

8. 'Pythoness of the Temple': Eliza Sharples and the gendered public of the Rotunda

With Robert Taylor and Richard Carlile now ensconced in their separate prisons, and numbers declining nightly at the Rotunda, the 'Palladium of Liberty' was in dire financial straights. The entry of the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) to the repertoire of Rotunda radicalism provided a much needed boost to the finances of the institution and, importantly, its radical credentials. The NUWC, however, was purely a political group whose organisation and structure were modelled on traditional forms, and forums, of radical male sociability. With the imprisonment of the flamboyant Taylor, Rotunda radicalism had all but lost its theatrical element, which had so captivated its male and, by the accounts of Home Office spy Abel Hall, its female audiences. Carlile worked desperately from within his prison cell to keep the venture alive. In the late months of 1831, he took the pragmatic step to rent the theatres (when not used by the NUWC) to a circus, a concert company and, on one occasion, a man exhibiting a 'Phenomena of Nature': a horse with seven legs. Given Carlile's previous barbs regarding the flippant nature of popular entertainment, it must have stung deeply to see his prized venue reduced to a forum of trivial spectacle. Nevertheless, such performances kept the Rotunda open. Abel Hall testified that the equine show was 'very well attended'.¹

Although the freak shows provided momentary financial relief, Carlile eagerly sought to re-energise the Rotunda's radical agenda. In September 1831, he announced the arrival of a 'new Jesus Christ' who was to lecture at the Rotunda on Thursday evenings under various titles of 'Shiloh', 'messiah' and 'Sion'. John 'Zion' Ward, a fifty-year-old crippled former shoemaker of Irish descent, had progressed through popular sectarianism, having been a Calvinist, Methodist, Baptist, Sandemonian and Southcottian before obtaining the revelation that he was the new Shiloh, or Joanna Southcott's spiritual offspring.² Ward believed that he was Jesus Christ and had formerly been Satan, and his millenarian Rotunda sermons, with titles such as the 'Judgement Seat of God', 'Balaam's Ass' and 'Fall of Man', enthralled Rotunda audiences. Charles Twort, a former

1 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 17 January 1832, fo. 12.

2 On Ward, see Chapter 6, Note 137. On Southcott, see James Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English millenarianism in an era of revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott: The woman clothed with the Sun* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2002); J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular millenarianism 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), pp. 16–18, chs 5 and 6; Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the making of the English working class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 107–11.

warehouse labourer, assisted Ward at all his lectures. The immense popularity of the two men was due both to their eccentricity and to the popular appeal of their millenarianism. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, revivalism gripped Britain on an enormous scale and the preoccupation with prophecies of the second coming of Christ extended through every level of society.³ Carlile initially offered Ward the Rotunda thinking his brand of infidelism and millenarianism might appeal to the 'bible-besotted multitude', but the enormous success of the prophet's dazzling harangues soon caused Carlile to take the duo seriously.⁴ Ward wore the mantle of Taylor with ease; his performances, also drawing upon principles of countertheatre and his ideology, were an eccentric blend of 'rationalism, republicanism and chiliastic mysticism'.⁵ Despite attracting crowds of up to 2000 at the Rotunda, the duo left London to continue on their roving lecture circuit and Carlile was again left without a major drawcard.⁶

By January 1832, large placards were seen around London announcing a 'new occupation of the building'.⁷ Carlile again tantalised patrons with a return to Taylor and Ward's brand of Rotunda radicalism, only this time, sensationally, in female form. Perhaps buoyed by the popularity of the 'Phenomena of Nature', and prompted by the need for immediate financial returns, Carlile promoted his new star attraction as a virtual freak show. Dubbed 'Lady of the Rotunda' and 'Isis' (derived from the romantic myth of the Egyptian Goddess of Reason), Eliza Sharples was billed as the first Englishwoman to speak publicly on matters of politics and religion in a 'style unparalleled in this country' (Figure 8.1).⁸ Her identity was concealed for many months to protect her family and the resultant mystery aided her image as a curiosity. The appearance of 'Isis' at the Rotunda was promoted as intensely as an opening night at the theatre—the publicity not unlike that which aroused the contemporary notoriety surrounding the display of the semi-naked body of the African woman Saartjie Baartman, dubbed the 'Hottentot Venus'.⁹

3 E. P. Thompson describes the impact on the working class as 'millennial instability'. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 878. See also Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), for the influence of millenarian principles on early Spencean radicals (pp. 50–72), and on the 1830s revival (p. 202).

4 *Prompter*, 3 September 1831. For a brief account of the type of followers attracted to Ward's chiliism, see Jackie Latham, 'The Bradleys of Birmingham: The unorthodox family of "Michael Field"', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 55 (2003), pp. 189–91.

5 Iain McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, Unpublished MA thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1975), p. 200. As E. P. Thompson noted, Ward 'directed his messianic appeal towards the dynamic of Radicalism'. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 879.

6 Their lecturing tour did not last long, however, for in early 1832 the pair was found guilty of blasphemy in Derby and imprisoned for two years. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 880.

7 *The Times*, 30 January 1832.

8 Report from *Christian Advocate*, reproduced in *The Times*, 30 January 1832.

9 On Saartjie Baartman, see Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The life and death of Saartjie Baartman: born 1789—buried 2002* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); Sadiah Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot

The promise of a reinvigorated Rotunda even stirred Taylor from the malaise of his prison cell. 'The spirit of the Rotunda lives', he wrote, 'and will live for ever in this country. The steps gained in the last two years cannot be retraced. It opens with new spirit, with new attraction, with all that is lovely and virtuous in woman to grace it.'¹⁰ Sharples' opening night was a promotional dream for Carlile; it was timed to coincide with a date auspicious to all radicals: the anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine.



Figure 8.1 Eliza Sharples with a copy of *Isis*, c. 1832.

From Theophila Carlile Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, London, 1899. Courtesy of the Barr Smith Library, Adelaide.

If Carlile's fervid promotion of the Lady of the Rotunda was designed to rouse radical followers, it also sparked the interest of conservative groups. The editor of the *Christian Advocate* feared that the claims of a new occupation of the building were merely a ruse, believing that 'the change of performers will only

Venus"', *History of Science*, vol. 42 (2004), pp. 233–57; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), pp. 268–72. A similar promotional strategy to that of Sharples was later employed for the female lecturers of the Owenite movement. See Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 140.

¹⁰ 'Memoir of the Reverend Robert Taylor', *Devil's Pulpit* (London, 1832), vol. 2, p. xii.

occasion a reiteration of those scenes of blasphemy and immorality which have so long been a disgrace to the metropolis'.¹¹ His prediction was soon proved correct. In the tradition of Taylor, Ward and Carlile, Sharples used the Rotunda platform to castigate the priesthood, expose religious superstition and denigrate established authority. She promised 'sweet revenge' on those responsible for the incarceration of Carlile and Taylor. She accused the government of complicity in the devastating outbreak of cholera. They had 'laid such burdens on the people that they could not exist and thus created pestilence among them while they "Rolled in Luxury"'.¹² Hall reported that Sharples' lectures were committed and energetic, containing some of the strongest abuse of church and state that he had witnessed.¹³

The theatrical success of Taylor's popular performances was drawn upon when Sharples appeared wearing a 'showy' dress for her lectures, stepping onto a stage strewn with the radical symbols of white thorn and laurel leaves.¹⁴ It is worth dwelling for a moment on this image; a simple description of such accoutrements belies the underlying tensions in the scene. Here, on a stage previously occupied only by men, in a venue that was otherwise publicly associated with the rough, unrespectable elements of radicalism, appeared a woman in respectable dress. Standing amidst the politically charged symbols of radicalism, Sharples delivered some of the most fervent castigations against church and state. Here was the inversion of familiar binaries: the respectable infidel, the feminine radical.

Eliza Sharples has long been recognised in radical historiography as having entered a 'moral marriage' with Richard Carlile after the collapse of his cheerless marriage to Jane.¹⁵ She is also noted for providing a home to the young Charles Bradlaugh, later to become a leading member of the British secularist movement and a Radical MP, after his commitment to free thought led to alienation from his family.¹⁶ Most accounts of radicalism in this period have recognised her role as editor of *Isis* and her appearance as the Lady of the Rotunda, though many such analyses have been coloured by her daughter's claim that Carlile had written most of her lectures for her. The emergence of studies focusing on

11 *Christian Advocate*, reproduced in *The Times*, 30 January 1832.

12 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

13 Ibid.

14 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 14 February 1832, fo. 38; HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

15 See, for example, Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 191–216; Guy Aldred, *Richard Carlile, Agitator: His life and times* (London: Pioneer Press, 1923), pp. 152–8; James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political language, ritual and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 133, 144–5; Iowerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London, John Gast and his Times* (Kent: Dawson, 1979), pp. 262, 290; R. S. Neale, *Class in English History, 1680–1850* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 205–14.

