Forum for Modern Language Studies Advance Access published April 5, 2016

Forum for Modern Language Studies Vol. 0, No. 0, doi: 10.1093/fmls/cqw007

COLLABORATION AND THE VICTORIAN ORAL NARRATIVE: *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CHARWOMAN*

FLORENCE S. BOOS

ABSTRACT

An intriguing example of the mixed genre of collaborative memoir is *The Autobiography of a Charwoman, as Chronicled by Annie Wakeman* (London, 1900), a rare, possibly unique extended memoir/life story of an illiterate late-Victorian urban woman worker. As a story transmitted by a fellow woman of a different nationality and social class, the *Autobiography* proffers two somewhat divergent truths, and two somewhat divergent fictions. It also testifies to the complexities inherent in cross-class collaboration, blending the memories of an abused wife with the dismayed response of her auditor. In addition, both the 'charwoman' and her chronicler apparently altered aspects of her account, though from different motives.

Keywords: collaboration; oral narrative; autobiography; Annie Wakeman; Elizabeth Dobbs; Martha Grimes; domestic violence; charwoman

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

IN *TRADITIONS OF VICTORIAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY*, Linda Peterson observes the collaborative nature of many middle-class domestic memoirs, a 'hybrid of auto/biography' in which a family member, such as Mary Howitt's daughter Margaret Howitt, edits and augments materials left by a distinguished relative.[1] For working-class memoirs, however, issues of editorial intervention, censorship and/or sympathetic reshaping become even more crucial to interpretation.[2] Whereas presumably Mary Howitt and her daughter shared common origins and viewpoints, the editor or transmitter of a working-class narrative could reshape the text in many ways: in the imposition of an alien, allegedly more coherent, plot line; the recasting of language and behaviour to better accord with middle-class norms, and the selection of incidents to provide an implicit teleological interpretation of its contents.

Issues of transmission and narrative reshaping are even more urgent for an understanding of oral narratives, whose unlettered speakers lack the power to record their own stories. Without the assistance of an educated transcriber, editor or co-author, the subaltern (in Gayatri Spivak's now-famous formulation) clearly cannot speak.[3] Yet intervention – even the limited intervention of the selection and recasting of sentences and language – creates a collaborative work, arising from a specific situation and reflecting the at times divergent purposes of its oral narrator and more educated enabler.

© *The Author 2016. Published by Oxford University Press for the Court of the University of St Andrews. All rights reserved. The University of St Andrews is a charity registered in Scotland: No. SC013532.*

In addition, the response to an autobiography presupposes slightly different assumptions than the reading of a novel or poem. Issues of 'authenticity', historicity and fictiveness determine one's interpretation of a memoir, and even to some degree the judgement of its merits.[4] The difficulties of evaluation and interpretation are greatly compounded in the case of working-class women's memoirs, however, not only because of their scarcity (over a several-year period I have been able to locate no more than about twenty), but also because their accounts are more difficult to corroborate. The recorded voices which would illumine the events in their lives, the assumptions behind their choices and the relative representativeness or atypicality of their stories have been largely lost, and in this context, issues of authenticity become more urgent as well as conceptually interesting. Moreover, the collaboration required for their publication – and in the case of oral narratives, for their very existence – suggests the need to decipher their palimpsestic, multiple and on occasion contradictory meanings. In such cases, one must ask which portions of an oral narrative may have been shaped by the views and questions of the transcriber, rewritten to present the speaker in conformity to middle-class views of proper behaviour, or simply suppressed.

The most intriguing example I have found of this mixed genre of collaborative memoir is *The Autobiography of a Charwoman, as Chronicled by Annie Wakeman.*[5] The text is a very rare, possibly unique, extended memoir/life story of an illiterate late-Victorian urban woman worker – representing her speech and dialect, opinions on a range of topics, alleged reasons for her life choices, and her responses to the events of her chequered life. Melodramatic, lively, but also disturbing in content, Elizabeth (Betty) Dobbs's tale chronicles a life of ceaseless effort, abuse and often self-destructive life choices.

The Autobiography is remarkable not only for attempting to convey the thoughts and consciousness of a late nineteenth-century woman of the underclass, but also for the fact that her story has been partly corroborated through historical and genealogical research. In what follows I will argue that *An Autobiography of a Charwoman* likely conveys both significant truth and significant fiction, and that both forms of witness may be seen as instructive. Indeed, as a story transmitted by a fellow woman of a different nationality and social class, the *Autobiography* proffers two somewhat divergent truths, and two somewhat divergent fictions. It also testifies to the complexities inherent in cross-class collaboration, blending the memories of an abused wife with the dismayed response of her auditor. And as we shall see, both the 'charwoman' and her chronicler apparently altered aspects of her account, though from different motives.

