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“Whilst working at my frame”: The Poetic Production of Ethel Carnie

SUSAN ALVES

THE BOUND VOLUMES OF POETRY BY NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY working-class poets Ellen Johnston, Lucy Larcom, and Ethel Carnie represent the conflicted status of the individual, female, working-class poet acclaimed by the middle- and upper-class readers. Unlike the literary careers of many nineteenth-century male British working-class poets, or even of the American “factory girl” poet, Lucy Larcom, the poetic profession of Johnston and Carnie did not permanently thrust them into the middle- and upper-class societies of mid-nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Great Britain. Instead, like British factory worker and magazine poet Fanny Forrester, Ellen Johnston, and Ethel Carnie rose to prominence among the middle class and then faded from middle-class view into the obscurity of the industrial community. Johnston and Carnie knowingly wrote to and compiled poems for a disparate audience for their bound volumes.

The literary career and production of Ethel Carnie (1886-c.1960), a woman who published three volumes of poetry and ten novels in the early twentieth century, may be compared to and contrasted with the careers and works of her working-class poetic foremothers. Like her working-class predecessors, Carnie, a South Lancashire mill girl, began working in the textile factories during her early adolescent years. Like other women poets, she initially published poems in local periodicals and in labor presses. The poetics and subject matter of Carnie’s bound volumes exemplify the poet’s anxiety over gender roles and the social position of white working-class women.

Although separated by more than six decades from the career of Lucy Larcom (1824-1893), the literary career of this British poet follows a trajectory similar to that of the American factory girl. Just as Larcom’s early poetry was noticed by poet and middle-class social activist John Greenleaf Whittier, so too, Carnie’s periodical poetry attracted the attention of middle-class male mentors W. H. Burnett and the editor of *The Clarion*, Robert

Blatchford. Just as Whittier brought Larcom into the nineteenth-century New England literary society, these two men drew Carnie into literary and publication circles and eventually secured a white collar position for her as an editor of *The Woman Worker*. In contrast to Lucy Larcom who did not submit her poetry to local newspapers until later in her career, choosing instead to write for a single-sex literary magazine funded by mill owners in Lowell, Massachusetts, Carnie submitted her works to local community newspapers such as *The Blackburn Mail*.¹

Still, while these comparisons with other female factory poets provide a sense of Ethel Carnie's connection to the poetic tradition of her literary foremothers, this poet is different from the American and British female factory worker poets for a number of reasons. She was born in the late nineteenth century and published all of her work in the twentieth century. Through her family background and her own political activism, Ethel Carnie publicly as well as rhetorically identified herself as a member of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Successfully publishing individual bound volumes both in poetry and in the novel, Carnie gained notoriety and critical attention, but her poetry has been ignored by literary critics. Most important, she had the opportunity and a forum to speak for herself because of the rise of trade unions, political parties, and women's suffrage movements.

Although Carnie incorporates aspects of sentimentality and romance in her writing—and by so doing “defies assumptions about working-class politics and literary practice”²—her poetry and prose are marked by socialist ideology. Edmund and Ruth Frow attribute the writer's political development at the end of the nineteenth century to the influence of her father:

Ethel Carnie's father was a member of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Great Harwood is within easy distance of Burnley which had one of the strongest SDF branches in the country. There was a club house and a lively programme of social and political activity. In Blackburn there was an SDF branch and a branch of The Independent Labour Party (ILP). They worked amicably together in a friendly relationship. Mr. Carnie took his daughter to political meetings and helped her to clothe her instinctive socialist attitudes with scientific understanding. (pp. 251-252)

Socialist concerns, the local color of political meetings, and the immediacy of her personal experiences in the mills and in an industrial community pervade her poetry both overtly and subtly.

In her poetry and poetics, Ethel Carnie represents her anxieties over gender roles and the social position of white working-class women. Like other individual British working-class poets celebrated by middle-class readers and sponsors such as Ellen Johnston, Fanny Forrester, and Jennie Heywood, Ethel Carnie is situated between and within two communities. With subjects such as the fallen woman, poverty, and motherhood, Carnie

explores and overturns the attitudes of a middle-class hegemony by reinscribing this and other tropes with the concerns of the British working-classes.

