



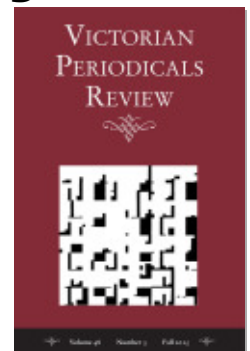
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“Let the Nightingales Alone”: Correspondence Columns, the Scottish Press, and the Making of the Working-Class Poet

KIRSTIE BLAIR

In February 1862, the “To Correspondents” column of the Dundee *People’s Journal* noted the receipt of “rather an ambitious strain from ‘Inverury,’ entitled ‘The Mist-Shrouded Mountain.’”¹ The journal’s well-known editor, W. D. Latto, cited the first stanza and commented, “Now, supposing the scene of the piece to be laid at ‘Bonnie Inverury’ and taking ‘Phimela’ to mean the nightingale, we beg to observe that the song of the nightingale was never heard ‘re-echoing’ through any wood in broad Scotland, whether dark or otherwise. That famous bird is confined to the South of England. ‘Judith’ should stick to the ‘laverocks’ and ‘linties’ and ‘blackbirds’ and so forth, and let the nightingales alone.”² “Laverocks” (larks) and “linties” (linnets) are native in two senses: they are birds found in Scotland, and they are described here in the presumed native Scots tongue of “Judith” from “Inverury.” Latto’s comment decries the tendency of local poets to abandon realism and Scots dialect for high-flown literary discourse and conventional English. It suggests the need for modest, local ambition. Poets with insufficient education who insert their verses into classical tradition will inevitably make embarrassing mistakes, as in “Judith’s” mortifying misspelling of “Philomela.” Similarly, given that the nightingale symbolizes English literary tradition, as reflected in the work of Shakespeare and Keats, it represents a poetic strain that is too high-flown for the would-be poets of the *People’s Journal*. If laverocks and linties were good enough for Robert Burns, they should be good enough for Judith of Inverury.

The People’s Journal (1858–1986) was an enormously influential Saturday paper that attracted a large audience of working-class readers. Its correspondence column functioned as a venue for the discussion of poetry

submissions, regularly proffering advice on the appropriate subject matter, language, form, and style that poets should adopt if they wished their poems to be published.³ Each week, the column offered commentary on a selection of poems received, noting which ones had been set aside for future publication as “Original Poetry” and citing the best and worst extracts from a selected group of runners-up. As this article will show, this practice became widespread in the Scottish press, particularly in weekly papers aimed at a predominantly working-class readership. What I wish to argue, with reference to only a few out of many possible examples, is that these correspondence columns offered the most widely circulated form of commentary accessible to aspiring working-class poets and that they were of vital importance in determining the subject matter and form of working-class poetry in Scotland and beyond during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the Victorian era, critics and patrons commented on what working-class poets could and should write in reviews and introductions to published volumes. We might think of Thomas Carlyle’s influential remarks on Ebenezer Elliott or the Dundee critic George Gilfillan’s introductions to volumes of working-class poetry, such as Janet Hamilton’s *Poems and Ballads*.⁴ But the fact that the Glasgow *Penny Post* found it difficult to persuade its readership to buy 500 copies of Ellen Johnston’s 1867 *Autobiography, Poems and Songs*, despite the enormous popularity of her work in its columns, demonstrates that few workers could afford to invest in volumes written by their peers.⁵ And while aspiring artisan writers might have been able to read or acquire a second-hand copy of an established periodical like *Blackwood’s* in a library or institution, they were certainly not subscribers. A farm labourer in rural Scotland or a factory worker in industrial Dundee with poetic aspirations was far more likely to find inspiration and encouragement in the pages of a penny weekly than from any other published source. Cheap periodicals were particularly accessible reading material because a single issue might circulate through many hands or be read aloud in the workplace.

Critics such as Natalie Houston and Andrew Hobbs are attentive to the significance of newspaper poetry in Victorian literature and culture, yet the vitality of correspondence columns as de facto poetry columns has been largely overlooked.⁶ Mike Sanders’s work on the *Northern Star* is an important exception; correspondence columns are also briefly discussed in studies of Scottish poetry by Judith Rosen, Florence Boos, and Edward Cohen, Anne Fertig, and Linda Fleming, which concentrate on the newspaper publications of Johnston and Marion Bernstein.⁷ Building on Brian Maidment’s important argument for the survival of a “bardic culture” in the industrial Victorian city, Rosen argues that the “poetry columns of

local penny papers” give us insight into the “Victorian era’s multiple communities of writers and readers and tastes.”⁸ Rosen and Boos also examine the responses of readers to Johnston’s poems and the function of the poetry column in creating a sense of community. But the difference between the poems and extracts from poems published under the heading “To Correspondents” and the poems published elsewhere in the newspaper has received little attention. Likewise, the critical commentary included in these columns has been neglected. This article will highlight the importance of these columns by analysing the advice offered by editors and by investigating how this advice shaped working-class poetics. It will briefly assess the function of the correspondence column as a space for poetic community, consider the complex strategies that poets used to construct their poetic identities, and demonstrate the satirical ways poets sometimes responded to editorial patronage.

