the Yeoman Cavalry, resulting in the deaths of at least fifteen men, women, and children.¹ Fearing an intensification of unrest such as that which mirrored revolutionary conditions in France less than three decades earlier, the Tory government passed six acts four months after Peterloo designed to limit public assemblies, to halt “military training” among workers, and to render left-wing newspapers too expensive for the poor through stamp taxes.² This served as a clear warning sign to reformists that their actions could be considered seditious and discouraged organization for the cause, and the cause of universal suffrage would be left unaddressed until much later in the century. In 1832, Parliament passed a reform bill that grew the electorate from 3.2% to 4.7% of the total population, primarily servicing the wealthiest men of the British Isles and ignoring the remaining 95% of the populace.³ Out of this frustration in the snail’s pace of meaningful Parliamentary reform grew the Chartist Movement, which promised to solve many of the problems afflicting the working class, and by 1838 the People’s Charter was written.

The Working Men’s Association decided to draft a bill for Parliament in 1837 which—after being advertised to the public—could force actual change based on popular pressure; while the proposal garnered widespread support among reformists and many radicals, most of the Charter’s aims wouldn’t be met for another three decades.⁴ This document—the People’s Charter, stylized after the Magna Carta—demanded universal adult male suffrage, the removal of property qualifications for aspiring members of Parliament, annually-elected Parliaments, equal

¹ Graham Phythian, *Peterloo: Voices, Sabres and Silence* (Stroud: The History Press, 2018), 11, 67–82.

² Phythian, 142–43.

³ Thomas Ertman, “The Great Reform Act of 1832 and British Democratization,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 8–9 (2010): 1007–8.

⁴ Mark Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, ed. T. F. Tout (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1925), 73.

representation between urban and rural areas, payment of MPs, and voting by secret ballot.

Interestingly, Chartists initially considered campaigning for the cause of women's suffrage, an issue addressed in the Charter itself:

Among the suggestions we received for improving this Charter, is one for embracing women among the possession of the franchise. Against this reasonable proposition we have no just argument to adduce, but only to express our fears of entertaining it, lest the false estimate man entertains for this half of the human family may cause his ignorance and prejudice to be enlisted to retard the progress of his own freedom. And, therefore, we deem it far better to lay down just principles, and look forward to the rational improvement of society, than to entertain propositions which may retard the measure we wish to promote.⁵

While granting the addition of female suffrage to be “reasonable” with nothing against such an amendment in theory, the Working Men's Association ultimately made the explicit choice to reject women's suffrage for its potential to hinder the fulfillment of Chartist tenets. This hindrance would be due not to any faults in the concept of women's suffrage (according to author William Lovett at least); rather, it would be due to the “ignorance and prejudice” of potential supporters of Chartism. This statement reads almost as a disparaging comment on the many who would become Chartists themselves, and it ultimately shouldered the burden for pushing forward female suffrage onto the backs of ordinary working-class people. As Chartism pushed for progressive voting reform, some proponents assured supporters and skeptics alike that it would produce moral working-class families from the current mire of alleged debauchery.

Moral Rhetoric in Chartism

The language of morality pervaded Chartism as it pushed against the changes wrought by the industrial revolution, suggesting that working-class decency had been upended by the greed

⁵ William Lovett and John Arthur Roebuck, “The People's Charter: Being an Outline of An Act to Provide for the Just Representation of the People of Great Britain and Ireland in the Commons' House of Parliament” (Working Men's Association, 1838), 1–3.

of the industrial elites. Consider this passage from *Blackwood's Magazine*, used to argue against bestowing the right to vote upon the working class:

Now, what are the habits of the operative classes, especially in the manufacturing districts and great towns, and what proof have *they* afforded by their sobriety, frugality, and foresight, that they possess the habits and qualities essential to a due appreciation or administration of public affairs? [...] Is the morality of the sexes improving? Are cases of bastardy, desertion of children by parents, or of wives by husbands, declining in number; and is the fatal gangrene of illicit indulgence giving way before the resolute efforts of a prudent and reflecting people?⁶

According to this and other conservative voices, the entirety of the British working classes needed to prove itself capable of adhering to a middle-class morality *before* being granted a voice in Parliament. Chartists pushed against these attacks on morality by emphasizing that their current state of misery was a result of their lack of representation. Anna Clark describes their rhetorical strategy as a use of “melodrama,” which viewed the struggle working-class families faced as the result of “upper-class oppression,” flipping the script of blame onto those in power and, consequently, providing justification for extending the vote to all men.⁷ Indeed, some Chartists claimed that before the rise of industry, a “Golden Age” reigned; prominent Chartist poet Gerald Massey romanticized this struggle to “win the Golden Age again,” which could be achieved with the “honest heart, and working hand [...] In Labour’s-lordlier Chivalry[.]”⁸ Whether this “Golden Age” existed in the 18th century is dubious, but this concern speaks to the anxiety some working-class men felt about the changing nature of the working-class family.

Additionally, the impact of the New Poor Law of 1834 on Chartist rhetoric cannot be ignored, as it led to a family-centric rhetoric of morality in the Chartist movement. Informed by

⁶ “The Chartists and Universal Suffrage,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 46, no. 287 (September 1839): 296.

⁷ Clark, “The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity,” 67–68.

⁸ Gerald Massey, *Poems and Ballads* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1854), 76.

utilitarian ideology, the New Poor Law eliminated aid for the poor that “became a regular element in the subsistence of the labouring classes,” replacing this aid with workhouses of truly terrible conditions. In 1931, historian H. L. Beales stated that the New Poor Law “accomplished a necessary cleansing,” while also admitting the shortcomings of the act; Chartists at the time were less kind.⁹

We have no reached a most portentous crisis, and every man ought well to weigh the question, how would he like to become the inmate of a union bastille [or a union workhouse]; there to have his hair cut short, his manhood brutalized, his wretched body subject to a ruffian’s stripes, branded as a felon, tethered like a beast, worked like a beast, and fed worse than a beast; no friendly eye to look upon him, no woman’s tenderness to soothe his desolation, no little ones to gladden his dull soul, the partner of his bosom pushed back by menial hands, the mother’s breast with all its wholesome nourishment dried up through very grief [...] all we want is an equal share in making the laws by which we are to be governed[.]¹⁰

Referring to the dehumanizing conditions of the workhouses, which could punish disobedient “inmates” through solitary confinement, whipping, and prison, this article in *The Northern Star* ties the working class’s inability to vote to the passage of the New Poor Law, laying bare the consequences of disenfranchisement.¹¹ The New Poor Law provided Chartists with a powerful foil against which to base their own moral attacks, arguing that the supposed aid for the most impoverished was actually ripping apart families, turning men into “beasts,” and pushing “little ones” from the comfort of their mother and father. The nuclear family, then, was in danger of being dismantled by the forces of poverty and industry, a problem that could be solved through “an equal share” in representation.

⁹ H. L. Beales, “The New Poor Law,” *History* 15, no. 60 (January 1931): 311–16.

¹⁰ A. Prentice, “Address of the Manchester Universal Suffrage Association, to Their Brother Radicals Throughout the United Kingdom,” *The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser*, November 17, 1838, 7.

¹¹ “Pauper Offence Book” (Beaminster Union, 69 1842), <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/rules.shtml>.

However, in defending working-class morality against attacks from voting reform opponents, Chartists sometimes imposed a restrictive domesticity on middle-class women, attempting to right the wrongs caused by the gender role-disturbing industrial revolution. Indeed, this avenue seemed to be one of the only ways open to Chartists seeking to establish their worth of the vote.¹² In 1840, around 200 Chartists legally interrupted a public meeting for T. F. Buxton's African Civilization Society, an anti-slavery group, partly for Buxton's hostile views to English democracy. Several of "the *elite* of the ladies of the city and county" were seated in the front. When the scene grew increasingly contentious between the Chartists and the abolitionists, the abolitionist Archdeacon Bathurst suggested that "the ladies ought not to have been allotted the front seats, delightful as it was to have them present; still it was to men the arguments of such a meeting were to be addressed," to which the Chartists gave "great applause." In this instance—despite the Chartist's "shouting, yelling & bellowing"—the presence of women at the forefront of the public sphere was an issue both the anti-slavery speaker Bathurst and the "savage" Chartists could agree upon.¹³ Motivated by a patriarchal desire to protect the "elite" women of the meeting space, the men questioned whether the presence of these women was appropriate, seemingly concerned that the respectability of these women could be stained by their mere proximity to such contentious debate. Similarly, in one novel—*Sunshine and Shadow*, published weekly by Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star*—author Thomas Wheeler describe one of his characters, called "the true model Chartist woman" by Schwarzkopf, as being "though a great frequenter of public assemblies, her character was of a retiring nature—more fitted to adorn

¹² Richard Price, *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 217.

¹³ Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, 249–54.

home than shine in public.”¹⁴ Although this description allowed for some female participation in the politics of the public sphere, this character ultimately preferred—through Wheeler’s characterization—a domestic, middle-class life, admired by her husband, who would ultimately do much of the political activism. Compare these markedly domestic visions of female behavior with those ascribed to the working-class women of the Chartist movement.

