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From the "Angel in the House" to the Suffragette: How the New Woman Crossed the Border Between the Private and the Public Spheres, Great Britain. 1854-1918

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While women officially have the same rights as men in Western societies, it still remains to be proved that they are considered fully equal. This discrepancy between theory and practice has always existed and one glance at British history and more specifically at the Victorian and Edwardian periods exemplifies how the border separating men and women has evolved over time.

This paper aims at analysing the presence and the evolution of that border between 1854 and 1918, a time when rebellious women gradually attempted to cross the border between the private and the public spheres, negotiate it, fight against it before eventually shattering it by getting the right to vote allowing them to exist and participate in the public sphere.

Until the turn of the 20th century, men and women in British society did not enjoy equality of status and were not expected to behave in a similar fashion in public spaces. That phenomenon led to an effective and existing border between the genders as well as between the private and the public spheres that lasted through centuries. The idea of the evangelical family in the late 18th and 19th centuries also centred on the mother who was seen as

the embodiment of piety, a moral and spiritual guide as well as the centre of care and affection (Caine 1997, 83). With the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of workplaces that were distinct from the home, men and women were required to occupy two different spaces that became more and more distinct. Men were needed in the factory where they earned wages while women were asked to take care of the home and thus performed unpaid domestic work. As Catherine Hall explains: "gender divisions were reworked [...]. Men [were] placed firmly in the newly defined public world of business, commerce, and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family" (Hall 1990, 52).

The publication of Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" in 1854 celebrated the idea of the "perfect" Victorian woman belonging to the domestic sphere. With works such as Patmore's poem, the border between the private and the public spheres became more visible and it was made clear that men and women could not belong to the two spaces at the same time. In the Victorian era, as the border established between the two spheres and entrapping both men and women in two separate spaces was solidified, it began to be increasingly criticised, challenged and continuously questioned by women who could no longer accept their imposed position.

The idea that women should stay at home was partly due to the conception of women as guardian angels whose involvement in the public sphere was seen as immoral if not indecent (Caine 1997, 86). Women thus suffered from the interpretation given to the terms "public" and "private" themselves that excluded them from the public sphere. A "public" man was seen as someone concerned with political and community affairs whereas a "public" woman was a prostitute (Caine 1997, 7).

Women's rights then represented a challenging fight for women, not only because they had to change mentalities, but also because they had to prove they had the ability to be real political actors that could be as strong and brave as men. This fight lasted, and its form evolved over time, between the Victorian era and the First World War, after which women were eventually granted the right to vote in Great Britain. As they obtained this right to participate in the political life, their status evolved accordingly and they became public actors, just like men. The border was shattered.

In order to understand how the gradual weakening of the border between the two spheres in the Victorian and Edwardian eras eventually allowed women to settle into the public sphere, three different periods have been distinguished and a chronological approach has been selected. After mid-Victorian feminists had first tried to negotiate the border between 1854 and 1894, the newly created and subversive New Woman redefined the Victorian woman and attempted to cross "over" and have a place in society. Those activists managed to create a semi-detached area between the public and private spheres, a kind of "borderland," not a no man's land but merely an "in-between" space they could more or less freely occupy before being granted—or conquering—a full access to the public sphere (Digby 1992, 196). The right to vote may today appear as the suffragists' and suffragettes' finest hour but it came after a long struggle. Between 1903 and 1918, the suffragettes eventually managed to tear down the barriers using heavily-mediatised provocative and shocking actions.

Even though Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" did not attract much attention when it was first published in 1854, it became more famous later in the 19th century and can still be considered as a key moment in the history of women's rights as it somehow made the place of women official and marked a clear separation between the private and the public spheres.

