WHEN THE FORMER ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST, FR. CHINIQUY, WROTE *The Priest, the Woman, and the Confessional* in 1874, his words touched a sensitive religious nerve in countries such as England which treasured its Protestant heritage. In his book, Chiniquy attacked the practice of auricular confession in the Catholic Church and claimed that the confessional represented an evil institution which could harm the integrity of all women, including nuns. Anti-Catholic rhetoric such as this proved to be an essential element in the formation and creation of the modern English state, where Roman Catholicism was seen as an alien and foreign element. The religion of the Reformation created a distrust of the Roman Catholic Church, and a number of traditional institutions of Roman Catholicism also ran contrary to the religious and secular spirit of Victorian England. The English Reformation, using theological and scriptural arguments, condemned both auricular confession and the conventual life for men and women. The nineteenth-century opponents of these Roman practices argued that the secrecy associated with both the confessional and convent life not only offended the traditions of English openness and freedom, but could give rise to numerous abuses. Some Anglicans, however, also actively encouraged confession and sisterhoods. Critics within the Anglican Church, therefore, worked to expose the perceived abuses associated with nuns confessing to celibate priests. One way to attack this perceived danger would be to use traditional anti-Catholic rhetoric which exposed the stereotypical dangers of convents and the confessional. This strategy not only tried to expose the alleged shortcomings of these institutions and their harm to the Church of England, but also became an occasion to keep up the attack against Roman Catholicism. But to what extent did the opponents of convents and the confessional consciously fabricate the evidence to discredit both?
Auricular confession, that is, the secret and spoken acknowledgement of one’s sins and the seeking of absolution from a priest, started to replace the earlier practice of public confession by the fifth century. The Celtic monks of the next century emphasized private confession to a priest, and this system eventually supplanted the public or open acknowledgement of a person’s sins. By the eighth century, auricular confession became synonymous with the sacrament of Penance. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) legislated that all believers had to confess their sins to a priest at least once a year. Maintaining that confession was necessary for salvation, theologians drew attention to the “Keys Passage” in the New Testament (Matt. 16:18-21) to make their point. The Reformers of the sixteenth century, however, expunged Penance from the list of sacraments and argued that this questionable practice greatly diminished the importance of Christ. They argued that one should approach the Son of God directly and intimately instead of asking a priest for forgiveness. Consequently, the Council of Trent in 1551 considered it necessary to reaffirm the divine origin and the sacramental nature of auricular confession and the necessity of confession to save one’s soul.

In England during the nineteenth century, theological views on confession remained polarized. Trent told Catholics that confession was necessary for salvation, but the Protestant theologians continued to speak of the shallowness and worthlessness of auricular confession. The practice of confession, however, began to gain some acceptance within Anglicanism. Writing in 1896, the American Henry Charles Lea argued that in the early church “there was nothing to correspond with the modern conception of absolution—the pardon or remission of sin by one human being to another.” But commenting on the history of confession in the Anglican Church, Lea admitted that the English Reformation avoided the extremes of its continental counterparts in regard to confession. He pointed out that confession no longer enjoyed the status of a sacrament of the Church of England, but the 1552 Prayer Book still gave the penitent an option to approach the priest for confession and absolution. The practice of approaching a priest to encourage the use of devotions and practices associated with Roman Catholicism, and auricular confession became an option for these Anglicans. These so-called ritualists, consequently, encouraged confession as spiritually beneficial and important. But anti-Catholicism remained a powerful and emotional force in nineteenth century England, and any association with Roman practices would naturally stir up latent suspicions and hatred.

