



“Oh Dear! How the Factory Girls Do Rig Up!”: Lowell’s Self-Fashioning Workingwomen

SYLVIA JENKINS COOK

What expansion of mind!—what awakening of dormant powers!
Wellington was not prouder, when he gained the field of Water-
loo, than I was with that gown.

—*Lowell Offering*, 1845

IN 1846, the militant newspaper the *Voice of Industry* accused New England mill recruiters of luring young women with promises that they would “dress in silks and spend half their time in reading.”¹ During the previous two centuries, fashionable dress and literary pursuits, compelling metonyms of desire, had been central to wide-ranging debates about the changing aspirations of the elite and, later, middle-class women of both Europe and North America. Now, the intrusion of working-class women dramatically altered those earlier controversies about female development and identity. If an affluent woman had come to define herself “by what she read . . . at least as much as by how she dressed, what she ate, or how she furnished her house,”² what was wholly new in the 1840s was that factory workers—women who lived in crowded boardinghouses, labored long hours over dangerous and deafening machines, and paid for their new acquisitions

¹Editorial, “Recruitment of Female Operatives,” *Voice of Industry*, 2 January 1846.

²Mary Ellen Lamb, “Inventing the Early Modern Woman Reader through the World of Goods: Lyly’s Gentlewoman Reader and Katherine Stubbes,” in *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 17.

The New England Quarterly, vol. LXXXIII, no. 2 (June 2010). © 2010 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved.

and accomplishments with their own hard-earned wages—were articulating those same enthusiasms for the adornments of body and mind.³ Not only were they reading books, wearing gold watches, and purchasing sweetmeats, they were also beginning to write and publish their own literary magazine, the *Lowell Offering* (1840–45), soon to be skillfully shaped by editor Harriet Farley. Emboldened by their newfound capacity to signify, workingwomen examined—but did not necessarily emulate—middle-class forms of conduct and self-expression. In the process, they created a body of literature about their own lives that proposed—sometimes playfully, sometimes very seriously—that they, and not the ladies, were the real heralds of the modern American woman.



Dress has been eloquently described as “the frontier between the self and the not-self,” a phrase equally applicable to works of the literary imagination, which are similarly situated at the boundary between the solitary individual and the encompassing world, between the mind and its material embodiment.⁴

³Contemporaries frequently commented on female factory workers’ penchant for fashionable dress, as have modern researchers. See *Catharine Williams, Fall River: An Authentic Narrative* (1833), ed. Patricia Caldwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 68–69; Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842; New York: Modern Library, 1996), pp. 86–87; Henry Adolphus Miles, *Lowell, As It Was, and As It Is* (1846; New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 125; William Scoresby, *American Factories and Their Female Operatives* (1845; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), pp. 16, 28, 62; Stephen A. Mrozowski, Grace H. Ziesing, and Mary C. Beaudry, eds., *Living on the Boott: Historical Archeology at the Boott Mills Boardinghouses, Lowell, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), pp. 75–80; and Joan Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840–1900* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1995), pp. 4–6. The female factory workers of Lowell and other New England towns have been scrutinized by scholars of nineteenth-century romanticism, class, gender, and literacy. On workers’ dress, see esp. Elizabeth Freeman, “What Factory Girls Had Power to Do: The Techno-logic of Working-Class Feminine Publicity in *The Lowell Offering*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 50.2 (Spring 1994): 113, and Tom Allen, “Melville’s ‘Factory Girls’: Feminizing the Future,” *Studies in American Fiction* 31.1 (Spring 2003): 50. For an important historical study of the intersection of fashion, fiction, and factory workers later in the nineteenth century, see Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁴Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 3.

Although clothing and books are powerful languages of signification in all modern societies, nineteenth-century factory women found in them a particularly appropriate form of mediation between their interior, private existence and their exterior, public revelation of themselves. Traveling from remote farms to New England mill towns with a trunk or a few handboxes containing all their earthly possessions, operatives must have been peculiarly conscious that their clothes, books, and writing materials constituted the major share of their personal belongings, and indeed of what they were ever liable to own.⁵ Compared to men, or to more affluent women, workingwomen were not likely to accumulate fortunes, estates, art, professional fame, or social repute. The immediate impact of what they wore, read, and wrote was heightened in part because their other modes of self-assertion and accomplishment were so limited. Female factory operatives were a group of discrete individuals with ordinary resources but a most extraordinary opportunity to scrutinize and communicate themselves. Their dress and literacy were thus fraught with conflicting concerns about identity and self-expression—with ideals of aspiration, achievement, taste, and innovation and with accusations of selfishness, vanity, frivolity, and emulation—that imposed an unusual burden of importance on the everyday evidence of their existence.

Thomas Carlyle had written metaphorically in 1834 that clothes were “unspeakably significant”;⁶ less than a decade later, American factory women tried to articulate this meaning within the realm of their personal experience. In doing so, they were reacting to a broad and long-standing debate that had emerged in the West in tandem with early modern capitalism and the expansion of a literate and affluent middle class.⁷ Economic and social transformations in the late seventeenth

⁵See Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle* (1898; Kailua, Hawaii: Press Pacifica, 1976), p. 39, for her account of the arrival of workers “with their arms brimful of handboxes containing all their worldly goods.”

⁶Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (1836), ed. Charles Frederick Harold (New York: Odyssey Press, 1937), p. 72.

⁷See Brayman Hackel and Kelly’s intro. to *Reading Women*; see also Robert Darn-ton, “First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” in *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, ed. James Machor and Philip Goldstein (New York: Routledge,

and eighteenth centuries enabled women to engage in forms of self-expression more openly than before, which renewed age-old concerns about the relationship of female virtue and taste to restricted mental activity and worldly limitations. Historians of female literacy have noted that, as early as the seventeenth century, women's desire to possess books was linked to their acquisitiveness, materialism, and general propensity for display or, more ominously, that "the reading woman was associated with the shopping woman."⁸ In the North American colonies, as T. H. Breen has argued, women enthusiastically embraced the latest imports of British goods, in the process raising fears that "new kinds of women who seemed bent on taking control of their own self-fashioning" would disrupt the social fabric. At the same time, enhanced access to British books encouraged what Mary Kelley has called the "crafting of subjectivities" among American women readers. The sheer abundance of such physical and intellectual embellishments exacerbated anxieties about the future survival of women's vaunted "moderation, virtue, and femininity," gendered concerns that were at the time still largely free of the complications of class.⁹

American women who participated in the world of polite letters and salons, which began to flourish in the eighteenth century, were affluent elites. Boarding schools and academies prepared young ladies for their future roles as wives of prominent men and educators of their children, but the young women's expanded literacy stressed, as Kelley has demonstrated, the cultivation of taste as a marker of established social status. Rather than serving as a model for extending populist education, "this exemplar of republican virtue was designed as a rebuke to the practices of aristocratic luxury and the vulgarity

2001), pp. 160–79; Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and the subsequent debates in *Journal of the Early Republic* 28.1 (2008).

⁸Brayman Hackel and Kelly, *Reading Women*, p. 8.

