

*Poets of the Loom, Spinners of Verse: Working-Class
Women's Poetry and The Lowell Offering*

Jennifer Putzi

In her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood* (1889), Lucy Larcom attempts to articulate the aspirations that led her and her fellow “mill-girls” to publish their work in *The Lowell Offering*; she writes: “we did not set ourselves up to be literary; though we enjoyed the freedom of writing what we pleased and seeing how it looked in print. It was good practice for us, and that was all that we desired.”¹ Reading this explanation is perhaps more confusing than it is enlightening. To begin with, what does it mean to “set [oneself] up to be literary,” and why does Larcom insist that the factory operatives did not do this? Why did “writing what [they] pleased and seeing how it looked in print” give them such satisfaction? Finally, what exactly is print “good practice” for, especially in the case of women who worked for the Lowell textile factories and published in *The Lowell Offering* between its first appearance in October 1840 and its demise in December 1845?

These women were an integral part of the nineteenth-century American textile industry that flourished throughout New England. With the establishment of the Boston Manufacturing Company in 1814, Francis Cabot Lowell and his fellow “Boston Associates” constructed and operated a series of mills throughout Massachusetts. In order to avoid the European practice of employing families in the mills, as well as the employment of male workers who might demand higher wages, the Associates advertised for female employees, usually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. While parents were persuaded to send their daughters to the mills by mill owners’ assurances of corporate paternalism and protection, the daughters themselves were drawn by the wages – higher than anything they could earn in other occupations – and the opportunities for independence and self-improvement. Operatives worked for twelve hours a day, but were encouraged to spend their spare time attending evening schools and lyceum lectures and enjoying free access to circulating libraries.

The literary interests of the operatives prompted the organization of improvement circles, often held in churches, in which they met to share their work with one another.²

Although other operatives' periodicals were proposed and even published, the *Offering* quickly became recognized as the only one entirely written and, eventually, edited by the mill girls themselves. It was first published in October 1840, by the Reverend Abel C. Thomas of the First Universalist Church in Lowell, and appeared sporadically until January 1841, when it became a monthly magazine. In 1842, Thomas sold the *Offering* to William Schouler, editor and publisher of the *Lowell Courier*, and two factory operatives, Harriet F. Farley and Harriott Curtis, were engaged as co-editors. Farley and Curtis eventually purchased the periodical from Schouler, although he remained as publisher until its demise in late 1845.

By the time Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* was published, almost fifty years after the first issue of the *Offering*, the equation between writing, print, and publication had shifted, with the dramatic expansion of the literary marketplace on the one hand and increased opportunity and technology for individuals to privately print and circulate their work on the other. During the antebellum period about which she writes, however, to be "in print" would necessarily mean to be published. Many literate women of the period occupied themselves with various forms of "parlor authorship," as Susan S. Williams calls it, writing diaries, letters, and poems, and occasionally exchanging their work with one another.³ While many sought to preserve their work and that of their peers in commonplace books, scrapbooks, and private collections, very few actually attempted to publish. Publication, as Larcom points out, usually required some measure of literary ambition, some sense of one's self as "literary." The Lowell factory operatives, however, found themselves in the rare position of having access to print without first having to imagine themselves as "literary"; any literary aspirations developed as a result of the publication of their work. It is for this reason that *The Lowell Offering* provides us with a unique opportunity to see working-class American women negotiating their relationship to print in public, as the interrelated processes of reading, composition, and publication are a central feature of the work of the periodical.

The relationship between print culture, labor, and the literary in the *Offering* is, I propose, particularly salient in the poetry written and published by the operatives, in that poetry was both the most literary of genres and, for nineteenth-century American women, one of the most

accessible. Poetry plays a prominent role in the *Offering's* mission, as articulated by editors Curtis and Farley in 1843, to demonstrate the "intelligence" and "self-culture" of factory girls and of "the mass of [the] country" in general.⁴ While the relative brevity of poetry lent itself to the long working hours of the factory operatives, the genre's inherent intertextuality allowed the poets to demonstrate their "self-culture," particularly their familiarity with and mastery of a vast reservoir of poetry, primarily British and American. Their use of this reservoir has led to their being labeled imitative and therefore uninteresting by later scholars, but such dismissals are generally mired in either a modernist aesthetic that has room for only a select few nineteenth-century poets or an expectation of working-class poets that would label their consumption and production of mainstream literary texts as inauthentic. I argue, instead, that we should think about how these poets used an imitative poetics to make their lives and texts legible to a wider, primarily middle-class, audience. I focus on poems produced by factory operatives that use the work of other women writers as their model or inspiration, not because they represent the majority of poems generated by this imitative poetics, but because they represent the *Offering* poets' positioning of themselves in a wider tradition of female poetic authorship.⁵ Claiming literary culture for themselves, these mill girls adapted it to the circumstances of the factory and insisted on their own participation in and contribution to nineteenth-century American poetics.

