Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God

Houston, Gail Turley

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5

**Eve, the Female Messiah, and the Virgin in Florence Nightingale’s Personal and Public Papers**

Dreamed in the very face of God . . .

—Florence Nightingale, Nightingale Papers XII, 17 Janvier 1850, NP 45846

Nightingale subverts a fundamental Western myth—that of God’s incarnation as man—by suggesting God’s alternative incarnation as woman.

—Ruth Y. Jenkins, “Rewriting Female Subjectivity” 24

IN 1833 the Owenite journal *The Crisis* published a letter from a feminist socialist who invoked Cassandra in her call for women’s rights. Using the pseudonym “Concordia,” the writer took Owen to task for presuming that he could institute laws in favor of equality without consulting women in the process. She explained that men would not succeed in legislating the rights of females, because woman “has always been forgotten when the work of legislation has been performing.” Thus, fair legislation could not be enacted “until woman shall be permitted to have a voice in all enactments that concern her; until, in short, she shall be permitted to *legislate for herself*” (Concordia 254). Prior to Harriet Taylor’s and John Stuart Mill’s famous arguments for women’s rights, Concordia reasoned that women had been oppressed for so long that they did not know their own feelings. As a
result, before any laws could be considered, woman would need to become acculturated to examining her desires and discovering where the “false arrangements of society have grievously led her” (255). Despite presenting a powerful argument, Concordia feared that her words would be ignored, and she herself viewed as a “mere Cassandra” (254).\(^1\)

Almost three decades later, a more famous Cassandra\(^2\) wrote similarly about women’s oppression when Florence Nightingale inscribed her feminist masterpiece, “Cassandra,” which insists that political reforms must take account of the social construction of women.\(^3\) Noting that “the next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ,” Nightingale was not sanguine about the prospect because there is no “woman who looks like a female Christ,” nor is there a female John the Baptist “to go before her and prepare the hearts and minds for her” (“Cassandra,” in _Suggestions_ 408). In this remarkable political analysis, Nightingale complains that it was impossible to produce a female savior because women were educated to ignore their god-given talents and instead urged to become social butterflies.

Nightingale also implied that even if there were a female messiah ready to come forth, patriarchal Victorian society scarcely took women’s spiritual, intellectual, or political thoughts seriously. Hence, Nightingale suggested that although a female messiah might have been in their midst, Victorians would not have known her if they saw her or heard her speak. As with Concordia–Cassandra, who argued that progressive legislation must consider the effects on women because women are constructed differently and thus have different realities than men, Nightingale suggested that a culture’s beliefs about deity affect women’s intellectual, political, and spiritual potential.

Seeking genealogical connections between modern feminists and their forebears, Elaine Showalter has claimed, of course, that Nightingale’s “Cassandra” provides the missing link between the feminist works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf (“Florence Nightingale’s Feminist Complaint” 396). I suggest, however, that Nightingale’s rhetoric harks back more to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century female millenarians and socialist feminists like Concordia than to the more famous Wollstonecraft, who, in her Deist leanings, never recuperated Eve or imagined a female messiah as a means of invoking the rights of women. And, although Wollstonecraft certainly supported the French Revolution and reviled the English class system, unlike the millenarians and socialist feminists, she did not link progressive reforms with a material or symbolic religious utopia.

As I shall argue in this chapter, while Nightingale may not seem a protofeminist, in many ways her theological interrogation of gender and class politics often reverberates with barely masked radical intensity worthy of
Southcott and Sharples. In addition, there are strong historical and rhetorical commonalities between the female millenarians, feminist socialists, and Nightingale, and I conclude that Nightingale most likely knew of these grandmothers’ radical incarnations of Eve and the female savior. Further, I will show that although Nightingale deeply venerated the Christian Father in Heaven, her construction of deity is hardly conventional, for she also believed in pagan, non-Christian mysticism and exhibited a poststructural willingness to play with the concept of the divine. Determined to be a prophet and theologian in her own right, Nightingale recalled the visions and politics of her radical grandmothers, ultimately imagining powerful emanations of Eve, the female messiah, and the Virgin Mary that hint at her own aspirations to be these divine entities.

Nightingale’s contribution to nineteenth-century revisions of deity is always underwritten by her belief that women’s voices were not included in the historical record of theological debate. It is no surprise that she vigorously attempted to rectify this lack. A letter to her father in 1846 illustrates her anguish about the absence of female voices in Church history. “Why,” she wonders, “cannot a woman follow abstractions like a man? has she less imagination, less intellect . . . less religion than a man? I think not. . . . She has never, with the exception perhaps of Deborah, the Virgin, & the Mère Angélique, been deemed a fitting vessel for the Spirit of God—she has never received the spark of inspiration” (Ever Yours 30). Distressed that the Virgin Mary’s words were the only ones spoken by a woman who had become universal, she derides the way Victorian middle- and upper-class women were educated to focus their conversations narrowly on their own mundane lives rather than on anything approaching theoretical rumination. In 1846 Nightingale passionately insisted as well that her culture should view woman as a “worthy House for the Spirit of Truth,” and women’s voices as “worthy” to “proclaim the service of the Kingdom of God” (30).

Deeming herself a credible recipient of divine inspiration, Nightingale had trancelike epiphanies or “call[s]” on a regular basis throughout her life, beginning “as early as her sixth year” (Cook 1:15). Interactions with her Voice were concerned with understanding the nature of perfection and deity, establishing nursing as a respectable career for women and making governments provide for the health of their citizens. Putting herself forward as a sage, Nightingale had no qualms about her gender when working on an essay titled “What is the Character of God?” Its thesis was that according to God’s plan, “every one of us is on the way to progress towards perfection, i.e. happiness” (17 August 1871, NP 45783: f.258; qtd. in Ever Yours 274). Nightingale also shed false feminine modesty in a letter to Julius Mohl in
1873 in which she asserted that “nothing solaces me so much as to write upon the Laws of the Moral World; especially as exemplifying, if possible, the character of a Perfect God, in bringing us to perfection thro’ them in eternity” (351). The insistent moral import of her writing and her sense that women should be the instruments for and voices of God’s work of perfecting human beings suggests that Nightingale did have ambitions to be a prophet.

