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The idea of Victorian womanhood typically summons images of Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house," the domestic saint who formed the moral center of the middle-class family. My dissertation examines another kind of Victorian woman: the factory girl who was also influential in reinforcing dominant class and gender ideologies across nineteenth-century Britain, if only by unfavorable comparison. The factory girl epitomized unnatural womanhood and symbolized the collision of Victorian economic and sexual anxieties; as such, she was cast as a sexual / sentimental other in industrial discourse and was absent or replaced by less controversial female characters in middle-class literature.

In this dissertation, I compare the "absented" factory girl of the mid-nineteenth century industrial novel with her revised image in the writing of female working-class authors. Working-class representation of the factory girl, I propose, generates "working identities" that re-imagine the narratives casting female factory workers as threatening or threatened figures. I also argue that genres central to working-class culture, like poetry and autobiography, offer these authors the literary authority to refuse to divide the woman from the worker, to describe their artistic and political aspirations, as well as to evoke, overturn, and pose alternatives to predominate views of working-class women as sexually and morally threatening.

The chapters of *Genres of Work* set up the comparison between the image of the sentimental / sexualized factory girl of industrial novel and her representation (and

revision) in working-class lyric poetry and working women's autobiographies. I begin with a study of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), in which the peripheral treatment of factory girls or their replacement with other types of working women draws attention away from the economic and personal potential factory work could have for working women; I then examine the poetics of Ellen Johnston, a Scottish working-class writer who united labor, gender, and art by taking on the poetic name "the Factory Girl" through publication in popular working-class periodicals and her book collection *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* (1868, 1869); and I end my literary analysis with a reading of Kathleen Woodward's *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum* (1928), an autobiography conscious of the limits of literary self-representation, a performance of the genre Woodward uses to critique the model of empowered female laborer that developed in and around life writing in the early twentieth century. I argue that in the space between literary constructions of factory girls by others and those they construct themselves, labor allows working women to question and re-imagine static categories of class and gender, marking spaces of change that facilitate a cultural renegotiation of what it means to be "working class" and "female" in Victorian and early twentieth century texts.

GENRES OF WORK: WORKING IDENTITIES AND THE FACTORY GIRL IN
VICTORIAN LITERATURE

by

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To the Theriot and Richard women,
The mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers who led me to this topic

To Gwendolyn and Mary Jane,
the little girls who make me laugh

And in memory of Amable Fawvor Trevino (1923-1996),
the *grande mere* who taught her *'tit fille* to value education

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by MELISSA JILL RICHARD has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION: THE OTHER VICTORIAN WOMAN.....	1
II. THE FACTORY GIRL IN (AND OUT OF) THE INDUSTRIAL NOVEL.....	22
III. THE POETICS OF LABOR IN <i>AUTOBIOGRAPHY,</i> <i>POEMS AND SONGS OF ELLEN JOHNSTON,</i> <i>THE 'FACTORY GIRL'</i>	61
IV. FACTORY GIRLS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION IN KATHLEEN WOODWARD'S <i>JIPPING STREET: CHILDHOOD</i> <i>IN A LONDON SLUM</i>	97
V. CONCLUSION: WORK IN PROGRESS.....	143
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	155

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE OTHER VICTORIAN WOMAN

You think we factory women can do nothing at all.—Bolton factory worker, interview from *The First Report of Factories Inquiry Commission*, 1833

I have often heard the ‘sarcastic’ remark applied to the factory worker oh she is only a factory girl; thus giving the impression to the World that we have no right to aspire to any other society but our own. I am sorry to say that we are not fully awakened to the facts that we contribute largely to the nation's wealth, and therefore demand respect, and not insult. For in many a Lancashire home are to be found heroines whose names will never be handed down to posterity; yet it is consoling to know that we as a class contribute to the world.—Selina Cooper, *The Lancashire Factory Girl*, 1898

The idea of Victorian womanhood typically summons images of Coventry Patmore’s “angel in the house,” the domestic saint who formed the moral center of the middle-class family. *Genres of Work* examines another kind of Victorian woman: the factory girl who was also influential in reinforcing dominant class and gender ideologies across nineteenth-century Britain, if only by unfavorable comparison. Unlike the domestic saint, the factory girl epitomized unnatural womanhood and stood as a blighted byproduct of industrialized society. She symbolized the collision of Victorian economic and sexual anxieties, as the term “factory girl” referred to a young, single woman who contributed to the working-class family purse or supported herself through employment in urban mills. The relative economic independence of factory girls implied sexual independence, subjecting them to accusations of promiscuity. If not sexualized, factory

girls were deemed pathetic victims of the industrial machine, prone to injury or mutilation, weakened by poor nutrition and the physical exertion factory labor required. Although not as morally damaging, this sympathetic view performed work similar to that of the sexual view: both supported the belief that femininity itself was antithetical to industrial labor. These views gave men in positions of political power a platform from which to argue for legislation that would put working women back in the home, where (it was argued) they “naturally” belonged.

These sexual / sentimental perspectives also made the representation of industrial working women in Victorian literature problematic, if not nearly impossible. Although factory girls made up a significant number of workers employed in mills, they were “killed off,” marginalized, or left out of Victorian novels and poems intended to provide a “realistic” view of industrial life.¹ Factory girls appeared consistently in the blue book reports of the 1830s and 40s, many interviewed before Parliament and royal commissions concerned with conditions in factories and mines; however, they barely registered in the industrial social-problem novel, a genre in part influenced by blue book representation of working conditions. If and when factory girls made their way into the industrial novel, they appeared in the background, died quickly, or, as Patricia Johnson observes, the issues they raised were represented by “less controversial figures”: washerwomen, seamstresses, and, intriguingly, prostitutes (27). For many Victorian authors, the factory

¹ In Manchester alone during the 1840s, women comprised more than 70% of the industrial workforce. For more on women’s numbers in manufacturing districts in nineteenth-century Britain, see Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (1930; rpt. London, Virago, 1969) and Wanda Fraiken Neff, *Victorian Working Women: A Historical and Literary Study of Women in the British Industries and Professions, 1820-1850* (New York: Columbia UP, 1929).

girl was an emblem of social, moral, and economic anxiety that could not be reconciled with normative gender roles or the return to the family to which mid-century novelists retreated as an antidote to the disorder of industrial life.

Yet several critics have shown that because of the great influence they had on industrial discourse, factory girls *are* present in the familiar “Condition of England” novels we associate with the early Victorian age, even if their roles are small, seemingly insignificant, or merely discursive.² My dissertation picks up the thread begun by such analyses and compares the “absented” factory girl of the industrial novel with her revised image in the poetic and autobiographical writing of working-class women. While the factory girl may seem irrelevant in literature written for a middle-class audience, this figure is an important touchstone for working women writers as a means of addressing the complexity of and creating alternate possibilities for working-class female subjectivity. Working-class representation of the factory girl, I propose, generates “working identities” that re-imagine and resist the narratives casting female factory workers as threatening or threatened figures. Examining the binary of the sexual / sentimental factory girl in relationship to texts written by factory girls themselves opens

² Critical work by Patricia Johnson and Susan Zlotnick illustrates that whether actually present in literature or not, factory girls and the trouble surrounding them play a formative role in representing all women in industrialized fiction. In *Hidden Hands: Working Class Women and Victorian Social Problem Fiction*, Johnson argues that while working-class women are essentially “erased” from the industrial novels of the 1840s and 1850s, “the traces they leave behind” and “the corresponding displacements of the issues [they raise] on to other, more manageable female characters” can illuminate “the transformative processes that have produced the modern industrial state” in literary production (3-4). In *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution*, Zlotnick points out that “the first citizen of [the new industrial world] was the independent, wage-earning factory girl, who emerged as the blank screen on which the Victorians projected their own fears and hopes for modernity” (7). The factory girl informs and shapes gender and class discourse in the industrial novel, even when not a central character in the narrative.

up a third space for presenting alternative views of working-class femininity, based on the work they do *in* the factory as a means of creating artistic work *about* the factory.

I also consider the importance of literary form in re-imagining the factory girl. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, I treat genres as spaces of symbolic action that can re-accentuate female working identities through literary production. Working-class women did not write the novel in the nineteenth century—they wrote poetry and autobiography. Laboring women's experiences fit better in poetic discourse, as it was linked with the oral traditions of plebian cultures, and autobiography, with its relationship to truth-telling (however problematic the idea of "truth-telling" may have been). These genres, I suggest, provide the rhetorical foundations from which working-class female writers were able to construct working subject positions. Genres central to working-class culture also offer these authors the literary authority to refuse to divide the woman from the worker and to describe their artistic and political aspirations, as well as to evoke, overturn, and pose alternatives to predominant views of working-class women as sexually and morally threatening.

The Sexual / Sentimental Factory Girl

Victorian socio-political discourse about factory girls heavily influenced the representation (or lack thereof) of working women in middle-class literature and, in turn, shaped the response working women created through writing of their own. Factory girls were a subset of the greater population of industrial workers, yet the sexual / sentimental representation of the industrial *femme sole* cast a long shadow over all female laborers. In

The First Industrial Woman, labor historian Deborah Valenze observes that the factory girl was “a virtual archetype of the era,” for “even though not all working women were factory workers, factory workers influenced all working women” (3). Through the 1840s and 50s, the bulk of parliamentary testimony, labor commission reports, and popular journalism cataloging the problems and “indecencies” of female factory workers prompted wholesale critique of working-class women who labored outside the home. The factory girl was an index to which commentators and politicians referred in order to argue for the separation of women and public work, regardless of their marital status or actual occupation.³ Written accounts of female factory workers in social documents reinforced this index, which in turn influenced the ways in which she was “written” and represented in literary documents.

Even parliamentary blue books not explicitly focused on working women, like those that investigate the problem of child labor in factories and mines, dredged up shocking representations of women at work and patterned the middle-class literary response to women’s industrial labor. Reports and books describing factory work and workers had begun proclaiming factories as sources of vice and squalor as early as 1833, beginning with Peter Gaskell’s study of workers and working conditions, *The Manufacturing Population of England: Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam*. The dangers of the mixed-sex

³ A famous example of political moves to remove women from work outside the home is Lord Ashley’s Mines and Collieries Bill (1842). As described by Patricia Johnson, Lord Ashley’s Bill called for, among other things, the “total exclusion of women from the pits,” to begin six months after the bill’s passage. The bill’s popularity crossed class lines, as for many it seemed to ensure that working-class women could be more attentive to domestic matters were they removed from public employment (23-4).

workplace and the physical conditions under which women toiled were nothing less than deplorable in Gaskell's estimation (and the scandalous nature of working in the "steamy" factory described in imperialistic tones). "The crowding together members of the young of both sexes in factories," he warned:

is a prolific source of moral delinquency. The stimulus of a heated atmosphere, the contact of opposite sexes, the example of lasciviousness upon the animal passions—all have conspired to produce a very early development of sexual appetencies. Indeed, in this respect, the female population engaged in manufactures approximates very closely to that found in tropical climates; puberty, or at least sexual propensities, being attained almost coeval with girlhood. (68-69)

Patricia Johnson notes that parliamentary reports of the same year build on Gaskell's observation: "the 1833 Royal Commission on the Employment of Children in Factories, for example, quotes one witness as stating that 'it would be no strain on his conscience to say that three-quarters of the girls between fourteen and twenty years of age were unchaste'" (25). The perceived sexual undertones of industrial work for girls and women was made even more apparent the popular publication of excerpts from the *First Report of the Children's Employment Commission: Mines and Collieries* (1842), particularly because the report punctuated the indecencies described in the text with wood engravings. These illustrations depicted girls "stripped to the waist" or "seated cross-lapped" with boys on an iron chain that pulled them up from the mines – not to mention the girls wore trousers and ripped blouses – and were reproduced in newspapers like *Bell's Penny Sunday Chronicle*, a middle-class family publication. Public interpretation of the mine report in popular journalism conflated work in mines with that of factories,

and the moral, as well as physical, dangers of industrial work for women continued to be the standard in mine and factory reports, as well as newspapers and periodicals, through the early 1860s.

Worse was the belief that factory work for women created unnatural gender roles that emasculated working-class men. Women were then considered “poor victims” of industrialism because they could not fulfill their natural roles in the household as wives and mothers. Fredrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) exemplifies the type of investigative writing that represented the factory girl as immoral, prone to sexual misconduct, but also as a sentimental victim oppressed by an unnatural industrial system because it curtailed women’s domestic abilities. Engels was especially troubled by the “unmarried women who have grown up in the mills” and warned that they were “in no position to understand domestic work.” When they would marry and have “young children to take care of, [they] have not the vaguest idea how to set about it” (157). Worst of all are the “moral consequences” brought on by the promiscuous crowding of men and women into a small space. Factory work for women encouraged “indecent” language and scandalous behavior; Engels wrote that factory girls had “no strong inducements to chastity” and, citing examples from various factory reports, accused them of using their sexuality to curry favor with their master when faced with dismissal or other unfavorable treatment (158). Engels’ study ascribes a host of unfeminine behavior to factory girls, the effects of which seem almost as bad as the cause: if and when they marry, they make unfit wives and mothers. Moreover, the sexual aggressiveness indicated by Engels configures economic anxiety in explicitly sexual

terms. The suggestion that factory girls trade sexual favors with their overseers overtly targets the capitalist economic system underwriting Engels' catalog of appalling behaviors. The overcrowding, lack of education, and absence of morality stem from a system of private self-interest and competition that corrupts humane social relations.

It is this system of "false relations," Engels argued, that promotes gender anarchy, a reversal of positions between men and women that disrupts the family circle (the "family" that constitutes society as well as the literal working-class family). Industrial working conditions create an "insane state of things [...] which unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow upon the man true womanliness or the woman true manliness—this condition which degrades, in the most shameful way, both sexes, and, though them, Humanity," Engels wrote (154). Women's work is not simply to the detriment of the household because women cannot perform duties ascribed to them; Engels strongly implies that women's paid work jeopardizes male authority and man's cultural identity as worker, breadwinner, and head of household. Thus Engels not only indicts the capitalist system as responsible for gender anarchy, but also demonstrates a cultural desire for strict definitions (or re-definitions) of what it meant to be male or female *and* working class. Even a complete reversal of the sexes is impossible: women aren't completely masculinized and men aren't completely feminized. Instead, the system generates a field of conflicting meanings on working-class femininity and masculinity that do not reconcile with cultural knowledge of sexual difference. By pointing out the degradation to "Humanity" brought about by the blurred distinctions between man and woman, Engels' argument also assumes that the

characteristics of sexual difference he assigned to the factory hands is something natural and universal, complicated only by an unnatural economic system.

Descriptions of women as indecent, scandalous, or, what seems even worse, masculine, depend on a definition of the woman as docile, modest, passive, the morally-intuitive center of the Victorian household. Engels invokes this model of femininity when he assumes that factory work makes women “inexperienced and unfit as housekeepers,” given to “drunkenness” and “unbridled sexual indulgence” (157-161). The opposite of this negative view constructs the true “feminine character,” the view of womanhood that stressed the domestic and moral virtue (157).⁴ Engels draws on characteristics that were integral to the creation of middle-class values, family life, and property relations in order to indict the factory system as unnatural and oppressive. The rhetoric of domesticity shapes cultural ideas about respectability and occupation for men and women, and Engels makes use of normative sexual difference to reinforce his depiction of the evils of the industrial system.

The publication of reports connected with “the factory question” and analyses like Engels’ not only fed public curiosity about Britain’s working-class citizens, especially those that were female, but also established the factory girl as the rhetorical filter through which the audience came to recognize and identify all working women not in domestic service. Labeling factory girls as sexual / sentimental others not only exemplified particular evils of industrialism (with special appeal to common notions of proper

⁴ Engels blames all of this on the introduction of machinery to the factory, which makes it difficult for men to perform their duties. Because women and children have smaller hands and are often more efficient in working these machines, as well as the fact that they’ll work at a cheaper rate, men are replaced and “condemned to domestic occupations” (154).

femininity), but also provided a clear way of mollifying the economic upset the working woman posed to working-class men and middle-class conceptions of the family; the sexual / sentimental discourse about factory girls displaced the potential economic competition that working women posed to working-class men, but also, the potential economic competition these women (as working-class representatives) posed to the middle classes. As these representations proliferated through the reform era of the late 1830s and 40s, the label made it difficult to productively address issues surrounding women's labor in industrial literature.

Working Identities

Factory girls may have been regarded by the dominant classes as dangerous or endangered, but views of women's industrial labor in working-class culture (and literature) were much more nuanced. In my comparison of representation of factory girls in the industrial novel and the writing of working-class women, these nuances are vital to the ways in which the latter re-imagines working-class feminine subjectivity. In the work of female factory poets and, later, in autobiographies, factory girls are not simply "emblems of ultimate social chaos" nor arguments for occupational reform; rather, they are enabling subjects who assert the value of their labor to the standard living of their families, who claim independence for single women, and who configure exposure to sexual danger as a functional knowledge for avoiding such danger. Moreover, as Florence Boos notes, the "urban 'factory' poets" more than any other working-class female poets, "seemed to consider themselves members of a well-defined occupational group"

(*Working-Class Women* 31). Factory work provides an occupational identity through which these writers re-envision working-class female subjectivity removed from models of middle-class domesticity that regarded them as sexual / sentimental others.

For those outside the working classes, factory girls articulated a contradiction in the gender differences promoted by the separate spheres ideology and, as such, posed a significant threat to the model Victorian family. As cottage industries gave way to the public marketplace in the early nineteenth century, economic forces consigned men to activity outside the home and women to activity within the home. In common thought, a woman's work revolved around household management, child care, and the religious / spiritual oversight of her family. Men followed their work into the marketplace and held greater power in terms of political citizenship and economic competition.⁵

The experiences of industrial working-class women complicated these neat categories of separation because, from an early age, women of the lower classes *had* to work; the additional income of women and children was vital to the survival of the working-class family. Working-class women would be expected to begin working while

⁵ Of course, even in middle-class culture the divisions of public and private are not as simple as they seem. Historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall challenge the comfortable separation of public and private that literary critics (and perhaps the Victorians themselves) may take for granted in their exhaustive study *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. Through close examination of diaries, memoirs, letters, wills, and other primary documentation, they confirm that gender was segregated in the way I have described here; however, they also argue that rather than being entirely separate, one sphere was increasingly dependent on the other (as men needed the existence of the family, of the home, to participate in public occupation, and women needed the public work of men to support the family). Thus, the family – the private realm of women – was not as separate from Victorian economics as we commonly allow. Moreover, the balance between the public and private spheres blurs depending on what type of “middle class” the family may be. For instance, the family dynamic of a shopkeeper, wherein wives and daughters might take care of the household but also support the male head in the daily operation of a shop, would be very different than that of an industrial capitalist. In other words, there is more than one “middle class” and so, more than one way of considering the dynamic of public and private spheres. However, for my purposes, I'm using this simplified version of this gender segregation as the cultural impetus for categorizing factory girls as sexual / sentimental others.

still children and, unlike middle-class women, would not—could not—be dependent on a father, husband, or brother for their upkeep. In reality, the income of single working-class women was necessary to secure the financial start of her family once she did marry. In her extensive chapter on working-class customs and traditions in *Women and Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*, Joan Perkin explains that both partners were expected to help set up a working-class household financially. “Women,” she writes, “contributed significantly to the family’s well-being by the savings they brought into the marriage... Even those who were ‘married but not churched,’ who ‘lived tally’ or ‘over the brush,’” faced the same kind of expenditure in setting up a home, to which the woman was expected to contribute her share” (119-20). From this perspective, women’s work is crucial to the “difference between a comfortable marriage and a poverty-stricken one” (120). While those outside of the working class might see women’s work as an obstacle to the creation and integrity of a normative domestic life, those of the working class knew women’s wages were fundamental to it.⁶ From a working-class perspective, single-female factory workers saving their wages for marriage was not a perversion of normative gender roles—this would be expected. Waged work outside of the home itself did not indicate a loss of respectability unless the girl was a spendthrift, a different problem altogether when compared to the issues indicated by the sexual / sentimental binary of representation.

⁶ This does not mean, however, that working-class women were entirely accepted by their male counterparts, especially in the realm of working-class politics. For instance, the political demands of working-class men were often fortified by rhetorical appeals to the middle-class cult of domesticity. The Chartist Movement in particular was led primarily by working-class men who, as historian Anna Clark argues, “used domesticity” as a “clever tactic” to agitate for working-class rights, publicly regarding women workers as “frail victims who needed chivalrous protectors” (234). These arguments played into the middle-class desire to take working-class women out of the workplace.

Moreover, while the general populace may have been quick to take the factory girl as an emblem of gender anarchy and moral chaos, a very different view of them lurked beneath more sensational accounts in Victorian social commentary. Deborah Valenze has found that while the sexual / sentimental representation of factory girls was most common in blue books and reports on industrial labor, some commentators asserted that “the regularity of factory employment kept [girls] productively occupied and prevented them from marrying early,” extolling “the manufacturing industry” and “its ‘tendency to raise the condition of women’ through profitable employment” (98). An anonymous 1862 article in the *Edinburgh Review* argued that once the political fervor surrounding factory work in the 1840s and 50s died down, factory work became preferable to the more “genteel” occupation of domestic service, usually touted as a safer occupation for single working-class girls: “Servant-girls rarely may marry, while factory-girls probably always may... Public opinion among the class is in favour of the independence of factory and other day-work... In one word, it is *independence* against *dependence*” (qtd. in Simmons 350; author’s emphasis).

The “working identities” of factory girls brings much to bear on the discourse about work’s value in the period at large. Work as moral imperative or good for its own sake deflects attention from the dehumanizing labor (and language) of production, but operates along crucial class and gender lines. Work as moral imperative pertains mainly to the middle-classes, but also subsumes working-class male character types (like the honest worker, for instance). In the rhetoric of respectability, work separates from its economic function, transcending social conditions arising from economic contexts. In

Gospels and Grit, Rob Breton argues that this separation “leads to contradictions in the cultural discourse,” discernible in the relationship between the Gospel of Work and its intended class audiences (6). The economic function of work is completely removed when “the value of work” is applied to the working class (after all, finding value in work deemed oppressive and dehumanizing comes close to endorsing back door exploitation). However, “Work” *has* to operate in those economic terms when applied to the middle class, as seen with Carlyle’s paternalistic model of master / worker relations. In addition, the inherent value of working activates discussion of appropriate work for middle-class women, work which could provide self-actualization and independence from patriarchal control.

This notion of work presents a complex scheme of classed and gendered relations that I propose illustrates a crucial element of working identities for factory girls, predicated on a kind of intrinsic (aesthetic as well as physical – it literally makes them strong) *and* economic value. In this matrix of imbricated “working identities,” the working-class woman intensifies the contradiction sensed by Breton because her work establishes a class identity at odds with the domestic gender identity derived from middle-class sources; the gender identity undercuts the class identity that could be a source of political and social motivation, a means of self-actualization and independence inherently masculine on all sides. Because working-class women, and especially factory girls, are typically left out of these conversations, contradiction provides productive sites in which working-class female artists can re-work common characterizations of laboring women in more enabling terms, in a rhetoric that acknowledges images of exploitation

and sexual monstrosity but also resists them. In a sense, female factory workers create their own “Gospel of Work,” but it is a discourse that cannot be created on the same terms as middle-class women or lower-to-middle class men.

In order to examine these relationships in connection with the creation of working identities in the chapters that follow, I make use of Joan Scott’s notion of gender in *Gender and the Politics of History*. Although Scott’s theories concern the work of historians, her emphasis on gender’s productive function in critical analysis also applies to literary discourse. Scott recommends gender as a “constitutive element of social relationships” that allows us to question how “implicit understandings of gender are being invoked or reinscribed,” not just the “stake[s] in proclamations or debates that invoke gender to explain or justify their positions” (43, 49). It is this “how” that I am interested in, particularly how gender understandings construct or mitigate constructions of class identity. In the space between literary constructions of factory girls by others and those they construct themselves, I suggest, work becomes an enabling force for women to question and refuse normative categories that hide class anxiety (the economic context) beneath gender anxiety (sexual / sentimental representation). Labor itself allows working women to re-imagine static categories of class and gender so as to make these categories dynamic, marking spaces of change that facilitate a cultural renegotiation of what it means to be “working class” and “female” in Victorian literary texts.

Genres of Work

Comparative study of various literary genres that perform working identities allows for alternate ways of thinking about performances of working-class women in nineteenth-century literature. In my analysis, genres are not prescriptive taxonomies or trans-historic aesthetic categories, but are instead sites of cultural negotiation that act in relationship to, within, and against each other. Rather than thinking of genres in terms of textual features only, I approach genres as rhetorical spaces that reflexively perform moments, situations, and cultures, a model that operates much like the standard area of publishing in the nineteenth century: the periodical. Although Victorian literature is often understood to be dominated by the rise of the novel, the multi-generic structure of periodicals and penny magazines assures that genres themselves are dynamic and shaped by the tension among elements. The assembly of non-fiction essays, short stories, serialized novels, and poetry in one space also creates in periodicals a sense of reciprocity: technology, ideology, commerce and other cultural forces shape the nature of texts and of reception. Although my project does not focus exclusively on the periodical per se, I take from it a model through which I theorize conflicting genres in which working identities for factory girls are inscribed, debated, and revised.

I imagine multiple genres as constituting a multi-voiced discourse on working-class female subjectivities, a discursive space in which what appear as stable identities are instead re-accentuated by an appeal to the value of women's work, both industrial and artistic. Rhetorical performance, the aesthetic act that constructs working identity as an alternative to the sentimentalized / sexualized factory girl, depends upon this interplay of

voices; genres and the distinctions between them (however fixed or fluid these may be) organize the force of symbolic action, and shape the terms through which working-class female writers organize and construct their own experience. As Bakhtin writes in “Discourse in the Novel,” “form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (259). Of course, Bakhtin will go on to suggest that such a study finds its best example in novel, as the novel is *the* genre that has the “fundamental privilege” of hybridization, dynamic in that it is always developing through living languages (320). My concern, however, is not so much to critique Bakhtin’s theory of novel but to use the implications of his theory of language in verbal arts for linking working-class female subjectivity in various kinds of poetry and novels, to think about how certain language-images (woman sentimental, woman sexualized) are re-accentuated across texts by and about working-class women.

Canonization and re-accentuation are “the processes of transformation” that Bakhtin discusses near the end of “Discourse in the Novel,” processes that provide me with conceptual categories for examining the transmutation from woman as sentimental or sexualized other to woman as working subject across multiple genres. Canonization refers to the idea that the play of heteroglossia becomes flattened by its already literary aspect, obscuring variants of double-voiced discourse; re-accentuation, however, plays upon this double-voicedness for, as context changes and as one brings different texts and points of views together, new meanings and insights are created by re-accentuating the

image. Bakhtin writes that “[n]ew images in literature are very often created through the re-accentuating of old images, by translating them from one accentual register to another” (421). Within images of woman as sentimental or woman as sexualized is the image of woman working, and the latter image is an impetus to artful creation of a class consciousness reinforced by gender ties.

