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Shame: a transnational history of women policing women

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Abstract

From the 1880s to the 1910s, novelist Marie Corelli reigned as 'Queen of the Bestsellers', far outselling any fellow authors of her day. As I read through her works to complete my Ph.D. on bestselling fiction and a history of women's emotions, I could not help but be disturbed by the glaring anti-feminist sentiment infusing her writing. Corelli was certainly no supporter of votes for women, but neither, it was apparent, was she a proponent of advances in women's education and employment.

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Shame: A Transnational History of Women Policing Women

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa reflects on her latest book, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890-1920* (2018, Routledge).

From the 1880s to the 1910s, novelist Marie Corelli [<http://www.thelatchkey.org/Latchkey2.1/featured2.1.htm#MC>] reigned as 'Queen of the Bestsellers', far outselling any fellow authors of her day. As I read through her works to complete my Ph.D. on bestselling fiction and a history of women's emotions, I could not help but be disturbed by the glaring anti-feminist sentiment infusing her writing. Corelli was certainly no supporter of votes for women, but neither, it was apparent, was she a proponent of advances in women's education and employment.

On the one hand, Corelli treated her vast army of loyal readers to humorous denunciations of the feminist or 'new' woman. Her novels consistently proclaimed that modern society had spawned a breed of ridiculous women who insisted on aping the habits and mannerisms of men. These women smoked cigarettes, like the character of Honoria Maggs in *My Wonderful Wife* (c.1886: <https://archive.org/details/vendettamywonder00core>), a manly New Woman [<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle>] whose husband informs us he would have kissed her on their wedding day 'but that vile cigar stuck out of her mouth and prevented' him. Women who rode bicycles or spoke 'slang', as in *The Mighty Atom* (1897: <https://archive.org/details/mightyatom00coreiala/page/n2>) and 'The Passing of a Great Queen. A Tribute to the Noble Life of Victoria Regina' (1901: <https://archive.org/details/passingofgreatqu00coreiala/page/n8>), were likewise held up for ridicule for contravening feminine conventions of the day.

On the other hand, Corelli's treatment of women's feminist aspirations revealed a much deeper, darker undercurrent of feminist hatred, or sometimes even a general hatred of women. It certainly cast light on a world where feminist shaming was an accepted and well-practised custom. Corelli bitterly condemned feminists, or what she called her 'distracted, man-fighting sisters', who were devoid of the womanly feelings of modesty and shame. Violent suffragettes behaved more like 'drunken men than even the worst feminist viragos'. Whatever the 'folly and the tyranny of men in regard to woman', 'woman alone is in fault for his war against her', she declared [<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780203728277/chapters/10.4324/9780203728277-25>]. Here Corelli was referring to the men's strident, often violent opposition to militant feminism. Her

novel *God's Good Man: A Simple Love Story* (1904: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4653>) blamed feminism for decivilising England – a country which had once been before rather than behind every nation in the world – so that it had ‘become one with less enlightened races in the deliberate unsexing and degradation of womanhood’.

The latent vitriol in Corelli's writing surprised me. Here was a woman who was an independent and extraordinarily successful female writer who, by all accounts, was also an incredibly astute businesswoman. Her public life did not seem at odds with the demands of turn-of-the-century feminism. More puzzling for me was the fact that a large proportion of her readers were women. Why were these 500 to 600 page novels, which were filled with blatant feminist hatred and feminist shaming – albeit while indulging in feminist transgressions – so attractive to her vast army of women readers? Why was women-shaming-women such a regular and familiar feature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular culture?

