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Feminist Reincarnations of the Madonna

ANNA JAMESON AND ECCLESIASTICAL DEBATES ON THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

APART from the horrors and calamities of war, unquestionably the leading topic of the day is the new Romish dogma—the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “the event of the nineteenth century,” as the Dublin Telegraph most correctly calls it.

—Edward Maguire, The New Romish Dogma of the Immaculate Conception v

All by Mary: nothing except by Mary.

—Qtd. in “Histoire de l’Eglise de France” 428 (“Observateur Catholique”)

[T]here she stands—the transfigured woman, at once completely human and completely divine, an abstraction of power, purity, and love, poised on the empurpled air, and requiring no other support.

—Anna Jameson, Legends of the Madonna xlv

CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S Villette is one of the major fictional venues depicting Victorian Protestant fascination with and repulsion for the Catholic Church. In the fair copy of Shirley Brontë deletes the words “by the hallowed Virgin Mary” in the vision of the titanic Eve (ms. BL Smith Bequest). In the arguments between Protestants and Catholics in Victorian Britain, one figure stands out as causing the most disagreement—the Virgin Mary. On 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX formally gave his blessing to the unof-
ficial dogma that not only was the Madonna a virgin at Christ’s conception but she was also born without sin.\(^1\) Referred to by Catholics as the “Marian age,” the period between 1850 and 1950 saw the official establishment of the Immaculate Conception, the rise in devotion to the Madonna, and an increase in accounts of the Virgin’s appearance to lay adherents. The period closed in 1950 when the doctrine of the Assumption was proclaimed (Herringer 11). In Victorian Britain, arguments about the Virgin—a sacred version of the Angel in the House—always filtered ideological concerns about gender. Thus it is no surprise that after centuries of relative calm, such debates reached a zenith during the nineteenth century, although conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in England were ever-present from the sixteenth century onward (Herringer 4, 20, 2, 19; see also O’Malley 7). Men were the main participants in the public brouhaha between Protestants and Catholics that centered on the Immaculate Conception, and their disputes more often than not ended up reiterating the proper behaviors expected of women. Indeed, as Carol Herringer points out, the virulent colloquy about the Madonna’s identity duplicated questions about women’s morality, maternity, and virginity (26).

In this chapter, I will examine these debates vis-à-vis Anna Jameson’s *Legends of the Madonna* and suggest that given the vehement male responses to the Immaculate Conception, Jameson’s participation in the discussion is astonishing, masked though it is behind analyses of artworks depicting the Virgin. I assert that the gender ideology enshrined in *Legends* and other writings by Jameson contains traces of the audacious mythoi articulated by female millenarians and socialist feminists from earlier in the century. If it can be argued that Mary put Christian concepts about gender and godhood under interrogation, I shall analyze how the dogma of the Immaculate Conception aggravated anxieties about the sexuality (read: sexual fallenness) of mothers; panic about women’s attainment of power over men, concomitant with concerns that divine justice should include no exceptions, especially for women; worries that strict boundaries were not intrinsic to the ontology separating God and human beings; and fears that God’s masculine ontology might not universally encompass all of creation, particularly the female.

In the Victorian period, Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the Madonna differed starkly. On the one hand, Catholic construal of Mary undermined parts of the dominant Victorian gender ideology in that Catholics saw her as morally superior and powerful in both the private and public spheres. That superiority was founded on the idea that a woman’s chastity held the highest moral premium, a principle that was, as Marina Warner notes, the most significant and unique concept that early Christian-
ity appended to older myth systems (48). Warner adds that the Madonna’s “miraculous virginity” was the most palpable topic in writings by the Church Fathers and heavily influenced ideas about mortal women (67). Indeed, the image of Mary always implicitly disciplines mortal women for being anything but celibate, and although mystified as few other women have been, the Virgin occupies a category of the ideal that no woman can achieve (Kristeva, “Stabat Mater” 327; Warner xxi, xxv, 104, 153, 159).

Many Protestants believed that any devotion to the Virgin was a step toward paganism, for the worship of Mary seemed analogous to the worship of the goddesses Isis, Juno, and Astarte (Herringer 97). As the Pall Mall Gazette noted, “The belief that there is to be a Goddess as well as a God for Christians” should be met with “contemptuous silence” (10). Unlike Catholics, Protestants in general believed that Mary was a mortal woman who was good but not necessarily morally superior. This led to the idea that the Virgin and women in general had no moral superiority (or power) over men, thus creating inconsistency in the ideal of the Angel in the House (64, 78). Protestants were also anxious about the Catholic belief in Mary’s eternal virginity and were concerned that women who remained celibate achieved a form of independence that upset the categories of gender (88). For example, Charles Kingsley represented the fear that sexual abstinence virtually “unsexed” men and women by feminizing both sexes. As such, the dogma of celibacy denied the sexes the erotic desires that Kingsley saw as inherent to Christian devotion (qtd. in Griffin 123). Clearly, the Virgin was a controversial figure from almost any viewpoint. Thus she acted as a touchstone for anxieties about gender and power.

Henry Hart Milman’s *History of Christianity* (1840) illustrates the subversive nature of the Virgin in Church history. Deriding the early Church’s inclusion of paganism, Milman remarked that the Church Fathers’ fierce battles over the nature of the Trinity and of Christ’s essence refocused devotional attention onto the gentler images of the Virgin (3:424). He also argued that Mary’s maternity and chastity were appealing because men had the highest regard for these qualities in women. Making a case for man’s inborn chivalry toward the opposite sex, Milman contended that women “deified” Mary as the ideal example of womanhood, thus ensuring that women’s status would increase (430). At the end of his three-volume tome, Milman wrote that worship of Mary offers “humane feeling” to the Christian religion, allowing it to increase its membership rather than having it dwindle away (436). But to end a text on the history of the Christian Church and its all-male Trinity by invoking the Virgin as the most powerful entity in that religion hardly met the aims of Milman’s digest. After all, he averred in his preface that his goal was to defend Christ’s divinity against Renan and
Strauss (1:vi). Here, as elsewhere, the concept of the Madonna outmaneuvered gestures toward its subordination.

Milman’s commentary is predictive of gender concerns that underlay debates about the Immaculate Conception. In such debates in print media during the 1850s and ’60s, Tory, Whig, and radical media reviled the Bull Ineffabilis for its “heretical harlequenadings” (“Mary—, the Rise, Progress, and Development of a Theological Illusion” 26). Even before the pronouncement, the Rambler complained that worship of Mary was one of the many “impieties” of the Italian Church (“The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception” 547). After the official Bull was proclaimed, the London Review grumbled that it undid everything ever prophesied about the immutable kingdom of God (“The ‘London Review’ Irish Church Commission” 616–19). Meanwhile, the Tractarian Christian Remembrancer panned Alphonsus de Ligouri’s “The Glories of Mary,” deeming the Bible and early Church Fathers as spurious sources for the doctrine (“The Glories of Mary” 417–67). The Tory Quarterly Review decried the new doctrine for being an insulting addendum to the “heterogeneous mass of fiction” the Catholic Church had already perpetrated on its followers (“La Croyance à l’immaculée Conception” 148). Elsewhere, Richard Carlile, editor of the radical Republican and paramour of Eliza Sharples, lamented the dogma as a “stultifying” doctrine turning men from reason toward superstition (495).

