In describing the domestication of women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft presciently consigns a certain category of women — what she called ‘ephemeron triflers’ — to the cage. She compared such married, bourgeois women to members of ‘the feathered race’: snared birds who ‘have nothing to do but to plume themselves and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch’. This analogy was translated into a political reality in the form of an actual enclosure, a separate, contained space devised for women in the House of Commons. The Ladies’ Cage, as it was known, was a method of isolating women, not only from the inconceivable — participation in public life — but even from their passive presence in the Visitors’ Gallery. Women, as if they constituted a dangerous species, were quarantined, according to the *Illustrated London News*, on the utmost sufferance extended even to the point of suffering on their part. ... High up above the Speaker’s Chair and over the Reporters’ Gallery there has been scooped a small suite of apartments, which have been fitted up on the architectural principle which applies to ... the cages in which oriental women are, or used to be generally confined.

The heavily decorated, latticed metal screen protected those in the chamber from any awareness of those in the cage, and for those in the cage it filtered their viewing and hearing of public proceedings, effectively reinforcing their unenfranchised state in emphatic physical terms. This concept of isolating women extended beyond the literalness of the Ladies’ Cage to a form of perceptual deprivation which severely incapacitated them in their social behaviour. Yet, as a barrier, it may well be that the cage, marking a boundary between inside and outside, possessed the same ambiguity which Lady Mary Wortley Montagu discerned in the wearing of the veil by oriental women. While the veil did indeed deny visibility to women, it also ‘allowed the “masquerader” to claim the power of sight while remaining unremarked, the paradigmatic voyeuristic scenario’. Anna Parnell used the same argument in 'How They Do

2 Ibid., p. 60.
4 Wendy Frith, 'Small-pox and Seraglios: A Monument to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu'

It in the House of Commons, a series of articles written in 1880 for the journal, Celtic Monthly. Her first attempt at political reporting stylistically prefigured her remarkable book, The Tale of a Great Sham, oscillating between humour and observation, with only hints of the scathing contempt to come. From the high vantage point of the Ladies’ Cage, she gives a bird’s eye view of the proceedings, noting wryly that

the ladies are certainly much better off than male visitors, who are subjected to very severe discipline by the attendants, not being allowed to speak ... and above all, not allowed to go to sleep.


5 Anna Parnell, ‘How They Do It in the House of Commons: Notes from the Ladies’ Cage’ in Celtic Monthly, iii, no. 5 (May 1880), pp. 469–72; iii, no. 6 (June 1880), pp. 537–41; iv, no. 1 (July 1880), pp. 17–21.

6 Anna Parnell, The Tale of a Great Sham (Dublin, 1986). The manuscript for this publication is now in the National Library of Ireland, NLI, MS 12144.
Anna Parnell goes on to argue that, contrary to what one might expect, there was resistance to reforming suggestions concerning the removal of the grating which screened the women from view, not because of any modesty on behalf of the women, but because they would prefer to endure the auditory and visual deprivation of the cage as ‘they value the freedom ensured to them by what at first sight would appear to be intended as a restraint’. In fact, Parnell gleefully acknowledges that the women are so ‘invisible’ that they are not asked to leave when there is a call for strangers to withdraw from the chamber; ‘not being visible’, she maintains, ‘they can very easily be supposed not to exist’. When Mr Biggar, for example, ejected the Prince of Wales and so made a thrill of horror run through the backbone of the Empire ... the ladies were present all through, and thus enjoyed ample compensation for any disadvantages imposed on them by their position in ordinary times, so that it is not after all hard to understand why they so contentedly submit to imprisonment and seclusion.

Anna Parnell uses these articles to expound on the phenomenon known as Irish Obstruction, in which the smallest parliamentary party in history held the House of Commons in frustrated thrall, a brilliant strategy of circumvention, the intricacies of which are keenly appreciated by Parnell herself. Indeed, Anna Parnell’s own contribution to Irish politics could also be described as one of attempted circumvention. Ironically, not only did she need to circumvent the House of Commons but also the original obstructionists themselves.

