Hotbeds of Popery: Convents in the English Literary Imagination

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I never saw you in the gay apparel of the world; but surely, no dress could give a greater force to your charms than that which it is your lot to wear. The habit of parade and fashion may add a more dazzling glare to the beauties of feature and complexion; but where personal charms are heightened by the graces of character, the simple garb in which Religion has clad your heavenly form gives to loveliness its full force, and fixes attention to its best object. The snowy robe, which hangs in ample folds around you, gives a simple, awful, yet winning dignity which all the luxury of the loom could not afford; and the black transparent veil, which, while it hides nothing, sets off every thing, and would make a homely countenance interesting,—alas! what is its office when it floats around your countenance![1]

Anti-Catholicism and Eighteenth-Century Culture

It seems consonant to reason, that the religion of every country should have a relation to, and coherence with, the civil constitution: the Romish religion is best adapted to a despotic government, the presbyterian to a republican, and that of the church of England to a limited monarchy like ours.[2]

As a political phenomenon, late eighteenth-century anti-Catholicism was primarily concerned with a perceived pro-Catholic lobby in government. In fiction, however, it figured more often in the topos of the nunnery. Nevertheless, *The History of Emily Montague* suggests that more than a coincidental connection existed between

1 According to the title page, "Translated from the French of J. J. Rousseau," *Letters of an Italian Nun and an English Gentleman*, 2nd ed. (London, 1784). This is, however, a false attribution: Michael Wheeler attributes it to William Combe, "Transforming the Literary Landscape: Jane Austen and Her Sisters at Chawton House Library," Inaugural Lecture at the University of Southampton (28 February 2001): http://www.pemberley.com/mwheeler.html. I would like to thank the Mrs Giles Whiting Foundation for funding the leave during which I was able to prepare this article.

2 Frances Brooke, *The History of Emily Montague*, 4 vols (London: J. Dodsley, 1769), 2:207. References are to this edition.

the two. *Emily Montague* is a travelogue and a political and cultural commentary thinly disguised as a sentimental novel. It is composed mainly out of the letters of Bella Fermor and Edward Rivers in Quebec to Lucy Rivers in England, and from Bella's father (author of the letter quoted above) to the Earl of ___, also from Canada to England. The skeletal plot culminates with the reunion of putative orphan Emily with her father, a merchant in the West Indies, who had placed her in a convent in France when she was a young child. This was apparently common practice at the time, and in this article I will study a series of novels in which sending or abducting an English girl to a French convent was a central plot device; *Emily Montague* is unusual because it placed that fictional device within the broader discourse of mainstream eighteenth-century anti-Catholicism. The letters written from Quebec, ceded to Britain six years earlier by the Treaty of Paris, reflect Brooke's own travels there with her husband; at the same time, they used the opportunity to comment on possible combinations of religion and government, another way to juxtapose the three choices offered by France, the American colonies, and England.[3] Equating types of faith with types of government, cited above, was not unusual; what was unusual was its appearance in a fictional framework that simultaneously broached questions of women's autonomy as a contrast between forced marriage and the convent on the one hand, and free choice and liberty on the other. This article presents a detailed anatomy of these and similar issues within a little-studied series of convent novels published in England between 1765 and 1800. Following a summary of the main features of anti-Catholicism during the same period, this study addresses some of the tensions that came into play when religious differences were

3 For more on *The History of Emily Montague* as the "first Canadian novel," see Carl F. Klinck, "The History of Emily Montague: An Early Novel," intro., *The History of Emily Montague* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961); Lorraine McMullen, *An Odd Attempt in a Woman: The Literary Life of Frances Brooke* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983); Mary Jane Edwards, "*The History of Emily Montague*: A Political Novel," *The Canadian Novel*, ed. John Moss, in *Beginnings: A Critical Anthology* (Toronto: NC Press, 1984), 2:19–27; Linda Shohet, "An Essay on the History of Emily Montague," Moss, pp. 28–34; Pilar Cuder-Dominguez, "Negotiations of Gender and Nationhood in Early Canadian Literature," *International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue Internationale d'Études Canadiennes* 18 (Fall 1998), 115–31; Juliet McMaster, "Young Jane Austen and the First Canadian Novel: From *Emily Montague* to 'Amelia Webster' and *Love and Freindship*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11:3 (April 1999), 339–46; Heinz Antor, "The International Contexts of Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769)," *English Literatures in International Contexts*, ed. and intro. Antor and Klaus Stierstorfer (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 2000), pp. 245–77.

represented in works of popular fiction: nation-building, fertility as a resource, and the problem of celibacy; women's self-determination; the dilemma posed by Continental education; marriage and the paucity of viable alternatives to it.[4]

The eminently Roman Catholic convent was a highly charged and complex literary topic throughout the century, appearing time and again as a place of imprisonment, synonym of forbidden love, a metaphor for dangerous sexual practices, an excuse for seduction, elopement, rape, abortion, madness, suicide, and murder: the epitome of injustice, arbitrary power, and inhumanity. Although figuring as a distant and exotic locale, it was also dangerously near and therefore a threatening possibility, easily found in France, as well as Ireland and the newly acquired French Canadian territories. For the English reader (and writer) of fiction, the convent served as shorthand for the antithesis of reasonable, Protestant, enlightened, middle-class values, but the convent was a place, nevertheless, to which Protestant English women could all too easily be sent or forcibly taken, confined, and, most alarmingly, once confined there, forced into conversion.

A convent was the setting for plays, poems, and novels; convents were shamelessly employed as a way to spice up a night at the theatre, or hype the wares of the circulating library by promising customers an extra bit of titillation—a ruse that seems to have worked quite well, for the most part. This phenomenon appeared as early as 1673, when Dryden in the epilogue to *The Assignation: Or, Love in a Nunnery* pointedly satirized the lurid appetite of the English audience for convent lore, classifying the type of fare an audience would anticipate when promised the adventures of nuns in convents:

> Some have expected from our bills to day
> To find a satyre in our poets play
> The zealous Rout from Coleman-Street did run,
> To see the story of the Fryer and the Nun.
> Or tales, yet more Ridiculous to hear,
> Vouch'd by their Vicar of Ten pounds a year;
> Of Nuns, who did against temptation Pray,

4 I use the term "convent novels" to refer exclusively to those epistolary novels of sentiment written in England during the second half of the eighteenth century. The series of erotic convent novels of the first half of the century and the end of the seventeenth, for example, have a different set of concerns, including all-French casts of characters, and are neither particularly anti-Catholic nor particularly concerned with issues of women's autonomy.

And Discipline laid on the Pleasant way:
Or that to please the Malice of the Town,
Our Poet should in some close Cell have shown
Some Sister, Playing at Content alone:
This they did hope; the other side did fear,
And both you see alike are Couzen'd here.
Some thought the Title of our Play to blame,
They lik'd the thing, but yet abhor'd the Name ...[5]

Three significant commonplaces about the convent are brought to the fore in this epilogue, significant because they persisted practically unchanged through the end of the eighteenth century, continuing, for example, to underpin the ideology of the Gothic novel a hundred years after Dryden. First, the idea of the convent aroused immediate expectation of sexual content: "the story of the Fryer and the Nun," "Nuns who did against temptation Pray," "Discipline laid on the Pleasant way," and Sisters "Playing at Content alone."[6] Second, the staunchly Protestant and anti-Catholic middle classes derived satisfaction from seeing what happened there: "The zealous Rout from Coleman-Street" (Protestants from the City of London) and "their Vicar of Ten pounds a year." Third, the convent motif had commercial value: the combination of titillation and religious ideology was frequently exploited for its ability to increase theatre attendance and book circulation.

