

The Role of Sisterhood Penitentiaries in the Reclamation of Fallen Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role played by sisterhood penitentiaries in the rehabilitation of 'fallen women' in nineteenth-century Britain. Beginning with a brief outline of the disciplinary rules implemented by these remedial institutions, it moves on to investigate the backgrounds of the penitents, the relationship between the sisters and the penitentiary wardens, the 'advantages' reaped by the penitents during their penitentiary sojourn, the schemes of reformation followed by the sisters, their solidarity with the penitents across the conventions of class, sexuality and morality, and the criticism of the reclamation system by some leading female activists of the day. By probing into such issues, this paper offers fresh perspectives on the socio-cultural relevance of female-managed penitentiaries during the reign of Queen Victoria.

A confessional lyric about an unnamed speaker who recounts her life history to the priest attending her deathbed, Dora Greenwell's "Christina"¹ follows a highly conventional and clichéd narrative trajectory: orphaned, impoverished and naive, the speaker is seduced and abandoned, and turns to prostitution. She no longer contacts her childhood companion Christina, but retains an emotional bond with

¹Virtually unknown today, Dora Greenwell (1821-1882) was a household name in Victorian England, famous for her lyrical and religious verse. Her debut collection *Poems* (1848) was followed by a further seven volumes of poetry, including two largely devotional works, *Carmina Crucis* (1869) and *Camera Obscura* (1876). In her day, Greenwell was thought to belong to a trio of eminent poetesses, including Jean Ingelow and Christina Rossetti. The work of each poet reveals many shared interests. There is a possibility that "Christina", composed in 1851 but withheld from publication until 1869, may have had some influence on the poems about women and sexual temptation that Rossetti authored in the 1860s.

her: "Across the world-wide gulf betwixt us set/ My soul stretched out a bridge" (Greenwell, 1998, p. 442). However, when the two women meet accidentally over the grave of Christina's daughter, Christina implores her friend to return home with her to take the place of her dead child. But the speaker rejects this solution, offering no explanation for her decision. Instead, she leaves "the guilty city far behind" and enters a "goodly inn", where she carries out her penance under the benevolent guidance of some "gracious souls", who "loving their Lord" "could trace His image" "upon the . . . Long-lost, defaced and soiled" (Greenwell, 1998, p. 448). Although couched in a heavily figurative language, such an ending seems to insinuate that the speaker has taken up residence in one of those penitentiaries managed by Anglican sisters, where "fallen women" – a culturally approved euphemism for prostitutes, kept mistresses, female thieves and alcohol addicts – were given asylum in the reign of Queen Victoria.² These institutions were intended as rehabilitation centres, where such wayward and transgressive women could be changed into conscientious and diligent women, a transformation which involved both a spiritual metamorphosis from sinner to repentant, and a concomitant social shift from ostracised female to respectable woman. Funded by the Church of England, penitentiaries (also known as Houses of Mercy) were a part of a large-scale Christian reform movement which stretched all over Britain. In fact, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century every English town and metropolis had at least one conventual organisation devoted to the emancipation and edification of fallen women (Bartley, 2000, p. 25). The Community of St. Mary the Virgin, Wantage and the Community of St. John Baptist were two of the earliest female-managed penitentiaries established exclusively to minister to this pressing social need.

All potential penitents were expected to remain in a House of Mercy for about eighteen months to two years to accomplish penitential assignments fruitfully, although cases were considered on an individual basis. The working patterns, leisure facilities and general lifestyle at these institutions were markedly alike; in a scribbled note found in the pages of the minutes of the Liverpool Penitentiary, a committee member scheduled the daily routine of the inmates as follows: "work (7.00am), breakfast (7.30am), work (8.00 - 10.30am), rest (10.30 - 10.45am), work (10.45 - 1.00pm), lunch (1.00 - 2.00pm), work (2.00 - 5.00pm), tea (5.00 - 5.30pm), work (5.30 - 8.00pm)" (cited in Bartley, 2000, p. 53). *Seeking and Saving*, the official bulletin of the Victorian reform movement,

