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'A Crisis in Woman's History': Frances Power Cobbe's *Duties of Women* and the practice of everyday feminism

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ABSTRACT The article explores the ways in which Cobbe's *Duties of Women* grapples with new challenges facing the late nineteenth-century feminist movement, with an emphasis on the particular force of Cobbe's text that results from her unique role as a mainstream journalist of mid-Victorian feminism to non-feminist-identified audiences. It argues that *Duties of Women* participates in the ongoing negotiation of the representation of suffrage, both within feminist communities and in the ways that feminism is represented and understood by a non-feminist public. Specifically, the author argues that Cobbe's lecture series and book are generically linked to the conduct book. They offer advice for the appropriate daily practice of emancipated womanhood at a time when significant changes in feminist practice, such as the increasing emphasis on suffrage, threatened, in Cobbe's view, the larger public perception of that movement.

In 1881, thirteen years before the New Woman made her official appearance, and over twenty years before the advent of militant feminist tactics, Frances Power Cobbe looked at the women's movement around her, and pronounced 'a crisis in woman's history'.^[1] More particularly, Cobbe noted, with increasing dismay, a looseness or slipperiness to the cultural meaning of suffrage, and the emancipated woman who would claim it, that compelled her to step into the fray, offering a strict definition of emancipated womanhood and of who could rightfully claim the vote.

This article explores the ways in which Cobbe's *Duties of Women* grapples with the new challenges facing the feminist movement. But rather than simply read her text as an interestingly early example of the negotiations over the meaning and direction of late nineteenth-century feminism or insert her text into the narrative that identifies the 1890s as a period of great transition, I want to emphasise the particular force of

Cobbe's text that results from her unique role as a mainstream journalist of mid-Victorian feminism to non-feminist-identified audiences. In other words, it is not only Cobbe's concerns about the definition of feminism or emancipation that are significant. Rather, it is Cobbe's concern to convey this strict definition in her role as a 'mainstream' writer on feminist issues that is most crucial for us to note. Cobbe's patrolling of the representation of emancipated womanhood and the meaning of suffrage in *Duties of Women* is one part of a larger 'management' of the meanings and circulation of feminisms that she conducted throughout her long writing career.[2]

Though she spoke regularly on feminist platforms and published pamphlets arguing the case for women's political rights, Cobbe's ideas on suffrage have not attracted widespread attention. Cobbe's analyses of domestic violence in essays like 'Wife Torture in England', her discussion of women's social subordination, and her celebration of women's celibacy and ability to create nurturing domestic friendships have dominated the critical discussion of her feminist ideas. In this light, *Duties of Women* has been read primarily as one of Cobbe's most thorough expositions of her thoughts on women's duties to themselves and others. As Caine has written, it is the 'continuity of her ideas' [3] on women's moral autonomy over some thirty years of writing that this text most clearly exemplifies.

In many ways, it is the 'continuity' of her ideas that arguably generates Cobbe's marginalisation in histories of feminism that have tended to locate the roots of modern feminism in the organising efforts of the 1860s, in which Cobbe was a central player, but move to focus overall on the period, beginning in the 1890s, which saw suffrage emerge as the defining demand of late nineteenth-century feminisms. In this context, Cobbe's late writings, including *Duties of Women*, written when she was nearing sixty years old, can be seen simply as calls for a return to a prior formation of feminist identities and organisation. I would add to this reading, however, the importance to our sense of late nineteenth-century feminisms of the specific framework within which Cobbe reiterates her ideas on sexual difference and moral autonomy, and the value of assessing the reception of her work. *Duties of Women* is not a 'suffrage text' per se, not immediately comparable to one of her many suffrage speeches or pamphlets, but it is a recapitulation of key Victorian feminist ideas deemed newly necessary by Cobbe because of the slow emergence - evident in the early 1880s as this text attests - of suffrage as *the* defining feminist demand. It is Cobbe's sense that such ideas as she espoused need recapitulation precisely because 'a crisis in woman's history' looms large over the everyday practice of women's moral autonomy, a practice that authorises all of feminism's larger political and social demands.

Caine has suggested that Cobbe gave suffrage a misleading prominence in her autobiography, arguing that Cobbe presents the vote as *the* catalyst to her many feminist activities when she comes to write up her life in 1894. An examination of her activities in the 1860s, however, shows Cobbe's ambivalence towards a large-scale suffrage campaign at this time.[4] Her writing during this period also tips the hat to issues of celibacy and women's moral autonomy as the key spurs to her entry into feminist activity, not an interest in suffrage, as she would later claim in the autobiography.

