Stray Threads: Factory Women in Fiction from the Freehold Farm to the Rented Room, 1840-1875

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STRAY THREADS: FACTORY WOMEN IN FICTION FROM THE FREEHOLD FARM TO
THE RENTED ROOM, 1840-1875

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THE RENTED ROOM, 1840-1875

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

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in
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for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

with a
Major in English

by
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B.A., The University of Dallas,

December 16, 2017
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Stray Threads: Factory Women and Fiction from the Freehold Farm to the Rented Room, 1840-1875

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“Stray Threads: Factory Women and Fiction from the Freehold Farm to the Rented Room, 1840-1875” argues that depictions of female wage earners served as an ideological testing ground for the values of a rapidly changing culture during the U.S. market revolution. As industrialism unmoored American values surrounding independence, individualism, and the gender roles attached to labor, it demanded imaginative solutions for these potentially broken ideologies in antebellum fiction. I argue that depictions of factory women highlight how female laborers became a convenient vehicle for repressing national anxieties about inequality and freedom within an emerging market culture. Analyzing sexualized depictions of the female wage earner sheds new light on conversations in Melville and Harriet Jacobs, while also demonstrating how an industrial economy used women’s bodies to legitimize itself in the public imagination.

Female factory authors themselves were not a blank canvas, however. Instead they were among the first authors to discard the yeoman farmer as an obsolete political model and symbolic ideal. In the agrarian’s place factory women scripted wage laborers, whose cooperative activity simultaneously transforms traditional womanhood and society at large. *Stray Threads* culminates in the image of the rented room, where interdependence is a given and market conditions rather than property are woven into the fabric of selfhood. This project focalizes patriarchy’s alliance...
with capitalism to contain the subversive potential of the laboring woman, while simultaneously recovering laboring women’s literature as part of an American laboring literary tradition.
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For Charlie, ever true.
Introduction

“When Reason Fails, We Fly on the Airy Wings of Imagination”: Women, Authorship, and Industrialism During the Market Revolution

When Louisa Currier ventured from home to the Lowell factory system, and from there to authorship, the factory system’s thunderous clatter and unprecedented output soon inspired her to make another leap—an imaginative one this time, into the genre of science fiction. In “Celestial Scenery,” Louisa Currier’s narrator rhapsodizes about humanity’s achievements. She becomes so carried away that she travels to outer space to find some being who can predict “what boundary, what limit, has his [mankind’s] ambition? What object is beyond his desire to accomplish?” The speaker, “propelled by a power mightier than steam,” travels to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and the moon. She wanders from planet to planet in search of some superior intelligence who can define humanity’s utmost capabilities. But, disappointed, the space traveler returns to earth and discovers through a “venerable sage” the mysteries her travels could not disclose. The sage proclaims, “Foolish children...the power ye seek is everywhere but ye cannot see Him. The Being who gave man existence, only can tell the extent of his faculties, or prescribe the limits of

1 Judith Ranta identifies the story’s pseudonymous author “Lisette” as Louisa Currier, who married Nehemiah Osgood, on her University of Massachusetts, Lowell webpage indexing Lowell Offering pieces: http://library.uml.edu/clh/offering.htm. I have used this index throughout this project to connect various stories to their real-life authors. Where the author has not been discovered, I cite the story only and omit the pseudonym.


3 Ibid.
his discoveries.” Confounded by the new perspectives technology has enabled, Currier’s narrator puts her faith in the old sources of wisdom available through human traditions.

Currier’s short tale encapsulates the intellectual dynamics incited by nineteenth century America’s technological and scientific advancements, on display every day in the Lowell manufactories. Awed by humanity’s almost super-natural know-how, Currier fashions a narrator with godlike capacities so that she can find some perch beyond the natural world from which to better understand humanity. As she attempts to define humanity in terms both of its unbounded desires and its untold potential, the narrator indicates that unprecedented technological achievement has resulted in a sort of attending ignorance: humanity has deepened the mystery of its own nature to itself. This problem must be explored not in terms of the species’ place in the natural world but by removing itself to a point beyond the natural world. And while attempting to define human nature is an ancient philosophical problem, Currier’s narrator leaves no doubt that her whimsical space journey is spurred by a recent phenomenon: scientific developments and their social consequences. “Science,” she reflects, “has investigated and explained the natural laws of our habitable globe—has weighed the other planets, and determined their distances, and explored the mysteries of etherial space. This, man has accomplished, and that which he will do, reason dare not prophecy; and when reason fails, we fly on the airy wings of imagination.”

Over a century later, Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition pinpointed similar dynamics of scientifically inspired imaginative flights into the stratosphere, inspired by the launch of Sputnik I in 1957. Contemplating a world governed by reckless scientific development

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4 Currier, 28.
5 Ibid., 27.
and overshadowed by the nuclear bomb, Arendt diagnoses a science-based crisis in human affairs, and evidenced in the profound world-alienation pervading modern culture. This world-alienation manifests itself in two directions: a flight inward, towards solipsism, and outward, into the universe, through scientific activity bent on releasing humanity from its last ties to earth and to the natural conditions governing its own species-life. Though Currier’s tone is celebratory and Arendt’s cautionary, both authors appear overcome not by the actual technology humanity has produced but by the expanded knowledge it has gained, and the accompanying intellectual disorientation it has endured. Currier’s tale terminates with the words “curiosity was silenced,” a mute recognition that scientific achievement pushes humanity to a place beyond even attempts at self-understanding, because it is beyond speech itself. Arendt balefully warns that if scientific activity has so far surpassed human speech that we are “forever unable...to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do,” then humans will “indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how.” As Currier’s meditation shows, a consequence of technological development lies in a sense of displacement from nature itself, in an ecstatic departure from earth ultimately depicted as both foolish and fantastic.

This dissertation examines depictions of antebellum New England factory women to explore how factory women and their contemporaries reckoned industrial change as a potential “departure from earth”—that is, from the traditional preindustrial relationships which had both controlled and defined female labor, and were perceived as natural. Like Currier’s narrator, this project traces continuities within change as antebellum authors measured industrial

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7 Currier, 28.

8 Arendt, 3.
transformations against old ways of thinking about women’s labor. Women’s largescale entrance into manufacturing towns like Lowell during the antebellum period raised alarm from many sides. Many of these concerns emanated from industrialization’s role within larger economic changes occurring as the United States shifted from an agrarian-based subsistence culture to a market economy, and each element of this transition incited new ways of thinking about women and labor.

I. Costs of Production: Women, Wage-Earning, and Cultural Values in the U.S. Market Revolution

When New England women left their families’ farms for textile factories in Massachusetts, their departures symptomatized larger tensions between land and market gaining momentum across the U.S. during the period roughly 1820 to 1860, a transformation referred to as the market revolution.9 For New Englanders in the colonial and early republican periods, the availability of cheap land resulted in huge sections of society surviving on cooperative labors between people on freehold farms and within their regional communities. On these homesteads women’s dependent labors as wives or daughters were typically organized under the male head of household.10 Their labors organized under a property-owning patriarch played an important role in supporting the property-owner’s political status, because these farms based on a

9 Although Charles Sellers’ seminal work on the market revolution focuses specifically on Jacksonian Democracy, and consequently sets its date range from 1815 to 1846, I follow Steven Deyle’s more sweeping historical focus on the period from 1820 to 1860, to allow for a wider perspective on the interrelated economic networks of industrialism in the North and the westward-moving slave trade in the South. See Charles Grier Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Steven Deyle, Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005).

10 For the freehold farmers who relied on neighbors in a communitarian culture for their survival, see Sellers, 12. For the patriarchal nature of this subsistence culture, see Sellers, 4.
subsistence culture resulted in a society of “roughly equal landowning families [who were] the
seedbed of American republicanism.” In this world structured by self-sustaining farms “money
was a specialized commodity, needed only for limited exchanges with the outside market world.”

While markets hovered at the edge of farmers’ existence as a place for specialized products,
they also loomed as a threat insofar as debts might destroy the property owner’s claim to the
farm.

In rural areas labor had a clear relationship to property, independence, and to a patriarch’s
control over his dependents, yet mechanics working in urban areas shared many of these values
before industrialization, despite their closer participation in markets. In the early U.S. “skills,
tools, and shop gave master mechanics something of the security and independence that land
gave farmers, as well as a similar patriarchal control over their families, including apprentices
and journeymen.” These arrangements allowed mechanics to take pride in their livelihood
because in their view, “they were not competing for wealth but providing essential services to the
community in return for the right to a decent competence.” Before the rise of a market culture
labor, even when compensated in money, was defined by its societal contributions rather than its
economic value.

In short, preindustrial New Englanders celebrated their region as one of dignified labor
practices, which in turn produced independence. Proudly juxtaposing their farmers or

\[11\] Sellers, 4.
\[12\] Seller, 13.
\[13\] Sellers, 15.
\[14\] Sellers, 24.
\[15\] Ibid.
shopkeepers with southern slaves, northerners insisted on a man’s dignity being tied to his right to reap the profits from his work.\textsuperscript{16} Second, but no less important, the male head of household’s independence was directly related to his ability to control and direct the labors of other household dependents, that they might contribute to the household’s survival in uncertain natural and market conditions. Female labor existed alongside and, in a strong sense, underneath these arrangements, and women before 1820 often contributed to the homestead’s income through spinning and weaving.\textsuperscript{17}

But as the factory system in the early nineteenth century began to absorb home manufacturing and to pay its workers in wages, it undermined the region’s proud certainties about work and the dignity of the laborer.\textsuperscript{18} The male-gendered ideal of independence always had a shaky relationship to money, and the rise of industrial wage-pay immersed labor in market conditions rather than producing any independence from them. Instead, factory employees labored to add to the owner’s wealth, without being able to claim ownership of any final product. In the public view wage labor meant dependency, and dependency meant degradation. Put simply, industrialism seemed utterly antithetical to the young nation’s political ideals. Add to these anxieties the nineteenth-century’s sense that women’s labors ought to serve a household or a homestead, and the factory woman emerges as the symbolic center of a cultural identity crisis.

The American market revolution, and the transformational technologies and knowledge accompanying it, offers a particularly dramatic context to study the ideological challenges

\textsuperscript{16} For preindustrial New Englanders’ pride in their free labor practices, contrasted against southern chattel slavery, see Daniel T. Rodgers, \textit{The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), especially 30-32.

\textsuperscript{17} Dublin, \textit{Farm to Factory}, 16.

\textsuperscript{18} Dublin, \textit{Farm to Factory}, 16-17.
industrialization posed to society and, especially, to women. The shift from an agrarian subsistence culture to an industrialized market culture profoundly challenged the young nation’s ideals even as it was in the process of defining them. “In the beginning, all the world was America,” John Locke declared in his Second Treatise of Government, “and much more so than it is now, for no such thing as money was anywhere known.”¹⁹ Yet as money and commerce came to be everywhere known in the United States, it seemed as if “America,” the romantic ideal, was already slipping from its Golden Age of independence. For Locke, as for many American citizens, an issue of key interest was how labor might lead to property, and how property might lead to the self-sovereignty leading to the formation of the political state. Market-based livelihoods, and especially wage-earning, threw this sequence of events into jeopardy.

Thus, the women who formed a large part of the textile labor force from 1820 to 1860 did so as representatives of these larger cultural changes sweeping the U.S. during this period. Many of them left struggling family farms, where New England farmers had settled on increasingly rocky and less arable land from 1790 to 1808, and had also been cut off from their access to a European market by 1809’s Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts.²⁰ Women’s migration to factories, therefore, was directly related to the threatened yeoman ideal, and signified subsistence culture’s capitulation to market culture. Moreover, women’s participation in textile manufactures also coincided with the ongoing erosion of mechanic culture in the cities, where the mechanic class had been in the process of being proletarianized because of market changes.²¹ In the largest

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²⁰ Dublin, 15-16.

²¹ Sellers, 25.
cities mechanics had survived market competition by cutting down on the costs of labor, which turned some craftsmen into capitalist bosses and others into laborers permanently reliant on wages.\textsuperscript{22} In several industries, including textiles, mechanics-turned-capitalists used the division of labor to facilitate mass production. Even before factories in Massachusetts brought all steps of the manufacturing process under one roof, Rhode Island manufacturers made use of the division of labor by the “putting out” system. In this system, storekeepers paid women for “outwork” performed on home looms.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, the general decline from skilled into unskilled labor, coincident with the division of labor, was begun long before Boston capitalists began designing America’s first large-scale manufacturing community in Lowell, Massachusetts. But in the long story of the mechanic class’s decline into unskilled labor, there is no doubt that manufacturing towns functioned as a significant catalyst.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, the first factories in Massachusetts sounded a death knell for home manufacturing by making such work unprofitable; women began to look outside the home for profitable labor even as corporations enticed them to the factory town with the promise of the highest wages available for women.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1821 American manufacturing achieved a paradigm shift when a group of capitalists, termed the Boston Associates—Nathan Appleton, Patrick Tracy Jackson, Paul Moody, and John and Kirk Boott—bought land near the Merrimack River and applied for an act of incorporation

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} See Hardy Green, 9. See also Sellers, 27 for an account of the “putting-out” system in shoe manufacturing.

\textsuperscript{24} Hardy Green, \textit{The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy} (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 10-11.

as the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. This land in East Chelmsford, Massachusetts would become a model for American manufacturing towns: the Lowell mills. Here the Boston Associates would present the Lowell mills to the world as a flagship location for their expanding network of factory towns across New England. This business paradigm, termed the Waltham-Lowell system, rested largely on young, single women as a labor force rather than Rhode Island’s family-labor system. To ensure New England families that their daughters would be safe away from home, the Boston Associates erected boardinghouses supervised by matrons, and subjected operative-residents to strict rules of behavior set by the corporation. In a familiar gesture, factory owners attempted to put the public at ease about industrial transformations by controlling how the public would interpret factory life. The factory town’s very design stressed continuity with change, and the preservation of old values within the new.

The Lowell mills were a hopeful, uncertain enterprise for factory women and their contemporaries, a nexus of cultural anxieties about a rapidly changing society. Standing on the forefront of industrialization in the United States, female factory authors like Currier recorded and imaginatively transformed their experiences during a time of tremendous upheaval. Through their experiences in the factory system they witnessed cultural changes wrought by a potent

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26 The original three Boston Associates were Patrick Tracy Jackson, Nathan Appleton, and Francis Cabot Lowell, who had reproduced England’s power looms from memory in 1814 with the help of mechanic Paul Moody. Lowell died in 1817, and the remaining investors invited the Boott brothers into their enterprise. They also rewarded Moody with shares of the company because of his mechanical expertise and his help with discovering an ideal location for the mills. See Hardy Green, 11.

27 For details on Rhode Island’s contemporaneous system reliant on families and child labor, see Hardy Green, 19.

combination of technological advancement, economic revolution, and corporate ascendancy in
the sociopolitical landscape. Factory women saw how industrialization challenged American
values that were by turns social, technological, economic, political, and symbolic for antebellum
Americans. Thankfully, unlike Currier’s space-traveling narrator, these experiences did not awe
them into silence. Instead, their writings testify to the wonder, the perils, and the possibilities of
these technologically and economically induced cultural changes for women. Women’s
experiences laboring in the industrial system had implications for the nation at large, as both they
and their contemporaries recognized.

II. Critical Interventions and Methodology

This study combines three main components: female factory laborers’ writings, canonical
American literary works, and contemporary archival material connecting the two. Bringing these
three discourses into conversation with each other highlights how factory women’s writings,
though never mainstream in American literature, nonetheless express important alternative
literary presumptions within a dominant culture whose ideals grew out of a romantic fixation on
land and frontier. For antebellum Americans the land was a space where the individual property-
owner’s control over labor supported his claim to political freedom; it was a space of personal
sovereignty not to be trifled with by others. Factory women’s labors move away from this
paradigm and from the traditional literary modes associated with it.

Yet a key qualification in this study is that factory women’s labors, while they inspired
political discussions, were not obviously political, and their defenses of their factory labor often
were neither precisely political nor domestic. Women labored in the industrial marketplace; they
could not follow the white male citizen’s paradigm and skip blithely from labor to property to
political participation. The transformational contexts of their labor led them to meditate on
women’s suffrage, but just as often they also pondered how their labor might be dignified without leading directly to political freedom, and without simultaneously being traditionally domestic and feminine. The writings produced in this market space, neither wholly private nor strictly public, suggests a rich literary tradition developing alongside, and simultaneous to, the independence-minded authors who persist as bastions of the American literary canon: Emerson, Thoreau, Melville.

While historians have extensively researched female factory laborers and their writings, too often they have placed the writings under traditional literary frameworks derived from other economic contexts. When they do, they tend to dismiss the writing as unworthy of serious analysis. They generally repeat Herbert Gutman’s assessment of the Lowell Offering as “derivative in style and frequently escapist.” If one begins with the presumption that factory women write in imitation of either sentimental literature or romantic individualist literature, then these writings will inevitably suffer from the comparison as poor facsimiles.

Yet Thomas Dublin, whose groundbreaking work on Lowell factory women helped to inaugurate them as one of the most studied groups of industrial laborers in American historical scholarship, cautions against interpreting mill women’s writings solely in terms of traditional frameworks. Because mill women often saved their wages for their own objectives, “Mill work

should not be viewed as simply an extension of the traditional family economy as work for women moved outside the home.”

Dublin finds that mill women’s letters “strikingly reveal a gap between the actual experiences of women in this period and contemporary ideals concerning ‘woman’s sphere.’” Given this context, scholars ought not to presume that factory authors positioned depictions of their labors within the traditional family economy that functions as the setting of the sentimental novel. Yet Dublin also points to the problem arising from the opposite view, of seeing factory women subjected within a larger narrative of capitalist power and labor exploitation. If readers focus solely on mill owners’ “preeminent power,” their “evident exploitation of female labor,” the “paternalistic system” they created and the “enormous profits” they reaped from it, they will miss mill women entirely. Methodological presumptions about issues of power and sovereignty inevitably “treat the mill women as relatively inert and passive elements in the historical process. One way to escape the limitations of this view,” Dublin suggests, “is to place the women themselves at center stage and, through their letters, permit them to speak for themselves.”

When factory women do so, they reveal instead the “increasing economic and social independence enjoyed by many single women even in the face of the dominant ideology. They suggest the importance for historians of constantly testing broad ideals against the concrete attitudes and behavior evident in the everyday lives of ordinary men and women.”

I would extend Dublin’s recommendation to literary scholars as well. And I would add that mill women’s writings also require us to re-evaluate theoretical frameworks presuming

30 Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 23.
31 Ibid.
33 Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 123.
female labor must either be understood in relation to separate spheres ideology, or it must symptomatize the class strife at the heart of modern theories of labor.

Literary scholars such as Michael Newbury and, more recently, Sylvia Jenkins Cook and Lori Merish have begun the work of interpreting factory women’s writings as a distinct body of literature. These scholars recognize with Michael Newbury that, for factory women, “literary work is a means through which an industrially created group of laborers might consolidate their identity as a group outside the terms of that labor.” Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, in particular, has opened up admirable avenues for scholarship as it explores the simultaneous possibilities and tensions that factory women expressed in their writings over the long nineteenth century.

Literary scholarship on mill women tends to take up one of two positions. Many scholars like Lori Merish and Mary Loeffelholz follow Philip Foner’s divisions in his important anthology, *The Factory Girls*, by dividing factory women along political lines: some operatives are literary-minded women with bourgeois sensibilities, too “genteel” to engage in activism; others are “militant,” raging at corporate exploitation and too skeptical, hostile, or impatient with literature to produce serious literary expression.

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35 Newbury, 74.

On the other side, scholars like Sylvia Jenkins Cook note a distinct working-class sensibility in the literature that does not neatly align with the absence or presence of labor activism. It is within this second mode of scholarship that “Stray Threads” proceeds, while also adding theoretical precision to the notion of a laborer’s literature, and showing how that literary tradition might be understood in continuity with preindustrial laboring traditions. As I see it, a special element of laborers’ writings cannot be captured by Marxist readings, because these focus on class conflict and the need to obtain justice for laborers by granting them more power in society. Many New England factory women make precisely this claim when they are arguing for political rights and governmental protections. Yet a great deal of mill women’s writings seeks merely to make laborers’ perspectives understood by a middle-class readership. Writers seek to portray “a community who share a special knowledge of work and struggle,” as working-class studies scholar Janet Zandy puts it.37 “Struggle,” in many factory women’s views, is the most fundamental mode of human life; privileged persons are insulated from it, resulting in attitudes towards labor that are both arrogant and delusional. Factory authors, who traveled from their families’ farms to the factory system in an early and hopeful moment for American industrialization, often experience industrial struggle not as one against their overseers but as an extension of the originary struggle with the earth they had experienced back home. For that reason “Stray Threads” uneasily occupies the field of “working-class studies.” That field is still plagued by definitional issues about what constitutes “working-class” literature, and this project insists on the need for precision in approaching factory women’s writings without losing sight of a historical moment defined by transitions, rather than definitions, in labor. In lieu of discovering

an emergent working-class identity, “Stray Threads” focuses on the precarious laboring moment as factory women portray it, in all of its society-sustaining dignity, to a skeptical world. In doing so it recovers women’s vision of labor as they saw it from the ground up, rather than in politically based theories of labor, which begin from the perspective that the laborer is being held down by the powers that be.

Hannah Arendt’s political theory profoundly influences the methodology of this dissertation, especially in Arendt’s careful thinking about the economically based relationship between labor and freedom in western political thought. Out of a desire to emulate her precise thinking on the various types of human activities, each with their own distinct purpose, I follow Arendt’s terminology throughout this project, especially her tripartite delineation of human activities—labor, work, and action—in The Human Condition. Labor refers to cyclical activities which sustain human life processes and produce nothing lasting—farmwork is labor and, in a mature capitalist society, wage-earning is labor. Work refers to durable artifacts—encompassing pottery, buildings, and written words—which build up the human world and allow the experience of that world to be passed down between generations. Action is proper to the world of politics, and it includes the individualistic speech characteristic of political bodies, which can influence governments and define the conditions in which humans choose to live.38

By parsing labor, work, and action in the Human Condition Arendt, with bracing clarity, offers a way to separate private from public, labor from work, and commerce from freedom, even as the lines separating each of these phenomena become blurred in the modern age. Moreover, when Arendt points out the antipodal relationship between economies and politics in

classical thought, she also unintentionally provides the intellectual tools for approaching the subject of laboring literature anew. Economies are not straightforwardly “public” spaces, Arendt argues, and this insight enables a separation between labor and politics, justice and independence, which allows us to approach laborers’ texts with new eyes. This crucial insight serves as a starting point for many others as I read Arendt’s theories against the grain to uncover the implications of market change for women’s dependent labor, laborers’ expressions, and the many and daunting cultural obstacles to a laboring aesthetic—a laboring work. Arendt’s perspective allows for a deep view of the relationship between labor and politics throughout western history. I combine the sweeping reach of Arendt’s presentation of changing political attitudes over time with the focused view of historians studying early republican thought and antebellum industrial change in the U.S., most notably Gordon Wood, Daniel T. Rodgers, and Thomas Dublin.\textsuperscript{39} I find that moving between these two lenses—that is, the panoramic sweep of western political thought and the close inspection of early and antebellum American historiography—enables a productive synthesis insofar as it helps us to grasp more tightly how antebellum Americans would have experienced market change on the ground, so to speak. These two modes allow us to see especially how New Englanders might have thought about rapid economic change through suppositions like the patriarchal shelter—that is, the premise that female labor was always sexual and needy of male control, in any context. The long historical view recovers assumptions about women and labor that today can seem quite foreign—although at other times these beliefs float up to us through the pages of history as radically, and sometimes depressingly, familiar.

I also engage Marxist thought, although I limit my appropriations of Marx to situations in which he furnishes useful insights into labor and oppression. I explain extensively in Part Two why, where laboring literature is concerned, I approach Marx with a critical eye. Raymond Williams has laid an admirable foundation on which to understand the particularities of the laboring perspective, and I use his insights throughout as useful interpretive tools to resist laboring perspectives being co-opted by middle-class interpretive assumptions. I also employ the work of cognitive cultural theorists, who have added to narratology by exploring how an individual consciousness experiences culture via conceptual metaphors based in lived experiences. 40 Other theories connecting aesthetics to class, such as Bourdieu’s account of taste, and the interplay of one class’s conventions with another’s, appear and are scrutinized in this project.41

Finally, a word on the “Stray Threads” concept I have foregrounded in my title. The image of threads as narrative traditions gestures towards this study’s focus on the textile industries and also towards the comparative nature of this study. By putting factory women’s writings in dialogue with established American literature and classical works on labor, I intend to show where those traditions are interwoven and where they depart.

III. Project Overview

Industrial labor introduced many uncertainties into antebellum society, but what is certain is that wage pay incited women to evaluate the significance of their own labors differently. When Senator Jeremiah Clemens suggested on the Congress floor in 1850 that industrialization

40 For conceptual (also called cognitive) metaphors, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

exploited laborers more than slavery, operative Harriet Farley responded with factory women’s own experiences of the changes wage labor offered women. Against those who would romanticize “the beauties and accommodations of home-manufacture,” Farley depicts a woman weaving in a poverty-stricken household: “Through the casement she can look upon the hills and vales; but necessity, by its iron law, chains her to her seat….Poverty and discomfort were doubtless then the lot of the operative.”\(^{42}\) The options available to women were rather bleak prior to factories, when “‘smart girls went out to service for fifty cents per week… and took it in butter. That is, oftentimes their wages were paid in anything but money.”\(^{43}\) Wage pay, however, not only freed women’s labor from the sequestered space of the home; it also allowed women to gain social significance through participating in industries with a global reach. “Vessels now,” Farley comments, “leave our wharves with cottons, not only for South America, but for Calcutta.”\(^{44}\) If the U.S. was now a market society, factory women’s industry produced the wealth of a nation by facilitating economic exchange. In Farley’s view Lowell factory women “made the city: at least were as essential to it as capital invested.”\(^{45}\)

To defend a highly controversial form of labor within a highly charged ideological setting, Farley provides one mode of response to this project’s sustained question: “What did industrial wage labor mean, socially and symbolically, for women and their antebellum contemporaries?” To the question of female wage labor’s significance for antebellum society generally, this project offers essentially two answers. What emerges in the following pages are

\(^{42}\) Harriet Farley, *The Operatives’ Reply to the Honorable Jeremiah Clemens* (Lowell: S.J. Varney, 1850), 3-4.

\(^{43}\) Farley, *Operatives’ Reply*, 16.


\(^{45}\) Farley, *Operatives’ Reply*, 16.
essentially two simultaneously occurring perspectives on industrial labor, one of which originates from a distinct strain of thought about female labor specifically, and the other from longstanding portrayals of the dignity of labor generally. Factory authors are grouped by which of these frames they chose for their depictions of wage labor.

Part One of this dissertation positions “female” as the ascendant term in depictions of female wage labor in an industrializing society. This section shows how antebellum portrayals of female factory labor derive from longstanding, deeply held beliefs about gender based in a preindustrial economy, termed in this project the patriarchal shelter. Part One’s introduction exposes the patriarchal shelter’s foundation in preindustrial labor arrangements, which encompassed both women and slaves as household dependents who were believed to benefit from the patriarch’s guardianship. This section shows how these beliefs traveled from farm to factory alongside factory women. As they did so, they incited arguments from the antebellum public that factory women were sexually violated by market conditions, and consequently more degraded than slaves safely governed within the shelter.

Chapter One shows how Melville uses the patriarchal shelter framework in the “Paradise of Bachelors, and the Tartarus of Maids” to articulate common male concerns in the antebellum period about how an industrial economy might threaten male freedom. Chapter Two looks at factory women’s myriad defenses of their labor in spite of the patriarchal shelter’s presumptions. Focusing especially on the writings of Harriet Farley, this section explores how the patriarchal shelter constrained women’s ability to argue for their dignity, even as it provided a way for factories to ingratiate themselves with the antebellum public. Finally, Chapter Three uncovers how Harriet Jacobs engages pro-slavery, patriarchal shelter rhetoric in her first publication, and in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Alert to arguments presenting slavery as a more
benevolent labor system than the wage system’s callous exploitation of laborers, Jacobs unmasks savage market conditions where the antebellum public would least expect to find them: ruling the slave household and violating the slave woman’s womb.

Part Two gathers together factory women’s fictions under “labor” as the primary term, and explores how market-based labor might be dignified in the U.S. republic under those conditions in which labor is not attached to political freedom. When factory authors dignified industrial labor as a world-sustaining activity, they adapted typically male-gendered beliefs about the importance of labor and transferred them to an industrial market context. Like the mechanic class who took “pride in meeting human needs,” factory women suggest in their fictions that “honest labor was the only source of value.”46 However, dignifying wage labor to a skeptical readership was not at an easy rhetorical feat. This section explores how factory women made use of similar tropes and presumptions found in the georgic and its literary kin. These works celebrating labor as an activity overcome ancient contempt for labor by presenting it as a divinely mandated task, a task clamoring for justice through greater social appreciation. Part Two traces the continuities within this literary tradition to show how factory women made use of them.

The introduction to Part Two addresses a key obstacle to understanding laboring literature on its own terms. This section argues that politically based theories of labor, especially Marxist theories, do not understand laborers in precisely the same way that factory women portray themselves in their writings. Political interpretations presume from the outset that laborers are exploited, and demand that laborers be granted social power commensurate to their social contributions. This perspective often collapses the political with the economic and views

46 Sellers, 24.
the laborer as oppressed beneath society rather than entertaining the possibility that labor might occur alongside society, in an activity not always dominated by political power. The political view obscures facets of laboring literature in which the laborer calls for social justice via greater appreciation of his or her nation-sustaining toil, but does not necessarily clamor for rearranged class lines.

Chapter Four builds upon the introduction’s theoretical observations by tracing continuities between classical literary works celebrating labor, especially Virgil’s *Georgics*, and factory women’s portrayal of wage-earning as a positive social phenomenon. This chapter argues that when authors position labor as a dignified activity and defining human condition, against the aristocratic contempt for labor, their writings produce themes and tropes manifesting remarkable consistency across eras.

Chapter Five takes up the laboring themes and tropes of Chapter Four to show how factory women incorporated these aesthetic decisions into their own depictions of factory labor. These industrial authors add female-gendered elements to classical portrayals of toil. In doing so, they produce a vision of sympathetic womanhood distinct from that found in sentimental literature, because sympathy is attached to cooperative labor in a market context. I argue that mill women’s literary innovations on sympathy are best understood as a form of laboring literature adapted to women’s experiences in factory towns. I call these portrayals of sympathetic female wage labor the *rented room* persona.

Chapter Six culminates Part Two’s theoretical interventions as it positions Lucy Larcom’s *An Idyl of Work* within the tradition of female laboring literature discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter argues that Larcom’s *magnum opus*, a sustained blank verse portrayal of women’s lives in the mills in the 1840s composed from Larcom’s retrospective
stance in the 1870s, consciously resists being assimilated into middle-class portrayals by portray ing a precarious laboring moment in factory women’s lives. Larcom uses historical hindsight both to celebrate the possibilities that wage-earning offered women in the 1840s, and also to condemn American society for abandoning this moment, when industrial labor was well compensated and factory life was dignified.

Each section, I hope, opens up rich new avenues for understanding female labor in socio-cultural terms on the one hand, and works of laboring literature on the other. When New England’s factory women left their looms at the end of the day and took up their pens, they joined a proud tradition of female weavers and storytellers using their craft to resist male authority and the emergent techno-scientific order. Penelope’s weaving and unravelling kept male intrusion into her household from becoming utter domination. Philomel, forced into silence, created a tapestry to reveal the crimes committed against her. And, in a reversal of the metaphor, Scheherezade spun brilliant tales each night, yet left the edges frayed and incomplete as she battled for her very life. Women’s weaving and tale-telling combine to create art, born from perilous moments. The mythic force of these women lay in creatively grasping power in situations where abjection seemed the only possibility. None of them had it in their power to topple the patriarchal order structuring their lives, but if their position was fundamentally a defensive one, they nonetheless grasped control of their own narratives by mastery of their craft. In a gesture that was one and the same, they simultaneously exposed the limits of the men around them to control their inner lives and to dominate their outer circumstances. Just so, dismal depictions of the female wage earner spurred New England factory women to enter print. The stories women spun there alongside their textile labors suggest creative new ways of thinking
about women, industrial labor, and how these might be woven into the fabric of a nation’s defining values.
PART I

DEVIANTE DEPENDENCIES: THE IMAGE OF THE FACTORY WOMAN IN THE MARKET REVOLUTION
Images of slaves and whores—and of concubines, the middle point between them—complicate antebellum depictions of female factory laborers. These unsettling images rhetorically sift the exploitative conditions for women’s labor from those safe, domestic spaces traditionally associated with women’s labors in the antebellum period. Consider, for instance, how a Nashua Corporation employee frames her protest against mill overseers’ power over female factory laborers: whereas “a female negro...has a master and owner to protect her… thousands of unprotected white females of Lowell slaves [are subjected] to the overseers of a dozen or two of cotton mills.” These men “hold not only the bread, but the characters of those girls, in the palms of their hands… placing thousands of virtuous and noble females under worse than Turkish subjection to the male tyrants of the cotton mills.” Her formulation likens the mill to the confines of a harem where, implicitly, lusty “male tyrants” sexually exploit the women under their power. Against this dramatic image, drawn from the dreaded mid-nineteenth-century mythology of the Islamic Middle East, the supposedly benevolent patriarchal structure of slavery seems far safer. Although the author does not go so far as to claim female operatives were actually being sexually exploited in the mill town, this factory woman knowingly resorts to the most alarmist sexual implications for women to raise concerns about laborers’ lack of rights in

the mills. However historically jarring this claim may seem today in its praise of slavery as a relatively benevolent labor system, it tapped into common cultural assumptions about the safe spaces for women’s labors in 1846. In “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” Melville resorts to a similar rhetorical formula to communicate women’s degradation in the factory system. In the sexually charged atmosphere of Melville’s hellish paper mills, women serve—and, implicitly, service—their machines, “mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan.”48 As female slaves beholden to a tyrannical Orientalist master, Melville’s maids once again raise the specter of the harem. The potency of this narrative of female wage earners’ sexual degradation asserts itself time and again. Even as Orestes Brownson and other commentators attempt to defend the factory woman, they maintain an almost obsessive fixation on her sexual vulnerability in lieu of other concerns such as wages or shift length. In “The Laboring Classes” Brownson indicts wage slavery as more pernicious than Southern chattel slavery, and claims that the statement, “‘She has worked in a factory,’ is almost enough to damn to infamy even the most worthy and virtuous girl.”49

Two curious, and curiously consistent, phenomena pervade antebellum criticisms of female factory labor like the ones above. The first is that, where the image of the whore or concubine haunts discussions of female factory labor, the image of the slave almost always accompanies it. This association stems from a heated contemporary debate concerning whether factory labor amounted to wage slavery, but northern authors carefully limit their worries about sexual violation to the northern factory worker, while the possibility that slavery may pose a


similar threat to black female laborers remains beyond admission.\textsuperscript{50} Said differently, the comparisons of women’s factory labor in the North and slave labor in the South run alongside each other like asymptotes, approaching but never crossing at the crucial issue of sexual exploitation. Further, these examples make clear that factory women need not have actually engaged in sexual activity to be morally corrupted. The female laborer, violated and yet untouched, becomes tangled in the most paradoxical of webs within the factory system. Here, context rather than conduct determines a woman’s sexual identity, and the conditions of a woman’s labor are enough to impair her virtue irreparably.

Part One examines the reasons for this phenomenon by focusing on the image of the female wage earner’s sexualized body as a belabored symptom of antebellum market change. Antebellum comparisons between factory women and slaves, consistently backlit by the image of a protecting patriarch, highlight how factory women emerged as a friction-worn touchstone between the shifting tectonic plates of agrarian-based social values and market-based values sweeping North and South between roughly 1820 and 1860.\textsuperscript{51} Part One argues that sexualizing wage-earning women’s labor in the atmosphere of a factory was a vehicle for authors to grapple

\textsuperscript{50} In addition to Brownson’s “The Laboring Classes,” see Alabama Senator Jeremiah Clemens’ public debate with factory laborers about wage slavery as described in “Senator Clemens and the Factory Operatives,” \textit{Louisville Examiner} (Louisville, Kentucky), March 1850; see also protests from journeyman shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts and laborers in New York in Charles Grier Sellers, \textit{The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 405.

\textsuperscript{51} See Charles Grier Sellers, \textit{The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Steven Deyle, \textit{Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life} (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005). Although Charles Sellers’ seminal work on the market revolution focuses specifically on Jacksonian Democracy, and consequently sets its date range from 1815 to 1846, I follow Deyle’s more sweeping historical focus on the period from 1820 to 1860, to allow for a wider perspective on the interrelated economic networks of industrialism in the North and the westward-moving slave trade in the South.
with the changes wrought by an industrializing society. They reckoned the costs of market change by interpreting women’s labor in relation to a potent cultural metaphor, here termed the *patriarchal shelter*. The patriarchal shelter specifically highlights discussions of female labor as an activity overlappingly productive and reproductive, inherently needy of male protection and supervision, and constantly in danger of sexual violation. This trope presumes women’s activities, both biological and economic, must take place within a traditional household economy—literally, an *oikos nomos* or household rule. Ideological investment in the patriarchal shelter provided one way for authors to discuss changing identity politics in the industrial economy, but its basis in a preindustrial society also limited the ways authors might come to terms with cultural transformations.

I. Unearthing the Patriarchal Shelter

The patriarchal shelter as a metaphor emerges from hierarchical arrangements within the preindustrial household. That household organizing women’s labors under a male property owner possessed two features relevant to antebellum female wage labor.

First, the household, be it a freehold farm in the North or a tobacco plantation in the South, was an economic unit where, in Judy Lown’s terms, “the head of the household production unit in the centuries preceding industrialization was not the biological father of all over whom he had authority. Young apprentices, stepchildren, lodgers and servants of both sexes, as well as the wife and immediate offspring, could come under the authority of the male father/master.” To Lown’s lists of possible dependents, drawn from her study of the English silkweaving industry, one must also add chattel slaves, since these might be dependents in the

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southern household and were a constant point of comparison for factory women in labor debates between North and South.\footnote{Lown, 13.} Crucially, “the relationship between the male head and the rest of the household was both economic and familial,” a system where the property owner’s exploitation of dependents’ labor was also justified in terms of the stability he lent their lives.\footnote{Hannah Arendt frames the property owner’s dominion over household members as “the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world,” with specific reference to ancient Greek society as the source of property-based independence as a western ideal. See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 31. This ideal was likewise embraced by the American founders when they celebrated the yeoman farmer as the model for independence. See Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York: Random House, 1993), 106.} Dependents were household belongings who belonged, whose place in the world was anchored by their role within the household.

Second, the dependents’ labors, so directed, granted the male leader the freedom from labor necessary for participating in political affairs as a citizen.\footnote{Jeffrey P. Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920 (Chapel Hill: Univ of North Carolina Press, 2002), 23.} In other words, the household functioned as an economic unit giving rise to a political unit, where a man’s dominion over his dependents both constituted his freedom and set it off by contrast. Moreover, this arrangement allowed the household structure to stand in metonymically for male status, as Jeffrey Sklansky suggests when he points out that “the American Revolution was in many ways dedicated to the defense of the freehold against monarchical and aristocratic encroachment.”\footnote{Jeffrey P. Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920 (Chapel Hill: Univ of North Carolina Press, 2002), 23.} Women had a key

role to play in these arrangements. First, they were dependents whose labor had a distinctly biological component in the sense of being persons “who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species.” Second, unlike certain household members whose dependency might be circumstantial, such as the male heir who could eventually expect to own his own property, women were viewed as inherently dependent and “rarely credited with an equal capacity for rational willpower and the equal rights associated with it.” By extension, when female labor occurred chiefly on farms, wives’ and daughters’ status under a male property owner proved their need of male authority, in a circular and self-fulfilling logic. Male independence presumed female dependence, and freedom proceeded from a household structure of gender-based dominion.

Before the market revolution, the few female exceptions posed little threat to this model of independence. Single, propertied women in New Jersey had voting rights from the Revolution until this privilege was revoked in 1807, but even among single, propertied women, few could maintain that status since “few could support themselves without marrying.” But what if women managed to escape the shelter en masse—were they then categorically independent alongside men? This was one of the challenges industrial capitalism posed to male authority,

57 Arendt, 72.
58 Sklansky, 21. Arendt also discusses women’s perceived inherent dependence as persons belonging to the private sphere, where “private” is also “privative” and points to a lack, associated with persons such as slaves who lack humanity in its fullness because they lack political capacities. See Arendt, 38.
since the factories erected in Massachusetts and, eventually, across New England actively recruited young, single women as its first labor force. The Boston Associates who made the original decision to hire their laborers along gender lines demonstrated considerable managerial savvy, not least because they could offer women the best wages available while still paying them less than men.\footnote{See Eisler,15.} Practically speaking, these labor conditions granted factory women a degree of “autonomy” insofar as they gave women “a greater degree of choice in whether to enter the institution of marriage.”\footnote{Michael Anthony Lawrence, \textit{Radicals in Their Own Time: Four Hundred Years of Struggle for Liberty and Equal Justice in America} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123.} But did autonomy amount to independence? Contemporaries thought not.

Laboring in market conditions hardly constituted liberty, since the market was already perceived as a chaotic, violating force threatening property ownership and the free status associated with it. Through debt or taxes, “the market world could seize the farmer’s land to enforce its demand for money.”\footnote{Sellers, 15.} Consequently, a living derived from money was not a marker of independence but, in Jefferson’s characterization of the merchant, of “subservience and venality.”\footnote{Thomas Jefferson, \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin, 1999) 171.} As women traveled from the family farm to the factory, then, the belief that “women were the inevitable wards of males” followed them tenaciously.\footnote{David Kasserman, \textit{Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 257.} But wage labor as a form of dependency seemed as aberrant as it was innovative. New Englanders fretted about wage labor

\footnote{See Eisler,15.}
because it separated labor from its product and profit. They feared allowing industrialism a foothold on American soil especially as it might threaten male freedom, since, "behind all the other terms for the worker who labored at the will and for the profit of another was the oldest, bluntest, and most troubling of all: 'slave.'"  
65 In other words, wage labor might "unman" free men. But for female wage laborers, always inherently dependent, the public associated an equally old, blunt, and troubling word for the vulnerable woman paid in money for her services: "whore."

To sum up, the formula producing the factory woman of sullied virtue works almost as a syllogism:

- Women are (re)producers in need of protection.
- Women in the industrial economy lack protection.
- The market economy is a space of violation and overweening male desire.
- Therefore, women laboring in the factory wage system have been violated.

Thus, Orestes Brownson proclaims that after their stint in the mills, "few of them [former factory women] ever marry," implying that industrial labor has ravaged the factory woman’s reproductive potential like a social disease.  

66 I use the term *patriarchal shelter* rather than the more general *patriarchy* to address specifically how the antebellum public linked laboring women’s identities to the spaces in which they were conceptually, if not actually, limited. Here, the shelter is a cognitive metaphor where

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“reasoning in abstract domains uses the logic of our sensory-motor experience.” In Lakoff and Johnson’s account, metaphorical thinking is a basic cognitive process “which emerges from functioning in the world.” Metaphorical thinking proceeds when the brain transfers information from a source domain, based in concrete experiences—in this case, the literal experience of being in a home—and maps it onto a target domain, the thing analogized—in this case, woman’s identity. In this basic cognitive process, “the only kind of similarities... are experiential, not objective, similarities.” Antebellum metaphors for women’s virtue use the logic of such a sensory-based space, frequently positing feminine identity as something that exists under or against a barrier erected against an external danger. In two representative examples, physician-cum-novelist Ariel Cummings constantly refers to factory women’s need for “the shield of Virtue” in their daily lives; similarly, ex-slave Harriet Jacobs addresses her female readership as “happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood.” Whether figured under a shield, within a boat, or beneath a shelter, women’s sexual purity and moral character always appear in these metaphors as passive spaces in danger of violent threat and in urgent need of protection. In this way, the patriarchal shelter serves well as a spatial image: its foundation of feminine virtue both enables and is structured by the walls and roof of the patriarch’s benevolent


68 See Lakoff and Johnson, 265, for further information on source and target domains.

69 Lakoff and Johnson, 154.

control. That the patriarchal shelter also recalls a hymen-like space, where a barrier hearkens to the possibility of violent intrusion, only reinforces the point: women’s labors, insofar as they were associated with the home, were implicitly sexual and tied to women’s status as biological reproducers.

Additional advantages proceed from refiguring the familiar image of domestic womanhood under the conceptual metaphor of the patriarchal shelter. First, as a sensory-based metaphor, the shelter points to the historical and economic base of this image during a time of cultural upheaval. The pervasiveness of the patriarchal shelter trope signals a “tellable” moment in shifting culture ideology, a moment when change opens up rifts in unspoken cultural assumptions and demands representation to close those gaps.71 Second, the shelter as a concept helps to bring together and explain the multifarious ways that female laborers are depicted in relation to a home, or a patriarchal figure, or both. Moreover, insofar as shelter trope structures ideologies of female virtue, it also presents a unique hurdle for the factory authors whose writings form a key focus of this project. Because the patriarchal shelter was so pervasive in cultural assumptions about female labor, female wage earners almost obsessively defended their virtue to their readers before they could discuss any other aspect of their labor or their lives in factory towns. The public’s widespread assumptions that female labor needed governance shows two the difficulty women would have in trying to supplant this concept with any other basis for feminine virtue, since depictions of female wage earners showcase how “additional knowledge

about the person, group, or event is considered in light of the existing conceptual metaphor.”72

The very term for Lowell operatives, “factory girl,” testifies to the enduring presence of the patriarchal shelter. Designating factory women of all ages as girls helped to assuage any fears about whether they remained dependents relying upon male authority.

Scholars may object that presenting the factory woman in terms of the patriarchal shelter, that is, as a woman backlit by images of the home, merely replicates another instance of the domestic female idealized in separate spheres ideology. Yet in actuality the factory woman demonstrates once again why separate spheres ideology is “too crude an instrument—too rigid and totalizing—for understanding the different, complicated ways that nineteenth-century American society or literary production functioned.”73 Separate spheres obstructs rather than aids our understanding of a situation where the private realm of the home has melded with, not the public realm precisely, but certainly the more open space of the market. Instead of parsing the female laborer’s situation between public and private, Lown recommends “using a single lens to view the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ realms” to reveal “a whole web of intersecting connections shaped by capitalist and patriarchal relationships….In such an approach, gender and class emerge not as two separate systems but as a complex matrix of shifting definitions, fluid alliances and continuously contested boundaries.”74 The patriarchal shelter precedes the mature market society within which separate spheres emerged and shows how that ideology functioned

72 See O’Brien, 32, on the difficulties of supplanting an accepted conceptual metaphor: “After a particular conceptual metaphor is widely embraced as an apt way of viewing the target, it may be extremely difficult to replace it with a contrasting mode of framing the issue or group.”


74 Lown, 5.
“as one discourse among many that shaped the lives of women in the century.”\textsuperscript{75} And insofar as the patriarchal shelter applies to women’s labor and the economy, analyzing factory women in relation to the shelter helps to bolster an underserved facet of women’s studies, that is, the female laboring classes, whose causes diverged in significant ways from those middle-class sensibilities too easily identified as a putatively universal feminism.\textsuperscript{76}

Lown’s point about how one must view the public and private via a single lens, however, points to another theoretical lacuna surrounding these laboring women. When Lown uses “public” and “private” she refers to economic and domestic relations, highlighting a potential pitfall in taking the economy for granted as a public space. We have become accustomed to doing so in our day because, as Michael Warner puts it, we assume phenomena like the economy belong to the polity, and “what belongs to the polity is by definition of public relevance.”\textsuperscript{77} For antebellum Americans, however, the economy was a more indeterminate entity, and their reservations about its social significance ought not to be dismissed out of hand. The American founders organized political citizenship in contradistinction to the economy, insisting on the political state as a space where “only autonomous individuals free from any ties of interest and paid by no master were qualified to be citizens.”\textsuperscript{78} In the early republic, the “only people

\begin{thebibliography}{99}


\bibitem{warner} Michael Warner, \textit{Publics and Counterpublics} (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 44.

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disinterested enough to be political leaders were landed gentry, who were above the fluctuating market because they received a steady income from their tenant farmers.” When early Americans valued a strict division between “private” household dependents and “public” citizens, they understood “public” as a tightly restricted political space where certain men’s words and actions might affect tangible change in the world. Here “public” upends our sense of a given, passive space where all people might meet to associate. It is the opposite of a town plaza or, more a propos, an agora or marketplace. Instead, this older sense of public insists on a space created by banishing labor and economics, and the imperatives they place on men, from its midst. This public political sphere was the converse of the household economy as it definitively “set aside familial and gender relations as apolitical, often along with other relations of dependence, such as slavery.”

In structuring the political sphere in this way the founding generation intertwined public and political, but men soon worried that a national market might unravel them. In his 1837 farewell address Andrew Jackson warns that individual male citizens, “the planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer,” “are in constant danger of losing their fair influence in the Government” to businessmen. “The mischief springs,” Jackson continues, “from the power which the moneyed interest derives from a paper currency which they are able to control, from the multitude of corporations with exclusive privileges which they have succeeded in obtaining in the different States.” He issues a final, baleful warning about private economic interests, admonishing the citizenry that if they do not vigilantly oppose these private influences in government, “you will in the end find that the most important powers of Government have been

79 Wood, 106.

80 Sklansky, 5.
given or bartered away, and the control over your dearest interests has passed into the hands of these corporations.”

Jackson’s conviction that private interests create invisible political hierarchies and produce the hollowest version of freedom anticipates what Habermas terms the “refeudalization of the public sphere,” where citizenship and political discourse dwindle to shallow consumerism, and moneyed interests retain control over the “most important powers of government.”

Thus, analyzing how private, domestic arrangements merge with a budding national market points to a need for sharper theorizing about the economy as a composite space where public and private meet—or, more precisely for the male authors in this piece, where private interests may overtake the public sphere. Paying attention to what is deemed “public” helps to explain why, even as property requirements receded in favor of a nearly universal white manhood suffrage in the early nineteenth century, men who made a living via commerce were disinclined to look sideways at the factory woman and see an equal.

Quite the contrary, any possible similarities inspired alarm, with the consequence that the female wage laborer’s body bore the burden of an entire culture’s anxiety about economic change.

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83 Arendt notes that the emergence of such an economy coincides with the rise of a deeply conformist “society,” “that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance.” See Arendt, 35.

84 For property requirements giving way to white manhood suffrage, see Alex Gourevitch, From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77. Legal practices reflected this reluctance to see women as economic peers, as nineteenth-century legislators worried that granting women legal and economic independence would introduce discord into marriage via the husband’s and wife’s competing interests. See Basch, 260.
When the founding generation circumscribed voting rights to property owners, they did so presuming that only the most exceptional of conditions would position men to think and speak freely. Consequently, one might think of the market revolution as creating a crisis of speech, one calling for fresh but subtle assertions to buttress male status. The patriarchal shelter amply supplied this demand; as a sexist metaphor it reassured men of their own dominion-based freedom even as markets called that freedom into question. Michael Warner notes this covert but powerful dynamic when he comments, “Because the interweaving of gender, labor, and publicness was indirect rather than definitional, it could often go unrecognized, and still does.”

Positing the patriarchal shelter supplies precisely the “definitional” context to prevent this phenomenon from evading further notice any longer. As William Andrews has pointed out, the underlying metaphors structuring narratives do not merely “adorn arguments,” but instead “are arguments.” The patriarchal shelter was an argument deployed to “domesticate” the female wage laborer, but in so doing, provided an avenue through which corporate industrialism likewise became domesticated on American soil.

Historical hindsight and contemporary sensibilities allow us to see the patriarchal shelter as a reprehensibly sexist way of thinking about women’s labor. Nevertheless, writings by persons on all sides of this cultural crisis—male observers, factory women, and female slaves—

85 Warner, 38.


87 See Basch, 246 for a legal analogue for the way the patriarchal shelter helped the household’s older dependent relationships to carry over into new labor situations, such as the industrial employer who claimed authority over wage-earners by drawing on “the preindustrial master’s claim to his servant’s personal services.” For further information on the corporation’s use of the patriarchal shelter, see chapters one and two.
suggest that antebellum Americans did experience the market revolution as a violent assault on both men’s and women’s sexual identities because it unseated conceptual metaphors organizing female virtue under a male property owner. Consequently, examining the female wage laborer’s body in relation to the traditional patriarchal shelter sheds light on the stakes of market change for women. With Susan Bordo, who points out that materiality and finitude go hand in hand, and Alison Piepmeier, who points out the ways “the female body is not unbounded,” though it can be subversive, this examination of the female wage laborer’s body explores how public ideology disrupted and constrained that body.\footnote{See Susan Bordo, \textit{Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181, and Piepmeier, 11.} The female authors in this section show how the walls of the patriarchal shelter fall short of protecting female activities in emerging markets, but they hesitate to dismantle the concept of the patriarchal shelter altogether. In many ways, then, the male and female authors explored in Part One recognized how market changes could unseat the basis of an older sense of identity for women but leave a vacuum in its wake. It required an act of imagination to see past the upheaval to the possibilities of a new feminine identity, grounded in new conceptual metaphors. Authors could perform this act of vision only to varying degrees.

Female factory writers testify to the failure of the patriarchal shelter as a guard for female virtue insofar as it cannot account for the empowerment women found in wage earning, while slave autobiographer Harriet Jacobs insists on the female wage earner’s ability to preserve her virtue while indicting slavery’s patriarchal shelter as a propagandistic sham erasing the horrific sexual vulnerabilities that women experienced under slavery’s market economy. Interestingly, however, all of the writings by and about female wage earners—whether by men, factory women, or former slave Harriet Jacobs—are characterized both by a sense of disorientation and
powerful accompanying nostalgia, a longing for the home women have lost through market vicissitudes. For the patriarchal shelter was not an entirely pejorative metaphor as it framed women’s lives. It carried with it positive associations of warmth, affection, and belonging. Tearing down the shelter required laying a new foundation for women’s identity and seeing how to interpret the female body as something more than an entity rendered vulnerable by its distance from a home. Those innovations are the subjects of Part Two.
Chapter 1

“RIGHTLY ENOUGH CALLED GIRLS”: MELVILLE’S VIOLATED VIRGINS AND MALE MARKETPLACE FEARS

The monk-giver of gratuitous ghostly counsel now counsels for a fee....Struck by Time's enchanter's Wand, the Templar is to-day a Lawyer.

—Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”

Melville’s 1855 diptych, “The Paradise of Bachelors, and the Tartarus of Maids,” proceeds by a series of contrasts: between British lawyer-bachelors and American factory women, between writing actively on paper and passively producing it, and between complacent obliviousness to the present moment and acute awareness of a lost past. But running alongside Melville’s carefully balanced comparisons are his omissions, where the fact of exchanges, sexual and monetary, become etherealized and mystified into the atmosphere of his storyworld.

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” features a sexually charged atmosphere devoid of intimate physical encounter, and an economically shaped environment where money never actually changes hands. In their place is a sense of profound sense of loss about human relationships: an anxiety that male freedom has become a trivial matter in an industrial economy, and that female identity and reproduction have been displaced into monstrous market growth.

To create this impression, Melville compares the present state of affairs to an ancient order of knights who selflessly dedicated their lives to a mission. But in the present moment “the monk-giver of gratuitous ghostly counsel now counsels for a fee” and becomes something far less
sacred, far more complacent: “the Templar is to-day a Lawyer.” Melville’s morose vision suggests a current industrial dystopia, where the conditions of life have been reconstituted to restrict rather than expand freedom, and elements from the past have been reconfigured but have not progressed. Within this framework women service phallus-like machines, each endowed with a “long glittering scythe,” “vertically thrust up,” which simultaneously inseminates and enervates them via the fine textile dust dispersed into the air (327). They are depicted as female slaves confined to the harem-like setting of Melville’s hellish paper mills. Melville’s depiction of factory women as violated virgins, women who have been tainted by their interactions on the production side of a market, typifies male-dominated discussions of factory women’s sexual characters and constantly forecloses the possibility of female wage earning as an innovation to women’s status. Depicting the female operative as a whore allowed authors to control conversations about her status as a woman with access to money but nonetheless without real choices. By portraying female wage earners in this manner and by frequently eliding the economic realities of her labor, Melville and the many male authors before him delayed the urgent question of whether a changing economic order may have also fundamentally altered ideologies surrounding male sexual identity and freedom by placing both men and women on a plane where money defines human freedom in relative and interdependent, rather than absolute, terms. That is, a condition in which freedom from necessity takes the illusory and unstable form

89 Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in The Complete Shorter Fiction (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 314. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

of freedom to spend.

This chapter seeks to explain these two phenomena going hand in hand within Melville’s short story and across antebellum discussions of the female factory operative: the repression of discussions of money or wages in situations of obvious economic inequality, in favor of the factory woman’s sexualized body as a burdened symptom of antebellum market change. I argue that male authors sexualized wage-earning women’s labor as a way to “master” fears about how the market revolution might change male independence. If men rendered dependent within a growing economy could still master women rhetorically, then perhaps they were still free. Melville and his contemporaries deflected deep concerns about industrial society by interpreting women’s labors via the logic of the preindustrial patriarchal shelter.

When male authors attempted to stem the tide of change through this rhetorical sleight of hand, they did so at the cost of embracing agrarian-based social values even as these were becoming outmoded in a commercial society. The farms which New England women left for factory work amply demonstrate this reality. From 1790 to 1808, farmers increasingly settled on rocky sections of New England and attempted to coax crops out of less arable soil. The period’s Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts added to their troubles by cutting off access to European markets. Many agricultural farmers chose to move west out of New England by the 1830s, but those who remained saw family profits further diminish with the rise of textile mills. Previously farmers’ daughters could bring money to the family through home manufacture, but industrialism rendered those efforts increasingly fruitless. Women looked outside the home for

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91 Before the Boston Manufacturing Company brought “all steps of production, from ‘bale to bolt,’” under one roof, American manufacturers relied on “the inefficiencies of the Rhode Island ‘putting out system,’ in which storekeepers arranged ‘outwork’ on cottage industry handlooms.” See Hardy Green, *The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the*
more gainful employment, and no entity offered more lucrative opportunities than the factory system.\textsuperscript{92} When New England farmers, afraid of losing the family labor supply, raised alarms about wage-earning women’s need of protection, their concerned cries masked self-interest.\textsuperscript{93}

More disturbingly, in thinking of female labor as needy of male control, antebellum men also provided a way for the industrial corporation to domesticate itself on U.S. soil by domesticating the female wage laborer. Thus authors’ gendered critiques of industrial labor imposed limitations on the way they might grapple with change in the industrial economy. The limitations inherent in these gendered critiques come to bear heavily on scholarly renderings of “Paradise” specifically. In doing so, scholars critiquing the narrative’s gender and class constructs—among them, Robyn Wiegman, Wai Chee Dimock, and Michael Newberry—downplay the story’s indictment of the emerging industrial economy.\textsuperscript{94} More recently scholars sensitive to the narrative as social critique, such as David Dowling and Graham Thompson, make the opposite mistake of arguing for Melville’s progressive politics by missing or trivializing the retrogressive rhetorical mechanism by which that critique is achieved.\textsuperscript{95} Interpretations opened


\textsuperscript{95} See David Dowling, \textit{Capital Letters: Authorship in the Antebellum Literary Market} (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009); and Graham Thompson, “The ‘Plain Facts’ of Fine
up by the middle course, in which Melville critiques industrial relationships by means of a
gender formula, signal the costs of allowing Melville’s rhetorical constructs to go unexcavated.

One such cost lies in failing to recognize how the patriarchal shelter’s elasticity as a
concept made it a useful trope for industrialism’s adherents and critics alike. Just as economic
change created the conditions in which the shelter arises as a symbol to suture cultural upheavals,
it also gave rise to competing metaphors for the business corporation as a central actor in
industrialization. Antebellum thinkers seem to have had at least three ways of thinking about the
corporation: as a benevolent father, a monstrous man, or a poisonous landscape. The corporation
unsurprisingly made use of the first. An 1833 broadside from the Lawrence Manufacturing
Company, for instance, posits the factory agent as a substitute father for factory women far from
home. These women “may apply with confidence to the Agent for advice; and such counsel as he
can afford them, will be cheerfully granted, especially to those who may be far from their parents
and friends.”

Factory operative Harriet Farley references the second cognitive metaphor—of
monstrous manhood—when she acknowledges people’s concerns about factory women putting
themselves under corporate influence: “Corporations were objected to. They were mighty; could
be powerful for any end; and had no souls.” Finally, Andrew Jackson in his 1837 farewell
address makes use of the landscape metaphor to indict corporations and moneyed interests as a
dire threat to men’s freedom. Here Jackson positions the dignified male labor of “the planter, the

Paper in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.,”” American Literature 84, no. 3
(September 2012): 505–32.

96 “General Regulations, to be observed by persons employed by the Lawrence Manufacturing
Company, in Lowell,” 1833, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Operatives’ Reply to the Hon. Jeremiah Clemens (Lowell: S.J. Varney, 1850), 16.
farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer” as occurring on an agricultural landscape where “the fruits of their toil” grow naturally from men’s honest efforts to gain a living. He indicts “the moneyed interest” with its attending demons, “paper currency” and “the multitude of corporations,” as undermining honest laborers’ efforts through underhanded exploitation. Jackson warns that capitalists’ influence may already have tainted the traditional ground of masculine dignity: “The paper-money system and its natural associations—monopoly and exclusive privileges—have already struck their roots too deep in the soil, and it will require all your efforts to check its further growth and to eradicate the evil.” In Jackson’s view the greatest threat to the male citizen’s identity lay in this underlying metaphor of corporate interests as a blight to the landscape, subverting the honest laborer’s attempts to yield natural rewards from traditional efforts. But when antebellum discussions of female wage earners reference the patriarchal shelter, they sidestep the possibility that market culture and its companions had unilaterally altered the grounds of male and female identity. Even the harshest critics of industrialism avoided difficult conversations of political identity by choosing to agonize over the female wage earner only through women’s changed relationship to the patriarchal shelter.

I. Trading Money for Sex in Melville

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” achieves its social critique by showing how far humans have strayed from Jackson’s natural landscape in a global industrial economy. Melville sets a difficult task for himself to expose the dangers of economic developments experienced as blessings for many people, of whom his leisurely bachelors are the paradigmatic example. To pinpoint the problems inherent in modern industrialized society he structures his story through a series of contrasts, “oppositions and pairings that constitute

98 Jackson, 86.
unresolved arguments within themselves.” Yet Melville connects his London bachelors and American paper mill “maids” by the most tenuous of threads: an American businessman narrator who travels between them and reflects on the opposite conditions of their lives. There is little to join the situations of these persons separated by gender, position, status, and nationality. But peppered in both stories lie clues to the way industrialism has created profound social stratifications and separated whole groups of persons into inflexible, unchanging roles. The ties that bind Melville’s foil characters are production and consumption, human life processes stretched to international lengths via transatlantic economic networks. Melville makes clear his bachelors are consumers, first and foremost, and his maids are producers. By dividing these roles along class and gender lines, Melville shows how an industrial economy has battered down the walls of the household economy “by transposing men into a domestic world of blissful consumption and women into a world of market production.” But Dowling interprets Melville’s dystopian portrayal of class as a call to social activism, claiming Melville constructs his narrative to demonstrate that “the economic inequities of the story are urgent and in need of immediate change.” Giving Melville credit for insight and progressive politics are two different things; in this story the former does not naturally feed into the latter. In fact, Melville’s decision to frame his bachelors and maids in terms of the retrospective standards of the patriarchal shelter precludes a progressive social vision. As Melville channels cultural ideologies of inherent biological difference into his portrayal of the industrial economy, he uses the female

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100 Dowling, 140.

101 Dowling, 142.
laborer’s sexualized wage slavery as an aesthetic device to raise the question of whether an older concept of male freedom has been rendered hollow, and simultaneously to delay the more troubling question of whether all freedom has been relativized by market conditions. One might therefore think of the narrative’s “unresolved argument” as a question emerging from the white space between the diptych’s joined panels. On one side lies male freedom without any sense of urgent purpose; on the other, females’ urgent purpose without any sense of freedom. The structure places special stress on the first half, since, as Newbury observes, “the bachelors’ self-indulgent and elitist activities of all kinds have entirely different meanings before and after one reads the second half of the diptych.”

As “Tartarus” demands reinterpretation of “Paradise,” it also poisons the joys there by implicating the men’s most ardent pursuits as callously solipsistic. The question therefore hovering between the two stories might be articulated thus: When male agency has become so alienated from “natural” human relationships as to find its fullest expression in self-indulging oblivion, does men’s social dominance truly signify freedom?

Claiming that “Paradise” comments on male freedom is nothing new, in the sense that the most prominent readings of the story inevitably circle this question. Although the story specifically focuses on wealthy males, Wai Chee Dimock notes how its stark divisions of the plot along gender lines make particular conditions of masculinity representative, causing “a privileged group of men... to stand in for the entire male population, making class privilege metonymically equivalent to a generalized maleness.” For Robyn Wiegman, the story idealizes the male bond among these representative men as the basis of democratic freedom by expelling women from the fraternity of peers, and composing a homosocial version of male

102 Newbury, 60.

103 Dimock, 79.
freedom against female dependence. Michael Newbury shifts the interpretive thrust from the penis to the pen, reading the factory women as “female automatons who produce antiliterary paper, marks that need not even be noticed because they are not the right kinds of strongly individuated and individualistic writing that Melville claimed as his own.” These interpretations tend to assume that the male agency portrayed in “Paradise,” be it expressed in homosocial bonding or authorial expression, possesses some sort of implicitly inherent value. I submit that in Melville’s terms it does not. Even before the narrator travels from “Paradise” to “Tartarus,” his reflection on the Knights Templar sets up his bachelor brotherhood for satire.

For Melville, one of industrialism’s most prominent qualities is the way it has freed some lives from necessity while condemning others to serve the endless and increasingly breakneck pace of production processes. To illuminate the path leading to his bachelors’ lives of pleasure and leisure, Melville inserts a historical layer over the lives of his bachelor companions by musing on their relationship to the ancient Knights Templar. The comparison highlights the way these lawyers have been freed from necessity and purpose in the comforts of modern society. The ancient knights were joined by the putatively holy and urgent purpose of “battling for the Holy Land” until “a moral blight at last tainted this sacred Brotherhood...the monk's austerity relaxed to wassailing, and the sworn knights-bachelors grew to be but hypocrites and rakes” (314). The dissipation destroying the knight’s legacy is the defining condition for his modern equivalent, the wealthy lawyer. This man has traded “his long two-handed sword for a one-handed quill,” and his sense of sacred purpose for a life of paper-based work where he “counsels for a fee” and reaps profits from self-interestedly obstructing “all the courts and avenues of Law”

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104 See Wiegman.

105 Newbury, 65.
(314). Similarly, the lawyer trades the knight’s life of glorious public deeds for a life of “glorious dinners,” because, shielded from necessity and consequently robbed of any higher purpose, enjoyment remains the one activity left to him as an expression of his freedom. Melville therefore makes use of the convenient name “Temple-Bar” as his setting, to indicate the way that the knights’ religious mission has been replaced by worshipping at the altar of pleasurable consumption (315). Consumption orders the bachelors’ lives so deeply that they measure time by it, using “a wine-chronometer” rather than “a water-clock, like King Alfred’s” (319). This measurement testifies to a second-degree effect of industrialism on society. Although industrialism restructured time for its laborers by breaking down experiential time into regular, measured units, the bachelors have been wholly liberated from experiencing time in either the old way, measured by the passage of time in nature, or in the new way, measured in clock hours. Time for them becomes wholly subjective, marked by the ebb and flow of its gentle tides in the enclosed space of “fraternal, household comfort” (319). Sequestered as a “band of brothers” in the private space of R.F.C.’s flat, the bachelors succumb to the sense of unreality pervading the life of ease: “The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations...Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such things.—Pass the sherry, Sir” (319). Their turn from a life of public mission to a life of private enjoyment inevitably results in a sort of solipsism, evidenced by the men’s almost hostile disavowal that life might inherently involve suffering. This shared, private

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106 See Sellers, 153-154. Sellers claims that new stress on standard time in the antebellum period displaced people’s previous experiential sense of time, and he interprets public time clocks (which added a second hand around this time) and wristwatches as a sign of alienated labor which transform even the land and labor into money-units of capital. See also Rodgers, 18. Rodgers notes that by the Civil War the American Watch Company at Waltham had begun to manufacture pocket watches, “those characteristic arbiters of industrial time,” on a massive scale.
enjoyment becomes “the decisive bonding experience for the fraternity,” but also signals “a shamefully self-absorbed and isolated class solidarity.”

