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**"THE WORKS OF WOMEN ARE SYMBOLICAL":  
THE VICTORIAN SEAMSTRESS IN THE 1840s**

by

**BETH HARRIS**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

1997

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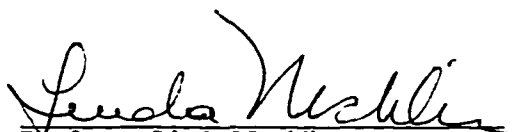
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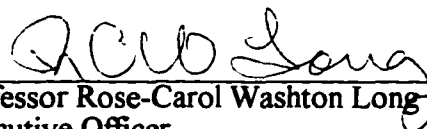
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**Abstract****"THE WORKS OF WOMEN ARE SYMBOLICAL":  
THE VICTORIAN SEAMSTRESS IN THE 1840s**

by

**BETH HARRIS**

Advisor: Professor Linda Nochlin

In an era (the "hungry forties") when government commissioners, religious reformers and novelists examined every aspect of the living and working conditions of the working class, concern and anxiety focused on one type of worker in particular: those women who earned their living with the needle. Richard Redgrave exhibited the first painting of this subject in 1844, and illustrations of lonely shirtmakers in garrets and young women sewing in crowded workshops frequently accompanied articles, pamphlets and stories. This dissertation examines some reasons for the prevalence of the figure of the distressed seamstress during two specific periods: 1843-1844 and 1848-1851. Virtually every source one consults (from parliamentary reports to melodramatic fiction) tells the same fairy-tale-like story: a story in which a happy, healthy and virtuous young woman from the countryside leaves her home to become a seamstress in the big city where she encounters an evil employer and/or seducer, and begins an irreversible decline leading to death and/or prostitution.

The sense of urgency evident in the constant repetition of the narrative of the seamstress's decline, as well as its use of one-dimensional characters and a melodramatic plot, suggests that it performed important ideological work: to secure definitions of "femininity" which had become increasingly unstable. Women and work became a hotly debated issue during the tense decade of the 1840s and seamstresses

and sewing (in part, because of tremendous changes in the clothing industry) figured prominently in those debates.

The narrative of the seamstress's decline worked to provide solutions to the grave problems which faced England in the 1840s. The seamstress became an especially visible figure during periods of working-class unrest, and corresponding upper-class fears of revolution. An extremely sympathetic figure, the seamstress was used to envision the problems of the 1840s in ways which were unthreatening and workable.

## Acknowledgments

For Julie Ugoretz,  
who will reconcile work and home for herself

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Kathy Morrison and Ron Baxter listened to me rant about seamstresses after my long days at the British library, and let me stay with them for weeks on end. They helped me to see and think about art, and have been, in general, the best friends any one could ask for. The same could be said for Susan Felleman and Peter Chametzky.

Many years ago, long discussions with Hilary Morgan taught me much about Victorian painting. Later, I happened upon a letter from her years after it was written which helped me over an important early hurdle in writing this dissertation.

I am also indebted to my mother, who sent me to England when I was sixteen (an event which turned me into an incurable anglophile); and to my father, who taught me about the enormous pleasure that could be derived from looking at art. My mother's long hours of baby-sitting have been critical to the actual completion and depositing of this dissertation. My sister has also taught me a lot, not about art

history, but about myself. To her, too, I am very grateful. For the same reason, I would like to thank Dr. Linda Laughlin.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1839, at the threshold of the period which became known as the "hungry forties," Thomas Carlyle penned the lines that came to symbolize the concerns of an entire decade: "A feeling very generally exists," he wrote "that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, much *was* said about the condition of the working class in the next decade. The Government conducted inquiries and produced multi-volume reports, newspapers ran lengthy articles, reformers distributed pamphlets, and politicians (like Disraeli) and religious activists (like Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna) joined sympathetic writers (like Elizabeth Gaskell) in fictionalizing the lives of the poor. No fact about the workers of England was deemed too small or insignificant; nothing escaped the "eye" of the commissioners, reporters and novelists.

The present age is remarkable for its spirit of inquiry into the social conditions of men of all ranks. 'How do poor men live?' is a question in answer to which many parliamentary blue-books have already been devoted. We have now ascertained with painful accuracy the sanitary state of the working population. We know how they live; what their dwellings are; what their income is and how they spend it; what they save, or rather what they do not save; how they are taxed, how many of them cannot read and write; how much sooner they die than the average of the comfortable classes; what they eat, what they drink, and what they wear; how many of them live in one room and sleep in one bed; almost every circumstance in their social and domestic state now lies bare and open to us. They have no domestic secrets and private affairs. The life of the poor is now a matter of notoriety; and the parliamentary commissioners have ferreted them out, and printed statistical accounts of them.... The physician has inspected their sores, and the magistrate their vices. The divine knows how many of them do not attend church, and the teetotaler how many go to the gin-

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, "Chartism," Thomas Carlyle: Selected Essays, New York: Dutton, 1972, p. 165.

shop. Society, like a policeman, has flashed its bulls-eye full upon them, and the darkest recesses of their social state have been revealed to us.<sup>2</sup>

"Like a policeman" is an apt metaphor, since the growing body of information on the working classes can be seen as an attempt to map, regulate and control an increasingly volatile society. The grave distress caused by the industrial depression of 1837-1842, the Chartist petitions to parliament demanding universal suffrage, and the general strike of 1842 gave many observers reason to fear that revolution was imminent. The apprehension that "if something be not done, something will do itself one day, and in a fashion that will please nobody,"<sup>3</sup> was behind the scrutiny of the working class during this period. Not coincidentally, it was at the height of this fear of working-class unrest (1842-44) that the Victorian fixation on distressed seamstresses took hold.

The Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission (published in 1843) can be credited with "exposing" the desperate plight of the London needlewomen.<sup>4</sup> The commission had been established by Parliament in 1840 in order to inquire "into the employment of Children in Mines, Collieries, and other occupations not regulated by the Factory Acts."<sup>5</sup> The commission's Second Report considered the wages, hours, and treatment of a wide range of workers, including

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<sup>2</sup> "London Street-Folk-Coster Life," Eliza Cook's Journal, September 20, 1851, p. 329.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyle, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons, Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, Sessional Papers XIV (1843). I will be referring to this document as the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, and I will be citing those sections of the report on dressmakers and shirtmakers in London written and compiled by R.D. Grainger, pp. 555-560 and pp. 772-839.

<sup>5</sup> R.H. Horne, A New Spirit of the Age, New York: J.C. Riker, 1844, p. 62. The subject of the commission's first report, published a year earlier, in 1842, had been the labor of women and children in mines.

those involved in the manufacturing of metalware, earthenware, glass, lace, and paper, as well as draw-by weaving, and hand frame winding and warping. The fifteenth chapter of the Second Report, devoted to "Miscellaneous Trades" (embroidery, rope and twine making, leather glove making, straw plaiting and watch chain making) included two sections on seamstresses. Thirty-two pages were devoted to those who worked as milliner's and dressmaker's apprentices and eleven pages were devoted to those employed at shirtmaking (these two categories of seamstresses are discussed below).

Although the Second Report detailed the miserable conditions in which all of the laborers listed above toiled, it was this small section of the fifteenth chapter, on women who earned their living with the needle, which caught and sustained the attention of the public. This section of the Second Report, written by a man named R.D. Grainger, told of the seamstresses' unbearably long hours, the crowded and poorly ventilated rooms where they worked six or seven days a week, and the way many suffered from irreversible illnesses which often led to their death. The Second Report also revealed how the employers of needlewomen never gave a thought for the suffering of the naive and helpless young women who worked for them.

Soon after the publication of the Second Report in 1843 newspaper articles and pamphlets as well as numerous works of fiction, poetry and drama appeared on the subject of the exploitation of seamstresses. These publications utilized the information on needlewomen "uncovered" by the government's commissioners to inspire the public and/or the government to action on the seamstresses' behalf. Different authors, depending on their political and religious beliefs (as we will see), promoted different solutions. The high point of interest in the figure of the seamstress was reached between October of 1843 and December of 1844, a period of just over a year. Later in the decade, between 1848 and 1851, the seamstress resurfaced -- but not without some significant differences.

1843 was not the first time that the cause of the Milliner's and Dressmaker's Apprentices was taken up by the press -- though that year the interest in them was far more intense and urgent. Articles on the subject occasionally appeared in the mid and late 1830s,<sup>6</sup> some of which were already calling for legislation to protect the young apprentices from long hours of labor. Other early articles charged that these "delicate" young women were being worked 16 hours a day in surroundings "unfavourable to virtue" which not infrequently ended in death.

What is interesting though, is that the iconography that we associate with the Victorian image of the seamstress (discussed below) emerged only after the publication of the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission in the Spring of 1843. Illustrations of seamstresses which predate the report fail to provide enough context to convince the viewer of the figure's suffering. One such illustration appeared in Heads of the People (1841) (fig. 1), a book which sketched humorous portraits of different English "types," including the Dressmaker, the Diner-Out, and the Chimney Sweep. The illustration of "The Dressmaker" by Kenny Meadows depicts a young, genteel-looking dressmaker sewing by candlelight. Although in the accompanying essay, Douglas Jerrold described seamstresses as "poor, unprotected creatures...once yearning with the noblest and tenderest affections -- creatures in whom the character of wife and mother might have shone with the brightest lustre...."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See "Domestic Tyranny and Oppression -- Dressmakers' and Milliners' Assistants," The Town, December 21, 1839, p. 937. This article was followed by another, "Prosecution of Young Females Employed in Dress-Making Establishments," The Town, December 28, 1839, p. 1075. The Town, in these articles, claimed to be the first to expose the hardships of the seamstress. I am not certain what exactly prompted the appearance of these articles. For other articles that pre-date the Second Report see "Female Slavery," The Weekly Dispatch, May 12, 1839, p. 224 and "Female Slaves," The Weekly Dispatch, June 9, 1839, p. 269. For an even earlier article on the subject see "A Few Words of Advice to Clerks, Shopmen, and Apprentices," Fraser's Magazine, vol. 12 (July - December 1835), pp. 267-79.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jerrold, "The Dressmaker," Heads of the People, London: Willoughby & Co., [1841], p. 5.

nothing about this well-dressed seamstress indicates the trials she has endured (except the low-burning candle) or her place within an unnatural environment.

An even earlier illustration of a dress-maker's workroom published in The Town (1839) (fig. 2), is similarly not as effective as those created after the publication of the Second Report. Two nicely dressed young women sit on either side of a table sewing by candlelight. A third figure stands between them and admires the bonnet she has been making. Although the clock on the wall reads three-thirty there is no sense of exhaustion, confinement or hopelessness.

Given the wide array of laborers in industrial England at mid century (and the range of workers investigated by the Second Report), one would hardly have expected seamstresses to have been the focus of such concern. Yet one art historian has written that the seamstress was "by far the most popular of all the examples of social themes in Victorian painting..."<sup>8</sup> Before the decade of the 1850s was over, at least thirty images of seamstresses were created by artists as diverse as George Elgar Hicks, Anna Blunden, George Frederick Watts and George Cruikshank.<sup>9</sup> Writers as well-known as Charles Kingsley, Frederick Engels and Charles Dickens, as well as many others now obscure, would take up their pens in the 1840s in support of the plight of the suffering seamstresses.

What exactly did "needlewoman" or "seamstress" mean in the 1840s? The Second Report divided women who earned their living with the needle into two

<sup>8</sup> Teri J. Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," Victorian Studies, vol. 23 (Winter, 1980), pp. 183-210.

<sup>9</sup> See Teri J. Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of Those Oppress'd?" The Social Theme in Victorian Painting, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, p. 129, for a list of paintings of seamstresses which are untraced and unreviewed.

groups: dressmaker's apprentices (who made women's clothing to order) and shirtmakers (who made men's shirts for a ready-to-wear market).

Millinery and dressmaking constituted the higher end of female employment with the needle; they were "respectable" occupations for young women from middle-class or lower middle-class families. Milliners and dressmakers came from families who, although unable to support them, had enough money to pay a premium for them to be apprenticed to learn the trade. They worked and sometimes lived at the establishment that employed them. According to the parliamentary report, they were not completely destitute and impoverished, so much as mistreated and neglected by their employers by being forced to work extremely long hours, often without sufficient food and rest. This type of employment was part of an old established apprenticeship and workshop system (like tailoring among men), and it was one of only a few occupations open to women (those who could afford the apprenticeship fee) which offered a skill and a sense of belonging to a trade, and which promised, at least after the apprenticeship period was served, a decent living.<sup>10</sup>

Apprentices were involved in an old type of commerce -- the business of producing dresses and other articles of women's clothing made to order. Shirt-makers on the other hand, were part of a new type of business -- the production of ready-made clothing -- also called "slop." Their work was called "slop-work" and the shops that sold these ready-made garments were called "slop-shops."<sup>11</sup> The ready-made

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<sup>10</sup> See Sally Alexander for a discussion of the various types of work open to women in this period, "Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London; A Study of the Years 1820-50," in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, pp. 59-111.

<sup>11</sup> According to Barbara Taylor slop-work originated in the period following the Napoleonic Wars when "government contracts for cheap army and navy clothing had stimulated the development of a system of large wholesale "warehouses from which fabric was given out to small masters or unemployed journeymen who in turn employed other workers, often women, in their homes or in sweatshops." See Barbara

clothing industry catered primarily to men's and boy's wear.<sup>12</sup> In most seamstress literature, women sewed men's shirts, although they also sewed men's trousers and waistcoats and women's shawls and embroidery.<sup>13</sup>

Slop-workers could be from the working class, or they could be fallen gentility.<sup>14</sup> Some were young, unmarried women, others were older, and many were

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Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> See James A. Schmiechen, Sweated Industries and Sweated Labor: The London Clothing Trades 1860-1914, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984, p. 13 for a table of the growth of ready-to-wear clothing outlets between 1880 and 1914. This information post-dates the period we are discussing, but nonetheless gives an indication of the industry's emphasis on men's and boy's wear. For example, in 1885, there were 119 outlets for ready-to-wear clothing for men and boys, but only 20 for women and girl's wear.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Miss Camilla Toulmin, "The Shawl Buyer, An Incident of 1843," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 217-221.

<sup>14</sup> For young women from the middle and upper classes with no money to pay a premium to become an apprentice, slop-work, with its miserably low wages, could be preferable to domestic service because it allowed them to remain independent. For older women, apprenticeship was probably not even an option. In a seamstress story from 1844, a poor orphaned sixteen year old girl whose family had once been surrounded with "life's luxuries" must decide what to do to earn a living. A friend of the family suggests that she go into domestic service, because it would be easier than trying to make a living sewing slop. But the young girl flushes at the thought of domestic service and states, "I would fain try some employment, the emoluments of which will more depend upon my own industry and application." J.M. Rymer, The White Slave. A Romance for the Nineteenth Century, London: E. Lloyd, 1844, p. 35. For women from the middle and upper classes women who had the necessary education, being a governess was another option. In another seamstress story, a sixteen year old orphaned girl (who, it turns out, is a "lady" by birth) must earn a living, and is advised by the curate that being a housemaid was preferable to being a governess. Teaching, he says, is "hard work...hard and miserable. A housemaid is happier, more independent, and -- better paid. A governess is perpetually exposed to circumstances which are torture to the soul of a high-minded woman..." This young girl ends up as a dressmaker's apprentice in London. Mrs. Stone, The Young Milliner, London: Cunningham and Mortimer, 1843, p. 6. See also my discussion on the employment options for women in chapter 4, p. 112.

widowed with children and other relatives to support. According to the Second Report they were paid starvation wages by employers and middlemen who were anxious to exploit their labor and make a large profit. They were far more likely than milliner's and dressmaker's apprentices to have absolutely no other options but the workhouse.

Given the wide variety of types of needlework and the vast amount of literature on seamstresses produced in this period, it seems remarkable at first that virtually every source one consults tells the same fairy-tale-like story: a story in which a happy, healthy and virtuous young woman from the countryside leaves her home to become a seamstress in the big city where she encounters an evil employer and/or seducer, and begins an irreversible decline leading to death and/or prostitution. The details of this often-repeated story, and the way that the subject gathered momentum after the publication of the Second Report in 1843 are the subject of the first two chapters of this dissertation.

The sense of urgency evident in the constant repetition of the narrative of the seamstress's decline, as well as its use of one dimensional characters and a melodramatic plot, suggests that it performed important ideological work: to secure definitions of "femininity" which had become increasingly unstable. The enormous changes in the clothing industry in the late 1830s and early 1840s (from male, unionized tailors making clothes to order, to women sewing clothing for a mass market), and the accompanying anxiety around these changes accounts, in part, for the attention given the seamstress in these years. These changes are the subject of chapter 3. Chapter 4 examines the growth of feminism during these years, and the ways that sewing and work figured in those discourses.

The narrative of the seamstress's decline also worked to provide solutions to the grave problems which faced England in the 1840s. The way that the figure of the seamstress figured into fears of working-class unrest is the subject of chapter 5.

The next two chapters explore the way in which the figure of the seamstress was used to envision the problems of the 1840s in a way which was both unthreatening and workable. Chapter 6 looks at the way that the seamstress was uniquely able to bridge the dangerous gap that seemed to separate the rich and the poor; and chapter 7 examines the way that women were exclusively held responsible for the seamstress's suffering (and not politicians, or entrepreneurs).

Chapter 8 investigates the re-emergence of the seamstress as a central working-class figure between 1848 and 1851 (after a brief retreat from the public eye) due to the cholera epidemic, a resurgence of working-class unrest, and the journalistic talents of Henry Mayhew.

### Richard Redgrave

Perhaps the most popular and well known portrayal of a seamstress was Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt," published in Punch in December of 1843. Hood's poem, about an overworked and overpaid seamstress, was widely quoted, parodied, and even set to music. Its repeated mournful refrains, "Stitch, stitch, stitch" and "Work, work, work," permanently engraved the image of the lone, toiling seamstress into the memory of many Victorians.

Richard Redgrave, probably inspired by the huge success of Hood's poem, and by the overwhelming public interest in needlewomen in late 1843 and 1844, exhibited The Sempstress (fig. 3) at the Royal Academy exhibition in the Spring of 1844. Although (as we have seen) a small number of black and white illustrations of seamstresses (accompanying articles and essays) had preceded Redgrave's depiction of the subject, The Sempstress was the first treatment of the theme in the form of a large scale easel painting. Moreover, Redgrave dramatized the seamstresses' utter

helplessness and destitution so effectively that his painting served as the prototype (iconographically and compositionally) for almost all later Victorian images of the subject.

Redgrave's painting depicts a single figure seated in a garret by a window. She appears to be sewing a shirt, like the woman in Hood's poem. The viewer can see that she is forced to work very long hours by the darkness outside the window, the low-burning candle, and the clock on the wall to the right. The garret and sparse furnishings indicate her extreme poverty, and the fact that she is paid very low wages for long hours of work. Several medicine vials on the shelf beside her reveal that she is ill. Like the dying plant on the windowsill, the seamstress has been forced to leave her "natural" home.<sup>15</sup> With the Second Report and several early examples of seamstress fiction in mind, it is possible that the seamstress in Redgrave's painting, who seems to be making a plea to God to save her, may be, in a familiar Victorian dilemma for women, "on the brink," pleading to God for an escape from the only two fates that most seamstress stories allowed: death or prostitution.

Like the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission which "exposed" the plight of the seamstress, Redgrave's painting (and later seamstress images) allowed the viewer to see something which was hidden from the public gaze: a working-class woman alone in her private chambers. It is likely that this "exposing" --

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<sup>15</sup> For iconographic readings of this painting and many others in this dissertation, I am indebted to the work of Susan Casteras, particularly her book Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987.

especially because it crossed class lines, and working-class women were seen to be more sexually available -- had an erotic component.<sup>16</sup>

Redgrave's painting is one of the earliest examples of a new type of painting which began to appear at the Royal Academy in the 1840s. These paintings have been characterized in a recent exhibition catalogue as part of a social realist strain in Victorian painting.<sup>17</sup> Some of these "social realist" paintings depict very specific social injustices which were being discussed in the press and by the public, while others depict more generalized scenes of poverty and hardship. The subject of Redgrave's painting was extremely topical and specific. Given its relationship to a particular historical problem, Redgrave's painting fell outside the parameter of subjects deemed suitable for painting by the founders of the Royal Academy. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, felt that great art had to have universal meaning and should not be tied to a specific era,

on the whole, it seems to me that there is but one presiding principle which regulates and gives stability to every art. The works, whether of poets, painters, moralists, or historians, which are built upon general nature, live forever; while those which depend for their existence on particular customs and habits...or the fluctuation of fashion, can only be coeval with that which first raised them from obscurity. Present time and future may be considered as

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on upper-class voyeurism of working-class women, see the literature on Arthur Munby, including Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England," in Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan, and Judith R. Walkowitz, eds., Sex and Class in Women's History, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, pp. 17-71 and Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life, Boston: David R. Godine, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Julian Treuherz, Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art, London: Lund Humphries, 1987, p. 12. This is a companion volume to an exhibition held at the Manchester City Art Gallery, Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam, and the Yale Center for British Art, 1987-88.

rivals, and he who solicits the one must expect to be discountenanced by the other.<sup>18</sup>

An early example of this new type of painting which treated a current "social problem" is C.W. Cope's Poor Law Guardians -- Board Day -- Application for Bread (fig. 4) which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1841, three years before Redgrave's The Sempstress. The painting depicts a widow and her children applying for outdoor poor relief from the parish. The widow is trying to avoid one of the central provisions of the New Poor Law of 1834, the elimination of outdoor relief in favor of residence in the workhouse. One of the most inhumane aspects of the law was held to be the separation of mothers from their children in the workhouse. The mother in Cope's painting is pleading desperately for some ("outdoor") aid which would enable her to stay with her children and avoid the stigma of the workhouse. Poor Law Guardians thus illustrates the abuses of existing legislation regarding the poor, legislation which had been vigorously attacked since its passage into law in 1834, and which was widely discussed again in 1841-2 while Parliament debated the Poor Law Continuance Bill.

Both The Sempstress and Poor Law Guardians treat subjects which had already gained considerable public sympathy by the time of their exhibition, and so would have been guaranteed a certain amount of popular success, and both refer to legislation currently being debated in parliament. Cope's painting is an important prototype for Redgrave's The Sempstress, since, as we will see, it was claimed that women would do anything -- including attempting to survive on the pittance earned by slop-work, or even breaking the law -- just to avoid the workhouse.

### The State of the Literature

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<sup>18</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses on Art, Robert W. Wark, ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959, p. 58.

The vast majority of the work that has been done to date on seamstress images has been iconographic. That is, it is involved in two related endeavors: decoding the easily missed meanings hidden in the details of the images and classifying different "types" of seamstress images. The figure of the seamstress makes an appearance in far more than the paintings of the period, however. She surfaces in a number of very different (and often surprising) contexts in the period between 1843 and 1851. These contexts are important for several reasons. First, they help to explain the overwhelming popularity of the subject of the seamstress within very specific time frames: the period between 1843 and 1845, and between 1848 and 1851. They also provide some insight to the kind of issues that the Victorians of the early 1840s brought to the images. Last, but not least, they give us a sense of the ideological work that these images performed.

Significant contributions have been made by three scholars in particular to our understanding of Victorian paintings of women. Linda Nochlin wrote the ground breaking article on the subject in 1978 entitled, "Lost and Found, Once More the Fallen Woman."<sup>19</sup> Nochlin's article provides the closest methodological model for this dissertation. Although Nochlin did not write about seamstress paintings specifically, in "Lost and Found..." she situated Victorian paintings of "fallen women" within ideological notions of the "natural" space for women: home and family. Nochlin's argument, that within images of the fallen woman was the "implicit loss of domestic happiness, the irrevocable exclusion from the joys of family,"<sup>20</sup> is an important one for this dissertation, since the same specter of exclusion from the familial home (either the

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Lost and Found, Once More the Fallen Woman," is reprinted in *Feminism in Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., New York: Harper & Row, 1982, pp. 221-45.

<sup>20</sup> Nochlin, p. 228.

father's or the husband's) informs paintings of seamstresses and other women forced to enter the public sphere and earn their own living.

Susan Casteras, the leading American scholar in the field of Victorian images of women, has written two books which have been central for this dissertation: Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art,<sup>21</sup> and an older exhibition catalogue, The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood.<sup>22</sup> She also contributed two essays to an exhibition catalogue on Richard Redgrave.<sup>23</sup> Casteras was the first art historian to focus exclusively on paintings of women in the Victorian era. Her approach combines feminism with social history and iconography. Casteras performed the important work of mapping out the different stereotypes of women which appear in Victorian paintings, and effectively placed these paintings against a historical background of social and legal restrictions on women. Casteras has provided thorough and invaluable iconographic readings of these images, reconstructing for the modern viewer symbols which were easily read by the Victorian public, but are largely lost to us today.

Lynda Nead has written a book focusing on images of the prostitute in Victorian painting, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain,<sup>24</sup> and several articles on women in Victorian painting. Most relevant for this dissertation are "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen

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<sup>21</sup> Susan P. Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Susan P. Casteras, The Substance and the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982.

<sup>23</sup> Susan P. Casteras and Ronald Parkinson, eds., Richard Redgrave, 1804-1888, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

<sup>24</sup> Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain, London: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," and "Seduction, Prostitution, Suicide: On the Brink by Alfred Elmore."<sup>25</sup> Nead's work is important to the arguments and methodology presented here in a number of ways. In Myths of Sexuality, Nead argues that the "fallen woman's" typical decline in Victorian painting and literature, from seduction to prostitution to suicide, was neither the real and necessary fate of women who were sexually active outside of the bounds of marriage, nor a simple "exaggeration" of the reality of women's lives. Rather, borrowing from Barthes, Nead views the narratives on prostitution in mid-Victorian England as constructing a "myth" of the prostitute which "participated in the definition of sexual behavior and 'respectability.'"<sup>26</sup> The myth also worked to inform "its bourgeois consumers that its moral codes were universal and that deviation from these codes inevitably resulted in decline and death."<sup>27</sup> Nead relates Augustus Egg's famous triptych on adultery, Past and Present, to a general moral panic regarding sexual deviancy brought on by anxieties concerning the decline of the British empire. These insights are all important for this dissertation, since a similar narrative of decline existed in seamstress narratives, promising prostitution or death to women who worked outside the home.

Two scholars have written dissertations which include sections on the seamstress. Lindsay Errington's Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840-1860, included one chapter on seamstresses, governesses and prostitutes. The wide scope of this dissertation prevented an in-depth analysis of images of seamstresses.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lynda Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," The Oxford Art Journal, vol. 7 (January 1984), pp. 26-37 and also by Nead, "Seduction, Prostitution, Suicide: On the Brink by Alfred Elmore," Art History, 5 (September 1982), pp. 308-322.

<sup>26</sup> Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times..." p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsay Errington, Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840-1860, New York: Garland Publishing, 1984.

Teri Edelstein's dissertation concentrates on social themes in Victorian painting and includes separate chapters on the four most prevalent modern life subjects in Victorian painting: the seamstress, the governess, the prostitute and the topic of emigration. She has also published an article focusing exclusively on the seamstress entitled, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': the Visual Iconology of the Seamstress."<sup>29</sup> Edelstein's approach is strictly iconographic and formal however, and not historical or feminist.

This dissertation is both a response to, and a continuation of the work of these scholars, built from a desire to further contextualize seamstress images from the historical, feminist and iconographic perspectives that they have already introduced into the study of Victorian images of women.

Many scholars, including those discussed above, have recognized that during the Victorian era maintenance of order within the nation at large was seen to be dependent on the maintenance of paternal power within the home. Nochlin argued that the focus on the "fallen woman" in mid-Victorian England pointed to "the sinister threat that woman's unregulated sexual activity was felt to offer the bulwark of Victorian paternal authoritarianism -- the home."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Nead wrote that "the ideal of the stable family home was central to middle-class culture. Family and sexual order were metaphors for social order: breakdown in the family structure was understood in terms of total social disintegration."<sup>31</sup>

The connection that I posit in this dissertation, between a fear of working-class unrest and a desire to return women's work to the home, was suggested, although not

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<sup>29</sup> Teri J. Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of Those Oppress'd?" The Social Theme in Victorian Painting, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979 and "The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconology of the Seamstress," Victorian Studies, 23 (Winter 1980), pp. 183-210.

<sup>30</sup> Nochlin, p. 230.

<sup>31</sup> Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times..." p. 27.

pursued, by Edelstein. In her introduction, she notes that part of the reforming spirit evident in such paintings as Redgrave's The Sempstress "was a need to placate, to avert the threat of Chartism...or the more generalized specter of the lower classes. There was a strong dose of self-interest intermingled with the interventionist spirit."<sup>32</sup>

Other scholars have disagreed with this connection. In an exhibition catalogue entitled Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art, Julian Treuherz writes that "there is no simple causal relationship between the urgency or intensity of social problems and their expression in art. Chartism, for example, found no immediate expression in painting." Treuherz goes on to say that "as a rule, violent occurrences, political events or reformist campaigns did not cause works of art to be painted."<sup>33</sup> While he is certainly correct in stating that the relationship was not simple and causal, the relationship did nonetheless exist. Chartism may have found no direct expression in art, i.e. there is only one image I am aware of which explicitly deals with the subject (Frederick Sandys, The Old Chartist, published in Once a Week in 1862, long after the movement had effectively ceased to exist).<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, Chartism and other contemporary issues did surface in the paintings of the period in a more indirect manner.

### Methodological Problems

Many historians and art historians have ignored the ideological nature and function of the seamstress narrative, and have been content to describe some sources

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<sup>32</sup> Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of those Oppress'd"...., p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Treuherz, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> See Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of those Oppress'd"...., fig. 9 for a reproduction of this image.

(i.e. the fiction) as exaggerations, while describing others (i.e. the parliamentary report and newspaper articles) as accurate and reflective of the reality of seamstresses' lives. The temptation to elide the ideological nature of all the sources is in part produced by the narratives themselves. They make claims on the real through their constant repetition across a variety of discourses, through their reliance on first person accounts, and through the testimony of sincerity on the part of the authors. Gertrude Himmelfarb has convincingly argued that the same "fantasy" which informed the fiction also saturated accounts which are supposedly more objective, such as parliamentary reports:

If the novels had only a tangential, fantasized relationship to the reality, the fantasy itself permeated the reality, shaping the ideas, opinions, attitudes, and behaviour of the readers, no less, perhaps than the commission reports, newspaper accounts, tracts, broadsheets, which were also, to one degree or another, removed from reality. If the novel cannot be taken as historical evidence tout court, neither can these sources; it might even be salutary if all sources were seen as, in some sense and in some measure, fictional, to be used warily, skeptically, critically, but also appreciatively.<sup>35</sup>

Art historians have recognized that the images have a problematic relationship to "reality." Edelstein has correctly pointed out that the paintings should not be understood as "merely illustrations of social conditions and the Victorian's concern for those depicted,"<sup>36</sup> clearly aware that the paintings do not present an unbiased and factual account of the condition of the seamstress. She further warned that "in using these works as social documents we must remain aware that they create their own reality...an artistic reality."<sup>37</sup> And Casteras has written that Redgrave's paintings serve

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<sup>35</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty. England in the Early Industrial Age, New York: Vintage Books, 1983, p. 405.

<sup>36</sup> Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of Those Oppress'd?"..., p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Edelstein, "But Who Shall Paint the Grief of Those Oppress'd?"..., p. 8.

as "poignant but melodramatic reconstructions or manipulations of reality."<sup>38</sup> But neither author has asked whose (and what) interests these reconstructions serve.

The tendency to read some of the primary sources, including the paintings and illustrations, as truthful and factual accounts of the reality of these women's lives has a long history in the writing on Victorian women, going as far back as Wanda Neff's Victorian Working Women, published in 1929. More recently, Lynn M. Alexander, in a dissertation on the seamstress in Victorian fiction, naively accepts the parliamentary report as truthful and unmediated. Alexander writes that "much of the fictional presentation of the seamstress was based upon known facts."<sup>39</sup>

Christina Walkley's The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress<sup>40</sup> poses an even more serious problem. She indiscriminately culls the fiction of Mrs. Gaskell, Charles Kingsley and others, in addition to parliamentary reports and articles in periodicals, to determine the actual conditions of work, hours of labor, and living condition of seamstresses in nineteenth century London. Walkley writes in her introduction that the authors of the various parliamentary reports on needlewomen in the nineteenth century "were unbiased, they had no wish to be accused of sensationalism, and if they erred at all it was probably on the side of caution...."<sup>41</sup> And regarding Henry Mayhew's highly sensationalistic letters on

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<sup>38</sup> Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood..., p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> Lynn M. Alexander, The Forgotten Icon: The Seamstress in Victorian Fiction, University of Tulsa, 1986, p. 12. See also a more recent article by Alexander "Following the Thread: Dickens and the Seamstress," in The Victorian Newsletter, no. 80 (Fall 1991), pp. 1-7. In the article, Alexander argues that certain stereotypes of the seamstress which appeared in the early fiction of Dickens are replaced by a more "true" representation in Dickens's work after the publication of the parliamentary report on needlewomen in 1843.

<sup>40</sup> Christina Walkley, The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress, London: Peter Owen, 1981.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

needlewomen for The Morning Chronicle, published in 1849, she writes "there seems little reason to doubt that his descriptions of seamstresses...were plain unvarnished truth. They accord too well with other accounts to be otherwise."<sup>42</sup>

Responding to the problems raised in Walkley's book, Deborah Cherry wrote a short but important article, "Surveying Seamstresses," published in Feminist Art News. Cherry takes issue with Walkley's belief in the transparent nature of the sources on the seamstress, and warns that "to accept these writings on their own estimates of their activities and functions is to neglect their active work in the production and securing of social meanings."<sup>43</sup> Like Nead on the prostitute, Cherry understands the category "seamstress" as a discursive construction, one which was "actively productive of definitions of the middle class" and "definitions of femininity and female sexuality."<sup>44</sup>

Concurring with Cherry, I would argue that all of the literature on the seamstress should be seen as active and ideological and not reflective and objective in nature. Terry Eagleton has described ideological discourse as "true at one level but not at another: true in its empirical content but deceptive in its force; or true in its surface meaning but false in its underlying assumptions."<sup>45</sup> If we want to apply this to seamstress literature, we can say that it is undoubtedly true that seamstresses were underpaid and overworked, that many were forced to turn to prostitution, and that their employers were often heedless of their misery. But the assessment of the problem -- that it was the fault of vain and selfish women, or Jewish capitalists, or a lack of sympathy between the rich and the poor, or an erosion of the working-class family -- is where we can locate the ideological work that the seamstress myth

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Cherry, "Surveying Seamstresses," Feminist Art News, no. 9 (1983), p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Terry Eagleton, Ideology: An Introduction, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 16-17.

performed. The "facts" became weapons, and when that happened, they were distorted. In other words, the facts and statistics were found to be useful tools in other battles: to retain a patriarchal order within the home and within the nation at large.

The ideological workings of the myth of the seamstress entailed a number of different strategies. In some areas the atypical was systematically misrepresented as the typical. The narrative of the seamstress, which leads by necessity to death and/or prostitution, was not the only narrative on seamstresses that was produced during this period, but it was by far the dominant one. In the 1840s at least, this narrative seems to have become almost inescapable. Within the parliamentary report, approximately half of the statements from witnesses were favorable. Yet Mrs. Stone, Charlotte Tonna, and others wrote only about the darker side of the evidence offered in the report, and ignored the evidence of some witnesses that they worked at "well conducted" establishments where their hours of work were regulated and the conditions of their work were comfortable. We need to ask why an idea of the seamstress who died from overwork or prostituted herself became the "typical" seamstress, whose experience stood for all seamstresses. In this sense, ideology can be said to have constructed a "false typical."

Another strategy involved the acceptance as natural and true certain ideas which today seem clearly false. For example, the idea that poor women who walk the streets of the city unchaperoned would be seduced by beguiling men, or that the employers of needlewomen were all heartless and evil and Jewish, or that the consequences of a woman leaving the home to work were drunken husbands and disobedient children, or that an unmarried woman who had sex with one man was certain to fall into an abyss of degradation, involving full scale prostitution, crime, and drink -- these were all accepted as truth within seamstress narratives.

Ideological discourse can also be understood to be "action guiding," that is, designed to prescribe solutions that fit its analysis of the problem. One of the things that was so remarkable about the seamstress myth was that it could be used to propose so many different solutions, and so many different ways of analyzing the problem of the distress of the 1840s. The seamstress could demonstrate the necessity of women's work remaining within the home for national security (chapter 5), she could promote sympathy between the upper classes and the working class (chapter 6), or she could conveniently point the finger at women for the problems of the 1840s (chapter 7).

Since the seamstress narrative existed to perform specific ideological functions, following Nead, we can substitute the term "myth," as defined by Barthes in Mythologies. In a chapter in that book entitled "Myth Today," Barthes defined myth as "depoliticized speech," and proposed a semiological model of myth as a double system, one in which a greater signifying system exists beyond the first signifier and signified.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, the image of a poor, overworked seamstress in ill-health becomes the first term in a second system which signifies something else, something which is at once visible and invisible. History has obscured the mythic aspects of seamstress paintings and accepted them on their first level of signification.

We would be dealing only with the first level of meaning if we did not go beyond Redgrave's own claim for his painting, that it "aimed at calling attention to the trials and struggles of the poor and oppressed."<sup>47</sup> Redgrave's words have tempted art

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, Mythologies, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, pp. 109-159.

<sup>47</sup> "Autobiography of Richard Redgrave, ARA," Art Journal (February 1849), p. 49.

historians to ask: was he successful? Did the painting inspire charity or other efforts toward reform? The consensus seems to be that they did not. But I would argue that this is the wrong question to ask of these images. It simply does not matter whether the painting "worked" in the way Redgrave says he wanted it to, since representations of the seamstress were really addressing much larger concerns about power within and outside of the home.

The significant work to be done is not in the area of measuring various sources against an approximate reality and deciding which is more accurate, but in looking at the (mis)representations themselves as actively formed and to determine what (and whose) interests they serve.

## Chapter One

### "ALONE, UNPITIED, FORLORN AND SPIRITLESS": THE MYTH OF THE SEAMSTRESS

One of the truly extraordinary features of the subject of the distressed seamstress is the relentless and monolithic character of the narrative that was employed to describe her life and trials. Sources as different as newspaper articles and sensationalistic short stories recount what is essentially the same melodramatic story. What follows is the bare bones of this narrative -- gleaned as much as possible from sources produced between 1843 and 1845.

Many artists and writers were moved to give a more dramatic form to the raw data on seamstresses contained in the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. They obviously hoped that their story or image would raise public consciousness about the suffering of the working class generally (not just seamstresses) in a way that no government report could accomplish. In the preface to a seamstress tale entitled The White Slave. A Romance for the Nineteenth Century, J.M. Rymer writes that

if the history of Millicent Manning [the seamstress in his story] will add but one drop to that tide of public opinion which is gradually, but irresistibly accumulating in favour of the poor and oppressed, the author will indeed feel that he has accomplished the highest object he could have proposed.<sup>1</sup>

And Richard Redgrave said his painting The Sempstress was "aimed at calling attention to the trials and struggles of the poor and oppressed."<sup>2</sup>

In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary for authors to demonstrate that, although the particulars of their stories were invented, the essential facts were all too

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Rymer, The White Slave. A Romance for the Nineteenth Century, London: E. Lloyd, 1844, p. iii.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Great Victorian Pictures: Their Paths to Fame, Arts Council Exhibition catalogue, London, 1978, p. 71.

true. Charlotte Tonna actually quoted the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission verbatim to verify the authenticity of her work, and Mrs. Stone, in The Young Milliner, claimed that she drew her information from "private authentic sources," but added that "her statements are fully borne out by parliamentary documents which have been published since her story was written."<sup>3</sup>

To arouse sympathy and inspire reform, seamstress fiction often employed the formula of melodrama, or to be more specific, "protest melodrama," a genre written "to stimulate political awareness, question established values, expose injustice, champion reform."<sup>4</sup> In protest melodrama, authors "set up a blameless hero as the victim of the system, and then subject him to such inhuman persecution that the audience explodes with indignation and demands the immediate repeal of laws which perpetuate such cruelties."<sup>5</sup>

The authors of seamstress tales had a heroine who was indeed blameless, but the seamstress was more than that -- she had the added advantages of being both profoundly sympathetic and particularly vulnerable. In the course of the narrative the

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<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Stone, The Young Milliner, London: Cunningham and Mortimer, 1843, introduction. Stone probably derived at least some material from an earlier parliamentary report, Erwin Chadwick's Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain, published in 1842 (reprinted with an introduction by M.W. Flinn, Edinburgh University Press, 1964). This report included a few paragraphs on the "defective ventilation and overcrowding" and the "deterioration of the air by the use of candles or gas lamps" in rooms in which milliners and dressmakers worked, and included a table on the number of deaths reported among needlewomen from consumption and other lung diseases.

<sup>4</sup> James L. Smith, Melodrama, London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973, p. 72. On melodrama in Victorian literature see also Christina Crosby, The Ends of History. Victorians and the 'Woman Question.' New York: Routledge, 1991, esp. chapter 3, "History and the Melodramatix Fix."

<sup>5</sup> Smith, p. 74.

seamstress loses everything: her home, her family and friends, her virtue, and often her very life. One author claimed that milliner's assistants "possess sufficient influence to awaken the active sympathies of every friend of humanity, virtue and justice in the universe."<sup>6</sup> And the ability to arouse sympathy, we will see, was an enormously important quality.

The seamstress, whether a dress-maker or slop-worker, was usually a young woman (as young as fourteen) who was forced, due to the death or sudden impoverishment of her parents, to earn her own living. Often, the young girl is from an impoverished middle class or upper class family and is offended by the thought of going into domestic service. Instead, she chooses the seemingly more genteel profession of needlework. Unaware of the hardships of her chosen occupation, she leaves her home in the country for the big city. Although sewing appeared to be work suited for women from more refined backgrounds, the unsuspecting young woman soon learns that she has in fact adopted one of the most dangerous of all vocations. "There are no occupations," the author of the Second Report's section on needlewomen claimed, "in which so much disease is produced as in dressmaking, or which present so fearful a catalogue of distressing and frequently fatal maladies."<sup>7</sup> Apparently the young woman would have been better off in a factory or mine!

