Title of Paper: “A Patchy Affair”: Paternalism in the Old Vic Adaptations of Jane Eyre and Mary Barton

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Abstract: This article considers the first theatrical productions of Jane Eyre in 1848 and Mary Barton in 1851, both of which were written by John Courtney for the Old Vic Theatre. By examining the particular composition of the Old Vic Theatre audience as well as the social and cultural events surrounding the productions, I argue that Courtney’s adaptations revive and manipulate the class structure of paternalism that had begun to fade in the face of industrialization. These plays look nostalgically back at a period of what appeared to be simpler class relations while also incorporating new ways of seeing the working class. Thus, I argue they reject not only the revolutionary tactics of groups such as the Chartists but also the industrialized system that alienated worker from employer. When considered within the context of both the industrial changes of the late 40s and early 50s and the decline of Chartism, the adaptations transform an old form of class relations and remake it in such a way that it empowers the laborers while still working within a historical class structure (though one in decline). In effect, I assert that Courtney negotiates between various ideologies, merging pieces of middle-class domesticity with paternalism. But, he does so in such a way that valorizes the working class.

Keywords: Jane Eyre, Mary Barton, adaptation, Old Victoria Theatre, John Courtney

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On Boxing Night of 1821 the Old Victoria Theatre (known then as the Coburg), a popular minor theater on the southside of the Thames River, debuted its looking-glass curtain. The principal owner, Francis Gloper “counted on pleasing the smart section of the audience with a reflection of themselves” with this new addition to his theatre (Rowell Old Vic 13). The New Monthly Mirror, in its review of the much-anticipated addition to the theater, found the effect wanting, terming it “one of the most absurd exhibitions we have ever seen,” noting, “it is not used as a curtain, but is itself part of the performances” (“Coburg” 61). Just as the mirror at the Old Vic became a part of the performance, reflecting the audience back to themselves, the productions at the theatre similarly mirror the spectators.

However, I do not suggest a simple one to one ratio between the performance on the stage and the audience viewing it. Like the Old Vic’s mirror where “the objects which are reflected are distorted and disjointed frightfully--one sees one’s head cut off or arm severed,” the plays discussed here dissect and manipulate pieces of the audience and the society of the time, crafting new versions (61). The Old Vic, with its looking-glass curtain, epitomizes the relationship between theater, performer, audience, and culture that this article explores. While the theater produced original material along with a variety of popular plays throughout the nineteenth century, it also relied on adaptations of popular Victorian novels to fill its repertoire. The Old Vic tapped into Victorian culture, and the first adaptations in London of both Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1849) found their home here with the same author penning the scripts, John Courtney. His versions of these two novels for working class audiences carved up the socio-cultural productions of class relations by paring off pieces of the traditional paternal class system and stitching it back together with new ideas concerning domesticity and the working classes. Playwrights like Courtney acted as interpreters and critics, not only of the literary works that they adapted for the stage, but also of the demanding constraints placed on women in the working class by both the standards set by the middle-class and the limitations that members of their own invoked in their attempts at gaining power and equality.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the Old Victoria Theatre produced a variety of shows, though focusing on dramas that appealed to local life. Productions based on popular novels were common at the theatre throughout the nineteenth century, including adaptations of Frankenstein (1818), Susan Hopley (1841), Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), and East Lynne (1861) to name a few. Courtney’s adaptation of Jane Eyre in 1848 appeared at the Old Vic shortly after the original publication. His version of Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life!, however, took longer to reach the Old Vic stage. Though he wrote the play in 1850, the first staging did not occur until 1851. Nevertheless, both productions evince the writer’s desire to reformulate these novels, written by women, for a theatrical audience who would not have been part of the original novels’ target audiences. As George Rowell notes, the audience of the Victoria theatre, for the most part, was “illiterate…simple and undiscriminating” (39), so these adaptations would likely be their first exposure to the material.

1 The dates listed are those of the original publications of the novels. The adaptations occurred throughout the nineteenth century, often repeating as the repertoire required.
Patsy Stoneman notes that little is known about John Courtney; still, she suggests that he may have been John Fuller, an actor and playwright who worked “at various London theatres between 1829 and 1852” (20). Although his origins in terms of class are unknown, Courtney’s connection with acting and playwriting does link him with that element of the working class. John Russell Stephens, in *The Profession of the Playwright*, explains, “most East End dramatists came from lower down the social scale” and further notes, “between roughly the early 1840s and the late 1850s almost no dramatist made any money out of the plays as the long process of economic decline in the theatre reached its nadir” (3 & 48). In any case, Courtney, in adapting both of these novels was certainly writing for the working class and, in part, about the working class, though the audience would have been from an entirely different segment of laborers from the majority of the characters in *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton*.

The struggle for working-class rights, a problem that unified many disparate groups in the labor market, was in flux at the time of the adaptations. The methods employed by workers shifted away from “the overtly revolutionary working-class institutions,” and “the conversion of all the covertly revolutionary ones into pillars of existing society” (Perkin *Origins* 323). According to Harold Perkin, this “left only the trade unions as residuary legatees of the working-class ideal” (323). Courtney’s adaptations invoke this changing climate as he dismisses new conceptions of class relations and instead links the world of his plays to an older system. While his depiction of class relations seemingly rejects “revolutionary” methods of improving the lives of laborers, he nonetheless seeks a solution to the difficulties facing the working-class and does so in a manner that acknowledges the realities of the laboring world while also leaning towards traditional class relations. Ultimately, these productions denounce the changes in the labor market that disconnected worker and employer, choosing to sculpt a new version of class relations in terms of an old system that was gaining traction at the time: Paternalism.

Throughout the nineteenth century popular novels quickly found their way to various stages in London and cities around Britain; these productions ranged from faithful adaptations that changed little to works that simply took the basic plot structure and went their own direction. Similarly, the theatres that took on these works of literature represented a broad range of theatrical houses: from the patent theatres in the West End to small transpontine or East End Theatres. Often, theatres would produce competing versions of the same plays. Of the many theatres that wove the contemporary literature of the Victorian era into their repertoires, The Old Victoria Theatre stands out not only for the volume of adaptations staged there but also for its place as the theatre that often created the first adaptation of several novels.

