

## Empathy for the Employed:

### The Lowell Offering as Site of Agency and Self-advocacy for Factory Girls

*The Lowell Offering*, a monthly amateur periodical written by the young women and girls (some as young as eleven years old) working in the factories of Lowell, Massachusetts from 1840-1845, was a vehicle that allowed them to tell the story of their lives to a larger audience. The publication both reflected and encouraged the factory girls' ambition to achieve a higher level of education and to play an active role in countering the negative stereotypes of nineteenth century industrial laborers. For example, one essay signed simply "A Factory Girl" takes issue with a statement published by Orestes Brownson asserting that factory employment "is sufficient to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl" (December 1840). The young author argues passionately for women's right to work without social stigma. She writes,

And whom had Mr. Brownson slandered? A class of girls who in this city alone are numbered by the thousands, and who collect in many of our smaller towns by hundreds; girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of worthy sons of Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England, and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! (December 1840)

The Lowell offering provided an opportunity for these young women to counter the existing negative stereotypes of female laborers and promote empathy between classes. "A Factory Girl"'s evocation of New England's Pilgrim heritage linked working-class girls in an emergent industry to values which the new Republic held sacred, insisting that they be recognized as worthy members of the society, not to be despised.