

Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908–1909

Laura E. Nym Mayhall

May some definition be given of the word “militant”? (Chelsea delegate Cicely Hamilton)¹

Scholarship on the women's suffrage movement in Britain has reached a curious juncture. No longer content to chronicle the activities or document the contributions of single organizations, historians have begun to analyze the movement's strategies of self-advertisement and to disentangle its racial, imperial, and gendered ideologies.² Perhaps the most striking development in recent scholarship on suffrage, however, has been the proliferating discourse on militancy among literary critics, a development with which few historians have engaged. Yet, while militancy has spawned a veritable subfield in literary studies, continually generating new articles and books, these accounts portray the phenome-

LAURA E. NYM MAYHALL is assistant professor in the department of history at the Catholic University of America. She would like to thank the late Lowell Durham and the Obart C. and Grace A. Tanner Humanities Center at the University of Utah for the 1996–97 Eccles Fellowship supporting the writing of this article; David Doughan at the Fawcett Library, London Guildhall University, and Dave Kelley of the Library of Congress for assistance in researching it, and Antoinette Burton, Michael Dunn, Carol Harrison, Jim Lehning, Philippa Levine, and the anonymous journal readers for their helpful suggestions in revising it.

¹ Transcript of the third annual conference of the Women's Freedom League, held at Caxton Hall, London, 1 February 1908, Fawcett Library, London Guildhall University (hereafter Fawcett Library), p. 12.

² Contrast, e.g., Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (London, 1974); with Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (London, 1987); and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

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non in similarly reductive terms.³ After 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), under the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, revitalized a genteel and moribund women's suffrage movement. The WSPU introduced the use of militancy, first interrupting Liberal Party meetings and heckling political speakers, then moving to the use of street theater, such as large-scale demonstrations, and ultimately to the destruction of government and private property, including smashing windows, slashing paintings in public galleries, and setting fire to buildings and pillar-boxes. Once the Liberal government introduced forcible feeding as an antidote to the suffragette hunger strike, militants created a visual activism, dependent upon the exhibition of women's tortured bodies as spectacle. By this account, the activities of the WSPU became exemplary of what critic Barbara Green has called "performative activism" and "visibility politics" in early twentieth-century feminist praxis, creating "almost entirely feminine communities where women celebrated, suffered, spoke with, and wrote for other women," and that "allowed women to put themselves on display for other women."⁴

In this narrative, a limited set of practices enacted by the members of one organization, the WSPU, constitutes militancy in the campaign for women's parliamentary enfranchisement in Britain. All other suffrage organizations become peripheral, if not antagonistic, to the furtherance of the women's cause. At the center of this narrative lie the bodies of women in pain, as in Jane Marcus's assertion that the practice of forcible feeding "may [be seen] as symbolic of the [women's suffrage] movement as a whole."⁵ Our contemporaries are not alone in this assessment; the image of the tortured suffragette figures prominently in canonical

³ This account draws from the following works: Barbara Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage, 1905–1938* (New York, 1997), pp. 1–27; Caroline Howlett, "Writing on the Body? Representation and Resistance in British Suffragette Accounts of Forcible Feeding," in *Genders Twenty-Three: Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*, ed. Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, Ellen E. Berry (New York, 1996), pp. 3–41; Glenda Norquay, "Introduction," in *Voices and Votes: A Literary Anthology of the Women's Suffrage Campaign*, ed. Glenda Norquay (Manchester, 1995), pp. 1–38; Janet Lyon, "Women Demonstrating Modernism," *Discourse* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1994–95): 6–25; Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 152–84; Mary Jean Corbett, *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies* (New York, 1992), pp. 150–79; Jane Marcus, "The Asylums of Antaeus: Women, War and Madness—Is There a Feminist Fetishism?" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York, 1989), pp. 132–51, and "Rereading Suffrage and the Pankhursts," in *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, ed. Jane Marcus (London, 1987), pp. 1–17.

⁴ Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, pp. 16, 30, 56–57.

⁵ Marcus, *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, p. 2.

histories and autobiographies of the women's suffrage movement written by participants, notably Constance Lytton's 1914 *Prisons and Prisoners*, and Sylvia Pankhurst's 1931 *The Suffragette Movement*.⁶ These early treatments of the women's suffrage movement enshrined the practices of the WSPU as militancy, creating a definition of authentic suffrage militancy dependent upon the movement from militant action (narrowly defined as violence against property), to arrest and incarceration, to the suffragette hunger strike, and ultimately, to forcible feeding at the hands of the government.⁷

But this representation of militancy is at best a partial one, for the practice of militancy was neither exclusively the province of one organization nor limited to the trajectory of authentic suffrage militancy valorized by former suffragettes in the years following the First World War. Thus, the innovative and instructive analyses of literary critics—while doing much to move scholarship on suffrage away from organizational studies to larger, analytic issues—fail to examine the premises and narratives borrowed from earlier historical accounts that defined suffrage militancy as the exclusive province of the WSPU. Much recent criticism on militancy within the Edwardian campaign for women's enfranchisement thus unwittingly reproduces many of the assumptions and agendas of one portion of an earlier feminist movement and ignores the vital debate within the suffrage movement itself—and the wider political culture of which it was a part—about the scope, meaning, and utility of militancy. For their part, while historians have long questioned the existence of a simple dichotomy between “militant” suffragettes and “constitutional” suffragists, that distinction remains a powerful, if sometimes unarticulated, organizing principle for understanding differences between and among suffrage organizations after 1900.⁸ Clearly, a new approach to explaining militancy is needed, and indeed, recent work on the connections between

⁶ See June Purvis, “A ‘Pair of . . . Infernal Queens’? A Reassessment of the Dominant Representations of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, First Wave Feminists in Edwardian Britain,” *Women's History Review* 5, no. 2 (1996): 259–80; Laura E. Nym Mayhall, “Creating the ‘Suffragette Spirit’: British Feminism and the Historical Imagination,” *Women's History Review* 4, no. 3 (1995): 319–44; Hilda Kean, “Searching for the Past in Present Defeat: The Construction of Historical and Political Identity in British Feminism in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 57–80.

⁷ Mayhall, “Creating,” pp. 321–22.

⁸ As Krista Cowman compellingly argues, to emphasize, as historians have done for the past decade, the interconnections among suffrage organizations at the local level “can sometimes ignore the fact that there were very real differences in policy and tactics between the suffrage organizations of Edwardian Britain” (“‘A Party between Revolution and Peaceful Persuasion’: A Fresh Look at the United Suffragists,” in *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Maroula Joannou and June Purvis [Manchester, 1998], p. 78).

popular-radical and progressive movements of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods suggests the direction such studies could take.⁹

Above all, militancy must be situated within late Victorian and Edwardian British political culture. Historian Keith Michael Baker defines politics “as the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole.” Political culture, then, is “the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims are made.”¹⁰ British political culture at the end of the nineteenth century was steeped in the constitutionalist idiom and infused, as had been late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political culture, with a popular consciousness of the right of resistance to political tyranny.¹¹ This latter point marks a departure from the mid-Victorian period, when the duty owed the state was service and altruism was the highest political virtue.¹² By the time of the second Boer War (1899–1902), a seismic shift had occurred in British political culture, so that large numbers of newly politicized individuals included as a duty of citizenship the obligation to resist government operating without their consent. Suffragettes thus joined Ulster Unionists, nonconformists, and trade unionists in interpreting the past in the service of negotiating contemporary meanings for citizenship.¹³

Several points follow from contextualizing suffragette militancy within late Victorian and Edwardian political culture. Suffragette militancy was always a dialogic practice, one developing out of personal and ideological interactions between organizations and individuals over a period of many years. To see militancy as purely the province of the WSPU, or even as a set of practices initiated by the WSPU that influenced other organizations’ membership and behavior, misses its connections with the wider cultural and political currents of

⁹ Ian Christopher Fletcher, “‘A Star Chamber of the Twentieth Century’: Suffragettes, Liberals, and the 1908 ‘Rush the Commons’ Case,” *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 504–30; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (London, 1996).

¹⁰ Keith Michael Baker, “Introduction,” in his *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 4.

¹¹ James Vernon, “Notes Towards an Introduction,” in *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. James Vernon (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–21; James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (New York, 1994), pp. 3–28.

¹² Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 60–90.

¹³ Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 9–17; and Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, 1998), pp. 11–36.

the day.¹⁴ Suffragette militancy deployed older forms of protest borrowed from traditions of male popular radicalism, the implications of which nineteenth-century suffragists had worked very hard to avoid.¹⁵ Suffragette militancy enacted the radical idea that citizens had the right to resist tyrannical authority; militancy's implementation became a contest over the uses and utility of physical force in negotiating with the state. Thus, suffragette militancy was performative and spectacular but not only and even primarily because it exhibited women's bodies in pain. Suffragettes utilized a range of strategies, gendered in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, designed to highlight what they saw as the arbitrary and historically anomalous exclusion of women from the constitution.

Through a juxtaposition of militant protests staged by two Edwardian suffrage organizations, the WSPU and the Women's Freedom League (WFL), this article suggests some of the implications of situating suffragette militancy within the political culture of early twentieth-century Britain. It argues that only by defining militancy as a set of political interactions, as a range of suffragist practices, can we understand militancy as feminist praxis.¹⁶ Three episodes in particular will receive atten-

¹⁴ Much of Sandra Stanley Holton's recent work addresses the nineteenth-century roots of early twentieth-century militancy; see "Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Women's Franchise League and Its Place in Contending Narratives of the Women's Suffrage Movement," in Joannou and Purvis, eds., *Women's Suffrage Movement*, pp. 15–36, "From Anti-slavery to Suffrage Militancy: The Bright Circle, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the British Women's Movement," in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (New York, 1994), pp. 213–33, and "To Educate Women into Rebellion: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Creation of a Transatlantic Network of Radical Suffragists," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1113–36.

