

Critiquing Catholicism: Victorian Women Writers and the Secular Home

Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home. Maria LaMonaca. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. xiii + 231 pp.

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<1> With this book, Maria LaMonaca enters a lively conversation about the function of Roman Catholicism in Victorian literature. *Masked Atheism*, like Patrick O'Malley's *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture* (2006), Michael E. Schiefelbein's *The Lure of Babylon: Seven Protestant Novelists and Britain's Roman Catholic Revival* (2001), and Maureen Moran's *Catholic Sensationalism in Victorian Literature* (2007), examines how even those Victorians who derided Roman Catholicism as a foreign, pagan religion could nevertheless be fascinated by it and able to use it – or, rather, their imagined view of it – for their own purposes. Collectively, these texts help us to see that anti-Catholicism remained a significant force in a population that was only five percent Roman Catholic because it was useful to the majority population, not just as a way to define their own religious and national identity against Roman Catholics, but also because this forbidden religion spoke to some secret desires held by those who vociferously denounced it.

<2> LaMonaca's contribution to this conversation is to show how women writers of various Christian denominations used Catholicism and anti-Catholicism to critique the home. Her study thus brings together two central concerns of the Victorians: religion and domesticity. Whereas scholars today are conditioned to see the home as one locus of women's spirituality, LaMonaca uncovers a great deal of anxiety about the home's potential to undermine religiosity. She argues that "even in women's texts that are ostensibly hostile to Catholicism, the most antireligious, 'profane' menace that emerges is not Rome, but *home*" (3, emphasis in original). Her argument is strengthened by her care in situating the texts she analyzes within the larger context of discourses about religion, including tracts and sermons.

<3> *Masked Atheism* examines the literary uses of the most horrifying – to Victorian anti-Catholics – facets of Roman Catholicism: idolatry, the confessional, the convent, transubstantiation, and the Virgin Mary. Rather than imposing an artificial conformity on the texts under analysis, it celebrates their diverse uses of these features of Catholicism in their respective critiques of domesticity. This is clear from the beginning, when LaMonaca analyzes how Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Lady Georgiana Fullerton's *Lady-Bird* (1852)

approach the problem of idolatry differently. Although Jane Eyre and Gertrude Lifford are similarly emotional and impulsive during their bleak childhoods, each ultimately finds a different, not entirely satisfactory, resolution to her idolatry of things and men. Jane embraces a domesticity that allows her to be an intermediary with the divine for her husband, while Gertrude renounces her early love even after a timely widowhood makes marriage to him possible in order to commit herself to good works. Each novel, however, allows the discarded lover – St. John Rivers and Adrien d’Arberg, respectively – to choose a life of active missionary work, leaving the now more stable domestic sphere to the heroine.

<4> The second chapter explores how these two authors utilize the confessional to critique domesticity in two other novels, Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) and Fullerton’s *Ellen Middleton* (1849). Confession had a vexed position in Victorian culture: as LaMonaca notes, individual confession by children to their parents and even wives to their husbands was encouraged by Protestants, but the Roman Catholic confessional was an object of horror and scandal, as priests were presumed to be uncovering domestic secrets and even seducing the women who came to them for confession. Again, these authors find different uses for confession: Fullerton’s eponymous heroine ratifies Catholic practice, as she learns the value of confessing to a priest, while Lucy Snowe subverts Catholic practice (after first experimenting with it) by choosing as a “confessor” M. Paul, a layman who loves her and who can, LaMonaca argues, show her a form of redemption that allows her to embrace her “less angelic self” (86).

<5> The convent was another source of anxiety in Victorian culture. It was popularly depicted as both a place where beautiful, innocent women were imprisoned and as the locus of a grotesque version of domesticity, where nuns spent their time on the same meaningless domestic arts, like sewing and beading elaborate goods, that middle-class women did. If the anti-convent literature was a coded attack on the foolish drudgery of domesticity, the solution was offered by Elizabeth Missing Sewell’s *The Experience of Life* (1852), in which not one but two independent women (the heroine, Sarah Mortimer, and her godmother) find celibacy a satisfying state, one that allows them the opportunity for independence and useful work. LaMonaca’s argument that the un vowed single life was a riff on the convent narrative allows us to see how this feared and secret space did inspire women writers to envision a life of active work for their single heroines.

