Masked Atheism
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The aspect of Catholicism that most directly contributed to its popular designation as an “antidomestic” religion was surely its privileging of celibacy over matrimony. If the Victorians were famously prudish about sex, they were even more horrified at the thought that Catholic priests, monks, and nuns systematically renounced it. In 1840, William Wordsworth writes, “I reckon the constrained celibacy of the clergy the monstrous root of the greatest part of the mischiefs of Popery. [. . .] If we would truly spiritualize men, we must take care that we do not do so by unhumanizing them, which is the process in respect of all those who are brought up with a view to the making of that unnatural vow” (qtd. in Best 126). Wordsworth’s vocabulary is telling: “[un]true,” “unhuman,” and “unnatural.” As Best notes, Victorians accepted the fact that some mellow bachelors “could be happy and virtuous” outside the married state, but “they must have the freedom to choose the single life” (125).

If the Victorians had difficulty “swallowing” male celibacy (to the point that an elderly woman was still picking arguments about it with her niece half a century after the “Papal Aggression”), how much more
“untrue, unhuman, and unnatural” might they consider female celibacy? Popular depictions of both Catholic nuns and Protestant spinsters suggest that in the opinion of many Victorians, no sane or healthy woman would voluntarily choose to live without a husband and children. Anti-Catholic literature constantly evokes the specter of young women being kidnapped, brainwashed, or inveigled into the convent; and spinsters, it was widely assumed, merely resigned themselves to a shabby lot in life. As an anonymous 1869 poem, “The Spinster’s Dream,” says of its protagonist,

In gloomy idleness her time she passed,
Blaming the lot in which her life was cast:
Accusing Fate in bitter tone,
For having left her thus—unloved—alone!

Despite the fact that many differences could, and did, exist between Anglo- and Roman Catholic nuns and Protestant spinsters (indeed, Catherine Sinclair, a model of virtuous Protestant spinsterhood, spent much of her time excoriating nuns in print), in nineteenth-century England both occupied what Frederick Roden describes as the “culturally queer” category of the Victorian celibate.¹

Beyond their shared designation as Victorian celibates, another link between nuns and spinsters is the types of stories told about them. This is the only chapter in the book that discusses “forgotten” fictional texts exclusively; they are “forgotten,” in part, because in the nineteenth century it was particularly difficult to write women’s fiction that was not preoccupied with romantic love, matrimony, and heterosexual domesticity. The texts I discuss here—a handful of novels attacking Catholic convents, and The Experience of Life (1852), Elizabeth Missing Sewell’s fictional apologia for spinsterhood—at times sit awkwardly within the genre of domestic fiction. These narratives of Victorian celibates rely on Catholic imagery and discourse to make radically different points. Anticonvent novels employ Catholicism to condemn lifelong female celibacy as “unnatural,” whereas Sewell’s novel invokes Anglo-Catholic veneration of virgin martyrs to “recuperate” spinsterhood as a spiritually empowering, freely chosen vocation for women. Perhaps the most interesting connection between these anti- and pro-celibacy novels, however, is that both, in very different ways, call into question the sanctity of conventional, heterosexual models of Victorian domesticity.

¹. In designating Victorian celibates as “culturally queer,” Roden does not necessarily imply homosexuality; queers, he notes, are “cultural dissidents, deviant or non-standard in some way” (2).
A Home That Is Not a Home

Victorian Women’s Representations of the Convent

In her autobiography, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna describes how she once made the acquaintance of a young nun, the director of an Irish convent who sought Tonna’s advice in teaching a deaf student. Tonna describes how, on her first visit to the convent, she is alternately enchanted and horrified by the beautiful Mother Superior:

The nun was indeed a most engaging young lady: in personal appearance, in manner, in feeling, realizing the visions of my girlish romance when reading idle stories in novels in such topics. She had, moreover, all the animated warmth of a genuine Irishwoman, and her fine countenance, beaming with benevolent joy at our successful beginning, and with affectionate gratitude for my services, quite won my heart. [ . . . ] I unhesitatingly mounted the stairs with my sweet conductor. Judge what was my dismay when, on passing the folding-doors, I found myself in a splendid Popish chapel, opposite the altar, over which shone a richly gilt cross, while my poor nun was prostrated in the lowliest adoration, touching the ground with her forehead before the senseless idol! (Personal Recollections 152–53)

Shocked by the nun’s “act of idolatrous homage rendered to a thing of wood and stone,” Tonna decides to try saving her soul. “With all my heart I loved the gentle, affectionate, elegant nun, she notes, “and earnestly did I pray for help in bringing her back, as I was resolved to do, from the path of destruction. While I deliberated on the best means of commencing the work, the difficulty was removed by her openly attempting to convert me” (154). Tonna receives from the nun a book on Roman Catholic theology, reads it, and is, expectedly, repulsed by it: “[H]ow disgusting,” she exclaims, “the painted face, the gaudy trappings, and the arrogant assumptions of the Great Harlot appeared in my eyes” (155).

Tonna’s description of this incident suggests much about nineteenth-century Protestant women’s encounters with Catholicism. Tonna arrives at the convent with certain expectations. Her “visions of girlish romance” nurtured by the “idle stories” she has read predispose her to view the nun at first as an alluring, yet entirely familiar and comfortable figure, who later betrays a frightening, incomprehensible tendency toward idolatry. The nun’s idolatry marks her as radically other to Tonna’s virtuous Protestant self, yet the nun’s attempt to convert Tonna—simultaneous with Tonna’s decision to convert the nun—renders her Tonna’s mirror image or double.
The nun’s threat, therefore, resides not just in her exoticism, but also in her familiarity. The tension between familiar and foreign is, of course, a common trope in nineteenth-century anti-Catholic literature. Perhaps nowhere, however, was the tension between familiar and foreign so obvious and so fraught with anxiety as in Victorian women’s representations of the convent. While women writers attempted to maintain a sharp division between the corrupt convent and the wholesome Victorian home, implied similarities between the two continually threatened to undermine their project. Rather than valorize the home at the expense of the convent, women’s anti-Catholic novels ultimately call the ideology of Victorian domesticity into question. Novels such as Mary Martha Sherwood’s *The Nun* (1833), Catherine Sinclair’s *Beatrice* (1852), Eliza Smith Richardson’s *The Veil Lifted* (1865), and Jeanie Selina Dammast’s *St. Mary’s Convent* (1866) help demonstrate that in attacking the convent, British Protestant women writers presented a nightmarish vision of domesticity gone wrong: a desacralized, nonreproductive domestic space overrun by the forces of materialism, atheism, imperialism, and industrialism.

British historians have documented the rapid establishment of both Anglican and Roman Catholic convents at midcentury, as well as the Protestant backlash against them. Susan Mumm, in describing reasons for the “enormous popular opposition” against sisterhoods, emphasizes their challenge to the domestic ideal of women—both married and single—remaining within the bosom of the family (175). Jenny Franchot, in her analysis of nineteenth-century American convent exposés, describes Protestant constructions of the convent as a threatening, “alternative family” which “voiced anxieties about [. . .] domesticity, its gender dis-

2. Catherine Sinclair (1780–1864) was an Edinburgh philanthropist and writer, best remembered for her children's book *Holiday House* (1839) and for *Beatrice, or the Unknown Relatives* (1852), described by Gabrielle Ceraldi as “one of the most popular of the so-called Papal Aggression Novels” (361). Mary Martha Sherwood (1775–1851) was of course among the most prominent Evangelical writers of the nineteenth century. Her works include the highly successful *History of the Fairchild Family* (in three parts: 1818, 1842, 1847), in addition to approximately four hundred other titles. Eliza Smith Richardson and Jeanie Selina Dammast are extremely obscure figures, and I have been unable to find reliable biographical information for either. Both, however, seem to have been fairly prolific writers. The British Library catalogue lists ten other titles for Richardson, besides *The Veil Lifted* (mostly anti-Catholic works), ranging in dates from 1848–1873; there are six other works (besides *St. Mary’s Convent*) by Dammast, at least two of which appear to be children’s books.

3. See Peter F. Anson’s *The Call of the Cloister: Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion* (1955); A. M. Alchin’s *The Silent Rebellion: Anglican Religious Communities 1845–1900* (1958); Walter L. Arinstein’s *Protestant versus Catholic in Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns* (1982); and Susan Mumm’s *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (1999); and chapter 8 of Michael Wheeler’s *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture.*
Franchot focuses her analysis on two accounts by “escaped nuns,” Maria Monk and Rebecca Reed. In writing their sensational, salacious narratives, Americans Monk and Reed, who were clearly inspired by Gothic thrillers, also drew upon the basic formula of the British anticonvent novel, one that remained more or less unchanged throughout the century. The heroine is usually a young girl who, through ignorance, extreme circumstances, or the machinations of a Jesuit priest, finds herself trapped behind convent walls. Through the girl’s narration, the reader gains privileged access to the forbidden, exotic world of the convent, in all its excesses, cruelty, and worldliness. The girl remains captive just long enough for the novelist to expound her views, and then she escapes, preferably into the arms of a Bible-toting Protestant hero.

