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Mechanic Accents
Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America

Revised edition

MICHAEL DENNING
THE HAYMARKET SERIES
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For my mother
Irish bandits make their way into the dime novels in this period. So one finds in one of the early James brothers tales, *Frank James on the Trail* (F), an Irish Fenian, Will Brannigan, who ‘had a kindly liking for the outlaw brothers, and often helped them out of their difficulties, but would never join their band or share their plunder. “No, Frank,” Brannigan would say, “no Brannigan was ever ‘wanted’ for anything but political offenses.’” (F, 2). But Brannigan does join them by the end of the story, after some vigilantes brutally murder the mother of a friend.

And in the Five Cent Wide Awake Library, in the midst of the original James brothers stories, one finds Corporal Morgan Rattler’s *The Irish Claude Duval*, a straightforward story of a noble robber who says to one victim: ‘you rob and plunder the people of Ireland, while I only take from the tyrant officials of the English government who are gorging themselves with Ireland’s blood’ (R, 3). He steals the lord’s money and wins the heart of his daughter while defending the people of Ireland. This tradition was strong enough to structure much of the discussion of the Molly Maguires. The *New York Weekly* (3 April 1876, 4), for example, once gave a history of the Molly Maguires which defended their incarnation in Ireland as a necessary arm of the tenants against the landlords, while maintaining that such tactics were out of place and criminal in Pennsylvania.

But perhaps the crucial reason for the absence of a Molly Maguire bandit saga can be seen in a comment that Hobsbawm (1981) makes about the James brothers: ‘by the time they flourished, Grangerism and Populism were a more coherent response to the problems facing the rural Mid-West than robbery. . . . social banditry wanes as modern organized and collective modes of representing class interests become available’ (154, 151). The violence of the so-called Molly Maguires did not precede the miners’ unions; it came out of the defeat of the union in the Long Strike. But the presence, memory and hope of the miners’ union meant that a certain distance was kept between respectable organization and forms of social banditry; thus Daniel Doyle and others made such an effort, not always successful, to separate the union and the Ancient Order of Hibernians from the individual acts of revenge. The acts of Deadwood Dick, Jesse James and the other dime novel outlaws — the Younger brothers, the Dalton Boys, and Joaquin Murieta — were both sufficiently distant from and implicated in the battles of labor and capital to offer a figure of those battles, a figure of vengeance and heroism.

Almost all dime novels have a romantic plot; the strikes and murder mysteries are intertwined with seductions, romances and rivalries in love. These cheap stories of labor and capital are also and at the same time stories of sexuality and gender, romances of manhood and womanhood. The disguises and revelations, captures and escapes attempt to resolve not only the ideological antinomies generated by the class conflicts in the republican community but also the contradictions generated when older notions of manhood and womanhood are thrown into question by the new sexual divisions of labor. In the middle class sex/gender system, the solidifying of the 'separate spheres' produced narratives of the self-made man and the domestic woman.¹ The working class sex/gender system, on the other hand, though not entirely separate and isolated from that of the dominant class and its culture, is substantially different: the tales of honest mechanics are not the same as the stories of the self-made man, nor can the narratives of the working-girl's virtue be subsumed under domestic sentimentalism. Even where the words are the same, and that is not often, they are spoken with different accents. The existential dilemmas and ideological contradictions that these producer heroes face are distinct, and their resolutions, though often borrowing from the ideals of middle class respectability, have their own meanings. In the final two chapters I will look at narratives of working class manhood and womanhood in the cheap stories. And in both of the sections that follow, I will use autobiographical accounts as a gauge, clumsy and inexact no doubt, to the way the dime novels of working class manhood and womanhood were read and lived.

Tales of honest young mechanics had appeared regularly, if
not in great abundance, from the 1840s: one of the earliest was *Fleming Field; or, The Young Artisan. A Tale of the Days of the Stamp Act* written in 1845 by one of the most popular novelists of the period, Joseph Ingraham. But the subtitle is revealing; like Lippard’s ‘legends of the revolution’, the tale is set in the past, in a more idyllic work setting before the battle between capitalism and the crafts. In the dime novels with a contemporary setting, the mysteries of the city, the honest mechanic tended to have a cameo role, as in the brief inset tale of John Davis in Lippard’s *The Quaker City*. In the late 1840s and 1850s, the first popular working class type developed in the newspaper sketch and the melodramatic theater: Mose, the Bowery B’hoy, a journeyman celebrated as a brawler and fire-fighter in a working-class volunteer fire company. But Mose, a comic figure of the antebellum ‘traditionalist’ working-class culture, never develops from a stock icon into a formulaic narrative, and by the Civil War, as Peter Buckley (1984, 271) notes, he had sunk into obscurity, ‘a strangely static, almost antiquated type’.2

However, in the 1870s and 1880s, a new genre of workingman hero tales appeared, stories of skilled mechanics, often in factory settings. These stories of working class manhood, which were published in the nickel and dime libraries, the story papers, and the labor newspapers, and were performed as melodramas, attempted to unite a narrative of an individual’s achievement of independence and ‘manliness’, a romance of chivalric love, and a tale of workers’ solidarity. In this chapter I will look at versions of this story of a ‘knight of labor’ written by two dime novelists, Frederick Whittaker and John E. Barrett.3

