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NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE IN TRANSITION: THE 1850s

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CHAPTER 13

Trauma, Gender, and Resistance
Working-Class and 'People's' Literature of the 1850s

Florence S. Boos

Contemporary psychologists have focused on the emotional aftermath of trauma, in which the effects of precarity, familial violence, and repeated abuse preclude the ability to lead stable lives and form secure relationships.[1] In a period when perhaps four-fifths of Britain's population lived beneath the middle-class level that ensured relatively secure access to food and shelter,[2] it seems unsurprising that the writings of workers and those closely allied with them should mirror and protest the strains of poverty and subordination. Moreover, not everyone had access to print; that only two-thirds of men and half of women were literate according to the low standards of the time[3] – with literacy defined for census purposes as the ability to sign one's name in a marriage register – ensured that, with some exceptions, only the more educated and favoured workers could represent their experiences in literary form. Books were expensive and could mostly be accessed through Mechanics Institutes and other urban workers' organisations; religious, temperance, and basic educational materials were often didactic in purpose, eschewing the fine arts; and even reforming periodicals, such as *People's and Howitt's Journal*, *Cassell's Working-Man's Instructor*, and *Eliza Cook's Journal*,[4] were largely controlled by middle-class editors. Given these constraints, it is fortunate that a significant body of literature by working-class writers (and those immediately identified with them) did achieve publication during the decade. Working-class responses of the period were necessarily more reformist than revolutionary in tone, but in aggregate they lay out a clear indictment of the violent effects of class and gender inequalities, often with a bluntness less available to their middle-class counterparts.

The 1850s was a period of transition between the crest of political Chartism – reached when a large crowd gathered on Kennington Common in 1848 seeking to deliver to Parliament a petition advocating universal manhood suffrage and other democratic reforms – and the 1867

Second Reform Bill, which extended the franchise to slightly more than a quarter of Britain's adult male population, including more prosperous urban workers.[5] The government's rejection of the Charter and its imprisonment of the movement's more prominent leaders diverted the efforts of working-class leaders toward more long-term goals such as organisation and education, including the sponsorship of the literary achievements that, it was hoped, would attest to working-class fitness to benefit from the franchise. The 1850s also brought changes that indirectly impacted working-class access to a wider culture. The abolition of the Stamp Tax in 1855 made cheap newspapers more widely available, providing more outlets for the writings of working-class authors. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 permitted civil divorce but enforced a double standard (only men could divorce for adultery), prompting a fuller discussion of women's rights and wrongs. In the wake of the Parliamentary Reports of the early 1840s on child labour in mines and factories, reformist novelists, such as Charlotte Tonna, Frances Trollope, and Elizabeth Wheeler Stone, had publicised an array of documentary information on the plight of factory and textile workers (especially women) and, as efforts on behalf of higher education aimed at middle-class women intensified (Queen's College was founded in 1848 and Bedford College, later of the University of London, in 1849), it seemed increasingly incongruous to deny basic primary education to poorer children. Also important was the effect of the Crimean War of 1853–6, whose burdens fell most harshly on soldiers recruited from the lower classes, and, as news of their sufferings and privations reached England from the front, national feeling extended to include the sacrifices of ordinary Britons in the national cause.

The responses of working-class authors to these events was not monolithic, in part due to their different social positions. The writings of those lower on the social scale more often bore witness to their own privations and protested forms of bigotry and persecution directed against them as individuals, whereas those with greater education and leisure more frequently sought to analyse and undermine systemic injustices. Overall, however, these writers share a painful recognition of the class-based nature of pervasive violence in its many forms: domestic, industrial, political, legal, and international (a partial exception may be Mary Seacole, whose concerns centre on her marginalisation on the basis of gender and race). In addition, most of these literary protests against state and economic injustices include a proto-feminist recognition of the uneven oppressions inflicted by Victorian patriarchal marriage laws and social norms on poor women (and even on more favoured ones). Forms of literature

marginalised by contemporaries as melodramatic, sensational, or disjointed may thus reflect the writers' attempts to capture the fragmentation and anxiety lower-class Britons experienced in the face of hostile forces. Often these writings by working-class authors and those most identified with them offer striking contrasts, as well as comparisons, to works on quite similar themes of precarity and gendered violence by middle-class authors such as Tennyson, Gaskell, Barrett Browning, and Dickens.

Poverty and Exclusion

Scottish factory worker and poet Ellen Johnston (1828–73)[6] did not publish an entire volume of her poems until 1867, and many of these celebrate her role as a newspaper poet featured in the Glasgow *Penny Post*. One of her finest efforts was composed the preceding decade, however, and, unlike the majority of her poems, is partly in Scots dialect. Couched as a dramatic monologue in the voice of a mother awaiting her husband's return home after a day spent futilely seeking employment, 'The Last Sark' (shirt) captures the precarity of a family's dependence on a single male wage-earner, the cruel effects of industrial depressions in the absence of any safety net, and the callousness of a class system which makes starvation possible even for those eager and able to earn a living:

> Gude guide me, are you hame again, an' ha'e ye got nae wark,
> We've naething noo tae put awa' unless yer auld blue sark;
> My head is rinnin' roon about far lichter than a flee –
> What care some gentry if they're weel though a' the puir wad dee! (st. 1)[7]

Johnson herself was a never-married single mother, but here she has captured a more conventional, iconic moment that focuses on a loyal, suffering wife and hungry children – 'The weans sit greeting in oor face, and we ha'e noucht to gie' – rather than the desperate male worker.