One can, however, trace a subtle evolution in the British anticonvent novel between the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. It began to exhibit more qualities of the domestic novel and less of the gothic. The “true” accounts by Monk and Reed resemble early British anti-Catholic Gothic novels, such as The Italian (1797) and The Monk (1796), in their sensational, salacious detail. But in Britain by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the public was no longer to be frightened by wolfish priests, prostitute-nuns, or murdered babies. Frightening enough was simply the notion of women living “unnatural” lives in celibate female communities. As Hobart M. Seymour argued in an 1852 lecture against convents, nuns “must spend their life-long existence, wearisome to themselves, and useless to others, for they are without one object to interest or occupy them.” He concludes “that the inner life of a nunnery is a life of monotony, wearisomeness, disappointment, contention, bitterness, and despair” (5). Like Seymour’s lecture, midcentury anti-Catholic novels focus primarily on the nun’s “unnatural” mode of life, and the psychological torments it entails.

While the convent novel’s new emphasis on the inner lives of nuns resulted in a somewhat higher level of character development and psychological depth, they retained all the flaws that George Eliot so harshly condemns in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” Eliot, of course, insists that a novel should portray a realistic depiction of life, one drawn from personal experience and observation. In contrast, anticonvent novels remained the stuff of sheer fantasy. Protestant women like Sherwood,

4. Wheeler lists nine other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British anticonvent novels of this genre, not discussed here (214).
Dammast, and Richardson had, at best, limited access to the convent, and they drew their information largely from anti-Catholic propaganda and hearsay.\(^5\) While this ignorance did not make for good fiction, it did leave room for telling inventions. Just as the Irish nun, in Tonna’s recollections, became the mirror image of Tonna and her own spiritual strivings, the fictional nuns in midcentury anticonvent novels eerily represent unhappy housewives. British women writers intended to demonstrate how Anglo and Roman Catholicism threatened the integrity of the Victorian domestic sphere. In their novels, however, women and domestic spaces are not threatened so much by Catholicism as by the larger, more pervasive, and unavoidable social forces it represents, such as industrialism, materialism, and secularism.

In the Victorian convent novel, the primary distinction between the domestic and commercial spheres is dismantled. Although some novels, such as Catherine Sinclair’s *Beatrice*, depict nuns in arduous, degrading tasks—such as the novice who must clean wooden floors with her tongue (II:145)—others show nuns engaged in pleasant, if frivolous and mundane, tasks. Cecile, the heroine of Sherwood’s *Nun* who decides to join a convent, states that “some of us made sweetmeats, and dried them in the sun; others artificial flowers; some made purses, and bags, and covers of books, adorned with beads; these were sent to Turin and sold” (65). Emily, the heroine of Dammast’s novel, describes a similar scene, with “a number of the sisterhood [. . .] occupied in embroidering robes for priests, and dressing up little figures of the Virgin and St. Joseph” (61). Both novels are critical of this type of silly work: “Emily [. . .] wondered how women in the full possession of their faculties could occupy their time in so frivolous a manner” (61). On one hand the nuns’ work seems so insignificant that it is mere play, like the dressing of dolls, yet these scenes also call to mind sweatshop labor, which serves to fatten the coffers of the Church of Rome. The nuns’ fascination with trinkets is a most worldly wallowing in materialism, one that might easily call to mind ornate middle-class Victorian homes. Finally, one cannot help but observe that the work of beading and embroidering, as frivolous as the heroines describe it, was precisely the kind of occupation that proper Victorian women were expected to pursue in their drawing rooms. The conflation between domestic and commercial continues as the nuns, workers in the Romish factory “system,” themselves resemble dumb pieces of machinery. “I could enumerate a dozen or more

\(^5\) Richardson claimed to have spent five years in the Roman Catholic Church and had direct experience of convent life (*Five Years a Catholic: with incidents of foreign convent life* [1864]). Even if this claim is true, her representations of convent life are as flat and stereotyped as those by Tonna, Sherwood, and other Protestant writers.
of these good honest bodies,” confides Sister Pauline to young Cecile, “who
never think at all” (60). Dammast’s novel continually describes the nuns as
performing actions “mechanically” (69); and “at the end of the year Emily
found herself, as it were, part of the machine, whose regular movements
seemed clock-like in their perfectness” (116; emphasis added). Apparently
life in the convent did not lead to a higher, ethereal existence, but one
engulfed by the grinding, soulless cycle of manufacture and consumption.

The factory imagery in anticonvent novels of course raises the question
of products, aside from beaded bags and wax dolls. While the business of
the domestic family was to produce babies, there were certainly no babies
(legitimate ones, at least) produced in these depictions of the convent.
Indeed, their message is that women who do not produce babies are
themselves infantilized. “An old nun is like an old baby,” states Catherine
Sinclair in Popish Legends and Bible Truths, “her mind reduced to a mere
second childhood by leading a life of unreasoning obedience” (liii). Aside
from this most unnatural production of “babies,” the primary function of
the convent “factory” seems to be the transformation of living, thinking,
feeling women into mindless automatons stripped of all feminine traits,
in particular, the all-important capacity for feeling. “I thought you knew,”
remonstrates another nun to the naïve Emily, “that a Jesuit is bound not to
possess human feeling [. . . ]. It is one of their most binding rules that all
love and humanity are to be trampled upon when they threaten to interfere
with any duties imposed by the order” (Dammast 99). These nuns “are
not naturally more unfeeling than others,” explains the narrator of The
Veil Lifted, “but their feelings have been repressed and blunted, and their
finer susceptibilities deadened, by years of practical stoicism” (151). These
female Scrooges in black habits have become hardened by their associa-
tion with the Catholic Church, presented here as a global moneymaking
enterprise.

The one feeling that these accounts do not deny is sexual attraction:
sexuality diverted, however, from its “natural” channels. Despite the
enduring popularity of the figure of the lascivious priest, in novels such as
The Nun and St. Mary’s Convent, the sexual predator is the Mother Supe-
rior, and the primary sexual tension is between women. Dammast, in St.
Mary’s Convent, describes the Reverend Mother as a classic femme fatale:

[Reverend Mother] was tall and slight, long flowing black robes setting off
the graceful outline of her figure [. . . ] but in her eyes and smile lay the
fascination that made her irresistible. Usually the lids drooped over those
lovely eyes, and the long black lashes literally rested on her cheeks [. . . ]
two lurking dimples near the corners of her mouth gave an almost magi-
Chapter Three

cal sweetness to her expression! Then the raised eyelids gave to view the
soft black velvet-like orbs, that seemed to enchain the gaze, and draw the
 beholder as by a hidden power or spell under their marvelous influence.

Reverend Mother’s beauty has an almost hypnotic effect on the young
female visitor to the convent: “[H]er eyes seemed to penetrate into Emily's
very soul, and draw forth as by magnetism a responsive thrill” (21). Cecile,
the narrator of Sherwood’s *Nun*, describes the “particularly pleasing”
appearance of the abbess, remarking upon “a most encouraging and even
cressing manner, and of a sort which, had I previously been balancing
respecting my vocation, would, I felt, have instantly decided me” (10). “I
did not,” she concludes, “feel able to resist her” (12). The Reverend Mother
is typically presented as the center of her “home,” but it is a female power
unsoftened or untrammeled by any higher male authority. For the young,
orphaned female narrators of *The Nun* and *St. Mary’s Convent*, the Mother
Superior initially is presented as a version of the Household Angel, a sub-
stitute for the lost mother. But each girl soon discovers the anti-Mother
lurking beneath. Sherwood’s abbess sows dissension among the nuns in
her charge, choosing favorites among the novices (the most beautiful
ones), and persecuting those who have fallen out of favor. *The Veil Lifted*
describes a Mother Superior blind to all “natural” family ties and obliga-
tions, who refuses to let a dying nun see her sister. This same Mother feels
morally obligated to cultivate a “heart of bronze” when punishing any
infractions of her rule.

