The Chartist Imaginary
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Loose, Margaret A.
The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice.
The Ohio State University Press, 2014.
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Chartist attitudes about the position of women in society and politics (also discussed in chapter five) are perhaps less easily discerned from literary than from historical evidence, but there are a number of creative works that directly address the vulnerable position of women in class and industrial society, and it is worth thinking about which views find literary expression and how Chartists imagine these problems and the circumstances that complicate their articulation and solution. This chapter begins by surveying several works from across the range of Chartism’s lifetime, to show what they share with each other and with other Victorian literary treatments of the “woman question,” and in what ways they are distinctive parts of the larger culture’s conversation on this topic. That survey then leads up to and provides context for the chapter’s longer, central analysis of Gerald Massey’s late Chartist poem “Only a Dream” (1856), of which there has been no prior critical examination in spite of its fascinating structural complexity.

Since the chief purpose of this book is to demonstrate the politics of Chartist aesthetics, it is important to devote to certain works the sort of detailed, literary technical critique customarily afforded to canonical writings. While I clearly think it valuable to subject earlier, more familiar Chartist works to such analysis (as this book does with Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides*, Wheeler’s *Sunshine and Shadow*, and Jones’s *The New World*, for example), there is also an interpretive payoff in looking beyond the standard texts and outside the decade or so that was traditionally conceived as defining Chartism’s termini. Some critics have significantly improved scholars’ sense of the
historically contingent texture of Chartist literature, demonstrating differences in the tone, attitude, and preoccupation of its poetry based on the contemporary milieu in which individual poems were composed (see Janowitz and Sanders, for example). This chapter shares a similar orientation by highlighting from the final years of Chartist history a poem that speaks directly to contemporary contests over marriage and women’s disabilities therein. Gerald Massey joined Chartism in its later stages, when several of its remaining leaders came from the movement’s left flank and were still active because of their ideological commitment to class struggle and radical politics. Those with connections to socialism also tended to articulate progressive views regarding women, and Massey worked closely with that cadre. So although he no longer had any active connection with the dwindled movement by the time his poem “Only a Dream” appeared in 1856, I believe the poem’s progressive outlook and its faith in the efficacy of poetry as political intervention result from Massey’s radicalization as a late Chartist,¹ making this poem part of the legacy of that movement.

1839: W. J. Linton

There had always been Chartist activists interested in the status of women and the peculiar liabilities they faced, though. In a single 1839 issue of his journal The National, William James Linton included two short sketches of his own writing, both of which attack the social hypocrisy that protects patriarchal prerogative over women’s lives and bodies. “The Outcast” follows a standard narrative trajectory of the young country girl who elopes to London with her beloved, suffers desertion by him when he learns she is pregnant, unwillingly resorts to prostitution when she cannot support herself and her baby, and dies at age 20. While firmly placing responsibility for this disaster on (the men and women of upper-class) society, Linton more specifically blames patriarchal power: the “Ministers of Religion,” who proclaim unnatural sexual standards to be God’s law; her father, who wields his power over Rose Clifford by interfering in her choice of a marriage partner; and her lover, whose desertion results less from his having harbored any insidious designs toward her than from his cowardly avoidance of matrimonially allying himself with a woman who—because she became pregnant—would be subjected to relentless moral opprobrium by a canting, judgmental society. Without knowing anything

¹. His friendship with George Julian Harney led him to become active with the Society of Fraternal Democrats and Harney’s Red Republican, for instance.
about him, Rose's father rejects the apparently earnest and respectable man of Rose's choice and demands instead that she marry a man he has selected for her, thus “prostitut[ing] herself in 'holy wedlock’” (Linton, “The Outcast,” 159). His tyranny and her rebellion set up her father's complete rejection of her once she finds herself in desperate need of aid. His assumption of absolute authority over the women in his family creates the conditions of his daughter's ruin, and his rote adherence to the social forms of morality (“she had disgraced them, and was not entitled to their assistance” [ibid., 160]) seals her death. Perhaps some of her vulnerability also results from the inferior education allotted to women, since Linton mentions that, although Rose had “as much sense” as most people, “those who educated her, did not think that she would ever need such a thing” as a strong mind (ibid., 158).

In “The Free-Servant” Linton turns from women's sexual to their labor exploitation, specifically focusing on the case of a young woman in domestic service, which he renames “domestic slavery” (163). As the eldest child in a large family penally deprived of its father's support, Jane Stephens helps her mother tend the many younger children until she becomes a servant, then a maid of all work, and then a question mark. Sharing a striking feature of some other Chartist narratives, this story leaves its ending and future completely open and undetermined, with the narrator exclaiming “God knows what became, or will become of her” after overwork precipitates a long illness and her loss of employment (ibid.). Again Linton points out the masculinist institutions and customs that render the whole family financially unstable, citing the landlord, legislature, clergy, and jurymen as colluding to impoverish Jane's ploughman father and then to punish him excessively for an unnamed (likely economically impelled) crime, thereby depriving the family of its chief or only source of income. Such institutions operate, the story implies, without regard to their impacts on the women who must nevertheless cope with the consequences (of unequal pay, few options for work, inaccessible divorce, and large families to nurse, feed, and support).

Possible outcomes the story posits for Jane after her loss of work and her friendless urban poverty include begging and prostitution, unless she finds other work. However, even if she does regain respectable employment, the narrator foresees a time when age and hard toil make her ineligible for

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2. See, for instance, the conclusions of Thomas Cooper's short story “Merrie England—No More!” and Thomas Martin Wheeler's novel Sunshine and Shadow (both discussed in chapter 3).

3. Ernest Jones's Margaret Haspen makes a similarly incisive point about the impossible position in which government places women by incarcerating their husbands while neither subsidizing the income-deprived wives nor permitting them to regain financial stability by remarrying. See my discussion of “The Working Man's Wife” below.
“service,” pushing her to become a seamstress or a char-woman, and when unable to survive in those still more meager vocations, either starving on the streets or bearing the “doom” of the workhouse hospital (ibid.). Though he leaves the story open-ended in this way, Linton does prescribe a specific solution that would liberate such women as Jane from the enslavement of servitude and its bleakly precarious futures: “rich folk and gentlemen” and the “fine Lady” should dispense with servants and “wait upon yourself!” (ibid., 163–64). Families, he proposes, should share the work according to their abilities, taking pleasure in serving those they love. And although the narrator says that “My wife and children wait upon me,” he hastens to add that “I help them” and “we know nothing of command and obedience” (ibid., 163). This self-sufficient, more balanced domestic vision is a distinctive contribution to midcentury discourses on the “woman question” because it broadens the scope of which women the “question” includes, indicts the male strong-holds that institutionalize women’s precarious economic status, and proposes a domestic model that is more egalitarian along both its classed and gendered axes. That Linton intended these two sketches as a radical engagement with gender issues is further demonstrated by the context in which he published them. As Haywood has noted, “the whole issue of the National in which the sketch[es] appeared is devoted to feminism,” as Linton surrounded these two stories with “extracts from Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Shelley, all reinforcing the view that conventional bourgeois marriage is superficial, materialist, and ruinous to women” (Haywood, Literature, 19). The stories also represent an early instance of a leading Chartist endeavoring to work out how the new movement should address problems specific to its female members.

1842: Mary Hutton

Women themselves were especially active in the movement during its early years, and they likewise wrote creative works preoccupied with the specific ways gender inflected the experiences of women. In one instance, for example, Mary Hutton celebrates the heroic self-sacrifice and mourns the cruel subsequent fate of “Madame Lavalette” (also discussed in chapter 5). Here Hutton perceives a shared experience among women of different classes, temporarily privileging their gender over their social station (as Jones does in Woman’s Wrongs, discussed below). In this light it is interesting to note the difference between Hutton’s version of Lavalette’s tale and a version that appeared in the Chartist press at about the time she wrote the poem. Hutton’s headnote to the poem says she composed it after reading an account of
Madame Lavalette, and such an account was printed in the *Chartist Circular* for May 2, 1840, showing that Hutton was not the only Chartist interested in the Frenchwoman’s story. However, the version presented by the *Chartist Circular* (an abridged extract from Hewson Clarke’s account in his 1816 *The History of the War*) makes no mention of the lady’s confinement to a “Lunatic Asylum,” which is the great overriding concern of Hutton’s poem. Hutton emphasizes not only the glory of the wife’s substituting herself for her condemned husband but also the fearful permanent consequences of the stress and imprisonment she endured on her husband’s behalf. She even opens up the possibility—in both the poem and her afterword—that Count Lavalette was unworthy of his wife’s devotion and sacrifice. The poem opines that “A woman’s love will firmer cling, / In peril and in pain, / Though often on a worthless thing; / Its treasures are but vain” (lines 22–25). These lines resonate with many Victorian representations of women who are loyal to their own detriment, such as Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, Margaret Haspen in *Woman’s Wrongs*, and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. In Hutton’s prose afterword to the poem, she exclaims:

> Oh, when a generous and feeling heart has lavished its affections, and its love, for years, and years, and years, upon a certain object, to whom it has given its confidence, and fondly cherished, and administered to, night and day, in sickness and in health; in sorrow and joy; and lives to see its love and kindness repaid by gross cruelty, and ingratitude, ’tis almost enough to shatter the brain, and destroy the mind, and overturn the reason of the very strongest . . . . (Cottage Tales, 101)

Certainly Madame Lavalette “lavished” her affections and loyalty on her husband in his “sorrow,” and though I do not know that she received anything but kindness from her husband during and after his exile, possibly Hutton suspected otherwise, and in any case “her mental powers were entirely overthrown” (ibid., 98). As Kossick has pointed out, the curiously plaintive and personal afterword—cast in unmistakably marital language—hints at Hutton herself having experienced spousal cruelty. Whether Count Lavalette or Michael Hutton was the “worthless thing” (line 24) who repaid prolonged devotion with “gross cruelty” and “ingratitude” (ibid., 101), Hutton’s insistence on this part of the story sets her telling apart and intimates her awareness of

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4. Since the *Chartist Circular* made no mention of Madame Lavalette’s insanity, relying as it did on a source written prior to her commitment, it was probably not Hutton’s (only) source. There were other, more up-to-date periodical and encyclopedia sources on which Hutton evidently relied.
Yet while she admires her heroine as brave, brilliant, strong, noble, and even chivalrous, Hutton also seems compelled to load Madame Lavalette with every conceivable “feminine” virtue. She possesses a “too sensitive heart,” tenderly and selflessly devotes herself to her “beloved” partner, is a “fair” and “lovely” rose who is as pure as lilies and pitying tears and baby faces, and in addition she is chaste, loving, sweet, generous, loyal, angelic, nature-loving, gentle, ornamental, and good. The poet twice calls her heroine a “fair flower of chivalry” (lines 12, 111), a phrase that neatly encapsulates Hutton’s uncomfortably bifurcated characterization of political women: one sees in the phrase both Madame Lavalette’s exceptional boldness and bravery and her modest, beautiful delicacy. It is as if the author wants to valorize smart, daring, unconventional women, but then retreats into the shelter of every Victorian cliché of womanhood. She is not alone in such vacillation: she simply anticipates Tennyson’s Princess Ida, Brontë’s Jane Eyre, and Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, for instance. Perhaps Hutton extolled her character’s femininity to elicit respect and sympathy for a character whose illness distanced her from most readers, or perhaps she was registering (consciously or not) the ambiguous role of women within the Chartist movement itself. Madness aside, whether one sees the poem’s oppositional tendencies as pulling it apart, generating an irreparable breach in which the poem founders, or as accurately representing—in intended and unintended ways—the dilemmas confronting political women, those tendencies form the basis of its interest.