At a time when the separation of the spheres was being consolidated in advanced metropolitan countries, women in Ireland were still not fully domesticated within the home, as is clear from the numerous images of women outworkers found in popular illustrations of the period. As the site of production shifted dramatically in the industrialising world, the sexual division of labour became entrenched; as the social and economic value of men’s work increased, that of women correspondingly decreased, constituting what Engels called ‘the world-historic defeat of the female sex’. Wielding his relative wealth, man now controlled the household, reducing women to virtual slave status – object of his desire, mother of his children. Engels used the metaphor of capitalist relations to describe the contract between husband and wife, and it is not surprising, therefore, that the economic modernization programme of the Land

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7 Parnell, ‘How They Do It’, p. 469.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (New York, 1972), p. 120.
League should display a profound instability and ambivalence when it came to considering the position of women within its campaign.

Anticipating that the imprisonment of the men under the extensive powers of Coercion was now only a matter of time, Michael Davitt persuaded a reluctant leadership to adopt the idea of a Ladies' Land League as suggested by Fanny Parnell. Davitt admits that his proposal was

laughed at by all except Mr Egan and myself, and vehemently opposed by Messrs Parnell, Dillon and Brennan who feared we would invite public ridicule in appearing to put women forward in places of danger.\(^\text{11}\)

He regained the upper hand with his colleagues by reminding them that 'We were engaged in virtual revolution. Our purpose should be to make confusion worse',\(^\text{12}\) and so he justified the formation of the Ladies' Land League with the dubious compliment that 'No better allies than women could be found for such a task'. He briefly redeemed himself, in relation to the women, by proclaiming that 'They are in certain emergencies, more dangerous to despotism than men,' only to equivocate with limited confidence:

They have more courage, through having less scruples, when and where their better instincts are appealed to by a militant and just cause in a fight against a mean foe. The fight was to save the homes of Ireland - the sacred, domestic domain of a woman's moral supremacy in civilised society.\(^\text{13}\)

This allusion to the domestic is significant. It allowed the men to temporarily embrace women in the struggle. Women saving homes was, apparently, acceptable, women saving Ireland was not. This contestation of women's position in late nineteenth-century society is evoked powerfully in the pictorial press of the day in a range of conflicting images which locate the debates concerning gender and citizenship on either side of the domestic door-step. 'The Daily Farewell' (Graphic, 20 November 1880) poignantly illustrates the separation of the spheres, as we observe a resident landlord leaving his family in the safety of the home, to be escorted to work by armed guards; It is clear, however, that the family awaiting the return of another landlord, will not be so fortunate:

Hark! did I hear a distant gun?
A cry a groan, an angry word ...

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Like 'The Daily Farewell', 'Awaiting His Return' (Graphic, 1 January 1881) also shows three generations of women, rooted helplessly to the threshold; while a visit from 'Rory of the Hills' (Illustrated London News, 22 January 1881) reveals, in no uncertain terms, the fate of this man who has resisted, what the accompanying report called, the 'illegal mandate of the Land League'.

The French journal, L'Univers Illustré, which carried the same illustrations, recognized, significantly, that what these images are really concerned with is 'the inviolability of the home'. It is not difficult to imagine from these illustrations the lengths to which women might in time be prepared to go to protect the home. It is, thus, on the spatial boundary between inside and outside, symbolising the personal and the political, the public and the private, that the tensions of gender and domesticity are tantalisingly teased out.

For Davitt the land question was but a stepping stone towards the resolution of the national question; it is doubtful if he, or his already reluctant colleagues, who considered women's involvement in the Land League a dangerous experiment, would have admitted women into the more revolutionary political struggle of national import.

Historically, the New Departure was always described in binary terms,
comprising moral and physical force factors. In fact it possessed a problematic third dimension turning on gender which is rarely fully acknowledged. Two years into the Land League, the already unique combination of revolutionary, agrarian and constitutional factions was dramatically transformed by the admission, not only of individual women, but of women as a category. Indeed, weeks into the Ladies' Land League Anna Parnell sardonically observed at a public meeting ‘that we have succeeded today in getting rid of the men nearly
entirely - and I am sure that we all feel much more comfortable in consequence'.

