Evangelical novelist Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, who has been described as the “most prominent female anti-Catholic activist” in nineteenth-century England (Paz 271), expresses repeatedly in her writings the notion that Roman Catholicism was “masked atheism.” It was, according to Tonna, the antithesis of Christianity and “civilized” religion; at worst, it was the tool of the devil himself: a “synagogue of Satan.” Although Tonna’s vehement anti-Catholicism would have been considered extreme even by many of her Victorian contemporaries, her assertion reflects a concept frequently articulated in Victorian literature and culture, that Roman Catholicism was a fake religion—a mask or “sanctified face” concealing the most profane excesses and tendencies of a fallen human nature. An anti-Catholic pamphlet of 1851, by a writer called “Paphnutius,” also brims over with anxiety at the notion of profane concepts and deeds presented in the guise of Catholic doctrine and holy sacraments. Paphnutius describes the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist as “cannibalism,” yet alternately suggests that priests fool gullible female believers into accepting a fake replica of the body and blood of Christ: “They may even so far impose on the rabid appetite of the multitude to substitute [ . . . ] something exceedingly like human flesh [ . . . ] and so nimbly insert it, with thumb and finger, into

1. “Paphnutius” explains that he has taken his name after the fourth-century Egyptian bishop who, at the Council of Nicea, strenuously opposed mandatory celibacy for the clergy.
the mouth of the believer, telling her to shut her eyes, and open her mouth wide, and then she will see what the god will send her” (8).

The Catholic Church, according to Paphnutius, not only distributes fake communion (in a transaction implicitly compared to a sex act), but also creates fake women and fake men. He marvels,

That women should be more generally found to embrace this religion with peculiar ardour is extraordinary. We have generally been taught to believe that cannibalism is the vicious propensity of men rather than of women, but [...] the sex, “for softness formed, and sweet attractive grace,” displays a remarkable attachment to this revolting religion, the proportion of female [adherents] being ten to one of the other sex [...] (10)

Not only are women debauched and literally turned into “man eaters” in a Catholic communion, but young boys are systematically unmanned; the smells and bells, argues Paphnutius, are “addressed to the feminine part of a boy’s mind [...] the whole type and bearing of the [Mass] is eminently feminine” (22; emphasis in original). Finally, Paphnutius accuses this “gloomy and repulsive” religion of blood and death, of passing itself off as mere child’s play, “made to appear charming even to infants, and impress[ing] them with the idea that the temple is only a great baby-house, with a very large doll [statue of the Virgin Mary] in it—an idea enchanting to the young female mind” (27; emphasis in original).

I begin this book with quotes by Tonna and “Paphnutius” because they emphasize two facets of popular Victorian perceptions of Catholicism crucial to this study: first, the notion that Catholicism, as a “feminized” religion, was particularly appealing to women, and second, that Catholicism appears to be one thing (a valid denomination of Christianity), but is always something else in disguise (profanity masquerading as sanctity; men masquerading as women; a “satanic synagogue” painted as a doll’s house). Most anti-Catholic clergymen, novelists, and pamphleteers had little, if any, firsthand experience of Roman Catholicism, and their writings frequently present grotesque distortions of it. Nonetheless, their assertions about women’s affinity for Catholicism had at least some basis in real life. Catholicism generated tremendous interest and fear among both men and women in nineteenth-century Britain, to the extent that, as D. G. Paz claims, anti-Catholicism “was an integral part of what it meant to be Victorian” (299). This was particularly the case in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, a time when Roman Catholicism became increasingly visible in Victorian England. This study, focusing mostly on midcentury literary engagements with Catholicism, isolates a brief but intense period of
popular fascination—shading at times into hysteria—toward Rome. It focuses further on women writers because Victorian women were uniquely intrigued by Catholicism. As numerous female-authored texts suggest, women related to, and engaged with, popular notions of a marginalized, feminized Catholicism in distinctive and powerful ways.

This study is not specifically about anti-Catholicism, but about how women writers of all Christian denominations (both Protestant and Catholic) appropriated popular Victorian notions of Roman Catholicism to articulate a shared set of anxieties about the increasing secularization of the Victorian domestic sphere. Their writings, examined here in the context of numerous, male-authored sermons, tracts, and pamphlets, point toward an even more pressing concern, one shared by Victorian men and women alike: the gradual waning of orthodox religious belief in society as a whole. The extent of these preoccupations is demonstrated by the variety of writers addressed in this study: Evangelical, Low-Church Protestants (Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte Brontë, Mary Martha Sherwood); High-Church or “Anglo-Catholics” (Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Missing Sewell); Roman Catholic converts (Lady Georgiana Fullerton, Michael Field); a Congregationalist (Elizabeth Barrett Browning); and one agnostic (George Eliot). Many of these writers are deservedly entrenched in the literary canon; others, such as Fullerton and Sewell, have been long forgotten, and their work dismissed by twentieth-century critics. What ties the writers in this study together is not a shared attitude toward Catholicism, but the fact that all deploy representations of Catholicism, or “masked atheism,” to pull the mask off ostensibly sacred cows in Victorian culture: popular constructions of domesticity, romantic love, matrimony, motherhood, and family. Throughout this study, even in women’s texts that are ostensibly hostile to Catholicism, the most antireligious, “profane” menace that emerges is not Rome, but home. “Paphnutius” accuses the Catholic Church of disguising atheism beneath an alluring façade of domestic comfort—“a great baby-house . . . enchanting to the young female mind.” Women writers, however, suggest repeatedly that Victorian domestic ideology itself, a secularized religion of hearth and home, masks other forms of atheism, and other, hidden threats to women’s moral and spiritual integrity.

The notion that Catholic tropes can be usefully employed as a form of cultural critique has been well established by Jenny Franchot and other scholars; this study explores female-authored cultural criticism motivated specifically by anxieties about the disappearance of God in the modern world. Jenny Franchot, in her study of American antebellum writers, argues that “anti-Catholicism operated as an imaginative category of discourse through which antebellum American writers of popular elite
fictional and historical texts indirectly voiced the tensions and limitations of mainstream Protestant culture” (xvii). Not only can images and representations of Catholicism provide a powerful vocabulary for social protest, but they can also, as Ellis Hanson, Ruth Vanita, Frederick Roden, Martha Vicinus, and Patrick O’Malley have all demonstrated, help marginalized groups, such as gays, lesbians, and “spinsters,” create a sense of shared identity in contradiction to dominant cultural norms and repressive roles. Catholic tropes could prove endlessly versatile: Vanita, for example, discusses how the Virgin Mary became “a site of free signification” for Protestant writers, who, unhampered by Catholic concerns about blasphemy, were “free to use the idea of Mary in transgressive ways” (19). Vanita’s notion of “free signification” could usefully be applied to other elements of Catholicism besides the Virgin Mary. As texts in this study demonstrate, women writers adapted, revised, and even “reformed” multiple aspects of Catholicism, including auricular confession, the cult of the saints, and transubstantiation.

Although Catholicism, employed as a literary trope, was frequently antithetical to “real” Roman Catholic practices and doctrine, it would be a mistake, for the purposes of this study, to regard it entirely as free play or a set of alluring but empty signifiers. Some women writers who appropriated Catholic imagery, such as Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, enacted “free signification” in sophisticated and deliberate ways; others, such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna and Mary Martha Sherwood, stumbled into “free signification” out of religious bigotry and a lack of substantial information about Catholicism. All of these women, however, with the single exception of George Eliot, identified themselves as Christians, and all professed a sincere belief in fundamental Christian tenets, chief among them the belief in God as the creator of the universe, the redemption of humanity through Christ’s life and death, and the immortality of the soul. Writing about religious topics, for these women, was not merely “play.” An acknowledgment of their religious identities and motivations is crucial to understanding how they perceived Catholicism, why they cared about it, and how they represented it in their writing. Although numerous studies have explored Victorian women’s resistance to domestic ideology, most have emphasized secular rather than religious motivations for such critiques.