Feminist shaming across the British Empire

These questions prompted me to write *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890-1920* (2018: <https://www.routledge.com/Shame-and-the-Anti-Feminist-Backlash-Britain-Ireland-and-Australia-1890-1920/Crozier-De-Rosa/p/book/9780415635868>), which was published in January. To begin the book, I had to reappraise what I knew of shame, shaming and woman and/or feminist shaming. Research confirms that shame works on people's fears of being judged and found defective. If people value their connection to a particular group, they will hesitate from doing or saying things that might risk their exclusion from that group. As a highly gendered emotion, shame has historically been used to police notions of femininity and masculinity. In the early twentieth century, women participating in the intensely visible, public world of politics – a world that was once exclusively masculine – drew attention to their gender transgressions. They attracted shaming. However, as feminist theorist Jill Locke iterates [<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01325.x>], shaming was and is limited in its effectiveness. It only works if the intended recipient has the ‘ability to engage in shameful self-assessment’. If a transgressive woman does not accept the specified reason for feeling shame nor honours the bond with the group in question, then she is unlikely to engage in ‘shameful self-assessment’.

After some initial research into women's periodicals, I realised that feminist shaming was in no way confined to Corelli. It permeated English women's political writings. But how widespread was this reliance on feminist shaming in England? Was it an English practice only? Or did its reach extend beyond the British metropole to other sites along the British imperial spectrum, which were similarly experiencing gender upheavals and gender anxieties? Was feminist shaming national or transnational in character? Given the nature of these questions, I used *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash* to examine how women opposed to the feminist campaign for the vote in early twentieth-century Britain, Ireland and Australia used shame as a political tool. Through employing an emotions

history framework to anti-feminist/feminist entanglements in national and transnational contexts, I found that women who were attempting to police their own political communities drew heavily on shame and its related emotional concepts – like embarrassment, humiliation, honour, courage, and chivalry. These women used these emotions to either draw misbehaving women back into the fold or, if that motivational tactic failed, they used them to confirm the transgressive subject's ostracism from the group. Shame was a versatile and ever-present feature in the feminist/anti-feminist entanglements across the British Empire.

Shaming histories and anti-feminists' fears of an erosion of gendered emotional virtues

Philosopher Michael Morgan says [<https://www.routledge.com/On-Shame/Morgan/p/book/9780415396233>] that, today, most people think it is a shame that shame exists. If we were to accept this, then the question stands: why was it such a prolific political tool at the beginning of the twentieth century? If shame is such a negative emotional concept, then what prompted women to employ it to oppose the feminist aspirations of their fellow women? In asking these questions, I was mindful of Brian Harrison's 1978 caution [<https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2633024>] to historians researching the anti-suffragist mindset to not dismiss anti-suffragists' ideals on the basis of their eventual failure, thereby consigning this unsuccessful movement to 'history's rubbish-heap'; his warning against viewing this conservative mindset as singular, shallow or uncomplicated.

What I found in my research for *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash* was that women used shame in order to protect a cherished notion of femininity – an esteemed community of womanhood – from further attack from feminist protestors. More specifically, they used shame to repel the corrosion of gendered emotional values that feminist tactics – not simply feminist demands – threatened. Militant feminists who enacted violence publicly challenged gender norms that positioned women as the inherently pacifist sex. This woman-as-pacifist model was one that many women – feminists included – held dear.

More than this, suffragette violence did not exist in a vacuum. It invited reciprocal violence from men, whether in the form of male hecklers or representatives of the police force. Anti-feminist women worried about what impact these 'invitations' to male-on-female violence would have on virtues like honour and chivalry which had, until then, stemmed – if not prevented – violence against women. These women expressed deep concern that whatever protection they had from male aggression would be eroded by militant suffragists' displays of physical force. If women were to prove themselves as capable of violent acts as men, what need would there be for men to protect women from men's violence? This fear and anxiety was specific to women. Women then used shame in the attempt to stop fellow women from further jeopardising the codes of chivalry that were established to protect them – the weaker sex – from the violent actions of men – the stronger sex.

Different reasons for feminist shaming: Ireland and Australia

In conducting a transnational analysis of feminist/anti-feminist entanglements, I was also mindful of another caution, namely that of scholars of feminisms in the Americas, like Maylei Blackwell [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/fronjwomestud.36.3.0001?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents], who have warned against adding to the inequalities suffered by certain groups of women by ignoring their distinctive contexts and conditions – geopolitical, colonial, racial, economic and sexual – and instead concentrating on the linkages formed by the ‘Sisterhood is global’ approach. It was this wariness of overlooking diversity and the differences of the local or the national that directed my examination of the connections/disconnections between Irish and British women opposed to the votes for women campaign.

