Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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Kevin Binfield and
William J. Christmas

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Florence S. Boos

Teaching the Poetry of Victorian Working-Class Women

In this essay, I argue for the inclusion of working-class authors in Victorian literature courses, with an emphasis on poetry by women. In my *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology*, I provide samples of the poems and memoirs of seventeen working-class women, along with introductions, notes, and a bibliography of forty-six additional such poets as an aid to further study. The selections suggest a wide variety of poetic, historical, and evaluative questions for general consideration and use in class. For example, which forms of verse did these women poets use to convey their convictions and emotions? To what extent were their writings autobiographical? What did they and their audiences value most in their poems and those of others? What sorts of concrete everyday experiences distinguished the lives of Victorian working-class women from those of their middle- and lower-middle-class sisters? Did these poets define themselves in terms of social class or simply as poor? When and to what extent did the century's intermittent gains in literacy begin to benefit lower-class women? Did they define themselves chiefly in regional or in national terms, as British, English, Irish, or Scottish? What twenty-first-century analogues might one find for these poets' works and aspirations?

Finally, to what extent were some of them feminist (or protofeminist) by twenty-first-century standards?

The best of these works belong in any good anthology of Victorian poetry, for they resonate with the force of the ballad, song, and folk traditions from which working-class verse emerged, and they startle students with their bluntness, immediacy, and freedom from classically derived literary conventions. Students mesmerized by performative modes of expression in the present find parallels between these and the oral and popular traditions of the past. Repositories of music, artworks, and photographs, such as *Songs of the Victorians* (www.songsofthevictorians.com), indirectly remind students that most of their ancestors were not members of Jane Austen's landed gentry but were instead farmers, factory workers, and skilled and unskilled laborers.

Moreover, classroom presentations of working-class literary works undermine the high-theoretical tendency to characterize ordinary Victorians as passive victims of inexorable historical forces. They open students' eyes to the life circumstances of our predecessors, which are underreported in conventional history as well as in the writings of most observers then and now. They also introduce students to nineteenth-century struggles for social justice, reminding them of the debt we owe to activists and reformers of the past and the extent to which the problems in their own environments (homelessness, food insecurity, unemployment, and violence) likewise shaped the subject matter and formal qualities of the texts they read.

Classroom Contexts: Working-Class Women in Art, Music, and Material Culture

For many students, material by nineteenth-century working-class authors may at first seem an alienating departure from a familiar curriculum in which the poor have been reduced to silence or stereotype. An initial discussion of how working-class women have been represented (or not) in the past and why an understanding of their life experiences and varied linguistic patterns helps decode their writings provides a bridge to the study of works by any specific writer. For this introduction, I find Victorian paintings, songs, and illustrations to be invaluable resources.

As Patricia E. Johnson has observed, women's work was almost invisible in middle-class Victorian art and literature. One way to demonstrate this invisibility is to project onto a computer screen the best-known images of working-class women in Victorian art—portrayals of sex workers, seamstresses, and farm workers—and ask students to interpret their intended messages, omissions, and latent assumptions. Often these images form a context for later readings: for example, John Spencer Stanhope's 1859 "Thoughts of the Past," in which a young prostitute surrounded by the accoutrements of her trade bleakly confronts her audience, may suggest the "fallen" (wronged) women evoked by Janet Hamilton in "Effie: A Ballad" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 87–88) and Fanny Forrester in "The Bitter Task" (247–48). Similarly useful images are Bessie Bodichon's "Sisters in Our Fields" (c. 1858–60) and Anna Jameson's "For Only One Short Hour" (1854).

Such portrayals, however sympathetic, reflect the viewpoint of middle-class artists. More widely represented in nineteenth-century working-class sources, by contrast, were chants, hymns, and songs, which provide an ideal introduction to the oral culture from which working-class poems emerged. Most American students, having little awareness of the existence of British dialects, are intrigued by recordings of Scots and Lancashire dialect poetry, songs by the Oldham Tinkers and other folk singers, and waulking songs, in which Hebridean women chant, shout, laugh, and divert themselves from the numbingly repetitious task of pounding cloth into shape. An interesting discussion results when students contrast "The Owdham Weaver" in its original form (Hollingworth 11–12) with the softened version provided in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* ([ed. Jennifer Foster] 69–70) as they confront the pervasiveness of middle-class censorship.

Only a few samples of the handwriting of working-class poets have been preserved, but these are of unusual interest. Hamilton, who from earliest girlhood read poetry and composed hundreds of lines of verse in her head as a young woman, learned to write only in her fifties. Her idiosyncratic script testifies to the barriers confronted by a gifted woman who had no access to formal education and little money for paper. In compensation, however, her inability to write until later life may have stimulated her remarkable auditory memory, and her example prompts students to consider the effects of an oral culture on adult literacy.