²The fact that Greenwell was personally involved in finding penitentiary homes for young prostitutes makes this interpretation even more plausible. See Maynard, C. (1926). *Dora Greenwell: A Prophet for Our Own Times on the Battleground of Our Faith*. London: H. R. Allenson.

suggested that there were four methods of disciplining penitents and keeping order in these institutions: (i) the military discipline "where everything was done to a signal"; (ii) the mute discipline "where all crept about silently"; (iii) the unrestrained discipline "where inmates laughed and talked about the sisterhood in perfect freedom"; and (iv) the "discipline of force" where inmates were administered coercively, if they refused to obey (cited in Bartley, 2000, p. 46). Some penitentiaries hung disciplinary rules on the walls as a constant reminder for all inmates of the need to behave properly. The Horbury Penitentiary kept a report book in which all breaches of rule were entered. Each Monday these report books were sent to the Sister Superior, who deducted a half-penny from weekly earnings of four pence for delinquency. All unpaid work, from scrubbing floors to cleaning windows, from making beds to sweeping carpets, from mending clothes to cooking food, was carried out by the penitents (Bartley, 2000, p. 50). The exhausting physical hustle involved in these activities meant that "the wild restlessness, the lawlessness, the animal passions, and excitement of the old life, were worked off by muscular exertion" (Hopkins, 1879, p. 15). Penitents were evaluated by the loss or gain of "marks": the accumulation of marks synchronized the speed with which a penitent would be promoted for release (Mumm, 1996, p. 536). However, to prevent monotony and spread of disgruntlement among penitents occasional excursions were arranged by many institutions. Usually this involved a tour of the surrounding countryside, a stroll in a park, boating on a lake or a walk by the seashore. Periodic invitations to the garden parties at the residences of local humanitarians were common. Special events were celebrated. For instance, at Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee the inmates of many penitentiaries were provided with tea and an afternoon out to watch the revelry taking place all over England (Bartley, 2000, p. 57).

One customary practice of every nineteenth-century penitentiary was the maintenance of a general memorandum on the familial backgrounds and occupational histories of the penitents. Three common denominators in these women's family backgrounds were financial bankruptcy, orphanhood and illiteracy. The predominance of the female relatives of gardeners, washer men, carpenters, shoemakers and tailors in the penitentiaries reinforces the malicious role destitution played in the creation of fallen women. Contemporary social activist, Anna Brownell Jameson (1859) observed: "We talk of 'fallen women'; but for the far greater number there is no fall. They are starving, and they sell themselves for food" (p. 39). Many applicants were parentless: they had been raised by foster relatives or had somehow survived as waifs and strays. "A good home till mother died" is the usual grievance made by the entrants in the

penitentiary roll books. Lack of education in families also contributed in these women's socio-economic vulnerability. The Thirtieth Annual Report of Lincolnshire Penitent Females' Home disclosed that of the thirteen penitents registered in 1878, five could read and write, six could do neither, and two could read but not write; parents of these girls were most likely illiterate (Mumm, 1996, p. 544). As time passed it became increasingly recognised by the sisters that the bulk of inmates were previously employed in various domestic professions. The Clewer House of Mercy traced the initial occupations of its plebeian penitents between 1866 and 1869. In these three years, fifty-nine servants, twenty-one housemaids, seven cooks, four nursemaids, three dressmakers, two barmaids, two factory labourers, one governess, one milliner, and one shop girl entered as prospective penitents (Mumm, 1996, p. 532).