The poetry of the *Offering* has received little attention, and most of that disparaging; this is, perhaps, in part because most scholars who have looked at the *Offering* are historians who have tended to turn to the periodical for factual details about factory life and reform. Hannah Josephson established this critical precedent in 1949, when she wrote in *The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls and Magnates* that "[t]he poetry in the *Offering* was almost completely undistinguished."⁶ Philip S. Foner's *The Factory Girls* (1977), a selection of writing by and about female factory operatives in New England, features a number of poems, but only those that protest the conditions of labor in the factories.⁷ Only one poem in *The Factory Girls*, then, is from the *Offering*, and even this is included in the section of the book titled "The Genteel Factory Girls" (as opposed to "The Militant Factory Girls," which follows). Benita Eisler, whose *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women* (also 1977) remains the only available anthology made up entirely of selections from the *Offering*, includes just one poem in the volume and says this of the periodical's poetry in her introduction:

Poetry was the least happy form of expression for *Offering* talents. Most selections, favoring elegiac subjects and form, are frank pastiches of women poets scarcely more gifted than their acolytes. As soon as they set out to “pen verse,” the spontaneous, freshly observed detail, the felt experience, were abandoned for the dreariest poetic formulas of the day.⁸

Eisler’s assessment of this body of work as “the least happy form of expression” for *Offering* contributors indicates her unwillingness to grant it any formal or thematic complexity or to read it as important precisely because it followed such a popular and wide-spread “formula.” For Eisler, to “pen verse” is simply to replicate the work of female poets whose work appeared in mainstream magazines; it is, therefore, unworthy of study.

Eisler’s dismissal of the *Offering*’s poetry as an imitation of an already formulaic original has, for the most part, shaped the critical response to this work, even by literary scholars. Sylvia J. Cook’s study of working-class American women writers, *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration* (2008), does much to position the *Offering* within its nineteenth-century literary and social context, but her argument about what renders the material of interest to scholars is not very different from that of Eisler. Both clearly prefer the fiction and nonfiction of the *Offering* to the poetry, claiming that the prose work realistically depicts the lives of the factory workers themselves. While Cook does not entirely dismiss the value of convention, she is quick to prioritize literary innovation in the *Offering*: “While much of [the operatives’] writing is in the vein of religious idealism, and is conventionally decorous and imitative in both form and content,” she writes, “they also begin the more radical process of developing imaginative literary modes that anticipate later realism.”⁹ Despite all that differentiates their approach to the *Offering*, both Eisler and Cook largely ignore the poetry in the periodical because it does not meet their expectations for working-class women’s literature.

What I would like to suggest here, however, is that the *Offering*’s immersion in and response to antebellum print cultures is precisely what should render it of interest to scholars of nineteenth-century American women’s poetry. Adelia’s “The Graves of a Household,” published in the *Offering* in April 1841, is likely a poem that critics following Eisler would find formulaic and imitative: it is modeled on a poem of the same title by the British poet Felicia Hemans, whose “The Graves of a Household” was originally published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1825, reprinted in *Records of a Woman: With Other Poems* in 1828, and widely circulated in the United States. It therefore provides a good test case for the value of imitation for *Offering* poets and, by extension, the value of poetry in any

study of the *Offering*. Adelia's poem does more than simply borrow its title from Hemans' original; the *Offering* poet also integrates three entire stanzas from Hemans' poem into her own. There is no deception here, no plagiarism as such, as the title itself is in quotation marks and the poem is preceded with a note that reads "The statements in the following lines are facts; but they were suggested by that beautiful little poem of Mrs. Hemans, from which the first verse and the last two verses are extracted." Adelia's parsing of her use of Hemans' poem – the "statements" in her own poem "are facts," merely "suggested" by Hemans' poem, from which she "extract[s]" three stanzas – is not intended as a defense; there is no sense that Adelia fears that her work will be seen as derivative or inauthentic. It is, it seems, a clarification, an explanation of the poem's form and the poet's creative project.

