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Author(s): Susan Hamilton

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Making History with Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminism, Domestic Violence, and the Language of Imperialism

SUSAN HAMILTON

In an 1864 editorial in the *English Woman's Journal* on the legacy of the journal, then coming to the end of its run, editor Bessie Parkes argued for the necessity of the “special,” feminist periodical:

Had it from the first any hope, any expectation, any *wish* to come forward in the same field with the able monthlies, which contained the best writing of the day? To this question an emphatic *no* must be given. [. . .] If it had been wished to start a brilliant and successful magazine, some eminent publisher should have been secured and persuaded to undertake active pecuniary interest and risk; and all the best female writers should have been engaged, “regardless of expense”, and *then*—good-bye to the advocacy of any subject which would have entailed a breath of ridicule; good-bye [. . .] to the results which have sprung up around the small office where so many workers collected together, because the purpose and the plan were *honestly conceived and carried out*. (“Review” 361)

Later that same year as editor of the new *Alexandra Magazine*, Parkes reiterated her contention that a special interest periodical was crucial to the success of organized feminism:

[T]here is something in a reiterated effort which far outweighs the effect of the separate thoughts. It is not this or that number of a magazine, this or that article from a given pen, which does the work: it is partly the effect of repetition—line upon line—and partly the knowledge that there is in the world a distinct embodiment of certain principles. [. . .] Even if this embodiment be in itself far from mighty, it serves to sustain a great amount of scattered energy, and may be a rallying point of much value to the whole of the field. (“Special Periodical” 258–59)

The writing of the history of Victorian feminisms has to a great degree followed Parkes’s lead in determining that it is the “distinct embodiment” of feminist principles in the Victorian feminist press that most deserves our historical attention. Sheila Herstein, Philippa Levine, Pauline Nestor, and other scholars of the Victorian feminist press, for

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example, have argued eloquently for the importance of such vehicles to the production of a shared feminist culture, a “distinct embodiment” of community and collectivity, in this period. Histories of nineteenth-century feminism have productively emphasized the establishment and internal workings of the separate culture of Victorian feminisms, particularly as represented by the network of feminist organizations and the separate feminist periodical press. Consequently, little attention has been paid to those texts that do not circulate primarily within identified feminist circles or feminist cultures, but which are located at the point of feminism’s perceived entry into the public written discourse of the mainstream or of those in power (see Rendall, “Nineteenth-Century Feminism”). Paying attention to such texts, however, has profound consequences. As I hope to show, an inquiry into the complex interactions of Victorian feminisms and the mainstream, established press will allow us a more adequate and ample understanding of Victorian feminisms themselves as it also complicates our knowledge of the Victorian public sphere. No less important, such study will invite a reconsideration of the categories of acceptable, historical identities for feminists; and this reconsideration, in turn, raises key questions about the shaping impact of those categories on the ways in which histories of Victorian feminism are written. In this way, our own relations to the feminisms of the past are at stake.

My entry into these issues here will be the periodical writing of Frances Power Cobbe, and its complex, perhaps even contradictory status in Victorian feminism. The essay at the center of this paper, “Wife Torture in England” (1878), has been chosen precisely because it has been selected to represent her in the few critical investigations of her work by historians such as Shanley, Caine, and Bauer and Ritt. Its concern with domestic violence signals an interest in matters now at the very core of Western feminist activity and thinking. But Cobbe’s pointed use of imperialist rhetoric marks also this piece as especially controversial (and necessary) for any history that seeks to understand the separatist and mainstreaming tendencies of feminism(s).

Before turning to that essay, however, I want to revisit briefly the critical emphasis on a separate feminist culture and collectivity which underwrites many current analyses of Victorian feminism. I do so in order to convey a sense of the importance and difference of Cobbe’s work in a way that does not simply add one more figure to our list of significant Victorian feminists, but keeps the processes by which such

significance is produced firmly in view. Tricia Davis and others at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies note the surprising neglect of histories of feminism in women's history and feminist history. Davis and her co-authors speculate that this lack of interest can be explained by modern feminists' lack of fellow feeling or identification with "an earlier generation whose work had focused on the entry of women into the public sphere" (304).

Histories of feminism have initiated a process that opens those narratives to a consideration of the profound pressure that the critical emphasis on feminist identity and culture—signifying unity, commonality, and harmony—exerts on the stories we choose to tell and how we tell them. In *Suffrage Days* (1996), for instance, Sandra Stanley Holton espouses a kaleidoscopic view of history making, bringing to the long story of suffrage a new configuration of networks, values, and loyalties. Her suffrage stories are, as she claims, partial—moving the neglected, the overlooked, but the still significant figures of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, Jessie Craigen, and others to the foreground.¹

But the results of an overarching emphasis on identity and community on our comprehension of Victorian feminism are still everywhere readable in the larger patterns of our writing. Two prominent patterns concern me here. The first of these is our habit of attending almost exclusively to the establishment, mechanisms, and maintenance of a Victorian feminist culture that is defined primarily as separate. This tendency produces a historical record that leans toward the exemplary leaders of specific, heroic campaigns: Josephine Butler and the Contagious Diseases Act; Barbara Bodichon and the Married Women's Property Committee; Emily Davies and women's university education; Millicent Garrett Fawcett and the fight for the vote. Networks of outstanding activists and committed workers in specific causes—like the Ladies of Langham Place, the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women, and the Female Emigration Society—also figure prominently.