In 1882, Frederick Whittaker, one of Beadle & Adams’ top novel-wrights (in 1886, he claimed to have been paid $3200 for 16 novels a year for Beadle & Adams), whose many cheap stories ranged in subject from pirates to Russian spies, from the Crusades to the Mexican frontier, began writing serials about workingmen for *Beadle’s Weekly*.4 Beginning with *John Armstrong, Mechanic; or, From the Bottom to the Top of the Ladder. A Story of How a Man Can Rise in America* (WTe), he wrote seven stories between November 1882 and December 1884 of young honest skilled mechanics who work their way up from the country, tramping or the orphanage to positions of success and respectability. Their struggle upward entails learning a skill, getting an education, becoming a foreman or even owner of the factory, while at the same time earning the respect of the other workers, fighting together with them in strikes. The strikes in the stories are always won, a marked contrast to middle class novels where, as Fay Blake (1972, 40) has pointed out, strikes are almost invariably lost.

John Armstrong, for example, comes to New York from the country to work in the Excelsior Iron Works. He is arrested for defending a seamstress against the boss’s son, is released after her plea, works his way to foreman, having to fight other jealous workers, goes to night school so as to be worthy of the woman he had defended and with whom he has fallen in love (Ella, the seamstress who is now a schoolteacher). Though he learns proper speech and manners, Ella’s mother prefers the boss’s son (now somewhat reformed). John is caught in the middle of a strike, but his mediation fails and the owners plan to bring in scabs — one thousand Italians who will work at one dollar a day. John joins the workers on strike, and makes a speech at a union meeting. They win the strike, he wins Ella, but marriage, we are told, is not the end of the story. John is now a manager, involved in ‘headwork’, and, in a series of battles against old enemies at a stockholders meeting, he becomes president of the company. He runs for mayor of New York as the Reform candidate and wins. ‘Look up, then, workman of the land, man with the muscle hardened by labor, brain trained in the struggle for life,’ the story concludes, ‘In America everything is possible for a workingman.’

As the title said: ‘from the bottom to the top’. Beadle’s advertisement for one of the other stories, *A Knight of Labor; or, Job Manly’s Rise in Life. A Story of a Young Man from the Country* (WTe), shows how they were presented: Another *speaking* story of work life and struggle — of man and master — of handy hands and sturdy purpose — of country boy fighting his way in the world, with a hammer and will, and out of whose step by step from the village blacksmith shop to the proprie-
torship of a great carriage manufactory is taught A Splendid Lesson with a Big Moral That, to the young American mechanic, will be a kind of revelation. As a romance of workingman’s life it is exceeding full of interest, both personal and associate. In Job, the rough, untutored, hard-headed, almost desperate apprentice, the reader literally has a rough diamond which takes severe cutting to bring out the facets of a fine character. That A Woman Does It does not lessen the young blacksmith’s heroism, nor detract from the great work-
man’s achievements; and we know the audience interested in
Captain Whittaker’s previous creations will give this new work a cordial greeting (Beadle’s Weekly, 5 April 1884, 4).

This statement to the reader, the ‘young American mechanic’, tells him not only what to expect in the story but also how to read it. They are pedagogic tales, agents of the ‘respectable’ rather than the ‘rough’ tendency in working class culture, inculcating a ‘producer’s’ ethic of work and manhood. Job Manly is himself a rhetorical figure, a personification of a ‘manly job’; and David Montgomery (1979, 13) has noted of the word ‘manly’ that ‘the craftsmen’s ethical code demanded a “manly” bearing toward the boss. Few words enjoyed more popularity in the nineteenth century than this honorific, with all its connotations of dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy.’ Whittaker’s stories are accounts of how this ‘manliness’ is won and what it consists of; but, since they are novels and not success handbooks, they are also stories of the contradictions of a craftsman’s manly bearing in society of wage labor.

The workingman hero formula is torn by two different received narrative paradigms, the aristomilitary romance and the bourgeoisie Bildungsroman, the novel of education. The first is built around a typical character — a knight, an outlaw, a rogue — who engages in a series of loosely strung together contests. The second is built around the growth of one individual man, a sentimental education into self-control and the social order. The dime novel’s most common terrain is the adventure romance; in the Whittaker novels, one sees this in the series of contests the hero enters — innumerable fistfights, rivalries for women, tests of work skill, courtroom battles, and the climactic strike or election. One particularly interesting version is John Armstrong’s contest with the boss’s son, Jim Stryker, over speaking ability. Ella’s mother likes an orator and thus Stryker who is giving a valedictory speech. John, on the other hand, feels that he can’t speak in public and refuses to give a valediction. However, in the middle of the strike, he finds himself addressing the workers, and this is followed by a formal speech at a union meeting. When word of his speeches reaches Ella and her mother, John is clearly the victor.

