RECONFIGURING THE VICTORIAN CONSERVATIVE WOMAN: FELICIA SKENE AND THE POWER OF CHARITY

by

KAREN ANNE SELESKY

BA, The University of Ottawa, 1996
MA, The University of Ottawa, 1997

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 2008

© Karen Anne Selesky, 2008
Abstract

This dissertation demonstrates why it is important to recover works by conservative Victorian women writers who, although not interested in the radicalism and subversion associated with the drive towards suffrage, were none the less interested in promoting social reform and constructing female agency within the social sphere. Specifically, it uses the life and writings of Felicia M. F. Skene (1821-1899) as a lens through which to examine how charity becomes a powerful tool for the conservative, religious woman writer to reform that conservativism, in the process shaping new identities for women. By committing herself and her characters’ lives to Christ’s example in the world (love, purity, justice, and self-sacrifice), Skene reveals how it is possible to look outside the self to the social body, enacting change in society and constructing a space for women’s action. In so doing, Skene promotes a moral vision of society that stresses the importance of personal, one-to-one intervention between the individual and society’s less fortunate members, and at the same time reconfigures conventional Victorian philanthropic theory and practice. Skene’s moral vision for society, which works to level some of the differences between its members, runs counter to dominant Victorian theories of social reform that move away from such personal connection to a theory that is systematic and bureaucratic; her writing continually returns to the efficacy of personal connection and the inadequacy of state intervention. Using a model of friendship, then, Skene and her heroines become “mother confessor” figures for the penitents and prisoners with whom they work. Furthermore, the agency modelled in Skene’s work in turn becomes a model for her readers to take into their lives. Writing about charitable concerns and philanthropic endeavours creates a community of readers, uniting them emotionally and personally, and helps to bring about moral transformation in the reader similar to that achieved both for the charitable recipient and for
society. Bringing Skene’s voice and writings into the twenty-first century, along with those of other conservative religious women writers, provides new insight into the condition of women and into the construction of society and social reform in the nineteenth century.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii

Table of Contents .......................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... v

Dedication ....................................................................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION Ending the “Forgetting”: Felicia Mary Frances Skene .......... 1
  I.1 Who was Felicia Skene? .................................................................. 2
  I.2 “Caring Power”: Theoretical Framework ....................................... 6
  I.3 Care and Caritas ........................................................................ 10

CHAPTER II “One of the least of these my brethren”: Women’s Agency and Sacrifice 20
  2.1 Christ’s Model – Minister and Worker ........................................ 25
  2.2 The Power of Self Sacrifice .......................................................... 48

CHAPTER III “Ye are My Friends”: Redefining Social Reform ................. 76
  3.1 Visitor as “Mother Confessor” ...................................................... 77
  3.2 An Instrument of Civilization ...................................................... 92

CHAPTER IV “To Do Good and To Communicate”: Using the Literary for Philanthropic Ends ............................................................ 117
  4.1 The Romance of Philanthropy – Literary Crafting ......................... 120
  4.2 The Mission of the Nineteenth Century – Literature as Philanthropy ... 149

CONCLUSION Beginning the Remembering: Publishing Felicia Skene in the Twenty-First Century ................................................................. 174

Works Cited .................................................................................................. 182

Appendix I Bibliography of Works by and about Felicia M. F. Skene .......... 193
Acknowledgements

A project like this dissertation, and graduate work more generally, is the product of many years’ work and the assistance and support of many people, whom I would like to take this opportunity to thank. To start at the beginning, I turn to my professors at the University of Ottawa—particularly Ina Ferris, Mary Arseneau, and David Staines—who were instrumental in my decision to pursue graduate studies following my BA. It was in Mary Arseneau’s “Women in Literature” class that I first read Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, to which I returned to find the genesis of this dissertation.

In my years at the University of British Columbia I have had the opportunity to work with many talented and supportive people: my exams committee—Pamela Dalziel, Miranda Burgess, Jonathan Wisenthal, Clare Grogan, and Andrew Busza; my course work professors who helped shape my thinking—Pamela Dalziel, Miranda Burgess, Jerry Wasserman, Ron Hatch, Siân Echard and Nick Hudson; and the graduate chairs who guided my progress—Susanna Egan, Janet Giltrow, and Mark Vessey. My work with Alex Dick, as a teaching assistant and research assistant, gave me the opportunity to hone my skills and a sounding board to develop ideas. The student colleagues with whom I discussed ideas, approaches, and the tribulations of graduate work—Sharon Alker, Kina Cavicchioli, Kate Willems, Lindsay McMaster, and Laurie McNeill—were key participants in this process.

Given the time and effort that goes into graduate studies, it is family and friends who see the day-to-day work: to my father Bryan Selesky I extend my love and thanks for his support and patience; Summer Pervez was instrumental in helping see me through the final stages of completing this dissertation, as were my friends Matthew Bailey and Adrea Johnson. My
students and colleagues at the University of the Fraser Valley also deserve recognition for the support they have given me.

Finally, I turn to my supervisory committee, Pamela Dalziel, Joy Dixon, Deanna Kreisel, and Sarah Williams; their guidance, direction, critique, and support have made me a better scholar and a better writer, and I sincerely thank them for the opportunities given me and recognize their contribution to the document that follows, in which any errors I am fully answerable for.
In loving memory of my mother,

Kathleen Marjorie Selesky:

You always believed this day would come;

I hold you in my heart and know you are here with me.
Introduction

**Ending the “Forgetting”: Felicia Mary Frances Skene**

By using the term *forgetting*, I am trying to convey a sense of loss and the possibility of recovery. ~ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing*

Felicia Mary Frances Skene (1821-1899) was a prolific essayist, novelist, and editor, as well as an indefatigable charity worker in Victorian Oxford. She corresponded regularly with Frances Power Cobbe, was a confidante of and editor for Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, advised Benjamin Jowett when he became Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, corresponded with Gladstone when she was writing *The Life of Alexander Lycurgus Archbishop of the Cyclades* (1876), stayed abreast of current political and social affairs through her connections with family and friends in Britain, France, and Greece, and wrote for some of the most prestigious publications of her day (including *Cornhill*, *Blackwood’s*, and *Fraser’s*). Andrew Lang approached her to write an autobiography (a request she refused), and John Murray published a biography three years after her death. The 1886 reprint of her 1866 novel *Hidden Depths* sold upwards of thirty thousand copies.

Nonetheless, Skene’s name is largely unknown in literary and social histories today. Despite the recovery of women writers from this period and others, which began with such influential works as Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own*, the canon might be considered almost as restrictive today as it was in the past. Those women who have been recovered seem to share a single trait: they are what we might call proto-feminists. Forerunners of modern feminism, their lives and works exemplify those issues that the second wave of feminism raised in the late twentieth century. Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* is representative in this respect; the novelists and poets they
discuss are celebrated for their subversive responses to the patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century society. Thus many women writers remain in obscurity: women who worked from within the structures, institutions, and traditions of society to effect change; women for whom notions of feminism and activism, even in its incipient forms, would have been unimaginable but who, nevertheless, made significant contributions to the reform of their society. Using the work of Felicia Skene as a lens through which to focus the discussion, this dissertation will argue that the moderate, conservative Victorian woman, who had no interest in furthering women’s suffrage, was no less active or influential than her more radical sisters, that the work of charity and writing could lead to significant social change, and that a powerful female agency is possible within the conservative sphere.¹ To paraphrase the Siskin quotation that serves as an epigraph for this introduction, the forgetting of figures like Felicia Skene has been a loss for literary history and our understanding of the Victorian woman, and recovery is both possible and imperative.

Who was Felicia Skene?

In 1902, Edith Rickards published a biography, Felicia Skene of Oxford: A Memoir.² The biography appears to have been a labour of love, commissioned by Zoë Thomson to commemorate the life and, more importantly, the work of her favourite aunt and closest friend. The biography’s primary purpose was to celebrate the life of one of Oxford’s most well-known women, known for her ceaseless work for the less fortunate of the surrounding area. Rickards’s two divisions in the biography—“Preparation for Work” and “Working

¹ See Joan Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man (especially the introduction), for a discussion of how and why this teleological history has been written—both in the nineteenth century and today.
² One might begin by asking: why is Felicia Skene the subject of a biography so soon after her death? The answer becomes evident in the work’s dedication: Dedicated to / Z. T. / To whom I owe the privilege of recording the life / of one dear to her by ties of kindred / and to both of us by friendship / and reverence for the / beauty of her / character. The “Z. T.” of the dedication is Zoë Thomson, Skene’s niece and the widow of Dr. Thomson, the Archbishop of York.
Days"—signal the importance of Skene’s charitable work to her life; even her early life in
Scotland and Greece are primarily depicted in terms of how it grooms Skene for a life caring
for others.

Felicia Skene was the youngest of James Skene of Rubislaw’s seven children, born
May 23, 1821. She was born in France, at Aix-en-Provence, where her parents had travelled
for the education of their elder children. Both James Skene and his wife Jane (daughter of
Sir William Forbes) were members of strong Jacobite Scottish families. James Skene was
also an author, but was probably most well known as an intimate friend of Sir Walter Scott.
Scott referred to James Skene in the dedicatory epistle to Ivanhoe, in his role as Secretary to
the Antiquary Society (13), and dedicated the fourth canto of Marmion to him.4

The family travelled a great deal, in part due to the delicate nature of Mrs. Skene’s
health. Since one of their sons had married well in Greece, the Skenes settled there for seven
years (1838-45), where one of their daughters married into the same Greek family.
Eventually, the elder Skenes agreed to take on the upbringing and education of two
granddaughters (Zoë and Janey Skene) in England upon their return. Felicia Skene’s life in
Greece and the people she met there formed the subject of her first two published works: a

3 All information in this section of the introduction is from Rickards’s biography of Skene unless otherwise
noted.
4 Graham Tulloch’s explanatory gloss to the Ivanhoe reference describes James Skene as a “close friend of
Scott’s, [who] published Sketches of the Existing Localities alluded to in the Waverly Novels, drawn and etched
by himself (1829-31) in 21 volumes, simultaneously with the publication of the Magnum” (508). The footnote
to the dedication in Marmion explains that “James Skene . . . was Cornet in the Royal Edinburgh Light Horse
Volunteers, and Sir Walter Scott was Quartermaster of same corps” (105, see pages 106-108 for the specific
lines referring to James Skene). Scott entered James Skene’s life one last time, when James Skene was on his
deathbed in 1864 and thus long after Scott had died (in 1832). Just a few days before his death, Felicia Skene
entered her father’s room to learn “he had just experienced an unexpected and inexpressible joy; he had seen
dear Scott again! he had walked into the room quite suddenly and told him he had come from a long distance
to visit him. Then my father described his unchanged appearance, and how he had sat down on the other side of
the hearth. It had been such a joyful meeting, my father said . . . His account was so detailed and clear, that I
almost felt as if I had myself seen what he described, and the remembrance has never left me” (“Personal
Recollections” 33; Charles Woods also relates this story in his recollections of Skene appended to Rickards’s
biography, and recounts a trip to Frewen Hall [the Skene home in 1864] to see the room in which Scott’s ghost
appeared [372-74]).
collection of poetry, *The Isles of Greece and Other Poems* (1843), and a travel book written
during the family’s journey home to England, *Wayfaring Sketches Among the Greeks and
Turks, and on the Shores of the Danube* (1847). Upon the family’s return to England, they
first settled once again in Scotland, then moved to Leamington (for Mrs. Skene’s health), and
finally, on the advice and urging of Felicia, they settled in Oxford in 1853.

Skene first made her presence felt in Oxford during the cholera outbreak of 1854. Sir
Henry Wentworth Acland, who became a close and lifelong friend of Skene’s, recorded in
his *Memoir on the Cholera at Oxford in the Year 1854* (1856),

> And lastly, because the most important, a lady, (who desires her name to be
> withheld,) visited daily every house (within a certain area) to instruct the
> Nurses, to comfort the sick, to cheer the disconsolate; and, where need was,
> herself to supply a sudden emergency, or to relieve a wearied attendant. By
day and by night she plied this task, and when she rested, or where,—as long
> at least as she knew of a house where disease had entered,—is known to
> herself alone. (99)

Rickards assures us the unnamed lady was Skene, and a number of the individual
recollections within her biography make note of Skene’s “unlocked door” during the
epidemic (103, 133). Skene’s desire to keep her name out of Acland’s memoir, although she
does (anonymously) provide him with a long letter to reprint on the efficacy of distributing
food to affected areas during an outbreak (Acland 101-02), and her desire to play down her
role in the care of others throughout her life in Oxford, is indicative of her understanding of
her role in caring for others: it is the work itself that should take precedence and prominence,
not the worker. “Some Episodes in a Long life” also details Skene’s involvement in Florence
Nightingale’s nurse recruitment for the Crimea (841-43). A number of nurses who worked under Skene during the 1854 cholera outbreak were chosen for Nightingale’s contingent: Skene travelled with them as far as London, became friends with Nightingale, and agreed she would invest part of the women’s salaries in a bank every month. Nowhere in this description of the nurses and their past experience in Oxford, however, does Skene include the information that she, too, was a nurse during the outbreak.

Late in her life, Skene wrote a number of semi-autobiographical articles, which are most notable for what they tell us about others, not about Skene herself. She became an actor in them only when it served to relate an anecdote about the “celebrity” under discussion. In these articles, we learn of her childhood friendship with the grandchildren of the exiled Charles X of France (“Personal Recollections” 30; “Glimpses of Some Vanished Celebrities” 3-4) and of Benjamin Jowett’s visit to her, upon being named Vice Chancellor of Oxford, in order to learn about the University’s treatment of “fallen women.” Although Skene only meant to give him information, he left her with a “merry smile” saying, “you have given me full instructions, and you will find that I shall follow them implicitly” (“Some Episodes” 845). As becomes clear from reading these recollections and the biographical articles of family members, Skene was not interested in putting herself forward as a model to follow or

---

5 See the article on her favourite sister Caroline, “A Noble Life”; one on her aunt Forbes, “Sir Walter Scott’s First Love”; and the biography of her cousin the Bishop of Brechin. Additionally, a number of her short stories are set in the Franco-Prussian war and purport to draw on “fact”; two of her nephews fought in this war (see “The Three Friends of Vaux Villaine,” “A Story of Vionville,” and “A Loyal Heart”). Rickards tells us that General Winston of “Light Out of Darkness” is “an excellent portrait” of her father, “both in appearance and in character” (181), and that Walter Seton of A Strange Inheritance is a “likeness... acknowledged by those who knew [her brother William], to be a true and accurate one” (307). The letters in the Blackwood’s archive also record that William was instrumental in arranging for Blackwood’s to publish the title (her first for them) (MS 4492 (1889) f.1, f.17).
a celebrity to be glimpsed. She died in the early morning hours of Friday, October 6, 1899. In that final week, she walked to Evensong at the Cathedral Saturday evening, went to the Prison for her regular Tuesday visit with the inmates, to the Cathedral again, and received visitors in her drawing-room on Thursday.

"Caring Power": Theoretical Framework

"Caring power" is a concept developed by Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, drawing on Foucault's "new pastoral power," in their study *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands*; it is a "mode of power that operates through care, that is, a commitment to the well-being of others" (11). Van Drenth and de Haan rework Foucault's term in order to "emphasize the double secularization involved: not only was the aim of salvation replaced by that of well-being in this world, but instead of the clergy, *lay women and men* became the agents of this type of power. The second reason to speak of 'caring power' is to underline the importance of *care* as the technique or mode of power" (15, emphasis in original). Van Drenth and de Haan are interested in caring power as both a method of humanitarian concern and as a "power aimed at shaping new identities—and thus new configurations of gender, class, and ethnicity. Moreover, the identities of both caregivers and those who received the care were reshaped in the process" (24). It is this mode of power, the agency and authority that are granted and/or assumed by the charitable woman through the offices of care, that makes van Drenth and de Haan's work particularly useful for studying a figure like Felicia Skene. All of Skene's work—her active participation with prostitutes and prisoners, her fictional heroines, and her non-fiction prose for a number of journals—was intimately concerned with the care of others.

---

6 The cause of Skene's death is not specifically identified except that she was "very ill—heart and slight bronchitis" (357). Both Edith Rickards and Charles Woods make reference a number of times to heart trouble, inflammation of the veins, and severe headaches.
and it was a caring power that first addressed “well-being in this world” as a step toward salvation; it was also a space through which Skene broadened women’s position and constructed a form of female agency used to shape identities for her characters, herself, and, by extension, her readers.

Van Drenth and de Haan identify the rise of caring power throughout the nineteenth century as an aspect of the three stages of women’s social activities:

The first category, *women’s activism*, includes all social and social-political activities of women undertaken on behalf of “others” or a better world in general: that is, helping the poor, fighting slavery, working for peace, and so forth.

The second category concerns organized activities of women on behalf of other women, based on an identification with “those of their own sex”, sometimes expressed by the notion of “sisterhood”: the *women’s movement* . .

The third category, *feminism* or the *feminist movement*, is characterized by the fight for equal rights and/or activities aimed at ending male domination and privileging, a struggle for which arguments of women’s and men’s “equality” as human beings, or of women’s “difference” could be used. In all three cases, women became organized as women, but the goal was different: to make the world a better place; to help other women; to fight against male domination. (46-47)

Felicia Skene’s writing about and care for the poor, the prostitute, and the prisoner places her work within this framework of women’s social activities. Although van Drenth and de Haan
do not identify these as specifically historical (i.e., chronological) stages, their movement from Fry, “a pioneer of the women’s movement” (47), to Butler, “a feminist” (47), to Fry’s and Butler’s descendents in the Netherlands, means that the categories appear historical and teleological, culminating in the feminist movement and agitation for the vote. As they conclude, “caring power . . . constituted ‘women’ as a new social category: they become actors or agents on the social and political stage, and that, in turn, would lead to their demanding formal citizenship” (45).

This dissertation is an attempt to resist that trajectory or, at least, to suggest a parallel movement that is focused on women as active agents in the care of others, which has social and political, although not suffragist, implications. Skene’s work was aimed at ending, through legislation or other means, the mistreatment of fallen women and prisoners. She did not imagine participating in government; instead, she imagined using her writing to advise those who did create and pass legislation, advice based on her experience and authority. Significantly, Skene’s work was seldom based on identification with her own sex; rather, her desire to end mistreatment was based on identification with a fellow human being. Although much of her work was with women—prisoners and prostitutes—she was equally interested in the mistreatment of and injustice to male prisoners. In the twenty-first century, we might want to read Skene as a “feminist,” given the inherent equality for men and women as fellow human beings expressed in her writing. In terms of van Drenth and de Haan’s formulation, however, she falls somewhere between the first and second categories: her work on behalf of the poor and prisoners of both sexes could be described as women’s activism and her work with fallen women as part of the women’s movement. She wanted both to make the world a
better place for all of humanity and to help other women, but her work never extended into the third category, feminism or the feminist movement.

Skene’s work to make the world better for others and to help other women, moreover, was accomplished through an emptying of the self; her individual needs (or those of her characters) were put aside in favour of the needs of the other: prostitute, prisoner, workhouse inmate. This rejection of the self did, in fact, work both to shape her own identity and her authority over the issues she engaged with and to reconfigure gender and class norms both for women like herself who undertook philanthropic work and for those who were the objects of such projects. The rejection of self, as we shall see, worked as a rejection of dominant beliefs regarding such issues as the position of women, the ways in which institutions work, and the treatment of the fallen. Although it is true she repudiated the title of “New Woman” when “suggestions [were] made that she should lend her name and influence to the movement,” noting that the representative who met with her “talked freely of subjects that even my poor girls would avoid” (Rickards 141), Skene seems to fall between the two poles of conservative and radical, at times championing and enacting quite radical notions about women’s place in society and at other times implicitly subscribing to conventional notions of women’s needs, abilities, and roles. To account for the sometimes contradictory nature of Skene’s work and yet at the same time encompass the complexities of her ideas and the coherence of her vision for society, I have labelled her a “moderate conservative” woman. By moderate, I mean to suggest a movement between radical and conventional, the

---

7 Skene’s response, as reported by Rickards, is indicative of the extreme and caricatured portrait of New Women in Victorian society. Ann Ardis and Ann Heilman have traced the representation of the New Woman in the Victorian periodical press and literature. Although many New Women favoured a platform of social purity and traditional gender roles, the New Woman of fiction and cartoon tended to portray women as sexually loose and usurping male roles (Ardis; Heilmann). In reality, some of the reforms and positions put forward by Skene were, as we will see below, quite similar to those of her New Woman contemporaries.
contrasting terms normally associated with women writers of the period. Skene can be placed at different points along that continuum, depending on her interest in or purpose for taking up an issue or cause. By conservative, I mean to suggest the dynamic in Skene’s work between traditional understandings of Victorian society, which she often valued—for example, its religious beliefs, prescriptions of men’s and women’s roles, and definitions of “normal” behaviour (sexual and moral)—and her questioning of these same understandings and values. She did not go to extremes, but she also did not simply accept the status quo. Skene thus used the tools of conservativism—the self-sacrifice of women for others—to reform that same conservativism.

Care and Caritas

“Charity,” Hannah More wrote, “is the calling of a lady; the care of the poor is her profession” (2.20, emphasis in original). For “caring power” to be applied to Skene’s work and writing, the concept needs to be placed within the context of Victorian Britain’s charity movement. Charity, of course, is derived from caritas—“The Christian love of our fellow-men; Christian benignity of disposition expressing itself in Christ-like conduct: one of the ‘three Christian graces’, fully described by St. Paul, 1 Cor. xiii” (1c OED)—a definition current from the fourteenth century through the nineteenth. Charity as religious action, then, is an important motivation for women’s activities in this realm, and it is necessary to consider such activity in terms of the concepts of charity, philanthropy, and benevolence. Van Drenth and de Haan, for example, “distinguish ‘philanthropy’, associated with the right to a humane treatment, from ‘charity’, associated with notions of benevolence and favour” (44). Olive Checkland, in her study Philanthropy in Victorian Scotland, also makes a useful distinction:
The terms charity and philanthropy embrace at least two different concepts. Charity is an essential element of many religious faiths involving care and concern for others. . . . But Christian charity was often a social observance, designed rather for the re-assurance of the giver than for the good of the receiver. It was regarded as a thank offering made by those with a surplus to those less fortunate than themselves. . . . Philanthropy, on the other hand, is a broader concept, based on humanitarian considerations, for it is concerned to better human conditions. (2)

Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not make such clear distinctions. Charity is defined as “[l]ove, kindness, affection, natural affection” in the 1840s and as “[b]enevolence to one’s neighbours, especially to the poor; the practical beneficences in which this manifests itself” in the 1870s (2a, 4). Philanthropy, from its inception in the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, not unlike charity, is defined as “[l]ove of mankind; the disposition or active effort to promote the happiness and well-being of others; practical benevolence” (1a); and benevolence as the “[d]isposition to do good, desire to promote the happiness of others, kindness, generosity, charitable feeling” (1, 1870s).

Skene uses the three terms somewhat interchangeably in the majority of her writing, but the opening pages of her 1866 *Penitentiaries and Reformatories (P&R)* indicate her understanding of the terms:

This [moral progress] has notably been the case with the marvellous impulse which has been given in our age to the virtue of charity—charity, that is, in the common acceptation of the word, as exercised towards the poor.
How far we have advanced in that more heavenly charity which is greater than faith and hope, is not the question with which we have to do. (3)...

We shall best prove both our positions, perhaps, by taking an example from the various philanthropic schemes now at work, in which the object of the charity has more than any other suffered by the mistakes in question. One of the most important movements of modern benevolence has been the attempt to grapple with that moral plague which has been termed “the social evil.” (5)

Charity for Skene, then, seems to be “[b]enevolence to one’s neighbours, especially to the poor; the practical beneficences in which this manifests itself”; philanthropy also participates in this meaning, specifically in reference to practical acts and institutions, and benevolence, as used above, suggests the motivation for action, the “[d]isposition to do good.”

Nevertheless, the distinctions made by Checkland and van Drenth and de Haan are useful. Charity and philanthropy in Skene’s writing, as the following chapters will explore, seem to partake of both the religious and the secular meanings of the terms. Charity and the care of others was never simply a “social observance” for Skene or her fictional characters, unless she wished to castigate an individual’s motivations, and although the giver may receive “re-assurance” of his or her relationship to Christ, it was the receiver’s needs that dictated action and benefit. Skene was interested in charity as the basis of humanity’s relationship to Christ and in the philanthropic impulse to assert the right to humane conditions for all society’s members. In her work—both literary and actual—we see an attempt to bring together the traditional notions of philanthropy and charity; they work in tandem to improve the receiver’s well-being in this world as a step toward salvation in the next.
Religion, therefore, is at the centre of care for others. Indeed, van Drenth and de Haan find in *The Rise of Caring Power* “that religion played a more complex, positive as well as continuous role in the history of the women’s movement” (13) than has previously been acknowledged by scholars. Van Drenth and de Haan’s caring power is articulated in terms of the participation of lay people as opposed to clergy; Fry’s and Butler’s motivation to care for others was, in part, grounded in their religious beliefs: an active and practical Christianity working in the world. Skene’s identification with her fellow humans was founded in religion and also based on a one-to-one relationship. It is as if she envisioned bridging Disraeli’s “two nations” one person at a time.

In *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864*, Mary Poovey traces the development of political and social reform in Victorian society from one based on a moral understanding of the relationship between individuals to one from which the moral has been excised in favour of the economic, the aggregate, and the collective (*passim*, but see especially the Introduction and Chapters 7 and 8). Thus early in the century it is encounters between individuals that dominate, a phenomenon Dickens represents in *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1857); later it becomes encounters between groups, evidence of which can been seen in the formation of the Charity Organization Society in 1869 and the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (1857-84) or the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875. The rise of socialism late in the century is further evidence of this change in approach and understanding. In the words of Denise Riley, “the hopes of philanthropy were thus swept up and systematised” (54), and we can see in Dickens’s satire his condemnation of such systemization, for example, in his representation of Chancery in *Bleak House* and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*. Skene’s writing and her model for society run
counter to the dominant theories of socialism and government involvement, and are instead aligned with earlier Victorian notions of social reform. As I will argue below, the framework through which Skene addresses the relationship between the individual and society is one of personal, one-to-one intervention. Her work provides a parallel trajectory that complicates that traced by Poovey, one that stresses the importance of personal connection. Throughout her writing from the 1860s until her death in 1899, Skene resisted the move to system and bureaucracy as an approach to rectifying social ills and emphasized the efficacy of personal care for the other grounded in her Christian beliefs.

The basis of Skene’s model for society was religious: the one-to-one relationship of (wo)man to Christ. One of Skene’s earliest published works was *The Divine Master* (1852), and it indicates the centrality of Christ in her life. The work is a manual “illustrating the way of the cross,” or, in other words, using the words and life of Christ as a model for facing the vicissitudes of modern life; chapter titles include such subjects as humility, temptation, suffering, perseverance, and death. The book is dedicated to Christ: “To Him / From Whose Hands has been received / THE BREAD OF LIFE” (iii).

The appendices by Charles Woods and Lady Sophia Palmer to Edith Rickards’s 1902 biography of Skene provide a picture of Skene’s religious life. Palmer reveals that

> With all [Skene’s] affection and absolute loyalty to the English Church, her aesthetic sympathies were, to the end, with the Greek. . . . [B]ut being absolutely satisfied as to the validity of Anglican orders, she thankfully lived in, and was nourished by, the Sacraments of the Church of England in the country of her service. (352-53)
Woods echoes the importance of religion in Skene’s life: “Whatever gifts she possessed, . . . she was deeply, earnestly devout. . . . Religion was the keynote of her life. She held that it must be found in the heart” (360, 362). As the reference to the Greek Orthodox Church in Palmer’s recollection indicates, Skene’s religious thought was complex and evolving. The “esthetic” affinity for the Greek Orthodox religion suggests, at least early in her life, a desire for ceremony and ritual as part of her religious worship. And although Skene settled in Oxford a decade after the height of the Tractarian controversy and Newman’s defection to the Catholic Church, her first mentor, Rev. Thomas Chamberlain of St. Thomas-the-Martyr, was decidedly High Church.8 Skene’s elder sister Caroline did convert to the Greek Orthodox Church as part of the conditions of her marriage, but did so, Skene wrote, “[h]aving carefully examined into the doctrines to which she would be required to give her allegiance, . . . [and finding] nothing in them contrary to the religious teaching [her parents] had themselves given her from infancy upwards” (“A Noble Life” 8).

The explanation of her sister’s conversion—specifically, the affinity of the Greek Orthodox and Anglican doctrines—suggests Skene’s own investigation of church doctrine and identification with some Roman Catholic/High Church Anglican practices. Rickards marked the beginning of Skene’s religious development with the family’s move to Leamington, where “she came under a very strong religious influence, which moulded her life and opinions for a long period. . . . the Rev. J. Lincoln Galton, a member of the extreme High Church party, impressed her deeply by his devoted life and teaching” (81). Although Rickards recorded that Skene later “regretted having surrendered too much of her religious

---

8 Rickards provides a description of Chamberlain: “a man of striking appearance, strong personality, and decided uncompromising views. . . . He certainly justified in his own person the title of Church Militant, for there was war to the knife between him and the terrible evils with which his parish was rife. . . . He drew forth from his ecclesiastical armoury every weapon provided by the Catholic revival in the Church of England” (89). For a discussion of Chamberlain’s influence on Skene’s life and work, see Rickards 86-97.
liberty and independence" (81), there is no sense that she repudiated the teachings of the 
High-Church party. Following her exposure to Galton and before moving to Oxford, Skene 
met the Rev. Thomas Chamberlain of St. Thomas-the-Martyr. Rickards described their 
relationship as a "still stronger and more lasting influence" (81) on Skene's life, and it is not 
unreasonable to assume his presence in Oxford might have contributed to her decision to 
move there. Summing up Skene's interaction with religion throughout her life, Rickards 
writes:

> If we must label those who profess fealty to "One Lord, One faith," we can 
> only say that she deeply admired the fervour of spirit of the Evangelicals, and 
> the high ideals and self-denying lives of those who are generally called High 
> Church. The majority of her friends belonged to that party, and her 
sympathies lay principally with them, though an elaborate and minute ritual in 
worship fretted and worried her.9 . . . Those who knew and loved her would 
feel it a sort of profanation to identify her religious life with that of any party. 
. . . Her personal devotion to Him was the heart of her Christianity. (287-88)

What we will see come to the fore in Skene's work, then, is a strong personal relationship 
with God.

This personal relationship with God permeates Skene's writing and is connected both 
to her (lack of) place in literary history and her participation in the rise of caring power. Just 
following Skene's death, Palmer remarked that "her own art seemed too consciously 
dominated by her moral purpose; to some loss, I thought" (352). And almost a century later,

---

9 Rickard's characterization of ritual as "fret[ting] and worr[ying]" Skene seems to contradict the statements of Palmer quoted above. But as Skene changed her mind about the place of confession in the English Church (see Chapter Two below), it is possible Palmer was referring to Skene's early affinities (i.e., when she was young and travelling with her family to Greece) whereas Rickards was making a more overall statement that encompasses her later beliefs.
Dorothy Mermin refers to Skene (alongside Charlotte Yonge, Elizabeth Sewell, and Mary Fullerton) as “another of the novelists whose work was dedicated to pious ends and who wrote fiction in order to earn money for charity” (85). She further compares Skene to Sewell and Elizabeth Gaskell as “women whose faith grounded their social protest novels” (111). Although from all accounts Skene’s publishing history was intricately linked to her care for others,\(^{10}\) these references tend to dismiss and belittle the writing of women who, using Elaine Showalter’s terms, worked “under the influence of a charismatic clergyman” (147), presumably, in relation to Skene, a reference to Galton and/or Chamberlain. It is as if these authors’ religious beliefs overshadow any literary or social significance of their work. For example, Jennifer Stolpa argues that Anne Brontë is considered a relatively minor writer, especially when compared to her sisters, “because her novels openly espouse Christian principles[,] they are categorized as ‘religious literature’” and, therefore, “appear to some critical readers to be little more than a moral sketch intended to promote patriarchal Christian principles” (226). Susan Mumm, in her study on Anglican Sisterhoods, notes that in church history “all women whose religion has been central to the way in which they choose to live, are too often portrayed as meek, subservient, other worldly; lacking the character and drive which makes historical personages memorable and important” (ix).

But, as van Drenth and de Haan illustrate of Fry and Butler, Stolpa of Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847), and Mumm of the many women in her study, it is precisely the centrality of religious beliefs that gives rise to Skene’s literary production and, more significantly, to the social activities and positions she constructs for herself and her readers. Placing Skene in

\(^{10}\) In the words of Charles Woods, “All she earned by her graphic pen was immediately given away” (qtd. in Rickards 366). Woods is quick to point out in a footnote that “Miss Skene, with all her charity, gave with great discrimination, since charity unwisely directed is the cause of much of the evil in the world” (366), a sign of the continuing concern with “pauperising” the poor that permeated discussions of the use of charity.

\(^{11}\) Like Mermin, Showalter discusses Skene in conjunction with Sewell and Yonge.
any box, High or Low Churchwoman, radical or conventional woman, is, as this dissertation will argue, to oversimplify and misunderstand the complexity of her life and her work: she is both one and the other as needed to care for others and communicate that need for care to society at large. She is, as Rickards implies, an individual acting in the world but one whose action is grounded in her identity as a Christian and her belief in the model of Christ.

To further counter the forgetting of the Christian woman writers explored above, it is instructive to consider the argument of Jane Tompkins’s Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860. She suggests that “novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular times and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi). Skene’s work, I argue, does exactly that: it articulates and proposes solutions to the problems she sees around her. My first chapter, “One of the least of these my brethren’: Women’s Sacrifice and Agency,” explores how Skene uses the model of Christ and valorizes female subordination in order that self-sacrifice generate agency and authority for woman. She does this, in part, by encompassing the full spectrum of Protestantism in Britain, including the promise of female authority in Evangelicalism, at least in its non-conformist manifestations, an authority not possible in the Church of England. The second chapter, “Ye are my friends’: Redefining Social Reform,” extends this analysis to show how Skene redefines appropriate charitable behaviour through the feminine and explores her role of “mother confessor,” as the Female Visitor becomes an avenue to redemption and psychological relief for prisoner and prostitute. The third chapter, “To do good and to communicate’: Using the Literary for Philanthropic Ends,” examines the relationship between charity and writing,
specifically how writing itself becomes a charitable agent. Finally, my conclusion will suggest how twenty-first century publication of some of Skene’s work will contribute to current scholarly discussion and the teaching of gender, history, and literature.
Chapter Two

“One of the least of these my brethren”: Women’s Agency and Sacrifice

Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. ~ Matt 25.40

In *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*, Felicia Skene examined the rules and regulations that formed the basis of the treatment for fallen women in penitentiaries and children in reformatories. Much of the work focused on the “mistaken principles” that guided authorities in their interactions with inmates. Skene’s response and her recommendations for change were based in scripture: “‘I have given you an example,’ He said, . . . and He had indeed given them an example all His life long of unwearied efforts to save the lost, to reform the erring, to raise the fallen by means of love alone, in all gentleness, meekness and tenderest compassion” (*P&R* 16). Although directly quoting from John 13.15 here, especially if we read “raising the fallen” as a particular allusion to the fallen woman rather than the more encompassing notion of a fallen humanity, Skene also seems to be drawing on the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25, which includes Christ’s injunction to care for the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned. In the example of Christ, his teachings, and his actions, Skene finds a pattern: a pattern around which to organize her own life and her charitable work, a pattern to hold as an example for those with whom she worked, a pattern to use in the creation of her fictional heroines. Skene makes it clear that Ernestine Courtenay’s actions and the narratorial comment on prostitution and the double standard in *Hidden Depths*, indeed the actions of all her heroines, are informed by a belief in the place of God in society: one flows directly from the other; thought and action are both inspired by and
give rise to the working of Christ’s example in the world. The religious norms inherent in
such a pattern, norms founded on biblical injunctions to live out one’s faith through acts of
social justice or mercy, and Victorian ideals about the responsibility of the more fortunate for
the less, provided the framework for Skene’s challenge to contemporary gender norms and
expectations, and her construction of women’s agency in the social sphere.

Conventional Victorian understanding, which was based on biblical example, defined
woman as the “helpmeet” of man, as naturally caring and benevolent, caring first for her
family and then moving outward into society; it was woman’s duty to sacrifice herself, her
wants and needs, for others. Hannah More’s Cælebs In Search of a Wife (1808) and
Coventry Patmore’s The Angel in the House (1854) were literary accounts of such “perfect”
Victorian women; indeed, More’s Lucilla Stanley proves her worth to the hero through her
charitable activities in the neighbourhood. Making a plea for workhouse visitors, Louisa
Twining wrote “there is man’s work and woman’s work to be done in the world” (“Plea” 53);
her phraseology is an example of how conventional femininity and philanthropic work were
intertwined. Women, who were believed to be particularly well suited to the work,
undertook much nineteenth-century charity and philanthropy: women visitors “applied their
domestic experience and education, the concerns of family and relations, to the world outside
the home. The saying ‘charity begins at home’ had a meaning unsuspected by its originator,
for that was precisely where so many women developed the sympathies and skills to perform
good works in a wider sphere” (Prochaska 7). The nation was made strongest through its
homes, as Mary Bayly wrote in Ragged Homes, and How to Mend Them (1860): “The
corner-stone of the commonwealth is the hearth-stone” (i), and that strength was, at least in
part, located in the figure of the middle-class, philanthropic woman.
In *Making a Social Body*, Poovey argues that the nineteenth-century cultural work of figuring society metaphorically as a “social body authorized an expansion of the informal role that women of the middle ranks had long played in social work” (43). Even the corresponding image of society as a machine opened a space for women, since it “implied that analysis should be dispassionate, even mechanical, [and] its proponents tended to efface all distinguishing characteristics of the social analyst—even, by implication at least, the otherwise disqualifying characteristic of sex” (43). In his study *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*, Frank K. Prochaska provides a list of “women’s special traits”: “Moral, modest, attentive, intuitive, humble, gentle, patient, sensitive, perceptive, compassionate, self-sacrificing, tactful, deductive, practical, religious, benevolent, instinctive, and mild” (3). “Because,” as Poovey contends, “the metaphor of the social body highlighted intimate bodily processes and championed the feminized epistemology of sympathy, its proponents inadvertently reinforced women’s claims to be naturally suited to work that could be seen as an extension of domestic offices” (43). Thus each of Prochaska’s traits shows how women are best suited to philanthropic work, and, perhaps more importantly, each trait can also be aligned with Christian duty, again suggesting women best fill the role of caring for their less fortunate fellow (wo)men.