Sexuality in these communities, although undeniably present, is
fairly well suppressed (no nun-prostitutes here). However, the convent is
frequently made to resemble another site of female lasciviousness—the
harem. Descriptions of the convent resonate with Eastern allusions. This
comparison is particularly marked in the writing of Catherine Sinclair,
whose heroine, Beatrice, compares one of the convent rituals to a “secret
Hindoo rite,” and tells the nuns that they “seem in all respects like the Ves-
tal virgins of a heathen temple” (III:131). Another character, Lady Edith,
sees a nun prostrating herself in church one day, and “almost expected to
see the black face of a Hindoo worshipper” under her veil (II:271). In this
sense, the convent also appears as a nightmarish version of the Victorian
home despoiled by Britain’s exposure to the “heathens” and “pagans” of
its far-flung empire. As Susan Griffin argues in her chapter on Sinclair’s
novel, Beatrice “attempts to shore up a unified, homogenous British iden-
tity by descrying and describing foreign “Others,” only to uncover how
the foreign has already infected contemporary Britain” (132).6 Here the

6. Griffin’s chapter on *Beatrice* includes an interesting discussion of the novel’s implicit com-
Imperial Other has, quite literally, come home to roost in English domestic spaces.

Sherwood, Dammast, Richardson, and other opponents of convent life worked particularly hard to point out the differences between the Victorian home and the convent. Yet what leaps out from the pages of their narratives is a tremendous anxiety about the resemblances between them. Just as anti-Catholic polemicists condemned Catholicism for “posing” as Christianity, writers of anticonvent narratives were eager to disabuse young female readers of the error that the convent could provide them a loving, supportive, or happy home.

While the figure of the Reverend Mother was exposed as one point of false parallelism between the home and the convent, what writers focused on in even greater detail was the nuns’ profession ceremony, which, in both Anglo and Roman Catholic sisterhoods, did indeed resemble that of a marriage. Apparently these ceremonies greatly appealed to the public imagination; in her autobiography, Charlotte Tonna describes how, when a nun took her veil at the nearly Irish Catholic convent “Every body [. . .] was trying for tickets to see the unhallowed show” (Personal Recollections 156). Writers of anticonvent novels appealed to this curiosity by providing copious details of the ceremony, “marked by all the pomp and glittering pageantry which the Church of Rome has ever at command, and all those dangerous appeals to the senses which she knows so well how to direct and organize” (Richardson 12). Sinclair describes the profession ceremony of a Miss Turton, majestic in “brocaded white silk, trimmed round the skirt with festoons of Honiton lace, looped up with bunches of white jessamine and lily of the valley” (III:127). Crowned with a wreath of orange flowers and diamonds (the property of the convent), Turton performs “a pantomime of devotion,” “having practiced over the whole scene of her profession in various rehearsals before a mirror” (III:129–30). Protestant writers obviously feared that young girls would be attracted to the convent by the lavish ceremony, just as a young woman might jump into marriage for the excuse to wear a splendid gown. Their descriptions, however, only increase the allure of the profession ceremony. Naomi Ryde Smith comments on this dimension of Sherwood’s novel, wryly stating: “It is possible that The

parisons between Jesuit priests and the “secret Hindu cult of Thuggee [. . .] discovered and subsequently prosecuted by British officials in India during the 1830s” (135). Gabrielle Ceraldi, in “‘Popish Legends and Bible Truths’: English Protestant Identity in Catherine Sinclair’s Beatrice” (2003), also discusses how Beatrice’s condemnation of the Catholic other betrays subliminal anxieties about aspects of the collective self—in particular, English Protestant identity.

7. Mumm describes profession ceremonies as “the high festival of [Anglican] sisterhood life [. . .]. These ceremonies were closely modelled on their Roman Catholic equivalents. At profession, the novices would wear wedding dresses at the beginning of the ceremony, which would be changed for the dress of a professed sister after the taking of the vows” (29).
Nun, intended to dissuade, may actually have persuaded some women of their vocation” (148).

These novels portray girls and women who, attracted by the romantic veneer of the convent, make a lifetime commitment to a life that they do not understand. Soon after profession they are stripped of their illusions. However, the worst most nuns suffer is not rape or other physical brutality, but a long, dreary life unrelieved of any “female” interests. “Oh! Who, that has not felt it,” exclaims Sherwood’s Clarice, “can conceive the horrible monotony of the mode of life I had precipitately adopted, in which there was gloom without privacy, dullness without ease, idleness without rest [. . . ], society without amusement [. . . ]” (78). Richardson’s novel also focuses on the mental, rather than physical, trials of nuns, who, she argues, suffer from homesickness, preoccupation with the state of their souls, intense feelings of guilt, callousness, and a sense of entrapment. Yet the specter of women driven to psychological neuroses out of enforced idleness calls to mind in our own time not nuns, but Freud’s bored, hysterical hausfrau. And surely, feelings of regret, boredom, and entrapment could plague the Victorian housewife just as easily as her “cloistered” counterpart. While Sherwood, Dammast, and Richardson never acknowledge this liability of the domestic sphere, defenders of the convent seized upon it. In *Five Years in a Protestant Sisterhood and Ten Years in a Catholic Convent* (1869), Mary Margaret Cusack, a Catholic convert and nun, states that “[u]ndoubtedly some few nuns may be drawn into the cloister unwisely, but how few are they in comparison with the thousands who make unhappy marriages” (271). In response to a proposed bill requiring government inspection of all religious houses, the Catholic archbishop of Birmingham, William Bernard Ullathorne, also transforms criticisms of the convent into an exposure of the weaknesses of the institution of marriage. After explaining the long, careful process of discernment required of all novices, Ullathorne asks, “[Is this] like the lottery or the bondage which a lady subjects herself to in entering the married state? [. . . ] [I]s [. . . ] not [marriage] accompanied with a far less degree of probation, if previous acquaintance can be called such, and with infinitely smaller checks and reserves against the despotism of authority? And if the one state implies a final decision, and that for life, so does the other” (9).

Victorian women’s representations of the convent were, for the most

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8. Arnstein notes that parliamentarians Henry Charles Lacy and Thomas Chambers both urged for the government inspection of convents, without success. “Chamber’s attempt in 1853 to institute a system of convent inspection won one test vote but was ultimately defeated, as were separate attempts in 1853 and 1854 to establish a parliamentary select committee to consider whether the inmates of such institutions and their property required additional legislative protection” (63).
part, troubled by the sensationalism of the subject matter and their lack of information about it. Ignorance, however, left room for other kinds of revelation. In their novelistic depictions of corrupt convent interiors, these women simultaneously project their darkest apprehensions about secularized English homes. Novelist worked hard to establish the nun as radically alien to everything the Victorian woman valued. Yet in their eagerness to “contain” the nun, by presenting her as powerless, feeble-minded, materialistic, and childlike, they inadvertently presented her as a distorted caricature of the Victorian domestic angel.

Spinsters in Popular Fiction

Brontë and Yonge

Victorian women writers may not have had much firsthand knowledge about nuns, but they certainly did about spinsters. Even so, the spinster proved a difficult topic, especially for novelists. In a literary form conventionally determined by the courtship plot, and in a society in which marriage, motherhood, and femininity were intimately linked, how might one construct a convincing, realistic single heroine with an autonomous identity? While the Household Angel owed her existence to Evangelical Protestantism, which framed marriage and motherhood in the context of a religious vocation, Protestant discourse was at best an impoverished medium for representing the plight and the identity of the Victorian spinster. In many cases, conduct literature presented the ideal spinster simply as a more mobile version of the Household Angel—one who places everyone’s needs above her own, and whose character is ennobled by passive suffering. In response to the rigid, unimaginative role allowed for single women in Protestant culture, some writers turned to Catholicism—with its emphasis upon worldly renunciation and its privileging of celibacy over marriage—in writing about spinsterhood.

This difficulty of representing the perpetually single woman plagued Charlotte Brontë, who tackled the issue of spinsterhood more directly than any other midcentury canonical novelist. In contrast to conduct books that preached religion and self-denial as reliable substitutes for husbands and children, Brontë’s fiction attempted to show that, as she insisted in her

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9. The desire to neutralize, soften, or contain the potentially threatening figure of the single woman is evinced by a growing number of advice manuals at midcentury aimed specifically at spinsters. Anne Ritchie, in an 1861 essay for Cornhill Magazine, complained of “those unmarried ladies whose wail of late has been so constantly dinning in the ears of the public [. . . ]. Old maids, spinsters, the solitary, heart-broken women of England, have quite a little literature
correspondence, “even a ‘lone woman’ can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers” (qtd. in Gaskell 247). She was, however, less than successful. In *Shirley*, we see potential spinster Caroline Helstone rejecting pious, long-suffering spinsters Miss Ainley and Miss Mann as role models; similarly, *Villette’s* Lucy Snowe is only happy when she feels secure in the love of a man—whether that of Graham Bretton or M. Paul Emmanuel. Caroline Helstone’s depression and Lucy Snowe’s hysteria are, in the end, cured only by the promise of love and matrimony.10

Catholicism informs the construction of nearly all Brontë’s spinsters. She uses Catholicism, however, not to elevate the condition of spinsterhood, but to cast it as an unnatural condition for women. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, one of the only women who does not marry, Eliza Reed, embraces at first Anglo-Catholic asceticism, and then enters a Catholic convent, “where punctual habits would be permanently secured from disturbance, and place safe barriers between herself and a frivolous world” (264). Although *Shirley* presents Christ-like Miss Ainsley in a positive light, her life—implicitly compared to that of a nun—strikes Caroline as an impossible model for her. “Does virtue lie in abnegation of self?” she reflects, while pondering what old maids should do with their lives. “I do not believe it. Undue humility makes tyranny; weak concession creates selfishness. The Romish religion especially teaches renunciation of self [. . .] and nowhere are found so many grasping tyrants as in the ranks of the Romish priesthood” (190). In *Villette*, the misery of spinsterhood is even more explicitly and extensively compared to that of the cloistered life, as Lucy Snowe identifies herself with the nun once buried alive in Madame Beck’s garden.

