“A Perfect Jesuit in Petticoats”: The Curious Figure of the Female Jesuit

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Abstract

This article investigates one of the most curious figures in the anti-Jesuit arsenal, the female Jesuit, or Jesuitess. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, opponents of the Jesuits in a range of nations warned that the bedrock institutions of society were vulnerable to infiltration by this figure who in their mind combined Jesuit cunning with feminine charm. This made the female Jesuit, in words that were repeated in exposés of the Society, even more dangerous than the male Jesuit. Perhaps paradoxically, the female Jesuit tells us a great deal about the imagined nature of Jesuit masculinity. The existence of such a creature could seem plausible because Jesuitism itself appeared to be shrouded in an ambiguous masculinity. As an imagined space where gender confusion rather than clarity was thought to reign, the Society of Jesus naturally spawned a figure like the female Jesuit.

Keywords

Society of Jesus – Jesuits – Female Jesuit – Jesuitess – anticlericalism – anti-Catholicism – masculinity – femininity – convent – Jules Michelet

The middle decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of works dedicated to exposing the wiles and plots of the Society of Jesus. Polemicists warned of a secret Jesuit plan to infiltrate and to seize control of the bedrock institutions of society: schools, legislatures, newspapers, and, perhaps most appallingly, homes.¹ Novelists, many of whom were well-regarded

1 On anti-Jesuitism in the nineteenth century, see: Michel Leroy, *Le mythe jésuite: de Béranger à Michelet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1992); Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy*

by critics and the public alike, depicted in great detail this vile, hypocritical, and yet fascinating figure.² In its appetite for such works, the reading public looked beyond national borders. The international potential of anti-Jesuit works was most stunningly demonstrated by Eugène Sue's *Le juif errant* (1844–45). The story of a plot by the Society to destroy the Protestant Rennepont family and seize its immense fortune, Sue's melodrama was serialized in British and American newspapers, then went on to become an international best-seller.³ The American fervor surrounding Sue's novel was witnessed by an English traveler, Sir Charles Lyell. In a conversation with its publisher James Harper, Lyell learned that 80,000 copies had been sold in the first few months of publication. Sue's book seemed to be everywhere. "It had so often been thrust into my hands in railway cars, and so much talked of," Lyell wrote, "that, in the course of my journey, I began to read it in self-defense."⁴

In their depiction of the Jesuit, these authors insisted on his elusiveness. Filled with ambition, cunning and resourcefulness, the Jesuit is at the same time almost impossible to pin down. His slippery nature is captured in one 1847 American polemic. "By what sign," the author asks, "can one distinguish the Jesuit?"⁵ This was a question with no easy answer. Take, for example, perhaps the most fearsome literary depiction of Jesuit villainy, Rodin in *Le juif errant*. On the one hand, his body and face bear the stamp of his foul nature. He shows a "cadaverous countenance" and "little reptile eyes"; his dress is "sordid." Rodin inspires at first sight a "disagreeable feeling of repugnance" in any man or woman of sound moral instinct.⁶ But instinct was an unreliable resource in picking out the Jesuit enemy. For when it suited his purpose, Rodin could just as easily exude sincerity and a good-natured charm; throughout the

Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-century France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Róisín Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Imperial Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Michael B. Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-century Germany* (Detroit: University of Michigan, 2004), 89–96.

- 2 Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 28–76; John Wolffe, "The Jesuit as Villain in Nineteenth-century British Fiction," in *The Church and Literature*, ed. Peter Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012), 308–20.
- 3 On the influence of Sue's book in England, see Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 136–38.
- 4 Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of America* (London: John Murray, 1849), 2:340.
- 5 Joshua V. Himes, *Statement of Facts Demonstrating the Rapid and Universal Spread and Triumph of Roman Catholicism* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1847), 95.
- 6 Eugène Sue, *The Wandering Jew* (New York: Dedalus, 1990), 115.

novel he wins over his victims with a finely-honed display of gentle amiability. Nor could the Jesuit be identified by his clerical garb. In the minds of his opponents, he was likely to dress as a parish priest, or disguise himself in the clothes of the laity.

Imagined as a master of disguise, the Jesuit seemed to be everywhere. Many American Protestants were convinced that their nation had been thoroughly infiltrated; the fact that so few were visible did nothing to allay their fears. "The Jesuits," as one writer warned, "are a class of human beings roving over the land, yet nobody seems to know or to see them."⁷ The Jesuit was thought able to play a vast number of roles. Thanks to his "chameleon [*sic*] nature," as one writer put it, he could be convincing as "a beggar at your door, a shipwrecked mariner at another time, a well-dressed Priest at an evening party among Protestants."⁸ All things to all people, he might be a conservative or a radical, a pro-slavery ideologue or an abolitionist. Rather than exposing himself to public view, he might prefer to work through his army of secular allies, the infamous *jésuites de robe courte*, men and women of influence—newspaper editors, politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, doctors—who acted at the Jesuit's behest. In the United States, anti-Catholic novels depicted politicians ceding to Jesuit demands in exchange for Catholic votes, or newspaper editors suppressing damaging information on the Society in return for money. The Jesuit, then, effortlessly insinuated himself into every channel of society, and this made him a confusing and terrifying adversary. As the *American Protestant Magazine* warned, "They are here and there, yet no one can tell where they are."⁹ The Jesuit, in the words of a popular anti-Catholic writer, "is present everywhere—though nowhere recognized."¹⁰