A handful of drawings and photographs of Hamilton, Forrester, Elizabeth Campbell, Mairi MacPherson, and Jeannie Paterson also exist, most of them from the last decades of the nineteenth century, when it became more feasible and inexpensive to print photographs as frontispieces to a poet's volume (all these photographs are reprinted in *Working-Class Women Poets*). The remoteness and elusiveness of such physical traces from the early days of mass-produced line drawings and photographs elicits a certain respect for the difficulties of transmission, and the coded symbolism of these carefully posed images prompts students to consider how the poet wished to represent herself—for example, the elderly Hamilton appeared in her photograph with book, eyepatch, plaid, and frilled bonnet (a mutch).

Memoirs by Working-Class Women Poets

When available, the most directly relevant background material for teaching Victorian working-class women's poetry is their memoirs and autobiographies, often drafted as prefaces for their volumes.[1] Selections from Hamilton's "Sketches of Village Life and Character," for example, which recall her girlhood love of ballads and impatience at long sermons, provide a sense of the poet's characteristic blend of good humor and social criticism. Campbell's "The Life of My Childhood" prefaces her 1873 *Songs of My Pilgrimage* (ix–xvii), and the guarded and somewhat enigmatic account of her life by Ellen Johnston, the "Factory Girl," begins her *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* (1867).

Campbell's memoir, drafted in old age, briefly recalls her half-orphaned childhood in rural poverty, her stints of local service, her pathetically short six weeks of instruction (in sewing), and her passionate responses to natural beauty. Her husband and four of her eight children had died by the time she wrote, most of them in work-related accidents, and she mourned their loss in poignantly heartfelt poems. Johnston, by contrast, casts her autobiography as a defiant account of obstacles overcome by devotion to her muse. Reflecting on her father's emigration to North America without his family, the abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather, and her struggles with ill health, factory labor, and unwed motherhood, she proudly declares that the bond forged with her readers through her verse has enabled her to transcend her travails and petty disappointments.

The memoirs of the modest Campbell and assertive Johnston bear common witness to rural destitution, urban exploitation, and the oppressive toll of death, dislocation, and potentially deadly working conditions. They also show flashes of reflective insight. When one of Campbell's sons left for the Crimea, for example, she responded with a truly ecumenical reflection, free of the routine patriotism of the period:

> I think it's a pity that kings go to war,
> And carry their murd'rous inventions so far;

of working-class women in Victorian art—portrayals of sex workers, seamstresses, and farm workers—and ask students to interpret their intended messages, omissions, and latent assumptions. Often these images form a context for later readings: for example, John Spencer Stanhope's 1859 "Thoughts of the Past," in which a young prostitute surrounded by the accoutrements of her trade bleakly confronts her audience, may suggest the "fallen" (wronged) women evoked by Janet Hamilton in "Effie: A Ballad" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 87–88) and Fanny Forrester in "The Bitter Task" (247–48). Similarly useful images are Bessie Bodichon's "Sisters in Our Fields" (c. 1858–60) and Anna Jameson's "For Only One Short Hour" (1854).

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> I think it's a pity that kings go to war,
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. . . .

I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave,
I weep for the monarch, I weep for the slave,
I weep for all those that in battle are slain;
I've a tear and a prayer for the souls of all men.
("The Crimean War" [Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 128–30])

Johnston's poems celebrate authorship, hopes for romance, and (in one poem only) motherhood, but "Come Awa' Jamie" and "The Last Sark," her best dramatic monologues, give voice to a working woman forced to work at a loom she can barely see and a wife who bitterly asks her exhausted and unemployed husband the recurrent question, "What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee!" (128). (That is, the rich wouldn't care if all the poor died, as long as they themselves remained well off.)

Other extant autobiographical sketches are informal memoirs by the untutored rural poet Jane Stevenson and the factory workers Ruth Wills and Marie. In "Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Nonconformist" (selections of which appear in *Working-Class Women Poets* [315–19]), Smith records her lifelong efforts to write poetry and aid reformist causes, initially as an unpaid servant and later in life as a largely self-taught teacher who managed to found her own successful school. All these poignant accounts by working-class women poets help students grasp the circumstances and aspirations that shaped their verse.

Student-Led Class Sessions

The study of working-class women's writings presents heightened opportunities for communal learning, since their unfamiliarity invites student responses unobstructed by the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom) caused by layered generations of prior criticism. I have found that after initial class sessions devoted to the cultural traces of working-class women's lives, student-led discussions on poets they have selected can yield rewarding and often unexpected results.