My second concern is the spotlight on the separate feminist press, and related papers of various feminist organizations, that emerges from this attention to a feminist culture defined as separate from the mainstream.² The press is seen, quite rightly as one of the enabling apparatuses that produce this separate feminist culture. The work of Herstein, Levine, Jane Rendall, and others, clearly lays out the workings of this enabling apparatus, and its central role in producing

an identity for feminists in the period. Herstein, for example, asserts that the evolution of the central feminist periodical, from the *English Woman's Journal*, to the *Victoria*, and then the *Englishwomen's Review*, is analogous to the changing nature of feminist reform, using the periodical to chart the evolution of feminist community. She treats as almost transparently “true” Bessie Parkes’s own remarks (quoted at the beginning of this paper) on special periodicals. Herstein argues that the feminist periodical is a “print platform” for the Victorian women’s movement, and that these women saw themselves as reformers not journalists (25). As reformers, Herstein’s Victorian feminists wrote and edited journals that produced community rather than mere commentary, “solidify[ing] the infant feminist network” (24). The implicit opposition between reform and journalism articulated here serves to generate a sense of the separateness—and thus the purity—of the Victorian women’s movement. More recently, Solveig Robinson has argued for the importance of a separate feminist press for the emergence of a distinctly feminist literary criticism (159–172).

Levine’s important work also persuasively argues that the creation of a feminist press was a “distinctive move, asserting both the importance of women’s issues and an understanding of the need for a women’s voice” (“Humanizing Influence” 294). More specifically, she argues that “Feminist journalism was [. . .] a means of strengthening women’s collective identity and common grounds of action” (305). Quoting Parkes’s by now infamous remarks, Levine argues that the principles of Victorian feminist journalism—implicitly defined in her text as writing for separate or special periodicals—“allowed women an actively separate literary space,” “offer[ed] a subtle challenge to canonic literary and journalistic assumptions,” and created not just a “literature of their own”—the phrase is Josephine Butler’s—“but a language of their own, [. . .] a piercing, critical redefinition of political culture” (300). For Levine, it is this separateness that defines the “identifiably feminist nature” of Victorian feminist periodicals (294).³

These are valuable and persuasive readings of Victorian feminist periodicals. But they come with risks. If, in response to past histories that erase Victorian feminisms as insufficiently radical or relevant to modern needs, we define feminist culture and identity only through their separateness from the mainstream, and their subsequent sense of collective purpose, we risk both a narrowing of our definition of feminism and a loss of the “pastness” of this moment in feminism. Antoinette Burton has

recently insisted on the need to take into account the full terrain of Victorian feminisms as part of a larger and necessary project that scrutinizes the histories of feminism we rely upon to authorize our own.⁴ Tellingly, for the argument to come, Burton's comments emerge from her conviction that "British feminists must also be counted among the shapers of imperial rhetoric and imperial ideologies in this period" (5). Bringing together the insights of feminist history with those of a feminist materialist analysis that looks to the cultural locations of analysis, will offer a fuller understanding of Cobbe's achievement and its public status.

* * *

Frances Power Cobbe, journalist, workhouse philanthropist, religious philosopher, feminist activist, antivivisectionist, was among the best-known feminist writers and thinkers of her day. Reviewing her two-volume autobiography, *The Life of Frances Power Cobbe: By Herself* (1894), the *Review of Reviews* called her the "oldest New Woman now living on the planet" ("Character Sketch" 329). She was a prominent spokeswoman for the improvement of Victorian women's educational and employment opportunities; a witty and formidable defender of so-called redundant women; an incisive critic of the Victorian idea of marriage; and a passionate advocate for women's suffrage and right to bodily integrity. She wrote over twenty books on Victorian women, science and medicine, and religious duty, and published innumerable essays, pamphlets, and tracts. Longtime editor of the *Zoophilist*, the weekly journal for the Society for the Protection of Animals Liable to Vivisection (known as the Victoria Street Society) which she founded in 1875, she also had a successful career as a regular front-page leader-writer for the London daily *Echo*. She was instrumental in the passage of the Cruelty to Animals Act (1876) and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1878). She was, as this too brief sketch suggests, an extraordinary woman—active, productive, and centrally involved with many of the key issues of her day. Now best known in feminist circles for her work on domestic violence, Cobbe's feminist thinking has proven unwieldy and uncomfortable, and has appeared merely unnecessary, for feminism today.

Writing in 1878 on the question of what she termed "Wife Torture in England," Cobbe stated clearly for the record that "the whole relation between the sexes in the class we are considering is very

little better than one of master and slave" (137). Drawing upon a thirty-year history of Victorian feminist critique in which the representation of marriage as a form of slavery was a central rhetorical and conceptual framework, Cobbe is also very careful to distance herself from it:

I have always abjured the use of this familiar comparison in speaking generally of English husbands and wives, because as regard the upper orders of society it is ridiculously overstrained and untrue. But in the "kicking districts," among the lowest laboring classes, Legree himself might find a dozen prototypes, and the condition of the women be most accurately matched by that of the negroes on a Southern plantation before the war struck off their fetters. (137)

In her footnote to this passage, Cobbe states:

Let it be noted that while they *were* slaves, these negroes were daily subjected to outrages and cruelties of which it thrilled our blood to hear. Since they have been emancipated their white neighbors have learned at least so far to recognize them as human beings, that these *tortures* have become comparatively rare.

From this point, "Wife Torture in England" freely uses the metaphor of master and slave, as well as related Orientalist metaphors, for violent marriages: the wrongs of abused women "can only be paralleled by the oppressions of a dominant caste or race over their helots" (137); the readiness of abused women to defend their abusers is "culminating proof of how far the iron of their fetters has eaten into their souls" (140); wife abuse itself is an old abuse, "having its origin in the remotest epochs of barbarian wife-capture and polygamy, [and] yet lingers in the dark places of the land" (140).

