
CONVICT SERVANTS AND MIDDLE-CLASS MISTRESSES

Dorice Williams Elliott

In George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894), one of the few nineteenth-century English novels to focus on a domestic servant as protagonist, the title character and heroine loses her job and nearly loses her "character" several times when her middle-class mistresses discover that she has borne a child out of wedlock. Nineteenth-century employers of servants counted on the "character," a kind of certification by previous employers, to ensure that their servants were both chaste and honest. Without a "character," it was difficult, if not impossible for women to find employment in domestic service, however skilled they might be at domestic work. Historian Patty Seleski observes that reliance on the personal attributes certified by the servant's "character" became increasingly important in the nineteenth century as more and more middle-class English women became the employers of servants, usually women of lower class (162). Given the emphasis put on these personal attributes by English mistresses, it may seem somewhat surprising that in the early English colonies of New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land, virtually all female domestic servants in middle-class homes were convicted thieves and reputed whores. In fact, almost the only way to procure domestic servants was to have convicted felons "assigned" by the government, and, between the years of 1814 and 1843, almost all female convicts were in domestic service (Oxley 11). That formerly English middle-class women were willing to employ such women in their homes shows just how important it was to them to have servants.¹ And, unlike most English novels, the novels written about the convict period in Australia frequently portray domestic servants as protagonists.

Dorice Williams Elliott is associate professor and Chair in the English Department at the University of Kansas. Her publications include articles on servants and factory workers, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Hannah More, and Sarah Scott, as well as her book, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Virginia, 2002).

Although they were outnumbered six to one by transported male convicts, nearly 25,000 women were exiled to Australia between 1788 and 1853.² Descriptions by contemporary observers, as historian A. G. L. Shaw points out, presented a “singularly unattractive” picture of the female convicts (164). “No, no surely not! My God not more of those damned whores! Never have I known worse women!” exclaimed Lt. Ralph Clark of the First Fleet, on sighting one of the ships of the Second Fleet in 1790 (qtd. in Summers 267). Almost forty years later, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Transportation headed by Sir William Molesworth reported of female convicts that “Their general conduct, according to the testimony of every witness examined before Your Committee, is (to use the words of Sir E. Parry) ‘as bad as anything could well be;’ he could ‘hardly conceive anything worse’” (12). Such women, the report concludes, are “excessively ferocious,” “profligate,” “all of them, with scarcely an exception, drunken and abandoned prostitutes.”³

Twentieth-century feminist historians attempting to recuperate the female convicts were troubled by the numerous vituperative representations of these women by their contemporaries, sensing a disturbing difference between the representations and reality of their lives. Landmark studies by Anne Summers and Miriam Dixon in the 1970s argued that the women who were transported as criminals were trapped in the whore and prostitute stereotype; because of the conditions in the new colony, they were often forced into cohabiting with men for economic and safety reasons and then condemned for it. Portia Robinson’s 1988 *The Women of Botany Bay*, on the other hand, uncovers a great deal of evidence that counteracts the perception that most convict women were morally loose and corrupt. Instead, Robinson celebrates the diversity and the accomplishments of female convicts and argues that Australia was a land of opportunity that the majority took advantage of, eventually achieving economic success and respectability. More recently, Joy Damousi reads the “damned whore” stereotype as a representation of men’s anxieties about social chaos and disorder and the women’s sometimes public expression of desire as a form of resistance against the system that defined them only as projections of male sexuality and fears. While the accounts of these feminist historians have done valuable work in combating the “damned whore” stereotype, even they have accepted it as the prevailing view of convict women.⁴

Curiously, however, nineteenth-century women writers who depicted female convicts did not characterize them as depraved and profligate whores, but rather as docile, repentant, and redeemable domestic women victimized by “the System.”⁵ If, as Damousi

suggests, the stereotypical representation was a projection by male commentators designed to relieve their own social and sexual anxieties, it is not surprising that Australian women writers, who were also employers of convict servants, portray the convict women differently. By portraying convicts as redeemable, these women writers further their own interests by opening a space in a male-dominated system for middle-class women to serve as redemptive agents. Specifically, by means of their domestic influence as “angels in the house,” middle-class Australian employers of assigned convict servants can be portrayed as necessary and effective social agents. By contrast to male writers who imagine solving the problems of social disorder and chaos by demonizing and sexualizing convict women, women writers of convict fiction advocate a private feminized solution to a major public problem by de-sexualizing and domesticating their convicted sisters.

In addition, representing middle-class women as the protectors and reformers of convict women worked to cement middle-class women’s own position in the shifting system of social classification that characterized early Australia. Examining literary—and non-literary—representations of Australia, especially those written during the first half of the nineteenth century, shows that social class is not a set of stable categories, either inherited (in the old sense) or strictly economic (in a Marxist sense), but rather a constantly negotiated set of social relationships between shifting social groups.⁶ Classes, Pierre Bourdieu tells us, have to be *made*; they are not given in “social reality” (129).⁷ In Australia, a land colonized primarily by people, whether convicts, emigrants, or government officials, who were socially unsuccessful in England, a new social system that was based on, but not identical to the English one had to be renegotiated.⁸ Thus, the process of making classes is made visible in Australia. For a middle-class woman to use published fiction to define the role and place of servants in this new society was to actively participate in the struggle to exercise symbolic power in one of the most important realms of social relations.

Women writers who portrayed convict women as redeemable through the influence of their assigned mistresses necessarily aligned themselves with those who saw the primary purpose of transportation to be rehabilitation. The debate over transportation was, of course, embedded in a larger nineteenth-century controversy about the punishment of crime.⁹ Judges, magistrates, legislators, convict administrators, theorists, journalists, and philanthropists, as well as the general public, had strong but often conflicting opinions on the relative merits of various methods of punishment. To the advocates of

deterrence, it was important that transportation seem painful and severe; many thus condoned practices like chain-gangs, flogging, and unrelieved hard labor in Australian penal settlements run by the government. Newer theories of crime, however, saw the primary purpose of punishment as rehabilitation. From its early history, when convicts were transported to the American colonies, transportation had been perceived as a potential opportunity to reform criminals by supposedly removing them from temptation and giving them a new start in life. By the late eighteenth century, both humanitarians like John Howard and Elizabeth Fry and theorists like Jeremy Bentham were stressing the need to make punishment disciplinary and, at the same time, humane, and a number of penal experiments involving surveillance, solitude, and silence were proposed and attempted by the government throughout the nineteenth century, both within England and in Australia. Proponents of the assignment system stressed its rehabilitative potential, along with its economic utility in the developing colonies.