But what is most important about Caine's observations for my purposes is her sense that Cobbe is responding in her autobiography to changes in the women's movement that impel her to alter the contours of her own awakening feminist consciousness in this formative period in order to locate herself more securely within a movement that had come to see suffrage as *the* legitimate issue for entry into feminist activism. As Caine writes, '[w]omen's suffrage had become the central issue in the women's movement by the mid 1890s, and it is this which explains the prominence which Cobbe gave it in her book'.[5] Extrapolating from Caine's assured sense of the shifting terms of feminist activism, we can also see *Duties of Women* as part of the ongoing negotiation of the representation and the strategic value of suffrage, both within feminist communities *and* in the ways that feminism is represented and understood by a non-feminist public. Cobbe's *Duties of Women* stresses how 'suffrage' looks to outsiders and the potentially damaging effects of a 'misperception' of emancipation on a range of feminism's political and social goals. Specifically, I will argue that Cobbe's lecture series and book, *Duties of Women*, are generically linked to the conduct book. They offer advice for the appropriate daily 'performance' of progressive womanhood – for the practice of an everyday feminism – at a time when significant changes in feminist practice, such as the increasing emphasis on suffrage, threatened the large public perception of that movement in Cobbe's view.[6]

In her 1881 preface to a course of lectures on feminism, Frances Power Cobbe drew a political line in the sand:

greatly as I desire to see the enfranchisement and elevation of women, I consider even that object subordinate to the moral character of each individual woman. If women were to become less *dutiful* by being enfranchised, – less conscientious, less unselfish, less temperate, less chaste, – then I should say: 'For Heaven's sake, let us stay where we are! *Nothing* we can ever gain would be worth such a loss'.[7]

Cobbe's answer to her own challenge lies in the clear 'problematic' that structures her presentation of material. 'There can be no doubt', she writes,

'that a great change is passing over the condition of women everywhere in the civilized world'.[8] That change is the result of increasingly successful pushes to reform women's political, social and economic place in society. 'An immense wave is lifting up women all over the world; ... we shall find in almost every country of the globe ... a new demand for education, for domestic freedom, and for civil and political rights, made by women on behalf of their sex'.[9] Cobbe's task, however, is not to recount those campaigns or successes, nor is it to rally new converts to the cause of organised Victorian feminism. Despite her larger conviction that progress is inevitable, she nonetheless characterises 1881 as a year of 'crisis in woman's history'.[10] At a time when Victorian feminists could point to the 1870 Married Women's Property Act and the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, the opening of Girton College in 1873 and the admittance of women to degrees at the University of London (1878) as key passages in their movement, Cobbe lectures in warning rather than celebration. From her letters, we know that Cobbe was concerned that she would not live to see the vote achieved: 'I have very little hope left to live to see our suffrage carried. Gladstone has been our ruin and I wish all the women of England would join the Primrose League to keep him and his party out of office for ever'.[11]

The crisis, as she sees it, has its root causes in the potential derailment of the women's movement by the inappropriate conduct of women who seemingly seek reform, and the unacceptable display or spectacle of emancipation. Cobbe's sense that the feminist movement is undergoing a 'great transition' [12] is the basis for a series of lectures that places front and centre the daily practice of feminism in individual women's lives, insisting on the vital political significance of women's private life and of practising an emancipation that is not defined solely by the well-known forms of government agitation, petitioning etc. Outlining clearly what constitutes the acceptable display and appropriate embodiment of emancipated womanhood, *Duties of Women* serves as a handbook for women on the cusp of a great transition, detailing the rules and regulations of daily engagement for progressive women. I am going to take some time to lay out the format, content and thinking that organises Cobbe's book, before turning to the larger question of what such a text can tell us about this 'moment' in nineteenth-century feminism's history.

Cobbe originally delivered *Duties of Women* (1881) as a course of six lectures in London and Clifton, outside Bristol. In London, the lectures took place at the Westminster Palace Hotel, a public-speaking and entertainment venue used for a range of political causes and social entertainments. That Cobbe spoke there suggests her high public profile and her ability to pull an audience. Approximately 150 people attended the talks by Cobbe's own reckoning.[13] Though there are no advertising pamphlets for either the

London or Clifton lecture series, and Cobbe has left no record of their organisation, the lectures were probably arranged in both instances by local feminist circles. Certainly, Clifton had a long and venerable history as a suffrage and abolitionist centre, as well being the home of many of Cobbe's most long-standing friends from her Bristol days at the Red Lodge with Mary Carpenter.