1845: Thomas Cooper

One of the most rousing Chartist calls for a complete overhaul of women’s place in society is the opening exordium in book 9 of Thomas Cooper’s Purgatory of Suicides (1845, also discussed in chapter 2). Like Hutton’s poem, this part of Cooper’s is also concerned with the plight of a woman whose husband faces execution. In addition, the Purgatory here resembles other Chartist works discussed so far in that this woman’s solo efforts to sustain her own and her child’s life hold little promise of success, given wage inequality and the lack of women’s work opportunities, unless she capitulates to prostitution (book 9: stanza IV: lines 1–9). Strikingly like both Madame Lavalette and the beleaguered woman in Hutton’s afterword, this almost-widowed wife “forgavest all” her husband’s errors, still bestowing on him an “ill-requited love” even though his “wild excess” often “nigh to madness drove” her (9: 
The close resemblances among the women represented thus far indicate the unfortunate likelihood of plentiful models for the trope, and also the desire of authors to create unambiguous sites of reader sympathy to stir outrage in a common cause. Whatever one’s position on religion or the Corn Laws or physical force, everyone within the Chartist movement would likely share indignation at the precarious positions which maltreated or single women occupied, especially if they are also directly victimized by middle- or upper-class men. In some respects, evocations of downtrodden women also conferred on poor men the feeling of dignity and manhood that came with assuming the role of protector of the weak. As Schwarzkopf has shown, most Chartist women seemed to share the view that ultimately, their place was in the home, and their exposure to poverty, insult, and insecurity resulted in large part from bad or nonexistent government intervention that their husbands and fathers could correct if they could vote (Women in the Chartist Movement, 149).

However, if most men and many women within Chartism subscribed to fairly traditional views of the sexual division of labor, the narrator in the Purgatory’s Book 9 decidedly does not. Instead, he furiously attacks how utterly “Man, the tyrant” controls women’s fate, affections, and sexuality (9: VI: line 4). The woman gets a voice here too: in a reference to workhouses and the 1834 Poor Law, the grieving wife herself speaks bitterly about how unnaturally cruel the wealthy are in separating poor mothers from their children (9: X–XII), a fate she likely dreads after her husband’s imminent execution. In spite of such severe handicaps (jealously domineering men and the deprivations of poverty and class legislation), even poor women nevertheless contrive to rear famously great children. And if, the narrator contentiously asks, women’s sons now can be so great, how much greater will they be “when / Man looks on thee no longer with the tyrant’s ken?” (9: XV: lines 8–9) Importantly, though, women should seek their liberation not merely in order to be conduits of others who are great, but to be great in themselves: “when thy mind matures / In freedom, and thy soul can make its choice, / Untrammelled, unconstrained” (9: XVI: lines 5–7), then women’s intellectual achievements will proclaim “that Mind is of no sex,” as the sense, skill, music, and reason of works by Maria Edgeworth, Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans, and Germaine Necker (Madame de Staël) already demonstrate (9: XVII: lines 1–6). Cooper envisions the time when “Woman’s intense / Inherent claim” to intellectual equality, “befoiled / No more by Man” (9: XVII: lines 7–9), will reveal her “truest dignity; no more / A slave, no more a drudge, no more a toy!” (9: XVIII: lines 2–3). What is distinctive about Cooper’s peroration is its assertion that men (both working class, such as this woman’s husband, and politically and economically power-
ful men) share responsibility for maintaining women’s oppression. Women therefore require not only that their laboring (male) peers gain social freedom, economic parity, and a political voice, but that they do too. To the extent that his intention is to advocate for gender equality in more than abstract terms (i.e., women should receive the same education as men and be entitled to vote, for example), Cooper differs here from many, though not all, of his Chartist peers, but he also demonstrates that Chartism was not uniformly conservative on women’s issues, as has sometimes been supposed.

1852: Ernest Jones

Representing a later time in Chartist history, Ernest Jones’s Woman’s Wrongs (1852) is often referred to as a novel, but it is better described as a collection of tales related by their shared purpose of showing “what [woman] suffers” “through all the social grades” (1). Jones accordingly includes five stories focused on women from the lowest classes through the merchant class and up to the leisured class, in each case revealing the burdens placed on women by various—but consistently oppressive—social norms and economic constraints. For the sake of brevity I will mention only two of the stories, which, nevertheless, will give some flavor of the work as a whole: “The Working Man’s Wife” and “The Tradesman’s Daughter.” Though the female protagonists of these two stories have first and last names, their more generic designation in the titles signals their symbolic function; the titles also signal their derivative status in relation to their husbands and fathers, a fact of paramount importance in each woman’s life.

In keeping with the standards normalized by the rise of the middle class (and ascribed or aspired to by many working-class families as well), Margaret Haspen, as a married woman, is not remuneratively employed until her working-class husband is transported. Significantly, the reader’s introduction to her

5. Feargus O’Connor, for example, opposed female suffrage and emphasized the auxiliary and secondary nature of women’s support for Chartism. As if in rebuttal to the opponents of Chartism who ridiculed the presence of women at Chartist events, the Northern Star for 2 July 1842 reported of one Chartist lecture that its auditors were “a very attentive audience, composed not of women and children, but of intelligent adults” (1). Chartist educationalists such as William Lovett viewed women’s instruction in overwhelmingly domestic terms: as necessary to prevent their opposition to husbands’ politics and for the enhancement of their housewifely functions as makers and menders of clothing, as bakers, and as child-minders (Schwarzkopf, 193–94).

6. The series originally included four stories, but Jones added a fifth story, “The Girl with the Red Hands,” when he republished the collection in 1855.
in “The Working Man’s Wife” occurs while she is in the act of childbirth, and the climax which leads to her hanging happens when she is arrested in the quintessential domestic activity of mopping (in fact she is arrested because she is mopping—her effort to remove the evidentiary blood implicating her husband for murder makes her an accessory to the crime). Her economic dependence on her husband John poisons the very activities that are supposed to define and “bless” her femininity: her childbearing angers and alienates him, and cleaning her house covers her with his crime and guilt. Her economic dependence also means that she dares not oppose him even when he beats and abuses her. Jones thus shows how bourgeois notions of respectable masculinity (measured as the ability singlehandedly to support one’s family) subject women to gross injustice and even distort their supposedly sacred maternal powers into a pretext for blame.

The couple’s class status does matter here, as the economic thumbscrews that make John so resentful of more mouths to feed, for example, would not bear down the same way on men of higher rank, but the financial pressures only exacerbate sexist attitudes shared by men of all classes. Despite his status as an unskilled workman, John Haspen subscribes to a conception of wives as protected and provided for by men and also to the paradoxical view of wives as servants: he looks on “his wife merely as a servant without wages, whom he found it convenient to prepare his meals, and make and share his bed” (ibid., 4). Whatever class they occur in, attitudes such as these restrict and punish women in every direction.

Margaret is not an entirely passive victim, however. In one episode of awful domestic violence, she finally hits back, striking John’s face and shoulder with a hatchet and threatening to do more. Unfortunately her rage is entirely maternal, aroused not by her husband’s repeated violence against her, but by his once striking their daughter after standing by to let her catch fire and burn. Margaret’s violence is certainly justified, but why is it only as a mother, and not as a self-respecting human being, that she acts? One explanation could be that Jones wants readers’ sympathy for her to be uncomplicated by any acts on behalf of the self. But the episode is still, in my view, a capitulation to the demand or belief that women behave selflessly and maternally, doing for others what they have not been willing or able to do for themselves.

In another instance, Margaret uses language, reasoning, and irony instead of a hatchet to protest her victimization, although there is again an emphasis on the needs of her children as motivating her interrogation of the legal system. In a very interesting dialogue between her and the lawyer who, early in the story, unsuccessfully defends her husband for robbing his erstwhile employer, the beleaguered wife poses a number of astute questions highlight-
ing how obtuse the laws are with respect to economically dependent women. To the counselor’s glib pronouncement that by imprisoning him, “society” is protecting her from her husband’s “rough” treatment, she asks if “society will take care of [her] children,” since it deprives them of their only breadwinner (ibid., 23). The lawyer condescendingly explains that society must punish those who hurt a member of society, as by stealing someone’s property. To this Margaret responds with wonder over why she and her children should be punished by starving, when they have never done harm to a member of society. She reasons that, in prison, her husband “will get plenty of food; we shall be at liberty, and there we shall die of hunger. D’ye see, we shall be worse punished than he!” (ibid., emphasis in original) Rather stunned and “at a loss for an answer” to this and her claim that it would be better if the law killed rather than imprisoned her husband, because then she could seek a new husband to provide for them, the lawyer tries to throw dust in her eyes with this: “Your husband is civilly dead. [. . .] If you had children by him now, they would be bastards. If he earns money before he dies, you wouldn’t inherit it. Henceforth, society looks on him as dead” (ibid.). Possibly feigning innocence, Margaret retorts “Oh, then I can marry again, sir, can’t I, if I find anybody who’ll work to give these children bread?” She defeats the lawyer utterly at this point, and he stalks off muttering about how “stupid these working-people are” (ibid.). Possibly feigning innocence, Margaret retorts “Oh, then I can marry again, sir, can’t I, if I find anybody who’ll work to give these children bread?” She defeats the lawyer utterly at this point, and he stalks off muttering about how “stupid these working-people are” (ibid.). Of course, she is not stupid; she has used the Socratic method to expose the complete absurdity and cruelty not only of the legal system that incarcerates and disinherits without opening doors for remedy but also of the impossible, even deadly, position of women rendered helpless and dependent by bourgeois patriarchy.

Jones was too experienced to expect—as some of his contemporaries seemed to do—that wage-earning alone would liberate women from such difficulties (Margaret’s labors as a publican, subsequent to her husband’s incarceration, do not save her from execution or her daughters from likely prostitution). At least two other tales7 in Woman’s Wrongs show women earning wages and still suffering harm from gender bias at the levels of society, employment, and sexuality. It is unclear whether Laura Trenton in “The Tradesman’s Daughter” actually earns any wages, though she certainly works hard keeping all the accounts, prices, and stock exchange rates relevant to her father’s grocery business. It is easy to see this story as an attack on the relentlessly prosaic and unimaginative drudgery of middle-class money-getting, but it also critiques the other extreme of self-indulgent romanticism in the person of Laura’s cousin Edward Trenton, who chafes at the “wooden” tradesman

and is instead “full of enthusiasm and overwrought poesy” (ibid., 71), a point I will return to below. What is most important for Jones is that the men on both sides of the dichotomy he thus constructs completely overlook or mis-apprehend who Laura Trenton is or might be, based largely on their willful blindness and arrogant assumptions about women.