It was at the conjunction of feminine duty and religion in the charitable and philanthropic impulse that Felicia Skene was interested in both the responsibility and motivation for caring for the less fortunate. The opportunities for women to assert their special traits in a larger, societal sphere were not plentiful, but the possibilities open to women in non-conformist Protestantism in Victorian Britain were somewhat more numerous.

---

12 Poovey traces this cultural formation through such figures as Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, Charles Babbage, and social reform documents by James Phillip Kay and Edwin Chadwick (see especially Chapter 2, “The Production of Abstract Space”).
than in the Church of England. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of evangelical women preachers who travelled throughout Britain to preach God’s word. Among the Dissenter sects, for example, Puritanism placed a “fierce emphasis on the democracy of God’s grace, [which] provided generations of female believers with a language of spiritual self-assertion” (Taylor 99). As Lucy Bland explains,

the Evangelical emphasis on personal morality and a moralizing role for women within the home, gave women a language and a voice with which to demand moral behaviour from those within the home, including their husbands. . . . [T]his emphasis simultaneously gave women a sense of mission and spiritual worth, and thereby a strong incentive to engage in philanthropy—to enter the homes of others in the pursuit of greater morality.

(403)

The “sense of mission and spiritual worth” Bland describes is evident in the patterning of behaviour on Christ’s example exhibited by Skene’s heroines. In *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall trace the naturalization of the “differences and complementary roles of men and women” through the Evangelical movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (149). By “the 1830s and 1840s,” they argue, “the language used was increasingly secular and the belief . . . had become the common sense of the English middle class” (149).

Skene’s heroines are not defined only by gender and class, then, but also, and more importantly, by their religious beliefs. The protestant ethic had become the women’s ethic, through which women were “endowed with a strong sense of self, a belief in their individual responsibility for their own souls which could inspire action among the weakest” (Davidoff
and Hall 117). This sense of belief, then, is the defining characteristic of Skene’s heroines, their lives, and their interactions with their fellow (wo)man. By this I do not mean simply their adherence to the Christian faith (or any one branch of it), although clearly that is a component of religious belief. Rather, for Skene, it is her and her heroines’ “strong sense of self, a belief in their individual responsibility for their own souls” that leads to a self-identification with and commitment to Christ’s example that shapes their identity and provides them with a space to operate in the world. In that “individual responsibility for their own souls,” Skene’s heroines look outside themselves, adopting the idea of the “social body . . . to sanction their participation in the social domain,” to use Poovey’s phraseology (43).

In *Hidden Depths*, Skene’s most well-known and reviewed novel, Ernestine Courtenay describes her religious beliefs to one of her brother’s tutors: “My Belief is in the Being, whom historical truth makes known to us in the incomprehensible greatness of His love, His justice, His purity, His utter abnegation of self” (2: 57). This articulation of Ernestine’s belief provides a useful framework for understanding how Skene and her heroines model their actions on Christ’s work and sacrifice their selves in favour of the other. Ernestine refers to the “historical truth” of Christ: the concepts of history and truth, reality as it were, provide a strong basis for Skene’s construction of women’s agency. In linking women’s work to Christ’s, this construction, too, potentially participates in the authority of such historical truth. The first three traits Ernestine attributes to Christ—love, justice, and purity—form the basis of the actions carried out by and the examples on which Skene’s characters’ model their behaviour. Love and purity, of course, immediately connote both the Christian idea of charity, in terms of its definition in 1 Corinthians, and the more secular

---

13 Monica Fryckstedt has shown that the only novel reviewed more than *Hidden Depths* in 1866 was Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (107-08).
notion of benevolent actions. Justice also has Christian connotations, as in Micah 6.8: “what
doeth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with
thy God” Justice here, then, is linked to mercy or what we might term as social justice.
Doing justice or being merciful in Skene’s work, then, might be understood as joining the
Christian act of charity to the philanthropic concern of humanitarian care.

The final trait, selflessness or sacrifice, is the second key component of the heroines’
embodiment of the Christian ideal. Just as the sacrifice of Christ benefited humanity, so too,
in Skene’s moral vision, will her heroines’ acts of sacrifice benefit their community. These
two behaviours—modelling Christ’s actions and self sacrifice—are the foundations upon
which Skene reconfigures women’s actions in Victorian society, a reconfiguration which
extends women’s ability to effect much needed change in society. For Skene herself,
moreover, Ernestine’s words have an additional implication: the historical truth of Christ is
“ma[de] known to us” through the Bible, through its stories and parables. This chapter will
explore how, in writing her novels, stories, and journalism, Skene both models love, justice,
purity and self-sacrifice for her audience, showing the interrelationship of fiction, history and
reality, and makes known to her readers the truth about the less fortunate and what can be
done for them. Her focus on women, moreover, in effect creates a different story for them
than the conventional, conservative one.

Christ’s Model – Minister and Worker

Contrary to what the passage quoted from Penitentiaries and Reformatories in the
opening to this chapter would suggest, Skene seldom explicitly quoted Christ’s words or
prescribed actions to either her heroines or her audience. Following Christ’s model was a
role she “naturally” filled herself, and it is arguable that her heroines fill it equally
“naturally”; that is, performing a role which becomes naturalized or normalized through thought and care in its enactment, but which does not require separate thought and care to undertake in the first place. As noted above, Davidoff and Hall show how this naturalized relationship of the individual, particularly the individual woman, to Christ, moved from Evangelical and Dissenter discourse into more secular and widespread belief by the middle decades of the nineteenth century (143-49).14

Just because Skene has normalized this pattern for herself and her heroines, however, does not negate the power and authority consequently gained by them. Christ’s words, “I have given you an example” are a compelling injunction for Skene’s heroines and their participation in society because an equality for women in Christ and in life is implicitly advocated: Christ’s example is a model for all of humankind, both men and women alike. The equality inherent in Christ’s example that Skene draws upon, however, was only one way of understanding his relationship to humanity and not a dominant one, as Davidoff and Hall point out:

Serious Christians did not doubt that women were and should be subordinate to men socially. This was established biblical teaching. At the same time, however, they firmly believed in the right of all women to salvation and the spiritual equality of men and women. The crucial distinction was between spiritual equality and social subordination. . . . [S]ubordinate did not mean inferior. Subordination in marriage did not imply that women were less important than men, but only that they were operating “in a different

14 See Part One “Religion and Ideology” of Family Fortunes for a full discussion of the development of religion and the middle classes.
department and sphere of action”. Men and women were in separate spheres
and those spheres were not hierarchical. (114-15)\(^\text{15}\)

Skene draws on the spiritual equality apparent in Christian teachings and works to
complicate the social subordination that is its complement, primarily through the single status
of her heroines who move beyond the “different department and sphere of action” assigned to
them.

Despite the spiritual equality possible for women represented here, equality is not
advocated throughout Skene’s writing, specifically as it pertains to the classes in Victorian
society. At times, Skene advances a program of activity for both her heroines and those she
helps that does not participate in the social hierarchy between the middle and lower or
working classes and instead implies an equality of humanity in Christ, regardless of social
position (see, for example, the paragraphs on “One Life Only” (1874) below). This is not,
however, always the case, as the quotation from *Penitentiaries and Reformatories* at the
beginning of this chapter attests; she refers to the lost, the erring, and the fallen, all language
that is explicitly hierarchical, suggesting a superiority on the part of the narrator and worker
and a right to interfere.\(^\text{16}\) What becomes apparent, then, is that Skene has no desire to upset
the social hierarchy of Victorian society that is based on class; in fact, this hierarchy is what,
in part, allows her heroines to act. She does, however, rethink moral dichotomies since they
are figured as horizontal (pure/impure, virtue/sin) rather than the vertical structure of social
hierarchy. Thus moral dichotomies are open to transformation, a transformation Skene
desires for society as a whole.

\(^{15}\) Davidoff and Hall are quoting from a series of essays on women in *The Christian Lady’s Friend and Family
Repository* (1832-33).

\(^{16}\) In Skene’s defence, it is also language that is often used in describing Christ’s work in the world, which is the
example she is drawing upon.
In writing her novels and journalism, Skene seems to be concerned primarily with the middle-class woman, not surprisingly, as they made up such a large percentage of the reading public. Although she challenges “truths” about the middle-class women’s place and agency in society, Skene proceeds largely to efface the class traits of those who are the objects of her work from her writing and even re-inscribes stereotypes about them. When such stereotypes come to the fore, Skene’s writing and its representation of humanitarian concern potentially becomes the very type of charity she elsewhere satirizes and critiques. These inconsistencies in Skene’s work are in part why, as I explored in my introduction, it is neither possible nor desirable to figure Skene as a (proto)feminist or radical. She is clearly a conservative working from within conservatism’s beliefs and values systems, yet at the same time, she works to challenge many of those beliefs and values. This also means that the model of Christ that is so empowering for her heroines can be quite positive for them and yet quite negative for others.

The assumption of equality and authority in Christ provides Skene’s heroines with positions of power and control through which they shape their own lives and the lives of those around them. Although the spiritual equality and subordinate social status of women led to the “assumption that women would support the initiatives of men rather than independently pursuing separate aims and ventures” (Davidoff and Hall 145), Skene and her heroines pursue their own “separate aims and ventures” to address the problems surrounding them. It is this same authority Skene drew on in her charitable work and used to sanction her writing on the subject. Thus although Skene undertook following Christ’s

---

17 “Men would deal with the formal, women with the informal. Men would be decisive, women would be supportive. Men would take their proper place in the world, women would remain associated with the home” (143).
example "naturally" and somewhat unconsciously, she used her writing to normalize and model that example for her readers who might not find such actions so "natural."

Una Dysart of "One Life Only" and Ernestine Courtenay of *Hidden Depths* are representative heroines in Skene's œuvre and are key figures for exploring how Skene uses the model of Christ's love, justice, and purity to provide her heroines with a space to operate in the world. Near the end of "One Life Only," Una commits herself to the work of the parish:

She bent her head down over her clasped hands, as she acknowledged to herself, in all humility, the total failure of her high ambition, and breathed an earnest prayer that she might be able, for the time, that still remained to her on earth, to serve her God in meekness and self-distrust, striving with tender charity to bring to her fellow-creatures some of the happiness she no longer hoped to win for herself. (811)

Una, bent in prayer, making a commitment to God, is a powerful image: she is no longer looking outward, but inward, and taking "responsibility for [her] own soul." The work that Una sets for herself is patterned on the example of Christ in the world: the "tender charity" is modelled on the example of love, whereas aligning herself with the villagers, by calling them "her fellow-creatures," implies a notion of humanitarianism in the connection; they deserve or have a right to happiness and love. In characterizing Una's work in such a way, Skene combines charity and philanthropy: love motivated by care for the other and social justice or mercy inspired by humane treatment of the other, respectively. Una bent in prayer also sends a distinct message to Skene's audience, one of the few messages about which she is so explicit: Una is "to serve her God." Skene's message was a common one in Victorian
society, but she was more than simply representing hegemonic beliefs about both women and religion.

Skene's depiction of Una, particularly the change she undergoes as the story progresses, is indicative of a power and activism available to women through serving one's God. Although the story opens with Una's committing to paper how she wants her "life to be noble and great, at least in its aims. . . [A] grand strong life that shall leave its mark for good in the world, and be of value to others as well as [her]self" (443), her subsequent history proves her life to be much smaller and less noble than she had imagined. She is relatively unaware of those around her who might require assistance, who do not live with the same physical comforts as she and her father. Her concerns are with her growing affection for Humphrey Atherstone and where it might lead. It is not until she attends Lilith Crichton's death bed that Una is made aware of the true import of the warning given to her in the first episode of the story: "you have one life only—only one life to make or mar" (442, emphasis in original). Lilith's religious beliefs have defined her actions throughout the story, including her renunciation of Rupert, since she "could not be his wife without conniving at evil, and morally sharing it" (715). In this case, it is the purity associated with Christ with which Lilith identifies. Beside Lilith's body, Una renews that earlier commitment, but in a new and telling way: "Oh, my God, make my life as pure and true as hers was, that my death, when it comes at last, may be as peaceful and as blest!" (730). Una's desire for a "noble and great" life is now expressed in terms of her religious belief and the model of Christ: Una turns to God for the guidance and strength to live in purity and truth. And the prayer quoted above shows the humility she has learned: her prayer is expressed in the conditional through the use
of “may.” In other words, there is no longer any presumption on Una’s part; she has put herself in God’s hands.

Una has, moreover, like most Skene heroines, sacrificed her own happiness by giving up the man she loves, and thus she has lost, at least at this point in the story, the defining gender identities most often associated with women: those of wife and mother. But in their place she has gained the identity of minister for Christ. Florence Nightingale explores this possibility in *Cassandra* (1860). “Jesus Christ,” she writes, “raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by this sympathy [with the sufferings of her race], to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity” (50). Skene’s Una becomes a servant of God, ministering to the sufferings of those around her. Una turns to the new rector, Mr. Trafford for instruction “in ministering to Christ’s own poor as [Lilith] did. I want you to tell me how I can be of use to the people here” (746, my emphasis). Trafford’s response, that “there is work enough to spare” and that Una can “undertake various offices among the sick and the children” (746), participates in Poovey’s ideas of the social body sanctioning women’s participation in the social domain (43). The social body of the village is itself ill and needs ministering to and it is the women of the village who accomplish this: Lilith in the past and Una now and in the future. Lilith’s life, modelled on Christ’s, has in turn become a model for Una and for Skene’s readers, and Una in turn looks to Christ as an example. Una commits herself to the people of the village, and she practices her ministry with “meekness and self-distrust.” As quoted above from Skene’s earlier *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*, Christ’s example is to be carried out “by means of love alone, in all gentleness, meekness and tenderest compassion,” an injunction Una has learned and internalized in her prayer.
As a minister or worker for Christ, Una’s commitment participates in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century sisterhood and deaconate movement. These institutions brought together single women, religious thought, and philanthropic impulses. Mumm reveals how Victorian sisterhoods maintained that their aim was “to Christianize and feminize the godless and masculine outside world, and this work was a calling from God as valid as a man’s calling to the priesthood” (94). Martha Vicinus claims that “a religious community empowered women, validating women’s work and values in a world that seemed materialistic, godless, and male” (83). Skene’s depiction of Una partakes in the agency and power suggested in Mumm’s and Vicinus’s remarks. Una’s prayer, her desire “to serve her God,” evokes the vows made by nuns and priests. This, then, is where Skene (and the sisterhood movement) seems to complicate the “woman as spiritually equal yet socially subordinate” formula noted above. Una and the women of the sisterhoods are not simply “support[ing] the initiatives of men,” but are rather “pursuing separate aims and ventures.”

Significantly, when the possibility for marriage is once again presented, Una remains true to the commitment made above and the example of Christ: she asks her fiancé to “help [her] . . . spend the rest of [her] life in following steadily . . . in our Master’s steps—the shining steps which the Light of the World left their brightness to guide us still” (826, my emphasis). Thus the marriage with which the story ends is predicated on the model of Christ and a concern for the other. For Christians, the marriage rites are understood as an earthly example of the relationship between humankind and God. The formulation of this desire for their marriage, however, the connection of husband and wife in Christ’s example, potentially extends conventional understandings of women’s role in marriage. Woman was most often

18 See Martha Vicinus’s *Independent Women* (especially Chapter 2) and Susan Mumm’s *Stolen Daughters* for a discussion of the development, goals, and participants in this movement.
depicted and understood as the moral centre of the home, a home which is separated from the world: "In this peculiarly English setting of the home, women could wield their moral influence and thus save not only themselves, but men as well, from the fall which they [as the daughters of Eve] had brought about" (Davidoff and Hall 115). Instead, when Una asks Atherstone "to lead [her] on aright," he responds, "We will help each other, darling . . . ; for I must tell you that I too have resolved to make my future existence very different from the past" (826). The implication seems to be that Una and Atherstone will take the lessons learned through their tribulations and experience to help each other and, since each had now turned outward to the villagers' needs, to help others. Possibly building on the spiritual equality that gave her and her heroines the authority to act in the world, Skene represents a companionate marriage premised on this same spiritual equality. Skene has expanded the woman's more traditional roles of wife and mother to encompass that of Christ's minister in the world.

Ernestine Courtenay of *Hidden Depths* also uses the example of Christ's love and justice to define her life, but here it is the common bond between Christ and humanity that Skene emphasizes and uses to develop female agency; Skene in turn uses that agency to complicate the "spiritually equal yet socially subordinate" formula. Ernestine's religious belief and concomitant actions at first appear quite conventional and uncomplicated. The opening chapters of the novel describe a heroine secure in her beliefs—the promise of an after-life, a promise that was obtained through Christ's suffering (1: 82)—and her understanding of the world. Thus Ernestine's response to the confrontation on the *Hero* between her brother George and his mistress Lois—George refuses to acknowledge Lois and whispers to her in an aside, "You can never be with me again; you might have known I had
done with you for ever when I sent you away” (1: 48)—is concern for “that unhappy one, known only by the common power of suffering” (1: 50). For Ernestine, suffering provides a common bond between herself and Lois, just as it provides a common bond between Christ and humanity. Lois’s suffering becomes Ernestine’s own; George and Lois’s guilt becomes her own: “So well had she loved [George], that the girl’s agony seemed to fall like heavy guilt on her own soul, and she felt that if it were so indeed, her victim must become her own most sacred charge” (1.48, my emphasis). The phrase used to describe Ernestine’s identification with Lois, “her own most sacred charge,” is telling. It is her obligation as a Christian to care for Lois, charity that is an expression of Christ-like conduct, which is modelled on Christ’s love, but it is also an obligation she takes on in a philanthropic spirit, modelled on his justice and mercy.

In making Lois’s suffering her own, Ernestine formulates a plan for the future: “at least in the narrow circle of her individual existence, not only before her marriage, but always, so far as other claims permitted, she would work out this problem with all the energy, power, and devotion of which her life was capable” (1: 81). Ernestine appears as independent worker and thinker here; the plans she begins to make are outside of any other schemes that might exist. Ernestine contemplates a life’s work based on humanitarian concerns, “to better human conditions” (2), in the words of Checkland, for fallen women. This is an active, engaged Ernestine, one who identifies with the other rather than those nominally like herself. For Ernestine, each individual soul, no matter its condition in the present world, is worth the effort and ministrations of another. The action of a single person to save another single person is of value no matter the size of the suffering in the world: it is
duty engendered by Christ’s example. It is not just a matter of family responsibility (as her fiancé Lingard believes), but one of Christian responsibility.

After Lois’s suicide, the common bond of suffering transfers to her equally erring sister Annie. Annie is also a child of God, “one only, but that one so unspeakably precious in the sight of the God who made her for Himself” (1: 137). Just as Christ would “have come down from heaven to die in His awful agony for her alone, had she only of all the human race been perishing and sinful” (1: 137), so Ernestine will work to help Annie. Ernestine, in searching out Annie, will both fulfill Christ’s example of “raising the fallen” and fulfill that character and potential which has been given her as a child of Christ, her “special mission for the furtherance of God’s Glory” (1: 81). Although Skene’s characterization of her heroines—both Ernestine here and Una Dysart as we saw above—works to encompass women’s spiritual equality and counteract their social subordination, her language does partake in the expression of hierarchy most often apparent between the classes, between the virtuous and the vicious. As Davidoff and Hall show, the separate spheres of men and women “were not hierarchical” (115), but it appears as if the separate spheres of types of women were. Although as we will see below, whereas Skene’s writing does work at times to counteract such hierarchy, at other times it is fully participant. It is the moral superiority that Ernestine implicitly imagines for herself here that provides part of the grounding for her role as saviour. Nevertheless, in this resolution and the work Ernestine undertakes throughout the novel, Skene combines the most constructive elements of charity as a Christian act and philanthropy as a concern for basic humane conditions, and, as we will see, does so to effect significant change and to give her heroine power to act in the world.
Ernestine’s religious beliefs, then, have revealed to her the misery of the world and provided her with an active sphere within which to participate. Significantly, this sphere of action was previously missing and one which she did not foresee marriage fulfilling. Early in the novel, Ernestine expresses a wish to avoid “returning to the hollow objectless life” of her circle; she wants to be of some use in the world; . . . it cannot be meant that women should spend their lives in dressing and visiting, and working at their embroidery. It must be possible for them to be useful to others, without going beyond their own province. . . . “I am sure of one thing” [she remarks] “—there must be in the great suffering world some work even for me, weak and ignorant as I am.” (1: 32-33)

Ernestine’s language of subordination and inferiority—“weak and ignorant as I am”—seems to be related more to Christian humility than to contemporary theological or biological discourse about the place of women. Nonetheless, the overriding message is one of action, of pursuing a line of “work.” The term “work” is key here, as it is associated with vocation or occupation, with the desire of women to labour, not necessarily for a livelihood but for a sense of self-purpose and a place in the world.

The restlessness and dissatisfaction Ernestine expresses here can be heard in the voice of various characters in contemporaneous women’s writing, for example Dorothea Brooke in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874) and Florence Nightingale in *Cassandra*. Nightingale is scathing in her attack of the enforced idleness of women (see especially 29-35). Nightingale, like Skene, connects the condition of women to that of Christ through the common power of suffering, and notes that “it is a privilege to suffer for your race—a privilege not reserved to
the Redeemer and the martyrs alone, but one enjoyed by numbers in every age” (Cassandra 30)—and thus elevates women’s suffering to the status of Christ’s. Ernestine’s intellectual acumen causes her to recognize the emptiness of the life prescribed for her, even though she is still in the dark about what the world holds for her. In Nightingale’s words, Ernestine has the “passion, intellect, [and] moral activity . . . and a place in society where no one of these three can be exercised” (25). Significantly, Ernestine’s desire for activity and stimulation are framed in terms of conventional womanly behaviour—specifically, activity within women’s “own province.” It is in her role as a woman, within the boundaries set for her by convention and society, that she looks for meaningful work. In the example of Christ, Skene implies, women can find a way “to be of some use in the world.”

The common bond of suffering that connects humankind to Christ is a bond that is predicated on the love expressed by Christ. The fact that Christ suffered for man’s sins (and I use the gender-specific term purposefully) links the work Ernestine undertakes, the suffering experienced by Lois and Annie, and the love Ernestine uses as a model for her actions. The novel clearly attributes the cause of both women’s suffering and prostitution to men’s behaviour and society’s acceptance of that behaviour. Thorold, the novel’s minister and out-reach worker to Greyburgh’s prostitutes, for example, expresses a wish that “the university police would administer a somewhat more even justice, and imprison the men, who are a hundred-fold more guilty than these wretched women” (1: 211). Ernestine’s

---

19 See Introduction for a discussion of Skene’s friendship with Nightingale and her involvement in Nightingale’s recruitment of nurses for the Crimea.

20 Skene was drawing on what she saw happening around her in Oxford, as both Victorian Oxford and Cambridge were subject to what might be described as a type of civilian Contagious Diseases Acts (CDActs). Arthur Engel describes how “Oxford served as an important magnet for English prostitutes, in type, though certainly not in scale, like London” (86), and details the duties and actions of the proctors in detaining women in the Spinning House. Although Skene never mentions the CDActs in the novel, they exist in the margins of the text. Hidden Depths was first published in 1866; the CDActs were established in 1864 with extensions in 1866 and 1869, and it was a number of years before campaign to repeal them gained momentum. The novel,
work and suffering, then, attempt to atone for "man's" sins much as Christ's did. However, Ernestine's mission cannot be fulfilled simply by finding and saving Annie or other women like her (for example Ellen, the prostitute who helps Ernestine find Annie and who is under Ernestine's care as the novel closes); it requires a systematic change in societal expectations of women and men, in the way in which reform and rescue are conducted, and a re-consideration of the responsibility of society to the individual.

The novel closes following Annie's death, with Ernestine's final and most lasting action: the commitment of her fortune and her time to "that miserable class of outcasts" (2: 217) which had so captured her interest and affection throughout the novel. As a response to all that has gone before, she founds a "new-style" refuge. Ernestine restructures both her own life and that of those around her; she provides a true and thoughtful response to the problems with which she has come face-to-face, not by agitating, or writing, but simply by using the example of Christ and acting on it, by examining those around her and responding to their needs based on what she sees, not on what conventional wisdom dictates as a course of action. The refuge Ernestine constitutes, her own "separate aim and venture," is one that, unlike Una's in "One Life Only," refers to no man for assistance or direction, but rather is pursued based on the experience gathered by Ernestine throughout the course of the narrative. To quote Skene in *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*, Ernestine strives to "speak to

moreover, begins and ends in the town of Seamount, likely a fictional Portsmouth, where the CDActs were first enforced. The registration of prostitutes in Oxford and the fictional Greyburgh both resemble the registration and examination of prostitutes under the CDActs. Even the fact that it was not the police who enforce the acts, but a special force in Oxford/Greyburgh is reminiscent of the details of the CDActs. In his work on prostitution, William Acton looked at Oxford and Cambridge as special cases, where there was a great cause of prostitution, "viz., the presence in their midst of a floating population of unmarried males" (24), but where the authorities had the requisite authority to keep things under control. Kathleen Washington also suggests that the "description of George [at the novel's end] as prematurely aged, weak, and demented recalls the symptoms of syphilis—which would, after all, be a more fitting punishment for his crimes" (190) than the carriage accident which caused his injuries. A number of reviewers of *Hidden Depths* have questioned Skene's portrayal of Greyburgh/Oxford as a centre for prostitution; "absurdity" was the term most often used (see "New Novels," "Reviews" and "Notices of Books" in Appendix I).
their heart by *deeds, not words*" (24, emphasis in original). In speaking to their hearts, Ernestine follows the example of Christ’s love; the deeds that she enacts, facilitating the societal change that is needed, at least in her own environment, are an example of Christ’s justice.

Skene’s depiction of Ernestine’s mission and setting up of the Refuge are indicative of an “unwearied effort to save the lost, . . . and to raise the fallen” (*P&R* 16), as it concerns the individual women but it also works to “reform the erring” (*P&R* 16), a designation which encompasses both the women and society. *Penitentiaries and Reformatories* detailed the day-to-day life in a Home, but Skene’s generalizations best describe the problems as she saw them:

> The theory that all moral effects are to be produced by discipline alone; and a consequent system of severe over-legislation, whose laws, of the most narrow and rigid description, are framed in an iron mould, to which the objects of charity must bend all their wants, necessities, and sufferings, without the smallest regard to the varieties of individual character or previous circumstance. (4-5)

Skene questions, here and in *Hidden Depths*, the very foundations of charitable work, especially work with the fallen that tended to be characterized by discipline and rigorous training. Nevertheless, despite this criticism of other refuges and their approaches to helping young women, Ernestine in *Hidden Depths* and Skene in her essays and the observations in *Penitentiaries and Reformatories* once again shows evidence of the social hierarchy noted above. The laundries in many refuges were economically and symbolically motivated: hard work, cleansing the soul as well as the clothes, was seen as a redemptive act. Skene,
however, was interested in more practical solutions.\textsuperscript{21} The work of a refuge needed to be much more than a symbolic act of redemption; it needed to effect real change. Skene advocated quite another \textit{modus operandi} for refuges, and the answer she provided in \textit{Penitentiaries and Reformatories}, modelled on Christ’s example, is the model on which Ernestine’s refuge is developed: “That agency was love—love so deep, so broad, so high, that there were none too wicked or too weak to find a shelter for their wretchedness in its infinite tenderness and pity” (16).

In \textit{Penitentiaries and Reformatories} Skene asks:

\begin{quote}
How comes it then, that those who in all sincerity are His servants, never fail, when they attempt the task of reform, to proceed on a principle diametrically opposed to that which governed all His dealings with the guilty? Surely one would have expected that they would have followed inch by inch the footsteps of perfect wisdom, when they engaged in the very work for which He left His Father’s glory, and endured the cross? (16)
\end{quote}

Her answer is the model of Christ working in the world, work motivated by love, and it is the model Skene used to regulate her own work with fallen women and prisoners and that

Ernestine uses to establish her identity at the novel’s end: “yet did the work often bring to her

\ldots the sweetest, purest joy which ever can be known on earth,—the hope that she had saved

---

\textsuperscript{21} When writing of Skene’s work with fallen women and her distrust of the penitentiary system, Rickards made an implicit distinction between the terms “Refuge” and “Home,” one which is delineated (equally implicitly) in \textit{Hidden Depths}: “If the young woman consented to say at the Refuge, Felicia’s interest in her was unabating. She would visit her, talk with her, win her confidence, do her best to persuade her to enter a Home, and keep up her interest in her afterwards by getting a place for her and corresponding with her” (146). The movement between Refuge and Home is, I think, telling. A Refuge, such as the one with which Skene was connected in Oxford or the one established by Ernestine at the end of \textit{Hidden Depths}, refers to a place where women learn to become penitent, a transition space between the life of prostitution or sin and a life that acknowledges the teachings of Carist. A Home, on the other hand, is the place where penitents learn from their penance, learn to reform their actions, are educated in new occupations so that they may take their place in the world again. For Skene, the penitentiary system as it existed in society has its place, but it was not enough. A woman could not simply leave the streets and enter a penitentiary, or in Skene’s terminology, a Home; she first needed this other station, the Refuge, through which to pass.
a deathless soul, and brought back to the feet of her dear Lord the wandering and the lost, for whom He died" (2: 221). The single woman has become the worker for Christ in the world, constructing solutions based in religious belief for what was perceived as one of society's most pervasive problems. These solutions, however, can also be linked to Poovey's argument about "the metaphor of the social body... champion[ing] the feminized epistemology of sympathy" (43). Ernestine's and Skene's characterization of the work as an extension of and motivated by love sanctions their participation in the social world. The novel and its representation of Ernestine's work with the fallen are focused on practical and constructive examples of what women can do to alleviate physical suffering, to change societal expectations. Skene's moral vision for society, grounded in personal interaction, provides a model for reform.

Because Skene focused on the role and agency of the middle-class, conservative women in Victorian society in her own work and her depictions of heroines like Ernestine or Una, the agency of the charitable recipient, particularly the female recipient, is largely missing from her work and this analysis. When attention is turned to such an issue, however, some inconsistencies and limitations in Skene's philanthropic thought and practice seem to appear. As has already been noted and will continue to be argued below, Skene places emphasis on the power and authority afforded women through such agency; the same cannot be said for the women Skene and her heroines assist. Very few charitable recipients people the pages of her work, and those who do—for example the Brook sisters and Ellen from *Hidden Depths*—are presented as passive: changed by their interaction with the charitable woman, but not actors in their own changed lives. Skene's depiction of Lois and Annie Brook, then, works to confirm Victorian conventions about the powerlessness and inevitable
end of the fallen woman. Even Ellen, who escapes the death traditionally meted out as punishment, is relegated to the margins of the text: we simply learn that she is aware of her darkest sins and that she lives with Nurse Berry caring for Annie prior to her death. The novel implies that Ellen assists at the new refuge of the novel’s end, but no details are provided; Ellen is effectively silenced and denied the agency celebrated in Ernestine’s actions. Caring power, as articulated by van Drenth and de Haan, is a mode of power that potentially reconfigures categories like gender, class, and race (24); Skene’s representations of the charitable middle-class focus upon and privilege the reconfiguration to the charitable actor, not the recipient.

As noted above in regard to Ernestine’s work and Skene’s prescription for penitentiaries, deeds or actions were privileged over words, yet in the very act of writing stories like “One Life Only” or Hidden Depths, Skene used words to model Christ’s work in the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in her journalism, which primarily represented her own charitable and philanthropic work. Skene’s writing on prison life is significant because it explicitly combines action and words. Whereas in her fiction social activism was implicitly modelled for the reader through the actions of the characters, Skene’s journalism enacted Christ’s directive to use His actions as an example and thus modelled behaviour much more overtly and didactically.

Since Skene’s journalism addresses both the attributes of a prison visitor and the condition of the prisoners, the model of love, justice, and purity was instructive for both her readers and the inmates with whom she has contact. Skene admitted in “Prison Visiting” that

---

22 See Chapter Three below for a discussion of how Skene shaped and constructed her interaction with prisoners and prostitutes for narrative representation.
the “greatest difficulty” for the Lady Visitor was to “win [the prisoners’] confidence,” and yet also suggested it was accomplished best by “simply . . . befriend[ing] them in any way that may be possible” (773). Once this friendship had been achieved, the Lady Visitor had the potential to enact change in the prisoner’s life. Grounding her theory of prison visiting in the principles of friendship rather than any other more official or overtly religious basis, Skene signals the importance of the philanthropic impulse (humanitarian concerns) in conjunction with the charitable one (religious concerns). This movement towards the philanthropic, or one might say secular, motivation for the Lady Visitor and the work she does links Skene’s actions and writing to the naturalization of religious beliefs for the English middle class explored by Davidoff and Hall. Women like Skene and her readers drew upon a belief in the individual’s responsibility for the other, a responsibility that had its roots in the Evangelical movement but which had by this point transcended any one religious sect to encompass society as a whole (Davidoff and Hall 148-49).

In the case of John Hill of “A Released Prisoner” in Good Words,23 for example, it was the Lady Visitor’s attention to his physical sufferings, even the lack of humane treatment, that broke the visitor–prisoner divide. On her first visit we are told, “[n]ot a word did she attempt of religious teaching; not the slightest allusion did she make to his position as a criminal. She spoke to him as she might have done to her own brother had he lain there suffering before her” (813). Hill is not a type, not a prisoner or criminal subject for reform; he is a person, an individual in his own right, with needs and desires. Skene refutes here the

23 In this early article, Skene did not identify herself as the Lady Visitor, but the story of this prisoner is retold a number of times in her work on prison life, including “Prison Visiting” (see pages 763-64) and, more significantly, Scenes from a Silent World (see the story of Jack Smith, pages 89-97), which was predicated on the fact that she related her own experience. Thus it seems appropriate to identify Miss M— as Skene. Additionally, this article opens with a description of the gaol “in the ancient city of——” as a “massive old building that has remained unchanged among all the modern improvements which have produced our model prisons and new convict establishments” (812). The City Gaol of Oxford, where Skene was visiting at this time, dated from the mediæval period.
systematic or bureaucratic approach to prisoners and their reform, replacing it with personal interaction. The narrator’s references to “religious teaching” and “his position as a criminal” suggest the very class-inflected views that the comments attempt to negate: that the Lady Visitor has a right to speak to him on such subjects. In treating Hill as a friend or brother, Skene defines the relationship between prisoner and Lady Visitor as one of love; in recognizing his individuality, Skene acknowledges the care due to a fellow human being. Skene, as Lady Visitor, looks outside herself to the individual who is the prisoner. In the attention to his body, she also attends to the social body.

Noting his fever and great thirst, and the inability of mere water to quench it, the Lady Visitor arranges with the doctor for him to have lemonade and oranges so “that he might have more permanent relief than her [handkerchief] could afford” (814). These small attentions lead Hill to question the guard about her status in the prison, and then to a growing friendship between Hill and the Lady Visitor. Additionally, they seem to be indicative of Skene’s work with the less fortunate in general. Sophia Palmer, for example, differentiated between Skene’s “freedom in acted thought, and trammeldom [sic] in written expression,” noting how she would “act and speak, in immediate, moment to moment, touch with the guiding Spirit” (352). The example of the Divine Master might be easier to carry out in practice than to articulate in writing.

It is the one-to-one relationship developed between Hill and the Lady Visitor that leads to the introduction of a religious component into their conversation—“the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin”—and Hill’s transformation into “the most humble and gentle of penitents” (817). Although the governor first introduces the visitor to Hill because he was “bound to do what [he] could for the good of [Hill’s] soul” (813), he refers to the
prisoners as “dumb beasts” (815), re-inscribing the hierarchal view of the lower classes. Thus the love and mercy that might be at the heart of the governor’s intention to help Hill are undermined. Skene’s accomplishment of the task by way of recognizing Hill’s humanity, however, converts the governor’s misguided goal to true mercy and love, to one connected to the place of the prisoner in the social body. Skene’s treatment of Hill begins with attention to philanthropic concerns, a bettering of his physical condition, which is then transformed into charitable concerns in their broadest sense: the salvation of his soul. Throughout, however, it is the prisoner’s wants and needs—physical and spiritual—that shape the caring power the Lady Visitor exerts.

Skene’s journalism about prisons and prison reform reflected the insights gained from her personal experience, providing new ways to think about the treatment of prisoners, and was used to model behaviour and instruct her audience. As is apparent from the “John Hill” account, which moves from Lady Visitor–prisoner friendship to the friendship of Christ, one of the motivating factors in prison visiting was the reformation of the prisoner, specifically his or her spiritual or moral reform. William Forsythe traces what he characterizes as the “spiritual reform” movement in prison management to the turn of the nineteenth century (20). Skene seemed to assume that moral reformation, not the deterrence of crime, was the ultimate goal of imprisonment, and it was an assumption that was predicated both on her experience of prisoners in the Oxford Gaol and, once again, on the model of Christ’s work to bring the erring back to the fold. The motivation behind Skene’s visiting was thus in part her desire to bring about the prisoners’ spiritual reformation. She was clearly interested in bringing prisoners to a “sense of sin” and to the knowledge and acceptance of Christ as saviour. An excerpt from one of her prison diaries, for example, recorded her exasperation
that she "could not get [Francis S—] to promise she would say even one prayer" (qtd. in Rickards 209). It becomes apparent in her writing on the subject, however, that this motive stayed primarily in the background (she seldom addresses it directly); the relationship is based in the secular although motivated by the Lady Visitor’s religious belief.

The epigraph added to Scenes from a Silent World (1889) for its book publication is significant:

Do the darkness and the terror plot against you?

We also plan.

Those who love you are more than those who hate you—

Trust God, O man.—From the Koran. (v)24

This quotation speaks to the prisoner, promising change and reform through the divinity of God. The "plan" of the quotation, when coupled with the idea of reform or change, suggests the religious salvation and moral reformation at the heart of prison experience, with love as its centrepiece. But it also suggests the importance of a comprehensive approach to the prisoner, a plan that is not haphazard or universal but particularized to the needs of the group and the individuals within that group. This is the message that much of Skene’s prison journalism sought to introduce into the minds of her readers. Part four of her “Prison Administration and the Training of Officials” series, for example, addressed the issue of prison chaplains, and spoke “from the experience of many years’ attendance at the religious

---

24 Skene was not, in fact, quoting the Koran; rather it is Edwin Arnold’s 1883 Pearls of the Faith: or Ismal’s Rosary, being the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah. She also misquotes or changes some of the lines. The complete poem is, “We are able to remake you, when ye die, / For cold death / Cometh forth from us, as warm life / and gift of breath. / Do the darkness and the terror plot against you? / We also plan; / They that love you are stronger than your haters. / Trust God, O man!” (127). Skene was likely introduced to the Koran during her family’s travels through Greece and Turkey in the 1840s.
services provided for prisoners” (41). Notably, she took the typical prison chaplain to task for “sermons [that] are generally much too discursive” and “of a nature likely to prove completely barren of good results” (41). And as we saw with Ernestine Courtenay’s founding of a “new-style” Refuge at the end of Hidden Depths, Skene did not limit her commentary to the theoretical or abstract. She provided a practical remedy to the problem: send “the future chaplain . . . to work for some months in a district peopled by those who have been harshly termed the ‘scum of their earth,’ . . . and he will soon learn what species of instruction is required for the prisoners who will be committed to his care” (41).