Although located near Waterloo Bridge and thus easy transportation across the Thames, The Old Vic nevertheless failed to draw audiences from farther away throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the increase in “local” audiences as the century progressed “may in turn have militated against the theatre’s attractions for a

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2 A term used to describe the theatres located on the south side of the Thames River--namely, the Surrey Theatre and the Old Vic Theatre. See Davis and Emelijanow “The Surrey and Victoria Theatres” in *Reflecting the Audience*, 2001
middle-class audience” (Davis and Emeljanow 12). However, The description of the audience as simply “working class” may be too vague a term, considering the wide scope that such a designation could imply. More specifically, the Old Vic audience consisted of costermongers, mechanics, pickpockets, local vendors, and a variety of other workers found in the Lambeth marshes, including “bakers, blacksmiths, bootmakers, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners and coach makers,” (Davis & Emeljanow 20). Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, the Lambeth district “retained its identification as a region of wharves, timber yards, and heavy machinery” and while the number of servants in the region would grow by the 1860s to 42.2% of the population, this was not the case in the decades during which the plays discussed in this article were produced (20). Although the theatre flirted throughout the nineteenth century with attracting a more genteel audience, most attempts failed, and the theatre consistently fell back on the local laborers for spectators. The audience at the theatre along with contemporary cultural issues inflected the ways in which Courtney’s altered both *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton*, resulting in revisions that speak to the ways in which the working classes manipulated the conversations concerning social hierarchy, domesticity, and gender relations.

**Revising Paternalism**

John Courtney’s *Jane Eyre* arrived on the Old Vic stage only a year after the initial release of Brontë’s novel. Although it appears that Brontë never saw a production, she did respond to the adaptation in a letter to her publisher William Smith Williams:

> A Representation of ‘Jane Eyre at a Minor Theatre would no doubt be a rather afflicting spectacle to the author of the work: I suppose all would be woefully exaggerated and painfully vulgarized by the actors and actresses on such a stage. What—I cannot help myself asking—would they make of Mr. Rochester? And the picture my fancy conjures up by way of reply is a somewhat humiliating one. What would they make of Jane Eyre? I see something very pert and very affected as an answer to that query. (Smith 25)

Brontë’s response was not without merit as many of the changes made when the play hit the stage in 1848 were less than literary and more than a little exaggerated and focused on spectacle. Nevertheless, Courtney’s and later adaptations provide a critical insight into the ways in which playwrights using material already situated in cultural and social issues could reinvent the work for a new audience with a new purpose, and consequently provide a new way of reading how Victorians conceptualized themselves—in this instance, how the working class perceived and projected images of themselves. With almost half of the population of the area surrounding the Old Vic employed in either industrial or commercial labor, the adaptation idealizes the life of the domestic servant in contrast to those who had to fend for themselves in more public venues such as schools and public businesses. Although some of the audience would have worked in the domestic realm, the numbers of those actually engaged as servants in the area was relatively low when the Old Vic puts on Courtney’s *Jane*
The Victorian

_Eyre_, and they would have worked as such in the city rather than the country, leaving them with few ties to the world in the novel and thus the chance to romanticize the safety of rural domestic employment. Ultimately, Courtney demonizes the work done for a public institution, suggesting that it is not the work but the system within which it is performed that is at fault.

Maintaining the basic structure of Brontë’s novel, Courtney’s play does cut the scenes of Jane’s childhood at Gateshead with the Reed family, opening instead with Jane already installed as a teacher at Lowood. Before Jane enters, however, Courtney introduces the character of Betty Bunce, a servant girl at Lowood who is frustrated by the ill treatment both the servants and the students receive at Lowood. She commiserates with yet another added character, Joe Joker who serves as her love interest in the play. After they bemoan the hardships of their lives, deciding they must leave to survive, Jane finally arrives on stage, engaged in a conflict with Mr. Brocklehurst that ends with her departing Lowood for Thornfield. Joe defends Jane to Mr. Brocklehurst, eventually throwing him out a window into a pail of water in a comic relief scene. The third scene opens at Thornfield where much of the plot from the novel is repeated, though the aristocrats never actually appear on stage. Here too, Betty and Joe have an added comic scene: Betty has taken work at a grocer’s and the owner, Jeddediah Piper, seems to have designs on his servant. However, Joe steps in again, this time attacking Jeddediah with flour when he attempts to kiss Betty.

Back at Thornfield, Mason has arrived and Bertha attacks him as in the novel, followed by Jane providing aid and shortly thereafter becoming engaged to Rochester. The rest of the play continues with Brontë’s plot, including Jane’s visit to the Rivers’s home and the revelation of Jane’s inheritance with slight additions concerning the relationship between Joe and Betty. The fire occurs at Thornfield like in the novel, but here, Joe runs in to save Rochester from the flames. After the fire, Betty and Joe search out Jane and tell her about Thornfield. Jane returns to Rochester, again with scenes similar to the novel, except that Mason arrives, attacks Rochester for hiding Bertha and Joe again protects Rochester. The play ends with Jane promising to care for Joe as he is the “preserver of my husband,” which results in exclamations of joy from all on the stage (Courtney Jane 63).

Courtney’s adaptation gives the first lines of the play to Betty Bunce, one of the additional comic servants added to the play. Betty is “discovered” in the schoolroom, reflecting on both her place and the place of the children at the school. Bemoaning her plight, she cries, “Dear me, what a life is mine—a servant of all work to a charity school” and follows through by similarly commenting on the perilous position of the “scholars” at Lowood whose relatives have “sen[t] them out of the way to be thumped, bumped and consumptionized” (32). Betty’s remarks reflect a general contrast in the adaptation between labor performed for an individual family and labor performed for a business or public establishment. Betty’s role as a “servant of all work,” in a public institution, a place with much discipline and little comfort, meant

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3 According the Patsy Stoneman, “Susan Hopely (1841), by G. Dibdin Pitt, was the play which established a reputation for Obsaldiston and Vincent, and its success explains the prominence of the servant characters in Courtney’s Jane Eyre (“Editor’s Notes to John” 29).
her duties would be “extremely burdensome” as she most likely “did virtually all of the housework and child care, was on duty 17 or 18 hours a day and slept on a pallet on the kitchen floor” (Mitchell 50). Although similar work would have been performed in poorer houses that employed only one servant, Courtney amplifies the horrors of service at the school rather than at a home. E.P. Thompson notes,

Relations between employer and labourer were becoming both harsher and less personal; and while it is true that this increased the potential freedom of the worker, since the hired farm servant or the journeyman in domestic industry was… ‘halted half-way between the position of the serf and the position of the citizen’, this ‘freedom mean that he felt his unfreedom more. (199)

Betsy’s engagement with an institution that dehumanizes and neglects rather than acknowledging the humanity of laborers initiates the tone for the entire play, one where the move to industrialization and impersonal work creates a chasm between employer and employee that degrades those involved in the process.