⁹T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 173; Mary Kelley, "Crafting Subjectivities: Women, Reading, and Self-Imagining," in Brayman Hackel and Kelly, *Reading Women*, pp. 55–71. See also Catherine E. Kelly, "Reading and the Problem of Accomplishment" in the same collection, pp. 127–28.

of the lower orders.”¹⁰ After the Revolution, the development of female literacy and support for women’s contributions to the cultural and intellectual growth of the new republic continued to focus on middle-class girls and young women who would go on to mother the leaders of the new nation.

But while middle-class women were increasingly the beneficiaries of a privileged education, early-nineteenth-century wage-earning factory workers were also acquiring the tools of literacy in an expanding public school system as well as through libraries, lyceums, and improvement societies. Indeed Lowell operatives were manifesting such literary enthusiasm that, by 1838, “reading in the mill” became official grounds for dismissal.¹¹ Such “lower-class female literacies” challenged “(white) middle-class women’s national dominance of domesticated reading and writing,” asserts Sarah Robbins, for they exposed the nation’s “seemingly incompatible agendas” of extending and democratizing literary culture while also reinforcing class distinctions.¹²

The realm of fashionable dress—whose availability, like that of books, had been dramatically extended during the eighteenth century—exhibited a parallel incongruity.¹³ A knowledge of clothing style had, like the love of reading, attracted contrary sets of values—good taste, refinement, and self-development but also frivolity, vanity, and self-indulgence. As with reading,

¹⁰Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, p. 25. For a history of American literary culture in the period, see David S. Shields, “Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 434–76. See also Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 189–93.

¹¹See Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 96–97, 104–9, and David A. Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties: New England Workers and the Mechanized Factory System, 1815–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 150.

¹²Sarah Robbins, *Managing Literacy, Mothering America: Women’s Narratives on Reading and Writing in the Nineteenth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), pp. 83, 76.

¹³See Marla R. Miller, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp. 30–33, who observes that “style and literacy went hand in hand” (p. 47).

the allure of fashion and its dangers escalated as new resources came within the reach of women outside the wealthy bourgeoisie. Middle-class women who rebelled against the policing of their own reading but who nonetheless defended their preferences as the cultural norm displayed similar patterns of behavior with respect to dress. In the post-Revolutionary United States, those who critiqued fashion, like those who appraised reading, rapidly factionalized into the contesting camps of republican virtue and democratic egalitarianism. In the right hands, fashionable clothing might serve as a symbol of civilized restraint, American independence, and stable values. In the wrong hands (perhaps “hands’” hands), it could prove vulgar and foolish, a sign of decadent foreign influences, crass materialism, and of a society increasingly captivated by the merely novel and ephemeral.

Conflicting attitudes about women’s dress and reading played out in the nation’s magazines. In New England, one of the most engaged disputants was Sarah Josepha Hale, who used her *Ladies’ Magazine* (1828–37) to admonish her female readers about republican fashion and women’s literacy.¹⁴ Initially, Hale set out to present a literary miscellany to readers of “all classes and both sexes.” Even in her introductory editorial, however, Hale narrowed this ideal, democratic audience to a more refined target—the lady—admirable for the “discharge of her domestic duties,” “delicacy of feeling,” and “love of retirement,” and she promised that the new magazine would assist her in becoming “a rational companion” to her husband and a “competent” mother to her children.¹⁵ Still, New England factory workers, who did not fail to observe the difference between their own situation and that of sheltered wives and mothers, read Hale’s magazine with interest.

¹⁴Hale edited the *Ladies’ Magazine* in Boston from 1828 until 1836. In 1837 she took over the editorship of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in Philadelphia. I refer throughout to the “*Ladies’ Magazine*,” although it underwent several minor alterations in its name. See Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1850* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 349 n. 34. The *Ladies’ Magazine* is accessible through Harvard University’s Open Collections Program, *Working Women, 1800–1930*, <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/>.

¹⁵*Ladies’ Magazine*, January 1828, pp. 1, 2.

Present-day historians of books and literacy have noted how the early-nineteenth-century female reader became “a lightning rod for anxieties about sexuality, gender, class, and power,” and indeed Hale’s impassioned rhetoric on right reading is matched only by her extravagant meditations on proper dress.¹⁶ In the *Ladies’ Magazine*, as elsewhere, controversies over women’s reading tended to focus on novels. Although first claiming that fiction was “an unhappy innovation in our libraries,” Hale was soon obliged to acknowledge that novels were becoming as necessary as tea and, when “temperately indulged in,” a preferable addiction to alcohol.¹⁷ With equal pragmatism, Hale, who had pronounced in an early issue how absurd it was that fashionable dress should be “worshipped by republicans,” revised her opinion and published what was essentially a manifesto on American fashion, a work whose language and rhythms presaged “The American Scholar” of 1837, Emerson’s later literary declaration of independence.¹⁸ In June 1830, Hale asked:

Are we always to be indebted to London and Paris, for our modes of dress? Shall the tasteful and elegant ladies of Boston and New-York never venture to decide on the proper and becoming for themselves? Shall we never be fashionably independent—republicans in costume as well as character? Our pride, if we have no principle that revolts from thus being the servile imitators of all the extravagant and absurd European modes of dress, should make us more rational and national.¹⁹

However, a month after this plea for fashionable self-awareness appeared, the magazine published a diatribe by “L. E.” of “Portsmouth,” who dismissed both fashionable and fictional indulgences for undermining the enduring obligations of duty. In censuring the fashion-conscious woman, “L. E.” specifically associated her with the decadent fiction-reading woman: she spent “her afternoons in lounging over the last novel,

¹⁶See Brayman Hackel and Kelly, *Reading Women*, p. 3.

¹⁷*Ladies’ Magazine*, January 1828, p. 47, and April 1828, p. 147.

¹⁸*Ladies’ Magazine*, June 1828, p. 243.

¹⁹*Ladies’ Magazine*, June 1830, p. 279.

and her evenings in a constant round of dissipation.”²⁰ Four months later, in November 1830, the magazine announced an “engraving of the newest fashion for ladies’ dresses,” “a new thing in the Ladies’ Magazine,” which was accompanied by the pronouncement that “[t]he study of the graceful and becoming in costume is not of trifling importance to women.”²¹

When she first began printing engravings of fashionable ladies’ dresses, Hale conceded that “Those who think all great events must be determined by great causes will probably smile to find the ladies’ fashions named on the same page with national independence.”²² Her continuing campaigns for republican simplicity and against the servile imitation of foreign dress styles were thenceforward increasingly accompanied by fashion plates. Later she admitted both her initial, principled opposition and her subsequent, practical acquiescence:

When the Ladies’ Magazine was first established, I resolved not to ornament it with the “Fashions,” because I could not, conscientiously, consent to the introduction of pictures which might, in any degree, excite, or sanction, the rage for foreign fashions, which I so heartily disapprove. But reflection, and the counsel of judicious friends, have changed my plan.²³

Hale’s fleeting disclosure intimates a largely undeveloped ironic possibility in the *Ladies’ Magazine*, which reflects but does not reflect upon the paradox of its simultaneous denigration and promotion of fashion, a paradox evident as well in the periodical’s contradictory treatments of women’s reading.²⁴ Though disparaging transatlantic novels as “debased ebullitions of disordered intellects,” the *Ladies’ Magazine* diligently reviewed tales of depravity and vice while inveighing against their danger to national and republican ideals.²⁵ Also publishing a great

²⁰*Ladies’ Magazine*, July 1830, p. 314.