Adelia clearly does not intend to alter the meaning of Hemans' poem; instead, her borrowing reinforces the sentimental, domestic, and religious message of the original, doubling it, in effect, by emphasizing its applicability to her own life experience. Nine stanzas long (as compared to the eight stanzas of Hemans' original), a third of Adelia's poem is freely "extracted" from Hemans', and these parts appear in quotation marks. These "extract[s]" establish the purpose of the poem – the detailing of the speaker's loss of her siblings, initially through geographical dispersion and eventually through death. While both poems assert a belief in the afterlife (the final two lines proclaim, "Alas for love, if thou wert all, / And nought beyond, O Earth!"), the emphasis of both poems remains on the separation of siblings, the disruption of an essential family bond.

Adelia's use of Hemans' original demonstrates her intimate familiarity with the work of the British poet but also places her poem in conversation with that of Hemans, rendering her own losses (or those of her own speaker) as worthy of comment as those of Hemans's speaker. Adelia essentially claims the same importance for her poetic expression of grief that has been afforded Hemans' poem by publication in her book and public association with her name and public celebrity. Moreover, by writing stanzas to be sandwiched in between the opening and closing stanzas of the original, Adelia also claims Hemans' poem as her own, to some degree. Such fluidity might, in turn, extend to yet another reader of Adelia's poem or Hemans' original (or both), who might write a poem of her own on the same subject, with the same title, perhaps even quoting some of the same stanzas.

Rather than a simple, unimaginative theft, then, Adelia's "The Graves of a Household" can be seen as a democratization of literary property and

a claiming of poetic authority and authorship. The poem thus lays bare the process of composition for *Offering* poets whose access to print came hand in hand with their employment in the mills. For middle-class women writers, amateur or professional, the parlor played a central role in the production of literary texts, providing women with a space in which they might read books and periodicals, clip items from newspapers and organize them in scrapbooks, and compose their own work and share it with others. Factory operatives may have used the public spaces of their boarding-houses in a similar way, but they had neither the time nor the space for the sort of parlor authorship enacted in private homes. Instead, they adapted the literacy practices of the domestic parlor to the public space of the factory. For example, given rules against bringing books (including Bibles) into the mills, many girls pasted poetry on the walls, clipping favorites from the newspaper and creating a scrapbook of sorts out of the environment in which they worked. As Larcom recalled in her autobiography:

I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. In those days we had only weekly papers, and they had always a "poet's corner," where standard writers were well represented, with anonymous ones, also. . . . I chose my verses for their sentiment, and because I wanted to commit them to memory; sometimes it was a long poem, sometimes a hymn, sometimes only a stray verse.¹⁰

The emphasis on memory here is essential: as these poems are read, clipped, pasted on the wall or the machinery, and reread, they are internalized to such a degree that they become the property of the operative herself and her larger community in the mills. The operatives are simultaneously readers, authors, and editors in this process, selecting poems based on their own tastes and preferences, and literalizing the notion of the newspaper's "poet's corner." These poems then inspire their creations, which go on to be privately circulated and finally published in the *Offering*. Toward the end of the century, former operative Harriet H. Robinson explains,

We little girls were fond of reading these clippings, and no doubt they were an incentive to our thoughts as well as to those of the older girls, who went to "The Improvement Circle," and wrote compositions.

A year or two after this I attempted poetry, and my verses began to appear in the newspapers, in one or two *Annuals*, and later in *The Lowell Offering*.¹¹

The internalization of newspaper poetry, then, leads to imitation and publication – a process that, to Larcom at least, represented "good practice." And unlike many middle-class parlor authors who had no access to

publication or saw publication as inappropriate for women, factory operatives such as Adelia had the venue of the *Offering* in which to present their work to a wider public.

The centrality of an imitative poetics to the literary success of the *Offering* is evident in “Factory Blossoms for Queen Victoria,” a poem published in October 1842 by Harriet Farley under the pseudonym “H.F.” Farley’s co-editorship of the *Offering* began in this same issue and “Factory Blossoms” seems to be a statement of the editors’ ambitions for the periodical. In “Factory Blossoms,” Farley presents her poem to the queen of England. The poem begins:

Lady, accept the humble flowers
Which I now tender thee;
They bloomed not in Parnassian bowers,
Nor on some classic tree.