Finding that her own generation might not attach significance to her theological discourse, perhaps she hoped that her written disquisitions on God would be discovered and revered after her death, as we know that those of her feminist “Cassandra” have been. But what kind of religion did Nightingale profess and prophesy? Mary Keele points out that Nightingale’s was a syncretic, open-minded approach to spirituality that was uncommon for her time and may have been partially due to her father’s Unitarian background, although her conventional mother ultimately decided to raise her daughters in the Church of England (FN in Rome xvi). Nightingale’s deep interest in every kind of spiritual mysticism led her to many of the world’s religions. “[Y]ou must go to Mahometanism, to Buddhism, to the East, to the Sufis & Fakirs, to Pantheism,” for the “right growth of mysticism,” she asserted in March 1853 (Calabria and Macrae, eds., Suggestions for Thought, xiii). Like Barrett Browning, she also disavowed sectarianism, remarking that God’s truth should not “be narrowed and confined to one book, or one nation” (Cook 1:72). Nightingale’s letter to Miss Blanche Smith in 1847 illustrates her more-than-broad Church view that the Mideast was a place “where one can be Christian in the morning and Pagan in the afternoon” (FN in Rome 134).

Catholic in her religious studies, she read a range of authors, including Plato, the Gnostics, Spinoza, Darwin, Confucius, John S. Mill, Augustine, Erasmus, Catherine of Sienna, and Islamic and Egyptian religions tomes. Nightingale also viewed Osiris as a sacred being, and, of early Egyptian religion, she exulted in her diary in 1850 that in the temples of Ramses II she “felt more at home, perhaps, than in any place of worship” (qtd. in Calabria, FN in Egypt 23). Indeed, in 1850 she wrote that her trip to Egypt was a “spiritual and intellectual whirlwind” (20 July 1850, NP 45846). It is fascinating, then, to learn that Nightingale read Brontë’s Shirley during the trip to Egypt, for while imbibing Brontë’s depiction of a titanic Eve, Nightingale herself was absorbed in intense repartee with God about her own spiritual and intellectual life as a woman (10 Fevrier 1850 NP 45846). As I will show presently, like Brontë she also recuperated Eve.

Central to Nightingale’s theology was the unorthodox belief that mortal life was a process of attaining perfection and becoming god. Nightingale’s
journals indicate that during her visit to Egypt, she read and repeatedly referred to Hermes Trismegistus. In Nightingale’s words, Hermes Trismegistus theorized that the soul “went through several mystic regions before it began again the course of its transformations—those transformations, which only meant the trials, the stages which the divine emanation has to go through before arriving at perfection” (qtd. in Calabria, *FN in Egypt* 29). In the diary kept during her time in Egypt, Nightingale often tersely lists her daily doings. For example, she writes on “Janvier 21, 1850,” “Wrote Hermes Trismegistus letter.” One wonders if she mistakenly penned “wrote” instead of “read” in a remarkable Freudian slip of the tongue (*NP* 45846). On the other hand, if she intended the word “wrote,” we are caught between two extraordinary interpretations of her word choice: she was either writing to the long-dead pagan mystic or writing for him—with either feat being tantalizing. Neither interpretation is beyond Nightingale’s confident sense of herself as a recipient and voice for sacred mysteries (*NP* 45846).

It is worth citing extensively from a letter Nightingale wrote on New Year’s Eve 1847 to show how confidently interrogatory her spirituality was and to understand how insignificant the Christian sects were in her theology:

> Are you afraid that I am becoming a Roman Catholic? I might . . . . , if there had been anything in me for Roman Catholicism to lay hold of, but I was not a Protestant before. Protestantism is confining Inspiration to one period, one nation, and one place, . . . and within that period, that nation, and that place of inspiration, allowing you all possible freedom of interpretation and thought. Catholicism allows Inspiration to all times, all nations, and all places . . . ., but limits the inspiration of God to herself as its only channel. Can either of these be true? Can the “word” be pinned down to either one period or one church? . . . When the day shall come when our (now so poor, so weak) ideas require no form, then people will cease to use the word “My church” when they mean “My religion,” and will not confuse, as now, “My theology” with “My faith,” . . . As the language is to the mind, expressing it, and, by re-action influencing it, so is theology to faith, but God forbid, that we should really degrade faith to be nothing more than language! (*FN in Rome* 155)

Many elements of Nightingale’s syncretic theology appear here, including her almost postmodern understanding of the cultural construction of religion and God, although she is unwilling to describe faith as consisting merely of “language.” Unwilling to label herself Protestant or Catholic, Nightingale seeks the freedom to intellectually explore and passionately respond to the
“inspiration of God” through every channel available. Ironically, too, this passage suggests Nightingale’s understanding that by inhabiting such a free-thinking position, she is able to attain an even more profoundly felt belief. In this mode of philosophical play, Nightingale recognizes that if God created human beings, they return the favor by continually (re)creating God. Concomitantly, she gives women power to revise theological territory. As Nightingale so presciently remarked, “People must make a God till they can find one. It has always happened that some have made such a God as could be imagined by them, and others have taken Him from them” (Calabria and Macrae, eds., Suggestions 103).

That Nightingale inscribed the following words in her journal further intimates her nuanced appreciation of the human construction of God: “‘The problem is to enlarge & raise the notion of God, which for so many ages religious dogmas’” were “‘furiously raging to shut up in the narrow limits of symbolism’” (NP 45841 f4). Similarly, on New Year’s Eve of 1847, she wrote to her father, “All churches are, of course, only more or less unsuccessful attempts to represent the unseen to the mind, to give form to ‘things hoped for,’ intangible” (qtd. in FN in Rome 155). These statements express Nightingale’s insight that discourse about God always relies on metaphorical language, although, to her, it is never mere language. Nightingale seems more hopeful than tragic in her comprehension of deity’s fictionality and humankind’s construction of God. In fact, she seems to believe that being expansive in one’s creation of God generates a more generous, sublime soul; likewise, the deity she constructs is spacious enough to measure the ambit of every entity in the cosmos.

In addition, Nightingale’s God is subject to interrogatory discourse beyond a professional inner circle of narrow-minded Church Fathers, for she insists that divinity be not only available to women’s appeals but also subject to their analysis. Nightingale’s intimate friend and suitor manqué Benjamin Jowett (who referred to her as “Goddess Athene”) remarked Nightingale’s obsessive desire to know God coupled with her refusal to define Him concretely (332). “During the ten years & more that I have known you,” he complains, “you have repeated to me the expression ‘character of God’ about 1,100 times, but I cannot say that I have any clear [idea] of what you mean, if you mean anything more than divine perfection” (qtd. in Ever Yours 209). Clearly, Nightingale took as much pleasure in monastic devotion to questions about God as she did in the work of nursing, and her refusal to label the divine suggests her attraction to a fluid understanding of subjectivity prototypical of third-wave feminist thinking. It also implies her desire to be schooled in a wide range of theological discourses and her intellectual
capacity for remaining in a state of deferral about truth, a state that allowed for Nightingale’s almost sensuous delight in protracted spiritual ecstasy.

