PROJECT MUSE®

A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell

Talia Schaffer

Victorian Poetry, Volume 38, Number 1, Spring 2000, pp. 49-61 (Article)

Published by West Virginia University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2000.0010>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/36025>

A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell

TALIA SCHAFFER

TODAY ALICE MEYNELL'S POETRY OFTEN SPARKS SLIGHTLY HOSTILE FEELINGS. As recently as 1986, one critic associated Meynell with the most saccharine coyness, arguing that "the ladylike ideal which she formulates in 'The Shepherdess' seems almost a parody of everything we would disparagingly describe as 'Victorian.'" ¹ On the other hand, Meynell is sometimes mentioned as a paradigmatic early feminist, a stalwart suffragist and pioneering female poet admired by Vita Sackville-West, amongst others. ² Although modern readers might view these roles as contradictory, Meynell's "ladylikeness" was as important as her "feminism," and she experienced them as parts of an integrated personality. We cannot understand crucial aspects of her life, her reputation, and her writing unless we comprehend how the notion of the Angel in the House contributed to Meynell's poetic and personal identity.

Meynell's most significant creative achievement was her own reputation. Her carefully fostered, complex, and finely balanced public persona perpetuated her career, assuaged her psychological needs, contributed to her fame, grounded her prose, and yet eventually destroyed her reputation. In this article, I explore how and why Meynell created herself. I argue that she had a complicated affiliation with the figure of the Angel in the House, and that, rather than judging her as a representative of an outmoded gender dynamic, we need to examine exactly what she derived from this role and why it was so useful for her. In so doing, we may come to find that the Angel in the House was not, as we have come to think of it, a stiflingly oppressive role under whose inexorable demands creative women squirmed, but that it was as much a creative construct as anything else, capable of being appropriated or subverted or inhabited for a wide variety of reasons.

Adored by Francis Thompson, George Meredith, and Coventry Patmore, amongst others, and nominated for Poet Laureate, Meynell achieved a level of critical adulation that was perhaps unrivalled by any other turn-of-the-century female poet. ³ As Meynell became famous, silence and loneliness became her essential claim to power, precision, and enviousness. By constantly refraining from speech, she intimated the

existence of reservoirs of thought too sacred to expose to the multitude. Her silence also established her modesty and her desire for personal and family privacy, an appropriate feminine attribute for the household Angel. "Alice Meynell had, all her life, an extreme modesty that was partly attributable to her generation and partly inherent in her personality," explains one biographer. "[She had a] general dislike for any violation of physical privacy. She managed, in the house crowded with children, never to be seen by those children except when she was prepared to receive all comers" (Badeni, p. 211). Her famous quietness created the effect of distance and irony, rendering her feelings a mystery even to her children. Through her carefully presented absence Meynell managed to combine the traits every group expected from women. Her readers projected the life they wanted for her onto the accommodating blank space she was at such pains to clear for them.

The life her readers wanted her to live was, most often, the Angel in the House of Victorian legend. The term is an economical way to convey Meynell's Catholic piety, her semi-divine status as poetic "muse," her apparent dissociation from mundane concerns, and her role as the presiding genius of the home. The Victorians famously applied religious iconography to women's roles. The use of a religious vocabulary for women's household tasks justified child-care, cleaning, and cooking by making them holy acts, not tiring chores. Meynell seemed to provide the ideal subject for this conflation. Indeed, Coventry Patmore, the author of *The Angel in the House*, fell in love with Meynell and gave her the manuscript of his famous poem (Badeni, p. 105). It was one of her most cherished possessions, and she stoutly defended its poetic merit throughout her life. The role of the Angel required certain characteristics: a deft "woman's touch" in the home, a calm unruffled demeanor, personal beauty, and physical fragility, a modest shrinking from public view, and a mute martyrdom, constant self-sacrifice to the greater good of the family. At the end of the nineteenth century, popular opinion ascribed each of these qualities to Meynell in spite of the interesting fact that none of them fit her. Though Meynell's own personality was not remotely like the popular conception of the Angel, her admirers insisted on reinterpreting her in these terms.