While Brontë’s suspicion of Catholicism seems to have influenced her negative construction of spinsterhood, Anglo-Catholic novelists were more successful in depicting the single life as an honorable vocation in its own right. Charlotte Yonge’s spinsters are far more interesting than many others in Victorian fiction. In *Heaven and Home*, June Sturrock notes that Yonge’s “concern with the spiritual life, [. . . ] and the Tractarian emphasis on ‘good works’ and her personal experience of absorption in her own work, led to a foregrounding of aspects of female life beyond the erotic and

10. There are, of course, Elizabeth Gaskell’s contented spinsters in *Cranford* (1853). Yet this novel hardly makes an effective comparison, as Gaskell situates her spinsters in a community in which marriage is not the norm. One might also consider Eliot’s Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1859), who initially renounces marriage for her vocation, but the force of this renunciation seems heavily compromised by the fact that Dinah eventually does marry.
the domestic” (16). Sturrock also notes that Yonge frequently provides her female characters with “interesting alternatives” to marriage, which Yonge never treats as an “inevitable resolution” (50). In the *Daisy Chain* (1856), for example, the brilliant and ambitious Ethel May and her cousin Norman fall in love—the two are presented as a perfect match—but each one renounces the other. Norman marries another out of duty to his parents, and parental duty motivates Ethel as well, who feels called to remain home and care for her aging father:

For herself, Ethel looked back and looked on. Norman Ogilvie’s marriage seemed to her to have fixed her lot in life, and what was that lot? Home and Cocksmoor had been her choice, and they were before her. Home! but her eyes had been opened to see that earthly homes may not endure, nor fill the heart. Her dear father might, indeed, claim her full-hearted devotion, but, to him, she was only one of many. Norman [her brother] was no longer solely hers; and she had begun to understand that the unmarried woman must not seek undivided return of affection, and must not set her love, with exclusive eagerness, on aught below, but must be ready to cease in turn to be first with any. Ethel was truly a mother to the younger ones; but she faced the probability that they would find others to whom she would have the second place. To love each heartily, to do her utmost for each in turn, and to be grateful for their fondness was her call; but never to count on their affection as her sole right and inalienable possession. She felt that this was the probable course, and that she might look to becoming comparatively solitary in the course of years—then tried to realize what her lonely life might be, but broke off smiling at herself, “What is that to me? What will it be when it is over? My course and aim are straight on, and He will direct my paths.” (666–67)

Although Yonge’s novel resembles popular conduct books for spinsters in that it counsels fortitude and faith in God for the trials of single life, what is unusual here is Ethel’s choice of potentially lonely spinsterhood over the attractive Norman Ogilvie. This presentation challenges the Victorian stereotype of spinsters, who were generally presented as women who, through bad luck and lack of personal charms, were forced into lives of solitude. Because freely chosen, Ethel’s spinsterhood takes on the nature of a divinely ordained vocation equally (if not more) dignified than marriage or the convent.
For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on Sewell, who, even in her own lifetime, was regarded as a less talented version of Charlotte Yonge.11 While Yonge’s depictions of spinsters are uncharacteristically positive for her era, none of them, in my opinion, equal Sewell’s semi-autobiographical creation of spinster Sarah Mortimer in her compelling and sophisticated characterization. Elizabeth Missing Sewell (1815–1906), a celebrated writer of children’s books, turned her attention to adult fiction in 1852, with the publication of *The Experience of Life.*12 This novel, her most popular work, is a spinster *bildungsroman* whose heroine, after a lifetime of struggle and renunciation, eventually achieves a self-sufficiency, material and moral agency, and a respectable, defined role within her community. The novel, which appeared a year before Brontë’s *Villette,* contains some striking parallels to Brontë’s novel: each is narrated by an unattractive, insignificant heroine; each directly grapples with the difficulties facing the single woman; after many trials and much suffering, each woman develops a firm sense of who she is and her place in the world. Unlike Lucy Snowe, however, Sewell’s Sarah Mortimer accomplishes this without relying on a traditional courtship plot, or indeed, any romantic attachments at all.

Sewell’s dispensation of the courtship plot allows her to make a forceful critique of middle-class family life. In the midst of a culture which traditionally placed home and family at the center of all that was most sacred and holy, Sewell’s novel suggests that the traditional, patriarchal home could be in fact a stumbling block to an earnest, ambitious woman of faith. In contrast to the quarrelsome, worldly Mortimer household, Sewell’s novel presents two alternative, overlapping spheres—the female world of her Aunt Sarah, and the idyll of a future heavenly home. Throughout the

11. In a *Dublin Review* essay of 1858, Fanny Margaret Taylor (who eventually cofounded, with Georgiana Fullerton, the Poor Servants of the Mother of God) states that “Miss Sewell and Miss Yonge have displayed sufficient talent to place them in the rank of the standard novel writers of our day, but they have by no means kept even pace with each other. Miss Yonge (author of the *Heir of Redclyffe,* &c.) fairly carries off the palm” (316).

12. Born in 1815 on the Isle of Wight, Sewell was the oldest daughter of a large, prosperous family, and the sister of William Sewell, a prominent figure in the Oxford Movement. Upon her father’s death in 1842, she turned to writing in order to support her mother and dependent siblings. Sewell established her reputation as a writer of pious tales for children, but her later fiction—including *Margaret Percival* (1847), *Ursula* (1858), *Ivors,* and *The Experience of Life*—was intended for adults. Sewell’s books sold extraordinarily well, and her most popular titles were successively reprinted (in English, French, and German) decades after their initial publication. Sewell’s tendencies to moralize, however, frustrated some critics, who regarded her pious tone as a hindrance to her full literary potential.
novel, Sarah's spinsterhood is presented not as an inevitable affliction, but as a freely chosen, if arduous, vocation. Sewell, an Anglo-Catholic, constructs Sarah's vocation by drawing upon revived interest in the lives of early Christian saints. Sarah seeks not a garland of orange blossoms, but a martyr's crown. While Victorian women were expected to suffer passively and silently, the female martyr's active embrace of her suffering suggested a dangerously unfeminine degree of autonomy and self-assertion. Sewell's spinster-heroine Sarah Mortimer, as a self-styled martyr, creates for herself a viable, even heroic, identity in the midst of a culture which defined the

13. Roman Catholics, of course, drew fire from Victorian Protestants for “worshipping” the saints. Saints' feast days and legends were an important part of the Anglo-Catholic revival; this is evident through such publications as Keble's *The Christian Year* (1839) and Newman's *Lives of the English Saints* (1844–45). Within the fold of the Roman Catholic Church, Newman and Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman each published a novel about early Christian martyrs—*Callista* (1853) and *Fabiola* (1854), respectively.
spinster as invisibility or lack. Moreover, in rejecting for its heroine earthly, domestic delights for an impending, transcendent heavenly home, Sewell’s novel challenges not only the rhetoric of Victorian domesticity, but also existing standards of novelistic realism and the narrow confines of the marriage plot.

