CHAPTER 1

Introduction

''BEHOLD HOW WE PREACH'': WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS POETRY AND CONTRADICTIONS OF LITERARY HISTORY

Christianity provided [nineteenth century women writers] with subject matter, justification and authority for many kinds of writing, but almost always at the price of accepting their inferiority to men and restricting their imaginative and intellectual scope. (Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride*, xvii)

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing Heav'nly Muse . . . (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1: 1–6).

> The lilies say: Behold how we
> Preach without words of purity.
> The violets whisper from the shade
> Which their own leaves have made:
> Men scent our fragrance on the air,
> Yet take no heed
> Of humble lessons we would read.
> (Christina Rossetti, "Consider the Lilies of the Field," lines 11–17)

The history of English literary criticism is not without its contradictions. One of the most glaring of these contradictions is the very different critical attention that has been offered to religious poetry written by men and religious poetry written by women. Although the triumphs of the past twenty years of active feminist literary criticism have suggested that women writers deserve as much recognition as the male writers who have been at the center of literary canons for centuries, women's poetry that deals with explicitly religious topics and texts still faces a kind of discriminatory

treatment by both male-centered and feminist critical orientations. One generalized assumption that supports this very different treatment of religious poetry by men and women is the idea that women whose poetry asserts significant commitments to religious traditions are "restrict[ed]" in "imaginative or intellectual scope," and that any woman who engaged with religious traditions must have been "accepting [her] inferiority to men." In short, women poets who write on explicitly religious themes have most often been seen as passively regurgitating "male" religious traditions which have often been categorized as repressive to women. This set of assumptions in turn creates the idea that women who write poetry on religious topics are not creative agents of either literary art or religious philosophy, while those male poets in the English literary tradition who write on religious themes deserve to be our most revered and canonized of authors.

Milton's opening lines from *Paradise Lost* typify the deep engagement with religion and Biblical texts that marks so much writing by men in the English literary tradition; for the most part, this engagement with religion has been seen as a central organizing principle for constructing a canon of male English Christian writers in which Milton takes his place with George Herbert, John Donne, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, etc. In this tradition, Milton's rewriting of Biblical narrative has been lauded as one of the most influential literary creations of British literary history, in part for its imaginative reworking of a Biblical text. However, while Christina Rossetti's poem "Consider the Lilies of the Field" also offers an imaginative reworking of Biblical text (Matthew 6: 27–30 and Luke 12: 27), it has rarely been read as offering creative reworking of the Bible. Instead, Rossetti's poem might fall – for some – into a category I once heard described as "that dreadful tradition of poems by women that paraphrase the Bible." When I first heard that phrase, I immediately began to wonder why Milton was not also classified as a "paraphraser of the Bible"; suddenly, the reality of the absolutely different treatment offered to women's and men's religious poems was crystallized for me.

It would be difficult to prove that Rossetti's poem merely "paraphrases" Jesus' parable about the "lilies of the field" which "toil not, neither do they spin" but are nevertheless "clothed" in beauty by God; in short, Jesus' message is that one must not worry about material conditions and anxious work, but rather have faith in God. Rossetti's poem, calling on that text, says something quite different; it certainly does not contradict the idea that one should have faith, but it puts a very different

context around that message. Highlighting the connection between flowers and women that is so common to English poetic and Biblical traditions, Rossetti's poem suggests that women-cum-flowers actually do have lessons to teach men – a teaching that may take a different form than men's "preaching" but is nevertheless full of "humble lessons." In short, Rossetti's poem suggests that along with being objects of beauty, women have a unique set of religious experiences, ideas, and lessons to teach, lessons that she perceives are rarely "heed[ed]" by men.