¹⁵ Millicent Garrett Fawcett contrasted "the perfect order and good temper" of the demonstrations and meetings for women's suffrage held in the 1870s with the agitation of male radicals for franchise reform in the 1860s, suggesting that the men's protests might provide historical examples in the future: "The remark, so common at the time, that women themselves do not want the suffrage, is silenced by these huge demonstrations; but how long it will be before the legislature listens to the demands of those who urge their claims without blowing up prisons or knocking down park rails is a question that only the future can solve"; see "England: The Women's Suffrage Movement," in *The Woman Question in Europe: A Series of Original Essays*, ed. Theodore Stanton (London, 1884), pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ And while my argument here focuses upon specific engagements between the WSPU and the WFL, my analysis could and should be widened to include the numerous other organizations enacting militancy, including the Men's Political Union, the Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL), the East London Federation of Suffragettes, the United Suffragists, the Suffragettes of the WSPU, and the Independent WSPU. Stanley and Morley's examination of Emily Davison remains the best resource for understanding suffragette networks as sites for the articulation of militant practice: Liz Stanley and Ann Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* (London, 1988), pp. 172–85. See also Joannou and Purvis, eds., *Women's Suffrage Movement*; Angela V. John and Claire Eustance, eds., *The Men's Share? Masculinities, Male Support, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920* (London, 1997); and Holton, *Suffrage Days*.

tion: the WSPU's 1908 "rush" on the House of Commons, the WFL's 1908 "grille protest," and its 1909 "siege" of Westminster. Part of an ongoing dialogue among suffragists and their audiences, these three protests constituted militancy at a pivotal moment within the campaign for women's parliamentary enfranchisement within Britain. Focusing thus on the particularities of militant protests illuminates heretofore underexamined points of congruence within Edwardian suffragism and expands current understandings of suffragettes' performative activism. My point here is not to engage in a disciplinary critique of literary critics' treatment of militancy. Rather, it is to acknowledge that historians largely have neglected an integral component of the women's suffrage movement in Britain, and literary critics too easily have glossed over its contradictions and complexities. An integration of approaches offers instructive points of departure for the study of militancy within the Edwardian movement.

Recovering the Women's Freedom League

While scholars have scrutinized many aspects of the WSPU's militancy, the WFL continues to receive relatively little attention. The WFL emerged in September 1907, when a faction of the WSPU broke away and formed a separate militant organization. Those historians who have treated the WFL tend to see it as the first of several "splits" within the WSPU arising from Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's increasing conservatism and their imposition of an autocratic structure on the organization.¹⁷ Implicit in this understanding of the WFL has been an argument that creation of the organization diminished, rather than increased, the practice of militancy, with the WFL's adherence to methods of passive resistance cast as a weak imitation of the WSPU's more spectacular methods.¹⁸ To view the WFL as an attenuated version of the WSPU, however, overlooks remarkable continuities across the twentieth-century

¹⁷ For treatments of the WFL as one of many "splits," see Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1978), p. 209; and Rosen, *Rise Up*, pp. 86–94. Accounts that discuss the WFL in a more expanded context include Claire Eustance, "Meanings of Militancy: The Ideas and Practice of Political Resistance in the Women's Freedom League, 1907–1914," in Joannou and Purvis, eds., *Women's Suffrage Movement*, pp. 51–64; Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists between the Wars* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 45–60; Les Garner, *Stepping Stones to Women's Liberty: Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900–1918* (Rutherford, N.J., 1984), pp. 28–43; and Andro Linklater, *An Unhusbanded Life: Charlotte Despard, Suffragist, Socialist and Sinn Féiner* (London, 1980), pp. 121–96.

¹⁸ This analysis originated with Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry* (London, 1911), reprinted in Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds., *The Non-violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig* (London, 1987), pp. 135–222.

women's suffrage movement. In its agitation for the parliamentary vote for women, the WFL joined the larger National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the WSPU in drawing upon a tradition of popular radicalism emphasizing universalized, liberal political ideals as a means of advancing women's claim to citizenship. At the same time, all three organizations made claims for women's right to vote based on the specificity of women's qualities qua women. The League joined the NUWSS and the WSPU in both challenging liberalism's conception of the separation of public and private spheres and accepting that conception on the basis of women's "difference."¹⁹

Yet, the NUWSS differed from the WSPU and the WFL in one fundamental respect. While the NUWSS continued to confine itself to the assertion of women's right to citizenship, members of numerous other organizations introduced and refined the concept of resistance to illegitimate government as a right also grounded in constitutional principles. And here I retain the conventional usage of "suffragist" and "suffragette" with an inflected meaning: suffragists continued to assert women's right to citizenship, while suffragettes asserted a right to resist the government and its laws until they were recognized as citizens. Suffragettes' assertion of the right to resistance emerged from a long tradition of British radical protest, and suffragettes' use of resistance as an ideological category would evolve—from a legal right grounded in the constitution—into an argument for the moral responsibility of suffragettes to resist the enforcement of law.

That last shift, however, largely concerns the practice of militancy after 1909. In 1907 women in both the WFL and the WSPU understood themselves to be militant suffragettes, but the governing structures underlying the practice of militancy in each organization differed profoundly. The WFL implemented a democratic system of governance, which historians have viewed as both its strength and weakness.²⁰ Individual branches communicated with the League's London headquarters through

¹⁹ On suffragists' challenges to liberal political ideology, see Jane Rendall, "Citizenship, Culture and Civilisation: The Languages of British Suffragists, 1866–1874," in Daley and Nolan, eds., *Suffrage and Beyond*, pp. 127–50; Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 67–95; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), pp. 3–23; and Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 9–28.

²⁰ Brian Harrison makes the case for the WFL's weakness as a result of its democratic organization (*Prudent Revolutionaries*, pp. 41, 50–51), Les Garner for its strength (*A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden, 1882–1960* [Brookfield, Vt., 1990], p. 25).

representation at the annual conference.²¹ Branches elected representatives to the annual conference; these representatives then chose the National Executive Committee (NEC), which made policy decisions on the basis of referenda from the branches. In 1907 WFL Scottish and London branches were further organized under councils, putting branches into contact with one another and encouraging interaction between districts. Practically, NEC actions were subject to branch approval prior to implementation, which meant that all major WFL protests had been debated at length before enacted. The WSPU, in contrast, rejected discussion and consensus as a means of formulating policy. Headquarters dictated policy; the branches never served as a focal point of decision making.²²

The question of governance prompted the creation of the WFL in 1907.²³ Much evidence exists that by the summer of 1907 discussion over the proposed constitution, in addition to rank-and-file concern over the organization's future use of militancy, had created at least two factions within the WSPU: one committed to implementing a constitution instituting democratic procedures, and the other to governing the organization from the top down.²⁴ Discussion of the need for a constitution led to a crisis within the WSPU. On the afternoon of 10 September 1907, at a meeting of the Emergency Committee of the WSPU, Emmeline Pankhurst reorganized the command structure of the Union and before a public meeting later that evening, tore up the constitution then under consid-

²¹ Each branch was permitted one representative for its first twelve to fifty members and one for each twelve to fifty members thereafter; see the WFL Constitution, 1912, Fawcett Library, WFL Papers, box 59.

²² Stanley and Morley have demonstrated the extent to which individual members of the WSPU initiated militant action. Specifically, they point to the first hunger strike, undertaken by Marion Wallace Dunlop in 1909, and to Emily Wilding Davison's martyrdom at the Derby in 1913, arguing that Christabel Pankhurst "harnessed the initiative and energy of WSPU members in the service of the organization" (Morley and Stanley, *Life and Death*, pp. 151–54). That individual members initiated acts of militancy should not obscure the point that the leadership of the WSPU strove to limit the range of political activism pursued by members and to limit organization-wide discussion of the principles upon which the practice of militancy rested.

²³ Public statements made at the time of the split, as well as the WFL's subsequent development, refute the WSPU's assertion that those women forming the WFL did so in order to maintain organizational ties to the Labour Party after the WSPU had broken with all political parties. Great diversity existed in the party affiliations of WFL members; it is impossible to state categorically that the WFL was affiliated with Labour. It is fair to say, however, that members of the WFL resented the discipline with which the WSPU attempted to limit political activity to the struggle for the vote. A WSPU member, Annie Kenney, records the discipline Christabel Pankhurst administered in order to exclude women from the WSPU who did not fit her definition of appropriate political activity (Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant* [London, 1924], pp. 110, 227).

²⁴ See "Mrs. Billington-Greig at Caxton Hall," *Women's Franchise*, 27 June 1907, p. 8.

eration by members.²⁵ Numerous WSPU members, including Charlotte Despard, Edith How Martyn, and Teresa Billington-Greig, repudiated Emmeline Pankhurst's actions and formed another organization that would become known as the Women's Freedom League, taking with them a significant percentage of the WSPU's membership.²⁶ Onetime WSPU, longtime WFL member Margaret Wynne Nevinson would write later of the actions taken by Emmeline Pankhurst in September 1907: "Such tyrannical and unconstitutional methods startled us all; there was a strong body of opinion against such autocracy, and subsequently—horrible as all schisms are, a large number of us refused to accept self-accepted leadership, we, who were working for representation!" How Martyn, WFL founding member, put it more epigrammatically when she argued, "If we are fighting against the subjection of woman to man, we cannot honestly submit to the subjection of woman to woman."²⁷

This divergence on the issue of governance would have important consequences for the practice of militancy after 1907. Historians have viewed suffragettes' use of militancy as a desperate measure on the part of the politically irrational. More recently, feminist historians have claimed the practice of militancy as a means of enabling collective female political activism, some going so far as to assert a connection be-

²⁵ Accounts of these events are, not surprisingly, partisan. See Emmeline Pankhurst, "Letter Sent to Enquirers," issued from Clement's Inn, September 1907, in British Library, Maud Arncliffe Sennett Collection (hereafter cited as MAS), 2: 2/3; the letter is reprinted in Marcus, *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, pp. 163–65. For the WFL perspective, see Provisional Committee to Mrs. Earengay, 16 September 1907, McIlquham (13), Fawcett Library, Fawcett Autograph Collection. The breach was debated openly in the pages of the Scottish newspaper *Forward* in 1907; see Lily Bell, "The Woman's Movement and Democracy," 2 November 1907; Mary Phillips, "Thoughts on Democracy," 2 November 1907; and Teresa Billington-Greig, "The Difference in the Women's Movement: Autocracy or Democracy," 23 November 1907. My thanks to Leah Leneman for bringing this newspaper to my attention.