But the cruelest cut of all lies in the way that the bachelors, whose lives are unforced, remain oblivious to the ways they force others. They enjoy the full freedom of being bachelors, moving freely and “without any twinges of their consciences touching desertion of the fire-side” (319). Their paper-pushing lives show how the globally stratified class lines created by industrialism create a harsher world than the brutal household structure of pre-modern eras. In the household presided over by the yeoman farmer, the patriarch might at least acknowledge that his freedom to participate in politics as an individual was possible only because household members labored to take care of the family’s continual needs. Patriarchs wrested their freedom from household dependents through the “force and violence [which] are justified in this [private] sphere because they are the only means to master necessity.” But the local and self-contained structure of the pre-industrial household also required the patriarch to face the subjects of his forcible rule on a regular basis. The bachelors, on the other hand, exert the patriarchal violence necessary to become free, although with the added insult of not knowing whom they have deprived of freedom. The consumer-bachelors by their role as paper-dependent lawyers call forth the paper maids’ energies and, in so doing, preside over their activities as patriarchs while sapping them of their sexual vitality, yet they are not required to think of their victims. In fact, they need not even know of the servant-class’s existence, and it is only a slight business motivation, coupled with a whimsical desire “for the adventure of the trip,” which incites the

107 Newbury, 61.

108 Arendt, 31.
narrator to travel to the paper mill and confront the industrial heart of darkness enabling his own life of ease.

Melville presents his narrator as the paradigmatic patriarch who indirectly presides over female wage earners’ labor as a key consumer and, relatedly, acts as emissary of the ecological changes and human costs brought about by mass-production in industrial society. The narrator travels to the Devil’s Dungeon paper mill to set up a large-scale order for envelopes as shipping containers for his seed business, whose distribution reaches “through all the Eastern and Northern States, and even fell into the far soil of Missouri and the Carolinas” (322). As a seed distributor, the bachelor-patriarch literally transforms the environment and figuratively inseminates a great portion of the United States through the western onslaught of the market. One consequence of that market expansion is that it allows massive production to disrupt natural cycles, throwing off balances of life and death in the natural world. Hannah Arendt groups both the capitalistic concern with the accumulation of wealth, and also industrialism’s concern with heightened production, as points where laboring processes devoted to human life cycles ceased being confined to nature or the home and entered society at large. At this moment “it was as though the growth element inherent in all organic life had completely overcome and overgrown the processes of decay by which organic life is checked and balanced in nature’s household. The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural.”109 This high rate of production, Arendt goes on to say, batters down the walls of the previously hidden domestic life while also eroding the integrity of the public realm as a space of free and independent action. Appropriately, Melville’s narrator plays a key role in impressing this “unnatural growth of the natural” on nature itself as a

109 Arendt, 47.
businessman trading in agricultural products. Recalling Andrew Jackson’s metaphor of the moneyed interests whose influence reaches deep into the soil, the narrator presides over nature through distribution and sales. In the process he simultaneously transforms the environment’s natural ecological diversity by allowing certain species of plant to overtake vast regions through farming practices. But in case readers miss the significance of the narrator’s more abstract patriarchal influence over nature through markets and insemination of the landscape, Melville reconstructs the patriarchal shelter within the factory itself. There, Melville’s mill maids, as persons ideologically bound to the private sphere on the basis of gender, testify to the “unnatural growth of the natural” as the patriarchally led project of industrialization hijacks their sexual identities and transforms them into handmaidens of a monstrous level of production.

In the torrid, damp atmosphere of the paper mill sex becomes an out-of-body experience. The air hangs heavy with antebellum associations with intercourse—male control, female passivity, and reproduction—but none of its actualities. The stifling atmosphere reconstitutes the elements of the patriarchal shelter, but in this dystopian space those relationships take on the qualities of the uncanny. Here, a patriarchal figure in the form of the “Old Bach” demands and orders women’s labors (327). Women serve the patriarchally directed project, using their energies to further production. And Eros, in the form an impudent young man named Cupid, mediates between male and female efforts as an errand boy in the process of endless production. Yet the factory remains the most unerotic of places, where sexual activity dissociates into machinery and reproduction moves outside the body. Here women “of whatever age,” “rightly enough called girls” because of their sexual inactivity, nonetheless demonstrate how women’s labor is intertwined with their sexual characters, and how those sexual identities have been degraded by industrialism (332). Yet Melville also makes clear that the factory system has not
succeeded in wholly destroying women’s reproduction; instead, factories have modified female sexuality to take on monstrous proportions. Thus, the narrator enters a sort of incubation room, “stifling with strange, blood-like, abdominal heat” where “white pulp” resembling “the albuminous part of an egg” begins the gestational process of becoming paper (328). The narrator notes with awe that the pulp, once shaped and delivered into a former nurse’s “waiting hands” as she plays midwife to the machinery, takes exactly nine minutes to be produced into paper (330). This process of (re)production, which creates the material for the bachelors’ legal documents, perfectly counterbalances the bachelors’ leisurely “wine-chronometer” time. Their regular consumption refreshes and invigorates them, while the “metallic necessity” of Melville’s machine enervates the factory women, shortening reproduction from nine months to nine minutes. In the process industrialism also lines the women’s foreheads like the paper they produce, quickly making wizened old maids of fresh young girls (325). The factory women of “Tartarus” clearly experience the industrial market as a violation in their lives. Mass production does not kill them, but it robs them of their dignity as distinct persons and as sexual creatures.

The problem with Melville’s aesthetic decision to portray his “maids” as virgins violated by industrial market conditions lies in the way he chooses to see the factory floor as a nightmarish version of the patriarchal shelter rather than as a possible departure in relations between the sexes. The decision to situate industrial conditions along patriarchal lines sets a chasm between men and women based on fundamental biological difference. Here, far from experiencing “the sexual (and economic) powerlessness” of “helplessly stand[ing] by while machines seem to have taken their places,” patriarchal figures exert force through cruel innovations on old relationships. Though the men and women do not actually engage in sex,

\[110\] Dowling, 142.
the male force exerted over female labor has an unmistakably sexual valence, just as the narrator’s influence over the American landscape is an expression of his sexuality as the most virile of seedsmen. The fact of male agency, and even male privilege, is a given within the storyworld’s donnée. If men suffer any impotence or powerlessness, then, that experience proceeds from a decreasing awareness of and control over their own influence, rather than any diminishment of influence itself. The narrative indicts the men to the degree that they remain complacently oblivious to their impact on the larger world. The narrator, for example, explicitly implicates “the strange innocence of cruel-heartedness in this usage-hardened boy,” Cupid, as the most “tragical” and mysterious of all industrial phenomena (328). In this light, the bachelors’ freedom has become a paltry bauble because they remain so inured to it. This indictment comes after Melville’s real-life disillusionment with Evert A. Duyckinck and his circle of literary bachelors. Newbury suggests Melville’s disaffection with this circle led him to create and condemn its “Paradise” counterpart for its dilettantism, “its intellectual facility and dishonesty,...[and] its political irresponsibility.”

While Melville may similarly use his factory women to scorn female sentimental authors “who produce reams of paper with no words worth reading for the literary market,” he notably does not also offer up an example of a male character who makes a mark worth reading. Even though the factory women provide the raw material to fuel the bachelor-lawyers’ business in the form of “lawyers’ briefs...marriage certificates, bills of divorce,” the bachelors seem to produce these documents as unreflectingly as the women (330). It is this failure of self-awareness Melville seems to indict above all, where the lawyers’ sense of public action has been diminished to “clog, hinder, and embarrass” law courts so that they can

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111 Newbury, 62.
maintain their own lifestyles (314). Justice and public responsibility seem to be alien concepts. In this depiction, male force remains unjustified when it leads not to public influence or political partnership, but to the cloistered world of shared indulgence. Said differently, it is not the fact of male control Melville finds so problematic in “Paradise,” but the careless exercise of it.

But to reiterate: these depictions of biological difference do not make “Paradise” socially progressive by any measure. To make his point about male privilege, Melville must compose women as a point of contrast, as numerous critics have in their own ways noted.\textsuperscript{112} Cook remarks that in the world of “Tartarus,” “women are less than fully human whether they are wage slaves or in thrall to their own reproductive machines.”\textsuperscript{113} This aesthetic decision subordinates issues of class and privilege to a supposedly fundamental and unalterable condition of biological difference. This is why Melville’s decision to refrain from portraying actual monetary transactions, coupled with his decision to analogize labor relations and sexual intercourse, becomes so significant. Both money and gender structure the divisions in this storyworld, but submerging the presence of money and building the narrative’s figurative level through sexual innuendo represents a significant repression on Melville’s part. To be sure, the narrator makes offhanded references to financial transactions: harried Benedick tradesmen worry about “rise of bread and fall of babies”; a young man may join the Templars’ vicinity if he can make “a special friend among the order” and pay rent under that person’s name; the narrator quickly “made known my business [of buying envelopes], [and] concluded it satisfactorily” before his factory tour; and Cupid explains the former nurse’s decision to enter the factory because “the business is

\textsuperscript{112}I have already noted Wiegman’s argument about the male fraternity constituted by eschewing females from its midst. Newbury interprets the women’s (de)sexualized labor in the factory system as implying “a subtext denying not only in biological but in artistic terms the idea of female originating power.” See Newbury, 63.

\textsuperscript{113} Cook, 129.
poor in these parts” (313, 315, 326, 330). But, significantly, each of these transactions occurs outside the narrative action. Unlike the many analogies likening industrial processes to sexual encounters, not one economic exchange is offered up for close inspection. Yet in the industrial economy, monetary transactions define both lawyers’ and factory women’s statuses. Trivializing this fact gives the impression that economic processes have been ossified into ontological difference, under the old framework of patriarchal freedom and female dependency. Although the narrator acknowledges that the modern lawyer counsels for a fee, his economic status seems sufficiently secure as to make his independence inviolable. On the other side of the equation, the factory women’s wages never merit a mention in the story. Like the lawyer’s fees, they cement a preexisting status. 114 Positioning women’s dependence as part of nature and not as part of an economy ruling bachelor and factory woman alike draws attention away from the issue of male dependence (and his relativized independence) within a market society. Thus, if Melville satirizes male privilege in an industrial economy in such a way that only he, as author, possesses sufficient awareness of this brave new world, he nonetheless includes significant omissions in his enlightened portrayal.

That Melville chooses in his other works to meditate on money as conditioning the human experience within market culture only makes his omission in “Paradise” more palpable. *Moby Dick* devotes an entire chapter (“The Doubloon”) to a gold coin representing a field of

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114 Melville, admittedly, had a precedent for thinking of stable payments as securing men’s independence. In the colonial period, only aristocratic landlords enjoying tenants’ regular rent payments had been thought of as sufficiently independent for public life. But in *Federalist* 35, Alexander Hamilton implied lawyers, doctors, and certain other “learned” professions might be more free from the marketplace than landed interests or merchants, and therefore better suited for public service. Even so, the landholder’s independence from nature and the lawyer’s independence through regular profits proceed from two entirely different spheres. See Wood, 106 for landlords’ independence; and Wood, 254 for details on *Federalist* 35.
mutual interest and endeavor for Ahab’s crew. The men’s interpretations of the coin’s markings simultaneously associate and individuate them. In the money-free world of “Tartarus,” no such acknowledgment of shared context and no such individuation are possible. Without reference to their wages as a system that degrades them through arbitrary human decision, Melville’s maids remain so many “hueless waves,” hopelessly degraded by sex. In “I and My Chimney,” published a year after “Paradise” in 1856, Melville does not draw gender lines so strongly in a market context. That short story portrays a male narrator-author’s attempt to claim the domestic space against market spaces, embodied both in his wife and in a master-mason wanting to dismantle the chimney for its component bricks. In this gender-bending alignment “domesticity functions as a viable, culturally accessible discourse through which Melville criticizes capitalism, which, interestingly,” Dowling adds, “cannot be said to be embodied by the female in a simple inversion.”¹¹⁵ By contrast, an inflexible gender-frame constrains “Paradise,” preventing the story from rising to any such insights.

For Graham Thompson, Melville’s attentive depiction of the industrial manufacturing process, based on his actual experience of it, destabilizes the temptation to follow the narrator’s gendered interpretation of factory labor. “The machine illustrates for the narrator in physical form the rigidity of his own mental need for control, harmonization, and correspondence,” and the narrator’s interpretations of the factory women’s sexualized labor function as symptoms of the selfsame need for control. But for all the narrator’s efforts to stamp a final interpretation on industrial processes, “the machine still produces blank paper, which, at this stage before it reaches the maids in the folding room, is literally and philosophically unruly.”¹¹⁶ In Thompson’s

¹¹⁵ Dowling, 137-138.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, 525.
view, critics’ fascination with the gendered divisions in “Tartarus” and “Paradise” follows the satirized narrator too closely, producing interpretations which are “too easily led by a story that appears to do so much of the critical work itself.”117 His own hermeneutics, however, require him to disengage completely with the gendered divisions so prominently thrust forth in the narrative, and also to dismiss the bachelor section of the narrative as “ancillary,” a mere “pretext upon which the second part of the story is stamped in relief.”118 While Thompson’s interpretation of Melville’s industrial machine as one that “confounds trust” in the very processes of interpretation is compelling, it is incomplete. Melville’s narrator may well remain confounded by the “great machine” of industrialization as “a miracle of inscrutable intricacy” resisting his ability to interpret it, but this confusion largely proceeds from the narrator’s inability to account for industrial processes as introducing a new and unsettling dynamic to human relationships.119 This confusion lies not only in the narrator’s perspective, however, but also in the narrative framework itself dividing bachelors from maids rather than associating them as key participants in market relations.

Melville’s own trip to a Massachusetts paper mill is suggestive of the story’s frame, which involves aesthetic “manufacturings” shaped out of complicated realities. In January 1851, Melville traveled to the Berkshire Mill in Dalton, Massachusetts to buy a slew of paper directly from the manufacturer.120 He wrote to Evert Duyckinck of his trip in a letter “stamped with the

117 Thompson, 509.
118 Thompson, 524.
119 Melville, 331.
120 For an account of Melville’s excursion, see Thompson, 511-513.
papermaker’s mark—‘Carson’s Dalton, MA.’”121 The possessive here, “Carson’s,” refers to the manufacturing family owning the Berkshire Mill, and also enmeshed in money and banking interests across New England. The family’s patriarch, Davis Carson, had helped to establish both the Berkshire Mill and several others in the area decades before. Carson also helped to open the Old Red Mill in the same area, but extricated himself from that establishment early on. Crane and Co. took over the Old Red Mill, and in 1844 introduced silk threads into the production of their high quality paper “to prevent counterfeiting and denomination altering [, which] meant that Crane’s was soon supplying banks in Boston and New York.”122 Meanwhile Carson continued managing the Berkshire mill until 1849. After passing it on to his sons upon retirement, Carson “moved to Pittsfield Bank when it was chartered in 1853, a position he maintained until his death in 1858.”123 Carson’s own life personally bridged the connection between moneyed and industrial interests Jackson had implicated as the most dire threat to men’s freedom and inequality. Did Melville recognize the interstate money and banking networks of “Carson’s Dalton, MA,” where industrial power ambiguously puts the town in possession of its capitalist proprietor? The suggestions are tantalizing, even as the details of Melville’s visit remain “unruly.” Nonetheless, Melville fashions his own aesthetic frame out of this unruliness, and that frame is the sexualized dialectic generated between “bachelors” and “maids,” dividing them as biologically distinct rather than placing them on the same economic playing field.

This division, even as it calls attention to ideological rifts, attempts to close them. Consequently, the narrative remains stymied by its retrospective orientation towards the

121 Thompson, 512.
122 Thompson, 514.
123 Thompson, 512.
patriarchal shelter and its nostalgic interpretation of the female wage earner within the shelter’s framework. By failing to address the question of whether a society dominated by money has placed men and women alike at the mercy of the economy, the narrator can only close with an observation that is inextricably also a lament: “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! and oh! Tartarus of Maids!” (332). This exclamation reiterates the gender lines drawn in the story, and the contrast drawn between them precludes viewing the present as anything other than a declension from the past.

II. Restoring the Old Home: Brownson’s Dispossessed Men and Degraded Factory Women

Melville’s imaginative figuring of female factory labor distilled actual commentaries on factory women that had been around for decades. These discussions, too, remain unwilling to understand female wage earning except by agonizing over women’s changed relationship to the patriarchal shelter. They perhaps help to explain Melville’s decision to situate female wage earning in terms of sexual degradation rather than to see women as market participants, as he does in the domestic setting of “I and My Chimney.” Antebellum discussions of wage earning, and of the working class identity it conferred on laborers, revolved chiefly around the issue of dispossession. Here again, to define “working class” is to substitute a new form of placelessness in modernity against an older identity defined by belonging to a place or owning property. Arendt defines working class as “a class of people who are without any property and live only from the work of their hands.” The rise of a working class is a particular feature of capitalist societies, since in previous eras most wage labor represented a mere stage during an apprenticeship. Industrialism broadened the threat of dispossession, including not just peasants but also mechanic and artisan classes, “the majority of whom cannot ever hope to rise to a higher
position.”124 Placelessness, dispossession, and hopelessness defined wage earning, working-class status in the minds of nineteenth-century American thinkers, in whose minds “the British example was ever present.”125 For these reasons Americans were especially worried that industrialization would introduce old-world oppression into the young republic—and for good reason. As industrialism and market culture became entrenched in the U.S., “the rise of the factory system along with the transformation of craft manufacturing entailed the dispossession of independent family farmers and mechanics and creation of a permanent class of propertyless wage earners.”126 While the threat to women’s identity was not specifically an issue of dispossession, since property ownership was not a feminine ideal, the female wage earner was still framed in terms of dispossession insofar as she was defined as a dependent belonging to the home. If “belonging” defined women’s dependent identities up until the market revolution, then industrialization’s introduction of a working class remained a particularly fraught possibility for women who might come to belong nowhere and to no one. This possibility transformed women into cyphers, sexually and socially, in the public eye. Where a dependent wage-earning male was an atrocity, a dependent wage-earning female was, at best, a curiosity. But since female wage earners introduced an indeterminate element in the antebellum social scale, authors eagerly sought to restore her to the patriarchal shelter as quickly as possible.

Orestes K. Brownson’s essay, “The Laboring Classes,” furnished a prominent example of this anxious effort to restore dispossessed manhood through ownership and to protect femininity by safeguarding female laborers’ ability to belong to a traditional home. This 1840 essay

124 Arendt, 66n70.
125 Cook, 48.
126 Sklansky, 35.
appeared in Brownson’s own *Boston Quarterly Review*, a magazine he had founded in 1838 largely for his own meditations on “the problem of the Destiny of Man and of Society.”\(^{127}\) It is notable not only for its anticipation of Marxist thought, but also for the controversy Brownson stirred up in his ill-fated attempt to defend factory women. The essay begins as a review of Thomas Carlyle’s *Chartism*, praising the author for his insight into social problems but faulting Carlyle for vagaries in recommending reform. “Society is wrong,” Brownson avers, “but he [Carlyle] mocks our sincerest and best directed attempts to right it.”\(^{128}\) Spurred by this deficiency, Brownson quickly takes up the obligation to diagnose the source of laboring-class degradation and to recommend clear solutions to it.

Brownson addresses squarely the issue Melville later would be so loathe to face—that is, the pervasive role money and moneyed interests played in degrading the wage earner. He rejects outright Carlyle’s recommendations for universal education and general emigration for laborers because “the evil we speak of is inherent in all our social arrangements, and cannot be cured without a radical change of those arrangements” (*LC*, 312). Present social arrangements, which are merely the latest form of class exploitation perpetuated throughout human civilization, proceed from “the evils of the present banking system” and the “evils of slavery,” where “the mischievous effects of this inequality do not result from the personal characters of either rich or poor, but from [the system] itself” (*LC*, 312). The wage laborers’ degradation manifests the latest form of the laborer’s exploitation, itself originating from humanity’s tendency to accept the authority of a “priestly” class of men who are set up as an elite, superior group authorized to

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\(^{127}\) Cook, 43.

control the masses. Brownson explicitly addresses these men as the group who violate humanity for their own selfish ends and unman the honest laborer. Unlike Melville, Brownson also directly addresses how these men have made a hollow concept of male independence. “Universal suffrage is little better than a mockery where the voters are not socially equal,” Brownson insists as he expounds on the plight of the laboring classes in a later issue of the Boston Quarterly Review. “No matter what party you support, no matter what men you elect,” he continues, “property is always the basis of your governmental action” (LC, 369). But since property is the condition for true freedom in a just society, Brownson’s musings on the problem of wage labor and its posited solutions are particularly revealing insofar as they break down along gender lines.

In his first essay on the laboring classes Brownson meditates first on the two labor systems in the U.S., slave and free, each of which illustrates his point about the universally exploited laborer and the phenomenon “that men are rewarded in an inverse ratio to the amount of actual service they perform” (LC, 306). Brownson then employs the familiar comparison of wage labor to slavery, approached through the lens of the patriarchal shelter. Though Brownson does not favor slavery, he regards it as more benevolent system than wage labor because of the security it offers slaves in a supposedly stable patriarchal order. His comparison of the two systems focuses chiefly on their indignities to male laborers. Of wage labor, he says, “It is no

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129 For Brownson’s explanation of the ruling class as the “priestly” sect, which destroys the individualism reigning in primitive cultures and manifests itself differently throughout human history, see Brownson, 313-321.
pleasant thing to go days without food, to lie idle for weeks, seeking work and finding none, to rise in the morning with a wife and children you love, and know not where to procure them a breakfast” (LC, 306). Consequently, the wage system is “a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders” (LC, 309). In other words, capitalists use the wage system to abandon their obligations as patriarchs offering protection in exchange for exploitation. In the process they also undermine actual fathers’ ability to care for their families.

When Brownson turns to the issue of female wage labor, he discards the issue of dispossession to fall back on the central dilemma of female virtue. But like his contemporaries, Brownson ensures his discussion of the factory woman’s vulnerable virtue will remain a distinct issue belonging to the laboring classes, not to be commingled with the female slave’s sexual status when he compares factory women and slaves. Put differently, because the patriarchal shelter is presumably the place where female sexuality is governed and guarded, Brownson confidently declares, “Our Northern system of labor is more oppressive, and even more mischievous to morals, than the Southern” (LC, 308). Keeping wage women’s labor outside the patriarchal shelter as the central issue, Brownson ensures the issue of threatened white female virtue does not cast suspicions on black female slaves’ sexual safety, contained within the walls of the slave household. Although Brownson first praises factory women for their industriousness, he quickly condemns the system in which they labor as an inescapably degrading one. The wage system takes the harshest toll on female operatives, who wear out “their health, spirits, and morals” in factory labor, and then return home with ruined health to die

130 Using Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative and Steven Deyle’s study of the domestic slave trade, I examine proslavery apologists’ use of the patriarchal shelter in light of slavery’s underlying economic realities in chapter three.
Faith in the patriarchal shelter leads to the attending belief that factory women are consumed by their labor conditions, used up and discarded in a market space of unscrupulous male desire.

Those fortunate enough to survive their tenure in the factories do not escape the indelible impression it has made on their identities, for few women “ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired” (LC, 307). Furthermore, Brownson claims merely to be ventriloquizing public opinion when he asserts, “She has worked in a factory,’ is almost enough to damn to infamy even the most worthy and virtuous girl” (LC, 307). Although Brownson later addressed the Lowell factory women directly after the firestorm his words had stirred up among them, he there also maintained that factory labor changed a woman’s social standing fundamentally: “You cannot, as a general rule, return to your early homes, after having spent several years in the mills, without being made to feel that the phrase ‘factory girl’ has a meaning not the most pleasant” (LC, 506). In this account, capitalists possess as few qualms about exploiting female wage-earners as they do men. However, the chief indignity inflicted on women is that labor outside the bounds of the home permanently damages their ability to belong anywhere. The wage-earning woman by her ungoverned activity becomes a stranger even in her native land.

Although Brownson insists he himself is free from prejudices against factory women, the solutions he posits to the wage system are discernibly oriented towards male laborers only. The only overall stipulation he would impose on wage labor is, “If wages are to be tolerated it must be, in the case of the individual operative, only under such conditions that by the time he is of a proper age to settle in life, he shall have accumulated enough to be an independent laborer on his own capital, on his own farm or in his own shop” (LC, 310). In this proposed scenario the wage laborer’s career terminates in property ownership, guaranteeing the male laborer the traditional
dignity and independence associated with the yeoman farmer or skilled mechanic. Although elsewhere Brownson anticipates Marxist theories of labor by prophesying the inevitable class warfare which must precede a more just society, here he attempts to thread up the frayed edges of economic change by a return to an earlier economic model of property ownership for all male citizens. His nostalgia for the ideal of patriarchally, property-based freedom becomes even more apparent when he acknowledges that model was already dying with urbanization and an ever more distant frontier: “The wilderness has receded, and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy” (LC, 309). Brownson attempts to reconcile this paradox by suggesting four solutions which will elevate all laboring classes by restoring the power of property ownership to all men while also curtailing the class privileges it confers. The first is to do away with “priestly order” in all its societal manifestations (LC, 320). The second is to renew an authentic “Christianity of Christ,” whose main goal is to fight oppression and bestow equality on humanity (LC, 322-324). Next, the common man must take control of the government and curtail its powers. Specifically, men must “free the government...from the control of the banks” so that the state ceases to be a tool of oppression (LC, 324). Finally, citizens must abolish all systems of privilege, especially the most persistent and pernicious one: “the hereditary descent of property” (LC, 326). Brownson plays a careful balancing act here in his attempt to dignify wage labor through universal male property ownership. His overall and foremost goal of ensuring the wage laborer eventually gains a farm or shop, and, through that, manhood and dignity, highlights the difficulties of identity politics in an emerging market culture. To guarantee male wage laborers’ manhood through property, Brownson must also limit property in the form of inheritance. One might think of Brownson as being caught between two theories of labor, one retrospective and one nascent. Where Marx later
locates property in the body, through the laborer’s ownership of his own labor power, in contrast Brownson hearkens back to a Lockean ideal where an individual proves his ownership of his body by investing his labor into a tangible thing, asserting his selfhood by his claim to that thing. 131 This solution clearly aims to solve the male laborer’s wage-generated identity crisis by bestowing on him the paramount dignity of property ownership, however curtailed it must be under current economic realities.

Brownson’s comments on female wage earning further reflect his nostalgia for a society in which the patriarchal shelter serves as an ideal for male freedom. Where male wage laborers can find justice in an elaborate system of eventual property ownership, Brownson offers no analogous solution for female wage laborers. This omission, coupled with his earlier statements on the female wage laborer’s permanent unmarriageability as a simple fact, suggest Brownson’s own discomfort with the possibility of women laboring outside the home. Brownson decries the public opinion that fates former factory workers to ruined reputations and ruined prospects, but he fails to offer an imaginative solution to the state of things as he does for the male wage laborer’s identity crisis. Instead, he ends on the image of the female laborer shuttled from home to factory and back again, but now with the added stigma of a destroyed reputation. Like Melville’s depiction of the maids, Brownson’s factory woman is an entirely passive receptacle, an empty space to be filled with other’s perceptions. When he declares the injustice of this reality but offers no alternative to it, and then turns to the plight of the male operative, he implies that

131 See John Locke, Second Treatise of Government: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government, ed. Richard Cox (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 18: “Every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his Labour with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property.”
the best solution for women is never to leave the home at all.

Brownson’s indictment of wage labor stirred up controversy among factory women and male defenders alike. Notably, however, they chiefly responded to the ways Brownson’s ideas seemed to attack the ideals surrounding men’s and women’s sexual identities. Among the most prominent of these responses was Charles Grandison Thomas’ *Hereditary Property Justified*, which chiefly protests the boundaries Brownson sought to place around a male ideal of ownership.¹³² Lowell factory operative Harriet Farley also took up the issues Brownson raised concerning wage labor and dependence, but she did so from a specifically female perspective. In the December 1840 Lowell *Offering*, Farley lambasted Brownson for slandering factory women by portraying their degraded reputations as merited, established fact. Although later scholars have interpreted Farley’s retort as “her failure to understand the larger issues in Brownson’s article,” Farley seems in actuality to limit her critique to Brownson’s glib stereotyping of the factory woman’s experience.¹³³ She concedes, “Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him God speed if he will but keep truth and common sense on his side.”¹³⁴ But factory women thought he had failed truth and common sense. The chief indignity for Farley lies in the way Brownson fails to recognize that wages innovate on women’s dependence by offering them wider horizons, without fundamentally changing their virtuous, patriarchally guarded identities. Though Farley recognizes that Brownson relayed a public opinion rather than his own in “The Laboring

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¹³³ Cook, 45.

¹³⁴ Harriet Farley, “Factory Girls,” *Lowell Offering*, December 1840, 18. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as FG.
Classes,” in her eyes this does not absolve him of his sins against factory workers. Factory women, she insists, care about their reputations as much as any women. If they were to unknowingly subject themselves to disrepute through their labor, “Then we must be a set of worthy and virtuous idiots, for no virtuous girl of common sense would choose for an occupation one that would consign her to infamy” (FG, 17). Instead, the virtuous women who come to work in the factory have left “quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners” (FG, 17). Notably, Farley stresses factory women’s characters being shaped especially under their fathers’ watchful guidance, implying that women can leave their fathers’ homes with virtue intact because they have internalized their fathers’ rules, carrying the patriarchal shelter with them into the factory system.

Farley’s retort handily strikes down the common worries about women’s sexual vulnerabilities in the factory system, but her position as a woman leads her to make interesting points about dependent labor in general. As previously noted, New Englanders worried that factories would undermine men’s dependence in particular by creating new social stratifications and undermining their independent labor. But Farley questions the way independence has been construed in absolute terms, veering towards an utterly antisocial ideal. She writes,

> It has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence of corporate bodies is contrary to the spirit of independence of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we sought to cherish. There is a spirit of independence which is averse to social life itself; and I would advise all who wish to cherish it, to go far beyond the Rocky Mountains, and hold communion with none but the untamed Indian, and the wild beast of the forest. We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. (FG, 17)

This riposte highlights the interdependence inherent not in women’s labor only, but in human social life itself. As she stereotypes “the untamed Indian” as an antisocial being and associates
him with the “wild beast,” she echoes Aristotle’s claim that the person who can exist outside of society “is either bad or superior to man.”  

For Farley, then, corporate influence may represent an economic innovation, but it remains a new variation on the old and universal theme of human interdependence. More importantly, factory women’s dependence on wage labor offers them greater freedom than ever before, and Farley notes the direct correlation for women of dignified wages and moral character. She stresses “it is the wages which are in a great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class” (17-18). Happily, factory wages remained higher for women than any other employment. Farley’s portrayal of wages here counters the divide Brownson sets up between male wage earning as economically degrading and female wage earning as sexually and socially damaging. Far from being damaging, female wage earning is empowering in Farley’s account insofar as it widens women’s options. Coming from a position of supposedly natural dependence, women experience wage earning as a cautious exercise in independence. Elaborating on this idea, Farley relates the example of a Lowell overseer who supposedly boasted he could find women to work for one dollar per week. Farley doubts this claim, “but supposing it true, they would not be such girls as will come and work for two, three and four dollars per week...Yankee girls have too much independence for that” (FG, 18). The factory women’s spirit of independence guides their quest for good wages, and this is why misguided public opinion fails to dissuade them from the most lucrative profession available to women in New England. Indeed, while factory work has introduced a new and artificial form of dependency to New England women, for them the advantage of this artificial dependency is that they can willingly lay it aside.

For many male authors, Farley’s claim that female wage earning facilitated independence facilitated independence

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either confounded their ideals of independence or remained too threatening a possibility to entertain. To underscore this point, among male authors in the 1840s who rushed to defend factory women’s reputations in the aftermath of Brownson’s article, only one that I’ve found echoes Farley’s pragmatic association of women’s dignity and fair pay. In 1841 Lowell’s first mayor Elisha Bartlett assured readers of factory women’s virtues and their male overseers’ respectful guardianship and then insisted, “In estimating the different causes which affect the morals of these females, the price of their labor ought not to be left out of the account.” While being careful not to reduce virtue to economic status, Bartlett muses, “All other things being equal, a well-paid female will be more virtuous than an ill-paid one” because fair wages encourage fiscal responsibility, keep desperation at bay, and bolster self-respect. Bartlett was an exception in his willingness to attach wage earning to women’s status. Other defenders of factory women, such as the Reverend Henry Miles and physician John Green, fixate narrowly on the factory woman’s (always tacitly sexual) virtue to defend her honor.

III. Flaws in the Design: Cummings and *The Factory Girl Who Wasn’t*

Brownson’s extreme discomfort with the notion of female labor ungoverned by the

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136 Elisha Bartlett, *A Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills: Against the Charges Contained in the Boston Times, and the Boston Quarterly Review* (Lowell: L. Huntress, 1841), 21. See also Duane Hamilton Hurd, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts: With Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Company, 1890), 190: Dr. Bartlett’s willingness to discuss women’s wages is all the more interesting given that he was entrenched in Lowell’s status quo as its first mayor, and his brother William from 1840 to 1841 edited a local newspaper favorable to factory interests, the *Lowell Courier*.

137 See Miles, Henry Adolphus. *Lowell, as It Was, and as It Is* (Powers and Bagley and N.L. Dayton, 1845), and John Green, *The Factory System, in its Hygienic Relations* (Boston: Wm. S. Damrell, 1846). Miles vindicates factory women by insisting on the strict system of moral policing they have adopted amongst themselves, while Green strongly correlates the women’s health and morality in his work.
patriarchal roof, and of the implications of female wage earning, turns up again and again in factory women’s most sympathetic male champions. While professedly sympathetic to the factory woman, men from Brownson to Miles to Melville nonetheless cannot hide their discomfort with the possibility that factories offered women new freedoms that seemed to hamper men’s social standing. One particularly telling example appears in Ariel Ivers Cummings’ 1847 novel, *The Factory Girl: Or, Gardez la Coeur*. This uneven fiction celebrating the virtuous factory girl merits careful study precisely because of the wide rifts running through it. Cummings, like many authors of his day, vindicates female earning as altruism, but in his eagerness to frame the docile factory “girl” in terms of patriarchally sheltered femininity, he also constantly erases the economic ties that bind her in the factory town. To these warring objectives, Cummings adds yet another by “depicting factories as distinctly antirepublican institutions that were enforcing increasing segregation on social classes, undermining democracy, and debasing the working population of New England.”

This impulse puts Cummings in the paradoxical position of celebrating a factory woman as an earner who successfully aids her loved ones, and the factory system as an enemy to American freedom. Unable to reconcile these objectives, Cummings reveals more prominently than any other author the challenge female wage earning posed to men. The novel is most telling in its conspicuous failures.

Cummings dedicates his novel “to the intelligent and highly respectable class of female operatives” and addresses factory women as his intended audience from title to conclusion.

138 Although elsewhere I deliberately use the term “woman,” here I follow Cummings in the term factory “girl” because of the pains he takes to craft characters clearly governed by the patriarchal shelter.

139 Cook, 147.
Although he writes to operatives “as a brother—as one who feels an interest in your welfare” and who offers his narrative as a morally instructive tool to the factory girls, he quite dramatically fails to engage with the actual conditions facing operatives’ daily lives. Absent from his story is any depiction of the boarding house life that was typical for factory women, or any peek into the factory labor that structured the majority of their time. Instead, Cummings mirrors Brownson in thinking of the factory woman as a person whose identity must remain firmly grounded in the traditional home. For his main character, Calliste Barton, time in the factory offers a mere extension of a fundamentally domestic identity.

The novel opens with Calliste Barton departing from her father’s New Hampshire family farm for a factory town, with the goal of using her factory wages to support her brother Edwin’s education. Calliste’s altruistic motives for factory labor constitute a bid for respect, affirming her status as the sentimental heroine “who labors thus for the good of others—denying herself the pleasures and luxuries of life” (AIC, 36). Actual factory women well knew this character-type, in addition to being quite aware of the public’s suspicion of women as earners. Consequently, in publications like the Lowell Offering they also frequently resorted to the formula of wage labor for the sake of supporting families back home, though in their more candid personal letters they admitted to working for personal reasons. The image of factory laborers like Calliste, who sacrificed for the sake of the family, channeled women’s domestic status as nurturers into the factory system. Their altruistic factory labor also channeled money earned in factories safely back into a domestic economy, thereby reassuring readers that spending would be supervised under a male-dominated household rule rather than granting women independent economic

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140 Ariel Ivers Cummings, The Factory Girl: Or, Gardez La Cœur (Lowell: J. E. Short & Company, 1847), 166. Further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text as AIC.

141 Dublin, Farm to Factory, 23.
agency. Calliste’s altruism also testifies to the fact that the household rule lives inside her long after she has left her father’s home. Indeed, it is only because her mother “had confidence in the fidelity of her daughter in the observation of those precepts which she had received” at home that “she was willing to trust Calliste in the wide world for a season” (AIC, 20).

But in actuality the narrative itself is only willing to trust Calliste in a “wide world” if she resides within a surrogate version of the patriarchal shelter. Addressing his female factory readership “who have learned by experience what it is to leave the paternal roof, for the first time, to mingle with strangers,” the narrator assures them that Mr. Barton’s influence extends into Calliste’s living arrangements in the factory town: “through the favor of a friend of her father, a place had been secured for Calliste, in a respectable family, and also employment as she desired, and she was thereby saved the anxiety, which otherwise would have taken possession of her mind” (AIC, 21). Calliste boards with a poor widow and her daughter, Louisa Elliott, rather than in the boarding house with a large group of other female mill workers. Though perhaps Cummings avoids figuring boarding house life out of his own ignorance of it, his authorial decision to situate Calliste in a traditional home also conveniently forecloses any sort of new subjectivities the boarding house may offer. Instead, the narrator buries the economic ties that bind the women in the Elliott home under familial terms: “The widow was indeed a mother to Calliste, and the gentle and beautiful Louisa was indeed a sister” (AIC, 52). Resolving the widow Elliott into a foster mother for Calliste frames Calliste’s dependency to her in terms of love, not money. This artistic legerdemain prevents any sort of judgment on the virtuous widow Elliott as Calliste’s landlord—that is, as a woman who wields economic power over Calliste. Cummings’ narrative thus straddles an internal contradiction. Its very title advertises the heroine’s class status as “the factory girl” and suggests readers will be interested in her on the basis of that
status. The narrative then proceeds to control and even erase the economic basis of her relationships throughout the novel.

But even more than governing Calliste’s character through a non-threatening traditional home and hiding her economic relationships, the narrative structures her identity primarily by having Calliste dramatically say “no” to the opportunities available in the factory village. As previously discussed, metaphors for female virtue from this era frequently return to the experience of a protective patriarchal shelter, protecting the vulnerable and passive space of female identity. In other words, women’s virtue, as structured under the patriarchal roof, is largely structured by denial, or a turning away from unwholesome influences. Cummings reinforces the sense of women’s virtue as prohibition. Rather than instructing factory women to discern judiciously the various situations they encounter, or to take up causes to better their own laboring situation, he warns factory women to turn away from the meretricious joys factory life has to offer. For instance, the widow Elliott’s “experienced sagacity” allows her to teach her two charges to avoid the “gay and fashionable circles” in town, preventing their ultimate destruction (AIC, 62). Instead Louisa and Calliste remain at home, their sexualities tightly buffered from any male interaction by their lack of place in society. The nearest threat to their virtue occurs when the two young women leave the safety of the home to venture out into the relative danger of a Lyceum lecture. Although Louisa and Calliste innocently seek to improve their minds in the democratic space of the lecture-hall, they are unaware that their beauty has attracted the attention of two predatory aristocrats, Cassius Wilson and Alfred Boydon (AIC, 61). These two wealthy men are, respectively, “the son of a wealthy planter” and of a “wealthy merchant” (AIC, 59). Their friendship, combined with their lustful purposes with the factory women, not only continues the novel’s equation of licentious aristocracy with anti-American tyranny, but also
raises once again submerged contemporary associations about female wage earners’ and slaves’ sexual vulnerability in both Northern and Southern market systems. But since female virtue, to be worth anything, must be utterly inviolable, Wilson and Boydon never actually pose a serious threat. When the two men offer to escort Louisa and Calliste home after the lecture the factory girls simply refuse, remaining completely oblivious to the danger the two seducers posed. The narrator, facing once again the issue of how female virtue can be preserved without the father figure it so desperately needs present to protect it, insists that the factory girls preserved their virtue because “they had ever been on their guard...They had seen the destroyer, and marked his favorite haunts... and they had avoided them all. Virtue had proved a potent shield, and a safe defence from all the arts of the corrupt and designing!” (AIC, 133) The scene of temptation fizzles out, manifesting the author’s real anxiety to limit factory women’s minds, hearts, and awarenesses in the narrative to the same degree that women’s consciousnesses would have been jealously guarded within the traditional patriarchal shelter. “Cummings’ novel thus reveals,” Cook notes, “the quandary of the woman whose mind dwells among the spindles: namely that her most striking characteristic—her eager intellect—must be constantly reined in and kept under control in order to comport with a good reputation.”

Incidentally, the novel ratifies the Lowell Offering as just the sort of controlled intellectual pursuit appropriate for a virtuous woman. Calliste reads the Offering during the evening and eventually becomes a successful contributor (AIC, 89, 94). The narrator clearly demarcates the sorts of experiences women might wholesomely enjoy in the factory town. The abstract intellectual pleasures of a Lyceum lecture or of authorship are commendable. However, any social encounters encouraging factory women to see themselves differently or to promote experiences not possible at home are firmly

\[142\] Cook, 146.
prohibited. Self-culture for the factory woman is permissible only so long as it remains purely intellectual and does not translate into social activism.

Although the narrative seeks neatly to tie up the threads of its tale by marrying Calliste to her betrothed, Marcus Hartwell, and marrying Louisa to Calliste’s brother, Edwin Barton, the most fascinating moments emerge from the fracture of the novel’s design. These fissures open up, as already implied, over the author’s unresolved struggle over the issue of female self-reliance and wage earning. Towards the end of the novel, in a bizarre break entirely unrelated to the narrative itself, the author allows himself a long tirade against factory capitalists as “vile lordlings” who exploit vulnerable factory girls and disregard the inheritance of the American revolution, where “the doctrine of ‘equal rights’ [was] sealed with blood” (AIC, 134). Yet while Cummings adapts the American Revolution’s principles of political equality to a bid for social respect for factory women, nowhere does his narrative actually try to make the necessary connection between fair wages for factory women as the obvious hinge of their social respectability and proof that they have not been wholly degraded. Moreover, the narrative’s sentimental constraints also prevent the narrator from furnishing any proof that factory women are being degraded. Calliste sets for herself the financial goal of financing her brother’s education and then surpasses it, first allowing him to complete university and then helping him to become a minister. Her status as a female nurturer who expresses care through money requires that the admirable factory girl not be economically thwarted. In short, Cummings wants the factory girl’s identity to serve him in all ways: he desires them to remain creatures of the home, ideologically speaking, and also wants other people to refrain from looking down on them as an abused class of women laboring outside the home. Yet he cannot celebrate them as wage earners with spending money. His inability to reconcile these contradictory requirements is reflected in
the way he turns away from his diatribe against capitalists—that is, by breaking the paragraph and turning to the pleasant subject of Edwin and Louisa’s impending marriage (AILC, 135). The factory girl’s identity, in flux with respect to traditional values, remains untamed despite Cummings’ best efforts.

IV. A Son is Born: The Shelter’s Corporate Heir Apparent

In short, factory women might choose between two extremes in outsiders’ portrayals of them: 1) the disparaging image of them as sullied victims and whores of the industrial system, or 2) the impossibly contradictory and endlessly repressed image of them as strictly daughters of the home. The solution these male authors came up with for this anxiety-inducing phenomenon was to focus on the factory woman’s sexuality and to trivialize or wholly omit any associations between her identity and money. The prostitute served them as a convenient image, accomplishing these two goals by framing the issue of women as an earner in terms of sexual degradation. The prostitute may indeed earn money, but on terms where money is in no way compatible with power or social standing. Portraying factory women in this way distracted from the urgent but unanswered question of whether men might still be powerful in a market-based society where capitalists exercised ever greater influence. But in portraying factory women in this way, anti-capitalist authors indirectly allied themselves with capitalists, since capitalists themselves also fixated on factory women’s virtues for their own purposes. A particularly telling example occurs in a letter draft by Francis Cabot Lowell II, housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The draft details his response to an unknown correspondent who had asked him for information on his father, Francis Cabot Lowell. The elder Lowell had helped to revolutionize American manufacturing in 1814 by reproducing British power looms in Waltham,

Figure 1. Francis Cabot Lowell II, undated letter draft. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Francis Cabot Lowell II to unknown recipient, letter draft, undated, Box 1, File 1.1, Loose Correspondence of Francis Cabot Lowell II (1803-1874) Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. The MHS speculatively dates this letter around 1841 or 1842. In the letter Lowell himself references speaking with a visiting Irish chemist in the mills over twenty years previous, making the earliest possible date 1841 and placing Lowell as a young college student or recent college graduate at the time of this remembered occurrence.
A transcription of the excerpt from Francis Cabot Lowell II’s letter draft appears below. Individual lines that have been struck out on the original document are indicated by strikethrough typeface here. Whole sections written and then struck out via curved lines are indicated by brackets [  ].

[continued from previous page] if he thought it would they would likely to have produce the same effect here as they had produced in England and Scotland. But he thought bringing people together in towns might quite as well encourage the virtues as the vices of society.

The plan adopted was to have boarding houses enough for all the young people employed in the Mills. All the young girls who did not live with their parents must live in these houses where they were under the Supervision of well known, respectable women.

[The rent of the houses was low and the board of the girls fixed at as low a rate as satisfactory board could be afforded. In short no money was to be made [sic: be made] out of the earnings of the operatives but every facility afforded them]

This was the main feature, and the real interest of the operatives was to be consulted in every thing.

This was the Waltham System and it has been in the main adopted by most of our large manufacturing companies in New England and is now generally called the American System. Formerly the manufacturing companies in New England paid their wages partly in money and partly in orders on a store or shop which either belonged to them or was kept by someone who [letter continues on the following page]
Massachusetts and thus enabling all factory processes to take place under one roof.\textsuperscript{144} Lowell II praises his father and the benevolent manufacturing system he committed to planting on U.S. soil. Unlike the European model, with the “degraded and vicious set” it tended to produce, Francis Cabot Lowell sought to establish a manufacturing town which “might quite as well encourage the virtues as the vices of society.” To this end, Lowell mentions the plan to establish boarding houses for employees, and goes on to clarify the basic limits of this virtue: “All the girls who did not live with their parents must live in these houses where they were under the Supervision of known, respectable women.” After associating the women’s virtue with the strict chaperoning of their sexualities, Lowell goes on to say that the owners ensured female operatives enjoyed such low rates of room and board that “no money was to made [sic] out of the earnings of the operatives but every facility afforded them.”\textsuperscript{145} Then he decides against this reference to their financial welfare and completely strikes out the passage on rent. To suture the rent on his page over rent, Lowell joins “respectable women” under “supervision” to the ensuing statement: “This was the main feature, and the real interest of the operatives was to be consulted in every thing.”\textsuperscript{146} The Massachusetts Historical Society speculatively dates this letter around 1841 or 1842. This is probably its earliest possible date, given that in the letter Lowell II recalls speaking with a visiting Irish chemist in the mills over twenty years ago, making Lowell II a youth or young man as he discussed business with another professional in the mills. Since the letter comes at least in the early 1840s, Lowell II would also have memories of the mill women’s strikes of

\textsuperscript{144} Hardy Green, 9.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
1834 and 1836. The first turnout protested wage cuts; the second, incidentally, opposed the very topic of raised boardinghouse rents he had cancelled in the letter draft.\textsuperscript{147} Lowell II’s deliberate decision to focus on the factory women’s “real interest” in terms of the strict propriety required in their boardinghouses, and to literally strike out any discussion of the material costs of their living conditions as their “real interest” was more strategic and perhaps more self-serving than many of his contemporaries. In his position as an industrialist and financier, the focus on wage-earning women’s sexuality allowed him to be a concerned paternalistic figure rather than the controversial “moneyed interest” that Jackson and Brownson so despised. To fixate on wage-earning women’s virtue was simultaneously to legitimate corporate authority over them through a specifically gendered mode, and to distract from the fact that corporate influence might be gaining power in every corner of society. Although Lowell II directly benefited from this discussion, the male authors surveyed here suggest that men of all social stations felt soothed by confining the female wage earner within narrow, sexual-ideological bounds symbolized in the patriarchal shelter.

To be clear, I do not mean to impose historically anachronistic and therefore deeply unfair judgments on those male authors. Given their understanding of freedom, they had good reasons for being reluctant to attach market-based labor to independence. But I do mean to argue that, with the decline of the household economy, industrialism’s harshest critics tilted at windmills when fixating on the female wage laborer’s threatened virtue. Repeatedly men’s depiction of women’s wage labor, whether alarmist or omitting, sought to master the sexual associations traditionally implicit in women’s activities. However, in doing so they simultaneously symptomatized the way women’s activities \textit{were not being contained}. Patriarchal

\textsuperscript{147} See Hardy Green, 20.
control had lost its iron grip over women’s labors insofar as industrialism allowed women to participate economically as wage earners, especially when combined to powerful effect with their place in the print sphere with self-representation.
Chapter 2
HARRIET FARLEY, THE FACTORY TOWN, AND THE FRAYING FABRIC OF FEMALE IDENTITY

I cannot go home. I do wish very much to see you all, especially dear Marcia, once more; but it is not best. I know you think so, or you would have urged my return. I think I shall feel more contented here, earning comforts for my sick sister and necessaries for you, than I should be there, and unable to relieve a want.

—From “The Evening Before Pay-Day,” by Harriet Farley

A full century before Auden identified suffering as the genesis of Yeats’ poetry, factory women might well have written, “Mad New England hurt you into poetry.” Factory women read with horror public portrayals of the female operative as a sullied victim of industrial labor, forever barred by her profession from re-entry into the domestic world which society had designated as the only place she truly belonged. Ignorant public accounts of them pierced these women’s psyches and goaded them into self-defense—and self-expression. The move toward the arts, spurred first by women’s desire to safeguard their social standings, soon gave rise to new musings on the very nature of women’s patriarchally sheltered status. In a story as old as narrative itself, factory women’s pain gives rise to poesis, and in their particularly female manner, labor pains suggest the possibility of new beginnings.

Dismayed by how poorly public portrayals of them matched their own experiences in the factory system, female authors flooded print avenues in the 1840s. Factory-penned publications
proliferated, with at least six magazines featuring female factory authors springing up in Massachusetts alone. Among these were *The Ladies’ Pearl, and Literary Gleaner* (Lowell: June 1840-July 1843), the *Lowell Offering* (Lowell: October 1840-December 1845); *The Operatives’ Magazine* (Lowell: April 1841-August 1842), *The Olive Leaf, and Factory Girl’s Repository* (Cabotville: May-October 1843); the *Voice of Industry* (Fitchburg, Lowell, and Boston: May 1845-May 1848), and *The New England Offering* (Lowell: Sept. 1847-March 1850). With additional operative-oriented magazines emerging in New Hampshire as well, factory women contributed in total literally thousands of pages to antebellum print culture. Their primary objective in many of these contributions was to prove to the reading public that they were not the degraded class outsiders assumed them to be. As Farley reminded Brownson in her impassioned retort to “The Laboring Classes,” “There are among us *all sorts* of girls,” women whose particularities resisted gross stereotype. Various though these women were, however, most shared the common goal of raising factory labor in the eyes of the general public.

This chapter focuses specifically on those authors who attempted to do so by grappling with their own loyalties to the cultural concept of the patriarchal shelter from the as-yet-undefined space of the factory system. In the process they deliberately or inadvertently exposed

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the limitations of that concept for their own lives as wage earners, even as they testified to its ideological power over their identities. Where male authors suppressed their own fears about freedom in a market society by rendering the female wage earner symbolically powerless as a whore in their fictions, factory women vigorously investigated ideological issues surrounding female wage earning. Generally wage earning emerges in these works as an expression of female character and an extension of female freedom. Yet their artistic endeavors lead even the most conservative among them to some undesired impasses.

For instance, in “The Evening Before Pay-Day” Farley offers a poignant example of the complexities wage labor had introduced to feminine identity itself. The story focuses on Rosina, a factory woman who scrimps to send the bulk of her wages home to a widowed mother, young brothers, and a consumptive twin sister. Like Cummings’ Calliste, Rosina defrays male anxieties about the female wage earner by channeling factory wages back under the patriarchal roof and using money to confirm her traditionally feminine, altruistic identity. But unlike other mollifying accounts of female wage earning, Rosina must choose between wage earning and home. When her mother writes to notify Rosina of her sister Marcia’s impending death and to tell her to return if she thinks it best, Rosina brokenheartedly responds, “I cannot go home” (PD, 248). Confessing that her own sisterly sympathies are rather helpless and “unable to relieve a want,” she favors the more important goal of “earning comforts for my sick sister” (PD, 248). In other words, Rosina re-frames feminine care, shifting the emphasis from traditional femininity’s emotionally expressed sympathies and actually replacing them with wage earning as sympathy. Making the ultimate sacrifice of personal feeling, she commits to earning money even if doing so means never being able to see Marcia again. That night, Rosina travels in a vivid dream to bid

150 Harriet Farley, “Evening Before Pay-Day,” Lowell Offering, October 1841, 239-249. Further references to the text are cited parenthetically as PD.
her dead sister goodbye as the funeral procession leaves the house. But as she bends to kiss Marcia’s cold brow, she awakens to her roommates calling her to her shift and ironically reminding her, “To-day is pay-day” (PD, 249). Loyal to and longing for home, Rosina discovers that wage earning pulls her away from it even in her inmost spirit. Farley’s story encapsulates the representational crisis many factory authors would experience as they subscribed to home as a symbolic ideal for women, but acknowledged that factory towns inevitably modified women’s relationship to home on a socioeconomic level. Despite their allegiances to the concept of home as a shelter for feminine identity, Farley and others still found that wage earning had placed them outside in the bitter winds of market realities. Although female factory authors went to great lengths to domesticate female wage earning as a patriarchally sanctioned project, they also found their efforts to defend their reputations frustrated by the very logic of the patriarchal shelter. These writings suggest that wage earning, no matter how conservatively portrayed, ultimately led female identity precariously away from the auspices of the patriarchal shelter and rendered it vulnerable and exposed to the storm of category failure. In the factory town authors like Farley experienced a nostalgia which made them willing to critique patriarchal structures observationally, but they remained unwilling to attack the theoretical basis of patriarchy because they had found no alternate foundation for feminine identity to replace the patriarchal shelter’s buckling floors.

I. The Good Father? Corporate Policy, Rising Women’s Voices, and Declining Labor Conditions in the 1840s Mill Town

When Francis Cabot Lowell and mechanic Paul Moody reproduced a power loom on U.S. soil in 1814, they not only propelled U.S. manufacturing forward through their famous act of industrial espionage, they also began a distinctively American experiment in the form industrial labor would take on U.S. soil. Lowell and Moody’s achievement meant that the Boston
Associates could carry out all stages of manufacture at their own facilities, from “bale to bolt.” This innovation allowed the Boston Associates to avoid the Rhode Island system’s sluggish method of arranging “outwork” on household looms as part of the production process.\(^{151}\) Lowell and two other investors, brothers-in-law Nathan Appleton and Patrick Tracy Jackson, also sagely decided to structure their investments as limited-liability corporations, the first of which was called the Boston Manufacturing Company. Lowell and Jackson provided most of the capital ($400,000) required to found the original Waltham mill around 1812.\(^{152}\) These three men formed the original members of the Boston Associates, and the mill systems they originated came to be known as the Waltham system. Other investors would eventually join, bringing with them fresh capital and forming new corporations and new mills spawned from the original Waltham model. Because Massachusetts manufacturing spread via a widening coalition of financiers, mill towns observed uniform policies on matters such as wage pay and working hours, and one could generalize about the Waltham system’s distinct culture of industrialization.\(^{153}\)

One of the first and most significant times the original Boston Associates expanded their small circle occurred in 1821, a few years after Lowell’s death. Jackson and Appleton joined with Paul Moody and brothers John and Kirk Boott in 1821 to petition the Massachusetts legislature for an act of incorporation as the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. They simultaneously purchased land and canal companies in East Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Thus began the town that would come to be known as Lowell, Massachusetts—the first corporate-

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\(^{152}\) Hardy Green, 10.

\(^{153}\) Hardy Green, 15.
planned factory town in the United States.\textsuperscript{154}

In Lowell the Boston Associates added a social innovation to the technological and financial developments they had made in American manufacturing: they decided to recruit a predominately female labor force for their mills. Part of their reason for doing so, as Francis Cabot Lowell II noted, was that Lowell’s father and the other Boston Associates wished to avoid the pitfalls of the European model, where “the inhabitants of manufacturing towns were particularly looked upon as a degraded and vicious set.”\textsuperscript{155} By placing women under careful supervision, the mill owners hoped that “bringing people together in towns might quite as well encourage the virtues as the vices of society.” Yet Lowell’s founders also demonstrated considerable financial savvy in recruiting young women as the bulk of their employees, for they could offer higher wages than they could make elsewhere while still paying them less than men.\textsuperscript{156} Moreover, as they implemented strict regulations for operatives’ behavior by setting curfew laws and living requirements, they “eased parental fears of trusting rural daughters to independent urban living.”\textsuperscript{157} Yet the Boston Associates constantly appear as a mysterious and sphinxlike group in these foundings. Just as investor and company names shapeshift from the

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\textsuperscript{154} Hardy Green, 11.

\textsuperscript{155} Francis Cabot Lowell II to unknown recipient, letter draft, undated, Box 1, File 1.1, Loose Correspondence of Francis Cabot Lowell II (1803-1874) Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, italics added. The MHS speculatively dates this letter around 1841 or 1842.


\textsuperscript{157} Sellers, 289.
\end{flushleft}
Boston to Middlesex to the Merrimack Manufacturing Companies, their motives are also hard to pin down. While the Boston Associates certainly profited off of their female labor force, they also provided working conditions superior to the family-based manufacturing conditions in Rhode Island, filled with the “little half-clothed children” who populated the state’s family-based labor system. Still, when the Boston Associates rejected families in favor of single women as their labor force, they in effect put the factory woman on public display, making her conspicuous body a litmus test for the character of industrialism in the United States. They did so deliberately, and just as deliberately fostered conditions in which they might be seen as protecting patriarchs who generously provided “boarding houses enough for all the young people employed in the Mills” and protected “all the young girls who did not live with their parents,” as Francis Cabot Lowell II put it.

Public figures from Andrew Jackson to Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, and Anthony Trollope made a point of visiting the mills and commenting on women’s condition there, many times confessing surprise at the operatives’ character and dignity. Correspondingly, the Associates credited themselves for laying the foundation for the mill town’s relatively

158 For the Boston and Merrimack Manufacturing Companies; see Hardy Green, 10; for the Middlesex Company, see Hardy Green, 22.

159 Hardy Green, 19.

160 Lowell.

benevolent living and laboring conditions, which, in their view, enabled the good impression factory women made on observers. After decades of the Boston Associates’ model entrenching itself in New England, Lowell II vaunted the Waltham system as “the American System,” adding, “manufacturers who would not be led to adopt it from principle or feeling are now led into it from self interest or they could not keep up with their competitors.”

Yet for all this, commentary on the mill women suggests the public themselves remained unconvinced about industrial labor’s wholesomeness for women. Newspapers commenting on the Brownson-Farley print skirmish confirmed the negative stereotypes Brownson referenced even while congratulating Farley’s response. Acutely aware of the scrutiny, mill women knew “their labor constituted one of the great social controversies of the age.” Their turn towards print was in no small part defensive and self-interested, but their ability to counter public opinion was also deeply constrained by a discourse requiring women to be in the care of a father figure. Factory authors were placed in the unenviable position of defending themselves by ratifying the corporation’s authority over them, regardless of current labor conditions.

Consequently, the 1840s was a decade not only when factory women’s writing flourished but also when industrial laborers faced unsettling conditions. The publications of the period testify to the contradictions factory women faced. During that time factory women consistently defended their labor in print as the most lucrative opportunity available to women, yet they also watched as factories inaugurated worrisome changes culminating from previous economic crises. In sum, the Boston Associates’ factories enjoyed early success, which soon attracted

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162 Lowell II, italics added.

163 See Cook, 47, for newspaper commentaries ranging from Maine to Rhode Island.

164 Cook, 43.
competition. Factories multiplied across New England during the 1830s and ‘40s, creating an environment of overproduction and plunging prices. When factories responded to these changes by cutting wages, factory women organized their first turnout in 1834. Though this strike was brief and unsuccessful, the women organized again in 1836—this time, in response to the company’s attempt to raise the cost of room and board. Their efforts were partially successful this time, when “some of the boardinghouse increases, at least, were revoked.”\textsuperscript{165} Factory women’s protests were part of a larger movement of successful strikes sweeping the Northeast from 1833 to 1836.\textsuperscript{166} However, economic depression leveled most of these gains in the next years, making workers more desperate and destroying collaboration among them.\textsuperscript{167} The 1840s brought no solutions to these conditions. The Middlesex Corporation attempted to double weavers’ workload in 1842 in response to another economic depression, sparking another turnout. When the mills in 1844 raised men’s but not women’s wages back to pre-depression levels, operative Sarah Bagley and her colleagues met to form the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. In its first few months the group grew exponentially from its original twelve founders. Between 1845 and 1847 it put intense pressure on the Massachusetts legislature to demand corporations limit factory shifts to a ten-hour day. Although they were mostly unsuccessful, the crisis remains significant because wage-earning women channeled their

\textsuperscript{165}Hardy Green, 20. See Hardy Green, 20-21, for an overview of economic conditions affecting factory labor in the 1830s and ‘40s.

\textsuperscript{166}Sellers, 338.

\textsuperscript{167}Sellers, 584.
protests into direct political activism.\textsuperscript{168} Despite all the economic instability, and unbeknownst to laborers, textile firms still “averaged annual profits of twenty-four percent from 1824 to 1845.”\textsuperscript{169} Factory women, unaware of this fact, had to decide whether they believed the layoffs, longer shifts, and increased production demands they experienced at the ground level resulted from necessity or corporate greed.\textsuperscript{170}

The operatives’ differing views over corporate policy reflected their ways of understanding the basis of their own standing as women in a rapidly changing market culture. The issue amounted to a basic level of trust versus mistrust in the corporation as a new manifestation of the protecting father figure, and of themselves as dependents whose virtue rested on their own filial piety. A myriad of factory women was willing to re-examine the home as a failed patriarchal space in their writings; but for many, these critiques were merely pragmatic.

Among factory authors of this mindset, Harriet Farley is the one whose writings receive pride of place in this chapter, for several reasons. As the daughter of a New Hampshire minister who struggled to support his large family, Farley was rather limited by the traditional home but discovered unprecedented opportunities in Lowell. Her experience was fairly representative of


\textsuperscript{169} Hardy Green, 15.

\textsuperscript{170} Hardy Green, 21. See also Dublin, \textit{Farm to Factory}, 129, where operative Mary Paul complains about the company’s claim that financial hardships have necessitated reduced wages.
the many New England women who left rural areas to find better opportunities in factories.¹⁷¹ Like many of her co-workers, Farley had tried other professions available to women but found millwork more congenial than labor on the farm, in education, or in domestic service. Farley herself found teaching a poor fit before she came to Lowell in 1838, at the age of twenty-five.

Moreover, Farley’s literary career in Lowell was bookended by two prominent public debates with men who claimed factory labor degraded women more than slavery—the first with Orestes Brownson in 1840, and the last with Senator Jeremiah Clemens in 1850. In both she justifies her willingness to enter as a woman into political debate by claiming to have been hurt into self-defense, thereby reconciling her combative position with traditional standards of feminine decorum. In her response to Clemens, Farley made the connection between hurt and writing explicit by paraphrasing a line from Emerson and placing it as the pamphlet’s epigram: “Not until we are sorely pricked and stung and shot at.”¹⁷² Farley’s defensiveness coincided with the Lowell Offering’s reason for its existence as cited by its original editor, the Rev. Abel Thomas, in its first issue: “to correct an erroneous idea which generally prevails in relation to the intelligence of persons employed in the Mills.”¹⁷³ In many ways then, one of Lowell’s most prominent factory authors had a literary career co-extensive with the mission of one of its most

¹⁷¹ See Dublin, Farm to Factory, 19 for general traits of the women who sought out factory employment between 1830 and 1860. Many were from large, middle-class families of limited property, with more than seven children. Farley herself came from a family of ten children.

¹⁷² Harriet Farley, The Operatives’ Reply to the Hon. Jeremiah Clemens (Lowell: S.J. Varney, 1850), 1. The line, incidentally, is paraphrased from Emerson’s essay, “Compensation.”

¹⁷³ See Abel Thomas, “Editorial Corner,” Lowell Offering, October 1840, 16. The Offering grew out of two of Lowell’s many Self-Improvement Clubs, one of which was sponsored by Rev. Abel Thomas’s Universalist church. Thomas edited and published the magazine until he moved from Lowell in 1842 and sold the Offering to William Schouler. See Eisler, 18, for a more detailed account of these events.
prominent publications.\textsuperscript{174}

Furthermore, Farley’s literary struggles with fidelity to the patriarchal shelter as a concept reveal the extent to which the shelter’s logic could claim women’s cultural loyalty, perhaps against their own economic self-interest. For Farley, this conflicted loyalty was expressed throughout her fiction and non-fiction writings, most notably in a public debate with fellow operative Sarah Bagley, and again in Farley’s musings on the social milieu structuring women’s labors in the factory town. Farley began as a regular contributor to the \textit{Offering}, but rose to prominence as the magazine’s co-editor in 1842 when the Rev. Thomas sold the \textit{Offering} to William Schouler.\textsuperscript{175} In 1843 Farley and her fellow editor, Harriet F. Curtis, purchased the magazine and oversaw all aspects of its printing, though Schouler “remained, somewhat ambiguously, as publisher.”\textsuperscript{176} Just before the \textit{Offering} ceased publication in 1845, Farley was dragged into a heated debate with Bagley over the issue of how factory women ought to represent their lives to the public. The year 1845 represents a striking point of departure between two women who had previously shared similar beginnings in the mill town. Like Farley, Bagley left her home in New Hampshire for Lowell after a stint as a teacher. She arrived in 1837 at the age of thirty—one year before Farley, only a few years older, and no less conservative in her

\textsuperscript{174}See Ranta 47-48 for an account of the \textit{Offering}’s subscriptions and distributions. In its early years, some issues seem to have sold more than five thousand copies and were distributed across the United States and in Europe.

\textsuperscript{175}See Ranta, 52-53 for more information on Schouler’s purchase. At the time, Schouler also printed another publication by factory women, the struggling \textit{Operatives’ Magazine}. In October 1842, Schouler merged the two magazines as \textit{The Lowell Offering and Magazine}. See also Eisler, 34: Schouler was simultaneously the publisher and editor of the \textit{Lowell Courier}, which she terms the “Corporation” newspaper.

