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## **‘Parliament as viewed through a woman’s eyes: gender and space in the nineteenth-century Commons’.**

Sarah Richardson

### **Abstract**

*The nineteenth-century House of Commons is traditionally viewed as a masculine space overlooking the presence of female tourists, waitresses, housekeepers, servants, spectators, and residents. This article demonstrates that, even when formally excluded from the Commons, women were determined to colonise spaces to witness debates. In the pre-1834 Commons they created their own observation gallery in an attic high above the Chamber, peeping through a light-fitting to listen to Parliamentary sessions. After 1834 they were accommodated in their own galleries in the temporary and new House of Commons growing increasingly assertive and protective of their rights to attend debates and participate in parliamentary political culture. Far from being exclusive male, Parliament was increasingly viewed through women’s eyes.*

**Keywords:** gender, parliament, Commons, Ladies’ Gallery, women, politics, space

On Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> January 1885, Irish Fenians carried out the most audacious attack on the Houses of Parliament since the gunpowder plot nearly two hundred and eighty years earlier. Luke Dillon and Roger O’Neil, so-called ‘dynamitards’, joined other members of the public visiting the Palace of Westminster, successfully setting off two cakes of dynamite near the Commons’ Chamber and in Westminster Hall.<sup>1</sup> The first bomb exploded undetected in the Commons just after 2 p.m. but, thanks to the vigilance of the public and the police, the device in Westminster Hall was

identified and was being removed before exploding, wounding two policemen and Edwin Green, a civil servant. The key eye-witness to the Westminster Hall events was Green's sister-in-law, an Irish woman, Miss Davies. Her dramatic account of the moment of the explosion was published by the *Pall Mall Gazette* the following Monday:

My sister and I were just outside the gates, and we fell together into the hole caused by the explosion... When we recovered from the force of the shock we could see nothing. It was pitch dark. Dust was flying about the Hall, and it was several minutes before it was light enough to distinguish anything... Mrs. Green and I lost our bonnets, muffs, and bags, and I had my skirt torn from my waist. My sister and I were covered with dirt, and my sealskin tippet was blown to pieces.<sup>2</sup>

A couple of weeks later, a new periodical was launched aimed at 'women of education.'<sup>3</sup> The *Lady*, founded by *Vanity Fair* proprietor, Thomas Gibson Bowles, devoted its opening editorial on the disruption caused to lady visitors to Parliament by the Fenian bombing campaign, railing against the new 'police instructions' regulating visitors to the House and concluding that 'I am not at all sure that I would not prefer the remote risk of dynamite.'<sup>4</sup>

The daring escapades of the Fenians had drawn the attention of the Parliamentary authorities to the many and diverse visitors to Parliament in this period, and in particular the presence of women as visitors, such as Miss Davies and Mrs Green, or observers in the Ladies' Gallery like the female columnist in the *Lady* who soon had a regular feature entitled 'From the Ladies' Gallery'. Although the parliamentary authorities attempted to bring in more regulatory control of visitors, this was

challenged and rebuffed by the women and some of their supporters in the Commons. The phenomenon was nothing new. Women had always been present in the nineteenth-century Houses of Parliament, as tourists, waitresses, housekeepers, servants, spectators, and residents, challenging the idea of the institution as wholly masculine. Although one historian, Claire Eustance, asserted that 'Parliament before 1918 was an exclusively male environment', in fact, parliament had regularly been viewed through women's eyes throughout the preceding century.<sup>5</sup>

Much attention has been given to the encroachments of the militant women's suffrage activists into Parliamentary spaces in the early twentieth century with an indication that these were the first efforts of women to challenge the idea that the Commons should be a male only space.<sup>6</sup> There were certainly high profile examples: Emily Wilding Davison hiding in a ventilation shaft; Muriel Matters chaining herself to the grille in the Ladies' Gallery; and Annie Cobden-Sanderson standing on seats to deliver her protest in Central Hall.<sup>7</sup> However, although suffrage campaigners, like the Fenians before them, targeted the institution of Parliament to ensure their protests received maximum publicity, the female invasion and occupation of parliamentary space had begun much earlier. This article will argue that, once women regained a foothold in the House of Commons, and were able to witness Parliamentary debates, they successfully resisted all efforts to curtail their attendance, and indeed, grew increasingly assertive of their rights as the century progressed.

### **Their own spectators' gallery: women and the Ventilator**

Things did not look so promising at the opening of the nineteenth century. Women had been excluded from the Commons since 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1778 when, as was common when MPs wanted to debate in private, a call was made for the House to be

cleared of strangers. However, on this occasion once male visitors had departed, the galleries were completely filled with women, including the Speaker's wife, Grace Norton. Captain George Johnstone then called for the House to be cleared of *all* Strangers, which was achieved after some considerable effort and a long delay in the proceedings of the Commons.<sup>8</sup> The role of the Speaker and his wife is significant. The Speaker, as well as presiding over debates, controlled all aspects of the administration of the Commons. He had the authority to admit or refuse admission to visitors and to order public galleries to be cleared. He, his wife and children, lived within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster and he was ultimately in charge of all parliamentary space.<sup>9</sup> Initially, following the open rebellion by women who refused to leave the Commons, the Speaker took a hard line, issuing a rule excluding them from the House. However, many powerful and well-connected women continued to lobby for admittance and there is some evidence that they ignored the regulations and continued to attend debates in the Commons either openly, or by masquerading as men. For example, Charles Moritz, a Prussian pastor and travel writer noted that in 1782 visitors to the galleries of the Commons included 'not unfrequently, ladies.'<sup>10</sup> The legal historian William Charles Townsend, who wrote a multi-volume history of the Commons, also commented on reports of women such as the Duchess of Gordon and Mrs Sheridan sitting in the Strangers' galleries dressed as men.<sup>11</sup> Margaretta Grey, cousin of the Whig leader, Earl Grey, was reputedly so disgusted at finding she was not allowed to attend Parliament that she made it a custom to obtain admission by dressing as a boy.<sup>12</sup> There continued to be a large number of women of high rank and status, often wives and daughters of Members, who wanted to visit the Commons, with a growing number of MPs and

officials who wished to exclude them. John Hatsell, clerk to the Commons in the late eighteenth century, summarised the problem:

...ladies, many of the highest rank, have made very powerful efforts to be again admitted. But Mr Cornwall, and the present Speaker, Mr Addington, have as constantly declined to permit them to come in. Indeed was this privilege allowed to any one individual, however high her rank, or respectable her character and manners, the galleries must soon be opened to all women, who, from curiosity, amusement, or any other motive, wish to hear Debates. And this, to the exclusion of many young men, and of merchants and others, whose commercial interests render their attendance necessary to them, and of real use and importance to the publick.<sup>13</sup>

The terms of debate were thus set. Women were singled out by some parliamentary officials, MPs and commentators as unsuitable visitors to the Commons on the grounds of propriety but also because they may take up spaces which should properly be given to men whose attendance at debates was considered necessary and important. Although women were officially barred from the Commons they continued to be allowed to view the Lords, first from behind the curtains either side of the throne and later in a new gallery designed by Sir John Soane in the 1820s.<sup>14</sup> This distinction between the Lords and the Commons persisted throughout the nineteenth century reflecting the greater ceremonial function of the Lords and perhaps the increasing status of the Commons as the legislating chamber.<sup>15</sup>

However, the pressure by women to attend the Commons persisted, in spite of the Speaker's definitive ruling. Therefore, at some point in the early nineteenth century a compromise was reached. A limited number of women were permitted to attend the House and listen to debates in what became known as the Ventilator or Lantern – a small attic space high above the chamber.<sup>16</sup> The exact date that women visitors started to utilise the attic space is unclear. Sarah Grand, in an interview she gave to the *Humanitarian* in 1896 implied that Elizabeth Fry was the first woman to be permitted to listen to debates there:

...there was quite a storm of opposition when she modestly asked to be permitted to listen to a debate in the House of Commons arising out of the prison reforms of which she was the initiator.

Yes, I remember, and as a last resort she asked to be allowed to listen outside one of the ventilators of the House, and the country squires were up in arms, and said that it would crush the fabric of domestic life if it came to the ears of their wives and daughters that a woman had listened to a Parliamentary debate, even through a ventilator.<sup>17</sup>

Fry attended Parliament and gave testimony to an enquiry on prisons in the City of London on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1818 and, if Sarah Grand's recollection is correct, this is the most likely occasion that she visited the Ventilator to listen to debates.<sup>18</sup> There is corroborating evidence that women were able to access this space in 1818 from the diary of Lady Frances Shelley.<sup>19</sup> Just a couple of months later, on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1818, Lady Shelley, a confidante of leading politicians including Brougham and Wellington, was invited by Brougham to the House to listen to discussions on the Alien Bill.

Permission for her to go to the Ventilator had to be obtained from the Serjeant-at-Arms, Colonel Seymour, who managed the attendance of male visitors to the Strangers' Gallery. Lady Shelley was escorted to the space in the roof of St Stephen's Chapel by the parliamentary caterer, John Bellamy:

I found myself in a room about eight feet square, resembling the cabin of a ship. There was a window to admit air, two chairs, a table, and a thing like a chimney in the centre. This was the ventilator, which opens into the body of the House of Commons. Through it, the sound ascends so perfectly that, with attention, not a word is lost.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, it is clear that women's use of the Ventilator was not a common occurrence. Indeed, Lady Shelley noted that later she was quizzed at a party on her 'secret expedition – for it is not an acknowledged thing to go to the House, although it is suspected that Lady Jersey has done it on some great occasion.'<sup>21</sup> However, by the 1820s, women's presence in the Commons was being routinely reported by the newspapers. For example, the *Morning Chronicle* noted in 1822 that, 'it was no uncommon occurrence for a party of ladies, from seven to ten in number, to be assembled in this elevated station, chiefly around the centre Ventilator, over the chandelier, to hear the debates.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the reporter even acknowledged the space as the 'Ladies' Gallery.' A few years later, *The Times* expressed surprise at women's determination to attend debates in such inhospitable surroundings: 'They sit in a shabby room over the chamber when the debate is going on, seeing nothing and hearing imperfectly through the holes of the ceiling ventilators, inhaling the steam of an intensely-heated atmosphere, and scarcely recompensed for their



disagreeable sufferings by one eloquent or witty sentence in the course of a long evening...'.<sup>23</sup>

But, in spite of the discomfort, women persisted in visiting the Ventilator to attend debates. Entry was restricted to the family and friends of MPs. Tickets were issued to MPs by the Serjeant-at-Arms and then passed onto female visitors. There were frequently ballots for the twenty-five tickets (although there were only sixteen places able to view the Commons chamber) available each night particularly for important debates such as those on Parliamentary Reform. One paper, reporting on female attendance at the discussion on Catholic Emancipation, commented that, 'so anxious was the Duchess of Richmond to secure a good place, that her Grace "took her seat" by half past two o'clock, an hour and a half before the meeting of the House!'<sup>24</sup> By 1832, the Ventilator had become so well known that *The Court Magazine, or Belle Assemblée* aimed at a female readership and edited by Caroline Norton, ran a series of four articles entitled 'Evenings in the Ventilator', a forerunner of the later feature in the *Lady*. The writer, identified as 'S.' (possibly Caroline's mother, Caroline Sheridan), represented herself as a seasoned observer of Commons debates, comparing what she described as the halcyon days of Burke and Fox with the less eloquent speakers of the 1830s. She painted a vivid picture of the female space in the attic above the Commons' chamber. As one article made clear, in the early days of the Ventilator, women had clear access to the sights and sounds of the Commons by sitting around the iron work that supported the brass chandeliers bringing light to the House. However, as they were wont to disturb proceedings by their chatter and even, on occasion, as the author of the piece admitted, throwing objects down to

attract the attention of the MPs below, they were '*built out*' of an unobstructed view on the orders of a furious Speaker:

... a circular shed of sixteen sides or panels, protects the spot sacred to the memory of Bankes and my comb, and a small oblong square aperture in every panel serves to admit the heads of sixteen anxious females who creep, unseen and unheard, to see and hear - and do their best to stifle the voice of the House of Commons, by preventing its members from breathing freely. Green baize benches surround the shed, and afford repose to the wearied forms of dowagers and damsels...<sup>25</sup>

A sketch of the space just before the Commons burnt down in 1834, drawn by Frances Rickman, daughter of the Clerk Assistant in the Commons, corroborates this depiction. Her drawing demonstrates that the 'shed' served to make listening to and observing debates most uncomfortable, as the women had to lean through the small windows cut into the structure. In 1822, in a letter to her friend, Sophy Ruxton, Maria Edgeworth elaborated upon the problems that women faced in viewing the chamber:

In the middle of the garret is what seemed like a sentry-box of deal boards and old chairs placed round it: on these we got and stood and peeped over the top of the boards. Saw a large chandelier with lights blazing, immediately below: a grating of iron across veiled the light so we could look down and beyond it: we saw half the table with the mace lying on it and papers, and by peeping hard two figures of clerks at the further end, but no eye could see the Speaker or his chair, - only his feet; his voice and terrible "ORDER" was soon

heard. We could see part of the Treasury Bench and the Opposition in their places, - the tops of their heads, profiles, and gestures perfectly.<sup>26</sup>

As Maria Edgeworth's report made clear, the space was uninviting, poorly lit, and filled with rubbish and debris. Yet she ends her account by comparing the Commons favourably with the French Chamber of Deputies and concluding that the visit 'surpassed our expectations'. By making the environment as inconvenient and unattractive as possible, the Commons' officials hoped that female visitors would lose interest and concede their right to attend debates. However, women of all ranks and status were not deterred, many adopting affectionate nicknames for the space. Lady Shelley called it her '*soupirail*' and Harriet Grote, the 'Lantern'.<sup>27</sup> As the series of articles by 'S.' demonstrates, there was an immense appetite to listen to political debate by women with connections to MPs. She devotes much space to discussing the debating styles of different MPs including Peel, Stanley, Althorp, Russell and Brougham, confirming 'though we hear well, we do not see in the Ventilator'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, there are many accounts detailing both the content, rhetorical style and mode of delivery of speeches by key MPs. Unless members were particularly quiet, mumbled, or had speech impediments, women spectators appeared to have no trouble in listening to debates – indeed it was primarily this that attracted them to attend. Elizabeth Wedgwood writing to her aunt, Jessie Sismondi, is but one example: 'Macaulay's speech on the Reform Bill almost made me cry with admiration, and I expect his speech on so much more interesting a subject to be the finest thing that ever was heard.'<sup>29</sup> Her sister, Fanny Allen, was equally enthusiastic about an address by Brougham, 'He spoke for an hour and 10 or 20 minutes, and it

was the most incomparable thing I ever heard. I could have screamed and jumped with delight.’<sup>30</sup>

It should also be noted that there were more frivolous reasons for visiting the Ventilator. It was a good place to see and be seen. Accounts by Lady Shelley and ‘S.’ confirm that MPs would often come up to the Ventilator to speak to the ladies present. Therefore, although it tended to be female *managed*, it was not a woman-only space. As with all aspects of Commons’ procedure, the Speaker was ultimately in charge and thus, in the Ventilator, the Speaker’s wife took precedence. Ellen Manners Sutton, the Speaker’s wife, attended debates on Catholic Emancipation on two occasions in 1829. The first time she processed through the lobby of the Commons accompanied by her train bearer, but that was considered too ostentatious for what was still a semi-official space. So, on the second visit, she came by carriage to the entrance in Old Palace Yard, but, as a reporter on a local paper pointed out, as she was still attended by the train bearer, she attracted a considerable amount of attention.<sup>31</sup> However, the Speaker himself did not acknowledge women’s presence in the Ventilator and rules such as clearing the galleries of Strangers were not applied to them. Hence, the regular attendees of the space were always concerned that their access would be removed. After the last sitting of the unreformed House of Commons in December 1831, ‘S.’ tabled her last bulletin for *The Court* magazine, expressing both anticipation and anxiety for the future:

Shall I be able again to occupy my seat in the Ventilator? Will the sternness of new members insist upon our stricter exclusion; or, imitating the gallantry of

the other house, will it admit us to see, and what many of us love better to be seen? I have sat out this session in my hiding place, certainly “far above the great,” and I shall hope to be at the first evening of the next; when I may give such readers as are not tired of me some account of the new members. With what solicitude I shall hear the new voice from the chair call upon the member for Birmingham or Leeds... it is most unlikely that six hundred and fifty eight men of education sent there by fifteen millions of Englishmen, will not furnish much variety of information, and a large fund of entertainment to sixteen ladies in the Ventilator.<sup>32</sup>