As a servant who must perform all functions, Betty’s position along with her place in an institution that had little care for the welfare of either employees or students, reinforces the adaptations’ connections between poor working conditions and unfeeling owners. Immediately following Betty’s opening monologue another character molded for the play appears on stage, the servant Joe Joker, who joins in Betsy’s reflections on the difficulties of their roles, remarking that working at Lowood is “Domestic Transportation” and firmly asserting that he will “make a rush and get out before I go out like a rush light” due to starvation (Courtney Jane Eyre 32). The reference to transportation here directly reflects the public discourse concerning crime at the time of the production. Early in the decade, parliament passed penal law reforms that made transportation much stricter. Before being sent to one of the colonies, “each convict should be subject to a ‘secluded’ course of ‘preliminary penal discipline, in some instances in England, before transportation” (“The Old” 277). While the law itself was passed originally in 1842, the issue itself continued to take center stage in the periodicals throughout the decade, with many, like the author of the article just mentioned, condemning the new practice as just as useless as the old. In 1849, a year after Courtney’s adaptation, the issue continued to fill periodical pages, with a twenty page article on “The Transportation Question” appearing in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. Interestingly, the author here again finds the system of punishment ineffective, but blames the increase of crime on “an imperfect education” (520). The depiction of such harsh conditions specifically related to working at the charity school, at the “Lowood Institution” as Joe names the place, where servants are left to die of “domestic starvation” indicts the system under which they labor, linking the new harsher system of relations to a slave-like servitude that used apparent liberty (the ability to leave) to justify lower standards and disinterest from those above. Moreover, the relation made here between poor education and “transportation” represents a direct assault on the system of governance that punished criminals with harsh treatment at home prior to forcefully removing them from their country without making real efforts to alleviate the causes of criminal
activity. Thus, the play indicts Lowood as a public institution for mimicking the uncaring and disinterested system of law and justice.

Jane’s rebuke of Brocklehurst in the following scene, where, in a change from the original, she refuses to stand on a stool and be degraded (though she is a teacher in this version and not a young student), further emphasizes that the failures at Lowood stem from the lack of empathy and understanding:

Jane: I will be heard, for my pent-up feelings must have vent. For eight years I have endured all that falls to the lot of the poor orphan girl, discarded by those that should protect her and cast upon the cold care of an unfeeling world—all that I could do in patience, suffering, industry, and obedience to those above I have done. You sir, by the munificence of others, are placed here as our protector. Instead of kindness from you, I and those around me meet but scorn. In place of the bland smile and mild reproval of errors we meet your continuous frown, your determined opposition. Charity! Oh, ‘tis a monstrous mockery of it, ‘tis persecution upon the helpless and unprotected—and I tell you, sir, that you should blush to own such feelings inhabit your cold and uncharitable heart.

Brock: And dare you talk thus to your kind protector?

Jane: I do, and tell you too that the time will come when those who dispense their wealth for the instruction of their poorer fellow beings will see more closely into the conduct of those into whose hands they place their trust. (35).

Jane’s long and detailed censure of Brocklehurst and his failures as a “protector,” especially in contrast to what she describes as her dedication to “obedience to those above” mirrors the changing conditions between laborers and owners, working-class and middle-class. While there was no doubt a shift in the ways in which employers and employees related to one another, as Thompson notes, there is also a simultaneous backlash against this new construction, a move to reformulate the old system in a way that benefited owners and workers alike. Thomas Carlyle’s 1843 Past and Present laments the shift towards what he terms the “Cash Gospel” (183), the reduction of relations between laborers and owners to simple exchanges of funds, asserting, “A Man has other obligations laid on him, in God’s Universe, than the payment of cash” (188) and further reminding his readership that “Cash-payment never was, or could be except for a few years be, the union-bond of man to man. Cash never yet paid one man fully his deserts to another; nor could it, nor can it, now or henceforth to the end of the world” (182). Carlyle intends his commentary as a warning to those in power, a reminder that the system they have chosen for class relations cannot succeed, and this adaptation plays out the dangers of class relations reduced to numbers and the benefits of human connections between masters and servants.
With such a morose and dark opening scene—one clearly linked with the dark imagery of the novel’s opening where Jane is locked in the Red Room, terrified, alone, and cut off from aid—the remainder of Betty’s performance stands in stark contrast as she lightly banter s with those around her and often finds herself in the center of comic relief scenes. While the somber tone of the opening depicts the plight of the working-class servant and underscores the failure of the capitalist system that rejects paternalistic focus on human connections, the switch to the comic tone maneuvers the issue of class relations into a more palatable form for a working-class audience who went to the theatre to escape from a “monotonous, drab, and squalid” life in search of “excitement, forgetfulness, and a better world in their entertainment” (Booth 60). The comic nature of these characters, so unlike anything seen in the novel, functions as an escape into a world that was simultaneously familiar and dreamlike, a world where audience members saw themselves reflected, in similar circumstances but with more success and freedom than they currently experienced but also saw the dangers of stepping out of their assigned roles. In part, this pull between freedom and class boundaries replicates what the audience would have seen in the looking-glass mirror at the Old Vic that descended between scenes (though it was gone by the time of this production): The mirror clearly showed the levels in the audience, the tiers that separated the poorest patrons cramped together in the pit from those who could afford a box. The play acknowledges the horror of the pit—the stench, the constraints, the limits, but also reminds them that clear lines must separate those stuck in the mire from those who had escaped it.

These play-made characters further underscore the growing conflict between duty to an employer and class loyalty as class relations altered with the burgeoning of industrialization. Because the masters felt less beholden to their employees and worried more about “cash,” the resulting breakdown of the paternal structure triggered an uprising of sorts from workers. In particular, Joe refuses to bow before a master who does not acknowledge his rights. In a scene where Brocklehurst belittles and dismisses Jane, Joe clearly stands on the side of a fellow servant, defending Jane:

Brock: Dare you interfere with my authority?

Joe: Yours or anybody else’s if he don’t know how to use it.

(Courtney 36)

Joe’s willingness to rebuke Brocklehurst becomes all the more significant since “the plight of large groups of workers remain[ed] desperate” in the late 1840s with many “at the point of subsistence” (Thompson 209). Though his remarks would mean the loss of his place and undoubtedly the loss of any hope of a letter of character, Joe speaks, reminding the audience that though their plight may be harsh, they too must remember “how to use” their voices and limited power. In the 1840s, England faced an uncertain economic outlook. The Rambler in April of 1848, notes that in fact the difference between wealth and poverty must be at the center of public discourse:

The great problem of the statesmen of this day is the reconciliation of rich and poor, or rather, of riches and poverty. For several hundred
years the whole course of society has tended to separate the two by a frightful chasm, which now threatens to widen so violently, as by an earthquake, as to shatter the social fabric, and overwhelm all classes in one indiscriminate destruction. (“Rich” 345)

Within the context of the violent and destructive class struggles that were rending British society, Brocklehurst’s outright hostility and Joe’s refusal to bend mark the “chasm” between the classes. This scene represents the dangers for those in the owning and governing classes when they abandon the responsibilities laid upon them by their positions of power while simultaneously mirroring for the audience the ways in which they could stand against “indiscriminate destruction.”

Throughout the adaptation, Joe continues to defy the authority of those he feels abuse their stations. In their attempt to escape, after Joe has “scuffle[d]” with Brocklehurst, Joe and Betty proceed to douse the Beadle and Brocklehurst:

Betty: Be quiet--here, this cupboard--no--the window--the cistern is beneath!

