Title of Paper: Loom(ing) Tragedy: Precarity, Sympathy, and Poetic Exchange in Ellen Johnston’s Autobiography, Poems and Songs

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Abstract:
On December 5, 1863, the working-class Ellen Johnston was dismissed from her position as a power loom weaver in the Verdant Factory in Dundee, Scotland. The dismissal came shortly after a considerable period of unemployment and added to a series of unfortunate circumstances that had affected Johnston’s life: she was abandoned by her biological father as an infant, forced into factory labor at the age of eleven, sexually and emotionally abused by her step-father in adolescence, left homeless at various intervals, and harassed by co-workers in her adult life.

Johnston catalogues these misfortunes in her 1867 Autobiography, Poems and Songs in what Monica Smith Hart calls a “risky act.” While I agree with Smith Hart, I find that – for Johnston – writing was not just “risky,” it was precarious. Following Judith Butler, I define precarity as “a politically-induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks…and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” Unlike riskiness, precarity accounts for the political structures which make it possible for some lives to flourish while others falter. While scholars have previously considered how Johnston candidly discusses her status as a fallen woman and dramatically proclaims herself a “factory exile,” the role of precarity in Johnston’s oeuvre has not been discussed; this essay seek to address that gap. I argue that the intimacy of Johnston’s Autobiography contests the conditions that create precarity and, in doing so, writes back against limited representations of class and gender.

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It is within the massive walls of factory dust and din
That I must woo my humble muse, her favour still to win
It is amidst pestiferous oil that I inhale my breath,
‘Midst pond’rous shafts revolving round the atmosphere of death.

- Ellen Johnston, “Lines to Edith” (1866)

On December 5, 1863, Ellen Johnston was dismissed from her position as a power loom weaver in the Verdant Factory in Dundee, Scotland. The dismissal came shortly after a considerable period of unemployment and added to a series of unfortunate circumstances that had affected Johnston’s life: she was abandoned by her biological father as an infant, forced into factory labor at the age of eleven, sexually and emotionally abused by her stepfather in adolescence, left homeless at various intervals, and harassed by co-workers in her adult life. Thus, Johnston was not exaggerating when she claimed to have “suffered neglect and destitution for some time” (Johnston 14). The dismissal from the Verdant Factory added to this catalogue of misfortunes, especially considering that Johnston’s employment contract required reason or notice for termination, and she was given none at all. “Smart[ing] under” such unjust treatment, Johnston summoned her foreman to court and sued for severance pay, a week’s wages. She won.

Suing for wages was an enormous risk and of great consequence for a woman at this time. So was Johnston’s victory. Readers might expect her to celebrate this at length in her Autobiography, Poems and Songs (1867), but she doesn’t. Her celebration is limited to a single line, where she humbly states, “I gained the case” (14). The brevity of this remark appropriately comments on the ephemerality of Johnston’s victory; although she did gain a week’s wages, she was “persecuted beyond description” on account “of that simple and just law-suit” (14). Speaking of the persecution, which included lies and physical assault, Johnston recalls, “But if I was envied by my sister sex in the Verdant Works for my [poetic] talent before this affair happened, they hated me with a perfect hatred after I had struggled for and gained my rights” (14). Johnston describes how her “sister sex” told “lies of the most vile and disgusting” nature about her character, “assault[ed] her on the streets, spit in her face, and even several times dragged the skirts from [her] dress” as if to symbolically strip her of her legal rights (14). Moreover, anonymous letters were “sent to all the foremen and tenters” directing them not to employ Johnston. As a result, she “wandered through Dundee a famished and persecuted factory exile” for a period of four months following the incident (14).

Johnston fought for her legal rights and won, but she could not celebrate. Rather, she was reminded of her legal and social insignificance.

Johnston will return to this anecdote throughout her Autobiography, Poems and Songs in order to frame her experience in terms of gendered exclusion. Monica Smith Hart suggests that writing about gendered experiences was a “risky act” for Johnston, “one with the potential to harm her when others sought retribution not for what she wrote, but for her writing at all” (78). Writing from a gendered place is always “risky,” even more so when that gendered place is complicated by issues of class and perceived sexual deviance, as it was for Johnston who was considered a fallen woman. However, I find that Smith Hart’s categorization of such writing as “risky” is insufficient. For
Johnston, writing was not just “risky,” in the sense that it involved the possibility of danger, injury, or loss (OED). Rather, writing was precarious. In other words, Johnston’s identity as a working-class woman writer was fraught with danger and risk because she occupies a number of marginalized positions; her identity intersects in culturally precarious ways. Like Judith Butler, I understand and define precarity as “a politically-induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). Unlike riskiness, precarity accounts for the political structures which make it possible for some lives to flourish while others falter. Understanding Johnston’s precarious identities – woman, factory worker, unwed mother, and poet – allows us to appreciate her fame and unique position as the celebrated “Far-Famed Rhyming Nelly.”