### **Formally not part of the Commons: the Ladies’ Gallery**

Ultimately, it was not the newly elected MPs that put an end to the Ventilator but the fire that swept through Parliament on the night of 16 October 1834 that destroyed much of the Palace of Westminster. The influential women who had populated the attic space were keen that they should continue to be accommodated in any new building. In 1835, their cause was taken up by the flamboyant MP George Fitzhardinge Grantley Berkeley. He successfully pushed through a motion for a select committee to be established to consider whether there should be a Ladies Gallery in the new House of Commons. The committee met in July 1835 but no women provided evidence. The only witnesses were Walter Watts, a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*, Sir Robert Smirke, the noted architect who was working on the Parliamentary estate in the aftermath of the fire, and rather bizarrely, John Bellamy, the parliamentary caterer. Unsurprisingly, Watts’s evidence focused almost entirely on the experience of reporters in the old House of Commons, with hardly any reference to the proposed Ladies Gallery. Smirke provided a detailed plan for the

gallery, which was to be positioned at the end of the Strangers' Gallery, partitioned off, and with its own staircase. Bellamy's testimony focused on the impossibility of women using the existing staircase to access the proposed gallery. The Committee eventually resolved that 'a portion of the Strangers' Gallery at the North end of the House, not exceeding a quarter of the whole, and capable of containing 24 ladies, be set apart for their accommodation, divided by a partition from the rest of the Gallery, and screened in front by an open trellis work.'<sup>33</sup> Regulations were also devised detailing the process by which women could gain entry via tickets issued to MPs. Although women did not give direct evidence, they quickly made public their desire to establish a subscription to buy a commemorative piece of silver plate for Grantley Berkeley in recognition of his championing their cause.<sup>34</sup>

There continued to be considerable resistance to the construction of an official Ladies Gallery in the new House of Commons. Although Berkeley had succeeded in incorporating a design for the gallery into the plans for the new House of Commons, opponents staged several attempts to sabotage its construction. For example, in August 1836, there was a motion to grant the £400 needed to build the Ladies Gallery. A number of leading parliamentarians, including Lord Palmerston and Sir John Hobhouse, reiterated arguments against admitting women to attend and observe parliamentary proceedings including that it was indecorous, opened women up to the horrors of political partisanship and that it was a continental practice (that is, French) and therefore to some extent 'unEnglish'. Hobhouse argued that he had assumed the original vote on Berkeley's proposals had been a joke.<sup>35</sup> Even the Speaker, James Abercromby, spoke against, asserting that he had not had an opportunity to put his own viewpoint but that he was decidedly against. This is in spite of previous Speakers tacitly allowing women to use the Ventilator as an

alternative ladies gallery. The motion to authorise a grant to build the gallery was defeated by 14 votes. The *York Herald* went so far as to allege that the vote against was 'intended to check the too great indulgence of female curiosity!!'<sup>36</sup> A further vote on a grant of supply to erect the gallery was again lost in June 1837 by 24 votes but there must have been some behind-the-scenes wrangling to ensure it was built. By May 1850, Hansard reported a debate on the new House of Commons which discussed whether the new ladies gallery situated behind the Speaker's Chair should be dismantled to provide a larger general public gallery.<sup>37</sup>

In the meantime, women were keen that they should not be excluded from attending debates in the temporary House of Commons. There was no official announcement, but a concealed compartment about twelve feet by nine feet was constructed between the Speaker's and Strangers' Galleries and was known as the Ladies' Gallery.<sup>38</sup> The *Derby Mercury* reported in 1842:

It is but little known that a small enclosure behind the strangers' gallery has been erected, "under the rose," for the accommodation of political ladies desirous of hearing the debates. A space about the breadth of a hand has been opened, through which the ladies peep totally unobserved. There is not room for more than 12 or 13 of the fairer sex, who are admitted by orders signed by Sir W. Gossett, the Sergeant-at-arms.<sup>39</sup>

The space was even less inviting than the Ventilator, was exceedingly cramped, and had hardly any view of the chamber. Yet women continued to throng to Parliament to listen to debates in spite of the best efforts of Parliamentarians to exclude them. The 'secret' nature of the temporary ladies gallery demonstrated the ambiguous nature of women's attendance at Parliament. By not acknowledging their presence and

screening them off, MPs could claim they were not an official part of the House. However, the fact that, even in the temporary Commons, a place had to be found for female visitors demonstrated women's determination to be included in parliamentary space. Women participated fully in the May 1850 trials of the new House of Commons. They were permitted to listen to the debates screened off, not by the grille which would later be erected to shield them from the chamber, but by a curtain of green gauze, giving them, as the *Morning Chronicle* reported, 'a shadowy look and cadaverous hue quite supernatural',

The gallery for ladies is a great improvement upon the pigeon holes in the old house, and the appearance of the fairer sex within the walls of the house was quite startling. However, to the superstitiously inclined, the flitting of certain dim figures across an upper gallery had a yet more awe-inspiring effect. These figures seemed as shadowy and unsubstantial as spectres, but we believe they were flesh and blood strangers, and not the ghosts of Barebone's Parliament come to revisit the glimpses of the Speaker's eye...<sup>40</sup>

The visual ethereal effect was, however, somewhat marred by women's audible presence, as they chattered excitedly in their newly constructed space.

The new House of Commons was eventually opened by Queen Victoria on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1852 and the Ladies' Gallery was rapidly established as an important space for women to participate in the political culture of the nation. Historians have tended to echo the criticisms of contemporaries, regarding the gallery as a symbol of male oppression, with Nirmal Puwar terming it 'an overcrowded, hot and suffocating



bird cage'.<sup>41</sup> Certainly, many women visitors expressed their discontent with the new gallery. Fanny Allen, who had been a regular attendee to the Ventilator, found it far inferior in terms of audibility, whilst Kate Field, an American journalist, likened it to a prison.<sup>42</sup> The heavy ornate grille placed in front of the gallery to screen the women off from the MPs in the chamber led many women to voice their disapproval. Anna Parnell wrote an article for *Celtic Monthly* subtitled 'Notes from the Ladies' Cage' commenting that, as women visitors were not visible, 'they can very easily be supposed not to exist'.<sup>43</sup> Others went further: Mabel Crawford, in a piece entitled "Purdah" in the House of Commons', viewed the latticework akin to the curtain or veil segregating physical space within Muslim households, arguing it was un-English and reduced British women to 'the low status of their sex in Oriental countries.'<sup>44</sup> This opinion was echoed by Zeyneb Hanoum, the pseudonym of a Turkish writer who exclaimed to a friend:

But my dear, why have you never told me that the Ladies' Gallery is a harem? A harem with its latticed windows! The harem of Government! How inconsistent are you English! You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, in spite of these negative opinions, what has been under appreciated by historians analysing the space is the steady build-up of female influence and confidence which ultimately led women openly to challenge Parliamentary procedures. The existence of an all-female space in the House of Commons, albeit one designed and controlled by men, assisted in the creation of a feminized political

culture nurtured and developed in this exclusive area. In fact, the Ladies' Gallery became one of the arenas identified by Martha Vicinus for activists 'claiming male space for women's purposes'.<sup>46</sup>

The new Ladies' Gallery was enthusiastically adopted by women visitors to the Commons. Tickets (or orders as they were known) had to be obtained from sitting MPs, which meant that the vast majority of attendees were the wives, daughters and friends of politicians. However, although the female audience was an exclusive one, it was also numerous. The papers regularly reported on the high number of women crowding into the gallery. The *Fife Herald* commented that Parliamentary debates 'stimulated all – male, female, and ecclesiastics – to struggle for room, sitting or standing'.<sup>47</sup> So many people wanted to attend the sessions discussing Gladstone's budget in April 1865, that the papers noted, 'It is said that every seat in the Speaker's and Ladies' Galleries and the Speaker's Ladies' Boxes was secured by promise before the recess, and that four hundred more orders are issued for the Strangers' Gallery than can possibly be accommodated.'<sup>48</sup> In fact, there were regular ballots for tickets for the gallery, leading parliamentary officials eventually to adapt the space to provide double the number of seats and a tea room for the comfort of the visitors. As noted above, the Ladies' Gallery was not the only place where women could observe parliamentary proceedings. A more exclusive vantage point was the Speaker's Gallery usually open to ambassadors and other privileged visitors. There was a corresponding Speaker's Ladies' Gallery, a sectioned off area to the west of the Ladies' Gallery which often provided much needed extra seats for women in popular debates.<sup>49</sup> The regular parliamentary columnist for *The Lady* noted that, 'Mrs. Peel, the Speaker's wife, I believe, is the presiding genius over this exclusive little nest'.<sup>50</sup> The wife of the Speaker therefore wielded immense power in

political circles and the parliamentary sketch writer, William Lucy joked that 'it is easier for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven than for any one less than an Ambassador to gain entrance into the Speakers' gallery.'<sup>51</sup> It was usually only the wives and daughters of cabinet ministers or other privileged offices who were allowed access, for example, Mrs Peel gave a seat to Catherine Gladstone so that she could listen to her husband's speech on Home Rule in 1886.<sup>52</sup> Not all visitors appreciated their honoured position. Mary Curzon, the vicereine of India regularly attended parliament when in London but resented sitting in the 'usual foul air and fussing female rows deep in the Speakers Gallery.'<sup>53</sup> However, she recognised the importance of the gallery as a place where she could influence and inform key politicians and diplomats on Indian affairs relaying evidence and opinion to her husband and civil servants. In Curzon's time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the space was even named 'Mrs Gully's Gallery' – Elizabeth Gully was the wife of the incumbent Speaker – and was frequently occupied by Miss Balfour, Lady Harcourt and Mrs Asquith.<sup>54</sup>

Between 1858 and 1878, there were parliamentary questions and debates on the Ladies' Gallery more than twenty times in the Commons. These fell into three categories: The vast majority were about the inadequacy of the accommodation; there were concerted attempts by MPs to have the grille in front of the gallery removed; and, particularly during the debates on the Contagious Diseases Acts, there was discussion on whether the Speaker had the right to remove the occupants of the gallery from listening to proceedings. The gallery itself was certainly overcrowded, stuffy and uncomfortable, with one MP likening it to the black hole of Calcutta.<sup>55</sup> The lack of a waiting room also drew comment, as women were not permitted to enter the gallery until the Commons was in session (in contrast to the

men in the Strangers' Gallery) with many women sitting on the staircase awaiting admission. When challenged, Austen Layard, the First Commissioner of Works, stated that it was not possible to open the Ladies' Gallery earlier because of the number of women who wished to attend and who would therefore arrive early to secure front row seats.<sup>56</sup> Women put pressure on the parliamentary authorities to adapt the space both directly and indirectly. The fact that the gallery was always full and that there were regular ballots for attendance meant that MPs could not claim women were disinterested in politics but women also made direct representations which were included in parliamentary debates on the space. For example, in 1858, Henry Edwards, the Conservative MP for Beverley, recounted the bitter complaints he had received from female constituents about their lack of access to the Commons due to the limited accommodation.<sup>57</sup> The fact that an MP from the north of England was receiving objections demonstrated that it was not merely small, metropolitan elites who were keen to attend the Commons.

The most heated debates regarded whether or not the grille should be removed, with MPs on both sides invoking the authority of the women who populated the gallery. Austen Layard quoted at length a letter from a regular attendee to parliament arguing that the latticework gave women privacy and seclusion meaning they could dress and act as they liked. The opinion of this one anonymous woman was repeated in subsequent debates, with MPs in favour of keeping the grille arguing that the women themselves wanted to retain it.<sup>58</sup> The most common argument put forward for the retention of the grille was that women were not officially permitted to be in the Commons and the grating therefore served to maintain the fiction that they were not present. As one of the Commissioners of Works put it, 'it would be better that the House should not be exposed to such an influence.'<sup>59</sup> MPs continued to resist the

removal of the grille, even when it was pointed out that women listened to debates in the House of Lords with unrestricted views. However, there were increasingly vociferous attempts by women themselves to pressure parliament to open up the gallery. The radical voice of suffrage activist Mabel Crawford was joined by the more measured tones of Mabel Mary Northcote, daughter of the Conservative cabinet minister, the Earl of Iddesleigh. Her informative article 'The Ladies Gallery: Parliament as viewed through a woman's eyes' was a comprehensive guide for female visitors to the House of Commons but she opened with an attack on the grille:

Why, then, should a woman, when she wishes to hear a debate in the House of Commons be relegated to a cage just under the ceiling, while man enjoys the use of a large and comfortable gallery immediately facing the Speaker? Why, too, should her charms – be they great or small – be hidden away in semi-darkness behind an elaborate grille, which makes it practically impossible to see anything unless one has the good fortune to occupy the front row?<sup>60</sup>

Their voices remained unheeded until, in 1917, a group of distinguished women, including many wives and daughters of parliamentarians, seized the initiative and presented Sir Alfred Mond, the First Commissioner of Works, with a petition from occupants of the Ladies' Gallery calling for the removal of the grille.<sup>61</sup> MPs could no longer claim that women visitors were in favour of keeping the grating, and Mond, whose own wife signed the petition, orchestrated its removal.

The final area of debate among MPs concerning the Ladies' Gallery was on the issue of whether the women were actually considered to be present in the House or not. Of course, they were literally in attendance, but the authorities, led by the

Speaker, could not acknowledge their existence, as they were not officially supposed to be there. This absurd fiction led to difficulties when MPs wished to sit in closed session. The call of 'I espy Strangers in the House' which led to the closure of the men's public gallery did not apply to the women. The matter came to a head during the debates on the Contagious Diseases Acts – a topic close to many women's hearts due to a fervent campaign coordinated by the Ladies' National Association. Many MPs argued that discussions on prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases were not ones that respectable women should be party to and tried to exclude women from the debates. In July 1876, the Speaker, Sir Henry Brand, made the official position clear after Philip Mitchell MP, spied Strangers:

I wish to point out to the hon. Member before I act upon his notice that if Strangers are excluded from the House this will not affect ladies, because the Ladies' Gallery is not supposed to be within the House. Of course, if after that intimation the hon. Member persists in calling my attention to the presence of Strangers it will be my duty to act upon the notice.<sup>62</sup>

Women themselves recognised that the existence of the grille gave them privileges not open to other visitors to the House. Anna Parnell argued that women in the privacy of the gallery had privileges denied to other visitors. Rules applied to the Strangers' Gallery such as absolute silence were not enforced in the Ladies' Gallery.<sup>63</sup> Women were also considered to be absent even though they were present. Parnell detailed a number of occasions where the House had been cleared of Strangers but the women remained, arguing that, 'it is not after all hard to understand why they so contentedly submit to imprisonment and seclusion.'<sup>64</sup>

Women were thus able to subvert what appeared to be restrictions on their access to the Commons for their own benefits and increasingly they made more open challenges by occupying or attempting to inhabit other areas of the House. For example, in 1871, Josephine Butler and Margaret Pennington managed to secure a vantage point at the entrance to the chamber to witness their petition to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts presented to the House: 'Mrs Pennington and I were allowed to stand quite at the door, almost in the House, directly facing the Ladies Gallery (which was crowded with ladies).'<sup>65</sup> In 1890, Henrietta Müller, editor of the *Women's Penny Paper*, which styled itself as 'the only paper conducted, written, and published by women', applied to be allowed a seat in the Press Gallery. Her request was turned down by the Serjeant at Arms who warned that 'the consequences were too difficult to conceive.'<sup>66</sup> Although Müller's attempt to move into the Press Gallery was thwarted, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the parliamentary authorities and MPs to maintain the fiction that women were not officially allowed in the Commons.

It was against this backdrop that the regular column, 'From the Ladies' Gallery' was published in the new magazine, the *Lady*. The editor may have taken inspiration from occasional articles written in regional newspapers introducing readers to the experience of listening to parliamentary debates from the space. For example, in 1879, the *Evening Telegraph* published 'A Letter to the Ladies (by a Lady Correspondent) In the Ladies Gallery.' Their reporter commented that she had difficulty hearing distinctly or recognising faces clearly.<sup>67</sup> The column in the *Lady* was humorous, written in the style of a parliamentary sketch, but also intended to inform with detailed synopses of debates running to over a thousand words per issue. The

comfort (or otherwise) of the gallery itself was a common topic and the author came down firmly on the side of keeping the grille after a parliamentary debate in 1885:

Our beloved gallery itself was the subject of a debate – remarkably deficient in “dash” and gallantry, considering the opportunities which it afforded – on Monday evening. Mr Sidney Buxton, who has constituted himself the champion of the Anti-grille Party in the House of Commons, moved a resolution in the following terms:- “That in the opinion of this House, it is advisable to substitute for the present grating (or some portion of it) a railing so constructed as not largely to exclude sound, light, and air; and generally that the accommodation of the gallery should be improved.”... I am sure he is well-intentioned, and sincerely wishes to make the occupants of the Ladies’ Gallery comfortable; but, as I remarked on a previous occasion, his zeal is altogether misplaced. We are quite comfortable at present, and no structural alternation in our “nest” above the Speaker’s chair can be an improvement. Mr Buxton is in error when he supposes that we cannot see as much of the House as we want to; and he is wrong, too, in his belief that we are likely to perish of asphyxia. In addition, we can hear all the good speeches. It is only when members drop their voices and mumble to themselves that their remarks fail to reach us, and then, I daresay, we don’t lose much...<sup>68</sup>

The correspondent for *The Lady* also revealed women’s growing confidence in colonising parliamentary space for their own purposes. No longer satisfied with being contained in a gallery behind a grille they began to occupy the lobbies and one MP’s wife even ‘*bestowed herself in the smoking-room, and declined to be dislodged*’



arguing that she had a right to be with her husband.<sup>69</sup> Another woman viewed debates, not in the Ladies' Gallery, but in one of the glass-fronted boxes either side of the chamber, which, as she was 'attired in a scarlet opera-cloak, threw a novel and striking beam of colour, as it were, across the dull and tiresome decorum of the House.'<sup>70</sup> Change was also happening in the class composition of female visitors to parliament. As Mabel Northcote reported,

In these democratic days all classes of the community experience no great difficulty in obtaining orders from their respective Members, and as a result the day tripper from Yorkshire and the factory girl from Whitechapel can rub shoulders with the leaders of London society.<sup>71</sup>

Although this might be an optimistic viewpoint, and it is unlikely that Parliament was overrun with working-class women, nevertheless, as these reports make clear, it was not the exclusive masculine domain that many have assumed.

