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### **Gender and Religious Consent in Mary Augusta Ward's Robert Elsmere**

Though now rarely read, Robert Elsmere created quite a sensation when it was first published in 1888. In this novel, Mary Augusta Ward, niece of Matthew Arnold, tells the tale of a clergyman who loses his faith in orthodox Christianity and founds his own quasi-religious sect around the doctrine of a purely human Christ. Bringing debates hitherto confined to intellectual circles to the novel-reading public, Robert Elsmere sparked one of the great religious controversies of the nineteenth century. Ward's novel was denounced from scores of pulpits, prompted dozens of reviews, inspired a stage production, and became the best-selling novel of its decade (Peterson 159-184).

Most of controversy surrounding Robert Elsmere, of course, concerned the eponymous hero and his religiously revolutionary projects. This essay responds, however, to a secondary controversy that emerged in the widespread discussion of Robert Elsmere: the novel's problematic characterization of Robert's wife Catherine. From beginning to end, the novel characterizes Catherine as a devout Evangelical Anglican, and throughout most of its six hundred pages, it presents her as "iron-will"(ed) (103) in her conduct. Yet, after her husband's death, the novel has Catherine devote her life to working for her husband's new sect, a group committed to toppling the orthodox faith that she holds dear. In explanation of this incongruity, the novel's most famous contemporary reviewer, former Prime Minister William Gladstone, posited that Ward had put advancing her theological agenda ahead of the artistic demand of consistent characterization (772).

This essay argues that this inconsistency reveals more than just a sacrifice of art to agenda. It also exposes a problem underlying Ward's theological agenda—that the very free thought that Ward celebrates jeopardizes women's power of religious consent. By religious consent, I mean the right to say yes or no based on a claim to spiritual authority.

Not surprisingly, Ward's pro-free-thinking text does not explicitly declare that free thought endangers women's consent. Instead, Robert Elsmere suggests this peril by halves. As Ward demonstrates through her simultaneous tracing of Robert's rise and Catherine's fall from power, free thought, with its claim to a higher truth, erodes orthodox Christian consent. But, as Ward suggests through her commentary on women's limited educations and their restriction from free-thinking circles, this new, consent-giving free-thinking truth is unavailable to the vast majority of women. Put together these realizations of Ward's add up to a tragic conclusion: free thought threatens to displace women's classic religious consent without offering them any viable alternative.

Most of Ward's examination of what I'm calling religious consent centers around free thought's impact on orthodox consent. In the Catherine of the early novel, Ward vividly portrays the power of consent that orthodoxy can provide. During the early part of Robert's courtship of her, appeals to religious ideals enable Catherine to resist his advances.

Chief among these consent-giving religious principles is the core Protestant ideal of conscience. The novel has Catherine appeal to conscience when she has first guessed Robert's intentions towards her and is trying to decide how to respond. As the wording of this scene suggests, Catherine feels gender pressures to give in to Robert. Having Catherine worry about "His [Robert's] claim?" (103), Robert Elsmere presents its heroine as grappling with a classic demand of traditional femininity—one most famously articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—that women should always strive to please men (218). To this threat to her consent, Ward's novel adds an additional gender-related trap. Not realizing Robert's romantic intentions, Catherine has inadvertently "encouraged him" (102), putting herself in the position where refusing Robert now "will. . .give him cause to think of her hardly, slightly" (103). In other words, Catherine has, albeit unknowingly, waited too long to say no—long enough that only an improper woman—a coquette—would try to say no now.

As Robert Elsemere soon shows, however, appeals to conscience allow Catherine easy escape from such gendered barriers to her meaningful consent. Ward's novel suggests conscience's freeing potential in the way that it structures Catherine's wrestle with her conscience. In the first half of this sequence, Catherine's conscience convicts her of unfoundedly "encourag"(ing) (103) Robert, a gender transgression that she could best remedy by agreeing to marry him. However, in the second half of this sequence, Catherine's conscience comes back to insist that she must nevertheless refuse Robert. Catherine, her conscience insists, must reject Robert, so that she, a daughter, can continue to act as the spiritual head of her family. Shaping this sequence as she does, where conscience enables Catherine to give a no that violates one gender norm in the name of a duty to transgresses yet another, Ward points to something invaluable about conscience. Conscience holds the power to overrule social norms, including those that impede women's meaningful consent.

