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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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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.

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
piece within the mystery of the city; and the tale of Nora, the handloom weaver’s daughter in Lippard’s The Nazarene, is the characteristic form of the working-girl tale in the 1840s.

The first full-fledged working girl heroine appeared in the wake of the public outcry about the plight of needlewomen in outwork and sweatshops in the 1860s. The penny press and the story papers declared themselves the champions of the ‘poor seamstress’; indeed the editor of the New York Weekly, Francis S. Smith, a supporter of the Working Women’s Protective Union (an association of middle class reformers which gave legal and employment assistance to working women), wrote a popular serial, Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl; or, Death at the Wheel, in 1871, and, as Mary Noel (1954, 277-278) notes, ‘practically every story paper had a crop of Berthas or factory girls in the seventies.’ Smith’s serial was quickly adapted for the melodramatic stage, and was produced at New York’s Bowery Theater in August, 1871. According to Dorothy Pam (1980), who has written the major study of working-girl melodramas, Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl was the first in a genre that was to last into the first third of the twentieth century; they were part of a popular theater which had a working class audience and a repertoire clearly distinguished from that of the middle class theater.

In the same year that Bertha, the sewing girl, made her appearance in the story papers and on the stage, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published her novel of a mill town, The Silent Partner. The juxtaposition is telling, for Phelps’ novel is one of the last in the extraordinary series of domestic novels of mid-century, and in its exploration of the alliance between Perley Kelso, the daughter of a ‘gentleman manufacturer’, and Sip, the factory girl, marks the limits of the domestic ideology, and in some ways completes and transcends the domestic novel.

It is striking that none of the recent, ground-breaking interpretations of the domestic novel, neither those that celebrate it as a genuine women’s fiction, ‘a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view, ... remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness’ (Tompkins 1980, 81), nor those that criticize it for its ‘anti-intellectual sentimentalism’ which ‘provided the inevitable rationalization of the economic order’ (Douglas 1977, 12-13), fully explains the reasons for the breakup of the domestic ideology and the demise of the domestic novel in the late 1860s, a collapse not only of a genre but also of a middle class hegemony over women’s culture and the ideologies of womanhood. I would suggest that the work of

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, whose mother was a domestic novelist and who thus marked a second generation of the domestic novel, can be seen as a symptom of this crisis of sentimentalism in at least three ways. First, the most common suggestion about the decline of sentimentalism has centred on the traumatic cultural effects of the Civil War, which shattered the well-regulated kinship networks, domestic routines, and Protestant certainties of the white middle class household. That Phelps’ first, extraordinarily popular novel, The Gates Ajar (1868), is explicitly an attempt to reconstruct the vision of a benign God and a domestic heaven in the face of the war dead, is testimony to the war’s contribution to the erosion of the domestic ideology. A second form that the crisis of sentimentalism took was the ‘discovery’ of the productive marginality of middle class women, the naming of the idle, ‘parasitic’ woman. This took fictional form in the novels and stories of sick and invalid women, which Phelps began to write in the late 1870s and 1880s, a genre which gave stark testimony to the paralysis of sentimental ideology. However, the third force that broke up sentimentalism seems to me the most important: it was the new visibility of class, of working women in the culture. The domestic novel was largely blind to working class women; it was a genre based around the kin networks and households of the families of white merchants and manufacturers. The few domestic novels that treated factory life tended to use already anachronistic pictures of the early mill girls at Lowell as their examples of working women (Siegel 1981, 86-99); the boarding house system with its paternalistic attention to the moral education and supervision of the mill girls was the organizational equivalent of sentimental ideology. An anecdote that epitomizes the place of working women in sentimental culture is related in Anthony Wallace’s (1978, 52) study of Rockdale, Pennsylvania. Wallace reconstructs the culture of a network of cultivated women of the ‘managerial class’ of Rockdale (manufacturers, mill owners, merchants, and gentlemen farmers, and their wives and children) through the correspondence of Clementina Smith and Sophie DuPont. At one point, Wallace notes, ‘Clementina and Sophie read, and approved, a novel about a factory girl by the well known English authoress, Charlotte Elizabeth.’ The plot of this novel, Helen Fleetwood, is a useful gauge against which to measure the works of Laura Jean Libby: the heroine ‘takes employment in the carding room of a great factory, perseveres in Christian virtue despite the coarseness of her companions and the hostility of the
irreligious, and then returns to her village to die, still a maiden, of overwork, an unjust beating by a supervisor armed with an iron bar, and consumption.' Libbey's heroines, we will see, are quite different: they are identified with, not against, the other working girls, are too resourceful to be beaten by supervisors (though they are threatened), and they never die.