The convent possesses a long literary history, from its appearance in such late medieval collections as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–51) and the late fifteenth-century *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, to the enduring popularity of the story of Abelard and Heloïse—Pope's verse retelling, *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), was much read throughout the eighteenth century. The convent has provided a site for amorous encounters, forced and broken vows, sacrificed youth, and unrequited love. Diderot brought another set of problems to the fore for the late eighteenth century in *La Religieuse* (written in 1760 and published

5 John Dryden, *The Assignation: Or, Love in a Nunnery* (London, 1673), p. 76.

6 "Discipline" means flagellation. "The word *Discipline* originally signified, in general, the censures and corrections which persons who were guilty of Sins, received from their Superiors; and when *Flagellation* was to be part of those corrections, it was expressly mentioned ... As Flagellation grew afterwords to be the common method of doing penance that prevailed among persons in religious Orders, the bare word *discipline* became in course of time the technical word to express that kind of chastisment." *Memorials of Human Superstition; Being a Paraphrase and Commentary on the Historia Flagellantium of the Abbé Boileau, Doctor of the Sorbonne, Canon of the Holy Chapel, &c.* By one who is not Doctor of the Sorbonne, 2nd ed. (London: G. Robinson, 1784), p. 19.

posthumously in 1796). In his novel, the superstition, sadism, and repressed desire that dominate convent life are the principal consequences of contradicting the laws of nature; most of Diderot's nuns were in the convent against their will. Clearly, the existence of Roman Catholic convents was controversial to enlightened French and English men and women—one of the earliest measures taken by the revolutionary government after 1789 was to abolish them. The theme of the nunnery in popular culture certainly participated in this discourse of enlightenment. Nevertheless, there is no clear-cut division between the expression of rational disapproval and the time-honoured sensationalism that was equally its stock in trade.

Four specific literary genres during the eighteenth century relied heavily on the convent setting: the theatre, the poetry of the ruined abbey, the Gothic novel, and a final category never identified as such: a group of novels sharing elements with the other three but which constitutes a distinct usage of the setting. This article is primarily devoted to this last group, which I term "convent novels." All were published after 1760, but they are clearly distinct from the Gothic novels of the last two decades of the century.[7] Although I will touch on the latter, they are not the primary focus of this article because critically, in recent years, they have been extensively studied.[8] The primarily French libertine novel, which also frequently uses the convent as a setting and shares some features with these English

7 Many episodes in Gothic novels take place in convents and frequently involve malevolent priests. Some of the best-known examples are Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (1796), Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian* (1797), and Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). A study of Ann B. Tracy's index, *The Gothic Novel 1790–1930: Plot Summaries and Index to Motifs* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), yielded the following statistics: sixty-five entries for "convent," thirty for "clergymen, evil," and seventeen for "abbess, bad."

8 Several critics have discussed Roman Catholicism in the Gothic; for a comprehensive study see Sister Mary Muriel Tarr, *Catholicism in Gothic Fiction: A Study of the Nature and Function of Catholic Materials in Gothic Fiction in England (1762–1820)* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1946). Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall identify and try to right a trend in recent criticism towards a psychologization of the Gothic novel at the expense of the historical that sees its religious biases as a quirk best explained away or as a detail to be mentioned in passing. "Gothic Criticism," *The Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209–28. Baldick and Mighall observe that up to the date of J.M.S. Tompkins's standard study, *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (London: Constable, 1932), "it was well understood that anti-Catholic satire was a major feature of early Gothic fiction and that Protestant readers found these novels welcome as endorsements of what Tompkins calls their complacency in their liberation from priestcraft, vulgar superstition and popish persecution" (p. 216).

fictions, has been equally studied.[9] The novels here discussed are all English, mainly epistolary and sentimental in the Richardsonian style, and their authors, when known, are women: *The History of Indiana Danby* (1765); Brooke, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769); *Anecdotes of a Convent* (1771); Phebe Gibbes (attr.), *The American Fugitive: Or, Friendship in a Nunnery* (1778); Anne Fuller (attr.), *The Convent, Or the History of Sophia Nelson* (1786); Agnes Maria Bennett (attr.), *De Valcourt* (1800). These novels were written during a period when the anti-Catholic consensus in England was beginning to break down.[10] By then, the Stuart restoration was an impossibility, and those in government showed a marked increase in tolerance towards Roman Catholics (attested by the Quebec Act of 1774 and the first and second Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791, respectively); nevertheless, anti-Catholic feeling was still strong in the countryside and among the Whig merchant middle class and most Protestant Dissenters. This contradiction between policy and popular sentiment erupted with the Gordon Riots in 1780, which testified to the strong anti-Catholic feeling still present in the last decades of the century.[11]

9 The best-known libertine novel is *Venus in the Cloister; Or, The Nun in her Smock*, translated from the French (*Vénus dans le cloître*, variously attributed to Jean Barrin or François de Chavigny de la Bretonnière), and well circulated in England (London: [Edmund Curll], 1725). This genre of libertine novel was common in France. In England, "soft-core" variations were published mostly in the first half of the century. In these English novels, which like the Gothic mostly take place on the Continent—primarily France—the principal concern is the consummation of love, and the driving force is desire, which permeates the language as well as the plotting. Some examples include Aphra Behn, *The History of the Nun: or, the Fair Vow-Breaker* (1688); *Nunnery Tales written by a young nobleman and translated from his French manuscript into English* (1727); Eliza Haywood, *Clementina; or, the History of an Italian Lady, who made her escape from a Monastery, for the love of a Scots Nobleman* (1728; reprint under this title, 1768).

10 Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1714–80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 164–203. This is probably one of the most comprehensive and useful studies of anti-Catholicism in England in the eighteenth century currently available, and much of my summary of the historical situation is indebted to it.

11 In a seminal essay, "The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and Their Victims," George Rudé tried to move away from a religious anti-Catholic interpretation of the Riots, giving it instead a class interpretation. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 6 (1956). Younger historians have recently begun to contest this interpretation: they have tried to restore religion to its place and move away from the secularizing ideology that informed most twentieth-century historiography. See, for example, Jeremy Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies: Anglo-French Relations in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1986); J.D.C. Clark, *English Society 1660–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). As Black succinctly puts the issue: "Anti-Catholicism was the prime ideological stance in eighteenth-century Britain." *The British*

These novels were published during a specific historical climate in which the issues they raised were ripe for renewed debate but were also able to appeal to a deep-seated affinity to the clichés they echoed.

The standard set-up in the novels is as follows: the heroine, a young Englishwoman, is taken to a convent in France by a relative or guardian who is either mean-spirited, tyrannical, greedy, or simply uninterested in his or her daughter's general welfare. The association of Roman Catholicism with patriarchal despotism and France is unmistakable, while liberty, benign government, and England present the reader with the other side of the equation. Accordingly, despotic relatives unable to abuse their daughters with impunity at home could always have recourse to France geographically, and by extension ideologically, if they chose to do so. Popery was always in league with despotism against justice and fairness—a fairly common view of the Roman Catholic Church in the eighteenth century, just as the despotic parent was a fairly common feature of the sentimental novel—but it was a view constructed in a peculiarly local manner in the convent novels. Unlike earlier versions of the convent, or, most notoriously, in the contemporaneous Gothic novel where this despotism was practised on the Continent and thus among the natives, these novels portrayed the dangers of popery for Englishmen and women at home. The self-congratulatory exoticism of the Gothic that provided enjoyable fear and suspense at a safe distance was in sharp contrast with the "realistic" depiction of the dangers that contemporary, unmarried, young Englishwomen were portrayed as being subject to in the convent novel: here, being English and Protestant was in no way a safeguard. A short trip across the Channel and all civil liberties were suspended, especially for a female victim. These novels were underpinned by an entirely different ideological agenda from earlier anti-Catholicism or the Gothic. This agenda merits further scrutiny: why did this particular variation appear in the well-worn tale of the convent after the middle of the century, and in the very decades when the English government was moving towards an easing of the social and religious conditions of Papists at home? What is the relation, if any, between these two events, and why was this change of policy represented as being particularly threatening to women?

