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FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS IN CHARLOTTE ELIZABETH TONNA'S QUEST

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Abstract: *Female workers represent a fundamental component of the workforce to the extent that it is true that the Industrial Revolution owes them a huge debt. However, despite the unfair exploitation of many women in factories in which conditions resembled manslaughter, they have been often neglected and reduced to liminal characters by Victorian novelists. An interesting exception in the early Victorian period is represented by the writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, whose fiction works as a medium of social criticism. Her semi-fictional The Wrongs of Woman is a reform novel which sheds a controversial light on female working conditions. On the one hand she indeed deplores the inhuman treatment of female labourers, but on the other hand she also argues that female employment provokes a consequent increase in male unemployment! My paper aims to investigate the role of Tonna's text and her attempt to alleviate working-class suffering.*

Keywords: *class struggle, disparity, factory work, female discrimination, hegemony.*

1. Introduction: Uncovering 'Hidden Hands'

The appearance of the 'industrial novel' came as a natural consequence of the achievements of the Industrial Revolution. Novelists played the key role in witnessing to this social change, also showing the dark side of the phenomenon, and pointing out the many negative aspects of this huge and epoch-making transformation. The contribution of novelists made possible the rise of a new awareness in the reading public. However, their representation of reality was never innocent, but rather biased by ideology. The class struggle and the poor living conditions of the working class were recurrent themes which often clashed with the untenable inequality of gender. Despite the fact that women accounted for as many as 60 to 80 per cent of all factory employees, their labour was at first rarely mentioned and was eventually marginalised or erased so that attention was paid to male factory workers' activities only. To describe industrial class relations a new phrase, *Masters and Men*, was adopted; women were, thereby, even linguistically excluded. The marginalisation (Johnson 2001:27) of female factory workers in Victorian novels was chiefly due to the fear of possible social upheaval brought about by women's untraditional economic independence. This development was indeed considered as dangerous as it was unfeminine by the collectivity. The figure of a female worker was often associated with that one of a prostitute, since sexual harassment was a constant part of employment in the factory. The dangers of mixed-sex promiscuity in the workplace became a source of moral reprobation. Nevertheless, the subject of prostitution, the so-called 'social evil', was supposed to be less subversive and, thus, more narratable than telling the story of ordinary women who made their own money at work. According to Anna Clark's essay *The Struggle for the Breeches*, those

women who were engaged in both domestic responsibilities and working life increased their perception of independence and began complaining to their husbands by questioning the patriarchal structure, so as to become a threat to social stability. In fact, women were allowed to give economic support to the family provided they remained subordinate. The term *breeches* in Clark's study is a metaphor indicating those women who attempted to challenge men's authority. If not sexualised, factory girls were depicted as victims of the industrial system and as generally weakened by disease and malnutrition; both views reinforced the conviction that women were unsuitable for factory labour. The only positive representation of women consisted in the image of the 'angel in the house', which relegated women to household duties. The almost total erasure of factory girls as characters in novels has therefore to be traced back to a feeling of anxiety that pervaded Victorian intellectuals' minds and favoured the return of women to the family as an antidote to the disorder of the industrial machine. Furthermore, female workers also represented a menace to male employment, since they were accused of stealing jobs intended for men. Even so, the perpetuation of a hierarchical family structure could still be possible among middle class families, but it became utopian for the working class, whose women were expected to work to contribute to the family income. This did not mean that their position was entirely approved of by men, who, as Anna Clark argues, "used domesticity" as a "clever tactic" to agitate for working-class rights, publicly regarding women workers as "frail victims who needed chivalrous protectors" (234). The industrial novel acts as a non-autonomous phenomenon, one that can be seen as a superstructure in close connection with real life.