Nightingale’s descriptions of spiritual ecstasy imply that she often apprehended more than a Voice. In a handful of instances she describes seeing God’s face, although she coyly masks the experience. In 1879, Nightingale sketched an anomalous interaction with deity in rhetoric that is spontaneous, mystical, and self-consciously artistic. On a tedious draft outline titled “System of Nursing” that hardly captures the reader’s attention, at the bottom of the page an interruption appears, as though *in medias res*, with no indication of when it was written or how it relates to the outline at the top of the page. The inscription reads: “Love sprang up under her steps But now she ‘knows’ and ‘sees’ that ‘sight of sights,’ the ‘unveiled majesty of God She has entered in” (NP 45750 f.163). In both instances, the writing is almost certainly in Nightingale’s hand, although the passage at the bottom of the page is not as neatly set to paper, as though it were inscribed while she was trying to remember a sudden thought before it faded completely. The matter at the end of the page is reminiscent of Brontë’s trances in content as well as lack of punctuation in the impulsiveness of the script. It is as if Nightingale had been working on a mundane project and was suddenly transported by an epiphany. Yet the quoted passages in her transcription of the vision reveal that she may have been comparing her vision with other renditions of the ultimate mystical experience. Re-presenting the ecstatic moment in self-reflexive language registering her lack of inhibitions, Nightingale is absolutely in control of the scene of divine *jouissance*.

This transcription is reminiscent of a scene in “Cassandra” describing the visionary protagonist. She “had seen the face of God,” wrote Nightingale, and “that face was Love—love like the human, only deeper, deeper—tenderer, lovelier, stronger. She could not recall what she had seen or how she had known it; but the conviction remained that she had seen his face, & that it was infinitely beautiful” (NP 45844 f.7). This provocative passage allows the reader to experience the effects of Nightingale’s decision to change “Cassandra” from a first-person autobiography to a third-person fictional narrative (see Showalter, “Florence Nightingale’s”). The narrator’s hazy identity and the “she” who is having the experience magnify and shroud the epiphanic episode. While the confusion about what is actually seen muddies the identity of the narrator, deity, and recipient of the vision, the ambiguity distances the would-be reader from the mystical revelation and creates a desire for the full disclosure of God.

In “Cassandra” the primal voice in the mangled manuscript cries out for the author’s face to be revealed from behind the feeble mask of the fic-
tional Nofriari. Re-presented as a fictional narrative based on Nightingale’s experiences, the passage defies generic labels—it is both fiction and mystic revelation, much like Brontë’s sutured fair copy of Shirley’s vision of Eve. Nightingale makes the female writer, rather than God, the powerful creator of the sacred scene, although her fictional alter ego, Nofriari, swoons like a neurasthenic Victorian heroine. Thus, in contrast to Showalter, I suggest that even if the revised “Cassandra” is disjointed and self-conflicted, it still illustrates Nightingale’s self-conscious control of the rapturous scene, which is in keeping with her belief that women could create their own God, their own religion, and their own perfection.

In fact, although Nightingale transcribed a dialogue with deity in April 1888 that includes her plea, “O God I throw the whole charge of my life upon Thee. Will Thou accept it?” and God answers, “Yes: but then you must be as if you were not,” Nightingale at times prescribes rather than prophecies God’s actions as though exasperated with an impractical or inefficient deity (*NP* 45844 f.35). What, for example, is the use of a God one cannot talk to, she wonders. Hence, in Nightingale’s religion the boundaries between the self and the divine are thin, for it is in the egalitarian relation with deity as much as the identity of deity that human perfection occurs. Reminiscent of the Beguine nuns, Nightingale avows that God “communicates with us by His nature actually becoming ours,” with the agent of the “becoming” being both human and divine (*NP* 45840 f.60).

In another instance, Nightingale amended the Lord’s Prayer to make it an intimate site of communion between equals. Implying that this famous prayer had become banal, she prophetically reinterprets its meaning, averring that “the soul ^ herself [“herself” is above the caret] should be heaven: that Our Father which is in heaven should dwell in her” (*NP* 45841 f.12). In this mystical description, Nightingale insists that religion and spirituality are within the tabernacle of the self and that the soul creates the conditions for deity to be present to and in the self. But in this metaphor, the female soul is procreative, giving space to a rather passive male God. Acting as the fructifying agent, the female soul generates the desire for divinity in a constantly dynamic, relational, soul-making process. In contrast to the biblical Lord’s Prayer, then, in Nightingale’s version, the female soul becomes the lord and shepherd guiding God to perfect humanity.

This Romantic view of God as in the human breast or as metaphorically part of a generative human process occurs often in Nightingale’s thinking. In a dense mystical description, for example, she writes that “God is a spirit— / He creates other spirits— / These spirits create their own casing— / When He throws off the germ, the germ creates its own body, its own material
always the same” (NP 45845 f.47). In what is essentially a theological mini-
discourse, Nightingale accepts the heretical notion that Southcott and Shar-
ples also supported—that is, that human beings participate with God in the
salvation of the soul. And, like Southcott, Nightingale’s rhetoric makes it
difficult to distinguish between the creator and the created.

Just whose “material” is referred to, and what exactly is the relation
between the “spirit,” “casing,” and “germ”? Who, one ultimately wonders,
is creating whom in this description of divine creation, for at certain points
that which has been created takes over the procreative process. This inti-
mate, self-confident merging of self with God also appears in Nightingale’s
ecstatic exclamation, “What if He should be in us after all, & working in
us this way? Just this very way of crying out after Him” (NP 45845 f.154).
Likewise, when Nightingale writes, “Where shall I find God?” she answers,
“In myself. That is the true Mystical Doctrine” (qtd. in Cook 2:233).

Illustrating the Hermetic canon, these statements erase the notion of
God as distant, hierarchical, and masculine and focus on the self as in the
process of becoming deity. Characterized by rhetorical informality, sponta-
eneity, immediacy, and blissful rapture, Nightingale’s dialogues with God
suggest her egalitarian approach to the divine. Discarding rote, Nightingale’s
transcriptions of her prayers use “OG” for the phrase “Oh, God,” in a fore-
telling of modern emoticons and abbreviations like “OMG.” Illustrating her
sense of what Michael Kalton refers to as “horizontal transcendence” with
God, Nightingale uses casual rhetoric not to imply her shallow spirituality
but rather her long-term familiarity with an entity she spoke to as a peer
(187–200).