A quite different attempt to represent themes of emotional instability and marginality appears in the thirteen scenes of Alexander Smith's (1829–67) 1853 poetic sequence, *A Life-Drama*. This quasi-autobiographical reflection on a poet's inner life was the work of a twenty-four-year old Glaswegian pattern-designer whose highly romantic verse, in the tradition of Keats' 'Epipsychidion' and Shelley's 'Alastor', drew favourable attention from several middle-class critics, including G. H. Lewes, Herbert Spencer, and Scottish author and critic George Gilfillan. This patronage drew ire from arch-Tory W. E. Aytoun, who attacked Smith and several other contemporary poets of relatively humble origins who had also received praise, whom he

labelled as 'Spasmodics' – a term intended to parody what he saw as their histrionically Faustian, Byronic, and orientalist verses. Although the immediate target of Aytoun's satiric verse-drama *Firmilian: or, The Student of Badajoz. A Spasmodic Tragedy* (1854) was apparently Smith's chief promoter George Gilfillan, it included a Smith-parody named Sancho, whose songs and speech centre on leeks and farm animals.[8] Sadly, the fallout from this splenetic episode severely damaged Smith, as Walter, the hero/narrator of *A Life-Drama*, had presciently feared:

> Naught for me
> But to creep quietly into my grave;
> Or calm and tame the swelling of my heart
> With this foul lie, painted as sweet as truth.
> That 'great and small, weakness and strength, are naught, . . .'
> . . .This – this were easy to believe, were I
> . . . not . . . as I am – beaten, and foiled, and shamed[9]

Like Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Smith's poem records the inner consciousness of an aspiring idealist, Walter, who without friends or helpers seeks to aid the world through his wide and humanistic vision of nature and transforming love. The poet's bouts of depression and self-doubt are relieved by two female friends, both of whom encourage his poetry – a 'Lady' who tells him that she will soon be forced to marry an elderly man she does not love, and whose subsequent death is mourned by Walter; and Violet, an idealistic and beautiful woman who forgives his later (unexplained) transgressions and heals his sense of despair through faith in the power of consoling love. Although critics correctly noted the poem's obscure plot line, it is hard to see grounds for Aytoun's contempt for the 'coarseness' of *A Life-Drama*'s contents except in the class background of its author. In particular, the poem alludes only rarely to scenes of urban poverty, as when its protagonist exclaims:

> I'd grow an Atheist in these towns of trade,
> Were't not for stars. The smoke puts heaven out;
> I meet sin-bloated faces in the streets,
> And shrink as from a blow. I hear wild oaths,
> And curses[10]

Aytoun's mockery may more broadly have reflected the view that working-class poets should not attempt the highly imagistic and allusive language employed by poetic contemporaries of higher station. In addition, *A Life-Drama*'s erotic content may have offended Aytoun; as he opined in a *Blackwood*'s article of May 1854, 'it is full time that the prurient

and indecent tone which has liberally manifested itself in the writings of the young spasmodic poets should be checked'.[11] Section 9 of Smith's poem, for example, describes a nocturnal outdoor tryst between the poet-protagonist and Violet, with the lovers left in a suggestive embrace as the section ends; in another episode, Walter sympathises with what seems an unhappy child prostitute who complains of the cruel treatment she has received at the hands of men – 'Woman trusts in man, / And he is shifting sand' – while he confesses that he too has briefly loved but then inexplicably deserted a once happy woman who 'had lost her world, her heaven, her God, / And now had nought but me and her great wrong'.[12]

Linda Hughes has also identified the poem's possible latent bisexuality, as its hero describes to the Lady his early love for a young male poet who had suffered an early death.[13] Walter's subsequent attachments, both to his friend Edward and his love Violet, are mediated by their sympathy for his tale of lost reciprocity:

> We read and wrote together, slept together;
> We dwelt on slopes against the morning sun,
> We dwelt in crowded streets, and loved to walk
> While Labour slept.[14]

Hughes observes that '[r]ather than the scenario familiar from Sedgwick's *Between Men*, whereby women serve as the exchange medium between men, *A Life-Drama* presents a deeply-beloved male friend as the means by which Walter finds his poetic vocation and solidifies his erotic ties to women'.[15] And, as if this were not enough, Walter has earlier courted the Lady with an inset tale of a page who woos an Indian princess, adding a suggestion of Orientalism and biracial attachment which may have aroused Aytoun's distaste for 'prurient and indecent love'.[16]

Smith recovered from these critical attacks sufficiently to publish several further works, including *City Poems* (1857), *Edwin of Deira* (1861), *Dreamthorpe: Essays Written in the Country* (1863), and *A Summer in Skye* (1865), but his failure to regain the attention of mainstream critics mirrors the exclusion of other non-middle-class poets from the Victorian canon. Moreover, although couched in allusive blank verse interspersed with songs after the manner of Tennyson's 1847 *The Princess*, *A Life-Drama*'s focus on its protagonist's depressions, fear of rejection and exclusion, uneven romantic life, and encounters with marginalised or mistreated women are motifs common to other working-class literature of the period.

