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"A higher and holier state:"

Challenges to Female Power in Early Anglican Sisterhoods, 1845-1870

by

Joy Frith

B.A. (Hons.) The University of Western Ontario, 1990

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department
of History

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

April 1995

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ISBN 0-612-06657-6
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Title of Thesis

A "higher and holier state": Challenges to Female Power in Early Anglican Sisterhoods, 1845-1870

Author: Joy Frith

(date)
ABSTRACT

The first Anglican sisterhood was established in the Church of England in 1845. By 1870 there were thirty-eight such communities in existence with several hundred members. Sisterhoods provided opportunities for single women who sought alternatives to domestic life and challenged popular conceptions of women's accepted roles. In doing so, these communities posed a threat to various aspects of middle-class culture and provoked widespread hostility from English society. One particular element of sisterhoods which critics attacked was the profession of religious vows by the sisters. This thesis examines how the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty provided women in sisterhoods with significant freedoms and allowed them to assert a variety of forms of female power. Opponents of these communities challenged the power displayed by sisters by concentrating specifically on what they believed the vows represented. The vow of obedience enabled sisters to devote themselves to God under the direction of a Mother Superior. Their freedom from male control within marriage was perceived as a challenge to Victorian patriarchal authority. Sisters' freely-chosen celibacy liberated them from male sexual control and threatened middle-class masculinity. In addition, celibacy challenged Victorian beliefs that women's special position in society derived from their role as wives and mothers. The vow of poverty gave sisters the right to control their own property and served as a tacit reproach of material culture. By enabling their members to live relatively free of male authority, and to control their bodies and their property, sisterhoods contributed to the movement for women's emancipation and changed popular attitudes regarding women's rights to work outside the home.
DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to my parents for their continuing love and support, and for always making me feel like I could accomplish anything I set my mind to.

This thesis has been supervised by an extremely capable and supportive committee. I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Ian Dyck. Ian provided me with the freedom with which to develop my ideas and was always enthusiastic about my approach and objectives. Profs. Robert Koepke and Rodney Day shared this enthusiasm and offered insightful comments which helped to direct and clarify my ideas. Prof. Joy Dixon at UBC kindly served as external examiner. I would also like to thank Prof. Susan Mumm of York University, who generously gave me a copy of her unpublished dissertation as well as difficult to obtain primary material from archives in England. Her extensive study was inspirational to my own work and helped to sharpen my analysis.

For his role as early-morning secretary, thesaurus, and provider of helpful comments, I would like to thank Andy Parnaby. Andy's enthusiasm for "my nuns" created a highly-conducive atmosphere in which to work. Thanks also to Larissa Horne for inspiring me and helping me appreciate life beyond history. Finally, I wish to thank my partner Todd McCallum. Todd's inspiration has taken the way I approach history in entirely new directions and greatly enriched my creativity. For supplying me with the just the right amount of coke, pesto, hockey, and "Headache," and for keeping alive my sense of humour, I am forever in his debt. To his continual patience and love I owe the completion of this paper.
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PREFACE

In 1867 a member of an Anglican sisterhood published an anonymous article entitled “Sisterhood Life” which offered English society the most detailed and accurate account of this subject to date. In this piece, the sister explained precisely what a sisterhood was:

A Sisterhood is a society of women, called of God to follow the Evangelical counsels, and united together for the purpose of obeying that vocation to the best of their powers; separated from the world, not for the mere intention of carrying on some work of mercy, but for the higher purpose of treading the narrow path of Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity. Such is the groundwork of Sisterhood Life; all things external to these essentials are merely incidental.1

The sister’s definition calls attention to a number of the fundamental principles which defined the religious life for its members. First and foremost was the importance of the “call”; many of the members of the earliest sisterhoods who committed their thoughts to paper testified to the feeling of being chosen by God to carry out His mission on earth. This call legitimised, in their minds, the decision to enter a Sisterhood and enabled sisters to free themselves from domestic duties and family commitments in order to serve God more completely. Closely linked to this was the idea that sisters were not “merely” performing works of charity, but were pledging their souls to God for a “higher purpose.” This pledge was manifested through the three religious vows of Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty. These vows served as the defining guidelines of sisterhood life: they symbolised a formal

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dedication to the life and emphasised total and permanent commitment of body, soul, and spirit. Finally, the overriding tone of the definition stressed that the religious life was not simply a retreat from the world, but was the embracing of a higher form of existence. Sisters were not rejecting the society in which they lived, but were removing themselves from its institutions and cultural conventions in order to embrace the society of God.

After the abolition of nunneries in 1536 by Henry VIII, an overwhelmingly-Protestant English public, which had elevated woman's domestic role to one of sanctity, did not receive the reestablishment of female monastic communities without concern. The problems surrounding Anglican sisterhoods were expressed to a committee of Church of England hierarchy by the Rev. R. Seymour at the Convocation of 1861:

> We in England are so little accustomed to the ideas of women being formed into one community for a life more distinctly devoted to works of piety and charity than is possible under the ordinary circumstances of life; it seems to us, and indeed it is, so foreign and un-English, that the very mention of such an object excites fears and suspicions lest the leaven of some old error should be at the bottom of it: it is surmised that some undue merit is attached to the single life as compared with married life; and that we want to lay the foundations of the old monastic and conventual life which was abolished in England at the time of the Reformation.²

Seymour expressed the two main concerns which the revival of sisterhoods provoked within English society: that these institutions sought to revive Catholicism; and that they suggested that the religious life was a "higher and holier" calling than marriage and motherhood. Both concerns were based on the belief that

an acceptance of sisterhoods would threaten the religious and gendered principles upon which English society was founded.

This thesis will explore the establishment of Anglican sisterhoods from 1845 to 1870 and how these communities affected English society. It will focus specifically on how sisterhoods enabled their members to choose an alternative to marriage and spinsterhood, and how, in so doing, these organizations threatened to destroy the tenets which governed Victorian middle-class women and attempted to keep them subordinate to men. More than just allowing sisters to devote themselves completely to God, sisterhoods, through the principles symbolised by the vows of Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty, enabled women to free themselves from male control psychologically, sexually, economically, and legally. According to their critics, sisterhoods posed a significant challenge to the hegemony of Anglicanism in England by appearing to promote the ‘Romish’ elements of the Anglo-Catholic faith. However, beneath the dense rhetoric of this ‘Catholic’ threat lay a more fundamental objection founded on the belief that sisterhoods posed a fundamental critique of patriarchal authority. By organizing themselves within sisterhoods, women were able to work publicly without male supervision and live free of male control. In a sister’s pledge to obey God, she liberated herself from male authority and was able to carve out her own sphere of independence and autonomy within the cloistered world of “Victorian womanhood.” Sisterhoods offered women alternative lifestyles and began the process of earning women respect in the public domain and must be recognised for their innovative position in the Victorian world.
Employment Wanted: Intelligent young woman seeks a career in social work, teaching or nursing. Ambitious, hard-working, dedicated. Hoping for mental and spiritual fulfillment. Prepared to undergo extensive training. Willing to relocate, preferably to live with like-minded women in an environment free of male control. Will work without remuneration in exchange for room & board.

Employment Opportunity: Serious-minded women required for voluntary work among children, the poor and the infirm. Candidates must be of a confident, conscientious, and caring nature. Must be willing to co-habitate with other women in a simple residence and to work independently in demanding and often dangerous conditions. No experience necessary. Only those with serious intent need apply.

To the late twentieth-century reader, the job sought by the above applicant may appear idealistic, even impossible to come by. In mid nineteenth-century England, however, such positions existed in the Anglican sisterhoods established after 1845, and were actively sought by willing candidates. There was, however, one qualification: women who joined such communities had to reject the basic tenets of Victorian life which sought to control them. In 1850, a Congregational clergyman lamented the legal position of a married woman, detailing the numerous injustices to which she was exposed:
The law of England does make marriage a legal slavery to the woman. By the law of England, the wife surrenders herself entirely to the will and pleasure of her husband; however sentiment and affection may regard the bond of marriage, evidently, in the eye of the law, it is rather a feudal than spiritual relationship. The husband may imprison his wife in his house, may strike her so long as he inflicts no severe bodily injury, leave her, and live in adultery with another; yet return; seize on her inheritance, and use it for himself and paramour.1

Anglican sisters freed themselves from these not inconsequential injustices: their sexual behaviour could no longer be regulated through marriage; their possessions could not be owned and controlled by husbands; and they must forsake pledging their obedience to men, placing their trust in God henceforth to 'protect' them. They would never experience the 'joys' of marriage in which their bodies, their material goods, their will and their activities were regulated by the whims of their husbands.

By joining a sisterhood and living according to the principles embodied by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, Anglican sisters consciously freed themselves from the primary form of female control in the nineteenth century - marriage.2 Unlike their married contemporaries, Anglican sisters possessed independent sexual and legal identities, rendering these women anomalies in the Victorian world, not because they were unmarried, but because they had freely chosen this state. Women who entered sisterhoods did so not simply to avoid marriage but also for the opportunity to obtain full-time, meaningful work. Unlike the thousands of Victorian wives who participated in philanthropy during this era, Anglican sisters chose to devote themselves exclusively to their work.

The appeal of the work however, does not explain fully why a woman would enter a religious community. By joining a sisterhood a woman embraced an entirely foreign lifestyle, physically, spiritually and psychologically. The sisterhoods established during the mid-1800s were unique organizations. Officially, they were under the guidance of the Established Church but they functioned as independent societies. The character of the order was determined by its founders, often the parish priest of the district, and the Mother Superior, a woman who exercised considerable responsibility. Anglican sisters were committed to serve God through devotion and charitable services and their time was divided accordingly between these pursuits. Once established, the sisterhood held a crucial position within its community. Sisters were expected to become dynamic members of the religious and secular societies to which they belonged, trained as intensively in the Bible as they were in their chosen vocation. As the existence of active sisterhoods as well as the lifestyles of their members were unprecedented in England since the sixteenth century, in matters relating to conventual life, sisters, the Church, and society were adrift on uncharted waters. As the ecclesiastic community and the public attempted to balance the functional with the organizational aspects of sisterhoods, it was the courage of the sisters which enabled these communities to remain afloat.

By the first half of the nineteenth century, religious and social conditions in England were highly conducive to the establishment of organised bodies of social workers. The growth of poverty, crime, and other horrors of the Victorian cities created an increasing demand for charitable societies to cure these social ills. The Evangelical revival stressed that women “could act as the moral regenerators of the nation.”3 Although the primary sphere of this regeneration was expected to be in

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3 Catherine Hall, White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992) p. 86. For a discussion of the effects of the Evangelical revival on women see esp. The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology pp. 75-93.
the home, many middle-class women utilised this ideology to extend the scope of their influence into the public sphere through mission work. The churches capitalised on the missionary zeal of middle-class women in an effort to improve these conditions and to expand the size of their flocks. The Evangelicals were particularly successful organizing missionary work and their philanthropic societies abounded in London’s slum districts.  

However, while women were the backbone of these missions, such as the British and Foreign Bible Society, they had limited control and were largely excluded from the decision-making process. These zealous women composed a "pool of inexpensive workers" whose activities, however significant, remained secondary to their domestic duties.

By the 1840s, the Catholic Church was also successfully utilising women’s religious devotion and missionary zeal. Unlike Evangelicalism however, Catholicism not only offered women the opportunity for social work, but also provided monastic communities for those who wished to devote their lives entirely to God. With the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, and the subsequent restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, the Catholic Church commenced a remarkable revival.

A significant element of this revival was the phenomenal growth of women’s religious orders. The first native Catholic order was founded in 1845 and by 1900 approximately ninety orders housed up to 10,000

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5 Lillian Lewis Shiman, Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-Century England (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) p 44. By 1824 there were over 500 of these types of associations.


7 See E. R. Norman, The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Walter Arinstein, Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1982). The Emancipation Act was primarily designed to avert the impending civil war in Ireland, however it was viewed by Anglicans as an act of Catholic aggrandisement. The Act also banned all male monastic orders yet by 1865 the number of such institutions had risen from 1 in 1841 to 58. For a text of the act see E. R. Norman, Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1968) pp 131-9.
nuns. Orders such as the Sisters of Mercy and the Faithful Companions of Jesus provided their members with education, the supportive atmosphere of community life, and active vocations in teaching and nursing. Not only did nunneries present an attractive lifestyle to Catholic women, but many women who joined these communities converted to Catholicism in order embrace this life. In her study of three early Catholic orders, Susan O'Brien reveals that significantly, two of the three original Mother Foundresses of these orders were converts from Anglicanism.

While the Evangelicals successfully harnessed the charitable zeal of middle-class women, and the Catholic Church enabled women to enter the religious life, the Established Church had made little, if any, attempt to capitalise on the preponderance of female piety. The origins of sisterhoods in the Church of England developed from an exclusive body of prominent religious leaders at Oxford, known as the Tractarians for their publication of religious tracts. These clerics, John Henry Newman, Henry Manning, and Edward Pusey among them, wished to restore the Catholic elements of Anglicanism in an effort to revive the lagging popularity of the Established Church.10 This revival, referred to as the Oxford Movement, founded in 1833, promoted an increase in Church decoration and symbolism, a greater focus on spirituality and an emphasis on good works. The Oxford Movement also focused on the restoration of monastic communities and the celibate life for those who aspired to a 'holier' state. In considering the necessity of establishing female religious orders, Pusey was aware of the competition from Catholicism in attracting

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9 O'Brien notes that of the eleven foundresses six were converts, p 134.
the devotion of pious young women:

I want very much to have one or more societies of 'Sœurs de la Charité' formed: I think them desirable (1) in themselves as belonging to and fostering a high tone in the Church, (2) as giving a holy employment to many who yearn for something, (3) as directing zeal, which will otherwise often go over to Rome. The Romanists are making great use of them to entice over our people; and I fear we may lose those whom one can least spare.11

Other Anglican clergymen, such as the Rev. Ward, also recognised the value of organised charity work in maintaining the Church's hold over the public. He lamented that unless the Church became involved with such work, "the population of our large towns would be lost to religion altogether, or would become Roman Catholic."12 In this light, the genesis of Anglican sisterhoods wedded the functional requirements of society with the religious and political motives of specific clergymen.

While not a member of the Oxford Movement, William Ewart Gladstone was similarly interested in the formation of sisterhoods for their benefits to the Church as well as to women. As a member of the committee which established the first sisterhood, Gladstone testified to the need for such institutions in England and the readiness of women to participate:

It has long been a matter of regret to many, that the Church of England possesses no institution similar to that of the Sisters of Mercy. For many years the internal conditions of our great towns, and the intensity of accumulated misery, side by side with our luxury, of comfort, or wealth, have weighed heavily upon the minds of those who are in any way acquainted with the state of

12 Liddon, p 5.
Gladstone envisioned sisterhoods not only as benefiting the disadvantaged, but also as providing an outlet for women who desired this type of life: "a longing to be employed in such offices has in this country been silently growing up in the minds of persons, who under favourable circumstances would be enabled to give themselves to them." Gladstone emphasised the spiritual commitment of the sisters and the fact that the organised structure of a sisterhood, rather than simply being of importance in the minds of the committee, was crucial to the women who joined. "[W]omen," he noted, "although trusting they are called by the leading and grace of God to a life of devotion and charity,...seem to need the outward protection of an institution through which they might enjoy mutual help and comfort, and the sympathy and respect of their fellow Christians." Ironically, the early sisterhoods were unable to provide protection, sympathy, or respect for their members. Sisters found their protection and reassurance from God rather than from their religious institutions which were held in low regard and viewed with suspicion by English society.

The first Anglican sisterhood was established in 1845 when Jane Ellacombe, age twenty-six, and Mary Bruce, thirty-one, established residence in a small, unpretentious house at 17 Park Village West, London. Jane, a local woman who had recently broken off a marriage engagement, and Mary, an Irishwoman, had never met prior to their taking up lodgings together. Their neighbours watched

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15 Ibid., p 288.
suspiciously as the two women left the house early each morning, often not returning until late in the evening. The women wore plain dress and entertained no one except a rather curious looking clergyman who often spent several hours in the house at a time. Within a week, Jane and Mary were joined by a third woman, the twenty-five year old daughter of the Bishop of Edinburgh, Sarah Anne Terrot.\textsuperscript{16} Writing to her father, Jane described her new circumstances:

We are very happy - we three...Our district is in the worst part of Mr. Dodsworth's district - where there are a great many low Irish people...The people are all very glad and thankful at our coming to them...We got them to relieve their bodily wants but principally our office lies in guidance. We live in a very quiet place; the house does not join any other; and there is very little passing.\textsuperscript{17}

Under such inauspicious beginnings, Jane, Mary, Sarah Anne, and their mysterious visitor, Dr. Pusey, established monastic life in the Church of England. While this sisterhood was unique in being organised and governed by a committee of fourteen lay and clerical representatives, it was the dedication of these women, rather than the efforts of the committee, that actually created the foundation of sisterhood life.\textsuperscript{18}

The infamous "Puseyite Nunnery," as it became known to the locals, maintained thirty members and two houses by 1850. The sisters established a

\textsuperscript{16} Sarah Anne Terrot was the daughter of the Bishop of Edinburgh who had contacted Pusey regarding his daughters' futures. Although Miss Terrot had stated that she would have preferred to "take service as a housemaid" rather than become a sister, she proved to be a devoted member. Anne Jemma Terrot, who felt more inclined to the religious life than her sister, also joined a sisterhood. Thomas J. Williams and Alan W. Campbell, \textit{The Park Village Sisterhood} (London: S.P.C.K., 1965) p 28. For her contribution in nursing in the Crimea, Sarah Anne was awarded the Royal Red Cross by Queen Victoria in 1897. Peter F. Anson, \textit{The Call of the Cloister: Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion} 3rd ed. (London: A.W. Campbell, 1964) p 268.

\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Liddon, p 28.

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Jay Williams, "The Beginnings of Anglican Sisterhoods" pp 350-372. While this sisterhood was unique in being governed by such a committee, perhaps because of the inadequacies of this form of government it eventually was taken over by another society run by a competent Mother Superior. Gladstone assumed financial responsibility for the lease at 17 Park Village, p 351. For a discussion of Gladstone's participation with the Tractarians see P. Butler, \textit{Gladstone: Church, State, and Tractarianism: A Study of his religious ideas and attitudes, 1809-1859} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982)
Ragged School, cared for victims of the Irish famine, adhered to a regime of regular fasting and abstinence, and frequently fell ill as a result of their diet and overworked routine. Further, they were scorned by their neighbours for resembling Roman Catholic nuns and almost lost the support of the local minister, Reverend Dodsworth, by refusing to cloak themselves in brightly coloured shawls. Bishop Blomfield of London was initially non-committal toward the sisterhood and by 1848 Jane described his attitude as a “negative sanction.” With such tenuous support from Church officials and the members of the community in which they worked, the original sisters must have relied heavily on their faith in order to persevere through this experimental phase in sisterhood life.

As illustrated by the Park Village Sisterhood, from their inception, sisterhoods faced various forms of opposition from the Church hierarchy and within English society. One specific point of contention stemmed from the religious affiliation of these societies. Within Anglicanism, the Oxford Movement was perceived as a breeding ground for Catholic converts. Indeed this perception was to a large degree justified as many prominent Tractarians, most notably Newman and Manning, had converted to Catholicism by 1850. The very idea of religious orders for women smacked of 'Popery' and incited widespread hostile reaction. Opponents of sisterhoods believed that by organising their religious lives within a Catholic structure, the convent, Anglican sisters sought to threaten the hegemony of the Anglican Church, clearing the path for the ascendancy of Roman Catholicism in England.

Although objections to sisterhoods frequently centered upon the 'Romish'

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19 Dodsworth was perhaps transferring his religious insecurities onto the sisters as by 1850 he had converted to Catholicism.
20 Williams and Campbell, quoted from Jane's letter to her sister, p 61.
nature of these institutions, the crux of the debate remained the question of a woman’s right to live in a context deemed ‘abnormal’ by English society. In 1863, Stevenson’s *Praying and Working* revealed that the main forms of opposition toward sisterhoods were that they resembled Romish nunneries and encouraged “women’s rights.”22 As early as 1848, John Malcolm Ludlow revealed the widespread and irrational nature of such hostilities:

> Because a certain number of single women have agreed to live in one house, put on one dress, and join their earnings and efforts into one common stock for the relief of certain acknowledged social evils, the whole Apocalypse is likely enough to be ransacked for the millionth time, to prove the mark of the beast is upon them.23

Ludlow emphasised that the animosity toward sisterhoods, such as that evident at Park Village, was based not solely on religious concerns, but also on the fact that the sisters were unlike other women and thus were perceived as a threat to the stability of English society.

The distinctiveness of the lifestyle was a significant factor that encouraged women to join sisterhoods. Anglican sisters were eager to cast off the physical markers which defined Victorian women. In doing so, they created identities which ran counter to those of Victorian middle-class womanhood. In an era deeply influenced by Evangelicalism, which stressed women’s domestic roles and created a rigid model of femininity, sisters defied this stereotype.24 Through their plain dress, independent behaviour, and personal rejection of home life Anglican sisters not only distanced themselves from the experiences of most married women, but they also took advantage of a significant degree of freedom which eluded their

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23 J. M. Ludlow, *Deaconesses, or Protestant Sisterhoods*, *Edinburgh Review*, 87 (1848) p 446.
24 See Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class* pp.75-93.
married counterparts. By choosing to join monastic communities, these women liberated themselves from the cloistered existence which defined the lives of many middle-class women. While the identities of most Victorian women were created by their outer appearance and the social status of their husband, sisters created unique identities through their relationships to God.

By constructing alternative identities, Anglican sisters challenged popular conceptions regarding the “nature” of women. In their personal rejection of marriage, domesticity, and ostentatious living, members of sisterhoods posed an explicit critique of women’s function in society. Opponents of sisterhoods maintained that Providence had provided women with a special sphere within the home and to abandon this role was to renounce God’s plan. *The Pall Mall Gazette* chastised these communities for their revolutionary potential to undermine women’s “highest” calling:

To be a good wife, mother, daughter, or sister, is, so to speak, the highest ambition of a woman...If she is a sensible person [she] is able to take a proper measure of charitable occupations to think of them in their true light as occasional pursuits forming a part of life, and not as an absorbing profession taking up the whole of it. ‘Recognize and heartily encourage’ the ascetic monastic system, and you change all of this.25

Few questioned the right of women to devote themselves to pious works of charity; however, when they did so exclusively, independently of male control, their activities were challenged by those who felt that sisters threatened the institution of marriage, and therefore, the entire basis of English society.

The belief that sisters perceived themselves as “higher” than other women was not altogether unfounded. During the formative period at Park Village, Dodsworth had voiced such a concern to Pusey: “that they think of themselves

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very much as nuns’ I never doubted; this is what I rather regret to see. I wish they
could think less of what they seem to be, and let this gradually grow out of the
reality.” 26  Priscilla Lydia Sellon, the Mother Foundress of the Society of the Most
Holy Trinity and inarguably the most controversial sister during the nineteenth
century, patently expressed the belief that Anglican sisters were not simply different
from other Victorian woman, but were indeed of a “higher” station. Addressing the
vicar in whose district her fledgling band of women were employed, Sellon
remarked: “You must not look upon us as mere ladies…but as Sisters of Mercy;…if
you refuse our aid, we must offer it elsewhere.” 27  In Sellon’s assertion that sisters
were not “mere ladies” lies the key to understanding both the appeal of Anglican
sisterhoods to their members as well the animosities which these communities
incited.

One of the most contentious issues surrounding sisterhoods, and one which
exemplifies how Anglican sisters were distinguished from other women, was the
taking of the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty. Although not every woman
who joined a sisterhood in the formative years of these communities pledged
official vows to her order, the principles implied by vows were an implicit part of
each sister’s experience within the community. 28  To sisters, vows were an
indispensable element of the religious life: “The Vows--Poverty, Obedience, and
Chastity--so freely stigmatized, because so thoroughly misunderstood, are, in their
reality, a stay, a bulwark, and a comfort, for the want of which nothing else can
make up.” 29  Just as the swearing of marital vows represented a level of
commitment important to those entering a wedded state, the taking of religious

26 Quoted in Williams, Priscilla Lydia Sellon p 24. Italics in original.
27 Liddon, p 200.
28 A letter from Pusey to his friend the rev. Keble testified to the tacit nature of the vows, as he writes of
the situation during the first year at Park Village, “There are no vows, but [the sisters] have given
themselves for life.” Quoted in Williams, Priscilla Lydia Sellon, p 21.
vows were deeply significant to women who wished to declare their commitment to God.