Carnie published her three volumes of poetry first. All were issued when she was still in her twenties. Most poems were collected from periodicals, especially from her contributions to *The Woman Worker*. The books, *Rhymes from the Factory* (1907 and 1908), *Songs of a Factory Girl* (1911), and *Voices of Womanhood* (1914), were each published with plain covers and in colors such as muted port. Each book is standard British dimensions, approximately 10 to 11 centimeters, and between 56 and 136 pages long.³ An advertisement on the front plate of *Voices of Womanhood* shows the price of the shortest collection, *Songs of a Factory Girl*, to be 1 shilling, while Carnie's short stories for children, *The Lamp Girl and Other Stories* (1911) sold for 2s.6d. The books were affordable for Ethel Carnie's fellow workers, many of whom earned an average of 16 to 20 shillings weekly.⁴ The costs of her books are in line with other non-essential expenses for workers, such as union dues, which also fell in this price range.

In marked contrast to Ellen Johnston's gregarious retelling of her life story and in keeping with the public reticence illustrated by Lucy Larcom in her published volumes, Carnie provides few details of her daily life or of her working conditions. Only in the preface to *Rhymes from the Factory* does the poet offer some explanation of her life and work:

I went on "half-time" at eleven as a reacher in the Delph Road Mill, at Great Harwood, after which I became a winder at the St. Lawrence Mill in the same town. I was a winder for some six years. 'Twas in this period that I wrote "The Bookworm," which seems to have attracted the most attention of any of my writings. It was really composed one morning whilst working at my frame. I think it is no exaggeration to say that all my poems came into my head at the mill. (p. vii)

Carnie attests to her early employment history and gives her readers a sense of her creative process, a process inspired by the rhythmic clatter of machinery. Unlike Johnston's volume which includes a long list of patrons as well as a testimonial of authenticity, Ethel Carnie's books (with the exception of two dedications to W. H. Burnett) include little suggestion of other middle-class alliances.

Ethel Carnie dedicates her first and last books of poetry to W. H. Burnett. In his roles as the editor of the *Blackburn Standard and Express* and as president of the Blackburn authors' association, W. H. Burnett encouraged and mentored the young poet. A key influence in her literary development, Burnett is identified as "my first literary friend" and Carnie credits him with "first introducing me to the reading public."⁵ Although less famous than John Greenleaf Whittier and not a poet himself, Burnett appears to have shared a warmly paternal relationship with Carnie, an asso-

ciation similar to that of Whittier and Larcom and common to so many other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century female writers and their male mentors.

The second volume of poetry, *Songs of a Factory Girl*, carries the simple offering, "To My Mother." Edmund and Ruth Frow attribute Ethel Carnie's dedication as a loving gesture by the poet to her mother after her father's death in 1910 (p. 259). Seen together, the preface to *Rhymes from the Factory* and the dedications of the three books of poetry illustrate Ethel Carnie's distinct relationship to her supporters and her readers both from the working and upper classes. Carnie speaks for herself in this one preface and in the dedication of each book.

Ethel Carnie writes at the stylistic intersection between women's traditions of Victorian and Modernist poetry. In her three bound volumes of poetry, she offers poems which incorporate Victorian⁶ and Modernist⁷ conventions such as the construction of a communal audience, the mythologizing and invention of a female self, the use of a banal rhetoric, and the representation of the struggle of female emotion. These characteristics often are nuanced by the poet's economic class and her ideological underpinning of democratic socialism.

Carnie's first success and most celebrated poem, "The Bookworm" (*Rhymes*, pp. 1-3), is an example of a blended Victorian and Modernist poetics and of the influence of socialism. While the language is banal, the range of the lyric is at once worldly and domestic. Although the first-person poetic speaker is of the lower, non-land holding classes, she/he revels in the glory of self-education:

I own no grand baronial hall,
No pastures rich in waving corn;
Leave unto me my love for books,
And wealth and rank I laugh to scorn.

I envy not the richest King
That ever steeped his lips in wine!
With Count of Monte Christo, I
Can truly say "The world is mine."

The world of books—how broad, how grand!
Within its volumes, dark and old,
What priceless gems of living thought
Their beauties to the mind unfold.

What flowers of genius suffuse
Their sweetness o'er its yellow page!
Immortal words of truth and fire,
Echoing down from age to age. (ll. 1-16)

In the twelve middle stanzas and without ever physically leaving wintry England, the poet enacts a romantic voyage from Italy, to Greece, to revolutionary France, and finally to Scotland by recounting narratives found in her books. Written in fifteen quatrains with a loose rhyme scheme, this poem which most likely was first published in *The Blackburn Mail*, caught the attention of the local writers' association as well as the regard of W. H. Burnett.