By the time that women writers began writing fiction about female convicts, however, assignment had already been abolished in Australia and was unlikely to be reinstated.¹⁰ Yet all of the nineteenth-century women convict fiction writers portray assignment as the best mode of reforming convicts. Advocating assignment even after it had been discontinued was a way for these writers to represent the woman's sphere as a space where important social work was accomplished.¹¹ The middle-class home was not a public institution, like the ones that Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, but accomplished the goals of surveillance and discipline even more effectively than "modern" institutions could. The discipline of the domestic sphere was accomplished through direct human influence; it involved the closest surveillance of the convicts' activities and behavior, but also taught moral principles and religion, instilled by instruction, example, and affection. The domestic sphere these writers depict is especially effective at reintegrating convict women into respectable society because the writers, and the convict mistresses they portray, assume that the female convicts share their values by virtue of being women. Far from being depraved and profligate, the convicts merely need to be returned to the path of virtue from which they have strayed by being restored to the kind of homes from which they have been banished by their supposed crimes. Class distinctions are thus on the one hand subsumed by gender differences, but on the other emphasized, in order to construct a publicly useful social role in the colony for middle-class women. Likewise, the sexuality of the women convicts is minimized, despite the fact that they

are usually “fallen women,” in order for the middle-class women to make claims based on their gender.

MARY VIDAL AND “THE CONVICT LAUNDRESS”

The earliest woman to write fiction portraying female convicts was Mary Therese Vidal. Married to an Anglican clergyman in poor health, she spent the years from 1840–1845 at Penrith in New South Wales. While there, she wrote and published a collection of tales entitled *Tales for the Bush*, which was issued in eight sixpenny parts and designed for a lower-class readership, specifically aimed at servants (Blain 1114). Once she returned to England, she wrote ten other works of fiction, including the novels *Cabramatta* and *Bengala*, which have Australian settings. *Tales for the Bush* was also published in England as *Tales from the Bush*, a distinction that I will comment on later. Vidal’s tales, written by a mistress for the benefit and entertainment of servants, are an active intervention in the process of defining social relations not only in Australia, but also in England. Vidal’s tales intervene in Australian—and, by extension, English—social relations in two important ways: one, she solidifies her own class status as a true gentlewoman in a contest with socially mobile upstarts who can be classified as vulgar and crass; and two, by arguing that middle-class women can make good servants out of convicts, she claims a role for women in the public sphere through their expertise in domestic management.

Vidal’s story “The Convict Laundress” was published in the 1852 edition of *Tales for the Bush*. The laundress is Grace Allen, an Irish woman convicted of receiving stolen goods in Belfast, transported to Australia, and assigned to the narrator/mistress. Grace is not a fallen woman; in fact, she exemplifies all the proper domestic qualities as a servant and wife, except that she ignores religion. When her husband and son are killed, however, she is inconsolable and drifts into an unintentional crime. In Australia, she becomes a model servant, hard-working and devoted to her master’s children as to her own, but she cannot conquer her grief and resorts to gin and opium to drown her sorrows. She ends up dying in an Australian insane asylum.

Although the overt message of “The Convict Laundress” is that servants—and lower-class people generally—should rely on religion, not alcohol, to help them cope with life’s inevitable problems, there are more subtle messages embedded in the tale. One is that servants should rely on the advice and direction of their mistresses if they want to be happy and successful. Grace’s first mistake, before she is transported, is to deceive her Irish mistress by meeting secretly with her

English sweetheart, and then to marry him against her mistress's advice. Even though her husband is devoted and steady and Grace is as happy as one could wish in her married life, the narrator seems to want us to believe that Grace would have been better off not to marry, but to keep her position as a trusted servant in the household of General Montgomery. The narrator tells us that as Grace listened to her handsome suitor, "her mistress's warning and advice fell away, like snow in sunshine. Grace had left the house, undecided what answer to give him; wishing to do right, but willing to be reasoned out of it" (6). Grace is not being seduced into an immoral act here, but sought in legitimate marriage by a man whose only known faults are that he is an Englishman and a Protestant and that "once, on some rejoicing, he had been the worse for liquor and got into an Orange row" (6). From that moment in the shrubbery when she accepts William's proposal, we are told, the "balance was struck. Heavily it weighed downwards, and its weight was the world." Grace's crime? "From that time [she] thought more of pleasing William Allen than her mistress whom she had served from a child, more than God!" (5). Pleasing her mistress is portrayed as the next thing, or virtually the same thing, as serving God.

Elizabeth Langland, in *Nobody's Angels*, points out how crucial middle-class women's role in managing servants was to establishing and maintaining their class position in England. "Domestic discourses and the bourgeois home," she writes, "served the representational function of justifying class arrangements by positing servants in the role of tutelary children to benevolent parents" (55). "The Convict Laundress," along with all of Vidal's other *Tales for the Bush*, certainly portrays the mistress and her servants in this tutelary relationship that justifies class arrangements and mystifies class antagonism. Setting her *Tales* in Australia, however, where such class arrangements are in the process of being renegotiated, gives them an additional function. In Australia, it was represented as quite possible for industrious servants of good character, even convict servants, to rise in the social scale to join the middle class and become themselves masters and mistresses of servants. In Australia, preaching the kind of domestic virtues that would make the lower classes into model servants might also lead to their expecting financial success and social mobility in the new colony. Many middle-class emigrants like the Vidals came to Australia, where stature was based as much on merit and character as on birth and education, in order to retrieve their own financial and social fortunes. Their own improved positions, however, depended on there being a supply of trustworthy and competent servants to support their status (Russell 167–69). If servants,

even convict servants, aspired to social and financial success and independence, where would a new supply of servants come from? How would social distinctions be maintained, if convicts and servants could become ladies and gentlemen? Hence, it is crucial that Vidal's servants do not aspire to rise socially, but instead attach themselves to benevolent mistresses and masters, whose good fortune they share—but do not compete with. The sign of Grace's success as servant in Australia is not that she marries and becomes independent—which historically most women in Australia could and did do—but that the family she serves loves her so much that they want to take her with them when they move to ever better situations, finally succeeding to the point that they can “go home” to England. Linked to them as part of “the family,” the only social mobility Grace achieves is tied to their rising success, since she herself is a necessary sign of that success.