Critique and Resistance

If Smith sought to celebrate the anxieties and aspirations of an individual lower-class poet, Chartist leader Ernest Jones (1819–69) attempted to unite his working-class readers in a shared vision grounded in class analysis. Born to an inheritance and trained as a lawyer, Jones joined the Chartist cause in 1845 and forfeited both prosperity and security in his principled identification with the cause of labour. Imprisoned for alleged sedition between 1848 and 1850, he was an associate of Karl Marx and a prolific journalist, editing two radical newspapers: *Notes to the People* (1850–2) and *The People's Paper* (1852–8). In the same decade, he published three volumes of poetry: *The Battle Day* (1855), *The Revolt of Hindostan; or, The New World* (1857), and *Corayda: A Tale of Faith and Chivalry* (1859); and two works of fiction: *The Maid of Warsaw, or the Tyrant Czar* (1854) and *Woman's Wrongs* (1851–2), discussed later in the chapter. Among his several short inspirational political lyrics, the most popular may have been 'The Song of the Low', set to music several times and sung at worker gatherings. The poem combines a hymnlike lilt with Jones' biting ironic humour and use of rhetorical reversals.[17] Each of the poem's stanzas successively invokes a separate means of creating wealth – farming, mining, construction work, and textile-mill weaving – and calls on workers to unite against their shared exclusion:

> We're low, we're low, – we're very, very low,
> And yet when the trumpets ring,
> The thrust of a poor man's arm will go
> Through the heart of the proudest king!
> We're low, we're low – our place we know,
> We're only the rank and file,
> We're not too low – to kill the foe,
> But too low to touch the spoil. (st. 5)

After the poem's series of controlled indictments, the lines 'The thrust of a poor man's arm will go / Through the heart of the proudest king!' hits with startling force, reminding Jones's audience of the revolutionary views that had earlier led to his imprisonment. If, for most of these readers, the appeal to violence was largely hypothetical, such lines also suggested the possibility of resistance and pride, especially when sung in company with like-minded workers.

Jones's most ambitious poem, however, was 'The New World, A Democratic Poem', first published in *Notes to the People* in 1851 and republished in 1857 as *The Revolt of Hindostan, A Democratic Poem.*[18] The

change in title emphasised its author's support for an Indian war of independence against its colonial ruler, the East India Company, a topic of immediate relevance in the context of the Indian Uprising and Britain's brutal repression thereof in the same year. *The New World/Revolt of Hindostan* is remarkable for its concentrated, pithy attacks on authorities of all kinds – political, religious, economic, and cultural – as well as its mordant humour, complex geographical and historical scope, and, most importantly, its broad vision of a potentially reformed future for humankind. Jones effectively combines historical critique, anti-militarist and anti-colonialist protest, and utopian projections, so that at times his verses simultaneously evoke the politics of contemporary Chartist resistance while also envisioning future anti-colonial revolts abroad.

The epic consists of thirteen sections composed in iambic pentameter couplets harking back to an eighteenth-century radical tradition. Its title, 'The New World', at first seems to celebrate the formation of the United States, which has sloughed off an impressive number of Europe's traditional evils: 'Young Nation-Hercules! Whose infant grasp / Kingcraft and churchcraft slew, the twinborn asp!' (I, st. 4). Yet the rising nation harbours a collective guilt – 'the stripes of slaves' – and, as a newly empowered realm, now seeks its own foreign empire: 'Round coral-girt Japan thy ships shall fly, / And China's plains behold thine armies die' (I, st. 6). Eleven years before the outbreak of the American Civil War, Jones presciently foretold a successful slave rebellion, followed by the dissolution of the Union: 'The giant fragments slowly break away', ending in hypocrisy and dissension what could otherwise have been a successful democratic experiment.

The scene now shifts to another potential 'new world': India, where (anticipating the events of ninety-seven years later) the narrator fantasises that pan-Indian forces will successfully unite to depose their British invaders. The confession of the amassed colonial powers anticipates modern historians' blunt judgement on British rule in India: 'We murdered millions to enrich the few' (II, st. 2).[19] At this point, the narrative switches to Britain, where 'oppression' invokes religion to raise its imperial armies, ostensibly in defence of its evangelising mission although, in reality, in service to greed. Jones is especially caustic on the treatment of soldiers:

> Think ye that men will still the patriot play,
> Bleed, starve, and murder for four pence per day –
> And when the live machine is worn to nought,
> Be left to rot as things unworth a thought? (II, st. 8)

The poem's charges against the British army are numerous and specific: officers are tried by fellow officers, whereas common soldiers are judged by their commanders; military punishments are even harsher than civilian ones; pensions for disabled veterans remain paltry; married soldiers' quarters permit no privacy; and the practice of selling commissions places the untrained 'titled schoolboy' in charge of experienced troops. No wonder that 'Marched against men, God never made their foes / [the soldiers] think of this, and strike unwilling blows' (II, st. 8). As a result, the Indian forces will overcome: 'The signal's up, and Hindostan is free!' (II, st. 20).

At this point, the narrative broadens into a wider critique of global imperial hubris, with clashing would-be empires (British, American, and Indian) all repeatedly provoking the needless horrors of war:

> Nations, like men, too oft are given to roam,
> And seek abroad what they could find at home.
> They send their armies out on ventures far;
> Their halt is – havoc, and their journey – war;
> Destruction's traders! Who, to start their trade,
> Steal, for the bayonet, metal from the spade.
> The interest's – blood; the capital is – life;
> The debt – is vengeance; the instalment – strife;
> The payment's – death; and wounds are the receipt;
> The market's – battle; and the whole – a cheat. (III, st. 2)

The narrator next turns from this particular imperialist-militarist inferno to an exposé of political corruption in general, recounting obstacles faced by populist resistance movements up to, and including, contemporary Chartism. Skillful leaders have managed to deflect populist anger from nobles to monarch to corrupt political leaders, repeatedly promising a redress which never arrives. For example, after leading an immiserated people's army to crush a monarch, political leaders enjoin their followers to '[i]n peace and confidence the future wait, / And hope the best, for – they'll deliberate' (IV, st. 1). Repeated deflections follow as the workers rise against successive overlords until: '*Wondering, they wake to find, once more betrayed, / 'Tis but a change of tyrants they have made*' (IV, st. 9). Jones is especially sardonic on the political repression he himself has suffered: when false economic arguments for social theft have been exposed and emigration schemes have faltered, the authorities resort 'To this last argument when others fail: "TO JAIL! TO JAIL! *You wicked men! To jail!*"' (IV, st. 13).