Joe: Throw it up, Betty--they shall have a bath--now--out with you!

Brock: Mercy--murder!

Betty: Silence! (business)

Both Outside: Help, murder, robbery, drowning!

Joe: Ha, ha--now, Betty, lets seek our fortunes together. (Courtney 38)

Joe and Betty’s reliance on one another for protection reflects a particular change in the nature of class relations in the nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, class relations remained hierarchical, with those below attached to those above through paternalism. E.P Thompson notes that moving into the 1830s and beyond this system is overturned and replaced by a sense of “class consciousness…in which working people were aware of continuing both old and new battles on their own” (712). Courtney’s adaptation simultaneously harkens back to the old system of paternalism while also affirming the realities of the changed relationship between worker and employer. However, the necessity of interdependence between members of the same class, in this instance, servants at a charity school, stems from a failure in the institutional structure to provide for the laborers.

Lowood, offering little protection and near starvation subsistence, stands in as a representative of the New Poor Law of 1834 and similar legislation that left the poor unaided. The issues with the Poor Law came to a head between 1845-1847 with a scandal occurring at the Andover Workhouse that resulted in parliamentary changes to the law due to public outcry at the treatment of the poor. According to Lynn Hollen Lees, “Tales of the Andover workhouse inmates eating the bones they were ordered to
crush took their place in a long saga of starvations, floggings, and mindless cruelties,“ and lead to “people fantasiz[ing] about confinement within the workhouse, endowing it with superhuman power of repression” (151). Courtney chooses not the somber and foreboding world of Brontë’s Jane Eyre to highlight these vast alterations in class dynamics but rather the lighthearted world of the invented servants, transplanting Brontë’s social discourse into a new form for a new audience, an audience directly confronted with the difficulties of the changing England, a group who sought the theatre not to be reminded of the difficulties of their lives but to imagine a world where they could overcome these problems. That the adaptation points to their fellow workers as a source of aid while also reinforcing many of the tenets of paternalism is not unusual. David Roberts contends that the widespread popularity of paternalism among a variety of populations (from landholders, to Whigs, to Tories and beyond) “was bound to produce different varieties among its supporters” (211). That this adaptation merges a concern for members of one’s own social class with a critique of a failed paternalist and a figure often associated with the new (failed) reforms, the beadle, emblematizes the ways in which the paternal outlook could be altered to fit the working class. Courtney’s adaptation, aimed at the urban poor and not at a Brocklehurst or beadle, offers the best of both worlds: an increased sense of the bond between laborers and the safety net that paternalism could provide.

While Courtney is quick to empower the working class when faced with the harshness of Brocklehurst’s notions of charity and duty, he just as quickly derides those in the lower ranks who fail to remain within the boundaries of their assigned roles. Betty, having left Lowood, finds a place as a servant to Jedediah Piper, a “Grocer[, Mealm[an], and Corn Chandler[.].” While neither belongs to the landed elite (Betty as working-class servant and Jedediah lower middle-class), they nevertheless mimic the boundaries seen in the gentry between masters and servants (a dynamic seen with Jane and Rochester). Betty, here, is the servant to Piper’s master, and when Piper oversteps his role, much as Rochester does with Jane, asking for a bit of romance, there is an immediate backlash from other working-class characters:

Piper: Go to that cupboard, you’ll find a bottle of brandy--give me a glass--another, thank you, come here, my dear.

Betty: His dear…

Piper: Come and sit by me, Betty--you are sure you have no followers?…That’s dear Betty--ah, you don’t know what I felt when I first saw you--Oh, Betty, take pity on your wretched master, let me have one faithful heart to repose upon--smile upon him--oh Betty, suffer him to take (about to kiss her)

Betty: That (a slap)

Piper: Oh!
Courtney presents a serious predicament in lighthearted fashion, defusing tension through comedy. This scene occurs after Rochester vaguely informs Jane of his past “error,” which he is quick to remark is not a “crime” and immediately before his proposal and Jane’s acceptance of marriage (45). Bookended by the two scenes that represent Rochester’s break from traditional hierarchies and his crime of bigamy, the comic scene where flour flies acts as a break in tension while serving a further thematic purpose as it juxtaposes Rochester’s social crime with Piper’s similar social misstep. Both act outside the bounds of the rigid hierarchical distinctions of early Victorian England. Patsy Stoneman notes that the audience at the Old Vic comprised a “prevalence of costermongers,” a group closely related to Piper’s profession (21). Rochester’s willingness to break the social barriers between master and servant may be excused in the play, but the same is not so for Piper who becomes a figure of derision when he mirrors Rochester’s actions. In effect, this subplot further underscores the rigid class distinctions that are a necessity of the paternalistic structure while simultaneously furthering a distinction between laboring for a private family home and working in a public venue, like Lowood or the grocers. Though Lowood and Piper’s businesses are by no means interchangeable, the repetition of “bad paternalists” (Brocklehurst and then Piper) emphasizes the contrast the play will then create between these men and the successful paternalist, Rochester.

Jane, however, becomes emblematic of proper subservience. Though she still makes claims to equality with Rochester, she does so only after she situated herself as Rochester’s social inferior. Their equality can only arise after Jane has let Rochester (and the audience) know that she recognizes her inferior place on the social scale as well as her duty to her master: “Oh Sir, this pains me--I would not be inquisitive, and should not seek to learn the secrets of my master--still the confidence you have placed in me this night emboldens me to ask--can I by any means, consistent with my sex, my station, or my means relieve your griefs?” (Courtney Jane 45). Jane’s language here, her obsequious tone as she begs Rochester not to think she would dare to “seek to learn the secrets of my master” as well as her emphasis on acting according to the designations that the Victorians placed on her--her gender, her work, and her class--all undermine the more subversive elements of the original novel in favor of affirming traditional conceptions of interpersonal relationships. Esther Godfrey argues that the Jane of Brontë’s novel “appears fully aware of the radical potentiality and instability of her new position as she moves from a working class world [at Lowood] into the middle class” at Thornfield (858). Courtney’s Jane seems even more cognizant of her “radical potentiality” but diffuses that power through moments where she makes statements such as the one quoted above. Rather than using Jane to undermine the constructed social hierarchy, this adaptation invokes Jane’s voice to reaffirm those systems and remind the audience of the dangers of their disintegration.

Jane, in her new position at Thornfield, not only bends to the paternal structure but also takes her own change in social position seriously, treating those beneath her in the same manner, demonstrating the ways in which paternalism could be adapted to changing social structures. David Roberts suggests, “The growth of paternalism was,
however, more than a revival. It took on a life of its own, creating new forms of old elements" (99), and Jane’s actions in this adaptation demonstrate one way in which “old elements” could be appropriated to favor the working class. When Joe arrives at Thornfield, she welcomes him and congratulates him on his escape from Lowood:

Jane: We both need to thank the chance that sent us from such a home-come, you will breakfast with me--Mrs. Fairfax will be glad to entertain one who, like you, has befriended me.