Using this range of master/slave and Orientalist metaphors, Cobbe's article participates in a journalistic commonplace of Victorian literary culture. The master/slave trope was frequently invoked by periodical writers and political commentators throughout the Victorian period, in the service of a range of causes, from the Ten Hours Movement, Chartism, to publicizing the conditions of the criminal classes. Though such language is not unique to feminist writing in this period, however, Cobbe's article must also be set alongside a massive collection of feminist periodical writings, pamphlets and oratory that rely upon the "women of the East" and the fettered black slave to articulate its demands for British women. So massive is this archive that Burton can rightly claim that the "colonial female Other was one of the conceptual foundations of Victorian feminist thinking" (63–64). Cobbe has, it

would seem, simply written these feminist narratives into the Victorian mainstream. What strikes me, however, are not simply the parallels between Cobbe's use of these imperialist and abolitionist metaphors in the mainstream and their use in separate feminist periodicals. Rather, I am taken by both the timing and the terms of their entry into the mainstream press as part of an avowed *feminist* intervention.

To explore these issues further, I will first map out a framework of the use of these imperialist strategies that will better allow us to assess the meaning—in a very broad sense—of their feminist implementation in the mainstream. For brevity's sake, I will use the term "imperialist" as shorthand for the range of rhetorical tropes using, variously, the abolitionists' black slave, the Indian woman, and the generalized Oriental woman, all of which are on display in Victorian feminist writing.⁵ The slippage between these particular figures is a historically specific one, displaying the ideological force of a homogenized idea of the Other woman. Though it is the American black slave who figures most prominently in Cobbe's "Wife Torture in England," the ease with which she moves from the figure of the black slave to the helot, then to questions of caste and polygamy, signals the ease with which these historically and culturally distinct figures were united under the generalized category of Other. Though Burton's impressive work on British feminism deals expressly with the work of the "Indian woman" in Victorian feminist and imperialist culture, her overarching argument about the ideological work of imperialist tropes, and her use of feminist periodicals from the period, echo the process we can discern in Cobbe's work.

Drawing on the work of scholars of the Victorian press, Burton argues that Victorian feminist periodicals were, first, a public, political act in their very establishment; second, a public space in which Victorian women actively worked out their theoretical claims; and, third, through these actions, a public, highly visible, "instrument of power and legitimacy" (100). Burton studies the feminist press thus conceived in order to delineate the strategies by which Victorian feminists transformed Indian women into an imperialist trope. This imperialist trope, she argues, serves two primary functions. First, it produces an image of the unemancipated, enslaved woman as the primary sign of a degraded race. This sign in turn both pointed to the risks of denying emancipation to English women *and* urged emancipation for English women in the name of their very difference from this now-dismissed figure. Secondly, it represents Indian women as the object of humanitarian compassion, and so the

object of humanitarian intervention by English feminists. This intervention grounded itself in sisterhood and was used to prove the necessary role of English women in the work of Empire, thus supporting the argument for English women's political rights (63–74).

These then are the defining terms of the use and circulation of imperialist tropes in Victorian feminist periodicals. Simply put, imperialist tropes were conceptually foundational to Victorian feminisms from the 1860s on. Cobbe's careful framing of these tropes in 1878 suggests, nonetheless, that however commonplace in Victorian journalism, however defining or constitutive they were of feminist self-representations *within* Victorian feminist culture, they were not readily or unproblematically mainstreamed as feminist markers in this same period. This may seem counter-intuitive. If, as Burton's work argues, feminists were among the shapers of Britain's imperialist ideologies, surely such strategies would find themselves at home in that same imperialist culture's established periodical press. This is difficult terrain to cover. Without wanting to reduce the complex cultural process of mainstreaming to a single dimension—that of time—let me present a kind of prehistory of the use of imperialist tropes in Cobbe's mainstream writing. Such a prehistory will reveal what such strategies can tell us about the ongoing production and negotiation of a public identity for feminisms in the established Victorian press in this period.

In some ways, Cobbe's claim in "Wife Torture in England" to have "always abjured" the familiar comparison of English men and women with masters and slaves is disingenuous. In "Celibacy v. Marriage" (1862), an article for *Fraser's Magazine* and one of her earliest pieces on the Woman Question for the mainstream press, Cobbe closes her analysis of the debilities of marriage with this rhetorical flourish:

The Englishman of the twentieth century will abandon those claims of marital authority, whose residue he inherits from days when might made right, and from lands of Eastern sensuality, where woman is first the slave of her own weakness, and then inevitably the slave of man. (83)

In a later piece that same year, also published in *Fraser's Magazine*, Cobbe refers both to the "moral Suttee" (91) that, in her view, shapes the narrow lives of English widows, and uses the master/slave analogy in her arguments for women's improved access to education:

To cramp every faculty and cut all large interests, and then complain that a human being so treated is narrow-minded, and scandal-loving, is precisely an injustice parallel to that of some Southern Americans whom we have heard detail those vices of the negroes *which slavery had produced*, as the reason why they were justified in keeping so degraded a race in such a condition. ("What Shall We Do," original italics, 102)

In an article for *Fraser's Magazine*, "Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors" (1868), Cobbe claims that:

We, in our day, are perplexed and well nigh overwhelmed with the difficulties presented to us. What ought the Americans to do with their Negroes? What ought we to do with our Hindoos? What ought all civilized people to do with their women? (110)

The parallels evoked here are self-conscious in Cobbe's article, intended to point to the absurdity of there being a problem with civilized, English women in the same way that "Negroes" and "Hindoos" have proved difficult to handle. The force of the imperialist metaphor is, thus, fully displayed and consciously invoked. Similarly, comparing the legal abilities of English husbands over their wives, Cobbe asks: "What was the law which gave to that reckless savage [an Englishman who had abused his wife] a power the same as that of a slave-holder of the South over his slave?" (117). Elsewhere in this article, Cobbe rhetorically agrees for the purpose of argument that "it is a noble Oriental metaphor, to describe a wife's relation to her husband as 'bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh'" (122).