While scholars have previously considered how Johnston candidly discusses her status as a fallen woman and dramatically proclaims herself a “factory exile,” the role of precarity in Johnston’s oeuvre has not been discussed. In pairing Johnston’s Autobiography and her poems, the following four sections of this essay seek to address that gap. In the first section, I argue that the intimacy of Johnston’s Autobiography wrote back against limited representations of class and gender. The second section complicates Johnston’s Autobiography by looking at how her poetry prefigures a politics of sympathy, which is later expanded through a series of poetic exchanges between Johnston and her readers. Here, I draw from Adam Smith’s work on moral sentiments to contend that Johnston uses sympathy to affectively mark the conditions of precarity, namely the social limits of class and gender. In the third section, I look to Johnston’s poetic exchanges with her readers to posit that Johnston cultivates community in a way that, as Sara Ahmed states, “undoes the separation of the individual from others” (174). In the final section, I detail the legacy of Johnston’s life, work, and writing. Ultimately, this essay argues that the intimacy of Johnston’s Autobiography, Poems and Songs contests the conditions that create precarity. In its place, Johnston offers a sympathetic connection meant to unite differently classed and gendered individuals in a literary kinship, thus collapsing social differences that would otherwise be insurmountable.

(Loom)ing Tragedy: Ellen Johnston and the Precarity of Representation

Dear reader, should your curiosity have been awakened to ask in what form fate had then so hardly dealt with the hapless ‘Factory Girl,’ this is my answer: - I was falsely accused by those who knew me as a fallen woman, while I was as innocent of the charge as the unborn babe. Oh! how hard to be blamed when the heart is spotless and the conscience clear.

- Ellen Johnston, Autobiography (1867)

1 See Johnston’s “Rhyming Nelly.”
Punctuated by abuse, poverty, and degradation, Johnston’s life, as detailed in her *Autobiography*, was continually at risk of being unnarratable. It would have extremely difficult for a working-class woman to address issues of domestic violence and economic hardship. Yet, Johnston does it. The examples she uses to examine her precarious life are noteworthy; the intimacy she does it with is heroic. This is particularly true for the scenes where Johnston describes the ways in which her stepfather abused her. Johnston does not directly or explicitly explain her relationship with her stepfather, indeed doing so would have been highly offensive to her reading audience. Rather, she refers to him as her “tormentor” and purposefully “draw[s] a veil” over the “mystery of [her] life,” which causes her to “run away…for safety and protection” (13, 9). She reveals this “mystery” to no one, not even to her mother. While the recurrent abuse is certainly figured as the most traumatic of Johnston’s early life experiences, it is not the only injurious situation she faced. The anecdote that opens this essay demonstrates how criticism for being an unwed mother and bouts of unemployment left Johnston on the verge of destitution, unable to care for herself or her daughter. Throughout her life Johnston will struggle to find steady employment, and she often turns to poetry to supplement her income. Neglect, destitution, sorrow, and isolation, themes first outlined in the *Autobiography*, are later echoed throughout Johnston’s verse, in poems such as “My Mother,” “The Suicide,” and “The Factory Exile.” In each example, whether autobiographical, poetic, or both, Johnston interlaces gender and class. She’s never just a woman. She’s never just a worker. Every case, including the opening anecdote, illustrates how Johnston frames her identity as a *working-class woman*, an identity that carries specific social, political, and economic consequences. Johnston’s subject position reveals that nineteenth-century, working-class women have a distinctly precarious identity.

Identity, for Victorian women of all classes, was predicated on domesticity. In many ways, the lives of working-class women, which involved labor outside of the home, conflicted with representations of the ideal, domestic woman. In her monograph *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social Problem Fiction*, Patricia Johnson explains that a working-class woman’s life inherently conflicted with “the Victorian view of ‘the feminine’” (7). Narrating the life of a working-class woman “meant describing the hard labor she was made to perform, the money she earned in full-time or part-time labor, and the strength and independence that these tasks demanded” (7). Focusing on the mid-Victorian fiction that Raymond Williams famously coined “the industrial novels,” Johnson notes a discrepancy between women’s significant contributions to Victorian industry and the deficiency – and sometimes complete absence – of representations of women’s labor in Victorian fiction. Johnson asks why women’s labor, their bodies, and their very existence remain hidden from the pages of Victorian fiction when women’s labor fueled the Industrial Revolution, “making up as much as 60 percent to 80 percent of the workforce in light industries” (1). In large part, as Johnson aptly notes, the factory girl’s class and gender make her representation difficult, “that is, they both demonstrate the masculine bias in the construct of the Victorian working class and the middle-class bias in its construct

2 On her mother’s deathbed, Johnston reveals everything.
of femininity” (8). Class and gender, Johnson reminds us, are composed dynamically and dialogically, meaning that they can only be understood in relation to one another (i.e. the middle-class is understood in relation to the working-class, masculine in relation to feminine). Thus, to narrate the life of a working-class woman meant revealing how class and gender are culturally bound and nearly inseparable; it meant exposing the structures of precarity.