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the relationship of the sentimental / sexualized factory girl of industrial discourse with her representation (and revision) in three distinctive genres: the industrial novel, working-class lyric poetry, and working women’s autobiographies. Each chapter, author, and genre illustrates the transformative processes that allowed for a “reaccentuated” factory girl across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

Chapter Two discusses the sexual / sentimental representation of working-class women in the Victorian industrial novel, using Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) as a case study. Factory girls are rarely protagonists in the main plotlines of industrial novels and the plot of *Mary Barton* bears this out. Nonetheless, factory girls do exist in the pasts of the novel’s secondary characters, in brief descriptions of urban working-class populations, or as minor characters. The peripheral treatment of factory girls or their replacement with other types of working women in *Mary Barton*, I argue, draws attention away from the economic and personal potential factory work could have for working women and refocuses instead on the sentimental / sexualized binary typified in discussion of working-class women, relegating these women’s concerns to the domestic sphere and

removing them from their identities as workers, canonizing them outside of the economic sphere.

Chapter Three focuses on the poetics of Ellen Johnston, a Scottish working-class writer who united labor, gender, and art by taking on the poetic name “the Factory Girl,” a label through which she placed herself within a national canon of laboring poets and challenged the sexual / sentimental binary that typically represented working-class women in mainstream literature. While other working-class female poets adhered to a “middle-class feminine script” in order to draw attention away from their class status, Johnston instead created a class script that worked toward creating alternate views of working-class femininity beyond sexual/sentimental representations and the pressures of bourgeois domesticity (Zlotnick *Women* 12). Johnston refuses to separate gender and class into constituent categories as the “Factory Girl” poet writing public verse for a diverse audience within a national canon of literature. Johnston’s melding of industrial and poetic labor does important work, I argue, toward reaccentuating canonical narratives that render working-class women powerless against the social and political forces used to define them.

Chapter Four examines Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum* (1928) as an autobiography conscious of the limits of literary self-representation, a performance of the genre she uses to critique the model of empowered female laborer that developed in and around life writing in the early twentieth century. For Woodward, a former factory worker, the features of autobiography do not so much reflect the truth of a life as they constitute the testing ground for dominant representations

of working-class feminine identity. Resisting the dominant shape of autobiographical representation for working-class women in this period, Woodward also resists the acceptable intersections of gender and class that these representations take: the laboring identities of women are merely rhetorical strategies that, while sometimes useful, do not change the story of one's life or make it viable outside of particular social or political contexts. Woodward's peers may have found autobiographical writing as a political act that asserts their right to speak and construct their own identities. Woodward's own narrative, however, highlights the contingencies of this act, for self-representation seems to provide little leverage against the shifting displacements of identity within language itself.

In Chapter Five, I "reaccentuate" the typical dissertation conclusion by writing a reflective narrative that ruminates on my experiences researching and writing about working-class authors as a working-class academic. I consider the ways in which class identity had psychological effects on the women included in my dissertation as well as the woman writing the dissertation.

Victorian factory girls had no access to a discourse of labor that was valuable to them. To be sure, the work they did was difficult, dangerous, and exhausting. Working-class writers like Johnston and Woodward focused on aspects of their labor that was valuable to them personally, even when questioning troubling aspects of taking on working identities as enabling subjectivities (as I argue Woodward does in *Jipping Street*). For Elizabeth Gaskell, however, the nuances of women's working identities were much more difficult to represent, not only because of her position as a middle-class

writer, but also because of the power of the sexual / sentimental image of factory girls in the Victorian zeitgeist. I now turn to her attempt to represent working-class culture, and the complexities of working-class women, in *Mary Barton*.

CHAPTER II

THE FACTORY GIRL IN (AND OUT OF) THE INDUSTRIAL NOVEL

Our understanding of the response to industrialism would be incomplete without reference to an interesting group of novels, written at the middle of the century, which not only provide some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society, but also illustrate certain common assumptions with which the direct response was undertaken.—Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*

That's the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves anyhow.—John Barton (in *Mary Barton*)

Because the factory girl was fundamental to socio-political dialogue in the middle decades of the Victorian era, my examination of her literary presence begins with the industrial novel, the subgenre of Victorian literature that treats industrial conflict most directly. Sometimes propagandistic, often didactic, the industrial novel supplied a literary platform from which authors explored, in Thomas Carlyle's phrase, the "Condition of England" and was the primary means through which the British middle and upper classes came to know their working-class compatriots. Written amid political instability, changing working conditions, economic depression, and the spirit of reform these social changes prompted, industrial novels depicted class strife, poverty, and exploitation of the working classes; driven by the impulse to capture industrial "reality," they individualized

the working collective so as to humanize the nameless, faceless “masses” mentioned in popular journalism and government documents. As the epigraph from Raymond Williams indicates, industrial novels offered readers the most “vivid descriptions” of urban, industrial life and filled the contours of the issues of the age (*Culture and Society* 87).

Yet, as Williams also notes, industrial novels make “certain common assumptions” in “direct response” to industrial strife. In this chapter, I show that sexual / sentimental representation of working-class women was one of the common assumptions made by industrial novelists – and, because of this, the response to factory girls in particular was not entirely direct. Factory girls are rarely protagonists in the main plotlines of industrial novels. As the discerning reader soon realizes, however, they exist in the pasts of the novel’s secondary characters, in brief descriptions of urban working-class populations, or as minor characters whose troubling presence as single, working females is resolved by marriage or death. If the issues factory girls raise directly enter the text, more “manageable” working-class female characters – usually women removed from the particular taint of factory work – bear them out in the narrative (Johnson 30). The peripheral treatment of factory girls or their replacement with other types of working women draws attention away from the economic and personal potential factory work could have for working women and refocuses instead on the sentimental / sexualized binary typified in discussion of working-class women, relegating these women’s concerns to the domestic sphere and removing them from their identities as workers, canonizing their representation outside of the economic sphere.

For this discussion in a specific industrial novel, I use Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848) as a case study that illustrates the problem of representing the factory girl in middle-class literature. In his overview of the industrial and "Condition of England" novels for Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing's *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, James Richard Simmons identifies two movements of industrial novels (typified by their political purposes): earlier novels written in order to help pass the Ten Hours Bill in 1847 and so had a specific purpose as political propaganda, and those written afterward, which needed to "interest readers through other means than merely appealing to their sympathy" for factory children.⁷ According to Simmons, novels written after 1847 were "more complex and significant as works of literature, because they aimed at portraying and understanding the condition of England question in all its complexity, and not merely at getting the Ten Hours Bill passed" (344). Published in 1848, *Mary Barton* is a complex industrial novel because is written amid – and partially as a response to – a significant failed attempt at greater working-class political representation when the Chartists' final 1848 petition for changes to the Reform Act of 1832 fell through. As a result, Gaskell makes clear that her purpose in *Mary Barton* is to "represent" the lives and feelings of "the factory-people in Manchester," perhaps a literary remedy to the lack of political representation of working-class citizens

⁷ The Ten Hours Bill (also known as the Ten Hours Act) was a part of the Factory Act that passed in 1847. It restricted the work day of women and children to ten hours and, while supported by much of the populace, did not gain significant political backing until the latter part of the 1840s (after the Peel administration, largely conservative, was replaced with the Whig politics of Lord Russell's administration). Ten Hours clauses had been a part of the factory reform movement beginning in the 1830s, and Lord Ashley attempted to include a similar restriction in the Factory Act of 1844, but the clause was excluded upon passage. Novels meant as support of the Ten Hours Bill were Francis Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1840) and Charlotte Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841), which specifically used factory children as protagonists in order to persuade the Victorian readership of the need to curtail long workdays for children.

(*Mary Barton* 4). Essentially, hers is a novel more complex in that it treats the concerns of working adults who, as Simmons points out, are less naturally sympathetic than the sentimentalized factory children of earlier industrial novels (344).

The complexities of which Gaskell's novel takes account, I argue, and her appeal to the sympathies of her readership for the working-class lives she describes in *Mary Barton* greatly affect her ability and willingness to represent the complexity of working women's lives. Gaskell's stated purpose of drawing sympathy for the working classes, especially "the care-worn men, who [look] as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want," suggests the challenges gender may have posed to any alternatives she had for representing working-class women as something other than sexual / sentimental others (*Mary Barton* 3). Factory girls who actually appear in the narrative, in conjunction with the numerous former factory girls who appear throughout the text, signal a complex series of interlocking debates and encounters with conflicting ideologies concerning working-class feminine subjectivity. The factory girl is dangerous and endangered; economically and personally independent while also an "industrial slave"; physically strong while also physically disabled (by machines, by long work hours and dangerous working conditions). Factory girls in conjunction with the novel's primary female working-class characters, Mary and Esther, embody vexed feminine subjectivities in the industrial landscape. Instances in which these working-class women encounter factory girls, whether the encounters are actual meetings or discursive engagements, point to a complex interrelationship between gender and class that regenerates dominant notions of proper femininity even as Gaskell may attempt to contest

these notions. Factory girls, although textually peripheral, are symbolically central to the novel's discursive formation of classed notions of sexual difference.

Mary Barton is also a remarkably intertextual novel in that it combines the narrative modes of realism, melodrama, religious homily, domestic tale, and sentimental romance while also including poems and songs by working-class poets and better-known authors. These poems frame the novel's chapters and, occasionally, interrupt its narrative flow. Investigating "how deep might be the romance in the lives" of working people in Manchester and "[giving] some utterance to the agony which ... convulses these dumb people," Gaskell's novel embodies multiple cultural perspectives on working-class experience. In *Mary Barton*, various narrative modes and generic conventions make an effort to capture diverse aspects of the industrial working-class community: their home and working lives, their moral beliefs and folk traditions, and their social and political concerns (Gaskell 3). The formal diversity of *Mary Barton* shows that, like the more ethical negotiation between factory owners and workers that her novel encourages, Gaskell negotiates her own artistry in order to attempt an ethical, and sympathetic, examination of the plight of the working classes. Nevertheless, a host of ideological complications, amplified by the novel's polyphony and the narrator's contradictory efforts to take account of it, complicate this sympathetic gesture and expose several key conflicts regarding representation of the factory girl in the industrial novel.

Women, Representation, and the Industrial Novel

In the introduction to *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Catherine Gallagher claims that “the discourse over industrialism led [Victorian] novelists to examine the assumptions of their literary form” (xi). Her observation has particular bearing on the discussion with which I begin this chapter: industrial discourse not only informed the subject matter of the set of novels we call “industrial,” but also influenced the formal shape these novels took. As noted by Simmons, there are indeed different types of industrial novels, those that were written in response to particular industrial problems or as a means of persuading an audience to support political measures in favor of factory reform, and those that attempt to take account of the complexity of industrialism in greater contexts. These varied purposes determined whether the novel might take a simple, formal shape or a more interesting, complicated one. As a novel of the latter sort, *Mary Barton*’s discursive and formal intricacies, I suggest, not only reveal the difficulties of representing working-class life in the late 1840s, but also intensify the difficulties of representing factory girls as more than sexual / sentimental others.

The anxieties born from the large-scale shift between agrarian and industrial society began long before they preoccupied mid-century Victorian thought, but the amount of attention paid to industrial problems by literary authors, social commentators and government officials exploded in the 1840s-50s; industrial literature, then, had particular import for the representation of working-class individuals, the amorphous masses that seemed to have no voice of their own (at least not in the literary realm). Novels such as Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845), Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and

North and South (1855), Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), and George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866) most notably critique the social ills caused by industrial capitalism, representing class strife, poverty, and exploitation within their pages. Most importantly, industrial novels, driven by the realistic impulse, individualize the working collective by making protagonists or prominent characters "working-class" and, thus, making claims for the exceptional (as with *Alton Locke* and *Felix Holt*) while also commenting on general conditions of working-class life by featuring individuals (like Stephen Blackpool and John Barton). The industrial novel localizes the experiences of industrial workers as a means of social protest to mend relations between the classes and to contain the threat a nameless, faceless working mass posed to the Victorian middle-class sensibility. The industrial novelist thus has an obligation to provide or suggest solutions to social problems, a resolvability mirrored in a clear narrative trajectory and plot structure.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell evokes lingering economic depression and the destitution it creates in her narrative of working-class struggle, stating in the preface that her novel's purpose lies mainly in "[giving] some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case" (3). Gaskell's claim "not to judge" those she depicts lays open the common understanding of the novel as a sympathetic gesture toward the working classes as a means to encourage such sympathy in the novel's readership (3). Critical readings of *Mary Barton* following Raymond Williams tend to focus, whether in large or small measure, on the Gaskell's inability to

persuasively embody the sympathetic encounter between classes that *Mary Barton* promotes and to reconcile the two classes so markedly at odds in the text. In Williams' terms, the "structure of feeling" illustrated by *Mary Barton*, the "combination of sympathetic observation and [...] imaginative identification," is mitigated by the novel's inability to come to grips with "violence and fear of violence" represented by the working-class John Barton, the novel's original hero, and his murder of Harry Carson, son of the factory owner for whom Barton works (88, 91). The effect of this inability to come to grips with that which makes us uncomfortable reflects the novel's paradoxical treatment of working-class culture: Gaskell's simultaneous desire to represent working-class people but to show them, their problems and their feelings, "realistically" to a middle-class readership.

At the time of its publication and in current literary criticism, critics have derided *Mary Barton* not only for its failure to provide clear solutions to the social problems it addresses, but also for its uneven plot structure. The mitigation of the novel's industrial / social plot, which features the early momentum of Chartist agitation and John Barton's ire toward the managerial classes, with the domestic / romance plot, which follows the dangers and consequences of Mary Barton's flirtation with Harry Carson, becomes the novel's downfall, its essential structural failure. In her recent work on labor in the nineteenth-century novel *Working Fictions*, Carolyn Lesjak highlights the problem of contemporary criticism to come to a more productive understanding of the industrial / domestic plots in the industrial novel. Considering how "intractable the public/private divide remains" in studies of the industrial novel, she observes an "either/or interpretive

model” wherein readings of the industrial novel focus on the politics of the industrial plot or the sentimentalism of the domestic (42). The blending of public and private, industrial and domestic, becomes all the more important in order for novelists to treat, however marginally, the figure of the factory girl and issues concerning working-class women in general. Because the society at large is unable to handle the challenge industrial working-class women pose to Victorian domestic ideology, the danger they pose toward commonly-accepted gender and class roles becomes the actual threat to be contained, attendant to but separate from the sort of violence embodied in John Barton’s murderous act.

Gaskell’s novel, more than any other of its time, attempts to represent working-class men and women through the structure of the double plot, but ultimately fails to provide a meaningful portrait of factory girls. Why? I suggest that while modern critical treatments, like that of Lesjak, might see the two plots as a virtue because they “blend” industrial and domestic concerns, the novel cannot intentionally blend the industrial and domestic in regard to working-class women. This would be particularly detrimental to Gaskell’s project to inculcate middle-class sympathy for the working classes and, as I discussed in Chapter One, middle-class views of working women were already being shaped by social discourse over and official documentation of the behaviors of factory girls. In regard to the representation of working women in *Mary Barton*, one could also take issue with Williams’ assessment of failure. The novel does not fail because of the fear of violence, but rather because of Gaskell’s inability to represent the factory girl as anything other than a sexual / sentimental being.

The failure to move beyond the sexual / sentimental representation of working women, embodied by the factory girl, is critical to the novel's efforts to fill a need for representation of the working classes in general. This is all the more important when considering that the year in which *Mary Barton* was published (1848), Chartism was at its peak. Essentially, as Chartists petitioned the government for political representation, *Mary Barton* petitions its readership for representation of the working classes. Although Chartism as a movement was not entirely supportive of universal suffrage, working-class women were involved in campaigning for and supporting the passage of the Charter. Dorothy Thompson notes that while the numbers of female Chartists are difficult to trace, wives and mothers "presented banners, made and presented gifts to visiting speakers, and invariably marched in the great processions and demonstrations, usually at the head" (120). In *Mary Barton*, women do not generally cross into the novel's political plot, even as wives and mothers of male Chartists, a position in which their political activity would be sanctioned publicly by their membership in "Chartist families" (Thompson 121). *Mary Barton's* women are not political beings in part because the double plot of the novel disallows women to be represented as workers – and even as the wives of workers, they remain politically inactive in the text.

The split between public and private spheres plays a crucial role in Gaskell's representation of working women in general and factory girls in particular. Historian Anna Clark explains that the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries promoted "a shift from a notion of gender as hierarchy to a notion of gender as separate, complementary spheres" (2). In both form and content, *Mary Barton*

exemplifies the split between public and private spheres and thus makes factory girls seem all the more contradictory as workers and women. Factory girls are all but absent from the text, existing in the pasts of the novel's secondary characters or in brief descriptions as the narrator endeavors to put a face on the working "masses." The unique position of the factory girl denies a comfortable separation between public and private activity; therefore, because of the challenge she poses to societal gender norms, she fits nowhere in the novel's class discourse. Moreover, the "romance of everyday lives" localized in Mary's narrative and "the agony that convulses these dumb people" shown through her father John, aligns melodrama, sentiment, and romance with women's narratives and realism and social documentary with men's narratives. The factory girl, then, would seem fit nowhere in literary representation as well.

Mary Barton does, however, indirectly address issues of women's work through Mary, Margaret, and Esther, the novel's most visible working-class women. While neither Mary nor Margaret are employed in a factory, their position as seamstresses places them in the way of sexual and bodily harm. Mary's flirtation with Harry Carson, and the consequences that follow, illustrate the sexual dangers women faced when working outside the home; Margaret's blindness sentimentalizes the figure of the working woman physically damaged by the actual work she performs. The sexual / sentimental binary illustrated by Mary and Margaret is magnified in Esther—Mary's aunt and a former factory girl turned prostitute—as she is at the same time an erotic and pathetic figure whose work in the factory, some of the novel's characters imply, leads her into prostitution. The factory girl hardly appears in *Mary Barton*, the concerns raised by

her unique position as both worker and woman carried by a different kind of working woman, the seamstress, and most notably, a prostitute.

Although Gaskell excludes factory girls from direct representation in *Mary Barton*, she focuses on female working-class characters that embody the sentimental / sexualized binary typified in discussion of working-class women, relegating these women's concerns to the domestic sphere and removing them from their identities as workers, canonizing them outside of the economic sphere. Gaskell's industrial novel treats working women in the domestic tale, so that, removed from the political agitation of the Chartist / industrial plot, factory girls, as literary entities, are without economic dimension. *Mary Barton*'s double plot canonizes factory girls as non-economic entities, as they are largely removed from the industrial / social plot.

Gendering the Working Class

While proper notions of femininity drawn from middle-class experience perhaps frame the women of *Mary Barton* (and marginalize factory girls), the challenges posed to this dominant ideology by working-class female experience become readily apparent because the text clearly exposes differing class perspectives. Writing of her aims in *Mary Barton* in a letter to Mary Ewart, Gaskell explained that her "intention was simply to represent the view many of the work-people take" (*Letters* 36: 67). What seems so simple appears quite complicated in the following sentence, however, and intimates that the "view of the work-people" must be in conversation with the views of their employers, of the middle-classes, in order for change to occur, even if that change was unknowable

when Gaskell was writing *Mary Barton*. Of the political strife existing between the middle and the working classes, Gaskell wrote:

I do think we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not see how; but surely there is no harm in directing attention to the existence of such evils. (*Letters* 36: 67).

Gaskell's assessment of class strife points toward the responsibility of the middle classes to acknowledge and address the working-class perspective (invoked by that Victorian keyword, *duty*), a conciliatory gesture that she enacts by "taking the view of the work-people" as a middle-class observer. As a result, the narrator is often before the reader as a translator buttressing Gaskell's sympathetic portrayal of the working classes against anticipated criticism, but also as a mediator between conflicting class attitudes. Where there is question of the educative potential of the working classes, the narrator steps in and provides as evidence the scientific curiosities of Job Leigh and Alice Wilson; where it might appear that the working classes are prone to vice, she suggests that economic depression, low wages, and poor living conditions would drive anyone to such behavior; and when John Barton's crime is revealed, she reminds readers of his former good intentions and selfless nature. The novel's negotiation between factory owners and workers forces Gaskell to negotiate her own artistry in order to promote an ethical examination of working-class life in Manchester. The narrator intrudes most prominently in the novel's divisive moments to head off any middle-class assumptions about the working-class values, behaviors, or attitudes, progressively complicating and implicitly

interrogating the stock opinions of her readership. As a result of this interaction, *Mary Barton* incorporates the social dialogue between the classes and makes class tension a vital part of the novel's aesthetics.

If we take Gaskell's general focus to be a reconciliation of the propertied and the working classes, the issue of class difference must inform notions of sexual difference. Relationships between the classes necessarily highlight relationships between men and women because, as Joan Scott argues in *Gender and the Politics of History*, "the concept of class in the nineteenth century relied on gender for its articulation," even if the discourse surrounding class identity and politics "[was] not explicitly about gender" (48). The articulation of class identity through gender can be glimpsed through Gaskell's coding of middle-class authority as masculine and working-class cooperation as feminine. Several critics have noted *Mary Barton*'s feminization of the working-class, which in part reflects large-scale middle-class imperatives to reform the problems of industrialism through a model of social paternalism. Pointing out that *Mary Barton* relies on two separate "ethical systems" to distinguish middle and working-class values, Patsy Stoneman argues that the "female ethic" shown through the communal interaction between the novel's working-class individuals stands as a remedy to and critique of "[t]he single-minded masculinity of bourgeois men" that "finds appropriate articulation in their aggressive use of the force of law and order" (45-46). Middle-class interests are aligned with "men of business," whose lack of concern for the lives of their workers stems from their concern for their bottom lines. When Carson's mill catches fire and subsequently closes in Chapters 5 and 6, the narrator explains that the factory partners are

in “no hurry about the business”; actually, the fire is fortuitous because the factory’s “machinery lacked the improvement of late years, and worked but poorly in comparison with that which might now be procured” (57). Not only does this example illustrate the concepts of self-interest and competition at work in industrial capitalism, but it also aligns these interests with the masculine world of business, profit, and property-owning.

This example contrasts significantly with the subsequent working-class ethic of care shown by John Barton and George Wilson’s efforts to help the dying Ben Davenport and his family. Barton learns the value of self-sacrifice from his mother, which he emulates when he grabs “the remains of his dinner [...], [b]read, and a slice of cold fat broiled bacon” to bring to the Davenports (59). Barton was accustomed to want, and willingly makes a gift of his dinner, for “that power of endurance had been called forth when he was a little child, and had seen his mother hide her daily morsel to share it among her children, and when he, being the eldest, had told the noble lie, that ‘he was not hungry, could not eat a bit more,’ in order to imitate his mother’s bravery” (114). In contrast to middle-class insensitivity—for, if the factory remains closed, the owners also do not have to pay their workers, one of whom is the indigent Davenport—Barton and Wilson are described as “rough but tender nurses” to the fever-stricken factory hand and his wife; after mixing together a thin gruel, Barton even feeds the stupefied Mrs. Davenport like he would a “baby” (61, 62). Barton and Wilson’s care for the Davenport family links with a variety of sick-nursing scenes and the multiple references to working-class men taking care of children (notably, Barton and Wilson literally walk into the novel carrying babies in the first chapter). Although men like the Carsons may be

superior in wealth and status, the novel's working-class men appear morally superior although their acts of charity and selflessness reflect the feminization of the working class.

Although Stoneman's thesis claims that gendered class interests clears a path for Gaskell's promotion of a feminine ethic of care, the fact remains that working-class are inferior not only because of class hierarchy, but also because they are feminized. The female ethic Stoneman interprets from the communal, charitable act exemplified by Barton and Wilson's care for the Davenport family also reinforces the dependent passivity that the feminization of the working class was sometimes meant to evoke. In *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Catherine Gallagher discusses the importance of the gendered dimensions of working-class identity as an integral component of social paternalism and offers that the feminization of the working class underwrote their continued submission and acquiescence to their middle-class employers. Paternalism as a managerial strategy relied upon the family as a means of structuring employer-worker relations as a relationship between father and child. If industrialists behaved as benevolent fathers, they might then instill in their workpeople feelings of obligation and gratitude that would produce harmonious industrial relations. However, as Gallagher points out, this model's effectiveness implicitly relied not simply on the configuration of workers as children, but "as permanent children," for "when workers were thought of as daughters rather than sons, they seemed permanently in need of protection" (128). Thus, Stoneman's characterization of the working class as feminine actually endorses the class divisions Gaskell attempts to reconcile; we might view the

actions of characters like John Barton as reflecting a feminine ethic of caring, but the dependence and passivity evoked by this model is the very thing that Barton rebels against through his political involvement and, ultimately, through his part in Harry Carson's murder as an attempt to strike back at the masters. Gaskell extrapolates the model of paternalism at the novel's end through the elder Carson's realization that "it was most desirable to [...] to have [workers] bound to their employers by ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone," but gendered distinctions between middle-class and working-class men demonstrates that the threat workers pose to their "masters" is hardly contained (388).

Thus, the gendering of class identity in *Mary Barton* is doubly enforced when applied to working women. Factory girls structure the terms through which women come to represent workers in the rhetoric of social paternalism and to represent working-class women, in and beyond the factory, in the rhetoric of domesticity. As Gallagher argues, the essential paradox presented by factory reformers' "focus on women" was that "women were thrust forward, by the rhetoric of social paternalism, as representative of workers and yet were simultaneously told by domestic ideologists that the roles of worker and woman were antagonistic" (129). Factory girls were vital to the "focus on women" Gallagher uncovers because the poor helpless factory girl provided a frame of reference for understanding workers' needs and positions in the paternalistic model *and* heightened the sense of class exploitation promulgated by working-class political actors (and, simultaneously, became a potent part of the argument for working-class male enfranchisement). Moreover, the factory girl typified the overturn of domestic models of

femininity because they were “martyrs, oppressed victims, lacking both time and energy to nurse their own babies” who alternately “metamorphosed into mannish monsters, with time to form clubs and energy to lead insurrections” (Gallagher 125). In *Mary Barton*, I argue, factory girls bring these issues to the fore as a means to underscore the sexual / sentimental narratives of the novel’s working women. They make visible the irreconcilable contradictions in the vision of community in the working-class family, and uncover the struggle of working-class men to define their own masculinity.

Factory Girls in *Mary Barton*

My examination of factory girls and working-class women more generally in *Mary Barton* focuses less on the notion of exclusion underwriting critical work that posits factory girls as marginal in the text and focuses on the moments where factory girls are included, why they are excluded, in what ways, and to what purposes. Joan Scott’s definition of gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes that signifies relationships of power” provides me with a model through which I fashion the factory girl as one of the “culturally available symbols that evoke multiple (and often contradictory) representation” of working women in the novel (43-44). Factory girls in *Mary Barton* draw together the normative categories of femininity threatened by work—associated with private identity, the home, moral, virtuous—and masculine identities drawn from work—a public identity that signified independence, strength, and intelligence. But they are not either one way or the other; as Scott explains, “meaning is multidimensional, established relationally, directed at more

than one auditor, framed in an already existing (discursive) field, establishing new fields at the same time” because language itself is not simply a vehicle for ideas” but “a system of meaning or a process of signification” (59). The gendered and classed fields of knowledge invoked by the novel’s factory girls signals irreconcilable tensions between class relationships, between men and women, and construct unstable images of working-class femininity in the text.

