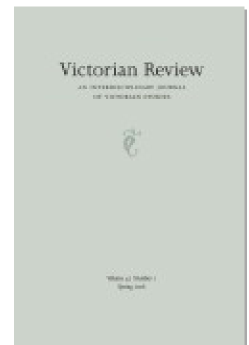
Convict Voices: Women, Class, and Writing about Prison in Nineteenth-Century England by Anne Schwan (review)



Janice Schroeder

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Fresh Strange Music, through its impressive close readings and its thorough grounding in contemporary discussions of prosody and poetics, makes a compelling contribution to the study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and of Victorian poetry more generally.

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Convict Voices: Women, Class, and Writing about Prison in Nineteenth-Century England

by Anne Schwan; pp. 304. Durham:
U of New Hampshire P, 2014. $68.00 paper.

In her 1912 prison diary from Holloway, the artist and suffragette Katie Gliddon documents an unnamed young prostitute calling to a friend from the confines of her cell in the night. Gliddon writes, "It is agony to us sometimes to look at the door and know that we cannot open it although we have the knowledge that it is for the sake of women like that little frightened one below that we are here" (qtd. in Schwan 175). Gliddon's brief recording of the cry of the oppressed woman encapsulates the themes of Anne Schwan's book, which explores the cross-class relationships and intersubjectivity between elite, print-literate women and the non-elite women who made up the majority of the female population in nineteenth-century English convict prisons. The voice and perspective of middle-class women—who appear in the book both as moral prison observers and as the criminal and contained—provided opportunities for women with less power to be heard, but often in a way that sentimentalized, sensationalized, and remarginalized them. Yet Gliddon's diary entry also gestures to solidarity between women by aligning the struggle for political representation with poor women's social existence. Acknowledging the general absence of non-elite women's voices from the historical record, Schwan is attentive to the risk of reducing textual representations to the containment-resistance dichotomy, arguing instead for the "complicated cultural work" (6) of the group of texts she investigates. One of the products of that cultural work, Schwan argues, was the emergence of an often-contradictory feminist consciousness.

The temporal and generic range of Schwan's investigation is expansive and, in my view, the book's greatest strength. In seven well-researched chapters, Schwan moves nimbly from early century execution broadsides and chapbooks to two mid-Victorian novels featuring working-class criminalized women, the memoir of convicted women in two high-profile late-century

cases (those of Susan Willis Fletcher and Florence Maybrick), and the prison writing of the suffrage movement. Schwan handles this diverse group of texts and writers with ease, bringing lesser-known texts and genres into conversation with canonical novels and, in a brief postscript, with the neo-Victorian fiction of Margaret Atwood and Sarah Waters. Schwan's works-cited list is an impressive document in and of itself—a gold mine of primary sources and contemporary literary and historical criticism.

While I feel that the readings of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) add little that is new to the criticism of these novels, I appreciate Schwan's methodology of reading fictionalized and historical subjects together under the umbrella of "convict voices." The strongest illustration of this is chapter 2, which investigates the prison narratives of popular novelist Frederick William Robinson, who published under the anonym "A Prison Matron." Schwan calls his group of 1860s texts on prison life an "early social history" for middle-class readers that combined titillating exposé with sober reformist writing, proto-feminist leanings with Christian paternalism, sympathetic identification with moral condemnation, and fact with fiction (41). Both widely popular and highly respected by the penal reform community, Robinson's two-volume *Female Life in Prison* (1862) and the fictional *Memoirs of Jane Cameron* (1863) are among the few texts to explore the prison from the perspective of female prison staff—matrons, guards, and others. The "complicated cultural work" Schwan claims for the texts she investigates in the book is best exemplified here, and this research will, I suspect, become an important bridge to further scholarship on these under-read texts. My seminar students were fascinated by Robinson, and Schwan's chapter on his writing was a godsend.

Schwan's book joins a growing body of what I might call post-panoptic investigations of the literary discourse of the Victorian prison, including Sean Grass's *The Self in the Cell* (2003), Jason Haslam's *Fitting Sentences* (2005), and the body of work on female criminality and Gothic and sensation fiction. Co-author of *How to Read Foucault's "Discipline and Punish"* (2011), Schwan wisely avoids reductive discussions of surveillance and disciplinarity that have come to seem almost mandatory in any discussion of the Victorian carceral imagination. I did, however, wonder whether the book's theoretical tool kit might have benefited from the critical vocabulary of subaltern studies, which is not evident here. While Schwan's approach to the texts is not an unfamiliar one, taking its cues from feminist retrieval methods and the recovery of "subjugated knowledges," it is also a welcome departure from the kinds of readings of Victorian penal culture—often grounded entirely in discussions of the middle-class novel—that see the presence or absence of marginalized voices as a kind of zero-sum game. *Convict Voices* makes a fresh contribution to a subject we thought we already knew well by bringing under-read texts to our attention, highlighting the voices of one of the most hidden populations

in Victorian culture, and demonstrating the shared history of the rise of the cellular prison and the emergence of feminist advocacy.

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Reading for Health: Medical Narratives and the Nineteenth-Century Novel
by Erika Wright; pp. 229; Athens:
Ohio UP, 2016. $79.95 cloth.

As early as 2005, Diane Price Herndl lamented the "disciplinary divide between the medical humanities and disability studies" that exists in spite of obvious overlaps between the two fields (593). Though it makes a valuable contribution to Victorian medical humanities, Erika Wright's *Reading for Health* reveals the continued lack of engagement between the two fields. As Wright acknowledges, her book focuses on the notion of health rather than disease or disability, unlike most corporeality-centred Victorian studies since the late twentieth century. Opening with an analysis of John Ruskin's "call for 'healthy literature'" in *Fiction, Fair and Foul* (1880–81; 4), *Reading for Health* analyzes health as a "persistent, if often overlooked" (15) thematic and formal defining feature of the nineteenth-century novel. Historicizing her approach through readings of early nineteenth-century medical texts that emphasize what she calls the "hygienic" model of health—that is, one of maintaining health and preventing disease rather than of curing and recovering from ill health—Wright traces narrative patterns of prevention that counter those of cure in nineteenth-century novels by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Moreover, *Reading for Health* shows us these narrative patterns with a clarity that makes their presence undeniable.

However, as someone working in disability studies, I could not help but notice a want of dialogue with disability scholarship in Wright's book (apart from its brief drawing on Maria Frawley's *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* for one chapter). The book would have benefited greatly from further attention to the discourse of disability studies, especially that which focuses on narrative. For example, I was surprised to find that *Reading for Health*'s discussion of the crisis and cure plot, "which imagines health as the end or beginning" (5) of narrative, made no mention of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, a major work that theorizes at length about this exact type of plot's use of disability. Additionally, when discussing readers' reluctance to appreciate the prevention narrative, explaining that