It is strikingly obvious from Anna Parnell's speeches and writings that her style of leadership would be emphatically different from that of her brother and his colleagues. Despite disparaging and misleading descriptions of 'fanatics' haranguing the masses, Anna Parnell particularly disliked the emotionalism of mass meetings which she regarded 'as a peculiarly male form of political demagoguery which incited crowds to frenzied cheers regardless of the content of the speech'. The tactics of the women were more educative than rhetorical, but no less effective for that. Preferring to assemble at evictions where practical solidarity could be displayed and useful discussion encouraged the women avoided the cult of personality in favour of collective action.

Inspirationally, the women took a long-term view of the situation. Their role in nurturing good foundations in their children’s education is pointedly exercised by the establishment of the Children’s Land League in 1881, thereby demonstrating the inclusive tactics of the women in politicising those for whom they had responsibility. The main function of the Children’s Land League was to teach Irish history, using the M.F. Cusack (the Nun of

17 Ward, Unmanageable Revolutionaries, p. 23.
Kenmare's) *Irish History for Students*, supplemented with some useful nationalist mnemonics:

A is the army that covers the ground  
B is the buckshot we’re getting all round  
C is the crowbar of cruellest fame  
D is our Davitt, a right glorious name  
E is the English who’ve robbed us of bread  
F is the famine they’ve left us instead ... 

This was not quite what was intended in bestowing upon women the responsibility for the moral education of children. Predictably, Bishop Gilooly of Elphin remonstrated, declaring that such a development would ‘train up the youth as rebels and communists’.

The politicisation of the women inevitably caused consternation in the church, as if only a miracle could reverse the seemingly inexorable breach of women of the public domain. As if made to order, such a miracle took place within a few days of the founding of the Land League in the form of the famous apparition of the Virgin Mary at Knock. Whatever about its scientific status, the moral or political message of the apparition was clear. On the one hand the cluster of individuals who concerned themselves with the apparition at Knock clearly put God on the nationalist side, and on the other hand, the role of the church in enshrining the apparition clearly contributed, Marina Warner argues, to the subjugation of women:

*The Virgin of Knock is silent, so the message is interpreted that a good woman is a woman of few words, submissive, obedient and resigned; the Mother set forth as the ideal woman works in the kitchen and is idolised as saintly by her children. But the credit for ‘planning’ and ‘striving’ goes to ‘Father’. ‘Mother’ is granted her pedestal worship to make up for the contempt in which her essential and unceasing labour is held.*

In effect, Knock introduced new parameters to the concept and practice of motherhood. Indeed, given church teaching on the innate inferiority of women, whose ‘place was the seclusion of home’, the existence of the Ladies’ Land League not surprisingly troubled Archbishop McCabe’s social, if not pastoral conscience. His infamous pastoral of 1881 denounced the Ladies’ Land League.

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League, ordering women to desist from political involvement and demanding to know if a whole nation was sheltering under women's petticoats. He was greatly alarmed about the woman who 'so far disavows her birthright of modesty as to parade herself before the public gaze in a character so unworthy as a Child of Mary'.

This allowed Michael Davitt to make a perceptive connection between the Land League and what we might call the 'erotic economy' of women:

the tens of thousands of Irish girls who had been driven to shame and ruin in foreign cities in being evicted from Irish homes ... never once appealed to the moral indignation or political thoughts of this Castle bishop. He was only aroused from his peaceful pastoral slumbers on the question of modesty, when ladies, belonging to the families at least as respectable as his own, felt called upon to face an infamous law and system in defence of the homes of Ireland and to run the risk of imprisonment in a struggle for righteousness.

Acutely conscious of gender as an inhibiting factor in her contribution to public life Anna Parnell maintained that 'if the Irish landlords had not deserved extermination for anything else, they would have deserved it for the treatment of their own women,' arguing that the landlords of Ireland dishonoured their pathetic obligations to female relatives who had annuities secured on landed estates, in effect treating their ladies as they would their tenants, by insisting on the primacy of their own profits. Not only did she have an unusual understanding of the connection between the sexual oppression of women and the exploitation of workers but, a contemporary, Andrew Kettle, a prominent League secretary, described her as having

a better knowledge of the lights and shades of Irish peasant life, of the real economic conditions of the country, and of the social and political forces which had to be acted upon to work out the freedom of Ireland than any person, man or woman — a remarkable tribute given the prejudicial circumstances of the time.