On June 5, 1841, Marian Hughes became the first woman in the Church of England to profess a religious vow. The symbolic nature of religious vows for women emerges from the circumstances in which her vows were pledged. While it was another four years before the first Anglican sisterhood was established, Marian, age twenty-three, felt that even without the existence of a religious order, she was prepared to dedicate herself to God. Her vow of chastity was professed privately, at the home of a friend, under the supervision of Pusey.30 Excerpts from her diary reveal Marian’s feelings toward her unprecedented commitment:

This day, Trinity Sunday, 1841, was I enrolled one of Christ’s Virgins, espoused to Him and made His handmaid....It was all very wonderful, very blessed; now that I look back I rejoice in the strong trust in Christ which He gave me and the undoubting peace—once and once only at the midnight that followed the day, came for a few moments of mental darkness that I had cut myself off from all human ties, that I might be ever alone, but I made an act of faith and the fear and doubt passed away never to return.31

Marian’s fears require little explanation: as Christ’s only Anglican bride, Marian’s awesome sense of loneliness is easy to comprehend. The subsequent strength she derived from her holy marriage is also evident: through her vow of celibacy, Marian’s freely chosen identity as ‘Christ’s Virgin’ and ‘handmaid’ empowered her to overcome her fears and celebrate her commitment.

While at this stage of her religious life Marian’s primary concern centered

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30 For varying account of this momentous event see Williams Sellon pp. 10-11; R. Townsend Warner, Marian Rebecca Hughes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) pp 10-11; and Liddon, Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey pp. 10-11. There exists some controversy over whether Pusey actually administered the vows or whether he was simply in attendance.
31 Warner, Hughes pp. 10-12, italics in original. See Anson, pp. 289-90. Marian was born in 1817, therefore she would be either 23 or 24 in 1840.
upon the physical dedication of herself to God through her body, she was also
cconcerned that in her outward appearance she followed, at least in spirit, the vow of
poverty. After reading Newman’s *Church of the Fathers*, which extolled the
religious life, Marian felt a strong conviction to cast off physical adornments. To
demonstrate this conviction she resolved to give up wearing jewelry, which she
sold, sending the money to Newman along with an unsigned letter promising to
dedicate her life to God.\textsuperscript{32} While discarding one’s jewelry may seem an
insignificant step toward the religious life, it was for Marian an important step away
from material pursuits. Although Marian was prevented from joining a sisterhood
until 1851 due to family obligations, she remained dedicated to her goal and spent
much of the intervening decade in preparation for the religious life by visiting
convents in France and assisting fledgling communities in England to establish
their Rules. She eventually became a Mother Foundress of her own community
and remained within its fold until her death in 1912. While Marian Hughes was
obviously a woman of independent spirit and strong conviction, her private vow of
1841, while unsanctioned by the Church, undoubtedly gave her the courage to
prepare for and succeed in the religious life.

While the sisters considered their vows intensely private, to English society
vows became the subject of heated public debate. To many supporters and critics of
sisterhoods alike, vows symbolised the vices inherent in monastic life and were also
considered the sharpest condemnation of the secular world. As yet another element
of the religious life borrowed from Catholic nunneries, vows represented a
dangerously ‘Romish’ device designed to ensnare unsuspecting young women. To
many, convents retained their infamous reputations from the Middle Ages and
“were often seen as an institutionalization of women’s stereotypical bad

\textsuperscript{32} Williams, *Sellon* p. 10. The fact that Marian did not sign her letter suggests the uncertainty she felt
about her actions. However, the fact that she wrote a letter to Newman was in itself a courageous move.
characteristics: quarrelsomeness, sensuality, ostentation." While vows were traditionally designed to counter these vices, Victorian attitudes echoed those of the Elizabethans and the vows were reconstructed as promoting rather than combating these vices. This inversion of the principles embodied by vows resulted in the representation of Anglican sisters as rebellious, sexually licentious, and frivolous.

An emphasis on the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity allows for an examination of not only what made sisterhoods attractive to their members, but also provides a context in which to explore why these orders were challenged extensively by the ecclesiastic community and English society. The vow of obedience suggested to the public that sisters felt no obligation to obey men. By professing such a vow, Anglican sisters devoted themselves solely to God's direction, thereby threatening Victorian patriarchal authority and questioning the right of men to govern women unconditionally in marriage. In addition, the authority of the Mother Superior challenged male power over women. That women could assume such positions of authority was perceived by the majority of English society not only as unnatural but as inconceivable. The abuses prevalent in late medieval nunneries proved to the Victorians that women were incapable of conducting themselves decently under "so-called" religious obedience and thus were better governed by men. In choosing to live independently of men, and in assuming positions of power over their own lives and over the lives of other women, Anglican sisters used their relationships with God to free themselves from male domination and suggested that obedience to God transcended obedience to men.

The vow of poverty was similarly problematic to the Victorian middle-class

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mentality. Sisters appeared to defy material culture by renouncing personal possessions and the accumulation of wealth. While the majority of the people attempted to lift themselves out of poverty, sisters embraced this economic status. The physical environment of a sisterhood differed vastly from that of most middle-class Victorian homes with its minimal furniture and decorations, again implying that simple living conditions represented a more virtuous state. By adopting a simple, unadorned costume, sisters seemed to criticise the ornamental appearance of ladies and the belief that women should be physically attractive. In addition, unlike married women whose property automatically transferred to their husbands, sisters retained control of their wealth through trusts maintained by the sisterhood. By allowing women to freely administer and dispose of their possessions, sisterhoods enabled their members to assume financial responsibility of their lives and threatened traditional structures of financial control over women by men.

Finally, the vow of chastity outraged the public as a damning censure of Victorian sexual mores. The Victorians were fascinated by sex; indeed the sexual behaviour of sisters was the one facet of these women’s lives that most intrigued English society. While other single women were expected to remain celibate, sisters were controversial because they had freely chosen this sexless state. Sisters’ celibacy liberated them from male sexual control. In their rejection of men as sexual partners, Anglican sisters threatened middle-class masculinity. Of course to those Victorians with active imaginations, sisters were by no means celibate, engaging in

34 See Susan Mumm, “Lady Guerrillas of Philanthropy: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian England” D. Phil. (University of Sussex, 1993) This carefully-researched study provides an invaluable social history of nineteenth-century Anglican Sisterhoods. Although Mumm draws similar conclusions to those presented in this paper in terms of the radicalism of sisterhoods, this study focuses exclusively on the formative years of sisterhoods rather than on the development of sisterhood life to 1900. This paper also attempts to examine the experiences of individual sisters, and in particular, how sisters used their faith to articulate their motives and pursue their calling.
every conceivable liaison with visitors to the convent, including delivery men, former boyfriends, who were forever waiting at the convent wall, and members of the clergy - priests in particular, who, it was presumed, found the confessional most convenient. As well, during the hours when men were not present, who could say what the sisters got up to among themselves? While sisterhoods' opponents portrayed these communities as a breeding-ground for sexual vice, the scandals which they tried to link with sisterhoods reveal much about the sexual insecurities of the Victorians.

Critics were equally appalled by sisters' renunciation of the 'natural' feminine role of motherhood. As illustrated in works such as Sarah Lewis' Woman's Mission, motherhood was women's God-given sphere, and to reject this role was seen as a rejection of God. By creating their own woman-centered identity, sisters not only threatened men by displacing them altogether from their lives, but also posed a challenge to other women by appearing to renounce the cult of motherhood through which many Victorian women felt elevated to a special moral status. Instead, sisters' celibacy suggested that virginity was a more virtuous state for women. Chastity, to a greater extent than obedience or poverty, was perceived as unnatural; it heightened preconceived ideas that sisters had been subconsciously manipulated by their religious fervor.

Victorians were by no means the first to grapple with the problem of vows for women who sought religious lifestyles. From the dissolution of the last monastic community for women in Britain in 1539 until the revival of such orders in the 1840s, pleas for such institutions appeared frequently and references to vows often figure prominently in these discussions. In many of these accounts the authors

35 If the Victorians did discuss lesbian relationships in the convent, they rarely wrote about them. "The love that dare not speak its name" is a theme that will be discussed below.

shared the attitude that vows were not to be tolerated. One of the first experiments in religious living occurred at a community established at Little Gidding in 1625.\(^{37}\) Under the direction of Mrs. Ferrar a group of single women lived together engaged in religious devotions, reading history, and performing charitable acts. The members of Little Gidding were in no way 'nuns' and vows were not taken in the community. Significantly however, during a visit by their bishop in 1630, two of the women requested to take a vow of chastity. The denial of their requests suggests the symbolic importance in which vows were viewed at this time: the women at Little Gidding felt that vows would give a tangible element to their devotion. The clergy, however, felt threatened by the idea of these women professing vows, either as a result of the Catholic nature of vows, or because they did not believe vows should be administered to women.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Mary Astell envisioned monasteries or 'Religious Retreats' for women as places where they could devote themselves to educational pursuits free from worldly concerns.\(^{38}\) In 1697, she confronted the religious-based concerns of her critics: "They must be very Ignorant or very Malicious who pretend that we would imitate Foreign Monasteries...a little attention to what they read might have convinced them that our Institution is rather Academical than Monastic."\(^{39}\) Astell’s plea was rejected by her contemporaries, but her concerns indicated the amount of discussion given to

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\(^{37}\) See Bridget Hill, *A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery Past and Present* 117 (1987) pp. 107-130, esp pp 110-111. Hill argues that "As an outlet for women's self-expression, religious organizations played a continuous role from the Restoration down to the early nineteenth century. They represented an area where a measure of independence, even a degree of self-fulfillment, was possible for women. This was certainly true of the religious sisterhoods and deaconesses that began to multiply in the mid-nineteenth century," p 127.


religious orders as well as the attitudes of British society toward these communities. By arguing that the church should fulfill women’s needs, as well as pointing to the threat of the Catholic church, Astell foreshadowed two of the issues which surrounded Victorian sisterhoods. As well, Astell’s description of this female utopia stressed her disdain of the frivolity of the age:

You are...Ladies, invited into a place, where you shall suffer no other confinement, but to be kept out of the road of sin: ...You will only quit the chat of insignificant people for an ingenious conversation; the froth of flashy Wit for real Wisdom; idle tales for instructive discourses.40

However, Astell instructed that these institutions should in no way resemble Roman Catholic nunneries and were to have “no Vows or irrevocable Obligations.”41 Despite this rejection of religious vows, Astell was a firm supporter of the right of women to construct their lives in the absence of men. Astell’s opposition to vows was rooted more in her dislike of their permanency, and therefore potentially restrictive bearing on women, than in the principles they represented as she celebrated the right of women to control their own bodies and mind and to reject the material world.

During the 1840s numerous commentators who discussed the revival of sisterhoods stressed the benefits of these communities for women while disputing the incorporation of vows. Anna Jameson lamented women’s idleness in her appeal for the creation of Sisters of Charity in England. She proposed that women should be able to make independent decisions regarding their careers: “We require in our country the recognition--the public recognition,--by law as well as by opinion, of the woman’s privilege to share in the communion of labor at her own free choice, and the foundation of institutions which shall train her to do her work

40 Quoted in Moira Ferguson, ed. First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578-1799. (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1985) p. 186

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well.”  

Jameson observed that even though sisterhoods were affiliated with the Anglican Church, they were regarded as tainted with Romish features, “and necessarily impl[ied] the existence of nuns and nunneries, veils and vows, forced celibacy and seclusion, and all the other inventions and traditions which in this Protestant nation, are regarded with terror, disgust and delusion.”  

Although Jameson supported sisterhoods for their benefits to single women and the poor, she stressed that they were to be free of the trappings of Catholic nunneries. In *Deaconesses, or Protestant Sisterhoods* J. M. Ludlow supported the creation of sisterhoods provided they were free of vows. Ludlow examined contemporary institutions on the Continent to illustrate that communities could exist successfully without the ‘constraints’ of vows. He praised Protestant communities in France and Switzerland where “No vows, no poverty, no monastic obedience, no celibacy, no engagements - even temporary - no claustral seclusion, no vain practices, no domination over conscience, no tyranny over the will” existed.  

Ludlow outlined the popular fears held by society that vows ensnared innocent women and exercised undue control over their will. His focus on Protestant communities provided a useful model for the author to distance nineteenth-century orders from the threat of vows as well as the taint of Roman Catholicism.

While commentators not associated with sisterhoods feared that vows would ensnare women, those who were involved with the establishment of these societies promoted the benefits of vows to Anglican sisters, suggesting the freedoms implicit in such vows. Pusey, spiritual advisor at Park Village as well as at Sellon’s community in Devonport, was a rare advocate of the benefits of vows to women in religious orders. As early as 1840, in a letter discussing his ideas for a sisterhood,

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43 Jameson, p. 18
44 Ludlow, *Deaconesses, or Protestant Sisterhoods*, p 348
Pusey outlined his thoughts regarding vows for women: “We, who are admitted to the priesthood, are under vows; we devote ourselves for a whole life: why should not women also for their offices? It seems to me a more religious way of devoting themselves to their office, than if they reserved to themselves the power to draw back.” Pusey equated the taking of vows with the formal establishment of a dedication towards one’s chosen vocation - as with the priesthood or marriage. Significantly, he assumed that women had the same right as men to commit themselves permanently to the religious life. Pusey was hesitant however in his public advocacy of vows at Park Village, realising that because sisterhoods were sailing on uncharted waters in England, a tentative approach toward vows would be most successful.

Reverend Thomas Thellusson Carter, co-founder of a sisterhood at Clewer, legitimised the taking of vows in *Vows, and their relation to Religious Communities*. Carter noted that while the introduction of vows was often blamed for the growth of abuses in medieval religious houses, “The truth rather is, that the vow was in part employed to remedy or at least check the tendencies to irregularity and decay, which spread even into the cloister in times of growing laxity of morals.” Carter hoped to dispel concerns that vows in nineteenth-century orders were imposed on sisters to regulate their behaviour. Instead he suggested that the desire for vows came from the women themselves. Carter’s firsthand experience enabled him to comment directly on the significance of vows to the sisters: “[vows] show the natural working of the inner desires of the soul, seeking to bring the outward organization of its state into the most decisive correspondence with its own

45 Liddon Pusey, p. 8.
self-devotion." Carter’s emphasis on the “natural” or Divine aspect of vows is ambiguous in respect to the degree of agency he attributes to women who take vows. In one respect he suggested that women play no role in the decision, they are simply directed by God to devote themselves to the religious life and, therefore, are simply following a ‘call’. From a different perspective, however, he empowered these women: by placing the decision in God’s hands, he ultimately placed it in the hands of the women, for it is they who decided whether or not to heed the call.

By the 1860s the controversy surrounding not only the issue of vows in sisterhoods but the actual existence of these institutions found a forum in the Church Congresses and Convocations. That sisterhoods were recognised as worthy topic of debate illustrates that, although there were only nineteen such groups in existence by this point, sisterhoods were drawing the attention of prominent clerics. During the Second Annual Congress of 1862, sisterhoods were discussed for the first time and not surprisingly, concern was raised over the issue of vows. As spokesman for these fledgling organizations, T. T. Carter, along with Pusey, stressed the significance of vows to the sisters. Carter also maintained that sisters should be free to adopt the outward badges of the religious life such as the prefix ‘Sister’ before their name and a distinctive dress. These outer changes of identity, Carter claimed, while of little importance in themselves, served to reinforce the solidarity of the community. Interestingly, while Carter downplayed the significance of a sister’s unique name and dress, these two forms of identification encouraged a great deal of controversy for those involved with the sisterhood debate. Together with vows, which represented a sister’s inner devotion to the religious life, these outer forms of devotion were highly contested. The combination of this inner and outer dedication enabled a sister to assume a new

47 Carter "Vows, and their relation", p 363.
48 Church Congress, Oxford, 1862. Quoted in Allchin, p 140.
identity through a religious order. To those who opposed sisterhoods, these outward tokens of difference were viewed with almost as much suspicion as the difference implied by the life itself.

The reports from the Church Congresses and Convocations provide a particularly informative medium through which the debate over sisterhoods and the validity of vows can be examined. The crucial point of contention which emerged between male clerics opposed to sisterhoods and vows and those who supported them was whether or not sisterhoods and the professing of vows elevated sisters above the station of other women. Carter noted the possible objections to religious orders: that they would "interfer[e] with family ties and duties" and the fear "lest Sisterhoods should involve any disparagement of the holiness of domestic life." While Carter maintained that such fears were groundless, Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford expressed his apprehension over vows. In his attempt to uphold the sanctity of domestic life, Wilberforce inverted the notion that vows symbolised a "higher" state: "that I should not have felt at liberty to take any part in the arrangements of any sisterhood of which such vows formed a part....instead of the perpetual vows representing the higher, it is the admission of a lower standard..." While Wilberforce claimed that his dislike of vows stemmed from their permanency, his statements to the Congress suggest that he was also concerned that vows appeared to give a form of sanctity to sisters which eluded lay women.

The Reports also examined whether or not women had the right to create their own identities on their own terms. For in choosing to live in a chaste manner, in obedience to God rather than a father or a husband, and in their repudiation of material goods, Anglican sisters rejected not only the socially-constructed role of Victorian women, but also the very principle which drove the economy - the

49 Church Congress, Oxford, 1862; quoted in Allchin, p 141. Italics in original.
50 Quoted in Allchin p 142.
exchange of paid work for the accumulation of wealth. By pointing to issues such as women's right to work, to control their own working environments, to determine their own appearance, and to choose their own way of life, the Church Congresses and Convocations, through their examination of Anglican sisters, present a microcosm of the debates which surrounded the entire "Woman Question" during the Victorian era.

By the end of the nineteenth century sisterhoods were firmly established in England and provided rewarding careers for several thousand women. Through their committed labour in such fields as social work, nursing, and teaching, sisters had won the respect of many. The admiration which sisters earned for their work did not however, extend to their lifestyle and these women were still often seen as fanatics.51 Although opposed to the idea of nunneries, Charles Booth commented in Life and Labour of the People in London that "Everywhere the Sisters may be seen going independently about their work."52 He noted the existence of thirteen Anglican sisterhoods, which he claimed were the "natural result of religious women living together," working actively in London by the end of the century.53 Booth remained critical of the sisters however, believing that their work was proselytising in nature, and that they were bribing the poor in exchange for their souls.

Other opponents of sisterhoods, reluctant to criticise pious young ladies,

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51 Martha Vicinus notes that, “Throughout most of the nineteenth century it was considered somewhat questionable and possibly fanatical to enter an order.” Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920 (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1985) p 54. In Chapter Two, “Church Communities: Sisterhoods and Deaconesses’ Houses” Vicinus presents an introduction to the trials and successes of these two forms of community life. Unlike the present study, Vicinus does not address the significance of religious vows to the sisters or their effect on English society. This paper also goes further to examine the challenges which sisterhoods posed to tradition models of Victorian womanhood and to middle-class culture.


53 Booth, 350
found a more suitable target in the Church. Ecclesiastical promoters of religious orders were accused of breaking apart families by kidnapping women and forcing them into the convent as prisoners for life, of demanding that sisters obey the self-denigrating orders of tyrannical mother superiors, of duping sisters out of their fortunes, and of the rampant seduction of virgins. What many of these anti-sisterhood crusaders failed or refused to recognise was the lack of support given to sisterhoods by members of the church hierarchy. One of the primary reasons that clerics, specifically bishops, withdrew their recognition of a community was the insistence of the sisters to profess religious vows. By addressing their attack toward a Church that they felt was moving 'dangerously close to Rome' opponents of sisterhoods, and specifically of vows, fed off the rampant anti-Catholic sentiment which pervaded much of English society.

One of the most extreme condemnations of sisterhoods and vows in particular resounded from the pages of Walter Walsh's *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement*, published to much acclaim in 1897. No aspect of sisterhood life remained unscathed under his critical eye. Based on the lurid testimony of several ex-sisters, Walsh maintained "that Ritualistic Convents are, in some instances, nothing better than jails for innocent young ladies, ... [where] moral bolts and bars are used which more effectually prevent [the sisters'] escape than any material ones could."54 The author hoped that by exposing the "scurrilous goings-on" within these "Secret Societies" he would force a governmental investigation of these communities and free the virtuous women trapped within their walls. In his comprehensive attack on sisterhoods, Walsh fed upon popular fears that within a convent women were subjected to numerous Romish evils such as mandatory fasting, flagellation, immoral acts during confession, and public humiliation, all at

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the hands of a wily priest and a dominatrix-like mother superior.

The worst abuses, however, according to Walsh, were the result of the Romish vows which were forced upon the sisters. "Anyone who submits to a Vow of Obedience," Walsh declared, "is more truly a slave to her Superiors than any negro slave is to his master, since slavery of the mind and soul is in her case added to that of the body."\textsuperscript{55} The vow of poverty, he stated, "is a grand scheme for relieving English ladies of their money."\textsuperscript{56} The vow of chastity was equally abhorrent, as Walsh displayed outrage at a case "in which a clergyman of the Church of England administered a vow of perpetual Celibacy to a young lady who was only eighteen years of age! No wonder," he continued, "that the Archbishop termed the taking of such a vow a \textit{sinful} act."\textsuperscript{57} Walsh maintained that he had no argument against the useful charity work done by the sisters, and that he had only the highest respect for the women themselves. "But surely," he confessed, "[one] is not to be considered an enemy of Christian charity who faithfully points out the dangers and evils which invariably follow the taking of Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience."\textsuperscript{58} Walsh's dramatic account of conventual life represents the fascination which nuns and their vows held for the popular imagination. As the majority of the British public was ignorant as to the organization and practices of sisterhoods, scandalous portrayals of these communities, such as \textit{The Secret History} were often the only, and certainly one of the most provocative, types of accounts which reached the average citizen.

While vows presented a continual threat to Victorian culture, they provided enormous support to women in sisterhoods. At the Convocation of 1885, the issue of vows was once again a part of the discussion. However, unlike the atmosphere

\textsuperscript{55} Walsh, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{56} Walsh, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{57} Walsh, p. 180. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{58} Walsh, p. 180.
in the debates of the 1860s, the significance of vows to the sisters was beginning to be recognised. The following excerpt from this Convocation Report illustrates the gradual acknowledgement by the committee of what had enabled sisterhoods to flourish.

Nor is charity the only, or perhaps the chief motive which inspires the desire to enter such Communities. Experience shows that, in point of fact, some women are conscious of a call which binds them, as they believe, to dedicate themselves wholly and irrevocably to a life of special devotion to God. They feel that this call requires them to give up their personal freedom of action, and to obey a settled rule; they have no mind to marry, or even to be free to marry; they will have nothing more to do with the distractions and cares which attend the possessions of this world’s goods. In this dedication of themselves to God—accepted, as they trust, and blessed by Him—they find their strength.59

Unlike accounts which attributed the taking of vows to regulations imposed by the Church, this report stressed the individual choices undertaken by the sisters who freely and willingly professed themselves to God. The language of the report goes beyond the suggestion that women merely heeded ‘the call’ to emphasize that the sisters interpreted this call in a personal manner. The author’s use of the terms ‘free’ and ‘freedom’ denoted the sense that what he perceived as a ‘giving-up’ of the ‘freedom of action’ and the ‘free[dom] to marry,’ was in fact for sisters a gaining of freedom. By taking vows, sisters gained the freedom to chart their own course of action and to exist independently of a husband.

When Marian Hughes took her vow of celibacy in 1840, she stressed the overwhelming sense of trust which she felt from God. Her faith that her ‘bridegroom’ trusted her enabled Marian to persevere through the struggles she was to face. It provided her strength. Ironically, while the nineteenth-century emphasis on Christian duty was intended to maintain social order, to keep women firmly

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within the home, it also enabled Anglican sisters to transcend domesticity for a wider sphere within society and to express their moral superiority.\textsuperscript{60} As Lillian Lewis Shiman observes: “some maverick females who insisted on venturing forth into forbidden territory utilized the emphasis on piety to follow one of the few avenues of escape from the domestic realm that Victorian society allowed them—religion.”\textsuperscript{61}

With the creation of sisterhoods, the Church of England unwittingly provided women a space to use their faith as a vehicle for their emancipation. Once given this space, Anglican sisters reconstructed the principles embodied by the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to create autonomous lifestyles. In creating new identities, these women assumed positions of power that eventually helped to destroy the ideology of “separate spheres” which held them captive. As one of the original sisters of the Society of St. Margaret, Mother Kate testified as to the power she derived from her faith: “There was a consciousness of God’s saints actually round and about us, which moved and inspired us to do and to dare anything and everything.”\textsuperscript{62} By enabling their members to ‘do’ and ‘dare’ Anglican sisterhoods empowered these women by challenging Victorian conceptions of gender and represent a significant chapter in the history of feminism.

\textsuperscript{60} For a discussion of the relationship between Victorian women and religion see, for example Katharine Moore, \textit{She For God: Aspects of Women and Christianity} (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 1978).


\textsuperscript{62} Quoted in Rowell, p 113.
OBEDIENCE: ENGENDERING POWER IN THE CONVENT

“A state of bondage it is not; because it is one of obedience to God, and, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

_Sisterhood Life_ ¹

One of the most significant challenges posed to Victorian society by sisterhoods was the notion that women did not need to be governed by men. In pledging their obedience to God rather than a husband or father, Anglican sisters circumvented the patriarchal family structure of the nineteenth century. By constructing their lives within religious orders, sisters disrupted the ideology of separate spheres in which women were confined to the private sphere under the authority of men. The decision of sisters to obey God instead of men represented only one aspect of the problem, however. A more prominent element of the controversy over obedience focused on the fact that sisterhoods were controlled by women. In Roman Catholic communities nuns were guided by Mother Superiors who were subject to the supervision of a powerful male church hierarchy. Within Anglican orders, no such episcopal control existed. Therefore, the women in charge of sisterhoods wielded much greater authority than their Catholic counterparts. By assuming positions of power within religious orders, Anglican Mother Superiors presented a challenge to accepted notions of femininity and of the ability of women to assume responsible roles.