During the eighteenth century, legislation against English Catholics slowly began to disappear. Nonetheless, Catholics remained second class citizens. Roman During the eighteenth century, legislation against English Roman Catholics slowly began to disappear. Nonetheless, Catholics remained second class citizens who were still not accepted into the country’s political and social life. Roman Catholics could not sit in Parliament even though they had demonstrated their loyalty during the Napoleonic era, and the campaign for Catholic Emancipation, which would give Roman Catholics this political right, became the goal for Catholics. The passing of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 represented a landmark in religious toleration in England, but it also ushered in a renewal of religious bigotry. According to John Wolffe, the effect of Emancipation “was, if anything, to strengthen anti-Catholicism.” In 1831, for example, “a Catholic writer complained of the polemical onslaught which was being waged against the faith, on platforms and in the press, associated with the gross misrepresentation of Catholic practices and principles.” Other events of the nineteenth century which appeared to favor Catholics—for example, Robert Peel’s generous financial policy toward Maynooth College and finally the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850—tended to turn the mistrust of Roman Catholicism into a public crusade. More troubling, a section of Anglicanism, the Anglo-Catholics, seemed to be endorsing Catholicism by adopting practices banished at the Reformation. One in particular, auricular confession, especially angered loyal Protestants, and in addition to theological arguments they also campaigned against the confessional with a more emotional weapon.

Auricular confession, they argued, could seriously
“What especially affronted the Victorian middle classes, however, were the secrecy of the practice and the fact that women went to confession on their own, without the sanction of their fathers, brothers, or husbands.”

Some maintained that the priest could easily learn the most intimate secrets of domestic life and even try to control the finances, including the transfer of property and funds to the confessor or his church. The Sacrament of Penance administered to a penitent on the death bed might also give some unscrupulous clerics the opportunity to suggest changes in the last will and testament, thus stealing the inheritance from the family members. Confession also created other potential problems. The priest’s questions could deal with the most personal details of married life. Consequently, the opponents of Roman Catholicism believed that the confessional might easily become the occasion of temptation and sin. The atmosphere of religious prejudice in England would welcome examples of scandal, but in fact stories of impropriety existed more in the mind of anti-Catholic writers that in reality. Fabricated stories of the seduction of women in the confessional by wicked priests did appear in some works of fiction, but actual cases of scandalous activities were extremely rare. Commenting on the campaign against confession in the Anglican Church and the amount of literature which emphasized possible dangers, John Shelton Reed notes that “it may be surprising how little seduction there actually was, beyond rumor and conjecture.”

The questions allegedly asked by some confessors, however, disturbed many, and when the public became acquainted with the nature of these queries they expressed disbelief and rage. The Rev. M. Hobart Seymour, a critic of the confession, sisterhoods, and Roman Catholicism in general, told the English that the “preparation for the Confession forms a large portion of clerical education.” This training for the Roman Catholic priesthood necessarily introduced the future confessor to “every kind of sin, every form of vice, every phase of impurity, and every way in which the vilest passions of our fallen nature can be indulged”. Consequently, according to Seymour, teachers at seminaries allegedly instructed future priests on the techniques they should use in the confessional on “how to search and ascertain every phase and form of sin in the penitent kneeling before him ... and every willful indulgence of thought or feeling which might aggravate its guilt.” Lewis H. J. Tonna also criticized the subject matter of the questions which the Roman Catholic priests asked, especially when hearing the confessions of nuns. In Nuns and Nunneries, he found fault with the preparation clerics received to hear confessions of women in convents, itself “a most unnatural system,” and he discussed the sensitive nature of the dialogue between a priest and the nun who entered the confessional. With no formal preparation for the duties of the confessional, Anglican confessors could acquire the necessary training from Roman Catholic books of moral theology. One written by Pierre Dens (1690-1775) became popular, and opponents of auricular confession translated relevant sections from Latin to English to alert the public of the possible perils associated with the secrecy of the confessional.

One translation of Dens’s book pointed out that the author openly acknowledged that actions of a sexual nature might take place during confession, and he set out the procedure by which the woman could denounce the sinful priest to the bishop in writing, and an episcopal investigation would follow.

Some opponents maintained that the sexual orientation of the questions contained in Dent’s book contributed to “the licentiousness of the clergy”; others believed that the priest’s questions led to abuses. The sensitive nature of this interrogation most probably scandalized Victorian society. Kissing, “other greater alternative liberties,” and improper thoughts were all appropriate subjects a confessor could discuss with an engaged woman. Another Catholic manual written by Louis Bailly, also translated into English, contained a list of questions that a priest could ask a female, including: “Has she ornamented herself in dress so as to please the male sex ... or bared her arms, her shoulders, or her bosom ...[whether] she has allowed him to kiss her?” This book of moral theology, moreover, discussed situations dealing with intimacies between a husband and wife. The general spirit of these two manuals, therefore, could anger Victorian men and could embarrass a woman. But why then did some Anglican wives and daughters frequent the confessional?