16 Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1974), pp. 193, 210.

women's involvement in early nineteenth-century radicalism have gone some way to recognising Sharples' own contribution to the movement, though many works contain only fleeting reference to her.¹⁷

The recent study of Sharples by Helen Rogers is the most comprehensive to date.¹⁸ It is an important contribution to radical historiography though it has, perhaps, been driven too forcefully by an attempt to exorcise Carlile from Sharples' story. Ostensibly, such a criticism might appear contradictory in a study that seeks to extricate another female radical, Susannah Wright, from the shadow of Richard Carlile. In an attempt to see Sharples in her own light, or to acknowledge her independent contribution to early nineteenth-century radicalism, however, we need not deny the influence of Carlile in shaping her principles, or even his role in penning her Rotunda lectures, or the words for *Isis*. Just as the relationship between Carlile and Susannah Wright involved collective authorship, the evidence of Sharples' intellectual commitment to radical principles both before her Rotunda appearance and in her later years suggests that she and Carlile shared an intellectual partnership, as well as a romantic one. As Rogers herself notes, Sharples' own interpretation of Christianity had a striking influence on Carlile, resulting in what Sharples claimed as the 'Christian conversion' of one of the most committed, influential and strident infidels in British history.¹⁹

Although Sharples' appearance at Blackfriars Road lasted only a matter of months, her experience provides an opportunity to focus on her in the wider context of Rotunda radicalism. While this chapter engages with Sharples' nascent public political involvement, it does not attempt a biographical approach or aim to examine her life beyond the Rotunda, but rather uses her story to examine how radical women engaged with the space and helps illustrate the gendered nature of Rotunda radicalism. Despite the masculine image that dominated both the print culture of the period and the subsequent historiography of the venue, Carlile established a space that both catered for and attracted a significant number of women at a time when other radical venues were less inclusive. Sharples' experience provides a platform from which to view other women involved in the Rotunda—notably, the anonymous female audience members whose attendance was recorded by Home Office spies and reporters. It allows the exploration of the feminist continuities of the site both prior to and following Carlile's occupation of the premises. The significance of female involvement at the Rotunda is examined in light of other venues open

17 See, for example, Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 183, 186; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, pp. 82, 128–9. A brief biography is provided in Ruth Frow and Edmund Frow, *Political Women, 1800–1850* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), pp. 35–9, 50, 63, 66, 85. Similarly, studies focusing on religious dissent also make mention of Sharples. See, for example, Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 212–18.

18 Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, authorship and the radical tradition in nineteenth-century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 48–79.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

to women in this period, providing an important opportunity for this chapter to survey the gendered terrain both of Rotunda radicalism and of the early nineteenth-century public sphere.

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Eliza Sharples was born into a prosperous middle-class manufacturing family in Bolton, Lancashire, in 1804. Educated at a ladies college until the relatively late age of twenty, both home and school instilled a strong commitment to Christian principles. Sharples first met Carlile and Taylor in her hometown during the Lancashire leg of their 1829 'Infidel Mission'.²⁰ Her daughter's memoirs provide some insight into how a respectable middle-class woman with a staunch Evangelical upbringing came to cross paths with the most notorious infidels of the day. Theophila Carlile Campbell, one of the four children to be born of the eventual union between Sharples and Carlile, suggests that her mother first became aware of her father in the years before 1829 when he dined at the home of a Liverpool banker, the father of a school friend of Sharples.²¹ Although Sharples claims not to have met Carlile on that occasion, it nevertheless sparked her interest, which was soon further heightened when she encountered a relative reading one of his early publications. Offered the use of her cousin's library, which contained some of Carlile's works, she thereafter sought more publications through a free-thought bookseller in Bolton, known only as Mr Hardie. Carlile's philosophies, Sharples later wrote, prompted a deep transformation. She described herself as a 'brand snatched from the fire'; she experienced a 'new birth...unto righteousness'—an intense emotional conversion not unlike that felt by William Knight from his seat in the Rotunda audience.²²

Upon learning of Carlile's imprisonment, Sharples sought an interview with him through Hardie, the bookseller. Like Susannah Wright in the decade before her, she was determined to champion the cause of the imprisoned infidels.²³ Sharples began a written correspondence with Carlile and, with her dedication to his philosophies determined, she decided to travel to London to meet her new radical mentor. Her first visit with him also cemented her dedication to the man himself. Her daily visits to his prison quarters at the Compter soon saw an intimate relationship develop. After many years of (apparently mutual) unhappiness with Jane, whom Carlile claimed did not share his unyielding

20 Theophila Carlile Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press as Told in the Story of the Life of Richard Carlile* (London, 1899), pp. 148–9.

21 Ibid., p. 149.

22 *Isis*, 27 October 1832.

23 During this prison term, Carlile was no longer supported by Jane, from whom he formally separated in the early 1830s. After the death of a wealthy supporter, Carlile provided an annuity of £50 a year for life for her and his children, which enabled her and her sons to establish their own radical bookshop. Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 150; Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 196.

dedication to the radical cause, Carlile was bewitched by the possibility of a true infidel as a soul mate. Even before meeting Sharples in person, he anticipated that she would become 'my daughter, my sister, my friend, my companion, my wife, my sweetheart, my everything'.²⁴

Convinced that Sharples would also invigorate Rotunda radicalism (and thereby his financial fortunes), Carlile took the bold step of evicting the NUWC from their headquarters in the larger theatre. His 'Goddess of Reason' was now the sole attraction and manager of the premises.²⁵ Only two months after first meeting with Carlile in his prison cell, at age twenty-eight and with no previous experience in the public world of politics, Sharples became editor of a new radical weekly publication, *Isis*, and was promoted as the first woman in England to lecture publicly on politics on the stage of the Rotunda.²⁶ Sharples was initially billed to give two lectures every Sunday (at sixpence for the pit and boxes, one shilling for the gallery), on Monday evenings (for half-price admission) and each Wednesday (at full price). She also provided a gratuitous lecture on Friday evenings to accommodate those unable to meet the modest entry charges.

Under Sharples' guide, the Rotunda was to be a place of 'sound political, moral and philosophical instruction'.²⁷ Her lectures, Hall noted, became a 'regular strain of abuse of Religion, Priests and all institutions'.²⁸ She argued that man and his language, thought and manners were perfectible on Earth and therefore the only sin was the absence or denial of knowledge and free discussion to all people.²⁹ Christianity, she held, was the chief barrier to the dissemination of knowledge; by denying the people education, priests were denying man's liberty. Nor was knowledge espoused merely for intellectual fulfilment. Sharples urged her audience to think and act upon their new thoughts. Passive submission and non-resistance were seen as the 'doctrine of priesthood'.³⁰

Carlile's shrewd marketing of his celebrated recruit initially paid dividends. Sharples' lectures were received with much interest. Hall reported that 'no interruptions took place in her proceedings', which were 'listened to with great attention and much applause'.³¹ Certain elements of Sharples' performances at the Rotunda drew on the theatrical. She was led ceremoniously onto the

24 Quoted in Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 51.

25 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 26 January 1832, fo. 19. Carlile advised the NUWC that they may not have use of the venue for some weeks to make way for Sharples and the group was forced to move their meetings to James Watson's Chapel in Finsbury.

26 The first edition of *Isis* appeared on 11 February 1832, and it ran until 15 December that year.

27 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

28 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

29 Neale, *Class in English History*, p. 209.

30 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

31 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 3 March 1832, fo. 52.

stage by Julian Hibbert and surrounded by radical symbols as stage props. They never came close, however, to the melodramatic and histrionic displays of Taylor. Sharples presented a more measured and structured production, reflecting perhaps that it was early days in her infidel conversion, as well as Carlile's growing dislike of Taylor's drama and jest, which, he considered, had begun to cloud the radical message itself.

Sharples' first lectures were calculated to establish her as an independent voice. She was an unknown in either London circles or the wider radical community, and the success of her public campaign depended partly on convincing the audience that she was delivering her own message, and not simply providing a mouthpiece for Carlile and Taylor from beyond the prison walls. On opening night, she declared that she was

neither of Taylor nor Carlile; neither of Owen or Saint Simon...I will be the little busy bee extracting the honey from all their doctrines...I stand here, not to be an organ of their sentiments, I have formed a mind and found a soul of my own, and I stand here unpersuaded by anyone, a free and independent woman...I will use no argument until I understand it, and adopt no maxim until I have studied it.³²

Yet Sharples was nevertheless dismissed as a puppet of Carlile and Taylor. Her inexperience and image as a stooge were reinforced when Hibbert immediately led her from the stage following her lectures.³³ Unlike the other Rotunda orators, she refused to field questions from the audience, demanding instead that they be put in writing to her. Had Carlile not been in desperate need to revive the Rotunda's fortunes, or presented with the delicious possibility of her inauguration on the anniversary of Paine's birth, he might have allowed Sharples more time to develop her political acumen before launching her into the public sphere.