When the Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine queried, “How came Divine honours to be rendered to the mother of our Lord?” a number of responses were given (“‘Immaculate Conception’ of the Virgin Mary” 13 [July 1867]: 597). Fears that papal aggression would overturn national sovereignty appeared in coverage of the decree. French Gallicans (nationalists) and Ultramontists (who believed that Church sovereignty was superior to State sovereignty) clashed over the doctrine, as though Mary were a site of a new French Revolution. Reviewing L’Abbé Guettée’s “Histoire de l’Eglise de France,” the Christian Remembrancer worried that Ultramontist beliefs held “sway” in France and that the contention between Ultramontists and Gallicans threatened the fall of the Gallican Church (423). The Quarterly Review warned that the schism within the Church over the new doctrine was a palimpsest for French revolutionary inclinations. The writer fretted that the “violent” Ultramontists paid homage to the doctrine not out of love for the Virgin. Rather, the conservative Quarterly was horrified that the new dogma might represent victory of “controversialist” over temperate Gallicans (172).

Apprehension that the Bull afforded the Virgin a higher status than God also reverberated in the public discussion. The Wesleyan-Methodist sneered,
“Every knee bows to Mary” while the Savior became “less loved” (“Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary” 600). Likewise, the London Review bristled at the Virgin becoming the omnipotent mediator, which, according to the Protestant Church, was the right of the Savior only (“The ‘London Review’ Irish Church” 616). Censuring the propaganda supporting the Bull Ineffabilis another journalist reviled the sacrilegious ideas that God the Father obeyed the all-powerful Mary; and that it was by “‘Mary that the virtue of grace, and the ineffable blessings of the Most High descend.’” The writer fumed that the new dogma instituted Mary as a higher being than God because she exhibited “infinite goodness,” which could reside in only one deity. Thus, if Mary was infinitely good, God must then have been stripped of His “essential attribute” when Mary replaced Jesus as the sacred go-between (qtd. in “Histoire de l’Église” 428). The binary logic mimicked the antisuffrage rationale that if women received the vote, men would be divested of a power essentially their own, and it also assumed that power is indivisible and therefore must always and only reside in the male, whether mortal or divine.

Concerns about God’s omnipotence also registered anxiety that He might not encompass the identity of female creation. Put simply, if the male Christian God could not fathom half of human creation, His power and omniscience were lacking. For example, the review of “The Glories of Mary” quotes William Gladstone, who worries that allowing Mary to be the intermediary with the Son because of her “tenderness and intensity of feminine sympathies” only “disguises a reality of infinite danger” (466). The review ends with a curious musing: “As if the Maker of woman did not possess in inexhaustible abundance those treasures of tenderness from and out of whose overflow it is that He has adorned the loveliest of His works” (467). This caveat suggests the concern that perhaps a male God might not be capable of imagining and embodying female qualities without encompassing those very qualities, thus undermining the supposed essence of Christian godhood as an all-encompassing and omnipotent masculinity. Gender slippage is imminent and Immanent in this subliminal alarm. Likewise, the Immaculate Conception creates slippage between what is considered human and divine. If a woman could attain Godhood in her mortal state, what was to stop Christian principles from being overthrown wholesale? And what might that mean for earthly constructions of political and spiritual power that reproduce Christian patriarchy?

The notion that Mary obtained her heavenly station through feminine wiles underwrites another Protestant response to the Bull. Signaling distaste for the Virgin, the London Review argues that she
availed herself to the utmost of a source of attraction which has been in all ages most powerful with the heart of man. In woman he beholds the most beautiful object in creation, one whose form excites his admiration, whose trusting tenderness and devoted attachment inspire him with love, whose virgin purity he holds to be sacred, whose affection as a wife and a mother fills his heart with the . . . most grateful esteem. The Mother of Jesus appears in the Church of Rome invested with all those sweet, endearing attributes exalted, intensified, etherealized in the highest possible degree. (“The ‘London Review’ Irish Church Commission” 617)

This writer imagines a Mary who engineers (“availed herself”) her dominance over the Catholic laity and clergy through her devious sexual and maternal attraction, which she cleverly “intensifie[s]” and “etherealize[s].” As the “object” of man’s worship, in part because of her sexual attraction, she makes men slavering devotees. What attractions the Virgin might have for the female believer are of no concern to the writer. But there is another tension implied: that God did not create humanity. Instead, male yearning for the erotic and maternal created the Madonna. Furthermore, even the all-powerful male God is inept at creating such intense worship in the hearts of His believers; without any effort whatsoever, the glamorous Mary aggregates adoration to herself and away from the Father, who continually grouses that his devotees do not adore Him enough. Thus the only spiritual relationship described takes place between passive men and a deified woman who need not seek omnipotence because men naturally cede it to her.

Remarks from the pulpit fueled antagonisms toward the Virgin. William Bernard Ullathorne, Catholic Bishop of Birmingham (and an acquaintance of George Eliot), metaphorically viewed Mary as the sacred earth (temple) from which Christ was made: in the same way the “Divine Artist” had made man’s body from Mother Earth, God had created Mary in “body as from earth and in soul as from Heaven to be a Mother for His Son” (34). Hence, Ullathorne made reproduction woman’s spiritual essence and in doing so admitted that the male Trinity lacked the power to engender. In his view, women need a model of perfection that mothers biologically and spiritually, which is impossible for men to achieve. The Bishop concluded that the “supreme excellence of woman as the type and head of womanhood” is to be found only in the Madonna. In answer to the question “what place is she assigned in the grand scale of the creation?” Ullathorne answers that Mary receives the “ministry” of the “divine maternity” (51, 52). He also gives highest place to Mary as a “spiritual paradise” of the second Adam, Jesus: that is, after the Fall, God created a new heaven and earth within which the second
Adam, Christ, was created, and Mary was that new paradise (18, 25). Here again, the ever-scheming Mary accumulates cosmic universality; she is everything and everything is she, and she automatically deprives the supposedly masterful male God of her own vast energy and self-containment.