The People’s Journal founded its “To Correspondents” column in 1858, apparently as a response to the vast quantity of poems it was receiving and the surprising popularity of its poetry competitions. Almost every daily or weekly British provincial newspaper published poetry, but offering criticism and advice on readers’ attempts was rare. As Berridge has noted, correspondence columns were “enormously popular” features of a great many Victorian newspapers, but they generally functioned as spaces for informative or humorous responses to a “whole range of concerns” submitted by readers rather than as venues for literary criticism.⁹ In sampling the range of newspapers digitized by the British Library from 1840–60, I have found only occasional comments on submitted poems. For example, in March 1840 the *Preston Chronicle* informed “Z” that his submission was “below the standard we wish to maintain in the poet’s corner,” noting that the “versification is exceedingly defective, as for instance, the first and third lines of the first stanza.”¹⁰ Likewise, in June 1850 the *Huddersfield Chronicle* acerbically responded to a poem submitted by “H. S.,” noting that a “certain number of words in a line, possessing neither rhyme nor reason, cannot be allowed a place in our poets’ corner.”¹¹ Such commentary most often appears in provincial northern papers and, more rarely, in the metropolitan press.

Prior to 1858, few, if any, British newspaper titles included regular correspondence columns that published and critiqued readers’ poetic efforts. *The Northern Star* came the closest to providing a venue for critical evaluation of working-class poetry. Sanders notes that as part of its commitment to Chartist poetics, the paper not only published many poems but also, in the “To Readers and Correspondents” column, gave “reasons for rejecting individual poems.”¹² In Scotland, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* was an important model for the *People’s Journal* because it focused on providing

improving educational content for a primarily working-class readership. Yet from the 1830s to the 1850s, *Chambers's* repeatedly discouraged readers from submitting their letters and literary productions. In an 1837 note on "Rejected Contributions," the editors published a few extracts from poems received, only to mock them "in the hope that the authors of similar things will be convinced . . . of the utter fruitlessness of offering them for approval or publication."¹³ Here and in the examples above, editors sometimes identified a specific problem with the poem submitted (such as length or versification), but they did not proffer advice for improvement other than sarcastically advising the worst offenders "never more to attempt to versify."¹⁴ Readers had no means of judging the fairness and accuracy of such comments; very few of the examples that I have found prior to the late 1850s publish all or part of a rejected poem in order to show why it was found defective.

If the *People's Journal* was unique in actively soliciting poems from its readers and then critiquing them, however, it did not remain so for long. By the mid-1860s, the two other major weekly papers examined here, Dundee's *Weekly News* and Glasgow's *Penny Post*, featured columns with running commentary on readers' poetic submissions.¹⁵ By the close of that decade, all three papers were publishing more poetry in their correspondence columns than they were in sections of the paper dedicated to poetry. *The Penny Post*, for instance, generally published at least one poem by a local author in a prominent position on the top left-hand corner of the front page. But on the third page, three or more poems might be published in full or "sampled" in "Notices to Correspondents," which took up most of one column immediately before the editorial. In the 1860s, the *Penny Post* and the *People's Journal* were overseen by editors from radical, working-class backgrounds—W. D. Latto and Alexander Campbell—who saw these columns as part of their mission to educate readers. Indeed, when Campbell resigned the editorship in 1868, the *Penny Post* lost the "cordiality and love of poetry" that, as Boos notes, had characterized "Notes to Correspondents" in the preceding decade.¹⁶

The Weekly News, conscious of direct rivalry with the *People's Journal*, which was also published in Dundee, experimented with different formats. In the early 1860s, it incorporated comments on local poetry into a running series of comic Scots sketches, "The Barber's Shop." The conceit was that one of the characters, usually Treddle, a radical weaver, would produce a "wee bit poetical fragment" by himself or a friend, and his cronies in the barber-shop would give their opinions.¹⁷ In 1863, the *Weekly News* first started running a regular "Gossip with Correspondents" column (placed in a prominent position on the second page, as in the *Penny Post*), which included poems, advice to poets, and poetic competitions. This changed

in 1865 to a "Local Bards' Column" on the back page and then in 1867 to a "Correspondents' Column," after which "Correspondence" ran as a regular feature with poems and poetic criticism as its leading features. In the late 1870s, for example, the *Weekly News* published William McGonagall's poems along with accompanying editorial commentary.

