

Deeds, Words and Drama: A Review of the Film *Suffragette* (2015)

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Abstract Review of the film *Suffragette* (2015), written by Abi Morgan and directed by Sarah Gavron, considering its use of fiction to explore women's history, comparing it to other dramatic treatments of the suffrage campaign, its historical accuracy and its portrayal of the legal and social position of women, and wives, during the early twentieth century.

Keywords Suffrage · *Suffragette* · Film · Legal history · Women's history

Suffragette, written by Abi Morgan and directed by Sarah Gavron, deals with a subject close to the soul, as well as important to the academic interests, of many feminists and scholars of women and the law: the early twentieth century campaign for women's suffrage. In particular, it focuses on the militant campaign of the Pankhurst-led Women's Social and Political Union (W.S.P.U.) in 1912–1913, and on London. The main characters are fictitious, though they interact with the real historical cast in the shape of Emmeline Pankhurst, Emily Wilding Davison, David Lloyd George and King George V. We see the main character, East End laundry worker Maud Watts (Carey Mulligan), grow from uncomplaining exploited and apolitical young worker, wife and mother to observer of the suffrage campaign, then sympathiser and finally full participant in protest and militancy, and are shown both the cruel price she pays for her activism and also the positive side of her personal and intellectual growth and formation of deep friendships within the women's movement.

The choice of approaching this subject through fictitious characters was an interesting one, and perhaps owes something to the wish not to tread the same

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ground as the much-praised 1974 television drama *Shoulder to Shoulder* (McKenzie 1974) which was, essentially, a ‘biopic’ of the Pankhurst trinity: an imperious Emmeline (Siân Philips), a disturbing, cold and brilliant Christabel (Patricia Quinn) and a sympathetic Sylvia (Angela Down). While it might have been possible to look at the working class perspective by using a genuine historical character, *Shoulder to Shoulder* had also already ‘bagged’ the most appealing prominent such example: mill-lass-turned-activist Annie Kenney. An advantage of using a fictitious heroine was that the writers were able to create for her a life outside the movement which made her suffrage campaign about rather more than a constitutional principle: Maud, we are shown, sees the vote as a route to improving the wages of women, safety in their work and their rights within the family.

Pains have been taken to ensure historical accuracy—from consulting those eminent in the field of suffrage campaign history, medical history and police history to tracking down the manufacturers of W.S.P.U. medals to help produce props for the film. This quest for precision appears not to have been only a defensive move against the inevitable search for anachronism which, in the social media age, follows hard on the heels of any historical drama, but to be the product of a real sense of responsibility to do justice to the subject-matter (Gavron 2015).

The film manages to convey some important points about the legal and social position of women, and wives, during this period—from the ease with which they might be exploited sexually, and the prevalence of ‘victim-blaming’ in cases of such abuse, to the lack of recourse in cases of domestic violence; from the lack of equality with men in terms of wages to the husband’s exclusionary authority with regard to children.¹ It may make a slight mis-step if the episode involving Maud’s son being ‘adopted’ by a well-off couple is intended to indicate a legally binding adoption in the modern sense (such ‘modern’ adoptions were not introduced in England and Wales until 1926),² but, otherwise, it does not exaggerate the intersecting disadvantages of legal rules and social norms, and of class, gender and marital status, which faced women in Maud’s situation in the early years of the twentieth century.

An interesting aspect of the film, from the point of view of the history of law and of civil liberties is brought out through another fictitious character, Brendan Gleeson’s police inspector. We see interesting scenes of the police surveillance of the militants, and those associated with them. Although surveillance of radicals was not an entirely new aspect of police work in the early twentieth century, improvements in photography in particular meant that new ways of conducting surveillance were being introduced (as a by-product of which we have some of the most moving visual records of the suffrage campaigners, in prison and out see further Mulcahy 2015). Episodes of police violence against protestors also have a sound historical basis. The film does, however, perhaps overstate the effectiveness of the police, showing them as rather more successful in combating the militants

¹ See, e.g. *Re Plomley* (1882) 47 LT (NS) 284; *R. v Agar-Ellis* (no. 1) (1878) 10 Ch.D. 49 and *no. 2* (1883) 24 Ch.D. 317; Cretney (2003, 566–9).