To begin with, Meynell was not interested in most household tasks. She was entirely oblivious to the need for dusting or darning, she was inadequate at nursing, and the food at her home was "frugal and usually bad." The house was run on haphazard lines according to the servants' ideas (Badeni, pp. 85, 144). "It was at once humorous and pathetic . . . to see her mending," remembered Katharine Tynan (Viola Meynell, p. 146). For Victorian women, bad household management was profoundly humiliating, for a woman who could not manage the domestic sphere failed in her first duty

and called her very "womanliness" into question. Intellectual women were frequently suspected (and accused) of neglecting their home duties.⁴ In this context, one would think that Meynell's admirers would be alienated by her evident domestic inadequacy. But Meynell's abstraction from household affairs in no way interfered with her status as the incarnation of housewifery. Indeed, admirers transmuted Meynell's housewifely incompetence into proof that her mind was above gross materialism. Richard Whiting claimed that her suppers were "just to serve, like the banquets in the Iliad, to put away from you the desire of eating and drinking as a hindrance to the flow of soul" (Viola Meynell, p. 141).

Similarly, observers prized Meynell's apparent unworldliness as a blessed relief from the increasing number of politically active, articulate, angry women who were mobilizing for rights and respect during the late Victorian era. Meredith remembered: "that flash of quiet heaven / Your presence gave; till I can think / An angel in one flitted wink / Was with me" (Badeni, p. 137). Meynell's lofty serenity could be used as an instructive contrast to her messy, passionate, hardworking, vociferous New Woman contemporaries.

However, this idea is just as flawed as the notion that Meynell was a household genius. From adolescence, Meynell had a strong sense of outrage about women's situations. At the age of eighteen, she wrote in her diary: "Of all the crying evils in this depraved earth, ay, of all the sins of which the cry must surely come to Heaven, the greatest, judged by all the laws of God and of Humanity is the miserable selfishness of men that keeps women from work" (Badeni, p. 28). Nor was Meynell serene; she converted to Catholicism partly because "her passionate nature and the violence of her emotions frightened her" (p. 36). As an adult, Meynell was able to channel "the violence of her emotions" into political activities. She marched in various suffrage parades, sat on the platform at the Hyde Park demonstration in July 1912, and served as the president and vice-president of various suffrage organizations.⁵ Strangely, her suffrage work did not interfere with her Angel in the House image. Biographers of Meynell often preserve her ladylikeness by stressing that she disliked the suffragettes' militant tactics.⁶ G. K. Chesterton even managed to explain that Meynell's "feminism was unique because it really was feminine. In her own quiet way she was quite militant, but she was never the least masculine" (Vogt, pp. 209-210).

Meynell's angelic nature seemed to demand a concomitant bodily frailty. As Tricia Lootens points out in her important treatment of Victorian sainthood and canonicity, Victorian women who were associated with Angels had to fulfill a dual role: they had to have the silent grace associated with Mary, but simultaneously experience the bodily suffering expected

of a saint.⁷ Francis Thompson claimed: "Fragile she must always have been," and other writers explicitly associated her weakness with her holiness (Badeni, p. 79). Major Fitzroy Gardner reminisced, "She had the face of an angel, and alas! a far too frail physique."⁸ "Ethereal, rather than very real, she seemed to live with a nimbus of adoration round her," wrote Vita Sackville-West.⁹ However, this myth of Meynell's frailty was not entirely accurate. The only ailment Meynell suffered from was migraines. Whatever "weakness" she had did not prevent her from taking taxing horseback rides, striding on seven-mile walks, and enjoying long railroad trips (Badeni, pp. 158-159). The fact that she was able to bear eight children certainly indicates some physical strength and endurance. For most of her adult life, Meynell worked extremely hard; this supposedly frail woman spent her nights writing furiously against the clock to get copy for the next day's issue of the newspaper published singlehandedly by herself and her husband. At the age of fifty-four she went to America for a series of lectures which involved constant travelling as well as constant public speaking, and although she found the schedule tiring, she enjoyed it. (Similar American lecture tours wrecked the health of both Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley, neither of whom was considered to have "a far too frail physique.") This "ephemeral" woman outlived many of her apparently sturdier contemporaries, dying in 1922 at the age of seventy-five.