In seamstress fiction, the countryside is associated with childhood innocence, physical health, and the protection of familial love. The binary opposition between city and country in seamstress fiction signals the seamstress's status away from home as vulnerable, and "unprotected." The city is what home is not; it is the locus of the "unnatural," of isolation, illness and vice, it seemed to be a place which followed the

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<sup>6</sup> "Female Slavery," The Weekly Dispatch, April 14, 1839, p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> House of Commons, Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, Sessional Papers XIV (1843), p. 559.

laws of capitalism -- of sacrificing everything to insure increasing profits -- instead of the laws of God.<sup>8</sup>

In Tonna's story, The Wrongs of Woman, two sisters leave for London to learn the dressmaking trade, and the narrator foresees their homesickness and vulnerability, "a morning scene, uncheered by the tones of a busy mother's voice...an evening's length, in which the father's loving look would never shine...the blessing and the kiss, the careful thought for all their comforts...these things would be missed indeed..."<sup>9</sup> "To speak of home!" wrote Ralph Barnes Grinrod, in a pamphlet entitled The Slaves of the Needle, "alas, she remembers but too keenly that she once enjoyed the pleasures of home; but now the contrast is too painful for her to contemplate."<sup>10</sup>

From this sheltered background, the young woman was ill-prepared for the dangers that awaited her,

But lately participating in the joys of a happy home -- the beloved and tender object of maternal care -- the seed of virtue and knowledge carefully implanted in her juvenile mind -- with the inexperience but implicit confidence of youth -- and utterly inadequate to contend with the snares of vice -- she is removed to a scene of trial, fraught with danger and temptation.<sup>11</sup>

The city is represented as a place of anonymity -- of crowds of people with no connection to one another -- in contrast to the close family and community that the seamstress has left behind. Ellen, the main character in Mrs. Stone's The Young

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<sup>8</sup> The authoritative text on this subject is Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, New York: Dodd & Mead, 1843, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Grinrod, The Slaves of the Needle: An Exposure of the Distressed Condition, Moral and Physical, of Dress-makers, Milliners, Embroiderers, Slop-Workers, &c., London: William Brittain and Charles Gilpin, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> F.D. "The Dressmaker's Apprentices," Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany, vol. III (1844), p. 434.

Milliner leaves her home, "a decent house in a retired village,"<sup>12</sup> for London "where all the busy myriads hurrying to and fro, not one individual should be found to smile on her, where not one eye should brighten on her approach, not one step quicken to meet her, not one friendly face gleam on her."<sup>13</sup>

In May Coverly, the Young Dressmaker, the fifteen year old May leaves the countryside after the death of her father to become a dressmaker's apprentice. An illustration of May's arrival in the city at her new place of work (fig. 5) shows the slight and plainly dressed country girl in front of an elegant looking shop with plate-glass windows. Standing at the doorway of the shop are three well dressed women who turn their backs and ignore her. In the background a carriage drives down the city street revealing two men staring at May. One of the men actually cranes his neck to stare behind him, revealing just how strange and vulnerable the innocent country girl appears in her new environment.

The seamstress who longs for the happy home she has lost in the countryside (and everything that stands for) is a standard topos of the seamstress myth from the beginning. Here, for example, is a stanza from Hood's poem "The Song of the Shirt":

Oh! but to breathe the breath  
Of the cowslip and primrose sweet  
With the sky above my head,  
And the grass beneath my feet

This longing for home, for nature, often takes the form of the seamstress taking a brief respite from her work to meditate on a plant or flower which she keeps in her room. In a poem entitled, "The Sempstress to her Mignonette," the seamstress contemplates her flowering plant and nostalgically remembers her childhood:

What talks it of, my Mignonette?

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<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Stone, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Stone, p. 22.

To me it babbles still  
 Of woodland banks of primroses,  
 Of heath and breezy hill;  
 Through country lanes, and daisied fields --  
 Through paths with morning wet,  
 Again I trip as when a girl,  
 Through you my Mignonette<sup>14</sup>

George Elgar Hicks, in his painting Old Associations (fig. 6), made the plant the focus of the composition. Daylight shines through the seamstress's garret window -- perhaps it is dawn and the seamstress has just returned from picking up the work which will engage her all day and night (her bonnet is prominently placed in the bed behind her). She has temporarily put down her sewing to gaze at a pot of flowering snowdrops, the only bit of life in her otherwise miserable garret. A reviewer at the time noticed that the scene was made even more poignant by the fact that "she is without a fire, and the tops of the houses are covered with snow."<sup>15</sup> Despite the cold, and the long hours of work that await her, the seamstress seems to find comfort in thinking about her past and admiring the small plant that lives on her windowsill. In the poem quoted above, as in Hicks's painting, the plant allows the seamstress to escape for a moment from her endless hours of work,

Why do I prize my Mignonette,  
 That lights my window there?  
 It adds a pleasure to delight,  
 It steals a weight from care;  
 What happy daylight dreams it brings!  
 Can I not half forget,  
 My long - long hours of weary work,

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<sup>14</sup> W.C. Bennett, "The Sempstress to Her Mignonette," Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine, vol. 4 (1846), p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> George Elgar Hicks, Painter of Victorian Life, exhibition catalogue, Geffrye Museum, London, 1983, p. 23.

With you my Mignonette?<sup>16</sup>

An even earlier image of a seamstress daydreaming of her previous life at home in the country was painted by John Thomas Peele, and exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1846 (fig. 7).<sup>17</sup> Peele, born in England but residing in the United States, returned to England between 1841 and 1844 (he was therefore in England when the seamstress scandals were at their height). In his painting, entitled The Song of the Shirt, the seamstress has put down her work for a moment and seems lost in reverie. Daylight streams through the window (as in Hicks's later painting), the candle is put away (on top of the closet to the left), and the seamstress's bonnet hangs to the right. Perhaps because light shines into their garrets, there is a sense in both Hicks's painting and Peele's, that there is still hope, there is still the possibility of the seamstress's salvation from her suffering.

In Redgrave's The Sempstress (fig. 3), on the other hand, and in most seamstress images, there is no relief at all for the seamstress from hours and hours of

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<sup>16</sup> W.C. Bennett, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Peele appears to have painted at least three versions of this painting, perhaps an indication that the subject was popular with American viewers. The earliest version, of 1846, appears to be lost, it was engraved and reproduced in The New York Illustrated Magazine of Literature and Art to accompany a story by I. Anderson Smith entitled "The Seamstress. A Tale of New York City," in volume II, pp. 405-411. Another, signed and dated 1847, is in the collection of Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc., New York, and the last version, signed and dated 1849, is now in the Albany Institute of History and Art, New York. Peele painted a different version of the subject which he exhibited at the Royal Manchester Institution in 1854 entitled Sewing Girls (location unknown), see Edelstein, 'But Who Shall Paint the Grief of those Oppress'd?' The Social Theme in Victorian Painting, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, p. 110. I am indebted to Professor Gail Husch for her help with American appearances of the seamstress.

work. A leafless potted plant sits on the windowsill, a symbol of the seamstress's unnatural and waning life in the city. A sickly plant, taken from its natural home, was often used as metaphor for the seamstress herself, as in the following lines from a poem which appeared in The Female's Advocate in 1844,

Once Maiden thou wast fresh and fair,  
As those sweet flowers of thine  
Now, shut from sunny light and air,  
How canst thou choose but pine?<sup>18</sup>

A similar kind of longing for the past, or recognition of past innocence in the countryside can be found within the discourse of prostitution. William Holman Hunt's painting The Awakening Conscience (fig. 8) depicts a kept woman who, on hearing her lover play "Oft in the Stilly Night" on the piano is reminded of her past. She jumps up from his lap and looks toward the open window, reflected in a mirror on the back wall. A portion of the woman's body is enclosed within the reflection of trees and flowers on a beautiful sunny day. As in the seamstress myth, sunlight and nature seem to offer the "fallen" woman the possibility of redemption.

John Roddam Spencer Stanhope's painting Thoughts of the Past (fig. 9) represents a woman near a window also reflecting on her past life. Potted plants on the floor beneath the window are again a metaphor for the natural versus the unnatural, for the woman in Stanhope's painting is a prostitute. Like the seamstress in Hicks's painting, she is thinking about her "innocent" past in the countryside. The use of similar iconography in paintings of seamstresses and prostitutes reveals how far the seamstress was thought to be from her "natural" sphere.

Even a brief rest -- to contemplate a plant or recall a childhood memory -- was a welcome break to the extremely long hours that both slop-workers and dress-maker's apprentices worked. According to the Second Report, during the busy seasons

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<sup>18</sup> "Milliners and Dressmakers," The Female's Advocate, November 1844, p. 127.

apprentices were required to work 18 hours a day, and often longer. In Mrs. Stone's The Young Milliner, Ellen stays up all night sewing three nights in a week, and works 18-20 hours the other days.<sup>19</sup> Grainger claimed in the Second Report that the long hours of labor were "quite unparalleled in the history of manufacturing processes" and a doctor testified that "no men work so long; it would be impossible for any animal to work so continuously with so little rest."<sup>20</sup>

The work rooms where these endless hours of work were performed were said to be small and poorly ventilated, and the rooms where the apprentices slept were no better.<sup>21</sup> These workrooms were often juxtaposed with the impressive show rooms of the shops. In Camilla Toulmin's story, two orphans arrive at the dressmakers and are awed at the "brilliantly lit showroom, and the noble entrance," but their own quarters were quite different -- a "dingy, cold, uncomfortable garret, crowded with beds."<sup>22</sup>

When May Coverly is shown to her quarters, she passes through a tiny room where more than a dozen young women sit or stand working around a crowded table. One would hardly suspect that this miserable scene was hidden behind the fancy windows and "noble entrance" of the shop front (figs. 5 and 10).

Without proper nourishment, it was simply impossible to endure such long hours of work. Yet, according to the Second Report, apprentice's meals were insubstantial, infrequent and hurried, and the slop-worker was lucky when she could

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<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Stone, pp. 33-4.

<sup>20</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 556.

<sup>21</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 557.

<sup>22</sup> Camilla Toulmin, "The Orphan Milliners," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. 2 (1845), p. 280.

buy any food at all on her wages.<sup>23</sup> In the story "The Dressmaker's Apprentices" the apprentices are fed sour, stale bread, tea-like water and are made to stand while they eat.<sup>24</sup> In one illustration of a workroom (fig. 11), the remnants of the apprentices' hastily eaten meal sit on a tray in the foreground. Each apprentice concentrates feverishly on her work, except for one on the far left, who stops and puts her head down in her hands, and another on the far right who lifts her head up and puts her hand on her brow.

Fainting was a common occurrence in the workroom according to the Second Report, due to lack of sleep, poor diet, or insufficient ventilation. One witness said she had "known two young women, one not more than sixteen, who fainted generally once or twice in the day; one of these left the house in deep decline, and witness believes she afterwards died."<sup>25</sup> Another witness, who had worked in the millinery business for ten years testified to the government investigators that she "has seen young persons in an alarming state of debility and faintness from excessive toil," and she "'should not at all have been surprised if death had happened in some of these instances."<sup>26</sup>

In the illustration for Camilla Toulmin's "The Orphan Milliner" (fig. 12), a dozen young women sew around a table, their backs hunched over their work. The

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<sup>23</sup> Actually, in the Second Report most of the witnesses gave favorable statements regarding their meals, but this did not stop Grainger from summarizing the evidence in a negative light. Only at the end of the section on "meals" does he briefly note that "in several establishments the principals are very careful in providing proper food." Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, pp. 556-557.

<sup>24</sup> F.D., "The Dressmaker's Apprentices," p. 434.

<sup>25</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 773.

<sup>26</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 775.

clock on the wall reads one-thirty and candles illuminate the otherwise dark room. Behind the seamstresses an old woman, the proprietor of the establishment or a forewoman, points a scolding finger, obviously admonishing them to work harder. Two of the seamstresses however, are obviously feeling ill and they put their heads in their hands.

An entire section of the Second Report was devoted to the "Medical Evidence on the Effects of Dressmaking," consisting of testimony by eleven doctors who had experience treating needlewomen -- and this testimony was widely quoted by the press. The doctors reported a range of illnesses including indigestion, headaches, constipation, shortness of breath, feeble pulse, problems with vision, poor circulation, and "general languor." The illness most frequently reported was consumption, which, according to some of the statements of witnesses, and much of the evidence offered by doctors, often proved fatal.

The seamstresses themselves reported suffering from various illnesses caused by working long hours in a sedentary position in an ill-ventilated and (frequently) crowded workroom. A woman in the profession testified in the Second Report that seamstresses,

very frequently come from the country and are then healthy and strong. The effects upon the health are, in the first place, lassitude and debility, with loss of appetite; pain in the back, either between the shoulders or in the loins is universal....Indigestion is very common. Pulmonary affections, such as cough and tightness in the breath are also frequent. Headache is very common.<sup>27</sup>

Tonna, who drew extensively from the parliamentary report for her seamstress tale, describes her character's health in great detail. Ann, a milliner's apprentice has pain in her side, back, chest and shoulders, and can barely speak or breathe.

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<sup>27</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 773.

Poor Girl! She breathes as though her slow progress along a level street had been a wild race to the summit of a mountain; yet no accession of colour has it brought to her wan and sunken cheek. Poor Ann! The slim, bowed figure, and the tress of thin, loose, flossy hair bear little vestige of the plump contour and bright rich curls that marked the young girl who, 12 months since, first made her appearance at the workroom of Madame A.<sup>28</sup>

The shirt-maker in Redgrave's painting The Sempstress (fig. 3) is obviously ill, she has dark circles beneath her eyes and her face is extremely pale. In case we were uncertain about the state of her health Redgrave placed some medicine bottles on the shelf to the right.

The apprentices in "The Orphan Milliners" are described as pale and thin with weak eyes, and there were not a few who suffered "distortion of the spine."<sup>29</sup> This seems to have come directly from the Second Report where Grainger wrote that "distortion of the spine, and consequent projection of one shoulder, are very common."<sup>30</sup>

Ralph Grinrod, a surgeon, published The Slaves of the Needle in 1844. This pamphlet was essentially a reprint of large sections of the parliamentary report, supplemented by Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" and medical information. Grinrod included two illustrations, "The Spine in its Natural State" where the spine is shown perfectly straight and "The Distorted Spine of the Sempstress" where the spine is grossly disfigured, the vertebrae make several wide curves, and the ribs and pelvis have spread (fig. 13).<sup>31</sup> In this case the standard seamstress image has been

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<sup>28</sup> [Tonna], p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Toulmin, p. 281.

<sup>30</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 558.

<sup>31</sup> Grinrod, The Slaves of the Needle; An Exposure of the Distressed Condition, Moral and Physical, by Dress-Makers, Milliners, Embroiderers, Slop-Workers, &c., London: William Brittain, and Charles Gilpin, 1844, p. 13.

transformed and reduced to a frightening medical diagram. The diseased female body was often a site of anxiety in seamstress imagery.

It was commonly implied that young women from the countryside were actually being used up - like so many yards of fabric - in the process of making dresses for wealthy women. "The London shopkeeper," wrote the author of the article which appeared in The Pictorial Times, "calls for her yearly supply from the provinces -- for her 'material' for the drawing room -- for fresh numbers doomed to consumption, hysteria, and loss of eyes!"<sup>32</sup>

The physicians who were interviewed for the Second Report were particularly obsessed with what dressmaking and slop-work was doing to the seamstress's ability to bear children. Doctors testified that seamstresses often suffered from "irregularity in the female functions." More specifically they claimed that "the action of the uterus is frequently permanently deranged" due to the fact that "these young persons commence this laborious occupation at the age of 14 or 16, when the great change occurs in the female constitution...."<sup>33</sup> One doctor testified in the Second Report that seamstresses "become not only unhealthy themselves, but afterwards consign debility and disease in their unfortunate offspring. It is thus that infirmities of body and mind are acquired, multiplied, transmitted from parent to progeny, and consequently, perpetuated in society."<sup>34</sup> This particularly ominous testimony was quoted by The Times in its article on the Second Report, and by Grinrod in his pamphlet, The Slaves of the Needle, and so reached a very wide public.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Slaves of the Needle," The Pictorial Times, May 20, 1843, p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 801.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 800.

<sup>35</sup> "Second Report of the Factory Commissioners," The Times, April 21, 1843, p. 5.

On top of all these hardships, writers made clear that the young women who went into needlework were often distressed gentlewomen, and therefore particularly frail and unsuited to the physical and emotional trials of poverty. Sewing was seen as a "genteel" occupation because it did not involve hard manual labor, and it allowed one to retain one's independence, unlike domestic service. It was therefore understood to appeal to women from the middle and upper classes who found themselves in need of money. A woman from the working class might find employment doing slop-work, but she would have been better off financially if she became a domestic servant, a washerwoman or a similar occupation that involved more physical work, and losing one's independence -- both of which would have been unthinkable to women from more "genteel" backgrounds.<sup>36</sup> Because of her class origins, the seamstress was seen to feel the pain of her destitution all the more acutely, since she had been raised and educated for better. One author contended that dressmaker's assistants were

peculiarly sensitive to the hardships of their lot. Their delicate frames suffer greatly, and their susceptible feelings are keenly wounded where females of more robust constitutions and less cultivated minds, would neither receive injury nor suffer annoyance.<sup>37</sup>

In The White Slave, a seamstress story published in 1844, the heroine is described as bearing "evident marks of having seen better days, and belonging to a

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<sup>36</sup> In a seamstress story from 1846, the narrator comments, "Of all the dreadful conditions in life, high or low...there is none so miserable as that of a young woman who has not been brought up to earn her bread by the work of her hands -- and that is bad enough, Heaven knows! But look at a woman who has been delicately bred, perhaps; how is she to get a living? She can't work in the fields; she isn't fit for that: she can't go as a servant; her pride chokes her when she thinks of that. What can she do, then? Earn her bread by her needle? Scanty is the fare that a poor woman can earn that way! That is the worst life of all..." Charles Rowcroft, Fanny the Little Milliner; or, The Rich and The Poor, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1846, p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> Lights and Shadows of London Life, London: Saunders and Otley, 1842, p. 186.

superior class."<sup>38</sup> Poverty, the narrator insists, is different for those who have been reduced,

the poverty of the once affluent, and the poverty of the boor poor, is very different. The first hides itself, and cannot bear the prying eye of society, and endeavors to conceal the ghastliness of its livery. The born poor, on the other hand, are used from their earliest infancy to such scenes; they never knew naught else, and the contrast between the present and the past is not felt...they have been educated to it, and suffer none of the pangs that attend a radical change in the mode of living, that must ensue when the affluent are reduced to poverty.<sup>39</sup>

Although the seamstress could be reduced from wealth to total poverty, her class never really changed and it was always visible to those around her -- in her bearing, cleanliness, neatness, beauty, and the way that she hid her poverty. The seamstress's class origins are not mentioned at all in the Second Report, yet authors and painters highlighted the seamstress's previous affluence to appeal to their middle and upper-class audiences. A working-class heroine might have suggested coarseness and vulgarity instead of the gentility, innocence and vulnerability of the upper-class seamstress.

The reviewer for the Art Union wrote that the seamstress in Redgrave's painting (fig. 3) was "not a low-born drudge to proclaim her patient endurance to the vulgar world; her suffering is read only in the shrunken cheek, and the eye feverish and dim from watching."<sup>40</sup> Redgrave's seamstress does in fact look genteel. Her thin figure, elongated form, and pale, weak appearance indicate that she is not likely to be from the working class.

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<sup>38</sup> Rymer, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> "The Royal Academy," Art Union, vol. 6 (1844), p. 158.

A painting by Abraham Solomon from the next decade entitled A Contrast (fig. 14) makes clear what was supposed to be the visible differences between the two classes, and how frailty and ill-health were the signs, so to speak, of gentility. In A Contrast, Solomon compares two working-class fisherwomen standing on the beach to a group of middle-class vacationers. Among the latter is a sickly woman in an invalid chair whose frailty and dependence on the protection of her husband is directly compared with the robust health and independence of the fisherwomen.<sup>41</sup>

In The Wrongs of Women, when Ann begins her apprenticeship for a dressmaker she mistakes the sickly state of her co-workers as a feature of urban, upper-class women. Ann "imagines that universal air of languor, that absence of healthful glow, that reed-like attenuation of figure to be the result of London polish for she has observed something of the same appearance in the high-bred quality ladies occasionally visiting at the manor house...."<sup>42</sup>

The seamstress had the allure, the refinement of a "genteel" young lady, yet she was available to the advances of men in a way that her middle-class counterparts were not.<sup>43</sup> Her frail and "unprotected" state, along with her economically precarious position meant that she was potentially seducible. Colonel Savage (a telling name)

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<sup>41</sup> See Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, pp. 30-32 for an interesting discussion of this painting, and the related issue of women's work.

<sup>42</sup> [Tonna], p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> The preoccupation with dressmaker's apprentices -- figures who were often fallen gentility -- relates to a general Victorian fascination with these women, as exemplified in the interest in the governess, who, like the dressmaker's apprentice, was seen to come from the ranks of the middle and upper-classes. See Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments. The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 and M. Jeanne Peterson, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society," in Martha Vicinus, ed., Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.

tempted Millicent, the seamstress in J.M. Rymer's The White Slave, with these words, "you may exchange your poverty for riches; your defenselessness for protection."<sup>44</sup> In May Coverly, Esther tells May that many people bother milliners in the street, "many persons, who would not dare to speak to a lady, think themselves at liberty to say anything to please a milliner with a handbox."<sup>45</sup>

E.C. Barnes painted a gentleman rather aggressively approaching a milliner on a city street (fig. 15).<sup>46</sup> The milliner is genteel enough to recognize the impropriety of speaking to a strange man. As if offended by the gentleman's approach, she gracefully turns her head away and raises her left hand to ward him off. Yet her need to work forces her onto the public streets unchaperoned, where she is exposed to the flirtations and enticements of upper-class men who would never for a moment consider actually marrying her -- thus, according to the myth, leading her into a progression which could only lead further "downward" to full-scale prostitution.

Roaming the streets left the seamstress open to the temptations of men, and the possibility of seduction. In The Wrongs of Woman, Frances, an apprentice in one of the most respectable dressmaking establishments in London, performs the services of an errand girl, walking the streets of the city unchaperoned. Her sister Ann warns their father that Frances "has been greatly exposed, by being sent out to the shops constantly and has got too much accustomed to the flattering, familiar talk of the young men in that line. The gentlemen I heard of are quite of a different rank, and

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<sup>44</sup> Rymer, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> May Coverly. The Young Dressmaker, London: The Religious Tract Society, 1860, p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> See Susan Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987, p. 139 for a thorough iconographic interpretation of this painting.

more dangerous to a girl so much off her guard."<sup>47</sup> Frances's employer callously refuses to feed her on Sundays and as a result she wanders the streets of the city hungry on the Sabbath. At first she takes refuge in a church, reminded that she "had one friend at hand still."<sup>48</sup> But Frances is treated with hostility and resentment by her employer, and eventually succumbs to "temptation,"

alas! the snares laid for young girls are as numerous as are the intended victims; and the wrongs inflicted by a heartless woman, in her pursuit of gain, exposed the unhappy Frances to the yet greater, more enduring wrong, that heartless man inflicts, in the pursuit of unlawful gratification. To trace her course into this abyss of wretchedness and guilt would answer no good purpose: suffice it to say, she fell....<sup>49</sup>

Frances is then abandoned by her "seducer," begins to drink, and is fired from her position at work. She tries to support herself by sewing shirts, but ends her life in hard labor in a prison house.

It was the duty of the seamstress's employer to act as a protector and safeguard the young worker from "danger" (i.e. to keep her virtuous). The seamstress's virginity was seen to be particularly at risk on Sunday -- the Sabbath, when she was likely to be alone and too tired to go to church. It was routinely alleged that employers were at fault, for if they thought of themselves as the "moral guardians" of the young women they employed, then they would not fail to provide meals on Sundays and to insure

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<sup>47</sup> [Tonna], pp. 83-4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

that their employees went to church. Grainger complained in the Second Report that failure to do these things was "likely to lead to the greatest moral evil."<sup>50</sup>

It was not always the streets or desperation from hunger that posed a danger to the virtue of the seamstress. The Weekly Dispatch carried a series of articles asserting that millinery establishments were in fact "houses of infamy" where the owner acted as an agent to secure innocent young girls for aristocratic men. One article told the story of the orphaned daughter of a clergyman who went to London to learn millinery and dressmaking. Before two weeks were over, she had been drugged by her employer and found herself in a brothel with an aristocratic man by her side who had "violated" her. "Overwhelmed with grief and shame," she wrote home to her "heart-broken parent an account of the mode in which she had been violated, and before the letter reached its destination she was dead."<sup>51</sup>

A periodical entitled The Female's Friend, published in 1846 under the sanction of the Associate Institution for Improving and Enforcing the Laws for the Protection of Woman (founded in 1844), an organization which seems to have existed to protect women from being entrapped into prostitution, insisted that "agents are sent into the towns and villages of the United Kingdom, whose ostensible object is to engage young

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<sup>50</sup> Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, p. 559.

<sup>51</sup> "Millinery Establishments. -- Houses of Infamy," The Weekly Dispatch, May 26, 1839, p. 248.

girls for domestic service or other female employments, but whose real design is to degrade and ruin them."<sup>52</sup>

The only image that I am aware of which makes direct reference to prostitution is John Everett Millais's drawing Virtue and Vice (fig. 16). The moment of the seamstress's temptation was written about often enough (as we will see, most explicitly after 1848), but was probably seen as too indecent to represent visually. Instead of being tempted by a man, the innocent seamstress in Millais' drawing is tempted to prostitution by what is probably a fellow needlewoman who has "fallen." In Millais' compact image the prostitute sits on the worktable of the seamstress, interfering with her work. The setting is a garret -- with the usual table by the window. The prostitute's face is in shadow and her figure is framed by the window, associating her with the dangers of the city that lie beyond the garret room. The seamstress on the other hand, seems small in comparison, her face and figure are bathed in light as she shrinks from the prostitutes' gesture. Yet she is "on the brink"<sup>53</sup> and is likely to have

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<sup>52</sup> The Female's Friend, January 1846, p. 19. A similar periodical entitled The Female's Advocate carried an article and poem on needlewomen in their November 1844 number. This journal was published under the supervision of the London Female Mission, an organization which sought to prevent prostitution by caring for young "friendless" women from the countryside who were unable to find employment. These women included seamstresses who "by slackness of trade, or change of fashion, are brought to destitution." They were seen to be "exposed to temptation" and "in circumstances of imminent peril." The Female's Advocate, vol. VII (November 1844), p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> I am referring to the title of a painting from this period by Alfred Elmore (On the Brink) of a woman who has lost all her money gambling and is "on the brink" of succumbing to the advances of a man. See Susan Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, pp. 60-61, and fig. 39.

little choice than to succumb. Indeed, in most stories, the seamstresses' only choice was to succumb to vice, or to retain her "virtue" and die. Authors often used two protagonists to demonstrate the inevitability of these two fates.

In Mrs. Stone's The Young Milliner two seamstresses, Ellen and Bessy meet the two fates of death and prostitution. Bessy becomes the mistress of a gentleman in order to keep herself and her ill mother out of the workhouse, and Ellen, who is "constitutionally delicate" and accustomed to the "pure air of the country"<sup>54</sup> falls ill and dies, learning too late that she is the cousin of a wealthy woman she has been working for. Bessy, who makes the typical Victorian fall from kept woman to prostitute, shows up at Ellen's funeral, "bloated and intoxicated...with soiled and tawdry garments,"<sup>55</sup> and must be removed by a policeman.

In "The Dressmaker's Apprentices," two protagonists again meet the two unavoidable ends of prostitution and death. If the reader had any doubts about which fate was preferable, the author makes clear that it is far better to remain virtuous and die, than to suffer the mental anguish of vice, which carries its own punishment. "May this be a lesson to those who are tempted from the path of virtue. Better it is to suffer in body than in mind -- better to live a life of innocence and suffering than a life of misery and crime."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Stone, p. 337.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>56</sup> F.D., "The Dressmaker's Apprentices," p. 434.

Part of the inhuman persecution that the seamstress is subjected to is an evil employer. For dressmaker's apprentices, the employer was almost always a woman (dressmaking was traditionally a woman's business), and for slop-workers, the employer, as we will see in the next chapter, was usually a greedy and cruel Jewish merchant.

In Mrs. Stone's The Young Milliner, Ellen's boss is so cruel that she tells her, when she is found crying about her dead mother, that her grief "will interfere with [her] usefulness."<sup>57</sup> The employer in "The Dressmaker's Apprentices" actually accepts a bribe to make Emma's life so unbearable that she will be forced to succumb to the temptations of James Macraw, who seduces her, but ultimately neglects and abandons her. Emma "tempted from the straight path of duty, must die a miserable death, or live a ruined and degraded thing."<sup>58</sup> At the end of the story Emma throws herself into the river.

It is difficult to imagine a more sympathetic heroine or one who loses more in the course of a story than the poor seamstress. She begins the narrative at home in the countryside surrounded by loving friends and family. When economic necessity forces her to find an occupation, she finds herself alone in the morally polluted atmosphere of the city, grossly overworked and underfed by a cruel and indifferent employer. From there, the downward progression of the seamstress was nearly irreversible: she would be driven to either prostitution and drink or illness and death.

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<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Stone, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> F.D., "The Dressmaker's Apprentices," p. 434.

This melodramatic narrative of the life of the seamstress, though based on an "objective" government report, was serving (as we will see) several important functions. The myth was created to deal with several sources of anxiety -- women entering the workforce, women replacing men in the tailoring trade and the workforce in general, and working-class unrest in 1842-43 and 1848. It was also used to pinpoint the supposed causes of the anxiety (Jews and women), and to provide solutions to it (to bring the rich and poor together, or to return women to their "natural" sphere). The fact that the myth of the seamstress was extraordinarily versatile accounts for its pervasiveness in the decade of the 1840s.

## Chapter Two

### SLAVES OF THE NEEDLE!

The Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, with its disturbing revelations about the condition of needlewomen, had been available to the public since the Spring of 1843.<sup>1</sup> Although the Report had generated a bit of interest in the press at that point, it was not until October of 1843 that a widespread hysteria focused around the figure of the seamstress took hold. Much of this hysteria can be traced to a report in The Times about a needlewoman named Biddell who had illegally pawned the clothing she was given to sew because she and her child were starving (she could not afford to live on the wages she earned).<sup>2</sup> From this rather simple and straightforward story, Biddell became the symbol of how poor, helpless English women were being cruelly exploited by unfeeling and (significantly) Jewish merchants (Mr. Moses, Biddell's employer came to stand for all slop-sellers).

Biddell's story was only the first of its kind. Two months later, in December 1843, another scandal erupted when The Times reported the sensationalistic story of Mary Furley, a shirtmaker who had tried to kill herself and her child.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, in the Spring of 1844, they published the shocking testimony of a woman named Ann Benson who claimed that she was paid a farthing for every shirt she sewed while in the workhouse -- a rate of remuneration so low that it was undeniably criminal.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By the spring/summer of 1843 the public could have known the information supplied in the Second Report through Blue Books, excerpts reprinted in newspapers, and, in the case of seamstresses, a separate volume of excerpts from the second report, chosen by Lord Ashley, published sometime in early 1843. Although I have not seen this publication, its existence is confirmed in "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. I (May to October 1843), pp. 97-100.

<sup>2</sup> [no title], The Times, October 26, 1843, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> "Central Criminal Court," The Times, April 17th, 1844, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> "Making Shirts for a Farthing Each," The Times, December 26th, 1843, p. 7.

Together, these three cases shaped public opinion on the condition of all needlewomen in London. It is not surprising that "then, as always, it was not the statistical averages and aggregates that shaped public opinion, but individual cases and dramatic, often atypical examples."<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I will develop a chronology of the articles on seamstresses which appeared in The Times and a number of other papers in 1843 and 1844 in order to illustrate how a handful of shocking stories generated a kind of moral panic which scapegoated Jews as the evil oppressors of Christian womanhood. This chapter will also examine how seamstress images (both paintings and illustrations) fit into the chronology of articles and literature on the subject.

When the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission was first published it received a handful of reviews in the press. On March 18, Mrs. Jameson, because of her interest in the subject of women and work, published an anonymous article reviewing the report.<sup>6</sup> One month after Mrs. Jameson's article, The Times published a long review of the Second Report (quoting it at length), focusing on the section of the report on seamstresses and urging the government to consider legislation. They argued that "there is another branch of trade, employing many youthful hands, which demands the benevolent supervision of the Legislature quite as much as those branches to which it is now going to be extended" -- the milliners and dressmaker's apprentices.<sup>7</sup> The Times had already demonstrated its interest in the

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<sup>5</sup> Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty. England in the Early Industrial Age, New York: Vintage Books, 1983, p. 518.

<sup>6</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], "Condition of the Women and the Female Children," The Athenaeum, March 18, 1843 (vol. 116), pp. 257-9.

<sup>7</sup> At just this time Parliament was considering legislation which would shorten the working day for all factory workers (heretofore legislation had only protected women and children). "Second Report of the Factory Commissioners," The Times, April 21, 1843, p. 5.

subject when, on March 23rd, they had published a letter from a milliner which contended that "if it was really known what some poor young girls suffer, there would or ought to have been a law for us to leave off earlier."<sup>8</sup>

In May of 1843 the first image of a seamstress created since the revelations of the Second Report, appeared in The Pictorial Times (fig. 11). It is actually a double illustration, contrasting a scene of milliners hard at work in a crowded workroom with one of duchesses fashionably dressed and flirting with admiring young men at an elegant party. The comparison between the suffering and impoverished maker of dresses and the selfish and vain consumers will become a standard motif in seamstress iconography. Other elements which will appear later in other versions of the subject are present here such as the clock on the wall (which reads three o'clock), the low burning candles, and the figure of the seamstresses bathed in light.

One month later, in June of 1843, another illustration of a seamstress appeared in a monthly periodical entitled The Illuminated Magazine (fig. 17). It was drawn by Kenny Meadows to accompany an article entitled "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," which quoted long sections on seamstresses from the Second Report "disclosed for the first time."<sup>9</sup> In the illustration, a milliner,

<sup>8</sup> "Milliners and Dressmakers," The Times, March 23, 1843, p. 8 The letter was addressed to Lord Ashley, a Tory M.P. who lobbied strenuously for a ten hours bill, and it was signed "A Milliner." The Times did not neglect the other kind of seamstress -- the slop-worker. On May 13th they published a letter to the editor entitled "A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work," which appealed for help for the poor seamstresses who worked at home for the slop-shops (p. 6).

<sup>9</sup> "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," pp. 97-100. The periodical that this article appeared in, The Illuminated Magazine was edited by Douglas Jerrold, who would go on to become one of the co-founders of Punch, and the author of an article on seamstresses published in that magazine which inspired Thomas Hood to write "The Song of the Shirt." The Illuminated Magazine also reproduced the illustrations of women and children working in mines which accompanied the First Report of the Children's Employment Commission, see "Children's Employment Commission," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. I (May 1843), pp. 45-53.

who appears in profile as a skeleton wearing a bonnet and skirt, delivers a hat to a client. Although this particularly grisly illustration departs from more typically "realistic" seamstress images, it too contrasts the wealth and vanity of the upper classes (symbolized by the furnishings on the left and the drapery, crown and feathers at the right) with the ill (in this case decaying) body of the seamstress.

It is significant that The Times published the majority of exposes on slop-workers. In fact, if it had not been for the stories printed in that newspaper, the hysteria around seamstresses which began in October of 1843 might never have occurred. We might ask what interest that paper had in printing scandal after scandal among the poor needlewomen. The answer lies in the position that The Times took on another issue of the day, the highly controversial New Poor Law of 1834. The Times had taken a vigorous stance against the New Poor Law, attacking it whenever they had the opportunity (and perhaps even inventing a few).<sup>10</sup> Seamstress scandals were so prominent on the pages of The Times in part because they provided that paper with more ammunition in their fight against what they considered to be an unjust and inhumane law.<sup>11</sup> It was the New Poor Law, The Times claimed, which forced women to accept the starvation wages of slop-work, and which drove them to criminal

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<sup>10</sup> See Himmelfarb, p. 178, on why the editors and proprietor of The Times were so virulently opposed to the law.

<sup>11</sup> The workhouse, a central feature of the New Poor Law, was often the focus of the attacks by The Times. The law had abolished out-door relief (i.e. granting the poor some money and food to enable them to continue to live in society) in most cases, and compelled the poor seeking relief to enter the workhouse. Once in the workhouse, families were separated from one another, not only husbands from wives, but also children from their mothers. This practice was seen as the most inhumane aspect of the law and attacked repeatedly. By controlling conditions in the workhouse, and by limiting the freedom of the individuals who entered, the law insured that the conditions of the able-bodied poor receiving relief in the workhouse were less desirable (the "less eligibility test") than the conditions of the poor who were independent. In this way, the poor would be discouraged from relying on relief, and, the framers of the law believed, the burden of the poor on rate payers would diminish.

behavior and even infanticide because they would do anything to avoid the workhouse (one of the central and most attacked provisions of the New Poor Law). Just how important The Times's position was on the New Poor Law for coverage of seamstress scandals can be judged from the fact that The Morning Chronicle, which had been purchased as an organ of support for the Poor Law, printed only a few articles on needlewomen in 1843 and 1844.<sup>12</sup> A look at the nature, character, and strategies of The Times's coverage of the New Poor Law will help to understand their coverage of seamstresses.

The Times campaigned against the New Poor Law by printing shocking reports of abuses in the workhouses. The alleged abuses included such horrors as naked men being drenched in water in an open courtyard in the cold of winter, a child who was so hungry he ate a mouse, and a woman who was stripped to the waist and whipped. The stories were reprinted in other periodicals, and their frequent repetition made them appear irrefutable. The reports of cruelty inside the workhouses seemed to defy belief, but The Times made sure that the articles were complete with names, dates and statistics, and other forms of "evidence."

Upon investigation of the alleged crimes in the workhouse, many of which were reported in The Times, the Poor Law commissioners found that those abuses which were most alarming, and which received the most press, were simply not true, and that many others were exaggerated.<sup>13</sup> According to Himmelfarb, The Times "had

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<sup>12</sup> For example, "Lambeth Street. Starving Prices Paid to Needlewomen," The Morning Chronicle, October 26, 1843, p. 4; An English Jew, "To the Editor of The Morning Chronicle," The Morning Chronicle, November 8, 1843, p. 4; "Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners," The Morning Chronicle, May 6, 1844, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> This discussion of the New Poor Law is based on Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, pp. 184-5, and David Roberts, "How Cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?" Historical Journal, 1963. Although I believe that Himmelfarb and Roberts are both correct in their assessment of the exaggerated abuses reported in The Times, precisely because that helps us to judge the ideological work being done by the workhouse scandals, I

made no attempt to substantiate them before publication, not even to the extent of determining whether the stories were consistent with the physical features of the workhouse in which they were presumed to have occurred."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, on at least two occasions when The Times reported allegations against the employers of seamstresses, those charges were vehemently denied, and the paper was accused of fabrication.

Were the sensationalized stories of starved and suicidal needlewomen which appeared in The Times during this period, like the stories of the workhouse, exaggerated or in some cases fabricated? Were they part of the mythologized and fictionalized accounts of the horrors of the New Poor Law, generated by The Times? Were they that and more? Like the reports of cruelty in the workhouse, the articles and fiction on seamstresses, generated by a few highly sensational cases "gave the impression of a policy not of random or occasional abuse, but of deliberate, systematic cruelty...."<sup>15</sup>

The story which seems to have begun the fuss about seamstresses appeared in The Times and the Morning Chronicle<sup>16</sup> on October 26th, 1843. On that date, The

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would obviously part with the conclusions that Himmelfarb draws from this type of analysis. In a recent article which appeared on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times on January 9, 1995 on the current debate about welfare, Himmelfarb rehearsed these same arguments -- that "Victorian England was not nearly as "Dickensian" as Dickens would have us believe," -- which I believe is essentially true. But the conclusions that follow, that orphanages were really okay, or even more disturbing, that the New Poor Law's provision of the workhouse could provide a model for today's welfare reform, or that we should rediscover Victorian values like cleanliness, charity, and shame -- conclusions that appear to blame the poor for their poverty, are highly offensive.

<sup>14</sup> Himmelfarb, p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> [no title], The Times, October 26, 1843, p. 7 and "Lambeth Street. Starving Prices Paid to Needlewomen," The Morning Chronicle, October 26, 1843, p. 4.

Times published the proceedings of the appearance before a magistrate of a needlewoman named Biddell who had been arrested for pawning goods which did not belong to her (she had tried to pawn the clothing which she had been given to sew). Within days, most of the daily newspapers in London had picked up the story. The article was reprinted in the Pictorial Times and The Sun two days later on October 28th,<sup>17</sup> and reported in The Weekly Chronicle on October 29th. Biddell also appears in a book published in 1844 entitled, Remedies Suggested for Some of the Evils which Constitute the Perils of the Nation.<sup>18</sup> Her sensationalistic story directly inspired many of the dozen or so articles which appeared in The Times on seamstresses between late October of 1843 and the end of the year.

Biddell was described by the reporter as a "wretched looking woman...with a squalid half-starved infant at her breast," whose home was "the very picture of wretchedness...almost without a vestige of furniture of any sort, and quite unfit for the residence of human beings."<sup>19</sup> When questioned, Biddell explained that she was paid such low wages for making trousers by her employer, a Mr. Moses, that she was forced to pawn some of the items which he had given to her to sew in order to purchase "dry bread" for herself and her two children. The magistrate who heard Biddell's case was sympathetic and blamed her employer for paying her starvation wages, but he also -- significantly -- blamed the provisions of the New Poor Law. He asserted that Biddell had been forced to pawn goods which did not belong to her

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<sup>17</sup> The Pictorial Times article took the same position as The Times, that part of the problem was the workhouse provision of the New Poor Law. See "Lambeth Street. -- Starving Prices Paid to Needlewomen," Pictorial Times, vol. II (October 28, 1843), p. 155. While the article in The Sun blamed the selfishness of the rich, and an unjust corn law. See the lead article in The Sun on October 28, 1843, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Remedies Suggested for Some of the Evils which Constitute the Perils of the Nation, London: Seeley Burnside and Seeley, 1844, pp. 96-7.

