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poems appeared in print during this period differed vastly in class status. These ranged from scarcely literate rural poets, such as Jane Stevenson and Elizabeth Campbell, to widely influential “people’s poets,” such as Eliza Cook, who, although a brazier’s daughter, rose to edit an influential Victorian journal (see Boos). Among the issues that bear on the relationship of working-class women poets to their more well-favoured “sisters,” however, are three that merit special notice.

1. Which authors and poetic traditions did Victorian working-class women seek to emulate?

Richard Altick, Martha Vicinus, and others have noted that the high cost of books and even periodicals aimed at middle-class Victorians limited working-class engagement with contemporary authors. And although Mechanics Institutes and other libraries became slowly available to men after 1823, these repositories were less hospitable to women. The testimonies of the few women working-class poets who left records of their reading confirm these observations. Instead, women poets found models in an amalgam of ballad and oral traditions, poems in Chartist and worker-sympathetic newspapers such as *The Northern Star* and *Ben Brierley’s Journal*, and, in some cases, works from an older, formal tradition, including Shakespeare, Milton, and eighteenth-century poets such as Robert Burns and Thomas Gray.

Only a few working-class women poets have left records of their reading habits,¹ and noticeably missing from these accounts are named women poets—not only mid-Victorian contemporaries Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Augusta Webster, but even older or regional poets, such as Johanna Baillie, Charlotte Smith, Letitia Landon, or Susannah Blamire, “The Cumberland Muse.” Largely deprived of a tradition of foremothers or classical antecedents, therefore, Victorian working-class women sought to emulate an older, male-authored (or in the case of ballads, anonymous) tradition, but also to infuse this legacy with new, often more women-centred themes based on familiar experiences.

2. How do women poets from different social backgrounds engage with poetic traditions?

As we have seen, Elizabeth Campbell is an example of an entirely proletarian poet without extensive prior models; as with many self-taught poets, her verses resemble declamations devoid of formalized rhythms. At times these fall into blank verse, as in her anguished “The Crimean War”: “I weep for all those that in battle are slain; / I’ve a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men” (*Poems* 24). Village poet Janet Hamilton reworked Burnsian satire and narrative ballad traditions for her own purposes; the most original instances of the latter are several “ballads of memorie”—accounts in ballad metre of actual events witnessed by the author or her family, but otherwise too humble for formal record.² A significant number of poems concern



An Alternate Poetics:
Working-Class Women Poets and a “People’s Tradition”

FLORENCE BOOS

INEVITABLY THE term *poetess* carries an appeal to education and social class, without which neither gentility nor resistance to its norms could exist. Neither can one oversimplify an alternate Victorian working-class women’s poetics, since the many dozens of working-class women whose

deserted unwed mothers, perhaps reflecting the fate of one of Hamilton's own daughters,³ and alcoholic and violent husbands are a frequent bane. Mancunian region factory poets Marie and Fanny Forrester, informed by a more sophisticated Chartist tradition of labour poetry as exemplified in the *Northern Star*, *Ben Brierley's Journal*, and the *Leicester Mercury*, carve out an honoured role for the "lowly bard." Marie's twin themes are the moral power of labour and the special grace of poetic vision, as she experiences it.⁴ More concretely, Fanny Forrester celebrates the unique ability of the working-class poet to witness the heroisms of those (in Mary Smith's words) "forgot e'en by tradition's garrulous tongue" (72). Since she or he alone (the gender here is not significant) "tunes his lyre within the garret lonely," her mission is to memorialize the courage and sorrows of the marginalized underclass.⁵ And at the upper end of the social scale is Eliza Cook, whose verses engage the works of mainstream writers. "Our Father" responds to the same passages in the 1842 and 1843 Parliamentary reports on the employment of children in mines and factories as had EBB's "The Cry of the Children," although with pathos rather than anger and social indictment (*Poetical Works* 452–53). And Cook's "Lines Suggested by the Song of a Nightingale" pass beyond imitation into parody in satirizing the Romantic identification of poetry with birdsong (*Poems* 535–36), a trope associated with middle-class women poets.⁶

3. How do working-class women's poems differ from those by their working-class male and middle-class female contemporaries?

As we have seen, working-class women poets prize the ballad tradition as a living, evolving medium rather than as an archaic source for more mainstream "art ballads." When aware of middle-class poetess expectations, they often beg to differ, either through adopting a consciously homely persona ("the lowly bard") or through humour. A further significant feature of the poems of many working-class women is their veneration of the role of poet, and the claim that their special mission is enhanced, not limited, by their class status; less often do they make this claim as women poets, perhaps aware that their female identities are already a singular marker of difference.