The ascription of ideal beauty to Meynell was just as misplaced as the three other myths we have examined: the assumptions of her domestic genius, her serenity, and her physical frailty. Photographs of Meynell indicate that her slimness is far more attractive by modern standards than it would have been at the turn of the century. (In 1909 Virginia Woolf found her physically unappealing, describing her as "spare and bony . . . a lank, slightly absurd, and altogether insignificant little body."¹⁰) The Victorians tended to value women who were either plump and dimpled, or Junoesque and majestic. Nor were Meynell's dark eyes, sallow complexion, and black hair particularly prized in the nineteenth century, where popular mythology associated bloneness, rosinness, and fairness with feminine attractiveness. However, Meynell's admirers read her slimness as a visible proof that her soul overpowered her body. Similarly, in the 1890s her drab, conventional gowns probably looked odd amidst the sage, amber, or teal draperies of her Aesthetic friends. However, her dowdiness was not read as a sign of her incapacity, but as proof of her elevated spiritual state. Marie Belloc-Lowndes recalled, "She was wearing a flounced skirt of smoke-grey crepe and a simple black hat. She moved among the women there, many of whom wore eccentric and startling costumes, as if she were a being belonging to another, and more rarified, sphere" (Vogt, p. 119). Meynell's unfashionable and even unattractive appearance fed straight into her Angelicism.

The final difficulty with idealizing Meynell lay in the simple point that she was a writer. "Thus we confront the paradox of canonizing a Victorian woman poet," Lootens explains. "She must be a heroine, and yet how can she? As an Angel in the House, she would presumably have no need to write: she could act as art directly" (p. 65). The fact that Meynell published her writing suggested an impulse towards publicity and an assertion of self-confidence that was difficult to assimilate into the Angel ideal. Moreover, the sort of writing Meynell produced was demanding, intellectual, and ambitious, tending toward the philosophical rather than the domestic, and exploring emotions like loneliness, pain, and deprivation far more often than merely pretty subjects. Meynell's admirers could endorse the fact that she was a poet, which seemed to demonstrate her soulfulness, but they had more difficulty with her essays, which seemed both too remote and too rigorous to be properly "feminine."

Nonetheless, Meynell's coterie managed to place her writing in a properly gendered context. Coventry Patmore wrote:

At rare intervals the world is startled by the phenomenon of a woman whose qualities of mind and heart seem to demand a revision of its conception of womanhood and an enlargement of those limitations which it delights in regarding as essentials of her very nature, and as necessary to her beauty and attractiveness as woman. . . . I am about to direct the reader's attention to one of the very rarest products of nature and grace—a woman of genius. (Badeni, pp. 98-99)

Patmore, interestingly enough, revises the whole definition of womanhood so as to accommodate Meynell. But he continues to draw the reader's attention to her non-literary qualities. Meynell seems to be "a woman of genius" because of her "heart" as much as her "mind." The rest of the passage emphasizes that her literature was produced by "nature and grace," not her own discipline and skill. Her poetic genius becomes something she does not control, is not responsible for, and is highly unusual ("one of the very rarest products"), so that Meynell's writing is both naturalized and marginalized at once.

Meynell herself continuously participated in these reconfigurations of her career. She often resisted her absorption into the generic ideal of Angelhood, instead interrogating different female roles and asserting her own individuality. These struggles tended to occur primarily in her prose essays and her feminist literary criticism.¹¹ Some of her poetry also stages this protest, as when Meynell pleads, "O be it heard, / That I am not a feather, but a bird."¹² "Not a feather but a bird": she is not ephemeral and fragile, but a being with body, agency, weight, direction, and intention. In "The Shepherdess," Meynell slyly undermines the notion of her own ladylikeness:

She holds her little thoughts in sight,
 Though gay they run and leap.
 She is so circumspect and right;
 She has her soul to keep.¹³

These lines seem to praise the propriety of female repression, as a virtuous Victorian lady ought to do. However, the verse is susceptible to a very different reading. Meynell juxtaposes the “little thoughts” which are visible and joyful, with the whole “soul,” which the shepherdess “keeps” private. Although this verse can be read as a precious Victorian effusion about girlish little thoughts, it actually says that these frivolous thoughts contrast with the darker soul the poet cannot reveal—and in that sense it is a quite un-Victorian exposure of the shallowness and insignificance of the conscious, and consciously feminine, mode of self-expression available to women writers.