In these instructions, sending the chaplain to work, Skene brings together action and words, deeds and storytelling; she does not simply advocate the importance of deeds over words, but the right deeds and the right words. At the root of Skene’s experience and solution was the belief that a well-delivered and thoughtful sermon “on the very foundations of religious truth,” one that takes into account the nature of the audience to whom it is addressed by “using plain emphatic language” (41), has the real potential to accomplish some good for the inmate. The Hospital article ends with just such an example: an elderly prisoner who had spent most of his life in and out of gaol, hears the sermon of a chaplain who “took for his theme the statement that God helped those who helped themselves, and gave a most clear exposition of it suited to the capacities of those around him” (41). The “broken down man” responded to the sermon by telling the governor “that parson has come here for me” (41); subsequently the prisoner met with the preacher, “and the result was that the prisoner regained hope and courage. He became, as he said himself, ‘a new man,’ prepared to do honest work on his release, and fight the battle of life with heart and energy” (41). This, for

---

25 Rickards reported that Skene played the organ at the Prison chapel at services twice every Sunday, and after ill health required her to resign this post, she still attended the Prison chapel once every Sunday (this in addition to her attendance at St. Thomas-the-Martyr) (204-05).
Skene, was the goal of introducing religious thought into prison: to speak directly to the prisoner. Right deeds that lead to right words have an immense power for good.

The model of Christ’s work in the world proved in Skene’s hands to be a powerful tool for women in their attention to the social body. In the relationship of Christ to humankind, Skene and her heroines developed a model that provided them both with an authoritative voice and language to develop their views of society’s problems and potential solutions and, equally significant, with a sphere of influence in which to undertake practical actions. Skene’s writing, moreover, works to counterbalance some of the silence associated with women’s work and the lack of a “public face . . . [for women since] the clergy dominate the official records” (Davidoff and Hall 432) of philanthropic institutions.

**The Power of Self-Sacrifice**

Although Christ’s model of love, justice, and purity provided a pattern for women to follow in the world, the question of exactly how to take up such action was still to be answered. Indeed, early in *Hidden Depths*, the narrator looks to the suffering that surrounds Ernestine Courtenay and her desire to ameliorate it, and asks, “but how, in the name of all that is practical, how is it to be done?” (1: 80). The phrasing of the question in terms of the practical is instructive: this is not a rhetorical or theoretical question; it is a question that needs a realistic and workable answer. The answer is suggested in the second component of women’s activity developed in the introduction to this chapter: in the words of Ernestine, Christ’s “utter abnegation of self” (2: 57). Self-sacrifice provides Skene’s heroines with a voice of authority and a sphere of action that worked both to shape their place in the world and to reject or refigure the conventional understanding of womanhood.
The emphasis on the other inherent in self-sacrifice is an example of the paradox at the centre of women’s lives, especially religious women’s. In *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, Joan Scott argues that “paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse ‘sexual differences’—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement through its long history” (3-4, emphasis in original). This paradox is clearly apparent in Skene’s work overall and more particularly in her construction of her heroines and their work in the world. Skene accepts “sexual differences” as they apply to women in the type of work her heroines undertake: rescue work, serving the poor, etc.; in other words, work that draws on woman’s special attributes. At the same time, however, “sexual differences” that represent women as submissive and followers are resolutely denied in the action and participation in the social domain undertaken by these same heroines. If, as Scott contends, the history of women and feminism needs “analytical distance” (2) to provide an alternative to the “teleological story of cumulative progress toward an ever-elusive goal” (1), then the nature of the paradox and its potential to “put into circulation a set of truths that challenge but don’t displace orthodox beliefs” (4-5) deserve exploration. Skene’s work provides a lens for that exploration, for the challenge to and simultaneous establishment of those beliefs. Caring power, as van Drenth and de Haan articulate it, is “power aimed at shaping new identities—and thus new configurations of gender, class, and ethnicity” (24). The emphasis on the other, then, as a constitutive aspect of Skene’s narratives and development of her heroines, provides the possibility of wielding power and authority through self-sacrifice.

In an August 5, 1896, letter to William Blackwood, following the publication of “Glimpses of Some Vanished Celebrities” and “Some Episodes in a Long Life” in his magazine, Skene asked for advice about writing a memoir because she has “been met on
every side with requests to gather up all the recollections of my life in a separate volume,”
including a request from the publisher Andrew Lang (MS 4562 [1896] f.152). She “shrinks
intensely from bringing [her]self forward in such an arrogant manner” and claims that the
two articles contained “the cream of what I could relate of any real interest.” Skene also
expressed a concern that since she had little of her working and writing life left, she wanted
“what may remain to me of working faculty [to] be made of some real use to others” rather
than wasted on a “long pretentious memoir.” Although Blackwood’s reply is not extant, later
letters from Skene suggest he supported her decision not to write an autobiography, and on
July 15, 1897, she sent him “a copy of her latest”: presumably A Test of the Truth, a work of
that could be described as “of some real use to others,” dealing as she wished and he advised
with scepticism and agnosticism (MS 4666 [1897] f. 189). Skene’s interest in all her writing
was not with the self: it was with others and what she could do for them.26

The impulse to put aside one’s own needs, desires, and wants was a defining
characteristic of Skene’s fictional heroines, as was identification with the other rather than
the self, but is through this very self-sacrifice that new identities are constructed for the
heroines. The connection of women to self-sacrifice is, of course, also linked to the
connection between women and the example of Christ explored above: Christ was sacrificed
for humankind’s sins; he died that humanity might live. This construction of women’s
sacrifice is presented in much literature surrounding philanthropy and charity. Writing about
the need for women to undertake rescue work in 1874, Ellice Hopkins makes a plea to her
“sisters in Christ” and notes it does not require “a remarkable woman [or] peculiar gifts to do

26 Woods explains in Rickards’s biography that “all literary labour was looked upon as intervals of rest and
refreshment in what she considered her real and more serious occupation: visiting those who were sick and in
prison, trying to discover the sorrows of others for the sake of carrying them herself as far as she was able to do
so” (375-76).
this work[,] . . . many women after thirty, married or unmarried, can do this work” (The Visitation of Dens. An Appeal to the Women of England 27). Although Hopkins does not specifically use the term sacrifice, her pairing of “simple womanly kindness” and “the strength that comes from faith in Christ” (27) suggests that the work has the potential to emulate Christ-like service and points to the acceptance of “sexual differences” noted by Scott. In rescue work, women sacrificed their time and energy, and even their own connection to virtue and purity, for another’s sins so that that other might come to understand her place in the world and in Christ. Of course, women’s actions in the social domain cannot be equated with Christ’s sacrifice and crucifixion, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries understanding of sacrifice as “to surrender or give up (something) for the attainment of some higher advantage or dearer object” (3a OED), it is possible to associate women’s charitable and philanthropic activities with Christ’s injunction to care for the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned in Matthew 25 (which serves as the title and epigraph for this chapter). Their work, then, is the sacrifice that can be made in this world.

But what were the effect and the power of such sacrifices? What was accomplished by negating the self in favour of the other? Yes, it did have a positive or ameliorating effect on society, but what about the women themselves? Skene addresses these questions in her fiction, although not overtly or possibly even consciously, constructing identities for her heroines that suggest a new understanding of woman’s place in the social domain while also recommending practical responses to society’s needs.

An act of sacrifice, particularly on the part of women, was somewhat expected in Victorian society. Not everyone lived up to such expectations, of course, but the pressure was prevalent. In Skene’s work, then, self-sacrifice on the part of her heroines was a
naturalized and unremarkable act, not unlike the example of Christ explored above. Ilana Blumberg, in "Unnatural Self Sacrifice': Trollope's Ethic of Mutual Benefit," investigates what sacrifice meant to the Victorians. She argues that Trollope's use of self-sacrifice (particularly in The Warden (1855) and The Last Chronicle of Barset (1867)) "hardly do[es] away with the demand for generous, selfless, or self-forgetful behavior; instead, [his novels] take on perhaps the more radical task of reconfiguring that behavior as entirely ordinary: normative rather than exemplary; hardly worthy of remark, thus deeply worthy of esteem" (507). Blumberg's analysis examines how Trollope brings together theft and sacrifice in his novels, both of which "belonged to an economic-moral vocabulary" (508), in order to critique the equation of theft with egoism and sacrifice with altruism. As Blumberg phrases it, "in Trollope's hands . . . sacrifice loses some of its sheen from its nearness to theft, while theft loses some of its tarnish from its nearness to sacrifice" (508). Thus in refusing the simplistic polarity of egoism and altruism, Trollope "allows morally desirable acts to reap reward for their agents" (509), and sacrifice is revealed as mutually beneficial for participants and the community. Although Skene's work does not participate in quite the same critique of sacrifice as Trollope's, Blumberg's conclusions do provide a useful framework through which to examine how Skene configures sacrifice and the effect of its rewards.

Like Eleanor Harding (The Warden) and Grace Crowley (Last Chronicle), Skene's heroines are motivated to sacrifice personal desires, happiness, even fortunes so that another may be spared suffering. Moreover, this is presented as normative; Skene's narrators make little comment as to the singular or extraordinary nature of the act. Ruth Vincent, the heroine of Skene's first novel Use and Abuse (1849) comes to mind as an example.27 She is

---

27 The examples are, in fact, numerous. In almost every story she wrote, Skene incorporated some facet of self-sacrifice, usually on the part of a female character.
described as possessing "an uncontrollable sympathy for all who were afflicted" (145), and as a woman who would not "have bartered the inexpressible joy she felt in tending and waiting on the most abject and degraded of the poor around her, for all the fondest care and tenderness that could have been bestowed upon herself" (167). Ruth's sacrifice of her own fortune to care for others is presented in a very matter-of-fact way in the closing chapter of the novel. We are simply told that "by reserving of her fortune only what was strictly requisite for the necessaries of life, she might devote it and herself entirely to the ministry of the suffering and afflicted" (441).

But whereas mutual benefit (communal or personal) is figured in Trollope in terms of marriage—both Eleanor Harding and Grace Crowley begin by sacrificing marriage proposals only to be rewarded with the same marriage by novel's end—no such reward is afforded Skene's heroines. In fact, Skene for the most part favours the pure, altruistic form of sacrifice, one that is emptied of egoism, a form which Trollope, according to Blumberg, critiques. As we shall see below, the "purist standard for sacrifice" (Blumberg 509) proves problematic for Skene as well; in figuring sacrifice in such a way for her heroines, Skene in turn provides for the mutual benefit of agent and community through the expanded roles for the heroines in addressing society's problems. Indeed, in attempting to empty the self of wants and needs, the charitable and philanthropic woman carves a space for herself to live and work in an otherwise masculine world. She opens herself up to assume and exert a great deal of power in the caring realm and beyond, power that also, significantly, ensures her superiority and control over others. By examining some of Skene's fictional heroines, namely May Bathurst of "Tried" (1871) and Ernestine Courtenay of Hidden Depths, it is possible to develop an understanding of how what is nominally a self-denying act, one that is
nobly grounded in religious beliefs, becomes transformed into an powerful agency used to construct these heroines’ lives and the lives of those around them. Like Trollope, then, Skene “imagines a form of benefit that is not conceit, not pride, not self-sufficiency, not overmastering self-love, and not the sacrifice of others, but instead is collective benefit” (Blumberg 516).

Blumberg contends that to understand the meaning of sacrifice for the Victorians, “we should hear ‘sacrifice’ first as a religious term, and then as a secularized ethical term as well as an economic term” (510). The idea that sacrifice is at once a religious and ethical term links the work of sacrifice in the Victorian novel and society to the definitions and understanding of charity and philanthropy, with the former being a religious term and the latter an ethical or moral one. For Skene, it seems that to achieve her ends all these terms are very much intertwined and dependent upon each other. Upon examining Skene’s heroines’ self-sacrifice, it is clear that she appears to advocate the conventional ethos of sacrifice: there can be no apparent reward for the heroines’ actions, nor can the sacrifice be motivated by anything but the most altruistic principles. Nonetheless, such purity is difficult to achieve or maintain, and Skene, not unlike Trollope, questions the purity of sacrifice, in her case by displacing the attendant egoism from the charitable/philanthropic realm to her heroines’ personal lives.

In “Tried,” Skene examines self-sacrifice through May Bathurst’s charitable visiting, visiting that was at the centre of much Victorian women’s charity and philanthropy. Women charitable visitors filled some of the gaps left by the New Poor Law of 1834, and they were called upon to perform a myriad of duties, from simple nursing of the elderly, to teaching young mothers how to care for infants or how to cook and clean in their own homes, to,
finally, providing spiritual guidance. The women visitors kept daily journals recording information about those visited, and a number of publications provided advice on visiting and on what type of information should be recorded.28 May Bathurst begins her story as a seemingly conventional, benevolent woman, one who cares for the people on her estate. On the surface, her actions would seem exemplary and worthy of emulation. Always a part of her life, charity is approached with renewed vigour on the death of her father, when May promises the lay preacher Mr. Evans to be “His in life” (434). The message here is clear: in making such a promise May commits herself to using Christ as a model for her own life, including the sacrifice of self.

Despite May’s laudable ideals, however, she falls short in her duty to God and humanity—not in terms of the results of her visiting or the manner in which she carries it out, but rather as a result of her self-deception. For, regardless of her “power of sympathy” (529) and the “many fair schemes she had, not only for the relief of the poor in her neighbourhood, but also for visiting hospitals and prisons” (514), May is engaged in an “unconscious self-deceit, that she was but trying to weave a glittering veil of zealous charity wherewith to hide from her own eyes the subtle betrayal of her highest allegiance which was involved in her devotion to her earthly love” (514). Self-deception, then, undermines the work of self-sacrifice and points to the problems inherent in a model of behaviour that is idealistic not realistic, as the sarcasm of the phrase “glittering veil of zealous charity” suggests. May’s

28 For example, Useful Hints: Gathered from the Experience of a Life (1880) provides an A-Z compendium of facts, remedies, etc., which a visitor might require knowledge of; others, such as Helen Baillie, A Manual for District Visitors in Town and Country Parishes or Simple Words for My District (1890), and Francis Hessey, Hints to District Visitors, Followed by a Few Prayers Selected for their Use (1858), excerpt readings from the gospels and other devotional texts which might be useful at a sick bed or death; still others are listings of charitable and other societies whose resources may be needed, for example Charles Bosanquet, London: Some Accounts of its Growth, Charitable Agencies, and Wants (1868) and Rev. Littlewood, The Visitation of the Poor: A Practical Manual for District Visitors, Deaconesses, Lay- Helpers, &C. (1876).
sacrifice, then, is actually centred in her own needs and fears and thus might even be described as a celebration of self.

In fact, May’s actions are more than centred in the self: she has chosen Sydney, the modern sceptic who renounces religion, whom May describes as “an enemy of Christ” (480), over God. Charity that is egoistic is repudiated by Skene and others who make the distinction, implicitly or explicitly, between it and philanthropy. As noted in my introduction, Checkland defines charity as “designed rather for the re-assurance of the giver than for the good of the receiver” (2). Skene signals the flawed nature of such sacrifice in part by failing to describe any of May’s “fair schemes.” Since they are centred in the self not in self-sacrifice, they do not qualify as truly charitable, nor are they philanthropic—“based on humanitarian considerations” (Checkland 2)—and thus they are not worthy of Skene’s or her readers’ acknowledgment. May’s charity and sacrifice are meant to re-assure her of her relationship to God, to embody and enact a relationship that does not truly exist, since she loves Sydney “more than heaven, more than God” (565). May continues to deceive herself and displace her concerns into charity throughout the first half of the story. 29

Even when Sydney falls in love with Irene Clive, an impoverished and friendless half-Greek woman, May’s apparent self-sacrifice is still dominated by self-interest. She enriches Irene with part of her own estate so that Sydney (who needs a wife with money) can

---

29 May’s attempt to distract herself from her concerns over the approaching nuptials with charitable endeavours is echoed late in the century in Mary Ward’s Marcella (1894). The titular heroine, like May, is uneasy about her engagement, although for very different reasons. Significantly, however, even before Raeburn proposes to Marcella, she is planning how the marriage would give her the “most splendid opportunities. . . . The cottages should be rebuilt. . . . No hopeless old age, no cringing dependence! We would try co-operation on the land, and pull it through” (101). As the engagement continues, the “splendid [charitable] opportunities” opened to Marcella do not compensate for the growing distance between her and Raeburn. Although I do not want to suggest Ward was consciously drawing on Skene in this depiction of Marcella, she did know Skene’s work well while growing up in Oxford and reported that Skene “encouraged me to print my first published story, ‘A Westmoreland Story,’ which I wrote when I was seventeen or eighteen, and published by her help in the Churchman’s Magazine” (qtd. in Rickards 133).
marry her. But the separation from Sydney does not “restore May to her true self” (692), does not return her to God, and the reason is clear: May’s sacrifice is based on her love for Sydney and she is still placing his needs, his happiness (to the detriment of her own, it is true) above her responsibility to others. Some of the tenants of Combe Bathurst, moreover, are severely disadvantaged by the financial accommodation made for Irene; May’s selfishness comes at a cost to others and her love of God. Early in the story, Sydney thinks to himself, “[b]enevolence is very fatiguing, . . . I begin to think I shall find a philanthropical wife a serious calamity” (483). He accuses May of a “philanthropic mania,” which he expects her to give up once they are married, in order to “keep to the duties and occupations of [her] own station” (565). Although we should suspect these sentiments, given who voices them, Sydney is, on one level, correct. The type of philanthropy and self-deceit May is engaged in is “a serious calamity.” Thus throughout the majority of the story, May’s sacrifice is questioned because of her self-deception, and she is constrained in her sphere of action rather than freed to act in the social domain.

Sacrifice properly motivated and acted upon, however, can engender power and agency for women and provide a mutual benefit for the woman and her community. It is not until May is confronted by the preacher Evans, who accuses her of being again and again “tried and found wanting” (691), that May is able to “deliver[] herself up once more unto her God, in repentance, in self-devotion, in undivided love, with a fullness of surrender which would bear her henceforward triumphant through every test and trial” (691, my emphasis). This turn to God, surrendering of the self, is one that is motivated by a “true” sacrifice. There is no interest in her own needs, unconscious feelings, or desires: it is God’s will, Christ’s example, that overrides all else. The egoism inherent in May’s earlier self-deception
is absent in this part of the story; however, unlike Trollope who brings egoism and altruism into dialogue with each other, Skene appears to return to the idealism rejected earlier. It is true that the idealism is reached through an acknowledgment of the self’s relation to God, but it is idealistic nonetheless.

May once again turns to the tenants of Combe Bathurst, but now with a purpose of truly serving God, with a conscience free of self-deceit. Accordingly, we are now given a description of her work for and with the tenants of Combe Bathurst:

Besides giving her personal care to all who were poor or sick on the estate, she founded schools and built a small church for the quarrymen, where she procured the services of a resident clergyman, and having done this she established a temperance club and reading-room, which had a wonderful effect in drawing the men away from the public-houses, and organized an evening schools for girls, which she superintended herself. . . . Those who were her equals reaped the benefit of her loving tenderness whenever she could in any way help or console them, but to the poor she was at all times as a very angel. (707)

May atones for her past conduct through good works, but quietly and unassumingly; one might say that actions speak louder than words, and the story ends with a very active, participatory May. All the work that was before only in the realm of thought becomes action. May’s sacrifice and philanthropic activities, then, are truly for the benefit of others and the community as a whole benefits; the structure of life and society has changed for the better at Combe Bathurst, the suffering of the community is alleviated.
In representing such an idealistic altruism in the story’s conclusion, Skene’s work partakes of the abnegation that is an aspect of sacrifice. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, using Carlyle’s *Heroes* as an example, defines abnegation as “renunciation of oneself; self-sacrifice” (3). But in this complete surrendering by May, Skene almost seems to suggest an evacuation of the self that is incompatible with the power and agency May ultimately wields. Of course, such abnegation has its roots in religious ideas of sacrifice, but as Blumberg has revealed, sacrifice is also an ethical and economic term where abnegation has no place. Perhaps Skene is trying to have it both ways: the religious sacrifice that is built on a renunciation of self and a more ethical one that relies upon an acceptance of the self acting in the world, concepts that might link, once again, to the competing definitions of charity (a religious act) and philanthropy (an ethical or humanitarian act).

Since the above description of May’s activity also encompasses a quality of power and agency for her, a space over which she asserts authority and control, the egoism of ideal altruism enters the picture once again, and again is displaced as self-deception: Skene, while seemingly only re-inscribing conventional womanly self-sacrifice, in fact challenges conventional gender roles. Very few extant letters or personal writings of Skene’s exist and thus it is not possible for us to know if she might, like Elizabeth Gaskell, think that she “must be an improper woman without knowing it” (Chapple and Pollard 223); however, there must be some self-deception on Skene’s part if we are meant to read May’s self-sacrifice simply as a reaffirmation of her place in the world. Rather, May and Skene are subject to the nature of the paradox women face: “put[ting] into circulation a set of truths that challenge but don’t displace orthodox beliefs” (Scott 4-5). It is May’s vision for the world that dictates the

---

30 The phrase is from an 1853 letter to Gaskell’s friend Eliza Fox and refers to the publication and reception of Gaskell’s novel *Ruth*. 
curriculum of the school. It is her beliefs that are inculcated to the tenants in reading rooms, temperance clubs and evenings for young women. May might be defined in terms of a “loving tenderness . . . a very angel” by those tenants, but she is a powerful force in the neighbourhood. Significantly, she also cares for that part of the estate belonging to Sydney and his wife, as he “made not the smallest effort for the moral and spiritual welfare of his tenants in any way” (707). Here, May actually fulfills the role that Sydney should be undertaking on his estate: the single woman takes on the traditional masculine, paternal role when required, and gender is not a limiting factor.

Through self-sacrifice—Skene’s idea of “true” self-sacrifice—woman has gained the power and authority over the lives of others that are conventionally read as the province of men, and both estates are thus modelled on May’s understanding of the world, of humankind’s place in relation to God. Without calling for the equality of men and women, without a thesis on the equal abilities of men and women, without a discussion of the need for fulfilling work for both men and women, Skene has carved a space for her heroine that participates in each of these discourses. By valorizing May Bathurst as the conventional Victorian woman, benevolent and putting the care of others before the self, Skene disrupts that convention and represents the agency and possibilities open to the single woman.

Significantly, Skene’s focus in “Tried,” as in much of her œuvre, worked to define this power, agency, and mutually beneficial sacrifice for the single woman. Victorian authors like Skene, who dealt with social problems, reform, and the role of women, provided dénouements for their novels that present an imaginative response or solution to these issues. These solutions, moreover, were (again like Skene’s) figured in terms of the middle-class woman. But this is where the similarities end. Margaret Hale of Gaskell’s North and South
(1855), Dorothea Brooke of Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and Marcella Boyce of Ward’s *Marcella* (1894) are all, like May Bathurst, concerned with the conditions of the less fortunate who surround them. Also like May, their first attempts at reform or amelioration are not particularly successful. Eliot describes Dorothea’s benevolent impetus as “haunt[ing] her like a passion, . . . preoccupy[ing] her desire with the yearning to give relief, and [making] her own ease tasteless” (622-23), and Gaskell’s Margaret is made to realize that the offer to visit her poor neighbours “[took] the shape of an impertinence on her part” (74).

Marcella develops an ill-advised scheme for “reviving and improving the local industry of straw-plaiting” (156), in which the local poor agree to participate only to placate the squire’s daughter, not because they think it will “regenerate the whole life” (156) of the village. The novels end on notes of success for the women philanthropists; however, that success is defined in terms of marriage.

It is the middle-class heroines’ marriages, moreover, that metaphorically and figuratively work as response or solution to the novels’ concerns with social conditions. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea, although not a St. Theresa, has achieved at least a modest degree of success. As the narrator notes in the finale to the novel, “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts” (688), and Ladislaw in Parliament is the historic actor with Dorothea “giv[ing] him wifely help” (680, my emphasis). Dorothea, then, is successful in terms of her role as man’s helpmeet not in terms of her own actions. The marriage of Margaret Hale and John Thornton at the end of *North and South* is also imagined both as a partnership between the two characters and the classes they represent in the novel and as a way for factory reform to be carried forward. In Ward’s novel, Marcella, when she realizes Raeburn will propose again, promises herself, “to bring honour and independence and joy to
those who had them not. But not alone; only, not alone!” (539). Each of these examples suggests that the mutual benefit to agent and community is accomplished through the marriage of the heroine, as Blumberg argues with respect to Eleanor Harding and Grace Crowley (544). In these works, as in the other major social-problem novels, such as those by Charles Kingsley and Benjamin Disraeli, the marriage works as a metaphorical or allegorical solution to the very social problem the novel explores. Disraeli’s *Sybil; or, The Two Nations* (1845) is exemplary: the bridge between the “two nations” is accomplished by way of the marriage of Sybil and Egermont, a marriage of nobility, youthfulness, and religion, despite the novel’s interest in the working class (with which Sybil is aligned for much of the story) and issues such as moral- and physical-force radicalism, strikes, and the “truck” system.

In stark contrast, Skene’s heroines and their sacrifices represent themselves in the imaginative solutions to social problems (such as May’s new vision for Combe Bathurst or Ernestine’s new style Refuge); the single exception is Una Dysart in “One Life Only,” who is the only heroine to bring an engagement to fruition in marriage. Skene’s fiction, then, provides a space for the single woman to act in the world, to participate in the public sphere, and to prove her worth to society (especially in the face of the “odd woman” problem explored in such authors as W. R. Greg “Why are Women Redundant?” (April 1862)). These women, moreover, are at the centre of Skene’s fiction, and the solutions they provide are, if somewhat truncated at the end of a novel, at least defined and explored. Kingsley, in *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* (1850), does provide a model similar to Skene’s: Lady Ellerton is educated by her husband, Alton’s poems and the needlewomen in the slum; the result is that she sacrifices her fortune and her time, sets up a cooperative in the slums, and lives and
works with the needlewomen (355-57). But Lady Ellerton is very much a secondary
character in the story, a widow, and little detail is given about her project. In Skene’s work,
single heroines perform “unhistoric acts,” acts of which little notice is taken or discussion
developed, but acts that engender a definable worldly good for others and themselves.

Like May Bathurst’s self-sacrifice, Ernestine Courtenay’s in Hidden Depths works to
develop authority and agency for the single woman in Victorian society, but whereas in
“Tried” Skene was interested in exposing the motives for such sacrifice and nominal
Christian activity, in Hidden Depths the heroine’s personal self-sacrifice throughout the
novel serves quite a different purpose. The novel explores prostitution and the place of the
fallen woman in society, an issue close to Skene, who worked with prostitutes throughout her
life in Oxford. The surviving annual reports for the Oxford House of Refuge record her
unfailing and continued support of the institution, both during her life and after. Skene was
one of the “Committee of Lady Visitors” from its inception in 1875 to the year of her death,
and her contributions as a subscriber were consistent. She was never a member of the
Committee administering the House, but this seems to have been a matter of custom, not
willingness: no women were official members until after her death. The “History of the
Refuge, 1875-1888,” appended to the 1888 report, does not specifically mention Skene as
one of the founders of the House; only the Rev. John Rigaud, the Chaplain and Secretary
until his death in 1889, was mentioned by name (9-10). The 1908 Annual Report, however,

31 Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh might also be considered here, although to call it a social-problem
novel is somewhat of a stretch. The end of the story, however, Aurora and Romney, “poet and philanthropist /
... stand side by side, / both stand face to face with men, / Contemplating people in the rough”(VI.199-201), but
the nature of their joint project in book nine is not defined.
32 The annual reports of 1879-1917 are bound together and can be found only at the Bodleian Library (BOD
PER GA OXON 80 657); the copy of the county archives no longer exists. The reports are spotty, however,
with a number of years simply missing. The Annual Report of 1900 recognizes a “special gift of ten pounds . . .
under the will of the late Miss Skene” and later reports refer to gifts of eight pounds from the “Trustees of the
Felicia Skene Memorial Fund” (see reports for 1915 and 1918).
does note that “[b]efore 1889 the work of reclaiming the fallen had been carried on mainly by
the devotion of the Rev. John Rigaud, assisted by a few friends, foremost among whom were
the Rev. Octavius Ogle and Miss Felicia Skene,” and that “certain ladies, foremost among
whom was Miss Skene, also took a warm interest in the work” (6-7). Skene’s “warm interest
in the work” formed the basis for both *Hidden Depths* and *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*
and was also evident in some of her journalism.

Although little of Skene’s writing on prostitutes and penitentiaries includes what is
normally termed “rescue-work” (the searching out of women in the streets and brothels of the
town), Skene did reach out to the women who had been apprehended and placed in the old
Spinning House under the custody of the Oxford proctors, where she “had received
permission to visit, . . . pleading with them to abandon their old habits and to come with her
. . . to the Refuge, . . . where she herself would visit and befriend them” (Rickards 145). The
town of Greyburgh in *Hidden Depths*, where Annie is seduced and takes to the streets, is a
very thinly disguised Oxford, and although the actions of Ernestine within the novel cannot
and should not be equated with Skene’s life, clearly they must, in part, be based on Skene’s
experience with and beliefs about prostitution.

Ernestine’s self-sacrifice in *Hidden Depths* works to explore the place of the
prostitute in a moral society: her sacrifice transgresses the boundaries of the home and the
purview of women, exposes the double standard that exists around prostitution, and
challenges middle-class respectability. Her mission is somewhat singular: Ernestine

33 Indeed, her 1898 piece for *The Hospital*, “Methods of Rescue Work,” refers not to street-by-street searching
but to the regulations and workings of a penitentiary (267).
34 See Engel for a discussion of the role of the proctors and the university in the regulation and control of
prostitution in Victorian Oxford.
35 Skene partially addressed the “factual” basis of the novel in its preface; see below in Chapter Two for a
discussion of the preface.
descends into the “dens of vice” in search of Annie Brook, in the clear belief that she will be able to “save” the girl. Ernestine is in a tenuous position as a single woman, since the journey has the potential of tainting her with the same pollution as those with whom she comes into contact.36 Quoting from a nineteenth-century text on manners, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, illustrate Victorian fears of contamination: “one must make all the greater effort not to touch any ‘undesirable’... the ‘healthy’ body is refined, uncontaminated by the ‘germs’ of the ‘spiritually inferior’, yet it is constantly assailed by them” (136, emphasis in original). It is precisely these fears Ernestine must overcome.

In an interior monologue, Ernestine recognizes the prejudices she must face:

She must break down the barriers that hedged her in from so much as a knowledge of the existence of the deadly vice, with which she now had to grapple face to face. She must overcome the shrinking horror which she felt for even the slightest contact with this hateful evil. She must lay aside the natural reserve which on such a subject sealed not only her lips, but her inmost thoughts. To do all this would be a sore trial for a pure-minded Englishwoman and yet, for that very self-sacrifice, she knew she would be met with unmitigated censure from all her acquaintances. ... She would hear that it was contamination to breathe the same air with the degraded and the lost. (1: 110, my emphasis)

36 The majority of the Lady Visitors to Refuges were married. As a single woman, Skene was somewhat anomalous in Oxford. Indeed, the repealers chose Josephine Butler to lead the CDAActs crusade partially because of her unimpeachable virtue as the wife of the Reverend George Butler; even this status, however, did not preclude spurious insinuations. As Nancy Boyd notes, Butler’s obituary in The Times did not even mention her work to repeal the CDAActs (78).
The verbs used to describe what Ernestine’s actions should constitute are active and constructive: breaking down, grappling, overcoming, laying aside. Her actions are practical, not theoretical. The prejudices are figured in terms of the difficulty she faces—barriers, horror, reserve—which in themselves might be seen as insurmountable, but when linked to the active verbs suggest the potential for change. Moreover, Skene immediately figures Ernestine’s actions in terms of self-sacrifice, of putting aside her own inherent reaction to the issue in favour of those in whom she would show an interest. Thus despite Ernestine’s desire to “be of some use in the world” noted earlier, it is primarily interest for the fallen that motivates her, not her own needs. The self-sacrifice, moreover, is figured in terms of middle-class morals. It is Ernestine’s contemporaries who will judge her, who will not recognize the sacrifice for what it is: if Christ gave his life that humanity might live, then Ernestine’s sacrifice of her name and reputation is to accomplish the same for Annie.

By articulating the respectable construction of both the pure woman and the potentially impure contamination, Skene places these in the foreground of her readers’ minds and subjects them to examination. Indeed, the first time she comes face-to-face with a group of prostitutes in the gaol, “for a moment Ernestine shrunk from raising her eyes to any one of them, but conquering the painful feeling which oppressed her, she turned towards them with a gentle imploring look” (2: 12-13). Ernestine’s sacrifice is motivated by human fellowship; she connects with the prostitutes by recognizing their similarities: they are all women. Showing Ernestine confronting and overcoming exactly these limiting conventions within both herself and society challenges their very validity in the first place. Skene suggests that the prejudices of denying women the knowledge of social evil and of the contamination of the pure by the fallen have no basis in fact. Women cannot deny the “sisterhood” they share
with their fallen brethren: they are all one under God. And to deny it, Ernestine’s sacrifice suggests, is to participate in it.

Ernestine’s sacrifice of her “virtuous” self and the resultant ability to overcome the prejudice faced by prostitutes are most effectively represented in the novel through the use of touch, and it is an image returned to a number of times. Its effectiveness is due in part to the injunction against touching noted above by Stallybrass and White. Ernestine’s interactions with the prostitutes constitute a complete reversal of common practice and “good sense.” During Ernestine’s first contact with a prostitute, she “press[es] the girl’s hand. A look of astonishment passed into the careworn faded face as the woman felt the touch of that soft white hand” (2: 17). When Ernestine meets this same woman later in the novel, Ellen reveals, “When I saw you at the gaol, ma’am, and you let me touch your hand, and seemed so sweet and good, I felt just for a moment as if I were not quite alone on the earth, and that perhaps you’d help me” (2: 146). The interaction with Ellen here is portrayed as a naturalized response, both on Ernestine’s part in reaching out to Ellen and on the latter’s part in the emotion it engenders.

On the surface, then, there would appear to be little sacrifice or prejudice to overcome. We might remember here that Blumberg argues that Trollope’s “reconfiguring” of sacrifice as mutually beneficial posits the behaviour as “normative rather than exemplary; hardly worthy of remark, thus deeply worthy of esteem” (507). But the narratorial comments that accompany the images of touch between Ernestine and Annie indicate the very nature of Ernestine’s sacrificial actions:

She would have been expected, not only in her own caste, but even by those whose charity made them seek to reclaim such sinners, to consider herself
bound, for the sake of principle and the girl's own moral good, to hold her at an immeasurable distance, and teach her, by word and look and manner, the gulf which lies between the fallen and the pure. But, happily for Annie Brook, Ernestine followed the instincts of that inner sense with which the love of Christ had gifted her, and there was, though she knew it not, the deepest wisdom, as well as the truest charity, in her mode of action. . . Ernestine Courtenay stretched out both hands to the fallen girl before her, and clasping hers with a warm pressure exclaimed, "Dear Annie, I am so thankful to have found you." (2: 67-69)

Ernestine's actions are exemplary and worthy of remark because Skene desires to make them normative. In Penitentiaries and Reformatories, too, she commented on the "unfortunate theory" adopted by many of those in charge of Refuges "that it is necessary to keep these unhappy women at a distance, in order to teach them the heinousness of their sin and the vast difference between the pure and the fallen" (12). Distance did seem to be the watchword when it came to dealing with fallen women. Judith Walkowitz describes the series of "protective devices" (33) used by authors to distance themselves from the "unspeakable evils" they were writing about. For example, although writing about prostitutes, both William Acton and Greg had "no interaction with [their] working-class subjects" (Acton 44). As Stallybrass and White argue with respect to representations of the city and contamination, "writing, then, made the grotesque visible whilst keeping it at an untouchable distance" (139, emphasis in original). In contrast, Ernestine acts from the impulse of "the truest charity," removing barriers and distance; in other words, she is filled with God's love. Ernestine's
response transforms the moral dichotomy of pure/impure, levelling what has been figured as hierarchy into equality, transforming difference into likeness.

As Seth Koven in *Slumming* and Ellen Ross in the introduction to her *Slum Travelers* examine, however, the distance–proximity dichotomy for philanthropists interacting with the poor was more complex than Ernestine’s response would suggest. Whereas while living with and immersing themselves in the culture of the slum, middle-class philanthropists ostensibly overcame barriers of class, gender, and sexuality, distance was reinforced in terms of beliefs (primarily about those same norms of class, gender, and sexuality). For women philanthropists in particular it was their perceived inviolability in these respects that made it acceptable for them to take up the work. Skene revelled in the physicality and immediacy of contact between her heroine and the subject: “Ernestine took leave of Annie, with a warm pressure of the hand a few words of kind encouragement, to which the poor girl’s sobs prevented her from making any answer” (2: 108-09). Ernestine’s sacrifice, her willingness, even eagerness, to physically “contaminate” herself with the touch of the impure, works to transgress and blur the boundary between the virtuous and the fallen, the pure and impure. Ernestine’s physical contact with fallen women, well outside the bounds of conventional respectability and the rules of visiting and Refuges, signals the inherent hypocrisy in the middle-class respectability which would hold itself aloof, emphasizes the true nature of the respectable woman as embodied by herself, and finally, demonstrates an inherent respectability that these “unrespectable” women hold onto as a part of their humanity. The fact that we are never given Annie’s full story, however, and the fact she exists only at the

---

37 Koven shows, moreover, that the transgression of gender and sexuality boundaries seemed at times to be the impetus for slumming—i.e., the ability to put off middle-class norms (*passim*).

38 This revelling in contamination might be read as participating in the erotics of slumming explored by Koven.
margins of the story, means that the focus is still on Ernestine; she is the one with agency, identity, and story, not Annie. Distance and barriers at once crossed are also maintained.

