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Writing across the Class Divide

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Historians have noted that the chief characteristic of nineteenth-century British society was its structural inequality, with estimates of the proportion of the population who belonged to the 'working classes' ranging from 75% to 95%,¹ reflecting a life of income and food precarity as well as limited access to education and occupational choice. Not surprisingly, working-class women suffered additional burdens from frequent childbearing, exclusion from skilled trades, and unequal access to existing schooling. Not until the Education Act of 1870 was an attempt made to ensure that every child receive a rudimentary primary school education until the age of ten, and even this minimal reform was unevenly enforced until the end of the nineteenth century.² David Vincent's *The Rise of Mass Literacy* (2000) records the sobering fact that in 1840 only 50% of the female population of Britain could sign their name in a marriage register, and though by 1870 this figure had risen to 70%, it seems clear that only the more fortunate and gifted among mid-Victorian working-class women could have aspired to literary composition.³

With the exception of personal accounts with contemporary political relevance—for example, the transcribed testimony of a former slave issued by the Anti-Slavery Society, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831)⁴—the low status and menial occupations of most working-class women further limited their chances for publication. A few reforming editors included poems by working-class women in such periodicals as *Eliza Cook's Journal* (1849–54), *The Working Man's Friend* (1855–77), and the *Penny Post* (1855–77), and a handful of working-class poets, including temperance advocate Janet Hamilton (1795–1873) and factory worker Ellen Johnston (1835–c. 1874), were able to bring out one or more volumes of verse, often self-published or issued by subscription.⁵ In addition, Dissenting religious organisations on occasion

published religious testimonies by humble writers (for example, Barbara Farquhar's *The Pearl of Days*, and A. Collier's *A Biblewoman's Story*),⁶ although the popular genre of fiction remained largely the province of the middle class.⁷ Published memoirs by mid-Victorian women were even rarer than volumes of poetry: Mary Ann Ashford (1787–1890) self-published her account of a servant's life, *The Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter*, in 1844, and Elizabeth Storie's *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Storie, A Native of Glasgow*, was issued by subscription in 1859, but most other memoirs by working-class women remained in diary or manuscript form for descendants to bring forth in the next century: for example, Elizabeth Oakley's handwritten account of the life of a rural farmwife was edited by a local historian in 1991.⁸

Almost all the mid-Victorian women authors most often read today—Charlotte (1816–55) and Emily Brontë (1818–46), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–65), George Eliot (1819–80), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61), Augusta Webster (1837–94), and Christina Rossetti (1830–94)—were situated in the middle or upper-middle classes, as reflected in their educational attainments, whether acquired through instruction by tutors (Webster and Barrett Browning), home tutelage by an educated parent (Christina Rossetti) or formal schooling (Eliot, Gaskell, and the Brontës). Quite strikingly, a pervasive feature of their writings is its generally reformist tone, as in response to the inequities of their society literary women sought to enlist readers' sympathies for its vulnerable, marginalised, or undervalued members: orphans, the infirm, the elderly, the ostracised, and the destitute. Often these writers portrayed their fellow women from the working classes, attempting to speak on their behalf, and such representations have been often accepted as accurate and fully sympathetic portrayals of their working-class subjects. In this chapter, I will probe such middle-class representations to discern their embedded assumptions of hierarchy regarding class relations, as well as the blind spots and cross-class tensions manifested in these writings. And, for an alternative subaltern perspective, we will examine the recorded perceptions of working-class women themselves.⁹ For despite disabilities and obstacles to publication, working-class women from a variety of occupations—among these, fish vendors, nursery maids, factory workers, tamborers [embroiderers], seamstresses, domestic servants, infant school teachers, and lay preachers—did manage to chronicle their own lives and viewpoints, providing often quite differing perspectives on their middle-class 'superiors' and other topics.

Since middle-class women writers often focused attention on servants and seamstresses, this chapter will contrast their representations with those found in the memoirs and poems of maids and textile workers as well as a few others, such as fishwives, child-minders, and itinerant poets. As we shall see, middle-class writers most often present servants and seamstresses who are devoted to their employers, eager to adopt 'respectable' behaviours, and/or romantically drawn to wealthy seducers. Yet the life narratives of

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lower-class workers express quite different concerns, including desires for autonomy, occupational advancement, and educational and imaginative outlets. In addition, only a minority of such memoirists viewed their roles as servants or textile workers as continuing sources of identity; instead, they saw these employments as stages in a varied and often difficult work life.

Representing Servants and Seamstresses

In most Victorian fiction, as Patricia Johnson has observed, the workers whose labours support the lifestyles of the protagonists are granted highly subordinate roles, viewed through stereotypes or rendered entirely invisible, literally 'hidden hands'.¹⁰ Readers of Charles Dickens's (1812–70) *David Copperfield* (1850) will recall that David and Dora's domestic troubles centred on her inability to discipline dishonest servants; in *Villette* (1851), Charlotte Brontë's unfriended Lucy suffers anxiety when faced with what she interprets as a supercilious London chambermaid; and in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the servants interfere to the detriment of their 'betters' when occasion permits.

When Elizabeth Gaskell, the wife of a prosperous Unitarian minister, chose to write two novels with sympathetic working-class heroines, *Mary Barton* (1847) and *Ruth* (1853), she departed from earlier portrayals of working-class women in presenting a credible romantic heroine who had worked as a seamstress.¹¹ Similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had eloped with the aid of her faithful servant Elizabeth Wilson to marry her fellow poet, created in *Aurora Leigh* (1857) the century's only major epic poem with a cross-class plot, as the intertwined fortunes of Aurora and the impoverished seamstress Marian both advance and threaten to derail the action's expected closure. And, further, in *Mistress and Maid* (1863), Dinah Mulock Craik (1826–87), a popular author of her day with a largely female audience, created a quite unique female inter-class plot centred on the close ties between three precariously genteel sisters and their loyal servant Elizabeth. Despite their reformist ideals, shared belief in women's higher ethical mission, and theoretical religious adherence to a doctrine of equality under God, these middle-class writers nonetheless struggled with the contradictions between such ideals and the difficulties of imagining the inner lives of those whom they encountered only in relation to members of their own class. All of these writers employed servants as a matter of course, and in writing about the latter they were representing an occupational category which they could never have conceived being forced to join, and whose members often exhibited radically different language patterns and private habits.¹² Such tensions add an ideological complexity to their efforts to portray interclass relationships and advocate for a better life on behalf of their working-class sisters, while simultaneously reinforcing the latter's separate, subordinate status.