Some of Meynell’s work, however, unambiguously perpetuates Angelic assumptions. For instance, “To One Poem in a Silent Time” describes the poet in painfully modest terms:

Who looked for thee, thou little song of mine?
 This winter of a silent poet’s heart
 Is suddenly sweet with thee. But what thou art,
 Mid-winter flower, I would I could divine. (*Poems*, pp. 40-41)

Here, Meynell is not the hard-working professional writer who crafted the poem, but the pleased and surprised recipient of a pretty gift. She cannot even “divine” what the poem is. “Divine” implies an instinctive guess, not a logical deduction—she thinks with her “heart,” not her “mind” (to use Patmore’s terms). The poem, moreover, is a “little” “mid-winter flower.” It is small, feminine, unimportant, and fleeting, and it is a spontaneous product of nature. “To One Poem in a Silent Time” replaces the threatening idea of herself as poetic genius with images reassuringly allying her with Victorian femininity.

Why did Meynell’s admirers insist on fictionalizing Meynell to this extent? Why made a strong poet into a frail paragon—and why did Meynell so frequently encourage these misattributions? One answer is that the figure of the Angel, insipid as it may seem to modern eyes, carried a peculiar erotic charge for Victorian writers, and by producing this frisson, Meynell drastically increased her popularity, while simultaneously working through some of her own psychological concerns. Two remarkable poems, by two of Meynell’s admirers, indicate how the language of Angelhood invoked, negotiated, and finally repudiated its subject’s sensuality.

Francis Thompson, the Catholic poet who fell in love with Meynell, insists that Meynell is purity itself, and that her body is merely a barrier to her soul: “I know not of her body till I find / My flight debarred the heaven

of her mind.”¹⁴ How could he explain the fact that she was a real, living woman? Only by imagining—in a devotion bordering on blasphemy—that she resembled Christ, for her divine spirit took on mortal form out of pitying love for fallen humans: “She took the cloistral flesh, the sexual veil, / Of her sad, aboriginal sisterhood; / The habit of cloistral flesh which founding Eve indued” (p. 29). Thompson makes the body itself into a nun’s dress, making her very flesh into the sign that she abjured the flesh.

When the poet and novelist George Meredith fell in love with Meynell, he too insisted on Meynell’s purity and bodilessness—yet he viewed that very disembodiment as profoundly erotic. Victorian readers had a sense of prurient delight when an apparently saintly woman, normally associated with the private sphere, suddenly displayed herself publicly. These readers desperately wanted to see the truth of her life or body, but enjoyed the complicated series of coverings which endlessly deferred that real truth. The erotic gaze is something of which Meynell was quite conscious, and which she frequently and successfully manipulated in her essays, by constantly indicating forthcoming autobiographical revelations which never quite occur.

In Meredith’s poem “To A. M.,” Meredith describes this voyeuristic pleasure:

And when the Lord of June bids her disclose
Her very heart, all bashfully she throws
An inner petal o’er the orange hue,
As one last plea; submitting to his view,
Yet virginally majestic while he glows. (*Prose and Poetry*, p. 32)

Although she reveals her “very heart,” she remains “virginally majestic,” a combination of purity and arousal remarkably akin to Thompson’s “sexual veil.” This paradox of the modest strip-tease recurs in an account of Meynell’s writing by Dixon Scott in 1914: “I can think of no prose-tissue . . . which presents a surface so free from the faintest falsity or blur, and that clings with so exquisite a closeness and transparency to the rippling body of the swiftly moving thought” (Badeni, p. 223). All three descriptions play with the notion of a woman veiled with transparent tissue—an apt image for the intermingling of privacy and publicity by which Meynell and her admirers were so fascinated.

Thompson and Meredith are, in different ways, obsessed with the need to frame their desire for Meynell’s body in heavenly terms, in order both to praise her and to exculpate themselves. Both insist on the body’s purity—an odd claim for a married woman with seven living children. If they allowed themselves to imagine her as a woman of ordinary sexual experiences, they would be killing the thing they loved. They adored the angelic Meynell, but if Meynell reciprocated these feelings, she would no

longer be the Angel. Meynell's Angelhood produced, shaped, and finally forbade Meredith's and Thompson's desires. It induced an irrevocably high-minded adoration, impossible to reduce to a carnal level. Meredith and Thompson, in this respect, articulated the pleasures shared by many of Meynell's readers.