In *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction*, Patricia E. Johnson makes two related observations that broadly illustrate the issues I explore in this section. She comments that in the industrial novel, “factory girls are marginalized, and working-class women are represented by more properly ‘feminine’ figures” (27). In *Mary Barton* specifically, Johnson continues, “factory girls reappear in a more manageable guise, displaced on to a working-class girl who can represent their experience” (30). Johnson argues that domestic ideology dictates working women be shown in more feminine occupations (like millinery) in the industrial novel, mitigating Gaskell’s project “to write truthfully” about the working masses depicted in popular journalism and commission reports (Gaskell 4). The domestic ideology associated with bourgeois culture, as referenced by Johnson, prescribed that in order to be good or “true,” a woman must be firmly rooted in and largely confined to the domain of the home. Her primary identity was to be that of a virtuous wife and mother, and before that a chaste and dutiful sister and daughter. To work in waged occupations outside the home might be bad enough for any Victorian woman, but female factory workers signified an extreme subversion of proper femininity, even if the additional income was valuable to the

working-class household. Thus, in Johnson's analysis, cultural representations of hyper-sexed and overworked factory girls spread by various government and sociological studies make these women dangerous material in literary work who must be replaced by characters more palatable to the middle-class audience for which Gaskell writes.

Mary Barton's opening description of the working-class holiday in Green Heys Fields provides the novel's only direct mention of factory girls. Across three short paragraphs, the narrator describes groups of young women whose looks and actions signify an energetic health and intelligence—a far cry from the cultural symbol of the sexual / sentimental factory girl that circulated in the Victorian popular imagination. The “merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to twenty” are not remarkably beautiful, the narrator notes, but walk with a “buoyant step” and emit “an acuteness and intelligence of countenance” that undermines the image of the factory girl as a pale, drooping victim subjected to the evils of the factory system (6, 7). But, should this energy be misinterpreted as sexual innuendo, the narrator inserts a rejoinder that exhibits the girls' resistance to sexual corruption. The narrator observes that along with the girls, “there were also numbers of boys, or rather young men [...] ready to bandy jokes with anyone, and particularly ready to enter into conversation with the girls.” Unfortunately for the boys, the girls “held themselves aloof, not in a shy, but rather in an independent way, assuming an indifferent manner to the noisy wit or obstreperous compliments of the lads” (7).

Gaskell's portrayal of factory girls serves as a prelude to a discussion between John Barton and George Wilson about the dangers of factory work for women,

particularly in relationship to Barton's sister-in-law Esther, a former factory worker who he believes to have become "a streetwalker" long before she enters the text as such (8). Barton's suggestion prefigures Esther as the ruined factory girl, for Barton's evocation of the rhetoric of prostitution conflates work and sexuality, the economic and the erotic, explicitly linking factory work with female immorality and corruption. Yet the preceding description of the groups of girls implies the line from factory work to prostitution is not necessarily a straight one. The factory girls purposefully ignore the advances of the young men, exhibiting an air of autonomy and authority arising from the very work that would pose a tremendous threat to female virtue, as implied by the narrator when she reports that such qualities are frequently noticeable in "manufacturing populations" (7). The girls' comparative vigor, acumen, and independence paints an alternate picture of working-class femininity that, surprisingly, contrasts with the narratives of sexual and physical danger connected with the novel's female protagonist, Mary, and her aunt Esther and the helpless passivity of the novel's former factory girls, Mrs. Barton, Mrs. Wilson, and Mrs. Carson.

When taken together, the novel's former and current factory girls reflect the contradictions implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) present in public and political opinions concerning factory work for single working-class women. As mentioned in Chapter One, during the factory reform movement of the 1830s and 40s, various government and sociological studies highlighted and catalogued a range of conditions and behaviors that fed popular concerns surrounding the perceived immorality of factory girls. The freedom of movement of the factory girl in the streets of industrial towns such

as Manchester made her clearly visible to the public, moving to and from the mills in large groups with her fellow female workers. Her suggested lack of parental or familial control and economic independence marked her as impertinent in the public eye. Refusing the paternalistic discipline of domestic service, the factory girl provoked intense fears that she might also refuse the role of respectable working-man's wife—and if she did marry, that she would be unable to carry out her domestic duties because long hours of factory work outside the home disabled her domestic abilities.

Yet, as Judith Walkowitz explains in *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, a few social commentators even recommended factory work as an effective deterrent to prostitution, since the work to be gained in a factory was relatively steady in comparison to that of “milliners, dressmakers, staymakers, and bonnetmakers” whose great numbers created a “glut on the market”; as such, women in these occupations “could at best eke out a living only six weeks out of the year” (38). The contradictory values and attitudes exhibited in the discourse on factory girls highlights a series of curious ironies: female factory workers are impertinent yet industrious, dangerous yet endangered. Factory work makes women incapable of being good wives and mothers; factory work keeps women from making imprudent marriages and from turning to prostitution as a remedy for privation. Cultural debate over the condition of factory girls underscores the complex organization of diverse perspectives that shape this figure in *Mary Barton*, developed through a series of oppositions and differences regarding notions of femininity in nineteenth-century discourse.

Many of the novel's mothers were once factory girls: Mary's mother is former factory worker, as are the mothers of her perspective love interests, Mrs. Carson and Jane Wilson. Mary's mother, "a fresh beauty of the agricultural districts," walks into the novel in tears, a sad figure whose fragility, Barton muses after her death, had made her "unfit" for the factory work she was engaged in prior to their marriage (7, 21). Jane Wilson is often described as walking with a limp and having a "frail appearance," infirmities attributed to her years in the factory prior to her marriage (6). Mrs. Carson, the mill owner's wife who once worked in the same factory as Jane Wilson, continuously suffers headaches and finds her maid "much more a companion to her than her highly-educated daughters," effects, the narrator implies, of her rise from working-class factory girl to middle-class wife and mother (209). Gaskell links femininity and sentimentality to evoke sympathy for working-class women through allusions to the factory pasts of these characters, revealing vital components of working-class femininity at odds with the relative autonomy assumed by the factory girls in the novel's opening chapter. Conflicting versions of working-class femininity are manifest in references to female factory workers, whose vulnerability and lack of domestic skill work together to regenerate elements of a Victorian feminine ideal even while this model is being contested.

When examined in comparison with other working-class women in the novel, Mrs. Barton stands as the only example of the Victorian feminine ideal, although she doesn't stand in the novel for long – she dies during childbirth in Chapter 3. From the start, the hint of her rural roots distinguishes her from the manufacturing women milling

about in Green Heys Field. She stands out as not only “a lovely woman” but as a woman with “somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is [...] characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns” (7). Mrs. Barton’s rural sensibilities contrast sharply with the portrait of the energetic, intelligent factory girls, differentiating between rural feminine charm and streetwise girls born in and accustomed to urban life. This distinction, between the rural woman and the city girl, evokes what Raymond Williams calls “the idealization of a ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ economy [...] as a contrast to the thrusting ruthlessness of the new capitalism” (*The Country and the City* 37). The idealization of agricultural simplicity as the more “natural” condition of humankind harks back to a pre-industrial England, and, in the period in which Gaskell sets her novel, held much purchase when hard social and technological realities, as well as crime, vice, and corruption, became associated with urban life. By extension, Mrs. Barton’s rustic beauty signals a “natural” femininity that stands apart from the urban intelligence (and, one might assume, corruption) of the girls.

It is not clear, however, that Gaskell intends to draw this distinction as a means of promoting a rustic / feminine ideal, for Mrs. Barton’s “deficiency of sense” appears lackluster in relationship to the “acuteness and intelligence of countenance” of the factory girls (7). Mrs. Barton is the appropriately feminine rustic who never belonged in the factory to begin with. Reflecting on his wife in the early years of their courtship, John Barton muses that she had been “far too shiftless [vulnerable] for the delicate factory work to which she was apprenticed” (21). Barton is prompted to consider this after his wife has died, when the doctor he fetches to tend to his wife observes that childbirth was

likely not the only cause of Mrs. Barton's death. The real culprit, the doctor assumes, is "some shock to the system," presumably the distress caused by Esther's mysterious absence (21). Although Mrs. Barton was once a factory girl, her "natural" femininity could not handle the rough life of a factory worker. Her presence in the text denotes a sentimental ideal, the defenseless woman saved from the factory by marriage and childbearing, vulnerable and fragile—almost the middle-class "angel in the house" dependant on the protection of her husband. It is not clear, however, that Mrs. Barton (and the subsequent lack of women like her in the novel) operates as a longing for the past or for an ideal femininity unsullied by the factory system. Gaskell seems to leave this scene open to two different interpretations: it seems that we may take Mrs. Barton as an indication that proper femininity cannot survive the industrial system in the negative sense, or we may understand that a different version of femininity replaces the idealized woman, a move that casts working-class women in a different, yet positive, light. Green Heys Field provides a rustic scene in which to introduce the reader to the industrial working-class men and women, which speaks of "other times and other occupations than those which now absorb the population of the neighborhood" (5). In one sense, the narrator appears to long for times past and the slow, "moral economy" of rural life, and maybe the idealized version of womanhood represented by Mrs. Barton in this scene. However, in another sense, the narrator draws comparison between rural and urban life, the rural beauty and the urban girls, in order to signal important changes in the contemporary life of *Mary Barton*'s readers, and thus make apparent the changing value systems inaugurated by the industrial system.

Jane Wilson and Mrs. Carson emphasize the sentimental aspects of the condition of factory girls, illustrating the effects of factory work long after the girl has left the factory: both are variously “injured” and both are shown at different points in the novel to be ineffectual in their domestic roles. Besides being marked by her injury in the factory, the narrator often characterizes Jane as helpless, careless, and inept at performing her duties as a wife and mother, inadequacies that she blames on working in a factory “sin’ five years old” (120). After the death of her husband and John Barton’s closest friend, George Wilson, she tells Mary of the gratitude she feels toward her husband for marrying “such a born goose at housekeeping” as she was. Describing their first dinner after their marriage, Mrs. Wilson explains her domestic ineptitude as she “had no notion of how to cook a potato,” which upon over-boiling them, she relates, they turned into an inedible “nasty brown mess” (120). She could only “[tidy her] house in a rough kind o’ way,” knowing nothing of domestic skill because of her pre-married life as a factory worker (120). Jane’s description of her first days as a married woman illustrates the larger cultural notion that work outside the home—and particularly work in factories, associated as it is with long hours that would keep women from the household for an unreasonable amount of time—contributes to a woman’s inability to perform the kind of “work” that a woman should naturally be able to do. At the same time, however, Jane’s belief that her factory work made her unable to perform domestic work shows that gender-inscribed notions of work are indeed not natural—she has no natural ability to boil a potato or clean a house. It is not so much her work in the factory that contributes to her domestic

ineptitude, but the belief that women naturally perform domestic duties that makes her feel inadequate in her own household.

Jane's tale of her early marriage leads to a short discussion between her and Mary on factory girls that invokes the political dimensions of the problem of factory work for women through reference to domestic occupations that work outside the home disallows. When Mary remarks that her father "does not like girls to work in factories," Jane reaffirms his opinion, although her opinion does not account for single girls, only married women:

Factory girls] oughtn't to go at after they're married, that I'm very clear about. I could recon up' (counting with her fingers), 'ay, nine men, I know, as been driven to th' public house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as though there was no harm in putting their little ones out to nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it? He soon finds out gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where the' fire blazes cheerily, and gives a man a welcome as it were (121).

Jane's complaint that factory work renders women incapable as housekeepers and mothers places women's work at the forefront of the downfall of the working-class family, driving husbands from their homes and into the public house. This complaint speaks to the issue of factory work as inappropriate for women because the conditions of their work—long hours outside of the home—kept them from tending to their children, their fires, or their husbands. Because Jane only applies this stricture to married women, the implication here is that if a single girl must work in the factory, she can, even if she struggles to assume her domestic role once she marries, as Jane had to do. This raises a

crucial counterpoint to the idea that factory work was bad for all women; for Jane, such work is only bad for married women.

Differences between single and married female factory workers became a crucial sticking point in factory reform arguments, for the income of female factory workers produced a necessary supplement to the income of the working-class family as a whole, whether the women were married or not. In the debates surrounding the Ten Hours Movement, however, economic concerns were minimized by anxiety over the well-being of the working-class family, and the emphasis on family, and the central role of the working-class mother and wife in that family, was integral to the passage of the Ten Hours Bill (the Factory Act of 1847). Children working in factories, for instance, provided reformers with leverage for reducing working hours, and the unnatural relationships created between parents and children shaped the terms of the debate. Children's wages were seen not as a vital component of the family's wage-earning potential, but as the impetus to rebellion and corruption. Children's work in factory reform arguments, as Catherine Gallagher shows, enabled reformers to "trace the desolation of working-class family life to the excessive labor of children," mainly because "[t]he relationship between parent and child was called unnatural" as "the child worked to support the parents." It was believed that as children reached adolescence, they then "rebelled against their parents, deserted them, and set up households of their own" (123). But it was not only the "financial independence" children gained through factory work that encouraged children to desert and demoralize their parents; the work of their mothers was partially to blame (and thus, hours of work for women and children

was reduced to ten hours a day through the Factory Act of 1847). Factory work caused women to be ineffectual mothers, even if the mothers were the “good folk” Jane Wilson describes. They could not provide the family with the necessary moral center that would keep children from exhibiting “unnatural” behaviors, and would drive their husbands to “th’ public house” as a result. The delicate balance of the working-class family, then, depended upon the working-class mother and wife, whose natural roles were interrupted by their work in the factory.

Alice Wilson, Jane’s sister-in-law, suddenly chimes in with the wish that “‘Jem could speak o’ word to the Queen about factory work for women. Eh! But he comes it strong when once yo get him to speak about it. Wife o’ his will never work away from home’” (121). Alice’s wish reflects a faith in working-class men to appeal to government on behalf of working-class women, which actually happens around the time *Mary Barton* was published. And while the monarchy “could not make laws,” as Mary astutely points out after Jane asserts that it’s “Prince Albert,” not Queen Victoria that Jem should appeal to, it’s clear that we’re talking about the political dimensions of work for women, and particularly of factory work for women. Yet this appeal for working women, in from Jane and Alice’s comments, applies only to married women and leaves the factory girl problem in tact.

In describing Mrs. Carson, who worked in the same factory as Jane Wilson when they were both young girls, the narrator makes a claim for domestic work as activity that might alleviate her headaches, but the work itself is something that her factory girl background and current status as a middle-class wife does not allow. Constructing the

tableau of the middle-class Carson family prior to announcing the death of Harry, the narrator explains that “Mrs. Carson was [...] very poorly, and sitting upstairs in her dressing room, indulging in the luxury of a headache.” The narrator goes on to explain that her struggle with headaches was:

the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed. Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both. It would have done her more good than all the ether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of s wallowing, if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week; made beds, rubbed tables, shaken carpets... .(202)

Leisure and ennui, the narrator assumes, create Mrs. Carson’s health problems and, thus, returning to a type of work would give her something to do and improve her health. A former factory girl and member of the working class, Mrs. Carson appears to suffer under the confusion of what it is that she should do as a middle-class wife, who should somehow parlay privilege into a space of activities that she had no idea of as a young girl working in a factory. Instead of having the ability to value wealth and leisure, she has to rather play a part that she has been “placed” into by her marriage and the family’s subsequent rise in status. The narrator makes a class assumption when she notes that Mrs. Carson would perhaps be much healthier were she to take on the domestic duties of her servants—which assumes that she can do these things, or at least could learn them from her servants. In part, this passage speaks to why young, single working-class women were encouraged to go into service: they could both work for wages and remain in the domestic space while also cultivating domestic skills that might come in handy once they were married. Factory work has especially crippled Mrs. Carson in that she cannot do

domestic chores, even if such chores were appropriate to her class station. While creating a contrast between classes, this moment also illustrates the double-voiced discourse that factory girls are unable to contribute to household later but also that work would be valuable to them.

The novel's former factory girls generate a domestic model of femininity in the play between their virtues and deficiencies within the family space. As Mrs. Barton shows, and Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Carson suggest, the "natural" role of women might be to take care of the household and the family, activities that factory work impedes. These characters gain their referential potential through their connection with factory work, simultaneously illuminating the debilitating and enabling possibilities of factory work for women.

Mary and Esther

The critical focus on the novel's split between the industrial / social and domestic / romantic plots has placed the study of working-class women in the realm of the latter, with the sexual / sentimental narratives of Mary and Esther Barton characterizing the politics of women's industrial labor in the novel. The stories of the novel's working women and of the working men, represented by the domestic and industrial plots respectively, merge in the story of the factory girl: in the intersections of the two plots, the dangers of factory work for women meets the possibility of the value of such work, opening a space for the consideration of working identities of factory girls in the novel.

While the novel's heroine, Mary, is not a factory girl, the independence and vanity she exhibits, as well as the chances she takes in her relationship with Harry, come

into sharp relief because of the affinities her narrative has with the story of a former factory girl, Esther. Not only are their two stories similar, but they are similar in their looks, demeanor, and attitudes. The narrator often refers back to Esther's promise to send for Mary and "make a lady out of [her]" when Mary ruminates on the possibility of marriage with Harry; her knowledge of her own beauty reflects Barton's earlier report of Esther's vanity; and Barton feels Mary's likeness to her aunt to be a bad omen, "for [their] very bodily likeness seemed to suggest the possibility of a similar likeness in their fate" (10, 26,127). Mary's connection with Esther (beyond the obvious relation they have as niece and aunt) triggers a crucial identification of factory girls with cultural understandings of femininity in the working class.

Ironically, it is the kind of autonomy exhibited by Mary that prompts John Barton to apprentice her to a milliner rather than allow her to work in a factory, as "he had never left off disliking a factory life for a girl, on more accounts than one" (25). Barton attaches erotic significance to factory girls; using Esther as an example, he notes that her income allowed her to "[spend] her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face" as well as gave her an excuse to "come home so late at night" (9). Strangely, Barton's comments on Esther as a factory worker do not apply to Mary as a seamstress, who also dresses to compliment her looks, returns home late, and, in her relationship with Harry, creates the very situation Barton had hoped to avoid in placing her outside of the factory. Barton's anxiety about factory girls, shown through the paramount desire to keep Mary away from the factory and in his opinions of Esther, situates independence, economic or otherwise, as a precursor to moral danger for industrial working women. Barton's view effectively

supplants the possible value of women's industrial work with its seemingly certain undesirable consequences.

In *Walking the Victorian Streets*, Deborah Epstein Nord argues that “although no one character in the novel fully articulates the argument against Barton's position, the narrative itself [...] continually undercuts the connection he makes between women's factory work and their sexual corruption” (150). For Nord, the novel's implicit refusal to endorse Barton's opinion is derivative of a larger aim, which she identifies as Gaskell's project to “claim *as a woman* the authority of urban spectatorship and interpretation and to work through the taint of exposure that was traditionally and powerfully associated with a woman's public role” [Nord's emphasis] (137). In other words, factory girls are symptomatic of a much bigger problem, the issue of the public woman that beset women working outside the home, regardless of class or occupation. The idea of the public woman in the Victorian imagination not only threatened domestic and private identity, but compromised notions of proper respectability, chastity, and femininity. Even Gaskell felt the stigma of exposure as a professional middle-class writer, with the writing itself as a kind of self-display, particularly in a novel like *Mary Barton*, where the narrator is closely aligned with Gaskell herself as the social investigator walking the Manchester streets. Nord suggests that Gaskell's ambivalence about her own public role surfaces in her treatment of the working-class female characters in *Mary Barton*, illustrating how the experiences of working-class women shaped the terms through which working women of all spheres negotiated conflicting, and potentially conflicting, subjectivities.

Entering public space made women of all classes vulnerable to accusations of immoral behavior because, as Richard Sennett explains, to venture out into the marketplace, the workplace, or even the city street was to encroach spaces “where one risked losing virtue, dirtying oneself, being swept into a ‘disorderly and heady swirl’” (23). Unless she was employed as a domestic servant, the working-class girl had to negotiate this public identity if she worked out of doors, a crucial dimension of representations of working-class femininity in *Mary Barton*. Nearly synonymous with the prostitute, the public woman epitomizes the competing discourses of economic and erotic desire and signals a radical dichotomy between threatened femininity and forms of female power. In the space of this dichotomy, characters like Mary and Esther are alternately sympathetic and objectionable, sentimentalized or eroticized.

On one hand, the image of the factory girl augments the sexual / sentimental narratives that distinguish prominent female characters like Mary, Margaret, and Esther. In the Victorian imagination, the factory girl was sexually dangerous and endangered; problematically independent while also an “industrial slave”; physically strong while also physically disabled (by machines, by long work hours and dangerous working conditions). Mary’s flirtation with Harry Carson, and the consequences that follow, illustrate the sexual dangers associated with female factory workers; Margaret’s blindness sentimentalizes the figure of the factory girl physically incapacitated by the literal danger of the work she performs. These elements converge in the character of Esther. As a former factory girl turned prostitute, Esther embodies the sexualized / sentimental binary linked to industrial women: Her tale of the sexual double-crossing effected by the soldier

who abandons her at Bristol and leaves her with an illegitimate child, as well as her latter profession, indicates her fallenness; her desperation to save Mary from her illicit romance with Harry Carson, her pathetic appearance upon approaching John Barton and, later, Jem Wilson, and her homelessness and alcoholism evoke a sentimentalized figure. The linkage of Mary and Margaret with Esther galvanizes cultural understandings of femininity in the working class through her crucial identification with the problems associated with factory work for women.

On the other hand, factory girls provide a glimpse of independence at odds with conventional standards of feminine propriety. As seamstresses, Mary and Margaret Leigh perhaps prove more “manageable” in service of Gaskell’s greater aim to inspire sympathy for the working classes because, as Lynn Alexander has argued, the seamstress was [...] a popular aesthetic figure because of her universality” (9).⁸ However, considering the sexual / sentimental narratives of factory girls circulating in Victorian society at large, *Esther* could easily have been a factory girl. It is the work of the prostitute that is easier for Gaskell to bypass because of its obvious sexual overtones. The possibility of economic independence or value of the labor factory girls perform, however, poses significant difficulty to a novel in which the working classes, and

⁸ Alexander explains that “the seamstress was someone to whom readers could respond without prejudice” because regardless of class, most women sewed, whether the activity was confined to fancy needlework done at the parlor fireside or in the actual construction of clothes (9). Moreover, it was a viable occupation that could be performed within the home. Even if a woman was not working class, the association of needlework with domesticity and the daily tasks of middle- and upper-class women made it acceptable employment for young women who had fallen on hard times, especially those unable to find a husband in a period when women greatly outnumbered men. Therefore, the experiences of seamstresses in *Mary Barton* could reach a much wider audience through the possibility of crucial identification with middle-class female readers. For more, see Alexander’s *Work, Women, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature*, Athens, OH: Ohio State UP, 2003.

especially working-class women, are subject to circumstance and are not self-governing agents. It is precisely because Esther was once a factory girl that she appears in the novel as a prostitute, not only as a reflection of sexual danger, but as a deflection of economic anxiety fostered by Gaskell's occasional allusions to the autonomous factory girl.

While John Barton hints at the likelihood of Esther's job in the factory as reducing her to moral ruin in his conversation with George Wilson about Esther's disappearance, there is never any direct correlation between her work and her fallen condition. Although John Barton's version of the tale associates her beginning fancies with making herself look better by being able to buy nice dresses and "set off her pretty face," a quality he asserts would make her a "streetwalker" someday, Esther's own version of the tale runs quite differently. Her only hint of factory work being the trouble for her is in saying that she might have better learned the value of money when she was making it in the factory, for it spoiled her in ways that her lover's disposable income supplemented. She does not suggest that factory work put her on the path to sexual danger. Rather, the anxieties of other characters regarding factory girls – as seems to be the case with John Barton, for instance – are embodied in the figure of the prostitute because she most directly exhibits the economic anxieties that underwrite the perceived threat of the independent factory girl.

In relationship to the heightened anxiety over class and capital at mid-century, Elsie B. Michie argues the prostitute produced discussion wherein "rhetoric about prostitution defused the potential threat of the working class desire to own property both by creating an arena in which it was possible to define individuals as property and by

defining some desires to possess property as negative” (114). Although she shapes discussion of class conflict in public circles, exemplifies sexual danger, and proliferates in sociological and artistic representations of the inner city, it appears the prostitute merely stands as text upon which other interests and agendas can be inscribed and interpreted. As a factory-girl-turned prostitute, Esther most visibly represents the sexual / sentimental image of factory girls and reflects this in the narrative.

Mary, however, also represents the threat of sexuality associated with factory – indeed, public work – for women. Mary’s unwillingness to go into domestic service – at the time, a much more respectable position for working-class girls – embodies a threatening autonomy personified by the factory girl. Mary’s distaste of domestic service, the narrator claims, results from the unchecked independence she had had in the years since her mother’s death: this freedom “had little inclined her to submit to rules as to hours and associates, to regulate her dress by a mistress’s ideas of propriety, to lose the dear feminine privileges of gossiping with a merry neighbour, and working night and day to help one who was sorrowful.” She also felt herself too “pretty” to be hidden behind the walls of a mistress’s mansion, influenced by “her absent, mysterious aunt Esther” who often reinforced this view of her niece (26). Already headstrong and able to take care of herself, Mary implies the particular strength of the factory girl, and her actions bear this out in the novel: in the absence of her father, who regularly keeps late nights because of his political activity, Mary keeps the Barton household, works outside the home, eventually resists the advances of Harry Carson, and travels a great distance to procure evidence that would exonerate Jem Wilson from the murder of Carson. In fact, Mary is

once misrepresented as a factory girl: while in route to secure the alibi that will clear Jem Wilson of the murder of Harry Carson, she hears two men on the train discussing the case as an issue stemming from “some dispute about a factory girl” (the two men argued over Mary prior to Carson’s death) (283).

Conclusion

Mary Barton ultimately solidifies sexual / sentimental narratives of factory girls, but opens vital spaces for re-accentuating work as enabling for factory women; this is important because these narratives are those that later writers will use to create the image of the factory girl for more enabling purposes. In this chapter, I examined factory girls in relationship to both the domestic and industrial discourses present in *Mary Barton*, and argue that while the confinement of women’s stories to the domestic plot canonizes factory girls as erotic or pathetic figures subjected to work, the story of the politically-motivated, rebellious worker both speaks for and estranges factory girls from the possible value they might find as working subjects. Just as the empowered male worker troubles the existing social order of industrial capitalism and laissez faire economics, the empowered female worker greatly troubles these *and* accepted domestic ideology. Factory girls can support and maintain themselves; they can be working subjects, not only sexual or sentimental objects. In other words, factory girls clearly illustrate the complex interrelationship between gender and class through both the problem they present to Victorian domestic ideology and to class identity, carving out a productive

space of contested meaning that more clearly accounts for the absence of factory girls in industrial literary discourse.