Despite her daughter's claims, the prevailing image of Sharples in this early period of her radical career is not entirely supported by the Home Office reports of Abel Hall.³⁴ Hall observed that much of the handwriting on her early lecture notes accorded with that of Carlile or Taylor. Importantly though, only a month after Sharples' first lecture, Hall observed by 'the character of the handwriting' that the first few pages of her lecture were written by herself, with the latter section most probably by Carlile, as witnessed by her making several stumbles in the reading.³⁵

³² *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

³³ Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 14 February 1832, fo. 38.

³⁴ From a close reading of *Isis*, Helen Rogers also considers that Sharples 'brought her own political theology to its pages' and that the publication is 'best seen as the product of an unequal collaboration'. Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 53.

³⁵ Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 14 February 1832, fo. 38, 27 February, fo. 47.

Once again, it is necessary to also look beyond the printed word when assessing the impact of Sharples' lectures at the Rotunda. Just as Susannah Wright's performance in the courtroom adds another dimension to our understanding of her story, so too Sharples' performance of her lectures provides a richer picture of her contribution to Rotunda radicalism. While she did stumble and mispronounce words on occasion, Hall attests to the strength of her convictions: 'I never saw or heard a more abusive or inflammatory language made of in any assembly and in which she takes a most Vulgar Pride in delivering.'³⁶ On another occasion, he wrote that 'her lecture throughout was more than before a very strong and mixed abuse of all Religions and Governments'.³⁷ Only a month after first stepping onto the Rotunda stage, she was beginning to find her own voice. Hall reports Sharples presenting a lecture written by Taylor (again observing the handwriting), but he reports that Sharples had altered it, erasing much of the astronomical interpretation of the Scriptures, which she was beginning to question in favour of her growing commitment to what she described as 'rational Christianity'.³⁸ On this particular occasion, Hall reports, she substituted Taylor's astronomical passages with 'her opinions on Drs Gall and Spurzheim Phrenology'—the theory of brain function and skull size that was to become another area of keen interest in Sharples' radical philosophy.³⁹ If she was ever a cipher, she soon began to think for herself. In this way, she was surely not unlike many younger radicals—men as well as women—who learned their craft from veterans of the public sphere.

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Sharples was the first woman to take to the Rotunda stage, but she was not the first woman to be involved with the Rotunda—in its former guise as a museum, scientific and literary society or even under its radical tenure. Tracing the history of its occupation from the late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century allows us to track the gendered nature of these public sphere institutions and reveals a continuity of female patronage. As we saw in Chapter 6, the Sarah Stone prints of the Leverian depict women among the paying visitors to the museum. Similarly, the Rowlandson print of

36 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 3 March 1832, fo. 52.

37 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

38 For the appeal of rational religion to women, see Ruth Watts, 'Rational Religion and Feminism: The challenge of Unitarianism in the nineteenth century', in Sue Morgan (ed.), *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 39–52; Kathryn Gleadle, 'British Women and Radical Politics in the Late Nonconformist Enlightenment, c.1780–1830', in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege, and Power: British politics, 1750 to the present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 123–51; Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 92–118; Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.

39 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 12 March 1832, fo. 58. Dr Franz Joseph Gall was a Viennese physician who devised theories of brain size and function and related its development to skull structure so as to allow a character reading from the shape of the skull. For a brief time, he joined with J. G. Spurzheim to advance his system, which was later coined 'phrenology'. On Gall and Spurzheim, and the development of phrenology, see John Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

Accum's lecture at the Surrey Institution attests to the considerable numbers of women who attended the Surrey's scientific lecture programme.⁴⁰ Further, we know that women were invited to apply for (limited) membership of the Surrey: membership of £2 2 s per annum allowed admittance to the lectures and to the Surrey's library. The Institution, however, remained demarcated along gendered and spatial lines: male members alone could access the full benefits of membership, which provided some areas for an exclusively male sociability—to read the morning and evening papers in the 'News Room' and to the 'Reading Room', where 'new books and pamphlets of present interest' could be found.⁴¹

Despite the limits on membership, the Surrey's attitude to women was modelled, like much of its organisation and philosophy, on the prestigious Royal Institution. Thomas Young, Professor of the Royal Institution from 1801, had lofty ambitions for his organisation, hoping that it might 'in some degree supply the place of a subordinate university to those whose sex or situation in life has denied them the advantage of an academical education in the national seminaries of learning'.⁴² Though it is unclear whether the institutions ever provided this level of fulfilment for their female members, this mandate clearly demonstrates that the thirst for knowledge and instruction in this period was not confined to any one particular class or gender.

The aims of Professor Young and that of Carlile were not entirely dissimilar. When Carlile took up the lease of the Rotunda in 1830, the participation of women was crucial to his agenda. For Carlile, ignorance was responsible for sexual inequality and discrimination. 'There is no kind of equality more desirably advantageous for the welfare of the human race, than equality with the sexes', he argued, and the only way to achieve such equality was for women to acquire knowledge.⁴³ Not only did Carlile philosophically reject the 'doctrine of woman as domestic agent', he institutionalised its opposite in the Rotunda itself. When Sharples joined the Rotunda milieu, it already had a strong female following. Hall's extensive reports to the Home Office reveal the presence of large numbers of women, as well as some youths and children, at Rotunda lectures throughout the period 1830–32. Sharples emphasised that there was to be 'no

40 Gillian Russell argues that the presence of women at institutions such as the Surrey 'was essential to the legitimisation of their claims to politeness and civility as well as to their financial survival'. Gillian Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen: The sociability of Romantic lecturing', in Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (eds), *Romantic Sociability: Social networks and literary culture in Britain, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 133.

41 *The Times*, 1 October 1813.

42 From Bence Jones, *The Royal Institution* (London, 1871), quoted in Peter J. Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image: Hazlitt and Coleridge lecturing', in James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *Romantic Metropolis: The urban scene of British culture, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 242n. Women were admitted to upper circles in the days of the Surrey Rotunda Wine and Concert Rooms. See folio 58 in the collection of printed ephemera on the 'Surrey Rotunda' held in the Wellcome Institute Library, London (hereafter Wellcome Collection).

43 *Lion*, 4 April 1828.

distinction between the sexes' at the venue under her leadership.⁴⁴ Her opening lectures paid particular attention to her female audience members. She made impassioned appeals for them to follow as she led them to a state of equality:

I will set before my sex the example of asserting an equality for them with their present lords and masters, and strive to teach them all, yes, all, that the undue submission, which constitutes slavery, is honorable to none.⁴⁵

Sharples' most important task, she declared, was to see the rebirth of the Rotunda as the 'Temple of Knowledge and Reason' for the radical community as a whole. By welcoming women and children to the Rotunda, Carlile and Sharples overcame one of the genuine impediments to women's public political participation.

The significance of the Rotunda as a forum for working-class women in this period can be better appreciated by considering the opportunities available for their participation in other radical venues. One key outlet for discussion and intellectual exchange for women was within the radical family itself. Radical networks and discussion groups had long operated within private homes. Those women, including Susannah Wright, who attended the home of B. B. Jones and his wife, for instance, enjoyed the safety, familiarity and flexibility of intellectual exchange in a private setting, which more easily accommodated the domestic and childrearing roles generally ascribed to women. This private radical space also acted to protect those women who did not wish to expose their adherence to radicalism to the public gaze. It was, however, also a restrictive space, separating women from the psychological benefits of citizenship and participation in the public sphere.

In terms of public engagement, however, some historians of the radical movement contend that the increasingly institutionalised form of radical sociability posed new challenges for women wishing to participate in wider radical culture. Dorothy Thompson and Catherine Hall, for example, note that during the late eighteenth century, the traditional site of protest of the street, which once saw the communal participation of men, women and children, was increasingly replaced with a move to indoor spaces with more formal and organised movements of the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ Although the 'institutional framework' of the radical movement—the clubs and societies—was 'central to the task of building a common culture', it nevertheless resulted in the increasing marginalisation

44 *Isis*, 3 March 1832.