In fact, the Jesuit might not even be a man. This appears especially curious, for the Society of Jesus had always insisted on not having a female branch. Ignatius of Loyola rejected the idea, and the attempt to found one by Loyola's supporter Isabella Roser had never received papal approval. Nevertheless, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a new figure emerged in the anti-Jesuit arsenal, the female Jesuit, or Jesuitess. This article investigates the depiction of this figure in French, American, and British novels, newspapers, and tracts

7 "Jesuits in Disguise in Our Country," *The American Protestant Magazine* 1, no. 12 (1846): 360–63, here 361.

8 "Jesuits in Disguise in the United States," *The American Protestant Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1846): 70–74, here 70–71.

9 "Jesuits in Disguise in Our Country," 361.

10 Helen Dhu, *Stanhope Burleigh: The Jesuits in Our Homes* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1855), viii.

published in the middle decades of the century.¹¹ Perhaps paradoxically, the female Jesuit tells us a great deal about the imagined nature of Jesuit masculinity. The existence of such a creature could seem plausible because Jesuitism itself appeared to be shrouded in an ambiguous masculinity. Though possessing several traits ascribed to true manliness, the Jesuit also embodied a set of disturbingly feminine characteristics. This gender confusion allowed him to cultivate his female helpers. Because he was thought to be so feminine, the Jesuit was particularly well-placed to identify the sentimental weaknesses of women, and turn them to his ends. At the same time, women who dared to display traits which were seen as the reserve of men, particularly political ambition, found a natural home in an institution where gender lines were blurred rather than rigid. As an imagined space where gender confusion rather than clarity was thought to reign, the Society of Jesus naturally spawned a figure like the female Jesuit.

It is difficult to know how many people believed in the existence of the sinister Jesuitess. However, in the context both of widespread anti-Jesuit hostility as well as a deep commitment to a bifurcated model of gender relations, polemics attacking the female Jesuit won a large audience that cut across national and social borders. She would appear in fictional works that, while no longer considered part of the literary canon, were esteemed in their time, and in Great Britain and the United States was a stock figure in several popular, if short-lived, anti-Catholic polemics. In majority-Catholic nations like France, leading anti-clericals such as the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) warned of the sinister workings of this female adversary. As we shall see, even Queen Victoria was an avid reader of works that unveiled the presence of female Jesuits. In another sign of the credibility attached to the female Jesuit, Catholic writers were forced to deny the existence of any such figure.

Like any credible figure of menace, the female Jesuit was thought to take on different guises. In one understanding, she was a member of a female congregation organized on the same rules as the Society of Jesus. Anti-Jesuits warned that these congregations had been revived in the early nineteenth century, and were now spreading across Europe and North America. In 1843, Michelet, working in tandem with Edgar Quinet (1803–1875), delivered a series of lectures at the Collège de France in which he unveiled the nature and ambition of the Society. In his second lecture, Michelet warned that the order of Sacré-Coeur

11 On the female Jesuit, see Margaret M. Maison, *The Victorian Vision: Studies in the Religious Novel* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 174, 177; Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 48–50.

was governed by the Jesuits and followed the same constitutions. Michelet went on to describe the nature and role of these female partners. At times, “subtle and gentle, adroit and charming,” the Jesuitesses paved the way for the Society’s plots, particularly its goal of enrolling wealthy young women into its schools and convents.¹² Here, the part played by the female Jesuit was crucial. Only she could win the trust of mothers and convince them to entrust the education of their beloved daughters to the Society. The success of this strategy was, Michelet warned, startling. Daughters of the leading families of France were now being molded by Jesuit teachers in their sinister principles, or enrolled into the ranks of the female Jesuit religious houses.¹³

In Britain and the United States, Protestant writers took note of what seemed to be occurring in France, and quickly detected Jesuit female orders at home. In 1846, the *American Protestant Magazine* declared that the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, an order which counted sixty houses in total and nine houses in the United States, were Jesuitesses, and “powerful auxiliaries in spreading Romanism.”¹⁴ In some account, these female Jesuits were being channeled into the United States through Britain. In *Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries* (1854), William Hogan, a renegade priest and the author of a series of sensational anti-Catholic polemics, recounted his encounter in New Orleans with a female Jesuit, who admitted to being “a *lay sister* belonging to the order of Jesuits in Stonyhurst, England.”¹⁵