Grace is a sign of her mistress's social success not only because she is living evidence that her mistress is wealthy enough to hire servants, but precisely because she is a loyal and devoted servant who has no desire to leave the family to become independent herself. Many newly rich people in Australia, including some former servants and convicts, could hire servants, but presumably only those with the qualities of real gentility could attach servants to their families with the kind of loyalty that Grace exemplifies. In English novels, it is also a mark of status as gentry to have servants who are so loyal to the family that their devotion supercedes any economic benefits they might accrue by leaving. Nellie Dean in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, and Dixon in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* are so identified with their employers that they choose to have no existence outside their service to the family. Nellie offers to use her life savings to support and serve her young mistress, Catherine Linton Heathcliff, in her misfortunes, while Dixon accepts demotion from lady's maid to maid-of-all-work to accompany Mrs. Hale to Milton-Northern in the family's reduced circumstances. Less genteel mistresses, like Mrs. Thornton and the other manufacturers' wives in *North and South*, have to deal with the “servant problem”—servants who do not do their work well, who leave unexpectedly, or show insubordination. In Australia, where there were many other options for working-class people, including women, finding and retaining good servants was especially a problem. Thus, the ability to inspire the kind of loyalty and devotion that Grace and the other servants display in Vidal's *Tales* is not only a marker of a woman's middle-class status generally, but of her difference from socially mobile upstarts who could be classified as vulgar and showy rather than genuinely genteel.

It is important, then, that Vidal's collection of tales about Australian servants promises more spiritual rewards than earthly ones, even for exemplary domesticity and devotion. This is especially noticeable in "The Convict Laundress," because most other convict narratives of the period do hold out the promise of social mobility for reformed convicts, whether overtly or only implicitly. In fact, there were fears in England that many in the lower classes were deliberately committing crimes so that they would be given passage to Australia at the government's expense. That Grace does not achieve worldly success in Australia, despite her exemplary service, is a warning to servants both in Australia and in England.

What ultimately separates Grace, the convict servant, from her mistress, is her inability to control her bodily desires, symbolized by her indulgence in the vices of gin and opium. In the passage that I quoted earlier, Grace approaches her lover intending to "do right," but is swayed by her desires once he is present. But Vidal doesn't choose to focus most of her attention on Grace's sexual desires, because that would make her difficult to rehabilitate as a model servant. Grace channels her sexual desires into marriage and motherhood, as she "should." Instead, Vidal shows Grace unable to control her bodily desires by having her succumb to the temptation of cordials prescribed by the doctor for her extreme grief, followed by whiskey, and then opium. Grace is "guarded," says the narrator, from this temptation by her Australian mistress, as long as they are isolated in the country, but her mistress's power to protect her is removed once they move to the suburbs of Sydney. Even though Grace's "sin" follows from her sense of sorrow at the loss of her family and degradation from her position as a convict, she is portrayed as unable to control her bodily longings, despite being "hard-working, and faithful, and gentle, and skilful in sickness and in hours of pain," as well as "attached [to the family] with that deep devotion which formed so strong a feature in her character" (14). Grace, concludes the mistress/narrator, was "truly a prey to strong passionate affections and keen sensibilities, which were unsanctified" (16).

This inability to control her desires is a key sign in the symbolic system of differences that makes Grace a servant and not a mistress, despite the relative upheaval of social class distinctions that characterized early Australian society. The mistress, of course, is able to regulate and control all of her desires; that guarantees not only her social position as a member of the gentrified middle class, but also gives her an important role in regulating social relations generally. In Australia, to be able to successfully regulate and reform convict servants was an implicit argument for power in the social sphere.

Again, whereas most convict narratives from the period emphasize the incompetence and brutality of convict overseers and administrators, narratives like Vidal's portray convicts as redeemable, but only under the social influence of the domestic sphere, an arena where women, of course, play the major role. Hence, by implication, the tale argues for women's superior skill at convict reform, a crucial social and political issue in Australia and in England.

The mistress/narrator is positioned as superior to the servant/protagonist not only because she can control her desires, however, but because she can speak publicly. Although most of Grace's story in "The Convict Laundress" takes place in Ireland, before she was known to the narrator, the entire story is narrated by the Australian mistress. Grace first appears in the story with the sound of a sob, and that inarticulate expression is almost the only time her voice is represented directly. Though we are to presume that all of the story, including its quoted dialogue, was told to the narrator by Grace, it is the narrator who arranges, shapes, and retells the story in such a way as to make the points she wishes to convey to the audience. The only time that Grace speaks directly in the text is when she says, "I never forget I'm a convict, ma'am" (14). Thus the mistress/narrator is the only one in a position to speak publicly for the convict, again underlining the importance of the middle-class woman in the dialogues about convict treatment that are part of the social sphere. The servant/convict is even more firmly enmeshed in the private domestic sphere than is her mistress, who can participate in public discourse as a writer of fiction.