In her pioneering study of *Victorian Working Women* (1929), Wanda Neff notes that seamstresses and other needlewomen were more attractive subjects for novelists than other working-class women: 'With the dressmaker and her work [...] the writer, especially the lady writer, was at home. Needlecraft was, unlike cotton-weaving or nail-making, no mystery'. Moreover, her trade enabled her to make attractive clothes for herself, and since the long hours of seamstresses exposed her to the streets, 'beautiful but poor, she met temptation on every hand'.¹³ This is exactly the situation of Gaskell's two working-class heroines. The eponymous protagonist of *Mary Barton* chooses the occupation of seamstress, in part influenced by her father. Like most observers of the day, he 'had never left off disliking factory life for a girl', and 'considered domestic servitude as a species of slavery, a pampering of artificial wants on the one side, a giving up of every right of leisure by day and quiet rest at night on the other' (Chapter 3). The sixteen-year-old Mary herself aspires to rise to the status of 'lady', noting that 'while a servant must often drudge and be dirty [...] a dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances' (Chapter 3). Crucially, this was a view which Gaskell glosses as 'folly', and which is severely chastened by the novel's narrowly averted seduction plot.

In *Ruth*, however, Gaskell portrays a woman who works in both of these occupations among others. Ruth is a dressmaker's apprentice, quasi-servant and companion, nursemaid or governess, occasional seamstress, and untrained visiting sick-nurse—virtually a compendium of the more 'respectable' forms of labour available to working-class women of the period. Since the novel is designed to point the moral of forgiveness for the 'fallen' (the unmarried sixteen-year-old Ruth had conceived a child), Gaskell emphasises her heroine's friendlessness and innocence, but each part of her account of Ruth's early life is plausible. The seamstress establishment into which the orphaned Ruth is apprenticed requires that its young women labor from 8 a.m. to midnight or even later, with scant food, little ventilation, and inadequate heating; Ruth's employer is autocratic and verbally abusive; Ruth shares a cramped sleeping room with four other girls; and she is dispatched on errands even late at night, when her presence on the streets would be dangerous. As a result of foul air and overwork her fellow-worker Jenny contracts what may be tuberculosis:

She could not sleep or rest. The tightness at her side was worse than usual. She almost thought she ought to mention it in her letters home; but then she remembered the premium her father had struggled hard to pay, and the large family, younger than herself, that had to be cared for, and she determined to bear on, and trust that, when the warm weather came, both the pain and the cough would go away (11).¹⁴

Ruth herself is fair, even pale, of complexion; as Neff comments, the 'waxen pallor'¹⁵ common in seamstresses accorded with Victorian notions

of genteel femininity, which prized a delicate, light complexion. Another historically realistic touch is that on Sundays the dressmaking establishment is closed and Ruth is forced to wander forth;¹⁶ on one such occasion, she meets the wealthy, assertive, and insincere Mr. Bellingham, who offers the unfriended girl his attention and seeming interest. When, on an expedition together to visit her former country home, the couple encounter her employer, the latter promptly fires her for immorality, and Gaskell's narrator intervenes to protest:

Mrs. Mason was careless about the circumstances of temptation into which the girls entrusted to her as apprentices were thrown, but severely intolerant if their conduct was in any degree influenced by the force of those temptations. She called this intolerance 'keeping up the character of her establishment'. It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care (48).

In any case, with no immediate alternative and a limited understanding of the consequences, Ruth accepts Bellingham's insistence that she join him in London. A gap in narrative chronology obscures the actual seduction, but when, shortly afterwards, during a brief holiday in Wales, Bellingham deserts her at his mother's insistence, Ruth is left destitute and newly shamed by what she now perceives to be her 'sin'. In desperation, she runs to a nearby river to drown herself, but her life is saved by the intervention of Thurston Benson, a compassionate Dissenting minister with a disabling spinal injury (which conveniently precludes any romantic overtones). When Ruth is perceived to be pregnant, the minister, Thurston Benson, persuades his at first reluctant sister Faith that they should take Ruth into their home to rescue her from further degradation. As the novel develops, both the minister and Faith become deeply attached to Ruth and her son, Leonard, and Ruth is revealed as a model of patience, discretion, charity, and helpfulness.

In *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy*, Jean Fernandez has documented the heated debates which attended the rise in literacy among the lower classes,¹⁷ and like other reformist women authors of the day, Gaskell represents her heroine as quick and eager for further education. Ruth's previous education had consisted only of her mother's rudimentary teaching—a low level of education even for a poor farmer's daughter of the time—but when Mr. Benson offers her lessons, he is surprised 'at the bounds by which she surmounted obstacles, the quick perception and ready adaptation of truths and first principles, and her immediate sense of the fitness of things' (155). Ruth quickly learns Latin and mathematics along with other subjects, ostensibly solely to enable her to teach Leonard, rather than from personal ambition or desire.

At this point, Ruth's class origins seem nearly erased, as the narrator interjects, perhaps hyperbolically,

Six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal, although ignorant of their conventional etiquette (173).