The credibility and fearlessness of the women of the Land League lay in the fact that they were, as women, untainted by historical power and excluded from future power, rendering them potentially very radical indeed. Interestingly, they are criticised for what they are supposed to be inherently

22 Parnell, *Tále*, p. 86.
incapable of doing, that is, following the logic of the principles established by the men. The long-missing manuscript, *The Tale of a Great Sham*, was a serious gap in the historiography of the movement allowing suggestions of, predictably, incompetence or extravagance to mar the record of the women's stewardship. When it finally appeared, Anna Parnell's account of the period was, ironically, a searing attack on the male leadership, especially its inconsistency and timidity.

In carrying on what the men had started, but had either not the courage or intention of following through, the Ladies' Land League went into directive leadership. Instead of maintaining a semblance of continuity, they actually set out to achieve the original objectives of the League only to be accused by Charles Stewart Parnell of 'extremism and extravagance'. In time-honoured fashion what the men seem to have wanted was to disempower the women but, as Foster says, have them 'continue as workhorses'. The commitment of the women to the original revolutionary principles was seen, both then and subsequently, as such an embarrassment that it was necessary to discredit the contribution of what St John Ervine disparagingly called 'Miss Parnell's band of harridans'.

Within a year of its formation, the Ladies' Land League constituted over 500 branches. Like the men before them, the women toured the country, travelling under very poor conditions, attending evictions; resisting land-grabbing; organising boycotts; forming new branches; building houses for the evicted; dealing with legal and agricultural matters; negotiating with the clergy and the armed forces; addressing public meetings; and raising and dispensing large amounts of money. On the arrest of William O'Brien they even assumed the publishing of the *United Ireland*, drawing on Miss Lynch's governess' French to negotiate with French printers. Unlike the men, however, they set up exemplary systems for recording data on every estate, landlord and tenant as well as documenting developments and morale around the country.

The tenacity of the Ladies' Land League, and its assertion of a female presence in a revolutionary public space, gave the lie to the separation of spheres, and the attempts of both the 'Victorian' nationalism of the Catholic Church, and the official Victorianism of the state, to quarantine women within the home. As the land war progressed it became apparent that home was not a haven in a heartless world but was actually infiltrated by violence. In 'The Reign of Terror in Ireland', Norah's attempt to block the penetration of the shadowy form, personifying, disintegration, is, we can see, doomed to fail. Nor was it simply a case, moreover, of woman as perpetual victim; the incongruity of domestic space became gradually apparent as successive images showed women on their

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socialite rounds or even in the privacy of the boudoir resorting to the gun to protect themselves against the intrusions of the outside world.

The Ladies' Land League thus fundamentally challenged the prejudiced oxymoron of rational woman. Its suppression, therefore, by the government in December 1881, with the ensuing arrests and harassment, was nothing compared to the savagery of the men's resumption of power following their release from prison. Shaken by the confidence of the women, and the extremes of loyalty and distrust which they had inspired — and in an attempt to wipe their own revolutionary record clean — the men besmirched the women with exaggerated criticisms, in an effort to re-erect the gender shibboleth to women's political position. Fraisse and Perrot maintain that in the dialectic which
opposed family and civic values, the very foundation of the civic community depended on the active repression of femininity. Ultimately, on the issue of women in public life Gladstone and Parnell were as one.

Less restrained in her views on physical force than her sister, it has been argued, Fanny Parnell, author of the 'Marseillaise of the Irish Peasant,' here photographed - alias Annie Oakley - in American western costume, uses what Lyn Innes calls 'the rhetoric of martyrdom, of bloodshed as fertilising the land for future revolution'.


27 Innes, *Woman and Nation*, p. 111.
In 'Hold the Harvest' she too declares that God is on the peasant’s side as she incites the peasantry to

Rise up! the answer to your prayers shall come, tornado-borne,
And ye shall hold your homesteads dear, and ye shall reap the corn.

