

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Escaped Nuns, Crafty Jesuits, and the Many Uses of Anti-Catholic Fiction

Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction. Susan M. Griffin. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. ix + 284 pp.

Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses. Diana Peschier. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x + 226 pp.

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<1> In her introduction to *The Brontës and Religion* (1999), Marianne Thormählen begins the defense of her project with a powerfully simple assessment of Victorian belief: “In the nineteenth century...religion was literally a matter of life and death in a way few people in our time can comprehend” (7). Indeed, the past quarter-century has witnessed a critical tradition invested in canonizing subversive texts seen to be either anti-Christian or at the very least vexed in their relationship to religion. In many ways, this trend signals, somewhat ironically, both the ubiquity of Victorian religious discourse and practice, and the degree to which our own cultural moment seems to manifest, as Thormählen suggests, the disappearance of religious belief from daily experience.

<2> It should not surprise us, then, that Susan Griffin’s *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and Diana Peschier’s *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses* are keen to distance themselves from the kind of work done by *The Brontës and Religion*, choosing not to take up theological implications, and preferring instead to remain solidly rooted in historicist concerns. Both Griffin and Peschier do, however, offer penetrating cultural and literary analysis grounded in the condition of nineteenth-century religious faith that Thormählen underscores. Painstakingly researched and convincingly argued, both books make important contributions to the understanding of nineteenth-century religion, especially concerning the work of English and American anti-Catholicism.

<3> Griffin’s ambitious and sweeping *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* focuses on nationalism, extending the work of both Linda Colley and Benedict Anderson. One of Griffin’s unique contributions in this regard is an interest in the transatlantic nature of nineteenth century anti-Catholicism and the distinct yet familiar ways in which anti-Catholic sentiment invoked a larger set of cultural and national issues. Her chapters, which oscillate between the United States and Britain, are arranged around particular cultural and historical moments, ranging from the rise of nativism in mid-century America to the contemporaneous Oxford Movement in England.

<4> Griffin begins by addressing the resurgent popularity of anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century. In doing so, she argues that anti-Catholic rhetoric had, by that time, gained a kind of currency in Protestant culture which allowed it to be deployed “as a flexible medium of cultural critique” (17). As such, Griffin suggests that nineteenth century anti-Catholic fiction actually tells us most about the “Protestantisms of the period” (4)–Protestantisms that wielded substantial

influence both culturally and politically. Coupled with the historical catalysts of the Papal Aggression and the mass influx of Irish-Catholic immigrants to Britain and the United States—as the influential work of D.G. Paz and others has underscored—the nationalist mood of the nineteenth century offered plentiful ideological and political grist for the reemergence of an anti-Catholic mill.

<5> Although she is interested in describing a kind of transatlantic Protestant imaginary of sorts, Griffin’s book never seems fully to capitalize on the particularly transnational aspects of, in her own words, such an “important and pervasive structure” as anti-Catholic fiction (18). Nonetheless, one of Griffin’s greatest strengths is her ability to deftly interweave recognizable anti-Catholic tropes—the crafty Jesuit, the dangerous confessional, the lapse into Mariolatry, etc.—with the historical occurrences that engendered their deployment in fictional contexts. In doing so,



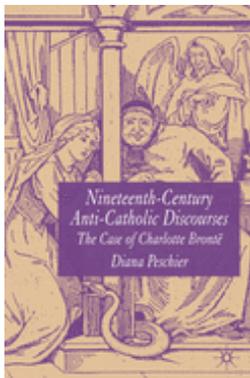
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she pinpoints the larger nation-defining work in which anti-Catholic fiction participated. One notable instance of this comes in the first chapter, concerning the escaped nun's tale. Tracing a genealogy of the nun's appearance in American works, from Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) to Lizzie Harper's *Maria Monk's Daughter* (1874), Griffin explains the myriad purposes that such tales served, including their role as a version of the fallen woman narrative used to warn young women about the dangers of Catholicism.

<6> What the genre suggests, beyond urging paternal control over vulnerable daughters, is an underlying antebellum fear that the supposed female bastion of U. S. Protestantism might be fundamentally weak. Griffin thus highlights the gendered aspects of anti-Catholic narratives—a theme she revisits throughout the book. Exemplifying her claim about the role of Catholic stereotypes in constructing Protestantisms, Griffin concludes the first chapter by arguing that the escaped nun's tale reveals the conscious effort to reimagine a national (Protestant) community threatened by “growing diversity, expansion, and secularization” (62)—threats characterized by the formation of nativist groups of the 1830s and the Know-Nothing party of mid-nineteenth-century.

<7> Griffin's second chapter shifts back to England, addressing the threat to Victorian manhood represented by the Oxford Movement, as she concentrates on two key novels: William Sewell's *Hawkstone* (1845) and Frances Trollope's *Father Eustace* (1847), the latter of which interests Peschier as well. Griffin's psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between “all-powerful fathers and obedient sons” (91) provides the foundation for the third chapter which returns to the United States. The fourth chapter, ‘Mariolatry, imperial motherhood, and manhood,’ is particularly astute in its criticism of the British Empire and the increasing Victorian investment in Orientalist tropes, such as the Indian “Thug.”

