

Punch Case Study: Women's Suffrage

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Introduction

When *Punch* is mentioned in histories of the British campaign for women's suffrage it is often depicted as a univocal, and uniformly hostile, publication. In these books '*Punch's view*' of women's suffrage is often represented by caricatures of suffragettes as unattractive spinsters. For example, Jane Eldridge Miller observes that Evelyn Sharp's suffragette fiction resists the idea that 'suffragettes look like the caricatures in *Punch*', without noting that Sharp herself was a *Punch* contributor [1]. Although such misogynistic caricatures did exist, a close examination of *Punch* itself reveals a more nuanced picture. *Punch* did not express a single fixed attitude to women's suffrage, and the ideas expressed were not stable over time. In contrast to some commentators' depictions of *Punch* as a male-dominated anti-feminist publication, the suffrage campaigner Millicent Garrett Fawcett, in her 1922 book *The Women's Victory and After* described the staff of *Punch* as having been 'true and faithful friends' of the women's movement [2]. *Punch* was written by multiple contributors with different viewpoints, some of whom, like Sharp, were active in campaigning for women's rights, and it was always possible for different readers to find evidence to support the attitude or viewpoint they were looking for within *Punch's* pages. The *Punch Historical Archive* is a valuable tool in identifying and examining *Punch's* interventions in debates about women's suffrage.

Searching the Archive

I found the keyword search facility very helpful for identifying a large amount of relevant material quickly. I restricted my search to the years 1906 to 1918, the period of the most militant and sustained suffrage

agitation. The keyword that returned the most results was 'suffrag*'. This 'wildcard' search works by locating any words that include the letters 'suffrag', encompassing 'suffrage', 'suffragette', 'suffragettes', 'suffragist', 'suffragists' and 'suffragism'. This search returned 511 results, which is a lot, but this could be refined through the use of additional keywords depending on the researcher's interests. These 511 results did not represent every reference to women's suffrage during these years because they did not include occasions when a word was divided because of a line break and so was not detected in the search. It was necessary to use some other keywords to find additional results. Searching for 'votes for women' and excluding 'suffrag*' returned an additional 29 results that had not come up in my previous search. I got some additional relevant results by searching 'militant' but only some of the results of this search referred to militant suffragettes. 'Pankhurst' without 'suffrag*' or 'votes for women' returned 38 references to Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst in articles that did not contain other obvious keywords. I got 16 results for 'franchise' with 'women' and without 'suffrag*'. I got a few results for 'W.S.P.U.' (the Women's Social and Political Union) but nothing relevant for 'WFL' (the Women's Freedom League) or NUWSS (the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies).

Results turned up by this search vary widely in their attitudes to women's suffrage. I found few openly misogynistic or hostile representations of suffragettes and there were even some pieces that expressed support for women's suffrage, such as 'Mars and Venus' (2 June 1909: 392), which responds to Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane's assertion that the

'Will of the People' is against women's suffrage by asking 'has the idea ever entered your head that "the People" are not only male?'. But most contributions occupy a middle ground, observing suffragette activities with a tone of detached amusement, as in the comment that 'The Suffragettes who so pluckily elected to go to prison rather than pay fines are now complaining that they found the prisons far from comfortable' ('Charivaria', 9 January 1907: 32), or professing chivalrous admiration for women while raising questions about their fitness for the vote, as in Mr Punch's comments in the 'Epilogue' to volume 134 (24 June 1908: 465) that women 'are not such good citizens, that they cannot take such a wide view of affairs'. Although the tone of *Punch*'s representation of the suffrage movement is more often mocking than supportive, the range of perspectives found in its pages is diverse and complex enough to prevent a simple characterisation of *Punch*'s attitude to this issue.

Advantages and Limitations of Keyword Searching

Even in volumes that I had previously examined in paper form to look for articles on women's suffrage, I sometimes found additional results through keyword searching. This was particularly true of pieces that were not overtly about women's suffrage but contained an allusion to the suffrage campaign. For example, articles that included references to Liberal politicians would often depict them as being stalked and harassed by suffragettes. In 'Winston Day by Day' (11 December 1907: 428-9), Winston Churchill, then Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, is kidnapped by 'a deputation of Amazons, who are anxious to ascertain whether he is in favour of Woman Suffrage'. In 'Who Works the Hardest?' (26 February 1908: 152-3) a researcher trying

to interview politicians notes the presence of a 'suspicious-looking female' on Chancellor of the Exchequer, Herbert Asquith's doorstep and finds that Haldane's footman refuses to answer the door in case the caller is a suffragette. Other articles used the vocabulary of women's suffrage to discuss an unrelated topic, as in 'Woman's Franchise' (7 April 1909: 251) which, despite the title, is a poem celebrating a fashion for looser waists in women's clothing. Not all of these results would necessarily be noticed by a researcher browsing through issues of *Punch* but these brief references contribute to an understanding of *Punch*'s use of allusion to connect different topical themes together.