## **Conclusion**

It is important then to take a critical approach to interpretations of parliamentary space in this period. It is true, that the House of Commons was an institution designed by men for men. Women had to fight for their right to occupy even small sections of the building, and even then were not considered to be officially part of the House. However, where women were in control of space they could subvert this authority and utilise areas to their own political advantage. In the Ventilator and in the Ladies' Gallery women challenged parliamentary authorities, flouted rules, and made the spaces their own, eventually spilling out into the lobbies and terraces of the Commons, refusing to be contained. When MPs, the Speaker and parliamentary officials tried to control women's access, they were thwarted, pressured into making

numerous concessions in the size and the organisation of the space before eventually removing the grille of the Ladies' Gallery entirely in 1917. At first, it was the sheer number of female spectators attending the House which compelled Parliament to change practices. But women grew increasingly confident and vociferous, writing newspaper columns and pamphlets, lobbying MPs, and openly contravening regulations. Women's presence changed the experience of parliament for all occupants as they reported on and reacted to particular debates. However, encounters with parliament also had an impact on the women themselves developing their identity as political subjects claiming a right to participate in the affairs of Parliament. Increasingly, they addressed MPs directly, in particular on areas which affected women the most: employment rights, education and of course, the vote. In a carefully constructed essay, "Better and Happier." An Answer from the Ladies' Gallery to the Speeches in Opposition to the Women's Suffrage Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1908', Laura McLaren challenged the arguments of those politicians who spoke against the bill.<sup>72</sup> She reminded MPs who claimed that women had limited 'physical force' that on their way to the debate they had put on shirts tailored and ironed by women, entered through the doors of Parliament that had steps that had been scrubbed and cleaned by women, and eaten food prepared and cleared away by women, 'From the cradle to the grave, that man depended for his comforts on the physical force of women.'<sup>73</sup> The Ladies' Gallery for McLaren was an empowering space enabling her to represent women's voices directly to MPs and the pamphlet was littered with references to the space. The cultural implications of living and experiencing the spaces of parliament were central to providing women with political experiences and forging female public identities. Parliament as viewed

through a woman's eyes was increasingly a place where their voices could not go unheard.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Fenian dynamite campaigns in London, see Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance Since 1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows: the Irish-American Fenians who Bombed Victorian Britain* (Dublin: Merrion, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Dynamite Explosions', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 January 1885.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the changing nature of female periodicals in the 1880s, see Erica Rapaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), ch. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Lady*, 19 February 1885.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Eustance, 'Protests from Behind the Grille: Gender and the Transformation of Parliament, 1867-1918', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Eustance, 'Protests from Behind the Grille'.

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Archives, HC/SA/SJ/10/12 item 26, Police report noting Emily Wilding Davison had been found hiding in a ventilation shaft, 4 April 1910; 'Suffragists in the House', *The Times*, 29 October 1908; and 'Women Suffragists at Westminster', *The Times*, 24 October 1906.

<sup>8</sup> There is no official contemporaneous record of the incident. For example, Almon's *Parliamentary Register* merely notes that the House was cleared for the debate. However, details may be found in John Hatsell, *Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons with Observations*, 4 vols, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Luke Hansard and Sons, 1818), ii, note to p. 181; W. Charles Townsend, *History of the House of*

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*Commons from the Convention Parliament of 1688-9 to the Passing of the Reform Bill in 1832*, 2 vols (London; Henry Colbourn, 1843), ii, pp. 460-1; and P. D. G. Thomas, *The House of Commons in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 149. The two former accounts are authorities cited by MPs in nineteenth-century parliamentary debates on the legality of women observing debates in the House.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Seaward (ed.), *Speakers and the Speakership – Presiding Officers and the Management of Business from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Moritz, *Travels, Chiefly on Foot, Through Several Parts of England, in 1782* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1795), p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Townsend, *History of the House of Commons*, ii, pp. 461-2.

<sup>12</sup> Glen Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity: The Campaigns of Josephine Butler* (New York, 1971), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Hatsell, *Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons*, ii, note to p. 181.

<sup>14</sup> Townsend, *History of the House of Commons*, ii, p. 461 and Sean Sawyer, 'Delusions of National Grandeur: Reflections on the Intersection of Architecture and History at the Palace of Westminster, 1789-1834', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 13 (2003), pp. 237-50.

<sup>15</sup> An analysis of spatial configuration and power structures in the modern Houses of Parliament has found that the Lords is designed for ceremony and the Commons for scrutiny. Similar arguments may be made for the eighteenth-century chambers. See Brigid Maclachlan, 'Scrutiny and Consensus in the Palace of Westminster', in John Peponis, Jean Wineman and Sonit Bafna (eds), *Proceedings of the Space Syntax Third International Symposium, Atlanta, 2001* (Michigan: University of Michigan,

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2001), pp. 44.1-44.7. The distinction in organisational practice between the Lords and Commons has continued into the twentieth century with initiatives such as the broadcasting and televising of debates.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the Ventilator space, see Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2013), ch. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah A. Tooley, 'The Woman's Question: An Interview with Madame Sarah Grand', *Humanitarian*, 8 (1896), pp. 161-9

<sup>18</sup> Parliamentary Papers (1818) *Report from the Committee on Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark*.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Edgcumbe (ed.), *The Diary of Frances, Lady Shelley, 1818-1873*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1913), ii, pp. 7-11. My thanks to Amy Galvin-Elliott for drawing my attention to this source.