The published account of the lecture series, *Duties of Women*, retains the organisation of the spoken series.[14] The introduction is followed by a chapter on the 'Personal Duties of Women' (by which Cobbe means duties which women owe themselves), and moves on through to the 'Social Duties' of women, a category further subdivided into duties 'arising from relationship', duties 'bounded on contract', 'duties of women as mistresses of households', duties of women as 'members of society', and ending with the duties of women 'as citizens of the state', each having one lecture or chapter. The overall structure suggests the idea of *progression* from smaller to larger duties, but Cobbe's intent is to convey the inextricable *links* between these arenas of duties, and to argue for the everyday duties of women as the foundation for all other duties women are bound to perform – including the duty to seek the vote.

Less overtly marked, but central to Cobbe's argument, are the three female figures discussed in *Duties of Women*, who are to varying degrees capable of performing their duties and whose (in)capacities mark the territory and type of feminist activism. These women are, first, the servile woman, the still lingering product of an unreformed mid-Victorian domestic ideology, who is called to domestic, social and political competence in the course of these lectures; second, the pseudo-emancipated woman, whose egotism and immorality endangers feminism's political reputation and efficacy, and makes her ineligible to respond to Cobbe's call to competence; and third, the true feminist woman, like Cobbe herself, whose own competence is self-evident and whose purpose it is to call others to duty and competence and so mount the case for feminism. These three figures weave in and out of Cobbe's text as she argues for an everyday practice of feminism that walks the line between a selfless, dutiful woman without the courage or competence for political activism and a selfish feminine Bohemian lacking the sense of collective political undertaking that distinguishes the true feminist.

Having established her working assumptions, Cobbe works methodically through the arenas of duty she has identified. In these chapters, her strategies range from considering and rejecting women's current daily behaviours through to a ringing endorsement of one of the larger goals of her lecture series, which is the transformation of patriarchal society ('patriarchy' is invoked by Cobbe [15]) through the reform of women's personal and social behaviours. Cobbe combines what she calls

'practical caution[s]' [16] with larger political analyses of the social meanings of certain postures and behaviours. As she does so, Cobbe also switches the female figures whose practices ground her political analysis, from the shrinking, servile woman incapable of self-duty to the pseudo-emancipated woman whose interpretation of self-duty falls short of Cobbe's stringent definition. As a result, we can trace the emerging shape of the figure who endangers feminism, and note Cobbe's strategies for response.

Cobbe's stress throughout *Duties of Women* is on weighing the relative importance of the areas of duties she has named, and identifying the misshapen products of the wrong 'mix' of duties. For her, the personal duty to 'pursu[e] ... the proper end of our being' [17] is paramount. The relations she establishes between arenas of duty insists on women's duty to themselves in order to 'correct' what she feels is the most common error that women make: 'there are', she writes, 'millions of women throughout the world whose freedom is wholly robbed from them, and who for all moral purposes are little better than slaves, and who submit patiently to this [slavery] under the notion that it is a duty to husband or father'. [18] Cobbe vehemently insists that the current view of women's duty makes only for 'an aimless and unmeaning patience' [19], producing the kind of servile woman who is a threat to women's very being.

Cobbe similarly rebukes women for lying [20], valuing their weakness and affecting a lack of courage [21], the temptation to manage husbands, and screaming. [22] 'There is', she writes, 'a terrible want of esprit de corps [among women] ... an unmeaning readiness to smile ... a base and servile willingness to flatter men'. [23] These behaviours are together understood as 'vice[s] of a servile sex' [24], proof positive that the social conditions of women's lives, particularly the primary condition of marriage, is 'irreconcilable with the fundamental basis of morality'. [25] Marriage, as currently conceived, produces grotesque figures, 'domestic Mrs. Machiavelli[s]' [26] whose obedience within marriage is a form of 'moral suicide'. [27]

Cobbe's interest in the servile woman produced by mid-Victorian domestic ideology returns to a concern which, by 1881, had long constituted a signature theme in her work. Her insistence on women's moral autonomy and her rejection of what she calls the theory of 'Woman as Adjective' characterises her earliest essays, such as her 1862 'Female Charity, - Lay and Monastic', which rejects organised philanthropic sisterhoods for women because of their imposition of external rules and regulations on women's moral and philanthropic lives, and her contribution, 'The Final Cause of Woman', in Josephine Butler's 1869 collection, *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, which propounds a theory of 'Woman as Noun' - as an end to themselves - to combat theories of women as adjectives or as

'relative' creatures. *Duties of Women* scorns, as Cobbe always had, 'the whole theory of woman's life which has made them what they are'. [28]

Cobbe's analysis of feminine servility is accompanied by a range of 'practical cautions' that can seem at odds with the larger analysis in its almost ridiculous detail. If women are enjoined to 'Regard screaming as a lise-majeste against womanly dignity' [29], they are also given a practical plan of action:

practise courage, I beseech you, at least as diligently as you practise the piano ... Make it a point of honour to be cool, collected, self-reliant ... Do all this only for a few years, and you will be surprised to find that, after all, in the small concerns of our smooth English lives, bravery, like cleanliness, is a cheap virtue.[30]