Readers of Autobiography, Poems and Songs of Ellen Johnston, the Factory Girl will immediately notice the ways that class and gender intersect. The title, the poems, and even Johnston’s signature line continually insist that Ellen Johnston is “the Factory Girl.” Johnston’s dual privileging of class and gender demonstrates how identities are lived and experienced as intersectional and highlights the ways in which identity categories themselves are allocated, divided, and unstable. In Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture, Elizabeth Langland traces the intersections of class and gender ideologies through the Victorian icon of the Angel in the House. In considering the tension between gendered and classed representations of the female subject, Langland challenges narratives that seek to naturalize women’s domestic roles. Similarly, Mary Poovey, in her seminal Uneven Developments, considers the interdependence of identity categories. Speaking directly about the cultural positioning of identity, Poovey reminds readers that “women’s control over the terms of representation remained limited by the ways in which the female sex was defined and positioned” (22). Thus, locating women within identity positions of relative helplessness – fallen women, working women, insane women – restricts the ways in which they can be defined and interpreted. Such representations, Poovey shows, are social phenomena, inscribed through cultural reinforcement of histories that cast women in positions of precarity. Adding to this conversation, Lynda Nead describes the “normative trappings of victimhood,” or the ways in which being represented as a victim confines women to strict cultural scripts that promote regulation and limit agency. One need only to look to Mary Barton’s victimized and persecuted Esther Barton (1848), Ruth’s repentant and selfless eponymous heroine (1853), or to Daniel Deronda’s dependent and sorrowful Lydia Glasher (1876) for examples of how the “normative trappings of victimhood” represent working-class and fallen women as desperate, dirty, and despised. In contrast, numerous scholars have noted the ways in which Johnston’s autobiographical representations of fallenness revise cultural assumptions by showing a working-class, fallen woman not only as a feeling and valued member of the community but as a principal character.

The central position of the fallen woman in Johnston’s Autobiography is at odds with Victorian culture’s treatment of fallenness, which culturally inscribes fallen women as dependent victims, tormented and haunted by their past moral transgressions and in dire need of moral guidance. Johnston’s “careful retelling” of her life events, writes Susan Alves, “departs from a Victorian rhetoric of fallenness” by revealing a “self-inscribed fallen woman [who] possesses voice and moral agency” (132). Indeed, Johnston makes no qualms about celebrating the birth of her daughter, Mary Achinvole. Returning to the event in her autobiography years later, Johnston rejects Oliver Goldsmith’s claim that death is the only way to soothe a fallen woman’s melancholy

The Victorian

5
and “wash her guilt away” (10). While Goldsmith anticipates the Victorians obsession with the dangers of fallenness, Johnston only cites his poem in order to negate the restricting narrative it provides for fallen women. In opposition to Goldsmith, Johnston writes, "I did not, however, feel inclined to die when I could no longer conceal what the world falsely calls a woman's shame" (10). Not only did Johnston not die of remorse and shame, but she lived to tell her story, to recount the conditions of her own fallenness. Johnston, as Susan Zlotnick shows, would have known that “openly proclaim[ing] her moral wanderings” was unusual and that “a proper Victorian lady, on becoming a single mother, should engage in some self-destructive display” (20-21). In contrast, Johnston “rejoices in the motherhood that brands her a fallen woman” (21). Zlotnick is right; Johnston does not apologize but that does not mean that she was not aware of her audience’s expectations.

It is not difficult to imagine how challenging it would have been for Johnston – a working-class, fallen woman – to publish let alone solicit the support of some of her subscribers, which include gentlemen, bishops, colonels, and doctors – such as the Duke of Buccleuch and the Earl of Enniskillen. Johnston was able to assuage the more shocking details of her narrative and appeal to an audience concerned with a public women’s moral agency by placing her authorial voice and pen under the influence and instruction of what would have been perceived as her moral superiors. The initial lines of her Autobiography actively and intentionally credit the factory girl’s middle-class friends and subscribers as providing the impetus for writing. In these lines, she humbly claims that she has penned the narrative at the request of friends: “Gentle Reader, - On the suggestion of a friend, and the expressed wishes of some subscribers, I now submit the following brief sketch of my eventful life as an introduction to this long expected and patiently waited for volume” (3). Pointing to these lines, scholars describe Johnston’s voice as “innocent” and that of a “victim of forces and circumstances beyond her own control” (Alves 132; Factory Girl 25). This move relocates the site of authorship from Johnston to her middle-class friends and subscribers and effectively displaces, what would have been perceived as, the immoral and unscrupulous details of her Autobiography. Hence, the conditions that create precarity also make it possible for her to publish and, in this way, provide a sense of liberation, of agency. Johnston does symbolically hand her pen over to her middle-class friends and subscribers, an act that seems to limit her authorial voice. This act, however, draws attention to the structures that create precarity, in this case the idea that a working-class, fallen woman could not and should not have a public voice.