Literary posterity has not been kind to Sewell; she has been remembered only as a minor novelist affiliated with the Oxford Movement, and her novels dismissed by Joseph Baker as “juvenile in morality and experience” (116). Yet a few scholars, including Patrick Scott and Shirley Foster, have called for a reassessment of Sewell’s work. Indeed, Sewell’s characters often are more complex, their inner lives more vividly represented, and her innovations with narrative structure more ambitious than that of her more famous contemporary Yonge. But perhaps most striking, Sewell’s novels more often, and more directly, interrogate the rules and expectations governing women’s lives. Sewell, more religiously and socially conservative than Brontë, would never have considered herself an advocate of women’s rights. In many ways Sewell’s novels offer very conventional images of Victorian womanhood. Yet even in the cases of Sewell’s heroines who quietly resign themselves to suffering, so vividly represented is their pain that the reader’s focus inevitably shifts from the presumed value of religious resignation to the social conditions underlying the spinster’s plight. As a reviewer for the Christian Remembrancer complained of Sewell in 1857,

The troubles incidental to [Sewell’s] own sex especially weigh on her heart and feelings; and life after life of patient self-sacrifice [. . .] pass before us, all told with an air of truth that ensures conviction, till her male readers [. . .] must feel ashamed of themselves for being at the bottom of so much suffering; and the advocates of the rights of women would certainly claim her as one of their sisterhood, but that her pious resignation and her course of active religious remedies might be, we fear, worse to their taste than the original disease. (292)

As this passage indicates, any stark display of pain might challenge a reader’s complacency with the status quo. All the more so, however, when

14. Despite Sewell’s reputation as a writer of children’s fiction, Patrick Scott calls attention to “the much more exploratory, sympathetic and ironically multiperspectival complex of attitudes taken in [Sewell’s] autobiographical writing and her adult fiction” (20). Shirley Foster asserts that “[Sewell’s] attitudes are often surprisingly unorthodox, and, without overt radicalism, she champions a far more challenging vision of independent womanhood than many of her contemporaries dared or wished to assert” (Foster 1985, 110).
a character fashions herself as a martyr by deliberately choosing suffering. In Catholic hagiography, martyrdom is never exclusively a matter between the sufferer and God; it is also a political gesture, a simultaneous rejection of a corrupt social order. In so many hagiographies, for example, a woman chooses martyrdom rather than worship the false gods or ideals of her culture. This heroism was celebrated by Victorian Anglo-Catholics, women in particular. The martyr was, without exaggeration, the only truly heroic literary prototype for women, suggesting a courageous, active femininity which legitimately transgressed traditional gender norms and expectations. Christina Rossetti wrote a number of poems about martyrs (among them “The Martyr” [1846], “A Martyr” [1856], and “Martyrs’ Song” [1863]), and all feature female protagonists similar to the martyr-heroine of John Henry Newman’s 1853 novel *Callista*.

Newman’s *Callista*, a third-century Christian, deliberately renounces both her brother and her earthly lover to embrace martyrdom, thereby gaining a heavenly love which far surpasses any familial or matrimonial tie: “A loved One,” she exclaims, “yet ideal; a passion so potent, so fresh, so innocent, so absorbing, so expulsive of other loves, so enduring yet of One never beheld;—mysterious!” (221). Callista, like Rossetti’s martyrs—led by “sublime desire” for the love of Christ—must face torture and death stoically and completely alone. Certainly, the martyr’s all-consuming, eroticized love for Christ and her willingness to suffer for him suggests some resemblance to the suffering household angel. Unlike this ideal, however, the martyr’s suffering is finite; the angel is plucked from the hearthside and delivered to an all-perfect Lover, and a heaven in which no suffering exists. Apparently, this idea was irresistible to many little girls of religious temperament. In her autobiography, Annie Besant (who became enamored of the Tractarian Movement in her teens) recalls how she read tales of the Christian martyrs “and passionately regretted I was born so late when no suffering for religion was practicable—no chance of preaching and suffering for a new religion” (42).

Despite the martyr’s invocation of religious devotion to justify her potentially unfeminine acts, the erotic intensity of her religious passion, her rejection of marriage and domesticity, and the public spectacle of her suffering continued to defy Victorian gender norms. While the angel was

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16. It must be noted, of course, that martyrdom was hardly a foreign concept to Evangelical Protestants. In another childhood reminiscence, Evangelical novelist Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna recalls reading *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* with her father, and asking, “Papa, may I be a martyr?” Tonna’s father assured her that if Catholic Emancipation succeeded, she would have ample opportunities (*Tonna, Life of Charlotte Elizabeth*, 22).
presumed to have no capacity for sexual pleasure, the erotic dimensions of the martyr’s suffering cannot be overlooked. Just as Besant recalls flagellating herself “till I often felt that the very passion of my devotion would draw Him down from His throne in Heaven” (57), the martyr Callista declares to her tribunal, “He [Christ] came to me amid much pain; and the pain was pleasant, for He came in it” (362). As for the martyr’s rejection of marriage, Agnes Smith Lewis declared in her book Select Narratives of Holy Women (1900) that the Syrian virgin martyrs “brought upon themselves and their friends a bitter persecution, not only by their steadfastness in the faith of Christ, but also by their unchristian renunciation of the marriage bond; a teaching which, if successful, would have upset all respectable society, and put an end to civilization” (vii; emphasis added).

While the martyr’s sublimated but powerful sexuality and her rejection of marriage could prove unsettling, most threatening was the visibility of the martyr’s suffering—a spectacle which, in effect, refuted popular notions that love, for women, could make all pain easy. In addition to treacherously unmasking the bleak, unromanticized trials of domestic life, both the martyr’s striving and her tendency to flaunt her pain also suggested that most dangerous of female traits, that which Sarah Stickney Ellis called “the love of distinction.” “In man,” warns Ellis, “this passion is ambition. In woman it is the selfish desire to stand apart from the many, to be something of, and by, herself, to enjoy what she does enjoy, and to appropriate the tribute which society offers her, distinct from the sisterhood to which she belongs” (109). Simply stated, professional victimhood and a martyrlike resignation could bestow upon women a distinct identity, a means of constructing a freestanding selfhood. In The Experience of Life, the power conveyed by Sarah’s role as a martyr—fortified by unshrinking observations of the imperfections of domestic life and Victorian matrimony—allows her not only to embrace life-in-death, but by so doing, to hold out for a more perfect love and a heavenly home.

Although spinsters, in the popular media, were occasionally (and mockingly) referred to as “martyrs,” the use of the term “martyr” did not fit the popular stereotype of spinsters: women who were forced into lives of solitude. The passive endurance implied by this stereotype was at once unheroic and entirely compatible with Victorian gender norms. Such a figure appears in one of Sewell’s own novels, Ivors (1856). Sewell, despite her earlier successes (including, of course, The Experience of Life), nonetheless felt compelled to attempt what she called “a regular novel, or a story in which love is the essential interest” (Autobiography 143). Ivors presents the reader with two cousins, Susan and Helen, who are in love with the same man. Although Sewell obviously intended for the reader to prefer pious,
gentle Susan to the beautiful, wayward Helen, her decision to leave the former single at the novel’s end (while Helen gets her man) disappointed and frustrated readers. As Sewell states of Ivors in her autobiography,

Up to the time when I wrote it, I had always tried to show that life could be happy, and its events of importance apart from marriage. I thought, and I think still, that marriage is a beginning, not an end—and that it is very misleading to young people to represent it in a different light. But love is, of course, a very prominent factor in human existence, and having fairly well established my reputation as a writer of fiction without it, I thought that I might venture to introduce it, endeavoring, if possible, to avoid the usual ending—“and so they were married, and live happily ever after.” But I did not quite succeed. My own interest lay with Susan, whom I left unmarried; but my readers did not, I think, as a rule, feel with me.

(145)

So powerful was the courtship plot to Victorian readers that Sewell could hardly “venture to introduce it” without having it dominate the entire novel. Although the novel’s primary goal is to uphold heartbroken Susan’s patience and Christian fortitude as a model for single female readers, Helen’s romance and marriage seem to push Susan to the margins of her own story. Left disappointed in love, the suffering that is supposed to ennoble and strengthen Susan merely renders her pathetic. The novel’s conclusion shows us parallel images of the two cousins—Helen standing before the altar as a bride, and Susan praying at home, too ill with grief to attend the ceremony. As Susan hears the wedding bells, “one bitter cry, one agonised burst of human feeling escaped her; and the crushed heart offered its last lingering feelings to God, and Susan Graham had no worse pang to suffer” (II:429). For the reader who believes, with Callista, that Susan’s pain “was pleasant, for He came in it,” Ivors’s ending might indeed provide adequate religious consolation and assurance to the lonely single woman. Sewell’s critics, however, could find no solace in Susan’s suffering. Refusing to believe that such a pious and faithful mind as Susan’s “could be surprised and disturbed by such a hurricane of earth-born grief,” one reviewer concluded that “[w]e really do not see who [Ivors] is to do good to, or in what critical position of circumstances a young person can turn to this work for counsel” (Christian Remembrancer 346).

Ironically, however, Ivors contains one of Sewell’s most forceful and direct affirmations of heroic martyrdom: the rejection of human suitors for a perfect, divine Lover. As Susan’s mother attempts to console her, she states,
A void has been created in our hearts which only one kind of earthly love can entirely fill. God has willed to deny you that [ . . . ] but he has not willed that you should go through life in loneliness. There is another love, before which all human affection fades into nothingness. [ . . . ]

[God offers] a love which can never change, never misunderstand [ . . . ] which is more fond than the love of a husband, more watchful than the care of a parent [ . . . ] a real, earnest, living, intense love, and to which we may give, not mere duty, or reverence, or gratitude, but the warm, eager, absorbing affection, which is as intimate as the craving of our hearts, and lasting as the blessedness of eternity. (II:411–12)

Here Susan’s mother suggests that her daughter has been specially chosen, singled out by God for an ecstatic divine romance. Although this passage transforms spinsterhood from a bleak misfortune to a passionate, ardent vocation, Ivors never convinces readers that Susan would rather have God than Claude Egerton. While the martyr suffers for God’s love, at one point Susan insists that “I would cut off my right hand to make them [Claude and Helen] happy” (I:232). So much for Susan’s integrity as a spinster.