²⁶ Uncovering the extent of WFL and WSPU membership in 1907 and 1908 remains difficult. Both organizations claimed to carry the majority of original WSPU members. For the WSPU's claims, see Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, *Fate Has Been Kind* (London, 1943), p. 75; and E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London 1931; reprint, London, 1977), p. 265. Amy Sanderson and Teresa Billington-Greig, WFL members, claimed that the majority of the WSPU's Scottish branches went with the WFL. Further complicating matters, as late as 1910, many women belonged to both organizations. See Amy Sanderson, "The Division in the Women's Movement: A Protest in the Name of Democracy," *Forward*, 26 October 1907, p. 6; and Teresa Billington-Greig, "'The Split,' 1907," Fawcett Library, Teresa Billington-Greig Papers (hereafter cited as TBG Papers), misc. manuscript notes, n.d., box 399.

²⁷ Margaret Wynne Nevinson, *Life's Fitful Fever: A Volume of Memories* (London, 1926), p. 196; Edith How Martyn, as quoted by Teresa Billington-Greig, *Report of the Second Annual Conference of the Women's Social and Political Union (Now the Women's Freedom League)* (London, 1907), p. 5.

tween the practices of the WSPU and radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ Analyses across this spectrum define militancy univocally: militancy and the WSPU remain synonymous, despite the fact that WSPU and WFL militancy existed symbiotically and in dialogue. And certain principles underlying these protests were common to both organizations in the years 1908–9, with both groups orchestrating militancy to advance particular interpretations of the constitution and women's place within it. Where the WFL and the WSPU would diverge eventually, however, was in their attitudes toward the use of violence in pursuing political goals.²⁹ The years 1908–9 proved critical in the course militancy would take in the twentieth-century campaign for women's suffrage. By late 1909, militants had divided again on the question of the use of physical force. The WFL had by that time rejected the use of violence, while WSPU violence spiraled upward until Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914.

Staging Constitutional Dramas

The consequences of this divide over the use of violence should not obscure, however, the extent to which suffragettes partook of a common political culture. Examination of suffragette militancy in 1908–9 reveals a remarkable consistency in analyses of and remedies for women's political condition. Drawing upon the constitutionalist idiom, suffragettes reworked a critique of tyrannical authority borrowed from early nineteenth-

²⁸ The classic articulation of suffragette militancy as political irrationality was penned by George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1935). It lives on in recent works by Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1959* (New York, 1993), pp. 4–5; and Brian Harrison, "The Act of Militancy: Violence and the Suffragettes, 1903–1914," in *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain*, ed. Brian Harrison (Oxford, 1982), pp. 26–81. A substantial body of scholarship examining militancy as the creation of a political subjectivity for women has emerged; see Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness, and Social Change, 1918–1938* (Oxford, 1995); Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London, 1994); Eileen Sypher, *Wisps of Violence: Producing Public and Private Politics in the Turn-of-the-Century British Novel* (London, 1993); Janet Lyon, "Militant Allies, Strange Bedfellows: Suffragists and Vorticists before the War," *differences* 4 (1992): 100–33; Corbett, *Representing Femininity*, pp. 157–62; and Sandra Stanley Holton, "'In Sorrowful Wrath': Suffrage Militancy and the Romantic Feminism of Emmeline Pankhurst," in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Amherst, Mass., 1990), pp. 7–24. For a recent articulation of the connection between suffrage activism of the early twentieth century and radical feminism of the 1970s, see Purvis, "'Infernal Queens,'" p. 259.

²⁹ Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald make a case for this distinction in the introduction to their collection of Billington-Greig's writings, *Non-violent Militant*, pp. 1–24.

century radicalism.³⁰ Suffragettes cast this critique within a narrative rooted in a belief in a lost golden age, retrievable through resistance to existing structures.³¹ John Belchem's description of nineteenth-century radicals applies equally to suffragettes: they read the constitution "as a history of recovery and resistance in which the constitution confirmed the sovereignty of the people and the contingent authority of parliament."³²

Perhaps the single most influential text in casting women's struggle for the vote within the radical narrative of loss, resistance, and recovery was Charlotte Carmichael Stopes's *British Freewomen: Their Historical Privilege*. Stopes's text, first issued in 1893 as a women's suffrage tract, was released in two editions in 1894 and a third in 1907. Each new edition was expanded to include Stopes's latest findings. Brief extracts of her research in progress appeared also in the liberal feminist newspaper, *The Englishwoman's Review*.³³ *British Freewomen* detailed the historic and legal rights of British women from the Roman occupation until the nineteenth century. For Stopes, British women constituted a racial group with ancient rights and privileges continually worn away by successive waves of invaders—Roman and then Norman. She attributed the real diminution of women's legal rights, however, to the influence of the seventeenth-century jurist Sir Edward Coke, who "first pronounced an opinion on the disability of women."³⁴ Stopes's argument recast the radical narrative in explicitly gendered terms: "Yet every great era in the Evolution of so-called *Popular Liberty* has been marked by contemporary restrictions of Feminine Freedom. Hence, in the seventeenth century, when hereditary serfdom was finally abolished, and when slavery, by

³⁰ See Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 27–55, and *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 176–204; James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 295–330.

³¹ See Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme Elmy, *Woman's Franchise: The Need of the Hour* (London, 1907), p. 3.

³² John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1996), p. 1.

³³ Swan Sonnenschein and Company published its first edition of the text after one thousand copies of a "brochure" on the subject had been printed for the women's suffrage societies the previous year; Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *British Freewomen: Their Historical Privilege* (London, 1894). Sonnenschein and Company published a second, and slightly expanded, edition of the book later that year and yet another expanded version in 1907. Stopes's other publications, which made similar arguments in less detail, were also sold widely and include *The Constitutional Basis of Women's Suffrage* (Edinburgh, 1908), and "Man" in Relation to That of "Woman" in the Constitution (London, 1907). For an example of Stopes's publication of research in progress, see *The Englishwoman's Review*, 15 January 1901, pp. 74–75.

³⁴ Stopes, *British Freewomen*, p. 99.

purchase, became impossible in Britain, we first find the doctrine promulgated that tended to disfranchise women. When outbursts of fervid eloquence on 'Liberty' were preparing the nation to lay out its millions in enfranchising even its colonial slaves, in 1832, the disfranchisement of women was effected by the use of a single statutory word."³⁵ *British Freewomen* circulated widely among suffragettes, appearing on lists of suffragette publications for sale well into the twentieth century. Stopes's arguments were used by suffragists of all stripes in making the case for women's suffrage in print, before crowds, and in the courtroom.³⁶

This radical narrative of loss, resistance, and recovery underwrote the practice of militancy in the crucial years of 1908 and 1909. In those years, the constitutional drama, in which suffragettes staged women's exclusion from the constitution, emerged as the predominant mode of militant protest. The constitutional drama consistently emphasized two principles adumbrated by WFL founding member Billington-Greig: the assertion of women's political rights and the repudiation of laws extending to women obligations but not rights.³⁷ Constitutional dramas articulated the belief, voiced by suffragists since the 1860s, that through property ownership certain women met the criteria for citizenship as defined by the British constitution.³⁸ By the 1880s suffragists had begun to argue that their rights as citizens had been systematically stripped from them by legislative action since the early nineteenth century, producing the introduction of the qualifier "male" in the definition of electors in the 1832 Reform Act as evidence for this argument. Despite this disenfranchisement, they argued, women continued to exercise the obligations of citizenship through the payment of taxes and the discharge of other responsibilities, notably in the realm of municipal social reform.³⁹

The WSPU and the WFL dramatized women's exclusion from the constitution in a variety of protests in these years, including WSPU annual women's parliaments, deputations to the House of Commons led by both organizations, tax resistance, and WSPU and WFL petitions to

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

³⁶ See, e.g., the testimony of Florence Elizabeth Macaulay in the trial of the "rush" case; F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, "The Trial of the Suffragette Leaders (1908)," reprinted in Marcus, *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, p. 109.

³⁷ Teresa Billington-Greig, misc. manuscript notes, n.d., TBG Papers, box 399.

³⁸ Helen Taylor, "The Claim of Englishwomen to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered," *Westminster Review* (1867), reprinted in *Before the Vote Was Won*, ed. Jane Lewis (London, 1987), pp. 24, 36–37.

³⁹ Harriet McClquham, *Women's Suffrage, An Ancient Right, A Modern Need* (London, 1891), pp. 5, 8; Stopes, *British Freewomen*, pp. 136–37; Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Home and Politics: An Address Delivered at Toynbee Hall and Elsewhere* (London, 1890), pp. 2–3.

