

By Lynda Mugglestone

In 1903, the motto “Deeds not Words” was adopted by [Emmeline Pankhurst](#) as the slogan of the new Women’s Social and Political Union. This aimed above all to secure women the vote, but it marked a deliberate departure in the methods to be used. Over fifty years of peaceful campaigning had brought no change to women’s rights in this respect; drastic action was, Emmeline decided, now called for. The “deeds” encouraged by the WSPU, such as stone-throwing, arson, window-breaking, and parliamentary deputations, would all be widely reported over the ensuing years. In the collective memory, it was however not deeds but words — and one word, *suffragette*, in particular — which came to epitomise this period and its aims.

MEMORANDUM.

Special attention is drawn to the undermentioned SUFFRAGETTES, who have committed damage to public art treasures, and who may at any time again endeavour to perpetrate similar outrages.

Mary Richardson (S/168429), age 31, height 5ft. 5½in., complexion pale, hair and eyes brown.

Damaged, with a chopper, a valuable oil painting in the National Gallery and has several times been convicted of breaking valuable plate glass windows.

At the present time is out of prison, but is required to stand her trial for arson.



MARY RICHARDSON.



CATHERINE WILSON.

Catherine Wilson (5753-14), age 31, height 5ft. 1in., complexion sallow, hair brown, eyes grey.

Is now out of prison, but is required to stand her trial for maliciously damaging, with a chopper, exhibits in the British Museum. Has been twice convicted of breaking plate glass windows and once for being found on enclosed premises for an unlawful purpose—found in the House of Commons in male attire with a riding whip in her coat pocket.

-ette and the conflicts of meaning

Suffragette neatly evokes the conflicted history of this time. If some women (and men) campaigned for the female right to vote, others campaigned against it. Even among those who supported female suffrage, there could be marked divides. First used in the *Daily Mail* in 1906, *suffragette* was not only new but a deliberate (and deliberately negative) coinage, intended to divide the *suffragists*, whose campaigns remained peaceful, from those who, as Pankhurst urged, should henceforth adopt more ‘militant’ methods. *Suffragette*, as a compound of *suffrage* (“The casting of a vote, voting; the exercise of a right to vote,” as the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) would confirm) plus the suffix *-ette*, was by no means complimentary. On one hand, *-ette* was a diminutive and was often seen as trivialising in intent, as well as distinctly patronizing; a *lecturette* (first used in 1867) was “a short lecture,” a *meteorette* “a small shooting star.” Both were very different from their non-diminutive counterparts.

-Ette had moreover another meaning which had become familiar in recent years. This, as in *leatherette*, first used in 1880 and *cashmerette*, used in 1886, signalled the idea of imperfect imitation, as well as inauthenticity. As a result, just as *leatherette* was a fake version of leather, so too, by implication, were the *suffragettes* ‘fake’ — and profoundly improper — versions of the *suffragists*. Densely polysemous, *-ette* was also starting to emerge as a specifically female suffix, a use which can be seen in forms such as *poetette*. Defined as “A young or minor poet; (sometimes esp.) a young female poet” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this already indicates the transitions at work, as the diminutive shades into the specifically female — a semantic development which was undoubtedly aided by the prominence of *suffragette* itself. Here too, notions of true and false, norm and other, intervene. ‘True’ women, as [anti-suffrage writers](#) regularly stressed, would never engage in militant activities of this kind. “*Woman—or suffragette?*” the writer Marie Corelli demanded in 1907. One could not, at least in anti-suffrage rhetoric of this kind, be both.

Lashing the wind

Trying to control meaning, as [Samuel Johnson](#) long ago affirmed in his *Dictionary* of 1755, is, however, rather like trying “to lash the wind.” One might feel better, but little result will be achieved. *Suffragette*, in fact, offers a precise illustration of Johnson’s point. Intended as a term of derision, it was nevertheless swiftly appropriated by the *suffragettes* themselves. Rather than a mark of stigmatization, it became a positive badge of identity — of shared aims and aspirations. A magazine was launched, named *The Suffragette* (copies of which were often left at sites of militant activity). In 1911, [Sylvia Pankhurst](#) published a history of the campaign so far. She called it *The Suffragette: the History of the Women’s Militant Suffrage Movement, 1905-1910*. Even the pronunciation could be hijacked for positive ends. Writing in the *Observer* in 1906, Lady Hugh Bell stressed the genuine appropriacy of the word. The dismissive *-ette* could, she argued, be converted into *-gette*, conveying not powerlessness but the “jet of enthusiasm” which united action for the vote across the land. It was also “feminine enough,” she noted — “a fine flowing word.” The Pankhursts suggested another version by which *-gette* was to be pronounced ‘get’ — succinctly indicating the *suffragettes*’ determination to ‘get the vote’ on equal terms with men.

Acts of definition

Whether dictionaries can ever capture this complexity of meaning is an interesting question. “A female supporter of the cause of women’s political enfranchisement, *esp.* one of a violent or ‘militant’ type,” wrote Charles Onions, defining this word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1915. A single pronunciation appears in the accompanying transcription. One suspects that, had the Pankhursts been asked to define this word, it

would have been very different. As the opening of Pankhurst's *The Suffragette* extolled: "the adventurous and resourceful daring of the young suffragettes who, by climbing up on roofs, by sliding down through skylights, by hiding under platforms, constantly succeeded in asking their endless questions, has never been excelled." "Instantly the crowd roared, "Votes for Women!" — "Three cheers for the Suffragettes!"

Emmeline Pankhurst's 1914 *My Own Story* records, here describing events in 1907. Words, then as now, can mean different things to different people. Point of view can influence the act of meaning, in dictionaries as well as outside them. Were the suffragettes brave, or foolhardy? Courageous or 'violent'? Women or suffragettes — or, of course, both?

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