Joe: Do you mean, Miss, to introduce me as an acquaintance with such clothes as these--look at my jacket!

Jane: I introduce you, not your attire--‘tis your heart I estimate, your clothes I heed not--come.

Joe: Well I never!

Jane: How happy it has made me to be enabled to serve my good old Joe. (Courtney Jane 49)

Although Jane remains just a governess, her response to someone beneath her on the social scale resembles the “Lady Bountiful” archetype, a figure whose “expenditure of time, money, gifts, and advice had been crucial in sustaining the bonds of deference that tied laborers to the land and its owners” (Elliot 57). Jane’s care for those below her on the social scale reinforces her connection to traditional class structures that succeeded based on the ability of those in positions of power to relate to and inspire deference from those below. Further, Jane’s reference to Lowood as a “home” strengthens the link between paternalism, and its failure in the public sphere. Lowood, though an institution, is, for Jane, a “home,” one where Brocklehurst should have acted as “protector” but failed in doing so. At Thornfield, Jane (and Rochester) act to maintain the reciprocal duties between ruling and working classes.

While the first portion of the adaptation emblematizes what’s wrong with the current system of relations between workers and employers, the second stresses the superiority of laboring in a rural family home controlled by a benevolent landlord. The play again relies on Jane’s language to ameliorate the more dangerous ideas from the novel, where, as Chris Vanden Bossche remarks, she “rebels against social exclusion” (46). This Jane instead embodies almost exclusively the second version of Brontë’s Jane, the one who “ultimately does not seek to overturn the existing social order” (47). Not only does she consistently remind the audience of her care for her “station,” she further highlights Rochester’s own superiority in several instances. At one point, she muses to herself, “Strange the kind interest my master takes in me….How is it that I, a poor girl, a creature of his bounty, should feel his equal--I do so spite of myself--it is the confidence his kindness gives to me” (Courtney Jane 49). The connections to the paternalist tradition are most blatant at moments such as these, where the characters reflect on or specifically respond to their “master” and his “bounty.” Jane, in essence, insists that her safety and happiness stem not from any
alteration in herself but rather from Rochester’s successful enactment of paternal duty.

Moreover, Rochester’s own repetition of his connection to the land further emphasizes his role as the “kind” paternal landlord. Upon his return to Thornfield he vehemently attests his devotion to his home:

The night is rough and the wind shakes the gables of these old towers I love. Thornfield [is] still my boyhood’s home--and yet staying by the old beech trunk, a hag stood by me and with a loud laugh, exclaimed--’Like it if you can, like it if you dare!’--[Perhaps] ‘twas my bewildered brain that pictured the wild form--no-I will like, I dare like it! (38).

While the Rochester of the novel can barely stand his home, and finds no desire to even visit, let alone “like it” until he cements his romantic connection to Jane, Courtney’s Rochester uses his first scene in the play to reiterate his connection to his “boyhood’s home.” Although he feels tested in his affection by an “old hag” he refuses to bend to the prodding of this phantom and instead reasserts his devotion to home. The image of the old hag here, much like Miss Havisham in Great Expectations, the three witches in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and even Brontë’s misshapen Bertha Mason, stands in as the disruptive feminine element that seeks to unhinge structured society. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their groundbreaking book The Madwoman in the Attic, argue for a relationship between nineteenth century hags and Chaucer’s protagonist in “The Wife of Bath:”

He portrayed [the wife] projecting her subversive vision of patriarchal institutions into the story of a furious hag who demands supreme power over her own life and that of her husband: only when she gains his complete acceptance of her authority does this witch transform herself into a modest and docile beauty. Five centuries later, the threat of the hag, the monster, the witch, the madwoman, still lurks behind the compliant paragon of women’s stories. (79).

Rochester’s imagined conversation with a hag on the grounds of Thornfield can thus be linked directly to his struggle with Bertha, the hag hidden in his attic. Rochester refuses to bend to the illusion of a hag, ignoring her as he does Bertha. Both Bertha and this imaginary woman mark the “wild” “subversive” women that disrupt the ordered paternal world. We feel no pity for this hag who threatens the rightful owner, and in this way the adaptation again seeks to reaffirm traditional gender and class boundaries. Just like the heroes of Shakespeare and Dickens, Rochester must overcome this figure in order to maintain the ordered world of Thornfield, something he achieves much more easily in the adaptation than in the novel as all of his workers seem utterly devoted to his protection, a unique trait among the men in power in Courtney’s adaptation.

Rochester’s role as paternalist in this adaptation works to further reinforce the duty not only of the landowner but also the devotion owed to the employer by a laborer. In so doing, the play seeks to subvert the rising antagonism and aggression
arising in the laboring classes due to harsh conditions and poverty. Courtney’s version of *Jane Eyre* implies that while bad paternalists in the public mean harsh conditions and a need for class solidarity, private labor under a good paternalist meant stability, suggesting that the worker should seek rural private employment, a state much idealized in this adaptation. Just as Rochester’s good paternalist was more fantasy than reality in England at this time, the production similarly crafts workers who, in responding to his generosity, exceed the reasonable bounds of duty. During the scene when Thornfield burns, Joe the Joker, who at every other turn has laughed at authority and physically assaulted those in positions of power, now leaps to protect Rochester:

Roch: Ha! the hall on fire--where is Jane--Jane Eyre! (*rushes up*)

Joe: Stay, sir, for heaven’s sake!

Roch: Stand off--Jane, I come to rescue you! (*rushes in*)

Betty: Oh, do not follow him!

Joe: He is our master and must not perish thus! (*Follows*)....

*Joe is seen bearing him off as the flames burst forth and part of Hall falls in--the female still laughing as she falls among the ruins[.]* (59).

Joe’s plea to Rochester and subsequent vehement assertion that Rochester “is our master and must not perish thus!” allows Joe to reposition himself within the traditional paternalistic relationship between master and servant, something he earlier derided with Brocklehurst, a man Joe felt did not deserve his authority. Joe becomes the idealized laborer to Rochester’s idealized landlord. While the audience suffered in urban London, Joe and Rochester exist in a dream-like world, one that for the viewers had been replaced by the harsh realities of urban industrialization, one that they could view as a possible form of escape from their own hardships and the neglect they received from politicians and others in positions of power. Kristen Leaver contends that melodramas became a tool to “voice the plight of their politically disempowered audiences by dramatizing the contradictions implicit in middle-class attempts to define and manage the ideological problem posed by the lower class” (444). Leaver uses this argument to reject the notion that the theatre acted as the mouth-piece of middle-class norms. While I agree that melodramatic productions can be subversive, in the case of Courtney’s adaptation, the laissez-faire disconnection between classes, which became emblematic of much of the class antagonism, bears the brunt of the assault. Rather than working towards an empowered working class, this adaptation relies on nostalgia for the paternal system that was slowly fading away.