Similarly to other early Victorian female writers such as Frances

Trollope and Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna devoted her artistic production to fictional narratives with the aim of informing middle and upper class novel readers of what was occurring in the industrial areas of England. Her narrative is characterised by a paternalistic style used to better dramatise the living conditions of the proletariat. Although the aesthetic value of her work is rather insignificant, she contributed to preparing the ground for later and greater novelists such as Dickens and Gaskell as well as indicating the path to be taken by welfare reforms. She was also the restless, polemical author of many pamphlets and religious writings, although, unlike other contemporary Evangelicals, she did not believe that poverty and starvation were the inevitable consequence of the divine plan. Charlotte Elizabeth, to use her 'pen name', can also claim the distinction of being one of the few who wrote at length about factory girls and children and strenuously condemned their dire situation. She was also conscious that industrialisation had to be ruled with clear legal measures. This was her mission, since she firmly believed in literature as a powerful tool to improve society. Her approach to the issue was systematic and scientific; she first saw at first hand all that she subsequently described, inspecting many factories in detail to determine their nature and condition. She also grounded her quest on reality by using tales and narrative material borrowed from the *Blue Books* (Colella 1998:108). Tonna became very popular through the publication of her novel *Helen Fleetwood*, serialised between 1839 and 1841, which reported the appalling story of an orphan compelled to work when she was little more than a child. Between 1843 and 1847 she published a second social reform novel entitled *The Wrongs of Woman*. This mingles fact with fiction in order to attract the attention of as many readers as possible. The four parts of the book, *Milliners and*

Dressmakers, *The Forsaken Home*, *The Little Pin-headers*, and *The Lacerunners*, describe the hideous daily routine of poor women in London factories and in industrial villages. The book caused so great a shock to public opinion that it contributed to the passing of the Factory Acts of 1844, 1847 and 1848.

2.1. Women or slaves?

Each part of *The Wrongs of Woman* shares the same narrative structure; as mentioned above, Tonna's mission was to combine real evidence with religious reflections that can be traced back to her strong Evangelical faith. Tonna had embraced Premillenarianism thanks to the preacher Hugh McNeile: "Premillenarians read contemporary political, social and economic disruption as signs of profound dislocation in the divine order. The Millennium would occur only after Christ's return and it was imperative that Christians prepare for his judgement" (Gleadle 2007:99). Consequently it became a matter of extreme urgency for her to involve the reading public in healing the crisis of her time, and, in so doing, Tonna demands the participation of women.

The result of her commitment is a piece of ultra-Protestant propaganda. As a convinced Tory and editor of the *Christian Lady's Magazine* (Midgley 2006:353) she delivers her thoughts and her beliefs not only in her novels, but also in her journal. Charlotte Elizabeth's "political Protestantism" (Gleadle 2007:100) aims at fostering legislative change, on the assumption that charitableness is not enough to support the needy. Her survey of the female role in society is based on biblical references and proves to be quite contradictory from the very beginning. If on the one hand

she emphasises the equality of men and women, on the other hand she states that the right place of women is inside domestic walls:

When we name the infliction of a wrong we imply the existence of a right. Therefore, if we undertake to discuss the wrongs of women, we may be expected to set out by plainly defining what are the rights of women. This is soon done. We repudiate all pretensions to equality with man, save on the ground specified by the Apostle, "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female". We claim, in common with men, and in like measure, the undying principle of a spiritual existence we possess an equal share of inbred corruption, an equal capacity to deliver ourselves from its bondage, an equal need of the redemption wrought out by our Almighty Deliverer by the sacrifice of himself on the cross for sinners (Tonna part I 1845:3-4).

The great privilege of women in domestic life is certainly that of making man's home so attractive as to counteract the many inducements that may cross his path to become a rover from it (part II 1). [...] there are certain duties so manifestly appertaining to the wife and mother, that wholly to neglect them would be doing violence not only to the best but to the strongest impulses of her nature (part II 6).

The effective strategy of her rhetoric is to convey a specific political-ideological discourse in which reporting the exploitation of female factory workers is intended to blame capitalism and corruption. The latter are immediately perceived by the unfair comparison between the countryside and the city outskirts. The former is idealistically referred to as the place in which the once harmonious fusional relationship between mankind and nature is abruptly interrupted by the mass migration of countryfolk towards the city in order to find a job in mines and industry. The city is therefore the place in which evil rules:

London is, indeed, the head-quarters of this as of most other national iniquities; but as fashion has everywhere its apes; so it has everywhere its victims; in large

towns especially. There is hardly an establishment, in any genteel neighbourhood that does not, to use the expressive language of one who repeated it to the author, “*kill a girl a year*” (part I 98 my italics).

An attentive overview of the workplace is another constant feature of her narration. The outdoor environment is only the dreadful anticipation of what one can see inside factories. The situation becomes even worse when the narrator’s gaze invades the domestic sphere in which disruption and despair reach their climax:

In the smaller and dirtier street of the town, where the working classes reside, there are narrow passages at intervals of every eight or ten houses, and sometimes at every third or fourth house. These passages are, in a very few instances, of the width of nine feet, and about nine feet high. Besides the numerous dirt-heaps, small pools, and doorway slushes fronting or adjoining the dwellings and workshops, there are in the town of W-- two vast masses of stagnant filth and putrescence, sufficient to breed a plague throughout the whole of England. (part II 127-130).