<sup>19</sup> The Times, October 26, 1843, p. 7.

because she would do anything rather than be forced to enter the workhouse with her children. It now appeared that the New Poor Law was making criminals out of poor, helpless widows. The magistrate contended that "the affair was one of very common occurrence in that part of the metropolis."<sup>20</sup> This seemed to be proven beyond doubt when another woman appeared before the court, immediately after Biddell, requesting a warrant for the arrest of yet another shirtmaker who had pawned some of her work. On the same day, probably inspired by the Biddell case, The Times published an article entitled "The White Slaves of London," which took much of its information on the wages, hours and health of slop-workers from the Second Report. The author of this article cited another case, like Biddell's, where a poor widow pawned shirts she was given to sew in order to buy food for herself and her infant, "and if she had not done so, he believed she must have perished from want." The article concluded that

the wretched shirtmakers...finding they cannot obtain a subsistence by the starving wages allowed them...are either driven upon the streets to add to the hordes of miserable outcasts who infest our thoroughfares, or else become confirmed thieves, and end their days in a penal settlement or model prison.<sup>21</sup>

Much of The Times October 26th article on Biddell was repeated in an article the following day. And this time the paper's position on the New Poor Law and the intersection of that issue with the distress of seamstresses was made completely apparent. Did Biddell have a choice, the author asked sarcastically. "Her country has nobly provided her with food, clothing and shelter if she will but ask for them," he asserted, if she would only enter the workhouse. But then he sarcastically described the conditions of the workhouse (remember that the conditions of the workhouse were

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<sup>20</sup> Himmelfarb, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> "The White Slaves of London," The Times, October 27, 1843, p. 4.

intentionally made miserable by the framers of the New Poor Law to discourage the poor from seeking relief),

With food, parceled out in rations calculated, with the utmost nicety, to rob every meal of its quality of fully-satisfying the pangs of hunger...with shelter, in a building on which the ingenuity of professed architects has been racked to render its very outside a deformity on the face of the country, to exclude its inmates from even a glimpse of the freedom they have left beyond the walls, and to keep the husband and his wife, the mother and her child, from indulging in the weakness of the natural affection.... Yes she has an option, but she rejects it....she deliberately chooses for herself...to toil Sundays and weekdays, 14 hours a day...rather than avail herself of the nation's 'hospitality.'<sup>22</sup>

The author blamed Jewish slop-sellers for taking security from needlewomen "for he, like Shylock, 'will have his bond'" and claimed that "the very Jews are revenging on the poor of a professedly Christian country the wrongs which their forefathers sustained at the hands of ours...."<sup>23</sup> Instantly, Biddell, represented as a poor widow paid almost nothing for long hours of work by a greedy, exploitative Jewish merchant and driven to criminal activity in order to feed her children by the cruelty of the New Poor Law, appeared to be typical and representative of all seamstresses.

The accusations of extreme cruelty among slop-sellers did not go unanswered. There were many who insisted that the reports in The Times which were reprinted in other periodicals and accepted as fact were exaggerated and unfair. The Times carried a letter to the editor on October 28, signed "An Israelite," and its author complained of the article of the 27th which implied that "Jews as a class are deficient in charity and callous to human suffering." The author asserted that "such an inference from the particular to the general is anything but logical, and in the present case, the conclusion

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<sup>22</sup> The Times, October 27, 1943, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

is very wide of the truth."<sup>24</sup> But The Times denied the allegations of anti-semitism, writing that "our observations applied only to a class of persons, including Christians as well as Jews, whose extortionate exaction of the utmost possible labour, at starvation prices, from the miserable wretches in their employ is one of the most flagrant scandals of the age."<sup>25</sup> Only three days later, on October 31st, a letter from Henry Moses, apparently the Mr. Moses, "a slop-seller on Tower Hill," who employed Biddell, appeared in The Times. Moses complained that most slop-sellers were not in fact Jewish, that he actually paid higher wages to his employees than other employers in his line of business, and that due to competition, his profits were, in actuality, quite small,

I beg to premise that the general body of slopsellers are not of the persuasion on whom, in the indignation excited by the case of the woman named Bedell (sic)...you have so unmercifully inflicted the lash, for out of upwards of 40 wholesale slopsellers and shirt manufacturers in London there are not more than three of the Jewish community; and further, that how revolting soever to your feelings the smallness of the remuneration allowed to my workwomen may appear, trifling as it undoubtedly is, my allowance for labour is considerably higher than many of the most respectable outfitting warehouses in the metropolis.<sup>26</sup>

This letter did not prompt The Times to forgive Mr. Moses. Instead of accepting the letter as proof of his innocence, The Times felt that his letter only seemed to prove just how guilty he and all his fellow slop-sellers were for the low wages they were paying needlewomen. The Times defended themselves against the allegation of anti-semitism by responding, "we only used the word "Jew," to which Mr. Moses somewhat indignantly refers, not as a term of reproach to the people, but in the other of its two significations, in which it forms a component part of the

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<sup>24</sup> An Israelite, "To the Editor of the Times," The Times, October 28, 1943, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Moses, "To the editor of the Times," The Times, October 31, 1843, p. 3.

language."<sup>27</sup> In other words, The Times defended themselves by claiming that they used the term "Jew" in the sense of "to Jew" someone, or to cheat them, as though that usage was somehow less anti-semitic.

The Satirist agreed with The Times that Mr. Henry Moses was still guilty. In an article from November 5th entitled "Snips and Slopsellers," they referred to Henry Moses as "the great Hebrew slop-seller." Moses's claim that his rate of profit was in fact quite low was disputed, "we never yet knew a Hebrew contented with so very moderate and conscientious a remuneration for the outlay of capital."<sup>28</sup>

Approximately one week after the article on Biddell first appeared in The Times, Douglas Jerrold published a short but important piece entitled "Famine and Fashion," in Punch, quoting part of The Times article on Biddell of October 27th verbatim. Jerrold scathingly attacked Moses for paying Biddell a mere seven shillings a week. "What is the cannibal to such money-spinning knaves!" Jerrold asked, "the savage slays his victim before he commences his revolting feast, the slopseller refines upon such cruelty, and banquets day by day...until Death, more merciful than mammon, closes the wretch's sufferings...."<sup>29</sup> The article concluded with a poem written to "Moses and Co." which began "All, who would seek a spotless robe to wear, In breathless haste to Moses should repair, Where Holland Coats from two and three are shown / By Hunger's haggard fingers neatly sewn."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> "Snips and Slopsellers," The Satirist, November 5th, 1843, p. 363. For recent work on anti-semitism in England see David Feldman, Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840-1914, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994 and Frank Felsenstein, Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660-1830, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Jerrold, "Famine and Fashion!," Punch, 5 (1843), p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

This article is especially important because it inspired Thomas Hood to write his famous and more serious poem "The Song of the Shirt,"<sup>31</sup> published in Punch in December 1843, and then reprinted immediately in The Sun and The Times.<sup>32</sup> Hood's poem was to provide artists with imagery and titles for decades to come.

On November 7th in The Sun and on November 8th in The Times, E. Moses and Son attempted to clear their name from the now infamous Biddell case. Their letters claimed that their firm had been confused with that of Henry Moses who worked in a different part of London. They listed the prices they paid their workmen, and insisted that "there is not the remote connexion existing betwixt our establishment and that of the tradesman in question...our books of payment...are proofs that our workmen are paid on an equality with the most respectable houses in the metropolis."<sup>33</sup> On November 8th The Morning Chronicle carried a letter to the editor signed only "An English Jew," which again tried to clear the name of the *other* Moses firm.<sup>34</sup>

The public interest in seamstresses was so intense in the autumn of 1843 that, as one person put it, "it was impossible to take up any one of the daily papers without

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<sup>31</sup> [Thomas Hood], "The Song of the Shirt," Punch 5 (December 1843), p. 260. According to Himmelfarb, p. 313, Jerrold's piece "Famine and Fashion!" was the inspiration for Hood's "The Song of the Shirt."

<sup>32</sup> "The Song of the Shirt" was reprinted in The Sun and The Times on December 16th.

<sup>33</sup> E. Moses and Son, "Tailors Wages. To the Editor of the Sun," The Sun, November 7, 1843, p. 4, and E. Moses and Son, "Tailor's Wages. A Letter to the Editor of The Times," The Times, November 8th, 1843, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> An English Jew, "To the Editor of The Morning Chronicle," The Morning Chronicle, November 8, 1843, p. 4.

seeing the most harrowing statements of the privations to which that meritorious class of women were constantly exposed."<sup>35</sup>

In January of 1844 Biddell's case was still being referred to in the press. On January 4th, 1844, a man named R. Clough wrote a letter to the editor of The Times. The headline read "The Poor Shirtmakers," and the author again refuted the conclusions of The Times and others regarding seamstresses,

Sir, -- Much has been written in your valuable paper on behalf of the poor shirtmakers; the sympathy of many members of the highest rank has been excited; and I fear that a very erroneous impression has been received. Now, sir, I think it a duty to myself and all respectable tradespeople to state, that much better prices are really paid than you are aware of; and though some persons are wholly destitute of principle, I am sorry to say, as to live by subjecting their fellow creatures to misery, yet I can and will confidently assert, that both myself, and, I believe, all respectable shirtmakers at the west end of the town, have for years paid, and still continue to pay, at the rate of 2s. 6d. each for plain long cloth, and 3s. 6d. for plain linen shirts -- nevertheless; and this I am prepared to prove to anyone who doubts the assertion.<sup>36</sup>

The concern regarding seamstresses continued to escalate after the initial interest produced by Biddell's case.<sup>37</sup> Then, on December 14, 1843, The Times and

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<sup>35</sup> "The Metropolis: Distressed Needlewomen," The Economist, December 7, 1844, p. 1494.

<sup>36</sup> R. Clough, letter to the editor of The Times, January 4, 1844, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> On November 10th a letter to the editor appeared in The Times. The author stated that he knew of a clothing manufacturer in the city where huge profits were being made by giving out work to middlemen or women who in turn gave the work out at even lower wages to "unhappy and defenseless women and children." The author demanded that the strong arm of the law do something given "what we are daily seeing and hearing of the privations and suffering of this class of the labouring poor...." N.E. "To the Editor of The Times," November 10th, 1843, p. 6. On November 11 the Pictorial Times published an article entitled "The White Slavery," about a poor widow, with two children and an aged mother to support, who had tried, unsuccessfully, to support her two children and her mother by sewing. Like the articles in The Times, the author took the opportunity to attack the New Poor Law's provision against outdoor relief. "Thames Police. -- The White Slavery," The Pictorial Times, II (November 11, 1843), p. 183. Three days later on November 14th another letter to the editor was published in The Times. This one was signed "A Needle-Maker," and

The Sun reported yet another seamstress scandal.<sup>38</sup> A woman named Ann Benson testified at an inquest that she was employed at needlework in the workhouse, and paid only a farthing for each shirt she sewed. If women were indeed employed at such low wages in the workhouse, it meant that women in the workhouse (who were there at the behest of the government's New Poor Law, and who could work for practically nothing because they did not have to pay their own room and board), were competing with the poor who did sewing outside the workhouse, driving down their wages and making them even poorer.<sup>39</sup> This practice therefore, had the reverse effect of what the writers of the New Poor Law had intended: it forced more women into the workhouse, dependent on public assistance, and kept the poor rates high, "the protected poor are become the greatest oppression to the unprotected poor, besides inducing a great accession of paupers or burthens to their parishes."<sup>40</sup>

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the author proposed a scheme to increase the wages paid to seamstresses. A Needle-maker, "Sewing and Seamstresses," The Times, November 14, 1843, p. 3. A letter signed "A Woman" to the editor of The Times was published on January 10th. The author offered a plan to help distressed needlewomen, but began by complaining that although she had read in The Times "various affecting accounts of the condition of the distressed needlewomen of London," she had not seen many letters or articles which offered practical plans for ameliorating their suffering. "We shall hear nothing more about them," she wrote, "until some other starving mother is brought before the Lord Mayor for pawning the material of her work to keep herself and her children from perishing of hunger." A Woman, "The Distressed Needlewomen of London. To the editor of The Times," The Times, January 10th, 1844, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> The article appears in The Sun as "Shirts at a Farthing Each," on December 14, 1843, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> This practice had been exposed in the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. There, Grainger had concluded that "it is shown by the Evidence that, owing to the security afforded the slop-seller for the goods he gives out, to the better quality of the work, and to the saving of trouble, a preference is given to the workhouses, which injuriously interferes with the independent workers." See the Second Report, p. 557, as well as the section on evidence on shirtmaking in the Second Report, pp. 833-39.

<sup>40</sup> Censorius, "The Distressed Situation of the Females Employed in Shirt-Making," The Weekly Dispatch, November 19th, 1843, p. 557.

Ann Benson's testimony that she was paid a farthing for sewing a shirt in the St. Pancras workhouse, and that the paupers there slept four to a bed, inspired a flurry of letters and articles. The Poor Law Commissioners had written to the St. Pancras union, where Benson was allegedly employed in needlework, asking if the allegations reported in The Times were indeed correct. The Board of Directors of the workhouse replied that they "had reason to believe that no such statements were made, and that no reporter was present at the inquest." They went on to state that the lowest price paid for needlework in the workhouse was 2s per dozen, and sometimes higher, and that on occasion three persons slept in extra large beds, but never four.<sup>41</sup> Was this another example of The Times using an unsubstantiated story in their struggle against the New Poor Law?

On December 15th, the very next day after the initial article on Benson, an article on her appeared in The Times which explicitly linked the evils of The New Poor Law with the destitution of needlewomen. It began:

Another, and yet another, flagrant exposure, each more signal than its predecessor, is day by day presenting itself, of the connexion of the hideous and crushing miseries of those thousands of friendless and unhappy creatures, who, especially throughout the metropolis...are suffering the extremities of privation, without wages, but not without work, homeless and starving, yet tasked withal even to exhaustion -- the sempstresses, shirtmakers, the weavers, and other operatives of a similar class, with the New Poor Law.<sup>42</sup>

Only a few months later, in March of 1844, Camilla Toulmin published a short story in The Illuminated Magazine entitled "The Shawl Buyer, an Incident of 1843." The story is about a poor, well-intentioned widow whose child had just died of small-pox. The widow, who made a living sewing slop, inadvertently sold a contaminated shawl which "was knitted in that infected chamber, and...was wrapped round my dying

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<sup>41</sup> "Making Shirts for a Farthing Each," The Times, December 26th, 1843, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> [no title], The Times, December 15, 1843, p. 4.

Nancy"<sup>43</sup> to a young woman who had been kind and charitable to her, thus endangering her life. The illustration by John Gilbert (fig. 18) depicts the deadly shawl draped over the coffin of the widow's daughter. The cramped and crumbling garret, with its sparse and humble furnishings has a single window -- the only source of fresh air and light -- which allows a redemptive sunlight to illuminate the small casket. This illustration is the first to depict a slop-worker's chambers (thus far, we have seen only the interior of dressmaker's workrooms, or a lone dressmaker). Many of the elements which will appear in later images of shirtmakers and other slop-workers are here: the garret, the light from a window, the crockery, bed, table and chair. Although the coffin contains the daughter of the widowed seamstress in the story, it functions as a substitute for the sickly seamstress herself, who is pictured sewing in that very spot in front of the window in other illustrations and paintings.

The next month's edition of The Illuminated Magazine carried yet another seamstress story by Toulmin, but this one was about milliner's assistants, not slop-workers.<sup>44</sup> The frontispiece of this story (fig. 11), also drawn by John Gilbert, resembles the illustration of "The Milliners" published in The Pictorial Times almost one year earlier (fig. 12). In both, a large group of seamstresses huddle over their work in a circle around a lamp-lit table, clocks on the wall reveal the late hour while a forewoman in the background admonishes the young dressmaker's assistants to work harder.

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<sup>43</sup> Miss Camilla Toulmin, "The Shawl Buyer, An Incident of 1843," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 217-221. The concern that clothing could carry infectious disease will also appear again and again, especially after 1848, and most notably in Charles Kingsley's Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet and Cheap Clothes and Nasty (both 1849).

<sup>44</sup> Miss Camilla Toulmin, "The Orphan Milliners, A Story of the West End," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 279-285.

The same month that Toulmin's story appeared -- April of 1844 -- another seamstress scandal, this one about a woman named Mary Furley, appeared on the pages of The Times.<sup>45</sup> Mary Furley's story is yet another example of how a scandal regarding a slop-worker was also used to illustrate the horrors of the workhouse and the New Poor Law. Furley's story stands out as one of the most frightening stories about a seamstress to have appeared in The Times. Although her destitution seemed to be traceable to a number of causes, only one of which was the low wages she received for sewing, the Jewish slop-sellers and her loathing of the workhouse were found to be responsible for her death.

Furley's testimony in court was reported in an article in The Times on April 17th, 1844, and is so scandalous that it is worth quoting at length:

The prisoner...said that...on going to the Bethnal-green workhouse, the eldest child became ill from some affection of the head. It was removed to the infirmary, and sent down again to her, and its head became a second time so bad that it was ordered to be shaved. The barber who performed this operation was drunk, and in consequence he cut pieces of flesh from the head of the child. The wounds became very bad, and continued so for some time, and on their being cured the child's eyes became sore. An eruption also appeared all over its body, which she attributed solely to the fact of the child being fed at the workhouse on hard beef. She requested that this might be changed for mutton, but this was refused.<sup>46</sup>

After this, Furley testified, she was determined to leave the workhouse and took some work as a shirtmaker. She found though, that the wages were so low that it was impossible to live. It seemed as though she would be forced to re-enter the

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<sup>45</sup> "Central Criminal Court," The Times, April 17th, 1844, p. 8. This is reprinted in The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change, ed. by Kate Flint, New York: Croom Helm, 1987, pp. 196-99.

<sup>46</sup> "Central Criminal Court," p. 8.

workhouse "to which she entertained such an aversion, that she preferred death to herself and her child."<sup>47</sup>

Finally, choosing to commit infanticide and suicide rather than re-enter the workhouse, Mary Furley tried to kill herself and her son by jumping into the river with her son in her arms. Furley was rescued, but her child slipped out of her arms and drowned. The judge who heard the case was merciless, and found Furley guilty of murder and sentenced her to death. Furley insisted that she "had committed the act through distress and ill-treatment."<sup>48</sup>

The Times article on Mary Furley prompted Charles Dickens to write a short satirical piece published in Hoods Magazine and Comic Miscellany in May, mocking those, like the judge, who would blame the poor for their own poverty.<sup>49</sup>

In May of 1844 -- the same month that this letter by Dicken's was published, less than one month after Furley's story appeared in the press, only five months since

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Murder," The Times, April 17, 1844, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> In this essay, Dickens sarcastically adopts the voice of an "ancient gentleman" writing to Thomas Hood, who regrets the passing of the days when "governments were governments and judges were judges," and asserts that "there is only one judge who knows how to do his duty now," referring to the judge who sentenced Furley ("that revolutionary female") to death for infanticide. Furley, he writes, "though she was in full work...had no pride in her country, but treasonably took it into her head, in the distraction of having been robbed of her easy earnings, to attempt to drown herself and her young child...." The "ancient gentleman" finds the death sentence to be a good warning to the poor, which will be "carried into every manufacturing town of this kingdom, and read aloud to crowds in every political parlour, beer shop, news-room, and secret or open place of assembly, frequented by the discontented working men...." [by favor of Charles Dickens], "Threatening Letter to Thomas Hood, from an Ancient Gentleman," Hood's Magazine and Comic Miscellany, volume I, no. 5 (May 1844), pp. 409-10.

the publication of Hood's popular "Song of the Shirt," and just six months after the Biddell's infamous case captured public sympathy -- Richard Redgrave exhibited his painting The Sempstress at the Royal Academy exhibition in London (in May of 1844). Not surprisingly, The Times reviewed the painting favorably, commenting that "the subject of this painting is one peculiarly of our time, viz., the miseries to which the metropolitan needlewomen are subjected, and the motto is taken from Hood's admirable 'Song of the Shirt.'"<sup>50</sup> The Times seems to be acknowledging Redgrave's daring decision to portray a specific, contemporary subject in the format of a large-scale oil painting.<sup>51</sup> Seamstresses were indeed the issue of the day.

The same month as the Royal Academy exhibition, Mark Lemon (who was a writer for Punch along with Douglas Jerrold), saw his play, The Sempstress, performed at the Theatre Royal in London and set to the music of Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt."<sup>52</sup> In the play, Mercy Goldring, whose grandfather has been

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<sup>50</sup> The Royal Academy, " Art Union, vol. 6 (1844), p. 158. Other reviewers were not as kind, many found the painting's subject appropriate enough, but Redgrave's treatment of it too simplistic and sentimental. The Athenaeum concluded that Redgrave had "only reached a sort of theatrical and elegant sorrow" (vol. 17 (May 18, 1844), p. 459). Thackeray, writing anonymously for Fraser's Magazine, felt that Redgrave's two entries to the exhibition that year were "inspired by that milk-and-water of human kindness, the flavour of which is so insipid to the roast-beef intellect" ("May Gambols; or, Titmarsh in the Picture-Galleries," vol. 29 (June, 1844), p. 702.)

<sup>51</sup> The reference to the subject as "peculiarly of our time," is reminiscent of Baudelaire's and Courbet's nearly contemporary call to artists to paint the heroism of modern life. In characteristic fashion though, British artists in general, and Redgrave in particular, never abandoned paintings of emotional and sentimental issues with a clear narrative.

<sup>52</sup> The play was also performed in other theaters. The Pictorial Times carried a very brief review of either Lemon's play or another one based on the same subject performed at "The Surrey." See June 1, 1844, p. 347

robbed of a small fortune, tries to earn a living sewing shirts. They are so poor though, that her husband suggests that they pawn some of the materials she has been given to sew in order to buy food. Mercy replies, "shame on us, George -- shame on us! we never thought about crime till now."<sup>53</sup> Like the moral drawn by The Times about Biddell, Lemon's seamstress, a basically honest and hard-working woman, is driven by her cruel employers and a fear of the workhouse to break the law.

The illustration which accompanied the text of the play shows Mercy hard at work by the light of the window. As in Redgrave's painting, the roof-tops of London are visible from the garret. But in this illustration, the shirtmaker is not alone; sitting behind Mercy is her grandfather, whose fortune is eventually found. At the very end of the play he declares, "Yes, we will go home, but not to that cheerless place where everything recalls some bitter sorrow -- no, we will to our childhood's dwelling-place, to its blessed fields of soothing green, and its old home of quiet memories."<sup>54</sup>

Before the summer of 1844 was over, another case, combining elements of Mary Furley's and Biddell's, appeared in the press. Two sisters, Eliza and Mary Kendal, aged nineteen and twenty respectively, had thrown themselves into a canal in Deptford. Mary was saved, but Eliza drowned. The entire family was employed at shirtmaking, at very low wages. Another sister of the two girls testified that they might have attempted to kill themselves because they had borrowed a small amount of the rent money which they could pay back only by pawning some of the shirts they

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Lemon, The Sempstress, 1844. Reprinted in English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century, New York, 1965, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Lemon, p. 15.

were given to sew. The jury's verdict: "that the deceased committed suicide whilst labouring under a fit of insanity; and the jury cannot but deprecate the cruel practice of the slopsellers in London, of employing young females at needlework at so low a rate of wages as to preclude the possibility of subsistence."<sup>55</sup>

Using the examples of Mary Furley and the Kendal sisters, J.M. Rymer wrote a novel about a seamstress entitled The White Slave. A Romance for the Nineteenth Century.<sup>56</sup> Rymer's story employed the same sentiment against the New Poor Law that we saw in The Times and in other stories.<sup>57</sup> The sixteen year old Millicent, who is described as "beautiful in her distress," lives with her blind brother and her father (her mother had died five years earlier). Millicent's family had once been affluent, but unfortunate circumstances reduced them to total poverty. Captain Manning, Millicent's father, tries to kill them all, but only succeeds in killing himself. George March, Millicent's suitor, pawns his clothing to get money for poor Millicent and her brother, but "suspicion haunts the guilty mind, and so the Jew slopseller thought at once that George must have stolen the articles he wished to dispose of in such a desperate hurry."<sup>58</sup> Millicent finally decides to work as a shirtmaker, living in a

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<sup>55</sup> "Horrible Case -- Suicide from Distress," The Northern Star, August 31, 1844, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> J.M. Rymer, The White Slave. A Romance for the Nineteenth Century, London: E. Lloyd, 1844.

<sup>57</sup> Rymer, whose story was meant to appeal to a working-class audience, might have agreed with The Times's position on the New Poor Law, but in the story he demonstrates as much disdain for their upper-class sympathy for the poor as for the laissez-faire approach of The Morning Chronicle.

<sup>58</sup> Rymer, p. 14.

"miserable attic" she "sat plying her needle by the dim light of a small candle that threw a mournful halo around her."<sup>59</sup> An illustration for The White Slave (fig. 19), unusual in its cluttered and unintelligible space, depicts Millicent, head bowed to one side as she pauses for a moment from her work. What appears to be a bird cage hangs from the ceiling -- like the potted plant, a reference to the seamstress's "unnatural" entrapment.<sup>60</sup> Millicent's story has a happy ending though, when it turns out that she is in fact the only daughter of the Earl of Daubigny!<sup>61</sup>

1844, the year that saw the most sustained and intense interest in the seamstress, culminated in a Christmas story by Charles Dickens entitled The Chimes, which was directly inspired by Mary Furley.<sup>62</sup> Toby Veck, the main character, is a poor (working class, not fallen gentility) man with a daughter named Meg who is a seamstress. One day Toby reads an account in a newspaper of "of a woman who had

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> A bird cage also appears in the illustration of a milliner's workroom in The Pictorial Times (fig. 10).

<sup>61</sup> See Catherine Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832-1867, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 131-36 for an insightful ideological analysis of the narrative of Rymer's story.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Hood's poem "The Bridge of Sighs" was also inspired by Mary Furley. For more on The Chimes see Peter Ackroyd, Dickens, New York: HarperCollins, 1990, pp. 440-41. According to Ackroyd, Dickens along with Mark Lemon (who wrote a play, The Sempstress), Henry Mayhew (whose articles on seamstresses in The Morning Chronicle in 1848 were among the most scandalous ever to be reported), and Douglas Jerrold (author of the article "Famine and Fashion," which inspired Hood's poem, as well as editor of The Illuminated Magazine which contained two seamstress stories) performed The Chimes in an amateur night (see p. 470). The Chimes was also adapted for the stage and performed in 1844, 1845, 1872 and 1873 (see Ernst Reynolds, Early Victorian Drama (1830-1870), New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1984, p. 144).

laid her desperate hands not only on her own life but that of her young child" (as Mary Furley had done).<sup>63</sup> This story leads Toby to believe that the poor (even though he is one himself) are "bad at heart" and have "no business on the earth." As in A Christmas Carol, Toby learns his lesson when he has a vision of the future after his own death. In that vision, his own daughter, Meg, is driven to suicide in the river with a baby in her arms. Just before she jumps, Toby screams "I have learnt it! From the creature dearest to my heart!",<sup>64</sup> and wakes from his vision. What Toby has learned is that "there is no loving mother on the earth who might not have come to this, if such a life has gone before."<sup>65</sup>

Dicken's story was accompanied by an illustration by John Leech (fig. 20). Meg, in Dicken's story, is truly working class and she appears, in this illustration, as a tiny figure bent over her needlework. She shows none of the dramatic signs of exhaustion or illness that Redgrave's gentile seamstress (fig. 3) demonstrates (or the apprentices in Camilla Toulmin's "The Orphan Milliners" (fig. 12), among others). Nor does she pause from her work to think about her past. Meg works unceasingly and uncomplainingly by candlelight in a garret furnished only by two chairs, a table, and a flower pot in the windowsill.

Not surprisingly, in late 1844 Punch carried a cartoon on the subject of the exploitation of needlewomen by evil Jewish slop-sellers (fig. 21). Apparently, the firm

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Dickens, The Chimes, London: Chapman and Hall, 1845; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 117 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

of Moses & Son (which, as we have seen, came to stand for all slop-sellers) published something of a promotional sales brochure (probably something like the catalogues we all get in the mail today) extolling themselves as "The Commercial Phenomenon." Punch in its usual irony, offered a design for a "Moses testimonial" which combines a base modeled on traditional memorial sculpture (with allegorical figures at the corners), with a trophy above. On the corners of this memorial sit a tailor in chains and a woman with a starving child at her feet. Above, seated on either side of a trophy engraved with the image of a shirt, sit two devilish figures with hooked (Jewish) noses and top hats.

The interest in distressed seamstresses reached a high point from October of 1843 through 1844. The Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, a pamphlet (Ralph Barnes Grinrod's The Slaves of the Needle), two novels (Rymer's The White Slave and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's The Wrongs of Woman), several short stories and poems, a play, dozens of articles, illustrations and one oil painting appeared during that time.

In the press, the sad cases of Biddell, Mary Furley, Ann Benson, and Eliza and Mary Kendal, initiated and perpetuated a scandal regarding seamstresses and at the same time pointed to those who were seen to be responsible: the Jewish slop-seller and the legislature's New Poor Law. The hysteria and scapegoating which accompanied the seamstress reports should be seen as part of a reaction (and the construction of a solution) to the problems and changes which plagued England in the 1840s.

### Chapter Three

#### AN UNCIVIL WAR

I have argued that the myth of the seamstress was to a great extent generated by a few highly sensationalistic cases along with the publication of the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. The myth was so pervasive because it effectively served a variety of ideological needs. We can begin to understand what these were if we examine the drastic changes that took place in the 1830s and 1840s in the production and purchasing of clothing, and women's place within that. Many of these changes understandably triggered reactionary responses, as those involved tried in vain to stave off changes that we know now to have been inevitable. One of those changes involved the development, for the first time, of a ready-made clothing industry (the way many of us purchase clothing today) which appealed to an enlarged middle class. This change, and the efforts to hinder it, involved a battle of the sexes, "it was in the London tailoring trade that the issue of female labor finally exploded into open controversy..."<sup>1</sup>

In the 1840s women were working in increasing numbers in a trade which had successfully excluded them for generations: tailoring. The issue was not so much that women were working, since women had always worked in the home sewing, spinning or doing other work to help their families. The real problem was that women were working independently in the tailoring trade, supplanting skilled male artisans, who were largely unable to find employment in a trade which they had once controlled. The tailors were not alone. In the 1820s through the 1840s, artisans in a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Taylor, "The Men are as Bad as their Masters...": Socialism, Feminism and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trade in the 1830s," Sex and Class in Women's History, Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith Walkowitz, eds., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 206. Or, see Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, chapter IV.

trades saw their entire way of life, as it had existed for generations, restructured. They were either replaced by machines, or an increase in the division of labor made possible the employment of unskilled female labor.

Skilled artisans were losing control of their trades to the "factory system," and they were not about to sit still for that. They complained about the loss of family life, the withering of their authority within the household, and the immorality of the factory system. They demanded the removal of women and children from the factories, they lobbied for legislation limiting the number of working hours, they joined the Chartists in their demand for representation in parliament, or participated in other radical movements of the period. Society had to contend with "the anger of men threatened in their whole being with loss of skill, sexual and economic authority."<sup>2</sup>

It was the Reports of the Children's Employment Commission which were credited with revealing these changes in the lives of the working class. Friedrich Engels wrote in 1845 that the reports made it clear "that in all branches of industry the factory system is slowly but surely making headway," a fact which becomes particularly obvious "when one examines the increase in employment of women and children." Engels observed that "machines are being introduced everywhere and they are destroying the last vestiges of the independence of the worker."<sup>3</sup>

Where most artisans were replaced by machines, tailors were losing work directly to women, since it was cheaper to have the work done at home ("sweating" or out-work) than in the master's shop where wages were controlled by the union, and

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, translated by W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner, California: Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 236. This is a translation of the original 1845 edition Die Lage der arbeitenden klass in England, Leipzig: O. Wigand, 1845.

the work itself was organized around an apprenticeship system. The sewing machine was still more than a decade away.<sup>4</sup>

Even though tailors were not being put out of work by machines, George Cruikshank blamed them for the problems of that group of workers anyway. He argued that machines had created a taste for cheap goods among English consumers, including cheap clothing. This in turn had driven down wages the wages of the poor seamstresses.

The monster steam swallowed up whole districts of spinners and weavers as he strode over the land. Every sort of manufactured article fell in price, as the great magician -- by finishing off thousands in the same time as his predecessor Labour used to take in completing units -- caused supply to exceed demand....machinery, by producing cheap things, had forced on a taste, sometimes a necessity for cheapness in the abstract. A very large class of the public, therefore, eagerly demand productions from human labour at prices as low as those sent forth by machinery....<sup>5</sup>

In the illustration which accompanies this article, a machine powered by a sinister figure turning a crank transforms an endless stream of poor young seamstresses into clothing which is sold by a fancy shop on the other side of a curtain (fig. 22).

The appearance of women in the tailoring trade had been slowly increasing since the early decades of the century. The London Tailors Union had been one of the strongest unions in the country, with strict regulations regarding wages and female employment. Within the London tailor's union, women's labor had been allowed, but carefully restricted and kept to a minimum. Women had always worked in the non-unionized industry of sewing women's clothing, but for them to be sewing men's

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<sup>4</sup> According to Jenny Morris, a man named John Brennan was the first tailor in Leeds to introduce "power driven machines" in the 1850s. See Jenny Morris, "The Characteristics of Sweating: The Late Nineteenth Century London and Leeds Tailoring Trade," in Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918, ed. by Angela V. John, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> George Cruikshank, "Tremendous Sacrifice," Our Own Times, vol. I, no. III (1846), p. 67.

trousers and shirts was another story entirely. By 1815, the tailoring trade was already broken into two sectors, one which was "honorable" (called "flints"), which employed unionized workers in the master's shop, and one which was "dishonorable" (called "dungs"), which employed non-union workers, often female, who worked at home for significantly lower wages. The Dungs were, until the mid 1830s, the minority. But in 1834 the competition from women was great enough that the Union decided to strike, demanding an end to home work (i.e. to the employment of women). Women campaigned for their right to work and their right to equal wages, believing that the problem would be solved if the union would only allow female members. But this was resisted, and in 1834, the union collapsed. This was the death knell of the old system. Without the union there was simply no protection of wages, and the wages of male tailors, where they were still able to find work, plummeted.

Barbara Taylor has described the conflict between the honorable and dishonorable sectors of the tailoring trade as a conflict between the sexes, for it was women who were increasingly employed in out-work, in direct competition with men. During the strike female labor was vigorously attacked in the press. Barbara Taylor summed up the enormous threat that women's labor posed,

the breakdown of male craft domination had simultaneously led to the breakdown of the male bread-winning role. Competition between female and male workers at the level of the industry as a whole often translated into a new dependency on the wife's labor in the industry at the family level: for the husband, loss of craft power became a loss of manly status, of sexual authority.<sup>6</sup>

The increased presence of "tailoresses" was related to the new demand for cheap, ready-made clothing. Previously, those who were well-off had their clothes made to order by a professional ('bespoke'/male) tailor who worked in a shop. Everyone else, who could not afford custom made, either had their clothing made at

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, p. 208.

home by the women in the family, received their clothing as hand-me-downs which were adjusted to fit, or as charitable gifts from upper-class families.<sup>7</sup> But with the growth of classes which desired, and could afford to buy, new clothing, the industry underwent vast changes, "the new habits of these families, which included buying ready-made clothes once a year, meant a significant increase in the demand for clothing...."<sup>8</sup> As cheap, ready-made clothing became more widely available, it was no longer just the middle class who purchased it, but also "people in wealthy circumstances" who were "allured by the cheap prices of the show-shops."<sup>9</sup>

The demand for ready-made clothing brought enormous changes to the industry, expanding the rift between the tailors who worked within the older system, and those who increased the division of labor and hired women.

Where the tailor retained control of the work process, as in the bespoke men's tailoring trade, wages for these men remained relatively high. The production of the garment was not broken down into semi-skilled and unskilled tasks and the employment of women and girls was limited. This was the more traditional part of the tailoring trade. By contrast, in the ready-made trade, skilled workers lost a great deal of control, semi-skilled and unskilled workers increased, together with the employment of women and girls, and the payment of very low wages was more common.<sup>10</sup>

Cheap, ready-made clothing simply had to be produced at lower wages than those paid to journeymen tailors, hence the employment of women. The London Tailor's union had fought these changes tooth and nail, demanding that all work be performed at the wages they were used to receiving, but this was simply no longer

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<sup>7</sup> See Duncan Blythell, The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth Century Britain, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Schmiechen, Sweated Industries and Sweated Labor: The London Clothing Trades 1860-1914, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> "Labour and the Poor. Liverpool," The Morning Chronicle, June 24, 1850, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, p. 111.

possible. So, when E. Moses and Son, manufacturer of bespoke and ready-made clothing, wrote to The Times to defend themselves against accusations that they paid miserably low wages to the women they employed, they referred to the change in the industry, and stated that "it would be unreasonable to suppose that a garment purchasable by a poor man could be paid for in wages at the rate allowed for making gentleman's attire."<sup>11</sup>

After the collapse of the London Tailor's Union in 1834, women's labor in tailoring increased rapidly, and cheap shops, also called "slop-shops" or "show shops," where one could purchase ready-made clothing began to appear in greater numbers in the East end of London. Fabric merchants were expanding into new areas of producing clothing and selling it, for the first time, in standard sizes. These shops were seen as part of "the cheap system now so much in vogue."<sup>12</sup>

The old system of workshops did not immediately disappear, but many were forced to reduce their prices because of competition from the slop-shops. Even where prices remained high to the customer, due to the break-up of the union, and the surplus of unemployed tailors, wages could be drastically reduced by employers. The Weekly Dispatch on November 19, 1843, accused the master tailors, who had once been the backbone of the "respectable" trade, of paying their workmen as low as the slop-shops yet continuing to charge high prices for their clothing (thereby deceiving the public by pretending to be opposed to the system which produced cheap clothing). The author of this article noted that many master tailors were crying out against "the system pursued by Moses and Son," meaning the sale of cheap, ready-made clothing.

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<sup>11</sup> "Tailor's Wages. To the Editor of The Times," The Times, November 8, 1843, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Censorius, "The Distressed Situation of the Females Employed in Shirt-Making," The Weekly Dispatch, November 19, 1843, p. 557.

But there, he wrote, at least the situation is honest, for when "you get a cheap coat; you know that it has been got up at a cheap rate...."<sup>13</sup>

Although the failure of the strike of the London Tailor's Union had occurred almost ten years before the period we are discussing, its relationship to the system of cheap wages and prices which was taking over was far from forgotten. In a Times article on Biddell, the impoverished seamstress who had been forced to pawn the clothing she had been given to sew in order to feed herself and her children, the author referred to the high wages that tailors had been paid in the past, and blamed the current situation on Jewish slop-sellers,

Our readers may, probably, remember that a grand strike of the journeymen tailors of the metropolis took place some years since, but that it failed to raise their average wages, as they had intended....the woman Biddell must have toiled ninety-six hours a week, sixteen hours every week day, or nearly fourteen hours every day, including Sunday, in order to earn her cruelly miserable pittance of 7s; while for a similar amount of labour, the regular journeyman tailor would be paid 2l 8s....the starvation tariff established by these Jew slop-sellers and their middlewomen -- Jews in heart when they may not belong to the nation -- is a scandalous outrage on humanity....<sup>14</sup>

"E. Moses and Son, tailors, wholesale and retail woolen-drapers, general outfitters, &c." was probably one of the first "slop-shops" or places to purchase cheap, ready-made clothing. Moses and Sons ran this advertisement in The Times in January 1842,

The enormous trade they do in every land leave markets -- manufactures -- all at their command. Their extensive store proclaims the hit they've made, The largest in the world in the tailoring trade; From Aldgate to Minories hundreds of feet through, Walk up either stairs their splendid showrooms view -- Of

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<sup>13</sup> "The Journeymen Tailors of the Metropolis," The Weekly Dispatch, November 5, 1843, p. 536.

<sup>14</sup> The Times, October 27, 1843, p. 4.

their bespoke department, where every texture -- style -- Of newest -- choicest -- goods appear in ample pile....<sup>15</sup>

Seamstress literature is filled with nasty references to this new type of "show shop," the way that it looked, the way that customers were treated, and the type of labor employed. There was seen to be a clear difference between the new Jewish slop-shops and those run by Christians. Many of the articles on seamstresses which appeared in the press focus on the features of the new "slop" or "show" shops that are mentioned in the ad quoted above, their "splendid showrooms," and "extensive" size. The shops were described as "houses in the metropolis fitted up like palaces" (sounds like Bloomingdales or The Express today) which advertised with "elegantly embellished circulars attached to covers of magazines"<sup>16</sup> and which had "handsome plate-glass fronts."<sup>17</sup> Another article described the "show shops" advertising with "ostentatious placards"<sup>18</sup> with their goods "displayed behind plate-glass, in splendid shops which are surmounted with gilt cornices, panelled with mirrors, and floored with carpet."<sup>19</sup> Lurking behind these snide descriptions is often a hatred of the new form of capitalist production, sales strategies, and mass consumerism.

Not everyone denounced the new slop-shops, however. There were those who found them to be a great attraction of the city, a sign of London's modernism,

Shops form no inconsiderable part and parcel of the attractions of London, and make up no contemptible share of its grandeur and power...It is not merely that

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<sup>15</sup> The advertisement appeared in the supplement to The Times on July 11, 1842, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> This phrase is from a letter to the editor signed "A Needle-Maker" entitled "Sewing and Seamstresses," The Times, November 14, 1843, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to the editor of The Sun, entitled, "Tailor's Wages," The Sun, November 7, 1843, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> "Labour and the Poor. Liverpool," The Morning Chronicle, June 24, 1850, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> George Cruikshank, "Tremendous Sacrifice," Our Own Times, vol. I (1846), p. 68.

the lace and shawl-loving dame therein feasts her fair eyes upon the delicacies of Brussels, and the richness of Cashmere, or that the laughter-loving man...may luxuriate by the hour -- grinning through plate glass, at the fun of caricature...they teach a more profound lesson. They talk to us of civilization; they put us in mind of our refinement, by showing us our varied wants...by exhibiting the ingenious contrivances, the slow growth of ages, which minister to it.<sup>20</sup>

This article was accompanied by an illustration (fig. 23) of a fancy shop (in a classical style building) with tall windows on a London street. Two women converse while standing in the doorway, another couple passes by, perhaps on their way in, or just window shopping. Across the way a poor woman sells items at a table on the street. The article (unusually) contains no moralizing on the relationship of the rich and the poor.