²¹*Ladies’ Magazine*, November 1830, p. 487.

²²*Ladies’ Magazine*, November 1830, p. 488.

²³*Ladies’ Magazine*, January 1832, p. 3.

²⁴*Ladies’ Magazine*, January 1832, p. 3.

²⁵*Ladies’ Magazine*, August 1833, p. 352.

deal of original fiction, Hale recognized that both fashion and fiction appealed to a widespread fascination with all that was new in America's accelerating and expanding society.

As editor of the *Ladies' Magazine*, Hale was clearly a beneficiary of the desire for novelty, especially among women, but she was also wary of it. Not only might novelty signal triviality and lack of moral seriousness, but early adopters who were not, in fact, "ladies" might usurp or encroach upon the privileges of the established social order. Observing wryly that, in the American republic, "the poor must be in the fashion," she emphasized the need for ladies to model good taste for the lower classes to emulate.²⁶ In the realm of reading, she insisted that "[p]ublic taste requires correcting" and recommended that educated women counter inferior tendencies toward the "trashy and vapid."²⁷ In an interesting blurring of the boundary between the accomplished female mind and the tastefully clad female body, Hale warned American ladies "of superior intellect" that they must not underestimate the force of their example. "Dress," she affirmed, "may be made a powerful auxiliary in displaying the graces of mind, and no woman, let her genius be ever so brilliant, can neglect it without injuring herself in the esteem of society, and consequently diminishing the influence of her talents."²⁸

Although the *Ladies' Magazine's* advocacy of women's advancement was progressive, the journal nonetheless maintained that the stability of the current order was paramount. One author noted that in a nation marked by "prodigious energy, enterprise, emulation, [and] excitement of all sorts," the hazards of "impetuosity, irregularity, rashness, recklessness, [and] hurry" were ever present.²⁹ Another essay identified turbulence as a characteristic feature of life in the United States: "This agitation of the whole mass of society, this independence of thought, the casting off of ancient opinions and authority, the determination

²⁶*Ladies' Magazine*, November 1830, p. 488.

²⁷*Ladies' Magazine*, March 1834, p. 116.

²⁸*Ladies' Magazine*, November 1830, p. 490.

²⁹*Ladies' Magazine*, December 1836, p. 688.

to know and understand for ourselves . . . will not submit to jog round in the same dull circle where our fathers and grandfathers have trod before us.” As a balance and balm for this “constant motion,” authors offered the palliative of “home”: an “abiding” and quiet “refuge from the bustle, excitement and restless activity of the world.”³⁰ This domestic haven was the realm of the educated lady, for “[t]o render *home* happy, is woman’s peculiar province; home is *her world*; it is here, she may unfold the treasures of mind.”³¹ She should set republican standards in fashion without capitulating to its frivolities; she should read wisely without succumbing to the intrigue of the latest novel; she should influence the course of the nation without sacrificing her penchant for retirement; and she should support the great changes of the age by establishing a sanctuary from them.



If the *Ladies’ Magazine’s* genteel New England subscribers noticed an incompatibility between its simultaneous endorsement of American democracy *and* social hierarchy, of novelty *and* stability, of female self-development *and* self-restraint, they had little cause to draw attention to the contradictions and little opportunity to publish their responses. The women laboring in the cotton mills of Lowell, however, had both a different perspective on the incongruities characteristic of women’s contemporary self-fashioning and “improvement” and a literary organ in which to publicize their opinions.³² In the pages of the *Lowell Offering*, female factory operatives repeatedly turned to the tropes of fashion and books—the dress of the body and the

³⁰*Ladies’ Magazine*, March 1836, pp. 132–33.

³¹*Ladies’ Magazine*, May 1830, p. 218.

³²See Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), pp. 290–91, for a discussion of the anomalous aspects of the promotion of a culture of gentility in a democratic society, and pp. 305–6, for the gendered aspects of this incongruity. See also my *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 39–73, for an extended discussion of the *Lowell Offering* in the context of American romanticism, the intellectual interactions between Concord and Lowell, and the attitudes of canonical authors to “factory girls.”

garments of the mind—to come to terms with their unprecedented situation. By examining and satirizing their anomalous circumstances and ambitions, as working-class wage earners, enthusiasts of fashion, and aspiring bluestockings, they explored their own novelty and signaled their acute consciousness of the larger changes it represented for them as workers, women, and authors.³³ As workers, they were rigorously supervised producers *and* newly empowered consumers. As women, they were both observed *and* observers. They were closely watched by a host of visitors and reporters to their factory world, but they were also alert witnesses to their own conditions. The magazine permitted them access to a public platform whereby they might demonstrate that they were independent, self-fashioning women—or reveal that they were merely tools of the proprietors, victims of class exploitation, dupes of sentimental novels, and apes of bourgeois modes of consumption.

To be sure, the female factory operatives encountered a host of constraints in articulating their views, including restrictions on any criticism of their working conditions imposed by factory managers or their own discretion. Moreover, as a group, the women held mixed and ambivalent attitudes toward class privilege and women's duties, and they were self-conscious that, as writers, they were novices and amateurs. Nevertheless, during the *Lowell Offering's* five-year existence, it offered vivid glimpses into the minds and everyday lives of "hands." With some frequency, and under Harriet Farley's leadership,³⁴ factory authors explored aspects of their daily experience that contributed wholly original perspectives to old controversies about women's essential nature and, especially, about their noted attraction to all that was new. In their recurrent tropes of fashion

³³Series 1 of the *Lowell Offering* comprised four issues published between October 1840 and March 1841. Between April 1841 and December 1845, it appeared in a second series of monthly issues, reprinted in five volumes: *The Lowell Offering*, ser. 2 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1970). See Judith A. Ranta, *Women and Children of the Mills: An Annotated Guide to Nineteenth-Century American Textile Factory Literature* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 47.

³⁴Harriet Farley took over the editorship (together with Harriet F. Curtis) from October 1842 until the magazine's demise in 1845; see Ranta, *Women and Children*, p. 47.

and literacy amidst the boardinghouses, streets, and workrooms of a newly industrializing city, mill writers found metaphors as apt and versatile as a white whale or a pond in Concord for embodying the peculiar tensions of their America. Metaphors of such tangible physicality and mental immediacy enabled them to reveal the details of their everyday lives with a direct simplicity, to celebrate their progress, and to speculate on their empowerment. However, such readily accessible and available figures also prompted workers to recognize that their newly treasured interests might be ephemeral, self-indulgent, and perhaps deceptive in their allure—as conducive to irreverent irony about their novel situation as to solemn sententiousness.

Some of the *Lowell Offering's* irony, especially in the initial issues, was unwitting. In “Woman’s Proper Sphere,” a wage-earning operative, writing for publication, derides any woman who deserts her domestic role and true character “to play a part for which nature has not fitted her” by venturing to speak “through a public medium.” Another early didactic piece, “Beauty and Wealth,” dismisses the importance of “earthly possessions” and “perishing things,” but it appears amidst the magazine’s copious advertisements, with their lavish descriptions of boots, shoes, miniature portraits, looking glasses, confectionery, bonnets, feathers, ribbons, and laces.³⁵ More notable than such obliviousness, however, were early signs that some authors recognized, and could even mock, their clashing ideals and impulses.