It was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps who first seriously treated working women in the domestic novel. Her 'silent partner' is the deaf-mute, Catty, who dies a redemptive death in a flood to cement a Christian sisterhood between the cultivated woman and the factory woman, both of whom decide not to marry. But the 'silent partner' is also all of the working women who demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Perley's sentimental philanthropy, the partner that comes to speak in her own accents (even though the content remains a version of sentimental Christianity) at the end of novel. 1871, thus, can stand as the end of the sentimental hegemony, marked by Phelps's post-sentimental novel of the 'labor question', and the appearance of a working class heroine of stage and story paper, Bertha, the sewing machine girl.

So Laura Jean Libbey, the young college-educated daughter of a Brooklyn surgeon, came to a genre and a public that had already formed in the theaters and the story papers; but she also inherited the conventions of 'highly-wrought fiction', the story paper serials and dime novels of writers like Ann Stephens (the author of Beadle's first dime novel), Metta Victor (who wrote for Beadle and the *New York Weekly*), E.D.E.N. Southworth (who wrote mainly for the *New York Ledger*), Mary Agnes Fleming (who wrote mainly for the *New York Weekly*), and 'Bertha M. Clay' (Street & Smith's house pseudonym). These novels are too often subsumed under the category of domestic fiction, though, as Nina Baym (1984, 208) has shown, contemporary reviewers — when they noticed them at all — saw them as 'the domestic novel's antithesis: a feverish, florid, improbable, melodramatic, exciting genre'.

Baym suggests that 'what might have united the readers and writers of domestic and high-wrought fiction was their deployment of an essentially similar plot, the story of female trials and triumph' (209). However, this plot that unites 'women's fiction' at an already abstract level (indeed it can be seen in Libbey's working-girl novels as well) takes on quite different accents in its genteel and sensational versions, as Alfred Habegger's (1981, 209) fine reading of Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* demonstrates:

'If there is no reconciling [Southworth's heroine] Capitola with our sense of Victorian femininity, neither is there any reconciling her with the supergood, hard-working, self-disciplined heroines of so many 1850s women's novels.' As Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, wrote, Southworth's work was 'beyond the limits prescribed by correct taste or good judgement' (Freibert and White 1985, 70). These sensational serials attracted their wide audience among young working-class women and continued to flourish alongside the working-girl novels of the 1880s and 1890s.

Libbey's combination of the working-girl heroine and the sensational women's serial made her a star of the fiction industry and, by 1910, the *Bookman* was able to note that in the trade any book of the genre was known as a 'Laura Jean Libbey' (Peterson 1983, 20). Though there are stories of her teenage writings being accepted by Robert Bonner's *New York Ledger*, she began writing regularly for the *Fireside Companion* in 1882 at the age of twenty; in the next twenty years she wrote at least 52 different serials for two major story papers. About seven of them are 'classic' working-girl stories; a number of others have closely related heroines despite their settings in Newport and other vacation spots of the rich.

Her intention, she wrote Robert Bonner, was to write 'young love stories — pure, bright — with a vein of deep romance and pathos running through them — a story for the masses' (Walcutt 1971, 2:402). And a quick plot summary of *Leonie Locke; or The Romance of a Beautiful New York Working-Girl* yields the basic Libbey formula. Leonie, new to the great city, is forced to go to work because of a sick father who soon dies. She attracts the unwanted attentions of the villain, Charlie Hart, who is the foreman at the shop where she works as a fur sewer. She is rescued by the junior member of the firm, the wealthy young Gordon Carlisle, and they fall in love. The plot, which is a series of abductions and escapes, pivots around two issues: the problem of the cross-class marriage with its contraries of love and money, and the dilemma of a forced and false marriage. The first of these is relatively straightforward. The wealthy young man must choose between being disinherited and giving up love. Gordon chooses Leonie, rightly according to Libbey's metaphysic of love. Unfortunately, his mother deceives both Gordon and Leonie, telling Leonie that Gordon would never choose her over money, and telling Gordon that Leonie chose some quick cash over a disinherited son. The roles are then reversed; by a
stroke of fortune, Leonie becomes an heiress, and Gordon, disinheritced and disguised, becomes her impoverished tutor. At the end, there is a much delayed recognition and explanation; they realize that each has chosen love over money, and they marry, getting both love and money.

