

Introduction

HIS STUDY began with the consideration of an anomaly. The mid-Victorian fictions that Raymond Williams famously classified as “the industrial novels” often focus on women characters, yet none of the women whose lives those novels use as templates for industrial transformation ever works in—or even enters—a factory.¹ Victorian statistics make this anomaly even more striking. Working-class women fueled the Industrial Revolution, making up as much as 60 percent to 80 percent of the workforce in light industries such as cotton manufacturing. Yet their labor, and sometimes very existence, seems hidden in the industrial novels as well as in later Victorian social-problem fiction. The absence of women factory workers—placed alongside the emphasis on women—is the contradiction that this study focuses on, a contradiction that has its roots in the complex role of working-class women in Victorian ideology. I have chosen to use Williams’s “industrial novels” as my core group of fictions, first of all, because they have largely set the terms of debate about social-problem fiction and industrial questions, and, second, because it was the relative absence of factory women in these novels that roused my initial interest. I have, however, expanded on Williams’s list by including works by key women writers—such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte Brontë,

and Frances Hodgson Burnett—who address the issue of working women, as well as some examples of the treatment of working-class women in late-nineteenth-century social-problem fiction.

Women's industrial labor was an explosive issue in the 1840s, and yet, despite that fact, female factory labor goes almost unmentioned in "the industrial novels." In earlier Victorian novels about industrialism, such as Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839) and Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842), factory girls play significant supporting roles. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1839–41) even centers on the experiences of female factory workers. By 1845, however, when "the industrial novel" proper appears, the female factory worker is relegated to the margins.² Factory girls are minor characters in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), but the title character, whose father is a factory overseer and Chartist leader and who refers to herself as "a daughter of the people," turns out to be a dispossessed aristocrat. Mill girls appear on the streets in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), but the heroine is apprenticed to a milliner, because her factory-worker father disapproves of mill work for women. In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), the girls who make up most of the workforce in Robert Moore's mill are never directly represented and are mentioned only twice in passing. Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet: An Autobiography* (1850) separates himself from his working-class mother and sister and is attracted only to upper-class women. In *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Dickens deleted the story of a factory girl who dies after being injured by a machine before he published the novel, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–55) presents Bessy Higgins, a former factory girl who is dying of lung disease. By the time of George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), not only has the female factory worker disappeared but working-class women themselves are rendered nearly invisible. The trajectory of these representations suggests a crisis in the early 1840s which made women's industrial labor at once a hot topic and yet almost impossible to address directly. The ambivalence about working-class women in these novels also lays the groundwork for their representation in later Victorian social-problem fiction with its continuing pattern of repression of and return to working-class women and their labor.

Critics, also, have been relatively silent about the ways in which female factory workers are represented in these novels. I argue that, because Victorian social-problem fiction has been read in relation to, on the one hand, a working-class history traditionally defined by male-dominated strikes

and the movement for universal male suffrage, or, on the other hand, to a women's movement conceived primarily in middle-class terms, the crucial role of working-class women has remained obscure. Drawing on the recent work of feminist historians, as well as original historical research, I reframe the novels by describing the complex role of working-class women—as workers, political activists, and symbols—in factory reform legislation and working-class and feminist political movements. This new context provides the groundwork for a reinterpretation of social-problem fiction that examines its treatment of the issues that particularly affected working-class women. For what is remarkable in Victorian literature is not just the repression of working-class women and the labor they perform but also their return. Although the processes by which these women are marginalized or erased are important, equally revealing are the traces that they leave behind them and the corresponding displacement of the issues that affect them on to other, more manageable female characters. The novels do foreground women, often working-class women, and through them they indirectly struggle with the troubling issues that the female laborer raises. Therefore, it is not just the avoidance of working-class women that this study examines but also social-problem fiction's continual drive to come to grips with the forces that made them so dangerous. This leads them, although by a circuitous path, to take on a variety of charged issues—ranging from sexual harassment in the workplace and on public streets; to women's inevitable involvement in the politics of such movements as Luddism, Chartism, and unionism; and from a religious millenarian rhetoric that expressed desires for sexual—as well as class—equality; to the violence that shadowed the attempts to enforce working-class women's domesticity.