In 1850, The Penny Illustrated News ran an article entitled "The Metropolitan Jews," which was accompanied by an illustration, "The Jews -- Clothes Dealers" (fig. 24). Here, two grossly caricatured Jews with hooked noses and greedy conspiratorial grins engage a reluctant customer. The article compares the Jewish and Christian shop owners, the different way they display their goods, and the aggressiveness with which Jews find customers:

To this day the indomitable, indefatigable, unwearying endeavour of the Jew is to acquire a fortune. The Christian, perhaps diligently, keeps behind his counter; but the Jew is out keeping his shop window. The wares of the former, perhaps tastefully, are laid within his premises; but the latter has his flaunting in the wind and waving to the passengers on the street. The Englishman is satisfied with the power of invitation, which a tastefully decorated window may possess; but he of Palestine makes personal application to every one who may possibly yield to the syren request. It is remarkable how carefully they select the chance currency of the street. They seem to have an instinctive or an intuitive knowledge of a possible or probable customer. Some

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<sup>20</sup> Agnus B. Reach, "The Philosophy of Shops," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. 3 (October 1844), p. 319.

they merely salute, some they make an offer, but others they will follow several steps beyond their little window beat.<sup>21</sup>

Punch carried a satirical article on what they saw as the aggressive sales approach of Moses and Son. In the article, "A Hint for Moses," a fictional reader complains about the deceptive advertising of an establishment named "E. Aaron and Co" (an obvious play on E. Moses and Son). Attracted by the shop's "unrivalled plate-glass windows," he stood outside and watched a country baronet and his son who likewise admired the shop and its wares. He noticed that the baronet and his son were invited in by Mr. Aaron, who sold the son a new outfit. He commented that "several persons had been spectators of the scene...and I have no doubt that many were attracted by the exhibition, and determined to bring their own children to the emporium." Yet the observer discovered that he, and the others who were watching, had been duped, the entire scene was merely a ploy designed to attract customers. The very next day "when the busy throng crowd thickest in that commercial quarter," he saw the same exact scene being enacted. This article was accompanied by two illustrations. One shows the baronet and his son outside the shop and its plate-glass windows, in the background, the face of a figure with a hooked nose peaks out the window of the shop and grins knowingly. The other illustration shows the son being measured for clothing inside the shop, on the reverse side of the plate-glass windows by a man with a long, hooked nose, while the father looks on proudly (fig. 25).<sup>22</sup>

Punch, which adopted a consistently antisemitic tone during this period, also published a satirical review of a booklet published by Moses and Son advertising their firm and listing prices, entitled The Commercial Phenomenon. The so-called review included a design for a mock "Moses testimonial" (fig. 21) with two devilish Jews on

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<sup>21</sup> "The Metropolitan Jews," The Penny Illustrated News, 1850, p. 462.

<sup>22</sup> "A Hint for Moses," Punch, vol. 7 (1844), p. 19.

either side of a trophy, and at the base, two victims (a seamstress and a tailor) of the new mode of production.<sup>23</sup>

The inside of one of these new slop-shops is depicted more extensively in an illustration by George Cruikshank, entitled "Tremendous Sacrifice!" (fig. 22). The title mockingly refers to the shop's advertisement -- that the shop is selling their goods so cheaply (due to a fictional calamity of some sort), that they are making a "tremendous sacrifice." The author of the article which accompanies the illustration, also apparently Cruikshank, remarks that "there is, in fact, a regular permanent system at work, by which sacrifices are yearly, daily, hourly made, and tremendous ones too; but not such as the advertising retailers imply." The sacrifice is, instead, the "unfortunate beings who are doomed to wear away their short lives in incessant toil for sixpence a day."<sup>24</sup>

The shop has high ceilings and a sign on the wall which reads "cheap house." It is filled with ladies who appear thrilled with the bargains. One remarks, "I cannot imagine how they can possibly be made for the price!" In this scene, the devious shopkeepers seem to be hiding how their garments are made in order to safeguard their profits. The salesmen are clearly intended to be Jewish. Their hooked noses and angular faces resemble the features of the figures in an illustration from 1850 entitled, "The Jews -- Clothes Dealers," which appeared in The Penny Illustrated News (fig. 24).<sup>25</sup> Similar features appear on the face of a Jewish clothing salesman, Mr. Moses, in a Punch illustration from 1848 entitled "Mr. Smith and Mr Moses" (fig. 34). In this cartoon the ousted French king Louis-Philippe is ironically shown shopping at a slop-shop -- "the palace of Moses and Son."

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<sup>23</sup> "Punch's Review: 'The Commercial Phenomenon.' Moses and Son. Small quarto," Punch, volume 7 (1844), p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> George Cruikshank, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> "The Metropolitan Jews," The Penny Illustrated News (1850), p. 462.

Punch published a poem entitled "Song of the Cheap Customer," which might be said to represent the other side of the story from Hood's "The Song of the Shirt." Hood's poem was sentimental and serious, but this one, told from the point of view of the selfish bargain-hunting customer who is very pleased with the cheap goods he has purchased, mocks the callousness and righteousness of the speaker. The poem is worth quoting in its entirety because its terms (the "respectable" tailor, the slop-shop) are the ones we have been discussing.

Hurrah for cheap clothing! I want not to know  
 How the work or material was got;  
 If the article's good, and the figure is low,  
 For the wherefore I care not a jot.  
 Make me out to encourage oppression and vice,  
 On my beggarly meanness enlarge; --  
 Ha! I get a whole suit at one half of the price  
 A respectable tailor would charge.

Hurrah for the Saxony coat superfine,  
 Which I buy for about two pounds ten!  
 If Theft furnished the cloth, 'tis no business of mine,  
 If starvation the stitching, -- what then?  
 Hurrah for the trousers of best kerseymere,  
 And the gay satin vest at thirteen!  
 To employ any tradesman, although he is dear,  
 All because he is honest, -- how green!

And hurrah for the shirt for whose purchase I pay  
 From a couple of shillings to three,  
 Wrought by famishing Need at a farthing a day;  
 What on earth can that matter to me?  
 All I want is to dress at the smallest expense,  
 In as stylish a way as I can,  
 Like a practical, straightforward, plain, common sense,  
 Economical, provident man.

That to clothe me the skinflint and swindler combine,  
 Is a fact I don't ponder about,  
 And that thousands in hunger and wretchedness pine,  
 I regard their employers' look out,  
 To procure all my goods at the lowest of shops

Is the course that I mean to pursue;  
 Then hurrah for low tailors and sellers of slops!  
 Be they Heathen, or Christian, or Jew!<sup>26</sup>

Yet another poem was written on this subject, this one from the viewpoint of the slop-seller, who is obviously, because of his accent, a Jew. The title is "A Word for the 'Song of the Shirt,'" and it was published in Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany,

A slopseller sat, sipping his wine,  
 Reading the 'Song of the Shirt,'  
 Perplexed and vexed with every line,  
 He seems with a rival feeling hurt.  
 Quoting 'In poverty, hunger and dirt,'  
 He leapt from his seat and seizing a harp,  
 He sung, in accents shrill and sharp,  
 A word for the 'Song of the Shirt.'<sup>27</sup>

As we have seen, Jewish slop-sellers, and particularly the firm of Moses and Son, appeared everywhere as both a symbol of the new modes of production and the new, more aggressive way of advertising and selling to an enlarged middle class. Because Moses and Son was run by Jews and had an obviously Jewish name, they were scapegoated by the press as the perpetrators of the "cheap system," as though they had somehow invented it and made it take over the old "honorable" system (even the term "honorable" or "respectable" here has sinister associations). They were seen as the oppressors of honest Christian workmen and women.

It was obviously necessary to find "outsiders" like the Jews (who were stereotypically greedy) to blame for the consequences of the progress of capitalism: the loss of thousands of jobs on the part of skilled workmen (including the male tailors), the diminished standard of living of thousands of families, and the employment of women in the men's tailoring trade. Although it is difficult to know how many of

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<sup>26</sup> "Song of the Cheap Customer," Punch, volume 7 (1844), p. 255.

<sup>27</sup> T. Alfred F. Stratford, "A Word for the 'Song of the Shirt,'" Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany, vol. 3 (1844), p. 379.

these shops were actually owned by Jews,<sup>28</sup> the term "Jew slop-seller" was used so frequently that it seemed as though there were no slopsellers who were not Jewish. The Satirist termed Mr. Moses "the great Hebrew slop-seller" who, like all the slopsellers, pay "a starvation price for female labor."<sup>29</sup> And the Illustrated London News reported on the "cruel labour" of the sempstress and the "Jew slopseller's extortion from destitution."<sup>30</sup>

Anti-semitism is present from the very beginning of the seamstress myth. One of the first articles on slop-workers which appeared in The Times stated that seamstresses were very often from good families, and so were unused to the rudeness they encounter from "vulgar and purse-proud tradesman." The author's antisemitism and resistance to the new forms of capitalism becomes even more clear when he writes that

the more respectable outfitters are less unfeeling and in many cases offer a fair remuneration for a fair day's work; it is the low-bred grasping Jews in the vicinities of Aldgate, Bishopsgate, and the docks, who are enabled to deceive the public by attractive exhibitions of 'low prices,' because they pay little or nothing for the labour of the persons they employ. Let those who encourage these 'cheap shops' delight, if they can, in the thought that they have obtained an article at half the usual price, for they must remember that scalding tears have been shed over that boasted bargain -- the bitter tears of the poor, hard-worked and the starved: they must remember that they are the accomplices in

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<sup>28</sup> Jenny Morris writes that the subcontractors in the tailoring trade were "mainly Jewish," and that they were recent immigrants. My feeling is that the intense anti-semitism which was aroused during this period of enormous change makes it difficult to determine whether the industry was numerically dominated by Jews. Morris also writes about the firm of "Moses Moses" and the "Moss Bros.," but I am not sure if this is the same firm that I encountered in my research. Morris, "The Characteristics of Sweating: The Late Nineteenth Century London and Leeds Tailoring Trade," pp. 106, 107 and 111.

<sup>29</sup> This article refers not to E. Moses and Son, but to Henry Moses, the man who caused the scandal regarding the woman named Biddell. "Snips and Slopsellers," The Satirist, November 5, 1843, p. 363.

<sup>30</sup> "Female Labour," Illustrated London News, vol. IV (January 27, 1844), p. 49.

the cruel oppression of the distressed -- that they aid and encourage the oppressors.<sup>31</sup>

The antisemitism found in seamstress literature continued into the next decade and beyond. In a story published in 1850 entitled "Lucy Dean; the Noble Needlewoman," Miss Moss (a thinly veiled illusion to the firm of Moses and Son?), the cruel employer of innocent Lucy is described as a "monstrously fat jewess, very gaudily attired" and her son Moses' voice is described as "strongly nasal, with a Jewish accent."<sup>32</sup>

Seamstresses were a potent sign of the painful changes that were taking place in the 1840s -- of all the skilled, hitherto respected and decently paid workers who had lost their status, and were made redundant, and thereby poor, by the unheeding progress of capitalism. It felt like a struggle of good versus evil, and this was symbolized by an imagined conspiracy of outsiders, Jews -- who were seen to embody the greed that seemed to be so much of a part of the new system. The presence of women in the workforce, and the dramatic class changes that were taking place were resisted on the level of the visible form they took in the city: the cheap clothing stores with their fancy window displays, and their splendid interiors. The rampant anti-semitism which is obvious in so much of the writing on seamstresses is a good

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<sup>31</sup> This is from a letter to the editor of The Times by someone who signed themselves "Compassion." The letter was titled, "A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work," The Times, May 13, 1843, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Silverpen [Eliza Meteyard], "Lucy Dean; the Noble Needlewoman," Eliza Cook's Journal, March 26, 1850, p. 314.

indication of how deeply disturbing the changes were felt to be, and an indication of the level of resistance to both the new form of consumerism and production.

## Chapter Four

### FOR THE NEEDLE SHE?

The 1840s was an important decade in the emergence of a feminist consciousness. It was in these years that "Woman" emerged as a social problem,<sup>1</sup> a fact that was readily apparent to contemporaries. Mrs. Jameson, in an essay written in 1843 entitled, "Woman's Mission, and Woman's Position" recognized that, "the press has lately teemed with works of which the condition, the destiny of women is in some form or another the subject....It is the popular theme of the day."<sup>2</sup>

It is no accident that the same period -- the early 1840s -- saw the proliferation of seamstress images and literature, since a primary issue in the debates about women was work. Sewing was in many ways the ultimate sign of femininity. It was sedentary, passive, not particularly intellectual, and it was traditionally done only for the care and maintenance of the family and home. As such, it became a symbol of woman's "natural" and God-given work at a time when those notions were under fire from a number of directions. On the other hand, for those women who yearned for a place in the world outside the home, the dull, repetitious act of plying the needle represented their unfair confinement to the domestic sphere. Seamstresses thus became a symbol for early feminists of women's need for education and decently paid work, since sewing (with its low wages and long hours) was one of only two occupations open to middle-class women (the other one was becoming a governess).

In the literature of the period the needle itself often stood for woman's "natural" place in the home, and carried powerful associations of domestic bliss and

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<sup>1</sup> See Sally Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Difference in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History," History Workshop Journal, vols. 17-18 (1984), pp. 130-149.

<sup>2</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], "Condition of the Women and the Female Children," The Athenaeum, vol. 16 (March 18, 1843), p. 257.

maternal devotion. In Tennyson's pseudo-feminist poem The Princess (also written in the important decade of the 1840s -- in 1847),<sup>3</sup> one character vainly insists:

Man for the field and woman for the  
                   hearth;  
 Man for the sword, and for the needle  
                   she;  
 Man with the head, and woman with  
                   the heart;  
 Man to command, and woman to  
                   obey;  
 All else confusion<sup>4</sup>

This character's insistence on traditional and separate realms for men and women is shown, in the poem itself, to be futile. It was clear to Tennyson and many of his contemporaries that the world was already quite different from the way his character described it.

A publication of 1843 entitled Plain Needlework reveals more about the sentimental, domestic, familial, and above all feminine, associations of the needle,

No one can look upon the needle without emotion: it is a constant companion throughout the pilgrimage of life.... The little girl first employs it in the dressing up of her doll, then she is taught its still higher use, in making up some necessary articles for a beloved brother or a revered parent. Approaching to womanhood, additional preparations of articles of use...call for its daily employment; and with what tender emotions does the glittering steel inspire the bosom, as beneath its magic touch that which is to deck a lover, or adorn a bride, becomes visible in the charming productions of female skill and fond regard.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See John Killham, Tennyson and the Princess. Reflections of an Age, London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1899, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> The book (the author is unknown to me) is quoted in a review published in The Weekly Dispatch, March 5, 1843, p. 118.

The needle is woman's "constant companion" through all the stages of a life, from childhood through courtship and motherhood, all in the service of the family. It is no wonder then that needlework performed for the marketplace, for strangers (not unlike prostitution), became a source of intense anxiety. Ideological notions of love, marriage, motherhood, home, morality and stability all became dislocated when the needle moved from the home to the garret.

The kind of domestic nostalgia reflected in the quote above, which centered around a woman sewing, can also be found in Ford Madox Brown's painting, An English Fireside (fig. 26). Recalling Dutch genre paintings, a woman who is sewing with a child in her lap is dramatically illuminated by the light beside her. This blissful domestic scene could never be mistaken for the image of domestic travesty that we see in Redgrave's The Sempstress (fig. 3). The woman in Brown's painting is where she should be: she is truly home. Her husband may be working late, or already asleep, but his presence is clear. The child which sleeps on the woman's lap while both are warmed by the fire, and the lack of a window, indicate a safe, protected and "natural" environment. Redgrave's seamstress on the other hand, is truly alone. The bare walls of her garret contrast with the cozy middle-class furnishings in Brown's painting, and the window in the background reminds us of the dangers of the city which are fast encroaching on the seamstress's virtue and health.

By the 1840s, though, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, it was painfully clear that the domestic ideal of a perfect woman at home patiently plying her needle (like the one visualized in Brown's painting) and exerting a profound moral impact on her husband and children, was just that: an ideal only. Anne Richelieu Dryden in Can Women Regenerate Society? (1844) wrote,

a book can scarcely be opened without meeting therein the assertion, that woman is the secret and silent spring which keeps us all right; that in her hands is placed that mighty engine 'the morals of society;' that she is the keeper of the Soul of the Social System, &c.

But, she asked, "is it that women are really thus?" And the answer she finds is the negative, "we are daily told that our power is great, if we only knew how to use it; I regret to say that for my own part I have never yet been fully made aware of this power, and therefore cannot recognize the influence of woman to be what is represented." She continues, illuminating what she holds to be the real state of affairs regarding women's capacity to influence the world around them,

she is tolerated, perhaps, but laughed at for her pains; she may dance, sing, and be a child as long as she pleases, write pretty stories, string rosy words in rhyme, -- but to help in devising or practicing such schemes, as may be for the real benefit of mankind, becomes in her, a matter for ridicule, a subject for merriment, impertinence not to be endured!<sup>6</sup>

Not only was it true that woman's "mission" in the home was not what the books made it out to be, but it was also true that many women were not even home. The reports of the Children's Employment Commission -- with their revelations of women toiling long hours in garrets and workrooms -- made it clear that women were in fact working. Lower middle class, middle-class and even upper-class women ("distressed gentlewomen") were increasingly put in the position of having to support themselves. Mrs. Jameson noted that "attorneys and apothecaries, tradesmen and shopkeepers, banker's clerks &c., in this class more than two-thirds of the women are now obliged to earn their own bread."<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Jameson and other early feminists blamed the persistent rhetoric "preached...by moralists, sung...by poets" of woman's holy mission as wife and mother,

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<sup>6</sup> [Anne Richelieu Dryden], Can Women Regenerate Society?, London: John W. Parker, 1844, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 258.

and the denial that "the real state of things is totally at variance" with that rhetoric, for the low wages and miserable working conditions of actual women.<sup>8</sup> "'Woman's Mission,' of which people talk so well and write so prettily," Mrs. Jameson wrote, "is irreconcilable with woman's position, of which no one dares to think, much less to speak."<sup>9</sup>

Harriet Martineau perceived the same paradox. In her book Society in America (1842), she wrote that in countries (like America, and one presumes England) where it is boasted that women do not work, women do in fact have to work. In some parts of America, she wrote, "there are now so many women dependent on their own exertions for a maintenance that the evil will give way before the force of circumstances." Yet, she noted that the "encouragement and rewards of labour are not provided."<sup>10</sup> Martineau, like Jameson, blamed the "chivalrous" attitude toward women for the tragic lack of real jobs for women at decent wages.

Punch recognized (with a bit of humor, of course) the rift between the ideal "Woman" and what many "women" *really* did in a short piece inspired by a book entitled Woman's Mission. The author of the Punch article noted that, although "washing, ironing, baking, brewing, frying, stewing, roasting, boiling, scouring, scrubbing, grate-cleaning, turning the mangle...selling apples, and carrying fish" are the "mission of some women" they are "not by any means that of Woman..." Woman

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Martineau, Society in America, Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1842, p. 177.

(with a capital "W") is "that charming, smiling, bewitching, fascinating abstraction..." And what was "Woman's" mission, according to this author? Sewing, of course, because the female hand has "delicate and taper fingers; thus exhibiting an admirable provision of Nature for darning the stocking." And the female middle finger is "especially fashioned for the thimble." And for what reason did "Nature" give women these talents? "To replace the shirt-button of the father, -- the brother, -- the husband..."<sup>11</sup> It seems that, whether one was writing about "Woman" or women in the 1840s, sewing was an unavoidable topic.

Yet with all the talk about "Woman" and women, a kind of blind-spot emerged in the writing of the period around who exactly was being talked about. Working-class women had, after all, always worked. The truly disturbing revelation contained in the Second Report was that middle-class women were working -- as seamstresses. One need only think of the comparative disinterest in laundering, an occupation, like sewing, in which many women found employment in London (there were few factories in the city). While laundering was based, like sewing, on women's domestic work, it involved hard, manual labor, and a certain amount of undress, neither of which would have been appropriate for middle and upper-class women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Woman's Mission," Punch, vol. 5 (1843), p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> For information on laundering, see Patricia Malcolmson, English Laundresses, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986. She acknowledges that the laundress was a far less popular figure than "the more refined dressmaker." And that the laundress and her work were "too commonplace, too rough, and too undramatic to attract much interest..." (p. 5)

Sewing and teaching were seen as the only occupations for which middle and upper-class women had some "natural" training, and not all had enough training to be a governess.<sup>13</sup> If a middle or upper-class woman chose to sew for a living, if she could pay a premium and learn the trade, she would have entered the higher end of employment with the needle, dressmaking and millinery. Sewing men's shirts and other ready-made garments would have been considered only as a last resort for women from more genteel backgrounds, yet, because it allowed one to remain independent, it may have been preferable to the only other option -- domestic service.<sup>14</sup> Unlike painting or writing, which some women were taking up as a

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<sup>13</sup> In one seamstress story, a destitute sixteen year old girl (who, it turns out in the end, is really upper-class) considers her options. She can not be a governess because she is not qualified (she knows French, but not how to speak it), and so she decides to go to London to be a dressmaker's apprentice. Mrs. Stone, The Young Milliner, London: Cummingham and Mortimer, 1843, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> While teaching and sewing were both options available to middle-class women, only the lowest paid sewing -- slop-work -- would have been an option for someone from the working-class, who would not have had the prerequisite education for performing the duties of a governess, or the training to be a dressmaker. The fact that teaching and dressmaking were the only occupations that were seen as suitable for women from the middle class explains, at least in part, the fascination (in art, literature, and the press) on the part of the middle-class public with governesses and seamstresses. This was a problem that they could empathize with. It could, after all, happen to them, or to their sisters, given the unstable economy of the 1840s. The concern for governesses occurred at approximately the same time as seamstresses -- in the early 1840s. And at least in Punch, this concern is tainted with the same anti-semitism (see "The 'Eight Pound' Governess," Punch, vol. 7 (1844), p. 26). In addition to the fact that the seamstress and governess were often both fallen gentility, the literature of the period evokes a similar sense of sexual availability for both, since both could be seen in "society," and yet were not protected by the same norms as middle-class women. While modern historians have recognized that the attention that the governess received in the early Victorian era is "disproportionate to the problem," and have tried to explain this, not as much work has been done to explain the disproportionate interest in seamstresses. This is perhaps due to the fact that there is not as much canonical literature with seamstress protagonists as there is with governesses (i.e. Bronte's Jane Eyre and Thackeray's Vanity Fair). For more information on the governess see M.

profession, "needlework and teaching the young...seem the natural employments of women, and in harmony with all her instincts..."<sup>15</sup>

A woman, from the uneducated classes, can get a subsistence by washing and cooking, by milking cows and going to service, in some parts of the Kingdom by working in a cotton mill, &c. But for an educated woman...there is in England no chance of subsistence but by teaching...or by being the feminine gender of the tailor and the hatter.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Jameson complained bitterly about the particularly vulnerable position of middle-class women who were forced to support themselves, "What shall she be? A governess? That is always the first thought; it is the only genteel profession open to her....She has one other resource, she can be a dress-maker."<sup>17</sup> And Martineau wrote that "for women who shrink from the lot of needlewoman, -- almost equally dreadful, from the fashionable milliner down to the humble stocking-darner, -- for those who shrink through pride, or fear of sickness, poverty or temptation, there is little resource but pretension to teach."<sup>18</sup>

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Jeanne Peterson, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society," in Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, edited by Martha Vicinus, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973, pp. 3-19. For a more recent discussion see chapter 5, "The Anathematized Race: The Governess and Jane Eyre," in Mary Poovey's, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 126-163. As Poovey points out, both occupations (seamstress and governess) were referred to at the time as "white slavery." But Poovey makes a distinction between the governess and the seamstress, who she sees as working class, thereby overlooking the fact that the seamstress was often, like the governess, fallen gentility. My conclusions about the seamstress are similar to Poovey's on the governess, that the interest in these figures was heightened by the socially unstable period of the 1840s, and the importance that women were given in guaranteeing social stability.

<sup>15</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 258.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Martineau, p. 178.

What Mrs. Jameson, Harriet Martineau and others decried was the lack of professions open to middle-class women who needed to work. The hardships of governessing and being a sempstress were elaborated by Martineau and Jameson as evidence of the necessity of making it socially acceptable for women to perform other kinds of work, and educating them for it. The seamstress, according to Mrs. Jameson, "goes forth into the streets, or shrinks into a lonely garret to make shirts for 6d. a piece."<sup>19</sup> And Martineau pointed to the poor health of seamstresses, and asked "whether it is not inconsistent with common humanity that women should depend for bread upon such employment."<sup>20</sup> If it was admitted that some women had to work, it was reasoned, then new, and presumably more remunerative occupations should be opened up to women.

The impoverished seamstress thus became, for Martineau, Jameson, and others, a symbol of the consequences of a hypocritical society that circumscribed women's lives, preached that they should not work, and consequently made almost no occupations open to them, while forcing them, at the same time, to work. This was what Jameson saw as the "anomalous" and contradictory position of women, "a state of opinion, a license of custom, which makes a home and a protection necessary to her, and a state of things which throws her into the midst of the world, to struggle and toil for her daily bread."<sup>21</sup>

Redgrave's exhibition of The Sempstress (fig. 3) at the Royal Academy in 1844, was preceded and followed by paintings by the artist on the subject of the

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<sup>19</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> Martineau, p. 178. The hardships of being a governess, and the specific possibility of an emotional breakdown are brought up in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley, when Mrs. Pryor tries to persuade Caroline not to become a governess. Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, New York: Penguin Books, 1983, pp. 363-5.

<sup>21</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 258.

governess.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the timing of these paintings, as well as their visual similarities, suggest that Redgrave (and/or the public who saw these at the Royal Academy) understood them in the context of the current debates about women's work. The images seem almost like bookends. In the earlier version of the painting, The Poor Teacher (fig. 27), a young woman sits in front of a table with her eyes downcast facing to the right, holding a letter in her lap which carries news about a death in the family. In The Sempstress the figure sits behind a table facing left, holding a shirt in her hands and looking upward. In both paintings, the figures' faces are illuminated, although the rest of the painting is comparatively dark, and at the upper left edge of both images is a window which serves to emphasize the figures' isolation and sense of entrapment. As we have seen in much of the literature on women and work, teaching and needlework are presented as an either/or situation, much the way they seem in Redgrave's paintings.

It is important to see women's position in this period not only from the point of view of the work that they were allowed to perform, but also the enormous amount of work which they were not allowed to perform. What is a woman to do, Jameson asked, "She can write a good hand and keep accounts; she might be a clerk or a cashier, or an assistant in a mercantile house; but who would employ her? Who would countenance such an invitation on all our English ideas of feminine propriety?"<sup>23</sup> Sally Alexander has listed the occupations in London where women were not to be found:

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<sup>22</sup> Redgrave painted at least four versions of the subject. The original version (location unknown) was titled The Poor Teacher and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1843. Another version, entitled The Governess was painted for John Sheepshanks who asked Redgrave to add three children to the scene, this version is probably the one exhibited in 1845, and is currently at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. For a full discussion of the different versions and the engravings of the painting see Richard Redgrave, edited by Susan P. Casteras and Ronald Parkinson, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 257.

women were not found in the skilled and heavy work in shipbuilding and engineering, two of London's staple industries....Neither were they employed in the docks and warehouses, nor their subsidiary trades. There were no women in the public utilities, (gas, building etc.) or transport, nor in semi-processing and extractive industries -- sugar refining, soap manufacture, blacking, copper and lead working and the 'noxious' trades -- which were London's principal factory trades in this period. Finally, women were excluded from the professions, the civil service, clerical work, the scientific trades, and had been excluded from the old guild crafts...since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup>

Some women did manage to find alternatives to governessing and needlework, such as writing or painting. Emily Osborn, one of a small number of women artists during this period to have a long and successful career, painted an image of a "distressed gentlewoman" (a woman who might also try her hand at being a governess or a seamstress) attempting to sell her paintings.<sup>25</sup> This painting, entitled Nameless and Friendless (fig. 28), depicts a woman dressed in mourning clothes showing her work to the manager of an art gallery.<sup>26</sup> The woman's embarrassing public exposure of her desperation is painful to witness, and we are almost made to feel that her work

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<sup>24</sup> Sally Alexander, "Women's Work in Nineteenth Century London' A Study of the Years 1820-50," in The Rights and Wrongs of Women, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on Women artists in the Victorian era, see Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Victorian Women Artists, London: The Women's Press Limited, 1987; Deborah Cherry, Painting Women. Victorian Women Artists, London: Routledge, 1993; and Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., Women in the Victorian Art World, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> The painting's subject (a woman artist offering a work of her own creation for sale) was identified by a contemporary reviewer for the Art Journal (see "The Royal Academy," Art Journal 19 (1857), p. 170. For a thorough discussion of this painting see Susan P. Casteras, Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987, p. 104.

can not possibly be good enough precisely because she is a woman. The painting, focusing as it does on the "distressed gentlewoman," reveals just how difficult it was to envision a strong and successful woman artist, even for a woman artist herself.<sup>27</sup> The trials that await the struggling artist are hinted at by the men in the corner who examine a print of a ballerina while eyeing her as though she were prey. Like seamstress images, the location of this sad scene is made clear by the view out the windows to the streets of city, where the inclement weather tells us more about the artist's vulnerability and need for protection.

Anna Blunden, another woman artist from this period, was trained as a governess but found the occupation disappointing. Blunden studied painting at Leigh's Academy in London, where women had the rare opportunity of studying anatomy, yet she was clearly aware of the limited opportunities for women who wanted training to become artists. In 1859 she joined thirty-seven other women (including Osborn) in petitioning the Royal Academy for entry into their schools. In what must have been in part a reaction to the difficulties faced by women artists, Blunden involved herself in an obsessive and self-destructive relationship (which existed primarily in her fantasies and on paper) with the most powerful art critic of the day, John Ruskin, who urged her in 1862 to give up figure paintings in favor of landscapes.

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<sup>27</sup> See Cherry's discussion of this painting. She writes that Osborn's Nameless and Friendless is: "on the borderlines of class and at the margins of feminine respectability this image of a woman artist selling her work tested the limits of pictorial propriety and it could only be accommodated within the discursive category of the distressed gentlewoman, already widely circulated in paintings, magazine illustrations, novels, investigative journalism and in philanthropic reports on indigent governesses" (p. 79).

Yet Blunden seems to have wanted, at least at the beginning of her career, to paint serious and reform-minded "modern life" subjects, like Richard Redgrave before her. Her painting of an impoverished seamstress formed her exhibition debut at the Society for British Artists in 1854 (fig. 29). The painting (exhibited with four lines from Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt") employs all the standard iconography of the subject (the garret window with its view of the city, the sewing implements on the table), yet Blunden improved upon Richard Redgrave's prototypical image (fig. 3). She emphasized the seamstress's sense of entrapment and plea for release by focusing solely on the upper body of the figure, framing it with an open window whose wooden slats read like the bars of a prison.<sup>28</sup>

The 1840s did see the emergence of institutions designed to educate women for higher paying employment. A Female School of Design was opened in 1842 in an attempt to provide both working-class and middle-class women with quality training to

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<sup>28</sup> For more information on Anna Blunden see Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, pp. 58-65. Blunden, who needed to support herself through her efforts as an artist, may have seen the subject as one that could earn her both recognition and income, since the poet of "The Song of the Shirt" had resurfaced in the minds of the public in 1854 as journalists debated a public monument to its author, Thomas Hood. Blunden's efforts were rewarded when the painting was engraved and appeared in Illustrated London News in 1854, and in the Penny Illustrated Paper in 1862. Blunden seems to have been aware that the plight of the seamstresses was often compared to the lives of African slaves, and that seamstresses were often referred to as the "white slaves of England." Her painting from just one year earlier than The Seamstress, Uncle Tom's Cabin (1853) (illustrated in Marsh and Nunn, fig. 4), taken from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about the evils of slavery, represents the moment when Eva puts her hand on Topsy's shoulder and tells her that she loves her. In this painting, a female heroine seeks to undo the dehumanizing effects of a cruel and unjust system, and in The Seamstress, a woman is nearly destroyed by a similarly enslaving system. Together, the iconography of these two pictures suggests that Blunden may have been offering a critique of the hypocrisy of nominally Christian nations that do not live by Christian principles of charity and love. In addition, she may be suggesting that the desire for wealth and luxury breeds moral indifference. Both of these themes were prominent in Stowe's novel, as well as in literature on seamstresses. Like the painting of a distressed seamstress, Blunden's painting of Topsy and Eva was timely, dating from the same year as Stowe's tour of England.

become artisans. Mrs. Jameson wrote about the enormous protests that accompanied the formation of this school. Like seamstress tales with their stories of endangered female virtue, she noted that the protests for the most part concerned "morals," and she remarked ironically that "one would have thought that half London was to be demoralized because a class of twenty or thirty girls were taught to use a pencil, under the same roof with a class of boys, though the two schools were separated from each other by three stories!"<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the issue of protecting women's "morals" was a kind of displacement of the anxiety felt by men at the thought of women empowered by education and entering the workforce.

Within the current limitations of the discourse on working women, Martineau's and Jameson's demands for education and widened opportunities for women were quite radical. They both used the current scandals on impoverished working women (and seamstresses more specifically) as an opportunity to call for a wider rethinking of women's roles generally, and to envision a time when women were not limited in the work that they could do. Martineau went so far as to claim that the evil "lies deep; it lies in the subordination of the sex."<sup>30</sup> And she predicted that in times to come, "life and its occupations will be freely thrown open to women as to men."<sup>31</sup> And Mrs Jameson saw the need for women to work as "an obligation which the advance of civilization, no less than the pressure of the times, has forced upon them" and she accurately predicted that it was "an obligation of which womankind, in the long run, will not have reason to complain."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 259.

<sup>30</sup> Martineau, p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> Martineau, p. 178.

<sup>32</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], p. 258.

In fact, many women who had no need to work, were, at that very moment, complaining about the enforced idleness which was the mark of a "lady," "in consequence of the want of mental pursuits, nay, proper employment of any kind, women often become the prey of inanity and nervousness to such an extent that the latter is in numerous cases the very bane of their existence."<sup>33</sup>

Charlotte Bronte, in her novel Shirley (1849), placed the dull repetition of domestic sewing in opposition to women's need for more stimulation, for real work. Caroline, one of two strong female protagonists in the novel does her needlework while yearning all the while for a profession, for "something absorbing and compulsory to fill her head and hands,"

she plied her needle continuously, ceaselessly; but her brain worked faster than her fingers. Again, and more intensely than ever, she desired a fixed occupation, -- no matter how onerous, how irksome....Her head labored to frame projects as diligently as her hands to plait and stitch the thin texture of the muslin summer dress spread on the little white couch at the foot of which she sat. Now and then, while thus doubly occupied, a tear would fill her eyes and fall on her busy hands; but this sign of emotion was rare, and quickly effaced: the sharp pang passed, the dimness cleared from her vision; she would rethread her needle, re-arrange tuck and trimming, and work on.<sup>34</sup>

Another female author, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, contemplated the emptiness of sewing in Aurora Leigh (1856). In this poem, the title character yearns to be a poet, and disparages the products of needlework as useless and inconsequential -- refusing to idealize them as the "charming productions of female skill and fond regard":<sup>35</sup>

By the way,  
The works of women are symbolical.

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<sup>33</sup> [Dryden], p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> Bronte, p. 244.

<sup>35</sup> The Weekly Dispatch, March 5, 1843, p. 118.

We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull  
     our sight,  
 Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
 To put on when you're weary -- or a stool  
 To stumble over and vex you.. 'curse  
     that stool!  
 Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean  
 And sleep, and dream of something we  
     are not  
 But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!  
 This hurts most, this -- that, after all, we  
     are paid  
 The worth of our work, perhaps.<sup>36</sup>

Not only did some middle-class women need to work, some actually wanted to, some indeed began to insist on the emotional and psychological necessity of work. And so it was, during the decades of the 1840s and 1850s, that work and education came to be seen as something that should be available to all women -- those who did not need to work, and those that did.<sup>37</sup>

Yet a disturbing conflict emerged for those writing about women's issues in the 1840s. Although the need for greater opportunities and decent wages for those women who needed to work was beginning to be recognized, the absence of working-class women from the home was seen to be a very dangerous development given the seeming volatility of the working class in that period. Work outside the home for these women was widely seen to be a "great and universally prevailing cause of

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<sup>36</sup> The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, London: Oxford University Press, 1920, p. 381.

<sup>37</sup> Other women were expressing similar views, including Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. See Barbara Leigh Smith, Women and Work, London: Bosworth and Harrison, 1857 and Bessie Rayner Parkes, Essays on Women's Work, London: A Strahan, 1865.

distress and crime among the working classes,"<sup>38</sup> because working caused women to neglect "needlework, cookery, economy, cleanliness -- and all the arts of home."

And so needlework figures again, this time as something lost -- a loss which carries with it quite dangerous and frightening ramifications. The rhetoric which deemed working women a threat to national stability is the subject of the following chapter.

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<sup>38</sup> This is a quote taken by Mrs. Jameson from the Second Report (Jameson, p. 257). It is also used, almost verbatim, by Lord Ashley in a speech to the House of Commons in 1846. The speech is published in Speeches of the Earl of Shaftesbury Upon Subjects Having Relation Chiefly to the Claims and Interests of the Labouring Class, London: Chapman and Hall, 1868, p. 205.

## Chapter Five

### THE PERILS OF THE NATION

In the years between 1842 and 1845 it seemed to people of all political persuasions that revolution was in the air. Not coincidentally, these are the same years which, as we have seen, saw the development and spread of the seamstress myth. As historians of the period have often pointed out, the Victorian ideal of "Woman" as the domestic guardian of morality and virtue was conceived, from its very inception in the late eighteenth century, as the "main bulwark against revolution."<sup>1</sup>

It makes sense then, that in this time of working-class discontent and fear of revolution that working women would be an issue. For those from the working class who had recently seen their family lives turned up-side-down by the wide-scale employment of wives and children in the factories (while husbands sat home unemployed), getting women out of the workplace and back home was a real priority. For those from the middle and upper classes who were fearful that the poverty and unemployment among working-class men would lead to revolution, the stability of the nation could be insured if real women -- those who were knowledgeable about "needlework, cookery, economy, cleanliness" and "all the arts of home"<sup>2</sup> -- stayed at home.

Evidence for these positions could be found in the same place as the revelations about distressed needlewomen -- the reports of the Children's Employment Commission. There, witnesses with authority like doctors and other professionals, testified to the problems caused by women working outside the home, including

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Alexander, "Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London; A Study of the Years 1820-50," The Rights and Wrongs of Women, ed. by Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> [Mrs. Jameson], "Condition of the Women and the Female Children," The Athenaeum, vol. 16 (March 18, 1843), p. 258.

"improvidence, absence of all comfort, alienation of all affection in families, and drunkenness on the part of the husband."<sup>3</sup> Over and over again, in the parliamentary reports and elsewhere, it was insisted that men whose wives worked had no comforting domestic life, and were therefore likely to become criminals, alcoholics, or revolutionaries -- driven from their cold, unwelcoming homes to attend chartist or socialist meetings. And the women themselves, "exhausted with [their] toils and sick with the misery of...home" might also flee to the gin-shop.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, women who stayed at home were seen as virtuous, self-sacrificing and devoted wives and mothers, yet the minute they left the home to work, they were capable of immorality, infanticide, and inciting revolution. Women, it was said, were naturally good wives and mothers, it was the "factory system" which was corrupting their "nature."

But why did the seamstress emerge as an important figure during this period? What did she have to do with the way the question of what could be done to prevent revolution was formulated, and the choice of answers that were given?

We have seen that the act of sewing itself carried strong associations of femininity. Unlike maids, laundresses, female factory or mine workers who (as we will see below) were seen as having or developing masculine characteristics, the seamstress

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<sup>3</sup> This is from the evidence collected by Grainger for a report of the Children's Employment Commission as quoted by Mrs. Jameson, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup> [Sibella Hatfield], An Essay on the Factory Question, occasioned by the Recent Votes in the House of Commons. Addressed to the Ladies of England, and Inscribed with the Most Devoted Feelings of Loyalty and Respect, to Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria, London: R. Hastings, 1844, p. 11. One wonders after reading the literature of the period, if there were any catastrophes which were not put on the shoulders of working women. It seems that women have always been the scapegoat for a wide variety of social ills, particularly in times of rapid change. See Katha Pollitt, "Subject to Debate," in The Nation, June 19, 1995, for her "What's Women's Fault Contest." Pollitt quotes from articles which blame women (and feminism) for everything from the Oklahoma City bombing to the decline of the local salmon population in Oregon.

was very much a "woman." In addition, the seamstress often had middle- or upper-class origins which made her seem more refined, vulnerable, genteel and therefore more feminine than her working-class counterparts. The seamstress thus allowed for a reassuring image of the separateness and difference of masculinity and femininity at a time when those categories seemed to be collapsing.

For these same reasons the distressed seamstress was at the same time a powerful symbol that society was coming apart. This most feminine of creatures, performing the most feminine kind of labor, worked not in a factory or mine, but in a garret (a kind of marginalization within the home itself), and what was worse, in the case of slop-workers, she sewed men's clothing and she worked for wages. Looking at the seamstress it seemed as though the world had turned up-side-down: the rightful and "natural" place of men and women, on which so much depended, was being inverted by the progress of industrial capitalism -- and that "progress" was anything but smooth.

The country had been in the grip of a severe industrial depression since 1837, which worsened in the years 1841 and '42. Unemployment was on the rise, and four bad harvests in a row meant that the cost of living far outpaced wages. New machinery being introduced in various industries meant that the cheap, unskilled labor of women and children replaced skilled male labor, promising "the father of the family nothing better than a loathed dependence on the exploitation of his wife and child."<sup>5</sup> On top of all this, it was believed that parliament had actively made things worse with the New Poor Law of 1834, "one of the most bitterly hated laws ever placed on the statute book."<sup>6</sup> The New Poor Law, it has been claimed, "did the most to provoke the

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<sup>5</sup> G. Kitson Clark, "Hunger and Politics in 1842," *Journal of Modern History*, 25 (1953), p. 360.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

working classes of England to rebellion."<sup>7</sup> The fact that "a disaster of the first magnitude had struck the working classes" of Britain was clear "to almost every intelligent contemporary"<sup>8</sup> and therefore "there was excuse for the opinion that there was no way out of these troubles, or no way out without bloodshed."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the writing of the period is teeming with references to the precarious state of the nation and the sense that a cataclysm could be forestalled only if something was done immediately to lessen the hardships endured by the working class. In Disraeli's novel Sybil, which was published in 1845 but which is set in 1842, one character remarks "the relations of the working classes of England to its privileged orders are relations of enmity, and therefore of peril."<sup>10</sup> And Lord Ashley, in a speech to the House of Commons in 1843, remarked "The danger is wider, deeper, fiercer..and no one who has heard these statements, and believes them, can hope that twenty years more will pass without some mighty convulsion, some displacement of the whole system of society."<sup>11</sup> The writer of a pamphlet of 1843 entitled National Distress; Its Causes and Remedies, cautioned "if the rulers of this country...refuse to adapt such measures as reason and justice approve, they must beware, lest the smouldering ashes of discontent burst into a flame, which may not only destroy their privileges, but include in one general ruin every institution of society."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> F.C. Mather, Public Order in the Age of the Chartists, New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, p. 357.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil, New York: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in [Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna], The Perils of the Nation. An Appeal to the Legislature, the Clergy, and the Higher Middle Classes, Second edition, London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1843, p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> National Distress; Its Causes and Remedies, London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1843, p. 44.