Protestants also worried that God’s justice could not be fulfilled if one mortal became the exception to the rule that all humanity was born in sin. In a sermon titled “The Recent Decree on the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary” preached on Christmas Day 1854, a cleric (name unknown) explained that by establishing the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Catholicism had undone the foundational concept of the Incarnation. In other words, if one mortal woman could be exempted from Christ’s salvific act, then the supposedly unchanging Christian God was inconsistent. Likewise, the Bull negated the concept that since all mortals, including Mary, were born in sin, all had to be redeemed by the Savior. Further, the sermon expounded, the Immaculate Conception obviated the doctrine that Jesus became mortal so that humans could see his graphic suffering and thus feel more unified with Him and more capable of believing in the possibility of their own redemption.

Predictably, in “The Recent Decree” the “man” in “humanity” has rhetorical currency: “God’s purpose lies in man, . . . and He will not fulfil it otherwise than by man. He will not put in subjection unto the angels the world that is yet to come—He will subject it to man” and “man shall reign over it” (2). The cleric was almost sniveling about the insult to masculinity: If the “blessed Virgin Mary . . . attained to perfect and unspotted holiness in the flesh previous to the Incarnation, then, proof . . . has been afforded that the act of Incarnation, and the work of redemption consequent thereupon, were not necessary or indispensable in order to attain that end” (“The Recent Decree” 6). Thus the writer views Mary’s Immaculate Conception not as the sublime exception that proves the rule but rather as the one exemption illustrating the male Trinity’s lack of absolute power over human salvation.

Ten years later in his Eirenicon, the High Church cleric E. B. Pusey sought a merger of the Anglican and Catholic churches. But strangely undermining his own line of reasoning, he laid out the issues that interfered with his proposal, the Roman Catholic worship of the Virgin chief among them. English Protestants, he asserted, would never reconcile with Catholicism because it gave Mary precedence over Christ and God the Father. This argument created another theological dustup. Asserting that he looked forward to the “intercommunion” between Catholic and Protestant churches, Pusey offered a solution for the schism. That is why it was so bizarre when he laid out the reasons why such a hoped-for event could not occur, and his Eirenicon—
con essentially remains trapped in that aporia. In speech worthy of a modern political campaign, Pusey averred that the two sects were separated by a “vast practical system” that supported doctrines with only “quasi-authority” (43). The most important dogma blocking union was the “special ‘crux’ of the Roman system,” or the “vast system as to the Blessed Virgin” (44). Pusey was most troubled by the fact that Mary was now seen as the “‘Co-Redempress” between the Church and Jesus (67). Not only did Mary’s “vastness” trouble Pusey; her cosmic universality and demand for the full attention of her worshippers stymied the reunion of the homosocial, male-dominated Christian religion.

Pusey’s litany of the accretions to the Catholic Church under the false doctrine of Mariolotry is comprehensive:

‘[I]t is morally impossible for those to be saved who neglect the devotion to the Blessed Virgin;’ that ‘it is the will of God that all graces should pass through her hands;’ . . . that Jesus has, in fact, said, ‘no one shall be partaker of My Blood, unless through the intercession of My mother;’ . . . that ‘God granted all the pardons in the Old Testament absolutely for the reverence and love of this Blessed Virgin;’ . . . that God is ‘subject to the command of Mary;’ that ‘God has resigned into her hands . . . His omnipotence in the sphere of grace;’ ‘that it is safer to seek salvation through her than directly from Jesus. (45)

Thus, with the advent of the Immaculate Conception, Mary’s power was consolidated because the “Cultus” of the Virgin was authorized through official imprimatur. Pusey also worried that the doctrine would allow this “Cultus” to grow ineluctably (50). So, for example, the former Tractarian abhorred the practice of naming churches after Mary and scorned the gigantic statues of the Virgin placed near the altars of the Roman Church (47). Most galling was Mary’s accession to divinity on a par with and even above God. Pusey loathed the Catholic endorsement of the idea that Mary so “‘loved the world, that she gave her only begotten Son,’” culminating in the concept that only Mary could provide salvation to all mankind (69, 70). Pusey specified his fears clearly: Christ’s relationship to Mary as a “naturally inferior” son guarantees that, as a mother, the Virgin is therefore “superior to God,” with God Himself being “her subject” (71). Here again, Mary causes rupture in Christianity. She makes unity impossible between the Catholic, Protestant, and Greek Orthodox churches. She also creates a gap that cannot be explained: in other words, how was it that a mortal female could attain the mode of godhood when Christianity was rooted in the patriarchal
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concept of God’s Fatherhood and Sonship? Mary, it appeared, irrationally imposes the notion of divine motherhood upon that holy, impregnable male twosome.

Following Pusey’s public display of disaffection from the Virgin, Cardinal John Henry Newman entered the fray. In his public response to his old friend, Newman acknowledged his lack of enthusiasm for Mariolatry. Explaining that he had always wondered why the fallen Eve was called the “Mother of all living,” Newman asserted that it was from Mary that “Life itself was born in the world” and that where Eve brought about the death of mankind, Mary had brought about its salvation (43). Pointing out the “national good sense” of the English, Newman rejected Pusey’s claim that Mary had become the centerpiece of the Catholic Church. English Catholicism, he avowed, is not subject to the “extravagances” found in other countries because the English disdained “curiosities of thought” that appealed to the “undisciplined imaginations” and “grovelling hearts” of non-English nations. Thus the English would avoid the histrionics that less-educated countries might exhibit (105). Distinguishing between “healthy” and “artificial” worship, Newman asserted that it is possible to revere Mary as mother and virgin without undermining the Trinity. This pragmatic type of devotion, he proudly proclaimed, is “the English style” in its “Christian good sense” (105).

Newman responded in kind to Pusey’s litany, asserting that he and other English Catholics never practiced the scurrilous Mariolatry that Protestants loved to claim the Roman Church indulged in:

God has resigned into her hands His omnipotence; that . . . it is safer to seek her than her Son; that the Blessed Virgin is superior to God; that He is (simply) subject to her command; that . . . Mary takes His place as an Advocate with Father and Son; [page break] . . . that, as the Incarnate God bore the image of His Father, so He bore the image of His Mother; . . . that His Body and Blood in the Eucharist are truly hers and appertain to her; . . . that the Holy Ghost brings into fruitfulness his action by her, . . . that the kingdom of God in our souls, as our Lord speaks, is really the kingdom of Mary in the soul.” (118–19)

The Cardinal bitingly concluded, “Sentiments such as these I never knew of till I read your [Pusey’s] book, nor, as I think, do the vast majority of English Catholics know them” (119).