45 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

46 Dorothy Thompson, 'Women and Nineteenth-Century Radical Politics', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 112–38; Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in feminism and history* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 134–5.

of women who found such venues harder to negotiate than men.⁴⁷ Such sites of 'homosociality' developed both formal and informal means of excluding women. The deterrents to female inclusion ranged from the times the meetings operated to the tavern milieu: 'pubs were coming to be seen as unsuitable places for respectable women'.⁴⁸ Hall does not suggest that women were absent from the radical movement—indeed plebeian women were in 'considerable numbers' and with 'considerable strength' in organisations such as the Female Reform Associations, in the Owenite communities and later among the Chartists—but rather from the key institutional structures through which that culture was experienced. Therefore men and women were confronted by a gendered radical culture, which they increasingly experienced in 'very different ways' from one another.⁴⁹

That early nineteenth-century radical culture was gendered in the way Hall describes is of little doubt. Her brief analysis of working-class women is, however, set within a study focusing predominantly on middle-class women in the public sphere, and as such offers an overview of the radical scene rather than attempting to differentiate how different sites engaged or appealed to women of different social rank. If we repopulate the institutions of the public sphere with their historical actors, however, we do see some women in the venues typically associated with radical male sociability. As Anna Clark astutely argued in *Struggle for the Breeches* (now an essential companion to E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*), while the separate sphere model may have restricted the public involvement of middling and upper-class women in early nineteenth-century Britain, for working-class women (and men), the demarcation between the two spheres was never as rigid. She argues that such a division between the public and the private was a 'class privilege denied to working men and women. Working men were denied political power, and working women could not take shelter in the home, but had to earn wages.'⁵⁰

Surveying the scholarship of authors such as Hans Medick, John Gillis, David Gilmour and Dorothy George on forms and practices of plebeian sociability, Clark argues that plebeian men and women continued to socialise together in public until the mid-nineteenth century, in venues including 'workshops, pubs, and streets'. Moreover, women were able to create organisational forms that 'transcended the boundaries between work and home'.⁵¹ The milieu of the tavern or the pub was not as alien to plebeian women as Hall suggests was the case for middling-class women. As Clark notes, when plebeian women organised and met, it was often in a pub, as evidenced, to take one example, by

47 Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*, p. 134.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., pp. 138–9.

50 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 2.

51 Ibid., p. 26.

the Female Radical Reformers of Manchester, who assembled for their meetings in the Forresters' Arms tavern.⁵² The historical record is littered with evidence of such groups throughout the period from the 1820s to the 1840s.

Nevertheless, as Clark herself notes, many plebeian women also had serious misgivings about the tavern as a venue for male sociability; the detrimental effect of such outlets on family finances and the engendering of violence were ignored in later scholarship, which promulgated the 'nostalgic vision of artisan communities'.⁵³ Radical men themselves recognised the spatial dimension of female participation in the political realm. The *Poor Man's Guardian* attributed women's dislike of political associations because

they are apt to abstract husbands from the scene of their domestic duties, and to make them neglect their wives for the club-room and public-house. Women very naturally like their husbands to stay at home in the evening, and not to spend their money to get drunk at the public-house...Let us therefore, my friends, when we meet to discuss politics, avoid the public-house, and make our sittings as short as possible.⁵⁴

The emphasis remained on keeping their wives happy with their absence, rather than inviting them into public participation.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the tavern, coffee house and pub were not the only forums available for radical assembly in this period. Dissenting chapels provided another outlet for plebeian radicalism and, as the performances of Reverend Robert Taylor and John 'Zion' Ward attest, elements of radical religion also became part of the Rotunda's appeal. Women were particularly numerous and prominent in the millenarian movements.⁵⁵ Dissenting chapels also held considerable appeal for women. At the very least, they catered for more communal involvement than the coffee shop or the tavern allowed. More importantly, Clark notes, radical religion 'imbued the common people, especially women, with a sense of spiritual equality'; it provided 'an intellectual outlet denied them in politics'.⁵⁶ Further, the institutionalised structure of dissenting chapels allowed women to learn the organisational skills, the 'language of protest' and 'knowledge of the precedent of female heroines which later aided them to join in radical political organisations'.⁵⁷

52 *Poor Man's Guardian*, 21 January 1832.

53 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 25, 30.

54 *Poor Man's Guardian*, 14 September 1833.

55 J. F. C. Harrison notes that 'whether in the role of prophetess or wealthy patroness or adoring disciple', women appear 'prominently in millenarian movements'. Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 31.

56 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 93.

57 See *ibid.*, p. 117; Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 173. On the relationship between Robert Owen and the wider radical movement, see Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture', in Sidney Pollard and John Salt (eds), *Robert Owen: Prophet of the poor* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 84–114.

The Owenite movement provided another alternative for women disenchanted with established religion to engage not only in religious heterodoxy but also to agitate against social and political orthodoxies. This cooperative movement, initiated by celebrated reformer Robert Owen, envisaged a 'New Moral World' in which all classes and both genders lived harmoniously and equitably in a system based on communal property and family life.⁵⁸ Barbara Taylor's seminal work on the movement, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, recovered the crucial gender aspects of Owenism, which had been largely forgotten in earlier histories of the movement and in the practice of socialism itself. Taylor argues that the vision for the New Moral World was motivated primarily by equality in both sexual and labour relations before the feminist ideals were subsumed by class as the dominant factor in the economics of labour relations. Working women could find a place within Owenite cooperative communities and engage in trade unionism, which allowed them not only to access feminist and radical political theory but also to practice social, political and sexual equality and liberation. Ironically, it was the issue of gender that critically divided the movement in the mid-1830s over the question of women's labour and it would take several years to recover in force. By 1840, the movement had again strengthened, although in a markedly different structure and with a strategy shaped more upon rational religion and freethinking tenets but with cooperative organisation and collectivity still paramount.⁵⁹

The parallels between the Owenite feminist philosophy and Carlile's vision for the Rotunda are evident. Many of the early male Rotunda leaders were also identified as Owenites. If we recall Gibbon Wakefield's alarmist pamphlet warning of the dangers of the London populace, he separated the Rotunda men into the supporters of Henry Hunt and the disciples of Robert Owen. Though we cannot identify the many women who joined Rotunda audiences, we can speculate that if Owenite men were attracted to Rotunda radicalism, and a vision of women's rights was publicly projected by Carlile, Owenite women could have been part of the earlier Rotunda milieu as well.

There is little doubt, as Clark maintains, that the Owenite movement constituted a minority group (albeit an important one) amidst working-class radicalism in this period, largely because of the extreme nature of their agenda. By the 1830s, there was mounting pressure on women of all ranks to adopt the codes of respectability, and the radical Owenite agenda of marital and sexual equality was a direct affront to such codes. The popularity of dissenting chapels and other outlets for 'rational religion' can also be better understood in this light. Removed from the unseemly association with drink in the pub or tavern, dissenting chapels 'provided an institutional infrastructure for the "respectable"

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19.

elements of plebeian culture'.⁶⁰ Carlile also recognised the need to address the issue of respectability, though he had long argued that the social and sexual subjection of women under established religion had nothing to do with morality or respectability. Nevertheless, even before the doors of the Rotunda opened, Taylor noted the benefits of presenting a respectable facade for the success of infidelism. 'All that infidelity wants for its general triumph', he claimed in 1829, 'is the dress that can put on an equality with the best appearance of other principles, the enough of money that is called respectability'.⁶¹

The trappings of respectability were particularly important to the Rotunda proprietors.⁶² Despite their infidel affinities, Sharples and many other Rotunda performers cultivated an air of respectability. Sharples herself originated from the ranks of the middle classes and, in her opening lecture, she presented herself as an educated and genteel woman who sought endorsement of her respectability from her female followers: 'Will you gather round me and give me that countenance in virtuous society which we all seek and need, and without which life to us is wretchedness.'⁶³ For all his 'roughness', Taylor's credentials as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and his associations with the Anglican Church helped the Rotunda's presentation as a respectable premise.⁶⁴ The status of the Rotunda's financial backers also assisted the reputable image of the establishment. Hibbert and Saull were described by Abel Hall as 'men of property' and their direct involvement in the lectures and debates at the Rotunda helped enhance the image of the Rotunda as a respectable venue.⁶⁵ Further, the adoption of a binary pricing system for admission also suggests that Carlile intended to cater for the desire for respectability; patrons could define their status by purchasing better seats for a higher price. There are parallels

60 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 99. Participation in the chapels perhaps assisted with the 'attainment of personal and collective respect and dignity', which Neville Kirk contends were features of working-class respectability in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as providing a 'practical safeguard against recurrent threats of insecurity, poverty and unemployment'. Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British society, 1850–1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). See also Peter Bailey, 'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up? Towards a role analysis of mid-Victorian working class respectability', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 12 (1977), pp. 337–8. For an overview of the debates about working-class respectability among historians, see Neville Kirk, *The Growth of Working Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 174–82.

61 *Lion*, 3 April 1829.

62 See, for example, the report to the Home Office that recorded Carlile imploring his Rotunda audience of the need for respectability and for 'orderly behaviour'. Home Office Papers, HO40/20–25, n.d., ff. 238, 250.

