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Special Issue:

Gender and Journalism: Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

**“With thrilling interest”:
Victorian Women Poets Report the News**

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<1> When, on October 25, 1854, Major General James Brudenell led a small force of mounted cavalrymen armed with lances and sabres on a frontal assault on a well-prepared, elevated, and impregably defended Russian artillery battery, the doomed attempt left 118 dead and 127 wounded for no military gain. The widely reported tactical fumble was, however, within weeks elevated to the stuff of nationalistic myth upon the publication in *The Examiner*, on 9 December 1854, of Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” To be memorised and recited by generations of schoolchildren as the embodiment of British values, the poem, as Kathryn Ledbetter has adroitly argued, was also a savvy marketing ploy on the part of its author.⁽¹⁾ Tennyson drew on journalistic accounts to create an emotive and nationalistic account that in turn built his own reputation and profits. While Tennyson offers arguably the supreme example of a Victorian poet capitalising on the news, countless nineteenth-century women also published periodical poetry that drew from contemporary news accounts creative and other kinds of capital. Women poets used journalistic accounts somewhat differently from Tennyson: less to promote themselves as cultural or literary authorities than to create dialogues that forwarded their own values, sometimes in counterpoint to the accounts that inspired them; and to challenge conventional thinking about the authoritative status of texts purporting to offer ‘a true account’.

<2> Women launched themselves into journalism in increasing numbers in the Victorian period, but often recorded the dilemmas they faced, dilemmas that were particularly sharp if they sought reporting work. In “The Confessions of a Newspaper Woman”, Helen M. Winslow describes her life as a female reporter on a metropolitan daily paper:

I have attended an all-day convention, and worked far into the night, writing reports for messenger boys to take in sections “red hot” to the presses ... I have worked eight hours a day in my dark, dingy city office ... doing the work evenings ... going to the theatres from twice to five

times a week ... The life is too hard and hardening... I have crawled from my bed in the morning only to fall back across it in a dead faint... Women are not fitted for the rush-at-all-hours a reporter's life demands. There will be a chance for them as editorial, fashion, household, society, and critical writers.(2)

<3> Such an account reflected and reinforced the concentration of Victorian women contributors to the 'cosy corners' of periodical publishing (the Fireside Chats, the Mothers' and Fashion columns, and particularly at century's end, the celebrity interviews). The guides for women seeking journalistic work that proliferated in the latter decades of the nineteenth century largely agreed, as does the writer of an article entitled "Young Women as Journalists" who warns "the girl reporter" she must assume "a bold mien" when she encroaches on a masculine and essentially threatening domain. The risks of the close proximity both to men and to unsavoury places and circumstances underlie the warning "it [reporting] is not an occupation which tends to the development of feminine graces" (*Girls Own Paper*, 396). Michelle Tusan has shown that while the women's advocacy press in the second half of the century affirmed and valued the contribution of women journalists, most women maintained only "a marginal existence" in the profession, often facing serious prejudice (15). The pioneering efforts of reporters like Emily Crawford and Lady Florence Dixie notwithstanding,(3) it was generally agreed that the nineteenth-century newsroom was no place for women. However, twenty-first century scholars of the nineteenth-century press have to date largely overlooked the considerable, various, and creative engagement of many Victorian women with reporting and with the production of news. One of the primary venues for this engagement was the genre of poetry.

<4> Occasional poetry, verse specifically possessed of a public or social occasion, was beloved by the Victorians and by their Poet Laureate.(4) Topical verse, as a narrower subset of occasional poetry, also proliferated in the nineteenth century; it may be defined as verse that, with a greater or lesser degree of specificity, responded to current events or contemporaneous issues. Such verse, of which Elizabeth Barrett's "The Cry of the Children" is perhaps the most famous Victorian example, insists upon being examined in close relation to the texts that contributed to its production: the journalistic reports in the dailies and weeklies, the parliamentary reports and commissions, the self-identifyingly factual material that occasioned the creation of self-consciously creative art. Dallas Liddle has challenged scholars to more closely examine what he dubs "peri-journalism," that is, poetic, historical and novelistic texts "generated at points of contact and translation between genres" (167). Topical poetry provides just such a suggestive contact point.