Confession for Anglicans remained a voluntary action, and it could be interpreted as a sign of defiance for women who sought freedom or independence. Confessing one’s innermost thoughts and transgressions to a cleric, and not the husband, also represented an act of defiance, and this presented a challenge to a society dominated by men. Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Bronte’s Villette, for example, personified this free spirit of self-expression and empowerment when she boldly entered the confessional box and could embarrass a woman. But why then did some
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Women seeking out a cleric for confession became associated in the minds of certain critics with an attempt to break the bonds of superficial Victorian mores, and the growth of Anglican sisterhoods in the nineteenth century also represented something more than an idealized desire to recreate the pre-Reformation world of English nunneries. The conventual life in the Anglican Church, like confession, became popular among the Anglo-Catholics, and Roman Catholic nuns arriving from Europe also began to establish convents throughout the country with some success. Detractors of the conventual life for women emphasized what they perceived to be the unnatural nature of the celibate life, drew attention to alleged abuses in convents throughout the centuries and argued that the strict regime and the secret nature of sisterhoods could deprive pious women of their English liberties. drew attention to alleged abuses in convents throughout and argued that the strict nature of sisterhoods could deprive pious women of their English liberties. Life within a convent indeed offered women an opportunity to break free from the strictures of Victorian convention. The cloister walls ironically gave them freedom. Entering a convent, much like the act of confession, became a sign of independence. In her study of Anglican convents in Victorian England, Susan Mumm argues that these nuns “saw religion as an empowering and enabling force, not as a restrictive or crippling limitation on their human potential.”¹⁶

One of the first in-depth studies of religious communities in the Anglican Church, A. M. Allchin’s *The Silent Rebellion: Anglican Religious Communities 1845-1900*, views the establishment of the convents as a reaction against the “worldly values and standards” of a prosperous and industrialized country.¹⁷ John Shelton Reed believes that Anglican sisterhoods offered a new path for unmarried women in the fields of education, nursing, and work among “fallen women” such as prostitutes or alcoholics which the individualistic and competitive culture of the Victorians had neglected. The appeal of the conventual life for women, therefore, occasioned some serious concern on the part of Victorian men. Sisterhood life took women out of their homes, gave them important work and sometimes great responsibility, and replaced their ties to fathers, husbands, and brothers by loyalties to Church and sisterhood. It demonstrated that there were callings for women of the upper and middle classes in addition to, or in they eyes of threatened members of the Protestant establishment other than those of wife, daughter, and “charitable spinster.” And it at least suggested that the religious life was the higher calling.¹⁸

Sisterhoods appeared as a threat not only to the integrity of the Protestant character of Anglicanism, but also to the status quo of Victorian society. Auricular confession fit the same view, and books of devotion, which influenced both Roman Catholic and Anglican sisterhoods, encouraged nuns to frequent the confessional. St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) wrote *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ* in 1760 as a guide for Catholic nuns, and some Anglican sisterhoods eventually adopted his ideas. St. Alphonsus argued that “nothing was more injurious or displeasing to ...[the devil] than frequent confession.”¹⁹ Moreover, he also stressed that nuns must obey their confessors and told them to “fear not that in obeying him you may be led astray.”²⁰ Because of the apparent dangers which auricular confession and Anglican sisterhoods posed to the state religion and the Victorian family, they had to be denounced, and critics in nineteenth-century England labored to paint a picture of corruption and wickedness which resulted when a nun went to confession. Stories of alleged abuses of the confessional...
in Roman Catholic sisterhoods had a long tradition of English anti-Catholicism and dislike of the monastic life, but the re-establishment of these convents in England also attracted some support. Catholic bashing, therefore, might be an important weapon against the growth of Anglo-Catholic sisterhoods.