So marked are Ruth's virtues of mind and deportment that a prominent member of Mr. Benson's congregation, Mr. Bradshaw, hires her as governess to his daughters. As Neff points out, the role of 'governess' could be close to that of a nursemaid, and (as in the case of Ruth) educational requirements were minimal, though here Gaskell may possibly have stretched probability to emphasise her heroine's natural talents.¹⁸ When her past is exposed, however, Ruth is unable to find work—and Gaskell dismisses the possibility that she could move elsewhere. After a brief period as an ill-paid seamstress, she is pleased when the parish surgeon suggests that she might become a sick-nurse, an occupation then considered unsuitable for an educated woman, and when cholera breaks out she is asked to assume the management of the fever ward of the town infirmary. Risking likely death, she undertakes the mission, and largely through her efforts the worst of the plague is endured with a minimum of fatalities. At the novel's end, Gaskell kills off her heroine honorifically after Ruth has nobly nursed the now cholera-ridden Bellingham back to health and in the process infected herself and orphaned her son. All who have known her, however, remember Ruth's saintly selflessness with reverence, and Mr. Benson's congregation join in honouring her memory.

Gaskell's novel mounts a powerful plea against a double sexual standard, the excesses of Victorian middle-class norms of respectability, and the narrow views espoused by certain religionists. To a lesser degree, it also reproves the gender and class hierarchies of its day, as the novel's most worthy characters value one another on the basis of intrinsic traits rather than status. Yet in emphasising her heroine's lengthy repentance, entire selflessness, and distaste at the thought of marriage the novel denies its heroine the possibility of life after seduction, and indeed, any personal life beyond motherhood. Any independent aspirations that Ruth might have had—for autonomy, financial security, or an emotional life apart from the Bensons and her son—are firmly precluded by the plot. As we shall see, a similar fate will befall other working-class heroines created by Victorian middle-class writers: paradoxically endowed with unusual virtues and denied full personhood.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is likewise notable for its unconventional representation of a seamstress. No other major epic

poem of its day includes a significant lower-class subplot, and the ingenious interweaving of the fortunes of the upper-class (though not wealthy) Aurora and the impoverished and abused Marian adds depth and specificity to the narrative's representation of women's aspirations to artistic and personal fulfilment. Orphaned by the successive deaths of her Italian mother and English father and deprived by gender of her right to inherit her father's estate, Aurora rejects the marriage proposal of her wealthy cousin Romney, and on her aunt's death leaves the family home to seek independent authorship in London. Though relatively poor by her previous standards, she does manage to retain her aunt's former servant Susan, mentioned only in an amusing passage in which Aurora mocks herself for ill-temper:

Leave the lamp, Susan, and go up to bed.
The room does very well; I have to write
Beyond the stroke of midnight. Get away;
Your steps, for ever buzzing in the room,
Tease me like gnats. Ah, letters! Throw them down
At once, as I must have them, to be sure,
Whether I bid you never bring me such
At such an hour, or bid you. No excuse;
You choose to bring them, as I choose perhaps
To throw them in the fire. Now get to bed,
And dream, if possible, I am not cross (III, ll. 25–35).

When, however, Romney announces that he intends to wed the seamstress Marian from motives of *noblesse oblige*, Aurora is startled but defends the idealism of his intentions and generously attempts to befriend and encourage Marian.

As Marian comes to trust Aurora, she begins to recount her life story, and thus the seamstress's own poetic autobiography is enfolded into the poetic autobiography of her upper-class counterpart. Aurora's explanation, that she has recast the language of Marian's tale and sought additional evidence to confirm its veracity, gives emphasis to common features of the transcribed or edited memoirs of working-class Victorians:

We talked. She told me all her story out,
Which I'll re-tell with fuller utterance,
As colored and confirmed in after times
By others and herself too (III, ll. 24–8).

The content of Marian's account is strikingly similar to that of many non-fictional working-class memoirs. The child of an alcoholic and itinerant day labourer and an abusive mother, Marian's only formal education had been

gleaned from Sunday school. Nonetheless she was an avid learner, reading from the books carried by travelling pedlars, and on occasion accompanying a friend 'to hear a lecture at an institute' (III, l. 296)—Browning's gesture toward the nascent adult education movement. Though awkward at outdoor and household labour, Marian had brought in income for her family by hose knitting and plain sewing, as Ruth had likewise done.

This is not enough for her parents, and her mother attempts to 'sell' her to a local squire: 'He means to set you up and comfort us' (III, l. 1057). Unlike Ruth in her instant comprehension of sexual danger, she flees her home in terror until she falls exhausted in a ditch, whence she is rescued by a kind wagoner who delivers her to a public hospital. There Romney had encountered her in one of his visitations and, after hearing of her plight, with characteristic charity had arranged for her to be apprenticed as a seamstress in London. Later, when Marian's sacrifice of employment in order to nurse a dying friend reveals her generous character, Romney proposes marriage, which he envisions as a cross-class partnership devoted to selfless social reform, 'to work with God as love' (IV, l. 146). Here Marian's recounted narrative ends, and with the shadow of St. John Rivers and *Jane Eyre* upon the plot, the reader knows that this non-romantic partnership is doomed. However, Marian's tale is significant for its careful parallels with Aurora's: both women have been deprived of parental care and face varying degrees of financial insecurity, and both are largely autodidacts, highly receptive to natural beauty, given to self-doubt, and eager to devote their lives to high ideals. Each has also been shaped by her circumstances: as Aurora wishes to become a writer, so Marian aspires to assist Romney in helping her fellow human beings.