Laura’s father treats her as a clerk who mechanically labors punctiliously and, apparently, for free. She has “never known the joys of childhood” (ibid., 72), or the playful exercise of her body that would give it some grace and strength, or the mental stimulation of any literature beyond a “cheap weekly publication” borrowed from a servant and occasional copies of Established Church periodicals (ibid., 74–75). For these reasons, cousin Edward scarcely bothers to initiate conversation with her, given his “habitual disregard of Laura’s intellectual powers” (ibid., 74). He even holds her in contempt, exclaiming that “it’s impossible to remain in such a house” after quizzing her on the monotony of her inert, drudging imprisonment in that house where, when she is not keeping accounts, she knits (ibid.). Edward’s petulant protest and assertion that rather than lead such a life he will “give up trade” and “go away” has everything to do with the fact that a male has the freedom to make such a choice, seek other employment, and travel to other places; he forgets that a woman does not. He does, however, loan some books to Laura, and unknown to him, she begins secretly borrowing his books and literary periodicals, under the influence of which she palpably changes.

Then, however, her father announces that he and his junior partner Mr. Ellman have settled that Laura shall marry the younger man, and by this means Mr. Trenton basically transfers the business to his partner. Laura is both the medium of transfer—as women almost universally are in polite literature—and a piece of the property so transferred: the account-keeper goes with the accounts. In this way Jones exposes how women of Laura’s class suffer their own kinds of prejudices and cruelties; they are not the same as those borne by her social inferior Margaret Haspen, but even without poverty and domestic violence, Laura undergoes her own, gender-delimited tragedy.

What is most intriguing about this story is its configuration of Laura’s deprivation in terms of her engagement with creative writing. Because she is a woman, no one dreams that she could have any yearning after visions or ideas or characters beyond the smallest possible round of her mercantile life. Hardly does she perceive any such thing in herself. But once exposed to “the best literature of the day” (ibid., 77), she develops a hunger for the same and an increasing discontent with her status as machine and chattel to her father, and eventually, her husband. After she marries, she performs less clerly labor, reads books openly rather than clandestinely, and shows “con-
tinual evidence of soul, intellect, and feeling” (ibid., 84). This brings her and Edward to a mutual confession—too late of course—of love.

While Edward pursues his ambitions of authorship, Laura’s jealous husband removes her to a home in Cumberland. It is ironic that her unfeeling merchant husband should take her to live, of all places, to the Lake District so associated with the Romantics, while Edward vainly pursues authorial success in the swindling literary marketplace of Victorian London. But the narrator pointedly contrasts the healthful, sustaining exertion Edward can feel himself to be making as a sublimated service to their love, with the mournful, docile endurance of monotonous “nothingness” Laura patiently suffers (ibid., 93). Of the pair the narrator says “He could fly out in the sunshine—she, like a brooding dove, must fold her wings, and sorrow in the shade” (ibid., 89). In youth and womanhood, in labor and in love, in discovery and in loss, the woman is fenced in and constrained by male assumptions of superiority, authority, and entitlement on every side. Even in death, her fate contrasts with Edward’s, for while he is free to travel to the neighborhood near her and there die, the reader’s last sight of her places her in “marble silence” in her drawing room, surrounded by the usual worthies of country life, as confined as she ever was (ibid., 99).

If that scene in her drawing room is supposed to show readers the moment of her death, it is very ambiguously narrated. After receiving an envelope containing a ring she knew to be from the then-perished Edward, she put the ring on “and then fell senseless on the ground,” with no additional comment or notice by the narrator (ibid.). The natural supposition is that she has fainted. She reacted in an identical fashion when her father told her she would marry his business partner, as she turned pale “and then fell senseless to the ground” (ibid., 81), so there is no reason to suppose anything catastrophic in the later, drawing room scene. Yet when some months pass and a family friend sends a handsomely bound edition of Edward’s works to Ellman Cottage, where Laura lived, Jones writes that “Alas! There was no one then in Ellman Cottage, who read poetry” (ibid., 100). This is a startling, highly unusual manner in which to disclose a protagonist’s death: “the extinction of the ability to read poetry,” as Haywood aptly describes it (Chartist Fiction, Vol. 2, xxiv). It is cryptic, since it records the dearth of an audience rather than the death of an individual, but at the same time it effects a transfiguration of Laura from pure body (“a moving anatomy of penmanship and arithmetic” [Woman’s Wrongs, 69]) to pure mind, perhaps the ultimate vindication of the claim that “she, too, could think” (ibid., 84).

With one hand, the story credits Edward for thawing and awaking Laura’s frozen intellect and soul, though with the other it points out his repeated
failures to perceive her as other than his “prejudice and folly” toward female intellectual capability represent her (ibid., 86). Perhaps her deafness here to his posthumously published poetry is a fitting reversal of Edward’s careless deafness to her through most of the story, summed up in his early avowal that her mental and moral darkness means “you never hear her voice” (ibid., 71). Neither a retired life in the *locus classicus* of Romantic poetry nor the status of tragic muse to a politically obtuse holdover of a Romantic poet (he is sensationalized as “another Chatterton!” [ibid., 99]) can liberate Laura, who is literally guarded and censored by her husband and surrounded by the stifling conventionalities of middle-class rural life (whist with the local clergyman, for instance). Mental death is death, Jones contends, and the remedy for women such as Laura must be structural, addressing their education, domestic labor, and disposal by male authorities in their lives.

1856: Gerald Massey

The cold and darkness outside the Greenwich Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge were increasingly broken by the gusts of warmth and light which accompanied repeated openings of the door to the crowded hall. Each time the door opened on that November night in 1874, groups of six or eight angry people stomped out into the snow to protest what they considered blasphemous and indecent contentions made by the visiting lecturer, for whose wisdom they had paid sixpence. At the podium stood a five foot, four inch man with the temerity to pronounce the biblical account of the “fall of humanity” a mere “lying legend” and a libel against women, inasmuch as it placed on their shoulders all the weight of humanity’s severance from God (Shaw, *Gerald Massey: Chartist, Poet, Radical and Freethinker*, 161). After similar claims on behalf of women and humanity prompted uproarious verbal sparrings among supporters, detractors, and a handwringing secretary to the Society, Gerald Massey found himself with only a third of the audience which had greeted him earlier that evening, and he quietly but confidently delivered the remainder of his lecture. The erstwhile Chartist earned a precarious, sometimes insufficient living through lecturing during the latter third of his life, but is best known as a poet and earned most of his plaudits for love lyrics and exaltations of marriage (Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-

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8. Massey’s poetry has begun to be anthologized in such sources as Brian Maidment’s *The Poorhouse Fugitives* (1987) and Peter Scheckner’s *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry* (1989), and even in *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*. 
Yet some of his poems on love and marriage were less celebrations than examinations of the negative impact those institutions had on women, revealing an innovative view of gender relations that, when brought to the interpretive table, modifies readers’ understanding of the contributions of Chartism to civil society in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

Just one year before the Matrimonial Causes Act reduced the cost of divorce by granting access to it through civil means (rather than through church courts or Private Acts of Parliament), Gerald Massey published his 1856 *Craigcrook Castle* containing the long poem “Only a Dream.” In the poem, the main character Charmian—trapped in a hateful marriage—“drag[s] [her] burthen to a nation’s throne, / And pray[s] deliverance from this Tyrant’s power” (lines 249–50). This and other references in the poem make clear that this is an extended poetic appeal for divorce, and its audience is not only a reading public but also a legislating one. As I will argue, however, the manner of that appeal is not simply a thematic entreaty to readers who will feel moved by the portrayal of a suffering woman. Rather, through its careful exploitation of linguistic multivalence, medieval poetic tropes, and concentric structure, the poem radically expands its protofeminist polemic, demanding that readers become aware of their agency as interpreters of people and literature and as makers of social change. The aim of this section is to show how these literary techniques themselves interpelate readers, forge links among various subaltern groups, and give rise to the conjecture that poetry as a genre was uniquely positioned by midcentury to be the literary icon of marginalized groups.

Since Massey’s literary work has garnered little critical attention, an analysis of “Only a Dream” requires a brief summary of the poem’s 367 lines. It begins with a narrator describing how he falls asleep and, in a dream world, realizes the true condition of Charmian, a woman he had believed was happy.

9. Examples include “The Golden Wedding Ring,” in which a lonely woman is revived and completed by marriage, and “Wedded Love,” where a poor wife and husband declare their exceeding love for each other. “The Bridal” describes a joyous wedding between a modest bride and a strong, gracious groom (again of small means), and “O Lay Thy Hand in Mine, Dear!” celebrates the continued love of an aging couple.

The bulk of the poem that follows consists of her speaking directly to describe how she was torn from her true, but propertyless, lover, and “sold” to a rich man in a degrading and morbidly agonizing marriage. She paints a lurid picture of the hell she shares with “the phantoms of the dark, / The Grave’s Somnambules” who were “so wronged” by marriage in life that they cannot rest after death (lines 162–65). When she realizes her husband has impregnated her, she hopes in spite of all to find happiness in the child. However, whether because the baby comes out looking like her true love or for some other reason, her husband hates the child, separates it from its mother, and allows it to pine for her until it finally dies. The poem then turns to allow the first-person speech of her lost lover, who recalls his happy past with Charmian and wonders if she still thinks of him, too. Following his words the narrator closes the poem with about thirty lines expressing bewilderment at how, now that he is awake, Charmian once again appears “in her summer-sumptuous beauty!” (line 343). However, the image of her marriage-tortured self remains in his mind and concludes the poem.

When the narrator thus completes the frame tale, he says that upon waking he read “the letter of [his] Dream” (line 342). That phrase captures much of what I want to posit in this section because a shadowy narrator figures an act of reading that suggests much about one’s own reading of the “Dream” letter just transmitted—the poem itself. Upon reaching the end of the poem, one discovers that what one has been reading is some sort of (intentional) letter, not just the (alphabetic) letters of a poem. The difference matters: it is not necessary to rehearse the discussion of letters and words as traces of absent signifieds, familiar to poststructuralist readers; the valences attached to those humble units of signification render them arbitrary, purely relative deferrals of any “real” meaning. But the notion of a letter, for most readers, still implies an intentionality and personal address which loads onto the shoulders of the mere “letters” an immediate significance, and loads onto the shoulders of readers a near-irresistible urge to pay attention, read on, even write back.