Amid the granite rocks they grew
Of a far-distant land;
Ne’er were they bathed in Grecian dew,
Or watched by sylphic hand.

This claims no place amid the wreaths
Which often strew thy way;
Simple the fragrance which it breathes,
A factory girl’s boquet.

But deem me not, when it meets your sight,
Wanting in courtesy—
This stubborn Yankee pen wont write,
YOUR GRACIOUS MAJESTY.¹²

Farley emphasizes the “humble” nature of her gift, but her humility is called into question by her daring to address Queen Victoria in this poem as well as her carefully capitalized refusal to behave as the queen’s subject. Similarly, Farley does not mask the origin of her “boquet” in the factory. Unlike the work of other poets, which is nurtured on “Parnassian bowers” or “on some classic tree,” the verses of the *Offering* poet have bloomed and thrived in the austerity of the industrial workplace. While flowers were commonly associated with poems in nineteenth-century America, this metaphor becomes even more interesting here in light of the fact that, just as many operatives created libraries or scrapbooks of their window seats in the factory, others created small window gardens. As David A. Zonderman notes, “Female workers often traded cuttings with each other, or helped a new arrival start her own window garden. . . . Flowers

became a medium of social exchange among workers.”¹³ Neither the growing of flowers or the reading and writing of poems was a solitary experience in the mills; rather, these were communal processes that brought the operatives together and sustained their sense of themselves as working women with lives prior to and outside of the mill. Farley’s poem extends the offer of fellowship across lines of class and national identity. While it is unlikely that the queen of England would read her poem, then, “Factory Blossoms” represents the kind of “social exchange” between the mill and the outside world that Farley and her fellow operatives envisioned for the *Offering*. This exchange is framed as “simple,” but it indicates the reach of the editors’ vision for the periodical and registers their mockery of the idea that they might humble themselves in order to carry out that vision.

The radical potential of Farley’s proffered gift to the queen is highlighted when “Factory Blossoms” is compared to the poem it was “suggested by”: Hannah F. Gould’s “American Wild Flowers, For Queen Victoria,” published first in London in a gift book and reprinted in the United States in the *Christian Observer* on November 26, 1841.¹⁴ Gould’s poem, like Farley’s, pays honor to the queen, but not to the monarchy. Gould writes:

Not drawn by state or titles forth,
My liberal heart would homage pay;
But at the shrine of moral worth
I bring these fresh wild flowers to lay.¹⁵

The poem concludes with Gould’s offering of “the simple wreath I weave,” begging the “Fair Queen, from o’er the deep receive, / A free-will offering of the free.” Gould proudly asserts her national identity, but the placement of this poem in the *Forget-Me-Not*, one of the earliest and most popular British literary annuals, also emphasizes her desire to work within a transatlantic literary marketplace, to claim American superiority in some things while granting the value of British culture in others. While the title of the *Offering* plays on the popularity of the gift book, its strict refusal to publish work by readers not employed in the mills (or not able to prove themselves to be employed) indicates a pride in and a recognition of the value of the parochial. Both Gould and Farley claim their identity as American poets, but, in the distinctive context of *The Lowell Offering*, “Factory Blossoms” not only allows Farley to critique the queen, but also to frame her poem (and, by extension, the *Offering*) as the distinctive offering of the “factory girl” who “may say / What others leave unsaid.”

Farley reserves her harshest criticism of the queen for the way in which she treats the neediest of her subjects, and she laments the fact that Victoria seems to lose her womanhood in her exercise of “regal power.”

There’s better far than pomp or state
To claim a sovereign’s care—
Goodness should always make her great,
And kindness make her fair.

While Gould’s gift of her “American wild-flowers” represents only her respect and love for Victoria, Farley’s offering is a mild rebuke to the queen, some of whose subjects are “by wrongs oppressed / Beneath a woman’s sway.” Rather than benefiting from a woman monarch, whose seemingly innate capacity for “goodness” and “kindness” should render her better able to wield power more sensitively and humanely, the oppressed see no change in their situation. As an American working-class woman, Farley represents the potential of the working-class, in England as well as America, capable not only of thriving under the right kind of government, but of being Queen Victoria’s equal in all of the qualities that matter – dignity, humanity, moral worth, and intelligence. The poem closes with Farley’s subversive suggestion that:

Lady, on earth we ne’er can meet;
But when, in death, we’re laid,
Proud England’s Queen, perhaps, may greet
The Lowell Factory maid.