CHAPTER III

THE POETICS OF LABOR IN *AUTOBIOGRAPHY, POEMS AND SONGS OF ELLEN JOHNSTON, THE 'FACTORY GIRL'*

And mine shall be a history—a Factory Girl's romance—
A truth more strange than fiction, and not of random chance.—Ellen Johnston,
“An Appeal”

As discussed in Chapter One, depictions of “the pale face behind the loom” and the sexually endangered / dangerous female worker supported the idea that “woman” and “worker” were irreconcilable identities in nineteenth-century Britain. The incompatibility of women and work outside the home solidified the sexual / sentimental lens through which factory girls were viewed in industrial discourse, as I argued in Chapter Two, making both labor and the women who performed it nearly invisible in literary representation. This chapter will show how one working-class writer united labor, gender, and art by taking on the poetic name “the Factory Girl,” a label through which she placed herself within a national canon of laboring poets and challenged the sexual / sentimental binary that typically represented working-class women in mainstream literature.

Scottish poet Ellen Johnston was a popular literary figure in the pages of the *Glasgow Penny Post* and gained considerable recognition after the publication-by-subscription of the first edition of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, The “Factory Girl”* in 1867 (followed by a second edition in 1869). While employed in textile mills for nearly 25 years, Johnston produced a body of autobiographical verse

written from the perspective of a female laborer beset by trials and adversity. She also endeavored to transcend the image of industrial victim through critiques and alternate praises of factory labor and the industrial system. Built on her experience as a factory girl, Johnston's poetic persona sometimes appeals to bourgeois notions of femininity, but also works to revise these dominant gender roles to fit a radical working-class subjectivity: she is not merely the "woman frail and weak," but also the rebellious, independent worker-artist who makes claims for the value of industrial labor ("Napier's Dockyard" 16). Because Johnston highlights the pathos of her life as a factory girl while also valuing labor and her class identity, her self-representation makes explicit the class and gender conflicts that the image of the sexual / sentimental factory girl works to suppress.

Johnston imagined herself as a poet in the tradition of Scottish laboring poets, a literary position that enabled her to locate unexpected value in the name "Factory Girl" and in factory work itself: one sort of labor (industrial) gave rise to another (artistic). As Patrick Joyce explains, nineteenth-century working-class literature was, at its core, "a rhetorical effort to *create* identity," with the literary as the artistic space in which the author examined and put forth interpretations of the classed self as well as constructed "tentative proposals about the self and others" out of the material, social, and political climate of the day [my emphasis] (*Visions of the People* 216). Poetry was particularly important as a space for creating and articulating working-class identities because of its fundamental place in laboring-class artistic and literary history, and this was certainly true for the Scottish Johnston. An avid reader of Robert Burns, Johnston saw the factory

girl as the voice through which she could express the inequities of her position as a female laborer, speak back to detractors and critics, and provide the female industrial worker with an aesthetic voice and artistic legitimacy. She cannot—and often refuses to—separate the woman from the worker because through factory work, she is able to carve a space for herself as a national poet. Within this literary context, the factory girl is the writer, rather than the written, a juxtaposition through which Johnston resituates laboring women as subjects in the making rather than objects for social analysis.

Unlike some of her contemporaries who wrote as a personal release from daily toil, Johnston wrote specifically for the public, and the popular reception of her work had much to do with the way she shaped her textual identity. Johnston published over 100 poems that touched on a variety of subjects, many written at the request of readers or labeled as “addresses” or “appeals” to various parties: lyric poems about romantic attachments and losses, political statements against poverty and working-class oppression, satires against literary critics, and the occasional Scots song (including one, “Auld Dunville,” that praises having a pint after a day’s work). *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* contains a special section for reader addresses and Johnston’s responses, which were originally published in the *Penny Post* as literary correspondence between author and audience. A quarter of her published poems that concern life in the factory directly were written on public occasions, events that honored her employers and commemorated workers’ excursions. The autobiographical prefaces heading the published editions of her work also demonstrate Johnston’s awareness of her audience, as she makes clear that she writes the preface following “the expressed wishes of some

subscribers” and addresses the “gentle” or “dear” reader multiple times (*Autobiography* 3). Significant changes were made to the preface of the second edition based on audience concerns, including the omission of a striking defense of her single motherhood. Johnston improvised around a host of ideological challenges in order to make herself representative to a diverse audience of readers; thus, the factory girl that Johnston declares herself to be is marked by contradictions that arise in part out of a context of reception.

As the “Factory Girl” poet writing public verse for a diverse audience within a national canon of literature, Johnston refuses to separate gender and class into constituent categories. While some of her contemporaries adhered to a “middle-class feminine script” in order to draw attention away from their class status, Johnston instead created a class script that worked toward creating alternate views of working-class femininity beyond sexual/sentimental representations and the pressures of bourgeois domesticity. The ambivalence that results from Johnston’s melding of industrial and poetic labor does important work toward reaccentuating canonical narratives that render working-class women powerless against the social and political forces used to define them.

Who Is “The Factory Girl”?

If reconciling femininity and industrial labor was problematic for the Victorians, this divide has also proven a challenge in current critical studies of Johnston. Critical opinion has been split with regard to the attention Johnston paid to factory life and factory work in her writing. Critics discount her emphasis on factory work and argue that this emphasis may have been motivated only by a wish to market her poetry; they advise

that the reality of factory work in the nineteenth century may have left her feeling oppressed and powerless; or they promote industrial labor as an area in which she found remarkable achievement and self-worth. All of these views have a basis in her writing: one moment, she's the rebellious worker making claims for the value of her labors and then, in the next, a "woman frail and weak"; she is both the confident poet who defends her work against criticism and then the deferential poet who apologizes for the "imperfect" poems of a self-educated writer. She has fallen victim to health problems caused by factory work even while she celebrates the "dear Factory" ("Napier's Dockyard" 16, "Lines [To James Dorward]" 19). These apparent contradictions between the empowered and apologetic laboring poet, combined with the rhetorical nature of her poetry, make it difficult to pin down Johnston's intentions for writing about work and life in the factory.⁹

Although Johnston's breadwork as a power loom weaver was not always easy, comfortable, or attractive, she was unable—and at times stubbornly unwilling—to disregard labor in the construction of her poetic identity. Aspects of Johnston's biography, the influence of laboring poets in Scottish literary history, and publication circumstances encouraged her to find value in factory labor and to create a complex working identity for the factory girl. Johnston's role as the "Factory Girl" poet, inspired

⁹ There is much that is unknown about Johnston's life as she left behind no letters or diaries to provide us with her personal perspective. There is no surviving correspondence between Johnston and her editor, Alexander Campbell, or anyone else, other than the poetic correspondence she exchanged with her readership and published in both editions of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*. Selected poems by Johnston have been published in Catherine Kerrigan's *An Anthology of Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991); Leighton and Reynolds' *Victorian Women Poets: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow, and Cath Sharrock's *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998); and Florence Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008).

by her labor, her love of Romantic literature, and an accommodating editor, allowed her to foreground the troubled meeting ground of gender and class in her poetry and ultimately to reject the Victorian domestic model that characterized factory girls as sexual / sentimental others.

Born in 1835 at the Muir Wynd, Hamilton, Lanarkshire, Ellen Johnston lived a something of a tragic life. Childhood was no model of familial bliss for Johnston, and, as she writes in her autobiographical preface to the first edition of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*, she was never “destined” to find “a future promised home and pleasure” (14).¹⁰ She was raised in a domestic environment marked by the tragic abandonment of her father, a stonemason who immigrated to America when the poet was an infant. Twenty years later, he took his own life upon learning that his wife had remarried after receiving erroneous news that he had died years before. Johnston’s early life “tormentor,” she writes, was her stepfather, a man who represents “the dark shadow” that “enshrouded [her] soul [and] haunted [her] like a vampire,” a statement that most critics read as a guarded suggestion that she was sexually abused by him (*Autobiography* 6). The adolescent Johnston ran away as a result, finding employment in a Dundee factory, only to be apprehended by an uncle who forced her back home. Upon her return, Johnston’s mother questioned her and, when met with silence, “beat [her] till [she] felt as if [her]

¹⁰ In the preface of the second edition of *Autobiography*, she replaced the word “pleasure” with “husband” and perhaps with good reason: the most prominent name on the subscriber’s list to the second edition was “Her Majesty Queen Victoria.” Many of the more “unsavory” biographical details included in the first preface were also removed in the second, including a striking defense of her single motherhood, hints of the sexual abuse she may have suffered from at the hands of her stepfather, and intimations of “meeting lovers”; in other words, elements of her biography that may have made the edition difficult to sell. According to Florence Boos, the removal of certain details may have also stemmed from the “generous criticisms and kindly hints respecting [her] autobiography” noted by “[e]ditors of the daily and weekly press” (“Queen” 506). Unlike the preface, however, her verse in the second edition remained untouched.

brain was on fire.” Still, Johnston managed to avoid explaining why she’d run away and kept “the secret” of it to herself (8).

Two things seem to have provided her with an escape from the emotional chaos of home: factory work and a love of literature. As Johnston moved from adolescent to adult, she became the breadwinner for her family. Although the details of how she traveled are unclear, she worked in factories across Great Britain through most of her adult life – in Scotland, Ireland, and England – sending money back to her family when her mother and stepfather fell ill and were unable to work themselves, a family burden increased when she gave birth to her daughter Mary in the 1852. She wrote several poems that extolled the virtues of specific factories and directly addressed the masters under whom she worked, aestheticizing the factory’s “bright” walls and “bending o’er [her] loom, / And musing on a lovely form of beauty’s sweetest bloom” (“The Factory Exile” 7-9). Writing of factory work in her autobiographical preface, she seems to take pride in her abilities and considers herself a skilled laborer, as when pointing out that while employed at the Verdant Works in Dundee, her woven cloths were regularly “selected by [her] master as a sample for others to imitate” (*Autobiography* 14). Because of the time spent in she spent in factories, Johnston rarely appeals to any kind of domesticity outside of the community she finds there. The factory is more a “home” to her than the one in which she was raised.¹¹

¹¹ However, I must note here that because of several incidents between Johnston and her factory girl sisters, the factories in which she toiled could not always be the communal spaces of affection, loyalty, and personal havens she makes them out to be in her poems. Often, Johnston labels herself a “factory exile” in these poems and laments unfair dismissals that she suggests estrange her from her labor. In one particular incident, Johnston was fired from the Verdant Works in Dundee without notice or reason from her foreman, presumably because she was a single mother at the time (*Autobiography* [1st ed] 14). She felt that the

In addition to traveling across Great Britain for factory work, she also began writing and sending out poetry for publication in penny papers, perhaps for the extra income, but certainly for her love of writing. Proudly self-taught, Johnston's textbooks were the novels of Walter Scott and the poems of Lord Byron, Robert Burns, Robert Tannahill, and James Hogg, as well as James Mackay Wilson's *Tales of the Borders* magazine.¹² She considered herself "gifted with a considerable amount of natural knowledge" and felt she could "read the English language and Scottish dialect with almost any classical scholar" (*Autobiography* 7). From the tone of defense she takes in her autobiographical preface, Johnston seems to have been fully aware that factory girls were not supposed to write poetry and that readers believed factory girls could not write *good* poetry. Therefore, the tradition of Scottish laboring poetry buoyed Johnston's identity as a writer, and it is through this tradition that she felt justified in labeling herself "The Factory Girl" poet. While the practice of identifying laboring poets by their occupations, which became common in the late eighteenth century with poets like Robert Burns ("The Ploughman Poet"), Stephen Duck ("The Thresher Poet"), and Ann Yearsley

slander that prompted her dismissal, particularly the spread of rumors by other female workers, was the result of jealousy over her poetic prowess and not actually driven by her position as an unrespectable, unmarried mother. In a remarkable turn, Johnston sued the foreman for wages she lost due to the lack of notice and actually won her case.

¹² Robert Tannahill (1774-1810) was a weaver and a songwriter popular for a handful of beautiful original songs including "Jessie, the flower o' Dunblane," "Oh, are ye sleeping, Maggie," "Thou bonnie wood o' Craigielea," and "Gloomy winter's now awa"; James Hogg (1770-1835) was a shepherd, poet, and novelist who befriended many of the great writers of his day, including Sir Walter Scott. Publishing under the name "the Ettrick Shepherd," he is best known today for his novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Both were contemporaries of Burns and were influenced by his work and rise to fame. James Mackay Wilson (1804-1835) was a popular writer and publisher who wrote, edited, and compiled submissions for his weekly magazine, *Tales from the (Scottish) Borders*, begun in 1834 and continued by his brother after Wilson's death in 1835. *Tales* boasted stories of the "Historical, Traditionary, and Imaginative," including reiterations of Scottish folk tales, original romance narratives, and mystery tales.

(“The Dairymaid Poet”), can be taken as an oppressive act on the part of upper/middle-class patrons wishing to market their charges for publication, Gustav Klaus explains that these labels “can [also] be a source of pride and inspiration for working people,” particularly those who wish to procure “literary success” as *working-class* artists (31). There is no evidence that the title of “The Factory Girl” poet was conferred on Johnston by outside sources, including her mentor and editor, Alexander Campbell; Johnston dutifully signed her poems as The Factory Girl and references herself by this name in her writing. That Johnston named herself The Factory Girl suggests that she had no desire to eschew her working-class identity; instead, the name lends value and purpose to her work and underwrites the poetics of labor on which she built her reputation.

Like her laboring poet predecessors, Johnston needed a patron to help promote her work and see it into print, and she was fortunate to publish under Alexander Campbell, an aging Owenite whose political allegiances valued the unique experience of a working-class woman. Campbell had agitated for trade unionism and working-class community building in the 1820s and was at the center of 1830s labor movements in Glasgow as one of the four founders of the National Radical Association of Scotland, an association through which he built a reputation as a pioneer of labor journalism.¹³ As a journalist and an editor of working-class newspapers and periodicals, explains Florence

¹³ A disciple of Robert Owen, this Alexander Campbell is not to be confused with the Rev. Alexander Campbell who engaged Owen in a debate on the validity of Christianity, an event for which Owen sailed to America in 1829. The Alexander Campbell who published Johnston fought vigorously for a working-class press by publishing unstamped newspapers and periodicals in the 1820s and 1830s, for which he was tried and imprisoned at Edinburgh in 1833. For more on Campbell’s life and politics, see Leslie Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1953); Alexander Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (New York: Augustus Kelly, 1970); and W. Hamish Fraser, *Alexander Campbell and the Search for Socialism* (Manchester: Holyoake Books, 1996).

Boos, Campbell “expressed a consistent interest in the working conditions and legal rights of women,” and hoped “to widen the opportunities open to working-class women” (“Queen” 504). It appears that in regards to Johnston, he felt he’d found the appropriate voice to represent lives and concerns of working-class women; Judith Rosen notes that although he actively sought submissions from female as well as male workers, “Johnston was the first recognizably female poet he published” (221). Campbell not only published Johnston’s poems in his *Glasgow Penny Post*, but also helped her collect, edit, and prepare her work for book publication, and actively sought subscribers to purchase her both the first and second editions. It is probable, judging from her the autobiographical preface to the first edition of her poems, he did little to censor or direct the content of her work, as Johnston tells of the birth of her illegitimate daughter and rebukes the label of “fallen woman” with a startling honesty.¹⁴ Johnston also makes radical arguments for unionization and worker’s rights and celebrates the value of manual labor, and admires the “handsome form” of gentlemen who catch her attention (“Lines to a Lovely Youth” 7). Of course, other working-class female poets wrote about their lives, but few were as intensely personal, rebellious, and exposed as Johnston. Without the support of Campbell, Johnston would very likely have not published in the press at all nor garnered

¹⁴ Writing of the latter event in her autobiographical preface, Johnston rejects the label of fallenness, writing that she does not feel shame nor wish to “die off” after giving birth to her daughter Mary; she instead locates the value of the experience in being a mother. Quoting and responding to Oliver Goldsmith’s poem “When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly,” Johnston asserts that unlike the betrayed woman who must cover her guilt until at last she is redeemed in death, she did not “feel inclined to die when [she] could no longer conceal what the world calls a woman’s shame.” Declining to play the role of the shame-ridden woman for the sake of propriety, she instead rejoices in the fact that motherhood would provide “something to love [her]” (Autobiography 11). Johnston’s rebuke of Goldsmith’s thesis (and of “the world”) clearly rejects what she believes society would have her do and shifts attention to how her experience as a fallen woman provides her with a role in which she finds value (and of which society would approve)—in being a mother.

the attention that she received as a poet, but, I also believe, likely would not have been able to capitalize on a poetic voice so explicitly personal.¹⁵ Because of her editor's political allegiances, Johnston was able to enact a feminine poetics grounded in working-class experience; his encouragement enabled her to forge a sense of independence and artistic agency aligned with the literary traditions authorizing her brand of poetic expression.

I suggest that Johnston's Romantic ethos gives her the framework through which she resists the model of Victorian domesticity that underpins representations of factory girls as sentimental / sexual others. Johnston's self-education through readings of Romantic poets and authors supported her rejection of Victorian values; when she does write of the Romantic heroine destroyed by love, she does so through monologues in voices not her own. Johnston's own expressions of rebelliousness, individualism, and uninhibited confessionalism recalls the work of Lord Byron and Shelley, and Burns, which put her at odds with the poetic work of her working-class female contemporaries.¹⁶

As Susan Zlotnick explains, the poetry of other working-class female writers in mid-

¹⁵ Unfortunately, there are no surviving records of editorial correspondence between Campbell and Johnston. As Judith Rosen notes, these would be invaluable for perhaps determining "how much [...] Campbell worked with Johnston to regularize her poem's rhythms and [...] tone down some of her more vehement turns of phrase" (221). Even so, she suggests that Campbell seems to have done little editing of Johnston's work because although the voice in her later poems tends to be "less strident" and "less explicit" in terms of her personal life or politics, it is "by no means [...] domestic or decorous" (221).

¹⁶ Other British female factory workers contemporaneous of Johnston were "Marie," the pseudonymous dye-worker from Chorley who published primarily in William and Mary Howitt's *People's Journal* (later the *People's and Howitt's Journal*) and *Eliza Cook's Journal* between 1846-1852; Ruth Willis, a lame factory worker from Leicester who published in book form [*Lays of Lowly Life* (1861; 2nd ed. 1862) and *Lays of Lowly Life: Second Series* (1868)]; and Fanny Forrester, daughter of Irish immigrants and factory worker in Manchester, who published primarily in *Brierley's Journal* throughout the 1870s. Across the Atlantic, Lowell operatives in Massachusetts, featured in Harriet Farley's periodical *Lowell Offering*, had been publishing since the early 1840s, and a collected edition, *Mind Amongst the Spindles: A Miscellany, Selected from the Lowell Offering*, appeared in Britain in 1845.

Victorian Britain betrays an intense awareness of the tension between the ideal roles of women as the center of the family and the real, material circumstances that keep working-class women from enacting these roles. “The pressures [of] domesticity,” she explains, “[...] left most working-class women without a suitable discourse to articulate their own experiences”; these poets tried to show that they “share[d] the emotionalized, moralized subjectivity of their middle-class counterparts” even if they did not share economic and material circumstances (*Women* 12, “Lowly Bards” 19). Thus, in effort to identify themselves outside of the competing and contradictory discourses that “resist telling,” working-class female poets appeal to a “universal femininity” and highlight gender as an essential category in self-analysis and class as one that is merely social, and so artificial (“Lowly Bards” 18-19). Johnston instead worked from a class script and did not attempt to build her poetic authority through appeals to working-class feminine respectability. She defended her single motherhood quite explicitly in the autobiographical preface to her first edition of published poems; she carried on an epistolary relationship with an admiring reader, G.D. Russell, with whom she traded poems and her *carte de visite* – a relationship that was published in the *Post*’s “Poet’s Corner,” and she kept her readership titillated with her life as well as her work. On occasion, her verse works within the “affective conventions and feelings associated with a feminine modality of experience,” as Isobel Armstrong has described the work of Victorian poetesses like Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Augusta Webster. Unlike her middle-class female predecessors and contemporaries, however, Johnston rarely relied upon “masks” or “role playing” that “displace feminine subjectivity [...] in order

that it can be made an object of investigation” (323, 325). Instead her work is extraordinarily confessional, unabashedly personal, and fiercely defensive of her status as a laboring *woman*.

Therefore, Johnston often revels in overturning reader expectations of a factory girl, a motivation clearly reflected in the reoccurring defenses she takes against being misunderstood, misinterpreted, and constrained by normative class and gender expectations. One such poem, “An Address to Nature on Its Cruelty,” is not so much an address to nature as it is a response to “men of genius” who accuse the poet of plagiarism and imitation, those who suggest that “Such wit and words quite out-furl / The learning of ‘A Factory Girl’” (19-20). A bold defense of Johnston’s poetic endeavors, “An Address to Nature” wrests literary authority away from (presumably male, upper class) detractors and claims her right to poetic expression as a laboring female poet.

Twice removed from the British literary tradition by her gender and class, Johnston attempts to make herself visible through the poem’s driving image of the female body. Johnston repeatedly laments that nature has made her “so small” that she is literally a diamond in the rough, a “jewel” that “cannot shine” (2-4). Although “Learned critics who have seen [her poems] / Says [sic] origin dwells within them,” they are shocked to learn that what they’ve read is the writing of a factory girl:

...when myself perchance they see,
They laugh and say ‘O is it she?
Well, I think the little boaster
Is nothing but a fair imposter;
She looks for poor-like and so small,
She’s next unto a nought-at-all;
Such wit and words quite out-furl

The learning of “A Factory Girl””
At first they do my name exalt;
And with my works find little fault;
But when upon myself they gaze,
They say some other claims the praise. (11-24)

Johnston uses the suggestion of physical “smallness” here to indicate the ways in which she is looked over and dismissed by critics as a serious poet: What is “so small” here is Johnston’s position as a working-class female artist, which nature has cruelly gifted with a significant poetic prowess. This “smallness” accounts for negative critique of her work, not the merits of the work itself; in this passage, Johnston almost takes pleasure in giving voice to the taunt of the critic as a means of drawing attention to the fact that the poet whose work they admire is indeed a factory girl. Overturning their expectations with the bulk of her work – and this poem itself, artful as it is – instills in the poet a sense of pride and purpose in bringing together class and gender under the heading of “The Factory Girl.”

While Johnston’s working-class status hinders her bid to be taken seriously as a poet, she emphasizes her position as a working *woman*, a move that seems to provide her with the leverage to assert the injustice of critics’ damaging appraisal of her poems. She writes that had Nature “taken time”:

And made me up somewhat sublime,
With a handsome form and a pretty face,
And eyes of language—smiles of grace;
With snowy brow and ringlets fair,
A beauty quite beyond compare;
Winning the charms of fortune’s smile.
Still dressed in grandeur all the while;
Then those who see me would believe

I never tried for to deceive
By bringing out a publication
Of borrowed lines or yet quotation (25-36).

Instead, she is “in *this* dress / So small and thin,” the dress literally being the very poem itself, simple and bare compared to those that might be “dressed in grandeur”—more artistically complex, nuanced, and deft, or at least poems accepted as such (37-8; emphasis mine). Johnston describes a version of the ideal Victorian woman as a metaphor for women’s poetry in the nineteenth century, that which Isobel Armstrong describes as problematic, yet generally accepted, “qualities attributed to women’s poetry—conventional piety, didactic feeling, emotions, sentiment” integral to feminine expressivity (320). Although, as Armstrong argues, middle-class female poets themselves related to “the affective conventions and feelings associated with a feminine modality of experience” in an “ambiguous way” and interrogated it even while assenting to it, Johnston implies that she can’t even do that; because of her class status, she has no access to experiences and conditions that make women’s poetry acceptable to a wider Victorian audience (323). Appealing to the feminine dimensions of poetry, she decries classist attitudes that would separate her poetry from that of women of a higher class and would make her more susceptible to unfair critique based on her social standing.

Near the poem’s end, Johnston takes ownership of her work, indicating that while critics may attempt to take the joy of her poetry away from her with unwarranted critique, the artistic gift she possesses was bestowed upon her by “nature’s God” (58). Reclaiming her work as her own, she asserts, “Imperfect though my lays maybe, / Still they belong to none but me” (55-6). These lines betray Johnston’s defensiveness of her verse and, in

part, reflect the underlying anxiety she may have felt about the writing of an artist “hard toiling for [her] daily bread” (63). Poetry, however, is also an integral part of her labor, that for which she toils “with burning heart and aching head” (64). For critics to claim her work is that of another undercuts not only her public reputation, but also the merging of class and gender that she attempts by taking on the name of “The Factory Girl” poet.

Johnston’s influences preceded her by at least fifty years, and there’s no evidence that she read contemporary novels or poetry, with the exception of the poetry published in working-class periodicals and newspapers. Judging from her oft-stated hope to not only write, but sell, her poetry, I infer that Johnston recognized the label “factory girl” was controversial enough to warrant wide attention and thus provide some financially-beneficial shock value. It certainly seems to have been an effective marketing tactic: Johnston was vastly popular in the local Glaswegian working-class press precisely because she was an unexpectedly literate and talented female factory operative, admired by both middle and working-class readers who wrote to the *Penny Post* in praise of her poetic gifts, and the first edition of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* garnered enough subscribers to warrant a second edition a year later. Johnston’s blend of labor and poetry, combined with the rebellious brand of expression she relied upon, reject the image of the victimized working woman who cannot fulfill her proper role in Victorian society. She instead creates out of the factory a home more binding than the actual home in which she lived; finds authority and voice among a “family” of workers who admired her as a distinct working-class talent; and constituted a wider community through her readership by writing some poems by request and responding to readers’ concerns and hardships

with a sympathetic ear. Through writing from her experience as a laborer and valuing that experience as an impetus to art (and authority), Johnston refigures the key aspect of a working woman's life that could be used to control her representation—the labor she performed.

Sites of Contention: Labor and Audience in Johnston's Poetry

Because she is one of the few of anthologized British working-class women writers who actually worked in factories for most of her life, making her a rare example of a female industrial laboring poet in mid-century Great Britain, Johnston's feelings about her daily work are common sites of critical contention. Most literary critics agree that Johnston emerges a fiercely independent spirit who overcame great obstacles to achieve local fame as a working-class poet beloved by her audience, but this is where the similarities end. For different reasons, both Gustav Klaus and Florence Boos argue that the labor angle may have been overstressed by the poet, claims which they support with experiential evidence from her autobiography and more personal poems. Working from a Marxist angle, Klaus asserts that while Johnston seems proud of her class status and skill as a worker, she was more likely to have found actual factory work "grinding and soul-destroying" (26). He further argues that the attachment Johnston feels toward factory life may have resulted from the oppressive circumstances of her early domestic life—however, dangerous and "soul-destroying" factory work was for Johnston, it would have likely been preferable to the physical (and possible sexual) violence she suffered in her home. Boos greatly discounts Johnston's "endorsement of factory work" and believes that Johnston and other female factory poets "derived their sense of self-worth from

something other than their breadwork” (*Working-Class Women* 200, 31). She points to evidence from Johnston’s poems to “Edith,” an anonymous middle-class woman with whom Johnston exchanged poetic addresses and responses, in which the poet describes periods of infirmity caused by work in the factory and bemoans her working existence among the “din of dust and gloom” (“Reply to Lines by Edith” 2). Boos insists that the poetic relationship Johnston formed with her female readers and the expression she gave to the oppressive circumstances under which she toiled “probably expressed her real views” (*Working-Class Women* 200).