Set against this somewhat repetitive plot of tests, contests, challenges, and duels, is a story of development and education, of struggling upward. All the heroes must learn self-control (particularly control of the temper that leads them into fistfights), temperance, thrift, and hard work. Often this education is tied to the romantic plot; both John Armstrong and Job Manly fall in love with their teachers. The ‘ladder of love’ propels the heroes to self-improvement in order to be worthy of the women they love. Both Job Manly and John Armstrong begin speaking dialect (and, we are told, swearing), but they learn to speak ‘properly’: they develop into ‘grammatical’ characters. Instead of the magical transformations of workers into noblemen that we saw in the stories of the Molly Maguires, these workers have to learn to be ‘gentlemen’. John Armstrong tries to give his father an etiquette lesson concluding that ‘the great secret of fine living is to keep clean at all times.’ But sometimes the contradictions surface; when John tries to stop his father from drinking his tea from the saucer saying that ‘it shows you’ve no time to wait for it to cool,’ his father replies, ‘Reckon we hain’t, John, when we’ve got to go to work soon.’ (WTb,9)

At first glance, these tales of self-improving working men appear to be akin to the Horatio Alger stories of self-made men, particularly if we recall that Alger’s stories were less stories of rags to riches than of, in John Cawelti’s (1965, 101) phrase, rags to respectability. And the popularity of Alger’s stories is often taken as a sign of the power of middle-class ideals of mobility and success, and of the consent given to those ideals by American workers. One may qualify this by disputing Alger’s appeal to working-class readers. Warren Susman (1984, 244) argues that Alger aimed at rural and small-town audiences and that ‘many city-dwellers found the works foolish and without interest’; moreover, he reminds us that the Alger stories may even have been enthusiastically purchased by many who did not believe in their basic value structure or who were not interested in the story as much as in the wealth of realistic detail.’ In a similar vein, Daniel Rodgers (1978, 39) has concluded that ‘Success writing was many things, but it was not a literature aimed at the industrial wage earner.’

But the Alger case is more complicated than this. For Alger did publish in the dime novel series and story papers that were aimed at industrial workers, like the New York Weekly; however, his ‘reforming’ fiction used the sensational format like a ventriloquist’s dummy, trying to capture and reshape its audience. The line between the cheap stories, the sensational fiction that spoke in mechanic accents and resonated within working class cultures, and this reforming fiction is difficult to delineate exactly; it was a boundary that shifted within communities of different sizes,
class composition, and ethnic cultures. Nevertheless, one can, I think, draw a line between Alger and Whittaker, for there are important differences between the Alger stories and Whittaker's workingman tales.

Whereas Alger rarely started a boy in a factory, and never showed a boy at work in a factory (Rodgers 1978, 39), Whittaker's tales take boys in the factories as their subject. Moreover, they are also more thoroughly devoted to the climb up the ladder than the Alger stories because luck — saving the rich man's daughter, befriending the wealthy young guardian — plays little or no role in them. Job Manly climbs step by step. Far from being accounts of self-made men according to bourgeois standards of success, the Whittaker tales are closer to the ethic embodied in the principles of the Knights of Labor: 'men wholly developed in all the attributes of manhood can not become accumulators. It is only towards those possessing special qualifications of management, of speculation and of foxcraft that the flow of accumulated wealth centres' (McNeill 1886, 484). Speculation and foxcraft, the qualifications of accumulators, are not honorific terms. Job Manly is not a manager, speculator or fox: he wants to 'make things'.

Thus, the two contradictory narrative formulas — the romance of contests and battles and the story of education and self-improvement — involve a real ideological contradiction which it is the task of the story to resolve. On the other hand there is the ethic of solidarity and mutualism, of the unity of the workers in a strike, of the readiness of the older workers to teach the hero, an ethic that is often tied to manhood based around the sociality of the saloon and the code of the most popular sport (to judge from the National Police Gazette), boxing. On the other hand, there is the more individualist ethic of hard work and raising oneself, what David Montgomery (1967, 204) has called 'the ideological syndrome of 'free agency', self-improvement, and temperance'. Though the narrative patterns are borrowed from pre-existing generic conventions, they are adapted to work out a genuine ideological antimony in producer manhood — how to reconcile mutualism with self-advancement. Perhaps the starkest expression of the antimony is in John Armstrong, Mechanic. One sees examples of both ethics: at one point he invokes the mutualist ethic at its most extreme, calling for a general strike: 'If every workman in the United States struck to-morrow on a common plan, they would be masters of the whole country' (WTb, 12). But at another moment, he overrides the mutualist ethic of the stint, 'underm-

ining' his fellow workers by enforcing a speedup. Later, when John is caught in the middle of a strike as an assistant superintendent, he decides to join the strikers; he comes and speaks to them, affirming his solidarity. But as he leaves the union meeting, he turns to his father and says that he has decided 'to go to the top of the ladder, and show my fellow workmen how to follow' (WTb, 16). This is one attempt to square the circle.