As a dedication to his "perfect" wife Emily, through this poem, Coventry Patmore suggested an idea of how an ideal Victorian woman should behave. The words he used in his poem, especially in Canto IX in the part entitled "The Wife's Tragedy," implied that the woman needed to perfect the art of "pleasing a man," as angels were supposed to please the Lord:

Man must be pleased; but him to please Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf Of his condoled necessities She casts her best, she flings herself. (Patmore 1887, 74)

Everything revolved around the man, and the woman was supposed to be at his service. She was confined in the house to breed children while the

man's role was to provide for the family. She was trapped in this scheme and would get no appreciation for what she did at home. Besides, the use of the preposition "in"—rather than "of"—in the title of Coventry Patmore's poem emphasised the entrapment of the woman "in" the house. Women were thus expected to be domestic and innocent, and not to take part in anything outside the home. They rather acted as a beacon of morality for their husbands. As a result, "The Angel in the House" became the emblem of the ideal middle-class woman in the Victorian era and the proper location for women was the home, where she provided care, nurturance and comfort for both a husband and a family (Caine 1997, 82).

This assumption was also conveyed in the newspapers and female magazines of the time that enhanced the nature and importance of women's moral and religious duty to family and hearth, and referred to women only in terms of "wives, daughters or mothers." The so-called "woman's mission" was then used to justify the idea of women's necessary domestic seclusion and their alleged inferiority to men. Women had to transform both their immediate family and potentially the whole society on a moral scale and in the interests of religion and order (Caine, 1997, 82). The function of the woman was to ensure stability, morality and piety and this could only be done if she stayed at home. As Barbara Caine explains: "[the idea was clearly linked to committed] evangelicalism, establishing a framework for seeing the home as a natural sphere for women and for giving a religious basis to male dominance and female subordination" (84).

Should a woman not fit into this scheme, should she try to cross the line separating the private and the public spheres and dare deviate from strict propriety, she would then become a "fallen woman" meaning that she would be ostracised. The figure of the "fallen woman" was portrayed in literature and the media but also and most notably in art as Victorian moralists warned against the consequences of losing one's virtue. Richard Redgrave's painting The Outcast dating from 1851 as well as Augustus Egg's series Past and Present painted in 1858 all illustrate the notion of the "fallen woman."

Many women actually agreed and tried to abide by this "ideal" Victorian woman model. Even those who were considered as "feminists"—though that term was not used before 1895—such as Josephine Butler, still believed that women were instinctively "home makers." Lydia Becker, one of the founders of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1867 wanted the society to deviate as little as possible from accepted middle-class standards of the time in terms of womanly behaviour (Caine 1997, 118). Although not all feminists agreed over the extent and nature of the differences between men and women, all accepted the idea that women were innately more chaste, more compassionate, more virtuous and dutiful than men. They used this image of women as a means of arguing that they needed and were entitled to a larger public role (Caine 1997, 102). Public lectures were organised at which male speakers predominated and worked hard to show that the women concerned about parliamentary representation were in all respects perfectly feminine.

Indeed, for mid-Victorian feminists, the idea was not to behave like men but instead to create a model of female excellence which would be a perfect combination of women's morality and nurturance with an added dimension of intelligence, independence and personal strength, seen as genuine. In the 1850s and 1860s, mid-Victorian feminists represented a middle-class movement designed to show their own acceptance of Victorian codes of propriety. What they sought and demanded was not only political rights for women but also that women be able to use and exercise their specific moral qualities in all areas of life (Caine 1997, 89). In other words, they did not try to break the border between the private and public spheres but attempted to negotiate and extend their previous range. Women's qualities were needed in public organisations and they intended to prove it. If a woman could take care of a home, why would she not be able to do the same outside home? As Mrs E.O. Fordham, a future member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), argued: "the government of the village is but the government of the home, only on a larger scale" (Digby 1992, 203).

As traditional female activities—such as local philanthropy or parochial education—undertaken as an extension of the role of wives became "public" activities, activists demanded a proper voice for women in public (Caine 1997, 92). That is why they tried to create a semi-detached area between

the private and public spheres, a kind of "borderland." Places like the Langham Place circle, a reading room created in 1859, became popular among women who were eager to come together while legitimating their presence in public and semi-public areas. It represented a female space where women could freely go to read and discuss current events. Organisations were founded like the *Society for Promoting the Employment of Women* in 1859 and women's clubs became more numerous during the second half of the 19th century. According to Anne Digby: "the extent of this Victorian and Edwardian social borderland was large since it related to different networks and organisations in political, social and economic life" (198).