Chartist Women: Early Suffragists

Making up a sizable portion of Chartist activists, working-class women differed from their well-to-do counterparts in their distrust of the middle class after the 1832 Reform Act favoring the wealthy. Although it is extremely difficult to accurately gauge the class makeup of the Chartist movement, Schwarzkopf concludes that, after comparing the records kept by the Chartist Land Company detailing new subscribers and the 1851 census, most female Chartists lived and worked in the manufacturing cities and towns of northern and central England and were directly impacted by the tide of industrialization.¹⁵ Interestingly, some working-class women fixated on the extravagance of the “Dowager Queen, who does nothing for the state,” and the immense amount of money Queen Victoria received, “which would have maintained twenty thousand families, each family consisting of seven individuals, for one month, at £1 per week each.”¹⁶ In other words, while Victoria was freely granted money according to her titles, working-class women—who helped to produce that wealth—received nothing, their efforts unnoticed by the state. Additionally—after the 1832 Reform Act witnessed the enfranchisement of the higher echelons of the middle class—working-class women remained wary of their

¹⁴ Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1991), 265–66.

¹⁵ Schwarzkopf, 84–88.

¹⁶ Schwarzkopf, 93–94.

middle-class counterparts. As the Nottingham Female Political Union proclaimed in *The Northern Star*,

[...the middle classes] are beginning to manifest their doubts and fears; and yet, even with this before their eyes, they are fearful and cowardly enough still to keep aloof from the cause espoused by the people. In a short time they will be too late to be considered of the least importance; in fact, they must ever be considered in the light of false friends, and of no moment whatever to the people, only to be closely watched to prevent them doing mischief by their treachery to the common cause; because they might be tempted to betray, for the sake of the shop—to gain the smiles of and custom of the Aristocracy, the great enemies of the liberties of the people.¹⁷

This address, pitting the middle class as the “false friends” of reform, was written just six years after the Reform Act and reflects the distrust working-class women felt toward the middle class, who should have been striving for the same “common cause” as the working class but had betrayed this for the good graces of the “Aristocracy.” Ultimately, working-class women made up a noticeable portion of Chartist support and focused their efforts on the injustice of the wealthy’s failure to care for the poor.

Some female radicals fought for women’s voting rights, existing outside of the mainstream Chartist push for universal male suffrage. One woman, anonymously protesting the failure of Chartists to include women in the language of their rules, stated that despite the movement’s “wisdom, policy and humanity,” it was full of “honest men” “who, it appears, [are] not yet prepared to feel an enlightened abhorrence of slavery!” “Slavery,” of course, referring to “the social condition reserved for her” by the Chartists.¹⁸ This may reflect a growing disillusionment with the hypocrisy of the Chartist movement and its inability to live up to its own proclamations of liberty and equality, even if the movement was headed in the right direction.

¹⁷ The Nottingham Female Political Union, “The Address of the Female Political Association of Nottingham, to the Patriotic Women of England,” *The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser*, December 8, 1838, 6.

¹⁸ Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, 249–50.

This critique was not unique; women banded together to resist Chartist limits and supported introducing language to the People's Charter to include women. During one meeting intended to form the "Female Chartist Association," a Mr. Cohen stood to protest the women's desires to vote, stating that "woman would be more in her proper character and station at home, where she was the pride and ornament of 'the domestic hearth,' than in the political arena. [...] She was not, physically considered, intended for it." Furthermore, if a woman were to fill a public office, he argued "to suppose herself in the House of Commons, as member for a parliamentary borough [...] and that a young gentleman, a 'lover,' in that house, were to try to influence her vote through his sway over her affection, how would she act? whether, in other words, she could resist, and might not lose sight of the public interests?" While being thoroughly heckled by the attending women, his points were taken apart: "It did not require much 'physical force' to vote," Susanna Inge stated; Mary Anne Walker "would treat with womanly scorn, as a *contemptible scoundrel*, the man who would dare to influence her vote by any undue and unworthy means."¹⁹ While this instance acts as an example of female reformers refusing to back down in the face of male prejudice, it also reflects the extent to which men feared the ability of female sexuality to upend traditional gender hierarchies and exert undue influence over a thoroughly masculine political world. This fear would continue throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century as the British Parliament refused to offer enfranchisement to women.

Women's involvement in the Chartist movement was tied with sexuality: in the eyes of some of their male Chartist compatriots, their political involvement enhanced their appeal; however, too much independent political agency remained a danger to extant hierarchies of gender. Although part of this danger can be seen in the previous paragraph—in which female

¹⁹ "Meeting of Female Chartists," *Caledonian Mercury*, October 24, 1842.

members of Parliament might not be trusted with the vote—it can also be seen in the fears of Reverend Francis Close, a preacher with a strong distrust of female Chartists:

It were bad enough indeed, if they used their influence over their husbands, their brothers, and their fathers, to foment discord, to create a spirit of sedition [...] in these evil days—these *foreign* [read: French] days on *British* soil, not content with this, women now become politicians, they leave the distaff and the spindle to listen to the teachers of sedition; they forsake their fireside and home duties for political meetings, they neglect honest industry to read the factious newspapers! And so destitute are they of all sense of female decorum, of female modesty and diffidence, that they become themselves political agitators—female dictators—female mobs—female Chartists!²⁰

This scathing concern with a rampant rejection of domestic femininity—“fireside and home duties,” “decorum,” “modesty and diffidence”—led Close to worry that female participation in Chartism was directly leading to revolution (such as that in France nine years earlier, in 1830) and that women had an outsized influence over their family members, upsetting traditional patriarchal hierarchies. However, to some Chartist men, women’s political participation was deeply desirable. Schwarzkopf argues although married women might face the obstacle of their husband’s consent in attending Chartist meetings, for a single woman to be a Chartist made her more desirable to other Chartists, as it was a goal “solely geared towards meeting male expectations.”²¹ In other words, a commitment to Chartism signaled a commitment to male-aligned goals, although not every male Chartist would have been pleased about this devotion. Female sexuality, then, was always viewed in relation to men and was intrinsically bound in politics and in influencing the minds of men.

²⁰ Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, 116.

²¹ Schwarzkopf, p.232-233.

Reactions to Chartism and Respectability

Although Chartism had a relatively favorable reception in the United States, conservative outlets in England diminished its importance and occasionally ridiculed its adherents. The *New York Times*, responding to an Englishman wondering, “Does not Chartism mean something like Revolution—almost Red Republicanism?” plainly stated the “Five Points of the Charter” and that “this is the extent of all that the Chartists have ever gone for.”²² A little more emotional was this defense of notable Chartist Ernest Jones, in which the *New York Times* stated,

We are proud of this history of an English demagogue. The unselfishness, the steadiness, the patience [...] show that there may be nobleness and enthusiasm in a Chartist agitator—in a man belonging to a class despised and loathed by thousands who would not give up a fortune of a hundred a year in order to advance the success of any creed, cause, or principle of any sort.²³

Despite Jones existing outside the English status quo as a “radical”—a “demagogue” and an “agitator”—he received praising remarks from the *New York Times* for his committed dedication to universal male suffrage. At the same time, however, the phrasing does paint Jones as being outside the Chartist mainstream—an exception to a group otherwise lacking in “nobleness” and “enthusiasm.” Other publications were less generous to Chartists—specifically, to Chartist women. The *English Chartist Curricular* of London reported that the *Times* described a meeting of female Chartists as “a meeting of hen-Chartists,” continuing, “The *Times* denounced them as ‘monsters;’ told them to read their prayer-books and keep to their nurseries.”²⁴ This article—seemingly written from a male point of view, as it refers to all women as “they”—is a virulently protective piece in which the author may have been spurred from a patriarchal desire to defend

²² “What Is Chartism?,” *New York Daily Times*, February 27, 1855, 4.

²³ “The Story of an English Radical - In the Biography of Mr. Ernest Jones,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1859, 3.

²⁴ Pro-Chartist, “Female Politicians,” *The English Chartist Circular* 2, no. 90 (n.d.): 4.

the women in his pro-Chartist camp—it also reveals, however, the extent to which the *Times* and much of the English population despised female Chartists, portraying any rejection of domestic femininity as truly monstrous. Indeed, other articles from the *Times* reflect this attitude: while reporting on a large Chartist procession in South Lancashire, the *Times* described it as a “much-talked of and alarming ‘grand’ moral demonstration of the working classes,” going on to downplay the number of attendees and argue that the hurdle races “appeared to have been the chief attraction of the great majority of the ‘good and true men of South Lancashire.’”²⁵

Although Chartists found some support in the more republican United States, their presence was discounted or outright ridiculed by more conservative-aligned news sources.

Although Chartism petered out into the 1850s—partly due to the failure of the national petitions and the violent ends of many protests—the ideas within survived to become partly fulfilled by the late 1860s. In 1839—fresh on the newly-born energies of the Chartist movement—a National Petition for the House of Commons to consider Chartist demands was floated while some militant Chartists prepared for fighting, calling for outright revolution: “Are your arms ready?” read one Manchester handbill, continuing,

Have you plenty of powder and shot? Have you screwed up your courage to the sticking place? Do you intend to be freemen or slaves? [...] How long are you going to allow your mothers, your wives, your sweethearts, and your children to be for ever toiling for other people’s benefit? [...] Be ready then to nourish the tree of liberty with the BLOOD OF TYRANTS.²⁶

In this anonymous, revolutionary plea—reflected elsewhere across the country as rumors of “street warfare” and “barricades” were floated—radicals were again encouraged to defend their families from wealthy oppressors, this time through violence. Additionally, this call invoked

²⁵ “The South Lancashire Great Chartist Meeting,” *The Times*, May 28, 1839, 5.