The frame narrative: Annie Wakeman

The 'chronicler', Annie Wakeman, was an actress active in the United States during the 1870s, described by a theatregoer in 1879 as especially skilled at performance in different voices.[6] Later, as a London-based journalist, she published an 1889 interview-based article on 'Tramps in London' in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

afterwards married the American consul in Cardiff, Lorin Andrews Lathrop. Wakeman's sympathetic interest in the London underclass, predilection for ethnographic interviews, and natural gift at reproducing dialect and oral narrative – traits useful in an acting career – would have prompted identification of her charwoman as a likely subject for investigation.

In addition, the American Wakeman may have viewed the English class system with some distaste, and as a former actress, her own background may have been more modest than her later position as a prosperous diplomat's wife. She admired the work ethic of Betty Dobbs, her servant, and many of her traits of character, and they shared a love of music and perhaps a common religion. In January 1897 she apparently attended the wedding of her servant's daughter as a courtesy, signing as a witness her name, Annie Wakeman Lathrop.

The *Autobiography* is arranged as a series of one- or two-chapter monologues, each opening with a conversational preface which creates a scene. Here, for example, is the beginning of chapter three, as Betty settles to another session:

> Well, I never! Excuse me smilin', fur I carn't 'elp it. This *is* a easy billet, a-settin' 'ere all mornin' restin' me weary bones in a stuffed chair, and sech a butiful soft cushion fur me back, no work in me 'ands, and me a-maggin' over me career. If I 'ad many sech arf day's charrin' I'd git as big as a halderman after a Lord Mayor's dinner. (p. 30)

At some point she was no longer employed by Wakeman, presumably because the latter had left London for foreign travel, and later chapters are recounted to Wakeman after her protracted absences, and so offer Betty's reflections on more recent events – most notably when she appears with a face disfigured from her husband's blows, or, reduced to greater poverty, refuses food so that she can carry her portion home to her family (Wakeman insists that she eat and provides an additional packet for her children). The two women's friendship clearly evolved in tandem with the narrative, and as recorded, Betty was an enthusiastic participant: 'Fancy! – and me career is all wrote out plain, and me a-goin' down in English 'istory!' (p. viii).

For her part, Wakeman rarely took issue with Betty's revelations, even when they apparently dismayed her, as when Betty told her that the adultery of her often violent husband had 'made me feel fair 'eart broke' (p. 194):

> You say'm that you should think it was quite enough to make me turn aginst 'im, 'is spendin' me money, lyin' to me, and abusin' of me?
>
> Well, it might be in some clarsses of life. But I didn't take no notice of 'is faults, mostly caused by drink and bad temper. But wen 'ee 'urt [...] me honour towards me name of Dobbs, them was things beyond bein' forgive fur, I not bein' no saint. 'Owever, I looked at 'is offspring, remembered another was comin', read over the lines [her marriage licence] and took 'ope agin. (pp. 194–95)

Here Wakeman dramatizes a tussle of values and expectations, and it is possible that at times her account may be designed to emphasize the strangeness of some of Betty's more surprising claims. Yet her underlying intent seems to have been to leave Dobbs's assertions intact, in all their pathos and cross-purposes – both because

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

Wakeman believed she (and her readers) should withhold judgement, and because she wished to give Betty her own voice. The use of dialogue enables their collaboration, as each woman remains free to preserve her separate responses: Betty, attachment to her abuser; Wakeman, refusal to accept his cruelty as 'normal', whatever his social class.

It would have been difficult for Annie Wakeman to transcribe her long conversations with Betty Dobbs exactly, even in shorthand. But her renditions are credible; Betty's locutions seem authentic, and certain details would have been difficult for a sympathetic middle-class American listener – even one with a sense for drama and an ear for dialect – to simulate. Wakeman may have taken notes during Betty's monologues, and, familiar with many of the idioms of her speech, reworked a fuller narrative from memory after each session. Finally, Annie Wakeman was Elizabeth Dobbs's chief advocate. As we shall see, she designed the end of her narrative to heighten sympathy for her subject, and her preface warns the reader against censorious aesthetic and moral judgements:

> I pray you of your charity, kind Reader, for the memory of her whose life record is here set down. Do not expect the daughter of a dissipated mother and a cruel father to picture a life as beautiful as, with all its advantages, yours has doubtless been; nor hope that this patient struggler of the mews can fashion her words into a style as glittering as yours would surely be; nor anticipate that sordid actions can be decked in a sheen of romance that shall captivate the drawing-room or charm a maiden's heart. (p. vii)

'The Autobiography': Elizabeth Dobbs's story

In what follows we will first consider Elizabeth (Betty) Dobbs's story as she recounts it, and then consider its likely source in the life of Martha Grimes, whose biography closely parallels Betty's account. Certain features of Grimes's life are not replicated in the *Autobiography*, however, and we will contemplate what may have impelled both servant and middle-class listener to soften or omit certain events from their joint account, perhaps even without the other's knowledge.