The record of Skene’s participation in rescue work is complicated: why did she primarily confine her work (and writing) to those already in custody? The manner in which she befriended and continued to help the young women she met suggests the individual care and concern that was the cornerstone of her theories about benevolence in general and rescue work in particular. It is one-to-one, individual participation in the work of God, following the teaching of Christ, that will ameliorate the problems of society. During the cholera epidemic of 1854, Skene had not hesitated to traverse the lowest regions of Oxford, spending nights in tenements with the ill (Acland 99-102; Rickards 103-04). Rickards suggests one reason to account for Skene’s restrictive approach, at least early in Skene’s career, which serves to further complicate our understanding of Skene. We are told that “Felicia did not shrink from joining in Mr Chamberlain’s crusade against the keepers of bad houses, or from entering them where she thought personal effort could alone avail” (142), yet Rickards also notes that Skene “did not, as a rule, go out into the streets in search of the girls. As long as her parents lived she could not well have done so” (143). Skene’s mother died in 1862 and her father in 1864, so presumably she could have added traditional rescue work after these very early dates in her efforts for fallen women if she had so chosen (and the Annual Report of the House of Refuge records her participation until 1898). Here we have the dilemma created for the Victorian rescue worker: how does one maintain one’s own sense of dignity, class, position, and virtue, and yet also contribute to the reformation of society through the auspices of its lowest female members? Indeed, Rickards notes that “Felicia Skene always maintained her dignity as a lady with them; she never allowed them to forget the difference
in their social positions, or to take liberties with her. Though she would do anything to help them, she found it best, when she met them in her daily walks, not to greet them as acquaintances” (152). By visiting fallen women in the Spinning House, Skene was as exposed to their “degradation” as she would have been in the streets, but it was a more controlled area of introduction—boundaries could be maintained.

Ernestine treats all women, fallen and otherwise, the same way—with humanity and love—once again fulfilling the mission with which Christ charged humankind. Ernestine’s actions, her agency, encompass interaction in the most material sense: the “taint” of these women becomes almost sanctified. Thus although Skene’s narratorial comments throughout Ernestine’s interaction with the prostitutes somewhat negate Trollope’s reconfiguration of sacrifice as “hardly worthy of remark,” we can also see that it is a sacrifice “worthy of esteem.”

Amanda Anderson and Lynda Nead both argue that the fallen woman is, to use Anderson’s words, “often perceived . . . as a text that is already written rather than an agent capable of dialogical interaction” (10; Nead 125). This already-written text of the prostitute is apparent in the narrator’s comments about society’s perception of Ernestine’s actions noted above; there seems to be no room for manoeuvring. Skene, however, constructs the fallen woman as an “agent capable of dialogical interaction” by remarking on Ernestine’s sacrifice, and by giving the prostitutes a voice to describe for themselves both their feelings and emotions and their reactions to their treatment by others. Although voiced by a middle-class woman (Ernestine within the novel and Skene outside), the fallen woman’s text is in the process of being written in Hidden Depths. The boundaries Ernestine transgresses, the way she listens to, speaks with, and physically interacts with Ellen and Annie, demonstrate that
the fallen woman is given a type of identity within the novel, one that aligns her with the humanity of Ernestine. Skene does not, however, extend her boundary crossing as far as her contemporary Elizabeth Gaskell. In *Ruth* (1853), Gaskell makes her titular, fallen-woman heroine the principle actor in the story, re-writing, in part, the trajectory of the fallen woman and suggesting the possibility of recuperation into society.

Just as we saw with May Bathurst above, one of the unexpected and surprising results of Ernestine’s self-sacrifice is a greater range of autonomy, power, and authority for the single woman. Significantly, the Refuge Ernestine founds at the novel’s end is an example of women’s expanded sphere of action and an assumption of authority that ensures her superiority and control over others. Ernestine “gave up the whole of her fortune, except the small sum necessary for her personal expenses” (2: 217) to establish the Refuge, an experiment “she had greatly longed to try” (2: 217). Thus we can see the single woman providing for her own needs and desires. She does not look to a husband or brother for reassurance, or to the Church for guidance and support. She hires only “kindly women, who had no theories as to rigid discipline or rule, but willingly agreed to take, for their one principle of action, the endeavour, by love or gentleness, to lead the wanderers they sheltered, to a perception of that everlasting love of which they knew absolutely nothing” (2: 218). In other words, Ernestine is in complete control: she dictates the type of Refuge and the type of care its inmates will receive.

The type of care they receive, moreover, is indicative of the middle-class woman’s perceived superiority over the fallen woman. Despite the apparent levelling of the difference between the pure and the impure woman evident in Skene’s representation of Ernestine’s actions throughout the novel, a class difference, a social hierarchy, still existed. Although the
Refuge would work to narrow the divide, it did so in way that assumes the superiority of Ernestine and her middle-class values:

to strive to show them the goodness of their Father in heaven reflected in the love and compassion of His creatures, was Ernestine’s first object; and when their health and spirits had improved under a few months’ care and kindness, she tried gently to influence for good each individual separately. . . . She received all who came or were sent to her, without requiring certificates of health, or otherwise raising obstacles to their admission. (2: 219-20, my emphasis) 39

Ernestine’s beliefs are paramount here: she knows what is best for these women and assumes an absolute right to “gain[] an influence over them” (2: 220). By gaining such an influence, moreover, the self-sacrificing woman potentially shapes the construction of society. Her actions throughout the novel have been shown to challenge and rethink societal expectations, and these actions can work to create a healthier, even more moral, future. By assuming such authority and control, even over a dispossessed faction of society, the self-sacrificing woman creates a space of work for herself in the world. Ernestine’s work, moreover, focusing on “each individual separately,” signals Skene’s understanding of social reform. The Refuge itself may be characterized as a system or institution, but the work that goes on inside it belies such categorization. Skene’s moral vision for society, her advocacy of a one-to-one personal response to needs and change, is paramount.

May and Ernestine, like Una Dysart and Ruth Vincent, are heroines for Skene because they embody the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice. Excepting only Una Dysart, each

---

39 The mention of “certificates of health” and accepting any woman in Ernestine’s refuge is a reference to the difficulties she experienced in trying to obtain admission for Annie Brook.
heroine also ends her novel as a single woman, yet fulfilled by a philanthropic purpose in life. Thus we can read a final benefit or reward of the self-sacrificing heroine: a viable alternative to marriage. Although the work they do is largely informed by gender expectations—work with the poor, the fallen, the sick—these women are not defined by traditional gender roles of wife, mother, sister. They are single actors in the world who effect a change in their environment and acquaintances. Susan Mumm argues that a “practical consequence of Tractarian theology, with its two-fold emphasis upon the importance of symbolic ritual and on works as evidence of faith, found in sisterhoods one of its permanent expressions” (137). Just as the sisterhood movement in the Church of England provided a sphere of action and value for women who entered orders, Skene’s heroines provide a model for the single woman, one that is grounded in religious beliefs but that does not require the rigorous sacrifices attendant on becoming a member of a sacred institution. Skene’s life was an amalgam of her heroines’ lives. She never married, but lived a fulfilling life in Oxford, dedicated to the poor in the workhouse, the fallen women in the Refuge, and the prisoners at the County Gaol. It has been suggested that Thomas Chamberlain pressured her to join his Anglican sisterhood, which she “resisted [because] the vow of obedience would have limited her freedom to write and to act” (Melnyk 141, see also Rickards 94 and Washington 160), although nowhere in her few autobiographical pieces does Skene entertain the idea of community life. Instead, like the very active, engaged heroines depicted in her novels, Skene

---

40 Washington speculates that Rickard’s references to Skene’s passionate nature refer to an “unhappy love affair” (163), possibly in Greece, but there is no evidence for this speculation. In fact, Charles Woods’s recollections of Skene, appended to Rickards’s biography, include his “belief that love and matrimony never crossed her thoughts” (381). The one mention of a man in Skene’s life is Frances Power Cobbe’s recollection that the two women “formed a friendship so sound that it subsisted unbroken (even through the considerable strain of her refusal to form nearer ties with my family), for something like fifty-five years” (qtd. in Rickards 74, my emphasis). In her new biography of Cobbe, Sally Mitchell interprets Cobbe’s recollection as “suggest[ing] the possibility of a romance with [Cobbe’s] clergyman brother Henry or perhaps the hope of one illuminated by [her] own fond admiration of a very attractive and sympathetic friend” (61). Clearly, any references to Skene’s romantic relationships are at this point pure speculation, possibly even fiction.
sacrificed her life, her income, and her work to those in need around Oxford; in so doing, she wielded a great deal of power and influence.
Chapter Three

"Ye are my friends": Redefining Social Reform

Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. ~ John 15.14

In an 1899 letter to Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, evidently responding to his query about her personal prayers, Felicia Skene explained that she did not use prayers out of a book because they were another’s words, and she “believe[d] that true & life giving religion is simply a close personal union with the Lord Jesus Christ—a life in Him with Him & by Him the dearest & closest friendship—in all humility be it said—but not unwarrantably because He Himself said ‘Ye are my friends’” (Acland MS d.80.f.79). The example of John Hill discussed in the previous chapter reveals the importance of friendship in Skene’s understanding of charitable interaction and how she translated this belief in friendship from her personal life to her working one. As we also saw in Chapter One, Skene’s philanthropic ethos did not stop at extending the hand of friendship; her writing, both fiction and non-fiction, extended friendship from the domestic to the public world, creating a space in and through which women might wield authority and act in the world.

In her response to Acland, Skene quotes John 15.14 and the following verse develops the theme of friendship: “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends” (John 15.15). Christ’s command is to love one another (see John 15.17), and this love and friendship are a commitment to be for another and act for another even at a cost to oneself. Skene’s interaction with prisoners and prostitutes draws on Christ’s words, and the definition of a friend current in the mid-nineteenth century as “one joined to another in mutual benevolence and intimacy” (1a OED)
also carries with it important connotations. The “mutuality” of the relationship is absolutely necessary for it to work; in other words, each participant must agree to the “benevolence and intimacy.” This chapter, then, extends the analysis of Chapter One to show how Skene uses her authority and action to develop these ideas of friendship, of “a close personal union,” in order to instruct a wayward society and create a “mother confessor” for the inmate, as the Lady Visitor becomes an instrument of civilization and an avenue to redemption and psychological relief for prisoner and prostitute.

**Visitor as “Mother Confessor”**

Skene was, according to her biographer Rickards, “the first lady in England to receive official permission from the Government to become a regular visitor in one of the public prisons” (189). It seems necessary to note here that Rickards was not claiming for Skene the designation of “first” Lady Visitor. Indeed, Skene herself had visited at the City Gaol for twenty years prior to this granting of permission in 1878; rather, it was the timing that was noteworthy. Skene received permission from Captain Stopford at the Home Office on May 13, 1878 (Rickards 190, 193). This date is significant because it followed the nationalization of the prisons under the Prison Act of 1877, which all but excluded everyone except officials from entering the country’s gaols. During the protectionist, even secretive, regime of Sir Edmund Du Cane,41 Skene was permitted full access to her local gaol and, as the Visiting Committee’s Minute Book recorded, “Miss Skene was authorised to aid all Female Prisoners from any place of Commitment according to her discretion, upon passing her accounts before the Committee” (March 27, 1886).

---

41 For a discussion of Du Cane’s tenure as Chairman of the Prison Commissioners (1877-1898), see Forsythe, Harding, et al., and Radzinowicz and Hood.
As noted in the previous chapter, one of the motivating factors in prison visiting was the reformation of the prisoner, specifically his or her spiritual or moral reformation. "The aim of spiritual reformists," William Forsythe argues, "was to ensure that a potent religious influence existed in prisons so as to create, as far as possible, the introspection and sense of sin which were essential preconditions of regeneration, means by which 'many an evil spirit may be exorcised'" (20). In light of the prison system's increasing use of the separate system, the spiritual reform movement became "perfected," to use Forsythe's term (24), due to the inherent introspection of a prisoner alone with his or her thoughts. Although Skene appears to be part of this larger project to bring religion and social control to the prisons, for her it was the interaction between Lady Visitor and prisoner, the transference of friendship, that achieved such a goal, not introspection leading to a sense of sin. In *Scenes from a Silent World*, for example, she explicitly refutes the idea that solitary confinement of prisoners could lead to spiritual conversion: "we freely admit that unless strong measures are taken for the improvement and moral education of the prisoners, it is likely that they will undergo a passive deterioration, during the long solitary hours spent in sullen brooding in their cells over the crimes of the past and the possibilities of the future" (85). For Skene, solitary confinement was indicative of the systematic and bureaucratic changes to the prison system and thus not right for the prisoner. Instead, Skene's practice of spiritual reformation was based on the needs of the individual prisoner as recognized and mediated by the one-to-one relationship between inmate and Lady Visitor.

---

42 In the separate system, a prisoner, either for a fixed period at the beginning of a sentence or for the duration of a sentence, was always solitary confined.

43 The debate throughout the Victorian period was seldom about whether or not prisons were necessary but rather about the type (i.e., the association/silent or separate system) and the goals (i.e., reformation or deterrence) of those prisons (Harding et al.).
Recollections of Skene solicited for Rickards’s biography portray her as particularly well-suited to take on this work of friendship and spiritual reform. For example, the Reverend R. L. Phelps of Oriel College writes in memory of her:

Her strength lay in the fact that she had very strong feelings of her own, and a great sympathy with passionate natures. She did not set up a cold ideal of conduct, nor what is often so discouraging, the perfection of the saintly character; those who came to her found a warm human nature; they knew at once that she could feel for them. But in her case those feelings were disciplined by reason and religion, they were entirely under control, and this gave her tremendous power in dealing with the victims of passion. . . . She had no specific, no prescription to suit all cases, but she gave herself freely, her great gifts, her warm heart, and she rarely failed to call out a corresponding gratitude. (qtd. in Rickards 296)

Rickards, too, refers to the “one characteristic of [Skene’s] nature, indeed of the very essence of it, which fitted her for the work. She was herself capable of a great passion” (140). Skene was not a “victim of passion,” but rather drew on that part of her own nature that she held in common with the outcasts of society to make the individual connection necessary for reformation to take place.

The details of Skene’s visiting were worked out with the Governor and Chaplain of Oxford Gaol, and she noted the terms in her prison-diary: “to visit the female prisoners . . . regularly on two days in the week, Tuesdays and Fridays, at eleven o’clock, and also be allowed to see the prisoners alone, without the presence of the matron” (qtd. in Rickards
The concession Skene received from prison authorities, “to see the prisoners alone,” was the cornerstone of her practice as a Lady Visitor and key to the “confessor” role the Lady Visitor ultimately adopted. Skene used the one-to-one, unmediated contact with prisoners to shape her interaction with them; forming ties of friendship with prisoners first, she treated inmates as individuals and placed importance on their humanity before their religious beliefs.

In an article about the need for and necessary qualifications of Lady Visitors, Skene repudiated the Prison Commissioners’ suggestion that classes of instruction were the best means to approach female inmates: “We hold most strongly to the conviction that there is but one way in which visitors can obtain a true and salutary influence over criminal women, and that is by seeing each one entirely alone, and by showing a sympathetic interest in her personal history” (“Lady Visitors” 439). At times, Skene was explicit about how good can arise only from individual interaction between Lady Visitor and prisoner, as in this article where she specifically names the requirement; at other times, it is more implicit: we simply read about the results of such one-to-one visitation (Scenes passim). Skene’s insistence on this personal, private interaction between Visitor and inmate made its way, moreover, into other discussions about the treatment of prison inmates. At the end of the century, for example, William Tallack, in a series of letters to The Times about Lady Visitors, quoted at

---

44 Rickards excerpts a number of Skene’s prison-diary entries. Although the diary was extant at the time of Rickards’s biography in 1902, my archival searches thus far have failed to discover if it is still available to researchers. It is only Skene’s prison diaries from this period (i.e., 1878) until her death (in 1899) that tell the story of her work. As she wrote in this same entry, “I have always regretted that I never kept any record of my visits to the old City Gaol now closed, . . . and I therefore mean to keep a register of the days on which I am able to go to the County Prison” (13 May 1878). Rickards confirmed that she “carried [this resolution] on to the close of her life” (190).
length from an anonymous correspondent who appears to be Skene. Tallack’s letters enumerate a number of stipulations, all of which draw on Skene’s advice: “[a] lady visitor sees the female prisoner entirely alone”; she must “not [be] a paid official”; the Lady Visitor is necessary because the chaplain, since chaperoned, “cannot gain their confidence” (3). The emphasis on the volunteer aspect of the Lady Visitor, and especially her lack of connection to the prison system or administration, indicates Skene’s resistance to structured, state-sanctioned approaches to the prisoner’s needs and social reform more generally. Only the unpaid Lady Visitor could enact the type of one-to-one, personal intervention Skene advocated. Tallack’s use of Skene’s advice also means that her understanding of the relationship between Lady Visitor and inmate had become a measure for a standard of care.

Two of Skene’s earliest works, the 1853 novel *S. Albans, or the Prisoners of Hope* and the 1854 devotional work *The Ministry of Consolation*, explore, among other issues, the place of confession within the English Church. *The Ministry of Consolation* is subtitled “A Guide to Confession for the use of Members of the Church in England”; its preface delineates why and for whom Skene wrote the work and is worth quoting at length:

> First, for those who having admitted the reality of this blessed means of grace, and having felt deep within their own weary and heavy laden souls, the stern necessity for its purifying discipline, are yet, from the prejudice existing against it and the peculiar delicacy of the subject, unable to obtain through any oral teaching, the instruction necessary for its actual application to their own case. And secondly, for those, under whose notice the subject has never been brought at all, either in theory or practice, but who, struggling helpless and

---

45 In the first letter, Tallack described the anonymous correspondent as one “of the most successful lady visitors to female prisoners” (3); in the second he revealed the correspondence was from one who “has for many years visited the female prisoners in Oxford Gaol twice a week” (10).
alone with the weight of unforgotten sins that clog them in their heavenward path, do truly feel within themselves a nameless want, a yearning vague and deep, for some unknown relief, which they are hopeless of obtaining, but which although they now it not lies even at their very door in this the Ministry of Consolation. (vii-viii)

Later in her life Skene still “deplored that, from whatever cause, the Gospel of the Confessional should have been largely lost to mankind, and its truth and grace in the English Church obscured by party support and party objections” (Palmer, qtd. in Rickards 354).46 Although, as Skene’s friend Lady Sophia Palmer asserted, Skene’s own relationship with God had changed in such a way that confession was no longer a necessary conduit, she still believed in the potential of the sacrament for others, drawing on her experience as “one who knew sin and sinners in men and women, boys and girls, of all classes” (354). Skene’s interest in confession, evidenced by these early works, seems to be carried into her later writing about and work with the inmates of refuges and prisons. This is not to say that she ever explicitly drew on confession as a tool, but rather that the way she described interaction with these inmates and the directives her writing provided for other workers in the cause partake of the characteristics of confession. The confessor role Skene evokes for her Lady Visitor, then, potentially provides the prisoner with the necessary teaching and instruction on the subject and becomes an outlet through which God’s grace may enter the prisoners’ lives.

At one point, Skene suggests that although the interviews could “take place in the prisoner’s cell, . . . there is a considerable advantage in the lady visitor having a room in which the prisoners can be brought to her one by one” (439; see also “Prison Visiting” 762, 46 Skene placed the blame for the loss with the Church hierarchy: if the Bishops would only “face it, with properly licensed clergy of unquestioned character and age” (qtd. in Rickards 355) then confession would again be available for the Church’s members.
Scenes 101, “Treatment of Criminals in Modern Greece” 58,47 and “Prison Administration — V”). The Lady Visitor’s room might be read, then, as a type of confessional space: somewhere within which inmates might escape the physical realities of the gaol in order to examine the more metaphysical ramifications of their actions. By calling for such a space within the country’s gaols, moreover, Skene enacts a powerful rearrangement of public and domestic space. The prison is a public space, one through which punishment is meted out for crimes against society; however, by inserting the Lady Visitor into this space, by demanding a separate room for her to which she will transport the arts and the virtues of the domestic space to which she normally belongs, Skene brings the public and the domestic into interaction with each other. She allows the healing efficacy associated with hearth and home, associated with the Victorian woman, to work within the public space of both the confessional and the gaol.

In this personal, confidential interaction between Lady Visitor and inmate, then, a relationship parallel to that of a confessor and penitent potentially developed; but for that relationship to develop, trust must first be established. Importantly, Skene’s “confession” was in no way enforced by the Lady Visitor or the prison system. In fact, Rickards suggests that Skene “was careful never to begin by a reference to the crime for which they were undergoing punishment, partly because she wished her visit to be regarded as a friendly one, and also because she would not put temptation in their way to tell a lie about it” (195; see

47 Skene made use in this article of information passed on to her by the Queen of Greece. She detailed the work of Queen Olga and the Association of Christ, an organization that promoted “suppression of vice and amelioration of the lawless classes” (54). Skene’s description of the Association’s eleven articles of constitution was predicated on using it as “an example that England as well as other countries might follow with advantage” (54). Letters survive both from and to Skene about this article. It seems she proposed it to Blackwood’s in January 1892 as an article that might “afford some useful hints to our Prison Commissioners.” The article was originally refused but later accepted when, it appears, William Blackwood stepped in and issued the order (Blackwood’s Papers, MS 4593 [1892] ff.123, 133, 145; MS 30061 f.100).
also *Scenes* 24, 41, 118). In other words, confession could only be realized with the building of trust between Lady Visitor and inmate. Friendship and a recognition of individuality were at the heart of Skene’s work with prisoners and this building of trust. By “enquir[ing] after their families, [and] promis[ing] to visit them if possible and see to the children” (Rickards 195), Skene particularized her dealings with each prisoner and developed working relationships with them. Numerous times in *Scenes*, for example, Skene reveals the surprise and satisfaction with which the Lady Visitor is received by an inmate on return visits (see, for example, John Hill, as discussed in the previous chapter). The point made in these cases is the footing on which the Lady Visitor interacts with the prisoner: friendship, care for their needs, voluntarily and without pay.

Skene advocates the room for Lady Visitors because inmates would “feel themselves there, as it were, in a new sphere which invites free intercourse” (439). This reference to “free intercourse” returns us back to “mutuality” in the definition of friendship; it is free because the inmates’ interaction with the Lady Visitor and what they reveal is of their own volition. In the freedom of that space, then, the Lady Visitor or “mother confessor” takes on something of a priestly role with the inmate, what might be termed a “priestly friendship.” Clearly, the Lady Visitor does not assume the priest’s connection to the sacraments and rituals of the Church; she does, however, develop a personal, intimate connection with the members of her “congregation,” a connection that is predicated on friendship and concern for the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of the individual.

The qualifications that Skene called for in a Lady Visitor, among which was “a deep though not sentimental sympathy with the individual prisoners” (“Lady Visitors” 439),

---

48 At least two reviews of *Hidden Depths* censure the depiction of the causes of prostitution, accusing the author of believing the tempting lies a prostitute would tell if questioned (see *London Review* [24 Mar. 1866] and *Saturday Review* [10 Feb. 1866]).
further develops the Lady Visitor's status as "mother confessor," as she meets individually with various inmates. It is the personal and individual history of each prisoner with which the visitor must interact. Rickards sums up Skene's approach to her gaol visits: "She would go from one prisoner to another, trying to establish friendly relations with them before attempting to reach their hearts and consciences" (195). A Lady Visitor who would class the prisoners—either by crime, background, or previous infraction (as the administration was wont to do at times)—would be ineffectual in her appointed task and would be more likely to cause harm than good. It was necessary for the Lady Visitor to have a true sympathy with those she counselled. She must comprehend where the inmates come from in order to fulfil her role as "confessor" and provide the inmates with the necessary empathy and understanding.

Despite her individualization of the inmates, Skene somewhat preserved what might be referred to as the sanctity of the confessional space in her writings when it came to "naming" the prisoners about whom she wrote. All the male prisoners with whom Skene came in contact were pseudonymously named; the female prisoners, on the other hand, were referred to by number (e.g., No. 26). In her private prison-visiting diaries, Skene referred to the women by initials, but in the more public space of Blackwood's (and later the pamphlet) she resorted to what was likely prison practice. In both cases, anonymity was preserved for the prisoners in order that their stories or their crimes could not be attributed by readers to specific individuals. The reader, then, although invited throughout Skene's writing to take up the work of Lady Visitor, is revealed as separate from the specific inmates with

---

49 There is a single exception in Scenes: pages 210-12 tell the story of "Mrs. Merry," a name Skene gave her because it "best expresses her real designation, which had a most hilarious sound" (211).
50 The articles for The Hospital did not refer to male or female prisoners specifically by name or otherwise; in these articles Skene used much more general references: e.g., "a female prisoner" or "an old man."
whom Skene interacts. The secrets of the confession are revealed as an instrument of education, both about the prison world and the work that needs to be accomplished, but a final degree of secrecy is maintained solely between “mother confessor” and penitent.

Although implicitly suggested throughout her writing on prisoners and prostitutes, Skene most succinctly articulates this idea of sympathetic understanding in her early article, “The Blunderer, or How the Work of the Rich Among the Poor is Marred” (1867):

Of course, as regards the poor, it is impossible we can divest ourselves of the advantages of education and position; but it is possible that: we should meet them only on the ground which is common to all—the joys and sorrows inseparable from humanity, and the bodily ills and ordinary necessities of existence. To place ourselves for the time being on an equality with the poor, and to give them a hearty and open sympathy, is one of the great secrets of success. (258)51

Significantly, for Skene, it was neither the wealth of the more fortunate nor their knowledge of the world that made philanthropic endeavours both possible and desirable; in this way, Skene was quite different from her contemporaries. Prochaska documents how “[m]ost nineteenth-century philanthropists held a hierarchical view of society and assumed that distinctions between rich and poor were God-given and likely to persist. . . . The opportunity to be charitable, after all, depended on social inequality” (125). The “opportunity to be charitable,” in Skene’s understanding of the phrase, arose from the similarities between individuals rather than from social inequalities. Society, for Skene, was structured primarily on moral lines not class-based hierarchical ones, and thus any perceived inequality could be

51 Skene’s instructions in the Hospital series “Prison Administration and the Training of Officials” makes similar points for those in authority in the country’s gaols, as noted in the previous chapter, describing her advising a prison chaplain to live among the poor before entering prison service.
levelled, bringing charitable worker and recipient together. The sensibilities and sympathies that could be found alike in prisoner and Lady Visitor, their humanity, formed the basis of both the relationship between them and the work of the confessional space.

The details confessed to the Lady Visitor and revealed in Skene’s writing are notable for how they function in relation to both the inmate and the reader. To examine how this works, it is useful to add conversion narratives to the ideas of confession already explored. In a chapter of *Pulling the Devil’s Kingdom Down: The Salvation Army in Victorian Britain*, Pamela Walker examines the construction and role of conversion narratives for the Salvationist. The narratives, she argues, describe “how the conversion of a sinner might occur and what the dire consequences would be should one fail to heed the warnings” (64). It is at the conjunction of occurrence and positive consequences of conversions that the work for the inmate was accomplished. Whereas in typical conversion narratives it was some outside event, some revelation of God’s working in the world, that acted as the spur to conversion, in Skene’s writing it was the “mother confessor” and the space she provided for the inmate that led to change and possible redemption.52 The Lady Visitor never invited confession of crime as a means to judicial reprisal (*Scenes* 101); instead, it was through confession of personal beliefs and personal history received from inmates that the Lady Visitor attempted to help them understand religious and societal beliefs about crime, personal integrity, and social order. Much of *Scenes from a Silent World* is concerned with the details of the inmates with whom Skene came in contact, but although some of those details are their crimes, the inmates’ personal fears, needs, and concerns constitute the bulk of the confidences to the Lady Visitor.

---

52 A number of Skene’s serial fictions for *Good Words* include conversion narratives for her heroines who partake of the conventions Walker examines (see, for example, “One Life Only” and “Tried”).
Chapter Four of *Scenes* is dedicated to the subject of suicide, and Skene provides numerous examples of attempted and completed suicides, including life histories, motivations, and explanations by the individuals, information that is primarily the result of inmates' confessions. For example, one of the more extensive narrative accounts is of a young man "extremely pleasing both in appearance and manners" whom "the writer saw . . . for the first time when he was being conveyed to the jail by the police, immediately after he had been taken out of the river in which he had tried to drown himself" (161). In the pages that follow, Skene reveals the substance of her conversations with him, including all the details of his upbringing, his family, and his failings that led to the suicide attempt: "Under the circumstances the visitor was very glad to be left alone with him in the prison cell next day. . . . He was quite willing to tell his story without reserve; but the sum and substance of his explanation was simply this: 'I could not face my mother'" (161-62). The fact that the young man speaks "without reserve" attests to the confessional aspect of the Lady Visitor–inmate relationship, and as his "simple" explanation conveys, Skene focuses on the personal, intimate details of his emotional condition. Following a recitation of the young man's history, we are told, "[h]is advisers within the jail saw that it was a case which required very plain speaking as to the errors of his past, if his future was to be conducted on better principles and more creditable motives" (164). There is no internal evidence in Skene's text that "advisers" is a reference to herself, but the note on which the narrative account closes is suggestive: "The result was that a really remarkable change took place in him: his eyes were opened to the serious misdeeds of which he had been guilty; and although, in his case as in all others, it was impossible to make him believe that suicide was in itself a crime, he yet did perceive most strongly, how utterly unfit and unprepared he had been for an entrance on the
unseen eternity” (165). In other words, his change is figured in terms of his spiritual and moral reformation. In addition, Skene asserts that it was “the advantages of the system of prison-workers” (165)—i.e., the Lady Visitor—that made the difference for this young man. Through her priestly friendship, the Lady Visitor has brought this inmate out of the inner turmoil and insular, selfish concerns that led him to prefer “to lie ‘uncoffined and unannealed’ rather than meet his mother’s reproachful eyes” (162) and helped him to become one who “amply fulfilled his promises of amendment” (165).

When the details of a crime were revealed to the Lady Visitor, it was often in aid of psychological relief for the inmate. The “mother confessor,” then, like the priestly confessor, provides a space for the inmates to relieve the emotional burdens caused either by their crimes or other events in their lives. In one case, for example, a wife reveals to the Lady Visitor, “with a vehemence which the visitor had no power to check” (Scenes 102), that when she “was more than usually depressed” (101) she “follow[ed] her husband up-stairs ‘to see it done’” (102); the “it” was their child’s murder, the particulars of which the authorities did not know. The forcefulness and lack of control in the confession suggest it was an emotional need that led the woman to confide in the Lady Visitor. Unfortunately, this prisoner does not “heed the warnings,” and a “dire consequence” is meted out, not to her (she is discharged) but in the finding of murder against her husband. In a similar manner, another inmate “yielded to the yearning . . . to pour out to some friendly listener the mournful secrets of the past: and the whole black record of a most hopeless existence was revealed in her own simple uncouth language” (Scenes 121). Nothing as destructive or evil as infanticide is revealed in this second example, but once again the emotional need of the prisoner is met in confession to the Lady Visitor.
This second example, moreover, links the relationship between “mother confessor” and inmate to the conversion narratives described by Walker. Skene describes the “extraordinary change which took place in [the inmate’s] demeanour and conduct when she realised that she was indeed no longer to be left friendless and unpitied” (127). A footnote reveals that, following her release from gaol to a “new position of honest and honourable living,” the woman enters upon a new life: “The last accounts we had of the poor woman in question were entirely satisfactory. She speaks with the utmost gratitude of the happiness she is enjoying in her new reformed life” (127). Like the conversion narratives that follow the “set of conventions in both style and content” (Walker 68) of revealing past sins and potential salvation (spiritual and material), the confessions heard by the Lady Visitor, although not so conventional with respect to how the conversion takes place, serve for the inmates as a vehicle for putting the past behind them and moving into a new life; confession thus becomes a significant marker in each of their lives.53

As Walker explains, however, the conversion narrative was not solely about nor did it solely affect the sinners themselves: “[The convert’s] life was to serve as an example and a call[; it ] . . . strived to turn converts into evangelists. . . . Moreover, it called readers to action, pressing them to take these lessons into the world” (64-65). As noted above, Skene required each Lady Visitor to have a “deep though not sentimental sympathy” with the inmates with whom she had contact. Skene’s writing, the conversion narrative out in the world as it were, can be read as a guide for engendering that sympathy in the reader, a means

---

53 Confession and conversion as explored fictionally by Skene in S. Alban’s, or the Prisoners of Hope follow a similar pattern to that noted here between Lady Visitor and prisoner. Maude Elleston meets the vicar of S Alban’s, who instructs her in “a better understanding of [her] duties and privileges as [a member] of the church” (109). Maude, in turn, shares the books and knowledge which he provides for her with Miss Daver. Maude receives her first Communion at Christmas and brings Miss Daver into the church. Interestingly, the vicar’s books are paralleled with those Maude’s brother asks her to read: the works of Carlyle, as the Chartist movement and God’s teachings are contrasted as responses to society’s ills.
of striving to convert workers to the cause. One of the stated purposes of *Scenes* is, after all, "the appointment of a properly constituted band of visitors, who would make personal acquaintance with every individual prisoner, and study his case in all its bearings, past and future, with a view to his amelioration" (xv). Skene does not comment on the efficacy of this conversion to the cause, although she continues advocating this need right through her final contributions to *The Hospital* in the weeks before her death. Louisa Twining’s agitation for and writing about visitors to workhouses, however, could be seen as a parallel call for action, and she does reveal details about the effectiveness of that call. Twining explains that her organization’s journal “ceased to be published in 1865, because it was then felt that its work was in a great measure accomplished, and had in fact passed into the hands of those who would be more able to bring its labours and investigations to a practical result” (*Recollections of Workhouse Visiting* 88-89). The debate about whether to sanction Lady Visitors to Her Majesty’s Prisons came to a similar conclusion shortly after Skene’s death:

After the nationalization of local prisons in 1877, unofficial intervention of any sort (including prison visiting, academic inquiry, and journalistic investigation) was decried as intrusive and disruptive to the smooth running of the regime. In order to circumvent these new objections visiting necessarily became more organized, . . . [and led to] the setting up of a National Association of Lady Visitors in 1901 under the presidency of Adeline, Duchess of Bedford. A highly organized and efficient body, it successfully gained the approbation of the Chairman of the Prison Commissioners, Evelyn Ruggles-Brise. (*Zedner* 124)
As the conversion moment acts upon sinners, changing their lives, the conversion narrative refigured as conversion confession acts upon Skene’s readers and calls them to change their lives by becoming Lady Visitors, by participating in the amelioration of the emotional and spiritual condition of the inmates.

**An Instrument of Civilization**

To the Memory of

FELICIA MARY FRANCES SKENE

Who helped her friends here and everywhere to come to Him who said,

“Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out.”

As noted in the Introduction, Showalter briefly discusses Felicia Skene in *A Literature of their Own*. Although she seems in part to dismiss Skene as “another unmarried Anglican novelist [who] did her early work under the influence of a charismatic clergyman” (147), Showalter goes on to suggest that Skene “rebelled” and “warned other women not to submit to the manipulative authority of the parson but to find their own way and their own words” (147). As the previous chapter has demonstrated, Skene was definitely interested in her heroines’ “find[ing] their own way and their own words.” Showalter’s characterization of Skene as a “rebel” who “warns women,” however, seems somewhat oversimplified. Indeed, Chamberlain appears in her fiction in the figures of Mr. Thorold in *Hidden Depths* and Mr. Chesterfield in *S. Albans*, but nowhere in Skene’s extant work does she suggest that she rebelled or that other women should rebel against clerical authority. In fact, her

---

54 Tablet in the Chapel at Oxford Gaol, quoting John 6.37 (qtd. in Rickards 207).
55 Rickards only identifies Chesterfield as a picture of Chamberlain, but given her discussion of Chamberlain’s work in his parish and his work against the “evil” (which can be read as the social evil) found there, I think it is fair to include Thorold here as well.
56 Rickards’s biography suggests she had access to diaries and letters I have been unable to find. It might be the case that if these sources are still available, and if Showalter saw them, another picture might be drawn. A great-niece of Skene’s recently attended the unveiling of a heritage “blue-plaque” ceremony at Skene’s house on New Inn Hall Street (now St. Michael’s) in Oxford (see French) and a future research trip will include contacting Miss Goolden to request access to family papers.
serial story "One Life Only" has the heroine reaching out to the new rector for instruction and guidance in caring for others. Additionally, in the numerous articles she wrote about the treatment of prisoners and the need for reform, Skene often addressed the role of the clergy. She did question their ability to win the confidence of female inmates; however, it was because the clergyman could not meet with the women privately but must be chaperoned (usually by a warder) and not because of any inherent problem with clerical authority. She also questioned some of the clerics sent to minister at the prison and the poor house, but this was a question of their lack of training for such work and not their influence over others. Rickards also notes that Skene's "interest in the parish of St. Thomas-the-Martyr lasted, through all changes and chances, to the end of her life. She never ceased to attend the services, or to help the clergy who succeeded Mr. Chamberlain in the vicarage" (96).

Showalter's inclusion of Skene in the "Feminine Heroes" chapter, however, is noteworthy. Showalter's argument in this chapter encompasses both women authors of the past, "professional role-models and fictional ideals—who could combine strength and intelligence with feminine tenderness, tact, and domestic expertise" and those women authors who began writing in the 1840s and had a view of "themselves and their fictional heroines as innovators who would provide role-models for future generations" (100). Because she refers to Skene only in passing, Showalter does not develop Skene's role in her chapter's argument—which is precisely what I shall do here. The attributes Showalter assigns to her "feminine heroes" sound not unlike those Skene assigns to the Lady Visitor, to the charitable worker. The Lady Visitor—both as Skene carried out that role in her prison and refuge work and as she represented it in her fiction and non-fiction prose—is an innovator and a role model for society and future generations. Specifically, the Lady Visitor becomes an
instrument of civilization, teaching both the wayward men and women with whom she comes in contact and a wayward society that views the less fortunate problematically.

Lucia Zedner, in one of the few extended analyses of women and the prison system in Victorian England, compares the work of female warders to that of Lady Visitors in the prisons: the warden’s goal was to “restore criminal women to honesty, propriety, and ‘womanliness’” (185), whereas the Lady Visitor “might devote sufficient attention to win confidence and so establish a friendship which would continue throughout the sentence” (123). Zedner’s characterization of the Lady Visitor’s work in terms of friendship recalls Skene’s appeals for Lady Visitors and the qualifications she sets out for them described above while clearly delineating the work of the Lady Visitor from that of the female warder. Notably, Zedner characterizes the women who, in the 1880s and 1890s, took up the issue of women prisoners, including Lady Visitors, as a “growing number of feminists” (126).