In hindsight, the reality of the "Popish threat" in England is difficult to assess, as well as the extent of anti-Catholic sentiment that English-

Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 238.

men and women experienced throughout much of the century.[12] It is, for example, difficult to determine the degree to which these fears were a national response to a real threat or were caused by paranoia and religious bigotry fanned by political opportunism; likewise, it is difficult to gauge how widespread these fears actually were. In the first instance and from the broader political picture, the possible restoration of the exiled Stuarts in the eighteenth century, coupled with the belief that the restoration would lead to popery being re-established by force, constituted a somewhat realistic threat, at least until after the second Jacobite uprising in 1745. The threat was reinforced when the Holy See did not recognize the Hanoverian monarchs until 1766, the date of the death of James, the Old Pretender.[13] This Stuart restoration would have been effected most certainly by a combination of foreign intervention—with the help of the French, and perhaps the Spanish—and plotting papists at home, the latter the most disturbing element for its opponents. The final Jacobite attempt came in 1759, backed by Louis XV's secretary of state, the duc de Choiseul; after that attempt, Jacobitism became a lost cause and the reinstatement of popery a highly unlikely event.[14]

Nevertheless, during the late 1760s, William Payne, who called himself the "Protestant carpenter," made it his job to uncover and denounce popish priests. In 1767, he managed to have John Baptist Maloney sentenced to life imprisonment for saying Mass (Maloney was later pardoned and exiled) and received a £100 reward for denouncing him.[15] Just a few years later the government passed the Quebec Act (1774), which gave Roman Catholics a place in the council nominated by George III and established a system of endowments for the popish clergy in French Canada. Under the provisions

12 In a very interesting study of the history of the celebration of 5 November, Gunpowder Treason Day, or Guy Fawkes Day, David Cressy notes that although the marked anti-Catholic element of the festivities decreased as the century progressed, it reemerged intermittently, even well into the nineteenth century. "The Fifth of November Remembered," in *Myths of the English*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 68–90. The sermons of 5 November were a golden opportunity for ministers to rehearse the horrors of popery from the pulpit and were mostly used for that purpose. See n. 21 below.

13 *The Revival of English Catholicism: The Banister-Rutter Correspondence 1777–1807*, ed. Leo Gooch (Wigan [Lancashire]: North West Catholic Historic Society, 1995), pp. 1–2.

14 Haydon, passim.

15 David Butler, *The Roman Catholic Church in England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), pp. 10–11.

of the Act, priests were allowed to hold land and collect tithes from other Catholics.[16] Clearly there was a contradiction in policy: on the one hand, although very rarely, priests could be convicted for saying Mass in England—as the Maloney case attests—on the other, in a feat of *Realpolitik* within its colonial domains, the government was de facto sanctioning the practice of popery, expressly prohibited in the Protestant constitution.[17] The main interpretation given to the passing of this Act, by unsympathetic Protestants, was that the government was seeking to enlist the Roman Catholic French Canadians against the Protestant rebels in the American colonies.[18] These political developments provide a rich backdrop from which to view, for example, *The History of Emily Montague.*[19]

The American cause was not without its sympathizers. Many outraged voices in Parliament and in the populace shouted at George III on his way to Westminster to sign the Act: "Remember Charles I," "Remember James II," and, of course, "No Popery," as Walpole records (1:359). The first Relief Act passed in 1778. It did not give Roman Catholics freedom of worship, but it did alleviate some of the legal disabilities that had been established by William III's Act against Popery. Only when the second Catholic Relief Act passed in 1791 were Roman Catholics allowed to worship openly in officially regis-

16 Haydon, p. 171.

17 For an example of this view, see Catharine Macaulay, *An Address to the People of England, Scotland, and Ireland, on the Present Important Crisis of Affairs* (London: E.&C. Dilly, 1775): "Though Quebec is situated beyond the Atlantic, my fellow citizens, you are still to remember that it is part of the British empire; and that, though a toleration of all religions, where such indulgence can be used with safety to the welfare of the community, is undoubtedly laudable, because agreeable to the principles of justice and the rights of nature, yet the establishment of popery, which is a very different thing from the toleration of it, is, for very just wise reasons, altogether incompatible with the principles of our constitution" (p. 15).

18 See, for example, Walpole's journals for June 1778: "Indeed it was evident that the Court was preparing a Catholic army to keep the colonies in as great subjection as they had been when Canada had been in the hands of the French ... Lord North was ridiculed on the content of this bill and told that 'the Pretender's birthday, 10th of June, was a proper festival for finishing a bill of so Stuart a complexion,'" *The Last Journals of Horace Walpole During the Reign of George III from 1771–1783*, notes Dr Doran and ed. A. Francis Steuart, 2 vols (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1910), 1:353–54. References are to this edition.

19 The occasion for Brooke's writing the novel was a visit to Quebec made with her husband, a clergyman of the Church of England, who had hopes for a colonial appointment but was eventually frustrated in his plans, in addition to more personal reasons, by the government compromise with the Roman Catholic Church.

tered churches.[20] Between the two Acts, however, London faced the worst civil disturbances it had ever seen: the Gordon Riots of 1780.[21]

The main arguments against Roman Catholics took two forms: political and doctrinal. Politically, some people feared that Papists at home and abroad would never rest until popery was re-established in England. First, even an oath of allegiance to the Protestant King of England could not be trusted, for they would think nothing of breaking that oath, as their Church would absolve them. Consequently, they were not trustworthy, for history had repeatedly proven that they were plotters and conspirators. Second, since they were beholden to a foreign sovereign, the Pope, they could never realistically be loyal subjects to two masters. Third, popery was despotic and bloodthirsty, the Inquisition attested to this argument, as did the massacre of Protestants everywhere on the Continent. If this was not sufficient proof, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* reminded Britons of what Catholicism had done in England in the past. On the doctrinal level, Catholics were considered idolatrous: their church forbade them to read the Bible and promoted superstition. Its main purpose was to control and rob the people, primarily through fear and by keeping them in a state of ignorance—why else was Mass still given in Latin, a language the common people could not understand? Furthermore, Roman Catholics thought nothing of lying or cheating if this would cause heretics to convert; their priests assumed supernatural faculties such as the magic of turning wine into blood and bread into a divine substance, and forgiving sinners their most dastardly sins.[22] These are

20 Butler, pp. 5–6.

21 As Clark sums up the situation, "Denominational politics in England and America were inseparably linked" (p. 408). The American Revolution provided a "litmus test of allegiance" where the majority of Protestant Dissenters aligned themselves to some degree with the cause of the colonists, and where Roman Catholics lost no time and "seized the occasion of France's recognition of the American republic for a (Trinitarian) declaration of loyalty to George III, and received as a reward the Catholic Relief Act in May 1778. The immediate result was a massive backlash of anti-papist sentiment, originating in Scotland and spreading south of the Border" (Clark, pp. 408–9). The greater part of the disturbances took place in London.