To this end, I provide a list of poets and ask students to choose one for presentation. Students must meet with me to discuss and rehearse the questions they intend to ask their classmates. On rare occasions, a student will choose a poem or poems with quite specific political or historical references that have entirely escaped him or her, and such prior meetings enable me to offer suggestions. Rehearsing produces significantly better results, and if the class fails to respond to a question, the student leader is better prepared to offer an interpretation.

That the classes are peer-led encourages students to identify with and advocate for their chosen poet, affirming her views as well as the literary merits of her work. What seem to me conventional sentiments are at times seized on with great seriousness by my students, while poems that I find literarily skillful or politically compelling may hold little attraction for them. But my stepping back is part of the teaching process, and compensation is provided by the serendipity of our discussions: since the material covered is never entirely predictable either to me or to them, each class session has elements of shared investigation and surprise.

Sample Case: Teaching Janet Hamilton's Poetry

The linguistic and thematic variety of Hamilton's verses and the many aspects of her career hold the attention of students. For example, the student who has prepared to teach the class might recount the trajectory of her remarkable life as a tambour worker, shoemaker's wife, and mother of ten, denied formal education as a child and blind from her mid-fifties on. The student then might project the frontispiece to Hamilton's *Poems* on the screen and invite commentary: "Why the white cap?" "How could a blind poet have composed and published poetry?" "Why is the sole picture of Janet one made in old age?" "What impression is her image designed to convey?" After listening to a recording of her satiric tour de force "Oor Location," which enables them to hear its lilt and cadence, students enjoy parsing the poem's unfamiliar diction and locutions. They next take turns reading in proper dialect, an effort that evokes reluctance and laughter.

The student leader then asks, "What angers Hamilton and why?" "Is she snobbish toward her neighbors or justified in disliking her noisy, pub-filled environs?" "What types of behavior does she most condemn, and why does she find these important?" "Are her language choices effective in drawing in the reader?" "Is she intentionally or unintentionally humorous?" "Why does she cite Milton?" "If Hamilton were alive today, what features of our society would she condemn?" Along the way, we discuss the Industrial Revolution, conditions in the mines and steel mills of southwest Scotland, unregulated pollution, the temperance movement, Hamilton's opinions on child-rearing, the nature of her intended audience, and the appropriateness for her subject of the poem's Lallands speech, swift-moving couplets, and pithy invectives.

Students receptive to criticisms of colonialism also like Hamilton's "A Plea for the Doric" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 62) and "Auld Mither Scotland" (79–80), sardonic indictments of British economic hegemony and the harm it inflicted on Scots language and culture. Good companion pieces for discussion and contrast are Hamilton's "Lay of the Tambour Frame" (Kerrigan 182–83), an English-language poem in which Hamilton denounces the meager wages paid to women embroiderers, and its more famous counterpart in Thomas Hood's third-person "The Song of the Shirt."

A few students are also drawn to some of Hamilton's longer Scots poems, such as "A Wheen Aul' Memories" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 63–68), "Sketches of Village Character in Days o' 'Langsyne'" (Hamilton, *Poems* 315–24), and "Grannie's Crack aboot the Famine in Auld Scotlan'" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 81–83). Some successes are hard to predict: one student reported that her favorite poem was Hamilton's "Luggie: Past and Present," a protest against local environmental degradation, and Margaret Loose at the University of California, San Diego, has told me her students especially enjoyed the grotesque appearance of a "bluidy haun" ("bloody hand") in "Grannie's Dream—A True Incident" (84–86).

Some Common Themes: Violence, Seduction, Desertion, and Destitution

A discussion of working-class women's poetry inevitably prompts the question, What thematic features distinguish their writings? Virtually all, it seems, address themes of child mortality, hunger, and poverty and protest the gender inequities that permit men to seduce and desert the mothers of their children. Working-class women's poems about desertion, such as Hamilton's "Effie—A Ballad" (87) and Forrester's "Bitter Task" are sharpened by their subjects' real and present fear of destitution, and similar fears overshadow poems about death and loss of children, such as Jessie Russell's "The Mother's Story" (325) and Campbell's "The Mother's Lament" (133–34) and "The Death of Willie, My Second Son" (126). At least three writers in *Working-Class Women Poets* focus on the widespread phenomenon of domestic violence—Marion Bernstein in "A Dream" (344–45), Russell in "A Recantation" (Goodridge, *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets* 3: 297–98) and "Woman's Rights versus Woman's Wrongs" (Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets* 324), and Ethel Carnie in "Shame" and "A Lament" (262)—in contrast to middle-class Victorian women poets, who generally avoided the topic.[2]