Membership in a female order affiliated to the Jesuits was not the only criterion. In another understanding, any member of a female religious order whose behavior was deemed to be unwomanly also fell under suspicion. This was most apparent in the animosity directed towards the figure of the mother superior, a woman who dared to wield one of the privileges associated with the male sex, overt authority. Conventional understandings of gender throughout the nineteenth century ascribed distinct and complementary physical and intellectual characteristics to the sexes. One of these was authority. Men embodied reason, and as such were the only dependable carriers of public authority; women, thought naturally emotional and passive, were more adept

12 Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, *Des jésuites* (Paris: Hachette and Paulin, 1843), 13. See Stephen A. Kippur, *Jules Michelet: A Study of Mind and Sensibility* (Albany: State University of New York, 1981), 93–98.

13 Michelet and Quinet, *Des jésuites*, 14.

14 “Features of Romanism,” *American Protestant Magazine* (1846): 247; “Pilgrims to Paray-le-Monial,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 3, 1873, 8.

15 William Hogan, *Popery! As It Was and as It Is. Also, Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries* (Hartford: S. Andrus & Son, 1853), 327.

at the art of influence. Women might act as exemplars of virtue, and gently mold their circle of family and friends in their own saintly image, but only men were permitted to wield bare power.¹⁶

Of course, many women challenged such prescriptions, but those who did so were likely to be denounced for having forfeited their femininity. Early feminists were routinely derided as "Amazons," devoid of the delicate and nurturing qualities associated with their sex. In a stinging denunciation of the attempts by the feminist Lucy Stone and others to ensure Antoinette Brown a place on the public platform of a temperance convention in 1853, the *New York Times* referred to them as "she-males."¹⁷ An article in *Putnam's* magazine expressed this association between feminists and masculinity even more aggressively. We advise, the author wrote, "our mannish women of the Woman's Rights Convention to transplant the hair from their heads to their chins, and with bold fronts and strong beards, make good their claims to man's privileges."¹⁸

In the case of the superior, the act which stamped her as a Jesuitess was her assertion of authority over the confessor. Jules Michelet rarely expressed any sympathy for the Catholic confessor. In fact, he routinely denounced the confessor as a rival to fathers and husbands. In his bestselling and widely translated *Du prêtre, de la femme, de la famille*, Michelet warned secular men that the confessor stood between them and their wives and daughters. His privileged access to their hearts and minds, in Michelet's account, was a direct threat to patriarchal authority. But such was his dread of the superior that Michelet was able to muster some compassion for the confessor who became her victim. In Michelet's vision of the complicated game of authority within the convent, the confessor who developed a bond of solidarity with his penitent nuns was a rival to the domineering superior. For this, he was sure to feel her wrath. The superior, in Michelet's imagining, would observe and follow him, limit the time allocated to confession, and eventually pressure the bishop

16 Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Joan Landes, *Women in the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Heather D. Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician: Suffering and Divine Healing in American Culture, 1860–1900* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

17 "The Female Pests," *New York Times*, September 8, 1853, 4.

18 *Putnam's Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science and Art* 1, no. 1 (1853): 314. Later feminists faced the same accusation. See Laura L. Behling, *The Masculine Woman in America, 1890–1935* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2001).

to move him to another convent. In this contest she had a clear advantage. The hardness of men, Michelet wrote, was no match for the cruelty of women. What, he asked, was the most faithful incarnation of the devil in this world? It was not the inquisitor, not even the Jesuit, but the Jesuitess, “a great converted lady, who believes herself born to rule over a troop of trembling women.” The Jesuitess, Michelet concluded, was akin to a female Bonaparte.¹⁹

The female Jesuit was most dangerous, however, when she left the convent and adopted a secular disguise. Her goal, according to one theory, was to convert elite Protestant men. Here we can see the construction of the female Jesuit as a response to the famous conversions of men such as John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning.²⁰ In one account, a group of English and American friends on a trip to Italy agree to share their carriage with a French countess and her servant. Clever, charming, and fluent in several languages, the countess almost deceives the travelers before a tip-off from a friend reveals that she is one of the most dangerous women in Italy. In this case, she is seeking not their money but their souls. Posing as a distressed traveler, the countess aims to convert wealthy Englishmen, and had on her own account been instrumental in winning men such as Newman and Manning to the church. Fortunately, the forewarned travelers manage to escape this “perfect Jesuit in petticoats.”²¹

The home was another enticing target. As novelists warned, the Jesuitess would work her way into the sanctity of the Protestant home with even more adroitness than her male counterpart. One of the most compelling fictional portrayals of the Jesuitess was contained in Frances Trollope’s *Father Eustace: A Tale of the Jesuits* (1847). Like many anti-Jesuit novels, the plot centers on a campaign to convert a young Protestant heiress to Catholicism, and thereby win her immense family fortune for the Society. The Jesuit Father Eustace is given the task of bringing the heiress, Juliana de Morley, into the fold. He is aided by a Jesuitess called Sister Agatha who, disguised as Mrs. Vavasor, charms the de Morley family with her elegant dress and smooth conversation. Like all Jesuits, Vavasor has a genius for finding the best means of winning over the local gentry. The key, in this case, is to address them “with taste and feeling on

19 Jules Michelet, *Du prêtre, de la femme, de la famille* (Paris: Hachette, 1845), 252.

20 Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Pauline Adams, *English Catholic Converts and the Oxford Movement in mid-19th-century Britain: The Cost of Conversion* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2010).