By 1913, the Angel in the House was becoming increasingly unpopular, and Meynell's continuing identification with this figure made her admirers uneasy. The novelist Phyllis Bottome wrote:

Each time I saw Alice Meynell I felt that I was watching a magnificent creature—a tethered angel—suited for enormous distances and stately freedoms, closed into a narrow space behind the iron bars of a cage. The sense of this disciplined self-control was so severe, and yet so impassioned, that it hurt me. I wanted to break down the bars and I knew that I never could. A. M. meant never to have the bars broken down. (Badeni, p. 213)

Bottome reverses the standard Angelic iconography here, by depicting the Angel as a strong creature with powerful physical abilities, not an ephemeral, frail beauty. Her description also alludes to Matthew Arnold's famous account of Shelley as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."¹⁵ The connection transforms Meynell's Angelhood into a sign of her real affinity with the strong tradition of British poetry. Finally, paradoxically, it is the prisoner who jails herself through her powerful "self-control." Thus Bottome utilizes the Angel image, but recuperates it to signify Meynell's power, strength, and poetic genius. If Bottome's analysis is sad—if she recognizes the waste of Meynell's imprisonment in an outmoded and unhealthy feminine ideal—it is also profoundly respectful of the strength that such self-punishment required.

Meynell's Angelhood indeed became a cage, and every idealizing comment added another bar to it. The other female Aesthetes adored her. Mabel E. Wotton dedicated her book of short stories to Meynell as "perfect womanhood."¹⁶ Katharine Tynan told Meynell, "You will always fulfill one's highest ideal more than any other woman in the world could." She asserted, "You are my ideal woman of all now living" (Badeni, p. 146). Not even in death could Meynell escape the crushing burden of reverence. The wreath laid on her coffin called her a "saint of women" (Schlack, p. 112). Reduced to a universal icon, a generic ideal, Meynell risked losing her individuality both as a woman and a writer. When she became a "saint of women," Meynell herself disappeared.

Meynell's Angelicism not only satisfied her readers but also positioned her well with late-Victorian critics, who could easily incorporate her into the tradition of writing about female poets as saints and angels. In fact, Meynell seemed to resolve the problems presented by both Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning as female poetic ideals. Rossetti's

spinsterhood came under skeptical scrutiny by the sexologists at the turn of the century; she was sometimes depicted as a religious fanatic, and her opposition to marriage seemed suspiciously “hysterical” (Lootens, pp. 175-177). Similarly, by the turn of the century, critics diagnosed Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s pre-marriage physical suffering as a hysterical neurosis (pp. 150-157). In the turbulent decade of the 1890s, female poets seemed more problematic than ever; critics had to find ways of handling Amy Levy’s suicide, the lesbian relationship of the aunt and niece of “Michael Field,” and Rosamund Marriott Watson’s notorious sequence of marriages. In Alice Meynell, they at last had a poet whose whole personal life could be seen as exemplary.

But the very excess of critical praise for Alice Meynell’s life ended up harming her reputation in the long term. Since she embodied turn-of-the-century gender ideology so precisely, she seemed hopelessly outmoded once these beliefs disappeared. Lootens explains:

Transformation into a sanctified heroine of Victorian literary history thus entails layers of loss. Not only is the metaphoric sinner revised and edited to fit a transcendent character, but that character itself is both definitionally removed from the specificity and physicality of history and cast as an embodiment of feminine silence. . . . Yet those figures whose value resides in eternal femininity can remain sacred only by virtue of the fleeting authority of their canonizers’ sexual politics. (Lootens, pp. 73-74)

In other words, when Meynell was idealized, she lost her real character, and the transcendent icon she turned into was victimized by changing gender ideas. In the twentieth century, as the “angel” became the name for an imprisoning, hypocritical, misogynist identity, Meynell seemed a symbol of the worst excesses of Victorian domesticity—a sad irony for someone who was an active suffragist and feminist historian.

Today, it is virtually impossible to think about Meynell without confronting the notion of Angelhood. Hagiographic language is positively ubiquitous, appearing throughout memoirs, biographies, and criticism, its frequency testifying to how fundamentally, if often unconsciously, it shapes our reception of Meynell. If Meynell sometimes chafed against this oppressive idealization, she also tacitly fostered it by maintaining her mysteriously profound silence, refusing to enunciate those unruly aspects of her experiences and emotions which might have drawn public disapproval. By participating in the Angel myth, Meynell won enormous respect from critics and gratifying popularity from readers, while keeping her own carefully cherished privacy inviolate. Today it seems that the Angel myth tragically entrapped Meynell; but it is also true that Meynell cannily and constantly exploited her own Angelhood.

