Fallen women, as a class, are incapable of reasoning. They never stop to think, or never think rightly. They act solely upon impulse, and this to an extent it is sometimes frightful to behold. Even in ordinary matters, where common prudence would point out to others the most fitting course to follow, they act with a recklessness and want of circumspection which is most surprising. Much of this may be traced to a noble primitive weakness of their sex; more to unwholesome influences, and want of proper training in earlier life; still more, to the unrestrained license and self-indulgence practised during their wild and mad career. Hence they are ever swayed, at first, by the uppermost feeling, whatever it may be, on their minds. With the moral consciousness blunted also, or well-nigh extinct, and a sense of right and wrong so dim as hardly to reveal its presence, it is practically useless to attempt to influence them, at the outset, by consideration of a moral, or even of a merely prudential character. (MF 5: 32-33)

I

In April, 1860, when the Reverend W. Tuckniss (of Magdalen Hall, Oxford, Chaplain to the Society for the Rescue of Young Women and Children) began the publication of *The Magdalen’s Friend and Female Home's Intelligencer*, he opened the magazine with a declaration. The magazine, he wrote,

distinctly pledged itself, to promote every measure for the prevention, removal, or alleviation of the 'great social evil,' either by making known the various remedial channels and preventive associations, which lead to these
results, or by bringing into communication, through the medium of its pages, all who are labouring to advance the cause. It enters upon no preoccupied ground or beaten track, but in devoting its pages specially to these objects, it will pursue a course almost untrodden by other journals. (MF 1: 1-2).

As this declaration indicates, *The Magdalen’s Friend* was unique insofar as it was the only publication written by and published for those actively involved in reclamation work. Each issue of the magazine offered advice, testimonials, and information to those involved in what was called the "reclamation movement," which attempted to encourage prostitutes to leave their “lives of sin” and enter into a home where they would be retrained and, eventually, returned to "respectable" life (usually as a domestic servant). *The Magdalen’s Friend* ran for five years at the height of this "reclamation movement," and published issues from 1860 until 1864. And while, as Tuckniss indicates, other journals had from time to time (depending upon the degree to which the fallen woman was a hot-button political topic) published features about the fallen woman, his was the first (and to my knowledge the only) magazine to focus exclusively on the subject. Attention to *The Magdalen’s Friend*, then, potentially allows us access to descriptions of the fallen woman outside the province of fictionalized representations of the figure, which have historically been the focus of critical commentary on the fallen woman commentary.

In this brief space, I will address two specific features of *The Magdalen’s Friend*: first, the descriptions of the “midnight meetings,” where reclamation workers came into direct contact with large numbers of fallen women; second, I will discuss the descriptions
in the magazine that indicate a conflict about the status of the fallen woman—that is, that there are moments in the magazine where she seems to be considered a moral or religious figure and others where she is clearly a socioeconomic figure. And while I could certainly approach an explanation for this looseness in the Victorian conception of the fallen woman by pointing out, as Deborah Logan has, that the term “fallen woman” was incredibly broad (and included a seemingly endless range of female sexualities, including “legitimate” motherhood), I want to suggest here the possibility that *The Magdalen’s Friend* records for us a moment of transition in thinking about the fallen woman—even among those who were active in the reclamation movement.

II

From its beginning, the *Magdalen’s Friend* published reports of what it called “Midnight Missions,” at which fallen woman who had been approached by “missionaries” would be served a meal and hear a sermon on the wages of sin. Although the idea behind these meetings may seem simple enough—administer a bit of Christian charity to these women whose lives seemed an interminable hardship—the reasons behind them were more complex. Early institutions of reclamation (such as the Magdalen Hospital [easily the longest-lived institution of its kind]) had been based on a penal model of reclamation. Women entering it would have their hair cut, their names changed, and would endure what was widely regarded as a two-year period of hard labor in which they sewed and ran a laundry service. Understandably, these conditions kept many fallen women from entering these institutions.