The appearance of these strategies in Cobbe's work in the Victorian established press can be read primarily as signs of Cobbe's own consciousness and negotiations of these terms of analysis. Their emerging ubiquity could then be read as Cobbe's own gradual acceptance of the relevance and usefulness of such comparisons. The appearance of potentially volatile metaphoric comparisons between slaves and English women in "Wife Torture in England"—written at a late stage in Cobbe's career—could also be read as a sign of the power of her own name as a rigorous writer on controversial topics: well-established, Cobbe is now able to signal more openly her indebtedness to the conceptual terms of analysis of that political community to which she has long belonged.

Alternatively, we could read her work primarily as reflecting changes or renegotiations in Victorian feminist thought throughout the

period. In this interpretation, Cobbe's writings make clear the more general usefulness and newly charged valence of these terms for thinking through the specific problems of Victorian women. Then again we could argue persuasively that the very invisibility or casualness of the comparison between women and slaves in Cobbe's work is itself a sign of its conceptual centrality in feminist thought. I do not dismiss any of these readings out of hand. But they all fall short of the mark, responding insufficiently to the relation between the high-profile location of Cobbe's writing and its effects, and failing to take into full account the historical record as Burton outlines it. As Ferguson, Zonana, and others have shown, imperialist rhetoric in feminist thought certainly has a much longer history than the mere sixteen-year history represented by Cobbe's work. What then, if anything, can we say about Cobbe's deliberate use of this comparison in 1878, and her bid to draw specific attention to its use in a prominent article on domestic abuse?

Part of the answer must address the specific high profile periodical in which Cobbe places this work. Cobbe's April 1878 article was her fourth to appear in the *Contemporary Review*, following substantial pieces on vivisection, women's healthcare, and a reply to criticism of the latter. It appeared alongside articles on India, John Stuart Mill, miscarriages of justice, and a theological symposium, entitled "Future Punishment." From her first 1877 publication, "Mr Lowe and the Vivisection Act," to a 1900 obituary for James Martineau, Cobbe wrote a total of fifteen articles for the *Contemporary Review*. Eight of them addressed theological and philanthropic issues, four dealt with vivisection, with the remaining three (including the reply) taking up feminist concerns. The *Contemporary* appears to be the primary venue for Cobbe's periodical writing during this period. Several factors affect our understanding of this choice of venue. Cobbe's long-standing publishing relationship with the *Theological Review* ended in October 1877 when that periodical was in the midst of what would be a long winding-down period, finally folding in 1879. She had written twenty-one pieces for the *Theological* on theological and philanthropic concerns, some of which, like "Fitness of Women for the Ministry" and "Women's Work in the Church," brought a feminist analysis of women's work forward to that periodical's audience. Cobbe's work as leader-writer for the London daily *Echo* had also ended in 1875 with the selling of that paper, and it may well be that she was looking for new sources of income.⁶

Another similarly long-standing relationship with *Fraser's Magazine* that began in June 1861 and ended in March 1870 produced twenty-seven articles, including many of those which brought her national attention and for which she is now best known. "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?" for example, caught the attention of Barbara Leigh Smith and the ladies of Langham Place. Her work for the *Contemporary Review*, then, in the thirteen-year span of her involvement, constitutes a significant portion of her periodical output. Although Cobbe published *Duties of Women* in 1881 when she was nearing sixty, "Wife Torture in England" is, indeed, her last substantial periodical piece on women in her long writing life. Interestingly, Cobbe's writing in the *Contemporary* falls sharply away starting in 1884, as indeed it does across all the periodicals to which she still contributed.⁷ That was the year in which Cobbe received a £100 annuity, raised by antivivisectionist friends, and retired to Wales, where her life partner, sculptor Mary Lloyd, had a life-interest in a family estate. A second legacy of £25,000 in 1891 from a fellow antivivisectionist enabled Cobbe and Lloyd to move to the estate's manor house, from which Cobbe continued her writing and antivivisectionist activism at a slower rate, publishing corrected reprints of earlier work and writing her autobiography.

The history of the *Contemporary Review* in 1878 also provides important background for any reading of Cobbe's article. Laurel Brake has identified the controversy surrounding the *Contemporary* as an "eruption of the press in which the constituent elements were momentarily hyper-visible and palpable" (51). Certainly, 1877 marks a turbulent time in the periodical's history that frames "Wife Torture in England" in compelling ways. Long distinguished as an open platform journal, called by R. W. Dale in the *Christian Witness and Congregational Magazine* a "new species of religious periodical literature" (qtd. in Srebrnik 119) with a history of courting controversy, the *Contemporary Review* in 1878 was only just emerging from a protracted period of highly public and bitter restructuring, both financial and editorial, that saw the ousting of its editor and a change in ownership. Alexander Strahan, the journal's publisher and primary owner, lost two-thirds of the shares of his periodicals and his position as business manager (Srebrnik 154). A very public debate of the effects of these changes on the *Contemporary's* literary merit between the various camps involved in the whole mess intensified the scrutiny. The ousted editor, James Thomas Knowles, who ran the journal from 1870 to 1876, was respon-