Women are similarly to ensure that there is always water in the dog's bowl [31] and to 'pay such attention to the position of the chairs and sofas of the family dwelling-rooms as that every individual may be comfortably placed, and feel that he or she has not been left out in the cold' [32] in the name of women's agitation for the vote. The rhetorical strategy is not new. Reversing the mid-Victorian feminist tactic of picturing women's entry into the public sphere as an extension of their work in the home, Cobbe exhorts women to strive after domestic competence in the name of political emancipation:

If we cannot perform these well, if we are not orderly enough, clear-headed enough, powerful enough, in short, to fulfill this immemorial function of our sex well and thoroughly, it is somewhat foolish of us to press to be allowed to share in the great housekeeping of the State.[33]

And yet, though the rhetoric is one we recognise, I would point also to the particular contribution that Cobbe is making. For her, it is the daily practice of women that both must undergo change, and must be the everyday arena for proving women's readiness and fitness, as well as pointing to their existing occupation of political spheres of action. An emancipated, non-servile comportment is the primary sign of and the qualification for women's political life. Though it might seem hard at first to locate *Duties of Women* in the 'celebration of womanhood' that has been labelled the most distinctive feature of her feminism [34], it is a celebration to the degree that it dismisses female incompetence as an insult and degradation to women. Importantly, too, Cobbe's rhetoric points to the vital role that class-privileged women must play in her conception of feminism, and so the profoundly negative impact on feminism that occurs when such women fail to display the domestic competence that should authorise entry into public fields of endeavour.[35]

It is Cobbe's argument throughout *Duties of Women* that the smallest individual action by a woman weighs heavily in the overall balance of arguments for and against women's enfranchisement. All of women's

pursuits, in this argument, authorise the organisation for political change precisely because all pursuits speak to the viability of 'womanly influence' as a foundational argument in the fight for the vote. Women who scream, gush, or otherwise fail to perform the kind of womanhood Cobbe agitates for, endanger not just their own moral stature, but the larger political movement for emancipation. For Cobbe, like other mid-Victorian feminists, it is woman's scrupulous moral character that is both a core belief and a central strategy in women's emancipation. The vote is sought, in the terms of this argument, precisely because it is seen as a mechanism for influence:

the individual power of one vote in any election seems rarely to affect any appreciable difference; but ... for, little or great, if we can obtain any influence at all, we ought to seek for it; and the multiplication of the votes of women bent on securing conscientious candidates would soon make them not only appreciable, but weighty ... the *direct* influence of a vote is but a small part of the power which the possession of the political franchise confers: its indirect influence is far more important.[36]

Cobbe's *Duties of Women* participates in the celebration of female competence that is a signal theme of her, as of many other mid-Victorian feminist, writing.

If the continuing existence of servile woman is one part of the crisis in women's history, the pseudo-emancipated feminist is the other. Like servility, pseudo-emancipation is detected in the daily behaviours of women. Drinking is one such behaviour that Cobbe is particularly keen to dissociate from feminism's public image. Accordingly, she offers both a social analysis and a word of 'practical caution' [37] on women's temptation to drink. Such temptation is traditionally understood as 'the prostration of the will' [38] and a loss of self control, something that the servile woman must regain. But Cobbe is more concerned that it is the 'fashion just now to say that women are learning to drink to excess' [39], a fashion she understands as part of a 'wholesale slander' [40] of women that is politically suspect. She calls on all who 'have the progress of women at heart' [41] to refuse to participate in such slander. Here Cobbe tackles what she sees as a politically pernicious pursuit of self-fulfilment on behalf of 'emancipated women', and rejects any attempt to circulate this figure as a representation of feminism's political goals. There is in this concern a heightened sense of the ways in which political women are scrutinised and the ways in which any and all negative female behaviour - whether political or not - will be used against feminism's claims. Interestingly, this analysis does not prevent Cobbe from offering a practical caution on the topic of drink: 'Whatever may be the oscillations of your spirits or strength', she intones, 'I entreat you never to strive to level them up by what men now call "nips," which are, in plain

language, drams. It is these "nips," taken at odd times, or in secret, which create the craving wherein lies the peril'.[42]