Interestingly, in researching for the book, I found that some of the most strident anti-suffragism in Ireland came – seemingly paradoxically – from nationalist feminist women, rather than from those who identified as anti-feminist. This was due to the complexities of competing nationalist and feminist priorities. Many Irish nationalist feminist women opposed fellow Irish feminists campaigning for a right to vote in an enemy British Imperial Parliament. They believed that attaining national autonomy and then allowing Irish men to give ‘their’ women a vote in their parliament was the right way to go about achieving the dual aims of feminism and nationalism. Like their British anti-feminist counterparts, these Irish feminist politicians used shame in the attempt to achieve political reform. They deployed shame in the attempt to convince fellow feminist nationalists to honour their connection to the nationalist community over the feminist, but only temporarily. Feminist shaming, then, was employed by Irish women who wanted to harness the energies of Irish feminism to counter the devastating and shameful effects of colonisation – to work with Irish men to reinstate a postcolonial form of pride.

What about early twentieth-century Australian women? They already had the vote. I found that those more conservative women who had previously been opposed to woman suffrage struggled to align modernising Antipodean concepts of womanhood with conservative deals in Britain, their Mother Country. They were acutely attuned to feminist shaming in Britain, and across the globe. Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash extends the transnational analysis of feminist/anti-feminist entanglements by examining how loyal Australian ‘anti-feminists’ reacted to accusations about the shame of the enfranchised woman emanating from the imperial centre.

Women and shame: today and then

In November 2016, on the eve of the US Presidential Election, I wrote a brief piece for The Conversation which looked at how women in general, and feminists in particular, were guilty of shaming Hillary Clinton [<https://theconversation.com/whats-gender-solidarity-got-to-do-with-it-woman-shaming-and-hillary-clinton-68325>]. Women across the United States – and across the globe – were shaming Clinton and each other for opinions on everything from feminism to anti-feminism,

to the point that it felt like the feminist community was imploding. Clearly, the use of shame by women to police their political communities was not simply a historic phenomenon.

In 2018, we are commemorating the centenary of limited female franchise in Britain and Ireland. As we celebrate the historic successes of feminism, it is imperative not to indulge in what historian Linda Gordon labels [<http://www.publicbooks.org/suffragettes-take-hollywood/>] ‘a simplistic “you’ve-come-a-long-way-baby” happy ending’. This phrase refers to the slogan used by the Philip Morris corporation in 1968 when they launched a cigarette brand, Virginia Slims, directed at female consumers. The marketing campaign attempted to link smoking with female emancipation and independence, proclaiming ‘You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby. Now you’ve got your own cigarette’.

The Clinton campaign of 2016 demonstrated that feminism is unfinished. Womanhood is still a highly fractured community, as befits a group of people that encompasses half the human race. Examining the motivations, fears, desires, and political tactics of anti-feminists – contemporary and historic – helps us to cast light on the ongoing existence of a wide range of feminisms and anti-feminisms, revealing just how diverse womanhood is. The ongoing use of shame as an emotional tool by feminist and anti-feminist women is illustrative of the lengths women are still prepared to go to in the attempt to construct a relevant and workable model of womanhood.

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa is a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Wollongong. She has just recently published *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890-1920* (Routledge, 2018). Currently, she is preparing *Remembering Women’s Activism* for publication with Vera Mackie (Routledge, 2018). Sharon is a past National Convenor of the Australian Women’s History Network (AWHN), past recipient of the AWHN’s Mary Bennett Prize, ongoing Editorial Board member of the AWHN’s *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, and current Co-Convenor of the University of Wollongong’s Feminist Research Network (FRN). Sharon blogs at *The Militant Woman*.

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