While feminist critics have long understood the double standards that women writers have faced in literary history, both feminists and non-feminists tend to reject women's religious verse as marginal to larger issues in Victorian studies, as well as less important in the history of women's creativity and literary agency. The goal of this book, at its broadest level, is to suggest that women's religious poetry is a site in which we find evidence of women's creative and original engagements with religious text and theology. Further, a focus on women poets and their religious affiliations is one way to get a clearer historical understanding of how the discourses of poetry, gender, and religion collided in Victorian England. Examining these historical intersections, I argue that women used poetry as a site to do the theological work from which they were excluded in most Victorian religious institutions.

A more specific goal of this book is to insist on the importance that the discourse about Jewish identity had in the poetry of both Jewish and Christian women poets, and so my readings focus on the ways Jewish and Christian women turn to the discourse of the Judaic, Hebraic, and Jewishness in their poetry.[1] Because the Hebrew Scriptures serve as a shared text for both Jewish and Anglican traditions, the comparison of Jewish and Anglican women's uses of Judaic texts and Biblical figures in their poetry illuminates these women's complex relationships to their own religious traditions, as well as to their respective religious "others." I argue that poetry is an especially important generic site for this inquiry, because hegemonic Victorian Christian culture claimed the genre of poetry as an essentially Christian theological enterprise, as suggested by my readings of John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Matthew Arnold in chapter 2.[2] That alliance between Christian ideology and poetry affected not only the Christian women writers who have been most canonized in literary history, but also impacted the lesser-known Jewish women writers' own bids for literary authority in their own day and by later critical history. Recognizing the importance Victorian poetics invest in the Judaic and Jewishness, we are in a better critical position to understand

how and why women poets in particular turned to this discourse of Jewishness in order to claim alternative kinds of literary identity.

In this study, I realign the discourses of gender, poetry, and religion to account for their historical specificity in the nineteenth century. In so doing, I acknowledge a number of important historical/events and phenomena that are coincident with the construction of poetic and national identity in Victorian England: the emergence of women poets as enfranchised figures in mainstream literary culture, the growing presence of a Jewish community as an increasingly legitimated political entity, and the renewed attention to the Hebrew Scriptures in the wake of the German higher criticism and the theories of Hebrew poetry generated, in part, by Johann Gottfried Herder and Bishop Lowth. These historical trends intersect with other larger ideological concerns in Victorian English culture: the increasing anxiety about the meaning of English Christian identity within an active imperialist regime, and the increasing anxiety about the status of women.

Within these larger historical contexts for understanding Victorian poetic identity and its theological implications, it becomes possible to rethink the position of women's religious poetry in feminist and literary contexts. Women of both Christian and Jewish affiliations did assert a theological voice through the act of writing poetry, and so I argue that these women should be read as creative agents of theological inquiry rather than merely passive recipients of a patriarchal tradition. Poetry was one of the most important generic sites in Victorian culture to accommodate this radical and public theological work of women – radical not in the sense that this theological poetry always positioned itself against traditional notions of gender or religion – but radical at the moment poetry provided a sanctioned public forum through which women could voice their theological ideas and participate in debates about religious, political, and gendered identity. Of course, the novel was an equally important force in this emergence of women's voices into a public sphere, yet the very different generic history of the novel and its very different cultural position in Victorian England meant that the novel has never claimed the deep relationship to religion that poetry has in the English literary tradition. It is precisely the power of the connection between religion and poetry, often understood to be rooted in the familiar figure of the poet/prophet, that has profound effects for Victorian women's poetry.

My comparative methodology reads Jewish and Christian women poets in juxtaposition; nevertheless, I put a special emphasis on the historical fate of Anglo-Jewish women poets and their double

marginalization in both Victorian and contemporary critical discourse. Suggesting that poetry was a rich site for women's theology, therefore, does not imply that I find either poetry or theology politically neutral sites. On the contrary, the vexed history of Jewish and Christian relations in the Diaspora is reflective of the fact that theology has been a site of profound ethnic and political conflict, while the hegemony of Christian theology in most Western societies has created persistent persecution of Jewish individuals and communities in a variety of historical periods. In this context it is worth nothing that most feminist criticism of Victorian women poets has tended to uncritically (and inaccurately) assume that Christian values were universal for all Victorian women writers; the Jewish poets I include in this study suggest otherwise, and indicate through a variety of poetic strategies how they challenged this assumed association between "woman" and "Christian" in their own poetry.