² Adoption of Children Act 1926. See, Cretney (2003, 596–627), Keating (2008, cc. 1–4) and Walker (2006, 211–21). There was some informal ‘adoption’ and fostering organised by Poor Law Guardians before the 1926 Act, but that does not seem to be what is intended in this film.

than, in fact, they were: in the case of several ‘suffragette outrages’, none of the perpetrators were ever arrested or convicted (the bombing of Lloyd George’s new house at Walton-on-the-Hill, Surrey, being a case in point). The wish to show the contrast between the might of the state and the vulnerability of the militants may have led to exaggeration here.

Some comments on the film have been along the lines of ‘Why did it not include X...’ (Anand 2015). Clearly, however, it is not realistic to expect one film to cover all aspects of the story of the struggle for women’s suffrage, and, while this film is, indeed, London-centric, W.S.P.U.-centric and very white, it makes a significant contribution within the compass of a feature film, in dealing with the story of a working-class woman’s journey to suffragette militancy. There are, of course, many other stories which might have been told, particular historical characters (or their fictitious analogues) who might have been included. Those who have taken a close interest in the campaign for women’s suffrage may regret in particular the film’s lack of interest in the ‘non-militant’, or ‘constitutional’ suffrage campaigners, who continued their work during this period, eschewing spectacular property damage. As pen-pushing academics, many of us are likely to feel a kinship with the patient, cerebral, approach of these women rather than with the dangerous deeds of the militants. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the ‘canonical’ episodes of the W.S.P.U. story into which Maud is here introduced—Mrs. Pankhurst’s surprise appearances, imprisonment and hunger striking, blowing up letter boxes and Lloyd George’s home, with the denouement of Emily Wilding Davison’s protest at the Derby and subsequent funeral—are infinitely more dramatic and suitable for cinema than are meetings, resolutions, addresses and peaceful pilgrimages. The argument from dramatic impact is sufficient justification for the choice: there is no real need for the director to try to explain her preference with the slightly odd suggestion that the W.S.P.U./Pankhurst story is less well known than the constitutionalists’ story (Gavron 2015). This is surely not the case for most people in Britain, even if there has not previously been a full cinematic dramatic treatment of the militants’ story. It is the militants who dominate historical fiction in recent novels, for example,³ and, whether we like it or not, (and whether we are comfortable with all of their views or not), the charisma of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in particular made them the most famous of suffrage campaigners in their time, and, in subsequent years, made their organisation, more than the non-militant alternatives, the one most commonly and most closely associated with the fight for votes for women. The considerable press interest in the fact that the hugely famous and admired Meryl Streep was to play Emmeline Pankhurst is as much a testament to the charisma of Pankhurst as to the status of Streep.

Despite the fame of these women, and the basic public knowledge of the campaign for women’s suffrage, however, it would be wrong to assume that the suffrage struggle is not a story which needs to be highlighted. It is not that long, after all, since Nick Clegg suggested that the timid reform programme he espoused within the Coalition government would amount to the biggest change since the

³ See, Quinn (2012), Ribchester (2015) and Close (2015). See also the graphic novel by Talbot et al. (2014).

reforms of 1832, conveniently erasing the great fruitions of the women's suffrage campaigns, and the Liberal government's less-than-creditable role in relation to suffrage (Wintour 2010; Richardson 2010).

One of the difficulties of telling 'the women's suffrage story', whether semi-fictitiously or with an ambition to historical accuracy, is deciding on an end point. This film makes the choice of ending with Emily Wilding Davison's death and funeral. Both are handled with dexterity: the dramatic treatment of the Derby Day 1913 episode, surpassing by some distance what was possible for the creators of *Shoulder to Shoulder*, manages to wring out tension despite the fact that we all know how it will end, and the slip from modern film to archive footage of the great funeral procession is both moving and effective. The death of Emily Wilding Davison, though dramatically justified here, and important as a catalyst for wider coverage, is not an altogether satisfactory end to the story. It was an interesting choice to 'zoom out' at this point, leaving unanswered questions about Maud's personal life—and what she did in the years between 1913 and the gaining of the vote for at least some women. *Shoulder to Shoulder* took a more downbeat approach: rather than ending with the pomp and publicity surrounding the Davison funeral, it allowed the last word to Sylvia Pankhurst—learning that the vote has been secured for some women and reflecting on the campaign and friendships forged in it. Alternatives as a suitable ending might be sought and argued for, such as the death of Emmeline Pankhurst, or 1928 and the equalising of voting ages between men and women. But perhaps there is a strength in ending the film at a point no-one would consider 'the end' of 'the story': as is illustrated in the rolling dates of the attainment of women's suffrage in different countries which are shown at the end of *Suffragette*, this is a multi-stranded and complex story, which is still unfolding.

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