For Anglican sisters, the question of obedience revolved primarily around religious faith: these women felt a divine calling to obey God which superseded any

temporal obligations to marry and thereby place themselves under the control of men. As noted by one sister, complete devotion to God was “the one thing needful” for potential sisters: “A pure, single, true heart, offering itself wholly to God, seeking for nothing again, but gratefully accepting all He may be pleased to give—that is the heart for a Sister.” Toward the end of her life, Harriet Monsell, Mother Superior at the Community of Saint Thomas the Martyr, eloquently encapsulated the principle of religious obedience in her advice to a friend:

Do not plan out your life. Plan’s are God’s, not yours. Leave them to Him and let Him gradually unfold what He would have you do. Look at my life, I made no plans, I never settled on what I was going to do; but all was gradually unfolded to me step by step...I felt there was some work I must do for God, that I had health and strength to give Him, and that I must dedicate my life and all my powers to His service. Then He showed me step by step what to do; and gradually my work commenced at Clewer, and my life-work grew there as Superior for twenty-five years.

Monsell stressed that by placing oneself under God’s guidance, a sister could gain the freedom to experience a productive life. She emphasised that obedience to God could liberate women from domestic idleness and could enable them to embrace a life of public devotion to God. For women who felt daunted by the prospect of an idle future, the idea of devoting oneself to God’s obedience, and thus having a special purpose in life, must indeed have seemed appealing. When Marian Hughes, Mother Foundress of the Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, co-founded this community in 1851 upon the death of her parents, she revealed in her diary the freedom which she felt: “Being now free I was able to do active work among the

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3 [Anon] *Sisterhood Life* p 178.

poor of St. Giles...it was a delightful occupation.5 By enabling women to devote
themselves to God, sisterhoods provided the opportunity for their members to
pursue rewarding careers in the public world. While obedience to a husband
through marriage meant, for many middle-class women, confinement and idleness
in the domestic sphere, obedience to God in an Anglican sisterhood provided sisters
with active, public lives.

By constructing their lives around religious communities, Anglican sisters
posed a threat to the ideology of separate spheres which sought to confine women to
male control within the sanctity of the home. As early as 1838, the Rev. Hubbard
Winslow stressed that only through the maintenance of separate spheres could
society retain its integrity. Basing his claim on natural law, Winslow articulated the
logic of separate spheres: “Nature has assigned to [women] a sphere distinct from
that and subordinate to that of man, though by no means less honourable and
important.”6 Although Winslow argued that women occupied an important moral
position in society, his argument was based primarily on the premise that women
were inherently different from men. By hinging women’s ‘equality’ on their
difference, many non-feminists hoped to resist women’s pleas for emancipation by
arguing that if women were to enter the public world and adopt ‘non-traditional’
feminine qualities such as reason and leadership, they would lose the features
which made them different and thus important in their own right.7

The issue of gender difference served at once to undermine and to facilitate
women’s movement into the public sphere.8 Often those on both sides of the

5 R. Townsend Warner, Marian Rebecca Hughes: Mother Foundress of the Society of the Holy and
7 For an earlier but highly applicable discussion of separate spheres and the position of women in society,
see Christine de Pisan The City of Ladies,1405.
8 This discussion of ‘difference’ has been informed by Joan W. Scott, Deconstructing Equality-versus-
argument could discover reinforcement for their ideals from the same source, as with John Angell James’ series of sermons to women. In these sermons, James propounded the importance of woman’s mission in the home, and echoed Winslow in his assertion, “that woman was intended to occupy a position of subordination and dependence is clear enough from every part of the word of God.”

Yet James also intimated that women’s religious gifts could be applied on a wider scale to release them from the chains of domesticity: “Whenever Christianity is understood and felt, woman is free. The gospel, like a kind angel, opens her prison doors, and bids her walk abroad and enjoy the sunlight of reason, and breathe the invigorating air of intellectual freedom.”

Religious women utilized the emphasis on their religious gifts to expand their sphere of influence beyond the family. To those who believed in confining women to the domestic realm, the ideology of separate spheres focused on the physical segregation of men and women in order to reinforce political differences based on gender. Katharine Moore’s remark that “In no other age have women been held so spiritually superior yet so mentally inferior to men,” emphasises the differences attributed to gender which were fundamental to Victorian middle-class culture.

For women who wanted to move beyond domesticity, the issue of difference provided a moral imperative to redirect their special abilities into the public domain. Anglican sisters adopted the argument of gender difference as it applied to religiosity but denied that a physical

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9 John Angell James, *Female Piety: or the Young Woman’s Friend and Guide Through Life to Immortality* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1865), orig pub 1853. p 77

10 James, p 15


12 For a discussion of how women used religion as a tool to transcend the private sphere, see Jane Rendall, ed. *Equal or Different: Women’s Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987). The author notes that women had two choices: they could either assert their equality with men and attempt to enter the male world, or they could stress their difference and create a unique female sphere of self-definition. p 2.
separation of women from men in public need accompany it.

The idea that the convent belonged to the public world was a twodimensional one to the Victorians. One the one hand, it was perceived that sisters were retreating from the world by joining a sisterhood. Opponents of these communities saw this retreat as a rejection and therefore a critique of society. On the other hand, because Anglican sisterhoods were active, as opposed to cloistered communities, and enabled their members to work in the public sphere, they were very much a part of the public world and its debates. As such, every aspect of sisterhood life was subject to close public scrutiny. Issues which were private in the domestic world, such as male control of the family, became public within the convent. Obedience in sisterhoods was thus a public concern.

Within a sisterhood the vow of obedience was pledged to the community and was maintained by the Mother Superior. In the Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, the vow was made directly to the Mother Superior, Marian Hughes. While not all of the earliest sisters pledged such a vow, they did adhere to the principles it embodied: to follow the Rule of the community and to submit unquestioningly to authority. For sisters, this vow signified that they had transferred their obedience from a secular power to a religious one; their lives henceforth were to be directed by religious rather than social and patriarchal guidelines. For the Mother Superior the vow of obedience placed her in a powerful position: not only was she to interpret what was meant by the Rule, but she was also in direct control of the members of her community. In this sense, the vow also transferred obedience from a male to a female head.

Opposition to the principles represented by the vow of obedience focused on two separate issues. The first problem involved the relationship between a woman who was considering joining a sisterhood and her family who, in the majority of cases, objected in some manner to her wishes. In these instances, the debate centred upon the right of a woman to choose whom she would obey. The Rev. Carter maintained that women had no choice whether or not to heed the call, and neither, for that matter, did their parents: “A call of God, if truly such, cannot but overrule all earthly authority; and parents may be unwilling to recognize the Divine Will, and make the sacrifice which the surrender of a child involves....The parent may err in the refusal, but the child’s duty is clear.” Anna Jameson echoed Carter’s sentiment, but placed the decision directly in the woman’s hands: “the question is not what this or that individual would choose his daughter to do...it is most unjust to make his particular feelings and opinions the rule of life for others.” According to advocates of sisterhoods, in choosing the religious life, a woman made an independent decision which, by transferring the power over her fate from her family to herself and God, empowered herself and alienated those who had previously dominated her life.

The experiences of many of the original Anglican sisters reveals that these women faced a great deal of parental opposition to their decision to follow a religious life. Marian Hughes felt her conscience torn over her duty to her parents and her duty to obey God when she felt the call: “The Religious Life was I felt my call, and yet there were home ties.” Marian decided to defer entrance into a sisterhood for ten years while she cared for her aging parents. Like Marian, many

sisters had to wait for the death of their parents before being free to join a sisterhood. One Devonport sister testified to the level of opposition sisters faced from their families: “Nearly every novice had to undergo much opposition, if not petty persecution, before she had succeeded in entering the Sisterhood.”¹⁸ When Amelia Warren, age fifty, wished to joined the Devonport society to devote herself to alleviating the miseries caused by the cholera epidemic of 1849, her family immediately tried to intervene. While Amelia believed that joining the community “would afford her the surest and safest prospect of serving God by serving her fellow-creatures,” her eldest sister protested on the grounds that such a move would break “the happy family circle.”¹⁹ Facing such opposition, Amelia sought sanction from a “higher” authority and received the local Bishops’ permission to join, providing she felt free to return to her family anytime. In a letter to her family, Amelia’s sense of emancipation and purpose is clearly revealed.

We are organized as a body, and act as such. We relieve one another at regular intervals, and night and day attend the Hospital,...and the district where no tongues can describe the scenes...I write to tell you how well we are in health, and supported in body and mind. We take every precaution, good food, perfect rest when at home, etc. We have not the slightest fear...My choice is deliberately made to remain here and nurse in turn with the rest so long as needful.²⁰

Like so many of the original pioneering sisters, Amelia refused to let the objections of her family deter her from pursuing a rewarding vocation.

Jane Ellacombe’s experiences over her consideration of the religious life further exemplify that even with tentative parental support, potential sisters faced objections to such a decision. When Jane advised her father that she was

²⁰ Williams, Sellon p 50.
considering such a life, his reaction was hesitant. Although she expressed the view that, "at that time she had no desire to join a nunnery and lead an inactive life," she explained that, "[w]ere there such an institution in our own Church, and were there no stronger claims at home, I might wish to be a Sister of Charity."  

Jane’s father reacted to his daughter’s decision by inquiring of the Rev. Pusey, who was establishing the first sisterhood and with whom Jane was in contact, whether “some situation as a governess where she would enjoy full religious advantage and have full occupation” might be found for Jane.  

In his reply to the Rev. Ellacombe, Pusey was tactful so as not to appear to undermine Rev. Ellacombe’s position of authority over his daughter. Instead of stressing Jane’s right to determine her own path in life, Pusey appealed to her father’s sense of religious dedication. “[I]f as a father, I may write to a father,” Pusey began, “I would venture to suggest what I should do myself were Jane my child. I cannot doubt that this drawing of people’s minds toward a more devoted life, giving themselves to His service, and the ministering to His poor, is...of God.”  

Pusey emphasised that Jane should be allowed to develop her piety, but in order to reassure her father, he focused on the supervision she would need in her new life:

Were I her father, I should certainly not...abruptly check the feeling which she has so strongly, nor even attempt to divert it, but only try its steadfastness. It seems to me to want guidance and discipline, and this she herself wishes for.... I cannot help feeling that a mind so energetic, and strongly penetrated with this longing might become something which might give you deep pleasure, and be a source of blessing to others.

Pusey wisely ended his letter by referring to the threat of the newly-emancipated

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22 Henry Parry Liddon Life of Edward BouveriePusey vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894) p 14; see also Williams and Campbell, p 9.
23 Liddon, p 14.
The Catholic Church and its ability to incorporate women into its expanding convents. The Church of England, Pusey maintained, must rise to meet the needs of women and the poor who might otherwise 'go over' to Rome:

> We have deep needs which Sisters of Charity alone can meet, and which as far as they are met now, being relieved by Roman Catholic institutions, result in withdrawing our poor from us. To our own educated ranks, I am sure, it would be often an exceeding relief, while to many ardent minds, like your daughters, the establishment of Sisterhoods will remove many sore temptations away from our Church and develop higher energies.25

Significantly, Pusey's reference to Jane's mind as 'energetic' and 'ardent' suggested that though Pusey did not wish to portray Jane as independent, he did however, wish to emphasize the depth and potential of her spirituality, thus implying that Rev. Ellacombe had succeeded in his duty to raise a fervently Christian daughter.

With recommendations from Pusey and Newman, who also had advised Jane's father that his daughter was suited to the religious life, Rev. Ellacombe gave his approval for Jane to commence such a life. In a letter to Pusey written in November 1844, while she was living with other women in preparation for sisterhood life, Jane asserted that she was "no longer under her father, who had given his blessing when she left home."26 Rev. Ellacombe however, was beginning to have misgivings, and again Pusey wrote to him, reminding him of his previous consent: "You will kindly not forget that you gave your free consent to your daughter's going and your blessing with her, and told me that you did so as being, under the circumstances, the best thing."27 With this final exchange, Jane's father acquiesced. Two days after Pusey wrote his letter, Jane began her life as a religious.

Rev. Ellacombe's reactions to Jane's plans indicated paternal concern for his

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25 Liddon, p 15; Williams and Campbell, pp 9-10.
26 Williams and Campbell, p 14.
27 Williams and Campbell, p 16.
daughter's well-being rather than direct opposition to her wishes. Jane's assertion that she was going to join a sisterhood, when in fact this form of community did not actually exist, would doubtless cause concern from most parents. Indeed, Rev. Ellacombe's views regarding Jane were quite enlightened for his time, representing the general attitude of support from clerical families as opposed to the feelings of hostility more prevalent within lay families. An additional factor which may have convinced Jane's father to accept her decision to enter a sisterhood was the fact that he was being persuaded by a man rather than a woman. In Jane's case, the transfer of paternal authority to religious authority was more easily accepted by Jane's father since Jane was not being directly handed to the control of a woman.

The second problem which arose over the question of obedience centred on the power of the Mother Superior over the sisters whom she ruled. According to Susan Mumm, "the vow of obedience was almost universally misunderstood by Victorian observers of sisterhoods....who saw it as unnatural, given as it was to a corporate group headed by a woman, while the vow of obedience to a man in a marriage ceremony was seen as eminently fitting for women." Critics maintained that this vow was unnatural because it was made to a woman; they loathed the notion that a woman, who styled herself a 'Mother Superior' would have control other young women. Walter Walsh's abhorrence of the vow of obedience was revealed by his criticism of Rev. Benson's The Religious Life Portrayed for the Use of the Sisters of Mercy, which stated: "A Religious has made the sacrifice of her will in taking the Vow of Obedience: she is no more her own but God's, and she must obey her Superiors for God's sake, yielding herself as wax, to be moulded unresistingly." The person who submitted to such a vow, Walsh asserted, "is

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more truly a slave to her Superiors than any Negro slave is to his master, since slavery of the mind and soul is in her case added to that of the body."\textsuperscript{30} Walsh articulated the popular view that women pledged body and soul to the despotic Mother Superior of a religious community. With his complaint, "Is it right that any freeborn Englishwoman should be permitted to take a Vow of Obedience of this horrible character," Walsh revealed that while it was unthinkable for a Mother Superior to control a woman's actions, it was acceptable for society to deprive women of the chance to make this decision on their own.\textsuperscript{31}

Frances Power Cobbe, one of the fiercest opponents of female monastic supervision, repudiated the authority of Mother Superiors, observing that, "[w]oman is assuredly not constituted to exercise outward legislative power":

\begin{quote}
Enough has been revealed to us of the secrets of convents, to leave no doubt that the possession of unnatural authority of the superiors has continually proved too strong a temptation; and the woman who in her natural domestic sphere might have become the gentlest of guides, has become in a convent the cruelest of petty despots.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Cobbe attributed the corruption of Mother Superiors to the unnatural power they exerted in the convent. Power, Cobbe believed, was sure to masculinise the women involved in these corrupt organisations. The idea that someone would control young women's behaviour, which was commonplace if it was the woman's father or husband, became repugnant if the powerful position was to be held by a woman.

Whether or not a Mother Superior would be accepted by society depended upon the degree to which her behaviour emphasised traditional feminine qualities and downplayed masculine characteristics. During the Victorian age the link between women and femininity and between men and masculinity achieved

\textsuperscript{30} Walsh, p 169.
\textsuperscript{31} Walsh, p 169.
\textsuperscript{32} Frances Power Cobbe, \textit{Female Charity-Lay and Monastic} Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country 66 (1862) p 786.
perhaps its greatest prominence, as did the sharp distinction between the expected behaviour of men and women. These dichotomies were further heightened by the ideology of separate spheres, "the period's most ingenious mechanism for restraining resurgent women." Rather than being judged by their contribution to society, such "insurgent women" as the leaders of sisterhoods were evaluated primarily by the methods by which they extracted obedience from their sisters. Simply by assuming the role of a Mother Superior, a woman was judged as overstepping her proper position. If she behaved 'like a woman' in this position, she was less likely to be criticised than the Superior who acted assertively and adopted 'masculine' qualities.

An examination of two of the original Mother Superiors in Anglican orders helps to illustrate the variety of ways in which women adapted to this unusual form of power. It also reveals how English society felt threatened by powerful women who undermined traditional gendered distinctions. Fortunately, the earliest Mother Superiors possessed ambitious, independent spirits that enabled them to succeed despite widespread opposition. Harriet Monsell and Priscilla Lydia Sellon were equally successful in establishing women's institutions and creating full-time vocations for the members of their sisterhoods. They thus advanced the ability of women to work independently outside the home. At the onset of their careers, both these women had the same mission: to serve God by ministering to His needy. Both were instrumental in founding sisterhoods which they controlled for the remainder of their lives and both contributed greatly to the establishment of conventual life in the Church of England. However, they differed in that only Miss Sellon became the prime target of anti-sisterhood campaigns. The fundamental difference between these women lay not in their achievements, but in the way they

were perceived as challenging traditional conceptions of femininity.

Priscilla Lydia Sellon began her monastic career in 1848 at the age of twenty-seven by responding to an appeal from Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter for the relief of the “appalling educational, moral, and spiritual destitution in the crowded slums” of Devonport.34 The daughter of a wealthy Navy captain, raised with her thirteen brothers and sisters by a Scottish governess, Sellon was undoubtedly accustomed to the techniques of running a ‘tight ship’. In addition to receiving Phillpotts’ blessing to work with the poor in his district, Sellon also had the emotional and financial support of her father.35 Originally working alone, Sellon soon realised that an organised community of women living under a Rule was necessary for effective relief work. On the advice of Dr. Pusey, whom she had met through her father, Sellon established her own sisterhood with Sarah Terrot, recruited from Park Village. The objectives of this society were ambitious and within two years the women had established “A Home for Orphans, St. George’s College for Sailor Boys, the House of Peace, A Home for Old Sailors and Their Wives, an Industrial School, six Houses of Hope, Lodging Homes, a Soup Kitchen, and five Ragged Schools.”36 Although supported by Phillpotts, the Devonport Society existed independently of local clerical control. As a result, Sellon had complete authority over its daily operations. Her ambitious character enabled the fledgling community to thrive despite widespread hostilities.

It is difficult to create an accurate character sketch of Priscilla Lydia Sellon. E. Edmund Seyzinger, warden of Ascot Priory in 1948, maintained that she “holds the

34 Thomas J. Williams, The Beginnings of Anglican Sisterhoods, Historical Magazine of the Protestant Church 16 (1947) p 353. Williams estimates that Sellon was born in 1821.
36 Anson p 263. See also Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church, vol. 1. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966) Chadwick notes that the “soup kitchen [served] over 80 meals a day to paupers too old to work” p 506.
foremost place in the honoured line of those entirely devoted to this great work of
[the] revival and restoration [of sisterhoods].”37 Her biographer describes Sellon as
having “the advantages of youthful enthusiasm, broad vision, indomitable will,
and those innate qualities of leadership.”38 Members of the Devonport Society
publicised their leader as “the wise and inflexible guardian of our laws,—our tender
and loving Superior and Mother,—our guide and our leader,—our counsel and our
help in difficulties,—our comfort in trouble,—our refreshment in toil,—the sharer of
our joys and sorrows,—our defense when attacked.”39 Pusey was so impressed by her
abilities that he planned to make her the Superior General of all sisterhoods in the
Church of England - a sort of Archbishop of women’s religious communities.40
Peter Anson describes her as “a born legislator” who “had the mentality and outlook
of a brilliant French woman rather than that of a typical English lady of 100 years
ago.”41 Owen Chadwick boldly asserts that “She must be remembered as one of the
indomitables of Victorian womanhood.”42

Other characterisations of this religious pioneer were not quite as charitable.
Margaret Cusack, a former sister who left Sellon’s sisterhood to join a Catholic
order, painted an extremely cynical portrait of the Mother Superior. In her scathing
account of the Devonport Society, Cusack accused Sellon of, among other crimes,
maintaining an illicit relationship with Pusey and hoarding the sisterhood’s funds
for her own lavish lifestyle.43 Cusack was similarly unimpressed with the nature of

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37 Edmund Seyzinger preface to Williams, Priscilla Lydia Sellon, xiii. Ascot Priory was connected with
the Devonport sisterhood.
38 Williams, Sellon, p 23.
39 Ibid., p 297.
40 See Anson, p 265.
41 Anson, p 69. The author's comparison of Sellon to a French woman can be attributed to the fact that
Sellon's family, he observes, was of Huguenot ancestry.
42 Chadwick, The Victorian Church p 507.
43 [Margaret Cusack] Five Years in a Protestant Sisterhood and Ten Years in a Catholic Convent (London:
Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869)
Sellon's leadership: "Miss Jones [the pseudonym by which the author referred to Sellon] required a personal obedience to herself on her own sole authority, which was very perplexing."44 In this description of Sellon's authority, Cusack employed uncharacteristically mild language. Elsewhere she likened Sellon to the zealous head of a fanatical cult.45 Other testimonies portrayed Sellon as a tyrannical dictator, subject to the control of none. Sellon's domineering nature was berated in a public opinion letter by J. McGregor Allan who wrote:

The sisterhood once so useful, so practically charitable, whose members were so happy, has become a complete Catholic convent -- only more so!...Even in Rome no Superior is permitted to rule despotically over the inmates of a convent without the supervision of a bishop.46

Allan's concerns, that Sellon was guilty not only of conducting her society in a Catholic manner but also of ruling "despotic", were just two of the numerous charges laid upon the Superior.

Above all, critics of Sellon targeted her unladylike behaviour. Her supposedly 'masculine' behaviour became the focal point for, and underlying cause of, all Sellon's 'crimes.' To one commentator, the Superior was nothing less than a "petty despot" displaying the characteristics of a "crafty old owl" who preyed upon "poor little mice...imprisoned in a tree."47 This portrayal of Sellon as a bird of prey and the sisters as helpless animals was, however, less revealing of the offense to Victorian sensibilities than were those characterisations which likened the Superior to a man. As John Shelton Reed explains in his analysis of the prejudice which Mother Superiors, and Sellon in particular, faced, "The clerical lecturer who said

44 Ibid., p 73.
45 For Cusack's representation of the sisterhood as a cult see Irene ffrench Eagar, Margaret Anne Cusack-One Woman's Campaign for Women's Rights, A Biography (Dublin: Arlen House - The Women's Press, 1979).
46 Quoted in Cusack, ix.
47 Quoted in John Shelton Reed, 'A Female Movement': The Feminization of Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Catholicism Anglican and Episcopal History 57 (2) 1988. p 235.
[the above comments] was closer to the mark, though, when he called her "unladylike"; by definition, a woman with Mother Lydia's determination and responsibilities was not behaving like a lady, as that word was commonly understood."48 This depiction of Sellon as an atypical and abnormal English lady was reinforced by Sellon herself as she revealed in her statement to one clergyman who attempted to regulate the work of the sisters: "if you refuse our aid, we must offer it elsewhere."49 Her threat to leave the district if she did not receive support from the local clergy provides an initial glimpse into her assertive nature and her refusal to obey clerical demands. It also indicates why, given the association between femininity and passivity, Sellon's behaviour was easily constructed as masculine.

J. M. Ludlow's denunciation of Sellon's rule represents a more direct challenge to female leadership. Rather than suggesting that Sellon was the wrong type of woman to lead such a community, Ludlow denounced the right of women to lead at all. Of the problems at Sellon's sisterhood, the author observed that

I have now to state as plainly what I conceive to be the cause of evil. I deem it to be mainly, that there is no man in the institution. I believe that for Sisterhoods of Mercy or Deaconess Institutions to be really honest and healthy, to preserve their due relation to the family of the Church, to strengthen instead of weakening it, it is absolutely necessary that they should be under the direction of a man, and that one who is, or at least has been, a husband.50

Ludlow's charge that the absence of a male head lay at the root of the 'evils' within Sellon's sisterhood raised concerns beyond that of female leadership. In his claim

48 Reed, p 235. Shelton himself describes Sellon as "strong-minded and sometimes ill-advised," while in her "unladylike" behaviour "she was like her contemporary, Florence Nightingale, with whom she shared many characteristics." p 235, 235n.
49 Liddon, p 199.
50 John Malcolm Ludlow, Woman's Work in the Church, Historical Notes on Deaconesses and Sisterhoods (London: Alexander Strachan, Publisher, 1865) p 301.
that the order might be ‘dishonest’ and ‘diseased’, the author intimated that this all-female arrangement might lead to sexual impropriety among its members, an idea he reinforced by suggesting that a husband or widower would be the best candidate for a supervisory position.\textsuperscript{51} Sellon’s youth and aggressiveness were imagined by many as sexually threatening not just to the sisters, but to outsiders as well.