Other commentators, conversely, have made claims for the value of labor for Johnston personally and as a working-class artist. In direct contrast to Boos, Susan Zlotnick views Johnston’s “factory effusions” as “grounded in the treasured freedom she associates with mill life and in the sense of self-worth [...] that it affords her.” Factory work, Zlotnick argues, “provided Johnston with one of the few areas in which she could achieve a certain standing and dignity” (*Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution* 220-21). In support similar to that of Klaus, she further suggests that “the mill rather than the home emerges as the emotional center of her life” because of the domestic terrors of her early history (“A Thousand Times” 23). Relying more on the material circumstances of Johnston’s publication activity than on her biography, Judith Rosen posits that Johnston may have placed a different kind of value on factory work, arguing that it supplied the subject matter for her treasured role as a working-class bard “who found voice and authority through community events and in [...] little-known papers and journals” (224). Labor as the impetus to an art that could be shared with her local

working-class community is the point, regardless of how difficult or tiresome the real work of the day may have been.

Admittedly my own view tends more towards the latter area of thought, but Klaus and Boos' assessments are not entirely unfounded. As I have argued, Johnston usually stresses her class position over her gender in constructing the poetic identity that emerges from her writing, and she feels there is nothing unnatural or reprehensible about her work in the factory. Awareness of the social limitations she faced as a woman troubles this satisfaction, however, a complication with which she repeatedly contends and to which she gives expression in her writing. While overtly dismissive of the cultural contradictions posed by a female laborer in the Victorian age, Johnston also struggles against what Joan Scott terms "the gendered construction of the working class" that "equated productivity and masculinity" (*Gender* 64). Johnston's political poems exhibit the sense of exclusion she may have felt from traditional sources of working-class resistance that were open to her male peers: in these, she addresses calls for unionization and uprising against "despotic power" to Scotland's "sons of toil," with her participation in the cause manifested through poetic intervention instead of actual involvement [my emphasis] ("The Working Man" 1, "Lines [Written in Belfast]" 18). Although Johnston repeatedly highlights labor as empowering for herself and her family, she also describes periods of physical infirmity that she suffered as a result of factory work and, as a female working for wages out of doors, she faced the common accusations of indecorous or immoral behavior. The amount of vigorous attention she focused on addressing these accusations took as much a toll on her health as factory work did. At times, the equation

of masculinity and productivity in relationship to her class position provides Johnston with grounds for power and authority as a factory laborer and a laboring poet; at others, it only highlights the lack of power and authority Johnston was met with as a *female* laborer. She was, as Rosen argues, greatly invested in her role as a working-class bard, though, which seems to have provided her more directly with the pride and self-worth Zlotnick attributes to her actual factory work.

My purpose in recounting critical interpretations of labor in Johnston's poetry is not to argue that these analyses are off the mark. On the contrary, the divergence of critical opinion actually gives expression to the complex factors that coalesce in figure of the Victorian factory girl. Because Johnston uses the factory girl as a poetic identity, these factors are more apparent in her work than in the representations they were afforded in industrial or social problem fiction (making it easier to read Johnston's treatment of labor in multiple and conflicting ways). If, as Patricia Johnson argues in *Hidden Hands*, "class and gender [in Victorian literature] combine forces to erase working-women's experiences and silence their voices," with factory girls as the epitome of what was essentially "unnarratable" after the 1840s, then Johnston's claim of the mantle of "Factory Girl" actively uncovers what's hidden by dominant Victorian ideologies, revealing the contradictions of class and gender as part of her identity and voice as a laboring poet (30). Rather than reading industrial labor in Johnston's writing as a "problem" or constructing it as an either / or issue (either factory work is helpful or harmful, valued or not by Johnston), I suggest we can instead read labor as the lens through which she interprets and presents herself as a subject in her writing.

The appeal to labor and the varying dimensions it takes in her poetry is evident in the poetic responses she addressed to her readership, a set of poems that warranted their own section in *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*. In the responses she exchanged with readers who wrote original poems addressed to her, which were in turn published by Alexander Campbell in the “Notes to Correspondents” section of the *Penny Post*, Johnston’s representation of labor and, by extension, of the factory girl, depends largely upon the gender and class position of the person to whom she’s writing. Working around the expectations of different members of her audience, Johnston’s vacillates between labor as hardship and labor as power and illustrates the challenge she faced in reconciling her class and gender identities. The conflicting attitudes that Johnston expressed about factory work reflect a rhetorical ambivalence that provides Johnston with a means of resisting representations of factory girls as sexual / sentimental others. Labor as hardship indicates moments where gender comes to the fore, where Johnston highlights the difficulties of women’s labor: the physical and mental anguish that female factory workers faced, but also the sense of powerlessness they felt as *women*. Labor as power denotes the liberating potential Johnston ascribes to her class position, as factory work does provide her with a measure of freedom, self-worth, and dignity in both its actuality and the poetry it prompted her to write: manual and mental labor converge in a mutual productivity in which Johnston takes obvious pleasure. Labor as hardship and labor as power are not exclusive concepts, but often play across the whole of her work, sometimes colliding within the same poem; as a result, the flux of her self-representation destabilizes cultural narratives that render working-class women powerless against the social and

political forces used to define them. This ambivalence provides Johnston with opportunities to locate unexpected value and agency in her positions as woman-worker and woman-worker-*poet* and, thus, to productively re-imagine the factory girl.

A significant part of the evidence buttressing critical claims that Johnston may not have found value in factory labor are the addresses and responses exchanged between the poet and her female readers, most notably a middle-class reader who signed her addresses as “Edith” and two factory workers from Glasgow who signed as “Isabel” and “A Glasgow Lassie.” In these poems, the factory girl’s labor is a hardship that becomes a case for sympathy or, as with her fellow female factory workers, a point of mutual understanding and moral support. Edith expresses her sympathy for the girl able to produce poetry “‘Mid din of shuttle and of loom—/ ‘Mid steam and dust and ceaseless ring / Of cotton wheels in factory room,” a sentiment that Johnston reciprocates in her reply, describing the factory in similar terms as a “din of dust and gloom” (“Lines by Edith” 2-4, “Reply to ‘Lines by Edith’” 2). In replies to her working-class sisters, Johnston characterizes her life as a history of “toil-worn heart-sick woe,” a story which the three women share as victims of “weary toil” (“Reply to ‘A Glasgow Lassie’” 36, 41). As Isabel points out, they are all “forced [their] bread to win / Exposed to many dangers ‘mid the factory’s smoke and din” (“Lines to Ellen” 9-10). Johnston does not ruminate much on her labor in the factory in these responses, preferring instead to link herself with these readers as poetic “sister[s]” whose “chords of melody” bind them together; still, labor as a hardship constitutes a significant part of the link that she creates between herself and the other factory girls who admire her poetry, and through this

hardship, she welcomes and encourages Edith's sympathy ("Lines to Isabel" 35-36). Significantly, each woman describes the factory in the same terms, beginning with the middle-class Edith, whose initial address, from which these lines were taken, preceded those of the working-class girls; as a result, the image of the hard-toiling poetess amid the factory din nearly reifies the sentimental image of the factory girl, a representation that much of Johnston's other poetry, ironically, tends to complicate.

This sentiment shifts from labor as hardship to labor as power, however, in Johnston's responses to working-class male readers, mitigating the subjection Johnston may have felt as a woman with the power she derived from her roles as an industrial worker and a laboring poet. Male readers entwine these roles, and Johnston takes a cue from them in her responses. In "To the Factory Girl," Peter M'Call sympathizes with the trials Johnston has conveyed to her female readership, but gently admonishes her for representing labor as a hardship despite the good it has done for her poetic career. He asks: "why repine whilst at thy loom / Amidst the factory din? / Thou'rt weaving for thyself a name" (13-15). In response to "H. Smith," who in his own address assures the poet that "the graces approve / And attend the fair poetess toiling," Johnston signifies labor as her muse by uniting Glasgow, his location and her hometown, with industrial labor, the place where "industry her garlands is twining [,] / Where the muse like a rainbow encircles my name / Like a star in the firmament shining" ("To the Factory Girl" 11-12; "Lines to Mr. H. Smith, Glasgow" 5-7). Another endorsement comes from "A Friend" in Lanark, who writes that he's "proud tae see a factory lass / The modern bardies a' surpass" (13-15). To this Johnston responds in Scots, singing of the pride she

feels in being from a region that has produced a host of distinguished laboring authors, bidding her region's "factory lads an' factory lasses" to "sing o' Dundee" and hopeful that "commerce an' steam lang be the bless'd theme / O' her poets an' poet-esses" ("To the Poet" 62, 61, 63-64). In these poems, labor is the muse and the subject matter that build Johnston's reputation and authority as a poet.

The value Johnston places on her industrial and poetic labors becomes even more explicit in Johnston's exchanges with David Morrison, a widower, laborer and poet himself. Both construct labor as power as they consider each other vital in the creation of a national literature built on the work of laboring poets. Morrison, whom Johnston terms the "bard of Caldervale," places her solidly in a canon alongside Burns, Tannahill, and Hogg, noting that "'Tis not the wealthy that doth fill / Our land with song and genius true; / Hogg was a shepherd on a hill / Burns was a ploughman at the plough" ("To the Factory Girl" ["Long may you sing, enchanting maid"] 17-20). Johnston concurs with Morrison's observation, remarking in reply that "'Tis true that Genius rarely smiles / Upon the wealthy of our lands; / She chooseth those who bravely toil / With willing hearts and hardy hands" ("The Factory Girl's Reply to David Morrison" 29-32). Johnston's breadwork as a power-loom weaver in various factories across Great Britain certainly may not have been enjoyable or easy, but, as her responses to Morrison and others show, her position as a laborer provided her with a personal and artistic value that she used to her advantage in re-imagining the factory girl and through which she found her voice and authority.

As Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds observe, “Johnston’s poetry is striking in that it answers to a public even more than a private need” (407). This description is an apt one because Johnston seems greatly to have desired publication, not only for the additional income it would allow her, but also for the connection it allowed her to create with her audience—with potential readers from all classes and walks of life. That the responses she received from and wrote to readers make up an entire section of her published volumes of poems is especially telling in this regard.¹⁷ While striking, the public need observed by Reynolds and Leighton points to the barrier critics face in efforts to uncover Johnston’s true feelings about her life as a factory operative, and suggests an either / or interpretation of labor cannot present readers with an easy connection between Johnston’s life on and beyond the page: she too often shapes her thoughts and feelings around the values of the audience for whom she’s writing. Because of the rhetorical nature of her writing, the questions remain: was Johnston, who sought to supplement her income with literary work, seeking to please potential sponsors, some of whom were themselves factory owners? Or did she really feel, as she proclaims in “An Address to Napier’s Dockyard,” that she’d “a thousand times” prefer to be “a factory girl” (92)?

¹⁷ The first edition of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* includes a dedication that offers to her poetry to “all men and women of every class, sect, and party, who by their skill, labor, science, art, literature, and poetry, promote the moral and social elevation of humanity,” indicating Johnston’s wish to make her work as inclusive as possible; both the first and second editions include sections of reader poems addressed to her and originally published by Campbell in the *Penny Post* (and she responded to most of these). In the second edition, poems by two her regular respondents, “Edith” and David Morrison, replaced the rather lukewarm endorsement of her work written by Rev. George Gilfillan in the first edition, a local “authority” on working-class poetry in Glasgow, illustrating that she put more stock in her audience’s opinions of her work than that of a little-known literary critic.

Labor as Hardship, Labor as Power in “Napier’s Dockyard”

The poem that usually raises questions about Johnston’s intentions in writing about work and life in the factory is “An Address to Napier’s Dockyard, Lancefield, Anderston,” the lead poem in both editions of *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*. Robert Napier was a highly-regarded Glasgow shipbuilder who gained prominence by constructing steamship engines for paddle steamers and ocean-going vessels in the early nineteenth century and, as a result of a childhood interest in drawing, he also held a rather impressive art collection and served as a patron to rising Glaswegian artists. Johnston did not work directly for Napier, although it appears she lived near the dockyard while residing in Glasgow, but it is unclear how and where the two met, if they ever met at all.¹⁸ What is clear is that Johnston wrote “Napier’s Dockyard” in honor of the man, his engineering achievements, his artistic patronage, and his “philanthropic spirit” (4). In return, Napier provided Johnston with a gift of £10 in order to set up a small business, which she used instead to support her family while out of work for three months.

This exchange forms a crucial piece of evidence for the argument that Johnston’s endorsement of factory work is overstated and motivated by factors beyond a mere love of the loom. Indeed, Johnston solicited Napier in order to receive financial help at a time when she briefly relinquished factory work at the recommendation of a physician.

Johnston explains that while contemplating alternatives to the factory, she recalled having

¹⁸ In the head note that prefaces Johnston’s poems in *Working-Class Women Writers in Victorian Britain*, Florence Boos identifies Napier as Johnston’s “employer,” but I can find no evidence that she actually worked for him or that he owned a factory (197). Of this event, Johnston writes in her autobiography that Napier checked her “character with her employer” when she forwarded him the poem, which suggests that he had little to no knowledge of Johnston previous to this exchange and that she was indeed working elsewhere at the time (*Autobiography* 12).

previously written “Napier’s Dockyard” and, in order to keep her family from the “pale face of poverty,” had it forwarded to Napier directly (*Autobiography* 12). Johnston does not admit that she did so in the hopes that he would pay her for her trouble, but the financial and material distress she describes in this section of her autobiography makes it apparent that this was ultimately what she had in mind. Thus Johnston’s possible financial motives troubles the poem’s praise of Napier and “dear Work” (“Napier’s Dockyard”15).

But it is also reasonable to propose that Johnston’s depictions of illness and distress perform the same function as her questionable endorsement of industrial labor. In the recounted exchange with Napier, for example, Johnston’s ill health is the impetus for writing, publishing, and *selling* her poetry. As both editions of her poems were published by subscription, with the autobiographical preface itself written explicitly at “the expressed wishes of some subscribers,” Johnston could have as easily sought to influence the emotions (and pocketbooks) of potential subscribers by appealing to the belief in the factory girl as a sympathetic victim of industrial circumstance (*Autobiography* 3). However ill she may have been when she forwarded the poem to Napier, she returned to work in the factory shortly after the money he generously provided her had run out, and thereafter wrote several other poems that praised factory owners and operatives, poems that commemorated work and life in the factory and for which Johnston did not receive direct payment or reward.

“Napier’s Dockyard” does more than honor the engineering achievements of a Glaswegian shipbuilder for the sake of payment at a time when Johnston, the

breadwinner of her family, needed it most. Rather, the curious associations it makes between labor and art display the authority Johnston ascribes to herself as a laborer who participates in the “public works” that underwrite Napier’s social position *and* as the poet in control of spatial and social organization (1). However, the poem also betrays the limitations Johnston senses in her position as a *female* laborer and, ironically, a working-class poet, unveiled in dramatized shows of modesty over being a “weak” woman and a self-taught artist. As a result, “Napier’s Dockyard” emerges as a “double poem” in the general sense as defined by Isobel Armstrong in *Victorian Poetry*: it is a poem that employs “systematically ambiguous language” and makes two readings “possible and necessary” because it “dramatizes relationships of power” in which power is not seated in a “privileged class” but is instead “vested in many” (15). Johnston achieves this doubleness by laying bare the uneasy relationship between labor as hardship and labor as power. She structures the poem around the struggle between the following elements: Napier and the industrial laborer; Johnston as an authoritative poet and as a rudimentary one; and the female worker who is “frail and weak” and the one who is a strong, proud member of the Scottish working class. Rather than indicating flaws in her work, Johnston’s inability to reconcile the contradictions and inconsistencies that emerge from this doubleness allow her to escape reinforcing generalizations about industrial working-class women and draw attention to, and authority from, the volatility of interpretation.

One way in which Johnston introduces a sense of ambiguity into “Napier’s Dockyard” is to address Napier himself as “Work,” slightly altering the recipient of her poem’s praise. Johnston’s descriptions of Napier’s nearby home (that “princely mansion”

that overlooks “hill and plain” [46, 51]) and the prayer she aims toward the success of his children make obvious that Johnston is, on the surface, writing about Napier. However, she declares that she will “only speak” to “dear Work” in the third stanza, shifting the reader’s focus to the labor of the dockyard and away from the man who owns and manages it (15). This substitution has a twofold effect on the reader, presenting dual perspectives at cross purposes. On the one hand, Napier is the personification of industrial labor that makes the country and its citizens “wealthy” both materially and culturally. Describing glimpses of the home’s interior, for instance, she commends the “Gothic towers” and architecture of his home, the paintings that adorn the walls, and the collection of literary talent his library displays: “Shakespeare, Milton,” “Burns, Scott, and Goldsmith” and “many more brave and distinguished men / Whose works for centuries yet will wear a gem” (47, 57-60). On the other hand, labor itself becomes the poem’s focal point through Johnston’s rhetorical address to “Work,” the thing that empowers men like Napier and without which this cultural and material capital might be lost. She ends the poem with a “farewell” to “dear Work,” asking that it “[r]emember [her] best wish shall be / Thy master’s welfare and success in thee” (101-102), remarkably separating Napier from labor only at the poem’s end (and intimating that these two had been separate all along). In the slippage between Napier and Work, Johnston shows that the master cannot function without the laborer, placing significant value and power in the work she herself performs for masters like Napier.

This double reading emerges even as Johnston attempts to join manager and laborer together in an industrial-national consciousness, connecting Napier and industrial

labor with the flow of “commerce” that brings “wealth and tidings” to Scotland (36, 42). She observes that the genius and success of Napier depends on the Clyde, the dockyard’s location, and combines the natural serenity of the scene with the industry that it accommodates, making nature / industry and manager / laborer interdependent in the formulation of national economic prowess. “Dear Work,” she writes:

You know not what a gorgeous sight
Thou art to me when wandering forth each night;
Inhaling the breeze of summer’s flow’ry scene,
Musing on nature’s lovely mantle green;
When all is still and silent as the grave,
When golden moonbeams kiss the silver wave
That rolleth gently o’er sweet Clutha’s breast
That gorgeous stream where commerce never rests;
Upon whose banks I’ve oft distill’d the dews
Of fervent love, and pour’d on thee my muse,
That prince of rivers that joins the mighty sea
That’s borne so many brave ships built by thee;
And will, I hope, yet bear a thousand more
With wealth and tidings to our Scottish shore (39-42).

The “gorgeous sight” the poet espies is at once Napier, labor, and the Clyde, the man walking along his dock, the work that takes place there, and the river that provides the setting for both. Remarking upon the “lovely green mantle” and typifying the Clyde as “that gorgeous stream where commerce never rests,” Johnston combines the natural and the industrial with a startling seamlessness. Johnston admires Napier as he walks along the bank in the evening, but through her address to him as Work, hints that it is the work of his laborers that has built “the many brave ships” his operation has sent out to sea. Although both Napier and labor itself have certainly brought “wealth and tidings” to Scotland, a point that Johnston indicates through her double focus, she also makes

ambiguous the origin of this power for Scotland. Is it in both the manager and the worker together, or in the manager *or* the worker?

As the factory girl whose mental and manual labors bring these relationships to life, Johnston also reveals the compelling role that she assigns to herself as a poet in this passage, signified by the almost striking nature of the poet's gaze. The "fervent love" that she has "distill'd" and "pour'd" on the Clyde in the past extends to Napier/Work and suggests that, along with nature, her muse is the industrial project itself. Johnston's gaze implies that she controls the power her subject has over her; Napier and the elements he represents are not outside of her reach when she, in her poetic musings, controls the organization of the scene. This act of looking bears a resemblance to prospect poems of the Romantic era, which Bridget Keegan defines as the "dominant form for writing about landscape, contemporary social questions and poetic vocation." This form, she argues, took an "additional resonance for labouring-class poets," pointing out that in these types of poems, "the [labouring-class] poet is always conscious of where he or she is *placing* him or herself, geographically, socially, and in terms of his or her relationship to particular details of the scene, to the literary tradition and the national culture" [author's emphasis] (68). Keegan also notes the importance of rivers in prospect poetry, observing that rivers perform "a personal function, to explore poetic vocation and the poet's specific or 'native' gifts, his or her uniqueness which is shared by the particular river of the region." Self-taught poets, she further notes, "worked with the rich and multiple resonances of this topos" and particularly found "their reliance on the river [...] actual and symbolic" (100-101). Considering that the Clyde forms a vital connection with

industry / nature, Napier / Johnston, and region / country, I would suggest that like her laboring-class predecessors, the river takes on a symbolic significance for Johnston as poet who uses it as the central image for representing her stake in the industrial labor, represented by Napier and his operations, which also speaks to Johnston's sense of her vocation as a poet. Johnston's authority to define through the gaze links her with the masculine power embodied by Napier and labor and casts such elements, including the poet's work, as essential to Scotland's "wealth and tidings."

The work done at Napier's dockyard reminds Johnston that the factory girl is also an essential component of Scotland's economic well being, a position she defines as one even more important than royalty near the poem's end. Reaffirming her commitment to Napier and to "Work" she announces:

I would not leave thee, dear beloved place
A crown, a scepter, or a throne to grace;
To be a queen—the nation's flag unfurl—
A thousand times I'd be a Factory Girl!
To live near thee, and hear thy anvils clink,
And with thy sons that hard-won pleasure drink.
That joy that springs from wealth of daily toil,
Than be a queen sprung forth from royal soil (89-96).

The work she sees and hears coming from Napier's dockyard substantiates the value she places on the labors of the working class and reminds the reader that it is through these labors that an industrious national character is sustained. This current of national sentiment becomes more explicit through Johnston's desire to align herself with the "wealth that springs from daily toil" rather than "a crown," "scepter," or "throne"—the "joy" she feels cannot be derived from the traditional seats of power because of her social

and political position. It is the factory girl who best contributes to and strengthens national economic power, as she suggests when placing the phrase “the nation’s flag unfurl” between the queen she wouldn’t wish herself to be and the factory girl that she “a thousand times” is. In this section of the poem, Johnston locates her authority and power in industrial labor, sanctioning the factory girl as a vital part of a larger national endeavor.

Johnston’s stress on industrial labor as the backbone of Napier’s operation and Scotland’s national wealth configures Johnston’s working-class position as one in which she holds a certain measure of power, an authority reinforced by work as the poet who brings all of these elements together. At the same time, the transposition of Napier and Work throughout the poem as whole codes production as a masculine activity by problematically drawing the two together. When cognizant of gender, Johnston compromises the worth she ascribes to herself as an industrial laborer, as becomes apparent when she laments that she can only speak to Napier / Work as she is—“a woman frail and weak” (16). Johnston again reverts to this characterization of herself when she asks Napier—but perhaps also the reader—if the blessings her poem offers to him and his family have no effect because “ ‘twas breathed by a woman weak and frail” (78). The acknowledgement of labor as power configures these as types of masculine power that she, as a woman, can only admire and regard. In another light, it may also indicate the pressure she felt to conform to what she thought Napier (and perhaps other middle-class readers) would expect of a laboring woman, since she was, in a sense, attempting to sell her poem to him; her claim to be a weak woman registers artificially in

its repetition, a seemingly obligatory gesture. These textual reminders of feminine weakness point illustrate the problematic intrusion of gender because of Johnston's felt need to perform to gender expectations.

It might seem as though Johnston appeals to Napier as a submissive subject because her position as a woman undermines her position as working class, yet there is evidence that something quite different motivates Johnston's pleas to weakness. In a surprising turn, Johnston characterizes her poem to Napier as the result of a weakness apart from a woman unable to perform manual labor like her male counterparts. Johnston claims that the poem represents:

The sproutings of a love-sick woman's strain
Whose hopes are centered now within thy walls,
One of thy noble sons my heart enthalls!
No marvel then I love to breathe thy name,
It cheers my heart and fans a secret flame;
No marvel I oft walk round thy dock,
Gazing intently on each secret spot,
Anxious to know when last my love stood there
That o'er it I might breathe a fervent prayer (20-28).

Although Johnston does not refer to this matter again in the poem, she may have had feelings for one of the workers at Napier's dockyard, a metaphorical son, suggesting that she considers herself to be "weak" because of unrequited love, not just because she is a woman. Johnston assigns herself a measure of influence in terms of her labor power, but her gender makes labor a hardship, if only because it gains her no favors with her object of affection. Even still, this element of the poem betrays the problematic intrusion that gender effects in Johnston's attempt to configure labor as power.

The effects of gender on Johnston's persona also strengthen and weaken her authority as a poet. Johnston links the "woman" with the "self-taught" poet in "Napier's Dockyard," but simultaneously notes that in this humble position, her words "may have power to move" because they are "drawn from truth and heartfelt love" (17-18). The modest literary effort of a female working-class poet ironically transforms into something that is more honest than what could be produced by male upper-class authors. She writes:

I cannot speak like scientific men
Whom literature gives colour to their pen,
Who clothe their genius in that golden robe
Wrought by learning, and not by nature's God.
Those gilded abstracts of high inspiration
Quoted out to gain man's admiration.
Give me origin—such I hold at bay
Who steal from authors of a bygone day;
Pampering pages with records unnumber'd
Robb'd from men who hath for centuries slumber'd (5-14).

Johnston recognizes that her poetic works lack the cultural capital afforded to male, upper-class artists, beginning with a move to efface the power of her own verse because it is written by a working-class woman. However, Johnston's description of these artists seems sarcastic and overwrought.

What is enabling about factory work for Johnston, and thus her writing on the subject, is not necessarily a question of her real views on factory work, but is the fact that she could quite willingly and deftly play both sides of the field. Johnston uses the sentimental (woman frail and weak) and the sexual (her approach to Napier's son) but also complicates it by relying on factory labor (both manual and poetic) to give herself authority. In the poem, Johnston's praise of work does at times ring false, but so do her

repeated self-deprecating comments about her position as a “woman frail and weak.” “Napier’s Dockyard” is not only a poem about labor, but about art and authority, as Johnston suggests that perhaps men with more learning could do a better job of writing about the subject than Johnston. Such moments exemplify the dynamicism with which Johnston constructs her representation of the factory girl and reveal class assumptions about art and labor.

Conclusion

The power that Johnston ascribes to her position as a laborer and a laboring poet reveals the more complex underside of the sexual / sentimental image of the factory girl, the side that this mainstream image works to hide. “The Factory Girl” serves specific rhetorical purposes for Johnston: it is as a means to argue for the factory girl as an independent being capable of self-care and self-representation; to transform reader sympathy for the factory girl into a viable avenue for fame and income generated by her poetry; and most significantly, to assert the value of women’s industrial labor in Scotland. Though often appearing to accomplish contradictory ends, Johnston’s engagement with dominant ideologies *and* oppositional modes of resistance prevents the factory girl from emerging as an exclusive symbol of oppression and pathos or moral and social chaos. Johnston does not merely overwrite the sexual / sentimental factory girl—the liberating potential of Johnston’s intervention does not lie in the presentation of a solid alternative. Rather, it is the complexity of the representation itself (and of the act of self-representation) that opens up alternate possibilities for re-imagining industrial working women.