After the nationalization of the church during the reign of Henry VIII, Roman Catholic monasticism disappeared from the country, but the conventual life, especially for women, began to flourish again in the early nineteenth century. Monks and nuns fleeing the horrors of the French Revolution found a refuge on English soil, and the number of convents grew. Monasticism had contributed to the development of English life and culture, and John Henry Newman stressed the significance of Roman Catholic monasticism throughout history. Prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845, Newman made no secret of his admiration of monasticism and its spiritual and educational contributions, and unfortunately these had disappeared from the fabric of English civilization.21 His writings reveal an appreciation of religious vows, especially celibacy, communal life, and common prayer. Monasticism humanized society; it offered alternative values to the growth of secularism which was occurring in industrialized England. The monastic life, Newman believed, preserved the truths and essentials of the Christian message and also offered a protection against indifference, and he pointed to the past when the monasteries contributed to order and education in Europe.

Another leading member of the Oxford Movement, Edward Bouverie Pusey, actively supported the establishment of Anglican sisterhoods, but he also noted that Newman recognized the value of convents. Writing to John Keble in 1839, Pusey pointed out that “Newman and I have separately come to think it necessary to have some Soeurs de Charite in the Anglo-Catholic Church.”23 Newman recognized the importance of women monastics in The Church of Our Fathers, Historical Sketches where he argued that “[t]here is another reason for such establishments, which applies particularly to women; convents are as much demanded, in the model of a perfect Church, by Christian charity, as monastic bodies can be by Christian zeal.”24 He criticized the “cruel temper of Protestantism [that is, day nurseries for young children], industrial schools and teacher education; retreat work, catechetics and religious instruction; hospital, prison and parish visiting and welfare support in working-class districts; homes for orphans or children unable to be supported by their families, the physically handicapped and the elderly; women’s refuges, reformatories and hostels for working-class young women; and, to a lesser extent, dispensaries, home nursing, convalescent homes and hospitals.”29

Roman Catholic convents offered valuable services which were absent from government programs. “In 1840 the English Catholic community could lay claim to fewer than twenty convents and an even smaller number of convent schools and welfare institutions,” Susan O’Brien points out, but “by 1880 the Catholic Directory listed more than three hundred convents ... administering a well-developed system of Catholic educational and welfare services.”25 Most significant, and an issue which infuriated many anti-Catholics, were the praiseworthy contributions of these sisterhoods in the area of education to all segments of English society.26 According to Edward Norman, the convent schools made available an education superior to other institutions: “In terms of education offered to girls . . . at all levels, the Catholic schools provided very much better and more extensive facilities than the education available for females generally in nineteenth-century England.”27 The curriculum at these schools included foreign languages, science, mathematics, geography, and needlework, and moreover, “many of these schools had a considerable number, even a majority, of non-Catholic girls.”28 But Catholic nuns contributed to the well being of society in other areas:
A sense of rivalry, embarrassment at their own shortcomings, and fear of conversion to Roman Catholicism (especially in the schools) contributed to the traditional hostility against these sisterhoods, but criticisms could also come from unlikely sources.

A shocking revelation came from Scipio de Ricci (1741-1806), the reforming Bishop of Pistoia and Prato. In 1829 his remarks appeared in England under the title, *Female Convents. Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed*, the same year Catholic Emancipation received royal assent. According to this account, the confessor of a certain Italian convent enjoyed free run of this cloistered institution, and this practice resulted in immoral behaviors. The Bishop’s use of an isolated example probably did more harm than good in the cause of convent reform, and the anti-Catholic mind was quick to generalize. Roman Catholic Italy also provided the scene for another unflattering look at life within sisterhoods. In 1864, an ex-Benedictine nun, Henrietta Caracciolo, published her reminiscences, and writers in England frequently quoted her words throughout the nineteenth century. Caracciolo’s purpose was not an expose, but she wanted to provide a justification for the recent anti-Catholic policy adopted by the Italian government in suppressing sisterhoods. Her descriptions of conventual life, not surprisingly, lacked objectivity. In this account, the religious superior encouraged daily confession, and some of the sisters became fascinated with the priest. The danger centered around the nature of the questions the priest asked the penitent nun: the suggestive language of the confessor could easily result in occasional trysts between the confessor and the sister. These Italian examples contained exaggerated and questionable examples of impropriety, and both authors had an agenda of progressive reform to champion. A book from America reinforced these exaggerated views for readers in England.