<5> When the topical poem is itself published in a newspaper or periodical, the contact point between news reporting and poetic refraction then becomes even richer, taking on multiple dimensions. In recent years, periodical poetry has been recuperated as a serious site for study. In 2007, Linda Hughes' provocative article on the omission of poetry from the Wellesley Index argued for the signal importance of the poetry printed in newspapers and magazines in relation to periodicals' "cultural politics, editorial principles, authorship, formal dynamics, and visuality" (115). Natalie Houston, in a study of poetry published in the *Times* in the 1860s, focusses somewhat more closely on poems treating topical events, which she notes sometimes "participated in a textual conversation of several weeks' length" (237). Most recently, the Spring 2014 issue of *Victorian Poetry* is devoted to periodical poetry, and

although none of the articles specifically treats the inter-relationship of journalism and verse, Alison Chapman's and Caley Ehnes' introduction takes care to note that "publishing in an ephemeral serial allowed the swift circulation of topical poems directly related to news events, interweaving poetry and journalism" (3).⁽⁵⁾

<6> This article focuses on topical poetry by Victorian women, published in periodicals, that self-consciously enters and constructs a conversation with news events presented in the same or other periodicals. As Houston has rightly noted, the highly topical nature of much periodical poetry renders it difficult to assess when extracted from the original context (234), but when deliberately read in and through that original context, these poems' complex operations may be revealed and analysed. In using the term 'conversation' I am drawing on Jahan Ramazani's recent book *Poetry and its Others*, which, arguing against Bakhtin's dictum that lyric poetry is essentially monologic, claims that news is one of poetry's most frequent and productive interlocutors. Ramazani argues that in undertaking active dialogue with news, poetry "feasts on, digests and metabolizes" this other linguistic form (7). Although the book focuses mostly on later twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry, Ramazani's call to "cast[] poetry into animated conversation with neighboring discourses" (7) applies just as urgently to nineteenth-century verse. In this article I read three examples of such nineteenth-century poems, in the context of contemporary journalistic accounts, asking a series of questions: What is the poem doing with the news? How is the news being reflected, refracted, or repurposed within the poem? How is the reader invited to respond to the poem, in distinction from response to news accounts of the same issue or event? I argue that the three women poets participate in and shape critical conversations not just about events and their interpretation, but also about the validity of emotion as a source of 'truth,' and about the fractured and constructed nature of authenticity and authority.

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<7> Laurel Brake has noted that all periodical texts unavoidably foreground their temporally and contextually constructed nature: "by virtue of the format in which they appear, [these texts] are self-confessedly historical, contingent, looking backward and forward, with a historical identity" (54). Topical poems are particularly conscious and explicit in their confession of historicity. But such poems may question that relationship to history and 'true accounts' even as they avow it. Without rehearsing here the debate about the relationship between poetry and truth that dates back to Plato, I suggest that Victorian women's topical poetry foregrounds questions of authority that operate on multiple levels and are deeply implicated with gender. Women's topical poetry problematizes authority as it produces a self-consciously second-hand and secondary version of an originary account. It queries how the veracity of its own secondary account may be asserted or evaluated. It asserts the authority of the female writer to intervene in the conversation about a news event, in the face of the exclusion of the female writer from the physical site of the *newsroom*. And, as in the case of Christina Rossetti's poem on a widely-reported but subsequently corrected account of an incident in the 1857 Indian Mutiny, a poem may serve to highlight the fictive rather than factive nature of the most reliable-sounding news, suggesting a relocation of readerly 'trust' from unreliable report to the unimpeachable personal witness of the poet's emotive response.

<8> The provenance of Rossetti's poem "In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857" has been traced by Jan Marsh. Actual events at Jhansi, Rossetti's inspiration, are still contentious. In June, 1857, Indian troops at Jhansi mutinied, and some 60 European men, women, and children took refuge in the Star Fort, under the charge of Captain Alexander Skene, British superintendent of the Jhansi District. By June 8, all the Europeans were dead, but the circumstances of their deaths were to be hotly debated. The first report of the death of Captain Skene seems to have been published in the *Times*, on 2 September, 1857 (5). The *Times* printed an extract from a letter giving details of the deaths of Captain and Mrs Skene. This letter reported Skene, upon realising the hopelessness of their plight, shot his wife then himself. The *Times* report appears here in full:

The Mutiny at Jhansi

The following extract from a letter, just received, giving a detailed account of the death of Captain Skene, Superintendent of the Jhansi District, and of his noble wife, also of Captain Gordon, Assistant-Superintendent, will be read with thrilling interest by all whom those officers were known:—

"It is all true about poor Frank Gordon. He, Alick Skene, his wife and a few peons managed to get into a small round tower when the disturbance began; the children and all the rest were in other parts of the fort - altogether sixty. Gordon had a regular battery of guns, also revolvers; and he and Skene loading for them. The peons say they never missed once, and before it was all over they killed thirty-seven, besides many wounded. The rebels, after butchering all in the fort, brought ladders against the tower and commenced swarming up. Frank Gordon was shot through the forehead and killed at once. Skene then saw it was no use going on any more, so he kissed his wife, shot her, and then himself." R. G.