sible for much of the high regard the *Contemporary* enjoyed, bringing Alfred Lord Tennyson, Cardinal Manning, and other members of the Metaphysical Society—including William Gladstone, Matthew Arnold, and T. H. Huxley—into its stable of writers, and increasing its circulation from 2000 to a reputed 8000 readers. It was Knowles, too, who had the eye for controversy and a gift for timing. Under his guidance, the *Contemporary Review* became an important venue for debates on culture, evolutionary theory, and scientific materialism. His famous October 1874 issue, which went through ten editions, gave space to Arnold to answer objections to his recent “Literature and Dogma” essay, and reveled in Gladstone’s attack on the doctrine of papal infallibility in “Ritualism and Ritual.”

By December 1877, however, Knowles was out, the victim of Strahan’s interminable financial troubles and facing accusations that (as Knowles complained to William Gladstone) under the influence of Huxley and John Tyndall, he set about to transform the *Contemporary* into “an atheistic organ” (qtd. in Srebrnik 153). This accusation was part of a larger strategy by *Contemporary Review* publisher, Strahan, to raise new funds for the journal from Evangelical backers and so regain financial and editorial control of the journal. Yet it also generated considerable problems for Strahan; potential backers worried that the open-platform, controversial style that had made the *Contemporary* so successful was about to be harnessed in the name of orthodoxy. Strahan and Knowles exchanged letters in *The Times* bitterly presenting their versions of recent events, with Strahan vehemently denying rumors that the *Contemporary* was to be made “properly orthodox”: “The *Contemporary* will keep [. . .] free from narrowness, bigotry and sectarianism” (qtd. in Srebrnik 160).

Patricia Srebrnik, Strahan’s meticulous biographer, suggests that the *Contemporary Review* never fully recovered from Strahan’s poor financial management and Knowles’s departure. For Srebrnik, the *Nineteenth Century*, which Knowles went on to found and edit, assumed the high position that the *Contemporary* once claimed through a similar mix of open-platform editorial policy, high-profile writers, and controversial content. In contrast, she deems the *Contemporary*’s efforts to consolidate its position as a leading monthly periodical to be ineffectual overall, with the *Nineteenth Century* the clear front-runner in the race for periodical supremacy. More specifically, she suggests that the falling off of the *Contemporary* can be charted, not simply in declining circulation figures, but also in its noticeable deficiency in famous names and its

turn to such hobby horse writers as the Duke of Argyll on natural and spiritual law and Cobbe on vivisection.

It is possible to see this moment as one of the most conservative in the *Contemporary Review's* run. If attention to the Woman Question is used as one gauge of political position, however, the *Contemporary Review* under Knowles and then Strahan looks remarkably consistent, if not slightly improved after Knowles's departure. The *Contemporary Review*, before Knowles, provided limited space for writings on the Woman Question. Under his editorship, between 1870 and 1883, it published seven articles on the Woman Question, five of which were signed by women. But from 1873 to 1877, when Knowles left, no other identifiably feminist, or women-centered, writings were published. With Knowles's departure, the *Contemporary Review* appears to have made some changes that opened up its platform a bit more widely to women. Brake notes the larger space allotted to literature and the arts in the *Contemporary Review* after 1877, increased attention that Brake reads as multiplying opportunities for women as writers and readers of the *Contemporary Review* (57-58).

Srebrnik ends her account of Strahan's publishing life noting the continued inclusion of the *Contemporary Review* in contemporary lists of weighty, authoritative periodicals. The *Contemporary Review* then, for all this public wrangling, remained an established, relevant periodical, treating theological, social, and political topics with authority. But the "eruption of the press," signified by the conflict over issues of ownership, editorial policy, and the importance of controversy to periodical platforms, is an important context for Cobbe's article. At one level, Strahan's turn to a figure like Cobbe can be read as a continued effort to court controversy by inviting high-profile writers to contribute articles on difficult, sensational topics. Though Srebrnik dismisses Cobbe the antivivisectionist as a hobby-horse writer, Cobbe in fact wrote on this topic and others for journals, like the *Fortnightly Review*, that similarly aimed for heterogeneity in coverage of issues. If "Wife Torture in England" is an intentionally provocative choice for the *Contemporary*, elements of the essay—such as Cobbe's turn to imperialist rhetoric or her case catalogue of torture—can, perhaps, be read as part of the journal's provocative address.

To shift focus slightly, we need also to consider the benefits to Cobbe, in particular, and Victorian feminism more generally, that the *Contemporary Review* might confer at this moment in its history.

Certainly, as an antivivisectionist, Cobbe would have found the old *Contemporary Review* under Knowles a less-than-congenial address. Its attention to evolutionary theory and scientific materialism may well have signaled adherence to a set of principles which Cobbe saw as the root of vivisection's scientific ascendancy. That said, she was always one for debate based firmly on knowledge. It would be, I think, simplistic to read her arrival at the *Contemporary Review* as merely a result of the absence of those topics from its pages.⁸ Nevertheless, the revamped *Contemporary Review* with its newly invigorated evangelical remit might well appeal to Cobbe for the very conservatism that others lament—and this, in spite of her criticism of established religion (see Caine, *English Feminism* 127). It is, of course, very much in Cobbe's interest to have domestic violence represented as primarily a moral and spiritual issue, perhaps even a conservative one, rather than merely a sign of one's progressive politics. Though the mechanism Cobbe favors for redress is legal reform, her comparison between the slave and the abused, working-class English woman appeals to a long established, powerful history of evangelical support for abolition.