A testimony written by the former Roman Catholic priest, William Hogan, tried to give some credibility to the charges of wicked confessors and their corrupting power over naive nuns. His motives, however, appeared to be based on hatred and anti-Catholicism rather than an objective study of alleged abuses. Hogan’s training at the Irish seminary at Maynooth touched an English nerve at a time when the public had become agitated because of the government’s perceived favorable policy to this Roman Catholic institution. Hogan’s book, originally published in America in 1845, appeared in England the following year. Hogan successfully combined his own experiences as a former confessor and the revelations he heard with the traditional critiques, most unsubstantiated, against convent life. He talked about seductions, murders, illegitimate children, infanticide, the immorality of nuns and clergy, and the hidden and seditious dangers of convent education. Hogan began his discussion of confession by reminding the reader that he wanted to demonstrate that it represented “the source and fountain of many, if not all, those treasons, debaucheries, and other evils, which are now flooding” America. Hogan then explored the secret world of the confessional in convents. **Bringing his creditability and motives into question, Hogan broke the bond of confidentiality and revealed the subjects of some confessions he heard as a Catholic priest.** He boldly claimed that “there is scarcely one of them [nuns] who has not been herself debauched by her confessor.” The suggestive and obscene questions which the priest asked were degrading and indecent, and could easily result in the manipulation of females, and members of a sisterhood were the most vulnerable. Hogan stated that he personally knew two nuns in Boston who became pregnant after they had been seduced by the convent’s confessor. The English, however, could read the accounts of nuns, Anglican and Roman Catholic, and their stories of sisterhoods in England. Their testimonies seemed tame and mild, and conflicted with the evil stereotype nurtured by anti-Catholic propaganda.

Eliza Richardson published *Personal Experience of Roman Catholicism. With Incidents of Convent Life* in 1864. The so-called “indelicate” questions asked by some father confessors not only embarrassed her, but also enkindled a sense of outrage and shame. Richardson did not single out issues of sexuality, but claimed that one of her confessors cajoled her and pressured her to reveal more information in order to obtain priestly absolution. She felt suffocated, and “a kind of fallen and crushed feeling seemed to paralyze me, both physically and mentally.” Richardson characterized auricular confession as a bondage and “an engine of foul spiritual tyranny.” Another former nun, Sister Lucy (Ann Cullen) “escaped” from a Roman Catholic convent in 1865, and soon afterwards wrote a small pamphlet which described her life in the sisterhood. She described her Essex convent as a prison of some, if not all, those treasons, debaucheries, and other evils, which are now flooding” America. Sister Lucy attended confession weekly “until the last five or six weeks, when I told the nun that it was mocking God, and that I would not go again.”
The probing nature of the confessor’s questions offended her and “sometimes caused me to suspect the priest’s motives were none of the purest.” Nevertheless, no allegation of abuse associated with the confessional appears in her account of her stay in the convent.

Former nuns also wrote about their experiences in Anglican sisterhoods. They complained about several aspects of the conventual life, but none contained the scathing condemnation of the confessional one might expect. Priscilla Lydia Sellon, who established an Anglican sisterhood in Devonport near Plymouth in 1848, attracted a number of critics. Some former members disliked her support of Roman Catholic devotions and her alleged tyrannical manner of supervising the convent, but the criticisms did not reveal anything scandalous or abusive as a result of her encouragement of the confessional. Margaret Goodman’s two books about the Devonport convent, for example, skimmed over Sellon’s support of confession. Mary Frances Cusack also attacked Sellon’s despotic rule and argued that episcopal supervision was needed to ensure a healthy religious life for the nuns, but she actually saw benefit in auricular confession: it could console a troubled soul. “It was to us merely a ‘comfort’ and nothing more. Indeed, had it been acknowledged to be a sacrament by our spiritual guides, they would have placed themselves in a position of extreme perplexity.” In The Anglican Sister of Mercy, the author resisted the pressure of other nuns in Sellon’s sisterhood to frequent confession, and she backed up her opposition by arguing that since “priestcraft” and the confessional were intimately connected a priest could control and dominate family life in England.