Victorian women were, of course, vitally interested in temporal issues of money, property, legal rights, employment, and education; and religious experience is inextricably bound up with issues of gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality. What often becomes obscured, however, is the fact that, in a culture that defined “good” women as predominantly moral and spiritual creatures, many women defined agency, first and foremost, as the ability to discern God’s will and act upon it. As the writings in this study demonstrate, many women sought to practice their religions as their consciences dictated, and to maintain lives in conformity with the religious identities they constructed for themselves. My analysis of these texts attempts to capture some of the anxiety and frustration Victorian women of all denominations experienced, as the demands of an increasingly modern, industrialized, and secular culture proved incompatible with traditional Christian understandings of the “good life.” The busy Victorian wife, mother of half a dozen children, and mistress of a comfortable middle-class household, would, by secular standards, have achieved the “good life.” But where was the time for reflection, solitude, and prayer? Would the overwhelming devotion to husband and children enjoined by her society diminish or eclipse her love for God? How could she live a life of simplicity and charity while trying to keep up a respectable domestic establishment? Was her family life, as Evangelical tract writers promised, a foretaste of heaven on earth, or was it indeed “masked atheism”?

Just as Catholicism, in the Victorian imagination, was always something “other” than it purported to be, this project ultimately invites readers to look beyond preoccupations with Catholicism and gender to something much larger. This inquiry begins with a focus on women writers, in part because both the terms “Catholicism” and “home”—despite appearing mutually contradictory to many Victorians—would have summoned up images of the feminine. Morality (but not theology) and the home were deemed “respectable” subjects for women writers, and many female novelists, as Christine Kreuger has argued, found “in scripture calls to essentially literary vocations as preachers, prophets, and evangelists,” authorizing them to “re-envision women’s lives and represent them authoritatively” (9). But women writers, although keenly interested in the problems of their own sex (foremost among them, challenges to female authority and agency), were not content to stop there. They wanted, like men, to help reform the nation, and even the world. In her Personal Recollections, Charlotte Tonna describes her longing to help defend England against the snares of Rome, after the infuriating passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829:
But suppose a woman feels herself called on to take a personal interest in public affairs, what can she do, without stepping out of her proper sphere, and intruding into the province of the superior sex? I am going to tell you what a woman may do; for of us it may be surely said, “Where there’s a will there’s a way.” When we set our hearts upon any thing, we are tolerably enterprising and persevering too, in its attainment; and this natural love of pleasing ourselves may be turned to a very good account. (292)

For many women writers, that “way” was through fiction, and other works designed for women to consume (and read to their children) by the fireside. Historian William Lecky argued in 1869 that “[t]he family is the centre and archetype of the State, and the happiness and goodness of society are always in a very great degree dependent upon the purity of domestic life” (282). Lecky’s view of the family was a popular one: why else would anti-Catholic writers point to Jesuit infiltrations of the home as their primary example of England’s susceptibility to Romish corruption? And how else could Scottish domestic novelist Catherine Sinclair consider her *Popish Legends and Bible Truths* (1852) of such national importance that she begged her far more famous contemporary, writer and critic J. G. Lockhart, to review it favorably? In a very deferential, apologetic letter of 1852, Sinclair explains to Lockhart her motivation for writing this volume: she is upset by the “clandestine means in daily action throughout the society of Edin[burgh]—at present to beguile the young over to Jesuitism.” *Popish Legends* is intended to provide answers to “these controversial questions [about Roman Catholicism] by which very inexperienced young Protestants are now being misled without the knowledge of their own parents.” She continues:

Much of my influence in this attempt must of course depend on the opinions of the press, & to you, whom I consider at the head of criticism in this country. [. . .] During the last twenty years, I have written fifteen volumes [. . .] and by subsequent editions there are now 57,000 volumes sold in England. [. . .] My works are all translated into German & French, & I have been honored with three letters from her Majesty, who reads them


4. *Popish Legends and Bible Truths* is not itself a novel, but a long polemical work warning young people of the dangers of Roman Catholicism. However, one might consider Sinclair’s later novel, *Beatrice* (1852) (half of which is set in polite drawing rooms, the other half in gloomy castles and dungeons), a novelistic version of *Popish Legends*. 
regularly.—In the world of criticism my works have all remained unknown for except a few of the daily newspapers, no opinion either favourable or otherwise has ever yet been given of them. The sanguine hope of being favourably noticed is now nearly extinct,—& those are in the grave for whose sake, I should most deeply have valued a good word from the public […] I have done for my new volume, what I never did for any of the others in asking whether you will second in my defence by your influence the earnest endeavor I have made in this volume to warn the young. . . excuse this intrusion from one who has long known you & yours […].

In this letter, Sinclair, whose work undoubtedly attracted many female readers, including Queen Victoria, begs a figurehead of the male literary establishment for public recognition. Her request for Lockhart’s approval is based not on the merits of her writing (or even her motherly concern for specific children of her acquaintance), but on a fact they would both (presumably) agree on: the future of the United Kingdom was in great jeopardy.

This awkward piece of communication from a relatively obscure woman writer to a lionized male writer might have been deemed audacious for several reasons, including the fact that it is Sinclair who invites Lockhart to assist her in a mission of national importance. More often, women writers longed for invitations from the male establishment; they craved the authority wielded by male preachers and orators, who thundered in pulpit and Parliament against England’s enemies. In regard to Catholicism as a threat to national security, most women and men were on the same page. What sets women’s writings on Catholicism apart is their construction of the home (often beset by Jesuit invaders) as a metonym for entities they were not authorized to write about: the nation and the world. Catholicism enabled women to present a far more pessimistic and critical view of the home than that embraced in popular culture, but to stop there would be to emphasize the differences between Victorian men and women much more than their similarities. What fascinates me most is how unified the majority of Victorians were, both in their terror of Roman Catholicism and in their anxieties about secularism. While this book ostensibly focuses on women writers, the voices of their male counterparts are far from silent. Masked Atheism places women’s writings within a rich context of male-authored sermons, tracts, and pamphlets, and also emphasizes how often women’s texts echo and mirror these documents.

This study also proclaims to be about Catholicism, but it is equally concerned with Protestant discourses and Protestant identities. This seems appropriate, given that Catholicism was often depicted as danger-
ously indistinguishable from virtuous Protestantism. What authorized most critics of Catholicism in the Victorian era was not gender identity but Protestant identity. As Jenny Franchot states of nineteenth-century American anti-Catholic rhetoric, “the Protestant invective against and fascination with Rome were clearly symptomatic of the modern West’s withdrawal from a cohesive spirituality. […] [T]he real enemy […] was not Rome but a ghostly skepticism that would soon destroy even Rome’s power” (xxvii). While this study supports Franchot’s claim that Protestants utilized anti-Catholicism to condemn secularism, it also demonstrates that Catholics shared Protestants’ concerns about secularism. Moreover, as some writers in this study demonstrate, pro-Catholic discourse could also serve as a powerful cultural critique both of Victorian domesticity and of secularism at large.

British Victorians’ responses to Catholicism, still so compelling to modern-day scholars through their drama, their outrageousness, their prurience, and—in the best instances—their originality and creativity—functioned, in part, as an elaborate mask for social discourse. Under cover of the “masks” of anti-Catholicism, pro-Catholicism, or decided ambivalence, Victorian writers could articulate concerns about a phenomenon deeply disturbing to nineteenth-century believers: a secular world in which human identity itself—not merely religious identities or gender identities—would demand reassessment and reconfiguration, this time without the aid or comfort of Christian vocabularies, assumptions, or worldviews.

"Loving the creature"

*The Protestant Evangelical Legacy*

The majority of women writers in this study were Protestant, and inevitably their knowledge of Catholicism was more often gleaned from hearsay and propaganda than firsthand experience or observation. A study of this nature cannot attempt to provide an accurate picture of Victorian Catholicism; rather, its goal is to lead readers back to Protestant discourses, and ways in which they contributed to problems inherent within domesticity.⁵ Scholars of the period are of course well acquainted with the cultural cliché of the Angel in the House; it was a powerful cultural symbol, but like

⁵ For more information on the history and practices of Victorian Roman Catholics, see Norman’s *English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century* (1984) and Mary Heimann’s *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (1995).
most gender-based ideologies, as Mary Poovey argues, “both contested and always under construction […] always in the making, […] always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formations” (Uneven Developments 3). The Protestant Evangelical revival contributed greatly to the popular notion of home and family as the locus of the sacred. Yet almost on the heels of Evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism became increasingly visible in British culture due to a combination of factors, including the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the Oxford Movement within the Church of England, the “Papal Aggression” of 1851, and the rapid establishment of both Anglo- and Roman Catholic religious communities.6,7 Evangelical Protestantism may have fostered Victorian notions of the domestic sphere in their infancy, but the discourses surrounding the Catholic revival, decades later, prompted writers to interrogate and critique Victorian Protestant domesticity as a mature and socially entrenched institution.

