

Reading Sentences: Prison Libraries and Literature

Rauner Special Collections Library

April 6th, 2026 – June 19th, 2026

Class of 1965 Galleries

Beyond punishment for social wrongs, imprisonment has long functioned to silence or remove voices from the public forum. As we have seen with figures from Cervantes to Martin Luther King Jr., however, prison can also give inmates copious time to articulate their thoughts and the fame or notoriety necessary to draw attention to them. This exhibit examines both the literature consumed and produced by prisoners as well as the evolving depiction of the prison in popular culture. Its scope spans hundreds of years and thousands of miles, from the chivalric romances dreamed up by imprisoned knights (and aspiring knights) of the medieval and Renaissance eras to the cheap, sensational prison dramas peddled to the working classes and the reformist prison library catalogs whose titles sought to educate and equip inmates with secular knowledge and employable trade skills in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New England. It highlights the electrifying prison manifestos of several prominent civil rights leaders and concludes with contemporary artist and children's books which grapple with the psychosocial impact of incarceration.

CASE ONE: EVOLUTION OF THE PRISON LIBRARY

Chanler, Isaac, and William Cooper. *New converts exhorted to cleave to the Lord*. Boston: printed by D. Fowle, for S. Kneeland and T. Green, near the prison in Queen-Street, 1740. Rare BV4253 .C5 1740

Convicts imprisoned prior to the nineteenth century could often only get their hands on a handful of religious texts administered by a chaplain to arouse repentance for their sins. Printed down the street from Massachusetts' first prison, this small lecture pamphlet exemplifies the Christian rhetoric circulating in proximity to early New England carceral facilities. Founded in 1635, Boston Gaol housed condemned witches, pirates, and eventually the printer Daniel Fowle himself, who ran afoul of the law for disseminating texts critical of the Massachusetts legislature and who later described the Boston prison as "a hell upon earth" in his foundational pre-Revolution treatise on freedom of the press, *Total Eclipse of Liberty* (1755).

A catalogue of books in the library of the New Hampshire state prison, Concord, N.H. Manchester, N.H.: John B. Clarke, 1881. Gilman SAB N456c

Of the 1,450 titles listed in largely random order in this booklet, the few named authors whose works dominate the collection – children's adventure novelist Oliver Optic (William Taylor Adams), nautical novelist Captain Frederick Marryat of the British Royal Navy, American frontier historical romance writer James Fenimore Cooper, American historian Jared Sparks, and the father of historical fiction, Sir Walter Scott, among others – reveal how sensational entertainment and secular education began to supplant religious sermons as the primary literary forms accessible to inmates.

That said, seventeen volumes of the monthly Methodist periodical *The Ladies' Repository* and Presbyterian pastor E.P. Roe's popular novels advocating for female education and financial independence indicate an effort to cater towards the handful of female inmates who began to be housed in the south wing of the facility in 1880 after the prison's reconstruction in 1878.

Jones, E. Kathleen. *A library for the education of the whole man: body – mind – spirit, Norfolk Prison Colony Library*. Norfolk, M.A.: publisher unidentified, 1936? Alumni P229Li

A stark departure from the continuous stream of authorless titles from fifty years prior, call numbers, bolded category headings, and italicized subcategories help guide the Norfolk Prison Colony inmates through their literary selection. The division schema ranges from geographic regions, with an emphasis on American states and European countries, to familiar forms like Poetry, Biography, and The Novel and targeted self-help topics like Mental Hygiene, Conduct of Life, and even a brief legal section on Penology. While the distinct classifications of Literature, Easy Reading, and Fiction reinforces the hierarchical relationship between the Western classical canon and sensational genres, Fiction continues to dominate the collection.

Parkhurst, Lewis. *The new prison at Norfolk, Massachusetts*. Winchester, M.A.: Lewis Parkhurst, 1932. Alumni P2288n

Constructed by inmates under civilian supervision, the new Norfolk Prison Colony re-situated the library at the heart of the institution. Placing the collection at the center of a dedicated Education building and surrounding it with classrooms and workshops encouraged inmates to translate vocational knowledge from the library's numerous technical manuals directly into hands-on experience with trades like carpentry, bookbinding, leatherwork, and mechanical engineering.

Kerrigan, James. Thank-you letter to Lewis Parkhurst relative to placement of books in Norfolk Prison Colony library. September 9th, 1938. MS-1161 Box 1, Folder 3 (Lewis Parkhurst papers)

Echoing this letter, perhaps no one has been more vocal about Parkhurst's generous donation to the Norfolk Prison Colony library than former inmate Malcolm X. A middle-school dropout - turned revolutionary Black nationalist who re-taught himself to read with the prison library's dictionaries and often cited Parkhurst's numerous rare books as his 'alma mater,' X recalled in his autobiography, "Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection" (200), going on to assert that "prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college" (207).