I mentioned earlier that Vidal's first published fiction appeared in Australia under the title *Tales for the Bush*. For Australians, her *Tales* implicitly reinforce the class position of the mistress/narrator and distinguish her from other, less genteel women who might have claim to a middle-class status. "The Convict Laundress" particularly, because it deals with a convict servant, also argues for the importance of women and the domestic sphere in schemes for reforming convicts and turning them into functioning citizens of the new colonies. When they were published in England, however, the stories appeared under the title, *Tales from the Bush*. Although they are not adventure stories about bush life, as one might expect from the title, the tales do describe some details of Australian life and landscape, emphasizing its difference from England. Even more importantly, though, this voice *from* Australia, where English social class relations are being rewritten, reveals truths about English society itself. Because the *Tales* can be adapted for an English audience with the change of only one word in the title, their lessons can be as easily applied to English

readers. Even in England, the paternal relations between mistresses and servants that exchanged loyalty, gratitude, and obedience for protection, guidance, and stability, were waning and needed such tales to shore them up. Women of the established classes, especially the gentry, feared that newcomers to the middle class, women employing servants for the first time, increasingly viewed servant-employer relations in terms of a cash nexus, where work was exchanged for wages and servants and mistresses were natural adversaries. The *Tales from the Bush* were a warning to servants not to expect social mobility and financial success in Australia and to their mistresses that they needed to manage their servants with tact, care, and prudence if they were to preserve their own social influence.

FEMALE PRISON REFORMERS

Like Vidal's tale for servants, most of the women who advocated for and participated in prison reform efforts in the first half of the nineteenth century also presumed a clear distinction between middle-class reformers and lower-class prisoners. They also, however, emphasized that it was the prisoners' inherent, if suppressed, femininity—that is, their likeness to their middle-class benefactors—that gave the reformers their special ability to reach and rehabilitate their unfortunate criminal sisters.

The language of a description of the female section of Newgate Prison in London, the scene of the reforming efforts of the famous Quaker Elizabeth Fry and her Ladies' Committee, shows how these middle-class women's work depended on both their sameness and their difference from the convicts they were attempting to aid:

“I found that the ladies ruled by the law of kindness, written in their hearts, and this displayed in their actions. They spoke to the prisoners with affection mixed with prudence. These had long been rejected by all reputable society. It was long since they had heard the voice of real compassion, or seen the example of real virtue. They had steeled their minds against the terrors of punishment, but they were melted at the warning voice of those who felt for their sorrows, while they gently reprove their misdeeds; and that virtue which discovered itself in such amiable exertions for them, recommended itself to their imitation with double attraction.” (qtd. in Timpson 54)

The ladies “rule” and “reprove” the prisoners, stressing their authority and their difference. Their feminine “kindness, written in their

hearts,” however, leads the prisoners to imitation, demonstrating the essential sameness between the ladies and the prisoners. The prisoners’ hardened hearts are “melted,” revealing their inherent femininity, by the gentle but authoritative “warning voice” of the middle-class women.

Fry’s own writings always characterize women convicts as redeemable. For instance, in a letter to Sir Thomas Baym Martin on the subject of female convict ships, Fry claims that “there are many of whom it may be said, that they were driven into guilt, and only want the way to be made open, to return with joy into the paths of virtue” (448). This is a far cry from—and probably an explicit rebuttal of—the characterizations of female convicts as irretrievably profligate and depraved by many of her male contemporaries. In fact, the reports of Fry’s prison efforts with female prisoners frequently represent male officials as being amazed at the changes worked among the convicts in only a few visits by the women philanthropists. Fry’s brother-in-law, Mr. Buxton, describes a visit to Newgate by the Lord Mayor, the Sheriffs, and several of the Aldermen, many of whom had visited only a few months before. What they now saw, says Buxton, “without exaggeration, may be called a transformation” (qtd. in Timpson 47). The newfound good behavior of the prisoners “conspired to excite the astonishment and admiration of their visitors” (Timpson 47). Politically astute, Fry always insisted that she was not trying to make prison “too comfortable,” which would lessen its deterrent effect, but she steadfastly maintained that rehabilitation was the primary goal of incarceration and punishment and that “kindness does more in turning them from the error of their ways than harsh treatment” (448). Rehabilitation through kindness, of course, was a task seen as uniquely suited to middle-class women, whether philanthropists like Fry and/or mistresses of domestic servants.

Fry herself never visited Australia, but, since most of the female prisoners she worked with were eventually transported there, she and her co-workers were concerned about the treatment their protégés would receive once in the colony. She corresponded both with sympathetic women and with convict administrators there, advocating the same approach to dealing with female prisoners that she and her cohort had pioneered in English prisons. She also arranged for women she had trained to be sent out in female convict ships to work with the prisoners while at sea and after they arrived in Australia. The way in which the reformers assumed the femininity and hence reformability of the convicts is demonstrated in an incident that occurred when “Miss A-” visited the female factory at Parramatta “at the particular request of Mrs. Fry” (Timpson 144). Two women,

confined in the “crime class” of the factory for having murdered their assigned master, complained to Miss A of being “pointed out to every stranger who visited the Factory as *murderers*,” explaining that they were “in liquor” when they beat their master and didn’t intend to kill him, though he deserved it for his brutal treatment of them. Miss A- responded that she “could believe the *act* of murder to be one of awful passion, and not of premeditated crime. . . . I could scarcely think otherwise of a *woman*” (qtd. in Timpson 156-57, emphasis in original).

Fry outlined the principles by which she organized the Ladies’ Committee of Newgate and that she advised for the management of convict ships and female factories in Australia, as well as for private homes, in a letter to the chairman of the Prison Discipline Society: “it is hardly to be calculated upon, how much may be effected by kindness, instruction, classification, and employment” (qtd. in Timpson 57). By “classifications” Fry meant that prisoners should literally be divided into classes based on their behavior and the severity of their crimes, so that hardened offenders would not contaminate convicts who were more redeemable. Thus Fry recognized not only differences between middle-class ladies and convicts, but also among the convicts themselves, which again counters contemporary stereotypes of female convicts as “all of them, with scarcely an exception, drunken and abandoned prostitutes” (Molesworth 12). Seeing differences between convicts—in fact, setting up a class system among them—is key to the project of reform that middle-class women were to carry out, giving them authority in the social sphere that was outside and more public than the domestic sphere of the home. The more like middle-class women the convicts are, the more reformable or redeemable they are; yet because they are convicts, they can never actually become middle-class women. This paradox is at the heart not only of women’s prison reform efforts, but also of women’s fiction about female convicts.