22 As an example of these well-rehearsed arguments, I will quote most of a 5 November sermon, as summarized in *Critical Review*: "The author describes the origin of Christianity, and its distinguishing characteristics, contrasting them with the origin, tenets, and spirit of popery. The former, he says, is derived from heaven, the latter from popes, fathers, councils, and traditions. Its votaries are taught to exalt the pope of Rome above all earthly potentates, and offer incense to him with prostration and adoration, to worship graven images without number, to call upon a multitude of inferior mediators, to believe the doctrines of transubstantiation and purgatory, to depend on the efficacy of indulgences,

some of the main arguments against popery, and they were levelled against Catholics with unvarying consistency. To this damning evidence, however, could be added another accusation central to this article: celibacy. Why were their priests forbidden to marry? If matrimony was a holy sacrament dispensed to others, why was it not sacred enough for the church hierarchy to partake of it? Why must men and women vow eternal celibacy when it clearly contradicted the laws of nature? Did God not create nature and establish its laws in his wisdom?[23] These were some of the most common arguments; the fantasies that they generated provided much of the fuel for convent creativity; even in more sober novels, the reader could expect to find at least one lascivious priest or nun, more in a Gothic novel. Ideologically, these persistent objections sustained the novels discussed below, providing an almost methodical rhythm as they were rehearsed one after the other.

"Beautiful plants in a wooden box"

> He [Jacques the woodcutter] informed me [Mortimer the hero] that the Gardner of the convent was his acquaintance, and that they had often lamented together the fate of the pauvres demoiselles, who were confined in that place; the gardner declaring, it was just as foolish to prevent such a number of fine women from fulfilling the purpose of their existence, as it would be for him to put a parcel of beautiful plants into a wooden box without earth or water. "Indeed (added Jacques) I thought locking up the women the most foolish thing of the two."[24]

confession, and absolution. Christianity is peaceable, gentle, merciful. Popery supports her usurpations by bulls, interdicts, excommunications, anathemas, persecutions, massacres and inquisitions. ... Popery teaches her votaries to offer up their prayers in an unknown tongue, and content themselves with the mere repetition of prayers. ... She pretends to honour the name of Christ, when she robs him of his real glory, by depriving the people of the scriptures." Review of *Popery a Perfect Contrast to the Religion of Christ: Proved in a Sermon Preached at Clapham, November 5, 1778. And published at the Desire of the Congregation. Now republished, with Additions, and Addressed to Protestant Parents*, in *Critical Review* (London: H. Venn and A.M. Crowder, 1778), 2:313–14.

23 For an example of the enduring polemic on celibacy from earlier in the century, see Joseph Trapp, *The Dignity, and Benefit, of the Priesthood; The Lawfulness of Marriage in the Clergy; The Hardships of them, and their families, in this Nation; and the Excellency of the Charity by which they are relieved. Set forth in a Sermon preached before the sins of the clergy, at their Anniversary Meeting, in the Cathedral-Church of St. Paul, December 8 1720* (London, 1721).

24 *The Convent: Or, the History of Sophia Nelson*, 2 vols (London, 1786), 2:198–99. Attributed to Anne Fuller (?–1790), although her authorship has been questioned on stylistic grounds. See Mary Anne Bendixen, "Anne Fuller," *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 133.

The idea of waste, especially of wasted women, was one of the primary criticisms of the convent; it was also aimed at Roman Catholicism in general, inextricably tied to the practice of celibacy. The Catholic Church was accused of keeping these women sexually, socially, and spiritually idle and unproductive. This argument persists in all of the convent novels. Many of the nuns are there because parents found it cheaper to pay for their daughters—usually the youngest—to be placed in a convent for life than to provide the necessary settlement to marry them off. Sometimes their estates were used to make a better provision for male heirs or elder daughters. In *Anecdotes of a Convent*, one of the two daughters tells the heroine how her brother Mr Hackit always said, "girls are a burthen upon an estate, wishing there were nunneries in this island ... that we might be placed in one of them for life."[25] Clearly two different economic principles are at work here. On the one hand, negligent or malevolent relatives and guardians find it economically attractive to lock up unmarried women, to whose fate they can remain indifferent thereafter. On the other hand, this practice results in a wasting of resources on a larger scale, since these cloistered women are no longer socially productive. In addition to the monetary question, this economic theme has a strange Malthusian twist, as when Miss Smith affirms in *The American Fugitive* that "It is the policy of the French nation to shut up the super abundant part of the family in a convent, as, without this check to the propagation, their noblesse would dwindle into bourgeoisie, and all the ranks of people become so numerous as to be ready to eat one another."[26] But what is the nature of this waste? Its most obvious meaning is sexual and reproductive: these women are denied their natural function as

25 *Anecdotes of a Convent*, by the author of *Memoirs of Mrs. Williams*, 3 vols (London, 1771), 1:26–27. References are to this edition.

26 *The American Fugitive: Or, Friendship in a Nunnery. Containing a full Description of the Mode of Education and Living in Convent Schools, both on the low and high Pension; The Manners and Characters of the Nuns; The Arts practiced on young Minds; And their Baneful Effects on Society at large*, by a Lady (1778; London: A. Pope, 1784), p. 76. References are to this edition. This novel has sometimes been attributed to Phebe Gibbes (d. after 1805), author of, among other novels, *The Life and Adventures of Mr Francis Clive* (London: T. Lownds, 1764) and *Hartly House, Calcutta* (London: J. Dodsley, 1789). See *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy (London: B.T. Batsford, 1990), p. 420; Gae Brack, "Phebe Gibbs" in Todd, p. 135; on *Mr. Frances Clive*, see April London, *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 124–28; on *Hartly House, Calcutta*, see Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 173–91.

Nun with soup ladle and pot, tome 8, p. 102 in Pierre Hélyot, *Dictionnaire des ordres religieux,* (Paris: J.-B. Coignard, 1721), engraved by François de Poilly (c.1665–1741). Reproduced by permission of the Library of the Pontifical Institute of Mediæval Studies, Toronto.

mothers and bearers of future subjects for the kingdom—bad economics for the prosperous and democratic English, but, presumably, artificially preserved wealth for the despotic French. Like the plants in the example above, they cannot germinate.

An additional set of social and religious values was at play here, constituting an essential part of the ideology propagated in these novels. Whenever possible, sexual sterility went hand in hand with an even more reprehensible element: the belief that most nuns did nothing all day and therefore contributed nothing to society. Consequently, their sexual sterility, to some extent, was seen to reflect a social and moral sterility. Both of these arguments are succinctly presented in a colonial context in *The History of Emily Montague,* when the hero, Edward Rivers, writing from Canada to his sister in England, condemns convents and Roman Catholicism because "their religious

houses rob the state of many subjects who might be useful at present, and at the same time retard the increase of the colony" (2:204). He also prefers the nuns in the Hotel Dieu to the ones in the other two religious houses, because they at least engage in active charity, "their province being the care of the sick" (1:28). The economic objections to the convent serve a clearly expansionist agenda in this novel, and reflect a larger belief that all members of society have a duty to contribute actively to community welfare. The Marriage Act of 1753, which attempted to assure the stability of the family by preventing clandestine or runaway marriages, attests to the mid-century preoccupation with increasing the state and providing subjects for the rapidly expanding empire.[27] Although expressed explicitly only in *The History of Emily Montague*, the concern with procreation tacitly informed the ideological precepts of the other novels as well. Whether the ideological desire for population growth directly affected the economic situation, the population of England increased dramatically from the middle of the century, following a period of minimal growth during the previous hundred years.[28]

As these convent novels tell us, even if a member of the community chose celibacy—and hopefully this would only rarely occur—she might still contribute something to her community through charitable deeds and active involvement in family affairs, a possibility well illustrated in the Protestant community of women detailed in Sarah Scott's novel *Millenium Hall* (1762).[29] A clear example of this philosophy within the convent novel can be found in *The History of Indiana Danby*, where, after two successive disappointments in love, the heroine decides that heaven does not look favourably on her intentions to marry. She vows to God in writing to renounce all prospects

27 On the centrality of the Marriage Act to eighteenth-century political economy and the connection it made between marriage, population, and wealth, see Eve Tavor Bennett, "The Marriage Act of 1753: 'A most cruel law for the Fair Sex,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30:3 (Spring 1997), 233–54.