Elizabeth Dobbs's lively narrative – told with a minimum of self-pity and many vivid characterizations – is a saga of neglect, victimization, prodigious effort, rapid rises and falls in fortune, internalized classism and some unfortunate choices. According to Betty, her father had been a mostly absent 'vetter-in-ary with a shockin' temper' (p. 3), and her alcoholic mother had died when her daughter was nine and a half. When one of her father's cruel wife-beatings led to a conviction, 'Dad paid the fine – and mother? Well, she forgive him. Beggin' your pardon'm, us women is soft-'earted creatures' (p. 6) – words which formed an ominous foreshadowing of Betty's own fate. Born before mandatory primary education, she had learned only to 'read and write, and add up figgers a little, 'aving got me eddication by fits and starts' (p. 17). According to Betty, when her father remarried and her stepmother resented her presence, she began to work as a servant when she was twelve. Reacting to the many severities of her employers, at sixteen she made a fateful decision: 'You see I'd 'ad a goodish assortment o' missises, and I made up me mind

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

habsence from me own sex would make me 'eart grow fonder of 'em. [...] Furst I thought a quiet widderer, with one or two offsprings needin' a mother's care, would be the tick' (p. 30). Could she have really expected this? But then she was purportedly sixteen ...

Harry, her alleged employer, was remembered fondly for his expensive apparel and relatively higher status. He had been

> quite the gent, and sech a 'andsome feller, a bacheldor about thirty, black curly 'air, wearin' a 'igh 'at, clean wite shirt ev'ry day, and Halbert coat, and the butifullest lavender trousers ever I see, wen 'e went out walkin'. [...] You may know 'ee was superior wen I mention 'ee was 'ead assistant to a furst-class pawnbroker in the West-end, seein' plenty of 'igh society over the counter. (pp. 31–32)

Betty claims that she had hoped that Harry might marry her when she became pregnant, 'feelin' sure 'ee'd lose no time in puttin' up the banns' (p. 42). In the event, he threw her out.

As we will see, the likely real-life original for Elizabeth Dobbs, Martha Grimes, had not borne a child by a 'bacheldor' employer but by a married man of considerably lower social status than that attributed to 'Harry', so perhaps 'Dobbs' felt the need to romanticize her first sexual encounter. In any case, after the birth of her son 'Ferdie' (Ferdinand Albert, about whom more later) and a brief stint in the workhouse, good fortune intervened in the person of the Rev. Charles Gutch (1822–96), the historical vicar of St Cyprian's Mission, who had carved out a parish with a special ministry to the poor of the St Marylbone district. Finding Betty singing in the hope of alms while holding her child one wintry night, Gutch spoke kindly to her, offered her shelter and in due course a chance to assist him in his efforts as a well-paid housecleaner and hostess at youth events. When she heard his kind words a

> feelin' flooded over me that was love in a manner o' speakin', yet it wasn't the kind of love I'd 'ad once afore. [...] It was love that would 'ave bore the soul upwards, yet never 'ave moved the body. [...] It was a love that made me rest in 'im and respec' meself all together like. (p. 74)

Four contented years later, Betty nonetheless left the mission to live with the man she named Jim Jakes, a decision fraught with ambivalence. She had evasively declined the Rev. Gutch's offer to perform the wedding service (which was not to occur) and, wise in the makeshifts of the underclass:

> 'Ee made no special com-ment, but jest lifted them speakin' eyelids and looked at me as if 'ee was sorry for me, saying if I ever needed 'im I know'd where to find 'im. Some of me own actions I never can make out. I needed 'im many a time, but I never went near 'im agin. (pp. 113–14)

Betty viewed her new partner with something close to disdain: Jakes looked 'undersized and awkward, nothin' to look at; seemin' as if 'ee 'adn't knocked about the world much and wasn't conversant with a good clarss' (p. 104). By her account her agreement was motivated in part by his willingness to ' 'elp me to bring up Ferdie accordin' to 'is clarss in life as the son of a gent' (p. 111), for

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

'Twas easy seein' 'is clarss in life was somethink superior, even by the way 'ee strutted off so proud to school. [. . .] I'd breeched 'im at four, makin' 'is close after them as I see in windders in Regent Street. I always did me best to keep 'im up to the style to wich 'ee was born. (pp. 99–100)

In fact, throughout Betty's life her attempts to favour Ferdie above her less 'well-born' children were to yield mixed results both for his character and for family harmony.

In any case, Betty relates that shortly before the planned wedding, Jakes had confessed that his previous wife was not dead, as he had thought, but incarcerated in a 'lock hospital' for women with sexually transmitted diseases. Begging her to move in with him despite this, he promised to marry her as soon as he was free. Jakes was to prove a loyal and steady partner, and she eventually bore him three children: Tim, John Henry and Winnie. Yet despite the welcome news of Jakes's first wife's death and his eagerness to marry right away now that this had become possible, she inexplicably postponed making their union official. Perhaps she remained highly ambivalent – nothing in her account indicates affection for the only one of her partners who behaved fairly towards her – or perhaps at this stage of life she lacked the concern for respectability that would later preoccupy her.