The fact that so many midcentury women writers employed images of “antidomestic” and “profane” Catholicism into their critiques of domesticity, attests to the extreme degree of frustration generated by the Evangelical Protestant legacy. As Victorian female-authored texts frequently attest, Evangelical Protestant constructions of both domesticity and femininity were fraught with contradictions. Victorian society called for devout wives

---


7. In The Oxford Movement in Context, Peter Nockles explains the origin of the term “Anglo-Catholic.” Although “Anglo-Catholic” was originally interchangeable with the term “Anglican,” Nockles notes that “the label increasingly was appropriated [in the nineteenth century] by the Tractarian party. […] Later generations of the [Oxford Movement’s] followers […] would claim the term ‘Anglo-Catholic’ exclusively for themselves” (41–42). I use this term to describe women writers affiliated with the Oxford Movement, which sought, among other goals, “a revival of an ever-increasing number of beliefs and practices from the Church of England’s pre-Reformation heritage” (Reed xxi). Aspects of this transformation included “the revivals of religious communities and the practice of confession,” as well as “changes in worship, church furnishings, and extra-liturgical practices” (xxi); changes that appeared, to many Protestants, as a dangerous blurring of distinctions between Protestant and Catholic. While Anglo-Catholics, members of the Church of England, insisted on a clear distinction between themselves and Roman Catholics, they were frequently represented in the popular press as Papists in Protestant clothing. In this study I follow Michael Wheeler’s lead in referring to all members of the Church of England (including Anglo-Catholics) and Dissenters as “Protestant,” and Roman Catholics as “Catholic”. This binary is admittedly somewhat crude, but I use it (as Wheeler does) for “convenience” (11).
and mothers to preside over morally pure homes, but the domestic realities of women's lives threatened to negate this moral power. Mary Poovey notes that Protestantism, by valuing the family and asserting the “priesthood of all believers,” male and female, elevated women's status, but at the same time “rigidly emphasized the patriarchal family organization ratified by Scripture . . . [and] tended, in practice, to restrict women's activity to narrowly defined domestic duties” (7). Monica Cohen highlights the renunciatory impulse of domesticity, noting, for example, that Dinah in Eliot's *Adam Bede* accepts domestic life as “a career whereby loving the creature [a phrase Cohen defines as “a life devoted to homecare”] entails an unparalleled sacrifice: the sacrifice of a religious self” (134).

Poovey and Cohen both remark upon the ways in which domesticity creates a defined, quasi-professional role for women yet limits them from complete agency. Yet the depth and complexity of the domestic woman's dilemma extends even further. As texts in this study repeatedly demonstrate, the issue for many women was not simply limited choices, diminished power, or even fewer opportunities for religious activity. More to the point, the Household Angel, so frequently depicted as an ethereal, spiritual, practically disembodied entity, was imprisoned within the realm of the material. By “material,” I mean anything that Victorians might have considered antithetical to—or a distraction from—the cultivation and awareness of the sacred in everyday life. Of course, this category includes actual physical objects: In a culture experiencing economic prosperity and an unprecedented standard of living, middle-class domestic comforts no doubt worried devout Victorians who equated suffering and asceticism with moral heroism. As George Eliot notes of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, “She could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery” (5–6).

A larger “material” obstacle for the writers in this study, however, was the body—especially the unruly female body and its many demands. Women’s natural longings for sexual and emotional gratification were further stimulated in a culture that, as Robert Polhemus argues in *Erotic Faith* (1990), increasingly based its notion of transcendence on human erotic fulfillment rather than an apprehension of an otherworldly divinity (1). The writers in this study demonstrate no small amount of concern that even women's “vocation” of marriage and motherhood, ironically, could interfere with their spiritual agency. Although the phrase “loving

---

8. Carol Christ makes a similar claim—that the ideal of husband as a woman's spiritual guide coexisted uneasily with notions of a morally superior "Angel in the House" (152).

9. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall point out, “Women who had encountered real religion were often worried about the effects which marriage would have on their spiritual lives,
the creature,” as Cohen suggests, implies the love of home comforts, more frequently it was used to denote idolatry. As sermons, tracts, novels, and other writings reveal, nineteenth-century believers, both Protestant and Catholic, were preoccupied with the sin of idolatry, which they frequently describe as “creature-worship.” Although idolatry could be the substitution of anything in the place of God (such as, most famously, the Israelites’ golden calf), “creature-worship” was most frequently described as the act of loving another human being as (or instead of) God. Although men such as John Henry Newman expressed anxieties about idolatry, women seemed to have been especially concerned about it. Sermons against idolatry permeate Christina Rossetti’s devotional prose; Charlotte Yonge worries about it in her correspondence; and, as this study demonstrates, women novelists and poets return almost obsessively to the violation of the first commandment in their creative work. If Victorian women were tempted toward idolatry, it is not difficult to see why. As “naturally” selfless beings, they were expected to attach themselves to parents, husbands, and children. While devotion to family might seem only admirable in our own time and culture, family as a potential obstacle to the life of the spirit seemed, to at least some Victorians, problematic indeed. And of course, the sexual dimension of romantic love could also unsettle those aspiring toward more transcendent goals.

This study concerns itself not only with the notion of domesticity, but also with constructs of female identity, as the two were so closely intertwined. The secularism of the domestic sphere had both temporal and spiritual implications for women. From a more immediate perspective, material domesticity threatened women’s identity because Protestant ideology posited female piety as an essential component of femininity.10 John Angell James, in Sermons to Young Women (1852), states that “[i]t is in the female bosom [. . .] that piety finds a home on earth. The door of women’s heart is often thrown open to receive this divine guest, when man refuses it an entrance” (16). Yet just as women are privileged by their susceptibility to religious feeling, they are all the more degraded if they deny it: “An infidel of either sex is a foe to our species,” continues James, “[. . .] but a female infidel is the most dangerous and destructive of the furies” (16). Similarly, Harvey Marriot, in Sermons on the Character and Duties of Women (1832), states that “[a] professed infidel among men is whether they would become too concerned with worldly matters [. . .] to allow enough space for spiritual life” (90).

10. Patrick O’Malley emphasizes the intricate links between gender and religion in the nineteenth century; he argues that “the production of nineteenth century genders and sexualities so persistently both shapes and is shaped by that of religious identities and practices that cultural studies must consider them in relation to each other” (7).
nothing regarded, whilst the woman who manifested herself ashamed of her religion would, by the public voice, be named a monster in society [. . .]. Hence women have much influence, from the very circumstance of its being expected that they should not be professedly irreligious” (7; emphasis in original).

While male preachers admonished women not to lose their religious faith, it never seems to have occurred to them—as it did to a number of women writers—that the demands of family and home could stand in the way of it. Florence Nightingale (who at one time nearly joined a Catholic sisterhood) complained bitterly of “the degree to which [the Evangelicals] have raised the claims upon women of 'Family'—the idol they have made of it. [. . .] They acknowledge no God, for all they have said to the contrary, but this Fetich” (qtd. in Allchin 115).

Aside from questions of female identity, this is where the stakes, for some women, became even higher. For if the demands of the everyday, domestic world obscured women's view of God in this life, then it seemed unlikely that they would see Him in the next. And to a woman who believed, as did so many Victorians, in the reality of hell and eternal damnation, this would have been a most terrifying thought indeed.