To call them prayers, even, is erroneous because they achieve a more
mutual and intimate immersion in the other than prayer might. Hence,
ignoring conventional grammatical practices, Nightingale creates a secret
shorthand, illustrating that in her engagements with deity she has become
so adept at horizontal transcendence that she—at least temporarily—can
achieve the “I AM” of God. If we return to William de Thierry’s theology
that underwrites much of Beguine mysticism, the God who exclaims “I am
who I am” in Ex. 3:14 must be linked with the New Testament statement
by Christ, “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (John 10:18; qtd. in
Brunn and Epiney-Burgard xxvi). In this interpretation, Christianity’s aim
is for the self to be with/in God and to have God in the self as it moves “to
become what God is” (Brunn and Epiney-Burgard xxvi).

The form Nightingale’s writing takes is as indicative of her yearning to
break hierarchical boundaries as is the substance. Consider a memorandum
in 1850, which reads, “God called me in the morn & asked me ‘Would
I do good for Him, for Him alone without the reputation" (NP 45846). Although there is a sense of profound intimacy in this description, one cannot help feeling that her God is just a phone call away. Similarly, in October 1892, in a shorthand account of her interactions with the divine, Nightingale invited the deity in almost as though He was as close as next door.

“Come in, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, come into my heart now. drive [sic] out self—monstrous self,” she writes (NP 45844 f.86). On 26 May 1892 comes another visitation:

You are keeping the Lord waiting—the indwelling God [indwelling love, gentleness, faith, meekness, temperance] that your light may give light to all that are in the house

Oh come to Jesus now
Jesus is here
O Father of an Infinite majesty waiting for me. (NP 45844 f.79)

Like Sharples, Nightingale insisted that God must be democratized, that, in other words, women, should be able to dialogue—and be taken seriously as theologians—about the deity’s ontological meaning. And, like Sharples, Nightingale insisted that God’s meaning must have practical effects in the daily lives of the sick and needy. The voluminous inscriptions of Nightingale’s prayers indicate her demand that spirituality be linked with making material existence better for the lowly of the world. For instance, when working in India in 1877, she wrote, “OG [Oh God] who makest the stars, the sun, the moon to obey Thee, who makest the beautiful sunrises, can nothing be done for these poor people in the Indian Famine?” (NP 45847). In this orison, Nightingale automatically links the transcendent cosmos with the microcosmic site/sight of the forgotten of the world, enjoining God to live up to her activist understanding of Christianity. Likewise, she wrote in her diary in December of 1877, “If it be possible, take this cup from me” (overseeing irrigation projects in India), not because she does not want to work for Indian subalterns but because she felt how impossible it is to achieve success as a private citizen (NP 45847). God, she insists, should be actively involved when she edits her practical book for nurses. “O Lord tell me what to say,” she pleads, “in this revision of Nursing & Training of Nurses. Tell me, inspire me, direct, control, suggest this day All I should think or do & say” (NP 45844). Thus it is no surprise that Nightingale gives short shrift to the earthly titles of men. In feminist revisionism worthy of Sharples, she asserts that a girl who saved two babies from being run over by a train “was a greater preacher of the ways of God
than all the Fathers of the Church who ever were born to write” (*NP 45843 f.262*).

In keeping with her political agenda, Nightingale emphasized that God “is always descending into hell” and that “we should always be ready to descend into hell with him” (*NP 45845 f.6*). In the same passage, she refers to prostitutes and convicts as “pioneers,” who also repeatedly descend into sites of ultimate suffering (*NP 45845 f.6*). In a sense, then, Nightingale saw no difference between God, the fallen woman, and herself, for all are engaged in the task of savoring, or, as Grace Jantzen explains, being “divine” for others (Jantzen 17; see also E. Johnson 68, 69). In Nightingale’s theology, the little girl who saves babies and the prostitute who daily traverses a nightmarish world are equal in their enactment of godness for others. Nightingale boldly wrote, too, that such self-sacrifice should not be seen as subservient, and that she does not believe that God desires docile obedience from believers. “The word ‘worship,’” she exclaims, “seems hardly to express what God wants of us. He does not want to be praised, to be adored, to have his glory sung. . . . What he desires seems to be . . . that we should be one with Him, not prostrate before Him” (qtd. in Calabria, *FN in Egypt* 24). Here, again, Nightingale views God as an equal.

I suggest, too, that Nightingale’s catholicity and self-reflexive rhetoric allow an amorphous understanding of divinity that would include dissolution of gender. The ability to remain fluid in her thinking allows Nightingale to create extraordinary metaphors about spiritual progress that elide gender stereotypes. In a description of John S. Mill after his death, Nightingale ascribes to him a godliness that obviates gender binaries. Writing to Edwin Chadwick in 1873, she exclaimed:

> The loss we have in John Stuart Mill is irreparable—I think there must have been a Goddess called “Till Passion of Reason” in olden times: & he was that Goddess returned in the flesh to life. And he would not at all have considered the gender humiliating. For he was like neither man nor woman—but he was Wisdom “thrilling” with emotion to his fingers “ends” (which last was truly said of him)—impassioned Reason—or reasonable Passion—in the sense which one supposes the Greeks had in their mind when they made Wisdom a Woman. Or shall we call him Sancta Sophia? *(Ever Yours 343)*

In this passage, Nightingale’s is almost a mystical voice revealing the very mystery and ambiguity of gender and divinity. As with Barrett Browning’s gender bending, God/Goddess/Sancta Sophia can be simultaneously or
interchangeably a man and a woman. This understanding of the rhetorical nature of belief never binds the nebulous profundity of spiritual creation and existence. Thus, in Nightingale’s revelatory trope, Mill is spiritually and intellectually a “Goddess” because he himself had articulated and attempted to live beyond the human binaries and because in the cosmos Nightingale and Mill attempted to construct gender is fluid and without oppressive stereotypes. Indeed, as one delves more deeply into Nightingale’s theology, it becomes increasingly apparent that although, as Showalter rightly suggests, Nightingale viewed herself as serving a masculine God, she also understood deity in more flexible terms (Showalter, “Florence Nightingale’s” 402).

Nightingale’s annotations of her Bible reveal that she was genuinely disturbed by the almost monolithic masculinity narrated there. Revising the sacred text to make it more inclusive, Nightingale changed “men” to “we” or adds the word “daughters” to references to “sons.” In her iteration of the Lord’s Prayer, she added the phrase “daughters with a loving father. . . . Thou art Love, and she that dwelleth in Love, dwelleth in Thee, and Thou in her,” rather than using the masculine pronouns. Intriguingly, referring to St. Paul as “Paula/Paul,” Nightingale playfully extended the role of apostle to women with the addition of just one letter of the alphabet. In another instance, Nightingale sounds like a modern Julian of Norwich when referring to God as “Father to me Thou art and Mother too and Sister dear” (FN’s Spiritual Journey 70, 283; see also NP 45843 f.66).