Women's ideas also began to be conveyed in periodicals and more and more articles, pamphlets, tracts and novels dealing with the woman question in general were published in the 1850s and 1860s. At the start, women were largely confined to publishing their work in domestic and literary magazines. However, women reformers were committed to creating press organs for and by women and thus transformed the periodical into both a real and imagined space for female intellectual and political community (Tusan 2005, 106). The press could thus also represent a threshold towards a semi-public accepted space for the woman reader. The subjects that were analysed and the articles that were published in the women's press were different from those published in the mainstream press though. The domestic press aimed at selling goods and services to women through the promotion of domestic ideas whereas the women's press aimed at pushing towards women's political activism through debate and discussion (Tusan 2005, 36). The start of *The English Woman's Journal* in 1859 established by Bessie Parkes and Barbara Bodichon marked the first step towards a campaign launched "for and by women" (Tusan 2005, 30). Undoubtedly, in order to convince public opinion that women needed more rights, feminists had to show themselves out of their confined field. They had to be out of their houses and clearly act in the public world. Women's newspapers thus became an active means of spreading the idea that women needed more rights, and they played an important role in pushing the border placed between men and women, giving the latter a chance to enter the public sphere.

All in all, the question of separate spheres in the second half of the 19th century and what precisely the separation involved became increasingly complex. On an ideological level, the doctrine of separate male and female spheres was still widely accepted and served to provide much of the framework for feminism (Caine 1992, 92). In this context, the semi-independent ideological territory crafted by mid-Victorian feminists allowed flexibility and enabled "official" Victorian values to be silently transgressed but without formal recognition necessarily having to be taken of such "frontier violations" (Digby 1992, 198). This movement was not perceived as an open challenge to the masculine public domain, though. Mid-Victorian feminists still appeared to be camping along an acceptable borderline since they were using familiar feminine skills in an extended, but not radically different, area from their domestic territory (Digby 1992, 210). They asserted the need for female public participation in terms of the particular nature of women and the specific contribution they could make as a consequence of their sex and of the familial duties, thus making the private and public spheres actually inter-connected (Caine 1992, 92). Yet, in 1894, as more and more feminists wanted to get rid of the image of the "perfect" and "ideal" Victorian woman, a new type of feminist emerged: the New Woman.

The term "New Woman" was first coined in 1894 in the newspaper *The Woman's Herald* in an article written by Sarah Grand and entitled "The Social Standing of the New Woman." When she was created, the New Woman was a fictional icon representing the political woman of the coming century who promised to improve and reform the English society. From 1894 to 1897, the women's press depicted a respectable and even a utopian image for political women by crafting an identity for the New Woman, with a clear emphasis on both ideas of independence and self-reliance (Tusan 2005, 131). Women's newspapers first tried to represent women's interest in politics and social justice not as a challenge to their dedication to the home, but as an extension of their domestic values. This image was countered simultaneously by the mainstream press that proposed a dystopian vision of the New Woman as the emblem of a society gone wrong (Tusan 2005, 131). The series of cartoons published in *Punch* and featuring powerful women on bicycles or bullying effeminate men at cocktail parties illustrate the vision

of the New Woman by the mainstream press. Because of that, contrary to mid-Victorian feminists who had kept feminine values and attempted to extend the border between the private and the public spheres, the New Woman was portrayed as attempting to cross the border between the two spheres by shocking the Victorian society and challenging masculine values. As such, the discussion of the New Woman in the 1890s raised a number of questions about marriage and sexuality that had rarely been publicly debated before. The term "New Woman" was used to challenge and attack some of the core Victorian ideals such as marriage and womanliness, which had been upheld by their mid-Victorian predecessors (Caine 1992, 95). The idea was to reject marriage and the family circle as they were seen as a "spiritual death for women," according to Sarah Grand (Caine 1992, 137). At that point, the battle for women's rights was decidedly taking a new turn, and what had previously appeared to be a casual subject of debate was slowly becoming a new step towards a real societal change.