Although a penitentiary was run exclusively by the deputed sisters working close at hand, there was a clerical warden always available to perform religious services and oversee pecuniary matters. Invested with ultimate sovereignty in the penitentiary, the warden was, however, not always personally engaged in its day-to-day operation. The function of the warden was thus a paradoxical one: the bureaucratic head of the ecclesiastical network administered the penitentiary; nevertheless, he had only minimal or highly ritualised interaction with the members of his institution. His curious status of absent-presence constituted a veiled patriarchy that tangentially dismantled the sororal paradigm espoused in the penitentiary movement's appeals for female volunteers. In other words, the unvarying triangulation of roles within the sister community forced women to define themselves and their relationships to each other in terms of an extra-sororal male presence, generally invoked as a last resort for consultation on matters affecting the penitentiary. Scott Rogers (2003) believes that the political resonance of the warden was "felt most powerfully in the hierarchical dispensation of authority within the sister relationship, and in the ways this affected the internal dynamics of the community of women" (p. 869). But to assume that Victorian wardens took zero interest in the daily functioning of their convents is to blinker our understanding of their significance in the penitentiary movement willingly. Certainly there were some exceptions. One such exception was the warden of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, Wantage, a well-beloved figure in the sisterhood circle, who in an 1881 symposium urged his putative audience not to separate penitents merely on class and moral grounds: "I have found that the great mass of the girls brought in are not at all worse in any manifest way than ordinary maid servants and with proper advantages they are not worse than many other girls" (cited in Mumm, 1996, p. 120).

That all nineteenth-century penitentiaries faced a routine oversupply of applicants requesting admission raises a question of incentive: why did women clamour to accommodate themselves in an institution for a twenty-four month course of penitence when they could attain respectability merely by starting life afresh? There are two possible explanations. First, Victorian lawmakers made the certified programme of formal penitence obligatory for all fallen women who desired to lead a reputable life in accordance to the set conventions of mainstream society. Second, women realised that they could reap multiple advantages and reorient their lives if they managed to gain access to a sisterhood penitentiary. Unquestionably, the second argument had more credence than the first; for these fallen women, the penitentiary was indeed a getaway from an infected environment and a sanctuary of opportunities which would enable them to get reabsorbed into the social fabric surreptitiously. Let us now examine some of these "advantages" of penitentiary life exploited by prostitutes, kept mistresses, female thieves and alcoholic women respectively.

Every penitentiary offered free accommodation, rations, clothing and medical treatment to its inmates. Consequently, many prostitutes who suffered steep decline in earning power owing to ill-health and senility requested admission to a House of Mercy with the expectation of spending their last days in peace and comfort. Some prostitutes who voluntarily abandoned the scene of their commercial activity out of feelings of personal culpability and self-mortification wanted to join a penitentiary to atone for their sins. The Community of St. John Baptist called such women consecrated 'Magdalens'; these should not be confused with ordinary penitents. But the general public seldom made this distinction and the two terms were often conflated. Surprisingly, the notorious Contagious Disease Acts of the 1860s also played a pivotal part in escalating the number of prostitutes in penitentiaries. The purveyors of these laws mandated compulsory genital inspection for venereal disease in suspected prostitutes and the detention of such women in penitentiaries. As a result, penitentiaries all over Britain became jam-packed with "unhealthy" prostitutes who were often discriminated against by other "healthy" penitents. One important feature of the rehabilitative penitentiaries was the vocational education imparted by nuns, sufficient to make penitents completely independent of the help of others. Apart from providing extensive tutoring in reading, writing and arithmetic, sisters emphasised that inmates should be trained for rudimentary domestic activities such as cleaning, washing, ironing, dairying, and needlework. In the 1870s penitents in at least one convent could earn sufficient spending money by undertaking these works during recreation times

(Mumm, 1996, p. 536). Such utilitarian facilities appealed to our second category of fallen woman: the kept mistress. In her influential study on the rhetoric of fallenness in Victorian culture, Deborah Logan (1998) has hinted at how kept mistresses in penitentiaries were coached to fill posts as household servants, generally specialist posts such as parlour-maid or nurse (64). Some of them received good references and assistance in finding jobs in what has been termed as "the great Victorian dustbin for the unwanted", the colonies (Hobsbawn, 1969, p. 84). However, it must not be assumed that all types of fallen women entered monastic penitentiaries in an earnest attempt to make a new beginning. Female thieves regarded these institutions as an expedient of bettering themselves and/or as a suitable bolt-hole to escape from the clutches of law. They would stay for as long as they fancied, usually during the bleak winter season or while recovering from illness. When the weather or their health improved they would leave, paying no attention to the solicitations of the nuns. Some of these pseudo-penitents absconded furtively at night, stealing whatever items of value they could carry with them. The rationale for the rising popularity of the penitentiaries among alcoholic women was the secular indoctrination given there as a part of the penitence curriculum. Coming invariably from a different social milieu, these hardcore alcoholics had no interest in learning about Christian rituals or about the sanctified lifestyle of the sisters. As a result, despite the unflinching religious constancy of the sisters themselves, many British penitentiaries allegedly tended to downplay the religious practice among inebriate penitents. One senior convent-manager counselled thus:

I believe there are many [addicts] who are repelled by the violent change from their free and easy life to the strict and severe system of a Penitentiary. Let them be admitted simply as inmates of a Home, requiring of them only quite behaviour, obedience, and work, and leaving them as perfectly free as regards religion. (cited in Mumm, 1996, p. 539)

Furthermore, penitentiary humanitarians made special remedial provision for alcoholics, after learning that these women's addiction problem rendered it difficult for them to stay abstemious and to retain decent jobs. In view of these facts, penitentiaries could be seen as therapeutic havens and the penitents as patients in treatment.

A major thrust area of the penitentiary programme was the wholesome reformation of the fallen women's bodies, minds and spirits. Both sisters and wardens strongly reckoned that strict implementation of this threefold reform

schema would be necessary for making these women physically as well as psychologically fit to re-enter mainstream society. The reformation of the body included proper acquisition of deferential and respectful demeanour. The fallen women wore a uniform dress, curtsied when passing seniors, observed regular hours of silence, entered others' room with permission, and refrained from mentioning their pasts. The reformation of the mind included adherence to bourgeois values, the ability to make the right decisions, and the capacity to work intelligently, and not like machines. The sisters' wish was to render the fallen women mentally unfit for their former lives; success was attained when previously acceptable manifestations of working-class idiom and conduct filled raised fallen women with revulsion. The reformation of the spirit included proper religious initiation under the tutelage of individual sisters; the ostensible aim was the hope that even if these fallen women reverted to their old lives they would ask for the privileges of the Church before they would die. It should be noted that these stringent corrective practices prescribed for fallen women were in many ways akin to those followed by the sisters themselves. This sameness of experience led the fallen women to see themselves as extended alter-egos of those who formulated and imposed the rules.

Significantly, many Anglican sisters perceived themselves as surrogate mothers of the penitents working under their supervision. These celibate nuns, who vehemently repudiated their myopic culture's strait-laced assumption that matrimony and maternity were the preferred goal and instinctive standard for all women, embraced the penitents as their spiritual, if not biological, daughters. Thomas T. Carter, Rector of the Clewer House of Mercy, was openly appreciative of such emotional mother-daughter bond shared by the sisters and their fallen yet willing-to-be-rescued penitents. Optimistically, he declared:

We are merely supplying . . . a home and mother's care. We are simply providing out of the bosom of the Church what nature had failed to give, and what the world cannot. This is the true way of viewing the case of these fallen women. (cited in Mumm, 1996, p. 538)

The life-cycle of every Victorian woman typically involved a movement from the father's family to the family of the husband. Prostitutes, kept mistresses, female thieves and alcohol addicts were expelled from both; the communities of the sisters with their egalitarian philosophy of mystical motherhood offered these unfortunate women a substitute congenial domestic space, the "home" of the penitentiary. Debunking the belief that fallenness was an outrageous offence against the ethical principles of the society, one that resulted in the incurable

deterioration of character, the sisters preached that the distinctions between penitents and other women were more of circumstance than of character. While the self-appointed guardians of morality passed the sentence of excommunication on the penitentiary inmates, the sisters did not; they were quick to break the barriers prohibiting their interaction with the inmates. Symbolically, the maternal compassion and camaraderie exhibited by these pious sisters upheld the penitentiary movement's insistence that "fallen women need some such sisters to be ever at their side, watching them in weak moments, encouraging them in seasons of overwhelming gloom, checking outbreaks of temper and light words, directing and controlling their conversations" (D'Amico, 1992, p. 72).