When Marian fails to appear at the appointed time for her wedding to Romney and leaves behind a rather incoherent letter (she has presumably taught herself to write), Aurora sets off for Europe, partly to seek her Italian origins but also, suspecting foul play, in pursuit of 'sister Marian Earle/My woodland sister, sweet maid Marian' (V, ll. 1095–6). Improbably, she finds Marian in France, holding her infant son and eager to escape Aurora's observation. Aurora's initial reproofs of unwed motherhood echo the judgments of Browning's most censorious readers, in response to which Marian is awarded some of the most disturbing, and feminist, lines of the poem:

No need to bring their damnable drugged cup,
And yet they brought it. Hell's so prodigal
Of devil's gifts, hunts liberally in packs,
Will kill no poor small creature of the wilds
But fifty red wide throats must smoke at it,
As HIS at me [...] man's violence,
Not man's seduction, made me what I am (VI, ll. 1212–17, 1226–7).

It seems Marian had been drugged and brought to a French brothel, raped, and released from captivity only after she had become insane—an episode which had prompted William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63) to reject *Aurora Leigh* for serial publication in *Cornhill Magazine*.¹⁹ Aurora then proposes to set up household with Marian:

'Come with me, sweetest sister,' I returned,
 'And sit within my house and do me good
 From henceforth, thou and thine! [...]
 And in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche
 And set thee there, my saint [...]
 That so, in gravity and holy calm,
 We two may live on toward the truer life (VII, ll. 117–19, 126–7, 131–2).

Presumably Marian will be an equal, a 'sister' as well as an object of regard for her motherly virtues, although the offer to 'set thee there' in her prospective Italian home could reflect the employer–servant relationship on which this subplot was based. In any case, when Romney, newly apprised of Marian's whereabouts, follows the two women to Italy to seek Marian's hand and explain his actions to Aurora, confusions must be untangled not only in the epic's romantic plot but in its ideological trajectory.

The poem's final scenes have the task of bringing Aurora and Romney together, a union which would readily make sense in a more conventional poem since it has been clear for some time that Aurora and Romney love one another and are well suited in aims and ideals. However, in an epic of ideas which has committed itself to promoting cross-class unity as well as affirming Romney's moral consistency, his earlier argument for a marriage with Marian would seem to remain as valid in book IX as it had been in book III: Marian is a generous woman who admires his aims and desires to help him achieve these. Moreover, he had already pledged to marry her, a serious commitment in Victorian England, and she had been entirely innocent of wrong-doing in the birth of her child.

Fortunately, this ideological and personal impasse is conveniently circumvented when Miriam herself rejects Romney. Her reasons are manifold: first, however kind Romney may seem to be, she fears he might secretly look down on a child of rape and she wishes to free her son from any slight; second, after her traumatic experience she has lost her previous identity and all personal desires and thus feels herself incapable of love or new attachments; third, she wants her son to receive all of her attention, so that she can satisfy all his desires; and finally, she has noticed that, however they may deny it verbally, Aurora and Romney care for one another. These arguments are somewhat contradictory and not entirely convincing, since Marian's son would surely benefit from legal adoption and from

Romney's high social status, wealth, and good example, nor would his mother's adoringly one-sided attention be an unmixed blessing.

Yet Marian's claims are also psychologically arresting: she wants to remain an independent if poor single mother, affirming that

[...]a woman, poor or rich,
 Despised or honoured, is a human soul,
 And what her soul is, that she is herself (IX, ll. 328–30).

Marriage is neither needed nor desired: 'here's a hand shall keep/ For ever clean without a marriage ring' (IX, 431–2). The possibility of a true romance between Romney and Marian is never considered, nor that of her potential future marriage to another suitor, possibly of her own class. Perhaps she will continue as a semi-companion, semi-servant in the home of Aurora and Romney or gain a humble living with her needle, probably aided by the Leighs as benefactors. As with Ruth, Marian is granted personal choice and respect, but at the cost of considerable emotional arrest—what will she focus on as her son reaches adolescence?—and expulsion from the main plot, as Aurora and Romney turn to defining the shared ideals which will guide their marriage. Aurora and Romney will presumably fulfil their respective ambitions as poet and reformer, but Marian will spend her life in service to her son. In an echo of Ruth's fate, moreover, when her son is grown she will live for charity:

And when I miss him (not he me), I'll come
 And say 'Now give me some of Romney's work,
 To help your outcast orphans of the world
 And comfort grief with grief' (IX, ll. 436–9).

Although *Ruth* and *Aurora Leigh* present their working-class characters favourably, Dinah Craik's *Mistress and Maid* (1862) is rarer still among Victorian literary works in fictionalising the everyday relationship between middle-class female employers and their servant. Craik wished servants as well as employers to read her novel: she published it serially in *Good Words*, a family magazine published between 1860 and 1906, because she hoped that servants would read it in the kitchen after it had been discarded by others.²⁰ In accord with its title, *Mistress and Maid* creates a double plot: that of the economic and romantic fortunes of the three Leaf sisters, who struggle to maintain the rudiments of gentility by keeping a largely unsuccessful school until poverty forces them to dispense with their only servant; and that of Elizabeth Hand, who enters their family as an adolescent, adapts to their failings, labours without salary as their fortunes decline, and finally after one of the Leaf sisters dies in childbirth, devotes her life to raising the latter's son Henry.

Mistress and Maid is a novel of education, though, unlike more familiar *Bildungsromane* such as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*, it is addressed to women employers and their servants. Thus we view Elizabeth's development, as her allegedly worst traits are initially apparent: when she enters the Leaf household she is described as ignorant, awkward, silent, and sometimes sullen under rebuke. A major incident occurs when the new employee stumbles and breaks a ewer in descending the stairs, the sisters disagree over whether to dismiss her, and the youngest and most gracious, Hilary, pleads that with kindness the young servant may improve. A second crisis occurs when, without explanation, Elizabeth suddenly rushes from the house to rescue a boy who has been kicked in the head by a horse; unaware of the motive for her absence, the sisters are about to dismiss her when she reappears with an explanation.