By appealing to conscience, Catherine makes her unfeminine refusal of Robert downright morally imperative. As can be seen in Evangelical treatises ranging from the works of Charles Wesley to those of the prominent late-Victorian Anglican minister J.C. Ryle, Evangelicals consistently urged Christians to follow their consciences. According to such Evangelical divines, only Scripture itself held the authority to overrule an individual's conscience (Wesley par. 18; Ryle 8).

This incredible deference to conscience is not surprising when considering what many Evangelicals considered conscience to be: the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in man. John Wesley for one held this view of conscience (par. 1). In its handling of the scene where Catherine wrestles with her conscience, Robert Elsemere connects the ideas of heeding conscience and following God. One page after Catherine's formal dialogue with her conscience, the novel reiterates her decision-making process. Once again Catherine thinks about how she has encouraged Robert, and once again she tells herself that she cannot marry him. But, this time, rather than having Catherine make her decision in the name of conscience, the novel explains her

choice with the comment “Catherine Leyburn knew of no supreme right but the right of God to the obedience of man” (103). Rehashing the same decision-making process with the one major change of moving from a language of conscience to a language of obedience to God, Robert Elsemere treats these arguments as if they are nearly synonymous—something many Victorians would have believed them to be. In hinting at this God/conscience connection, Robert Elsemere points to the fundamental reason why conscience can grant such power of consent, the reason why it can trump the standards of men. To claim that conscience advises a decision is to imply that God has authorized it.

Catherine’s powerful orthodox consent does not, however, last. As the courtship section advances, the novel launches a preparatory attack of sorts on orthodoxy. Unlike later sections of the novel, the late courtship section stops short of questioning the fundamental truth of orthodoxy. Instead, this earlier section confines its critique to what it sees as the extremeness of harder-line strains of orthodox Christianity. Though limited in its scope, this attack on Catherine’s beliefs begins eroding her power of religious consent.

Robert Elsemere’s preparatory assault on orthodoxy largely consists of a questioning of the reliability of Catherine’s hard-line Christian conscience as opposed to Robert’s more modern, tolerant one. Robert Elsemere first questions the accuracy of Catherine’s conscience by having Robert correct her stance regarding her sister Rose’s violin playing. From early in the novel, Catherine’s conscience tells her that Rose’s desire for a musical career is sensual and prideful, something that a faithful Christian must oppose. Robert, however, soon offers an alternate view: that music is a gift from God that Rose can use to serve others. Just two pages after Catherine’s powerful rejection of Robert in the name of conscience, Robert Elsemere has Catherine decide that Robert has been right, and she wrong, in this matter of Rose’s music. The effect on Catherine’s religious consent is immediate. Catherine’s recognition of her error of conscience puts an end to all her long resistance to Rose’s musical career. Even more significantly, it paves the way for a

second, more dramatic attack on Catherine's consent: a questioning of her conscientious refusal of Robert.

Within pages of Catherine's admission of error regarding Rose's music, Robert begins questioning her rightness in rejecting him. Once again, Robert provides a more modern, enlightened perspective, only this time he posits arguments that are less orthodoxly Christian. Robert counters Catherine's resistance to marrying him by appealing, for example, to the modern ethic of self-realization. Turning Catherine's argument about duty to family on its head, Robert argues that what parents want from their children more than anything else is self-realization, not self-sacrifice. To this modern ideal of self-realization, Robert adds an argument based on a modern principle that the novel calls "the divine right of love" (103). According to this quasi-religious modern principle, love should supersede all more mundane marriage-related concerns.