Other attempts to reconcile self-advancement with mutualism produce a variety of plot resolutions, resolutions that often resemble the 'labor panaceas' of the time, the imagination of solutions to what the labor leader George McNeill (1886, 459) called the 'inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government', solutions which included cooperatives and profit sharing. For John Armstrong, politics becomes the resolution; to be elected mayor is to be a representative, to climb to the top of the ladder while remaining true to his fellows. In A Knight of Labor, Job Manly sets up a profit-sharing system where his workers own stock in the company. This device, also used in Martin Foran's labor novel, The Other Side, may seem artistically mechanical and politically hopeless but it is narratively perfect, enveloping both Job's 'rise in life' and the image of the cooperative commonwealth. Only in Larry Locke, The Man of Iron; Or, A Fight for Fortune, A Story of Labor and Capital (WTd) does the hero, a cranelman in a steel works who leads a strike and is the Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, resist the lure of the ladder: when offered a share in the profits of the mill, he turns it down: 'I'd rather be a Master Workman than own a mill, anytime."

One can get a sense of the power of the Whittaker workingman stories both in their evocation of 'manliness' and in their labored attempts to reconcile self-improvement with mutualism by looking at an autobiography of an iron puddler a couple of years younger than Larry Locke. James J. Davis, whose autobiography, The Iron Puddler: My Life in the Rolling Mills and What Came of It, was published in 1922, was born in Wales in 1873 and came to the United States in 1881; he began working in a nail factory at eleven, in the same year that the story of Larry Locke was appearing, and a year later became a helper to an iron puddler. When he came to write his autobiography forty years later, he wrote a book that reads like a workingman hero dime novel.

It is perhaps not surprising. In a discussion of the theory and politics of popular memory, a group of Birmingham cultural
historians argue that ‘the cultural features of [oral history and autobiographical] accounts are not simply the product of individual authorship; they draw on general cultural repertoires, features of language and codes of expression which help to determine what may be said, how and to what effect. In charting such repertoires, we might start, for example, from the repeated observation of the centrality of storytelling to working class accounts of social reality’ (Popular Memory Group 1982, 229). They go on to argue that certain events become ‘salient experiences’, organizing accounts and highlighting an author’s social position. I think one can find in Davis’ autobiography a cultural repertoire, a way of telling stories, and a choice of salient experiences that is remarkably similar to the workingman hero dime novels.

There is no evidence that Davis read Whittaker’s stories, nor even that he read the nickel libraries or story papers. He does say of himself and his siblings that:

We were fluent readers, much better readers than our parents, but we had no books. We took the Youth’s Companion, and it was the biggest thing in our lives. Every week we were at the post-office when the Companion was due. We could hardly wait, we were so eager to see what happened next in the ‘continued’ story. Surely so good a children’s paper as the Youth’s Companion could never be found in any country but America (Davis 1922, 72).

The Youth’s Companion was one of the most respectable of children’s story papers, still suspicious of the absence of parents and the melodramatic heroism of the Horatio Alger stories (Rodgers 1978, 142-144). But the stories Davis tells of his own exploits would lead one to think that he either read the Youth’s Companion as if it were a Whittaker tale, or, more likely, that the final phrase about ‘so good a children’s paper’ is an adult repression of a wider range of reading in the cheap stories than Youth’s Companion.

For example: Whittaker’s Larry Locke wins his sobriquet of ‘boy of iron’ in the first installment not from his work in the iron mill but from his victorious fistfight with a bully, ‘the terror of all the ‘prentices in the mill’. And Davis opens his autobiography with these words:

A fight in the first chapter made a book interesting to me when I

was a boy. I said to myself, ‘The man who writes several chapters before the fighting begins is like the man who sells peanuts in which a lot of the shells haven’t any goodies.’ I made up my mind then that if I ever wrote a book I would have a fight in the first chapter.

So I will tell right here how I whipped the town bully in Sharon, Pennsylvania (Davis 1922, 17).

The ‘fistic duel’, as it was called in Tony Pastor’s dime novel, Down in a Coal Mine, has a place of honor in these stories; it is a ‘salient experience’, a structuring event in the history of ‘manliness’. Another such event is the public speech: recall that one of the climaxes of the John Armstrong story came when he, unaccustomed to public speaking, made his first speech to the striking iron workers, affirming his solidarity and urging caution. And the climax of Davis’ autobiography also comes with a speech, as he dissuades his fellow workers from striking: ‘‘Men,’’ I said, ‘‘I’m a newcomer here and I never made a speech in my life.’’ Like John Armstrong his plea for caution wins out over the trouble makers. And Davis adds: ‘‘If this were a novel, it would be fine to record in this chapter that the orator who at the last moment turned the tide and saved the day became the hero of the union and was unanimously elected president. That’s the way these things go in fiction. And that is exactly what happened. In due time I found myself at the head of the Local, and nearly every man had voted for me’’ (Davis 1922, 187-188).

Davis’ conception of manhood, of a ‘man of iron’, is elaborated in metaphors drawn from iron puddling. He writes that

... man’s nature is like iron, never born in a pure state but always mixed with elements that weaken it. Envy, greed and malice are mixed with every man’s nature when he comes into the world. They are the brimstone that makes him brittle. He is pig-iron until he boils them out of his system ... Lincoln was one who boiled it out in the fires of adversity. He puddled his own soul till the metal was pure, and that’s how he got the Iron Will that was strong enough to save a nation ... The stubborn earth is iron, but man is iron too. (103, 109, 87).