Intrinsically associated with the functioning of the conventual penitentiaries was the notion of mutual solidarity between sisters and penitents across the conventions of class difference, sexual myth and moral law. Although the general public was of the opinion that "good" women should maintain a sufficient distance from "bad" women³, the sisters thought otherwise and defiantly spearheaded the reformatory process to ensure unflinching support for the fallen women in their route to social reintegration. In so doing, they metaphorically lived out the biblical parables of Jesus Christ; like the shepherd looking for the lost sheep or the woman searching for the precious coin or the Good Samaritan attending the half-dead Jewish traveller, they made every possible effort to offer the penitents a sure means of escape from the quagmire of sin, money and flesh. Dissolution of class differences is indicated by the fact that sisters (usually upper-class in background) often received hundreds of correspondences from ex-penitents (belonging to the working-class): intimate bonds were formed when such "old girls" returned to visit the sisters during Christmas vacations or to make monetary contributions as a gesture of their active interest in the work of the community. Demystification of sexual myth is seen in the foundation of Magdalen orders by canonised sisterhoods where former penitents entered as nuns. This posed a radical challenge to the Victorian dualistic paradigm of femininity, a paradigm that promulgated an uncompromising segregation between two mutually exclusive categories of "pure" and "impure" woman. When a former penitent became a nun this not only signified that the sexual contamination of her character had been white-washed by expiation, but also situated her in a more elevated spiritual and social plane than she had been

³An article titled 'Female Penitentiaries' in *The Quarterly Review* of 1848 gives expression to this blinkered public mentality. In general the reviewer lends his support to penitentiaries, but balks at the idea of "virtuous" nuns undertaking any practical running of them: "We may express a doubt whether it is advisable for pure-minded women to put themselves in the way of such knowledge of evil as must be learnt in dealing with the fallen members of their sex" (Armstrong, 1848, p. 375-6).

before her fall from virtue. Questioning of the moral law is evinced in the sisters' probing of the double standards and divided consciousness of the Victorian frame of mind. Sisters urged that the social stigma of moral contagion often levelled against women should be extended to men as well; they were convinced that men's ethical standards must be hoisted to those of women so that both sexes could become alert to their respective roles in soiling an otherwise unsoiled world.

Nonetheless, confidence in the power and viability of the penitentiary was questioned by many sceptical Victorians, who perceived it as a system of paternalistic regulation and severe religious observance, which the penitents, and even the sisters, found somewhat hard to bear. Activists such as Margaret Goodman, Penelope Holland and Felicia Skene⁴ unequivocally focused on the flawed organisational methods governing these institutions in their writings on the "problems" inherent in female-managed communities. As Goodman (1862) recalled:

Led chiefly by the wish to minister to untended suffering, I joined the Sisters of Mercy at Davenport. As time went on, Miss Sellon thought fit to develop such conventual rules . . . that pressed too heavily upon me; and, therefore, after a sojourn of six years I returned to my former occupation. (p. 1)

Holland offered an analogous criticism of contemporary penitentiary life. In an editorial in *Macmillan's Magazine*, she asked acerbically "whether it be right for women who have reached the full maturity of their intellects to submit themselves to a system by which they are treated as we should scarcely treat an infant in these days, when fools' caps have gone out of fashion" (Holland, 1869, p. 536-7). Much in the same vein, the punitive reform policies implemented by the sisters were denounced sneeringly by Felicia Skene (1865):

One of the cruellest parts of the system is their rigorous confinement to the house, and total want of exercise in the open air. Not one breath of fresh air is allowed to these poor prisoners; not one half hour is granted them in which to look on the blue sky and the sunshine, and to meet the cool breeze with its invigorating power. (p. 10)

⁴ Goodman entered Ascot Priory, Davenport as a novice and her bitter experience there was reflected in her anti-sisterhood writings for which she was roundly criticized by Florence Nightingale in a letter (dated 18 January 1863) to Hilary Bonham Carter. Skene was a Scottish philanthropist and prison reformer. She published in a wide variety of genre, including memoirs, novels and poetry. Her most significant work is *Hidden Depths* (1866), a realist novel about prostitution. There is a blue plaque for Skene, installed on 2 July 2002 by the Oxford Blue Plaques Board, located at 34 St. Michael Street, Oxford. Nothing substantial is known about Holland's life except the fact that she wrote extensively on woman-related subjects for *Macmillan's Magazine*.