When the narrator finally reveals that the poem itself is a letter (or perhaps an envelope one has to open to read a letter), one brushes up against

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11. During her pregnancy Charmian cherishes the memory of her lost working-class lover and so, in accordance with Lamarckian theory, the baby takes on his image. Many working-class thinkers favored Lamarck’s 1809 hypothesis that offspring acquired traits based on the associations and environment of their forebears (perhaps because it allowed one to hope that one could alter the future) until Darwin’s theories refined and superseded it toward the end of the nineteenth century. For a brief discussion of the French naturalist’s theories, see the essay on “Evolution” in Sally Mitchell’s Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia (New York: Garland, 1988), 274–76.
the outermost layer of what I conceive as a trileveled concentric structure of envelopment in the poem (see figure 3). Innermost in this structure is Charmian, enclosed and shrouded in numerous explicit ways; the intermediate level consists of the framing device of the poem, whereby both Charmian’s and her lover’s words exist within a boundary set by the narrator’s voice; and most broadly, the poem itself as bearer of the “letter” of a dream becomes an envelope readers must open for themselves and respond to appropriately. Such an elaborate formal pattern of sheathing collaborates with the poem’s self-definition as a letter to allure readers, to demand their attention, to habituate them to an interactive experience of reading and, more ambitiously, of the world. Readers simultaneously feel hailed by the poem’s letter qualities and “get the hang of” opening envelopes, be they characterological, literary-technical, or semantic. Three broadly defined tasks or roles correspond to the poem’s three concentric layers of enclosure: inculcating an awareness of the slippery potential of language, legitimating narrative and the effort to analyze it, and exercising audiences in their essential role as readers and interpreters, actors not only on texts but also finally on the world. I will take up each of those roles as they arise in the discussion of each expanding circle of enclosure.
Biographical, Literary, and Political Context

Like other autodidacts to whom Chartism had given inspiration and a practical utility for their talents (as poets of the movement, journalists, speakers, and organizers), Massey sought a continued livelihood in public speaking after the Chartist movement’s demise. By most accounts Massey was an accomplished lecturer, and it was by this labor that he supported himself and his family for much of the latter third of his life. The living was always uncertain, much as his living had been during his days as a reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, as a poet, as editor of the *Edinburgh News*, and as bookkeeper to the publisher William Chapman, among other means of employment. Before his 1850 marriage to Rosina Jane Knowles, daughter of a shoemaker in Bolton, Massey had labored as a draper’s errand boy, as a shop assistant, as secretary to the Working Tailors’ Association in London, and, when a child, as a straw plaiter and as a silk thrower at the silk mill in his home town of Tring, where his illiterate father, a laborer and boatman, lived in poverty until his death in 1880.

To complement what he could earn through his lecturing and literary pursuits (which included scholarly studies of Shakespeare’s sonnets and of the Egyptian origins of human civilization)—and sometimes in lieu of any earnings therefrom—Massey was constrained to apply for grants from the Royal Literary Fund and the Civil List Pension, as well as loans from his acquaintance William Stirling, MP. He was also the occasional beneficiary of Lady Marian Alford, who favored Massey with financial assistance and, during a certain period, rent-free housing on her estate in Berkhamsted. There were occasions on which Massey’s resources were insufficient to prevent seizures of his furniture and effects for debt and to prevent his children from suffering the cold which adequate clothing would have mitigated (Shaw, *Gerald Massey: Chartist, Poet, Radical and Freethinker*, 104, 107).

At times his wife Rosina Massey contributed income to the family through her public demonstrations of mesmerism and clairvoyance, but her mental illness and alcoholism presented some financial difficulties as years passed. She required supervision and could not be trusted with the care of their children, so that the Masseys had to hire a housekeeper or Gerald Massey had to take her with him during his lecture tours and pay for the additional accommodations.12 Doctors pressed for her commitment to a mental hospital, but Massey

12. Massey mentions these facts in letters to William Stirling, held by the Strathclyde Regional Archives in the Stirling of Keir Collection, Mss. TSK.29/8/79 and TSK.29/8/30, quoted on page 97 of David Shaw’s *Gerald Massey*. See also Shaw, 82–83. Rosina Massey did, however, sometimes contribute her skills to her husband’s public appearances, reading and reciting his
resisted, and they remained together until she died at age 33 (apparently of heart disease), after nearly 16 years of marriage.

The nature of Rosina Massey’s illness seems to have been largely depressive, but it also included fits of violence and delusions, all perhaps exacerbated and self-medicated by her addiction to alcohol. The question of why doctors urged her consignment to an asylum gathers interest when one considers Mrs. Massey’s public and private demonstrations of her paranormal powers. Neighbors’ suspicions that she was a witch likely prompted the family’s removal from a cottage to a more remote farmhouse on Lady Alford’s Ashridge estate, and Victorian cases of other spiritualist women being committed for “lunacy”—and fighting back—are well documented. Whether Gerald Massey’s resistance to her incarceration stemmed from a steady affection for an admittedly ill wife or from a suspicion that doctors too readily dismissed women who wielded public and/or spiritual power (or from both) is a matter of speculation.

Given Rosina Massey’s lifelong influence on her husband’s thought, though, despite her early death and his remarriage, it seems logical to infer that she not only permanently converted him to spiritualism but also helped shape his progressive consciousness with respect to women. British interest in spiritualism arose during the same years as “the woman question,” and the two phenomena overlap in important ways. Since Victorian spiritualists believed anyone could be a medium of communication with the spirits of the dead, and that women possessed special talents in this regard, the movement not only provided a forum for female authority and public presence but also attracted large numbers of women to its ranks. Here some women found professional opportunities, social prestige, and personal validation and respect. Owen argues for the “subversive” potential of spiritualist cul-

13. Gerald Massey first met Rosina Knowles when he went to see her public demonstration of clairvoyance, and after their marriage she continued to perform in public as her health permitted and family finances required (Shaw, chapter 2).

14. Alex Owen details the 1870s case of the spiritualist Louisa Lowe, who in courts of law and the public press tirelessly protested her earlier, wrongful incarceration. Lowe also campaigned through the Lunacy Law Reform Association to protect others—in particular women with unorthodox religious views—from being similarly warehoused. Owen also mentions other women and details the history of Julia Wood, a spiritualist sympathizer who was consequently detained in an asylum for many years, despite Lowe’s efforts on her behalf. See The Darkened Room, 154–201.

15. As one example, “Towards the end of the 1880s a rival to the London [spiritualist] presses appeared in the form of the highly successful Two Worlds, which was published in Manchester. Under the editorship of the talented and well-known medium, Emma Hardinge Britten, Two Worlds adopted a progressive and crusading stance which won it an enthusiastic readership amongst provincial and reform-minded spiritualists” (Owen, 24).
ture which could, in certain circumstances, “provide a means of circumventing rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms” (*The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, 4). Viewed this way, spiritualism’s appeal to progressive men and women who actively agitated for women’s rights is unsurprising, and many of the prominent figures among the 24,000 signers of Anna Jameson’s and Mary Howitt’s 1855 Petition on Married Women’s Property, for instance, also showed considerable interest in spiritualism.16 Connecting her husband to communities more interested in and open to the elevation of women’s status and authority, Rosina Massey might well account for Gerald Massey’s increasingly progressive stance on women’s issues.

In his own and in his reviews of others’ poetry, Massey showed an interest in women’s social, economic, and political status, as when he reviewed Tennyson’s *The Princess*. Speaking there of the inadequate education afforded to women, Massey in 1847 wrote that “the hallowing wretchedness of this inequality is often a very hell in its torments” (qtd. in Shaw, 50). In later years, he believed women required not only education but also access to the parliamentary franchise as an absolute essential if they would begin to enjoy full equality with men. Perhaps more controversial than these opinions, long advocated by activists such as William Thompson, Anna Wheeler, and Barbara Leigh Smith (Bodichon), Massey dedicated his poem “A Greeting” to Annie Besant, whose 1877 prosecution for disseminating birth control information and whose vehement support for the striking Bryant and May match girls in the following decade won her a notoriety with which not all progressives wished to associate themselves. Nevertheless, Massey’s poem hails her as a “brave and dear” fellow fighter for the right causes (Shaw, 164).

The Masseys married in 1850, and by the time he published his protofeminist “Only a Dream” in 1856, the Petition on Married Women’s Property had circulated, and Barbara Leigh Smith and Caroline Norton had each published very influential works about the legal disabilities marriage imposed on women.17 The legislation proposed by the 1855 Petition on women’s ownership of property mostly disappeared under the twin initiatives of (a) a co-optive and unfulfilled promise by the Government to initiate its own measure on mar-

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16. Howitt herself, for example, as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau.

ried women’s property and (b) the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857,\textsuperscript{18} which addressed some of the worst abuses married women suffered while still not granting women the control over their property that they would later gain under the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 (Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, 300–02). That a pre-emptive governmental promise and the clamor over divorce should temporarily drown out the agitation for married women’s control of their property suggests just how vocal marriage’s critics had become when Massey published his poetic appeal for women’s freedom from unwanted marriages.

However, midcentury voices on marriage and divorce were hardly harmonious. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 *Aurora Leigh* put forward strong arguments in favor of women’s independence from men and marriage, Coventry Patmore’s epic of perfect domestic harmony presided over by a wife of otherworldly selflessness and purity began publication in 1854. Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* represents one of the most conservative poetic statements on the marriage theme. At least one critic has claimed that, in this work, Patmore rebelled against Tennyson, whose position regarding women and marriage was less conservative than Patmore’s (Saintsbury, *Historical Manual of English Prosody*, 190–91). Nevertheless, Tennyson’s intellectual, initially separatist heroine in *The Princess* (1847) was only slightly less conservative than Patmore’s “angel.” After holding a child awakens her to the duties of maternity and womanhood, Tennyson’s princess abandons her educational mission in order to marry the prince.

Tennyson espoused these conservative views also in his rendering of Arthurian legend in *The Idylls of the King* (1862–72), which blames Guinevere’s illicit, extramarital love of Lancelot for leading the world astray and destroying the Round Table. The poem retails the scandalous rumors of a wicked queen whom her husband Arthur reproaches for her forbidden love. Comparing Tennyson’s depiction of Guinevere to William Morris’s is instructive because the latter poet’s more liberal treatment of an unhappily married woman represents a position farther left on the spectrum of poets’ views I am outlining. Morris wears his position on his sleeve, so to speak, by entitling his poem “The Defence of Guenevere” (1858). More as a victim than a cunning schemer (as she is in Malory’s original), Morris’s Guenevere was almost

\textsuperscript{18} This Act permitted divorce by civil means (rather than through church courts and Private Acts of Parliament) and cheapened the cost of obtaining a divorce (though insufficiently to benefit the working class). At the same time, it unfortunately codified a sexual double standard whereby men could obtain divorces on the ground of a wife’s adultery alone, whereas women had to prove not only their husbands’ adultery but also one of several aggravating offenses such as rape, incest, cruelty, desertion, sodomy, or bestiality (Perkin, 303).
tricked into choosing a conventional, loveless marriage to Arthur and suffered “hell” as a result (line 38), and though she admits guilt for her illicit relationship, she launches a defense that focuses readers less on the details of what transpired between her and Launcelot than on the fact that her love for him is altogether good, on a spiritual level. All of these poems, published within about a decade of each other, fill in some details of the literary landscape in which Massey published “Only a Dream.” His poem staked out a position which was arguably more feminist than any of those to which I have referred, and it was not anomalous within his poetic corpus.