63 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

64 It appears that Taylor played the role of the respectable gent convincingly, for after his release from prison in 1833 he left his Rotunda companion, Miss Richards (who sued him for breach of promise), to marry an older, wealthy and 'respectable' woman. Iain McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England: Infidel preachers and radical theatricality in 1830s London', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (eds), *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 60.

65 See Chapter 6, Note 106.

here with the demands of radical prisoners for a separate space to that occupied by ordinary felons—an attempt to define one’s identity according to a spatial hierarchy within a venue.

Carlile hoped the Rotunda would be viewed as a finishing school of moral and intellectual culture, and claimed that infidelism created a body of sober men, ‘much respected in their neighbourhoods’.⁶⁶ Sharples agreed with the sobering effect of infidelism on members of the working class and refuted allegations that the Rotunda was breeding ‘thieves and prostitutes’:

We do not wish to deal with criminals here. I am sure we do not make any; for they who come here, men, women, or children, will have their minds so exercised on matters of useful knowledge, that six months acquaintance with us shall make them sober, rational, honest, and generous, in all their dealings with society. We have no consideration for miserable sinners.⁶⁷

Even the poorer patrons attending the half-price or gratuitous lectures were urged to cultivate the manners and appearance of respectability for the sake of their standing in the community and the infidel cause.⁶⁸ By developing a respectable venue, Taylor and Carlile considered that Rotunda radicals could move one step closer to the general acceptance of infidelism as a serious alternative to established religion.

Preoccupations with respectability began to influence both the working and the middling classes in the pre-Victorian period. Crucially, as Clark notes, the definitions of respectability were not rigid; they shifted between the plebeian and middle classes, and over time, much as the demarcations between classes themselves remained fluid.⁶⁹ Hall’s reports attest to the presence of working-class women and men in Rotunda audiences, but was it only plebeian women who were attracted to the diverse range of offerings at the venue? We know that Carlile had female supporters in the upper ranks of society—notably, the wealthy Chichester sisters from Ebworth Park, Gloucestershire, who supported him financially for many years, but it is unknown whether they ever attended Rotunda performances.⁷⁰ Hall’s reports suggest that women from different ranks were attracted to the venue, and he categorised the women of the Rotunda

66 *Prompter*, 2 July 1831.

67 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

68 Home Office Papers, HO40/20–25, n.d., ff. 238, 250.

69 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 43, 54.

70 Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 252–4. Campbell reports that the ladies were ‘advanced thinkers’ and great friends to both Richard and Eliza. On the Chichester sisters, see Jackie Latham, *Search for A New Eden, James Pierrepont Greaves (1777–1842): The sacred socialist and his followers* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), pp. 89–149, especially pp. 121–38; idem, ‘The Political and the Personal: The radicalism of Sophia Chichester and Georgiana Fletcher Welch’, *Women’s History Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1999), pp. 469–87.

as either 'respectable' or 'decent' and noted them in the various levels of the Rotunda's spatial hierarchy—in both the 'pit and boxes' and in the gallery seats.⁷¹ It is difficult to ascertain precisely on what basis Hall considered one woman 'respectable', while another 'decent', but we can surmise that Hall's differentiation between the two descriptors was based on accoutrements. For men, rank could be determined not only by dress, but by occupation. In terms of the wider issue of class, Hall reported during 1830–31 that Taylor's audience consisted overwhelmingly of the 'middling sort' of ambitious artisans, small shopkeepers and lesser professionals. He also witnessed many 'gentlemen' donating considerable sums of money to Carlile's and Taylor's prison funds. Carlile also boasted about the select company attracted to Rotunda performances. They included, he stated, 'men and women most respectably-attired, officers in the army and navy, physicians, surgeons, astronomers, theologians, critics, [and] mechanics'.⁷²

Carlile also identified a high number of respectable, 'well dressed' women who attended Taylor's lectures, believing they were attracted by his suave manners and good looks. It has been argued that they belonged to the same category of intellectually frustrated women as Eliza Sharples—those beginning to demand the right to intellectual inquiry and fulfilment and questioning their condemnation to a life of marriage and domesticity.⁷³ This position is supported by the strong showing of women at Sharples' lectures. Few details are known of these women, though Abel Hall observed that most were 'the same as attended in Taylor's time'.⁷⁴ He observed that even at Sharples' gratuitous and half-price evenings, she attracted a wide variety of interest from within different ranks of society. On one Friday evening in early March 1832, he recorded people of 'all ranks among whom was 59 Females, several youths and 11 children under 12 years'.⁷⁵ These observations caution against assuming that the availability of cheap or free seats meant the attendance solely of poorer members of the working class or led to a class-based demarcation within the venue. As Richard Altick notes, curiosity could be a great leveller and led to the 'cultural interplay'

71 See, for example, Home Office Papers, HO64/11, n.d., fo. 202.

72 *Prompter*, 12 November 1830. Carlile's claims are not without foundation. In 1834, the Rotunda coffee-shop proprietor, Georgiana Richards, filed for damages against Reverend Robert Taylor for breach of promise of marriage. During the trial, Joshua Fletcher, a surgeon from London Road, was called as a witness, acknowledging he had been to lectures at the Rotunda at least once a month and had seen *Swing!* performed. See *The Times*, 28 November 1834. In another report, a Mr Easley, 'retired stockbroker', advised that he and a friend, 'an indigo broker', attended a political lecture by Cobbett. See *The Times*, 1 July 1833.

73 Iain McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, no. 38 (1980), pp. 12–13.

74 Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 27 February 1832, fo. 47.

75 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, May 1831, fo. 302; HO64/12, 3 March 1832, fo. 52. See also the account of Dan Chatterton, the veteran communist and atheist of the late nineteenth century, who recalled attending the Rotunda lectures of Carlile and Taylor with his father. Andrew Whitehead, 'Dan Chatterton and his "Atheistic Communistic Scorchers"', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1988), pp. 83–99.

between the classes that was not always evident in other public institutions.⁷⁶ It is likely that the lack of cultural conventions at play in the Rotunda—a new type of space in the public sphere—as well as its multiple layers of identity provided a safer place for middling-class women to commit their patronage compared with other sites with more established (and masculine) conventions of political exchange and discussion.

Even though the modes of behaviour might still have been in the process of negotiation early in the Rotunda's radical life, we cannot ignore the fact that despite the concern and pretensions of respectability, visitors to the Rotunda were entering what was regarded as the most notorious den of blasphemy and sedition in London. Rotunda radicals continued to serve out some of the most blasphemous humour available in the city. For all their respectability, Rotunda audiences were subjected to, and apparently revelled in, outspoken and fierce denunciations of the establishment. The bawdy, ribald and often profane subculture of countertheatre provided radicals with an ideal medium through which to voice their message of dissent. Audiences participated in spectacles of outrageous sacrilege by Taylor, Ward and Sharples, and listened to assertions of female equality and sexual freedom—issues of great contention among middling and plebeian communities as the emerging 'respectable' image of women as confined to the domestic sphere and as sexless until marriage began to take hold.⁷⁷

To find such outwardly respectable Englishmen and women at a venue that became renowned for its decidedly unrespectable modes and practices provided a dilemma for early scholars of the radical movement who relied on traditional historical models and theories of nineteenth-century working-class respectability. Many of these were drawn from the observations of contemporaries (among them Francis Place and later Henry Mayhew), who identified two distinct and exclusive constituencies in working-class life, imposing the dichotomy between 'respectables' and 'roughs'. These masculine definitions of working-class respectability, or otherwise, structured many early accounts of nineteenth-century radicalism.

Rather than viewing respectability as a fixed absolute, historians such as Peter Bailey and Neville Kirk examine it as a dynamic phenomenon. Kirk considers that the working classes could employ respectability for family or individual status, a 'mark of distinction and respect at work, a source of class pride, or a contradictory jumble of all of these significations and more besides'.⁷⁸ Bailey charged E. P. Thompson with presenting values such as moral sobriety,

76 Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), p. 3.

77 For scholarship that discusses Carlile's philosophies regarding sex and birth control, see Chapter 3, Note 90.

78 Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class*, pp. 112–13.

economic thrift, temperance and self-help, self-improvement and self-sufficiency as characteristic cultural absolutes.⁷⁹ Rather, Bailey considered that respectability constituted a more fluid set of roles, which could be deployed by working people in occasional ways or in different settings.⁸⁰ Seemingly contradictory modes of behaviour could therefore exist within a single working-class lifestyle. Although Bailey did not consider whether this fluidity was experienced equally by men and women, the case of the Rotunda and other studies of working-class women suggest that it also applied to women.