Correspondence columns likely held more significance for working-class readers than the standard "Poets' Corner" or "Original Poetry" section of the newspaper because they explained the principles behind editorial selections. Editors took pains to lay down guidelines for aspiring poets, though they primarily focused on what not to do. As Andrew Murray Scott's history of literary Dundee notes, the *People's Journal* in particular offered a "virtual correspondence course in creative writing."¹⁸ Editors recognized that many of their correspondents had had limited access to education and consequently offered basic suggestions for self-help when they discovered genuine talent in need of cultivation. For instance, "J. G., Dundee" received signal encouragement from the *Weekly News* after submitting a poem on "The Wallace Monument": "You have many difficulties to overcome in writing, spelling and grammar; but if you intend to make an effort to overcome them, it will give us great pleasure to mark your improvement in any verses you may submit for our approval. Get a spelling book, or better still a dictionary and a grammar, and strive to master them, and there is no fear that in course of time you will be able to claim a corner in our columns. The attempt you have made is highly creditable, and we hope you will persevere in it."¹⁹ The editor's tone may be patronizing, but he nevertheless devotes time and effort to mentoring a deserving writer. A canny poet might use such a note as a stepping-stone towards further patronage by the newspaper. In the *People's Journal*, editorial advice similarly emphasized the basics: legible handwriting, spelling, grammar, and an understanding of the "rules" of rhyme and metre. "W. B." was advised that when spending a "poetical 'Afternoon among the hills,' he should have had a copy of Lennie's grammar in his pocket."²⁰ "Anneta Eliza" was informed that "she should adopt some standard poem as a model to begin with, and study also the rules of prosody contained in any good English grammar," and "A Village Girl" was instructed to "give her sole attention to reading, writing and spelling until she is a woman, and then we shall be happy to look at her effusions."²¹

The key point here is that correspondents and would-be poets were not only *told* which aspects of poetic production they should work on; they were *shown* examples of faulty poetry in the column and were expected to be able to identify faults in their own work, laugh (or despair) with the editor over them, and learn from example. For example, an editor for the *People's Journal* writes,

The author of the "Elegy on My Brother" is indignant that we should have had the audacity to call his production "nonsense." We shall, in reply to his strictures, simply quote the first verse, and ask our readers to say if the term "nonsense" was inapplicable:—

How oft have poets, by poetry's fill,
Sung the echoes of the dead
How oft have they, by soft touch'd thrill,
Melted a soul though hard as lead.
So here I too would sing and weep,
And, till, in anguish, sob and sigh.²²

While the grammar, spelling, and prosody of this excerpt are unexceptional, the editor asks readers to consider a broader question: why the lines fail to make sense. (What is meant by "poetry's fill"? "Till" what?) Perhaps more importantly, the editor prompts readers to recognize that the lines are unintentionally comic because they are a compendium of exaggerated, shop-worn clichés. Editors of correspondence columns might mock poets who submitted poorly written verses, but they seldom patronized their readers. Rather, they assumed that their readers were well-read poetry fans who were capable of assessing literary quality.

Readers apparently responded to this invitation with enthusiasm. In a letter to the editor published in the *People's Journal*, one reader writes, "It always affords me (as well as thousands more, I reckon) a great pleasure to glance over your column 'To Correspondents,' though, it strikes me, your *soothing* comments are not always appreciated by some of your contributors."²³ He goes on to ruefully acknowledge that he had "been intending for some months past to send you a few verses for dissection" but "never got beyond the first or second line."²⁴ As this suggests, readers were keen to subject their poems for possible editorial "dissection," not simply just for possible publication. In an 1863 letter, "An Ebriesside Servant" writes, "Few are aware of how much your *Journal* does as a social reformer. It is eagerly read in our rural circles, exciting a craving for more knowledge to comprehend its sketches. Sandy Swingletree, in looking over your notes to correspondents, says he is determined to learn grammar. Geordie Barleychaff says that he must have a book to tell him of the countries that these terrible wars are in."²⁵ What is significant here is that the imagined readers first turn to the correspondence column and then to the news. In 1865, "J. F. from Meldrum" confirmed that "there is assuredly no single column in the paper that is more anxiously scanned by weekly readers than that to Correspondents; and moreover, there is no single column more truly valuable as a literary school . . . By means of this column weekly, the

editor is laying for the rising generation over the north of Scotland the foundation of a more refined taste in literary matters.”²⁶ While we should bear in mind that these letters were mediated by the editor, it is evident that readers enjoyed editorial dissections of “bad” poetry still more than they enjoyed reading “good” poetry and that they viewed correspondence columns as an engaging site of discussion, speculation, and aspiration. By the 1870s, the function of correspondence columns was well established. In 1874, a contributor to the *Weekly News* asks, “What shall we say of the many sad tales which the poets have disclosed to us? Are they not written in those detestable columns called ‘Notices to Correspondents’? We, too, have suffered. Our own fine imagination, after purchasing a rhyming dictionary and sending seven poetical effusions, was nearly snuffed out by the editor of the *Partenclaw Gazette*, published in Auchmithie.”²⁷ If a small-town, small-scale production like the imaginary *Partenclaw Gazette* was engaged in literary criticism, then poetic correspondence columns had truly spread their reach across all of Scotland.