CAROLINE LEAKEY’S *THE BROAD ARROW*

The most well-known work of convict fiction by a woman writer is Caroline Leakey’s novel *The Broad Arrow, Being Passages from the History of Maida Gwynnham, a “Lifer,”* published in London in 1859 under the pseudonym “Oliné Keese” and named for the government stamp on all clothing and equipment used by convicts. The novel was fairly popular, going through three editions and two reprints between 1860 and 1900, although only one of the subsequent editions was issued during Leakey’s lifetime and she herself

apparently thought of the novel as a failure (Rutherford 250; Mead 86). While, like Vidal's "The Convict Laundress," *The Broad Arrow* has as its protagonist a female convict, Leakey's novel complicates some of the assumptions made by Vidal and the female prison reformers, while reinforcing others. For starters, Leakey's Maida Gwynnham is not a servant or working-class woman, but begins life as a middle-class lady herself. Also, she is innocent of the crime of child-murder for which she is transported, although she is guilty of the lesser crime of forgery. A convict servant with the bearing, education, and breeding of a lady, Maida's position in the convict system is already complicated and anomalous, demonstrating that not all female convicts are alike or inherently different from their middle-class mistresses.

It is significant that although *The Broad Arrow* is one of the more well-known Australian convict novels, it does not follow the conventions of most male-authored convict fiction.¹² Works like Marcus Clarke's famous convict novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1872), usually dwell on the floggings, tortures, or inhumane physical conditions that prisoners had to endure. That *The Broad Arrow* does not focus primarily on brutal prison conditions is partly explained by the fact that, historically, women convicts were not flogged and their punishments tended not to be primarily physical. More importantly, however, Leakey emphasizes the humiliation, degradation, and mental torture Maida suffers as a convict over her bodily suffering in order to subvert the kind of discourse that turned prisoners into bodies. Mr. Evelyn, Maida's master and a former magistrate, makes this explicit. "It is a colonial assumption," explains Mr. Evelyn, "that prisoners have no feelings, and a Government assumption that they ought to have none, save those known as physical" (88). By insistently focusing on Maida's feelings, Leakey reclaims the convict for the domestic sphere, where emotions—the hallmark of domestic femininity—reign.

Leakey's version of the domestic sphere, however, is more complex than the one that Vidal portrays in "The Convict Laundress." In Vidal's tale, the home is the province of women; men, as husbands or fathers, are barely mentioned, while in *The Broad Arrow* Mr. Evelyn and his brother, the Reverend Mr. Herbert Evelyn, play a large role in the functioning of the family and the household. While not exactly a villain, Mrs. Evelyn, the putative mistress of the Lodge, is actually something of an anti-heroine. By contrast, the two masters rule the home as benevolent patriarchs who have chosen the home as a more effective arena for exercising their authority than the government and its corrupt institutions. Mr. Herbert still works for the

government as a prison chaplain, but Mr. Evelyn, though a former police magistrate, has resigned his government position and seems to have no other work outside the home. Mr. Evelyn exemplifies the reformative possibilities of assignment under a good master, even for male convicts “whose crimes were of the worst kind”:

Under such masters, it might be with them as with those four of Mr. Evelyn’s whose reformation, commenced temporarily at first to save punishment, continued by way of experiment to prove how it would answer in a remunerative point of view; good sense deciding that it might be profitable to themselves, they launched into reformation as they would into any other speculation whose end was self-aggrandizement. . . . Mr. Evelyn was very careful that the profit should be clear to the sight of these arch speculators, or, he well knew, accustomed as they were to the subtle calculations of knavery, they would not cast in their lot with honest men. (68–69)

Mr. Evelyn’s system for reforming convicts derives from his experience in the male realms of government and commerce. He understands the language—and effective deployment of—the profit motive and uses it effectively within the environment of the home. His system alone, however, is not enough to accomplish complete rehabilitation and redemption, which is the goal for convicts like Maida and her convict friends Lucy Grenlow and Robert Sanders. For them, the additional stimuli of sympathy and religious conversion are essential to their transformation from convicts into useful citizens of the new Australian colony. Separated from the contaminating influence of other prisoners, learning new and marketable skills, exposed to proper moral values and discipline, treated with courtesy but firmness, required to do their work well, and given responsibility only as they prove themselves capable of bearing it, the convict servants in the Evelyn household are trained like children to recognize and perform their duty. While Mr. Evelyn’s judicious management is highly praised in the novel, it is most of all his niece Emmeline’s beneficent influence that motivates reform in the convicts. Even at Port Arthur, one of the most dreaded penal settlements, Emmeline tames and civilizes even the most hardened criminals. Clearly, Leakey’s alternative to “Government’s” misguided attempts at reform is to take convicts out of institutions where possible and send them to model homes; and where it’s not possible, to model the institution itself on the home, a place where womanly values turn ruffians and rogues into obedient and grateful children. Thus,

women, too, as one would expect, play a crucial part in maintaining the domestic environment that is portrayed as the best possible space for the reform of convicts.

The home portrayed in *The Broad Arrow* offers three different models for women's role in the home. Mrs. Evelyn, the literal mistress of the Lodge, has exemplary domestic skills and knows how to keep her distinctly Australian household running smoothly and efficiently. She is hence able to teach her sometimes inept convict servants important new skills that will give them the ability to support themselves honestly once they have earned their freedom. She is, however, shown to be deficient in sympathy and influence. An Australian "native," or second-generation colonist, she has been corrupted by living all her life among convicts and, though she sees herself as a liberal and fair mistress, she fails to recognize their humanity and subscribes to the view that convicts even superior ones like Maida—have no feelings but physical ones. Her husband, the benevolent patriarch Mr. Evelyn, always bows to her wishes in domestic matters, which several times results in serious plot complications and suffering for Maida. Despite her evident skill in domestic management, Mrs. Evelyn is portrayed as a failure in the novel's domestic economy.