Importantly, Cobbe's depiction of 'false emancipation' – the drinking, smoking and Bohemianism she vaguely names – does not posit alternative political understandings of women's agitation for political rights. Nor does she see such women as products of an ideology gone awry, as is the case with servile women. The women who threaten Cobbe's *Duties of Women* are not 'different kinds' of feminists offering different models of emancipated womanhood. Instead, these women move through *Duties of Women* as almost pure media representations that must be entirely dissociated from feminism itself, and presented as signifying only what non-feminists have come incorrectly to believe about feminism or a narrow opportunistic grab at what feminism's entry into nineteenth-century political life has opened up for women. They circulate outside of feminism as it is constituted in Cobbe's text. The resulting strategy is to empty such women's behaviour of any claim to political meaning, stressing instead the dangers to suffrage agitation that lie in pseudo-emancipation. If the servile woman, sufficiently fortified, can become the true feminist Cobbe advocates, the pseudo-emancipated woman cannot. Her inappropriate pursuit of her duty to herself seemingly negates any possibility of participating in feminism's progress. These women are, simply, the enemies of feminism: 'There are women', she writes, 'who call themselves "emancipated" now, who are leading lives, if not absolutely vicious, yet loose, unseemly, trespassing always on the borders of vice'.[43] Addressing her audience as the 'pioneers of a nobler career for [women's] sex' [44], Cobbe's practical caution against such women takes this form:

Shun them, and repudiate them as representations of any emancipation which you desire to share. Whether in the highest ranks, among 'fast' ladies of fashion, with their indecorous and undignified habits (smoking with the men of their society at night in smoking-rooms, and so on), or in the middle class, the Bohemianism which, to young girl-students, seems so enchanting after the plodding ways of home, – in both, this pseudo-emancipation is equally to be condemned and denounced as having absolutely *nothing* in common with the movement for the true progress of women.[45]

Though the pseudo-emancipated woman receives less textual space than the servile woman in Cobbe's text, I would argue that she nevertheless looms largest over *Duties of Women*. The political stakes in the public misrecognition of feminism in that figure are higher. Pseudo-emancipation cannot be seen to be a possible offshoot of true feminist agitation. Cobbe implores her audience:

to aid with all our power of example and voice to show that liberty *now*, for the women of England, shall have a different result ... And let us ... take uttermost precaution that we adopt no habits, assume no freedoms,

which, even if they might be safe for ourselves individually, might be unsafe for other women. Better to forego for a time some of the privileges which our sex shall hereafter enjoy than imperil by any laxity, any want of caution and wisdom now, the whole character of this great reformation.[46]

It is clear from this excerpt that the behaviour itself is not anti-feminist or even unworthy of being claimed as feminist. Note that Cobbe suggests that some of these habits and freedoms are indeed the privileges that feminists seek for all women in the future, and which are 'safely' enacted now by some individual women. It is the larger unprepared, uneducated and hostile public's perception of these freedoms that must be actively shaped and secured by a strong repudiation of them now, a turning against them in the present.

In many ways what is most important about Cobbe's rejection of the Bohemian, pseudo-emancipated woman is its timing. In 1881, the year of Cobbe's lectures and publication of the book, the New Woman had not been named, with Sarah Grand's 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' not appearing in the *North American Review* until 1894. Yet the genealogy connecting Cobbe's Bohemian woman, the descendant of the 1870s 'Girl of the Period', to the Revolting Daughters of the 1880s, and so to Grand's New Woman is strong.[47] Interestingly, many of Cobbe's strategies in *Duties of Women* anticipate what will become signature tactics of rejection in the 1890s. As Barbara Caine has shown, part of the strategy of journals such as the *Woman's Signal* in the 1890s (to which Cobbe contributed) was to recuperate the figure of the New Woman by redefining her behaviour in accordance with accepted principles whilst also condemning many portrayals of the New Woman as viciously false, as we see Cobbe doing here.[48]

What is particularly distinctive about Cobbe's *Duties of Women* and the strategies of its critique of the pseudo-emancipated woman is her choice of textual/lecture address. She uses, amongst others, the form of the guide or manual that we now associate primarily with those who both advocated and produced the very domestic ideology of womanhood that Cobbe rejects as propounding a theory of 'Woman as Adjective', and yet is also the source of the model of sexual difference that underpins Cobbe's own political projects.[49] The generic resonances with the handbook or conduct book were certainly heard, and made explicit, by the wider audience of Cobbe's book. The eighth (and last) American edition of *Duties of Women*, published by the Woman's Temperance Publication Association in 1887, is the inaugural title in the Women's Christian Temperance Union's 'Library for Local Unions' series. Frances Willard explains the rationale behind the WCTU's decision to publish Cobbe's book as part of a course of reading aimed at the workers in the movement, who are seen to be at risk of becoming overly narrow workers in the temperance cause, and so to need

'education, information ... to have a broader outlook, and a more intelligent insight into the great movements of civilization'.[50] In her introduction, Willard makes clear that Cobbe's book will circulate as a conduct book for the WCTU's membership:

Ever since reading Miss Cobbe's 'Duties of Women', I had hoped to see it used as a text-book in the schools, and as our publishing house grew in power, it became with me an earnest wish that this noble book might bear our imprint, and thus go with added interest to our constituency in the mighty school of the W.C.T.U.[51]

Willard also claims the distinctiveness of this conduct book written for women by a woman. Noting that a 'distinguished man [unnamed] said of it, this is "a veritable hand-book of noble living"', Willard insists that:

we have here a unique volume, quite unlike those that men have written on the same theme for our behoof. To be sure it draws anew the 'sphere of woman,' but makes the circle thereof large as the equator; nay, immense as the ecliptic; or, to be still more accurate, limitless as the sidereal heavens. ... This is a book that could not have been written save on the threshold of the twentieth century. Individuality, balanced and benignant, as the prerequisite to successfully fulfilling all of life's sacred relationships and solemn trusts, is the basis of its argument.[52]

Cobbe's determination to use a conduct book form is compelling in a number of ways. Certainly, the genre, which arguably reached its fullest flowering in the 1840s, is a link back to Cobbe's formative years as a young woman living on her father's estate just outside Dublin. Though Cobbe makes clear in her autobiography that such conduct books would not have formed the staple of her own reading, they would certainly have been known to her. The complex interplay between this older text form and the content of Cobbe's remarks is vital to understanding the particular intervention she is making. Certainly, the kind of woman who would theoretically emerge out of a complicit yielding to or engagement with conduct book teaching is the object of feminist analysis in the period between 1861 and the time of Cobbe's lecture series. But, just as we can read the lectures and book as a reclamation of conventionally domestic feminine spheres of influence to the feminist cause, so too can we see Cobbe reclaiming an earlier textual form strongly associated with that traditional sphere for the ends of feminism. Cobbe's use of the form speaks to her particular ability as a feminist writer, whose work appeared regularly in the established non-feminist press, to adapt available textual forms for feminist ends.[53] The move is analogous to the movement of feminists who sought to reclaim the New Woman by recasting the meaning of her behaviour alongside naming behaviours not ordinarily associated with that figure as New Womanish. Here the conduct book, with its attention to women's domestic duties, is rewritten as a genre

for feminists, in which women's domestic activity is claimed for its feminist meaning. The move anticipates, in some sense, the 'Suffragettes at Home' photograph series published in *The Vote* between March and May 1910 (discussed in this issue by Maroula Joannou) that also reclaim the home as a site for meaningful feminist practice. In this comparison we can see the value of the conduct book form in appealing to those women who might not identify as feminists, just as *The Vote's* photographic series was used, at least partially, to combat anti-suffrage smears of the suffragette as slattern.

The final figure in Cobbe's trilogy of women is what we might call the 'true feminist', represented in *Duties of Women* primarily by Cobbe herself. Authorising her own argument on who and what represent feminism is Cobbe's own stature and position, her own being, as a successful feminist writer. Carefully and casually placed along the argument's way in *Duties of Women* are innumerable references to Cobbe's own writing on women's issues, her involvement in various reform campaigns. Cobbe refers to her work over a twenty-year career on, variously, women's health, women's legal status, wife torture, marriage as a contract, the education of women, women's religious duty, heteropathy (hatred and cruelty directed towards the suffering of others), vivisection and duties to animals more broadly. It is, in other words, Cobbe's own display of emancipated womanhood – her unimpeachable public reputation as a respected fighter for the cause – that grounds Cobbe's analysis and judgement of other women. She speaks as a woman well known, admired, an old-timer who aims for the remembered phrase, and who claims to be counted amongst the figures of feminism to be remembered. And she ends her lecture series with an appeal to the authority – philosophic, political, social, generational – of her public stature. She notes:

I spent many a day and many a long night studying the science of ethics, and learning what the greatest minds of all ages have thought about it, years before many of you, here present, were born, and in years when you, who are my contemporaries, were perhaps more naturally engaged in dancing and playing, and thinking of love and marriage ...[54]

Cobbe hopes that, as a philosopher of ethics, she has 'succeeded in leading you [her audience] to think a little more *distinctly* than you have hitherto done on this great subject, and induced you to bring your more or less vague impressions into shape, and to test them by the larger principles of morality'.[55]