In his final indictment, Jones identifies each aspect of the current social system as a form of structural class war:

> With humble names their strongholds they conceal:
> Jail, prison, work house, barrack, and bastille.
> Beggar and vagrant there they hold secure,
> Thro' that long battle of the rich and poor;
> Struck down by Want, and marked by Hunger's scar,
> PAUPERS they call those Prisoners of War! (IV, st. 19)

At the epic's climax, the speaker imagines (however improbably) a successful, worldwide, and peaceful revolt, a kind of universal general strike, and the non-violent nature of this vision contrasts notably with Jones's long career as a physical-force Chartist.

> –Grandly and silently the People rose!
> None gave the word! – they came, together brought
> By full maturity of ripened thought . . .
> Each foot at once the destined pathway trod;
> An army raised and generalled of God! (V, st. 1)

Europe's deliverance will herald freedom for all oppressed peoples: Africans, slaves, the indigenous denizens of South America and elsewhere, the peoples of the Near East (then under Turkish rule), and Jews (at the time the object of disabilities in Britain), who will attain a new homeland. Imbued with biblical language, the poem's final messianic vision is international and gender-egalitarian, a world reborn: 'And when the strong the weak no more o'erbears, / But equal rights with Man sweet Woman shares' (VII, st. 2). Even children will reclaim their rights and the harshness of an Old Testament ethic will vanish in the new order:

> Vengeance no more, and wrath, and blood, and fire,
> That strained the strings of David's angry lyre;
> Through their ecstatic chant this descant ran:
> 'Glory to God!' and 'Peace!' – 'Good will to man!' (VII, st. 2)

'The New World' is distinctive among nineteenth-century poems for its caustic humour, social critiques, and clarity of language, harking back to eighteenth-century models in its satiric and epigrammatic style. Among literary works of the period, it remains unique in its ability to conceptualise British working-class resistance within a wider international focus and proto-socialist vision.[20]

The Violence of War

As we have seen, it is impossible to separate issues of worker precarity and cultural and economic dispossession from threats of violence. Jones's 'The New World', though primarily directed against political repression and the savagery of imperialism, had attacked both war and military traditions as forms of systemic wrong. Although the fear and horror of violence permeates virtually all working-class literature of the period, this reaction is found perhaps most directly in the responses to the Crimean War (1853–6) by those who experienced it from below.

The first major British conflict since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Crimean War was fought by the British government in alliance with France and Turkey against Russia in order to protect access to the Black Sea, central Asia, and India. The results of the war brought Britain few rewards and some shame, however, due to the well-publicised accounts of inept leadership, failed supply chains, inadequate provisions, disorganised battles, and heavy casualties (in the words of Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', 'Someone had blundered'). The burden of these privations predictably fell most heavily on soldiers, drawn largely from the working classes, as well as on their families.

It is rare that a genuinely poor woman was able to publish poetry expressing her distress at the dangers faced by family members in the Crimea, but Elizabeth Campbell (1804–78), a ploughman's daughter with no formal education, left behind a series of self-published poems centring on her horror at the conflict which threatened to destroy her son, William. Printed and sold to raise money when her husband's disability plunged their family into indigence, the poems of Campbell's small pamphlets (1862, 1863, 1865, and 1867) centre on issues of poverty, marginalisation, political violence, the deaths of family members, and war.[21] Although these brief works are dated from the 1860s, it seems most likely that the Crimea-centred poems were written under the stress of Campbell's immediate fears for her son's survival. Neither formally accomplished verses nor categorical anti-war poems in the modern sense, her poems offer anguished expressions of the psychic pain of the indirect victims of military conflict.

In a poem on the battle of Sebastopol, 'The Attack on the Great Redan, and the Fall of the Malakoff',[22] the speaker first conjures the scene of conflict – 'Smoke to the clouds bounding, the war trumpets sounding / Mixing with moans and screams of the slain' (st. 2) – then directs her rage against those who have instigated this conflict – 'Lord Aberdeen's counsel'

(the government of George Gordon [1784–1860], the Conservative prime minister) – 'To gold they were slaves, their hearts whited graves' (st. 5), and even Victoria herself:

> Weep, Queen of England, weep for the great Redan,
> There Britain's brave men fought and fell bleeding,
> Sold life for liberty – all at your bidding;
> If war be a glory, on theirs is no stain. (st. 12)

Other poems express empathy for the uncertainties and dangers of a soldier's life. 'Bill Arden' (recall that Campbell's son was 'Willie') describes an itinerant worker turned soldier who fights bravely and lethally for Britain's cause: 'Drenching the trampled ground with blood from the mortal wound', (st. 5), only to repent of his association with the sovereign and return to his home and mother. In 'The Mother's Lament', the poet poignantly conveys an experience she knows well: a mother's anxiety over the fact that she cannot know the fate of her absent son. As the speaker stands by the sea, she cries out to his spirit to reassure her of his continued existence:

> Ah, there I stood and wept aloud,
> And call'd aloud to thee,
> As if through the horizon,
> Or up out of the sea,
> Ye like a vision in a dream,
> Would come and speak to me. (st. 3)

Perhaps Campbell's most comprehensive indictment of military conflict, however, occurs in 'The Crimean War', composed in near stave-rhyme tetrameter couplets:

> I think it's a pity that kings go to war,
> And carry their murd'rous inventions so far;
> Since Adam did blunder such blunders have been
> And I weep for those that's the victims of kings.
> 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. (st. 1)

Among other qualities, these slant-rhyme lines are remarkable for their suspension of judgement ('I weep for the coward, I weep for the brave'). A similar capacity to empathise with those in different (and even hostile) subject positions appears in 'The Windmill of Sebastopol', as the poet imagines the weariness of the Russian soldiers who must defend Sebastopol

in the depths of winter, and, characteristically, she can also imagine the pain of the enemy survivors:

> Sorry must be the home – sick, hungry, cold and lone,
> Where the camp with the hostile gun
> Claims the command. (st. 13)

Campbell's humble verses thus repeatedly remind their readers that battles are fought not by the influential or wealthy, but by ordinary men unheeding of strategy or political goals, and that the ensuing suffering extends to those at home. More personal and delimited than Jones's structural indictment of British militarism, Campbell's poems nonetheless constitute a rare surviving proletarian protest against the cruelties perpetuated by military adventurism and empire.

By contrast, Mary Seacole (1805–81) was a Jamaican-born Creole who travelled to the Crimea on the outbreak of the conflict, and whose *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857)[23] describes her participation in the war as an entrepreneur, hostess and nurse, battlefield ministrant, and keen observer (she entered Sebastopol directly after the British victory to gather souvenirs and offer provisions to the needy). A complex personality with an appetite for adventure and flair for self-promotion, Seacole nonetheless showed true heroism in bringing her services to those wounded in battle as soon as access to the field became possible, as after the battle of Tchernaya:

> But little time had we to think of the dead, whose business it was to see after the dying, who might yet be saved. The ground was thickly cumbered with the wounded, some of them calm and resigned, others impatient and restless, a few filling the air with their cries of pain – all wanting water, and grateful to those who administered it, and more substantial comforts . . . And this, although – surely it could not have been intentional – Russian guns still played upon the scene of action.[24]

The noted war correspondent W. H. Russell emphasised these intrepid and selfless acts of compassion in his introduction to her book: 'If singleness of heart, true charity, and Christian works; if trials and sufferings, dangers and perils, encountered boldly by a helpless woman on her errand of mercy in the camp and in the battle-field, can excite sympathy or move curiosity, Mary Seacole will have many friends and many readers.'[25] Seacole remarks with asperity on the occasions on which her Creole status evoked notice (though she is careful to note, 'I am only a little brown'). She desexualises herself as a 'stout female' and 'old lady' (she was forty-eight at the war's commencement) and takes pride in her role as surrogate mother to the

dying; for example, in recording the death of a young surgeon, she wrote 'I grew fond of him – almost as fond as the poor lady his mother in England far away, . . . I used to call him "My son – my dear child," and to weep over him in a very weak and silly manner.'[26]

That her memoir was published to raise funds after the sudden conclusion of the conflict had rendered her and her business partner insolvent may have affected its patriotic tone, for she repeatedly lauds British soldiers while casting mild aspersions on the French and heavier ones on their Russian foes – at the conclusion of hostilities she breaks open caskets of wine with a hammer rather than sell them to those who had fought 'my own people'. Throughout, she carefully records numerous praiseful tributes to herself and her ministrations, including a testimonial from *Punch* ('But her smile, good old soul, lent heat to the coal, / And power to the pannikin'). She concludes her work with a list of prominent officers and officials who can testify on her behalf.

As her title may suggest, aspects of the conflict appealed to Seacole as spectacle, as she remarks after observing the conclusion of the battle of Tchernaya:

> I was near enough to hear at times, in the lull of artillery, and above the rattle of the musketry, the excited cheers which told of a daring attack or a successful repulse; and beneath where I stood I could see – what the Russians could not – steadily drawn up, quiet and expectant, the squadrons of English and French cavalry, calmly yet impatiently waiting until the Russians' partial success should bring their sabres into play. But the contingency never happened; and we saw the Russians fall slowly back in good order, while the dark-plumed Sardinians and red-pantalooned French spread out in pursuit, and formed a picture so excitingly beautiful that we forgot the suffering and death they left behind.[27]

Most of all, the war had given Seacole a sense of excitement and belonging, so that she regretted its conclusion:

> Had I not been happy through the months of toil and danger, never knowing what fear or depression was, finding every moment of the day mortgaged hours in advance, and earning sound sleep and contentment by sheer hard work? What better or happier lot could possibly befall me? And, alas! how likely was it that my present occupation gone, I might long in vain for another so stirring and so useful.[28]

As an outsider by race and nationality, unlike Campbell Seacole seems to have accepted war as a source of opportunity and sense of belonging, identifying unreservedly with the British cause and avoiding criticism of its leadership, although, like Campbell, she grieved the conflict's many losses and disruptions.