²⁶ Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, 151–60.

patriarchal language, calling for courageous men to defend the women of their lives: “mothers,” “wives,” “sweethearts,” working for other men. Radical Chartism then, too, was embroiled in a perceived fight to protect domesticity. When Parliament voted not to consider it—235 nays to just 46 yeas—factions within the Chartist movement became more extreme, advocating armed rebellion and resulting in the disastrous Newport Rising, which saw several thousand Chartists try to free imprisoned leaders only to be fired upon by the military, killing around twenty-four and injuring dozens others.²⁷ In 1848, with much of Europe undergoing revolution, it seemed like Britain could go the same way; the Chartists, marching into London, were quickly disbanded by the united military and police, which led to despair among radicals and began the decline of Chartism.²⁸ By 1859, the *New York Times* reported that “Chartism is dead and buried now in its old form [...] What may be the present phase of Chartism we do not pretend to know.”²⁹ However, many working-class women continued to be politically active throughout the decline of Chartism and beyond, largely fighting for the temperance movement, a continuation of prior Chartist demands for happy, sober working-class families. The drive for sobriety stemmed from the need “to become a thinking and strictly moral people, and acquire sound political knowledge,” along with the end of squandered wages to alcohol.³⁰ This political activism—the drive for petitions, the female political unions—would remain vital skills in securing women’s suffrage in the early 20th century.

Female political involvement in Chartism, while often highly desirable for Chartist men seeking to secure universal male suffrage (and other demands), was largely allowed to exist only

²⁷ Hovell, 164–80.

²⁸ Michael Bentley, *Politics without Democracy: Great Britain, 1815-1914, Perception and Preoccupation in British Government* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 133–34.

²⁹ “The Story of an English Radical,” 3.

³⁰ Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement*, 257–60.

on male terms, and any deviation from this script was ridiculed and feared by conservatives. Already, just midway throughout the 19th century the language of “separate spheres” can clearly be identified, cited by numerous men as the basis for refusing women the right to engage in politics, not to mention the right to vote. Many Chartist women—politically active and socially conscious—fought this rejection, and rarely did their reasoning ever receive a competent rebuttal from men, a trend that would continue into the debates surrounding the 1867 Reform Act. And while working-class women remained politically active even after the decline of Chartism through the temperance movement, the structure of their political organizations would survive into the late 19th century as they began to voice their demands for female suffrage, unhampered by the Chartist men wanting only universal male suffrage. Though the Chartist years were marked by disappointment and violence, they provided both an outlet for a working class starved of legal political expression and a blueprint for the realization of universal male suffrage a few decades later.

Chapter Two

The Reform Act of 1867 as a Trigger for the Female Suffrage Movement

On October 18th, 1865, Lord Palmerston—Prime Minister of the British Parliament, member of the Liberal Party, and opponent to electoral reform—died of a fever.¹ This death opened the doors to meaningful Parliamentary reform, and across the following three years, representatives debated over who could be admitted to the privilege of the franchise. Women sought inclusion in this debate despite their exclusion from Chartist politics decades before, and their campaigning for the Reform Act of 1867 publicly demonstrated to the nation that female suffrage was no far-fetched demand dreamt by utopians; it could be achieved through organization and further campaigning. Late 19th-century Britain, then, witnessed the rise of the first-wave feminist movement, which also fought to end elite sexual control over working-class women in addition to female suffrage. These adjacent campaigns utilized rhetoric similar to the suffrage movement, attacking the supposed moral superiority of the male elite; however, too often those controlled via legislation were poor women. However, by the century's turn female suffrage had become a notable movement worthy of debate, becoming progressively unshackled to the strict domesticity imposed by male Chartist leaders. Although the 1867 Reform Act did not see the success of women's suffrage, instead greatly expanding the vote for men, it directly led to the growth of an official suffragist movement that attempted to defend the most vulnerable women in society.

Lord Palmerston's death, though unfortunate, allowed the Liberal Party to pursue Parliamentary reform, a shift also encouraged by the success of the Union in the American Civil

¹ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 1.

War. Upon hearing news of this death, William Gladstone—who supported “a fair, and liberal, and sensible [...] admission of our brethren of the labouring community to the privilege of the suffrage”—grew “giddy,” presumably at the avenues this could open for tempered reform.² However, by the mid-1860s agitation among the working classes for suffrage had largely fallen off partly due to improved living conditions and working-class apathy, and the Chartist movement had become divided and weak. The central issue dividing Chartist leaders throughout the 1850s and 60s was whether to take the movement further and tie it to socialism, or to restrict it the cause to universal male suffrage alone. Additionally, working-class radicals faced apathy among their contemporaries: one described his attempts to build working-class enthusiasm as “like driving snails to Jerusalem.”³ However, the lack of widespread protests for universal suffrage ironically convinced parliamentary reformists that the time was right for electoral reform. Gladstone argued that the working class’s improvements in their condition, education, and loyalty should induce the “privileged classes” to “make some sensible, ay, some liberal, though some safe extension of the franchise.”⁴ Lastly, events abroad bolstered liberal hopes for an extension of the vote. Although the American Civil War had been seen by some conservatives as proof that “all the horrors arising from civil warfare were attributable to the electoral system prevalent in the republic,” liberals took the Union victory as a sign to proceed with suffrage reform, as “we, the advocates of universal suffrage, point triumphantly to its results across the Atlantic,” indicating the repairing economy after the peace.⁵ Indeed, for many proponents of an electoral extension, conditions were aligning perfectly for reform.

² Alan Bullock and Maurice Shock, eds., *The Liberal Tradition: From Fox to Keynes* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 145; H. C. G. Matthew, ed., *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 6 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 391.

³ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 82–83.

⁴ Bullock and Shock, *The Liberal Tradition*, 143–44.

⁵ “Manhood Suffrage, The People’s Right,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, November 26, 1865, 3.

Male working-class respectability remained at the center of this debate, a dynamic that can be seen in coverage of the 1866 Hyde Park demonstrations. When Gladstone's first reform bill failed in 1866, demonstrators took to Hyde Park in the London West End near Buckingham Palace, upending the rails surrounding the park and trampling flower gardens. *The Times* described the assemblers as "a number of the lowest rabble [...] insulting everybody who appeared to be more respectable than themselves," focusing on the potential violence of such a gathering as the daily paper worried about what "appalling results might have ensued had the mob used [the park railings] as weapons." The *Pall Mall Gazette*, however, painted the disturbances in a different light, stating, "The great bulk of the people were as good-natured as men could be," though "boisterous and disorderly no doubt, and it did a good deal of mischief to the iron rails [...] but there was not a touch of malignity or sedition about it."⁶ These two newspapers, and many others, quarreled over the interpretation of these events primarily through reference towards the respectability of demonstrators—whether those in the assembly were "good-natured" as the liberal *Pall Mall Gazette* claimed or "'roughs' and juveniles" as *The Times* asserted.⁷ However, both accounts listed reform as the primary cause of the assemblies, and they each either defended or attacked reform based on their depictions of its proponents.

John Stuart Mill and the Early Drive for Female Suffrage

With universal male suffrage back in the national spotlight, women seized their chance to get female suffrage recognized as well. The election of John Stuart Mill to Parliament in 1865, along with intensifying talks of electoral reform, convinced increasing numbers of women to campaign for the inclusion of female suffrage in the current wave of reform, resulting in

⁶ "Hyde Park," *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 24, 1866, 1.

⁷ "Hyde Park," 3; "The Rioting in Hyde Park," 9.

women's suffrage organizations lasting into the 20th century. Though fractured between radicals and moderates, this movement sought to enfranchise women either on the same conditions as men (taxpayers, meaning single and widowed women) or entirely, including married women.⁸ Mill's election had shown that, finally, "Women's Suffrage had a champion in the House of Commons. Surely the time to move had come!"⁹ Newly-created suffrage organizations—such as the Kensington Society—moved indeed, collecting approximately 8,000 signatures in London and Manchester in advance of Mill's move to amend the 1867 Reform Act's language to include the enfranchisement of women.¹⁰ Though his motion failed, these organizations grew stronger with the Kensington Society first becoming in mid-1867 the "London National Society for Women's Suffrage," allying further with its Manchester and Edinburgh counterparts to become the "National Society for Women's Suffrage." Significantly, these organizations that found their official beginnings campaigning for suffrage in the 1860s went on to become major forces in British politics, using the same petitioning strategies throughout the rest of the 19th century.¹¹ These suffrage societies sought to secure the vote through entirely peaceful means, contrasting with the later, more militant suffragettes. Additionally, the Kensington Society of the 1860s was relatively conservative; one of its leaders, Emily Davies, wanted to avoid connecting the organization with John Stuart Mill's significantly more radical liberal politics, along with the male working class-led Reform League, fearing negative press of women's suffrage as a result.¹²

⁸ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 135–36.

⁹ Helen Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage: A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles, with Biographical Sketches of Miss Becker* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1902), 53.

¹⁰ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 135.

¹¹ Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 63–65, 139, 215.

¹² Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 132–33.

However, Mill was still viewed by many as the key for raising female suffrage into the national spotlight.

John Stuart Mill, one of the earliest, most passionate, and most articulate supporters for women's suffrage in England, deeply believed in the right for women to vote, framing many of his arguments within a necessarily heterosexual paradigm of man and woman belonging together. Mill believed that women were subjugated under men and deserved "perfect equality," with the first step to this reality being full political representation.¹³ Indeed, Mill employed many arguments to support this end, stating that women had the right to suffrage because "representation is co-extensive with direct taxation," enshrined in the British Constitution, although because wives did not pay "direct taxation," only single and widowed women would have been enfranchised.¹⁴ Additionally, he argued that reformists couldn't say that "the interests of all women are safe in the hands of their fathers, husbands, and brothers" because "this is exactly what is said of all unrepresented classes," extending the presently popular logic of reform to women's suffrage.¹⁵ While Mill made the case that women deserved enfranchisement based on human rights, some of his arguments also depended on a heterosexual relationship between men and women.

