Religion and religious discourse contributed meaningfully to the formation and definition of British national identity in the nineteenth century. “The center of Victorian discourse, in which all questions were implicated and to which all road led, was religion.”¹ Important to that ideology of Englishness was the cultivation of “Distrust, even hatred, of papist and the papacy,” according to Richard Helmstadter. “In the nineteenth-century, anti-Catholicism was closely bound up with the Irish question, as well as with the tendency of Protestant Britons of all political parties and all denominations to identify their anti-Catholic venom with a self-satisfied celebration of British liberty.”² England’s sense of itself—England’s Englishness—involved the way religion, and especially Protestantism, factored into nationness. “Protestantism was,” Linda Colley writes, “the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible,” forging “an unquestioned equation,” according to Gauri Viswanathan, “of Englishness with mainstream Anglicanism.”³ Not surprisingly, Colley commences her seminal study Britons with Protestantism, noticing that what cemented the nation was neither geography nor racial identity but religion, essentially Protestantism: “it was this shared religious allegiance . . . that permitted a sense of British national identity. . . . English Francophobia,” for example, had much to do with the sense that France was a Catholic country.⁴ According to Frank Turner,

Anglican culture first and foremost rested upon a religious definition of cultural identification and political outlook. From the Restoration through the battles over Catholic Emancipation and after, spokesmen for the Anglican monopoly had defined their character and that of the political and social culture that they defended in terms of the dual opposition to Roman Catholics and Protestant Nonconformists. Roman Catholicism was identified with tyranny, potential domination by a foreign prince, superstition, idolatry, and Ireland.⁵

Much of the literature of the nineteenth century reflects “this play of Protestant against Roman Catholic.”⁶ Englishness simply constituted Anglicanism. Thus, when Jane Eyre was considered an interloper, as
someone estranged from an essentialized English family, she had to be
troped as something entirely Other; and but for a racialized outsider, such as
Eliot’s gypsy or Thackeray’s Sambo, what better assignation than Catholic,
an “infantine Guy Fawkes.”
Englishness comprises a particular kind of char-
acter (istics) and characters. British national identity, like Victorian discourse,
is constituted through exclusion, enacted largely around religion.
Because a sense of Englishness meant familiarity with a canon, a set of
particular English religious texts, those outside the fold are naturally drawn to
heretical or heterodoxical texts; for female prodigals, this also includes a pref-
ence for biblical texts thought to be unsuited for their gender. Jane Eyre is
vilified by Reverend Brocklehurst for her canonical preferences—her fondness
of the Revelation, Daniel, Genesis, Samuel, parts of Exodus, the Kings,
Chronicles, Job, and Jonah—and for her aversion to the Psalms, which she
finds “not interesting” (JE, 26–28). The goal of organized religion, as in putting
down social upheavals and all threats to the patriarchal management at Lowood, likened to quelling “the Babel clamour of tongues” (JE, 39), was to
secure the status of women as social subalterns. This means recommending
for Jane a “‘Child’s Guide’ . . . containing ‘an account of the awfully sudden
death of Martha G——, a naughty child addicted to falsehood and deceit’”
(JE, 30). Clearly, Jane’s canonical preference, in the words of Dorothy
Mermin, was a way to “wrench Christianity out of its male-centeredness.” In
The Mill on the Floss (1860), Maggie Tulliver, similarly, frequents religious
texts considered by men morally unbecoming for women, especially prepu-
bescent girls: Defoe’s The History of the Devil and Jeremy Taylor’s Holy Living
and Dying. To “vindicate the variety of her reading” and to convince her male
detractors that she is interested in “prettier books,” books that make her
appear less of a witch, Maggie cites her familiarity with the Protestant classic,
Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, which, as only the precocious Maggie would
have observed, also contains “a great deal about the devil.” In fact, it was this
interpretive privilege sponsored and endorsed by Essays and Reviews that
allowed for different discursive readings of the Bible, including opportunities
for women to read the same text more broadly and completely and from a
female, if not feminist, perspective. Eliot’s other heroine, Dorothea Brooke,
as A. D. Nuttall observers, “reads Protestant Jeremy Taylor far into the night,
and Anglican Richard Hooker also figures in her misguided girlish dreams of
an ideal husband,” and “at the same time she reads Catholic Pascal.”
Dorothea, he concludes, “is a personality stretched, in a rich awareness,
between Protestant and Catholic worlds.”

The Pilgrim’s Progress, and especially the episode of the battle between the
devil (a representation of Dante’s Charon) and Christian, also features
centrally in Maggie Tulliver’s early religious education. The subsequent
Tulliver estate sale, viewed from the loss of The Pilgrim’s Progress, was for
Maggie lamentable, something resembling a kind of familial death: “every-
thing is going away from us—the end of our lives will have nothing in it like
the beginning!” (MF, 197). Eliot, we know, was fascinated by the prophetic
tradition, especially by the early Patricks and Scholastics. The Mill on the