Carnie, a young socialist activist, posits the breaking of class distinction based on heredity and economics. She writes:

For I am heir to an estate
That Fortune cannot take from me,
The treasure-rooms of Intellect,
With gates ajar eternally.

The world of books, where thirsty souls
Drink deep from Learning's crystal rill:
Where glad perpetual Summer pipes
Upon the verdant wind-swept hills. (ll. 53-60)

Her socialist ideology is drawn from the context of the poet's life in Great Harwood. Robert Blatchford describes the area in which Carnie lived:

Great Harwood is a monstrous agglomeration of ugly factories, of ugly gasometers, of ugly houses—brick boxes with slate lids. There is neither grace nor beauty in Great Harwood. It is the last place in which one would expect to find a poet.⁸

Like the astonished middle- and upper-class visitors to Lowell, Massachusetts, who discovered the literary production of the New England mill girls, “members of the Blackburn Authors Society were astonished that a mill girl of nineteen should be capable of such verse” (Frow, p. 253).

The influence of the material conditions of this poet's life as well as her presence at the convergence of Victorian women's poetic tradition and a Modernist sentimental poetics are illustrated by “The Rich and Poor” (*Rhymes from the Factory*, pp. 20-23). In this poem, Carnie offers not only a biting critique of social and economic ills, but in plain language represents the emotional conflicts inherent in a capitalist system. Carnie's speaker echoes a moralizing tone common in the poetry of many nineteenth-century women poets:

My heart is weary and my soul turns cold
With loathing. From all sides a cry for gold
Arises. Men with coffers flowing o'er
Still kneel at Mammon's shrine and pray for more.

More! Though the people faint beneath a load
Of unrequited labour, further goad;
Drive us more quickly up Life's stony hill

Ye rich! That ye may reap more profit still. (ll. 1-9)

Like her female poetic predecessors, Ethel Carnie's speaker in these stanzas is pious, pure, and seemingly outside the world of commerce. The poet begins the poem within a tradition of nineteenth-century women writers who, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, sought to extend the domestic sphere of the true woman into the public domain.

In stanza six, the poet introduces another voice; this one adheres to a philosophy of delayed reward:

Quoth he: "Ye poor, be patient here below,
Soon shall ye leave this shadowy vale of woe;
Do not revolt, though pale with want and cold,
Soon ye shall walk a street that's paved with gold." (ll. 25-28)

The use of formal, if not archaic, pronouns suggests that this is an upper or aristocratic speaker. By representing this voice in only four lines of an eighty-line poem and in one stanza out of twenty, the female working-class Carnie marginalizes the role of the upper-class speaker in her overall critique of the relationship of economic status and humanitarian concerns. Carnie saves her passionate criticism for a fourth, and last voice, to articulate.

Though also marked by a male pronoun, this last speaker is located between the pious, pure, and private sphere of true womanhood and the impious, practical, and public sphere of commerce associated with men. By so positioning her last speaker, Carnie repeats the scope of the poem's initial poetic voice, while exploring the abject emotional struggle of those working in the public domain:

Another cries with fire,
With all the passion of his soul's desire,
"If Death be equal, why not also life?
Why should the toil, the suffering and the strife

"Fall but to some? Each tender bud that opes
Its petals to the sun on grassy slopes
Drinks morn's bright dew and dances to the wind—
Why not thus bloom the flowerets of mankind?

"Why should our lives from the first breath we draw
Be overshadowed by dark clouds of woe?
Robbed of the things which make Life sweet and fair,
We droop, as plants obscured from light and air.

"Our lives? They are not ours—in this great mart
Our richer brethren play the buyer's part;
Mere chattels are we, at their lightest mood
Tossed to one side as things devoid of good.

“Worn out with toil, through the beguiling gate
Of yonder almshouse pass with feeble gait,
Beneath a roof thy brother’s bounty rears,
Drag out the remnant of nigh joyless years.