Van Drenth and de Haan’s notion of caring power, “a mode of power that operates through care, that is, a commitment to the well-being of others” (11), better describes Skene’s involvement in prison work than Zedner’s delineation of such women as feminists.57 “Women’s unprecedented and large-scale activism in the public sphere,” as van Drenth and de Haan note, occurred “not just in the second half of the nineteenth century, but from its beginning” (43, emphasis in original). Skene might have begun writing extensively on prisons in the late 1870s and the 1880s, but she had worked as a Lady Visitor from as early as 1858. The Oxford Mail in July 2002 reported on the blue plaque placed on Skene’s home with the headline: “Memorial honours prison reformer” (French). For all her work with the Charity Organization Society, in the local workhouse, and in the Oxford House of Refuge, it

57 See the Introduction for a discussion of van Drenth and de Haan’s conception of the rise of caring power and its place in the changing activities of women.
was Skene's indefatigable work with and for prisoners that defined the major part of her writing and her life.

Although van Drenth and de Haan's categorical framework is identified in chronological stages, and although I do not want to suggest that Skene was "behind the times," it is their first category, "women's activism," that most usefully explains the type of work in which Skene was involved and which her writing represents. In the category of "women's activism," van Drenth and de Haan include "helping the poor, fighting slavery, working for peace, and so forth" (46) to exemplify the type of work undertaken by the woman activist. It is a "religiously inspired social responsibility for the welfare of 'others'" (van Drenth and de Haan 46) that characterizes Skene's work, one that works toward the goal of "mak[ing] the world a better place" (47); she was concerned with the humane treatment of all prisoners as individuals. As an activist, then, Skene's Lady Visitor uses the friendship developed with inmates in order to teach them societal norms and values, essentially to maintain control over their own future actions.

The issue of marriage in relation to the women prisoners greatly excited Skene's interest. She always made an effort "to persuade those women who had been living with men, to be married to them on leaving prison" (Rickards 197). An undated diary entry, for example, refers to "B—, an R.C., whom I hope to get married" (qtd. in Rickards 210) and another to C—, who "could not help laughing because I asked her not to live with a man before she was married to him" (211). The diary entries reveal both Skene's sense of the waywardness of the inmates' ideas and her attempts to correct them. Skene would organize wedding breakfasts for the day the woman (and sometimes also the man) was released from gaol. Rickards describes the typical breakfast:
It consisted of a glass of gin and a twopenny bun. If it was a bribe, she considered it a justifiable one in the circumstances, because likely to contribute to success in her righteous aim. For Felicia was a woman of resources, and would leave no stone unturned. (198)

By encouraging couples to legalize their unions, Skene ensures that they conform to societal standards for relationships between the sexes; the sacramental dimensions of sanctioning marriage, a sacrament at the very least evoked in this wedding feast, would be key to the respectability afforded the couple in making the relationship official. She “civilizes” them in the eyes of society, making them more understandable and palatable to that society, which is then more likely to proffer future assistance.

The caring power of the Lady Visitor, however, should not, in Skene’s view, be limited to female inmates. Skene made a point in a number of places to draw attention to male prisoners’ needs in reference to visiting: “we hope to see the day when [Lady Visitors] will be allowed to attend the male patients in the prison infirmaries also, and there seems to be no reason why volunteers of the opposite sex should not be allowed to work among the men” (“Short Prison Sentences” 95, my emphasis; see also “Prison Administration – V,” and “Mistaken Impressions – I”). For the most part, male inmates had only prison officials and chaplains to care for their needs. By asking that Lady Visitors be “allowed to work among the men,” Skene is not questioning the offices of those who already meet with the men, but rather desiring that the unique qualities of the Lady Visitor, as explored earlier in this chapter, also be available for the men.

The narrative accounts of male prisoners throughout Scenes as well as those in The Hospital articles provide evidence of Skene’s visitation with male prisoners:
Hodson could neither read nor write, and the time hung somewhat heavy on his hands, while waiting till his fate should be settled at the Assizes. He therefore welcomed the present writer eagerly to his cell, as the visit afforded him an opportunity for a little conversation. (Scenes 142, my emphasis)  

The confession narrative explored in the previous section also reveals how “the visitor was very glad to be left alone with [the young man] in the prison cell” (161). The offices of the Lady Visitor have reconciled the young man to life, to work, to duty; in short, he is once again a full member of society. The John Hill narrative examined in Chapter One, which in addition to its first treatment in “A Released Prisoner” is included in Scenes, also explores the effect of the Lady Visitor in the male inmate’s cell. Hill’s “release” is not the originally desired release from gaol but the Christian release from the human world of suffering to the heavenly after world of God.

Interspersed as the narratives of male and female prisoners are throughout Skene’s prison writing, especially in Scenes, it is easy for the reader to miss the significance of such revelations. By not limiting her interaction with prisoners to women, Skene ensures that the male inmates have the benefit of “feminine tenderness, tact and domestic expertise” (Showalter 100) that would otherwise be denied them—and that was denied the majority of male prisoners throughout this period. The authorial pseudonyms used for Scenes—“A Prison Visitor” for its Blackwood’s incarnation, and the male pseudonym Francis Scougal for the book form58—further obscures the unconventionality of her actions. One does have to read carefully, because if the author/visitor is male, he would not be able to see the female prisoners alone, and the essays frequently depicted the author/visitor doing just that. If we

---

58 See the head note to Appendix I for a discussion of these pseudonyms and footnote 124 for the work’s publication history.
consider the masculine persona these pseudonyms allow her, then Skene is in fact the Lady Visitor who is “allowed to attend the male patients in the prison infirmaries” and to undertake her normal duties with female prisoners as well as a “volunteer of the opposite sex . . . work[ing] among the men.”

Skene seemed not to be committed only to the idea of Lady Visitors for the male inmates; she also requested that lay-men become visitors to the gaols for these male inmates. Skene was certainly not the first to make such a request. In 1868, Charles Bosanquet, Secretary of the Charity Organisation Society, calls for men of leisure to take up the cause (*London: Some Accounts of its Growth, Charitable Agencies, and Wants* 122). Six years later, he notes, “[h]e has, for convenience, used the masculine pronoun throughout in speaking of Visitors, but he has never forgotten that the great majority of them are women. It is a matter of congratulation that this is so, though it is also desirable that men should take their share of the duty; the field is large enough for a greatly increased number of workers” (*A Handy-Book for Visitors of the Poor in London* 1, my emphasis). Bosanquet was interested in district visiting, but the request for “gentlemen district visitors” and the specification of their attributes finds an echo in Skene’s later call for “gentlemen prison visitors” in the 1889 *Scenes*. Skene was still calling for male volunteers as late as 1898 (see “Prison Administration and the Training of Prison Visitors – V”).

For all her emphasis on individuality of treatment and development of true friendships and empathetic relationships between Lady Visitor and prisoner, Skene at times resorted to stereotypes and generalities in her descriptions of prisoners and her attitude towards them. In “The Blunderer,” for example, the article I used above to exemplify her understanding of friendship as the basis of relationship between rich and poor, between
inmate and visitor, Skene draws a parallel between the lives of the poor and those of "the lower animals" (258). Moreover, later in this same piece, when recounting another incident, she refers to the "many coarse, ugly children" of a "brutish, godless family" (259). It is difficult to reconcile notions of love, friendship, and equality with such bestial imagery.

Skene's attitude towards tramps, moreover, whom she terms "a most mysterious and distinctive race—wholly unlike all other portions of the community" ("Ethics of the Tramp" 682), participates in such class stereotyping and fails to afford any individuality to those with whom she comes in contact. They certainly were a class who captured Skene's interest, as they are woven throughout her writing on prisoners, suicides, and poor visiting, as well as a number of articles specifically devoted to them. Many of these representations are quite comic and friendly in tone, but tramps are most often referred to in the conglomerate, as a class, a race, a group: "The story of Dick Arch may be taken with slight variations as describing the existence led by thousands of tramps in all parts of Her Majesty's dominions" ("Autobiography of a Tramp" 179). Significantly, every reference to tramps ends with the same conclusion: the impossibility of solving the problem of their existence. Empathy seems to be extended, but not the love and friendship offered to others.

To be fair to Skene, however, she was participating in a discourse that pervaded Victorian writing about the lower classes and the poor. In his series *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849-50), Henry Mayhew describes the "brutified state" of the costermonger, in whom "the qualities of the beast are principally developed, . . . while those of the man are stunted in the their growth" (24). Sophia de Morgan, in both *The Philanthropist* and *Good Words* (1869), uses almost the same language as Skene, describing the moral tone of the

---

59 One obituary on Skene remarks, "tramps excited Miss Skene's pity, but she considered it almost hopeless to endeavour to induce an habitual tramp to resume a settled life" ("World of Women" 6).
workhouse as “almost on the level of animal life” and referring to how “our fellow-creatures are living the lives of the lower animals” (285). One wonders how women such as Skene represented this incongruity to themselves. None of the published memoirs of charitable women and institutions I have read records their personal thoughts about such issues; thus it is not possible to ascertain if the “brutish” depiction is a reflection of personal beliefs or a deliberate choice on the authors’ part: i.e., images of the poor that conformed to their audience’s preconceived understanding of them, establishing a connection between author and audience. After all, one of the stated purposes of many of these works is to rally workers to the cause, and it would be important to construct a recognizable world view for the audience. Whatever the reason, imagery like Skene’s populates writing on the subject, coupled with references to the “respectable” nature of many of those who were the objects of their work.

Geraldine Jewsbury’s novel Marian Withers (1851) provides a particularly good illustration of this point. The novel is concerned throughout with showing the respectability of the lower classes and establishing the similarities in needs and outlook between the classes. Factory workers and their families are provided with washhouses both for themselves and for their clothes, for example, to allow them to avoid the filth associated with factory work. But when Lady Wollaston, the all-but-fallen woman of the novel, explains her desire to stay in Ireland and work with the people there, she describes them as “wretched creatures, who are scarcely human beings” (3.230). On the one hand, this description is a

60 In Imperial Leather, Anne McClintock examines a similar phenomenon. She demonstrates the link between notions of racial deviance in the “family of man” and the so-called “degenerate classes”—“the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane—who were collectively figured as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern, imperial metropolis” (43). McClintock argues that the figuration of the other in such a way is part of a hierarchical class- and race-conscious construction of the world by the English to maintain superiority in the face of new exploration, discovery, and knowledge.
power play: by describing them as animals, the middle-class woman can maintain her right to control and shape the lower classes’ actions. Moreover, there seems to be no awareness on the part of Jewsbury and other authors of how such bestial imagery might affect both their own understanding and relation to these people and the message their audience takes away.

To castigate these authors, Skene included, for subscribing to this prevailing view, however, is, in the words of David Owen, to “criticise the period for not conforming to twentieth-century notions” (140). Owen is referring specifically to notions of class superiority and, like Prochaska, notes that “[e]ven the most devoted and self-sacrificing of those who served the poor never dealt with them on terms of equality, nor did it occur to them to do so” (Owen 104). It is important, then, to see the writing of Skene and others in the context of their own time and judge these works for how they participate in contemporary debates. Skene shows that she believes in an essential equality between all humankind, no matter how problematic the language she uses to articulate their difference is to our sensibilities.

Skene’s depiction of some prisoners in terms of stereotypes or received wisdom about the poorer classes serves as an example of how her language can degrade those she claimed to be humanizing. The power of the Lady Visitor, however, potentially civilizes both the poor and the reader. Early in Scenes, we hear the story of Ted Brown, who killed his wife in his sleep. The family’s life before the killing is described by Skene as “on a level with that of the beasts of the field—if not below it” (5)—like many others of the poorer classes.

Brown is described as:

not only absolutely illiterate, but of so low an order of intelligence that he was very happily characterized by one of the prison officials as the missing link which Darwinism seeks to find between our race and the Ascidians. It may
really be doubted, however, whether any respectable gorilla would have
demeaned himself to Ted Brown’s level. (5)

Although comparing Brown to a gorilla might be an effective image of how the family exists
and inject some humour into the text, Skene nonetheless bestializes the Brown family,
stripping them of their humanity. True, it is the prison guard who makes the Darwinian
association, but Skene perpetuates it in her commentary that follows the guard’s. She picks it
up again later in the story in her description of the Brown’s young daughter: “In all her ways
and movements she was exactly like a monkey, with the one exception that she should speak
with a human tongue, in the lowest dialect of her native county” (8-9).

So how are we to assess Skene’s use of language here? Was she aware of the
potential consequences of depicting Brown in such a way—that instead of civilizing the
Brown family she brutalizes it? Although I suggested earlier that it is not possible to
ascertain thoughts and intentions, I argue here that she is aware. First, she is using language,
at least in this case, with a purpose. The invocation of a “gorilla tribe” would be familiar to
her readers, since it was quite common to render the working classes, the Irish, and people of
colour as simian. Skene was writing within a culture that unconsciously used terms like the
“degraded” or “brutal” class to refer to the poor and the criminal, but she was not simply
perpetuating the stereotype. As Leon Radzinowicz suggests, “[t]he vast majority of
Victorians who investigated, and commented upon, the causes of crime did not question the
prevailing economic structure of society and the class relations shaped by it” (49). Skene
participates in the class-based hierarchical view of society, but she does so in terms of her
own moral structuring of society. The depiction of the Brown family robs them of their
connection to her readers, something quite foreign to the other depictions in Scenes. Thus
Skene implicitly questions societal economic structures: unable even to obtain a subsistence-level existence, the family lives “on an open common in the vicinity of a large town” (6). The open common should be home to the beasts of the fields, not to a family. Skene’s conscious use of language that degrades the Browns compels her readers to consider the causes of poverty and recognize the realities faced by such classes.

Second, the above quotations appear in both the original first instalment of Scenes in Blackwood’s and in its later book form, almost word for word. In both versions, Skene followed her description of Brown’s daughter with details of the murder itself and the judicial proceedings that culminate in Brown’s execution. However, in the book version, Skene added a telling supplement to Brown’s story, describing her last interview with him:

Despite his affinity to the gorilla nature, Ted Brown was not insensible to the touch of human sympathy; and he never relaxed his grasp of the visitor’s hand during the whole interview... He suddenly displayed a degree of delicacy which seemed strangely at variance with his grosser characteristics—he stopped short in his recital of [his wife’s] misdeeds, and asked leave to whisper to the officer present, some details which he did not consider fit for the ears of his visitor. (18-19)

This addition to the text works to re-humanize Ted Brown and possibly, by extension, his family. Brown is no longer simply of a “gorilla nature,” but rather a man capable of sympathy and delicacy. The images of his “gorilla-like consciousness” (12) in understanding what was happening to him are countered here in the book to make his humanness more than apparent. The inclusion of such statements in the book form of Scenes suggests at least some recognition of a potential, damaging effect of the description of Brown in the Blackwood’s
version. It is as if Skene was afraid her readers did not learn their lesson or misread the original incarnation of the story and she therefore added this humanizing touch to serve as a comparison to the conventional brutalizing image, to ensure that her readers understood her message. Moreover, the addition here is one of the very few substantial revisions that Skene made to the book.\textsuperscript{61} Ted Brown's bestiality, then, has in part been overcome through the friendship of the Lady Visitor, and society's view of him has been substantially altered through the same conduit; the Lady Visitor civilizes those with whom she comes in contact either in person or in print.

The examples of the Lady Visitor as an "instrument of civilization" thus far explored have primarily related to those whom she visits, but as the revision to Ted Brown's story suggest, and as we saw with respect to the conversion confession working on the visited and the reader, the Lady Visitor also "civilizes" those who read about her. If the Lady Visitor is to act as an instrument of civilization for the balance of the society (or the reader), it is necessary for her friendship to be truthful. Skene's representation of her own work and those of her heroines in her writing develops the Lady Visitor's faithful friendship to her reader; she civilizes through the truthful representation of experience, in order that society be exposed to and recognize the validity of these truths.

The challenge of truth permeates Hidden Depths, and it begins with Skene's preface to the novel:

This book is not a work of fiction, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. If it were, it would be worse than useless; for the hidden depths, of which it

\textsuperscript{61} See below in Chapter Three for a discussion of the other major changes. The majority of other revisions are the addition of simple, single sentences that seem intended to enhance rhetorical and logical continuity. The exception is pages 171-72, in which Skene lifts and expands text that appears in a footnote in Blackwood's into the text proper in the book.
reveals a glimpse, are no fit subjects for a romance, nor ought they to be opened up to the light of day for purposes of mere amusement. But truth must always have a certain power, in whatever shape it may appear; and though all did not occur precisely as here narrated, it is nevertheless actual truth which speaks in these records. (v)

Prefacing her novel in such terms, the (at this time) anonymous Skene\textsuperscript{62} establishes authority and purpose for the narrative: she draws on the experience of her own work with fallen women and defines the novel as didactic, or at least practical and constructive. It is no mere romance or flight of fancy; the novel will explore the truths that lie at the centre of prostitution, and in those very truths its power will become apparent. The novel’s motto, *Veritas est Major Charitas*—“truth is the greater charity”—further reinforces the importance of truth in Skene’s purpose for this novel.\textsuperscript{63} In both of these examples, then, Skene figures her writing as the instrument of civilization, changing the views of society about the realities revealed in her writing.

Although exposing the truth and changing societal views about prostitution were Skene’s stated purposes in writing *Hidden Depths*, the novel was not received as the civilizing force she intended it to be precisely because it was not believed to be true. On the whole, the reviews of *Hidden Depths* recognized its author’s purpose in writing but most refused to believe the veracity of what she presented. In the words of *The London Review*, March 24, 1866, Skene “has courted failure; for the admiration which ‘Hidden Depths’ is well calculated to inspire, so long as it is considered in the light of a work of fiction, is turned

\textsuperscript{62} It was not until the 1886 edition of the novel that Skene’s name was added to the title page, nor do any of her other works appear as “by the author of *Hidden Depths*” until after the second edition of the novel.

\textsuperscript{63} Some of the reviews consider this to be the novel’s subtitle; it is difficult to tell from the title page which reading is correct.
to objection when the story, with its narrow bounds and partial exhibition of facts, has to be viewed as the exposition of a gigantic social disorder” (345). The reviewer’s desire for another type of truth might be linked to the movement toward a systematic approach to social reform that Skene’s writing seeks to resist. In the decade prior to the publication of Hidden Depths, Greg had reviewed James Beard Talbot’s Miseries of Prostitution and Dr. Ryan’s Prostitution in London for the Westminster Review (July 1850) and Acton published Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects (1857), all of which present statistical analyses and scientific studies of prostitution, approaches that were quite different than Skene’s individually experienced stories in the novel.

John Dennis’s review of the novel in conjunction with Penitentiaries and Reformatories, in The Fortnightly Review, February 15, 1866, is a case in point. Reading the review, it appears that Dennis was unaware that Skene was the author of both anonymous works. If in fact he was aware of the double authorship, his review could only be termed disingenuous. Dennis uses the review to examine the state of rescue work in Britain, and notes that like the pamphlet, the author of the novel has “made out his position” with regard to the horrors of prostitution (126). Dennis, like the other reviewers, finds value in bringing the subject to the public’s attention, a much-needed innovation, but also like them, he questions the manner in which it is done: “It is true, as Milton says, that there are many people who will not look on the Truth herself unless they see her elegantly dressed; but unfortunately in ‘Hidden Depths’ truth is not dressed elegantly” (127). Dennis’s analogy of an “elegantly dressed” truth seems to suggest that the subject be treated with the “romance and flights of fancy” Skene disdains in her preface. Although not explicitly questioning
Skene’s truths in the novel, Dennis has implicitly cast doubt on them by suggesting the expository prose of a pamphlet carries a greater truth and value for the reading public.

It was exactly Skene’s claims to truth both in her depiction and in the stated purpose of that depiction that so concerned the novel’s reviewers. The Westminster Review, April 1866, for example, asserts that “[t]he author, we should suppose, is either a young curate, or a woman. No other beings could possibly have imagined such scenes. Fingunt creduntque. The book is put forward as being substantially true, whereas it is substantially false” (587). The reviewer directs the reader to the Mrs. Dorrell episodes—the brothel keeper who presents a false front in her home to visitors but keeps the young women behind the scenes—as a particular example of the falsity of the novel’s depiction of prostitution and advises, “[t]he passage cannot well be quoted. And we should advise none but those who may consider it a duty to test our words to refer to it” (587). Despite the preface’s claim to eschew romance in favour of truth, despite the authority of personal knowledge that is drawn upon throughout the novel, The Contemporary Review, May 1866, asserted it “to be impossible that the author should have had any but romance-knowledge of the things treated” (131). It is on the grounds of gender that the novel’s veracity is most often challenged.

Although The London Review, The Reader, and The Contemporary Review make the same argument, The Saturday Review, February 10, 1866, states the objection most succinctly:

---

64 The only novel reviewed more than Hidden Depths in 1866 was Eliot’s Felix Holt (Fryckstedt 107-08). Five of the weekly publications reviewed the novel immediately upon its publication—in the two weeks between February 10 and 24, 1866. The commentary of the first, The Saturday Review, February 10, 1866, dwells primarily on the veracity of the novel, wishing it could “assum[e] the truthfulness of the facts” but finding the “foundations on which the edifice is based . . . to be utterly unsound” (181). This focus is immediately taken up by The Athenæum on February 17, 1866, and The Reader on February 24, 1866, seemingly rendering the novel more controversial and thus potentially generating more reviews. Despite the notoriety, however, it did not sell well—it appears not to have been a Mudie’s selection (see Fryckstedt 109, fn. 4) and sold for a guinea. It was not until the 1889 cheap edition that the novel was widely circulated.

65 Although the novel was published anonymously, most of the reviews assumed it was written by a woman, with a clergyman a close second.
Those who are most actively engaged in the reclaiming of "unfortunates" tell us that this is always their first story—that each and all endeavour to throw a veil of sentiment over their fall, and to excuse themselves by charging their sin upon the head of a seducer. To a lady questioner, in particular, this story is sure to be told, but an adroit cross-examination speedily elicits the falsehood of the statement. (181)

Presumably a male administrator, who is more capable of ascertaining the truth, conducts the "adroit cross-examination." None of the reviewers is, in the words of The Reader, February 24, 1866, "satisfied [with] the innocence" of the young women (198). It seems, then, that the very experience and truth upon which Skene laid the authority for her depiction, a truth which is grounded in her own work with fallen women, and the depiction of Ernestine's personal identification with the fallen women, are the very factors which, for the reviewers, condemn the work as a failure. Skene's truth is produced from the individual stories of the women she met in Oxford, including Mrs. Dorrell. Challenged and threatened by the questioning of genders' roles in sexual transgression, by the questioning of society's responsibility to the victim and victimizer of Skene's individual stories, all the reviewers can do is protest and attack the truths Skene portrays.66 One might say, with Shakespeare, "the [gentlemen] doth protest too much, me thinks."

The second, or cheap, edition of Hidden Depths was published in 188667 under the auspices of W. Shepherd Allen, who was a Member of Parliament at the time.68 Allen

66 In an article about Josephine Butler's evangelical spirituality, Helen Mathers describes how Butler was revolted at "the refusal of Heads of Houses to acknowledge the wrongdoing of dons" (298), including the seduction and abandonment of a young woman whom the Butler's take into their home.
67 The copyright page records 1886 as the publication date, but the British Museum mark in the text is dated 22 Dec. 1885.
68 Allen had read the novel when recovering from an illness at Bournemouth. He subsequently purchased the copyright from Skene and arranged for its publication (Rickards 173-74). Unfortunately, I have not yet been
provided an additional preface to this edition in which he outlined his reasons for publication. He chose a "cheap form, with a view to its more extensive circulation, in the earnest hope that it may be the means of helping on in some degree, the cause of Justice, Mercy, and Truth" (v). If the novel had a partial didactic purpose in the past, that didacticism was brought to the fore in the second edition. Allen ends his preface by expressing "the earnest hope that it may be the means, [sic] of stopping some from entering on the downward road, and of leading them to travel on in that straight and narrow path of purity and peace, which leads on through time to the rest of Heaven" (vii). He also tells Rickards that "[f]rom a financial point of view there was practically no profit; as the great object I had in view was to circulate the book as widely as possible, as a means of preventing evil" (174).

Allen reiterates Skene’s emphasis on the truth of the depiction:

It is a story founded on fact. The principal incidents it relates are true. They are taken from real life. The tale is no mere dream of imagination. Its characters were living men and women. Its scenes of suffering and death are no romance of fiction. The actors lived. Many of the scenes were real. The story is based on the sad realities of truth. It is a tale of cruel wrong, of hopeless sorrow, of dark despair, and untimely death. (v)

One can almost hear Allen refuting the 1866 reviews of the novel. Skene does, however, seem to be somewhat ahead of her time: the 1866 edition of the novel, published in the wake of the first Contagious Diseases Act, which resulted in numerous inquiries into prostitution, proposed a reform program that Victorian society was not prepared to accept: thus the hostile reviews and lack of sales. It was with the 1886 cheap edition, which achieved sales as high
as thirty thousand copies, and followed more than a decade of repeal agitation and the rise of the social purity movement, that society began to reach some of the same conclusions as Skene. Whereas an 1866 reviewer can conclude that "the evil whose hidden depths she has attempted, though feebly, to explore is, we fear, too vast and too deeply rooted to be written down or preached down" (Saturday 181), the 1886 publisher can assert he has "every reason to believe that the book did a great deal of good" (Rickards 174). Allen’s publication of the novel therefore reinforces the didactic function of Skene’s original writing. The two prefaces clearly suggest that the reader is intended to leave the novel with new knowledge of this world and those who populate it, and, more significantly if less explicitly, the truths exposed are presumably intended to encourage readers’ conformity to societal and religious standards.

Skene approached her writing on prisons in a similar manner to that of her fiction, and she was more successful in her use of truth there. Much like the preface of *Hidden Depths*, the opening sentences of *Scenes from a Silent World* insist upon the veracity of subject’s depiction and its consequent effect on the public:

This work is the result of a real experience within the unseen prison world. It contains no element of fiction from beginning to end: it tells, as clearly and accurately as may be, the true histories of some who have lived and suffered and died in that hidden region of remorse and pain. . . . [T]he facts themselves speak with the voice of truth; and we claim for that voice that it has a right to be heard by all who desire to help and benefit their fellow-creatures. (ix)

---

69 See Rickards 174 and a letter from Skene to Blackwood’s (MS 4492 [1886] f.9).
70 See, for example, the work of Ellice Hopkins, Josephine Butler, and Elizabeth Blackwell. The standard that Skene holds out for the men in her novel, particularly Hugh, is embodied in the members of the Hopkins’s White Cross Army (*The White Cross Army* 2).
Skene was determined to bring the prison world into the light of day. The imagery she uses, of an “unseen” world, a “hidden region of remorse and pain,” speaks to her understanding of the way this world has previously been viewed, and the importance of changing that view. The reference to “true histories” for the work’s origins again speaks to the importance of individual relationships, with the stories first passed between inmate and Lady Visitor and then passed on to the reader. The Lady Visitor she develops throughout the text works to reveals these truths to the reader, and thus society is rendered more civilized for its recognition of the truths of this silent world.

_Scenes from a Silent World_ in its original incarnation as a series of articles for _Blackwood’s_ might be viewed as part of a larger social phenomenon taking place with respect to the figure of the criminal. In June 1892, _The Nineteenth Century_ published William Morrison’s article “The Increase of Crime,” which undertook to establish verifiable statistics relating to crime to avoid “misleading ideas” (950). Prison Commissioner Du Cane answered Morrison, taking up an opposing stance and with opposing statistics in “The Decrease of Crime.” Morrison was a vocal opponent of Du Cane’s regime, publishing articles in monthly and quarterly journals and possibly the daily newspapers. Christopher Harding, in his examination of the 1895 Gladstone Committee Report on Prisons, takes his title from a quotation in _The Daily Chronicle_, April 15, 1895: “The Inevitable End of a Discredited System.” Harding cites the report:

---

71 See, for example, “Are Our Prisons a Failure?” Rev. William Douglas Morrison, “Are Our Prisons a Failure?,” _Fortnightly Review_ 55 (May 1894). and the series “Our Dark Places” [Our Special Commissioner], “Our Dark Places. The Prison System,” _The Daily Chronicle_ January 23 1894 in the _Daily Chronicle_. Radzinowicz notes that the anonymous author of these articles was “accompanied on most of his visits to prisons by John Burns, the eminent labour leader, who had been imprisoned during the unemployment disturbances of 1888. . . . The author remained a mystery. . . . It has often been assumed that is was William Douglas Morrison, the assistant chaplain of Wandsworth, a noted penologist and critic of the prison administration” (573-74). Tallack’s prolific letters to _The Times_ and other publications on the subject in the 1880s and 1890s might also be seen as opposing Du Cane’s administration.
In magazines and in the newspapers, a sweeping indictment had been laid against the whole of the prison administration. In brief, not only were the principles of prison treatment as prescribed by the Prison acts criticized, but the prison authority itself, and the constitution of that authority, were held to be responsible for the many grave evils which were alleged to exist. (603) Morrison’s articles were definitely part of the campaign of indictment that led to the formation of the Gladstone Committee, and I think it is fair to examine Skene’s writing as part of this same impetus for change.

*Scenes from a Silent World* appeared more than a decade prior to the later, vociferous attack on Du Cane and his administration, and it does not participate to the same degree in the expression of condemnation of Du Cane apparent in the later articles, but Skene rehearsed some of the same issues and, moreover, reworked them again in her later (contemporary with Morrison and the Committee) articles for *The Hospital*. Her position as a Lady Visitor to Her Majesty’s Prisons, her “unrestrained intercourse” (2) with prisoners, allowed Skene to take an active part in the debates around prison reform by communicating her experience to readers. As Skene herself wrote, protesting the charge of “benevolence”:

> Prison visitors see too much of crime in its worst aspect to be capable of false benevolence, or to have the smallest desire that assassins should escape the direst penalty which can be awarded them for their cruel deeds; but we cannot be blind to the facts bearing on the administration of the law in all its phases, which are brought into strong relief by the true histories we have to tell. (41)

It is not possible to trace exactly what effect Skene’s writing on the subject may have had, but it is significant that once again she has returned to the idea of “true histories” in the
formulation of her ideas. Skene’s transformation of social reform projects depends upon such histories as they are the result of personal contact between individuals, not between the state and inmate. William Tallack, as noted above, included his correspondence with Skene on the subject of Lady Visitors in his letters to The Times, but he does not refer to any of her published writing specifically. The only citation of her work I have found does not appear until after her death, in the Webbs’ English Prisons under Local Government in 1922. But this failure to find specific references does not negate either her participation in the principles of prison reform or her intended purpose of communicating the reality of that world to the reading public.

Whereas Morrison, Tallack, and others were interested in showing specifically what was wrong with prison administration, namely Du Cane’s leadership, Skene was more interested in presenting the challenges faced by warders, prisoners, and Lady Visitors and the possible solutions for those challenges. Two of her series for The Hospital, for example, “Mistaken Impressions” and “Prison Administration,” present a balanced view of prison life—both examples of the positive aspects that work for the benefit of prison and prisoner and negative examples that are used to suggest possible improvements in the day-to-day administration of the gaol. Skene’s writing on prisons was grounded in the specific particulars of her experience rather than, as was the case with other writers, in the more general questions of how the system as a whole was to be managed. This reliance on personal, individual experience of the gaols and their inmates sets both her writing and the reforms she suggests apart from her contemporaries. Skene was not interested in the growing trend toward structural or systematic change to society and its institutions; her project is always grounded in a moral understanding of a society in which individuals care for each
other. The “Prison Administration” series was written in direct response to the Gladstone Committee’s determination “to render the working and administration of our English prisons as perfect as possible” (“Prison Training and Administration” 409), a project to which Skene imagines her writing contributing. Significantly, in the first number of that series, “Prison Training and Administration,” she responded to the repeated requests received “to give advice in these pages to persons desirous of entering the prison service” (409). Because Tallack had covered the issue with respect to men in *The Times*, Skene explored it with respect to women, proposing a potential training centre for female warders. Her voice, then, is added to those “mak[ing] a searching examination into the condition of most of our time-honoured institutions.” More importantly, even though she addresses what individuals could and should do within the system, the advice is based on “practical experience of the interior life of prisons” (409), and she advocates only the most qualified and those with the greatest aptitude be appointed.

Skene’s periodical writing can thus be seen in a similar light to her fiction and non-fiction as attempting to teach a wayward society truths to which it otherwise would not be exposed. Although her early writing appeared in such well-known and seemingly appropriate journals as *Good Words*, *Fraser’s*, *Cornhill*, and *Blackwood’s*, most of Skene’s writing on prisons and prisoners was published in *The Hospital*. Unfortunately, Rickards does not suggest how or why this seemingly incongruous alliance was formed. The journal’s first number describes its mission as “to fight disease with the best weapons it can make available, by extending the area of public interest and knowledge in the work of those who labour amongst sickness and suffering” (“To Our Readers” 1). Skene’s work in the gaol might well be described as “labour amongst sickness and suffering,” and certainly she was
interested in developing "public interest and knowledge," but care of the sick and fighting disease was not the primary function of the prison. No matter how she came to write for The Hospital, Skene's own interests drive the ever-increasing emphasis on the plight of prisoners and the work of warders in the journal's columns.

Her first article for The Hospital (which unlike many of the later ones is signed) is entitled "The Care of the Sick in Prisons" and discusses the recent improvements in the sick wards of prisons and the role of the prison medical officer. The connection here between the journal's mandate, its readers (both professionals and lay people in the field), and Skene's interests in the prison world is apparent. The subject of her first four-part series, "Criminal Mania," also coincided with the mandate of the journal. Insanity is explored in terms of the medical profession: the difficulty in defining and diagnosing a case, how and why doctors might be called upon to testify in court, etc., and Skene also passed on her experience of working with prisoners, particularly suicides, to help the profession understand mania.

By the time of the publication of her next piece, however, the column had been given a name—"Modern Sociology"—and the concern to shape the topic to the readership, one that she had previously acknowledged in stating the need "in these pages . . . to deal with this matter mainly in its relation to the members of the medical profession" ("Criminal Mania I" 19), was laid aside in order to explore the issue of capital punishment. No mention is made of the medical profession, not even of the health of those subject to punishment. Instead, the article proceeds to question whether the death penalty is meant to punish or deter, "[a]nd was it the best method for either of these purposes?" ("Capital Punishment" 189). The trend begun here in the first "Modern Sociology" column continues throughout Skene's subsequent
contributions for the column. 72 Where appropriate to the topic under discussion, she included references to the medical profession, but health issues do not form the basis of any article after the column was given its title. 73 Skene used the freedom allowed her in the title “Modern Sociology” to explore her own interests rather than the more restrictive mandate suggested by the journal’s title. 74 She also used many of the narrative accounts that had appeared in her earlier writing on the subject again in The Hospital articles, allowing her message about the realities of the world within the prison to reach an even wider audience.

The Lady Visitor, and by extension the feminine charity worker, as constructed by Skene and as seen in these first two chapters, is revealed as a powerful figure for change in Victorian society. Friendship provides a model for managing both the inmates of the country’s institutions and society more generally. She proves her fidelity through the confessional and civilizing interaction with the less fortunate and through Skene’s writing she ensures that society is exposed to the truths of these worlds. As we will see in the next chapter, Skene develops the representations of visiting and charity in such a way as to further extend societal understanding and change.

72 Skene was not the only contributor to this column—The Hospital was published weekly and made use of a number of regular and occasional writers. Other subjects discussed in the column include ones more explicitly medical, but also subjects related to education and the care of children. Nor was Skene the only author to deal with the prison world in this column. At least one entry, “Prison Reform, Or What the Authorities Say,” which was a response to recent sensational statements about prisons in Parliament, was almost certainly not her work. Although it did appear anonymously in the middle of Skene’s anonymous six-part series, “Prison Administration and the Training of Prison Officials,” internal evidence of the piece, particularly the empathetic nature of the language used and the repeated reference to the “poor honest workman” (“Prison Reform, Or What the Authorities Say” 71) suggests she was not the author.

73 Nowhere else in Skene’s writing did she particularly concern herself with health issues. She organized district nurses during the 1854 cholera outbreak in Oxford, and when Florence Nightingale chose nurses under her charge to serve in the Crimea Skene may have wished to join them (Rickards presents contradictory evidence, see pages 104 and 111), but it was not a topic that recurred in her writing.

74 The title of this column—“Modern Sociology”—makes Skene’s choice to write under it somewhat odd, especially given her commitment to the individual and a moral vision of society. Coined in the 1840s, sociology had come, by the 1870s, to mean “the study of social organization and institutions and of collective behaviour and interaction, including the individual’s relationship to the group” (1a, OED). Skene’s interest in the prison system and the relationship of the inmate to the system would, in part, account for her inclusion in this column. Her focus on the importance of individual, one-to-one relationships within that system, however, largely contradicts the implication of the column’s title.
Chapter Four

“To do good and to communicate”: Using the Literary for Philanthropic Ends

But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.
~ Hebrews 13.16

In 1825, as part of her Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisons, Elizabeth Fry made a plea for workers in her cause:

All reflecting persons will surely unite in the sentiment, that the female, placed in the prison for her crimes, in the hospital for her sickness, in the asylum for her insanity, or in the workhouse for her poverty, possesses no light or common claim on the pity and attention of those of her own sex, who, through the bounty of a kind Providence, are able ‘to do good, and to communicate’. (7-8, emphasis in original)

Fry’s call for workers, specifically women workers who would care for their less fortunate fellow women, was a refrain that would be heard a number of times throughout the nineteenth century. Anna Brownwell Jameson, in 1855 and 1856, lectured on the need for women to be trained in a vocation of care; later that same decade, Louisa Twining made an impassioned plea for women to act as workhouse visitors; the 1870s saw Octavia Hill’s social housing development; and Skene would echo Fry’s call for Lady Visitors in prisons throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The language that Fry used, moreover, is instructive both for its appeal to her readers’ emotions and for its representation of the work in terms of a biblical injunction. Fry’s implicit assumption that her readers (who presumably would want to consider themselves “reflecting persons”) would “unite in the sentiment” suggests a community of feeling and ideas around the care of women in various state institutions, a
community that texts like hers worked to create; the characterization of the sentiment as neither "light" nor "common" furthers the creation of community in that the connection between the reader and the institutionalized women is developed through the emotion of "pity," giving rise to "attention," and bringing them together.