21 Edmund Spencer, *A Tour of Inquiry Through France and Italy* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1853), 1:263.

the subject of horse-flesh."²² In her determination and will, Vavasor outshines Father Eustace. He cannot stop himself falling in love with Juliana de Morley; she betrays no such sentimental weakness. As Trollope describes her, she is the perfect combination of Jesuit ruthlessness and female insight. She has, as Trollope writes, "not only the power of reading the human heart, she possessed also that of turning over its leaves at her pleasure."²³

Father Eustace was an unusually sympathetic character within the anti-Jesuit genre. But it was not uncommon for the female Jesuit to be pictured as rivaling, if not exceeding, the Jesuit in strength and cruelty. She shared all of his sinister traits: outright obedience to the orders of the general, a willingness to use any means to achieve the Society's ends, a fanatical desire to crush the heresy of Protestantism. But in the minds of anti-Jesuits, she had the added benefit of feminine wiles. In a phrase that was repeated by anti-Jesuit writers everywhere, the only thing more dangerous than a Jesuit was a female Jesuit.

The phrase came from Eugène Sue's *Le juif errant*, and referred to perhaps the most fearsome depiction of the female Jesuit, Madame de Saint-Dizier. This female Jesuit was not a member of an order. Having renounced the frivolity and promiscuity of her youth, she has retired to her austere country estate, and emerged as the pious patron of a group of religious females. But her influence is pervasive: in her salon she cultivates rising and ambitious men, ensuring their appointment to positions of power in exchange for their everlasting loyalty to the Society. In her ruthlessness, too, she matches the sinister Rodin. Like him, she bends people to her will through a mix of charm and intimidation. Her "large blue eyes" could be "affectionate and caressing," her smile "full of the sweetness of seeming good-nature." But the mask is quickly dropped in the face of resistance, replaced by a countenance of "cold but implacable malignity." In Sue's novel it is her niece, the heiress Adrienne de Cardoville, who dares to defy her sinister aunt. Sue depicts the two women as opposites. Adrienne de Cardoville is honest, daring and independent, exactly the sort of person who will not be duped by the false mask of the Jesuitess. Enraged, Madame de Saint-Dizier conspires with a doctor, a *Jésuite de robe courte*, to have her niece locked up in an asylum for the insane.

Sue's novel, as I have noted, gained a large readership in Britain and the United States. But in these nations, anxiety centered more on the legions of governesses and servants allegedly smuggling Jesuitism into Protestant homes. The most famous literary depiction of such a figure was contained in

22 Frances Trollope, *Father Eustace: A Tale of the Jesuits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), 3:34. See Peschier, *Nineteenth-century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, 51–61.

23 Trollope, *Father Eustace*, 3:76.

The Female Jesuit, or, The Spy in the Family by the English Author Jemima Thompson Luke. Widely reviewed, the novel captivated no less a figure than Queen Victoria. We know this from Lady Augusta Bruce, one of her ladies-in-waiting, who in 1863 wrote that “Her Majesty could hardly put it down and has been much occupied about it.”²⁴

Even by the standards of popular anti-Jesuit books, the *Female Jesuit* offered a complex story of intrigue. Told from the perspective of a deceived British family, the book recounts the frauds of Marie. This impostor, by claiming to be a victim of Jesuit persecution, gains shelter within a sympathetic Protestant family. To win their sympathy, she recounts stories of ill-treatment in a Jesuit-run convent, and produces threatening letters from a Jesuit uncle. The family soon discovers that her story is false, and that the supposed letters from her uncle have in fact been written by her. This is not, however, a vindication of the Jesuits. In its conclusion, the novel speculates about a double-trick—Marie might indeed be an agent of the Jesuits, in a plot whose depth and intricacy would be unparalleled. Women like Marie, after all, were the ideal agents; as the author warned, “It must be obvious to all, that women introduced into families for Jesuit objects would be far more efficient than any out-agents could be; and that feminine tact, combined with Jesuit cunning, could scarcely miss the attainment of any desired object.”²⁵ The author finishes by citing Sue’s familiar maxim, that the only thing more dangerous than a Jesuit was a female Jesuit.