<9> This same letter was printed verbatim in the *Illustrated London News* on 5 September, 1857 (242). However, this account was soon contradicted by a number of other eye-witness accounts, and on September 11 the *Times* printed a new letter, with some corroboration from surrounding letters, reporting that Skene, his wife, and the other Europeans had surrendered and voluntarily left the fort, under assurances of safe passage. They were subsequently all killed, according to these new accounts, "by the sword" (8).

<10> According to Rossetti's notebooks, her poem "In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857" seems to have been written between September 2 and September 8 1857,⁽⁶⁾ that is, after the initial letter from R. G. was printed in the *Times* but before the *Times* issued its revised version of events. Rossetti depicts the last, loving moments of Captain Skene and his wife, as they prepare for Skene to fire the bullets that will end both their lives. Although it was apparent within a matter of days that such a scene never happened, Rossetti still chose subsequently to publish her poem, first in the periodical *Once a Week* (on August 13, 1859, where it appeared over a misprinted name: 'Caroline G. Rossetti'), and subsequently reprinted with an extra stanza in the volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). She published and republished this poem, despite full knowledge that the facts it reported were not, in fact, true. Why Rossetti did so, how she explained it, and what these choices indicate about her claims for the

respective authority of poetry and news, are questions worth investigating. Here is the complete text of the 1859 poem.

“In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857”

A hundred, a thousand to one; even so;
Not a hope in the world remained:
The swarming howling wretches below
Gained and gained and gained.

Skene looked at his pale young wife:—
“Is the time come?”—“The time is come!”—
Young, strong, and so full of life:
The agony struck them dumb.

“Will it hurt much?” “No, mine own:
I wish I could bear the pang for both.”
“I wish I could bear the pang alone:
Courage, dear, I am not loth.”

Kiss and kiss: “It is not pain
Thus to kiss and die.
One kiss more.”—“And yet one again.”—
“Good-bye.”—“Good-bye.”

<11> The title of the poem offers directions for initial decoding by the reader by providing a highly specific location and date. That date indicates to the reader that this poem functions as a poem but also as more than a poem: it requires to be read as an account of ‘the facts of’ June 8, 1857. Furthermore, the title insinuates that these are *accepted* facts, of which the reader possesses existing knowledge, as no gloss is provided either for the specific tower or the particular location, Jhansi. How the reader should treat this account is the most interesting challenge of this somewhat slight poem. The poem implicitly acknowledges its secondary relationship to these facts because it is clear ‘Caroline G. Rossetti’ was not present in the tower (or for that matter in the Indian sub-continent) to bear witness. Indicating another degree of secondary relationship, Rossetti’s debt to the original R.G. letter printed either in the *Times* or the *Illustrated London News* seems clear in the outline of events that she borrows, and even in the vocabulary (for example, she retains the emotive and dehumanising word “swarming”). Jan Marsh has shown how keen Rossetti was to publish both this poem and “Maud Clare” in *Once a Week*; Rossetti hoped to capitalise on the topical appeal of the tragic event, counting on the popular frisson lingering even though, in 1859, two years had passed since the original event.

<12> Yet despite the locative operations of the title and within the originating framework borrowed from newspaper accounts, Rossetti chooses her own point of focus, which is not on the “swarming howling wretches below” but rather on the mutual devotion of the married couple, which she portrays

through repeated instances of syntactic and metrical symmetry. With the line “Skene looked at his pale young wife”, Rossetti initiates a mirroring in which the two protagonists become virtually indistinguishable. The utterances of the two so closely correspond that the mutual reassurances of the third stanza must be read extremely closely to ascertain which party is to take the decisive action. The two are encompassed within and described with the same adjectival phrase (“young, strong, and so full of life”), and their actions are identical to the point of dispensing utterly with pronouns: “Kiss and kiss.” The scene very rapidly (after a single stanza) moves from the exterior of a besieged Indian tower to “in the round tower,” an interior scene of such marital harmony that the husband and wife truly seem ‘one flesh’.