The man no longer gives his spare hours to violent outdoor exercises and boisterous conviviality with male associates: the two sexes now pass their lives together; the woman of a man's family are his habitual society; the wife is his chief associate, his most confidential friend, and often his most trusted advisor. [...] unless there are manly women, there will not much longer be manly men. When men and women are really companions, if women are frivolous, men will be frivolous; if

¹³ Mill, *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, 21:261.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, "Speech on Women's Suffrage 4," in *Sexual Equality: Writings by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill, and Helen Taylor*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 286.

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Public and Parliamentary Speeches, November 1850 - November 1868*, ed. John M. Robson and Bruce L. Kinzer, vol. 28 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 158.

women care for nothing but personal interest and idle vanities, men in general will care for little else: the two sexes must now rise or sink together.¹⁶

Fascinatingly, Mill has tied masculinity to the question of female suffrage, arguing that unless women are permitted to do something “manly”—specifically, vote—men will become feminized. No longer solely spending time with other men in “violent” exercise, men were becoming increasingly domesticated by their female partners, a feminizing influence that, unless counterbalanced by giving women a voice in public politics, could “sink” the two sexes. Additionally, this quote implies that feminized men are much more frightening than masculinized women. English masculinity, then, hinged on women’s suffrage. John Stuart Mill’s relationship with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, may have influenced these views on the relationship between men and women.

Harriet Taylor Mill (HTM) collaborated with John Stuart Mill (JSM) on many of his earlier writings, seeming to influence his later work by emphasizing the feminizing effect women have on men. The two developed a romantically intense relationship outside of HTM’s marriage, collaborating on several political tracts; once HTM was widowed, they married and continued to work together until her death in 1858.¹⁷ HTM and JSM worked together on drafts of HTM’s “Enfranchisement of Women,” in which traces of JSM’s speech above can be seen:

...for the first time in the world, men and women are really companions. A most beneficial change, if the companionship were between equals; but being between unequals, it produces, what good observers have noticed, though without perceiving its cause, a progressive deterioration among men in what had hitherto been considered the masculine excellences. [...] In the present closeness of

¹⁶ Mill, 28:155–56.

¹⁷ Jo Ellen Jacobs, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), xiii.

association between the sexes, men cannot retain manliness unless women acquire it.¹⁸

There are clear similarities between both this declaration, published in 1851, and JSM's 1867 speech above: both argue that the future of masculinity depended on women's suffrage, on women acquiring the "manliness" of participating in public politics. Just as JSM would argue sixteen years later, HTM stated that this was the result of a new closeness of men and women. While it might be tempting to state that JSM wrote both, he attributed "Enfranchisement of Women" to his wife, describing his role as "little more than that of an editor."¹⁹ Therefore, it is safe to assume that they shared this complex view on gender, which invoked the fear of a feminized male class to achieve women's suffrage. This move toward gender signifies the importance of separate spheres in mid-Victorian Britain.

The concept of separate spheres—of active, political, public men as separate from passive, domestic, private women—directly impacted the discussion on women's suffrage, and while John Stuart Mill denied its importance, he worked within the separate sphere dichotomy regardless. Writing in 1840 on the subject, Alexis de Tocqueville fondly observed this phenomenon in the United States, describing "two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes," one domestic and the other political; this was responsible for "the superiority of [American] women."²⁰ John Stuart Mill, too, was aware of this classification; more than a generation after de Tocqueville, he stated that "the notion of a hard and fast line of separation between women's occupations and men's [...] belongs to a gone-by state of society." Instead, he

¹⁸ Harriet Taylor Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women (1851)," in *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, ed. John M. Robson, vol. 21 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 407–8.

¹⁹ Mill, 393.

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 4 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1840), 101–7.

argued that, more and more, women were working closer with men than ever before.²¹ Whether this reflected the reality of late 19th-century England is debatable, but Mill's own writings did occasionally lean on concepts tied to the separate spheres when arguing for women's suffrage. Six years earlier, he stated that while women were "confined to domestic occupations" and men would be "nothing else than labourers in corn-fields or manufactories," they deserved the vote regardless; additionally, if women's suffrage was legislated, "the vote itself, too, would be improved in quality," as "Often, indeed, it would be used, not on the side of public principle, but of the personal interest or worldly vanity of the family."²² Here, Mill emphasizes the moralizing nature of women, suggesting that their expertise in their private, family-oriented sphere might benefit the vote in better considering family interests. These shifting semantics were less malicious than they were opportunistic based on the circumstances of the suffrage debate of the moment.

Although Mill's attempt to amend the Reform Act of 1867 to enfranchise women failed, it demonstrated the lack of organized opposition to female suffrage and opened the doors to further campaigning. Guided by the numerous petitions from women's rights advocates from London and Manchester, Mill introduced on May 20th, 1867 an amendment designed solely to extend suffrage to unmarried or widowed ratepaying women, delivering a detailed, eloquent speech to a relatively receptive House of Commons. At issue was a simple change of phrase: changing "male person" to "man," with man being (officially, since 1850) the gender-neutral term in Parliament. Unfortunately, his proposal failed, with 73 votes in favor versus 196 votes opposed. However, this level of support at such an early stage was critical and convinced

²¹ Mill, *Public and Parliamentary Speeches, November 1850 - November 1868*, 28:155.

²² John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Society*, vol. 19 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 480.

supporters of women's rights that suffrage could be attainable with future campaigning.²³ Additionally, those opposing the amendment in the House of Commons provided little justification for rejecting the measure, and "nothing had pleased [Mill] more than to find that every one who had attempted to argue at all had argued against something that was not before the House."²⁴ The move seemed to have surprised opponents in the House who, although handily defeating Mill's amendment by almost three to one, lacked the developed arguments to concretely refute Mill's points; *The Times* suggested that he "startled those ignorant of the controversy."²⁵ News coverage of this event varied depending on the source, but even critics admitted Mill's prowess in argumentation; among those even in mild support, it was stated that "If there be any convincing reason why [women] should not have the franchise conferred on them, those reasons ought certainly to be shown."²⁶ It seemed, then, that the potential for women's suffrage could only grow from this promising first venture.

However, women's suffrage advocates received a notable amount of ridicule and criticism from several news sources, which tended to uphold the notion of the separate spheres in justifying their refusal to support women's suffrage. *The Times* provided the most thorough deconstruction of Mill's argument: while stating, "No man of sense has any blind prejudice against female voting in the abstract, nor is there about it that 'strangeness' which Mr. Mill speaks of," *The Times* concluded that "In the present relation of the sexes, and with the current disposition of women, the weaker sex will consult its own advantage more by maintaining its present domestic influence than by venturing into the arena of political contest."²⁷ Simply put,

²³ Hall, McClelland, and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 135–38.

²⁴ Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 63.

²⁵ "Mr. Mill Has Redeemed His Pledge," *The Times*, May 21, 1867, 10.

²⁶ "Shall Women Have the Franchise?," *Cambridge Independent Press*, May 25, 1867, 5.

²⁷ "Mr. Mill Has Redeemed His Pledge," 10–11.

women would be better off maintaining their own “domestic influence”—its own separate sphere of influence—pitting women as an opposing force to men and utilizing the same imperialistic language the British Empire used in maintaining its “spheres of influence” over its overseas territories. The *Chester Chronicle* was much more blatantly sexist, suggesting that while it wasn’t appropriate for uninformed women to be granted the franchise, men “ignorant enough of their duties as citizens” at least took “to politics with a natural taste.” However, if women were allowed onto the register of voters and, as Mill supported, became members of Parliament:

Haunting public houses and standing £5 notes for everlasting rounds of beer, would be no longer an indispensable duty of the candidate, but he would be called on more than ever to cultivate the graces of expression, to learn the value of a killing glance, and to calculate how many votes dwell in a fascinating smile. A few appeals to his tenderer speeches would be found under these circumstances marvelously effective, and a touching way of putting his hand to his heart might on occasion win him a seat.²⁸

Together, these quotes suggest that male involvement in politics was “natural,” whereas female involvement was not only unnatural and undesirable—it had the potential to overturn existing gender dynamics as male politicians would be forced to abandon male-only spaces of discussion to appeal to tender women prone to falling in love with their Parliamentary compatriots.

Additionally, this reflected concern that not only would the inclusion of women supplant serious debate with illogical, emotional drivel, but men would become feminized by female inclusion.

Another article, similarly viewing a woman’s place in the domestic sphere as “more in harmony with the original design and purpose of creation,” worried less about the potential for romance to overturn gender hierarchies than the possibility of “the man and the woman confronting each other upon every parochial platform,” concerned about heightened discord across England.²⁹ The

²⁸ “Lady Politicians,” *Chester Chronicle*, May 25, 1867, 8.

²⁹ “The Female Franchise,” *York Herald*, May 25, 1867, 8.

issue here was that women and men should act “in harmony” rather than squabbling over “parochial,” or inconsequential problems. News coverage, then, often upheld prevailing notions of “natural” gender roles and argued that the key for harmony between the genders was separation.