Certainly, the larger feminist community cheered Cobbe's intervention, without any apparent concern that she had distorted or limited Victorian feminist analysis of domestic violence in staking her position. In her *Life*, Cobbe identifies her efforts against domestic violence as “[t]he part of my work for women [. . .] to which I look back with most satisfaction” (534). She also quotes a letter from “a very energetic and prominent woman-worker with whom I had slight acquaintance” (540)—most likely the poet and activist, Arabella Shore—which ends: “You have love and gratitude from our hearts, I assure you; we live wider lives and better for your presence. I have ventured to write freely on a subject some would find wearisome, but your heart is big and will sympathize; and I am always longing for you to know the active result of your achieved work. This: that poor battered, bruised women are relieved, are safer and bless you, and so do I, from a full heart” (541). The *Englishwomen's Review*, too, acclaimed Cobbe's role in the domestic abuse debate (ctd. in Bauer and Ritt, “Husband” 114).

These contexts for reading Cobbe's article are, it seems to me, plausible, compelling, and necessary. But they too require supplemental context if we are to assess the full range of Victorian feminisms' constitution and participation in the broader Victorian culture. In particular, we must compare the use of imperialist rhetoric in Cobbe's

establishment writing and its use in the feminist press. In Victorian feminist publications the figures of the Oriental and the enslaved black woman stand on one side of a binary, negatively balanced by either the degraded English woman who betrays the Orientalist infiltration of English culture or by the civilized English feminist whose emancipation the darker woman guarantees through her racialized difference. The figure of the black slave had, in this structure, the particular force of a degradation successfully opposed, a battle already won. In English feminist thought, as Cobbe's initial footnote in "Wife Torture in England" makes clear, the torture and violence of slavery in America is a thing of the past—a sign of past shame now nearly vanquished from history. As Burton reminds us, the present state of the Oriental woman and the past torture of the black slave are both also implicitly compared with the English feminist. Her quest for freedom is thus rewritten so as not to threaten but to embody, and indeed accomplish, English advancement and progress (73). This would seem also to characterize Cobbe's earliest, and seemingly most fleeting, use of imperialist language.

In "Wife Torture in England," however, the dichotomous relation between the degraded English woman and the Oriental woman or the black slave underpins an argument that is intended to generate a much more specific benefit. The mainstream article uses a foundational metaphor not to make a foundational point about the condition of English women and progress in general, but to argue for a specific legislative intervention into married, working-class women's lives. A draft bill outlining the terms of that intervention is attached to the article. Most significantly, Cobbe does not connect her request here to a substantial argument about women's political rights (though she does point to what she considers to be the natural changes to legislative reform once women are accorded the vote). Nor does she stake out an overt claim to a role in the Empire more largely, a role that imperialist rhetoric underwrote in the separate feminist press in the same period. Cobbe's political terrain is narrowly domestic.

In other words, her first extended use in the mainstream of a critique common to the separate feminist community since the 1860s performs a circumscribed kind of domestic missionary work; it does not launch wider arguments. Where separate feminist periodicals increasingly invoked the work of empire in arguing for political rights for English women, Cobbe's political work in this article is much narrower, though based in the same authorizing language. Conversely, the

absence of imperial rhetoric in her earlier writings suggests that it was seen as risky to represent such rhetoric as part of feminism to the Victorian public. Though the degradations of slavery are imagined as a thing of the recent past, the success of its vanquishing cannot be attached, it would seem, to a larger political platform. That said, it is also important to stress the degree to which domestic missionary work—intervention in working-class women’s lives—is authorized through the force of the imperialist metaphor. The “land of darkness [. . .] ugly sounds [. . .] nauseous odours and [. . .] hideous sights” (136) that characterize Cobbe’s working-class England define a primitive land yet to be conquered.

What then are the specific risks of imperialist language—particularly the figure of the abolitionist slave—to a Victorian feminist analysis of domestic violence? One way to register the complexity of the tension between the apparent restraint and the specific application in Cobbe’s usage is to compare her work here with the coverage of domestic violence in the feminist journals. Lydia Becker’s *Women’s Suffrage Journal*, for example, reported in graphic detail the kinds of assaults and abuses that women suffered, drawing frequently on an imposed parallel between the situation of British women and black slaves.⁹ In this self-consciously feminist textual space, the full force of the slavery analogy is central to the demand for large political change.

Feminist publications like Becker’s *Women’s Suffrage Journal* argue forcibly for the political efficacy in feminist-identified communities of the repeated use of a parallel so mildly used by Cobbe in the more mainstream *Contemporary Review*. But, more importantly for my purposes here, the terms of this explicitly feminist usage go some way to providing a more nuanced sense of Cobbe’s specific intervention and its importance. Part of what circulates within the trope of the black slave and the Oriental woman for Victorian feminist communities is a political conviction about what structures and characterizes the intimate relations between English men and women of all classes.¹⁰

It is here, I think, that we find a compelling context for Cobbe’s reticent use of a powerful and troubling, imperialist trope, and an exact sense of the specific risks she saw herself taking in “Wife Torture in England.” For Victorian feminist communities, the particular strength of the analogy of the female black slave is its ability to voice a feminist critique of sexual intimacy between men and women. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler has argued, the metaphoric link forged by nineteenth-

century feminists between the figure of the bound and silent slave and the white woman argued for their shared position as property, as bodies that could be bought, sold, and owned. Within this symbolic economy, the figure of the identifiably *female* black slave further designates what is at issue. Enslaved women's sexual vulnerability becomes a sign of what is understood but largely unarticulated in feminist communities: the inability of the free white woman to own her own body in marriage (29-34). For the Victorian feminist, such a sign also implicitly points to the desire to argue for an understanding of sexual and bodily integrity that includes women's sexual expression.