Clearly, Sewell could not write a “regular novel” in which “love is the essential interest” without compromising the dignity and effectiveness of her spinster heroine. Not surprisingly, Experience of Life does not rely on a conventional courtship plot. Although many factors seem to have contributed to the novel’s success, foremost among them is its close resemblance to Sewell’s own life. “Nothing I have written,” states Sewell in her memoirs, “has ever been as popular as The Experience of Life—probably because it is what its name denotes [ . . . ] the groundwork is constructed from facts which belong either to my own experience, or personal knowledge and observation [114]. [ . . . ] Sarah’s troubled mind was a record of my own personal feelings [115].” Sewell’s critics agreed with her assessment; the physically frail Sewell, who passed through life unmarried, and who did not “remember having been at more than half a dozen balls in my whole life” (46), was comfortably in her element in constructing the introspective and pious Sarah Mortimer, weak in body and timid in disposition. 17

17. A rare firsthand description of Elizabeth Sewell can be found in the correspondence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who met the novelist in 1861. Barrett Browning, although admiring of Sewell, nonetheless describes her as a stereotypical spinster:

She is a very nice, gentle-looking, cheerful, respectable sort of—single-womanish person (decidedly single) of the olden type; very small, slim, quiet, with the nearest approach to a poky bonnet possible in this sinful generation. I, in my confusion, did not glance at her petticoats, but judging a priori, I should predicate a natural incompatibility with crinoline. But really I liked her, liked her. There were gentleness, humility, and con-
The power of Sewell’s personal experience helped her push past representational conventions in telling Sarah Mortimer’s story. Challenging traditional ideas about the place of romance in the novel, the first paragraph of Experience is a sort of realist manifesto against romantic falsehoods. Sarah Mortimer, who narrates her autobiography, ambitiously promises the reader in their stead “a real representation of human existence”:

I am not going to write a tale, not at least what is usually so called. A tale is, for the most part, only a vignette, a portion of the great picture of life, having no definite limit, yet containing one prominent object, in which all the interest is concentrated. But this is not a real representation of human existence. For one person whose life has been marked by some very striking event, there are hundreds who pass to their graves with nothing to distinguish the different periods of their probation, but the changes which steal upon them so naturally as scarcely to occasion a momentary surprise. They hope and enjoy, they are disappointed and sad, but no one points to the history of their lives as containing warning or example. They are born unthought-of beyond their own immediate circle, and die lamented only by a few; and we pass over their names in the obituary of the day [. . .] forgetting that for each individual soul in the vast multitude there has been a special day of trial, a special providence and guidance, and there will be a special day of reckoning and doom. (1)

In this passage, through its assertion that the true stories of human life are, by traditional novelistic standards, unremarkable, Sewell anticipates the closing paragraph of Eliot’s Middlemarch, composed nineteen years later. Of Dorothea Brooke, modern-day St. Theresa and “foundress of nothing,” Eliot states,

Her full nature [. . .] spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (682)

Like Eliot, Sewell sets out to record the story of a woman noteworthy not for her personal charms, her romantic conquests, or the excitement of her life, but for her ethical import; that is, her subtle but nonethe-

science—three great gifts. (Qtd. in Kenyon 430)
less perceptible influence in promoting the well-being of others. Sewell’s insistence upon altruism, even its “unhistoric” manifestations, as the truly noteworthy quality of her protagonist, defines a legitimate form of female heroism and female power based on moral and ethical agency. Thus Sarah Mortimer, who renounces earthly life in a much less dramatic fashion than Newman’s Callista, can nonetheless take on a heroic, martyr-like stature. Conveniently for an aspiring martyr, Sarah encounters difficulties and sorrows from an early age. Like Brontë’s Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Sarah narrates her own story toward the end of her life, as an elderly woman. Describing herself as “one of that numerous race who are set apart from their earliest childhood for patient endurance” (8), Sarah also rivals Lucy Snowe in the extent to which her negative self-portrayal unsettles, even repels, the reader. “Sickly, plain, and indifferently educated,” states Sarah at one point, “what better could I expect than to live in shade, whilst others glittered in sunshine?” (29). Sarah seems the only sensible and truly good-hearted member of a household populated by quarrelsome, shallow, and self-absorbed relations. When Sarah’s father dies, leaving nothing but a legacy of debt for his wife, two unmarried adult daughters, and two younger children, Sarah takes it upon herself to start a school and be the financial savior of her family. Despite Sarah’s ill health, her willingness to be imposed upon and manipulated by greedy family members, and the loneliness of her unmarried state, her strength of character and her religious faith pull her through every crisis. By the story’s end she has established a thriving school, successfully provided for her mother, and raised her younger brother and sister to be as sensible and good-hearted as herself. For all Sarah’s self-dependence, however, clearly her success is directly aided by two important female role models in her life: Aunt Sarah Mortimer (her godmother and her grandfather’s sister) and Lady Emily Rivers, a charitable-minded aristocrat who befriends and advises young Sarah. Lady Rivers, happily married, provides Sarah with the emotional sustenance of her friendship and provides for her a model of benevolence to the poor. It is Aunt Sarah, however, who most profoundly influences “Sally” (her pet name for Sarah), emphasizing to her the importance of self-sufficiency. As she tells her niece “never be a burden” to others, the words give to Sally “a brave, determined, independent feeling, such as one might imagine to inspire a soldier with courage on the eve of a battle” (22).

18. We do not know if Charlotte Brontë read *The Experience of Life*. However, in an 1852 letter to her friend and former teacher Miss Wooler (a close family friend of the Sewells), Brontë requested her to “tell me how you liked *The Experience of Life*.” Unfortunately, Miss Wooler’s response is lost to history. (Qtd. in Shorter 275)
Moreover, Aunt Sarah, herself a lifelong spinster, provides Sally with a religious rationale for her unmarried existence: “The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord,” Aunt Sarah says, as she quotes St. Paul, “that she may be holy in body and spirit; but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband” (199). Upon hearing this proclamation, Sarah’s sister Joanna exclaims, “Oh! then, aunt Sarah is going to turn Roman Catholic, and say that people ought not to marry” (199). Aunt Sarah informs Joanna that she will do no such thing, “in a tone of unusual severity, which made poor Joanna shrink” (199). “[T]o be an old maid,” she concludes, “is to be able to live to God, and work for your fellow-creatures in an especial manner” (200).

Sarah’s conscious desire to live for God rather than this world seems to emerge on Sarah’s confirmation day—also the day of her older sisters’ first dinner party. This marks the first time in which the increasingly pious young woman realizes that the world and the spirit are perpetually at odds. “And yet in the midst of all this distraction and even vanity,” recalls Sarah, “I was very much bent upon collecting my thoughts, and sadly distressed when I found myself wandering from my confirmation vow to the question, how all the people who were expected at luncheon would manage to find room in our small dining-room” (35). When Sarah returns from church, rather than join the family luncheon downstairs, she practices her first deliberate act of self-denial, apparently choosing the spirit over the world: “I should have liked very much to see the luncheon, and I thought to myself several times what a cheerful party there must be down stairs, but I felt that it would do me harm to be with them, for it would untone my mind, and I could not bear the thought of placing myself voluntarily in the way of temptation” (37). In retrospect, Sarah remarks that she remembers that first act of self-denial “with great gratitude [. . .]. It gave me [. . .] a consciousness of moral strength; and with strength came hope and happiness” (37).

This is virtuoso asceticism indeed.19 But it is not an isolated moment in the novel. On the contrary, Sarah’s lacerating self-denial manifests itself throughout her narrative in her continual efforts to take on the burdens of others and to deny herself pleasure, even when these sacrifices are not called for. A self-fashioned “Cinderella,” Sarah helps her mother and sisters dress for a party one evening, all the while taking it for granted that she will stay home, alone with her younger sister Hester, and nurse a headache.