It is not clear whether it is impossible for the queen and Farley to meet in life because of geographical distance or the distance created by social class. Nevertheless, Farley clearly suggests that it would not be inappropriate for the two to meet after death; the only barrier to such an encounter would be Victoria’s pride – a sense of superiority that is out of place on both heaven and earth.

By using Gould’s “American Wild-Flowers” as the model for her own poem, it is also possible that Farley is claiming equality to Gould, an established American female poet whose work was published widely in a variety of periodicals and had also been collected several times throughout the 1830s and 1840s. In doing so, she demonstrates her membership and participation in a larger literary culture of both readers (who write poetry) and writers (who read poetry). Rather than hiding this imitative practice or using it to mask a lack of skill or originality, Farley highlights her use of the poem, adding a note to the inside front cover of the October issue to point her readers’ attention to the imitation. The exchange between women

enacted in this poem – Gould and Queen Victoria, Farley and Gould, Farley and Queen Victoria – demonstrates the ambition and potential reach of the *Offering*, as well as its subversive potential – a potential that is only visible if poems such as “Factory Blossoms” are read within the thriving antebellum culture of poetic imitation.

As “The Graves of a Household” and “Factory Blossoms for Queen Victoria” indicate, imitation is neither simplistic nor formulaic. Each of these poems uses a specific original and relies on the readers’ knowledge of that original (and, to some extent, its publication and circulation). But each uses a different imitative method, one that shapes the reading of the text that is ultimately published in the *Offering*. Like the other two poems I’ve discussed in this regard, “To M. M. Davidson” by M. R. G. (Miriam R. Green), which was published in August 1845, similarly frames imitation as a worthy poetic project, one that demonstrates the familiarity of these working-class poets with their literary forebears and peers. Responding to the relationship between Margaret Miller Davidson and her sister, poet Lucretia Davidson, the poem also positions the *Offering* poets in a longer tradition of imitation, particularly among American female poets. While “To M. M. Davidson” is not an imitation of a specific original, as are “The Graves of a Household” and “Factory Blossoms for Queen Victoria,” this poem is an example of the versatility of the poetics of imitation evident in and central to the poetry of *The Lowell Offering*.

While Margaret Miller Davidson’s work had been celebrated throughout her young life, it was collected and published posthumously in *Biographical and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson* (1841), with a lengthy introduction by Washington Irving. Appearing the year following the publication of the first issue of the *Offering*, it is possible that this book had an impact on the mill girls, whose own manuscript writings had so recently been converted into print. Margaret Davidson was best known as the sister of Lucretia, a poetic prodigy who died at the age of sixteen, when Margaret was only two years old. According to Rufus Griswold, Lucretia’s death shaped the course of Margaret’s life, in accord, apparently, with their mother’s wishes:

[Margaret] loved, when but three years old, to sit on a cushion at her mother’s feet, listening to anecdotes of her sister’s life, and details of the events which preceded her death, and would often exclaim, while her face beamed with mingled emotions, “Oh, I will try to fill her place – teach me to be like her!”¹⁶

Margaret's self-imposed training to become "like" Lucretia, according to Griswold, was to read precociously and voraciously; to embark "on a general course of education, studying grammar, geography, history, and rhetoric"; and, of course, to compose poetry.¹⁷ As Mary Loeffelholz points out, "The name and death of Lucretia authorize the appearance of her sister Margaret," and Margaret's reputation is thus part of "the productive family machine of [Lucretia's] posthumous reputation."¹⁸

Margaret makes no secret of what drives her desire to write and publish poetry; in fact, her connection to her sister and her imitation of her work and her career are important parts of her public image. In the dedication of a long poem to Lucretia titled "Lenore," Margaret claims that the relationship between the two goes beyond mere influence or imitation to a sort of cohabitation of the same creative spirit. Using the same "hallowed harp" as her long-dead sister, she imagines her work as a collaboration between the two:

For thee I pour this unaffected lay,
 To thee these simple numbers all belong;
 For though thine earthly form has passed away,
 Thy memory still inspires my childish song.