Unexpectedly Jakes became ill; he showed signs of derangement, was diagnosed with Bright's disease, and shortly afterwards died in the Canterbury workhouse hospital, where ''e breathed his larst in me arms, wisperin' to me, "Pore Bett, we ain't never 'ad the lines [a marriage licence]" ' (p. 139). It appears that Betty was unjustly repelled by Jakes, whom she described as a 'pore inerfensive worm' (p. 113). He was sincerely attached to her, deferred to her in household matters, and willingly shared everything he had. While he lived, they achieved a prosperous life, in which she managed two houses with lodgers to supplement his income as a shoemaker. Neither of the fathers of Betty's other children treated her or their children so well. Her internalized sense of social 'class', however, would continue to inform her future choices.

After Jakes's death, Betty maintained his shoemaking business by hiring an assistant and repairing shoes ('snobbing'), and she continued to keep two houses of lodgers: 'I was thankful I 'ad money comin' in so as Ferdie could live up to 'is clarss' (p. 142). But her other children? When her youngest child, Winnie, contracted bronchitis at eighteen months, Betty records that she had taken her to the chemist, who prescribed castor oil. After Winnie died within hours, Betty was forced to confront a doctor, who asked why he hadn't been consulted: ' "A chemist is not sufficient fur brownchitis", 'ee says, very severe, and there'll "have to be a inquich" ' (p. 144). Betty felt wronged: 'To think suspicion should fall on me as loved Winnie to me very 'eart's core!' (p. 144), but at a coroner's inquest held at St Pancras, she had to defend herself as a never-married mother of four: ' "Mebbe some of you 'as famblys. Think wot a cruel blow to 'ave your offspring told they wasn't born with lines." I see 'em lookin' kinder, and I begged 'em not to tell nobody about me not 'avin' them lines' (p. 148). Betty got off with a mild reproof: 'next time brownchitis breaks out in your fambly, send fur a proper medical man' (p. 149). All this was well, and a relief,

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

but by contrast when Ferdie was born she had engaged a doctor, despite her severe poverty: 'I made up me mind to 'ave the child of a gent born into the world as become its clarss in life [. . .] with the 'elp of a proper medical man' (p. 53). The woman who had had money for Ferdie's clothes, and later for his debts, might well have afforded better medical care for her daughter. As it was, as she tells it, the quest for legal respectability seems henceforth to have dominated her thoughts.

After Jakes's death, Dick Dobbs, a sporadically employed alcoholic widower, began to court her. Dobbs had been Jakes's fellow shoemaker, and Betty had long admired him:

'Ee was a 'andsome, tall feller, and could make a speech equal to a Lord Mayor. 'Ee was all fur politics, and 'ee was know'd to every pub in Kentish Town. [. . .] [W]ith all his pot'ouse ways 'is manners in front of females was most superior. (pp. 128–29)

Danger signs were blatant: as a family friend he had encouraged Ferdie to leave school, and on occasion enticed Jakes to drink to excess; he had already drunk away his small inheritance from his first wife, and after quarrelling with his former employer he was now destitute from lack of work. Perhaps most significantly, her sons all objected, especially the bright and reliable John Henry, who offered to help support his mother and her family as an alternative recourse. Betty readily acceded to Wakeman's suspicion that this was to be an unfortunate union, but she deflected thoughts of alternatives:

You say'm, 'You agree with Jon 'Enry that I was a silly.'

Curous! That's jest what I was a-thinkin'. Us women is always a-makin' fools of ourselves. (p. 152)

Perhaps Dobbs had also thought that as a woman in her thirties with three dependent children, other partners would not be available to her.

More important to Betty than Dobbs's alcoholism, it seems, was her reluctance to have the banns for their marriage read in public, since she had concealed from her sons their parents' unmarried state. Instead, she proudly paid for the relatively expensive private licence, while Dobbs used the occasion of his wedding to drink through the evening with the 'best lady'. Nonetheless, Betty defended him in retrospect: 'Well'm, in your clarss of life, I dessay, it is [scandalous]. But weddin's don't come often, and it's overcomin' to mix drinks' (p. 160).

In the years which followed, Dobbs squandered Betty's £120 in savings, drove away her boarders, bullied her two elder sons, who were first forced to leave school for work and finally left home, and made life miserable for the two who remained. The family was compelled to move into cheaper lodgings in the less sanitary district of Crouch End, too distant from London to permit Betty to supplement their income with shoe repair. Dobbs also started

gittin' cruel to me. 'Ee give me many a blow. But 'ee was that artful 'ee never left bruises nor draw'd blood, so I 'ad nothin' to show 'ad I been inclined to arsk pertection. But 'ee'd give me a 'ard shove, aginst a chair or the bed or table, wot was a strain to me muscles, or 'ee'd twist me 'and round. (p. 174)

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

Yet she resorted to familiar rationalizations: 'It's a woman's life to keep on forgivin' the males and 'elp 'em to believe in theirselves' (p. 195); 'It wasn't 'im as treated me cruel, it was the drink' (p. 197).