After 1867: Suffragists and their Moral Crusades

Suffragists didn’t campaign solely for women’s suffrage; frequently, they banded together to fight other causes, opposing existing public policy regulating sex work. After the passage of the 1867 Reform Act, 19th-century feminists campaigned to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act by emphasizing an abuse of power in the hands of the police, a double moral standard placed on women, and by connecting it to suffrage. Initially passed to combat venereal diseases among the military—for which sex work was seen as a necessary evil—the Act expanded in 1866 and ’67 to mandate registration and medical examination of sex workers across England.³⁰ However, by 1870 opposition arose among feminists, many of whom were suffragists. Josephine Butler, a women’s suffrage supporter herself, founded the Ladies National Association specifically to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, and—in the process—guided many supporters to the suffrage movement.³¹ While Butler opposed the Act on the grounds that it was unconstitutional, she also opposed it on moral grounds, pointing to the level of power aimed against the most vulnerable members of society. Because of the failure of the Contagious Diseases Act to properly define what “a prostitute” is, Butler argued that this definition “gradually falls into the hands of the policeman who accuses her [...] the whole operation of the

³⁰ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 76–80.

³¹ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, 9; Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop*, no. 13 (1982): 80.

law degenerates into a mere hunting in the streets by policemen of women suspected by them of unchastity.” Butler depicts this vagueness within the law as responsible for overreaching abuse by the police and even compares it to the Spanish Inquisition for its forced medical examinations, the refusal of which could send the accused woman to prison.³² By arguing that this legislation was another example of male excess controlling the most destitute of women, Butler appealed to many middle-class moderates and feminists. Additionally, the Ladies National Association attached women’s suffrage to the underlying, systematic inequality that had led to the Contagious Diseases Act, arguing,

That dependence of women upon men was taught and maintained by [...] the acceptance of that unequal moral standard which pardons vice in a man, but almost shuts the door of hope on a woman who has erred; and lastly, by political subjection or extinction of women, which deprives them of any direct means of altering the laws which affect them unjustly.³³

The LNA, then, posed a lack of women’s enfranchisement—their “political subjection,” an inability to directly change laws—as one of the reasons for the passage of the acts. While suffrage remained at the end of a long list of underlying reasons, it still played an important role in the rhetoric of the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act. By 1883, the C.D. Act was suspended, and 19th-century feminists turned their attention to new issues.³⁴

With the Contagious Diseases Act made powerless toward the end of the 19th century, feminists directed their efforts against the moral double standard faced by women; the movement, however, led to further restrictions on sex workers rather than those in power. Directed in part by Josephine Butler, W. T. Stead wrote in 1885 “The Maiden Tribute of Modern

³² Josephine Butler, *The Constitution Violated* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871), 94–99.

³³ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, 77–78.

³⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution,” *Signs* 6, no. 1 (1980): 126.

Babylon,” a scathing critique of the sale and abuse of underaged girls to the wealthy and powerful. The problem, according to Stead, was “sexual criminality,” which included

- I. The sale and purchase and violation of children. II. The procurement of virgins.
- III. The entrapping and ruin of women. IV. The international slave trade in girls. V. Atrocities, brutalities and unnatural crimes.

Within this subtext, Stead places the blame on those acting against victims; the real criminals were not sex workers, but rather those directing this trade. As such, the solution was not “any increased power for the police,” who might “interfere arbitrarily with the ordinary operations of the maker of vice,” nor attacking it “by Act of Parliament.”³⁵ As the Contagious Diseases Act had tackled “vice” through police and Parliament, Stead cautioned against resorting to the same measures opposed by so many feminists. However, thanks to the campaigning of hundreds of thousands outraged by “The Maiden Tribute,” Parliament passed in 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act, part of which enacted stricter controls against “poor working-class women and children” and brothels.³⁶ Both the Women’s Suffrage Association and the Ladies National Association were present at one Hyde Park demonstration in support of the Act, at which speakers praised the Criminal Law Amendment Act for its “protection of girls and for the punishment of those who led them astray.”³⁷ The consistent support of the women’s suffrage movement for these causes throughout the final decades of the 19th century speaks to the persistent drive for suffrage and for the causes that leaders of the movement believed could advance suffrage. While it may be easy to discount their efforts due to the repressive measures resulting from laws like the C.L.A. Act—it once again put power into the hands of the police to investigate poor working women and included a clause prosecuting against sex between men—

³⁵ W. T. Stead, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” in *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c. 1880-1900*, ed. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1885), 34–35.

³⁶ Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution,” 128.

³⁷ “Repression of Vice,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, August 24, 1885, 8.

feminist intentions generally sought to protect marginalized women from an elite male power structure that oppressed them at every turn.³⁸

While women's suffrage was not legislative reality by the end of the 19th century, it had become a movement with intentions dedicated toward protecting working-class women. The organizations established through the campaigning of the 1867 Reform Act grew in size and strength to become noteworthy opponents of a conservatism that doggedly maintained its opposition to any extensions of the franchise, continuing to base its rejection in weak assertions of the patriarchal separate spheres occupied by men and women. With John Stuart Mill, suffragists had a voice in Parliament willing to support women's suffrage through eloquent arguments that, while based in the heterosexual destiny of men and women, worked to discard the notion that women were unequal and inferior to men. Support for female suffrage had come a long way since Chartism, which—while many women supported it—pushed women into a narrative that emphasized the domesticity and respectability of working-class men. At the same time, female suffrage had a long way to go until it would be passed into law; the movement diversified and differed in tactic in a truly revolutionary sense. Still, the years of reform of the late 19th century propelled women's suffrage forward and provided a blueprint for achieving it in the future.

³⁸ Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution," 128.

Chapter Three

“Splendid Ammunition”: Suffrage in Opposition, Moderation, and Militancy

The United Kingdom entering the 20th century had changed immensely from the U.K. of the early 19th century. Before 1832, only around 440,000 men could vote for Parliament; after 1918, over twenty-one million men and women were enfranchised.¹ However, the transition from widespread disapproval of women’s suffrage to Parliamentary approval involved the growth of the militaristic “suffragettes,” who were displeased with the current pace of reform and were willing to incite violence for their cause. This contrasted with the “suffragists,” a moderate, constitutional force of women that sought to persuade the Liberal Party to support their cause, and the anti-suffragists, who were largely led by women ascribing to a classical Victorian definition of femininity.² To many conservative men, giving the vote to women would invite a new kind of social upheaval to Britain that would threaten the very fabric of gender relations; to many moderate and militant supporters of female suffrage, the vote symbolized the admittance of women to a traditionally male institution of power, an admittance that had the potential to halt centuries of systematic oppression. The suffrage movement of the 20th century blossomed into a new kind of militant radicalism that prompted anti-suffragists and moderates to distance themselves from the militant Pankhursts, each faction invoking competing definitions of respectable British femininity.

¹ Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), 312; David Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in England* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 146.

² British Library Learning, “What Is the Difference between the Suffragists and the Suffragettes?,” Archival Collection, British Library, February 6, 2018, <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/suffragists-and-suffragettes>.

Opponents to Female Suffrage

Opponents to suffrage claimed that it would upend existing gender relations in Britain; the proposed Women's Franchise Bill of 1892 demonstrated this resistance. The extremely modest bill would have enfranchised only those independent women already entitled to vote in town and county elections as heads of their household—in other words, single or widowed women with experience in local elections.³ Members of Parliament, however, largely refused to grant suffrage, pointing to the perceived social upheaval resulting from female voters. Samuel Smith, an opponent to the 1892 Franchise Bill, penned a public letter explaining his opposition; Millicent Fawcett—a moderate suffrage leader—commented on his letter, stating, “Against this horde of eleven million malignant women, [Smith] says that the fortress of the Constitution would only be defended by ten million men; and the inevitable consequence, in his opinion, would be that ‘the splendid fabric of centuries will totter to its fall.’” While Smith misunderstood the number of women that would be enfranchised—according to Fawcett, “less than one million women” would be given the vote—he was described as worrying for the very foundations of England itself, fearing later that wives would be

brought up to vote against their husbands; wives and mothers neglecting their babies and their husbands' suppers to attend clubs and political meetings; the physical health of unborn generations being destroyed by ‘febrile excitement of politics on the part of mothers.’⁴

In Fawcett's portrayal, Smith was largely concerned about the domestic impacts of women's suffrage, which would destroy marriages and endanger female capacity for reproduction, ruining

³ Jane Lewis, ed., *Before the Vote Was Won: Arguments For and Against Women's Suffrage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 489.

⁴ Lewis, 434–35.

the health of the future leaders of Britain. This language was still deeply entrenched in the notion of separate spheres between men and women.

Parliamentary opponents to women's suffrage also pointed to the supposed lack of desire among women for suffrage. A suffragist in 1870 illustrated this when she stated, "[the ordinary man] generally smiles benignly and says, 'I don't think the ladies wish for it,' and turning, if he can, to some pretty, doll-like girl, he will appeal to her to confirm his statement."⁵ Indeed, this hadn't changed by 1892; in opposing the Women's Franchise Bill, one representative argued that "the vast majority of women of this country did not want the franchise or care one pin about it [...] why should [women] insist on forcing the franchise on their unwilling sisters?"⁶ For many members of Parliament, the widespread popular unrest that had accompanied past reform wasn't present, giving no urgency to the desire for women's suffrage. Additionally, the presence of a strong, female-driven anti-suffrage movement persuaded many lawmakers to steer clear of supporting suffrage societies. This anti-suffrage movement, which waxed and waned over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, played a significant role in the debate for women's suffrage.