Fry's use of Hebrews 13.16—"But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased"—points to the engagement necessary on the part of the reader and, indeed, the writer. The biblical injunction makes use of the infinitive form of the two verbs, demonstrating the action to be taken by the reader: first, she is "to do good" in her care for the institutionalized women, and this type of action can be seen in Skene's representation of women's philanthropic work examined in my previous chapters; second, she is "to communicate"—but communicate what, how? To communicate can mean "to unite in the celebration or observance of the Lord's Supper; to partake of or receive the Holy Communion" (6a OED), a meaning that Hebrews incorporates and one that Fry would also expect of her readers, the community formed by readers "partaking of" her text. From its Greek etymology, communion also carries the meanings of participation and fellowship (Hoad), ideas key for philanthropic writers in their desire to both develop bonds between inmates, authors, and readers, and to have readers participate imaginatively in the worlds described. But to communicate in the nineteenth century also encompassed the meaning of "to impart (information, knowledge, or the like)" (2a OED), and Fry's Observations incorporates this meaning as well; she is communicating her observations and experience of the treatment of women in the prison system. Fry's reader can also communicate in this sense, sharing her experience with family and friends and ensuring that the community of
sentiment grows. Thus Fry's appeal seems to conjoin the philanthropic and charitable with the power and effect of the literary.

This conjoining of the literary with the charitable makes Fry's appeal a particularly useful framework within which to analyze how Skene communicated with her audience, how she created a community of sentiment. In her entire œuvre, but particularly in her writing on prisoners and the prison system, Skene enacts the directive "to do good and to communicate." From all accounts, Skene's publishing history was intricately linked to her care for others; in the words of Charles Woods, "[a]ll she earned by her graphic pen was immediately given away.... [and the] list of those whom she substantially helped on their way through life was a singularly long one, comprising all ranks of society" (quoted in Rickards 366). Indeed, Skene's occasional inclusion in twentieth-century scholarship makes exactly this point; Dorothy Mermin, for example, refers to Skene, together with Charlotte Yonge, Elizabeth Sewell, and Mary Fullerton, as "another of the novelists whose work was dedicated to pious ends and who wrote fiction in order to earn money for charity" (85; see also "Hidden Depths" in Sutherland).75 Rickards noted that Skene's *A Cry from the Foot of the Cross*, 76 which endeavoured both to inspire workers to take up the cause of the poor and to provide much-needed money for the work, "prompted her to give her industrious pen ample employment at all spare moments.... It was her rule throughout her long life never to spend on herself what she gained from her writings" (96). For Skene, the literary impulse to create seemed to be entwined with the charitable impulse to ameliorate suffering.77 The

---

72 Mermin also compares Skene to Sewell and Elizabeth Gaskell as "women whose faith grounded their social protest novels" (111).
73 As noted in Appendix One, I have not yet identified the details of this work. Given where it appears in Rickards's text, however, it must be from the late 1850s or early 1860s and the reference to it as "a little book" (96) might suggest the parish published it privately.
74 Even Skene's first "recorded" effort at creation combined the imaginary with the care for the other. Sir Walter Scott, a close friend of her father's, had retired to the Skene home following the news of his financial
representation of her fictional heroines and the Lady Visitor explored in the previous
chapters shows how their intervention both brought about a moral transformation in the
charitable recipient and provided a model for social reform. Skene’s literary work, then, can
be understood as using an emotional, personal appeal as an attempt to bring about a similar
moral transformation in her readers. Placing Skene’s work in the context of others writing on
similar subjects, this chapter will both explore how Skene used literary devices and rhetorical
strategies to craft and shape her writing and show the social and political effect of her
communication.

The Romance of Philanthropy – Literary Crafting

The primary rhetorical device used in writing about philanthropic and charitable
motivations (the duty of society’s more fortunate members) or memoirs of and appeals by
women involved in charitable work was narrative: nearly every article, pamphlet or report,
no matter what its purpose or content, contains a narrative account:78 either a story about the
effects of the experience on the visitor herself, or the “touching” story of one of the inmates
encountered.79 Why did these authors, authors who ranged from published novelists to

---

ruin and, as the elder Skenes were busy with other guests, the eleven-year-old Felicia was sent to entertain him.
Scott, not surprisingly, was normally the storyteller, but on this occasion he asked Felicia to take the role:
I made no difficulty whatever about doing as he desired,... I therefore began at once with the coolest
effrontery to give the great writer the benefit of my fanciful ideas, and invented then and there a long
romance about giants, and fairies, and water kelpies—supernatural phantasms of that description being at all
times the objects of my special predilection.
Sir Walter listened with the utmost good humour, and I think with some amusement, as he laughed out
heartily every now and then. (“Personal Recollections” 28; see also “Some Episodes” 1-2).
78 Although not used by Skene and others writing on these subjects, “narrative account” is the term I am using
to refer to the narratives or stories included in the writing. The term “story” alone is too suggestive of
imaginative writing to be useful (although this aspect of narrative accounts is explored), “narrative” is
somewhat ambiguous, and “case history” or “case study” implies social science conventions (like transcription)
that it would be invalid to invoke. Using the term “narrative accounts” suggests, I hope, some of the
connotations of story as well as the idea of the account of one’s life narrated to the Lady Visitor by the inmate
himself or herself and an accounting of events that took place within the prison or workhouse.
79 Some of these narratives almost take on the status of urban myths; it seems that no matter how genuine or
seemingly original the story might be, it sounds not unlike another from years earlier. Particularly popular is
one that describes the work of a provident or savings bank society, the earliest of which I have found appears in
members of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science to individuals working with the poor, make use of such a rhetorical device to approach their readers? The answer can possibly be found in the intended audience, who is clearly not the poor, the prisoners, nor the fallen women who populate the narrative accounts; in the words of a correspondent to Good Words, "narratives such as these are not written for those of whose case they treat. They are written for those whose dwellings are fixed in providence on the sunnier slope of life; who have round them a sufficiency of temporal, and an affluence of spiritual blessings" ("The Evils of Great Cities" 366). Since the narrative accounts are written for the majority of society who have little or no knowledge of what happens in state institutions, we can examine how these accounts are crafted to appeal to readers. The question then becomes one of engagement: how might the author engage the interest and sympathy of her reader? How does the reader become engaged with, first, the details of the narrative account and, second, the work or ideas presented in the piece? Skene's writings on prisons and Louise Twining's on the workhouses, among others, turn to the techniques and tools of literature—figurative language, allusions, and generic forms—to ensure their works do not simply become Blue Books in a different guise, but rather participate in the pleasure and emotional involvement created by more literary compositions and thus engage readers in their causes.

Figurative language, primarily imagery and symbolism, becomes a powerful tool in the hands of an author who desires to engage her readers and to influence their beliefs about

---

80 Reports prepared for and published by parliament on many of the social and political issues of the period.
and actions with the less fortunate. The goal is to involve the reader empathetically in the plight of the narrative account’s subject so that the reader is moved to consider his or her involvement in the issue. Skene manipulated the narrative accounts of prisoners for inclusion in her writing, making conscious use of the artistic dimension of language, particularly the Christian symbolism of water and its power to relieve, revive, and renew life.

The account of “John Hill” first appeared in Good Words as “A Released Prisoner,” and in this first form it appeared to be a story. Good Words was the “most popular fiction-carrying monthly (after 1861) magazine of the nineteenth century” (Sutherland 252), and there is nothing in “A Released Prisoner” to suggest it was anything but fiction, a work of the imagination. The story is permeated with images of water or the consequences of a lack of water. In the opening paragraph, the gaol is described as “mournfully ornamented by a few sickly plants languishing in the perpetual shadow” (812) of the building. In the visitor’s first interaction with Hill, “Miss M— raised [the jug of water], and held it to his lips. He drank some eagerly, and then pushed it away. ‘Taint no good; it leaves me as dry as I was’” (814). Like the plants “languishing” in the prison yard, so Hill is languishing within the prison, and it takes Miss M—’s intervention to obtain some lemonade, “something more refreshing than this plain water” (814).

The next image of water comes in the form of the prisoner’s tears when he learns he has a friend in the visitor: “How long was it since the blessed dew of tears had come to soften the arid desolation of that poor hopeless soul, like waters from heaven falling on the burning sand of a desert waste!” (815). By transferring the power of the water to renew from an external source, the lemonade, to an internal one, the prisoner’s tears, Skene shows her audience the results of the Lady Visitor’s intervention. The reader who has been touched by
the unquenchable thirst of the prisoner can now further the imaginative bond with the prisoner, for who has not either desired to provide relief or be relieved?: the reader might place herself either in the role of Lady Visitor bringing such relief to the prisoner, or in the role of prisoner, recipient of the visitor’s ministrations. In either case, the reader’s life is connected with both the inmate’s and the Lady Visitor’s.

The water imagery culminates in the “unquenchable pity” of the love of Christ that Hill learns from Miss M—, and the cleansing power of His blood (816). The desire to quench his bodily thirst that began the story has become for Hill a revelling in the abiding love of Christ. Hill has come to understand the Christian symbolism of water: Christ is the living water; He refreshes the soul, whereas lemonade only refreshes the body. The association of water with baptism furthers the symbolism: the water imagery comes to be a sign of (Hill’s) individual salvation, reinforcing Skene’s larger project of reimagining social reform through the individual. Through reading the narrative account, Skene’s reader presumably arrives at the same understanding and recognizes her own power to participate in such change. The retelling of the same narrative account in Scenes from a Silent World,81 even though this work is presented as fact (the actual experience of the narrator/author) in comparison to the fictional overtones of the work in Good Words, likewise sets up contrast among “consuming thirst” (92), “burning desire . . . [and] frantic craving” (95) indicative of the prisoner’s condition under confinement and the “perfect liberty” (96) he achieves as “he passed to the pure air and boundless expanse” (97) of a future life with Christ.

Water is the strongest image in “A Released Prisoner,” but Skene also uses a movement between the world outside and inside the walls of the gaol and the curing power of touch to shape the story. Just as the water imagery changes from a concern with the body to

81 “John Hill” appears in a number of guises in Skene’s articles on prisoners.
one with the soul, the other images also change or invert as the story progresses. Whereas
the story begins with a description of the gaol’s exterior and Hill’s fervent desire to be
released from it, it ends with the movement of the visitor from a beautiful day outside to the
beauty of Hill’s departure from life within the gaol’s walls, showing that it is the internal
reflection of life that is important, not a desire for external remedies. Again, we can read this
message as both for the prisoner within the action of the narrative account and the reader
outside the action through an imaginative participant in it.

In addition, elsewhere in her writing about prisoners Skene uses a simile connected
with water imagery to describe the salutary effects of the Lady Visitor: “The first touch of
human sympathy fell on the hard defiance of her despairing darkened spirit like a ray of
warm sunshine on ice that binds imprisoned waters” (Scenes 121). The invocation of touch
represents both the physical contact between Lady Visitor and prisoner and the metaphysical
contact of shared humanity. As we saw in Chapter One, Skene uses physical touch in a
similar way in Hidden Depths to bridge the pure—fallen woman divide and develop the
relationship, one might even say friendship, between Ernestine and the prostitutes. The
symbolism and imagery of water is particularly effective here, in that the water is frozen until
touched, bound like the prisoner and yet freed through interaction with the Lady Visitor. The
cold series of “d” sounds—defiance, despairing, darkness—are indicative of the prisoner’s
hardened state, “refractory” (120) and troublesome, before softened by the offices of a Lady
Visitor represented through the “s” sounds—sunshine, ice, binds, imprisoned, waters—into a
“gentle, obedient” being (120-21). The power of language to speak to the reader’s heart and
empathetic nature is used by Skene to ensure that her reader is moved by the narrative
accounts—moved in such a way that the result is a change of perspective about the subject of the piece (both person and issue).

We can see a related use of imagery to engage and capture the sympathies of the reader in Louisa Twining’s many articles for the Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society (hereafter referred to as Journal). Similar to Skene’s writing on prisons in the latter third of the century, Twining’s on workhouses in the 1860s uses narrative accounts to implicate the reader empathetically and personally in the lives of those who require help. One of Twining’s contributions to the second number of the Journal, “A Plea for Workhouse Visitors,” is quite instructive because of both her use of a picture metaphor to describe her writing and the conclusions towards which she, like Skene above, directs her readers.82 Twining begins by noting how little is known about the inner workings of the workhouse, its inmates, or its administration. She directs specific questions to her audience, asking if they know the truth of the workhouse, and then offers to provide “one picture, a true and perhaps not uncommon one, drawn from the life[,] we will try to present it to them in plain, unvarnished colours, for the facts need no additions of ours to send them to the heart” (“Plea” 51). The idea that the workhouse could be captured as a picture, detailed, yet truthful, pervades philanthropic writing. The picture is not, significantly, simply a sketch of the workhouse and its inmates; rather, it is much more complex, more like the period’s narrative paintings, such as Augustus Leopold Egg’s triptych, known as Past and Present (1857-58),83 or the scenic dioramas84 that proved so popular with Victorian audiences. Like the dioramas,

---

82 This is one of the unsigned articles, but Twining’s participation in the life of the crippled girl becomes evident from her Autobiography and diary extracts in Appendix One of Recollections of Workhouse Visiting.
83 Egg’s triptych, an example of “Victorian ‘problem pictures’ . . . [that] present didactic, moral narratives on social issues” (Warner 106), displays the cost to a family of a wife’s infidelity.
84 The diorama, a forerunner to modern cinema, was a form of public entertainment . . . featuring a large, partially translucent scenic painting, which by means of varied illumination simulated . . . effects” (Chilvers).
which move and change, showing effects of weather and light, Twining’s series of pictures move through time with the inmate, showing the effects of the Visitor’s intervention, and are meant to move the hearts of its audience. Having prepared her audience in such a way, Twining wastes no time with other preliminaries or facts about her topic; she launches straight into the narrative account of “a poor crippled girl” (50), for whom the “union was now hopelessly and for ever her home, and the Guardians her friends and protectors” (52). We learn of the “four walls of that ward [which] bound her horizon,” of the “sick or dying women” who formed her sole companions, and the “dying struggles” of a poor woman in the bed next to her (52).

After painting this first sketch, Twining moves on to notions of responsibility and motivation—looking to both her immediate, individual audience and a larger one—to drive home “the moral that we would draw from these facts” (52):

Here it is that the lady visitor may step in with some of the kindly offices and charities of life. She provides an alphabet, some old books, and encourages the poor cripple to endeavour to learn from them[;] . . . a bright look of welcome and pleasure upon her face shows that a gleam of sunshine has crossed her path, and the motive of pleasing her friend induces her to persevere in her efforts. (52-53)

Twining’s moral lesson encourages her audience to become active members in workhouse visiting. The verb tense changes through the passage, from the conditional “may step in,” providing the reader with a possible action to take, to the present “provides” and

---

84 Other examples of such narrative pictures or dioramas, moving the heart and moving through time, include the debates about nurses in Workhouses, and the need for convalescent homes for the sick poor and homes for the incurably ill poor, which begin in the pages of the journal as descriptions of conditions and develop into the fruition of policy and practical changes.
“encourages,” showing the reader acting and the results of those actions. Her readers have been affected by the accounts of the deprivations of the poor crippled girl and are now provided with the way to ameliorate those deprivations through their own ministrations. Significantly, Twining’s sketch of the girl continues to develop and change, diorama-like, through the *Journal*, as we learn in future issues of the crippled girl’s progress, including the news in November 1859 that she has been confirmed and received communion twice.\(^8^5\)

If the use of figurative language has the effect of engaging the reader with the characters and events portrayed in both fictional representations of the less fortunate and the narrative accounts in journalism, then it is also necessary for charitable writers like Skene and Twining to make their readers comfortable with the texts they are reading in order to counteract the sometimes disagreeable subject matter. This goal was accomplished through allusions to other literary and religious texts with which the reader would be familiar and through the use of recognizable genres. The purpose of such allusions and genres was to bring what is an unfamiliar and alien world into the lives and familiar world of the reader and thus involve the reader further in the lives of those depicted.

Religious texts figure prominently in Skene’s *Scenes from a Silent World*, at times via direct quotation, as in “Bring my soul out of prison” (97; Ps. 142.7) or “That it may please thee to show thy pity upon all prisoners and captives” (xvii; *Book of Common Prayer* 151), and at times through echoes of the language of the New Testament and Christ’s relations with humankind. It is not surprising, of course, to find such allusions: the philanthropic motives of Skene and other writers were, as discussed above in Chapter One, grounded in

---

\(^8^5\) Other examples of such narrative pictures or dioramas, moving the heart and moving through time, include the debates about nurses in Workhouses, and the need for convalescent homes for the sick poor and homes for the incurably ill poor, which begin in the pages of the Journal as descriptions of conditions and develop into the fruition of policy and practical changes.
Christian beliefs and the desire to act as directed by Christ. The biblical allusions, then, reinforce the message of the text.

Shakespeare is also quoted frequently: the epigraph to Chapter One of Scenes is from Cymbeline (V.iv) and a reference to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy is used in that same text to describe how in contemplating suicide the lower classes follow him in his “To die, to sleep” but “never follow to the deeper issue—’In that sleep of death, what dreams may come!’” (137). A quotation from The Merchant of Venice—“The quality of mercy is not strained” (IV.i)—is used to suggest the suitability of the topic of mercy when conversing with prisoners. All of these references would be immediately recognized by Skene’s readers, and thus the familiarity potentially allows the project of her text to enter the world of those readers.

Thomas Carlyle is one of the few writers Skene mentions by name in Scenes (12), not surprisingly, given his writing on the “Condition of England” and the subject matter of his Latter-Day Pamphlets (1850). The echoes of his work can be heard a number of times: compare Skene’s “the bane of our modern schemes of benevolence—a species of moral red-tapism that surrounds otherwise useful charities” (16) with Carlyle’s “redtape establishments” and “jungle of redtape” of the Latter-Day pamphlet “Downing Street” (111). Skene’s sympathy with Carlyle’s critique of “red-tapism” is another example of her resistance to system and bureaucracy as an approach to social reform traced in the previous chapters. A “jungle of redtape” and “redtape establishments” are symbolic of exactly the type of state-sanctioned, administrative charity that Skene’s writing works to counteract.

---

86 The OED defines “red tape” as “excessive formality or attention to routine; rigid or mechanical adherence to rules and regulations” (2b) and cites works by Lytton and Carlyle (1838 and 1840, respectively) as the first examples of the term’s use in this way.
The controversy surrounding Carlyle’s mid-century pamphlets, which ensured that his ideas were well-known despite their poor sales, and the social frustration expressed in them made the works an ideal vehicle for Skene to draw on; in many ways, Scenes expresses a similar frustration with the treatment of prisoners, although from a very different perspective. Carlyle’s depiction in “Model Prisons” of inmates in gaols and workhouses as “pet prisoners” (to use the term coined by Dickens and used by many, which held that prisoners were treated better than the working class and many others) would make his work suspect to Skene. A number of her articles work to counteract such depictions, suggesting the true hardships and deprivations inmates face. For Carlyle, the prisoner has already “declared for the Devil” (78) and “[t]o guide scoundrels by ‘love;’ that is a false woof, I take it, a method that will not hold together; hardly for the flower of men will love alone do; and for the sediment and scoundrelism of men it has not even a chance to do” (72-73). Love, of course, is at the centre of Skene’s methodology of working with prisoners and prostitutes; to quote Penitentiaries and Reformatories, “by means of love alone, in all gentleness, meekness and tenderest compassion” (16) can good be accomplished. Carlyle, on the other hand, would have the benevolently minded person (a term full of sarcasm in his text) leave the prisoners to their own devices and help “those dingy caverns of the poor; and there instruct and drill and manage, there where some fruit may come from it” (78).

What links Skene and Carlyle, however, is a frustration with the complete lack of knowledge about or interest in the plight of the less fortunate. In asking, “[m]y sublime benevolent friends, don’t you perceive, for one thing, that here is a shockingly unfruitful investment for your capital of Benevolence; precisely the worst, indeed, which human

---

87 See Michael Goldberg and Jules Seigel’s introduction to the pamphlets for an extensive discussion of their writing and reception.
88 See, for example, “The Care of Sick in Prisons” and “The Diet of Prisoners.”
ingenuity could select for you?” (77, emphasis in original), Carlyle also asks why the benevolent do not see the “continents of dingy poor and dirty dwellings” (74) that surround the prisons, or realize that “benevolent trouble taken [with the prisoner], will yield zero, or the net minimum of return” (78, emphasis in original). Although Skene would clearly disagree with Carlyle’s conclusions here, her work is also concerned with making the realities of prison life and benevolent action known. The very title of her work, *Scenes from a Silent World*, speaks to the lack of knowledge; the opening of the text also refers to how these scenes are “hidden” (2) behind the walls of the prison. Using such models as Carlyle, Shakespeare, and the Bible, Skene begins both to make the unfamiliar and unknown recognizable and familiar and to involve her readers with the lives of the prisoners, which will, in turn, allow her to counter readers’ ignorance of that world with knowledge.

In addition to alluding to familiar texts, the narrative accounts of charitable writing were also likened to genres familiar to readers. In “A Strange Life and Death,” the opening chapter of *Scenes from a Silent World*, Skene explains that “[h]idden [in the prison] are elements of the deepest tragedy; . . . true histories, equalling the wildest romance that imagination could picture; while on the other hand the daily routine is constantly enlivened by incidents that are irresistibly comic” (2-3, my emphasis). Skene’s accounts of the antics of some of the prisoners indeed often appear quite comic. We learn, for example, of Mrs. Merry’s attempts to win favour by reciting the first seven chapters of Genesis, “in a high-pitched tone of voice with wonderfully glib utterance, and marginal readings of her own.

---

89 Sydney and Beatrice Webb echo Skene’s phrasing in their work on the English justice system. “We are struck,” they write, “first, by the loss of publicity which the transfer of the administration from local to central government has involved. Since 1878 the prison has become ‘a silent world,’ shrouded, so far as the public is concerned, in almost complete darkness. This is due, in the first place, to the policy, to which every well-ordered administration is prone, of ‘no admittance except on business’” (235). It is impossible, of course, to know if the Webbs are quoting Skene here, but the fact the phrase is placed in quotations marks, and that twice in their text they use *Scenes from a Silent World* as an example in footnotes (see pages 181 and 220) does suggest the possibility.
which slightly impaired the solemnity of the proceeding,—‘Now the serpent was the most suitable of the beasts of the field,’—and so on” (213). Another unnamed prisoner she met, whom Skene describes as “one of the strangest, as well as the most comical” (128), is used to end Chapter Three of *Scenes* on an upbeat note:

> She was a diminutive elderly woman, with a countenance full of vivacity and cleverness, and the keenest of black eyes, which sparkled with malicious amusement whenever she succeeded in perplexing the officers by some odd proceeding. . . . [S]he would insist, most inappropriately, on treating her visitor to royal honours. Never did she approach that individual without making three profound curtsies at different stages of the advance, and invariably retired backward from the august presence with the same elaborate ceremony. (128-29)

Comedy “explores common human failings” (Baldick), and these two prisoners’ actions, the desire to please on the one hand and the personal vanity on the other, are failings that many a reader would recognize in themselves. Mrs. Merry’s misquotations and the “royal honours” of this elderly prisoner serve as “comic breaks” in *Scenes*, relieving some of the tension and gloom that could overwhelm the reader. Just as Skene describes the comic as enlivening the daily routine of prison life for both prisoner and visitor, so it enlivens the structure of *Scenes*.

Skene uses a similar tactic in her prose fiction: satire is used, not unlike Dickens’s representation of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, to portray the “wrong” way to go about charitable visiting. When searching for Annie in *Hidden Depths*, for example, Ernestine attempts to enlist the aid of Dr. Granby, the local churchman. Instead of
helping her, he upholds his daughters' "works of charity, piety, and necessity" as the "proper channels" of such work, where "innocent little ones [are taught] to clap their hands in unison" (1: 194–95). One wonders, with Ernestine and Skene, what necessity is met when children learn to "clap their hands in unison"? Sophia Egerton of *The Tutor's Ward* (1851), moreover, shares many characteristics with Mrs. Pardiggle, as her charitable "calling" is described in military terms: "in her daily descent on the village, armed with medicines and tracts, and stocked with severe, overbearing admonitions" (1: 106), Sophia assaults the poor. Both Sophia and Mrs. Pardiggle barge into the homes of those they visit, with no consideration for the needs, wants, desires, or privacy of the occupants, and they show no sign of respect for them. Also like Dickens's portrayals, Skene's satiric portrayals work as negative examples against which the heroines are judged. Ernestine and Millicent, of *Hidden Depths* and *The Tutor's Ward* respectively, go about their charity "do[ing] a great deal and ma[king] no noise at all" (Dickens 113), just as does Mr. Jarndyce, with his pension to Miss Flite and his care of Charley and her family. In these fictional examples, then, satire has a much more significant role than the comedy of Skene's non-fiction prose, since it is "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule" (Baldick). Thus the reader is theoretically meant to examine the actions of characters and judge them accordingly.

History and tragedy shape the majority of the *Scenes'* narrative accounts. Because the prison visitor has befriended those whom she meets, because she has attempted to reach them on their own level, she knows their stories from both within and without the prison walls. For most prisoners to whom the reader is introduced, Skene provides a history of their lives, quite often in terms of the conditions of that life that led the prisoner to the gaol. As a
result, the reader also learns to know the prisoners as individuals because no two stories are
the same, even if both the crime and the punishment are. The history and tragedy of
Wheeler, the “dream crime” of Chapter Five, wherein Wheeler stabbed his wife while they
were both sleeping, with no knowledge of the act, is compounded through the justice system.
A jury, believing Wheeler to be “virtually innocent” but feeling it had no choice except to
find the man guilty, provided “such an extremely strong recommendation to mercy, that they
never for a moment doubted it would take effect in the reprieve of the prisoner” (197). The
judge, however, ignored the recommendation “with unyielding determination till the tragedy
was consummated” (198). The retelling of the narrative account, with Wheeler’s many
plaintive “but I am innocent” interjections, emphasizes the tragic quality of Wheeler’s death
and pulls at the heartstrings of the reader’s emotions.

Another prisoner, No. 19, whose past and crime Skene characterizes as “[o]ne of the
most romantic histories revealed in our prison” (108), might better be described as a tragedy.
No. 19 was a dancer who gave up her liberty for her lover, refusing to name him (a well-
known aristocrat) and thus denying herself an alibi for the crime with which she was charged.
Because the prison visitor is forbidden to reveal events taking place outside the gaol, it is
only after No. 19 was released that she learned he had married someone else. It is more than
the loss of her freedom and her companion that make the story tragic, however; “the tragic
effect usually depends on our awareness of admirable qualities—manifest or potential—in
the protagonist, which are wasted terribly in the fated disaster” (Baldick). No. 19’s integrity
in not subjecting her lover to public shame and her trust, albeit misplaced, are qualities that
normally would be admired in a young woman, but in this case the cost is gaol, and “[a]fter
that all went wrong with her. She became embittered and hopeless. . . . [S]he drifted back
into London... to disappear altogether from the knowledge of those who had taken so much
interest in her” (117-18). It is Scenes’ object, then, despite their apparent incongruity with
notions of life within prison, to narrate and illustrate these tragedies, histories, and comedies
to the reading public. Skene’s purpose in invoking such familiar genres seems to be to
reassure her reader: yes, the stories from within this “Silent World” can at times be horrific
and are, on the surface, unconnected with the world of her reading public, but at the same
time these stories and the prisoners who people them are neither so different from nor
unrecognizable to that public.

Romance is neither a term nor a genre one would normally associate with
philanthropy, yet it is repeatedly used in philanthropic journals like Twining’s and writing
like Skene’s (as the above quotation from Scenes suggests), and effectively encapsulates how
the individual reader is worked upon in this writing. Romance is defined as “a fictional story
in verse or prose that relates improbable adventures of idealized characters in some remote or
enchanted setting” (Baldick). In charitable writing, the workhouse or prison, normally
considered quite pedestrian or even a space to shun, becomes an enchanted setting full of an
adventure provided through the work of visiting and the characters encountered. The reader,
then, is invited to escape her ordinary routine first through the reading of other women’s
adventures and second through her own participation in the work.

The invitation to participate in the adventure of romance is a particularly common
trope in philanthropic writing. In the March 1861 number of Twining’s Journal, for
example, an unnamed correspondent takes the opportunity to share her experience of the
local workhouse’s inmates in a piece entitled “Workhouse Sketches.” The very terminology
used in her title is telling; the idea of a “sketch” invokes storytelling, as in Dickens’s
Sketches by Boz, but the juxtaposition of her purpose for sharing the experience and the
manner in which she describes the nature of the work is significant for the "romance of
philanthropy." The correspondent clearly believes herself to be motivated by altruism and a
selfless consideration for others. 90 "I assert, [she writes], the visitor is sorely needed. . . . [I]f
once [the poor] see and feel the disinterested love of one human being towards another, a
step has been made towards helping them to understand what is the love of God and Christ"
("Workhouse Sketches" 375, emphasis in original). The author's closing begins in the same
vein as the above: all individuals, no matter how insignificant their standing, or how little
time they might possess, are exhorted to fulfill their roles by "doing very much good" for the
poor. She then refers to those of her readers "who have tried it [and] . . . know that they
could have supplied many sketches such as these from their own experience" (380). It is
these experiences, these narratives, that will provide the motivation for others to follow in
their footsteps: "May [these stories] induce some who have not tried it to experience for
themselves the 'romance of the Workhouse'" (379-80); in other words, an outright challenge
to the reader to embark upon such adventure for herself. Thus as the article concludes,
readers find themselves enticed to experience the romance that has been opened to both the
author of this article and the many others who also participate in this work, and the figuration
of the experience as "romance" makes it a desirable occupation, one that will enrich the life
of the participant. Very little of the deprivations and indignities the visitors themselves are
subjected to appear here; rather, all is covered with what Carlyle refers to as "rose-water"
philanthropy in "Model Prisons" of Latter-day Pamphlets (294). Unlike Carlyle's

90 The issue of whether or not the correspondent is indeed altruistic and selfless is difficult to ascertain in such
an article, but the issue of motivation was frequently discussed.
condemnation, however, in the Journal there is a sense that real work might be done: it just needs to be perfumed with a tincture of romance to bring others to it.

A second “romance of philanthropy” is signed “An East End Incumbent,” and it is, surely, all the more significant that the rhetoric of romance and sensation should be used by a clergyman to motivate his readers to action. This July 1864 letter ends with the notions of self-sacrifice and religious duty with which the previous example began, but the incumbent seems to be aware that he needs both to entice his readers to read his narratives and to colour the work in such a way that visiting will prove an interesting, even stimulating project to undertake. It is worth quoting from the opening in full:

And it is a very mistaken idea which some entertain that the visitation of a Workhouse or hospital is a dull, dreary, and melancholy business; that there is nothing to relieve the monotony of misery, nothing to stir the soul with sympathy for the sorrows of the fallen. Ladies who, as they suppose, have nothing else to occupy their time, spend hours of their valuable lives in devouring the pages of a sensational novel, in tracing out the fancy-wrought calamities of a fictitious heroine, and in giving themselves up with rapt attention to the highly-coloured fictions of the present day. Now it is as true as truth itself that, within the compass of a single metropolitan Workhouse, more domestic tragedies may be unravelled, more startling incidents may be discovered, more villainies exposed, more seductions lamented over, more temptations succumbed to, than are contained in all the sensation novels of a whole prolific season. As a matter of excitement, then—and this is the besetting weakness of the present time—the Workhouse visitor has a far more
ample field in real life for the display of her emotion than the fashionable idler has in the pages of the most exciting novel. ("Workhouse Visiting" 205, my emphasis)

The author, then, recognizes the role of romance in these ladies’ lives ("tracing out the fancy-wrought calamities of a fictitious heroine") and shapes his description of workhouse visiting in terms with which they will be familiar. The tragedies, seduction, villainies, and temptations invite the reader into the adventure of workhouse visiting. The language of the sensation novel resonates throughout this article, both in terms of the novel’s content (its stimulation of the senses) and the widespread concerns about women who spend too much time reading, who are more interested in fictional heroes and heroines than in the teeming mass of humanity that surrounds them. The East End Incumbent seems caught between the desire to appeal to the sensibilities of these types of women—to paint the workhouse as a space for sensation and romance—and the desire to find dedicated workers for the cause. Indeed, he concludes his letter on the latter note: “But this is a very low view of the responsibility which attaches to those who are but stewards of the manifold gifts of God. If wealth has its duties as well as it rights, it behoves its possessors to discharge those duties in the best and most earnest way” (205-06). The true worker has the teachings of Christ at the heart of her work, but she must sometimes be enticed through more worldly temptations to find that calling.

The narrative accounts that abound in philanthropic writing tend to fall into one of two categories: either positive examples of the triumph over adversity and degeneracy that charitable visiting can accomplish (examples of potential and perseverance) or, conversely, negative examples of how not to go about the work of visiting. Likewise, the “romance of
philanthropy" also has negative examples to contrast with the positive ones noted above. These examples also work to exhort readers to appropriate action, but now the appropriate action is to avoid the pitfalls of "romance."

An 1855 correspondent to *The Philanthropist*, signed "Common Sense" and whose letter the journal entitles "Romantic Benevolence," chastises the results brought about by the very rhetoric of romance used by the East End Incumbent and anonymous workers in the examples above. This correspondent is concerned about the "love of novelty" (a phrase very much connected with concerns about the effects of romance on readers) which gives rise to new benevolent ventures where old ones exist and are, moreover, short of funds. In particular, he finds fault with Lt. John Blackmore's *Romance in Real Life* (an account of some work of the "London by Moonlight Mission," which attempts to reclaim prostitutes), and he asks "is there a man of any common sense, and who knows anything of London, who can be content to take this wonderful romance, which reads so exceedingly like a chapter from one of Lloyd’s or Mr. G. W. M. Reynolds' penny novels, as plain, sober, unsophisticated truth?" ("Romantic Benevolence" 118). Here, sensation-type novels and romance are found wanting as motivators to action; rather, it is the clear light of reason that should be the controlling force. Romance, then, for "Common Sense" has come face-to-face with realism, "a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life" (Baldick). The correspondent notes, after reading Sampson Low’s *Charities of London*, "that there are fifteen or sixteen refuges for women already in operation, none overburdened with cash; and of one it is said, 'the society is in debt fifty

---

91 Blackmore’s “romance” tells the story of a blackmailing brothel keeper, a potentially penitent young prostitute, and the Moonlight worker who attempts to rescue her, even paying the Madam blackmail money. He is thwarted a number of times, but eventually succeeds in rescuing the young woman from the clutches of a degenerate life.
pounds,' and the report states, that 'during the past ten months about two hundred young women have been refused admittance for want of funds'” (117, emphasis in original). Thus “Common Sense” concludes, “if any gentleman has ‘a considerable sum of money’ to give away, I think he may dispose of it, with great advantage, to some of the institutions daily appealing for assistance” (118). Romance must be balanced with realism, otherwise the good these authors represent and use to motivate others will be undermined.

We might go back to look at the two earlier examples and see that they are also balanced with realism. Although the language of romance is used in each to entice readers, the truth of the narrative accounts presented, the authors’ real experiences in the workhouse or prison, are also asserted. The unnamed correspondent of “Workhouse Sketches,” for example, provides details of a number of those she visits: the aged infirm who have no one to care for them, the unrepentant sinner who is converted to the Truth on his deathbed. The East End Incumbent likewise moves from his sensational opening to portray the lives both within and without the workhouse of those he encounters. Visiting might be an adventure for the reader, but the narrative accounts are also realistic representations of life in these institutions for both inmate and visitor.

It is interesting to find a letter such as “Common Sense[’s]” in The Philanthropist, because sometimes the paper reads like a sensation tabloid. Although its declared intention is to expose the “errors of philanthropy” and to subject philanthropic societies “to the most vigilant scrutiny” (“Address to Our Readers” 2), and although the early pages of each number are filled with reports of society meetings, parliamentary debates, etc., it also includes columns such as “Police Intelligence” and “Law Intelligence,” as well as advertisements of people in distressed situations soliciting funds or work, which use the
language of sensation and sentiment to appeal to readers. For example, the January 1855
“Police Intelligence” column—headlined “An Imposter!”—details the arrest for fraud of
James Driscoll, who was found applying for relief at the City of London Union despite a
large amount of cash found on his person (“An Imposter!” 34). Additionally, the
advertisements’ movement from the back page through the first seven numbers to the front
page in June 1855 indicates their importance to the journal. Nonetheless, as these articles in
*The Philanthropist* and the *Journal* attest, as do Skene’s narrative accounts in *Scenes*, generic
identification, especially identification in terms of romance, is vital to the successful
publication of narrative accounts and the work of visitors to the country’s institutions, when
success is defined in terms of engaging the reader in ideas and ultimately encouraging that
reader to take up the cause. Without such a “romance” colouring, these authors imply,
readers might not be reached, and thus the inmates left without care.

As the above examples of figurative language and genre suggest, the crafting of
narrative accounts for publication is key to the connection between worker and reader, key to
the building of community. Behind each of these rhetorical strategies is a clear and defined
voice, often that of the Lady Visitor, who is the conduit for the narrative accounts, who
directs the reader to appropriate conclusions about the accounts and to actions that need to be
taken. The directives to read (or ignore) the romance aspects of the narrative accounts might
be considered in such a way. At times, then, it is the narrative voice, not the narrative
account, that shapes and controls the writing about both visitors and inmates. The
correspondents, journalists, and workers clearly envision part of their work to be the
motivation of others, in order for others to become involved in the work. In the words of a
*Journal* correspondent, “I have selected these cases from several equally interesting, hoping
that some of those who read this journal will feel that there is much to be done in our Workhouses for the spiritual good of the inmates, as well as in showing to them they are not forgotten or uncared for, though ‘in the Workhouse’ (‘Correspondence’ 127). This is just a single example; throughout the journals, readers learn of an author’s desire to “stimulate the exertions” of visitors (“An Awful Death-Bed Scene” 9) or to provide an “encouragement to perseverance” despite difficulties and apparent failures (“Encouragement to Perseverance” 13). Twining published a memoir of her work from a similar motive; in the preface to Recollections of Workhouse Visiting, she hopes it might be “of help and service to some of my younger sisters who are now pursuing the same path” (Recollections of Workhouse Visiting ix), noting “the inestimable value of experience” (x, emphasis in original).