After they returned to housing in London to enable her 'snobbing' and charring, Dobbs descended yet further into drink, while Betty slept less than four hours a night to finish her piecework, and anxiously awaited his next attack:

> More than once [he] sharpened the knives to do fur us. One night 'ee stood over the bed with the snobbin' knife, and I 'ad jest time to grab the children and git out in the 'all. 'Ee didn't foller us, but 'ee locked the door, and we three spent the rest of the night on the stairs. [. . .] [W]e was most froze. (p. 203)

Not surprisingly under these conditions, her first child with Dobbs had been 'a mis'able weak boy', and Joe, the second, 'never 'ad a ounce of strength in 'im. I've struggled all 'is life with 'is eyes and years, wich is always ailin'' (p. 185). The local Vicar and his wife attempted to intervene. The Vicar endured a violent attack by Dobbs when visiting the house, 'though I do say it, mum, 'ee fought very well for the Lord in 'is line' (p. 202), and the Vicar's wife 'tried to git me to say I'd leave sech a brute' (p. 202), promising to find her employment elsewhere, but Betty refused.

Worst of all, in the midst of all this stress and violence, her second daughter, Winnie (named after her now-dead older half-sister), was born crippled and deformed, and Dobbs cursed her for 'bringin' sech a thing in the world, and run off to 'is pub. It was 'ard on 'im' (p. 206). The midwife spoke home truths, again mostly ignored: 'It's all because you've been treated cruel. The blows and the fright and the 'ard work 'as done it' (p. 205). When her son John Henry tried to console her, stroking her hands with tears and praising his new sister's hair and complexion, Betty's response jars: 'It was a feelin' action. Yet John 'Enry ain't the son of a gent, and I carn't make out where 'ee got sech ways from' (p. 208).

Of course 'the son of a gent' had never displayed such empathy, nor had 'the gent' himself, but Betty's notions were fixed. She decided that Winnie's deformity had not resulted from Dobbs's violence during her pregnancy nor from constant undernourishment, but had been a punishment on her for her cohabitation with Jakes. Conceiving her first son out of wedlock had been forgivable, for 'I 'ad paid fur me young foolishness by bein' a good mother to Ferdie' (p. 205). But,

> I 'ad put off the lines wen I could 'ave 'ad 'em with Jakes, and 'ad been a silly to take Jakes without 'em in the fust place. Countin' up me sins, I felt ashamed of meself, and coverin' up me 'ead in the close cried and prayed fur forgiveness. (p. 205)

One might argue that it was not only Betty but also her severely disabled daughter who had suffered the brunt of this alleged divine punishment.

The final break occurred when Betty followed Dobbs to his new lodging to bring him more food, and found him living with a younger and handsome partner. When she accused Dobbs of deceit, he threw her against the door, and Dobbs and his new partner attacked her: 'She give me 'er fist side the 'ead and 'ee give me a wac' (p. 256): 'The pain was stingin', but I shed no tears fur it, nor fur me awful 'eart blow. The sorrer 'ad struck deeper than salt water' (p. 257). Her

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

account continues: 'I looked in the glarss. Oh, wot a vision I see! [. . .] Me face was swelled out of shape. I says to meself, "Every dog 'as 'is day; Betty Dobbs, you 'ave *'ad* your'n." Then I [. . .] disremember all as 'appened till I see Florrie [her son Tim's wife] bendin' over me, 'avin' got me into bed' (pp. 259–60). According to Betty's account, it had taken her three months to recover from her injury; her health declined thereafter, and her narrative closes as Wakeman records a final deathbed interview. Nevertheless, the preceding months had brought some satisfaction: Ferdie became engaged to a sincere, good-hearted and middle-class woman, and when John Henry married the heir of a public house, Betty 'felt that thrilled that a son of mine should 'ave raised 'isself like that out of the slums of North London that the tears run down me cheeks in streams' (p. 280).

When Wakeman visited the invalided Betty, the latter offered some reflections on her complicated life. The deformed Winnie had reportedly died, relieving Betty of her chief obligation, and a prosperous boarder – who had recently amazed her with a marriage proposal – had offered to raise her youngest son, Joe. Characteristically forgiving Dobbs, she asked that Wakeman would 'kindly speak to 'im quiet and say as I've furgive 'im and wish 'im well' (p. 301), should he come to Winnie's funeral. In this last visit, Betty had also tried to make a final reckoning and review the wants and aspirations of her life:

> I ain't 'ad much of a chanst, and that's a fac'. I've loved fine clothes as much as the next one and 'ave wore second-'and dresses all me life. I've loved soft underclose fittin' snug against a skin as wite and soft as most women's, may be, – and me aquaintance with 'em was over the washtub wen I was a-soapin' for somebody who 'ad drawed more of a prize in life than me. [. . .] Maybe you'll understand now, mum, and not think too 'ard of me because me thought goes back to them times wen there ain't no denyin' as I was no better than I'd ought to be [her life with Harry]. I carn't 'elp it'm, but it's me pride that wunst fur a few weeks I was among me betters and was employin' charwomen on me own. (pp. 274–75)

None of her regrets seem to centre on her marriage to an abuser, whose wrongs had harmed her and her children, nor on the wisdom of repeatedly bearing children into poverty. Yet all of Betty's sons, by her account, had become self-supporting, none were alcoholic or unwilling to work like Dobbs, and the eldest remained attached to her. Two had become engaged to or married middle-class women, a third was adopted by a prosperous boarder after her death, and the unprepossessing Tim had married the helpful and loving Flossie.