The popularity of the book soon led to satirical attacks. *Punch* magazine imagined a conversation between Mrs. Grimes Wapshott, described as living “under the constant shadow of the Seven Hills,” and Mrs. Jones, otherwise known as “the ex-unprotected female.” When Wapshott discovers that Jones has not read the *Female Jesuit*, she urges her to check on the religious principles of her cook and housemaid. Jones begins to panic, noting that they often go out to a chapel, but she has never inquired which one. Her fear increases when another friend tells her that young women from fine and prestigious Roman-Catholic families are going out as cooks and nannies to find converts to their faith. But Jones is soon reassured. Her domestic staff cannot have come from good families, she reflects, for she has seen the cook drinking.²⁶

24 Cited in *Victoria Travels, Journeys of Queen Victoria between 1830 and 1900, with Extracts from Her Journal*, ed. David Duff (New York: Taplinger, 1970), 153.

25 Jemima Thompson Luke, *The Female Jesuit, or, The Spy in the Family* (New York: H. Dayton, 1859), 352.

26 “Scenes from the Life of an (ex) Unprotected Female,” *Punch*, May 3, 1851, 177.

But the act of mocking these fears was at the same time a concession of their popularity. Nor was the home the only institution thought to be vulnerable to Jesuit subversion. Another was the school, where the female Jesuit, disguised as a teacher, was ideally placed to bring the minds of the young under the control of Catholicism. This nightmare scenario of boys and girls being surreptitiously schooled in Jesuitism appeared in Catherine Sinclair's *Beatrice, or, The Unknown Relatives* (1852). Beatrice is a Spanish orphan adopted by the Protestant Sir Evan McAlpine and his aunt, Lady Edith. Given her wealth and Catholic origin, she is prized by the Jesuits, who undertake a range of strategies to win her back. A favored weapon is the schoolmistress, Mrs. Lorraine, who poses as a Protestant but is in fact the lady abbess of St. Ignatia. Anxious to protect her charge, Lady Edith investigates the books distributed by Mrs. Lorraine to her students, and is horrified to discover Catholic tracts inserted between Protestant book covers. Their content appalls her. The children have been reading stories of Catholic saints "crawling on their hands and knees, starving, beating and cutting themselves." Lady Edith confiscates these works, which she considers "destructive of reasons and morals," and in a stern lecture warns the children to be wary of a false religion which entrances the senses.²⁷ Mrs. Lorraine, or Mrs. Jesuit as one of the characters refers to her, is undaunted. Soon she opens a rival school in the village, which she fills with "painted idols" and images of suffering saints, a ploy to capture the imaginations of the children of the village as they pass by.²⁸

Education was a sensitive point as well in the United States, where the church was making rapid strides in the middle decades of the century. As Protestant commentators noted with alarm, not only were parochial schools expanding, but in some cases were enrolling Protestant girls. In certain regions, there were more Catholic schools than Protestant ones. In Kentucky, for example, Catholic female religious orders were running ten schools for girls as early as the mid-1830s. In contrast, there were only four Presbyterian schools, and most of these enrolled only boys. Since public education in Kentucky was not constitutionally mandated until 1849, and remained very limited until after the Civil War, Protestant parents had little choice but to send their daughters to

27 Catherine Sinclair, *Beatrice, or, the Unknown Relatives* (London: R. Bentley, 1852), 1:271–77.

28 Sinclair, *Beatrice*, 1:283–4. On Sinclair's novel, see Gabrielle Ceraldi, "Popish Legends and Bible Truths: English Protestant Identity in Catherine Sinclair's 'Beatrice,'" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31 (2003): 359–72.

convent-run schools.²⁹ What happened next was, for many Protestants, even more alarming. Would these Catholic-educated girls then turn their back on the Protestant home and choose to enter a convent? This is in fact what sometimes occurred. In their study of the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith note several instances of Protestant girls who converted to Catholicism and joined the order as nuns after having attended convent schools.³⁰

As this suggests, underlying the attack on the female Jesuit was an anxiety about female conversion. Parents needed to be made aware that the schools to which they entrusted their daughters were agencies of the Society. Speaking at the 1861 Evangelical Alliance Conference in Geneva, Reverend Robert Baird blamed these schools for the occasional success achieved by the church in converting Protestant women. A female school headed by a Jesuitess sometimes managed “to proselyte youth, belonging to families of distinction, to Rome.”³¹ But such conversions were rare, Baird reassured his audience, and at odd with the general tendency for the church to lose its hold over the faithful. Others were not so confident. The Ladies of the Sacred Heart, the *American Protestant* warned, were Jesuitesses who, through their female schools, sought to corrupt and to control the daughters of the Protestant elite.³² Some writers pointed to a Catholic college run by Jesuitesses at Georgetown in the nation’s capital. Even strict Protestants, a writer in the *Illustrated American Journal* warned, were foolish enough to send their daughters to this school, believing that their children would be immune to Jesuit influence. “Such ignorance,” the writer lamented, “was truly astonishing.”³³

As in England, popular fiction took up the theme. In *Sister Agnes, or, The Captive Nun: a Picture of Convent Life* (1854), the Jesuitess Sister Agatha poses as the Protestant governess Mademoiselle Dupin. In many ways an admirable woman—“acute, politic, insinuating, accomplished, endowed with indomitable energy and perseverance”—Agatha is also utterly ruthless and treacherous. Having been entrusted with a teaching post, the result was disastrous.