Despite the valorising of her own stature, and the near castigatory reproach to her audience, the status of Cobbe's feminism is also vulnerable to misrecognition. She is aware that, at this moment of transition, her own place in that history is an uncertain one, and takes precautions to secure it. The preface to *Duties of Women*, which sounds the clarion call to see

women's scrupulous practice of their moral autonomy as feminism, and is prepared to jettison the suffrage in the necessary pursuit of this feminist goal, also contains a clarification of Cobbe's status as a feminist activist. Though her purpose in delivering and publishing these lectures is one she knows will 'become sufficiently apparent as the reader proceeds', she wants also 'to avoid the risk of any possible misconstruction' [56] of her views. What follows is a plain declaration of Cobbe's involvement and support with 'nearly all the movement in England for the advancement of women'. [57] Her audience at the lecture series itself seems to have been strongly supportive of her pronouncements, if the evidence from Cobbe's autobiography can be trusted. Cobbe's *Life* is characteristically sparing with details about this lecture series, as with so many experiences in her life. She tells us simply that her 'auditors were very attentive and sympathetic, and altogether the task was made very pleasant' [58] for her. But the preface attached to the publication of those lectures indicates, perhaps, that there was something in the week's proceedings after all, something risky in the uncertain embrace of suffrage in her text, that required the unambivalent avowal of feminism it represents.

Duties of Women tells us that the place of suffrage in what 'counts' as feminism is very much up for debate in 1881, and that one can argue in the name of feminism for a kind of conduct that many feminists would reject as insufficient. *Duties of Women* is a feminist text that issues warnings, evaluates behaviours and agitates for the appropriate display of emancipation in order to maintain the viability of women's fight for the vote. It is also a claim for inclusion and for relevance from a figure whose position as a working journalist on the border between nineteenth-century feminist communities and the wider non-feminist public, to which she addressed a substantial proportion of her feminist writing, means that she is particularly attentive to the shifts in meaning of political actors and acts when they move across that border to circulate beyond the immediate control of feminism itself. [59] Cobbe's *Duties of Women* is an attempt – a highly successful one in terms of sales and readership – to control the slipperiness of meaning that the emancipated woman could have in her culture, to patrol the dangers that such messiness might mean to the successful attainment of a specific political goal, by training the category of the 'feminist' or emancipated woman into avenues of expression and comportment that she finds acceptable and politically safe in a time of transition.

An emphasis on Cobbe's particular location within nineteenth-century feminism by no means suggests that she did not have a vital place in, and strong connection to, the feminist networks of friendship, committees and

social groups that, for historians of Victorian feminism like Philippa Levine, characterise the mid-Victorian movement.[60] Indeed, *Duties of Women* can also be read as a report back to headquarters, a reconnoitring look at what strategies need to be in place to respond to the assortment of ‘enemies’ – false feminists and self-declared opponents – beyond the battle lines by someone long accustomed to a place at the front line.

Sandra Stanley Holton writes, in *Suffrage Days*, of the ‘alternative dynamics’ of suffrage movement that a refocusing of the historical eye produces, and urges us to attend to the variety of stories, patterns, and dynamics of this, as of all, historical moments.[61] In many ways, the challenge of Cobbe’s *Duties of Women* is the alternative dynamics of genre and audience; namely, the kinds of places we, as contemporary literary and historical scholars, look for feminism. The range of suffrage texts is generous: pamphlets, speeches, committee minutes, plays, memorials, government petitions, letters, autobiography, journalism and novels. The ‘conduct book’ as feminist or suffrage genre requires more of a stretch. And yet, I would argue that *Duties of Women* is precisely that: a feminist conduct book, advocating a range of practices and behaviours, put forward precisely when the suffrage begins its emergence as the key feminist goal. For its author, that period of transition necessitates the careful display of liberated womanhood, and for us as contemporary readers, requires an understanding of the many faces or appearances of feminism.

Notes

- [1] Frances Power Cobbe (1881 Authorized Edition) *Duties of Women*, p. 22 (London: Williams & Norgate).
- [2] Management of the ‘public face of feminism’ is not limited to ‘mainstream’ spaces, though it is important to heed the shifting contours of established and ‘feminist’ spaces as the press undergoes rapid expansion in the latter quarter of the century. In this issue, Lucy Delap and Maroula Joannou discuss the fervour that arose about the term ‘feminism’ in response to the 1911 publication of *The Freewoman*, Dora Marsden’s self-consciously provocative periodical. For a discussion of Cobbe’s work in the mainstream press of the 1870s, see S. Hamilton (2001) Making History with Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian feminism, domestic violence and the language of imperialism, *Victorian Studies*, 43, pp. 437-460.
- [3] Barbara Caine (1992) *Victorian Feminists*, p. 133 (London: Oxford).
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 114. Histories of feminism that define ‘feminism’ primarily through the suffrage agitation are themselves opening up. See particularly Maroula Joannou in this issue.
- [6] Cobbe’s concern with how the demand for suffrage looks to non-feminists was consistent throughout her long political career. Writing in 1884 to the

American *Woman's Tribune*, Cobbe notes that '[t]he idea that the possession of political rights will destroy "womanliness", absurd as it may seem to us, is very deeply rooted in the minds of men; ... these fears are futile and faithless, but there is nothing in them to affront us. To remove them, we must not use violent words, for every such violent word confirms their fears; but, on the contrary, show the world that while the revolutions wrought by men have been full of bitterness and rancour ... we women will at least strive to accomplish our great emancipation calmly and by persuasion and reason'. Quoted in Frances Power Cobbe (1894) *Life of Frances Power Cobbe: By Herself*, p. 217 (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Company).