Yet the government seemed unwilling to take any action and thwarted every measure that was proposed to help. In 1842, the new Tory government had the nerve to introduce a bill renewing the power of the poor law commissioners for five more years, and in 1844 the Tory Prime Minister, Robert Peel, blocked passage of the Ten Hours bill, insisting on twelve hours instead of ten. The government seemed mired in stagnation, unmoved by the pleas of more radical M.P.s, working-class committees and others that the government do *something*. It was simply impossible to ignore the extreme distress among the working class.

Although today it seems clear that the English were not in fact on the brink of an actual revolution, "they did experience the fear of revolution." And even those who did not experience the fear of revolution "often utilized and played upon it for reasons of their own."<sup>13</sup> Those who argued that revolution was imminent and that working women were the cause often did so with the intention of promoting legislation or other reforms that were undoubtedly necessary. Many of these reforms (like the ten hours bill) were clearly humane and just. But the rhetorical strategy employed by many of the reformers -- using working women as a sign of impending revolution -- reveals quite a bit about the tremendous threat that women's participation in the public sphere was felt to be. A rebellion of the working classes was feared, yet another revolution had in fact already begun.

Much of the fear of working-class violence in the early 1840s was inspired by the Chartist convention of 1842 and by strikes in northern England that summer. First in 1839, and then again in 1842, a group known as the Chartists petitioned parliament demanding, among other things, universal male suffrage. Claiming to have over three million signatures on their charter, they warned in 1837 that "unless immediate

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<sup>13</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Culture of Poverty," in The Victorian City: Images and Realities, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, vol. 2, p. 729.

remedial measures be adopted, your petitioners fear the increasing distress of the people will lead to results fearful to contemplate."<sup>14</sup>

What the Chartists had called the "wretched and unparalleled condition of the people"<sup>15</sup> erupted into a general and widespread strike in the summer of 1842 which affected at least fifteen English and Welsh shires and eight Scottish counties. Huge numbers of strikers, many of them armed with clubs and sharpened stakes, marched from town to town, turning out other workers, and pulling the plugs of boilers to make sure that the mills were halted (this strike is also known as the "Plug-Plot riot"). The numbers of strikers grew as they moved forward, until they reached about five thousand. What was particularly frightening was that one-third of them were women (we will return to this below).<sup>16</sup> Fifty thousand laborers were affected by the strike, which was described in this way by a contemporary:

eight of the largest counties in England, and a great part of Scotland, were in open insurrection. All Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumberland, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Leistershire, and North Wales, were in arms. Houses were attacked, battles were fought, and vollies of musketry, and files of prisoners, and carts loaded with the wounded and the dead, shocked the eyes and ears of the peaceful inhabitants of our towns and villages.<sup>17</sup>

In mid August the central government intervened. Troops were called in to quell the violence, and the leaders of the movement were arrested. A contemporary described the strike of 1842 as "an outburst of popular violence, sufficient to send a

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<sup>14</sup> From the Chartist petition to Parliament, reprinted in The English Reform Tradition, 1790-1910, Sydney W. Jackman, ed., New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Jackman, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, p. 363.

<sup>17</sup> Remedies Suggested for Some of the Evils which Constitute the Perils of the Nation, London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1844, p.13. This book, like its predecessor by Tonna, The Perils of the Nation was published anonymously, but its author has not been identified. It may or may not have been written by Tonna.

thrill of terror through the remotest corners of the land."<sup>18</sup> One historian has called the disturbances of 1842 "the most intense of any that occurred in Britain from the time of the French Revolution to that of the Chartist detente of 1848."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, it seemed as though the English were preparing for a revolution on the magnitude of the French Revolution of 1789. In May of 1843 The Times published a three-part review of a book entitled The Perils of the Nation written by Charlotte Tonna (an ultra-evangelical propogandist and reformer, discussed at length below).<sup>20</sup> The reviewer of Tonna's book (typically for The Times) blamed the New Poor Law for the misery of the working class, and went so far as to make a fearful analogy between England in 1843 and France on the eve of revolution in 1789, "to a superficial observer, nothing can be more dissimilar than the two cases, yet we fear that a closer analogy may exist between them than most people imagine." The reviewer continued, "we are no idle alarmists; but we cannot close our eyes to the signs that surround us, nor amidst the distractions of party strife, lose sight of the real quarter in which the danger lies."<sup>21</sup> Less than two weeks before the review appeared, The Times had published the shocking revelations from the Second Report's section on needlewomen.

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<sup>18</sup> [Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> F.C. Mather, "The General Strike of 1842: A Study in Leadership, Organization and the Threat of Revolution during the Plug Plot disturbances," Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History, edited by R. Quinault and J. Stevenson, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> The Perils of the Nation was published anonymously, but was identified as Tonna's work by her husband in a chapter entitled "Concluding Remarks" in her autobiography. The Perils of the Nation was widely read and published in several editions. See Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], Personal Recollections, third edition, New York: Charles Scribner, 1854, p. 373.

<sup>21</sup> Review of The Perils of the Nation in The Times, May 15, 1843, p. 6.

For some, the danger did not pass with the strikes of 1842. In a sequel to The Perils of the Nation written one year later in 1844, entitled Remedies Suggested for Some of the Evils which Constitute the Perils of the Nation, the author referred to the unrest of 1842, and added,

what have we now? For many weeks past a fresh kind of peasant-war has broken out, and after tearing down turnpike gates, and burning toll-houses, it has proceeded, at last, to attack dwelling houses, destroy corn-ricks, and even to murder any, whether men or women, who oppose the least resistance.<sup>22</sup>

The strikes of the summer of 1842, along with the sight of able-bodied men sitting idle in a workhouse, prompted Thomas Carlyle to put aside a book he was writing on Oliver Cromwell to write Past and Present, which was published in the spring of 1843. For Carlyle, the Manchester operatives who participated in the strike put a "huge inarticulate question" before England: "what do you mean to do with us?" "All England heard the question," he wrote, and "England will answer it; or, on the whole, England will perish; -- one does not yet expect the latter result." Carlyle warned parliament do something more than debate about laissez faire and political economy, and unleashed an attack on the New Poor Law: "with millions of working eager Working Men imprisoned in 'Impossibility' and Poor Law Bastilles, it is time that some means of dealing with them were trying to become 'possible!'"<sup>23</sup>

Although the poverty and discontent of the working class seemed to be on nearly everyone's mind, the connection between social instability and working women was then, as it is today, a particularly potent issue for what might best be termed the religious right. I am thinking of two people in particular, Lord Ashley, a radical Tory M.P. and champion of the Ten Hours movement in parliament (quoted above) and

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<sup>22</sup> Remedies Suggested..., pp. 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present, ed. by Richard D. Altick, New York: New York University Press, 1965, p. 249.

Charlotte Tonna (the author of The Perils of the Nation, also quoted above, as well as one of the earliest seamstress tales). Both Ashley and Tonna belonged to an extreme Pentecostal wing of evangelicalism.<sup>24</sup> Ashley has been described as a "fervent millenarian, obsessed with prophecy and with the imminence of the Second Advent."<sup>25</sup> And Tonna has been described as an "ultra-Protestant Evangelical" whose views were often "narrow and bigoted."<sup>26</sup> They were also among the most outspoken prophets of

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<sup>24</sup> Tonna and Ashley were both Premillennarianists. They believed in the imminence of the Second Coming, which they held would precede the millennium, and they also believed that God directly intervened in the affairs of individual men and entire nations to punish and express his disapproval. For Ashley and Tonna, then, events such as the cholera epidemics, or violent working-class agitation were punishments for the sins of the nation. These views were not so extreme as they may seem today, especially in an age of such rapid and frightening change. According to Boyd Hilton in his book, The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795- 1865, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, extreme evangelicalism spread rapidly after the mid 1820s due to "economic alarms, Catholic emancipation, constitutional crisis, cholera, and other 'signs' of impending divine initiative." (Hilton, p. 10). Hilton has argued that it was primarily the extreme evangelicals who worked toward the material betterment of the working class. Because extreme evangelicals, like Tonna and Ashley, held that God directly intervened in the affairs of man to punish and express his disapproval, they also usually believed that governments should heed these messages from God, and likewise intervene. See also Jennifer Hart, "Religion and Social Control in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain, ed. by A.P. Donajgrodzki, Croom Helm, 1977, pp. 108-131. Hart analyzes religious sermons and pamphlets between years 1830-1880 and confines her discussion to the Church of England. She does not, however, distinguish between moderate and extreme wings of evangelicalism. It is therefore difficult to determine if she is referring to the entire Church of England when she writes that the "standard doctrine" was that "disasters such as the cholera, famines, wars, the Indian mutiny, trade depressions, the cotton famine, the cattle plague and any other pestilence were sent by God because of sin -- that is as punishments for sins, or as warnings to people to behave better." (p. 121) Tonna was also the editor and a frequent contributor to the *Christian Lady's Magazine*, and the author of numerous other works including a tract published in 1842 entitled Principalities and Powers, in which she predicted that the second coming was imminent.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton, p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> Ivanka Kovacevic and S. Barbara Kanner, "Blue Book into Novel: The Forgotten Industrial Fiction of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 25 (Sept. 1970), p. 155.

revolution, and they often employed the most frightening and fanatical arguments to make their case -- frequently linking revolution with working women.

Not unlike the rhetoric of the Moral Majority today, the writing of Tonna and Ashley in the early 1840s reveals an intense panic about working-class unrest, the breakdown of the family, the evils of the city,<sup>27</sup> and the growing sinfulness and godlessness of the modern world. All of these things were seen to be connected to the issue of working women.<sup>28</sup> Ashley asked in a speech in parliament, if women "cannot do that which Providence has assigned...what must be the effect on the whole surface of society?"<sup>29</sup> In her book entitled The Perils of the Nation Tonna argued that "female labour is rapidly superseding that of the men" causing the latter to become "fit instruments for Chartist or Socialist agitators."<sup>30</sup> A reviewer of the book in The Times wrote that "when we hear of whole branches of manufactures, formerly wrought by men, but now solely carried on by women...we cannot but tremble for the consequences."<sup>31</sup>

Tonna's interest was clearly not so much in writing fiction, but in using fiction (a fiction based upon the "facts" of the parliamentary reports) to convince her readers

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<sup>27</sup> Tonna referred to London as "the headquarters of...most...national iniquities...." Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, New York: Dodd & Mead, 1843, Part I, p. 98.

<sup>28</sup> Ashley and Tonna are not so far from Dan Quayle, who argued a few years ago that "when families fail, society fails. The anarchy and lack of structure in our inner cities are testament to how quickly civilization falls apart when the family foundation cracks." See The New York Times, May 20, 1992, p. A20.

<sup>29</sup> Ashley's speech to the House of Commons on March 15, 1844, reprinted in British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850, Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., New York: Arno Press, 1972, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> [Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, pp. 27-8.

<sup>31</sup> Review of The Perils of the Nation in The Times, May 15, 1843, p. 6. Additional segments of the review had appeared earlier on May 2 (p. 6) and May 4 (p. 6).

of the reality of the terrifying consequences of women working. At the same time, she advocates and idealizes the "Christian" lifestyle of "the quiet home, the clean swept hearth" and "the industrious wife" claiming that this would be "better than fifty treatises on loyalty and contentment to reconcile [the laborer] to his lot."<sup>32</sup> Tonna considers the following to be "the great privilege of woman in domestic life,"

to nourish her little ones, to clothe their bodies, watch over their health, and protect them from danger, to clean and order her dwelling...to cook her husbands food, wash and mend his wearing apparel...those are the tasks from which no English female desires to shrink, and the ready fulfillment of which is, of all things, best calculated to...attach the man to his own dwelling, and to save him from the drunkenness, the vice, the misery, of those whose long hours of leisure are passed in a beer-shop.<sup>33</sup>

She has been called a "superb propagandist" who "no doubt chose to ignore certain evidence tending to contradict or soften her attack."<sup>34</sup>

Given their interest in the subject of working women, it is not surprising that both Ashley and Tonna were involved in the plight of the distressed seamstress from the very beginning. Ashley was president of two charities, the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners, founded in 1843,<sup>35</sup> and the Society for the Protection and Employment of Distressed Needlewomen. He also spoke about the plight of the distressed seamstress in speeches to the House of Commons on at least

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<sup>32</sup> [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, Part IV, p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>34</sup> Kovacevic and Kanner, p. 160. See also Monica Correa Fryckstedt, "Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna & "The Christian Lady's Magazine," Victorian Periodicals Review, vol. XIV, no. 2 (Summer 1981), pp. 43-50.

<sup>35</sup> What appears to be the first advertisement calling for subscriptions and donations for a charity with a slightly different name, the Association for the Aid and Protection of Dressmakers and Milliners, appeared in The Times on May 25, 1843, p. 3. But the first meeting of the Association did not take place until May 1, 1844.

two occasions.<sup>36</sup> Tonna wrote one of the earliest seamstress tales and referred to their plight often in The Perils of the Nation and in the periodical she edited and contributed to, The Christian Lady's Magazine.<sup>37</sup>

In The Perils of the Nation, Tonna offered this picture of a seamstress to prove to the reader that the country was indeed in grave danger:

when we consider that while the three halfpence...is being earned, an infant perhaps, hangs at the breast, and others surround the knee of the sempstress, watching her progress towards the attainment of the penny roll that is to be shared among them, we shall be better able to judge of the perils that impend over the nation....<sup>38</sup>

And in the sequel to Tonna's The Perils of the Nation the author described seamstresses working for starvation wages and then warned that "the natural and inevitable results of this state of things are fraught with innumerable dangers to the whole realm."<sup>39</sup>

It is important to see the seamstress myth as a central part of the hysteria which was emerging about working class women generally in the fearful climate of 1842-1845. Tonna's story "Milliners and Dressmakers," for example, can not be seen out of context with the other three stories that made up the four-part book The Wrongs of Woman. This book was written, as Tonna herself put it, to enable the reader "to keep in view the circumstances under which families must farm out, as best

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<sup>36</sup> Ashley was an active philanthropist in many areas, not simply on behalf of needlewomen. As we have seen, he was the Tory M.P. responsible for pushing the Mines Act through parliament, and he was also the greatest supporter of the Ten Hours Bill.

<sup>37</sup> "Dressmaking," The Christian Lady's Magazine, vol. 20 (July-December 1843), pp. 243-253. See Monica Correa Fryckstedt, "Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna & 'The Christian Lady's Magazine,'" Victorian Periodicals Review, vol. XIV (Summer 1981), pp. 43-50.

<sup>38</sup> [Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, pp. 77-78.

<sup>39</sup> Remedies Suggested..., p. 102.

they can, the commodity which we would fain see reserved for home consumption -- female labour."<sup>40</sup> Three of the four stories were written to prove that working-class women who work are a real danger to their husbands, their children, and indeed all of society.<sup>41</sup>

Tonna's story about seamstresses formed Part I of The Wrongs of Woman. The narrative follows the typical format of the seamstress myth, tracing the lives of two unmarried daughters of a small farmer, Frances and Ann. Frances, apprenticed to a dressmaker, is overworked and poorly fed, and eventually dies. Her sister, Ann, works for a millinery shop, where she is callously treated by her employer. Ann soon begins to drink, becomes a prostitute, and serves time in jail.

Part II, "The Forsaken Home," follows an entire family whose demise begins when they are forced to move to Birmingham where the factory is hiring only women. Alice Smith, mother of several children, and the wife of a decent farmer, sets out to work in a screw factory. Within a week of Alice's employment, the Smith family begins to disintegrate. The children become difficult to discipline and Alice loses her ability to provide a moralizing influence in her home,

Alice sees with anguish that six days absence from her home has sufficed to unsettle all within it, that her husband has become fretful and restless, her children wayward and unruly...while her word, once all-potent in influencing them, has lost much of its authority.<sup>42</sup>

At the end of the story, one child dies, the other children are forced to work in a factory out of economic necessity, and her husband begins to drink heavily.

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<sup>40</sup> [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, Part I, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Part III of The Wrongs of Woman, "The Little Pin Headers," was written as a diatribe against child labor.

<sup>42</sup> [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, Part II, p. 53.

In volume IV, entitled "The Lace Runners," Mrs. Collins (a poorly paid lace maker) gives her infant "Godfrey's Cordial," a narcotic which parliamentary reports claimed was frequently given to children while their mothers were at work. Two of her children die of the measles, and an infant, to whom she has fed "the Godrey" also catches the measles and dies. In what is perhaps the most frightening moment in The Wrongs of Woman, Mrs. Collins looks at the body of her baby and reflects on how she may have unintentionally killed her own child by denying it the "natural" food it needed to sustain strength, its mothers milk,

Ay, there you lie, my baby, and the doctor says true, I killed you, for I robbed you of the natural milk that was bubbling out o' purpose for you, and all to earn what should feed and clothe others that had as good a claim. And I gave you the drug, that you shouldn't feel the wrong, but sleep away, and leave me to toil on. Do they say I killed you? O, it's false, it's false! God knows I did not neglect you for pleasure nor for gain, nor for anything I'd get by it myself. I ain't guilty, I ain't the murderer! and them that are shall answer it.<sup>43</sup>

With consequences as horrifying as infanticide, sickness and death, prostitution, alcohol abuse, and the breakdown of the family, it would be difficult not to be convinced after reading Tonna's stories that the security and health of the nation depended on keeping women in the home.

What made the whole thing much worse was that in many cases women were working and men were not, a circumstance described by Tonna as "sufficient to justify the deepest alarm."<sup>44</sup> This meant, of course, that men were having to perform "women's work." In Part II of The Wrongs of Woman ("The Forsaken Home") the husband, John Smith, asks his friend "suppose now I did as you say, and let the wife and girls go out to work, who's to mend and make, to wash and scour, and tidy up the place of evenings? Do you think I'd molly about such things myself?"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> [Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, Part II, pp. 15-16.

Engels, in The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845) commented on these reversals. He quoted a letter from a man who found a (male) friend at home darning stockings while his wife was working at the mill. Engels wrote that this situation deprived "the husband of his manhood and the wife of all womanly qualities," adding, "one may well imagine the righteous indignation of the workers at being virtually turned into eunuchs."<sup>46</sup> Men were actually doing the family sewing, while at the same time husbandless and fatherless women sewed men's clothing for wages -- surely there was something gravely wrong with this picture.

Not only were men becoming emasculated, but women were losing their femininity. There were important feminine skills -- like cooking, cleaning, and significantly sewing -- which, it was asserted, women who worked outside the home all their lives knew nothing about. And this lack of knowledge had far-reaching consequences,

the girls are prevented by their early removal from home...to be employed in labour, from learning needlework, and from acquiring those habits of cleanliness, neatness and order, without which they cannot, when they grow up to womanhood, and have the charge of families of their own, economize their husband's earnings, or give their homes any degree of comfort, and this general want of the qualifications of housewife in the women of this class, is stated by clergymen, teachers, medical men, employers, and other witnesses, to be one great and universally prevailing cause of distress and crime among the working classes.<sup>47</sup>

This sentiment was expressed by people of differing political persuasions. Here is Engels, in a section of The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845), discussing the dangerous results of women's work,

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, translated and edited by W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner, California: Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 162 and p. 164. This is a translation of the original 1845 German edition.

<sup>47</sup> Carpenter, p. 22.

obviously a girl who had been an operative since the age of nine has never had a chance to acquire a skill in house-hold duties. Consequently all the factory girls are wholly ignorant of housewifery and are quite unfitted to become wives and mothers. They do not know how to sew, knit, cook or wash.<sup>48</sup>

And Lord Ashley exclaimed with equal aversion "look...to the effects [of women working] on domestic economy; out of thirteen women taken at one mill, only one knew how to make her husband a shirt, and only four knew how to mend one."<sup>49</sup>

In the world of the 1840s it seemed increasingly as though women were becoming like men, and men like women, and few things were (and are) as frightening as that. Not only were working women unskilled in cooking, child-care, and sewing, what was worse was that they had lost a sense of obedience and passivity with their husbands and fathers. Lord Ashley, in a speech to the House of Commons, told a story of a man with a baby in his arms who went to fetch his wife from a club where she was drinking, but she refused to go home. Ashley asked,

Whence is it that this singular and unnatural change is taking place? Because that on women are imposed the duty and burthen of supporting their husbands and families, a perversion as it were of nature, which has the inevitable effect of introducing into families disorder, insubordination, and conflict. What is the ground on which the woman says she will pay no attention to her domestic duties, nor give the obedience which is owing to her husband? because on her devolves the labour which ought to fall to his share....<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Engels, p. 165-66.

<sup>49</sup> Carpenter, p. 22. Engels and Ashley both took their information from the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, as did Disraeli for his novel Sybil (1845). In that novel one character asks, "what is a poor man to do...after his day's work if he return to his own food and finds no home: his fire extinguished, his food unprepared; the partner of his life, wearied with labour in the field or the factory, still absent, or perhaps in bed from exhaustion.... We have removed woman from her sphere; we may have reduced wages by her introduction into the market of labour; but under these circumstances what we call domestic life is a condition impossible to be realized for the people of this country; and we must not therefore be surprised that they seek solace or rather refuge in the beer shop." Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil, or the Two Nations, New York: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 144).

<sup>50</sup> Carpenter, p. 25.

Working women were clearly no longer women. They acquired male characteristics and habits and usurped the freedom that only men had previously enjoyed. The narrator in Disraeli's *Sybil* watches workers coming out of the mines after a long day of work, and observes

troops of youth -- alas! of both sexes, -- though neither their raiment nor their language indicates the difference; all are clad in male attire; and oaths that men might shudder at, issue from lips born to breathe words of sweetness. Yet these are to be -- some are -- the mothers of England!<sup>51</sup>

According to Lord Ashley, women were "forming various clubs and associations, and gradually acquiring all those privileges which are held to be the proper portion of the male sex."<sup>52</sup> These privileges seem to have included the seemingly innocuous, but obviously disturbing, behavior of using foul language, and gathering at clubs to drink, sing and smoke.

As we have seen, working women were also seen to be capable of "moral evils" such as prostitution, abortion and infanticide, a complete reversal of "real" femininity, exemplified in the faithful wife and devoted mother. And when Ashley, in a speech to the House of Commons, described women, not as the pacifiers nature intended them to be, but as "the leaders and excitors of the young men to violence in every riot and outbreak in the manufacturing districts..."<sup>53</sup> he was painting a frightening picture of a world where categories of gender, which seemed so "natural" and obvious, had been completely undermined. Women were simply, in the words of

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<sup>51</sup> Disraeli, p. 178.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Carpenter, p. 24.

their contemporaries, losing their "femininity," and becoming "unsexed." Yet if femininity was a part of women's "nature," how could it be lost?<sup>54</sup>

It is not surprising then that the underpaid and overworked seamstress became the focus of so much attention in the 1840s. Here, at least, was a woman who still knew how to sew. She was still feminine. Trapped within her garret, she sewed day after day, hour after hour, but she sewed clothing for men unknown to her, not for her husband. The fact that the seamstress sewed clothing for men<sup>55</sup> meant that she was performing wifely duties for the marketplace. In this sense, her work was not unlike prostitution itself.

Since sewing was the ultimate female act, a sign, so to speak, of femininity itself, of service for the family, a world in which men did the sewing for the family, and women were incapable of it, was a frightening one indeed. When performed by a woman, sewing had connotations of delicacy, precision, and grace. It was a type of female labor that obviously and naturally belonged in the home. There was something rather pathetic and emasculating, however, in the idea of a man sewing in the home that reveals the assumption that labor performed there is ultimately rooted in

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<sup>54</sup> This is an issue which feminists have been dealing with for quite a while. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir, in the first paragraphs of The Second Sex writes, "we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity." (New York: Vintage Books, 1974, pp. xv-xvi). This issue is also taken up by Shashana Felman in What Does a Woman Want?, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

<sup>55</sup> I am speaking here about those women who were employed in slop-work, sewing men's ready-to-wear clothing, and not dressmaker's apprentices.

powerlessness, whereas the image of a man sewing in a tailor's workshop evokes a sense of skilled, artisanal labor and authority.

An image of a seamstress could only be successful when it conveyed, as Redgrave's painting The Sempstress (fig. 3) did, the very unnaturalness of the seamstress' lot. In order to convey a sense of the abnormality of the situation, the image would have to differ significantly from a simple image of a woman sewing, which had quite pleasant associations, and seemed "natural."

Ford Madox Brown's painting An English Fireside (fig. 26), for example, conveys these feelings. Here, a woman sews an article of clothing for a member of her family by the comforting light of a fire, as her child sleeps on her lap. Who would want to spend an evening at a chartist meeting if he had this to come home to?

The success of Redgrave's The Sempstress depended on conveying a sense of the unnatural. It gave form to the conflict between the femininity of both the seamstress and her occupation and yet her complete exclusion from the feminine world of home and children for which she is fully qualified. Redgrave highlighted the feminine aspects of his seamstress, her long hair, her graceful neck, her full bosom and delicate features. Strangely, though, she has disproportionately long legs, and is clearly too large for the space she occupies. She seems confined and hemmed in, but her open-armed gesture of appeal to God seems to test those boundaries and struggle against them. It is the tension between the oversized figure and the confining space which compels the viewer to empathize with the seamstress's plight. We keenly feel her entrapment in an unnatural life without husband, father or children to care for.

A study by Redgrave for The Sempstress (fig. 30) reveals how, in the artist's initial treatment of the subject, the figure of the seamstress was smaller and fit more comfortably in the space of the garret. For the final painting Redgrave enlarged the figure and strengthened the gesture of appeal to heaven. The table was shifted to the right and the seamstress was moved to the center of the composition. In addition, the baroque device of placing the basket of sewing in front of the candlelight so that it created a dark silhouette has been eliminated. In the final painting the only thing the candle highlights is the seamstress herself.

A comparison with two other illustrations, one accompanying Mark Lemon's play The Sempstress (fig. 31), the other, John Leech's illustration to Dickens' Christmas story The Chimes (fig. 20), both of which date from 1844, reveals the power of Redgrave's final composition. In the two illustrations, we see women sewing in surroundings which indicate extreme poverty, but there is no sense, as there is in Redgrave's painting, of a call for help, a plea for protection, or a sense of entrapment. These seamstresses comfortably occupy their space, making no gesture of appeal, and so the images lack much of the emotional power of Redgrave's painting.

Ten years later, Anna Elizabeth Blunden, recognizing that it was this sense of being caged in, and the related plea to heaven that made Redgrave's painting successful, attempted a variation on these devices (fig. 29). Her seamstress is viewed up close, locked into a small space between table and chair. Her head and hands are framed by an open garret window through which we view the city that imprisons her, and the "natural" world beyond it where women are allowed to become mothers and wives.

There is no doubt that the seamstress was in the wrong place. If this was what a Christian country was doing to its most vulnerable and sympathetic members, if genteel and "feminine" women could be driven to prostitution, infanticide and an early grave, then the nation, although it appeared prosperous (like the plate-glass facades of the sloop-shops) was in actuality in grave, but unseen (like the seamstress in her garret) danger. England was indeed "one vast mass of superficial splendour, covering a body of festering misery and discontent."<sup>56</sup>

The seamstress -- precisely because of her contradictory nature -- offered a resolution to the widespread sense that the nation was in imminent danger of revolution. Unlike the women who worked in factories she retained her femininity and her connection to nature and the countryside. Only recently exposed to the city and its vices she was a total innocent caught within a web of dangerous circumstances, yet she remained untainted, unchanged by her new environment. With her the world could easily be set aright once again if she were only returned to the home where she rightfully belonged.

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<sup>56</sup> [Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, p. xv.

## Chapter Six

### FAMINE AND FASHION, OR THE TWO NATIONS

What lent such urgency to the fear of revolution between 1842 and 1845, was a sense that a large number of people were working harder, earning less, and going hungry even though the nation as a whole was actually wealthier than it had ever been. On the one hand, signs of England's power and prosperity were proudly exhibited. On the other, the suffering of the working classes had been painfully enumerated and laid out for all to see in the reports of the Children's Employment Committee.

Punch captured the conflict between England's boast of her imperial and industrial achievements and the grim reality of many people's lives in a cartoon entitled, "Specimens from Mr. Punch's Industrial Exhibition" (fig. 32).<sup>1</sup> Here, in a play on the Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations, which was being planned in 1850, Punch himself, along with a top-hatted (upper-class) gentleman, peruse an exhibition with "specimens" (under glass) of impoverished, overworked laborers, including "An Industrious Needlewoman." This is an obvious play on the word "industry," and exactly whose "industry" creates the superficial wealth and power that could be seen at such exhibitions.

A disturbing and embarrassing sense that England's newly created wealth had only created a class of selfish, self-serving capitalists with nothing on their minds but increasing their profits at anyone's expense -- including that of women and children -- haunted the minds of many reformers. "England is the most wealthy and powerful empire that the world ever saw," Charlotte Tonna wrote in The Perils of the Nation, adding "there is nevertheless, in England, such a dreadful amount of misery and oppression, as to render the very maintenance of social order within its boundaries, a

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<sup>1</sup> "Specimens from Mr. Punch's Industrial Exhibition of 1850," Punch XVIII (1850), p. 145.

matter of doubt and difficulty."<sup>2</sup> Carlyle echoed this sentiment in 1843 in Past and Present, "we have more riches than any Nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any Nation ever had before....In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls, and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied."<sup>3</sup>

Given this sense of extreme inequality, it is no wonder that the relationship between the classes seemed to be one of bitterness and hostility. This seemed especially true when that relationship was compared with what was nostalgically seen as the cooperative and mutually supportive (feudal) relationship of the past. In the industrial era, human relations seemed to have been reduced to monetary exchange.<sup>4</sup> In Past and Present Carlyle claimed that "we have profoundly forgotten everywhere

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<sup>2</sup> [Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna], The Perils of the Nation, second edition, London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1843, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyle's understanding of the problem was different from Tonna's. He denied that the wealth of England was "enriching" anyone, referring to the fact that wealth was not making life really any better, or people any happier. See Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present, Richard D. Altick, ed., New York: New York University Press, 1965, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1840s it seemed as though the old ways of insuring the well being of the poor - the duty of the aristocracy to those on their land -- were no longer effective. With the new class of wealthy manufacturers assuming more and more political and economic power, came the expectation that they would assume the paternal care of both their employees and the poor in general. In the 1840s though, this class was blamed for not doing its "duty." The land-owning aristocracy (for the most part represented by the Tory party) attempted to prove that it could solve the problems of the day. Perhaps unexpectedly, many Tory landowners, like Lord Ashley, and Tory politicians, like Disraeli, allied themselves with working class interests in the decade of the 1840s and became effective reformers. They opposed the factory owners and their ideals of "political economy" and free-trade, and felt a sincere sympathy with the plight of the working class. Even Engels preferred the Tories to the Whigs. See Friedrich Engels, "The Condition of England: Review of Past and Present by Thomas Carlyle," reprinted in Critics of Capitalism. Victorian Responses to 'Political Economy.' Elisabeth Jay and Richard Jay, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1986, p. 88.

that Cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings; we think...that it absolves and liquidates all engagements of man."<sup>5</sup>

An ever-widening gulf seemed to separate the rich and the poor. Disraeli expressed this feeling best in often-quoted lines from his novel Sybil (1845).

Egremont, the aristocrat/hero of the novel remarks:

I was told...that an impassable gulf divided the Rich from the Poor; I was told that the Privileged and the People formed Two Nations, governed by different laws, influenced by different manners, with no thoughts or sympathies in common; with an innate inability of mutual comprehension.

But very rarely is Egremont's next sentence quoted, "I believed that if this were indeed the case, the ruin of our common country was at hand."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it seemed absolutely imperative to find some way to close the gap between the two nations, for it seemed to many that the security of the entire country was at risk.

What the upper levels of society seemed to need was a familial sense of responsibility for those below them (it was nostalgically imagined that this had existed in the past).<sup>7</sup> It appeared to be absolutely necessary to bring the "two nations"

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<sup>5</sup> Carlyle, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil; or the Two Nations, New York: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> The paternalist call for society to act as a family, with the upper classes as a father "protecting" the poorer classes, as a remedy for the ills of the 1840s dominates seamstress literature. In fact, one could say that seamstresses became so much of an issue in part because they suited paternalist rhetoric. More than any other type of laborer, the seamstress seemed clearly defenseless and in need of protection, she was therefore the perfect representative of the working class for paternalist rhetoric. This was clearly a very powerful and reassuring image at a moment when the working class seemed anything but friendly. The seamstress therefore fit snugly into all forms of paternalist arguments -- whether the author was calling on the aristocracy, employers, or the government for protection. In perfect Paternalist fashion, many seamstress stories end with the recognition of the seamstress as a sister, daughter or other relative of an aristocratic family, or the family of an employer. The stories thus "terminate in an image of familial solidarity between the working and upper classes." This argument is convincingly made by Catherine Gallagher, in The Industrial Reformation of English

together, to promote understanding and empathy between them. After all, it was to the benefit of the middle and upper classes to portray themselves as not so cruel as to knowingly allow the working class to starve to death. The problem, it was asserted, was that they simply did not know the "other nation."

Lord Ashley went so far as to assert that "the vast proportion of the evils which affect and endanger this country, is not ascribable to physical or commercial causes..." instead "a great part of our fellow subjects, who might entertain or express an interest in the remedy of such evils, are altogether ignorant of their existence..."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sybil, in Disraeli's novel of the same name (1845), ascribed "the want of sympathy that unquestionably exists between Wealth and Work in England, to mutual ignorance between the classes...."<sup>9</sup>

The same ignorance on the part of the public was blamed for the distressed seamstresses. The Morning Chronicle reported that the "distress has been in a great measure produced by want of proper consideration, and not by heartlessness."<sup>10</sup> In Charlotte Tonna's The Wrongs of Woman, one seamstress asserted that "they that

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Fiction, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 132. As Gallagher argues, this is true of the following stories: James Malcolm Rymer, The White Slave: A Romance for the Nineteenth Century, London, 1844; G.W.M. Reynolds, "The Slaves of England, No. 1: The Seamstress," serialized in Reynold's Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science and Art, vol. 5 (1850). It is also true of Mrs. Stone's The Young Milliner (1843); Camilla Toulmin's "The Orphan Milliners," Illuminated Magazine, vol. 2 (1845), pp. 279-285; Charles Rowcroft's Fanny the Little Milliner; or, The Rich and the Poor (1846); and a story published in an American periodical by Mrs. Jane C. Campbell, "The Seamstress," Union Magazine, vol. III (May 1848). See also David Roberts, Paternalism in Early Victorian England, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Patricia L. Schmidt, "The Role of Moral Idealism in Social Change: Lord Ashley and the Ten Hours Factory Act," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (1977), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Disraeli, p. 350.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

oppress don't seem to know they are doing so, though their fellow creatures are perishing before their eyes...."<sup>11</sup>

The English, after all, prided themselves on their sympathy and compassion. They had abolished slavery in the colonies because it was perceived as an unjust and cruel system. Although the public had made a grand show of sympathy when it concerned those that were far away, it appeared that they were unmoved in the face of the suffering of British workers.<sup>12</sup> "If we gave to human misery out of our sight a tenth part of the sympathy which we give to that which comes home to ourselves, or even accidentally fall under our eyes, we should never be at rest...."<sup>13</sup> In a letter to the editor of The Times on January 10th, 1844 signed "a woman," the author stated that "had the account of these poor women's wretchedness reached us from distant lands...how would the tears of sympathy have started unbidden to our eyes! What densely-crowded and fashionably attended meetings would have been convened at Exeter Hall!"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, New York: Dodd & Mead, 1843, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> The worker/slave metaphor was common among reformers in the 1830s and 1840s, and was also used quite frequently to describe the condition of seamstresses. Examples include, Richard Redgrave's painting of 1847, Fashion's Slave, Ralph Barnes Grinrod's pamphlet entitled, The Slaves of the Needle (1844), and an article on needlewomen in The Times on October 27, 1843 which appeared below the heading "The White Slaves of London." For a lengthy and invaluable discussion of the worker/slave metaphor in the writing of early factory reformers and others see chapter one in Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> "Death and the Drawing Room, or, The Young Dressmakers of England," The Illustrated Times and Weekly Miscellany, April 22, 1848, p. 4. This is a reprint of an article published in The Illuminated Magazine, vol. I (May to October 1843), pp. 97-100.

<sup>14</sup> "The Distressed Needlewomen of London: To the Editor of the Times," The Times, January 10, 1844, p. 3.

Reformers wrestled with the question of what to do to protect the seamstress.<sup>15</sup> Could employers be coerced into paying higher wages by the force of public opinion, or through a boycott?<sup>16</sup> Would legislation regarding the number of hours that needlewomen worked have any real effect? Or would legislation, as some employers contended, damage the entire trade? What about those women who worked at home, how could their wages and hours be regulated? Would the efforts of private citizens -- charity, patience when women gave their dress orders -- be enough? These questions were all hotly debated. Government regulation of dressmakers and milliners hours was usually seen as a last resort, and, in the case of women who worked at home (slop-workers), limiting hours of work was probably an impossible law to enforce, and anyway, the real problem there was perceived to be one of low wages. At the very least those who wrote seamstress stories or created seamstress images probably hoped that the public would be motivated to take some kind of action, perhaps in the form of charities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission reveals a decided bias in favor of employers voluntarily assuming a more paternal and protective role toward their employees (instead of being coerced to do this by government legislation and supervision). The statements made by dressmaker's employers to Grainger in the Second Report indicate an awareness that employers were expected to behave like parents to their employees, and that negligence of this "duty" had very severe consequences. House of Commons, Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, Sessional Papers XIV (1843), p. 772-805.

<sup>16</sup> A later publication, from 1856, advised "your custom is your weapon; transfer that, and Shylock's power to punish will immediately cease." Adding that this "effectual and official remedy, which without governmental interposition can be easily done." Shylock is, of course, the term the author is using to describe shops who employed women to make cheap, ready-made clothing. Transfer Your Custom: A Treatise on the Present Deplorable Condition of the Poor Needlewomen, By One who is Well Acquainted with the Misery of Poor Needlewomen, London: R. Wilson, 1856, pp. 8 and 18.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Grainger, the author of the Second Report's section on seamstresses, became personally involved in at least two charities; he was the Honorary Secretary of the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners, and he is listed

Because the very real economic distress among the working class was often represented as a simple lack of knowledge and therefore of sympathy between the rich and poor, the seamstress was useful because she was an eminently sympathetic character. As we have seen, seamstresses were seen to come from the middle and upper classes, and could therefore be easily identified with by middle and upper class readers and viewers. The seamstress's origin in the middle or upper classes also insured that she remained free from the stereotype of working-class women as coarse, vulgar, and masculine. Because of her actual physical proximity as well, the seamstress provided a tangible and simple way in which the abyss between the "two nations" could be bridged. In the case of the seamstresses, the other "nation," although "hidden," was not suffering far away and underground in the factories and mines of northern England, but lived and worked in the city of London. What was so unique about seamstresses, out of all the types of laborers described in the Second Report, was that they were both familiar, visible, and close by, and at the same time unfamiliar invisible, and distant.

Authors of seamstress tales often used words having to do with visibility, such as "exposure" "sight" and "eyes," so perhaps it is no surprise that the seamstress

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as an active participant in a notice of a preliminary meeting of the Society for the Protection of Distressed Needlewomen of London, which appeared in The Times, January 16, 1844. The Association for the Aid and Protection of Dressmakers and Milliners, ran ads in The Times on May 25 and June 24, 1843, which listed six "principle objects" of the Association, none of which included lobbying the government to pass legislation. Another charity, known as the Society for the Protection and Employment of Distressed Needlewomen, focused not on women who were employed at dressmaking and millinery establishments, but on slop workers, including shirt-makers. The notion of free trade was important to this charity as well. They were clearly concerned that the efforts of the organization not disrupt the natural laws of the market. See The Times, May 25, 1843, p. 3 and June 24, 1843, p. 2; "The Distressed Needlewomen," The Times, January 16, 1844, p. 3; "The Metropolis: Distressed Needlewomen," The Economist, December 7, 1844, p. 1495; and "Society for the Protection and Employment of Distressed Needlewomen," The Female's Friend, January 1846, p. 16.

became the subject of so many illustrations and paintings. The authors and artists who treated the subject of the distressed seamstresses saw themselves as quite literally bringing something to light, making visible that which was near and yet invisible. They complained that the public refused to "see" what was right in front of their eyes, "here the misery presses too closely on the visual organ to be discerned...."<sup>18</sup>

There was a sense that all could be made right between the seamstress and her employers and between the working class and the upper class by simply exposing the middle- and upper-class public to the hardships of the seamstress. Male and female authors of seamstress tales were motivated by the simple desire to bring the facts before the "wealthier classes," because it was contended that once the facts were known, something would surely be done. The author of an 1843 article entitled "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," stated that he wished "to drive people out of their strongholds of indifference...and, by bringing home to their feelings the suffering which is now remote and hidden, to make them rouse themselves and say, 'These things shall exist no longer.'"<sup>19</sup> Once the truth was known it was believed that, at the very least, women would give more time for their orders to be filled, an act which would "have the effect of showing to the humbler persons who are engaged in these laborious undertakings that they are thought of by those who are in a superior station to themselves" and "promote a kindly feeling between the different classes of society, and to make all feel that they are in fact brothers and sisters, and must go far to diminish and finally close up the gulf which separates the higher from the lower classes."<sup>20</sup> One of the stated purposes of the

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<sup>18</sup> "Death and the Drawing Room," pp. 97-100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Association for the Aid and Benefit of Milliners and Dressmakers," The Morning Chronicle, May 6, 1844, p. 6.

Association for the Benefit of Milliners and Dressmakers was "to diminish that gulf which absolutely yawned between those who made dresses and those who wore them."<sup>21</sup>

We know that pictures could go along way in moving the hearts and minds of the English public in the 1840s. The scandal caused by the First Report of the Children's Employment Commission report was provoked in part by its unprecedented use of illustrations (fig. 33). The illustrations for the First Report must be seen as an important prototype for Redgrave's The Sempstress, which is, in effect, a "high art" illustration of the disclosures found in the (unillustrated) Second Report.