29 C. Walker Gollar, “The Alleged Abduction of Milly McPherson and Catholic Recruitment of Presbyterian Girls,” *Church History* 65 (1996): 596–608, here 597.

30 Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 171–72.

31 “The Influence of Civil and Religious Liberty on Roman Catholicism in the United States of America,” *Christian World* 12 (1861): 368.

32 “Features of Romanism,” 247.

33 “The Jesuit College at Georgetown, D. C.,” *Illustrated American Journal*, October 14, 1854, 3.

The whole school "had been infected with popery," and two Bible associations had then been dissolved amidst great bitterness.³⁴

The figure of the Jesuitess, then, served as a means of discrediting Catholic female activism and philanthropy in a range of fields. Education was one, but another was nursing. Here, a figure as revered as Florence Nightingale was not free of suspicion. Though never formally converting, Nightingale was drawn to Catholicism. Several close friends were Catholic, including Archbishop Henry Manning, whose assistance led Nightingale to recruit ten Catholic nuns for her expedition to the hospital at Scutari (present-day Albania) during the Crimean War. In her letters, Nightingale often expressed admiration for Catholic convents, and particularly for the opportunity they afforded single women to lead independent and active lives. In 1847, Nightingale made a retreat at the convent of Trinità dei Monti in Rome.³⁵ Enough of this was known publicly to rouse suspicions. In the midst of the war, the *Belfast News-Letter* expressed alarm that Catholicism was on the verge of "monopolizing the control of the hospitals of the East," a development which raised the nightmare prospect of hospitals for sick and wounded British soldiers becoming "hotbeds of propagandism" for the church. The reporter then questioned Nightingale's faith. Was she, the editor asked, a "sincere Protestant or a female Jesuit?"³⁶ Catholic nurses in the United States were similarly accused of plotting to spread their faith. One writer in the *New York Crusader* cited an observer of the Sisters of Mercy in France to prove that these nurses were "spies of the priests" who were more intent on conversion than on healing. When their efforts to convert sick patients were balked, charity quickly turned to brutality. If Protestants could only see their "wrathful countenance" when they saw a patient with a Bible in his hand, the writer concluded, they would be less trusting of these female Jesuits.³⁷

By the middle decades of the century, then, the Jesuitess had emerged as a recognizable figure of menace. This was a response to several developments, notably the development of female Catholic activism in education and nursing, as well as fears over the security of the Protestant home. But the figure of the female Jesuit was also a function of a deeply-rooted ambiguity surrounding

34 *Sister Agnes, or, The Captive Nun: a Picture of Convent Life* (New York: Riker, Thorne & co., 1854), 28.

35 Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale, 1820–1910* (London: Constable, 1950), 97–98. On her relationship with another Catholic, see Mary C. Sullivan, ed., *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

36 "Popery in the Crimean Hospitals," *Belfast News-Letter*, November 10, 1855.

37 "Sisters of Charity," *Raleigh Register*, September 26, 1855, 3.

Jesuit masculinity. The female Jesuit made sense to many Protestants because the masculinity of the Jesuit was open to question. The Jesuit and Jesuitess were thus twin products of what to Protestants seemed the confusing gendered space that was the Society of Jesus.

Like the figure of the female Jesuit, at first glance the ascription of effeminacy to the Jesuit seems odd. After all, polemics portrayed the Jesuit as an almost superhuman figure. Courageous, intrepid and determined, the Jesuit loomed as a fearsome rival for any man. Rodin in *Le juif errant* is just one countless portrayals of unbending Jesuit resolve: to cure a bout of cholera, he submits to an excruciating surgery before emerging unbowed to continue orchestrating his plot against the Rennepont family. His ambition was without question; the Jesuit aimed for nothing less than world domination. Finally, the Jesuit was active. Scorning the contemplative life, the Jesuit threw himself into the fray. He was, in the words of the American historian Francis Parkman, “emphatically a man of action.”³⁸

But alongside these manly traits, the Jesuit acted in a manner which could only be understood as feminine.³⁹ Most strikingly, the Jesuit was submissive. A recurring theme in anti-Jesuit literature is the extreme level of obedience demanded by the Society. As countless books claimed, one of the founding principles of the Society was that every member of the order must obey as if he was a cadaver or a walking stick in the hands of an old man. The superior general was a despot presiding over one of the most ruthlessly disciplined organizations the world had seen, and the Jesuit, schooled in subservience by the Society’s education machine, his unthinking pawn. Poor Father Eustace, for example, has retained enough human spirit to fall in love with the target of Jesuit machinations, Juliana de Morley. His superior, Father Edgar, is nevertheless confident that he will not dare to rebel. He was nothing more, in Edgar’s estimate, than a slave incapable of breaking his chains, “although they should drag him into the lowest depths of misery and sin.” Like all Jesuits, Eustace was bound by his vow of utter obedience, a “more binding law which either God or man could teach him.”⁴⁰ As both Edgar and Eustace know, even the slightest

38 Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Little Brown, 1867), 96.