If Newman was rich in rhetorical flourish and righteous anger, he was poor in substance, for he had nothing to fill the lack produced by Mary’s
ostensible coup. Strangely, in seeking to show that Mary was not invincible, the English Cardinal concluded his rejoinder to Pusey by discussing the imminent approach of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, followed by Christmas. Noting that Christmas focuses on Christ’s birth, Newman accepted that the Nativity cannot help pointing the worshipper’s attention to the “peculiar prominence” of the Virgin. Unlike the Easter season, when Mary remains safely behind the scenes, at Christmas she is the intermediary who “brings Him to us in her arms.” Thus, Mary is inexorably imprinted on one of the holiest Catholic holidays (123).

Having previously derided notions of Mary’s preeminence over Christ, Newman began and ended his depiction of the Christmas season with Mary, noting that her ineluctable “image is upon it.” Despite the astonishing disjuncture, he called for unity, saying, “May the sacred influences of this time bring us all together in unity! May it destroy all bitterness on your side and ours! . . . May that bright and gentle Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, [page break] overcome you with her sweetness, and revenge herself on her foes by interceding effectually for their conversion!” (123–24) Unable to elide the rhetoric about Mary that he abjured, Newman must link her to any negotiation of Christian unity between Protestant and Catholic. Registering her virtual omnipotence, Newman pictured the Virgin as the only God able to “overcome” the very schism she seems to have created. Like the confounding God of the Old Testament, she creates the very conundrums she is meant to resolve.

Tropes about the “Immaculate” nature of the Madonna’s sexuality were, one might say, bloodcurdling. If Cardinal Newman could not erase Mary’s pesky influence, Bishop Ullathorne was awkwardly enmeshed in her ambiguous sexuality. Quoting St. Proclus’s view of Mary, spoken in 429 A.D., Ullathorne reminded his audience that “we celebrate her, who is the argument for chastity and the glory of her sex; her [page break] who is Mother at once and Virgin. Lovely and wonderful is this union” (14–15). Fears of the sexualized woman/mother were gratified and appeased in Mary’s erotic ambiguity, with which the good Bishop was infatuated: “She is a mother without man’s concurrence. She is mother of God and man at once. She is a mother whilst she remains a virgin. She is exempted from the curse of Eve, that fruit of [page break] original sin, and brings forth her Son without pain or sorrow. Her child is born, whilst her virginal integrity is preserved. She nourishes God at her breast. She commands Him by her words, and He is subject to her” (40–41). The conspicuous lack of discussion about the Father’s and Son’s sexual purity, coupled with Ullathorne’s need to “preserv[e]” Mary’s
“virginal integrity” (to keep her intact), virtually acts as the sole basis for her accession to a divine state.

The centuries-long attempts by Church Fathers to preserve Mary’s virginal integrity led to tortuous deliberations like Ullathorne’s. Each theologian who entered the debate was tasked with pinpointing the exact moment that Mary became immaculate. As Nancy Mayberry points out, “The confusion was the result of the belief that sin was passed on to each generation through the act of concupiscence,” and thus the question was, did she become immaculate “at her conception, in the womb, at birth, at the Annunciation, or in the mind of God before her conception” (211). With this confusion, even a convert to Catholicism and devotee of the Virgin would become distressed by her female stain on Christ’s purity. Obsessed with the sex act and procreation, Frederick William Faber worried about the sharing of blood when Christ was in Mary’s womb. He remarked that it was impossible to believe that “the matter of the Precious Blood had ever been itself corrupted with the taint of sin” but fretted that “what was to supply the free price of our redemption was once enslaved to God’s darkest, foulest enemy” (Faber 29; qtd. in Herringer 124). Satan, of course, is that “enemy,” but the implication is that the mortal Virgin’s tainted blood might have corrupted the Savior’s blood during pregnancy, when all his physical functions transpired through intermixture with Mary’s bodily functions.

Similarly, Protestant Edward Maguire focused on Mary’s postpartum cleanliness. Asking whether Mary “observed the law of Purification” after Christ’s birth, Maguire asserted that all “uncleanness, ceremonial or moral, is connected with sin” (21). One gathers that he assumed the biblical horror of female blood, that is, that the shedding of blood after the birth process was unclean and sinful and thus a mode of being that could not be associated with the Mother of God. This might explain the Eclectic Review’s dismay about the new dogma: one of the “More monstrous” implications is that “we have not only the transubstantiation of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. We have Mary’s too” (“Doctor Pusey’s Eirenicon” 83). One cannot help wondering whether this writer is alluding to the different forms of blood that Jesus and Mary shed—the Virgin’s post-puerperal, supposedly “unclean,” matter that always reiterates the menses and women’s fertility. The Eclectic Review seemed to ask how males could identify with such a bleeding deity. Again Milman’s inability to connect the female reproductive anatomy with noble Godhood enters the equation. It is obvious that woman’s need to identify with deity was ignored, along with what might be her query: how
could women identify with a procreative deity who did not bleed as Mary did?

Viewing Protestantism as sturdy, British, rational, and manly, and Catholicism as effete, Continental, irrational, and feminine, many Protestants believed that because Catholicism appealed to women, it was "feminized" (Herringer 4, 56; LaMonaca 2, 3). In one instance, the debates about the Bull evoked a withering interrogation of the masculinity of a Catholic who reverenced this vexing female deity. While the Protestant press admired Cardinal Newman, perhaps because of his so-called rational English refusal to divinize Mary, it could not abide Cardinal Manning's enthusiasm for the Madonna. In its critique of the official doctrine, the British Quarterly Review highhandedly attacked Manning for his devotion to the Virgin and for being "too effeminate" himself, thus suggesting that by worshipping a female divinity, male adherents became feminized (Dale 289). Maligning Manning's virility, the High Church journal complained that while the Cardinal's sermons were "severe without being robust," his preachments lacked "depth and vigour." The Protestant writer did not stop there in questioning the cleric's manhood, adding that although the "sentiment" of Manning's homilies may be "delicious," they lacked "passion," "sinew," and "logic" (289). "Vigour" and "sinew" are, of course, code words for masculinity, which, this journalist snidely implied, Manning had not properly displayed, making him and his Church not only "effeminate" and "powerless" but also implicitly perverse (289).