Problems surrounding Sellon’s form of authority commenced almost immediately for the Devonport Society when, in 1849, members of the local clergy charged Sellon directly with imitating the practices and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, a protest fuelled by the growing popular fear of Catholic infiltration of the Established Church\textsuperscript{52}. Specific points of contention were the offensive habits of the sisters such as their dress and their wearing of the cross. Rev. Hatchard articulated these concerns in a letter of complaint to the Mother Superior. He asserted that although the sisterhood claimed to be affiliated with the Tractarians, they were in fact “Romanists”:

\begin{quote}
so long as the Roman Catholic name of the ‘Sisters of Mercy’ was retained, the dress of nuns or something similar was used, and the appellation ‘Superior’ of the Sisterhood was applied to the head of the establishment, the Christian public could not fail to look with great jealousy at their proceedings.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

More damning were the charges that Sellon abused the principles of obedience, demanding excessive and demeaning behaviour from the sisters. Rumours that Sellon forced a novice to lie on the floor in the shape of a cross for a week, and often sent sisters out alone at night on ‘dangerous missions’ seized the imagination of her critics.\textsuperscript{54} Complaints were manifested in numerous letters to The Guardian with

\textsuperscript{51} The issue of sexuality will be discussed in a later chapter.


\textsuperscript{53} Quoted in Williams, Sellon p 35.

the scandal reaching such a fervor that a public inquiry was held to investigate the nature of her rule.

At the sensational inquiry, which attracted large crowds, Sellon launched a spirited defence. She protested against the public scrutiny of her sisterhood and demanded that sisters were entitled to the same amount of privacy as their secular counterparts. During the hearings, Sellon defended the sisters' rights to wear religious garb and to display the cross on their dress: "What would be thought of one who inquired of her attendant...what an Englishwoman wore beneath her dress or laid under her pillow, and published the information so gained." Sellon hoped to suggest in her defence that sisters were just like other Christian women and deserved to live as they chose fit without being investigated in such a public forum. Phillpotts maintained his support of the sisterhood, focusing on the positive contribution of the society in restoring the "spirit of love" to the Anglican church. The furor eventually subsided when the mayor and several influential churchmen announced, to the hissing of the crowd, the results of their investigation: "We have visited this establishment and have fully ascertained the principles on which it is conducted. And we feel bound to state our conscious conviction that these ladies who superintend it are sincerely attached to the Church of England." While the controversy incited sympathy for and distrust of the sisterhood, it appeared that, provided it retained the support of the Bishop, it would be protected.

Faced with these malicious attacks, Sellon stood firm. In a pamphlet of 1850 entitled *A Few Words to Some of the Women of the Church of God* she defended her methods, urging religious women to pledge their sole obedience to God:

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55 Sellon's entry into the inquiry was quite dramatic. The Mother Superior was ill at the time and had to be led in on the arm of a clergyman, therefore diffusing her assertiveness and portraying her a weak victim.
Oh! most sweet mystery of mighty Love. Hushed be for ever the din of controversy, the clamour of tongues, the strife of words, the conflict of opinions. We may turn from these, my sisters; we have nought to do with these. We may fall prostrate, and adore in silence, and in uninterrupted communings with our Lord, the exceeding beauty of His Love.\(^5^8\)

The pamphlet also suggested the complete submission of the sisters to God’s will: as Superior, Sellon’s judgements were interpreted by the sisters as God’s will. It was this unchallenged, self-imposed authority that critics found particularly disturbing.

By 1852 Sellon’s authoritarian nature had given rise to another wave of controversy. This more serious opposition revolved around two issues: that the sisters were not free to leave the community at will, and that the sisterhood retained control of a sister’s property even if a sister did manage to decamp. The majority of the attacks focused on Sellon’s methods of extracting obedience from the sisters in her charge. In 1852 W. M. Colles launched a vehement pamphlet war against the Superior. Within her order

there can be no natural affection-no obedience to parents-no peace in the family; the destruction of natural affection is considered meritorious, and the destruction of peace and harmony in the home is the result. The father will be neglected for the spiritual father, whose power is supposed to be from God; the mother will be deserted for the spiritual mother, who usurps her place in her child’s affections, and requires entire obedience to her commands;\(^5^9\)

Colles’ hostility illustrated the acute fear held by English society that sisterhoods and the vow of obedience in particular, threatened the authority of parents as well as the structure of English family life. Significantly, Colles was more concerned with the


loss of power of the woman’s family than with the woman’s own rights. To this author, a sister was no more than a ‘child’ whose affections were transferred from a loving family to a wily Mother Superior whose hypnotic powers, in the guise of religion, were undeniably great. The sister, Colles assumed, was merely a pawn. Colles again denied sisters of any element of choice in his assertion that “The Sellon System destroys the social system which the people of England have long enjoyed...Fathers should not give their money to support monastic institutions. Mothers should not allow their daughters to be slaves of a self-appointed Mother Superior.”60 While Colles explicitly stated what parents should do to save the patriarchal family, he implicitly asserted the expected behaviour of women: obedience to their parents.

In the same year the Reverend James Spurrell, a local vicar, produced a statement which called for nothing less than the suppression of all monastic institutions. In his highly inflammatory charge, Spurrell disclosed the covert means by which Sellon forced anxious young women to obey her. He charged that the Superior advised a young lady who was eager to join the sisterhood but was held back by her parents’ disapproval to disobey the authority of her parents. Spurrell maintained that Sellon told the prospective sister that “It is your duty to wait until [your mother] sends you away; and then recollect the solemn warning: ‘He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me.’”61 To Spurrell, this was proof of Sellon’s clandestine attempt to circumvent parental authority. He thus sought to expose the “Romish” features of the order and warned any prospective members that “this ‘professedly Protestant Sisterhood,’ is nothing less than an

60 Colles, p 18.
organized [Roman Catholic] convent."\textsuperscript{62}

In her reply to these charges, Sellon denied that she controlled the minds of her sisters; rather, she asserted, their actions followed from their obedience to the Lord’s command.\textsuperscript{63} She maintained that all sisters came to the sisterhood of their own volition and were likewise free to leave. Of the young lady whom Spurrell believed was coerced by Sellon, the Superior replied, “I never advised Miss --- to deceive her parent, far from it. I always recommended her [to] state simply and decidedly her state of mind to her.”\textsuperscript{64} Sellon’s suggestion that the prospective sister should disclose her wishes to her parents rather than silently obey reveals her advocacy of a woman’s right to control her own life, a tenet which would be poorly received by Victorian parents. Sellon refused to admit that she forced undue obedience from the sisters, exclaiming that “Any system not wholly voluntary would be simply impossible.” While Sellon denied each of Colles’ charges, she transferred agency for these supposed wrong-doings from herself to the sisters. While this had the effect of creating the atmosphere of democracy in the order, it also produced further hostility from her critics, who maintained that such women were not capable of governing their own lives.

In addition to targeting the power of the Superior, Spurrell was also highly critical of the vow of obedience which he referred to as the “great rule” of the Society. Sellon responded to the allegation that she forced the sisters to take a vow of obedience by denying the very existence of such a vow:

\begin{quote}

It has given the impression that I meant to imply that Miss --- had taken a vow of obedience from which I had no power to release her. I did not mean that. She never took a vow. A promise of obedience is not a vow. A promise is not.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Spurrell, p13.
\item[64] Ibid., p 17.
\end{footnotes}
exceedingly sacred and binding as far as it goes; but a promise of obedience to myself is not a vow to God.65

Again, Sellon’s denial of the existence of vows - which, according to a variety of sources, were an integral part of the sisterhood - fuelled rather than quelled the flames of controversy.66 Sellon stressed the voluntary nature of sisters’ obedience:

I asked them no questions, and they asked me no questions. I simply bid them welcome in the name of CHRIST, and required from them, before they were admitted members of the society, a promise that they would obey me. I certainly had a right to say that I did not wish any one to live with me unless they would do as I told them, otherwise I could not have received them at all.67

Such an admission that sisters promised to obey the Superior alarmed her critics even more than a promise to obey God could have done. Although her manner was often brash and alienated many supporters, by emphasising women’s right to make their own choices, Sellon helped women to enjoy experiences which they would have been denied in the domestic realm. A group of women from her order were sent to the Crimea as nurses, where they received praise from Florence Nightingale for their dedicated service, while other sisters found fulfilling positions as social workers, educators, and relief workers throughout England.68

Perhaps the strongest testimony to the glory of life in Sellon’s order came from Sister Sarah Anne, who revealed the pleasure she had derived from membership in the Devonport society in 1849: “Hard work, love, and obedience were all in all. The Household was the happiest, busiest, merriest, least constrained,

65 Ibid., p 9.
66 Sources which attest to the existence of vows include Cusack, Liddon, and Margaret Goodman, Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy.(London: Smith, Elder, 1862).
68 Goodman provides a detailed description of this work as does Anne Summers in Pride and Prejudice; Ladies and Nurses in the Crimean War History Workshop 16 (1983) pp 33-56.
and most united of any that I was ever in."\textsuperscript{69} To Sarah Anne, the obedience expected of sisters was simply another aspect of religious life and she clearly did not feel restrained by its principles. While Sellon's achievements were substantial, it is evident that Sarah Anne also felt a great deal of accomplishment from her own work within the sisterhood. Instead of focusing on the achievements of the community and the experiences of women who enjoyed sisterhoods, critics concentrated solely on the aspects of sisterhoods that they deemed were scandalous, and formed their opinions from disgruntled sisters who had left the order.

Despite Sellon's efforts to defend herself against numerous allegations, the Bishop of Exeter was forced to withdraw as Visitor, unable to diffuse the hostility that surrounded the sisterhood. In the face of continuing charges Pusey officially severed ties with the community in 1869, but remained a close friend of Sellon's until her death.\textsuperscript{70} Left without official episcopal sanction, the Devonport Society nevertheless continued to flourish. Nor was Sellon herself deterred. In 1856 she assumed control of Park Village and a year later her society housed three distinct orders. The trials which Sellon encountered were echoed to a lesser degree in several of the other sisterhoods, but were exacerbated at Devonport by the Superior's strong, aggressive personality - exactly the same qualities however, that enabled her community to survive.

The scandals which surrounded Sellon's society, and the absence of these in Monsell's order, provide a glimpse into the relationship between gender identity and power which fuelled much of the opposition toward sisterhoods during their formative years. Harriet Monsell became involved in the conventual revival in England under circumstances somewhat different than those of Priscilla Sellon. Upon the death of her husband in 1850, Monsell felt called to the religious life: "if

\textsuperscript{69} Quoted in Williams, \textit{Sellon} p 73.
\textsuperscript{70} Chadwick p 510. Sellon died in 1876.
God has anything for me to do elsewhere, I am ready to go where He calls...And then I felt God’s call to work for Him.” Monsell’s call led her to a House of Mercy at Clewer where a Spanish widow, concerned for the plight of local ‘fallen women’ in the area, had opened her home as a shelter. As the number of penitents grew, a house of refuge was established and, upon the death of the widow, a replacement supervisor was required. When Harriet arrived, the House of Mercy sheltered thirty women under the guidance of the Rev. T.T. Carter and several women volunteers. Monsell’s introduction to the teachings of the Tractarians had taken place while she and her husband had spent some time with Pusey in Oxford during the early 1840s. She had been involved with social work in Limerick, but certainly had no training to serve as the head of a religious order. Imbued with the principles of the Oxford Movement and a strong religious faith, however, at age forty Monsell felt prepared to devote herself completely to Carter’s House of Mercy.

Public support of the sisterhood at Clewer was enhanced by the nature and structure of its government. Monsell’s character, unlike Sellon’s, inspired trust from the district and enabled Clewer to progress relatively unhampered. With her unwavering commitment and her concern for the welfare of the sisters in her care, the Superior was instrumental in gaining respect for sisterhoods. She and Carter advocated both the married life and celibacy, which drew the sisterhood support from critics. Monsell made the effort to contact parents who showed concern over their daughter’s consideration of monastic life, stressing that God, not she, would help their daughter make the right choice. Aware of the significance of a woman’s dedication to a religious order to her family, Monsell was careful to make the decision a family matter: “Dear friends, I do not wish ---- to join us until I feel you are partakers in her offering of herself, till your hearts go along with it and you love

71 Quoted in Carter, Harriet Monsell. A Memoir pp 24-26. Like Sellon, Harriet belonged to a large family, being one of nine children, and was influenced by devoutly religious parents.
to see her thus give herself to God."72 In correspondence with another family, Monsell emphasised the importance of the question of obedience, which concerned the woman’s family as well: “The great question for you all to consider is, first, is it God’s call to her? and next, can you all obey the call? for you have to obey it as much as she.”73 The authority structure at Clever posed less of a threat to society, as it was modelled on the Victorian family, with Carter as the strong father and Monsell as the attentive mother.74 In addition, Bishop Wilberforce’s position as district visitor of the community provided further public support. As a comparison of the public reaction to the sisterhoods controlled by Sellon and Monsell reveals, the public’s perception of the Superior was crucial to the reception of the institution by its community: Sellon’s sole authority was feared and challenged while Monsell’s caring leadership under the guidance of Carter was welcomed.

Although Monsell’s semblance of subordination to Carter and Wilberforce provided Clever with public respectability, within the sisterhood Monsell’s actual authority was explicitly recognised. Carter attested to the Superior’s leadership: “It seemed providentially ordered that she should be the chief instrument in the formation of the Community, rather than take up its management when formed.”75 Government at Clever was not, however, as ordered as it appeared. In the early stages of her monastic career Monsell had been influenced by Pusey. Unfortunately, Wilberforce refused to be associated with the sisterhood if Pusey was in any way involved. In addition, Wilberforce was threatened by Carter’s advocacy of vows, of which he would have no part. Although initially vows were not taken by the sisters

73 Ibid. pp 93-4.
75 Carter, Harriet Monsell p 42.
due to the bishop's veto, Carter believed that the sisters should decide for themselves: "It has always been the feeling of the Sisters that their purpose and conviction is a life-long dedication of themselves...They assume it as a preliminary; that if thought worthy to be a Sister at all, it must be for life. They have taught me, not I them." From Carter's self-deprecating, self-described role as pupil of the sisters, it is rather difficult to establish just what he believed his actual position to be. As a married man who seemed to have the sisterhood under his control, he drew little of the public scorn attached to the much-maligned Pusey. In asserting her conception of her role, Monsell displayed little of Carter's modesty. She acknowledged her powerful position as well as the importance of the call:

> It is a call to saintliness. You know you and I are offered as whole burnt offerings, so we must be satisfied to be wholly consumed. You will find God opening up inner chambers of His love, but at the threshold of each door a fresh surrender of self. All high offices make one feel so. God's call to you is to be a a pillar round which others twine, rather than a thing meant to lean itself.  

While Wilberforce and Carter quarreled over the government and Rule of the sisterhood, Monsell, placing her trust in God, visualised the scope of her authority, and the best way to accomplish it, quite clearly.

As a testimony to the difficulty of establishing a sisterhood, even with the support of the clergy and a lack of local opposition, many women left the community while in their novitiate and by 1858, Clewer had only nine members. Gradually however, Clewer's membership grew and by the early 1870s the society

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77 Carter, Harriet Monsell, p 86.
78 See Maria Trench, English Sisterhoods The Nineteenth Century 40 (1884) The author also noted that by 1884 Clewer's membership had risen to between 200 and 250 members, p 343. Allchin maintains that the sisters who did leave did so to join other Anglican orders, or to join Catholic orders, or to return to home life, p 81.
had expanded widely throughout the United Kingdom and established houses in America and the colonies.79 The regulations at Clewer were designed for maximum social acceptance: postulant’s families were consulted prior to their daughter’s admittance, sisters were able to visit their homes annually and could leave the sisterhood permanently without pressure, and any property belonging to a sister could be left to her relatives in her will. Free of the burdens which hampered the Devonport Society, Clewer earned a high reputation by attracting “ladies” and by its success in penitentiary work. Clewer maintained such dignitaries as Mrs. Gladstone and the wife of Archbishop Tait among its Associate members. By responding effectively to a prevalent social problem and by operating within the structure of the Church hierarchy, Clewer was instrumental in advancing the popular status of sisterhoods as well as enabling women to hold positions of responsibility.

The popular perception of Harriet Monsell was in many ways the antithesis of that of Priscilla Sellon. While Sellon was the home-wrecker, the despot, the seducer of clergymen, the corruptor of young women’s minds, and the pied piper leading innocents to Rome, Monsell epitomised the beloved mother figure. Her sisters lavished praise on her. According to one devoted sister, “The most beautiful thing in her dealing with us was her motherliness...I think she really cared for each one of us, not only as a working machine more or less useful, but as if we had been her own children.”80 Another sister testified to the strength she derived from Monsell’s maternal guidance:

Wherever I might be, I could not but feel that Mother was with me in spirit, knowing all that I was doing or feeling, encouraging, strengthening, thinking of me always, so that I learned to trust her, and rest in her love...[she] made me feel that she knew my powers better than I did myself, and that I could do whatever was required of me. Indeed she had a very happy persuasion and confidence that there

79 Anson, p 312; See also S. Mumm ch. 1 p 7.
80 Carter, Harriet Monsell p. 46.
was nothing in the way of work that her Sisters could not do well and thoroughly.\textsuperscript{81}

A widow in her forties, Monsell was indeed more of a maternal figure than the youthful, single Sellon. Monsell herself stressed the importance of being a mother figure to sisters who ran associate houses within the sisterhood: “Meditate well on the duty of being motherly to the Novices and Sisters under your care and training. You cannot too earnestly realize this as your peculiar office. Others are to do the work, your care and training of them is of first importance.”\textsuperscript{82} Beneath this image of maternalism which characterised Monsell lay a woman as ambitious, energetic and independently-minded as Sellon. Her biographer portrayed her in terms which many Victorians would have had difficulties equating with their conception of the ideal mother. He spoke of “her ready frankness, her quick discernment, the practical business-like way in which she dealt with cases,” depicting her in terms more like a male lawyer than a female religious.\textsuperscript{83} In another passage, he stressed Monsell’s intellectual ability: “She had also a courage and a venturesomeness, with great mental elasticity, which enabled her at once to be ready to make experiments, and to adapt or change what had been begun.”\textsuperscript{84} An “intimate friend” emphasised Monsell’s corporate acumen, which existed alongside her cheerful disposition:

Hers was the brightest and gayest of natures...with a quick, clear knowledge of men and manners, the sharpest common sense, and great confidence in her power of managing, which was due neither to imperiousness nor intrigue, but to that ingenuousness which has been described as the temper which trusts others and expects to be trusted.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p 47.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p 85.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p 129.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p 42.
\textsuperscript{85} Maria Trench, p 343.
Another sister testified as to the magnitude of Monsell’s presence: “I should describe Mother Harriet’s personality as the most living power I have ever come across.” In terms of personality, Priscilla Sellon and Harriet Monsell shared many similarities; yet they were judged on their differences in age, marital status, and, most significantly to the Victorians, in the degree to which they emphasised “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics. Because Monsell was viewed more as “Mother” and Sellon was perceived more as a “Superior” over other women, Sellon became the target of hostile attacks which threatened not only her community, but sisterhoods in general, while Monsell and her order remained comparatively untouched by public scandal.

To the members of the earliest sisterhoods, the vow of obedience was interpreted as a badge of commitment, not unlike a traditional wedding vow. Even in communities where the vow was covert, sisters believed that they gave themselves for life. Ironically, unlike a traditional wedding vow, the vow of obedience was perceived by observers of sisterhoods as depriving women of their independence and forcing them to obey an unnatural authority figure. The debate over obedience and a woman’s right to decide her own lifestyle reveals one of the numerous ways in which sisterhoods challenged accepted women’s roles in society. The vow of obedience allowed sisters freedom from male control, and while this may not have been their primary motivation in joining a sisterhood, it was the element of obedience which sisterhoods’ opponents seized upon. By enabling Mother Superiors to obtain powerful ‘public’ positions, and facilitating the entry of sisters into the public world, the vow of obedience disturbed the ideology of separate spheres and threatened to loosen the rigid demarcation between prescribed masculine and feminine behaviour.

86 Carter, Harriet Monsell, p 43.
CHASTITY: ANGLICAN SISTERHOODS AND SEXUALITY

"The question of chastity, both of mind and body, is one of the greatest interest and complexity."

Virginia Woolf

In 1843, Jane Ellacombe, one of the initial members of the Park Village Sisterhood, wrote to her father advising him that she was calling off her engagement in order to devote herself to God. In her correspondence Jane explained what had motivated her decision to embark upon a single life.

I had I believe a sort of abstract admiration of celibacy some time before I was engaged and before it affected me personally...perhaps you might wish to know my reasons for preferring a single life... I believe, I have preferred it as being, when religiously undertaken, a higher and holier state in itself - and again one in which one can devote oneself more entirely to Christ’s service.

Jane’s letter draws attention to a number of significant issues concerning her thoughts on religion and sexuality. Her decision to embrace the celibate life seems to have been primarily directed by religious motives. She maintained that the single life combined with religion was a “higher and holier” state than marriage, yet whether or not she also believed this state to be more fulfilling in other ways is uncertain. No information is given as to whether Jane believed that marriage would confine her, nor is it clear whether Jane was uninterested in sexual relations.

1 Virginia Woolf Three Guineas
3 In another letter Jane admitted to having been strongly influenced by the writings of Newman, yet she expressed to her father, that “it was not [Newman’s sermon] which first turned me, but texts of scripture.” Quoted in Williams and Campbell, p 11.
However, in an era when women rarely discussed their sexual nature, Jane’s reticence to discuss the sexual aspects of her celibacy is not surprising.

Almost a century and a half after Jane made her pledge to God, Barbara Anne, a current member of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, established at Oxford in 1848, experienced a similar desire for celibacy. When Barbara Ann first felt called to God she was involved in an intense love affair and was challenged by her personal struggle between physical and Divine love:

I experienced God in the middle of love; at the same time I experienced a threat to my autonomy and a sense of being magnetically drawn towards the total giving of myself to God. It was definitive because although I experienced God in love, celibacy represented freedom, space to breathe, wholeness of self, autonomy of being.4

To Barbara Anne celibacy implied an independence that she felt could not be found in marriage. She did not experience an aversion toward men or toward sex. She simply felt that a relationship with God would allow her a greater sense of freedom than could be found in a heterosexual partnership.

The comparison of Jane with her twentieth-century counterpart illustrates that in both cases the original impetus behind these women’s decisions to enter conventual life came from their desire to be celibate. As the first sisterhood in England was not formed for another two years, Jane’s celibacy was established independently of her decision to enter a sisterhood. Similarly, Barbara Anne had not considered conventual life until after her definitive decision to embrace God. To both Jane and Barbara Anne celibacy represented a path to spiritual self-fulfillment. Neither woman was forced into a life of celibacy but rather chose to reject their respective suitors and the promise of marriage. Their decisions to

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become celibate were intensely personal and nowhere in the writings of either woman exists an implicit critique of the sexual standards of their time. However, Jane’s assertion that the celibate life when combined with religion was “higher and holier” challenged Victorian beliefs by suggesting that monastic celibacy was ‘above’ marriage and family life. While in the mid-twentieth century Barbara Anne’s decision certainly was seen as unusual, Jane’s choice a century earlier was viewed by the majority of English society not only as unfathomable on a personal level, but also as one that undermined the nature of sexual relations in the Victorian world.

In her recent analysis of sisterhood life Susan Mumm remarks that “Of the three vows taken in Anglican sisterhoods, that of chastity attracted the least attention. It was assumed that any respectable unmarried woman would inevitably remain chaste.” While the latter part of this statement is certainly true, Anglican sisters were by no means perceived as “normal” respectable unmarried women. Women in religious communities differed substantially from their unmarried counterparts in that their decision to remain chaste was, like Jane’s, freely-chosen. They did not view their choice in terms of giving up sexual relations, but rather as embracing celibacy in order to fulfill their union with Christ. While women whose circumstances had forced them into lives of celibacy were viewed with a mixture of pity and respect for their noble sacrifice, Anglican sisters’ freely-chosen celibacy provoked suspicion and contempt, attracting a great deal of attention from numerous commentators.

Opposition toward female monastic celibacy sprang from three distinct yet related sources. In each case the principles symbolised by the vow of celibacy represented a threat to a certain aspect of Victorian culture. First, monastic celibacy
was equated with Catholicism, and specifically with monastic nunneries’ reputation for sexual impropriety. In addition, by advocating celibacy, sisterhoods seemed to reject the teachings of the Church of England. Secondly, monastic celibacy was perceived as undermining Victorian family values which dictated that women’s primary social duty was to marry and their chief biological duty was to bear children. Finally, sisters’ celibacy rejected the need for men in a sexual sense, claiming that betrothal to God and virginity was somehow “higher and holier” than marriage. While clerics shrouded their criticism of celibacy in a defence of religious imperatives, and secular critics pointed to sisterhoods’ attack on the family, the nucleus of the debate focused, often quite explicitly, on the attempts of men to regulate women’s sexual behaviour. Therefore, in each of these three forms of opposition, the issue of sexual control always assumed a prominent position. With its seeming disregard for marriage, motherhood, men, and the Protestant faith, it is not difficult to understand why female monastic celibacy was perceived as threatening to the English way of life, not only by those who wished to control women’s sexuality, but also by those who alleged that it deprived women of their “special mission.”