<13> Marital fidelity and devotion even unto death, rather than martial bravery and derring-do, thus centre Rossetti’s poem about the round tower at Jhansi. That the topical trappings of this portrait of devotion were subsequently revealed to be fictional does not in fact have any impact on the poignancy of the ‘true focus’ – or the purported truth - of her account. Rossetti extends the potential range of the reader’s emotional response beyond that evoked by R.G.’s letter: this account presents not just a tragedy, but a heroic and inspiring testament. As Ledbetter has noted in *British Victorian Women’s Periodicals*, poetry that appeared in newspapers could modify the news in certain ways, articulating emotion, providing a kind of relief from harsh (or bluntly reported) realities, and offering reassurance of the continuation of certain cultural edifices (109-10). Following such a reading, Rossetti’s poem offers an alternative interpretive framework for events at Jhansi, one that de-emphasises war horror and that instead salutes the unsubduable nature of British amity and fealty.

<14> Rossetti made a number of alterations in subsequent reprintings of this poem. In 1862, she inserted a new stanza after the second:

Close his arm about her now,
Close her cheek to his,
Close the pistol to her brow—
God forgive them this!

<15> Marsh suggests this added stanza gives more historical context (more ‘true facts’) which readers in 1862 would need, whereas 1859 readers, still in sufficient proximity to this and other tales of the horrors of the Indian Mutiny, would not require any more information than that provided by the title. While it extends the syntactic mirroring of the previous stanzas, the new stanza also inserts a note of Christian piety, beseeching the Lord to forgive the sins of murder and suicide.

<16> Later still, Rossetti reprinted the poem yet again. In the 1875 reprinting, Rossetti appended a footnote: “I retain this little poem, not as historically accurate, but as written and published before I heard the supposed facts of its first verse contradicted” (see Crump vol.I 26, 237). This is a notable explanation for what it does not explain, and for what it elides. It seems clear the poem was written when the ‘supposed facts’ were still uncontradicted, but it was first *published* some two years after the initial report of the deaths of Captain and Mrs Skene was withdrawn. The poem is, as Rossetti blithely notes, “not... historically accurate”, but the ‘supposed facts of its first verse’ are subordinated to the

greater truths of its whole – a depiction of idealised British, Christian, married love. While the events themselves may be questionable, Rossetti’s account is beyond reproach. Rossetti’s choices to publish and republish this poem, in relation to the retracted and the ‘new’ versions of actual events, make a claim for the validity of the message of this poem, despite (or even in contrast to) the non-validity of its original source. Rossetti’s poem claims it tells a different kind of truth, and presents a different and unimpeachable kind of authority.

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<17> Some ten years later, Dora Greenwell’s poem “Grand Coeur Pour Grande Heure,” first published in *Saint Paul’s Magazine* in December 1870, treats the Franco-Prussian war, also known as the War of 1870. In July of that year Napoleon III had somewhat hubristically declared war on Prussia, which was allied with the Northern German Confederation and several German states, and the German coalition speedily defeated the French in a series of battles across eastern and northern France. The French lost the crucial Battle of Sedan on September 2, resulting in the capture of Napoleon III and his troops, and while the French continued to resist for several more months, Paris eventually fell on January 28, 1871. The united German Empire was declared, and France lost long-disputed territory: in May 1871 Germany was granted the regions of Alsace and Lorraine.

<18> In December 1870, when “Grand Coeur Pour Grande Heure” first appeared, the war was technically still on-going, though France’s ultimate defeat was imminent and widely apparent (Greenwell’s biographer William Dorling later wrote of the poem’s composition: “At the time when France was crushed by German arms, and lay wounded and bleeding at the feet of her proud conqueror, Miss Greenwell wrote the following stirring lines” [204]). The conflict received broad reporting in England’s press. The *Times* printed regular dispatches from its own correspondents as well as offering bulletins of reports from German and French papers. Daily newspapers as well as weekly and monthly periodicals regularly and closely documented events and details of the war, including the fall of Strasbourg, the numbers of casualties, and the superiority of the German armaments. *St Paul’s* itself, within its monthly format of leisurely, lengthy essays interspersed with the occasional poem, printed four commentaries on the conflict between September and December 1870. In the same December issue as Greenwell’s poem appeared, Archibald Forbes contributed a detailed twelve-page exposition outlining his “comprehension and appreciation of the Prussian soldiery, and of the Prussian military system, its characteristics and its advantages” (282), arguing the reasons he perceived for the Prussian success and the French failure in the war. Greenwell’s poem, however, does not admire the Prussians.