Although feminists kept disagreeing, not only regarding strategies but also about the nature of women and about what their emancipation meant, New Women rejecting the border between the private and the public spheres tried to organise themselves. Indeed, more and more women thought they would not be able to enjoy more rights if they did not have the vote, which represented the first step towards the destruction of the border between men and women. Reaching this aim became the clearer and main objective of activists. It was in this context that the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed in 1894 bringing suffrage to the centre and putting an end to the feminist movement as middle-class only now that it spread to all social classes. However, the campaigns for the female suffrage seemed to many anti-suffragists, both men and women, to threaten the ideas of social propriety and to overtly challenge the conventional Victorian feminine ideal (Digby 1992, 211). As Anne Digby underlines:

> In contrast to female work in the local community, the campaigns for the female suffrage seemed to many anti-suffragists both men and women, to threaten ideas of social propriety. Natural gender roles would be over-turned;

women would neglect their true concerns—the private ones of home and family, and their moral purity would be contaminated by entry to a public, national politics. (211)

Many feared that with the appearance and development of the New Woman, gender roles would be overturned, women would neglect their true concerns, that is to say the private ones of home and family, and their moral purity would be contaminated by politics (Digby 1992, 211). It was actually a time when the very idea of women speaking on a platform was regarded as not only indecorous but even indecent (Caine 1997, 117). It was a time when managing a public campaign which needed to persuade male Members of Parliament to take action was seen by some as a very delicate matter. Yet, despite these oppositions, the suffragists campaigned, demonstrated, delivered numerous speeches, wrote pamphlets and persuaded other people to accept their views. What the NUWSS and its leader Millicent Garret Fawcett had successfully achieved was to bring together all the older societies that militated for this same right in a loose confederation; yet, they had not dramatically altered the tenor of their work (Caine 1997, 160). They had continued to hold meetings in public drawing rooms, send deputations to Parliament and try to lobby its Members. However, the effectiveness of those activities remained very limited and women actually failed to get the vote.

At that moment though, even if it was still quite unpopular, the idea of granting women the right to vote began to gain ground in political debates. Following in the footsteps of mid-Victorian feminists who had tried to extend the border, the New Woman managed to cross over it and started to establish a new vision of women. Nevertheless, crossing over, behaving in a provocative and shocking fashion for some was simply not enough in order to access and settle into the public sphere. Indeed, while the border was present in people's minds, women could not fully exist as citizens. A series of cartoons published in *Punch* at the turn of the 19th century illustrates how New Women were perceived by society. They turned into males, adopted a masculine behaviour by smoking, wearing pants and riding bicycles. Although women remained politically and economically subordinate to men, they were also turning into "working girls," performers, and athletes. They entered higher education and professions that



What a charming Surprise it is, to a Man who has looked to his Bicycle for Two Hours' Peace and Liberty a Day, to come down on his Birthday and fird that his Wiffe and his Mother-in-Law have taken Lessons in secret, and will henceporth of with him always and everywhere!

Fig. 1. Punch, 1895

had formerly been closed to women. Reformers were also more and more active and involved in women's clubs and suffrage.

Although this may seem caricatural, figures 1 and 2 represent how men saw New Women at the time and how those women represented a challenge in the masculine domain. However, as those challenges did not allow women to gain more rights, other means were required and the New Woman as she had been created in 1894 had to evolve and go even further in the struggle.

It is in this context that the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel in 1903. Their objective was to seek the vote in the hope that it would give women more power in the workplace, improve their pay and conditions, increase their independence and radically transform society. Focusing on the vote as access to a real place in society and a way to gain more rights as fully accepted citizens became essential. If women managed to obtain the right to vote, then people would have no other choice but accept their role and



THE NEW WOMAN.

"You're not leaving us, Jack? Tea will be here directly!"
"Oh, I'm going for a Cup of Tea in the Servants' Hall. I can't get on without Female Society, you know!"

Fig. 2. "The New Woman," Punch, 1895

impact in politics first but also in society in general. The border would not only be destroyed officially but also in people's minds. However, if feminists agreed on that point, they did not agree on the means to reach their goal. The creation of the WSPU thus led to the emergence of two main types of feminists: the radicals and the conservatives also referred to as the suffragettes and the suffragists.