Antagonism toward monastic celibacy was deeply rooted in English religious history. When Martin Luther unlocked the gates to nunneries across Europe in the 1520s, an act followed by Henry VIII a decade later in England, he linked monastic celibacy with the evils of the Catholic Church and decreed that women’s rightful place was not cloistered in convents, but in the home beside their husbands.6

Although Luther maintained that religious vows held no basis from Scripture, and in fact were contrary to God's word, central to his opposition to the vow of chastity was his belief that this vow was illegitimate simply because it was impossible to uphold.

God has not allowed many virgins to live long, but hurried them out of this world, as with Cecelia, Hagne, Lucia, Agatha and so on. He knows how precious their treasure (virginity) is and how difficult it is to maintain very long.7

Luther feared that within convents women's sexual appetites were unbridled rather than repressed, and thus his closing of religious orders represented a significant attempt to regulate female sexuality. By denying women a respectable and viable alternative to marriage, Luther revoked women's rights to make choices regarding their sexual behaviour and placed control over this behaviour squarely in the hands of their husbands. As Sally Alexander illustrates, "Men's desire to confine women to their proper place must be understood - at least in part - as a desire to (legally) control and (morally) order sexuality."8 Three centuries later in Victorian middle-class bedrooms, female sexuality continued to be closely regulated.

Luther's claim that convents promoted sexual vice remained as viable in nineteenth-century England as it was during the Reformation. Contemporary tales of sexual impropriety in medieval nunnerys implied that monastic celibacy was nothing more than a veiled disguise which enabled nuns to partake in a variety of illicit affairs.

"Convents resemble brothels rather than hallowed cloisters, their doors are open, even by night itself, to clergy and laity, indiscriminately, whomsoever it may please the sisters to admit"; "nowadays the cloister of nuns have become as it were brothels of harlots"; "the

7 D. Martin Luthers Werke 10, 1, p 708, quoted in Merry Wiesner "Luther and Women" p 301.
8 Sally Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of Feminist History" History Workshop 17 (Spring 1984) p 144.
nuns sometimes prostitute themselves abominably."9

Capitalizing on the perceived impure reputation of medieval nuns, Charles Kingsley condemned celibacy as one of the many evil trappings of the Catholic Church. His denunciation of the celibate life perhaps best illustrates the extent to which this rejection of 'normal' sexual relations alarmed Victorian observers. In his assertion that celibacy was "anti-human, and therefore anti-Christian, as well as being anti-democratic," Kingsley maintained that Anglican sisters promoted not only sexual anarchy, but political and religious anarchy as well.10

Other critics disputed the notion of female celibacy by asserting that women who refused to marry and produce children were repudiating their God-given reproductive gifts. One of the chief proponents of this argument was John Malcolm Ludlow, who denounced monastic celibacy as unnatural and as undermining woman’s maternal role. “Left to the direction of an unmarried woman,” Ludlow exclaimed, “it seems absolutely impossible that [sisters] should not gradually merge into ascetic celibacy, - Romish celibacy, - that celibacy which is an insult to marriage, to motherhood.”11 While he admitted that a woman should be allowed to work for God, he suggested that the vow of celibacy would only increase a nun’s chances of falling from grace, "place[d] under a vow of celibacy, every fellow-man becomes to her a tempter whom she must flee from.”12 Elizabeth Jane Whateley, author of *Maude; or an Anglican Sister of Mercy*, suggested that sisterhoods were a Papist

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threat because they encouraged women to abandon their roles as wives and mothers. "For the Christian woman, her home claims must come first; and the work which would lead her to forsake these, however noble in itself, is not, she may be assured, God's work for her."\textsuperscript{13} She further maintained that vows of chastity undermined women's true duty to Christ: "the Christian woman [is] truly consecrated to her Master's service, not by vows or outward badges, but by daily offering up herself as a living sacrifice to the Master"\textsuperscript{14} Echoing the reformers of the sixteenth century, Ludlow and Whateley professed that women's social position as well as her spiritual superiority could be best protected by husbands in the sanctity of marriage.

The extent to which issues of sexual control figured in criticism of the vow of chastity, but were cloaked under the guise of religious opposition, is perhaps best illustrated by the Bishop of Lincoln. In a statement to the Church Congress, he stressed that celibacy was unnatural and that it stood in direct opposition to God's word:

\begin{quote}
A vow of perpetual celibacy has no warrant from God; rather it is repugnant to His will as manifested in nature and revealed in Scripture....and to impose on any one a vow of celibacy, or to take a vow of celibacy in early life, is repugnant to His will and Word.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

However, the underlying motivation for the Bishop's objection was revealed in his declaration that "No one under sixty years of age should be allowed to take such a vow."\textsuperscript{16} He thus implied that it was not the vow itself that he opposed, but rather


\textsuperscript{14} Whateley, p 353.

\textsuperscript{15} T.T. Carter, "Are 'Vows of Celibacy in Early Life' inconsistent with the Word of God?" (London: Rivingtons, 1878), pp. 4.

\textsuperscript{16} Carter, "Vows of Celibacy in Early Life" p 4.
the idea that a woman with any remote chance of bearing children should be denied the possibility of doing so.

In addition to celibacy being perceived as a threat to woman’s social position, it was also considered as detrimental to her physical and mental well-being. In his trilogy of books on women’s sexual nature published in the 1830s and 1840s, Alexander Walker maintained that celibacy was as harmful to women as sexual activity in the extreme. A Scottish physiologist, Walker envisioned women as being antithetical to the sexually passive “angel in the house”, she was “entirely defined by and identified with her sexualized body.” Walker maintained that chastity was as unnatural and unhealthy as promiscuity and that a lack of use could lead to the decay of the sexual organs. Such widely read texts as the Walker trilogy exemplified Victorian attempts to understand women’s sexuality by attempting to subject it to male control. It was precisely this male power over female sexuality that Anglican sisters, by regulating their own sexual lives, seemed to be challenging.

In contrast to Walker’s view that women were highly sexual creatures, the dominant Victorian belief regarding female sexuality held that the majority of women were sexually passionless. The respected physician William Acton testified to this belief, “I should say that the majority of women (happily for them)

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19 Robyn Cooper, p 220.
are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind."21 Toward the end of the eighteenth century the Evangelicals advanced the theory that women's moral superiority was based on their chastity.22 Throughout the nineteenth century, middle-class Victorians adopted this theory to create a rigid code for the regulation of female sexuality. Men were willing to allow women moral preeminence in exchange for control over their sexual behaviour.23 Peter Cominos suggests that passionlessness was accepted because it was an ideology controlled by men: “in the Victorian battle of the sexes, women were disarmed of the weapon of their sexuality. Gentlemen imposed unilateral disarmament upon them which they simultaneously denied doing through the theory of feminine sexual anaesthesia.”24 By the mid-1800s however, passionlessness became a convenient argument through which women could find solidarity.25 Nancy Cott explains how this theory could be used to women's advantage: “women might hail passionlessness as a way to assert control in the sexual arena-even if that ‘control’ consisted in denial.”26 It was precisely this “control” that was perceived as threatening in Anglican sisters. These women utilised the mask of passionlessness to support their chastity and promote their moral superiority, yet they did so in an unacceptable manner.

By pursuing female homosociality to the exclusion of men and family life, Anglican sisters went beyond acceptable limits of what was intended by the concept

23 Peter T. Cominos, p 162.
24 Cominos, p 163
25 Cott, p 173.
26 Ibid.,pp 172-3.
of passionlessness. Because Anglican sisters regulated their own sexuality, the vow of chastity was inverted by sisterhoods' critics to construct these women as sexual predators. In a study of nuns in Reformation Augsburg, Lyndal Roper observes how the virginity of nuns was perceived as intensely sexual: "Virginal women, forever poised at the moment of transition from daughterhood to wifehood, yet brides of Christ, their sexual status made them compelling. A convent full of such women...was therefore a magnet for male sexual imagination." With their renunciation of sexual relations these women directly challenged prevailing conceptions of masculinity and patriarchal authority and were perceived, rather than being passionless, as highly sexual creatures. By retaining their virginity, Anglican sisters in Victorian England, like their Augsburg predecessors, possessed a highly-charged 'sexual weapon' which men found both disarming and fascinating.

Lavinia Byrne, a current member of The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the author of numerous works on female religiosity, eloquently encapsulates the threat which women in religious orders held over men.

There is...a sexual agenda around because a nun is someone who's saying, "I can construct my life without men...I'm not putting sexual gratification at the top of my list. Therefore, that bit of you is not going to be greeted by me because I'm just not interested in it - or I'm certainly not interested in it today." And I assume that is threatening.

In the nineteenth century the celibacy of Anglican sisters created precisely this same threat.

30 Quoted in Loudon, p 158.
kind of threat, a threat testified to by the numerous critics who challenged these women on the rights to control their bodies.

Despite the proliferation of criticism of monastic celibacy, Victorian women could find support for this way of life from a variety of sources. Considered one of Britain’s first feminists, Mary Astell was a firm supporter of celibacy as a means for women to escape oppressive male power, which she described as “potentially wanton and destructive”. The radicalism of her feminist ideas emerged both in her claim that women should feel free to reject marriage if they so desired and in her suggestion that this communal lifestyle might provide women with a more satisfying existence than the wedded state. Ruth Perry observes that Astell’s advocacy of celibacy should be seen less as a turning away from sex than as a movement toward a more noble purpose: “Only by eschewing sexuality could women be free of the biological imperatives which otherwise dominated their lives and deflected them from what Mary Astell would have called their ‘higher purposes.’” It was indeed this conception of chastity as being of a “higher purpose” that outraged Victorian critics who maintained the family as the ideal.

One of the strongest advocates of female celibacy during the nineteenth century was Frances Power Cobbe. Having been exposed to a variety of female relationships throughout her life, and having what Barbara Caine refers to as a “female marriage”, Cobbe revolted against the idea that women could only find self-fulfillment in heterosexual relationships. In Celibacy v. Marriage Cobbe maintained that not only could women achieve independence and happiness by

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32 Perry, p 153. The author notes that Astell’s choice of chastity, rather than being repressive “has the ring of emancipation.” p 141.

remaining single, but that they were better suited to this state than men. She assured her readers that the obstacles faced by women within marriage must all tend towards rendering (for a long time, at least) celibacy more and more common and desirable...[at least until] the theory of the "Divine Right of Husbands" has followed into limbo that of the "Divine Right of Kings," and that a precedency in selfishness is no longer assumed to be the sacred privilege of masculine strength and wisdom.\textsuperscript{34}

Although Cobbe believed that female friendships could offer as much fulfillment to women as marriage, her support of celibacy seemed to derive as much from her criticism of marriage in its present form as from a belief that the single life was inherently advantageous to women.

If the proponents of celibacy in Anglican sisterhoods thought they had found a kindred spirit in Frances Power Cobbe, they could not have been more mistaken. Cobbe asserted in \textit{Female Charity - Lay and Monastic} that while philanthropic societies for women offered their members an important public function, charity within monastic communities was grounded in the evils of asceticism and self-mortification. Sisterhoods she believed, hampered women’s autonomy through their denial of heterosocial life and ordinary relations. Self-mortification was inherently destructive, "tempting thousands of the noblest souls in all lands and ages to strive to climb up to virtue by a path which never has led thither, and from whose barren and herbless cliffs they either rise into clouds of spiritual pride, or fall down and are lost in gulfs of sensualism below."\textsuperscript{35} In addition, Cobbe stressed the threat of sisterhoods to English family life: "Communities and families are naturally antithetical to each other. There is for ever a tendency in each to break up the other. Wherever the natural and excellent association of two friends or sisters

\textsuperscript{34} Frances Power Cobbe, \textit{Celibacy v. Marriage} Fraser's Magazine 65 (1862), pp 232, 234-5.
\textsuperscript{35} Frances Power Cobbe, \textit{Female Charity - Lay and Monastic} Fraser's Magazine 66 (1862), p. 779.
enlarges itself into a community, the evil begins..." Cobbe's objections to celibacy in religious orders differed from those of many of her contemporaries as they were rooted in a feminist perspective. While many opponents of sisterhoods attacked celibacy as unnatural, Cobbe maintained that celibacy, to be prized in other single women, was forced upon women in religious orders, thus threatening their autonomy. Like many other commentators however, Cobbe failed to realize that celibacy was, for many sisters, a freely-chosen state and one which preceded their decision to join a sisterhood.

The strongest supporter of religious celibacy was the Rev. Thomas Thellusson Carter who was associated with the sisterhood at Clewer, established in 1849. Carter maintained that, of the three vows, celibacy held the most significance as it was freely chosen, not imposed by the will of God. Carter equated a woman's choice to marry with her decision to remain celibate, assuming that if one was freely undertaken, so could the other: "There is no question as to any 'command' of God to take a vow of celibacy, any more than there is a 'command' to any particular person to marry. The question is confined to celibacy, chosen and preferred to marriage, as of voluntary self-devotion." It was with this logic-based argument that Carter pointed to the cultural threat implied by celibacy: if a woman could choose not to marry, perhaps the decision most women made to wed was based not as much upon free choice as upon social conventions.

Carter further legitimised monastic celibacy by revealing that it was indeed a part of Christian life: "Our Lord's own virgin life, and that of His mother, must also necessarily have acted as an example, stimulating and hallowing desires to attain such a state." While Carter and his critics debated on the biblical basis of celibacy,

36 Ibid., p. 784.
37 Carter "Vows of Celibacy in Early Life" pp. 4-5.
38 Ibid., p 5.
the debate was centred, on a more fundamental level, on the right of men to control women’s sexual behaviour. In its assertion that women could enter a state of permanent celibacy as easily as they could enter the state of matrimony, which was also implied to be permanent, Carter’s argument legitimated the religious life and offered women freedom from sexual dominance by men. While Carter’s argument for freely-chosen celibacy may have appealed to feminist critics such as Cobbe, it angered those who perceived celibacy to be a woman’s conscious revolt against marriage and men.

The question of choice was crucial to the debates surrounding female celibacy. Many sisters maintained that they wished to become celibate and to enter sisterhoods because they felt called by God. Certainly Marian Hughes felt such a call, rejoicing that she was “espoused to Him and made His handmaid” through her vow of chastity. Harriet Monsell, Mother Superior at Clewer, testified to the direction she received from God upon her husband’s death: “and then I felt God’s call to work for Him...if God has anything for me to do elsewhere, I am ready to go where He calls.”

For some women however, the clarity of their call was clouded by feelings of physical desire. Harriet revealed these feelings of divided loyalties apparent in a potential sister who was torn between marriage and the religious life:

No doubt to ---- the deepest struggle lies in her affections. She longs with one part to give herself wholly to Christ and His work...She has other struggles, such as the submission of herself to others, the longing to cling closer round one, etc., but these are easily overcome with a little self-discipline.

For other sisters, the wish to embrace celibacy was unencumbered by such indecision. Dr. John Crosse, father of Lavinia Crosse, the foundress of The Community of All Hallows, believed that his daughter was uninterested in

40 Ibid., p 93
marriage: "Her charm brought several admirers to her door but she refused them all 'determined to remain celibate.'”41 For sisters such as Jane Ellacombe, Marian, and Lavinia, their decision to embrace celibacy provided them with the freedoms which they believed would not be possible within marriage. By maintaining that her decision to become celibate and join a sisterhood was divinely ordained, a woman could free herself from the argument that she was neglecting her 'natural' role as wife and mother, by asserting that she was following a calling from God.

The argument that women did not choose to become sisters, and hence to embrace celibacy, but were divinely ordained to do so, was made by Alexander Forbes in his defense of female celibacy. Forbes maintained that celibacy, rather than being freely-chosen, was directed by God and if felt, was a woman’s duty to follow.42 By downplaying women’s agency in their decision to embark upon the celibate life, Forbes minimized the problem of celibacy as a threat to marriage and focused rather on the strength of women’s God-given religious conviction. Whether women consciously chose the celibate life or whether they were indeed called by God was of little concern to critics of sisterhoods. To these observers, sisters’ celibacy implied either that these women had been scorned by their lover, or were the victims of religious fanaticism. Far from being an accepted part of a nun’s vocation, monastic chastity evoked widespread reaction from English society. As Suzanne Campbell-Jones argues, the chastity of nuns, rather than attracting minimal attention, is what really separated these women from rest of society and produced so much scandal: “Whatever else is extraordinary in their lives, it is their renunciation of sex which

captures the imagination of 'everyman.'

In the popular media, rather than emphasis being placed on their work or communal lifestyle, it was the sexuality of the sisters that attracted the most attention. *Punch* was merciless in its ridicule of all aspects of sisterhood life suggesting that vows of celibacy were seldom upheld, that stays were commonly employed for the mortification of the flesh, and that the sisters' cells were as comfortable as any boudoir.44 The same article attested to the availability and vanity of the sisters:

> the costume of the sisterhood will consist of a judicious admixture of the conventual style with the fashion of the day. The Nun will not be obliged to sacrifice her hair, but only to wear it plain, a la Madonna....Absolute seclusion will by no means be enforced; indeed it will be incumbent on the Nuns to appear in society, in order to display the beauty of sanctity...45

By suggesting that sisters need not "sacrifice" their appearance and that they should "appear in society" like other women, *Punch* reconstructed them as sexual objects, and implied that their desire to transform themselves into nuns was simply another method to attract male admirers. *Punch*’s parody of the "beauty of sanctity" clearly implied that sisterhood life was little more than what it conceived as an extension of middle-class women’s often frivolous and self-absorbed existence.

This theme of the misguided devotion of sisters was similarly explored in Harriet Martineau’s serialised account of convent life, entitled *Sister Anna’s Probation*. In this story, the heroine leaves her family and the affections of her suitor, Captain Fletcher, to join a religious order. As the story opens, Anna’s thoughts on her impending vocation as a bride of Christ are contrasted with her

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44 "Convent of the Belgravians" *Punch* 19, (19 October, 1850), p 163.
sister Eleanor's concerning her forthcoming marriage. Eleanor praises her sister's devotion, yet Anna reveals that her vocation was preordained: "Some are made to be wives, and some to [be] nuns." While Eleanor eagerly anticipates her union, Anna's mood is decidedly one of resignation. Anna's subsequent conversation with Captain Fletcher, in which he declares that should she ever need to be rescued from the convent he will be at her service, foreshadows the couple’s eventual elopement when Anna awakens to the "horrors" of convent life. As in Punch's lampoon of the seriousness of purpose of women religious, Martineau’s portrayal of Anna revealed the novice to be misdirected as her physical devotion to Fletcher ultimately supplanted her religious one to God.

Pictorial representations of nuns during the mid-century also focused on the sexually repressed state of their subjects. Many of the paintings depicted nuns in the early stage of their religious lives - the novitiate - before they had taken their final vows, and therefore, before it was too late for them to be 'saved' from the 'perils' of convent life. The beautiful young women in the paintings were often presented in sharp contrast to their dark foreboding convent cells, suggesting that their sexuality would soon be smothered by their religious garb. As well, the anxious expressions of many of the subjects implied that they were having second thoughts regarding their vocation. The comments of an art critic about an 1852 painting entitled The Novice were typical in their implication that sisterhoods offered nothing but a life of despair:

A fair maiden, in the blossom of youth and beauty, sits pensively in a lonely cell on a wretched pallet...[she] has laid down her mass book, and casts a wistful glance at what she has given up. Seemingly she muses on the hopes and possible affections of wife and mother, all of which has been exchanged, ere she knew their value, for a cheerless, unnatural celibacy from which death is the only...
Significantly, this critic juxtaposed the positive opportunities associated with woman’s “natural role” with the impending doom of an “unnatural celibacy.” The maiden’s “wistful glance” seems to imply that this woman, like Martineau’s Anna, was uncertain of her devotion, waiting to be “rescued” by her own Captain Fletcher.

While many of the women in these paintings appeared as victims of religious tyranny, and thus in need of rescue, it was their perceived sexual repression which specifically interested many Victorian observers. In her analysis of this form of artwork Susan Casteras notes that “It was as if the decision to renounce matrimony and the outside world—not to mention sex—merely enhanced the nun’s desirability, thus creating an eroticism out of virginity itself." In their depiction of nuns as highly sexual creatures, Victorian artists contributed to negative stereotypes about women religious that trivialized their religious commitment and their desire to perform useful social functions. Together with popular literature and periodicals such as *Punch*, these paintings suggest that public attitudes toward sisterhoods ranged from curiosity to condemnation. More significantly, they reveal that Victorian society was largely ignorant as to the actual experiences of nuns and continued to be more fascinated with their bodies than their achievements.

The belief that the vow of chastity promoted rather than repressed female sexuality was to some extent reinforced by actual practices within sisterhoods. As all-female communities which supposedly exhibited scurrilous ‘Romish’ tendencies, sisterhoods proved easy targets for Victorian observers eager to expose scandalous goings-on in the convent. Critics of these communities readily seized

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48 Casteras, p 166.

49 In his attempt to expose conventual life Walter Walsh left no stone unturmed in his sensational *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement* Sixth ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1899)
upon those conventual practices which suggested even the remotest hint of sexual impropriety. One such component of monastic life was the practice of confession. To opponents of sisterhoods, not only did the confessional represent the church's attempt to usurp familial authority, but it was also perceived as providing the setting for sexual vice. The Reverend S. A. Walker testified to the inherent dangers of confession:

Are not sinful thoughts to be counted as sin?...Does not the confessor, then, instigate the sin in himself and his penitent, when he deals in lasciviousness of thought and expression under circumstances calculated to quicken a corrupt imagination, and stimulate the vilest passions?50

Critics also asserted that the confessional was used as "a form of spy system" to pry into the secret thoughts of the sisters.51 At the Devonport Society, Priscilla Sellon was accused of extracting undue confession from the sisters in her care. In her defence, the Mother Superior retorted: "It is said that the sisters are under a tyranny which extracts from the the revelation of their interior life, of course implying that I seek those confidences, whereas the truth is that they seek it themselves."52 Although the problems regarding the practice of confession at Devonport did not suggest sexual impropriety, they nonetheless served to reinforce the popular perception that the confessional was a device which could be employed to enforce sisters to reveal their innermost thoughts. Within sisterhoods rumours of sexually illicit behaviour in the confessional burned from the pages of scandal-filled accounts by ex-sisters, adding substance to charges regarding the real nature of the

51 Hill, The Religious Order p 297.
vow of celibacy.\textsuperscript{53}

Perhaps even more titillating than the confessional were scandals involving sisters’ acts of flagellation. It was alleged that Dr. Pusey proposed that sisters use the ‘discipline’, a kind of cat-of-nine-tails, for about a quarter of an hour a day.\textsuperscript{54} One of the most damning exposures of flagellation was recalled by Sister Mary Agnes, whose treatment at the hands of her Mother Superior must indeed have raised more than a few eyebrows.

I was commanded first to strip. I saw the Discipline, with its seven lashes of knotted whipcord in her hand and I knew that one lash given (or taken by oneself) was in reality seven. I should mention that at times it was the rule to Discipline oneself... A deep feeling of shame came over me at being half-nude. The Mother then ordered the Nun to say the ‘Miserere,’ and while it was being recited she lashed me several times with all her strength. I was determined not to utter a sound, but at last I could not restrain a smothered groan, where at she gave me one last and cruel lash, and then ceased.\textsuperscript{55}

In accounts such as this, the distinction between alleged religious practices and pornography became blurred. However, by revealing such an experience, Mary Agnes lent credence to the popular belief that sisterhoods were dens of sexual vice. Despite such lurid reports, some observers refused to believe that such practices were performed in sisterhoods: “I am sure that the respectable Sisters of the Orphanage of Mercy neither flagellate themselves or wear hair shirts, nor sleep on

\textsuperscript{53} Such accounts are found in for example, [Margaret Cusack] Five Years in A Protestant Sisterhood and Ten Years in A Catholic Convent (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869) The most notorious of such accounts was [Maria Monk] The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, As Exhibited in Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice, and Two years as a Black Nun (London: Richard Groombridge, 1836).