The double power of the figure of the enslaved black woman in nineteenth-century English feminist discourse—to speak the “truth” of English women's status as property *and* to embody English feminists' anxiety about women's physical and sexual vulnerability—makes the trope dangerously necessary to Cobbe's argument for legislative intervention.¹¹ She needs to harness the power of the figure to deplore English women's status as property, so miserably clear for Cobbe in the abject plight of the abused working woman. But she needs to invoke that figure of affronted womanhood without also invoking the figure's power to articulate a feminist argument for English women's right to sexual autonomy, an argument she does not want to put into explicit play in this specific context. Cobbe's legislative intervention is to bring together in one act some of the forms of legal redress theoretically available to all women.¹² In particular, her focus is to make locally available to working women the same forms of redress currently obtainable only through the Divorce Court in London (see Hammerton, ch. 4). This extension and reconfiguration of available law is primarily effected through suggestions for bureaucratic machinery at the local magistrate level, to which Cobbe gathers already available procedures for gaining child custody and maintenance orders. Her contribution is to collect some of the disparate legal procedures available to women, streamlining the process whereby an assaulted wife could petition for legal separation (known as divorce *a mensa et thoro*), custody of her children, and maintenance support (see Shanley; Holcombe; Doggett).

Importantly, Cobbe explicitly does not, at this point, challenge current legislative grounds for legal separation rather than divorce. The beaten wives relieved by her proposed bill would not be permitted to marry again. Indeed, Cobbe worries both that the quasi-legal separation she proposes leaves “the separated man and woman liable each to

fall into vicious courses since marriage is closed to them” and that divorce proper (legally termed divorce *a vinculo*) could “act as an incentive to commit the assault in the case of a husband, and an incentive to provoke one in the case of the wife” (164). Unsurprisingly, then, the enslaved figure in Cobbe’s text is not identifiably female. The physical autonomy of the freed, English slave in this narrative consists in freedom from bodily assault, from physical torture, and not the freedom of sexual expression.

The issues of women’s bodily integrity and sexual autonomy, and their place on a feminist agenda, was at the center of Victorian feminist discussion. As Caine argues in *English Feminism*, the split between feminists such as Fawcett and Elmy was one between those, like Fawcett, who considered women’s admission to the suffrage as the mechanism whereby all women’s disabilities—social and sexual—would be addressed, and those, like Elmy, who saw the suffrage campaign as simply one part of a larger feminist campaign for women’s autonomy that took on marriage and criminal law reform, domestic violence, and issues surrounding child custody as specific, central initiatives (115–123). For Fawcett and others, the potential sexual controversy surrounding some of these issues muddied the suffrage waters, making it difficult to keep organized feminisms’ forward march towards the all-powerful vote on course. For feminists like Elmy, these other initiatives, however controversial, were given priority over suffrage in the name of an “embodied” notion of the citizen in which improvements of the social and sexual terms of women’s lives was the material prerequisite for women’s full participation in the life of the citizen.¹⁸

Cobbe’s article on wife-torture circulates within this contested, often divided, space. Making the feminist commitment to women’s bodily/sexual integrity visible to a different public, Cobbe also drastically curtails the full force of that commitment in this space—pulling back both from a feminist assertion of women’s sexual autonomy and a feminist insistence on women’s political rights. One could read these strategies as manipulations or containments that, through their very functioning, are full of political force but emptied of political meaning for the community from which they originate. But much feminist historical work—like Holton’s on the Married Women’s Property campaign, and the debates over married women’s right to vote—tells us that strategy cannot be so neatly severed from feminist analysis. The differences between a Fawcett and an Elmy—between a gradualist

approach to the erosion of male ownership of the vote and a refusal to leave married women behind in the fight for suffrage—are analytical and conceptual differences. There were a range of fine distinctions and blunt oppositions that altogether constituted the field of Victorian feminisms. Frances Power Cobbe's feminist argument to a non-feminist identified audience—constricting the power of the strong political trope of slavery here, letting it flow powerfully there—is likewise part of that field, with all of its contradictions and dissonances.

* * *

My analysis here is far from exhaustive. Working in broad strokes, I try to give some sense of a time-lag and circumscription in the mainstream use of available and foundational conceptual tropes of Victorian feminism. Cobbe's use of imperialist rhetoric is simply one of the more highly visible and, for feminists today, more troubling instances of this time-lag and circumscription. One could as readily focus on the mainstreaming of the trope of prostitution in Cobbe's writing in order to explore the relation between separate Victorian feminist analysis and its mainstreaming. As broadly worked as this study is here, however, it serves an important purpose. I have written against what I see as a tendency to reduce observable differences between mainstream and separate feminist thinking to the personal histories, consciousnesses, or political differences of the writers involved.