28 Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 20.

29 Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762), ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1995). On *Millenium Hall* and the Protestant convent, see Bridget Hill, "A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery," *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 117 (1987), 107–30; also Nanette Morton, "'A Most Sensible Economy': From Spectacle to Surveillance in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11:2 (January 1999), 185–204. Scott's novel does not address issues of anti-Catholicism, but rather is preoccupied with women's choices within England and within a Protestant environment.

of altering her "virgin state." This refusal to marry, however, does not entail an inactive selfish life; to the contrary, Indiana reassures her readers, "the vow I have entered into will not be any hindrance to my fulfilling the duty I owe her [her mother], but rather put it more in my power, by being permitted to live constantly with her, to sweeten the remainder of her life by my constant unremitted endeavours to oblige and please her."[30] The next volume of the novel finds Indiana arguing with a kindly neighbouring minister about the validity of these vows, which he strongly opposes as contradicting God's will. Similarly, in *The American Fugitive*, once Miss Gerrard, a Protestant, has decided to take the veil and become a nun, her friend Miss Freeman warns that "you will regret the pleasures of friendship, and find that to do your duty in the state of existence to which you are called, I mean in the bosom of society, is an actual, an essential part of our devotion; for it is a chearful acquiescence with, and a lively approbation of, the will of Providence" (p. 55). Through the setting of the Roman Catholic convent, where women were sequestered after being deposited there by greedy parents, the desire for short-term financial gain was shown in the long run to defraud society physically and morally.

These novels contain a strong social ethos: women are actively encouraged to serve their immediate community—the family—or engage in charity that benefits society at large, especially the poor. But there is also an acknowledgment that marriage was not always possible, convenient, likely, or desirable for all women, that other alternatives to this state existed outside the convent, although those alternatives were mostly fictitious. Nevertheless, and there is no mistaking this fundamental dogma, marriage was the best and most desirable state for women. To live a life of inactive confinement—praying and singing did not on their own constitute acceptable activities—was socially destructive and in clear contradiction of scripture. Inactivity inevitably led to all sorts of evil; and proof of the disastrous effects of this policy could be found easily on a Grand Tour of the Continent: was not the prosperity, the naval and military prowess of Britain, then, a sufficient proof of God's judgment? There is an urgent moral, theological, cultural, and political plea in these novels, a plea perhaps triggered by a feeling that Britain was caught

30 *The History of Indiana Danby*, by a Lady, 4 vols (London: J. Dodsley, 1765), 2:229–31. References are to this edition.

between two opposite destinies: Catholic, despotic, old, and feminized France, and Protestant, republican, new, and manly America—an analogy that would recur, for example, in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) vis-à-vis the ancien régime.[31] And, yes, in case there was any doubt, these were all Whig novels, although not equally radical in their ideology, but they were all somewhere to the left, if we accept that appellation as an adequate characterization of the republican cause.[32] Accordingly, *The American Fugitive* is by far the most anti-Catholic and republican of the group, while *The History of Emily Montague* is the most centrist both politically and religiously.[33] The other novels espouse some, but not all, of these views—anti-Catholicism is the only constant in them all—and are less consistently political and readier to bow directly to the generic pressures of plot and romance.

Abducted Heroines

> But her simple tale made no impression on their minds, his Lordship having previously assured them she was an heretic daughter, whom he had, with much difficulty, snatched from distruction; and whom he was now going to place in a convent. They beheld her tears, and heard her pathetic pleadings, unmoved; awed partly by reverence for the church, but restrained more by the dread of ecclesiastical severity.
>
> Though his Lordship thought less secrecy necessary, now they journeyed through a country, where, from the religious prejudices of the people, and the tale he had already told, he had less reason to fear a rescue, than while dragging

31 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *The Vindications*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1997), esp. chaps 3, 4.

32 In view of the schematic oppositions that obtain in the convent novels, I have in the main glossed over the many nuanced and changing perspectives on Roman Catholicism taken by Protestant Dissenters and members of the Church of England in the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, as James E. Bradley has argued, many expressions of anti-Catholicism were in fact "thinly veiled attacks on the Anglican Church." "The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1662–1800," *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 187–253, at 199. This would add a provocative layer of meaning to the convent novels, but only perhaps *The American Fugitive* suggests the potential of such a coded political discourse.

33 The reviewer of *The American Fugitive* found the republican views in it well expressed and finely argued, although he or she did consider it rather amusing to find such views put forth by the eponymous fourteen-year-old heroine, Miss Smith. Review of *Friendship in a Nunnery; or, the American Fugitive*, in *The Critical Review: Or, Annals of Literature* 46 (October) (London: A. Hamilton, 1778), 300–1.

> her through her native country, where a tale of distress would have been more likely to interest; yet, he continued to guard her with the strictest attention.[34]

Abduction was probably the most formulaic feature in the convent novels, just as it was in the Gothic. Typically, the heroine is abducted and placed in a convent by a guardian who wants to appropriate her fortune (*The Convent, Or the History of Sophia Nelson*); she is abducted and placed in a convent by her estranged Roman Catholic father in order to force her into a marriage of convenience (*De Valcourt*); she is abducted and placed in a convent by a spurned lover who wants to force her into marriage because she is very rich (*Anecdotes of a Convent*). This motif is recurrent—accompanied, of course, by unpleasant and unsympathetic abbesses and superstitious and sycophantic nuns. The sheer repetitiveness begs to be examined. To a certain extent, this feature is related to the one discussed in the section above, in that the coercion that lands these women in convents generally involves financial gain. But another salient feature is the power of unscrupulous men over women and the collusion of the abbesses in that power, as they invariably take the man's word over that of their unwilling prisoners. In all of these novels, the man has told a story of disobedience that has forced him to place the woman under the care of the nuns until she "knows better what her interest is or where her duty lies." A slight variation on this theme is provided by the case of Julia in *Anecdotes of a Convent*, who is placed in a nunnery by her so-called husband because she has supposedly been found in an adulterous relationship. Without exception, however, a disciplining principle is at play in each case. Although it is not strictly speaking a novel, it would be difficult here not to refer to an interesting narrative entitled *The History of Miss Katty N—*, the complicated memoirs of a Scottish woman who has been victimized and cheated by her relatives. She describes how she was coerced into entering a nunnery in Channel Row in Dublin; the memoir provides a much watered down version of its novelistic counterparts, but its claim to historical fact makes it an interesting point of comparison. The nuns in Katty N—'s story are extremely benign: although they do try to

34 *De Valcourt*, 2 vols (London, 1800), 2:90–91. Sometimes attributed to Agnes Maria Bennett, although no author appears on the title page. This novel, with the latest publication date of the group, while sharing its thematic concerns, differs from the others in several aspects: it is not epistolary, and the events supposedly take place at the end of the seventeenth century, although the heroine has nevertheless clearly benefited from a Rousseauian education.

convert her. Once she explains that she is a Protestant and determined to remain so, they resign themselves to losing her. She claims she liked the convent very much, "and to give them their Due, no People, said I, can behave better than they have done to me; and I own I should be sorry to part with them; and my chief Motive for wishing otherwise, is, the being deprived the Liberty of going to Church."[35] The very mildness of the experience narrated suggests that the practice of locking up Protestant women in Roman Catholic convents did indeed occur, although it would be difficult to determine how often and with what degree of coercion.[36]

The American Fugitive presents a slight departure from the standard abduction scenes, for Miss Gerrard is taken to France not by her father but by her mother, who fears that her daughter will compete with her for the attentions of men, and that her daughter's height will intimate that her mother "was got on the wrong side of thirty" (pp. 1–2). Although, in this case, a mother is responsible, her daughter re-establishes the pattern of coercion in her description of the situation to her friend Miss Freeman:

> My mother never once opened her designs upon me until we reached Dover; when, in the style of an eastern Bashaw, she signified to me, that it was her *will and pleasure* I should be placed for some two or three years in a religious house; that my *chearful acquiescence* would be considered as a *mark* of *duty*; but that, whether I acquiesced or not, it was her will and pleasure, and must be complied with. (p. 3)

This coercion illustrates the despotic nature of "Papist parents"—not that different in this analogy from that of Eastern monarchs in their

35 *The History of Mis Katty N—. Containing A Faithful and Particular Relation of her Amours, Adventures, and various Turns of Fortune, in Scotland, Ireland, Jamaica and in England*, written by Herself (London, 1757), pp. 148–49. Whether the events she narrates actually occurred cannot be ascertained.