3 Johnston quotes Goldsmith’s “When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly” (1766) in its entirety.
4 Duke of Buccleuch – who subscribed to four copies of Autobiography, Poems and Songs – and the Earl of Enniskillen and the first two names to appear on the subscriber list, which includes a number of other high-ranking individuals as well as others with no titles.
5 Johnston significantly passes the credit of her autobiography to “a friend” – possibly the radical socialist Alexander Campbell, editor of the Glasgow Penny Post from 1860 to 1868.
Yet, as a worker – an employee – Johnston did possess some legal rights. In most cases, she was guaranteed a work contract, which outlined pay and the details of employment. Moreover, as a working woman, she would not have been required to labor more than ten and a half hours each day, per the 1850 Factory Act. Thus, Johnston was – in some respects – legally visible. The factory girl is very much aware of these allowances, and she sings the praises of factory work throughout her poetry. Noting Johnston’s affection toward employment, scholars such as H. Gustav Klaus and Alves have shown that Johnston does celebrate her position as a factory girl in a number of her poems. For instance, Johnston’s most famous line occurs in “An Address to Napier’s Dockyard” where she memorably proclaims, “To be a queen – the nation’s flag unfurl - / A thousand times I’d be a Factory Girl!” (ll. 90-91). Here, Johnston vociferously announces that she would prefer the subjectivity of a Victorian factory girl over that of the Queen of England. Moreover, Johnston celebrates the life of factory workers in “The Workman for Ever.” In the second of four stanzas, Johnston compares the workmen, herself included, to the heroes of Scotland. She writes, “And we feel freedom’s fire as wildly burst o’er us, / As our forefather’s did in the fam’d days of yore” (ll. 15-16). Although these proclamations have a patriotic ring that seems to celebrate her national and class identities, Alves and others have questioned the sincerity of such remarks. Such criticism is justly founded, especially considering that Johnston performed many of these poems at work-funded events where she would have been expected to sing the praises of her employment and employers.

Johnston’s celebration of work is not wholly surprising considering how employment offered a number of legal rights and made her somewhat independent. Yet, when examined in the context of her Autobiography and poems, we cannot forget how difficult life was for a Victorian factory girl. The rights Johnston enjoyed as a factory employee were predicated on being able-bodied and in good health. Thus, illness and injury had dire consequences. In her Autobiography, Johnston recalls one incident where she had been medically advised to leave off work and obtain a “change of air” or she would not live three months longer (11). These recommendations are alarming; Johnston is the sole provider for not only for herself and her daughter, but for her invalid mother and stepfather, who were “unable longer to work” (11). As the breadwinner of her household, Johnston recalls passing a number of sleepless nights considering how best to provide for her family: “…I did not consider myself in duty bound to struggle against the stern realities of nature, and sacrifice my own young life for those whose sympathies for me had been long seared and withered. Yet I could not unmoved, look on the pale face of poverty, for their means were entirely exhausted, without hope to lean on” (11-12). Troubled by economic hardship and facing poverty and even death, Johnston applies to Robert Napier, the man to whom she had presented “Address to Napier’s Dockyard,” and he supplies her with ten pounds, enough to keep her family for five months. Not only does Johnston provide for her family through writing, but she later returns to factory labor, which she continues until her death. Johnston’s physical survival and the survival of her close family members depends on her ability to earn a living wage. These very real material needs create a shared sense of precarity between individuals and bind the factory girl to her family, co-workers, and employers.
“Doom’d a Poor Exile”: Sympathy in Ellen Johnston’s Poetry

Like a storm-battered barque tossed on the sea,
A poor ‘Factory Exile’ she wandered Dundee;

- Ellen Johnston, “The Morning: A Recitation” (1867)

While Johnston’s Autobiography implies that the factory girl enjoyed a level of economic independence, it similarly suggests that the life of a working-class woman was precariously dependent. Dependency is both a “promise and…[a] threat,” meaning that it “establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited…But it also establishes the possibility of being relieved from suffering, of knowing justice and even love” (Butler 61). In other words, the dependent conditions of binding – or what Butler calls “sociality” – create the possibility for cruelty, which Johnston has experienced personally; however, such circumstances can also cultivate sympathy and build communities (61). Johnston’s poetry does just this. In the section that follows, I demonstrate how the use of sympathy in Johnston’s poems establishes connections across social divides, even when there is little reason to believe such sociality is possible. Johnston’s use of fallen women as well-known sentimental figures seeks to produce embodied, sympathetic responses in her readers. More specifically, I show how Johnston asks her readers again and again to look and listen to fallen women situated at the precarious intersections of class and gender. Such women’s bodies are typically absent from Victorian narratives, their voices silenced. Yet, Johnston’s poems place her readers in a position to look, hear, imagine, and – most importantly – sympathize with fallen women.

Sympathy, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries, indicated feeling with as well as feeling for the subject. Adam Smith famously theorizes the concept of sympathy in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), in which he offers the imagination as the appropriate space to engender sympathy. It is only through the imagination, writes Smith, that we can “form any conception of what are [another’s] sensations….It is the impression of our own senses only, not those of [another’s], which our imaginations copy” (9). Smith’s theory places a spectator at “ease” in proximity of a sufferer to show how the impression of the senses, including the practice of looking, upsets a position of comfort by asking the spectator to “conceiv[e] what [he] should feel in the like situation” (9). Smith emphasizes that, through sensory experience and the imagination, we conceive ourselves as enduring the suffering of another and, in doing so, “we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him” (4). In other words, sympathy, as a “fellow-feeling for the misery of others,” is produced when someone else’s suffering is “brought home to ourselves” (4).