The second dilemma is somewhat stranger, but no less characteristic. The villain, after several abductions and affronts, deceives the heroine into marriage (in Leonie Locke Leonie signs a paper she thinks is a charity but is really a declaration of marriage in invisible ink), thus putting her into his power and separating her absolutely from the hero. Eventually, the fakeness of the marriage, never consummated, is exposed, and she is free to marry the hero. The significance of this plot can be seen in a variety of striking titles: 'Kidnapped at the altar', 'did she elope with him?', 'was she sweetheart or wife?', 'married by mistake'. This 'wife in name only' plot, to use the title of an often reprinted Bertha Clay novel, allows Libbey and other novelists to combine in the same story a romance leading to the happy ending of marriage and a displaced marriage story, often implicitly criticizing the metaphysics of romantic love, where the heroine is subject to a villainous husband who 'loves' her. Thus the novel is both a romance and a masked divorce story.

There are three principal aspects of the Libbey novels that I want to look at: the return of the seduction plot and its meaning for working class womanhood; the significance of the transformation of working-girl into lady; and the way these stories were read. One of the striking characteristics of the working-girl story is the return of the seduction plot to the novel of womanhood. Earlier, I cited Nina Baym's argument about the importance of the eclipse of the seduction plot in the domestic novel of mid-century; its return is equally significant. The seduction/rape plot is, I have argued, more a story about class than gender, and it is in these novels of class that it once again becomes central. The seducers are all of a higher class than the working girl; some are only foremen using their power in the shop, but more often they are sons of the factory owner with no respect for a working girl. These are also seduction tales from the women's point of view, unlike those of Lippard; here we find working women successfully defending themselves against the villains. Nevertheless, there are similarities: Leonie is held captive in a red-brick building that houses a young gentlemen's club, not unlike Monk Hall. But these are all stories of Pamela, not of Clarissa. None of Libbey's heroines is seduced or raped; they always escape in the nick of time. In a sense these are tales of heroic working class resistance to the unwanted advances of the wealthy and powerful.

It has been suggested that this concern for the working woman's 'virtue', and the centrality of this resistance to seduction and rape, is a conservative aspect of Libbey's novels, an acquiescence to the dominant genteel sexual codes. Cathy Davidson (1981, 3-4) writes of 'Libbey's socially conservative fables' that 'all of the novels preached the same simple and not very original message: A young girl who remains virtuous (i.e., virginal) can ultimately expect to secure not only a husband and happiness, but a fortune too.' However the concern for 'virtue' is more complicated. Just as the rhetoric of self-improvement found in the Alger tales changes when it is narrated in tales of working class manhood, so the meaning of 'virtue' shifts in tales of working class womanhood. For in the rhetoric of the late nineteenth century bourgeois culture, a working woman could not be virtuous, regardless of her virginity; in the memorable phrase from an 1874 working woman's letter to the Workingman's Advocate (that Alice Kessler-Harris [1982, 75] has called our attention to), 'why is it can a woman not be virtuous if she does mingle with the toilers?'. Middle class popular novels of mid-century often 'revolved around the question of whether mill employment was compatible with virginity' and usually concluded that it was not (Siegel 1981, 87).