Some women formed anti-suffrage societies, which encouraged women to grow within the domestic sphere. Members of Parliament pointing toward opposition to female suffrage were likely thinking of "An Appeal Against Women's Suffrage," published in 1889, which was supported by several thousand women. This document, largely written by female anti-suffragists in collaboration with men, restated many existing arguments against women's suffrage, largely based in separate spheres. However, what was unique about this appeal was that it built women up rather than emphasize their supposed inferiority. Indeed, despite protesting against women's

⁵ Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 217.

⁶ "Parliamentary Franchise (Extension to Women) Bill," *The Times*, April 28, 1892, 6.

“admission to direct power,” the published appeal sought to “give [women] their full share in the State of social effort and social mechanism; we look for their increasing activity in that higher State which rests on thought, conscience and moral influence.”⁷ This escaped the negative, frankly sexist language of MP Samuel Smith which depicted all women as corrupters and instead elevated women to their fullest potential within the separate sphere dichotomy. Similarly, Louise Creighton—an anti-suffragist woman from a middle-class background, her life described as “a kaleidoscope of Victorian values”—opposed female suffrage on positive grounds in her memoir, arguing that “it would be of great advantage to have a large body of intelligent & thoughtful opinion that stood outside party politics,” standing alone amongst her friends who supported or opposed suffrage for other reasons. Creighton was concerned with preserving a sense of respectable womanhood untouched by “party politics,” which she had “always hated.”⁸ While this position translated into fewer political rights for women, it was held on the basis of defending female independence and moral quality from the negative influences of the public sphere.

Additionally, the anti-suffrage societies (like the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League) existed in part as a response to the increasing militarism led by the Pankhurst family. In 1909, an anti-suffrage meeting was disrupted by the presence of a large crowd of suffragettes who heckled the women leading the W.N.A.S.L. meeting throughout. The article on the event described the crowd of suffragettes as “not altogether favourable to orderly methods,” which was purposefully juxtaposed with a description of the “orderly propaganda” of the North England Society for Women’s Suffrage. Similarly, one leader of the meeting—Miss Fothergill—stated,

⁷ Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142–50.

⁸ Louise Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman: Reflections of Louise Creighton, 1850-1936*, ed. James Thayne Covert (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi, 145.

“The first qualification for being a good law-maker was to be a good law-keeper, and in the ranks of their opponents they did not find law-keeping very much.” Lastly, another leader, Mr. Mills, asked the audience

...to imagine that Miss Pankhurst got married—(loud cheers)—and consented to love, honour, and obey a mere man. Would they not have the whole agitation over again, and would not the next demand be womanhood suffrage?⁹

As these quotes suggest, the anti-suffragists viewed their suffragette contemporaries as disrespectful of established laws and procedures, unable to maintain the composure of their male counterparts and, therefore, unable to either govern or vote responsibly. Additionally, Mills implied that “Miss Pankhurst”—which could refer to several women of the infamous Pankhurst family—viewed herself as above “mere” men and would ultimately be unsatisfied with a modest extension of the vote. This unflattering portrayal again painted a picture of unruly, irrational suffragettes who did not represent the true women of Britain.

The Moderate Suffragists as Rejecting Militarism and Embracing the Establishment

The moderate branch of women’s suffrage, headed by the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (N.U.W.S.S.), campaigned tirelessly to convince the Liberal Party that suffrage was worth advocating for; however, the party’s leadership was unwilling to acquiesce. The women leading the N.U.W.S.S. were largely from the upper and middle class and had advocated in previous campaigns for moral reform such as the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act; in addition, these women (for the most part) “belonged to the Victorian establishment,” and were not advocating for revolution but rather inclusion. However, the tried-and-true methods of attracting Parliamentary attention—of petitioning, writing letters, and holding meetings—found

⁹ “No Votes for Women: Anti-Suffragettes Heckled,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, February 5, 1909, 20.

little success through the early years of the 20th century, partly because the N.U.W.S.S. had largely failed to inspire activism among the working classes.¹⁰ Additionally, the broader Liberal Party was unwilling to fully endorse the cause of women's suffrage, though the Women's Liberal Federation (a subsection of the Liberal Party) had endorsed it since 1893. In a 1909 speech, David Lloyd George (then-Chancellor and a prominent Liberal) stated that there were "influential, responsible men whom no party would risk a quarrel with" who opposed women's suffrage, despite the alleged support of a majority of the Liberal Party.¹¹ In other words, the Liberal Party was unwilling to support female suffrage not because the issue was unpopular with liberals, but rather because a shadowy, "influential" minority of men opposed it. Members of the Women's Liberal Federation, then, had to continue lobbying their own party to support one of their most important causes, women's suffrage. In their attempts to convince Members of Parliament, the moderate suffragists invoked the ancient constitution, describing a lost reality in which propertied women could vote on the same basis that men could.

This constitutionalism, following in the steps of other popular movements, maintained that women meeting property requirements could vote for Parliament, a right interrupted by the gender-specific language of 19th-century reform. By the early 20th century, a subsection of scholars argued that the ancient British constitution (by which is meant the Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, and other "medieval and early modern statutes") originally gave propertied women the right to vote, a right that the Reform Act of 1832 allegedly trampled when it introduced sex-based voting discrimination by specifying only a "male person" could vote rather than the legally gender-neutral "man." The campaign for universal male suffrage argued similarly, maintaining

¹⁰ Leslie Parker Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1897-1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982), 13–20.

¹¹ Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals*, 18, 52–53.

that the English Parliament of the late middle ages was elected through universal male suffrage. Women's suffrage, like other popular movements of the time, appealed to an originalist interpretation of the British constitution that maintained ancient privileges had been displaced by an influential elite.¹² In 1867, at the birth of much of the British women's suffrage movement, Helen Taylor commented on this line of argument, suggesting that this "peculiarly English point of view" ultimately would be "likely to meet with the most general support and the smallest amount of dissent" because it clung not to abstract ideas of representation but rather historical fact.¹³ Similarly, in 1902 Helen Blackburn pointed to cases in the 1860s, though unsuccessful for women's suffrage, in which lawyers "spoke in favour of the ancient constitutional right of women to take part in Parliamentary elections," which had "never been taken away by Statute."¹⁴ However, it is important to recognize that this line of argument was not frequently employed particularly when attempting to sway public opinion in the 20th century, and when Fawcett wrote histories of women's suffrage, they began in the late 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft.¹⁵ Regardless, invoking the ancient constitution remained a powerful legal argument.

A major part of the strategy of the N.U.W.S.S. included both issuing educational pamphlets and lobbying the Liberal Party, both of which accepted rather than rejected the preexisting liberal establishment. In educating about the history of the N.U.W.S.S., these pamphlets devoted special significance to 1867, which was "the date at which the First Suffrage Societies were started," connecting the current fight for suffrage in the 20th century to the initial

¹² Joel Barnes, "The British Women's Suffrage Movement and the Ancient Constitution, 1867-1909," *Historical Research* 91, no. 253 (August 2018): 505–10.

¹³ Lewis, *Before the Vote Was Won*, 24–25.

¹⁴ Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage*, 84–85.

¹⁵ Barnes, "The British Women's Suffrage Movement and the Ancient Constitution, 1867-1909," 508.

struggle to be heard during the 1867 Reform Act debates.¹⁶ Additionally, these pamphlets spread the central arguments in support of women's suffrage; significantly, these arguments sometimes celebrated the separate sphere dichotomy. One such pamphlet, entitled "Women in the Home," pointed to several laws that concerned home life and argued, "Isn't it time the 'Woman in the Home' voted on questions that concern the home, since she knows most about them?"¹⁷ This pamphlet didn't argue that the separate sphere dichotomy was defunct; rather, it appears to level with those who continued to believe in traditional gender roles and argued within those parameters. We might attribute this strategy to the fact that the leaders of the N.U.W.S.S. were, again, middle-to-upper class women who embraced Victorian values and wanted less to completely reconstruct the existing gender hierarchy than to simply be granted a political voice. Additionally, the N.U.W.S.S. spent much of its time lobbying officials of the Liberal Party to support legislation like the Conciliation Bills of the early 1910s, which would have narrowly extended the vote to property-owning women. However, the Liberal Party was hesitant to support the Conciliation Bill partly because it was thought that it would expand the vote for the Tory Party, giving more votes to only the wealthiest of women; Lloyd George stated such a narrow enfranchisement would spell "disaster to Liberalism."¹⁸ What is most significant here is that the N.U.W.S.S.'s key strategy involved convincing the liberal establishment to support women's suffrage, rather than outright overthrowing the existing establishment.

This strategy intentionally contrasted with that of the Pankhurst family's Women's Social and Political Union, a fact that the N.U.W.S.S. frequently cited in their attempts to court

¹⁶ "What Does This Tree Mean?" (The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, August 1913).

¹⁷ "Women in the Home" (The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, July 1913).

¹⁸ Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, 111–14.

moderates off-put by the militancy of the Pankhursts. Part of this distancing occurred in the many pamphlets published by the N.U.W.S.S.; one pamphlet stated,

Some people think that Women's Suffrage means breaking windows and spoiling other people's property. This is a great mistake. Only a small number of women do these violent actions. Thousands and thousands of quiet law-abiding women are asking for the vote. [...] Remember that we are a law-abiding, non-militant society, and that our work depends on Public sympathy.¹⁹

This fairly explicit reference to the actions of the militant suffragettes not only set moderate suffragists apart from them, but it also claimed that these raucous women were a tiny minority compared to the “thousands and thousands of quiet law-abiding women” who were far more respectable—and far more willing to accept the existing gender hierarchy. In 1908, Millicent Fawcett spoke even more directly on the matter: after members of the W.S.P.U. began throwing rocks into the Prime Minister's residence and encouraging members of “the lowest classes of London toughs” to “rush the House of Commons,” considering such a strategy to be an “immoral and dastardly thing to have done” that “will stop Women's Suffrage.”²⁰ Clearly, the leadership of the N.U.W.S.S. viewed the more violent actions of the W.S.P.U. to be counterproductive to the public image of women's suffrage and, consequently, the likelihood of its passage. However, the W.S.P.U. believed that without militancy, female suffrage was unlikely to become reality anytime soon.