Others of his poems also scrutinized how love and marriage might have a negative impact on women, particularly when women bore children without the sanction of marriage or the aid of deserting men. Such seems to be the scenario in “A Ballad of the Old Time,” sung by a pregnant woman anxiously, hopefully, and it appears, futilely awaiting her lover’s return. In a hope the poem subtly renders sadly naive, the abandoned woman believes he will come bearing a wedding ring in token that “He never will lightly me” and so that “Base-born his Babe shall not be.” And in an especially interesting quartet of poems entitled “Deserted,” “Desolate,” “Doomed,” and “Dead!” Massey progressively tells the story of a suicidally depressed woman who has been deserted with a child. The first two poems are spoken by the woman herself, whose baby dies in the second poem, and in the third a narrator describes her as a victim who has been “stain’d and trampled” before she kills herself. In the final poem the ghostly woman gruesomely, relentlessly (and I must say satisfyingly) haunts her “Wronger.” Thus the poem on which the rest of this chapter concentrates is not exceptional in Massey’s oeuvre.

INNERMOST CIRCLE: DECIPHERING LINGUISTIC AND MARRITAL CONCEALMENT

In “Only a Dream,” the first layer of envelopment is at the level of narrated characters within the poem: the primary speaker Charmian is herself trapped inside a marriage she likens to live burial, and her true state of affairs is obscured to the frame narrator’s eyes until a dream reveals it to him. Introducing Charmian’s self-narration is the observation that her voice “stifled half its pathos not to hurt” (line 53), indicating that even the words she will utter in this dream are muted. What she does tell us, though, is that she resembled “the

19. “Dead!” was originally published, without the other three poems, in Craigcrook Castle under the title “In the Dead Unhappy Midnight.” In his collected Poetical Works (1861), however, the four poems appear together.
sheeted dead” (line 103) when she married, that she afterwards felt “bound, and buried alive” (line 139), and that with 50 other women,20 she “struck, and beat” (line 135) on the earth above her and “cried, and cried” (line 141) in an effort to escape, but remained trapped and went unheard. The “woe” suffered by these marriage victims is “unutterable” (line 171), and within the space of four lines we learn that their hearts are “drownéd,” their agonies “stifled,” their lips “struck dumb” by brutal husbands in the “curtailed bridal-bed,” and they have endured “silent tortures” and “shrouded deaths” (lines 173–76), so that even the language describing silence and enclosure becomes crowded and gives readers a claustrophobic feeling.

Charmian indicates later in the poem that her anguish rends the “bridal-veil,” allowing her to call on her auditors to “Come see what ghastly wounds bleed hidden here!” (lines 245–46). But her concealment extends beyond what she experiences in her nightmarish marriage and makes it difficult for others to apprehend her true condition as well. This innermost portion of the poem’s tripartite form in fact doubles the enclosure: Charmian is “shrouded” and “curtailed” in marriage, and the very fact of her misery is hardly disclosed without concentrated penetration beyond appearances and language. When not revealed by the narrator’s dream state, Charmian appears to be all beauty, a voluptuous, proud, and “serene” woman with dimpled cheeks and “large lotus eyes” and musical laughter (lines 20–25, 343–47). The narrator thus calls attention to the differences between his perceptions of Charmian when he is waking or sleeping, implying that readers also should beware of what is below the surface, even of language.

It seems important that the narrator portrays himself here as a follower and learner whose initial interpretations had been faulty. In a disarming pedagogical gesture, the narrator is represented as someone who, once needing leadership and correction, is now in a position to welcome and lead the inexpert reader, diminishing any gap between himself and those he would instruct. The frame narrator not only initiates and guides his readers in practices of correct interpretation but he is himself guided by Charmian. The beginning of the poem describes how “a hand reacht thro’ the dark, and drew

20. She mentions assistance from “a hundred hands” (line 136), which probably means there were 50 other women, a number significantly corresponding to the number of the Danaïdes. The 50 daughters of Danaus absolutely opposed marrying their 50 cousins and fled to Argos, where they were pursued by the men ready to fight to possess them in marriage. The Argives defended the women and explained that they “would allow no woman to be forced to marry against her will” (Hamilton, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes, 281), but when the marriages finally occurred 49 of the brides murdered their husbands on their wedding night. They were afterwards condemned to hell. See Edith Hamilton’s Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes (New York: Mentor, 1969).
/ [His spirit] gliding silent on,” until the narrator follows Charmian and hears her tale (lines 8–9). The poem thus performs for its Victorian readers a teaching function that shares some qualities with medieval tradition (more about the poem's medievalism later). In the Divine Comedy, for instance, the narrator—guided by Virgil and receiving instruction from various mentors among the shades—then guides his readers (through apostrophes) to apprehend the allegorical meanings of his poem and to learn what he has himself been taught. Thus Dante makes “clear that the task of understanding is ultimately the same for himself and the reader” (Spitzer, “The Addresses to the Reader in the ‘Commedia,’” 162). Massey, however, seeks to pass on his instruction not through authoritative, direct apostrophic address, but through the successively layered form of the poem itself. His indirect, structural approach subtly alters the learning dynamic from one in which the reader somewhat passively interprets according to direction (narrator’s apostrophe), to one in which a second order of deciphering (linguistic and structural decoding) intervenes between instructor and student, making greater demands on the reader and rendering him or her more nearly self-taught. Welcoming nonexpert, active, semi-independent readers to join the narrator on his journey, Massey formally democratizes the literary sphere in the same way that he means to democratize the political sphere. Through the formal structures of the poem, he enfolds workers almost simultaneously into the projects of reading/interpreting and of intervening in public affairs; this is the Chartist imaginary at work in the aesthetic nuances of the poem.

Massey democratizes the literary not only by summoning his readers to active participation with the poem but also by writing Chartists into a literary history that could itself be a smothering, confining force (like Charmian’s marriage). Inasmuch as certain styles, diction, and familiarity with literary heritage largely defined social status and cultural clout, those shibboleths contributed much to working people’s exclusion from cultural and political power, burying them under a weight of literary tradition as Charmian is buried under social and legal traditions. Massey reworks those traditions as a gesture of intellectual equality, speaking in and revising accepted forms much like Charmian speaks out against her powerlessness. At the same time, he also engages in a sort of pedagogy, bringing his Chartist readers into the experience of the literary tradition (regardless of whether they are aware of that tradition), enabling them to encounter for themselves dream visions, frame narratives, imaginative otherness, the startling effects of oxymoron, and other linguistic and rhetorical devices. Whereas many working-class readers might not recognize the names of Dante or Petrarch, and might experience literary dream visions as forays into alien historical, philosophical, or religious ter-
ritories, they might very well know the need for divorce or the frustrations of voicelessness, and feel the jarring effects of a phrase such as “warm snow.” Infused with the content of women or workers or other disempowered characters, established literary tropes might be transformed from exclusionary cultural devices into experiences and imaginative projections for new groups of (uninitiated) readers. This is a literary education which occurs in tandem with the overt political education that urges workers to take seriously the plight of women in restrictive, abusive marriages.

Elaborating the poem’s contention that people cannot trust what they see, either on the page or when they study other people, are numerous linguistic peculiarities throughout “Only a Dream.” On several occasions the diction of both the frame narrator and Charmian raises questions about language, as when the narrator describes snow as “white and warm” (line 2). What was that? Warm snow? (This particular oxymoron also underscores the poem’s medieval debts by alluding to Petrarch’s pervasive “icy fire” conceit.) Charmian also surprises readers later when she declares that she should have worn “The white [. . .] weeds of widowhood” instead of bridal attire when she was married off to her hated husband (line 101). Victorian standards of mourning for rich and poor alike required black clothing, not white.21 In both cases the adjectives are exactly opposite to what we would expect, alerting readers to the potential for inaccuracy, or at least slippage, in the medium of Charmian’s history.

A more complex example of how the poem heightens reader awareness of linguistic nontransparency, moderating one’s faith in the word as written, comes from a passage in which Charmian seeks to impress on her listeners that her husband “was a cruel Tyrant, just too mean / To murder” (lines 124–25). For just a moment, one has to puzzle over whether this is a delightfully withering insult (her husband is so insignificant that she would not squander the energy it would take to murder him) or a statement of his paucity of resources (he himself would not murder because he is deficient in the requisite courage and determination), semantic alternatives with quite different, indeed oppositional, implications. Has she contemplated murdering him? Or has he contemplated murdering her? Arguably this radical divergence of possibilities is foreclosed by the remainder of line 125, which makes the sentence read “He was a cruel Tyrant, just too mean / To murder, altho’ pitiless as the grave.” Now the prevailing sense is that, though he is “pitiless,” he lacks the spirit to be a murderer. Or is it? If readers imagine Charmian as the potential

21. For mourning customs including duration of mourning, wakes, and proper clothing (including colors and materials) for widows, see the helpful compendium on 160–63 of Sally Mitchell’s Daily Life in Victorian England (Westport: Greenwood, 1996).
murderer, they have (probably unconsciously) inserted an understood phrase in the white space between the lines. The mental revision reads “He was a cruel Tyrant, just too mean [for one] / To murder, altho’ pitiless as the grave.” In that case, the adjectival phrase which completes the sentence and would otherwise make clear that her husband is the potential murderer becomes a modifier of the understood “one”: Charmian. She would not murder him because, no matter how pitiless she might become, he is still too base to kill. So the sentence never quite comes clean, however much that final phrase seems to clinch the intention and import of the sentence. That Charmian calls her husband a “Tyrant” invites readers to see in her tormenter a figure for the target of radical political discourse since at least 1789. Early Chartist poetry, in particular, abounds with indictments of selfish aristocrats, corrupt legislators, ruthlessly exploitative employers, and religious and military powers as “Tyrants” whose powers must be checked or destroyed by the new movement’s popular muscle. This is one of several instances throughout the poem where the straightforward meaning of Charmian’s suffering complaint gains additional layers of political signification.

The degree to which language might conceal, rather than reveal, the truth that dreams manifest emerges in this passage from the poem’s opening:

Portentous things which hid themselves by day,
Sweet-shadowed ‘neath her sunning beauty-bloom,
Came peering thro’ the dim and sorrowy night.