What becomes apparent, moreover, is that the narrators of these articles want to accomplish more than motivating others: their voice and experience, their shaping of the account related, is meant to direct the reader to the “right” type of action. For example, the very title of Skene’s earliest piece on district visiting, “The Blunderer; or How The Work of the Rich Among the Poor is Marred,” addresses the message of the piece: the right way to go about working with the poor. The article is a series of sketches of a young woman’s first efforts to aid the less fortunate. In the first case, she attempts to awaken an “old man who had attained the age of a hundred and three years” (257) to the reality of his spiritual condition as he nears death, but she can persuade him to agree to nothing except a desire for apple dumplings. In other words, his physical wants override all, and he persuades her rather than the other way around, with what the narrator describes as “an awful bathos” (257).
Early in the piece, the narrator (who is not the Blunderer) refers to the “religion of respectability—a culture which satisfies the aspirations of a vast number of the middle classes in England” (257). The tone of contempt pervading this statement is clear; the religion of respectability is no religion at all for the narrator and should not be linked to the work of charity. Likewise, after the Blunderer’s first foray into the field, when the narrator moves from narration of story to statement of fact, she condemns those who are more interested in their own spiritual welfare than those who they claim to be helping:

It were well if it were understood, once for all, that any one who goes among the poor with only motives of this description is certain to fail of the smallest real success among them. There must be a genuine love for them, a hearty compassion for their physical suffering, and an earnest unselfish desire to help them for their own sake, before the slightest good can be done to either their souls or bodies. (258)

As Prochaska argues, “charity turned into a branch of fashion in the nineteenth century. The long lists of subscribers, which commonly took up the bulk of annual charitable reports, were in themselves a sign of status seeking” (40). Skene is not interested in such status seekers. She wants her reader to learn from the titular “blunderer” through the directives of the narrative voice: “We have spoken of blunders; but in truth it is but one great want which mars in a thousand different forms the work of the rich among the poor—that want is Love, in its purest and simplest essence, unincumbered [sic] by theories of duty of discipline—the

---

92 This is one of Skene’s signed pieces, so it seems fair to bring together the narrator and author as one person. But unlike some of her other writing (see, for example, that on prison reform) the author/narrator is not explicitly aligned with the events related. In these other articles, often signed “by a visitor” or some such appellation, it is clear that there is a single voice narrating, authoring, and enacting the experiences, but this is not the case here. It is interesting, however, that the final recitation of the blunderer’s visiting, about the father seeing his dead son on his death bed, and the daughter who promises to follow, makes an appearance in another Skene piece, “Light in the Valley of the Shadow.” Skene’s biographer reveals that it “is the more interesting, because she was herself with the dying man to whom, as she relates, the ghost appeared” (308).
love, not of masters to servants, of patrons to dependents, if such exist—but of friend to
friend, of brethren one with another” (260, emphasis in original). The narrative voice, then,
ensures that readers understand the moral of the narrative account described; it is her voice
that not only shapes the comical aspects of the account but also brings the reader back to the
message of the piece. The comic element of a charitable, spiritual mission ending in apple
dumplings engages the interest of her reader and possibly entices the reader to continue on,
as might the “amusing instance,” when the Blunderer is told “them as wants to live religious,
had best not marry a stoker” (258), since Sundays must be spent in attempt to scrub her man
clean rather than in church. By enticing the reader into the piece, the comedy guarantees the
reader receives the message Skene wishes to convey. Additionally, Skene shows that good
intentions do not always result in good effects, or even intelligible ones—what do apple
dumplings have to do with one’s moral condition? Again, this allows her to articulate her
message, in this case against the sense of “superiority, and a self-arrogated right to pry” (258)
into the lives of the less fortunate, that many philanthropists bring to their work. Each of
these elements, the comical and its correlative rational correction, also reinforces the message
that the visitor must meet those she encounters on their own terms and respect their
understanding of the world.

The strong, directive, at times even intrusive narrative voice that shapes and controls
Skene’s *Hidden Depths*, her fictional account of a young woman’s efforts to help the young
women degraded by her brother and fiancé, can be likened to the use of narrative voice in
charitable journals as explored above. Through the narrator, who at times overpowers the
story, the novel’s social criticism is developed and the reader is directed to understand the
implication of the events narrated in specific ways, ways that might well be connected to the
“truth” that the novel’s preface asserts has “power” and without which “it would be worse than useless” (v).

The social criticism of the sexual double standard is introduced by the narrator’s directive as to the “right” view of the situation. For example, in the middle of recounting Lois’s story, specifically how she was treated by her lover George, her parents, and their employers, the narrator interrupts:

People solemnly accept and believe (chiefly on Sundays) in the eternal truths revealed by the Holy God, and then they go and systematically act as if those truths were lies. . . . It would seem as if in the world it was sufficient that a vice should be fashionable and almost universal to transfigure it into a virtue, or at least into a mild weakness; and crime well-dressed and aristocratic [sic] is received with flattering warmth, which, when it appears clad in tatters and vulgarity, is denounced according to the laws of eternal righteousness.

(1: 23-24)

Skene directs the reader towards two facets of the double standard here, connecting the events of the novel to her larger agenda. First, there is the fact that George is fêted by society despite what we might want to call his “fallen” nature: he is a sexually active male who is in no way called to account for those actions; indeed, one might even say he is rewarded for them. Sir John and Lady Talbot, so pious and rigid that they dismiss any employee for even the hint of misconduct, “with the most entire complacency and self-satisfaction, . . . handed over their young daughter to be the wife of Colonel Courtney” (1: 25). Although society fêtes and rewards George, the tone of the narrator’s interruption causes the reader to question the treatment of both him and the Talbots.
Second, there is a class issue: George’s upper-class status, his leisure to travel the
countryside and meet young women like Lois, precludes any notion of his actions as wrong,
either criminally or morally. Situated otherwise in the world, Skene implies, George might
be held to account. But would he? Does her phrase “clad in tatters and vulgarity” refer to a
lower-class or poverty-stricken rake, or is it a reference to gender? On the face of it, and in
its simplest interpretation, Skene does seem to compare the aristocratic with the plebeian
rake. But it is also fair to argue Skene makes here one of her first forays into the issue of
gender in the double standard. The interruption by the narrative voice ensures that the reader
considers that what is accepted and even celebrated in the male sex is denigrated and
punished in the female. It is not unusual for a woman to stand in for the lower classes in
Victorian literature: a single female figure who takes on the symbolic value of the masses.
One has only to look at the many Condition-of-England novels in which the heroine (often,
but not always, middle-class) undergoes a change of status or rank in order to represent
societal change towards the working classes.93 The female participant in a sexual fall,
moreover, is likely to be described as “clad in tatters and vulgarity.” It is the woman who is
held criminally and morally responsible for her fall. Indeed, Greg is moved to ask in an 1850
article, “What makes it impossible for them to retrace their steps?—almost impossible even
to pause in the career of ruin?” (“Prostitution” 471, emphasis in original). The answer is
clear: “that harsh, savage, unjust, unchristian public opinion which has resolved to regard a
whole life of indulgence on the part of one sex as venial and natural, and a single false step
on the part of the other as irretrievable and unpardonable” (Greg 471). As these quotations
from Greg attest, Skene is not the first to question the double standard; however, since the

---

93 I am thinking here of novels like Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855),
Disraeli’s Sybil (1845), or Geraldine Jewsbury’s Marian Withers (1851). Significantly, three of these examples
use the name of the heroine for their titles.
events of the novel themselves are not new or presented radically, it is the narrative voice and its directives that work to guide readers in specific ways: to indict male transgression and to reconsider the definitions of fallen and pure, thus levelling the moral dichotomies of society and refiguring the impetus of social reform.94

This reconsideration of the double standard is also accomplished, in part, by the use of questions in Ernestine’s accusation of her brother (104-05). The questions work to engage the reader in the debate, and, given the events to this point in the novel, we are also likely to indict George. A paragraph that begins with Ernestine’s thoughts about her brother, however, immediately continues with a narratorial intrusion:

And she was right. In vain will be all efforts to stem the “social evil” in this land, so long as this, the most odious of the world’s hypocrisies, is allowed to hold the place of justice and equity with regard to it. It is a marvel which can only be accounted for by the power of self-deception, inherent in human nature, that any who profess the principles of truth and honour, much less of religion, should dare to truckle to so mean a sham as that which pretends to uphold the interests of morality by trampling under foot the fallen woman, and holding out the right hand of fellowship to the man who dragged her into sin, and shared it with her. (1: 105-06)

What began as a third person description of the workings of Ernestine’s mind becomes a dissertation on the effects of the double standard, one that goes on for two pages and includes the evidence of a recent trial “which involved a question as to a young man’s moral conduct” (1: 107). Again, both aspects that interest the narrator are evident: a failure to indict male transgression and a questioning of what makes a woman fallen. At this point (and others like

94 See Chapter One above.
it), the novel loses some of its narrative impetus, but, Skene seems to be suggesting, the messages the narrator introduces are equally important. One might consider the narrator one of the chief “actors” of *Hidden Depths*, whose opinion and ideas form an element of the story parallel to and in explanation of its more “sensational” events. When, in the opening scenes of the novel, for example, Mrs. Clement, wife to one of George’s sailors, responds to Lois’s plight “with a gentle sigh” (1: 19) and compassionate pity, the narrator immediately remarks: “And would to Heaven that all who may read these words would not only agree with her opinion, but act as though they did” (1: 19). This narrative voice continues throughout the novel, asking that the reader both agree with Skene’s ideas and act upon them; action, of course, being key for change to take place.

Julie Ann Melnyk, in her chapter on Skene and *Hidden Depths*, characterizes the novel as a “social sermon”:

> religious women [writers] use their public voices for public purpose, to comment on social problems and to influence the means of their solution. In certain respects, they preach “moral sermons” that deal with issues outside the realm of family and village, and portray their work as an extension of their private moral influence. Christian women thus used their assumed superiority in the moral and religious realm to establish their authority to speak on social and political questions. (138)

Melnyk’s argument is compelling, particularly in terms of the narrative voice that permeates the novel. This voice seems very interested in pointing the reader to the correct reading of events and, as Melnyk argues, the authority for that correct reading is most often developed
in terms of the narrative voice’s superior morality. The fact that the narrative questions conventional morality and its definition of male and female transgressions, moreover, somewhat changes the tenor of the “moral sermon.” The narrative voice’s superior morality does not simply uphold conventional, religious ideas about men and women; specifically, there is an acceptance of the fallen woman that challenges convention.

I would, however, take issue with Melnyk’s final point. Quoting the closing paragraph of the novel, she asserts that “Ernestine may end in joy, but Felicia Skene ends in anger, as befits the reforming preacher” (155). It is not anger that motivates the exhortation for a Christian understanding of women’s place in mitigating the society’s problems, even when, as Melnyk notes, “it brings them into conflict with patriarchs or patriarchal institutions” (156); rather, the exhortation is representative of Skene’s rhetorical style. The paragraph begins “[s]hall it ever be thus?” (2: 222): i.e., with a question. In fact, the paragraph is riddled with questions, just as the novel itself has been throughout its exploration of the double standard. Some of the questions address very specific issues—“Shall [prostitution’s] hideous wickedness still be ignored, glossed over, or made light of, as regards destroyers . . . ? Are the haunts and centres of infamy always to be suffered to exist openly, and still allure souls to destruction in the face of day?” (2: 222)—reminding her readers of the details of Lois’s and Annie’s stories in the novel. The overt turn to God’s justice in other questions—for example, “Will a time never come when this matter shall be tried by God’s estimate of right and wrong, and not by man’s?” (2: 222)—show the reader how to answer the paragraph’s and the novel’s main question: “Shall it ever be thus?” In other words, the answer is to follow the precepts of Christ, again, as the novel’s plot, through Ernestine, has suggested. Although the questions might be read as anger, as frustration, they

95 See Chapter One for a discussion of morality in the novel in relation to both Ernestine and the narrator.
can also be read as a sign of hope, especially if the narrative voice has done her job throughout the novel. Skene invites her readers to ask themselves these questions, and by doing so, by considering the implications of the novel as a whole, there is a potential for the answer to be “No,” a potential that change can take place. Ernestine’s new code of morals is one which might cause her and others sadness, but it is one upon which a new society can be built. Thus the narrative voice in this novel, like that in Skene’s other works and those in philanthropic journals, becomes an authority for the reader, an authority who might speak difficult truths, but truths the reader needs to understand and accept. The epigraph of *Hidden Depths* is “*Veritas est Major Charitas*”: truth is the greatest charity; it is the charity of truth that the novel and other philanthropic writings are concerned with, and the reader needs the guide of the narrator/author to find this truth.

**The Mission of the Nineteenth Century – Literature as Philanthropy**

Skene opens Chapter Two of *Scenes from a Silent World* with the following observation:

> The history of the last fifty years seems to indicate that it is the mission of the nineteenth century, at least in this country, to make a searching examination into the condition of most of our time-honoured institutions, whether social, moral, or religious, and expose, without mercy, any error or weakness in their *modus operandi*. It is to be hoped, therefore, that this active spirit of investigation may now be turned more seriously than has hitherto been the case, to the various branches of our existing criminal law. (39)

By aligning her project with the “mission” of the century, with the progress and change that had been the hallmark of such institutions as the workhouse and the education system, Skene
elevated the prison and its inmates to the same degree of concern and care. Her use of terms like "spirit of the age" and "spirit of the times" throughout the text reminds her reader of the connection between the prison world and other social reform projects. Scenes from a Silent World, moreover, becomes the vehicle through which the "searching examination" is undertaken, and the scenes "brought forth from their well-regulated obscurity" (x) serve to expose society to the realities of the system.

Before interrogating Skene's "examination" of the prison system and its purpose and effect, it is instructive to contextualize her work within other writing of the period on prisons and prisoners. Skene's use of narrative accounts in Scenes (and in her other writing of prisons), the primary medium through which she conducts her examination, was not necessarily new, but her use of it was unique. Earlier writers on prisons and prisoners took quite a different approach when presenting the prisoners' world. Although Skene and Fry have a similar goal of creating community between reader and visitor, Fry's 1825 Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisons considers the female prisoner only in terms of the rules to which she will be subjected:

[The Committee of the Ladies' Association] will express their sympathy with [female prisoners] under their afflicting circumstances, soothe them with words of gentleness and kindness, and endeavour to hold up, in strong colours, the danger and misery of vice, the beauty of holiness, and the innumerable advantages which attach to a life of sobriety, industry, honesty, and virtue. When the attentions of the prisoners has been thus engaged, and their better feelings excited, it will be necessary to propose a series of rules for their future conduct. (15-16)
There is no sense of the prisoner as an individual or what she might be suffering in Fry’s account; in fact, empathetic engagement between Lady Visitor and prisoner is used to establish the visitor’s authority in the space of the prison, and by extension, after the inmate’s release. Fry’s interest centred on the middle-class woman acting as Lady Visitor rather than with the prisoner herself. As a result, it is not surprising to find that there are no narrative accounts of incarcerated women within Fry’s text. Fry and Skene were writing half a century apart, and although they were both interested in bettering the condition of women in prison through the offices of Lady Visitors, their approaches were quite different. Little had changed in the conditions of prisons and for prisoners between the writing of the two texts (the need for Lady Visitors is as pressing in the 1880s as it was in the 1820s), but as a result of the move away from a moral vision for social reform and toward a systematic one, Skene needed to frame and construct her “observations” in a different and potentially more effective way than Fry. As I will argue below, Skene uses narrative accounts to establish the individuality of prisoners in order to re-establish the efficacy of the individual as the central actor in social reform.

The 1868 *Female Life in Prison, by a Prison Matron*,96 is a fictional account of life in a women’s prison. The first-person narrative voice of this text, the anonymous “prison matron,” puts the reader in the position of the administrative authority of the prison and thus the book’s narrative accounts have characteristics of observation or spectacle. We are seldom in the cell with the prisoners, and instead of meeting the prisoners on a footing of friendship, the spectre of the narrator’s authority overshadows all; we are with the matron or warder watching over the women. The prisoners’ stories, moreover, are not interspersed

---

96 This book has been attributed to Frederick William Robinson; it was erroneously attributed to Mary Carpenter, and the microfilm copy in the *Women’s History* series carries a pencil addition of her name to the title page.
within the chapters describing the workings of the prison where they might naturally work as illustrations, but rather they are separated into distinct chapters: each is entitled “Prison Characters,” followed by the name of the prisoner whose story is told. Just as the women are imprisoned within cells of the prison, so their stories are imprisoned in individual chapters. It could be argued, of course, that the exact opposite is true: the prisoners are treated as individuals when given a chapter, rather than being used as illustrations. But the power and authority of the narrative voice in the other chapters, where the primary concern is depicting the life of the female warder not the female prisoner, as one might expect from the book’s title, undermines an argument for the work giving voice to the inmates. The message in the other chapters, for example, “that the staff of matrons is not sufficient for the proper working of our female prisons; that it has never been sufficient, and that the officers are worked too hard” (321, emphasis in original), shows that the primary impetus of the work seems concerned with the matrons, with the administration of the gaol, and not with the inmates or their experiences. The good that the additional staff of matrons might do “when more attention can be paid to each woman, instead of to each class” (321), is measured in terms of satisfactory results for the prison system rather than for the inmates.

The Rev. Lindon Meadows’s “Secrets of the Cells,” which ran in The Argosy from January to June 1897, chronologically follows Skene’s in Blackwood’s but precedes it in the events it depicts. Although not a direct allusion to Skene, the title is at least reminiscent of her series, and Meadows also made ample use of narrative accounts of the inmates he met in his local gaol. These accounts, however, serve a quite different purpose than those of Skene.

97 A head note to the second number in this series assures the reader “that the description of prison life and discipline in these papers refers to a long past condition of things. . . . Everything connected with prisons has changed for the better, and if they err at all it is on the side of comfort and consideration towards those confined within their walls” (233). One can imagine Skene taking issue with the “comfort and consideration” asserted by the author.
Meadows was interested in depicting his own experiences: the prisoner’s story is recounted in order to reveal something about the adventures of his own life. We learn about a prisoner, Graham, for example, who buried his burgled diamonds and gold in Québec, but the purpose of hearing about Graham is to narrate the four different unsuccessful attempts made by Meadows’s friends to recover the buried treasure (643-51). Another story related allows Meadows to return some stolen plate to its rightful owners (242-44). Meadows is the “hero” or protagonist of these “Secrets of the Cells,” not the prisoners. And despite the “editor’s” note that “[t]he papers . . . are of unusual interest from the vivid and graphic manner in which the various characters are described, affording an insight into the class of society from which they are taken not often to be obtained so powerfully drawn” (233), there seems little purpose for the series except to sensationalize the role of this particular chaplain and more generally the condition within prisons.

In contrast to the above examples, Skene envisions Scenes as a literary vehicle through which the prison world entered the larger society, and she was acutely aware of the effect of relating narrative accounts for this project. In the letter to William Blackwood that accompanied the second “Scenes” article, she noted that one of the inmate narratives included in this article was also included “in a paper on the visitation of prisons which I wrote for the departed Frasers Magazine [sic] but in a totally different manner from that in which it is treated in the present paper. — I have now clothed my recollection of what the woman told me in my own words instead of merely stating the facts” (Blackwood’s Papers

---

98 This attribute of Meadows’s articles participates in the “romance” of philanthropy explored above.
99 This head note reads as if it could as easily have been written by Meadows as by the editor of The Argosy, thus my use of quotations around editor.
The idea of “clothing” the account in her “own words” suggests Skene acted as a mediator between the account she heard and the one she related in the Blackwood’s article. The “Prison Visiting” article did primarily “stat[e] the facts” of the inmate’s account; it is told in the third person, and the few details included are vague: we learn the child spoke “words of entreaty” (766) as the prisoner killed him, we learn the “hearer shrank from listening to the details of the dreadful deed” (766), but none of the facts is passed on to the reader. In contrast, when the same narrative account is included in Scenes, the telling is explicitly and significantly in the words of the inmate herself:

Suddenly a spasm of pain passed across the woman’s face, and she put her hands over her ears as if to shut out some torturing echo from the past. . . .

“Then,” she whispered hoarsely, “the child said to me, ‘Oh, mother! don’t put me in the dark water.’ Yes he did—he did—” and her voice rose to a shriek. It was evident that this dreadful remembrance scorched her very heart, . . . “Yes, he said that—my child did; but I only cried out—‘I can’t part with my love for ever,’ and I let the little one drop out of my arms into the deep rushing river.”

(76-77)

By using quotation marks to clearly delineate a boundary between the Lady Visitor/author’s observations and commentary and the “reported speech” of the inmate, Skene creates a space in which the voice of the inmate can be heard from within the silent walls of the prison. Although this speech might be in part (or wholly) recreated from Skene’s memory (there are, after all, eight years between the two versions of the inmate’s account), constructing it in such a way in Scenes provides an immediacy for the reader—it is as if the Lady Visitor is a

---

100 In fact, at least two of the female prisoners referred to in “Prison Visiting” and one male prisoner appear also in this article for Blackwood’s.
transparent mediator through which the voice and history of the inmate is heard. When the
inmate implores the Lady Visitor, "'Let me tell you how it has all been with me'... 'Listen!'...
'I will tell you all'" (72), she seems also to be speaking directly to the reader, drawing the
reader into her history.

Skene made use of reported speech and dialogue between prisoner and Lady Visitor
throughout *Scenes*. In one case, she included an extended exchange between the judge and
prisoner, presented almost like a court transcript, to indicate the prisoner's stubborn desire to
die, pleading guilty when the judge tries to help him (144-46). The dialogue of "A Released
Prisoner" between the Lady Visitor and John Hill about friendship, quoted above, was
reworked for its inclusion in *Scenes*. The effect of putting the prisoners' voices into the text
served to counter the outer world's perceived notion of the prison world as silent and to
reinforce the immediacy of connection between Lady Visitor and prisoner and, by extension,
between Skene's reader and prisoner.

Philanthropic journals also took advantage of the idea of the Lady Visitor as
transparent mediator or facilitator between charitable institution and the public. Workhouse
visiting, district visiting, prison visiting, and casual visiting: the work of visiting seemed to
be never done in Victorian society. Variations on the verb "to visit" appear in two of the
titles of these philanthropic journals. This is not a coincidence, but rather a rhetorical device
on the part of the editors. The journals, when considered as literature, as printed publication,
work as charitable visitors—not into the homes of the poor or the workhouse but rather into
society itself, a charitable visitor to the homes and minds of the middle and upper classes.101
Twining's *Journal* walks a fine line in accomplishing such work. The prospectus of the

101 Louis Billington documents how many religious tracts took on the title of "visitor" to exemplify just such a
purpose (120).
association, printed in both *The Philanthropist* and the first number of its own journal, makes clear that although the visitors are working for change within the system, they are not to interfere with the running of the workhouse; in fact, all regulations and hints to visitors call for them always to adhere to the schedules and needs of the Guardians: “Visitors are recommended not to encourage complaints from the inmates, nor to repeat them to the authorities, but rather to endeavour to introduce a spirit of cheerfulness and content” (“Rules and Suggestions,” *Journal*). This may be the case when it comes to the day-to-day work of visiting at the Union, but in the *Journal* quite another type of work takes place: in its pages, the exact opposite is true. Grievances are portrayed, at least as perceived through the eyes of the visitors, and the journal attempts to interfere with the running of the workhouse by suggesting possibilities for change, rallying public support, and soliciting funds for new endeavours that will fundamentally change the way the workhouse and later the Poor Law are conducted. The examples are numerous, including a movement to change the way nursing is conducted in the sick wards (see Nightingale “Notes on Nursing”), the separation of the aged or incurably infirm from the temporarily sick (see “A Ward for Incurables”), debates about whether charity should be privately or publicly funded, and the concern that young women of sixteen are being contaminated by older women in the wards, leading to their ultimate degeneration to pauperization or worse.\(^\text{102}\)

The reports on societal meetings, which were printed in the pages of the different philanthropic journals, are also interesting in terms of the role of journal as visitor. The *District Visitor’s Record* was instituted due to a concern that merely circulating the reports of District Visiting meetings to its members meant a circulation too small for the information to

\(^{102}\) Twining takes up this last cause, instituting a Home of Industry for Young Women and ultimately receiving a portion of the Poor Law rates for their care.
reach out to other members of society ("Address" 1-4). *The Philanthropist*, moreover, at times seems almost exclusively a series of reports of different charity meetings that took place in the previous week. These reports, then, "advertise" the work of visiting and charitable endeavours and hold forth the promise of results if the reader becomes involved. Thus in the same way as the visitor enters the homes of the poor to shape and influence their lives, philanthropic publications enter the home like other literature, such as serialized fiction, three-decker novels, and political and literary reviews, to participate in and shape social discourse, debate, and understanding.

In addition to the journals themselves working as charitable visitors, collectively publications such as Twining’s *Journal* might be read as analogous to the narrative accounts that permeate its pages: its six-year run tells the story of its individual members and the Society as a whole. This relationship between the Workhouse Visiting Society’s individual members and the aggregate Society might be read as analogous to the moral vision Skene has for social reform: individuals acting in society for the care of other individuals. Twining remarks, in the *Journal*’s final number, that it “has in some measure done the work it was intended to accomplish, and has succeeded in creating, as well as spreading, a wide interest in the subject of which it treated” ("A Letter to the Members of the Workhouse Visiting Society, which all are required to read" 261). But, as Margaret Beetham comments with respect to the paradox of the periodical’s individual numbers being bound into a single volume, the result is “that really the periodical is a kind of book and the numbers are incomplete sections of the whole. Putting covers round the pages has ensured that they survive, but the survival is bought at the price of the form of the text” (23, emphasis in original). Given that it is the twenty-first-century reader who views and reads the *Journal*
bound together, it is possible that its structure as a narrative account is more apparent to us than to its contemporary audience. Twining herself, however, seemed somewhat anxious about exactly this issue when she acknowledges that “there must necessarily be a considerable degree of sameness in a periodical which is limited to one branch of philanthropy alone, and that after a time the arguments which are used, and the subjects which are brought forward, must become wearisome and monotonous” (261). The narrative account that the Journal relates, however, is an important one, providing a space in which both the domestic, charitable woman and the charitable organization bring their story to the larger society, allowing it to work upon its readers.

One of the rhetorical strategies of the Victorian periodical was the use of an editorial “we,” which worked to join writer to reader. Notwithstanding its categorization as a rhetorical commonplace, however, the editorial “we” functioned in philanthropic writing as an important aspect of motivation and responsibility: “Each article, each periodical number, was and is part of a complex process in which writers, editors, publishers and readers engaged in trying to understand themselves and their society; that is, they struggle to make their world meaningful” (Beetham 20). A correspondent to the Journal on the condition of workhouse nurses signs herself in the singular, “A Visitor”; nonetheless, she invokes the editorial “we” throughout her description, especially when considering notions of duty:

Lastly, I would say, that if we expect our poor to be treated with that respect which is due to every human being, to every fellow-Christian more especially, we must show that we who have power and influence in our hands do not despise them or consider them beneath our care; we must not consign them to the ministrations of nurses such as I have described, without showing that we
feel for them, and go among them with the consolations of charity and
sympathy,—sympathy not only for the patients but for the nurses also.
(“Workhouse Nurses” 59, my emphasis)

The remedies she offers for the particular problem, however, are articulated in the singular—
both as her own suggestions and as what the individual can do to make a change. The body
of her letter describes remedies based on her experience:

I would suggest that the pauper dress of nurses should be everywhere
exchanged for a neat and uniform costume[;] . . . then, that we should exact no
more from the nurse in a workhouse than from one in a hospital[;] . . . that
proper opportunities of rest (especially at night), and for taking air and
exercise, should be granted; and, above all, that the food should be sufficient,
nourishing, and palatable, with such supplies of hot tea and coffee, especially
at night, as should do away with all necessity and excuse for the stimulating,
but most injurious. (58-59).

The very fact that she takes it upon herself to write to the Journal indicates the singularity of
her actions: the individual using the organ of a journal to speak to the whole of society. In
this way, the individual and the social come together in the space created in a periodical.
Christopher Kent, writing about the reporting on the New Poor Law, argues that “journalism
created a community, or communities, of information” (4). Clearly, the idea of community.
of making known the problems of the workhouse and the privations faced by the poor to the
population at large, is central to the work of these philanthropic journals: we each have
individual duties, talents, and responsibilities both to our family members and to humanity as
a whole, and society itself must be concerned with its individual and its communal members.
By moving between the editorial “we” and the personal “I,” the correspondent implicates both the individual and society in the discussion.

*Scenes from a Silent World*, both as published in *Blackwood’s* as articles and in its book form, attempted to work as mediating visitor and as narrative account, similar goals to those Twining set out for her *Journal*. The very idea of *Scenes* as participating in a “mission of the nineteenth century,” as noted above, is indicative of this goal. Because the proliferation of voices and the multiplicity of narrative accounts presented in the separate numbers of *Blackwood’s* could overwhelm *Scenes* when bound together as a single book, Skene constructed a structural framework of movement and balance to give it coherence and stability. An examination of its form and structure provides a case study for how writing about philanthropic endeavours can become itself a philanthropic endeavour, as a book that would visit homes, enlighten society, and call workers to its cause.

The addition of chapter titles to the original five articles from *Blackwood’s* indicates the narrative structure and interest of *Scenes*. What began in *Blackwood’s* as simply numbered articles become (in order): “A Strange Life and Death,” “The End of a Bitter Experience,” “The Acquittal of a Murderer,” “The Desire of Death,” and “A Dream Crime.” Moreover, each chapter also has a short, verse epigraph. The result is an experience not unlike reading some of the century’s three-decker novels. Consider, for example, the title and epigraph to Chapter Four: 103

THE DESIRE OF DEATH.

“A little struggle at first, of course,

A little gasping for one more breath,

A little agony, nothing worse,

---

103 The following paragraphs use Chapter Four as an exemplar for examining the changes made to *Scenes.*
And then the long sweet sleep of death.” (135)

Following such a beginning, readers might find themselves surprised to enter into a discussion of suicide. Yes, the “desire” of the title suggests a conscious wish, but the poem suggests a death more natural than suicide, something quite beneficent in its “long sweet sleep,” different than the future the Christian faith normally dictates as awaiting a suicide. Following the apparently uplifting message of the epigraph, we learn that the chapter will explore “the peculiar aspect which death assumes in that region of sin and sorrow and remorse” (135). This chapter considers suicide in its largest sense: not only the direct and explicit act of taking one’s life, but also the actions of those within this realm that court death as a solution to their lives. Thus although the reasoning behind the title and poetic epigraph might not at first be overtly apparent, the choice effectively captures the impulse of the chapter’s exploration of suicide.

The structure of the chapter develops using the literary tropes of philanthropic writing discussed earlier in order to shape the work into a form suitable for its middle-class audience. Skene notes that in the outside world “not even the brightness of immortal hopes . . . dispel[s] the gloom and sadness which surrounds [death]” (135). Yet for the prisoners, death has “no gloom, no repulsion; it is their hope, their desire—always their best, often their only friend” (136). Skene’s language here is noteworthy, because in describing what the prisoners desire—an ultimate end—she also uses the language of Christianity, which denotes Christ as a man’s “best, often only friend.” But such use of allusion was apparent only to her reader—not for the prisoner himself or herself: “It must not be supposed, however, that they are influenced in this respect by the vague impression that their last hour on earth may possibly usher them into a brighter and more-enduring existence” (137). Significantly, this
commentary does not appear in the *Blackwood’s* article. Skene seems to have recognized the potentially problematic interpretation the earlier version might have generated. Death is not necessarily a negative: for the devout Christian, death is better than life, because it is an entrance into a better world. If this world is wretched, as it would be for the prisoner, a desire for death is understandable. By adding this commentary, Skene ensured that her readers acknowledged the difference between their own understanding of life and death and that of the prisoner: the “beneficent and alluring aspect which death wears within the Silent World” (138), where scepticism and the irreligious characterize the inmates, is quite different than its aspect in the outer world. The introductory pages to Chapter Four are framed within the reader’s understanding, unlike the narrative accounts included in this and other chapters. Skene presumably intends that the issue under discussion will be identifiable to her readers, couched in a language they understand, yet at the same time seems to want the difference between inside and outside the walls of the gaol always to be apparent to her readers. A significant part of *Scenes*’ philanthropic impulse, both in what it represents and in its place in the middle-class home, is to reveal the truth of what happens within prisons.

Chapter Four, like all the chapters of *Scenes*,104 turns to the prisoners themselves and their narrative accounts for effect and to emulate the work of the Lady Visitor. The first representative example is that of Richardson Hodson, a “man enamoured of death” (138), who surrenders himself to authorities with “utmost cheerfulness” and remarks, “[n]ow I’ll go to the gallows like a prince” (141–42). Hodson is so determined to die, to escape the life he has lived, that he thwarts attempts by both attorneys and the judge to save him, and he is executed. We move from this story to that of a fallen woman, who attempts suicide three times—by poison, strangulation, and drowning—and who “fling[s] maledictions at her

104 The exceptions are discussed below.
rescuers” (156). After these two narratives of prisoners who ultimately succeed as “suicides” (by execution and literal suicide, respectively), Skene then moves to that of a young man for whom “the term of imprisonment . . . proved to be of incalculable value[;] . . . he yet did perceive most strongly, how utterly unfit and unprepared he had been for an entrance on the unseen eternity” (164-5). This story is quickly followed by “another equally successful instance of complete reformation, in the case of a woman, who was, without exception, the most lawless and daring young person” (166) when she first entered the prison. The chapter then ends with a peculiar figure who, in Skene’s understanding, courts death: the tramp. Like her numerous examples of conventionally defined suicides noted above, Skene provides examples of tramps of all ages and both sexes to help the reader understand the lifestyle of tramps as one of suicide. This movement back and forth—between the success and failure of the gaol’s reformative powers, between male and female inmates—is a characteristic of all the chapters, and important to the structural coherence of Scenes. We are within the world of the prison, moving between different cells like the Lady Visitor, exposed to first one type of prisoner and then another, and although the narrative accounts have been chosen and shaped, they carry with them a sense of reality and truthfulness in their very variety. No one prisoner in any of the chapters is meant to stand as an exemplar for the whole with respect to whichever issue is under discussion. As the title of Skene’s book identifies, these are scenes from within the prison world, and the sheer volume of stories and voices heard through the histories recounted begin to counteract the silence that previously reigned there. Although Oxford County Gaol did not operate under the silent system, where inmates were not allowed to speak with each other even while at work, the world of the prison system was a silent world: its inmates had no way to make their voices heard outside its walls. Scenes serves to
give voice to those inmates, and, as mediated through Skene as Lady Visitor, their voices and stories enter middle-class homes and come to the notice of the men and women living there.

Although Skene used narrative accounts as a primary means of examining the conditions of the prison world, they are absent from two moments of Scenes—moments that are key components of Skene’s rhetorical strategy to construct the social purpose of her text. Significantly, these two moments frame the work and are the two major additions Skene made for the book publication of the original series: the Introduction and the final chapter, “The Death Penalty.” Whereas narrative accounts accomplished Skene’s goal of communicating the realities of prison life to the outer world, the additional trope of narrative voice was necessary to accomplish its other goal, namely to establish a recognizable voice that would be invited into the homes of society and an authoritative one whose ideas would be listened to and solutions followed.

The opening sentences of the Introduction work to insist upon the authority with which Skene addresses the subject at hand and the public:

This work is the result of a real experience within the unseen prison world. It contains no element of fiction from beginning to end: it tells, as clearly and accurately as may be, the true histories of some who have lived and suffered and died in that hidden region of remorse and pain. . . . [T]he facts themselves speak with the voice of truth; and we claim for that voice that it has a right to be heard by all who desire to help and benefit their fellow-creatures. (ix)

Skene began her novel Hidden Depths with a similar avowal, but the recourse to experience and truth here is key to understanding how and why she approached this topic in print. Skene was determined to bring the prison world into the light of day. The imagery she uses, of an
"unseen" world, a "hidden region of remorse and pain," speaks to her understanding of the way this world has previously been viewed, and the importance of changing that view. As she moves into the subsequent chapters of *Scenes*, Skene returns to these ideas of experience and truth. She claimed a "most intimate acquaintance" with the prison world to counteract those "who pay a mere visit of curiosity to a prison" (2). They did need counteracting; much of the writing about prisons was undertaken by those who are "conducted by an official" (Scenes 2) through the prison. An 1893 article in *The Argosy*, for example, was written by an "occasional visitor" to a local gaol, and the second-person point of view means the narrative reads as if the readers themselves were being conducted about the gaol by the visitor/author: "now you pass through a locked door into the body of the prison and you then see the whole interior of the same if built on modern principles" ("Our Prisons, and their Inmates" 156, my emphasis). Indeed, Skene was determined to highlight the importance of a relatively unrestricted view like her own from within the walls in comparison to the limited view of those from without. Repeatedly in *Scenes*, she returns to her intimacy with this world:

Those who form their opinion only outside the prison walls, or after a brief official visit, are not, however, in a position to judge rightly on these points; it requires a long and intimate acquaintance, both with the criminals themselves and with the machinery which surrounds them, to gauge adequately the nature and extent of the problems involved in the legal administration of punishment.

(84)

We are not to forget her opening injunction that the work is "the result of a real experience," and we are to trust her judgement above our own very limited view.105 It is significant that

105 Interestingly, in all of her prison writing, it is only in "Reform in the Criminal Law" that Skene further emphasizes this point by using first-person pronouns, and there is no apparent reason for the change in this one
Skene refers to both the inmates and the system which incarcerates them. The individual Lady Visitor passes on information based on her individual encounters with the prisoners; the system, on the other hand, is figured as machinery—impersonal, inhuman—and thus not equipped to really know or deal with the individual needs of its inmates. By reading her text, moreover, the readers become more than just “occasional visitors”; they potentially step into the place of the Lady Visitor and garner the knowledge obtained from her years of experience.

The value of experience when writing about prisons also re-entered Skene’s later works. Many of the articles in The Hospital make similar claims about the insider’s perspective. In fact, Skene took one writer to task, most likely William Tallack, for proposing a remedy to recidivism drawn “from its apparent results as seen in the outer world” (“Mistaken Impressions – V” 161) rather than from knowledge of the interior world of the prison. Tallack was a prolific writer on the subject of prisons and prison reform, especially in letters to The Times, but his letters reveal that he only occasionally visited prisons and was always “conducted by an official.” Because of a belief that the prisoner came out of prison “exactly as he goes in, mentally and morally,” Tallack called for an “asylum prison, to which prisoners should be drafted after completing terms of penal servitude” (Mistaken Impression – V” 161). Skene suggests that although there was a need to deal with recidivist offenders, an insider would recognize that the moral and spiritual agencies within prisons are the “only effective education as to the difference between right and wrong” (161) the prisoners receive, implying that it is the system of care and education, in the prison system and society, that is at fault, not the prisoners. For Skene, the solution is

---

Like many of the other articles, including Scenes, she used the pseudonym Francis Scougal, and the topic of this article is the 1898 Criminal Evidence Act, which allows those accused to speak in their own defence and a wife to testify to what she knows.
not to further punish and incarcerate offenders, but to educate and care for them, providing them with possibilities for change. She leaves the details to officials, but does suggest a new scheme of emigration, quite different than the earlier scheme to Australia, that might provide a “measure . . . for their wise disposal” (161). Tallack and Skene corresponded, nonetheless, despite her questioning of his methods, and he wrote Skene’s obituary in The Daily News.

