
Gendering the Evangelical Novel

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Most people who study and teach the nineteenth-century British novel don't really care about the Evangelical novels of that period. That's a rather bold claim, but I feel comfortable making it for two reasons: first, because at no point during my own high school, college, or even graduate school careers did I encounter an Evangelical novel on an assigned reading list or in a class discussion. And second, because Evangelical novels are completely omitted from nearly every major twentieth-century work on "the rise of the novel" or on Romantic- or Victorian-era novels and novelists. Reading the works of Ian Watt, George Levine, Lennard Davis, Nancy Armstrong, even Elaine Showalter, you would never know that there had been an Evangelical novel at all.

In fact, these works are so invisible to the average critic that the 2007 Oxford University Press title *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*—a text intended to familiarize students with the most important religious movements of the period and the literature those movements inspired—doesn't include a single literary work by a practicing Evangelical in its long chapter on Evangelicalism. Every other religious movement the book discusses, including Unitarianism, the Oxford Movement, and Secularization, is analyzed using fiction written by practitioners of those movements (Gaskell, Newman, Hardy), but the authors study Evangelicalism exclusively through the works of non-Evangelicals like the Brontës, Eliot, Dickens, and Collins—all of whom might have been exposed to Evangelical teachings at some point, but none of whom wrote Evangelical novels: that is, novels that don't just depict Evangelical characters, whether satirically or sympathetically, but attempt to embody an Evangelical world view. A young scholar reading this introduction to nineteenth-century religion and literature might again be led to believe that nineteenth-century Britain produced no Evangelical novels.

But it did. In fact, there were scores of Evangelical novelists writing in Romantic- and Victorian-era Britain, and some of their works were extraordinarily popular and influential. The most significant of these writers were often women. Hannah More, Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Brunton, Mary Martha Sherwood, Barbara Hofland, Catherine Sinclair, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Maria Louisa Charlesworth, and Hesba Stretton were among the most popular. Some of their novels sold hundreds of thousands

of copies, were widely reviewed and read on both sides of the Atlantic, and were translated into multiple languages. Yet, despite their wide readership, these names—unlike Austen, Dickens, Gaskell, and Eliot—do not figure into most scholarship that seeks to reconstruct the attitudes and ideologies of a nineteenth-century populace based on what that populace read. Nor do Evangelical novels inform the most influential critical studies of plot, character, and narrative technique. Since Evangelicalism was such an important cultural force in nineteenth-century Britain, one might think that Evangelical novels have a lot to teach us. Unfortunately, twentieth-century literary scholarship has ensured that the most famous Evangelical characters from nineteenth-century British literature are Mr. Brocklehurst, Nicholas Bulstrode, Obadiah Slope, Mrs. Jellyby, and Mr. Chadband, rather than any Evangelical characters created by actual Evangelicals. While some critics have, indeed, made important contributions to our knowledge about Evangelical novels—most notably Elizabeth Jay, Christine Krueger, Samuel Pickering, and Mitzi Myers—this genre remains confined to the margins of literary scholarship.

What is it about this fiction that makes it so uninteresting to most scholars? To answer that question, we might turn first to the reputation of the Evangelical movement itself. So, what do we know about nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism? We know that Evangelicalism was a dominant cultural force in nineteenth-century Britain, responsible for much of what we consider the “uprightness” and “seriousness”—or, if we’re feeling less charitable, the prudishness and close-mindedness—of the Victorian character. We have been told that Evangelicalism’s focus on intense self-examination and individual salvation drove, or at least reinforced, a growing emphasis on the individual in economic and political theory. Its doctrinal imperative to evangelize was a driving force behind the colonization of the far-flung British Empire, while, domestically, it was devoted to clarifying and enforcing social hierarchies: Evangelicals preached that the proper place for women was in the home and that the poor should accept their divinely appointed lot and seek their reward in heaven rather than on earth.