“But Evolution, fluttering on her way,
Is tearing to shreds these fabrics grey,
Is bound to weave them a brighter web:
Take courage—let not Hope’s bright water’s ebb

From out your hearts—it is no idler’s dream:
The little tinkling lowly mountain stream
Is swelling to a river, broad and free—
A river rushing on to meet the sea.” (ll. 58-80)

Although her style displays no other characteristics of her middle-class contemporary, Charlotte Mew, Carnie borrows the images of the flowers, the river and the precariously woven web of life from earlier female poetic traditions.

In other social activist poems such as “A Crying Child in London,” “Epitaph on a Toiler’s Child,” “Summer in the Slums,” and “The Children of the Poor,” this twentieth-century female factory worker borrows poetic subjects, styles of addressing an audience of readers, and metaphors from nineteenth-century British female activist poets like the middle-class Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the working-class Jennie Heywood. These poems by Carnie offers a critique of a society which allows children to be neglected, used for labor, and robbed of the playfulness of childhood. For example, in Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” (1843), the speaker calls the reader to attention in the first stanza of the poem:

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And *that* cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west:
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of others,
In the country of the free. (ll. 1-12)⁹

So too the speaker of Carnie’s “The Children of the Poor (1914) addresses the reader and calls attention to this social problem by juxtaposing natural imagery against the toil of children’s labor:

Have you ne’er seen some sweet-hearted flow’r

That trembled high o'er world of grey?
 Nor felt the next bleak wind would shower,
 And blow its beauty bright away?
 Such is the brief and fragile joy
 Of poor folk's children—blossoms fair!
 Chill winds of Care and Toil destroy
 The innocence that comes—from where? (ll. 1-8)

Nineteenth-century working-class poet Jennie Heywood also shares this female social activist tradition with Barrett Browning and Carnie. Unlike Barrett Browning, Heywood does not use a narrative voice to address her readers. Heywood instead employs oppositional metaphors in "The Children's Holiday" (1877):

They turn their gleeful steps, and leave behind the grimy town,
 Away to where in majesty the glorious hills look down;
 Where the little brooks are singing through the meadows fair and green,
 Where the clover and the buttercup and bonnie harebell's seen.

The little ones make daisy chains, and pluck the may-flowers bright,
 Or weave them fairy garlands of the hawthorn blossom white.
 The pale and sickly faces seem to gain a rosier hue,
 And shadows all are chased away from eyes of tender blue.

The youth and maidens scatter in merry laughing bands,
 The love-light dances in their eyes, they clasp each other's hands.
 For one short day they leave behind their lives of toil and care,
 And revel in the loveliness of Nature's face so fair. (ll. 29-40)¹⁰

With contrasting rural and urban images, Heywood implies the impossibility of an idyllic happiness in the "grimy town." However, Ethel Carnie departs from the tone of both Barrett Browning and Heywood in the last stanza of "The Children of the Poor":

The children of a newer day
 Whose light e'er now comes o'er the brink
 Of this dark night, with faint, pure ray,
 Shall deep of dreaming glories drink.
 The sheath shall guard the tender soul
 Till strong, mature—then, flung aside,
 The slow-won colours of the whole
 Shall be the nation's joy and pride. (ll. 25-32)

Carnie's infusion of socialist democratic ideology moves her away from the earlier poets who appealed more to the reader's humanitarian sense of justice than to a revolutionary and political concept of justice.

While subjects related to womanhood and motherhood overshadow other concerns in the poetry of many nineteenth-century male and female poets, the appearance of these subjects in works by middle-class and work-

ing-class women suggests the poets' anxieties about the social roles of women and about upper-class gendered expectations of the lower class. British middle-class female poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Adelaide Procter, and Alice Meynell published their examinations of these gender questions in their works, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1847), "A Woman's Question" (1858), and "The Modern Mother" (1900). British working-class women poets "Marie," Ellen Johnston, and Fanny Forrester present their considerations of gender roles for working-class women in "My Mission" (1848), "A Mother's Love" (1867), and "A Love Song to My Wife" (1876).

The social roles of working-class women are among a variety of other poetic subjects and themes in Ethel Carnie's poetry. While present in her first two books of poetry, this subject dominates the last volume, *Voices of Womanhood*. In *Rhymes from the Factory* and in *Songs of a Factory Girl*, she focuses four poems on the working-class woman as mother. These poems are: "Lines to My Mother," "Motherhood," "The Mother," and "A Tired Mother." At first glance, "Lines to My Mother" would seem a traditional elegy to the poet's mother:

Fain would I wake a song round thy sweet name,
Which, haply, should endure a year, an age:
I've sat an hour—the midnight chimes I hear—
Yet white before me gleams the empty page.