After his sister's steady efforts to secure his transfer to Norfolk paid off in 1948, Malcolm X described Parkhurst's experimental colony and its progressive policies as "a heaven" compared to Charlestown (181) and "the most enlightened form of prison that I have ever heard of," with inmates who "went in for 'intellectual' things, group discussions, debates" and visiting instructors from Harvard and Boston University who taught in the educational rehabilitation program (182).

X, Malcolm and Alex Haley. *The autobiography of Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, c. 1965. Baker-Berry Uncataloged Reserve #5

In addition to Miltonian epics, Mendelian genetics, and ‘useless’ Nietzschean philosophy – “Where else but in a prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely, sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day?” (207) – X’s correspondence with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad throughout his time at Norfolk drew him further into the Islamic faith; while he espouses the prison’s tolerant living conditions and characterizes the prison library as a space of mental liberation, he simultaneously paints a picture of religion as a rigorous regiment of self-discipline during his sentence:

“Bending my knees to pray – that *act* – well, that took me a week... Picking a lock to rob someone’s house was the only way my knees had ever been bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up” (196).

X’s efforts “to hunt the library for books that would inform me on details about black history” (201) cemented his early belief that God is just and “the white man is the devil,” a conviction he endeavored to instill in his black peers by reading aloud passages from the library’s history books (210-211) but which he renounced later in life after encountering Muslims of all backgrounds during a ‘hajj’ or pilgrimage to the Islamic holy site of Mecca. A powerful orator, X heralded the “exhilarating” (212) experience of “speaking to a crowd” (212) for the first time in Norfolk Prison Colony’s weekly debating program as his “baptism into public speaking” (210).

Nintzel, Jeffrey S. (photographer). [“The Temple Murals: The Life of Malcolm X” painted with acrylic by Florian Jenkins.] Cutter Hall (now Shabazz Center for Intellectual Inquiry), Dartmouth College, 1972. Iconography 1399

According to his autobiography, the browline glasses which became an iconic part of X’s intellectual public image – and indeed inspired an ongoing trend of so-called ‘Malcolm X glasses’ – were rendered necessary after the avid bibliophile lost his 20/20 vision and developed astigmatism in the Norfolk Prison Colony from “read[ing] so much by the lights-out glow in my room” (218).

“I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life... the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive” (206).

CASE TWO: VOICES FROM THE CELL

Malory, Thomas, Sir. *The birth life and acts of King Arthur: of his noble Knights of the Round Table their marvellous enquests and adventures the achieving of the San Greal and in the end Le morte Darthur with the dolourous death and departing out of this world of them all.* Illus. Aubrey Beardsley. London: J.M. Dent (revised from Caxton ed.), 1893. Illus B38maja

A self-described “knyght-prisoner” repeatedly incarcerated for crimes ranging from theft and extortion to attempted murder, the author who popularized the tales of Excalibur and the Knights of the Round Table spotlights his confinement within the chivalric narrative by directly entreating readers to pray for his release at the end of the text. Drawing on a tradition in which exile and captivity shape plot and character, Malory turns to the escapism of medieval romance to write his own fate into Arthurian legend.

Bayly, Thomas. *Herba parietis; or, The wall-flower: as it grew out of the stone-chamber belonging to the metropolitan prison of London, called Newgate: being a history which is partly true, partly romantick, morally divine: whereby a marriage between reality and fancy is solemnized by divinity.* London: Printed by J.G. and are to be sold by John Holden, 1650. Hickmott 458

Like many other imprisoned royalists of his time, religious controversialist Thomas Bayly encoded his political criticism of the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the new republican Commonwealth of England through allegorical romance epics (de Groot, “Prison Writing, Writing Prison during the 1640s and 1650s,” 205). In *Herba parietis*, Bayly asserts that readers’ engagement with the story should remain untainted by the carceral circumstances of its composition:

“Is Vertue of lesse worth, for being Muffled up in an Uncouth habit? Or Beauty blemish’d by the Modest Covert of a Vaile? Surely not! Nor more my Flower, of lesse worth, or Beauty, because twas set, and sprung up, within the Barren Confines of a Prison, and Lives shaded from Vulgar Eyes, by the silken Curtaine of Conceit” (Bir, Biv).