Smith’s emphasis on “[bringing] home” the suffering of another does not necessarily mean that the observer has the same experience as the sufferer. Rather, the “fellow-feeling” is created when the observer filters that suffering through his or her own experience. In this way, Johnston’s poetry might be read as an attempt to create a fellow-feeling; the poetry challenges readers to feel with as well as feel for the suffering victim. Thus, it makes sense for Johnston to highlight suffering as a means to elicit sympathy for her fallen women. If sympathy is to be enacted, the audience – who, as I
have shown, was highly influenced by middle-class standards of morality – must sympathize with the plight of the seemingly less virtuous. In connecting morality to sympathy, including the sentimental figure of the suffering victim, Fred Kaplan has persuasively argued that, “most Victorians believed that the human community was one of shared moral feelings, and that sentimentality was a desirable way of feeling and of expressing ourselves morally” (7). Johnston’s repeated emphasis on her own fallenness, coupled with her fictional representation of fallen women, works toward such a shared moral feeling by forcing the sufferer and a spectator / reader at ease to engage with one another through the pages of the text, producing tears and connecting individuals.

The use of the suffering victim to produce sympathy in readers, so that they might feel with and feel for the fallen woman, is perhaps nowhere more clear than in Johnston’s poem “The Maniac of the Green Wood.” In this poem, an unnamed speaker observes and narrates the deterioration of the mind and body of a wronged woman. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker recalls the woman’s childhood:

I saw her when a little child,
Her heart from care was free,
‘Twining a wreath of May flowers wild
Beneath a greenwood tree.
She wondered how they withered
In her little hands so soon:
…Ah! She knew not in these hours
What ere long would be her doom;
That, just like her wreaths of flowers,
She would wither in her bloom. (ll. 1-6, 17-18)

Although the poem will later insist that a woman’s fate is predetermined to end in tragedy, this woman, in her youth, has no apprehension or fear of danger: “For her heart it knew no sorrow, / Her doom was not in view” (ll. 25-26). Similarly, in these early lines, the speaker’s knowledge of the woman’s future is limited to what he can observe: he perceives a youthful, carefree child “Going gladly to the school” with a “…bright and sunny curl / Deck[ing] her features calm and cool” (ll. 18, 19-20). It is only in retrospect that the woman, the speaker, and – by proxy – the reader, understand the woman’s disastrous fate.

Realization of the woman’s terrible fate is marked by tears. As Peaches Henry has effectively shown in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry, crying compels readers to gaze upon the weeping victim “so that the depth of [its] deprivation becomes visible” (545). The gaze of Johnston’s speaker rests on the woman. He recalls seeing her after her fall, sitting alone under the shady greenwood:

And she seemed as she was musing
On some fair and lovely youth; …
Ah! too true, she had been thinking
Of her first and only love;…
Then I heard her weeping sadly

6 Johnston does not specify the speaker’s gender. However, considering that the woman mistakes the speaker for her absent lover, Henry, I will refer to the speaker as “he.”
Within that same greenwood
Where I heard her singing gladly
In days of her childhood…
All youth’s joys she had forgotten,
In her memory they lay dead;
Her false lover’s vows were broken,
And her reason it was fled. (ll. 41-42, 45-46, 53-56, 61-64)

At first, the speaker does not hear the woman’s cry and, therefore, relies on what he sees. His gaze leads him, at least initially, to draw the incorrect conclusion that the woman is happily musing on her lover. It is not until he hears the woman weeping that her sorrow is made comprehensible. Crying – an action at the boundary of sound and language – highlights the woman’s loss and interrogates the types of utterance possible at the limits of grief, longing, and isolation. However, unlike Johnston, who loudly trumpets her fallenness, this woman voices a soft, almost inaudible cry.

The woman’s cry is compounded by the immobility of her body. The speaker notices that the woman ceases gathering flowers “To wreath around her brow” (ll. 58). Moreover, like dying foliage, the woman’s body begins to wilt: “Her slender form was withering / Like leaf on broken bow” (ll. 59-60). It is as if the woman’s body has ceased to function; she has begun to wither – to fade, decay, decline, and dry up (OED). Like most literary fallen women before her, whose bodies and stories are marginalized and often excluded from narratives, the body and voice of Johnston’s fallen woman is similarly withering from the poem. Indeed, after this moment, the narrator observes the woman in positions that shrink her frame: he sees the woman stooping and then “prostrate lying,” actions that suggest her body is in fact disappearing (ll. 49, 65). The sight of the woman’s withering frame, coupled with the sound of her cries, communicates an overpowering sense of mourning and isolation that is not lost on the speaker, whose pity is punctuated by his falling tears.