Then take this feeble tribute! 'tis thine own—
 Thy fingers sweep my trembling heartstrings o'er,
 Arouse to harmony each buried tone,
 And bid its wakened music sleep no more!¹⁹

Here Margaret offers "Lenore" to her long-dead sister as "tribute," but also acknowledges Lucretia's part in the production of this and other poems. It is not simply that Lucretia's "memory inspires [her] childish song," but that the song actually seems to belong to Lucretia, despite its having been written down by Margaret. The creative process here – the evocation of emotion, the shaping of harmonies, the production of music – is assigned by Margaret to Lucretia. This sort of collaboration between reader and poet as well as between sister poets is exactly what Green intends to evoke in her own tribute to Davidson published in the *Offering*.

"To M. M. Davidson" is prefaced by a note that explains that the poem was written "after perusing and reperusing" Margaret Davidson's *Biography and Poetical Remains*, particularly the poem titled "To die and be forgotten," in which, Green states, "she gives sway to the ebullition of a full heart, with regard to literary fame, in an affecting manner."²⁰ As editor of the *Poetical Remains*, Irving explains that "To die and be forgotten" was inspired by a conversation with Davidson's mother in

which Mrs. Davidson asked her daughter “whether she had no ambition to have her name go down to posterity.”²¹ While Margaret rejects any elaborate commemoration of her death, she admits the appeal of being “embalm’d in kindred hearts.”²² Yet as soon as she imagines this sort of afterlife for herself, she dismisses the possibility:

To be, when countless years have past,
The good man’s glowing theme?
To be—but I—what right have I
To this bewildering dream?

In the remainder of the poem, Davidson rather unconvincingly insists that she will forget about literary fame, instead “toil[ing] to write my name within / The glorious book of life.” Having essentially transferred the credit for her own poetry to her deceased sister, Margaret seems in this poem to struggle with how she herself will be remembered.

In “To M. M. Davidson,” Green reassures the now deceased Margaret that she will not, in fact, “be forgotten”:

Yet thy memory shall live, and ages to come
Shall love to repeat thy sweet name:
O, the golden thread that thy genius has spun
To weave in the web of thy fame!

While subtle, Green’s emphasis on weaving here renders this poem, like Farley’s tribute to Queen Victoria, a sort of “factory blossom,” a gift that could only come from the mill girls themselves. Although the “golden thread” was created by Davidson and left to survive her after her premature death, it is Green – and perhaps her fellow factory operatives – who are said to have woven this thread “in the web of thy fame!” Therefore, just as Margaret’s career is inspired by and enmeshed with that of her older sister Lucretia, the writing careers of the female factory workers are intimately intertwined with that of Margaret, extending its life beyond her death and even imitating it in their own rapid acquisition of cultural literacy.

One way in which Davidson, and by extension other poets, will live on after their deaths is the deployment of a vigorous poetics of imitation. After commending Davidson’s poetry about nature and calling her Nature’s “lost, her favorite child” (perhaps in contrast to her earthly family, in which Margaret seems always to have been a poor replacement for Lucretia), Green describes the broad range of Margaret’s “fancy”:

Thy fancy explored the boundless waves,
That roar for the mighty deep,

And down, far down in the coral caves
Where "the green-haired sea-nymphs" sleep.

Quoting from Davidson's poem "A Moonbeam," Green incorporates Margaret's work into her own; as in Adelia's "The Graves of a Household," this "extraction" is purposeful and is intended to be noticed by Green's readers. Similarly, later in the poem, Green insists that "The 'good man' often will wander forth, / By the purest reverence led, / From the scenes of fashion and festal mirth, / To seek thy lowly bed," thus responding directly to Davidson's desire in "To die and be forgotten" to be "The good man's glowing theme." Such borrowings reinforce the wish Green expresses in her next stanza:

Methinks 'tis a theme may well inspire
The heart with a kindred flame,
O, would, while *I* touch the tuneful lyre,
I could imitate thy strain!

While quotation is not strictly imitation, it does highlight a related engagement with and an incorporation of other poetic texts; as in Adelia's "The Graves of a Household," the original text becomes part of the new text, signaling a sort of posthumous collaboration. Imitation is regarded as a positive poetic project, one that is not just instructive for the poet but is productive of a superior "strain" of poetry, to which both Margaret Davidson and Green aspire.