Bayly goes on to characterize prison as a space for reflection and a catalyst of imagination, which, in turn, offers “such a Libertie... as to the Prisoner might seem an Enlargement beyond the extent of Aire.” Following a band of Roman exiles through comedic setbacks and romantic entanglements in sixth-century Egypt and Tunisia, Bayly’s slapstick adventure narrative points to an enduring desire and market for escapist literature in the early modern era.

Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*. Madrid: La viuda de Ibarra, hijos y compañía, 1787. Quixote PQ6323 .A1 1787 vol. 1

Trained in cartography in Paris and Amsterdam, the preeminent Spanish engraver and royal Geographer Tomás López grounded the infamous Don Quixote's fictional journey across Spain in real field surveys conducted by the Captain of Engineers. The expansive, tipped-in map charting the knight-errant's tortuous pursuit of glory heightens the irony of the soldier-author's legendary confinement in a Sevillian jail for tax evasion while writing his celebrated parody of traditional chivalric romance, drawing from his own former military ordeals and extended captivity in Algiers.

Velnet, Mary. *The captivity and sufferings of Mrs. Mary Velnet: who was seven years a slave in Tripoli, three of which she was confined in a dungeon, loaded with irons, and four times put to the most cruel tortures ever invented by man. To which is added, The lunatic governor. And Adelaide, or The triumph of constancy: a tale*. Boston: T. Abbot, 1828. 1926 Coll V357c 1828

Likely a work of fiction or heavily embellished account rather than a verifiable autobiography, the sensational episodes and striking woodcut frontispiece of Velnet's narrative align with early nineteenth-century tastes for female captivity tales and gothic romance. Framing imprisonment as spectacle, the text demonstrates how prison narratives of the period foregrounded bodily suffering and emotional resilience over psychological depth and intellectual development.

Manzanar Free Press, 1943, 1945. ML-43 (Agnes Bartlett Papers): Box 1, Folder 51

Launched on April 11, 1942 by a cohort of ex-journalists, the *Manzanar Free Press* grew from a mimeographed community bulletin into one of three typeset newspapers printed three times a week for the rapidly expanding population of the Manzanar War Relocation Center – one of ten camps established by the American government during WWII to hold over 110,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese American citizens forcibly evicted from their homes by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) through the Civilian Exclusion Orders.

The *Manzanar Free Press* kept residents informed of everything from administrative regulations, payroll announcements, and work opportunities to school, sport, social, and religious events. While criminal activities like gambling and theft were often reported, larger incidents like police shootings and the camp-wide riot which shut down the press for twenty days in December 1942 were notably absent. Similarly, the newspaper covered discrimination, strikes, and resistance efforts occurring at other camps but largely

feigned normalcy within their own, highlighting cooperative stores' offerings and advertising the resettlement project as a pioneering opportunity for Japanese Americans.

Despite issuing a statement in its first print run that the press "belongs to the people of Manzanar," the WRA retained censorship power over camp newspapers until the Relocation Center's closure at the end of the war, and former staff editors have testified to the absence of internees' personal views on the poor housing, nutrition, and medical care within the camp.

Ex-convict no. –, or 'Jock of Parkhurst.' *Dartmoor from within.* Illus. by H. M. Brock. London: G. Newnes, 1932. Sine Illus B762dar

Through an anonymous first-person narrator who adopts only the pseudonym "Jock of Parkhurst," we glimpse daily life in early twentieth-century Dartmoor Prison and learn that the remote carceral facility once notorious for rampant disease and disciplining French and American prisoners-of-war with manacles, straightjackets, and flogging instruments now possessed a printing press, book-binding workshop, and "a very fine library of books" (54) which 'Jock' and other inmates primarily used for leisure reading (132). Beyond the available literary collection, sensational stories circulated amongst prisoners through rumors and lectures; our narrator recounts listening to the Governor's tales about his soldier days in the prison church as "the highlight of my stay" (54).

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Letter from Birmingham Jail.* Stamford, Connecticut: The Overbrook Press, 1968. Presses O96kin

Drafted in the margins of a newspaper article and paper scraps and passed through his lawyers to his secretary, Willie Pearl Mackey King, for transcription, Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 letter from Birmingham Jail transforms confinement into a powerful act of public witness. Responding to local white clergymen urging desegregation demonstrators in Alabama to find solutions to their grievances in court, King plainly states the inequality within the legal system and defends nonviolent resistance and the urgency of racial justice. His famous words "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" exemplify how prison writing can challenge the criminal system and reach far beyond its walls to create lasting social change.