The debates between the male laity and patriarchs over the Virgin's role were similar to Victorian commentary by males on the Woman Question: in both discussions, any hint of equality between the sexes raised fears that women would supersede their male counterparts in power. Further, there was an anxious desire to remind women that their central meaning to men and the Christian patriarchy was sexual: they must be virginal while also fulfilling woman's "essential" function of motherhood. Likewise, the generic meaning of the term "man" as a universal marker for both sexes implicitly comes into question when distinctions are made between inherent male and female roles, duties, and characteristics. In the rigidly gendered Victorian culture, the iconic Virgin automatically put the male God into question; that is, without male involvement she biologically conceived and thus created the sumnum bonum of God's plan, the Savior. Indeed, Mary's role is a recognition that God cannot do without woman in the creative act—the divine not being generative without an earthly female in the process. As I have also shown, obsessive fears about masculinity, female purity, and bodily functions hovered subliminally in these debates between men.
But while many Catholic and Protestant clerics agreed that woman's inherent duty was simultaneously motherhood and chastity, Catholicism provided more of a horizon, if a troubled one, for divine womanhood. In arguing that religion must offer women a model of perfection, Bishop Ullathorne declared that Jesus is the “head and type of all human excellence,” being the “one perfect man.” But he then asked, “where shall we look [page break] for the highest form and example of excellence in woman?” This being, of course, was Mary, who had “a nearer resemblance to God than all others, and a greater union with God than all others” (51–52). Offering woman vicarious divinity, Ullathorne's approach implies that the fully male Trinity cannot act as the absolute sign of divine perfection. In suggesting that the generic term “man” could not cover the woman, the Bishop intimated that the generic male Trinity was also lacking in the feminine graces and thus incapable of modeling and encompassing perfect womanhood.

Herringer points out that while Protestant attacks on Mary were based on the belief that women were limited in their divine and earthly emanations, Catholic representations of a powerful Virgin implied that the very “virtues that were intended to restrict women to the domestic sphere were a means by which to access the public sphere” (25). Both Maria LaMonaca and Ruth Vanita assert that Protestant Victorian women writers subversively used Catholicism to undermine and protest Victorian “sacred cows” by examining Victorian culture through Catholic “tropes.” Most importantly, the Madonna becomes “a site of free signification” for these writers (Vanita 19; qtd. in LaMonaca 3, 4). When mainstream Victorian women writers publicly responded to the Woman Question and discussions about the Virgin Mary, the rhetoric was usually more carefully calibrated than the debates between men. This does not necessarily mean that their analysis is feeble; it suggests that in order to retain a voice in the culture, they often had to resort to masked, convoluted discourse.

If the official establishment of the Immaculate Conception offered a new potentiality for divine womanhood, the feminist American journal The \textit{UNA: a paper devoted to the elevation of woman} (1855) fearlessly stated its opinion about the historic pronouncement. Much in the vein of early socialist feminists, The \textit{UNA} proclaimed that the Bull did not complete a much-needed revolution in thought. In an article titled “The New Catholic \textit{Goddess},” the writer (unknown) argued in Carlylean tropes that she expected that the \textit{Bull Ineffabilis} “would be something more than a new metaphysical patch on an old metaphysical garment.” Looking for the “revelation of some fact that would stretch the faith of Christendom up to a higher measure or a broader compass,” the journalist expressed her wish that the Church...
had sanctified a “quartet divinity” by adding Mary as the “fourth” member
of the erstwhile male Trinity rather than leaving her on her own private,
ambiguous pedestal in limbo. Yet the writer was optimistic, believing that
eventually Mary would have equal standing with the Trinity, and woman-
hood would be “reinstated in the functions which were superseded during
the dark and barbarous ages” (“New Catholic Goddess” 41–42).

Derrida’s definition of empirical events facilitates the understanding
that paradigmatic occurrences are always in process rather than hyposta-
tized as a fait accompli. As he remarks, “one thinks at the same time the
impossibility of predicting an event necessarily without horizon, [and] the
singular coming of the other” [Tel partage suppose aussi qu’on pense à la
fois l’imprévisibilité d’un événement nécessairement sans horizon, la venue
singulière de l’autre, et par consequent une force faible] (qtd. in Callinicos
84). Likewise, as Pamela Sue Anderson argues of the mythoi surrounding
the Virgin, the maternal is an “ambivalent unnameable principle” since it is
both “outside of the paternal social-symbolic order and a condition of that
order” (157). Coupling Derrida’s and Anderson’s insights with the optimism
of the writer of “The New Catholic Goddess,” one might say that in the face
of historic fatality about the maleness of God, imagining a feminine divin-
ity may be made possible by patriarchy. Nevertheless, the female divinity
also brings into view what Grace Jantzen refers to as the “divine horizon”
of potentiality for women and the concomitant possibility for real historic
change (65).

One of the few mid-Victorian women who publicly took men to task
about the Woman Question, Anna Jameson remarks that when women “pre-
sume” to question male “rights and privileges,” or intimate the “horrors and
moral disorders to which they give rise,” those same women are viewed as
“unfeminine,” for it:

shocks the nice delicacy of “her protector, ‘man’” and yet the assump-
tion that the woman consults the decorum of her sex by appearing not to
know that which she does know—that which all the world knows that she
knows—the common . . . most fatal assumption, that women have “noth-
ing to do” with certain questions lying deep at the very root and core of
society, has falsehood on the very face of it; but no one dares to look it in
the face, and show its heartlessness . . . ! If woman has nothing to do with
what concerns the fidelity of her husband, the health and virtue of her sons,
the . . . honour of her daughters,—with what, in heaven’s name, has she to
do?” (“Woman’s Mission” 243)
Here Jameson brilliantly captures the double standard regarding women who dare to discuss the double standard. Hence Jameson’s statement offers an explanation for why few women publicly engaged in the ideological meanings of the Immaculate Conception in terms of the Woman Question, even though the Madonna might offer them the perfect opportunity to imagine divine femininity.

Similarly, Jameson’s final words in “Woman’s Mission” are a gauntlet flung at a culture that trivializes women’s work:

The question must be settled one way or another; either let the man in all the relations of life be held the natural guardian of the woman—constrained to fulfil that trust—responsible to society for her well being and her maintenance; or if she be liable to be thrust from the sanctuary of home to provide for herself through the exercise of such faculties as God has given her, let her at least have fair play; let it not be avowed in the same breath, that protection is necessary to her, and that it is refused to her; and while we send [page break] her forth into the desert, and bind the burthen on her back, and put the staff into her hand,—let not her steps be beset, her limbs fettered, and her eyes blindfolded. (247–48)

Jameson’s heated words should be juxtaposed with her remembrance of a possibly trancelike existence, when “from ten years old to fourteen or fifteen, I lived a double existence; one outward, linking me with the external sensible world, the other inward, creating a world to and for itself, conscious to itself only. I carried on for whole years a series of actions, scenes, and adventures; one springing out of another, and coloured and modified by increasing knowledge. This habit grew so upon me, that there were moments—as when I am to some crisis in my imaginary adventures,—when I was not more awake to outward things than in sleep,—scarcely took cognisance of the beings around me” (Commonplace 131). In this passage, Jameson poignantly recalls that during this period her “reveries were my real life” and that it was an “unhealthy state of things” (132). She asserts that “Employment!” was the answer to her dis-ease as well as to the brutal “fetter[ing]” and “blindfold[ing]” of girls (Commonplace 133; “Woman’s Mission” 247–48).