Cross-Class Audiences: Pairing Working- and Middle-Class Poets

A few working-class authors managed in later life to pass through the barrier that separated them from the middle class. Eliza Cook, a brazier's daughter with no formal education, became the de facto middle-class editor of a widely circulated popular journal, and the epigrammatic humor and accessibility that attracted her contemporaries also make her a student favorite. Discussion of her poems prompts an examination of how she appeals simultaneously to working- and middle-class audiences, as poems such as "A Song: To 'The People' of England" assure the disenfranchised that "*Ye* shall soon have wider charters!" while urging middle-class readers to "Let 'the People' have ***their*** 'College'" (*Poetical Works* 286–87, lines 29, 73; [emphasis mine]). Similarly, she reaches out to her cross-class audience in "They All Belong to Me," anticipating Woody Guthrie in promising the poor that "this land is my land [too] . . ." and reminding middle-class readers that the beauties of life should be available to all (288–89).

In class discussion, it is often effective to compare working- and middle-class poems devoted to common—or at least assimilable—topics. Cook's "Our Father" (*Poetical Works* 452–53) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children," for example, were both written in response to the 1843 parliamentary report on child labor, and both contrast the children's innocence with the hypocrisy of a professedly Christian mercantile class heedless of the Sermon on the Mount. "The Cry of the Children" seems to me a more pointed and better-crafted poem, but students have argued vigorously for the merits of Cook's epigrammatic and melodic work.

Similarly, Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" may be read as a homologue of "The Cry of the Children" and "The Lay of the Tambour Frame," and one can contrast the infatuated self-deception of the narrator of Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" with the grim indictment of Carnie's "A Lament." Hamilton and Gerard Manley Hopkins both inveighed against the ravages of industrial development, but to Hopkins in "Binsey Poplars" this development meant suburban sprawl, whereas to Hamilton in "A Wheen Aul' Memories" it meant slag and industrial squalor.

Working-class women's poetry also pairs naturally with that of working-class men. Samuel Laycock's "Bowton's Yard" (Maidment, *Poorhouse Fugitives*

257–59), a description in dialect of the poet's neighbors in an urban alleyway, compares well in class with Hamilton's "Oor Location"; and the anonymous "Just Instinct and Brute Reason: By a Manchester Operative" (47–48) parallels Johnston's mordant indictment of callous employers in "The Last Sark."

But no woman poet I have found was preoccupied with political violence, however much she may have condemned the rich as a class, and none drafted a stark parable of class vengeance such as the innocuously entitled "Song," in which W. J. Linton responded to onlookers' protection of a tax collector's murderer with the prophetic lines "O wrong! Thou hast a fearful brood: / . . . / Who know revenge but reap't the seed / Of blood" (62, lines 21–24).

The Benefits of Inclusion

I have tried to make the case that routine inclusion of working-class texts in graduate and undergraduate courses would modify the study of nineteenth-century literarature in significantly beneficial ways. Many students, for example—at least many American students—are unaware that the term *middle-class* referred to a relatively small minority of the nineteenth-century British population, as it does now to a relatively small minority of the world. The teaching of poems and memoirs by working-class women provides a partial corrective to this incorrect assumption.

Working-class texts can also be naturally integrated into the study of several genres—essays, autobiographies, the ballad, the elegy, and the dramatic monologue among them—as well as topics, such as childhood, youth, marriage, parenthood, old age, religion, war, imperialism, nationhood, and the devastating effects of unchecked industrialization and resource extraction. These texts provide a fuller sense of the range of literary expression common to the period and clarify how the events of history—war, displacement, emigration, child mortality—were experienced by those who felt their effects most directly.

Routine integration and inclusion of working-class texts also casts canonical works such as Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam A. H. H.," *Aurora Leigh*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* into relief, focuses attention on how they represent or fail to represent contemporary working-class viewpoints, and creates more nuanced angles of incidence and frames of reference for the study of popular literature and shifting class audiences. The aspirations and accomplishments of working-class poets offer interesting contrasts of registers with works such as Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine." They change some of the lenses through which we view the more refined works we teach—on the one hand, throwing into sharper focus their rarity, eloquence, and intermittent profundity, and on the other, revealing more clearly their episodic heedlessness, self-absorption, and embedded sense of class.

Efforts to understand such working-class writings are acts of projective literary and historical imagination—*Verstehen*, as conceived by early theorists of consciousness and hermeneutic awareness such as Wilhelm Dilthey—and they require cognate efforts to explore remote analogies of ourselves and our sensibilities in other times and other communities. Certain aspects of the sensibilities of working-class authors will necessarily remain unknown to us, but it is a privilege, I believe, to transmit their writings to new generations of readers.

Notes

1. An account of several such autobiographies may be found in Boos, *Memoirs*.

2. An exception is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, in which the seamstress Marian Erle has fled from her violent and abusive parents.