“And is it, then, by fate or chance
Decreed, that as the ages roll
The world shall be without its France,
The body be without its soul?
Yea! let them spurn thee with their heel,
And plunge within thy heart their steel;
Be thine all anguish life can feel;

Their best, their worst, let foemen try,
Beloved France! thou canst not die!

“No! not though to dust should grind,
And beat thee into fragments small,
And scatter thee unto the wind!
Instinct, each fiery particle
With life, as is the breath of God,
Would kindle into life the clod
Whereon it fell; and thou be chief
In glory, as thou art in grief!

“Arise! and grapple with thy foes.
Thy foes without, thy foes within;
And fear not thou to meet and close
In pangs of death! thy travail throes
Are these; a purer life to win;
Shake forth thy lilies! let thy lark*
Soar, singing still above thy dark,
Ensanguined fields; the dawn is nigh;
Beloved France! *thou* canst not die!”

* The Gallic Legion (*alauda*) was so named by Julius Caesar.

(emphasis in the original; footnote in the original)

<19> Greenwell’s poem tantalisingly combines the identities of artwork and news reporting. Artistic elements are prominent: the French language title immediately communicates both the poem’s subjective approach and sympathy for France, as well as its non-literal, creative response to the subject matter, founded on an emotionally stirring metaphor (a rough contextual translation of the titular phrase is “great heart for the challenging hour”). In addition to assuming an emphatically subjective and sentimental identity, the poem deploys an array of self-consciously poetical tools, opening with a rhetorical question and then moving to an invocation, directly addressing a personified France. The first stanza utilises metonymy: “[let them] plunge within thy heart their steel”; the second, biblical allusion. The third stanza makes particular use of repetitive phrasing and alliteration as it urges the French on to repeated efforts, even if those efforts seem to mean certain defeat and death. As it concludes, the poem (romantically, but impractically) compares the pains of death to labour pains ushering in a new life; it also strikes echoes of *La Marseillaise* in its mention of France’s “ensanguined fields”.

<20> Complicating its identity, the poem also asks to be read in terms of its relationship to historical fact, the contemporary conflict between ‘Beloved France’ and the German-Prussian alliance. The poem’s footnote displays self-consciously fact-based authority, directing the reader that the phrase “let thy lark soar” should be read as more than just a poetical device: the metaphor in which “lark”

represents the French forces is grounded in a verifiable historical fact (and further demonstrates the author's knowledge of Latin). Other facts are noticeable by their absence from the poem. No specific events or details of the war are offered. Even the antagonist of "beloved France" is not named, only referred to as "foes" or "foemen," or simply "them". On the one hand, the lack of specificity is explicable through the poem's consciousness of its historical and publication contexts: no poem published in England in 1870, dramatizing France as entangled in a bloody conflict, would need a gloss for readers to identify the antagonists as Prussian forces. Though Greenwell would not have known this in advance, the editors of *St Paul's Magazine* placed Forbes' detailed discussion of those forces some forty pages after her own poem, and his essay supplies detailed critiques of the battles of Gravelotte and the Spicherenberg (additionally noting, "the thorough checkmate of the French at Sedan is among the most brilliant of modern strategic performances" [291]). So the poem doesn't need to supply journalistic specificity because it assumes the journalistic specificity of its surroundings; in this case, it consciously directs it should be read and understood within a journalistic context. But on the other hand, omitting specific details of France's dire military position – and omitting even the name of France's enemy – helps create the emotional directiveness of the poem, as it urges France to battle nobly on without acknowledging military defeats, and urges *St Paul's* English readers to sympathise with the French rather than with the contemptibly anonymous foe. Thus Greenwell's poem places itself in intimate relation to journalism –and it undertakes related, but different, work.