Given that editors were attempting to instil a “more refined taste” among readers and contributors, what, then, did this consist of? Once would-be poets had mastered the basics of spelling, grammar, and orthography, what kind of verse should they aspire to produce in order to inspire their peers? First, their poems should conform to recognized metrical patterns, should rhyme in a harmonious fashion, and should not be too ambitious in subject-matter, language, and form. As the editor confessed in the *People’s Journal*, “We always feel uncomfortable when reading unrhymed twelve-syllable lines.”²⁸ Or as the editor of the *Weekly News* informed “J. H. of Blairgowrie,” “It will not do to make verses of six and eight syllables in once place, and in another make all the lines of eight syllables.”²⁹ In 1858, the editor of the *Penny Post* observes, “W. T., Dumfries, sends in lines on the Death of a Grandchild, which are good in sentiment, but the versification is defective,” and in 1866, he writes to another contributor, “The sentiments of your lines are good, but not properly arranged for publication.”³⁰ The poet’s choice of subject and the affective power of verse, as these examples suggest, were always a secondary consideration to choices of form. Editors explicitly discouraged ambition, signalled by unwieldy topics and by blank-verse or epic form, in part because they did not have the space to publish poems over a certain length or width. Given that Scottish poets and critics in the 1860s would have been keenly aware of the fate of the “spasmodic” poets (including the Glasgow working-class newspaper poet Alexander Smith) whose radical, experimental book-length poems were initially highly praised but rapidly fell into ridicule and neglect, they may also have wished to discourage readers from pursuing a similar course.³¹

Lyrical verse that focused primarily on local and personal themes, such as courtship, grief, and local scenery and history, was therefore far more likely to meet with editorial approval. Poets were encouraged to use “simple” language and form. In the mid-1860s, Latto often recommended Tennyson as a poetic model based on the simplicity of his poetic language. (The Tennyson he had in mind, of course, was the author of “Enoch Arden,” *Idylls of the King*, and patriotic newspaper songs rather than the author of *Maud*.)³² If we take these editorial views at face value, they clearly encourage newspaper poets to conform: to produce poetry that will be inoffensive both in form and sentiment.³³ All three weeklies agree that the essential characteristic of publishable verse is the “smoothness which poetry should always possess.”³⁴ “Smooth” is the adjective most often used to judge the merits or demerits of a poem; if a poem’s form was “not very smooth,” it had no chance of appearing in print.³⁵

Twentieth-century critics who dismissed the newspaper poems of the previous era as weak imitations of canonical works objected to the very qualities that Victorian editors most valued. As Maidment notes, the requirement that newspaper poems should be accessible and thus not “formally or intellectually complex” implies that “most poems written in this genre will be little more than occasional verses using . . . the simple and conservative conventions of banal public utterance.”³⁶ Yet this also oversimplifies the case. While much newspaper poetry relies on conventional form and subject matter (love, death, and pastoral themes), this does not necessarily mean that it is banal or uninteresting. “Address to Keppoch-Hill,” by “R. H. P., Parkhead” (John Petticrew), for example, met editorial standards of suitable content and smoothness of form, gaining a coveted place on the front page of the *Penny Post*:

Sweet place, near thee I first drew breath
 Near thee I lived in guileless joy;
 Near thee my parents closed in death,
 And left me here an orphan boy.
 No wonder then, go where I will,
 My compass points to Keppoch-hill.

Thou’rt sadly changed, my dear birthplace,
 Since first I bid farewell to thee;
 Few of my comrades now I trace—
 Some dead, and some have crossed the sea.
 And where honeysuckle did sweetly twine,
 Are dens of noxious grovelling swine.

Methinks it is but yesterday

I joined the merry laughing bands,
And pull'd blue bells and roses gay

Where now that huge iron foundry stands.
Yet though thou'rt changed, I love thee still,
Mark of my birthplace—Keppoch-hill.³⁷

A lament for a lost birthplace was one of the most popular poetic topics in newspapers; it celebrated local scenes familiar to many readers and expressed nostalgia for pre-industrial ways of life. Yet such poems cannot be completely disregarded since they offer a sharply focused account of the damage to rural Scottish communities caused by emigration (“some have crossed the sea”) and industrialization (“where now that huge iron foundry stands”). During this period, Keppoch-Hill was incorporated into the rapidly-expanding industrial city of Glasgow. Parkhead, R. H. P.’s given location, was a weaving village that was quickly merging into Glasgow’s industrialized East End. Petticrew worked in Parkhead Forge and as a jobbing gardener. Glasgow readers of the *Penny Post* would probably have been able to visualize the exact site he references as “*that* foundry.” In its local context, then, this poem makes a defiant plea for the survival of traditional attachments in the modern city (“I love thee still”) and makes an implicit appeal to the readerly community that will support the isolated, orphaned poet. Indeed, it was already supporting him, as readers of the *Penny Post* knew. Petticrew, writing as “R. H. P.,” exchanged verses with Ellen Johnston in the correspondence column in October 1865, and in the first six months of 1866 the *Post* published at least four poems either by or dedicated to him.

“Address to Keppoch-Hill” additionally touches on another highly favoured poetic theme: temperance. The Biblical-sounding “dens of noxious grovelling swine” almost certainly alludes to the public houses that sprang up in the vicinity of the factories. Given that the *Penny Post* and its sister publications all supported temperance as part of their educational remit, R. H. P.’s poem expresses appropriate sentiments. But what about their expression? The “smoothness” of his eminently predictable end-rhymes is indisputable; we know from the first line that “breath” will lead to “death.” Iambic tetrameter was by far the most popular measure used in newspapers due to its familiarity and ease. We might note, however, that “honeysuckle” awkwardly disrupts the smoothness of line eleven. Why not choose “the rose” or “the briar”? This move may be deliberate given that evoking the scent of honeysuckle sets up a pleasing contrast to the pigsty image of the following line and the discordant metre of the line also signals a shift of tone from regret to anger. Similarly, the potential triple stresses

on “huge iron foundry” serve to emphasise the disruptive quality of the foundry as well as its massiveness. In practice, very few newspaper poems were completely “smooth,” and editors clearly selected those that could deploy variations with a degree of skill.