- [7] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 11, emphases in original.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- [10] *Ibid.* Barbara Caine notes that the letter came from Hengwrt, North Wales where Cobbe moved in 1884. Caine also notes that Cobbe's interest here in the Primrose League is unusual: 'what exactly she thought the Primrose League would do to help in the gaining of suffrage [is unclear]. Although some Tory leaders supported women's suffrage, the party as a whole certainly did not - but presumably keeping Gladstone out of office was enough ... she was at odds even with the very broad beliefs which underlay the League'. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 127.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 25.
- [13] See Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*, p. 549, for Cobbe's minimal account of the event.
- [14] Cobbe's text was reprinted many times, with three English editions and eight American editions.
- [15] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 150.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

- [28] Ibid., p. 48. See Frances Power Cobbe (1869) 'The Final Cause of Woman', in Josephine Butler (Ed.) *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, pp. 1-26 (London: Macmillan).
- [29] Ibid., p. 83.
- [30] Ibid., p. 88.
- [31] Ibid., pp. 145-146. Cobbe's concern for the family pet must also be placed within the larger context of her involvement in the nineteenth-century antivivisection movement (of which she was the acknowledged leader) and her animal welfare work more broadly. In particular, this practical caution speaks to late nineteenth-century concerns about 'hydropathy', the rabid animal's aversion to water. Women's domestic work is, in this context, politically vital at the most mundane level.
- [32] Ibid., p. 148.
- [33] Ibid., p. 151.
- [34] Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 109.
- [35] Cobbe's 'philanthropic feminism', in which privileged women speak on behalf of their oppressed sisters, participates in an agreed upon strategy in the mid-Victorian movement. See Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 106.
- [36] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 181, emphasis in original.
- [37] Ibid., p. 65.
- [38] Ibid., p. 68.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] Ibid., p. 64.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Ibid., p. 66.
- [43] Ibid., p. 135.
- [44] Ibid.
- [45] Ibid., pp. 135-136, emphasis in original.
- [46] Ibid., p. 178, emphasis in original.
- [47] Cobbe made something of a career grappling with Eliza Lynn Linton's 'Girl of the Period' essays, gleefully rewriting Linton's anti-feminist caricature of an emancipated woman as the figure of woman disfigured by narrow domestic concerns. Cobbe's previous exchanges with Linton form a vital part of the background to her strategies in *Duties of Women*, though that exchange is too large for the scope of the present article.
- [48] Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 140.
- [49] See Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, chapter 2, for a discussion of the productive relationship between Victorian feminisms and Victorian domestic ideology.
- [50] Frances Power Cobbe (1887, Eighth American Edition) *Duties of Women*, Library for Local Unions Series No. 1, p. 6 (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publication Association).

- [51] Ibid.
- [52] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
- [53] Cobbe's work writing second-leaders in the London evening *Echo* from 1868 to 1875 similarly uses an available textual form, the newspaper editorial, to argue feminist positions.
- [54] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 192.
- [55] Ibid., emphasis in original. Caine notes that Cobbe's self-identity as a philosopher meant that she saw herself as able to write in very broad terms about women's nature, their social roles and responsibilities. She also notes that some contemporaries saw Cobbe as a feminist thinker too: 'excepting John Stuart Mill, she has done more than anyone else to give the dignity of principle to the women's movement'. Walter Lewin (1894) *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*, *Academy*, 46, p. 321, quoted in Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 105.
- [56] Cobbe, *Duties of Women*, p. 5.
- [57] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
- [58] Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*, p. 549.
- [59] Angela John's article on Evelyn Sharp in this special issue is a valuable counterpoint to Cobbe's experience writing for the non-feminist press. It is also an important reminder that the space on the threshold between feminist and non-feminist communities undergoes profound shifts in political and cultural meaning in the period from 1863, when Cobbe first starts writing, to Sharp's own journalism for *The Nation* and the *Manchester Guardian* and other papers in the first decade of the twentieth century.
- [60] Philippa Levine (1987) *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900* (London: Hutchinson Education).
- [61] Sandra Stanley Holton (1996) *Suffrage Days: stories from the suffrage movement* (London: Routledge).

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