

Are Women Rejecting True Girl Power?

G. K. Chesterton was politically incorrect well before the term had been invented and well before its potent force could have been imagined. This political incorrectness especially reared its head concerning the family and gender roles, as evidenced by a 1911 *Illustrated London News* essay on “suffrage and the family.”

On the eve of the Great War the suffrage issue was at such a fever pitch in England that street demonstrations occasionally grew violent. Chesterton was not about to assign blame for the violence, but he couldn't resist commenting on reports of suffragettes punching policemen.

To be clear, Chesterton did not object to this suffragette behavior on philosophical grounds, for he was anything but a pacifist. Nor did he dismiss their actions as evidence of bad manners. But he was willing to declare the punching to be a “bad tactic.” Why? Because it was not a “female tactic.” (Cue the screams of “sexist.”)

Chesterton hastened to add that not all female tactics were bad tactics. Some were—and are—very good; some were highly effective; and some were downright frightening in both their power and effectiveness. But punching policemen? Here Chesterton had his doubts.

How did the policemen respond? While newspaper accounts offered no details, Chesterton speculated that the London bobbies must have been laughing. Why? “When a woman puts up her fists at a man, she is putting herself in the one and only position in which she does not frighten him.”

Chesterton then began to count the ways . . . That would be the ways by which a woman does frighten a man. Every turn of a

woman's head or hand is capable of shaking a man "like a dynamite explosion." For that matter, every man "who is a real man" is afraid of a woman's tongue—and "still more of her silence." He fears a woman's endurance—and "still more her collapse." He fears her sanity—and "still more her insanity." Lastly, he fears her laughter—and "still more her tears."

If you've lost count by now, you're not to blame. In any case, you could start over with this Chestertonian clincher: When all is considered and contemplated, the "only part of a woman" which a man does not fear is her "deltoid muscle."

But Chesterton wasn't finished. Suffragettes, he continued, linked the vote with the census. Their status as non-voters somehow reduced suffragettes (in their own minds) to non-citizens, if for no other reason than the census was a list of citizens. Chesterton wasn't persuaded. After all, the census tallied others who lacked the vote. Most of those others were children, and some of the others were "lunatics."

Chesterton also noted that suffragettes objected to any census that listed the husband as "head of household." Such a notion apparently struck some of them as "highly despotic" (or as patriarchal, as might be deployed today).

To Chesterton, "head of household" called to mind "something highly mystical" (rather than highly despotic). Certainly, its origins were mystical, not to mention evidence that the family was older than the state.

Those same mystical origins suggested to Chesterton that, within the family, agreement was older than coercion, since the family rests primarily on "consent," not despotism.

This explained to Chesterton why the father of a family was never referred to as the "king" or "pope" of the household. He was simply its head, while the wife was its "heart." For G. K. Chesterton, the heart was what gave "life to the home," while the head was the "thing that talks to the world beyond the

home.”

Now before we get our dander up and muster our offended expressions, let's stop and contemplate Chesterton's wisdom. He asked his readers to think of a different sort of head, namely the head of an arrow. Then he asked them to think about the shaft. If the arrow was to do its work successfully, both the head and the shaft were necessary. One was not more important than the other.

He then moved on to the head of an axe. Was it more vital than the handle of an axe? Certainly not. In fact, when it came to “mere fighting” with just the handle or just the blade, Chesterton let it be known that he preferred wielding the handle to fighting merely with the blade alone. Whether it was the arrow or the axe or the family, the head was pretty useless all by itself.

But the head of the arrow, the head of the axe, and the head of the family each had an “absolutely vital” role to play. Each was the “thing that enters first.” For Chesterton this was especially important for the “old human family” on which “all civilization” had been built. Here the head was that which dealt with the world. Suffragettes might well disagree, but Chesterton insisted that such dealings had nothing to do with controlling the lives of others or performing acts of despotism.

Power was not the point. Nor was it the issue. But if a “canvasser” came to the home to inquire about this or that political issue, “it is I who ought to see him, because I am the head.” And if a drunkard should fall asleep in the family flower garden, “it is I who ought to inspect him, because I am the head.” And if a robber should break into the home, “it is I who ought to confront him, because I am the head.”

To 21st century sensibilities, Chesterton's words can seem patriarchal and offensive. But is there some wisdom in them?

Have women, in scoffing at their “traditional” roles and searching for more power, actually rejected a highly effective way of doing good for themselves, their families, and the world in general?

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