An indication of how widespread the sense of the immorality of factory women was can be seen in as relatively sober a work as Carroll Wright's The Working Girls of Boston. This 1884 report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor concludes with a section on 'the moral condition of working girls': 'it has often been said that the shop girls are an immoral class, that it is largely from their ranks that prostitution is recruited, and the vile charge has often been made that in great stores where many girls are employed, an engagement often depends upon the willingness of the saleswoman or shop girl to become the intimate friend of either the proprietor or head of department. . . . In addition to our desire to ascertain the general moral condition which surrounds the working girls of Boston, we have had a very strong desire to ascertain the truth or falsity of these damaging assertions and charges' (Wright 1884, 118). His conclusion is that 'the working girls are as respectable, as moral, and as virtuous as any class of women in our community' (118). Nevertheless the energy and prominence that Wright gives
the matter indicates the public perception.

One solution to this collective reputation was the organization of working girls' clubs in the 1880s and 1890s by an alliance of working women and middle class reformers. Priscilla Murolo, in a study of the working girls' clubs of New York (1981, 10-11), has argued that 'for working women, individual sexual decorum was not only an end in itself but also a means to a collective end... To working women in the clubs, "being right" was not a private matter between the individual and god. It was a matter of public concern and one which helped define an individual's relationship to other women of her class. She could practice group solidarity and represent them well. Or she could adopt an ethic of individualism and risk lowering an already-low public opinion about the character of the "working girl".' The working girls' clubs were, one might say, the organizational equivalent of the working girl novel, as the boarding house system had been to the sentimental novel. Thus one might see Laura Jean Libbey's working-girl narratives as lying between Wright's investigations and conclusions and the articles published in Far and Near, the journal of the Working Girls' Clubs, under titles like 'Why Do People Look Down on Working Girls?'. Neither the reformer's scientific discourse nor the actual writing of the working girls, they nevertheless must be seen as attempts not to mimic genteel codes of womanhood but to establish a working class virtue that was excluded from those genteel codes. That it shared certain key terms — particularly the association of virtue with virginity — does not make it an identical discourse. In the defiant speech of Leonie Locke — 'You are no gentleman, sir... to insult an honest unprotected girl in this manner!... I am only a poor unprotected working-girl, but let me tell you this, sir: I would rather die — yes, die — than become your wife' (Lba, 1,3) — and in the hero's genuine respect — 'My sympathies always have been and ever will be, with those noble young girls who earn their bread by their own honest labor, ... and every true gentleman will voice my sentiments. ... And whenever I hear any one speak illy of a working-girl, I lose my respect for that person, for I know that they are shallow of heart and silly of head' (Lba, 7) — lie the burden of Libbey's novels. Unlike the seduction novels that occasionally occur in middle class fiction, which focus on the fallen woman, the Libbey stories are tales of the woman who does not fall, despite drugs, false marriage, physical violence, and disguise. Against middle class sympathy for the fallen is set working class virtue.

There are three aspects of this 'virtue', this working class womanhood, that stand in striking contrast to the middle class womanhood of the late nineteenth century. One is the attitude toward manual work itself. Though one will not find in these stories the same kind of pride in craft and ethic of workmanship that one finds in the honest mechanic tales, there is a strong sense of the dignity of work. Second, there is an almost complete absence of the Christian piety and evangelism that characterize the domestic novel. Though these are often allegorical and typological novels, they are not based on Christian types. One is more likely to find tags from Shakespeare than from the Bible. The Christian metaphysic of redemptive love is replaced by a metaphysic of romantic love, one that Libbey herself promulgated in short columns of advice that accompanied her serials in the story papers. The full significance of romantic ideologies of love for ethnic working class women who grew up in households dominated by various forms of patriarchy and with equally various forms of women's power is an issue too complex to attempt to deal with here. Suffice it to note that the Libbey novels presented love, sexuality, and marriage in individual terms that were in marked contrast to most working class families. Unlike the majority of Libbey's working women readers, who lived at home with their parents, Libbey's working-girls are usually orphans without siblings, unprotected but independent. The barriers to love and marriage are the machinations of the villains, not the objections of parents.