In the early 20th century, there was a massive increase in feminist organisation and agitation as well as in suffrage societies and suffrage activity. The number of societies affiliated with the NUWSS increased by more than four hundred between 1907 and 1910, reaching about 50,000 members. Yet, as the peaceful means advocated by the NUWSS as a way to get the right to vote failed, more radical feminists emerged. When the WSPU was created, it advocated more violent methods to get the right to vote, placing the organisation in total disagreement with the NUWSS. This form of propaganda was defined on the one hand by the strong conviction that the political

ideology in place was wrong, and on the other hand by the realisation that strong means of actions were needed to make this situation change. Indeed, Emmeline Pankhurst admitted: "We threw away all our conventional notions of what was 'ladylike' and 'good form'" (Digby 1992, 212). After 1905, militant suffragettes violated ladylike norms of behaviour even more to react to the male-dominated Victorian and Edwardian society's obvious refusal to concede what Harriet Martineau had described as a "rational treatment" of women's political desert (Digby 1992, 212). According to the Pankhursts, a solution involving more violence would be the key to breaking the border between the private and the public spheres and paving the way towards the right to vote. Even though their first methods were similar to those used by the suffragists and consisted in demonstrating, singing, performing plays, writing poems and novels, exposing banners and paintings, the actions undertaken by the WSPU members gradually became more shocking and violent. The strength of the suffragettes' demands increased, and violence became a trademark of their means of action, as the traditional ones led to no valid answer. At that moment, their strategy consisted in using all possible means to draw the public's attention to their message. Hence, they performed notorious gestures varying between interrupting political meetings in order to show "Votes for Women" slogans, slashing Velázquez's Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery, and even destroying symbolic private properties. They clearly felt that they did not have a choice but break the border violently as there was a strong resistance. The subject then became passionate and of paramount importance in the British society.

Differences increased between the WSPU and the NUWSS, the two main organisations fighting for women's suffrage. The "unladylike" suffragette (member of the WSPU) was regularly portrayed and caricatured in the press compared to the more "ladylike" suffragist (member of the NUWSS) as in the cartoon entitled "The Shrieking Sister" published in *Punch* in 1906 (Fig. 3). In response to the cartoon, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, an eminent WSPU member declared: "You see how much need there is for our 'shrieking.' It is the duty of every woman here to come and help us shriek" (Digby 1992, 214). Indeed, even though the WSPU became increasingly violent, and although it lost some of its most eminent members on the



THE SENSIBLE WOMAN. "YOU HELP OUR CAUSE? WHY, YOU'RE ITS WORST ENEMY!"

Fig. 3. "The Shrieking Sister," Punch, 1906

way, it perfectly illustrated the suffragettes' motto "deeds, not words." For a while, the suffragettes kept seeking imprisonment, chaining themselves to railings, throwing acid at polling booths, destroying sporting fields and letter boxes. They also broke the windows of the shops that were known not to support them, and led an arson campaign in 1913. All those actions

were not seen in a positive way among the public, as they were judged deeply offensive and unacceptable. However, they also represented a way to exist and spread their message, granting them a daily existence on the public scene, and having the mainstream press talk about them constantly.

As Anne Digby explains:

The militant campaigns of the suffragettes were indeed an overt and therefore "visible" challenge to the power distribution of an Edwardian patriarchy. They provoked allegations of unwomanliness, and also of hysteria, a convenient term which bore both a flexible everyday meaning as well as more specialist clinical connotations. (212)

The Government also fought back and, as a result, many suffragettes were sent to jail. But even in reclusion, the militant acts did not stop, as women went on hunger strikes and kept doing whatever they could to attract the attention of the public to their claims. When the suffragettes were imprisoned, the Government brought psychiatrists to Holloway to see whether hunger-striking suffragette prisoners might be certified as lunatics and prison wardens were eventually asked to force-feed the prisoners. The treatment of suffragettes influenced the way the population saw the movement. Many people were first outraged at the actions led by the suffragettes but as time passed, more and more people sympathised with these women.

