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978-1-107-03617-8 - Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel

Anne Dewitt

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MORAL AUTHORITY, MEN OF SCIENCE, AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Nineteenth-century men of science aligned scientific practice with moral excellence as part of an endeavor to secure cultural authority for their discipline. Anne DeWitt examines how novelists from Elizabeth Gaskell to H. G. Wells responded to this alignment. Revising the widespread assumption that Victorian science and literature were part of one culture, she argues that the professionalization of science prompted novelists to deny that science offered widely accessible moral benefits. Instead, they represented the narrow aspirations of the professional as morally detrimental while they asserted that moral concerns were the novel's own domain of professional expertise. This book draws on works of natural theology, popular lectures, and debates from the pages of periodicals to delineate changes in the status of science and to show how both familiar and neglected works of Victorian fiction sought to redefine the relationship between science and the novel.

ANNE DEWITT is a lecturer in the Princeton Writing Program.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as “background,” feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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For David, Julie, and Lizzy DeWitt, and for Andrew Goldstone.

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