The Rotunda itself exhibited signs of the dualistic character of working-class respectability. In the same way that the audience could move in and out of respectable roles, so too Rotunda performers oscillated between blasphemous harangues denying the validity of Christianity and sermons espousing the benefits of self-improvement and self-help. Taylor's congregation might be instructed in blasphemy one week and on the 'laudableness of rational ambition' the next. His *Moral Catechisms* and *First to Thirteenth Moral Discourses* advocated virtues such as 'moral fortitude', 'government of temper', 'industry' and 'temperance', as well as free love and family planning.⁸¹ Bailey's thesis helps explain how the decidedly unrespectable modes and forums of countertheatre were continuing to thrive as forms of working-class dissent in an age in which the values of respectability were beginning to permeate radical culture. While the trappings of respectability were readily apparent in working-class culture, it appears that they did not necessarily involve the displacement of older conformities. This ability of working people to combine respectable and unrespectable modes and pleasures without jeopardising their social standing or sense of inner consistency provides another explanation for the popularity of the Rotunda in working-class culture, particularly for women.

Although we cannot know for certain whether Abel Hall's description of 'respectable' women signalled participation by the ranks of middle-class women or 'respectable' working women, the earlier accounts of audience reaction to William Hazlitt's lectures at the Surrey Institution detailed in Chapter 6 suggest that middling-class respectability could be deployed in similarly calculated ways. Despite Catherine's Hall's general assessment that middle-class women were increasingly marginalised and excluded from the political public, the examples of the Surrey and the Rotunda suggest that at venues

79 Bailey, 'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?', pp. 337–8.

80 Bailey considers that respectability was assumed as a role or a cluster of roles that were practised in certain situations rather than being a permanent code of values. As such, many men registered in the 'mental dossiers' of middle-class observers could have been known as such on the evidence of a single role performance. In a way, the role-playing of respectability was a new form and style of countertheatre. *Ibid.*, pp. 336–53.

81 McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 190.

traditionally outside those associated with political discussion and exchange, women of rank continued to defy this marginalisation by supporting those more gender-inclusive venues. Anna Clark and Dorothy Thompson regard postwar radicalism as the pinnacle of female participation in radical politics that the Chartists helped to destroy. In this respect, regardless of the rank of the women who were attracted to the venue, the Rotunda can be viewed as either the last gasp of gender inclusiveness in radical culture or a milieu well ahead of its time.

The enthusiasm with which Sharples promoted herself as a respectable woman was calculated partly to pre-empt the accusations of immorality and indecency from publicly engaging in the political arena. For radical women such as Sharples, Barbara Taylor reminds us, 'egalitarian principles tugged in one direction while the tightening claims of respectable femininity pulled in another'.⁸² Inevitably, the accusations against Sharples of unrespectable behaviour were soon forthcoming. One correspondent's report to *The Times* considered her a

female who exhibits herself in so unfeminine a manner...so utterly illiterate is the poor creature, that she cannot yet read what is set down for her with any degree of intelligibility...with her ignorance and unconquerable brogue...her 'lecturing'...is almost as ludicrous as it is painful to witness.⁸³

Another report contemptuously described her as the 'Pythoness of the temple', branding her message as 'rubbish' and suggesting retirement from the public sphere back to a domestic role, where, they supposed, she would more fittingly be occupied as a 'housemaid, or servant of all work, in some decent family...She is strong enough for either, and neither of them are so laborious as the treadmill'.⁸⁴ Unfeminine, illiterate, working class, provincial and destined for criminality—such belittling and demoralising comments were designed to strip any 'pretence' of respectability Sharples might have hoped her accoutrements would have afforded her.

Rotunda orators seized on such vicious attacks. Quick to defend Sharples against such accusations, John Gale Jones sought the approbation of the Rotunda audience in support of Sharples:

⁸² Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 221.

⁸³ *The Times*, 14 February 1832.

⁸⁴ *The Times*, 30 January 1832.

He (Mr. Jones) had even been told that the Lady had delivered an indecent lecture (Shame). He would put it to the audience if such were the case (Cries of No). Was there one present that could countenance such an assertion (Loud cries of No).⁸⁵

Members of the audience also censured *The Times* on their reporting of Sharples' lectures. Though the correspondence remained unpublished, they prompted *The Times* editor to send along his own reporter to the 'temple of infidelity' to 'satisfy ourselves of which of the conflicting statements of our correspondents was true'.⁸⁶ Although the subsequent report acknowledged that previous correspondents' claims that Sharples resembled a 'servant' or 'country actress' (substitute prostitute) were unjust, *The Times* continued to focus on her appearance, finding her 'figure is good, her appearance and manner rather genteel than otherwise, and she is much more like a pretty woman than an ugly one'. The content of her lecture drew more scorn: it was the 'sorriest rubbish' they had ever read or heard, 'an ill-conceived attack upon the Christian faith'. They dwelt on her Lancashire accent, attacking her pronunciation—"hanimal" "for animal", "hignorance for ignorance".⁸⁷ Like Susannah Wright in the decade before, Sharples quickly discovered that taking her radicalism into the public sphere was a risky endeavour for a woman.

The cultivation of respectability at the Rotunda goes some way to explaining why, unlike the case of Susannah Wright's female supporters, the female members of the Rotunda audience appear to have evaded public mention and, by default, public scorn. It was also ironically assisted by the masculinisation of the public Rotunda identity in the print culture of the period surveyed in the previous chapter. The focus on the revolutionary male obfuscated women's involvement in the Rotunda by shielding them from the public eye and, thereby, from public censure.

If we turn to the historical record, we can see that Rotunda women faced other, more subtle, albeit less public, means of chastisement. During 1831, Robert Taylor frequently issued challenges to clergymen to debate the evidence of the Christian religion. Though few were foolish enough to accept his challenge, one ex-Canadian missionary, Reverend Osgood, did debate him on several occasions. It was during these debates that Taylor's theatricality, wit and brilliant oratorical skills particularly shone. As Hall noted, Osgood

85 *Isis*, 17 March 1832.

86 *The Times*, 18 February 1832.

87 *Ibid.*

was too old and inept to match wits with the 'Devil's Chaplain', and Taylor not only won all the debates convincingly, but Osgood was also made the 'subject of derision' by attendants.⁸⁸

Though Taylor clearly trumped Osgood in the debates, the latter's intervention can be seen as an attempt to cleanse the infidel space on several levels. He was accompanied to the Rotunda by an entourage of genteel church ladies whose role was to place Bible passages and other reading material on the seats to enlighten the Rotunda heathens.⁸⁹ Though they listened intently to Osgood's presentation, they avoided any theological contamination by promptly leaving the theatre before Taylor began his rebuttal.⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Osgood chose to take only genteel, respectable female supporters. Such intervention is reminiscent of the Quaker Ladies entering the seething underworld of Newgate prison to redeem and reclaim the female prisoners. Like the 'unfortunate wretches' of Newgate who were faced with the morality, piety and respectability of the Visiting Ladies Committee, Rotunda women were also confronted with an alternative model of middling-class feminine moral virtue.

Circulation of rumours that a brothel was operating on the premises might also have acted to dissuade female patrons wishing to be seen to be adhering to the codes of respectability. Abel Hall reported to the Home Office the concern of some of his Rotunda associates that the coffee shop and sleeping apartments were being used for illicit purposes after Carlile engaged the services of Miss Georgiana Richards and her 'maid-servant', Margaret Beauchamp, to operate the coffee shop. Hall reported the 'very loose appearance' of the two women, suggesting that their involvement at the Rotunda extended beyond the supply of refreshments. Hall reported that, where once the NUWC radicals would retire to the coffee shop after lectures for refreshments, this was no longer the case with the new coffee-shop proprietors. 'The opinion formed of them', he wrote after observing that they had hung red curtains over the glass doors and windows, was that 'they either do or intend to keep it as a Brothel'.⁹¹

The association of female coffee-shop proprietors with prostitution was not altogether new in early nineteenth-century London. As historian Brian Cowan

88 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, n.d., fo. 191; HO64/11, n.d., fo. 200. Carlile invited such exchanges because he recognised the power of observation; what better way to defuse the 'superstitions' of Christianity than for his audiences to witness Taylor counter every assertion made by the Christian ministers and dismantle the Christian doctrine with his oratorical brilliance.

89 David Worrall, *Theatric Revolution: Drama, censorship and Romantic period subcultures, 1773–1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 356.

90 Osgood himself, however, was tainted with the Rotunda stain when he was mentioned in *The Times* as one of the Rotunda speakers. Defending his reputation in a letter to the newspaper, he likened his 12 visits to the building with the 'same view as a physician would visit a hospital', wishing that 'more ministers of the gospel' would follow his lead and 'give medicine to the sick instead of employing most of their time in giving cordials to those who are in health'. *The Times*, 22 November 1830.