The third distinctive characteristic of the working class womanhood in these novels is the stress on physical action and violence. Sally Mitchell (1981, 151), discussing the British penny weeklies of the same era, notes that 'the chief difference between this fiction and the reading of the middle class... is the overwhelmingly physical nature of the action.' The fistfights of the honest mechanic stories are replaced by a series of assaults, abductions and imprisonments. Throughout all of this the heroine not only maintains her virginity, but also proves to be an able and resourceful escape artist. Her abilities to fight back remind us that the working-girl heroine has a sister in the cheap stories who is even less bound by gentility, the western heroine, from Frederick Whittaker's 'Amazons' in the West to Edward Wheeler's Calamity Jane. Since the western dime novels were less tied to the everyday reality of workers, they made fewer concessions to respectability. Thus, just as the outlaw flourished more in the mining camps of Leadville than in those of Pottsville,
so a physically active, non-genteel woman flourished more in the streets of Deadwood than in those of New York. Nevertheless, from Capitola, the cross-dressing ‘tomboy’ who fights a duel in Southworth’s 1859 The Hidden Hand, to Old Sleuth’s 1885 The Lady Detective, a story of a woman placed in an essentially unfeminine position ... and more than holding her own with desperate law-breakers without any sacrifice of her womanly attributes’, the heroines of the cheap stories skirt the boundaries of genteel codes. Indeed, the predominance of representations of physical action and violence in the dime novels may also indicate a different accenting of ‘virtue’ in working class culture. Both Christine Stansell’s study of working women of the Bowery in antebellum New York and Kathy Peiss’s study of New York working women at the turn of the century suggest that young working women developed an etiquette and sexual style that was markedly different from middle class ‘respectability’, and that this can be seen in dress, dance styles, and public behavior at commercial amusements and in the street. And it is striking that the Libbey novels rarely take place in the home; the working-girl finds both villain and hero in public places: in the streets, on the trains and streetcars, in the parks, and in the workshop.

This reading of the Libbey novels as tales of working women’s resistance and manifestos of a working class womanhood and ‘virtue’ is, however, thrown into question by two transformations that occur in the stories: the rapid move out of the world of work and shop, and the revelation that the working girl is an heiress, that she is really a ‘lady’. As Joyce Shaw Peterson (1983, 26) argues: ‘Libbey openly decries the popular tendency to equate working girl with easy morality and disreputability and replaces this stereotype with an equation of working girl with innocence and misfortune worthy of respect and sympathy. But Libbey’s equation is proved false at the end of the book when it is revealed that the working girl is really a born lady and only taking her rightful status at last.’ Indeed, often, the revelation occurs long before the end of the book; Leonie Locke becomes an heiress about a third of the way into the story, and her life as a garment worker comes to an end. However, as my earlier argument about similar transformations in stories of working-men/nobles might indicate, I do not think that this magical transformation should be interpreted as ‘proving false’ the earlier vindication of the working woman’s virtue or as ‘eroding’ Libbey’s ‘assertions of democratic values’. Indeed there are good reasons for interpreting this transformation in exactly the opposite way, as the culminating assertion of the working woman’s virtue and heroicism.

First, if one looks at the narratives of factory women to which these stories respond, the reasons for their wish-fulfilling fantasy become clearer. In the stories of fallen women or of factory women beaten down to death (as in the story the Rockdale bourgeois women read), there is no magical transformation, no working woman revealed as a disinherited lady; the ‘realism’ of bourgeois fiction represented workers as victims, sometimes sympathetically, but always keeping them in their place. The working woman was neither a lady nor a cheated heiress. The working-girl novels, on the other hand, not only made her an active agent in her world, without minimizing the threats and hardships she faced, but also asserted that she had been cheated, that the babies had been switched in the cradles, that the evil stepsister was an usurper.

Libbey’s central imaginary resolution — ‘that the rich should wed with the poor ... just as the Lord intended it’ (LBa,10) — stands as both a simple wish-fulfillment for her readers and as a utopian vision of reorganized society. But the marriage of the rich and the poor does not yield two rich people; all of Libbey’s heroines are still ‘working-girls’ at the end. As the narrator says at the end of Leonie Locke:

The great sensational story found its way into the daily papers, as sensational stories always do; and many a working-girl read the story of Leonie Locke, and their honest hearts thrilled as they read the story of her struggle against adverse fate. She had been a working-girl like themselves; she had known all their privations, the early rising, hurried toilet, and hurrying steps to the work-shop. She had known what it was to toil late and early for the sweet bread of life, and had known all their sorrows and the pitiful desolation and fear of being discharged from work.