Among Elizabeth's chief tasks is putting up with the ill-temper of Selina, the hypochondriac, indolent, and sharp-tempered middle sister, and the rudeness and mockery of Ascott, the orphaned nephew who lives with the sisters and who, in contrast to Elizabeth, receives every indulgence they are able to provide. Lest these trials seem unreasonable, Craik intervenes to temper her doctrine of charity with a restatement of class hierarchies:

Yet Hilary could not bear to make [Elizabeth] feel more sharply than was unavoidable the great gulf that lies and ever must lie—not so much between mistress and servant, in their abstract relations (and yet that is right, for the relation and authority are ordained of God)—but between the educated and the ignorant, the coarse and the refined (Chapter IV).

It is assumed, apparently, that these middle-class women (unlike Dora Copperfield) possess innately the arts of housekeeping in which to instruct their servant; indeed Hilary's patience and careful tutelage soon inspire Elizabeth's devotion. When Hilary remarks, referring to the customs of a medieval court:

'So, Elizabeth, if I spend a little of my time in teaching you, you must grow up my faithful and attached blower-maiden?'

'I'll grow up any thing, Miss Hilary, if it's to please you,' was the answer, given with a smothered intensity that quite startled the young mistress (Chapter IV).

Craik's message is to 'Love [and instruct] thy servants'.

Over time the family's power dynamic shifts, as the sisters move to London in a vain attempt to increase their earnings and come to depend on Elizabeth's competence, discretion, and devotion. Eventually, however, the sisters can no longer support a maid at all, and Hilary herself accepts an invitation to superintend a shop. When the discontented Selina

unexpectedly marries a prosperous if vulgar former townsman, Peter Ascott, Elizabeth asks to become permitted to work as her servant so that she may retain her association with the family. In time, friendship and the press of multiple disappointments inspire the sharing of confidences between Elizabeth and Hilary: 'In the dead of night, the two women, mistress and maid, by some chance, said a few things to one another which never might have been said in the daylight, and which, by tacit consent, were never after referred to by either, any more than if they had been spoken in a dream' (Chapter 25). Thus when, after Selina's death, Elizabeth becomes a necessary mainstay of the wealthy Ascott household, she is well remunerated, trusted, and loved by her small charge Henry.

The novel also provides a double romantic plot. The competent and long-suffering Hilary is attracted to Robert Lyon, Ascott's patient and scholarly tutor, and waits anxiously for his return from a business position in India. Meanwhile Elizabeth, now established as Henry's nurse, is courted by Tom Cliffe, whose life she had saved some years back on that occasion when she had distressed her employers by rushing from the house. Whereas Hilary's long wait is rewarded by a joyful reunion with the newly returned, prosperous, and loving Robert, Elizabeth's fate provides a sad contrast, as Tom jilts her to marry a handsomer woman who afterwards deserts him. On his deathbed, hastened by poverty, he sends for the forgiving Elizabeth, who cares for him and tends to his burial. Surprisingly, though, it is not Hilary's satisfactory fortunes but Elizabeth's compensatory resignation with which the book concludes:

Elizabeth is still living—which is a great blessing, for nobody could well do without her. She will probably attain a good old age; being healthy and strong, very equable in temper now, and very cheerful too, in her quiet way.

Doubtless, she will yet have Master Henry's children climbing her knees, and calling her 'Mummy Lizzie'.

But she will never marry—She never loved anybody but Tom (Chapter XXVIII).

Both Hilary and Elizabeth have earned their respective degrees of emotional fulfilment, but nonetheless Elizabeth's must consist of the satisfaction of acknowledged devotion to social superiors.

Sally Mitchell observes that Craik 'enlists conservative feelings to support essentially radical values' (67). Accordingly, Craik's novel maintains many rather traditional notions regarding gentility and maternity. The Leaf sisters' social superiority or the value of their claims to refinement are never questioned, and Elizabeth is paradoxically idealised chiefly in her role as a 'relative creature'. Even so, Elizabeth is presented as intelligent and self-respecting, her labour and devotion are crucial to the family's survival, and

her relative rise in status remains a focus of the plot. Whether or not contemporary reviewers were justified in criticising Craik's novels as limited by their concentration on the domestic emotions of women,²¹ in *Mistress and Maid* Craik succeeded in dramatising for her middle-class readers the challenges of living up to their ethical commitments in their everyday interactions with those who served them.

All three of the literary works we have examined struggle with the difficulties of shaping the seamstress/servant plot. Each strives to model for its readers how worthy persons of lower status should be treated: Thurston Benson is a paradigm of charity, Aurora, despite her limitations, is an affectionate friend and benefactor to Marian and her son, and Hilary's goodness and instinctive fairness enable Elizabeth's transformation from an awkward adolescent into an intelligent, wise, and responsible caretaker. All three works are reformist in representing working-class women who are eager to learn and upwardly mobile according to the lights of the day. In none of these works, however, does the working-class character become the focus of the successful romantic relationship which organises so many Victorian novels (the marriage plot), nor does she achieve a fully independent life free of her benefactors. Desexualised and unresentful of her fate, her emotions centre on the lives of her employers, a male offspring (Marian) or surrogate offspring (Elizabeth), or (as in the case of Ruth), her community.

From the Servant's View

An illuminating contrast to these fictionalised middle-class accounts is provided by the words of Victorian working-class women themselves, as recorded in their memoirs. Unlike the rather romanticised middle-class portrayals, these writings tackle directly the issues of underpayment and unpleasant working conditions, chronicle what is perceived as the capriciousness and mean-spiritedness of specific employers, and often recall the pain of entry into the work-force in heart-rending detail. Especially onerous were the conditions visited on children, who were virtual child slaves. Elizabeth Duncan Campbell (1803–78) recalled her first employment at the age of seven as a farm servant in south-east Scotland, for which she was paid slightly over a half-pound a year:

I could not tell how miserable I felt in that strange ugly hovel—me that had such a strange love for the beautiful. It was a prison to me [...]. Every morning I wakened to sorrow when my eyes looked upon that ugly little window, with its mouldering clay sole. I could not treat any one's child as that woman treated me ... she beat me and pushed me out of doors into the dark, and called on the ghost of Brandy Don to take me. I was as unhappy as a banished convict in that ugly cot on the whinny moor. [...] I wept among the willows and among the whins, and talked aloud to myself as I gathered my load (xii–xiii).