An advocate of women using their god-given intellectual and other talents, a point Nightingale would later strongly support, Jameson matter-of-factly writes that “according to the diversity of the gifts which God has bestowed,” all should offer the “best that is in us, and lay it a reverend offering on the altar of humanity, to burn and enlighten” (“Woman’s Mis-
sion” 211). Jameson’s own rhetorical gifts enlighten others on the need for women’s rights, which, she recognizes, must begin by dismantling arcane notions about gender, particularly as manifest in Christianity and its Victorian secular formations. Her brassy rhetoric well deserves to be set against the radical utopians who preceded her, for Jameson bracingly derides the cult of domesticity. Archly, she remarks that the “beautiful theory of the woman’s existence” so long portrayed by moralists and poets became socially acceptable in all lands even in the “teeth of fact and experience!” (217). In a sharply satirical section, Jameson derides the “trite” notion that while man should be the “bread-winner,” woman should be relegated to the domestic sphere because is “she not the mother?—highest, holiest, dearest title to the respect and the tenderness of her ‘protector Man!’” (217)

Jameson’s stern attacks on Victorian verities about motherhood, the cult of womanhood, and the Angel in the House must be taken into account when turning to her views on Eve and Mary as models of femininity. Born during the French Revolution, Jameson bears traces of the socialist feminists who recuperated the first Eve. She figures the second Eve, the Madonna, as a fluid entity that expands and elides boundaries, while also modeling for mortal women their divine potentiality here and now. Jameson’s Legends of the Madonna (1852) precedes by two years the debates about the Immaculate Conception, but concern about Mariolatry was much in the air before its official inception, much as discussions about evolution preceded Darwin. Because Jameson had a deep interest in the Madonna, it is likely that she would have been aware of the public debates about the Immaculate Conception, and thus her writings on the Madonna should be seen as participating in those ongoing debates.

Kimberly VanEsvald Adams notes that Feuerbach’s notion of the feminized Savior makes way for Jameson to honor the “Madonna as divinized woman” and thus use the Virgin as a symbol for women’s rights (42). As Adams asserts, George Eliot, Margaret Fuller, and Jameson position Mary at the core of their rationale for seeing women as part of the Christian godhead and as a causal link to arguments for giving women political power. Yet, says Adams, although the Madonna is an important symbol in the work of these women, given the material reality of women’s lives in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and America, the Virgin Mary was an “as-yet unrealized ideal for women and thus also serves as the basis of a feminist social critique” (43).

In the case of Eve, Jameson’s representation is strikingly similar to those of the utopian feminists, described in previous chapters. Like Charlotte Brontë, Jameson deplores “MILTON’S EVE” because she represents a “mas-
culine standard of perfection in woman,” for the great author focuses only on Eve’s “graceful figure,” “‘coy submission,’” and “unreasoning willfulness” (Commonplace 115). Complaining about Milton’s tired cliché that the snake practiced flattery on Eve, Jameson protests the assumption that the mother of all living was vain. According to Jameson, Milton’s description belies the biblical depiction, which she says is “ampler, grander, nobler far”:

As the Eve of Paradise should be majestically sinless, so after the Fall she should not cower and wail like a disappointed girl. Her infinite fault, her infinite woe, her infinite penitence, should have a touch of grandeur. She has paid the inevitable price for that mighty knowledge of good and evil she so coveted; that terrible predestined experience—she has found it, or it has found her;—and she wears her crown of grief as erst her crown of innocence. (348)

Here Jameson shows high esteem for the first Eve because she “paid the price” of pursuing her desire for knowledge. Like Brontë’s “mighty” mother, this Eve is not a mincing “girl.” Rather, she is a majestic, worthy actor in the primeval drama about the inception of humanity. Jameson’s Eve bravely embraces “mighty knowledge” so that her progeny may enter into the presence of the divine (348). Like any tragic hero, she pays the highest price. In fact, in this excerpt, like Sharples, Jameson admires Eve because she “reverses the accepted conditions and characteristics of sex” in her “desire of . . . Knowledge of good, bought dear by knowing ill” (History of Our Lord 1:106). Jameson’s interpretation shames male commentators for their rejection of the idea that women could heroically encounter the tragic conditions in which God had put her. Implying that masculine scorn for Eve simplistically saw the Fall as about Adam being caught in a schoolboy lie, Jameson points up the cosmic import of Eve’s tragic choice and, unlike her mealy-mouthed spouse, Eve’s refusal to think only of her reputation.

Jameson’s potent vision of Eve also suggests that Milton’s version is inferior to Elizabeth Barrett’s depiction. As Jameson contends, Barrett’s Drama of Exile rightly figures a “noble picture” of Eve as “the Mother of our redemption not less than the Mother of suffering humanity” (Commonplace 347–49). In The History of Our Lord (1864), Jameson sounds like Joanna Southcott, who viewed Eve as equaling or even surpassing Christ’s salvation of humankind. Elevating Eve above Adam’s creation, Jameson reviles stereotypes that picture her as taken from Adam’s rib. Instead, Jameson states that the rib motif “signifie[s] that, while the Second Adam hung on the Cross, His side was pierced, and the sacraments flowed therefrom,” thus
explicitly aligning Eve (and woman) with Christ’s miraculous sacrifice and self-resurrection (1:93).

Jameson reasons, too, that Eve must be seen as a holy entity in Christian works of art, for it was she from whom Christ “deriv[ed] His human nature,” and thus it is “her seed that was to bruise the serpent’s head” (93). In this analogue, Eve symbolizes Jesus’s own blood, the graphic process through which he saves humanity and becomes fully divine. Of course this view of female blood contrasts starkly with the horror of Mary’s sanguinary processes seen in male debates about the Immaculate Conception. Further, by focusing on Eve’s pivotal role in the triumph over Satan, Jameson mirrors Southcott’s heretical view of Eve as equal to Jesus in her participation in the mysterious sacrifice for humanity’s salvation. Like Southcott, Jameson suggests that those who do not recognize Eve as the rival of Satan and as a talismanic emblem of salvation must face not only feminist censure but the Savior’s rebuke as well.

Like Southcott and the utopian feminists, Jameson also depicts Adam as at best self-righteous, and at worst effete. In her recuperation of Eve as a divinity in human form, Jameson slyly suggests, without naming names, that “[m]any” have written of Eve’s moral edge over Adam; the coyly unidentified authors to whom she refers—might she be alluding subversively to the early nineteenth-century radical feminists—claimed, for example, that the foremother was made of “nobler materials” than those from which man came, that Eve was created from flesh and blood, whereas Adam was made from the dust. Furthermore, Jameson argues that while Eve was created in the Garden of Eden, Adam was engendered outside that paradisial place (History of Our Lord 1:94–95).