Mr. Herbert's saintly daughter Emmeline, on the other hand, is extremely sympathetic and exercises an extraordinary influence over everyone in the household or remotely connected to it, including the most hardened convicts at the Port Arthur penal settlement. Opal, the Evelyns' Chinese convict cook at Port Arthur, for instance, worships Emmeline, who, as he says is a "nice lady; me luffs her wely much; always got a smile for poor chaingang" (315). Despite the long-suffering efforts of Mr. Herbert Evelyn to reach Maida's heart and turn her to religion as a solace for her immense suffering, efforts which begin early in the novel even before Maida is transported, it is only Emmeline who finally touches Maida. But Emmeline is such an invalid that she performs no domestic work at all. Her crowning act of influence is to die a saintly death, which makes her a paragon of piety and submission, but not a model for the practical functioning of the domestic sphere.

Bridget D'Urban, however, unites the qualities of efficient home management and feminine sympathy, making her a fit prototype for the novel's female readers. Bridget, the niece of both Mr. Evelyn and Mr. Herbert, has recently arrived in Hobart to be a companion and nurse for the dying Emmeline. A lively, inquisitive, and sensitive young woman seeing Australia for the first time, Bridget serves as the eyes and ears of the English reader of *The Broad Arrow*. Much of the

narrative is focalized through her, and the narrator clearly expects the reader to share Bridget's value judgments of what she sees and experiences. Although Bridget is very young—not yet 20—and is quite naive not only about Australian customs but about human relations in general, her sympathy with all the convicts and her horror at the way they are treated is portrayed as a sign of her inherent femininity. Because Mrs. Evelyn is away from the Lodge on visits to her family for much of the novel, Bridget becomes the substitute mistress of the household. Although, because of her youth and inexperience, she bungles the management of the household at first and is taken advantage of, especially by the more conniving of the convict servants, she learns quickly and soon acquires the necessary domestic skills of cooking, managing servants, and supervising the household economy. Cementing her role as the ideal “angel in the house,” Bridget ends the novel by marrying a clergyman and setting up her own model household. Her marriage is not only a conventional novelistic happy ending, but a metaphor for the partnership between reform-minded men and domestic women who are fit not only to run homes but to act as active agents in the social sphere, in this case by reforming convict servants.

The representation not only of the right kind of mistress, but also of the model Australian home, is crucial to the social work of a novel like *The Broad Arrow* because under the system of convict assignment the home is the primary scene of convict administration. Leakey's novel teaches women readers how to use both their domestic skills and their feminine qualities in publicly useful work. It also, however, proposes a pattern for public institutions like the prison and the penal settlement. Much of the novel is concerned with documenting the brutality of the convict system in Australia. In fact, for many years Leakey's novel was valued primarily for its historical significance as a realistic depiction of corrupt and vicious convict administrators and colonial mismanagement (Hergenhan 32). Leakey condemns the government-administered penal system by explicitly linking the government with the devil: “the Broad Arrow . . . showed itself—symbolic alike of Government's claim on the body, and the Evil One's claim on the soul of the poor sinner” (94). If the “poor sinner” has any hope of reformation, in Leakey's view, it is through the combination of sympathy, religious influence, and humane treatment that is available in good middle-class homes or in institutions modeled on them. Within the ideal penal institution that Leakey imagines, the church fills structurally the position of the woman in the home; the governors provide firm but always fair and humane discipline, and the clergymen exercise influence over the feelings and souls of

the prisoners. The chief fault of the convict system, according to Leakey, is that it has stifled this feminine side of the properly functioning institution by thwarting the efforts of even the most devoted clergymen like Mr. Herbert Evelyn. Emasculating the clergyman by circumscribing his authority, the System simultaneously denies the necessity of the feminine in the important work of rehabilitating society's outcast children.

While *The Broad Arrow* implicitly argues for the indispensability of the feminine half of the domestic partnership in both the home and the institution, this feminine side is not always tied to gender. Mrs. Evelyn, as we have seen, fails in the crucial area of feeling sympathy for her convict servants. Even worse is the nurse to whom Maida is assigned when she goes to the convict hospital. Like the vile male convict constables Leakey portrays elsewhere in the novel, the nurse is unscrupulous and sadistic. Literally pouring salt into wounds and otherwise tormenting her already abject convict patients, the nurse is an apt example of the way the System tries to turn convicts into suffering bodies and suppress their human sympathies and proclivities. The nurse is so debased that her own evil has erupted into "a large excrescence which disfigured her nether lip," literally marking her own body (237). Like the male administrators of the System, both convict and free, the nurse has been corrupted by having too much power over other human beings: "The rod of office becomes a snake in her hand"—explains Leakey—"a snake whose malice *all* must feel, whose subtilty [sic] *all* must dread, and whose fascination none can withstand" (237, my emphasis). Whether convict officials like the nurse are corrupt because they already have bad characters or because the system makes them so is something of a chicken-or-egg dilemma in *The Broad Arrow*. Where the officials are themselves convicts, as in the case of the nurse, the answer is usually that they were vile characters to begin with, and their viciousness corrupts the system. But the danger of contamination that the convict system poses to both male and female characters is a theme that runs throughout the novel. Even the saintly Mr. Herbert claims that he would not be safe with the absolute power over other humans that convict administration confers: "I could not trust myself," he says. "I might commence with every good intention, but unrestricted power would soon make a despot of me" (260). If even Mr. Herbert could be corrupted by the convict system, then it is the institution itself that is vicious. It is a system that inflicts "a punishment of *revenge* and not of *reform*" (260, my emphasis) on its objects and necessarily corrupts its own agents. Power, whether the masculinized version exercised by Mr. Evelyn or the feminized one exemplified in

Mr. Herbert and the best of the women, is only safe when it is subject to constant surveillance—best effected in the home, but also necessary for all administrators as well as convicts in the institution.