\textsuperscript{176} See Harriet Farley, “Editorial. To Our Patrons,” \textit{Lowell Offering}, November 1843, 23-24 for a notice regarding the women’s purchase. See Eisler, 34, for Schouler’s ongoing relationship with the magazine.
early contributions to the Lowell *Offering*. But sometime between 1840 and 1845, Bagley discarded that fundamental conservatism in favor of radical feminist labor activism. Farley, who had not followed the same trajectory, seemed rather blindsided by the changes wrought in Bagley’s perspective. Although Farley took up the role of factory women’s defender in her print forays against men in 1840 and 1850, in 1845 she herself was accused by a woman of crimes against factory women—specifically, that as editor she had censored labor activist pieces from publication. Farley’s response from this uncomfortable position shed a great deal of light on the complexities facing women who bore allegiance to the patriarchal shelter as a concept. The skirmish marks a point of departure between two ways of thinking about the grounds of female identity. Bagley went on in 1845 to head the Female Department of the labor activist *Voice of Industry* and to foster radical women’s pieces under its masthead alongside her own political activities, while Farley insisted on feminine decorum and limited channels for protest in the *Offering* and in its successor, the *New England Offering*. Farley’s commentaries show that, unlike Bagley, not all factory women were willing to theoretically oppose patriarchal protection as the only legitimate grounds for understanding female selfhood. To do so would have required an act of faith from many women, who must trust they could safely depart the familiar shelter for a new location and identity they were still struggling to grasp.

**II. Outside Looking In: Farley and Factory Women Explore the Patriarchal Shelter’s Frame**

Factory operatives’ first objective was to defend industrial labor as a safe space for women’s activities, sexual and otherwise, by portraying factory life as an extension of the patriarchal roof. Farley and countless others female authors were quick to disarm any accusations that factory life had warped their domestic feminine identities. Most often, their publications

177 See Foner, 159-160.
ensure the public that they had sought out factory wages to support families back home. For instance, Farley in her incensed response to Brownson cites “widows earning money for the maintenance and education of their children, ...daughters providing for their aged and destitute parents; and...widows, single women, and girls, endeavoring to obtain the wherewithal to furnish some other home than a factory boarding-house” as important groups within the supposedly degraded factory population. \(^{178}\) Sarah Bagley, too, counts among the great pleasures of factory life “being able to assist aged parents who have become too infirm to provide for themselves.”\(^{179}\) Bagley here also chants the oft-repeated refrain that factory women, far from being sexually vulnerable or sullied by living beyond the patriarchal roof, instead enjoy continued fatherly protection under the corporation’s auspices: “Let no one suppose that the ‘factory girls’ are without guardian. We are placed in the care of overseers who feel under moral obligation to look after our interests.”\(^{180}\) These claims make clear that wage-earning factory women virtuously bolstered the traditional patriarchal shelter of the ancestral home, while also continuing under its alternate form provided by corporate paternalism.

But the rhetorical tactic of figuring the economic space of the factory town as a continuation of the natural relationships in the home contained its own contradictions. When Farley and many factory authors like her justified their wage earning as a way to prop up the family home, they also inevitably gestured to the ways that the patriarchal shelter, invaded by market forces, had failed to grant security to those under its domain. Factory women who

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\(^{180}\) Ibid. See also Harriet Farley, “Letters from Susan: Letter Third,” *Lowell Offering*, August 1844, 237-240, for a lengthy defense of male overseers as fatherly figures and also for another example of the nostalgia common to Farley’s characters.
claimed they labored to finance a brother’s education or to support aging parents highlighted the fact that their fathers were unable to do so. The degree to which economic forces could tear down the patriarchal shelter finds a particularly dramatic example in “The Purrington House,” an article in a December 1841 issue of The Operatives’ Magazine. This piece recounts a real-life tragedy in Augusta, Maine in 1806, when Captain James Purrington murdered his wife and seven of his eight children with an axe, including the couple’s infant daughter, and then committed suicide with a straight razor. As the Operatives’ piece accurately relates, only one son managed to escape, and one daughter survived the immediate attack but died of her wounds three days later. The Purrington murders were the subject of discussion for decades in newspapers, particularly insofar as authors could use Capt. Purrington’s behavior to attack some unsavory cultural phenomenon. Some articles acknowledged Purrington’s frequent fits of depression; others, the financial troubles that drove him to insanity; many debated whether Purrington was a Universalist whose religious beliefs motivated him to hasten his family on towards eternal life.

The piece in the Operatives’ Magazine was no exception in using the murder to further an agenda, though in this case it painted a particularly damning critique of patriarchal protection as an adequate fortress against market pressure. In this piece an aged Revolutionary War veteran recalls witnessing the scene of the murder as a boy. The narrator remembers Capt. Purrington as an essentially decent man: a person who “had been the kindest of husbands; the best of fathers.”

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but “was oppressed with the idea that they [i.e., his dependents] would soon suffer for want.” Economic distress drove the harrowed father to “protect” his family from want in the only way he knew how, by ending their lives in the face of certain poverty. The veteran particularly dwells on Purrington’s betrayal of his own trusting daughter, who died later in part because “a father’s hand had dealt the death-blow, and how could she recover?” The daughter’s horrified realization that her father betrayed her faith in his protective role wreaks a psychological wound on her as fatal as the cut of his axe. Pointing out that the father “took that life he had sworn to protect,” the piece exposes how market forces pervert fatherhood to its very core. The old man’s final comment reveals that even wartime violence does not equal the destructive power of the failed patriarchal shelter, for in all his experiences since, “never did I witness a parallel to the drama acted in the Purrington House.” Through “The Purrington House” the factory author reiterates a point subtly made by Farley and other operatives. In countless narratives about struggling fathers who cannot support their children, drunk and neglectful fathers who thwart their families’ futures, and dead fathers who fail to leave their heirs an adequate inheritance, stories about factory women demonstrate the myriad ways economic uncertainty had rendered the patriarchal shelter inadequate—and even potentially harmful—as the only acceptable site of


184 Ibid.

185 Ibid.

186 All articles in The Operatives’ Magazine were written by factory operatives from the publication’s fourth issue. See notes on inside and outside covers of The Operatives’ Magazine, Issue No. 4, July 1841.
female activity.\textsuperscript{187}

But if the market’s encroachment into the home represented a danger to women’s filial status, the opportunities it offered outside the home nonetheless represented an opportunity. Early in the 1840s, when operatives had just started to publish on a wide scale, many women discarded the traditional defense of female wage-earning as an extension of female altruism. Instead, they unabashedly celebrated their access to money as a project of self-development.\textsuperscript{188}

Certain factory authors still carefully positioned women’s wage earning as a patriarchally sanctioned activity, but no longer felt compelled to portray every instance of money-getting as self-abnegating. For instance, in the anonymously authored piece, “Incidents in the Life of an Operative,” the story begins with Mr. W. laying his hands in blessing on his daughter Lucy before she leaves for the mills: “May a kind heavenly Father watch over you and keep you, while you are free from the restraints from home.”\textsuperscript{189} The blessing symbolically extends Lucy’s activities in the factory as falling under patriarchal authority, both human and divine, but the narrator makes clear that Lucy’s labor in the factory need not directly contribute to the family itself: “The house is the abode of plenty, yet Lucy having heard of the compensation received in

\textsuperscript{187}See “The Redeemed Farm,” \textit{Operatives’ Magazine}, June 1841, 33-36, for an example of a daughter turning to factory work to defray her father’s expenses. See also “The White Mountain Sisters,” \textit{Lowell Offering}, May 1842, 145-155, which tells of daughters who enter the factories after their father loses the family farm, and who use their earnings to restore the patriarchal shelter by buying the family a new house.

\textsuperscript{188}See Dublin, \textit{Farm to Factory}, 23, for an account of how these developments parallel women’s motivations. Their private letters revealed they often labored for personal reasons, although they portrayed their labor as selflessly devoted to supporting relatives in \textit{The Lowell Offering} and elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{189}“Incidents in the Life of an Operative,” \textit{The Operatives’ Magazine}, May 1841, 27.
the manufactories, longs to call such ‘wages’ her own.’’ Although Lucy later uses her earnings to “bear the blessings of the gospel to the wilds of the West,” her decision comes after five years of factory labor rather than as a selfless goal informing her initial departure from her home.

Farley also portrays the complementary relationship between paternal blessing and expanded female freedom through wages. Farley’s idea of how factories benefit women comes into focus in her short story, “Abby’s Year in Lowell.” In this piece Abby Atkins, a New Hampshire farmer’s daughter weary of farm life, begs her father to let her go to Lowell. She dreams of buying silk dresses and fashionable clothing with her wage-earnings. Mr. Atkins acquiesces to her plan, not out of financial need, but because he thinks his “wild, thoughtless” daughter needs the opportunity to “think and act for herself” (AYL, 3). In this way he outlines a plan for Abby’s personal development and increased independence, under the auspices of his patriarchal authority. The conditions for Abby’s time away are clear: she may stay in the factory system for one year only, and she must suffer being away from home without any visits, unless she becomes ill. Mrs. Atkins fears her husband’s plan will only confirm Abby in her capriciousness. However, the night before Abby’s departure, her father cautions her, “If you do not wish to make me wretched, you will return to us a better, milder, and more thoughtful girl” (AYL, 4). Abby realizes her parents are sending her to Lowell because they feel every previous effort to curb her strong will has failed. She resolves to return home a more responsible woman and prove to her parents “that I am not so very bad, after all” (AYL, 4). This resolution is difficult, and Abby daily struggles with her desire to treat herself to luxuries. She suffers other

\[\text{\footnotesize I\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize I\textsuperscript{91} Harriet Farley, “Abby’s Year in Lowell,” Lowell Offering, April 1841, 1-8. Further references to the text are cited parenthetically as } AYL.\]
women’s ridicule at her plain clothing; fellow operatives see her and wonder if she is a country girl just arrived to town. To force restraint upon herself, she puts all of her earnings into a savings account, and at the end of a year returns home with gifts for her family and an account of her savings. Her family notices immediately how a year in the factory system has wrought dramatic change in her character: “There was more delicacy of personal appearance then when she left them and also more softness of manner.” The narrator notes that Abby’s increased gentleness proceeds from her associations with other women, “for constant collision with so many young females had worn off the little asperities which had marked her conduct while at home” (AYL, 7). Her father, deeply moved, weeps tears of joy and wonder at the change wrought in his daughter. Satisfied that Abby has taught herself restraint and responsibility, he is happy to give her his blessing when she asks if she may return to Lowell to earn money for just one silk dress. Wholeheartedly, he tells her, “Yes Abby, you may do anything you wish. I shall never again be afraid to let you spend a year in Lowell” (AYL, 8). Farley’s account of factory labor’s benevolent effects on female development in many ways illuminates her own view of how the factory and the traditionally feminine intersect. Abby’s turn towards factory labor falls under the auspices of paternalistic care, but is a project of personal discovery and independence nonetheless. The story is a cautious celebration of female autonomy complementing but exceeding the bounds of the home, and a clear celebration of women’s ability to conduct themselves responsibly in the economic sphere.

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Fictional and non-fictional pieces testify to the ways the mill town modified women’s behavior after they had left their rural homes, with many operatives looking down on relatives or new arrivals to the mill town. See Dublin, Farm to Factory, 146 for a striking example, where Mary Paul remarks in a letter that some of her old acquaintances “are real nice folks but seem rather countryfied in their ideas.”
Farley’s own later comments on women’s access to wages in “The Operatives’ Reply” clarify the thrilling narrative of self-development she portrays in “Abby’s Year in Lowell.” This 1850 essay records Farley’s response to Alabama Senator Jeremiah Clemens, who angered wage earners across the North by repeating a common refrain on the congressional floor: factory operatives were more degraded than Southern slaves. When incensed New Englanders protested this insult, Clemens dug in his heels and published a list of “interrogatories,” or questions about the pay, care, and conditions provided for operatives. ¹⁹³ Clemens seemed certain that the answers he demanded would prove factory operatives to be wage slaves in thrall to callous capitalist masters.

Farley recognized Clemens’s underlying presumption that capitalist authority was an aberrant innovation on preindustrial household conditions, and her ensuing pamphlet struck at the heart of this belief. To disabuse Clemens of any belief that labor in the preindustrial household was less onerous because it was “natural,” Farley paints a dismal picture of home manufacturing. She describes an old woman attempting to spin cloth in her home while simultaneously cooking for the family and carrying on other tedious work, in the midst of dinginess and poverty: “Through the casement she can look upon the hills and vales; but necessity, by its iron law, chains her to her seat.” She continues, “Hand-carding, roving, and spinning by hand-wheel are equally unattractive to look upon. An old hat upon the floor, filled with the spinner’s quills, is significant of the beauties and accommodations of home-

¹⁹³ See “Senator Clemens, Southern Slaves, and Northern Manufacturers,” Christian Register (Boston, 1843-1850), February 16, 1850.
manufacture.”  

In short, Farley disabuses Clemens of any romantic sentimentality about women’s preindustrial domestic manufacturing by showing how home manufacturing was no less toilsome for being hidden from public view. Even more than in the current factory system, “Poverty and discomfort were doubtless then the lot of the operative” (OR, 4). Farley makes clear that domestic labor rendered women prisoners of their own homes rather than enriching their lives. Factories, by contrast, took the same tedious labor and made it lucrative. Prior to the wage-earning system, “smart girls went out to service for fifty cents per week; and tailoresses, mantua-makers, &c., went out to work for twenty-five cents per day, and took it in butter. That is, oftentimes their wages were paid in anything but money” (OR, 16). The much-decried factory wage system, by contrast, gives women a wider range of freedom by allowing both work and pay to exceed the benefits of home. Farley elsewhere points out that manufacturing has allowed “vessels now [to] leave our wharves with cottons, not only for South America, but for Calcutta (OR, 7). Through factories, then, women’s activities gain significance far beyond their own limited sphere, and make them factor even in the wide world of global commerce.

Although Farley’s excited portrayal of women’s access to wages during the market revolution is by no means distinctive, her writings do suggest an ambivalence that wages may betoken an inescapable, even ontological change for women. As already noted, “The Evening Before Pay-Day” posits a scenario in which wage earning for the sake of the home actually prevents returning to the home. In this story Farley muses insightfully on how such a dynamic has come about for women, with the first chapter portraying a lively discussion between four boardinghouse roommates—Rosina, Elizabeth, Dorcas, and Lucy—about how they will spend their wages the next day. The conversation reveals how money has become attached to each

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Harriet Farley, *The Operatives’ Reply to the Hon. Jeremiah Clemens* (Lowell: S.J. Varney, 1850), 3. Further references to the text are cited parenthetically as OR.
woman’s value. Specifically, Farley uses dialogue to imply that the women’s spending decisions manifest their moral characters. This formulation, character-as-money, exists at a degree removed from women’s character as loyal, altruistic, or submissive within the home. The figuration suggests one way money has modified female virtue, although the narrative channels women’s spending back into those ideal feminine qualities through its heroine, Rosina. The most vivacious of these women, Elizabeth, mocks Dorcas for hoarding her money to the point of refusing to spend it on virtuous causes, such as the church pew fee. Instead, Dorcas takes care of her spiritual obligations by reading free spiritual tracts distributed and usually discarded in the boardinghouse. Elizabeth and Lucy chide Dorcas for her stinginess, but Rosina deflects their barbs into a reflection on how the price of something (here, the free spiritual tracts) determines its value, rather than vice versa: “People are apt to think things worthless which come to them so easily. They believe them cheap, if they are offered cheap. Now I think, without saying one word against those tracts, that they would be more valued, more perused, and exert far more influence, if they were only to be obtained by payment for them” (PD, 240). Rosina offers this observation uncritically, accepting the translation of market value into social worth—and cost into influence—as mere fact. Dorcas attempts to turn Rosina’s point into social criticism by pointing out that the Gospel was freely given in its own day (PD, 240). Rosina counters that people in ancient times had to exert themselves in their travels to receive Jesus’s word, while today “money is much more easily obtained than then” and replaces the physical toil people experienced to receive spiritual nourishment (PD, 241). In other words, Rosina legitimates the ascendancy of exchange value over use value, and of money spent as an expression of labor exerted—an expression of one’s inner character. Moreover, in Rosina’s analogy money invested serves as a conduit to freedom—to a spiritual freedom at least—just as ancient people’s natural
exertions opened a path towards spiritual freedom.

Within Farley’s narrative frame, the other wage-earning women in the story share Rosina’s equation of spending with character. Elizabeth knows she will become “worthwhile” only when she curbs her prodigal spending and saves up money to increase her value on the marriage market (PD, 242). She imagines how such a change will increase her status in other’s eyes, anticipating that onlookers will say after her transformation, “She will be quite a fortune for some one, and I have no doubt she will get married now for what she has, if not for what she is” (PD, 242). But the mystery of Farley’s first chapter lies in the fact that these women associate spending with character, yet Rosina’s roommates remain bewildered about where her money goes. They mock Rosina for defending the pew fee as a sign of one’s priorities, since she herself belongs to no church. Rosina neither spends, as revealed by her shamefully shabby clothing, nor saves, as she admits when she tells the others she has no savings account (PD, 242). When Farley finally reveals Rosina’s self-denying support for her struggling family, this revelation both affirms and modifies the traditional values surrounding feminine sympathy. By creating a scenario in which Rosina must choose between sympathy expressed via money or sympathy expressed via emotional availability—that is, between continuing to labor on behalf of her family or going home to bid farewell to her dying twin—Farley nudges the generic conventions for female sentimental fiction towards realism. Moreover, while Farley stands with other Lowell Offering contributors who had initiated the “radical process of developing imaginative literary modes that anticipate later realism,” she exhibits none of the repressions male authors felt about the stakes of female wage earning. Instead she baldly exposes the high costs of a world where money has become a definitive expression of character. Unlike male authors who fear that

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195 Cook, 46.
money tabulates a social relation undermining equality and, therefore, freedom, Farley here unabashedly presents money as the more important part of the social networks mill women were always already living in—taking precedence even over their meeting on a spiritual plane, as demonstrated in her interrupted dream where she reunites with her family at Marcia’s funeral procession. As Rosina’s roommates wake her with a reminder she could not possibly forget, that “to-day is pay-day,” the heroine returns to the cold world of economic obligation (PD, 249).

Although Sylvia Jenkins Cook admires Farley’s forays into realism elsewhere, she puts a more romantic spin on this story. In her view the narrative’s final iteration of “payday” as a concept puts a final emphasis on “heavenly rather than earthly rewards,” sidestepping a “tension between two different ways of thinking about ethics and earnings...between the reasonable demands of self-interest and the unreasonable demands of Christian charity.”¹⁹⁶ Most certainly it does not. Rosina’s conversation with Dorcas may imbue the word “pay-day” with Christians’ pursuit of salvation, but she does so in support of the pew fee the other and more frivolous factory women have already paid. The demands on Rosina are not spiritual but familial, a new form of the altruistic behavior expected of women as handmaidens of the home. While cultural ideals for women’s behavior certainly overlapped with Christian ethical standards, Rosina’s support of an ill sister hardly constitutes “charity.” The only other character who may have an analogous circumstance at home is Elizabeth, who mocks a letter from a country-bumpkin cousin who mentions an uncle dying “of the information of the brain”—a malapropism for inflammation of the brain (PD, 245). Elizabeth’s relationship to this more-distant relative is unclear; she does not seem to have an obligation to his health comparable to Rosina’s responsibility for the companion of her childhood. Home and job produce the chief tension here,

¹⁹⁶ Cook, 56.
and the story’s final scene, in which Rosina leaves home in her dream by awakening to rush to her factory shift, puts a razor edge on the already cutting point. Women’s access to wages here undermines the patriarchal shelter by showing one way that factory work was already ideologically drawing women out of the private space of the home and into a more ambiguous and harsh semipublic sphere of commerce.

It is a threatening possibility that Farley continually in one gesture entertains and forecloses. One question loomed large in Farley’s and many of her colleagues’s minds: If women’s access to wages had changed their relationship to the domestic sphere, might it also have granted them entrance into politics? In her early Lowell essay, “Woman,” Farley reflects on whether women might eventually “rise en masse, and claim the right” to vote.\(^{197}\) Should women do so, she asserts, they ought to be granted the privilege since they could participate in government as well as their male counterparts. Furthermore, Farley meditates on whether American revolutionary principles have failed women in the U.S., “where the rights of men are so vehemently asserted” but where “woman is here, as elsewhere, the governed.” Farley goes on to postulate, “if her natural rights and duties are the same as his [i.e., man’s], she is the oppressed. She has here no privilege which she might not enjoy under the enlightened monarchs of Europe, and no distinction but that of being the mothers and daughters, the wives and sisters, of freemen.”\(^{198}\) This powerful statement, however, hinges on Farley’s subjunctive phrasing: “if her natural rights and duties are the same.” After speculating about whether women are oppressed citizens, Farley closes off any discontent her insightful admission might generate by insisting on women’s dependent status. Though woman’s status has been determined in every


\(^{198}\) Ibid, 129.
society throughout history by man, “at his caprice,” nonetheless women enjoy that contingent status with less harm to their nature than they would the strife-filled public sphere. Farley’s sense that women could rise up *en masse* and claim their rights no doubt grows from her awareness that female operatives had done just that in the strikes of 1834 and 1836. For her, however, this show of female solidarity does not truly have political potential, since female friendships form an inadequate substitute for the security of home so congenial to woman’s nature.

The issue of female friendship was a hinge on which Farley’s devotion to the patriarchal shelter turned, and one that ultimately divided her from activist colleagues. Other factory women’s writings repeatedly testify to female friendships as transformative, while Farley’s writings often weigh female relationships in the mill town with a measure of ambivalence. Several times she acknowledges that feminine associations in the mill town refine women’s character, as happens in “Abby’s Year in Lowell” when Abby returns home far gentler than she was before. But Farley consistently counterbalances each benefit of female friendship with a drawback. Virtuous factory women frequently suffer their colleagues’ scorn and misunderstanding, as happens with both the self-denying Abby and altruistic Rosina. Moreover, where other authors would find feminine sympathy in the mill town empowering, Farley also pointed out the ways women’s close relationships with each other could annihilate innocent victims through gossip. In “The Affections Illustrated in Factory Life: No. 1—The Sister,” Hannah Felton becomes the subject of scandal because she will not reveal her relationship to the man who visits her in the evenings at her boarding house.\(^1\) Her reticence on the matter soon turns the other women against her, with some of the boarders threatening to leave if the supposedly immoral Hannah is not evicted, and others speaking to her overseer to have her

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dismissed. Hannah, distraught and already overtaxed, comes down with a fever and hovers near death, finally revealing that she has been helping to support her brother, who is a poor young man in love with a rich and proud young woman. Hannah hid her relationship to her brother Orville because she worried his fiancee Olivia Ainsworth would reject him if she knew him to be the brother of a factory woman. By the story’s close, Olivia comes to love Hannah and marries Orville despite the family’s poverty, while the other boarders regret persecuting their gentle housemate. Significantly, the majority of the narrative’s final passages are spent reflecting on the appropriate ways a loving sister can influence her brother. These ratify the traditional view of femininity within the home as submissive and passive, and caution against sisters being too forthright in criticizing brothers. For Farley women’s relationships, bounded ideologically by the patriarchal shelter, are hierarchical and curbed by strict standards of decorum. The alternative found in the boardinghouse, characterized by women’s outspokenness and their meddling, is so destructive as almost to kill an innocent victim. Where other women would find in boardinghouse relationships a springboard to political activism, Farley seems to find only a poor and deficient facsimile of the home’s affectionate harmony. Her public argument with Sarah Bagley seems to have confirmed each one’s *a priori* sense of how women should act in the mill town. Bagley’s increasingly heated attacks would have confirmed Farley’s feeling that women’s unseemly public gossip could devastate innocent women’s reputations—in this case, her own. And Farley’s devotion to traditional feminine decorum in lieu of direct political activism would have amounted, for Bagley, to a cowardly betrayal of her factory sisters.

**III. Parting Ways: Farley, Bagley, and Corporate Paternalism**

Harriet Farley and Sarah Bagley’s public skirmish in 1845 over *The Offering* and Farley’s editorship illustrates the depth of the conflict for women who struggled with whether
fighting corporate policy was at odds with feminine virtue. The women’s argument emerged from the *Voice of Industry*’s coverage of a speech Sarah Bagley had made on July 4, 1845 at a laborers’ convention in Woburn, Massachusetts. In her own account of the event, Bagley spoke critically of the *Offering* as misrepresenting operatives’ feelings, but did so only because a previous speaker cited the magazine as proof positive of laborers’ contentment. According to her auditors, Bagley claimed the *Offering* was “controlled by the manufacturing interest to give a gloss to their inhumanity.” As evidence, Bagley stated the *Offering* had rejected several of her submissions protesting corporate policy on the grounds that these pieces were too controversial.

Bagley probably originally intended to attack the *Offering*’s publisher William Schouler in her speech, since he had emerged as Bagley’s political nemesis in the spring of that year. As already mentioned, Schouler had taken over the *Offering* and merged it with the *Operatives’ Magazine* in 1842. At that point he was already editor and publisher for the *Lowell Courier*, a newspaper whose first issue in 1835 had aligned its politics with Whigs and against Jacksonian Democrats. Although he sold the *Offering* to editors Farley and Curtis in 1843, he retained some connection to the magazine. During this same period Schouler had risen to the role of Lowell’s Representative to the Massachusetts State Legislature. He headed a committee appointed to investigate petitions from Bagley and other operatives about poor laboring conditions in the mills. Bagley and her fellows pleaded for the legislature to cap the workday at

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200 “The Following From the Pen of Miss S.G. Bagley…,” *Voice of Industry*, July 17, 1845, 3.


202 See Hurd, 190.
ten hours, curtailing the current eleven- to thirteen-hour shift. Schouler’s committee expressed sympathy for factory women and acknowledged that “there are abuses,” but it essentially washed its hands of the matter. Deflecting the issue back onto operatives and expressing trust in their ability to exert pressure on their employers, Schouler shrugged, “The remedy is not with us.” Bagley was outraged and immediately set out with other operatives to ensure Schouler would fail reelection—an ultimately successful measure. In her view the scenario confirmed her male contemporaries’ most extreme fears about moneyed interests destroying political equality, for Bagley and the Female Labor Reform Association publicly singled out Schouler as “a corporate machine, or tool,” and excoriated “the cringing servility to corporate monopolies manifested by said committee.” Schouler does not seem to have been directly beholden to the corporations, but his position in Lowell aligned him with moneyed interests. Bagley was likely doubly offended at Schouler’s seeming separateness from factory owners, coupled with his friendliness to them as their ally in the press. This invisible alliance made him extremely dangerous to the average citizen because he could feign impartiality while in fact acting as corporate stooge, as he did during the committee investigating hours of labor. Bagley describes how one witness from the Lawrence Corporation, Mr. Herman Abbott, was told by his superior to “say as little as possible” to the committee. When Abbott’s interviewers asked whether his employer had

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205 Foner, 100.

206 Foner, 243.

207 Foner, 245.
instructed him on how to answer their questions, “the Chairman [Schouler] looked daggers at the
enquiry” and attempted to stop the damning line of inquiry entirely.\(^{208}\) For Bagley, factories
might exert a secret influence over citizens’ lives and destroy political freedom through men like
Schouler. Of course, this suspicion trickled down to anyone allied with Schouler.

Whether Bagley was thinking specifically of Farley and Curtis when she accused the
\textit{Offering} of censorship, they inevitably bore the brunt of the charge. Farley responded to
Bagley’s criticism in the \textit{Lowell Courier}, although a person who heard Bagley’s speech insisted
Bagley “spoke in kind and courteous terms of the present editress” and “brought no charge
against the \textit{Offering}, farther than it was controlled by corporation influences.”\(^{209}\) But Bagley had
inevitably cast aspersions on Farley’s professed commitment to operatives, and Farley’s defense
in turn invited further questions from Bagley about her loyalty to women. Calling attention to
Farley’s outraged editorial against Brownson, Bagley quipped that “controversy has not always
been studiously avoided” when Farley wished to take on public opinion and not “corporation
rules.”\(^{210}\)

Here Bagley rightly pinpointed Farley’s willingness to engage some controversies rather
than others as an issue of “propriety.” Farley’s response in the Lowell \textit{Advertiser} makes clear her
belief that the \textit{Offering} serves factory women’s highest interests by responding to their greatest
threat—namely, public slander. “I believe the wrong impressions that \textit{may} in some minds be
created by the Offering,” she insists, “are but a tittle in comparison with those which it

\(^{208}\) Ibid.

\(^{209}\) “The Following From the Pen of Miss S.G. Bagley…,” \textit{Voice of Industry}, July 17, 1845, 3.

\(^{210}\) Ibid.
removes.”211 If the Offering “benefit[s] the corporations” insofar “as it elevates the character of
the operatives, and removes the unjust prejudice against them,” the magazine benefits operatives
much more by providing “a refutation” against the ongoing tendency to disparage wage-earning
women.212 As such, all Lowell women “have cause to bless the originator of the Lowell
Offering.”213 Farley’s editorial constructs a hierarchy of values among the choices available to
factory women in improving their lives. Her comments make clear that operatives defending
female virtue fight on the most important battlefront for factory women. She acknowledges,
however, that there are many ways to advocate for factory women and maintains, “I had ever
before considered Miss B. and myself upon one side of that great question—what are the rights
and capacities of the laborer?”214 But immediately after this declaration, Farley reveals her sense
of hierarchical division within the labor movement. She herself “cannot make a speech or talk
politics,” nor does she approve of those who do, since their political activities “are attributed to
an unwomanly love of notoriety.”215 In so saying, Farley advocates her own way of using the
Offering to reference “all the abuses I have known” as the manner most becoming of a
woman.216 But for Farley it is impossible for a virtuous woman to speak out in public against the
corporation as an unjust authority, and against factory labor as “slave driven task work,” without
playing into the hands of those critics who would see the factory woman as a lost and

211 Foner, 64.
212 Foner 64, 66.
213 Foner 66.
214 Foner 64-65.
215 Foner, 65.
216 Ibid.
unprotected female—which is to say, a sullied victim, a brazen woman, or a whore. For her, then, acknowledging aspects of factory life that are less than desirable and attacking corporate activity are two entirely different activities. Farley fundamentally affirms the traditional ideology that viewed patriarchal authority as the lynchpin of female virtue. To see factory women’s labor as virtuous, then, she must see the factory system as possessing a legitimate patriarchal authority over women. Thus, she attributes the Offering’s positive reception both “to the writers, so far as they indicate talent and education, ...kind feelings and discriminating judgment; and…to the corporations so far as they represent the home of New England females, who, in spite of weariness, toil, and long confinement, retain or improve the characters which they brought from their country homes.” \(^{217}\) In other words, if the patriarchal roof is the fundamental condition that makes female activity virtuous, then the corporation must be coextensive with that traditional patriarchal roof. Consequently, any of factory women’s virtuous activities are creditable to the factory as a patriarchal authority. For them to attempt to tear down that authority as illegitimate would be social suicide.

Farley’s response whipped Bagley into a frenzy. The editorial had included three snobbish statements, proceeding from Farley’s homebound and hierarchical ideas about the appropriate avenues for female protest, which disparaged operatives: first, that the Offering’s primary imperative to defend factory women’s characters may have been unfaithful to reality insofar as it painted too rosy a view of operatives as a group; second, that factory women’s low support for the magazine was “more a discredit to themselves than to us”; and third came Farley’s jab at labor activism as “unwomanly.” \(^{218}\) Bagley pounced on Farley’s separation of the

\(^{217}\) Foner, 63, italics added.

\(^{218}\) Foner, 64, 64, 65.
virtuous few from the misguided many, portraying Farley as a pretentious prig who viewed literature as an escape from factory life’s troubles. She satirized the editorial as “a specimen of refined literature, from the pen of one of the geniuses of the age.”

Contributor Amelia Sargent joined Bagley’s side by claiming her characterization of Farley as a litterateur removed from factory life was quite literally true, since “the Company employed another person to take charge of her looms one half of the time” so that Farley could complete her editorial work for the Offering. Other and more damning charges ensued: the Corporation kept the ill-supported Offering alive by buying up extra issues, and Farley was like “a pampered negro slave” whose privileged position discouraged her from complaining about institutional evils.

The women’s frustration perhaps goaded them into exaggeration and omission, for several of Bagley’s claims simply misrepresent the Offering’s content. For instance, Farley had often called attention to factory ills in fictional accounts of factory women’s long shifts and delicate health. In an 1843 editorial she went so far as to call on the corporations to create more healthier living conditions for operatives, at minimum, by adding bathing facilities. She also declared her personal inclination to call for shorter shifts, but would refrain from doing so outright because women supporting dependents were desperate for the money. Farley often phrased her complaints tentatively and subjunctively, but her writings nonetheless demonstrate a pattern of acknowledgment that factory life needed improvement. Moreover, these complaints

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219 Foner, 66.
220 Foner, 71.
221 Foner 73, 71.
222 See for instance, Harriet Farley, “Editorial. Health,” Lowell Offering, May 1843, 190-192. Farley here references the “cotton dust” that infected some operatives with the occupation-
did enter print—even under Schouler’s management—and did so during the period Bagley cited when she claimed her own submissions had been rejected on account of their activism. Bagley’s damning critique of the Offering as a mouthpiece of the corporations was also a favorite insult hurled at opponents. She also directed it at Schouler, and when John Allen in 1846 fired Bagley from her editorship at the labor-interested Voice of Industry, she likewise accused him of favoring “the mushroom [i.e., upstart, or capitalist] aristocracy.” However, Ranta suggests these accusations were ill-founded insofar as they pertained to the Offering: “To date, no evidence has surfaced to substantiate more than a meager level of corporation support (see the Amos Lawrence Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society). For the most part, the periodical appears to have been editorially independent and financially self-supporting.” Additionally, Bagley excoriated the Offering for low patronage by its intended audience of factory women. However, a low level of laborers’ subscriptions was “usually the case for workers’ periodicals.”

Yet most views of the Farley-Bagley debate take up Bagley’s view: that Farley’s literary aspirations required her to subscribe to a middle-class ideal of femininity and gentility that necessarily removed her from her fellow laborers. Scholars tend to divide Farley and Bagley along aesthetic and activist lines, respectively. But Cook reproves critics like Lawrence Buell induced asthma known as “brown lung” or byssinosis, but she also places some responsibility on operatives to protect themselves “if the mills are unhealthy,” 191, 192, italics added.


224 Ranta, 47. N.B.: My own perusal of Francis Cabot Lowell II’s business and personal correspondence, at the Massachusetts Historical Society, during this period likewise failed to indicate support, or even mention, of the Offering.

225 Ranta, 48.
and Philip Foner for accepting a too-neat division between literature and activism that fails to see their overlap.²²⁶ Buell categorically rejects all industrial literature in favor of “more sophisticated” works, while Foner classifies the Offering as “Genteel” and the Voice of Industry as “Militant.” Each critic suggests “tacitly that the literary and the class-conscious modes of thought belong to different intellectual spheres, different classes, and perhaps even different gender affiliations. For Buell, the Offering isn’t elevated enough to be literary, and for Foner it is too literary to be working-class.”²²⁷ Lori Merish, too, cites Farley’s professed reluctance as editor to use the Offering’s pages as a forum for political debate as proof that she played into the terms of a bourgeois and feminized specialization of literature as a strictly apolitical forum.²²⁸ Only Cook herself puts a finer point on the Farley-Bagley debate by acknowledging Farley’s rhetorical predicament. By resorting to cultural rhetoric where male protectors guarded female virtue, women like Farley “appeared to play directly into the hands of the owners.”²²⁹ But on the other hand, “If they admitted to degradation by industrial exploitation, they risked tainting themselves with the devastating associations of ‘ruin,’ a term that, for women, had an exclusively sexual connotation.”²³⁰ Each account falls short, however, insofar as it too readily accepts class as a settled issue and a clear category in the minds of Lowell factory laborers. Instead, it was an urgent and contested issue for women like Farley and Bagley.


²²⁷ Cook, 42.


²²⁹ Cook, 48.

²³⁰ Cook, 48-49.
The American public, factory women included, were indeed haunted by accounts of industrial squalor from across the Atlantic, but factory conditions had not emerged in the same way on New England soil. Factory women’s writings testify over and over again to wage earning as a form of American independence for women. And factory women, Bagley included, had agreed that factory employment still remained the best option for women above teaching and domestic service. Female factory labor before the Civil War, then, was a source of significant anxiety for onlookers and participants alike, but it was not yet a confirmed cultural tragedy. Understandably then, factory women defending their labor were careful to point out that factory labor did not constrict but expanded their options, insofar as it served as a temporary opportunity before women returned to the homes to which they belonged. Farley repeatedly returns to this claim as she stresses the many women “who do not call Lowell aught but a temporary home” in her 1840 reply to Orestes Brownson, and again in 1850 insists that women take advantage of factory labor as a lucrative opportunity for as long as it remains such. Given the contemporary views that tied women’s virtue to a home and patriarch, and the laboring classes to a hopelessly pathetic state, Farley’s reluctance to portray factory women as wage earners without options appears quite understandable. To reposition women’s identity inside the factory and outside a home was to unmoor her virtue and leave her in a threatening space beyond good and evil. Any alternative way of thinking—for instance, that women might celebrate an interdependent female identity born in factory and boardinghouse, explored in Part Two—required letting go of a still powerful cultural ideology in favor of a new and somewhat inchoate model for female virtue. In light of these murky possibilities, Eisler comes closest to characterizing Farley when she points

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Harriet Farley was not a toady; she was what Sartre once described as a ‘passéiste.’ Accepting the watered-down Fourierism of the day, Farley truly believed that with goodwill, and recognition by labor and management of their mutual interest, Lowell’s Golden Age would return. But there could be no turning back. The end of Lowell was the beginning of a large-scale industrial economy.\(^{233}\)

To think of Farley as a passéiste, as a backward-looking individual ill-fitted to respond to the demands of the present day, seems apt in view of many of her writings both before and after her verbal battle with Bagley. Eisler’s conjecture, that Farley was fundamentally inclined to trust the factory corporation as a benevolent entity, seems equally fitting. However, insofar as any possible solutions to factory labor’s problems still remained ambiguous for women in 1840s, it is perhaps too harsh to fault Farley for not predicting the course of industrial decline or envisioning a clear plan of action for New England mill women against it. After all, as she and other factory defenders pointed out, most female operatives did belong to country homes, and could return to them if conditions became unacceptable.\(^ {234}\) In Farley’s view this departure would be a formidable censure on factory conditions, a confirmation that industrialism and American independence had gone separate ways. Farley’s writings, when contrasted against those of activist authors like Bagley, reveal the complexity of her position. Like her politically active co-workers, Farley did indeed recognize and cite many of factory life’s ills. Unlike her colleagues, however, she was not willing to form her complaints against the factory system into a theoretical attack on the legitimacy of patriarchal control over women’s activities. Consequently, Farley’s

\(^{233}\) Eisler, 40.

\(^{234}\) See Farley, “Factory Girls,” 19; and John O. Green, “The Factory System,” 16. See also Miles, 129: “Before we proceed to notice the details of this system, there is one consideration bearing upon the character of our operatives, which must all the while be borne in mind. We have no permanent factory population. This is the wide gulf which separates the English manufacturing towns from Lowell.”
writings join with those of many other female authors in pointing out the many ways the patriarchal shelter had failed New England’s daughters and spurred their turn towards factory life, but they are also characterized by a powerful nostalgia, a potent longing for the home factory women had left behind, and to which they could only return transformed.

IV. Unnatural Paternity in the Industrial Town

Factory women and industrial corporations alike benefitted from portraying the factory system as a new manifestation of the old patriarchal order, and factories throughout the antebellum era eagerly embraced the rhetoric of paternal benevolence. An 1833 broadside from the Lawrence Manufacturing Company, for instance, carefully wrote out company regulations for women as an extension of household rules. The regulations stipulate that younger operatives are “solicited and urged to appropriate their earnings and leisure hours to economical and useful purposes, and to the attainment of that knowledge and those qualifications in household economy, and other pursuits in life, necessary to a proper and faithful discharge of the various duties which may await them in all the relations of life.” Without explaining how factory or, perhaps, boardinghouse life can serve as a training ground for domestic responsibilities, the pamphlet insists that the factory system will not fundamentally change women’s roles as domestic creatures even as it draws attention to those realities. It continues to highlight the factory as a facsimile of domestic space when it posits the agent as a substitute father for factory women far from home. These women “may apply with confidence to the Agent for advice; and such counsel as he can afford them, will be cheerfully granted, especially to those

235 “General Regulations, to be observed by persons employed by the Lawrence Manufacturing Company, in Lowell,” 1833, Massachusetts Historical Society.

236 Ibid.
who may be far from their parents and friends.” The broadside serves simultaneously as a rulebook and a public relations tool, for it tries to assure readers that factory women will not lose their domestic identities in the industrial system. Later broadsides from other Massachusetts mills testify to the success of this tactic, demonstrating significantly less anxiety when painting the factory in a paternalistic light. 1840s pamphlets from the mill system jettison these more personal guidelines for women’s relationship to their male bosses, but exert the same patriarchal force over operatives’ behavior, retaining essentially the same rules from the 1833 publication. Company regulations consistently require operatives to demonstrate upright conduct, attend church on Sundays, and be in their boarding houses by 10 p.m. In other words, as the company regulations let drop the tender, fatherly role of company agents, they still retain the more fundamental assurances that factory women will be sexually governed through the corporation’s paternalistic control over boardinghouse life.

But as company rules changed over time, they etherealized the fatherly model for regulating women’s behavior into an unabashed system of surveillance. This transformation exposes corporate paternalism as manmade and artificial, a stark contrast to the biologically based patriarchy on which corporations legitimated their original authority. A Lowell pamphlet likely dating from 1847 proclaims, “The keepers of the boarding-houses must give an account of the number, names, and employment of their boarders when required, and report the names of

\[237\] Ibid.

\[238\] See “Regulations to be observed by all persons employed in the factories of the Middlesex Company,” 1846, Massachusetts Historical Society; and “Regulations to be observed by all persons employed the Lowell Manufacturing Company,” tentatively dated 1847, Massachusetts Historical Society.
such as are guilty of any improper conduct.” An 1866 pamphlet, no longer eager to justify factory conditions to the public, nor to protect the immigrant laborers who had replaced New England women by that point, baldly explains the logic for church attendance: “A regular attendance on [sic] public worship on the Sabbath, is necessary for the preservation of good order.” Here religion is exposed as a form of bareknuckled corporate social control, replacing any previous fatherly concerns about individual laborers’ characters. These developments in corporate policy show how, as patriarchal control of women’s labor shifted over the decades from the home to society, it also made more visible the artificiality and self-serving nature of a set of relationships previously deemed natural.

V. Accepting Orphanhood

Factory women were vigilant early on to the artificial nature of corporate paternalism. Each woman had to decide for herself whether this new form of patriarchal control allied itself with the supposedly benevolent and natural structure of the home, or whether it threw into question the nature of all patriarchal control. For female laborers this philosophical question had urgent practical consequences insofar as it predisposed their responses to deteriorating factory conditions.

Under Bagley’s editorial involvement at the Voice of Industry, activist women began to critique the concept of the patriarchal shelter more pointedly than ever before. A March 13, 239 “Regulations to be observed by all persons employed the Lowell Manufacturing Company,” tentatively dated 1847, Massachusetts Historical Society.

240 “Regulations to be Observed by Persons Employed in the Boott Cotton Mills,” 1866, Massachusetts Historical Society, italics added.

241 See Foner, 142 for background on Bagley’s involvement with the Voice: William F. Young founded the paper in May 29, 1845, in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. When Young moved the newspaper in November, 1845 to Lowell and joined it with two other labor papers, he also
1846 issue reprinted an article from the *Boston Bee* on “Woman’s Weakness.” In this piece author Ellen Munroe unleashes a diatribe on the notion of male protection justifying the grounds of the patriarchal shelter. She asks men, “What have you done in return for the great advantages you possess in your position in society? Merely nothing....You boast of the protection you afford to women. Protection! from what? from the rude and disorderly of your own sex—reform them, and women will no longer need the protection you make such a parade of giving.”\(^{242}\) For Munroe justifications for the patriarchal shelter are arbitrary and rooted in men’s own injustice. An article from “Martha” goes still further by indicting Christianity for abjecting women more than other cultures: “In fact, if the Christian faith were carried out, it, of all others would the most subject the female sex to the lowest point of subjection in servile dependence on man, and implicit obedience to what he conceives his lawful commands.”\(^{243}\) These were indeed radical words, demanding profound social changes from women who wanted to claim “their proper station in society, when they will no longer be considered the plaything and slave of men.”\(^{244}\)

And if these were the implications discovered by women who had ideologically left the patriarchal shelter behind, then Farley certainly found herself unable to follow them. At her most morose, she instead reiterates her sense of women’s need for home, and of female friendship as

\(^{242}\) Ellen Munroe, “To the Editor of the Bee,” reprinted in *Voice of Industry*, March 13,1846, 1.


\(^{244}\) “A Queer Prayer,” *Voice of Industry*, August 27, 1847, 2.
an inadequate substitute for it in the cold space of the factory town. For instance, in her 1844 editorial, “The Suicide,” Farley explores two operatives’ motivations to kill themselves within weeks of each other in mill towns. Contemporary newspapers reported that the first woman, from Lowell, “had neither friends nor home.” The second, from a nearby factory town, suffered from “reports injurious to her fair fame...reports which, after her death, were ascertained to be false” (S, 212). In both cases Farley suspects that surrounding conditions warped each woman’s nature to the point that “the soul itself must have become distorted and diseased” to be so capable of self-harm (S, 213). Farley’s interpretation of the suicides and of factory conditions, of course, hinges on where she imputes blame for these women’s despairing deaths. Eisler reads this editorial as an instance in which “Farley seems to confront the fact that [corporate] paternalism was dead,” but in reality Farley offers up only ambiguous statements on factory conditions. If the editorial does indict corporate paternalism, it does so only in service to a

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245 Such sordid events periodically occurred in the factory town, fueling claims that factory women had been sexually corrupted. Two of the most prominent scandals were the ambiguous suicide or murder of the pregnant Sarah Maria Cornell in 1833, and the death several years later (and after the time of Farley’s editorial) of Sarah H. Furber from an abortion, in 1848. Each incident spawned a vast amount of print chatter, and each had its fictional counterpart in gothic tales of seduced factory women. This chapter does not emphasize these pieces, however, for two reasons. First, these events were statistically miniscule in comparison with the overall populations of factory towns, and therefore do not furnish real insight into women’s sexual behavior in mill towns. Second, as I take great pains to show how claims about factory women’s sexual promiscuity were ideological, I submit that sexualized discussions of mill women would have taken place with or without the occasional and statistically inevitable real-life tragedy of the “fallen” factory woman. For a thorough bibliography of fictional and non-fictional sources on seduced factory women, see Ranta, “Blighted and Deceived: Dangerous Desires and Women’s Wrongs,” in Women and Children of the Mills: An Annotated Guide to Nineteenth-Century American Textile Factory Literature (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 107-132.

246 Farley, “Editorial. The Suicide,” Lowell Offering, July 1844, 212. Further references to the text will be cited parenthetically as S.

247 Eisler, 197.
greater indictment of the factory town as an insufficient replacement for the domestic setting woman’s nature so desperately needs. Farley paints a vivid picture of women’s private griefs unassuaged by cold and isolating public conditions. Before even proceeding to the details of each case, she figures the inevitably public nature of their conspicuous grieving as precisely the sort of violation she has long sought to deny in factory towns. Farley characterizes each woman’s decision to kill herself as an instance “when the innate delicacy of her nature is so far forgotten that the body, itself, is yielded up to the cold eye, and unshrinking hand, of the dissector—for this must always follow” (S, 213). For these women to forget their natural modesty and allow their naked bodies to be “yielded up” to a strange man for postmortem analysis is a sign of their warped feminine natures indeed. Farley’s phrasing remains abstract enough to allow “the dissector” to suggest both the man performing the autopsy, and the public dissecting the woman’s life with “cold eye, and unshrinking hand” in print. For Farley, both the physical and the social inspections violate the women and serve as the consummate example of betrayed womanhood.

Farley’s editorial, nevertheless, places her in the role of “the dissector” and threatens to repeat the gesture she decries. Consequently, she does not expend much effort providing personal details about either woman. She conspicuously omits the names of the deceased, along with any individuating details about their place of birth or residences in the factory towns. Instead, she reflects on the deaths as proof of how circumstances had wrenched each woman from the sympathetic ties so crucial to her existence, and instead had placed her in a cold and isolated situation averse to her nature. Farley ruminates on the first death as resulting from the woman’s lack of a home or parents. Without either, the woman was unmoored in the factory town, bereft of any “refuge to which she might retreat, when weary and faint with tedious
pilgrimage” (S, 213). Grueling and monotonous labor conditions contribute to the woman’s suicide, but only insofar as they exacerbate her fundamental homelessness. “She rose early at dawn, and toiled till night. Day after day brought the same wearisome round of duties,” Farley imagines, projecting that the woman could not see any end to this life, unable as she is “to procure an independence by her slight savings” and likely unable to continue her labor because of her “sinking energies” (S, 213). Wage earning fails the unfortunate woman, but no less so does female sympathy in the factory town. Farley attributes the woman’s hopeless melancholy to her fellow operatives’ unwillingness to sympathize—literally, to suffer with—her in her plight. She depicts fellow operatives as “shrink[ing] from the sad one lest sympathy should reveal that which in their own hearts had better be concealed” (S, 213). In other words, Farley suggests that the woman’s situation reminds factory women of suffering common to all: that they may all suffer from being apart from their homes, and may in actuality be rather friendless in the company town despite a number of superficial acquaintances. Farley’s interpretation of the second suicide goes further in condemning female society in the factory town as uniquely destructive. In this case, an operative had placed all her love and future hopes in her fiancé until malicious gossip ended the relationship. Like the first woman, this woman despaired of any future home, since her “soul had made his [i.e., her lover’s] its stay” prior to their broken engagement. The broken engagement, then, also deprives this second woman of any hope of a home with its warm security. Slander destroys the woman’s present and future social anchors, and Farley blasts factory gossip as a violation of even the most innocent victims. “People may talk of village gossip,” she points out, “but in no place is an evil report more quickly circulated, and apparently believed, than in a factory” (S, 214). The factory town’s climate has grown so slanderous, she notes, that the saying, “‘it is only a factory story’ is considered as an intimation
to inquire further” (214). Each reflection portrays the factory town as producing a sort of category failure for the woman’s femininity, divorcing her from the home and sympathy that define her. The editorial situates the deaths as largely socially inflicted, interpreting each woman’s suicide as an anguished response to the ultimate affront to her nature: isolation.

Farley’s indictment both of women’s homelessness and of the failure of female sympathy in the factory town leads her to consider whether two other social factors also contributed to the women’s deaths: namely, labor conditions and the Offering itself. Farley tackles these delicate questions simultaneously, pointing out that the Offering never felt it necessary to remind the public that factory shifts were grueling, since pieces had mentioned both the number of hours women worked and had noted that most women were assigned to a single room day after day. Nor did the magazine feel obligated “to enlarge upon the fact that there was ignorance and folly among a large population of young females, away from their homes,” since the public’s monomaniacal concern with unchaperoned women’s vulnerability caused the real “worth, happiness, and intelligence” of operatives to be “undervalued” (S, 214). Nevertheless, Farley worries that operatives are not as happy as young women elsewhere in the prime of life, who enjoy access to money, society, and fashion, but she phrases this concern too tentatively to assign any real cause to the women’s perceived dissatisfaction. She does, however, go so far as to admit that factory labor itself is isolating, so that “the mind is thrown back upon itself” (S, 214). For women inclined to contemplation, this form of labor is advantageous, but for those of a morbid turn of mind, factory labor can be utterly destructive. She closes with an anecdote that in many ways summarizes factory women’s suffering and the failure of women around them to sympathize, but falls short of indicting the factory itself for women’s predicament. Farley tells of a young operative “who was weary of her monotonous life, but saw no hope of redemption.”
This woman vented her despair to a “benevolent lady, who was visiting us upon a philanthropic mission” (S, 215). After disclosing her griefs, the operative asks the woman what she should do. The middle-class woman feels stunned by the complicated nature of the laborer’s problems, particularly because her problems are not primarily financial and therefore do not require the simple and gratifying solution of charitable aid. Dismayed, she tells the operative, “I can tell you of nothing,...but to throw yourself into the canal” (S, 215). Farley counters this hopeless advice with a more noble but vague suggestion for operatives. Referencing Milton’s “On His Blindness” and its affirmation of passive persons who only “stand and wait,” she maintains that operatives “serve, even more acceptably, who labor patiently and wait” (S, 215). But Farley’s appropriation of Milton’s words bears dark and complex implications for female laborers. Milton’s speaker dwells on his own passivity in the face of God’s final judgment. He finally reconciles his own fears about not being able to labor sufficiently for God by associating his own blindness-induced passivity with the highest orders of angels, whose sole duty is to contemplate and praise God. “They also serve who only stand and wait,” the poem concludes, finding that passive contemplation is rewarded through present contemplation of the divine nature, and the future reward of a complete beatific vision. But when Farley praises those “who labor patiently and wait,” her assertion offers no such final promise. The problems she has outlined for factory women are social, not theological. Furthermore, though Farley traces women’s fraught position within a changing economic and social landscape, she does not cite more money or better labor policies as the solution to their problems. Thus, by situating female operatives as cheerful but fundamentally passive laborers in a secular landscape, Farley offers no insight into the goal of the laborers’ waiting. Put differently, Milton’s sonnet gestures to embracing a vision in the absence of labor; Farley’s editorial, to embracing labor in the absence of a vision.
Farley’s editorial, then, strikes at the heart of the dispute with Bagley that would erupt the following year: the chief danger to factory women was not the material facts of their laboring conditions, but the social and cultural disruptions that labor introduced into their lives. If, as Eisler states, Farley ultimately concluded that “paternalism was dead,” that the factory had failed to live up to its promise as a substitute father, the void left women in a position not of greater freedom but of rudderlessness in the ideological maelstrom of an industrializing society.\textsuperscript{248} For Farley the broken ties to home left each woman desolate, anticipating Friedrich Engels’ own insight into the plight of the working classes as one in which capitalism had abandoned each person to her own desperate misery, where laborers “perished, each alone.”\textsuperscript{249} If the pattern of disappointing female friendships in her writings is any indication, Farley did not see solidarities with her fellow operatives as lifelines out of the social and cultural vortex in which they found themselves. Representation was the only possible solution for a representational problem, and Farley sought to rectify cultural misrepresentations of factory women’s experiences through both her own artistic experiments and in her editorial decisions. From her point of view, wage labor pushed women into a space where they experienced a category failure: the feminine domestic identity unanchored from the home. This category failure called for new categories, or, new genres. Consequently, Farley experimented in some of her own pieces with “modes of writing that [would] encompass the clashing new worlds of these aspiring operatives.”\textsuperscript{250}

Although Bagley retrospectively dismissed the \emph{Offering} as committing “the fatal error of

\textsuperscript{248} Eisler, 149.


\textsuperscript{250} Cook, 69.
neutrality” because it “neglected the operative as a working being,” for Farley the problem and its solution were never so simple. In Bagley’s view, labor and economic conditions defined the factory woman’s position and, as such, required them to mobilize together as a united front against company policy. But Farley’s fictional and non-fictional pieces indicate that, far from viewing the crisis as primarily economic, she saw factory women’s problems as social and symbolic. Consequently, their troubles lacked a single solution. For Farley the issue was not quite so much a contest between being “more interested in the aesthetic ends of literature than in propaganda,” as Cook suggests, if by “literature” Cook means something more open-ended and less agenda-driven. To categorize Farley’s objective as literary and Bagley’s as propagandistic is to draw a line between the two that is muddied by the works themselves. It is more useful to think of the bulk of Farley’s writings as oriented towards a goal just as dire as Bagley’s activism. Farley, however, diagnosed factory women’s chief problem as societal representation rather than labor hours or wages. Said differently, the symbolic implications of women’s wages, rather than the wages themselves, most interested her. In Farley’s view, wages themselves determined the quality of a woman’s present life, but failure to change society’s understanding of the female wage-earner would deprive her of a future as well. Consequently, for her the issue must chiefly be worked out in representation; Farley’s perspective made political activism not only unseemly but also largely irrelevant.

Farley’s writings testify to her sense of cultural trauma and cognitive dissonance as a woman caught up in a rising industrial economy: cultural trauma, because she experienced societal transformations as violations; and cognitive dissonance, because public portrayals of her

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251 quoted in Eisler, 40.

252 Cook, 51.
and other operatives’ predicaments fell far short of her own lived experiences. Unfair public commentary hurt her, and so many other operatives, into poetry, and Farley’s own nostalgia testifies to this sense of hurt. In so many of Farley’s writings the longing for home, and the look back to the home as a perpetual reference point, function as a lingering pain produced by rapid cultural change. But the cognitive dissonance between public accounts of factory labor and her own experiences also inspired innovation in Farley’s writings. Although Cook concedes that Offering pieces only sporadically portrayed operatives’ struggles authentically, “nevertheless she [Farley] proved to be a thoughtful theorist about fiction and literary realism, and she anticipated the struggles of many later women and working-class writers to find a suitable form for encompassing their untold experiences.”

Caught between defensiveness and innovation, Farley suffered a divided psyche in the conflict between traditional values and the factory woman’s lived experience. She provides perhaps the most fitting interpretation of her own troubles in an 1848 New England Offering editorial: "With a heart quite radical and, a head somewhat conservative, we get credit for being 'neither one thing or another;' whereas we are, in reality, far more like two things." Like an early Huck Finn, Farley profoundly understood the conflict of traditional values falling short of lived experiences; like an early Huck Finn, she found no solution to these things except to testify to the space between them in her own tentative way. Melville’s 1855 “Tartarus,” reiterating all the stereotypes Farley had expended so much energy opposing, perhaps proves how futile the gesture was: “For poetry makes nothing happen.” And yet Farley’s writings testify to her own heroic struggle and that of factory women.

253 Cook, 51.

like her, whose turn to the creative arts, “With the farming of a verse, / [Made] a vineyard of the curse.”
Chapter 3

SEXUAL SERVANTS OF THE MARKET: HARRIET JACOBS, WAGE LABORERS, AND THE FARCE OF BELONGING TO SLAVERY’S POTEMKIN VILLAGE

We next went to Steventon, in Berkshire. It was a small town, said to be the poorest in the county. ... Of course they lived in the most primitive manner; it could not be otherwise, where a woman’s wages for an entire day were not sufficient to buy a pound of meat. ... ...But when I visited them in their little thatched cottages, I felt that the condition of even the meanest and most ignorant among them was vastly superior to the condition of the most favored slaves in America....Their homes were very humble, but they were protected by law. No insolent patrols could come, in the dead of night, and flog them at their pleasure. The father, when he closed his cottage door, felt safe with his family around him. No master or overseer could come and take from him his wife, or his daughter. They must separate to earn their living; but the parents knew where their children were going, and could communicate with them by letters. The relations between husband and wife, parent and child, were too sacred for the richest noble in the land to violate with impunity.

— Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Factory women and their detractors often measured the female wage laborer’s virtue against that of the woman assumed to be most firmly ensconced within the patriarchal shelter: female slaves. If market culture’s whirlwinds ravaged factory women’s labors and security, slavery’s iron chains held slave women in the patriarchal shelter. Harriet Jacobs recognized the contrasting economies within these debates and used them as an occasion to reveal market culture where antebellum thinkers least expected to find it: mastering the slave household. In exposing slave households shattered by the market’s insatiable desire, Jacobs also unraveled assumptions about the interdependence of social and economic arrangements within the patriarchal shelter, and about women’s identities as the shelter’s belongings.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ This essay uses historical names rather than pseudonyms, adopting “Harriet Jacobs” over “Linda Brent.” While Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and John Carlos Rowe opt to reference the
To reveal slavery’s darkest secrets in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs takes her reader on a transatlantic tour into households and economies, from South to North in America, and from the U.S. to England, and back again. As she does so, Jacobs reverses conventional travel-narrative comparisons between home and abroad to defamiliarize the country of origin, and to alert readers to the economy’s invisible hand as it invades American homes.

Harriet Jacobs knew that Southern slavery succeeded as a social, economic, and political institution in part because its greatest atrocities stemmed from sweeping economic realities in the South, realities that remained largely invisible to the casual observer. For that reason, Jacobs’s transatlantic tour upends common expectations by playing the antebellum rhetoric of wage slavery against itself. Reversing this rhetoric, Jacobs shows how England’s post-slavery, industrial economy respects the sacred threshold separating home and market, but the South’s grasping capitalist economy has utterly broken down all differences between the two.

Jacobs accomplishes this feat most especially by giving her reader glimpses into households, showing that some which readers assume are broken are in fact sturdy structures, while others that seem stable and intact crumble under closer inspection. Consider, for instance, Jacobs's analysis of the living conditions of England’s agricultural wage laborers. Where many Americans looked pityingly at destitute foreign wage-earners, they assumed with Marx “the narrative’s pseudonymous characters to praise Jacobs's artistry in crafting her narrative, I have decided against this tactic. I believe going beyond the text to characters’ basis in real life is amenable to Jacobs's own aesthetic objectives. Jacobs makes clear that human artifice— in the dual senses of “constructedness” and of deception—is central to the world in which she lives, and that correctly interpreting that conditioned, constructed world is essential for making sense of the slave’s real, lived experiences. The narrative’s factitious elements highlight an underlying reality, one which should lead back to actual experiences and historical personages. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 462 n. 5; and John C. Rowe, *At Emerson’s Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 129.
practical absence of the family among the proletarians,” coincident with widespread “public prostitution.”256 While Jacobs acknowledges the dismal living conditions of England’s “poorest poor,” however, she also celebrates the lives they are free to carry on in their “little thatched cottages” because the father, symbolically, has the ability to close his cottage door. It is a gesture reinforced by law and social practice, this ability to maintain the threshold between the home and the crushing economic forces outside. This barrier enables the father to protect the honor of “his wife, or his daughter” from the rapacious “master or overseer,” despite those labor conditions requiring the family to “separate” to earn their living. Jacobs highlights the wage-earning family’s fundamental integrity in the English industrial economy. In doing so she tacitly counters beliefs that families are dissolved when the economic component of the patriarchal shelter’s social arrangement dissolves. Here the family circle remains unbroken despite the rise of wage labor and the decline of the preindustrial household. In stark contrast the slave household’s presumed stability masks a nightmarish chaos. Jacobs scorns the naive northerner too ready to

256 Engels, Friedrich and Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” in Karl Marx: Selected Writings, ed. David McLellan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 259. American physician John Green reflects the same sentiment as he defends American wage labor against the English model, where a half-starved, ignorant child is raised “with scarcely sufficient parental care to attend upon its merely animal wants” before he or she “begins its life of constant service, and enters its permanent dependent factory caste.” See John O. Green, “The Factory System, in its Hygienic Relations,” (Boston: Wm. S. Damrell, 1846), 14. This essay does not seek to trivialize the many differences between the agricultural wage labor Jacobs observed and industrial labor. However, it is valid to reckon the farm laborers in Steventon alongside wage labor debates focusing on industrialism, since the rise of industrialism, as Engels notes, precipitated the transition from a “patriarchal time” when farmers kept farmhands on their land, to the phenomenon of seasonal “day-labourers” who lack a stable home and steady income. See Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 268.
believe “he has been to the South, and seen slavery for himself.”\textsuperscript{257} In the case of slavery, firsthand observation of the “beautiful patriarchal institution” is insufficient for understanding how market conditions tyrannize slaves’ lives. Consequently, Jacobs points to all of the ways market imperatives have created “half-starved wretches,” “shrieking” mothers and children for sale, and degraded “young girls,” each example undermining the slaveholder’s status as a benevolent protector (\textit{ILSG, 99}). But these conditions are difficult to see, because conversations about the slave household are scripted to thwart outsiders’ understanding of the southern slave economy. In a sophisticated and canny economic critique, Jacobs upends contemporary debates comparing slave labor and wage labor by parsing the two economies to which women were supposedly subjected in the antebellum era: the stable and self-contained household economy of the patriarchal shelter, and the cruelly violating and depleting economy of the market. Specifically, Jacobs deconstructs the patriarchal shelter as it ideologically encloses female slave labor. In the process she tears down attending assumptions that female laborers exist in the home as stable \textit{belongings} by instead showing that the lives of female slaves exist as \textit{commodities} subject to relentless hounding, placelessness, and disappropriation.

This chapter examines Jacobs's portrayal of English wage labor as the rhetorical keystone in her antislavery rhetoric. It does so by recovering in detail how northern and southern Americans joined in international debates about the effects of capitalist culture on the patriarchal shelter and especially female reproduction, then shows how Jacobs adapts these same points for

\textsuperscript{257} Harriet Jacobs, \textit{Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl, Written by Herself: With Related Documents}, ed. Jennifer Fleischner (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 99. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text as \textit{ILSG}. 
her powerfully abolitionist and “deeply feminist” writings.\textsuperscript{258} In doing so, I join with recent scholarship in stressing the importance of England to Jacobs's development as an author. A transatlantic emphasis leads Grace McEntee to frame Jacobs's ten months (1845-1846) abroad as Imogen Willis’s nursemaid as a period of respite and spiritual refreshment, providing Jacobs much-needed emotional resources to draw upon fifteen years later when she dared to compose her troubling story.\textsuperscript{259} McEntee suggests that Jacobs's religious conversion in England unleashed her tongue, enabling the “personal healing that significantly contributed to her ability to open up her heart to her daughter—and, eventually, to share her story with a reading public.”\textsuperscript{260} Jacobs’s foremost biographer Jean Fagan Yellin similarly stresses the need to bring a transatlantic focus to Jacobs’s writings, pointing out that “again and again in her letters, in her narrative, in her only recorded speech, and in her organizational work, Jacobs makes clear that the scope of her concerns is not local, regional, or national, but international.”\textsuperscript{261} For Yellin that global preoccupation signals Jacobs's universalist and “ongoing concerns with the condition of all women.”\textsuperscript{262} This chapter thus joins with the transatlantic turn in Jacobs scholarship and adds to it

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Yellin, “Incidents Abroad,” 158.
\item Yellin, “Incidents Abroad,” 159. Dowling also makes passing comment on Jacobs's portrayal of England to “refute the proslavery claim that northern economic conditions were less humane for blacks and whites than the benevolent paternal order of the slaveholding South.” Dowling, 31.
\end{enumerate}
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by arguing that international debates about the seemliness of wage labor for women provided Jacobs the occasion to expose slave women’s sexual vulnerabilities—to deconstruct the slaveholding South’s patriarchal shelter. Important as England was as Jacob’s emotional oasis, it was perhaps still more important to her as an exemplar of labor conditions insofar as it had sought to extirpate slave labor from its own society.263

Jacobs's transatlantic comparisons feed into a second and related argument of this chapter, one flowing into a central channel of Incidents scholarship: interpreting Dr. James Norcom’s sexual harassment and its significance for the narrative. Incidents criticism inevitably circles the question of whether Norcom actually raped Jacobs or whether she protected herself, physically and psychologically, by selecting Samuel Tredwell Sawyer as her lover. Given female slaves’ defenselessness in law and southern society, scholars like Jennifer Fleischner infer the assault as a probable subtext both in Jacobs’s narrative and private letters, knowing that “if Norcom did rape Jacobs, she would not have felt free to write about it explicitly in her narrative.”264 Others point out with Frances Foster Smith that resisting Jacobs's narrative on a factual basis repeats the dismissive attitude that nineteenth-century readers took towards the

263 It is important to point out the historical context of Jacobs's time in England, since she was able to experience the widespread humanitarian stance many English people had taken towards black American refugees in the 1840s, after slavery was abolished in 1838 and before pseudoscientific ideas about racial difference eroded these cultural attitudes in the 1850s and ‘60s. See McEntee, 125.

slave narrative. Scholars who accept Jacobs's account as basically truthful, on the other hand, see Jacobs's use of narrative conventions not as symptoms of her submerging the real facts of her life under literary symbols, but as her way to make her own otherwise sensationalistic story understood. Specifically, William Andrews claims Jacobs felt compelled to incorporate sentimental narrative conventions and engage loathsome stereotypes as a precondition for gaining “maximum freedom to tell her story in her own way and to her own ends,” including relating her stratagems to resist Norcom. This debate is important insofar as it circles the question of the female slave’s representation, so prone to stereotype “as hopeless and humiliated victims.” If Jacobs did successfully avoid rape, she not only asserted a degree of personal control over her own life; she also suggests that female slaves, though abjected by law and social practice, were not wholly passive victims to be reduced to yet another “sympathetic” stereotype smacking of pity and condescension. Jacobs had to reveal a taboo subject, sexual exploitation, that would discredit her in the public eye as an unwed mother and would also potentially suffocate her between the walls of available clichés: Jezebel or degraded victim.