Appearing in the inaugural issue of the *Lowell Offering*, the first in a series of “Recollections of an Old Maid” challenged the conventional feminine stereotypes of delicacy and sentimentality that were applauded in the preceding essay, the above-mentioned “Woman’s Proper Sphere.” The “Old Maid” author associated ladylike refinement with unnaturalness and endorsed instead a heroine who “laughed and chattered and frolicked with the beaux” but “could take care of herself and of them too.”³⁶ To be a “lady” was to be both languid and useless, while

³⁵*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, October 1840, pp. 3, 12.

³⁶*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, December 1840, p. 22.

to be a “respected woman” was to be joyful and energetic. Such a rebuke of “ladyhood” might seem (like much conventional middle-class magazine literature) appropriate within an anti-aristocratic republic; however in the next issue, “ladies” were explicitly identified not with the elite ranks of society but with the middle-class audience of Sarah Hale’s “Ladies’ Book.”³⁷

In the *Lowell Offering*’s acutely class-conscious essay “Gold Watches,” the author, “A Factory Girl,” notes that Mrs. Hale addresses herself “to the *ladies* of New England” when she bewails the modern problem of distinguishing the lady from the factory worker by dress alone. The writer, who notes that, according to Hale, “[e]ven gold watches are now no *sure* indication—for they have been worn by the lowest, even by ‘many of the factory girls,’” imagines the daughters of a supposed “gentleman” exclaiming in dismay, “‘O dear! how the factory girls do rig up! We cannot get any thing but they will imitate us.’” Using Hale’s elitism as a point of departure for burlesquing the gentry, who are worried that they may become indistinguishable from the proletariat, the factory author goes on to propose that if ladies truly wish to be superior to “no-ladies,” then they should use their labor-free time “for the improvement of their minds.” Given their advantages of time and money, the author pertly submits, if ladies “still need richer dress to distinguish them from *us*, the fault must be their own.”³⁸ This witty essay, which implicitly ridicules fundamental assumptions about class emulation, was reprinted two years later in the *Lowell Offering*, suggesting that its skeptical irreverence toward “exemplary” ladies accorded fully with the stance of the periodical’s discerning editors.³⁹

The only half-joking insistence of “Gold Watches” that the smart dressing and mental development of working-class women were second to none emerged again, in the magazine’s first year, in a further episode of “Recollections of an Old

³⁷*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, February 1841, p. 44. The reference is evidently to Hale, writing in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, although the “factory girl” refers to it as Mrs. Hale’s “Ladies’ Book.”

³⁸*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, February 1841, p. 45.

³⁹*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 2, 1842, pp. 377–79.

Maid.” This tale concerned a village “blue-stocking” and her meticulous concern for, appropriately, her stockings—a prime example of clothing’s metonymic playfulness.⁴⁰ The young intellectual aspirant, a poor man’s daughter, is obliged to walk a long, difficult road to her academy, located in a nearby town, but she is determined to make a good appearance:

Sarah always drew on over her nice white linen stockings a pair of socks . . . and then put on her cowhide shoes. Just before she turned the last corner, she took off her thick shoes, and the socks which had preserved her stockings from dust; and then, putting on a pair of thin slippers, a foot was displayed which, though not exquisitely small, was neat and pretty enough to please almost any bachelor, young or old.

Although the account derives in part from the common folklore of country girls saving their shoes and stockings for town, the young bluestocking’s trek “to study Chemistry, Rhetoric, Logic, and the Languages” reworks the traditional material in novel ways.⁴¹ Under the coarse cowhide and the common socks is the fine linen, emblem of both external style and internal refinement. However, not only are Sarah’s pretty clothes and pleasing demeanor perfectly compatible with her erudition, the factory author’s carefully qualified language (of feet *not* “exquisitely small” and bachelors *not* ideally youthful) also suggests certain realistic expectations for and about her lower-class heroine.⁴² “Betsey,” the author of “Recollections of an Old Maid,” had earlier noted her own red skin and rough hands in specific contrast to the white-skinned delicacy of someone she describes

⁴⁰The very notion that the new thinking woman, or bluestocking, might be designated by an item of clothing anticipates the central link, later articulated by Hale, between women’s “outward decorations” and “the mind within.” See Amanda Vickery, “Not Just a Pretty Face,” *Guardian*, 8 March 2008; and also “The Fashions,” Editorial, *Ladies’ Magazine*, November 1830, p. 487.

⁴¹*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, March 1841, p. 50. The growing opportunities at this time for working-class women in New England towns and villages to improve their education are described in Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood: Outlined from Memory* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1889), p. 223. They include working in the mills half a year and then attending academies or seminaries the other half.

⁴²According to Richard Bushman, during the nineteenth century, tiny feet were widely considered to be a chief physiological indicator of innate superiority (*Refinement of America*, pp. 293–96).

facetiously as “a natural born lady.”⁴³ In mocking the very concept of a natural elitism manifested in pallid daintiness, “Betsey” figured the disjunctions between traditional and emerging standards of breeding, taste, and accomplishment.

Such ironies as “Betsey’s” were outside the purview of the *Ladies’ Magazine* and, undeniably, were achieved only rarely in the *Lowell Offering*. The majority of factory contributors—novices who were glad simply to rehearse accepted formulas and conventions, even if their subjects were new—produced an array of sentimental stories, didactic essays and poems, and idealist meditations not dissimilar to those in the *Ladies’ Magazine*. They told “disguised identity” stories of humble factory girls who discovered they were daughters of eminent judges or sea captains; the device functioned equally well in reverse, with accounts of fine society ladies who were revealed to be former mill workers. Female factory operatives wrote solemn essays both deriding and advocating French fashions and attacking and defending the reading of foreign novels; they asserted workingwomen’s self-reliance and their obligations to others; they maintained their rights to pleasure and the demands of duty. In these earnest juxtapositions of conflicting ideals, most of the publications in the *Lowell Offering*, like those in the *Ladies’ Magazine*, mirrored but did not artistically incorporate or transcend the contradictions to which they bore witness. Still, a distinct minority of the *Lowell Offering’s* writers were able to match the novelty of their new authorship with an accompanying range of innovative literary approaches, and they fashioned work that countered moral absolutism with humorous pragmatism and tempered poetic excess with graphic, detailed accounts of everyday experience.