Where love is deepest speech doth tongue-tied seem;
The words like shy wild birds are lingering near,
But fly at my approach, so take the leaf
With all the song it holds—a heart-felt tear. (ll. 1-8)

Carnie departs from the traditional elegy and presents a wordless tribute to her mother by presenting her own limitations as a poet. Therefore, Carnie employs a Victorian form to articulate a Modernist gap. Like Alice Meynell's unconsoling poems on motherhood, these poems are among Carnie's best because even when they are sympathetic, these works do not pander to melodramatic commiseration with readers.

Considering the complexity and ambivalence of a mother's role when lived out by women of the lower classes, Carnie offers a series of three poems on mothering. In the first, "Motherhood," the poet presents the dramatically fresh metaphor of a sea diver:

Here break the strong, tumultuous waves of pain,
Thundering with awful sound along the strand,
Through which the distant sky looks ashen pale,
And floats no whisper from the lovely land
Where corn is springing green beneath the sun,
Where the sweet spray is bent by some glad bird,

Where white moons peep through aisles of plumed woods,
 And rain-drops, pattering hail, earth's songs are heard.
 Down, down, as goes the diver through the flood,
 Where unknown horrors through the waters creep,
 Alone, for none may follow if they would,
 Leaving the world with one adventurous leap—
 Then up and up, flung back upon the shore,
 Clasping the precious cup of life's pure gold—
 Forgetting, as the sunlight makes it blaze,
 The weird, black tides, that o'er the diver rolled. (ll. 1-16)

Years before American poet Adrienne Rich writes "Diving into the Wreck" (1972), Carnie represents birthing as a dangerous semi-erotic passage into motherhood. It is a trial of strength, courage, and will; it is also a near-death struggle to endure and to survive.

On the subject of motherhood, Ethel Carnie's poetry is keenly in line with Alice Meynell, her middle-class contemporary. Angela Leighton's description of Meynell's writing on mothers and motherhood could also be applied to Carnie's work:

Meynell writes with a new restraint and sceptical distance about a subject which has conventionally lain outside the sphere of serious literature. Motherhood, for her, carries a troubling knowledge of separation and difference, of love which is not necessarily satisfied and of birth which cannot be dissociated from death. She quietly turns this last Victorian certainty: that the mother's heart, if nothing else, is holy, and in her muted way suggests that the truth may be less dependable, less reassuringly transparent. (*Writing Against the Heart*, p. 259)

In "The Mother," "A Tired Mother," and "Weariness," the poet offers both a Victorian sense of maternal self-sacrifice and the complication of a woman's longing for something more than the narrowness of a mother's life. This wrenching ambivalence is articulated by the first-person female speaker of "Weariness": "I love them, God knows, but I get so tired!" (l. 5). Carnie extends the conflicting emotions of motherhood into a metaphoric opposition between nature and the home:

With every little prattler fast asleep,
 And my own thoughts alone to speak to me,
 And find a place within my tranquil breast.
 To drink for one brief hour the western lights,
 And feel the cool, wet winds caress my cheek,
 And blow against my body—and the earth,
 So strong and bold, uphold me, mortal frail;
 Then let my eye, grown sick of little rooms,
 Rove o'er the endless, boundless worlds of space,
 With towering and fantastic lands of cloud,
 And feel once more Eternity's loved guest;
 And a deep peace flow from the quiet hills
 Into my heart, too narrow or too wide

For motherhood that dwells in dwarfing rooms,
 Until it wearies of its heavy crown,—
 Ah, just for this, what would I give to-night? (ll. 12-27)

This claustrophobic motherhood against which Carnie's poetic figure strains is associated with the domestic sphere. The poet, a woman who works outside the home, does not address the specific anxieties of a woman who attempts to balance parenting with her paid labor. Thus Carnie suggests that a mother's ambivalence and emotional conflict is related to the narrowness of a social order which valorizes the domestic sphere, rather than to mothering itself. For instance, in her second poem entitled, "The Mother," the poet offers this statement of maternal joy:

I toil through the day, strong with love,
 And the night is sweet-parted in two
 By a cry like a bird's in the grove
 As a pale morning comes, faint with dew.
 And I ask not the gown rustling loud,
 Nor the ease, nor the gayness, nor rest,
 For I wear robes of motherhood proud
 Through the bird and the flower at my breast. (ll. 17-24)

Here the poet joins natural images associated with Romanticism to the figure of the mother. Ethel Carnie embraces the energy and elation associated with the distinctive role of mother in the Victorian social institution of the family.