Thus, on one level, this is a specifically textual and historical study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Grace Aguilar, and Amy Levy. My literary analysis pays close attention to the ways each of these women conceptualize the relationships between Jewish and Christian, gendered, sexual, and literary identity. But on another level, this book also engages in comparative cultural studies; by comparing the work of the two most famous Christian women poets in the Victorian canon with two of the most important Jewish women poets of the era, this book asks readers to first consider how the canonized women poets turn to discourses of Hebrew Scriptures to construct quite particular Christian literary identities, and then to consider how Jewish women poets created their own literary identities with and against this more familiar Christian female poetic enterprise. I hope readers will be, by the end of the book, in a position to think about the larger theo-literary politics that operated between Victorian Christian and Jewish women, and to observe the implicit and often explicit dialogue about Jewishness that pervades Victorian women's poetry. Including Anglo-Jewish writers in this study is thus more than an act of canon revision; reading from both Christian and Jewish perspectives, I expose the anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic assumptions that structure so much of Christian Victorian poetic discourse.

In the rest of this Introduction, I explore the methods of some recent and not so recent critical studies that have perpetuated the historical inattention to Victorian women's theological poetics. Before turning to that analysis, however, it is important to clarify my own use of the terms

"religious difference" and "religious affiliation" in this text. Readers will note that I rarely use terms of specific religious denomination in reference to the writers I examine, although I realize that there are very important differences between the Christian and Jewish denominations these writers might claim for themselves or others have claimed for them. Instead, I tend to use the more general terms "Jewish" and "Christian," though I do refer to "Anglicanism" as a marker for the Victorian period's most politically powerful form of Christian identity at different moments in the text. My use of the more general religious terms is strategic rather than an oversight. For, to explore the significance of the specific locations of these women in Christian and Jewish religious institutions – perhaps naming them "High Anglican" or "Anglo-Catholic" in the case of Rossetti, Broad Church, Dissenter, or Swedenborgian in the more slippery case of Barrett Browning, "traditional" in the case of Aguilar's Judaism, and "liberal or agnostic" in the case of Levy – might serve to limit the ways these women can be read as original religious thinkers. Further, these established labels often best refer to issues of practice and worship, but may not be useful when seeking to identify specific contours of the particular woman poet's religious thought.

However, my emphasis on the rather general terms "Jewish," "Christian," and the occasional more specific usage of "Anglican" are not intended to deny the complex histories of Victorian Christian and Jewish movements. The very real divisions in Christian identity that mark the Victorian period, such as: the struggle for Roman Catholic enfranchisement that rivaled the struggle of the Jewish community for similar rights; the attendant Catholic revival that marked the period; the power of evangelical Protestant movements in their own separation from the Established Church and their deep influence on that Church itself; and the myriad crises in the Established Church itself, as typified by the Oxford Movement – all of these are important examples of religious difference, though not the "difference" I am most interested in as I trace the discourse of Jewishness in the period. Similarly, a detailed study of Victorian Jewish history shows sweeping changes in the nature of worship, the growth of "liberal" synagogues, and the shifts in Jewish religiosity; yet the issue of where my writers did or did not worship, while important in other contexts, is less interesting to me than how they articulated their Jewish identity. Thus, while no religious historian would suggest that both Barrett Browning's quite anti-institutional Christianity and Rossetti's commitment to the Established Church are the "same" brand of Christianity, I position these women together and

in contrast to demonstrate a range of Christian women's thinking about Jewish identity. Similarly, it is quite possible that Aguilar would not have approved of Levy's claims about Jewishness, yet in this study, they are read together to offer two divergent voices on Jewish self-understanding.