Women Writers’ Appropriation of Pro- and Anti-Catholic Discourse

Evangelical Protestantism was a religion of the Word, and appropriately it proselytized through the printed word: sermons, tracts, and pamphlets that inevitably colored women's representations of the domestic sphere. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a second wave of religious discourse influenced women writers. Victorian women and men of all classes and denominations would have been saturated with texts about Catholicism. In an 1853 issue of the Rambler, England’s foremost Catholic periodical, an anonymous British Catholic complains of the ubiquity of anti-Catholic sentiment in popular literature of the day:

11. For further information on the centrality of the home and family in Protestant Evangelicalism, see Ian Bradley’s Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians (1976) and Elisabeth Jay's Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel (1979). As for Florence Nightingale, Roman Catholic beliefs and organizations (especially orders of nursing sisters) had a large impact on her, and tensions between Catholic and Protestant sisters, nurses, and patients (in addition to anti-Catholic sentiment back home) proved a sizable challenge for her nursing work in the Crimea. For further information, see Gillian Gill's Nightingales: The Extraordinary Upbringing and Curious Life of Miss Florence Nightingale (2005).
[T]he miscellaneous literature of the country is so infected with this anti-Popish mania, that a Catholic is never safe from some offensive or insulting insinuation or accusation, whatever kind of book he takes up. Go into a railway carriage, and ensconcing yourself snugly in a well-cushioned corner, prepare to wile away an hour or two with a cheap edition of a novel: before you have passed the next station, the author is flinging a handful of mud in your face, and suggesting crimes against the clergy and laity, as a body, which revolt the commonest sense of decency. [. . .] For what we have said of fiction and travels applies to every species of literary work. In the strictest sense, it is not safe to put any book into the hands of the young without first examining its contents. ("Protestant Authors," 94; emphasis in original)

One cannot help but suspect that the “young person” in question here is—like Podsnap’s blushing daughter in Our Mutual Friend (1864–65)—female. While women’s understanding of Catholic teaching and doctrine may have been incomplete or even at times misinformed, what was readily available to them, as this Rambler essay attests, was Protestant constructions of the Church of Rome (and, by implication, reading material that was often prurient and sexually suggestive). Women were not, moreover, passive consumers of anti-Catholic messages, but actively participated, alongside of men, in generating them. Despite D. G. Paz’s assertion that anti-Catholicism in Victorian England was “more exclusively a male activity” (274), a huge number of women contributed to the controversy with their pens.12 “Miscellaneous literature” was the only avenue through which a woman, barred from the pulpit, could publicly disseminate her theological views. Very often, those “cheap novels” which so affronted the Catholic railway passenger were authored—and consumed—by women.13 Women writers attacked the Catholic Church just as aggressively as their male counterparts, with a vehemence that probably would have been deemed unladylike in reference to any other topic. Charlotte Elizabeth

12. Paz suggests that women were, at best, passive participants in anti-Catholic activities, explaining that “women could best combat popery by being nurturers: by keeping alive the issues of the day in their households, by teaching Protestantism to their children, and by encouraging their husbands and their brothers to be active in the Protestant cause” (273).
13. In the Garland Reprint Series of Victorian “Novels of Faith and Doubt” selected by Robert Lee Wolff, eleven of the twenty-one “Catholic and Anti-Catholic” novels are authored by women, and eleven of the twenty-five “Tractarian and Anti-Tractarian Novels” (that is, novels relating to the Anglo-Catholic movement) are by women as well. Wolff’s survey, although broad, is far from comprehensive: considering the hundreds of long-forgotten titles he omits (such as the anticonvent novels I discuss in chapter 3), women’s novels of Catholic religious controversy may well represent more than half of the total. See Wolff’s Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England (1977) for the specific authors and titles Wolff selected for the Garland series.
Tonna, for example, was particularly harsh; in her autobiography she describes the Catholic Church (alongside her many other colorful epithets for it) as “an apple of Sodom, beneath the painted rind which is a mass of ashes and corruption” (*Personal Recollections* 150).

Tonna and other women writers, in declaring their aversion to Catholicism, repeated many of the arguments made by clergymen and other male authors. Mid-Victorian opponents to Catholicism, both men and women, were responding to a series of political and religious events, beginning with Catholic Emancipation in 1829. The notion of Catholic landowners attending university, participating in elections, and sitting in Parliament aroused fears that Rome was slowly invading England with the aid of a vast network of sinister Jesuit spies. Thus Catholicism was constantly depicted as dangerously foreign and un-English. As Kevin Morris notes, “[T]he worse Catholicism was pictured, the better Britain and its rulers seemed. It was useful as a demonstration of what Christianity and Englishry were not, and so had a rôle in the process of national redefinition” (214). Other common accusations against Catholicism, as outlined by Morris and D. G. Paz, include the following: it was superstitious and irrational; Catholic priests were “bloodthirsty and scheming” (Paz 60–61); Catholicism was, in the popular press, “an effective vehicle for [tales of] sex and death” (Paz 62). It was, furthermore, a religion marred by “idolatry, saints . . . miracles and fanaticism . . . celibacy, monasticism . . . confession . . . asceticism,” and thus proved its “irrelevance to British needs in the modern, scientific, democratic, freedom-loving, progressing age” (Morris 214).

What made Catholicism particularly relevant to women and to women writers, however, was its perceived threat to hearth and home. The most frequent accusation against Roman Catholicism was that, as a religion which elevated celibacy and monastic life over matrimony, it schemed to undermine the primacy and integrity of the English family. Anti-Catholic novels such as *Father Clement* (1823), *Beatrice* (1852), and *Under Which Lord?* (1879) present Jesuit priests infiltrating the family primarily through its women, romantic and weak-minded souls whose religious conversion is described in terms of sexual seduction. In Elizabeth Lynn Linton’s *Under Which Lord?* the heroine goes on to divulge her husband’s secrets in the confessional, ship her daughter off to the convent, and transfer the family fortunes to the pope’s coffers.

Poisoning the home in its pursuit of Mammon, the Church of Rome was frequently depicted as a commercial, “public” religion in contrast to the domestic, private creed of Evangelical Protestantism. Taking
advantage, no doubt, of growing cultural anxieties about industrialism, utilitarianism, and consumerism, other writers depicted Catholicism as a growing, rapacious, multinational corporation. Benjamin Scott, for example, explains that Catholicism is successful because it can best market itself: “It is unhappily the case in this world of ours, both in commerce and in religion, that the corrupted debased, adulterated article passes too frequently for the genuine and the pure, upon the word of the loudest and boldest asservator” (209). The language of the marketplace also emerges in anticonvent novels. Such books depict the convent not as home, but factory, which transforms living, breathing women into faceless automatons: “That system [the convent] is antagonistic to the laws of nature and the instincts of humanity,” insists Eliza Smith Richardson in The Veil Lifted (1865); “and, when they [the nuns] became its devotees, they entered upon a life-long warfare with these blessed laws and instincts” (151). Richardson and her contemporaries present nuns as less than human, stripped of both their individuality and their womanly feelings, mere mechanical cogs in the great Romish system.

Many women writers, such as Charlotte Brontë (chapters 1 and 2) and Mary Martha Sherwood (chapter 3), made materialistic, idolatrous Catholicism a signifier for the home stripped of its Protestant sanctity through the modern forces of capitalism and secularism. However, Roman and Anglo-Catholic writers, such as Lady Georgiana Fullerton (chapters 1 and 2) and Elizabeth Missing Sewell (chapter 3), drew upon Catholicism to develop the idea that female sanctity might flourish best outside an increasingly materialistic, worldly home.14 Fullerton, for example, upheld women’s spiritual prerogative to confess their sins directly to God (albeit through the intercession of a male priest) rather than to their husbands. Sewell, in the Experience of Life (1852), incorporates Anglo-Catholic veneration for the virgin martyrs to construct the ideal of a heroic vocation to chastity, one superior to the call of marriage and motherhood. For these writers, Catholicism presented an alternative set of values through which to view and critique the Protestant domestic sphere. This juxtaposition of positive and negative representations of Catholicism in women’s texts reveals a fascinating commonality: the same anxieties about secular and

14. By addressing the varied spectrum of attitudes toward Catholicism as demonstrated by Victorian writers, I hope to shed light on some relatively unexamined facets of midcentury Victorian literary appropriations of “Romanism.” Recent studies, including Susan Griffin’s Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (2004) and Diana Peschier’s Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë (2005), while compelling, focus almost exclusively on negative literary depictions of Roman Catholicism.
material domesticity that led some women to condemn Catholicism in their writing compelled others to celebrate it.