If one of the main functions of the correspondence column was to create a relationship of patronage between editor, correspondent, and reader, it also allowed poets to correspond with each other. Correspondence columns show a pattern of serial publication and response where poets submit poems that criticize, satirize, eulogize, answer, or offer thanks to poems or poets that previously appeared in the same column. For example, as Rosen and Boos discuss, at least fifteen poems were written to Johnston by the poets of the *Penny Post* in late 1865 and early 1866, and poems devoted to her were still appearing into 1868, usually swiftly followed by her own poetic responses. But Johnston was by no means an isolated example. In the *Weekly News*, for instance, a typical correspondence column of March 16, 1867, contained “To Colin Sievwright, Kirriemuir, on reading his volume of poems” by “J. G., Arbroath”: Sievwright was a Dundee artisan poet who had been sponsored by the *Weekly News* and was now a familiar presence in its columns. “Colin’s Reply to ‘J. G.,’ Arbroath” was published three weeks later, on April 6, and “J. G.’s Reply to Colin Sievwright” followed on April 20.

In 1866, a typical column in the *Penny Post* published a poem titled “To David Morrison, Calder Vale,” by “D. Thomson, Hillend,” which had been written in response to a previous poem by Morrison praising Thomson:

O Davie, dinna sing my praise
 Sae loud on Cather’s bonnie braes,
 Or echoes wild I’m fear’t ye’ll raise,
 As lood as thunner,
 An gar the bodies at me gaze
 As at a’ won’er.

They’d laugh at me, auld doited sot,
 Wha’s pouches scarce e’er held a groat,
 An’ aften wears a ragged coat,
 Far frae genteel,
 Up poesy’s height, sweet lovely spot,
 Attempt tae speel.³⁸

The poem praises Morrison, addressing him as a “guid frien,” thanking him for “his kind address,” and concluding with the wish that they might

meet and shake hands. In the same column, a poet known as “The Ploughman’s Wife,” who had started a poetic campaign to memorialize the eighteenth-century labouring-class poet Robert Tannahill, submitted “Answer to ‘A Reader,’ Lanark,” in which both she and her husband expressed friendly wishes towards the writer of an earlier poem:

Whatso’er thy lot in life,
 Claim as thy friend the ploughman’s wife.
 Tom, fearing to be left behind,
 Desires to send thee greetings kind;
 For rather would he clasp thy hand
 Than that of noblest in the land.³⁹

As these examples indicate, verse written to honour fellow poets tended to be conversational, informal, and humorous. It often referenced the epistolary poems of Burns and others by employing Scots and habbie stanzas (six-line aaabab stanzas deploying tetrameter on the “a” lines and dimeter on the “b”). The poets emphasize their humble position and consequent lack of poetic skill while praising their fellow poets for having managed to achieve such skill despite their lowly status. They thus assume the modest pose effectively proscribed to labouring-class poets, yet they also make strong claims for the significance and pleasure of working-class verse.

Correspondence columns presented readers with a lively and supportive yet critical community of working-class writers and readers. Poetry correspondence columns, more than any other aspect of the provincial press, provided working-class readers with insight into the lives and emotional history of members of their own class and community, people they might actually know or meet. For example, readers’ emotions were excited by the love affair and engagement of Johnston and fellow-poet G. D. Russell, as conducted in verse in the *Penny Post* correspondence column, only to be cast down with grief after Russell sailed for Queensland, leaving “The Factory Girl” behind to be consoled in print by her many poetic admirers. Meanwhile, Russell kept readers of the *Penny Post* up to date by supplying poems from shipboard and from his new address in the colonies.

Johnston was expert at using her poems to solicit sympathetic responses from readers, but many other poets evidently understood the value of playing to an audience. David Willox, a Parkhead weaver who published poems in local newspapers “before he could read and write” and who later became a Glasgow city councillor, recalled his friendship with Petticrew (R. H. P.): “We entered into what I may term a poetical conspiracy, that he should write a piece laudatory of his birthplace, Keppochhill, I think it was, under the name of McDuff, and I was to write a poetical criticism of

it. This worked out well, and continued for a few weeks, indeed it drew others into the controversy, until the editor either saw through the game, or became tired of us washing our dirty linen through the medium of his paper.”⁴⁰ Stirring up controversy by writing derogatory poems to another author was a sure way to rouse other readers to join the fray and attract publicity. R. H. P.’s affecting sentiments on his lost birthplace in “Address to Keppoch-Hill” were, this suggests, part of a long-term collaborative strategy focused on increasing his visibility and reputation.