This rhetoric leads him to scorn reformers and uplifters who see life in the mills as terrible: ‘‘Men are ground down to scrap and are thrown out as wreckage.” This may be so, but my life was spent in the mills and I failed to discover it ... I lusted for labor, I worked and I liked it’’ (97-98). It is a line that Job Manly might have spoken. But the rhetoric is also used to reinforce the racism
that was so central to nineteenth-century white popular culture; Davis says that 'Some races are pig-iron; Hottentots and Bushmen are pig-iron. They break at a blow. They have been smelted out of wild animalism, but they went no further; they are of no use in this modern world because they are brittle. Only the wrought iron races can do the work' (72). Davis also shared in the cultural form that best testifies to the contradictions of nineteenth-century racism; his greatest delight was performing in blackface in local minstrel shows.

Despite the confidence of the rhetoric of iron men and the narratives of fistfights, the autobiography is as split by the contrary ethics of mutualism and self-advancement as are the dime novels of Frederick Whittaker. In his chapter, 'The Puddler Has a Vision', he clearly speaks in the accents of mutualism: 'Love of comrades had always been a ruling passion with me. I joined my union as soon as I had learned my trade, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers of North America [it is also Larry Locke's union] ... Sympathy is the iron fiber in men that welds him to his fellows' (134). But in other places he defends the wage system and affirms its mobility; he moves 'from tin worker to small capitalist' saying that 'the laborer who does not turn capitalist and have a house and garden for his old age is lacking in foresight.' As much as one has sympathy for the underdog, 'the upper-dog must be the better dog or he couldn't have put the other dog down' (137). His story is filled with contempt for communists and anarchists who are slackers and sick men, not unlike those in John Barrett's stories, to which I will turn later. Davis' solution lies in a school for orphans sponsored by the Loyal Order of Moose, a solution not unlike Job Manly's profit-sharing carriage factory, and in his rhetorical figures, which, like Whittaker's, have their power: 'I have been a puddler of iron and I would be a puddler of men. Out the best part of the iron I helped build a stronger world. Out of the best part of man's metal let us build a better society' (275).

Whittaker also finds his most successful resolution of the antinomy of mutualism and self-advancement in a rhetorical figure, one with particular significance: the phrase 'knight of labor'. Here the two plots and two ethics are violently juxtaposed, and, since this metaphor is the name of the leading working class organization of the 1880s, it is worth looking at in some detail.

The strangeness of the term, 'knights of labor', struck German socialists of the time as one of the peculiarities of the Americans.

Friedrich Engels (1887, 494) spoke of the Knights, 'the first national organization created by the American working class as a whole', as 'a truly American paradox, clothing the most modern tendencies in the most medieval mummeries'. One of the sources of Engels' knowledge of American workers was his correspondent, Friedrich Sorge, and Sorge too, in his articles about the American labor movement for Die Neue Zeit (1891-1895, 247-248), noted the paradox of the Knights: 'At first sight it appears strange that in this great republican community secret organizations, not by any means only the Knights, are able to achieve such importance. Undoubtedly the affected secretiveness, the stuff of ceremonies, and the obsession with titles of the Anglo-Saxon natives (other people's also) places the American folk character in an unfavorable light.' But, after citing Marx's comments in the Eighteenth Brumaire about the ruses of class representation, he concludes that there is no contradiction between secret organizations and republican institutions: 'the rubbish of secret orders and ceremony in the United States points simply to a certain youthfulness, an immaturity in the movement, as in the life of the people, and is deliberately cultivated by clever intrigues, petty-bourgeois reformers, quacks and politicians.' In a way Sorge was correct, not so much in the deliberate cultivation of secrecy by intrigues, but in the relation of secrecy to a relatively undeveloped working class movement. The secret Knights were a descendent of organizations like Lippard's Brotherhood of the Union; indeed a short history of the Knights of Labor by its founders opens with the invocation, 'Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, the home of Lippard and of the Brotherhood of the Union, has the honor of being the birth-place of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor' (McNeill 1886, 397). And the early, secret Knights were often accused of being connected to the Molly Maguires. This secrecy added to the power of their image in popular fiction and the popular culture at large. Nevertheless, the Knights abandoned their oaths and complete secrecy as they grew more powerful, and Frederick Whittaker's Job Manly gives a sense of their image in the 1880s: 'He found no terrible secrets in the initiation, but only a set of signs and grins by which the members recognized each other at times when a strike was on foot' (WTe,19). But if the secrecy began to fade as the organization grew, the 'medieval mummeries' did not.

There were those at the time who thought the name not well chosen. S.M. Jelley (1887, 196), in a description of the Knights of
Labor, noted in 1887 that 'many of the Knights have expressed themselves to the effect that the term is too much like those of orders with which the Knights are distinctly at war.' And this was true: the knight is accentuated in a variety of ways in the late nineteenth century. There was a revival of interest in chivalry throughout American society in the 1880s, and it usually was the basis of a conservative ethos; Henry Seidel Canby noted that in the 1890s, historical romances, books like Charles Major's bestselling When Knighthood Was in Flower (1898), became 'a landslide, millions of copies circulating among all classes except the proletariat'.