A movement emerged in the 1840s, however, that attempted to distance itself
from the penal model of the Magdalen Hospital, and so rather than emphasize punishment as the means of effecting reclamation, they described themselves as modeled upon “Christian charity,” which often meant that the fallen woman’s reclamation was brought about through the volunteer work of good, middle-class, Christian volunteers. Many of these institutions employed “conventual model” as a means of structuring the interior dynamics of the institution. The problems inherent in this did not go unnoticed. In her 1865 jeremiad against the penitentiary and reformatory system, Felicia Skene suggests that

penitentiaries, established from the best motives, and conducted with the utmost self-denial, have . . . been productive of far more evil than good, by the unfortunate system of management, which has driven out those they should have saved to rush into deeper guilt, and to warn others to avoid, as they would a pest-house, the 'Homes,' which they have found, to use the actual words of many of them, 'worse than the jail.'

Skene goes on to describe the kinds of women who seek refuge in these institutions. They are, she claims,

Accustomed only to lives of the wildest indulgence, the grossest excess, the most lawless freedom,—governed solely by passion and impulse, without hope in the future, or memory in the past, to inspire them with a wish beyond the gratification of the present moment,—they come, in the fiery excitement of some passing fancy, to the Refuge, and are straightway subjected to a system of conventual rule and severe religious observance, which the best-disposed novice that ever sought to be trained as a nun
would find hard to bear! It seems to us as if nothing short of insanity could propose such a system to those poor reckless girls, dead to moral sense, and unconscious of their own degradation, when probably not one in a hundred of the most refined religious minds could long endure the strain, the weariness and depression it inevitably causes.

Skene’s diatribe (and she goes on to attack the daily structure of the penitentiary, as well) highlights the primary concern of the *Magdalen’s Friend* at these midnight meetings: they functioned as a kind of public relations effort designed to counter the assumption among fallen women and prostitutes that these new houses of reclamation operated under the penal model. While Skene is certainly correct in her complaint that the conventual model employed by many of these institutions (such as Highgate Penitentiary, where Christina Rossetti volunteered for a decade) often interfered with the institutions’ purpose, the fact remains that these new institutions were oftentimes not *as harsh* as the Magdalen, and so there were, apparently, widespread efforts underway to counter the pre-existing myths about the reclamation movement. It should be noted that despite their political differences, all forms of reclamation were counter to the much more traditional (by which I mean prior to the founding of the Magdalen Hospital) *public* response to female promiscuity, which was simply to treat such women as a pariah. Indeed, as one contributor to the *Magdalen’s Friend* put it, “in former days, little study appears to have been given as to the best mode of reforming the fallen, and still less discrimination displayed in the means of relief applied to their condition. They were universally regarded as persons who were to be treated as *criminals*, and, accordingly, into
penitentiaries were freely imported the penal character and degrading conditions of the 
*prison system*” (3: 27-28). The apparent choices facing fallen women seeking refuge and 
reclamation were, then, almost universally undesirable: enter an institution based on a 
penal model or enter one based on a conventual rule. Or stay on the streets.

**III**

These “midnight meetings” were the most highly visible effort to counter this 
imagery associated with the reclamation movement. In 1862, the *Magdalen’s Friend* 
printed a report from a meeting in Liverpool, and the author included some remarkable 
comments on the “quality” of women they received. The author expressed surprise at the 
“strange, mixed company” (2: 22) in the room, and makes specific note of the apparent 
presence of mainstream class distinctions even among the fallen: “how strikingly they 
arranged themselves according to several orders! They were left perfectly free in their 
choice of seats, and they defined their own positions silently and clearly. The bold, harsh, 
and defiant features were characteristic of the majority; a few of the slimly formed had the 
pensive air of drawing-room young ladies” (2: 22) This description is worth noting, since 
the thinking about the fallen women indicates that they are a class of women—or even a 
race—with specific distinguishing features: *bold, harsh, defiant*—the antithesis of 
Victorian womanhood. And while we might argue that these characteristics are also markers 
of moral failings, and thus recall the conception of the fallen woman as an exclusively moral 
figure, the fact remains that the terms cut both ways, and thus indicate, at the very least, that a 
blurring is taking place here.