In feminist splendor on a par with Sharples and Wright, Jameson exults that Eve was “as much the work of the hand of God, whether taken metaphorically or actually, as that of Adam himself,” and that Adam had nothing to do with his companion’s creation. Jameson argues that Adam’s presence is not “implied” in the narrative about Eve’s creation because the Bible shows that God “‘brought her’ unto him” (95). It is important to Jameson, then, that Eve maintain an independent, separate identity from Adam in the creation story. Thus she derides the inaccuracy of the line “‘He for God only, she for God in him’” as a “Mahometan doctrine.” She suggests instead that, by virtue of the material reality of her creation and eternal essence, Eve was made by God and thus had equal access to that divine being (98, 102).

Urging her reader not to blame Eve alone for the Fall, in History of Our Lord, Jameson brazenly examines artistic depictions of the scene in the Garden of Eden to see if they lay the blame for the Fall on Eve. In doing
so, she derides the tradition that Eve alone was responsible, mocking the early Church Fathers and monks who showed their “sour grapes” against the original female parent. Male clerics, she insists, suggest that the snake/Satan was merely a redundant entity in Eden because Eve was the “enemy of souls” (99). In contrast, Jameson sees Eve as a potent, profoundly important figure in the biblical story and claims that Michelangelo rightly made her birth the crux of the Sistine Chapel (93). Thus, her extensive remarks on Eve imply that Adam was a bit player in the Eden drama and that Eve had the most important role, for she wrestled with God for the very knowledge of which divinity consists. Milton, the Church Fathers, and monks may have tried to erase her magnificent achievement, but Jameson, along with Brontë and early nineteenth-century utopian feminists, fiercely condemns this insult. Preempting second-wave feminism, Jameson recognizes that male-driven religious and aesthetic constructions of Eve have everything to do with how her symbolic daughters are interpellated politically and personally, and she deftly deconstructs the foremother’s reification.

Before I examine her views of the Madonna, it is important to note that Jameson does not consider Mary as the sole goddess in the Catholic Church. In *Sacred and Legendary Art*, she recognizes the metaphorical power of the “Virgin Patronesses,” including St. Catherine, St. Barbara, and St. Ursula. She writes, for example, that these saints “were absolutely, in all but the name, Divinities” (276). Astutely asserting that these saints attained symbolic power, Jameson notes that even though the Church thought of the saint’s power as merely “delegated,” the layperson viewed them as strong “intercessors.” As Jameson theorizes, when an ordinary member of the Catholic faith prayed to St. Catherine for special favor, it was with the absolute belief that she had the inherent power to bestow blessings (277). Jameson adds that the lower classes gained power over the Pope himself because they, not the Papal Father, endowed these saints with divinity (277). Jameson’s historicization of female divinity implies that the engendering of God underwrites women’s access to ideal modes of action, including responses to modern questions about female rights and powers. Her approach also exists in a subliminal site between the literal belief in a primal God above and outside human understanding and the necessity for the ongoing human construction of god as symbol, which would result in a more expansive and benign world here and now.

When considering her most famous work, *Legends of the Madonna*, as a Protestant, Jameson has to preempt charges that she views the Madonna through the lens of Catholic “superstition.” She circumvents this challenge by explaining that she is interested not in worshipping the Catholic
Madonna but rather in analyzing Mary as an aesthetic figure in Western art. Noting that the Madonna is a dominant motif in Renaissance and Medieval art, Jameson asserts and masks ideological points (xvii). Although she separates herself from Catholics who confuse the “creature with the Creator,” Jameson argues that the Virgin fulfills a profound psychological need.

Mariolatry, she says, results from “deep sympathy—deeper far than mere theological doctrine could reach” (xix). Belittling the surly Christian God, Jameson hints that she prefers Mary’s “ethics of human love,” which is kinder and gentler than the “‘strong hand and the might that makes the right,’” a slanted reference to the temperamental tactics of the Old Testament God (xvii–xix, xx). Like Sharples and other utopian radicals, Jameson argues, too, that Mary and the pagan goddesses signal “the coming moral regeneration, and complete and harmonious development of the whole human race, by the establishment, on a higher basis, of what has been called the ‘feminine element’ in society” (xix). In fact, this astonishing statement could have been taken directly from Sharples.

As in her discussion of Eve, Jameson skillfully obviates charges of paganism by referring to unnamed thinkers (perhaps the utopian feminists or historians such as Milman) who assert that most cultures Mary conquered already had a “dominant idea of a mother-Goddess” and distill those pagan beliefs in a Mighty Mother into the icon of the Virgin (xix). Jameson does not view the primal versions of the goddess as impure but as presaging future manifestations of a Mother in Heaven. For example, she claims that pagan goddesses were “the voice of a mighty prophecy, sounded through all the generations of men, even from the beginning of time” (xix). Untroubled by mixing polytheistic and Christian ideals of the Mighty Mother, Jameson implies that Mary’s morality relates to these pagan foremothers.

In her own litany of the goddesses, Eve and Mary carry equal weight with their pagan alter egos: “Eve of the Mosaic history, the Astarte of the Assyrians—‘The mooned Ashtaroth, queen and mother both,’—the Isis nursing Horus of the Egyptians, the Demeter and the Aphrodite of the Greeks, the Scythian Freya,” were, Jameson concludes, “considered by some writers” as the “foreshadowing” of the Virgin Mary (xix). Jameson notes too that one of the pagan symbols associated with Mary was the “crescent moon beneath her feet,” which suggested the “idea of her perpetual chastity” (xlvii). Jameson’s egalitarian allusions to Mary’s sister goddesses forgo challenges to Mary’s exceptionalism and suggest that, like the Bible, pagan myths function as another witness of female divinity.

By historicizing how the Madonna became amalgamated with other feminine icons, Jameson recognizes women’s need for a divine feminine,
whether there might be an essential eternal difference between the sexes or not. Reviling the use of “certain phrases and epithets, as more applicable to one sex than to the other,” Jameson deplores how said stereotypes create “unchristian confusion” about behavior (Commonplace 91). But although she argues that men and women should be held to the same religious standard for perfection, Jameson defers to difference feminism, because, one would imagine, Christianity was so top-heavy with masculinity. The gendering of divine perfection as male is not enough, according to Jameson, for it elides the most basic creative (reproductive) relationship, that of the father and mother. Like Bishop Ullathorne, Jameson reasons that a divine image of the mother is crucial, and she recognizes that men and women need divine models. She also accepts the idea of gender construction, remarking, for instance, that although the “model-man,” the Savior, typified the qualities of both sexes, “the idea that there are essentially masculine and feminine virtues intruded itself on the higher Christian conception,” causing the Church to respond to the need for a female divine (Commonplace 91; Legends xxii, xxi).