Perhaps because writing for publication was such a new experience for them, the *Lowell Offering’s* contributors were remarkably self-analytical about their efforts to express themselves. Were they capable of producing something other than the “literary sugar-plums” of the *Lady’s Book* and *Lady’s Companion* and the “milk and water” schoolgirl essays they had

⁴³*Lowell Offering*, ser. 1, October 1840, p. 5.

been taught to write? Although such “meek-eyed” fare did indeed occupy much of the *Lowell Offering*, it also became an object of amused parody.⁴⁴ In the story “Leisure Hours of the Mill Girls,” one writer comments sardonically on her work-mates’ literary taste for “tears and flowers, dews and bowers,” and she jeers at a typically poetic rhapsody for the magazine entitled “‘twilight reverie,’ or some other silly, inappropriate thing.” And, indeed, in the issue, her lampoon is immediately preceded by just such “A Reverie,” signed “Bereaved,” which *is* filled with sadness, flowers, and bowers. Although this particular juxtaposition may have been the work of a mischievous editor, the *Lowell Offering*’s contributors often took delight in burlesquing their much-vaunted literariness. In “Something New,” an aspiring contributor reviews the possible subjects on which she may venture an essay for the periodical: “There were ‘the beauties of nature,’ the pleasures of home, hope, memory, the stars, the ocean, the birds and flowers; these, and various others, came up in array before me, but they had all been so often, and so amply descanted upon, that it seemed presumptuous in me to think of offering any thing upon any of them.” Another prospective author wrote a facetious letter to the magazine bewailing the difficulties of living up to the factory women’s reputation for “mind among the mills.” Spurning nostalgic descriptions of her birthplace—“the pond, the brook, the forest and hill”—she also rejects grandiose meditations on labor as well as “romantic” treatments of “*moonlight on the waters*.” Finally, she abandons a love story about a knight’s “violent, turbid streams of passion” for his lady and turns her discarded literary efforts to practical use as “curl-papers.”⁴⁵

Time and again, the Lowell workers’ much-bruited literariness collided with the actual literary material their lives afforded. In “A Peep at Factory Life,” the fictional “Mehitable

⁴⁴*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, p. 20; see also *New England Offering*, March 1849, p. 71, and December 1849, p. 275. In an effort to extend the concerns of the defunct *Lowell Offering*, Farley edited her own journal, the *New England Offering*, from 1847 until 1850.

⁴⁵*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 2, 1842, p. 66, vol. 3, 1842–43, p. 42, and vol. 5, 1845, p. 108.

Thinkhard” abandons her musings on ardor and wretchedness and drops her pen in dismay as she realizes that her fine literary prose will inevitably be tainted with the colloquial conversations and mundane events surrounding her. “Mary Thoughtful,” meanwhile, tries to invoke artistic inspiration while her companions chatter about oiling their looms and going shopping. In the poem “A Scene in Elysium,” the gods engage in a “noisy and comical” discussion of the factory magazine, the pretensions of the Lowell intellectuals, and the “*bas bleus*” among the “clamoring spindles.”⁴⁶ Questioning how much help the workers receive from Minerva and the Muses, the poet suggests to the reader that only a subscription to the *Offering* will reveal the extent of the Immortals’ contribution. A witty tour de force, the poem simultaneously satirizes factory bluestockings, demonstrates the remarkable talent of at least one of them, and evokes the contingencies of the literary marketplace into which they are, perhaps imprudently, venturing.



As the *Lowell Offering*’s contributors sought out original subjects for their new literary endeavors, Harriet Farley—the periodical’s animating spirit and, with Harriot Curtis, its editor from 1842 until its demise in 1845—was more than ready to supply advice and examples. The daughter of a Congregational clergyman, Farley had, as a girl, studied at an academy run by her father and then taught briefly before entering the Lowell mills in 1837. She contributed to the *Lowell Offering* from the start and left mill work in 1842 to take over its editorship full time.⁴⁷ Farley, who later reminisced that only with a sturdy hemlock broom could she sweep through factory workers’ accumulated mounds of “Hope, Charity, Gentleness, Spring, . . . Morning, Evening etc., etc.,” urged the young women to write about the immediate, familiar, and tangible world they inhabited. They

⁴⁶*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, pp. 59–60, and vol. 4, 1843–44, p. 13.

⁴⁷See Farley’s autobiographical account in the *Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, pp. 165–68, 188–90.

should, she said, resist “namby-pamby” and present instead a “faithful transcript . . . of real life.” Modeling these aims, she ran a serialized novel, “The Smuggler,” by coeditor Curtis, whose outlaw protagonist used “low vulgar profanity” and, as one of many letters of complaint opined, betrayed his creator’s “depraved taste.” In response, Farley tartly editorialized that she had no desire to publish a magazine whose main virtue was that it need not be hidden from children. Addressing the particular objection that a *female* author was condoning immorality, she replied firmly that she did not “countenance a different code of morals for the different sexes.”⁴⁸ In copious contributions and in her editorials, Farley sought to advance a complex realism that encompassed the diversity and contradictions of working-women’s lives and resisted their incorporation into any unitary perspective.

Although Farley would be condemned for the *Lowell Offering*’s silence about the ills of factory life, she was also the energetic facilitator of an array of lively, detailed, and witty accounts, both factual and fictional, that divulged the novel experiences and preoccupations of factory women. Fiercely defending the Lowell operatives’ reputation, she also insisted that the workingwomen did not manifest only a single “type” of womanhood.⁴⁹ Farley pursued this theme repeatedly in her own fictional contributions to the *Offering*, most notably in her story “Evening before Pay-Day,” in which she depicted four very different young workers talking about how they planned to spend their wages. Their anticipated expenditures—for a fashionable shawl, reading material, a savings account, and a needy family—reveal the diversity of their personalities and of their values. Their vividly described routines, including jostling

⁴⁸*New England Offering*, September 1849, p. 215; *Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 4, 1843–44, pp. 119–20.

⁴⁹For a detailed account of the contemporary attacks on Farley by Sarah Bagley and the *Voice of Industry*, see Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Factory Girls* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 57–73. In her editorials, Farley responded to the charges over and over again, sometimes appearing to concede that, as a barometer of factory life, the *Offering* did indeed tend to “fair weather.” Her defense was that she was attempting “to offset the false impressions of a darker hue that have long existed” (*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, pp. 22–23).

for letters at the post office and parading their finery at Sunday meeting, suggest their mixed attachments to rural homes and urban styles. Despite the criticisms leveled against her by more militant fellow workers, Farley attempted to find ways to come to terms with her contemporaries' lives within a framework more expansive than wages and working conditions and more immediate than the florid abstractions and morbid nostalgia the women had learned to call "literature."⁵⁰

Although the *Voice of Industry* attacked Farley for collaborating in the myth that women went to the mills for "recreation," she pondered deeply just what kind of woman was being "re-created" there. She led the way in investigating the internal and external self-fashioning involved in workers' avid interests in clothing and books as well as in demonstrating how these might serve as literary tropes for their changing identities. In her story "Abby's Year in Lowell," Farley tells the tale of a young woman drawn to Lowell by fantasies of new clothes who returns home with a modest but attractive wardrobe and, more important, new books and new ideas. When she arrives in Lowell, Abby's outdated country dress prompts her fellow workers to offer sly insinuations about "bush-whackers," ask her if she has "*just come down*," and suggest that her dress was "made in 'the year one.'" Their language marks one of the most fundamental ways in which the workingwomen are being "re-created," and, to signal new urban customs and habits, Farley extends the range of the operatives' neologisms in her fictional "Letters from Susan." In this instance, Farley conveys not only the diminution of regional accents ("statter" and "arternoon") but also the new *mores* of the Lowell experience that are carried in the talk: the "boarding woman" (landlady), "going out upon the street" (shopping or visiting), "read this

⁵⁰John Styles, in his account of the dress of common people in England, argues that to focus on aspects of poor people's material lives other than their "immiseration" is not to deny "deprivation, exploitation and repression in the plebeian experience." He also notes eloquently that "the very features of dress that once made it suspect as a subject of intellectual enquiry—its ephemerality, its superficiality, its variability, its loquacity"—have now become central to historical explorations of the cultural construction of identity. See *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 2, 16.