Given that Catholicism, in the Victorian imagination, was emblematic of the clash between sacred and secular, it was a promising medium through which women writers could express anxieties about the secularization of the ostensibly sacred home. For many women writers, as well as for male writers, Catholicism served as metonym for a godless world. It was common to compare Catholicism directly with paganism; Benjamin Scott’s *Contents and Teachings of the Catacombs at Rome* (1853), an address to working men which drew heavily upon Charles Maitland’s *Church in the Catacombs* (1846), employs architectural evidence to argue that the church of Rome has become, since ancient times, corrupted by pagan beliefs and practices. In *The Image-Worship of the Church of Rome Proved to be Contrary to Holy Scripture* (1847), Tyler J. Endell, the rector of St. Giles in the Fields, London, describes the Catholic veneration of saints as a pagan practice, exclaiming, “How any distinction can be maintained between the miraculous images of the heathen world of which we read in ancient mythology, and in the fabulous histories of pagan Rome, on the one hand, and, on the other, those miraculous images of the Virgin Mary . . . we cannot see” (264). An anonymous sermon entitled *Popery like Paganism* (1840?) states that “the resemblance between Popery and Paganism in Italy strikes every impartial observer. The names of things only are changed” (1).

Catholicism’s presumed emphasis on idolatry and superstitious religious practices also aligned it with the most menacing aspects of Empire—another threat to the civilized domesticity of home. Mary Martha Sherwood, in her autobiography, describes how pagan idolatry followed her family on board a voyage home from India:

I have little worth recording of our long sea voyage, saving that we had one awful storm, which had scarcely passed away before a black Ayah, who had charge of two English children, passengers on board, made an attempt to mislead our two little ones, by drawing the figure of some Hindoo god on the deck, and making poojah (worship) to it, and getting my children to do the same with hers. I found them bowing and bending before the grim figure, though I think they had no idea what they were really doing, yet I was very much shocked, and very angry with the elder ones especially, for not hindering it. (507)

As terrifying as the “black Ayah” was to Sherwood, she seems to have made no distinction between her foreign shipmate and the Catholic idolaters at home, whom she attacked vigorously over the course of
an extremely prolific literary career. Indeed, Catholics were repeatedly compared to Muslims and “Hindoos.” Protestant missionary W. Keane, in Romanism and Hinduism, states that “[i]n places where the Romanists are at all numerous in India, it were not easy to distinguish between the illuminated altars, and the gay and noisy processions of them and the Heathens (10); [. . .] [W]here, is the difference between the oft-reiterated Sanskrit ‘Mantras,’ counted by strings of beads, and the Latin Rosary of ‘ten Aves and a Pater’ again and again repeated? Are they not both alike ‘the sacrifice of fools?’” (11). In Beatrice, Catherine Sinclair’s heroine makes a similar comparison between “the dignified purity of a [Protestant] spiritual worship [. . .] which needs no visible object of adoration” and the Catholic practice of venerating statues and crosses. “We pity the Egyptians for worshipping bulls, cats, and leeks, and the South Sea Islanders for adoring pigs,” exclaims Beatrice, “but prayers to a wooden image are equally incomprehensible!” (II:76). This dimension of anti-Catholic language is especially significant, for it suggests one way in which anxieties about the imperial Other informed fears of the domestic, Catholic Other. Ultimately, such comparisons between Catholics and Hindoos portray the insidious influence of Catholicism in England as representative of further-flung, even more mysterious, beliefs and practices threatening the British Empire. As Susan Griffin argues of Sinclair’s novel, for example, Beatrice exposes fears that “the growing heterogeneity of the British Empire threatens its very identity” and “focuses on the weaknesses of modern British bodies, depicting their vulnerability as emblematic of that of the British Empire” (115).

Aside from its foreign associations, Catholicism was also useful to women writers in addressing anxieties about a rising middle-class standard of living and a domestic culture increasingly devoted to the pursuit of physical comfort. Anti-Catholic writers charged Rome with pampering the body at the expense of the spirit; Hugh M’Neile argues that eventually Rome “began to draw down . . . the very shape of God himself, into an exterior and bodily form [. . .]. They hallowed it, they fumed it, they sprinkled it [. . .] till the soul by this means of over-bodying herself [. . .] forgot her heavenly flight, and left the dull and droiling carcase to plod on in the old road [. . .] of outward conformity” (23). This equation

15. According to Miriam Burstein, another popular tactic was to compare Catholicism and Judaism; “most Protestant denominations represented Roman Catholicism and Judaism as structurally and temperamentally identical, a claim stretching back at least to Martin Luther. [. . .] Victorian Protestants accused both religions of substituting man-made laws for biblical truths; of elevating priestly authority above private judgment; and of forbidding laity access to the Bible” (133).
between Catholicism and gross corporeality led some women writers, such as Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* (chapter 1), to appropriate Catholicism to represent the flame of female spiritual agency virtually quenched in a tide of sensual pleasures: Jane committing “Catholic” idolatry in her sexual passion for Rochester. Christina Rossetti, on the other hand, did not represent Catholicism so negatively; rather, her Anglo-Catholicism informed her deep suspicion of the physical comforts of domestic life. In “Triad,” the one woman who makes a conventional marriage “grew gross in soulless love, a sluggish wife” (l.10), her existence, like that of the bitter spinster and the prostitute, “All on the threshold, yet all short of life” (l.14). Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in contrast to Brontë and Rossetti, achieved less conflicted representations of matrimony and female sexuality, suggesting in *Aurora Leigh* (chapter 4) that a woman cannot truly fulfill her spiritual and artistic vocation without feeding her physical and emotional cravings for marriage and motherhood. Yet even this positive representation of married, corporeal bliss is enabled by Catholicism—in particular, Barrett Browning’s reliance on Catholic sacramental imagery and the doctrine of transubstantiation (the affirmation of Christ’s actual physical presence in the Eucharist).

**To What Extent Were Victorian Women Uniquely Attracted to Catholicism?**

The previous section demonstrates some ways in which women writers’ responses to Catholicism paralleled those of male clergymen and tract writers. But did women simply shift the discourse of Catholicism from male-dominated literary genres to the female world of domestic fiction? Where do we see innovations on the part of women writers, and to what extent can one craft an argument for women’s unique attraction to Roman Catholicism? Catholicism inspired similarly ambivalent attitudes for both men and women in Britain, but women’s texts (both pro- and anti-Catholic) do suggest that Catholicism offered possibilities for women that Victorian Protestant culture did not. Although, as John Shelton Reed observes, it would be a mistake to equate Victorian Catholicism with twentieth-century concepts of feminism, Catholicism presented a model of female sanctity more ideologically consistent than the fractured domestic sphere informed by Protestantism. It offered women a broader scope of opportunities for benevolent agency, especially through organized sisterhoods and lay volunteer work. Catholicism also elevated celibacy over marriage,
providing a challenge to the hegemony of matrimony in Victorian culture and an incentive to those increasing numbers of women for whom marriage was not an option.

Moreover, Catholicism was a marginalized religion traditionally depicted as feminine, in contrast to “masculine” Protestantism. This mode of representation was hardly new to the Victorians; Frances Dolan, in *Whores of Babylon*, notes the frequency with which seventeenth-century Protestant texts associated Catholicism with “disorderly women.” “[A]nti-Catholic polemic,” she explains, “often represents its object as feminine, despite the fact that men dominated the institutional church” (8). Dolan interprets this phenomenon as a response “to the perceived importance of women in Catholic theology [and] iconography” and popular anxiety that Catholicism would endow women with a dangerous degree of both spiritual and temporal power (8). This anxiety is reflected in anti-Catholic pamphlets and tracts that represent weak-minded women as especially susceptible to the allure of Rome. An 1835 tract entitled *An Address to Every Lady in Britain by a Protestant* (with a dainty pink cover, no less) cautioned women to stay away from theological controversy and theological writings—especially those by Roman Catholic theologians. The writer argues:

> [I]f all women devoted their lives to the study of controversy, what would become the duties of their station? What would become of the charities of life? Who would perform the social part allotted to them? And which, if properly performed, is enough to occupy the time of every one?

> You must perceive at once this would be an impossible and unnatural state of things; it cannot therefore be right.

> Neither is Controversy on subjects with which she is conversant becoming in a woman. Her reasoning powers are generally weaker than those of men: whether it is so by nature or education, signifies little to the present purpose. It is evidently the will of God. . . . (9–10; emphasis in original)

The writer concludes by sending her female readers to the Bible to find for themselves proof that Roman Catholic practices and doctrines are not necessary to salvation. “[S]tudy the word of God, and not the doctrines of men. Again, I say, do not study the doctrines of men. It is these which every day lead aside silly women, and make such inroads on the peace of our families” (12; emphasis in original).