Meynell’s self-concealing strategy ultimately worked against her. While it satisfied the Victorian belief that women should not seek publicity, it

contradicted the Victorian expectation that women's writing was autobiographical self-revelation.¹⁷ Victorian readers might enjoy the erotic play of Meynell's promised, deferred self-revelations, but ultimately would see Meynell's reserve as a failure of "openness" and warmth. Meynell's self-protective writing also conflicted with the modernist interest in psychological readings, which Allon White has named "symptomatic readings," the technique of deriving theories about the author's state of mind from reading the text.¹⁸ Readers today might see her essays as annoying examples of Victorian artifice and etiquette. For their very different reasons, then, both Victorian and modernist readers expected to locate Meynell's private experiences in her prose, and when her popularity finally declined, it was partly because she succeeded in eluding them.

One of the most frustrated of these modernist readers was Virginia Woolf, who saw Meynell as a larger-than-life figure who embodied every gender idea Woolf was resisting. Since Woolf introduced the term "Angel in the House" as a dismissive name for Victorian virtue, it is not surprising that she had a strong reaction to the woman who owned the "Angel in the House" manuscript, and who had been loved by the author of that infamous poem. If Woolf reacted violently against this living Angel, however, she had a much more uncomfortable sense of fellowship with Meynell when she considered Meynell as a feminist activist and historical revisionist. Indeed, Woolf found in Meynell both her antithesis and her predecessor.

Woolf regarded Alice Meynell as a disturbing alternative version of herself. Meynell was a genteel, delicate woman at the center of an exciting literary clique, a woman who wrote experimental literature and expressed passionate feminist politics. Like Woolf, Meynell had been born into an intellectual, well-connected literary family, and grew up knowing the most prominent writers of her era. Woolf and Meynell were both considered to be among the most important living women writers of their respective generations. Even physically, the two women were similar, slender and pale, with large dark eyes and a knot of dark hair. Yet Meynell had actually participated in the unthinkable Victorian institutions of sentimental domesticity and self-sacrificial childbearing. When Woolf met her during a visit to Italy in 1909, she wrote: "Among the guests was a lean, attenuated woman, who had a face like that of a transfixed hare—the lower part was drawn out in anguish, while the eyes appealed piteously. This was Mrs. Meynell, the writer, who somehow made one dislike the notion of women who write" (*Diary*, 3:352-353). Since Meynell's saintly suffering, soulful gaze, and slender form so embodied the 1890s poetic ideal, Woolf's violent dislike of her figure can be seen as a repudiation of the entire period's aesthetic, a determination to set herself apart as a member of a younger group with very different ideas. She concludes: "Tepid people, timid and deco-

rous, never coin true words" (*Diary*, 3:352-353).

Twenty years later, Woolf's attitude toward turn-of-the-century timidity had mellowed slightly. When Woolf read a biography of Meynell in 1929, she mused:

When one reads a life one often compares one's own life with it. And doing this I was aware of some *sweetness* & dignity in those lives compared with ours—even with ours at this moment. Yet in fact their lives would be intolerable—so insincere, so elaborate; so I think—all this word paring & *sweetness* & charity. (*Diary*, 3:250; my italics)

Here Woolf uses "sweetness" as both a positive and a negative term. The word's flexibility conveys Woolf's shifting judgments, from envy to repudiation. She ends: "But its odd—this comparing that goes on as one reads a life—I kept thinking how little good could be said of me" (3:251). The "comparing" did indeed "go on." Indeed, when Woolf wrote that Meynell "look[ed] like a crucified saint," it was not bad description of Woolf herself (3:250). But when Woolf complains that Meynell resembles a "crucified saint," she is invoking that whole litany of self-sacrificing martyrdom with which the previous generation had so enveloped Meynell, and which looked annoyingly irrelevant (at best) to a postwar generation.