In her last volume of poetry, rather than representing a spectrum of images of women, Carnie extends a cacophony of women's voices to her readers. In the aptly entitled *Voices of Womanhood*, she creates a wide variety of female figures who possess agency and voice. The intent of the book is established in the "Prelude":

Voices impetuous, daring, and wild
 Voices of agony, moaning, and fear;
 Voices of yearning, with sorrowful sigh,
 These through the silence I listen, and hear.
 Whispers that faint in the great world of sound,
 Echoes that linger a moment—to die!
 Murmurs of tenderness over the cot,
 Murmurs of weariness for the wide sky.
 Out of the mystical silence they float,
 Voices of rebel, or motherhood mild;
 Love to you, gentle ones, crowned with white peace.
 Voices impetuous, daring and wild,
 What shall we give to ye, blazing new trails?
 Prison, and scorning, loud laughter and jeers,
 These give all those who seek for new lands!
 What shall a poet give? Shall it be tears?

I, as you pass, unashamed, unafraid
 Out from the silence to cry against wrong
 Wave Song's bright banner, and smile that the world
 Yet has its heroes so splendidly strong. (ll. 1-20)

The emphasis of Carnie's construction of women and of womanhood is more aural than visual, actively speaking rather than passively represented, heroic rather than victimized. Besides women who mother, the poet presents female figures, usually working-class, who work at domestic and physical labor, are independent, are old, are friends, are violently abused by lovers, use others, and who are fallen. The tonal force of the volume is carried by the first-person voices of Carnie's female figures.

The strength of these woman-centered works is the poetic presentation of the moral, ethical, and emotional crucible of poor and working-class women's lives at the turn of the century. For example, of the four poems which explore the traditionally nineteenth-century motif of the fallen woman none consider fallenness as a sin from which the woman needs redemption; rather fallenness opens opportunities for a better life. Each one presents a different complex social dilemma through which the central female figure is moving. In "A Modern Magdalen" (*Voices of Womanhood*, pp. 65-68), a young woman, working in a textile factory, feels her life slipping away, so she uses her beauty to escape her dismal existence and save her life by "losing it":

And a weary fear did clutch me of growing grey and bent
 As the woman who worked next to me with a dreary, sad content,
 And who never knew when the sky was blue, and whose life was a lengthened Lent.

So I wandered away and left it, and found it easy to go,
 With the light of the beauty God gave me, and the scorn and the whispers low,
 And the door of the friend that was shut in my face, and the flattery of my foe.

O God, I am very sinful, and I've nothing at all to say . . .

.....

I failed, and went down in the darkness. I fell, and I know they shan't. (ll. 20-42)

The speaker of "The Coquette" (*Voices of Womanhood*, pp. 92-94) employs a similar agency:

I win men's hearts with a little sigh,
 With the quivering lash of a downcast eye,
 Then I toss them away with a mocking laugh,
 Oh, as if they were only so much chaff!
 And what is their pain is my dancing joy,
 And the boy of an hour back is no more a boy. (ll. 1-6)

Carnie displays not only the character's independence and will, but her vulnerability as well. A woman's fallenness becomes not so much an acci-

dent, a fall from grace, or a sin, but a woman's conscious choice made after she examines her limited life options. The coquette, while sexually powerful, begrudges other women's relationships with men:

Yet I envy the lovers who saunter by
 When the bright stars burn in the deep, green sky,
 Who can see only one in a world so wide,
 Whilst my heart is that of the shifting tide,
 That is never true to one narrow shore,
 But wins them, and scorns them for evermore. (ll. 13-18)

Thus Carnie proposes the oxymoron of a lonely coquette. But not all of Carnie's fallen women are as sexual as the Modern Magdalen or the Coquette.