Under the surface of the poetic correspondence column, then, lay complex constructions of working-class poetic identity and relationships between poets, poems, editors, and readers. These issues are made still more complicated by one of the most remarkable and hitherto unnoticed features of these correspondence columns: their incorporation—indeed, their creation—of a culture of *deliberately* bad verse, poetry which self-consciously satirizes and parodies the categories carefully constructed by newspaper editors. We can trace this with some specificity to the appearance of a writer called “Poute,” from Lundin Mills, and later “Levin Saat Pans,” whose work first appeared in the correspondence column of the *People’s Journal* in September 1861.⁴¹ Initially, Latto took “Poute’s” claim that he was a “self-taught man who doesn’t know where to put in the ‘comies’” at face value, presuming that his mangled poetry was accidental and citing extracts illustrating the poet’s “priceless” comic effects.⁴² The following week, he printed a “most indignant epistle” received from Poute:

Sir I have been advised by my friends to write a rejonter in ansir to your insult which you gave me for sending my poetry on the water lily I could prosecut you if I pleased for some thing you said for instance i never said that I was dead as any man may see in reading My poem it was the lily that did die and not i. Sir i have more of the blood of an independent scotishman in my viegns than ever to write any more poems to you.⁴³

Inspired by the many poets who immediately submitted delighted response poems to this epistle, Poute continued to supply contributions. On October 1, 1861, for instance, the *People’s Journal* printed his poetic letter to the editor in its correspondents’ column:

I sore aloft in regons high.
beyond the reach of all you small fry.
I say yet i am self taught a natures poet.
and well does your poor meen critics know it.
But tho ive got small edication.
ive raised your Journals circilation.

My lily made your Reedars all to wonder.
and caused you to print thirty three thoosand hunder.⁴⁴

Coming upon pronouncements like “It was the lily that did die and not I” and “I am self-taught a natures poet,” both Latto and his readers at some point realized that they were not dealing with an uneducated and unintentionally comic poet (many such poets did appear in correspondence columns) but rather a highly sophisticated satirist.

The Poute persona was created by Alexander (“Sandy”) Burgess, a violinist and dancing-master in Fife who possessed little formal education and lived in relatively impoverished circumstances. He became one of the best-known contributors to the *People’s Journal* and sparked a craze for “Poutery.” Under the heading “Original Poute-ry,” Poute’s poetry was eventually afforded its own separate space on the second page of the *Journal*, and throughout the 1860s his new poems were advertised at least a week in advance. The joy of his writing is produced by its misspellings, formal mistakes, and grammatical blunders as well as through its comic juxtaposition of high-flown poetic subjects with Scots dialect and its satiric treatment of the material concerns of Scottish working-class life. For example, “Kale-Wurms” opens:

Ceres descend o help me to Bewale
the qwik despatch of my Most Splindid kale
onse Lairg as Johnys Gurde wi Bledes lyk lethir
Now pykit to the Benes as bairs the hethir
it was their Bulk aliss! & Monstriss Syse
which drew forth Rejmints of whyt butrflys
To sitt on them lik Teylyers on Their furms
& klekk thier Skors and Mulyins of kale wurms⁴⁵

This poem displays careful mastery of the heroic couplet; indeed, its bathetic appeal to the Muse, its language of battle, and even its seemingly random capitalization of nouns might recall Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* and other mock-epics.⁴⁶ Linguistically, the poem contrasts Scots conventions and slang, such as “pykit,” “klekk,” and “wi,” with high-flown poetic language such as “bewail” and “alas.” As in all Poute’s poems, there is a complicated relationship between phonetic spelling and Scots dialect, where the reader is thrown off by the inability to distinguish spellings that are allowable as dialect terms and spellings that are simply errors. His poems have an air of sly mockery with regard to both Scots and Scottish rural concerns, yet a poem like “Kale Wurms” also unsentimentally celebrates the kailyard and uses images of labour (“Teylyers on Their furms”)

that would be familiar to readers. “Kale Wurms” asks the reader to recognize that for a hungry labouring-class writer, the destruction of a good crop of kale by caterpillars is an event worth lamenting. It anticipates the identification of a “kailyard” sensibility in Scottish literature by nearly two decades, presenting an almost aggressively local take, linguistically and thematically, on the genre of local pastoral verse.

Poute’s success gave rise to a host of imitators, such as “Moses Dalite of Kats Klos, Dundee,” whose ode to a famous Dundee building, “A Nod Tew the Old Steepil,” opened with “Stewpendyis moniment of ainshent times” and concluded with a gloomy prediction of the steeple collapsing on the Reverend Gilfillan’s congregation in School Wynd church:

Twood be moar sad if a strong east wind was blawin
 Some stormy Sabeth day, and yew was fawin.
 They woud here the thundren crash near broty ferry—
 Yude kaws a wunderfil sensaishon verie
 Amongst the sitisens of this grate naishun,
 But speshily in the numeris kongirigashun
 That okkypies the skool wind kirk clos buy,
 Whair grate filgillan lifts his voyse on high.
 But I du hop that time is far away
 And that I wont be in the kirk on that disasttris day.⁴⁷

For local readers, this fantasy, when coupled with the mangling of the minister’s name, must have been particularly amusing since Gilfillan was a devoted patron of the city’s aspiring artisan poets. Dalite’s poem is a clever mockery of Gilfillan’s efforts, suggesting that the minister inspires local writers to produce stunningly bad verse. In the 1860s and 1870s, correspondence columns were rife with comic bad verse, including contributions by Poute, Dalite, and Poute’s “prentis” (Gordy Snotter) in the *People’s Journal* as well as verses by Job Sprott, Sawmule Slyde and others in the *Weekly News* and many other newspapers. A poet who could produce parodic verse perhaps had a better chance of getting into print and achieving local fame than did a newspaper poet who wrote the kind of standard poem proscribed by the editors.