<21> Interestingly, when "Grand Coeur Pour Grande Heure" was republished – but NOT on its first publication in the *St Paul's Magazine* - the poem has a date appended at its foot: 'September 29th, 1870'. The presence of this date with the poem's reprinting in Dorling's 1889 posthumous collection of Greenwell's poems means that even when extracted from the immediate periodical environment of its first appearance, the poem still asks readers to read it in relation to the historical and textual context in which it was first published. It must be read 'in conversation.' The date refers to the poem but also points beyond the poem itself; it insists that the reader place and read the poem in a specifically chronological context with reference to specific historical events; it encourages readers to conceive of the poet as inspired by current events; it foregrounds its own topicality and its relation to fact.

<22> The September date itself provokes a series of questions. This dating suggests to the reader either that the poem was composed on September 29th or that the poem comments on a particular historical event that occurred on this date – or *that was reported* on this date. This last possibility suggests an elision between the poem and a wartime dispatch, or a reporter's correspondence. In accounts of the military campaign and in contemporary newspapers, I cannot find September 29 1870 as having particular significance,⁽⁷⁾ but, as Ledbetter has shown in her analysis of Tennyson's political verse in periodicals, both the facts and the rhetoric of a periodical account may prompt or influence the writing of a poem. For example, it might be argued that Greenwell's poem offers a response to a passionate editorial published in the *Times* on September 29th, 1870, which urged the French to be practical and surrender rather than waste further lives:

Those who really knew how to fight knew also when to yield. It is otherwise with the advocates and journalists now attempting to sway the destinies of unhappy France. Men who do not fight seem unable to comprehend that the national war has been fought out. They cannot be

brought to admit that all was lost when Sedan was lost... There can be no more delusive patriotism, no more hollow and false sympathy, than that which would urge France to further exertions... (9)

<23> Arguably, Greenwell's poem presents a counter-editorial. The *Times* piece, along with Forbes' article and other contemporary and subsequent accounts, agree that France was effectively defeated after the Battle of Sedan. Greenwell's poem notably omits mention of Sedan or, as noted above, of any specific event or occurrence within the war. Eschewing specifics, unabashedly partisan, it utters a generalised rallying cry exhorting "Beloved France" to continue to fight. The specific detail both offered (in the September 29th date) and withheld (in terms of facts about the war) foregrounds the poem's relationship to fact or report, and simultaneously suggests specificity is not an essential element of a truthful account.

<24> In terms of the poem as reportage, the address of the poem provokes its own questions. Is "Grand Coeur" truly directed at France's resistance, as the invocation suggests? Or is the poem directed at the English readers of *St Paul's Magazine*, to help them interpret the events of the war and (correctly) identify the villain and the hero of the conflict? Such a question may, however, be predicated on a false division: the poem might be better understood as orienting itself toward multiple audiences, working as multiple texts, in multiple literary contexts. Greenwell's poem's relationship to journalism is complex, simultaneously dependent, affirmative, and corrective. It assumes a journalistic context in order to be understood, and also offers an interpretive guide to that journalistic context, helping readers respond appropriately. To borrow Ramazani's terms, the poem digests and metabolises the news in order to insist both on its identity as a poem (that is, a conscious art-work) and on its authority to (rightly) interpret events and to (appropriately) direct the sympathies of the reader.

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<25> In one final example from late in the century, a poem entitled "A Woman's Wage" appeared in the *Women's Penny Paper* on November 30, 1890, page 64, taking as its topic an article published earlier that month in the reputable, serious-minded *Fortnightly Review*, concerning the working conditions of women and specifically the pay-rates of seamstresses. The poem's relationship to the original report is made explicit in the parenthetical note appended directly below the poem's title, which reads thus:

(In a recent article in the *Fortnightly Review*, Miss Clementina Black states that such skilled work-women as army embroideresses can only earn 2d. an hour after a long apprenticeship; other women earn only 1d. an hour.) (parentheses in the original)

<26> Black's original article, "The Organization of Working Women," appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in November 1889 (695-70). Unlike the previous two examples, this article does not report war news, but rather offers commentary on a contemporary social issue. The author positions herself quite explicitly: she is arguing a position, as she states in her second sentence, in which she compares the effects of economic competition on poor women to "a slavery which I believe to be worse than any of which record exists in the world" (695). The article, while not purporting to be objective, does signal unequivocally its claims to present true facts. Black writes,

I know a young woman who applied for work at a large shop: she is a skilled dressmaker. The master of the shop offered her 6. a week as an out-door hand. She said she could not live on it. He replied that he could get plenty to come at that price. [...] I visited several of these women [army embroideresses] about a year and a half ago, and carefully noted their several cases. I concluded that their wages ranged from about 2d an hour downwards (697). [...] I have myself seen the wage-book of a London woman who was paid eightpence a dozen for shirts... (698).