In a comment illustrating Kristevan semiotics avant la lettre, Nightingale cites an Italian writer who noted that “all scripture but speaks to us of God as a mother makes soft inarticulate sounds to her babe, the babe that could not otherwise understand her words” (Note, NP 45843 f.292; qtd. in FN’s Spiritual Journey 71). Nightingale’s attention to the maternal as a necessary aspect of deity, alongside her insistence that women are worthy hierophants, makes for a strong connection with Mothers Ann Lee and Luckie Buchan. In fact, in Genesis, Nightingale glosses “the Almighty God” as “El Shaddai,” explaining, “Shaddai derived from ‘Mamma’—the Breast and signifies that we are as dependent upon God for every blessing as the infant on its mother’s breast” (FN’s Spiritual Journey 105).

As with Sharples’s merging of Isis and Eve, Nightingale’s mixture of pagan goddesses with Christian mythoi rejects the ideology that women are inferior. Like Anna Jameson, Nightingale delivered her thealogy, if you will, under the cover of art criticism. Her description of the “colossal head of Juno” at the Ludovisi Gallery is a case in point. Bracingly, Nightingale included the reflection that this is the “only Goddess I ever saw—all other Goddesses have been to me but beautiful women—nothing the least divine,
like Jupiter Capitolinus and the Apollo, so that I always thought we should be men in the next stage—as there could not be made an ideal of a woman—but now I have seen a Goddess” (1 February 1848; qtd. in FN in Rome 219–21). Referring to her belief in Hermetic mysteries, Nightingale implied that human beings evolve into divinities in later phases of eternal existence. She contended, as well, that seeing Juno gives her an actual model for what females might become, so that women no longer need be confined to a male type of godhood for “the next stage.”

Nightingale’s interpretation of Eve is not as contrary to mainstream Christianity as is Brontë’s, but there is an unconventional element that is reminiscent of Southcott, Sharples, and Wright. Indeed, like these earlier writers, Nightingale stated that the Fall did not result in the damnation of mortal men and women. Rather, she saw the first couple’s “expulsion from Paradise” as initiating salvation (NP 45843 f.267). Like Southcott and Jameson, Nightingale perceived Eve as the transcendent heroine in the story of the Fall, and Adam as spiritually and physically effete. This is apparent in a letter to her sister on 17 January 1848, in which Nightingale describes Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam and Eve. Observing the “extraordinar[y]” “difference between the characters of man and woman” in the painting, she writes that Adam is not depicted as “speaking purely from heart to heart” with God. She notes, too, that there is “nothing of the inward consciousness of the Divine Presence” in the depiction of Adam. Instead, the Creator reveals himself to Adam by an “outward manifestation” (FN in Rome 171).

In contrast, Nightingale asserts that “any body looking at the Creation of Woman, will see the difference.” She describes “the lovely new born woman” Eve as kneeling “before her Creator, who, in his unspeakable Goodness, has stripped himself of all his Power and Majesty, and stands before her in the semblance of a man, her father, and her friend, and yet, such is the sublime idea of M. Angelo, that there is nothing lost of dignity in the figure.” Noting that “Adam continues sleeping” when God appears, Nightingale derides his profound insensibility: “No woman would have done this, she would have been warned (by her quicker perception) of the presence of a supernatural being. Eve, kneeling in perfect love and devotion, receives with entire submission, the commands of her Creator, which come straight from His spirit to hers, without any material manifestation of Power. She is lovely beyond description” (171).

The Christian creation story signs Adam as having a more sacred relation with God than does Eve. But as illustrated in her prayers, Nightingale sees women as capable of a spiritually refined and intimate communication with deity that is more difficult for men to achieve. Teasing out what it means
when, despite her subordinate position, Eve is sentient while Adam lies inert and unconscious, Nightingale’s account of Michelangelo’s “Creation” interprets God as trusting the “sublime” Eve so much that He strips himself of his outer divine accoutrements to present himself in His noumenal godliness. But not only is Eve capable of standing in the presence of deity without being obliterated; in this interpretation, godliness consists of being equal with the human, implying that God can be man (or woman, in this case), and woman can be God. Further, in Nightingale’s view, Michelangelo limns a spiritually receptive Eve whose converse with God requires no speech. Meanwhile, Adam’s weakness (sleeping) makes him a hanger-on in the myth created just for him, for he is all but literally dead to the spiritual and physical world God has created for him. Nightingale almost seems to see Adam as so self-involved that he exists in absolute inanition, while Eve, utterly open to all creation and the Creator, is effulgent in her jouissance. Thus, her strong agency and meticulous susceptibility to the spiritual allow her to steal Adam’s, and even God’s, starring roles.

Nightingale’s Eve is an effulgent precursor for the female messiah she envisions. As noted in the introduction to this study, the idea of a female messiah had an earlier iteration among the English Civil War sects, when women rebelled against the father’s law practiced in the religious, political, and domestic spheres by imagining a “spiritual democracy” and a female messiah (B. Taylor, “Woman-Power” 122). The notion of a female savior may go as far back as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when lower-class radicals read the works of Hermes Trismegistus and spoke of a Christ-like goddess; the concept erupted again at the end of the eighteenth century in response to the French Revolution, which, apocalyptic in its magnitude, increased prophetic discourse during the last two decades of the eighteenth century (B. Newman; Harrison, Second Coming 5, 30). Linda Lewis muses that the female messiah, imagined by the millenarians and depicted in Shelley’s “Revolt of Islam” and Nightingale’s “Cassandra,” might have represented the merging of the woman as wisdom motif (Athena and Sophia) with the motif of Christ as the Word or Wisdom (173–74). Nightingale’s allusion to a female deity underscores her concerns about the oppression of women and links her with her radical grandmothers, Southcott and Sharples, who equate Eve with deity and foretell a coming divine female.

Seemingly unacquainted with earlier historical iterations of the female savior, Showalter suggests that Nightingale originated this concept. Rather than creating a new concept, most likely Nightingale came across the radical concept and used it for her own protofeminist purposes. With extensive knowledge of so-called heretical religions and an obvious interest in the
gendering of God, Nightingale could have read about the female savior in press accounts about post–French Revolution radical groups and the millenarians Ann Lee and Southcott. Certainly Nightingale might have learned about the Owenites and St. Simonians in British or French journals.\(^8\)

Her correspondence with Jowett indicates her awareness of the millenarians and other fringe Christian groups that believed in continuing revelation. In 1865, Jowett explicitly refers to millenarians when he writes to her about their goal to improve the world: “the stream of improvement is so narrow in the whole of the world . . . that instead of casting your eyes far & wide” it is better to look “forward to some ideal future. . . . I suppose we should . . . get the habit of looking onwards to the future & not backwards to the past. This would be a new kind of Millenarianism founded on fact & not on the interpretation of prophecy” (41; emphasis added). Likewise, the content of a letter Jowett wrote to Nightingale in March 1865 hints that he was responding negatively to her possible attraction to Mormonism, a religion that posited the existence of a Heavenly Mother and the idea that humans could become gods (Jowett 46; “Heavenly Mother” Mormon Encyclopedia). In any case, these letters signal that Nightingale examined many religions and forms of spirituality in her quest for spiritual perfection.