39 For an extended consideration of the androgynous qualities of the Jesuit, see Róisín Healy, “Anti-Jesuitism in Imperial Germany: The Jesuit as Androgyne,” in *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany 1800–1914*, ed. Helmut Walser Smith (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Timothy Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

40 Trollope, *Father Eustace*, 3190.

sign of defiance would invite a terrible punishment. In this case, Edgar's confidence in the annihilating power of Jesuit training is misplaced; tormented by his love for de Morley, Eustace flees to London. But punishment is sure, and Eustace is quickly imprisoned in a dark subterranean cell.

Eustace's inner drama is rare in the world of anti-Jesuit literature. More often, the Jesuit is imagined carrying out his orders without any compunction. In one of his lectures entitled "machinisme moderne," Jules Michelet described the Jesuit as "a machine, a simple instrument of action."⁴¹ His colleague at the Collège de France, Edgar Quinet, similarly described Loyola's maxims as designed to produce "the Christian automaton."⁴² In an age of industry, anti-Jesuit writers likened the Society to a factory filled with docile workers. In a series of articles from its French correspondent, the *New York Observer* denounced the automated and unthinking character of Jesuit spirituality. The *Spiritual Exercises* were, according to the paper's correspondent, little better than the religious equivalent of a factory schedule. As he wrote, "The man who prays is but a machine to groan, weep, cry out, stop at moments marked out beforehand according to Loyola's ritual!"⁴³ The Jesuit was an amoral creature trained unquestioningly to carry out the monstrous schemes of his superiors.

This sort of passive obedience clashed with a code of manliness which stressed independence and an active conscience. One could not, as reformers on both sides of the Atlantic insisted, be both a slave and a man. Within this understanding, the Jesuit appeared to have been emasculated. This was one of the accusations leveled against the Society by the controversial anti-Catholic lecturer, Alessandro Gavazzi. Speaking in New York in 1853, Gavazzi told his audience that "The Jesuit [...] is a good Jesuit when he is no more a man: when he is a man he is no more a Jesuit."⁴⁴ For the historian Francis Parkman, the Jesuit missionaries of the early American frontier were some ways models of boldness and courage, retaining their faith though subjected to terrible physical torture. But even these men could not escape the emasculating effects of submission. In reference to Jean de Brébeuf, Parkman wrote that "nature had given him all the passions of a vigorous manhood, and religion had crushed them, crushed them, or tamed them to do her work."⁴⁵ No matter how courageous or disciplined the Jesuit showed himself to be, the core principle of

⁴¹ Michelet and Quinet, *Des jésuites*, 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴³ *New York Observer and Chronicle*, June 1, 1844.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, April 25, 1853.

⁴⁵ Parkman, *Jesuits in North America*, 188.

submission, what Frances Trollope described as “the very soul and essence of perfect, finished Jesuitism,” barred him from attaining true manliness.⁴⁶

This core of effeminacy was thought to give the Jesuit several advantages. When the situation demanded it, he was capable of disarming opponents with an almost feminine charm. Helen Dhu’s *Stanhope Burleigh: The Jesuits in Our Homes* (1855) won a wide readership on both sides of the Atlantic. At key moments, the villainous Jesuit in the story, Jaudan, begins to take on the appearance of a woman. His eyes might at times be “full of fire.” But if it suited his sinister purposes, they “melted to the liquid softness of a woman’s.” His lips might be “curled with hatred or contempt,” but could also exude the “careless grace of voluptuousness.” His hands, too, resemble those of a woman: “Small, white, and soft,—indeed, almost too feminine,” while the neatness of his nails speaks to a “touch of vanity.”⁴⁷ Father Eustace, too, benefits from his feminine appearance. His face is one “of very remarkable beauty,” its “features exquisitely formed.” In the same manner as Jaudan, it is the hands that betray Eustace’s femininity—each is described as “singularly symmetrical” with “an almost feminine delicacy of its color.”⁴⁸ These marks of femininity were important, for they allowed Jesuits such as Jaudan and Eustace to pry open the hearts of their female prey. Eustace, for example, entrances Juliana de Morley with his delicate singing. Listening to his sweet tenor voice, she is overcome with feeling, a reaction observed by Eustace who, with his Jesuit cunning, has chosen his weapon with great skill.⁴⁹

In the dark world of the Jesuits, masculinity was a fluid category. Young boys who could easily pass as women became their helpers. In Dhu’s book, Jaudan enrolls a young boy named Carlo into his plot to lure the beautiful Ginevra into a convent, and thereby acquire her immense inheritance. Carlo’s task is to infiltrate Ginevra’s household. In order to do so, he transforms into Inez, and enters the household as a young maid. When Inez’s usefulness is exhausted, she returns as the male Carlo, displaying a dexterity with gender-crossing that was a reflection of his master’s.