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19. James Eli Adams, in Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity (1995), notes that heroines such as Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke often embrace “a virtuoso ascetic regimen,” to enact “a decidedly masculine self-fashioning” (9).
When Hester protests against Sarah’s unfair treatment at the hands of her mother and older sisters, Sarah simply replies, “[Y]ou must go to sleep, and I must be miserable.” “Must you?” asks Hester. “Who told you you must?” (44). Later in the novel, Aunt Sarah also chides Sally for her martyrlike acceptance of her older siblings’ unwillingness to help support their widowed mother. “[C]ontrary to the dreams of self-sacrifice in which I had for years indulged,” Aunt Sarah orders her to ask the rest of the family for help, her aunt all the while pointing out that “good people sin in their virtues, as well as bad people in their vices” (315).

Clearly, Sarah also resembles Dorothea Brooke in that she “likes giving up.” Just as *Middlemarch* suggests that Dorothea’s youthful penchant for needless self-sacrifice is misguided, Aunt Sarah’s description of her niece’s ambition as a “sin” questions the true motives of Sarah’s extraordinary altruism. While Sarah seems aware that extreme self-renunciation might be a paradoxical attempt at self-aggrandizement, it is one scruple she does not agonize over. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea’s love match with Ladislaw indicates her evolution away from futile renunciation, and toward an acknowledgment of her own needs and desires. Sarah, in contrast, renounces an attractive offer of marriage that would effectively strip her of her cherished martyr role. Sarah, who claims to submit to God’s will, seems in this case particularly determined to control her own life. Although wise Aunt Sarah acknowledges the religious benefits of spinsterhood, she tells Sarah that marriage is also a divinely ordained vocation. In case of a proposal, instructs Aunt Sarah:

> If you don’t care for the man, or if your parents object, or if there’s any other very good reason for saying no, why those are plain marks that it’s not meant you should marry; but if a man comes to you and says he’s fond of you, and he’s a good man, and your parents like the notion, and you like him, it would be just setting yourself against the ordering of Providence to declare that you would be better for a single life. (201)

Eventually, Sarah receives a proposal that seems, by her own description, to fit Aunt Sarah’s definition of a marriage proposal willed by Providence. Sarah’s suitor is—like all worthy suitors in Sewell’s novels—a clergyman:

> [ . . . ] [A] person whom I thoroughly esteemed, and liked, personally, more than any one I had ever seen. If we had met when we were respectively twenty and thirty, instead of nearly thirty and forty, I might probably have given him a still warmer feeling. As it was, I will not pretend to say that the necessity of refusing him did not give me a great pang. But to leave
my mother and sisters was impossible; and he was not rich enough to offer them a home, or give them, indeed, any assistance. If we had married we must have lived for ourselves alone. (354)

Sarah, consistent with her “dreams of self-sacrifice,” seems completely unaware that she has just provided the reader with a detailed account of family finances, which demonstrates that her mother is already adequately provided for through a legacy from Aunt Sarah, and that another unmarried sister, Joanna, is perfectly capable—as capable, at least, as Sarah herself—of earning her own living. The most telling evidence that self-will has usurped God’s will in this instance, however, is the fact that the proposal “was the only very important event in my life which I ever kept from Aunt Sarah” (355). Although Sarah claims that she has no fear of Aunt Sarah’s disapproval, “It was just possible [ . . . ] that she might have tried to induce Caroline to come forward more largely with assistance, and then the whole thing would have become known to my mother, which was what I especially wished to avoid” (355). Although Sarah does not explain her reasons for this sentiment, clearly, if she became less financially necessary to the family, she would no longer have a reasonable excuse to refuse the marriage proposal. As it is, Sarah professes to have made her decision in the best interests of the family, all the while overlooking any possible heartache she might have caused the poor clergyman. Claiming that he was “not desperately in love” with her (354), she next mentions the fact of his immediate departure to Australia with no overt acknowledgment of what his emigration might imply (355).

While Sarah’s attachment to her role as family martyr influences her decision to remain single, her choice also reflects her belief in the exclusivity of perfect Divine love. To love in this world, Sarah seems to believe, would be to render oneself ineligible for an analogous, yet immensely more perfect, kind of love in the next. “My spirits had been so worn [at the time of the proposal],” she states, “that I actually dreaded the thought of any change, even though it might be for happiness. I felt as if I had not the power of beginning life again,—as if it would be, in a certain way, going backwards, creating interests for this world, when all my object, hitherto, had been to loosen them” (354). Sarah’s dismissal of the clergyman’s suit allows her to channel all her desire upon the prize of a heavenly consummation with her Divine Lover. When Aunt Sarah finally passes on, her deathbed scene—immediately following Sarah’s description of her sister Hester’s wedding—suggests a consummation even more wonderful than that between Hester and her own clergyman, and also prefigures the sort of union Sarah herself also anticipates. When Sally reminds Aunt Sarah
of the long-dead family members she will soon meet again, Aunt Sarah simply replies, “One love, Sally, one all-sufficient love, is my comfort and joy,—the love which has blotted out sin” (441). By the closing pages of the narrative, Sally’s preparation to receive this “all perfect” love in its fullness would seem to have eclipsed all worldly interests and occupations. Attending daily church services, morning and evening, Sarah also frequently finds herself meditating in the graveyard, “look[ing] forward to the time when I also shall be called to deliver my body to the dust, and my spirit in the gladness of its love ‘to Him who gave it’” (470).

Implicit in female martyrs’ rejection of marriage and motherhood for Paradise (as Agnes Smith Lewis realized to her dismay) is a bold challenge to societal expectations and norms for women. Appropriately, Sarah’s narrative provides only a few, fleeting glimpses of happy marriages and contented families. Sarah’s beautiful older sister marries a coarse, elderly banker solely for his money; the couple’s subsequent misery paints a grim picture of the emotional, spiritual, and psychological degradation awaiting those who marry unwisely. As for Sarah’s descriptions of life with her parents and other siblings, such representations led critics to complain of Sewell’s tendency to “so constantly pictur[e] the home as the scene of disappointment, want of sympathy, uncongeniality, worry, weariness and pain” (Taylor 316). Here reviewer Fanny Taylor complains that Sewell’s scenes of home life might lead young people to view their own familial situations with discontent. Hints that not all homes were happy ones were subversive enough; Sewell’s portrayal of the pious Sarah being driven to distraction by her irreligious, worldly family, moreover, also boldly challenged Evangelical Christian notions that home was ever the center of all that was most sacred and holy. In short, marriage and family life, far from being the natural vocation of every woman, might in fact prove a dangerous stumbling block to women’s moral, religious, and spiritual integrity. Robbed of such integrity, then, women like Sarah Mortimer—who defined personal agency as the ability to discern God’s will and act upon it—would be stripped of their power entirely.

Because the martyr’s rewards are beyond the representational scope of the novel, however, *Experience* cannot balance scenes of domestic misery with representations of an ideal heavenly home. Therefore, even though the narrative’s conclusion thwarts the dominance of the courtship plot, it does not (or cannot) sustain Sarah’s otherworldly focus to the very end. *Experience* is not, after all, a hagiography (in which we might expect to see Sarah Mortimer, in the final scene, sprout wings and ascend a heavenly throne), but a novel that seems to demand some sort of concrete, tangible gratification for its protagonist, even if she is a martyr. As Sarah, in the
final paragraph, dictates her burial arrangements, the focus suddenly shifts from Sarah’s exclusive relationship with God to a recognition of her honored and revered position in the eyes of her nieces and nephews:

It seems as if it would be safe and blest still to be within reach of the prayers and praises I have loved; it soothes me to think that I may thus be connected in memory with the constant worship of the Church;—and most dear is the hope that those over whom I have watched from infancy, the children of my darling Hester, and it may be their children after them, may recall, as they pass my grave, the lessons I have labored to teach them, and speak of me with the love, though it can never be with the reverence, which must ever place amongst the dearest of my earthly memories, the name of—aunt Sarah. (471)

For all Sarah’s insistence that her true happiness lies in the next world, her identification of herself as a second Aunt Sarah suggests the possibility that spinsters could achieve a measure of fulfillment on earth. Sarah may aspire to a heavenly home, but in the meantime she seems to long for the existence enjoyed by her own Aunt Sarah. Throughout the novel, Sarah finds peace, quiet, sympathy, and religious guidance not in her own home, but in the well-ordered tranquility of Aunt Sarah’s spinster household. In contrast to the tumultuous Mortimer household—ostensibly controlled by a father lacking in financial acumen and overall common sense—Aunt Sarah runs her home competently and efficiently. Although Aunt Sarah also has a limited income, she keeps her home and gardens in impeccable condition; she retains a personal companion as well as three servants, who efficiently prepare and serve five meals a day: “[N]o dinners,” recalls Sally, “were ever so nicely dressed as aunt Sarah’s” (18). Not only does Aunt Sarah exercise strict control over her own domestic affairs, but, as matriarch of the Mortimer family, she can, unlike Sally, speak her mind to the rest of the family, men included. Nothing but a strongly worded letter from Aunt Sarah to Sally’s older siblings, for example, can induce them to contribute their financial share to the support of their widowed mother.