Christian Watt (1833–1923), later a fishwife, mental asylum inmate, and mother of ten, recorded the circumstances of her first job with characteristic causticity:

My first job I was 8½ as skiffie [in this case, scullery maid] to Mrs. Lawson, the Banker's wife. It was 3 months of drudgery and half starvation. I resented being called all the time by my surname. Everything in the kitchen was done—I had to do the washing, the scrubbing brush had about 3 bristles left in it [...] The public rooms were beautiful. I slept in a closet under the stairs [...] I had to start raking out the fires at 5 in the morning, and I always slept sound as I fell into my bed over the Bank [...] It had a beautiful view over Fraserburgh Bay: that was the only thing I liked, when I could get a second to admire it (17).²²

Equally onerous had been the fate of the youthful Janet Bathgate (1806–98), employed at eight years of age for somewhat over a pound annually. She described her first day of employment, which had begun at 5 a.m. with three hours of work before her breakfast porridge, after which her elderly employer laid out the remaining day's tasks:

See, lassie, be clever, and get the dishes washed, and gang out into the yaird and cut some greens, and take the graip and howk up some leeks, and take them to the burn and wash them, and bring them in an s̄hear them for the kail, and then take the tattie creel and wale a wheen tatties and wash them at the burn [...] Ye see the tatties are to be cut [...] Oh aye, the tatties maun be ready for Rob [her son] to plant after lambing time, for he will be needin' you to gang to the hill wi' him to cairry warm milk for some o' the silly lambs, and bring hame on yer back the dead yins [...] Did ye ever skin a lamb? [...] you'll have that to lairn like ither things [...] and then the cow will have to be oot to the grass—and you'll have to herd, and watch that she does na gang ower the march when you're paidlin' the tatties and cabbage—and b' that time the hay will be in hand, and the theekin' for the hoose and the peat stack and the hay-stack, and the hay ropes to make [...] Then [...] the tatties will be to lift and pit, and the cabbage to pit, and the peats to get in (70–1).

Nor did Bathgate's trials end after her first few jobs; even under much better conditions and with an employer who respected her, regular vacations and outings were impossible; after some years as a child-minder, since she had never asked for a holiday, she was granted three days' leave to attend a friend's wedding (150), and later as a nursemaid to a frail child, she was 'in a great measure a prisoner; but she [was] now allowed an hour in one day of the week to take a walk or see a friend' (157–8). It was on her first expedition under this new dispensation, a properly chaperoned walk with her brother, that the attractive and amiable Janet met her future husband.

A rare self-published autobiography by a woman who spent nearly her entire working life as a servant or child-minder was Mary Ann Ashford's *Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter* (1844). Orphaned and left to the mercy of ungenerous relatives, the thirteen-year-old Mary Ann had made the opposite choice of occupation from that of Mary Barton. Her relatives had offered to pay for her apprenticeship as a seamstress and warned her that if she instead became a servant, her lowered status would prevent their further association with her. On the other hand, a friend had advised:

I'll tell thee what, Polly, [work as a seamstress] is all very well for those who have got a home and parents to shelter them, when work is slack; but depend upon it, many clever women find it, at times, a half-starved kind of life in those employments (20).

Ashford disliked sewing and accepted the first service position offered her, beginning a succession of mostly unsatisfactory employments as kitchen servant, nursemaid, maid-of-all-work, cook, custodian to orphans, private seamstress, and pastry-seller. Even writing from a position of relative security years later, she remembered many of her previous situations with resentment. When she worked briefly in the home of the elderly daughter of a Scottish earl:

My mistress [...] would be away for days and weeks together, and leave me with very little to subsist on, and with orders to give 'Jacko' [her monkey] the best of everything [...] One day, after looking at me earnestly she said, 'Mary, child, you would be very handsome were it not that your cheeks are too large; if you would eat less, they would soon be thinner' (29–30).

In desperation Mary Ann ate part of a lodger's cheese, and he complained to her employer that 'if the girl had been properly fed, he did not think she would have taken his cheese' (33).

The middle-class notion that untutored servants benefited from the moral example of their more prosperous betters was often tested by reality. A few days after she began her first employment as a servant in Norfolk at the age of twelve and a half, Elizabeth Green (Oakley) (1831–1900) remembered that she had been startled when, after she had put the children to bed as instructed, her mistress entered her room and crept under her bed.

I made believe I was asleep, but I was trembling from head to foot. After a few minutes she got up and went out of the room and went to hide somewhere else [...] H]e found her crouching down to hide from him, and the wretch of a man that he was he knocked her about and abused her shameful [...] I thought then that was not the first time he had come home [drunk] and very likely would not be the last (122–3).