Cinderella does not forget her origins.

For these are Cinderella stories; Libbey’s novels that do not focus on working girls usually surround the heroine with evil and envious step-mothers and step-sisters that force her into a position not unlike that of a working girl or servant. And it is worth recalling that in non-capitalist tribute and kinship societies, the fairy tale was the story of peasants and slaves; the genealogical myths and legends were the legitimating narratives of the warrior and priestly classes. The importance of the Cinderella story in the working-girl narratives is, I think, a sign of the
powerlessness of working women. Consider the differences between the stories of knights of labor and Libbey's ladies of labor. The magical transformation from working-girl to heiress is much more radical in Libbey; there is a more violent juxtaposition of the upper ten and the lower million, a juxtaposition emphasized by the shift of scene from the mill town to the great city of New York. (This geographical shift between a Pennsylvania mill town and New York is well illustrated in Barrett's A Knight of Labor which, as I noted, has a working-girl tale inset within the main story.) The mediations that make up the story in the workingman tales, the variety of virtues that make an honest mechanic — the acquisition of a craft, the solidarities of the union, the public life of local politics and courtroom scenes — are not present in the working-girl stories. These mediations structure and inflect class conflicts in the stories as in the small towns themselves. The working-girl stories tell of a class confrontation that is at once more direct, for theirs is a violent world of male predators and jealous rivals, and less social. The persecution of the working girl takes place in a private world of sexual harassment; the class conflict is condensed into the personal confrontation of a villainous boss and a virtuous working woman. The isolation of the heroine foregrounds the relative absence of friendships between women in the Libbey novels. Though active jealousy and the refusal to have 'girl friends' is a characteristic of Libbey's female villains, none of her heroines is able to establish more than fleeting friendships with other working girls. Dorothy Pam, whose study of the working-girl melodrama takes her into the first decade of the twentieth century, argues that it is not until after 1900 that the melodrama features scenes of solidarity between working girls.

There are several other fairy tale aspects to the stories that tell us to read the transformation as a metaphor: the working-girl is a working-girl and a lady. First, there is the inversion of the plot when the good wealthy lover is literally disinherited and returns to the working-girl-turned-heiress as a 'poor and obscure' tutor. The cross-class love affair is repeated in reverse, and he, to be worthy of the working-girl, must not only respect her but must also become a poor man. Second, the transformation of working-girl into lady almost always follows her closest encounter with death: in one story she is rescued from suicide in the East River; in another she has been tied to a railroad track and passes out; in a third she is about to be buried, pronounced dead by doctors, when a lover detects signs of life in the casket. The transfor-

mation is a rebirth, a second chance. Finally, in Libbey's novels, as in Whittaker's Nemo, there is a distinction within the upper ten between good and evil. The evil figures of wealth — the snobbish parents who disinherit the young man that loves the poor working-girl — are millionaires and capitalists. The good figures of wealth — the working-girl's real father — are judges, senators, generals and colonels; figures of the republic who have been led astray in some way and come to regret the actions that disinherit the working girls. A characteristic case in a quasi-working girl story, Viola, the Beauty of Long Branch; or, Only a Mechanic's Daughter. A Charming Story of Love and Life at the Sea Shore (Lbd), sets Viola as her cousin's maid because her uncle, General Wallingford, disapproved of his sister's marriage to Richard Sterling, 'a handsome young mechanic'. By the end, Viola is rich, as a result of her father's invention, and the General's mistake in rejecting the mechanic is put to right.

These allegories are still under the sign of the patriarch; one could not argue that Libbey's novels are a part of a nineteenth century feminist culture any more than one could argue that Whittaker's and Barrett's stories of knights of labor are a 'proletarian fiction' in the sense of a revolutionary socialist culture. However, it is equally wrong to see Libbey's stories as simply 'socially conservative fables', agents of the dominant culture in colonizing working class imagination.