As this description continues, the author exhibits an interest in the class-markers of 
the women in the room. “Girls,” he writes,

in all the pride of youth and beauty, tricked out in gay apparel, were there to
see the dark side of their career pictured in poor, broken-down, battered women, prematurely aged, worn with care and disease, and striving in vain to make their tattered, ragged clothing appear decent for the occasion. On some the stamp of vice had hardly set its mark, but almost every trace of womanly refinement seemed lost in many of the older portion of this company. (2: 22)

The description here is particularly interesting: the “gay apparel” of the young and beautiful contrasted with the “poor, broken-down, battered women [ashamed of] their tattered, ragged clothing.” Even more, the specific use of the word “career” to describe this narrative (and it is important to note that not all of these women would have been prostitutes) suggests that rather than viewing these women’s condition as the result of moral failings, that rather than viewing them as hedonistic, that rather than making claims about their iniquity, the author admits that their work in the sex trade is, in fact, a career for lower-class women with no other real options.

The 1851 census had proven publicly and scientifically what these women knew through experience: with a national demographic imbalance where women outnumbered men, on average, by 4%, there were simply not enough men for all the women to marry. The result was that an increasingly high number of women from both the lower classes (which had traditionally supplied the sex trade) and the middling classes were forced into work in the factories and as domestic servants—two trades where they were in danger of seduction. And even though earlier censuses (of 1825) had revealed that the demographic imbalance was roughly consistent with the later census of 1851, the primary impulse prior to mid-century was not reclamation, but punishment.

Interestingly, while the magazine at times represented the fallen woman as a socioeconomic figure (a victim of a vast array of socioeconomic forces), it also continued to publish pieces that described the fallen woman in almost exclusively moral terms. One commentator, for instance, complains about the delusions present among some workers in
these institutions of reclamation:

“All the fallen are not unfortunate—all are not deserving of that extreme sympathy which must be felt for those who have been made what they are by the heartlessness and villainy of others.” (2: 57).

This is one of the more remarkable admissions contained in The Magdalen’s Friend. Indeed, prior to the journal’s publication, statements about the occasional failures of the reclamation movement to were often limited either to the personal journals of activists or to sermons preached in these institutions. Even more, such statements were usually designed to serve a specific function. Because these institutions were based on a model of Christian charity, and because they relied upon and recruited middle-class women to perform the primary work among the fallen women, administrators sometimes found themselves in the difficult position of trying to appeal to these volunteer women’s sense sentimentality while simultaneously avoiding planting any delusions about the work itself. As the commentator I have just discussed makes clear, sometimes the work is a failure. Sometimes, the women are recalcitrant. Sometimes, despite their best efforts, reclamation is impossible.

We might note a later issue of the magazine, for instance, which commented on the 10th Annual Report of the Rescue Society by noting the ways that the actual situation differed from conventional wisdom. While the traditional narrative held that teenage girls, led by their vanity and pride, were complicit in (if not altogether responsible for) their own sexual improprieties, the records of the various Rescue Society painted a different picture:

The ages at which these majority were led astray is of itself a text on which volumes might be written. Commencing, not at the age of puberty as might be expected, but with absolute infancy, the ages of these children gradually acquire a fearful celebrity in the annals of seduction as they rise in an ascending scale from six to fifteen and sixteen (which are the most fatal of
ages), and then descend in an equal ratio, till the mature age of thirty places
the virtuous, it may be reasonably supposed, beyond reach of
contamination—or at least of ordinary deception.

“’Every year’s investigation,’ says the Report, ‘brings out the evil in more
hideous shape and dimensions.’ In the present year it has been found that
the majority of those claiming the Society’s protection were, when first
ruined, not more than sixteen years of age.” (4: 244)

The degree to which these “fallen women” were “led astray” at an age so young that there
was little question about their complicity suggests that the problem is less one of individual
moral failings as it is something more: something larger, something systematic, something
edemic. Indeed, the author’s own metaphor—of a nameless evil being brought slowly
into shape and scale—indicates a shift in the terminology and taxonomy of the reclamation
movement. Whereas in other magazines and newspapers, “Great Social Evil” had been
clearly defined as prostitution, here the evil is something markedly less distinct and far more
complex than had previously been thought. What I am suggesting is that the journal
records publicly a transformation in Victorian thinking about the fallen woman during
which she ceased to function primarily as an example of moral weakness (and thus as a
religious figure) and became, instead, a part of a class of women shaped by economic
hardship and poor education.
Works Cited