Such poets often represent themes of love and romance (factory poet Ellen Johnston, for example, attempted a poetic courtship), but these celebrations are more often undercut with a sense of practical losses. Deserted or unwed mothers are a repeated theme—and even prostitutes are not viewed as "fallen women," as middle-class ideology would have it, but simply as victims whose plight prompts anger; of course, authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Rossetti advocated reclamation, but even reclamation implies a moral error. Similarly, domestic violence is a repeated theme in poems by working-class women, with examples from Hamilton,⁷ former factory worker Agnes Mabon, and seamstress Jessie Russell; the chief claim of the extensive subgenre of temperance verse is that alcoholism destroys working-class families.

Like their middle-class sisters, working-class women poets offer social critique, taking up the cause of abolition and representing sympathetically the toils of underpaid workers—the young and fading seamstress is a common poetic subject—as well as the unemployed, the deformed, the outcast, PTSD-haunted veterans, and the homeless, imprisoned, or enslaved. Most important, however, is a slight shift in viewpoint—from pity to identification and even fear, as in Forrester's poignant series "Strangers in the City." Doubtless, this shift in perspective reflected on-the-ground realities: Johnston was an unwed mother; two of Hamilton's sons were alcoholic, one (apparently) violent, and one daughter an unwed mother; Campbell's four sons died in accidents, and she alludes without specifics to a family shame; Ruth Wills was partly disabled from a stroke; and Hamilton was blind from age fifty onward. One misfortune—an employment stoppage, a disabled spouse, a death—could plunge even the relatively secure downward into indigence. And in frequent contrast with middle-class poetess verse, the sense of community and audience—consisting of one's fellow workers as well as sympathetic middle-class readers—undergirds a less individualist, more communal voice.

In conclusion, working-class women poets negotiated many barriers—of gender and class, occupational insecurity, and in some cases, extreme poverty, regional marginality, and lack of access to formal training and approved poetic models. As a group, they claimed a special status to speak for and to a broader culture and to proffer forms of embedded witness and empathy. Theirs is not primarily an appeal to gentility or class mobility but to universality—an eclectic tradition drawing on popular ballads, dialect poetry, Milton, Burns, Chartist newspapers, and the didactic contemporary literature of religious and temperance movements. Whatever the limitations of their specific works, moreover, these working-class women poets aspired to appropriate and reshape these prior traditions into distinctive voices of their own.

Notes

¹ The impoverished Campbell, deprived of formal education, recalled committing to memory a "penny book of the 'Bleeding Lamb'" and reading assorted works of prose, including James Hervey's *Meditations* and "Raggit Harry, the Black Dragon of the Glasgow College" (*Songs of My Pilgrimage* xv). Campbell, Janet Hamilton, Lizzie Smith, and Eliza Craven Green all wrote poems to Burns, doubtless encouraged by the annual poetry competitions for Burns Day (January 25). Factory poet Ruth Wills remembered her deep love of Milton and systematic reading in English and French classics, including "the poetry of Lamartine and Beranger" (9). More extensive memories are found in the writings of Coatbridge-region poet Janet Hamilton, who fondly recalled her girlhood preference for an "aul' worl' balat" over other treats, her excitement at age eight at reading Milton's verses and those of Scottish poet Allan Ramsay, and her delight in Shakespeare (17). However, it is Eliza Cook who provides the liveliest account of available sources for popular verse in her poem "The Streets":

The "College Hornpipe" stirred my feet, "Auld Robin Gray" my breast,
But "Nannie, wilt thou gang wi' me,"—I think I liked that best . . .

Oh! Let me list what strains I may, I know my pulse ne'er beats
Such perfect time, as then it did to music in the "Streets." (Boos 284-85)

- ² Examples include "Grannie's Crack About the Famine in Auld Scotlan', 1739-40" and an allegorical visitation, "Grannie's Dream. A True Incident" (Boos 81-84, 84-87).
³ Among these are "Effie—A Ballad" (Boos 87-89) and "Mysie, An Aul' Warl' but Ower True Story" (Hamilton 215-19).
⁴ Her "Sibyl, the Far-Seer" offers a semi-autobiographical view of the poet's role: "Brief her life—a moment's glory, / Woven thro' my whole life's story, / Sweet Sibyl, the Far-Seer!" (*People's and Howitt's Journal* 132).
⁵ Cf. her celebration of "The Lowly Bard":

The great may flaunt their pampered bards above him,
But when their laurels shall be sere and brown,
Kind heaven will grant, because the lowliest love him,
To the poor rhymester an eternal crown. (Ben Brierley's *Journal*)

- ⁶ I'll wish he had to write his song beneath a midnight taper;...
And then, to crown his misery, and break his heart in splinters,
I'll wish he had to see his proofs, his publishers, and printers.
⁷ In "A Feast of the Mutches," for example, the poet comments of a friend, "An' there's a pair heid that's been cutit and clour'd."

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