In addition to such rigidity, the late courtship section also critiques an opposite extreme that it sees in Catherine's hard-line Christianity—a laxness concerning gender norms. Robert Elsemere begins this critique by having Catherine's mother, Mrs. Leyburn, openly dispute Catherine's perceived mission to serve as the spiritual head of her family. Arguing that Catherine should marry Robert, Mrs. Leyburn proposes what she sees as a more suitable mission for Catherine. In her mother's words, Catherine "ought to be a clergyman's *wife*" (130) (italics mine). Further questioning Catherine's disregard for gender norms, Mrs. Leyburn goes on to specify what kind of head the family needs: a male one. As Mrs. Leyburn insists, a man such as Robert, not a woman such as Catherine, is just what the family needs to keep the wild youngest sister Rose in hand. The late courtship section continues this critique of Catherine's overly lax conscience by having Catherine herself criticize her earlier stance. After considering her mother's counsel, Catherine realizes that she has "over-estimated her value" (132) to her family, and that this over-estimation of self has been influenced by "all sorts of personal prides and cravings" (132). This uncovering of Catherine's "personal prides and cravings" (132) wields a potentially serious blow to women's orthodox religious consent. Orthodox religious consent is powerful because it allows

women to assert themselves, not in the name of self, something that traditional femininity forbids, but in the name of God. In revealing the selfishness in Catherine's apparent selflessness, the late courtship section raises the possibility, however, that women's appeals to God may be little more than fronts for the fulfillment of their individual desires. This conviction of her own selfishness leaves Catherine with an immediate "slackness of nerve" (132), something that bodes ill for her capacity to consent.

Before long, this and earlier critiques of Catherine's conscience lead to a much more tangible loss on consent on her part: a squashing of her long-standing resistance to Robert. In the chapter immediately following her recognition of selfishness, Robert finally makes his long-anticipated formal marriage proposal. Returning to her old counter-argument, Catherine once again pleads her conscientious conviction that she "is bound to others" (145). Having fundamentally questioned Catherine's conscience in the previous twenty pages, the novel is able this time, however, to immediately dismiss Catherine's argument. As the novel has Robert declare outright, he simply "do[es] not admit [Catherine's] plea" (145). With her religious argument discredited, Catherine is left vulnerable to Robert's gendered pressures to make her consent—his entreaty that she "Be kind to" him (145) and his threat that she will ruin him if she perseveres in saying no. Exacerbating the problem, the novel depicts Catherine as still suffering from the "slackness of nerve" (132) that hit her when she first recognized her selfishness. Her conscience discredited and her will crushed, Catherine accedes to Robert's demands.

Still, this is not the low-point for Catherine's power of orthodox religious consent. This nadir comes in the last, longest section of the novel, the portion that depicts Catherine and Robert's married life. In this last section of the novel, Mary Augusta Ward takes her assault on orthodoxy much further. Moving beyond critiques of hard-line extremes, Ward begins attacking orthodoxy's most fundamental doctrines. During this final section, Ward has her hero and religious spokesperson reject orthodox Christianity in favor of his own, unorthodox creed. This new creed, which I am calling Elsmerism, proclaims the existence of some higher power—a God. And, it

recognizes the moral value of Christian teaching. However, it denies the possibility of all miracles, including the inspiration of the Bible and the divinity and resurrection of Jesus.

As this final section of Robert Elsemere soon reveals, Robert's new theology poses a tremendous danger to Catherine's orthodox Christian consent. Elsmerism does more than just declare orthodox Christianity deeply wrong. It also takes a belief system that is, by orthodox standards, unchristian, and presents it as a higher, more enlightened form of Christianity. Purporting to speak most accurately for Christian tradition, Elsmerism manages to claim Christianity's most powerful consent-conferring ideals as its own.

Robert's new theology commandeers conscience, for example. As Robert wields the term "conscience," it could almost come out of the writings of John Wesley. Describing conscience as "God's witness in the soul" (475), Robert makes conscience as peremptory a force as ever. Robert makes one alteration, however, to the Protestant model of conscience, a change that gives free thought, not orthodox Christianity, the supreme claim to this ideal. Robert defines conscience as having an intellectual as well as a moral component. By having Robert thus intellectualize conscience, the novel reshapes this ideal so that orthodox Christians, a group that the novel depicts as largely nonintellectual, can lay very imperfect claim to it. According to Robert's model, their consciences are only partial, whereas the more intellectual free-thinkers' are all-encompassing.