The primary victim of the corrupted power of the System in *The Broad Arrow* is, of course, its female convict protagonist, Maida Gwynnham. Though some of the narrative is focalized through Bridget, the largest part of the story is experienced through the eyes of Maida. The narrative follows Maida through most of the vicissitudes of convict life, from the prison ship through assignment to both bad and good masters, to secondary punishment in the Cascades, or female factory, solitary confinement in the cells, and eventually death in the convict hospital.¹³ Because she is a gentlewoman by birth, Maida resembles not only the novel's presumed readers, but also the domestic women portrayed in the novel and historical reformers like Elizabeth Fry and the women on her Ladies' Committees. Maida, however, is different from these women she resembles because she is "fallen"—not only from her position as a virtuous woman, but from her rightful social position. Maida has all the qualities a nineteenth-century reader would expect from a middle-class heroine; she is beautiful, genteel, graceful, and well-educated, and, though her pride must be humbled by religious conversion in order to complete her reformation, it is also an ambiguously admirable quality marking her innate qualification as a "lady." Opal, the most "other" of all the characters in the novel, being both convict and Oriental, has an innate sense of what constitutes gentility; he can never be brought to understand that Maida is a convict and not a lady (while ironically he also continues to believe that Mrs. Evelyn is *not* a lady). Despite her evident good breeding and femininity, however, Maida has fallen and is now not only a convict, but a servant. Like other Victorian fallen women, Maida has come to this position because she gave in to her sexual desires for an unscrupulous seducer. Convicted in order to save her lover Norwell from judgment, she early displays both selfless and selfish desires. Throughout the course of the novel, however, Maida gradually learns to relinquish her own desires and become submissive and passive. As she does, she herself exercises influence over others, such as the child-convict Lucy Grenlow and Wilcox, her fellow patient in the convict hospital. She exhibits both her femininity and her reform, which become in essence synonymous, when she forgives and aids her old enemy Bob Pragg and finally renounces Norwell for the sake of his new wife, Mary Doveton. In the end, she becomes essentially bodiless as her now-redeemed soul leaves her body altogether in death. On the other hand, however, in terms of the narrative, Maida ends up as only a body, one which she herself

lays out for burial as she closes her own eyes and folds her arms in repose to thwart the attempt of the nurse to force her dying body into a desecrated state. When a repentant Norwell finally appears in Australia, it is Maida's dead body that haunts him and leads him to spend the rest of his life in an Australian asylum for the insane. But, however powerful Maida's dead body, it is now a body without desire, and Maida, though dead, is redeemed from both her convict and her servant state.

If Maida is redeemed, however, she is not really rehabilitated. She does not overcome her convict taint in order to resume her position as a lady in society. She rehabilitates Lucy, who not only survives but becomes successful, the wife of a "Ticket of Leave" man who himself employs a convict servant. Lucy, however, unlike Maida, is clearly from an English working-class background and therefore, in the scheme of the novel, poses no direct challenge to the class position of her Australian mistresses. She rises slightly in social class position, but she maintains her gratitude and deference to her "betters," including Maida herself—even when she is technically in a higher social position than Maida. As Elizabeth Fry believed, a class system is inherent and necessary, even within the ranks of the convicts. True ladies must not and cannot be contaminated by lower-class convicts, and working-class convicts must not aspire to middle-class gentility. *The Broad Arrow* complicates both common male representations of female convicts as all depraved and profligate and simpler portrayals by other women writers of middle-class mistresses reforming lower-class convicts. This more complex view of the nature of female convicts threatens to collapse the difference between them and middle-class women. Nonetheless, the novel ultimately maintains class difference and presents it as something so essential that even the stain of convictism cannot erase it. Thus, women's work with convicts, whether in institutional or home settings, not only provides socially useful work for women but also and necessarily reinforces their own class position.

ELIZA WINSTANLEY'S *FOR HER NATURAL LIFE*

There is one other significant nineteenth-century convict novel authored by a woman. With a title that is obviously reminiscent of Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), Eliza Winstanley's *For Her Natural Life* (1876) also deliberately focuses on the experience of a female convict, Margaret Aubert (her convict name is Margaret Nesbit). Like Leakey's Maida Gwynnham, Margaret is a gentlewoman by birth and is innocent of the crime of

child-murder, for which she is transported midway through the novel. Unlike Maida, Margaret is not even a fallen woman sexually; she is secretly married to the worthless Nesbit Aubert and only presumed to be fallen. Thus, Margaret does not really need to be reformed. Her conviction is a cruel mistake that indicts not only the System but also the English justice system.

For Her Natural Life does fulfill a tutelary function for its women readers, however, in some of the same ways that Leakey's novel and Vidal's earlier short story do. Margaret is assigned to a series of colonial mistresses, all but one of whom fail as proper managers of convict servants. Mrs. Bromley's mistake is that she listens to the gossip of a meddling woman who insinuates that her husband is attracted to Margaret, an accusation that represents common middle-class fears about having female servants in the home. Besides misreading Margaret's character in this case, Mrs. Bromley also errs by violating her domestic partnership with her husband. Concealing from him the reason for her dismissal of Margaret, she falsifies their relationship and makes it one based on sexual maneuvering instead of trust and mutual respect. Such a marriage does not live up to the ideal that Leakey and Winstanley both inherently promote, one that gives women an important social function beyond their strictly familial duties. Margaret's next mistress, Mrs. Prusser, is herself an admirable convict mistress, though without lofty ideas of reform, but her daughter Angelica becomes jealous of Margaret's beauty and musical talent and insists that she be dismissed. Angelica's envy is the sign of the precariousness of the border between convict servants and supposed ladies, and her selfish response marks her as unfeminine and not fit for social reform work. Only Glenthora Cathcart treats Margaret—and other convicts—with respect and humanity, and she earns Margaret's trust and devotion. Although Margaret is obliged to shatter Glenthora's dream of marrying Nesbit Aubert, Margaret's revelation that he is already her own husband saves Glenthora from a bigamous union and frees her to achieve a more ideal marriage.