\textsuperscript{55} Jane Mary Povey (Sister Mary Agnes), Nunery Life in the Church of England (London: 1890)pp 97-99. Italics in original. See also Walter Walsh, pp 40-1.
cold stones, nor rise at one in the morning to chant litanies."\textsuperscript{56} Whether or not such activities actually took place, the fact that were publicly discussed suggests yet another illustration of how the vow of celibacy was inverted to sexualize the sisters as well as of the Victorians' obsession with sexuality.\textsuperscript{57}

Innuendoes of sexual relations between sisters and men who were affiliated with the convent also piqued the curiosity of many observers. One of the most infamous cases of this type of affair revolved around Priscilla Lydia Sellon and Edward Pusey, the ascetic spiritual director of Sellon's community. A member of Sellon's sisterhood claimed that the relationship between the two was clearly more than a "Platonic Friendship," indicating that "The woman had laid her spell on him; and, as far as I could learn, she held him in thrall to the bitter end. Whatever she did was right in his eyes. He spent much of his time in the house with her, and always occupied the room next to hers."\textsuperscript{58} At a public inquiry in 1849, held in response to a local outcry over rumored scandalous activities in the sisterhood, Pusey was questioned as to the nature of his overnight visits to the convent. While it was claimed by his defenders that the visits were strictly for the purpose of administering Communion to a sister suffering from illness, it was obvious from the presiding bishop's comment that "nineteen--, possibly out of every twenty in this room couple criminality with the name of that clergyman," that Pusey's reputation was far from that expected of one who worked in such close connection


\textsuperscript{58} Quoted in Irene ffrench Eagar, \textit{Margaret Anna Cusack - One Woman's Campaign for Women's Rights. A Biography} (Dublin: Arlen House, The Women's Press, 1979) p 54; see also [Margaret Cusack] \textit{Five Years in A Protestant Sisterhood and Ten Years in A Catholic Convent} p xii.
with Christ’s devotees. While the inquiry focused its attack only on Pusey’s sexual behaviour—it was not quite bold enough to call the sexual actions of the Mother Superior into question—with its investigation of Pusey however, the inquiry explicitly suggested that the sisters were also involved.

Fears of sexual relations within sisterhoods were not always confined to those involving men. Issues of lesbian desire in convents were often centered on the relationship between the Mother Superior and the sisters in her charge. Opponents of sisterhoods claimed that the undue obedience which the Superior demanded of the sisters could lead to the development of unnatural affection. Priscilla Sellon advised the women in her order against forming friendships with other sisters, suggesting instead that they focus their love on Christ. Harriet Monsell, Mother Superior at Clewer, was approached by one of her sisters who felt her conscience troubled over her feelings for her Superior. Harriet stressed that such feelings were not in themselves cause for concern and advised the woman simply to transfer these emotions to God.

I do not think you need trouble yourself because you love me... All efforts to think or feel otherwise will only be unreal and lead to no good. All you need strive for is to love God more, more singly and simply; to still the human acting and impulses of your being in Him.

Unlike Sellon’s instructions that sisters avoid developing close friendships with each other, Monsell’s recommendation that sisters utilise the emotions they felt for her might have enabled the sisters in her community a greater sense of emotional freedom.

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60 Carter, Harriet Monsell, A Memoir p 63. The biography reveals that Harriet was contacted by several such women who felt love for their Superior.
While many accounts by Anglican sisters speak of the "deep friendships" and "love" shared by the sisters, in her extensive research into Anglican orders Susan Mumm records that she was able to locate only one specific reference to a relationship "which could be labelled lesbian."\textsuperscript{61} The account actually suggests the existence of two such relationships, as the community's chronicler noted: "It was not a good relationship, but Josephine stayed with Sister M. R. after she left the community and in fact until she died. Sister Virginia...came in out of her affection for Sister Mary Isabella. Best to say no more."\textsuperscript{62} In light of the reluctance of sisters to discuss sexuality, particularly homosexual relationships, it is not surprising that only one such account was uncovered. However, given the opportunities for female homosocial bonding within an all-female community such as a sisterhood, it seems quite possible that women in sisterhoods did experience romantic feelings for each other, and that these feelings did sometimes develop into physical attachments.\textsuperscript{63}

The possibility that lesbian relationships could develop in sisterhoods were not ignored by Victorians commentators. Such a likelihood was examined and condemned by Anna Jameson:

\begin{quote}
I conceive that any large number of women shut up together in the locality, with no occupation connecting them actively with the world or humanity outside, would not mend each other, and that such an atmosphere could not be perfectly healthy, spiritually, morally, or physically.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

David Hilliard explains that in its promotion of celibacy, the Oxford Movement...
could provide a supportive environment for homosexuals as well as for those who wished not to marry. Members of the Oxford Movement were publicly perceived as unmanly, as illustrated by Punch’s lampoon of High Church clergymen who, it maintained, were “very fond of dressing like ladies.”\textsuperscript{65} Although Hilliard examines only how the Anglican brotherhoods established in the latter part of the nineteenth century could be attractive to gay men, his argument could also be extended to encompass the women in sisterhoods. Questioning the possibility that one’s advocacy of celibacy could have a homoerotic motivation, Hilliard observes that

It seems inherently possible that young men who were secretly troubled by homosexual feelings that they could not publicly acknowledge may have been attracted by the prospect of devoting themselves to a life of celibacy, in the company of like-minded male friends, as a religiously sanctioned alternative to marriage.\textsuperscript{66}

Indeed, while many Anglican sisters employed the argument that celibacy was “a higher and holier state,” it is possible that this argument was convenient for sisters who felt no desire for men and longed for the company of women. Attempts to control women’s entry into sisterhoods must therefore be seen not only as restricting women’s rejection of men, but as one manner of preventing the development of lesbian relationships as well.\textsuperscript{67}

The debates which focused around the vow of chastity in Anglican sisterhoods represent a significant chapter in the history of male efforts to control female sexuality in Victorian England. By renouncing sexual relations, Anglican sisters were perceived as threatening the sanctity of marriage and women’s “special


\textsuperscript{66}Hilliard, p 185.

\textsuperscript{67}For a discussion of lesbian sexuality in early monastic communities see, Judith C. Brown, “Lesbian Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Europe” in Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 81
mission” as mothers and the upholders of moral virtue. A sister’s decision to embrace celibacy could imply not only that she rejected marriage but also that she believed the single state to be more rewarding. Despite the prevalent conviction that women were supposed to be sexually passive, Victorian opponents of sisterhoods refused to believe that women would choose to live outside of a “normal” heterosexual relationship. Consequently, these critics inverted the vow of chastity, sexualizing the nuns. Whatever the extent of actual sexual activities within sisterhoods, accusations of sexual impropriety within the convent were rooted in the threat posed by sisters’ lifestyles. Because of this threat, English society sought to undermine the religious life by focusing explicitly on the sexually sensational aspects of sisterhoods. For Anglican sisters however, the vow of chastity represented sexual freedom: it provided a female-centered alternative to sexual relations within marriage and a unique source of fulfillment and empowerment.
The poverty of Anglican sisterhoods was perhaps the most complex and misunderstood aspect of conventual life during the nineteenth century. To outsiders, poverty was perceived strictly in monetary terms: the vow of poverty robbed naive young women of their wealth and padded the coffers of the Church of England. To members of sisterhoods however, the material aspect of the vow of poverty was superficial; beyond this, this vow represented a spirit of poverty. Sisters’ renunciation of material possessions and plainness of appearance became symbols which reflected the spirit of poverty within, as was exemplified by Marian Hughes’ refusal to wear jewelry. To sisters, an unadorned body represented a spirit unfettered by material concerns. The vow of poverty also enabled sisters to retain ownership of their property and to choose the manner in which to dispose of their possessions, unlike whose marriage vow legally transferred their property to their husbands. In this sense too, poverty provided a freedom: freedom to be unencumbered by possessions and freedom to allocate their own money as they desired. Just as the vow of obedience gave sisters a freedom to obey God, and the vow of chastity allowed sisters sexual freedom, the vow of poverty entitled sisters to have legal freedoms which evaded the majority of married women.

Criticisms of the vow of poverty emerged on two fronts which appear disproportionate in significance but were both of central concern to the Victorians. These two forms of opposition were often represented along class and gender lines. One way in which the vow of poverty was opposed was through a critique of the sisters’ appearance and living conditions. The simplicity of sisters’ dress was
perceived by many observers as an affront to the traditional and accepted attire of Victorian ladies. As the dress of women during this period was the most obvious indicator of their social status, sisters were negating class distinctions by dressing below their station.\(^1\) In addition, by refusing the material comforts of the middle-class home and living in conditions which more closely resembled those of the working-class, sisters' lifestyles again angered their critics by appearing to renounce class divisions.

The other principal criticism which the vow of poverty created centred on the regulation of women's property. Critics maintained that Anglican sisterhoods were nothing but 'secret societies' of the Catholic Church designed to embezzle the fortunes of wealthy women and consign them to a life of economic dependence. However, as Priscilla Sellon asserted to her critics, women had as much right to control their possessions as they did to determine their lifestyles. "It is obvious," she wrote, "that a person who was in circumstances to determine for herself about joining the society, would be able to determine for herself what she thought it right to do with her money."\(^2\) Not surprisingly, concerns based on property were launched overwhelmingly by men. While women were just as likely as men to oppose sisters "giving" their money to what they perceived was a "Romish" church, men had a great deal more to lose than their female counterparts by arguing that the church did not possess the right to control sisters' property. However, because sisterhoods' critics feared the Church's control of sisters' property to a greater degree than they feared sisters' own control of it, ironically, these critics could be seen as advancing women's property rights.

\(^1\) Once sisterhoods increased their numbers, many communities were divided into lay and choir sisters who were differentiated by dress. While in this respect, some sisterhoods did maintain class distinctions within their community, regardless of whether one was a lay or choir sister, neither type of dress was modelled after the dress of middle-class women.

One of the most controversial aspects of the vow of poverty was that sisters, by renouncing personal possessions, refusing to dress like “ladies,” and living without material comforts, were implying that their lifestyle was more virtuous, or holier, than that of other women. This apparent critique of domesticity and female ornamentation was exemplified by Priscilla Lydia Sellon’s assertion that not all women were designed for a superficial life:

there are some hearts to whom He has given higher, deeper yearnings which the world knows not of, and which it can not understand;-- some hearts, who can not live in luxury, when our Lord lived in poverty, who can not be idle when He went about doing good, who can not but live for His poor, when He told us that in ministering to them, we minister to Him, --some hearts, who hate wealth and despise 'respectability', which is a very idol in our Country.3

By arguing that wealth and respectability were but idols of the weak and unvirtuous, Sellon explicitly condemned the economic foundation of capitalism, as well as the social basis of English society. One sister, writing anonymously in 1867, noted that women who devoted their entire lives to God did indeed pose a criticism of lay society: “Those who give up all earthly things for God, are, it is true, a tacit reproach to those who only ‘make offerings to the Lord their God of that which doth cost them nothing.’”4 It is significant that sisters were aware of the threat they posed to English society: the notion that sisters “lived in their own world” is misguided, for they were aware that their lifestyle stood outside the borders of Victorian conventions.

In respect to their possessions and general living conditions, Anglican sisters’

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lifestyles were markedly different from other middle-class women. Compared to the opulence and excessive bric-a-brac found in many Victorian homes, the sparse decoration of sisterhoods was a dramatic departure. Many of the earliest sisterhoods were comprised of one small building, often, but not always, a house, and as the sisterhood expanded, many sisters endured several relocations. The Community of All Hallows, established in 1854, began in a simple farm house in the hamlet of Shipmeadow. The sisters were soon forced to leave ‘Nunnery Farm’ however, as it proved “unsuitable on health grounds.” The house at 17 Park Village, the location of the earliest sisterhood, was characterised by “poorness and cramped surroundings.” The house featured “on the ground floor a parlour, a recreation room, and a small oratory leading into each other. The upper rooms were partitioned into six cells, and there were four attics. The kitchen served as the refectory. The house was plainly furnished throughout.” The decor of the individual cells, “consisting of an iron bedstead, with coarse sheets, a straw mattress, a flock bolster, a chair and table, some shelves for books” shared little in common with other middle-class women’s boudoirs.

A sister viewing her accommodation for the first time must have been temporarily discomfited by these minimalist decorations. Alice Horlock’s wealthy upbringing could not have prepared her for the austerity of sisterhood life. She later described her initial reactions to her new-found lifestyle: “I had not minded the plain food at supper, but the coarse tablecloth, the mugs and steel forks instead of shining silver and glass, had been difficult to ignore” and further remarked that, “it was not pleasant to face spending the rest of one’s life amid such bare surroundings

5 It was not until later in the century that sisterhoods occupied stately compounds.
7 Henry Parry Liddon, Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894) p 16
8 Dodsworth to Pusey, quoted in Liddon, p 17.
without carpets, curtains, or any of such things that make a house attractive."

Any women holding romantic notions of sisterhood life would have been immediately forced to reconsider her vocation given the paucity of her surroundings. During the formative period at Park Village Pusey explained that the sisters expected and were provided with only the bare essentials: "They have all which is necessary, good food, warm clothing, firing; ... Some of them, you know, although the rank of clergymen's daughters, had nothing of their own: and, being themselves supported by others, they could not wish to have mere superfluities." Pusey suggested that although the social background of most of the sisters at Park Village was middle-class, these women came to the sisterhood without material possessions and therefore could not expect such to be provided in their new home. He also demonstrated that material poverty at the sisterhood was crucial to the spirit of the religious life. That the sisters were as dedicated to the spirit of the vow of poverty was testified to by Jane Ellacombe, an original Park Village sister. Shortly after commencing the religious life, Jane wrote to her father requesting her copy of Pearson's *On the Creed*. The volume, however, was not to be sent to her by name, "but only 17 Park Village West" she wrote "Everything of that sort is common property and of course...we are no longer known as Miss This or Miss That..."

To the critics of sisterhoods, Pusey's remark that women who were equivalent to the "rank of clergymen's daughters" needed nothing more than food, clothing, and shelter, appeared to be an implicit condemnation of the socially constructed identity of middle-class women. Victorian "ladies" were material symbols of their husband's wealth: the dinner parties they hosted, the clothes

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10 Letter from Pusey to Mr. Hope, quoted in Liddon, p 27. Park Village was unique among the early sisterhoods as it was run and financed by a committee of laymen.


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they wore, and the splendor of their residences all represented their social status and degree of refinement. For if there was one characteristic that middle-class Victorian women strove to exude, it was refinement. Priscilla Sellon criticised this emphasis on refinement, stressing the potential harm to women’s souls in devoting themselves to such trivial concerns:

It is a very painful degree of trifling in days when living souls are perishing for lack of help, and when the land groans and teems with suffering and sorrow,...it is a painful and alarming levity to talk together of “young ladies, brought up with all the refinements of polite life.”...The refinements of polite life will not stand us in any stead when we shall be called to give account of the talents entrusted to us, the good we might have done, the evil we might have prevented.12

By embracing simplicity in all aspects of their lives, and more significantly, by implying that this simplicity represented a ‘higher’ state than chintz and clutter, Anglican sisters were perceived as undermining the seriousness of purpose of middle-class women. In a public article, one sister pointed to the threat implied by the religious life: “It would be better at once to face the truth, that no religion can be real without involving some degree of effort and self-denial, and that domestic life, however pure and peaceful, is not the only ideal of human perfection.”13 This sister’s statement emphasizes that to the members of sisterhoods, the denial of material goods represented a crucial aspect of their dedication to God.

One form of self-denial practiced in sisterhoods was the observation of religious fasts. At Park Village several of the original sisters suffered from ill-health as a result of their over-zealous adherence to fasting. A former sister claimed that

13 [Anon], “Sisterhood Life”, p 173.
“the Sisters kept more than 100 days of Fasting and Abstinence.”

‘Sister Ogilvie’ carried her rejection of the material world to the extreme when she “resolved to take no food but a dish of thick oat-meal” during the Lent of 1850. Despite Pusey’s inducements to resume eating, her obsession with fasting proved fatal shortly after she joined the community. Reverend Dodsworth complained to Pusey of “overfasting” and feared he would soon be left with a “house of invalids” if the sisters did not take better care of their health. At St. Margaret’s, Rev. Neale also stressed to the sisters that fasting be closely regulated:

Now remember: this Lent is clearly your duty not to fast. Therefore you are to take meat and beer exactly as often as the others do. If you can deny yourself in any little unostentatious way at breakfast or tea, you may, but not at dinner, nor at supper.

To sisters, the observance of religious fasts symbolized their commitment to their vocation. To sisterhoods’ opponents however, it was perceived as another indication not only that religious orders practised ascetic rituals, but also that the women who joined these societies were fanatics. Punch took a lighter approach in its criticism, claiming that, “Fast days would be kept by religiously eating red mullet and raspberry jam tart.” As it did with so many other aspects of the religious life, Punch inverted the vow of poverty to stress instead the perceived lack of commitment of Anglican sisters.

The dress of Anglican sisters was one of the most strongly contested features of the conventual revival for women. To the sisters, dress was central to their

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15 Cusack in Anson, p 238. Miss Ogilvie was a pseudonym, Cusack used aliases for all her characters.
16 Williams and Campbell, p 31. Many sisters were ill from overwork.
17 Neale, letter to a sister training at Westminster Hospital, shrove Tuesday, 1855. Quoted in Letters of John Mason Neale Selected and Edited by His Daughter (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910) p 241. Italics in original.
18 Punch 1850, quoted in Anson, p 99.
identity and represented their commitment to poverty. In the early sisterhoods, women wore loose gowns, of brown or black with some white at the neck. This attire served several important functions: it identified women as members of a religious order; it provided a practical uniform for the sister’s work; and it protected sisters by serving as a passport into dangerous work sites. Former sister Margaret Goodman testified as to the function of religious attire: “The dress of those belonging to the outer order was sufficiently peculiar to make the wearer known as a Sister of Mercy, and, therefore, she could pass at any hour through the worst localities, without hearing an unseemly expression.” The Society of All Saints, known as the “Sisters of the Poor,” worked in dangerous conditions in London. The protection, as well as the respect, afforded by their dress allowed them to venture where other respectable ladies feared to tread.

The All Saints’ Sisters have a great work to do, and they do it....among the miserable population, part infidel, part heathen,...behind our great London streets...where also, by observation, they could not work without a distinctive dress. In places which few other women could enter without insult, the Sister’s habit is at once her recommendation and her safe-guard.

The distinctiveness of the sisters’ dress may have provided accessibility, but it also symbolised an affront to the ornamentation of Victorian ladies. Fashion was arguably the most obvious way in which Victorian women were differentiated along class lines: a middle-class woman’s finery distinguished her from the less elegant dress of working-class women. While for well-to-do women, as Mariana

Valverde explains, finery represented sophistication and femininity, showy clothes suggested immorality to working-class women who equated love of dress with vanity and idleness.\textsuperscript{22} Although Valverde points out that “instances of challenges to the ideology of finery-as-vice are few and far between,” such challenges did exist.\textsuperscript{23} Henry Mayhew expressed such a concern, as Valverde notes, “portray[ing] the dress code as inversely related to the moral code, with plain dress usually signifying more virtue and showy dress more vice.”\textsuperscript{24} The obsession with fancy dress was condemned in the eighteenth century by William Law: “it must be owned that all needless and expensive finery of dress is the effect of a disordered heart that is not governed by the true spirit of religion.”\textsuperscript{25} In his assertion that simplicity of dress symbolised greater holiness, Law lent support to Anglican sisters’ attire and their claims to a “holier state.” In this sense, the degree of virtue represented by ladies’ finery was inverted in sisterhoods through the association of plain dress and moral purity. In the 1800s, support for less elaborate female costume was advanced by groups such as The Rational Dress Society.\textsuperscript{26} While the object of this Society was to reform impractical garments such as corsets and crinolines, by advocating simple dress, the principles espoused by this agency might have served to legitimise the attire of the sisters in its practical capacity. As Valverde notes, attempts to reform dress were crucial in nineteenth-century attempts to extend women’s public roles: “The dress reform movement, which now tends to be dismissed with trivializing anecdotes, was an important aspect of first-wave feminism.”\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{23} Valverde, p 186
\textsuperscript{24} Valverde, p 179.
\textsuperscript{27} Mariana Valverde, “The Love of Finery”, p 185.
At Park Village the sisters faced immediate opposition as a result of their dress. Their distinguishable attire provided an identity for the sisters which was refashioned by various observers to create hostility toward sisterhoods. Pusey's biographer, H. P. Liddon, described the popular concern over the sister's attire: "The sisters wore a distinctive dress. Nowadays no one thinks more of it than of a clergyman's black coat or a soldier's uniform. But fifty years ago it was a novelty, and was regarded, even by some sensible people, with dislike and apprehension."\(^{28}\) As early as 1840, Rev. Hook, the Vicar at Leeds, wrote to Pusey expressing his concerns about the proposed dress of the sisters: "we [should] decide on the dress to be worn—which ought to be just sufficient to distinguish them and yet not sufficient to subject them to remark."\(^{29}\) At Devonport Rev. Dodsworth voiced his concerns that church attendance had dropped due to the "excitement" the sisters were causing "amongst the poor." Seemingly the poor "[did] not know what to make of the Sisters, and suspect[ed] them of being disguised Roman Catholics."\(^{30}\) Dodsworth suggested that owing to the prejudice against "the peculiar dress" of the sisters, they should adopt "a more ordinary dress out of doors, such as black and white or coloured shawls...which would break the uniformity, which our people are unused to."\(^{31}\) Although Dodsworth maintained that the opposition originated from "emissaries, dissenters or others" who opposed the Tractarians, it was the reactions of the poor that caused the most visible problems. Pusey and the sisters opposed compromise, and in the end, the dress was modified only with the "introduction of little white about the neck" which decreased the attention on the sisters.\(^{32}\) This debate suggests that it was the distinctiveness of the sisters' dress that created such

\(^{28}\) Liddon, p 26.

\(^{29}\) Liddon, p 7.

\(^{30}\) Williams, p 27.

\(^{31}\) Quoted in Williams, p 27.

\(^{32}\) Williams and Campbell p 32.
controversy: by adopting unique and uniform outfits, the sisters were perceived either as Catholic nuns or as strangers who deliberately stood apart from the districts in which they worked.

The debate over attire at the Community of All Hallows illustrates that, despite interference from men, sisters played a significant role in controlling their attire. This community was initially governed by a council of thirty clergy and country gentry, “whose influence was considerable.” Sister Violet, chronicling the history of her order, notes that

The dress adopted by the ladies was one of the obnoxious features; it smacked of a nun’s habit...Even to the clerical members of the Council, the adoption of a dress more in line with a nun’s habit created an unwelcome precedent...[and] could mean the loss of support from well-known worthies.33

In her position as Mother Superior, Lavinia Crosse, whose “strong personality,” Violet admits, “needed tempering and sweetening,” refused to be bullied by the council and the sisters’ dress was not modified to meet the council’s wishes, resulting in the resignation of at least one council member. To all involved the dress of the sisters was to symbolise their identity. For the sisters, their attire set them apart from other women. Outsiders interpreted this differentiation not only as “Romish” but also as an attempt by the sisters to elevate themselves, to become “higher and holier” than other ladies. One observer, George Stacy, chastised the sisters as “these Tractarian women, who are trumpeted forth as so much more devout than others.”34 Through their manner of dress, the most visible manifestation of the vow of poverty as well as the most visible censure of “finery,” sisters drew widespread hostility from clergy and the local community alike.

33 Sister Violet, pp 12,13,16-17.
34 Sister Violet, p 12.
Defenders of the sisters’ appearance and their lifestyle stressed the right of these women to determine their own affairs. Ludlow argued that the practicality of sisters’ dress suited the financial austerity of sisterhoods: “Does uniformity of dress offend you? Who does not know that wherever economy is sought after, such uniformity is a necessary means toward realising that end?” Dodsworth, who later argued for the modification of the sisters’ dress, originally stated that not all aspects of sisterhood life need be disclosed to the public: “people have no business to enquire how the Sisters regulate their dress or diet—or their devotions.” An anonymous writer in MacMillan’s Magazine, who generally did not support sisterhoods, nonetheless stressed the moral aspect of the sisters’ poverty.

Men argue as though they would have no objection to convents if the nuns’ bedrooms were well warmed and furnished, their dinners varied and well cooked, and their occupations light and easy. If they would take the trouble to study the history of the monastic orders, they would find that luxury has always demoralized them, and that, whenever they have offered such comforts and pleasures, they have produced a thousand times more evil.

In this statement once again class issues are apparent. The above commentator reacted to critics who were disturbed because the sisters’ lifestyle appeared to be “below” that to which ladies were accustomed. These opponents suggest that in such conditions, the morality of the sisters would decline, whereas the above writer stressed that the opposite would hold true. As did William Law before him, this writer equated simplicity with virtue, supporting sisterhoods’ claims for austerity and critics’ arguments that sisters felt themselves to be holier than other women.

36 Dodsworth to Pusey, quoted in Williams, p 16.
The second aspect of the vow of poverty that proved controversial for early sisterhoods focused on the rights of sisters to control their own property. With this control came the ability to control the nature of their work. The economic advantages which Anglican sisters gained by remaining single were substantial in comparison to those of their married counterparts. Upon professing the vow of marriage, women lost ownership and control of their property, including inherited property, and were stripped of their legal identity. Joan Perkin suggests that the marriage and property laws of common law affected middle-class women more directly than other women, as the aristocracy had the power and means to circumvent the law and working-class women were less likely to hold property. Attempts to change these legal inequities fell on deaf ears and it was not until 1870, after a lengthy campaign by numerous feminists, that The Married Women’s Property Act began to address these issues. In addition to losing their property, married women could not gain a degree of financial independence through paid work as husbands were entitled to their wives’ wages. For middle-class women this final injustice held little relevance since English society viewed it as inconceivable that women of this station should be employed in any capacity.