story out” (finish a book before bedtime), and “O.S. instead of O.K.” (old style, out of date rather than acceptably modern).⁵¹

Farley’s vivid documentary fiction of the changing appearance, language, and customs of new factory women is most provocative and unsettling when it reaches into their new work routines. She describes the carding room, “where the cotton flies most, and the girls get the dirtiest,” the disagreeable smells of the “sizing” or starching room, the confinement of the weavers, spinners, and doffers, and their ear-ringing, foot-swelling, hand-enlarging, skin-staining labor from five in the morning until seven at night.⁵² In their brief evening and Sunday hours of respite, the women engage in their varied and disparate interests: some study religious tracts while others plan fashionable outfits for church; some go to lectures while others go courting; some plan improvement societies and write poetry while others shop and distribute their wages among phrenologists, confectioners, and peddlers of finery. The repeated effect of Farley’s descriptions is to blur distinctions and bridge gaps—between the dirty working girl and the stylish lady, between the factory hand and the bluestocking, between the self-centered materialist and the public-spirited idealist. All sorts of possibilities for re-creation in Lowell are present for all sorts of workers, and Farley insists that, amidst the hazards, temptations, and opportunities of an urban industrial order, the refinement and development of the individual is just as probable as her degradation.

Farley’s depictions challenge not only the womanly ideal of the dignified republican mother, envisaged by the *Ladies’ Magazine*, but also the nobly reformist operative, encouraged by the *Voice of Industry*. The *Voice of Industry*, launched in 1845 just as the *Offering* was approaching the end of its career, endorsed, like Hale and Farley, women’s intellectual development. However, the periodical expressed serious reservations about its

⁵¹*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 1, 1841, pp. 5–6, and ser. 2, vol. 4, 1843–44, pp. 145–46, 148. On the symbolic “transformation of the self into a modern form” by means of new language and new clothing, see Allen, “Melville’s ‘Factory Girls,’” p. 50.

⁵²*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 4, 1843–44, pp. 169–72.

likelihood given prevailing labor conditions.⁵³ Turning to fashion and fiction as means of evaluating female improvement or debasement, the *Voice of Industry* shunned the *Offering's* playfulness and, more like the *Ladies' Magazine*, took a distinctly censorious attitude toward workers' taste for escapist novels and fashionable dress, warning women against "mental dissipation" and advising them to dress "so that it will not excite a thought." At the *Voice*, no editor intervened, as had Farley at the *Offering*, to help women negotiate between the temptations offered in the paper's advertisements and the articles' and stories' didactic images of martyrs and angels. Advertisements trumpeted gold watches, novels, daguerreotypes, and the latest fashions while essayists derided cheap fiction and advocated, sartorially, the virtual disembodiment of women. One of the most dramatic argued that an ideal woman should have "no outline and no mass" but should appear "like a receding angel or a dissolving view."⁵⁴ Confronted with the alternatives of transcendent ethereality or gross materialism, the reader of the *Voice of Industry*, no less than of the *Ladies' Magazine*, might have felt herself to be a strange anomaly, neither saintly nor fallen, profound nor frivolous, selfless nor greedy. Only the *Offering* attempted to encompass the complexity of working-class literati who delighted in gothic thrillers and the latest French bonnets; only the *Offering* acknowledged that spiritual maidens might have oil-stained hands, swollen feet, and the stench of the sizing room in their nostrils.

Farley vigorously resisted any classification that separated workers gratified by the immediate delights of stylish attire and sensational reading from those dedicated to the enduring cultural rewards of intellectual uplift and self-improvement. In editorials in successive issues of the *Offering*, in March and April of 1843, she explored the quest for both "mental happiness" and "physical pleasures" by the woman who wished to be "something besides a mere operative." The first editorial focused on books and reading, the second on fashion (especially

⁵³*Voice of Industry*, 5 and 12 June 1845, 6 March 1846, and 28 May 1846.

⁵⁴*Voice of Industry*, 5 June 1845, 3 July 1845, and 3 December 1847.

the criticism of factory workers' tastes for "geegaws," "finery," and "fol-de-rols"). In both pieces, she attempted to balance moral elevation—reading didactic literature, wearing simple republican dress—with harmless enjoyments. She acknowledges the pressures for immediate gratification in working women's lives: their labor is arduous; they are constantly exposed to tempting commodities; *and* they have the power to pay for them. In what is probably one of the earliest defenses of retail therapy, she argues that what others see as "geegaws" may well contribute to workingwomen's self-respect; moreover, the sacrifice of such trifles might taint the operatives' reputations with "parsimony, want of taste, or oddity." On the vexed question of their fiction reading, Farley voices her personal approval and adds, pragmatically, "But whether it is approved, or not, it will be read." As with fashion, she suggests, fiction's absence may be more deleterious than its lively presence, and thus she judges "all but positively injurious reading preferable to no reading at all."⁵⁵

Farley's emphasis on pleasure is tempered by her sense of duty, but she insists that gaiety and solemnity need not be opposed to one another. The intangible sphere of the mind is not divorced from the material surroundings in which factory women lead their daily lives, nor are their spiritual aspirations utterly distinct from the bodies in which they are formed. While other contributors to the *Offering* frequently bemoan that their reveries and flights of fancy are interrupted by supervisors, machines, or even a toothache, Farley relishes such collisions for the reminders of immanence they represent. Books and clothing serve as particularly suitable vehicles for connecting the mental and physical planes of existence since they are, literally, the main "goods" possessed by women living four and six to a room in the boardinghouses of Lowell. As metaphors, those "goods" opened up connections between body and mind, sensation-seeking and self-development, the individual and the world; and thus, as Farley understood, they enabled the "mere"

⁵⁵Lowell *Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 3, 1842–43, pp. 165, 144.

operative to examine her life and re-create her identity in a wholly new style.



One of the most consummately skillful and innovative of the *Offering's* expressions of workingwomen's changing identities appeared in the 1845 story "The Patchwork Quilt," signed by "Annette," and possibly written by Farley.⁵⁶ The eponymous quilt, whose fabric patches come from various items of family clothing, figures one woman's transition from rural domesticity to urban industry, a transformation marked by her relinquishment of hand sewing for wage-earning machine work. The first-person narrator recalls her childhood aspirations:

What legends were told me of little girls who had learned patchwork at three years of age, and could put a shirt together at six. What magical words were *gusset*, *felling*, *buttonhole-stitch*, and so forth, each a Sesame opening into an arcana of workmanship—through and beyond which I could see embroidery, hem-stitch, open-work, tambour, and a host of magical beauties.

Instead of mastering the intricate skills of this traditional female occupation, however, the protagonist becomes a factory worker whose proudest accomplishment is earning money sufficient to pay for a gown produced by the handiwork of others. The extent of her newfound power is manifest in the mock-heroic extravagance of her pride: "What a feeling of exultation, of self-dependence, of *self-reliance*, was created by this effort. What expansion of mind!—what awakening of dormant powers! Wellington was not prouder, when he gained the field of Waterloo, than I was with that gown." The story's multiple ironies encompass the young girl who anticipates joyous sacrifice in "the pricks and inflictions of the needle" and her mature

⁵⁶"Annette" was one of the pseudonyms Farley used. Benita Eisler attributes the story to either Farley or Rebecca C. Thompson, in her edited collection, *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women, 1840–1845* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1977), p. 154.

counterpart who thinks of factory labor as an epic adventure.⁵⁷ Not least, the satire also targets the nostalgic *and* the progressive reader—the one seeking to defend women’s traditional work; the other hoping to vindicate the new industrial order.