Searching for keywords can also help a researcher to identify adjectives that are often used to describe suffragettes. For example, I felt that I kept encountering the word 'shrill' in descriptions of suffragettes, even in articles that did not seem overtly hostile to the suffragettes' aims but on carrying out an advanced search for articles containing 'suffrag*' and 'shrill' between 1906 and 1918 I only found seven results. It just happened that I had come across several of these articles on the same day. Although this search disproved my hunch, it was helpful to be able to find the answer to that question so quickly and I intend to make further use of this aspect of keyword searching to explore the frequency of other adjectives in discussions of women's suffrage.

Although the keyword search facility helped me uncover a large number of articles, poems and cartoons that were relevant to my research and saved a

lot of time when I wanted to locate a poem or article that was quoted in a book about women's suffrage but not fully referenced, it also made me realise how often discussions of women's suffrage in *Punch* do not include any of the obvious keywords. For example, Jessie Pope's poem 'The Clue' (26 February 1913: 159) refers obliquely, through the subtitle 'A Walton Heath Reflection' to the previous week's bombing by suffragettes of a house that was being built for David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The narrator of this poem describes how he had always liked finding discarded hairpins in public places because they were comforting evidence of a female presence but now when he finds a hairpin he suspects that there may be a bomb nearby. The poem does not explicitly mention suffrage, votes for women, or any key figures in the suffrage movement. The reader can infer a link to the suffragettes through the context and the reference to Walton Heath but, unless I had been searching specifically for reactions to the Walton Heath bombing, I would not have found this poem through a keyword search.

I also found that keyword searching was more effective for finding references to women's suffrage in articles, stories and poems than it was for searching cartoons. Cartoons often identify their subject matter through handwritten labels on people or objects or by including recognisable visual references such as images of well-known public figures. Neither of these things is currently picked up by a keyword search. As an example, in *Punch*'s Almanack for 1909 a cartoon, 'The Merry Wives of Westminster' under the heading 'Scenes from Mr Punch's Benefit Performance' uses *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as an image of female

cunning and trickery. In the image, Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst force the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, depicted as Falstaff, into a laundry basket labelled 'Witness Box' among laundry emblazoned with 'Votes for Women'. This cartoon refers to the 1908 trial of Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst and Flora Drummond for conduct likely to provoke a breach of the peace, at which Christabel's examination of Gladstone and Lloyd George brought the arguments for women's suffrage to a much wider audience than they had previously reached. Unlike the caricatures of humourless spinsters that are often associated with *Punch*, Christabel is depicted as attractive and intelligent, with a playful smile directed towards the reader.

This cartoon approvingly represents the women's conduct during the trial and is relevant to an examination of the range of depictions of women's suffrage in *Punch* but I was not able to locate it through a keyword search for terms that related to women's suffrage, only through the more traditional approach of reading through a bound volume of *Punch*. Some significant cartoons that depict a favourable attitude to women's suffrage, such as 'Excelsior!' (13 July 1910: 21) and 'The Catch of the Season' (4 April 1917: 225), were not returned by any of my keyword searches. Although keyword searching is valuable as a way of identifying a large number of results quickly, it does not entirely replace the task of searching through whole volumes. The *Punch Historical Archive* also allows users to read through issues in order (in the 'Browse by Date' section) so researchers who do not have easy access to paper copies of *Punch* could use the archive both for

keyword searching and for reading entire volumes chronologically.

Recommendations for Teaching and Further

Research

One possible teaching activity would be to ask students to contrast representations of a particular event, such as the Pankhursts' 1908 trial, in different publications by using a resource such as Gale Historical Newspapers to search by keyword and date.

Conclusions could then be drawn about editorial policy and projected readerships in different publications and this could feed into a larger discussion about representations of the campaign for women's suffrage.

Examples from *Punch* could be used as contextual material in English Literature seminars to read against novels or poetry that deal with women's suffrage as a way of giving a sense of a range of opinions to balance pro- or anti-suffrage propaganda found in other publications. *Punch* is often used as an example of public opinion in discussions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature but I would encourage my students to use their examples from *Punch* in a nuanced way that recognises the existence of a range of different opinions and avoids sweeping statements.

For other researchers who are interested in depictions of women's suffrage in *Punch* I would echo the recommendation found in other articles on this site to combine your searching of *Punch* with an examination of the *Times Digital Archive* or other Gale Historical Newspapers to compare the representations of the same events across different publications and to contextualise some of the more obscure references

in *Punch*. There are some useful books that have explored the range of representations of women's suffrage in *Punch*, particularly Constance Rover's *The Punch Book of Women's Rights* and, to a lesser extent, Lisa Tickner's *Spectacle of Women*.

Combining a focused examination of *Punch* itself with contextual reading of history books and other periodicals from the time gives a wealth of material for historians, media historians and literary critics with an interest in representations of women's suffrage.

NOTES

[1] Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 141. Sharp's contribution to *Punch* was 'The Wreck of "The Ark"', 13 October 1909, pp.254-7.

[2] Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *The Women's Victory and After: Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1918* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd., 1920), pp. 77-8.

CITATION

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