With the attempted exclusion of middle-class married women from the work force, many such women turned to philanthropic societies in order to satisfy their missionary zeal. For women seeking paid employment however, missions held little reward. Donald Lewis explains that in the London City Mission women were excluded from administrative positions, and unlike men, their work was organised only on a voluntary basis: “In spite of the fact that women were lay supporters of

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40 See Joan Perkin, esp. p 225.
the mission, the London Society declined to employ females in its intensive and well-financed campaign to evangelize London.42 Lewis notes that in the London Society men were concerned that if women were compensated for their work, they might begin to take over the Society as they had done in the District Visiting Society.43

The fear that the conditions in London slums were simply too dangerous for ladies to work in prevailed in the British and Foreign Mission, an Anglican society founded 1838. In this society, active roles for women were not promoted until the late 1850s when women became engaged in selling Bibles and tracts, as well as attending ‘cottage meetings’ in their role as travelling evangelists. With no expected income from such endeavours, married women could only consider this work as supplemental to their duties as wife and mother; single women had to be financially independent to engage in such work. Not only was paid work difficult to find for middle-class women, but it was also considered “unladylike.” In 1869 Sarah Ellis noted that a woman’s motives and zeal for charity work were acceptable but that wage work reduced her to the status of a tradeswoman.44

While charity work could offer married women only part-time unpaid work, and was as an alternative only for financially secure single women, the advantages of work within a sisterhood were numerous. The opportunities for work provided by sisterhoods attracted many initial members.45 Margaret Goodman testified to such motivation: “led chiefly by the wish to minister to untended suffering, in the

43 Lewis, p 417.
44 Prochaska, p 6.
summer of 1852, I joined the Sisters of Mercy at Devonport."46 As John Shelton Reed remarks, "the movement offered what was virtually a full-time occupation."47 In addition, the community lifestyle of sisterhoods was acknowledged by many observers as providing a more conducive and effective environment for women's work. One early sister compared the relative success of women working individually with those in communities:

when the zealous labourer, overtaxing her strength, as she is almost certain to do, fails at her accustomed post, who is to supply her place? An organized staff of workers would here have no difficulty, but what can a solitary, worn-out woman do?...the single labourer [worries] because all depends on herself,...Put the work in the hands of a community, and that anxiety is ended.48

Even those who opposed sisterhoods agreed that single women living communally could provide a valuable contribution to relief work.

Opposition toward the nature of sisters' work sprang from the belief that sisters considered their work to be of a more devoted nature than that done by lay women in missions. The concerns of Elizabeth Jane Whateley exemplified the threat posed by the work of sisterhoods. She maintained that the problem lay in sisters' adherence to monasticism:

That danger is the monastic spirit. Wherever we can trace a disposition to view work done in a community as something higher and holier than the same work done elsewhere; wherever there is a tendency, even the slightest, to consider that a woman is more truly working for God in such an association than she would be in the discharge of home and family duties;...then and there we may be very sure that the leaven of monasticism is

46 Goodman, p 1.
beginning to show itself, and if not promptly checked it may lead to all the evils of the conventual system.\textsuperscript{49}

Whateley expressed the concern that by organising themselves within a religious order and completely devoting themselves to their work, sisters were more devoted than women who divided their time between family and charity work.

For women of means, joining a sisterhood also allowed them the opportunity to contribute financially to its growth. More than being merely an investment, offering financial assistance to their sisterhood could provide women with a great sense of purpose, satisfaction, and pride. In 1866, when The Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity required a larger building to house the sisters, Marian Hughes and Sister Caroline Buckland were the main contributors in raising the £8,000 necessary for its completion.\textsuperscript{50} At Devonport, Priscilla Sellon, who “had a considerable fortune of her own,” invested in housing for the poor “only requiring of the tenants the elements of a moral life.”\textsuperscript{51} As Mother Superior, Sellon encouraged sisters who wished to donate to the order: “I think it would be a very good thing for a ‘wealthy heiress’ to join this or any such community, and devote their money to charitable purposes, if it seemed good to them, and if they first duly provided for the wants of those who had a stronger claim upon them.”\textsuperscript{52}

By allowing their members to contribute financially to the orders’ operations, sisterhoods opened themselves up to charges that the vow of poverty “is a grand


\textsuperscript{50} R. Townsend Warner, Marian Rebecca Hughes, Mother Foundress of The Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) p 20. For others instances of sisters’ financially supporting their community see Susan Murm, chap. 5, pp 26-37.

\textsuperscript{51} E. Edmund Seyzinger, preface xvii in Williams and Campbell, \textit{The Park Village Sisterhood}, also Clarissa Powell gave money for new sisterhood house in 1847. p 30. See also Maria Trench p 341.

\textsuperscript{52} Sellon, \textit{Reply to a Tract} p 22
scheme for relieving English ladies of their money." Critics of sisterhoods directed their hostilities not toward the sisters, whom, it was assumed were unwittingly being 'duped out of their fortunes,' but at the church' which was perceived as clandestinely orchestrating this transfer of wealth.  An 1851 *Punch* cartoon entitled *The Kidnapper -- A Case for the Police* depicted a young woman eager to offer her substantial dowry to a wily priest in exchange for the veil. The accompanying article, "No Business of Ours," documented the story of a would-be sister who was "so charmed and edified by the conventual life, that it is said she feels inclined to adopt it altogether; and taking the church for her bridegroom, will possibly endow her mystic spouse with her eighty thousand pounds." The title of the piece perhaps indicates the public fears which surrounded the perceived private dealings of sisterhoods.

The notion that sisterhoods could operate on a financially independent basis infuriated men who were denied their right to have legal control over women. Although Sellon recognized the potential hostility from parents of sisters who gave money to the sisterhood and tactfully referred to the primacy of family claims, she defended sisters' financial freedoms by suggesting that these women were simply obeying their duty to God's command: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." By couching her plea in religious language, Sellon undermined individual sisters' element of choice by underlining that their actions were in obedience to God, thus again publicly deferring to her critics. Sellon's most adamant opponent, W. M. Colles, elaborated the threat posed by sisterhoods to paternal control of wealth: "The Sellon

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System destroys the social system which the people of England have long enjoyed...Fathers should not give their money to support monastic institutions.56 Significantly, Colles appealed directly to fathers, indicating that they should be certain to control their daughter’s wealth lest it fall into the ‘wrong hands.’ The issue of women giving money to their sisterhoods created enormous scandal and illustrates how the vow was perceived as trickery by the church. This type of scandal is no more clearly demonstrated than in the brutal assault on the sisters of the Society of St. Margaret’s in the Lewes Riot of 1857.

PUSEYITE DOINGS AND CONSEQUENT RIOTS AT LEWES

Lewes has been thrown into a state of the utmost excitement by what will appear to many a very trivial circumstance. It has risen as one man against Puseyism, choosing, however, with very bad taste, as the occasion for a demonstration, the funeral of the daughter of a respected clergyman, who is himself free from the taint of that alleged heresy. The circumstances of the case are so curious that we have deemed them worthy of special investigation.57

With this extended headline, The Brighton Herald launched into its sensationalist account of the extraordinary attack on the members of the Society of St. Margaret’s by an angry mob in the southern English town of Lewes. The causes, events, and consequences of the Lewes riot reveal significant aspects of the hostility toward Anglican sisterhoods during their formative years. The riot emanated from the initiatives of the independent-minded Emily Ann Elizabeth Scobell, daughter of

57 The Brighton Herald, Saturday, November 21, 1857. Anti-Catholicism was notorious in Lewes.
the Reverend John Scobell, rector of Southover and All Saints, Lewes. In the autumn of 1857, Miss Scobell disobeyed her father’s wishes by joining the nursing sisterhood at East Grinstead. One month after her religious life commenced, Sister Amy, as Miss Scobell was known, fell victim to scarlet fever and died suddenly on November 13th, 1857 - a Friday. Her death was not so sudden however, that there had not been time for Amy to draw up a new will in which the sisterhood became a beneficiary. The Rev. Scobell was outraged and accused the “Puseyites” of kidnapping his daughter and jeopardising her health in order to rob her of her inheritance.58 At Amy’s funeral, a volatile mob attacked the members of the sisterhood, forcing the sisters and their spiritual advisor, the Rev. Neale, to flee to safety as their fly was hailed with stones. The infamous Lewes Riot represents not only the wrath of an influential disgruntled father, but also demonstrates the underlying tensions among local townspeople who felt threatened by the very existence of a sisterhood in their midst. The uprising clearly illustrates how one sister’s decision to join such a community and to pledge money to its upkeep was interpreted by her family and neighbours as defiant, disloyal behaviour.

Described by her father as “of quick imagination and strong religious impressions,” as a teenager Emily became attracted to “these new high church ideas” and “began to rebel against her father’s narrow Protestantism and the empty social life which she was expected to follow.”59 Rev. Scobell did not however, support his daughter’s religious experimentation, typical as he was “of many Victorian fathers who expected his family to conform to his wishes without question.”60 In 1855, at

59 [Anon] “Painful Account of the Perversion and Untimely Death, under the most afflicting circumstances, of Miss Scobell, the Stolen Daughter of the Rev. Mr. Scobell, Rector of Southover, inveigled from her home, persuaded to become a Puseyite “Sister of Mercy,” and, through threats of eternal damnation to her soul, plundered of her property by a crafty band of Puseyite Jesuits, for the support of Popery.” (London: C. Elliot, n.d.) p 3, Letters of Neale, p 107
60 A.G. Lough, John Mason Neale - Priest Extraordinary (Devon: Newton Abbot, 1975) p 107
age 27, Miss Scobell, who had learned of Neale through the sisterhood’s nursing work, approached him to request that he hear her confession. Neale, aware of Emily’s spiritual dilemma, was willing to accommodate her request and the two began to hold “clandestine meetings” and correspond privately via Miss Parker, the local schoolmistress. Miss Parker was unable however, to maintain Emily’s secret, and eventually revealed the “sordid” details of the relationship to Scobell. One report, favourable to Rev. Scobell, maintained that: “Conscience, however, seems at length to have stung that exemplary woman,...she made a clean breast, and revealed to Mr. Scobell the extent of his own and his daughter’s danger.”

Confronted by her father, Emily refused to bow to his authority and fled to the shelter of out-of-town relatives. The highly-incensed Scobell first charged the Mother Superior, described by a Scobell ally as “the godly Miss Greame [sic]” with attempting to usurp his paternal role. Upon learning that Amy had been invited to St. Margaret’s Scobell responded: “If it be so, I beg to ask, by what right or authority--upon what principle of honour or religion--is my household broken into--my family peace invaded--my parental authority contemned [sic].” Scobell then redirected his assault toward Neale, accusing him of a multitude of “crimes”:

That you seek to hold and keep up a lasting spiritual influence over my daughter living in my house. That you seek to guide her future course of life. That your advice is to her, that she may quit my house, that she persevere in demanding my consent to do so, and that she join and give herself, and whatever income and property she may have, to an establishment at or near East Grinstead...and, under your guidance and tutelage, there to resign her will, her person, her services, her property, to you or others will and pleasure.

61 “Painful Account” p 4
63 Ibid., p 4.
64 Ibid., p 5.
Although Scobell was reacting to his daughter's "disobedience", he chose to wage his battle directly with the leadership of the sisterhood, assuming that Amy was simply a passive victim. By criticising Ann Gream together with Neale, it is evident that Scobell was aware of her authority within the order. Scobell's charges make evident his dual anxiety over Amy's soul as well as her property, highlighting the fact that prior to Amy's joining the community, Scobell was concerned that the church sought to embezzle her fortune.

The Society of St. Margaret's had been founded by John Mason Neale and Ann Gream, the first Mother Superior, at her suggestion in 1854. The original sisters devoted their efforts to nursing the poor, training at Westminster Hospital and by mid-1856 the sisterhood maintained eight members. Initial opposition to the community focused on religious concerns. Neale revealed the fears of the local Vicar toward the sisters' religious affiliation:

They [the Sisters] have settled in here very quietly with no further expression of feeling than that [of] the Vicar -- I suppose for their benefit -- he preached a sermon on Popery on Sunday. Miss Gream called on him to explain to him, that in coming here they had not the remotest intention of interfering with him or his parish;

Neale's involvement with St. Margaret's played a significant role in creating such fears: even for a Tractarian he was extreme in his religious views and had been publicly condemned by Bishop Chichester for his Catholic tendencies. Neale was also instrumental in praising the value of the religious life over marriage for

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65 Ann Gream formally joined the community in 1856 upon the death of her father. She was 47 years old at the time. Neale had obtained instruction from Harriet Monsell regarding the establishment of the sisterhood. See Eleanor A. Towle, John Mason Neale. A Memoir (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906) pp 235-7

66 Neale, letter to Webb, June 10, 1856, quoted in Lough, p 103.

women, asserting that sisterhoods should be managed independently of men.\textsuperscript{68} He advised a priest who considered forming a sisterhood, that “The governing body must be the Chapter and the Mother;...the Priest should have no official authority. With ten years experience, I know this is right. And were I a Sister, I would not for a second be under a Lay Treasurer.”\textsuperscript{69} Neale’s advocacy of sister’s autonomy and their right to control their finances could not have improved his reputation among the citizens of Lewes. Indeed by September 1856, Neale commented on the fact that the sisterhood faced widespread opposition and that the “Brighton Gazette thunders away at us every week.”\textsuperscript{70}

It was under this cloud of popular hostility toward the sisterhood that Amy contemplated a life at St. Margaret’s. An excerpt from Amy’s diary, written in 1853, illustrates not only that she had considered the religious life for several years before joining, but also that she was well aware of the ramifications of such a decision:

\begin{quote}
Let me consider deeply about joining a sisterhood....I must resign entirely the love of all my relations, my father, my mother, in great measure my sisters and my eldest brother...I should be going with the fierce anger of my father, mother, and almost all my relatives, and many of my friends; thought at least foolish by all I know and going amongst strangers whom I may not like.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

Amy’s subsequent membership into St. Margaret’s suggest that even though joining the order meant a severing of all former relationships, she was willing to break these ties for the chance to perform a useful function to the poor, and perhaps to free herself from “a tyrannical and difficult father.”\textsuperscript{72} While Amy was correct in her

\textsuperscript{68} Such opinions were stressed in Neale’s \textit{Annals of Virgin Saints, By a Priest of the Church of England} (London: Joseph Masters, 1846).

\textsuperscript{69} John Mason Neale to Cecil Wray, nd. Quoted in Mumm, chap. 2, p 22. The Chapter consisted of the members of the sisterhood.

\textsuperscript{70} Quoted in \textit{Letters of John Mason Neale}, p 277.

\textsuperscript{71} Amy Scobell, letter to Neale, pp 21-2, quoted in S. Mumm, chap. 2, p 22.

\textsuperscript{72} Anson, p 98.
assumption that she would anger her father should she join a sisterhood, Rev. Scobell objected to Emily’s wishes but he could not prevent her actions.

I was repeatedly asked by her by letter to consent to her going to East Grinstead, if only for a time. I felt it my duty steadily to refuse. Indeed to give my approbation was an impossibility...she suddenly communicated her intention of turning aside to East Grinstead, and there taking up her abode with Miss Gream at S. Margaret’s till Christmas...About six weeks afterwards...she entered into fresh promises; the final step was taken; abandoning the name of her baptism, she took another title, and assumed the garb of a Sister of Mercy. She then wrote to me, dating from East Grinstead, giving me this information, and adding her signature ‘Sister Amy’.73

Although Scobell was aware of the dangerous conditions in which the nursing sisters worked, he made no reference to Amy’s new career but rather to the outward badges which symbolised her new identity. As did so many other opponents of sisterhoods in the 1850s, he overlooked the sisters’ social function by concentrating instead on how his daughter had broken with her past by renouncing her family name and adopting the attire of a religious.

Sister Amy’s attempts to receive her father’s permission, and her subsequent decision to act according to her beliefs, indicate she was a considerate and independent woman. Rev. Scobell however, refused to view her as a grown woman capable of running her own life. Instead he described his thirty year-old daughter, as “an overwrought, dissatisfied and disobedient child, yielding herself to undue spiritual influence.”74 While much of the public opinion in Lewes supported Scobell’s claim that his daughter was a pawn to the Puseyites, The Sussex Advertiser was more liberal-minded in its assessment of her decision to join the sisterhood: “This step was taken contrary to the wishes and without the consent of

73 Lough, p 108.
her father, but the lady being thirty years of age, was in a position to act and decide for herself.”75 The mature and responsible behaviour of Amy stands in sharp contrast to her father’s claims that Amy’s mind was unstable.

Neale was not unaware of the fierceness of Scobell’s opposition and his biographer claims that he was hesitant to receive Amy without her father’s permission. However, once hearing of Amy’s “suffer[ing] at home, and more especially the paroxysms of anger, to which even her presence seemed sometimes to excite her father,” Neale received her into the fledgling order.76 Scobell’s patience with his daughter and her ‘Tractarian’ consorts, which had been hitherto pushed to the extreme, was now, however, about to explode. The catalyst, sadly, was Sister Amy’s death. Upon his daughter’s untimely departure, Scobell accused the community of forcing Amy, who “had always been assiduous among the poor,” to accept a suicidal nursing position among the contagious.77 If Scobell actually believed that Neale could have devised his daughter’s death to serve his own purposes, he was not alone in suggesting such an abhorrent idea. The Vicar of East Grinstead had already announced to Neale in 1856 that “The first case of infectious fever I have I will ask [the sisters] to undertake it, and then perhaps we shall get rid of them.”78 Clearly, public hostilities in East Grinstead, as expressed by the Vicar’s death threat, had reached a “fevered” pitch well before Amy’s demise.79

While the Rev. Scobell was no doubt disturbed by his daughter’s passing, her death was, in Scobell’s opinion, incidental in relation to the more scurrilous crime

75 *The Sussex Advertiser*, *Surrey Gazette*, &c., Nov. 24, 1857.
78 Quoted in *Letters of John Mason Neale*, p 297. Emphasis in original. In Nov. 1856, Neale noted that 4 of the 9 sisters, including Ann Gream, had contracted the fever; they all recovered. p 280.
79 Such hostilities were expressed by the Brighton Protestant Association and *The Brighton Gazette*, see *Letters of John Mason Neale*, pp 277,278.
which had occurred just prior to her demise. A commentator, sympathetic to Scobell’s plight, revealed the source of this “greater evil” noting that “the wretched girl was already dead to their father and friends. What survived the Tractarians, however, was destroyed shortly after by a fever,—not, however, until Sister Amy had made a will!” While Amy’s acts of unfilial defiance in attending confession and becoming a member of St. Margaret’s certainly outraged her father, it was Amy’s final act of betrayal in drawing up a new will on her death-bed, which appointed Neale and Miss Greame as executors and left a portion of her estate to the sisterhood, that led directly to the ensuing mob attack. Amy had died with property and assets totaling £5,000-£6,000 and had designated £400 to the sisterhood with the remainder going to her favourite brother. While Neale reportedly was ignorant of her riches until her will was prepared, Scobell immediately recognized the potentially “ominous plot” which Neale had successfully carried out to “steal” his daughter and her money.

As the details of this last-minute will were released, the sisterhood once again came under attack, causing Neale to refer to “the fierce newspaper war on us.” The Brighton Herald announced that Amy “le[ft], as we learn, all her personal property, inherited from her mother, to the College.” The Sussex Express was incensed, explaining that “The circumstances connected with her death, taking place as it did, away from her parents’ obedience, give rise to so many painful feelings.” Amy’s will, the article explained, was drawn up “only a few hours before she breathed her last.” The particulars of Amy’s will, rather than her death, assumed centre stage for The Brighton Protestant Association. The statements of one member, and the crowd’s reaction, as recorded by The Brighton Examiner,

80 “Painful Account” p 5
81 Lough, p 114.
82 The Brighton Herald, November 21, 1857.
83 The Sussex Express, November 21, 1857.
reveal how Amy was perceived as a passive victim.

[He] alluded to the reception of Miss Scobell...into the sisterhood of the Sisters of Mercy--Sisters of Misery was the right name (applause)...that young lady was supposed to be a person of property in her own right, and it was supposed...and naturally enough too, that she would have left her property to her own family, but it appeared...that in her last hours, she was induced to sign a document making over her whole property for other purposes. (Shame, shame).84

As the controversy raged, the perceived treachery of the sisterhood, and Neale in particular, was pitted against the fatherly concern of Scobell. Amy’s death had not only removed her physically from the scandal, but also enabled her actions prior to her death to be represented as those of a helpless pawn, tossed between her father’s parental authority and the “trickery” of the Puseyites. The events of Amy’s death thus became centred not on the plight of a young woman who attempted to find a career for herself in nursing, but instead focused upon a deceived father and the “invader of his rights as a clergyman and father” - the Rev. Neale.85 Townspeople rallied behind a father “robbed” of what they perceived were his parental rights, namely the right to control his daughter’s will and her property: “Painful indeed was [Scobell’s] position! Nay, indeed it was cruel that a parent should be deprived of his rights of his daughter, who, only a few weeks before, had left her home for that of strangers.”86 Although it was certainly more conducive to their portrayal of the sisterhood as swindlers to assert that Amy’s entire estate had been transferred to the St. Margaret’s, one newspaper account was compelled to set the record straight.

To prevent doubt and misconception on one point of a matter which has created so much excitement, we are at liberty to state to following acts from authority. The

84 Reported from the Brighton Protestant Association, quoted in The Brighton Examiner, November 24, 1857.
85 “Painful Account” p 4.
86 The Sussex Express, Nov. 21, 1857.
independent property which the late Miss Scobell had power to will, was a legacy from her maternal grandmother. Her last will gave her four hundred pounds of that property to the rev. J. M. Neale and Miss Greame, [sic] for the benefit of the Institution, of which they are the Principals. The rest she apportioned to her family.87

Regardless of the exact details of the will, the “damage” had been done, and the communities of East Grinstead and Lewes rallied behind Scobell.

DISGRACEFUL SCENE AT A FUNERAL.
PUSEYITE DEMONSTRATION, AND VIOLENCE OF THE MOB.

Five days after Sister Amy’s death hostilities surrounding the sisterhood reached their zenith. The day of the funeral, held at Amy’s request at All Saints’, Neale and the remaining eight sisters travelled with the coffin by train to nearby Lewes. As they reached the chapel they must have seemed a curious sight, as one reporter noted: “The Sisters of Mercy were attired in cloaks and hoods, presenting an extraordinary contrast to the ordinary fashion of female attire.”88 The appearance of the sisters, coupled with other oddities such as the pall over the coffin, which “[had] a large black cross on a white ground in the centre...excite[d] an adverse feeling in the minds of the spectators.”89 During the service the crowd was “yelling” and “becoming alarming,” but it was not until the small party attempted to emerge from the vault that the real trouble began. An angry rioter demanded that if Neale did not leave immediately, “then we shall have the pleasure of burying you.”90 As the mob approached chanting “No Popery” and “Remember, remember

87 The Brighton Examiner, Nov. 24, 1857.
88 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 21, 1857.
89 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 24, 1857.
90 The Sussex Express, Nov. 21, 1857.
the fifth of November", the vicious attack commenced.

Mr. Neale was hustled from the churchyard into the road, and during the process he was thrown down, and assailed with repeated raps on his collegiate cap; an operation generally described as 'bonneting.' Ultimately the cap was lost and the rev. gentlemen was left bare-headed, his gown was torn off his back, and was found the next morning on the premises of the railway station....The lanterns were broken and extinguished, the Sisters of Mercy thrown about, the priests had their surplices broken and torn from their shoulders, the graves were torn down, Mr. Neale... had to fly for his life, being pursued by nearly 1,000 persons, the majority of them tradesmen of Lewes.91

This unprincipled attack on the women religious illustrates how their identity became constructed more closely with religion than women. The citizens of Lewes identified the sisters with the threat of the 'Romish' church and disassociated them from other Victorian middle-class women. Rather than being afforded the protection other ladies would certainly expect, the sisters were tossed about and their clothes torn in a shameless disregard for their gender. In a public letter to The Times, Neale reflected on the astounding assault upon the sisters.

the strangest part of all was, that men, certainly in the garb of gentlemen, could stand by and see ladies dashed this way and that, their veils dragged off, and their dresses torn, and, far from rendering the least assistance, could actually excite the dregs of the rabble to further violence.92

The focus on clothes in both of the above passages indicates the significance attributed to attire. The mob attempted to disrobe Neale and literally to strip away the identity of the sisters by tearing at their clothes.

91 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 21, 1857; The Brighton Herald Nov. 21, 1857. The fifth of November, Guy Fakes Day, held special significance to the staunchly anti-Catholic citizens of Lewes, and they continue to hold one of the greatest celebrations of this day in Britain.