The drawings of the mines and miners which appeared in the First Report are simple and rather primitive. They depict scenes of women harnessed to coal carts on all fours like animals, and of children carrying bundles of coal on their backs. The illustrations were said to render "the more apparent to comprehension" the "degraded condition of the children and young persons employed in the mines."<sup>22</sup> They were described as offensive and sickening by Lord Londonderry, who also complained that they were "calculated to inflame the passions."<sup>23</sup> But others insisted that "so far from any of them being exaggerations. they are, one and all, inadequate to convey the extent of the wretchedness."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Dressmakers and Milliners," Northern Star (Leeds), May 1, 1844, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> R.H. Horne, "Children's Employment Commission," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. I (May to October 1843), p. 46. Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith, physician, sanitary reformer, and member of the Children's Employment Commission recognized that illustrations would catch the attention of the public in much the same way that they served to attract readers for the novels of the period, and recommended that the report be illustrated.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. As a result of the report (and its illustrations), Lord Ashley was able to push the Mines Act through parliament, eliminating the labor of women and children

"When the Report on Mines was laid on the table of the House, astonishment and horror were universal," wrote R.H. Horne in his 1844 book A New Spirit of the Age,

No such outrages on humanity had been discovered since the disclosure of the treatment of Negro slaves. It was truly said that this report resembled a volume of travels in a remote and barbarous country, so little had been previously known of the state of things it described.<sup>25</sup>

The disclosures on needlewomen from the Second Report, although unillustrated, were greeted with a similar feeling of wonder at the unknown, not unlike the West's fascination with the "exotic" cultures of the near east. This was not unusual -- in the 1840s the world of the poor was continually presented as "another land" or, in Disraeli's famous words, another "nation" which had, until the parliamentary reports, remained hidden from view.<sup>26</sup>

When the Second Report, with its revelations about needlewomen, was published, it seemed remarkable that the type of extreme misery and poverty that everyone had been reading about in Northern England (in the First Report) existed close at hand. An author in The Morning Chronicle reported that,

everybody was filled with astonishment at learning that such an evil existed. It never had entered into the contemplation of the British public that in London such an amount of toil was imposed upon the dressmakers. They had heard a great deal about the evils of the factory system, but they had no conception

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from the mines. See Georgina Battiscombe, Shaftesbury. The Great Reformer, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975, p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> R.H. Horne ed., A New Spirit of the Age, New York: J.C. Riker, 1844, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Gertude Himmelfarb argues that the frequently used metaphor of the poor as a foreign country during this period was an exaggeration that served other purposes. That foreign country, she argues, could not have been that foreign in reality. She also discusses Henry Mayhew's use of terms like "race" and "tribe" for the poor in his four volume epic London Labour and the London Poor, see Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, New York: Vintage Books, 1985, especially pp. 324-334, 403-406 and pp. 489- 503.

that here, just at home, that the orders given by themselves to the dressmakers, or the gown and cap-makers, could not be executed without imposing this evil upon a large class of their fellow creatures.<sup>27</sup>

The mines and factories may have been distant and difficult to envision, but nearly everyone knew a dressmaker or milliner, or purchased their shirts or trousers from someone who employed women, and everyone had seen a woman sew, if only embroidery or for the family,

when we hear of the hard toil of the collieries or the iron districts, we congratulate ourselves that we do not live in a coal country...and we contrive to feel as if we had nothing to do with the toils and sufferings of the young labourers, because we are at a distance from them....but here, in this very London where we live, in its gayest and most crowded streets...are to be found...the victims of the luxury to which they minister.<sup>28</sup>

The seamstress allowed for an image of the two nations living literally side by side, yet not communicating at all. The two nations, as it turned out, were actually in contact with one another, they passed each other on the street. And it was precisely because of the nearness and familiarity of the seamstress that complacency in the face of the "exposure" of their trials could be presented as all the more inhuman. Writers and illustrators alike stressed the proximity of wealth and poverty, of the seamstress and her customer.

The sense of seamstresses being visible and yet invisible at the same time is evident in many seamstress images. An early article on milliners and dressmakers which quoted passages of the Second Report at length was accompanied by two illustrations at the bottom of the page, one entitled "The Milliners," the other, "The Duchesses" (fig. 11). Together, the scenes show us unmitigated luxury near to, but oblivious of, the suffering of the "other nation." The milliners are portrayed in a small

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<sup>27</sup> "Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners," The Morning Chronicle, May 6, 1844, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> "Death and the Drawing Room," p. 4.

crowded workroom illuminated by candlelight. According to the clock on the wall it is three o'clock in the morning, and the women have put aside their hastily consumed meal, visible in the foreground. A milliner on the far left has put her face in her hands, and a bird in a cage on the right provides a metaphor for the seamstresses, trapped, and far from their home in the countryside. The figures form a circle which is closed to the viewer. The figures in the image of "The Duchesses," on the other hand, form an open circle, so that their faces and dresses are visible. The open composition which seems to include the viewer, also implicates her in the apprentice's misery. A chandelier - not candlelight - illuminates the large room. Three couples form the circle, and the women in particular are all elegantly and elaborately dressed. The author of the article stressed the proximity of the two classes,

beautiful, indeed, are the high-born daughters of England on their way to the palace of Queen Victoria; but philosophy and compassion place by their sides, even in their very carriages, the worn and dying sempstress, -- the creature whose health and human hopes have all been sacrificed to the mere waywardness of tyrannous and fantastic fortune.<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes the seamstress and the heedless women who purchase the clothes they have made are separated only by a curtain, as in George Cruikshank's "Tremendous Sacrifice" (fig. 22). In this case, a seemingly endless stream of meanly-dressed seamstresses (slop-workers) are literally being "ground" (talk about grinding oppression!) into heaps of beautiful clothing by a machine whose crank is turned by a figure with horns and a devilish grin (a Jew?). Yet just beyond the bulging curtain, to the right, is a fancy shop filled with "ladies" thrilled by the bargains. Two suave salesmen stand with their back to the curtain that separates the glamorous showroom "surmounted with gilt cornices, panelled with mirrors, and floored with carpet" from the stark scene of exploitation as they display garments to unknowing customers. The

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<sup>29</sup> "Slaves of the Needle," The Pictorial Times, May 20, 1843, p. 146.

article which accompanies the illustration, entitled "Tremendous Sacrifice" refers ironically to the way that the cheap shop has advertised their goods at a "tremendous sacrifice" to themselves -- when what is really being sacrificed is the lives of the seamstresses. The author warns that the clothes are

manufactured in garrets by slaves of the needle who can scarcely keep themselves alive on the pittance they receive, they are transported to splendid shops, and thence to drawing rooms, amidst wealth and aristocracy. Little do their fair purchasers imagine amidst what tears, privation and misery they are produced.<sup>30</sup>

The rich and the poor, the two nations, exist side by side, and yet the rich remain unaware of the nation that supplies their luxuries. A slightly later illustration by Henry Anelay for a seamstress tale by George W.M. Reynolds, The Seamstress; or, the White Slave of England (1850), is similarly divided in two, between the seamstress and her fashionable, well-dressed patron (fig. 35). On the left a plainly dressed seamstress, depicted in profile with her back hunched over her work, sews by candlelight in a miserable room. On the right, a group of three extravagantly dressed women parade before the viewer in a fancy parlour. We see the faces of all three women, but their backs are indifferently turned to the scene on the left. The figure closest to us, who is also the most elaborately adorned, looks directly at the viewer. The two scenes are separated by enlarged scissors, pincushion, needle, thimble and thread.

John Leech did a pair of similar images for Punch in 1849 entitled Needle Money and Pin Money (fig. 36).<sup>31</sup> This time the figures actually face one another without seeing each other. In Needle Money a haggard looking seamstress sits behind

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<sup>30</sup> George Cruikshank, "Tremendous Sacrifice," Our Own Times, vol. I, no. III (1846), p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Leech's illustrations "Needle Money" and "Pin Money" appeared in Punch 16 (1849), pp. 239 and 240.

a table sewing by candlelight. And in Pin Money an upper-class woman sits at a dressing table facing to the left, but it is her vanity -- her mirror -- that separates her from the scene of the seamstress.

There were endless variations on this theme. In a much later illustration by John Tenniel entitled The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost' in the Looking Glass from Punch in 1863 (fig. 37), a woman in a fancy gown looks into a mirror, but sees a half dead seamstress instead of her own reflection.<sup>32</sup> And an illustration on the cover of a short-lived periodical entitled The Sempstress (fig. 38), reveals a seamstress in a similar position, leaning back in her chair, absolutely exhausted by her work, while on the right, instead of an upper-class woman, we see the fancy dress which is being worked on.

Richard Redgrave's painting of 1847, Fashion's Slaves (fig. 39), depicts an actual confrontation between the employer and the seamstress. An upper-class woman reclines luxuriously on a couch in her bedroom as the plainly-dressed seamstress, with down-cast eyes, delivers her goods. Redgrave's message is clear: this woman does not have any thought at all for the seamstress who supplies her with items of luxury -- even though she stands before her. Even the maid at the right scowls at the needlewoman -- perhaps because she jealously senses that she retains some pretension to gentility.

Visible and invisible at the same time, the seamstress lived in two worlds, and thus became the ideal ideological tool for bridging the gulf which separated the "two nations." The seamstress embodied a series of contradictions, she was both upper class and working class; she produced beautiful objects sold in lavish shops but lived in

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<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that the men who purchased shirts and trousers made by seamstresses are never confronted by the ghost of their maker -- the problem was clearly one of women's vanity and love of a bargain. It is as though the guilt produced by England's material prosperity has been projected onto women.

a cold and miserable garret; she lived and worked in London but worked longer hours and performed labor more dangerous to her health than the women in the mines; she often knew and visited the homes of her upper-class patrons, but they knew nothing of her life.

As we have seen before, the figure of the seamstress was perfectly suited to reconfiguring the problems of the early 1840s (unemployment, the New Poor Law, poverty, working-class unrest etc.). In this case these problems were (re)conceived as a lack of contact between "the two nations." The seamstress also posed a straightforward and simple solution to this problem -- seeing and sympathy.

## Chapter Seven

### PLEADING FOR HER OWN SEX

In the tense period of the early 1840s, when various political factions were scrambling to find someone to hold accountable for the precarious state of the nation, two groups were commonly blamed (depending on one's politics and background): factory owners and landlords. Factory owners came under attack for the horrors of the "factory system" (the employment of women and children, long hours and poor working conditions), the perception that they would do anything (however unjust and inhuman) to increase their profits, and their resistance to legislation which would put restrictions on the labor they employed. Similarly, land owners were accused of protecting their own interests in their refusal to repeal the Corn Laws (which many believed would make the cost of bread a good deal cheaper) and in their unwillingness to pass legislation restricting labor in the mines (because they owned the land that the mines operated on). One of the reasons for the tenacity of the seamstress myth was that the responsibility for the suffering of seamstresses seemed to rest on the shoulders of another group entirely, one which was hitherto unimplicated in the "condition of England" question: women.

Distressed seamstresses certainly seemed to be a woman's issue: women were doing the sewing, women were often the employers, and it was women who were purchasing the dresses and other articles of clothing made by poor needlewomen. It seemed that women's vanity was to blame, and that their natural inclination to sympathy was the answer.

Article after article on seamstresses appealed directly to women, to "the ladies of England, the mothers, the daughters of England."<sup>1</sup> The Female Mission Record carried an article entitled "An appeal to the Young: To the Young Ladies of Great

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<sup>1</sup> "Dress-Making," Christian Lady's Magazine, vol. 20 (July-December 1843), p. 248.

Britain," which urged women to be less demanding on their dressmakers claiming that they are "sisters." The article outlined the tortures of dressmaking and asserted "you partly caused it..."<sup>2</sup> The Pictorial Times also addressed itself to women when they published sections of the Second Report:

We say to you, ladies of London -- to you, the chosen foundlings of fortune -- a heavy responsibility is on you. It is for you...to save fifteen thousand of your fellow creatures from much daily suffering, from disease and early death. Such is your task. Upon your conscience be it, if, after what has been published to the world -- if, after what has been forced upon your knowledge, you still neglect to perfect it.<sup>3</sup>

Many female writers and painters treated the subject of distressed needlewomen and often directly addressed a female audience.<sup>4</sup> In The Wrongs of Woman, Charlotte Tonna addressed "the educated females of England" that they might be alerted to the "wrongs sustained by those of our own sex."<sup>5</sup> She described herself as "a woman pleading for her own sex - an Englishwoman for the daughters of her own land...."<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Stone in The Young Milliner wrote that

<sup>2</sup> "An Appeal to the Young: To the Young Ladies of Great Britain," The Female Mission Record, vol. VIII (Jan. 1845), pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> The Pictorial Times, "Slaves of the Needle," May 20, 1843, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> I am speaking here of Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, New York: Dodd & Mead, 1843; Camilla Toulmin, "The Orphan Milliners," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 279-285; and also her "The Shawl Buyer, An Incident of 1843," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 217-221, as well as Mrs. Stone, The Young Milliner, London: Cunningham and Mortimer, 1843. And in the case of painting, the most well-known example is Anna Blunden's The Song of the Shirt (fig. 29). For a list of other seamstress images by women see Edelstein, 'But Who Shall Paint the Grief of Those Oppress'd?' The Social Theme in Victorian Painting, Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], The Wrongs of Woman, Part I "Milliners and Dressmakers," New York: Dodd & Mead, 1843, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> [Tonna], p. 14.

fashionable ladies, -- individually kind and good, and exemplary, -- are collectively the cause of infinite misery to the young and unprotected of their own sex...should this Narrative meet their sight, it is hoped that its appeal to their sympathy will not be made in vain.<sup>7</sup>

We have already seen how the "condition of England" problem was being cast in "feminine" terms of feeling and sympathy, and we have also seen that there was no one more "feminine" than the seamstress. With the seamstress myth, the uncomfortable issues around an image of a powerful, male working class demanding fair wages and regular employment was reframed around more "feminine" issues of charity and sympathy. Women's charitable "nature" could be called on to solve the problems not only of distressed seamstresses, but of all the poor and suffering. Sarah Ellis, a prolific author on women wrote that

men, engaged in the active affairs of life, have neither time nor opportunity for those innumerable little acts of consideration which come within the sphere of female duty, nor are they by nature so fitted as woman for entering into the peculiarities of personal feeling, so as to enable them to sympathize with the suffering or the distressed.<sup>8</sup>

The ability of the seamstress myth to frame the problem of working-class distress in terms of sympathy and to shift responsibility away from landowners and factory owners to women is undoubtedly one reason for its success.

A good example of how the seamstress could be used to reconfigure the debate about how to solve the problems of working-class distress is the career of Lord Ashley, a landowner and resolute critic of the "factory system." Ashley may have championed the cause of the distressed seamstresses in part to prove that his policies did not arise from any personal prejudice against factory owners.<sup>9</sup> At the very

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<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Stone, introduction.

<sup>8</sup> [Sarah Ellis], The Wives of England; their relative duties, domestic influence, and social obligations, London: 1843, p. 294-5.

<sup>9</sup> See Patricia L. Schmidt, "The Role of Moral Idealism in Social Change: Lord Ashley and the Ten Hours Factory Act," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63 (1977), p. 17.

beginning of a speech in favor of the Ten Hours Factory Bill in parliament on March 15, 1844, Ashley denied allegations of personal prejudice. "Let me anticipate," he said, "the constant, but unjust accusation that I am animated by a peculiar hostility against factory masters, and have always selected them as exclusive objects of attack." Several sentences later he asserted that "avarice and cruelty are not the peculiar and inherent qualities of any one class or occupation.... We are all alike, I fully believe, in the town and in the country -- in manufactures and in agriculture...." And to give credence to this assertion he insisted,

Look at the frightful records of the London dress-makers -- for whom do they wear out their lives in heart-breaking toil? Why, to supply the demands and meet the sudden and capricious tastes of people of condition! Here is neither farmer nor manufacturer at fault; the scene is changed, and the responsibility too: we must ascribe it entirely to the gentler sex, and among them, not a little to our own intimacies and connexions.<sup>10</sup>

Over and over again, the "unnatural" vanity of women was called upon to explain the problem of distressed seamstresses. Charlotte Tonna in The Wrongs of Woman claimed that though God made woman "to be an help-meet for man, the unnatural exertions of pride, and pomp, and frivolity have made her a beast of burden to her own sex."<sup>11</sup> As one concerned citizen stated, "it was most dreadful to reflect that those who ministered most to female luxury were, from want of consideration, most exposed to female misery."<sup>12</sup>

Friedrich Engels echoed this sentiment in The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845), "it is characteristic [of industrial England today] that it is precisely the workers engaged in the manufacture of those articles intended for the personal

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth E. Carpenter, British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850, New York: Arno Press, 1972, pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> [Tonna], p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> "Dressmakers and Milliners," Northern Star, May 1, 1844, p. 3.

adornment of middle-class ladies whose health is most seriously threatened by the nature of their employment."<sup>13</sup> And the Illustrated London News wrote about "what is endured by the toiling and wasting beings...who work to gratify the caprice to sustain the fashion, or adorn the beauty of the charitable gentlewomen of England."<sup>14</sup>

According to the seamstress myth inconsiderate and vain women were giving their orders to their dressmakers at the last minute in an effort to keep up with the latest fashion,

the changeableness of fashion, the evanescence of each succeeding whim produce a brisk and most hurrying demand for new articles. This causes a great press for work: ladies, having waited to the last moment for the appearance of some novelty in costume, and then being eager to figure among the first to adopt it, must urge the poor operatives to the utmost of their speed.<sup>15</sup>

Grinrod, the author of the pamphlet The Slaves of the Needle, concluded that the Parliamentary Report demonstrated that "much mischief results from the inconsiderateness of ladies, whose orders for dresses are not infrequently, but unnecessarily delayed until the last possible moment."<sup>16</sup>

In Toulmin's The Orphan Milliners, a fashionable woman demands that her dress be made in twenty four hours. The narrator remarks,

probably it never occurred to the thoughtless woman as she rolled away in her carriage...made selfish by perpetual luxury, that she had on such occasions done her part in wearing out not only silks and satins, but youth, health and

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, translated by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chalmer, California: Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 237.

<sup>14</sup> "Female Labour," Illustrated London News, vol. IV (January 27, 1844), p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> [Tonna], p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Barnes Grinrod, The Slaves of the Needle: an Exposure of the Distressed Condition, Moral and Physical, by Dress-makers, Milliners, Embroiderers, London: William Brittain and Charles Gilpin, 1843, p. 29.

life. And for what? To minister to... 'the disgusting foolery of idiotic vanities'....<sup>17</sup>

The unmistakable message is that women, due to their vanity, are literally causing the death of other women. Vanity comes to seem like a sin whose punishment is the further and more profound sin of murder. This understanding of the problem made women seem at least as bad, if not worse, than factory owners, landowners and even the evil Jewish slop-sellers who appear in so much seamstress fiction.

In illustrations which accompanied articles and fiction, a thoughtless, upper-class woman is confronted with the corpse or skeleton of the seamstress. An illustration for an article entitled "Death and the Drawing Room, or the Young Dressmakers of England," depicts a seamstress in a bonnet and skirt, delivering an item of clothing (a hat perhaps) to a wealthy household (symbolized by the crown and feathers to the right and the classical style case to the left) (fig. 17). But the seamstress's torso, arms and hands are those of a skeleton.

A similar image (fig. 40) appeared on the cover of a pamphlet entitled Confessions of a Needlewoman! in which are Revealed the Remarkable Trials, Sufferings, and Temptations of Susan Fry, including, the title page continued, "the thrilling disclosures made to Rebecca Wheeler, a village girl, detailing her heartless seduction, cruel desertion, and untimely end." Here, the image is the familiar workroom of the seamstress. On a table lie the tools of the trade: a scissors, thimble, thread, candle and flower. But this time the table also includes a stand on which appears a skull, adorned in a bonnet. On a cloth which drapes over the table is inscribed "Fashion's Slave."

Both of these illustrations are strongly reminiscent of "Dance of Death" images, which depict sinners being confronted by death who appears as a skeleton. Particularly relevant are the images by Holbein of female sinners, such as "The

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<sup>17</sup> Toulmin, p. 282.

Countess" (fig. 41) which depicts a woman about to dress while death approaches in the form of a skeleton and fastens a necklace of bones around her neck.

It is interesting that a "love of finery" on the part of the upper classes was seen as the cause of the downfall (moral and otherwise) of seamstresses, since in most Victorian literature, the situation is reversed, and it is a love of dress on the part of the working women themselves that leads to their downfall.<sup>18</sup> In some early stories, before the seamstress had emerged fully as a victim late in 1843, seamstresses themselves were accused of this, and other typically feminine vices.

For example, in 1843 The Christian Lady's Magazine published a letter from a reverend which at one and the same time portrayed seamstresses as unprotected victims and as stereotyped vain and foolish women. According to this author, dressmakers engage in "romantic and foolish" chatter in the workroom about young men whom they have met or the "prurient pages of a licentious novel," and they are willing to succumb to temptation if the reward were a nice dress.

How is it that they dress in a style at once fashionable in appearance and somewhat expensive in material -- cheap as material is, it must cost solid money, and I have often asked myself the question, -- where do these poor girls...procure their dress? I could, but my profession enjoins me to secrecy, reveal some items in the dark account, which would afford an insight into the matter, and tell something of the purchase price of some of them.<sup>19</sup>

And in Heads of the People (1841), a book which humorously describes types of English people, the "dress-maker's girl" is portrayed as someone who is "but too apt to tarry and muse upon the play-bills," and is "a reader of novels" and spends her time daydreaming of a man who kissed her hand. The dressmaker finds herself

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<sup>18</sup> See Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," Victorian Studies, vol. 32 (Winter 1989), pp. 169-188.

<sup>19</sup> "Dress-Making," Christian Lady's Magazine, vol. 20 (July-December 1843), pp. 245-6.

"unconsciously wandering towards the wedding-rings -- at the next window a new bonnet, at the next, a gown for very great occasions."<sup>20</sup> The tone of these last two essays, although widely different in their approach -- one moralizing and the other humorous -- are in many ways quite similar. Both stereotype seamstresses as vain and flirtatious in a way which coexists quite strangely with, and nearly undermines, the author's insistent accounts of their victimization. This type of analysis disappears quickly from seamstress narratives soon after the publication of the Second Report, so that it is the upper classes alone which are seen to suffer from vanity while the seamstress is depicted as a paradigm of virtue, driven to poverty and prostitution, not from a love of finery, but from such selfless motives as saving her children from starvation or the abuses of the workhouse.

For example, Nelly, a seamstress turned prostitute in Eliza Meteyard's "Lucy Dean; the Noble Needlewoman" (1850) explains that she has "gone wrong" "not through an evil disposition, or a love of finery," but because she wanted to save her family from starving.<sup>21</sup> And when The Times first published excerpts from the Second Report in April of 1843, they referred to "the proverbial immorality of our young dress-makers," but in the very next paragraph explained that dress-makers "lose their virtue" only because "they would do anything rather than return to such labour."<sup>22</sup>

The shift is a subtle, but important one: from dress-makers who are themselves "immoral" to a vision of dress-makers who are still aware of the difference between good and evil, but are *driven* to evil by their circumstances. In this way the

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<sup>20</sup> Heads of the People; or, Portraits of the English; Drawn by Kenny Meadows. With Original Essays by Distinguished Writers, Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1841, pp. 106-7.

<sup>21</sup> Silverpen [Eliza Meteyard], "Lucy Dean; the Noble Needlewoman," Eliza Cook's Journal, March 16, 1850, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> "Second Report of the Factory Commissioners," The Times, April 21, 1843, p. 5.

responsibility for immorality is shifted entirely away from seamstresses (who strangely possess none of the "naturally" feminine qualities of a love of finery and vanity) to other women (who do possess those qualities).

As Lynda Nead has pointed out regarding notions of the prostitute in Victorian England, one way of negotiating fear of a social group is to define that group as victims.

If you feel sympathy rather than fear towards a group which challenges the dominant social order its power may be diffused. Pity deflects the force of that group and re-distributes power in terms of a conventional relationship organized around notions of social conscience, compassion and philanthropy.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the switch from dress-makers as vain and immoral women who transgress the boundaries of acceptable female sexuality to innocent victims gives us a sense of just how threatening seamstresses (as women entering the world of waged labor) were felt to be.

In addition to having a selfish "love of finery" women were also portrayed in seamstress literature as ruthless bargain hunters (who are usually duped by the stereotyped Jews who appear in the stories), looking to pay the cheapest price for an article of clothing, utterly insensitive to the cheap labor which produced the item they purchased. Perhaps the best example of this is "The Dress Cap," a story published in the spring of 1845 in a periodical entitled The Female Mission Record.<sup>24</sup>

In this story, a well meaning woman named Mrs. Mowbray, whose husband is involved in benevolent charities for the poor, bargains down the price of a hat at the milliners. When she visits the home of a milliner at the request of her wise husband, they find a respectable woman living in total poverty who is barely able to support

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<sup>23</sup> Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> This periodical was published under the auspices of the London Female Mission which attempted to save working-class women from prostitution.

herself and her aged mother because, as the seamstress herself explains, ladies refuse to pay a decent price for their hats. Mr. Mowbray remarks, "they little think, when they are so mercilessly hunting for bargains, how sadly they are diminishing the wages of the poor." Mrs. Mowbray learns her lesson, and the narrator explains,

bargain hunting had been in her case the result rather of thoughtlessness than of an unfeeling disposition....A bargain was ever afterwards associated in her mind with depreciated wages and the misery of the poor; and the charm which it had once possessed in her eyes was entirely dispelled by the recollection of the sorrow and oppression which were so often involved in its production....<sup>25</sup>

But if women's "nature" was so vain that it could cause the death of poor needlewomen, another aspect of their "nature" could help to ameliorate the plight of those same women. Philanthropic and benevolent by "nature," women were urged to become active in the various charities that were established to aid needlewomen, and the working class generally.<sup>26</sup>

In Charles Rowcroft's Fanny the Little Milliner; or, the Rich and the Poor (1846), an aristocrat remarks, "I have thought if a board or committee of women of rank and influence could be established; a board of protection and encouragement, and of relief when necessary, much practical good might be effected."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "The Dress Cap," The Female Mission Record, April 1845, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Philanthropy was one of the only avenues open for women of the leisured classes to become active in public life. For more on women and charity see F.K. Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Rowcroft, Fanny the Little Milliner; or, The Rich and the Poor, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1846, pp. 137-8.

Several charities, with active women members, were in fact founded to help needlewomen in the period immediately following the publication of the Second Report.<sup>28</sup> These charities directed their efforts toward those who were seen to be the cause of the distress: women themselves. The Association for the Aid and Protection of Dressmakers and Milliners held that "the brief and insufficient time allowed by ladies for the execution of their orders was a frequent source of hurried and protracted exertions." They urged that women allow enough time for their orders to be filled, and they added the hope that women would not "withdraw their patronage" from establishments that refused orders for this reason.<sup>29</sup>

An article published in Punch poked fun at one such attempt at charity by upper-class women (countesses and duchesses to be exact) who had attended a meeting on establishing an association to aid distressed needlewomen. To Punch, their response to the revelations in the Second Report seemed selfish, melodramatic and

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<sup>28</sup> Ironically, although the salvation of suffering seamstresses was seen to be women's mission, some of their charitable efforts were attacked in the press. The Association for the Aid and Protection of Dressmakers and Milliners was attacked on the pages of The Weekly Dispatch, a radical London newspaper for alleged abuses of the funds they had raised. The author of this article attacked the aristocracy by claiming that although many charities existed in England to help the poor, and the aristocracy alleviated their pangs of conscience by purchasing subscriptions, those who were deserving never saw the money. The funds that were raised, the author claimed, were spent on "paying large salaries to secretaries and officers." The author declared that "it is preposterous that the funds should be so disposed of, and it is highly discreditable to the ladies of the committee, which comprises a Duchess and a Viscountess, to allow the money of the poor to be expended upon costly apartments...for their secretary." "Charity Abused -- The Dress-makers' and Milliners' Association," The Weekly Dispatch, May 26, 1844, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> "Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners," The Morning Chronicle, May 6, 1844, p. 6.

overwrought. Even worse, their vows to help seemed like self-congratulatory and useless tokens of aristocratic charity. Punch reported that a dowager marchioness "celebrated for the splendour and brilliancy of her diamonds, in the very morbidity of what she deems remorse, refused to wear her costly gems from the moment she became assured of the miseries of those fifteen thousand London victims, the milliners and dressmakers." The Duchess of Buckingham said that "unless something was done, she should feel that on Court-days, at parties, &c., she always carried about with her the ghost of a milliner -- should feel that her very clothes were haunted and possessed by the departed spirit of a sacrificed sempstress."<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, in illustrations at least, wealthy and vain women were confronted by the ghost of the seamstress whose very life had wasted away in the creation of the garment. In John Tenniel's "The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost' in the Looking Glass" done for Punch somewhat later, in 1863, a woman looks in a mirror to model her new fancy dress only to see a dead seamstress. The point of so many of the articles and stories about distressed seamstresses was that people, and more specifically women, needed to see the dreadful consequences of their vanity.

The myth of the seamstress shifted responsibility for the suffering of the other "nation" from the government or from manufacturers (unless, of course, they were Jewish) onto women. Women were thus doubly responsible: they could ameliorate the plight of needlewomen through an appeal to their charitable "nature" and through a curtailment of their thoughtless, vain and selfish "nature." This was, I believe, one

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<sup>30</sup>. "Needles and Coronets -- Great Meeting of the Duchesses!" Punch vol. 4 (1843), p. 219.

reason why seamstresses became the focus of so much attention. They allowed for the pressing question of the destitution of the working class to be figured in a reassuring way, allowing for both a simple analysis and an easy solution to quite serious problems. At the same time, the seamstress myth managed to sidestep the entire debate of government regulation versus free-trade by blaming women.

## Chapter Eight

## AT HOME AND ABROAD: 1848-1851

The figure of the distressed seamstress made a dramatic reappearance between 1848-1851 after a brief ebb in interest in the subject in the mid 1840s. H.M. Rathbone's, "The Routine of Daily Life. No. III -- The Sempstress," Eliza Meteyard's, "Lucy Dean; the Noble Needlewoman," and G.W.M. Reynolds's "The Seamstress; or, The White Slave of England," were all published during this period. Images of the subject from this period include (among others) Henry Anelay's illustrations for Reynolds's story (fig. 35), and John Leech's illustrations for Punch (fig. 32, fig. 36, and fig. 48).

It was also during this period that George Frederick Watts painted his version of the subject (fig. 42). A biographer has written that Watts's "disapproval of extravagance rose at times to passionate resentment when conditions of sad distress were realized and often exaggerated in his mind."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Watts painted several sad "modern life" subjects around 1850, including The Sempstress, Found Drowned, Under a Dry Arch, and The Irish Famine.<sup>2</sup> Watts's painting of a seamstress may in fact be the most bleak of all such images. The room, the furnishings, and the seamstress's clothing are all unremittingly plain and coarse. The poor woman seems so exhausted that she can barely sit upright; supported by her elbow, she leans her cheek on her hand. She makes no plea for redemption, as in Redgrave's or Blunden's version of the subject, nor is there any relief from her unending work in the contemplation of a withering plant as there is in Peele's Song of the Shirt (fig. 7) or in Hicks' later painting

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Russell Barrington, G.F. Watts: Reminiscences, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> All owned by the Watts Gallery, Compton, England. For illustrations and a brief discussion of these images see chapter 2 in Julian Treuherz, Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art, London: Lund Humphries, 1987.

Old Associations (fig. 6). Watts does not elaborate on the figure of the seamstress with a great deal of narrative details. This may be because the iconography and the composition of seamstress images had become so predictable that Watts wanted to do something different. It is more likely though, that Watts eschewed details like the clock, broken crockery, medicine vials and dying plant because he was primarily a painter of historical and allegorical scenes and not a genre painter (as were Redgrave and Blunden).

The seamstress myth, as we will see, became much more sensational during this period. Stories of needlewomen who turned to prostitution and clothing that spread fatal diseases became commonplace in seamstress literature. Emigration, for a time, became the solution of choice for the problem of distressed seamstresses, as though the issue had become so dire and pressing that legislation and philanthropy would no longer suffice.

The increased anxiety over needlewomen turned prostitutes, the desire to see them shipped off to the colonies, along with the fear of contaminated clothing should be seen as part of a wider moral panic caused by a renewed fear of revolution and the cholera epidemic of 1848. Working class uprisings, (caused in part by the French Revolutions of 1848), together with the cholera epidemic of 1848-49 created a climate of insecurity and foreboding. Insurrection, disease, poverty, filth, and deviant sexuality (the prostitute) were conflated together. The anxiety caused by these events took the form, as Lynda Nead has observed, of an "obsession with public morality and national stability."<sup>3</sup> It is within this context that we need to look at the literature on seamstresses that was published between 1848 and 1851.

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<sup>3</sup> Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 112.

The revolutions on the continent (Germany, Prussia, Italy and Austria) in 1848, and especially the French revolution of February that year which established universal male suffrage (exactly what the Chartists in England had been demanding) provided powerful inspiration both to the Chartist movement and to working-class unrest generally. "Within a fortnight," of the French revolution in February, "disorders had broken out in London which were more serious than those in 1842."<sup>4</sup> The unrest was not limited to London, uprisings inspired by the French revolution as well as by unemployment and economic recession reached north to Glasgow and Manchester. One historian has located a period of working-class disturbances running more than six months, from February of 1848 through August of that year.<sup>5</sup>

April 1848 was a particularly fearful month in Britain. That month the Chartists organized a demonstration in London before the presentation of the charter (for the third time) to parliament. This demonstration "acquired a spurious revolutionary flavour in establishment circles,"<sup>6</sup> and large numbers of troops and police were called in to prevent any serious outbreak of violence. And although the demonstration passed peacefully, once again, as in 1842, "many people felt that the country had come too close to confrontation for comfort."<sup>7</sup> A few months later, in June, conflicts between Chartists and the police in London further aroused fears of revolution.

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Quinault, "1848 and Parliamentary Reform," The Historical Journal, vol. 31 (1988), p. 835.

<sup>5</sup> F.C. Mather, Public Order in the Age of the Chartists, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Quinault, p. 835.

<sup>7</sup> Quinault, p. 836.

As in 1843, the distress of the working class was very real, and the threat of revolution equally so. Like Tonna in 1843, Hugo Reid in What Should be Done for the People? An Appeal to the Electors of the United Kingdom (1848) claimed that "the condition of the working population of this country is one which must call forth feelings of sorrow, anxiety, and alarm in the breasts of all who know what that condition is.... There is a wide-spread discontent with our laws and institutions..."<sup>8</sup> From this he turned immediately to the subject of the revolutions on the continent, "in almost every European state we observe the Government...overturned by the popular power." Reid asked,

What is there in the British Constitution, in the character of the British people, or, in their present state and temper, to assure us that the metropolis...may not be turned into a scene of carnage such as was exhibited but a few weeks since in the streets of Berlin, -- or, that every branch of our industry shall not be paralysed, as the commerce and manufactures of France are at present, from the disorganized state of that country? It may be granted that such contingencies are a little less probable in this country; -- but a narrow basis on which to rest for the security of your lives, fortunes, and all that you hold dear!<sup>9</sup>

At about the same time that revolution was occurring in the different nations in Europe, a cholera epidemic spread through the continent and England, making 1848 "the greatest and most devastating of all the epidemic years, at least in terms of the sheer number of people affected."<sup>10</sup> The epidemic continued well into 1849. One could easily conclude that, for England, the entire decade of the 1840s was a period of "anxiety and crisis: the Irish famine, the financial crisis, revolutions on the Continent

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo Reid, What Should be Done for the People? An Appeal to the Electors of the United Kingdom, London: Simpkin, Marshall & co., 1848, pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Evans, "Epidemics and Revolutions: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe," Past and Present, August 1988, p. 131.

and the fear of revolution at home, and, climactically and most disastrously...the cholera epidemic."<sup>11</sup>

As in 1842-44, there was an urgent sense that revolution could be averted only if something was done immediately to ease the suffering of the poor. So it makes sense that the seamstress should reappear on the scene as a figure who could both dramatize the fearful state of the nation and provide reassuring solutions to the problems. Occasionally, the relationship between the necessity of seeing and ameliorating the suffering of seamstresses and the revolutions on the continent was made explicit, as in an article in The Westminster Review on distressed seamstresses. The article begins,

the question of human misery -- its causes and their removal, is at the bottom of the movement which is now convulsing Europe, and which threatens to agitate it for some time to come....Human misery has at last found tongues and pens to make itself heard and felt. It appeals to our feelings and our understandings, to our sympathies and our fears....It will no longer hide itself. We must either remove it, or submit to have it constantly exposed to our gaze in all its horrid deformity....

and continues, "the sufferings of the distressed needlewomen have obtained an infamous notoriety -- they are a scandal to our age and a reproach to our boasted civilization."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the suffering of needlewomen (as opposed to miners or factory workers) was what could acceptably be "exposed" and what could pull the most heart strings.

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<sup>11</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Culture of Poverty," The Victorian City, edited by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 717.

<sup>12</sup> W.E., "Art. III," The Westminster Review, vol 50 (October 1848-January 1849), pp. 371-2.

Much of the literature written after 1848 betrays a bitter sense of disappointment that the pangs of conscience produced when the seamstress scandal was first been revealed in 1843 had brought no real change. A short satirical piece in Punch has a needlewoman saying

I well remember when Mr. Hood sang his "Song of the Shirt" in your pages. Ha, Sir! what a song was that! and how it seemed to touch and tremble upon the heart-strings of all England....People talked of the sisterhood of woman; and the slaves of the needle and thread smiled at the words, and...thought there really was something true and beautiful in them. All this however passed away.<sup>13</sup>

The figure of the distressed seamstress resurfaced in 1848 in much the same way as she had originally appeared in 1843-44. The Times and Punch published articles about the low wages paid to a seamstress named Emma Mounser by "Moses."<sup>14</sup> Articles in other periodicals followed, debating what should be done for seamstresses and whether it was right for the government to interfere. The most famous (because they were so sensational) seamstress articles from this period appeared in The Morning Chronicle, a paper which had just recently joined The Times and other papers in the reforming crusade. These articles, written by Henry Mayhew, on slop-workers, milliners and dressmakers, were published in the autumn of 1849 and 1850.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "The Cheap Shirt Market," Punch 15 (July - December 1848), p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> See a review of an article which appeared in The Times about a woman named Emma Mounser who, like Biddell in 1843, pawned the work she was given to sew because of the indecent wages she was paid by (once again) "Moses and Son." "The Cheap Shirt Market" Punch 15 (July - December 1848), p. 73. See also "A Shroud as well as a Shirt" in Punch 15 (July-December 1848), p. 76. Another article, in The Westminster Review debated the problem -- which appeared once again in 1848 -- of what to do about shirtmaking in prisons and workhouses driving down the wages of needlewomen. See W.E., "Art. III," The Westminster Review, vol 50 (October 1848-January 1849), pp. 371-2.

<sup>15</sup> Although less well known to historians of the period, The Morning Chronicle also published other (albeit less scandalous), articles on seamstresses written by their

Mayhew began working as the London-based Metropolitan Correspondent for The Morning Chronicle in October 1849 and his letters form part of a series that paper had begun on "Labour and the Poor."<sup>16</sup> Like the detailed inquiries into the lives of the poor conducted by parliamentary committees earlier in the decade, the editors of the Chronicle promised that their correspondents would provide "a full and detailed description of the moral, intellectual, material, and physical condition of the industrial poor throughout England."<sup>17</sup>

The seamstress's prominent place on the pages of The Morning Chronicle makes sense when we consider that the paper was purchased in 1847 by several men of a strongly Paternalist persuasion (including Sidney Herbert, who became involved in The Needlewoman's Emigration Society, discussed below).<sup>18</sup> Like The Times, The Morning Chronicle sought to expose the hardships of the poor in order to inspire reform, and were adamantly opposed to the principles of free-trade.<sup>19</sup>

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Liverpool correspondent in the summer of 1850. See "Labour and the Poor. Liverpool. Shirtmakers and Needlewomen. -- The Slop Trade and the Sweating System, Letter VI," The Morning Chronicle, June 24, 1850, p. 5. "Labour and the Poor. Liverpool. The Tailors, The Slop Trade, and the Sweating System, Letter VII," The Morning Chronicle, July 1, 1850, p. 5. See also that paper's coverage of charities formed for the aid of seamstresses, "The Needlewoman Emigration Society," The Morning Chronicle, June 27, 1850, p. 5 and "Distressed Needlewomen's Society," The Morning Chronicle, July 20, 1850, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> The series was inspired by an article that Mayhew had written on a slum in London which was devastated by the Cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1848.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted by Himmelfarb, "The Culture of Poverty," p. 709.

<sup>18</sup> Earlier in the decade the Morning Chronicle had taken the opposite position. Instead of elaborating the suffering of the poor which might have inspired reform, they had advocated free-trade when the Factory Act was being debated, and adopted the position that there was absolutely nothing wrong with women working. See Roberts, Paternalism in Early Victorian England, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1979, p. 198.

<sup>19</sup> Carlyle, who can always be counted on to provide an unusual interpretation of an issue, addressed the question of the distressed needlewomen in "The Nigger

Mayhew's letters to The Morning Chronicle are the most dramatic and heart-wrenching accounts of seamstresses produced in the entire decade of the 1840s, and for that reason they were frequently reprinted by his contemporaries and are often used by historians of the period.<sup>20</sup> The letters were so disturbing that Mayhew himself seemed emotionally overwhelmed at times, "the facts that I have set before the public in my present communication are of so awful and tragic a character that I shall not even attempt to comment upon them. The miseries they reveal are so intense and overwhelming that, as with all deep emotions, they are beyond words."<sup>21</sup>

Mayhew's letters, as well as other articles on needlewomen published during this period in The Morning Chronicle, The Times and other periodicals, reiterate much of what was described in the literature from 1843-44. They express contempt for the new cheap clothing shops and anger about the loss of artisanal status and the presence of female labor (the division of the tailoring trade into an honorable and dishonorable sectors). Jewish-owned slop-shops continued to be scapegoated for these inevitable

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Question," an essay which was published in Fraser's Magazine in December 1849, one month after Mayhew's letters began to appear in the Chronicle. Asserting that "the everlasting duty of all men" is "to do competent work for his living," Carlyle argued that the distress which was said to exist among needlewomen was caused by their failure to be willing to work and obey. Distressed needlewomen, Carlyle wrote, were nothing more than "Mutinous Serving-Maids." "Who has not heard of the Distressed Needlewomen in these days?" he asked, and then continued, "We have thirty-thousand Distressed Needlewomen, -- the most of whom cannot sew a reasonable stitch." Thomas Carlyle, "The Nigger Question," (1849), reprinted in Carlyle: Selected Essays, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1972, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, "The Labour Question: An Exposition of the Social Condition of the Working classes. No. 1. -- The Needlewomen of London," The Penny Illustrated News, vol. I (January 5, 1850), pp. 82-3; J. T., "Labour and the Poor," Fraser's Magazine, vol. XLI (January 1850), p. 3 and Christina Walkley, The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress, London: Peter Owen, 1981.

<sup>21</sup> Henry Mayhew, The Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor: The Metropolitan Districts, Sussex: Caliban Books, 1980, vol. I (Letter VIII, November 13, 1849), p. 151.

changes in production. The seamstress myth was dominated, as it had been earlier in the decade, by a paternalist discourse which romanticized a stable "old England" and bemoaned the loss of connection that existed between the classes.