The quilt gives material substance to the protagonist’s memories of her youth:

Here is a piece of the first dress I ever saw, cut with what were called “mutton-leg” sleeves. . . . Here, too, is a remnant of the first “bishop sleeve” my mother wore; and here is a fragment of the first gown that was ever cut for me with a bodice waist. . . . By this fragment I remember the gown with wings on the shoulders, in which I supposed myself to look truly angelic; and, oh, down in this corner a piece of that in which I first felt myself a woman—that is, when I first discarded pantalettes.⁵⁸

The fashions evoke the mutability of a woman’s life, while the exotic and allusive vocabulary of bishop sleeves, bodice waists, and shoulder wings offers the narrator a flexible code of “magical words” by means of which she may continue to update her response to the object of her first ambitions, the “gusset, felling, buttonhole-stitch.” What remains constant amid these alterations is, significantly, the pleasure the author takes in flaunting the arcane terms she has acquired from her intimate contact with cloth and clothing. Like the materials and the styles from which it originates, dressmaking’s specialized language supplies the narrator with a rich system of signs that suggests her evolving identity as workingwoman and as literary artist. The garment of the author’s thought is thus woven from associations with the literal fabric and raiment of her historical experience as maker, purchaser, and wearer of clothes.

“The Patchwork Quilt” captures both the narrator’s nostalgia for a bygone existence and her delight in her newfound autonomy. She recollects the important stage in her girlhood “when

⁵⁷*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, pp. 200–201, 202, 200. For a slightly different interpretation of the story as “a shrewd defense of mill work that challenges the pejorative ‘old maid’ classification,” see Kristie Hamilton, *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), p. 107.

⁵⁸*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, p. 201.

the mind expanded beyond the influence of calico patchwork” but also when it reverted to dreams of quilting when a young man came courting. It is the failure of her marriage prospects that propels the protagonist onward to womanhood and wage-earning independence, while her “baby sister” becomes the wife who inherits the stored patches and helps produce the final quilt. When the young wife becomes ill and the bridal chamber rings with her “knell-like cough,” the finished quilt becomes a winding-sheet for a whole conception of womanhood embodied in marriage, domestic seclusion, and needlework.⁵⁹ In the final twist of this complex tale, the older, unmarried, wage-earning sister survives to possess the quilt in the “old maids’ hall” of her living quarters. Her account of the quilt is, like the quilt itself, a pastiche—of sadness and joy, tradition and change, craft and innovation. The tale achieves a level of candid eloquence and satiric awareness about the conflict of old and new identities that is reached (if only on rare occasions) in the *Lowell Offering* but scarcely even attempted in other women’s magazines of the period.

One of the more surprising revelations in “The Patchwork Quilt” is that the protagonist derives greater satisfaction from her industrial wage earning and its consequent purchasing power than from the less tangible rewards of her former handicraft. The attraction of money, not simply its grim necessity but also the pleasure it might afford, was a matter about which the *Lowell Offering* was remarkably frank. As Nina Baym has shown, women’s mid-nineteenth-century writings widely condemned the “belle” intent on catching a rich husband, a “thoroughly ‘modern’ woman” whose “rage for money was the greatest threat to the dignity of woman’s life and to the moral life of the entire nation.”⁶⁰ In the *Offering*’s “The Wedding Dress,” however, the calculating younger wife adjusts happily to marriage with her wealthy older husband despite her lack of “noble and disinterested motives” and the bridegroom’s

⁵⁹*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, pp. 201, 202, 203.

⁶⁰Nina Baym, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 28.

businesslike courtship of her. The story suggests that money can be a practical source of satisfaction and, indeed, that young women who are astute bargainers and shoppers may be exemplary models of self-development. Early in the tale Laura, the protagonist, is shown not in church, like Petrarch's Laura, but among the temptingly displayed wares of Lowell's stores: she is on "an excursion of pleasure, namely, a shopping expedition." The urban environment of the factory town—hurrying pedestrians, alternately servile and importunate store clerks, bargain-hunting workers—is bemusedly and tolerantly depicted. Silks are spread out on counters "in such a manner as to reflect the light most advantageously," and the heroine, who displays (while shopping) "patience, circumspection, and the untiring exercise of her perceptive faculties," is finally "abundantly rewarded" by the somewhat anticlimactic discovery of "an unobjectionable piece of dove-colored silk."⁶¹ Laura's expedition, like her grander quest for a rich husband, is assiduously tracked to its ultimately satisfying and "unobjectionable" outcome. Her dignity and the moral life of the nation are not in the least imperiled by her intelligent dealings in the marketplace of commerce and marriage.

Published in 1841, "The Wedding Dress" antedates by some forty years Émile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*, often regarded as the first great fictional exploration of stores, shoppers, desire, and the exhilarating contest between retail entrepreneurs and female consumers.⁶² The metaphors of exchange, bargaining, energetic application, and rational compromise in the *Offering's* much earlier foray into consumer realism extend fluidly from the marketplace inward to the seemingly more private realm of marriage and outward to the larger public sphere of social, economic, and gender relations. The story both satirizes and celebrates an expanding culture of productivity and

⁶¹Lowell *Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 1, 1841, pp. 39, 33, 35.

⁶²Émile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*) was published in 1883. Its celebration of modernity emphasizes the seductions of shopping, the entry of women into the public world of commerce, "the entrepreneurial spirit," the urban world, the marketplace, and the machine. See Brian Nelson, intro. to *The Ladies' Paradise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. x.

consumption, of getting and spending, and of workingwomen's ventures into the realms of money, power, and negotiation. After the heroine has paid for her grey silk, she sets off "in quest of a milliner whose fashionable patterns, pleasant manners, and low prices" should merit her "patronage." Not only does the story refuse to condemn Laura's shrewd materialism, it offers her as a model of self-knowledge and social awareness worthy of her Lowell contemporaries' emulation, because Laura possesses a sharp capacity for (as "A Factory Girl" had earlier claimed for Lowell operatives in general) seeing things "more as they really are."⁶³



The *Lowell Offering's* emphasis on workers' acquisition of silk dresses, books, and "goods" prompted the *Voice of Industry* to charge that it played into manufacturers' enticements while refusing to criticize their factories' wages and labor conditions.⁶⁴ Farley was, indeed, generally silent about campaigns for reform, although she did argue that self-respect was more likely to emanate from "a well-paid, than an ill-paid, class of operatives."⁶⁵ If her leadership was radical, its originality consisted in her candor in asserting that money, for factory women, was not the root of all evil but a means to financial independence, self-improvement, and deserved pleasures, both elevated and transient. Among the magazine's contributors, a certain formulaic nostalgia for the pre-industrial world was balanced by a delight, both playful and sincere, in a new order of change, invention, acceleration, urban life, and consumption.⁶⁶ Writers

⁶³*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 1, p. 35, and ser. 1, February 1841, p. 45.

⁶⁴See the *Voice of Industry's* final "censorious eulogy" on the *Offering*, 2 January 1846.