What I have just mentioned are some of the master-narratives that scholars have produced over the past hundred years or so to explain the impact of the Evangelical movement on nineteenth-century British culture. Implicitly or explicitly, these narratives read Evangelicalism as what we might call a “masculine” force—paternalistic; imperialistic; interested in promoting bourgeois values, fostering a culture that prizes individualism, and reinforcing gender and class hierarchies. Is it any wonder that twentieth-century scholars interested in validating the lives and literatures of oppressed groups, such as women and children, the working classes and colonized peoples, have seen Evangelicalism as a movement inherently opposed

to their project? As Christine Krueger explains, many critics have assumed that the Evangelical movement, informed as it was by the “phallogocentric, logocentric texts of scripture and religious discourse[,] necessarily preach[ed] reconciliation with patriarchy” (4).

The novels of the Evangelical movement have, in turn, been criticized for simply reproducing patriarchal power schemes and knowingly or unknowingly working hand-in-hand with dominant political and economic interests to keep women, children, and the poor in their place. To cite just a few examples: in her study of radical women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, Eleanor Ty criticizes Hannah More for “express[ing] and internaliz[ing] male culture’s assumptions about female nature” and defending, in her bestselling novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, the “Burkean model of the patriarchal household with an added emphasis on Christian doctrines” (17). Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace’s study of female novelists and patriarchal complicity calls More a “daddy’s girl” who “surrendered her heart to the ultimate benevolent patriarch, the Evangelical Christ” (23). Other successful Evangelical women writers, including the phenomenally popular children’s writer Mary Martha Sherwood and the successful industrial reformer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, have been accused of promoting the humility, passivity, and self-policing of oppressed populations through their texts. Is it any wonder, then, that these authors have not found favor with twentieth-century scholars who, as Charles Howard Ford puts it in his biography of More, “tend to appreciate only those women writers of the past whose ideas and tactics resemble current preferences” (xi)? Krueger makes the connection between Evangelical novelists’ gender, religious beliefs, and critical neglect even clearer when she states, “Construing evangelical Christianity as antithetical to both feminism and fiction ... [modern critics] measure the progress of women’s literary authority through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by their rejection of ‘patriarchal’ religious beliefs and language” (4).

So is this the story of the nineteenth-century Evangelical novel’s reception in the twentieth century—a simple tale of a patriarchal religious movement spawning patriarchal religious fiction that we do not study much because it is both distasteful to modern critics and relatively easy to characterize and understand? In a word, no. Because there is another side to Evangelicalism and its depiction in twentieth-century scholarship. We might call this its “feminine side.” And while the patriarchal values of Evangelicalism have been thoroughly documented and loudly critiqued by modern critics, the movement’s “feminine” qualities have been noted and maligned far longer—though the gender coding of *these* qualities has been covert, perhaps even unconscious.

Evangelicalism has long been considered an “emotional” religion, a faith of the heart rather than the head. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Evangelical adherents were criticized by non-Evangelicals for being overly passionate, for valuing an internal emotionalism that led to external manifestations such as ranting, tears, fainting, and fits. While Evangelicals found meaning in these bodily displays, non-Evangelicals could not. Thus, at the time of its own ascendance, Evangelicalism was derided by outsiders for being a religion that prized emotion over reason and the body over the mind. While eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics of the movement rarely used language that overtly characterized it as a “womanish” or emasculating religion, their critiques were nonetheless directed quite pointedly at the traits that modern scholars might say were coded as “feminine.”

For the past hundred years or so, scholars have continued the trend of linking Evangelicalism to “feminine” values and, implicitly or explicitly, disparaging those values. As Elisabeth Jay explains, “Evangelicalism, whose intellectual content had never formed its strongest appeal” has been talked about by intellectual historians as “a drag upon the wheels of intellectual and social progress” (6). Robert Altick is presumably one of the critics Jay is referring to. He declares that nineteenth-century Evangelicals displayed an “unintellectual temper” and rejected “reason and the analytical habit” in favor of “simplistic truths” (190). Paul Sangster sounds a similar but more provocative note, asserting that Evangelicals were convinced that “nothing except religion mattered”—a conviction that he says “sprang, not from reason, which might well have persuaded them otherwise, but from their emotions” (18). Here Sangster is implicitly validating a certain kind of reason: the kind that refuses to let religious conviction and religious proscriptions be the primary shapers of one’s existence—a kind of reason recognizable, one could say, to an agnostic twentieth-century scholar. But I would challenge Sangster’s assertion: if one is convinced that our ten or thirty or eighty years on earth are to be followed by unimaginable billions of years in the afterlife, and that valuing religion on earth is the key to ensuring our happiness in that long afterlife, then it seems eminently reasonable to value religion at the expense of everything else.