92 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 24, 1857.
As Neale and four of the sisters took shelter at the King’s Head Inn, the mob, now numbering “several hundred,” gathered outside. Neale, believing alcohol could still the raging mob, “placed a small sum of money in the hands of the landlord.”93 Not surprisingly, this had, however, “the opposite effect” as the crowd continued its chants. Inside the Inn the sisters remained undaunted as “they expressed a wish to go and face the mob, for they were certain there was no body of Englishmen that would do them injury, but Mr. Neale, suffering from fright, was of a different opinion and dissuaded them from it.”94 Although Neale’s biographer stated that “Neale could be recklessly provocative at times....[and that he] always refused to be intimidated by mobs,” it appears that on this particular occasion he felt God’s watchful eye may not have been all the protection he needed.95 While the mob outside continued its tempestuous cries—“We don’t want to hurt [the sisters], we want the Pope inside”—Neale made his escape: “Divesting himself of his cassock, that he might not be recognized, he succeeded in his shirt sleeves, of climbing over two walls, nine feet each, into some gardens.”96 As the sisters made their escape, one reporter noted, “The Sisters, although much frightened, were not much hurt, except from the crowding, some of their dresses, from the same cause however, were considerably torn.”97 Perhaps the sisters had been too generous in their estimation of the temerity of the mob, for as they were whisked away in a fly, they were mercilessly pelted with stones.

When Neale and Mother Gream returned from East Grinstead to Lewes the following day, the ferocity of the mob had not abated. Forced to flee to the White Hart Hotel, Neale and the Superior then “entered the fly and immediately the

93 Ibid.,
94 The Brighton Examiner, Nov. 24, 1857.
95 Lough, p 111.
96 The Brighton Examiner, Nov. 24, 1857.
97 Ibid.,
windows were smashed, and threats of violence greeted their ears on all sides....The fly was broken almost to pieces."98 The final blow occurred when Neale and Mother Gream boarded the train out of town. As Neale "leaned forward out the window...exhibiting a demeanor of the most determined bravado and defiance...several missiles struck the side of the carriage, and, as it appeared one hit Mr. Neale on the head."99 Although one witness noted that "the thing thrown was a quarter of a brick," the culprit, one Charles Rooke, "a man in a respectable position in life," was later acquitted in a public inquiry. "The Lewes crowd was so delighted with the verdict that they brought out the town band, which 'performed several tunes before Mr. Rooke's residence.'"100

As the band celebrated this victory over 'Popery,' the beleaguered sisterhood faced additional verbal attacks. The usurpation of Scobell’s parental authority by Mother Gream and Neale was sensationalised in Painful Account of the Perversion from Protestantism of Miss Scobell and her Untimely Fate. Mr. Paul Foskett, chairman of the Brighton Protestant Association, advised parents to be wary of the hidden Roman Catholic threat lurking in their midst, again suggesting that Amy had been the unwitting victim of a Popish conspiracy.

But shall not this sad occurrence put an end to all trifling? Parents and guardians, will you not pluck the young thought-less one from the deluding priests? Will you suffer the music, the glitter, the sham pomp, the pretended sanctity to mislead your offspring? It matters not whether called 'Anglican' or 'Roman' --THE THING’S THE SAME.101

To the Brighton Protestant Association, the dedicated nursing and devoted social work of the sisters was merely "trifling." The significance of the Lewes Riot, the

98 The Brighton Herald, Nov. 21, 1857.
99 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 24, 1857; See also Lough.
100 Quoted in Lough, p 111.
101 Quoted in The Brighton Gazette, 26 November, 1857; Lough, p 112.
Association declared, lay in its warning to parents to control their rebellious youth.

While the events surrounding Amy's death certainly resulted in heightened local opposition toward St. Margaret's, former supporters of the sisterhood, most notably clerical support, also fell off. Bishop Gilbert of Chichester, who referred to Neale as "that infatuated man" withdrew his position as district Visitor despite attempts by Mother Ann to explain the sisterhood's position. Neale lamented that it was strange "to find the Bishop of the Diocese appearing to endorse, certainly not thinking it fit to condemn, the proceedings of a savage mob at Lewes" As Sister Miriam noted in her memoirs, the immediate ramifications of the scandal were profound:

- Donations ceased, subscriptions were dropped, and not least perplexing and unpleasant at the time, their landlord, a dissenter, gave the Sisters notice to quit at the ensuing midsummer, as his conscientious scruples forbade his longer retaining them as tenants.

Despite such hardships the sisters were eventually able to secure lodgings and the community prospered. As was the situation at many early sisterhoods, public recognition of the sisters' work helped enable the success of St. Margaret's. The Sussex Advertiser, critical of the 'Puseyite' tendencies of the sisterhood, did however note that "Whatever opinion may be entertained as to the course of secluded life adopted by the sisters--their devotedness and self-denial...as voluntary nurses...must command due respect."

The community refused to be distracted by a lack of public support as an orphanage commenced in 1858, a school was opened in 1862, and two years later a daughter house was opened in Aberdeen.

102 Lough, p 112.
104 Memoir p 125d, Quoted in Lough p 113.
105 The Sussex Advertiser, Nov. 24, 1857.
The Lewes Riot illustrates several of the problems experienced by early sisterhoods. Members of the community within which the sisterhood was located were often ignorant, and thus suspicious, of the Anglican affiliation of the orders. The fact that the Bishop of Chichester served as Visitor at St. Margaret's prior to the uprising should have signified that the sisterhood was affiliated with the Established Church; however, this affiliation seems not to have affected the sisterhood's public representation as a "Romish" society. This perception was further heightened by the lack of support from prominent Church of England clergy after the riot, as was displayed by Bishop Gilbert. The incidents at Lewes also reveal that public opposition was based on fears surrounding women's rights. Although Amy was a mature woman capable of making her own choices, local reporters, and her father in particular, continued to portray her as a rebellious child. At the same time as being viewed as disobedient, Amy was also perceived as an innocent victim. By enabling Amy to free herself from parental authority, pursue an active career, and dispose of her inheritance as she saw fit, the sisterhood was publicly perceived as kidnapping her and sending her to a tragic death - but not before maliciously robbing her. Here the distinction between anti-Catholic-inspired criticism and anti-feminist criticism becomes blurred. By removing Amy from the centre of the scandal and portraying her as a pawn of the church, her agency was denied; however, the central problem at Lewes was not that a woman had died in the line of duty, but that she had disobeyed her father and disposed of her own property without his permission. In this regard the strong anti-Catholic sentiment at Lewes became a convenient springboard from which to attack women's freedoms.
The Lewes riot caused the ambiguities surrounding not only the vow of poverty and the control of property in sisterhoods, but also the government of these societies, to become the concern of the Church hierarchy as well as of the state. At the Church Convocation of 1861 the Rev. R. Seymour commented on the problems with sisterhoods: "I am persuaded that the scandalous proceedings at Devonport, at Lewes, and elsewhere, in connection with these institutions, are to be attributed to the fact that the Church of England has at present no rules for the ordering of such institutions." Seymour's concerns, and his proposed solution, illustrate that the clergy believed that women were unable to control religious orders and that if left in the hands of Mother Superiors instead of the clergy, public opposition toward these societies would continue to create problems.

Attempts to understand and control religious orders, and specifically to determine and regulate the principles embodied in the vow of poverty, were manifest in the Parliamentary Committee of 1870-71, established to investigate female religious houses. Charles Newdegate, MP for North Warwickshire from 1843 to 1885, and a staunch anti-Catholic, repeatedly requested that such an investigation take place. In 1866 he proclaimed that "History and the current events of the time warn that unless the civil power had free and ready scope within these convents, they ought not to be permitted to exist." In 1870, he was successful in his proposal to the House of Commons that in the manner of lunatic asylums, A select committee be appointed to inquire into the state of law respecting Conventual and Monastic Institutions of Societies in Great Britain, and into the terms upon which income, property, and estates, belonging to such Institutions or Societies, or to Members therof are

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106 Quoted in Ailchin, p 158.

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respectively received, held, or possessed. 108

Although most of the orders to be investigated were Roman Catholic, four inspectors were called to investigate and report upon Anglican sisterhoods. The Committee proclaimed a threefold agenda: to determine if sisterhoods belonged to the Church of England, what the property arrangements of the sisters were, and to give an indication of the financial position of religious orders. 109 The objectives of the Committee, while ostensibly designed to investigate the church’s control of sisters’ property, also served to ensure the sisters’ property rights. Because the Committee feared the church usurping women’s property, it unwittingly helped to sanction women’s property rights within sisterhoods.

The Committee revealed that the sisters of All Saints retained control of their own property through a communal trust held by the treasurer of the sisterhood, and that they were at liberty to make contributions to the sisterhood. The exchange between committee member Talbot and the solicitor at All Saints, Mr. Ford, demonstrates the insistent tone adopted by the committee concerning the sisters’ freedoms:

Talbot: “With regard to property, though the rules distinctly provide that the members shall not be able to keep any part of the common property, there is nothing in the rules which prevents any woman from continuing to hold her own personal property is there?”
Ford: “Nothing whatever.”
Talbot: “So that this community entirely differs from any community where every person on entering gives up all private property?”
Ford: “Yes, there is no such relinquishment of private property in this case, and I know of my own knowledge that they do retain their property, because I have been

108 ‘Report from the Select Committee on Conventual and Monastic Institutions’, p ii. Quoted in Allchin p 176. As Prime Minister, it was actually Mr. Gladstone’s committee rather than Newdegate’s; however, The Guardian reported, “Mr. Gladstone wanted no committee at all.” 4 May 1870, p 501, Allchin, p 177. Gladstone and Bishop Wilberforce were trustees at Clewer.
109 Quoted in Allchin, pp 177-8.
asked to make wills and deeds of gift for the sisters.”

Talbot: “There is nothing in those rules which makes it compulsory on any of the sisters to contribute anything?”

Ford: “Nothing” 110

Despite the Committee’s belief that All Saints’ was unique in its property arrangements, it was further ascertained that the sisters at Clewer also retained their property rights. At Clewer sisters could pay £50 yearly if they were able, however, Freeman, solicitor at Clewer, commented that “of course the sisters can, if they think fit, give more than £50 a year to the common fund, and some do, I believe.” 111

When the committee Chairman inquired: “They are under no obligation to pay to the common fund, whatever they may receive after joining?” Freeman replied: “No.” Although the sisters did not hold any property individually, it was revealed that the sisterhood held no control over the actual disposition of the sisters’ private property as in this order as well, common property and funds were held in trust.

The Committee succeeded in its objective to understand the financial arrangements of sisterhoods, but did not, much to Newdegate’s displeasure, succeed in transferring control of these arrangements from the sisterhood to societies of laymen. As Susan Mumm observers, “[s]ister’s own incomes were the primary means of support for most communities” and in this sense sisterhoods refused to sacrifice the administration of their finances entirely to outside committees or clerical control.112

The clearest example of sisters demanding control of their finances occurred at the Community of All Hallows. This community was originally managed by a council of some thirty members, composed of clergy and country gentry whose function was “To administer the finances and direct the policy of the

110 Ibid., p. 178, See also Arnstein.

111 Report p 190. Quoted in Allchin, p 178. Entry fees had certainly been reduced since Mary Astell proposed a fee of £500-600 p.a. See Bridget Hill, p 108.

112 Mumm, chap. 5, p 32. See chap. 5, pp 27-37 for a detailed discussion of the financial arrangements at individual sisterhoods.
institution." All Hallows’ Mother Superior, Lavinia Crosse, had already displayed her mettle when she refused to allow the Council to alter the sisters’ dress and she proved as resilient an opponent when, in 1866, control of the sisterhood’s finances were at stake. As the Council mismanaged the sisterhood’s funds and ran up a debt of £400, Lavinia, who had “inherited her father’s determination,” became angered at the “undue interference in the internal affairs of the house, and ‘with her management or authority.’” Succumbing to Lavinia’s demands, the Council dissolved the Finance Committee and the Mother Superior successfully assumed its former responsibilities, quickly restoring the books and turning a surplus. As the events at All Hallows reveal, the vow of poverty not only led to the creation of a communal fund within sisterhoods, but it also enabled the sisters to control their collective assets.

The vow of poverty represented the spiritual devotion of Anglican sisters as manifested by the abolition of material possessions. By freeing themselves of the primary symbol of middle-class womanhood - appearance - and living in similar conditions to those among whom they worked, sisters threatened Victorian assumptions about gender and class roles. These visible manifestations of poverty were highly significant in the construction of sisters’ identities. The dress of the sisters distinguished them from other women and challenged conceptions of female appearance and morality. By choosing to live in an environment that many Victorian ladies considered unthinkable, sisters again negated traditional class distinctions and were perceived as challenging materialistic culture. The less obvious manifestation of the vow of poverty, the regulation of sisters’ property, allowed these women to retain legal property rights which eluded married women.

113 Sister Violet, p 11.
114 Quoted in Ibid., pp 11, 18.
115 Ibid., By 1872 the Council dissolved itself, realising the sisters demanded managerial autonomy, p 18.
As exemplified by the events at Lewes, these property rights contested paternal authority and provoked further opposition toward sisterhoods. However, as Priscilla Sellon had asserted, women had as much right to control their possessions as they did to determine their lifestyles. The vow of poverty, through its various manifestations, allowed sisters, figuratively and literally to build independent lives for themselves. As well, as illustrated by the Parliamentary Committee of 1870-71, the debates which focused upon this vow brought public attention to the issue of sisters' rights to control their own property and thus to women's property rights in general.
When Jane Ellacombe joined with Mary Bruce and Sarah Anne Terrot to establish the first sisterhood in the Church of England, they believed that by organizing themselves within a religious community they could not only perform meaningful work, but could also embrace, in the words of Jane, "a higher and holier state" in which to devote themselves to God. Their efforts however, could not overshadow their appearance, as their neighbours withdrew from these "Romish" sisters in their midst. As sisters proved capable workers in times of local crisis, as through the efforts of the Devonport Society during the cholera epidemic of 1849, they became accepted for their dedicated service. Alongside this gradual approval for the public function of sisterhoods however, existed a refusal to sanction their internal organization, as was exemplified by the persecution which faced Priscilla Sellon during the public inquiry of the same year. The trials of the first sisters at Park Village and Devonport present a microcosm of the general experiences of sisterhoods within their first twenty-five years. While the sisters gained increasing respect for their work, they could not however, earn public acceptance for their lifestyle and identity and continued to be branded as unruly religious fanatics, tarred with the brush of "Puseyite" Anglo-Catholicism.

While the perceived Catholic nature of sisterhoods incited widespread opposition, the considerable freedoms which sisterhoods offered women also provoked much public hostility. As Catherine Prelinger observes,

On the surface the issue of sisterhoods functioned as a dimension of the High Church/Low Church controversy; beneath the surface, however, often quite explicitly, the debate concerned the place of women in the family and
the authority of the family within society at large.¹

By challenging the nature of women’s position in society, sisterhoods threatened the authority of the patriarchal family and espoused the right of women to govern themselves. Rather than being conceived as devout women serving God, sisters were reconstructed as a threat to woman’s mission. Their lifestyles rejected marriage, motherhood, and men, thus appearing to undermine Victorian middle-class culture. In addition, they advocated women’s right to live communally and to work in the public world without male control. They refused to obey the church hierarchy and, when they lost its support, they continued to exist on their own terms. Despite repeated attempts to control them, as evidenced by Newdegate’s Parliamentary Commission and the Church Congresses, sisterhoods maintained their governmental and organisational autonomy.

In their advocacy of women’s right to autonomous lifestyles, sisters should be regarded as advancing the principles of Victorian feminism. In her discussion of nineteenth-century feminism, Nancy Hardesty states that

*Feminism* can be defined as a belief in and commitment to the moral and social autonomy of individuals male and female. It is a commitment to woman’s freedom to choose her own destiny apart from sex-determined roles, society’s rules, or any of the social relations in which she participates.²

Anglican sisters did not maintain that all women were oppressed by the social and political institutions of the Victorian world. Nor did they believe that these institutions needed to be dramatically overhauled to give women equal rights with

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² Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1984) p 9. Although the term feminism is anachronistic to the mid-1800s, many historians nevertheless employ it to discuss women of this era.
men. They did not, as did many Victorian feminists, actively campaign for, and explicitly write about, women’s emancipation. They did, however, as indicated by their activities, believe that women had the right to “choose her own destiny” even if this destiny transgressed the traditional boundaries of woman’s sphere. Through their vows of Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty they liberated themselves from male control of their minds, activities, bodies, and property.

The historiography of nineteenth-century feminism has paid scant attention to the experiences of women religious.3 Traditional approaches toward Victorian feminists have focused on pioneering individuals such as Francis Power Cobbe and Florence Nightingale, and on such organized political campaigns as the suffrage movement and the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act.4 Women religious have primarily been viewed as being governed by the Church hierarchy and have thus been largely excluded. Although Anglican sisterhoods were organised communities of women, their religious, rather than political, motivation has excluded them from being considered as espousing the principles of feminism. As Deborah Valenze notes, “Historiography has tended to place religion and politics within a hierarchy running from primitive to modern, attributing to religion an embryonic consciousness.”5 As women’s history continues to seek out new approaches, scholars are focusing on “woman’s emancipation” as a form of feminism distinct from “woman’s rights.”6 In this light, Victorian women’s


religiosity has assumed a prominent position in understanding how women used their faith to articulate and transform their identities.

Although Anglican sisterhoods have not been historically represented as feminist organizations, the actions of the sisters often embody implicit or explicit feminist principles. While the writing of these women was often veiled in the language of Christianity, with an emphasis on self-sacrifice and the surrendering of oneself to God, the feminism of sisters can often be unearthed from their actions. As Philippa Levine observes, “Victorian feminists appear as doing rather than as developing ideas.”

Independence from family was crucial for the development of a nineteenth-century feminist consciousness. By pledging the vow of obedience, Anglican sisters liberated themselves from patriarchal control. Sister Emelia’s decision to become a sister at the age of fifty against her family’s wishes indicated her belief that only by freeing herself from the oppressive restrictions of her family could she achieve independence and a sense of self-worth from her work. According to Levine, “The institution of the family was central to women’s subjugation and it was the specific oppressions it imposed on which much feminist campaigns devolved.”

Sister Amy’s assertive behaviour must also be seen as advocating such feminist ideals. In her quest for a meaningful existence and freedom from patriarchal authority, Amy broke away from an oppressive father and demanded that she could determine her own way of life. Although Amy’s story is a tragic one, it must also have been an inspiration to other women who felt cloistered by a repressive family environment.

In order to abandon family ties and thus pursue independent lives, Anglican sisters required extraordinary faith. Such faith enabled Marian Hughes to pledge her

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8 Levine, p 9.
vow of chastity in 1841 and to devote the next ten years of her life to preparing for
the religious life. It also afforded Harriet Monsell the strength to establish a
sisterhood and guide the sisters in her care upon the death of her husband.
Katherine Moore reveals how Victorian women’s faith enabled them to carve out
careers for themselves: “the first impetus towards vocational training for women in
nursing and pioneer medical work, in teaching and in social service in the Victorian
age sprang from their faith.” For some sisters, this faith translated into a higher
sense of purpose, an identity which enabled them to find security and power in their
new life. Mother Kate exemplified this power as she bore witness to the feeling she
had “to do and to dare everything and anything.”

Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin speak of the nineteenth century
as an important watershed in the history of traditional models of women’s
leadership, which derived from holiness and were often expressed in monastic
form: “through holiness and ecstasy a woman transcends ‘nature’ and participates
in the eschatological sphere.” This transcending of “nature” was illustrated by
Sister Catherine’s sense of purpose: “It is such a wonderful goodness and love to be
chosen to work among those devoted to His service,—to lead an angel’s life on
earth.” For sisters such as Kate and Catherine, faith provided power and self-
confidence. By its insistence that women were the more spiritual sex, Victorian
middle-class culture provided sisters a powerful tool for self-fulfillment. As Levine
explains: “The nineteenth-century women’s movement was discovering a pride in
its female identity, and its campaigns were concerned as much with promoting that

9 Katherine Moore, She For God: Aspects of Women and Christianity (London: Allison and Busby Ltd,
10 Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds. Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish
11 Quoted in James Spurrell, “Miss Sellon and the ‘Sisters of Mercy.’ An Exposure of the Constitution,
Rules, Religious Views, and Practical Working of their Society; obtained through a ‘sister’ who had
recently succeeded” (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1852) p 10.

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optimistic self-image as with a simple call for equality with men.”^{12} Through their faith, sisters were able to celebrate their accomplishments and their womanhood.

Faith not only liberated sisters spiritually, but also sexually. By gaining sexual freedom through the vow of chastity, sisters liberated themselves from being treated as sexual objects. This sexual freedom represents a significant aspect of feminism, as, according to Mary Maynard, “it could be argued that freedom from being treated as continually sexually available to men is an important aspect of developing autonomy and freedom.”^{13} For Jane Ellacombe and Marian Hughes, their decisions to embark upon a celibate life allowed them the freedom to pursue an independent life. Significantly, for both these religious pioneers, it was the devotion of their bodies to Christ, and thus the control of their own sexuality, that led them to the religious life. With their vow of chastity, sisters reconstructed the emphasis on women’s purity to celebrate the ennobling power of virginity.

Freed from the confines of domesticity and male sexual control, Anglican sisters were able to put into practise what many Victorian feminists demanded: the right to work in productive professions and become financially independent. Although they were not paid for their efforts their work was not simply an extension of philanthropy, as sisterhood life gave them complete economic independence and control of their own labour. They used the belief that women were to act as the moral regenerators of the nation to extend their mission into the public sphere. In her assertion that sisters were not “mere ladies,” Priscilla Sellon argued for the right of sisters to work where “ladies” could not. Sellon reinterpreted the emphasis on female moral superiority to differentiate sisters from “mere ladies.” In doing so, she legitimised their right to full-time work. By lamenting that

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"respectability [was] an idol" Sellon argued for the right of sisters to live according to the vow of poverty, and, in so doing, supported the sisters' rights to control their own property. While other Victorian feminists challenged women's legal inequalities through organised campaigns, sisters circumvented the legal system by creating their own system which they controlled.

Theoretically, Anglican sisters did not reject Victorian domestic ideology. Instead, they capitalised on the emphasis on women's religiosity to legitimise their calling to God. Once they established the right to exist as women religious, they utilised the belief in women's "moral supremacy" and "missionary zeal" to work in the public sphere in a full-time capacity, thus rejecting in practice the cultural emphasis on 'separate spheres'. They were aware that by embracing the argument that women were spiritually superior, they could gain control of their lives by "subjecting" their lives to God. By arguing that sisters were not equal to men, but were in certain ways superior, they were able to challenge male power from within the dominant ideology.14

Despite the new trends in considering female religiosity as an important aspect of Victorian feminism, historians and feminist scholars still largely refuse to conceive of women religious as feminists in any capacity.15 There seems to be a self-conscious reticence to link such women with the word feminist at all. At a recent synod on religious orders in Rome, the 245 bishops in attendance focused on the role of nuns in the church. The reporter noted that "[t]he word "feminism" was not used at the conference. Instead the participants spoke of "women's issues."16

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14 Joan Scott, *Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism* Feminist Studies 14:1 (Spring 1988) Scott asserts that "Power is constructed on and so must be challenged on the ground of difference." p 48.

15 Hill remarks that "sisterhoods can be seen as representing limited but explicitly feminist goals." p 277. Dougherty maintains that while not all deaconesses were religious feminists, her study presents their movement as an example of religious feminism. p 93.

16 "Nuns 'scratching' route to more power in church" *The Vancouver Sun*, Oct. 30, 1995.
While it is to be expected that the Victorians would not refer to Anglican sisters as feminists, the refusal of current historians to refer to these women as such suggests an inability, or an unwillingness, to peel back the layers of Christian rhetoric which surrounding sisters to focus on the principles they espoused through their activities. These principles, articulated through the vows of Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty, enabled Anglican sisters to achieve self-determined, and self-governed lifestyles which ran counter to those which otherwise controlled women in Victorian England. As a priest observing the recent synod pointed out, "the three traditional vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience, which may seem considerable deprivations in the West, can all offer an improvement in the condition of women in the Third World."17 These "deprivations," which continue to liberate women today, brought substantial freedoms to nineteenth-century Anglican sisters. According to Martha Vicinus, "Life within a religious community, at its best, was a living example of the Christian paradox that to lose one's life for others was to gain it."18 By gaining control of their own lives, sisters proved to English society that women were capable of self-government. Sisterhoods offered women rewarding, independent lifestyles in which their faith could liberate rather than constrain them. As Dinah Murlock Craik recognised their significant contribution to women's emancipation in the 1880s, so must historians of women religious today.

When our Protestant horror of [conventual establishments] has a little subsided, we may learn--indeed, in many instances we are already learning--to eliminate the good from the evil, and make use of, without abusing it, Hamlet's not altogether unwise advice to Ophelia, 'Go, get thee to a nunnery--go--go--go!'19

17 The Vancouver Sun, Oct. 30, 1995.
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