Like other Victorian novelists, Charlotte Elizabeth makes use of the term *hands* to synecdochically define the workforce of the new industries. The perception of women’s identity and the construction of the self were not independent of the context. “Not human beings anymore, but common hands” (Part IV 25); there was no possible self-determination since even the body was thought of in terms of fragments made available only for specific tasks. However, Tonna dares to go even further, defining factory girls as “machines” (77), and therefore also like “animals” (104).

Indeed, more and more often, female workers were summoned to replace men because they were available to work harder, but at lower wages. The result of this upheaval was the splitting up of the family unit,

which turned out to be a great advantage for employers as they saw their profits grow. The writer's intention is to fight against this social system, which violates the natural order, and to show how frustration can transform good husbands into drunken and violent men. To accomplish her political objective, Charlotte Elizabeth makes use of *melodrama* and persuades the reader by also appealing to their emotions. In doing so, she adopts the Chartist method to relate domesticity. Chartists thought that the crisis of the family unit was due to the fact that women couldn't fulfill household duties because they were at work. Consequently to this social upheaval there was an increase in male unemployment and much frustration; this is the reason why:

Chartists promised to transform the old marital misery into happy domesticity. Domesticity was therefore not only a rhetorical tool to demand concessions from the government but a vision used to appeal to women. Acknowledging the chronic problems of working-class marriage and promising to solve them were key means of gaining women's adherence (Clark 1992:74).

As we know, the Chartist Movement can be considered the forerunner of the subsequent socialist one, but it was predominantly a male movement which, as Clark observes:

[...] displaced the blame for factory misery on woman's work rather than on the employment relationship itself. [...]. When the Chartist-influenced West Riding Short-Time Committee demanded the gradual withdrawal of all females from the factories, they declared that the domestic unhappiness caused by the factory system's inversion of the order of nature was fraught with danger to the State (1992:84).

The path towards the recognition of women's rights is yet to come since the emancipation of workers still concerns only male matters. Tonna ideologically supported the decision to withdraw female labourers from factories.

2.2. Tommy/Truck System

The volume also exposes another economic trick which in the Victorian age was commonly used to put workers at a disadvantage: the Tommy or Truck System. This was an agreement under which the employee was paid in commodities instead of in money. The system limited employees' liberty to choose how to spend their money. The fictitious character of Alice Smith, worker in a screw factory, becomes the pretext for Tonna to explain this further abuse. Built on disparity, this agreement was the perfect means for employers to get profits and extra capital. As a matter of fact, capitalism depends on the principle that: "the value of the commodities which the labourer receives for labour power has to be less than the value of labour power itself, even though these commodities are produced by labour power" (Valentine 2006:55). However, less money and fewer commodities leads to an increase in poverty, which, according to Malthusian thought, should 'wisely' reduce the birth rate among working-class people. This possibility seems not to be a logical consequence, but is nevertheless a real threat to the family balance so much emphasised by the narrator. The Malthusian theory of population indeed based its belief on the necessity of birth control over that part of the population who was more destitute in order to avoid the catastrophe of starvation.

2.3. Eve vs Eve: Female Hegemonic Interconnection

Another issue extensively reported in the text is the class struggle, which assumes specific nuances in relation to the female workforce. In the first part of the book, the story of Ann and Frances constitutes an emblematic instance of disparity among working class women. The rise of capitalism indeed does not simply create an opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Madame A. and Madame B., for instance, are two proletarian employers who milk young dressmakers dry in their premises. Those who survive will have learnt a trade and can aspire to become employers themselves. Tonna seems to anticipate what Gramsci defines as “the importance of consent”; while the fundamental Marxist interprets power in terms of class versus class, Gramsci raises the question of *class alliance* and postulates conflict between “the resistance of subordinate groups in society and the forces of incorporation operating in the interests of dominant groups in society” (Storey 2006:11). The class struggle can be so epitomised in the synchronic coexistence of opposition and assimilation to hegemony. At the workplace there is no room for female mutual support; the weak are doomed to die in accordance with Darwin’s theory of natural selection.