Mandela, Nelson. *Long walk to freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1994. Tower Room DT1949.M35 A3 1994

Conceived in secrecy during his imprisonment on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela's account of his lifelong efforts to combat apartheid in South Africa bears witness to resilience under constraint. Writing in small fragments that were hidden, smuggled, and

later reconstructed, Mandela used his prison sentence for sustained political and personal reflection. Furthermore, the alliances and strategies he developed with other convicted freedom fighters and the fluency he gained in Afrikaans, the language of his captors, enabled him to bridge divides and dismantle racial segregation as president.

CASE THREE: THE PRISON IN POPULAR CULTURE

San Pedro, Diego de. *Carcel de amor: La prison d'amour*. Lyon: Benoist Rigaud, 1583. Rare PQ6431.S4 C3 1583

An international bestseller, appearing here in both French and Spanish “for those who wish to learn one through the other,” this sixteenth-century romance draws on medieval conceptions of love as mortal illness cured by (marital) consummation and is considered one of the first stories to yoke the harrowing experiences of love and incarceration.

Guided to the Prison of Love, a physical and allegorical fortress, by Desire, a servant of Love, the chivalric Author facilitates the illicit correspondence of a princess and her unsanctioned beloved to the detriment of all; though the young lover rallies an army and rescues the imprisoned princess from execution after the king learns of their relationship, the liberated royal refuses to acquaint herself with her beloved again until her father’s passing. Driven mad by ungratified desire, the hero dies by starving himself and finally tearing, mixing, and drinking his lover’s letters – a private, violent consumption of written affections displacing the physical consecration of a socially recognized bond.

***Lord Bakeman, who was taken by the Turks and put in prison, and afterwards released by the jailor's daughter, whom he married*. Boston: Printed by N. Coverly, ~1816. 1926 Coll L669.**

An inexpensive broadside peddled to the lowest literate echelon of Boston society to help the struggling publisher evade his own arrest for fraudulent bankruptcy, this satirical ballad sheet derives from a popular eighteenth-century Scottish folk song in which a jailer’s daughter frees a young, foreign nobleman on the condition that he later bind himself to her in marriage.

Optic, Oliver. *Taken by the enemy*. Boston: Lee and Shepard; New York: Charles T. Dillingham, 1889. Rare PS1006.A5 T35 1889

With a restrained tone that avoids the graphic brutality of adult war narratives, Oliver Optic recasts imprisonment through the lens of youthful adventure and moral instruction in his *The Blue and the Grey* series. Captivity during the Civil War becomes a test of loyalty and ingenuity rather than a site of prolonged suffering. Contextualizing imprisonment as a temporary trial within a larger coming-of-age arc ascribes to the didactic mission of nineteenth-century children's literature and, as we have seen in the vast representation of Optic's books in the Norfolk Prison Colony library catalog, continued to resonate well into the early twentieth century.

Parker, Norton S. and Dorothy Davenport, Dorothy. *Prison Break* (screenplay). Place of publication not identified: Universal Pictures, 1938. Scripts 1624

Romance and violence entwine once again in this Depression-era prison film, where a fisherman wrongfully accused of murder at a wedding strives to keep his record clean in prison in hopes of expediting his parole reunion with a beautiful woman but inevitably becomes embroiled in an escape plot hatched by threatening inmates. Several film theorists have criticized Hollywood's preference for prison break narratives as minimizing real prisoners' organized efforts to better their carceral living conditions and create systemic change which holds prison administrators accountable for malfeasance.

Butterworth, Oliver and Susan Avishai. *A visit to the big house*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Alumni B985v

First published in pamphlet form by Connecticut Families in Crisis to help parents and children navigate the emotional complexities of relationships impacted by the criminal justice system, this picture book depicts a mother taking her two young children to visit their father in prison. Throughout the drive, the mother addresses the siblings' anxieties and misconceptions drawn from popular culture of prisoners chained in striped uniforms and explains their father's sentence as retribution for an unidentified wrong. The children's conversation with their father in prison shifts focus to both vocational learning and literary production, as he discusses working at the printing shop, writing for the prison newspaper, and the opportunity to volunteer as a reading tutor.

Lorenz, Angela. *The fettered lettered*. Bologna, Italy: Angela Lorenz, 2007. Presses L876lof

According to the exhibit brochure for "The Artist's Book as Volume of Knowledge," Lorenz's 2007 showcase at Phillips Academy Andover, "This piece represents writers who authored works in jail, or other places of confinement such as mental institutions or in exile." Sewn together with dental floss, "a material that could get a person in or out of prison," the book was displayed suspended from a chain of notebook rings. Names of

imprisoned authors – many of whom appear in this exhibit – are overlaid in vertical and horizontal bands printed on squares of clear plastic to create an illegible grid of text evoking the bars of a cage, blurring the line between the writers and their confinement.