Violence and the Working-Class Wife

Under British law in the 1850s, a wife's property and earnings belonged to her husband; husbands were granted the right to 'chastise' their wives periodically (though not the reverse); and women were prohibited from testifying in their own defence in court. As mentioned earlier, civil divorce was impossible until 1857, although due to the cost of legal proceedings and the narrow circumstances under which divorce was possible (bigamy, bestiality, incest), leaving an abusive marriage was nearly impossible for women of the lower classes until the 1870s.[29] Nonetheless, the public discussions which surrounded the passage of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act brought attention to the disabilities women could suffer through dependence on potentially abusive spouses. For poorer women, frequent childbearing and low wages would have made self-support especially difficult. Further, since children were the property of the father by law, separation from one's husband would bring the loss of access to one's offspring – an unthinkable option to many. The parliamentary reports of the 1840s on child labour[30] brought a greater knowledge of lower-class working conditions, and authors of both sexes critiqued the pervasive victimisation of poor women through desertion, domestic violence, and rape.

Ernest Jones's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1852)[31] is a series of short fictions designed to demonstrate the systemic disabilities suffered by women of all social classes: a lower-class mother ('The Working-Man's Wife'), an exploited home worker ('The Tradesman's Daughter'), a poor seamstress ('The Young Milliner'), and a potential heiress forced into marriage against her will ('The Lady of Title'). As a writer of political fiction, Jones competed with the publications of the more sensational journalist, G. W. M. Reynolds (*Reynold's Miscellany*, 1846–9), whose less analytical 'penny dreadfuls' proffered unrelieved melodrama, crime, and mayhem.[32] Although the fortunes of Jones's heroines likewise embody what seem near-worst-case scenarios, Jones makes plausible claims for the pervasiveness of these wrongs as a consequence of contemporary social structures, with their concatenating intersectionality of class and gender oppressions. His final assessment is uncompromising: women are the victims of systemic, socially enforced patriarchal violence:

> What gross injustice! For society counts woman as nothing in its institutions, and yet makes her bear the greatest share of sufferings inflicted by a system in which she has no voice! Brute force first imposed the law – and moral force compels her to obey it now.[33]

The first and longest of these stories, 'The Working-Man's Wife', details the life of an abused wife eventually executed for the crimes of her brutal husband. Jones's narrative makes unrelievedly painful reading, as the institutions of marriage, the medical system, and the law repeatedly fail its heroine and her daughters. The first scene introduces Margaret Haspen as she undergoes a difficult childbirth in the fetid and dark dwelling she shares with her husband, John, attended by the callous local surgeon, 'a fearless practitioner, who treated his man as a sculptor does a block of marble – cutting away without remorse or scruple'.[34] She survives this lack of care only to hear her husband's angry curse at the birth of a daughter; and the narrator comments on John's views of marriage: 'He looked . . . at his wife merely as a servant without wages, whom he found convenient to prepare his meals, and make and share his bed.'[35]

Matters worsen as John refuses to accept a pay cut, loses his employment, and sinks into drunken despair and repeated wife-beating; 'to crown their misery', the narrator dryly notes, Margaret delivers another child, Mary. One night as John chides her on finding their home without food or fire and furiously smashes one of their remaining chairs for firewood, the sparks set the clothes of their daughter, Catherine, on fire. When John then strikes Margaret in anger, she picks up the fallen hatchet to defend herself, and murder is only averted by the intervention of a timely visitor.

In a subplot, John is tempted by his former scheming co-worker, Latchman, to aid in a failed night-time robbery of his former work premises, after which he is apprehended and sentenced to transportation for life with hard labour for the first ten years. The trial and sentence enable Jones to showcase his critique of the unequal effects of an arbitrary legal system, for when a lawyer condescendingly explains to Margaret that society has punished Haspen for harming another, she protests his logic: '*Oh, yes, sir. But then why are my children and I punished, who never did any harm to anybody? For now we're without bread. Haspen will be in prison, and there he will get plenty of food; we shall be at liberty, and there we shall die of hunger.* D'ye see, we shall be worse punished than he!' When the lawyer informs her that, since Haspen is now legally dead, she cannot inherit his effects should he actually die, she asks hopefully, 'Can I [then] remarry', but he reminds her that marriage is indissoluble. The narrator intrudes

with sarcasm: 'Margaret was too simple to understand the justice of our laws. Her learning was only COMMON SENSE.'[36]

More evils follow from their poverty. Catherine becomes a prostitute to avoid starvation, leaving her family, and when in a show of charity Barrowson, John's former employer, offers Margaret a job working in a country tavern, she is forced to serve her husband and Latchman, who have escaped from their captors and fled to the country for protection. In her absence on an errand, Barrowson appears and Haspen stabs him, and as Margaret returns and mops up the blood, she is apprehended for murder. John then meets a violent death at the hands of the police and Latchman and Margaret are sentenced to death by hanging.

Jones emphasises the grotesque delight the audience takes in witnessing this spectacle: 'And you should have seen how the people thronged! . . . the hoarse laugh and the delighted scream, testified of the general pleasure.'[37] As expected, Margaret dies with dignity, '[i]nnocent of murder, innocent of any crime, except the more than questionable one of not denouncing her own husband', and her last words are an attempt to console her grieving and horrified daughters, as she calls out 'Don't cry so, Mary!'[38] Two passing clerks speculate on the fate of the crying child, as one comments 'Luckily for her, she's pretty!' The two smile knowingly, and readers are left to infer that the orphaned Mary will likewise succumb to prostitution.