The most obvious work of reform in *For Her Natural Life* is accomplished by Margaret herself. Like Maida in *The Broad Arrow*, she redeems another convict, a working-class woman named Joan Lopez, through her influence. Joan at first appears to be a thoroughly bad woman in the service of an evil seducer, one of the novel's several villains. However, her maternal instinct is first touched through Margaret's devotion to her baby. Joan is further tamed by Margaret's suffering and her sympathy while both are on board the convict transport ship. Finally, she enables Margaret to preserve her virtue by helping her to escape from yet another seducer, the evil convict

superintendent Dunmarra. Especially on board the ship, it is Margaret's difference from the other convicts that attracts Joan and reaches her own deeply buried feminine instincts. Thus, a class-based difference between convicts is stressed, as well as a difference in level of guilt and redeemability. But the shared femininity of the two women is what is important to the working-class convict's reform.

Even though Joan Lopez, like Lucy Grenlow in *The Broad Arrow*, is reformed through feminine influence, she is not allowed rehabilitation. In *For Her Natural Life*, there is ultimately no place for a female convict and both Joan and Margaret die in an effort to escape Dunmarra and the convict system he represents. For Winstanley, the contradiction between convictism and domesticity is too great to overcome, even when the convict is herself untainted. So, while she does try to instruct her readers in how to manage convict servants, she holds out no real hope to them of having the kind of publicly useful work that Leakey, Vidal, and Fry envision.

One reason that Winstanley's novel does not offer the same vision that earlier women writers used convict fiction to embody is that she wrote after transportation to Australia had been completely abolished. It was thus difficult to hold out middle-class women's role in convict reform work, at least in Australia, as a viable option for entering the social sphere. Nonetheless, her portrayal of female convict servants has in common with the earlier women convict writers a sympathetic and individuated depiction of the condemned women, unlike the stereotypical representations of convict women as profligate whores. Interestingly, the language used by convict officials and Parliamentary committees in the first half of the century is used in *For Her Natural Life* by the standard melodramatic villain, the evil Dunmarra.¹⁴ A comment by Dunmarra about the women convicts on the ship transporting them to Australia virtually acknowledges that his language is a caricature of traditional rhetoric about female convicts: "Yes," he says, "I'm a pretty fair judge of what I ought to do with these vixens, when any of them wax obstreperous *and so on*" (113, my emphasis). Having the conventionally melodramatic villain use this kind of rhetoric in such a patently inapplicable situation to describe the virtuous Margaret and her friend Joan demonstrates that by 1876 such assumptions about female convicts were ludicrous, largely, I would suggest, because of the writings of women like Fry, Leakey, and Vidal.

Obviously, the female convict posed a difficult problem for colonial society in Australia, not only because it was difficult to house, employ, and discipline them under the same system used for male convicts, but because it was problematic to represent women who

had strayed from the prescribed roles of the domestic sphere, rules that were considered essential not only for mistresses, but for female servants as well. Their very presence in Australia was a contradiction. If many male observers used the figure of the female convict to embody their own anxieties and sexual desires, as Damousi suggests, women writers also used their representations of convict women to accomplish their own ambitious desires. If convict women were *not* all “damned whores,” they could be recuperated by women writers to advocate middle-class women’s participation in penal reform and in public debate, important arenas in the developing social sphere. Thus, middle-class women’s domesticity, reinforced by the sameness of the femininity they shared with the convicts and the difference of class that allowed them to fill the position of reformer, could be turned to public uses. Their portrayals of female convict servants, then, sympathetic as they might be, should not be read as more authentic representations of the historical reality of convict women, but as rhetorically useful to the writers. Nonetheless, as Winstanley’s villain demonstrates, they at least accomplished the work of dispelling the most egregious of stereotypes about the convict women for some nineteenth-century readers. That even twentieth-century historians still believed such stereotypes, however, shows how seductive such projections could be.

NOTES

1. Although many artisans and retailers, who might be considered members of the working class, employed servants, it is a commonplace among nineteenth-century historians that the employment of domestic servants was the marker of the middle-class way of life. As Theresa M. McBride writes, “the employment of servants helped to define the distinctiveness of the middle class despite tremendous disparity in income levels and social status” in the nineteenth century (18). On the centrality of servants to the middle-class way of life, see also Langland (42), Crow (49), and C. Hall (28).
2. Transportation to Western Australia continued until 1868, but no women were transported to any Australian colony after 1853.
3. The Molesworth Report notoriously served a particular agenda, intending to prove the necessity of abolishing transportation by equating it with slavery, and its evidence and conclusions should not be taken as objective or unbiased (see Ritchie). However, the statements about female convicts cited in the report are typical of the official rhetoric of the period.

4. Not all historians have accepted the “damned whore” stereotype of female convicts, however. One notable exception is Sturma.
5. “The System” was the term usually employed by contemporaries to describe the legal system that condemned the criminals to transportation as well as the whole convict administration.
6. See Dimock and Gilmore (2–3) and J. Hall (21).
7. Thompson famously makes this point as well (9–11).
8. Russell comments on the complicated shifting relationships which middle-class colonists had to negotiate (6).
9. For extended description of the history of the transportation system see Robson, Shaw, Hirst, and Hughes, as well as Beattie and Radzinowicz and Hood.
10. Assignment of convicts to private masters ended in 1840. It was replaced by the “Probation System,” in which convicts were first incarcerated for a set period and then, on condition of good behavior, allowed to work for wages. The earliest woman writer of convict fiction discussed here, Mary Therese Vidal, published her tale “The Convict Laundress” in 1852.
11. Summers discusses the important social function of domestic women in nineteenth-century Australian society, the “God’s Police” of her title. However, in her reading, their socializing role was thrust on women by the force of “national needs” (292). She does not discuss the ways in which women, including women writers, actively participated in the social sphere, which was both public and private. For a discussion of women and the social sphere, see Riley and Elliott.
12. For a detailed account of the conventions of convict narratives, see Baker.
13. A female factory was a barracks for convicts waiting to be assigned, as well as a prison for repeat offenders.
14. Winstanley herself was a noted professional actress and her novel bears a strong resemblance to the melodramas that were popular on the Victorian stage.

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