267 For the sexualized stereotype of black women as “Jezebels,” see Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 44.
Yet framing Jacobs's narrative as either a hidden confession or an empowered tale of subversion to some degree misses the point that, whether Norcom assaulted Jacobs or whether Jacobs successfully evaded her master by selecting a different white man as her lover, a racist economy asserted itself over Jacobs’s reproductive abilities regardless. Approaching the issue via race rather than economics, Dana Nelson points out that Jacobs’s “action only redistributes her bondage; she is in fact exploited by both men.” This essay’s focus on the economies surrounding female slaves builds upon that notion of redistributed bondage as it applies not just to exploitation in the South but also in the lingering effects of capitalistic slavery on Jacobs's life up North. Just as Jacobs draws in the third, unexpected stereotype of the female wage laborer to drive a wedge between the binaries forced on slave women as hopeless victims or sensual Jezebels, this chapter also seeks to pry apart the hostile dichotomies imposed on the text by an obsessive focus on whether Jacobs avoided rape under Norcom’s roof. To miss the way Jacobs refracts portrayals of the female wage laborer onto American slave women is also to miss Jacobs's incisive, stinging indictment of an entire nation that has wedded itself to the “demon slavery” in the polluted embrace of a national economy. It is to miss the way Jacobs points out how black women’s biological capacities, rather than being guarded within the traditional household, become channeled into market spaces. Because that market has national ties, *Incidents* continually demonstrates how (fugitive and former) slave women’s sexual identities continue to be used against them in the Northern states. If this account qualifies the narrative of Jacobs's personal empowerment through shrewd sexual strategy, it nonetheless puts Jacobs into several other powerful positions: that of sage, economic theorist and, simply, one of the most insightful and courageously forthright feminist critics of her day.

268 Nelson, 135. For an account of Jacobs's canniness in her love affair, see also Nelson, 137.
I. From Property to Commodity: The Woman Comes Undone

When Thomas Hertell introduced the married women’s property act to the New York legislature in 1837, he defined women’s status as legal dependents under a male property owner. In Hertell’s argument, “because the wife at common law was constrained to function as a servant or slave to her married lord and master...she was herself a species of property. Only her husband’s inability to sell her outright saved her from the status of unqualified slavery.”\footnote{Basch, 260.} In this analogy the distinction between wives and slaves does not consist in being free or unfree, as expected, but in being immobile versus mobile property. Rarely did his contemporaries articulate as baldly as Hertell the economic basis of women’s and slaves’ fundamentally different statuses: their existence outside or inside a market.

For women this social distinction, between property and commodity, was so profound as to be almost ontological because it conferred on women a fundamentally different relationship to the world. To understand the depths of that difference, though, one must recover the difference between property and commodities before the rise of capitalism, since in a mature capitalist culture the distinction has been all but lost, practically and semantically. Hannah Arendt notes that under capitalism property always has the potential to become a commodity, but in the precapitalist world property signaled just the opposite: security in an unstable world. For male heads of household, the property ownership of the house and land granted an objective relationship to the world of things and also functioned as a refuge from the outside world capable of being passed down from generation to generation.\footnote{Arendt, The Human Condition, 70.} As the language of laborers’
disappropriation later made clear, dependents also enjoyed the house as a place of refuge.  

Ideologically the household functioned for them also as an anchor in the world, even if they lacked the male head of household’s freedom through dominion. Dependents in service to one specific master, in other words, by definition were not bound to another; the local particularity of their lives in a precapitalist society solidified their senses of identity, security, and stability. In English the overlapping associations between economic dependency and social fixedness are retained in the word “belonging,” which, from its earliest forms, signified both an economic status and a social condition. The word’s positive connotations also help us to understand how antebellum thinkers could have conceptualized women’s and slaves’ status as a condition benefiting all involved. Insofar as women and slaves functioned as belongings, they also belonged. However, with the rise of capitalism came the “transformation of immobile into mobile property.” For female dependents those changes functioned as the “greatest threat” to their own form of existence because with the transformation of property into wealth came the loss “of a tangible, worldly place of one’s own.” Even more horrifying than the loss of belonging that these changes would have signified for female dependents was the possibility that

271 See Chapter One, especially Brownson, who claims wage labor has torn down the patriarchal shelter as a refuge for dependents, as evidenced by the hungry wives and children of unemployed wage-earners: “It is no pleasant thing...to rise in the morning with a wife and children you love, and know not where to procure them a breakfast.” Orestes Brownson, The Early Works of Orestes A. Browson, ed. Patrick W. Carey, v. 5, The Transcendentalist Years, 1840-41 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 306.

272 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “belonging” originates from “belong,” which appears first in Middle English as “an intensive (with be- prefix) of the simple longen”—a word meaning both “to be the property or possession of” or “to be a member or affiliate of a particular group or category.” See Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online (2016), s.v. “long, v.3.”

273 Arendt, 69.

274 Arendt, 70.
property, previously existing to be maintained, would become wealth, meant “to be used and consumed” and exchanged.\textsuperscript{275} Under these terms, women’s sexualized status as reproducers under the patriarchal shelter might be channeled into market imperatives: human generation for the purpose of accumulation.

The threat that commerce might pose to women’s status becomes clear within the U.S.’s capitalistic system of slavery, when female slaves subject to a market might make “wealth bec[o]me capital, whose chief function was to generate more capital” in order to mimic the sense of “permanence” in the precapitalist era of property ownership.\textsuperscript{276} In the market-dominated capitalist world, “however, this permanence is of a different nature; it is the permanence of a process rather than the permanence of a stable structure. Without the process of accumulation, wealth would at once fall back into the opposite process of disintegration through use and consumption.”\textsuperscript{277} For women forced to labor perversely for a market, this meant that market conditions demanded they reproduce as much as possible. “The fertility of slave women was of obvious economic value” for slaveholders “since their offspring became assets of the mother’s master,” a social arrangement financially motivating slaveholders who were intensely “concerned with fertility rates” to rape their female slaves.\textsuperscript{278} In this economic context female victims of the owner-investor suffered not only an initial violation, but as capital-generating commodities they endured the fundamental disappropriation which, for them, “undermine[d] the

\textsuperscript{275} Arendt, 68.

\textsuperscript{276} Arendt 68.

\textsuperscript{277} Arendt, 68-69.

\textsuperscript{278} Melton A. McLaurin, \textit{Celia, A Slave} (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 100.
durability of the world.”  

For this reason Jacobs shows throughout her writings how impermanence has taken the place of belonging for slave women and the families to which they so futilely cling, as will be seen.

Given the widespread antebellum disdain for capitalists, proslavery apologists knew it was crucial to position slaves’ lives rhetorically on a stable plantation and away from a capitalistic market. If slaves functioned as exchangeable commodities, then slaveowners were not protecting patriarchs but merchants and investors. And capitalist masters, rather than protecting slaves as property, would treat slaves as “object[s] of ‘consumption’” whose worth was no longer “determined by its location” but instead took on an “exclusively social value determined through...ever-changing exchangeability [,] whose fluctuation could itself be fixed only temporarily by relating it to the common denominator of money.”

To a mixed audience they would conceal these realities, but among themselves they could speak more openly about their obvious economic interests. “Slaves constitute the largest portion of our wealth,” James Gholson admitted to the Virginia legislature in 1832, “and by their value, regulate the price of nearly all the property we possess.” Gholson gestures to the fact that the domestic slave trade, far from being an exceptional circumstance, had become a fully developed Southern institution by 1820. States in the Upper South, such as Virginia, sold their slaves to the Lower South and western territories to meet the growing labor force required for cotton production. Cotton

279 Arendt, 68.

280 Arendt, 69.


282 Deyle, 42.
traveled to Northern textile mills, a tangible link forged between the oft-compared slaves and factory women. Thus, the domestic slave trade formed a crucial leg of the market revolution linking North and South in a national economy. \(^{283}\) Moreover, states came to rely so heavily on the sale of slaves as the keystone of their economies that Gholson went on to warn that “any measure which should close those [western] markets against us, would essentially impair our wealth and prosperity.”\(^{284}\) Gholson’s words indicate that slaves’ primary existence lies in the market, a phenomenon Marx ascribes to the commodity’s double life when he claims that a commodity’s exchange value, unlike its use-value, is immanent and “forms a part of them as objects.”\(^{285}\) As testimony to the commodity’s fundamental existence as an exchange value, slaves’ monetary value came to serve “as security for countless other investments, [and] the vast capital in slaves propelled the southern economy and brought the region great wealth.”\(^{286}\)

By the time Jacobs turned to the task of writing her life’s story in the 1850s, southern economies had dipped and surged on the slave trade’s human tide for several decades. From her vantage point in slave-exporting North Carolina in the early 1800s, Jacobs could have observed local slave owners grow wealthy on the westward sale of their dependents. During these years the interregional domestic slave trade ensured the market value of slaves steadily grew until the

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\(^{283}\) See Deyle, 40-41.

\(^{284}\) Gholson, quoted in Deyle, 41.


\(^{286}\) Deyle, 41. Slaves could not delude themselves with lies about the patriarch as a stabilizing figure, as owners could, for in Virginia in the 1830s “one out of every four slaves was forcibly removed,” with over half a million persons being sold westward to cotton states between 1820 and 1860. See Deyle, 44.
Panic of 1837, which cut the slaves’ economic value in half. Once Jacobs escaped to the North in 1842, she could read about southerners who argued vehemently for slavery’s westward expansion to recover their losses. If new territories were open up to the slave trade, they argued, the ensuing demand for labor “would drive the value of slave property back up to its predepression levels.” This is precisely what happened with Texas’s annexation in 1845, and over the next fifteen years the market value of human property rose by 150 percent. Skyrocketing values incited a fever of speculation outstripping any rationalizations of slavery based on slaves’ labor value. In 1857 one Louisianian complained in the *New Orleans Bee* about the “exorbitant prices” of these human workers: “If an adult field-hand is worth over twenty-three hundred dollars, what would a first-rate negro mechanic bring on the auction table?” As slaves’ value as commodities became increasingly disjointed from other market realities, such as the price of cotton, their fundamental existence on the market and outside the patriarchal shelter exceeded any utilitarian arguments for the economic utility of their labor. “Insatiable demand and rampant speculation had become the sole determinants of slave prices,” Stephen Deyle notes, which meant that market values and human cupidity alone could explain the actual dynamics of slaveholding in the South.

In spite of the fact that many white southerners’ wealth rested on mobile human capital, Virginians and other slave exporters forcefully denied breeding slaves for the purpose of selling them. Deyle notes that these denials were technically true in the sense that scholars have not found solid evidence of breeding farms akin to those for livestock, but he also points out that Southerners specifically disavowed the idea that they bred slaves for the exclusive purpose of being sold. Given that slaves would not fetch a high price until at least their teenage years, “it made little economic sense to invest in slaves with the sole purpose of breeding them,” and
Virginians defended themselves on the basis that no individual slave was raised exclusively for the purpose of sale. Still, “While Upper South slave owners may not have deliberately bred their slaves exclusively for sale, they certainly were aware of their economic value and did sell off more of their human property than did their Lower South counterparts.” Perhaps no individual slave was raised with the certainty of an eventual sale, but every slave added to his or her owner’s wealth through the continuous possibility of eventual sale. Even Southerners who did not intend to sell their slaves watched market prices with great interest, just as homeowners might watch the rise and fall of real estate values as an indicator of their own general wealth. Thus, although Southerners frequently gainsaid the charge of breeding their human dependents for sale, they were less able to deny that market realities gave birth to their region’s particular form of institutional slavery.

The interregional trade guaranteed great suffering for female slaves like Jacobs as the source of Southern commerce. As a testimony to the market revolution’s effect on chattel slavery, Stephen Deyle points out that in the colonial era female slaves’ reproductive capacities were seen as a nuisance, and for that reason a pregnancy might occasion a woman’s sale. But this attitude began to change in Virginia and elsewhere as early as the eighteenth century, when slaveholders came to view slaves’ reproduction as an opportunity for capital growth and was advertised as “part of her appraised value.” The outcome of these market dynamics was that the slave woman’s reproductive body became the matrix from which human life entered the market economy and became marked, not by its humanity, but by its location within a system of economic value.287

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287 Rowe also gestures towards this idea when he points to the female slave’s body “as her primary means of creating value,” although he mistakenly, in my opinion, claims that “Jacobs turns that same body into an effective weapon against slavery.” Rowe, 132.
Under these conditions slaveholders clearly had an economic incentive to rape their slaves, as Jacobs suggests when she points out that slave laws passing down slavery through the mother’s status have ensured “that licentiousness shall not interfere with avarice” (ILSG, 100). It is crucial, however, when parsing the differences separating women as commodities and women as property, to recognize that the patriarchal shelter did not necessarily shield female dependents from rape, as might be expected, but only from certain kinds of forced sex. For instance, in a particularly revealing case in Missouri, a slave named Celia faced trial for murdering her master to prevent his raping her, as he had countless times before. Celia’s defense attorneys sought to save her from execution by arguing that she had acted lawfully out of self defense. However, the court struck down this entire line of argument because “in Missouri, sexual assault on a slave woman by white males was considered trespass, not rape, and an owner could hardly be charged with trespassing on his own property.”

Slave laws varied from state to state, but these conditions seemed to be basically true across the South insofar as there seems to be “not a single case in which a white male was charged with raping a slave.” Although white women by contrast were legally protected from rape, that protection was conditional and limited. After marriage “white women had no legal recourse against unwanted advances from their husbands, [even if] they remained protected from other men.”

Despite all appearances, this was not an “essential legal difference” set between the sexual status of slaves and white women, as Melton McLaurin claims. Regardless of whether his victim was a black slave or white wife, the patriarch-master could force sex onto his belonging and rationalize that violation insofar as it

288 McLaurin, 93.
289 McLaurin, 96.
290 McLaurin, 99.
was by contained within the structure of the patriarchal shelter. In other words, white women were “protected from other men” to ensure that their reproductive capacities belonged exclusively to the male head of household and remained contained within the shelter. Thus the law opposed not rape specifically but the wrong conditions—in a sense, the wrong economy—surrounding rape.\textsuperscript{291} A similar economic logic guided the ideology that “it was culturally acceptable for a master to rape his slave, though not someone else’s.”\textsuperscript{292} In short, the cultural values surrounding women as biological laborers opposed the concept not of women being forced to labor within the household economy but of women being forced to labor perversely outside of it.

To argue for slave women’s emancipation, therefore, Jacobs faced several complicated rhetorical constraints furnished by white women’s own highly constrained “freedom” as belongings within the patriarchal shelter. If not all of Jacobs's readers could agree that slavery was a positive evil for women, however, they might unite around one shared position: that market conditions posed a fundamental threat to women’s identities. Contemporaries presumed that the culture of consumption would sap women of their very life force, although they generally viewed that market culture as a northern phenomenon only. One factory woman related this view of the enervating effect of market culture when she wrote, “the labor of the southern female slave is neither so hard, or so wearing upon the constitution as the burdens imposed upon the factory operative of the north.”\textsuperscript{293} But even more perturbing than the market’s draining effect

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\textsuperscript{291}Ibid. Italics added.
\textsuperscript{292} Fleischner, 10.
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on women outside the patriarchal shelter was the way capitalism had found a way to harness women’s personal and reproductive energies. One author lamented the cunning cruelty of these commercial innovations in factory towns, where

in many of the manufacturing villages in the south part of Massachusetts, in Rhode Island and Connecticut the English system is fast gaining ground. No men are employed but those having families—the larger the better. Those that are employed must trade at the corporation store, live in the corporation house, and patronize the corporation tavern—But little money is paid to them, and but few years elapse ere they are bound, body and soul, wife and children; at the command of the agent, forced into the mills at an early age, sold, as it were body and soul, to a corporation who will always keep them enslaved.294

Under the factory corporation’s auspices, the employee’s wife performs a reproductive labor complementing her husband’s factory service. By capitalistic ingenuity the corporation transforms the family from human beings into economic resources. Insofar as the corporation can structure the operative’s world via workplace, store, house, and tavern, it can also alchemize the most natural details of human relationships by transforming mundane social conditions into corporate gold. In this formulation, corporate greed reduces growing families to growing profits, while constantly widening its domain in the process. Interestingly, the most fearsome aspect of the industrial economy, its ability to consume people “body and soul” by transforming human life processes into money, whittles down to a basic violation as it dominates women’s capacity to reproduce—that is, of figuratively raping women as bearers of the race. By this logic, capitalism exploits laborers from a first and primal exploitation, by reaching into the womb and discovering not humanity but money. George Fitzhugh, firebrand slavery apologist, so condemned this fundamental exploitation that he equated the conditions within capitalism and outside the patriarchal shelter as a state where humans become Cannibals All!: Or, Slaves without

294Ibid., italics added.
Masters. 295

Fitzhugh’s 1857 defense of slavery rested on the notion that capitalism was so toxic for human dignity that its wheels must grind to a halt and slavery’s benevolent paternalism be restored. From his perspective, “The duty of protecting the weak involves the necessity of enslaving them.” 296 Following classical republican thought in which liberty is wrested from conditions of slavery, Fitzhugh argues that “in all countries, women and children, wards and apprentices, have been essentially slaves, controlled, not by law, but by the will of a superior.” 297 Fitzhugh remains untroubled by dependence as a mere fact of life, but virulently opposes the unfettered consumption associated with market culture. In his view capitalism takes the basic human impulse to dominate to an extreme by tearing down protective natural boundaries for the sake of profit. To communicate this idea Fitzhugh analogizes capitalistic exploitation and forced reproduction. Capital, like usury, commits the sin of unnatural generation: “as money would not breed, interest should not be allowed,” and “all other capital stood on the same grounds with money. None of it is creative, or will ‘breed.’” 298 Because “other capital or property did not ‘breed’ any more than money, ...its profits were unjust exactions levied from the laboring man.” 299 Underlying this final image, of the exploited “laboring man” from whom capital has

295 George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All!: Or, Slaves Without Masters (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857).

296 Fitzhugh, 43.

297 For Fitzhugh and other southerners who defended slavery via classical (i.e., Roman) republican thought, and viewed political liberty as derived from slave labor, see Alex Gourevitch, From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 36.

298 Fitzhugh, 40.

299 Fitzhugh, xxii.
wrung out an unnatural generation, lies the inverse and ghostly image of the patriarchal shelter—the protective space casting judgment on capital’s mastery over labor. When capital dismantles the shelter by forcing labor to “breed,” the image of the ruined shelter is haunted by the ruined woman, the person transformed from a protected and valued dependent within the sacred hearth, and into a profit-generating commodity. Fitzhugh again links profit-making to female sexuality when he, curiously, draws the following comparison: “It is clear, then, that there is no difference between profit-making in its mildest form, speculation in its opprobrious sense as the middle term, and gambling as the ultimate, except in degree. There is simply the bad gradation of which there is between the slaveholder, the driver on the slave plantation, or between the man of pleasure, the harlot, and the pimp.” 300 Fitzhugh’s analogy disturbingly reflects the aforementioned cultural and legal complacencies surrounding the “mildest forms” of domination, including the sexual domination found in his list of examples, so long as they occur within accepted conditions. Slaveholder and pimp alike exploit others, but the slaveholder exists at the “mild” end of a sliding scale that terminates where sexual exchange becomes unseemly precisely because it has been joined to profit.

“Capital is a cruel master,” Fitzhugh bellows, and Jacobs heartily agrees. 301 Her writings evidence a nuanced understanding of these arguments supporting slavery and opposing capitalism, especially as they hinge on the issue of female virtue. By arguing that these fears were not wrong, but misdirected at industrialism, Jacobs found a way to urge slave women’s

300 Fitzhugh, 72-73.

301 Fitzhugh, 32. Although readers may find it curious that the radically proslavery Fitzhugh and deeply abolitionist Jacobs employed parallel rhetoric, David Dowling uncovers a similar convergence between Fitzhugh and Harriet Wilson, who portrays capitalism as destroying domestic sympathies in Our Nig. See the second chapter of Dowling’s Capital Letters, 27-43.
freedom at a time when, categorically, free women were still ideologically closer to slaves than to free men. In arguments like Fitzhugh’s, if women were “naturally” socially dependent, and that dependence functioned as a *de facto* slavery, then slavery was “a normal and natural institution” and “a positive good, not a necessary evil”—if not for men, then for women.\(^{302}\) Arguing for social reform via equality was a bridge too far when it came to women, and Fitzhugh seized upon this point when critiquing abolitionist William Goodell, who “appears to us to carry the doctrine of human equality to a length utterly inconsistent with the power and control which ordinary Christian marriage gives to the husband over the wife.”\(^{303}\) Knowing how offensive and deeply subversive it would be to make a bid for slave women’s freedom along the lines of equality, Jacobs had to argue against female dependency within slavery while still leaving the patriarchal shelter as a concept intact—or risk entirely losing her readership. To simply expose the widespread rape of slave women might be insufficient because of the aforementioned legal and social conditions allowing for sexual assault within certain parameters of household economy. Civil War diarist Mary Chesnut gestures to the way that such sexual exploitation could be sanctioned within western social thought when she complains that the “men [who] live in one house with their wives and concubines” are like “the patriarchs of old.”\(^{304}\) Moreover, “the abolitionist press was [already] full of tales of the brutality of slaveholders, and was particularly fond of stories that involved the sexual abuse of female slaves by their masters.”\(^{305}\) These tales

\(^{302}\) George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!: Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857), xiii.

\(^{303}\) Fitzhugh, 130.


\(^{305}\) McLaurin, 69.
did not always clearly serve the cause of abolition so much as function as “pious pornography.” Reading the slave narrative in this mode might allow readers “to keep the story of slavery neatly generalized, safely individualized, or otherwise contained,” especially if sexual abuse was read as existing in isolated cases, or interpreted as being contained within the patriarchal shelter’s inviolable walls. Such sexual exploitation might be lamentable, but perhaps not sufficient reason to galvanize the reading public to overthrow an institution. Thus, Jacobs finds a brilliantly astute way to turn the proslavery argument on its head by showing exactly how “money” surely is made to breed, and in the last place Fitzhugh would acknowledge it: within the slave household’s economic heart of darkness.

I would submit that Jacobs's experiences as a woman under bondage allow for her unblinking focus on the intersection between slavery’s sexual dynamics and commercial logic. Jacobs distinguishes herself by sustaining this focus from the first, where Frederick Douglass seems to have developed objections to female dependence over time. His 1845 Narrative offers a glimpse into slavery’s commercialized sexual exploitation when it reveals how Covey and his wife used the slave Caroline as a “breeder,” but this event does not demonstrate how sexual exploitation propels the machinery of slavery forward, as similar incidents do in Jacobs. Although he also mentions that slave laws make the master’s lust “profitable as well as pleasurable,” he diminishes the market emphasis of that statement when he explains that the master’s illegitimate children usually must be sold “out of deference to the feelings of his white

307 Ernest, 223.
308 For the account of Covey and Caroline, see Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61.
wife.”

Instead of indicting the patriarchal shelter as a false image in the South, Douglass rejects its ability to claim authority over his own male identity by framing his rebellion against Covey as a revolutionary casting off of dependence: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. It was perhaps not until the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 that Douglass realized, as he would later say in “The Rights of Women,” that “many who have at last made the discovery that negroes have some rights as well as other members of the human family, have yet to be convinced that woman is entitled to any.”

William Andrews claims the convention enabled Douglass to see “clearly what later became a familiar theme in his antislavery speaking and writing: that white supremacy over blacks and male domination of women were often interwoven and dependent on similar prejudices and fears.”

As a black woman, Jacobs always regarded that ideological interweaving as painfully obvious. That is why, from her first foray into print, she attacked not female dependency within slavery but the farce of feminine “belonging” within a full-fledged southern market culture. Because that culture depends on the slave woman as commodity, Jacobs makes clear that the slave woman belongs not to a patriarchal shelter but to market desire. That is, she belongs specifically nowhere, and to no one.

309 Douglass, 17.

310 Douglass, 63.


II. Exposing “The Peculiar Circumstances of American Slavery”: Jacobs's First Publication

As late as the early 1850s Jacobs remained reluctant to reveal the degradation heaped upon slave women. But in 1853 she overcame all reservations and burst onto the pages of the New York Daily Tribune, “the most influential paper in the antebellum United States,” to take on no less a person than the former first lady, Julia G. Tyler. It is no coincidence that the inciting event for Jacobs's writing debut was a heated transatlantic debate over southern chattel slavery and English wage slavery. Although England had abolished slavery in its West Caribbean and North American territories in 1833, its publications—like American ones—teemed with “sketches of the easy life of an American slave...contrasted with the miserable life of a member of the British working class.” The highly conspicuous print war Jacobs chose to enter began with a document known as the Stafford House Address. In it the Duchess of Sutherland and over half a million British women petitioned American women of the South to join the cause of opposing slavery. Julia Tyler vollied back in the Richmond Enquirer with harmonious images of the slave household as a patriarchal shelter, standing in stark contrast to the horrific instabilities suffered by England’s working poor.

313 See Jacobs's letter to Amy Post, speculatively dated 1852, in ILSG, 224-225.

314 Elizabeth Duquette, “The Pleasures of Occasional Vitriol,” J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists 3, no. 2 (2015): 221. In addition to being incensed by international debates on slave versus wage labor, Jacobs was also goaded into writing her own story by Harriet Stowe, who profoundly insulted her in the process of declining to be her biographer. For this component of Jacobs's turn to print, see Yellin, “Incidents Abroad,” 165-166.


316 For an overview of the Stafford House Address and the transatlantic debate it sparked, see Sarah Meer, Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 166-176; and also Yellin, “Incidents Abroad,” 158-172.
Tyler chose a rhetorical tack common both in American and English publications, which teemed with “sketches of the easy life of an American slave ... contrasted with the miserable life of a member of the British working class.”\(^{317}\) To that end Tyler painted the slave plantation as a stable patriarchal institution where Southern wives as second-in-command “preside over the domestic economy of the estates and plantations of their husbands.”\(^{318}\) The plantation mistress’s sympathetic attentions “alleviate the sufferings of their dependents,” while the landless “working men, women, and children of England” rise each day “without knowing where or how they were to obtain their ‘daily bread.’”\(^{319}\) Tyler goes on to accuse English lords and ladies of making African slaves property in American colonies in the first place, but says she will desist from advising England how to look to its own dependents, lest its “landless millions” favor the more benevolent American system.\(^{320}\) The key point in Tyler’s defense lies in her descriptor, “landless.” Being tied to a place, and to a master, guarantees them protection and stability via the slave mistress’s gratuitously bestowed sympathy and the consistency of regular meals. For Tyler Southern slaves, unlike landless wage laborers, are belongings who belong, precisely because they are the master’s property and tied to his home.

Goaded by the blitheness and probable feigned ignorance of Tyler’s transatlantic comparisons, Jacobs quickly dismantled Tyler’s position. Her anonymous rebuttal in a June 1853

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\(^{317}\) Jean Fagan Yellin, “Incidents Abroad,” 166.

\(^{318}\) Julia Tyler, “Mrs. Julia G. Tyler To the Duchess of Sutherland and Others,” New York Daily Times, February 5, 1853. Tyler’s essay was the most prominent of several responses to the Stafford House address, and consequently was reprinted in several northern and southern newspapers after its original appearance in the January 28, 1853 edition of the Richmond Enquirer.

\(^{319}\) Ibid.

\(^{320}\) Ibid.
New York Daily Tribune article took aim at Tyler’s insistence that the disintegration of the slave household was “a thing...of rare occurrence among us, and then attended by peculiar circumstances.” In Tyler’s piece this claim appears in passing, but Jacobs exposes how a common rather than “rare” occurrence undermines all rhetoric depicting slaves as stable property. She recognizes that underneath Tyler’s defense lies a contrast between two economic systems: an older, putatively feudalistic model of Southern slavery, and the wasting capitalist order found in British industrialism. By demolishing this economic model for the slave household, Jacobs’s “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” shows precisely and incrementally how the terrifying threat of exchangeability shapes slaves’ lives.

“Letter from a Fugitive Slave” demonstrates unmistakably that the market realities governing slaves’ lives actually incentivized slave owners to rape their female slaves. Insofar as the market guided the slaveholders’ actions, it functioned as the slave’s true master, an entity for exerting force on slaves’ lives. For instance, Jacobs's beautiful fourteen-year-old slave girl experiences market-inflicted violence firsthand when she must choose between giving in to her master’s sexual advances or seeing her mother sold off. Although she temporarily keeps this nightmare at bay by acquiescing to the master’s demands, she cannot truly barter stability for herself. Her life under slavery essentially belongs to the market and takes on the traits of the commodity. Over the course of several years the slave girl suffers the master’s “brutal passion,” until “sorrow and suffering [had]...made its ravages on her.”321 Once the agony of years of sexual abuse destroy the girl’s looks, her status as a consumable object becomes clear. The master, having “used up” her desirability, does not hesitate to sell his twenty-one-year-old slave and the

two children she has borne him to make room for another concubine. If the slave owner’s economic exchange of one female slave for another, and the return on his sexual “investment” in the form of two children whom he can sell at a profit, are not clear enough for skeptical white readers, Jacobs extends the economic metaphors in this piece so as to be inescapable. No benevolent patriarch, Jacobs’ slaveowner is instead a careful capitalist, an investor par excellence weighing his options on an open sex market. She points out that “a slaveholder seldom takes a white mistress, for she is an expensive commodity” (italics added, LFS). The white mistress is both an expensive good and also a risky investment, for when the capitalist-owner’s “passion seeks another object, he must leave her in quiet possession of all the gewgaws she has sold herself for” (LFS). Not so with the female slave, who can be “torn from the little that is left to bind her to life, and sold by her seducer and master, caring not where, so that it puts him in possession of enough to purchase another victim” (LFS).

Jacobs astutely addresses the dilemma facing the white master as one of cost over time, of depreciation of capital, highlighting his status as a capitalist investor. The capitalist-owner understands that maintaining his position on the market requires a process of continual accumulation, and knows that with the white mistress such a process has a finite end, a moment when he must relinquish all investments in the seduction as sunk costs. This occurs partly because the white woman’s legal and social status allow her to belong to a stable place and to have belongings of her own. Those factors mitigate the extent to which she can be treated as a “commodity.” But the slave girl’s inability to belong to any location on earth enmeshes her person with the commodity, a reduction that makes her a particularly valuable investment. As Jacobs makes clear, the capitalist master can invest in her reproductive capacities while he uses her up as a consumable object, then sell her and their children to enrich himself. Yet Jacobs
points out the double-edged irony of this scenario, for when she dubs the white woman a “commodity,” too, she shows how the slave master’s cupidity makes all women potential victims of market-driven slave culture. As the market encourages his inordinate sexual desires to monstrous proportions, it also leads him to measure black and white women alike as dehumanized investments in a game of economic self-interest. Acutely aware of the entire nation’s connection to the slave trade through these links, Jacobs closes her letter by excoriating the nation itself, pointing out the social hypocrisy pervading “this free country where all nations fly for liberty, equal rights and protection under your stripes and stars.” Bitterly, she adds, “It should be stripes and scars, for they go along with Mrs. Tyler's peculiar circumstances, of which I have told you only one” (LFS). By transforming the national flag’s stripes and stars into “stripes and scars,” Jacobs makes slavery’s rapaciousness as an institution ideologically coextensive with the nation as a whole.

Through “Letter from a Fugitive Slave,” Jacobs expertly taps into public fears about market-driven control of female bodies and shows how these fears were all too real for the female slave, as Julia Tyler and southerners in general well knew. Here Jacobs demonstrates her practical knowledge of the slave trade as it underpinned social dynamics in the South. In doing so she also manifests a developed knowledge of economic theories. Specifically, Jacobs’s complex, multilayered presentation of a Southern society rotted through by capitalist greed suggests her sense that the economic base of the South’s capitalistic slave system determines its social superstructure and affects its mores. How did Jacobs, without formal education of any kind, arrive at this sophisticated grasp of the relationship between economies and their attending social values? One enticing possibility lies in the print milieu she must have been reading closely while composing this publication. When Jacobs selected the New York Daily Tribune as
publisher of her “Letter,” she joined many fellow readers, some quite expert, in answering the paper’s call to explore the era’s most pressing issue, “the great problem of the harmonious and beneficent combination of Labor, Skill and Capital,” a “problem [which] must be solved, and...Society fearfully suffers while awaiting the solution.” Among those thinkers were Joseph Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and, from 1851 to 1862, Karl Marx. For more than a decade, Marx contributed over four hundred articles, covering “a range of subjects that would be astonishing for someone else, among them the national politics in various European countries, colonialism, religion, rebellions, wars, as well as political, military, economic concerns across Europe and around the globe.” One week before Jacobs's article appeared, Marx had offered his insight into the way that illicit trade in China had undermined the paternalism justifying its social hierarchies: “Just as the Emperor was wont to be considered the father of all China, so his officers were looked upon as sustaining the paternal relation to their respective districts. But this patriarchal authority, the only moral link embracing the vast machinery of the State, has gradually been corroded by the corruption of those officers, who have made great gains by conniving at opium smuggling.” The formal similarities are striking: a paternalistic figure, trusted to care for his subordinates, undermines any justifications for that authority by engaging in illicit market transactions. His financial corruption destabilizes society generally, calling into question “the vast machinery of the State” itself.

It is possible Jacobs read Marx as she sharpened her theoretical condemnation of the U.S.’s own illicit markets. Did Marx help her to see with greater clarity how illicit trades eroded

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323 Duquette, 223.

324 Duquette, 221.
“patriarchal authority,” and how amoral markets destabilized society as they supplanted “the moral link” rationalizing traditional hierarchies? Did she recognize in Marx the ways that commodities impressed themselves on human lives in a market society? The suggestions alone are tantalizing. Even if not directly influenced by Marx, by 1853 Jacobs clearly had a tight grasp on the economic debates between slave and capitalist societies, and the ways these affected women and families. “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” prefigures in microcosm her ideas in Incidents about the way capitalistic slavery stealthily breaks down the patriarchal shelter and commodifies human life.

III. “To be free to say so”: Indicting the National Slave Economy in Incidents

Jacobs's “stripes and scars” metaphor makes the North guilty by association, but Incidents shows how Northern society not only associates with the slaveholding South, it actively participates in slavery by reproducing the social practices upholding it. As she narrates her tale of trial and escape, she also counterbalances the horrors of slavery with parallel conditions hounding her life in the North.

Jacobs stresses from the start “the incongruity between slavery and family by contrasting...the contradictory nature of the two institutions: a slave is by definition a commodity; a relative is entirely not a slave.” Donald B. Gibson’s careful attention to Jacobs’s diction shows how Jacobs crafts language to highlight the contradictions between these two opposed institutions. I add to Gibson’s point by showing how Jacobs's language also wastes no time in dismantling the patriarchal shelter, and reliving for her reader her own disillusionment to

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its reality in the South: “I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (ILSG, 28). Shelavishes detail on the irony that in her own case, her liberty-loving father is literally an accomplished builder of shelters: “my father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman” (ILSG, 28).

Together he, Jacobs's mother Delilah, her brother John, and she herself “lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment” (italics added, ILSG, 29). In opening with her birth and lineage, Jacobs ironically employs conventions of nineteenth-century autobiography, since, especially for women, “to speak of where one comes from is to imply where one belongs, which is further to imply that one belongs somewhere. And if one’s connectedness to the land helps to establish one’s identity as part of something larger, the citing of family names and family history simply reinforces this impression of connectedness.” It is precisely this connectedness—to other people, “to the land”—which sows the seeds of identity for individuals, for disclosing one’s family origins and one’s birthplace testifies to the fact that a person possesses a “location in [the world] which [is] properly his own.” For men, this is the prerequisite to “participate in the affairs of the world,” whereas for women, this is the basic condition from which to claim dignity through belonging. With women this familial connectedness adheres to their status as domestic creatures protected under the patriarchal shelter. In this case, however, Jacobs

326 Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 27.
327 Arendt, The Human Condition, 30.
328 Ibid.
ironically undercuts that sense of connectedness by enumerating her family’s constant exploitation, betrayal, and disintegration at the hands of their owners, from her maternal grandmother Molly Horniblow’s “Anglo-Saxon ancestors,” to the sale of all of her five children, despite her frantic attempts to earn money enough to keep her family together (ILSG, 31).

Under these economic realities, even the strongest of patriarchal protectors must be divested of his authority. Jacobs makes this point posthaste. She recalls the time her brother as a child had to choose between going to his father or his slave mistress when they had simultaneously summoned him, despite “being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim on his obedience.” When John chooses his mistress, his father admonishes him on the basis of patriarchal authority: ‘You are my child,’ replied our father, ‘and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.’” (ILSG, 34). That authority, however, is soon emptied of any possible meaning when Jacobs relates being unable to visit her father’s house after his death because her mistress sent her on an errand for party decorations. (ILSG, 34, 35). Knowing that the patriarchal shelter is a fiction for slaves, the teenaged Jacobs in 1829 would give up hope of marrying her free black lover—also a carpenter—because “he would have no power to protect me from my master” (ILSG, 66). For Jacobs, the home signifies stability and protection brought about by the patriarchal figure who dwells there. But under slavery Jacobs would not have a home, even if she were allowed to live in a separate building with a carpenter-husband, because he could not protect her from sexual abuse. It is a stark testament to her life as object lesson that homes haunt Jacobs's narrative from start to finish even as they elude her throughout her life.

For female slaves homes must always be Potemkin villages so long as women can be used and children can be sold to generate capital, as they were throughout the Upper South. As
Jacobs reminisces about her own observations of womanhood under slavery, her diction and imagery constantly suggest the way that slaves’ lives begin and end with market vicissitudes. On the slave plantation women are commodities designated to multiply wealth, and they are “considered of no value, unless they continually increase their master’s stock. They are put on a par with animals” (ILSG, 74). When slave women increased that “stock” by bearing children, slaveholders rejoice at gaining commodities who are as “marketable as the pigs on the plantation” (ILSG, 6). In these comparisons of women with animals Jacobs bridges animal husbandry and economics, pinpointing the female slave’s womb as the wellspring of biological life flowing out into the market. As a teenager Jacobs soon learned firsthand the cruel realities of being “stock” on that market, first in suffering abuse from her lecherous master Dr. James Norcom, and then realizing how her reproductive capabilities could be turned against her via the birth of her children—her son Joseph in 1829, and her daughter Louisa Matilda in 1833.329 While Jacobs entered into a liaison with the wealthy lawyer Samuel Tredwell Sawyer expressly to discourage Norcom’s interest in her, she soon realizes that no stratagems and no amount of devotion to her children could grant her security from the existential threat posed by her master’s lusts—both sexual and economic. Norcom gloatingly reminds her “that my children were an addition to his stock of slaves” (ILSG, 86). As Norcom was fond of telling Jacobs, the slave market turned her own biological capacities towards the profit of her owners, regardless of whether she had attempted to exercise choice in selecting the father of her children.

Jacobs can never forget that her children, Norcom’s “stock,” suffer constant instability

because of slaves’ neverending threat of sale and their attending inability to belong to any one location. When Norcom tortures Jacobs with the idea of selling her son and daughter to spite her for refusing his sexual advances, Jacobs begins a long journey of attempting to regain control of her own life from the slave market—a process that begins in 1835 when Jacobs flees the Norcom family plantation, and finally ends in 1852 with Jacobs’s sale in New York. The trajectory of Jacobs’s life, from the slave trade’s ubiquity in North Carolina to Jacobs’s sale in a free state, demonstrates that although those markets originate from Southern slave culture, they pervade the North as well. For instance, Jacobs extends the metaphor of the slave woman as money when Norcom’s daughter, Mary Matilda Messmore, and her husband attempt to recapture Jacobs into slavery in New York. After observing the Messmore’s seedy accommodations in New York, Jacobs recognizes “that they were short of funds and had need of my value,” pointedly qualifying the difference between their market epistemology and her own human worth: “as they valued me; and that was by dollars and cents” (ILSG, 208). Jacobs here acknowledges the two planes of existence slaves occupy wherever they go: their existence as persons, and their existence as exchange values or money, “a form of social existence separated from the natural existence of the commodity.”  

Jacobs repeatedly describes the owner’s desire to sell her via the expression “put me into his pocket,” a possibility which only makes sense if understood that a person’s natural existence can be quantified in money (ILSG, 209). By resorting to this expression throughout her narrative, Jacobs makes clear that slaves’ existence as exchange values is the ascendant one dominating their lives.

As stock and capital, the slave girl exists primarily in relation to the market in the South, lacking any true home or protective shelter. Where a free woman’s life manifests the qualities of

property, allowing for the “connectedness” William Andrews describes in her ability to be attached to a location, the slave woman’s life of commodification is plagued by placelessness and an inability to obtain a solid foothold in the world. It is no coincidence, therefore, that being homeless ranks among the chief crises in her narrative, from her seven years as a fugitive through her final reflection on the home she lacks even after being freed. One might say that Jacobs is haunted by homes—homes that have been, homes that might have been, and homes that may never come to pass. After emptying the southern slave home of any meaning as a patriarchal shelter, Jacobs catalogues the many unstable shelters she has passed through, in the South and the North: among them, her grandmother’s, Dr. Norcom’s, Dr. Norcom’s son’s plantation, Rev. Jeremiah Durham’s, and the Willis’s. Although each of these edifices ultimately underscores the insecurity of slaves’ lives, three in particular manifest Jacobs's fundamental homelessness as a slave. The first is the cottage Norcom begins to construct for her in 1829, “in a secluded place, four miles away from the town” (ILSG, 78). Norcom’s overlapping lust, greed, and insane desire to control Jacobs lead him to try to remove her from the community and from any obligation that community might impose on him. Although he euphemistically describes his dark plan as his desire to give Jacobs “a home of my own,” Jacobs describes it more aptly as a “living death” (ILSG, 78). Sequestered from all of her relations, subjected to concubinage, and disallowed any community at all, Jacobs in that cottage would endure the profoundest alienation from any right to belong. Symbolizing slavery’s social death, the cottage functions as the antithesis of the patriarchal shelter. 331 When, later in 1835, Jacobs must face the possibility of having her children sent to her on the Norcom family’s plantation, one of her only choices is to

331 The allusion to Patterson’s classic study is deliberate. See Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1982).
select social death in a new form—the utter placelessness of a life in hiding. The seven years Jacobs spends in her grandmother’s garret serves as an extreme example of slaves’ fundamentally homeless condition because they are always potentially commodities and not belongings.\(^{332}\) Life in the North fails to improve much on Jacobs's worldlessness, since the aforementioned example of the Messmore’s arrival in New York proves she can be hounded as a fugitive and transformed into cash even there. In Jacobs's case, the slaveholder’s insatiable desire for her prevents her from having any stable foothold in any community, South or North. In all of these incidents, male desire deprives Jacobs of belonging, in the double sense of her status as property and in her ability to possess a social life in the world.

As Jacobs makes clear in her “Letter,” slave reproduction must meet the needs of capital growth—that is, it must increase the capitalist-master’s wealth with a minimum of cost or risk. As a result the cost of raising children, while usually claimed by the slaveholder as proof of his role as protecting patriarch, falls chiefly on slave families. In her own family, this responsibility falls chiefly on her grandmother. For instance Molly Horniblow, “helping to support me from her hard earnings,” constantly provides her with food and clothing to make up for the Norcoms’ neglect (ILSG, 38). This burden, imposed on already impoverished families who possess little means of support, functions as one additional way the slave economy turns women’s reproductive abilities against them. Jacobs's life as a mother in New York continues this pattern as she uses “her earnings to educate her children” and ensure they have sufficient clothing for the hard winters, although they are still under the power of the family of their biological father, Mr. Sawyer (ILSG, 209). Neglect and indifference function as economic blackmail against black dependents’ family members. These constant drains on Jacobs's income prevent her from being

\(^{332}\) For the initial description of the garret, see ILSG 35. For time spent in the garret, see ILSG 164.
able to purchase her freedom, or to purchase a home to shelter her children. Like Norcom’s constant threats to return her to slavery, these obstacles to Jacobs's economic stability pay witness to the ways that her insecure status under slavery hounds her even in nominally free states, preventing her from erecting her own family shelter against market conditions.

Again, the heart of Jacobs's task is to alienate the naive reader from commonplace beliefs about the economy’s role in slaves’ lives. One of the key difficulties of that task is helping readers understand that slaves, as commodities, are subjected to different forms of expression than other dependents, such as women who enjoy a greater discursive range by virtue of their belonging. The reader therefore must be educated to interpret slaves’ testimonies within slavery by being taught that dependents within a household economy and commodities on an open market speak in fundamentally different ways. Here I consider the distinctions between different forms of expression available to different categories of persons via their relationship to the household economy. I do so using Arendt’s terms, imagining a spectrum of modes of expression made possible by a person’s place in the world, marked at one end by the conditions for free and individualistic speech (Arendt) and on the other, the imagined vocalizations of commodities (Marx). Stratifying modes of expression along the lines of “public and private” is appropriate because in Arendt these function as “existential categories” and “different contexts for personhood.”

On this spectrum of expression, one must distinguish between the politically enfranchised individual’s capacity for speech, the dependent belonging’s capacity for particular self-expression, and the commodity’s scripted vocalizations. In Arendt’s formulation, speech is a “performative utterance” that, when articulated before a set of political peers, has the creative

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333 Warner, 59.
power to change the world and simultaneously to disclose the speaker as an individual subject to public scrutiny.  

Speech as a performative act by its nature occurs outside the household, and consequently does not belong to dependents.

As household dependents nineteenth-century white women were politically denied speech in this technical sense because they lacked access to “the scene of world making and self-disclosure.” To explain the distinction between speech as a performative act versus everyday human communication, Arendt presents the classical distinction between dependents and citizens as a contrast between those lacking speech and those possessing it: “Aristotle... formulated the current opinion of the polis about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the polis—slaves and barbarians—was aneu logou, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.” Although “speechless” dependents’ utterances could not be given in conditions that would change the world (e.g., on the Senate floor), nonetheless they each possessed a “distinctness, which [humanity] shares with everything alive.” In this way we might think of white women’s articulations as a form of, if not speech in the Arendtian sense, “self-expression”—glimpses into their personal distinctness, but restrained nonetheless by the private, domestic character of their lives. I would argue that this restrained form of self-expression applies even to women’s

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335 Warner, 59.

336 Arendt, The Human Condition, 27.

337 Arendt, The Human Condition, 176.
published works, since in Jacobs's case she must frame her exposure of the slave household not as a rallying cry for political action, directed at male citizens, but instead as a secret whispered to a white female readership. By selecting a woman as her imagined reader, Jacobs allows her narrative to be contained symbolically within the privacy of the home. “Patriarchalism spawns secrecy,” Andrews points out, and women’s need to observe propriety with regard to sexual matters reflects women’s “existential” status as dependents and the linguistic restraints entailed to that status.\(^{338}\) Women’s silence on sexual matters was a function of their status as belongings insofar as it testified to their “submissiveness” to the patriarchal shelter’s sacred privacy and to their “purity” by patriarchal standards, to borrow from Barbara Welter’s classic terminology.\(^{339}\) But insofar as a free woman could utter the name of her own father, she could gesture towards the sexual history producing her and solidifying her belonging. Thus it is relatively unproblematic for the free white woman to repress talk of sex as it relates to her own person and that of her family, since the relationship of sign to signifier—in this case, of sexual history to a social lineage—is understood to be the same and to signify semiotic stability. Put differently, Mary Chesnut need not mention that her mother had intercourse with her father (the sign), since that is understood by her ability to state her own last name.\(^{340}\) But for slave mothers, sexual history and social lineage come unmoored. For a master to place his own children on a market, he must be divested of any paternalistic obligation and thus must control his dependents’ language regarding their own lineage. Such moves fall under the overarching signified: slavery.

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\(^{338}\) Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 255.


\(^{340}\) I am aware that discussing “the Name of the Father” raises associations with psychoanalytic theory, but I develop this concept via other theorists because of my interest in the way economic conditions might exert pressure on human expression via mores and social structures.
as originator, mode of being, social order, and legal system.

Thus the first and most fundamental expression denied to slaves, as commodities, lies in identifying a patrilineage because “fathers,” as a category, has evaporated once again into slavery. In place of a patrimony the slave’s status was legally defined as *partus sequitur ventrem*, a reference not to a patriarch but to a woman’s womb. Under slavery that originating space exists at the crossroads of human life and capitalistic commodification because of the mother’s own precarious dependence upon a capitalist owner, as Jacobs’s first publication so tragically demonstrated. Birth in these conditions did not cement a people’s places in the world but facilitated their ability to be exchanged by nullifying any claims to protection from a person, or belonging to a place. Because the commodity’s primary purpose is to be exchanged, the commodity’s value “depends on something more than the ‘physical relations between physical things.’” The commodity’s physical values must be diminished to facilitate potential exchanges. In the slave’s case, diminishing one’s physical origins requires either silence or a scripted form of expression. Marx explains the commodity’s speech as a dynamic event in which the social character of the market infuses objects with the social marker of “value,” and the object’s value “speaks” for it to consumers, eclipsing any physical qualities the object may have. To make this point, Marx notably ventriloquizes the voice of commodities: “Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other, we are nothing but exchange values.” Translated to the situation of human commodities, the

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342 Marx, *Capital*, 95.
record shows that slaves were also allowed to speak, but also as “nothing but exchange values.”

To testify to one’s patrilineage was therefore forbidden, because lineage implies not commodification but belonging. Belonging furthermore implies obligation on the part of the head of the patriarchal shelter, the slave master-father.

Jacobs offers a poignant example of this unwritten mandate through the example of Dr. Norcom and a husband-and-wife slave couple. Dr. Flint has the husband tortured, supposedly for fighting with his slave wife over their fair-skinned child’s paternity (ILSG, 38). Not long afterward, Flint sells both slaves, cursing the mother in the process because “You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!” (ILSG, 39). Jacobs remarks, “She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child” (ILSG, 39). Belonging resists exchange, a fact tacitly agreed upon by white slaveholder-capitalists. Mary Chesnut notes this cooperation when she points to the necessity for white owners to disavow blood ties with their own slaves: “every lady tells you who is the father of all of the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends to think so.”343 By maintaining a threshold of silence about slaves’ patrimonies and insisting that those slave children nearest home seem to “drop from the clouds,” southerners fortify a sui generis quality around slave children’s births. In doing so they diminish any claims their slave children may make on persons or places surrounding their dependent existence. Hiding slave children’s origins allows southerners to create the illusion that these lives are divorced from ties to a natural world and the people in it, with the consequence of strengthening the logic of slaves’ fundamental existence on a market.

As commodities who can claim neither a public persona nor a private realm, slaves are denied both creative protest of a political world-making sort, and also self-expression testifying to a certain distinctness originating from belonging to a particular place on the earth. Where male citizens can claim individuality, and women can claim personality, commodified slaves can claim only bland fungibility, where the slave trade both looms over their lives as a threat and confirms their social death in each moment by stifling personal utterances. Jacobs makes the slave’s scripted responses utterly clear when she relates the story of the skeptical northerner who tours the southern plantation. He asks the slaves “if they want to be free, and they say, ‘O, no, massa.’ This is sufficient to satisfy him...He assures people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful ‘patriarchal institution’” (ILSG, 98). The slave’s answer is determined by the necessity that he hide his status as a commodity, liable at any moment to be torn from all he loves. One of the most pernicious qualities of the capitalist slave economy, then, is to hide the ways it has gained ascendancy over human lives by controlling human expression. Jacobs points out that the southern slaveholder hides from the northern visitor’s view all traces of the market— slave rape, slave sales, and disintegrated slave families— “and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them” (ILSG, 99). If a slave openly makes a claim to belonging, that slave must be sold immediately so that those human ties of connectedness and obligation cannot be strengthened within the social world. To prioritize market imperatives and diminish patriarchal obligations, “the secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences” (ILSG, 59). The threat of being sold induces slaves to follow the script to all
outsiders. Jacobs shows how Norcom zealously insists on that script when he strikes her for answering honestly that she loves the free black man and refuses to be molded into the form of the perfect concubine (63-64). Later, Norcom quite literally writes that script for her when he suppresses the letter she had mailed to her grandmother from New York and rewrites it in an attempt to flush her out of hiding (ILSG, 147).

This suppression of language and lineage continues even in the North. Upon her arrival in Philadelphia in 1842, Jacobs openly responds to the searching inquiries of Reverend Jeremiah Durham, an African American minister and Jacobs’s first ally in the northern states. Though granting “it was painful for me to do it,” she shares the story of her two children and her life in slavery. Durham responds, “Your straightforward answers do you credit; but don’t answer everybody so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt” (ILSG, 176). Although Durham’s words sting her and make an “indelible impression” on her, they do not deter her. When Jacobs began the task of composing her own narrative over a decade later, she testified to the way she flouted Durham’s advice, knowing that only openness about the sexual exploitation endemic to slavery could change the condition of her “sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered” (ILSG, 54). When she refuses to be quiet about sexual abuse, Jacobs resists the language of commodification as one of the “customs of slavery” (ILSG, 178). By doing so Jacobs reminds the reader that any such descriptions of speech conditioned by social hierarchies and economic circumstances must be construed in terms of generalizations and not rules.

Of course, women could and did flout these bounds—as Jacobs’s narrative pointedly does by ruminating upon and then discarding Rev. Durham’s advice to avoid frankness with strangers. Jacobs’s doughty decision to tell her own story, in spite of great personal cost, brings
to mind Hannah Arendt’s own emphasis on the unforeseeability of human events. Given that unpredictability it is possible that anyone, even women and slaves, might seize an occasion for political speech if they might gain access to the public arena. Although such a speech and its effectiveness afterward might be unlikely, it is important that the public realm is characterized by the unpredictability attending human plurality.\textsuperscript{344} But when people like Jacobs risk themselves in speaking openly, they show how speech in Arendt’s terms always “risks the dangers of the radically contingent public realm, where anything can happen, where the consequences of action are ‘boundless’ and unpredictable.”\textsuperscript{345} If the public realm of speech between equals presents danger, so much more so for dependents whose lives are defined under another’s rule. These must weigh even more seriously the costs of self-disclosure in that “struggle—between the private and the public self, the risk-aversive stay-at-home and the courageous and even rash actor in the contingent public realm.” To say that self-expression pertains to women as belongings and scripted vocalizations pertain to slaves as commodities, then, is merely to recalibrate the violence exerted on their lives as dependents weighed against, first, the likelihood they might risk all in the face of almost certain retribution, and second, the avenues available to them for effective protest.

To return to those constrained conditions for self-disclosure: lacking access to these public channels drives the slave’s experience into an isolated hell of private experience. Arendt points out that “the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of

\textsuperscript{344} Honig, 140. See especially Arendt’s discussion of statisticians’ dangerous attempts to anticipate human actions in the nuclear age when, despite their fantasy of control, “events, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures; only in a world in which nothing of importance ever happens could the futurologists’ dream come true,” in Hannah Arendt, \textit{On Violence} (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1970), 6.

\textsuperscript{345} Honig, 141.
the reality of the world and ourselves,” but slaves are deprived even of this most basic dignity of having their sufferings acknowledged as real.\(^{346}\) They can relate their agonies only to each other in hushed tones, behind closed doors, and then must hear their experiences twisted by their abusers in public. As one of many examples of slaveowners who misrepresent their actions by blaming their victims, Norcom has the audacity to tell Jacobs's uncle that “she has been very ungrateful to me for all my kindness” \((ILSG, 148)\). But this sense of unreality hovers even over her manumission by her dear friend Mrs. Willis, as Jacobs struggles to express her feelings about being sold.

Jacobs's embittered reflection on her own sale makes painfully clear that it is slavery that unites the “United” States. Sadness and disillusionment overwhelm this event, presenting her freedom, surprisingly, as one more “incident” degrading the slave girl. Jacobs attempts to close the rhetorical abyss separating her self from her white readership, who anticipate joy and gratitude at her manumission but instead find her relief on these pages commingled with a sense of utter defeat. This account indicates that an essential difference separates persons who have never functioned as commodities, and those who have lived their lives subject to the marketplace. Jacobs attempts to explain this difference to her friend Mrs. Willis when she tries to dissuade Willis from buying her: “I wrote to Mrs. Bruce [i.e., Willis], thanking her, but saying that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that such a great obligation could not be easily cancelled; and that I preferred to go to my brother in California” \((ILSG, 211)\). Jacobs's message suggests once again the “scripted” language imposed on slaves as commodities, and sheds light on the breakdown of communication separating persons inhabiting different positions in the slave economy. Where Jacobs gives three reasons to Mrs. Bruce for not

\(^{346}\) Arendt, 50.
wishing to be sold, to her readers she gives only one: “the more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property” (211). Jacobs remains sensitively attuned to the ways slavery functions as a set of legal and social practices serving an economic heart of darkness. Rather than save her from economic abjection under slavery, her manumission only confirms that status. White supremacist thought, however, prevents Jacobs from being able to limit her reasons for not wanting to be sold because she knows that to declare forthrightly that she objects to being sold will only prove her to be the ungrateful black slave. Consequently, to avoid being misinterpreted as ungrateful, Jacobs adds the two additional reasons to decline Mrs. Bruce’s offer; however, these seem to dilute her message and furnish further grounds for misunderstanding. When Mrs. Bruce ignores Jacobs’s expressed wishes and purchases her, Jacobs feels affronted and even traumatized: “My brain reeled...Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion” (ILSG, 211). Literally and figuratively, Jacobs knows this sale signifies defeat alongside victory, for it allows money to flow back into the slave trade while also affirming her prior status as a commodity even in the act of releasing her from the market. Jacobs points once again to the absence of the patriarchal shelter over her life when she specifically designates women as “articles of traffic.” By singling out women, she again stresses the sexual dangers for women under a market, even at the moment of her social transformation under the law.

To avoid the similar charge of ingratitude from her reader, Jacobs constantly reiterates her awareness of Mrs. Bruce’s good intentions without assenting to the sale: “I felt grateful for the kindness that prompted this offer, but...” (ILSG, 210); “I wrote to Mrs. Bruce, thanking her,
but…” (ILSG, 211); “I well know the value of that bit of paper, but…” (ILSG, 211); “I am deeply grateful…but…” (ILSG, 211). These yes/but statements make clear Jacobs is sensible that Mrs. Bruce intended the manumission as a sign of generous devotion, and also that Mrs. Bruce, as a person never refused a place in the world by market relations, is almost incapable of understanding the difference between the life of belonging and the life of commodification. Dana Nelson makes this point as she demonstrates Jacobs's objections to the false and overdetermined sisterly sympathies between white and black women throughout Incidents. The problem with “sympathy,” Nelson notes, is that it “assumes sameness in a way that can prevent an understanding of the very real, material differences that structure human experience in a society based upon unequal distribution of power.”347 In this fraught incident of sisterly friendship, it seems as though those material differences are so profound as to be almost insurmountable. Jacobs tells her employer outright that she objects to the sale; her “benefactress,” with the best of intentions, disregards her wishes and misses the philosophical basis of Jacobs's opposition. As a result this incident exposes the narrowness of Jacobs's rhetorical path: she must expose race as an economically motivated fiction while not engaging it as an ontological condition. But, almost in the same breath, she must point out that the consequence of that culturally constructed fiction is that it sets an experiential abyss between freeborn women and former slaves. This difference is so deep that it comes to seem essential because of the wedge it drives between women’s perspectives. Nelson vocalizes the rhetorical complexity of Jacobs's situation this way: “Her observation, that ‘lives...receive their hue from circumstance’ is strikingly double-valenced. It deconstructs the essence of color—a perceptually invalid but epistemologically enforced distinction between ‘white’ and ‘black’ people—by asserting the historical basis

347 Nelson, 142, italics in original.
(‘circumstance’) of what is perceived as essence (‘hue’).” Jacobs's sale, however, viewed so differently by herself and her employer, testifies to the ways that race can be a fictionally created circumstance, yet the trauma it imposes on human life is real. The depths of that trauma, moreover, can be so profound as to be experienced as an almost ontological separation from others. When, to borrow from Nelson’s terminology, Jacobs portrays Mrs. Bruce as sympathizing without understanding, Jacobs testifies to the depths of that economic difference as it imposes itself unevenly on womanhood in the United States—preserving one form of it, relentlessly ravaging another, and obstructing even the wished-for fellow feeling between the two.  

While Jacobs restores Mrs. Bruce as a friend and reiterates her own devotion to the woman who secured her liberty, she closes Incidents with several final jabs at the slave economy’s lingering power over her own life. Misunderstood by her white friend first, Jacobs ensures her message will not be missed in the final summation. Consequently, she hammers away at several images of absences and wrenched domestic ties where belonging ought to prevail. Jacobs thus qualifies the “freedom” of being a former slave: freedom means only to be “as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north” (ILSG, 213). Given the many ways Jacobs has demonstrated slaveholders’ far reach into the North through relentless bigotry, continued economic exploitation, and the Fugitive Slave Act, that freedom, “according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, [although] it is a vast improvement in my condition” (ILSG, 213). But the slaveholder’s power leaves its imprint on Jacobs's life via the protections and care that should be her privilege as a woman, yet still elude her. These last paragraphs

348 Nelson, 141.
349 Nelson, 140.
rounding out her narrative circle back to the idea of a protective shelter. Although in slavery the patriarchal roof was a smokescreen used to hide the terrifying instabilities of black slaves’ lives, Jacobs clings to the ideal of the home as a locus of stability for her family. Additionally, Jacobs's final juxtaposition of freedom with marriage not only makes clear her rhetorical technique of wedding the slave narrative to the sentimental tradition, it also highlights the possibilities that are (un)available to her as a former slave in the North. As a sexually exploited former commodity, Jacobs stresses that marriage is not currently an option for her and, implicitly, may never be. Her sexual/economic past determines that the patriarchal shelter will not be restored over her, and thus “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own” (213). Sentimental novels frequently find peaceful resolution in the heroine’s choice of a proper husband and a shelter to abide under after a woman’s uncertain sojourn on the marriage market. Jacobs stresses that the patriarchal authority of the law has freed her from but not for: her sale and manumission free her from persecution in the North but do not render her, literally and figuratively, any less homeless and kinless than she was in the South.

Deprived of any firm hold on the world, Jacobs ends her narrative by emphasizing the fleeting things she can call her own: specifically, her “tender memories of my good old grandmother, [arising in Jacobs’s mind] like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea” (ILSG, 213). She brilliantly and appropriately chooses kinesthetic imagery to close her narrative in the image of clouds and stormy ocean, each in motion, and neither a habitable terrain for human life. However comforting the memory of her grandmother may be, however restorative to her psyche, this memory cannot grant Jacobs a foothold in the shared world of human beings. Endlessly denied stability in the social world, Jacobs turns inward to the subjective space that remains her only portion as a former slave. Although these final words try
to force a cheerful note on the text, they serve only to deepen the ambivalence running through it. They signify the loneliness of having only one’s psyche to depend upon in the absence of solid external supports. This conclusion anticipates and reiterates Arendt’s critique of the “mass society” produced when biological life joins with public life in a world governed by economic concerns. In Arendt’s view modern mass society, in destroying the public and private realms, has caused “the mass phenomenon of loneliness” because people in this disorienting modern space can no longer find refuge in a shared world, as before:

The reason for this extremity [i.e., of loneliness on an enormous scale] is that mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life.  

Long suffering at the crossroads between family life and human commodification, Jacobs demonstrates how capitalistic slavery produces the keenest loneliness by perpetually destroying the home for its victims.

IV. Aping the Customs of Slavery: America vs. England

If these comparisons to the sentimental novel shed light on how dark and, perhaps, abject Jacobs's situation remains at the end of her narrative, they do so in service of her larger point: the horrors of a life degraded into dollar signs. Jacobs sees everywhere in the U.S. effects of commodification within a culture happy to declare its own righteousness, and even happier not to examine its own wrongs. Sadly, she is not long in the North before she realizes that, though slavery is outlawed regionally as a labor practice, economic conditions still make it a social practice by allotting persons of color, and women, strictly circumscribed rights. Northern segregation offers one prominent example of the way slavery’s household logic infiltrates

\[^{350}\] Arendt, 59.
northern society, resting as it does on a belief in blacks’ inherent inferiority. Jacobs describes her bitter disappointment upon learning that northerners subscribed to this tenet of racial slavery, as reflected in the fact that blacks could not ride in the same railroad cars as whites: “It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery” (ILSG, 178). Jacobs’s selection of the word “aped” functions as *le mot juste* insofar as it turns a white supremacist term against itself by implying that Northern white society has unthinkingly and automatically imitated the South. By making the North a land of mimics who lack intellectual independence, Jacobs slices through the white supremacist logic used to justify racial slavery.

However, that logic is so pervasive that even black northerners fail to recognize racism as a form of dependence to be resisted. When Jacobs refuses to stand behind little Imogen Willis on the steamboat passage from New York to Rockaway, she earns the ire of other black servants on board. In response her employer, Mr. Willis, protects her dignity by ordering meals to be delivered in their rooms. The white waitstaff sent to the Bruce’s cabin resent having “to wait on negroes,” and other black servants on the boat “were dissatisfied because all were not treated alike” (ILSG, 189) Jacobs fired back, insisting “that the colored servants ought to be dissatisfied with *themselves*, for not having too much self-respect” to protest being treated as inferiors, though they are required to pay the same fare as white servants (Jacobs, *Incidents* 190). The economy, here as throughout her narrative, is the conduit of their blindness. Where it should unravel the fiction of racial difference, evidenced in the fact “that there was no difference in the price of board,” it instead reinforces the mores of capitalistic slavery.

Jacobs represents England as the ultimate and ironic contrast as a place of superior freedom, despite the United States’ declaration of “independence” from the mother country. As a national economy no longer reliant on slave labor, England’s mores also do not necessitate black
persons’ racial persecution. Thus while Jacobs in America is perpetually denied the rest of a stable home, it is in an English hotel of all places that she can “lay my head on my pillow, for the first time...[in] the delightful consciousness of pure, unadulterated freedom” (ILSG, 195). The fragile and passing rest to be found in a hotel stay makes it no less profound an experience for Jacobs. She reinforces that same sense of affirmed human dignity found in a context of economic transitoriness when she explores the “little thatched cottages” of English wage laborers, examined at the beginning of this chapter. The example of their intact families serves as a cornerstone to Jacobs’s critique of slavery. Americans feared that the patriarchal shelter, dually a social arrangement and economic unit, would be destroyed in the process of economic transformation. But English wage-earners prove that families can survive in the midst of utter economic instability, if only society will let them.

V. Closing the Domestic Economy’s Circle: Jacobs and American Factory Women

Harriet Jacobs read wage-slavery debates and used the controversy to shed light on slavery’s darkest secret: market conditions hadn’t reduced wage-earning women to being whores, but they had reduced women’s slave labor precisely to the capitalistic concubinage Americans so feared as the epitome of female degradation. In both “Letter from a Fugitive Slave” and Incidents, Jacobs confronts discussions of the female wage earner’s supposed sexual vulnerabilities, striking those fears down with respect to female wage earners and applying them instead to female slaves. In doing so, she treats the female laborer as the paradigmatic counterpoint to labor debates, entirely upending defenses of slave labor. So, given the centrality of the female wage-earner to Jacobs's rhetoric, why does Jacobs fix her gaze on wage earners across the Atlantic instead of closer to home? Why does she set aside the controversial women of the New England factory systems? A few possible reasons suggest themselves.
The first and most practical is that Jacobs had firsthand observation of English wage laborers but not of the American-born variety.\textsuperscript{351} Although Jacobs had traveled to several New England cities, most factories of the era were built in rural areas, places where rivers and waterfalls could power machinery and where capitalists might gain land cheaply. Lowell’s population had exploded by the 1850s, making it the second largest city in Massachusetts, but it still was a factory-centric town.\textsuperscript{352} As a domestic servant Jacobs would have had little cause to go there.