This invocation of prayer – the call to heaven – acquires more significance in view of M.F. Cusack’s linking of unmanageable women with the lethal threat of collective violence; ‘Women and the mob,’ she quotes, ‘must have some kind of religion; it is necessary for them, because we wish to keep them in some subjection, and we know of no other means to effect this end.’

Fraise and Perrot have observed that women often played a ‘galvanising’ role

28 M.F Cusack, Woman's Work in Modern Society (Kenmare, 1875), p. 132.
in uprisings, but were relegated to the sidelines as soon as associations took control of events – they were emphatically excluded from the institutions of revolution – initially there was room for both sexes, neither being organised, but once it was succeeded in establishing an effective political structure, a structure that excluded women even though it was supposed to represent the sovereign people from whom it drew its legitimacy, the new insurrectional economy could afford to dispense with the earlier balance of gender relations.29

So, while the executive of the Ladies’ Land League sought to maintain their position in control there were groups of women, especially in the West of Ireland, who, it could be argued, were emphatically out of control. One of the first physical skirmishes of the Land War was the Battle of Carraroe in which the local process server was prevented from serving notices to quit, and was set

upon by a group of highly indignant women and boys who incurred a number of bayonet wounds while the body of men who marched with them stood back from the onset; we hear of Mrs Mackle who succeeded in throwing a shovelful of burning turf upon Sub-inspector Gibbons – the resulting attack by the constabulary finally roused the men to action, and they retaliated with stout blackthorns and stones forcing the police to retire from the fray. This, we are informed by Fraisse and Perrot, is the stock pattern. They cite the role of peasant women in the French Revolution – taking the initiative, the women led the first onslaught, but once the rebellion was underway, the men took over, and the women resumed their conventional roles. Maternity and paternity are key determinants in militant engagement – the fact that the typical male militant was a family man in his forties, and the typical female militant was under thirty or over fifty, would suggest that the former is actively engaged while she is left holding the proverbial baby; unencumbered by children, however, in her youth or later middle age, she is, at least, as militantly active as he.

Having assuaged their position through the land courts, the larger farmers distanced themselves from the League, leaving a mutual sense of identification between the women and the poorer sections of the peasantry who had yet to gain from the Land War. In a sense, neither the women nor the peasantry had anything to lose and so, inevitably, there were escalating incidences of the latter taking matters into their own hands. The result was a dramatic increase in agrarian ‘outrages’, for which women, regardless of whether they were victims, onlookers or perpetrators, were largely blamed. Using abusive language, rocks, scalding water and sticks the women, often in large groups, ‘mostly barefooted’ and ‘all poorly clad with blue lips and hungry looks’, prided themselves on intercepting the hated process-server, disrupting evictions and defending the moral economy; indeed, it was the women of Lough Mask who prevented the process server from carrying out his work in the Boycott affair.

According to James Daly of the *Connaught Telegraph*:

> God or nature never intended ... that the manhood of any nation could be so cowardly and demoralized as to intrench themselves behind the fair sex. ... We do not see how any man or body of men having Celtic blood coursing in their veins can be found to descend to or condescend to female leadership. ... We ... enter our solemn protest against having the responsibility of Irish affairs vested in women.31

Anne Digby’s study of Victorian values deals with the concept of moral insanity, devised by Victorian psychiatry to police unusual female behav-

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31 *Connaught Telegraph*, 12 February 1881.
It is highly significant that instead of using the existing law, under which the male Leaguers were imprisoned, male disapproval of the Ladies' Land League was signalled by the invocation of an ancient statute dating to the fourteenth century and subsequently used to curb prostitution. Once imprisoned the women were denied political status and treated with unparalleled harshness; while the *Illustrated London News* (unfairly) accused the male Parnell of getting fat on the food from the Governor's table, the women were being humiliated by the application of a misogynistic law which allowed the men to avail of their accomplishments and then apostatise them in solitary confinement. The imprisonment of Irish women in this way suggests intense male discomfort with their crossing of the threshold - the social borderland - into confrontational behaviour.


33 The Protection of Person and Property Act, 1881, which gave the authorities power to arrest on suspicion, was known as the Coercion Act.