What I think Sangster is really getting at here is that religion itself is unreasonable, that men and women who live in modern times and yet subscribe to the “pre-modern” notion that religion is to be valued above all else are unreasonable. The hugely influential secularization thesis tells us, after all, that religion faced an inevitable decline in the nineteenth century as mankind became more and more skeptical of a divinely ordered and controlled universe. Sandwiched in between the rational advances of the Enlightenment and the paradigm-shattering work of

Darwin, Evangelicalism was purportedly the last gasp of religion as a dominant force in Western culture, politics, and the popular imagination before the inevitable march of secular modernism. Much twentieth-century scholarship tacitly endorses as “moderns” the nineteenth-century men—and, occasionally, women—who were on the forefront of scientific, political, and philosophical change. On the other hand, Evangelicals of either sex who continued to believe in the presence, rather than the absence, of God, and to insist on the reality of spiritual truths, have been painted as anachronistic—outdated men and women participating in what J. Hillis Miller calls a “belated [attempt] to stop the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the sea of faith” (7). The secularization hypothesis casts writers and readers of Evangelical novels—and, in fact, all practicing Evangelicals—as “unmodern,” as holdovers from another time. Miller’s word “belated” tells us that their faith appeared after the appropriate or expected time, too late to be effective or useful. They and their experiences are not an integral part of modernity; rather, modernity marches on in spite of them.

It is important that we acknowledge that the secularization hypothesis is not gender-neutral. It has implicitly coded the men and women who did not want to be “emancipated” from an all-consuming spirituality by the philosophy and science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as both too masculine—tied to old paternalistic ways—and, perhaps more importantly, too feminine. Nineteenth-century Evangelicals are by no means the only religious population to be coded this way, but they make for an illuminating case study. Moreover, I believe that much of the modern critical establishment’s disdain for Evangelical literature can be traced back to this feminine coding of the movement and its novels—that the movement’s “feminine side” is just as responsible for the novels’ neglect as its passé masculine side. A half-century ago, Margaret Maison wrote: “in reading the many Evangelical novels of the [nineteenth century], one is struck by their trashy nature and the worst elements of Victorian Evangelicalism that seem to come to the fore—excesses of *emotional gush and sentimentality*, the introduction of the cheaply sensational and the luridly spectacular, a certain narrowness and negativity, a lack of good taste, *self-control and discipline*” (91, italics mine). In 1987, Juliet Dusinberre was still lamenting the “saccharine sentiments” child readers were supposedly forced to imbibe from Maria Louisa Charlesworth’s hugely popular Evangelical novel *Ministering Children* (xvii). Finally, in *Evangelical Religion and Popular Education*, John McLeish admitted that Hannah More “wrote a number of ‘best-sellers’ which nowadays confront us with the problem of understanding how such unimaginative, unoriginal, unliterary, and naïve compilations could be consumed with such evident enjoyment by the reading public” (125).

McLeish's bafflement at the taste of the reading public, like many critics' conviction that such "trashy," "saccharine," "unliterary" works must have been read only under duress, illuminates for us the consequences of the ways in which the Evangelical movement and its novels have been gendered: that is, we are confronted with the utter *foreignness* of the men, women, and children who could have read these novels and found value in the education, entertainment, and/or spiritual guidance they provided. It is my argument that we cannot get past our own feelings of bafflement, frustration, even annoyance at these works and their legions of readers in order to reach a more accurate understanding of the nineteenth-century literary landscape until we acknowledge the alien quality of those texts and readers—and acknowledge, too, that the source of their mysterious and threatening energy has too long been located in their femininity.

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