Internal evidence in a fragment of “Cassandra” shows that Nightingale knew of the Fourierists: “You are a This is not Fourierism in everything but his matrimonial scheme. [new paragraph] ‘No, I am not. I think The Fourierists’ (NP 45839 f.168). This all-but-deleted passage implies that Nightingale was working out her own feminist political utopia vis-à-vis those offered by the radical generation that came before her. We know that the Fourierists and St. Simonians foretold a coming female messiah and that St. Simonian emissaries made contacts with English radicals, trade-unionists, and cultural savants in the first half of the century (Malmgreen 10, 6). In fact, the young John Stuart Mill was favorable toward the Saint-Simonians and may have written an open letter in Le Globe to that effect in 1832 (Moses 241). Mill explicitly named the St. Simonians as an inspiration for his feminist agenda, noting that he “honoured them most for what they have been most cried down for” (qtd. in Malmgreen 10). Nightingale knew Mill well enough to share with him the manuscript in which “Cassandra” appears. Although I am not aware of letters between them that explicitly refer to a female deity, it would seem likely that Mill would have commented upon Nightingale’s allusion to the female messiah. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, when the nephew of the radical James Elishma Smith wrote that his uncle admired Nightingale’s “inspiration that glows, the vestal fire that ever burns,” because he had such “a strong faith in a female Messiah” (274).
Jowett’s comment about “Millenarians” appears to be part of a conversation with Nightingale that may include her own revisionary rhetoric about this movement and that points toward Nightingale’s habit of reinvigorating clichéd terms. Indeed, when Nightingale refers to the female savior in “Cassandra,” it is congruent with her ongoing dialogue with and practical adaptation of many forms of political and religious thought. In this case, it is probable that she appropriated and redefined the concept of the female messiah that had circulated in print media by or about such radical groups. Nightingale was adept at taking well-known spiritual concepts and making them new again, as prophets are supposed to do for their particular age. She performed such a revision, for example, when she said of evolution, “The real demoralizing theory is not that we once were apes but that we are no more than apes now in capabilities for ‘high emprize’” (NP 45843 f.177).

Similarly, Nightingale adapts the image of the Holy Family to argue that every family is a holy family, and each child a holy child. Indeed, à la Jameson and Sharples, she asserts that daughters should be allowed to develop their sacred intellectual talents as God intended. Asserting that the family unit acculturates girls to waste time on the frivolous, Nightingale explains that in this way daughters are “slowly put to death at home” (NP 45843 f.10, f.18). In a draft of “What is the type of a family in God’s mind,” she imagines a “‘holy’ family” that would replace the modern family, which she regards as in a “State of War” (NP 45843 f.1, f.4). In Nightingale’s theology, the child should develop her god-given talent and use it both publicly and privately for the good of humanity. She reasons that parents who require their child’s absolute devotion to the domestic sphere negate that child’s spiritual responsibility to live a life devoted to God (NP 45843 f.20). Nightingale does not see a woman’s commitment to God’s work as a sacrifice, because the “holy family” must seek “the development of each Individuality according to its type, so that each individual may be working out” a “part of the great whole which is working with God by God” (NP 45843 f.22). As she sees it, then, dedication to God is also the ultimate form of individualism.

Thus, like The Isis, Nightingale combines the spiritual with the political to make a practical, moral argument. In other words, as Ruth Jenkins suggests, Nightingale views women who make unconventional choices based on their talents as holy martyrs fighting patriarchal dominance (“Rewriting Female Subjectivity” 17). Indeed, in a feminist tour de force, Nightingale bluntly queries what purpose keeping women buried in the domestic sphere can serve: “What is this but throwing the gifts of God aside as worthless, and substituting for them those of the world?” (qtd. in Jenkins, “Rewriting
Female Subjectivity” 18) Reared in a family that repressed her outsized intellect, organizational skills, and Herculean dynamism, Nightingale suggests that family life is too constricted to create the immortal deities God intends human beings to become. Since Nightingale envisions a holy family that would allow single women to use their abilities to do good in the domestic and public spheres, her desires intersect with political efforts to find what religion can do to help women achieve their potential (Calabria and Macrae, eds., Suggestions 256). In fact, there is a startling similarity between Karl Marx’s view of the “holy family” and Nightingale’s, for he writes that “once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and revolutionalized in practice” (“Theses” 70).

As with the “holy family,” Nightingale revises the concept of the female Christ. Consider the famous section from “Cassandra” where Nightingale’s alter ego, Nofriari, remarks, “Christ, if He had been a woman, might have been nothing but a great complainer.” The passage goes on to say that “the next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ. But do we see one woman who looks like a female Christ? Or even like ‘the messenger before’ her ‘face,’ to go before her and prepare the hearts and minds for her?” (“Cassandra,” in Suggestions 408). 9 Implying a reference to previous uses of the phrase “female Christ,” the word “perhaps,” coupled with her other references to Fourierism, strongly suggests Nightingale’s awareness rather than creation of the concept of the female savior. Interpreted in this way, like Concordia–Cassandra, Nightingale shows that she had something to add to the previous generation’s radical politics. As Nightingale argues, even if a female savior did appear—as early nineteenth-century socialists and millenarians prophesied she would—she still would be saddled with the culture’s misogyny. Nightingale understands, then, that if Christ had come as a woman, even He could not have been recognized as God in his first incarnation, for spiritual illumination absolutely depends upon the culture’s construction of gender.

Nightingale’s representation of the female savior thus mirrors and revamps radical feminist discourse, in particular Sharples’s statement that Christ would return as a secular “second Messiah of republicanism and happiness” (“Second Person of the Trinity” 614). Like Sharples and Southcott, Nightingale contends that Christ’s self-sacrifice had to be duplicated by earthly (female) saviors for any sort of true salvation to be achieved. Likewise, Nightingale, Southcott, and Sharples see humankind—women, in particular—as the key to spiritual and material redemption. In other words, Christ could not save human beings without the help of human saviors and without salvation, including the improvement of mankind’s material condi-
tions. Cognizant of the political ruptures in the modern state, Nightingale rejected the idea that “the time is past for individual saviours” and preached that “even when Europe has burst her chains” the “world cannot be saved, except through saviours” (Calabria and Macrae, eds., Suggestions 201). Referring to Europe’s class hierarchies, which radicals from the French Revolution forward attempted to destroy, Nightingale’s Realpolitik contended that no such reform would occur with just a storming of the barricades.