My starting point for understanding the contradictions at the base of representations of working-class women is the figure of the factory girl. Critics have often dismissed or overlooked this figure's importance. On the one hand, she is seen as merely sentimental, a pathetic victim, who becomes politically significant only if she inspires male action.³ On the other hand, images of degraded factory women are part of a larger pattern that uses monstrous, sexualized working-class women as emblems of ultimate social chaos.⁴ But, as Cora Kaplan points out, representations of working-class women are far from univocal; in fact, they are “peculiarly incoherent and contradictory.”⁵ It is that incoherence and the contradictions it exposes that this study aims to elucidate. The economic and sexual independence of the factory women made them doubly threatening. Politically,

too, the image of working women was disruptive. As historian Sonya O. Rose argues, “Public oratory which made men central and women peripheral to the workplace portrayed working women as on the sidelines of working-class politics. But, ironically, the marginalization of women and its consequences were at the very heart of those politics.”⁶ In the 1840s, Tory paternalists, middle-class moralists, and working-class Chartists joined ranks in arguing that working-class women should be returned to the home. This return was imagined as a panacea for a variety of problems ranging from working-class gender conflict to economic hardship, which middle-class moralists claimed could be resolved by the working-class woman’s skillful management of household resources. The middle class also envisioned a domesticated working-class woman as a way of pacifying working-class men, keeping them at home and away from drink and politics. The triumph of domestic ideology and the repression of working-class women’s public roles in the 1850s are reflected in *Hard Times* which has chapter titles such as “Masters and Men” to describe the relations between mill owners and workers and “Men and Brothers” to describe the union movement. Similarly, Gaskell’s *North and South* repeatedly uses the phrase “masters and men” to describe industrial class relations. How long this erasure of working-class women lasted is indicated by a 1981 historical study of the Preston Strike of 1853–54—a strike which influenced both Dickens and Gaskell. The study describes the all-male strike leadership in detail and frequently employs the phrase “masters and men” to describe class relations. Yet tucked into the study is this revealing statistic: of the 18,000 workers who struck in Preston, 11,800 were women and girls.⁷

My title—*Hidden Hands*—underlines the ways in which class and gender have combined to obscure the role of working-class women in the transformative processes that have produced the modern industrial state. The tendency of Victorian factory owners to refer to their workers as “hands” was often criticized by writers such as Dickens and Gaskell as dehumanizing. In the 1840s and 1850s, working-class men transformed themselves from disembodied hands into political and economic actors. But the designation “working men,” of course, also repressed the actual gendered makeup of the factory workforce. Thus, women remained invisible and disembodied sources of cheap labor. Classic *laissez faire* economic theorists from Adam Smith onward have posited an “invisible hand,” a godlike, abstract force that regulates markets and orders the distribution of wealth for the general good. My study focuses on the ignored underside of this image: the hidden hands of thousands of working-class women,

whose forgotten, poorly paid labor created some of the surplus wealth which made the achievements of the Industrial Revolution possible.