Indeed, these autobiographies constitute a litany of complaints rather than a plea for more beneficent guidance. Other frequent privations included offensive and unhealthy sleeping quarters, withheld wages, and an annoying practice of borrowing from servants to cover immediate debts and then failing to repay, a fate repeatedly inflicted on the future schoolmistress Mary Smith (1822–89). Servants could be dismissed suddenly; Ashford lost two positions without warning when other servants expressed the desire to return to their previous posts (31, 34). The need to leave one's family at an early age was especially trying for child servants, as instanced in the poignant extended leave-taking described in Bathgate's account (57–62). Moreover, when confined with virtually no escape from work, servants often suffered loneliness; when left in isolation for long periods, the adolescent Ashford was so depressed that she resigned an otherwise desirable post. Since servants' aspirations to learning were expected to be confined to rare after-hours, Smith had to fear rebukes for absent-mindedness when she composed poetry in her head while working.²³ For the sensitive, also, emotional abuse could seem worse than economic exploitation, as Smith recalled bitterly:

I did the teaching, though [Mr. Osborn] made the bills out and took the money [...] I was indeed worked so hard and kept so close while there, that all through summer I was never able to get out for a walk in the evening [...] At times, my head was excruciating, and all sorts of remedies had to be tried for it. But besides hard work, I had also very scant and coarse fare ... But bad as these things were, they were not those that tried me the most, or made me feel the keenest. There was an atmosphere of jealousy, I felt, continually around and about me, that led to criticising and underrating very much, if not all, I did. This was carried so far, at times, as to lead to my being found fault with, and rebuked before the whole school [...] But a woman without friends in the world, as I was, must harden herself to dare and endure much (153–5).

Nor was upward mobility through marriage often available or desired; of a sample of twenty working-class memoirists whose accounts I have found, only one writer—Christian Watt (1833–1923)—seems to have resembled Mary Barton and Ruth in receiving romantic attentions from a wealthy or titled suitor, and she chose a fisherman as husband in preference to two suitors with better prospects.²⁴

Both Sally in *Ruth* and Elizabeth Hand in *Mistress and Maid* had gladly contributed their own small savings to help their employers; Sally had even rejected a raise and bequeathed her small property to the Bensons. But if the fictional Sallys and Elizabeths were content to sacrifice food and income from loyal solidarity, these working-class memoirists were not. Bathgate fled from her first employer to home; Ashford changed jobs

repeatedly to attain better conditions; and when later left a widow with no financial prospects, Bathgate resolved on risking indigence as a seamstress rather than accepting an offer to return to her previous generous, wealthy employer: 'To have a home, however humble, her own quiet fireside, her morning and evening devotions [...] even with no more than a potato and salt, was a great possession' (190). When in an article published in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1893, Clementina Black proclaimed that 'The conditions of domestic service are still those of an earlier industrial and social system, and this earlier form does not harmonise with the sentiments of to-day',²⁵ she was surely correct in identifying the reason: 'The domestic servant, in short, still lives under a system of total personal subservience.' The more forceful of character may have suffered most from the deprivation of autonomy; as Christian Watt recalled proudly, 'My mother told me never to depend on a living from landed proprietors, for it took away one's independence, in much the same way as a caged wild bird. It was preferable to be a poor fisher compared to being a well-fed ladies maid: though a Lord or a servant, money will never make you if you are not right yourself' (23).

Working-class women were often employed at several jobs in succession, so it was not uncommon to spend time 'in service' before proceeding to other occupations such as needlewoman, farm worker, food seller, or primary teacher, and even memoirists who were in the end relatively successful recorded their prior time as servants. Ashford was for a time a caretaker in a public nursery, and twice escaped from her labours to marriage; Campbell worked briefly in a factory, married, and sought income as an itinerant poet; Oakley laboured to keep her family alive on her husband's meagre farm income; Christian Watt married and, when widowed, followed her parents' occupation as fishwife, Elizabeth Dobbs advanced from servant to boarding-house keeper until her husband's alcoholism reduced her to charwoman;²⁶ and the most fortunate of all, Bathgate and Smith, became respected teachers. Even the one career servant, Ashford, records as her greatest triumph that she had helped her husband obtain a promised pension which would enable their survival in old age. Clearly, the most common aspiration for a servant was to cease such work at all, and those who were able to be employed in a more independent capacity were happier. Although they appreciated kindness, servants ultimately wished not for better relations with their employers but for none at all; nor did they wish to age as beloved and loyal members of an employer's extended household, as in *Mistress and Maid*, but preferred to form families of their own.

As they narrate their lives, then, these working-class women viewed themselves as engaged in a struggle for survival and self-reliance. Those who were less successful described with resignation their lifelong efforts at self-sufficiency, and those who were in fact able to escape viewed their lives as a triumphal ascent upwards from anxiety and dependence. A few, such

as Mary Smith and Christian Watt, expressed egalitarian ideals and supported political efforts to raise members of their class to equal status.

Conclusion

I have been discussing the ways in which, during the mid-nineteenth century, servants and other working-class women (mostly seamstresses) came to figure more prominently in the works of reformist middle-class women writers, with mostly favourable results. Not only does the social position of each author shape these portrayals, but a middle-class Victorian audience might well have found unacceptable a genuinely proletarian-centred literary work. *Ruth* and *Aurora Leigh* are, nonetheless, among the finest literary achievements of their age, not least because the insertion of working-class heroines motivates the inclusion of controversial subject matter; and *Mistress and Maid*, if less compelling, brings a certain homely realism to its dramatisations of familiar cross-class relationships. By ascribing to their working-class heroines intelligence and moral rectitude, and by dramatising the mutual benefits of inclusiveness, Gaskell, Browning, and Craik offer their middle-class readers a vision of co-operative domestic harmony as a template for social solidarity.

In real life, however, these relationships were often fraught: Margaret Foster chronicles the strains between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her actual servant Elizabeth Wilson, who wished a higher salary, freedom to marry, and greater access to her children.²⁷ Wilson's aims were in fact consistent with the testimonies of working-class women memoirists of the period, whose narratives provide a sharp corrective to the idealised constructions of mainstream fiction. Offering a perspective from below, these marginalised writings instead reveal the desires of working-class women for financial self-sufficiency, an independent sexual and family life, and (in ideal cases) meaningful work on their own terms, goals not dissimilar to those of fictional middle-class heroines of the period such as *Aurora Leigh* and Hilary Leaf. These alternative working-class narratives also manifest a more concrete grasp of economic reality, a sense of the limits of attempted solidarity across the class divide, and a desire to recount their life stories on their own terms.