Poute and his contemporaries were sometimes compared to the American prose humorists Artemus Ward and Josh Billings, whose comic writings circulated in the Scottish press during this period.⁴⁸ In the British press outside Scotland, no similar culture of comically bad working-class (or pseudo-working-class) poetry has yet been identified. Poute’s *The Book of Nettercaps*, although it had substantial success for a collection by a working-class poet, was little known outside local circles.⁴⁹ Of course, as

with much newspaper verse, we cannot always identify the figures behind the pseudonyms, and it is possible that some comic poetry published in correspondence columns was written by highly educated or middle-class contributors. What we can say is that correspondence columns fostered a culture of satire. Far from humbly following the dictates of Gilfillan and middle-class newspaper editors, self-identified artisan poets sometimes turned these dictates on their head, undermining their privileged critical function.

Humorous bad verse appeared alongside editorial advice in correspondence columns, demonstrating that poems with poor grammar and spelling and deliberate lurches into poor form (in terms of content as well as metre) were eminently publishable providing they were sufficiently amusing. But how were editors to tell *deliberately* bad poetry from poetry that was simply bad? We might compare Moses Dalite's satiric "A Nod Tew the Old Steepil" to J. W.'s poem on the same building that was criticized and rejected for its poor scansion in the 1877 *Weekly News* correspondence column. Given that J. W.'s poem opens, like Dalite's, with "Thou lofty monument of ancient time," can we assume that he means us to take the poem seriously?⁵⁰ Still more pertinently, does the fact that William McGonagall's famously bad verse is correctly spelled mean that it should be excluded from the forgotten culture of Poutery? There is no doubt that McGonagall was familiar with the correspondence columns of the *People's Journal*, and he would have known, two years before he ventured into verse himself, that Poute had been successfully supported into volume publication by Latto and his fans at the *Journal*. As I have argued elsewhere, situating McGonagall's poems in this context makes it considerably more likely that his style is a self-conscious and deliberate attempt to capitalize on the success of similarly "bad" poems in a local context.⁵¹

James Mussell notes that the Victorian newspaper offered "spaces of experimentation where new forms were tried and ideas broached."⁵² This was also true of correspondence columns, which functioned as spaces for *poetic* experimentation and provided venues for poets who had little other means of access to print culture. Correspondence columns were also important to working-class poetics—and Victorian poetics more broadly—because they dispensed widely read critical advice on literary taste and values, advice that may have been more influential than we have supposed. In Scotland, where the models of Burns and Robert Tannahill helped to foster a culture that valued local artisan poets, poetic correspondence columns represented a substantial and influential innovation of the weekly press. As this case study suggests, further research into Victorian provincial newspapers will doubtless uncover more valuable evidence of the reach and scope of such columns, both in Britain and further afield.

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NOTES

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1. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, February 1, 1862, 2.
2. Ibid.
3. On the significance of the *People's Journal* for working-class readers and writers, see Blair, "A Very Poetical Town"; Donaldson, *Popular Literature*; and Whatley, "Altering Images."
4. On Carlyle and Elliott, see Waithe, "The Pen and the Hammer." On middle-class patronage more generally, see Maidment, *Poorhouse Fugitives*, 281–89.
5. Johnston's volume was heavily advertised in the *Penny Post* from 1866 to 1868. Despite the newspaper's efforts to actively solicit subscriptions and offer discounts, editor Alexander Campbell noted that the "number of subscribers fell far short of the cost." "Notices to Correspondents," *Penny Post*, February 1, 1868, 4.
6. See Houston, "Newspaper Poems"; Hobbs, "Five Million Poems."
7. Rosen, "Class and Poetic Communities"; Boos, "Queen of the Far-Famed Penny Post"; Cohen, Fertig, and Fleming, *A Song of Glasgow Town*.
8. Maidment, *Poorhouse Fugitives*, 324, and "Class and Cultural Production," 158. Rosen, "Class and Poetic Communities," 208.
9. Berridge, "Popular Sunday Papers," 252.
10. "To Correspondents," *Preston Chronicle*, March 7, 1840, 2.
11. "Notices to Correspondents," *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 5. See also the *York Herald*, which commented in 1852 that the lines "entitled 'The Sunshine' are too incorrectly written for publication." "To Correspondents," 5. The *Nottinghamshire Guardian* of 1855 more sympathetically informed "Leon," "We are very sorry that the length of your effusion 'The Six Wise Men of Nottingham' alone precludes its insertion." "Notices to Correspondents," 8.
12. See Sanders, *Poetry of Chartism*, 72, 75.
13. "Rejected Contributions," 336.
14. "To Correspondents," *Preston Chronicle*, April 16, 1842, 2.
15. From 1874 onwards, the *Glasgow Weekly Mail* also ran a lively poetry column and poetic correspondence column under the tenure of James Ramsay Manners. I am indebted to Edward H. Cohen and Anne R. Fertig for sharing with me their work in progress on Marion Bernstein and the *Weekly Mail*, which includes discussion of these columns.
16. Boos, "Queen of the Far-Famed Penny Post," 520.
17. "The Barber-Shop," 2.
18. Scott, *Dundee's Literary Lives*, 82.