Dangerous Figures

Although female factory workers are marginalized in Victorian novels, other figures associated with social disruption, notably prostitutes and male radicals, abound. There is often a blurring of the lines between prostitutes and working-class women involved in nondomestic kinds of labor. Any woman working outside the home, especially in a mixed-sex workplace, was in danger of being classified as a prostitute. Such studies as James Kay Shuttleworth's *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Class Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832) and Peter Gaskell's *The Manufacturing Population of England: Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery* (1833) are typical in their obsession with working-class women's sexual morality and in their claims that factory girls were sexually precocious and the factories hotbeds of promiscuity.⁸ Prostitution is the famous "social evil" of the Victorian period; and, therefore, it is particularly striking that it becomes more acceptable for Victorian literature to present the working-class woman as a prostitute, as in the case of Esther Barton, than it is to represent a woman actively engaged in factory work. The reasons behind this substitution are manifold. The prostitute both stands in for the factory worker and avoids the contradictions that she makes so apparent. Although the figure of the prostitute can be used to represent the threats of social chaos and class conflict, it can also be managed through eroticization and sentimentalization.⁹ In addition, the prostitute is symbolically cordoned off from other women, and she does not threaten male dominance. Female factory workers, by contrast, draw the reader's attention to the very problems that the prostitute obscures: class and gender conflict, systemic economic exploitation, and the irresolvable contradictions at the base of domestic ideology. And, to make her even more frightening, the factory worker still contains the threat of working-class female sexuality, made even more dangerous because it is associated with an unfeminine economic independence.

Similarly, although critics, following Raymond Williams, quite rightly stress that the industrial novels are fueled by a fear of revolution,¹⁰ the novels can still represent and even sympathize with such working-class radicals as Walter Gerard, John Barton, Alton Locke, and Felix Holt. This,

despite the fact that all these men not only engage in working-class politics but also in violence of some kind: each of them participates in a riot and/or actually kills someone as a result of his political beliefs. Their acts of violence are condemned or punished in some way, but these characters' concerns about their class are treated with respect. As men, they assert a right to political action, which the novels recognize as basic to masculinity, even if their actions are represented as misguided. Not incidentally, each of these radicals espouses conservative sexual politics. Walter Gerard is typical, opining that the most damaging aspect of industrialization is that "[t]he domestic principle waxes weaker and weaker every year in England" and, as a result, the working class live like animals.¹¹ Such statements suggest that the right of working-class men to be politically active is intertwined with their ability to domesticate their women.

Thus, the representation of working-class women engaged in factory labor becomes more subversive of mid-Victorian values and more dangerous to class and gender ideologies than either the representation of prostitution or working-class male radicalism. In *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Elizabeth Langland points out that, during this same time period, the plot of the working-class heroine who marries her master also disappears from the novel, a disappearance that I see as directly related to the larger problems of representing working-class women that I am discussing. Langland postulates that certain plots become "non-narratable" at particular historical moments because plots are always "informed by a culture's ideologies, its assessment of value and meaning and possibility."¹² In the working-class woman the categories of gender and class, always in contention in Victorian England, take on a particularly charged relationship because she underscores the contradictions at the base of their formation. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the increasing dominance of men in working-class movements and the construction of the ideal of "the male breadwinner" meant that to be fully working class was to be male. At the same time, the rise of domestic ideology meant that a true woman adhered to a middle-class standard that was impossible for the working class to achieve. In a sense, the very concept of "the working-class woman" became an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. What made the representation of working-class women so difficult was the ideological burden they came to bear. By the mid-1840s, the Tory reformer Lord Ashley, upper- and middle-class women, working-class men, and even many middle-class factory owners had come to agree that working-class women must be re-

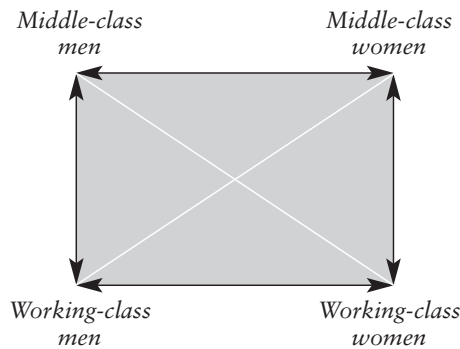
turned to the domestic sphere. This consensus was unusually powerful because it represented the common ground for so many important constituencies. On the other hand, it was also extremely fragile and rife with contradictions. To narrate the life of a working-class woman was to come dangerously close to destroying that consensus and exposing the contradictions that it hid. In fact, domestic ideology rested on the exploitation of the working-class woman, both working double shifts in working-class homes and working for low pay as domestic servants in middle- and upper-class homes. To represent her life was to confront the cost of enforced domesticity as well as the many exceptions to the ideal of the working-class male breadwinner who could support a separate sphere for his women: the men who did not make enough money or were seasonably employed or unemployed, the men who were sick or alcoholic or who deserted their families, the unmarried women, and the widows. Such “exceptions” were the rule, pointing out that the male breadwinner remained a fiction for most of the working class. To narrate 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, all elements which conflicted with the Victorian view of “the feminine.”