CHAPTER IV

FACTORY GIRLS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION IN KATHLEEN WOODWARD'S *JIPPING STREET: CHILDHOOD IN A LONDON SLUM*

Imperceptibly the novel experience of taking my place [in the factory], a woman among women, began to lose its bloom. I found myself forever dwelling on the sufferings of the women about me. I was oppressed, suffocated by them.—
Kathleen Woodward, *Jipping Street* (1928)

When asked by editor and friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies to write the preface to *Life as We Have Known It*, a collection of autobiographical essays written by the working-class members of the Women's Co-Operative Guild in 1931, Virginia Woolf instead addressed an "introductory letter" to Davies in which she quipped that she "would be drowned rather than write a preface to any book whatsoever." "Books," she wrote, "should stand on their own feet... If they need shoring up by a preface here, an introduction there, they have no more right to exist than a table that needs a wad of paper under one leg in order to stand steady" (Davies xv). Published by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press, *Life as We Have Known It* may have been an exception since the fragmented essays of the guildswomen, Woolf observed, seemed in no way book-like. Unsure of its aim and purpose, she asked, "What is this book then, if it is not a book?" (xv)

In this chapter, I ask the same of Kathleen Woodward's *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum*, slightly amending Woolf's question: what is this autobiography then, if it is not an autobiography? While *Jipping Street* appears to be the self-portrait of a

factory girl's upbringing in the district of Bermondsey, London, Carolyn Steedman identifies it a "fictional" autobiography in which "truth and order do not seem to matter in the same way" as in conventional autobiography (Woodward xiv). She regards *Jipping Street* as a text that exists out on the "literary borderlands of the novel," a "case-history" or a "psychological narrative, rather than a historical one" (xiv, vii). While Woodward was raised in a working-class household in Bermondsey and worked as a machinist in a men's collar factory until she came upon a career in journalism, the street of the book's title is a false location and does not exist on a London map; the residents of *Jipping Street*, while perhaps reflections of "real people," have a Dickensian allegorical quality to them. Yet the author seems to be the protagonist of her own tale, unaltered by fictional characterization or pseudonym: Woodward was involved in the trade union movement as a young factory girl, much like the narrator of her book, and experienced many of the events *Jipping Street* describes. While not exactly an autobiography, *Jipping Street* is also not a bildungsroman, the female, working-class version of *David Copperfield*.¹⁹

Rather than viewing *Jipping Street* as something other than an autobiography, I regard it as an autobiography conscious of the limits of literary self-representation, a

¹⁹ Steedman explains that "Details of time, place and politics are used by Kathleen Woodward to construct a psychological narrative rather than a historical one, and because of this, the *meaning* of events described is of a different order from that of the very same events written about elsewhere" [author's emphasis] (vii). Following Steedman, other literary critics have discussed *Jipping Street* as something "not quite" an autobiography; both Sally Alexander and Patricia Johnson explicitly label it a "fictional autobiography" without qualification. Although I agree with Steedman that Woodward's book is perhaps more of psychological portrait than the uncontested record of Woodward's life, I take issue with labeling *Jipping Street* "fictional" because this assumes that (1) all autobiography is based on verifiable truth and (2) that all texts not completely "true" are then fictional. In my assessment, *Jipping Street* straddles generic lines because Woodward may have intentionally blurred the divide between "truth" and "fiction" in order to problematize the popular subjectivities of working-class women at the time, including her own. For more, see Steedman's introduction to the 1983 reprint of *Jipping Street*; Alexander, "A Room of One's Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias," (*Women: A Cultural Review* 11.3 [2000]: 273-88); and Johnson, *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social Problem Fiction*, (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2001, 181-86).

performance of the genre Woodward uses to critique the model of empowered female laborer that developed in and around life writing in the early twentieth century. Born in 1896, Woodward began work as a factory operative near the start of the First World War, coming of age at a time when the popularity of socialism, trade unionism, and labor politics in Great Britain was high. Although a person's labor did not directly translate to a particular party affiliation or organization, this political climate fostered a public sense of working-class identity and "the masses" were suddenly not only visible, but also quite vocal: economic insecurity, issues surrounding workplace rights, women's suffrage, and the development of the welfare state mobilized both male and female workers to speak for themselves and publicly advocate legislative reform. Working-class literature followed suit; "reading and writing literary texts" at this time, critic Pamela Fox explains, was thought of as "a strategic tool in the class war" (46). Prose replaced poetry as the chosen genre of working-class writers and readers, since labor journalism, novels, and autobiographies featured writers as literate and educated—poetry signified an earlier oral culture that was perhaps culturally valuable, but not politically viable. Autobiography in particular became a popular genre that could present, indeed create, laboring selves that were articulate and politicized.

This was especially the case for women workers who were sometimes encouraged by social organizations like the Women's Co-operative Guild to write life stories that could influence political opinion on women's issues. From 1889-1921, Guild secretary Margaret Llewelyn Davies collected letters and essays by guildswomen that addressed many of these issues through personal writing and detailed their political activism,

publishing these texts as *Life as We Have Known It* in 1931. Women's suffrage also gave voice to working women involved in the cause; for working-class suffragette Annie Kenney, performing the laboring self enabled the political activism on the platform that became the basis for autobiographical self-representation. A factory girl and militant suffragette, Kenney wore her factory shawl and clogs when giving public speeches and leading protests in order to motivate other working women to agitate for the vote. Consequently, she felt that her value as a working-class participant in the suffrage movement authorized the life writing that would become her autobiography, *Memories of a Militant*.

While the politicization of the working classes may have enabled working women like the contributors to *Life as We Have Known It* and Annie Kenney to represent themselves through their labors, Kathleen Woodward rejects the form and the content of such claims in *Jipping Street*. Woodward links her refusal of a feminine working identity to the rejection of an autobiographical self because of the underlying assumptions these writers make about textual embodiment and self-representation: that there is a direct correlation between the real and the written self, and that the act of life writing generates a textual authority able to transform into a powerful socio-political authority. The failure of working identities for women becomes clear in Woodward's treatment of factory girls in *Jipping Street*, women who at first appear empowered by their working identities, but in due course are merely literary figures on the page who stand powerless against ravages of illiteracy, poverty, and deeply embedded class and gender bias. While Woodward initially acknowledges the powerful potential of the factory girl as a working identity, she

ultimately reveals her as unable to actualize large-scale change beyond the political moment that allows working-class women's voices to be heard.

Therefore, *Jipping Street* is an autobiography in that it is that is mindful of the limits of autobiography as a working-class literary genre and of the factory girl as an enabling sort of working-class femininity. Woodward capitalizes on the power and popularity of life writing in this period as a means of exposing the failure of the working subjectivities it produces for women: for Woodward textual identities do not transform working-class women into social and political beings capable of actualizing localized, everyday change. They are merely figures in the text that cannot move beyond particular historical and social contexts, beyond the confinement of class and gender self-definition.

***Life as We Have Known It* and *Memories of a Militant*: Working Women and Autobiographical Self-Representation**

In order to take account of the literary and historical moment to which Woodward responds with *Jipping Street*, I want to first examine two texts that illustrate the possibilities autobiographical self-representation for working-class women: *Life as We Have Known It* (1931), Davies' collection of autobiographical essays and letters written by members of the Women's Co-Operative Guild, and *Memories of a Militant* (1924), the autobiography of factory girl and militant suffragette Annie Kenney.

Davies' collection exemplifies moves to connect the industrial and domestic labor of working-class women by the English Co-operative Movement, a revival of Owenite socialism. The Guild regularly solicited publishable life writing or personal

correspondence from its members, making use of these texts to sway public opinion on issues that affected laboring mothers and wives. Carolyn Tilghman points out that the life writing of guildswomen gave them opportunities to “define and articulate their experiences on a personal level, and to act as political agents who could effectively improve their life circumstances” (594-95).²⁰ Through autobiographical writing, members of the Guild “gained an increasing sense of narrative control and empowerment that changed their self-perception,” encouraging them to view themselves as subjects who could change discourse, rather than be the “object” of it (593).

Annie Kenney turns this potential inside out, instead using her origins as a laborer and involvement with militant suffrage as the vehicle for narrating her life story in *Memories of a Militant*. Kenney’s ability to organize working-class women for the cause of suffrage hinged on her identity as a factory girl and, as a result, she became a key player in the Women’s Socialist and Political Union (WSPU). Her leadership as a working-class lobbyist sanctions the autobiographical self she creates in *Memories*—calls for it, in fact: she writes that the “best way” to set down the narrative of the “Militant Movement for Women’s Suffrage” is “to write [my] life” (v). For both the guildswomen and Kenney, writing the self as an embodied, political self provides working-class women

²⁰ The Women’s Co-operative Guild was not the only organization that requested autobiographical writing from its constituency. In their study *Socialist Women*, June Hannam and Karen Hunt explain that it was not uncommon for big name political groups, like the Socialist Democratic Federation and the Independent Labor Party, to request the personal writing of members for the purpose of creating an organizational history or lineage; the ILP, for example, called for its members to “look back after 1913 on [the Party’s] early history and encouraged [them] to write reminiscences of the pioneering days” (16). What sets the Guild apart is that it was the only organization of its size and scope to request life writing from working-class women alone—and then used this writing to lobby for social and political change on behalf of its constituency. For more, see Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Carolyn Tilghman, “Autobiography as Dissidence: Subjectivity, Sexuality, and the Women’s Co-Operative Guild” (*Biography* 26.4 [2003]: 583-606).

with a measure of agency: autobiographical representation begets social and political representation (and vice versa).

Although unpublished until 1931, *Life as We Have Known It* consists of letters and essays that Davies collected as the General Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild from 1889-1921, emerging from a historical moment which inaugurated a legitimate view of women as laborers through the trade union movement and development of Labor politics. As I discussed in Chapter One, women who performed waged labor outside the Victorian home upset the divide between public and private spheres, creating a sort of "unnatural" femininity, troubling the concept of the family unit, and threatening male economic and political power. Thus, Chartists and male trade unionists in the first half of the nineteenth century used the rhetoric of domesticity as a means to exclude women from both the factory and the political arena. However, the language of male unionists in the late nineteenth century moved away from the domestic framework for discussing women's labor and explicitly acknowledged the problem between male and female laborers as one of unfair competition: women came cheaper than men, receiving lower wages for the same work.²¹ Carol Morgan notes that while heavy industries, like metalworking, still relied on exclusionary tactics to remove women

²¹ Of course, the problem of women undercutting men in industry was nothing new in the 1880 and 90s; Anna Clark writes that this problem was a foundational issue underwriting calls to exclude women from labor as artisanal work was slowly replaced by machines in the period between 1780-1826; outcries against the lower-waged, unapprenticed work of both women and immigrants (the Irish in particular) were commonplace in trade union rhetoric between 1830-1850. However Carol Morgan argues that in the late nineteenth century, this argument transformed from a discourse of exclusion into one of inclusion as it became a powerful strategy for trade unions to organize female workers, especially those who were single, unmarried wage earners. For more, see Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) and Carol E. Morgan, *Women Workers and Gender Identities, 1835-1913* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

from factories, public negotiations of wage inequity helped women's labor "to be recognized and legitimated" (169). Although gender divisions were to some degree maintained "by the establishment of separate trade union organizations," Morgan argues that "considerable cooperation among union leaders and workers, male and female, existed, as all were [then] struggling for the same ends" (169).²² In conjunction with the development of woman-specific trade unions, this type of cooperation helped to make women both visible and vocal in trade reform and authorized their work as industrial laborers.

Even so, a separation emerged between single female laborers and those that were married and, in part, it was this division that the Women's Co-operative Guild worked to eradicate. Single women were thought much easier to organize for political purposes and were more welcome in socialist groups and industrial trade unions than their married counterparts; for example, sects of the Socialist Democratic Federation often leveled calls for exclusion toward married working women, as they argued that single women, like male workers, were breadwinners and had to earn their own living.²³ Therefore, the Guild

²² Specifically, including women in trade unions was seen as an effective means to combat sweated work, which was usually taken from factories by middlemen who sold the work to women to do in the home at a low rate. Sweated work undercut both men and women who worked in factories and was a particular evil that union workers crossed gender lines to eradicate. Moreover, it softened calls to keep women at home; when faced with the option of having them work in factories for comparable wages or in the home an extremely low rate as sweaters, male workers generally agreed that the first option was the lesser of the two evils.

²³ Generally, the SDF followed Engels' argument in the *Origins of the Family* that "paid labor was a necessary precondition for women's emancipation... Only then would women be full members of their class and be able to fight with their proletarian brothers to achieve a socialist society where women would be fully emancipated" (Hunt 118-119). "Women's work" in the SDF's lexicon referred to labor in the public sphere and, owing to the SDF's rigidly Marxist framework, actually served a purpose in bringing about revolution against capitalism. For further discussion on the SDF's uneasy relationship with women's issues and feminism, see Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

took as its mission the concerns of married workers in order to widen the public voice of working-class women, its singularity resting on a reframing of domestic, household work as skilled labor and combining the politics of production with those of consumption. Labor done by women, whether inside or outside the home, was still labor after all; therefore, the group employed the tone of industrial trade unions to bring attention to and mitigate domestic injustices, leading Davies to describe it as “a sort of trade union for married women” (qtd. in Gillian Scott 2). Additionally, the Guild educated its members in principles of cooperation by encouraging them to participate in a politics of consumption: owning and shopping in Co-operative stores, participating in housing and rent strikes, arguing for fair food prices and against profiteering. Working-class wives were wage earners *and* household consumers, which the Guild argued gave them a unique vantage point from which to challenge and expose the nature of the capitalist system and to participate more fully in “the labour world and in national life” (Davies xiii). As a result, the Guild’s ability to reconcile their members’ contradictory positions as both laborers and homemakers authorized a powerful gendered class subjectivity that could be used to articulate the problematic double bind faced by working-class women who straddled the public sphere of work and the private sphere of the home.

Most importantly, the Guild worked to empower the guildswomen by providing them with the tools to engage in public debate and encouraging them to produce life writing about their experiences. The Guild argued the combination of domestic and industrial labor prepared working-class women for public roles; as Gillian Scott frames it, Guild leaders assumed that if wives and mothers “could balance household budgets, and

carry out the range of tasks involved in housework” while simultaneously laboring outside the home, then they could just as well “tackle wider social questions and participate in public life” (74). To this end, the Guild offered women courses in foundational public and governmental procedure and trained them to be effective public speakers (75). It was Margaret Llewelyn Davies, however, who personally encouraged and coached the guildswomen in their life writing. Tilghman explains that Davies allowed the guildswomen to “tell their stories without the intervention of an external observer who interpreted their experience on the assumption that working-class women did not have the rational capacity to do so” and thus “established a power base from which they began to define and articulate their experiences” (594-95). Although Davies directed women to the issues they addressed in their writing, she seems to have felt her role as an editor did not authorize her to change the structure or language of the guildswomen’s efforts; in the introductory letter to *Life*, Virginia Woolf remembers that Davies handed her the packet of letters and essays that made up the collection as they were, unmarked, untouched, and unedited (xxix).²⁴ To Davies, the letters and essays comprised the strongest evidence for arguments in favor of changes for women on a number of social and political issues,

²⁴ Nonetheless, Davies’ direction of the guildswomen toward particular issues that she felt most affected them is unsettling. Tilghman argues that by attempting to gather compelling evidence for the political causes she felt required the Guild’s involvement, Davies is akin 19th century social investigators Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth in that she was a middle-class woman who “sought to gather testimonies and data concerning guildswomen’s life conditions” and so “can be considered a privileged social investigator who revealed previously ignored concerns of working-class women, but who also maintained the position of middle-class privilege and control” (591). However, Tilghman implies that the benefits of Davies’ feminist agenda and wish for the women to write their narratives themselves outweigh the disturbing fact that Davies dictated what they would write about and when. What troubles me is that, however unintentional it may have been, Davies’ direction suggests that the guildswomen were unable to recognize their own needs or were unable to act in their own best interest without the intervention of a privileged outsider. Tilghman does admit that “the issue of Llewelyn Davies’ position as an outsider and an autocrat” in regard to her work in the Guild and as an editor “is not easily resolved” (593).

notably in regard to public health care for women and divorce reform.²⁵ Trained to speak “boldly and authoritatively,” as Woolf’s introductory letter to *Life* describes them, the guildswomen were able to take ownership of their representation, both textually and politically, and to represent themselves as agents of social and political change through autobiographical writing.

Nearly all of the contributors to *Life as We Have Known It* acknowledge the Guild as the thing that “brought [them] out” from silence; each writer includes testimonials in their essays that indicate that the organization not only taught them how to combine their gender and class identities but also enabled them to express it in various discursive contexts. As one anonymous guildswoman writes, the lessons she has learned through Guild activities “[gave her] courage to speak boldly, even at Men’s Meetings outside the Co-operative Movement,” allowing her to become “more public-spirited” (141). Mrs. Layton, a midwife, remarks that the Guild helped her see that “education was to be the worker’s best weapon” and “made [her] a fighter” (49). The fight Mrs. Layton cultivates as a member of the Guild gave her voice in both the public and private arena. Her experience as a midwife, she explains, was “very useful when the Guild had the Campaign for the National Care of Maternity... I was invited to speak on the first deputation connected with it” (49). However, she also felt authorized to argue for her rights within her own home:

²⁵ For example, the guildswomen’s personal stories, written in the form of letters, were solicited by Davies and brought before the Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes (published in 1915 as *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*); these letters helped the Guild lobby for divorce reform in 1912, had a significant impact on the passage of the National Insurance Act of 1911, and instituted a push to make maternity benefits the legal property of women in 1914.

...when I was ready to buy my house I had put the mortgage in my name. This caused a little friction between my husband and myself. He thought that although I had earned and saved the money, the house should certainly be bought in his name. He said it did not look respectful for a woman's name to be put on the deeds when she had a husband alive. I thought different, and so the house is mine. (48)

Recognizing that the "education" provided by the Guild enabled a working-class feminine voice that could resonate in public and private contexts, Mrs. Layton's testimonial illustrates the value of self-actualization possible when laboring women are capable of self-representation, political consciousness, and protest. As she proudly points out, her experience as a midwife was valued for both professional and political reasons in the public arena; additionally, her occupational status not only provided the wages that paid for her home, but the sense of self-worth it affords her to voice her independence to her husband and overturn the standards of accepted social respectability.

While the labor that the guildswomen perform might not always offer such rewards in and of itself, these writers still acknowledged it as the catalyst for public and political involvement. The trimming performed by Mrs. Scott, another contributor to *Life* and a felt hat worker, was often tedious and difficult, but she grants that her occupation has led her to a valuable political activism. Mrs. Scott eventually realizes that many of the women around her work for "'honour,' priding themselves in never putting a crooked stitch in their work, in fact giving their lives to their work" without considering other ways of developing self-worth or other means of achievement (88). This realization allows her to make a connection between her labor and need for reform; she consequently develops an "interest in real things," not merely an old-fashioned pride in making straight

stitches, joins a union for felt hatters, and convinces many of her co-workers to do the same (86). Her involvement in her local union later transformed into a position as treasurer of The Women's Labor League, followed by work on Guild committees, and at the time of writing her essay, she sits as a magistrate (justice of the peace) and is able to exercise power in her local community. For Mrs. Scott, her laboring identity jump starts her political career and gives her the credibility to make way into public life and local politics, and so is valuable as a means to represent herself socially and politically.

In conjunction with political activism driven by her experiences in the labor world, literature and literary practice inculcate in Mrs. Scott a critical awareness of textual representation that she argues is essential for working women to take control of their own narratives. Identifying herself as a life-long reader, Mrs. Scott lists a diverse range of authors she considers favorites—from J.M. Barrie to George Eliot—and notes how books have influenced her thinking on everything from the “longing and stretching out after dreams and ideals” to “religion” and family life (92-93). Most influential on her views of working-class life has been H.G. Wells, in whose novels she discovers familiar character types, for he “hits off the class we belong to” so well (93). Recording the myriad ways in which particular authors have raised in her an awareness of how “people are regarded as pawns in a game,” she recommends that Wells and other authors “should be read by the workers because they find a different point of view and how we are thought of by the other class” (94). Through literacy and literary work, workers can understand other representations of themselves in order to speak back, as she does in her own essay by not taking literary representation at face value and “testing things for

[herself]” (81). It is through the Guild’s encouragement of political activism, literacy, and life writing, she writes, that working women can learn “to become articulate” and “to express themselves”: the autobiographical act represented by her essay holds great promise for speaking back to both textual and political representations of working-class women (101).

Life as We Have Known It also represents a kind of strength in numbers prevalent in working-class autobiography as a genre, for these women recognize themselves as part of a larger communal activism reflected in both their collective guild work and the book’s status as a collection of essays. The act of collective autobiographical self-representation embodied by *Life* reflects what Regenia Gagnier has described as the “social atom” model of working-class subjectivity, wherein the autobiographer’s personal story makes up a small part of a collective whole (in this case, female working-class experience). Each contributor featured in *Life* weaves her life story toward her eventual participation in the Guild, toward the community through which she has been empowered to speak for and write of herself. For Mrs. Yearn, a former factory worker turned “public spirited rebel,” the agency of speaking on one’s own behalf, which her narrative expresses through an extensive listing of her own political involvement, leads to a call for collective involvement from all guildswomen in local and national politics. She recommends that her own example should encourage other guildswomen to use their newfound voices in order to put up their own candidates for social and political positions newly available to them (106). Her story is only one, she suggests, that reflects what the Guild collectively

represents when its members are taken together, and each story told in *Life* represents, even in small measure, this powerful group identity.

Another formidable group identity built around labor, though not nearly as cohesive as that evidenced by the Women's Co-operative Guild, was that of working-class Edwardian suffragettes, many of whom used their experiences in the labor movement to push for women's votes between 1900-1914. Jill Liddington writes that the industrial north was "the *cradle* of the suffrage movement," as many of the women "who became community suffragettes either worked in a textile mill or in linked manufacturing jobs" [author's emphasis] (7).²⁶ Because many factory girls had been exposed to public and political discourse through their participation in unions and other socialist organizations, they became instrumental voices in the fight for women's votes.

Born in Springhead, Yorkshire in 1879, factory girl Annie Kenney was more than a community suffragette; she rose to prominence as a member of the Women's Social and Political Union through her ability to organize working-class women for the cause. First noticed by Christabel Pankhurst at an Oldham Trade Council meeting, the WSPU recruited Kenney as a platform speaker because of her great oratorical ability and her willingness to perform as a working-class agitator. Known for wearing her factory

²⁶ Liddington further points out that the specific regional centers of working-class suffragettes generally determined the tenor of their political tactics. In *Rebel Girls: Their Fight for the Vote* (2006), she suggests that Lancashire suffragettes were more radical than militant, with their "confidence to demand the vote for themselves [springing] from their jobs in the great cotton mills and from their political experience in the new labour movement" without violence. Militant working-class suffragettes from the Yorkshire region like Kenney, on the other hand, were less politically experienced but more "daring," seeing Votes for Women as "a battle of youth and energy" that meant imprisonment, hunger strikes, and violent threats against the liberal government until the vote was won (xii). Regardless of region, Liddington's analysis posits women's experiences as laborers as key to working-class participation in the movement—it gave them a sense of experience and power that made them confident in speaking out for women's rights to vote.

shawl and clogs while speech-making, Kenney became infamous in 1905 for her arrest after heckling Winston Churchill and Edward Grey at a Free Trade Hall meeting in Manchester, an event credited with the beginning of the adoption of militant tactics in the struggle for women's suffrage in Great Britain.²⁷ In 1906, she also famously gathered a group of factory girls, all dressed in their work clothes, to the home of Herbert Asquith, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and demanded votes for women until she was arrested. For Kenney, as well as for other lesser-known suffragettes, labor and the labor movement provided the experience and foundation, as well as the spirit and the fight, from which to argue for their rights to political representation. Not surprisingly then, Kenney's autobiography *Memories of a Militant* (1924) reveals an autobiographical subject who constructs herself politically out of her working identity; development from ordinary mill worker to the factory girl suffragette structures Kenney's self-realization as well as the book itself. Linking labor to politics, Kenney creates a narrative of the self that builds on multiple layers of representation: by representing herself as a factory girl in order to fight for women's political representation (through extension of the franchise), Kenney feels authorized to represent herself as an autobiographical subject.

From the outset of *Memories*, Kenney describes her life as one of continual search and discovery that culminates in her valued role as a militant suffragette: the quest of her life, she writes, "has been with one object in view, and that object has been to find

²⁷ Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst were both arrested for repeatedly interrupting the men's speeches by chanting the question: "Does the liberal government support votes for women?" Kenney was arrested at total of 13 times for similar disruptions and was one of the first militant suffragettes released from prison under the Cat and Mouse Act of 1913, wherein detained suffragettes conducting hunger strikes were no longer force-fed but instead temporarily released in order to regain their health (after which they would need to return to serve out their sentence).

myself” (1). From her childhood onward, Kenney searches out literary models around which she can narrate, and thus, understand, who she is. Many of these models are drawn from romance; she imagines that she is a heroine like those in the fanciful tales her mother reads of the London poor and in the weekly papers she and her fellow factory girls “used to go in shares” to purchase, which contained stories of “Mayfair, dukes, and factory girls” (16). Unable to find something that fit and allowed her to interpret herself as something other than “a little dunce,” Kenney finds herself aimless and restless. “I was not conscientious about anything,” she reflects. “I just acted” (5). Even while showing strong leadership skills after taking on part-time work in the mill at age 10, her capabilities were hindered by her impulsive “devil-may-care-come-and-go” personality; she often leads the other factory girls into varieties of mischievous behavior, like skating on a forbidden pond or climbing the tall factory fence (and nearly falling and breaking her arm) (12).

On a symbolic level, Kenney’s tendency to try on imagined, romantic selves and her impulsive nature reflect her inability to organize her conception of self as well as prefiguring the beginning of her autobiography: as Kenney explains the various texts and contexts through which she tries to discover herself, *Memories* meanders through short anecdotes and reflection without connecting them. In the first two chapters, the reader is rapidly taken through educational experiences, both in school and in the home, Kenney’s current thoughts on religion and spirituality and what these have meant to her, and discusses the struggles of her parents to support a household of twelve children (1-16). It is not until Kenney begins working in the factory that the narrative evens out and builds

toward her eventual involvement in the WSPU. Kenney's narrative becomes more detailed in this section of the text as she lays out the specific qualities that helped her to speak out for herself as a defense against subjugation; watching her fellow workers stand up for their rights against the labor mistress under which they toiled, whom Kenney describes as a harsh "God-fearing hypocrite," taught her to do the same (15). In the other factory girls, she discerns the qualities that tempered her mischievous impulses and came to characterize Kenney as an activist: defensive and proud, able to quickly sum up character and full of "open-handed generosity to workmates in trouble or illness" (16). Through this realization, readers see Kenney become more purposeful in her behaviors and actions as the narrative drives toward her first introduction to Christabel Pankhurst: she attends night classes at Ruskin College in order to improve her education, joins a local chapter of the Independent Labor Party and, recognizing the need for women to hold leadership positions in labor organizations, serves on the committee of a local union. Through her experience as a factory worker, Kenney feels authorized to speak out against injustice and through political activism and burgeoning knowledge of socialism, develops the ideas and the tools to do so. The birth of the laboring self organizes her experience and lays the (personal and narrative) groundwork for her participation in the WSPU.