Notes

1. For estimates of the respective proportions of each social class within Britain, see James A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), and Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996). The relative size of the middle class varied by region, and also increased as the century progressed. For discussions of social class, see Patrick Joyce, ed., *Class* (Oxford: Oxford

- University Press, 1995), *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and the introduction to *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Biography*, ed. by John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, 3 vols. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1984–9). Discussions of working-class women's lives appear in Wanda Neff, *Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions, 1832–1850* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1929); Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1993); Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach, eds., *'The World Is Ill-Divided': Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990); Kelly Mays, 'Domestic Spaces, Readerly Acts', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 80.4 (2008), 343–68; and Florence S. Boos, *Memoirs of Victorian Working-Class Women: The Hard Way Up* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), chapter 1 and *passim*.
2. For working-class and working-class women's education in the nineteenth century, see: Neil J. Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); Jane Purvis, *Hard Lessons: The Lives and Education of Working Class Women in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); John Hurt, *Elementary Education and the Working Classes, 1860–1980* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); and Florence Boos, 'The Education Act of 1870: Before and After', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, <http://branchcollective.org/>. Accessed 7 June 2018.
 3. David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 10. These figures are approximate since they are taken from Vincent's graph of female illiteracy from 1800 to 1914.
 4. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831). See also chapter 3 of Boos, 'Under Physical Siege: The Early Victorian Autobiographies of Elizabeth Storie and Mary Prince', in *Memoirs*, and chapter 6, by Cora Kaplan, in this volume.
 5. For a discussion of the venues of publication for Victorian working-class women poets, see the introduction to Florence S. Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets of Victorian Britain: An Anthology*, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2008).
 6. A Labourer's Daughter [Barbara Farquhar], *The Pearl of Days: or, The Advantages of the Sabbath to the Working Classes* (New York, NY: Samuel Hueston, 1849); Mrs. Collier of Birmingham, *A Bible-Woman's Story: Being the Autobiography of Mrs. Collier of Birmingham*, edited by Eliza Nightingale (London: T. Woolmer, 1885).
 7. Several novels by Chartist men were published, including Thomas Wheeler's *Sunshine and Shadow* and Thomas Doubleday's *The Political Pilgrim's Progress*; see *Chartist Fiction*, ed. by Ian Haywood, vol. 1 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). I have been unable to locate comparable novels by Victorian working-class women.
 8. Mary Ann Ashford, *The Life of a Licensed Victualler's Daughter, Written by Herself* (London: Saunders and Ottley, 1844); Elizabeth Storie, *The Autobiography of Elizabeth Storie, A Native of Glasgow, Who Was Subjected to Much Injustice at the Hands of Some Members of the Medical, Legal, and Clerical Professions* (Glasgow: Richard Stobbs, 1859); and Elizabeth Oakley, 'The Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakley (1831–1900)', in *A Miscellany*, ed. by R. Wilson (Norwich: Norfolk Historical Society, 1991). Other memoirs by working-class women published in the nineteenth century included Janet Bathgate's *Aunt Janet's Legacy to Her Nieces*, (Selkirk, 1892), discussed below, and several short lives appended to volumes of poetry by Elizabeth Campbell (*Songs of My Pilgrimage*, 1873), Ellen Johnston (*Autobiography, Poems and Songs*, 1867), Janet Hamilton (*Poems, Sketches and Essays*, 1885), and Jane Stevenson (*Homely Musings by a Rustic Maiden*, 1871).
 9. For the term 'subaltern', see among others, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1991). For recent accounts of middle-class women's authorship, see Linda Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), and *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. by Linda Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
 10. Patricia Johnson, *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social Problem Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001), p. 4.
 11. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1847), and *Ruth* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1857); Dinah Mulock Craik, *Mistress and Maid*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863). For a discussion of Gaskell's indebtedness to earlier reform novels by women, see Joseph Kestner, *Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827–1867* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), chap. 4, especially his discussion of Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshaw* (1842) and *The Young Milliner* (1843), and Charlotte Tonna's *The Wrongs of Women* (1843–4).
 12. See Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), and Frank Dawes, *Not in Front of the Servants: A True Portrait of English Upstairs/Downstairs Life* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1973).
 13. Neff, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 147. See also Lynn Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewoman in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003).
 14. Gaskell could have found these details in the First and Second Parliamentary Reports by the Children's Employment Commissions of 1843 and 1844, or in Stone's *The Young Milliner* (see Kestner, *Protest and Reform*, pp. 68, 80–2).
 15. Neff, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 147.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
 17. Jean Fernandez, *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3–26.
 18. Even so, this seems a stretch, as someone of Mr. Bradshaw's status and pretensions would probably have wanted his children's governess to have some training in continental languages or the female accomplishments, such as drawing or music. See Neff, *Victorian Working Women*, pp. 159–65.
 19. Margaret Foster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1988), p. 357.
 20. Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), p. 59.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 22. Christian Watt, *The Christian Watt Papers*, ed. by David Fraser (Edinburgh: Paul Harris), p. 17.
 23. *Autobiography of Mary Smith* (London: Bembrose and Sons; Carlisle: The Wordsworth Press, 1892), pp. 142–3.
 24. Watt, *The Christian Watt Papers*, pp. 52–7. Technically Lord Lovat did not propose, but he had invited her to meet his mother, clearly with the intention of doing so; Christian defended her background so fiercely that her prospective mother-in-law was offended. Mary Smith had also declined offers of marriage from three prosperous men; see *Autobiography*, pp. 57, 103–4, 136, 195, 198.

25. Clementina Black, 'The Dislike to Domestic Service', *Nineteenth Century*, 33 (March 1893), p. 454.
26. Annie Wakeman, *The Autobiography of a Charwoman, as Chronicled by Annie Wakeman* (London: John Macqueen, 1900). The character of Elizabeth Dobbs is probably based on the life of Martha Grimes (1843–1926).
27. Foster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 272–3 and *passim*.