The topic of auricular confession and its place in convents also appeared in other stories by ex-nuns, but the subject did not attract much attention in their descriptions of life in a sisterhood. Sister Mary Agnes, O. S. B., an associate of the Anglican Benedictine, Fr. Ignatius of Llanthony, expressed a sense of disillusionment with convent life and remembered the cruel treatment she endured at the hand of the superior, but she gave the subject of confession only a few passing words. In 1874, Charlotte Myhall published a short pamphlet about her stay in an Anglican sisterhood, complete with illustrations of instruments of torture she claimed convents used, but Myhall did not even mention the confessional as a possible source of abuse. A Roman Catholic former nun, Sister Mary Elizabeth, criticized Irish convent life in 1892, but the subject of auricular confession within the cloister was absent. The testimony of Julia Gordon at first sight appeared to be a gold mine for critics of convent confessions. These so-called memoirs, in reality fictional creations of an anti-Catholic mind, rehashed the usual fabrications of infanticide, seduction, torture and murder usually associated with Gothic prose, but Julia Gordon seemed restrained in her comments on the confessional:

.. when I was closeted with him [the priest] at confession, to urge me to confess crimes I never conceived, and interlarded with religious homilies pictured to my mind scenes of licentiousness I could never suppose were enacted.

But the testimony of another young woman, Miss A. R. B., who left both the convent and the Roman Catholic Church, took offense at anti-Catholic diatribes against sisterhoods, and wrote in 1875 that she “can nevertheless look back with pleasure upon Convent days and Convent friends.” As for Catholic priests, “she still holds [them] in affectionate remembrance.” Although accounts of both Anglican and Roman Catholic conventual life could be critical, their negative assessments did not include alleged abuses associated with the confessional.

Writers of fiction, however, enjoyed the option to take more liberty with aspects of convent life, and they could easily portray the confessional in more harsh and threatening terms. Lorette was written by an American minister and published in Edinburgh in 1836. The pages of the Rev. George Bourne’s book contained the usual litany of anti-Catholic and anti-convent stereotypes, and he did not neglect the apparent dangers of auricular confession. Early in the book one of the main characters announced, “I will never go to the confessional unless I am dragged there. The ceremony is a farce and delusion, and it is connected with wickedness.” The book dramatically exposed the alleged evils of the Roman Catholic Church and sisterhoods, but surprisingly did not target the convent’s confessional as an occasion of sin. Another work of fiction, however, became the standard work which condemned convent life in stark and pornographic terms, and one might expect vivid descriptions of unethical confessors.

The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, published in 1836, quickly became a best seller and soon appeared in
England. Marketed as a memoir of Maria Monk, an ex-nun who chronicled her dreadful experiences in a Montreal convent, the scandalous happenings and immoral activities of priests and nuns in the book were quickly exposed as false. Maria Monk, who probably suffered from mental problems, really existed, and a group of anti-Catholic Americans worked with her to compose the book and conjured up the fictional activities within the convent. They used vivid and detailed language to illustrate the unsavory actions of the sisterhood: infanticide of the nuns’ children and the crude burial of their young bodies in lime pits, a murder of a nun, the torture and the walling up of disobedient sisters, and the not-to-be-neglected liaisons with predatory priests. In a book of such graphic detail, one might expect that the secrecy associated with auricular confession might also find a prominent place in this attack against sisterhoods, but the confessional was not the object of harsh criticism. Early in the book, however, the subject of confession did appear. A friend of Maria Monk told her about the conduct of a priest in the confessional, which Monk thought was shameful. This nun did not mention the nature of the inappropriate conduct, but it did not appear to be sexual. The only instance of abusive priestly actions in reference to the confessional occurred when Maria Monk related how the questions became detailed and “that the priests became more and more bold, and were at length indecent in their questions and even in their conduct when I confessed to them in the Sacristy.”