36 Regarding real abductions by force, a pamphlet published much earlier in the century relates the abduction of a Protestant woman: *Popish Intrigues and Cruelty Plainly Exemplified, in the Affecting Case and Narrative of Mrs. Frances Shaftoe. Containing An Account of her being Eleven Months in Sir Theophilus Ogelthorpe's Family; Where hearing, among many other Treasonable Things, that the Pretender Prince of Wales was Sir Theophilus's Son, she was trick'd into France by his Daughters, Anne and Eleanor, and most barbarously used, near the Space of Six Years, to force her to turn Papist and Nun, in order to prevent Discovery. With the Deposition of a Swiss Protestant Woman, who effected her Escape from a Nunnery in France, into Switzerland, (taken before the Lord Chief Justice Holt) from whence she returned into England, in December 1706* (1707; 2nd ed., London, 1745). This is a strange story indeed: the Pretender is a changeling, and Frances Shaftoe, the abducted woman, a servant in the house of the man mentioned in the title, who was a recusant.

seraglios—and these women writers all seem to find it especially threatening to women. The Oriental motif is also used to describe the power of the abbess, who "is no less surrounded by her flatterers than an Eastern monarch" (p. 217). Like the seraglio, the convent functioned as a microcosmic reflection of the larger society, mirroring and distorting the society with which it was compared implicitly or explicitly. It was a commonplace of eighteenth-century discourse to represent "Oriental" society as despotic and feminized, and what else was a convent but a seraglio for the brides of Christ? For a few sentences before the discussion of the abbess, Miss Boothby says the nuns see themselves as "the chaste Spouses of Jesus Christ; and nothing can affront them more than to be called old maids" (1:215–16). Why be surprised then that Protestant virgins should be kidnapped and imprisoned in such a harem? The great difference was that the convent was an outpost of Oriental otherness in the midst of supposedly Christian and enlightened Europe, and the abduction aided and abetted by supposedly respectable citizens of England.

Nevertheless, how was abducting the heroine and locking her up in a convent in France until she accepted a forced marriage and/or signed over her fortune different from the fate suffered by Richardson's Clarissa at the hands of her family, or Sophia Western's plight in *Tom Jones* at the hands of her father and aunt? How is the convent motif different from these other familiar tales of parental coercion and brutality? Certainly the structural function in the plotting was identical, and the convent lent a bit of exoticism to a stock crisis in the romance. In either case, there was also concern over the perceived despotic and patriarchal character of popery and the ability of absolutist parents to exercise their will over their daughters by forcing them into arranged marriages. The possibility of choosing a husband and respecting the inclinations of daughters was a central preoccupation of the sentimental novel and a key theme in all of the novels discussed here. The sentimental novel sustained the belief that a marriage of mutual consent was the ideal venue for women to fulfil their personal and social potential. In *The History of Emily Montague*, for example, where the three heroines all manage to choose their husbands and marry according to their inclinations, there is a not-so-implicit comparison to the French Canadian women who can be forced into convents to be wives to Jesus. The comparison between marriage and conventual life is made explicit when Bella Fermor in

a letter to Lucy Rivers records a conversation she has had with a French Canadian woman to the following effect: nuns have a year of trial before taking their final vows, while brides in arranged marriages make their vows without knowing what they are getting into (3:29–31).[37] And although this witty concession is infused with a liberal desire not to condemn alien practices, the entire substance of the book illustrates how if parents were reasonable and allowed their children to develop their understandings, instead of behaving despotically towards them, the choice they made would always be the correct one, that is, the choice most conducive to their private and public happiness.

The analogy established in this letter is not one between conventual life and the kind of marriage engaged in by the three female protagonists, but between conventual life and forced marriages. This would also be the case in the hypothetical Protestant convents discussed below, where the women who would live in them would do so of their own volition. By association, free and consensual marriage and the Protestant convent are equated on one side (not accidentally most of the instances where the Protestant nunnery is portrayed are in the sentimental novel), with forced marriages and Roman Catholic convents squarely on the other. It is this ideological polarity that structures these novels either implicitly or explicitly. A temporal component of new/old completes the picture: Catholicism, arranged marriages, and despotic parents were assigned to the dark past; Protestantism, sensible families, and women able to make their own decisions under the guidance of their parents were the way of the present and the future.[38]

37 Intriguingly, Bella is named after the Roman Catholic model for Belinda in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Because of its status as the "first Anglo-Canadian novel," *Emily Montague* was edited several times during the twentieth century, and, uniquely among the novels discussed here, has received a modicum of critical attention. See n. 3 above.

38 In one of the few critical essays I have found that discusses the convent in the eighteenth century, Katharine M. Rogers establishes a similar comparison but argues that the convent in England was seen negatively, while marriage was viewed positively; Rogers intimates that female celibacy was perceived as threatening. "Fantasy and Reality in Fictional Convents of the Eighteenth Century," *Comparative Literature Studies* 22:3 (1985), 297–315. This juxtaposition elides the more interesting—and feminist—argument in favour of choice that these novels also made, by presenting Protestant nunneries *and* consensual marriages as valid options for women side by side.

The Dangers of Finishing Schools

> A whole cargo of *catholic* protestants, alias scholars, from this blessed academy, were shipped off yesterday for Old England. Cheapside and Gracechurch-street will be wonderfully *improved* by their *improvements*; for the poison of erroneous tenets is lodged in their souls—extract it who can.
>
> I asked a little girl on the low pension, the other day, what she had learned by visiting France. She replied, with great *naiveté*, to eat soup and tell her beads. "What," rejoined I, "is your father a catholic, then ?" —"No, Miss, both my father and mother go to Wapping-church every Sunday, and will make me go there too when I return home; but what of that? I shall never forget my *Ave Marias*, or my *Pater Nosters*, and can be of what religion I please, you know, in my heart."[39]

In the opening pages of *The History of Indiana Danby*, the eponymous heroine is writing to her friend Miss Clara Freemore from a convent in France, where she has been for a couple of years polishing her education and perfecting her language skills. This was not an uncommon practice in the eighteenth century; in many ways it was the female equivalent of the young man of fashion's Grand Tour. For many English parents, the prestige of a French finishing school sufficiently balanced the accompanying danger of brainwashing. In many of these novels, parents warn their daughters not to listen to Romish superstition while in the convent, and at the same time they instruct abbesses and nuns that their daughters are not to be importuned or interfered with in matters of religion.[40] Yet it seemed never to work, as the passage above asserted, and these novels made it their duty to warn English parents that as long as their daughters were in the convent they were in danger.[41] The reviewer of *The American Fugitive* in the *Critical Review* judged that the novel's warnings of the dangers that beset school-girls in convents might not be new and

39 *The American Fugitive: Or, Friendship in a Nunnery*, pp. 66–67. The episode is related in a letter from Miss Smith, the American fugitive, to Miss Freeman in England.