In Victorian culture, Catholicism was associated with destructive—and virtually irresistible—female sexuality. For example, in a sermon of 1855 attacking the new Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate
Conception, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce compared the Catholic Church to a sorceress and a siren:

There are her spells; and mighty hearts—on that the Spirit of the Lord might set them free!—have sunk entranced beneath them. Let no man undervalue their potency or trifle with their might. It is the very character of the cup of the sorceress, that its lightest taste so besots the subtlest intellect and subdues the strongest will, that her victim follows her bidding, lead him whithersoever it may. The only safeguard, therefore, is in the earliest and most instant refusal to drink the wine of her fornication. (27)

When the dark side of female nature is unleashed, the result is power over men. Perhaps partly for this reason, some women writers made Catholicism a signifier for female human nature, which must either constrain itself within, or free itself from, the shackles of social convention. Jane Eyre’s cravings for love, her idolatrous tendencies, and her longing for domestic comforts are coded Catholic; significantly, her dark double, Bertha, really is Catholic, with her Spanish Creole ancestry, her crucifix, and her images of saints. Barrett Browning’s Anglo-Italian Aurora Leigh also has an “inner Catholic,” but in this case Romanism signifies positive qualities (ones nonetheless discouraged by Aurora’s society) such as artistic and sexual expression. Despite the differences in their representations of Catholicism, both Brontë and Barrett Browning use it to construct a “secret” female self that threatens to disrupt the social status quo.

Although Brontë’s and Barrett Browning’s use of Catholicism as a signifier for the disorderly female self is highly innovative, we can nonetheless discern the influence of anti-Catholic sermons on both narratives, as clergymen frequently portrayed Catholicism as “substantially the spirit of Human nature” (Whateley 9). In an 1848 sermon, for example, Hugh M’Neile argues that, in contrast to Protestantism, which expresses “antagonism to human nature as it is, with the high and determined aim to renew it in conformity with God” (14; emphasis in original), Romanism, by alternately indulging both the passions of the body and the qualms of the conscience, “is congenial to human nature as it is: and therefore Romanism, with her black Lent and red Carnival, can prosper with the unconverted multitude. She gives or takes, smiles or frowns, according to circumstances” (14). Rev. C. S. Hawtrey also expounds this view, explaining to his congregation in 1826 that “the materials of Popery are within us” (14):
Do we wish thoroughly to understand in what Popery consists? [...] Let us look into our own hearts, let us search deeply the “chambers of imagery” within us. [...] In our self-righteous pride, in our love of ostentatious display, in our carnal policy, in our contempt of God’s word, in our attachment to blind traditions, in our indolence and want of spirituality, in our uncharitableness, in our formality, superstition, and hypocrisy, in our light thoughts of sin, in our love of cruelty,—in all these things (and the seeds of all these evils are in us) we see the materials of which Popery is constructed. Let us, then, learn to regard it as a mirror, in which we may behold a full length picture of ourselves; and having seen it let us be humbled, and smite upon our breasts, and say, God be merciful to us, sinners. (Hawtrey 12; emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, the notion that even the staunchest of Protestants was “naturally” Catholic made Romanism seem especially terrifying—as well as intriguing. Protestants’ repeated warnings of the deadly attractions of Catholicism surely increased its allure; as I suggest in chapter 4, one might easily associate Rossetti’s luscious Goblin Fruits with the fruits of Romanism. Although the impulse to associate Catholicism with the “secret self” might not have been new to women writers, their use of Catholicism as a “full length mirror” enabled them to represent highly complex and original female subjects.

Women Who “Went Over” to Rome

Only three of the authors in this study, Lady Georgiana Fullerton, Katherine Bradley, and Elizabeth Cooper (Bradley and Cooper are collectively known as Michael Field), converted to Rome. While this is not a book about Catholic converts, their letters and manuscripts, which I discuss briefly in this section, provide a useful context for the preoccupations of the novelists and poets I examine in the following chapters. Just as Protestant women writers’ responses to Catholicism overlapped with those of their male counterparts, so also did male and female converts articulate similar perceptions of Rome. Catholicism, in the eyes of Protestant women writers, may have suggested expanded agency for women, but they did not equate it with feminism. Neither, it seems, did Catholic converts. Female

16. Joyce Sugg, in her edited collection of women’s letters to John Henry Newman, states that “not one of the Catholic women converts known to Newman espoused the cause of women’s
converts appear to have embraced Catholicism for the same reasons men did, and foremost among them was a terror of religious doubt and a desire to save their immortal souls. In contrast to conflicted and divided Protestantism, Catholic converts presented their church as a bulwark of moral certainty. “Except in communion with the Holy See,” states Robert Belaney, “[. . .] where shall we see anything but one tide of opinions after another flowing in ceaseless succession, stunning the world each with its own momentary noise?” (52). Similarly, John Gordon states that those who remain outside the Catholic Church “must for ever go on doubting and disputing, demanding intellectual demonstrations for spiritual truths, which it is impossible to convey to them [. . .].”

This construction of the Catholic Church as infallible moral guide is echoed by poet Adelaide Procter, who converted to Rome in 1851. In an undated letter to Bessie Rayner Parkes, she explains what she perceives as a moral imperative to settle questions of religious doubt: “I do not think there is any neutral ground in belief. It seems to me one cannot climb a mountain top and watch the stream of events out of it oneself. [. . .] [D]epend upon it if God made any truth from mankind—he made every mind capable of receiving it.” Not long after Procter’s death, Parkes herself converted to Catholicism, to the horror of her friend Barbara Bodichon. In a letter of 1861, before her conversion, Parkes explains to Bodichon that “at 32, with neither a strong body nor a strong brain I feel I require a settled belief in religious matters to keep me sane, healthy, happy.” Catholic nun Margaret Frances Cusack, in her autobiography, says doubt about the nature of the Eucharist helped steer her toward the Catholic Church: “I now saw plainly,” she notes, “that there could be no shades of opinion about this matter—either our Divine Lord was really [in the sacrament], or He was not there [. . .].” Frustrated with Protestant clergyman, who “worshipped something [in the sacrament], they knew not what, nor could they clearly define their own views” (177), she eventually went over to Rome. “Here,” she states, “there were no questions, no difficulties, no doubts. Christ speaks through Peter, and we, the sheep and the lambs committed to his care, have but to hear and obey” (202).

Another parallel between Catholic converts, male and female, and writ-
ers such as Brontë, Rossetti, Barrett Browning, and Eliot, is their intense desire to locate and preserve a sense of the sacred in an increasingly secular world. For some Victorians, conversion to Catholicism implied a return to the sacred. It seems ironic that while Protestants accused Catholics of promoting secularism beneath a veneer of sham spirituality, Catholic converts, in turn, decried the worldliness of Protestantism, its religious authority eroded by doctrinal squabbles. Frederick Lucas, a lawyer who left the Society of Friends for the Catholic Church, explains that spiritual worship requires “the feeling of the close connection between the supernatural world and human daily life.” Unfortunately, however, “The spirit of Protestantism which produced, and has been in its turn influenced by the skeptical, worldly tendencies of modern times, has endeavoured as much as possible, to refine away every thing supernatural out of the domain of modern life” (12). Lucas's 1839 apologia, addressed to the Society of Friends, is simultaneously a manifesto against secular modernity: “We have studiously brought every thing down to the same vulgar level [. . . ] we have done our best, and in sooth with unmatched success, to Paganize every thing that the eye can look upon, or the ear can hear, or the hand can touch, and we wonder at the result” (94). Converts’ quest for the sacred in the midst of secular modern life simultaneously functioned as powerful cultural critique.