Although there are many similarities to the seamstress literature produced earlier in the decade, Mayhew's accounts of needlewomen turned prostitutes are far more explicit, sensational and melodramatic than anything written earlier in the decade. The seamstresses Mayhew interviewed recounted how they lived with different men, got pregnant out of wedlock, and other shocking stories. The Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission had referred to prostitution only minimally, and the newspaper articles of 1843-44, as we have seen, were often more concerned with seamstresses turned thieves (pawning articles of clothing given them to sew) than with prostitution. Mayhew's letters, on the other hand, carried a wealth of prurient details, all related to the reader, of course, out of a concern for the "breakdown" of morality.

How do we understand Mayhew's letters to The Morning Chronicle?<sup>22</sup> Like the earlier Parliamentary Report, it is difficult not to grant Mayhew's letters a degree of objectivity, after all they were printed in a respectable newspaper and Mayhew himself insisted that "hardly a word is written here but a note was taken of the matter upon the spot."<sup>23</sup> "I will endeavour," he wrote, "to reproduce the scenes I have lately

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<sup>22</sup> As with the industrial novels and the parliamentary reports, historians have disagreed on the best way to treat both Mayhew's letters to The Morning Chronicle and his larger work on the subject, London Labour and the London Poor. Yeo and Thompson see Mayhew's letters as a serious survey of poverty in mid-Victorian England. See Eileen Yeo and E.P. Thompson, The Unknown Mayhew. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971. Himmelfarb, characteristically, has adopted a more skeptical position toward the letters, offering reasons why we should doubt the absolute accuracy of Mayhew's work (Gertrude Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, New York: Vintage Books, 1985, p. 320).

<sup>23</sup> Mayhew, vol. I (Letter VI, November 6, 1849), p. 111.

looked upon -- and I will strive to do so in all their stark literality."<sup>24</sup> Like the parliamentary reports of 1843, Mayhew's letters contain "quotes" or testimony, supposedly taken verbatim from the needlewomen themselves. Yet, because they are still among the most cited documents by historians, it is important to step back from Mayhew's letters and their claims of accuracy and truthfulness to look at his career as a whole, and some of the evident biases and ideological assumptions that are evident in his letters to The Morning Chronicle.

Mayhew's activities as a writer were extraordinarily varied. He wrote plays, novels, biographies, travelogues, educational philosophy, satire and children's stories. Mayhew and his brother co-authored numerous stories including a humorous one with a distressed seamstress character who is really the daughter of an earl, entitled When to Marry and How to Get Married! or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Husband.<sup>25</sup> He was not simply an "objective" reporter then, and he was quite adept at writing fiction. Mayhew was also one of the founders of Punch, which as we have seen carried many articles on distressed needlewomen, satirizing their heartless employers and poking fun at attempts made by aristocratic women to form charities. It must have become clear to Mayhew that needlewomen were a profitable subject when Punch published Hood's "Song of the Shirt" in 1843 against the advice of most of the staff, including Mayhew himself. That poem proved to be enormously popular, insuring the financial success of the magazine. Mayhew had further connections to the early seamstress scandals. His father-in-law, Douglas Jerrold (Mayhew dedicated the work by which he is best known, London Labour and the London Poor to Jerrold),

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<sup>24</sup> Mayhew, vol. I (Letter VI, November 6, 1849), p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> When to Marry and How to Get Married! or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Husband, London: George Routledge and Sons, 1856. See Anne Humpherys' Henry Mayhew, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984, for a very useful survey of the vast array of Mayhew's work.

had written the article in Punch on the needlewoman Biddell, which in turn had been the inspiration for Hood's poem.<sup>26</sup>

We can get a sense that Mayhew's letters carried some biases if we look to the opinions of those of his contemporaries who held different political viewpoints.<sup>27</sup> It was evidently very difficult to denounce Mayhew's "facts" because to do so would be to open oneself up to accusations of heartlessness. Yet The Economist, a free trade periodical whose editors were wary of appeals to sympathy for the poor (such as were made by Mayhew in The Morning Chronicle as well as earlier in the decade in The Times), printed an article entitled "Distressed Populations. A Warning and A Doubt." The public, the article began, is so well aware of the amount of wretchedness that it generally believes what it reads about the subject. Yet, when the Morning Chronicle published

its graphic delineations of the 30,000 needlewomen, and the 23,000 journeymen tailors of the metropolis, such a vast proportion of whom were said to be starving on 2 1/2d. a day, and enduring the strangest varieties and the deepest extremities of human wretchedness...the needlewomen, driven by hundreds to eke out the earnings of the needle with the wages of prostitution, - the public stood utterly aghast, unwilling to believe, yet unable to disprove, statements promulgated by a journal of high repute, and attributed to a gentleman whose zeal, diligence and capacity it was impossible to question.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In addition, Jerrold was the editor of The Illuminated Magazine which carried several stories about seamstresses, "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dressmakers of England," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. I (May to October 1843), pp. 97-100, Miss Camilla Toulmin, "The Shawl Buyer, An Incident of 1843," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 217-221 and Toulmin, "The Orphan Milliners, A Story of the West End," The Illuminated Magazine, vol. II (November 1843 - April 1844), pp. 279-285.

<sup>27</sup> See E.P. Thompson, "The Political Education of Henry Mayhew," Victorian Studies II (September 1967), p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> "Distressed Populations. A Warning and a Doubt," The Economist, November 16, 1850, pp. 1264.

Angered at Mayhew's denunciation of free trade, The Economist did some investigating and concluded that

much of this misery may have been exaggerated; and that at all events the statements which were found so startling may contain only half the truth, and would assume a very different appearance and lead to very different conclusions, were the other half brought forward to correct them.<sup>29</sup>

It is evident from Mayhew's letters that his position (like that of The Morning Chronicle for whom he worked) was decidedly biased against free-trade and strongly paternalist, and that it also took the position of those artisans who had recently been put out of work by unskilled (female) labor. In fact, Mayhew was interested not in the industrial poor as a whole (although that was the advertised subject of his letters to The Morning Chronicle). He was interested specifically in artisanal trades which had been divided, like tailoring, into an "honorable" sector -- which was controlled by unions -- and a "dishonorable" sector -- which relied on the work of women.<sup>30</sup>

If Mayhew was partial to the artisan whose wages had been drastically reduced or who found himself unemployed due to the introduction of machinery and/or the employment of women, then we can hardly accept the letters on needlewomen in the Morning Chronicle as simple "fact." Mayhew even adopted the anti-semitism that we have found was such an integral part of the resistance to the new forms of production. At a meeting Mayhew called of 1,500 tailors he attacked the firm that we have seen symbolized the replacement of artisanal labor for slop-work -- Moses and Son. Magistrates, he said, were "too ready to listen to any paltry Jew who might come from Judas Iscariot, or any other Hebrew, to swear, by Barabbas, or Iscariot, or any of the

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<sup>29</sup> "Distressed Populations. A Warning and a Doubt," p. 1265.

<sup>30</sup> This argument relies on the work of Karel Williams, who argues that Mayhew's approach was that of the artisan himself -- "the letters not only collected artisan opinions, but also endorsed them as significant and serious." Karel Williams, From Pauperism to Poverty, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 249. I would like to thank Kathy Morrison for bringing this book to my attention.

brutal race that were thus festering upon us."<sup>31</sup> These are hardly the words of an "unbiased" reporter.

The testimony by seamstresses that Mayhew recounted often combined attacks on the New Poor Law with accounts of extremes of poverty, infanticide, suicide and prostitution. In Letter XI (published on November 23, 1849), for example, Mayhew quoted the testimony of one needlewoman, "the most eloquent of all," who spoke for half an hour "crying hysterically." Her story is long, but is worth retelling here, even in an abridged form, to give a sense of the scandalous quality of Mayhew's letters on needlewomen.

This seamstress told Mayhew how she had been left a widow, pregnant and with two children, and had tried to make a living sewing slop-shirts, working fifteen hours a day. She soon gave birth to a sickly child which made it impossible to work long hours. She was refused out-door relief -- even a loaf of bread (because of the provisions of the New Poor Law), and found herself without anything to feed her children on Christmas day. She finally applied to the workhouse even though she could not bear the thought of being separated from her children. One of her children caught the measles in the workhouse, where it died. Her youngest was near death. She left the workhouse and took up sewing slop-shirts again, but found it impossible to make a living and "a man lodging in the house was anxious to get a partner." She briefly moved in with him and soon found herself pregnant again -- this time with twins. One of the twins died, and she was pregnant yet again. She told Mayhew, "utterly distressed, I thought again of making away with my children. I locked the door, with the intention of taking their lives first and then my own, but God touched

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<sup>31</sup> This is from a speech Mayhew made at a meeting of 1,500 tailors in October of 1850. The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the "Morning Chronicle," 1849-1850, ed. E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, London: Pantheon Books, 1971, p. 38. Also quoted by Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, p. 322.

my conscience and I could not do it." Unable to pay her rent, she was turned out of her apartment on New Years Day with her two children. She concluded her story by stating "my firm belief before God and man, is that three out of every four of the young women of London who do slop-work are obliged to resort to private or public prostitution to enable them to live."<sup>32</sup>

Mayhew's letters, including this one, were widely reprinted, but sometimes they were deemed too explicit for a sensitive audience. An abridged and edited version of the story recounted above was reprinted in The Penny Illustrated News. But the most scandalous references to that woman's habitation with men, and the details of her "taking to the streets" were omitted.<sup>33</sup> The article was accompanied by an illustration (fig. 43) which conforms iconographically with those from the early 1840s. Two seamstresses (one who pauses from her work apparently from pain and/or exhaustion) sit at a table beside a window in a garret. The meager furnishings indicate their poverty and a candle casting a dramatic shadow on the back wall tells us of the long hours they work. Interestingly though, there is no indication either of children (and the contemplation of infanticide) or the possibility of prostitution.

The articles and fiction on seamstresses who had become prostitutes which appeared after 1848 inevitably caused problems.<sup>34</sup> After all, how could a prostitute inspire sympathy? How were the upper classes to identify with a prostitute? The

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<sup>32</sup> Mayhew, vol. I (Letter XI, November 23, 1849), pp. 235-240.

<sup>33</sup> "The Labour Question: An Exposition of the Social Condition of the Working classes. No. 1.--The Needlewomen of London," The Penny Illustrated News, vol. 1 (January 5, 1850), p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> Victorian paintings of the subject of the prostitute or "fallen woman" date slightly later than the period we are discussing, for example. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Found (1853) (Surtees 64), William Holman Hunt's Awakening Conscience (fig. 8) (1853-54, and retouched several times later), and John Roddam Spencer Stanhope's Thoughts of the Past (fig. 9) (1858-9). See chapter 3 in Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988.

authors of the period had to work even harder to prove that seamstresses turned prostitutes were still virtuous and sympathetic women -- even though they had "fallen." Over and over again testimony like the following from a seamstress appeared in Mayhew's columns in the Chronicle,

I pledge my word, solemnly and sacredly, that it was the low price paid for my labour that drove me to prostitution. I often struggled against it, and many times have I taken my child into the streets to beg, rather than I would bring shame upon myself and it any longer.<sup>35</sup>

Seamstresses were not vain, sinful women, but the most pathetic of victims. A story by Thomas Mills published in The Penny Illustrated News on February 2, 1851 entitled "The Seamstress" described the needlewoman's blameless turn to prostitution in this way:

The remuneration for her labour was so small...that she found it to be impossible for her to live as she had hitherto done, in innocence and virtue....Blame her not then if in an evil hour she fell; blame her not, if, when suffering under an accumulated load of sorrow and misery, poverty before her, starvation and death staring her in the face -- she succumbs to the power of the seducer.<sup>36</sup>

These accounts actively work to present an image not simply of a long-suffering seamstress but of a sweet, innocent and blameless woman absolutely driven to prostitution by starvation and illness. John Everett Millais's drawing from just a few years later, Virtue and Vice (fig. 16) depicts a young girl being tempted from her "virtue" by a prostitute. It is clear though that this seamstress is not being tempted by promises of fancy clothes and money, but rather by poverty and hunger. Above her head, tacked to the wall behind her is a notice reading "Distressed Needlewomen,"

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<sup>35</sup> Mayhew (Letter VIII, November 13, 1849), p. 166.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Mills, "The Seamstress," The Penny Illustrated News, vol. II (February 2, 1851), p. 35.

indicating that the public and the government know of her suffering, indeed they have known for years, and have done nothing.

The frightening image of innocent and blameless seamstresses forced to prostitution became the focus of anxieties about an economy and a national health problem that appeared to be spinning out of control. It also became a significant part of the rhetoric of reformers who wanted to paint the most dire picture of what was happening and what would continue to happen if something was not done immediately for the working class. It was simply impossible to make the paternalist argument that the working class needed "protection" because the country was in grave danger any better than with the picture of a distressed seamstress with children who was forced to turn to prostitution or commit infanticide.

Sometimes the subtopic of much seamstress literature -- anxiety about unregulated female sexuality -- is brought out into the open. This is true of a letter to parliament written and published in 1850 by a man named William Shaw.<sup>37</sup> Shaw actually knew the business of making clothing first-hand, since he employed women to make clothes for the army. Shaw was repeatedly held out by Mayhew and others as an ideal employer.<sup>38</sup> Mayhew states that "his whole life appears to have been an anxious study, and, indeed, struggle, to benefit the workpeople in his employment."<sup>39</sup> But it is clear that Shaw was obsessed not simply with seamstresses' low wages but with the threat of their seduction. His letters to Parliament on behalf of needlewomen reveal an overwhelming anxiety about the "morals" of all female laborers, and needlewomen in

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<sup>37</sup> William Shaw, An Affectionate Pleading for England's Oppressed Female Workers: Respectfully Addressed to My Queen; the Government; the Aristocracy; the Clergy; and the Consuming Classes in General, London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1850.

<sup>38</sup> Including the "J.T." the author of "Labour and the Poor," Fraser's Magazine, vol. XLI (January 1850).

<sup>39</sup> Mayhew, vol. I (Letter VII, November 9, 1849), p. 130.

particular, who he insists over and over again require the "protection" of the legislature. He asks government officials to "afford protection to poor females from the wicked lusts of depraved men," and insisted that it had become necessary "to have a watch set over certain unfrequented places by the river, that the daughters of England might be arrested in their purpose of carrying their chastity to a watery grave."<sup>40</sup>

Shaw's letter to the members of Parliament, Mayhew's articles in The Morning Chronicle, as well as other seamstress literature from this period needed to portray female sexuality as imperiled and defenseless precisely because the opposite appeared to be true. Cartoons in Punch like "How to treat the Female Chartists," (fig. 44) and "The French Female Socialists" (fig. 45) poked fun at women's involvement in the working-class struggles of the day.

In the former cartoon, the accompanying text recommends dispersing a crowd of female chartists not with the police, but with "a good supply of cockroaches...a fair sprinkling of rats, and a muster of mice." The illustration shows a group of women fleeing from the rodents and insects who are released from cages by two men at the right. In the latter cartoon, a group of washerwomen stand behind and on top of a barricade created by wash buckets and mangles and hurl irons at soldiers who run away and lie wounded in the foreground. When compared with these French and British female revolutionaries, the seamstress seems truly powerless and vulnerable, and that is, of course, one reason why she became such an important figure.

The seamstress was, in most respects, a helpless victim, but in the period after 1848, she was also seen to be directly responsible for the spread of fatal and highly contagious diseases. This is another one of the ways that the seamstress myth

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<sup>40</sup> William Shaw, To the Right Honourable the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and to the Members of the House of Commons, 1847, p. 13.

escalated in this period, and it seems to be directly related to anxieties aroused by the cholera epidemic. Seamstress stories warned that clothing made by poor needlewomen often carried deadly and highly contagious diseases, thus evoking fear of the uncontrollable spread of disease up through the social hierarchy. To purchase clothing at a slop shop now meant not only the murder of a virtuous young girl and the enrichment of selfish Jewish merchants, but also, in a way, suicide.

Cholera, it was believed by most professionals of the time, was spread through the atmosphere by miasma. That is, "under certain unpredictable circumstances the atmosphere became charged with an epidemic influence, which turned malignant when combined with the effluvia of organic decomposition from the earth. The resulting miasma produced disease within the body."<sup>41</sup> The unsanitary living and working conditions of the poor were connected to this miasma. The miasmatic theory envisioned cholera as a disease whose spread was "invisible, centreless and unknown."<sup>42</sup> It could therefore escape the attempts of contemporaries to control through seeing and categorization -- a very frightening prospect indeed.

It is important to recognize that it was class -- and not simply poverty -- that was seen as the cause of Cholera. In letter IX Mayhew investigated two distressed gentlewomen who had turned to needlework. He found the home of these women "untainted by the *atmosphere* of poverty," and was "no longer sickened with that overpowering smell that always hangs about the dwellings of the very poor." In both cases the appearance of the needlewomen was neat and clean, a quality which Mayhew felt "invariable distinguishes the lady from the labouring woman."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 120.

<sup>43</sup> Mayhew, vol. I (Letter IX, November 16, 1849), pp. 189-90.

The fear of disease ridden clothes sewn by sick seamstresses was not entirely new -- but it did take on added urgency after 1848. A story by Camilla Toulmin from 1844 entitled "The Shawl Buyer. An Incident of 1843," told of a needlewoman who had knitted a shawl while her child was dying of small-pox. Soon after, the shawl was inadvertently purchased by an upper-class woman. The illustration to this story (fig. 18) reveals the seamstress's usual sparsely furnished garret -- this time occupied only by a coffin which rests between a chair and a stool by the window. Across the very top of the coffin lies the infected shawl.<sup>44</sup>

The fear of disease spreading through contagious clothing was expressed far more often after 1848. G.W.M. Reynolds, chartist, author of a seamstress tale, and editor of several periodicals, complained of the new development of having tailoring work done at home, "whereby the health of those employed is so greatly impaired, their morals affected, and the lives of her majesty's subjects placed in great jeopardy, through diseases rising up from this source, which spreads contagion to a most appalling extent."<sup>45</sup>

Reynolds also claimed that it was not uncommon "to see the mother and children confined to their beds with fever, small-pox, or other infectious diseases, and the habits of ladies and coats of gentlemen supplying the covering for their beds."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Another article from earlier in the decade which described contaminated clothing appeared in The Weekly Dispatch. It described the "unwholesome effluvia" of workrooms where men, women and children are crowded together in a small back room, "the rags on which they sleep are huddled up in a corner, unless some sick members of the family are lying on them." The author warned, "a gentleman may well shudder at the idea of wearing a garment made in the midst of such filth and infection." See "The Journeymen Tailors of the Metropolis," The Weekly Dispatch, November 5, 1843, p. 536.

<sup>45</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, "The Case of the Journeymen Tailors," Reynolds' Political Instructor, February 2, 1850, p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

The North London Needlewomen's Association published a tract in 1850 which asserted that the "bondage" of needlework "is dangerous to the public, as well as destructive to [needlewomen] themselves. The goods which are made up in their wretched dwellings may carry disease and infection with them."<sup>47</sup>

Once again Punch masterfully satirized the cruelty of Moses and Son in a piece entitled "A Shroud as well as a Shirt."<sup>48</sup> Like the earlier articles in Punch, this was inspired by a newspaper report about a woman who had been arrested for pawning shirts she had been given to sew. Although there is no mention of disease in the article, the illustration which accompanies the article (fig. 46), of a shirt with skulls and "2 1/2" (pence) written all over it, gives the impression of a shirt which not only causes the death of the seamstress through overwork and low wages, but continues to be tainted with mortality for the future wearer.

Given the terrible fear that fatal diseases were being spread through clothing made by impoverished needlewomen, it is no wonder that emigration became the favored solution to the problem of distressed needlewomen. There were, it was asserted, more women in England than men (due to male emigration and other causes). Consequently too many women were forced to support themselves (the majority, apparently, becoming needlewomen), causing a surplus in the labor market which in turn drove down wages. Articles with statistics appeared claiming, for example, that 28,000 of the 33,500 women employed in apparel making were under the age of 20, and that in Great Britain there were 320,000 more women than men.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "The North London Needlewomen's Association," tract, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> "A Shroud as well as a Shirt," Punch 15 (July-December 1848), p. 76.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, "Excess of Females in England," The Penny Illustrated News, vol. I (February 23, 1850), p. 151.

Sidney Herbert, Tory M.P. and co-owner of the Paternalist The Morning Chronicle established the Fund for Female Emigration (along with help from Lord Ashley) in 1850. This was not an entirely new idea, emigration had been a solution for pauperism (both male and female) for decades,<sup>50</sup> and there were institutions set up to facilitate emigration, but Herbert's organization's emphasis on seamstresses was entirely novel.<sup>51</sup>

From the beginning Herbert's organization encountered problems. There were heated debates in the press about the efficacy of emigration in helping those needlewomen who were left behind, and about the type of women that it was appropriate to "export" to the colonies. Mayhew's articles had established that nearly all needlewomen had turned to prostitution at one time or another, but these were not the women that the Fund wanted to help to emigrate. Herbert's organization insured that the women it aided were of "good character" and "satisfactory morality" by establishing a home where those who sought the aid of the organization lived for a period so that their background and character could be checked. Herbert countered the charges that he might be assisting women who were of uncertain morals to emigrate by asserting that "he was less interested in professional needlewomen than

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<sup>50</sup> For a thorough and informative investigation on the history of nineteenth century English emigration, and specifically the emerging acceptance of emigration for "ladies," see A. James Hammerton, Emigrant Gentlewomen. Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830-1914, London: Croom Helm, 1979. Emigration was put forward as a solution occasionally in the early 1840s, see "Tory Remedies for National Distress -- Emigration," Tait's Edinburgh Magazine IX (January 1842), pp. 2-5.

<sup>51</sup> There are also a number of Victorian paintings from the period dealing with the subject of emigration generally, for example, Richard Redgrave's The Emigrant's Last Sight of Home (1858, Tate Gallery, London) and Ford Madox Brown's The Last of England (1864-66, Tate Gallery, London). See Susan P. Casteras, "'Oh! Emigration! thou'rt the curse...': Victorian Images of Emigration Themes," Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, vol. 5 (Spring 1985), pp. 18-19 and chapter 6 in Teri Edelstein, 'But Who Shall Paint the Grief of those Oppress'd?' The Social Theme in Victorian Painting, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979.

ex-domestic servants who had been forced into the lowest paid forms of needlework." So, although the establishment of the Fund was inspired by Mayhew's letters on needlewomen, "needleworkers were never in a majority."<sup>52</sup>

Needlewomen posed other problems. The Fund had determined that those it would help would be "free from any mental or bodily defect likely to impair their usefulness as settlers," and that they should be accustomed to "washing or cooking, or have had some experience in domestic service as housemaids or nurses." These requirements excluded needlewomen who "may generally be described as pale, sickly, feeble and emaciated, incapable, by long habit of sitting at work, of any active exertion or bodily labour."<sup>53</sup> It seems seamstresses may have been too genteel to be shipped off to the rough life of the colonies.

The periodical Reynolds's Political Instructor, which was edited by G.W.M. Reynolds, a chartist, denounced emigration. The fact that the scheme was cooked up by aristocrats was suspicious to the author (who may have been Reynolds himself) of an article entitled, "A Warning to the Needlewomen and Slopworkers." The author asserted, "I always mistrust aristocrats when they voluntarily come forward with some alleged boon for the people." He continued, "the doctrine of surplus population is a base, wicked, willful lie; and it is only preached in order to divert men's minds from the pursuit of an investigation into the real causes of the wide-spread pauperism, distress, and misery apparent in this country."<sup>54</sup> The author was convinced that the advantages of emigration were exaggerated, while the disadvantages were minimized, "the Society's prospectus shows that in the Colonies there are more males than females; and

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<sup>52</sup> Hammerton, p. 107.

<sup>53</sup> "Distressed Needlewomen's Society," The Morning Chronicle, May 14, 1850, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> "A Warning to the Needlewomen and Slopworkers," Reynolds Political Instructor, January 5, 1850, p. 66.

this statement...is put forward as a delicate means of saying to the starving needlewomen of London, 'Go out to Australia and you will get married the instant you land!' But, the author asks, "of what does a large proportion of the male population of Australia consist? Of the banished felonry from England!"<sup>55</sup>

The goal of emigration was not just to reduce the number of seamstresses in London and thereby increase the wages of those left behind, but also to make wives and mothers of distressed, unmarried, childless women. To return them to the home, in other words -- and it did not so much matter where that home was, as long as it enabled the seamstress to fulfill her "natural" role. Seamstresses, as one contemporary put it, must be shown that "they are regarded as women -- that their rights to the happy title of wives and mothers are acknowledged...."<sup>56</sup>

The way that emigration was hailed as a cure-all for the problems of the late 1840s was satirized in Punch. One such illustration by John Leech entitled, "Here and There; or, Emigration a Remedy" (fig. 47) contrasted the homeless and destitute life of a family in England with the image of an industrious, bustling household in Australia.<sup>57</sup>

Over a year later, after the publication of Mayhew's letters, and the beginning of Herbert's Fund for Female Emigration, Punch published a much graver and starker contrast of a seamstress also by John Leech entitled "The Needlewoman at Home and Abroad" (fig. 48), accompanied by a poem entitled "The Needlewoman's Farewell."<sup>58</sup> The thin seamstress "at home" wanders in rags past a gin shop and is propositioned by a man. Like Redgrave's seamstress (fig. 3) or the seamstress depicted in the drawing

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<sup>55</sup> "A Warning to the Needlewomen and Slopworkers," p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> "On the Best Means of Relieving the Needlewomen," Eliza Cook's Journal, volumes 5-6 (July 19, 1851), p. 191.

<sup>57</sup> Punch, vol. XV (1848), p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> "The Needlewoman at Home and Abroad," Punch 18 (1850), p. 15.

by Millais (fig. 16), she is probably on the brink of succumbing to prostitution. To the right, the seamstress "abroad" is a seamstress (or prostitute) no longer. She is rather a happy and loving wife and mother, shown inside a rustic home. In the accompanying poem, the seamstress says, "We leave no homes behind us, no household ties had we; In one long coil of heavy toil our hours went creeping -- creeping." But in Australia, "Where in wedlock's tie, not harlotry, we shall find men to mate us." Ironically, in the illustration of the seamstress "at home," she is not at home at all (symbolically and literally), but when she goes "abroad" she gets to go home.

In the period between 1848 and 1851 there was an even more urgent sense that something needed to be done for seamstresses and the working class as a whole than there had been in 1843. Seamstresses were not just stealing -- they were turning to prostitution in record numbers. For Mayhew and Shaw in 1850 the problem of distressed needlewomen was represented as a battle with satan himself for the lives and souls of innocent, "virtuous" women. Now it was not just the seamstress who was losing her life -- but everyone who came in contact with the clothing she sewed. It was no longer enough to belong to a charity or urge parliament to regulate the industry. Seamstresses had to be removed bodily from the cities of England. The two classes it seems, had gotten too close for comfort.

## CONCLUSION

Richard Redgrave's 1844 painting The Sempstress (fig. 3) was the starting point for this dissertation. This painting is, in many ways, a quintessentially Victorian narrative painting. Every detail of the seamstress and her room, even the very nature of the room itself (a garret) serves to tell the viewer a piece of her story -- her past, present and even her future. The seamstress's story is tragic, but not in the sense, obviously, of David's Death of Socrates. It is a story of a woman, after all, and it is a contemporary (not historical) tragedy.

Victorian "modern life" subjects, particularly those involving women, have attracted scholars, most notably Susan Casteras, for some time. She and Teri Edelstein located the majority of Victorian seamstress images, decoded the story, explained the iconography, compared the painting to written sources, and identified different types of seamstress paintings produced during the Victorian era.

There was still work to be done, however. Redgrave was not the only one to tell this story; it was told over and over again, and significantly, it was told in spurts. The story first makes its appearance in the period between 1843 and 1845, and then again between 1848 and 1851.

The seamstress was able to become an important figure in 1843 because she had already been constructed as a social "type" -- a vain, frivolous girl who was likely to be flirtatious with handsome young men. However, after the spring of 1843, that is after the publication of the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, her very nature shifted and she became a sympathetic victim of social injustices. It was not until this time that the seamstress became the protagonist of a long and involved narrative (one which, apparently, had to be told over and over again). Even though the image of the seamstress continued to be produced through the rest of the century (many of them resembling Redgrave's in their iconography), if we look closely there are sure to be different reasons for her reappearance, different points of emphasis in

her story, and different prescriptions for her problem. The seamstress is therefore, first and foremost, bound into her historical period. That is why this study is so limited in the time frame it examines.

If this study is narrow in its chronological scope, it is wide in its synchronic scope. That is because the seamstress herself makes an appearance in so many different contexts within these two periods in the 1840s. Illustrations of her appeared in the satirical and reformist journal Punch, in the chartist periodical, Reynold's Miscellany, in a serious pamphlet, Ralph Barnes Grinrod's Slaves of the Needle, and on the walls of London and provincial exhibitions. Most often she appears as a lone figure sewing in a garret, but she is also depicted in large workrooms. Sometimes she is contrasted with the upper-class women who thoughtlessly wear out her life, and other times the Jewish slop-seller who pays her such low wages is satirized. She is also discussed in a wide variety of sources -- from ultra-evangelical, anti-feminist, texts warning of a great cataclysm (revolution or worse) to feminists' calls for education and wider job opportunities for women. It is clear then that the myth of seamstress was remarkably versatile and useful.

The people who wrote about her, and the artists who represented her had agendas, and they were all focused in one way or another on the problems of the day. England, many people felt, was facing a crisis, and the seamstress fit perfectly into almost every way one had of analyzing the problem. The crisis involved (depending on who was asked), unemployment, poverty, the New Poor Law, the "factory system," women's labor replacing men's, and not enough types of decently paid work available to middle-class women. It also involved an issue that relates to all those mentioned above, working-class unrest.

Authors and artists were usually putting forward their analysis of the problems of the 1840s (working class men needed to have wives at home in order to be happy, women who work become like men, the rich have no sympathy for the poor only

because they do not know how they suffer). They wanted their readers or viewers to do something (change their views about the character of the poor, lobby to pass some kinds of legislation and fight for the repeal of others, change the way they purchased clothing). They were also blaming someone (women for their vanity, the Jews for their greediness, the government for failure to act).

The myth of the seamstress found comfortable places in the ideologies of the day. Ideologies "are typically mixtures of analytic and descriptive statements on the one hand, and moral and technical prescriptions on the other."<sup>1</sup> This is precisely what the myth of the seamstress was being employed to do: to analyze a problem and to find solutions for it.

It is important to remember, though, that ruling ideology "does not so much combat alternative ideas as thrust them beyond the very bounds of the thinkable."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the seamstress myth enabled limitations in what could be thought or done in regard to the problems facing England in the early 1840s. Those limitations, in turn, reveal more about the nature of the problems themselves.

For example, the idea that a primary cause of working-class unrest was women's absence from the working-class home (which appears often in the seamstress myth) seems to be saying something about problems that were not being discussed directly, like fear of women achieving some economic and social power because they were working outside the home. That working women were a cause of working-class unrest was certainly a fair analysis of the problem, but it was almost the only analysis that was ever offered. The ideological assumptions of the period made positions other than this seem practically unthinkable.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Occasionally, however, a different assessment of the problem did manage to surface. The author of an article entitled, "The Advocates of the Ten Hours Bill Oppose the First Principles of Society," cleverly pointed out the hypocrisy in Lord Ashley's (and other reformer's) arguments against women working in factories.<sup>3</sup> Their arguments, he insists, are premised on the assumption that "there are certain employments natural and peculiarly fitting for males and females, which they should never interchange." Lord Ashley, he goes on:

would have every woman a cook and a sempstress... mending clothes, washing dishes, scrubbing floors, teaching her children, and doing all kinds of household drudgery, while he does not object to her labouring a limited time at piecing....He insists on the woman cooking and washing for a man, but he is quite horrified at one woman...washing and cooking for a dozen other women...

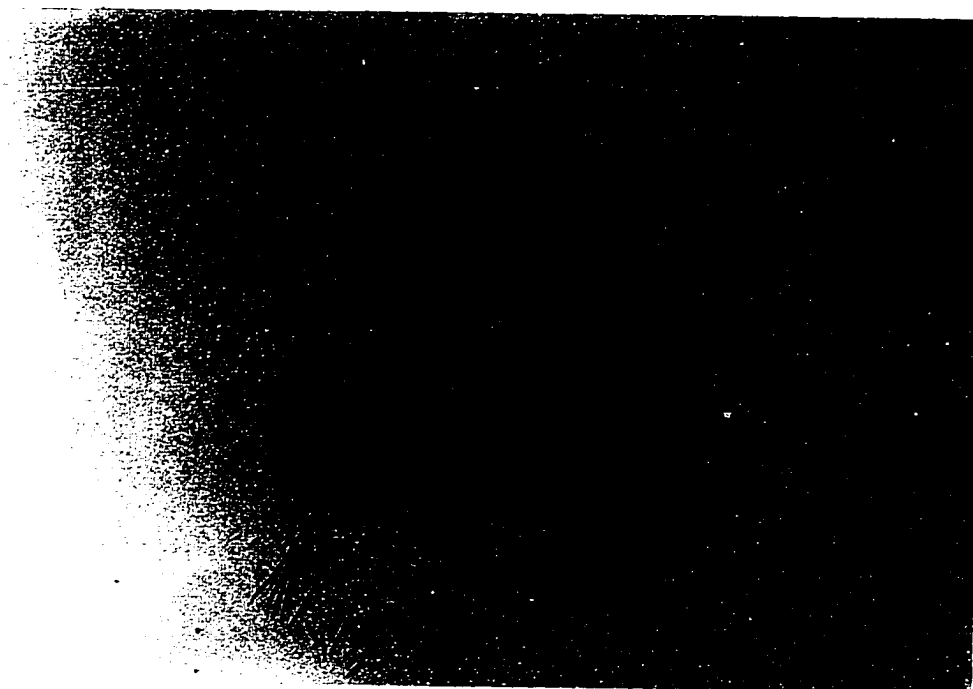
He noted that many women send out their laundry to be done "and the best mothers, without thinking it any deterioration of their moral character, employ grafters, stocking footers, sempstresses, dress-makers, &c." This author removed the issue from the moral realm, and at least for one brief moment, pierced through the dominant ideology of the time.

It is impossible to know exactly where, in the complex weave of ideological notions in which the seamstress played a part, Redgrave's The Sempstress fits. In other words, it is impossible to know exactly what Redgrave intended and how Victorian viewers responded. However, by limiting the chronological scope of this study I was able to explore the broad range of functions of the seamstress myth, and

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<sup>3</sup> The author did admit that "we are far from saying that the domestic arrangements in the factory districts are the best which can be devised and adapted to the new state of society. It is most likely they are very defective." "The Advocates of the Ten Hours Bill Oppose the First Principles of Society," The Morning Chronicle, April 20, 1944, p. 3. This remarkable article was, significantly, published in The Morning Chronicle. This newspaper supported a Whig free-trade position.

**the possible ways in which different types of seamstress images could fulfill those functions.**



1. Kenny Meadows, "The Dressmaker," illustration for Douglas Jerrold, Heads of the People (1841)



2. Illustration for the front page of The Town (1839)



3. Richard Redgrave, The Sempstress (1844) (Forbes Magazine Collection)



4. C.W. Cope, Poor Law Guardians -- Board Day -- Application for Bread (1841)



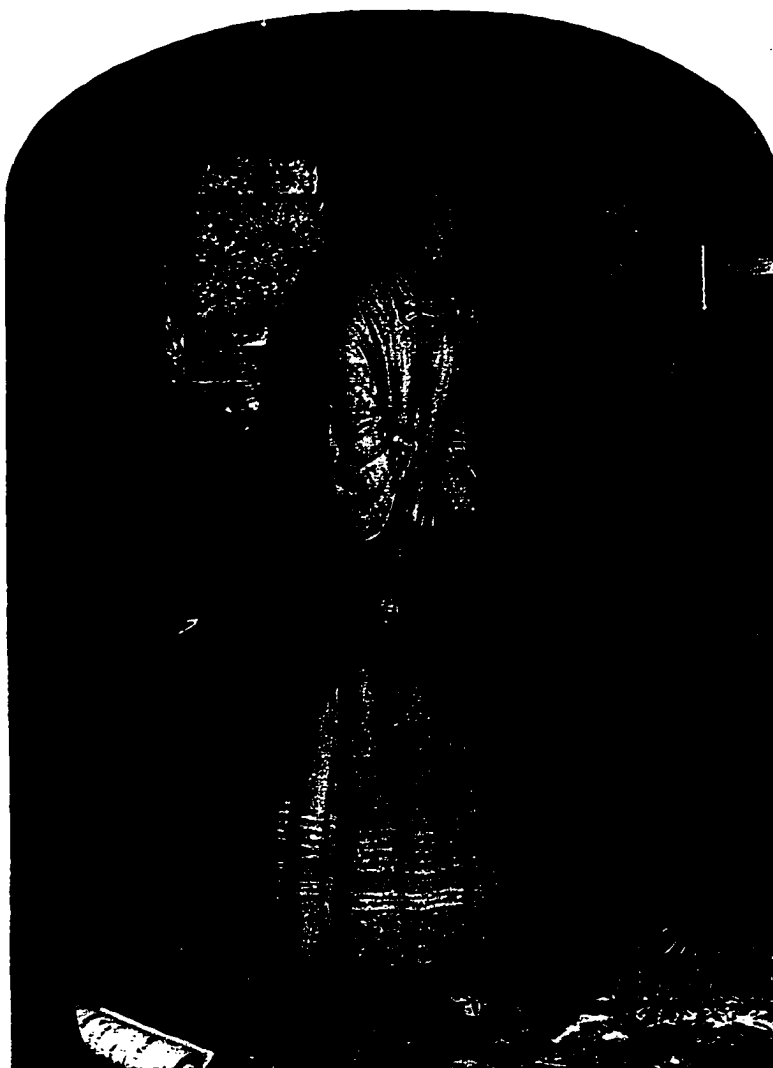
5. "May's Arrival at Mrs. Brownes," illustration for May Coverly, the Young Dressmaker (1860)



6. George Elgar Hicks, Old Associations (1858)



7. John Thomas Peele, Song of the Shirt (1846) (Albany Institute of History and Art)



8. William Holman Hunt, Awakening Conscience (1857) (Tate Gallery, London)



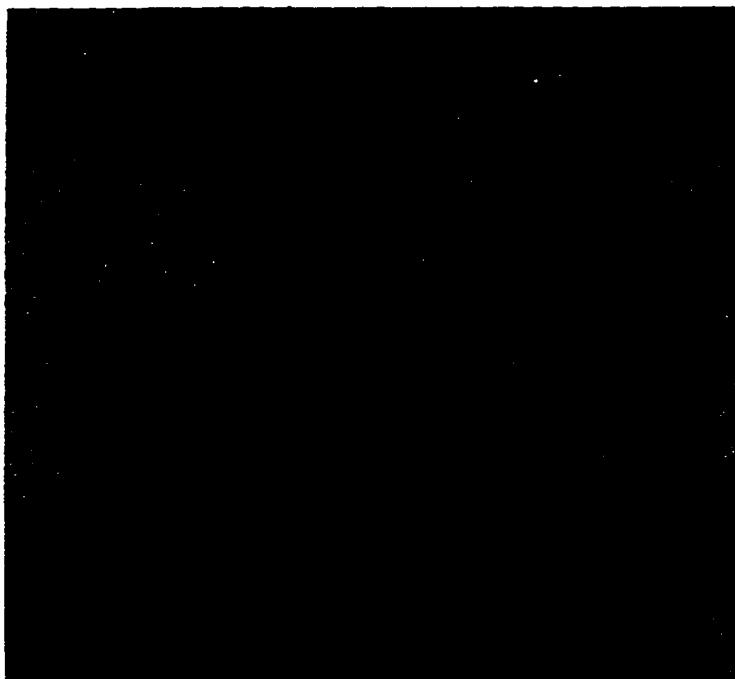
9. Spencer Stanhope, Thoughts of the Past (1858) (Tate Gallery, London)



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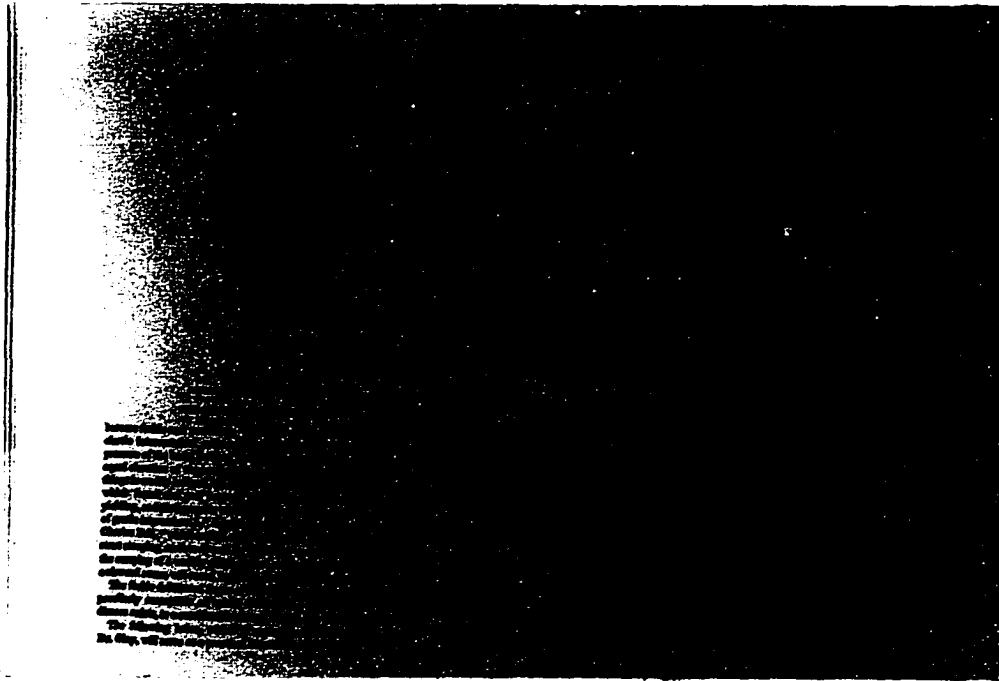
10. "The London Dressmakers," illustration for May Coverly, the Young Dressmaker (1860)



11. "The Milliners" and "The Duchesses," illustration for "Slaves of the Needle," The Pictorial Times (1843)



12. John Gilbert, illustration for Miss Camilla Toulmin, "The Orphan Milliners, A Story of the West End," The Illuminated Magazine (1844)



13. "The Spine in its Natural State" and "The Distorted Spine of the Seamstress," illustrations for Ralph Barnes Grinrod, The Slaves of the Needle (1844)