One avenue into the place of Libbey's novels in working women's reading and imaginations is the autobiographical narrative by Dorothy Richardson, The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working Girl, which was published in 1905, and which includes a discussion between women workers in a box factory of the novels of Laura Jean Libbey. It is not the most unequivocal source: little is known of Dorothy Richardson, of when the experiences related took place, or when the account was actually written. It seems clear that she was of a middle class background and did not share the culture of her fellow workers in the box factory. We hear those workers' voices through her prose and in the situations that she sets up. Nevertheless, the very contrast between her culture and theirs gives us some sense of working women's culture and the place of cheap stories in it. I want to look at two aspects of Richardson's account: the telling of the story of Libbey's Little Rosebud's Lovers to her by Mrs. Smith and Phoebe; and Richardson's own contradictory assessment of the popular novels.

When Mrs. Smith asks Dorothy Richardson, 'Don't you never
read no story-books?’, Richardson enthusiastically replies that she does. But when asked whether she has read *Little Rosebud’s Lovers*, she not only reveals that she has not, but that she has not read any novels by its author, ‘a well-known writer of trashy fiction’. Indeed *Little Rosebud’s Lovers; or, The Cruel Revenge* (LBC) was written by Laura Jean Libbey in 1886, and was reprinted many times after. It is not a working girl novel; rather it is a Cinderella tale. Little Rosebud, the daughter of a judge, is mistreated by her step-mother and step-sister, and, later, becomes a maid to her cousin. Though ‘only a servant’, she attracts two virtuous lovers and two villainous lovers, and is married twice leading to a variety of assaults, abductions and escapes. At the end, her marriage to one of the villains proves to be a false one — the magistrate’s term of office had run out — and she is free and legally married to the hero who had rescued her from being buried alive.

Mrs. Smith proceeds to tell Dorothy Richardson the story of *Little Rosebud’s Lovers*, and in that account there are several interesting emphases and discrepancies from which we might draw some suggestions about working women’s readings of Libbey. First, Mrs. Smith puts a major emphasis on Rosebud’s fall in fortunes, when she becomes homeless, without money, and abandoned by her ‘husband’. In effect, she reads the story as if Rosebud were one of Libbey’s working-girl heroines. Second, when confronted by a discrepancy in her account by Phoebe — how could Rosebud take the train to New York if she had no money (in fact, Libbey carefully allots Rosebud ‘a hundred dollars or more’ for her trip) — Mrs. Smith first says that rich men’s daughters can travel anywhere on a pass, and then resorts to ‘it’s only a story and not true anyway.’ (78) The investment that Mrs. Smith has in the story does not depend on its absolute fidelity to daily life, rather on the fact that it is ‘more interesting, besides being better wrote’ than other novels. Furthermore, her reading of Rosebud as a helpless, penniless orphan in New York would be disrupted by a too close attention to her hundred dollars in gold coins or her privileges as a rich man’s daughter on the trains.

What realism Mrs. Smith finds in Libbey is in her characterizations of typical men and women. She exaggerates the villainy of Libbey’s female villains, and dwells on the men who are villains. Paul Howard, who is not one of Libbey’s more developed characters, is elaborated by Mrs. Smith: ‘he was a terrible man; he wouldn’t stop at nothing, but he was a very elegant-looking gentleman that you’d take anywhere for a banker or Piscopalian preacher ... he just fascinated women, the way a snake does a bird, and he was hot stuff as long as he lasted, but the minute he got tired of you he was a demon of cruelty.’ So the characters are re-interpreted through types known and imagined in the culture, types which are themselves modified by the popular stories.

Finally, and most unexpectedly, Mrs. Smith tells only the first half of the story, leaving her hearers to believe that Rosebud died of her sufferings. The miraculous rescue from being buried alive and the subsequent second marriage and happy ending are entirely left out of Mrs. Smith’s account. This may be due to Richardson’s editing, to the nature of serialization which must have left many stories half read and abandoned, or to a seemingly uncharacteristic preference for a tragic rather than happy ending. Louis Gold (1931, 48), who served as Libbey’s secretary at one time, recalled that the happy ending of a wedding was invariable: ‘only once did she write a story with an unhappy ending; the storm of protesting letters she received discouraged her from making another such blunder.’