Theorizing Gender and Class

On the surface, it would seem that, even if novelists wished to emphasize the importance of keeping working-class women confined to the domestic sphere, novels could still represent a girl or woman who worked in the factory to the detriment of herself and her family and then saw the error of her ways. What are readers to make of the disparity between a Victorian factory workforce that was heavily female and a Victorian industrial novel that cannot represent a female factory worker? What does it mean that such a story becomes non-narratable while women factory workers, if they appear at all, appear only in the margins? In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Pierre Macherey argues for the significance of what is not said and of what is placed in the margins, noting that “what begs to be explained in the work is not that false simplicity which derives from the apparent unity of its meaning, but the presence of a relation, or an opposition, between elements of the exposition or levels of the composition, those disparities which point to a conflict of meaning. This conflict is not the sign of an imperfection; it reveals the inscription of an *otherness* in the

work, through which it maintains a relationship with that which it is not, that which happens at its margins.” It is in a novel’s margins that we read both the unconscious of the work and its relation to history: “Thus, it is not a question of introducing a historical explanation which is stuck on to the work from the outside. On the contrary, we must show a sort of splitting within the work: this division is *its* unconscious, in so far as it possesses one—the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it.”¹³ Applying Macherey’s concepts to this literature, it becomes clear that the figure of the female factory worker haunts the industrial novels, just as the specter of her descendants troubles later Victorian social-problem fiction. Her constant repression and return are crucial to an understanding of their focus on women and their fascination with the interrelationships between gender and class.

Class relations and gender relations are each, in themselves, complex fields of study. When we try to understand them in relation to one another, the complications are more than doubled. Yet this is one place where representations of working-class women can be particularly revealing, because they make manifest the contradictions in and between class and gender ideologies. That is, they both demonstrate the masculine bias in the construct of the Victorian working class and the middle-class bias in its construct of femininity. Further, it is important to remember that class and gender positions are neither static nor isolated. Class and gender are composed dynamically and dialogically; they can only be understood in relation to one another: middle class is constructed in relation to working class, masculine in relation to feminine. In order to visualize such complex relationships, it might help to map them on to A. J. Greimas’s semiotic rectangle:¹⁴



Here the rectangle represents the nodal points implicit in the Victorian ideological system of gender and class relations. The texts I will be examining play out every variation and combination of these positions. As Fredric Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, they seek “desperately to transcend” the inherent contradictions of the system, generating more contradictions of their own in the process of moving through “all the syntheses logically available,” as well as repressions, sublimations, and displacements.¹⁵ So, as we shall see, Victorian social-problem fiction works through a series of configurations—middle-class, working-class, men, women—playing with every possible combination of these terms in its attempt to come to terms with the dynamics of class and gender relations.

Working-Class Women and History

My readings of these literary representations would not be possible without the work of feminist historians. Their research not only describes the conditions of working-class women’s lives but also argues for their importance even to issues that have traditionally seemed to exclude them, such as politics and economics. As Joan Wallach Scott claims, “The realization of the radical potential of women’s history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women’s experiences *and* analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies.”¹⁶ The history of industrialization and of working-class politics alters significantly when viewed through a feminist lens. Sonya Rose comments, “Gender . . . was implicit in working men’s struggles even when women were not directly involved.”¹⁷ Yet male dominance was not a foregone conclusion. Barbara Taylor’s *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, which provides the foundation for my argument that religious rhetoric is particularly significant for working-class women, demonstrates that early-nineteenth-century movements such as Owenism were receptive to a radical rethinking of gender roles, while millenarian religious sects, such as Southcottianism, both featured women in prominent leadership roles and employed a language of aspiration that reflected hopes for gender equality. By the 1830s, however, the suffrage and union movements were becoming more and more male