In doing so, my aim has not been to produce a different kind of separateness for the mainstream writing of a figure like Cobbe. I have hoped to suggest that it is not sufficient to define the public space of Victorian feminism as exclusively those areas wherein feminists spoke and represented themselves to each other. The separate feminist press is a public space within which Victorian women worked through their theoretical claims, and where they staked their claims to public, visible power. But such activities were also highly circumscribed, working primarily to represent Victorian feminists to themselves and so generate a self-representation, an identity, which they could take into the larger culture they negotiated. We need to rethink our conception of feminisms' public to include the full range of historical feminism's cultural locations. I have also hoped to question the kinds of claims we can make as feminist scholars about the meaning of the conceptual tropes of Victorian feminists. That Cobbe's imperialist tropes are so

carefully framed does not lessen their value to our study of nineteenth-century separate feminist cultures and strategies of representation. Instead, we need to know that concepts foundational to Victorian feminists' self-representations were differently sayable, differently available, as part of feminisms' representations to larger Victorian audiences. Where feminist analyses rooted in a sense of separateness might argue that Cobbe's careful framing requires her marginalization within the feminist culture of the period, a different kind of feminist analysis can connect what may seem a strategy of complicity or capitulation to the complex and often contradictory strategies of feminisms in the period. Cobbe's different terms of articulation form feminist identities that are necessarily permeable, malleable, and open to revision in the multiple locations within which nineteenth-century feminisms circulate. The Victorian established press represents one way into the many public faces and public spaces for feminist lives and activism, one in which Victorian feminists enjoyed limited success, despite the central role of that press in debating social, cultural, and political questions. A Victorian feminist like Cobbe may or may not figure prominently in the triumphal narratives of feminism once told, but she needs to be part of our understanding of historical feminisms.

University of Alberta

NOTES

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¹For analyses of the historical definition of "feminism," see Caine, "Women's Studies"; Offen; Scott, *Feminism and History*. In "Uneven Developments," Rendall points to the need to widen the terms of feminist history in order to move beyond a focus on the literate classes. Caine's *Victorian Feminists* similarly asks us to rethink the questions we bring to historical materials. See also Riley and Purvis.

²Feminist scholarship on the feminist press is aware of the ways in which feminism necessarily participated in established print practices, especially of other political pressure groups, in organizational structure, financial arrangements, etc. Nineteenth-century feminist periodicals worked hard to represent themselves as established magazines worth reckoning with. As material objects, they do not signify subculturally but participate in all the production values connoting journalistic respectability that they could afford. The stress in feminist analysis of these materials has, however, been laid on the differences that can be spotted: *English Woman's Journal's* commitment to a paid stable of writers, for example, is unusual in pressure-group politics. It is also important

not to homogenize the field of the established press, especially in an effort to mark the distinctiveness of feminist journals in the period. For work on the periodical press and the functioning of the press more broadly, see Brake, Brown, Harrison, Hollis, Jones, Metcalf, Nestor, and Sullivan.

³Compare Parkes's confidence in the separate feminist press with Emily Davies's exasperation with Parkes's emphasis on "centres & rallying-points & so on" (qtd. in Rendall, "A Moral Engine?" 136). Davies argues that *English Woman's Journal* was not a rallying point because no one was reading it.

⁴In "Nineteenth-Century," Rendall questions how to respond to the public/private dichotomy in nineteenth-century feminisms, urging a carefully differentiated sense of what constitutes the public in this period.

⁵I follow Burton in using the term "imperialist," rather than "orientalist," despite the potential for confusion that choice represents. It is important to distinguish between the discursive tropes I discuss here and explicit political support for empire that becomes an increasingly prominent feature of 1890s English feminism. Of course, discursive use and political conviction are linked. But it is important that Cobbe's imperialist language looks back to abolition rather than out to empire. That sleight-of-hand is my focus here.

⁶Cobbe regularly earned in the region of £300 per year through her newspaper and periodical writing. The sum was roughly the equivalent of the patrimony paid out yearly from her father's estate and made traveling and a lady's maid possible. See *Life*, 364. See also Mitchell.

⁷The *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* indicates that Cobbe published only seven of a total of one hundred and four articles after 1884. The *Wellesley Index* remains the best indicator thus far of where women published their work, despite its somewhat narrow range.

⁸For an example of Cobbe's engagement with evolutionary theory, see her *Darwinism in Morals* (1872). The chapter "London in the Sixties and Seventies" in her *Life* recounts some of her frequent encounters, spirited skirmishes, and gracious respect for such eminent scientific figures as Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Tyndall, despite their very real, and for Cobbe painful, differences. See *Life*, 440-44.

⁹Caine's contention that Manchester feminists were both a less decorous lot, and more committed to a feminist political campaign that explicitly yoked together the various disabilities of women, suggests that the Manchester-based *Women's Suffrage Journal* may well have been more open to a graphic style than other feminist journals in the period. See Caine, *English Feminism* 118.

¹⁰In a note to the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, Cobbe makes explicit feminist concern with sexual intimacy as a component in domestic violence. "Why are these particularly revolting murders always committed against women—women who have invariably borne to their cruel assassins those intimate relations on which are supposed to be founded so much of the tenderness of *men* for their sex?" (qtd. in Caine, *English Feminism* 111).

¹¹See Midgley on the importance of enslaved women's physical and sexual abuse to women's abolitionist writing.

¹²Shanley's discussion of the movement of the draft bill through Parliament is important here. Shanley argues that Cobbe's focus on working-class men and women is part of a deliberate strategy appealing to Parliamentary bias. It is not Shanley's task to explore the relation between Cobbe and other feminist activists, and so she does not

analyze the differences in representations of domestic violence in Victorian feminist circles. She notes simply that Cobbe "brought the feminist interpretation before the general public" (165).

¹³Holton identifies Elmy as a "radical suffragist" for whom the dissolution of coverture was as important a feminist goal as the achievement of the vote. The phrase "embodied citizenship" is Holton's (28).

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