⁶⁵*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 3, 1842–43, p. 48.

⁶⁶See Chad Montrie, "'I think less of the Factory: Than of My Native Dell': Labor, Nature, and the Lowell 'Mill Girls,'" *Environmental History* 9.2 (2004): 45 pars. 18 Mar. 2010 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/9.2/montrie.html>>. Montrie emphasizes the tendency of many of the Lowell authors to romanticize the natural world from which their industrial labor severed them.

for the *Offering* composed witty poems celebrating the manufacture of the “India Rubber Shoe,” and they wrote ironic stories listing lengthy catalogues of the advertisements and “puffs” to which they were habitually exposed. They devised an early and ingenious form of branding whereby the names of specific commodities, and even of authors and books, became a kind of shorthand for their associated values. Thus the names Eliza Wharton, Charlotte Temple, Mrs. Hemans, and Mrs. Radcliffe signified a woman’s intellectual preferences just as Pease’s Hoarhound Candy, Bullard’s Oil-Soap, a dress of gros de Naples, or a Navarino bonnet signaled her material objects of desire.⁶⁷ Factory authors incorporated the lexicon of contemporary culture and contemporary commerce into their writing in a manner that suggests a remarkable self-consciousness that literature’s modes and metaphors required updating if they were accurately to embody the availability of new ideas, new products, and new ways of being in the world.

Several contributors to the *Offering* explicitly connected the innovations of factories and industrial life to their personal sense of openness to novelty. In a strikingly titled essay, “The Prospect from My Window in the Mill,” one worker captured, in a few short paragraphs, the evidence of modernization encircling her. From her vantage point, she sees the canal and railroad, the constant influx of strangers to the city, and a nearby factory producing yet more machinery to serve the needs of an expanding, industrializing nation. Her prospect includes the spires of seven churches, pointing upward to realms of “enduring felicity,” but her focus is on the less sublime evidence of human creation, for which she expresses her “heartfelt gratitude.”⁶⁸ Sarah Bagley, later one of factory reform’s most ardent advocates, described in the *Offering* her exhilaration in the presence of industrial machinery: “In the mill we see displays of the wonderful power of the mind. Who can closely examine all the movements of the complicated, curious machinery,

⁶⁷See *Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 4, 1843–44, pp. 273–74, ser. 1, March 1841, p. 51, ser. 2, vol. 2, 1842, p. 361, and ser. 2, vol. 1, 1841, pp. 34, 2.

⁶⁸*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 3, 1842–43, p. 57.

and not be led to the reflection, that the mind is boundless, and is destined to rise higher and still higher.”⁶⁹ Such sentiments, if not entirely uncongenial to the proprietors, suggest a metonymic pattern of association, often expressed by the *Offering's* writers, between themselves as female workers and all that was possible in their new age. Even if their own role was modest and oblique, their gaze, as they looked out from the factory's windows, was far-sighted and direct.

Other contributors to the magazine examined conflicts between tradition and novelty within the narrower microcosm of the family: between old-fashioned farmers and their urban, factory-educated offspring, fathers who found nothing so appalling “as innovations on old customs and opinions” and daughters who returned home with new books, new styles, and new ideas. In “Harriet Greenough,” the heroine, who imparts both “elegance and convenience” to the routines of her “entirely traditionary” father, is responsible for “strange revolutions” on the farm. She encourages him to cut down and sell some trees, which not only reaps cash but opens a view onto the Merrimack River.⁷⁰ The daughter's modern economic pragmatism and her newly elevated romantic sensibility therefore combine to improve the profits and enhance the pleasures of traditional life.

In “Life among Farmers,” Moses Eastman is “unbending in his adherence to the creed, prejudices and customs of his fathers,” whereas his daughter Mary acquires, while away from the farm, “some very dangerous ideas of religion, . . . dress, and reading.” One such “dangerous” idea is organizing for efficiency, and this “technological innovation” takes the form of a book, “Mrs. Child's Frugal Housewife,” which replicates one person's ingenuity for the benefit of many. By mass producing the fruits of Lydia Child's “labor and research,” the manual frees “every wife and daughter” from the necessity of expending a comparable time and effort and, with the time thus released, allows them to read and nurture their intellects. They may also

⁶⁹Lowell *Offering*, ser. 1, December 1840, p. 25.

⁷⁰Lowell *Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 1, 1841, pp. 295, 302.

use their greater efficiency to enhance their wardrobes, thus reflecting their new identities: instead of wearing traditional homespun, they may now “flaunt off to meeting every sabbath, in white or silk.”⁷¹ The innovations introduced by Harriet Greenough and Mary Eastman result in physical delight as well as mental invigoration, external as well as internal satisfaction. If the synecdoche for such improvements is dressing well and reading widely, beyond it lies the broader suggestion that the protagonists who inhabit the stories, as well as the factory women who create them, possess the sensibility to fathom and appreciate a larger universe of material and intellectual refinement made accessible by the processes of modernization.

When the factory author of “Gold Watches” urged, in an early issue of the *Lowell Offering*, that working-class women set an example for their elite counterparts, she argued that her mill comrades’ superior perspicacity about worldly matters should be directed toward the improvement of their spiritual values. Her class-consciousness, though pointed, was in the service of a moral code that subordinated material life to a sublime ideal and held women particularly responsible for enacting and enforcing its tenets. And indeed such traditional views continued to dominate the *Lowell Offering*. Those authors who challenged such standards as incongruous or outdated and proposed new ones for measuring the quality of their lives were among a small advance guard. However, as Harriet Farley noted on the general question of representativeness, writers in any age and context are “a very minute proportion”;⁷² those who attempt to confront and find ways of articulating the paradoxes of their lives have an impact that is not to be judged by their numbers. They are admired for their prescience, for their skill in revealing the remarkable in the ordinary, the novelty in the everyday. In attempting to capture the tensions of their daily lives, contributors to the *Lowell Offering* turned to the very follies that had been leveled against the factory operatives—their love of finery and their fantasies of a literary life—as means to explore

⁷¹*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 2, 1842, pp. 129, 130, 133, 134, 130.

⁷²*Lowell Offering*, ser. 2, vol. 5, 1845, p. 22.

their own self-development. In doing so, a significant minority engaged in a self-directed irony about their new ambitions and hopes and, in the process, strikingly rethought old ideals. Their resulting ventures into an innovative mode of realism suggest alert circumspection toward (rather than resistance to) the new industrial order and irreverent skepticism about (rather than emulation of) the cultural norms of their “betters.” They would become neither disembodied minds nor puppets of popular fiction, although they could certainly speculate on the risks; they would become neither foolish fashion plates nor rapacious consumers, although they could certainly play with the extravagant possibilities. If they were neither the militant radicals that the *Voice of Industry* might have wished nor the admiring imitators that the *Ladies’ Magazine* hoped to cultivate, the talented writers of the *Lowell Offering* were also no longer “mere operatives” but modern, self-fashioning authors striving to find a new way of seeing things “as they really are.”

Sylvia Jenkins Cook is Professor of English at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Her most recent book is *WORKING WOMEN, LITERARY LADIES: THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND FEMALE ASPIRATION* (2008). She has previously written on the fiction of poor people and poverty. She is currently working on a book on class, dress, and novelty in American literature.