Yet even this reference to improper and questionable actions is mild compared to the other examples of brutality and abuse in this book.

Other works of fiction also described Roman Catholic sisterhoods in unflattering terms, but the indictment against auricular confession was also gentle. Julia McNair Wright’s Secrets of the Convent and the Confessional and Priest and Nun warned America of the dangers to their liberty posed by the Roman Catholic Church, and these books soon appeared in England, where the same fear existed. In the former novel, Wright alerted the country about the evil designs of the Jesuits and the dangers of convent education. The growth of Roman Catholic sisterhoods had to be resisted, and she described the alleged cruelty of convent life, the abusive power of the mother superior, and the unnatural atmosphere, but confession only received a passing comment:

The Confessional is Rome’s electric telegraph. Every Confessional is an office, every priest an operator; from parish to parish, from town to town, from diocese to diocese, from State to State, and from land to land, Rome flashes her secret intelligence, until what was spoken in the ear, is proclaimed upon the house-tops, and what was whispered in darkness blazes into the light of action.31

In her second book, Priest and Nun, Wright briefly mentioned confession as being unscriptural, but she did not discuss the role of this Catholic sacrament in sisterhoods. Another work of fiction also critical of convents, St. Mary’s Convent; or, Chapters in the Life of a Nun, singled out the lack of freedom in a sisterhood and described the convent as a prison, but in this story, the priest-confessor surprisingly appeared in a positive light. He actually encouraged “ideas of a state of more freedom and enjoyment into the minds of some six or seven of the sisterhood” in a plot to replace the harsh superior with one more “good-natured” and “good humoured.”52 Love’s Strife with the Convent, another novel, critiqued both sisterhoods and the confessional, but the author did find a redeeming act by the convent’s confessor. It noted that Fr. Francis “reproached the abbess in private for having used the vault of penitence without first consulting him, and more particularly for having immured” one of her charges.53

Nonetheless, stories of wicked confessors taking advantage of over scrupulous nuns did exist. In 1850, when the Roman Catholic Hierarchy was restored, Priests and Their Victims; Or Scenes in a Convent was published. This collection of anti-Catholic and anti-Jesuit propaganda contained the story of an eighteenth century orphan whose father stipulated that she had to enter a convent in order to inherit his small fortune. The shocking descriptions of the sisterhood echoed the falsehoods found in Maria Monk’s book about convent life. This tale used stories of immoral priests, sexual license, illegitimate children and infanticide, a despotic and cruel superior, and the murder of rebellious nuns to discredit the Catholic religion and convent life, and it did not ignore the evils of the confessional. One
member of the convent, Sr. Agnes, suffered imprisonment, torture, and death because she resisted the advances of her confessor priest. When she complained to the Abbess of the convent, this superior told Sr. Agnes that she had to obey the dictates of the confessor. She still refused, and revealed that “I have been tortured in almost every conceivable shape to make me yield ... [and] for this am I punished.”

Because she would not give in to the wishes of the superior and the priest, Sr. Agnes had to suffer the horrible consequences: “A large feather bed was now brought forward by the elderly sisters ... and placing it over her they got on top of it, and stamped and jumped upon it until death released her from her sufferings.” This work of anti-Catholic fiction is an exception, but it illustrates that the hatred and bigotry of critics would go to any extent to create abuses associated with both sisterhoods and auricular confession.

But was the convent confessional a den of sin and a place where unscrupulous priests used their power and authority to corrupt the naive nun who looked to the confessor for comfort and absolution? The use of well-known anti-Catholic images and charges of scandalous actions to attack and discredit Anglican conventual life for women would certainly give their detractors a great opportunity to carry on their attack against the perceived threats from Roman Catholicism. Opponents, therefore, could create pictures of evil confessors in an attempt both to smear Roman Catholic convents and to warn Anglicans about the dangers that would exist within their sisterhoods.

