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History and the militant woman

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Abstract

In Britain in 1909, militant suffragist Theresa Garnett publicly whipped politician Winston Churchill with a riding switch saying, 'Take that, in the name of the insulted women of England.' In an inversion of gendered norms, the male Churchill was reported in the feminist paper, *Votes for Women*, as pale and afraid, and the female Garnett as forceful and courageous. She had undertaken 'a piece of cool daring.' Churchill and his 'cowardly' government would not accept deputations of suffragists. They endorsed state violence against campaigning feminists. This man, *Votes for Women* declared, was a 'statesman who has dishonoured British statesmanship by his dishonest conduct to the women of Great Britain.' 'Moved', another article declared, 'by the spirit of pure chivalry, Miss Garnett took what she thought to be the best available means of avenging the insult done to womanhood by the Government to which Mr. Churchill belongs.' The writer added, 'A woman has at last humiliated the man who has humiliated women for so long.' (*Votes for Women*, 19 November 1909, p. 116) Yet another article represented Garnett's actions as 'a knightly and chivalrous thing'. (*Votes for Women*, 26 November 1909, p. 138.)

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In Britain in 1909, militant suffragist Theresa Garnett publicly whipped politician Winston Churchill with a riding switch saying, 'Take that, in the name of the insulted women of England'. In an inversion of gendered norms, the male Churchill was reported in the feminist paper, *Votes for Women*, as pale and afraid, and the female Garnett as forceful and courageous. She had undertaken 'a piece of cool daring'. Churchill and his 'cowardly' government would not accept deputations of suffragists. They endorsed state violence against campaigning feminists. This man, *Votes for Women* declared, was a 'statesman who has dishonoured British statesmanship by his dishonest conduct to the women of Great Britain'. 'Moved', another article declared, 'by the spirit of pure chivalry, Miss Garnett took what she thought to be the best available means of avenging the insult done to womanhood by the Government to which Mr. Churchill belongs'. The writer added, 'A woman has at last humiliated the man who has humiliated women for so long'. (*Votes for Women*, 19 November 1909, p. 116) Yet another article represented Garnett's actions as 'a knightly and chivalrous thing'. (*Votes for Women*, 26 November 1909, p. 138.)

In feminist reports about this incident, the male politician embodied the weaker feminine emotional values of fear, dishonesty, and humiliation. The female protester embodied the more masculine ones of courage, chivalry, and retribution. It seemed that through exercising physical force publicly, women were able to challenge the gendered nature of the emotional regimes underpinning the traditional honour codes of men.

'On the subject of militant methods there is no need to enlarge. Violence in woman is an ethical degradation of her being. The man who strikes a woman is a coward. The woman who strikes a man is lost to shame. — Father Day, S. J. (Quoted in the Anti-Suffrage Review, no. 51, January 1913, pp. 321–322)'

In my chapter on 'The Shame of the Violent Woman' in [Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash, Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890-1920](#), I examine how feminists and anti-feminists justified or condemned women's use of political violence. I look at fears about the prevalence of male-on-female violence. Women's 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 or enemy army. British anti-suffragists were highly sensitised to the issue of male-on-female violence. Therefore, they often predicated their hostility to female uses of physical force on the basis that women exercising violence would interfere with the normal operation of codes of chivalry. Theoretically, chivalry protected women from male acts of aggression. If women proved they were as capable of violence as men, what would compel men to exercise restraint against women?