dominated. While in the 1830s Chartism debated the idea of “universal suffrage” and political equality for men and women, in 1842 the Chartists decided to exclude women and call for “universal manhood suffrage.” As Scott argues, after “a moment of flux and experimentation,” “[t]he version of class that Chartists espoused affirmed a working-class family structure resembling middle-class ideals and susceptible to middle-class pressures: a family organization that no later radical theories of economics managed entirely to displace.”¹⁸ Similarly, as its title suggests, Anna Clark’s *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* describes the struggles over the definitions of masculinity and femininity that were central to the political formation of the nineteenth-century working class. She demonstrates that working-class political and union movements made a series of choices to abandon gender equality for male dominance, and she uncovers evidence of ongoing gender conflict, as well as a significant strain of misogyny, in popular plebian culture.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the woman worker was also at the center of parliamentary debate. In 1842 the publication of a blue book by the Children’s Employment Commission on Mines caused an uproar due to its revelations about the conditions of women’s work. Following a debate that one minister remembered as the most emotional that had ever taken place in the House of Commons, Parliament voted to exclude women from underground work in the mines and to classify women with children as a protected group.¹⁹ In 1847 Parliament passed further protective legislation, voting to limit the daily hours of factory work for women and children. These votes are significant in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they represent a crucial break with *laissez faire* economic doctrine, preparing the way for legislation that would address the working conditions of men as well as women. Such unlikely allies as Lord Ashley and the unions fanned the flames of gender anxiety and forced Parliament to pass legislation for working-class women that would, then, benefit working-class men, either because it eliminated women’s competition for jobs or because such reforms as shortened work hours would automatically be extended to them.²⁰ On the other hand, by classifying women with children, Parliament and the unions effectively silenced working-class women, indicating that women were to be represented by men and “protected” as they saw fit, rather than allowed a political voice of their own.²¹

Dorothy Thompson states, “Working-class women seem to have re-

treated into the home at some time around, or a little before, the middle of the century.”²² This symbolic truth, however, is contradicted by statistics that demonstrate that women constituted a growing percentage of the factory workforce.²³ But, because of the triumph of domestic ideology, by the 1850s working-class women largely disappear as topics of political discourse, and there is a corresponding repression of their ongoing dominance in the factory workforce. Although one might see this silence as strictly a Victorian problem, it has had continuing effects. Until recently, historians erased women’s contribution to industrialization, and working-class and socialist movements excluded women’s issues from serious consideration. Barbara Taylor describes the resultant fracturing of radical politics:

As the utopian imagination [of early working-class movements] faded, so also did the commitment to a new sexual order. As the older schemes for emancipating “all humanity at once” were displaced by the economic struggles of a single class, so issues central to that earlier dream—marriage, reproduction, family life—were transformed from political questions into “merely private” ones, while women who persisted in pressing such issues were frequently condemned as bourgeois “women’s rightsers.” Organized feminism was increasingly viewed not as an essential component of the socialist struggle, but as a disunifying, diversionary force, with no inherent connection to the socialist tradition. And thus the present disowns the past, severing connections and suppressing ambitions once so vital to those who forged them.²⁴

This divorce of class and gender issues will affect working-class and women’s movements not only in the nineteenth but also in the twentieth century. This study positions itself as part of a larger effort by literary scholars and historians to recover these obscured stories and interpret the ways in which gender and class relate to one another.