Parliament and, eventually, to the king.⁴⁰ Highlighting the constitutional idiom shaping these protests leads to a different understanding of the practice of militancy in the Edwardian movement than has been advanced heretofore by either historians or literary critics. Far from representing an antiparliamentary assault upon the government, militancy emerged from a legalistic, or constitutional, analysis of women's exclusion from political life. The terms on which women contested that exclusion were not monolithic, however. While all militants self-consciously cast themselves as political actors engaged in the act of interpreting the constitution, they by no means held only one understanding of British political tradition or of their relationship to it.⁴¹

Dramatizing women's exclusion from the political nation presented women's arguments for extending the franchise on the grounds of sex while pointing simultaneously to inconsistencies in other laws when applied to women. In staging constitutional dramas, suffragettes drew upon a long tradition of feminist challenges to law framed as appeals to precedent, of which attempts by suffragists to vote in the wake of the 1867 Reform Bill represent just one example.⁴² The repeated assertion of women's right to organize deputations and present petitions to the House of Commons and their staged exclusion from Parliament and other public dimensions of citizenship displayed a belief that by publicizing women's exclusion from the political nation, that exclusion could be remedied. Such dramas connect the twentieth-century women's suffrage movement to an earlier, predominantly masculine tradition of radical protest and suggest important points of convergence with other radical movements of the Edwardian era.

⁴⁰ The annual women's parliaments of the WSPU were not opportunities for the organization to discuss issues and debate policy; rather, they served as symbolic enactments of women's exclusion from the "Men's Parliament" and as staging grounds for the presentation of petitions to Parliament and the king; see Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote*, ed. F. W. Pethick-Lawrence (London, 1959; reprint, London, 1987), pp. 75–84.

⁴¹ Here, I am drawing from Vernon, *Politics and the People*, in which he argues that competing groups in nineteenth-century Britain articulated their own understanding of the public political sphere through the discourse of popular constitutionalism (p. 7). See also Anna Clark, "Gender, Class and the Constitution: Franchise Reform in England, 1832–1928," in Vernon, *Re-reading the Constitution*, pp. 239–53. That such a reading had racialized implications is clear; see Burton, *Burdens of History*, pp. 52–59. This suggests that militancy incorporated, rather than challenged, the narratives of constitutionalism; for a different view, see Sandra Stanley Holton, "British Freewomen: National Identity, Constitutionalism and Languages of Race in Early Suffragist Histories," in *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eileen Janes Yeo (Manchester, 1998), pp. 163–67.

⁴² See Helen Blackburn, *Women's Suffrage: A Record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles* (London, 1902), pp. 82–88.

‘‘Help the Suffragettes to Rush the House of Commons,’’ October 1908

On 9 October 1908, the WSPU issued a handbill inviting Londoners to join the organization in a deputation to the House of Commons, setting off a chain of events culminating in the arrests and public trial of three Union officials, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and ‘‘General’’ Flora Drummond.⁴³ Within days of its release, the handbill’s wording—‘‘help the suffragettes to rush the House of Commons’’—prompted the Home Office to initiate proceedings against the women on the grounds that they were inciting crowds to violence.⁴⁴ The trial of the women, held in the Bow Street Police Court, and Christabel Pankhurst’s celebrated examination of two members of the cabinet present in Parliament Square that day, David Lloyd George and Herbert Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary, respectively, brought the women’s claim to public attention as never before. At the ‘‘suffrage meeting attended by millions,’’ Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence’s apt description of the widely publicized trial, suffragettes persuasively reiterated women’s claim to inclusion in the constitution.⁴⁵

The ‘‘rush’’ case has received extensive treatment by historians, and indeed, has been seen as a turning point in the development of WSPU militant strategy.⁴⁶ This protest, initiated by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, paled, however, next to the dramatic courtroom scenes resulting from Christabel Pankhurst’s cross-examination of Lloyd George and Gladstone. In fact, neither woman had participated in the ‘‘rush’’ on the House of Commons as both had been arrested and taken into police custody immediately prior to the demonstration. The rhetoric of Christabel Pankhurst around this protest of 1908 provides not only insight into how Union officials defined militancy at that time; it also illuminates the principles upon which the practice of militancy rested and pointed toward its future development.

The ‘‘rush’’ was articulated as a constitutional challenge. In her

⁴³ Treatments of this protest are found in the following autobiographical accounts: E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette: The History of the Women’s Militant Suffrage Movement, 1905–1910* (London, 1911), pp. 260–321; Constance Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences* (London, 1914), pp. 18–30; Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914), pp. 116–30; E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Suffragette Movement*, pp. 288–93; Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London, 1938), pp. 194–207; F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, *Fate Has Been Kind*, pp. 79–80; Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled*, pp. 102–12.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 14 October 1908.

⁴⁵ Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part*, p. 205.

⁴⁶ See Rosen, *Rise Up*, pp. 109–17; Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, p. 46; Fletcher, ‘‘A Star Chamber,’’ pp. 506–7.

closing arguments before Bow Street Police Court magistrate Henry Curtis Bennett, Christabel Pankhurst reiterated the historical and legal precedents informing the protest: “We have a perfectly constitutional right to go ourselves in person to lay our grievances before the House of Commons, and as one witness—an expert student of history—pointed out to you, we are but pursuing a legitimate course, which in the old days women pursued without the smallest interference by the authorities.”⁴⁷ Where the protest may have slipped the bonds of constitutional sanction lay in its execution, a point not missed by either the government or the suffragettes. While small groups of suffragettes attempted to make their way into the House of Commons, the size of the crowds assembled outside Parliament on 13 October 1908, estimated by historian Andrew Rosen at sixty thousand, far exceeded the number provided for by the Statute of Charles II, which suffragettes used as justification for their deputations. That number was ten.⁴⁸

The constitutional principle at stake in the “rush” case became the linchpin of Christabel Pankhurst’s arguments before the magistrate in police court. *The Times* paraphrased Pankhurst’s representation of the women’s offense: “Read in a reasonable way, the handbill in question might possibly be said to be an invitation to persons to unlawful assembly. That was the charge upon which Mr. John Burns was tried in 1886, and upon which he was acquitted. If it was not unlawful assembly, it was nothing at all, but they were not charged with that offence, for the reason that such a charge would give them the right to trial by a jury and the right to appeal.”⁴⁹ In all her public statements surrounding the trial, Christabel Pankhurst assiduously linked the constitutionality of the women’s protest to the means they employed. In a speech given at St. James’s Hall, two days after her arrest, she argued: “I want very briefly to speak of the example that stands before us in pursuing these militant methods. Let us begin with Magna Carta. It is a long time to go back, but still in Magna Carta we have the title-deeds of British liberty. Magna Carta was secured because of the fear that the people succeeded in implanting in the mind of King John. We must make Mr. Asquith as much afraid of us as King John was of the Barons.” In this statement, Pankhurst reread British constitutional history, interpreting the accounting of its development “from precedent to precedent” as meaning an evolution derived from the use—or threat of the use—of force. She asked, “the Reform Bills—how were they obtained? Were they obtained by milk-

⁴⁷ F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, “Trial,” p. 58.

⁴⁸ Rosen, *Rise Up*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 22 October 1908.

and-water methods? Were they obtained by coaxing the Government, by trying to win their sympathy? No. They were got by hard fighting, and they could have been got no other way." "Hard fighting," then, played a role in the constitutional process; it spurred political reform. In this interpretation of British constitutional development, the use of violence, far from antithetical to political reform, performed the integral function of promoting change.⁵⁰

For Pankhurst, justification for the use of violence lay not merely in its constitutional function; the rationale for violence lay in other realms as well, in those of a "higher law." In that same speech given at St. James's Hall, Pankhurst provided important perspective on the future of WSPU strategy as she deftly moved from an interpretation of WSPU militancy as constitutional practice to one resting upon the higher principles justifying the use of violence. Pankhurst began her speech before the crowd with an appeal to historical precedent and the constitution as grounds for challenging current laws prohibiting women from voting, pointing to the "constitutional" practices then exercised by militants, such as challenging by-elections and presenting deputations to Parliament. But her next rhetorical move threatened to dislocate the constitution from the center of the WSPU's justification for militancy. In her assertion, "Friends, if we are found guilty by the law of this land, we shall hold ourselves to be innocent by a higher law," Pankhurst thus appealed less to the "the law of the land" than toward the necessity of appealing to laws above those of men.⁵¹

This speech, pointing as it does both toward and away from the language of constitutionalism, made reference to the historical legacy upon which the practice of WSPU militancy drew in 1908 and suggested how that organization would come to justify future use of violent action. Pankhurst asserted a legalistic basis for women's claim, rooting certain practices in constitutional precedent. What is telling, and original, in Pankhurst's interpretation was the slippage between constitutional principle and historical precedent; for Pankhurst, trained as a lawyer, the two became one and the same. By renarrating the history of constitutional conflict to emphasize popular violence as a counter to official despotism, Pankhurst stretched constitutional principles to accommodate the inclusion of women. Pankhurst's rhetoric points also to alternative sources of

⁵⁰ Christabel Pankhurst, "The Militant Methods of the N.W.S.P.U. (Being the Verbatim Report of a Speech of Christabel Pankhurst, at the St. James' Hall, on October 15th, 1908)," reprinted in Marcus, *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, p. 48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49. For a provocative and innovative discussion of the rhetorical strategies of the WSPU in the later years of militancy, see Cheryl Dorgensen-Earp, *The Transfiguring Sword: The Just War of the Women's Social and Political Union* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1997).

legitimacy for protest in popular-radical culture, such as Christian and ethical movements, and suggests not an escalation in rhetoric but a shift in emphasis between two interdependent sides of the notion of “lawful” agitation and resistance.⁵²

Yet, this speech made before WSPU supporters on 15 October 1908 contradicts Pankhurst’s testimony at the trial the following week, especially her extensive parsing of the word “rush” in closing arguments. Through a juxtaposition of dictionary definitions of the word, Pankhurst expounded upon the word “rush” as meaning “haste” or “hurry,” while denying any connection with the use of violence. Pankhurst submitted “that ‘rush’ as a transitive verb cannot mean ‘attack,’ ‘assail,’ ‘make a raid upon,’ or anything of that kind.”⁵³ Pankhurst’s later reflections on the case contradict her statements in court and bear a striking resemblance to her comments before the WSPU audience in 1908. In her autobiography, Pankhurst explained that “rush” was chosen as a synonym for “storm,” “besiege,” and “invade,” all implying not only haste but also a kind of forcefulness in staking a claim.⁵⁴ A consummate politician, Pankhurst played to her audience; in her speech before the magistrate, she emphasized “haste,” while before the suffragettes, overturning the government, with force if necessary, became the goal.