She quotes from H. Nelson Coleridge to explain the Christian longing for female and male models of divinity:

So long as the ancient mythology had any separate establishment in the empire, the spiritual worship which our religion demands . . . was preserved in its purity by means of the salutary contrast; but no sooner had the Church become completely triumphant and exclusive . . . than the old . . . appetite revived in all its original force, and after a short but famous struggle with the Iconoclasts, an image worship was established, and consecrated by bulls and canons, which . . . differed in no respect but the names of its objects from that which had existed for so many [page break] Ages as the chief characteristic of the religious faith of the Gentiles. (Commonplace 163–64)

Analyzing this convoluted quotation, Jameson explains that before Christianity became predominant, it was separate from pagan religions and thus did not practice pagan goddess worship. Once Christianity became dominant, an “appetite” within Christian members caused the Church to include the worship of Mary, resulting in the Bull Ineffabilis. Jameson’s use of this quotation suggests her direct knowledge of the 1854 endorsement of the Immaculate Conception. It also captures the idea that both pagans and Christians responded profoundly to the concept of a female divine.

Jameson suggests that pagans worshipped “beauty, immortality, and power” in their goddesses, while the Christian mythos reverenced “purity, self-denial, and charity” (163–64). In either case, she recognizes a human
need for a symbolic divine Mother. In light of Coleridge’s statement that at some point in history, new ideas about gender shaped the construction of Mary, we might also infer that Jameson is comfortable with the concept that “God” is always being metaphorically and historically reproduced and that it is important in this life to have access to rhetorical, symbolic renditions of women’s divine potentiality. Thus she believes that mankind must recreate its god(s) in response to deep human needs, including the desires of women. Like the utopian feminists, then, Jameson contends that such recreation is necessary to making mortal existence more paradisial now.

Reviewing the history of early Church controversies over Mary’s ontology, and showing that she had done her theological homework, Jameson explains the difference between the Nestorians and Monophysites, a debate that utterly affected Mariolatry. The Nestorians believed that the divine and mortal natures of Christ were kept separate and that Mary was merely the mother of Christ’s human nature, with God the parent of his divine nature. In contrast, the Monophysites argued that Mary was the literal Mother of Christ because “in Christ the divine and human were blended in one incarnate nature.” As Jameson is not hesitant to mention, when the Monophysites won the argument, “the representation of that beautiful group, since popularly known as the ‘Madonna and Child,’ became the expression of the orthodox faith” (xxii).

Thus Jameson highlights the fact that after this historic debate, every rendition of the Madonna and Child is a testament to the belief that Mary was included in Christ’s divinity and Incarnation because she was his mother (Legends xxii). Jameson explains the Monophysite logic: after the fifth century it was necessary to believe in Mary as the Mother of divinity; ergo Mary also had to be included in that divine essence, for she was “raised bodily into immortality, and placed beside her Son.” Hence Jameson recognizes and takes pleasure in the fact that “The relative position of the Mother and Son being spiritual and indestructible was continued in heaven; and thus step by step the woman was transmuted into the divinity” (xliii). Although a Protestant, in this statement Jameson is quietly exultant about the moment of Mary’s exaltation to divinity. Her ambiguous reference to “the woman” being transformed into “divinity” also carries subliminal aspirations about the power and potentiality of mortal women.

How well Jameson covers over subversive purposes can be seen in a review of Legends in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. The disgruntled reviewer reviles the “evils of Popery” and Catholic excesses brought about “through orientalism and heathenism.” The writer is particularly offended by
the way devotion to Mary supplants worship of Christ, because the idolatry of “The Queen of Heaven” restores the “heathen title of ‘Mother of the Gods’” (Eagles 35, 31, 30). Nevertheless, he accepts the gender ideology portrayed in worship of the Virgin:

a thinking mind will not doubt that this feminine element, in cases where real essential Christianity had a looser hold of the people, tended greatly to ameliorate the manners of wild and boisterous periods in man’s history, and to bring the civilisation of gentleness over barbarism. It tended greatly to raise woman; and it was better, by a romantic worship, that she should be lifted above an equality with man, than be degraded infinitely below him. . . . The feminine element, then, by the permission of Providence, had its good tendencies, notwithstanding its idolatry. Nor was this good confined to a few spots: it spread far and wide; nor is it yet lost in places where we might least expect to find it.” (Rev. “Legends of the Madonna” 31)

Thus, although the writer deplores the “evil” popish plot of “setting up the mother as Divinity above the Redeemer-Son,” he believes that in The Legends of the Madonna, Jameson was “not discussing religion” (35). Jameson’s care in presenting her work as merely an evaluation of aesthetic depictions of the Virgin seems, then, to have mollified her audience regarding the possibility of her heretical or feminist intent. Certainly, in comparison to the vitriolic arguments between men about the Immaculate Conception, Jameson’s rhetoric is mild and strategically intended to remain uncontroversial. Yet, coupled with commentary from the rest of her oeuvre, Jameson invokes earlier, more radical feminist interpretations of the female divine.

It is appropriate to end this chapter by examining Jameson’s idea of the horizon of woman’s divinity, which appears in her description of her favorite portrait of the Madonna. “I have seen my own ideal once,” she says, “there, where Raphael—inspired if ever painter was inspired—projected on the space before him that wonderful creation which we style the Madonna di San Sisto.” She continues:

there she stands—the transfigured woman, at once completely human and completely divine, an abstraction of power, purity, and love, poised on the empurpled air, and requiring no other support; looking out, with her melancholy, loving mouth, her slightly dilated, sibylline eyes, quite through the universe, to the end and consummation of all things;—sad as if she beheld afar off the visionary sword that was to reach her heart through HIM, now
resting as enthroned on that heart; yet already exalted through the homage of the redeemed generations who were to salute her as Blessed.” (Jameson, *Legends* xlv)

In this description, the Virgin is no simpering subordinate but an “abstraction of power” representing love, which is, again, perhaps Jameson’s way of questioning depictions of a harsh God the Father. In *Legends*, Jameson points out that the Nicephorus Callixtus’s history of the Church adds “gifts of the poetess and prophetess” to Mary’s other spiritual qualities (xliii). In her interpretation of Raphael’s painting, Jameson focuses on Mary’s prescient, prophetic eyes and their vision of the “consummation of all things.” And, in fact, as Jameson implies, Mary might be a poetess in her ability to imagine new metaphors for godhood. Jameson is enraptured by Raphael’s ability to capture Mary in the moment of transfiguration, in which she is both divine and human, powerful in her amorphous subjectivity. That Mary needs no “support” to maintain her elevated position suggests that she requires no propping up by male Gods or Church Fathers. Her divinity comes from her own goodness and from the spontaneous upwelling of love and devotion from her followers. She neither asks for adoration nor seduces men with her charms. Becoming God, she fulfills the mystic ideal of woman transfiguring herself through stages into divine potentiality.