The uneasy and complex female relationship between employer and employee is even more thoroughly analysed in the fourth part of the book. The *incipit* recalls a sermon-style speech closely interwoven with religious precepts. An opening question morally challenges the reader about his responsibilities towards the most disadvantaged: “Who shall plead the cause of the poor?” (part IV 1). The interpolation of this rhetorical question immediately identifies and constructs two antithetical social positions: the

poor and the rich. Both social groups are understood in terms of social power, in a logic of domination and subordination that, according to the author, has to be questioned. The word *poor* strikes the reader as an accusation against the growing middle class whose business is based on the exploitation of the workforce. Charlotte Elizabeth warns the reader against the excesses of this gold rush by quoting the words of the apostle Timothy, who leads man back to his reasonable demands. Against the rising greediness of her age the writer hypothesises a better distribution of wealth:

“Now let us for a moment contemplate our mesh of this great snare; [...]. Accordingly the manufacturer has many hands at work, among a class who do literally depend for their daily share of the coarsest food, the scantiest raiment, the most miserable shelter, on the daily toil of their own hands; and these being wholly at his mercy, he throws the whole burden upon them. [...] moreover the number of applicants [...] are fettered by their helpless condition not less strongly than is the galley-slave by his iron chain; and they must toil on” (pp.4-7-8).

The pronoun “us”, at the beginning of the quotation, becomes the metonym for the nation, since the author wants the reading public to be sensitised to the dehumanisation of workers and wishes to alert the dominant classes to the danger of turning an ideology that serves their own class interests into the false commonsense of society as a whole. Charlotte Elizabeth was a convinced opponent of the economic policy of *laissez-faire*. The opposition between the rich and the poor also assumes an interesting gender connotation (Ingham 1996) in many passages of the book. This is due to the fact that Tonna wants to condemn the unjust attitude of rich women who, to follow “the changeableness of fashion” (99), submit young poor women to incessant shift work. Then comes the emblematic story of Kate Clarke. The latter is the poor daughter of a widower. She has many

siblings so she can see no other option but to become a worker in a lace manufactory. Working in the textile industry was considered acceptable for women, especially after the publication in 1842 by the Children's Employment Commission on Mines of a Blue Book which provoked strong reactions due to its report about the conditions of women's work. As a result Parliament was persuaded to vote for the exclusion of women from underground work in the mines. Immediately afterwards both women and children were classified as a protected group. If on the one hand the new legislation helped women to improve their condition, on the other the state apparatus did not allow them to express their political opinions on the topic, compelling women to be represented by men. Kate Clarke's story runs parallel to that of her employer Mrs Collins. Initially they are described in accordance with two opposite models of femininity. Kate has a tender and compassionate nature, unlike Mrs Collins, who behaves like a slaver, and whose harshness never gives way even to her baby's crying. Later the reader finds out that Mrs Collins' attitude is simply the result of the tough life she leads as a part of the relentless industrial machine:

When I married, things hadn't come to pass they're at now, though they were getting worse and worse every day; steam-machines being so expensive at first cost, and wanting to be altered or changed so often, made the labour of hands and feet worth a deal more than they are now; and Bob and I being both able and willing to work, we began life with a better look-out than some others. Well, the one thing that I set myself against was the bad custom of putting young children to toil [...]; as to giving Godfrey (56).

Overwork was of course the main source of distress for those women who had children. In order to continue working, mothers were forced to dope their little ones with a few drops of Godfrey. This harmful cordial,

which dramatically affected children's health, is another sad feature of the social and moral degradation described in the book. The indiscriminate use of Godfrey is widely mentioned in the many tearful tales Charlotte Elizabeth resorts to in her determination to legitimise and support, once again, her fight for the protection of the family unit. This same drug, together with laudanum, was also given to alleviate hunger. Mrs Collins' confession definitely testifies to the impossibility of combining work and family.

3. Conclusion

The epilogue of the book is only its formal conclusion. The number of questions asked directly to the reader is intended to underline the lack of those supposed women's wrongs:

It has been asked, Why is this little book called "The Wrongs of Woman," seeing it is only to one class of female sufferers that its sad details apply? We answer, that the wrong against woman, against woman in every rank and every class, perpetrated by the means which have been very briefly sketched in these pages, is alike fearful and universal. [...] But now, through the atrocious system of which a very small, and that too the least revolting part, has been set forth, our women are changed into men, and our men into devils; and the fair inheritance of England's Queen is becoming but as a throne whose pillars rest on an awakening volcano (139-140).

Charlotte Elizabeth, surprisingly, breaks through the web of prejudices that had limited and silenced women of all social classes up to this point. Her militancy took her beyond the narrow standpoint of her contemporaries, and, despite some naivety in her approach, she was able to convey the urgent need for prompt social change.

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