This reading supports the contention, made since 1973 when historian Andrew Rosen examined the protest, that the WSPU’s “rush” constituted a turning point in the organization’s articulation of the use of militancy.⁵⁵ The trial provided the WSPU with a forum in which it could be established definitively that not only were women excluded from the franchise, but they were denied also the constitutional means of redressing that exclusion. Furthermore, the government would bring its full weight to bear upon those women who dared to claim their constitutional rights. The WSPU’s evocation of the specter of violence, despite Pankhurst’s disingenuous disclaimers, thus could be both rooted in constitutional precedent and above that precedent simultaneously. Finally, this

⁵² My thanks to one of the anonymous readers of this article for pressing me on this point; see also Rohan McWilliam, “Radicalism and Popular Culture: The Tichborne Case and the Politics of ‘Fair Play,’ 1867–1886,” pp. 44–64; and Duncan Tanner, “Ideological Debate in Edwardian Labour Politics: Radicalism, Revisionism and Socialism,” pp. 27–93, both in *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour, and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914*, ed. Eugenio F. Biagini and Alistair J. Reid (Cambridge, 1991).

⁵³ F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, “Trial,” p. 60. Examination of those dictionary entries establishes that Pankhurst’s reading of their definitions was quite selective, for in fact, violence plays a large role in their definitions of the word; see, e.g., *The Century Dictionary* (New York, 1899), p. 5277.

⁵⁴ Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled*, p. 104.

⁵⁵ Rosen, *Rise Up*, pp. 110–17.

notorious trial of the WSPU leadership left a public statement against which all other militants had to assert their views.

“The Grille Protest,” October 1908

The WFL marked that same October Parliamentary session of 1908 with protests designed to put forth its own interpretation of the constitutionality of militancy, asserting women’s inclusion in every aspect of Britain’s political life. Shrouded in secrecy, the WFL prepared for its Special Effort Week beginning 12 October. The opening salvo came with the posting, on public buildings in England and Scotland, of a proclamation calling upon the government to remove the sex disability implicit in the existing parliamentary franchise and demanding the immediate enfranchisement of women. In London, members of the League successfully posted their proclamation in Westminster and the City, on the private residences of cabinet ministers, on public buildings, and on letter boxes. Also plastered were Cleopatra’s Needle, Boadicea’s statue, the law courts, Nelson’s Column, and General Gordon’s statue. Reports conflicted over the organization’s success in placarding the Houses of Parliament, *The Times* asserting that these were too well guarded to be reached by the women, the WFL claiming success at Parliament and at the gates of Holloway.⁵⁶ The protest was portrayed in more than one press account as the WFL’s “passive method of forwarding the scheme as against the rival SPU’s attempt to ‘rush’ the House of Commons on Tuesday evening.”⁵⁷

But the posting of proclamations on public buildings was only a prelude to what would come. On 28 October 1908, at approximately 8:30 P.M., while a licensing bill was discussed in committee, cries of “Votes for women!” were heard from the Ladies’ Gallery above the House of Commons. Two members of the League, Helen Fox and Muriel Matters, had chained themselves to the metal screen in the Ladies’ Gallery that obscured women observers from view in the House of Commons. Matters held forth on women’s suffrage to the members below, while Violet Tillard, another member of the League, showered the floor of the Commons with leaflets advocating women’s suffrage. Simultaneously, leaflets were thrown by male supporters of the League from the Strangers’ Gallery, and WFL members protested outside the House—at the entrance to St. Stephen’s Hall, in the hall itself, and outside on the

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 13 October 1908; the WFL euphemistically noted that the House of Commons “received attention” (*Women’s Freedom League Report for the Year 1908 and of the Fourth Annual Conference* [London: WFL, 1909], p. 11; hereafter AR1908).

⁵⁷ *Daily Graphic*, 17 October 1908; see also *The Times*, 13 October 1908.

statue of Richard the Lionheart. House officials found that they were unable to remove Matters and Fox without dismantling the grille, as it had been constructed in sections, "each section being fixed to stone mullions by screws." The women were taken into a committee room and their chains filed off when they refused to produce a key for the locks. Fourteen members of the League were arrested that day, and the Speaker of the House of Commons ordered that both the Ladies' and the Strangers' Galleries be closed indefinitely.⁵⁸

One analysis of this protest is suggested by critic Jane Marcus's terminology for the practice of interrupting political meetings implemented by the WSPU. The "grille protest," like the WSPU's inaugural militant protest in the Manchester Free Trade Hall in November 1905, aimed at the "'interruption' of male political discourse."⁵⁹ *The Times's* account of the events surrounding the "grille protest" suggests the symbolic struggle involved: "It should be mentioned that the shrill vociferation of the women and the disturbance for which they were responsible did not interrupt the proceedings of the House. Throughout the scene first MR. REMNANT and then MR. RAWLINSON addressed the committee, and, but for the fact that they had to raise their voices to a high pitch, one might have thought that they were unaware that anything unusual was taking place."⁶⁰ The predominant imagery of this press account evokes less the successful interruption of political discourse, however, than an eerie *tableau vivant*: parliamentary activity proceeding while women mouth grievances from afar. Press accounts of the WFL's plastering of their proclamation in London two weeks earlier had similarly emphasized successful police protection of the Prime Minister's residence and the Houses of Parliament from the women's protest. *The Times's* account of the "grille protest" demonstrates the extent to which the battle for the parliamentary enfranchisement of women was a symbolic struggle over whose narrative of events would prevail. By implication, that women had not succeeded in interrupting the committee meeting in progress was evidence for the ultimate illegitimacy of their claims for representation; after all, if M.P.s could talk over the women's protests, then those women had not been forceful enough in making their case.

The symbolism of the "grille protest" extended well beyond the interruption of male political discourse, however. The protest resonated

⁵⁸ AR1908, pp. 10–11; *The Times*, 29 and 30 October 1908.

⁵⁹ Marcus, *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, p. 9. See also Claire Eustance, "Protests from behind the Grille: Gender and the Transformation of Parliament, 1867–1918," *Parliamentary History* 16, no. 1 (1997): 107–26.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 29 October 1908.

metaphorically in at least three other registers. First, the protest drew attention to the grille—which kept women apart from the House and invisible to it—as a symbol of women’s exclusion from political representation. The protest forced M.P.s to choose between listening to the women’s claims for political representation and removing a symbol of their exclusion from that representation. Second, the “grille protest” dramatized further erosions of women’s historic rights by invoking the rules regulating the admission of women into the House of Commons, which, until the late eighteenth century, had allowed women to sit anywhere in the chamber.⁶¹ Women’s twentieth-century exclusion from the House of Commons—where they were allowed to sit and observe but where they were an invisible and unacknowledged presence—thus suggested a strong analogy with women’s status as citizens within the nation. Third, the language WFL members used to describe the grille—as “that sign of sex-subjection”—resonated with the orientalist imagery of oppression characteristic of Victorian feminism.⁶²

While not raising the specter of violence as had the WSPU’s “rush” protest of the summer, the WFL’s dramatization of women’s exclusion from the political nation in the “grille protest” similarly contributed to the production of militancy as political spectacle. Critic Barbara Green has observed that “for feminists, the term [spectacle] was usually associated with the deliberate and sensational tactics used to draw public attention to the cause.”⁶³ Yet, it is important to note that the impact of protests like the one undertaken by the WFL in October 1908 depended, for visual and political impact, upon radical narratives of resistance and recovery as much, if not more, than upon the exhibition of women’s bodies in public space. The transgression of male political space depended upon the redeployment of radical narratives in the service of women’s emancipation. These narratives, and what they implied, as much as the scenes of chaos portrayed by the press, explain why the “grille protest” reinforced divisions within the women’s suffrage movement on the utility of militancy to the women’s cause.⁶⁴

⁶¹ AR1908, pp. 10–11; House of Commons, “Report from the Select Committee (1908), on House of Commons (Admission of Strangers),” *Sessional Papers, 1908*, vol. 9, par. 1, p. 23; Norman Wilding and Philip Laundy, *An Encyclopedia of Parliament* (London, 1968), pp. 415–16.

⁶² Burton, *Burdens of History*, pp. 63–96. The phrase comes from Teresa Billington-Greig, “The ‘Grille’ Protest,” *Women’s Franchise*, 5 November 1908, p. 211.