<6> Anti-Catholics often focused on transubstantiation as evidence that Roman Catholics worshipped a “wafer god” rather than the true God. However, Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) show that the premise implicit in the doctrine of transubstantiation – that the material could become sacred – could be used by female authors to reconcile the physical and the spiritual. *Aurora Leigh* and the sisters Laura and Lizzie exemplify this melding of physical and spiritual. *Aurora* is ultimately able to reconcile the physical (her body) and the spiritual (her poetry) and to consummate her love for Romney, while Laura and Lizzie engage in a “spiritually and physically redemptive Eucharist” that offsets “the material, idolatrous, and arguably Romish communion the goblins offer Laura” (155). In both cases, however, the reworking of Catholic doctrine does not necessarily lead to complacency. Although transubstantiation is redemptive in both works, LaMonaca argues also that it could be vexing, as it showed “the slippery, indeterminate nature of the very categories of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ and their waning relevance in modern society” (159). LaMonaca’s analysis of these

two works is a useful reminder that even those Victorians who ventured to appropriate Roman Catholicism for their own uses could not entirely control where it might lead.

<7> The shift that began in chapter 4 away from a focus on anxieties about the home to anxieties about material things continues in chapter 5, which considers George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63) in light of the reported apparition of the Virgin Mary at LaSalette in 1846. Here LaMonaca argues that Eliot's transformation of *Romola* into a Marian figure allows her to shift the focus from the divine to the Other, and from prayer to active work. Curiously, given the focus of *Masked Atheism*, LaMonaca pays less attention to the critique of domesticity here, although this novel clearly expresses a profound discomfort with the ways in which domesticity can trap women. The final chapter, which examines the poetry and journal of "Michael Field" (Katherine Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Cooper), shows how Catholicism was used to make the home a sacred space. Thus we have completed the circle: the destabilized home which was a focus of anxiety has become, by the early twentieth century, the locus of a peculiar domestic and individual religion that was adapted to Roman Catholicism.

<8> This is a well-researched, clearly written study with a compelling argument that deserves to be tested in other texts. It will certainly inform the reading of texts, those sympathetic to Catholicism as well as those critical of it. Given its likely influence, I wish more attention had been paid to the nuances of Victorian Christianity. For example, LaMonaca adopts Michael Wheeler's rather facile division of Victorian Christians into two groups, Catholics – that is, Roman Catholics – and Protestants. This division shoves Tractarians, Ritualists, and Anglo-Catholics – all of whom claimed membership in the universal Catholic church – into an awkward union with those who really did consider themselves Protestant. Accepting this designation of these more problematic Anglicans – or at least problematic to those who prefer easy divisions – allows one to ignore their different status and the ways in which they challenged Protestant assumptions and a Protestant identity for the Church of England. Likewise, LaMonaca's designation of her authors' religious commitments is less precise than it could be. Although Evangelical and Low Church are not necessarily synonymous, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte Brontë, and Mary Martha Sherwood are designated as such without distinguishing the terms. Likewise, High Church and Anglo-Catholic are assumed to be synonymous (3), although this was not the case after the rise of the Tractarian and Ritualist movements in the 1830s. These are not pedantic quibbles but invitations to reconfigure how Victorian Christianity is described, in hopes of encouraging more fruitful readings of Victorian texts. If we see non-Roman Catholics as divided in terms of theology and practice, and also see how some in different denominations had shared beliefs and practices, we can make other connections in these works. For example, Fullerton converted a relatively short time after she wrote the two novels under consideration here, raising the question of the extent to which these works reflect proto-Roman Catholic rather than Anglican convictions. On balance, however, LaMonaca has written a thoughtful, nuanced analysis of the intersections of women's fiction, domesticity, and religion, one that will encourage Victorianists to continue to explore the cultural role of Roman Catholicism in Victorian Britain.