14. Abraham Solomon, A Contrast (1855)



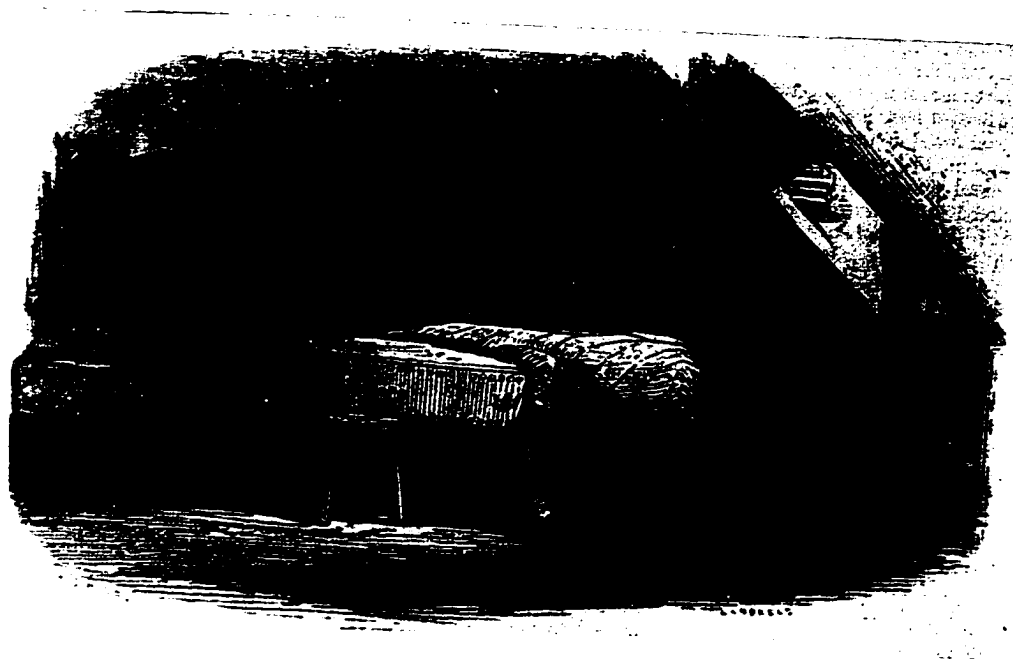
15. E.C. Barnes, The Seducer (c. 1860)



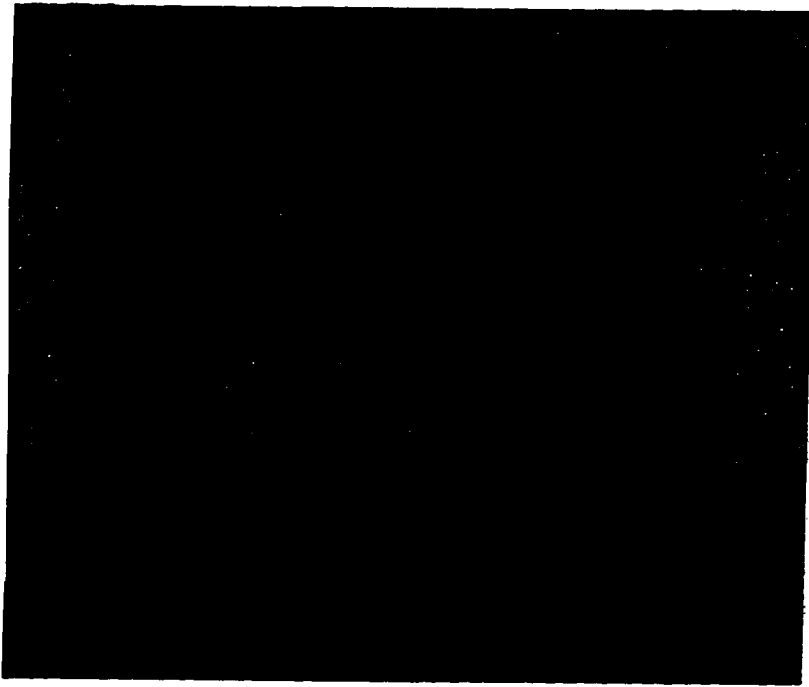
16. John Everett Millais, Virtue and Vice (1853)



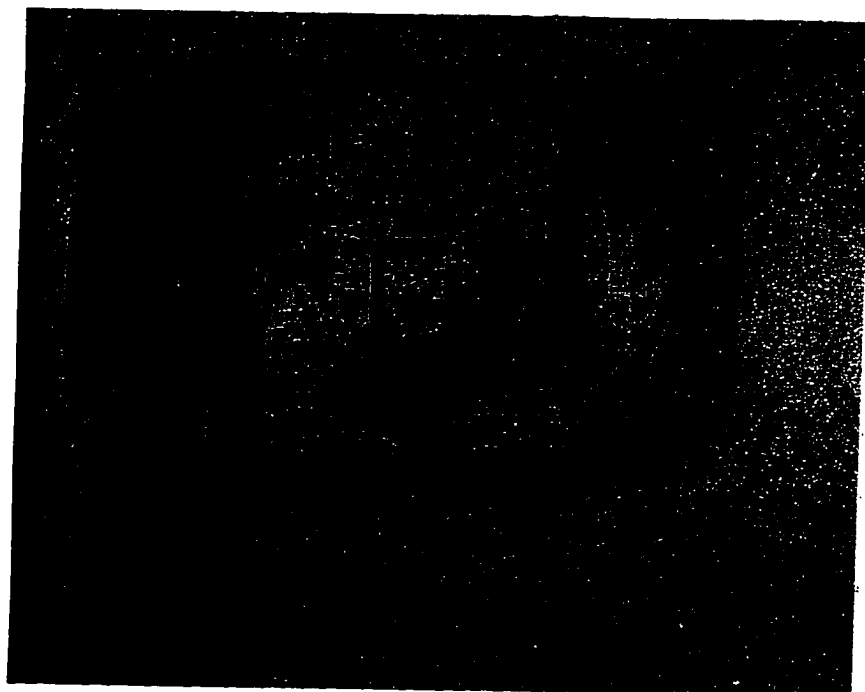
17. Kenny Meadows, illustration for "Death and the Drawing Room or The Young Dress Makers of England," The Illuminated Magazine (1843)



18. H.C. Hine, illustration for Camilla Toulmin, "The Shawl Buyer," The Illuminated Magazine (1844)



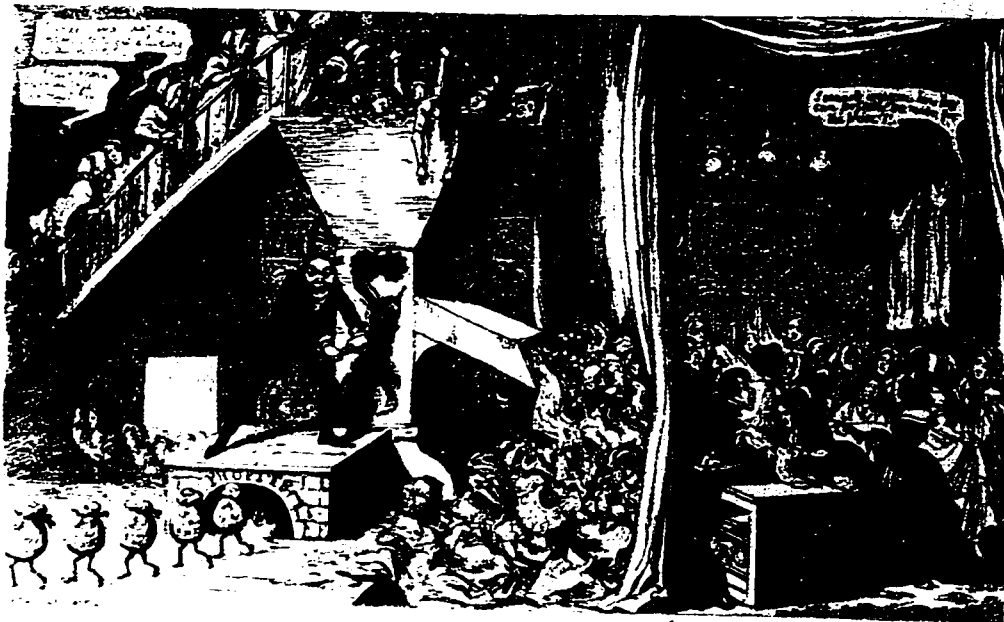
19. Illustration for J.M. Rymer, The White Slave (1844)



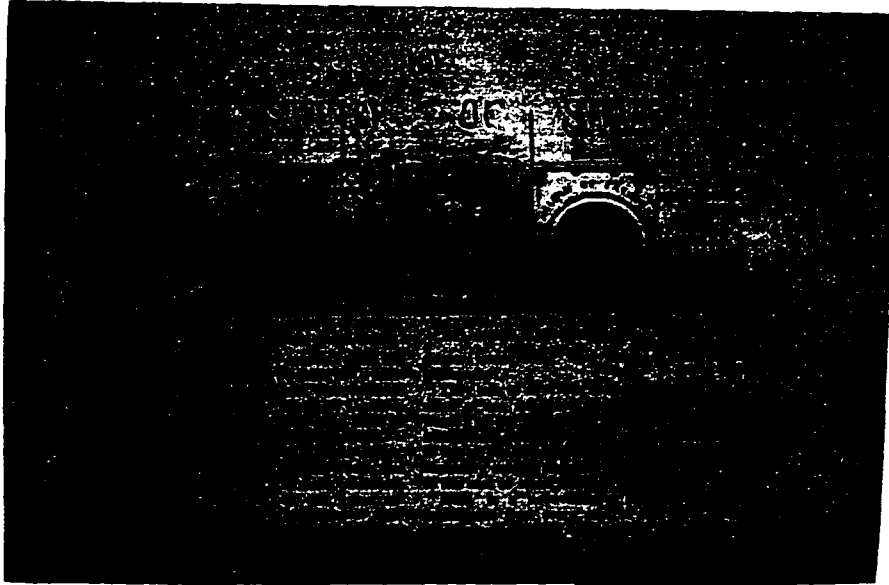
20. John Leech, "Richard and Margaret," illustration for Charles Dickens, The Chimes (1844)



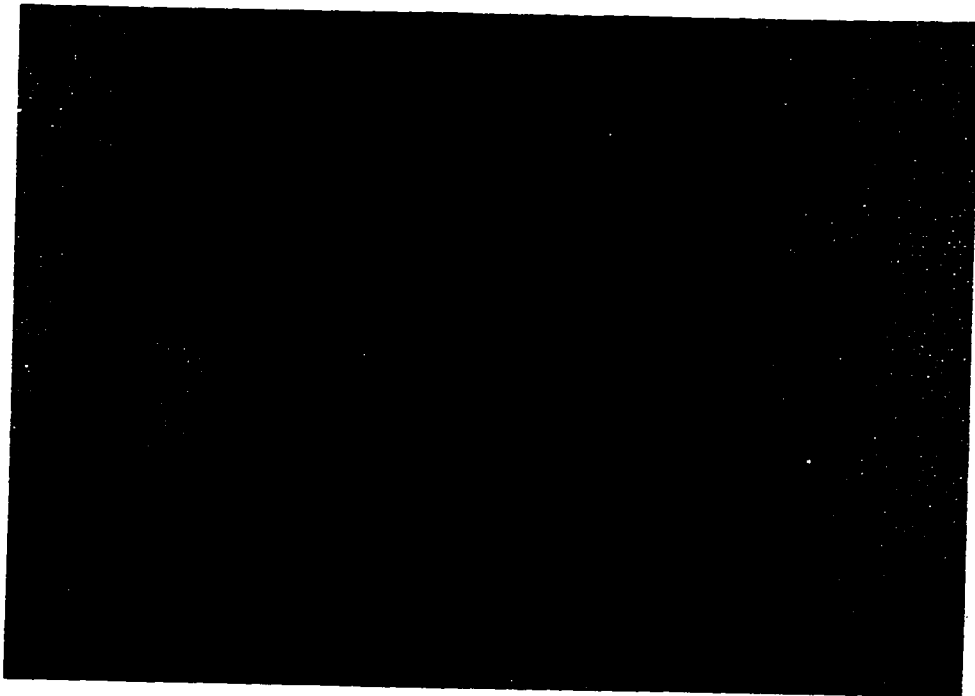
21. Illustration for "Punch's Review. The Commercial Phenomenon," Punch (1844)



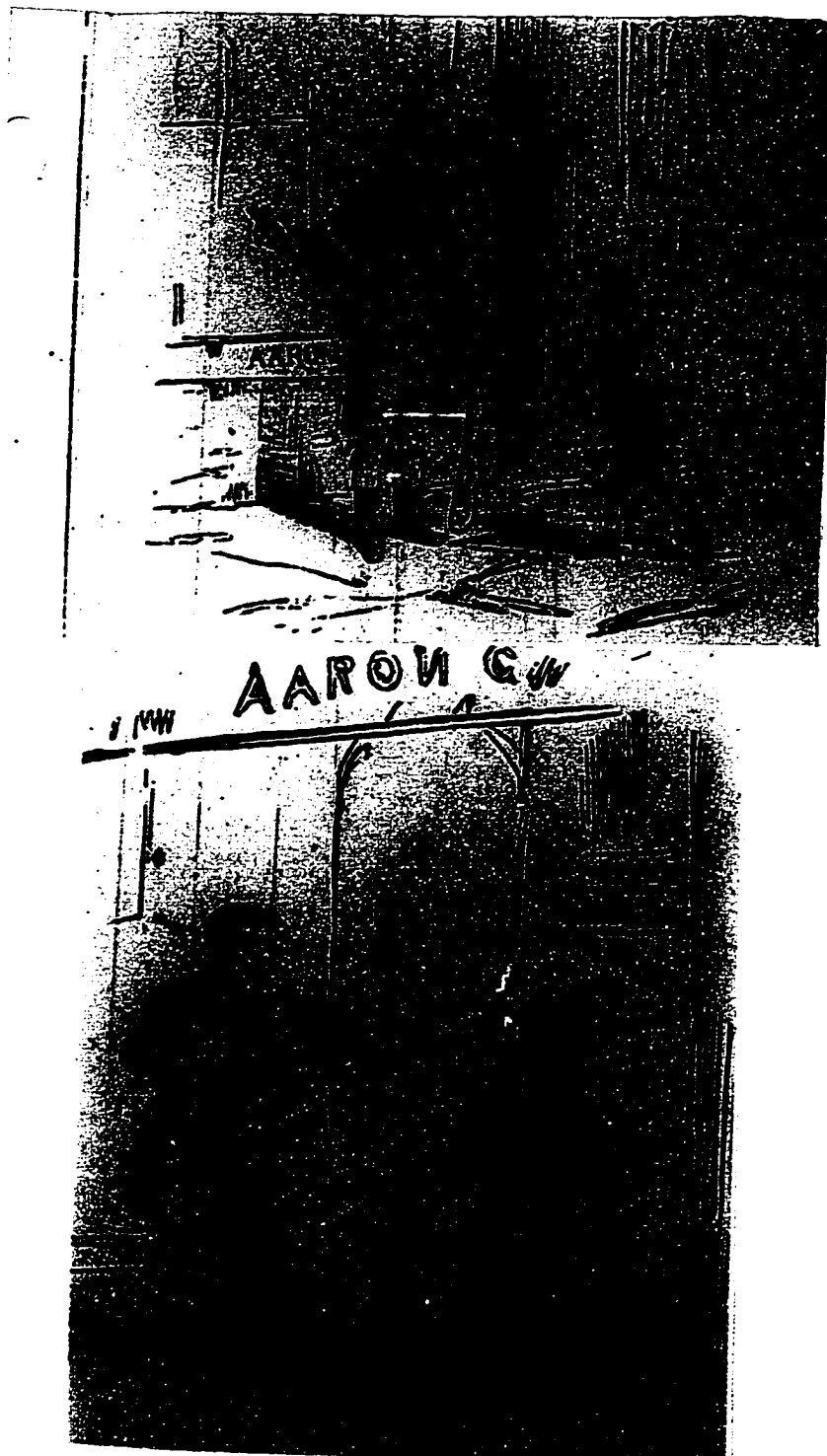
22. George Cruikshank, "Tremendous Sacrifice!" illustration for Our Own Times (1846)



23. H.C. Hine, illustration for "The Philosophy of Shops," The Illuminated Magazine (1844)



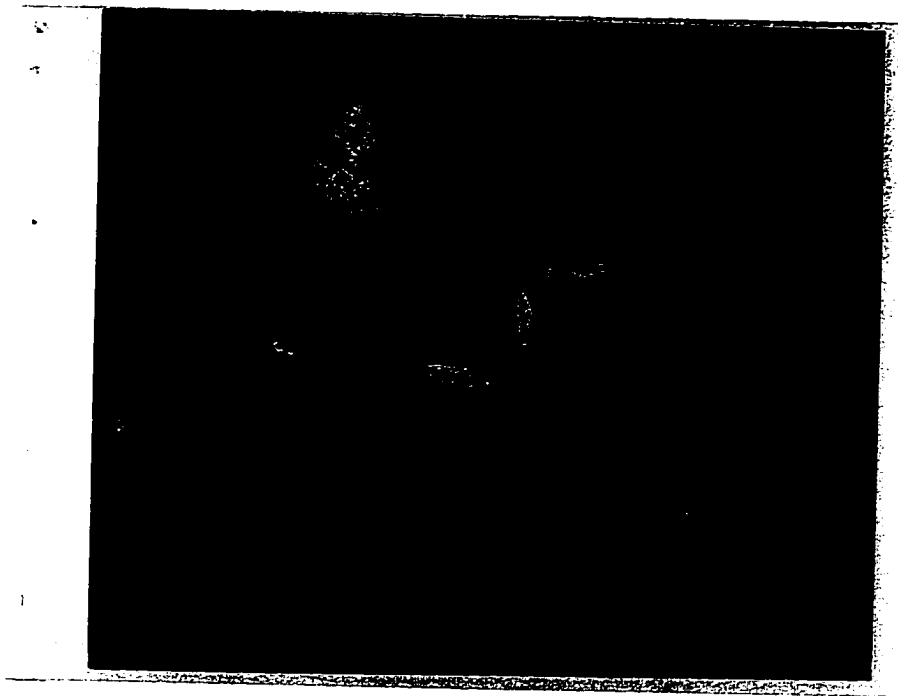
24. "The Jews -- Clothes Dealers," illustration for The Penny Illustrated News (1850)



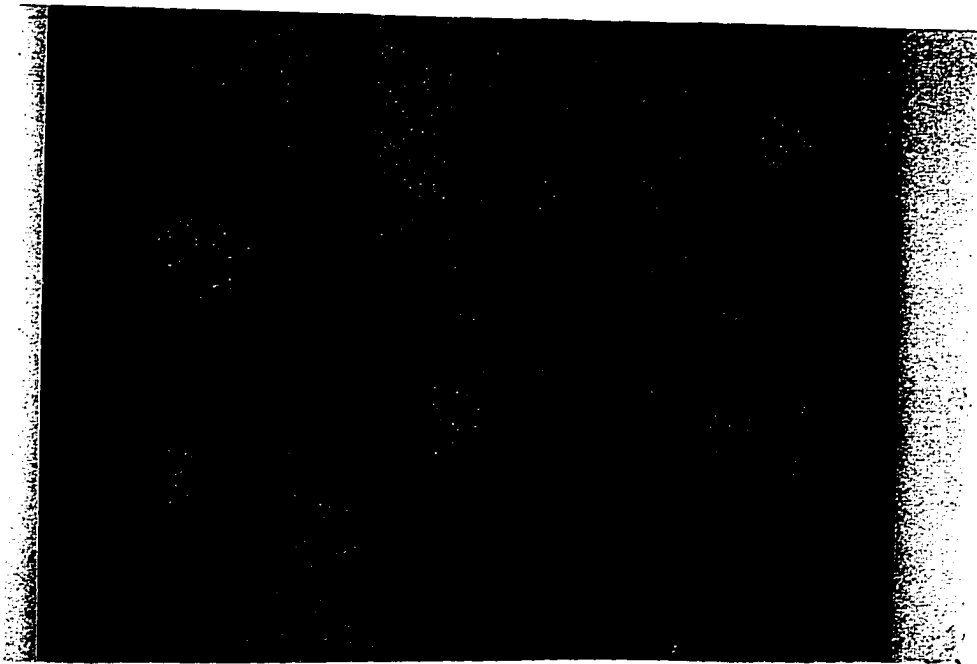
25. Illustrations for "A Hint for Moses," Punch (1844)



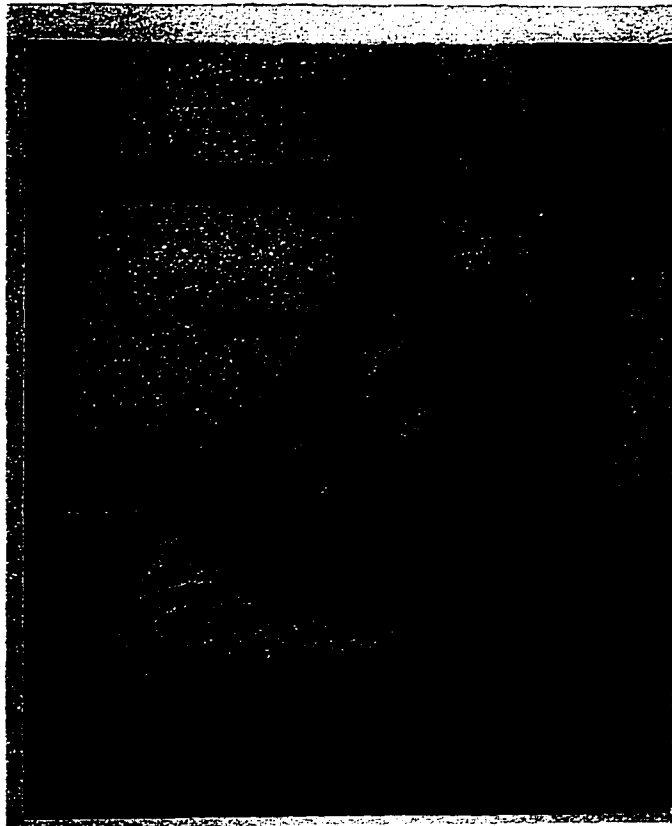
26. Ford Madox Brown, An English Fireside (1885) (Merseyside Museums and Art Galleries)



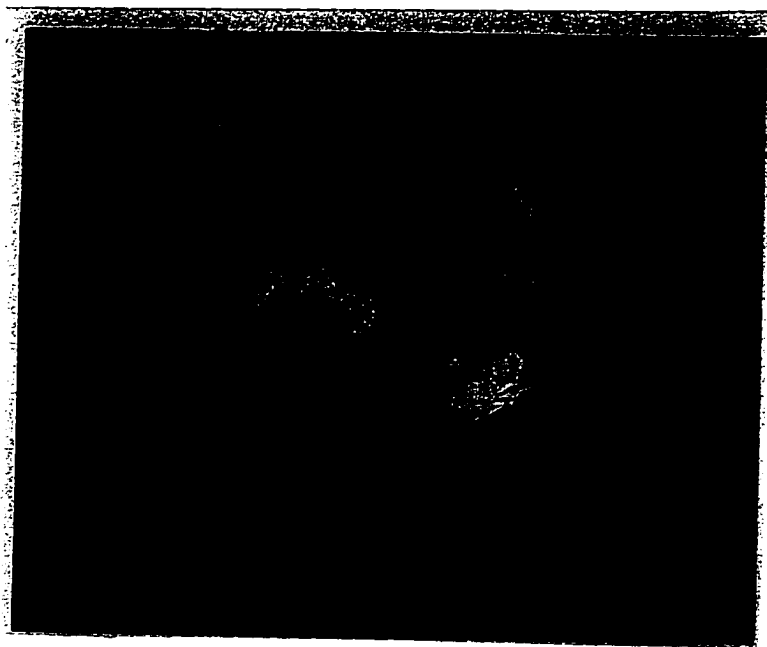
27. Richard Redgrave, The Poor Teacher (1845) (Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead)



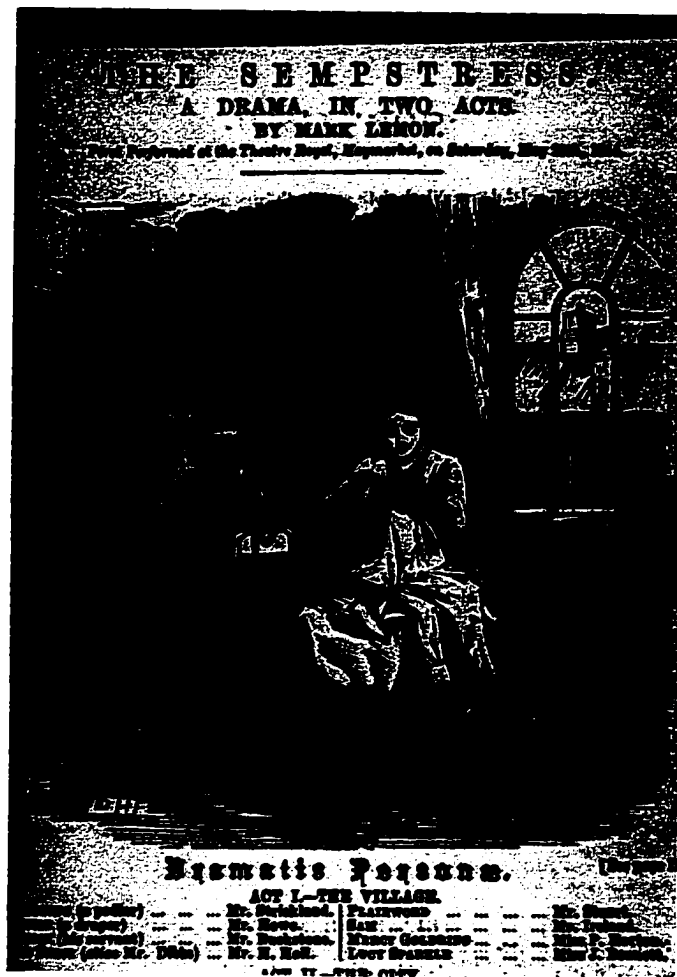
28. Emily Osborn, Nameless and Friendless (1857)



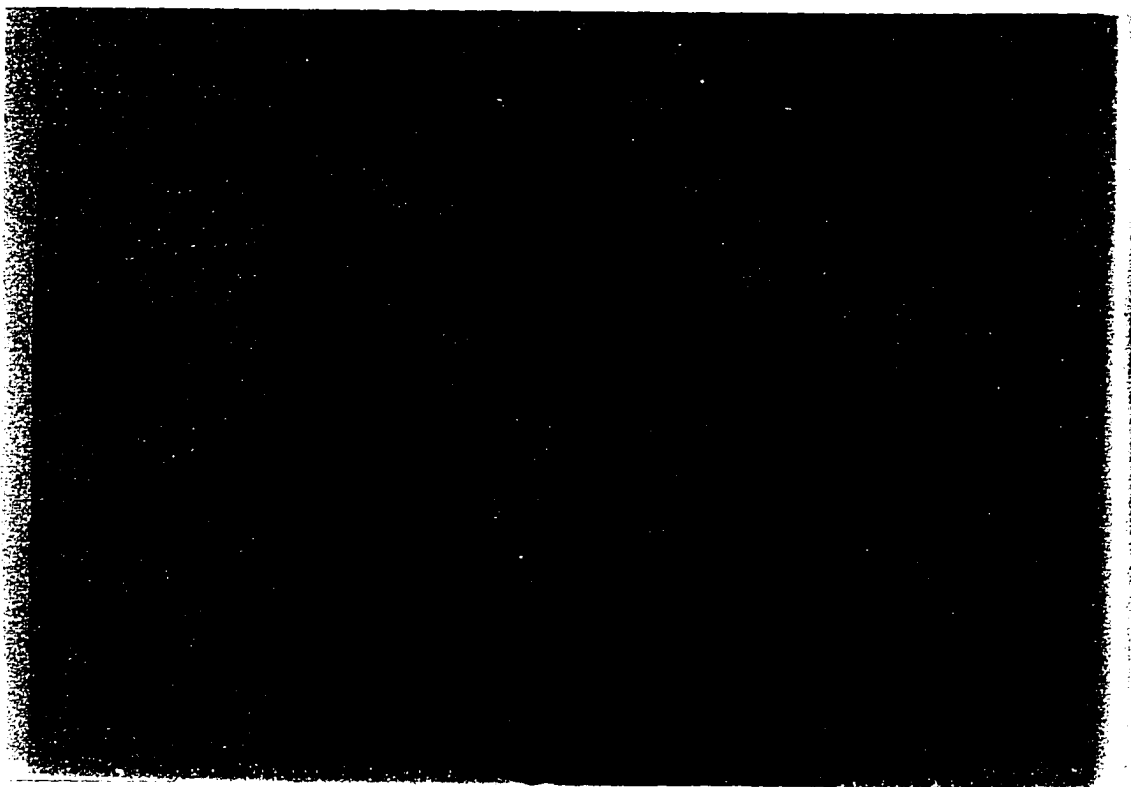
29. Anna Blunden, The Seamstress (SBA 1854) (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven)



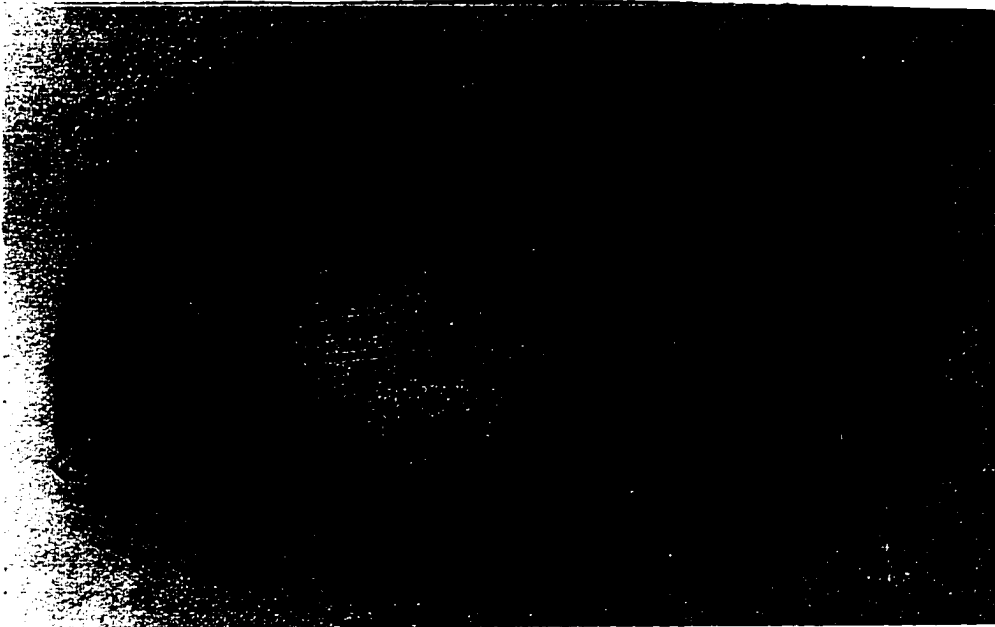
30. Richard Redgrave, compositional study for The Sempstress (1844)



31. Illustration for Mark Lemon, The Seamstress. A Drama in Two Acts, 1844



32. "Specimens from Mr. Punch's Industrial Exhibition," Punch (1850)



33. Illustrations from the First Report of the Children's Employment Commission  
(1842)



34. "Mr. Smith and Moses," Punch (1848)



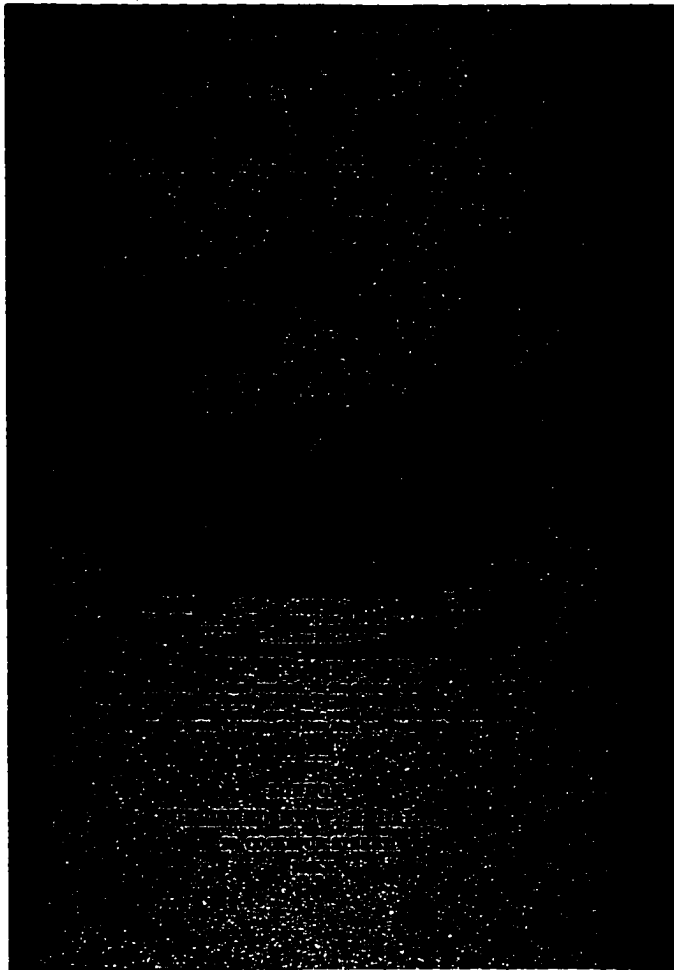
35. Henry Anelay, illustration for G.W.M. Reynolds, "The Seamstress; or, The White Slave of England," Reynold's Miscellany (1850)



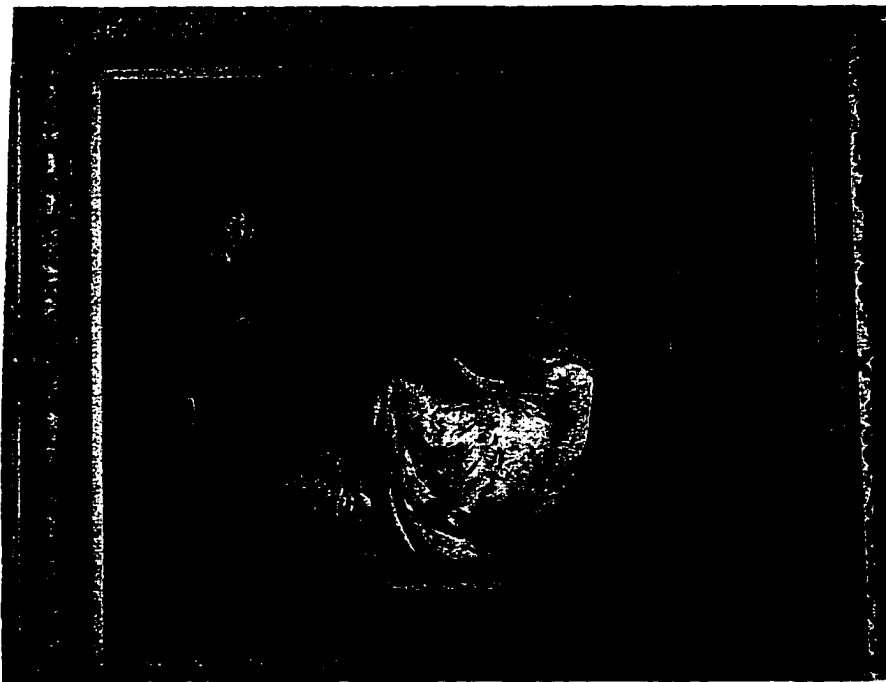
36. John Leech, "Needle Money" and "Pin Money," Punch, (1849)



37. John Tenniel, "The Haunted Lady, or 'The Ghost' in the Looking Glass," Punch (1863)



38. Illustration for the cover of the periodical, The Sempstress (1855)



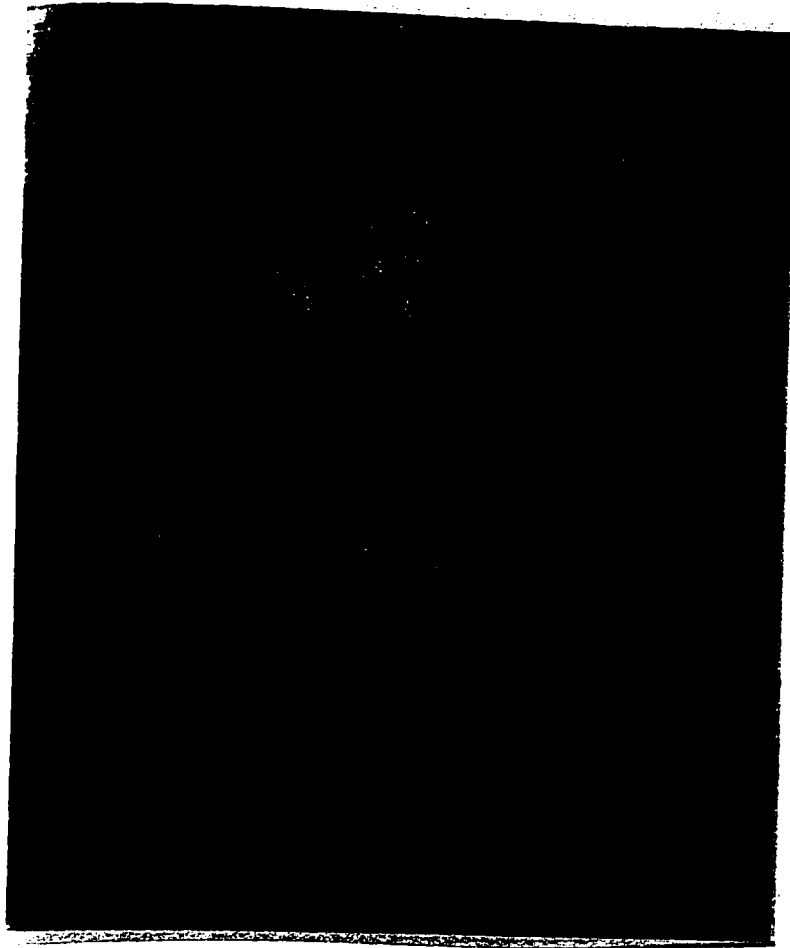
39. Richard Redgrave, Fashion's Slaves (RA 1847) (Private Collection)



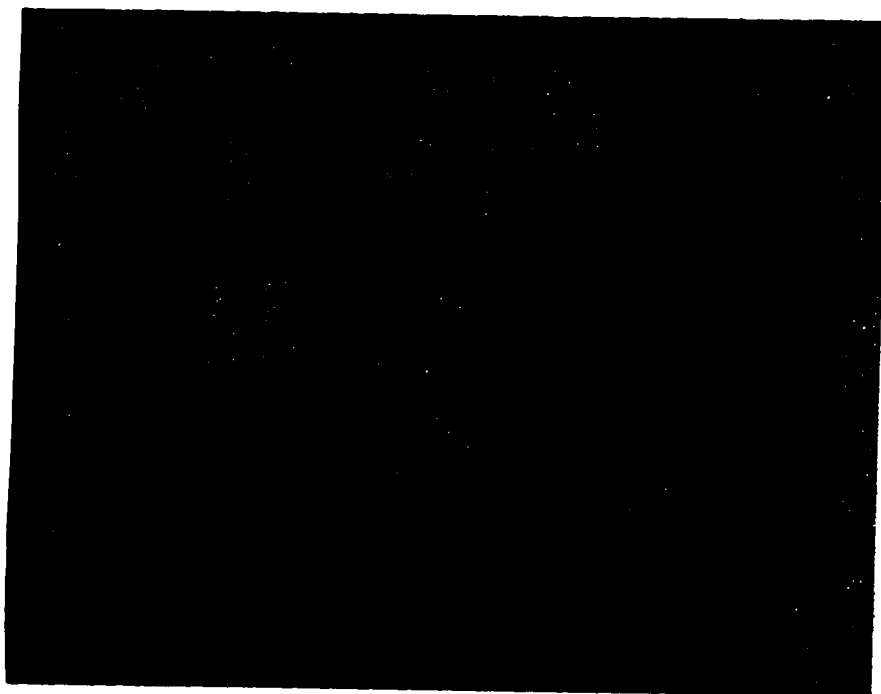
40. "Fashion's Slave," illustration for Confessions of a Needlewoman! in which are Revealed the Remarkable Trials, Sufferings, and Temptations of Susan Fry, n.d.



41. Hans Holbein the Younger, "The Countess," from The Dance of Death (1538)



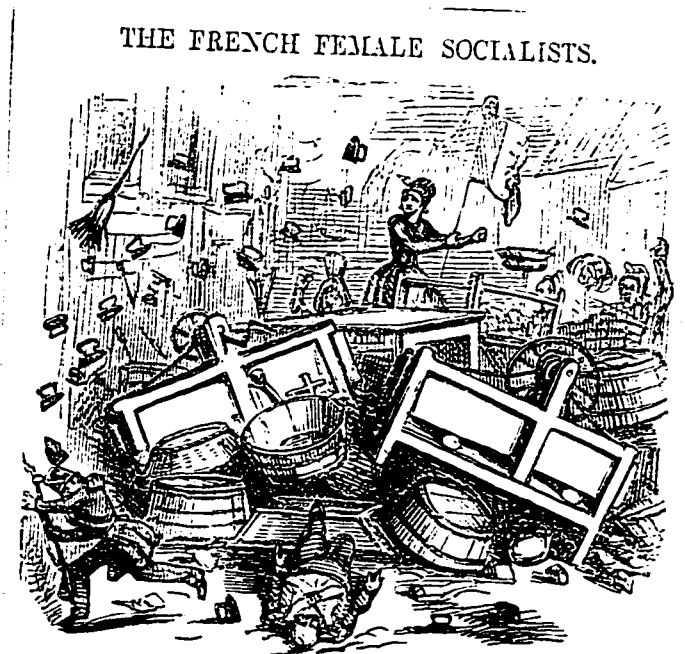
42. George Frederick Watts, The Sempstress (c. 1848) (Watts Gallery, Compton, England)



43. Illustration for "The Labour Question. -- No 1. The Needlewomen of London,"  
Penny Illustrated News (1850)



44. Illustration for "How to Treat the Female Chartists," Punch (1848)



45. Illustration for "The French Female Socialists," Punch (1848)



46. Illustration for "A Shroud as Well as a Shirt," Punch, (1848)



47. John Leech, "Here and There; or, Emigration, a Remedy," Punch (1848)



48. John Leech, "The Needlewoman at Home and Abroad," Punch (1850)

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