⁶³ Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ The “grille protest” occasioned a formal breach between the WFL and the organization led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the NUWSS, which used the WFL’s October 1908 protest as justification for ending its affiliation with *Women’s Franchise*, the newspaper carrying news of suffragist activism between 1907 and 1909. The NUWSS continued to distance itself from the methods of the WFL in public statements and letters to

The "Siege of Westminster," 1909

In 1909, WSPU militancy fulfilled the promise put forward by Christabel Pankhurst in the "rush" case. In the aftermath of a failed attempt to present a petition for women's enfranchisement at the House of Commons on 22 June, a group of WSPU protesters undertook the organization's first campaign of window breaking that night at the Privy Council, Treasury, and Home Office. Two days later, Marion Wallace Dunlop, a member of the WSPU, was arrested for posting the bill of rights on St. Stephen's wall at the House of Commons. Convicted of defacing the wall and sentenced to one month in prison, Dunlop initiated a hunger strike on 5 July. Numerous suffragettes followed her example. By August 1909, "hunger-striking had become the normal practice of imprisoned suffragettes."⁶⁵

Against these events of the summer of 1909, the WFL undertook what it called the "siege of Westminster." In an ongoing effort to meet with Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, the League requested on 14 June 1909 that he receive a deputation of members to discuss their demand for a government bill enfranchising women. Asquith's response, that his "statements on the subject [were] on the record," resulted in the WFL announcement that it would send a deputation to the House of Commons on 5 July "in order to obtain an audience in accordance with their right, as expressed in the 13th Statute of Charles II," to present a petition. At a meeting at Chandos Hall on 5 July, the League chose eight women to present its demand.⁶⁶

Later that same day, when the House of Commons began its evening sitting, the WFL's "siege of Westminster" began. Its eight volunteers stood at public entrances to the House of Commons awaiting the arrival of the prime minister. Upon hearing that Asquith was not within the precincts of the House, Amy Hicks, leader of the deputation, inquired of Inspector Scantlebury at quarter-hour intervals as to whether the prime minister had arrived. The women remained outside the House of Commons that evening until the House rose at 3:55 A.M. The WFL announced its intention to maintain the picket outside Parliament until a deputation

Members of Parliament (see *Women's Franchise*, 21 January 1909; and *The Times*, 12 and 20 November 1908).

⁶⁵ Rosen, *Rise Up*, pp. 118–21.

⁶⁶ "The Besieged House," *Women's Franchise*, 8 July 1909, p. 673. The WFL's petition is found in "Women's Social and Political Emancipation: The Suffragette Fellowship Collection in the Museum of London" (hereafter Suffragette Fellowship), Museum of London, Harvester microfilm, reel 12, 50.82/588, p. 11; and *Women's Franchise*, 15 July 1909, p. 686.

from the League was accepted by the prime minister.⁶⁷ After two nights on the pavement, the WFL requested a meeting with Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone. Following standard constitutional procedure, the WFL wanted Gladstone to transmit a petition to Edward VII, whom they hoped then would prevail upon the prime minister to agree to see their deputation. The League followed this letter with a deputation to the Home Office on 8 July, during which Gladstone agreed to convey their petition to the king.⁶⁸ When the WFL received no further word regarding the petition, the picket was moved from the House of Commons to the prime minister's residence.

Arriving at 10 Downing Street in the afternoon of 9 July, four members of the WFL presented Asquith's doorkeeper with a copy of the petition and then stood to either side of the door awaiting a reply. A crowd of approximately two hundred people had gathered by the time the police arrested the women for obstruction. The next night, and each night thereafter when the House was in session, a group of WFL members gathered at the entrances to St. Stephen's Hall, waiting to intercept Asquith. Further arrests were made at the prime minister's residence on following consecutive Mondays, 16 and 23 July.⁶⁹ The "siege" continued throughout July, into August, September, and October, its drama heightened by its staging during the House's consideration of Lloyd George's People's Budget and the merits of a veto by the House of Lords.⁷⁰

The WFL framed the "siege" within the context of early nineteenth-century radical protest, emphasizing in particular the people's right to petition Parliament.⁷¹ Like their early nineteenth-century counterparts, suffragettes made explicit comparisons between their struggle and the seventeenth-century struggle between king and parliament, the WFL battling "despotism, constitutional infringements, and unjust taxation."

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 6 July 1909; "Why We Petition the King," WFL leaflet, Suffragette Fellowship, Museum of London, Harvester microfilm reel 12, 50.82/587.

⁶⁸ "The Humble Petition and Advice," *Women's Franchise*, 15 July 1909, pp. 685–86. At that meeting, Gladstone informed the women that it was "a new point of law to argue for the King's acceptance of a deputation under the Act of 1661"; see the transcript of this meeting in the Home Office files: Public Record Office (PRO), Home Office (HO) 45/10338/139199/63a. See also correspondence between the Home Office and the WFL: PRO, HO 45/10338/139199/64 and /67, 23 July, 3 and 9 August, 1909.

⁶⁹ See *The Times*, 10, 13, 17, and 24 July 1909.

⁷⁰ The longest a single deputation waited was on 14 July, when the women remained on the pavement from 2:50 P.M. until the House rose the next day at 9:15 A.M. (*Report of the Women's Freedom League for the Year 1909 and of the Fifth Annual Conference* [London, 1910], p. 45; hereafter AR1909).

⁷¹ The petition was a mainstay of early nineteenth-century radical protest; see Epstein, *Radical Expression*, p. 15.

Like their “Puritan forefathers,” they were forced to draw upon the “instrument of remonstrance.”⁷² Yet the League’s deployment of the language and practice of constitutional struggle represented no mere reenactment of earlier struggles in the name of women’s electoral rights; rather, the constitutional idiom served to gender militancy in complex ways. The League consciously manipulated the image of women waiting patiently for the granting of their political rights, emphasizing the political maturity of those desiring enfranchisement. As the protests became a fixture in London that summer, the composition of deputations was formed more deliberately, with the League organizing groups of “representative” women at the House of Commons. This tactic was influenced by the massive suffrage processions in London of the two previous years, and similarly contributed to the developing iconography of the suffrage movement.⁷³ The League drew attention to the more “womanly” women excluded from the franchise. These included “representatives of the working women of Britain . . . widows with little children dependent on their earnings, breadwinners and rent payers”; women prominent in social reform; women graduates in academic gowns; and nurses, whose “uniforms caused great excitement in the crowd. Womanliness personified—and yet demanding their public rights! A woman graduate—that is understandable—but a nurse!”⁷⁴

The imagery of the “womanliness” of the nurses, and of the character of the widows and their small children, drew a contrast between the WFL’s “siege,” where members patiently waited outside Parliament to claim their rights, and the WSPU’s “rush” on the House of Commons to demand their rights. It also stood in marked contrast to the WSPU’s use of window breaking. This contrast employed gendered notions of how women should seek political rights—quietly, passively, and with dignity—and yet challenged the idea that women would be less womanly if enfranchised. The League had long argued that women would be more womanly if granted the vote; once enfranchised, they could better care for their families and the nation.⁷⁵ The WFL’s picket at Westminster in 1909 thus linked prevailing assumptions about womanliness to women’s political participation and challenged the WSPU’s representation of mili-

⁷² K. M., “History-Making and Magisterial-Heckling,” *Women’s Franchise*, 22 July 1909, p. 698.

⁷³ Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, pp. 213–26.

⁷⁴ M. Nelson, “The Siege,” *Women’s Franchise*, 29 July 1909, p. 709, and “The Siege,” *Women’s Franchise*, 12 August 1909, p. 727.

⁷⁵ A key component of WFL rhetoric was the significance of women’s roles within the family; see Charlotte Despard, *Woman in the Nation* (London, 1910); Eunice Murray, “Why I Want the Vote,” *The Vote*, 2 April 1910, p. 272.

tancy as forcefulness and violence.⁷⁶ This contrast was not lost upon contemporary observers. Commenting on the picket, H. G. Wells “found that continual siege of the legislature extraordinarily impressive—infininitely more impressive than the feeble-forcible ‘ragging’ of the more militant section.”⁷⁷

Yet, if the WFL emphasized the womanliness of its demands and its methods, the “siege of Westminster” also displayed women’s capacity for self-governance and self-discipline, behaviors arguably rooted in older and notably masculine traditions.⁷⁸ The WFL’s deployment of the language of constitutionalism in the summer of 1909 strove to appropriate the terminology of male radical protest. Repeatedly, the WFL argued in the language of radicalism for women’s suffrage, adopting a masculine political identity that served both to legitimate its own protest and to distance itself from the protests of the WSPU.⁷⁹ From the beginning, WFL commentators implicitly compared the “siege” with earlier WSPU protests. In the pages of *Women’s Franchise*, the WFL commented on the first day of its protest at Westminster, noting the contrast between “dramatic embellishments” of prior deputations—“scenes of violence . . . cordon(s) of police . . . sensational arrests”—and the WFL’s “peaceful band of women ‘who only stand and wait’ at the door of St. Stephen’s.” The WFL’s assertion that “we have neither invited nor created disorder—we went less than ten in number—we have obeyed all the police regulations—yet still our members have been refused a hearing,” simultaneously criticized the government’s inaction and the actions of the WSPU.⁸⁰ This comparison of the WFL’s attempts to present Asquith with a petition to those of its rival, made the political point: even when women suffragists upheld the law, their petitions were denied.⁸¹

Throughout the summer and into the autumn of 1909, the WFL

⁷⁶ See Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, p. 226.

⁷⁷ Wells described the women of the picket as “women of all sorts, though of course the independent worker-class predominated,” in H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (London, 1911), pp. 430–31.

⁷⁸ On the gendering of suffrage militancy, see Sandra Stanley Holton, “Manliness and Militancy: The Political Protest of Male Suffragists and the Gendering of the ‘Suffragette’ Identity,” in John and Eustance, eds., *The Men’s Share*, pp. 110–34. On the gendering of citizenship, see Anna Clark, “Manhood, Womanhood, and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790–1845,” pp. 263–79; and Keith McClelland, “Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850–1867,” pp. 280–93, both in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

⁷⁹ See the WFL handbills from the “Siege,” in the Suffragette Fellowship Collection, including “Is Political Agitation a Crime?” reel 12, 50.82/557d; “An Appeal to the Voters,” reel 12, 50.82/557k; and “Who Are the People?” reel 12, 50.82/557i.

⁸⁰ “The Besieged House,” *Women’s Franchise*, 8 July 1909, p. 673.