Elsmerism similarly usurps orthodox Christianity's claim to truth. Like its conscience, Elsmerism's truth strongly resembles orthodox Christian truth. Truth, as Robert uses it, describes more than just a set of doctrines. Denominating God "the Eternal Truth" (529), Robert also uses his truth to refer to the Godhead in a manner reminiscent of the Bible's description of Jesus as "the truth" (John 14:6). As it does with conscience, Robert Elsemere, however, reworks truth so as to give free thought, not orthodox Christianity, preeminent claim to this ideal. Describing Christianity as "only an imperfect reflection of a part of the truth" (355), Robert Elsemere reconfigures truth in the same language of part versus whole that it used in redefining conscience.

Once again, the novel gives orthodox Christianity the partial and free thought, the complete claim to a historically Christian ideal.

As the novel soon reveals, this appropriation of Christian language by Elsemereism shifts the power of religious consent strongly away from Catherine and towards Robert. During the final, free-thinking section of the novel, the unorthodox Robert wields the terms conscience and truth in a manner reminiscent of Catherine's earlier appeals to conscience. Through appeals to conscience and/or truth, Robert authorizes a series of controversial decisions, including his resignation of his Anglican post and his founding of his free-thinking sect. Robert's power of religious consent is so great towards the end of the novel that Ward describes it in almost utopian terms. In Ward's words, Robert's founding the Brotherhood of Christ is "one of those critical moments of life, when circumstance seems once more to restore to us the power of choice, of distributing a Yes or a No among the great solicitations which meet the human spirit on its path from silence to silence" (397). In other words, Robert's power of consent becomes so great that his choices begin to shape not just his own life, but also the entire world.

As empowering as this appropriation of Christian language is for Robert, the novel presents it as trampling of Catherine and her consent. From the time that the novel reworks conscience and truth, it never again allows Catherine to appeal to conscience, and permits her only one claim to truth. With Robert having seized conscience and truth as foremost his own, the last pages of Robert Elsemere have Catherine instead turn to a less powerful and rather archaic Christian language of "bearing testimony." In the name of "bearing testimony" (493) Catherine voices her dissenting theology to Robert's friends and publicly declares her unwillingness to attend Robert's free-thinking meetings. "Bearing testimony" never having been a very popular Victorian ideal, Ward's novel easily squashes any resistance couched in this language.

Robert Elsemere deals an even bigger blow to Catherine's consent when it finally allows her one last appeal to truth. As she is attempting to reconvert Robert on his deathbed, the novel has Catherine refer to a physically resurrected Jesus as "the truth" (572). In Catherine's words, Robert

should “stretch out [his] hand to. . .the Lamb of God sacrificed for us” (572) because this supernatural savior is “the true comfort—the true help” (572). As Ward soon shows, such attempts by orthodoxy to take back its language offer free thought the perfect opportunity to demonstrate its supremacy. Free thought can simply trump orthodoxy’s truth by appealing to its more expansive, enlightened truth. This is exactly what the novel has Robert immediately do. Redefining truth as God as he, Robert, envisions Him, Robert tells Catherine, “Your misery—your prayers hold me back from God—from that *truth*. . . which can alone be honestly mine” (572) (*italics mine*). This direct trumping of Catherine’s truth puts an end not only to her attempt to reconvert Robert. It also shatters her power to resist him in any way at all. For the rest of the novel, Catherine devotes her life to working for Robert’s Brotherhood of Christ—to advancing a faith that fundamentally contradicts her own.

As Ward imagines it, her hero’s free thought comes at a high price: at the expense of her heroine’s orthodox religious consent. This conclusion becomes all the more chilling when considering how typical Elmsmerism, with all highly Christianized rhetoric, is of much of nineteenth-century free thought. In creating a highly Christianized theism, Ward was following the lead of a real-life free thinker, her idol, the philosopher T.H. Green. Moreover, in wielding a vocabulary of conscience and truth, Ward was following an even more widespread trend. Appeals to Christian ideals of conscience and judgment fill the writings of many of the most famous Victorian free thinkers. Such writers include not only theists, such as Green, but also agnostics such as philosopher John Stuart Mill and journalist John Morley. If Victorian free thought stripped orthodox Christians of their consent when it stripped them of their language, then many besides the fictional Catherine stood to suffer.