Works of nineteenth-century fiction could be harsh in their condemnation of convent life, but in general the critiques of the confessional seemed mild in comparison with the license some authors took in their descriptions of alleged cruel punishments, murder, and infanticide within the cloister. In the case of Roman Catholic convents, however, little evidence supports the charge of an abusive confessional. The testimony of several ex-nuns and examples of literature critical of sisterhoods do not support the claim that Roman Catholic priests misused the confessional to corrupt and ruin members of sisterhoods who sought their spiritual advice and comfort. Consequently, this allegation did not figure greatly in the rhetoric against Anglican sisterhoods. Like the Victorian era, when Roman Catholicism and sisterhoods stood in stark opposition to the increasing secularization of the country and offered alternatives that challenged a society which appeared to abandon religious principles, the current opposition in America to Catholic values and its institutions, such as the sanctity of the family, the religious life for men and women, and its educational system, is motivated by anti-Catholic prejudices, exaggerations, and personal agendas.

**NOTES**


2. See the numerous articles dealing with confession in the New Catholic Encyclopedia.


10 See P. Dens, *Tractatus Theologicus de Sacramento Poenitentiae* (Dublin: J. Barlow, 1812). Sections of Dens’s book dealing with confession were published in Dublin in 1836. By the middle of the nineteenth century, several English translations dealing with the questions which the priest asked women had appeared. See, for example, C. Sparry, trans., *Translations (with the Original Latin) from Dens’ System of Moral Theology on the Nature of Confession, and the Obligation of the Seal* (New York: privately printed, 1848) and C. B. (David Bryce), trans., *The Confessional Unmasked: Showing the Depravity of the Priesthood and Immorality of the Confessional, Being the Questions Put to Females in Confession* (London: Thomas Johnston, 1851).

11 C. Sparry, 21-22.

12 *The Confessional: An Exposure of Its Mysteries and Iniquities As Practiced in Foreign and English Convents by Priests and Their Victims* (London: W. H. Elliot, 1873), 11.

13 Ibid., 30.


17 John Shelton Reed, *Glorious Battle*, 203.

18 Ibid., 204.


20 Ibid., 550.


29 Susan O’Brien, “Religious Life for Women,” 120.

30 T. Roscoe, ed., *Female Convents. Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed. Compiled from the Autograph Manuscripts of Scipio de Ricci, Roman Catholic Bishop of Pistoia and Prato. By Mr. De Potter* (New York: D. Appleton, 1834), 84. The book was first published in London in 1829. References are from this American edition. The introductory essay to this edition warned the American readers that the same scandal and abuses would take place in their country if Roman Catholicism and its institutions, such as religious orders for men and women, flourished.

31 *Memoirs of Henrietta Caracciolo, of the Princes of Forino, ExBenedictine Nun.* (London: Richard Bentley, 1864), v.

32 Ibid., 102-05.
33 William Hogan, *Popery! As It Was and As It Is. Also Auricular Confession; and Popish Nunneries.* (Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1854), 233.
34 Ibid., 247.
35 Ibid., 473.
37 Ibid., 66.
38 Ibid., 70.
39 *The Marvelous Escape of “Sister Lucy” and Her Awful Disclosures* (London: Protestant Electoral Union, 1866), 16.
40 Ibid.
44 Sister Mary Agnes, *Nunery Life in the Church of England; Or Seventeen Years with Father Ignatius.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 50.
46 Mrs. Joseph Slattery (Sister Mary Elizabeth), *Convent Life Exposed.* (Cliftondale, Mass.: Mrs. Slattery, 1892).
47 *Awful Disclosures of Miss Julia Gordon, The White Nun, or Female Spy! Her Vile Jesuit Plots; Scenes of Infamy, Torture and Murder in Convents! And the Strangling & Burning of New-Born Infants, in a Lime Pit, To Conceal the Crimes of the Priests with the Nuns.* (London: G. Abington, 1858), 6-7.
52 Jeanie Selina Dammast, *St. Mary’s Convent; or, Chapters in the Life of a Nun.* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1899), 91.
54 G. M. Viner, comp., *Priests and Their Victims; Or, Scenes in a Convent.* (London: H. E1l1iot, 1850), 8.
55 Ibid., 9.