In the end, at least four people seem to have brought practical succour and comfort into Betty's difficult life: her loyal Aunt Bayley; the Rev. Charles Gutch; her affectionate second son John Henry; and Tim's wife Flossie, formerly derided for her lack of 'clarss', who had nursed her in her illnesses. Annie Wakeman may be counted as the fifth, not only for her sometime provision of employment, food and friendly sympathy, but even more for her proffer of perspective on this tale of a long-abused but firm-minded woman, with her internalized classism, sexism and partiality for her eldest son.

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

Betty Dobbs has hidden no fault – about her virtues alone is she reticent, perhaps not knowing them.

Let her chronicler give them one paragraph.

Even on her death bed she had the remains of great personal beauty. She never made merchandise of it. Read her life and deny, if you dare, that this was heroic. Her maternity had no thought of self. She loved her children, slaved for them, went hungry that they might eat. She had boundless pity for all things helpless – animal or human. She was a sunny optimist and her brave courage never flagged. She delighted in music, and sometimes stole into Covent Garden gallery, away from care and hunger. She loved flowers, and they bloomed in her window often when the larder was empty. She was persistently industrious, a natural cook, a born nurse. Her voice was as soft as the cooing of a dove, and her touch as soothing as a gentle anodyne. And finally, there was great personal dignity in this Gentlewoman of the Slums. (pp. vii–viii)

Although, as we shall see, certain aspects of Betty Dobbs's/Annie Wakeman's narrative were likely untrue, there is no reason to doubt Wakeman's testimony to her humble friend's character.

A likely original: enter Martha Grimes

Who was Betty Dobbs? I was frustrated when I could find no death certificate for 'Elizabeth Dobbs', either in the years shortly before the publication of *The Autobiography of a Charwoman* or at any other time. It occurred to me that if the speaker's husband had indeed been a serial abuser, both she and Wakeman would have had a motive for altering names and obvious clues to identity in order to protect Betty's surviving children from retaliation. If so, I feared that we would never know who had served as the original for this powerful and disturbing oral narrative. Moreover, elements in the story seemed to confirm the slipperiness of Dobbs's identity: early in her life she is repeatedly called 'Betty Black'; her grandmother's favourite name for her had been 'Patsy', an odd nickname for Elizabeth; and when as a adolescent servant she hears a distinguished lodger, the singer George Honey, practise his song 'Martha', she wonders if he is making advances to her (both George Honey and the song are historically accurate).[7]

At this point I experienced a rare stroke of good fortune (much as Elizabeth Dobbs had when she met the Rev. Gutch on a wintry night) in the person of Sharon Knapp, a resident of Burnaby, British Columbia, who had encountered my anthology of Victorian working-class women poets.[8] Her hobby was historical and genealogical research, and she devoted many weeks of her after-hours life to locating and examining census records and birth, marriage and death certificates of women whose life stories reflected aspects of Betty's account: her birthdate, residences, the occupations of her father, lover 'Harry', 'Jakes', 'Richard Dobbs', and her sons, the sequence, sexes and ages of her children, her time in the workhouse, the inquest after her daughter's death, and her references to contemporary events in and around London.

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

At first I feared that locating an original would be like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack – a 'mind crank', as Sharon described it[9] – and even if found, unverifiable. When she first identified a likely suspect as a Martha Grimes, born 1843, I remained sceptical, even as more evidence poured in that the lives of Grimes's parents, cohabitation with a shoemaker whose wife had been incarcerated in a hospital, his early death, the inquest on her child's death, marriage to a nearby shoemaker, the sequence and fathers of her children, her sons' occupations, and her husband's desertion to live with a younger woman, all generally followed the pattern of the charwoman's account.

The chief clue came when, as mentioned earlier, Annie Wakeman Lathrop was found to have signed the marriage register of Grimes's daughter Rosina Jakeman in 1897, a year when Wakeman was presumably preparing her account.[10] The presence of a diplomat's wife at a working-class wedding (the groom was an 'enameller') would seem to reflect some unusual personal tie; and the narrative's hints that Betty Dobbs had had other names (Black/Grimes; 'Patsy', an older nickname for Martha; and her identification with the song 'Martha') seem more plausible in this context. Martha Grimes's first, illegitimate son, Albert, was indeed the offspring of a pawnbroker's assistant in the 1860s, possibly William Hulbert, who died a wealthy man at the approximate time indicated in Dobbs's account. The father of her second, third and fourth children, 'Jakes', was Joseph Jakeman (1840–77), a shoemaker as in her story, and her husband Dick was indeed a bootmaker and widower named Richard (Richard Goffin (*c.* 1841– after 1901)), to whom in 1880, as indicated, she was married by licence in St Martin's Church.