91 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, n.d., fo. 249.

shows, coffee-house proprietors had long been associated with a more illicit enterprise: 'The low social status of the coffee-house keeper only served to accentuate the coffee-woman's vulnerability to the solicitations of her customers.'⁹² Abel Hall's testimony could have been influenced both by the growing personal relationship between the coffee-shop proprietor and Robert Taylor at the Rotunda and by his increasing antagonism towards Carlile. In Hall's report to the Home Office, he expressed his doubt that, even if Carlile were aware of the operation, he would object to the brothel plan. Carlile's more marginal advocacies—such as the promotion of equality and freedom in sexual relations as a means of liberating women—often overshadowed many of his more political beliefs, not only among hostile radicals turned informants, but even among many in the plebeian radical community.⁹³

* * *

By the end of April 1832, facing deepening financial burden, Carlile and Sharples took what must have been the wrenching decision to end their tenure at the Rotunda. Although some of the responsibility for the demise of the Rotunda has been attributed to Sharples' lack of business acumen (particularly compared with Carlile's previous wife, Jane), in reality, the Rotunda had teetered on the brink of closure ever since the imprisonment of Taylor.⁹⁴ By February 1832, Sharples reported that no less than £1000 was needed to keep the venture open, to cover rent, taxes, lights, repairs, servants and to keep it in 'good order'.⁹⁵ If that mammoth task was not enough, she inherited an impossibly heavy debt of £300 amassed since the imprisonment of Taylor and Carlile.⁹⁶

Aside from these dire financial difficulties, it is clear that Sharples failed to capture the imagination of radical London. By the end of March 1832, she could not sustain the initial interest in her performances. Facing dwindling audiences of both men and women, she despaired that women of the radical community had not embraced her cause:

92 Brian Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the coffeehouse milieu in post-Restoration England', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 51 (2001), p. 147.

93 For the reception of Carlile's ideas on birth control, see Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 181–5; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex and contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 70–6; Angus McLaren, 'Contraception and the Working Class: The social ideology of the English birth control movement in its early years', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 18 (1976), pp. 238–45.

94 In private correspondence, Carlile declared that 'the present Mrs C is not a good business woman'. Richard Carlile to Thomas Turton, 3 January 1842, Carlile Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California (hereafter Carlile Papers).

95 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

96 *Ibid.*

I verily believe that I stand alone in this country, as a modern Eve, daring to pluck the fruit of this tree, and to give it to timid, sheepish man. I have received kindnesses and encouragements from a few ladies since my appearance in the metropolis, but how few!⁹⁷

The passage bears striking resemblance to the despair of Susannah Wright's supporters a decade earlier. Neither woman enjoyed sustained support from the women of the radical community. Helen Rogers considers that her failure resulted partly from her 'presentation as a goddess [which] was in tension with her democratic principles and with the collective and egalitarian spirit of contemporary reform movements'.⁹⁸ Perhaps Sharples' vision for a new social order for both working-class men and for women of all ranks was so outlandish that it smacked of the more bizarre prophecies of Joanna Southcott. As Anna Clark notes, 'the role of female prophetesses was anchored in visionary proclamations and in other-worldly spiritual context...their influence was evanescent and could not translate into female authority in the wider society'.⁹⁹

Given the parallels with Wright's experience of participation in the public sphere, Sharples' intimate connection with Carlile cannot be overlooked when assessing the reasons for her inability to forge a stronger leadership role in London radicalism. Where Wright embraced Carlile's most marginal of advocacies, including birth control and sexual freedom, Sharples embodied them, bearing him four children outside a legal marriage. As Clark notes, 'issues of morality had always divided plebeian society, with some rejecting libertinism in favor of religion'.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the expectation that she could have achieved a prominent place among leading male radicals is perhaps misplaced. In a period when few radicals of any rank advocated equal social or political rights for women, it is perhaps not surprising that Sharples' aim to be a 'leader of the people' would not come to fruition.

This is not to say, however, that her brief participation on the Rotunda stage did not produce a lasting legacy. Sharples helped create an enduring tradition of female participation on the site. Edward Royle first noted the 'tenuous continuities' of secularism at the Rotunda and the wider environs of South London in his book *Victorian Infidels*.¹⁰¹ The significance of the female dimension of this continuity, however, was overlooked. Evidence of the Rotunda's occupation after the departure of Carlile and Sharples is fragmentary, but it is possible to trace a succession of females involved at the site of 3 Blackfriars Road, not only as audience but as orators.¹⁰²

97 *Isis*, 31 March 1832.

98 Rogers, *Women and the People*, p. 64.

99 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 117.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

101 Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, p. 192.

102 For an account of Sharples' life post-1832, as well as her death amidst poverty in 1852, see Rogers, *Women and the People*, pp. 66–71.



Figure 8.2 Eliza Macauley, 1819.

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Shortly after the departure of Sharples, the Rotunda again came under female management with the arrival of Eliza Macauley, a former actress and Christian turned Owenite preacher (Figure 8.2).¹⁰³ In August 1832, Macauley established the Surrey and Southwark Equitable Exchange Bank on the model of Owen's own National Equitable Labour Exchange. The Exchange operated a system whereby workers deposited their goods, which were then valued by a committee according to the amount of labour invested in them.¹⁰⁴ An exchange note was then issued, allowing the member to purchase goods in return. Macauley's Exchange also allowed women to 'add their industry to that of their husbands' by issuing exchange vouchers for women's labour.¹⁰⁵ Drawing on the model of Carlile's

103 See Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 71. On Macauley, see also Frow and Frow, *Political Women*, pp. 83–92; *Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator*, May 1832; *The Crisis*, 7 July and 25 August 1832; *Isis*, 3 November 1832; *Poor Man's Guardian*, 11 January 1834; Eliza Macauley, *Autobiographical Memoir of Miss Macauley* (London: Charles Fox, 1834 and 1835); Frow and Frow, *Political Women*, pp. 82–92. As one of the first autobiographies by a working-class woman, Macauley's has come to the attention of scholars interested in women's life writing. See, for example, Jane Rendall, "'A Short Account of My Unprofitable Life': Autobiographies of working class women in Britain c.1775–1845", in Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson (eds), *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New essays on auto/biography* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 31–50.

104 Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 86.

105 See the pamphlet outlining the scheme: *Surrey and Southwark Equitable Exchange Bank, Commercial Reform Surrey and Southwark Institution (late the Rotunda) Equitable Exchange Bank and Bazaar, near the*

operation of the Rotunda, Macauley also used the premises to deliver lectures on gender equality, financial reform and the superstition of established churches. The lectures were conducted every Sunday and Wednesday evenings; Macauley defended her decision to lecture on a Sunday despite protestations in the local community determining that 'the true spirit of Christianity is to do good on the Sabbath'.¹⁰⁶ 'Ladies', she advertised, were 'admitted free'. She also promoted her plans to open a school of education and science for adults and an infant school in the Rotunda. Despite her efforts, the venture did not succeed and, in 1835, Macauley penned her memoirs from the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison.¹⁰⁷

The demise of Macauley's endeavour saw the Rotunda again return to an outlet of popular entertainment. In 1835, a magician advertising 'conjuring tricks' was said to be performing there.¹⁰⁸ In 1837, the *London Dispatch and People's Social Reformer* reported that a licence to operate the premises as a concert room had been rejected, though, by 1839, it was operating as the 'Surrey Grand Café and Musical Saloon', featuring billiard tables and tavern facilities.¹⁰⁹

Thereafter follows a gap in the historical record in terms of political use and female involvement in the Rotunda until the early 1840s. The period 1842–43 saw a brief return to the premises' heyday as a focal point for multifarious radical identities. There was again an Owenite connection with strong female presence among the new tenants. Harriet Martineau, radical-liberal, and another unnamed 'lady speaker' were reported lecturing at the Rotunda in November 1842.¹¹⁰ The Rotunda's identity as a gender-inclusive venue for knowledge and instruction was also rekindled with the opening of the Hall of Science—the term for an Owenite institution that provided classes to boys and girls without differentiation of subject matter based on gender (Figure 8.3).¹¹¹

bridge, Black-friars Road (London, 1832).

106 Ibid. Unlike Sharples, Macauley was not new to the lecturing scene when she appeared at the Rotunda. She was earlier involved in the Dissenting chapel run by Josiah Fitch. See Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London*, p. 260. During her career as an actress, Macauley also provided lectures for entertainment at the Crown and Anchor tavern on elocution, music, comedy and literature. See the broadsheet *Miss Macauley's Literary and Musical Regalia at the Crown and Anchor*, Acc. NS1069 B137 (38), City of Westminster Archives, London.

107 Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 71.

108 *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 17 January 1835.

109 *London Dispatch and People's Social Reformer*, 22 October 1837; *The Charter*, 3 February 1839.