While Green seems to lament her inability to imitate Davidson, her poem, like "To die and be forgotten," contains mixed messages about her own talent and her desire for fame. In imitating Davidson's modest dismissal of her own talent and ambition, Green may be seen as asking for a response similar to that she has given Davidson – some assertion that she is not to "be forgotten" herself. At the very least, her tribute has rendered her worthy of Davidson's attention: as a sort of reward for her own faithfulness to the deceased poet, Green imagines for herself a meeting of the two poets:

O, then may we meet in the heavenly choir,
Where eternal anthems ring,
And strike with thee the seraphic lyre
To the songs which *all* can sing.

In this rendition of an American women's literary tradition, Green effectively takes the place of Margaret's sister, striking the "seraphic lyre" with Margaret, just as Margaret herself imagined she and her sister making use

of the same “hallowed harp.” The ending frames Green as Margaret’s poetic heir, just as Margaret was her sister’s. By emphasizing “the songs which *all* can sing,” Green also claims poetry for everyone, thus dissolving the boundary between audience and performer, establishing imitation as the way in which those who hear the song can become those who sing it. The *Offering* writers can then lay claim to a lineage of song (and poetry) that renders their own work worthy of attention.

Although the poetry in the *Offering* has largely been ignored by scholars, it might productively be seen as central to the project of the periodical. Poetry comes to stand, in many ways, as proof of the factory operatives’ desire to engage with print culture. Speaking of all of the writers published in the *Offering*, Robinson insists in her memoir of 1898, *Loom and Spindle*, that “These authors represent what may be called the poetic element of factory life. They were the ideal mill-girls, full of hopes, desires, aspirations; poets of the loom, spinners of verse, artists of factory life.”²³ For many scholars, this “poetic element” has been evidence of the factory operatives’ lack of talent, and the work has been condemned for its aspirations – either to gentility or to literariness, with both seen as somehow inauthentic on the part of young working women. Rather than seeing these poets as aspiring to be middle class, however, I am suggesting that we see them as rejecting the idea that poetry and print culture are by their very nature middle class. Accessing a literary tradition usually denied them by class and education, the *Offering* poets claimed poetry for themselves, experimenting with its place in their own lives and their own periodical.

Notes

1. Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood: Outlined From Memory* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1889), 221.
2. Histories of the New England textile factories include Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England’s Mill Girls and Their Magnates* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1949); Caroline F. Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966); and David A. Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties: New England Workers and the Mechanized Factory System, 1815–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Studies of women’s work in the factories include Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and William Moran, *The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002). For collections of the writing of female factory operatives, see Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Factory Girls* (Urbana and Chicago: University of

- Illinois Press, 1977); Benita Eisler (ed.), *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Women* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977); and Thomas Dublin (ed.), *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
3. See Susan S. Williams, *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America, 1850–1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
 4. Harriot F. Curtis and Harriet Farley, "The Lowell Offering," *Christian Register*, 22.51 (December 23, 1843), 202.
 5. My discussion of this imitative poetics is deeply indebted to Eliza Richards' argument about gender and mimicry in nineteenth-century American poetry. See *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 6. Josephson, *Golden Threads*, 189.
 7. Foner, *Factory Girls*.
 8. Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, 113.
 9. Sylvia J. Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.
 10. Larcum, *A New England Girlhood*, 175–176.
 11. Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle, or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1898), 46.
 12. H. F. (Harriet Farley), "Factory Blossoms for Queen Victoria," *The Lowell Offering* 3 (October 1842), 1–4.
 13. Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties*, 67.
 14. Eisler, *The Lowell Offering*, 3 (October 1842): inside front cover.
 15. Hannah F. Gould, "American Wild-Flowers, For Queen Victoria," *Christian Observer* 20.48 (26 November 1841), 192.
 16. Rufus Wilmot Griswold (ed.), *The Female Poets of America* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849), 155.
 17. *Ibid.*, 155.
 18. Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 14, 22.
 19. Margaret Davidson, "Lenore," *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson*, Washington Irving (ed.), (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1843), 217.
 20. Miriam R. Greene, "To M. M. Davidson," *The Lowell Offering* 5 (August 1845), 181–182.
 21. Washington Irving, "Biography of Miss Margaret Davidson," *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson*, 74.
 22. Margaret Davidson, "To Die and Be Forgotten," *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson*, 74–75.
 23. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 117.