It was against this revival of chivalry, largely anti-republican and anti-egalitarian, that Mark Twain set his contradictory novel of the Connecticut Yankee, the mechanic Hank Morgan, in King Arthur's Court.

Despite this occasional sense that the rhetoric of chivalry belonged to anti-republican and anti-producer discourse, the term, 'knight of labor', is usually used as a popular honorific in working class culture; in his autobiography, Joseph Buchanan (1903, 172), a labor agitator and editor, will unself-consciously refer to someone as 'a true knight and my trusting friend'.

The 'knight of labor' makes one of its earliest appearances in the dime novel in the stories of Frederick Whittaker, beginning with Larry Locke, the Man of Iron. Larry Locke, a craneman in a steel mill, becomes an organizer of the 'Amalgamated Union of iron-workers' and a Master Workman of the Knights of the Labor. Larry Locke's story has the subtitle, 'a story of labor and capital'; and, unlike the others, with their subtitles of his 'rise in life', making 'his way in the world', and 'from the bottom to the top of the ladder', it has little of the self-advancement plot and much of the mutualist plot. Larry marries another orphan, Red Moll, and though they have a respectable household, he does not go through the night school education and the reform of manners and speech the other Whittaker heroes do. His respectable marriage and home are threatened when he is robbed of his mortgage money and unjustly arrested; however, at the end, after all is won and he is made a manager, he turns down a chance to share in the profits:

...a workman I am, and always shall be. The Knights of Labor made me what I am...Till there are no more bosses and slaves, and till the time when work won't be looked on as a favor to be asked, I'm going to stick to the Knights. I'd rather be a Master Workman than own a mill, anytime. When the time comes that every honest workman in America belongs to the Order, and all stick together, as we should do, every workingman shall see more happiness, than he ever saw before. Heaven send the time, and God speed the just aims of the KNIGHTS OF LABOR! (WTd, 40).

Larry Locke is the hero of mutualism and solidarity, Whittaker's one Master Workman.

The story is in part a straightforward exposition of the principles of the Knights, first as the organizer arrives and explains the Order to the iron-workers, and second, in the trial of Larry Locke for assault. The trial establishes that the Knights do not require false testimony and absolute secrecy, the old accusations against the Molly Maguires. When a newly initiated Knight is nervous about revealing the aims of the Order on the witness stand, he is told that there is no secrecy: 'the objects of the Knights...are to raise the condition of the workingmen of this country in the scale of civilization, and to enable them to live in greater comfort.' And when Larry himself takes the stand, he gives an eloquent account of the Knights. However, perhaps because there is some overlap in the story between the Knights and the Amalgamated Union, there is little exploration of the figure of the 'knight of labor' itself.

This elaboration of the 'knight of labor' comes in a more problematic story of early 1884, Whittaker's A Knight of Labor; or, Job Manly's Rise in Life. A Story of a Young Man from the Country. In this story Job Manly arrives from the country to work in a carriage factory, and finds a union shop. Far from echoing Larry Locke, Job refuses to join the pernicious 'lords of labor', and is persecuted by his fellow workers. Later, another worker says that he is 'beginning to sour on the Order...I don't see where the good comes in. The Order never yet made a strike succeed.' To which Job replies: 'Is it beginning to make you feel that you are the slaves and the men who control the Order are masters? ...I defy any society or Order, whatever it may be, that tries to stop me from going to work' (WTs, 17). However, as the greenhorn becomes more experienced in the shop he learns the values of solidarity and joins the Union and the Order: 'He began to appreciate how they must have hated him before they were not by any means the men he had pictured them [that is, villains]; but, on the contrary, simple, unlettered workmen, who were afraid they might lose the means of making a living by reasons of the selfishness of their employers, and so had combined together to make the employer do as they wished'
(WTe,19). By the end, when Job owns and runs a carriage factory, we see ‘Dignity Lodge K. of L.’: ‘The order that Job once thought to be his persecutor had turned out, in his prosperity, to be the best friend he had, and he had given the building for the use of the new Lodge thereof’ (WTe,36).

This story ends up extolling the Knights of Labor all the more effectively partly because of Job’s initial hostility toward them, but also because of its use of the figure of the ‘knight of labor’ itself. In disentangling a popular metaphor, it is useful to consider its contraries, the terms that are counterposed to it; often the power of the figure lies in its condensation of several semantic oppositions. There are at least four such oppositions working in the figure of the ‘knight of labor’, and one sees these in Whittaker’s tale. The first sets knights against monarchs and aristocrats. In an analogical construction, the contemporary social order is viewed through the lens of an earlier social cleavage. So as accumulators and non-producers are stigmatized as an aristocracy, as lords of labor and as monarchists subverting the republic, the workers are seen as knights, as vassals: George McNeill (1886, 463) writes that ‘the cotton oligarchy (lords of the loom) ... are amassing princely fortunes, and creating in our midst a vassal or permanent wage-labor class.’ Whittaker does not use the opposition in exactly this way, but his narrative does move from a vision of the evil ‘lords of labor’ to the good ‘knights of labor’.