Woolf's physical revulsion not only reflected her feelings about the role Meynell represented, but was also an attempt to disavow Meynell's intellectual influence on her. After all, Woolf not only met Meynell, but also reviewed Meynell's *Hearts of Controversy* in 1917, and her own feminist criticism was largely shaped by her predecessor's example. Both women wrote similar essays on the same subjects, ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to Ruskin, and *A Room of One's Own* is itself marked by Meynell's unacknowledged influence.¹⁹ By insisting on Meynell's Angelhood—by relegating her to an irretrievably old-fashioned ideology—Woolf set up a wider chronological and cognitive space between herself and her predecessor than actually existed. The Angel idea served Woolf's unconscious needs, making Meynell more different and more distant from Woolf than she really was.

For the modernist generation, Meynell had become the Angel in the House entirely, her public persona swamping her literary merit. She was canonized so completely that she remained trapped when cultural mores changed around her. Yet the establishment of an identity is never simple. Meynell's establishment of herself as the veritable Angel in the House may have been her most remarkable narrative. Meynell used her own genius to produce a kind of mystic, beatified version of herself, and then spent her life in a dialectical engagement with her own idealization. The Angel was, tantalizingly, both truly herself and not herself at all: its elements of truth gave the image its popular appeal, and its elements of falsehood made it

useful as a decoy to distract readers from her private self. By associating herself with the Angel, Meynell won critical plaudits, acquired popular appeal, and protected her private thoughts. Her virtuous life positioned her well within the hierarchy of Victorian female poets. Her constant promise to reveal the real truth enticed readers, who were nonetheless relieved when their scrutiny was baffled and they were left with the same transcendental "saint of women" as ever. The public was fascinated by the way Meynell made every dream of femininity come true: wife, mother, martyr, Muse, suffragist, "a saint and a sibyl smoking a cigarette."²⁰ And the association between Meynell and the Angel was equally useful for her successor Woolf, though in a different way. If in the twentieth century we see Angelhood as a cage, we ought nonetheless to remember that, in the nineteenth century, the Angel's wings helped Meynell soar upwards into what her bedazzled admirers confidently if mistakenly believed was an eternal blue heaven of literary fame.

Notes

- 1 John S. Anson, "'The Wind is Blind': Power and Constraint in the Poetry of Alice Meynell," *SMY* 9 (Spring 1986): 37.
- 2 For instance, see Beverly Ann Schlack, "The 'Poetess of Poets': Alice Meynell Re-discovered," *WSs* 7, nos. 1-2 (1980): 111-126.
- 3 For biographical information, see her daughter's memoir: Viola Meynell, *Alice Meynell* (New York: Scribner, 1929); and June Badeni, *The Slender Tree: A Life of Alice Meynell* (Padstow, Cornwall: Tabb House, 1981).
- 4 Fictional examples include Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* and Mrs. Dunscombe in Charlotte Yonge's *The Three Brides*, both efficient reformers who are nonetheless dangerously incompetent household managers.
- 5 Badeni, p. 210; Elizabeth L. Vogt, "Honours of Mortality: The Career, Reputation and Achievement of Alice Meynell as a Journalistic Essayist," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1989, p. 209. Schlack, p. 111; Viola Meynell, p. 267.
- 6 Badeni, p. 210; Viola Meynell, p. 267.
- 7 Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Canonization* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 61.
- 8 Major Fitzroy Gardner, *More Reminiscences of an Old Bohemian* (London: Hutchinson, n.d. but c. 1926), p. 200.
- 9 Vita Sackville-West, "Introduction," *Alice Meynell: Prose and Poetry*, Centenary Volume (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 8. Hereafter cited as *Prose and Poetry*.
- 10 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), Appendix II, p. 353. Hereafter cited as *Diary*.
- 11 I discuss Meynell's essays in "Writing a Public Self: Alice Meynell's Unstable Equilibrium," forthcoming in *Women's Experience of Modernity*, ed. Ann Ardis.
- 12 Cited in Schlack, p. 124.

- 13 Alice Meynell, "The Shepherdess," *The Poems of Alice Meynell* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 51.
- 14 Francis Thompson, "Her Portrait," *Prose and Poetry*, p. 31.
- 15 Matthew Arnold, "Shelley," *Essay in Criticism: Second Series, Works* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 14:185.
- 16 Mabel E. Wotton, *Day-Books* (London, 1896).
- 17 One influential exponent of this theory was W. L. Courtney, author of *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904).
- 18 Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
- 19 For details, see Schaffer, "Writing a Public Self."
- 20 J. C. Squire, *London Mercury*, cited in Badeni, p. 245.