Both fiction and nonfiction writings, upon close analysis, caution the scholar and historian against claiming for Victorian women an experience with Catholicism too distinctive from that of men. Yet women, charged with the task of keeping religious faith alive through their vocations as housekeepers, wives, and mothers, were threatened by secularism in a way that men were not. Questions of the hereafter aside, secularism threatened to rob women of a broad path of agency open to them in mid-Victorian culture: the power to discern God’s will and act upon it for the good of themselves and others. Catholicism, with its highly controversial figures of female spiritual agency (whether nuns or the Virgin Mary), must have appeared an especially seductive alternative for many women. Not only did Catholicism suggest an alternate role for women, but its locus of sanctity was situated well outside the walls of the problematic Victorian home. In

17. In Catholic Devotion in Victorian England (1995), Mary Heimann notes that “women seem to have been disproportionately prominent in every aspect of Catholic practice, from attendance at church services to participation in extra-liturgical devotions and enrolment in devotional societies.” She steers away, however, from any claim of women's greater affinity for Catholicism: “Since men, albeit in smaller numbers, were also involved in all of these activities, it seems to me that one can justifiably speak of Catholic rather than of gender-linked piety” (127).
contrast to the empty, crumbling Protestant church buildings that permeate Dickens’s fiction, writings by Anglo- and Roman Catholics testify to the existence of vibrant church sanctuaries and sublime rituals enacted therein. Female converts’ descriptions of Catholic Mass and other devotions portray nondomestic enclosures which seem to lift them beyond their secular lives and worldly cares. In 1844, Mary Holmes, a Catholic convert, describes to her former spiritual director (John Henry Newman, who at the time was still an Anglican priest) her impressions of a Catholic church in Birmingham:

[Early in the morning, there arrived] young men and women of the lower class, dirty mechanics, shopmen, dress-making girls; number of these persons […] with clasped hands and focus wrapt in devotions, kneeling before the pictures against the pillars, or bowing down before the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. And this in a town so notoriously wicked as Birmingham. […] Many kneel for hours. […] Children kneeling about the Church, so still. Oh it was a beautiful sight. I could have fancied myself abroad, or in the middle ages. (Qtd. in Newman, “History of a Conversion”)

This fascination for Catholic spaces also permeates Margaret Percival, an 1847 novel by Anglo-Catholic Elizabeth Missing Sewell, which was supposed to be an attack on Rome. Nonetheless, one of the most striking contrasts in the novel is the tension between the peaceful Roman Catholic churches that so fascinate the novel’s Anglican heroine and the clamorous, contentious, and distracting environment of her own family home. Margaret’s impressions of a French Catholic cathedral are remarkably similar to Mary Holmes’s account:

[B]efore her […] [were] altars and chapels, some dark and scarcely to be distinguished, others touched by the light of the dying day, as its mellowed rays shone mistily through the deep yet gorgeous colours of the windows. A few figures were scattered about the building, but none were moving. Kneeling before the shrine of the Virgin or the image of a favourite saint, they were apparently absorbed in devotion; and, except the distant murmur of the world’s cares, which reached even to that temple of God, no sound fell upon their ear, save from the farthest end of the south transept, where, before an illuminated altar which shed a flickering light upon the bases of the pillars near, a priest was chanting a mass for the repose of the dead. Margaret stood motionless: she thought of nothing—observed nothing—her whole soul was absorbed in a feeling of intense awe. (129)
In the midst of her transcendent encounter, Margaret still discerns “a distant murmur of the world’s cares,” and such descriptions often simultaneously betray an awareness of the fragility and precariousness of this sacred world. In some of these accounts, the marked tension between an ideal of the sacred and the prosaic reality of everyday life is poignant and sometimes even humorous. Bessie Rayner Parkes, in a fragment of an 1865 letter, exclaims over the otherworldly appearance of Cardinal Manning at Mass: “The Consecration has been a wonderful Sight. The thin, spare, ascetic looking man looking ready to faint under the weight of his Mitre; the spiritual weight I mean; but his features are almost too unearthly to be in the juxtaposition of jewels and gold.” Mary Holmes, in another letter written to John Henry Newman while both were still Anglicans, reports her initial disappointment with a too-corpulent bishop at Catholic Mass. “His appearance is sadly against him; and in his mitre and pontificals he looked just like a fat jolly Abbot, such as Protestant stories abound with; but, as soon as he began to speak, one forgot his appearance. The language, voice, manner, all was perfect. At Mass I felt much affected. When the Saving Victim was raised, I felt as if I dare not refuse to go to my Saviour” (20 April 1844; qtd. in Newman, “History”).

Perhaps the most striking tension between the sacred and the profane, however, comes from a description of Newman himself. Emily Bowles, Newman’s longtime friend and also a Catholic convert, records in her unpublished memorial to Newman her first impressions of the great Tractarian, at Littlemore in 1840:

The little Church at Littlemore (then as first built by him) was overflowing to the very brim. [. . .] But there was the figure, ascetic in its spareness, one head, wonderful in its intellectual moulding, one face, grand, reticent, powerful both in speaking and at rest, and slightly forbidding, that detached itself from all the others, and thenceforth always stamped upon my mind. He glided from the body of surpliced clergy and acolytes, noiselessly appeared in the pulpit [. . .] and began at once to preach [. . .] like a messenger sent direct from God. As the exquisite voice, so full, so thrilling, so silvery yet so trumpet-like, poured itself out, absolutely stripped of self, of all human fear, and as it seemed, of all human feeling because the humanity was [abrogated?] in the visible sense of God, a wave of such emotion swept through me as I had never felt before in my life.

Immediately after the service, at lunch, the great man spoke to Bowles for the first time: “Will you have some cold chicken?” And the sound of the same voice uttering those words [. . .] so bewildered me,” she recalls, “that
I think my dear mother was obliged to answer for me [...]” (emphasis in original). Although the image of the messenger of God descending from on high to offer young Bowles some light refreshment (and a sobering reminder of things domestic) is an amusing one, Bowles’s gentle self-parody perhaps best encapsulates the central issue facing all the writers in this study. Although with the exception of Georgiana Fullerton and Michael Field, these writers were not Catholic converts, all of their texts demonstrate a sense of existing in two worlds increasingly at odds with each other.

**Overview of Masked Atheism**

In the opinion of Protestant polemicists, Catholicism challenged a multitude of cherished Victorian values and ideals. This book focuses on a series of issues that were not only among the most visible and contentious in Protestant-Catholic controversy, but also ones that signaled for Protestants perversions of various facets of Victorian domesticity. The texts I discuss in chapters 1 and 2, with their emphases on idolatry and Catholic confession, disclose the possibility of marriage as a type of spiritual enslavement. Chapter 3 suggests that Victorian condemnations of celibate women (whether nuns or spinsters) mask concerns about the banality and materialism of middle-class homes. Chapter 4’s focus on transubstantiation evokes a sinister dimension of the ordinary, domestic activities of eating and drinking. Chapter 5, on “Mariolatry,” is as much about a collective fear of abandonment—that is, bad mothering—as it is about the longing for signs of transcendence. Chapter 6 also discusses abandonment, as the death of Michael Fields’s dog, Whym Chow, symbolizes for Bradley and Cooper the profanation of their once transcendent domestic idyll. Taken together, these chapters and these domestic perversions trace the outlines of a much larger issue—a preoccupation with the disappearance of the sacred in modern culture.

The study incorporates both canonical and minor women writers, in part because I wish to recreate a sense of the literary world as Victorian readers experienced it. I also hope to invite reflection upon how a work’s religious content can shape—or doom—its literary posterity. While novels by Lady Georgiana Fullerton and Elizabeth Missing Sewell may, in some ways, lack the sophistication of those by Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, their almost complete erasure from literary history in the twentieth
Masked Atheism / 27

...century—given the popularity and impact of their works in the nineteenth century—is a glaring oversight. For example, despite the fact that the early novels of Lady Georgiana Fullerton (a High Anglican who converted to Catholicism in the 1840s) were reviewed favorably in tandem with those of Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens in major periodicals in the 1840s and 1850s, today she is remembered (or more accurately, forgotten) only as a minor novelist who promulgated the views of Oxford Movement. The other interesting points of Fullerton’s work become obscured by her religious views.18

Conversely, early feminist scholarship on Jane Eyre either overlooked the novel’s profoundly religious dimension entirely, or presented Jane as a rebel against Christian patriarchy.19 When works by Brontë, now the best-known Victorian anti-Catholic female novelist (however inaccurate the designation), is placed alongside those of the era’s most popular Catholic novelist, the comparison facilitates new understandings of each author. No one, for example, would think to pigeonhole Jane Eyre as a “religious novel,” yet like Fullerton’s Lady-Bird (1853) it is centrally preoccupied with issues of spiritual integrity, moral and ethical agency, and divine salvation. And Lady-Bird, despite its religious emphases, engages with very earthbound issues of gender and power, its plot culminating in a stinging critique of popular ideals of romance and marriage. So powerful is this juxtaposition that I have elected—rather than write a separate chapter for each author—to discuss them in tandem in the first two chapters.