<27> The author emphasises her personal witness, as an informed observer of what she relates: the economically-based suffering of an entire class. After analysing a complex of causes, the second half of the article clear-sightedly explores responses to the situation, querying the potential consequences of raising wages, decrying the unintentionally destructive philanthropy of the rates system (which enables the continuation of wages below subsistence level), and, with emphasis but without histrionics, promoting the unionisation of women workers. Black marshals careful and systematic arguments, appealing to reason throughout. It is only through unionisation, claims Black at her ringing close, “that [women of the labouring classes] may now at last deliver themselves from the bondage in which many of them have been born and lived” (704).⁽⁸⁾

<28> The *Women’s Penny Paper* poem “A Woman’s Wage,” credited to C. A. Dawson, owes a clear though unacknowledged debt to Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt”.⁽⁹⁾ Its debt to the Black article, while overtly claimed, is more oblique and the relationship between the two texts more vexed and fractured. The first two stanzas read:

An attic sloping-roofed, a broken chair
Hard by the cheerless table, and a light
Guttering in a window-draught, no rags can stop;
No fire, no food, the hopeless want of all
That give their magic warmth to hearth and home!
A woman, wan as death, her painful bones
Upstanding through the skin, the long claw hands
Clasping the cloth and flying down the seams
Until the pile of heavy needlework
Rises completed and she seeks her wage.

Her wage? The heavy wage of toil, of toil
Through twelve long hours, twelve long and cheerless hours
Of garret chill and cramp and loneliness!
Good honest labour worth an honest wage,
A Christian wage beseeming wealth and power,
Our civilised and happy century!
Oh! A good wage, a wage well merited,
“Twelve pence for twelve hours’ work!” a righteous wage,
A wage to live and fatten on, a wage

To teach unceasing industry—
In every woman's ears throughout the land to ring
Until she rises from her ingle-side
And sobbing—through her tears, cries "Shame, shame, shame!"

<29> The poem echoes and magnifies Black's indignation, explicitly repeats the penny-an-hour pay rate recorded by Black, and also deploys Black's metaphor of slavery. However, the poem stops well short of echoing the solution that Black's article offers, and actually suggests a solution substantially different. In promoting unionisation, Black suggests that working women may "deliver themselves." In contrast, the fourth stanza of Dawson's poem addresses "we sister souls," invoking the predominantly middle class readers of the *Women's Penny Paper* as some kind of intercessor, granting them the only real agency in the poem, and handing them responsibility for ending the slavery of the suffering (and passive) seamstress:

... Let us look
Till eyes are dim with tears, till in our hearts
Flames the resolve, the strong resolve that yet
Shall move the world to empire of new day,
The glad new day of Justice. Let us look
Till burning thoughts arouse to burning deeds,
And we can sweep this curse from Christendom;
Can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, strike
These fetters from our sisters, and so turn
This bitter slavery into a bond
Binding all women in love's charity.

<30> Similarly phrased appeals to the sisterhood animate many poems and articles in the *Women's Penny Paper* (and its successor, the *Woman's Herald*), a late-century daily dedicated under the editorship of Henrietta Muller to reporting and promoting the progress of women across Great Britain and the world. However, in promoting an ideal of a global sisterhood spearheaded by philanthropic middle-class activists, as opposed to a union organised by and empowering the working women it represents, this poem works to distinctly different political ends to those promoted by the original *Fortnightly Review* article. In the article, Black aims to reveal that while entry into the labour market and the ensuing economic competition has led to an increase in liberty - "better education and greater freedom" (697) - for a number of middle- and lower-middle class women, what has worked to the benefit of many has also led to the piteous under-payment of the least powerful and least resourced groups of working women. The complicated operation of the labour market and the contributing role of other women is, however, elided in Dawson's poem. No cause for working class seamstresses' suffering is identified other than "accident of birth"; no responsibility is accorded to any party other than "this curse". The poem promotes sentiment over specificity. Its focus has moved from a collection of organised women to one singularised working woman who is simultaneously de-personalised, made no more than a collection of ciphers of suffering (a conglomeration of "painful bones" and "long claw hands"). Such strategies work, in effect, to ward off the threat of working-class women's political

agency. Far from promoting unionisation, the poem emphasises individual weakness rather than collective strength. While filled with emotive declarations and decrials, the political impetus of the poem differs markedly from its originary source. Dawson's poem invokes but redirects Black's urgent emotionality to make its middle-class readers respond in a sympathetic but politically abstract way to the plight of the seamstresses, as distinct from responding by supporting the organisation of working women to help intervene in their own plight. The original article is digested by the poem to make the original message, I suggest, more 'digestible' to the *Women's Penny Paper's* particular readers.