(Massey, “Only a Dream,” lines 29–31)

In these lines, the frame narrator draws a sharp contrast between how one might perceive Charmian by day or by night, but her beauty is not the only veil which might block readerly apprehension of or access to “portentous things.” Hyphenated nouns such as “beauty-bloom” are common in early nineteenth-century poetry and most readers would take the cue that “bloom” is a noun when they see the hyphen. However, especially in poetry, what readers hear is as important as what they see, and it is impossible to read these lines without becoming aware of “bloom”’s latent double identity as both noun and verb. Because of the potential uncertainty here about what part of speech “bloom” functions as, indicators that her story is ominous might

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22. For a memorable prose example of the importance of what one hears as s/he reads, see Garrett Stewart’s Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 242–49. See also Stewart’s Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), the spirit of which informs my discussion in this portion of the chapter.
be “shadowed” or concealed under her beauty-bloom or they might, on the contrary, bloom, albeit in a shadowy fashion, beneath her beauty. Of course, Massey’s hyphenating “beauty-bloom” puts the weight of interpretation on the side of the former, with “bloom” as a compound noun obscuring the presence of portentous things, but the “portentous things . . . bloom” construction—having once stepped onto the field of possibility through the gate of one’s mental ears—leaves an aural trace, an unmistakable impression, a footprint, so to speak, on the reader’s mind. The simple technique of lineation deepens the impression by keeping at bay the true predicate for portentous things: “came,” which arrives on the scene only after readers have hesitated between the subject-verb status of “bloom,” kept out of sight just long enough for the pun to sink in.

If one doubts, even momentarily, whether her beauty hides the ambiguous “portentous things” or causes them to blossom out into something else, then one loses some confidence in language (and possibly in Charmian) and should consider himself warned that conventions regarding marriage are not the only agents in a cover-up. Readers have to penetrate more than the “bridal-veil” to understand all that this poem seeks to convey. Charmian’s burial both within marriage and under the language in which she endeavors to express that marital entrapment represents a first locus for reader awareness of the poem’s call to scrutinize characters and linguistic expression.

**Intermediate Circle:**
**Frame Narrative as Reader Interpellation**

Backing out to a slightly larger circumference, readers can detect the poem’s second pattern of envelopment at the level of the narrative framing of the poem: the narrator’s frame encloses Charmian’s telling of her own tale and also encloses the first-person meditations of her true lover. The key point here is that the frame self-reflexively calls attention to its own status as narrative at the same time as it posits the validity of narratives and the importance of their proper reception. This intermediate circle of the poem’s structure then implicates its readers in the drama of literary exchange, writing them into the script and thereby directing their interaction with literary “scripts” in general. Though distinct from the direct, apostrophic mode of reader address prevalent in other Chartist poetry, Massey’s technique here shares an immediacy that actively, explicitly hails readers and demands a political response.  

23. For example, Linton’s “The Gathering of the People” enjoins its readers to “Gather ye silently” on their “hill of right” in order to “burst on the plain,” overwhelm their erstwhile mockers, and “reign.” In Cooper’s *The Purgatory of Suicides* the poet addresses workers thus:
There has been some disagreement about what a literary frame is and whether it should be regarded as a simple (disposable) relay to the “real,” embedded narrative or rather as a narrative in its own right “in relation to which the embedded narrative takes the position of an indirect object” (Jeffrey Williams, *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition*, 100). My own view more closely approximates the latter than the former account of the frame’s function. The frame is not a mere bridge between the reader’s world and the fictional world, a mediator that is almost nonfictional since it treats the embedded plot as “the story” and seems to stand outside that and comment on it, and something one properly forgets once s/he has settled in to what the work is “actually about;” instead the literary frame serves as a miniaturized pattern for the exchange of narrative, with particular emphasis on its reception. Frames often depict not only a narrator but also auditors who express a desire for narrative and a situation to which storytelling seems like the natural, ideal response. Examples of these characteristics occur in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—in which people exiled from a plague-ridden city or on a religious pilgrimage tell tales to pass the time—and Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, in which Nelly relates to Lockwood the history of Wuthering Heights while he recovers from illness. As these instances demonstrate, the conditions for narrative seem perfect since there are no distractions or other demands to compete with, and in fact the circumstances for any activity other than narrative are inculcive. Not every literary frame exhibits all of these characteristics, but they are sufficiently common to warrant their inclusion in a definition of frames.

“Slaves, toil no more! Why delve, and moil, and pine, / To glut the tyrant-forgers of your chain?” Appealing to rural and urban readers on behalf of the Charter, Jones concludes his “The Factory Town” with “Then up, in one united band, / Both farming slave and factory-martyr! / Remember, that, to keep the LAND, / The best way is—to gain the CHARTER!” These and many other examples of the use of apostrophe in working-class poetry are collected in Peter Scheckner’s *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s–1850s* (London: Associated University Press, 1989).


Following the convention of frame narratives that auditors be in ideal circumstances to receive the tale, the narrator of “Only a Dream” slumbers. Since in sleep one’s attention cannot be directed to any activities, demands, or interests except the dream, this frame not only sets up the seductive power of narrative but also enforces a sense of its aptness or opportuneness. What else should one do during sleep but dream? Far from just establishing contact or opening up a channel through which to transmit the narrative of Charmian’s life, the frame dramatizes the consumption of narrative as natural, desirable, and opportune, and narrative itself as valuable and authoritative. The frame asserts the interest and worth of the narrative-to-come but also performs what the reader’s response to Charmian’s tale should be by figuring for us someone else’s reception of (and submission to) narrative in the framing scenes. Readers see the narrator clamoring after what others have to tell him and infer that they should clamor after what he himself has to tell them.

Massey’s frame differs in some respects from his models mentioned above because “Only a Dream” makes use of both the framing device and the dream vision device, which adds some features by virtue of its own technical norms. In this poem, as in many dream visions, the narrator himself becomes the auditor who craves narrative, drawn irresistibly toward his guide and the story she has to tell: “lo, a hand reacht thro’ the dark, and drew / [His spirit] gliding silent on” (lines 8–9). If the narrator were not already an eager listener, the mysterious, disembodied hand stretched out to grip him like some ghost of Christmas past is likely to capture his attention as well as himself. The convention of dream visions stipulates that the dream comes as a fulfilment of some psychological need in the narrator, dovetailing with the frame narrative’s self-valorizing portrayal of the value and desirability of narrative. Instead of a circle of listeners who model how readers should respond to literature (more typical in frame narratives), in “Only a Dream” we are confronted with a narrator whose feminized spirit goes “out to meet her Bride-groom,” seduced by his music and “clasp[ed]” by him (lines 5–7). The narrator depicts himself as pursuing and captivated by narrative. In modelling this powerful double attraction, the poem urges readers to seek out stories, which will embrace them with an ardor akin to a lover’s—the normative heterosexu-
ality of matrimony unmistakably casts such a reader/text relation as natural, even necessary.

But whose necessity is it? For the fact is that, to the extent that Charmian and the narrator are fictional characters in a long poem, neither exists and the only real ground of their being is the mind of the reader who encounters this text. Arguably, this symbiotic relation is why the poem performs its structural gymnastics and provides this hybrid of the frame tale and the dream vision (see chapter 3 for more on generic hybridity in Chartist literature). The reader’s imaginative engagement is the existential basis of the entire utterance, but because the reader is always outside the text, beyond its entire control, the narrative attempts to inscribe its auditors within itself and thereby contain or direct their decoding of what will come. Right from the beginning, then, the poem offers an analogue of eager reception as a means of forcing on readers a recognition of the self as seeker, as earnest consumer and interpreter of the tale it has to tell. Thus it is no accident that the devices of the frame narrative and dream vision apparently situate the reader’s proxy outside the story of Charmian’s true love and her marriage, as if he too were exterior to and beyond the reach of her narrative. His casual acquaintance with Charmian has led him to see her as contented, but he quickly falls within her sphere of influence and revises his erroneous reading of a text he will now share with readers, who also seem to be outside the text. He has deciphered what really lay in her story, and the textual effect of the reader’s metaphoric incorporation into this narrative is that s/he, too, must listen (or rather read)—and that not casually—to discern properly. This is how the text secures itself an attentive readership; if frames function as fences delimiting the possibilities of text or canvas,27 this frame would circumscribe readers themselves and rope them into the textual fold.28

The narrator’s usual hunger for dream stories (like the ones his spirit seeks out each night) reaches a higher pitch when Charmian appears in order to guide him and draws our surrogate out to hear the tale she has to tell. And

27. In Tennyson’s *The Princess*, for example, the frame narrative (clearly more conservative than the embedded tale of Princess Ida) shuts down social possibilities, as when Little Lelia removes her shawl from a male statue that she had converted into a man-woman in the opening frame by wrapping him in her garment. She accompanies her action with a request to her superior, Oxford-educated brothers to “tell us what we are.” In numerous nineteenth-century British novels (*Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Dracula*, for instance), “it is precisely the human extremity of death that is circumscribed and packaged, made manageably phantasmal” and tamed by the frame device (Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, 271).

28. For a sophisticated treatment of reception theory using fiction as its site of investigation, see Garrett Stewart’s *Dear Reader*. 
she is not a mere diversion, but a “Spirit” (line 51), an imposing figure with a vast, “sea-like” soul and a divinely transfigured “white, lit face” (lines 38, 28), suggesting the authority of her words. Compliments of the frame’s closing bracket, she reappears as this same larger-than-life figure at the poem’s conclusion, in a last effort to command the reader’s regard. Awakened from his dream, the frame narrator still sees her “Holding the great Curse up to heaven for ever, / To call God’s lightning down, altho’ it kill / Her with her wedded Curse” (lines 357–59). One of the poem’s final descriptions of Charmian, these lines allusively associate her with two biblical figures noted for their superhuman authority and strength: the prophet Elijah and the judge Samson. Elijah’s authority was vindicated when he called down fire to burn not only the sacrifice offered up to God but also the altar and the water with which Elijah had drenched them. Interestingly, Charmian is a prophet with a twist, for she calls down lightning while she holds “up to heaven” a “great Curse,” rather than a slain animal or a prayer for the humiliation of competing prophets (1 Kings 18:25–41). Samson avenged himself for his captivity and blinding at the hands of the Philistines through one last show of strength: he pulled down the pillars of Dagon’s temple, collapsing the structure and killing himself and his enemies (Judges 16:23–31). Charmian is similarly fearless for her own safety in that she is so set on the abolition of women’s captivity in unwanted marriages, she calls for its destruction “altho’ it kill / Her with her wedded Curse” (lines 358–59). She differs from Samson in her less selfish motives, so that while she is identified with the authority and strength of both these biblical heroes, her aims are unalloyed with the swaggering, pettiness, and vengeance of those men. By summoning and revising them, what the frame distills from these intertexts is the valor, the courage, and most important for my discussion, the sheer status of an authoritative speaker whose “hand reacht thro’ the dark, and drew” the narrator—with readers in tow—irresistibly to hear the story of her curse (line 8).