The first chapter examines concerns that marriage itself—as defined by Evangelical Protestantism—could be a stumbling block for devout Victorian women. Whereas Protestant clergymen frequently upheld Milton’s Adam and Eve as a template for the ideal Christian marriage, Charlotte Brontë in Jane Eyre and Lady Georgiana Fullerton in Lady-Bird both suggest that the dynamic of such a marriage—“he, for God alone, and she, for God in him”—robbed women of the spiritual agency and autonomy necessary for their salvation. If a woman viewed her husband as an intermediary for God, these novels suggest, how easily might she come to view her husband as God? This, of course, was the sin of idolatry. Since this transgres-

18. Georgiana Fullerton (1812–1888) was born Georgiana Charlotte Leveson-Gower, the daughter of Lord Granville Leveson-Gower and Lady Harriet Cavendish. For more information on her life and works, see chapters 1 and 2.
19. Two examples of such approaches are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s reading of Jane Eyre in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination (1979) and Adrienne Rich’s “Jane Eyre, the Temptations of a Motherless Woman” (1973).
sion was most frequently associated with Catholics and their adoration of spurious saints and the Virgin Mary, it hardly seems surprising that both Brontë and Fullerton drew upon Catholicism to expose the idolatrous potential of Victorian matrimony. Here, however, the differences cease: whereas Brontë condemns Jane's tendency toward creature worship by associating it with Catholic symbols and practices, Fullerton draws upon the Catholic tradition of celibacy to free her heroine from an idolatrous marriage at her novel's conclusion. Both authors, writing from different ends of a doctrinal spectrum, employ Catholic imagery to articulate very similar concerns about Victorian matrimony. This testifies not only to the power and pervasiveness of Catholic discourses at midcentury, but also the extent to which women's anxieties about marriage transcended religious denominations.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in chapter 2, which juxtaposes Brontë's representation of confession in Villette with Fullerton's defense of it in her 1844 novel, Ellen Middleton. Both novels, despite contrasting doctrinal positions, suggest that women require a space set apart from the rigid constraints of the domestic sphere to acknowledge, despite their outwardly feminine roles, the existence of less "angelic" qualities, such as sexual desire and rage. Catholic confession, as a "nondomestic" space removed from the prying eyes of fathers and husbands, allows women to confess sin and reconcile with God (in the case of Ellen Middleton) or, like Lucy Snowe, to embrace an essential part of themselves that society refuses to recognize. These representations of confession as attractive, and even necessary, for women contradict a prevailing public attitude of suspicion and outrage over Catholic confession in the 1840s and 1850s. Protestant fears of the priest's authority in confession centered around women and the family; opponents of confession argued that the rite, by compelling women to confess their sins to clerical outsiders, would effectively drive a wedge between husbands and wives, violate the sanctity of the home, and perhaps even end in sexual seduction and ruin of female penitents. Yet this very "nondomestic," potentially scandalous, element of the rite is what renders it so attractive to the heroines of Brontë's and Fullerton's novels; only within the confessional can each woman begin to reconcile conflicting aspects of her identity.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the ways in which Catholic discourse helped structure women's literary representations of alternatives to traditional domesticity: the celibate paths of spinsterhood and religious sisterhood. In the first section, an analysis of Elizabeth Missing Sewell's The Experience of Life (1852) explores how Sewell's Anglo-Catholic spinster bildungsroman
appropriates elements of Roman Catholic hagiography to present the lay single life as a domestic vocation that simultaneously calls into question the entire concept of domesticity. This novel presents spinsterhood as a sacred calling, drawing its authority from tales of the virgin martyrs. It works so hard to present spinsterhood as a rigorous, “muscular,” and heroic path for women that marriage and maternity, in contrast, appear to diminish, rather than enlarge, women’s potential for spiritual and moral agency. The second half of this chapter, focusing on Mary Martha Sherwood’s *The Nun* (1833) and other anticonvent literature, reveals how anti-Catholic attacks on female religious orders also, ironically, betray subliminal anxieties about marriage, motherhood, and domesticity in Victorian culture. Sherwood and other Protestant writers attempt to portray convent life (a topic about which they knew little, at best) as the antithesis of the Protestant English home—self-indulgent, materialistic, trivial, and spiritually deadening for women. These laboriously constructed binaries, however, collapse upon closer analysis: what emerges instead are moments of genuine anxiety about apparent similarities between domestic life and Protestant fantasies of convent life.

Whereas the first three chapters examine women’s representations of the domestic sphere as potentially antithetical to the sacred, chapter 4 addresses how women poets employ Catholic Eucharistic imagery in an attempt to reconcile women’s lofty spiritual vocations with their more earthbound callings as wives and mothers. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862), Catholicism’s emphasis upon the physical body—in particular, its doctrine of the Eucharist—becomes a framework through which women poets can construct the notion of a female body that is at once sexualized and sacred. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning repeatedly employs the image of Roman Catholic transubstantiation (the doctrine of the literal transformation of bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood) to signify the merging of Aurora’s identity as artist and spiritual muse with her calling to marriage and the building of God’s kingdom on earth. In *Goblin Market*, Rossetti represents an intensely corporeal Eucharistic moment between Lizzie and her fallen sister Laura, thereby elevating the “base” female body as an agent of human redemption. Such redemption can only occur, moreover, once Lizzie ventures beyond the safe confines of the domestic sphere and risks physical seduction by Goblin men. Although Rossetti and Barrett Browning achieve a more satisfactory reconciliation between women’s competing identities than other authors in this study, figures of fallen women (Jeanie, “who should have been a bride,” and Marian Earle) linger uneasily in the
background of each text, testifying to the endurance of the culture’s strict binary between angelic and embodied women.

Chapter 5 addresses some of the culture’s more overt anxieties about secularism and atheism as they emerged in controversies over Roman Catholic veneration for the Virgin Mary and specifically in the British responses to a purported apparition of the Virgin Mary in La Salette, France, in 1846. To many Protestants, Catholic veneration for the Virgin, along with their credulity in such “sham” miracles as the apparition at La Salette, threatened to eclipse or deny God altogether. At the very least, the ludicrous nature of Catholic apparition claims might, as Protestants argued, provide the perfect motivation for reasonable, critical-minded individuals to reject Christianity and theism. George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862–1863), a novel obsessed with the demise of religious authority and the absence of God, appropriates elements of Marian apparition stories at first to critique Catholic veneration for the saints and the Virgin Mary. Such practices, Eliot suggests, simply reinforce humans’ egoistic tendencies and do nothing to promote personal virtue or altruism. In the course of the novel, however, Eliot revises traditional understandings of the Madonna and of the cult of the saints to envision the possibility of human moral evolution *made possible* by the absence or “death” of God. Eliot’s heroine, at the end of *Romola*, becomes a morally powerful agent (and a secular Madonna) only through the loss of all paternal sources of guidance and authority.

Some of the most interesting work to date on Catholicism and nineteenth-century literature focuses on the fin de siècle; the book’s final chapter, therefore, attempts to draw connections between women writing at midcentury and those a few decades later, when popular antagonism toward Catholicism was presumably on the wane. At first glance, lesbian poets and lovers Michael Field may seem a complete departure from the other writers in this study (the thought of Lady Georgiana Fullerton and Elizabeth Sewell mingling at the same dinner party with Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper has, I confess, been an amusing diversion for me as I finished this book). On closer examination, however, Bradley and Cooper, self-proclaimed “pagans” who converted to Roman Catholicism after a domestic calamity (the death of their pet dog, Whym Chow), form a perfect ending point for this study. Focusing exclusively on the 1906 volume of the Fields’ vast diary, *Works and Days*, I explore the Fields’ construction of a unique domestic piety—one that accommodated Bradley and Cooper’s unconventional religious and sexual identities before their conversion, weathered Whym Chow’s sudden death in 1906, and adapted to the paradigm shift of their successive conversions in 1907. For the Fields, Catholicism was not so much a radical departure from their secular,
“pagan” past, but a means of bridging the “pagan,” Dionysian aspects of their identities with their newfound desire to create meaning out of suffering and loss. Although the Fields undoubtedly demonstrate the most daring and creative appropriations of Catholicism, texts by all the writers in this study highlight Catholicism’s usefulness in the nineteenth century as an inspiration for artists, an instrument for cultural critique, and a palliative for the growing pains of a rapidly changing society.