Uncovering Hidden Hands

I begin in Part One, “Industrial Fictions,” with the social and literary ramifications of early Victorian debates over women’s industrial work. Chapter 1, “The Death of the Factory Girl,” traces this figure’s troubled

history. Before the mid-1840s, novels—most revealingly, Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood*—provided detailed descriptions of the lives of factory girls. After the early 1840s, however, factory girls almost disappear from “the industrial novels.” I argue that the public uproar over the 1842 parliamentary blue book on the mines, which included woodprint illustrations of women at work, was the turning point in this development because it revealed the woman worker's threat to Victorian ideologies of gender and class and resulted in her repression: in response to the report, Parliament voted to forbid women's work in mines and, for the first time, to classify women with children as a protected group, incapable of self-determination. The impact of this political event is seen in Disraeli's *Sybil* and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* where the working-class heroine is recast as a nonworker or in a more feminine occupation such as millinery. Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* demonstrates the connection between the erasure of working-class women and the confirmation of working-class men as political subjects, the spokesmen for their class. In the 1850s and 1860s, Gaskell's *North and South*, Dickens's *Hard Times*, and Eliot's *Felix Holt* both resurrect factory girls and working women and kill them off or mutilate them, revealing the power of domestic ideology and the ways in which working-class women continue to disrupt its compromises.

Chapter 2, “Naming the Unnameable: Sexual Harassment and Working-Class Women in Novels of Industry,” examines some key responses to the sexualized images of working women that emerged from parliamentary blue books and relates them to the issue of sexual harassment. Contradictory ideologies of class and gender made it particularly difficult for working-class women to articulate their experiences of sexual harassment. They were caught in a vise between a middle-class view of working-class women, especially those employed in certain kinds of work, as *de facto* prostitutes and the harassment of working-class men who sought to keep women in occupationally segregated jobs, if not eliminate them from the workplace altogether. Nevertheless, this chapter argues that sexual harassment and its relationship to the working-class heroine's right to self-determination become central features in three novels of the 1840s. It is most remarkable in *Helen Fleetwood* whose title character works in a factory where sexual harassment is a condition of employment, and Helen's articulated resistance to harassment exposes Victorian society's hypocritical attitudes toward working-class women. Later novels present images of harassment which are more occluded by class and gender ideologies. This is particularly true of Disraeli's *Sybil* which portrays harassment as widespread but resolves

the problem by scapegoating working-class men and consigning its heroine to lifelong aristocratic protection. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* addresses the class and gender myths that obscure the issue by rewriting the popular working-class melodrama of working girl beset by upper-class seducer in order to create a heroine who is seen as the agent of her own rescue.

The book's second section, "Women, Class, and Politics," considers the complex interplay of gender and class issues in Disraeli's *Sybil* and Brontë's *Shirley*, two novels that both describe working-class political movements and take women's political involvement seriously. "Two Nations: Women and Politics in *Sybil*" examines all categories of women in the novel and relates their roles to the rhetoric of the factory debate of the 1840s in which Lord Ashley and other politicians used the concept of "Woman" as a transclass category, thus converting her into a political symbol. Through specifically classed characters such as factory girls and aristocratic political hostesses, Disraeli suggests that women are politically interested and influence the political process in significant ways. But what he gives with one hand, he takes with the other. *Sybil*, the central female character who describes herself as "a daughter of the people," mystifies that influence: she is the "Woman" of Ashley's rhetoric. Her otherworldliness removes her from political interest at the same time that it transforms her into a useful symbol of political authority which male politicians compete to possess and manipulate.

"Hidden Connections/Missing Links: Luddism and Feminism in *Shirley*" considers why *Shirley* is able to posit a potentially revolutionary connection between the position of women and the position of the working class but also looks at why it is unable to imagine a way to develop that connection. One of the novel's two middle-class heroines, Caroline Helstone, parallels herself to the Luddites who have just attacked a cotton mill. The second, Shirley Keeldar, has millenarian visions which link her to the Luddite assassin Michael Hartley. Although female factory workers are not directly represented, women's work in the form of housework is emphasized by the novel's continual references to servants. But, I argue, the novel's search for connections between the working class and women falters because, on the one hand, the male-dominated Luddite movement ignores the importance of women's issues and even directs its strikes against women's factory work while, on the other hand, unaddressed class issues trouble the novel's feminist visions.