This production, much like Courtney’s adaptation of *Mary Barton* in 1851, manipulates traditional normative class relations, simultaneously reinforcing strict boundaries between workers and employers while appropriating the language of paternalism to serve the working class. While this adaptation, like Brontë’s original, does not overturn the reigning social structure, it does undermine the middle-class
ideal of individuality and the changes that arose in class relations with the rise of industrialization in favor of more nostalgic paternal relations, though it idealizes this system as much as it derides the new structure. This play represents an appropriation of the contemporary dialogue surrounding class relations, assessing the failures of the vast alterations in Victorian society while proffering to the audience a safe and sentimental performance of paternalism that guarantees the continuance of a traditional class hierarchy while refocusing on the strong role the workers can play. Just a few years after this re-imagination of class relations graced the stage at the Old Vic, Courtney followed up with yet another revision of popular conceptions of class with his 1851 *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life!* In his essay, “Encountering Melodrama” David Mayer describes the eponymous theatrical genre as a “deformed hybrid” (145). The manuscript\(^4\) for *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life!* epitomizes the reasons for this oft bequeathed title, both metaphorically and literally. The physical manuscript is scribbled in a handwriting that at times becomes almost entirely unreadable, Ds, As and the symbol for “and” all look the same, and there are pages hastily added to the end after the censor rejected the original version.\(^5\) More broadly, as an adaptation, Courtney’s play reflects the essentially “hybrid” state of many theatrical works at this time as well as the hybridity of adaptation itself. However, Mayer in no way means his remarks as a criticism of the form, arguing instead that the theatre in general and melodrama in particular are part of “an essential social process” (146), and this adaptation engages with not only its audience but with the larger cultural exchanges occurring at this time. The hybridity of the text stems not only from its relationship to both theatrical production and novel but also to the dynamic influence of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, the audience in the theatre, contemporary cultural pressures as well as the economic constraints. While Gaskell’s novel targeted middle-and upper-class readers, attempting to attract attention to the plight of the poor, this adaptation engages a specifically working-class audience, an audience that would have experienced firsthand the hardships depicted in the novel, though this does not mean that the middle-class could not (or would not) see performances of the play. Written in 1850 and performed in 1851 at the Old Victoria Theater, Courtney’s production of Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1848 *Mary Barton* was “written expressly for this Theatre” according to the playbill (Bolton 209), and in the 1850s, this would mean writing to the limited audience in the area of the Old Vic, which tended to be poor, uneducated, and engaged in a variety of laboring fields.

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\(^4\) As noted in the introduction, many of the plays here exist solely in the British library. The only copy of this adaptation is in the guise of the manuscript that was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office for licensing. All plays produced in London during this time frame had to be examined by a member of this office, often resulting in changes if the Lord Chamberlain felt the material inappropriate. These copies are often hastily written, with sections crossed out, notes in the margins and tacked on additions.

\(^5\) Although the correspondence of the Lord Chamberlains’ office is available in the British National Archives, the indexes for 1850-1851 did not survive, making it difficult to find the letter outlining the problems. Thus, I am currently unable to provide any specifics concerning this data.
including commerce, industrial work, and domestic service (Davis and Emelijanow 12).

Where the readers of Gaskell’s novel could separate themselves from the horrors of working-class life, the audience in the Victoria theatre had a visceral connection to the tenacious position of laborers, could themselves easily end up starving or unattended, and the playwright necessarily takes into account this relation in adapting the novel. When viewed as an interpretation, a response to Gaskell’s work in light of various social and cultural events, this adaption becomes significant for its transformation in perspective. Anna Clark contends, “The ‘working class’ should not be seen as an ideal theoretical construct, but as an ever changing creation of radicals choosing from different strategies in their attempts to unite working people” (Clark 177). And, we can similarly view this adaptation in terms of “strategy” as the writer, works to influence and respond to the needs of working rather then middle-class spectators while simultaneously contending with the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain’s office. In responding to these constraints, this adaptation manipulates the stereotypes surrounding female labor and domesticity, reconfiguring the middle-class domestic ideal to better suit the realities of laboring life, but it does so by invoking a more traditional conception of class relations.

Courtney’s Mary Barton cuts much of the beginning of Gaskell’s novel, opening with Harry Carson and Sally Leadbitter discussing Mary and her response to his letter. When Harry leaves, Sally gives her first monologue, explaining why she acts so poorly and her jealousy of Mary’s beauty. This is followed by the entrance of a character crafted for the play, Badger, who is one of Sally’s love interests and a scam artist of a sort. The play shifts from Sally and Badger to Mary contemplating her life and its hardships, followed by the entrance first of Sally and then of John Barton. Here, some of the general content from the novel remains—Barton has been to London, seen his charter rejected and is bitter. Mary tries ineffectively to calm him. Many of the side characters and their corresponding plots have been cut, including Alice Wilson, though Job Leigh still plays a small role in the play as he is a member of the union with John and Margaret has a small role as Will Wilson’s love interest (with no mention of her singing).

Again, the main plot concerning Jem, Mary, and Harry plays out as it does in the novel, with Mary initially rejecting Jem (though after she had also already ceased relations with Harry), regretting doing so, blaming herself when Jem is put on trial for Harry’s murder, and working to free him. Mary’s aunt Esther does return to warn first Jem and then later Mary, and the play ends with the revelation of Barton’s guilt and Mr. Carson forgiving him when he dies. Aside from this, the main alterations made concern the addition of a sub-plot concerning Sally, Badger, and Tom Shuttle (another added character who vies for Sally’s attention). The scenes with Sally and Badger alternate with the main narrative, as they seek their fortune as performers (singers to be specific though they do not work or practice at it). Sally and Badger’s dreams are quickly dashed when they are laughed off the stage with patrons asking for their money back, and they find themselves in Liverpool, where Badger is called to testify against Jem, though he refuses to do so. Sally and Badger separate, each feeling that the other has ruined their life.
Written two years after Courtney’s version of *Jane Eyre* and performed three years later, *Mary Barton* underscores an evolution in perspective on paternalism and class relations. While this adaptation similarly relies on nostalgia and traditional hierarchies, its criticism of the importation of ideals from above onto the working class is more pronounced, though it similarly finds fault with aggressive working-class tactics. According to Harold Perkin, the nineteenth-century saw a struggle between various ideals, each supported by a different class, with the middle-class ideology ultimately winning out (*Origins* 224). For the middle class, the entrepreneurial man and the woman as the Angel in the Household along with a severe set of moral regulations (at least in public) denoted success. Where Courtney’s *Jane Eyre* seems to reject middle-class ideology outright, focusing instead on simply returning to paternalism, *Mary Barton* reconsiders middle-class values, especially in terms of domesticity, and manipulates them along with the paternal ideal in a manner that undergirds the superiority of the working class while questioning any outright imposition of middle-class norms on laborers’ lives.