What can we conclude from Richardson’s story of Mrs. Smith’s story of Libbey’s story? Not much, perhaps. Clearly, the appeal of the basic wish-fulfillment had its power. Richardson tells of the women in the box factory choosing imaginary names for themselves out of the story books and Sadie Frown, a New York garment worker, said of the romances of Charlotte Brame (a writer often linked to Libbey) that ‘she’s a grand writer and makes things just like real to you. You feel as if you were the poor girl yourself going to get married to a rich duke’ (Katzman and Tuttle 1982, 56).

And there may be, indeed, a peculiar and unintended realism at work. In her discussion of aristocratic costume romances of the British penny weeklies, Sally Mitchell (1981, 158) argues that ‘the absurd conventions of the aristocratic romance provided a set of characters and situations that were actually less foreign to working women than were those found in the domestic novels written for the middle class. Money and social position gave the Duke’s daughter [like Rosebud] — at least in the novelist’s imagination — a freedom of action unknown to the genteel governess or the cloistered daughter of the family.’ Like the knights of labor, the ladies of labor borrowed older costumes to figure contemporary lives.

Dorothy Richardson’s conclusions about the reading of her
fellow workers have a curious contradiction. At the end of her account, she writes that:

It is a curious fact that these girls will not read stories laid in the past, however full of excitement they may be. They like romance of the present day, stories which have to do with scenes and circumstances not too far removed from the real and the actual. All their trashy favorites have to do with the present, with heroes and heroines who live in New York City or Boston or Philadelphia; who go on excursions to Coney Island, to Long Branch, or to Delaware Water Gap; and who, when they die, are buried in Greenwood over in Brooklyn, or in Woodlawn up in Westchester County. In other words, any story, to absorb their interest, must cater to the very primitive feminine liking for identity (Richardson 1905, 301).

This conclusion, which, as far as setting is concerned, is substantiated by a reading of Libbey, stands uneasily next to one of Richardson’s earlier conclusions. When she described the plot of Alcott’s Little Women to the other workers, she tells us, Phoebe’s reaction was, ‘that’s no story at all — that’s just everyday happenings. I don’t see what’s the use putting things like that in books . . . They sound just like real, live people; and when you was telling about them I could just see them as plain as plain could be. . . . But I suppose farmer folks likes them kind of stories . . . they ain’t used to the same styles of anything that us city folks are’ (86). So a story, to be a story, had to be set in a contemporary time and knowable landscape, but its plot had to be out of the ordinary; ‘everyday happenings’, according to this working woman’s aesthetic, did not make a story. The story was an interruption in the present, a magical, fairy tale transformation of familiar landscapes and characters, a death and rebirth that turned the social world upside down, making proud ladies villains, and working-girls ladies.

Conclusion: Happy Endings?

In 1900, the Bookman announced ‘The Extinction of the Dime Novel’ (Dred 1900). Though somewhat misleading — cheap sensational fiction continued to flourish into the twentieth century — it epitomizes a widespread and not inaccurate sense that the dime novel passes into history at the turn of the century. A number of publishers went out of business in the 1890s including Beadle and Adams, whose demise seemed to mark the end of an era. Both the dime novel and story paper formats were dying out in the face of the Sunday newspaper and the pulp magazines. Cheap libraries continued but were now entirely the provenance of children; as often happens, out-of-date popular fiction became children’s fiction. By 1907, the Atlantic Monthly had published a eulogy of the dime novel, Charles M. Harvey’s ‘The Dime Novel in American Life’. Though Harvey’s opening parallels that of W.H. Bishop, writing in the Atlantic 28 years earlier — ‘Are not more crimes perpetrated these days in the name of the dime novels than Madame Roland ever imagined were committed in the name of liberty? It looks that way. Nearly every sort of misdemeanour into which the fantastic element enters, from train robbery to houseburning, is laid to them’ — this is no longer a serious question for the Atlantic’s readers, and Harvey moves quickly to elaborate a newer and quite different view of dime novels. They now have become a token of nostalgia: ‘What boy of the sixties can ever forget Beadle’s novels!’ He sketches the outlines of a history in which cheap fiction is no longer seen as the reading of working people but as the reading of all American boys. The central question has shifted from the paternalistic and humanistic one of Bishop: is this reading better than no reading? to the more general historical issue: ‘what did the dime novel stand for? What