The second opposition is a diachronic rather than a synchronic construction; it sets the pre-capitalist values associated with knights against the new capitalist order. David Montgomery (1980, 204) notes this, writing that ‘the workers’ mutualistic ethic had pre-capitalist sources ... The very name “Knights of Labor”, and the Order’s incessant appeal to “chivalry” against gluttonous commercialism underscore this romantic use of popular memories and traditions, just as did the medieval pageantry of anarchist parades, the ornate regalia of craft unions, and the invocation of crafts’ patron saints.’ This use of chivalry against the present is clearly found in Whittaker’s story, particularly in the character of Axel Petersen, the ‘Norse’ nobleman and master craftsman who represents a time and place where there is no division of labor: ‘we are taught our trade from the bottom to the top’ (WTe,5). Axel teaches Job ‘what he himself knew, not only of manly exercises, but of the work of his trade, and of the learning that is necessary if a man wants to get on in the world’ (WTe,7). In a reverse of Twain’s Hank Morgan, Axel is a combina-

ation of a medieval knight and artisan who comes into Job’s present.

However, this temporal opposition is also often inverted in the popular rhetoric, as the knights of labor, the aristocracy of toil, are posed against the knights of old. At a later point in Whittaker’s often contradictory story, Axel, who is no longer a figure of the ideal artisan but has become Count Smedburg, asks Job: ‘A knight of labor? What do you mean by that? Labor is a thing to be avoided; and no gentleman labors if he can help himself.’ But, disinherited for his love of a commoner, Axel comes to learn the nobility of labor: ‘I will go to work, as you say. I will take care of my wife.’ Job can then say that Axel too is a ‘true Knight of Labor, and that is a title I value more than you can value all your proud titles of nobility’ (WTe,26).

The final meaning of the knight lies in its relation to the lady, its place in the rhetoric of working class manhood. During a long romantic interlude, Job Manly tells Cora: ‘I am no knight of the old times, to go about robbing peasants and calling on the name of my lady. I am a knight of the new time, Miss Cora — a knight of labor ... a true Knight of Labor would always work hard to deserve his lady. I told you that I knew I was your inferior [she is a schoolteacher], and I was only good enough to lean on in time of trial, but anything further I knew was out of my power. Well, now I have resolved to end this and know my fate, be it bad or good. I am able to support a wife and I ask you to be mine’ (WTe,24,26). Of course she accepts; as the advertisement had promised, she brings out the facets of this rough diamond, reflecting to herself that ‘He had grown to a man. What a change!’

Thus the ideals of chivalry come together with the notion of manliness, of a ‘manly job’. In the midst of a challenge to the present order these stories drape themselves in the costumes of a past order; the knight reconciles the story of education, undergoing trials of self-improvement to be worthy of a lady, with the story of ‘fistic duels’ and secret brotherhoods, the ideology of self-advancement with the ideology of mutualism.

However Whittaker was not the only dime novelist to tell stories of knights of labor. Six months after the conclusion of Whittaker’s A Knight of Labor; or, Job Manly’s Rise in Life. A Story of a Young Man from the Country in the Beadle’s Weekly issue of 28 June 1884, the New York Weekly began serializing John E. Barrett’s A Knight of Labor; or, The Master Workman’s Vow (Bb). Barrett was less of a novel-wright than Whittaker; he may have written as
few as four story paper serials. And he had a significant role in the labor movement; an associate of Terence Powderly, the Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, he was born in Ireland, arrived in the United States in 1871, and was the editor of the Scranton Truth after 1884 (Powderly 1940, 237).

Barrett had written a serial for the New York Weekly in 1877 about the railroad strike, Love and Labor; or, The Perils of the Poor. A Tale of the Present Great Strike (Ba), and both Love and Labor and the 1884 A Knight of Labor have a similar plot. Neither are stories of the education of a young mechanic; rather they are tales of workingmen unjustly arrested and imprisoned. In both stories, an opposition is set up between the great city, New York, and the milltown in Pennsylvania. In both stories, when a young man or young woman secretly leaves for New York, a workingman is accused of his or her murder; after a series of adventures, the young runaway sees a newspaper account of the trial of the accused, and, in a variation of the old fantasy of attending one’s own funeral, they return and reveal themselves, clearing the workingman. The first story is set against the 1877 strike, and a locomotive fireman, Harry Hinton, a moderate but respected leader of the striking railroad men, is accused, in the midst of a battle between the vigilance committee and the crowd, of murdering his sweetheart. Harry’s individual plight is paralleled to that of the strikers, and it is not until Annie, who had fled to New York because of a misunderstanding, returns that both Harry and the strikers are victorious; Harry becomes a mine superintendent and marries Annie.

A Knight of Labor is slightly more complex. Here Ruth Watkins, the daughter of Reese Watkins, a steel worker and the master workman of the Knights of Labor, runs off to New York with Basil Brandon, the son of the president of the steel works. The master workman had vowed to kill Basil if he dishonored his daughter, so when a corpse is found in the river, he is arrested for murder. The Knights rally behind him, but it is a losing struggle until Basil returns from his misadventures in New York, clears Watkins, and shows his honorable nature. The story ends with the cross-class marriage of the son of the steel magnate and the daughter of the master workman.