The speaker’s tears accompany a realization that grief has transformed the woman into a maniac; overcome and “affected by mania,” the woman is “raving with madness” (OED). In this scene, the speaker observes the woman / maniac as she stoops over a stream. The woman speaks directly to the narrator, mistaking him for her lover:

She cried – ‘I see him now!’
‘Ah! ’tis Henry; yes, I know him - …
And see how his tears are flowing –
He sheds those tears for me.’
She had thought I was her lover,
And called me by his name. (ll. 68-74)

The collapse between the speaker and the lover signifies a pivotal, significant shift into sympathy. The speaker, in this moment, is no longer a spectator, passively observing from the margins, but has instead entered into the woman / maniac’s story. Her suffering has been “brought home,” in Smith’s terminology, and the speaker is compelled to a “fellow feeling,” as highlighted by his falling tears. The tears, a visible marker of the speaker’s sympathy, show that the speaker is no longer “at ease” but, has been disrupted, affected. Yet, rather than act on his feelings, the speaker, like the woman / maniac, is rendered immobile. Although he sees the woman lying on the ground and hears “her mother weeping” and her “father breathe a prayer,” the speaker
is unable to do anything (ll. 85, 86). Frozen by the magnitude of the situation, he can only listen and watch as the woman “heav[es] a heavy sigh” and ascends to heaven: “Life’s golden cords had broken, / Her soul had winged on high” (ll. 99-100). Along with the poem’s insistent, heavy rhyme, the “golden cords” serve to remind readers of the perilous “snares on woman’s path,” which entrap and bind women to dangerous and precarious positions, ultimately leading to their disappearance or death (ll. 34).

The “snares on woman’s path” are personified in Johnston’s “Love Outwitted.” Here, the sly and deceitful Love attempts to destroy Genius, an innocent young woman. Unlike “The Maniac of the Green Wood,” where the precarity of the fallen woman’s subject position binds her to a withering, shrinking state, “Love Outwitted” features a heroine whose cunning and wit work to unbind. The poem opens by describing how the snares work to trick and trap young women:

As youthful love one day was straying
He stole in to a rosy bower,
Where Genius sat her time betraying
Musing on a fragrant flower…. 
Like a thief he stole behind her,
Fear’d lest she might him descry,
And in his golden chains to bind her,
He this artful plan did try. (ll. 1-4, 9-12)

Significantly, Johnston describes Love as a thief, as one who is seeking to steal the innocence of the young Genius. Moreover, the golden cords reappear in these opening lines, now figured as chains, to represent the ways that fate is fixed and binding. Love certainly does plot to fix and bind the “handsome, young, and pretty” Genius (ll. 5). After purposefully falling into Genius’s arms, the artful Love “plunge[s] his dart” into her breast and “heave[s] his chains round her young and happy heart” (ll. 33-34).

Genius, however, is quite a match for Love. She listens patiently as Love “firmly weave[s]” his artful lies and watches closely as Love twists his heavy chains: “Genius looked not melancholy, / Nor showed that she his chains defied” (ll. 35, 37-38). All the while, Genius is constructing a plan to unlink each knot:

Soon his boastings I will scatter,
His hopes I’ll prostrate in decay,
Unlink each knot while him I flatter,
Then laugh at him and fly away. (ll. 33-36)

The grammatical inversion in these lines – which emphasizes the verbs “scatter,” “prostrate,” and “flatter” – highlights Genius’s action, her agency. Indeed, Genius ultimately outwits Love through flattery, freeing herself from the permanence of a fate

7 In the nineteenth-century, “flatter” could mean “to persuade,” but it could also be used to describe one who “couples and uncouples trucks at a flat in a coal mine” (OED). Like the coal laborer, Genius labors to uncouple the links of the chain that have been woven around her. Most likely, Johnston would have been aware of the use of the word in this context, which would explicitly link Genius’s labor to an industrial context and her body to the industrial world, thus making her escape even more celebratory.
that would wither her body and her mind. Furthermore, near the end of the poem, Genius uses flattery to enact her plan:

Oh love! Thou art a golden light
That leads us to the path of hope,
And cheers us on through sorrow’s night,
While thus she said she loosed a knot. (ll. 49-52)

Genius undoes and unties Love’s chains while she speaks. Her unbinding is echoed in the verse, as the loosening of the knot in the final line undoes the rhyme scheme. Not only does this act of loosening set Genius apart from Love, but it also differentiates her from the woman / maniac; the woman / maniac withers away, whereas Genius is a woman of pronounced physical and mental strength.

Genius’s escape predicts the literary mobility Johnston will later experience in a series of public, poetic exchanges. Along with a middle and upper-class readership, Johnston’s poetry attracted “poetic sisters as well as epistolary lovers” who not only wrote but exchanged poems with the factory girl (Working Class Women Poets 200). In this way, Johnston’s Autobiography, Poems and Songs offers a non-hierarchical space where differently classed and diversely social bodies come together in a lateral exchange. A lateral exchange, in this sense, opposes the benefactor-victim relationship so often associated with the fallen woman and, instead, constructs a balanced and even relationship based on sympathetic understanding. As the following section of this essay demonstrates, lateral exchange moves sympathy from tears – a visible reminder or readers’ pity – to poetic response – a vehicle for conversation and community.