Though my hope is that later scholars will build on my analyses by perhaps linking this work to studies of denominational differences, my concerns in this project have been to explore how women who have some link to the "Established" dominant Christian culture of England situate themselves in relation to Jewish identity, and likewise how women who identify as Jewish situate themselves within a dominant Christian culture. Given the book's focus on the religious division between Christian and Jew, I am ultimately most interested in those basic tenets that connect Christian denominations rather than the differences that separate them: namely, that Jesus Christ was a Jew who became Messiah and Son of God, and that the Christian covenant and Scriptures supersede and replace the Jewish covenant of the Hebrew Scriptures. Conversely, within this context, "Jewish" can come to mean those who are born into a Jewish family, who reject the idea of Jesus as Messiah, and who base their faith on the understanding of the Torah as a divinely inspired text to which nothing can be deleted or added. The competing discourses which circulate around the Jewish texts which all Christianities and Judaisms claim to share – namely the "Old Testament" or Tanakh, is what initially motivated this study of women writers, and continues to motivate the readings I produce throughout.

FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE RELIGION ''PROBLEM'': CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AS TEST-CASE

> Most scholars of American women . . . interpret religion as a variable *inside* the established framework of public and private spheres that reinforces women's assignment to the private and their exclusion from the public. Religion is often depicted, as if in a drama, in the role of the gatekeeper – even of prison guard – in the lives of historical women. Recognizing religion as shaping only the values or beliefs people hold, however, and not also the *structural* values their social institutions and arrangements embody and promote, misses the major aspect of its historical significance. (Constance H. Buchanan, *Choosing to Lead*, 43)

Our current critical moment is one in which the "lost" texts of so many women poets are again resurfacing, thanks to the pioneering research manifest in the new anthologies that have emerged in the last five years, including three new anthologies of Victorian poets by major

publishers (Everyman, Blackwell, and Oxford University Press) and a number of recent books by important feminist scholars, including Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets* (1992), Germaine Greer's *Slip-shod Sibyls* (1995), Dorothy Mermin's *Godiva's Ride* (1993), and Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (1993). In addition, an international conference in July 1995 titled "Rethinking Women's Poetry 1730–1930" (Birkbeck College, London), drew a number of scholars at the forefront of this resurgence of interest in Victorian women poets, as does the annual British Women Writers Conference. Given this new access to texts of women poets, then, the time is ripe to reconsider some of the critical assumptions that have attended the study of Victorian women writers.

This project of rethinking Victorian literary history from the starting points of women's poetry and religious identity has led me to examine certain critical narratives of Victorian literary history.[3] I begin with a generalized observation: feminist literary critics of the past thirty years have tended to dismiss the religious and theological as meaningful categories in an explicitly feminist literary history. Despite a handful of critics who have taken the lead in exploring women's religious identity in literature, discussed below, there has been a more general resistance to this approach in many critical studies of women's writing. This resistance has its roots in a much larger Western feminist myopia about the crucial role religion has played throughout history in women's lives, in both public and private dimensions.

Constance Buchanan has offered a cogent analysis of how scholars of women's history have repeatedly erased the powerful role religion has played in shaping women's public identity in American history. Buchanan points out that feminist scholarship has sought to construct a woman's history that focuses on what seem to be "strong and independent" women's voices; thus, feminist scholars who chart women's emergence in the public sphere tend, as Buchanan writes, to understand religion as a minor, and even negative force in women's history. Buchanan suggests that scholars who see religion as fully contained within the private sphere are unable to see the larger function of religion and theology in women's historical agency; thus, Buchanan suggests that for many feminist historians, "[t]heir assumptions about women and religion lead them to believe that only *non*religious and *non*domestic language signals the historical emergence of women's full public agency" (Buchanan, *Choosing to Lead*, 140).