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<31> The women's topical periodical poems discussed above all work in conversation with the news reports that inspired them. This article argues that this was a dynamic and constructive conversation by which poem and poet could arrogate to themselves particular kinds of authority, in relation to but also distinct from the authority of the journalistic accounts on which the poems depend but from which they simultaneously distance themselves. The poems simultaneously connect themselves to their specific historical context to make sense AND construct independent identities and meanings for themselves. Such an argument is illustrated particularly by the case of Rossetti's poem, which was originally inspired by actual events, but which by the time of its publication had lost even that secondary connection to 'accuracy' when the incident on which the poem is based was revealed to be fictional. Independent of factual anchoring, the poem asserts its own veracity in terms of the emotive response it invokes and the cultural values it promotes.

<32> As Kirstie Blair has noted, "poems... when placed within the context of a newspaper column and located within a specific community of readers, ... operate as sophisticated and often politically charged reflections upon current events, as well as upon the practice and purpose of poetry" (91). These women's poems diverge from any simplistic mission 'to inform' and take on multi-valent identities as independent and authoritative conveyers of particular values to newspaper and periodical readers. Greenwell's response to reportage of the 1870 war raises for debate the varying degrees of textual authority granted to journalistic report, editorial, and poem. Asserting the validity of its own account, in implicit relation to other published accounts, it problematizes the reliability of *all* accounts. Dawson's poem even works to modify the explicit political message of the article to which it responds.

<33> Reading Victorian women's topical verse and periodical journalism beside and through each other enables us to begin to reconceptualise women poets' challenges to conventional understandings of the role and authority of poetry at a time when their own cultural and literary status was severely circumscribed. In constructing creative and emotive dialogues with reported news, and foregrounding the creative reconstruction of their own accounts, these women poets arrogate to themselves expanded forms of authority. They provide readers with alternative responsive possibilities, boldly using poetry to suggest alternative analytical frameworks, to promote particular values, and to suggest diverse political viewpoints.

Endnotes

(1)See *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals*, particularly the fourth chapter, “War scares and patriot-soldiers: Political poetry.”[\(△\)](#)

(2)See Lorna Shelley’s article, “Female Journalists and Journalism in fin-de-siecle Magazine Stories,”*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 5.2 (2009), for other contemporary attestations of the demands of journalistic work on women.[\(△\)](#)

(3)For a brief account of the career of Emily Crawford, see Hunter; for a fuller account of Lady Florence Dixie’s war reporting, see Sebba.[\(△\)](#)

(4)For an accessible discussion of occasional poetry, with much insightful commentary on the nineteenth century, see Wilson.[\(△\)](#)

(5)In this same special issue, Hobbs and Januszewski examine the poetry printed in five representative local newspapers in the Victorian period, arguing that local papers were the most significant site for the printing and reading of Victorian poetry, from the 1860s.[\(△\)](#)

(6)Marsh asserts “it was almost certainly composed between 5-7 September” (17).[\(△\)](#)

(7)On this date, Strasbourg had very recently surrendered to the Prussian forces, and Paris and Metz were both under siege.[\(△\)](#)

(8)Unionisation is explicitly and enthusiastically supported elsewhere in the *Women’s Penny Paper*, for example on August 30 1890 with a short item entitled “Tailoresses” beginning: “Splendid material for organising is to be found among the Jewish tailoresses who are so numerous in Spitalfields and the surrounding neighbourhood. They are ripe for union as English girls rarely are, and enthusiastic and unanimous in their demand for higher wages and shorter hours...” (532). The same article goes on to give indignant specifics from the report of the Sweating Commission.[\(△\)](#)

(9)Hood’s poem was originally printed in *Punch*, December 16, 1843.[\(△\)](#)

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