The Militant Suffragettes as Controversial Revivalists of the Suffrage Movement

The W.S.P.U. intentionally profited from the shocking treatment of its suffragette prisoners. Though the N.U.W.S.S. publicly disavowed militancy in the name of female suffrage, they recognized that the renewed interest in women's suffrage was partly due to the widespread

¹⁹ “What Does Women's Suffrage Mean?” (The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, July 1913).

²⁰ Hume, *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, 50–51.

public sympathy garnered from the sickening treatment handed to imprisoned militant suffragettes, who were force-fed to end their hunger strikes.²¹ The Women's Social and Political Union recognized this sympathy and exploited it accordingly, publishing posters depicting the forced feeding of hunger-striking prisoners through their noses, a torturous process described as "the modern inquisition" to discourage voters from electing anti-suffrage Liberal candidates.²² Emmeline Pankhurst, describing this poster, stated,

We had printed a wonderful poster showing the process of forcible feeding, and we used it on hoardings everywhere. We told the electors that the "Liberal Party," the people's friend, had imprisoned 450 women for the crime of asking for a vote. They were torturing women at that time in Holloway. It was splendid ammunition and it told.²³

The leader of the W.S.P.U. clearly recognized the strategic outrage these horrific acts could cause and sought to profit in votes accordingly, viewing it as "splendid ammunition" in the war for women. Indeed, these instances prompted protests and led concerned readers to submit letters to *The Times* describing the acts as "torture" and defending the militant suffragettes as "gifted, magnetic, and brave."²⁴ These accounts also led to widespread Parliamentary denunciations of forcible feeding even among some anti-suffragettes, though some Members of Parliament (and *The Times*) affirmed the humanity of forced feeding as an alternative to death. Therefore, the W.S.P.U. welcomed the controversy, unfortunate though it was, and viewed hunger striking as an effective strategy against an elite that recoiled at such horrendous punishments against women who "were not criminals in the ordinary sense"—in other words, largely respectable, educated,

²¹ Hume, 50.

²² Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), vii.

²³ Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1914), 164.

²⁴ Constance H. Emmott, "To the Editor of The Times," *The Times*, October 19, 1909, 10.

middle class women.²⁵ The militant suffragettes viewed this outrage as a fortunate byproduct of their violent strategies, which they defended as necessary for the passage of female suffrage.

Leaders of the W.S.P.U. defended the organization's violence by pointing out the double moral standard defended by men, in which male violence for civil liberties was celebrated. Emmeline Pankhurst praised the militant strategies of the W.S.P.U., arguing, "does not the breaking of glass produce more effect upon the Government," comparing the militant suffragettes' movement to the Chinese revolution and the revolts of 1848, contextualizing her movement against other struggles for basic civil rights.²⁶ Similarly, her daughter Christabel defended the W.S.P.U.'s violence, stating that the suffragettes were simply responding to the overwhelming violence shown by the British government, and that women were following the "example set by men" in which "violent measures were used in winning votes for men," citing a kind of militancy defended even by David Lloyd George, who stated,

Freedom does not descend like manna from heaven. It has been won step by step, by tramping the wilderness, crossing Jordan, and clearing the Jebusites out of the land. I do not regret that we cannot obtain these blessings except by fighting. The common people have taken no step that was worth taking without effort, sacrifice, and suffering.²⁷

The militant suffragettes, then, saw themselves as exposing a moral double standard perpetrated by men, whose violence was defended and celebrated by liberal statesmen as a legitimate way of achieving liberty. For women to take these same violent actions marked a dramatic break from the deeply entrenched, gendered norms of respectability and absence from the political sphere.

²⁵ "Vote on Account: Release of Suffragist Prisoners," *The Times*, March 19, 1913, 11–12.

²⁶ Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp, ed., *Speeches and Trials of the Militant Suffragettes: The Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1918* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 144–47.

²⁷ Jane Marcus, ed., *Suffrage and the Pankhursts* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 117–19.

However, this moral double standard is precisely why the militant strategies of the W.S.P.U. largely alienated moderate suffragists and Members of Parliament.

In their disapproval of militant suffragette strategies, some men argued that the violence and disrespect of the suffragettes was the result of their lack of sexual satisfaction, an argument that pitted subservience to men as the solution to their “militant hysteria.” Throughout the first half of the 1910s, suffragettes resorted to intensifying violence against property in their bid to get the Liberal Party to support women’s suffrage: they broke windows, committed arson, bombed churches, and cut telegraph wires; when they were imprisoned for these acts, they went on hunger strikes.²⁸ These actions by otherwise respectable, middle-class women were shocking to observers and invited expert analysis. In a letter to *The Times* “On Militant Hysteria,” Sir Almroth Wright stated that he “cannot shut [his eyes] to the fact that there is mixed up with the woman’s movement much mental disorder,” suggesting later that the militant suffragettes were

a class of women who have all their life-long been strangers to joy, women in whom instincts long suppressed have in the end broken into flame. These are the sexually embittered women in whom everything has turned into gall and bitterness of heart and hatred of men.²⁹

Here, then, Wright suggested that women who resorted to physical violence in the name of female suffrage had suppressed their sexual instincts, which had overflowed and led to “gall,” “bitterness,” and “hatred of men.” This implied that what the Pankhursts needed was just a husband to satisfy their sexual drives, following in a similar line of thought to the anti-suffragist who had asked the audience to imagine Mrs. Pankhurst married to a “mere man.” The

²⁸ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, 201–3.

²⁹ Almroth Wright, “Suffrage Fallacies: Sir Almroth Wright on Militant Hysteria,” *The Times*, March 28, 1912, 7–8.

explanation for the women's suffrage movement was the absence of a patriarchal husband; the solution was his sexual control.

In another response to the violence perpetrated by the suffragettes, one article by *Western Gazette* depicted uproarious protest against the society-defying militants, whose actions were unbecoming of British women. The article emphasized the popular "indignation" against the militants, in which protesters to militancy threw "tomatoes and eggs" at suffragettes and smashed the windows of one of the W.S.P.U. headquarters. The same article quoted Millicent Fawcett's disapproval of the W.S.P.U., stating harshly that the "Suffragette outrages [...] had induced women, who ought to be symbols of refinement, to commit crimes that were excusable only in primitive people, in savages, or in children."³⁰ The quote doesn't make clear what Fawcett's exact words were, but it directly references its imagining of what ideal women are: those who act as "symbols of refinement" in an otherwise unrefined world, implying that the militant suffragettes lacked the refinement women were meant to have. However, this quote also dehumanizes and others the suffragettes by comparing their actions to those by "primitive people," "savages," and "children." These particularly imperial comparisons declared suffragettes to be stooping to the level of those who were perceived to be less civilized than the British, thereby symbolically stripping their status as respectable middle-class women.

Not everyone within the W.S.P.U. agreed with the violent tactics of the organization; suffragette Teresa Billington-Greig came to advocate against militancy, arguing that it wasn't true feminism. TBG had joined the W.S.P.U. in the year of its inception in 1903, participating in demonstrations and penning genuine defenses of militancy. However, by 1907 TBG began to step away from the W.S.P.U. to form the Women's Freedom League, which she led "toward

³⁰ "Suffragists' War on Property," *Western Gazette*, February 28, 1913, 12.

innovative, non-violent direct actions on several women's issues."³¹ This was a particular brand of feminism which abstained from both the militarism of the W.S.P.U. and the moderatism of the N.U.W.S.S.; TBG argued,

Militancy as designed and carried out by Miss Pankhurst and her mother has not tended to work a revolution by the enslaved women, much less to work a revolution in her. It has not been designed to clear away the accumulated barbarities of ages in order to prepare the way for a gospel of free womanhood. The experience of the last five years goes to prove that militancy is the exploitation of the natural forces of sex revolt for the purposes of advertisement.³²

For TBG in the 1910s, militancy was a failed strategy used cynically by the W.S.P.U. as "advertisement." Because militancy didn't "clear away the accumulated barbarities" against women for the final goal of "free womanhood," it wasn't effective feminism. Additionally, militancy took advantage of women by exploiting "the natural forces of sex revolt" to promote itself, making a spectacle of female protest—of pushing against notions of female respectability—in the name of a cause that was, according to TBG, ultimately useless to feminism.

War and Suffrage: The Triumph of Patriotism

World War I put the British women's suffrage movement on pause as its leaders rallied behind the war effort, viewing it as an opportunity to earn suffrage. Despite the presence of internationalist and anti-war sentiments within the W.S.P.U., Emmeline Pankhurst called for a pause on militant activity, viewing Britain's victory in the war against authoritarian Germany as more important than immediate violent action for women's suffrage, stating that if "Germany were to win, the women's movement, as we know it in Europe, would be put back fifty years at

³¹ Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Non-Violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig*, ed. Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 4–11.