A combination of Kenney's working identity and her abilities as an orator made her attractive to the WSPU, an organization that, unlike the Lancashire-based National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), had a low number of working-class participants. Patricia Johnston argues that because Kenney's recruitment into the WSPU hinged on her position as a factory girl, she was able to see this position as a "boon rather

than a liability,” and she continued to represent herself as a factory girl even after she quit factory work to participate in the WPSU full time (180). Kenney writes that at the beginning of every public speech she made, “I had to start by telling them I was a factory-girl and a Trade Unionist” (30). Throughout *Memories*, she is particularly invested in the gender / class terms of her involvement as a factory girl in the suffrage movement; she carves out the niche through which she is able to gain social and political prominence but also through which she comes to understand and articulate herself across the course of the book. Within the context of the women’s movement, Kenney is able to locate value in her working identity, a connection which is made and smoothed out through the narrative trajectory of her autobiography.

Because of changing attitudes toward women’s labor, the gendering of politics through the suffrage movement, and emphasis on the cultivation and uses of literacy for working-class writers, autobiographical writing allowed working women to publicly merge gender and class into a powerful subjectivity through which they gained entry into local and national discourses. Through autobiographical self-representation, the authors of *Life as We Have Known* and *Memories of a Militant* construct their working identities as the means by which they enter social and political contexts or write themselves from it. Under the political circumstances, self-writing was an active enterprise through which these authors could become agents of change for all working-class women. Yet, when thinking carefully about the publication dates of both *Life* and *Memories*, these texts almost seem nostalgic for the moment in which these subjectivities gained a public face: *Life As We Have Known* It was published more than fifteen years after Davies collected

the women's essays and very title of Kenney's autobiography, *Memories of Militant*, recommends it as exactly that—a memory—written several years after women over 30 obtained the vote in 1918. Because *Life* and *Memories* were written and / or published beyond the historical moments that produced them, they may only be attempts to hang onto the fleeting power of self-representation interrupted by war and obscured by increasingly esoteric literary pursuits that questioned the very social categories through which these women found voice and power. The women hold faith in autobiographical self-representation as the means to claim agency through a kind of truth-telling in the intersection of gender and class, but their texts fall flat outside of the historical moment that authorizes them.

It is the belief that these authors seem to hold in the power of self-representation with which Kathleen Woodward takes issue in *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum*. As both the title of an autobiography and the locale in which Woodward sets her narrative, *Jipping Street* symbolizes the literary shape and the mental landscape of working-class feminine subjectivity. She reveals not only how women's working identities form through the gendered class consciousness made accessible by autobiographical writing, but also argues against these identities as enabling, concluding that they only “keep one in one's place”—both in the identities and the historical moments that produce them, as the adolescent Woodward realizes on the verge of entering the adult workforce:

...it seemed to me [...] that all the world was a continuation, an expansion of Jipping Street. It bounded my horizon, and I tremble when I consider Jipping Street in the light of our ever-advancing psychology; for the psychologist would

give us as little reason to hope as the theologian he would replace, if it be so true that early influences are so potent, so impressing, so inescapable. I hardly know if there is much to choose between being born in sin—or Jipping Street. (23)

If we read “Jipping Street” as “class” in the passage above, it is clear that one has little choice in being anything other than a working-class subject if one has been born into it or has developed a sense of one’s self through it. Even if one aspires to leave Jipping Street, to move beyond the boundaries of classed experience, these boundaries bind self-definition in ways that are not liberatory. For the women of *Jipping Street*, then, class consciousness does not offset or reframe gender in enabling terms: to be a working-class woman is restrictive and limiting, giving individuals little hope of defining themselves outside of social categories and of creating large-scale change that could impact or improve the quality of their everyday lives.

***Jipping Street* and the Limits of Autobiographical Self-Representation**

That Jipping Street, or class identity, follows one beyond its boundaries seems to have been a significant problem for Kathleen Woodward as professional writer. Only a year before composing her own autobiography, Woodward wrote and published a biography of the queen, *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* (1927), which was well-received by reviewers as “exceedingly interesting” and “charming,” although some found the work “tedious” in her tendency to tell and not show (“one might wish that the writer had concentrated more on incidents and anecdotes [than on interviews and explication],”

wrote one *Bookman* reviewer).²⁸ What actually made the book worth reading for *Queen Mary*'s critics was the "knowledge that this author is a former factory girl" ("*Queen Mary*" 5). As if in answer to critical focus on her past, Woodward published *Jipping Street* in 1928, leading still more commentators to praise the "London factory hand who wrote the queen's life" (qtd. in Woodward xvi). Regardless of who she might become as a writer, she would always be the "London factory hand"; the mythical Jipping Street would indeed bind Woodward's horizons.²⁹

Given the critical response to *Queen Mary*, Woodward may have been anxious about her social identity and its possible effect on her literary career, for unlike other factory-girls-turned-journalists, she did not identify as a working-class writer; Woodward wrote professional biographies about famous personages, not about working-class politics or labor issues. In part, *Jipping Street* may be an ironic statement on the professional restrictions the label "factory girl" imposed on Woodward's reputation as a writer, given that *Queen Mary* reviewers focused more on her background than on the merits of the work. Perhaps this intent explains the slight oddness about *Jipping Street* that leaves readers like Steedman questioning the exact nature of the text: What is truth and what is fiction is uncertain as Woodward appeals to all-too-convenient working-class stereotypes,

²⁸ "*Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study*," (*Bookman* 73.435 [1927]: 5).

²⁹ It is worth noting here that Woodward spent more of her life as a professional writer than a factory operative. According to Steedman's introduction to *Jipping Street*, Woodward began working in a Bermondsey factory around 1910 and quit somewhere between 1920 and 1925. After the publication of *Queen Mary* and *Jipping Street*, she "worked her passage across the Atlantic as a stewardess, worked as a receptionist at a London club, wrote children's stories, worked as a freelance journalist, and on the staff of the *Daily Express*" (Woodward x). While in America, she was a staff writer for the *New York Times*, her articles consisting mainly of biographical profiles of famous British and American persons. Very little information about her life is available after the appearance of her last book *The Lady of Marlborough House*, a rewriting of *Queen Mary*, published in 1938. She died in 1961.

sets her childhood in a non-existent location, and cultivates a narrative voice that is subtly indifferent to the stunning events the book recounts. These qualities appeared as suspiciously overwrought to her contemporary reviewers as well. One article in *The Saturday Review* notes that Woodward pushes the stereotype of working-class violence to the edge of reality as “such brutality seems a shade darker than the level of drab these days.” The reviewer stops short of labeling *Jipping Street* a fictional narrative and instead describes Woodward’s project as “a creative account” of her life intended to reveal “what it is good for us to know” (512).

What Woodward thought it “good for us to know” may go beyond a desire to show readers how the other half lives, as this reviewer’s comments imply. By experimenting with the autobiographical form, she reveals the restrictions imposed on working-class women by the textual representations they create, one of which is the empowered laboring self. If working-class women were able form an authoritative voice by reconciling gender and class through autobiographical representation, then Woodward’s book, as a kind of response, highlights the provisional nature of this subjectivity by disrupting its literary shape. *Jipping Street* features the narrative of an autobiographical *I*, but one that is disconnected from a proper name in the text; although readers can assume that this *I* is the Kathleen Woodward listed on title page, she does not make this correspondence clear otherwise. Woodward traces out her development from childhood to adulthood, but focuses much of the narrative’s events on the women around her, leading readers to wonder who, exactly, *Jipping Street* is about. She represents the women of Jipping Street as little more than their words, their articulations (or

inarticulations), a symbolic gesture toward the limits of language to create, and through creation empower, social beings capable of self-representation. Through these features, *Jipping Street* questions the ways in which working-class women understand autobiographical self-representation as a means of critiquing the working identities their texts put forward.

In order to illuminate Woodward's examination of the autobiographical self, I read *Jipping Street* through what feminist critic Leigh Gilmore has termed the "technologies of autobiography": rhetorical practices and discursive modes that appear to "produce 'truth'" as determined by specific cultures and yet signify "identity as a network of representational practices in which the production of truth is everywhere on trial" (19). *Jipping Street* is best understood as a production of autobiographics, a concept that Gilmore proposes as crucial for analyzing the writing of women in studies of literary autobiography. Autobiographics provides us with a strategy for discerning how women use autobiographical representation against itself to reveal gender as something that "persistently performs as incoherence, contradiction, and a challenge" in a genre that favors the development of a coherent identity (2). Autobiographics, she writes:

Describe[s] those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine, not content with the literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge... Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation. (42)

As a strategy for autobiographical self-representation, Gilmore's concept imagines a conscious writer aware of the belief in an essential self that traditional autobiographies develop through features like the autobiographical *I* and a chronological life narrative that extends from childhood to adulthood. The writer then interrupts, contradicts, and resists these features as a means of troubling the vision of self as well as revealing its mode of construction; as gender is also a social construction, women writers can simultaneously interrogate "discourses of truth and identity" attached to gender through critique of autobiographical self-representation.³⁰ Therefore, the technologies of autobiography—the rhetorical and stylistic features that signal to us to a book's generic status as an autobiography—can unmoor the very foundations of representation and present the gendered subject as a troubled, evolving-and-retracting textual identity. Subsequently, the writer employs the resulting "interruptions and eruptions" as the means of autobiographical representation itself.

When viewed through the lens of autobiographics, the problems critics face in applying a generic label to *Jipping Street* arise from its remarkable self-consciousness of

³⁰ Although Gilmore's readings of women's text recommend female autobiographers as especially engaged in autobiographics, she resists coding autobiography as the domain of the male subject and autobiographics as the domain of the female subject because the "construction and codification of gendered personhood" are culturally and historically specific (10). I mention this here because I am arguing that Woodward's intervention is especially conscious of the empowered subjectivity working *women's* autobiographies promoted in the early twentieth century; while not constructing the essential or authoritative male self of, say, Augustine or Rousseau, the guildswomen and Kenney do create identities that are contextually authoritative—the political and social circumstances under which these were written legitimizes this authority. Gilmore argues that the gendered dimensions of autobiography "cannot be explored mainly through the compulsory lumping together of all male-authored texts [...] and all female-authored texts"; foregoing this, questions of gender and the authority of self-representation afforded to the autobiographical subject "can usefully be enjoined at a more specific level, at the level of each text's engagement with the available discourses of truth and identity (12-13). The social and political shifts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made acceptable, and in some cases endorsed, feminine working identities that render women's autobiographical selves authoritative; these, I'm suggesting, constitute the "discourses of truth and identity" to which Woodward responds in *Jipping Street*.

genre, for the features of autobiographics call into question the very foundations on which a text can be termed an “autobiography.” Typically, autobiographies are deemed true if they appear to tell a life story through events, trials, and relationships that the writer has personally experienced and the structures of autobiography—the correspondence of the author’s name with the autobiographical *I*, parallels between narrative and personal development of a coherent self, for instance—signal this truthfulness to us. Autobiographics, however, more adequately describes a text that blurs the line between fact and fiction in order to highlight the constructed (and contested) nature of truths, of identities and of subject formation. Woodward’s “autobiography” blurs this line as a means of interrupting the representations of working-class women who position their identities in relation to their work and resists the autobiographical model of coherent selfhood on which the authority of these working identities depend.

The most apparent sign that *Jipping Street* raises the issue of self-representation is through Woodward’s staging of an autobiographical *I* that is never referred to by a proper name. The *I* of conventional autobiography signifies an implicit understanding between the reader and the writer that the pronoun stands in for the author, a “contractual identity” that Gilmore refers to as one “site of experimentation” in an autobiographic text (93). In *Jipping Street*, it’s never certain that the *I* actually refers to Woodward. Her experimentation is subtle: although the story is told through the first person point of view, this *I* is not attributed to Woodward directly or given a fictional name that registers a character based on the author. Other characters do not refer to this *I* by a proper name in reported speech. Proper names, Gilmore explains, act as a signpost to a stable subject that

exists outside of the autobiography because names provide a concrete referent to a person and “assert an identity and continuity between the self and language”; by detaching the pronoun and proper name, Woodward breaks this referential connection and highlights discontinuity between body and word (87). Woodward’s *I* signals the slippage between language and “the world,” between the words on the page and the body that writes them. Summarily, writing the self does not necessarily make one more “present,” authoritative, or legitimate as a socio-political agent in *Jipping Street*. To whom the *I* refers is less important, it seems, than to what it refers: *Jipping Street*’s pronoun symbolizes a textual self that may not correlate to a real self beyond the text.

Woodward’s unmooring of the *I* from a name throws into relief the relationship between representation and the real that, in their belief in the power of self-representational agency, other working-class female autobiographers seem to take for granted: the *I* of the text as an essential mirroring of a “real” person. In *Autobiographics*, Gilmore notes that writers and readers ignore the problematic correlation between representation and reality through a function of metaphor wherein the autobiographical *I* is taken to stand in for a real self. She argues that the *I* appears as a “metaphorical resonance of *reality*, a metaphor that functions as a trope of truth beyond argument, of identity beyond proof, of what simply is” [author’s emphasis] (67). The metaphoric function of the *I* in the autobiographies of working-class women is extremely important to the authority acquired between textual and actual self; if the *I* does not refer to a real person, then autobiographical representation cannot lead to social and political representation. Impelled by a desire for textual identities to correspond to actual ones, the

power of the autobiographical *I* as a metaphor is easily assumed because the real life “seems so obvious that it barely deserves further explanation” (Gilmore 68). Female working-class autobiographers in the early twentieth century not only take for granted the relationship between truth telling and referentiality that autobiography seems to support without question, but also depend upon it for authorization as social and political selves.

However, Gilmore points out that it is the temporality of *metonymy* that in fact signifies “the real” and can be taken advantage of by the autobiographic text. Rather than reflecting a metaphorical real, Woodward’s *I* is instead a metonymic revision of the autobiographical self-representation of working-class women popularized in this period. The *I* as a metaphor for reality succeeds in *seeming* real through the repetition endemic to metonymy, so the truth any autobiography produces is always necessarily “a truth restructured and revised in its telling” across narrative time (Gilmore 84). Thus metonymy, Gilmore argues, finds its way into autobiography through “the continual production of identity as a kind of patterning sustained through time by the modes of production that create it” (69). The autobiographics of a text can then exploit these temporal revisions of the self to raise questions or present counter-narratives of self-representation. The distance Woodward creates between her name and *I* could be seen as surpassable through the metonymic function Gilmore explains; the proximity of the author to the pronoun may indicate the *I* as the real Woodward, since we continue to associate her with the *I* over the course of the narrative. Yet Woodward’s distance also creates a disjuncture between herself and the *I* that leaves the identity of the autobiographical subject—and the modes through which that identity is produced—open

to question. The lack of a name to which the *I* can refer recommends that the *Is* of working-class autobiographers are equally volatile. By denying the reciprocity of name / pronoun, Woodward also denies the evolved, coherent selfhood on which the autobiographical representations of her peers depend.

In advancing Woodward's experimentation with the *I*, I do not mean to suggest that Woodward is entirely absent from *Jipping Street* or that the account should be read as fictional; as I will discuss more fully in the next section of this chapter, Woodward did work in a factory throughout her adolescence, became politically vocal through union activities, and, because of the failure of these experiences, turned away from factory work and pursued a writing career. However, what I am claiming is that this autobiographical *I* registers *differently* than that of other female, working-class autobiographers. While the politicization of the working-class autobiographical *I* depends on an implicit belief in essential mirroring between the text and the world (the metaphorical real), Woodward constructs her *I* to invalidate this belief and deny the connection between textual and political subjectivity. Hers instead relies upon the contradictions that arise from the *metonymic* real as a way of illuminating the autobiographical subject as one that is always multiple and conflicted, changeable and shifting.

Besides the name and the *I* as a "site of experimentation" in the autobiographic text, Gilmore argues that emphasis on "the stories embedded in the story of the self and the figures of identity which constitute the technologies of autobiography" enable a text to "continue to foreground the issue of representation" (93, 157). She explains that

“tropes and figures” available to the female writer “compose the rhetoric of self-representation”:

Autobiography dramatizes the scripted nature of life by revealing the stories within stories we tell and are told about who we are and who we might become. It offers the insider’s account of the doubled narrative of the feminine, where the story a woman struggles to tell about herself is inscribed within the scripts she receives from her culture. (157)

Woodward accomplishes this in *Jipping Street* by concentrating much of the narrative on the women who shaped her view of selfhood as a child, and through these figures, she creates a typography through which we can read the subjectivities of laboring women as a whole.³¹ Rather than foregrounding her own experiences, Woodward organizes much of *Jipping Street* around her mother, a neighbor Jessica Mourn, and her friends Lil Reeds and Marian Evelyn, with each representing a type of working-class woman as constructed in the popular imagination: respectively, the tough-as-nails working-class mother, the solemnly religious neighborhood sick nurse, and one ostentatious and one illiterate factory girl (Lil and Marian, respectively). While it is not uncommon for an autobiographer to bring influential figures into his or her narrative, Woodward presents the women not only as influences but also as different versions working-class femininity. These women reflect the “stories embedded in the stories of the self,” drawing attention away from Woodward personally—the supposed subject of the autobiography—and to

³¹ The few critical assessments that exist of Woodward identify this quality as one that recommends we place the term “autobiography” in scare quotes when applied to *Jipping Street* and leaves readers wondering who (and what) this book is really about. Both Sally Alexander and Carolyn Steedman have indicated that *Jipping Street* tells the story of working-class women writ large. In her brief analysis of *Jipping Street* at the end of *Hidden Hands*, Patricia Johnson argues that the book clearly appropriates “cultural images” that typically represent working-class women and “seems less [Woodward’s] own story than the women around her” (181).

the ways in which working-class women come to understand and, by extension, write of the self.

Woodward's mother functions as the most prominent of these figures, so much so that it is the mother's description, not Woodward's, that greets the reader in *Jipping Street*'s opening lines: "The circumstances of my mother's life," she writes in the first sentence, "in no manner differ from the circumstances of the lives of those inarticulate people without number who compose the 'lower' classes" (3). From the outset, the mother functions as an illustration the working class as a whole, encouraging readers to regard the mother as an important model through which "working-class woman" can be articulated. Indeed, men hardly appear in *Jipping Street*, and when they do, they symbolize violence or inefficacy: Mr. Mourn, long deceased by the time Woodward comes to know his wife, was a hot-tempered sailor who used Jessica as a "punch ball" (41); Albert, the basketweaver who teaches Woodward about Marx and labor politics, is shockingly arrested for "slitting the throat of a little girl" (52); and Woodward's own father, bedridden and made emotionally sensitive by a long illness, "should have been a woman" according to Woodward's mother (15). In *Jipping Street*, it is the women of the working class who come to most clearly embody the narratives of the "inarticulate lower classes," not men; thus Woodward's mother makes legible the stories working-class women tell of themselves, stories that constitute the cultural scripts one must negotiate in order to tell the story of working-class women writ large.

As a washerwoman who tells her daughter stories while they work together, the mother also symbolizes the autobiographical act of telling stories of the self through

labor; as such, the mother's description as a laborer establishes a pattern of examining gender in relation to class in order to reveal hers as a strong, working identity. "You must see mother as she most familiarly comes back to me," Woodward insists: "From out of the wash-house in Jipping Street, for ever full of damp, choking, soapy steam from the copper" arises a face "pinkish purple, sweating, her black hair putting forth lank wisps that hang over her forehead and cling to the back of her neck. The hairpins in her hair rust in the damp and steam" (10). This strength is thrown into clear relief when Woodward introduces her father as a "delicate"; he even seems to be of a different class, as Woodward notes that the residents of Jipping Street regarded him as more of a "gentleman" than a working man (10). The juxtaposition of gender roles produced by Woodward's comparison of her parents further reinforces the text's positioning of women in relation to their work, and the endurance that her mother develops by performing difficult labor fosters a defiant personality that serves as a form of agency: she roughly demands payment from customers by wedging her foot in the door "lest it be shut in our faces without the washing money" (13) and does not hesitate to tell her parish's Board of Guardians that one cannot subsist entirely on "a diet of rice," growing more "dogged" in this insistence during an in-person appeal (17). While a thankless job, washing also provides the mother with one of the few areas in which she can achieve a certain standing and dignity. If anything, Woodward admits, her mother took pride in her authority as the household's sole breadwinner, as she acknowledges her washing work as the means through which she was able to escape a life of violence in her father's home and support a family in her husband's. Woodward recognizes, and admires, that it is

through her work that her mother is “singular... in her strength and poise” and becomes the lens through which Woodward later judges her own tenacity as a politicized factory operative (4).

More importantly, the actual labor Woodward’s mother performs sets the stage for storytelling, for it is among the “soapy clean washing” that Woodward “listen[s] to mother” tell of a violent childhood, the hard life of work that supports an invalid husband, tales that throw into relief the mother’s repeated rejoinder to hardships: “Life kicks you downstairs and then it kicks you upstairs” (12, 5). Although Woodward implies that one comes to know and articulate the working-class self through these stories and the context of labor, her internalization of her mother’s words and of her work leaves Woodward feeling more uncertain than sure about her own selfhood. Woodward explains that she “shall never know how much strength and resolution [her mother] gave to [her],” never know how much of her mother’s story is her own (7):

I could not discover in my own self either her grim acceptance of life, or her rigid endurance; and my days were spent in a bewilderment of unresolved protests, questionings and problems. I could and I did conceive of a world that was wholly different; and this was a torment no less than a relief. (20)

Woodward exposes the relationship between the self and the reading of the self through others as an act fraught with anxiety. Woodward’s inability to interpret the influence of her mother’s stories on her own identity is both a “torment” and a “relief,” illustrating the oscillations of identity in flux and denying the coherent wholeness of self-understanding embodied by the autobiographical act. Moreover, Woodward’s “questionings, problems” and the “different world” she conceives hint at a life beyond the working identity her

mother represents—although she’s unsure of what this otherness might indicate, so strong is the model. Through the figure of the mother, Woodward sets up a working-class code of gender that configures labor as the vehicle for the story of working women and the interpretive device for making meaning of the working-class feminine self. However, in efforts to interpret this code in regard to her own selfhood, she reveals the feminine laboring self as something more complex, a subjectivity that cannot be articulated by a single narrative or representation.

Indeed, Woodward’s preoccupation with the word “articulation,” with “words” in general, highlights the limits of language as a means of empowering working women. Whether one is articulate or not emerges as a great concern in *Jipping Street* as Woodward ruminates on the inadequacies of the verbal expressions and desires for literacy expressed by the women around her. She ultimately frames her mother’s repetition of “Life kicks you downstairs and then it kicks you upstairs” as a passive acceptance of the inequities she faces as the street’s washerwoman, a verbal defense that does nothing for her beyond the boundaries of Jipping Street. Jessica Mourn “greatly lament[s]” that she cannot read and write and, as Woodward dryly observes, “gave a most exaggerated importance to these proficiencies” without actually trying to learn them (35). Factory worker Marian Evelyn shows interest in education and literacy for political purposes but is “afflicted with an inarticulateness only rescued from the tragic by her acute sense of humor” (104-05). In her initial attempts to educate herself with works as varied as Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and the *Book of Common Prayer*, Woodward’s own engagement with words means little beyond what she sees on

the page as she “confess[es] that the sense of these books was often uncomprehended by me” (137). As the various “failures” of articulation and literacy by *Jipping Street*’s women imply, using words as a means of empowerment falls flat unless one can comprehend the sense behind them, because, on the face of it, words are just words. Even when one can read, write, and learn to use language as a means of personal and political self-representation, as Woodward’s experience shows, there is no guarantee that greater life choices, escape from the deprivations of poverty or agency through a working identity will result. The failure of language to enable working women to escape oppression symbolically reflects the failure of textual self-representation to do the same.

Woodward’s emphasis on articulation (and on failed articulation) leads Carolyn Steedman to argue that *Jipping Street* insists on “seduction and betrayal of words” in a working-class woman’s experience (Woodward xii). Woodward learns that words do little for political representation; believing that speaking out as a unionist and a socialist will raise the quality of life for working-class women early in her career as a factory girl, she later observes with some disgust that she feels “that the grievances we felt were worth something better than our windy rhetoric” (113). After trying to become like the women she interacts with and narrates throughout *Jipping Street* and the failures of political activism on their behalf, she withdraws completely from the burdensome world of working-class women to a white-washed room empty of everything but books—the room, she proclaims, is her “citadel” where she is removed from the pressing concerns of *Jipping Street* (133). But even away from the clamorous voices of the working class and the women, she cannot put *herself* into words. In the last chapter, she feels that the

“bonds” of Jipping Street are loosening and “familiar things have lost their meaning... but whither, to what end?” Although the “beautiful words ... beckon to me,” she writes, “I cannot shape this knowledge even to myself” (151). As Woodward cannot understand the sense behind the words she reads, and thus cannot use words with any measure of accuracy, she ends the book without a sense of who she is or who she may become. Although there is still faith in the power of literacy and self-articulation, Woodward’s story ends with a crippled sense of self-knowledge that cannot be put into words: beyond Jipping Street, read as a metaphor for working-class feminine experience, she knows not who she is or where to go next.

Jipping Street has many of the features of the classic autobiography: it focuses on the narrative *I*’s self-development and struggle to understand the self in relationship to the world, and its narrative continuity reflects this development. Yet Woodward’s odd detachment from the narrative *I*, focus on other women’s narratives, and emphasis on the failure of language leads us to examine not what working-class women’s autobiographies are, or how this book is or is not an autobiography, but instead to question what autobiographies do for the subjects who write them. For Woodward, the features of autobiography do not so much reflect the truth of a life as they constitute the testing ground for dominant representations of working-class feminine identity that meet her resistance at the book’s end. Resisting the dominant shape of autobiographical representation for working-class women in this period, Woodward also resists the acceptable intersections of gender and class that these representations take: the laboring identities of women are merely rhetorical strategies that, while sometimes useful, do not

change the story of one's life or make it viable outside of particular social or political contexts. Woodward's peers may have found autobiographical writing as a political act that asserts their right to speak and construct their own identities. However, Woodward's own narrative highlights the contingencies of this act, for self-representation seems to provide little leverage against the shifting displacements of identity within language itself.

***Jipping Street's* Factory Girls and the Limits of Working Identities**

Jipping Street can be seen as a response to a moment in literary history in which working-class women began to think and write of themselves as working identities that garnered a kind of authority in the socio-political arena. Once achieved, Woodward seems to ask, what does defining one's self as a laboring woman really accomplish—how does the working identity of women's autobiographical self-representation empower them beyond text and context? While Woodward offers no firm answers, she also has little faith in the power of women's labor and the form its literary self-representation takes to create an enabling, classed version of femininity. Thus, the working identity is not an emancipatory subjectivity in *Jipping Street*, but another aspect of subjection.

This sentiment becomes obvious in Woodward's treatment of the text's factory girls as they most clearly indicate the potential and the failure of an empowered gender-class consciousness. Two factory girls in particular, Lil Reeds and Marian Evelyn, illustrate the unsettling connections between labor and agency and make up figurative "horizons" that bracket Woodward's own experience as a factory worker. The

independence of Lil and activism of Marian Evelyn encompass the enabling potential of the factory girl, which Woodward takes on as she enters the workforce and labor politics as an adolescent factory operative. However, Lil and Marian also exemplify the failures of the factory girl as an empowered subjectivity, a failure emphasized by their seeming “literariness” in the *Jipping Street*. Through Lil and Marian Evelyn, Woodward proposes that the factory girl is not useful as a means to articulate the working-class feminine self. Although Lil, Marian Evelyn, and even Woodward herself present the reader with transformative possibilities for laboring women, *Jipping Street*’s factory girls fail to escape subjection, just as the factory girl fails to escape the text as a useful symbol of personal, social, or political authority.