<sup>20</sup> Edgcumbe, *Diary*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Edgcumbe, *Diary*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Oct. 1822.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, 14 February 1829.

<sup>24</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, 23 March 1829.

<sup>25</sup> 'Evenings in the Ventilator, No. II', *Court Magazine*, 1 (June to December, 1832), p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Edgeworth to Mrs Ruxton, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1822, in Augustus J. C. Hare, *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, 2 vols (London: Edward Arnold, 1894), ii, pp. 66-7.

<sup>27</sup> As a soupirail is a basement window, one assumes Lady Shelley was being ironic; Edgcumbe (ed.), *Diary*, ii, p. 10. H. Grote, *The Personal life of George Grote Compiled from Family Documents, Private Memoranda, and Original Letters to and*

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from *Various Friends* (London: John Murray, 1873), p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> 'Evenings in the Ventilator, No. IV', *Court Magazine*, 1 (June to December, 1832), p. 188.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Wedgwood to her aunt Mme Sismondi, 27 March 1831, in H. Litchfield, *Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1915), i, pp. 234-6.

<sup>30</sup> Fanny Allen to her sister Mrs Josiah Wedgwood, 13 June 1824, in Litchfield, *Emma Darwin*, i, p. 158.

<sup>31</sup> *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 28 May 1829.

<sup>32</sup> 'Evenings in the Ventilator, No. IV', *Court Magazine*, 1 (June to December, 1832), p. 189. Unfortunately, this was to be the last column by 'S.' writing from the Ventilator.

<sup>33</sup> 'Report from the Select Committee on the Admission of Ladies to the Strangers' Gallery', *Parliamentary Papers*, XII (July 1835), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Preston Chronicle*, 11 June 1836.

<sup>35</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 11 August 1836.

<sup>36</sup> *York Herald*, 13 August 1836.

<sup>37</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 11 May 1850, vol 111, cols. 102-4.

<sup>38</sup> *Aberdeen Journal*, 14 April 1847.

<sup>39</sup> *Derby Mercury*, 9 March 1842.

<sup>40</sup> *Morning Post*, 31 May 1850.

<sup>41</sup> Nirmal Puwar, 'The Archi-texture of Parliament: Flaneur as Method in Westminster' in Shirin M. Rai (ed.), *Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 15-29. See also Eustance, 'Protests from Behind the Grille'. For a more positive interpretation, see Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, ch. 6.

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<sup>42</sup> Fanny Allen to her niece Elizabeth Wedgwood, 26 December 1847, in Litchfield, *Emma Darwin*, ii, p. 113 and Kate Field cited in Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920* (University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. 152.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Parnell, 'How they do in the House of Commons. Notes from the Ladies' Cage', *Celtic Monthly*, 3:5 (May 1880), p. 469.

<sup>44</sup> Mabel Shannan [sic] Crawford, "'Purdah' in the House of Commons", *Women's Penny Paper*, 24<sup>th</sup> May (1890), p. 363. See also, Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Zeyneb Hanoum, *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (London: Seeley, Service and Co., 1913), p. 192.

<sup>46</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 264.

<sup>47</sup> *Fife Herald*, 1 March 1855.

<sup>48</sup> *Derby Mercury*, April 26 1865.

<sup>49</sup> The Speaker's Ladies' Gallery is shown on plans drawn up by Edward Barry in 1869 proposing alterations to the space: The National Archives, WORK 29/1465. 'Strangers in the House', *The Graphic*, March 16, 1889, refers to the space as Mrs. Speaker's Gallery. My thanks to Melanie Unwin and Mari Takayanagi for these references.

<sup>50</sup> *The Lady*, 15 April 1886.

<sup>51</sup> Henry William Lucy, *The Gladstone Parliament, 1880-1885* (London: Cassell & Company, 1886), p. 128.

<sup>52</sup> *The Lady*, 15 April 1886.

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<sup>53</sup> Mary Curzon to George Curzon, c. May 1901 cited in Nicola J. Thomas, 'Mary Curzon: "American Queen of India"' in David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 285-308.

<sup>54</sup> Mabel Mary Northcote, 'The Ladies Gallery. Parliament as Viewed Through a Woman's Eyes', *The Harmsworth London Magazine*, 10 (1903), p. 680.

<sup>55</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 12 May 1864, vol 175 c 434.

<sup>56</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 16 July 1869, vol 198 cc 20-1.

<sup>57</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 31 May 1858, vol 150 c1203.

<sup>58</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 9 July 1869, vol 197 cc 1582-8.

<sup>59</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 30 June 1864, vol 176 c496.

<sup>60</sup> Northcote, 'The Ladies Gallery', p. 675.

<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 16 May 1917.

<sup>62</sup> Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 19 July 1876, vol 230 c 1554.

<sup>63</sup> Parnell, 'How they do in the House of Commons', p. 469.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Parnell, 'How they do in the House of Commons', p. 469.

<sup>65</sup> London School of Economics, The Women's Library, Josephine Butler Letters, 3JBL, Letter from Josephine Butler to Margaret Tanner, 4 April 1871.

<sup>66</sup> 'Women in the Press Gallery', *Women's Penny Paper*, 22 March 1890. See also Michelle Tuson, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>67</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 23 August 1879.

<sup>68</sup> *The Lady*, 26 March 1885.

<sup>69</sup> *The Lady*, 17 March 1887.



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<sup>70</sup> *The Lady*, 17 March 1887.

<sup>71</sup> Northcote, 'The Ladies Gallery', p. 680.

<sup>72</sup> Laura McLaren, "*Better and Happier.*" *An Answer from the Ladies' Gallery to the Speeches in Opposition to the Women's Suffrage Bill, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1908* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908).

<sup>73</sup> McLaren, "*Better and Happier.*", p. 7.