40 In *Anecdotes of a Convent*, for example, the German Catholic mother (a suitably unscrupulous and unnatural mother) of Miss Jenny Homes and her sister, both Protestant, persuades her husband to send the daughters to France. The girls are armed with "strict injunctions that we should not practice the religion they were of" (2:138–39). In spite of these precautions, however, Miss Jenny Homes's sister is persuaded not only to convert but to take the veil at the age of fifteen.

41 The same fears and warnings persisted at least as late as 1840; witness an interesting polemic by Rachel MacCrindell thinly disguised as a novel, *The School-girl in France, a narrative addressed to Christian Parents* (London, 1840), which systematically and clearly denounces all the possible doctrinal errors and dangers a Protestant girl is likely to encounter while at a convent. It went through several editions over the next twenty years.

might be a bit overstated, but nevertheless "mothers and guardians may profit by what cannot easily be exaggerated, by what they cannot be told too often."[42] The assertion that no assurances from the nuns were to be taken seriously harks back to the anti-Catholic arguments summarized in the first section above. According to doctrine and to ideology, the conversion of heretics was expected to be first and foremost in the good Papist's mind.

Accordingly, Louisa Boothby, in *Anecdotes of a Convent*, recounts how after her best friend Miss Merton, who was a Catholic, had left the convent, she was called to the abbess's parlour where the abbess and the Franciscan confessor awaited her. She is asked whether she indeed loves her friend, and whether or not she would be sorry to be separated from her for all eternity in the other world, as most undoubtedly will be the case, if she persists in being a heretic. Miss Boothby pertly retorts that she has all the confidence in the world in God's mercy, and how, she would like to know, does he (the priest), a mere human, know how God disposes of things in the other life; may he perchance have been there that he is so well informed? To which the priest responds:

> This is the way, Madam, [addressing the abbess] in which they bring up all their children in England, permitting them to reason upon subjects which they cannot understand, instead of teaching them, as they ought to do, implicit obedience to the ordinances of the church, without suffering them to argue upon topics which are so absolutely above the reach of human wisdom to expound: Could they once be thoroughly convinced of this undoubted truth, viz. that nothing less than inspiration from above, can enlighten our understandings to the comprehension of our sacred mysteries, they would then learn, that all this sort of knowledge is confined solely to God's ministers on earth, the servants of our Holy Mother the Church. (1:223–24)

The priest's arguments rehearse many of the other hard-felt prejudices held on this subject against the Roman Catholic Church. These included the priests' assertion of special powers such as transubstantiation and absolution, and the conspiracy to keep their flock in a state of ignorance in order to retain their power and ill-gotten wealth.[43]

42 *Critical Review* 46 (1778), 300–1.

43 Not surprisingly, the documents relating to the notorious case of a French girl named Catherine Cadière against a Catholic priest ran through at least eleven editions in England in one year and as many in Scotland. The case was a cause célèbre all over Europe in the

It would be inexcusable to conclude this section without relating one of the most sensational stories found in these novels: the story of Miss Merton in *Anecdotes of a Convent*. Briefly, Miss Merton is born to a mixed marriage: her father, Sir Francis, is Protestant, her mother a Roman Catholic. In their marriage settlement, they have agreed that any male offspring will be raised Protestant, and any females Catholic. When their only child is born a boy, the mother goes back on her promise, and, with the assistance of her mother and their confessors (of course), decides to deceive the father regarding the child's sex. Consequently, the father removes himself from the child's upbringing; it is first sent to the country when still an infant to be cared for by the grandmother, and later to a convent in France, when a young child. This child grows up without knowing that he is not a girl and the nuns take care that he will not discover the truth. "Miss Merton" befriends Miss Boothby, a Protestant girl in the convent, because they are both English; they are never left alone until one day by accident. Miss Merton, now a tall girl of eighteen, takes the opportunity to passionately embrace Miss Boothby, to the horror of the nun who finds them upon her return. Miss Boothby is a little surprised at her friend's vehemence, who during that scene appeared to her a "perfect virago." The friends are separated permanently; Miss Boothby thinks they fear she will convert Miss Merton to Protestantism. Once out of the convent Miss Merton is told the truth and eventually, he and Miss Boothby marry. Needless to add that (the now) Mr Merton is so disgusted with what has been done to him that he loses no time in embracing the Church of England. In the preface, the author of this novel writes that once she had decided to write a fictional narrative,

1730s, and a source of much embarrassment to the Church, which saw one of its priests exposed in the law courts, accused of every kind of perversion, abuse, and even witchcraft. *The Case of Mrs. Mary Catharine Cadiere, Against the Jesuit Father John Baptist Girard. In a Memorial presented to the Parliament of Aix. Wherein that Jesuit is accused of seducing her by the abominable Doctrines of Quietism, into the most criminal excesses of Lewdness, and under an appearance of the highest mystical Devotion, deluding into the same vices six other Females, who like her, had put their consciences under his direction. With a Preface by the Publisher, Containing a short and plain Account of the Rules of proceeding according to the Laws and Customs of France in Cases of this Nature*, 6th ed., corrected (London, 1732). The verdict absolving the priest of wrongdoing was highly controversial, but while it was being debated and for a long time afterwards, it provided ideal reading and debating material for Protestants and Catholics in France who relished every aspect of the salacious narrative that so amply confirmed all their preconceptions. The episode formed the basis of the well-known libertine novel, *Thérese philosophe, ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de D. Dirrag* [anagram of Girard], *& de Mademoiselle Eradice* [anagram of Cadière] (La Haye, 1748).

she found that although she tried to invent, she found herself using real-life anecdotes as the basis of the story: "Among these was the story of Mr. Merton; which, however improbable it may appear to my readers, was, I most firmly believe, a fact, since I had the heads of it from the Gentleman's own mouth ... and whose address and manner, owing (as he said) to the effeminacy of his education, were (upon my honor) just such as I describ'd them; I myself have seen him work at his needle, and paint fanmounts, for days together" (pp. vii–viii). If the necessity of the Catholic convent to the English gentry could lead to such extremes of behaviour, some other option must be found.

The Protestant Alternative

> Your Lordship's idea, in regard to Protestant convents here [French Canada] ... is extremely well worth the consideration of those whom it may concern; especially if the Romish ones [convents] are abolished, as will most probably be the case. The noblesse have numerous families, and, if there are no convents, will be at a loss where to educate their daughters as well as where to dispose of those who do not marry in a reasonable time; the convenience they find in both respects from these houses, is one strong motive for them to continue in their ancient religion. As I would however prevent the more useful, by which I mean the lower, part of the sex from entering into this state, I would wish only the daughters of the seigneurs to have the privilege of becoming nuns: they should be obliged, on taking the vow, to prove their noblesse for at least three generations; which would secure them respect, and, at the same time, prevent their becoming too numerous. They should take the vow of obedience, but not of celibacy; and reserve the power, as at Hamburgh, of going out to marry, though on no other consideration. Your Lordship may remember, every nun at Hamburgh has a right of marrying, except the abbess.[44]

As the epigraph to *The American Fugitive* reminded its readers, those who flew to convents, far from escaping "Danger, vice, and wo of every kind," would meet with it again, in spades. One solution, proposed early in the century and popularized by Charles Grandison's endorsement of it in Richardson's novel (1753–54), was to create a Protestant convent, which would offer a life of devout fulfilment with all of the advantages and none of the pitfalls of the Catholic counterpart. Such convents did exist on the Continent in Moravia and in Germany, but were only found in England in fiction. Indiana Danby's friend Clara Bevill describes the Protestant convent

44 William Fermor to the Earl of —, *The History of Emily Montague*, epigraph.

she has visited in the English countryside as "a little Eden," an "enchanting spot of ground. Art and Nature had exerted their utmost efforts to render it delightful." Informed to her surprise that this idyllic place is a "nunnery," which she had thought impossible in a Protestant country, Clara learns from her guide how she had originated the concept: "'Why can we not have nunneries in England for Protestants?' thought I. 'Sure they would soon be filled. How many are compelled to live in the world, after they are sick of its delusive joys, for want of such an institution! Numbers, whose small fortunes render them independent, might there enjoy their liberty, at least as far as they regarded it" (1:96–97).