⁸¹ “Humble Petition and Advice,” *Women’s Franchise*, 15 July 1909, p. 685.

picketed the House of Commons, maintaining that Asquith needed to hear the views of a militant suffrage society on the issue of women's suffrage, as its approach was "entirely different" from that of organizations already heard by the government, including the Women's Liberal Federation and the NUWSS.⁸² No further arrests of League members were made between 23 July and 18 August as the WFL prepared for an action designed to force a judgment on the constitutionality of their protest before the courts. The "siege" entered a new phase on the afternoon of 18 August, when WFL members Charlotte Despard and Anne Cobden Sanderson appeared on the doorstep of Asquith's residence in Downing Street. Other members of the organization soon joined them, and together the women waited almost twelve hours before they were arrested for obstruction. Their case came before a magistrate the next day but was remanded until 27 August, when it was heard before Henry Curtis Bennett at Bow Street.⁸³

The prosecution pursued its case on two points. First, it emphasized that the petition the women carried that day in Downing Street was not of the proper form, as it was, in fact, a remonstrance, that is, a presentation of grievances rather than of requests. Second, the prosecution asserted that, even assuming that the women had exercised a constitutional right to protest, they were not exercising it responsibly at the time of their arrest.⁸⁴ The Irish M.P. and barrister T. M. Healy, defending the women, disagreed. He argued that the right of remonstrance—as that of petition—dated to the time of Charles II. At that time, Healy urged, the "general body of the disenfranchised classes received a right . . . to put forward any remonstrance or any private complaint, both to the King's Majesty and to every Member of Parliament." That right was reiterated by the First Statute of William and Mary—"that it is the right of the subject to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal." Healy observed that the authorities' attempt to control how the WFL presented its petition indicated that they knew full well that the League had the right to present its petition. Nor could the women be charged with obstruction as "every one of them yielded like Lambs led to the slaughter" when the police moved to arrest them.⁸⁵ The magistrate deferred his opinion for a week. When handing down his

⁸² "Correspondence with the Prime Minister," *Women's Franchise*, 19 August 1909, p. 735.

⁸³ *The Times*, "Suffragists at Downing Street," 19 August 1909; "In Parliament," 20 August 1909; and "Women Suffragists and the Prime Minister," 28 August 1909.

⁸⁴ T. M. Healy, *Right of Petition: The Defence at Bow Street* (London, 1909), p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–4, 10–11.

decision, he carefully concurred with the League that it held the right to petition the king but reiterated that the women had not been reasonable in the execution of that right.⁸⁶ Despard and Cobden Sanderson were sentenced to pay forty shillings or spend seven days in the second division.⁸⁷

Undaunted, the League persisted with its picket through September and October, although no further deputations to Asquith's residence were undertaken. The WFL's strategy changed, however, at the end of October. By that point, over three hundred members of the League had logged more than seven hundred aggregate hours waiting to present Asquith with its petition. Asquith's deafness to "constitutional appeal" and his obliviousness to the "manifest unrest and discontent among women" prompted the WFL to send a stronger message.⁸⁸ After months of deliberation, the WFL's National Executive Committee had decided that the most effective way to end the picket at Westminster would be to stage a protest drawing attention to women's disenfranchisement by attacking the means by which individuals exercised their right to vote in parliamentary elections. The committee conceived of a protest that would parallel the League's earlier and successful "grille protest" of 1908. While the latter had focused upon a tangible sign of women's exclusion from representation—a voice in Parliament—the former would emphasize their powerlessness at the ballot box.⁸⁹

Polling day in the Bermondsey by-election fell on 28 October 1909. The contest was a three-cornered one, with Conservative, Liberal, and Labour candidates vying to represent this London metropolitan constituency. In the weeks before the election, the WFL worked alongside the WSPU and the NUWSS to oppose the Liberal candidate. But the WFL's work at the Bermondsey by-election would not be limited to canvassing and holding open-air meetings. On the morning of 28 October 1909, two members of the WFL, Alison Neilans and Alice Chapin, entered two different polling places in Bermondsey. Each woman broke a tube of a liquid into the ballot box. Election officials at the Laxon Schools Poll reprimanded Alison Neilans but released her; she received a summons the following day. While attempting to stop Chapin, however, George Thorley, an election official at the Boutcher Schools Poll, got some of

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16; see also *The Times*, 4 September 1909.

⁸⁷ The two women remained at large until their appeal was heard ("The Women and the Case," *Women's Franchise*, 9 September 1909, p. 765); the WFL's appeal to the Lord Chief Justice was dismissed in January 1910; see AR1909, p. 15.

⁸⁸ Edith How Martyn, letter to *The Times*, 29 October 1909.

⁸⁹ Since the 1870s, the ballot box had been the object of popular constitutional scrutiny; see Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 155–58.

the liquid into his eyes. In assisting him, election officials rinsed his eyes with a solution containing ammonia, causing his eyes to burn and sting and leading to the accusation in the press that Chapin had thrown acid into the ballot box.⁹⁰ She was arrested and indicted on four charges: interfering with a ballot box; attempting to destroy ballot papers; assault resulting in “actual bodily harm”; and inflicting “grievous bodily harm” to Thorley.⁹¹

Alison Neilans conducted the defense for both women in their trial at the Old Bailey on 24 November.⁹² Neilans framed her remarks in the language of radicalism, claiming that the women’s intention had been to protest against “a tyrannical and unrepresentative authority” and urging that women “are part of the people.” She appealed to the jury to disregard the fact that she was a suffragist and a woman, arguing that the only difference between her actions and those of a Cromwell, a Pym, or a Hampden was her sex. Asserting the connection between suffragists’ struggle and those of generations of Englishmen, she observed, “we have won all our liberties by fights and struggles against constituted authority.”⁹³ Regardless of her arguments, the two women were convicted: the jury found Neilans guilty of interfering with an election and sentenced her to three months imprisonment in the second division; Chapin was convicted of interfering with an election and with assault, and she was sentenced to four months imprisonment, also in the second division.⁹⁴

The Bermondsey protest ignited a debate within the WFL with im-

⁹⁰ According to Edith How Martyn, the liquid was “an alkaline solution of pyrogallol and its use was decided upon only after many experiments had been made with it” (letter to *The Times*, 29 October 1909). At a pretrial hearing held 4 November, Alice Chapin maintained that “she had been told that the fluid was absolutely harmless, and she honestly believed that it could not hurt anyone.” At the same hearing, Dr. Francis, ophthalmic surgeon, Guy’s Hospital, testified that the “injury was caused by a strong irritant, possibly an alkaline solution.” The appearances were compatible with pyrogallic acid (*The Times*, 5 November 1909). See also Wodehouse (metropolitan police) to Gladstone, 28 October 1909, reporting that, in the opinion of the police divisional surgeon, the mixture was composed of ink and ammonia; British Library, Herbert Gladstone Papers, Add MS 46067, fols. 256–57.

⁹¹ Central Criminal Court, Sessions Paper, first session, 24 November 1909, PRO, CRIM10/100, pp. 200–203.

⁹² Women were excluded from the court during the trial; see Mr. Justice Grantham to E. Troup, 25 November 1909, PRO, HO 144/1047/185574/13.

⁹³ Alison Neilans, *The Ballot Box Protest: Defence at the Old Bailey* (London, 1910), pp. 4–6.

⁹⁴ While imprisoned, Neilans went on hunger strike to protest her status in the second division; see Neilans to Edith How Martyn, 27 December 1909, Militants (20D), Fawcett Library, Fawcett Autograph Collection. Neilans was released on 1 February 1910. Chapin was granted a pardon when it was confirmed that Thorley’s injury had been caused by the ammonia used in rinsing his eyes and not the solution Chapin had flung into the ballot box. Chapin was released on 3 February 1910, three weeks before her sentence expired; PRO, HO 188/5/1910/2.

portant consequences for the practice of militancy within the Edwardian women's suffrage movement. Delegates to the Fifth Annual Conference, held 29 January 1910, overwhelmingly passed a resolution to the effect that "in future, no militant action involving risk of personal injury to bystanders, or destruction of property, be taken without the knowledge of the branches." By a vote of confidence from the branches, the following resolution was confirmed: "that [the] Conference is persuaded that [the National Executive Committee] will initiate no undertaking involving risk of personal injury to bystanders."⁹⁵ The NEC later decided by a vote of six to five that documents were property.⁹⁶ For a significant number of women who believed in the principle of passive resistance, the fallout from the Bermondsey protest strengthened their resolve to leave the League and form the Women's Tax Resistance League in late October 1909.⁹⁷ And it contributed to Teresa Billington-Greig's assessment, in her much publicized critique of 1911, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Emancipation in a Hurry*, of the "Freedom League failure" as arising from the simultaneous imitation of, and reaction against, the WSPU's militancy.⁹⁸

The Bermondsey protest affected the WFL's relations with other suffrage societies as well, straining what had been a cordial working relationship between the WFL and the NUWSS at the local level. Upon hearing of the WFL protest, the NUWSS immediately withdrew its workers from polling places in Bermondsey. The London Society for Women's Suffrage, a constituent part of the NUWSS, did so as well, in order to demonstrate that "the cause of Women's Suffrage was not identified with lawlessness." The situation proved to be delicate for the NUWSS, as a number of women working the Bermondsey by-election claimed membership in both the NUWSS and one or more of the militant societies.⁹⁹ The London Society for Women's Suffrage took the first available opportunity to require its members to take a stand on the issue. At its

⁹⁵ Transcript of the WFL's fifth annual conference, held 29 January 1910 (hereafter Transcript 1910), pt. 2, pp. 8–9, 15.

⁹⁶ WFL National Executive Committee Minutes (hereafter WFL NEC), 20 June 1910, Fawcett Library, box 54A, p. 212.