A second and equally practical reason was that the factory population was a problematic and complicated one, and thus would not have allowed Jacobs so effectively to make her point about wage labor and the patriarchal shelter. The much-discussed Lowell factory women could not be referenced without either raising the issue of female exposure outside the patriarchal shelter, or translating capitalist control into paternalistic terms. Jacobs may well have wanted to avoid each of these possibilities. Moreover, by the 1850s factory women were being replaced in large numbers by another problematic figure: the immigrant family. Lowell still retained a large portion of its native female labor force during Jacobs's first years in the North, but by the time \textit{Incidents} was published in 1861, these differences had all but disappeared. As industrialism became an accepted American institution and laboring conditions worsened from the 1830s onward, Lowell increasingly hired immigrant Irish laborers, “employing adults and children

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{351} Jacobs’s premier biographer, Jean Fagan Yellin, makes no reference to Lowell or any other American factory town in \textit{Harriet Jacobs: A Life}.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{352} For the mills’ waterpower, see Hardy Green, \textit{The Company Town: The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills That Shaped the American Economy} (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 9. For Lowell’s exploding population, see Hardy Green, 16.}
Indeed, in the U.S.’s case the issue of female wage labor outside the patriarchal shelter had distracted from industrialism’s most exploitative conditions in the family-employed Rhode Island factory system. As industrialism’s first foothold in the U.S., Rhode Island had favored using families all along during the Lowell system’s public relations experiment with a female labor force. Yet intellectuals raising alarms about factory labor as wage slavery “concentrat[ed] their fire on Waltham/Lowell rather than Rhode Island’s laissez-fare system, which offered little care for its workers.” Meanwhile, even the Lowell system became increasingly apathetic as employers “abandoned requirements that workers live in company-owned housing and attend church.” Fixating on the English wage laborer, agreed upon in the U.S. as epitome of abjection, and then presenting her as safe under her father’s roof, in the comfort of her family, cast judgment back on the U.S. economy without forcing Jacobs to become embroiled in local laborers’ grievances against industrial capitalists. Jacobs may have avoided articulating the grievances of New England laborers because they diluted the antislavery cause, just as William Lloyd Garrison avoided workingmen’s causes “because they too spoke the language of abolition.”

Finally, northern textile mills formed the topmost point of the trade linking the sale of slaves in the Old South to cotton production in the Southwest. As such, laborers hardly formed an abstract rhetorical counterpoint to conditions in the slave economy since their labors helped grease the wheels of the slave trade. Holding up England, the slaveless mother country, as a

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353 Hardy Green, 21.
354 Hardy Green, 19.
355 Hardy Green, 21.
356 Gourevitch, 42.
space of unalloyed freedom cast a damning critique on U.S. society. In these contrasts between two societies and two distinct labor economies, Jacobs joined with a host of African American visitors to the British isles who testified to their profound relief at England’s “absence of racism” and the “immeasurable superiority” of labor conditions even for the poorest wage-earners.\(^ {357} \) Jacobs's readers surely must have felt the force of this comparison. Jacobs hierarchizes forms of liberty, placing the lower forms of law and protection of rights as the most fundamental. English wage laborers, “safe, in their little thatched cottages,” enjoy this form of liberty, while also enjoying other forms not found in the U.S. In Jacobs's view the highest form of liberty is one in which economic conditions do not fetter natural human sympathies, but instead where social freedom allows people to express their natural concern for each other—a freedom which ought to be granted by a nation’s most powerful members even to its “poorest poor.”

\(^ {357} \) See Yellin’s *Harriet Jacobs*, 138.
Conclusion to Part One

LONGING FOR HOME: THE PATRIARCHAL SHELTER’S RHETORICAL CONSEQUENCES

Daniel Rodgers has said, “Industrialization is essentially a story of values, not inventions.” Examining female wage laborers in relation to the patriarchal shelter demonstrates this point, many times over.

The values thrown into question when industrial labor joined female character and money inspired anxiety-filled debates from the northern to southern United States, and beyond the Atlantic. These myriad discourses reaffirm a sense of culture as a dynamic “product of human minds,” where artists and orators alike use representation as a medium to test reigning ideological assumptions, with the aim of either winning others’ assent to those assumptions or offering a critique of them. Female wage earners represented a particularly urgent need to revisit cultural values, since as women they called into question male authority, and as wage earners they reminded onlookers of the shifting and uncertain grounds of male freedom. Yet those discourses making female wage earners into whores sought to reinforce the dividing line between public and private precisely at a moment when women’s industrial labor conditions, increased access to publication opportunities, and market-derived livelihoods combined to

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obscure it. Because the ideological efforts of restoring the female wage earner to the patriarchal shelter were anachronistic efforts in a changing world, almost all of the authors of the previous chapters fought a losing battle to some degree. Melville cannot criticize the female laborer’s condition without simultaneously rendering male freedom insipid; Farley, when she rejects corporate control as an innovation on patriarchal protection, can only see women as lost and abandoned; Jacobs indicts market control of female slave labor as the source of black women’s relentless alienation from the world around them. But in painting the market as a usurper, did these authors also call into question whether the original male authority in the preindustrial shelter was legitimate? The nostalgic aura surrounding the patriarchal shelter, the lament at its core for a simpler world irretrievably lost, seems to have rendered such critiques almost unspeakable. In Melville women are denied the psychological depth that would be required to question women’s tacit role as helpless creatures in need of male protection. In Farley and Jacobs, women are granted that depth but, as they trace the ideological lines they will not go beyond, they suggest that questioning all-male authority would be self-destructive. To question the shelter while still in it would be to self-destructively pull the roof down around their ears.

Nonetheless, when female laborers entered the fray of contemporary cultural discourse about their bodies, they contributed uniquely to antebellum representations of the female body. These women’s representations were and still are “efficacious as deconstructive tools, displaying misalignments and prompting the search for solutions.”\textsuperscript{360} As the ideology interpreting women outside the home as victims and whores restricted the terms on which their identities could be understood, it also fell short of women’s lived experiences during this period. Consequently, examining the female laborer’s relationship to the patriarchal shelter exposes both

\textsuperscript{360} Spolsky, 93-94.
the failures of that shelter to contain her activities, and the female laborer’s own culturally
shaped embodiment as imposing a limit to going beyond the concept of shelter. Harriet Farley
and Harriet Jacobs each demonstrate this dilemma by their ambivalence towards the shelter as a
limiting condition for female activity.

Because of those publicly imposed limitations, Farley teases out the problems of the
shelter for female wage-earning to tortured extremes, but she does not go so far as to reject it.
She meditates on how feminine sympathy might be expressed in earning and spending outside
the home in “Pay-Day”; dwells on women’s capacity for voting rights with a tentative “if” in
“Women”; and muses on the costs for women when women’s domestic ties are stretched to the
breaking point in the factory town in “Two Suicides.” If the shelter begins to crumble in these
portrayals, Farley, no mason, can only trace the cracks in the walls. Unlike opportunistic
capitalists, she cannot furnish out of old materials a comfortable new abode.

Jacobs betrays a similar reluctance to destroy the shelter even after showing its utter
absence for female slaves. While she does not furnish a coherent ideological attack on the shelter
as she does on slavery in the shelter’s absence, she does include subversive moments in which
she allows problems within patriarchy to speak for themselves. Jacobs obliquely critiques
nineteenth century marriage as it disempowers women under their morally inferior husbands.
She poignantly relates the story of the kind young Southern woman whose slaves, out of
devotion and trust, refuse her offer to manumit them before her impending marriage. In
fulfillment of the woman’s warnings about her own powerlessness after matrimony, the new
husband’s lust tears apart the black and white families under his roof, and his helpless wife
passes away, “glad to close her eyes on a life which had been made so wretched by the man she
loved. Both the kind Southern woman and the example set by Mrs. Norcom suggest that women’s powerlessness under amoral husbands is unhealthy for nominally free dependents, and not just for enslaved people. However, Jacobs’ powerful attachment to the concept of certain traditional homes, including her father’s home and the home she wistfully imagines she might have shared with her free black lover, suggests that she does not weave her criticism of the patriarchal shelter into a theoretical attack in the same way that she does for her ubiquitous critiques of slavery’s hidden economies.

For Jacobs to stop short rhetorically of claiming her father’s revolutionary principles for herself, and for her to amend her original ending praising John Brown in favor of domestic reflections on her grandmother, is only to add one example to the countless ways women were handcuffed by ideology and imprisoned in the court of public opinion. Nonetheless it was an act of bold resistance for Jacobs to shine a light on the darkest corners of the capitalist economy in the South and North alike. I think it is in this light that we can best measure the weight of Jacobs’ feminism, playing her use of restrictive sentimental narrative conventions against her explosive disclosure of sexual abuse.

If Jacobs assents to the patriarchal shelter insofar as she finds it a useful symbol to highlight slaves’ homelessness and kinlessness as victims of capitalistic slavery, there is a power in this rhetorical position, too. The power lies in her ability to argue her humanity to a skeptical and disapproving audience, understanding the nuances of their perspectives and tracing the lines


of an invisible but understood and unilaterally accepted ideology. She uses the patriarchal shelter to anticipate every objection and shut it down.

Her entrance into political activism differs, then, from that of women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton who rallied for suffrage. Without trivializing the enormous differences between chattel slavery and free (but disenfranchised) female wage labor, I would submit that Jacobs’s transformation into an author more closely mirrors Farley’s and other factory women whose activities were highly scrutinized, frequently misunderstood, and hotly debated. When these women added their voices to the existing print polyphony, they made the most logical move to salvage their dignity from public opinion, since their labors—vital processes channeled into a market—had in an important sense been matters of national interest all along.
PART II

SKILLFUL WEAVINGS: FACTORY WOMEN, WAGE-EARNING, AND THE LABORING

LITERARY TRADITION
Introduction to Part Two

WHAT AILS WORKING-CLASS STUDIES: THEORETICAL OBSTACLES TO A LABORING LITERARY TRADITION

“Perses, do store this up in your spirit, lest gloating Strife keep your spirit away from work, while you gawk at quarrels and listen to the assembly...For already we had divided up our allotment, but you snatched up much more besides and went carrying it off, greatly honoring the kings, those gift-eaters, who want to pass this judgment—fools, they do not know how much more the half is than the whole, nor how great the boon is in mallow and asphodel!”

—Hesiod, Works and Days

This man aspires to the sack of Rome itself, all its poor hearths and homes, just so he might imbib from cups inlaid with gems and sleep beneath the coverings of an emperor.

That man stockpiles a fortune while he broods on buried treasure.

That man looks on with open mouth at speakers in the forum, while that one is struck dumb by the applause that punctuates the talk of senators...

[But] a countryman cleaves earth with his crooked plough. Such is the labour of his life. So he sustains his native land and those who follow in his footsteps”

—Virgil, Georgics

“The laboring classes, who are in fact the wealth of a nation, are trampled upon; while those whom dame Fortune has placed above, or if you please, below labor, with some few honorable exceptions, arrogate to themselves all of the claims to good society.”

—“Prejudice Against Labor,” The Lowell Offering

We see things more as they really are, and not through the false medium which misleads the aristocracy.

—“Gold Watches,” The Lowell Offering

Some industrial women rejected the patriarchal shelter as the defining condition for laborers’ feminine virtue by abandoning its nostalgic view of household labor and embracing in its place the factory’s alternative, wage-earning. For the modern reader it may seem obvious that women would forthrightly celebrate wage labor in print, since, as Harriet Farley noted in the
Operatives’ Reply to the Honorable Jeremiah Clemens, women previously worked for low pay and also “took it in butter. That is, oftentimes their wages were paid in anything but money.”

Women’s access to money clearly improved on their own condition, but it was not so clear how they might convince their readers that wage-labor and women’s dignity ought to coexist in public opinion. Wage pay, after all, was the antithesis of freedom for many New Englanders. These were, to revisit Orestes Brownson, “a cunning device of the devil,” ill-gotten gains symbolizing not increased opportunity but social strife. For women to celebrate wage pay in their fictions, then, might imply that industrialism had found a way to render the laborer complicit in her own degradation under new social stratifications.

This chapter turns to women who such bypassed common objections to wage by incorporating the tropes and attitudes of a literary tradition centered on labor’s value. This literary tradition, which I term here laboring literature, includes the formal georigc but also embraces its literary kin celebrating dignified toil. It is preoccupied with labor as the most fundamental human activity. Positing labor this way counters aristocratic scorn for labor, seen as degrading because practitioners cannot rise above mere species life to expressing their full humanity. In the literature countering that aristocratic prejudice, a set of distinct beliefs, tropes, and values emerge based on the presumption that labor is a dignified and inherently human activity. From the laboring point of view, aristocrats hide from this basic fact when they take others’ labor for granted. The western tradition’s earliest works evince this tension between a labor-based worldview and aristocratic scorn for labor. In Hesiod’s Works and Days (c. 700 BCE) aristocrats are “gift-eaters” out of touch with reality and ignorant of the blessings of the


364 Brownson, 309.
honest life of toil.\textsuperscript{365} Labor-based literary values find their most full-throated expression in Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} (c. 29 BCE). When Virgil’s virtuous husbandman “cleaves earth with his crooked plough,” his economic activity moves beyond his household and “sustains his native land.”\textsuperscript{366} The farmer functions as the social antidote to the politically ambitious man seduced “by the applause that punctuates the talk of senators” and the aristocratic man who “aspires to the sack of Rome itself.”\textsuperscript{367}

In laboring literature the chief tension arises from the simple fact that the laborer creates wealth and, quite often, the aristocrat benefits from, appropriates, and sometimes steals the wealth while trivializing the labor. Moreover, aristocrats add insult to injury by devaluing or forgetting the laborer’s essential contributions to society. In \textit{The Country and the City}, Raymond Williams devotes his landmark work of literary scholarship to the way that this tension, present in Hesiod, Virgil, and many premodern poets, has been dropped from the modern literary record for the sake of idealizing country life in the pastoral mode: “The achievement, if it can be called that, of the Renaissance adaptation of just these classical modes is that, step by step, these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world.”\textsuperscript{368} In Williams’s study of the British literary tradition, these class-based “living tensions” emerge throughout between laborers and


\textsuperscript{367} Virgil, 2.514, 2.509, 2.505.

\textsuperscript{368} Williams, \textit{The Country and the City}, 18.
aristocrats, or between those who toil to make the idyllic landscape possible and those who nullify the human toil enabling the pastoral view.

The chief theoretical intervention of this section then is to show how, in many factory women’s fictions, these “living tensions” endure in an unending contest between the laborer’s contributions to society and the aristocratic tendency to belittle them, even as the conflict transitions from an agricultural to an industrial context, and from men to women as the lifeblood of civilization. For instance, in the Lowell Offering’s aptly titled short story “Prejudice Against Labor,” Martha Croly’s affluent relatives debate the social risks of inviting her, a factory operative, to a party with their social peers. Martha’s cousin Emily sighs, “I do wish there was not such a prejudice against those who labor for a living, and especially against those who work in a factory.”³⁶⁹ Martha’s uncle, Mr. K., condemns this prejudice as vile snobbery: “The laboring classes, who are in fact the wealth of a nation, are trampled upon; while those whom dame Fortune has placed above, or if you please, below labor, with some few honorable exceptions, arrogate to themselves all of the claims to good society.”³⁷⁰ The continuity between Rome’s husbandman and New England’s operative is almost seamless: virtuous laborers sustain the nation via their economic contributions, yet the privileged reveal their own injustice by valuing wealth itself, while spurning the laborer as the source of wealth. I argue that in this literary tradition, from the classical era to the antebellum American factory operatives, society’s value for the laborer, the cornerstone of human civilization, functions implicitly as barometer of the just society. From the perspective of this literature, laborers subject to the harsh necessity of toil are able to “see things more as they really are, and not through the false medium which misleads

³⁶⁹ “Prejudice Against Labor,” The Lowell Offering, no. 1.5 (July 15, 1841): 137.

³⁷⁰ “Prejudice Against Labor,” 138.
the aristocracy.” That awareness functions as both a philosophical counter and a social admonition to western culture’s deep-rooted aristocratic prejudice against labor.  

Readers may object that the conflict sketched here between laborers and aristocrats, preserved in the laboring literary tradition from the classical era to the modern one, cannot possibly apply to nineteenth-century American works. One might protest that, whereas Raymond Williams can trace longstanding class-based conflicts between laborers and aristocrats in the British literary record because of the region’s longstanding class stratifications, the United States disposed with British snobbery about labor through its ample supply of land and its idealization of the hardworking agrarian necessary to develop that land. Consider, for instance, Jefferson’s well known proclamation in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God.”  

This appears to be a celebration of labor if ever there was one. However, it is important to remember that Jefferson lionizes agricultural labor because of its political connotations. The farmer harvests personal virtue from the soil not because labor as an activity is so wonderful, but because land ownership makes him master of himself and an independent participant in his nation. Jefferson’s yeoman does not suffer the “corruption of morals” characteristic of those who must toil in market conditions and remain subservient to customers for their livelihood. Labor remains repugnant to Jefferson if it is renders the laborer dependent and therefore compromises his political capacities: “While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff.” In


372 Jefferson, 170.

373 Ibid.

374 Jefferson, 171.
contrast to Jefferson’s mistrust of market-based livelihoods in Chapter XIX’s treatment of U.S. “manufactures, commerce, interior, and exterior trade,” factory women like the author of “Prejudice Against Labor” celebrate all who “labor for a living,” and particularly those whose market-immersed trades produce the “wealth of a nation.” Meanwhile, they decry as “aristocratic” the cultural scorn for labors like industrial wage-earning, a livelihood that cannot clearly bolster the operative’s political independence. When these authors do so, they continue an ancient literary tradition dating back to Hesiod and Virgil which defends labor categorically, irrespective of whether it produces political freedom, because labor’s economic relationship to society can be celebrated as nation-sustaining and vital. Unlike the Jeffersonian celebration of independence-producing agrarian labor, these authors celebrating labor do so via a literary mode wary of political life in general.

If iconic studies on the agrarian ideal in American literature, such as Henry Nash Smith’s *The Virgin Land* (1950) and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) have neglected the difference between literary works celebrating the romantic individual and his political correlate, the independent yeoman, versus those celebrating labor as an activity, this difficulty stems in part from their presumptions that pastoralism, romanticism, and agrarianism reign supreme in the American symbolic. Leo Marx, for instance, bases his study of the American pastoral tradition largely by tracing that tradition’s roots from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, in which the property-owning Tityrus invites the exiled Meliboeus to stay as his guest on his idyllic land and be spared momentarily from the chaos of both political turmoil and natural disaster. Marx references the *Eclogues* only, with their retreat from and opposition to politics, commerce and history. Virgil’s *Georgics*, with emphasis on hard, continual, world-sustaining toil which moves commerce,

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sustains the nation, and shapes history, are nowhere to be found in *The Machine in the Garden*. Thus, when Leo Marx traces “anti-pastoral forces” (i.e., history, industrialization, commerce, and technology) as providing “the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design,” these forces can only function as nemesis to the pastoral ideal.\(^{376}\) In Marx’s selective survey of American literature they cannot ever be interpreted as positive because of the pastoral design’s conceit, and Marx’s chosen interpretive lens. In a similar vein, Henry Nash Smith diagnoses early American authors’ obsession with romance and adventure as obstructing accurate depictions of American agrarianism, yet, as Timothy Sweet has noted, Smith did not question that agrarianism (with its implications for political freedom) was a reigning American ideal “embodied in the actual experience of the agricultural West.”\(^{377}\) Because of their aesthetic and political presumptions, neither of these important American scholars was attuned to different literary presentations of putatively “dependent” labor.

Raymond Williams’s own scholarship is similarly unaware of how to categorize authors who criticize aristocrats’ independence-inflected celebrations of the land. While Williams astutely identified the pastoral as an artificial construct aimed at eliding class tensions between aristocratic and laboring perspectives, Williams did not identify the laboring perspective with its own literary tradition. Part of Williams’s difficulty seems to have been that he, like Marx and Smith, understood pastoral and agrarian ideals well but was less familiar with the georgic as a mode. For Williams the georgic was a subcategory of the pastoral, but contemporary scholars


have come to recognize in the georgic a “paradigm shift” from the pastoral in its portrayal of economic conditions. The georgic does not merely contrast country and city, like the pastoral, but instead presents the city as intimately bound up with the country “as the destination of rural production.”378 As Timothy Sweet has recently argued in *American Georgics*, the georgic’s emphasis on labor lays bare humanity’s economic relationship to the world and necessitates a realistic depiction of “our cultural engagement with the whole environment.”379 Part Two joins with and builds upon scholarship like Sweet’s and Karen O’Brien’s as it explores the boundaries of the georgic and its literary kin as a distinct mode treating labor. This section makes the case for continuity in classical and modern literary depictions of labor, even as the “whole environment” changes from farm to factory. Factory women lived this change of environment within their own lifespans, and thus were able to carry over presumptions about the dignity of agricultural labor to their understanding of wage labor in an industrial society.

To do justice to factory women’s positive depictions of labor, Part Two makes several critical interventions. These are intended both to re-contextualize interpretations of factory women’s writings within a longer literary tradition, and to interrogate the traditional theoretical frameworks imposed upon depictions of factory labor. This introduction seeks to understand literary depictions of labor with greater nuance, using Arendt’s terminology. I flesh out “labor” as a specific activity for the sake of arguing that politically based perspectives of labor tend to

378 See Karen O’Brien, “‘Imperial Georgic, 1660-1789,’” in *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*, ed. Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph P. Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160. Timothy Sweet, on the other hand, sees Williams’s critique of the pastoral as emanating from “an implicit appeal to its classical differentiation from the georgic” (Sweet, 6). However, Sweet has little evidence for Williams’s “implicit” appeal to the georgic, and even less for his claim that Leo Marx also implicitly identifies the georgic in the pastoral’s countervailing forces. See Sweet, 3.

379 Sweet, 5.
misinterpret this literary tradition because they presume that labor which does not correlate to political life is itself a symptom of degradation. This politically concerned presumption of the laborer’s exploitation, while well intentioned in the modern era, replicates the ancient scorn for labor based in hierarchical presumptions about the laborer’s pathetic position. This view is often at odds with laborers’ perspectives. For laborers toil may become subject to human exploitation, but as an activity it emanates from nature and as such is a fundamental and universal human condition. “Aristocrats” unmindful of this simple fact become pompous and dangerous fools. In arguing for this distinct perspective on both theoretical and aesthetic terms, I add to Janet Zandy’s scholarship on the importance of recovering working-class perspectives. “By looking into the historical pipeline of working-class literature we see an often obscured national narrative from the ground, even underground, up and though workers’ eyes,” Zandy argues of this alternate perspective. 380 “Given the severe class divisions of this country, reclaiming and expanding this cultural legacy is crucial to a democratic culture,” she continues. “It is an ongoing process of not only witnessing the making of the working class, but also the unmaking and masking of it. Our collective work involves the unmasking of this hidden legacy and presence.” In short, to recover the laborer’s perspective is also to understand how laboring values disrupt, and also are disrupted by, cultural master narratives.

To be clear, in tracing the continuity between works emerging from vastly different eras, cultures, and laboring conditions, I do not mean to argue that factory women studied these classical traditions and deliberately incorporated them into their work. In some cases they may very well have done so, but they need not have been conscious of classical works treating labor to write as part of that tradition. It should be noted, however, that scholarship indicates New

England factory women were a highly literate bunch. In Thomas Dublin’s survey of 557 cases of female piece workers employed across the spinning, weaving, and warp winding departments in Lowell’s Hamilton Company in 1850, 429 women (77 percent) were tallied as literate.\(^{381}\) Moreover, the small group of laborer-authors within the larger factory workforce suggests that these women were well read, insofar as factory women frequently discuss major poets and authors in their writings: Josephine L. Baker references Felicia Hemans’s “The Switzer’s Wife” in “Woman’s Proper Sphere,” while Harriet Farley’s narrator in “The Sea of Genius” dreams of joining the company of literary greats ranging from Homer and Virgil, to Shakespeare and Milton, and Cooper and Sedgwick, and beyond.\(^{382}\) Lucy Larcom, the Lowell mills’ most famous author, explicitly mentions Virgil and seems self-consciously to incorporate georgic tropes into her great poetic commemoration of factory labor, *An Idyl of Work* (1875).\(^{383}\) But it is improbable that every factory woman presented here as an author of laboring literature was intimately acquainted with Virgil or the formal qualities of the georgic, and I make no such claim. I do argue, however, that when authors set labor as the central, dignified activity of their literature, this literary decision entails certain philosophical and aesthetic considerations which reappear with remarkable continuity across historical periods and cultures, because the values and assumptions viewing labor as a degrading activity likewise appear with remarkable continuity across eras and cultures.

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I. Political Strife and the Theoretical Obstacles to a Laboring Aesthetic

This section intervenes theoretically into the interpretive frameworks imposed upon positive literary depictions of labor in part by arguing that common methodologies used to interpret labor are inadequate. I show why political, and especially Marxist, readings of laboring literature, miss several key points made by authors dignifying labor as an activity because of their focus on power relationships. Before proceeding to the literature itself, therefore, it is necessary to first take an extensive account of the terms and presumptions surrounding labor as an activity.

I use the term labor in Arendt’s precise definition, as I have from the beginning of this project: “labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor.” Labor produces consumable objects, if it produces anything at all, and defined in this way it is an activity which leaves behind no trace or testament to the laborer’s existence. In terms of its ephemerality, labor is distinguished from work, which produces durable artifacts and erects an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings, within which each individual life is housed. For most of human history, Virgil’s farmer would count as a laborer, while the woman producing fabric and clothing would have counted as a “worker,” since the aim of her activity was to produce goods not meant to be used up. However, the industrial era transformed work into labor by

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385 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55, for a discussion of how labor condemned persons like slaves to a life of obscurity which would leave behind no record of their existence at all.

speeding up the pace of production and causing durable goods to enter consumption cycles, so to speak: “industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today’s objects.” In the textile industry, for example, it “kills off” yesterday’s clothes through fashion cycles encouraging owners to discard garments before they have actually been worn out. Additionally, industrialism transformed work into Marx’s “alienated labor” via the division of labor by separating textile workers from control over and claims to their final products. The New England operative became a laborer by contributing to commerce within a market society dependent upon economic exchange, just as the Roman farmer sustained a civilization by distributing the fruits of his own labor to the empire’s far-flung corners.

The most fundamental aspect of labor, from a social standpoint, is that it has existed in a binary relationship with political freedom from time immemorial, and has always suffered as the lower, degraded term in that association. “Contempt for laboring,” Arendt notes, “originally [arose] out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and a no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance.” Setting political freedom as the widest expression of a human being’s humanity—that is, defining man as a “political animal”—necessitated setting labor below the threshold of humanity in its fullness. Those who performed labor were sullied by it, associated through their activities with “the slave’s degradation” as a person “dominated by the necessities of life.” This domination amounted to “a blow of fate worse than death, because it carried with

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387 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52. Revisit also Arendt, 69, for capitalism’s “transformation of immobile into mobile property” so that property items erode into objects of consumption.


it a metamorphosis of man into something akin to a tame animal." To understand this perspective in all its nuance we must recognize that “the opinion that labor and work were despised in antiquity because only slaves were engaged in them is a prejudice of modern historians. The ancients reasoned the other way around and felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life.” Laboring as an activity was slavish because in the end, the body and its needs are tyrannical.

Ancient people denied labora special dignity because as activities they did not testify to any sort of uniquely human capacity. This especially applied to coordinated activities as opposed to individualistic ones. For the Greeks the social component of human nature had more in common with animals rather than distinguishing human beings as a distinct sort of creature:

It is not that Plato or Aristotle was ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the fact that man cannot live outside the company of men, but they did not count this condition among the specifically human characteristics; on the contrary, it was something human life had in common with animal life, and for this reason alone it could not be fundamentally human. The natural, merely social companionship of the human species was considered to be a limitation imposed upon us by the needs of biological life, which are the same for the human animal as for other forms of animal life.

Thus, from the political perspective of humankind, the specter of animality haunts labor as an activity, and labor becomes the spurned paradigm underlying coordinated activities between human beings as manifestations of a mere species life.

In this sense coordinated labors and, by extension, all forms of cooperation below the level of reasoned speech remain problematic from the perspective of political freedom and

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390 Ibid.
391 Arendt, Human Condition, 83.
individualism, if only in the sense that shared activity bespeaks being dominated, either by natural processes or people, and prevents individualism. One such shared condition, pertinent to the female factory author, is sympathy. Tobias Menely notes this phenomenon in his study of early modern rhetoric delineating animals from humans, and finds that those who diagnose excessive sympathy as pathological do so to maintain political ideals and “affirm a definition of personhood, and thus to maintain the contours and horizons of political community, based on the division between (legible, because speaking and rational) humans and (opaque because silent and passionate) animals.”  

Menely points out that in *On Revolution* Arendt rejects sentiment in the form of pity and compassion on the same grounds: both are threats to political life because they undermine reasoned deliberation. “Arendt’s argument exemplifies a constellation of widely held assumptions about the politics of fellow-feeling,” Menely comments, and one of those assumptions is that “to be sentimental is to misunderstand or mis-represent the world, to show an ‘emotion-laden sensitivity to reality.’ Above all, the intrusion of the body, the voice, and the passions—common creaturely life—into the sphere of political communication diminishes deliberative rationality, with violence as the inevitable outcome.”  

Because sympathy might be a form of emotional influence emanating from social and biological basis, it is opposed to politics and the prudence required to participate in them.

I belabor the political, philosophical, and social beliefs about labor and the conditions associated with labor here because these come to bear heavily not only on aesthetic interpretations of labor generally, but also on the politically motivated interpretations of labor in

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394 Tobias Menely, 183-184.
the modern age, even when theorists are sympathetic to the laborer. In this respect I find Arendt’s trifolds partition of the vita activa so useful, in spite of her own agreement with ancient political thought that laboring considerations and biological processes threaten political freedom. When Arendt parses work from labor, she acknowledges that the theoretical distinctions between labor and work were not fully worked out, although the theoretical differences between the two sorts of activities persist in “every European language, ancient and modern, [each of which] contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity.”395 Just as persistent as the tendency to interchange work/labor is the inability to totally collapse any difference between them, however, because in each language “the word ‘labor,’ understood as a noun, never designates the finished product, the result of laboring, but remains a verbal noun to be classed with the gerund, whereas the product itself is invariably derived from the word for work.”396 “It is not surprising that the distinction between labor and work was ignored in classical antiquity,” Arendt explains, because the binaries set between “private household and public political realm...overshadowed and predetermined all other distinctions.”397 In other words, political freedom was a value so prized that it tended to eclipse differences between all other sorts of activities. Arendt goes on to point out that various artistic activities and professions in antiquity were categorized in terms of whether they seemed amenable to political freedom as the ascendant human value. Thus Aristotle “would have accepted shepherds and painters (but neither peasants nor sculptors)” to citizenship.398 Arts like painting which manifest

395 Arendt, The Human Condition, 80.

396 Ibid.

397 Arendt, The Human Condition, 85.

398 Arendt, The Human Condition, 82.
a single person’s unique point of view could gain dignity because this individualistic mode of expression seemed to mirror individualistic, free political speech. Likewise, the shepherd’s leisurely profession—also, incidentally, the center of the pastoral ideal—had a political valence insofar as the shepherd need not be constantly in thrall to an urgent activity. Hence the artist, or even the laborer, who carries on his activities in isolation and leisure, can be formally likened to the free, politically engaged individual whose activity is the touchstone of humanity in its fullness. The professional gains status through this association. By a simultaneous process political freedom, with its attending conditions of power and individuality, becomes the ascendant value in the arts and professions because it is the only occasion on which a person might disclose himself or herself as an individual in a context of free speech, and might thus have the opportunity to rise above the crowd. By contrast, coordinated activities, cyclical activities, and activities devoted to life processes bespeak the animalism of drones and herds. Thus, “occupations which did not consist in laboring, yet were undertaken not for their own sake but in order to provide the necessities of life, were assimilated to the status of labor, and this explains changes and variations in their estimation and classification at different periods and in different places.”

399 In his discussion of Hesiod’s origins as a shepherd, C. Bradford Welles notes the shepherd’s social significance and political possibilities in antiquity: “Sheep represented wealth, and were often tended by young men of good family, handsome and attractive to goddesses. Such boys might well fashion for themselves flutes and learn to play them. There wasn’t much else to do while the sheep grazed, after all; but Hesiod became an aoidos, a singer of tales, and this was a profession in itself. The bard was a teacher of the people, rich in learning, whether this had been acquired by divine inspiration or otherwise. Shepherds in antiquity often went on to greater things. Some of them became kings. It was not an ignoble start in life.” See C. Bradford Welles, “Hesiod’s Attitude toward Labor,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1967): 5.

400 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 83.
If we isolate *work* from association with either the diametrically opposed poles of labor and political action, it emerges as a relatively neutral activity insofar as it is a process of preserving human activities which would otherwise disappear without note. To endure in civilization, *labor* and *action* both rely on *work*: “In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas, they [human activities] must be first seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things—into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments.”401 In fact, Arendt notes, *work* is quite unlike both *labor* and political *action* in the sense that it resembles death, taking items out of natural cycles of consumption and not returning them back to those cycles quickly. By contrast, labor and politics are both alike in that on their own they are fleeting; each leaves no trace behind. Both labor and political action, without *work*, “are as futile as life itself.”402 From a neutral standpoint which does not prize freedom or individuality over labor, it becomes clear that *work* can ossify either of the other forms of human activity arbitrarily. From this view, literature is on its most fundamental level a process of recording, but human culture has subsumed it into the values of political freedom and distanced it from labor.

Thus *work*, along with its attending sense of aesthetics and hermeneutics, tilts towards political values—freedom, power, and individuality—in the western tradition. Raymond Williams noted this phenomenon when he suggested in *Culture and Society* that the laboring classes have a culture, but no steady aesthetic tradition. Williams traced the contours of this paradoxical situation, in terms so eloquent that they should be reproduced in full:


402 Ibid.
We may now see what is properly meant by “working-class culture.” It is not proletarian art, or council houses, or a particular use of languages; it is, rather, the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from this. Bourgeois culture, similarly is the basic individualist idea and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from that. In our culture as a whole, there is both a constant interaction between these ways of life and an area which can properly be described as common or underlying to both. The working class, because of its position, has not, since the Industrial Revolution, produced a culture in the narrower sense [i.e., a high art, a distinct aesthetic]. The culture which it has produced, and which it is important to recognize, is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the cooperative movement or a political party. Working-class culture, in the stage through which it has been passing, is primarily social (in that it has created institutions) rather than individual (in particular or imaginative work). When it is considered in context, it can be seen as a very remarkable achievement.

To those whose meaning of culture is intellectual or imaginative work, such an achievement may be meaningless. The values which are properly attached to such work can, at times, seem overriding.\textsuperscript{403}

For Williams individualism is the province of the bourgeoisie, and from this reigning ideal emanates a worldview reflected in the arts. As Williams implies, it is also reflected frequently in the interpretation of the arts and of human achievement generally, via a narrow and elite sense of culture whose “values...at times, seem overriding.” Those values override and trivialize working-class culture, and they seem also to make working-class artistic achievements for the most part impossible.

The possibility one must entertain is whether labor has actually been raised above its contemptible position in the modern era. From the perspective of art, the answer is uncertain. If the terms by which these artistic depictions are interpreted only in terms of power relationships—that is, whether characters have freedom and/or the dominion associated with it, over and against those who do not, then interpretations of labor will always result in the conclusion Bourdieu draws about working-class aesthetics generally: “The working-class

‘aesthetic’ is a dominated ‘aesthetic’ which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics. The members of the working-class... can neither ignore the high-art aesthetic, which denounces their own ‘aesthetic,’ nor abandon their socially conditioned inclinations, but [can] still less proclaim them and legitimate them.”

The French working-class’s “socially-conditioned aesthetic,” Bourdieu elsewhere elaborates, is one predisposed to value direct, immediate experiences of artistic works and to make moralistic judgments upon them. Bourdieu’s vast sociological study suggests that nineteenth-century French laborers constantly attempt to contextualize the work of art in the real world, a direct contrast to middle-class sensibilities insisting on the art object’s constructedness and the viewer’s need to interpret it with detachment. “Working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign,” Bourdieu summarizes, “and their judgements make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis.”

In other words, the working-classes seem to have an innate but naive desire to see the work of art as real, while it might also simultaneously function as a cathartic escape for them. But to function as such, they must be able to enter into it emotionally and viscerally. By contrast the sophisticated aesthete manifests his or her own sophistication by insisting on all of the values testifying to the work’s artificiality: “Detachment, disinterestedness, indifference-aesthetic theory has so often presented these as the only way to recognize the work of art for what it is, autonomous, selb standig, that one ends up forgetting that they really mean divestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest

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405 Bourdieu, 5.
oneself and take things seriously. Bourdieu identifies as the hallmark of their aesthetic criteria, might be thought of as the independence necessary to think freely and judge the work without predispositions. Once again freedom from necessity, formerly defined solely in terms of a person’s political capacities, becomes aligned with freedom of thought as an artistic criterion. In the process it also produces unwritten cultural markers which allow enlightened members of an elite group to separate the so-called free class from the dominated one. From the perspective of those in possession of “cultural capital,” or the tastes coinciding with social power, laborers’ aesthetic inclinations inevitably reaffirm their degradation:

When faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence. These schemes, giving rise to products of an unwilled, unselfconscious systematicity, are opposed to the more or less fully stated principles of an aesthetic. The result is a systematic ‘reduction’ of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favor of ‘human’ content, which is barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic.

Bourdieu’s statistical correlation of aesthetic tastes to social class leads him to conclude that, from the perspective of social power, the laborer experiencing “legitimate” art work lacks interpretive “competence.” The laborer’s attempt to resolve interpretation in terms of his or her

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406 Bourdieu, 34.

407 Bourdieu is by no means alone in seeing in working-class aesthetic values a symptom of domination. H. Gustav Klaus draws a similar conclusion in his study of British working-class writings: “But the real issue seems to me to lie elsewhere, in the relationship between the dominant tradition (part of which may have been received into the canon) and the (manifest or latent) countervailing tendencies with which the major working-class compositions are imbued. It is in exploring the nature of this complex, interpenetrating and yet, ‘in the last instance,’ dominant relational process that we get to the heart of the literary culture of a period.” See H. Gustav Klaus, The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing (Harvester Press, 1985), xii.

408 Bourdieu, 44.
own “perceptual schemes” relating the artwork back to the “things of life” amounts to a
“reduction” betraying a dangerously ignorant “barbarism.” If we replace “barbarism” with
animalistic “brutishness,” the meaning stays the same: the laborer’s lack of sophistication does
little to differentiate him from an instinctual, anti-intellectual, animalistic approach to life—at
least, “from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic.”

I propose that this tendency to read laboring literature through the lens of the laborer’s
presumed oppression and domination by others arises from theoretical difficulties in Karl Marx,
because of his pervasive influence on theories of labor relations. Even though Marxist thought
makes a parallel gesture to laboring literature by positing labor as the fundamental human
activity and organizing society around it, Marx’s focus on how the oppressed proletariat will
gain the political power which is inevitably their due creates certain theoretical constraints with
which laboring literature does not always engage. Where Marx posits labor as the most
fundamental human activity, he also entertains utopian fantasies about how laborers might be
freed from it. I develop this point at great length in the following chapters, where I note how this
is a daydream alien to the author of laboring literature.

Arendt points out that Marx reversed longstanding prejudices against labor, moving it
from “the lowest, most despised position to the highest rank” in the modern era, where “labor
became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man” (Arendt,
The Human Condition, 101). Marx, like the authors of laboring literature to be discussed here,
recognizes the inverse relationship between labor’s contributions to society and its status in
society. However, his political concerns about rectifying this injustice lead him to see the laborer
fundamentally as a person degraded under oppressors: he repeats the hierarchical relationship
between the laborer and the political individual by inverting its values.
In effect, Marx inverts the ancient logic of the patriarchal shelter by diagnosing the manmade phenomena of private property, freedom, and individualism, rather than nature, as the defining conditions of the laborer’s subjugation. To make this claim, however, Arendt notes that Marx also introduced a contradiction into his original—and accurate—definition of the laboring process as a “‘metabolism between man and nature,’ into which the product is immediately ‘incorporated,’ consumed, and annihilated by the body’s life processes.” However, to isolate private property and individualism as the inherent enemies of labor, “Marx insists that the labor ‘process comes to its end in the product,’ [and] he forgets his own definition of this process” as metabolism. This lack of distinction between labor as a process and work as the production of a product becomes centrally important when Marx discusses alienated labor as the estrangement of the laborers from their products. For Marx alienated labor reaches a new iteration in the industrial revolution, but it has existed from time immemorial, too, when laborers were compelled to erect monuments in the service of the gods: “But the gods alone were never masters of the work. And nature just as little….This alien power above man can be neither the gods nor nature, only man himself.” When Marx muddies the distinction between laboring activities sustaining the “species-life” of humanity, and works building up the durable world, and then sees aristocratic theft of the latter as the defining condition of the laborer, he skips lightly from labor originating in nature but ending, always, in a condition of human oppression. Maintaining Arendt’s distinctions between labor and work helps us to see that, while property owners may


410 Ibid.

control labor to maintain their own position, the laborer does not create property any more than he or she creates the food supply. A market society blurs these distinctions, since money seems to preserve labor processes even as it transforms them. Without money “the laboring body, in its obedience to the life process, could never have become the origin of anything so permanent and lasting as property.” But “even Marx, who actually defined man as an animal laborans, had to admit that productivity of labor, properly speaking, begins only with reification..., with ‘the erection of an objective world of things’....But the effort of labor never frees the laboring animal from repeating it all over again and remains therefore an ‘eternal necessity imposed by nature.’” Presumptions that labor is always a political versus a natural matter necessarily reinforce the vertical, hierarchical relationship between the laborer and the rest of humanity even as they seek to overcome it.

Marx assails political relationships to labor in his attack on individuality, but in terms that wind up being an attack on labor itself. With Engels, Marx interprets individualism as hostile to the laborer’s existence in The Communist Manifesto when the two authors link property-ownership to individualism and the freedom built through oppressing the proletariat: “You must, therefore, confess that by ‘individual’ you mean no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle-class owner of property. This person must, indeed, be swept out of the way, and made impossible.” Marx also links the individual not only to political power in the ancient era, but to economic power in the modern capitalistic one:

412 Arendt, The Human Condition, 103.

413 Arendt, The Human Condition, 102-103.

Only in the eighteenth century, in “civil society,” do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a zōōn politikōn [a political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.\textsuperscript{415}

Marx recognizes that individuality only occurs by a process of individuation within a sophisticated set of power relations, but scholars such as Arendt and Wai Chee Dimock tend to agree that the stickiest part of his thought lies in the question of how to overcome these power relations and the individual represented by them. For Arendt the key flaw in Marx’s thought lies in his contradictory stance regarding labor’s relationship to freedom. Marx defined labor as “an ‘eternal necessity imposed by nature’ and the most human and productive of man’s activities,” but “the revolution, according to Marx, has not the task of emancipating the laboring classes but of emancipating man from labor; only when labor is abolished can the ‘realm of freedom’ supplant ‘the realm of necessity.’”\textsuperscript{416} Marx elevates labor as the most fundamental human activity and, on the other hand, presents it as the condition which must be overcome for a just society. Additionally, Marx assumes class warfare to be the most animating element of society, yet falls into contradictions when he tries to envision a more just society not built on that warfare: “The fact remains that in all stages of his work he defines man as an animal laborans and then leads him into a society in which this greatest and most human power is no longer necessary. We are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom.”\textsuperscript{417} In a sense we might think of this problem as part of Marx’s


\textsuperscript{416} Arendt, 104.

\textsuperscript{417} Arendt, 105.
recognition that the individual “must indeed be swept out of the way, and made impossible” because individuality as an ideal threatens labor’s dignity. When he does so, however, he runs into the difficulties of supplanting any sort of value for laborers in place of power relations, once labor is no longer defined by domination.

Wai Chee Dimock notes a similar problem in Marx’s thought insofar as he was a materialist thinker who accepted the modern era’s premise that knowledge must proceed from the biologically materialist, individual body. As a result of Enlightenment thought, the material world becomes the epistemological foundation of the immaterial world, “the foundation upon which the immaterial might be reincorporated as a secondary effect.” Individual bodies become the cognitive and metaphorical locus of reason as a result, no longer representing the indwelling presence of the community, but rather stand as metonym for the community, “a part generalizable into a whole.” When the bodily subject became the basis to understand nonphysical bodies like class, it forced Marx to begin with the individual body in theorizing class, because he found only materialist inquiries valid. Marx uses metonymy as a central trope to think about the way industrialism values a person only as a “hand,” or a “back,” in which “class” is the shadowy figure suggested by the metonym as a presumably whole formation. Dimock points out that metonymy as a cognitive and linguistic device gestures towards a whole entity precisely by not mentioning it; the metonymic word always points beyond itself to the thing with which it is associated. But the problem here is that Marx laments

\[418\] Dimock, 68.

\[419\] Dimock, 89.

\[420\] Dimock, 69.

\[421\] See Dimock, 72.
industrialism because it sections off discrete persons, “whose much-publicized dismemberment
he lamented—but whose original (and eventual) integrity he apparently never questioned.” For
instance, Marx’s vision of the proletariat revolution presumes a unified working-class
consciousness that can be achieved in a whole, unified group. For Marx, “if capitalism was that
monstrous machine whose ‘parts are human beings,’ class was that organic body within which
those human ‘parts’ could once again be united into a political whole.” Marxist thought
remains conflicted by both despising and aspiring to the economic condition of political
individualism as freedom from oppressed—and oppressive—labor. In doing so, it unwittingly
reinforces a focus on freedom from necessity, previously the political condition which created
the individuality Marx so reviles.

Of course, these difficulties in Marx’s thought are political ones, and Raymond Williams
patiently explains in Culture and Society why Marx’s political theories should not be neatly
imposed on artistic interpretation. Marx possessed a complicated understanding of the
relationships between a society’s economic base and its cultural superstructure, and many
scholars apply his ideas without understanding the nuances of this small and underdeveloped
corner of Marx’s thought. Williams points out that Marx “outlined, but never fully developed, a
cultural theory,” but the gestures he made in that direction show a great deal of restraint about an
immensely complicated issue. Sloppy “Marxists” tend to make the mistakes of seeing
superstructure as a static, vertical erection over an economic base, locked in “an absolute and

422 Dimock, 60.

423 Dimock, 72.

424 Williams, Culture and Society, 265.
fixed relationship.” By contrast Marx and Engels recognized the dynamic relationships between these parts. There is not merely a direct relationship between base and superstructure; instead, economic change is always happening, and superstructures are reflective not only of current economic states but also historical ones. Cultural productions do not merely reflect the economic base, they also reflect the elements of superstructures, because they are borne out of “the way of life as a whole.” Williams concludes that a responsible “Marxist theory of culture will recognize diversity and complexity, will take account of continuity within change, will allow for chance and certain limited autonomies, but,” mindful of these factors, it will most fundamentally “take the facts of the economic structure and the consequent social relations as the guiding string on which a culture is woven, and by following which a culture is to be understood.” While Williams ventured that the question of the economic base’s relationship to culture might be undecidable, he nonetheless attempted to follow that “guiding string” at moments in his own interpretations.

Williams’s own struggles with the free/dominated binary in Marxist theory are illustrated in his proposed and then discarded concept of the “structures of feeling,” his own theoretical attempt to draw out Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to show how “cultural practices [are joined] with ideological oppression.” When Williams introduced “structures of feelings” as a term in

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425 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 268.
426 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 281.
427 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 269.
428 Williams appreciated the nuances of Marxist thought while also inspecting closely “the basic question…[of] whether the economic element is in fact determining”—a question which he found in the end “unanswerable.” See Williams, *Culture and Society*, 280.
the 1950s, he meant it as a way “to correlate the form and emotional power of an artistic product with the general psychology of a culture.”\textsuperscript{430} By the 1970s he had revised the term specifically to signify elements of resistance in society, where structures of feeling were “the innovative forms and new psychology of emergent cultures of opposition.”\textsuperscript{431} By the 1980s he discarded the term altogether, but remained concerned with how culture got below the “top of the mind,” shaping people’s understanding and behavior.\textsuperscript{432} Bruce McConachie explains Williams’s discarded attempt to find the mechanisms of social domination through artistic expression as a right-minded effort, but one out of time in the sense that Williams lacked access to present-day cognitive research demonstrating how the human mind interacts with cultural models and institutions.\textsuperscript{433} The cognitive sciences have shown how individual minds imbibe and adapt cultural metaphors to show how “domination by consent still occurs.”\textsuperscript{434} But another crucial advantage of the cognitive sciences and the development of the concept of cognitive metaphors is that it reveals culture as a collection of fragments that “function semi-independently of each other.”\textsuperscript{435} Williams’s disadvantage lay in thinking of culture “as an organic totality,” larger than the sum of its parts. It is precisely this totalizing gesture, inherent to Marxism, which frustrates

\textsuperscript{430} McConachie, 138.

\textsuperscript{431} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{432} Raymond Williams, quoted in McConachie, 138.

\textsuperscript{433} McConachie, 140.

\textsuperscript{434} McConachie, 144. In McConachie’s view “dominant culture reproduces itself, in part, by analogically transferring concepts and schemas to a network of cultural practices.” See also McConachie, 145.

\textsuperscript{435} McConachie, 144.
the possibilities for working-class studies because, in seeing artistic productions of labor in terms of ubiquitous power relationships, the laborer can only come out at a disadvantage.\textsuperscript{436}

While Williams concedes the endless complexity of the economic base’s relationship to cultural productions, somewhere underneath it all lies the political presumption of the laborer’s degraded condition, and this presumption seems not only to be a phenomenon in irresponsible Marxist interpretations but in Marxist thought itself. The urge to try to discover the trace or “guiding string” leading back to that dominated condition seems almost irresistible. Thus, Williams unwittingly may have been speaking of himself when he pointed to the intellectual habits of mind which pre-ordain artistic interpretations: “If people have lived together, and come to share a certain kind of organization by which their minds have been trained to activity, we shall find that the processes of organization are in fact institutions, of which art is usually one.”\textsuperscript{437} Consequently, when Williams defines working class achievements as collective, institutionally based moments of social progress as against middle-class, individualistic artistic achievements in the previously cited passage, he reveals his own (reluctant and self-aware) tendency to interpret aesthetics around the values of freedom, individualism, and power.

In conclusion, when politically centered theories presume the laborer’s dominated, degraded condition, they reproduce power relationships which reflect the laborer’s presumed degradation back to the interpreter. “Let us explore the degraded laborer’s degradation,” the tautological thinking goes. This is a phenomenon similar to Spivak’s argument in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” regarding western interpretations of colonized cultures merely replicating imperial relationships on an epistemological level. Spivak particularly emphasizes that western

\textsuperscript{436} Ibid.

interpretive apparatuses, and particularly Foucault and Deleuze in their “substantive involvement with more ‘political’ issues”—function as a self-referential obstruction preventing accurate interpretations of the subaltern’s utterances.\(^{438}\) By the same logic these myriad working-class articulations, if they could testify to anything but their own domination, remain mysterious and undisclosed because even the intellectual frameworks for interpreting these works are produced by power relations which bar rather than facilitate understanding. The laboring classes, diffuse and impenetrable, babble utterances which the listener/reader can only interpret by imposing his own perspective. The oracle’s exhortation becomes a curse for the individualistic seeker of enlightenment: to “know thyself” then means always and only to know thyself, and no other.

II. Avoiding the Central Difficulty: The Field of Working-Class Studies

To date, working-class studies continues to emerge as a field despite these theoretical obstacles, like a tree growing around an impediment placed at its roots. Janet Zandy, the foremost scholar working in the field, has also come closest to outlining the theoretical obstacles to understanding working-class labor and to positing something else in their place. Zandy notes that the field itself is “threatening to the bourgeois academy because it is linked to how knowledge is determined, organized, advanced, and taught.”\(^{439}\) When the field’s subjects manifest their own perspectives they reveal that “working-class and poor people may not have wealth, power, or status, but they do have an epistemology, a way of knowing the world.”\(^{440}\) Moreover, even though this “way of knowing” has been poorly understood by others, “they


\(^{439}\) Zandy, “The Making,” 44.

\(^{440}\) Ibid.
recognize their relationships to each other just as the owning class is very clear about who is in or out of their club. Class consciousness increases the possibility for agency – which is not the same thing as upward mobility. Class relationships need to be seen and understood close-up.†441 Scholars such as Michael Denning challenge the asphyxiating framework of domination gripping this body of writing by teasing out tropes and patterns unique to working-class writing and suggestive of conversations outside the mainstream. For instance, Denning’s study of Popular Front art leads to his formulation of the “proletarian grotesque,” in which laboring authors hold up disfigured bodies for inspection to jar readers and “attempt to wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetic.’”†442 Renny Christopher places similar emphasis on bodies and bodily pain as important elements in the literature, while Zandy stresses the cooperative values found in this literary field.†443 “With few exceptions,” Zandy argues, “working-class writing is made out of a collective sensibility that while not denying or ignoring individual identity, expresses an alignment and kinship with others. It is what I call the ‘we’ inside the ‘I.’”†444 Still, Zandy subtly alludes to the charge that working-class literature can be trivialized into a condition of domination when she claims, “the literature reveals a much more nuanced and complex human struggle for economic justice. It is too simplistic to read it as exclusively a series of polarities between dominance and suppression. (There is certainly plenty of dominance, but human

†441 Ibid.


expression is not so easy to suppress.)” In place of these polarities, she continues, “we see the
formation of relationships across time and within particular historical moments that produce
mutual recognitions and birth new literary expressions.” Zandy, in a gesture consistent with
this emergent field of scholarship, acknowledges the theoretical obstacles but moves past them
without precisely refuting them.

III. Recommendations for Antebellum Factory Women’s Writings: Laboring vs. Working-
Class Literature

Ordinarily to argue that factory women embraced wage labor to their reading public
would be to say that they embraced their emerging working-class status and proceed, matter-of-
fact, to the literature evidencing that status. However, I choose to analyze these women’s
writings in a tradition of laboring literature rather than committing to a working-class framework
for several reasons. First, as I have shown, I find the distinction between labor and work to be
paramount to understanding laborers’ perspectives on their own lives as practical responses to
the natural need to toil, without presuming beforehand that labors entails domination by other
human beings. The term working-class itself obfuscates this distinction, and I also eschew the
term “labor literature,” because, as Janet Zandy and Nicholas Coles note, this connotes “work
associated mainly with organized labor movements, [and] is too narrow.” Laboring preserves
the emphasis I wish to maintain on perspectives based on the experience of a transitory process.

Furthermore, to term factory women’s defenses of wage labor beyond the patriarchal
shelter as “working-class” raises immediate complications for female factory authors. As

446 Ibid.
447 Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, eds., American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology
Thomas Dublin notes throughout his extensive and detailed study of antebellum operatives, New England women treated their mill labor as a temporary stage before marriage.\textsuperscript{448} So long as women had options beyond industrial labor, their contemporaries argued, they were not a class.\textsuperscript{449} To label factory women’s fictional defenses of wage labor as “working-class,” then, is to impose class as a brittle moniker on a phenomenon that was still fluid in antebellum society.

Because antebellum women labored temporarily in the factories, designating them as \textit{working class} imposes a lasting status on a transitory activity. Their wage labor was an inherently transitory activity in two senses: first, as already noted, it occupied one epoch in women’s lives. Second, industrialism’s division of labor transforms the \textit{work} of producing a durable good into a ceaseless process of labor, from the laborer’s vantage point. The mill’s discrete processes of carding, spinning, and weaving, for instance, carry on constantly in front of laborers without culminating in a finished product to which the operative has a claim. No single operative makes the fabric which the textile mill produces. She merely steps in to assist a process that, from her vantage point in mill, constantly hovers in a state of incompletion. Like the farmer following cycles of sewing and harvesting, any reified sense of completion is a fantasy: once the labor is finished, it must be begun again.

Of course the concept of \textit{class}, properly understood, is neither static nor decontextualized, and in refusing the label of \textit{working-class} for mill women I do not intend to make a straw man of that term. E.P. Thompson notes this common misunderstanding in \textit{The}


\textsuperscript{449} For an example of this argument, see Henry Adolphus Miles, who claims that factories’ decision to import women from other towns and place them in temporary boarding houses guards against the possibility that laborers will be proletarianized and “sink down here a helpless caste.” See Miles, 75-76.
Making of the English Working Classes when he points out that Marx never intended class to be a reified thing.\textsuperscript{450} Thompson clarifies, “By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasise that it is an historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a ‘structure,’ nor even as a ‘category,’ but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.”\textsuperscript{451} In Thompson’s view the “making” of a class happens over a long historical period, “when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.”\textsuperscript{452} But even when emphasizing class as a dynamic happening in human history, Thompson follows the Marxist concept that class is a relationship signifying strife. Two problems arise in applying Thompson’s precise concept of class to mill women. First, against Thompson’s conditions, the period in question is a fairly short one, from the early 1800s to the Civil War.\textsuperscript{453} For that reason class consciousness, or a sense of one group’s interests against another’s, only happens momentarily. Philip Zonderman observes an emergent class-consciousness in antebellum mill women’s writings, but “since this class consciousness was in its nascent stage, it was always expressed haltingly—in words, gestures, symbolic expression, and physical actions—as workers


\textsuperscript{451} E.P. Thompson, 9.

\textsuperscript{452} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{453} Thomas Dublin demarcates the period from 1820 to 1860 on the rationale that during these decades “saw the first decisive steps from the preindustrial to the industrial economy.” See Dublin, \textit{Women at Work}, 5.
labored to define their own identity in relation to others and to the new means of production.\textsuperscript{454}

Chapter Five explores the way women’s experiences of industrial labor produced the rented room as a symbolic nexus of female relationships in the mill, but it is important to establish first that these relationships proceeded from suppositions about labor itself as a transitory activity, one which is not fully continuous with the concept of working-class as an identity. Second, over this period factory women did not clearly identify their own interests as being opposed to capitalist factory owners—a phenomenon that Amy Schrager Lang has called “the doctrine of the harmony of interests of labor and capital.”\textsuperscript{455} Zonderman notes that mill laborer Harriet Hanson Robinson recalled many factory women as being of higher birth and better educated than their managers; Farley was convinced that mill managers and operatives characters were so commendable that they would of course tend to each other’s best interests; Eliza Jane Cate encouraged factory women to treat their overseers with the mutual respect accorded to each.\textsuperscript{456} In short, while I parallel Thompson’s concept of class as a dynamic social formation, I also insist that his defining criteria for class do not precisely apply to the factory women of this study.

Moreover, I feel that the definitional issues I have enumerated regarding the term working-class mirrors similarly fraught issues in working-class studies as a whole, especially in how to define its own boundaries. In American Working-Class Literature: an Anthology, Janet Zandy and Nicholas Coles choose to define “working-class” capaciously as they bring together works from the colonial era to the twentieth century. In addition to industrial laborers, Zandy and

\textsuperscript{454} Zonderman, 17.


\textsuperscript{456} See Zonderman, 101-102. See also Amy Schrager Lang’s account of the
Coles categorically include slaves, indentured servants, “those who perform unpaid work at home,” “those who work in the burgeoning service economy,” and generally those who lack economic and political power. Working-class literature’s inclusivity, framed this way, makes it possible to swallow up both the African American slave narrative and sentimental literature. It can also be written by members of the working-class on a topic not directly related to class or labor, and it can be about members of the working-class by authors outside their class. Zandy explains this far range by claiming, “working-class writing flourishes today—but it is now called multicultural literature... Grouping them [multicultural authors] as working-class writers is not to cast class against race, ethnicity or sexuality, but rather to open a space of reciprocal and mutual visibility.” From this perspective working-class studies is inherently intersectional; part of its value lies in creating sinews between infrequently associated authors and texts. However, in the case of a hotly contested debate within working-class literature—that is, “whether American slaves should be categorized as working class because they did not work for wages or possess even the limited autonomy that wage workers did”—applying working-class as a label to slaves and industrial laborers, based on each’s relationship to the means of production—seems to raise


458 For an example of the latter, see unconventional working-class lens David McCracken imposes on *I am Charlotte Simmons* by Tom Wolfe, an author definitively outside the working-class, in David McCracken, “Charlotte Simmons as Working-Class Heroine in Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons*,” in Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature, ed. Michelle Tokarczyk (New York: Routledge, 2012), 87–102.

as many difficulties as it seeks to solve.\textsuperscript{460} That industrial laborers and slaves may have had some overlapping experiences of labor is reasonable, but collapsing these similar experiences to the neglect of their profoundly different relationships to law, society, and citizenship, for the sake of a term (working-class) seems to me intellectually irresponsible. John Lavelle points to a similar issue in the field’s inclusion of poverty based on economic criteria: “poverty is a condition, not a class designation, and needs to have its own area of study.”\textsuperscript{461}

Once again, the issue of labor as a process, and class as a “making” based on that process, slips from view in favor of a reified term. In spite of Thompson’s caution, class becomes a thing. Moreover, when scholars reify class, they also introduce stereotype into the text. Lavelle complains of his own sense, as a member of the working class, that the field misrepresents its subjects. He attributes this problem, incidentally, to Marxist thought: “Because Marxism has effectively closed off the discourse to new rules in the language game, working-class studies, as it now exists, is prone to, at best, stereotyping working-class people or, at worst, caricaturizing them by stripping them of their individuality and applying a preconceived representation that, no matter how noble, renders them less than human.”\textsuperscript{462} This field cannot decide its borders, and I would suggest that part of the problem I have raised regarding women’s wage labor applies to the field as a whole: trying to impose an identity on literary concerns which revolve around a type of activity entails interpretive inaccuracies, because the assumption that there can be a direct correspondence between an activity and an identity is faulty. The tail wags the dog.


\textsuperscript{462} Lavelle, 2.
In spite of the daunting cultural obstacles to a laboring literature, not all artistic work has remained in thrall to freedom, individuality, or power—each associated with political life. Some few works preserved labor, raising it up in spite of the widespread scorn it held as freedom’s antithesis. These works of laboring literature philosophically overcome the scorn for the laborer by showing how labor is a fundamental, dignified, ubiquitously human activity. All along, the work in praise of labor has persisted at cultus, the root both of tilled and culture. Williams was alert to the potential for an alternative sort of literature linking labor to civilization rather than serving as civilization’s beast of burden. He noted, “The idea of culture rests on a metaphor: the tending of natural growth. And indeed it is on growth, as metaphor and as fact, that the ultimate emphasis must be placed. Here, finally, is the area where we have most need to reinterpret.”

In so saying Williams clearly identified the literary and theoretical lacuna a laboring aesthetic might fill, as well as its status not as a thing but as a process, but he remained unaware that any literary mode had already sought to answer it.

Yet a full century before Williams, Lucy Larcom also pinpointed the idea of culture and labor as allies to the natural processes of metabolism linking human labor to nature and to culture: “The toiler is saved from being a drudge by remembering that his work goes on side by side with the grand processes of creation; by feeling himself surrounded with the glory of the earth and the heavens,—at once an infolding and a release,—and by entering into great thoughts and hallowed aspirations, as the atmosphere in which it is his right to breathe.”

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463 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, 335.


figures labor as breathing, a process of “infolding and release” participating in the “grand processes of creation,” she draws theoretically quite close to Marx, who describes labor as humanity’s metabolic process with nature. But Larcom disavows the possibility that labor transforms the “toiler” into a “drudge” because both the labor of her body—like breath for her and for the society it sustains—and the attitude of her mind, participate in “hallowed aspirations.” It is the spiritual, intellectual, and moral component occurring alongside these bodily “aspirations” which culturally dignify the laborer. Laboring literature claims the moral and spiritual spaces surrounding the laborer as the “atmosphere in which it is his right to breathe.”
Chapter 4

FACTORY WOMEN AND THE LABORING LITERARY TRADITION: REJECTING ARISTOCRATIC CONTEMPT

So there was not just one birth of Strifes after all, but upon the earth there are two Strifes. One of these a man would praise once he got to know it, but the other is blameworthy; and they have thoroughly opposed spirits. For the one fosters evil war and conflict—cruel one, no mortal loves that one, but it is by necessity that they honor the oppressive Strife, by the plans of the immortals. But the other one gloomy Night bore first; and Cronus’ high-throned son, who dwells in the aether, set it in the roots of the earth, and it is much better for men. It rouses even the helpless man to work. For a man who is not working but who is hastening to plow and plant and set his house in order, he envies him, one neighbor envying his neighbor who is hastening towards wealth: and this Strife is good for mortals. And potter is angry with potter, and builder with builder, and beggar begrudges beggar, and poet poet.

—Hesiod, Works and Days

There are cracks in the structure. The theory of the laborer’s literature as a dominated aesthetic is not impenetrable, not because the political theories opposing labor to freedom are not apt, but because there is another conversation that has been going on all along, and it will not play by politics’ rules or subscribe to its absolute terms.

When Hesiod turns from the subject of the gods in the Theogony, to the subject of everyday life in Works and Days, his shift in focus from the divine to the human causes him to issue a self-correction: “So there was not just one birth of Strifes after all, but upon the earth there are two Strifes.” The second sort of strife lives “in the roots of the earth,” improving humankind by inciting both labor and invention (WD, 89). Because of the strife-ridden

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466 Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 87. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as WD.
relationship the gods have imposed between humanity and nature, people must plow, plant, and build. But a secondary effect of this fundamental relationship is that strife, beyond inciting laboring need and invention, also generates commercial competition, with “one neighbor envying his neighbor who is hastening towards wealth” (WD, 89). Mindful of the vast ingenuity it spurs, the poet declares, “This Strife is good for mortals. And potter is angry with potter, and builder with builder, and beggar begrudges beggar, and poet poet” (WD, 89). Viewed literally from the ground up, the natural strife inciting labor, work, and commercial activity, is not a condition to be freed from; it is instead the source of all human excellence.

As the seed of all human activity, Hesiod’s healthy strife also has implications for literary analysis. Classicist Glenn W. Most points to the discursive strife Hesiod highlights in this, one of western society’s earliest written texts. By correcting his earlier genealogy of strife, Hesiod “takes advantage of the newer means of communication afforded by writing”; for, “in an oral situation, differences of detail between one situation and another are defined by the considerations of propriety of the individual performance and do not revise or correct one another: they coexist peacefully in the realm of compatibly plausible virtualities.” Hesiod might have glossed over his textual contradiction rather than highlighting it, Most points out, but citing the distance between one text and another paradoxically makes his testimonial more plausible: “Hesiod’s reference to himself as an author serves to authorize him.” The works embracing the healthy strife of toil, and, by extension, the discursive “strifes” or controversies surrounding labor, form the subject of this chapter.

The premise of this chapter is that when authors figure labor not as a contemptible but as

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468  Most, xxii.
a world-sustaining activity, their focus on this foundational premise transforms the reigning value of the literature not into freedom or power but ethics. Literature’s focus on labor profoundly transforms the values of that literature with an end towards greater social justice, but in such a way that it cannot be synthesized with Marxist thought. Mindful of the pervasive prejudice against labor, authors of laboring literature make use of several tropes or *topoi*, some or all of which appear in this genre with surprising regularity. While the following *topoi* are not exhaustive, I analyze several of the most predictable tropes because of their status as rational and artistic responses to the aristocratic prejudice against labor.

I. Labor as Universal Category and Defining Human Condition

Laboring literature’s central, defining trait is the subject of dignified toil. The literature insists on the value of strenuous labor as it occurs between the poles of natural hardship and human prejudice, insisting with Hesiod that “work is not a disgrace at all, but not working is a disgrace” ([*WD*], 113).

This literary stance consistently proceeds from an argument with politics. In *Works and Days* Hesiod’s insistence on the value of labor emanates from a legal quarrel with his malingering brother, who has claimed more than his fair share of the brothers’ inheritance and seeks through political connections to buttress his claims to wealth, so that he might enjoy a life of ease.\(^469\)

In the *Georgics*, Virgil’s celebration of healthy strife participates in the task of rebuilding society after the chaos of Rome’s bloody civil war. Labor’s vast task is to restore harmony to

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\(^{469}\) For the brothers’ disputed “allotment” and Perses’ attempt to seek refuge for his actions in the rulers’ protections, see *WD*, 89-91. Scholars debate whether Perses was an actual person or a fiction Hesiod created for rhetorical purposes. For the critical discussion of this issue, see Most, xlv-xlvi.
society through the “arts of peace.” The enormity of this endeavor, and “the extreme hardships of civil war[,] explain the real urgency” with which Virgil addresses his poem to Emperor Octavius, appealing to the ruler’s power to restore harmony in cooperation with the farmer’s labors. This lateral yoking of the laboring and political spheres instantiates the georgic as a new form, distinct from Virgil’s source material in several ancient texts, including *Works and Days*. Hesiod and Virgil both praise labor and counter aristocratic prejudice, but as Anthony Low notes in his groundbreaking study of the georgic mode’s adaptation in early modern England, “Hesiod has none of Virgil’s sense that labor may contribute to national progress.” I have said before that laboring literature encompasses the georgic, and what Anthony Low says of the georgic mode holds basically true here: “As an initial working definition...we may say that georgic is a mode that stresses the value of intensive and persistent labor against hardships and difficulties; [and] that it differs from epic because it emphasizes planting and building instead of killing and destruction.” One final quality, found solely in the georgic and not necessarily in

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472 For more information on which texts most influenced Virgil, and in what manner he drew from them, see L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Virgil scholars such as Elaine Fantham consistently cite Wilkinson’s careful research as still quite useful for understanding the *Georgics*.