**Songs of “The Far Famed Rhyming Nelly”: Mobility, Exchange, and Poetic Response**

*I had not been long in my present situation when I fortunately became a reader of the ‘Penny Post,’ and shortly afterwards contributed some pieces to the ‘Poet’s Corner,’ which seemed to cast a mystic spell over many of its readers whose numerous letters reached me from various districts, highly applauding my contributions, and offering me their sympathy, friendship, and love.*


Inspired by Johnston’s poetic contributions to the *Penny Post*, where she published regularly from March 4, 1865 until June 20, 1868, six women poets wrote responses to “The Factory Girl;” Johnston replied directly to three of these women (“The ‘Queen’” 505; Working Class Women Poets 200). Florence Boos posits that the anonymous Edith, a middle-class reader who was deeply affected by Johnston’s work, was the poetic “sister” who became most important to the factory girl (200). In one poem, Edith asks what led Johnston to write poetry:

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They ask me girl, what made thee sing
‘Mid din of shuttle and of loom –
‘Mid steam and dust and ceaseless ring
Of cotton wheels in factory room. (“Lines by Edith to the Factory Girl” ll. 1-4)

Edith asks Johnston not only why but how she is able to thrive in such an oppressive environment; how can Johnston even think of singing – an action of joy, of hope, of celebration – in such a precarious setting? More impressive, though, is the rhythmic engagement with the factory girl’s verse. The iambic tetrameter and heavy rhyme of Edith’s lines imitates the hyper-predictable form of “The Maniac of the Green Wood” and “Love Outwitted” as well as some of Johnston’s other poems, such as “The Suicide” and “The Gowan and the Buttercup.” Edith proudly acknowledges her metrical impersonation and asserts that the factory girl’s “witching strains taught [her] rude harp to sing” (“Welcome and Appeal for the ‘Maid of Dundee’” ll. 70).

Johnston responds by echoing Edith’s poem: “They ask thee, Edith, why I sing
‘Mid factory din, its dust and gloom” (“The Factory Girl’s Reply to ‘Lines by Edith’” ll. 1-2). The remainder of the poem, which autobiographically recounts the emotional and physical violence in the factory girl’s life, multiplies the confining, oppressive structures that stifle the poet’s voice. Moreover, “The Factory Girl’s Reply to ‘Lines by Edith’” stunningly resembles “The Maniac of the Green Wood” in content as well as form. Recalling her childhood, Johnston writes:

While yet a child, scarce six years old,
Musing on nature’s carpet sod,
Among the fields like waving gold,
I prized the works of nature’s God….
But like the linnet in the linn
That’s caught and caged in prison air,
They forced me midst the factory’s din
To chase my fairy phantoms there. (ll. 9-12, 21-24)

Johnston does chase her “fairy phantoms,” or romantic ideals, into the factory. It is in this industrial space that Johnston dreams of her first love’s “golden smiles” and the “vows he did impart” (ll. 28, 29). But, like the woman from “Maniac of the Green Wood,” Johnston is deserted; her lover flees, abandoning her to isolation and ruin: “And with his false bewitching wiles / He stole away my trusting heart;… / Then left me with a look of scorn (ll. 30-31, 34). Although scorned, grieved, and wrecked, Johnston does not wither and die like her woman / maniac. Instead, she sings:

Yet still I sung, though all in vain,
While year in sorrow followed year,
When all at once like magic strain
My harp burst on the world’s ear. (ll. 37-40)

Although Johnston slightly exaggerates – her poetry reached a fairly limited audience – it is poetry that saves her from withering away, from disappearing. Poetry creates community and, in doing so, allows Johnston to thrive amidst precarity. This exchange between Edith and Johnston, which is representative of Johnston’s relationships with many of her readers, illustrates how words and poetic forms are passed between
speakers, echoing in their resonance and connecting differently gendered and classed subjects who will never actually meet.

Numerous scholars have noticed Johnston’s effect on her readers. Boos remarks that Johnston was the first woman poet to appear in the “Notices to Correspondents” section of the *Penny Post* and, while other poets certainly developed relationships with their readers, Johnston’s “long series of epistolary poems of friendship” is notable (“The ‘Queen’” 508, 509). As Boos rightly points out, Johnston’s relationships with her readers are enduring. These exchanges, which as Judith Rosen notes “concentrate on messages of friendship and encouragement,” express sentiments that are endearing and distinctly intimate: “the pieces are often less notable for their content than for the deep sense of needed recognition and camaraderie they express” (223). Noting that a majority of Johnston’s readers and poetic correspondents were women, Hart Smith suggests that Johnston’s verse “inspired other members of the working-classes to write poetry” and that Johnston’s “example was potent and powerful, and her actions gave others the courage to enter into a world they were told was beyond their reach” (86). In fact, Rosen finds that many of Johnston’s poems were modeled on popular songs and, therefore, may have been meant to be read aloud, sung together. This accounts, at least in part, for the heavy, predictable rhyme of the verse, which would have aided in memorization.

In their shared capacity, the poems imagine an implied community that moves beyond the *feeling for* and into the *feeling and singing with* of sympathy. Certainly, Johnston was able to model how a working-class women poet could not only write but publicly engage with her audience. Joanne Dobson, speaking about how literary sentimentalism creates communal feeling, argues that sympathy “is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal” (536). Johnston’s readers can attest to such a feeling. In “Lines to Ellen, the Factory Girl,” the working-class Isabel expresses her kindred relationship with the poet: “I know that you, like me, are forced your bread to win” (ll. 7). Isabel claims to have been moved by Johnston’s “feeling” and “sensitive” heart and suggests that the “silver lining” of Johnston’s poetry allows her to endure the “duties of the day” (ll. 9, 21, 30, 26). Speaking of her sympathy for Johnston, Isabel writes, “A year ago this very month I heard your touching song - / Your last farewell to your betrothed, just after he had gone; / My thoughts were with you ever since” (ll. 13-15). Isabel’s lines emphasize a connection that spans distance. Although they will never physically meet, the women exchange thoughts and feelings through poetry.