Her famous statement that “the next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ” should be seen, then, in light of her other references to the term “savior,” for they illustrate her belief in horizontal transcendence (408, 201). As Barbara Montgomery Dossey argues, Nightingale’s was a “mysticism that focused on creating a better life for mankind here on earth through social action” (325). In fact, in a time of Victorian laissez-faire attitudes, Nightingale insisted on the government’s spiritual obligation to ensure the safety, sanitation, and health of its citizenry. She boldly asserted, “The objects of the statesman, the lawyer, the doctor, the merchant, the shopkeeper, the day labourer” are as “sacred as those of the priest” (NP 45841 f.31). Likewise, she contends, “We can only know God’s nature & man’s nature by improving our social arrangements” (NP 45843 f.189). Hence, although not as republican as Sharples’s belief that the Second Coming would establish political equality, Nightingale’s view of the savior’s role in society is political, for she essentially demands that the modern welfare state be established forthwith and that the “statesman,” “lawyer,” and the “doctor” be saviors in deed and word.

Textual evidence indicates that Nightingale palpably felt the desire to be more than just a metaphorical savior. Explicit about her aspirations in her diary in 1837, she transcribes the words of a Heavenly voice that reminded her: “It is 15 years to-day since I called thee to the perfection of my service” (NP 45844 f.6). Audaciously connecting her own ostensible martyrdom with Christ’s, Nightingale also writes on 28 July 1865, “on the Cross I shall see his face / Am I being offered to him?” (NP 45844 f.7) A little after this, she inscribes the words, “And is it not worth all to see his face? And may I think that I am another Himself, another like that? . . . oh too blessed to think that He should look upon me as another like that” (NP 45844 f.7).

In this euphoric passage, Nightingale vacillates between envisioning herself as being “like” the Savior and being the Savior—“another Himself”—with the border between the two entities being extremely tenuous. The paucity of punctuation and lack of capitalization erase the boundaries between the self and God, making it difficult to tell where God begins and Nightingale ends. It appears that the two have had a long relationship, and
there is no need to establish a hierarchy or separation between ostensibly different divine and human identities. In fact, in these entries, Nightingale’s radical horizontal transcendence results in her sense of simultaneously being both divine and mortal. Hence, despite often seeming rigidly self-righteous, Nightingale also feels the instability of her spiritual selfhood as it imagines or rehearses godhood.

Noting that she had once ended a letter to a cousin as your “poor Cassandra,” Nightingale’s biographer Edward Cook asserts that “Cassandra” is autobiographical (Cook 1:116; qtd. in Showalter, “Florence Nightingale’s Feminist Complaint” 410). In fact, in a deleted section of “Cassandra” that describes the protagonist’s spiritual crisis, Nightingale imagines herself to be a female savior. It is important to point out that Noferiari’s martyrdom reads exactly like Nightingale’s diary accounts of her own heroic self-sacrifice for God: “I remember the day. It was like a day of Crucifixion to me. It was like death. As each confession came out I feared I should not have strength to make the next confession and drive the next nail. But I did. I went through the whole. And when it came to piercing the side, I did it too” (NP 45839 f.242). “Cassandra” also limns this spiritual ambition in the section after Noferiari—Nightingale’s doppelganger—proposes that the next savior will be a female. At this point, her brother, the narrator of “Cassandra,” comments: “‘Now I don’t wonder,’ . . . ‘at your being unhappy’” if “‘you have that . . . ambition to be a Christ or a John the Baptist’” (NP 45839 f.284). Though Noferiari dies without achieving her ambitions, Nightingale lived a long life devoted to savoring.

But if associating herself with a female savior was an inordinate “ambition,” Nightingale also appropriated the role of the Virgin, whom she seemed to view as the supernal deity. In fact, Nightingale considered converting to Catholicism, in part because of the freedom it allowed its adherents to venerate the Mother of Christ. Nightingale felt a profound connection to the Madonna, and this iconic figure appears often in her unpublished writings. In a letter to Jowett in 1867, Nightingale equated herself with the Virgin Mary when she contemplated the famous interchange between Mary and God at the Annunciation:

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according as Thou will. 1. What a wonderful favour to be chosen before as many thousands to be the handmaid of the Lord. 2. What return does God expect from me—with what purity of heart & intention should I make an offering of myself to Him—And when that offering is made, what a life ought I to lead? 3. I give myself up entirely to Him that He may do with me whatever it pleases
Him—and I earnestly desire that He will never think of sparing me and let no occasion pass of mortifying my pride & trying my temper. 4. God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NP 45783 ff.112–13; qtd. in Dossey 334)

Indeed, the passage is another example of Nightingale’s hasty discursive practice that results in the reader’s inability to infer who is speaking and who is acting upon or with whom he is acting. With no names to indicate the speaker, it is increasingly problematic to discern between Mary as purported speaker and Nightingale, the Virgin manquée. Moving immediately from Mary’s statement to the Angel in the Bible to inserting herself in the place of Mary, in this impulsive rhetoric Nightingale fulfills her belief that humans are in the process of becoming gods, or that God is in the human self, or that mortals continually recreate the concept of God. The outcome is an uncanny blend of humility, submission, and self-glorification as Nightingale, for an ecstatic moment, becomes the Virgin. Transitioning between self-abnegation and interrogation of the concept of divinity, and imagining herself as deity, Nightingale creates a spiritual mode that underwrites her activist Christianity. Given the amorphous nature of her rhetoric, one might conjecture that Nightingale discovered a mode of being that fluctuated between godhood and the corporeal. In these sites, she perhaps achieves what Ann Taves refers to as “discontinuities of consciousness, memory, and identity” when Nightingale’s normal sense of self as “embodied agent” could be said to have virtually disappeared (9).