In the narrative poem "A Lament" (*Voices of Womanhood*, pp. 132-134), Ethel Carnie joins the metaphoric fallen woman to the image of a woman abused by her male lover. She engages both a female narrative voice and the voice of a female figure who tells her story in her own words. By so doing, the poet gives voice to the person typically silenced in Victorian and turn-of-the-century England, a woman mistreated by her lover. The poem opens with a first-person forensic account:

I saw a woman lying in her grave,
 Her yellow hair all dabbled in her blood,
 Her little hands clenched close in agony,
 Her lovely eyes in horror looking up
 Through clay and water and the roots of weeds,
 Her little mouth agasp to call for aid. (ll. 1-6)

Unlike the other fallen women in Carnie's poetry, this unnamed woman's words show her to be naïve and victimized by her love. She tells the narrating speaker:

I went to meet my lover in the wood,
 And found a man who had his looks and voice,
 Who gripped me till my very heart was crushed,
 Who would not hear my voice, but took his will,
 His cruel tiger's will—and then, afraid,
 Looked shuddering round upon the evening wood,
 And murdered me. And yet I could not speak,
 And could not say to him "I love you well,
 Though you dishonored, and are murdering me!" (ll. 17-25)

The poet links the woman's silencing to her murder, thus positing the widespread social violence of such silencing of women. Still, by articulating her criticism of her male lover, this female fallen victim exhibits some of the will of the other fallen women in Carnie's poems. Now dead, the female figure instructs and warns other women, as they are represented by the poetic narrator, of the folly of an unquestioning love. The poem takes up such

popular conventions as feminized desire and the joining of oppression with romantic love, thus participating in a “communal, uncertain self-mythologizing and self-inventing” (Leighton and Reynolds, p. xl).

Throughout Carnie’s poems, about women, their social roles and expectations of gender run an assumption of whiteness. Whiteness functions within the communal discourse and self-inscription the poet shares with her readers. Although race remains unwritten in works such as “A Lament,” “His Books,” and “The Children of the Poor,” whiteness operates within the texts, participating in a “racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability.”¹¹ Carnie’s poetic female figures are consciously or unconsciously constructed as “universal” and “race-free.”¹² Only in “Woman” does Ethel Carnie specifically inscribe whiteness:

Fair woman! With skin made of roses and milk,
With lily-white hands for embroidering silk;
Made to sing dainty love songs and wake the lute’s chord,
With a Joan of Arc grasping the hilt of the sword. (ll. 9-12)

Herein the poet assesses and rebukes popular discourses which represent women as weak, fickle, timid, and illogical. In the first three lines of each quatrain the poet articulates a dominant public perception of women. In the last line of each quatrain, Carnie posits a variety of women’s strengths which remain unseen to those articulating the popular notion of womanhood. Significantly, Carnie does not overturn the female figure’s whiteness as part of her argument, instead in the poet’s reference to Joan of Arc, whiteness is used to represent a passionate purity.

“Woman” epitomizes Ethel Carnie’s attitudes toward race. Published three years after the first Aliens Act (1905) in Great Britain and during a time of rising ethnic and racial unrest among the working classes, this poem participates in a public dialogue about what constitutes Britishness. Initially passed to stem the tide of Jewish immigrants to Great Britain, the Aliens Act of 1905 set the working classes against Jewish and Irish immigrants who were not constructed as white and/or British. Historian Joanna Bourke concludes that:

Although restrictive and discriminatory, legislation aimed at “aliens” and “foreigners” was the governmental reflection of a more expressive ideology of hatred shared between individuals from diverse classes, genders, and localities. Racism has a strong backing in British institutions and explicitly racist organizations have won considerable support within working-class districts. Its twentieth-century history can be said to have started in 1902 when the British Brothers League (an organization based in the East End and claiming a membership of 45,000) pressured for immigration controls to (in the words of its president) discourage grafting onto “English stock” and diffusing into “English blood” the “debilitated, the sickly and the vicious products of Europe.”¹³

Moreover, key Labor publications, such as Blatchford’s *Clarion*, with

which Carnie is associated, identified Jews and other foreigners as threats to their class. While Ethel Carnie's poems do not overtly participate in the racist discourses of her day, the inscription of a universal woman as white in "Woman" indicates the presence of an assumption of whiteness in her representations of female figures. "Woman," as well as the representation of other poetic figures in Carnie's work, suggests not so much her acceptance of the dominant discourse on race but rather her unease with racial difference.