19. "Bards' Column," 4.
20. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, August 29, 1863, 2.
21. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, August 27, 1864, 2; "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, October 31, 1863, 2.
22. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, March 7, 1863, 2.
23. "The Benefits of Newspapers to the Working-Classes," 2.
24. Ibid.
25. "Social Reformation among Farm Servants," 2.
26. "Literary Culture," 2.
27. "The Poetical Riches of Montrose," 3.
28. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, May 16, 1863, 2.
29. "Correspondence," *Weekly News*, February 14, 1874, 4.
30. "Notices to Correspondents," *Penny Post*, November 28, 1858, 2; "Notices to Correspondents," *Penny Post*, September 29, 1866, 2.
31. Smith had a special relationship with the *Glasgow Citizen* in the early 1850s and was championed by George Gilfillan, who loomed large in the Dundee poetry scene and was a judge for many of the *People's Journal* poetry competitions. Gilfillan and his protégés were ridiculed by Edinburgh critic and poet W. E. Aytoun in a *Blackwood's* parody. See Weinstein, W.E. Aytoun, and Boos, "Class and the 'Spasmodics.'"
 32. See, for example, "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, October 1, 1864, 2.
 33. Working-class women poets such as Johnston (discussed by Boos and Rosen) and Bernstein (discussed by Cohen, Fertig and Fleming) have attracted significantly more critical attention than their male counterparts. For this reason, I have not focused specifically on female newspaper poets and gender issues here. In the newspapers I have studied, there is no obvious trend for poets who self-identify as women. Women newspaper poets are fewer in number than their male counterparts but not uncommon. Male and female poets receive similar advice and address similar topics and forms. For a general discussion of the gender issues associated with the publication of working-class poetry, see Boos's introduction to *Working-Class Women Poets*.
 34. "To Correspondents," *People's Journal*, May 24, 1860, 2.
 35. "Notices to Correspondents," *Penny Post*, July 20, 1867, 2.
 36. Maidment, "Class and Cultural Production," 158.
 37. R. H. P., "Address to Keppoch-Hill," 1.
 38. "Notices to Correspondents," *Penny Post*, September 29, 1866, 4.
 39. Ibid.
 40. Willox, *Memories of Parkhead*, n.p.
 41. Lundin Links and Leven are villages in Fife, the implication being that the writer is a millhand or artisan working in the salt pans.

42. Edwards suggests that “for a considerable time” Latto assumed that “Poute” was “simple, raw and green.” *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets*, 271.
43. Burgess, *Poute*, 2–3. This is an enlarged posthumous edition of Burgess’s *Book of Nettercaps*.
44. Poute, “Kale-Wurms,” 2.
45. Poute, “Original Poute-ry,” 2.
46. Eighteenth-century labouring-class poems also deployed the mock-epic form, notably Stephen Duck’s *The Thresher’s Labour* (1730), which invokes Ceres in line 2. There is no evidence of Poute’s reading, but it is unlikely that he would have had access to Duck’s works.
47. “To Correspondents,” *People’s Journal*, November 18, 1865, 2.
48. Latto describes Poute in 1865 as being “for Scotland what Artemus Ward is for America.” “To Correspondents,” *People’s Journal*, October 14, 1865, 2. Edwards commented that Burgess had “adopted a quaint and original style of spelling before the names of Josh Billings or Artemus Ward were heard in this country.” *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets*, 271. Local Scottish papers did reprint these authors: for instance, Ward’s prose featured regularly in the *Stirling Observer* in 1865, and Billings’s volume appeared around the time that Poute began to publish. Intriguingly, Billings’ *Hiz Sayings* contains mock correspondence columns, which suggests that US newspapers may also have used such columns to critique readers’ poems. See *Hiz Sayings*, 62, 94–95. Given its prominence in the British press, American comic prose most likely influenced “Poute” and his imitators. More work remains to be done on the importance of this transatlantic connection.
49. My copy of “Poute,” a reprint from the 1890s originally owned by James Law, contains a handwritten letter from Burgess to Law dated December 1884 indicating that the 1,000 copies of *A Book of Nettercaps* had sold out by 1876. “I made a mistake in printing so few copies,” Burgess notes.
50. “Correspondence,” *Weekly News*, June 23, 1877, 2.
51. Blair, “Poute, McGonagall.”
52. Mussell, *Nineteenth-Century Press*, 37.

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