473 Low, 114.

Hesiod or laboring literature generally, is that the georgic “is preeminently the mode suited to the establishment of civilization and the founding of nations.” ⁴⁷⁵

With Low, I agree that the “set of themes and images” signaling laboring literature’s “informing spirit” and its defining “attitude toward life” are somewhat plastic and diffuse. Nonetheless these are governed by a logic strongly demarcating the literature’s dignified presentation of the laborer from other traditions viewing the laborer as a victim of oppression and subject of pity. ⁴⁷⁶ Laboring literature faces squarely the harsh and inhospitable world defining humanity by struggle. In that world the laborer’s unflagging efforts make him the paradigm for humanity, since his stamina alone can face the harsh truth: “For that’s the way it is / world forces all things to the bad, to founder and to fail, / just as a paddler in his cot struggling to make headway up a river, if he lets up a minute, will find himself rushed headlong back between the banks” (*Georgics* 1.199-203). No one glorious deed defines the laborer’s heroism; rather, it takes countless humble tasks and stubborn endurance to make him, or her, a worthy subject of poetry. This literary tradition’s panoramic view of laborers immersed in the life of the nation, via trade, and its attending argument that this condition makes laborers’ lives meaningful rather than degrading, becomes crucial for understanding how these literary values can also be seen in industrial women’s fictions in a space not yet subservient to politics.

In the laboring literary view the toiler sustains himself and the community through his steadfast struggle with nature, while simultaneously shunning aristocratic prejudice against himself as so much idle fantasy. The laborer, consequently, exists in a horizontal relationship with the political sphere, rather than the vertical one of dominion presumed by politics. Mindful of this difference, between struggle with nature and struggle with the human world of politics, I

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⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.
⁴⁷⁶ Low, 7.
would like to qualify Janet Zandy and Nicholas Coles’ insight into “two lasting and linked common ideas in the history of working-class people, ideas that animate this writing.” Zandy and Coles pinpoint these ideas as “the value of solidarity and the tradition of struggle.” This is true, but when working-class studies scholars like Zandy and Coles say “struggle,” they typically mean struggles with managers, bosses—human oppressors. This focus on the lateral struggle between laborers and their oppressors is crucial. Most would say upward struggle, but laboring literature rejects the spatial metaphor of hierarchy, refusing to see powerful persons as their “betters.” Instead, laboring literature begins with the struggle under people’s feet: the struggle with the earth, the struggle to survive that is the origin of labor and the most fundamental human gesture. This struggle is the seed of laboring literature, and the beginning of laboring literary culture.

Labor may sustain the political sphere, but it most certainly does not exist beneath it. Arendt commits a rare inaccuracy on this point when she insists that the classical works are really oriented towards political freedom because the heroes are property owners. Where Hesiod appears to praise labor, she claims, he actually merely reinforces “the conviction that the labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish,” because “labor and work (ponos and ergon) are distinguished in Hesiod; only work is due to Eris, the goddess of good strife, but labor, like all other evils, came out of Pandora’s box and is a punishment of Zeus.” Furthermore, Hesiod “assumes as a matter of course that the actual farm labor is done by slaves and tame animals,” but even though he “praises everyday life” in actuality “his ideal is a

\[477\] Zandy and Coles, xxii.
\[478\] For “the labor of our body,” see Arendt, The Human Condition, 83. For labor versus work in Hesiod, see Arendt, The Human Condition, 83n8.
gentleman-farmer, rather than a laborer.\textsuperscript{479} Arendt argues, in effect, that the only way Hesiod might dignify toil on any level is in its tacit relationship to property-derived freedom. From this perspective Hesiod’s rhetorical gesture would be similar to the workers of Francis Hopkinson’s early republican poem, “The Raising: A New Song for Federal Mechanics” (1788), in which workers see their endeavors as actively constructing the state by providing a jointly built space in which men might gather as political equals.\textsuperscript{480} If men must toil, they can take pride in their toil because it constructs the conditions of freedom. But C. Bradford Welles counters Arendt’s point about Hesiod’s supposed praise of work and its political potential: “When he says ‘work,’ he means ‘labor,’ and our traditional translation of the title should not blind us to it. This is labor as it appears in Old Man River, or in the folk-song of the English farmer digging his turnips in the sleet and rain. Unpleasant and undignified, unintellectual and little rewarding. It may be a way to a poor livelihood, but never to riches.”\textsuperscript{481} In so doing, Hesiod was “proposing something which no Greek (I would almost say, no human being) ever did if he could help it, ever looked on as anything but an unmitigated evil.”\textsuperscript{482} In this light we can start to see the distinctness of the literature’s aesthetic values.

Those values come into focus more clearly in Virgil’s panoramic portrayal of labor alongside trade networks and politics. To claim that Virgil intertwines labor and politics however, raises the question of whether he actually intends to elevate labor or repeats the same

\textsuperscript{479} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 83n8.


\textsuperscript{481} Welles, 9.

\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.
gesture Arendt levels at Hesiod: in idealizing a gentleman farmer, does Virgil celebrate only certain distinguished kinds of work and freedom while taking for granted that certain degrading labors are animalistic? From Hesiod, Virgil had “the idea of addressing an independent small farmer who works for himself and of commending honest toil.” In *Works and Days* Virgil recognized “the first attempt at formulating a social philosophy which consists in promoting the peasant ideal of justice and hard work to be one for all mankind.” But where Hesiod at points casually references slave labor alongside his celebration of toil, Virgil makes the opposite move by avoiding any mention of slave labor, with its negative association of human degradation. In so doing Virgil seems to have pointedly elevated labor as he muddies the distinctions in the *Georgics* between activities performed by slaves and by their masters. During Virgil’s era affluent Romans owned land (or aspired to), and had slaves farm it under a Bailiff’s watch. Less wealthy farmers might own small plots of land and would work it intensely. Many of the activities Virgil describes “seem to presuppose quite a large farm,” but “the astonishing thing about the *Georgics* is that in the whole poem there is no reference to slavery, which was casually assumed by Hesiod.” Wilkinson muses, “This omission must be intentional.... the kind of farmer Virgil seems generally to envisage is the *colonus*, without distinction between freeholder and tenant. He is more than a *pauperculus*, but he still works with his own hands.” Wilkinson meditates on Virgil’s motivations for collapsing distinctions between a landed proprietor and his

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483 Wilkinson, 59.
484 Ibid.
485 Fantham, xviii.
486 Wilkinson, 53.
487 Wilkinson, 53-54.
dependents, reasoning that this sort of farmer may have been the type with which Virgil was most familiar in his native Cremona region, or that Virgil may have wished to avoid current economic controversies regarding farming. But more likely “Virgil’s farmer is presented as his own ideal, the old-fashioned yeoman—vetus colonus—revived. He must work himself: the whole moral fabric of the poem is based on this.” If Virgil then “exploits a Roman linguistic feature, which credited a man with doing whatever he had done for him directly by subordinates, to instruct the farmer directly,” then he does so for the sake of elevating labor itself to a high station by having a person of secure status engage in all types of labor.

II. Rejecting Dominion: Labor’s Horizontal Relationship to Politics

To reiterate this crucial distinction: any reference to social standing serves emphatically to raise up labor in the reader’s eyes, rather than labor serving to produce or create social standing. Virgil’s title emphasizes the labor as a process “because it relates both to the Greek phrase for ‘working the land’ and to the noun geourgos, or ‘farmer’: we could call it ‘the farmer’s life,’ but Virgil’s stress is as much on the continuing interactive relationship between the worker and the earth as it is on his daily or yearly work” (Fantham, xv). Virgil’s deliberate unwillingness to draw social hierarchies between labor performed by slaves or by proprietors “contributed greatly to the poem’s vitality in the long run” by making the concept of labor itself more universally commendable. As the principle of equality rendered slave labor morally controversial in the modern era, the Georgics could still function as a model for authors because

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488 Wilkinson, 54.
489 Fantham, xviii.
490 Wilkinson, 55.
it could be adapted to the yeoman ideal.\textsuperscript{491} As L.P. Wilkinson puts it, “The very vagueness made for universality.”\textsuperscript{492} In doing so, Virgil circumvents the derision attached to slave labor and allows labor itself, deemed inherently unfree, to be drawn into cooperation with politics. By suppressing the degradations associated with slave labor, he frames labor not as the condition from which political freedom is wrested, but as an activity which sustains and occurs alongside the exercise of political freedom as joint partner. In this way, Larcom might have been describing Virgil’s depiction of labor as well as her own when she insisted, “Labor, in itself, is neither elevating nor otherwise....In our country low associations and sacrifice of refinement are no necessities of the toiler’s lot.”\textsuperscript{493}

If Virgil left the specifics of who is performing the hard labors of the \textit{Georgics} hazy so that he could categorically prop up the laborer, he also left the types of labor specifically plastic, thus to raise labor generically as well—a vital point for understanding how one might find the georgic mode in a nineteenth-century industrial context. The fluidity of Virgil’s subject matter make the \textit{Georgics} “very difficult to describe or analyse” because they are “part agricultural manual, with instructions to the farmer on dealing with crops, vines, and olives, livestock, and (surprisingly) bees,” while at the same time functioning as “political poem and allegory.”\textsuperscript{494} The diverse activities Virgil treats are important because, against critics who would like to collapse the georgic mode with agricultural endeavors, it is important to note that Virgil’s scope is much

\textsuperscript{491} Gourevitch presents the principle of equality as a modern value entailing moral objections to slave labor which would have been quite foreign to most classical thinkers.

\textsuperscript{492} Wilkinson, 55.

\textsuperscript{493} Larcom, ix.

\textsuperscript{494} Fantham, xv.
wider than the cycles of tending plant life. Low is mistaken when he claims, “To be truly georgic, a poem should come face to face with the realistic details of farming life, see them for what they are, yet accept them and even glorify them,” but he is more reasonable in claiming that in the georgic “husbandry is...paradigmatic for other professions.”\textsuperscript{495} In reality, “the grain crop itself takes up only a small fraction of Book I,” while the other books treat the care and propagation of horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and bees.\textsuperscript{496}

On display, then, is not farming but \textit{toil}: the cyclical efforts human beings must make to sustain their own lives, and lives they will never know. While Virgil imagines those labors in relation to the land, it is possible for the philosophical and aesthetic presumptions governing literary toil to adapt themselves to a more modern context. To do so is not to invite the same scorn Raymond Williams directs at those scholars who can stretch the pastoral mode so far that “even a modern proletarian industrial novel can be pastoral in this sense!”\textsuperscript{497} Quite the opposite, it is to make a move parallel to Williams’s project in \textit{The Country and the City} by recovering a concurrent social tension in American literature via factory women’s laboring depictions. Doing so shows, to borrow from Williams once again, that “there has been an effective and voluntary congealment at the point of significant historical transition.”\textsuperscript{498}

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\textsuperscript{495} Low, 9, 23.

\textsuperscript{496} Fantham, xxiii.

\textsuperscript{497} Raymond Williams, \textit{The Country and the City} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 21.

\textsuperscript{498} Williams, \textit{The Country and the City}, 21.
the laborer’s existence. Factory women presented themselves to the world in light of this tradition, as the Lowell Offering makes quite clear.

In 1845 the Lowell Offering’s editorial board commissioned a custom engraving for the magazine’s cover. This picture features a mill woman, book in hand, between the traditional industries of agriculture and beekeeping.

Figure 3. Lowell Offering Cover, December 1845.
The factories appear prominently over the woman’s right shoulder, emerging between these forms of labor in nature. Church and school, two institutions testifying to the female laborer’s character and intelligence, are figured behind her left shoulder. When Harriet Farley described the process of commissioning this engraving in a March, 1845 editorial, she narrates a real-life struggle for the laborer to express her own values without being co-opted by a bourgeois aesthetic. The women first debated between two allegorical designs: one, an “altar of literature” featuring respected magazines of the day, including *Graham’s Magazine*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and *The Southern Literary Messenger*. The image would depict “a bevy of girls bringing forward their *Offering* also, to lie upon the steps of the altar.”

Ultimately the women rejected this possibility in favor of portraying the factory woman among familiar forms of labor. The chosen image aims to ward off stereotypes about factory women’s degradation. The church ensures traditional piety, while the school reminds viewers that “the law requires that they must have been school girls.”

In addition, the image positions the mill woman looking back “to a quiet country home,” and thus assures viewers of the operative’s continuing devotion to the patriarchal shelter. In positioning the factory laborer outside the home and in relation to familiar forms of labor, however, the editors bring women’s labor into a georgic mode. “A bee-hive... emblematical of industry and intelligence,” makes the laboring tradition most explicit. Moreover, in true laboring literary fashion they seek to stress labor as an activity, in contradistinction to class as an identity. This image, Farley insists, is “not a ‘factory girl’—for, in truth, there is no such person as this to be the representative of a distinct class of beings, and this we wished to

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500 Ibid.
implies.” While she struggles to articulate the precise difference between a shared _stance_ emanating from shared labor, versus a shared _identity_, Farley insists on the distinction just the same: “It may seem a paradox that we should be so particular to represent a factory girl as not a factory girl, but our friends here will understand us.”\(^{502}\) This “paradox” reinforces the precise terminology I have insisted on, between “laboring” versus “working-class” literature: Farley gestures to the mutual understanding emanating from shared labor, even while strenuously resisting the notion that such an understanding results in some sort of shared and interchangeable identity. Cooperative labor produces a shared epistemology, and shared values, but these are not reducible to stereotype.

Even as factory authors sought to express themselves, however, bourgeois literary values threatened to silence them. Farley relates the laboring mode as being almost sacrificed, again, on the “altar of literature” in the struggles the women had with their engraver. The artist immediately struck down the idea of an allegorical cover, insisting that this approach was out of fashion. He attempted, however, to combine the original idea for a literary cover into dialogue with the image of the female laborer. The result is an image of a woman writing at a large desk littered with heavy books. Meanwhile, “the bee-hive was crowded under the table, or somewhere, but it was not the old-fashioned allegorical bee-hive, and might have passed for a stool.”\(^{503}\) Farley gently mocks the high aesthetic sensibilities of the artist, whose literary pretensions coincide with a laughable ignorance of the everyday world. In the bourgeois aesthetic distance from the natural world, a “bee-hive..might have passed for a stool.” In spite of

\(^{501}\) Ibid.

\(^{502}\) Ibid.

\(^{503}\) Ibid.
these pretensions, the factory women prevail and finally express their labor as they understand it, positioned within the laboring tradition.

III. Laborers, Economic Life, and Justice as Value

When women like Farley position factory labor among the fruits of industry, they highlight another important aspect of laboring literature: its emphasis on economics as a basic part of the human condition. Timothy Sweet’s study of the georgic mode in early American literature argues that the georgic’s portrayal of labor, as a form of interaction between humans and their environments, enables economic conditions to be particularly visible. This mode runs in the exact opposite direction of the pastoral, which suppresses market conditions on principle. The Lowell Offering’s cover illustrates this artistic technique of making economic conditions visible. When factory women define their labor by how it contributes to the world beyond it, they circumvent the patriarchal shelter’s horror at the idea of women laboring in economic spaces. The alternate perspective is that economic conditions pervade all aspects of human life; given this truth, women’s market-based labor benefits the world at large.

The person who emerges from these laboring conditions which sustain the wide world is a far cry from brutish laborers whose endless toil has stunted their development. Quite the opposite, laborers are already in possession of a knowledge crucial for civilization’s functioning, and as disciplined and adaptable thinkers they are society’s paradigmatic person. Virgil’s laborers know “before we take our implements to unfamiliar territory / we must work to

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504 See Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in American Literature, 1580-1864* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 2. Sweet specifically says that the georgic makes visible *homo oeconomicus*, but I avoid that term because in the field of economics it describes individual self-interest as a person’s primary motivation in the marketplace. This connotation is inaccurate for laboring literature, which emphasizes the collective labors of the people who generate markets.
ascertain its changing weather and winds’ moods, / to learn the ways and habits of that locality—
/ what’s bound to flourish there, and what to fail” (Georgics, 1.50-53). This know-how lying at
the heart of the georgic is not an inferior mode of knowledge, for it enables laborers to rise above
the caprices of chance via an almost scientific knowledge: “And so we have the power to
anticipate uncertain weather— / the day to reap, the day to sow—” (Georgics, 1.252-253). The
laborer’s knowledge of nature’s local, particular laws manifested “each in its specific place”
benefits society generally by making the choicest goods from each region available within vast
commercial networks.\footnote{See Georgics, 1.54-59 for regional products and wide markets.}
That ability to interpret and adapt to each region makes the laborer
humanity’s paradigm, for he can read the laws nature fixed from the start of human life, when
“Deucalion cast onto the world the stones from which mankind originated, a hardy race!”
(Georgics, 1.60-62). This pun on both “hard,” like humans sprung from stones, and on “hardy”
renders the laborer as the defining example of humanity, tracing back to its mythic origins.

Their characteristic hardiness, moreover, grants laborers the discipline to interpret human
society with equal canniness to their interpretations of natural laws. By presenting laborers as
cornerstones of society Virgil continues Hesiod’s social critique of upper-class leisured persons
as “gift eaters,” thereby reorienting cultural value around toil as the most fundamental social
contribution. The georgic laborer practices the virtues of sympathy and contentment by
remaining mindful not of the power or acquisition requisite to the highest social stations, but of
the needs defining the lowest: “For those with wants he feels a sorrow, not envy for the ones
with none” (Georgics, 2.499). Moreover, the laborer remains skeptical of political and economic
prestige: “To cruel codes of law, or madding market places, / or the public record office—he
simply gives no thought” (Georgics, 2.501-502). In this way the georgic mode offers a
formidable rebuff to political ambition and to dominion-based freedom as an ideal. Where the georgic laborer stabilizes society, the politically ambitious man radiates chaos: “This man aspires to the sack of Rome itself, all its poor hearths and homes, / just so he might imbibe from cups inlaid with gems and sleep beneath the coverings of an emperor. That man stockpiles a fortune while he broods on buried treasure” (*Georgics*, 2.505-507). The exercise of political freedom, and the greed and ambition so often accompanying it, lends itself to excess. Said differently, the powerful man grows increasingly blind to what is truly valuable. Thus the freedom from necessity necessary for ancient political life cannot function as the central social ideal in this literary mode, because it so easily creates social ruin. For that reason, dominion-based freedom does not preside as laboring literature’s preeminent ideal. In its place lies justice, the central social value and the province particularly of society’s toilers. To drive home this point, Virgil gestures to a myth (also referenced by Hesiod) in which Justice resided longest among the simple country laborers, “young men wed to meagre fare but born and built for work” (*Georgics*, 2.473). Justice “left her final footprints [among them] as she was taking leave of earth” (*Georgics*, 2.474). In this view humble laborers are both the keystone and, potentially, the salvation of society who alone can ensure harmony. Because Virgil presents the need to toil as part of a divine injunction after humanity fell from a leisured golden age, he also reframes labor as the key to returning to a second and distinct sort of golden age: “Under the enlightened leadership of Octavius and by means of the exertions of individual citizens, typified by but not necessarily limited to the husbandman, Rome may once more be entering a period of happiness and prosperity, which is characterized not by a miraculous transformation back to primal *otium* [i.e., leisure], as Virgil has earlier prophesied in *Eclogue 4*, but by the performance of equitable labor for the common welfare. In such circumstances, work is transformed from a curse into a
blessing.” Overcoming the divine curse of toil requires not being released from it, as in the ideal of freedom, but in cooperative submission to it. The blessing offered to society comes from diminishing the existential distinction placed between politics and labor, and between “dominating” and “dominated” social members, by seeing all members valued not in terms of freedom but justice.

To sum up, laboring literature consistently manifests a connection between labor, trade, social values, and justice as the ideal which should preside over all, but it does so in a way distinct from Marx. Laboring authors do not necessarily aspire to control over the means of production and a greater share of wealth, although some pieces of laboring literature might subscribe to a socialist or communist political view. The more fundamental value that these texts share unilaterally is the need for the aristocracy and bourgeoisie to reform their own snobbish prejudice against labor. One short piece from the labor paper *The Voice of Industry* illustrates this distinction. In this Feb. 27, 1846 issue, dubbed “The Valentine Offering,” a wealthy man proposes to a beautiful factory woman named Peggy Green, whom he has been eyeing from afar. He attempts to entice her into marriage by giving her an idea of his social standing:

Well, my father is a wealthy manufacturer—lives in the most aristocratic style—keeps a number of white servants, who are never allowed to see the front door, or speak unless some question is put to them; it being decidedly vulgar for servants to presume to converse on any subject except their work. As to myself. I am a gentleman—I spend my time in talking politics, smoking cigars, dressing and dancing.

506 Low, 18.

507 For one example socialist utopian piece of laboring literature, see Marie Howland’s *The Familistere; a Novel*, The American Utopian Adventure ; Ser. 2 (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1975).

Here the suitor’s aristocratic scorn is presented as a self-conscious attempt to silence laborers and render them invisible, referenced in the servants “who are never allowed to see the front door, or speak unless some question is put to them.” By implication, Peggy Green would have to assent to join in spurning laborers if she joins aristocrats’ ranks via marriage. Therefore she balks at the proposal: “What could I do with a gentleman? I could not live on cigars and politics, and dance the rest of the time. I have been instructed by my poor but honorable parents, to make myself useful to others, by acting well my part in the great drama of life—and not like an idle drone, live on the hard earned goods of the worthy laborer.” The factory woman quickly closes ranks with the “worthy laborer” against her suitor’s aristocratic scorn. Moreover she indicts him—and not the laborer—as a mindless “drone,” condemning his prodigal, selfish leisure and, in closing, urging him to seek happiness not in marriage but in moral reform. One can easily infer that she urges the manufacturer’s son to give up the wealth labor has yielded him, but in fact her advice is more general. She tells the man to become happy “by reforming in your vicious habits.” In the context of the whole piece, this means on the most fundamental level to recognize that the laborer be seen and heard—that is, given basic recognition for the aristocrat’s comfortable life.

For this reason authors incorporating the georgic mode and depicting toil (including especially the mill women of central interest to this study) ought not to be interpreted as depicting dominated persons within a dominated aesthetic, but instead as operating by a distinct set of assumptions. If we revisit for a moment Bourdieu’s reasons for interpreting his working-class interviewees as betraying a “dominated” aesthetic, I think that an alternate explanation emerges for his subjects’ ethical and seemingly primitive interpretations of art. Recall

\[^{509}\text{Ibid.}\]
Bourdieu’s insight that laborers consistently demonstrate moral responses to art: “their judgements make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis.” They refuse to interpret artwork as a self-standing creation according to bourgeois standards, and “the result is a systematic ‘reduction’ of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favor of ‘human’ content, which is barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic.”

But the same reactions Bourdieu describes become different if we eschew the issue of social power for a moment and think of the laborer’s interpretive aesthetics as being essentially the values of the laboring literary tradition. From this perspective, the work of art succeeds or fails based on its ability to account for basic human realities, the most fundamental of which is the need for persons to exercise ethical judgment to make their way in the world. These ethical interpretations reinforce the laborer’s display of his or her own humanity, which, from the laboring perspective, disproves rather than confirms barbarism. Moreover, as laborers resort to ethical interpretations and experiences from everyday life, their interpretations essentially function like a compass, orienting the laborer to the artwork, and the artwork to the world. The aesthetic interpretation here recreates the fundamental gesture of the georgic mode, which represents the wide world around labor. As Karen O’Brien puts it, “Genre is both a set of conventions and mode of social understanding, but few genres or modes invite their readers to consider their recreations of the social domain as openly as georgic.”

510 Bourdieu, 5.

511 Bourdieu, 44.

stubbornly refuse to render laborers invisible, as traditional aesthetics so often do. Similarly, the laborer’s ethical interaction with the work of art builds ties between the art object, the world, and the self. This interpretive gesture likewise stubbornly refuses rendering both the real world and the laborer in it invisible as well.

IV. The Essence of Aristocratic Contempt: Animals as Partners, Analogues

Thus far I have essentially shown how the laboring tradition counters the aristocratic scorn for labor, stemming from political theories about freedom, by instead viewing human society in lateral economic relationships defined not by domination, but by a primary and universal struggle with nature. This approach objects to derisive attitudes by seeing the vast sweep of humanity from the ground up. Laboring literature offers a related response to the political view of cooperative activity as animalistic, in contrast to the individualistic action presumed to be uniquely human. Recall the underlying logic of Aristotle’s definition of man as a political animal, defining humanity’s capacity for individual political action as the only trait setting humans apart from all other animals. If this was an elite status reserved for a few, it still set the terms for the rest of the species by virtue of its singularity. Labor, on the other hand, dragged human potential downward by forcing the laborer to be always “dominated by the necessities of life,” in thrall to processes transforming a person “into something akin to a tame animal.” Moreover, the cooperation necessitated by labor was the opposite of individualism and demonstrated certain person’s inability to rise of above mere species life. The farmer’s labor alongside other laborers sullied him, and his cooperative labors with the farm’s animal partners—dogs, horses, cattle—blurred any distinction between him and them.

One question arises along this train of thought, however: when farmer and ox plow a field

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together, during this shared activity is the farmer like his animal, or is his animal like him? One literary tradition, as we have seen, has already decided the answer. But it has done so by dropping the rejoinder out of the conversation. In the laboring literary tradition we witness a quite different view of the tasks which create and sustain the human world.

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod points out an essential difference separating all human activity from animal life: “This is the law that Cronus’ son has established for human beings: that fish and winged birds eat one another, since Justice is not among them; but to human beings he has given Justice, which is the best by far” (*WD*, 109-111). Hesiod directs this distinction specifically against aristocratic prejudice, as becomes clear when he decides to “tell a fable to kings” about the hawk and the nightingale (*WD*, 105). The nightingale protests being carried in the hawk’s talons, but the hawk admonishes her: “Stupid he who would wish to contend against those stronger than he is: for he is deprived of the victory, and suffers pains in addition to his humiliations” (*WD*, 105). It is futile for animals to protest violent, unequal power relationships, but this is not the case for humans. Glenn Most notes that “Hesiod establishes justice as an anthropological universal in his ‘fable’ by contrasting the condition of men with that of animals. For animals have no justice, and nothing prevents them from simply devouring one another. "  

The moral of the tale is to remind powerful persons, like the king to whom it is addressed, that justice prevents them from abusively controlling others.

Eons later, Arendt echoes the same sentiment from her own unlikely corner of political theory as she protests the tendency of modern sciences to observe animal behavior as an explanation for human behavior: “I am surprised and often delighted to see that some animals

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514 Most, xli.
behave like men; I cannot see how this could either justify or condemn human behavior.”

Once again, “Justice,” or the ethical questions to which all human activities may be submitted, prevents explaining away human acts—even the lowest, the most instinctive, or the most monotonous—as animalistic behavior. From this perspective the ethical capacity binds humans and distinguishes all of their activities from the whole of animal life. If anything, then, the labor occurring alongside animals and supposedly paralleling animal behavior, can be described just as Arendt describes these other comparisons of human activity with animals. These insights “do not close the gap between man and animals”; rather, they prove that “much more of what we know of ourselves than we thought also occurs in animals.”

Elsewhere, Arendt also suggests that all things and creatures brought into the sphere of human activity are not merely transmuted but transformed by the gesture, for “whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. That is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings. Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition.”

That process of transformation is one of the defining qualities of human life. Laboring literature follows a similar logic, and thus when laborers’ joined activity is analogized to that of bees, or any set of social animals, one must repeat the crucial retort dignifying labor: human activity is not bestialized in these comparisons; instead, humanity’s animal partners are lifted up and

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516 Arendt, quoting Adolf Portmann, 60.

anthropomorphized in the analogy.\textsuperscript{518} Consider, for instance, Theresa Serber Malkiel’s use of the familiar analogy between bees and laborers in her fictionalization of the Uprising of the 20,000, a 1909 New York garment industry strike. Malkiel describes a scene in which garment workers, who have been striking against the factories and starving themselves as they go without pay, listen to a labor speech in spite of their failing bodies:

Girls with sore throats and girls with broken noses; girls with wet, torn shoes and girls without hats or coats; shivering from cold and faint and hunger; they were all on hand; their condition didn’t matter a bit. Their vote was wanted and they came. Tired, half starved and almost dropping from weakness, they stood up on the tables, clung to the banisters, steadied themselves on windowsills and hung onto the balcony railings. Their deep, thoughtful eyes wide open, their lips parted, they tried not to miss a single word uttered from the platform and the expression of their worn faces was even more eloquent than words.

Like a numberless army of bees they rose in a body against those who were trying to mar their future.\textsuperscript{519}

\textsuperscript{518} This philosophical proposition—that is, that animals are raised in status insofar as their behavior parallels human acts, or becomes raised in status by virtue of cooperating as tame creatures in the human sphere—has been suggested obliquely in Arendt, and more squarely elsewhere. In \textit{The Problem of Pain}, for instance, C.S. Lewis toys with the idea that “the good sheepdog in the good homestead” might attain a new level of existence borne out of its cooperation with human beings. See C. S. Lewis, \textit{The Problem of Pain} (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 142-147. More recently, the cognitive sciences have explored whether teaching human language to animals enables a higher order of thinking. The rough answer, derived from disparate experiments across several species, is yes. The authors find that language enculturation allows some higher order species to display increased attention to objects, and to relationships between objects. However, even though language experiments elevate certain faculties in animals, this research also reinforces a certain dividing line. Even the most advanced species rarely evidence the susceptibility to language, or the ability to think about hypothetical situations, that is common to young children. See Stan A. Kuczaj, II and Jennifer L. Hendry, “Does Language Help Animals Think?,” in \textit{Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought}, ed. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 237–75. Tobias Menely’s study of a developing language of animal rights in the early modern period also points out that the definitional threshold set between humans and animals is always fluid, and often is used to facilitate the exercise of sovereign power. See especially Menely’s account of sovereign power in Agamben and Hobbes. Menely, 12-13; 48.

It would be easy for an author to animalize the suffering group of women here, to prioritize their bodily pain and diminish their psychological suffering to a symptom of species life. Instead, Malkiel attends to her laborers’ minds, to their mental toughness and intellectual alertness as they control fainting, failing bodies. In spite of these bodies, the women are fully open to the speech. They have “deep, thoughtful eyes wide open,” eyes opening a portal into intellectually vigorous minds, manifested likewise in the “eloquent” expressions of their faces. Like Virgil’s reference to the myth of Deucalion, here stands “a hardy race,” whose hardships produce the virtues of discipline and savvy. Malkiel’s extended depiction of the shirtwaist strikers’ virtues prepares the reader for the animal analogy she offers immediately after, where the woman come together “like a numberless army of bees.” While the bees analogy highlights a social collectivity, it is important to note the simile’s parameters: the women are not reduced to thoughtless drones; instead, the bees as a purpose-driven community are an “army.”

This form of animal analogy is a far cry from Rebecca Harding Davis’s discussion of degraded laborers in Life in the Iron Mills:

You may pick the Welsh emigrants, Cornish miners, out of the throng passing the windows, any day. They are a trifle more filthy; their muscles are not so brawny; they stoop more. When they are drunk, they neither yell, nor shout, nor stagger, but skulk along like beaten hounds. A pure, unmixed blood, I fancy: shows itself in the slight angular bodies and sharply-cut facial lines.\(^{520}\)

Put simply, these are sentences an author of laboring literature would never write. Like Malkiel, Davis analogizes her laborers to animals for the sake of highlighting social injustice, but the animal analogy runs in the opposite direction when laborers “skulk along like beaten hounds” and have a pedigree of alterity testifying to their “pure, unmixed blood.” Davis’s Cornish miners

are pitiable because they are brutish, their labor-warped minds deprived of full participation in the human sphere. To alert her middle-class readership to injustice, Davis begins by playing to their prejudices. But the story never quite rises above these prejudices insofar as it critiques the “self-made man” narrative by showing how steel mill owners refuse to reward exceptional ability when they see it. The story does not interrogate whether hard labor reduces men to the status of hounds; instead, it stresses the failures of liberal individualism insofar as Hugh Wolfe is indeed a “wolf” who, despite his remarkable qualities setting him apart from his class, is denied the ability to become a man. To reiterate: the author of laboring literature does not produce animal analogies like these because he or she refuses to entertain the question of whether labor makes humans animalistic in the first place.

Three common aesthetic tropes attend laboring literature’s philosophical approach to analogies between animals and laborers. First, the literature frequently follows Virgil in analogizing laborers and bees, who are nature’s representative economic producers. Virgil anthropomorphizes his society of bees in Book 4, describing them as “a small society comprising systems worthy of your high esteem. / Its leaders great of heart, its customs, character, and conflicts” (Georgics 4.3-4). Like humans, bees suffer vicissitudes spurring them on to ingenuity: “The more trials sent to test them, the keener they become, one and all, / to throw themselves into the mending of their tumbled world.” (Georgics, 4.248-249). When Virgil’s bees suffer two rival leaders in close proximity, social tensions “explode in all-out civil war” (Georgics 4.68). Political power rather than a behavioristic attempt to dominate territory explains conflicts between rival hives. Humans’ animal analogues are raised by the likenesses drawn, rather than bestializing the human laborer. A similar phenomenon occurs when the farmer uses his tame animals to help with his labors. Anthony Low notes that in the georgic, animal helpers join with
farmers in “a heroic activity, a kind of constructive warfare in which farmer and ox labor together as fellow-soldiers,” although here the battle’s contest is growing and not killing.\textsuperscript{521} Because the georgic does not question the laborer’s humanity, it is crucial that the laborer’s associations with animals raise the latter in esteem without compromising the former.

Authors of laboring literature often use a related technique when treating of the sexual passions as a dangerous natural threat to the “arts of peace” (\textit{Georgics}, 4.563). Great labors demand great and persistent energies, and mindful of that fact Virgil offers advice on how sexual passions ought to be managed so as not to distract from the project at hand. In the \textit{Georgics} erotic desire must be controlled and reserved to a proper timeliness, lest it sap creatures of the vital energies particular to their own roles and duties. For that reason, farmers “banish bulls to the back of beyond, to languish on their own / behind a mountain or the far side of a river’s current, / or keep them locked in pens well stocked with fodder. For it’s a fact, a female saps their strength and leaves them wasted by the sight of her / and turns their heads from thoughts of woodland fare and pasture” (\textit{Georgics}, 3.212-216). Eros vitiates its victims, without distinguishing between “man and beast, each and every race of earth...all of them rush headlong into its raging fury: love’s the same for one and all” (\textit{Georgics}, 3.242-244). Only bees as ideal laborers have found a way around this phenomenon by “refrain[ing] from intercourse [so that] their bodies never / weaken into ways of love, nor suffer pangs of labor” (\textit{Georgics}, 4.198-199). But since few creatures can imitate the example of bees’ selfless society, the poet warns readers that sexual passion threatens to drive the victim to distraction from other important obligations: “No other time a lion cub could slip from his mother’s mind / than when she roams the plains all hot and bothered” (\textit{Georgics}, 3.242-246). Passion must be controlled because it threatens to

\textsuperscript{521} Low, 8.
swallow up other labors—an insight Virgil repeats in the Aeneid as Aeneas’s passion for Dido threatens to derail the forging of Roman civilization itself. L.P. Wilkinson notes that regarding these discussions of sex, Virgil is “concerned with dissipation of energy at other times, with waste, with caeci stimulos amoris [the pangs of love]. And he now bursts out into a passionate reminder of the havoc lust can cause. Once again, man and beast are not distinguished.”

But when sexual passion is curtailed and limited to the proper time, as in the case of a bull who grows mighty upon being kept from the heifers, love serves “not as a weakener but a strengthener.” In early modern adaptations of the georgic, love’s labors join with the courtly ideal to become, for instance, in Spenser, a series of tasks where “legitimate love leading to marriage must serve out an apprenticeship, must prove itself over a period of time, and must act and labor in the world.” For factory women adapting the georgic mode, love also enters the circle of a series of timely labors. In Malkiel’s work for instance the main character, Mary, participates in the strike that threatens to destroy her relationship with her fiancee, Jim. While Jim initially disapproves of his betrothed taking part in anything so degrading as a strike, eventually she brings him into sympathy for the justice of their cause. Upon his change of heart, Mary asks Jim if he would marry her once the strike settles. He readily agrees: “I’ll marry you on the day your girls go back to work.”

This unconventional treatment of the marriage plot, where physical union requires first that lovers be brought into the sympathy of shared toil, demonstrates one way that laborer-authors rejected middle-class forms in favor of their own.

522 Wilkinson, 96.

523 Ibid.

524 Low, 57.

525 Malkiel, 81.
Raymond Williams notes the problematic nature of conventional narratives for working-class authors, because the “available forms of the novel [are] centered predominantly on problems of the inheritance of property and of propertied marriage, and beyond these on relatively exotic marriage and romance.” Especially in women’s laboring literature, however, the male suitor’s efforts must be adapted to the social and political project of affirming female labor’s dignity. Marriage is a secondary consideration at best, and frequently women’s suitors must like Jim suffer a waiting period for the sake of the factory woman’s laboring project, lest his efforts be rebuffed as threatening to the great and primary goal of yielding a successful harvest from one’s endeavors.

Laboring literature emphatically rejects degrading animal comparisons to the laborer, as it often just as forcefully resists the seductions of individualism. The literature typically has little to do with individuals. It may include a central protagonist, but such a person is in no way necessary or even “representative.” Virgil’s Georgics does not center on any particular laborer or even any particular type of laborer. When Spenser adapts Virgil’s model to The Faerie Queene, he likewise retains this element of de-centered, collective heroics, depicting “long labor, constant struggle, and hard, cooperative effort by many heroes working together at a task that is never finished.” When Lucy Larcom incorporates laboring literary elements into An Idyl of Work, she openly declares her lack of interest in individuality because it is incompatible with mill life: “The routine of such a life is essentially prosaic; and the introduction of several leading characters of equal interest [into An Idyl of Work] has seemed to make artistic unity impossible:

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527 Low, 39-40.
it has not, indeed, been attempted.”528 Because, as Larcom points out, a central character and traditional narrative circling that character are not necessary to this type of story, if one looks for these as artistic criteria one will judge the work, and not the interpretive framework itself, to be faulty.

V. Labor in the Divine View

The divine perspective consistently appears in laboring literature, from classical to modern times, as a crucial rhetorical element dignifying labor. In Hesiod, as already noted, when Zeus commands humanity to labor and to treat society’s least powerful with justice, he clearly demarcates labor from animal life and granting it basic human dignity. Virgil innovates upon this tactic in the *Georgics* by not only justifying this sort of activity via divine mandate, but also by showing how the cyclical endeavors of the country farmer buttress civilization while in turn being protected by political ingenuity. In book one’s Jupiter theodicy, “which many consider to be at the heart of the *Georgics*, Virgil reveals the important interconnections among farming, the constructive arts, divine providence, and civilization itself.”529 The Jupiter theodicy sequence rationalizes the laborer’s life by explaining that “it was Jupiter himself / who willed the ways of husbandry be ones not spared of trouble / and it was he who first, through human skill, broke open land, at pains / to sharpen wits of men and so prevent his own domain being buried / in bone idleness” (*Georgics* 1.121-124). Toil is the double-valent blessing and curse of a god who hates idleness.

This divine perspective is, of course, readily adapted to a Christian worldview and especially to the “Protestant ethic” Max Weber sees as so crucial to the development of

528 Larcom, vii.

529 Low, 9.
capitalism. When Lucy Larcom adapts these principles in her poem “Lowell at Sunset” to her vision of commerce-structured life in Lowell, “the beautiful City of Toil,” she reminds Lowell’s bustling crowds to remember that labor, far from being insignificant, is a matter of divine interest: “O ye who toil in the town, / The work of your hands is well; Do you know how close the heights lean down / Toward the busy depths where you dwell? / Look up! For the glorious gates / Above you are open spread, / And a splendor beyond your dream awaits / To illumine the ways you tread.” The divine view of toil appears with remarkable consistency across laboring literature of various eras. The reason for it becomes clear if we remember that labor in the ancient view suffered a “manifest disgrace of producing only ‘things of short duration.’” In Marx’s definition labor is essentially an extension of biological life, “man’s metabolism with nature,” in whose process ‘nature’s material [is] adapted by a change of form to the wants of man,’ so that ‘labour has incorporated itself with its subject.’ For Marx “labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever recurring cycle of biological life.” As such it is fleeting, a basic component of life which is so mundane as to hardly merit notice. It is only from a perspective above or beyond time that the most transitory of activities can have any lasting significance. When the laboring-literature author locates recourse in the immortal perspective, she gestures to the divine functioning as a repository of time, a collector of humble daily tasks.

Lucy Larcom meditates on this contrast between labor’s insubstantiality in the human sphere and its transformation into significance in the divine sphere. In her poem, “Weaving,” a

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531 Arendt, 102.

mill woman “all day...stands beside her loom; / The flying shuttles come and go” as she partakes of an unceasingly passing activity reminiscent of “the winding river” outside the mill.  

“Weaving” is a labor which only merits significance when it becomes continuous with the futility of all human life, which God nonetheless values and binds together in a “vast work”:

So, at the loom of life, we weave  
Our separate shreds, that varying fall,  
Some strained, some fair: and, passing, leave  
To God the gathering up of all,  
In that full pattern wherein man  
Works blindly out the eternal plan.

In his vast work, for good or ill,  
The undone and the done he blends:  
With whatsoever woof we fill,  
To our weak hands his might he lends,  
And gives the threads beneath his eye  
The texture of eternity.

Larcom’s poem elaborates upon this insight, that labor partakes of eternity, by rising to a vision of a national economy weaving and clothing itself in a mantle of guilt, “a Nessus-robe of poisoned cloth,” because of its complicity with slave labor (56). From Hesiod to Larcom, when labor becomes a divinely sanctioned activity it also inevitably and immediately becomes an ethical one, because to be elevated above mere species life is to also to imbue every activity with the human capacity for thought and judgment. Thus the laboring poet’s function is to remind and admonish human beings of the ever-present divine perspective on the wide panorama of human

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533 Larcom, “Weaving,” 1-2, 4. It is important to reiterate my earlier point that the weaver does not produce a “work,” because as a wage laborer in the mills her life is devoted to a process and not a product.

life, and in so doing to call human beings back to their own humanity. What Glenn Most says of Hesiod he might as well say of Lucy Larcom two and a half millenia later:

For Hesiod a defining mark of our human condition seems to be that, for us, justice and work are inextricably intertwined. The justice of the gods has imposed upon human beings the necessity that they work for a living, but at the same time this very same justice has also made it possible for them to do so. To accept the obligation to work is to recognize one’s humanity and thereby to acknowledge one’s place in the scheme of things to which divine justice has assigned one, and this will inevitably be rewarded by the gods; to attempt to avoid work is to rebel in vain against the divine apportionment that has imposed work upon human beings, and this will inevitably be punished. 535

From the divine perspective, labor is at least equal to, if not morally superior to, all other activities and social distinctions. The immortal perspective overcomes human derision for labor as a passing activity because eternity translates fleeting labors into permanent works. Put differently, eternity is the vessel of all human activities, from the most eventful to the most humble.

VI. Between Nature and the State: The Precarious Laboring Moment

Labor takes on a lasting significance when joined to the divine, but of course humans experience only its ephemerality. Laboring literature straddles these oppositions by focusing especially on the precarious laboring moment, in which labor appears as an urgent, dignified, and moral matter between forces from all sides threatening to frustrate the laborer’s every effort. 536

535 Most, xxix.

536 This dire moment in part explains authors’ tendency to, like Virgil, present labor as a peacetime warfare. For some striking parallels between laboring and war, see Renny Christopher, “Work Is a War, or All Their Lives They Dug Their Graves,” in Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature, ed. Michelle Tokarczyk (New York: Routledge, 2012), 35–51. I do not emphasize this trope here because it seems to be a gendered trait of laboring literature, and factory women do not favor this specific comparison.
Laboring literature emphasizes the dynamic nature of the present moment over any sort of narrative resolution because, for Virgil and others “life is chaotic, but ... balance is as well.” Thus, the laboring moment proceeds in a fragile and temporary relationship with nature on the one hand and the political world on the other. Virgil’s husbandman relentlessly continues in a “world [that] forces all things to the bad, to founder and to fail,” mindful that a natural disaster or plague might blight his efforts at any time (Georgics 1.200). And while laboring literature at the same time insists that labor proceeds not under but alongside the political world, each sphere nonetheless exists in a fragile alliance. One fundamentally human activity makes the other possible, with labor and politics fixed in an endless process of mutually constituting each other. Just as the farmer “sustains his native land,” so too does the political state make it possible for him to practice the “arts of peace” by ensuring social stability (Georgics, 2.514; 4.563). Labor sustains the political state, and in just times the political state exercises “regard for the labours / of the plough” (Georgics, 1.506-507). When the political state weakens, however, the symbiotic relationship between labor and politics is upset, and “right and wrong are mixed up here, there’s so much warring everywhere, evil has so many faces,” that such regard is utterly lost (Georgics, 1.505). The grand project of labor fails, and “bereft of farmers, fields have run to a riot of weeds. / Scythes and sickles have been hammered into weapons of war” (1.507-508). Because of the devastating consequences of such political turmoil to labor, the laboring author insists yet again on justice and admonishes the political state to “regard...labours” once again. Lucy Larcom makes the same point in her preface to An Idyl of Work, when she reflects thirty years later at a moment when factory labor has succumbed to the precarious moment and been vanquished by its

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enemies. By the 1870s society has unmistakably devalued industrial labor since the antebellum period, and this phenomenon once again results from politics’ flawed way of thinking about labor: “That any work by which mankind is benefited can degrade the worker seems an absurd idea to be met with in a Christian republic.”538 The labor occurring alongside politics is not degrading but profoundly human, and those who entertain prejudice against labor as degrading pose a “danger” to the nation “of returning” to a “feudal half-civilization” revelling in “wealth, show, and luxury” but ignorant of true value.539

VII. Revisiting the Laboring Literary Tradition’s Relationship to Politics in the Modern Era

If authors of laboring literature depict labor in an alliance with politics, but in opposition to all political thinking equating labor with a dominated condition, does this in itself furnish a sort of political stance in the modern era? The answer is yes, sometimes, and often no. The literature, as I have shown, emanates from toil as the central value and shaping force. It stridently insists on a certain equality between laborers and all other people because of their basic vulnerability to life in the world. But this egalitarian outlook does not amount to a political stance arguing for transforming social stratifications, although some laboring authors might take up this secondary position as a consequence of the first.

Take for instance, the diametrically different political stances of two former factory women who both produced works of laboring literature: Lucy Larcom and Marie Howland. Larcom constantly insisted on the need for society to value labor, as already noted, yet she advocated neither women’s suffrage nor labor strikes. Writing to her friend and fellow mill

538 Larcom, ix.

539 Larcom, ix.
operative Harriet Hanson Robinson, Larcom confides, “I am for human rights for woman. I never did believe in man’s claim to dictate to her. But I want to work for her elevation in my own way.” Elsewhere she jokes, “You know I am way behind the times, am not even a ‘suffrage woman’ yet, though I haven’t the least objection to the rest of women’s having it. Don’t you see, I’m constitutionally on the fence.” In an issue that will be explored at greater length in the next chapter, Larcom also seemed to reject labor strikes as the appropriate reaction to capitalist exploitation. In *An Idyl of Work* when factory women go on strike in Lowell, most of Larcom’s characters go on vacation in New Hampshire. When Larcom insists in her writings that Americans must radically improve their attitudes towards labor, her recommendation to society does not translate into political activism.

Mill work, on the other hand, helped to radicalize Marie Howland. After her early years in Lowell boardinghouses, Howland embraced Fourierist ideas and communal living, going on to participate in three experimental communities: the Fourierist Unitary Household in New York City; a utopian socialist commune in Topolobampo, Mexico; and a single-tax community in Fairhope, Alabama. Howland was an advocate of economic independence for women and a proponent of free love, insisting on women’s full autonomy in every area of their lives. Her

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541 Ibid.

542 Fore more information on Howland’s life and writings, see Holly Jacklyn Blake, “Marie Howland—19th-Century Leader for Women’s Economic Independence,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 74, no. 5 (November 2015): 878–1190. Howland was not alone in experiencing Lowell as a starting point for communal living. In *Farm to Factory*, Thomas Dublin also finds this phenomenon in the life of Mary Paul, who labored in the mills for the roughly average stint of four years, was briefly employed in garment-making in Vermont, and then experimented with utopian communal living for a year. See Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 1.
novel, *The Familistere*, demonstrates her commitment to each of these issues as she charts the Forest family’s eventual embrace of a utopian community built through the investment of a European aristocrat: Paul, the Count de Frauenstein. The novel tells a collective story of social empowerment for women and laborers through the particular story of its heroine, Clara Forest. Over the course of her life, Clara learns to insist on her own utopian socialist beliefs; her eventual marriage to the likeminded count symbolizes the success of her endeavors. Because the narrative details how characters come to share the same values necessary for establishing a utopian socialist commune, mental states are central in this book. Originally titled *Papa’s Own Girl*, Clara comes into her own ironically by mastering the ideological language initiated by her progressive father, Dr. Forest, and then finds her soulmate by recognizing his use of that same language. Love is a key concept in the narrative’s movement from the nuclear family model to the communal model of society in this novel, but love primarily manifests itself as an ideological affair. Characters love others when they hear their own language (i.e., their own beliefs) in another’s mouth. That ideological language testifies to a spiritual unity so close that the doctor’s, Clara’s, and Paul’s speech all might be substituted for each other. In essence, they are one character, one mind, in separate bodies.543

The book ends with a tour of the Social Palace, which mimics the tours of the factory in the Lowell *Offering*, on a day of community festivities. Part of the celebration involves welcoming the first baby born in the Social Palace, which happens to be Clara and Paul’s son. Although the narrative culminates in Clara’s and Paul’s love, that love is primarily ideological—sex remains conspicuously in the background. One might explain the novel’s careful omission of

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sex in terms of nineteenth-century conventions, but conjugal love gets backgrounded for a deeper reason consistent with the book’s philosophy. In the journey towards this communal utopia founded, first and foremost, on a belief in the brotherhood of mankind, biological difference must be erased because it is problematic. For instance, after the baby’s birth Clara’s father makes a speech to the community in which he claims the child belongs to all members of the Social Palace: “It is our baby. It is the child of the Social Palace. Every man is its father, every woman its mother, and every child its brother and sister.” When the doctor claims Clara and Paul’s son as the community’s, he also diminishes Clara’s role as a mother, just as the Social Palace’s nursery turns raising children into a systematic factory-type of labor rather than an intimate familial bond. The nuclear family must be diminished for the commune to take over its role and for women to gain equal rights as wage earners alongside their husbands. The familial bond is replaced by a bond between peers; hence, the tour guide going through the nursery claims that babies in the Social Palace fuss only when they are truly hurt because they intuitively desire their peers’ approval. One’s peers supply one’s most basic social needs. But the transition from family to peer-based society also requires women to “unsex” themselves to some degree by creating a uniformity of both mind and body between women and men. In a sense the original title, Papa’s Own Girl, is the more apt one for this novel because Clara’s development is a development towards becoming like her father, and her father figures as an odd, oedipal substitute at several points in the book. For instance, when Clara returns home after leaving her first husband, she explains, “I am going to one who never fails me; one who always loves and caresses me, even when I commit the enormity of daring to suffer.” When the book ends on the note of Clara

544 Howland, 546.

545 Howland, 280.
holding her and Paul’s baby but asserting herself as “papa’s own girl,” the narrative implies that Clara gives birth, in a sense, to her father’s infant insofar as she finally becomes fecund within the terms of the ideological system he has helped to make concrete. (Paul chooses Oakdale as the location for his utopian community because Dr. Forest lives there.) Sex—because it creates a nuclear family threatening to protect its own interests against the interests of the community—presents a problem here, and thus it must be subverted to the community’s great project of shared labor and partly erased by it.

I mention the stark political differences between these two authors of laboring literature to make an important qualification about laboring literature, generally. I have sketched out definitions, philosophical interventions, and aesthetic tropes of this literature, each element of which opposes political hierarchy and individualism in some way. I have also made the point that traditional agricultural labor in the classical era and market-based industrial labor in the modern one possess formal similarities—similarities enabling authors of vast historical difference to write about labor in similar ways. But of course if labor in the modern era can include market-based labor, the question, then, is whether this literature ought to be recouped for political readings, but under the more radical political labels of socialist or Communist, where market-based labor is a central concern. If authors present wage-earning as labor and insist on justice for the laborer, does this amount to a radical political claim to economic justice? This possibility, latent in a literature stressing cooperation and social collectives, would raise some serious objections from the thinker on whom I have relied to uncover the works of labor as a literary tradition: Hannah Arendt.

When Arendt parses labor from work in The Human Condition, she does so with the larger purpose of reclaiming a clear understanding of action and political freedom in the long
western tradition. Most likely Arendt would have regarded the appropriation of her terms *labor* and *work* for the sake of exposing the alternative values of a laboring literature with skepticism, if not hostility. Arendt’s objective in illuminating the differences between labor, work, and action is to re-institute an appreciation for *action*, whose hallmarks are individuality, disagreement, and pluralism, against mass society’s conforming tendencies in the modern era. From Arendt’s perspective, labor’s rise as a matter of public concern is complicit in those conforming tendencies, because labor is attached to ultimately tyrannical, universal biological processes. When laboring concerns in the form of the national economy overtake the public sphere, the tyranny of biological life overwhelms the freedom of public discourse. Labor’s values feed the threat of totalitarianism in modern-day mass society, where democratic principles turn into a rule by “nobody.” “This nobody, the assumed one interest of society as a whole in economics as well as the assumed one opinion of polite society in the salon, does not cease to rule for having lost its personality,” Arendt insists, for “the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions.”546 In Arendt’s view, when laboring concerns overtake social values, the resulting society substitutes an unthinking behaviorism for political action, the end of which is to control mass populations: “Society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.”547 This push towards normative behavior is a serious charge indeed, and one that seems to reinforce the idea that a literature radiating out from labor as a fundamental value will tend to insist on shared values and


547 Ibid.

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a sort of “hive mind.” Raymond Williams makes a similar point in *Culture and Society* when he faults Lenin for suppressing cultural productions threatening to communism’s (labor-centric) values, and cautions elsewhere that “an emphasis of solidarity which, by intention or by accident, stifles or weakens such growth may, evidently, bring a deep common harm. It is necessary to make room for, not only variation, but even dissidence, within the common loyalty.” If laboring literature does tend towards this “emphasis of solidarity,” then perhaps it merely reflects the tension between liberty and domination by quashing independence and dispersing the dominion over labor more generally, under the guise of a false and propagandistic sham of freedom.

While there are some instances of laboring literature which emphasize solidarity to the point of stymying dissent and nullifying difference, this totalitarian tendency in the name of progress is not inherent to the terms of laboring literature. Howland’s novel marks one instance of absolute intellectual uniformity presented as freedom and progress. But Larcom, who shares many of Howland’s core principles about society’s urgent need to value the laborer, eschews political means to this end. Returning to my earlier warning against defining and interpreting the literature in terms of the author’s class, it is also important to remember that authors of laboring literature need not be politically socialist, or communist, or feminists, or labor activists, nor do their writings need to espouse predictable stances on these issues. This literature focuses on labor as a central subject and radiates outward from there. Authors of laboring literature consistently stress that labor is an activity requiring cooperative relationships; unlike Howland, they do not always agree that this amounts to a fixed identity necessitating spiritual communion or ostentatious displays of entirely interchangeable values. Labor requires not subordination but

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548 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 334. For Williams’s criticism of Lenin’s flawed interpretation of Marx, and his consequent flawed “theory of culture,” see Williams, *Culture and Society*, 283.
cooperation. It is a physical activity which, when coordinated between people, requires a temporarily shared mental focus. When the labor itself ends, however, the need for a shared mental state also ceases. This is how Lucy Larcom allows for diversity within unity where laborers are concerned. In *An Idyl of Work*, Minta Summerfield debates leaving factory labor in pursuit of some activity which will help her to become a scholar. The woman seeks a balance between toil and study, because “Heads like to be employed, as well as hands,” and she wonders, “Is there no way to give each a fair chance?” Her aristocratic friend Miriam Willoughby suggests “the Brook Farm experiment,” where her own “well-born friend was there, for weeks, / Doing her share of menial work, to give / Others free hours of study: and she learned, / In that community, to reverence hands / Hardened by useful toil, no less than brows / Bent with the weight of thought.” This experience makes the experiment useful for affluent women to overcome their own prejudices towards labor, but factory women need no such lessons. Minta’s fellow factory worker Eleanor protests the utopian community because of the way it levels distinctions not only of station, but of personality, by forcing all aspects of life to be shared: “There’s no home / For any one, in everybody’s home; / And home’s the very best of selfish things in all this selfish world.” In this view the commune erases positive forms of being “selfish”—that is, of having a distinct self. Against this possibility, she tells her roommate Esther that “our one little room, is more / to me than ten Brook Farms,” to which Minta adds, “I’d rather

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550 Ibid.

551 Ibid.
struggle on, / And puzzle out the problem by myself...I will ask no man’s help or blessing.”

The conversation enacts diversity within a group of women brought together by shared labor, with the exception of the also-present Miriam Willoughby. Each factory woman attests to her own need to claim her own perspective, with Eleanor’s emphasis on innocently “self-ish” spaces and Minta’s need to think outside of the constraining ideological context of Brook Farm’s social utopia, which, implicitly, is also a patriarchal context of “man’s help” for others. While the women obviously share labor and values, they proudly insist on their own rights to the intellectual independence necessary to maintain the life of shared labor as something above the level of being a mere drone.

Thus, laboring authors such as Howland and Larcom might disagree politically on whether utopian socialism might succeed in bringing justice to the laborer in the modern era. They do, however, share one specifically modern literary value in spite of their political differences. Each manifests a profound opposition to individualism as an artificial and misleading social value. Howland’s novel demonstrates this opposition insofar as the narrative action culminates in mutual agreement between all key characters. Larcom also demonstrates an opposition to individualism throughout her fiction and non-fiction writings. Nowhere does she make that opposition more clear than when she takes up the role of literary critic, distancing herself from any perceived alliance with individualistic thought or its literary corollaries, Transcendentalism and Romanticism. Larcom opens her memoir, *A New England Girlhood*, with a reflection on how autobiography as a form runs the danger of being reducible to “conceit and

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552 Larcom, *Idyl*, 139. According to Larcom, most mill women were skeptical of Brook Farm as a self-indulgent experiment for affluent idealists: “We often heard the Brook Farm Community talked of...and were curious about it as an experiment at air castle building by people who had time to indulge their tastes.” Larcom is quoted in Eisler, 33.
egotism.” However, in Larcom’s estimation, autobiography rises above these tendencies so long as it candidly witnesses to the fact that “none of us can think of ourselves as entirely separate beings.” In Larcom’s view, it is not only egotistical but also deceitful to attempt “withdrawing mysteriously into oneself” so as to set oneself apart from humanity.

This tendency to withdraw and set oneself apart from others, while it does not necessarily inhere in autobiography in Larcom’s view, does seem inherent to the vein of individualism running through Transcendentalist and Romantic thought. Larcom wittily skewers both throughout her writings. In an 1857 letter to Harriet Hanson Robinson, a friend from her “New England Girlhood” in the mills, Larcom inquires about Robinson’s visit to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s house for a meeting of an anti-slavery society. “Didn’t it seem funny to go agossiping to the house of the Seer?” she queries. Presumably referencing Emerson’s Lyceum lectures during her time in Lowell, Larcom continues, “I should like to see the philosopher again. I don’t think I should be afraid of him now...Sometimes I like philosophers, and sometimes I don’t. The thing is to live. Beautiful theories don’t make any of us do that.” Larcom implies that when she was younger and more impressionable she was inclined to revere Emerson as a solemn intellectual, but as an adult she sees the self-serving nature of Emerson’s stance as a “Seer.” He is a prophet spreading a gospel of individualism out of keeping with lived experience.

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556 Robinson, 103. For Larcom’s reference to Emerson’s Lyceum lectures during her childhood in the mills, see *New England*, 252-253.
In a wonderful jab, Larcom adds, “I don’t wonder at your expecting the parrot to talk ‘transcendentally.’” For Larcom, the language of transcendentalism can be absorbed from others—parroted—without thinking. In this quick aside, Larcom implies that transcendentalism as a philosophy derives from social context rather than any sort of inner revelation or prophesy. As such, it is a performance and a farce.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has taken the long, two-millenia view of literary history to trace a deep tradition of laboring literature, expressed in but not limited to the georgic mode, so that it can be seen more fully in mill women’s writings. I have spent a great deal of time drawing out ideas in the classical literature out of my conviction that certain facets of the georgic mode and its literary kin remain underappreciated. This phenomenon occurs because scholars continue to underestimate the depths of cultural contempt for laborers, not just as it was expressed in ancient times, but as it continues in the modern era in a priori assumptions about the laborer as a deficient subject and an object of pity. In failing to recognize these presumptions, scholars can impose vertical, hierarchical frameworks on laboring literature, which formally parallel the political presumptions creating aristocratic scorn. To uncover how much those interpretive apparatuses miss, I have sketched out shared themes and likenesses in historically distant works. I tease out literary origins, but there is also a great deal to be done after the antebellum period as laboring literature becomes transcribed to ever new laboring traditions and art forms.

For instance, Michael Denning has argued in The Cultural Front that Popular Front artists sought “a laboring of American culture,” one facet of which aimed at bringing laborers’ values into mainstream works of art.557 “As children from working-class families grew up to

557 Denning, xvii.
become artists in the culture industries, and American workers became the primary audience for those industries,” a moment of new aesthetic sensibilities entered U.S. culture. Certain of these works yield fresh interpretations when placed in dialogue with the laboring tradition. Take, for example, Frank Capra’s iconic film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey—whose name may deliberately allude to the georgic—is another man who struggles to see the dignity of his own “works and days” as his commitment to his community prevents him from rising above a hardscrabble, humble existence in his town. Bailey’s ambition and intelligence lead him to want to take part in the wider world of human events, but his economic “labors” in the local bank force him instead to sustain Bedford Falls at every crisis. Denning deems Capra’s films a rather sentimental version of “mainstream populist rhetoric,” but this film actually parallels laboring literature *topoi* to a remarkable degree. The angel Clarence communicates the divine reminder that George’s labor is dignified and, from the perspective of eternity, a thing of enduring moral significance. George labors in spite of Mr. Potter’s aristocratic scorn and in defiance of the rich man’s thirst to exploit and control him. The political world of great deeds exists laterally, literally off-scene in the form of world war and Harry Bailey’s congressional medal of honor. Amidst economic precarity and social underappreciation, George’s labor endures. His chief conflict is psychological: George must learn to see his life as meaningful and dignified—a not-inferior alternative to the glorious life represented most fully in his brother Harry. Categorizing the film as part of a laboring literary tradition helps to change our estimation of it—not in terms of the overall “failure” of Popular Front culture to enact the “laboring of American culture,” but

558 Ibid.

559 See Denning, 127.
in the endurance of a literary tradition in innovative forms. The same holds true for the New England factory women who enjoyed a brief efflorescence of literary activity before economic conditions drove them from the mills.

As with George Bailey’s psychological struggle to value his own life of relentless labors, mill women’s literature likewise follows this pattern of stressing characters’ psychological makeup alongside laboring literary elements. Their task lies in learning to embrace cooperative labor via the feminine-gendered psychology of sympathy. What results when laboring literary values are grafted onto feminine sympathies in the market economy is a phenomenon in stark contrast to the patriarchal shelter. I term this feminine stance within laboring literature *the rented room*.

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560 Denning, 118.
Chapter 5

CONTEXT AND CONDUCT, OR LABORING ASPIRATIONS IN RENTED ROOMS

There everlasting spring abides,
And never-withering flowers.
Death, like a narrow sea, divides
This heavenly land from ours.

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green;
So to the Jews old Canaan stood,
While Jordan rolled between.

...Meanwhile the river rose, and downward bore
Strange booty, stolen from the upper farms,—
A fence, a hen-coop, torn roots of old trees,
And once a little cottage, half unroofed.
That stopped the music, and the singers three
Leaned out in wonder, while their thoughts went up
To the stream’s far-off sources.

Lucy Larcom, An Idyl of Work

As floodwater slows production at a Lowell textile factory one rainy April, it also frees the three main characters of Lucy Larcom’s *An Idyl of Work* to take stock of their roles in a rapidly industrializing society. Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel first discuss the meaning of the term “lady,” critiquing the erosion of the word into a false show of status from its Old English origins as a “giver of loaves.” Being a “lady,” Esther insists, consists in embracing the feminine condition wherein “our Lord has given us ‘Service’ for a badge.”

The women grow silent,

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561 Lucy Larcom, *An Idyl of Work* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), 21. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *IW*. 
reflecting on this divine mandate, and then Eleanor calls for a hymn to punctuate the sacred “preaching” they have just heard (IW, 21). As the factory women gaze out the window upon the swollen river and its opposite slope, Eleanor sings about other rivers separating vastly different modes of life: the Jordan, flowing between the Jews and the promised land; and death, separating strife-ridden mortals from holy souls in heaven. Larcom’s suggestive frame-within-a-frame raises a crucial question for interpretation here: as the mill women ponder the Jordan separating travellers from the Holy Land in front of a river, are they on the side of the panting pilgrims, or are they already in an earthly heaven? In a stunning moment, Larcom suggests the answer as a broken “little cottage, half unroofed” drifts in front of her characters’ shocked eyes, alongside other remnants of farmhouses upstream, all flowing alongside the “torn roots of old trees” (IW, 23). These mill women, drawn together into a sisterly bond by their shared labors, watch the broken remnants of the patriarchal shelter go by, with its ancient tradition of enclosing female labor within its bounds. On both a literal and a figurative level, this shelter is mysterious in its origins, and the women from their alternate labor space can only “lean out in wonder, while their thoughts went up / To the stream’s far-off sources” (IW, 23). Homes, hen coops, fences—these are symbols of patriarchal control delimiting female (re)productive power, as well as being broken emblems of broken traditions, coming down to the mill like “torn roots of torn trees.” Larcom’s mill women contemplate the mysteriousness of their own present situations as well as the shrouded origins from which they have emerged. In this masterfully presented poetic juxtaposition Larcom makes clear that mill women, if only momentarily, enjoy the best conditions for female laborers this side of heaven.

This chapter explores factory women’s writings as they construct new spaces for women’s labors, after rejecting the cultural bias insisting on the patriarchal shelter as the
vanishing point for all of women’s activity. Factory authors recognized the shelter as an inadequate, broken framework for interpreting women’s industrial labors, but the issue was whether the broken shelter, under which feminine virtue had been defined, meant also that wage-earning women were also, by extension, broken by their laboring environments. Chapter Two showed how Harriet Farley entertained that possibility in her more gloomy moments. For other women to overcome this forced binary, however, they had to think about how factory life might offer transformative contexts for feminine identity and female virtue, where cooperative labor itself functions as a catalyst for positive accounts of womanhood. In this chapter I argue that female factory writers overcame the challenge of defining women’s wage labor by an absence—that is, the absence of the patriarchal shelter—through joining the laboring literary tradition to an emergent persona for female laborers in the market economy, termed here, the *rented room*.