The bound volumes of poetry by Ethel Carnie are material representations of the conflicted status of an acclaimed, individual, female, working-class poet in Great Britain. Unlike the literary careers of many male British working-class poets, or of the American "factory girl" poet, Lucy Larcom, the public renown of Ethel Carnie as a poet did not permanently thrust her into the middle- and upper-class societies. Although nineteenth-century male working-class poets such as Gerald Massey, Edwin Waugh, and Ben Brierley did enter local middle-class communities, they were faced with an immutable British class system, a structure they could never fully overcome. Complicated by their gender, British female factory poets also were effectively frozen out of any opportunity for class mobility.

So too, in traditional literary histories American and British female working-class poets such as Larcom, Johnston, Carnie, and their pseudonymous counterparts have remained in relative obscurity. Because these poets produce a difficult negotiated poetic subjectivity which circumvents critical standards of originality, convention, and subject matter, their omission from literary histories is a great loss. The absence of poets such as Ethel Carnie in most literary histories calls attention, not to the aesthetic failures of working-class women writers, but to the inadequacy of critical strategies and of literary histories in contextualizing difference within categories such as authorial identity, subjectivity, and poetry.

Notes

- 1 Edmund and Ruth Frow, "Ethel Carnie: Writer, Feminist and Socialist," in H. G. Klaus, ed., *The Rise of Socialist Fiction, 1880-1914* (New York: Harvester Press, 1987), p. 252.
- 2 Pamela Fox, "Ethel Carnie Holdsworth's 'Revolt of the Gentle': Romance and the Politics of Resistance in Working-Class Women's Writing," *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals: British Women Writers, 1889-1939*, ed. Angela Ingram and Daphne Patai (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 58.
- 3 Unfortunately, no information is available on the size, cover, and plates of the first edition of *Rhymes from the Factory* (1907). Only 500 copies were issued; none are currently obtainable in the academic and national libraries of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Neither can copies of this first edition be found

among the networks of antiquarian booksellers in Great Britain and the United States.

For scholars seeking actual bound editions of the poet's work, these books are procurable through normal academic avenues of inquiry:

Rhymes from the Factory (with additions), 2nd edition. 1908. 92 pp. with a preface. 1 page plate, a photograph of Ethel Carnie. Published by R. Denham of Blackburn and Shackerley Literary Agency of Southport.

Songs of a Factory Girl, n.d. (forward dated February 19, 1911). 56 pp. No plates. Published by Headley Brothers of London.

Voices of Womanhood, n.d. (dedication dated April 1914). 136 pp. No plates. Published by Headley Brothers of London.

Apparently, some volumes of Carnie's last book of poetry are available, but scholarly access to this last book of poetry has been greatly aided by the microfilming done by the Kohler Collection Preservation Project at the University of California, Davis.

- 4 Jill Liddington and Jill Norris provide a lengthy discussion of women's wages in "Weavers and Winders," chapter five of *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: River's Oram Press, 1978), pp. 84-92 and 271, n. 9.
- 5 See the dedication to the *Voices of Womanhood*.
- 6 Angela Leighton, in her introduction to *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995), characterizes Victorian verse as "communal, uncertain self-mythologizing and self-inventing" (p. xl). Such an identification allows Leighton to place late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British middle-class poets Alice Meynell (1847-1922) and Charlotte Mew (1869-1928), Ethel Carnie's contemporaries, in the same category as Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). These poets participate in a "self-mythologizing and self-inventing" of womanhood which is shared among female poets and female readers of the time. See also Leighton's discussion of Alice Meynell and Charlotte Mew in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1992). These two chapters provide ample evidence for comparing Modernist poets, Meynell and Mew, with poets traditionally considered Victorian, such as Barrett Browning and Rossetti.
- 7 Sentimental Modernism, Suzanne Clark argues, is an "unwarranted discourse" which employs "banal rhetoricity" in "the representation of an abject struggle over female emotion" (Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press], p. 11). She distinguishes literary modernism and the related new criticism as movements which "constitute [themselves] by conflating the romantic with the sentimental and the popular. The private discourse of feeling and the public community of women, guardians of feeling, are, under modernism, both sentimental" (p. 19).
- 8 R. Blatchford, "A Lancashire Fairy," *The Woman Worker* (July 28, 1909), p. 155.
- 9 *Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. Browning* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 156.
- 10 Ben Brierley's *Journal*, May 26, 1877, p. 163.
- 11 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), p. 11.
- 12 For a sustained discussion of these terms as well as the implications of examining

unwritten race in texts, especially normative whiteness, see Morrison.

- 13 Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 198-199.