Lil Reeds is the most important of these figures because she is both a guide for the impressionable young Woodward and a symbol of the continuing power of the Victorian factory girl in the literary and social imagination. Bright, bold, and dangerously independent, Lil is forward in her manner, cheerful to the point of seeming to “dance as she walked,” spendthrift and as pleased with the look of her high-heeled boots as with her reflection in the mirror while she arranges her hair each morning for work (73). Woodward tells us that Lil was “full of an uncontrollable thrill for living,” a girl of nineteen who “seemed removed from all the things that made the days to be dreaded... Life presented her no questions, no problems, no sadness; and people looked on her with envy and suspicion” (75). Lil seems pulled directly from the pages of *Mary Barton*: she is a two-dimensional character meant to reflect the sexually endangered / dangerous young factory girl, threatened and threatening in her independence and vitality.

Lil is an important touchstone for Woodward; she enters *Jipping Street* at a crucial moment when Woodward anxiously faces the prospect of leaving behind her childhood as a helpmate to her mother and joining the adult labor force. Because of her energy and autonomy, Lil changes Woodward's negative perspective on labor and adult responsibility. The adolescent Woodward is daunted by the "anguish of first going out to work" and imagines her future as "black and horrible" with "clear visions of the new slavery" that she was about to face (67-68). Although conditioned to the likelihood of going out to work as soon as she was legally able, Woodward still cannot fathom what a life of labor signifies—she describes it as "the unknown," an amorphous "cruel fate" that would force her to "[take] on a new way of looking at things" (67). Lil, however, shows Woodward that her mother's wearisome toil as a washerwoman is not the whole of labor for working-class women. The joy Lil expresses even while in the factory is contagious for Woodward, making bearable her own work as the factory's errand girl. Moreover, Lil embodies a more attractive version of self-reliance than Woodward's mother and shows Woodward that, in time, Woodward too could earn enough to help support her family, to buy high-heeled boots with "startlingly bright" buttons, to command the attention of all the neighborhood "young bloods," and to haggle successfully with stall sellers (75-77).

Lil is the empowered factory girl, with her self-determination and strength made possible through her labor: she supports mother and father, buys gifts for Woodward, and seems able to take care of herself in regard to the numerous beau who attempt to court her. She is exactly what Woodward's washerwoman mother is not: joyfully self-sufficient, full of happiness and hope for the future. As a result, Woodward regards Lil

with “uncritical admiration, unquestioning trust, and an inordinate desire to serve her” (76). Because of Lil, Woodward begins to see labor as an opportunity for escape from her drab life on Jipping Street, rather than a kind of dark slavery. On a metaphorical level, Woodward’s admiration speaks to the power of the image of the Victorian factory girl as a model of empowerment. Lil embodies the very aspects of the representation that made her both a fascinating and dangerous figure in Victorian literature and society, but that was also enabling for women like Ellen Johnston and, for a short time, Woodward.

In spite of Lil’s promising presence in Woodward’s life, there is something disquieting about the older factory girl, for even as she weaves into the darkness of Jipping Street a “ray of light from heaven,” the light she brings shines “a little unsteady and with a preternatural brightness” (72). Woodward modulates Lil’s charm and vivacity by tracing the excessive outlines of her character: Lil may be a kind of “irresistible sunshine,” but in such light also appears “a little garish and tinselled, leaving you to wonder, to be uncertain”; she is “too bright a light,” doomed to burn out (76, 78-9). Lil recalls the dangerous vivacity of Gaskell’s Mary Barton (and perhaps her aunt Esther, who was a factory girl before she appears in the novel as a prostitute); in other words, she is unreal, a fiction that expresses the enabling potential of the factory girl, but, as a fiction, is not an actual possibility. The greatest indication of Lil’s “literariness” is Woodward’s note that Lil often tried to give herself a look of “glowing health” through rouge she creates by licking the stolen cover of a penny dictionary and applying it to her cheeks and lips (76). Lil has to color herself in (and with words, no less); otherwise, Woodward tells us, she is “ashen and gray,” flat and uninspiring (77).

As Lil fills in her lips and cheeks with dye from the cover of the dictionary, Woodward also attempts to flesh out Lil's representation in *Jipping Street* by focusing initially on Lil's cheerful personality, personal autonomy, and economic independence. Lil, however, is ultimately a ghost from another genre: the marginalized factory girl of the industrial novel. As such, her story must play out in the usual way of the sexual / sentimental factory girl: as indicated by numerous suitors courted by Lil (and also by her "painted" face), Woodward implies that she is promiscuous, a bit too independent for her moral good. "People hinted at the wildest irregularities and attributed them to Lil," Woodward writes, "and, now when I think of it, I see that she was not much concerned with the moral aspect of life (82). In a quick move, Woodward writes her off; within a mere five pages from her introduction, Lil dies in childbirth (and the pregnancy itself is hinted at as illegitimate). There is no back story Woodward would like to tell about the circumstances of Lil's death, only that one day, Lil's "light went out," and "her voice [heard] no more" (82-83). We are only told that "Lil's baby, two days old" lies at the foot of her bed in "a little white box" similar to those that would hold "wedding cakes at the pastry shop" (83). Whether the baby is still alive or not – Woodward gives us no indication – it would seem that, as the sexualized factory girl, Lil has gotten her just desserts by dying in childbirth. Yet the young Woodward grieves deeply for her, perhaps illustrating the power of the potential contained in that image of the factory girl, wishing Lil and the power she symbolized earlier were not merely fictions.

Whatever Lil symbolizes as a literary figure, the independence and vitality she gives off in her better days influence Woodward to begin factory work in earnest. Tired

of the meager wages she manages to obtain as an errand runner for nearby factories, the fourteen-year-old Woodward lies about her age and manages to procure a position as a machine worker in a factory near Jipping Street. Out of “a boldness bred of despair,” she writes “I pinned my hair up at the back and presented myself [...] as a person much older than I was. With the utmost effrontery I offered myself as a skilled worker” (91). Suddenly, she is no longer a liability or burden to her family; as a factory girl, her neighbors and family regard her more highly than when she was a simple errand girl: her “change in status was shift – marvelous” (83). Woodward as factory girl quickly adapts to her new, adult role as a laborer and is able to contribute significantly to the family purse, so much so that her mother is finally able to give up washing and tend to her own health. Woodward takes pride in her work and her newfound ability to be a productive part of her working-class family.

In her early days in the factory, Woodward appreciates her independence as a factory girl. Yet, as the novelty of being able to support herself and care for her family wears off, she begins to imagine a life beyond Jipping Street, to something beyond the want and dirt that she begins to regard as endemic of a working-class existence. “I changed – inside,” she observes. “I came not to know my own self. My days were consumed in rage and anger against the order of things as I saw it reflected in Jipping Street, the factory, wherever I turned my eyes” (102-03). These “things” – dirt, oppression, poverty – change her outlook in regard to the factory women with which she initially enjoyed working, women who she felt “at ease” with and from whom she “learned [from] their experience” (94). Woodward becomes tired of people, the working

masses and her immediate community on Jipping Street, angered by their complacency in the face of poverty and oppression. While work in the factory does benefit Woodward by providing her (and her mother, whom she supports) with a measure of independence, she ultimately regards it as a never-ending chain of repetition that keeps working people in place; it cannot cure the ills of the working class or offer them meaningful advancement of any kind. There is no movement from the factory to better “horizons,” only unremitting labor (105).

Woodward’s dissatisfaction with her position as a laborer is mollified by thoughts of political agitation and a new companion who holds similar “revolutionary notions”: Marian Evelyn, an older factory worker who introduces Woodward to several socialist and suffrage organizations (108). Together, Marian Evelyn and Woodward participate in meetings for working-class agitators, are “fired” by revolutionary rhetoric, and spend summer nights in Marian Evelyn’s back garden “[discussing] how hard it was to break away from that attitude of misery accepted that encompassed us [...] and the tragic, soul-deadening lack of spirit in pushing away from Jipping Street and the factory and all for which they stood” (111). Marian Evelyn, a rare “discovery” who “was not disheartened by her fifty-odd years of age” from supporting the trades-union movement and suffrage measures, inspires and encourages her young counterpart to night school and asks her to read political pamphlets for practicing her “speech and pronunciation” which, to Woodward, seems necessary in order to truly fight against working-class subjection (108-110). For Woodward, Marian Evelyn represents an aging revolutionary desirous of great change for people of her class and sex, with aspirations beyond the factory

Nonetheless, through Marian Evelyn, Woodward (and readers) learns that it's not revolutionary fervor drawn from the experience of labor but education that's needed to bring political and social agency to women. Although Marian Evelyn symbolizes the politicized factory worker, "her intense feeling on [unionization] and the matter of social reform generally, could find no outlet" because she was illiterate (108). Therefore, Marian Evelyn can only be "the best of listeners" – ultimately, as passive as the other working-class Jipping Street residents (111). She may be sympathetic to the causes in which she is involved, but can do nothing to actualize them.

Disappointed with the social organizations in which Marian Evelyn has encouraged her to participate, Woodward ultimately rejects political involvement when her experience with a trade's union falls flat. In attempt to convince her co-workers to pay weekly subscriptions, she "could not help becoming aware of the unreality, as it were, of our efforts to coerce a Utopia" from the women "to whom even two pennies a week represented a loaf of bread" (122-23). Sally Alexander argues that for Woodward, "the politics of socialism were [...] too unaware of the abjection and passivity of poverty to be able to change anything," and thus, Woodward instead chooses "solitude, silence, and the aesthetic seduction of words and thoughts in the place of politics" (283). Woodward's move from the factory to her "citadel," the bare room she rents implies that while work, and then political involvement through work, was at one stage of her life enough to sustain her; in the long run, however, it is a shackle that keeps her from "read[ing] all day and set[ting] down [her] dreams" (141). Unlike Ellen Johnston, the Guildswomen, or Annie Kenney, Woodward does not find an aesthetic agency in writing

about her work, in taking ownership of her working identity as a factory girl. Instead, labor stifles her intellectual and artistic development, clearly desired for personal and not social or political gain. Woodward would rather focus on her development as an individual beyond the community of working identities that shaped her childhood, the dual lens of class and gender through which she comes to understand herself.

Conclusion

Woodward argues that literacy and labor are antithetical—the act of toil leaves little time for education, or self-education, that can move women beyond the context of labor politics. This point comes across most poignantly in a scene near *Jipping Street's* end in which Woodward, working then as a machinist in a men's collar factory, absently sews across her finger while reading Gibbons' *Decline and Fall*. Snatching time to read “clandestinely... with one eye on [her] work on the other eye on the book,” Woodward accidentally “put[s] the first finger of [her] left hand under the needle of the machine, instead of a collar” (135). Although the scar is “honorable” in Woodward's estimation, it also denotes the virtual incompatibility of labor and literacy, as Woodward is literally tethered to her work while attempting to read, kept in place as a laborer.

For Woodward, words alone—the ability to articulate and represent one's self as a female laboring self—are not enough to sustain long-term change for working-class women. The ideas behind words, the strengths of an educated, cultivated mind, are what are needed to move women beyond the social categories that contain them. Otherwise, the language of the socialist, of class consciousness, of a gendered-classed subjectivity, is

just that: language. While language can be seen as active, on Jipping Street, it signifies empty action; it is merely talking about things, not making them happen.

Consequently, the bare room to which Woodward withdraws at *Jipping Street*'s close represents the fresh start that she desires, "a world apart" from the sea of faces on Jipping Street and in the factory, away from their hardships and the burdens that characterize their lives (135). Whitewashing the room from ceiling to floor, she creates a physical bare space holds only the small library of books she's collected and day dreams of a time when she can build shelves to hold even more. Symbolically, the room is Woodward's attempt to move beyond classed and gendered categories of identity, the metaphorical whitewashing of her origins, of the forces and social categories that have shaped the trajectory of her life. It is a room of her own, a space beyond history and the past – beyond the factory girl.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: WORK IN PROGRESS

I sometimes find myself thinking that if the worst comes to the worst, I can always earn a living by my hands ... all you have in the end is your labour.—
Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*

Conclusions are departures, and this conclusion is a departure in more ways than one. Yes, it does the normal work of departing from the subject matter at hand, but it is also a departure from the typical final chapter of a dissertation. I could, in the usual fashion, tell you what all of this – the previous four chapters – means in light of trends in Victorian studies today. I could tell you that my analysis is important for reconsiderations of the literary canon and how we read working-class subjectivity, especially working-class feminine subjectivity, in the canonical contexts and texts that we regularly teach and research – because it is. I could tell you that our studies tend to follow the group of writers who upheld the status quo in the nineteenth century (or, at least, were married to men that upheld the status quo), and that inclusion of working-class authors in our monographs and on our syllabi is vital to a more democratic study of literature in the Victorian age. I could tell you *why* the claims I've made here are important, in other words, and recommend where we – where I – can go beyond *Genres of Work*.

And that is what I would tell you, were this chapter a typical dissertation conclusion. I want to talk about stories instead. I want to talk about stories *about* labor, because this dissertation is more than a critical study of working-class women, of factory

girls, of literary representation and the ways in which literature itself shaped identities in nineteenth-century Britain. This dissertation also tells stories: the stories of women like Ellen Johnston and Kathleen Woodward, who tried to make something meaningful of their labor, who tried to tell stories of themselves and women like them; of writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, who tried to tell meaningful stories about the Johnstons and Woodwards of their time, but failed on account of social pressures and historical circumstances. But it is also the story of me and other women I know who, like Carolyn Steedman, realize that in the end, all you have is your labor. And it is, in essence, the story of a first-generation college student who made it into a Ph.D. program and decided to write her final project on the type of woman she would've been, had she been born a century or so earlier, in a country across the Atlantic.

I came into this project curious about the “work” in the “working class” of the Victorian age in part because of my own background – blue-collar girl from a family of folks who work mainly in the south Louisiana petroleum industry. Work was something of a theme that I felt I needed to trace out. I thought I would examine working-class representation through a comparative study of middle and working-class literature, the latter taking me into territory I'd never deeply explored, but had always interested me. At the time, I wasn't being gender specific in my search. I began by skimming a bevy of critical sources on the Industrial Revolution, industrial literature, Carlyle's “Gospel of Work,” and a host of other “work-related” topics, feeling out leads on working-class authors (usually male) I saw mentioned in some critical works on industrialism, and re-reading the industrial novels of the middle decades of the Victorian age. Through all of

this, I found myself asking, over and over, “Where are the working women?” I knew there were many of them – while domestic service held the first slot in typical jobs for working-class women, factory work was a close second. So, where were they?

On occasion, a female factory worker might pop up in the industrial novels I was reviewing, but I wasn’t seeing much of them otherwise. Factory girls were mentioned in *Mary Barton*, as I discussed in Chapter Two, but were not part of the narrative for very long or, if they did have any kind of staying power, they appeared as working-class housewives (and / or prostitutes) who were *formerly* factory workers. There’s also a scene in Gaskell’s other industrial novel, *North and South*, when the middle-class heroine Margaret Hale is disturbed by the direct looks and silent challenges factory girls pose to her as she is jostled through the streets of Milton Northern (and there’s the consumptive, religious Bessy who teaches Margaret – and us – about the evils of the factory system, dying of an illness brought on by carding cotton in a mill). The street scene, of course, caught my attention, but I still couldn’t understand why women workers like those who silently challenge Margaret Hale didn’t figure more prominently in novels that were, sort of, about working-class people. Couldn’t these women be considered an important part of “working-class people”?

Then I rediscovered Harriet, one of three factory girls who appear as minor characters in Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil*. The daughter of the weaver Warner and his wife Mary, Harriet is “infamous” in the text because after a time of working in the factory, she takes her wages and goes out “to keep house for herself,” away from her poverty-stricken family (120, 113). Her independence is, of course, at the peril of her parents and three

younger siblings, who need her wages to help support their own household; for that reason, her mother condemns her as a “wicked” girl, a “hussey” who has plunged the family into squalor (117, 120). At the novel’s end, when Julia and Caroline, the text’s other factory girls are married off, Harriet is “not yet married,” a loose thread. The narrator tells us that “though pretty and clever, [Harriet] is selfish and a screw. She has saved a good deal, and has a considerable sum in the savings bank, but, like many heiresses, cannot bring her mind to share her money with another” (420). And then, for this narrator, there is no more to be said about Harriet.

I was curious about this last scene for reasons obvious to any Victorianist: Harriet is no literal heiress (her money is not inherited, but earned and saved) and she disturbs the usual ending of the Victorian novel (*i.e.* women are either married, married with babies in their laps, or, if not married, dead). Disraeli suggests she is not yet married because she is *like* an heiress – oh, the horror! – in her desire to keep her money to herself (should Harriet marry in 1845, her money would become her husband’s because of marriage and property laws at the time). From a twenty-first century perspective, Harriet seems like a smart girl. From a working-class perspective, staying unmarried *is* a smart move on her part. She’s better off without the family to support... and so it also seems like a smart move for her to have removed herself from her parents’ cellar, for while her father seems to recognize the problem of allowing one’s children to pay the rent, her mother only wants her around *because* of her wages. Of course, “smart” is not how the Victorians would have regarded a girl like Harriet. In the Victorian zeitgeist, girls like Harriet are dangerous. They are “bad” daughters, “bad” women. This, as I argued in

Chapter One, means that they must be written off as sexual / sentimental others. But Harriet isn't written off this way. She's just left there at the end of *Sybil*, happily on her own, with her hard-earned money safely stowed away in the bank. Harriet is a good indication of why working women could not be fully included in industrial literature. She doesn't need to be saved or taken care of by anyone other than herself. She's an anomaly.

I probably owe the course my dissertation took to Harriet. Once I began to ask where the women were and managed to find her, I wanted to see if there were other "Harriets" in Victorian literature. I also wanted to see if there were any *real* Harriets who happened to be writing in the period, women lost somewhere in the dustbins of literary history. Thanks to Florence Boos and Patricia Johnson, literary critics who have done quite a bit of digging in those proverbial dustbins, I found a few, including Ellen Johnston and Kathleen Woodward. Of the handful of other writers I could have chosen, I was drawn to Johnston and Woodward because their relationships to class and gender seemed the most complicated, the most difficult to pin down, and I couldn't readily explain why. They were a challenge. I saw the complexity of their work as a kind of attempt to raise questions about class and gender consciousness, to claim an enabling class and gender identity, to try and make something of it. They seemed to most directly test the potential their positions as workers might have for empowering them in their personal and economic lives... rendering them a little less certain than Harriet, but also similar to her in that they, too, were anomalies (in the context of other working-class female writers).

It's probably that Johnston and Woodward, like Carolyn Steedman, would say that they were able to make a living with their hands, that all you have in the end is your labor. They may not like to say it – especially Kathleen Woodward – but they would say it, nonetheless. They lived it.

So have I.

I live in a different time and country than Johnston and Woodward, so my experience with the intersections of class and gender is not the same as that of a Victorian factory girl. But there was something about these women that felt familiar to me when I decided to dedicate whole dissertation chapters to their writing. There are no factories in south Louisiana, but there are plenty of oil refineries – my childhood home is only a stone's throw away from one. My mother has worked in oilfield construction and was recently laid off from one of these positions, replaced with one of her male counterparts. My mother's youngest sister, my Aunt Kay, is a short-haul truck driver who runs pipe and other materials to oil companies between Houston and New Orleans; her husband, my uncle, is a commercial fisherman. When she's not on the road, she's his first mate. Before I was born, my paternal grandmother ran a "lounge" (she would kill me if I called it a bar – to her, there was a big difference) for rig workers coming in from and going out to platforms in the Gulf of Mexico on boats and helicopters.

There's more I could say and describe about the "industrial" work the women in my family have performed, but the laundry list doesn't really matter here. What does matter is that when I said Johnston and Woodward were familiar to me, it was because of these women. Johnston and Woodward also reflect my own ambivalence about class and

gender and my own identity. The women in my family don't write poetry, will likely never write autobiographies, but they have pride in what they do, especially if it's work that only men are supposed to be able to do. I do, too. And they have fought with their working identities, as well. For instance, I believe my mother would love to go to college, but she won't admit it. She says she'd rather keep working (as if going to college meant that working would have to stop). She has lived vicariously through me in regard to higher education, having been the valedictorian of her high school class, but unable to get scholarships to attend university because at the time, she was also married with a two-year-old (me). She can't afford it now, and believes she's too old to get stuck in the student loan trap. She'd rather do what she knows how to do, and that's to work with her hands. Like Kathleen Woodward, she's kept in place by her labor. I can never tell if this is a good or bad thing for her. She seems to move between the two extremes.

Johnston and Woodward are also familiar to me because of my own position as a working-class academic. I have had to live by my own hands to get by, without a trust or savings or even parents who could afford to give me regular loans as I began and finished out my studies. Take last summer. As an adjunct at a local private university, I am only paid seven months of the year (and while I am paid well considering what I could be paid as an adjunct at a public institution, this is still not enough to save for the months when the paychecks stop). In the past, I managed with receptionist jobs from temp agencies, but with the economy being, well, less than friendly, there were no temporary jobs to be had in my area. I had begun setting the wheels in motion with my temp agency at the beginning of April, but by mid-May, I came to the conclusion that there was no chance of

a summer short-term assignment. I began applying to every job I could find, every opening that I might, however little, be qualified for. A close friend who had recently lost her housekeeper offered me the position, which I thought kind and fair of her. Another friend told me of her mother's need for someone to help her with a summer cleaning of her home and recommended me for that position. I also picked up a part-time retail job which paid a little better than minimum wage. All of this, combined with my regular part-time job on top of the part-time job of adjuncting, teaching belly dance at a local studio, saw me through. And, while I was working all those jobs, I was also supposed to be writing this dissertation. Even though having the dissertation behind me could mean that I could get an academic position that would actually pay the bills without having to file several W2s on the following year's taxes, the labor of a dissertation – the research, the writing, the thinking – does not pay the rent in the short term.

The most I did was to re-read Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: a Story of Two Lives* (1987), the text I originally intended to analyze in this conclusion. Steedman, an academic historian influenced in part by Woodward's *Jipping Street*, does a little genre-bending with *Landscape*. Part history, part theory, part autobiography, *Landscape* is the story of the relationship between Steedman and her mother as a way to consider

what people – particularly working-class children of the recent past – come to understand of themselves when all they possess is their labour, and what becomes of the notion of class-consciousness when it is seen as a structure of feeling that can be learned in childhood... Class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made. (7)

As I re-read these lines, it occurred to me that this idea of class consciousness as “a structure of feeling” and class and gender as “a psychological selfhood[s]” were issues that I was trying to address in this project; it occurred to me that these matters also have something to do with how I regard myself, my own “class consciousness,” in my academic life. Class has a great deal to do with psychological structures, with how we think of ourselves and represent ourselves to others, whether we are willing to admit it or not. Class may be considered artificial, the result of an unnatural capitalist system, but it has very real psychological effects on individuals. We have psychological relationships with economic class, even when we reject class as having nothing to do with our identities. I can’t help but think of all the people who consider themselves middle class in America today... and how it’s ultimately impossible that we can all be “middle class.” That alone says much about the psychological effect “class” has on us. Class influences how we place ourselves, consciously or not, in relation to others, even in a country that – supposedly – is not as rigidly “classed” as the UK.

Class also has much to do with how we move through the academic world – and how we relate to it. There are plenty of working-class academics in the ivory tower, but many folks don’t like to talk about the effects a working-class background might have on an academic career (which is, at best, shortsighted since our job market woes have created an intellectual working class). Class backgrounds have much to do with the resources available to academics; we can’t all get those competitive fellowships, and teaching assistantships, while helpful, do not cover all of one’s expenses (especially the unspoken expenses of conference attendance, professional memberships, and so on). The

money issue here is not about being materially comfortable, but about getting by. As Ph.D. students, class also has much to do with the “time to degree” issue, especially once we reach the dissertation stage, or lose funding because of budget cuts, or run out of student loans because we’ve already financed two other degrees. Last summer was not the first time I had to work multiple jobs to get by since my prospectus was approved. And I know that I am hardly the only one who has experienced juggling academic and economic priorities.

It’s easier to see how class affects the progress graduate students make in their programs than to see how it affects them psychologically. It’s easier for me to describe the challenges of juggling money and time; it’s more difficult to go into the deeper issues – imposter syndrome, confidence issues with writing and idea sharing, or simply being unable to relate other academics – that I know result from being the daughter of my welding, dump-truck driving, construction-working parents. It’s difficult to admit that it has affected me because I’ve heard others say that class should not matter here in the academic world. Most days, I still can’t shake the feeling that reading and writing is lazy work (even when I realistically know it’s actually very difficult), because it is not the labor of hands. Although I’m reasonably aware that I would not have made it to this stage without some sense in my head, I often fight the feeling that I’ve been passed through or that I’ve barely gotten by on embarrassingly thin ideas. I cannot even begin to consider the effect that a four-year dissertation process has had on my self-confidence – I don’t allow myself to think of this. I can say that I do regularly consider, even with working all those jobs, that I could’ve written more often, that plenty of people make it through on

less, the people write dissertations while working full time, and that I am somehow inadequate because I was not able to do it. I don't consider myself a victim because I think this way, but I do know where my psychological pitfalls lie should I choose to remain in academia.

But perhaps the greatest psychological effect that class has had on me as an academic is best expressed by Steedman, my current favorite working-class academic. It's not just her reminder that come what may, you can always get by with your hands. It's the way, in *Landscape*, that she acknowledges the problems of class consciousness, the complications that gender introduces to this consciousness, but also argues that there is something powerful in owning your labor, in telling your story rather than allowing others – the modern Henry Mayhews of the world – to tell it for you. Survival for the working-class individual, she discovers, is about rejecting the traditional psychological simplicity attributed to the working classes. It's about holding on to the psychological complexity that results from the incompatibility between what you know about class consciousness and the “central interpretive devices” of a culture that attempt, but ultimately fail, to take a nuanced account of it (5). There's power in the knowledge that as a working-class individual, you are aware of inequities and power structures that people of other class backgrounds aren't. There's a certain kind of leverage you get from owning the tag “factory girl” or “working-class academic.” It makes you feel as if you've got something to hold on to when the rest of your life seems uncertain.

There's a special kind of annoyance that results from other folks attempting to interpret those tags for you. That annoyance probably led Johnston and Woodward to

take on the title of “factory girl” and to trouble it as a way of revealing the psychological complexity of working women’s lives (I’m certain it was annoyance that prompted Woodward – Johnston is still a mystery to me on many levels). That annoyance leads Steedman to admit, in *Landscape*’s preface, that she holds “a secret and shameful defiance” in relationship other female academics. “I read a woman’s book,” she writes, “meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago I’d have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don’t” (2). That annoyance is what led me to write about working women in my dissertation. These women’s lives weren’t only difficult because of poor working conditions, poverty, lack of political rights. Their lives were difficult because they were so egregiously misunderstood and misrepresented in official documents, in literature, in social discourse. They wrote back.

And I suppose with this conclusion, I have as well.

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