Anti-Jesuits at times recorded their encounters with these sinister gender-shifting foes. One such scene from William Hogan’s *Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries* was widely reprinted in Protestant magazines. While dining with a Protestant family, Hogan, then still a priest, was intrigued by one of the

46 Trollope, *Father Eustace*, 3:255.

47 Dhu, *Stanhope Burleigh*, 24. Dhu was a pseudonym of Charles Edwards Lester, the American translator of Michelet and Quinet’s *Des jésuites*.

48 Trollope, *Father Eustace*, 1:236–37.

49 Ibid., 2:50.

servants, Theodore. There was nothing in the man's actions which was suspicious; in fact, he performed his tasks with unfailing efficiency and politeness. Yet Hogan immediately disliked Theodore. His constant expression of "meekness, humility and habitual obedience" struck Hogan as odd; even worse, his expression at times betrayed a lack of sincerity, particularly the "closely-compressed lips and furtive glance."⁵⁰ At subsequent meetings, Hogan could not shake the feeling of dread which Theodore inspired in him. One day the accuracy of Hogan's sentiments became clear. In a private consultation, Theodore revealed to Hogan her true identity: a lay Jesuitess under the patronage of the Sisters of Charity in New Orleans. At first she had worked as a Jesuit spy, disguising herself as a chambermaid in respectable Protestant families. But a further mission in Washington D.C. required a more radical disguise. Implanted as a waiter in a hotel frequented by senators and congressmen, Theodore gained a unique insight into the private habits and foibles of the nation's great statesmen. This "lay sister in male uniform" was perfectly placed to gather dirt on the nation's political elite, thereby giving the Society an enormous leverage. Not only did these men not suspect there was a Jesuit amongst them, but they did not detect either that "Theodore" was a woman.⁵¹

By the end of the nineteenth century, depictions of the female Jesuit had begun to dwindle. On both sides of the Atlantic, Catholic commentators dismissed the notion of an army of women working under the banner of the Jesuits as ludicrous. Writing in the *North American Review*, Thomas F. Meehan, a Catholic journalist and future president of the Catholic Historical Society, attacked the "stage and fiction variety of the Order" in all its manifestations. "There never was, and never could be," he wrote, "such a thing as a female Jesuit."⁵² Yet though appearing less regularly in literary works and polemics, the figure of the female Jesuit was so resilient that newspapers continued to find it necessary to debunk the myth. "It seems as if it ought hardly be necessary to say," as one newspaper put it, "that there are no female Jesuits of any kind."⁵³ But of course it was necessary. Some of the "more zealous Protestants," as the English Jesuit Richard F. Clarke noted with dismay in 1896, continued to fear the female Jesuit.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Hogan, *Poperly*!, 323.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵² Thomas Meehan, "The Organization of the Catholic Church in the United States," *North American Review* 188 (1908): 689–99, here 695.

⁵³ "The Jesuits," *Scranton Republican*, August 17, 1901, 10.

⁵⁴ "The Training of a Jesuit," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, Illinois), October 18, 1896, 32.

The fascination with the female Jesuit can be attributed to several factors. In an atmosphere that approached paranoia, where Jesuits in disguise were thought to be at work in schools, hotels, newspaper offices, legislatures, and nurseries, it was perhaps inevitable that women, too, would fall under suspicion. We might also understand the backlash against the Jesuitess as a reaction to trends which disturbed many Protestants, from prominent Catholic conversions to the expansion of educational and philanthropic activism of Catholic women religious, an activism which in some cases outpaced that of Protestant churches or the secular state. But what made the existence of such women seem plausible was the aura of gender confusion that was perceived to surround the Society. For his opponents, the Jesuit presented a curious amalgam of hyper-masculinity and feminine sensibility. Embodying several heroic traits that even the most ambitious of men might struggle to emulate, he was at the same time bound to a humiliating and emasculating submissiveness. As ever, he turned this to his advantage, seizing on his privileged insight into female nature to recruit formidable women to be his allies and entrap naïve heiresses. But more broadly, this perception of an androgynous Jesuit cleared the path for the emergence of a similarly androgynous creature, the female Jesuit. She, too, possessed a set of traits that were identified as feminine, particularly a grace, charm, and unique insight into the workings of the heart. But when circumstances demanded, she could take on a distinctly masculine cast, wielding overt authority over those around her, including men, and pursuing her goals with a determination and an intrepidity that any man might envy. In this sense, the female Jesuit was the mirror image of her similarly ambiguous accomplice, the male Jesuit.