I. Mapping Factory Women’s Rented Rooms

The *rented room* describes an emergent literary persona, where labor and living bring together women creating “a fresh society / of eager, active youth, long held apart / In rustic hamlets; that, like flint and steel, / Meeting, struck light from faculties unknown.” As Lucy Larcom implies, when women’s labor was released from being sequestered in private domestic spaces, the result was enlightening for exposing women’s “faculties unknown.” This phenomenon yielded a panoramic view, via the laboring literary mode, of women as a “fresh society” whose labors sustain society as a whole. When Larcom and others cannily adapt laboring elements into their depictions of factory women, the result is alchemy: both for the laboring literary tradition as a poetic form, and for nineteenth-century ideological frameworks underlying female identity. By validating the female wage-earner’s importance, the *rented room*

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562 Larcom, *Idyl*, 178-179
runs opposite the logic of the patriarchal shelter by in effect ratifying women’s entrance into market conditions. This is in part a direct consequence of incorporating laboring tropes into wage-earning women’s literature, for as critics Timothy Sweet and Karen O’Brien have noted, labor-centric literary modes like the georgic more readily present human economic relations than other forms seeking to suppress or belittle this facet of life.  

Women would likely have had trouble viewing their own labors in a laboring literary mode before industrialization allowed them to enter *en masse* into commercial industries. Critics examining the georgic, specifically, have often noted it is not a mode naturally amenable to women. Kate Lilley points out that “the pedagogical prerogatives and imperatives of georgic authorship are usually presumptively male and masculine.” Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, on the other hand, sees in Frances Burney’s novel *The Wanderer* (1814) a moment in which women can taste independence in economies driven by their own labors, but as the novel resolves its main conflict via a discourse of property rights, it ultimately betrays “an all-pervasive fantasy ...of a return to patriarchal protection.” The U.S. industrial economy seems to have modified these obstacles to a female laboring tradition, however, because it allowed women to enter

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market conditions in a sustained and highly visible manner. Women became immersed in market-based labor, and factory women’s rented room personae celebrate the female laborer as a distinct sort of economic creature. She is not one motivated by self-interest, competition, or the desire to distinguish herself by amassing wealth. Her wage-based labors instead use laboring topoi to reinforce both the dignity of wage-earning’s modest gains and of industrial labor’s meaningfulness as a society-sustaining activity. Indeed, one factory woman goes so far to define operative “as those who, by their industry, energy, and enterprises, are the producers of all that is around, which render us more independent and happier, than the other nations of the earth; and, hence, the most honorable class, and those who are of the greatest benefit to the world.”566 As with this definition, the rented room considers the significance of women’s labors as they open out into the wide world. When women see their labor this way, they use a literary mode operating in a way similar to early modern British women writing georgic verse epistles: the form allows women to stage “cultures of female homosociality and affect between women” which exist apart from, and in opposition to, male societies.567 The patriarchal shelter, if referenced at all, has little to do with the scope of the rented room’s vision.

Sympathetic Cooperation as Virtue, Against a Hostile World

Outside the patriarchal shelter, this literature presents female solidarity as the basis of the female laborer’s virtue rather than defining her character in submissiveness to a patriarch’s control. If we think of virtue as an excellence oriented towards the achievement of a particular goal, it becomes clear that when the rented room persona finds a new context for female virtue, it also modifies previous, domestically enshrined understandings of female virtue altogether.

566 Editorial,” Operatives’ Magazine, no. 1.4 (July 1841): 64. The editorial also notes that this issue is the first in which the magazine exclusively began to publish factory women’s writings.

567 Lilley, 169.
Political theorist Alex Gourevitch points out that virtue has a political component insofar as it is a trait a society encourages for its own benefit. “The politics of virtue has generally been associated with coercive socialization into shared traditions and institution,” Gourevitch notes, and through lionizing certain traits a state directs various person’s aspirations towards the achievement or maintenance of a social ideal.\textsuperscript{568} As Gourevitch notes for nineteenth century laborers generally, however, mill women embrace cooperation in \textit{rented room} literature without influence from politics or institutional traditions. By positing their own form of excellence, they anticipate the parallel self-regulating gesture of late-nineteenth century male labor reformers. Factory women, like these later men, developed “a way of thinking about virtue as a form of solidarity that workers inculcated in themselves, through their own self-organization and education, rather than via the coercive apparatus of the law” or, in women’s case, of patriarchal control. In “A Dialogue,” for instance, two friends meditate on how they have formed a friendship in the factory system which never would have been possible at home. Augusta, reflecting on factory life to her friend Emma, realizes that “Many, like us, have been made glad by such intercourse with kindred minds, who, had they remained at home, would probably never have known the pleasures of exalted friendship” because “‘caste’ would have forever excluded from these privileges in their native towns.”\textsuperscript{569} Both women note that the patriarchal shelter imposes a constraining, hierarchical way of looking at society generally, and each admits that she previously harbored the shelter’s closed-minded prejudice against factory women. But by living in the factory town, these women have become members of “a truely [sic] republican community, or rather we have among us the only aristocracy which an intelligent people should

\textsuperscript{568} Gourevitch, 140.

\textsuperscript{569} “A Dialogue,” \textit{Operatives’ Magazine}, no. 1.3 (June 1841): 37.
sanction—an aristocracy of worth.” In line with the perspectives found in laboring literature, for these women the experience of laboring, combined with sympathy, transforms their basic sense of value.

Beyond the shelter women also flout traditional ways of thinking about human excellence, as in the case of an essay titled “The Human Soul” in which a factory woman inverts the political hierarchy placing reason over sympathy, and mind over emotion. She muses, “It is often and truly said, that ‘tis intellect which raises us above the brute creation, and fits us for the society of the highest order of spiritual existences. Yet are not the social affections to form the golden chain of union between us and them?” In this view sympathy becomes the touchstone of human excellence because it allows human beings complete fulfillment of their natures. Those natures are social and spiritual, and thus the narrator asks, “What would it avail that we were endowed with the same noble intellectual capacities, if our soul were not drawn to each other by the sweet attraction of love?” Presented thus, intellectual achievements will remain deficient, in spite of being celebrated as masculine and political ideals, if human beings do not learn to develop other faculties besides their intellectual independence.

For factory women this sympathetic solidarity often manifests itself against two fronts: against the aristocratic derision from those in a higher social rank, and against the patriarchal control inherent to marriage. In a literary sense, then, it also runs counter to individualism and also the patriarchal shelter. Thus in “Gleanings by the Wayside” an operative diagnoses the individualistic, aristocratically minded person who seeks to distinguish himself from others as a

570 Ibid.


572 Ibid.
person infected with pride. This type of character can be recognized by their snide “look of distance” and their desire to avoid engaging with people they deem inferior. The author calls “the wild glare of a distance-giving eye... a symptom of moral insanity.” Moreover, the narrator dubs this desire to distinguish oneself totally from others as fallacious, for the “deadly disease” itself is “contagious.” Valuing sympathy as a core value enables factory women to attack contempt squarely, while it also helps them to seriously question the benefits of marriage for women. In Eliza Jane Cate’s short story “Emma Hale,” Emma’s friend Alice writes to her with news from Lowell after illness has forced Emma to leave the factory town. In the letter Alice relates that another friend, Dorcas, has become engaged to be married: “I have something to tell you of our friend Dorcas that will please you; not because marriage is so pleasant, abstractly considered, but because ‘tis so melancholy to be an orphan, destitute of home and home friends, as you and I have been, and as Dorcas is now.” This casual comment devalues marriage categorically, or “abstractly considered,” as an institutional formation. Far from being a universal good and, by extension, a condition all women implicitly need, marriage is only good circumstantially. In Dorcas’s case, it is beneficial as another form of sympathetic relation for the lonely individual “destitute of home and home friends.” The rented room stance, emerging from sympathetic labors, levels profound critiques on traditional social hierarchies as bloated fictions.

Simultaneously, the rented room also forms new visions for female character in a context referential only to other women, and beyond patriarchy as a defining condition. This stance is

573 “Gleanings by the Wayside,” Operatives’ Magazine, no. 1.9 (December 1841): 130.

574 Ibid.

egalitarian and communal, but while it values cooperation as chief among women’s virtues, it
does not necessarily demand uniformity (although some rented room texts like Marie Howland’s
do skew that way). The rented room consists of distinct walls but open doors. Men may be
invited into this space, but only if they agree to its egalitarian terms. For instance, in An Idyl of
Work, Dr. Mann succeeds in convincing the noble factory woman Esther to marry him, despite
her previous commitment to lifelong single work for women: “I confess...disappointment at
myself...for I meant to honor it, / Blessed old-maidhood! As my chosen lot.” But Esther
overcomes her initial resistance to Dr. Mann, whom she believed looked down on factory
women: “He seemed to patronize us working-girls, / As some strange, pitiable phenomenon,—
Lusus naturae [freaks of nature] to all well-bred folk. / But either I mistook him, or he found /
Himself mistaken; for more deferent or manlier courtesy never have I met.” (IW, 162-163).
When Esther agrees to marry Dr. Mann, however, the poem stresses that it is a “partnership,” and
the two will emigrate West to a life of shared labors. Thus, men can only cement relationships
with rented room women when they, too, become cooperative rather than being crowned lords of
the patriarchal shelter. The only men worthy to share in rented room society are those who
accept its egalitarian relationships, rather than trying to subordinate the female residents to
patriarchal standards.

Strikingly, in each of these pieces women express ideas on aristocratic scorn and
marriage through a dialogue involving a female speaker, addressed to a female listener. Perhaps
the authors here opt for female interlocutors speaking in industrially shaped speaking situations
because they hope readers, too, may come to share their perspectives—if they only can
understand how a setting can change a person’s perspective. Abstracted from that industrial

576 Larcom 169-170.
setting, these countercultural ideas—criticizing patriarchal shelters as confining, individualism as diseased pride, and marriage as a merely circumstantial good for some women—might be far too radical for a wider reading public to accept. These are radical sympathies.

To reiterate the above point: if factory women embrace sympathy as a virtue, the form of sympathetic solidarity they display is precisely not the type of sympathy present in middle-class women’s sentimental literature. Lauren Berlant, in her study of the political implications of sentimental literature, argues that the sympathy Harriet Beecher Stowe attempts to elicit in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other classic sentimental works presumes that the experience of suffering is a universally identifiable condition. When the reader identifies with an abjected character, this affective experience purports to collapse reader and character. The reader consequently is moved to recognize the need for social change from the suffering character’s perspective. However, Berlant argues, pain and victimization are not universal experiences, and “because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy.”

The *rented room* stance in the factory woman’s case (and others) presumes just the opposite: privileged human beings have been spared the experience of toil and struggle by exploiting others; sympathy, then, need not be mustered to effect transformation—it already exists among the oppressed. Social transformation begins in the act of reaching across class lines and persuading others not to suffer with the oppressed via sympathy, but to see—and often to feel ashamed for—their own conditions of privilege enabled by exploitation. Factory women’s sympathies call not for some sort of passive fellow feeling, which will eventually, hopefully

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bring about change in some way. Their sympathies instead recognize their own role as the lifeblood of society, and demand up front that their allies join their struggle for recognition. Thus labor activist Huldah J. Stone published a notice in the January 1846 issue of The Voice of Industry calling women to meetings of Lowell’s Female Labor Reform Association. The notice begins with the epigram, “As is Woman, so is the Race.” The association’s secretary Huldah J. Stone elaborates on this principle in the notice itself: “Every Female who realizes the great necessity of a Reform and improvement in the condition of the worthy, toiling classes, and who would wish to place woman in that elevated station intellectually and morally which a bountiful Creator designed her to occupy in the scale of being, is most cordially invited to attend and give her influence on the side of virtue and suffering humanity.”

Here to be virtuous is not to feel with the suffering laborer but to stand with her, by first acknowledging her role as the very foundation of society: “as is Woman, so is the race.”

The rented room’s radical sympathies function as literary counterpart to the practical cooperations women sustained across boarding house and factory floors. There, sympathy easily translated into rallying cry for protests, such as the series of 1834 strike resolutions organized under the motto, “Union is Power.” Sympathy’s role is more explicit in an operative’s 1847 editorial protesting the factory’s premium system. The premium system turned the screws on women’s labors by rewarding overseers for eking the maximum amount of production out of

578 See Huldah J. Stone’s “Notice” in Foner, 143. Italics in original. Twelve factory women founded Lowell’s Female Labor Reform Association in January 1845. It burgeoned into a group of 500 members half a year later, all of whom pledged to seek constantly for labor reform and to attempt to convince public of the need of their cause. The Female Labor Reform Association oversaw the Voice of Industry’s “Female Department,” eventually buying the paper in 1846. For more information, see Foner, 99.

579 Foner, 9.
their employees. Warning her peers against giving overseers the benefit of the doubt, the operative instead reminds them of their shared toil and shared struggle as the key concern: “We are a band of sisters—we must have sympathy for each other’s woes.” This is a sympathy that closes ranks against those who do not value toil. In the factory system the sympathy arising from shared hardships creates a “band of sisters” whose cooperative action aims at enacting tangible change in the world.

Commemorating the Rented Room’s Fleeting Moments

As a stance proceeding from a form of market-based labor, the rented room persona follows the laboring tradition of dignifying labor in spite of its fleeting nature and precariousness. Because of its emphasis on the fragile transitoriness of the laboring moment, it is emphatically a stance or a persona, not an identity. It is a set of positions, attitudes, and values revolving around a woman’s experience of market-based labor, a persona an author can step into while discussing toil. By joining the georgic’s precarious laboring moments to market conditions, rented room literature also presents the fleetingness and flux of female cooperation there. As noted throughout rented room fiction, factory labor may represent only a stage in a woman’s life, but it endures as a moment of central importance. In the patriarchal shelter’s place, the female factory authors enjoy shared living spaces—rented rooms—to commemorate the economically shared, contingent, and transitory egalitarian relationships as counterparts to their coordinated labors on the factory floor. As they do so, factory authors construct memorials to the ever-tenuous laboring moment, a moment of profound friendship and solidarity with one’s fellow workers. Although these moments cannot last, the impression they make on the female laborer remains. Harriet Hanson Robinson evinces this sentiment in her memoir:

580 Foner, 90.
Riches have fallen to the lot of some of those young girls, and to others a degree of distinction in various situations and occupations; but have they not, from their better surroundings, ever looked back, as she does, to those dear old simple days, so full of health and endeavor, so free from care, as among the happiest of their lives? Then, ignorance of the world was bliss, and hope and aspiration reigned supreme.  

Lucy Larcom also echoes the idea in *An Idyl of Work*: “And this, a millionaire’s wife, will regret / Her dear old factory-nook, and the clear gold / The sunshine coined there, bringing her no care.” These laboring moments appear throughout factory women’s literature, as in Eliza Jane Cate’s story “Emma Hale,” when the narrator’s childhood friend reminisces on her mill days from her current vantage point within an advantageous marriage. From her opulent mansion, this woman admits,

“I think that part of my life spent in the factory its happiest portion,” said she, as we were comparing the present and past. “There was such an entire freedom from all care! and I had such good friends. How I did love them, and how they loved me! I have never known friendships like them anywhere else; and I am convinced that I shall never find them.” She looked down upon her daughter who was nestling in a rich rug at her side; and her eyes were filled with tears when she turned them to me. “I could not leave my little Ellen and my husband, and go back to the mill, and live,” continued she. “But I was as happy then, as mortals can be in any situation.”

Perhaps most striking about this unnamed character’s reflections is the fact that marriage—even under the best of circumstances—is an inferior replacement for the heady joys of female laborers’ solidarities. In *rented room* literature feminine virtue does not necessarily take up a position of universal rebellion against women’s devotion to a home, but it does reorient literature around women’s experiences of sympathetic solidarities in labor as a defining moment for their lives.

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581 Robinson, 100.


II. Shared Spaces: In Boardinghouse and on Factory Floor

The “fresh society” of female laborers depicted in *rented room* fictions becomes all the more remarkable for their celebrations of female community, given how corporate paternalism structured most aspects of factory women’s lives. Antebellum factories owned the boardinghouses mill women were required to live in, and they organized the factory town so as to be able to surveil each tightly.

Corporations placed the superintendent’s one-story office between factories on one side and boardinghouses on the other.

Figure 4. Sidney & Neff, Detail from “Plan of the City of Lowell, Massachusetts,” 1850.

Reverend Henry Miles praised this situation as an example of corporate paternalism: “Thus, the superintendent, from his room, has the whole of the corporation under his eye.”\textsuperscript{584} From Miles’s perspective, this arrangement was one component of the mill town’s stringent vetting and

\textsuperscript{584} See Miles, 65.
regulation of all of its employees. These boardinghouses were “rented only to known and approved tenants,” while factory rooms were each managed “by some carefully selected overseer.” Patriarchal control became easily translated to corporate surveillance in a context where women’s labor could no longer easily be dubbed private.

Factories tightly regulated women’s schedules both in the factories and in their boardinghouses. Women labored every day except Sunday. On summer days the factory’s bell tower woke women up at 4:30 a.m., called them to work at 4:50, and then marked the beginning of their shifts at 5 a.m. Women worked until breakfast in their boardinghouses at 7:00 a.m., returning to work by 7:45 until the main midday meal at noon, and then on uninterrupted from 12:45 till 7 p.m. They enjoyed a brief three hours to eat the final evening meal, visit with each other, read, participate in “improvement circles,” or catch up on their own chores of mending, until they returned to the boardinghouse by 10 p.m., or risked being locked out and accused of scandalous behavior, which might result in job loss across Waltham-Lowell factories. Factory labor was a grueling test of endurance, and mills eventually granted women slightly shorter hours in response to laborers’ protests. In 1847 factories extended the mid-day meal by one hour, shortening the workday to 11.5 hours. In 1853 they reduced the day to 11 hours, producing a 66-hour work week. But even with these concessions, the labor schedule was increasingly difficult as the pace of production increased from the 1830s through the 1850s. During this period competition drove the price of textiles down, so companies increased laborers’ workloads

585 Ibid.
586 Dublin, Farm to Factory, 7.
587 Dublin, Farm to Factory, 12.
without a corresponding increase in pay. This strategy prompted strikes across Massachusetts mill towns.

On its surface, the arduous schedules set by factory corporations within the Waltham-Lowell system would have seemed to render the factory women’s artistic outpourings almost impossible. Yet in spite of all the ways factory women might have looked at themselves as victims of the corporation, authors of rented room fictions instead depict the invigorating possibilities for female laborers’ identities in a way that absents patriarchal control almost entirely. Literary themes buttress the historical record in this respect. As Wendy Gordon points out in her study of single women who migrated from home to factory employment, some women consciously chose mill labor to evade patriarchal control. Eliza Page, for instance, moved to Lowell so that she and her beau could correspond away from their families’ surveillance. More generally, women’s letters reveal that mill life extended far beyond the system of “moral police” Rev. Henry Miles had touted as the hallmark of virtuous factory life. “Letters written to Emma Page emphasize that the boarding house culture and the network of friends it engendered was at least as enjoyable as it was repressive,” Gordon notes. These records “reinforce the importance of friendship in explaining why migration to Lowell continued” when women could have chosen a dozen other mill towns. Try as corporations might to define the female society

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588 Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 1.


591 Gordon, 99. For “moral police,” see Miles, 128.
in its midst, *rented room* literature suggests that corporate paternalism could neither take credit for nor control the organic growth of female societies brought about by factory-induced arrangements.

### III. Open Doors in Rented Rooms: Undoing the Self-Culture/Activism Divide

Grouping factory women’s writings under the *rented room* stance frustrates the militant/genteel divide scholars such as Philip Foner and Lori Merish tend to place on factory women’s writings. 592 Both activist and politically reluctant authors impress upon their readers the same urgent corrective: the need for society to re-orient all sense of value around the laborer’s fundamental dignity. A key critical obstacle in this body of literature has been the tendency to see factory women’s constant display of their intellectual sophistication as evidence of their belief that education and self-culture would save them from becoming a degraded class. Lori Merish articulates this critical position quite clearly when she interprets “activist” factory women portraying the body and unabashedly discussing female desire in ways that challenge the bourgeois aspirations of their genteel peers. In Merish’s view these genteel “factory defenders... idealize factory women’s labor and assimilate female workers’ bodies to the era’s aesthetic ideal of feminine ‘delicacy,’ ethereal norcorporeality and (dis)embodiment.”593 In other words, Merish’s factory women submit to bourgeois ideals of femininity that prevent political activism, and their display of a supposed “self-culture” represents a form of class betrayal in which women

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593 Merish, 7.
secretly hope their fictions will enable their aspirations for upward mobility. These accounts see factory women’s fictional depictions of intellectual sophistication as essentially upward-aspiring, thus supposedly proving the factory woman’s ability to be validated according to middle-class sensibilities in spite of her laboring conditions. How scholars interpret the signifier of factory women’s intellectual sophistications determines how they position the literature itself. It is hard for scholars to see the flaws in the self-culture argument because self-culture itself functions as a mirror reflecting middle-class beliefs, about the utility of education and the presumed deficiencies of the laborer, back to itself: Raymond Williams notes this bias in *Culture and Society* when he speaks of the middle-class attitude that reads workers’ class envy as a desire to become like the middle classes: “We all like to think of ourselves as a standard, and I can see that it is genuinely difficult for the English middle class to suppose that the working class is not desperately anxious to become just like itself. I am afraid this must be unlearned.” Because I trace laboring literature’s elements in factory women’s writings, I interpret these frequent depictions of the toiler’s intellect instead as counterarguments to the aristocratic bias that sees laboring as mind-deadening activity, which prevents laborers from developing into a fully human existence. One of Larcom’s characters, Minta Summerfield, makes this point about inherent intelligence to counter similar, overlapping prejudices against women: “Human beings / God made us, then he added womanhood; / And never does he add to mar his work / Or lower its

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594 Dublin notes a similar temptation to use factory women’s letters to uncover their political stances or genteel inclinations, and points out that even in nonfiction the political versus genteel division does not hold up to scrutiny: “We should be wary of diving mill women into activists, on the one hand, and more articulate letter writers, on the other.” See Dublin, *Farm to Factory*, 211.

595 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 325.
greatness. An intelligence / Is woman, or a failure.”\(^{596}\) In this view to be human is to be, first and foremost, “an intelligence.” Larcom makes a variation of the same point in the previously discussed quote: the factory town “struck light from faculties unknown” because those faculties had been “long held apart / In rustic hamlets.”\(^{597}\) If these faculties had previously gone unnoticed and unappreciated, they existed nonetheless. Biological sex, social status, gender constraints, and socially constructed conditions—to extend Larcom’s point in line with her grand vision in *An Idyl of Work*—do not change this fundamental fact.

### IV. Factory Labor is a State of Mind: The Case of “Myra”

Women did advance their own educations in factory towns through the opportunities offered by Lyceum lectures and improvement circles, but valuing further education does not necessarily imply an *a priori* state of boorish unrefinement or ignorance, nor does it clearly signify women’s desire to escape their supposedly lowly status through a project of upward mobility.\(^{598}\) It may seem here that I am creating a false dilemma, between crude ignorance and cultural aspirations, but it was in fact the antebellum public who initiated these crass dichotomies in the first place. Sylvia Jenkins Cook notes that even a supporter of factory women in the *Portland Transcript* admits, “the idea prevails pretty extensively that the operatives of our factories are persons sunk low in the depths of ignorance.”\(^{599}\) This presumption was deeply ingrained and virtually immutable, and Cook notes that in spite of factories’ “emphasis on the

\(^{596}\) Larcom, *An Idyl of Work*, 171.

\(^{597}\) Larcom, *An Idyl of Work*, 179.

\(^{598}\) Thomas Dublin points out that at least one mill woman saw her labor as a means to obtain an education at Oberlin. See Dublin’s discussion of Lucy Ann’s letters in *Farm to Factory*, 20-21.

\(^{599}\) Quoted in Cook, 47.
New England origins and sturdy Puritan roots of their workers, despite strict boardinghouse regimens and churchgoing requirements, despite lyceums and improvement societies, the stereotype was still apparently pervasive enough to raise the question of why it had such enduring resonance, and especially why it was so devastating for women workers.”\textsuperscript{600} Cook explains this question in part by the fact that Americans were deeply troubled at the prospect of the U.S. following Europe’s example of industrialization, and this is certainly true; but I would also submit that the “contemptuous labeling of the factory girl” goes deeper into profoundly held cultural biases about (often, market-based) labors which don’t clearly produce the laborer’s (political) independence—as of course they cannot for women.\textsuperscript{601} The thinking goes thus: the woman who would forsake “natural,” benevolent social supports for such degrading arrangements does so because she is already degraded and ignorant herself. In the middle-class view, this is the only possible explanation for a woman to freely elect factory labor as a mode of life: she is deplorably ignorant and rude.

Factory women meet this subtle bias with equally subtle distinctions in their writings. In \textit{rented room} literature women do not seek educational opportunity in the factory town for upward mobility; instead, the factory town brings to light faculties of which the laborer was already in full possession. One story from \textit{The Operatives’ Magazine} makes this point with great sophistication by virtually equating the “factory girl” with this pre-existing intelligence which must move beyond the constricting and inadequate space of the patriarchal shelter.

Lousia Currier’s short story, “Myra, the Factory Girl” presents factory life as the appropriate choice for intelligent woman whose mind and life would otherwise stagnate in the

\textsuperscript{600} Cook, 47-48.
\textsuperscript{601} For the European model, see Cook, 48. For “contemptuous labeling,” see Cook, 47.
Myra desires to leave for the factory town, but she is loath to part with her family on bad terms if they resist her plan. The greater part of the story involves Myra’s rigorous debate with her mother’s friend, Miss R., on the wholesomeness of factory life. Currier paints an intricate character portrait of Myra as a woman of deep intelligence and equally deep sympathies, who must seek new opportunities via factory labor to match her own innate capacities.

Myra is an orphan raised lovingly by Mrs. M. and supported by a guardian named Esq. Rockcliffe. In the absence of traditional parental ties she is able to evaluate the home objectively, and questions whether it is truly the best space for women’s aspirations. Myra “shrank from thoughts of dependence, where conscious of no natural claim; and alas! that claim, for her, was not on earth.” The author carefully crafts the narrative to make clear that the independence forced on Myra through the loss of her parents has not perverted her own sentiments as a woman. Indeed, Mrs. M. admits, “I have never seen a more affectionate child….Neither of my own daughters ever loved me with a deeper affection.” Furthermore, Myra is so devoted to her original home that “when we changed our residence, she left her heart at her birthplace.” The nuanced point here is that orphanhood has not deprived Myra of any devotion to the home, as deemed “natural” to her sex, but it has freed her from any blind devotion to the home as an unquestioned concept.

From this position, as an independently minded orphan, Myra launches an attack on the

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603 Currier, 85.

604 Currier, 83.
logic of Miss R.’s arguments against factory life for respectable young women. For instance, Miss R. objects that factory women must be corrupt somehow, since no normal woman would voluntarily “exchange the pleasures of home, and friends of early days, for a factory life, and the cold civility of strangers.” Myra retorts that Miss R. has created a false dilemma, as if women’s only choice were between a happy home life and arduous factory labor. The real issue, she insists, comes down to women being from homes that cannot support their aspirations: “if an all-wise Providence has withheld the good things of life from my friend so as to restrict the means of her usefulness or happiness at home, I maintain that both duty and pleasure require her to seek them elsewhere.” In Myra’s view, a failing patriarchal order that cannot sufficiently protect or support its dependents must then release those dependents to take responsibility for their own lives.

Myra goes on to show the many ways a household rule fails women, particularly as it attempts to curb women’s minds and choices through public opinion. Miss R. warns Myra that the factory system, by drawing women out of the home, threatens their virtue and their identities: “Remember a young and unprotected female may never regain the confidence, she, by one imprudent step, forfeits.” Rehashing the familiar argument, Miss R. goes on to say that even if Myra guards her own virtue and resists corruption from degraded operatives, still “you are not safe” because of the damage her status as a factory woman will do to her reputation. The words “unprotected” and “safe” hearken back to the concept of the patriarchal roof as a shelter

605 Currier, 70.
606 Ibid.
607 Currier, 81.
608 Currier, 82.
for women’s identities, and here Miss R. unmistakably references the shelter as an ideological condition keeping women away from market labors, lest they be pierced by the violating economy and sullied in public opinion. Myra bristles at Miss R.’s logic that she must forego an important opportunity because of others’ baseless attacks on factory women’s characters. She insists that “selfishness in high places” spreads these rumors about factory women because it is in the calumniators’ best interest to instill “prejudice against one of the most lucrative employments in the land.”

Myra carefully neglects to ascribe this selfishness to any particular class of people, only assigning it abstractly to persons at the top of some sort of hierarchical structure. But she provides a clue that the source of this selfishness may inhere in the home’s organization by pointing out that this “erroneous sentiment [is]...far-reaching as all the firesides in our land.” In Myra’s view, “home” can be coextensive with withering, restrictive patriarchal opinion.

Mrs. M, more specifically, also suggests to Miss R. that parents who unjustly impose their opinions on their daughters in the home may be the ones who stunt women’s development. Mrs. M. acknowledges that she feels uneasy about forbidding Myra from going to the factories, since Myra is not positively rebellious but simply is an individual who “claims unrestrained freedom and independence of thought.” Mrs. M. consciously refrains from forcing her own opinions on Myra, since “I never could find it in my heart to check what I have ever deemed an inalienable right of our nature.” Miss R. objects, “I almost hope, dear Mrs. M., you will depart

609 Currier, 82.

610 Ibid.

611 Currier, 84.

612 Ibid.
so far from your general practice [of allowing Myra to think for herself] as to give her a negative she can not misunderstand.”613 But Mrs. M. admits Myra’s arguments in favor of factory labor are both sound and logical, and “I will not make her filial spirit the tenure by which to hold her against her own candid, enlightened choice.”614 If Myra’s judgment is sound, in other words, Mrs. M. sees her daughter as fully capable of exercising rational judgment. Her own maternal authority has no place in forcing the choices of a person endowed with a rational and fair mind. Mrs. M’s commitment to prudential judgment and independence of thought, where appropriate within her home, serve as a microcosm in the home of the forces that began to set women like Myra free from a hierarchical domestic order. The story positions this small move towards autonomy—of expression, of choice—in parallels with the larger movement of women towards the factory in the antebellum period.

Myra’s conversation with Miss R. goes further than Mrs. M. by interrogating the mere usefulness of patriarchal force, in the form of public opinion, against would-be factory operatives. When Miss R. cautions her that “the time will come when the good opinion of others will appear of great value,” Myra replies, “That time has already arrived. Interest has cheerfully been sacrificed to secure it.”615 Myra implies that she herself has delayed pursuing her own interests by entering the factory because she does not want to earn the censure of her loved ones. She continues, “The good opinion of my fellow-creatures, well as I love it, will afford a scanty pittance towards supplying the needs of life, and a dreamy substitute it must be for what, during

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613 Ibid.

614 Ibid.

615 Currier, 83.
a lifetime it must cost me.” In other words, if shame and fear lead women to forego the opportunities available in factory life, they are left with the paltry alternative of remaining in a home whose limitations will determine the rest of their days. The shelter becomes a prison, the “protection” it offers female dependents an invisible chain.

Miss R. points out that Myra has other employment options not nearly so threatening to her reputation. One of these is domestic service, obviously a “safer” employment since Myra would remain in a home setting. Myra points out, however, that the very justification for the household’s structure is that the dependents there belong, but this condition does not apply to laboring in someone else’s home: “If I leave my home, it is not that I may find one elsewhere; wherever I may rove, the home of youth will be the home of my affections still; and ‘well paid,’ as is their boast, will never compensate me for the sacrifice of leaving a spot so dear.” The sophisticated point is that if the patriarchal shelter is a particular, regionally specific place where specific women belong as distinct persons, then the patriarchal shelter by definition cannot be made into an abstract concept and applied categorically. In other words, to tell Myra that labor in any house will make that place a home for Myra, undercuts the concept of home itself. She points out the disingenuousness of this argument for financially needy women: if the supposed advantage of domestic service lies in being shuttled from one’s own home to a poor facsimile elsewhere, then this form of labor is a misleading and inferior option for the women it supposedly protects. Nor can it add to the training she has already received at home on how to run a household. Miss R. also recommends teaching, the traditional occupation open to women. Myra cites the degradation inherently involved in a system so little valued by the public at large.

616 Ibid.

617 Currier, 69.
Communities happily employ under-educated women to teach their children, burdening ill-prepared women with arduous, unending labor and harsh criticism, for “the enormous sum of one dollar per week.”\textsuperscript{618} The mills are undeniably the best choice for a woman desirous to improve her lot in life, and no amount of trying to control her mind or choices can withstand the bare facts of the matter.

Myra emphasizes the mills as a rational choice, against the disparaging multitude who assume mill workers’ degradation and think they, like prostitutes, only could have been forced into a life so abject. On the contrary, Myra stresses that women choose mill employment freely over teaching or domestic employment because the wages available there are superior to any other possible profession.\textsuperscript{619} Unlike male authors uncomfortable with the independence money will give women, Myra unabashedly celebrates wage earning as a way for women to improve self-expression and self-improvement. “Money for its uses, is my motto,” she proclaims, “and let me earn it for myself, and it shall go for what I deem its uses, as freely as the tributary stream hastes to the ocean.”\textsuperscript{620} Myra’s own desire for money, Mrs. M. acknowledges, stems from her desire to obtain a better education than Mrs. M.’s limited circumstances permit.\textsuperscript{621} Without that money, Myra faces few possibilities in life. A year passes between Myra’s conversation with Miss R. and her ultimate decision to leave for the mills, and during that time Myra experiences firsthand the home as a place of stagnation. At home “the wheel of fortune, ever performing its

\textsuperscript{618} Currier, 69. Italics in original.

\textsuperscript{619} Currier, 69.

\textsuperscript{620} Currier, 81.

\textsuperscript{621} Currier, 86.
rotations, had effected little towards bringing her up or down in the world." Currier effects a subtle point here as she contradicts cultural beliefs about the dangers for women of laboring in the violating chaos of the market. While Myra may be “protected” from those vicissitudes within the patriarchal shelter, the cost of security is too high. Myra resolves to carry out her plans.

Perhaps the most curious part of this piece lies in its title. At first glance the reader thinks she will be treated to a story about a woman laboring in the mills, but by the end Myra is only on the verge of finalizing her plans to leave. Why, then, does the author rename Myra with the appositive “factory girl”? By implication “factory girl” stands more for an emerging set of perspectives and attitudes about female labor, witnessed in this story’s protagonist, than it does for the conditions in which a woman labors. The story offers a sort of shorthand for the rented room stance. With Myra functioning as a literary representative, the factory woman possesses an independent, questioning mind; pragmatically embraces the necessity of labor; celebrates the opportunities available to her through wages; unabashedly faces the patriarchal shelter’s limitations squarely, rather than romanticize them; and labors away from family while loving them as devotedly as is natural for a woman.

V. Slippery Solidarities in the Writings of Eliza Jane Cate

“Myra” gestures to an emergent perspective possible for women once their minds and labors have been released from the patriarchal shelter. Eliza Jane Cate’s short story collection, *Lights and Shadows of Factory Life in New England*, demonstrates how women’s freed consciousnesses struggle to form the rented room persona in community form, as a set of values

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622 Ibid.
shared by distinct persons, within the factory town. Cate’s stated purpose in this collection of three short stories detailing the lives of three factory women—“Kate Kimball,” “Emma Hale,” and “Helen Gould”—is to resist grouping factory women into a “caste,” especially since factory labor occupies a transitory phase in their lives. To stress these laboring women’s plurality and also to manifest the faithfulness of her own depictions, Cate resolves to present factory life’s various “lights and shadows.” The result is a highly ambiguous, textured portrait of factory society. These stories depict a discernible tension between factory women’s emergent, sympathetic solidarities, and those countervailing forces threatening to dissolve the possibilities inherent to the laboring moment.

“Emma Hale” particularly combines feminine sympathy with laboring topoi to suggest the possibilities for a new female labor consciousness. The eponymous heroine is the beautiful, intelligent daughter of two doting parents who is suddenly thrown upon her own resources after her parents’ sudden deaths. She turns to factory labor rather than suffer becoming a guest in her own home by its new possessor, her uncle Alfred Hale. The narrative action arises from Emma’s commitment to being “self-dependent” via honest labor, contrasted against her uncle’s sneering concern with money and status. In this tale’s backstory, Alfred Hale exemplifies the “aristocracy of mere wealth” and its attitudes insofar as he reduces all of his relationships to economic terms. As a young man he had selected a local woman to be his bride on the basis that her status was most suited to his aspirations. He proposed to her “with just the business-like

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624 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 1.
626 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 8.
manner of a dealer in horse-flesh,” and when flatly rejected he relinquished his share of the family estate and migrated to the South. Unsurprisingly, Alfred found southern society more amenable to his tendency to commodify people, and soon married the only daughter of a southern planter. When Alfred’s aristocratic pretensions led him to financial speculation, he lost his family’s wealth at precisely the same moment that Emma’s parents die. Alfred once again spurns honest work and embraces economic convenience by reneging on the informal agreement he had with her father by claiming the estate as his legal property. He disappropriates Emma from her own home. In short, Emma flees from one space structured by economic expediency, her seized family property, to another space potentially just as unjust and exploitative: the factory town.

Cate’s scathing portrayal of Alfred Hale as a person who sees his relationships only in commercial terms, however, cautions the reader against seeing her subsequent, detailed accounts of laboring women with the same crass commercial attitude. The factory town offers women a precarious and transitory new society, the significance of which will be missed if women’s relationships there are seen in a merely economic light. It is not just outsiders who make this boorish misjudgment. The story shows that factory women, like Alfred Hale, can also fall prey to the error of only valuing human beings in an economic light; however, when they learn to value each other instead as fellow laborers joined by shared toil, they transform their community into a more just society.

In essence “Emma Hale” shows how the heroine’s positive influence begins to weave sisterly sympathies into factory labors. As a female laboring hero, Emma practices the “arts of

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627 Ibid.

peace” by showing small, humble, sympathetic gestures to the women in the factory town; when she inspires the women around her to do the same, she transforms the society she has found there. When Emma first comes to the factory town, she stumbles into Mrs. Wells’s rowdy boardinghouse because she lacks connections who would have directed her to gentler accommodations. During the crowded, noisy evening meal, the besieged Mrs. Well treats Emma roughly, and her manner is “contagious” among the boarders.\(^{629}\) That night Emma is mistakenly put into another boarder’s bed, provoking a roommate’s outburst and Emma’s apologetic, lonely tears.\(^{630}\) The other boarders offer Emma little sympathy, and the house’s generally hostile climate emanates from Mrs. Wells’s pragmatic, economic outlook on her own role. Her boarders “only paid her for their ‘bed and board’; and when these were supplied, her conscience was at rest.”\(^{631}\) The resulting atmosphere is one of debts and grudges, where boarders and hostess each only judge the other’s behavior in terms of what is owed herself. No one offers “gratuitous attentions” or kindness, and each suffers neglect.\(^{632}\)

A similar experience meets Emma at the factory. The overseer assigns Emma’s training to a mill girl, Miss Conner, who did not want to have another pupil ever again.\(^{633}\) Just as Mrs. Wells and her boarders tend to see each other in terms of economic costs, Miss Conner presumably resents this tutoring relationship because it means lower wages for herself. Operatives protested training new workers because teaching others meant less time for their own

\(^{629}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 10.

\(^{630}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 12.


\(^{632}\) Ibid.

\(^{633}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 11.
work, which might reduce their pay.  

Towards the end of the day Emma makes a mistake in the care of her looms. While paying attention to one loom, “an ‘overshot’ — to use a technical — was weaving on the other. It was no worse than Miss Conner had allowed to pass many times, with a little combing, shrinking, and flowering.” This time, however, Miss Conner chooses not to diminish but enhance the error so that the overseer will not assign her a trainee again. Miss Conner throws her shuttle noisily into a box and yanks on the cloth, tearing it “down an inch or two farther than was necessary, to give it an appearance as ruinous as possible.”

Emma tries to ask about her mistake, but Miss Conner refuses to speak, leaving Emma to retreat into a corner to cry. The scene is emblematic of the torn and frayed society of laborers Emma first meets in the factory town, who rend the social fabric and leave each woman to her own troubles. Emma’s grand project is to heal these rifts alongside her increasing skills as an operative.

Her first success lies in transforming the atmosphere of her boardinghouse by inspiring Mrs. Wells to embrace her boarders in the sympathy of shared toil. One night Emma sees that Mrs. Wells has several hours of work ahead of her picking currants for the next day’s meal. Moved with compassion, Emma volunteers to help. All of the factory boarders join in, and they begin to tell their own stories of trouble and struggle. Through this event Mrs. Wells’s house becomes a community. Like the factory town itself, economic motives first brought together this boardinghouse’s occupants. Shared labor and sympathy, however, transform it into a home: “She [Mrs. Wells] realized then, that she was surrounded by those whose trials were, at least, equal to their own. She felt a new and pleasing interest for their happiness springing up in her heart. She

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634 See Zonderman, 121.

635 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 11-12.

636 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 12.
determined to be to them a mother, *pro tempore*; and to soothe them, and atone to them, as far as possible, for friends and joys that were not.”\(^{637}\) Only when the women recognize themselves as cooperative toilers can their living space become something more than a house structured by economic need.

Emma incites a similar change on the factory floor, inspiring sympathy there by suffering slander meekly. When Emma’s overseer, Mr. Adams, falls in love with her and proposes, she declines because she cannot return his feelings. The two continue a warm friendship, however, and when other mill women notice their connection they grow envious. A few spread a rumor indicting Emma’s character by claiming Emma chose Mrs. Wells’s boardinghouse specifically because it also housed male boarders.\(^{638}\) The rumor spreads but ultimately fizzles without the force of truth behind it. When the other mill women trace the slander back to its source in three rough, ill-tempered operatives, the community turns against Emma’s slanderers and the superintendent threatens their discharge. However, Emma argues on their behalf because “she feared it would be worse to treat them with such severity.”\(^{639}\) Emma’s refusal to meet wrongdoing with retaliation evokes a change in the heart of one of her accusers, Dorcas, and in the whole onlooking room of operatives, who are softened by this show of sympathy and mercy.\(^{640}\)

Although Cate presents Emma’s patient forbearance as exceptional, it is important to note

\(^{637}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 13.

\(^{638}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 17. Mrs. Wells’s supposed male boarders are never depicted in the story.

\(^{639}\) Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 18.

\(^{640}\) Ibid.
that her basic gesture of grafting sympathy onto the harsh circumstances of toil is not. Rather, Cate presents Emma’s mercy as one instance of the ways that women harness their innate creative energies within the mill community. Mill women often have to use their wits to keep up morale when their labors become discouraging: “When a mill girl finds her good-nature vanishing before a ‘break-out,’ a ‘pick-out,’ a ‘bad-selvedge,’ or any such ills to which factory girls are heirs, she cannot...leave her work...but there are many ways in which she may employ art in the management of her mind.”641 The laborer’s innate creativity, like the streams powering the mills, is a force which must be directed for good or ill. Emma chooses to fortify a community, but other mill women fabricate stories to tear apart laboring relationships via unfounded gossip. Both of these responses, positive and negative, emanate from laborers’ minds reacting to the dull regularity of toil. “There is much in the monotonous tenor of the lives” of most factory women to incite their craving for excitement.642 To overcome the “fits of listlessness and ennui” accompanying such monotonous toil, factory women seize upon stories about their peers. However, their restless impulses often lead them to create those stories unwittingly in the process: “If a marriage or death occurs in their midst—if Miss A is praised, or Miss B censured—if Miss C is engaged, and Miss D almost—and if there happens to be an insufficiency of incident to give a high zest to the affair, the chinks are filled by conjectures, which become, as they are passed around, matters of sober fact, and without intentional falsehood on the part of any one.”643 This fault in factory women does not occur because they are ignorant boors, but in fact because they are intelligent creators— their poetic propensities have


642 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 17.

the power to tear apart communities if left unchecked. On two levels this gossip which rends the fabric of factory life occurs out of women’s desire to escape from toil: their active but unchecked imaginations fly from the dull pangs of monotony via storytelling, but the chosen course is also a failure of sympathy in its etymological sense of suffering together—and one might easily call “cooperative toil” a synonym for “suffering together.”

When factory women do sympathetically embrace the fact of toil, however, they build up a new society rather than creating obstacles to community. Cate describes the alternative tactic taken by a factory woman who responds to the “dullness of the day” by refusing to be “sad herself, or see others so.”

644 “Fanny,” an example of factory women who respond creatively to the drudgery, recognizes the low morale of her co-workers and “hastily puts her work in such order that she can be absent from it some time with safety,” and then goes on to prank the other women. 645 She may sneak up on another woman and playfully attack her with a switch, or fashion a rag baby and tie it to the loom of an operative so that it dangles in front of her co-worker when she turns around. During these bouts of fun “others are drawn in; and those not actually engaged, look on and laugh,” while still other “non-participants...kind-hearted, but seriously girls...ever and anon pay the neglected looms a visit” to serve the collective project of labor while giving their co-workers some relief. 646 Fanny’s creative play lightens the burden of shared toil, with the result that “all feel better after such recreations...the girls all love each other better; feel more like a band of sisters from the pleasure they receive and confer. All love Fanny, A, B, and C, because they broke up the monotony that was so oppressive to them. Fanny, A, B,

644 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 18.

645 Ibid.

646 Ibid.
and C, love all on the principle—‘love begets love.’”

Cate makes clear that when factory women achieve these sympathetic solidarities forged through shared toil, they create a new society for women distinct from those women might experience elsewhere: specifically, in homes or boardingschools—common settings for sentimental literature. She insists that factory society offers a unique experience for wisdom because women must make a home out of the factory town’s constant flux. Its sorrows and elations, as a result, are deeper than elsewhere. Factory women know better than others “the value of such friendship” they find in the factory town, and “the need of ‘something around which the heart may cling’ and fix its tendrils,” because they have discovered these friendships outside of the traditional home’s regionally fixed sense of belonging. Cate makes clear that this experience is quite different from the boardingschool, its nearest analogue. A girl who goes away to school makes friendships lacking “the intenseness and permanency of the factory girls” because “she has few toils, few difficulties, and therefore asks little sympathy; and wants little.” By contrast “the mill is the mill-girl’s home. She stays a year—perhaps two years, and perhaps ten. And when she leaves finally, she may be going to a pleasant home, to as kind parents, brothers, and sisters as ever blessed mortals; but she feels in her heart that she would not have.

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647 Ibid.
648 Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) provides an example of sentimental fiction set in the home. Foster’s *The Boarding House* (1798) is a conduct manual which might be categorized under the sentimental label, but a more clearcut example of boardinghouse life in the sentimental novel would be Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801), in which a teenaged girl runs away from her boardingschool with an office.
649 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 16.
rather stay just where she is, with just those friends forever.’”651 Not everyone in the mills has such a positive experience, but all kind women “who act their part as operatives, boarders, and members of society” can experience the lasting impact of this paradoxically transitory society. 652

In spite of the lasting impact these laboring sympathies have on factory women’s psyches, they are in the end based upon the passing nature of the laboring moment. Cate reinforces the georgic theme of laboring moments which may come to naught by following Emma’s virtuous achievement of laboring solidarity with a contagion born out of the same basis of solidarity: the rented room. Emma falls seriously ill shortly after her reputation is vindicated. When the doctor examines her, he protests against unhealthy mill conditions. He implicates factory culture’s insufficient exercise, sunshine, hurried meals, and especially the stagnant, shared air of poorly ventilated boardinghouses as the culprits of disease:

“I don’t like this practice of stowing so many into one little badly ventilated apartment—sometimes six, sometimes more for aught I know—in a room that contains none too much air for healthy respiration of one! ‘Tis horrid to think of it. Their beds are so near the windows—ten to one—that they cannot have them open without the greatest danger of taking colds; and there they lie, for hours, breathing the same air that has been already breathed a hundred times; and that is scarcely fitter for respiration than pure carbonic acid gas. I don’t know who is to blame for this—whether ‘tis the girls, the keepers of the boarding-houses, the superintendents, gents, or proprietors; and I don’t care. There is blame somewhere, and humanity calls loudly for its removal.”653

The doctor’s vivid description of shared air, pumped in and out of the women’s lungs as it is passed throughout the room, reinforces the precarious laboring moment as it is instantiated in factory women’s peculiar circumstances. The air is both a tangible token of a society joined by shared labors and living spaces, and potentially a medium for dissolving those bonds. Further, it

651 Ibid.

652 Ibid.

is also possibly a symbol and vehicle for capitalist exploitation, where factory owners plan town
designs and calculate the maximum number of laborers who can fit into a given space. Abstract
mathematical decisions have real bodily consequences, in the form of disease-ridden air. The
doctor finds it hard to impute exploitative living conditions to any one person. While his
perplexity may seem to result from Cate’s reluctance to engage controversy with factory owners,
her decision to portray contagions, of unknown origins, which threaten human labors is also
quite georgic. William Batstone, commenting on Virgil’s account of the diseased hives in Book
4, explains this phenomenon in terms of the georgic’s emphasis on struggling with a world
whose complexity always exceeds our grasp: “We cannot be separate from nature because we are
ineluctably a part of it: ... human artifice becomes nature’s way of spreading the plague from
animal to man.”654 In a similar way, human artifice has somehow mysteriously caused the
illnesses tearing through the mill’s ranks. Although the doctor cannot precisely pinpoint the
source, he insists that there is injustice and imbalance in these unhealthy conditions, and
“humanity calls loudly for its removal.” By the doctor’s implications, these unhealthy
accommodations are the result of stupidity, carelessness, indifference, exploitation, or neglect.
Whatever the reason, injustice once again threatens the laborer’s dignity and existence. The fault
must be rectified to allow both laborers and factory society to fulfill their purposes.

The labors of Virgil’s virtuous husbandman may be undone by contagions as a force of
nature, or civil war as a form of human violence; Emma’s achievement of rented room
solidarities are likewise quickly overwhelmed by an illness which has its origins in a
combination of natural force and human exploitation. If civil war actively disregards the laborer
as it rages through the farmer’s fields, capitalist exploitation mimicks Emma’s mercenary uncle

654 Batstone, 142.
by passively disregarding Emma and reducing laboring lives to impersonal calculations. Whether political violence or socioeconomic neglect assaults the laborer, the result is the same. Emma’s factory labors cease, and she returns to her hometown on the verge of death. She eventually recovers under the care of kind neighbors, and ultimately marries their son in a match that is both prudent and loving. Emma sustains her connections to factory society via letters and visits, but the overall narrative demonstrates that the rented room network of sympathetic laborers must be forged with effort. For women it is a transformative, meaningful experience, but one which nonetheless is prone to collapse.

The final story in this collection suggests one possible reason that women’s rented room personae can so easily pass out of existence. In “Helen Gould” Cate makes an excellent, subtle point about the significance of women’s labors which as yet lack a clear telos in society, or aesthetic analog in literature. In this story the titular character also loses both parents suddenly and goes to live with her uncle, who is agent in a New Hampshire mill. Each of Helen’s four cousins is employed in the mill, and with their wages they decorate their separate rooms to express their own personalities. Thomas, a college graduate, fills his rooms with scholarly tomes; Maria fills hers with musical instruments, art, and books bespeaking her own “simplicity and elegance”; Henry litters his room with wild trophies and outdated furniture testifying to his own “wild spirit”; Grace decorates her room with birds and flowers reflecting her own gentle nature. What is stunning about these rooms is that factory labor has provided the means for both young men and women to express their rich inner lives through commercial goods, but only Thomas and Henry consolidate that inner life into a self-image. Thomas’s room contains a

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655 Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 23.

656 For the full description of each cousin and room, see Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 25-26.
picture of himself studying late into the night; Henry displays a portrait of himself as a knight, valorizing his own imaginative nature.657 Each room reflects factory labor’s possibilities as labor translates into money, and money makes possible a form of artistic self-expression. The self-portraits are not idle fancy, however, since each image also corresponds to the profession each boy will claim in society: Thomas is already living his life as a respected scholar in the town, and Henry’s father has channeled his own imagination into becoming a machinist. As a sixteen-year-old Henry “has already drawn out some fine models and improvements.”658 Where his wildest impulses might have otherwise led him astray, his future career ensures he will “become a talented and useful man.”659 It is worth ruminating here on how wage-earning commemorates labor in a sense by translating it into “some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling,” to borrow from John Locke’s description of money as a “preservative” of labor.660 An industrial economy makes it possible for Maria and Grace to translate their labors into various commodities which function as fragmented artistic gestures, but these are not organized into a declaration of selfhood for women. Cate highlights a discrepancy between men whose labors allow a clear revelation of their selves to a wider world and women who struggle to project their own significance to an audience. Helen Gould notes that factory society has given women’s capacities “shape and direction” by improving rural women’s preexisting “vivacity of intellect, and native grace of manner,” but while these conditions transform women in the present, they

657 For Thomas’s portrait, see Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 25. For Henry’s, see Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 26.


659 Ibid.

660 John Locke’s commentary on labor as the origin of both property and money are provocative for thinking of Cate’s depictions of wage-earners here. See Locke, 28.
have no certain future.\footnote{Cate, “Lights and Shadows,” 27.}

Laboring literature does for toil in the artistic realm what money does for it in the social realm: it allows something which endlessly passes to “keep without spoiling.” Maria and Grace’s lack of portraits suggests that factory women’s labors must wrest significance from the precarious “now.” True to laboring literature’s emphasis on a fragile present, women’s labors are significant now in sustaining women and allowing them to participate in a wider world via the economy. I submit that Maria and Grace’s rooms, filled with various personal tokens but no image, suggest both consistency with the georgic’s emphasis on the present but also the ominous state of affairs for wage-earning women as Cate wrote during the 1840s. At the time of these stories publications in 1843, Cate could not have been certain that factories would abandon their initial commitments to a temporary labor force versus a proletarianized one. Although factories increasingly employed uneducated Irish immigrants in the 1840s, manufacturers tried to avoid New England women’s resentment and cultivate their favor as they took on uneducated foreigners. “In an effort to reduce turnover among native-born women,” Thomas Dublin notes, “mill agents seemed to have tried to concentrate the immigrant newcomers into a limited number of rooms within the mills, thereby cushioning somewhat their impact on Yankee operatives.”\footnote{Thomas Dublin, \textit{Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 153-154.}

Yet Cate’s images suggest deep hesitation about the state of mill labor for women.

These stories seem to recognize that wage earning enacted new types of relationships for female laborers in the present. Cate, in attacking aristocratic pretense and crass commercialism via Uncle Alfred, suggests that understanding factory women’s relationships is important not
only for factory women themselves but also for a wider American society quick to reduce labor and laboring to economic self-interest. She makes this point more explicitly later in the Lowell Offering’s successor, The New England Offering. In a didactic short story titled, “The Factories of Lowell, and the Factory Girls,” Cate asks her reader to focus on women laboring in the factory. She challenges her readers to examine their own biases regarding the laborers, to wonder whether they dehumanize the women to being “merely automata” beside their machines. In place of this barbaric reduction, Cate invites readers to recognize all of the women as sympathetically and spiritually bound to loved ones near and far: “Do you not see passing off from them, in every possible direction, the mystic wires of sympathetic influence, spiritual intercourse with the companions that are near and the friends that are afar?” Portraying laborers as spinning spiritual threads alongside their literal ones not only thwarts the prejudice reducing women to profit-generating machinery, but it also simultaneously counters the traditional image of women’s sympathetic belonging within the traditional household. These women are not locally bound to a house or community; like part of a huge tapestry they are woven close and wide through sympathetic bonds. And yet, to revisit the problem of women’s lack of portraiture in “Helen Gould,” it still seems difficult for Cate to translate the significance of female labor beyond rooms and factories. When factory women struggle to project a self-image from wage earning, they suggest a form of Tillie Olsen’s artistic “silences”: “The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the

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664 Ibid.
spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.” When authors wed the laboring literary mode to wage-earning, they can insist on the female laborer’s present importance yet still struggle to project a role for female laborers beyond their own eloquent walls. Given this precarious state of affairs, when factory women portray the social significance of their own labors they truly must present these as “stray threads” diverging from generic conventions and cultural master narratives. The “stray threads” of factory women’s writings subvert common ways of thinking about female labor as inadequate to factory women’s laboring conditions. Yet, in pointing out how female factory labor participates in the larger world but has no symbolic foothold in it, authors like Cate ultimately present female wage labor at the frayed edge of American culture – outside the main fabric of culture assumptions but without a secure place of its own.

_The New World_ published _Lights and Shadows of Factory Life in New England_, and the publishing context itself perhaps sheds light on the contradictions Cate runs up against in seeing female wage labor as having a new but inchoate and uncertain role in society. _The New World_ positioned Cate’s stories of industrial labor within a larger narrative of nationalist pride, and, according to a later advertisement, _Lights and Shadows_ sold over twenty thousand copies. This context suggests one way that stories of labor are interpreted and, in turn, misinterpreted, for political ends. When _The New World_ presented _Lights and Shadows of New England_ to its subscribers in a special issue format, it did so under its masthead featuring Columbus landing in America, with a line referencing Joseph Addison’s play _Cato_ (1713) underneath: “No pent-up

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666 _The New World_ (1840-1845), April 1844.
Utica contracts our powers; for the whole boundless continent is ours." The play was shorthand for patriotic zeal among the founding generation, and the motto drawn from its themes here clearly ties nationalist pride to imperialist expansion.

Figure 5. Masthead of The New World as it appeared in 1843.

Cate’s Lights and Shadows, therefore, appears in a context of national pride. Her stories about laborers’ dignity seem to serve an image of a nation’s justice and morality as the United States looked westward to expand its territories via the collective labors of individual citizens. The nation’s presumably righteous treatment of factory labor, evidenced by mill women’s sophistications, seems to argue for its future and equally righteous settlement of the frontier. A reviewer commenting on factory women’s writings in the April 1844 issue of The New World similarly cites Cate’s work and the Lowell Offering as grounds for “congratulations to all American patriots.” These works evidence “the elevation of the working classes,” a social issue

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667 The New World’s motto plays upon language in Addison’s play rather than quoting it directly. Cato was popular before and after the Revolutionary War for its patriotic zeal. See Christine Dunn Henderson and Mark E. Yellin’s introduction in Joseph Addison, Cato: A Tragedy, and Selected Essays, ed. Christine Dunn Henderson and Mark E. Yellin (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), viii.

668 See Henderson and Yellin, eds., Introduction, viii.
“which our glorious republic has most successfully answered.” Yet the reviewer simultaneously echoes the subtle, familiar contempt for the laborer as deficient and needy of cultural uplift. In the U.S. “the laboring classes, feeling that they are politically on an equal level with their wealthier employers, desire also to be on a level with them socially, and in order to do this it is indispensably necessary that they should educate themselves.” The Lowell Offering serves as “one of the great indices” of “the degree of advancement attained by the present age.” Factory women’s writings proved the U.S. laborer’s ability to raise herself from an implicitly low condition. Yet the reviewer omits the contradiction between his premise and his proof. He argues that Americans laborers feel themselves politically equals to their employers, and therefore they feel the need to educate themselves; the Lowell Offering proves their ability to do so. But, quite obviously, disenfranchised factory women could not have felt politically equal to their enfranchised employers; this could not have be their motive for any supposed self-education they display in their writings. The reviewer seems very little interested in the laborer’s intellectual ability, except as it serves the cause of national self-justification and historical progress. The writer goes on to review a new work by Cate—“Rural Life in New England”—and advertises her as author of the popular “Lights and Shadows of Factory Life in New England.” However, any points which she made in the previous work about the laborer’s fundamental dignity, and society’s need to examine its own prejudices against that fact, have clearly been lost on this writer in the more dazzling glow of American exceptionalism. If Cate implies that women have experienced societal transformations in factory towns, perhaps she also sensed that these

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669 The New World (1840-1845), April 1844, 435.

670 Ibid.

671 Ibid.
transformations were precarious precisely because the larger public was once again willing to exploit labor even in interpreting its significance, to serve more powerful citizens’ own self-interested purposes.

This issue, of cultural attention to the laboring literary tradition only when it advances state interests, seems to be consistent throughout history. For instance, scholars have shown that the georgic as a literary mode rises and falls with the tides of cultural attitudes towards labor. Anthony Low points out that medieval scholars ranked Virgil’s own *Georgics* above the pastoral as a literary genre, but as “the courtly or aristocratic ideal” ascended in literature it also served as “the great enemy of the georgic spirit” because courtly attitudes were characterized by “a fundamental contempt for labor, especially manual and agricultural labor.” Cultural contexts like this one tend to neglect or misconstrue the georgic when it becomes “an uncongenial mode, which most writers either ignored entirely or silently converted, in the alembic of imagination and prejudice, back into pastoral.” With the rise of the romance the pattern repeats itself, as L.P. Wilkinson suggests in noting that, although “the ploughman-poet Robert Burns naturally found the *Georgics* ‘by far the best of Virgil,’ the Romantics had other ideas.” Laboring literature’s core tension, between the laborer who sustains civilization and the society quick to take him or her for granted, reproduces itself in cultural responses to the laboring literary tradition. When laborers insist on their foundational place in society, society either takes credit for the laborer’s dignity by appropriating their humble labors into a narrative of national progress, or ignores their literary achievements alongside their labors as specimens of an inferior

672 Low, 5.

673 Low, 28.

674 Wilkinson, 310.
sort.
Chapter 6

A CULTURE DIVIDED: EMBRACING TOIL AND REJECTING VIOLENCE IN AN IDYL OF WORK

That hour
Can never be repeated. Whoso toils
To-day toils in a different atmosphere.
The chariot-wheels of Progress fill the air
With dust.—Yes, it was something to be born
While this gray Mother Century was young.
-Lucy Larcom, An Idyl of Work

Eliza Jane Cate’s writings stress the fleeting and precarious present of factory labor for New England women, which is nonetheless full of promise for them. Cate’s own participation in factory labor was transitory, as was New England women’s generally. Thomas Dublin’s statistical survey of mill women suggests most women stayed in the mills for an average of four or five years.\(^{675}\) For many, mill labor represented a passing stage before marriage.\(^{676}\) But from the 1840s onwards, laborers who remained in the mills after wage cuts and increased workloads increasingly were those who either stayed for their communities, or lacked a better option to leave.\(^{677}\) By the Civil War immigrant families largely supplanted women’s place in the mills, and

\(^{675}\) Dublin, Farm to Factory, 32.

\(^{676}\) See Dublin, Women at Work, 31, 32. Wendy Gordon slightly modifies Dublin’s image of a rapidly ebbing New England labor force after 1860, claiming that a substantial group of New England women continued to seek out mill employment after the way for the same reasons they had before. Among these reasons were that “boardinghouses, networks of friends, and frequent travel back and forth to family homes remained important aspects of the migrants’ experience.” See Gordon, 99.

\(^{677}\) Foner, xxiii-xxiv.
American industrial labor became proletarianized and increasingly cut off from the social
activism and cultural opportunities mill life had offered in the preceding generations. Thus
when former mill laborer Lucy Larcom penned a retrospective ode to women’s antebellum
factory labor, she embraced the paradox of praising the laboring moment while being mindful of
its historical demise. In Larcom’s hands laboring tropes join rented room identities to eulogize a
moment of genuine possibility in the United States, and simultaneously to criticize the nation for
abandoning its earliest and best commitments to the laborer’s dignity. In place of those
commitments the U.S. embraced “aristocratic contempt” on cultural, economic, and
philosophical, and Larcom’s poem counters these trends as hostile to laborers in art as in life.

As a former mill woman and as an author who tried unsuccessfully throughout her life to
support herself through writing, Larcom was no stranger to struggle as a way of life. Her
literature, often embracing the laborer’s values, never was embraced reciprocally by the public.
She accepted this fact pragmatically, admitting in a letter to her childhood friend from the mills,
Harriet Hanson Robinson,

I have tried to make my life count for good to others, and to make my verses an
expression of what I am trying to live….The material fact that I have never earned more
than enough with my pen to meet, with difficulty, the necessary expenses of living, does
not in the least discourage me, or make me willing to write the trash that “pays.” That is
where I stand on the literary question, and that is where I am content to remain.

Larcom seems to parallel Hawthorne’s complaint about the “damned mob of scribbling women”
as she prioritizes her own writing against “the trash that ‘pays.’” However, she does not belittle

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678 For an account of these changes in factory labor, see Cook, 223.

679 Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson, Loom and Spindle, Or, Life among the Early Mill Girls: With
a Sketch of “The Lowell Offering” and Some of Its Contributors, revised edition (Kailua,
the adversary, only the literature, as she defends her own chosen mode of authorship despite its tepid reception. Larcom’s life exemplifies the difficulties of equating “working-class” writings with an author’s status. Her own status was a mixture of privileged educational opportunities, self-learning, economic vicissitudes, and advantageous connections. She was born in the seaside town of Beverly, Massachusetts in 1842 as the daughter of a retired captain and the ninth of ten children. Larcom enjoyed a comfortable upbringing there during her early years. At the age of two she began her education at a village dame school, first learning Bible passages and then progressing to hymns and works by British Romantics. She had a knack for poetry even from a young age, and at age eight wowed her siblings with a first poem about a thunderstorm. This thoroughly middle-class upbringing came to an end in 1832 when her father died and left the family heavily indebted.

Larcom’s mother struggled financially in Beverly for three years before moving her dependent children to Lowell, where she ran a boarding house until 1843. Little Lucy continued her education at the Lowell grammar school, but when her mother found herself still unable to meet expenses, eleven-year-old Lucy was sent to the mills. She first served as a “doffer,” collecting bobbins full of spun thread and replacing them with empty ones. Lucy progressed from being a doffer to a spinner, then a dresser, and finally a bookkeeper in the cloth room. After her mother returned to Beverly in 1843, Larcom chose to stay in the mills by taking up


681 Robinson, 101.


683 For more details on Larcom’s roles in the mills, see Lockard, 142, and Robinson, 101.
residence in a boarding house. She met John Greenleaf Whittier in 1844, beginning a lifelong friendship which would benefit both. She assisted Whittier as an editor in her later years, while he steadfastly encouraged her to complete the ambitious project that would become *An Idyl of Work*. 684

Larcom left mill work permanently in 1846 to travel with her sister to Illinois. There, she accepted the first of several teaching jobs she would take up at various points throughout her life. Writing, and not teaching or editing, was Larcom’s first passion, but she turned to teaching whenever circumstances compelled her. Harriet Hanson Robinson notes that Larcom made an art of making do, by using her “rare gift of finding and keeping the right kind of friends, in her own family as well as outside, and these supplied her that practical (though not pecuniary) help she so much needed” by relieving her from household duties so that she could write. 685

Larcom’s greatest literary successes came from depicting mill labor, sometimes to her annoyance. She complained to Robinson about the reduction of a varied life to one epoch: “Don’t you think it is getting a little tiresome, this *posing* as factory-girls of the olden time?...I am proud to be a working-woman, as I always have been; but that special occupation was temporary, and not the business of our lives, we all knew, girls as we were.” 686 To interpret *An Idyl of Work* is to revisit the question Larcom found so tedious and yet so inescapable in her later years: what should we make of a poem written in the 1870s but commemorating mill life in the 1840s, with full knowledge that the poem’s idyllic depictions of labor were a transitory phrase both for Larcom’s female protagonists and for the nation? Larcom self-consciously forces this

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684 See Loeffelholz, 5-9, for more details on Larcom’s and Whittier’s friendship and professional collaborations.

685 Robinson, 105.

686 Ibid.
question from the start; her title alludes to Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and also parallels its twelve-book structure. The allusion prepares readers for an elegiac depiction of a society irretrievably lost. Moreover, the reference raises the question of whether we should expect a romance of labor, so to speak. To solve these issues, scholars must decide the poem seeks to accomplish through its complicated portrayal of female wage earners who analyze their social standing and look to their futures, all measured against Larcom’s historical hindsight. Scholars such as Mary Loeffelholz have felt that the mill women’s cultural sophistication registers the national loss by memorializing a moment in which laborers could aspire to middle-class cultural sensibilities through education.

Yet the question of genre is an incredibly complicated one because *An Idyl of Work* possess an odd ensemble-cast of characters whose stories weave in and out over the course of a poem chiefly concerned with discourse on toil, not plot. The poem also frames one storyline around mill women who take a vacation to the New Hampshire mountains while other mill women go on strike back in Lowell. Given its historical hindsight, it is easy to wonder if Larcom lets her mill characters fiddle while Rome burns, so to speak, but it is hard to understand why Larcom would do so. When scholars try to interpret Larcom’s poem through the lens of mill women’s supposed social class, defined by tension and conflict with other classes, their interpretations tend to judge the poem for its presumed betrayal of class solidarities. For instance, Shirley Marchalonis, Joe Lockard, Judith Ranta, and Loeffelholz interpret mill women’s

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687 See Cook, 169, for an account of Larcom’s deliberate allusion to Tennyson.