The authority for Scenes Skene founded in her experience is further bolstered in the introduction through Skene’s use of rhetoric, where her use of exclamations, rhetorical questions, and religious rhetoric reaches a fevered pitch:

Is this man deserving of no pity, no help, no effort to lift him out of the black gulf of his despair and set him upon the delectable hills from when he may yet catch a glimpse of the mercy of God and the sympathy of man? Surely of all who writhe in pain upon this lower earth, he most sorely needs the touch of human beneficence! But does he obtain it? Does not the world in general go on its way amid fair sights and engrossing interests, without one thought of those who are lying pent up in the perpetual gloom and silence of the prison walls? (xii-xiii)

It is significant that this rhetoric is used in the introduction to Skene’s text. The prisoner is spoken of here in the collective: “this man” is everyman, all the prisoners incarcerated in England. Elsewhere in Scenes and other prison writing, Skene asks similar questions about the role of “human beneficence” and the blindness of society to those who suffer its punishments, but without the flourish apparent here. This use of rhetorical style in the introduction is before she has launched into the details of stories “taken from life,” and she is therefore freer to use rhetoric in order to influence her readers. Since part of the purpose of
the project is to ensure that her readers believe and understand the truth of what happens inside the "Silent World," to give voice to that world using its own words for veracity, she is constrained from using such flourish when narrating what she has seen and heard in the balance of *Scenes*, where language of the real or experience dominates.

In the Introduction, it is Skene’s ideas and beliefs about prison life, Skene’s passion that we are meant to hear—a passion she wanted to instil in her readers, enacting a moral transformation in them like the transformation in the prisoner and the system the Lady Visitor enacts. This moment and others in the Introduction take on an oratorical or sermon-like quality and further establish the authority for the text that follows. Skene’s use of oratory here is indicative of what Melnyk identifies as “women’s religious utterance” in Victorian women’s writing in the religious novel, women’s magazines, and religious poetry and hymns; it is a combination of ordinary language and tone and preacherly ones. Melnyk’s chapter on the “Social Sermon” includes a reading of Skene’s *Hidden Depths*, but her characterization of the “social sermon” speaks to the tone and the purpose of Skene’s introduction to *Scenes*. Melnyk observes that “religious women use their public voices for public purpose, to comment on social problems and to influence the means of their solution. . . . Christian women thus used their assumed superiority in the moral and religious realm to establish their authority to speak on social and political questions” (138). Skene implicitly aligns herself with an “assumed superiority” by placing the speaker above those of the “world in general,” and referring to “the mercy of God” and “this lower earth.”

The other section of *Scenes* that includes no narrative accounts is the final chapter on capital punishment. It returns to a similar use of rhetoric and authority as is used in the Introduction, an approach that has been primarily absent throughout the intervening chapters.
Although many times in *Scenes* Skene recounts the narrative of a prisoner condemned to death, it is not until this chapter, entitled “The Death Penalty,” that she moves beyond the particulars of individual cases to consider the death penalty’s place in the judicial system and to mount an explicit argument against its continuance. It is significant that no individual stories enter this chapter: Skene apparently does not want her reader to identify with one particular case or another (for example the horrific reaction to a mother with no remorse for killing her child, or the sympathetic reaction to a man pushed beyond human limits of endurance by hardship and misery) when judging the efficacy of the system as a whole. Whereas many of the narrative accounts included earlier in the text implicate her reader emotionally and empathetically, Skene excludes them in the final chapter Skene seems to ensure a rational consideration of abstract or general principles rather than personal or individual responses to specific cases. She is interested in counteracting the “absolute fallacies” (232) that form the basis of the majority’s support of the law. Anecdotes enter the chapter, but since they are not attributed to a particular person or time, they work to highlight how commonplace ideas about the death penalty are “re-echoed with parrot-like precision” (233) by those “who have no possible means of knowing whether the assertion is true or not” (232).

In this new, final chapter, the only knowledge and understanding of capital punishment that is affirmed as true and verifiable is Skene’s own. Thus although addressing systematic change might seem antithetical to her theories of social reform explored elsewhere in this dissertation, it is the author as individual, drawing on the aggregate of her experience, who attempts to transform the reader’s views about that system and potentially bring about systematic change. The text ridicules those who support the death penalty by opening the
chapter with the figure of “an astute politician” of her acquaintance who “strongly advocated
capital punishment on the ground that it was the cheapest mode of disposing of criminals”
(232). Although this seems quite comical and macabre, and Skene quickly “hope[s] that
there are not many who would share the[se] views” (232), the subsequent, more reasonable
assertions of support for capital punishment become aligned with the quite ridiculous “very
economical gentleman[’s]” (232) ideas. In the centre of the chapter, she drops the oratorical
diction of the introduction (which appears again at the end of the conclusion) to mount a
point-by-point, step-by-step, rational argument against the death penalty to counter the
irrational nature of its support. She does not give way, as opponents of the death penalty
were often accused of doing, to a “sentimental tenderness toward crime” (251); in fact, she
calls for a quite horrific punishment—flogging—because it “is unspeakably dreaded by the
class from which most of our criminals are recruited” (234). In Skene’s understanding of the
criminal, punishment can only work as a deterrent if the criminal himself or herself really
fears it.106

Skene demonstrates, moreover, that the criminal class does not fear the death penalty
(or even death) for a number of reasons. First, she asserts that the power of the death penalty
to educate “the public mind . . . into a sense of the enormity of the act [of murder] is an
absolute baseless theory which has no standpoint in reality” (238). For the “brutish masses
of untaught, unreasoning people” (238) of the past, she argues, it might have been true. But
given the “intelligence and mental independence” (238) of the current criminal class the same

106 Interestingly, Skene seems to rehearse some of Foucault’s argument in Discipline and Punish when she
provides a history of the public spectacle of the death penalty in the past, how spectacle could enhance
deterrence, and how the contemporary move to secrecy undermines its deterrent effect (235-236); see Foucault
pages 32-69.
cannot be said: they “criticise the acts of the legislature” and are not “morally influenced by them” (238). Second, and most significantly,

so far from the death penalty being a deterrent to murder, it operates, in fact, as an actual encouragement to it. It has the effect of destroying the intuitive sense of sanctity of human life among the people. . . . Our working men, who now think and reason for themselves, are wont to say that if it is lawful and right in the authorities to kill a man deliberately because he has taken the life of another, it must be equally justifiable on their part to knock on the head any scoundrel who has done them or theirs some deadly injury. (239-40)

Skene, as elsewhere in this work, explains the morals and beliefs of the criminal class to the world outside the prison, but again she does not provide any narrative or case history to support these ideas. Instead, it is the force of her own words and her own experience that gives her authority; the above two quotations begin “it is a manifest truism” and “we feel bound to affirm on the most substantial grounds,” respectively (237, 239). The absence of narrative accounts does not undercut the efficacy or power of her messages here, however, since all the preceding chapters have established that authority, and the careful reader would find specific narratives interspersed among the earlier chapters, used there for different purposes, but which would here support her concluding assertions.107 Her experience “ought effectually to dispel any doubt as to the value of prison visitation” (213), she asserted in the discussion about Lady Visitors, and by extension it also ought to dispel any doubt as to the veracity of her conclusions and assertions about the death penalty. Time and again in this

107 A series of case studies in Chapter Four, for example, depicts the cruelty and torture inherent in potential mismanagement of the death penalty (151-52).
text she has addressed the “difficulty of judging rightly” (84, 190) and subsequently shown “right judgment” through her experience.

Skene’s final argument against capital punishment returns us to the social sermon and religious utterance of her introduction; once again oratorical rhetoric is her vehicle. She uses the questioning spirit of the age, in which “every line of the sacred text is submitted to a searching examination” (241), to attack both the “eye for an eye” school of justice and the more charitable, but equally problematic, belief “that a man who suffers death on the scaffold escapes a future retribution, receiving his punishment in this life and passing to the Divine Judgment with an assurance, or at least a reasonable hope, of pardon which he could not otherwise possess” (242). Our inability to know for certain what follows death and the possibility of misinterpreting the Bible, Skene argues, means that “in dealing death to a fellow-mortal we are inflicting a punishment of which we know neither the meaning, nor the issue, nor the extent” (249). In other words, we cannot take God’s work into our own hands, even in the name of justice. The closing lines of the text could be the closing lines of a sermon: “but let not a human touch, even by the impersonal hand of the law, be laid on the sacred, mysterious life which God alone can give, and God alone may rightfully take away” (252). The conclusion of Scenes from a Silent World, therefore, recognizes the importance of humankind’s place in the world, our relationship to each other and to God, which in turn has been the subject of the text as a whole.

Skene, like Twining and other writers on the subject of the institutionalized less fortunate, consciously and creatively used her prose to effect changes in the world and to establish a community of like-minded thinkers and actors. The Workhouse Visiting Society

---

108 Skene suggests that Genesis 9.6—"Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed"—is “quite open to question whether it does not imply a prophecy instead of a command” and points to Cain’s sentence of life not death as evidence it is not meant as a commandment (241).
asserted, "it cannot be denied that this society may with truth claim some share in this awakened interest. . . . The tide of public interest has in great measure turned towards the poor, forgotten, and forlorn inhabitants of workhouses. Ladies amongst the very highest in the land are now willing to become visitors to them, and express the greatest pleasure and satisfaction in their visits" ("Sixth Report" 197-98). And the effect of their work moved well beyond motivating individuals to action. Skene repeatedly returns to her thesis in *Scenes from a Silent World* about the need for an efficient, well-organized group of voluntary workers, a group that demand state sanction (see, for example, pages 97-98, 133-34). She also expects her work to participate in the drive to "seriously engage the attention of those in authority" (223-24) to effect change, in this case a specific reference to the death penalty. At another moment she asserts, "[s]ince it is no part of the law that a criminal should be kept in ignorance as to his doom till within a few hours of its accomplishment, and the matter is entirely dependent on the will of one State official, it is to be hoped that the strong representations already made on the subject may produce a change, at least in this particular, as regards the treatment of prisoners" (68, my emphasis).\(^{109}\) The injunction of Hebrews and of Fry—"to do good and to communicate"—comes together in philanthropic writing. Another variation of the definition of the verb to communicate current in the 1880s was "to impart by way of information to a society, the readers of a journal, or the like" (2b *OED*). Skene's work in *Blackwood's*, in *The Hospital*, and in publications like *Scenes from a Silent World* did exactly this: impart information to society, information and knowledge she felt it was imperative for her society to hear.

\(^{109}\) The case is one where despite the law that requires three Sundays between trial and execution, when appeals are made (as in this case) notice is given only hours before the execution, "add[ing] a torturing element to his punishment which he has not legally incurred" (65).
Conclusion

**Beginning the Remembering: Publishing Felicia Skene in the Twenty-First Century**

It was a matter of whose texts, read or even unread, did get talked about and reproduced and whose texts, unread or even read, slipped into silence and out of production. ~ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing*

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf famously examines the bookshelves of the British Library looking for her predecessors, the women who paved the way for her and for women writers of the nineteenth century:

> Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer... For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (84-5)

Of course, Woolf finds little on those bookshelves, and it has been the project of the last quarter century to begin to populate them. As Woolf notes, authors such as Austen, the Brontës, and Eliot “had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women” (99). Half a century later, Showalter makes a similar observation as part of her recovery project *A Literature of Their Own*: “Having lost sight of the minor novelists, who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next, we have not had a very clear understanding of the continuities in women’s writing, nor any reliable information about the relationships between the writers’ lives and the changes in the legal, economic, and social status of women” (7).
This dissertation, then, forges another link in Showalter’s chain by recovering Felicia Skene’s work as an example of the powerful female agency that became possible through the moderate conservative Victorian woman.

Since this dissertation has focused on Skene’s representation of middle-class women and female agency, I have largely omitted a discussion of her representation of middle-class men and masculinity. Nonetheless, Skene’s writing provides a potentially fruitful field of inquiry. Her representation of men tend to fall into two categories: the first is strong, upright, moral, and ideal men such as the Rev. Thorold in Hidden Depths, Raymond in Use and Abuse, and Mr. Seton in A Strange Inheritance; the second is the wayward men in need of much instruction to follow God’s and society’s dictates, such as Hugh Lingard and George Courtenay in Hidden Depths, James Ferrars in Light out of Darkness, Sydney Leigh in Tried, and Humphrey Atherstone in One Life Only. Skene’s configuration of masculinity and its relationship to femininity might be explored for its participation in such discourses as the ideology of work, self-help, class relations (particularly master–worker), the ideology of separate spheres, and duty.

Woolf, in the quotation above, refers to potential “masterpieces” by women writers of the past, but I am not making such a claim for Skene’s work, nor do I think is it necessary to do so. Rather, if we are to have a real understanding of the past, we need to be more inclusive of whom and what are recovered; we need to reconsider the criteria for recovery. Jane Tompkins makes a similar point in her conclusion to Sensational Designs:

People often object . . . that while one may affirm the power or centrality of a novel on the grounds that it intersects with widely-held beliefs and grapples with pressing social problems, that affirmation does not prove anything one
way or another about the literary value of the text, and does nothing to
guarantee its status as a work of art. (186)
As the preceding dissertation has shown, Skene’s novels and essays intersect with
nineteenth-century ideologies about women, men, charity, sexuality, and religion; they
grapple with the social problems of prostitution/fallenness, crime, and suicide. Tompkins
ultimately makes a claim for “the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and
shaping the social context that produced them, . . . to substitute finally for the critical
perspective that sees them as attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and
formal coherence” (200). The question then becomes not “is it any good?” (the question
Tompkins addresses in her conclusion) but rather “what can we learn by reading this author
or text?” Reading Skene reveals the way in which conservative, religious women of the
period became active, practical participants in the social world.

Skene’s *Scenes from a Silent World* is a look into the silent world of the Victorian
prison, an attempt to bring the voices that existed there into public view and discourse. A
project like this dissertation might be described in a similar way: by bringing Skene’s voice
and writing to a twenty-first century world, it is possible for today’s scholars to hear and
identify another viewpoint and perspective on the condition of women and society in the
nineteenth century. If we are to understand the historical movement that resulted in the
social welfare system and the vote for women, among other achievements, it is necessary to
hear all the voices speaking at that time, not just those who protested against and attempted
to subvert what was understood as a restricting and oppressive establishment. Skene’s voice
contributes an important facet to this understanding. Caring power, as a mode of power, was
wielded by Skene and others to shape the world around them in ways that addressed society's problems from within that restrictive establishment.

In an analysis of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, Jennifer Stolpa draws on the work of Christine Krueger to suggest that "Christianity can be seen as antithetical to feminism" (227), and thus the sermon-like quality of novels such as Brontë's have been largely ignored; likewise, Helen Mathers argues that Josephine Butler's evangelical spirituality has been "underplayed in many historians' accounts of her life and work. In the case of feminist historians, this may be because of a desire to focus on the feminist motivation for her work and a reluctance to acknowledge the intensity of the religious convictions of some nineteenth-century feminists" (283). One might see Skene's *Hidden Depths* as suffering a similar fate to that of Brontë's novel. This antithetical relationship between religion and feminism has also been linked to the larger "forgetting" of many novelists and other authors from the period. However, as van Drenth and de Haan's work on caring power has shown, as well as Scott's work on nineteenth-century French feminists and Mumm's on the Victorian sisterhood movement, the terms can be cooperative rather than oppositional. In Skene's work, religion is also an important constituent in the development of female agency.

Drawing on her High Church beliefs and practices, ones that "stressed the importance of the conversion experience and individual spiritual life" (Davidoff and Hall 83),¹¹⁶ Skene constructs an identity for her heroines—an identity she seems to embody herself as well—that positions women as social beings.

As has become clear through this dissertation, then, religious life and teachings were an important cornerstone of Skene's understanding of the world. The Victorian period, ...

¹¹⁰ Davidoff and Hall are referring to Dissenter practices in this quotation, but the terms equally apply to High Church beliefs.
however, was not so sure about that life and teaching as Skene appears to be in her writing, but she does incorporate the crisis of faith facing many Victorians at mid-century and beyond in her novel *Hidden Depths*, and although not explored in my work, it is an important aspect of the novel. Ernestine’s brother Reginald, a student at “Greyburgh,” is dying of consumption, and Ernestine nurses him during his final days. Reginald’s consumption is represented as the result of his crisis of faith. With the help of a tutor, he has subjected his faith to a “free inquiry,” attempting to use reason to justify religion. The result is a fear of death and the unknown. Ernestine confronts the tutor, refuting all his claims in the name of her faith, and with the assistance of a local clergyman, she works to soothe Reginald and prepare him for death. This aspect of the novel effectively provides a fictional gloss to the Broad Church movement and the many other explorations of the role of faith in a newly emerging scientific world. Additionally, one of Skene’s last published works, *A Test of the Truth* (1897), was a reaction to scientific materialism and rationalistic agnosticism; the protagonist “tests” the truth of God by doing his will and keeping the commandments of Christ.

“Give us back our suffering, we cry to Heaven in our hearts,” Nightingale writes in *Cassandra*, “for out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure” (*Cassandra* 29). Nightingale is in part lamenting the forced inactivity of women. The evocation of suffering and the use of Christ as a model elsewhere in Nightingale’s text, however, point to the development of women’s activism via religious belief. For Skene, this means that heroines who are both motivated by the suffering of others and willing to suffer themselves, giving rise to personal, one-to-one interaction with others as the charitable and philanthropic act, are figured in terms of self-sacrifice, confession, and the imitation of the
model of Christ. Ultimately, Skene’s writing and life function within the religious and social confines of womanhood to create alternative stories about society’s problems and to offer individual solutions. As they enter the “social body,” to use Poovey’s terminology, Skene’s heroines reconfigure that body in their own image and Christ’s.

Much of the early recovery of women’s writing drew attention to the importance of women authors’ reading each other’s works, creating a community of writers and readers (see, for example, Gilbert and Gubar, Mermin, Moers, Showalter). Although it is not possible to ascertain who was reading Skene and what they thought, it is clear from her writing that creating a community of readers was part of the project. Communication through the written word was an integral part of the philanthropic undertaking, particularly for Skene; it both informed her readers of the problems and possible solutions and incited them to action—either personal, active participation in the solutions or more general agitation for reform.

Through the work of Felicia Skene, then, we can understand how the work of charity and writing led to significant social change and provided a powerful agency for the Christian woman. Currently Skene’s work is only available in print in its original forms or in an online selection through the Victorian Women Writers Project at Indiana University.111 In 2004, Hidden Depths was included in Volume 4 of Pickering and Chatto’s series, Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890. Clearly, it is time to reverse the “forgetting” of Skene and her contemporaries.

One of the first ways to do this would be to incorporate Skene’s shorter prose and magazine pieces into curriculum and scholarly discussion. Histories of the Victorian period

---

111 The works available are Scenes from a Silent World, Penitentiaries and Reformatories, The Tutor’s Ward, The Inheritance of Evil, and The Shadow of the Holy Week; Kessinger Publishing has also made reprints available of these same texts.
(in a classroom or a text) would benefit from examination of Skene’s writing, particularly with respect to the social ills that society must confront. Her writing on prisoners and prison reform, the most prolific of her shorter prose and magazine pieces, provides invaluable insight into the conditions of prisoners within the country’s gaols, as well as the necessary training and administration of the gaol’s employees, while also suggesting revisions to administration, the enactment of which can be traced through changes to the penal system in the early twentieth century. The numerous pieces on tramps—both within the prison system and without—provide a unique view of an often-overlooked Victorian character. Skene’s sometimes colourful depictions of tramps reveal them as individually representative of a problematic social system, particularly revealing the failings of the Poor Laws. Additionally, Skene’s novel *The Lesters: A Family Record* (1863/1887) would provide an interesting and useful fictional companion to sociological pieces on alcoholism and the temperance movement. In *The Lesters*, the heroine’s love interest is discovered to be an alcoholic and sent to what we might describe as “rehab”: three years on a secluded Scottish island in the care of a minister, from which he returns reformed and then marries the heroine. Skene’s short stories about the Franco-Prussian War (“A Story of Vionville,” “La Roquette, 24th May, 1871,” and “The Three Friends of Vaux Vilaine”) in part provide an insider’s view of events in France (provided by family members). In short, Skene’s writing contains a wealth of information and insight into the century’s social problems and the events she witnessed.

As noted above, Showalter suggests that the recovery of women’s writing is necessary if we are to understand “the changes in the legal, economic, and social status of women.” Skene’s writing about women—as charitable agents, as instruments of civilization, as the victims of society’s double standard—sheds new light on the status of women. In

112 See Appendix 1 below for a listing of these works.
gender studies and history classes, Skene’s work on prostitution and rescue work would be instructive companion pieces to the contemporary work by W. R. Greg, Josephine Butler, Ellice Hopkins, and William Acton. A current edition of her novel *Hidden Depths* would further facilitate explorations of these issues.\(^{113}\) Skene’s construction of the Lady Visitor to prisons, as explored throughout this dissertation, also provides an effective starting point for discussions of conservative women, charitable women, and the participation of women within the social realm.

Finally, Skene’s moral vision for Victorian society as a whole and for the reformation of that society more particularly provides an important voice for a very specific brand of conservative woman reformer who lived and worked in the nineteenth century. Even as many middle-class women were seemingly disenfranchised by the new, socialist, systematic approach to society and its ills that became dominant during the second half of the century, Skene’s representation of women’s agency developed through one-to-one, personal interaction with the other presented a counter model for her readers and presents a new understanding of women’s roles in society for the twenty-first century reader.

---

\(^{113}\) See Appendix I for specific book proposals for both *Hidden Depths* and Skene’s prison writings.
Works Cited


Beetham, Margaret. “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre.”


Bland, Lucy. “‘Purifying’ the Public World: feminist vigilantes in late Victorian England.”


Blumberg, Ilana. “‘Unnatural Self-Sacrifice’: Trollope’s Ethic of Mutual Benefit.”


“Communications from Visitors: Encouragement to Perseverance.” *District Visitors’ Record* 2.5 (January 1837): 13-17.


Kent, Christopher A. “Victorian Periodicals and the Constructing of Victorian Reality.”


“A Letter to the Members of the Workhouse Visiting Society, which all are required to read.”


"Penny Savings Banks." *Good Words* 1.6 (June 1860): 381-83.


Appendix One

Bibliography of Works by and about Felicia M.F. Skene

Notes:

1. I have compiled this bibliography of Skene’s work from a number of sources: the British Library and Bodleian Library catalogues, references to specific titles in Edith Rickards’s biography of Skene, entries in Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature and The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, references in the few extant letters of Skene’s collected in archives, and, finally, by searching through those magazines and journals where I knew she had published to find other works not mentioned in the above sources.

2. In order to effectively manage the number of entries included and to make it user-friendly, I have organized this bibliography first according to major themes or genres in which Skene worked and second chronologically within each category. This is somewhat arbitrary, of course, as a number of works could appear in more than one category.

3. At the end of the appendix I have also included two book proposals: one for an anthology of Victorian women’s charity work, which would include Skene’s writing on penitentiaries and prisons, and another for a current edition of Hidden Depths, which would facilitate incorporating Skene’s writing and ideas in curriculum and scholarly discussion.

4. The majority of Skene’s early work was published anonymously or, after the success of her first devotional works, subsequently identified as “by the author of.” When she
did sign her work—particularly the later articles and novels—she used the same
signature as in her personal correspondence: F. M. F. Skene. Occasionally, Skene
used pseudonyms, the most frequent of which was Francis Scougal\textsuperscript{114} for some of her
work on prisons. I have used the following symbols to identify works not signed
F. M. F. Skene:

* – Anonymous
+ – “By the author of” (usually The Divine Master)
§ – Scougal, Francis
± – Moir, Erskine\textsuperscript{115}
# – Oxoniensis

Novels:

+ Use and Abuse, a Tale. London: Francis & John Rivington, 1849 (rpt. New York: Garland,
1975).

* The Inheritance of Evil, or, the Consequence of Marrying a Deceased Wife’s Sister.

London: Joseph Masters, 1849. Available:


\textsuperscript{114} Skene’s letters in the Blackwood’s Papers record that her brother William Skene (the Historiographical
Royal of Scotland) chose this name for her, specifically for the book form of Scenes for a Silent World (Skene
MSS 4542(1889) f.59)

\textsuperscript{115} Skene’s choice of the surname Moir could be related to family legend. In her biography of Skene’s niece
Zoë Thomson, Edith Rickards reveals that “George Moir of Stoneywood” was an ancestor of the Skene
family—a Jacobite hero. During the ‘45, Moir tried to disguise himself as a cobbler but was revealed by his
white hands. He escaped with his highland followers from the English soldiers by way of a haggis: they rolled
a haggis down a hill, causing some curiosity among the soldiers. When pricked it spurted on the soldier and
allowed for a delay during which Moir of Stoneywood escaped (9-10); Skene also recounted the story in her
article “Alexander Lord Pitsligo” (106-07).
The Tutor's Ward. London: Colburn and Co, 1851. Available:

http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/skene/tutor1.html;


S. Alban's, or the Prisoners of Hope. London: Joseph Masters, 1853.


Tajné hlubiny; providka o kruté krivde. Trans. Ladislav Vojáček. Prague: Urbanka, 1890.


Serial Fiction:


Rickards records that following the second edition in 1886, Hidden Depths was “translated into several languages” (174), but I have found only this single translation.

Skene had an extended exchange of letters with William Blackwood about the authorship on the title page of this work. As she was also in negotiations with W. H. Allen at this point about The Lesters, Skene was primarily concerned that their request to identify the author as “by the author of Hidden Depths” did not conflict with Blackwood’s plans for A Strange Inheritance. She also felt that using “by the author of Hidden Depths” might give a “false impression” of A Strange Inheritance, due to the former’s sensational subject matter. As time went on, however, she did intimate to Blackwood that he might reconsider using this appellation, as the second edition of Hidden Depths had been a run away success (Blackwood’s Papers, MS 4492 [1886] f.5, f.7, f.9).

In a letter to William Blackwood, Skene noted that this “mere temperance story” was first published in the Alliance News “twenty three years ago” (i.e., 1863), but I have not yet been able to confirm this (MS 4492 [1886] f.5). Like the later edition of Hidden Depths (see Chapter Two above), it seems that an enthusiastic reader petitioned and arranged for this later re-publication.

Skene was the editor of this journal from 1862 to 1880, but I have not yet had the opportunity to look at a run from this period to establish her contributions both editorially and as author.

“One Life Only.” *The Quiver* 9 (1874).

“Still and Deep.” *The Quiver* 10 (1875).

“Raymond.” *The Quiver* 11 (1876).

“More Than Conqueror.” *The Quiver* 13 (1878).

**Short Stories:**


**Devotional and Theological Works:**


---

120 The full title is *The Quiver, An Illustrated Magazine for Sunday and General Reading.*

121 I have only seen the fourth edition, but the British Library catalogue suggests the first edition was the same year. Rickards records it attained an eleventh edition in 1885 (99).


**Prisoners and Prison Reform:**123


§ Scenes from a Silent World. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1889. Available:


“The Treatment of Criminals in Modern Greece.” Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 152.921 (July 1892): 54-61. (Signed “by the author of 'Scenes from a Silent World’”)


---

122 The date here reflects the British Museum stamp in the book, as there is no date noted.
123 Rickards refers to an article in the magazine Helping Hand, “Work of Prison Visitors,” which I have been unable to track down.
124 Originally appeared as a series in Blackwood’s Magazine 144-146 (November 1888 – August 1889) under the name “a prison visitor.” The note in the later publication records “these papers . . . are now reprinted with an Introduction, large additions, and a new chapter upon Capital Punishment” (vii). The additions are, in fact, quite minor (exceptions are noted in Chapter Three above) and primarily correspond to a rhetorical and stylistic consistency necessary with the change from serial articles to single publication. The original five articles correspond to Chapters One through Five, with the addition of titles and poetic epigraphs to each chapter.
125 The full title is The Hospital, an Institution, Family, and Congregational Journal of Hospitals, Asylums, and All Agencies for the Care of the Sick, Criticism and News.


* "Capital Punishment." *The Hospital* (June 20, 1896): 189.


* "Mistaken Impressions of Prison Life. – V." *The Hospital* (December 5, 1896): 161.

* "Mistaken Impressions of Prison Life. – VI." *The Hospital* (December 12, 1896): 177.


* "Prison Administration and the Training of Prison Officials. – II." *The Hospital* (March 19, 1898): 427.


* "Prison Administration and the Training of Prison Officials. – V." *The Hospital* (April 30, 1898): 73.

* "Lady Visitors to Her Majesty's Prisons." *The Hospital* (September 24, 1898): 439.

---

126 Rickards did not list this title as one of Skene's articles for *The Hospital* (see 242-43). I, however, would like to argue it was written by Skene. First, the topic under discussion, the advisability of appointing Lady Visitors to the prison system, is one she deals with elsewhere in her *Hospital* articles and in *Scenes from a Silent World*. Second, the article is included in the column "Modern Sociology," where most of Skene's articles also
* "Juvenile Criminals." *The Hospital* (October 29, 1898): 79.\(^{127}\)

"Short Prison Sentences." *The Hospital* (November 5, 1898): 95. (Signed "A Correspondent Within the Gates")


"The Diet of Prisoners." *The Hospital* (November 26, 1898): 151. (Signed "An Official")

§ "Reform in the Criminal Law." *The Hospital* (December 10, 1898): 182.\(^ {128}\)

**The Poor, Workhouses and Visiting:**\(^ {129}\)


appear. This article, moreover, is a response to commentary in a major newspaper on the subject (*The Daily Chronicle*); at least six of Skene’s two dozen articles for *The Hospital* respond directly to letters in major newspapers or the publication of germane reports on prisons and prison reform. Third, in the opening paragraph the author claims, “In these columns, while dealing with prison discipline generally, we have repeatedly alluded incidentally to the valuable results which would accrue from the appointment of rightly qualified lady visitors to every prison in the country.” Both her series “Mistaken Impressions” and “Prison Administration” in the “Modern Sociology” column address exactly this issue; in fact, the final number of “Prison Administration,” which appeared five months prior to “Lady Visitors,” closes on the “principals that should guide” Lady Visitors, noting that “a certain amount of training is as necessary for these ladies as for all other officials” (73). Finally, the author’s insistence that Lady Visitors be allowed to visit with prisoners without the presence of an official, and in a “room in which the prisoners can be brought to her one by one” instead of in the prisoner’s cell, echoes Skene’s writing on prisons as early as her Fraser’s article of 1880 and *Scenes from a Silent World*.\(^ {127}\)

Rickards (243) refers to this title as one of Skene’s series in *The Hospital*, but I was only able to find a single article.

\(^ {128}\) Again, Rickards (243) refers to this title as one of Skene’s series in *The Hospital*, but I was only able to find a single article.

\(^ {129}\) Rickards refers to another work I would include here, *A Cry from the Foot of the Cross*, which Skene wrote in order to encourage workers for the parish, but I have been unable to find where or when it was published. Given where it appears in Rickards text, however, it must be from the late 1850s or early 1860s, and the reference to it as “a little book” (96) means that it may have been privately published by the parish. She also mentions a “little sketch” for the *Quiver*, "A Workhouse Episode," that I did not come across in my reading of the *Quiver* (308).


**Prostitution and Rescue Work:**


“St. Michel During the Year of Pain.” Good Words 14 (1873): 144-50.

*“Methods of Rescue Work.” The Hospital* (July 16, 1898): 267.

**Suicide** *(fiction):*


**Suicide** *(non-fiction):*

# *A Test of the Truth.* London: Elliot Stock, 1897.

§ “The Ethics of Suicide.” The Hospital (August 26, 1899): 371.

§ “The Ethics of Suicide. – II.” The Hospital (September 9, 1899): 409.

§ “The Ethics of Suicide. – III.” The Hospital (September 16, 1899): 427.

§ “The Ethics of Suicide. – IV.” The Hospital (September 23, 1899): 444.

**Biography and Semi-Autobiography:**


130 The author of this work, Alexander Penrose Forbes, was later the Bishop of Brechin and the subject of a biography by Skene. From her letters in the Acland papers, it appears that Skene also worked as an editor for
A Memoir of Alexander, Bishop of Brechin, with a Brief Notice of His Brother the Rev.


“Sir Walter Scott’s First Love.” Century Magazine 36 (July 1899): 368.

Greek Life:

The Isle of Greece and Other Poems. London, 1843.

Sir Henry Acland, but I have not been able to identify which of his works she edited (see d80 f.84, f.88, d89 f.163).

131 Skene carried on an extensive exchange of letters with W. E. Gladstone about including his letters and memories of the Archbishop in her biography, and she dedicated the volume to Gladstone. The letters also suggest that a shortened form of the biography appeared in the Church Quarterly Review.

132 This article is mistakenly entitled “Mrs. Kyria Caroline” in the Wellesley Index.

133 This is, in part, a review of her nephew Oscar von Heidenstam’s biography of the same title.

134 I have not yet seen this particular work.
Wayfaring Sketches among the Greeks and Turks, and on the Shores of the Danube. By a
Seven Years' Resident in Greece. London: Chapman and Hall, 1847.


Miscellaneous:


"La Haute Magie." Temple Bar 21 (September 1867): 278-87. (Signed “F.M.F.S.”)

* "French Preachers: A Court Preacher and Father Hyacinthe." Temple Bar 26 (June 1869):
345-55.

"A Story of Vionville." Macmillan's Magazine 23.133 (November 1870): 53-65.\(^{135}\)

"La Roquette, 24th May, 1871." Macmillan's Magazine 27.160 (February 1873): 323-34.

"The Three Friends of Vaux Vilaine. An Episode of the Present War." The Temple Bar 32
(May 1871): 270-80.

"Lilia Alexandrovna. A Story of Russian Peasant Life." The Argosy 50 (September 1890):
246-59.


Archives:

Oxford Prisons – Minute Book of the Visiting Committee.

---

\(^{135}\) The article is mistakenly entitled “A Story of Venice” in the Wellesley Index.
Letters to W. E. Gladstone, British Library.

Blackwood’s Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Sir Henry Wentworth Acland Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Reviews of Works:

Use and Abuse:


“Our Library Table.” *The Athenæum* 1116 (March 17, 1849): 276.


Inheritance of Evil:

“Publications Received.” *The Spectator* 1079 (March 3, 1849): 205.

Tutor’s Ward:

“Reviews.” *Dublin University Magazine* 38.227 (November 1851).


Hidden Depths:


“New Novels.” *The Athenæum* 1999 (February 17, 1866): 233-34.


---

136 A review of *Hidden Depths* and *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*. 


*A Strange Inheritance*137

“Novels of the Week.” *The Athenæum* 3075 (October 2, 1886).

*The Lesters*

“Novels of the Week.” *The Athenæum* 3131 (October 29, 1887): 565.

**Obituaries:**


Tallack, William. “The World of Women: The Late Miss Skene, the Story of a Useful Life.”

*The Daily News* Saturday, October 14, 1899: 6.138


**Works about or including information on Skene:**

*Skene’s Contemporaries:*


137 Skene’s letters in the Blackwood’s Papers refer to William Blackwood sending her notices of this novel, but thus far I have only been able to find this single review (MS 4492 [1886] f.13).

138 This obituary is unsigned, but Rickards identified the author as Tallack, secretary of the Howard Association (241).
Twentieth Century:
Fryckstedt, Monica Correa. "Hidden Depths: A New Perspective on Victorian Fiction."


**Book Proposals**

To facilitate Skene’s inclusion in curriculum and scholarly discussion, a short anthology of Victorian women’s charity work might be useful. Selections from *Penitentiaries and Reformatories* and *Scenes from a Silent World* would probably be the
most valuable choices from Skene’s writing. Some additional authors and writing I would propose are: 1) on prostitution – Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, *Wrong and Right Methods of Dealing with Social Evil* (1883), Ellice Hopkins, *The White Cross Army* (1883), and any of Josephine Butler’s writing on the Contagious Diseases Acts; 2) on women’s mission – excerpts from Anna Brownell Jameson’s *Sisters of Charity* and *The Communion of Labour* (1859), and selections from Angela Burdett-Coutts’s *Woman's Mission: A Series of Congress Papers on the Philanthropic Work of Women by Eminent Writers* (1893); 3) on charitable visiting – excerpts from Ellen Ranyard’s writing on Bible Women (1859), Mary Bayly’s *Ragged Homes and How to Mend Them* (1859), selections from Louisa Twining’s contributions to *The Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, Sophia de Morgan’s pieces for *Good Words* on poor children, and Octavia Hill’s *Walmer Street Industrial Experiment* (1872); 4) miscellaneous and anonymous guides and manuals for visiting. Such an anthology would prove an invaluable resource in literature classrooms as well as those of history, gender studies, and religious studies.

Finally, it is important to ensure that Skene is read, through the publication of a current edition of her most well-known novel, *Hidden Depths*. As the preceding dissertation has shown, the novel is significant because of the ways in which it intersects with the dominant Victorian discourses around women’s roles in society, prostitution, and the reformation of society. The fallen woman was the subject of much discourse in novels and essays throughout the period, and the “Woman Question,” which addressed issues such as what to do with the “excess” women of England and what role women could play in society, is very much encompassed in Skene’s characterization of Ernestine Courtenay.
Because Skene and her novel are so little known in the twenty-first century, I wish to propose a Broadview edition of *Hidden Depths*. Broadview's commitment to "the addition of primary source documents contemporaneous with the work [that] . . . help demonstrate the context out of which the work emerged" ("Editorial Guidelines") makes it an ideal publication venue. The primary source documents I propose below will provide the first-time reader of Skene with the necessary framework within which to examine both her novel and to situate other better-known Victorian works.

*Proposed Appendices for a Broadview Edition:*

1. Contemporary Reviews – selections from the of *Hidden Depths* in 1866. Of particular interest is John Dennis's review in *The Fortnightly* since it also includes a review of *Penitentiaries and Reformatories*.


4. Redundant Woman – excerpts from Margaret Oliphant's "The Condition of Women" (1858), W. R. Greg's "Why are Women Redundant?" (1862), Frances Power Cobbe's
“What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” (1862), and Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra* (1860).

5. Charitable Women—see suggestions for anthology above.

6. Crisis of Faith—excerpts from *Tracts for the Times* (1833-41), specifically Newman’s Tract 90, *Essays and Reviews* (1860), specifically Jowett’s “One the Interpretation of Scripture,” Samuel Wilberforce’s reviews of both *Origin of the Species* and *Essays and Reviews* for the *Quarterly Review* (1859/1861), Charles Kingsley’s *Yeast* (1851), specifically the letters between Lancelot and Luke regarding the latter’s catholic conversion, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), specifically the Helstone chapters, and Mary Ward’s *Robert Elsemere* (1888).