By itself, such a dismantling of orthodox Christian consent would not necessarily deprive women of all power of religious consent. As Ward illustrates through Robert’s rise, Victorian free thought transferred rather than destroyed religious consent. Notably, though, Ward makes her heir to her new religious consent, a man—not a woman. As Ward suggests through a couple of on-

going social commentaries—one on women’s education, another on free thinkers’ gender attitudes—this masculine gendering of free-thinking consent may have been much more than just some accident of plotting.

Robert Elsemere repeatedly comments on women’s education, and this commentary does not bode well for women’s free-thinking consent. With its expansive, intellectualized truth and its study of many erudite texts, free thought would have demanded an extensive education on the part of the free thinker. But, as Ward repeatedly emphasizes throughout Robert Elsemere, most Victorian women received very limited educations. The novel brings this home quite powerfully when it has Rose recount the exact extent of her and her sisters’ educations. According to Rose, they were taught only: “arithmetic, sewing, English history, the Catechism, and Paradise Lost” (238). Victorian women could, of course, try to teach themselves, but Robert Elsemere casts doubts on the effectiveness of such a practice. Rose, the novel’s brightest, most talented female character, teaches herself French and German, but, as the novel warns, they “are [Rose’s] French and German. [It] wouldn’t advise anyone else to steal them” (238).

Further keeping women’s educations limited, the novel presents informal educational spaces as nearly as closed to women as formal ones. Those men who cannot afford to go to Oxford can hone their free-thinking skills at groups such as Robert’s scientific study clubs in Murewell and London and a more clearly free-thinking group, the North R---Club. But, of the novel makes clear, none of these groups are available to women.

Of all the intellectual spaces Robert Elsemere depicts only the salon as open to women, and this openness is quite limited. Though led by a woman, Madame de Netteville, the salon, as the novel presents it, is still primarily a men’s space. When Robert and Catherine enter, there are a dozen people in the room—ten gentlemen and two ladies. One of these ladies is Madame de Netteville herself; the other is her aristocratic kinswoman Lady Aubrey Wilbert. Ordinary women are not welcome, as Ward suggests by Mme de Netteville’s outrage when Catherine, mere “an ordinary country clergyman’s spouse” (404), attends her salon. Though providing an education of

sorts to an extreme social elite of women, the salon offers little for the vast majority of women. Excluded from every intellectual circle in the novel, Victorian women, as Ward presents them, by and large lack the educational opportunities to become independent-minded free thinkers.

This is not the only impediment, though, that Ward identifies to women's free-thinking consent. As Ward suggests through yet another social commentary, a discussion of free thinker's ideas about gender, Victorian free thinkers tend to be downright dismissive of women. Ward suggests this, for example, through her characterization of Squire Wendover, the novel's resident free-thinking scholar. Wendover, the text remarks, "doesn't like women to talk about [his] books. He says they only pretend—even the clever ones" (211). Ward's characterization of a second free thinker, the ardent Comtist, James Wardlaw, further connects free thought to a devaluation of women. Wardlaw, Ward writes, is "not a man to make much of women, and he [holds] strong views as to the subordination of wives" (490). Particularly ominous for women's free-thinking consent, Ward specifies that Wardlaw's attitudes towards women are not some personal oddity. Rather, he derives them from Comtism, a real-life school of Victorian free thought. Dismissive of women and requiring an education that few women ever receive, the free thought that Ward depicts in her social commentaries seems an unpromising place for women to find some new religious consent.

Considering free thought's dismantling of orthodox Christian consent, this untenability of female free-thinking consent puts Victorian women in a difficult position. Free thought, as Ward presents it, strips women of the power they had---orthodox Christian consent---without providing any viable new power in return. Robert Elsmere may be one of the nineteenth century's most famous defenses of free thought. But, it also lays the groundwork for a powerful critique of this new theology. As liberating as it is may be for the Robert Elsmere's of the world, Victorian free thought may prove far from freeing to women.

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