Adding impetus to such existing anti-penitentiary sentiments was what Pauline Nester (1985) has recently termed as the "thriving anti-conventual fiction" (p. 4), which either demonised sisters or associated conventual life with a kind of kidnapping. Indeed, the foreword to one such novel, *Sister Agnes; or the Captive Nun: A Picture of Conventual Life* (1854), alludes to the widespread profusion of sensational "narratives of escaped nuns, converted priests, and ex-confessors," purporting to unmask the dark underbelly of religious sisterhoods (cited in Nester, 1985, p. 4). While many of these charges might seem to have been fabricated, the tantalising scandals surrounding penitentiaries galvanised the widespread belief concerning the dystopian ambience of the sisterhoods and aggravated an already polarised debate about women's competency for communal activity in England. One such scandal was the case of *Saurin vs. Starr and Kennedy*, known as "The Great Convent Case", tried before Lord Chief Justice Cockburn in the Court of Queen's Bench in February, 1869. The plaintiff Miss Mary Saurin sued her former convent, and the overwhelming media attention attracted by the case threatened to make public the inner workings of the penitentiary system (Rogers, 2003, p. 874).

In light of the arguments made so far, it would be fairly justifiable to claim that two major demands overlapped in the nineteenth century: the number of deviant fallen women desiring institutional welfare in order to lead a future life of unblemished decency was accelerating, and the newly-mushroomed sisterhoods, seeking a means to justify their charitable enterprises, deemed the provision of remedial penitentiaries for fallen women as an incontrovertible vindication of their own existence. However, these penitentiaries, with their pervasive inclination to control, contain and change nonconformist and problematic behaviour of the fallen inmates, appeared to operate under the principle of what Michel Foucault (1979) has famously called Panopticism. Invoking Jeremy Bentham's conceptualisation of the Panopticon as an exemplary prison, Foucault points out that "whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panopticon schema may be used" (205). The Panopticon and a Victorian female penitentiary were conceived of in such a way that their architectural and administrative setups turned out to be strikingly alike: both were designed as enclosed segmented spaces observable at every point by an ever-present power – watchmen in case of the Panopticon and sisters in case of a penitentiary – and the regulation and regimen enforced in these institutions aided in the training of the problematic inmates, inducing in them an awareness of their own constant visibility. Bentham regarded the Panopticon as one which combined safe custody, confinement, labour and

instruction, a process which with the use of timetables, tutoring, exercises and surveillance would successfully tame the deviant into docile, and more importantly, also deter the potentially deviant (Mukherji, 1996, p. 60). Similar rules and objectives prevailed in every Victorian penitentiary working for the rehabilitation of fallen women. A sisterhood penitentiary was therefore the archetypal symbol of modern disciplinary power much like the Panopticon.

However, by the twentieth century many of these sisterhood penitentiaries quickly started to lose their importance in Britain. Fewer women enrolled owing to a number of factors: the duration of the coursework, the inflexible disciplinary policies, the droning lifestyle and the inward-looking stagnation of the Anglican sisterhoods themselves. In addition, the founding fathers of the penitentiaries were aging and thus lacking enthusiasm for the reclamation of fallen women. In the Liverpool Penitentiary, for instance, subscribers were dying off just as the premises needed drastic renovation; in particular, a new roof, exterior paint, an extended doorway and drainage. By 1921 there were only two penitents left in the institution and not surprisingly it closed in 1922 (Bartley, 2000, p. 64). After the First World War, penitentiaries were replaced by new institutions such as homes for unwed pregnant women known as "mother and baby homes" which operated under the same rhetoric of amelioration and maternalistic supervision. Most of these revamped institutions subsisted until the counter-cultural revolutions of the 1960s, but they could never manage to match the social omnipotence of their Victorian precursors.

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