A comparison of the events of 'Betty's' story with what is known of the life of Martha Grimes reveals many close and near correspondences, but also some surprises. Betty/Martha's story seems consistent with other evidence for the three or so decades preceding her narration – from the time of her cohabitation with Jakes until she recounts her story to Wakeman. The story of Betty/Martha's adolescence includes some romantic fantasy, however, and the account of her alleged death and her children's fates requires some revision.

Martha Grimes was born in Clerkenwell, London, in September 1843 to Walter Grimes, a farrier (a veterinarian in Dobbs's account) and his wife Ann Radley Grimes. Her father did indeed remarry shortly after Ann Grimes's death, when Martha was twelve. Records confirm that she worked as a servant; however, as mentioned earlier, 'Harry' may well not have been a 'bacheldor' but a married man, since the pawnbroker's assistant named William (the name on her son's birth certificate) who would fit the appropriate location and age range was apparently married. Nor did Martha bear Albert (Betty's 'Ferdie', given a name with similarly refined associations) until she was nearly twenty-one. If her happy memories of good times with 'the gent' seem quite plausible, her tacit excuse that at sixteen she had been too naive to consider the meaning of an employer's advances would have seemed less convincing for a twenty-year-old. Perhaps at twenty 'the lines' had not bothered her, and she could not have expected her already-married seducer to wed her. Also, a

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

married lover might well have wished no contact with or responsibility for illegitimate children (a neglect which Betty had ascribed to his higher 'clarss').

Martha's difficulties in single-parenthood must have been real, but there is no record of her resorting to the workhouse, as she narrates, but instead she lived next door to her father and stepmother, suggesting that, however reluctantly, they may have provided some measure of assistance. Whether or not she agreed to live with Joseph Jakeman in the belief that he was unmarried cannot be known, but census records identify them as living as man and wife. Jakeman, a shoemaker born in 1840, was three years older than Martha, not ten years older as Betty attests. He was freed from the burden of his hospitalized wife Mary Brandon Jakeman in 1873 as claimed, and died in 1877, aged 37, in the workhouse hospital in Chatham, Kent, as in Dobbs's account, shortly before the birth of his and Martha's fourth child, a daughter Jane (a son not mentioned in Betty's narration had died in infancy).

After Jakeman's death, Martha Grimes was subject to an inquest into the death of her eighteen-month-old daughter Jane from bronchitis (Betty's 'Winnie' had also been eighteen months when she died of bronchitis), one of her life's major humiliations. Two years later, as mentioned, she married Richard Goffin, three or four years her senior, who, as in Betty's story, was a childless widower and shoemaker. They then added two sons (Richard/Dick and Charles, Betty's 'Joe') and one daughter (Harriet, Betty's 'Winnie') to Martha's previous four surviving children out of six births (Albert ['Ferdie'], Henry ['Tim'], Jesse ['John Henry'], and Rose [not included in Betty's account]). Interestingly, the sole surviving daughter of Martha's union with Jakeman – and the one at whose wedding Wakeman had served as witness – was not mentioned in Betty's account (perhaps to protect her privacy?). Important deviations appear in the fact that Martha's youngest daughter and ninth child Harriet was born 'deaf and dumb', not 'a pore, crooked little cripple' as in Betty's account (p. 204). Nor had the original of (the second) 'Winnie' died; according to the 1901 and 1911 censuses, Harriet continued to live, supported by her older brother Richard, and not too disabled to prevent her working as a dressmaker as of 1911.

The greatest shock, however, is that Martha survived Richard Goffin's blows and desertion and lived until December 1926, when she would have been 83. In the 1901 census she is listed, appropriately, as a 'domestic cook'. Just as Betty's tale of her highborn bachelor lover may have been partly fabricated as a romantic fiction or to avoid Wakeman's disapproval of an adulterous relationship, Wakeman later recast her conclusion to Betty's story to provide a dramatic closure for her book, to deflect readers from seeking a living original among her former female servants, and perhaps to increase the reader's sympathy for a victim of abuse. It is possible, of course, that in *c.* 1897–98 Martha Grimes believed herself to be dying from wounds caused by the attacks of her husband and his new partner, but the book's final paragraph and closing sentence, in which Betty enunciates the Dickensian lines, 'I'm goin' 'ome – I'm goin' 'ome' (p. 303), are perforce entirely fictional.

As Betty narrates her life, a question in the reader's/listener's mind inevitably rises – why did she bear so many children under circumstances she found distressing? Viewing Martha Grimes's life history, there is an obvious economic answer: the

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

21–22-year-old Martha would have needed the stable earnings of a workman such as Joseph Jakeman to maintain herself and her son. The humiliation of facing a criminal inquest into possible child neglect may have jolted her into the view that marriage was necessary; and with four surviving children after Jakeman's death and the knowledge that another had died from lack of medical care, a second union would have seemed prudent. If Betty's account is true, she was capable of self-deception, hoping that marriage would motivate the talented Richard to desist from excessive drinking and contribute to her support, the more so as his graceful appearance and speaking manner suggested to her the 'higher clarss' of her lifelong aspiration. Moreover, while bearing nine children and raising seven, she cannot have had much leisure to consider radical alternatives to her current situations, however difficult.