Of course, the suffragettes also kept using more traditional and legal ways of putting their claims into the political debate. They focused a lot on continuing what earlier feminists had started: the women's press. They developed their own periodicals: Votes for Women (1908-1912), The Suffragette (1912-1914) and Britannia (1914-1917), which represented an "easy" way to exist in the public sphere. Besides, as the suffragettes sold their newspapers themselves, in front of mixed crowds of supporters and anti-suffragists, they had to be very self-confident to shout and sell their copies (Tusan 2005, 172). According to Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, selling the newspapers represented a new kind of political culture based on public display. The women's press formed a very particular kind of community using both public and private characteristics of traditional modes of women's sociability (172). In her opinion, creating a respectable image for women sellers had to

be developed as a key strategy in melding the image of the public woman with that of the private citizen (Tusan 2005, 175). These actions blurred the lines between public action and private duty but the image was idealistic. The harsh conditions in which women had to sell the newspapers were somehow far from the romantic image of the street seller easily navigating the public space as a private citizen (Tusan 2005, 175). The actions of the WSPU served to dramatise both the brutality and fundamental sexual nature of male domination—along with the complex ways in which women could resist it. For Barbara Caine, militancy offered women a new kind of freedom and expression, and the capacity to engage in suffering and self-sacrifice of a potentially transforming kind (Caine 1997, 167).

All in all, the suffrage press played a key role in enabling women to participate in a wider public discussion over the future role of women citizens, while creating a multifaceted political community for female activists. Rather than understanding the vote as part of a larger series of conditions necessary for the improvement of women's social position, the suffrage press portrayed the vote itself as a necessary precondition to any advancement of women's status.

The beginning of the First World War in 1914 brought the suffrage campaigns to an end and women had to leave the domestic sphere to help with the war effort. Both men and women did not have a choice and had to accept the situation. During the war, women's newspapers employed new strategies to bring women's citizenship claims and calls for social reform into public discourse. Even the *Women's Social and Political Union* somehow stopped fighting to get the right to vote as the war was being waged. The suffragettes adapted their newspaper and changed its name from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*. Whether female activists wanted it or not, suffrage was no longer centre stage and the newspapers dedicated themselves to proving women as worthy of citizenship because of their war work. Indeed, the war brought the female political activist to prominence by providing new opportunities for her to engage in public discourse. This strong women's commitment in the war effort made it obvious for everybody, both men and women, that women had a place in society and

not just in the house. Women over 30 years old eventually got the right to vote in 1918 and on the same terms as men in 1928.

In attempting to move women so openly from the private to the public sphere, militant suffragettes aroused deep-seated psychic anxieties and antagonisms in society (Digby 1992, 213). That is the reason why for some, it was predictable they should fail to gain the vote. Women were seen to be moving out of an acceptable social range in an attempt to breach what their opponents regarded as an impermeable and immutable gender frontier (Digby 1992, 213).

As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, from 1854 to 1918, moderate feminists appreciated the value of social visibility at the margins since, on the one hand, this was non-threatening to men, and on the other hand, it allowed women to unobtrusively build up a set of new skills, confidence and identity. Rather than consisting in a fixed boundary, this social borderland represented a moving frontier providing an expanding opportunity for women (Digby 1992, 214). In a way, getting the right to vote corresponded to the destruction of the border between the two spheres because it acknowledged the role of a woman and her potential place in the public sphere and led to the reconfiguration of the two spheres. However, boundaries have been displaced rather than fully erased. Many restrictive dichotomies still retain their full force within a gendered world today, so that modern feminists continue to see analytical relevance in the concept of public and private spheres. On the whole, women can be seen as having opened a door allowing them a position in the public sphere. Yet, further boundaries have been created since then, and that is why some women keep fighting today to change the situation and improve the condition of women worldwide. In my opinion, actions performed by groups like the Femen or the Pussy Riots utterly echo the actions performed by the WSPU about a century ago as all aimed at shocking and drawing the media's attention to their message as much as possible. In the end, after the fight women have been leading for so long to get access to the public sphere, it may be time to leave the door open and enable men to have a place in the private sphere. Equality

may actually not be fully reached unless the door between the two spheres remains open allowing both women and men to cross over and freely move from one sphere to the other.



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