In keeping with her dislike of sectarianism, unlike Henry Hart Milman, who deplored the early Church’s intermixture of pagan elements with the Virgin Mary, Nightingale was unperturbed by this prospect. In Suggestions for Thought, she accepted that though pagan religions had died off, “traces” of the old religions remained. She did not take issue with the fact that the Catholic worship of a divine female probably originated in the veneration of the goddess Diana (244). She remarked, too, that, as a symbol of wisdom, the Virgin was analogous to the pagan divinities Athena and Minerva. Like the radical Sharples, then, Nightingale conceived of pagan deities as symbolically equivalent to Mary, and she viewed both as responsive to a profound human need. Thus she asks rhetorically, “Is the worship of the goddess of wisdom by the ancients more unreasonable than the worship of the God of the nineteenth century?” (190) This query is in keeping with Nightingale’s remark that there was more truth in the pagan religion of “thankfulness to the River Gods, the fountain nymphs, spreading plenty wherever they reach go” than in the harsh “Calvinist God” (NP 45843 f.67).
Nightingale’s belief that the Virgin was an outgrowth of the pagan goddesses expands this entity beyond the strict confines of the Christian Mary in the same way that Sharples reconfigures deity. Respecting the indeterminate nature of the mystical and the divine, Nightingale’s theological understanding of the Madonna is more fragmented than her disquisitions on the triune God. Obsessive about inscribing her every idea, Nightingale often wrote on any slip of paper at hand (including used envelopes). The archive at the British Library is full of these scraps as well as voluminous drafts of essays, books, letters, memos, and reports. An example of the disconnected nature of her thought about the Madonna is graphically apparent in her statement, “The great legend of the Virgin Mother—its true meaning is this . . .” (NP 45843 f.307). Shockingly, Nightingale fails to complete the epiphany at hand. We do not know if at this point she had a revelation that was beyond the ability of words to describe, or if she felt incapable of recording the experience because of the onset of writer’s block, or if she was interrupted, a not unreasonable speculation since she kept to such a hectic schedule. Or if, god literally forbid, she was afraid to posit god’s supernal essence as female.

Such engagements with the Virgin suggest that Nightingale realized she was composing a new theoretical discourse about the female divine, as though she were in the beginning stages of imagining this entity. We can piece together from her other writings what the spiritually unconventional and interrogatory Nightingale found so compelling about the Madonna. In one example, she inscribes the words, “all history, all society shews it us that there is a profound truth in the idea of the ‘Virgin Mother’—” (NP 45843 f.66). Providing more substance than her incomplete transcription of Mary’s meaning supplied, this dramatic proclamation runs short, again, on the actual “idea” of the Madonna, as though she is the ineluctable essence to be found behind the Veil of Isis.

In her cryptically abbreviated diary from 1850 during her time in Egypt, in jumbled notes that appear to be the beginnings of a philosophical paper regarding Catholicism, Nightingale refers to its “dishonest compromise.” With no hypotactic connections between her thoughts, Nightingale outlines a sketchy list: “a dead church & no creed the throne of the Fisherman, built by the Carpenter’s son household thought—& dearest of sympathies—love of the Virgin” (NP 45846 f.66). Despite the discordant tone, limited punctuation, and lack of cohesive connectives, it appears that Nightingale assumes the superiority of the “dearest” Virgin as the climactic element of her spontaneous litany. Curiously, the throne built by Christ is for the Madonna rather than God the Father, who is completely absent. One might conclude that in this minimalist theological disquisition, Nightingale affirms that modeling
Christ was just practice for becoming the most sublime instance of deity, the Mother in Heaven.

Another example of this fragmentary mode compares the Virgin with God, with Mary being deemed as a higher form of divinity. In fact, Nightingale implies that the Judeo-Christian metaphor of the jealous Father pales in comparison with the merciful, more human(e) Mary. Thus Nightingale does not blame Catholics for praying to the Virgin. “Is there not more truth of feeling,” she asks, “in the devout Roman Catholic woman who tells you that she cannot doubt the existence of the Virgin, because she feels the proofs of her goodness ‘there, so near me’ (tho’ for God she puts Virgin) than in the expressions we use of ‘God’ being a ‘jealous God,’ an ‘angry’ God, & of praise to God,” because “he does not desire the [page break] ‘death’ of a sinner” (NP 45843 f.65–66). In the margin, Nightingale lines out her completion of the statement thusly: “because we see truth in the idea of the Virgin Mother’s goodness” (NP 45843 f.67). Manifesting no anxiety about the Catholic woman replacing God with the Virgin in her devotions, Nightingale logically concludes that metaphorically the Virgin is more godlike than the harsh, biblical God who appears wrathful toward His children too much of the time. Known for compassionate nursing, Nightingale seems incapable of venerating a surly, willful being who psychologically manipulates and irrationally disciplines those he ostensibly loves.

In these musings on the Madonna’s appeal, particularly to women, Nightingale also defends her (Catholic) sisters against the condescension to which they are susceptible, because they worship this ostensible stand-in for God. In 1873, she wrote in a manuscript that was never published, “say not that a large section of us does still believe in the Virgin. It is the ‘feeble multitude’ and the ‘helpless’ sex either in man or woman, whose ‘zeal fains intensity,’” toward the Virgin Mary (NP 45482 f.110). In this instance, Nightingale rejects the male dread of the emasculating Madonna. She puts the ostensibly feminine qualities of ineffectuality under question with her air quotation marks around “feeble” and “helpless,” stereotypical feminine markers even today. Nightingale also demands that the stereotype describing deity as masculine be interrogated and resisted, since any kind of gender stereotyping detoured god from working with the unique “Individuality” of each mortal being (NP 45843 f.22).

Thus the pushy crusader cannot resist making a jab at masculine Godhood on Christmas day 1888, no less. She writes, “I don’t like the X Commandment—it is all ‘you shall not, you shall not, . . . Negation never gave love. . . . And I don’t like the perpetual telling us of the perfection of having no other will but God’s. It ought to be a strong will, to second His. That is the
real end & aim & perfection” (NP 45844 f.37). Enlarging the male Christian God’s character, Nightingale demands that He move beyond His own monolithic will to include the “strong” willfulness of his children, including his female daughters, like herself, Cassandra, Eve, the female savior, and the Virgin.

To conclude, then, Nightingale, like Sharples, worked for material redemption that depended on transformation of sociopolitical systems in order to bring about earthly horizontal transcendence. Indeed, in their efforts to imagine horizontal transcendence by democratizing God, Nightingale, Southcott, and Sharples went a long way toward reconstructing earthly forms of hierarchical power, for all three deconstruct traditional Christian dogma, particularly about Eve, the Virgin Mary, and the gender of the Savior. Nightingale recuperates Eve and imagines herself to be the female savior and the Virgin Mary; Sharples figures herself as the pagan goddess Isis and a reconstructed Eve; and Southcott claims to be the Virgin and the woman clothed with the sun as well as a second godlike Eve. Likewise, each disturbs the binary featuring man as prophet and deity. Thus, to figure Nightingale, the more mainstream of the three female prophets, as the link to the secular feminist Mary Wollstonecraft does justice neither to Nightingale’s overdetermined commitments to feminist spirituality and the political and social rebirth of the world, nor to her feminist forebears who were perhaps more radical than Wollstonecraft in using spirituality to feminize God and politically transform the world.