**Outer Circle:**

**Epistolary and Theatrical Address to the Reader**

Finally, at the level of the poem’s being itself an envelope or an enveloped letter, one perceives the third and broadest circle of enclosure in the poem: the narrator says at the end “And I with marveling eyes had broke the seal / Of slumber, read the letter of my Dream” (lines 341–42). In the most literal sense, it would seem that slumber is the wax seal affixed to the envelope of a dream, and that the conscious interpretive act on waking constitutes the “reading” of
content or meaning, the opening of an enveloping dream to get at its “letter.” The dream we have been reading in the form of this poem turns out to contain an urgent letter, and the narrator’s “read[ing] the letter of [his] Dream” performs for us what the appropriate response to that letter is: we too must read the letter of this poem/dream and take steps to change the law. The narrator complains that “The kings and queens of prospering love go by, / And little heed this Martyr by the way” (360–61) and Charmian herself calls on “all good people” (read: readers) with the vocative “ye” to “Behold where all the Tortures of the Past / Are stored by Law, and sanctified for use” (lines 251, 247–48). Her interlocutors should “behold” and “heed” both Charmian’s torture and the laws which “sanctify” it. How readers receive and respond to this “letter” clearly matters. The injunctions here to examine both letters and laws would have resonated for Victorian readers with the Christian New Testament’s distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the religious laws inherited from the Jewish tradition. In the new dispensation, Christian believers are taught to outgrow literal-minded observance of the letter of the law in favor of a more perceptive observance of its spirit. In this poem, by implication, the nature of society’s engagement with the laws of marriage crucially depends on its felt apprehension of the suffering and torture, the spiritual impact, of that which the laws sanction.

The poem’s self-designation as letter is the reason that the narrator calls so much attention to acts of reading, looking, and listening throughout the poem. The sense, if not the grammar, of line 9 is that he “look[ed] up” into Charmian’s face, at which time he “read her look” (line 11) and began to follow her to hear her tale. And tales, as the discussion of frame narratives above demonstrates, are not to be ignored. With a prophetic authority whose urgency resembles that of the story Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner has to tell, “The golden legends on Night’s prophet-brow” in this poem “burn[]” (lines 16–17). Legends here command attention by virtue of their prophet status, burning as divine things do and also burning to be told in the way prophets’ messages do (recall, for example, how God compelled Jonah to deliver the story entrusted to him for that purpose). So readers are reminded from the outset to regard stories as urgent, powerful, and demanding attention, a reminder effectively buttressed both by the narrator’s misreading of Charmian

29. Since Charmian earlier mentions that she “drag[s] her burthen to a nation’s throne” (line 249), this reference to royalty whose idyllic love makes them complacent about others’ marital suffering might well refer to Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, to whose throne were directed such appeals for divorce law as Caroline Norton’s.

30. I am thinking, for example, of Moses’s encounter with God in the burning bush (Exodus 3) and of God’s leading the Jews out of Egypt by appearing to them “in a pillar of fire” (Exodus 13:21–22).
and by the multiplied visual and reading references that fill out this opening section of the poem.

As it progresses, this portion of “Only a Dream” makes readers aware that the narrator’s impression of Charmian merely as a beautiful, sensuous, carefree woman is a misreading of which he is disabused when he perceives her “sorrow,” “anguish,” and the withering of her life’s “luxuriant flower” into “ashen dead-sea fruit” (lines 21, 34, 26–27). He becomes conscious of his misapprehension through the new imperative to read which dreams bring to bear. Notice how insistent is the visual in these lines:

Diaphanous in the moonlight grew her life  
With all its written agony visible;  
Down the dark deep of her great grief I stared,  
And saw the Wreck with all its dead around.  
(Massey, “Only a Dream,” 44–47)

Since it means sheer or almost transparent, “diaphanous” is a distinctly visual adjective with which it is appropriate to introduce the metaphor of reading which follows. Her agony grows “visible” when the narrator not only “s[ees]” but also “stare[s]” into what he represents as an ocean entombing a shipwreck. Clearly the emphasis is on the ocular, and not only as a passive reception of images but as focused, active concentration on unpleasant subjects: he stares. However, the really curious word choice here is the adjective describing her agony as “written,” which one might regard not only as incompatible with the shipwreck metaphor but also as simply a strange descriptor for an emotional state. The double jarring produced by the diction helps insist on the epistolary character of this agony, which makes itself known through the letter of a dream and, ultimately, through the letter of this poem. It is the letter as poem at which readers must “stare,” and we are cautioned not to misread the letter as the narrator originally misread Charmian.

The interpretation implied in correct reading is the reader’s first, and crucial, act, but it entails a second act if opening this final envelope is to be complete. For if those in power fail to address the pressing need for divorce reform (recall the heedless “kings and queens” of lines 360–61), readers should not only “read the letter of [this] Dream” but also take action on its contents and “drag [the] burthen to a nation’s throne” as Charmian herself does. Perhaps an emphasis on action is what Massey means by giving the poem the dismissive title “Only a Dream” (emphasis mine), as if to say that, though the text matters, finally what readers do with it and their world matters more. The poem’s concluding lines forcefully demonstrate such a contention:
The kings and queens of prospering love go by,  
And little heed this Martyr by the way;

This life fast fettered to a festering corse;

This passing Tragedy of Soul within  
Our five acts of the Sense, that breaks its way  
Thro’ human hearts i’ the Theatre of a world.  

(“Only a Dream,” lines 360–61, 363, 365–67)

Before moving to its final admonition to readers, which I will discuss momentarily, the poem graphically reminds them of the urgent need for divorce reform. In one of the most densely reiterative lines of the poem, Massey variously alludes to and repeats the ancient punitive practice of strapping together the bodies of (living) murderers and their victims. Massey alters the image to suggest that the victim Charmian is horribly tied to the corrupting dead weight of a bad marriage. “Festering” chiasmically alliterates “fast fettered” and is also a portmanteau word which contains and echoes traces of the earlier pair. The portmanteau in fact gives a creepy performance of just how intimately bound are the decaying and the living bodies: the very description of being “fast fettered” folds over onto itself and merges into the rank image of “festering.” The parts of speech in this line also chiasmically fold over onto themselves, as the adjective-noun phrase “festering corse” redoubles, in reverse, the earlier noun-adjective (phrase) construction “life fast fettered,” subtly adding another bond between the decomposing and the living. The redundancy of the alliteration, use of a portmanteau word, and chiasmus in a single line form a gripping prelude to the poem’s, and this outermost circle’s, final hailing of readers to read the letter of this poem and then act based on its contents.

The theatrical references to the genre of “Tragedy,” the dramatic structure of “five acts,” and the thespian forum of a “Theatre” in lines 365–67 tie together the poem’s various insistencies that people attend (to) and watch the story of women such as Charmian as they would a play. But more than this, readers of this poem, watchers of such tragedies, must themselves become the vehicles for their gaining a wide audience. Notice how the “five acts” double as not only the standard divisions of classical plays but also the five human senses; they are “our” five acts “of the Sense,” as if human beings themselves are the play and their perceptive faculties the mechanism of its unfolding. Before encountering that line, one might be lulled into thinking that “This passing Tragedy of Soul within” is a purely individual one. The deictic “this”
anaphorically points to some tragedy about which we must already know: Charmian’s—it is her tragedy and not ours. And it is a tragedy “of Soul”—stressing its internal, personal, spiritual nature—which occurs “within,” an almost defensively private preposition. But this line coupled with the following one represents a splendid example of double grammar, in which readers make sense of a line as a complete grammatical unit but have to revise that sense once they round the corner into the next line. Turning the corner, we realize that this Tragedy takes place not just “within” Charmian, but “within / Our five acts of the Sense,” a radically different meaning. The new grammar shifts the play from Charmian’s interior to an outside, public, collective awareness (not just “my” senses but the collective pronoun “our” senses).

The poem’s final line takes this turning inside out even further, beyond the five senses of even a group of people. The plight of women trapped in hymeneal misery bursts onto the theatrical stage “of a world,” and I believe Massey’s use of the indefinite article “a” instead of the more usual “the” before “world” transforms the prepositional phrase from a simple (possessive) genitive to an equative genitive. The theater of “the world” could imply possession: the world owns a theater and that is where Charmian’s terrible drama is staged. The theater of “a world” more strongly suggests an equivalence: the whole world is itself a theater. The possessive relationship implied by “the” would relegate the theater to some subsidiary position (optionally viewed) in the world, whereas the metonymic relationship invoked by “a” renders the theater inescapably, pervasively public. But importantly, the conduit through which such drama reaches the theater of a world is still “human hearts.” These final lines of the poem underline the degree to which a literary narrative (or drama) requires the medium of humanity to be realized on a broadly social stage, far beyond their own five senses. By definition, drama is a genre of action, written to be acted, produced, and not just read. This is why I say that the poem calls on readers not only to consume narrative but also to act, based on it, in “a world.” Such a reader-text interaction would almost literally turn

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31. Though now rarely used, the term “double grammar” remains quite useful as a descriptor for a common effect of poetic lineation, often exploited to potent effect. It was coined by William Empson in his 1930 book Seven Types of Ambiguity, in the context of a discussion of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

32. Also called a genitive metaphor, in which the prepositional phrase establishes an equation, not subordination, of the metaphor’s vehicle and tenor. In the example “the eye of the sun,” “of” functions as a fulcrum across which eye and sun are equated: the metaphor means the sun is the center or eye, not that the sun possesses an eye or a sun spot.

33. Unquestionably Massey, who would later publish a study of Shakespeare, has in mind the famous lines from As You Like It: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (Act 2, scene 7).
inside out “the letter of [this] Dream,” inducing readers to unleash its contents on the world through the medium of their own consciousnesses and deeds.

There could hardly be a clearer illustration of the view that the relationship between art and reality is human action. But crucially for The Chartist Imaginary, some of the most persuasive, effective means of connecting art and human action are those of form. The outermost ring of the poem’s concentric enclosures completes the formal trajectory from character and language to genre to allegory. It is a sort of final frontier of figuration, the place where having to penetrate language and recognize the seduction of narrative culminates in skillful reading and calls for decisive behavior. One is reminded of Brechtian literary theory, in which the form of a work should “alienate” the audience in order to make it aware of its own agency, of the artificiality of (literature and) society and therefore its susceptibility to change. It is as if the formal exercises literature calls on readers to perform train them not to be passive registers of presented reality, but to accept responsibility for the imperative to interpret and act on reality, changing it and themselves in the process.34 “Only a Dream” is not a simple didactic tale or exercise (relying on themes to teach readers to look “deeper” into social practices), but achieves its summons to agency precisely through its concentric form.