688 Loeffelholz’s interpretation is the most articulate representative of this perspective, although it is by no means the sole one.

689 A contemporary review from *Scribner’s* criticized the poem for this very reason. See Cook, 172.
neutrality on labor questions as evidence of Larcom’s middle-class identifications. In this view Larcom presents her laboring protagonists as a variation on middle-class cultural sensibilities, whose sophistications set the women above their peers and, by extension, above the uneducated immigrant laborers who replaced New England women in the mills. Larcom’s sole biographer, Shirley Marchalonis, frames her as a poet who survived by adapting and conforming to change. In Marchalonis’s view Larcom was reluctant to “venture outside the patriarchal definitions of poetry.” Joe Lockard also sees in Larcom’s writings a basic conservatism except in her indignant portrayal of exploited child laborers, an attitude which allows for moments of “subterranean radicalism” in “a poet otherwise careful to shape her market acceptability for middle-class Victorian America.” Even in these radical moments, however, Lockard believes Larcom holds middle-class cultural values as the solution to social dilemmas: education must be the means for child laborers to ascend out of an exploitative society. Ranta claims that the poem celebrates “women’s friendship and mutual support...but only as they occur among cultured, refined factory women like the heroines”; such conditions are not possible for the cruder women laboring in the mills. Mary Loeffelholz, one of the few scholars to focus primarily on An Idyl of Work in an already small pool of scholarship on Larcom, also sees in An Idyl of Work an essentially middle-class appreciation for self-culture as the solution to laborers’ degradations.

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691 Marchalonis, 181.

692 Lockard, 141.

693 Ranta, 17.
For Loeffelholz *An Idyl of Work* is an “anthology-poem” arranging Larcom’s previous poetry within a longer blank-verse narrative. In adapting an anthology form used by Longfellow and Whittier, Larcom’s work interweaves poems and narrative to show “in poetic form the means by which poetry is transmitted” between people.\(^694\) Characters disperse “cultural capital” through these poetic transmissions, and in so doing they reflect Larcom’s decision to defend mill women against the charge of degradation through literary sophistication rather than social protest.\(^695\) Loeffelholz’s interpretation entails her viewing *An Idyl of Work* as operating in a pastoral mode throughout. She claims the poem studiously avoids “concrete detail about the work of the mills” as further proof of Larcom’s essentially bourgeois commitments as an author, in spite of the fact that Book VI is entirely devoted to women’s mill labors.\(^696\) Notably, each of these authors presents Larcom as responding via fiction to class strife by forsaking social protest, in a self-serving display of her own ability to conform labor issues to middle-class ideals.

Two critics take exception to recouping Larcom as a middle-class author in spirit and purpose. James E. Dobson focuses on *A New England Girlhood* rather than *An Idyl of Work*, but finds in her memoir a principle which also applies to her magnum opus—that is, Dobson claims that Larcom layers her knowledge of the present over her presentation of the past to disrupt the narrative of historical progress.\(^697\) Sylvia Jenkins Cook, in her study of writings by and about American factory women over the long nineteenth century, sees *An Idyl of Work* as an American

\(^{694}\) Loeffelholz, 13.

\(^{695}\) Loeffelholz, 26.

\(^{696}\) For *An Idyl of Work* as a pastoral, see Loeffelholz, 31; for avoiding depictions of toil, see Loeffelholz, 14.

epic in which the factory woman functions as the nation’s ideal citizen by exemplifying the “spirit of a national life.”698 In her nuanced reading of Larcom, Cook points out that *An Idyl of Work* presents female laborers as “the bearers and transmitters of democratic, communal, and cultural ideals,” without Larcom herself having to embrace activist politics in either women’s suffrage or labor reforms.699 Cook’s astute observations of the poem show how Larcom’s characters resist being recouped by middle-class sensibilities. However, these sophisticated insights lack a strong interpretive frame because of Cook’s desire to collapse factory women’s market-based labors with politics. She acknowledges that Larcom shied away from the women’s suffrage movement, but then claims paradoxically that Larcom unproblematically posits the factory woman as an ideal “citizen,” one who contributes to the national spirit without participating in the nation’s political life. Cook deftly exposes the problems of reading Larcom as bourgeois, but she succeeds mostly via the “healthy skepticism” of middle-class literary sensibilities which she also attributes to Larcom.700

I risk belaboring the problems in Larcom scholarship here because they reinforce the interpretive dilemmas discussed earlier concerning scholars’ tendency to subsume the concerns of laboring literature into a middle-class narrative of self-culture, when they begin with political- and class-based interpretive frameworks. This is precisely the case with the scholarship surrounding *An Idyl of Work*. These interpretations inevitably make Larcom appear as disloyal to laborers or somehow deficient in her political consciousness. Cook, on the other hand, suggests the many ways Larcom possesses a distinct “working-class” consciousness but nonetheless

698 For ideal citizen, see Cook, 166; for national spirit, see Cook, 170.

699 Cook, 170. For Larcom as a politically neutral working-class author, see Cook, 187.

700 Cook, 165.
struggles to parse women’s economic enterprises from their role as citizens—a politically inflected word—with the result that her excellent insights are somewhat flattened by an underdeveloped and rather unsubstantiated thesis about female laborers’ contributions to political life. I submit that *An Idyl of Work* becomes most clear if we refuse to accept class as a reified thing within the text and reject the attending assumption that class strife must be a central issue for the plot. If we instead read *An Idyl of Work* as deliberately incorporating laboring elements, however, the poem’s chief objective emerges as a reminder to the reader that toil—in this case, female toil—sustains the world. Each of Larcom’s female characters embraces this fundamental fact by the poem’s ending and recognizes that toil does not presume degradation on the part of any of Larcom’s laborers; instead, the poem exposes a deficiency in a wider world refusing to value women’s contributions in both social and economic terms. In a move repeated elsewhere in her poems, Larcom measures the country’s character by the moral standards of its economies, in terms of how it values toil. Her retrospective framing suggests that a once-proud American society now fails by this standard, since it has allowed economic exploitation to enact violence on the laborer’s dignity.

*An Idyl of Work*’s plot is primarily discursive—that is to say, its many interwoven subplots serve to argue a point about female labor via both narrative action and dialogue. This complicated arrangement explains critics’ tendency to dub the poem a pastoral: the poem opens to mill women’s debate about what it means to be a lady while flooding disrupts textile production. After Esther, Eleanor, Isabel, and Minta’s discussion, the women leave the mills and pass another operative who has just read a letter and fainted. They take Ruth Woodburn, a woman harboring some secret grief, back to their boardinghouse room to rest away from other mill women’s wagging tongues. Esther lets the desperately isolated Ruth stay in the cramped
room she shares with Isabel and Eleanor, so that she might suffer and heal apart from women’s nosy conjectures. Ruth responds to Esther’s gentle, unobtrusive kindness, eventually confiding that she has found out via letter that the man she loved has thrown her over for her beautiful but shallow cousin. By leaning on her new friends for support, Ruth relinquishes her previous dream of marriage and begins to imagine new possibilities for her future. Soon after Ruth begins to discover a sense of belonging and purpose through her mill friendships, the factory employees plan to go on strike. Rather than participate, Esther and Eleanor travel to Minta’s New Hampshire home, where they form an important friendship with a well-to-do inn owner, Miriam Willoughby. Meanwhile, Ruth and Isabel remain in Lowell until Ruth elopes to Boston with an aristocratic-seeming suitor, who turns about to be Miriam Willoughby’s ne’er-do-well nephew, Rodney. After Rodney abandons Isabel and skips town because of his debts, the plots join again with Esther recovering the deceived, ashamed, but not “fallen” Isabel in Boston, and both return to Lowell. Esther becomes engaged to a noble-hearted physician, Dr. Mann, and prepares to move west with him. Isabel finally gives up her aristocratic aspirations and embraces the life of labor as a dignified one; by the poem’s close she seems likely to wed a respectable carpenter.701 Eleanor, “whose only heirloom from rich ancestors / Was slow consumption, hers by sure entail,” begins to succumb to the final stages of her disease in the last pages.702

One might dub the poem’s central conflict as the characters’ mutual struggle to embrace toil as a fundamental and dignified fact of life, despite society’s inability to understand or appreciate labor. The other character’s discursive struggles with the purpose and dignity of labor is reflected on the narrative level in Isabel’s subplot. From the opening pages, Isabel expresses


misgivings about Esther’s definition of “lady” as an action and a role rather than as a superficial marker of status. When Minta calls Eleanor a lady because of her pale complexion, Isabel cries, “‘Lady’ again!...Now I know there’s something more in it than feeding folks / With bread or with ideas. Eleanor says / I look a lady; You say she looks one. / I think it’s in the dress, the air, the gait—.”  

703 Isabel betrays her own susceptibility to aristocratic pretensions here, and she does so again in her clandestine love affair. To entice Rodney and conceal her own shame about her status as a wage-earner, Isabel admits, “telling half the truth, / I wove romances for him. He believed I was an orphan seamstress, who was born / To wealth and luxury. Of my factory life / I never hinted, thinking by and by / To be his lady-bride, and, far away, / Lose every memory of my working days.”  

704 While Isabel uses the romance’s tropes to distinguish herself as a beset damsel, her desire to flee the toil of her “working days” likewise makes her prey to Rodney’s fictions of being the white knight to save her from drudgery. Hence the poem’s cautionary message: when female laborers imbibe the aristocratic contempt for labor, their attitudes open them up to becoming the sport of unscrupulous men. It is not wage-earning which threatens to turn factory women into prostitutes; it is the human reluctance to embrace dignified toil that makes their virtue assailable.

In the end all of the characters take stock of their labor-based friendships as they look to their separate futures and new labors. Even Eleanor embraces her own death by looking forward expectantly to the labors she may accomplish in heaven. In the end Eleanor and Esther gaze on the setting sun together, “looking forth into fair realms / Of untried being,” and thinking of the labors which await them, for “nothing satisfies the soul / But opportunity for nobler work, and

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703 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 19.

704 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 159.
glimpses of illimitable fields.”

I. Laboring Tropes

As evident from the many interwoven threads of its plot, categorizing *An Idyl of Work* raises difficulties because of the complicated arrangement between its many moments of leisure and its endless discussions of labor. A good deal of the narrative takes place outside of the mill, but women’s discussions in their leisure hours constantly meditate upon toil. Thus, the poem’s twelve books defy simple categorization as pastoral and instead represent a philosophical counterpart to the full-fledged, georgic depiction of toil in Book VI. Moreover, the poem’s other sections depict moments of toil, and every chapter maintains discussions of labor’s relationship to women’s status, and its implications for feminine virtue. The conflict uniting these discussions of labor and Isabel’s sentimental romantic subplot is each character’s struggle to embrace labor as a fundamental, necessary, and dignified human condition, while at the same time rejecting aristocratic contempt, patriarchal control, and capitalistic exploitation of labor. These are the laboring literary tradition’s struggles, experienced by antebellum female laborers on philosophical and practical planes. Through these women the narrative seeks to modify societal attitudes towards labor to meet the ways women have already been modified by market-based cooperation.

The opening pages begin the poem’s sustained retort to the aristocratic contempt for labor by showing how labor and sophisticated mental activity are not mutually exclusive. When flooding slows factory looms to a lazy pace, Isabel, Eleanor, and Esther can share thoughts which normally would be drowned out by the speed and volume of machinery: “Slight watching their work needed; so they stood / And gave free voice to thoughts and fantasies / That groaning

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shaft and ceaseless clattering loom / Were wont to clamor down.”
The women’s ensuing conversation about what it means to be a lady quickly counters the idea that labor’s exigencies stifle intellectual sophistication. Far from it. Although the factories may temporarily “clamor down” laborers, this momentary slowing in mill production allows the always-occurring intellectual activity to come on display. Thus, if the shuttles slow to allow for leisurely conversations, these conversations reinforce the laboring premise that toil is a fundamental and necessary component of the human condition, and that the toiler is not degraded by her labor. A sympathetically portrayed overseer testifies to this fact to visitors on a tour through the mills.

One visitor, seeing Ruth’s wan countenance, worries that mill labor is enervating to delicate women. At this comment the overseer’s “brow grew serious. ‘If, being here, I needs must solve all problems of these lives,— / A hopeless task, —perplexed, I must withdraw / And seek a wiser man to fill my place. / But work’s a blessed curse, and some of these / Would wonder at our pity; smile, perhaps.’” The overseer’s comment reinforces several laboring topoi at once. He continues the laboring tradition dating back to Hesiod in calling labor a “blessed curse” whose pains might also bear the fruits of virtue. Additionally, he continues the didactic mode of that literary tradition by countering the tourists’ aristocratic bias. Meanwhile, he reinforces the laborer’s view that toil is not a matter for pity, and gently lampoons the naive pretenses seeing

706 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 12.
708 Once again, I do not reference the classical laboring tradition to imply that Larcom read and was conscious of Hesiod; I merely make the point that literature organized around labor as a principle entails other similarities in outlook. Raymond Williams in The Country and the City and Anthony Low have both made the point that the idea of labor as a blessed curse from the gods was easily adapted to a Judeo-Christian vision of labor in a postlapsarian world. See the discussion of Eden in Williams, The Country and the City, 12. See the discussion of Spenser’s view of the relationship between labor and “biblical imperatives” in Low, 53.
labor in this manner by referencing the mill women’s likeliness to smile at such condescension. Although some readers might interpret the overseer as a glibly shrugging off his responsibility for the laborers he manages, in fact he points to the fact that life itself is a complicated and mysterious struggle. His managerial role only grants him authority over a small segment of women’s troubles; it cannot enable him to “solve all problems of these lives.” The narrative seems to reinforce his position: Ruth’s pale face is not the result of toil but of heartbreak.

Larcom’s mill laborers are pragmatic, wise persons who are often far more knowing than their wealthier contemporaries about toil as a fact of life. When Eleanor asks a group of young girls if their labors tire them, they have already been inured to this fact of life by watching their mothers. “Oh yes!” they respond to her inquiry about being fatigued, “But so is everybody. We must learn, / While we are children, to do hard things, / And that will toughen us, / So mother says; / And she has worked hard always.” Whether labor is domestic or industrial, even the youngest of factory women realize its necessity to keep back what Virgil called the “pressing poverty” threatening those who will not toil. In light of this knowledge the young mill girls sing a song meditating on their own labor: “Merry days go dancing by; / hard work comes and tarries.” This is a version of Virgil’s “optima dies...prima fugit” uttered from a child’s mouth. Larcom does not unproblematically portray child labor in the mills, but, in a concept that will be discussed at great length later, she distinguishes between the need to toil as a natural force exerted on humanity, and the capitalist exploitation enacted on mill laborers. Mill employees’ lives proceed somewhere between these two dynamics.


710 Virgil, *Georgics*, 1.146.

Aristocratic presumptions about the laborer’s brutishness must constantly be countered, and even mill women must be reminded at times that labor and intellect are partners rather than adversaries. Esther later sings a poem (“Her Choice”) about a farmer’s wife who reflects on her previous courtship by a fop, in a situation recalling Isabel’s own struggle to accept labor’s dignity. The farmer’s wife, reminiscing on her previous bias, realizes that her husband’s dignified labor elevates both himself and his country: “she had not wedded a clod, whose heart was earthy, of earth, / Whose cattle and acres and crops were the measure of his worth. / He knew the ring of a truth, and the shape of a royal thought, / And how at integrity’s mint the wealth of a land is wrought. / He labored with mind and strength.”  

In this Virgilian depiction of nation-sustaining toil, the thinking farmer is also an example of economic man, whose steady character “mints” a wealth of virtue for the nation even as the products of his toil generate the tangible basis of the nation’s wealth. Now that the farmer’s wife has embraced her lot as partner to her husband’s toil, the woman also identifies herself via Virgilian tropes and sees her former affection for the dandy as a moment in which “her possible fate had been the fate of a homesick bee / In a butterfly’s leash, driven on amide scentless and useless bloom,— / What drudgery were not bliss to inanities of that doom?”  

Measured against the hollow fate she might have had, the farmer’s wife now accepts with equanimity that “woman’s lot at the best is hard.”  

Larcom’s female laborers do not scorn toil, but (except in their most vulnerable moments) embrace its processes as partaking of divine immortality. Towards the narrative’s end, after each woman has learned to celebrate labor’s dignity, Minta exults in its loftiest theological

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714 Ibid.
implications: “‘Tis work we love, and work we long to do; / But always better work, and better still: / Is not that right ambition? The good God, / Letting us labor, makes us like himself, — / Creator, glad in his work, ever beginning, perfect evermore!”

Although Minta does not intentionally imply Arendt’s distinction between labor as a process and work as a durable artifact, her diction reveals a great deal as she interchanges “labor” and “work” when bringing cyclical labors into God’s enduring circle within eternity. Endlessly passing labors become “works,” granted lasting meaning by mirroring the divine life that is always at once new and complete.

II. Gathering Female Laborers into Rented Rooms

When Larcom adapts laboring tropes to female wage-earning, she fashions a new female persona with virtues adapted to her particular laboring context. For instance, where Virgil urges control over the sexual passions so as not to distract from the grand task of labor, Larcom’s laboring women delay or reject marriage for the sake of their own great projects. This feature of the narrative neatly interweaves georgic discipline to feminine virtues by tasking the mill women with forging a female laboring society, an instance of the true lady as “loaf-giver.” Esther is just such an ideal lady. She is “a Ruth who never of a Boaz dreamed,” inspired only by “a hope to spend herself for worthy ends.”

Bereft of all her family, Esther embraces the laboring moment, and through it, she also embraces lonely laborers like Ruth: “Whatever work came, whoso crossed her path, / Lonely as this pale stranger, wheresoe’er / She saw herself a need, there should be home, / Business, and family.”

Esther’s rented room persona, her belief in the

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715 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 173.

716 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 35.

717 Ibid.
creative possibilities of women’s cooperative labors, lead her at first to set herself against marriage. She intimates to Ruth, “My thoughts are shut fast, marriage-ward. / There is much else to live for, full as much / For woman as for man, in separateness.”

In embracing the rented room persona, Esther also constructs it for others. She is a “shelter” for lonely mill women like Ruth. She invites other women into the cooperative construction of the rented room via kind sympathy and free inquiry. Each Sunday, Esther invites her friends to her room after church services, presiding there over women’s open philosophical conversations, “when each spoke her free word, her deepest thought / Or lightest doubt, and Esther, as she could, / Suggested an answer.” Esther’s dialectical model represents a far cry from the mill women’s Calvinist upbringings, where from childhood the girls were force-fed “the tough meat of Calvin’s doctrines” by “pilgrim nursing-fathers.” In the rented room female laborers are far from the patriarchal shelter and its tendency to constrict human spirits. In its place lies Esther’s image of the soul as a bird flying upward, navigating between rafters within a building and longing to find its way out into the world with “all the free, glad things that worshipped in unconscious restraint.” As Esther’s comments imply, when female laborers are joined under the banner of the rented room, they are often profoundly critical of patriarchy, and equally suspicious of marriage as an institution. This is a natural extension of joining laboring tropes to female toil. Classical laboring literature critiques aristocratic snobbery and men’s

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718 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 94.
719 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 69.
720 Ibid.
721 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 74.
political ambitions because they devalue toil by denying its central place in human society. This feminine adaptation takes up those attitudes while additionally questioning men’s pretensions to be women’s superiors. For instance, commenting on men’s ability to be seduced from their commitments by beauty, Esther jeers, “Poor weaklings! Why do women call them ‘lords,’ / Who are not their own masters?” The female laborer accepts no such master. Minta, for instance, rejects an obnoxious suitor and dreams instead of perpetuating the rented room in the form of a girls school where Eleanor will teach sewing, Esther will teach various subjects, and Minta will “make the bread, / And teach girls how,” as the incarnation of the lady as loaf-giver. Minta’s plan for constructing new rented rooms needs only capital. “Give me a money-lever,” she declares, “and I’ll move / The world into a new thought about girls / And schools to train them in.” Through laboring literary tropes and anti-patriarchal attitudes, this collection of women intends to transform society’s ingrained prejudices against women and labor by using the rented room, with its market foundations, as a “lever” or catalyst for change.

III. Categorical Dilemmas: Laboring Dignity and the Refusal to be “Massed”

Admittedly, scholars who interpret this poem as an argument for the laborer’s self-culture—that is, the idea that only some factory women have the capacity for gentility, evidenced by their manifest cultural sophistications—find a great deal of support in the passages where Larcom notes female laborers’ diverse characters. When Larcom depicts the factory population as pluralistic, she does not also present each laborer as equally admirable: the poem makes clear that some women are better, some worse. On this basis scholars interpret Larcom as

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722 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 93.

723 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 140.

724 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 141.
distinguishing her own characters from the rest of the population. But, upon reflection, this is not an obvious conclusion to draw from Larcom’s textured portrayal of the factory town. If Larcom, like Eliza Jane Cate before her, intended to portray some of the “shadows” of cooperative labor because the life of toil inherently resists romanticization, how might she acknowledge that laboring societies are imperfect without playing into stereotypes about the toiling masses? It is essential that we meet the complexities of the text on these issues, in order to comprehend precisely how *An Idyl of Work* dignifies labor while acknowledging its dark side.

At points the narrative, focalized usually through Esther’s consciousnesses, terms other factory women “ill-bred, hoydenish” and condemns their inability to refrain from gossip and leave their peers in peace (*IW*, 30-31). Esther again perceives different calibers of laborers when she leaves for Boston to search for Isabel, and stays with the mother of a co-worker in a “a cheap lodging-place for sewing-girls, / Shop-tenders, tailoresses, milliners”—in other words, all women employed in some aspect of the clothing industry, like Esther herself. However, they are not the community of laborers to which Esther is accustomed:

> The chat of the house-inmates wearied much  
> The soul of Esther, —idle prattle, all  
> Of fashions, scandal, good looks, stylish beaux:  
> She wondered at it greatly; used, herself,  
> To talk that held some meaning. Could it be  
> That much toil on the outside shows of things  
> Deadened the deeper faculties? (*IW*, 153)

This is a powerful, troubling question, and one filled with the ancient charge that labor itself might mute certain human capabilities. But while the question itself is suggestive, it is not presented as rhetorical—that is, the question itself does not imply a clear answer. Nor does the narrative offer a response; Esther merely seeks relief from these women in the solitary space of her rented room. We are left wondering what might be the fundamental difference between
textile labor in a factory town, and seamstress labor in a city. What makes millinery shallow, but fabric production profound? Each time the poem returns to this issue of whether labor produces a certain, predictable identity, the answers slide away.

This frustration to pin down the relationship between labor and character, and between individual laborer and the larger laboring group, occurs in another instance during the factory tour of Book VI. There, visitors are treated to a vision of women’s cooperative labors in vivid detail:

The door, swung in on iron hinges, showed
A hundred girls who hurried to and fro,
With hands and eyes following the shuttle’s flight,
Threading it, watching for the scarlet mark
That came up in the web, to show how fast
Their work was speeding. Clatter went the looms,
Click-clack the shuttles. Gossamery motes
Thickened the sunbeams into golden bars,
And in a misty maze those girlish forms,
Arms, hands, and heads, moved with the looms,
That closed them in as if all were one shape,
one motion. For the most part tidy they,
and comely; wholesome-looking country girls.
But now and then a stolid face, an eye
That held a covetous glint, a close, cold mouth,
Made emphasis for itself. And now and then
A countenance eloquent with quiet thought
And noble aspiration, shone out clear,
A sun amid the cloud-like nebulae. (IW, 80)

In this brilliant passage leisured factory tourists’ seek to comprehend factory women as a category by observing their labor. But labor is an activity, and laboring as an interpretive framework is itself dynamic—its nature is founded in motion. Consequently, at each moment when the onlookers try to pin down some sort of stable interpretive framework on the women as a category, their efforts break down. The onlookers’ vision moves into a romantic mode as the “gossamery motes” of fabric particles in the air are transformed by “sunbeams”—and by the
onlooker’s perspective—into “golden bars.” In this hazy golden light, this “misty maze,” the women’s cooperative toil takes on the semblance of unity, where “those girlish forms, / Arms, hands, and heads, moved with the looms, / That closed them in as if all were one shape, / one motion” (italics added). But the laborers’ unity is an analogy only, and one that quickly breaks down. In spite of one’s desire to unify the women on the basis of their shared labor, the semblance of unity immediately disintegrates. The women’s distinct characters—some better, some worse—flash out from this “cloud-like nebulae,” which is a vague perspectival grouping hovering over the women’s actions. The vision is cloudy because it is, after all, only made possible by of the viewers’ romantic impulse to harmonize the women’s identities in the first place.

The view then turns to a window area, where Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel “worked in a sunlit corner, side by side,” and we wonder once again if these women are the exceptional rays of “sun” shining out through the toiling cloud we have just seen (IW, 81). But again, this impulse to hierarchize mill women according to some clear-cut designation of their identities breaks down. Isabel immediately sees her secret lover among the factory tourists and, becoming agitated, mysteriously asks Eleanor to tend her looms. In Virgilian fashion, her unchecked passions have drawn her away from the project of labor, and she retreats behind a pile of cloth to conceal her double deceit: of her status as a factory woman, from Rodney Willoughby; and of her clandestine love affair, from her friends. Thus, if some of the women are more virtuous than others, these are clearly not the heroines of the story versus the laboring masses surrounding them.

In fact, the poem constantly moves between this impulse to categorize laborers and the challenging particularities defying that impulse. Scholars like Judith Ranta often take Esther’s
characterization of Ruth Woodburn’s boardinghouse at face value: these “‘ill-bred, hoydenish’ factory girls are viewed as incapable” of the “exalted friendship” the protagonists enjoy. Yet even in the passage cited, the “hoydenish” girls do not divide neatly between the poem’s protagonists and the crude laboring masses. Esther tells her roommates that the refined, cultured Ruth is living in a difficult boardinghouse full of “hoydenish” women. But in the next breath she acknowledges that her dear friend Minta is among these residents: “She is next door to Minta Summerfield, but Minta has not met her, and I doubt / If Minta’s mirth would be good medicine / For one like her” (IW, 30-31). The association Esther raises between the boisterous boardinghouse women and Minta is no accident, as Minta herself acts a bit hoydenish throughout the poem. Minta is not unkind, and she explicitly disapproves of her housemates’ tendency to gossip, but she also has an unfailingly saucy attitude and delights in constantly teasing her fellow laborers, often much to their annoyance. Ruth needs to be momentarily protected not only from the “mass” of supposedly crude women in her boardinghouse, but also from Minta, Esther’s dear friend. Thus the poem, even in presenting its virtuous factory heroines, resists the urge to portray them as wholly distinct from the large population it does not display. Indeed, as the aristocratic Miriam Willoughby comes to appreciate Esther and Eleanor’s refinement, she comes to understand that “these girls, too, from their talk, were not so far / Above the rest” (IW, 142).

In short, Larcom refuses to clarify to what extent her characters are representative of the factory population, and to what extent they are exceptions from it. They are not clearly metonymic, nor symbolic, nor representative, nor allegorical, because the relationship between Larcom’s characters and other women in the factory town is always dynamic. Ruth enters into the women’s rented room solidarities; Isabel temporarily leaves them when she elopes. By

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725 Ranta, 17.
portraying the movement of characters into and out of labor-based solidarities, Larcom carefully constructs a poem that frustrates any stereotype of factory women as a reified laboring population. If her characters are not quite exceptional, they cannot be categorically better than their ignorant co-workers. But if they are also not quite representative, then they cannot stand in for the masses.

The word “masses” itself has a fraught history with factory populations like the ones in *An Idyl of Work*. Raymond Williams notes that the term originally referred to a mob, but under industrialism *masses* began to indicate the large populations of laborers gathered in factory towns. After it took on the denotation of this large physical grouping, it also started take on social connotations for “the work-relations made necessary by the development of large-scale collective production,” and then accrued a sociopolitical meaning as these populations tended towards “an organized and self-organizing working class.” But *masses* as a term always diminishes the mental activity or intellectual consciousness of the group, since “masses was a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained in its significance: gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit. The masses, on this evidence, formed the perpetual threat to culture.” Williams points out that designating others as the *masses*, like stereotyping, is essentially an epistemological error—even if, troublingly, it is also a reflexive cognitive gesture in modern society:

> A difficulty arises here with the whole concept of masses. … I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses; we none of us can or do. The masses are always the others, whom we don’t know, and can’t know...To other people we also are masses. Masses are other people.

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726 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 297.

727 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 298.

728 Ibid.
There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. In an urban industrial society there are many opportunities for such ways of seeing. The point is not to reiterate the objective conditions but to consider, personally and collectively, what these have done to our thinking….What we see, neutrally, is other people, many others, people unknown to us. In practice, we mass them, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. Within its terms, the formula will hold. Yet it is the formula, not the mass, which is our real business to examine.\footnote{Williams, \textit{Culture and Society}, 300.}

This is an exceedingly complicated problem: if the concept of \textit{masses} is degrading and inaccurate, then it urgently needs to be examined, as Williams says. But how can a person examine a formula they are not aware they use? This presents a particularly difficult problem for Larcom if she wishes to avoid nullifying factory women’s differences between the equally inaccurate options of romance and stereotype, for positive and negative traits of factory women can be interpreted toward either pole. But throughout \textit{An Idyl of Work} Larcom seems to suggest that people must embrace the condition of being in the world over withdrawing from it. If engaging with the world raises perplexing contradictions, people must accept the need to move between epistemologies, because no single epistemology will yield the whole truth. This insight comes literally in sermon form: in Book V, Eleanor and Esther hear an inspiring sermon from Pastor Alwyn, who claims that to find God does not require turning away from earth, for during his life Jesus spoke with people in the inn and marketplace. Said differently, Jesus preached truth to people in both rented rooms and commercial environments. The Pharisee’s great sin, in Alwyn’s view, was “shutting his sanctimonious eyelids close / In on himself” (\textit{IW}, 63). After the sermon, Esther and other mill women return to her room for their Sabbath-day spiritual discussions. As she presides over their conversation about a lecture that week in which the speaker claimed prayer to God was ineffectual, because the divine law cannot be changed, she responds by pointing out that all of the separate disciplines—Philosophy, Science, and Law—are
particular means to particular ends (IW, 75-76). So, she trusts, is the soul’s instinct to pray, and thus she recommends that women resign themselves to the contradictions between these modes of knowing. “Though Philosophy forbid...though Science forbid,” though law obstruct the urge, “still let heart / Respond to heart,—deep calling unto deep, / The voice of many waters,— ‘Let us pray!’” (IW, 75-76)

Because laboring is a condition of living close to the world, laboring literature seems to lend itself to this interplay between interpretations and the failure of interpretations. The Georgics, according to William Batstone, also suggests the interpretive richness but irreducible complexity which inevitably arises when works portray humanity’s engagement with the environment: “We do not need to choose between a poem about dirt and dung and a poem about metaphysics, because this poem addresses the great abstracts (knowledge, history, power, psychology, ethics, art death) in the way our lives do: by ‘contact’ with things, by fictions and interpretations, by witty and elegant postures, and ultimately by the failure of projects and systems.”730 Laboring literature begins with the physical struggle of being in the world, but it also makes clear that these struggles are epistemological, too: the richness of our world will always invite interpretations while simultaneously eluding them. That epistemological struggle also includes how to understand the precise effect laboring has on the laborer’s mind, capacities, and character. Even if the answers will always try to pinpoint a dynamic that is elusive and unpredictable, human beings cannot help asking the question anyway.

IV. Self-Culture vs. Laboring Culture and the Art of Protest

Yet for all of the poem’s insistence on the dignity of labor, and its resistance to stereotyping and classifying mill women, the fact remains: none of Larcom’s characters engage

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730 Batstone, 125.
in the strike back in Lowell. There is then this one clear-cut difference between Larcom’s characters and the rest of the mill population, and it is also based on a dynamic activity: the majority of mill women are activists; our heroines are not.

Moreover, while Eleanor, Esther, and Minta are hiking through the New Hampshire mountains, Miriam relates an experience to them that powerfully critiques Romantic individualism as a way of understanding oneself and the world. The mill women discuss how human wisdom resides in discussions and traditions with this new, well-born woman they have brought into their circle. They converse about the arts to make this point, while their peers beat the pavements back in Lowell. This raises the question of whether the poem does not wholly reject the notion of self-culture as individualistic value, but instead modifies self-culture to be something that is more communal. But still, perhaps Larcom does put her faith in middle-class values as she presents her mill women as a culturally distinguished circle, hovering elegantly above the angry masses.

Mary Loeffelholz articulates this mode of interpretation quite carefully when she shows how Larcom adapts Wordsworth’s concept of the sublime to factory women’s perspectives. When Miriam Willoughby relates to the factory woman how one day she ascended “Pequawket’s hidden top” and stayed there alone through the night, Loeffelholz notes that the scenario is a repackaging of Wordsworth’s conclusion to his 1850 Prelude. There Wordsworth climbs Mount Snowdon in thick fog and learns from nature about the “mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss.” Miriam likewise finds herself sequestered from civilization by nightfall and deep mists, and from this isolated vantage point she and her bird companion “were

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cast adrift / ‘Mid insubstantial guesses of a world.” (122-123). From her lofty vantage point
Miriam experiences visions—or perhaps temptations—of how to view her own place above the
crowded world. She imagines a voice telling her, “We are philosophers! / Life is illusion; we and
fogs are real.”  

But an alternate voice counters, and “with him I agreed,— / ‘Who climbs to
isolation from mankind, / There thinking to find wisdom, is a fool.” In Larcom’s hands, as
Loeffelholz points out, Wordsworth’s isolated vision is an “egotistical sublime,” a masturbatory
exercise in self-delusion. The women of Larcom’s poem, by contrast, attain wisdom through a
collaborative, dialectical process. All of the poem’s “peaks” of epiphany, from Ruth’s
reassessment of her unrequited love, to Isabel’s disillusionment with aristocratic pretensions, and
Miriam Willoughby’s eventual re-assessment of factory women and labor issues, arise from
earlier conversations with other mill women.

Loeffelholz believes that Larcom stages a “cross-class female literary commons” in An
Idyl of Work as a revision of Wordsworth’s Excursion—“especially the Excursion’s debate, in its
final two books, over the consequences of British industrialization for country folk.” But
Larcom innovates on Wordsworth’s distanced view of the social issue when she “positions the
mill girls as the speaking subjects, as well as the objects, of the Idyl’s dialogue on their
position.” This is a crucial departure from Wordsworth’s aesthetic framing, which also
amounts to a class-based and cognitive distance from the child laborers who are the subject of its

732 Larcom, Idyl, 123.

733 Ibid.

734 Loeffelholz, 24.

735 Loeffelholz, 24.

736 Ibid.
concern. And it is in a sense the laborers’ cognitive states Wordsworth worries about, since the moral injury of factory work lies in the way that “child labor is the denial of childhood’s natural access to the sublime.” In a familiar trope, it is labor for Wordsworth which cuts off the mind’s access to more lofty thoughts. Larcom refuses this premise that labor blunts mind and spirit when she, according to Loeffelholz, “insists not only that the natural sublime is accessible to her mill girls’ appreciation but also that Wordsworth’s version of it is within their capabilities to assess.”

Loeffelholz provides an apt and compelling reading of Larcom’s artistic reproof to Wordsworth and romantic values.

However, when Loeffelholz extends Miriam’s vision above the mists into an allegory of the value of exalted, socially-oriented thoughts hovering above grim industrial realities, the aptness ends. Loeffelholz argues that the poem’s overall question “is whether her heroines’ shared, female-authored revision of Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime has sufficient power to alter the industrial landscape.” In Loeffelholz’s reading Larcom proposes to solve the challenges of the factory population of the 1870s—that is, of the poor and uneducated immigrants who replaced New England-born women—through the example of her educated, native-born factory characters. Workers’ dignity will be elevated through self-culture, and this can happen literally through Larcom’s personal commitment to education, “through the

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737 Ibid.

738 Ibid.

739 Loeffelholz, 26.

740 Ibid.
dissemination of an Anglo-American vernacular English literary curriculum in the public schools of the United States.”

This is where the argument about self-culture becomes most evidently problematic for laboring literature. It is another model of upward motion, reinforcing the frame of hierarchical power relationships so often placed around working-class texts. For Loeffelholz Larcom’s female protagonists have adapted but not formally altered “Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime” by transcribing its elevated vantage point to the laboring question, and the hierarchies produced between Larcom’s genteel factory women in the White Mountains and the striking masses back in Lowell makes “the heroines’ bonding over poetry “literally their escape from, and figuratively Larcom’s solution for, labor unrest back in Lowell.” The self-culture frame uses booklearning as a ladder in a vertical narrative of laboring uplift. Once again, it places the issue of laborers’ individual minds as the rough matter which must be worked upon for their own good and, through them, the good of the nation. In a gesture which ought to be quite familiar by now, the laborer is viewed in a state of initial deficiency, and his or her salvation will come from moving from a state of ignorant potentiality to educated self-realization.

The issue of whether Larcom proposes self-culture as a solution to laborers’ degradation strikes at the heart of how we ought to interpret—and frankly, value, An Idyl of Work as an underserved American text. I submit that “self-culture” is, from the perspective of laboring literature, a rather pernicious interpretive strainer, because it preserves certain details about the book—the laborers’ reading practices, labor tensions, and their own perspectives on strikes—by resolving them within an interpretive framework reinforcing a class-based perspective.

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741 Loeffelholz, 27.

742 Loeffelholz, 26.
Meanwhile, the laborer’s values and her own powerful protests run through unnoticed. Self-culture, even when it might be disseminated broadly via the public school curricula Loeffelholz sees recommended underneath the poem, succeeds or fails based on criteria observed in individual persons. It is next-of-kin to the rationale that “solves” the problem of poverty by blaming it on immorality. Orestes Brownson denounced the complacency this solution encouraged: “Self-culture is a good thing, but it cannot abolish inequality, nor restore men to their rights….as a means it is well, as the end it is nothing.” Brownson, dripping irony, called self-culture a “capital theory,” which “has the advantage that kings, hierarchies, nobilities, in a work, all who fatten on the toil and blood of their fellows, will feel no difficulty in supporting it.”

Raymond Williams also categorized solutions like these as forms of “the ladder,” which “is a perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because, while undoubtedly it offers the opportunity to climb, it is a device which can only be used individually: you go up the ladder alone.” Williams rejects the trope altogether because “it sweetens the poison of hierarchy” and “weakens the principle of common betterment, which ought to be an absolute value.” Rather than mitigating social divisions, the ladder carefully maintains them while seeming to offer progress. As a social remedy “the ladder will never do; it is the product of a divided society, and

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743 Brownson, 311.
744 Brownson, 310. For a more detailed reading of Brownson’s view of self-culture as the social ally of capital, see Cook, 44-45.
745 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 331.
746 Ibid.
will fall with it.” The question remains, then, of whether Larcom falls for the trope of the ladder in presenting her refined, educated, thoughtful factory women, or whether she proposes something else in her “idyllic” vision of labor.

The answer lies in Larcom’s presentation of strikes, and the issue of whether Larcom’s female characters substitute pastoral discussions of poetry for “class-based labor action,” as Loeffelholz suggests. Before Miriam and her laborer-guests go on their hike in the White Mountains, Esther receives a letter from Ruth, who is with Isabel back in Lowell. Ruth writes to Esther of the strikes and her own objections to them as an instrument of resistance. Ruth muses,

Why should we,
Battling oppression, tyrants be ourselves,
Forcing mere brief concession to our wish?
Are not employers human as employed?
Are not our interests common? If they grind
And cheat as brethren should not, let us go
Back to the music of the spinning-wheel,
And clothe ourselves at hand-loom's of our own,
As did our grandmothers. The very name
Of 'strike' has so unwomanly a sound,
If not inhuman, savoring of old feuds
And savage conflicts! If indeed there is
Injustice,—if the rule of selfishness
Must be, invariably, mill-owners’ law,
As the dissatisfied say,—if evermore
The laborer’s hire tends downward, then we all
Must elsewhere turn; for nobody should toil
Just to add wealth to men already rich.
Only a drudge will toil on, with no hope
Widening from well-paid labor.” (IW, 118-119)

We must surmise that Larcom intends Ruth’s objections to be taken seriously, given that none of her characters participates in the strike. If we interpret Ruth’s objections via Foner’s division between genteel and militant mill women, then certainly Ruth—and Larcom, by extension—is

747 Williams, Culture and Society, 332.

748 Loeffelholz, 26.
open to the charge of identifying bourgeois feminine delicacy counter to her own interests as a laborer. Ruth does indeed express reservations about a female protester who “spoke on the rostrum for herself, / And such as felt aggrieved,” and objects to women striking on the grounds that it has “so unwomanly a sound.” In this view, Ruth’s delicacy of opinion amounts either to cowardice or madness, since to refuse support for the strike is to accept the course of industrial decline.

And yet Larcom writes in 1874, with the benefit of knowing whither mill conditions were tending for her fictional characters. Even though she is armed with historical hindsight, Larcom still seems to present Ruth’s objections to the strike unironically. Either Larcom perpetuates in Ruth her own folly—which really would seem madness, given Larcom’s knowledge that Ruth’s policy of ladylike submission would render Ruth’s status as a factory woman obsolete—or the militant/genteel interpretive frame fails to explain Ruth’s import.

To solve this puzzle, it is important to remember how historical hindsight leads modern readers to equate strikes with progress on the labor question. We too easily forget that progress on that front was won quite slowly, and that nineteenth-century strikes were often met with violence, brutality, and defeat. From Larcom’s perspective in the late nineteenth century, the strike’s effectiveness was not at all clear. Larcom’s childhood friend Harriet Hanson Robinson summed up the story from her own perspective in 1898: “ Strikes ensue, which usually end, as the first Lowell one did, for the time being at least, in the success of the employer, rather than the employee.”

Robinson refers to the 1834 strike, which occurred a year before the Larcom family moved to Lowell, in which 800 mill women organized a “walk-out” over wage cuts. They

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749 Robinson, 122.
stunned but did not move the Boston Associates, and “the walkout came to a quick end.” Their 1836 strike over increased rates of room and board won a partial concession, where “some of boardinghouse increases, at least, were revoked,” but strikes were rarely enjoyed even this much success. In 1867 many of Lowell’s skilled mule spinners struck unsuccessfully in favor of the ten-hour workday. In 1875 they struck again over wage cuts, with the result that “they were locked out and fired. Three years later, female operatives struck over another wage cut, and they too were fired.” The wave of unsuccessful strikes extended far beyond Larcom’s time, both within and beyond Lowell. As the nineteenth-century drew to a close, it “resolved” the labor question with a pattern of increasing violence and force directed at American laborers. In one particularly chilling instance, federal troops and state militias used force in 1877 to end a massive national railroad strike, killing forty-five laborers in Pittsburgh. Once again in Lowell, laborers in 1903 organized a city-wide strike for wage increases, with the result that factories closed for two months and reopened with a new immigrant labor force. In short, Larcom had little reason to equate the labor strike with the laborer’s uplift. Ruth’s words suggest an alternate means of influence, one which aligns with the tenets of “laboring literature” by calling for a recognition of the laborer’s fundamental human dignity.

While Ruth’s reservations about women speaking in public do suggest her concern with feminine delicacy and propriety, her objections to the strike go deeper than that. From her perspective, exploitative wages suggest the capitalist owners’ unwillingness to acknowledge

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750 H. Green, 20.
751 Ibid.
752 H. Green, 23.
753 Ibid.
their laborers’ dignity as human persons. To correct their cruelty, Ruth insists on all parties’
shared humanity, where “employers [are] human as employed,” “their interests common” (Idyl,
119). If factory owners refuse to recognize these facts, however, factory women cannot correct
the imbalance through retaliation. But a strike, almost “inhuman, savoring of old feuds / And
savage conflicts” answers dehumanizing violence with dehumanizing violence, “forcing brief
concession to our wish” and making mill women “tyrants...ourselves” for the sake of “battling
oppression.” (IW, 119, 118). The only action which can save the laborer from becoming the
unthinking brute her employers treat her as, is to display her own intellectual consciousness by
leaving, for “only a drudge will toil on” so thoughtlessly and hopelessly (IW, 119). While
elsewhere Larcom associates factory labor with the harsh forces of nature, which necessitate
human toil as a fact of life, here she addresses the artificial human component of industrial labor
conditions, where toil is the product not of natural circumstance but of deliberate human violence
via exploitation.

To reconcile this apparent contradiction in Idyl, where laborers can shrug off toil as a
necessity, yet still protest capitalist exploitation as a feature of wage labor, it is useful to draw in
Arendt’s distinction between force and violence. Although the two are often used
interchangeably, Arendt insists that force is not a synonym for violence. It should be used to
describe impersonal processes by which energy is released by physical or social movements,
rather than to signify intentional coercion. Nature exerts force on human life, and while it may be
painful and destructive, it is a happening not bound by ethical standards because there is no
human intention behind it. Violence, on the other hand, is a tool directed by human intention
and “distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength,

754 For this discussion of force, see Arendt, On Violence, 44-45.
since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it.755 When Arendt references a “last stage” of weaponized violence, she is considering sophisticated tools like the nuclear bomb, a tool so strong and devastating to its enemies that the user need not be strong at all. The tool itself overwhelms all gradations of unequal strength between the person wielding it and the person subjected to it. In this “last stage” humanity ceases to exist on a spectrum because the aggressor can annihilate his victim, without risking much threat of retaliation to himself. While Arendt was far from thinking of economic inequalities in this analogy, the same principles hold true when factory owners can lower wage rates beneath the basic costs of living without being accountable to employees, or bringing negative consequences on themselves. In the absence of nineteenth-century laws to curb their actions, if capitalist owners become disinclined to see the humanity of their employees, who can stop them? In Ruth’s view the only way to counter violent men bent on denying any shared humanity with their employees, who “grind / And cheat as brethren should not,” is either to remind them of that shared humanity, or to withdraw from the reach of an overwhelming weapon which she cannot hope to wield herself.

Ruth’s letter suggests there is a psychological component to violence insofar as it dehumanizes the opponent, allowing the person who will “grind / and cheat” to forget he does so to his brethren. In other words, the factory owner treats the laborer as if she lacked an equal consciousness, and injures her grievously in the action. The other characters, in separate moments, seem to agree. If capitalists inflict violence on laborers by forcing them to toil too much, they will harm the humanity of their employees. Miriam Willoughby asserts as a general

principle, “Labor is beautiful, but not too much; / For that kills beauty in the laborer” (IW, 135). Ruth’s protest against the strike as a retaliatory act of violence suggests a belief that violence only serves to deny others’ humanity, but it can never restore a mutual recognition of humanity between two opposing parties. In this way Ruth’s response to capitalist violence offers an appropriate corrective in terms of laboring literature insofar as it refuses to concede the laborer’s intellect under any circumstance, to the point of abandoning a hostile environment.

This counterbalancing of violence and respect for human consciousness recalls Arendt’s own criticism of Franz Fanon. Fanon claimed that violence had a “cleansing effect” and could restore the manhood of the debased slave. He also saw it as forcing a recognition beyond race, involving “the veritable creation of new men,” and aimed primarily at “a revolution in consciousness” functioning as “both the means and end of revolution.”756 Arendt’s problem with Fanon, according to political theorist Richard H. King, lay in her certainty that “violence [could not] define what it meant to be human,” and that man cannot create himself, either through violence or otherwise. Moreover, she saw that perpetuated violence threatens to enter the body politic itself as a habit, which makes “the creation or re-instatement of a political realm of speech...very difficult.”757 For that reason she stressed revolutions “aimed at the creation of public spaces, via institutional arrangements, where speech and action about the affairs of the republic could take place.”758 With a similar concern for spaces respectful of her own human capacities, Ruth rejects violent action in favor of retreat to a more dignified space—in this case, a socioeconomic, laboring space versus a political one. She recommends this retreat even if doing

757 King, 37.
758 King, 38.
so means returning to the rather primitive work of “spinning-wheel” and “hand-loom.” Although at first glance Ruth seems to recommend a wistful anachronism, in reality she advocates a “revolution” in the original sense of the word as a rolling backward, a return to first principles. In this case, the principle the laborer must recover from the wage system is a recognition between employer and employed of the shared humanity binding them as partners in a joint economic endeavor, where the inescapable fact of toil sustains the world. This, from her perspective, is something a strike can never do.

V. Conclusion

An Idyl of Work ends with a meditation on these women’s dignified laboring moments as they hang in the balance, before capitalist exploitation enacted violence on the laborer’s humanity. The poem concludes in the laboring mode, by demanding justice and calling for society’s need to value labor on both a social and economic level. Miriam Willoughby recognizes where the worrisome industrial trends her friends experience are tending. Her forward-looking vision recognizes that if capitalists will not value labor in the economic sphere, it is time for politics to intervene: “Here was a problem, then, / For the political theorist: how to save / Mind from machinery’s clutches” (IW, 142). Just as Virgil recognizes that farmers urgently need Octavius to stop the violence running riot through the countryside, Miriam sees that if the government will not stop this market violence, corporations will destroy the dignity of nation-sustaining labor. These trends have already begun, even if the mill women themselves do not recognize it. Miriam sees that each woman’s distinct personality is already being portioned out, vivisected by market conditions reducing them to the status of mere “hands”: “These counted but as ‘hands!’ named such! /No! No! It must not be at all; or else their toil / Must be made easier, larger its reward!” (IW, 142). In its final pages, though, An Idyl of Work
acknowledges that this basic sense of valuing labor has not happened: “high rewards no longer stimulate toil,” and the country goes the direction of “other feudalisms” by depriving laborers of their basic dignity by trivializing their crucial contributions to the life of the whole.

Thus, in acknowledging the precariousness of the laboring moment, rented room literature calls attention to the auspicious balance necessary between natural, political, and social conditions to grant labors success. This balance is necessary for labor to sustain both the factory woman and the world to which she renders a service, rather than dividing their needs against each other. The rented room character embraces toil as a fundamental human condition, the result of necessity, but rejects violence in the form of capitalistic exploitation over labor. Factory women’s pragmatic attitude towards labor itself derives from women’s own origins on family farms, where they were inured to long days and demanding tasks. Factory toil of itself did not bother women, but they bristled at the corporation’s unending tendency to push labor past natural boundaries. For instance, women often mentioned that factory labor was much easier than the farm labor they were used to, but they complained heavily that factories extended shift lengths past sundown on long winter nights.\textsuperscript{759} In accepting toil but rejecting exploitative violence, factory women do not intimate a desire to ascend the social ladder and escape their laboring condition, but to aim consistent, profoundly critical attacks on those social prejudices taking it for granted.

\textsuperscript{759} Dublin, \textit{Farm to Factory}, 12.
Conclusion

MODERN LABOR: AT THE CROSSROADS OF INDUSTRIALIZED SOCIETY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

1837 marks a meeting of worlds in Massachusetts: the year that Emerson delivered several lectures to factory operatives of the Lowell mills. Emerson must have had a captive audience, for his contemporary and fellow veteran of the Lyceum lecture circuit, Harvard professor A.P. Peabody, recalls the remarkable studiousness of Lowell women: “I have never seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking. No, not even in a college class, as in that assembly of young women, laboring for their subsistence.”760 One important conclusion of this dissertation, which will form the premise of my future scholarship on laboring literature, is that Emerson’s Lyceum lecture before his audience of laboring, thinking, writing factory women serves as a symbolic moment and a point of departures —emphasis, plural—in American literature. While Emerson’s note-taking listeners may have hung on his every word, they were hardly passive receptacles for the great intellectual’s ideas. As Emerson developed his theories of individualism from the 1830s through the 1850s, Lowell mill women formulated ideas of their own. In the midst of deteriorating labor conditions, operatives organized strikes and defended their dignity via fiction and non-fictional works, through publications such as the Lowell Offering and the Voice of Industry.

This dissertation has laid a foundation to argue that this moment, of Emerson the speaker enunciating to his audience of laborers in a space made possible by industrial conditions, opens

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760 qtd. in Eisler, 32-33.
up like a portmanteau to two distinct American literary traditions. One of these, exploring the contours of freedom, power, and individualism, has been always with us. The other, termed here “laboring literature,” is poorly understood and oft-neglected. It requires propitious historical circumstances to come into view. We must relax our grip on the individual, whose rebellions so often disclose his independence, to see this body of literature, which neither pays homage to the individual nor consistently idealizes rebellion, although protest and social critique are true to its nature.

I have argued that many fictional depictions of women’s industrial labor have been mightily misunderstood, both in their own time and in our own. One reason for this misunderstanding lay in the antebellum public’s reluctance to condone any female activity proceeding beyond the walls of the patriarchal shelter. The other reason lies in a politically based reluctance to interpret market-based labor—and especially wage labor—as a dignified activity unto itself, irrespective of its relationship to political freedom. Laboring literature constantly addresses society’s undervaluation of the laborer. The emphasis is most fundamentally on social dignity, but in an increasingly commercialized society, it must also be in dollars and cents. In modern society, however, to urge the need to “value the laborer” means jumping to the latter solution—often in Marxist terms—without appreciating the full significance of the former. To appreciate laborers, we must appreciate more deeply the inherent nature of the laboring struggle.

For many of the authors of the preceding pages, labor is a precarious activity because it faces threats on many sides. For that reason, laboring authors emphasize the importance for society, always, to remember the dignity of labor in the precarious now. Yet their awareness of living on the razor’s edge, in both the conditions of their toil and in a society which can always devalue them, often makes them skeptical of clearcut narratives of progress. Their skepticism
helps scholars to reexamine the narrative of progress that industrialized production, technological developments, and scientific knowledge have won for society generally.

It is undeniable that the knowledge which has helped to produce modern industrialized society has granted certain segments of human populations a vast amount of security. Human beings the world over enjoy unprecedented levels of comfort because of industrialization. But the knowledge which transforms industrialized societies also carries with it, paradoxically, a degree of ignorance as it cuts people off from a sense of what is natural in their lives and what is conditioned.

One conclusion of this dissertation is that the way of knowing facilitated by modern scientific and technological developments is also enmeshed in an intellectual distance from nature, from the struggle to live, and from the laboring perspective. This is not an entirely new problem in human society, as laboring authors condemning ancient “aristocratic scorn” throughout the ages make clear. Yet due to the comfortable, technologically conditioned nature of the world in which we live, it is an increasingly difficult problem to recognize that “the objective, tangible difference between being free and being forced by necessity is no longer perceived.” Indeed, it is almost impossible to remain mindful of how deeply daily life in the so-called “First World” has been conditioned by these developments, because they have buffered human beings from the natural world down to the level of their very existence. Consider, for instance, Charles C. Mann’s exploration of the ways “industrial monoculture with improved crops and high-intensity fertilizer [has] allowed billions of people—Europe first, and then much of the rest of the world—to escape the Malthusian trap,” in which natural environments become

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761 Ibid.
unable to sustain human populations past certain levels.\textsuperscript{762} “Incredibly,” Mann continues, “living standards [have] doubled or tripled worldwide even as the planet’s population climbed from fewer than 1 billion in 1700 to about 7 billion today.”\textsuperscript{763} To put this in perspective, Mann cites the findings from a 2001 study by geographer Vaclav Smith of the consequences of factory-produced nitrogen for fertilizer, the food supply, and human populations. Smith estimates that “two out of every five people on earth would not be alive” without the increased food production made available through the agro-industrial complex. We live, and move, and have our very beings in these industrial developments, and to remember to value the techno-industrial condition of the world, and the industrial laborers who ceaselessly enable it, is difficult. The predicament recalls Emily’s question from the afterlife in Thornton Wilder’s\textit{ Our Town}, “Does anyone ever realize life while they live it...every, every minute?”\textsuperscript{764} The answer given there, as here, is generally “no.”

The converse of these incomprehensible achievements, however, lies in the precarious position of human life within its own highly contingent world, where, for instance, scientific activity remains only a few steps ahead each season of parasites capable of wiping out huge swaths of our food supply.\textsuperscript{765} This mode of life produces an epistemological consequence alongside the objective one. According to Martin Heidegger, the individual person experiences a


\textsuperscript{763} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{765} See Mann’s account of potato blight and the Colorado potato beetle’s constant threat to this staple crop. Potatoes are mostly propagated through cloning via spuds rather than fertilization, which makes crops exceptionally susceptible to disease. Mann, 303.
sense of disorientation within the vast sweep of the industrialized landscape. Heidegger diagnoses humanity’s sense of limitlessness, gained through technological achievement, as bringing humanity “to the very brink of a precipitous fall.” He foresees that when humans beings regard themselves as utter masters of nature,

man...exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.\textsuperscript{766}

Industrialization seemed to encourage this delusion of power from the start, and from its first days on American soil it testified for many people to the possibility of such a fall. In the 1820s Sam Patch, a former cotton spinner from the Rhode Island Mills, began his career as a folk hero by leaping from factory roofs into the rivers and waterfalls that powered them. Dubbed the “philosopher of the cataracts,” Patch perhaps felt humanity’s mastery of nature generally through industrialization extended to himself, personally.\textsuperscript{767} For a time Patch thrived as an exhibitionist, successfully jumping over Niagara twice, but fell to his death as thousands watched in 1829 at the Genessee Falls in Rochester, New York.\textsuperscript{768} A contemporary criticized Patch’s death as a lesson “that vain and mortal man may not trifle with the bounds of God.”\textsuperscript{769} Yet the scorn leveled at this factory-born Icarus could also be directed at the factory system itself. In Sarah Savage’s \textit{Trial and Self-Discipline} (1835), Mrs. Ellenwood observes a stagecoach thought to be carrying


\textsuperscript{767} “Sam Patch in Philosophy.” \textit{New York Evangelist (1830-1902)} 11.32, August 8, 1840, 126.


\textsuperscript{769} “Article 4 — No Title: Sam Patch’s Fatal Leap,” \textit{Masonic Mirror: Science, Literature and Miscellany} (1829-1830), December 5, 1829.
laborers to the mills. When her companion complains, “These factories will be the undoing of our country,” Mrs. Ellenwood laments, “I am afraid we do not improve these advantages as we ought; instead of awakening a deeper gratitude to God, I am afraid they remove us from him; these contrivances of man, these human inventions, come between us and Him.”

Mrs. Ellenwood specifically worries that technological advancements will obscure humanity’s need for God, and although she does not regret the “improvements” they bring, she fears the “spirit of self-reliance” that accompanies them. In so many ways, then, antebellum Americans experienced industrial transformations with a combination of wonder and concern that they would diminish humanity’s sense of its own finitude. While these concerns may seem rather quaint to us now, they are worth revisiting as historical testimony to the effects industrial change wrought on human consciousness, or what Heidegger would term “being-in-the-world.” Laboring literature helps us to revisit these changes with deeper awareness of the tensions at stake.

A key value of reading industrial women’s writings in the long tradition of laboring literature, as I see it, lies in women’s pragmatic attitudes towards labor, coupled with their alertness to the increasing violence that industrial capitalism brings to the laboring situation. Their writings remind scholars of these continuities and changes—natural, technological, and social—through the eyes of people who knew from experience that industrial progress had not undone humanity’s fundamental war for existence; it merely redrew the battle lines. In the process industrialization has also made the differences between the arts of war and Virgil’s “arts

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770 Sarah Savage, Trial and Self-Discipline (Boston: J. Munroe, 1835), 67.

771 Ibid.
of peace,” between human violence and natural force, less discernible. Consider, for instance, a stunning set of statistics from Renny Christopher’s essay, “Work is a War”:

1. The United States has the highest rate of industrial casualties of any developed nation.
2. More Americans died on the job than in battle in World War II.
3. 210,900 Americans died in “unintentional work-injury deaths” between July 1959 and April 1975, as compared to the 58,220 casualties of the Vietnam War who are memorialized in Washington, D.C.\footnote{Christopher, 35.}

Life has always been a precarious matter. Industrial laborers, undervalued by their employers and largely ignored by society, toiling in precarious economic and often horrifically violent conditions, have never had the luxury to forget this fundamental fact.

Perhaps because of labor’s status as a form of perpetual struggle, some laboring authors remain alert to the lingering tensions between freedom and justice, fully aware that when some people enjoy greater freedom, this does not necessarily ensure that justice is more widespread.\footnote{It is worth noting once again Alex Gourevitch’s point that the modern era’s commitment to equality puts a tension between freedom and its own economic base—in a sense, between the value for freedom and the perception of justice—that was not bothersome for ancient Greeks or Romans. See Gourevitch’s \textit{From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth}. Consider, for instance, the ultimate definition Plato offers in \textit{The Republic} of justice as a harmony of parts, or the ideal harmony to be achieved between members of a civilization. Plato offers a vision of a highly stratified society, meant allegorically for the capacities of the human soul, in which each member achieves his or her merited station and fulfills his or her designated purpose. See also Plato, \textit{Complete Works}, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).}

Mindful of that contradiction, Esther admits to Miriam Willoughby in \textit{An Idyl of Work},

\begin{quote}
For our daily bread,  
We, who must earn it, have to suffocate  
the cry of conscience sometimes.  
When I’ve thought,  
Miss Willoughby, what soil the cotton-plant  
We weave, is rooted in, what waters it,—  
The blood of souls in bondage,—I have felt
\end{quote}

\footnote{Christopher, 35.}
That I was sinning against light, to stay 
And turn the accursed fibre into cloth 
For human wearing.

... 
Am not I enslaved
In finishing what slavery has begun?774

Esther sees with great clarity that the force of necessity—the need to “earn” one’s “daily bread”—is often interwoven with the violence of exploitation, “the blood of souls in bondage” in an immoral economy. Miriam Willoughby shares her sense of guilt: “In wearing cloth / So rooted, and so woven...We all share the nation’s sin.”775 But for Esther the matter is not so comfortably abstract, for she admits that she has considered trying other professions that do not rest on slave labor, such as domestic service. However, this form of employment would not pay enough for her to have extra money to share with others, “nor could [I] have / My first wish answered—freedom for my books, / Freedom of my own movements.”776 Sylvia Jenkins Cook notes that Esther is far more keenly aware than her well-intentioned aristocratic friend of “the predicament of freedom bought by others’ enslavement.”777 The laborer sees this predicament more clearly: the relationship between freedom and justice might be perversely inverse.

For that reason, laboring authors know that distributing freedom more widely might also entail distributing oppression more widely, too. The laboring perspective often disrupts narratives of historical progress by showing that only the locations of struggle have changed. The historical record confirms this perspective too often. The Pemberton Mill collapse of 1860 in

775 Larcom, An Idyl of Work, 136.
777 Cook, 180.
Lawrence, Massachusetts and the Rana Plaza factory collapse of 2013 in Bangladesh, for instance, both occurred in inadequate buildings which had been filled beyond capacity with machines and workers, to maximize production and profit.\(^{778}\) When the Pemberton Mill collapsed, 145 laborers were killed, and another 166 persons were permanently mangled. It continues to be considered one of the worst industrial disasters in U.S. history. The Rana Plaza collapse killed 1,127 laborers. It supplied U.S. companies such as Wal-Mart and Gap, but political definitions prevent it from counting among U.S. industrial disasters. Moreover, investigations showed that three years after the tragedy, garment industry workers in Bangladesh continued to labor in situations that were unsafe. The struggle persists.

Lucy Larcom sensed that economies are moral matters, and that the most basic test of their justness lies in whether they value the laborer—not as a “hand,” or as “muscle,” as an extension of a machine, or as a beast of burden—but as an intelligent, thinking, feeling human being: as someone whose perspective counts in society. In our era of laboring literature, a moral economy must value the laborer of course in money, but rented room authors insist on something more than that: valuing laborers means changing basic and deeply ingrained prejudices towards them—prejudices that, like racism, are so casually held that they often go unnoticed. Journalist Sarah Smarsh has recently pointed to how widespread these prejudices continue to be as she discusses media coverage of the working-class, especially since Donald Trump’s election.\(^{779}\)

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Smarsh protests that "media makers cast the white working class as a monolith and imply an old, treacherous story convenient to capitalism: that the poor are dangerous idiots." This perspective begins with assumptions about the laborer’s fundamental deficiency. In so doing, it erases distinctions between laborers and also predetermines that outsiders will misinterpret laborers’ perspectives. Smarsh relates a recent op-ed written by David Brooks about a Kentucky metal-worker who had been laid-off. Brooks described how “on his last day, the man left to rows of cheering coworkers – a moment I read as triumphant, but that Brooks declared pitiable. How hard the man worked for so little, how great his skills and how dwindling their value, Brooks pointed out, for people he said radiate ‘the residual sadness of the lonely heart.’” Smarsh dryly comments, "A sentiment that I care for even less than contempt or degradation is their tender cousin: pity." If “aristocratic contempt” has taken the more socially acceptable form of condescension and pity in contemporary society, it is no less unfair to laborers: "I’m hard-pressed to think of a worse slight than the media figures who have disregarded the embattled white working class for decades now beseeching the country to have sympathy for them.” Smarsh continues, “We don’t need their analysis, and we sure don’t need their tears. What we need is to have our stories told, preferably by someone who can walk into a factory without his own guilt fogging his glasses.”

When this modern form of contempt is not condescending to the supposed pathos of the working-class’s condition, it is dehumanizing to laborers altogether. Smarsh relates another story, this time from her own experience working at a grain elevator as a teenager. When she was seventeen,

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780 Ibid.

781 Ibid.
An elevator 50 miles east in Haysville, Kansas, exploded (grain dust is highly combustible), killing seven workers. The accident rattled my community and reminded us about the physical dangers my family and I often faced as farmers.

I kept going to work like everyone else and, after a long day weighing wheat trucks and hauling heavy sacks of feed in and out of the mill, liked to watch Politically Incorrect, the ABC show Maher hosted then. With the search for one of the killed workers’ bodies still under way, Maher joked, as I recall, that the people should check their loaves of Wonder Bread.

That moment was perhaps my first reckoning with the hard truth that, throughout my life, I would politically identify with the same people who often insult the place I am from.\footnote{Ibid.}

In Smarsh’s view, political progressivism is still implicated in failing to take laborers’ lives seriously. But still more perniciously, people like Maher remain blind to their own blindness:

“Such derision is so pervasive that it’s often imperceptible to the economically privileged. Those who write, discuss, and publish newspapers, books, and magazines with best intentions sometimes offend with obliviousness.”\footnote{Ibid.} Smarsh attributes this obliviousness to a certain smug self-righteousness about laborers, who are always presumed to be in need of cultural uplift to step into their own humanity fully. Speaking of the widespread media prejudice blanketing all working-class Trump supporters as crass racists, Smarsh ventriloquizes the media’s view:

"That problem [of racism] is rooted in the notion that higher class means higher integrity. As journalist Lorraine Berry wrote last month, ‘The story remains that only the ignorant would be racist. Racism disappears with education we’re told.’ As the first from my family to hold degrees, I assure you that none of us had to go to college to learn basic human decency."

Smarsh’s indignant editorial highlights the fact that the faulty interpretive apparatuses for understanding laborers’ experiences, cited frequently by nineteenth-century laboring authors as “aristocratic contempt,” are still very much alive. If scholars respond to laborers’ stories in terms...
of the pathos of the laborer, this is not merely an emotional error, based in sentimentality, it is also an interpretive error, based in faulty presumptions about the laboring perspective.

Reading attentively laborers’ viewpoints challenges scholars to reexamine the values and interpretive frameworks they bring to the study of laborers. Political frameworks are useful for examining inequities and for urging social change, but it is important to remember they are not the only frameworks scholars might bring to laborers’ writings. When interpreting literature whose primary conflict is not political inequality but the reality of toil itself, scholars would do well to remember how laboring literature defies aristocratic contempt and, with it, all political perspectives blinding readers to the dignity of laboring lives. By shedding light on the vast sections of human concerns that are not directly related to issues of sovereignty or dominion, factory women’s writings can function as barometers of cultural changes. These texts help us to recognize the strayed threads of a modern world whose constructedness prevails everywhere, and whose artificiality seems both natural and given. I submit that laboring literature generally, and factory women’s writings specifically, help us to revisist these concerns, because these works reinforce that this struggle for existence is as inescapable as it is fundamental to our humanity.


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