Part Three, "Class Relations," focuses on how the industrial novels lay the basis for ongoing patterns in the representation of working-class

women. Chapter 5, “Domesticating Violence: Hard Times for Working-Class Women,” discusses the link forged between domestic violence and class in later Victorian literature. As working-class women largely disappear from political discussion after 1850, *Hard Times* reveals the cost of enforced domesticity—as well as the political and ideological reasons behind it—through its many subtle images of domestic violence. *Hard Times*, unlike other industrial novels, presents no strikes or riots; instead, it displaces violence on to the working-class household where women both receive and manage it. *Hard Times* thus suggests that the ultimate social task of the working-class woman is to contain violence within the home so that it will not infect the political or economic spheres. Later fictions—such as Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *That Lass O’ Lowries* (1877), George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889), and Rudyard Kipling’s “The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot” (1892)—seal the bond between domestic violence and working-class women by representing it as endemic to their lives and evaluating women by the variety of ways in which they adapt to such an environment.

My epilogue is both a conclusion and a beginning, looking back at Victorian social-problem fiction through the lens of the last industrial novel, Eliot’s *Felix Holt*, and forward to the developing tradition of working-class women’s writing in the twentieth century. Written on the eve of both the Second Reform Bill and the start of the women’s movement in England, *Felix Holt* seems to lay disruptive working-class women to rest by subsuming them under the general category of “women.” The troubling questions that they had once raised—work for women and rebellion against the traditional limits put on women’s lives—are now represented by upper-class women such as Mrs. Transome. In the twentieth century, voices that had been largely silenced in the nineteenth begin to emerge, and working-class women speak for themselves. I examine the autobiographies of working-class women, such as Ellen Johnston, “the Factory Girl” poet; the suffragist Annie Kenney; and London dressmaker Kathleen Woodward, who discuss their working lives and, while doing so, appropriate images of working-class women from Victorian social-problem fiction and use them for their own purposes.

In *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, Mary Poovey describes both the importance and instability of gender as an organizing force in Victorian society and concludes by calling on critics to examine the changing relations between class, race, and gender in order to construct “a history of ideological formulations

that might help us understand the impetus behind and resistance to change in ways our old histories have failed to do.”²⁵ Building on her work, and that of many other feminist and Marxist literary critics and historians, I intend here to contribute to that new history. Looking at Victorian social-problem fiction through its representations of working-class women effects a striking reversal. These hidden workers are revealed as centrally important: their factory labor enabled industrialism, their work as servants lay at the basis of domestic ideology, and their exclusion from politics underlay the construction of the male worker as respectable breadwinner and head of household. Not only did working-class women provide the foundation for these developments, but questions of women’s right to self-determination, political involvement, and work outside the home gradually spread upward to affect all women, and only when middle-class women began to address these issues did the feminist movement start to exert force in England. Thus, representations of working-class women—and the contradictions in and between class and gender formulations that they expose—become openings through which history pours.

Examining the margins of this literature has helped me to understand more fully what is at its center. The texts avoid addressing the challenge of working women’s lives directly, but they undergird the questions the novels pose about women and politics, women and work, and women and domestic ideology. Although these works put working-class women through a series of transformations, they always remain a crucial and disruptive factor, their very existence threatening to expose the dominant—and, in the case of the working class and middle-class feminism, still emergent—ideologies of class and gender. These works re-present and reinforce those ideologies, but what most fascinates me about them are their extraordinary moments of disruption and resistance. At the very least, they demonstrate the ongoing costs to working-class women of middle-class and male hegemony. At their most incisive, they bring together a confluence of factors—working class, middle class, male, female—in such ways as to reveal their problematic impact on social, economic, and political life—an impact that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are still struggling to understand.