This story uses the Knights of Labor in two quite different ways. First, like the Whittaker stories, it simply depicts the Knights, showing their solidarity, reciting statements of their principles, and generally serving the educative and informative function that has always characterized popular fiction. One sees the Knights rally behind Reese Watkins when he is beaten and called a tramp by the people at the millionaire’s home, and hears their class-inflected, masculinist rhetoric: ‘let us teach those ruffian aristocrats, who are not content with squeezing out our life-blood on low wages, but who also want to invade the sanctity of our homes, and sacrifice the purity of our daughters, that there is a God in Israel, and that they are not yet beyond the reach of law’ (Bb,30). The reader also learns that the Knights are neither ‘ nihilists’ nor ‘communists’. One of the evil characters is Facility Jack Dabble, a lazy, alcoholic and extremist follower of the anarchist Most; though he begins as a member of the Knights assembly, his attempt to burn their hall and kill a newsboy lead to his expulsion, after which he goes to work for the capitalists in their attempt to frame Reese. This strenuous anti-radicalism (when the story was reprinted in the Log Cabin Library, the scene depicted on the cover had the caption: ‘The powerful young blacksmith seized the communist and shook him vigorously’) seems to be common to dime novels, both in the workingmen tales and in the range of stories which set detectives after anarchists and communists (see, for example, Anthony P. Morris’s Old Cincinnati on his Mettle; or, On the Trail of the Anarchists [M]).

However, the Knights have another function in this story which is integral to the plot, and not merely an informative illustration. When Basil, the son of the steel works president, returns from the great city, he comes in disguise as Dick Russell, looking for work in the steel mill. He is told by a Knight that there is a strike brewing, that, though the Order opposes strikes, in this case there is no other solution. Russell’s first reaction is to insist on his ‘right’ to work and take someone else’s place: ‘Is not this a free country? Can I not sell my labor for what I please?’ ‘Yes, I suppose you can,’ he is told, ‘but if you be much of a man, and I think you are, it will make you feel mighty mean when you see the streets of Throckton filled with idle men, to think that you are eating the bread that belongs to some little family . . . Join us. Stand with us, and assist us in resisting what is an injustice to yourself as well as to us. You will find that the honorable, manly course to pursue’ (Bb,27). Russell is convinced of the ‘honorable, manly course’ and becomes a Knight of Labor. After he reveals himself as the missing Basil and clears the master workman, he intercedes for the men with his father, the president of the steel works, and becomes the superintendent,
rescinding the wage cut. But it is only after he has taken the
guise of a workingman, and been accepted as a Knight of Labor,
that Basil is worthy to marry Ruth, the daughter of the master
workman. The cross-class marriage required an imaginary
crossing of class by the young steel baron; rather than the
workman revealed to be a gentleman, the gentleman becomes a
knight of labor.

But Barrett’s novel is not only one of many knights of labor in
the steel town of Throckton; a large portion of it takes place in
New York, and its protagonist is not a knight of labor, but Ruth
Watkins, a working girl. It is as if Barrett had fused in one story
Frederick Whittaker’s tales of working class manhood and Laura
Jean Libbey’s stories of working class womanhood, which first
appeared in 1882, and to which I will now turn.

Only a Mechanic’s Daughter

Three months after the conclusion of Frederick Whittaker’s
serial, Larry Locke, the Man of Iron, in the Beadle’s Weekly of 12
January 1884, Larry’s ‘sister’ appeared in the pages of the Fireside
Companion in the first working-girl novel written by Laura Jean
Libbey: Leonie Locke; or, The Romance of a Beautiful New York
Working-Girl (LBa). Over the next twenty years, Leonie would be
followed by many working-girls in the pages of the Fireside
Companion and the Family Story Paper in serials by Libbey, Emma
Garrison Jones, Lillian Drayton, Charlotte M. Stanley, and Mrs.
Alex McVeigh Miller, among others. Though little collected and
little studied, the working-girl novel is one of the major genres of
the cheap stories, dominating a number of the major story
papers and a host of cheap libraries. It is also a central narrative
of working class womanhood, resolving in a variety of imaginary
ways the contradictions between wage work and the gender
ideologies of the dominant culture. In what follows I want to
look at the genesis of the working-girl story out of the crisis of
the ideology of domesticity, at the ways that Libbey’s narratives
work, and, with the help of the autobiographical account of
Dorothy Richardson, at the ways the stories of Leonie Locke
were read and lived.

Like the stories of honest mechanics, stories of working
women first appeared in the 1840s. Joseph Ingraham, whose
Fleming Field, the Young Artisan was an early example of the
mechanic genre, also wrote an early example of a working-girl
story: his The Beautiful Cigar Girl; or, The Mysteries of Broadway,
published in 1844, was a fictionalization of the Mary Rogers
murder case, the same case that was basis of Poe’s tale, ‘The
Mystery of Marie Roget’. However, as we saw with the tale of
the mechanic, the story of the working woman was usually a set