110 *Morning Chronicle*, 2 November 1842, 18 November 1842; *The Times*, 2 November 1842, 17 November 1842.

111 See the prospectus of the South London Hall of Science in which they announced their aim to 'render the Institution an efficient and powerful instrument in forwarding the cause of Popular Reform'. They also announced the opening of the South London Rational School where boys and girls were to be instructed in 'all branches of knowledge', as they were 'fully convinced the present system of female education is lamentably defective'. See the 'Surrey Rotunda' collection, 1842, fo. 129, Wellcome Collection.



Figure 8.3 South London Rational School meeting in the Large Theatre of the Rotunda. This illustration provides a rare glimpse of the Large Theatre, which housed the performances of the Reverend Robert Taylor's play *Swing! Or who are the incendiaries?*, as well as meetings of the National Union of the Working Classes. The image is from the mid-1840s when the South London Rational School used the premises.

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In his private correspondence from July 1842, Carlile quipped that the 'Socialists' had taken over his Rotunda. 'The Social Thieves of Lambeth', he despaired, 'have possessed themselves of my Rotunda! How I envied the rogues of Sunday!'¹¹² Carlile found some solace that the Rotunda was again working for 'public purposes', noting that his friend George Holyoake, secretary to the Lambeth Branch of the Rational Society, was due to lecture there the following day. Holyoake wrote to Carlile thereafter, advising he had 'elicited some warm cheers for you this morning at the Rotunda'.¹¹³

In the tradition of the NUWC, the South London branch of Chartists also held meetings throughout 1843, with the 'largest gathering' since they 'obtained

112 Richard Carlile to Thomas Turton, 12 July 1842, Carlile Papers.

113 George Jacob Holyoake to Richard Carlile, 24 July 1824, reprinted in Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 258.

possession of the Rotunda' occurring in July that year.¹¹⁴ In late 1843, leading Chartist Bronterre O'Brien was reported to be lecturing there, and a soiree was held in his honour in the Rotunda's large theatre in January the following year.¹¹⁵ In January 1843, the *Examiner* reported a meeting to appeal for the Repeal of the Corn Laws, which attracted a gathering of some 1500 people.¹¹⁶

After reportedly spending 'several hundred pounds' on the premises, by 1844, Holyoake's branch of the Rationalists was also forced from the Rotunda for want of funds and due to the lack of a 'Resident Director' to manage and invigorate the site.¹¹⁷ Not wanting 'so important an arena for philosophical investigation' to be lost to the 'cause of philanthropy and reason', Holyoake proposed a subscription plan to allow the premises to be turned into a 'Philosophical Institute' for the magnificent Owenite lecturer Emma Martin.¹¹⁸ Holyoake reported that Martin, though 'not the advocate exclusively of any party', was 'precisely fitted for the management of the Rotunda, eminently calculated to adorn it by her talents, give it efficiency by her energy, and conduct it with that nice propriety which would merit for it great support'.¹¹⁹ Holyoake believed under her tutelage, the Rotunda would again realise a 'Reign of Reason'. Despite his reticence about the socialists and his Rotunda, Carlile might well have approved. As Barbara Taylor mused, the funeral sermon Martin penned upon learning of Carlile's death in 1843, which contained caustic attacks about the established clergy and Old Corruption, would have 'warmed his own heart'.¹²⁰ Though the subscription effort raised the required amount of £250, the landlord intervened in the plan, refusing to lease the building for 'atheistical purposes'.¹²¹ The power of the landlord to exclude Martin and other rationalist groups again points to the inextricable link between political power and property in the early nineteenth century and the continuing struggle for access to sites of assembly. It further highlights the significance of Carlile's success during 1830–32 in providing the radical movement with a unique space of their own.

The feminist continuities at the site into the 1840s also reveal that there were other, more inclusive outlets for women's political participation than the radical scholarship of the period suggests. The dominance of Chartism in these years,

114 See *Northern Star*, 22 October 1842, 29 October 1842, 4 March 1843, 15 July 1843, 29 July 1843, 30 September 1843.

115 *The Movement*, 30 December 1843.

116 *Examiner*, 21 January 1843.

117 *The Movement*, 3 February 1844, 20 April 1844.

118 On Emma Martin, see Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, especially pp. 68–73, 130–55; George Jacob Holyoake, *The Last Days of Mrs Emma Martin* (London, 1851); Frow and Frow, *Political Women*, pp. 83–5, 104–6, 110–15. Martin also published several tracts herself, including a work dedicated to Richard Carlile upon his death in 1843. See Emma Martin, *A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of Richard Carlile* (London, 1843).

119 *The Movement*, 3 February 1844; Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, pp. 192–3.

120 Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 142.

121 Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, pp. 192–3.

both in terms of its mass support and in the subsequent historiography, has led to an emphasis on the separation and segregation of women from the radical movement. As Barbara Taylor's study reminds us, the early Chartist years also saw a reinvigoration of the Owenite movement. The marginalisation of women in the Chartist movement has tended to overshadow the continuation of the liberating and inclusive traditions of Owenism and those from Carlile's legacy.

* * *

By way of conclusion, I wish to return to late 1831 (even before Sharples' entry onto the Rotunda stage) to show how the feminising of the space impacted on even the most masculine of the Rotunda identities: the NUWC. Despite some dissenting voices, the NUWC took an early position in respect to women's rights, firmly excluding women from their vision of political reform; 'why talk of restoring them to their social rights until we have first obtained our own?', questioned Henry Hetherington, ironically, a leading London advocate of Owenism.¹²² The prevailing mandate of the NUWC remained universal male suffrage and membership was open only to men. Yet on 29 October 1831, John Cleave, a leading NUWC figure, moved a resolution that wives of members be admitted to Rotunda meetings free of charge. In his supporting arguments for the resolution, Cleave considered that

the meetings would be ornamented by the women and [he] was satisfied that there would be more peace and happiness at home. He was aware that women in general were Tories (a laugh); but if they could be induced to attend there, they would shortly become republicans, (cheers) and they would then rear up the next generation not like the slaves of the present age. (Great cheering).¹²³

Though the resolution met with resounding cheers from the meeting and was passed unanimously, it is clear from Cleave's justification for their newfound inclusiveness that there would be a long way to go before the NUWC would see women as equal radical compatriots. It was surely no coincidence that the veiled concession occurred within the confines of the Rotunda where the NUWC witnessed firsthand the successful participation of women in other radical forums and which tempered the otherwise segregational tendencies of this most masculine of Rotunda affiliates.

Following the adoption of the resolution, it appears that some wives embraced the opportunity to participate in the Rotunda meetings. One Home Office report noted 32 wives of members were among the 500 attendees at a meeting in late

¹²² Quoted in Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 82. Taylor notes that Hetherington would soon alter these opinions and become a close friend and ally to leading Owenite proponent Emma Martin.

¹²³ *Poor Man's Guardian*, 29 October 1831.

November.¹²⁴ Just as women were beginning to find a seat alongside their husbands at NUWC meetings, however, in January 1832, Carlile evicted the NUWC to make way for Sharples. Though the NUWC continued to operate out of other meeting venues (and returned sporadically to the Rotunda), the timing appears critical for the participation of women. By mid-1832, women aligned with the NUWC began to form separate groups. The gender separation was institutionalised in the Female Reform Societies, and public notices of NUWC meetings no longer extended an invitation to women.¹²⁵ There is a certain irony that the radical leader most vocal in promoting women's rights and equal participation might have played even a small role in encouraging a separate model of organisation.

The gender relationships gleaned from this brief episode suggest that the anointing of the NUWC as a forerunner of the Chartists is merited in more ways than its approach to reform of the political system. The role ascribed for women as auxiliary radicals was to find increasingly strong favour in the Chartist years. My intention here is not to oversimplify what Anna Clark has shown to be the complex negotiation of gender roles throughout the nineteenth century. As she argues, the

working-class movement did not simply reject the 'feminine' in favor of the 'masculine' version of class and a middle-class notion of domesticity; rather, radicals struggled for decades to define masculinity and to solve a persistent sexual crisis.¹²⁶

This episode at the Rotunda highlights the tensions inherent in the gender struggle within early nineteenth-century radicalism. That an organisation as gender-defined as the NUWC could be tempted to include women testifies to the fact that other Rotunda radicals not only considered women as radical equals but also created a venue to accommodate their participation. This suggests further that the gender-inclusive public of the Rotunda deserves greater recognition in radical and feminist historiography for its key role in shaping the social and political aspirations of a generation of radical men and women.

124 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 23 November 1831, fo. 441.

125 See *Poor Man's Guardian*, 21 July 1832. Many meetings of the Female Society were held at William Benbow's Theobalds Road Institution—another important radical venue in this period.

126 Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 264.