Perhaps one of the starkest examples of the collision between middle-class ideal and working-class reality is the depiction of Mary Barton herself: unlike the novel, the play secures Mary in the home. Though she still works for the seamstress Miss Simmonds, Mary never actually goes to work. In fact, Mary’s remains almost entirely in her home until called to go to Liverpool to save Jem in Act 3. The play obscures Mary’s labor, instead leaving her to tend to the hearth in accordance with the domestic ideal that left women as the holder of the household keys, a silent protected member of the family who did not stray into the public sphere. In the 1830s through the late 1840s, the Chartist movement fought for working class rights, beginning with local groups of workers and burgeoning into a national movement calling for reform. In 1838, they published the People’s Charter, outlining their goals, and later submitted it to Parliament in 1842 and again in 1848 though Parliament refused to see them. Clark asserts that Chartists “tried to create a positive class identity for working people uniting diverse elements into an ‘imagined community’ through political organization and rhetoric” but also notes that they often deployed “domesticity to wrest concessions from the state,” though, “working people had to negotiate ways to put the principles of domesticity into practice” as the lifestyle of laborers could not easily accommodate separate spheres (220 & 248-249). Within the context of the “working-class culture of the Midlands and the north which nurtured physical-force Chartism,” Mary’s appropriation of domesticity along with a rejection of violence emphasizes the ways in which this text reappropriates ideology of both Chartism and the middle-class to new purpose (495).

Essentially, Mary’s character manipulates domesticity, enacting a working-class version that acknowledges the necessity of some movement between spheres.

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while primarily focusing on remaining in the home. Mary’s first remarks in the play remind the audience of the harsh conditions her family struggles under as she informs them that “times have been very hard with us of late,” but she also quickly changes her position (Courtney Mary 477). In a scene added after the Lord Chamberlain rejected the original version, Mary tells her father, “we have suffered and may suffer more, but let us bow to the burden. The storm passes and the sun bursts forth again to health and vigour” (510). Mary’s consistent placement in the home along with her efforts to assure her father, and the audience, that “the storm passes” suggests that the aggression of Chartism is no longer necessary. Perkin notes that “physical force Chartism,” which was associated with the northern portions of the country had nearly ceased to exist by 1850, arguing, “physical force…was mere bluff, and when their bluff was called they could only retreat” (Origins 322). Courtney uses Mary’s place in the home, her ability to mimic middle-class domesticity along with her belief in renewed “health and vigour” for the working class to reinforce the death of Chartism; he follows through by offering a new method by which the working class could unite. Courtney further reinforces the lack of urgency for Mary’s labor when Sally comes to entice her to meet with Harry Carson. Mary not only refuses to have further involvement with him but also dismisses Sally, declaring, “I shall not return to work today,” a comment that provokes no response from Sally (Courtney Mary 477). While Mary’s first speech implies desperate conditions for herself and her father, her lines in the rest of the play dismiss that danger of poverty as something of the past and in so doing also discards the methods by which the working class organized themselves to counteract these hardships.

Instead of promoting the Chartist aims of her father, Mary invokes a more traditional mode of class relations, one which leads more towards cooperation. Andrew Maunder, in his article, “Mary Barton Goes to London: Elizabeth Gaskell, Stage Adaptation and Working Class Audiences,” argues that in Courtney’s adaptation, “Mary…becomes much more than she does in the novel, a forthright articulator of family values, community and domesticity” (15). However, Mary exceeds these boundaries as she acts not only as an idealized working-class woman--balancing the restrictions placed on her gender from both her own class and those in higher classes--she also serves to underscore the failures of the actions of the factory-owning middle class. In the novel, when Harry’s intentions are revealed, she simply proclaims, “I now scorn you, sir, for plotting to ruin a poor girl!” and leaves (Gaskell 158). Courtney, however, chooses to expand this speech, indicting Harry more specifically for his misdeeds against the working class:

Sir, I could not love you before, but now I totally despise you owning as you do you mean to not honor till your disappointed vanity and person forced you to this offer. I despise you for your attempt against one whose poverty should have made you her protector. (Courtney Mary 481)

Throughout the play, Mary acts as the mouthpiece of working-class concerns and does so more effectively than the aggressive John Barton. When Mary castigates Harry for failing to act as her “protector”, she connects herself to the paternal class
The Victorian

system, a set of relations between the laboring and owning classes that echoes back to the traditional landed agricultural system of England’s past, and this speech mirrors Jane Eyre’s response to Mr. Brocklehurst in Courtney’s previous adaptation. Mary’s use of this terminology reflects a reformation of labor relations occurring during the 1850s as factory owners, like Titus Salt who built a town for his workers and tried to ameliorate their conditions while still rejecting large scale reform and unionism⁷, attempted to mimic the landed elite’s paternalism in their relations with those who worked for them.

Mary further attempts to disarm her father’s angry comments concerning the disparity between “the owner of the lordly mansion and the trial oppressed dweller of the humble cot,” again reminding him that “we should not murmur” and then calling on religion to reinforce her speech as god “cares for all is with both and watches the deeds of all” (509). While Barton consistently underscores the differences between classes, Mary works to make connections between them and to counteract her father’s harsher sentiments. Consequently, Mary acts not only as the ideal female worker, but also as the representative for the return to an older formation of class relations in urban environments that asks the audience to reject Chartist violence and instead look backwards to a family-like style of cooperation between workers and employers that would allow the woman to stay in the home but would not necessarily disengage her from the labor market. In essence, Courtney’s Mary adapts the Chartist call for domesticity, used by them to legitimize their claims to space in public discourse with the middle-class and aristocracy, for a more peaceful return to a revised paternalism.

While Mary melds middle-class domesticity with a call for a paternal system, Sally Ledbetter embodies the failures of middle-class ideology when applied to working-class women. Mary is the exception to the rule for working class women and domesticity and Sally the model for the negative consequences of simply taking it in its entirety. Judy Lown notes, “Domestic ideology made far fewer inroads into working-class women’s consciousness at this time than into that of working-class men. In terms of the distinctive conditions of working-class women’s lives the ‘domestic ideal’ was neither realistic nor desirable” (186). Sally, given a larger and more multifaceted role in the play than in the novel, emblematizes the dangers and disruptions that the introduction of ideals from above could have. Importation of domesticity can succeed but the assumption that middle-class ideology could be imported wholesale into the lives of working-class women was nothing but destructive for Sally.