The concept underlies all of the novels discussed here; it enters into the narratives of *Emily Montague* and *Indiana Danby* as a way of freeing the debate between celibacy and marriage from the shadow of anti-Catholicism. Economics was central to these alternatives. Celibacy was problematic because of the need to expand and populate the empire, and the waste of women, as shown above, was unacceptable in the convent novel. The domestic sphere was the proper place for women, and family the most desirable choice. With its irregular rendition of family in the nomenclature of mother superior, a father, and innumerable sisters under the smothering authority of unchecked, despotic patriarchy, these novels tell us, the Roman Catholic convent was simply the worst choice of an option that still seems to have been considered as necessary. In the Protestant convent, the rule of patriarchy would be checked and the configuration of the community would not constitute a grotesque caricature of the family. It was seen to constitute a desirable and needed economic alternative for those women unable or unwilling to enter into the domestic sphere.[45] The convent novels' endorsement of this idea of the Protestant convent was consistent with their endorsement of the need for women to be

45 On the Protestant convent in the eighteenth century, see the following pamphlet (the title gives a good idea of the issues at stake): *An Academy or College: Wherein Young Ladies and Gentlemen may at a very moderate Expense be duly instructed in the true Protestant Religion, and in all Vertuous Qualities that may adorn that Sex: also be carefully preserved, and secured, till the day of their Marriage, under the Tuition of a Lady Governess, and grave society of Widdows and Virgins, who have resolved to lead the rest of their lives in a single retir'd Religious way, according to the Pattern of some Protestant Colledges in Germany* (In the Savoy by Tho. Newcomb, 1671); Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interests* (1694); Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54). For a history, see Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Cloister, Religious Communities and Kindred Bodies in the Anglican Communion* (1955), rev. and ed. A. W. Campbell (London: SPCK, 1964), and especially Hill, "Refuge from Men."

able to make their own choices; granted, that endorsement was generally limited to the two choices of celibacy and marriage, but it was better than none, especially in the procreative context of the romance novel. A further restriction on the underlying assertion of autonomy was the acknowledgment that such choices should never be made without the parents' blessing, in any case.

Of the convent novels, *The History of Indiana Danby* devotes the most narrative attention to these questions, when Indiana decides to make a vow of eternal chastity after two disastrous attempts at marriage. The last two volumes of the book see her friends and relatives trying to convince her that her vow is void. This particular development requires some attention. The local minister, Mr Brathwait, engages Indiana in a scriptural debate:

> "If a woman also vow a vow unto the Lord, and bind herself by a bond, being in her father's house in her youth; then if her father disallow her in the day that he heareth it, not any of her vows or bonds, wherewith she hath bound her soul, shall stand; and the Lord shall forgive her, because her father disallowed her vow."
>
> "Now Madam," continues the good man, with an air of triumph, "what becomes of this bugbear of a vow?—your parent disallows it, to speak in the language of the holy scripture; it is therefore, to all intents and purposes, null and void." (3:25–26)

The debate about Indiana's vow is passed on to Mr Braithwait's patron, a bishop, who determines that she is absolved from her vows on the same grounds as described above, but with the added injunction to "honour thy father and thy mother"—her mother's opposition equally disallows the vow (3:231–33). When Indiana gives in and consents to marry a Mr Montague, and this third attempt fails as well, she decides not only that she is going to remain chaste, but that she will enter into the Protestant convent that her friend Clara described to her in the first volume.

What we should take into consideration in this episode is the patriarchal prerogative invoked to annul a sacred vow that the female character has made, using legal written language, in the presence of witnesses to the following effect: "I, Indiana Danby, being in my perfect senses, but greatly afflicted in mind,—and judging it necessary towards the restoring of my lost peace ..." (2:229). More peculiar indeed is the caveat made by the bishop explaining that because Indiana does not have a father, her mother's authority can stand in its place. Female autonomy can only be taken so far. The legal

disregard for a prior vow also strongly echoes the primary dictate of the Marriage Act, which was designed, basically, to disallow any vows made without parental consent. But while elopement and clandestine marriage may have been out of the question—at the conclusion of *The American Fugitive,* for example, the good girl Miss Gerrard (although she has escaped from the convent) keeps the vows sanctioned by her mother; the bad (and French) girl Louisa disobeys her aunt, breaks her vow, and runs off to her doom with a soldier—the more radical alternative of the Protestant convent remained a tantalizing, if finally unattainable, option for these female characters.

In the end, even the idealized form of the convent could not escape the conforming model of the marriage plot. Thus, *Indiana Danby* schematically outlined maternity and its importance to society as the dominant issue underlying the choice between a retired life and a domestic one. At the same time that Indiana Danby, educated in a Roman Catholic convent, is preparing finally to enter a Protestant convent, her best friend Clara Bevill is recovering slowly from the birth of her second child. Clara, although weak, desperately pleads with her friend, albeit in writing, not to resign the world and vow celibacy. That Indiana is in the end preserved at the moment of her final vows by the reappearance of the man she loves—who turns out not to have been her brother after all—resolves the issue of which alternative, in these novels at least, was preferable. As a further association of these issues, Clara's sister Fanny had taken her vows to enter the same Protestant convent on the very day (and perhaps in the same chapel?) in which Clara was married, exchanging the maiden name of Freemore for the innocuous Bevill. Nevertheless, the way the novel and the character of Indiana Danby tease with an alternative ending before the required romance resolution should remind the reader not to underestimate how the need for an alternative could be formulated at all.

Even in the ideal community of the Protestant convent, the signifiers of subjugation to the outer world cannot be escaped. The description of Indiana as she prepares for her vows already warns the reader of the denouement to come: "Her cloaths were white and silver; her linen suitable to the richness of her gown—some very fine jewels in her hair—over the loose flowing vail of black gause, which with a becoming negligence, shaded part of her lovely face.—A vail is always worn by us on those occasions" (4:210). As Felicity Nussbaum

has written of the veil in the context of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), "the veil evokes the Other woman, especially the Persian and the Egyptian, the harem and the harlot [and, we may add to the list, the nun] ... Woefully out of fashion in eighteenth-century England, the veil represents the ancient, the mysterious, and romance itself."[46] A "symbolic mediator," as Nussbaum puts it, the veil in these convent novels epitomizes the foreign allure of the convent in the midst of English society while also showing how that allure could be properly domesticated as part of the marriage ritual, the sign both of the heroines' reacceptance into English society and of their loss of whatever autonomy that other space may have offered. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's comment on the veil's "suffusion with sexuality" in the Gothic novel is apposite here: "This is true partly because of the other, apparently opposite set of meanings it hides: the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it."[47] As the English gentleman wrote to the Italian nun in the letter which heads this article, "the black transparent veil ... while it hides nothing, sets off every thing." The convent novel, like the veil that links its spaces to the exoticism of the harem and the return to the domesticity of the wedding, used the setting both to amplify the sensationalism of its narratives and to maintain them in the proper ideological context.

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46 Nussbaum, p. 123.

47 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980; New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 144.