⁹⁷ The Bermondsey protest drove a wedge between those women devoted exclusively to passive resistance and those desiring to employ a combination of strategies. The evidence suggests that the formation of the WTRL as a separate and distinct organization resulted from disillusionment with the direction of WFL policy (WFL NEC, 8 December 1908 and 20 November 1909, box 54A, pp. 14, 117; WTRL minutes, 22 October 1909, Fawcett Library, box 59; see also Transcript 1910, pp. 5, 9).

⁹⁸ Billington-Greig, in McPhee and FitzGerald, eds., *Non-violent Militant*, pp. 171–78.

⁹⁹ Philippa Strachey to Marion Phillips, 4 November 1909; statement by the Election Committee of the London Society for Women's Suffrage, forwarded to the Executive of the NUWSS, WS (1F), Fawcett Library, Fawcett Autograph Collection.

annual meeting, 5 November 1909, the organization passed a resolution creating a new membership pledge: "I pledge myself to adhere to lawful and constitutional methods of agitation solely, and to support financially and otherwise only such societies as adhere to these methods."¹⁰⁰

Response to the protest by the WSPU was equivocal. On the day of the protest, the WSPU, like the NUWSS, withdrew its workers from the polls and moved quickly to repudiate any connection with the two women involved. Helen Fraser, an organizer for the WSPU working in Bermondsey, wrote to *The Times* that day expressing "strong indignation at the interference . . . with the constitutional rights of men." Characterizing the protest as "an outrage," she asserted that "as the most emphatic protest we could make against violence and lawbreaking we at once withdrew [to show] our great detestation of such methods of conducting political agitation." Christabel Pankhurst, in a letter published alongside Fraser's, similarly rejected any connection of the WSPU with the protest. Pankhurst, however, attributed blame "not with women, but with the Government . . . [who] have thrown to the winds all principles of law and justice." Characteristically, the editorial response of *The Times* was to mock the women for believing that the public would be interested in such distinctions among militant organizations.¹⁰¹

The Bermondsey protest, culminating the five-month-long "siege of Westminster," reoriented WFL militancy in much the way the "rush" case had WSPU militancy the previous summer. Just as the "rush" case had enabled Christabel Pankhurst to justify the grounds on which WSPU militancy lay, the Bermondsey protest forced the WFL to articulate its position in light of having caused bodily injury to an election official. Tension clearly existed within the WFL over the protest, with members struggling over the parameters of militant action. An editorial in *The Vote* commented upon the protest obliquely: "The legislative machinery of our country is not of such light and airy structure as to be moved, particularly in the unwonted direction of Franchise reform, by the gentle breath of petitions, or a supplicatory 'please do!' It needs the fires of revolt and rebellion lit under it and around it before it makes the faintest creaking movement towards action." Yet, Charlotte Despard, president of the League, publicly rejected such incendiary rhetoric and instead emphasized the protest's "political significance." The protest, she urged, conformed to the WFL's militant principles—"to be ready when militant action demands the sacrifice, to break the civil law, but to be true to our

¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, 6 November 1910.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1909.

conscience on which the moral law is inscribed.”¹⁰² Despard’s appeal to the “moral law” echoed Pankhurst’s earlier appeal “to a higher law” in her 1908 speech. Ultimately, the difference between the two organizations’ stances on militancy would lie in the value each placed on violence and its consequences.

Uncovering Militancies

Juxtaposition of these protests points to significant and underexamined aspects of militancy in the Edwardian campaign for women’s parliamentary enfranchisement. Militancy, as a range of practices, emerged from different organizational structures and political imperatives. Despite its autocratic structure, the WSPU had always proceeded more spontaneously in its practice of militancy than had the WFL. Ann Morley and Liz Stanley have argued that Christabel Pankhurst’s brilliance as a strategist was her ability to utilize militant action undertaken by individuals for the publicity of the entire organization.¹⁰³ In contrast, WFL militancy entailed an involved process of garnering branch approval for particular forms of militant action. The League’s structure often hampered its use of militancy, for its National Executive Committee could not enact any protest without first meeting with the branches in conference. As conferences were held only once a year, with the occasional special conference convened around pressing issues, the WFL was unable, in effect, to take spontaneous militant action. The Bermondsey protest, for example, had been discussed within the League for months before it was implemented and never would have taken place had members considered likely the possibility of injury.¹⁰⁴

Militant protests took place within a political struggle between women suffragists and a legal system that denied women access to direct means of participation in political life. While sharing an analysis of the exclusion of women from the constitution, militants were divided nevertheless over the use of violence in the attainment of their goals. If persuasion were a goal of the use of militancy, as both the WSPU and the WFL claimed, then arguments about the impact of violence upon the

¹⁰² “What We Think,” *The Vote*, 11 November 1909, p. 25; Charlotte Despard, “Our Responsibility,” *The Vote*, 11 November 1909, p. 34.

¹⁰³ Morley and Stanley, *Life and Death*, pp. 153–55; see also Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁴ The WFL’s NEC discussed the possibility of invalidating a by-election as early as January 1909 (WFL NEC, 30 January 1909, box 54A, p. 34). Alison Neilans claimed the organization had discussed the prospect of such a protest for two years, crediting Teresa Billington-Greig with the idea (*The Times*, 1 November 1909).

women's cause were inevitable. A good deal of evidence exists that the WSPU's use of violence placed more difficulties in the way of those who wished to enfranchise women.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, a connection existed between suffragettes' structures of governance and the methods they employed to make a case for women's enfranchisement. The WSPU's use of violence required secrecy and a lack of democratic decision making; the WFL's rejection of violence left democratic structures largely intact, but its perpetual wrangling over what constituted militancy reduced its impact and its public profile.

Comparison of these three protests also tells us much about the dialogic nature of militancy in the British women's suffrage campaign. Far from being an exclusive practice of the WSPU, militancy was a contested concept, existing at points along a continuum of practice. Not all suffragettes were willing to let militancy be defined by the practices of the WSPU.¹⁰⁶ Militants both resisted and relied upon Edwardian conceptions of womanhood, but they did so in complex and contradictory ways. Sandra Holton has argued that the "suffragette identity was one built around a feminine heroic, and a rhetoric of female rebellion which the presence of men continually threatened to undermine."¹⁰⁷ Yet, by the summer of 1909, members of the WFL distinguished their own militant practices from the WSPU by appropriating masculine traditions of "dignity" and "independence" and infusing these qualities with womanliness. Militancy at times, therefore, deployed masculine and feminine political identities concurrently.

The utility of recent studies by literary critics has been to draw attention to the underlying logic of WSPU militancy. But that is not sufficient to understand militancy historically. Shifting our gaze from the bodies of WSPU members in prison (and the events leading up to their incarceration) to the idioms they deployed in articulating their grievances should

¹⁰⁵ For a nuanced discussion of why neither militancy nor women's war service resulted in the enfranchisement of women, see Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), pp. 190–225; see also Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 34–42.

¹⁰⁶ The odd dissident from the WSPU is documented; on Dora Marsden, see Garner, *Brave and Beautiful*; and on Teresa Billington-Greig, see McPhee and FitzGerald, eds., *Non-violent Militant*; and Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*. Yet few scholars have explored contemporary critiques of WSPU militancy in any depth, and many of those who have tend to reject outright the criticisms of the WSPU's contemporaries; see Corbett, *Representing Femininity*, pp. 171–79; and Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, pp. 89–93. Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*, pp. 52–59, remains the exception. Morley and Stanley's evaluation (*Life and Death*) remains the most thorough, although the WSPU remains central to their story.

¹⁰⁷ Holton, "Manliness and Militancy," p. 110.

draw our attention from the transgressive power of violence (either against property or against women), about which we know a great deal, to the transgressive power of diverse forms of nonviolent protest, about which we know little in this context. The early passive resistance of the WSPU and the WFL was much admired by Gandhi and served as an example to him in his own early protests against white colonial authority in South Africa.¹⁰⁸ Understanding militancy primarily as a feminine assault upon public space, without acknowledging its connections to radical political culture, has privileged one understanding of women's political activism and led to conflation and misreadings of the practice overall.¹⁰⁹

In much the same way we now speak of feminisms in the plural, we should speak of militancies in the plural as well.¹¹⁰ The Edwardian campaign for women's parliamentary enfranchisement initiated multiple practices, not all of which focused upon the manufacture and/or exhibition of women's bodies in pain. Perhaps most important, militancy cannot be reduced to the representation of women to women. Militancy's primary purpose was not to build community among suffragettes, although that may have been one consequence of its practice. Suffragettes' use of militancy originated in a political impulse, to persuade Parliament and male voters that women should be enfranchised. As these protests from the years 1908–9 illustrate, suffragettes' use of militancy rested upon a political analysis of women's exclusion from the constitution. Suffragettes utilized a range of militant tactics in the attempt to make women's suffrage an issue considered by public opinion, and they made their case within a radical narrative, casting themselves as resisting tyranny in the attempt to recover ancient rights.

¹⁰⁸ James D. Hunt, "Suffragettes and Satyagraha: Gandhi and the British Women's Suffrage Movement," *The Indo-British Review* (Madras) 9, no. 1 (1981): 65–77. See also his *Gandhi in London* (Springfield, Va., 1993). For Gandhi's impressions of early suffragette passive resistance, see Mohandas Gandhi, "Deeds Better than Words, 26 October 1909," in *Gandhi on Women: A Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women*, compiled by Pushpa Joshi (Ahmadabad, 1988), pp. 3–7. For Gandhi's later assessment, see his *Satyagraha in South Africa*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai (1928; reprint, Stanford, Calif., 1954).

¹⁰⁹ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1985), p. 262.

¹¹⁰ Debate on feminisms has characterized the last decade of feminist scholarship; for influential arguments, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn., 1987); and Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Approach," *Signs* 14 (Autumn 1988): 119–57.