If the crime, robbery, escape, and murder plot of Jones's tale seems more sensational than plausible, the melodramatic elements of his story add an element of horror and suspense to the narrative's embedded protest. The story's serious themes – the heedlessness of the legal system in choosing its victims, the havoc caused by alcoholism, the expendability of poor women, and the grotesque nature of public execution – are pervasive motifs throughout the period's literature. Nonetheless, Jones's eagerness to compress every possible form of oppression into one plot causes some incongruities. His desire to demonstrate the interconnectedness of class evils prompts him to briefly defend John Haspen as a worker driven to despair by his employer's mistreatment; at one point the narrator asserts that, 'On the whole, he was not by nature a bad man. Sunk in utter ignorance, his principal pleasure was the satisfaction of his appetites – society had done the best to make a brute out of a man',[39] and the epigraph to chapter 4 asserts that 'Poverty is the Mother of Crime'. However, Jones's case for entire economic determinism seems undercut by Haspen's overall behaviour as an irredeemably violent sociopath, and Margaret's problem remains that she cannot escape repeated abuse, nor protect her daughters from violence.

Nonetheless, as Ian Haywood observes, '[i]n 'The Working-Man's Wife' Jones took fiction into uncharted territory, as no writer before him had attempted to write a realistic tale about a working-class woman's habitual oppression and tragic destiny'.[40] Jones's pioneering exploration of the effects of gender beyond (and within) systemic class hierarchies provides a feminist analysis of a series of interlocking problems, refusing its reader the comforts of a suggested resolution, and challenging its audience to action:

> I propose . . . to lift the veil from before the Wrongs of Woman . . . To show it, not merely in one class or order – but upward, downward, through all the social grades. If I draw pictures at which you shudder – if I reveal that at which your heart revolts – I cannot help it – it is truth – such is the world that surrounds you – such is the world that made you – such is the world you help to make – go! Try to alter it, and BEGIN AT HOME. (1)

Jones is distinctive in his feminist class analysis, as the problems of an oppressed working-class are both manifested in and intensified by a self-destructive misogyny.

Gerard Massey (1828–1907) was a former Chartist, Christian Socialist, and autodidact, whose previous occupations had included silk mill worker, straw plaiter, bookkeeper, secretary to the London Working Tailor's Association, and later, lecturer on spiritualism and ancient religion.[41] During the 1850s, Massey published *Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love* (1850), *The Ballad of Babe Christabel* (1854), and *War Waits* (1855), which were later followed by *Havelock's March* (1860), *A Tale of Eternity* (1869), and *My Lyrical Life* (1889). Massey's poems drew acclaim from Alfred Tennyson, Samuel Smiles, and others, and he is assumed to have been the model for the working-class protagonist of George Eliot's 1866 novel, *Felix Holt*. His sixteen-year marriage to Rosina Knowles, a shoemaker's daughter, mesmerist, and clairvoyant, was complicated by her alcoholism and mental illness and may have provided a context for his many poems about love and marriage. During a period of indigence, the couple lived rent-free on the property of Lady Marian Alford, whose husband possessed an estate in Northhampton, and it is possible that Massey's friendship with a titled woman prompted his critique of woman's subordination within the landholding classes. In contrast to Jones's detailed prose account of exterior events in a married woman's life, Massey's 'Only a Dream', couched in metaphorical blank verse and suffused with echoes of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855) and possibly Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856),[42] offers a dramatic exploration of the victim's psychological pain and

resistance to an imprisoning matrimonial system. The poem's frame structure enables the woman to speak for herself within its inner 'dream' section, buttressed by the supportive remarks of the male narrator of the outer frame.

As the poem begins, the speaker explains that he has admired his friend, Lady Charmian, viewing her as a beautiful and happy woman. However, he is forced to revise these superficial responses when, one night, he is overtaken by a dream in which Charmian's exterior self falls away and he hears her inner speaking voice: 'with all its written agony visible; Down the dark deep of her great grief I stared, / And saw the Wreck with all its dead around'.[43] She reveals that, in her youth, she had experienced a sincere and ideal love 'with him whom my soul had sought' (49), but this tie was ruptured by an outside force (presumably, her titled family)[44] and, like the lady in Smith's *A Life-Drama*, she is instead mated to a man she finds repellent:

> They sold me to a Worldling wrinkled, rich
> And rotten, who bought Love's sweet name for gold . . .
> 'Twas like a wedding with the sheeted dead.[45]

Matters worsen as Charmian, completely unprepared for her wedding night, feels herself imprisoned by her husband's lust: 'That night as we sat alone I felt his eyes / Burningly brand me to the core, his Slave'.[46] She then describes what seems an act of marital rape – a quite unusual scene in Victorian poetry – and even more strikingly, she resists:

> I struck, and struck, and beat
> With bleeding strength, in vain. A hundred hands
> Fought in the gloom with mine as water weak . . .
> I felt as one that's bound, and buried alive;
> The black, dank death-mould stampt down overhead,
> And cried, and cried, and cried, but no help came.[47]

As in Dante's hell, she imagines her fellow restless phantoms '[w]ho walk and wander in the sleep of Death':

> The crownless Martyrs of the marriage-ring!
> Meek sufferers who walkt in living hell,
> And died a life of spiritual suttee. . .
> Slow murders of the curtained bridal-bed;
> The silent tortures and the shrouded deaths.[48]

From this abyss there is no return. Although Charmian briefly rouses herself to happy expectation at the birth of her child, whom she hopes

will provide a focus for her love, her husband (who has legal control of their child) orders the infant to be brutally torn from her, and he dies pining for his mother, 'its dear eyes closed by stranger hands'.[49]

At this point, Charmian directly addresses her audience in an appeal against marriage laws:

> Much misery hath not made my spirit meek:
> Mine agony rends the bridal-veil: I cry,
> Come see what ghastly wounds bleed hidden here! . . .
> Behold where all the Tortures of the Past
> Are stored by Law, and sanctified for use.
> I drag my burthen to a nation's throne,
> And pray deliverance from this Tyrant's power.[50]

As the dream image of Charmian fades, the narrator re-enters the poem to solicit the reader's empathy; the 'dream' has been a nightmare, the conduit to a dark truth:

> But still, as in my dream, I see her stand, . . .
> Telling the wild stern story of her wrongs[51]

Massey's tale contrasts with that of Jones in its self-consciously literary language, its sympathetic focus on the 'high-born maiden' familiar from other romantic plots, and its greater preoccupation with the psychology of frustrated love and depression than with physical violence. The details of Charmian's fate are unclear: under what circumstances was she forced to marry her detested husband? And why did he (or his family) take her infant from her? But if, at points, Massey romanticises and blurs the contours of his subject, 'Only a Dream' remains unusual among contemporary poems in portraying a presumed female view of the psychological ravages suffered by women trapped in loveless marriage, undesired sex, and/or the denial of maternal rights over their offspring.

Conclusion

As we have seen, working-class writers of the 1850s offered a blend of witness, analysis, and protest as they testified to experiences of insecurity, fear, and self- and class-assertion. In particular, literary works of the decade often centred on threats of violence: in the workplace; in the law; in the patriarchal home; and in war, providing grotesque and painful plots that offered compressed and heightened representations of emotions familiar to many of their readers. In form and theme, these writings also contribute to

the wider shared culture of the decade, as parallels between their writings and those of middle-class authors abound. For example, working-class and middle-class authors alike presented sympathetic portrayals of needlewomen, as in G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Seamstress, or the White Slave of England* (1853), Jones's 'The Young Milliner' (1850–1), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). Tennyson's heroising 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' provides a graphic contrast to Campbell's agonised 'The Crimean War', and his *Maud* (1855), with its motifs of economic precarity, madness, doomed love for a woman of higher station, and war, models the use of a medley of varying lyrics to portray shifting moods, as in Smith's 'A Life-Drama' (1859). Of works by middle-class writers, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) stands out for its portrayal of a seamstress who is allowed to narrate her own poetic story, which includes parental violence, precarious employment, rape, and single motherhood. The sensational, introspective, and dramatic qualities that so repelled Aytoun thus reappear throughout the period's fiction and poetry, from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) to Robert Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) and William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). And the 'woman question' was pervasive, from Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1849) and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1852) to Tennyson's first instalment of the *Idylls of the King* (*Enid and Nimuë: The True and the False*, 1856) and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (composed 1859).

More than their middle-class contemporaries, however, working-class authors such as Johnston, Jones, Smith, and even Campbell offer structural indictments of the effects of a class hierarchy, influencing the portrayals of middle-class writers while adding a marked specificity and sharpness of critique to themes common to the writings of the period. Although working-class literature has hitherto suffered marginalisation within critical assessments of the period, an integration of these writings into our conceptions of Victorian authorship can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the latter, as well as greater appreciation of the unique contributions of mid-century British working-class writers to the literary representation of the social issues of their time.

Notes

1. For example, Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2015).
2. According to the Newcastle Commission of 1862, one-seventh of England's population belonged to the upper and middle classes; the proportion would

42. Since *Aurora Leigh* was published in November 1856, it would be difficult to say definitely which poet most influenced which; Massey was however an admirer of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as indicated by his defence of her metaphorical style in the 1862 *North British Review*, 517–18.
43. *The Poetical Works of Gerald Massey* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1864), 48.
44. Ibid., 50.
45. Ibid., 50.
46. Ibid., 50.
47. Ibid., 51.
48. Ibid., 52.
49. Ibid., 54.
50. Ibid., 55.
51. Ibid., 58.

CHAPTER 14

The Poetry of Married Life

Joseph Phelan

Although marriage as an idea and an institution carried significant symbolic and cultural weight for the poets of the mid-nineteenth century, they found the quotidian reality of married life a surprisingly problematic subject. At the end of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), the proposed marriage between Aurora and Romney prefigures nothing less than the regeneration of the human race, a world in which men and women will no longer have to 'distort [their] nature', and 'the love of wedded souls' will usher in '[new] churches, new œconomies, new laws'.[1] This utopian vision is not, however, followed by an account of the couple's married life together; as is so often the case in Victorian poetry, and indeed in Victorian fiction, the end-point of the narrative is the wedding, not the marriage. Stories of betrothal are commonplace, as are stories of betrayal; stories dealing with the conflicts, reconciliations, adjustments, and compromises that make up the experience of married life are much rarer. Even those poets who set out to deal with this subject usually end up admitting defeat or writing about something else. In the 'Epilogue' to *The Espousals* (1856), the second volume of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, Felix, the narrator, is forced to admit to his wife Honoria that he has not yet delivered the paean to married love he had promised her at the beginning of the first instalment; and the projected 'Epic of the Hearth' remains unwritten at the end of the fourth and final volume, *The Victories of Love* (1863).[2] The poetry of married life is almost invariably a poetry of postponement and evasion.

The poets of the mid-nineteenth century were, nevertheless, repeatedly drawn to this topic. Taking the year 1855, which saw the publication of Robert Browning's *Men and Women*, as a focal point, it is possible to see a cluster of poems dealing with marriage radiating backwards to the end of the 1840s and forward to the early 1860s.[3] The first two volumes of the most famous (or infamous) example of the genre, *The Angel in the House*, appeared in 1854 and 1856 and drew on material published earlier by