So what can be learned from this rare instance of cross-class collaboration, in which each participant altered some features of historical reality to create a composite result? Distinguishing features of Betty's account include her repeated assertions of pride in her youthful affair with someone of higher status and her resultant offspring, and rather contradictorily, her obsession with the respectability of marriage. Clearly she did not act on the latter motivation – if indeed she possessed it – until later in life. Furthermore, even if she had separated from Dobbs, she would have been respectably married; her repeated refusal to leave him and her hope that she would reclaim an abuser had probably stemmed from some mixture of internalized social expectations, the need for male attention, and/or hopelessness. As we have seen, although some details of Betty's account of 'Harry' and her life as a street singer were likely romanticized, Wakeman would have had no evidence with which to question their truth value, nor was their literal veracity central to her story. For her part, as an associate of the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts and a former journalist with an interest in London slum life, Annie Wakeman presumably held reformist sympathies. She likely emphasized the painful aspects of Betty's account to draw attention to the pervasiveness of domestic abuse and the need for efforts such as those of the Rev. Charles Gutch to bring self-respect and material comfort to darkest London. Indeed, news of his death evokes Betty's memory of ' 'is lovin', 'opeful words', and she attends and weeps throughout his funeral service (pp. 229–30).

Still, Betty did not want to be entirely reclaimed, and Wakeman refrains from imposing unlikely solutions in order to permit her subject the individuality of her contradictory ethics and imaginative spirit. One cannot know what Wakeman alludes to in her preface as Betty's/Martha's manifest 'faults' (though it is clear that she disapproves of all of Betty's partners, especially Dobbs), but her plea is for respect, not forgiveness. As a former actress, Wakeman identifies with the dramatic energy – even theatricality, within limited possibilities – which Betty/Martha brings to her 'self-fashioning'. In short, though the account given in the *Autobiography* is of necessity shaped by a sympathetic editor, Wakeman doubtless tried to highlight, not repress, her subject's characteristic modes of thought. The alteration of names and the claim that the subject had died were most likely Wakeman's modifications to preclude recognition by those acquainted with the original. Her addition of a dramatic, even sentimentally melodramatic, ending likewise provided a clear closure to

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

the narrative, in part to accent and heighten the plot motif of pervasive abuse, as well as to call attention to the pathos and courage of a woman's lifelong struggle with want.

An Autobiography thus remains a remarkable instance of cross-class collaboration, with Betty's/Martha's serialized dramatic monologue cast into relief by her auditor's blended sympathy and mild judgement. Though both participants apparently felt the need to alter some aspects of Betty's/Martha's story, their respective changes reflect differences in class-inflected values as well as temperament. The transcriber/editor's partial detachment also testifies to her recognition that for an outsider – with the best intentions on both sides, and the fullest researches by latter-day readers – the life story of a doughty member of her class must nonetheless remain partly shrouded in mystery.

Department of English
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242
USA
florence-boos@uiowa.edu

Downloaded from http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/ by guest on April 5, 2016

NOTES

1 Linda Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 152.

2 *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology*, ed. by Florence Boos (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2008), pp. 36–37.

3 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 21–78.

4 For recent discussions of the issue of accuracy in autobiographical writing, see Paul Eakin and Draig Howes, *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Peaches Henry, 'I, Rigoberta Menchu and the Truth-Value in Autobiography', *A/B: Autobiography Studies*, 16.1 (2001), 7–23; Nancy K. Miller, '"The Entangled Self": Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir', *PMLA*, 122.2 (2007), 537–48; and David Shields, 'Reality, Persona', *Truth in Nonfiction: Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), pp. 77–88.

5 Annie Wakeman, *The Autobiography of a Charwoman, as Chronicled by Annie Wakeman* (London: John McQueen, 1900 / Boston: L. C. Page, 1901). Hereafter, cited parenthetically.

6 A discussion of Dobbs's *Autobiography* and information on Wakeman appears in Melissa Donegan, 'Writing for their Lives: British Women's Survival Narratives, 1848–1900' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 2008).

7 George Honey (1822–1880) was a British vocalist, comedian and actor who co-starred with Lorraine Price in the opera *Martha*, first performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane in late 1858.

8 *Working-Class Women Poets*, ed. Boos.

9 Private correspondence, 8 May 2012.

10 According to records of entry and exit, Annie Wakeman Lathrop and her husband spent at least part of each of the years 1893–95 in England, and returned after an absence in June 1897. This would fit the fact that before her last interviews Betty greets Wakeman after the latter's long absence and tells her that she had learned of the death of Rev. Gutch, which had occurred in 1896 (*The Autobiography*, p. 229).