Aunt Sarah’s most impressive power, however, is her power to do good unto others. Having taken upon herself the supervision of the poor people of Carsdale, Aunt Sarah possesses “a large manuscript book,” which contains “a list of houses and inhabitants, the number of children, the occupations of the parents, their necessities and their characters” (75). With the aid of this book, Aunt Sarah and her friend Lady Emily Rivers—who, although married, provides Sally with another model of active,
independent, benevolent womanhood—can determine which families in the parish most require financial assistance. Although Aunt Sarah is strong willed, her care for others adds “the charm of a woman’s feeling to a character which was masculine in its strength of will and vigour of action” (17). It is Aunt Sarah’s Christian love which tempers and softens the otherwise potentially unnerving fact of her power. In this regard she is set apart from other strong-minded, powerful female characters such as Horatia, a scheming, money-hungry pretend “cousin” of the Mortimers, who is repeatedly described as a mannish female. In regard to Horatia, Aunt Sarah acknowledges that a fine line exists between masculine love of power for its own sake and a more feminine power born of love itself: “[Horatia] knows quite well, that if she rules herself first, she may rule the world afterwards. If she had but one grain of honesty, and two of kind-heartedness, in her composition, she might, with such self-command, become a saint” (392).

For all Sarah’s longing after her transcendent God, it is Aunt Sarah who embodies for her God’s wisdom, his knowledge (witness the fact of her great book, chronicling the lives of her poor people), his goodness, and even his severe judgment. At one point, Sally, plagued by what she considers to be a sinful excess of religious doubt, almost takes her “sin” to Aunt Sarah. “I fancied I could better bear my doubts if they were not secret,” she states, “and a sudden impulse urged me, and I stopped at the parlour door and thought I would go to Aunt Sarah—go to her, confess what I was, beg her to hate me, to send me from her, to give me any suffering, but only to listen to me and know me” (87). Aunt Sarah’s power extends to even more than the absolution of sins, however. At the end of Aunt Sarah’s long afternoons of planning charitable projects for the poor of Carsdale, she orders the frail Sally to rest on the couch during household prayers: “I lay down, weary with the day’s exertions [. . .] and generally at last fell asleep, with a happy, tranquil sense of reposing under the shelter of an Infinite Power” (80). Although Sarah’s use of the term “Infinite Power” refers to the prayers and to the One to whom the supplications are addressed, Sally’s happy and tranquil sense of absolute protection no doubt owes as much to Aunt Sarah’s judicious care as to her own sense of divine omnipotence.

Considering both the temporal and spiritual influence Aunt Sarah wields, both in Sarah’s life and in the overall narrative, young Sally’s gradual metamorphosis into a second Aunt Sarah to her own nieces and nephews emphasizes her acquisition, in old age, of increasing wisdom, self-assurance, and autonomy. Having been left a legacy of five thousand pounds in her uncle’s will, white-haired Sarah, in the final scene, is financially independent, now able to devote herself to charitable projects and to the main-
tenance of a separate household, a peaceful cottage adjoining that of her sister Hester and Hester’s children. Sarah, a spinster looking on from the margins of her own narrative—a narrative she fills up largely with accounts of the trials and tribulations of others within her family—has by the novel’s end moved to the center. As the new “Aunt Sarah,” Sally has become not only the centrifugal force for goodness and piety in her autobiography, but also a sort of glorified, saintly figure, her considerable “Experience of Life” now authorizing her to narrate her own story. Even though Sarah spends these final days meditating on the site of her burial and, like Susan in *Ivors*, fastens her heart’s desire onto an anticipated, blissful union with God in the next world, by the final chapter the temporal benefits of her spinsterhood cannot be denied. While *Ivors* requires of Susan (and its readers) absolute faith in God and his heaven to conjure up a convincing “happy” ending, *The Experience of Life* satisfies more conventional expectations of novelistic closure. Sarah, much like any romantic heroine who marries into money and social status by the novel’s end, at long last achieves financial stability, the respect of the community, and most important, a well-defined social role. Rather than derive these benefits from marriage, however, Sarah owes her temporal well-being at the novel’s end to God and to her aunt. Uncle Ralph’s deathbed bequest to Sarah seems nothing short of providential; as the novel implies, the stingy uncle’s uncharacteristically generous gesture springs from an awakening conscience, a terror of impending divine judgment. It is from Aunt Sarah, however, that Sarah receives her most priceless inheritance—a precedent by which to define her identity and purpose as a single woman, one who gains power not from the passive exercise of receiving love, but from actively loving others.

Although Sewell’s narrative seems less conflicted in many ways than other novelistic treatments of spinsterhood, one might ask whether her representation of Victorian women is really superior to or more desirable than others. The notion of embracing suffering is of course repugnant in our own culture, as it was for many Victorians. Yet to label the religious beliefs espoused by the Tractarian Sewell as morbid or “sick-souled” would bring us no closer to understanding them. The integrity and validity of such worldviews demand to be acknowledged on their own terms, rather than being forced into (or negated by) our own cultural frames. As a woman and a writer Sewell had to function within the constraints imposed by her society—in particular, a construct of womanhood defined by passive, invisible suffering. The spinster-martyr, then, although not a feminist figure, was a radical one nonetheless. This assessment is confirmed by *The Afternoon of Unmarried Life*, an 1858 conduct book that—despite its attempts to cheer and console unmarried women—emphatically resists the
notion that single life could be preferable to the married state. Its author, Anne Judith Penny, may well have had Sewell’s novel in mind when she passionately argued that

we should do wrong to believe this state of detachment from earthly love to be decidedly the best. [ . . . ] [T]his assumption that single life is in itself holiest and best has caused an incalculable amount of misery among Christian people during many successive ages. In the feebler sex it has occasioned morbid excitement of a perverted impulse. Instead of a meek submission to the temporary disadvantages of single life, and a clear-sighted recognition of its sorrow and deprivation, how often has there been among virtuous women an attempt to exalt and glorify this separate and unfinished life as being holier and more desirable in the abstract, as well as in their own particular case! [ . . . ] Would it not be better to allow that some right feelings must lack their completion, some pure desires their scope, rather than to confound devout joy and holy confidence with the passionate tenderness of a woman’s lonely heart? (286; emphasis in original)

Cold consolation for spinsters, indeed. Sewell’s ideology, in comparison, is certainly radical and—on some level—much more appealing.

Even if The Afternoon of Unmarried Life does not respond directly to Sewell’s work, surely Catholic ascetics are the miserable “Christian people” its author had in mind. Sewell, in writing The Experience of Life, drew upon her Anglo-Catholic beliefs to make statements at once radical and countercultural. Sewell, unlike most of her female contemporaries, managed to produce a sympathetic, realistic narrative of female celibacy, and a novel in which “love is not the central interest.” This was no mean feat in an era which, as Robert Polhemus explains in Erotic Faith, novels became “cathedrals” which enshrined and disseminated secular notions of erotic love as the source of ultimate transcendence (3). The other narratives of female celibacy discussed in this chapter are less satisfying and less ideologically consistent. The anticonvent novels, of course, are doomed by a combination of religious bigotry and an utter disregard for real life. Works by Yonge and Brontë, and even Sewell’s Ivors, fall into the mistake of presenting spinsterhood as a calamity that is passively endured and nowhere near preferable to the married state. The spinster may cling to God for solace, but this is meager comfort for the reader convinced—as Brontë’s Lucy Snowe seems to be—that one can only be saved through human love. In the logic of erotic faith, the spinster remains a reprobate and an outcast. Of course, Sarah Mortimer also clings to her Christian faith. But more than
passive resignation, her faith provides her with models of active female heroism in the tales of the Christian martyrs. And unlike other narratives of female celibacy, *Experience* does not overlook or abandon the rich possibilities of female community, as sustenance for its heroine. While Sarah Mortimer does not join a formally organized female community, strong bonds between female characters contribute significantly to the success of her *bildungsroman*.

Sewell and other Anglo-Catholic women did not set out to challenge the status quo. But in an era in which women defined their agency in moral, spiritual, and ethical terms, not even the most entrenched social institutions or expectations could quench the desire of so many women to live, act, and even write as their consciences demanded. Florence Nightingale, herself a lifelong “spinster” who at one time nearly converted to Roman Catholicism, once criticized popular romance novels for promoting a “false idea” of life, as they always concluded with two people “wrapped up” solely in each other, in “an abyss of binary selfishness” (64). Sewell would undoubtedly have agreed. In her attempt at creating what she deemed a more ethically responsible representation of women’s lives, Sewell challenged the dominance of the courtship plot, interrogated her culture’s definitions of female sanctity and identity, and presented an exposé—not of profane convents, but of profane Victorian homes.