At one point, Sally compares her situation to Mary’s and notes that she must “make a fool” of Harry because of her precarious monetary situation (one payment from Harry is more then she “gets in a week’s wages”); For Sally, her success rests on her ability to “make up in dress” “what she lack[s] in beauty,” something Mary need not worry about according to Sally as she is “so pretty” (Courtney Mary 475). Maunder suggests that the play reforms Sally’s character, arguing that “Sally still takes bribes from Harry Carson but feeds him misinformation; she is no longer

characterized by her grasping self-interest but feels a strong sense of sisterhood with her neighbour and is outspoken about Carson’s motives” (9). This, however, seems to be an exaggeration of Sally’s good intentions. Though the play does make her more pitiable, she tells the audience that a large part of her manipulation of Harry Carson is because she has “a poor old mother to keep” (Courtney Mary 475), Courtney undermines Sally’s claims of altruism when she follows this line by noting that she also has “appearances to keep up” (475). Both reasons in the text seem to be given equal weight in Sally’s mind, and her need for what she deems appropriate dress is referenced multiple times while her mother is never again mentioned.

Sally, like Lady Audley in Mary Braddon’s novel Lady Audley’s Secret, wishes to escape the hardship and trappings of a working-class life in favor of what she perceives as the beauty and ease of wealth and position. However, as Martha Vicinus notes, the “Victorian middle class regarded such mobility as undesirable,” and the play similarly criticizes Sally’s actions, though for different ends (7). Sally represents a significant deviation from Mary’s embodiment of middle-class domesticity as she seeks to not simply incorporate domesticity into her life but rather desires to achieve the leisure and the accoutrements that go along with being a member of the middle class. This juxtaposition reminds the audience that while the working class can claim domesticity, they cannot escape the boundaries of their class, a sentiment also espoused in Courtney’s 1848 Jane Eyre. That Sally finds no support, even from members of her own class, reinforces the class loyalty as depicted in Mary who consistently remarks on her desire to “dwell with the friends that have grown with me” (Courtney Mary 510). Mary employs a version of middle-class domesticity that does not conflict with a return to paternalism where masters care for employees and those employees in turn do not seek to exceed their bounds since this social hierarchy demands clear stratification. Sally, then, reminds the audience that the imposition of standards from another class cannot be entirely successful due to the real conditions of working-class society; instead, her experiences combined with Mary’s support a selective approach.

Further, Sally’s character disrupts the depiction of any simplified conception of middle-class ideology as applied to laborers. In her attempt to escape her place in the working class, Sally allies herself with a performer who gives “benefit concerts”--that is concerts to benefit himself where neither he nor Sally attempt to actually prepare. In this instance, neither Sally nor Badger has any interest in actually working, instead simply expecting money and success to be given to them. Sally’s pseudo-work with Badger ultimately disqualifies her from legitimate labor with Mrs. Simmonds, who kicks her out for consorting with him:

Sally: Great powers, its Badger--the wretch--oh you monster

Badger: Oh--I wont stand it Sally

Sally: Oh you brute, look here at the broken-hearted girl who has got herself discharged for you…misses heard of my singing for your benefit concert…and she told me next day if I made such acquaintances as you, that you must provide for me. Oh Badger wont you share your fortune with me” (496)
Sally’s apparent misdeeds are only such when viewed through the lens of middle class norms as the working class has a more fluid and less restricted view of gender relations and sexuality. As Clark notes, “Even if laboring women did not accept middle-class definitions of sexual morality, they lived in a society [that]…could punish them for deviating from bourgeois values” (51). Sally’s persecution by her employer for “mak[ing] such acquaintances” connects the value system used by Courtney to the middle class rather than the working one. In so doing, the adaptation simultaneously critiques the system itself for failing to recognize the working class dynamics of gender and imposing inappropriate notions of fallenness crafted by the middle class while also reinforcing the dangers facing those in the working class as they can and will be judged by standards that neither fit their mode of life nor reflect the real relations between laborers.

Courtney’s adaptation, responding to the changing dynamics in the factory and labor markets as well as the tone of the political movements engaged in fighting for workers’ rights, reframes Gaskell’s novel. The consistent repetition of scenes featuring Mary followed by scenes featuring Sally offers the audience conflicting conceptions of the effect of the middle-class ideal of domesticity and idleness on working class women. However, these seemingly disparate depictions--Mary as the ideal homemaker and Sally as the fallen woman corrupted by a desire to escape the working class for the stability of the middle--signal the need for a modification in the already existent discourse concerning class relations. Maunder contends that the play “leaves the Victoria audience with an idea of the necessity and the possibility of an alternative employer-employee relation, one that does not accept capitalism without humanitarianism” but more specifically, the adaptation invokes a new “old” system for its audience, calling on them to adopt the return to the paternalistic style of class relations that factory owners like Titus Salt⁸ were attempting to reanimate (16). This system would allow the working class to claim domesticity as the Chartists desired but also reaffirmed clear class boundaries, rejecting any possibility of upward mobility. Courtney’s adaptation, though by no means aggressively subversive, does disrupt the simplified stereotypes of female labor that women encountered across class boundaries, effectively proffering to its audience a new vision of femininity and labor that stitched together pieces of the contemporary dialogue surrounding domesticity, work, and class relations.

Together, Courtney’s adaptations of Jane Eyre and Mary Barton suggest an evolution in the discourse surrounding class relations. For both adaptations, the vast changes that arose due to industrialization and the rise of a middle-class ideal, which eroded the relations between laborers and employers that existed in decades and centuries past with the paternal system, become the focal point. Jane Eyre, in part

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⁸ Titus Salt, a philanthropist from Yorkshire, is most well known for establishing Saltaire, a factory town not far from his hometown of Bradford where the factory workers lived and worked under his care. The factory and town were both well equipped, including “a recreation-ground for the workpeople,” a Sunday School, and well-maintained homes (Belgarnie 254). For more on Titus Salt, See Robert Belgarnie’s Sir Titus Salt, Baronet: His Life and Its Lessons.
due to its rural setting and focus on domestic labor, envisions the paternal system as safe retreat for those who have ventured into the public arena (in this case, Lowood as emblematic of institutional labor). Although this adaptation provides a critique of class relations as developed from the changes in the labor market, it does so as a subtext, simply focusing on the positive elements to be found in the country under an idealized version of paternalism. Mary Barton, however, takes a more critical look at the imposition of middle-class ideology as applied to the working class and suggests instead a melding of middle-class domesticity with the old paternalism as an ideal method for fashioning a method of class interaction that considers the realities and harshness of working class life. However, as it is conceptualized here, it idealizes the relationship between the wealthy/well-off and the poor, Courtney emphasizes the failures of the dominant social structure and simply leaves Mary to remind the audience of how things should be in an ideal paternal world. Ultimately, these adaptations act as a microcosm of the larger discourse of class relations that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. While, as Perkin notes, we can identify various “ideals” for each class, these systems are in no way stable but are rather pliant and interconnected with pieces from various systems blended together at different moments.
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