³² Billington-Greig, 185.

least”; however, Pankhurst argued that women should be trained in the armed forces, so they might “step into the shoes of the men when they were called up to fight.”³³ This, of course, ran contrary to Victorian ideals of femininity, in which women could expect protection by men, rather than the inverse. The N.U.W.S.S. had a similar pacifist following, and when Millicent Fawcett urged, “Women, your country needs you. [...] Let us show ourselves worthy of citizenship, whether our right to it be recognised or not,” many of the organization’s officers resigned in protest.³⁴ Fawcett viewed the First World War as an opportunity for women to prove themselves “worthy” of suffrage, a worth that came from patriotism and a firm backing of the government—in other words, a worth dependent on supporting men.

Without the war, it would have been unlikely that female suffrage would have been passed so smoothly; it prompted a coalition government and affirmed the patriotism of British women. By 1918, the large wartime coalition in Parliament favored women’s suffrage with the qualifier that only women over 30 could be enfranchised, this caveat slightly easing the fears of those opposed to women’s suffrage. With the new requirements, an estimated six million women would be enfranchised, unable to outnumber ten million men, a conservative measure that addressed the concern that Parliament would become rapidly, and revolutionarily, driven by women.³⁵ By the end of the war, even conservative sources were willing to admit that the time for female suffrage had come: *The Times*, previously a consistent opponent to women’s suffrage, asserted in 1917 that the House of Lords should vote for suffrage not because of

the triumph of [suffragette] agitation, for agitation has long been stilled, nor on the notion, which every patriotic woman resents, that the vote is a mere reward for good behaviour. It is based wholly on the palpable injustice of withholding such

³³ Jorgensen-Earp, *Speeches and Trials of the Militant Suffragettes*, 355–62.

³⁴ Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals*, 135–36.

³⁵ Morgan, 145–46.

protection as the vote affords from a sex which has for the first time taken its full share in the national effort...³⁶

For *The Times*, women deserved the vote because of their involvement in supporting the war; not the “good behaviour” stemming from rejecting “agitation,” but rather a patriotic investment in the “national effort” through munitions manufacturing and support on the home front. This, then, demonstrates that without the World War, and the large Parliamentary coalition it spurred, female suffrage would likely have waited on the sidelines until the Liberal Party presented a leader willing to champion, rather than begrudgingly acquiesce to, the cause of suffrage. Though female suffrage was granted in a conservative form, excluding all women under thirty, it ultimately enfranchised over eight million women and served as a springboard for future expansions of the vote.³⁷ However, this suffrage was granted entirely on the terms of men, effectively a reward for the cessation of militancy and female labor in service of the British war effort.

The success of women’s suffrage in 1918 followed the quietening of both the militant Pankhursts and the N.U.W.S.S., raising questions about both the success of militant strategies and suffragist lobbying in the face of determined opposition from Parliament. The final key for suffrage seemed to have been this respectable, quiet, patriotic duty in the service of wartime Britain, rather than the revolutionary, violent change advocated by the Pankhurst family. However, without the work of the militant suffragettes and the moderate suffragists, it is unlikely female suffrage would have been seen as a major issue; after all, several Members of Parliament had initially argued that because few women seemed to care for the vote, there was no need to make it a parliamentary priority. Therefore—despite being ultimately passed on the terms of

³⁶ “Woman Suffrage and the Lords,” *The Times*, January 10, 1918, 7.

³⁷ Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals*, 145–46.

wealthy, elite men in Parliament—female suffrage resulted from female efforts to campaign, following the tradition of the women who petitioned Parliament to accept women’s suffrage in 1867 and the women who pushed Chartist leaders to include women’s suffrage in their demands. This tradition—this memory—of the decades-long fight for women’s suffrage was frequently present in leaders’ minds and evoked a fond appreciation of how far women had come despite such consistent opposition. As Pankhurst stated close to the passage of women’s suffrage,

It will be 50 years on the 17th of May since John Stuart Mill introduced the first Women’s Suffrage Bill into the House of Commons. Is it not a remarkable thing that exactly fifty years after the introduction of the first Women’s Suffrage Bill we should be on the eve of seeing this question settled?

Those fifty years—though “altogether too long a time”—contained with them, according to Pankhurst, a narrative of hardship that had culminated in real results.³⁸

³⁸ Jorgensen-Earp, *Speeches and Trials of the Militant Suffragettes*, 367.

Conclusion

The Legacy of the Suffragists

Respectability defined the women's rights movement in Britain. The debates and arguments for and against the right to vote were tinted in the lens of female respectability and their relation to men; frequently, women were described as uniquely possessing the ability to control men, to alter the dynamic between the genders, often in a negative way. This reflects the anxieties many late 19th-century critics had regarding women, fearing that men could become feminized by female political involvement, or that women could become too powerful and overthrow the existing patriarchal order. Therefore, at the heart of much of the resistance to female enfranchisement was sexism, whether blatantly misogynistic or disguised in benevolence.

This sexism—this focus on respectability, domesticity, and the maintenance of a clear demarcation between the sexes through hardening notions of the separate spheres—followed the women's rights movement over the course of its existence. Throughout the Chartist movement, male leaders intentionally cut female suffrage from their demands, requiring instead from their female supporters an outward domesticity that would bolster the image of working-class male respectability. A similar fixation on the gender performance of women persisted into the 1860s, when John Stuart Mill implied that the feminization of men could only be prevented by the masculinization of women, because men and women had become so co-dependent in living together. In other words, women needed to be given the right to vote—to be masculinized, in Mill's eyes—hinging women's suffrage on the basis of heterosexual attraction and revealing his anxieties that the feminization of men was a worse fate than the masculinization of women. While this line of thinking was not directly tied to respectability, Mill, like the Chartists, was concerned with femininity; however, unlike the Chartists, the femininity of women wasn't at

issue, but rather the femininity of men. As the century closed and a new one began—one of heightened violence and polarization within the suffrage movement—respectability remained a key issue. The militant Pankhursts advocated for property damage and public disruption to achieve female suffrage, intentionally pushing back against the respectable politics of the moderate suffrage movement, which had lobbied, petitioned, and protested peacefully for decades with little results. Critics and many members of Parliament were appalled at this behavior, which violated the entrenched mores of Victorian England, and frequently cited those actions as reasons against giving the vote to women. As the First World War erupted in Europe, women's suffrage finally succeeded partly because the militant suffragettes put down their arms in favor of patriotic devotion for the duration of the conflict, suggesting that for Parliament, support for the British Empire in her hour of need superseded all else. Though is difficult to fit this century-long narrative—from exclusion to legislative success—into a clear-cut story with a beginning, middle, and end (as the movement suffered from several setbacks and stalling), the experiences of the individual women of the movement speak to the common thread of being largely discounted and ignored throughout the 19th century.

This story, of course, is not limited to just over a century ago; currently, women lack political rights all over the world, and tension remains over whether maintaining respectability in politics is justifiable in the face of egregious acts. For the Pankhurst family, this maintenance of respectability had proved itself a failure as Members of Parliament, time and time again, refused even to consider the question of women's suffrage. Moderate suffragists, like Millicent Fawcett, harshly opposed these militants, imposing what historian Evelyn Higginbotham coined as “the politics of respectability.” Specifically, this is a minority population policing itself to emphasize “manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as

petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice.”¹ Though this concept was initially applied to the black Baptist women’s movement of the early 20th century in the United States, it can be similarly applied to the respectability-driven British women’s suffrage movement, which sought to conform to the expectations of the ruling patriarchal class in the hopes of being admitted into the political system. This question remains today: the concept of the “respectable woman” hasn’t disappeared, but rather has morphed as society’s priorities have shifted; according to researcher Mary Evans, the respectable woman today is the “economically active citizen,” who is financially independent of the state.² And while British women enjoy the same political rights as men, they continue to be paid less than their male counterparts for the same work—more than 17% less among all employees, according to a 2019 report by the British Office for National Statistics.³ Unfortunately, political representation does not always translate directly into improved conditions, and feminism has seen second- and third-wave resurgences in the century following enfranchisement.

Further studies are recommended for better understanding the women’s suffrage movement in Britain. The U.S. suffrage movement, operating on a similar scale of time with the U.K. suffrage movement, deserves a length comparative study beginning with the Seneca Falls Convention, which inspired women in the United Kingdom, continuing to the American Civil War and its impact on British democracy, and concluding with the competing strains of militarism and moderatism in both the U.S. and Britain. Women’s suffrage was by no means

¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement In the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185–87.

² Mary Evans, “Women and the Politics of Austerity: New Forms of Respectability,” *British Politics* 11, no. 4 (2016): 10–11.

³ Roger Smith, “Gender Pay Gap in the UK: 2019,” Statistical bulletin (London: Office for National Statistics, October 29, 2019), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2019>.

insulated and was in constant conversation with neighboring movements. Additionally, the suffrage movement did not simply end in 1918, as it did not enfranchise men and women equally; the campaign leading up to the Representation of the People Act in 1928 needs further research, studied as a continuation of earlier campaigns. Finally, a study on the British women's suffrage movement in popular contemporary culture could reveal which details of the movement were remembered by the public, which weren't, and why—and what that tells us about the shifting values of our contemporary lives.

The story of women's rights is an uneven, imperfect story that is constantly being recorded, interpreted, and reinterpreted by both activists and historians. The events of the past never become obsolete or irrelevant; rather, they are frequently referenced by the actors of the present as they call upon the past for inspiration to gain or lessons to be learned. Though the circumstances have changed greatly, the British women's suffrage movement of over a century ago speaks to this century's own anxieties about voting rights and feminism, making the struggles of the past once again relevant to today.

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