<8> Griffin ends her analysis, in many ways, where she begins. Returning in her final chapter to discuss canonical works by Benjamin Disraeli, William Dean Howells and Henry James, she demonstrates how in the late nineteenth century, anti-Catholic tropes were recycled by writers of fiction even though they had become largely divorced from polemical religious concerns. Such writers, Griffin argues, appropriated the same tropes used a half century before, mobilizing a set of associations familiar to their readership, yet did so more for psychological complexity than for any overtly political purpose. Griffin thus suggests that in texts such as James's *The American* (1877), Catholicism represents a type of fin-de-siècle “Other” that, in contrast to its more threatening precursor in the 1850s, seems romantic by the turn of the century. The study closes by pointing to a correlation between the waning of anti-Catholicism at the turn of the century and the increasingly secularized use of Catholic tropes in religious fiction. Nonetheless, Griffin is unwilling to surrender the persistent investment of Protestant nationalisms in anti-Catholicism – a condition which continues to the present day, if we are to accept Philip Jenkins' thesis in his recent *The New Anti-Catholicism* (2003).

<9> In a similar yet more circumscribed manner, Diana Peschier offers a focused examination of the influence of anti-Catholic discourses on the writing of one of the most well-known of Victorian novelists, Charlotte Brontë, showing how Brontë's writing borrows, and transforms, typically anti-Catholic scenes of encounter. *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses* is split roughly in half, with the first six chapters exploring many of the same themes and tropes discussed in Griffin's book, and the second half devoted to close examination of Brontë's four published novels. Throughout, Peschier outlines in vivid detail the scope and degree of anti-Catholic rhetoric, drawing from a wealth of sources ranging from newspaper accounts to controversial texts such as *The Confessional Unmasked* (1851), purportedly written by William Murphy and drawn from the testimonies of Roman Catholic theologians. One strength of Peschier's book is the care with which she uncovers the history behind the publication and reception of texts like Murphy's, conveying a pervasive sense of the work's importance to anti-Catholic discourse. Such rigorous attention to context allows Peschier to move deftly between medical journals, lesser-known novels, and modern criticism, among other sources.

<10> Peschier's book is, perhaps, less effective when her attention is focused solely on novels such as Trollope's *Father Eustace*, resulting in lengthy summary which comprises the bulk of her fourth chapter. It is, however, most provocative in its examination of the overwhelming popularity among upper-class males of case studies of lecherous priests, monastic sadism, and lurid tales of imprisoned and escaped nuns. Interest in such studies, she argues, was “prompted by a particular set of anxieties concerning the wives and daughters of English, Protestant men” (25). While careful to emphasize the diverse uses to which anti-confessional literature was applied, including use as propaganda in an era of increasing Roman Catholic influence in Protestant England, Peschier concludes that such literature “provided a respectable forum for the discussion and

contemplation of sexual behavior, particularly transgressive behavior” in which upper-class men “could speculate and talk as much as they wanted under the pretence of rescuing their women from the clutches of rapacious, popish priests” (42). Thus, the anti-Catholic novel can be seen to have satisfied both prurient and protective interests.

<11> Another important aspect of the book is its emphasis on the Victorian association between the nunnery and the asylum. Although Peschier suggests that this connection “has more to do with a nineteenth-century male view of women than with their professed anti-Catholicism,” she notes that the association nonetheless “uses one idea to reinforce the other, drawing on current perceptions of Catholicism to sustain the position of the patriarchal, Protestant male and his duty to protect his womenfolk” (74). This argument sets the stage for an analysis of the convent as a ‘Total Institution,’ using Irving Goffman’s term, which makes use of Michel Foucault’s description of the asylum (in Peschier’s paraphrase) as “a religious domain without religion” (74). One vivid example Peschier notes is Samuel Day Phillips’ *Life in a Convent* (1848). Phillips, formerly a monk, spoke of the dangers of the isolation of convent life; like many studies on solitary confinement done in the 1850s, he argued that the practice caused madness. Such preconceptions of nunnery life worked both to vilify the Catholic church and to reinforce the need for Protestant women to return to the protective care of men. These Victorian ideas about the dangers of isolation become relevant in Peschier’s readings of Brontë’s fiction, and the frequent references to loneliness that appear in those texts.

<12> From the beginning, the book seems to lead its readers towards a discussion of *Villette* (1853), the Brontë novel most obviously concerned with anti-Catholic themes, and for which the topical format of the first half of the book seems particularly well-suited. Thus, the discussion of the Catholic confessional in chapter three is a perfect set-up for Lucy Snowe’s well-known confessional experience, while the dangerous “gliding Jesuits” of chapter four evoke the secrecy and surveillance so prevalent in Madame Beck’s pensionnat. Peschier’s consideration of nunneries and the threat of isolation plays out all too vividly in Lucy’s ‘nervous breakdown,’ following her enervating experience attending the *cretin*. It is, thus, not surprising that Peschier’s reading of *Villette* is the strongest of the four.

<13> Together, Griffin and Peschier offer intriguing possibilities for rethinking both the influence and scope of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism. Both pull together an impressive wealth of material, fictional and non-fictional, providing attentive readings that have been lacking in previous work on the subject. Such texts suggest that interest in religious fiction hardly died with the nineteenth century, and point us towards new ways of thinking about Victorian religion.