Johnston expresses a similar sentiment in her “Lines to Isabel from the Factory Girl.” The poem opens with a reflection on the speaker’s isolation as she sits “all alone” in her “lonely room” (ll. 5, 2). Despite her seclusion, Isabel’s poetic response stirs Johnston: “Dear Isabel, methinks I hear thee singing - / Thy plaintive strain my soul’s deep fount doth stir” (ll. 13-14). Upon the act of reading, Johnston’s body sympathetically responds and the “well-stream” of her heart “spring[s]” into motion (ll. 15). In this jubilant act of reading, Johnston finds that her heart has once again been bound. This time, however, the heart is bound with musical chords. Unlike life’s “golden cords” or Love’s heavy chains, which ensnare and trap, these poetic chords are liberating. Speaking to Isabel, Johnston embraces being bound to a poetic sisterhood: “For like my sister Edith thou dost bind me / With chords of melody around my heart”
(ll. 35-36). Here, Johnston revises the poetic figures of the woman / maniac and Genius, who are bound to fate’s cords. The “chords of melody” impress rather than oppress; they signal poetic voice and movement and allow for the free exchange of sympathy between poetic speakers.

Moreover, Edith and Isabel are not the only readers to be moved by Johnston’s verse. One reader, David Morrison, describes hearing Johnston’s “sweeter strain” on the gale, feeling “all enchanted,” and pouring out his own song in an echoing resonance: “I’ll waft my songs upon the gale, / And try to imitate her too” (“To the Factory Girl” ll. 5, 16, 19-20). Similarly, readers describe hearing “that strain again,” Johnston’s “soul-inspiring” verse that “wake[s]” their muse and fills them with a “love that more and more doth grow” (“Lines by Edith” ll. 5, 8; “To the Factory Girl” ll. 12). Over and over again they ask her to “sing on” and to “chant forth thy soul-inspiring song of glee” (189). These exchanges are full of longing; they communicate solidarity through networks that challenge the conditions of precarity.

**Conclusion: Manufacturing Textiles as well as Tears**

_What we call literature, and what we teach,_

_is what the middle class — and not the working class — produced._

- Martha Vicinus, _The Industrial Muse_

Johnston, who worked in a factory beginning in her childhood and continued throughout her entire adult life, wrote prolifically for the periodical press, and published two editions of _Autobiography, Poems and Songs_, offers one of the most complete accounts available of a Victorian woman’s working-class life. Yet, while she managed to labor both in the factory and on the page and encouraged a fair number of admirers, Johnston ultimately fell into relative obscurity. The factory girl’s final appeal, in January of 1873, appeared as a brief few lines in the _Penny Post_. It reads as follows: “We are sorry to learn that our old contributor, Ellen Johnston, has been very ill, and is in very distressed circumstances. Some of her old admirers might, perhaps, be inclined to give a little to assist her; and, if they forward anything to our office, it will give us great pleasure to hand it over to her” (as qtd. in “The ‘Queen’” 520). Klaus has shown that Johnston’s distress may have begun a number of years earlier, in 1870, when she applied for poor relief less than a year after the second, expanded edition of her poetry was published (“New Light” 430). Unfortunately, it appears that substantial aid did not arrive. Klaus, following earlier conjectures by Boos and others, confirms that “there is now stronger evidence than before that [Ellen Johnston] may be the ‘Helen’ Johnston who died in the Barony Poorhouse on 20 April 1874” (“New Light” 431). Thus, while

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9 The notice was most likely penned by the new editor of the _Penny Post_, James Watt.

10 As a result of this second edition, Johnston received £50 from Royal Bounty plus another £5 from Queen Victoria in 1868. Unfortunately, it seems that these funds were not enough to raise the factory girl from distress.
the factory girl may have experienced a brief stretch of success during her life, she unfortunately died alone and in poverty.

It might seem as though Johnston met with the fallen woman’s fate after all. Although she does attempt to throw off the oppressive cords and normative trappings of victimhood, as a working-class, fallen woman poet, she is inevitably stuck in a precarious position. While her death appears to have passed comparatively unnoticed, her struggle for recognition and her work toward fairer and more appropriate representations for working women cannot be discounted. Johnston’s narrative and her poetry are her final appeal, where each written word was meant to be shared. Johnston’s work reminds us that bodies exist in proximity to one another and are bound to one another. To say that Johnston’s poems challenge the conditions that make a life precarious is not to say that they substantially alter the material and social conditions for all working women. However, her work has clear political consequences. It emerges from scenes of extraordinary subjugation and remains proof of what forms vulnerability and precariousness can take. Ultimately, the poems and responses are critical acts of resistance; they transmit feeling on and through fictional bodies and into lived, physical ones.
The Victorian

Works Cited