Conclusion:
Medievalism, Gender, Genre, and Epistemology

“Only a Dream” registers the wider mid-Victorian fascination with the medieval discussed in chapter 2 on epic. In particular, Massey incorporates literary devices such as oxymoron, the frame tale structure, and the dream vision made famous by Boethius, Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer. By means of his concentric structuring of the poem and especially his concluding references to “the letter” of his dream, he also nods to the famously Italian poetic trope of congedo (“envoi” or “envoy” in Old French and in Britain). This device of closure has the poet (usually) apostrophize the preceding poem by bidding it to go out into the world and say or do some specified thing with

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34. Brecht is not, of course, the only author or the only Marxist to conceive of literature this way. P. B. Shelley held that since “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination” and “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination . . .,” therefore “Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb” (Shelley, A Defence of Poetry, 1076). Writing of art, Trotsky said that “it refines feeling, makes it more flexible, more responsive, it enlarges the volume of thought in advance and not through the personal method of accumulated experience, it educates the individual” (Literature and Revolution, 168).
respect to its readers. *Congedo* very self-consciously emphasizes the act of communication and the process of transmission.\textsuperscript{35} Although Massey’s poem does not include such a formally demarcated device, his concluding stanza unquestionably gestures at *congedo* by sending the poem out into the world to solicit specific responses from its readers, and he explicitly refers to the foregoing poem as a letter to be interpreted and as a drama to be acted in “our” human hearts. In this way, the poem self-reflexively thematizes both the act of communication and the summons to readers to act on the matter so communicated. He concludes by addressing, not the poem, but “us” (implied by the collective first person pronoun “our”), bidding readers to alter women’s position in society and in marriage.

Massey’s nod to *congedo* furthermore prompts consideration of just what is at stake in the particular erotic encounter of Charmian, her proscribed true love, and her husband. Without the outward-focused conclusion and the concentric interpretive model, the poem would as likely as not be read in a purely lyrical mode, as one woman’s cry against romantic travesty. But its close connections to medieval poetic customs turn the lyric inside out (from inward- to outward-looking), a project in which Massey’s contemporary Victorian poets were also famously engaged. Arguing for an explicit association between poetic device and political function, Keen observes how Italian poets in exile frequently used the *congedo* to superimpose the political onto the romantic.\textsuperscript{36} The trope that Massey echoes and modifies, then, served historically to “open[] up to political interpretation what would otherwise be read as a purely erotic poem, in which imprisonment and separation would be taken as conventional amorous metaphors” (Keen, 190). In “Only a Dream,” what broader concerns does Charmian’s particular experience represent? Certainly part of the answer is the status of women more generally in loveless marriages. But I contend that another part of the answer is the relatively disempowered position of working people, and of worker writers, in Victorian Britain.

For reasons already mentioned, the weight of literary tradition could be repressive for such political and literary aspirants as numbered among the

\textsuperscript{35} Catherine Keen describes this function as making “both author and audience [. . .] aware of shifting from the fictional space of the lyric back to the world in which its words are read or spoken” (“‘Va, mia canzone’: Textual Transmission and the Congedo in Medieval Exile Lyrics,” 184).

\textsuperscript{36} Regarding Re Enzo’s lyric “Amor mi fa sovente,” for example, Keen points out that its erotic theme seems unrelated to anything political until the *congedo* mentions imprisonment and pleading with a powerful lord. The final stanza also names (in order) the regions of the Italian peninsula through which the poem must travel to reach Enzo’s beloved, strongly implying the poet’s position in Bologna, where he was a political exile for twenty-three years.
Chartists, helping to enforce their disenfranchisement much as Charmian's rigidly traditional marriage subjects her to silent suffering. Chartist writers such as Massey might very well identify—and be identified—with Charmian due both to their intellectual labor as poets and to their class status as working men. Criticizing Tennyson, for example, as lacking “manliness” in the “emasculate floridity” of his style (“The Faults of Recent Poets,” 74), Victorian critics were notoriously uncomfortable with what they saw as the feminizing influence of certain poetry.37 “Only a Dream” would certainly have earned a similarly gendered dismissal, yet Massey ventriloquizes Charmian's voice over the bulk of the poem, prompting speculation that he is self-feminizing in solidarity with oppressed women and in order to draw an analogy between them and workers more generally. He also explicitly genders the narrator's “Spirit” as a female going forth “to meet her Bridegroom in the night” when the dream state begins in the poem's opening lines (lines 4–5).

Massey's choice and handling of genre associate him with female subjectivity, but his class status too could powerfully link him with the objective definition of womanhood in the middle-class dispensation. Cultural historians have shown how, with the rise of the industrial middle class and the shift of labor away from cottage industry to factory production, an important marker of manhood and status became the capacity to go out (of the home) to work and earn an income sufficient to provide for a dependent wife and family who remained in the domestic space.38 A key complaint of the Chartists was that mechanization and capitalist competition deprived men of their masculinity by paying below subsistence wages (necessitating employment of wife and children) and by sometimes depriving men of jobs at all (leaving them at home to be supported by wives who formed a cheaper work force).39 Critiquing the assumptions underlying such complaints, Schwarzkopf avers that

Chartists responded to the upheaval in gender relations by attempting to revert to pre-industrial patterns of sexual power, at the workplace, in the

37. Thaïs E. Morgan explains that “Victorian male poets inhabited an ambiguous cultural space: as poets, they were expected to express deep feelings and explore private states of consciousness, yet this was identified in domestic ideology as the preserve of the feminine” (“The poetry of Victorian masculinities,” 204). See also Adams's Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Sussman's Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

38. See, for example, Bivona and Henckle's The Imagination of Class: Masculinity and the Victorian Urban Poor (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006) and Davidoff and Hall's Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750–1850 (London: Routledge, 2002).

39. See Schwarzkopf, 34 and passim.
family as well as in politics. [. . .] In fact, Chartist opposition to women’s exploitation was embedded in a conception of a woman’s proper social position that put her more firmly in her place by cementing her dependence on man. (Women in the Chartist Movement, 77)

Conceding the validity of this line of criticism (also discussed in chapter 5 on female Chartist poets), at present my chief concern is not an evaluation of male Chartists’ perceived feminization but simply a notation of its reality, however complicated. To the degree that pre-industrial or middle-class criteria of successful manhood shaped perceptions and self-perceptions of working people, laboring men experienced their diminished power as feminizing. Thus although Charmian’s self-representation is principally aimed at specific marriage law reforms on behalf of women, its layers of related meanings include other disempowered people (the working class, Chartist poets, men seeking the vote, for example).

Charmian’s own misery as a woman forcibly separated from her true love and trapped in a diabolical marriage neither requires additional meanings to confer significance nor serves as a mere window that disappears as readers gaze through it to the analogous circumstances of workers and Chartist writers. Yet in the voice of the socially and legally constrained, yet self-representing woman, it is hard not to hear as well the voices of culturally excluded, electorally disqualified worker-writers seeking the right of political self-representation. As categories of subalternity, these groupings overlap and share similar positions in relation to hegemonic powers.

Importantly, though, the subject of Massey’s poem both hears the outside world (“the sounds above me far away; / The feet of hurrying Life, and loitering Love; / Rich bursts of music, hum of low, sweet talk” etc. [lines 142–44]) and speaks at length about her own experiences in this poem, thus insistently injecting the individual, the inconvenient, and the historically excluded into the prefabricated institution of marriage. Likewise Massey and other Chartist writers infuse the protests, hopes, and realities of women and the poor into literary traditions from which they had been largely excluded. As a figure for other oppressed women and for stifled workers more generally, Charmian’s self-representation metonymically represents the disruption not only of marriage but also of political exclusion and literary elitism.

As many have pointed out, poetry in the nineteenth century became an increasingly marginalized genre. To explain this, Felluga examines the century’s paradoxical demands on poetry in terms of class and gender that are especially useful here: on the one hand, critics said that poetry should strive to maintain a place “above” the taint of the present, with its mass market com-
modities (such as novels) and lower-class consumers. In this view, poetry's unpopularity signified its status as an antidote to low, democratic tastes. On the other hand, some demanded that poetry should not become solipsistic and lose touch with the common world, for that sort of “purity” and self-indulgent privacy leads to an effeminate sensualism. Critics diagnosed the resulting lassitude and artificiality as a source, rather than remedy, of social disease. In either case, whether valorized as an elite cure or demonized as a feminizing curse, poetry landed firmly on the margins of society, as something external to the social body. From this fringe, Felluga argues, the genre has “sought to extricate itself ever since” (Perversity of Poetry, 3). As antithetical as these prescriptions for poetry were (“separate us from working-class rabble by being unpopular!” and “avoid feminine irrelevance by being popular!”), both took for granted two assumptions: poetry is not an organic part of the social or political body (it is rather a prophylactic or a disease), and poetry has some poorly defined but fraught connections to women and the poor.

In all cases, it is cordoned off as foreign, as exterior to dominant subjectivities, be they male, ruling class, or narrative/prosaic. For these reasons, poetry was uniquely situated as the genre of the dispossessed, the non-normative, the outsider (with plenty of exceptions and qualifications). That could be one reason Chartists (and other agitators) favored it. Viewing the question of Chartism’s genre preferences this way places the discussion within aesthetic and literary historical parameters, which should not be divorced from or replace the more usual material explanations of less leisure to write or read literature, access to newspaper columns but rarely publishing houses, and so on. I propose this explanation of Chartism's overwhelmingly poetic output not to displace the other explanations on which this book also relies, but to take seriously, on their own terms, the artistic choices and cultural intuitions Chartist writers evinced when they chose to write poetry.

As an iconically marginal self-representation, “Only a Dream” poses a final, metadiscursive reminder that historical influence is not unidirectional. Those who come after the settlement of major conflicts easily forget that the power relations, roles, and cultural understandings of the contenders (in this case women and men, lower and upper classes) were once unsettled; it is a critical commonplace that the winners of such struggles dictate the terms in which their successors understand the conflict and its resolution. But still one needs reminding of what feminist scholars have shown: categories such as the state, industrialization, womanhood, and class do not in fact possess characteristics and powers distinct from and pre-dating human beings. Rather, ideologies and institutions “are the progeny of human encounters, of women
and men who engage, as they occasion, the potentialities and limits of their circumstances of living” (Silverblatt, “Interpreting Women in States: New Feminist Ethnohistories,” 154). The winners might dictate terms to posterity, but the losers are not one-dimensional victims who played no role, however obscure(d), in the creation of those terms. Such apparently settled categories as worker and family and poet and citizen bear traces of the push and pull, the resistance and complicity, of those who did not emerge in control of their definition.

Charmian’s (admittedly fictional) protest, like the literary self-projection which is the poem about her, represents a counterhegemonic contribution to what would become the accepted, nearly automatic ways of thinking about wives, poets, and workers. The poem grants readers access to how a culturally or legally powerless individual (autodidact, voteless man, feme covert) actually participates in the formation of customs and laws of which we have come to see them as merely the victims or objects. With this access, “woman” and “wife” become historical entities, the outcomes of a gestation to which women and wives contributed. In the same way, “writer” and “citizen” become contested identities shaped also by the uneducated and disenfranchised who left their imprint on the terms of their own exclusion. The epistemological shift to seeing (literary) history this way—as disputed, multiply determined, lived process—is one of the most important consequences of understanding Chartistm and its literature.