Though Buchanan writes specifically about the political and historical work of American women reformists, her comments on the emergence of

women's "full public agency" resonate with many feminist constructions of British women's literary identity. For, like constructions of feminist history which assume a certain understanding of "public" identity, so too have feminist literary critics tended to assume that the religious is a "private" category that did not contribute to women's emergence as public writers. This rejection of the religious or domestic as potential sites of women's power and resistance, Buchanan suggests, "tells us more about the values of modern scholars that about the lives [and I would add to this the texts] of historical women" (135).[4] It would seem that for many current feminist critics, women writers who actively supported religious institutions and affiliations were necessarily didactic, submissive, unenlightened, and uncreative reproducers of male religious hierarchy; they are, it would seem, somewhat of an embarrassment to our twenty-first-century secular feminism.[5]

We can chart this discomfort, and the subsequent critical contortions feminist critics have made, by a brief examination of some critical comments on Christina Rossetti, the most canonized – and yet perhaps the most religiously identified woman – in past and present Victorian studies. Rossetti's status in the feminist canon might challenge my thesis that women poets have been most dismissed when they engage with religious themes or identity in their poetry. Yet Rossetti has not been canonized in feminist circles for her religious poetry, but rather, I would suggest, despite it. As a self-identified, deeply devout Anglican, Rossetti has proven an interesting stumbling block for feminist criticism of Victorian poetry; in her work, religion can not be dismissed, and yet her stature in Victorian and contemporary canons insists that feminist critics find a way to position her within the hegemonic narrative of women's literary history, a narrative which often validates writers and texts which challenge the assumed oppression of patriarchal religious institutions, and has canonized those writers who take a stance for women's emergence in the public sphere.

Three milestone publications in feminist literary criticism on women's poetry will serve here to illustrate the complications Rossetti's work creates for feminists: the momentously important work by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The *Madwoman in the Attic*, Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, and Dorothy Mermin's *Godiva's Ride*.[6] As I offer a particular critique of some of the most influential books on women's poetry in the last thirty years, I want to assert my own intellectual debt to the critics I cite below. My intent in the following section is simply to suggest that certain assumptions about religious identity which are at

play in these works deserve to be challenged; nevertheless, I recognize that the religious issues I am interested in exploring may not have been of central importance to these critics. Thus, the following criticisms are not intended to dismiss the immense importance and influence these writers have had on my own development as a critic, but rather to suggest why later criticism might take up new concerns in relation to women and religion as a way to build on this earlier, groundbreaking work.

In this history of twentieth-century feminist literary history there is perhaps no single text as important as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. As part of their theory of nineteenth-century women's "Poetics of Renunciation," Gilbert and Gubar read Rossetti's famous *Goblin Market*, writing "Obviously the conscious or semi-conscious allegorical intention of this narrative poem is sexual/religious . . . Beyond such didacticism, however, 'Goblin Market' seems to have a tantalizing number of other levels of meaning – meanings about and for women in particular – so that it has recently begun to be something of a textual crux for feminist critics" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 566). Gilbert and Gubar recognize that the "intention" of *Goblin Market* is "sexual/religious," though their conflation of these two terms is somewhat confusing. Within the passage from which I have quoted, the critics provide basic outlines of the poem's religious references to Christ's redemption narrative. The reading they go on to produce after this quotation is indeed quite complex, one that argues for the poem's concern with tropes of women's intellectual and sexual power. Situating *Goblin Market* in relation to work by Wollstonecraft, Keats, and Milton, they conclude that the poem contributes to Rossetti's theory that a woman must "bur[y] herself in a coffin of renunciation" in order to survive patriarchy's conflicted demands on women writers.

Gilbert and Gubar's reading is problematic, however, at the moment it sets up a binary opposition between the religious "allegorical intention" and those "tantalizing . . . other levels of meaning . . . for and about women in particular." Why is the religious necessarily linked to "didacticism" and then distinctly separated from "tantalizing . . . levels of meaning . . . for and about women in particular"? Of course, throughout their reading, Gilbert and Gubar make use of religious symbol and doctrine; it would be hard to read this particular poem without reference to Christian symbol. For these critics, however, what is important is Rossetti's depiction of the submission women artists must make to the patriarchal, Christian proscriptions against female pleasure and art.