



"The End of the Commune—Execution of a Pétroleuse"

PALACE-BURNER

*The Selected Poetry of
Sarah Piatt*



Edited and with an Introduction by
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AN AFTER-POEM

You will read, or you will not read,

That the lilies are whitest after they wither;

That the fairest buds stay shut in the seed,

Though the bee in the dew say "Come you up hither."

You have seen, if you were not blind,

That the moon can be crowded into a crescent,

And promise us light that we never can find

When the midnights are wide and yellow and pleasant.

You will know, or you will not know,

That the seas to the sun can fling their foam only,

And keep all their terrible waters below

With the jewels and dead men quiet and lonely.

Capital (1871)

Text from *A Woman's Poems*, 1871

SHOULDER-RANK¹³

"West Point?" Yes, that was the one grand argument ever so long

At the capital, I remember now, in our far-back battledays:

If the hour's great Leader blundered and war, therefore, went wrong,

West Point would give a subtle faith in that great Leader's ways.

West Point—Ah, well, no doubt they can graduate generals there,

Why, I wonder they do not send them out, plumed, sworded, and ready-
scarr'd,

And just because one when a boy has happened somehow to wear

The uniform of their cadets, let his shoulders be splendidly starr'd!

And if he in such starlight should grope on a little ahead

Of the failures of two or three others and fall in some shining high place,

Does that go to prove that not one in the dusty dim legions he led

Could give him his orders in secret and point him the way to your grace?

Oh, you fancy you honor where honor is due? But I feel

You may shake the hand that finished your work, nor guess at the head that
planned;

What if I tell you that one, who studied the science of steel,

In the nameless name of a Private commanded his chief to command!

If I say that he passed, through a wound in his breast, up the hill,

And lies buried where grave-marks by thousands at Arlington whiten the
air—

Why—you will go on and believe that our very first warrior still

Sits smoking his pipe of Peace in the Presidential easy chair!

Text from *The Capital*, 1871

MY DEAD FAIRIES

"Do the Fairies ever die?"

Why, yes, they are always dying.

There, in the freezing dark close by,

A thousand, dead, are lying.

Of the time they made so fair

But the fading shadow lingers;

Oh, how the light gold of my hair

Curled on their airy fingers!

I shall not see them again.

They fell in the Sun's fierce bright'ning;

They were drowned in drops of—"Rain?"

They were burned to death with lightning.

With bloom, as the bee-songs pass,

Our sweet-briar keeps its promise;

The fireflies shine in the grass;

Winds blow our butterflies from us!

Yet under that thin gray tree,

With the moonrise in its stillness,

They keep hidden away from me,

Forever, in dusty [ch]illness.

Text from *The Independent*, 1871

ically he has given her a flower and he dies of a chest wound in the war. Also see “The Memorials,” in the appendix.

6. This could be Piatt’s response to J. J.’s “The Birthdays”: “My fancy, love-created, goes / Lightly from passing year to year: / My little fairy maiden grows / To tender girlhood dear. / A dreaming girl, as shy as dew / In dells of Fairyland apart, / Within your soul a lily grew— / A rose within your heart” (*NWa* 94). Piatt’s last-stanza allusion to Psalm 23:2—“He leadeth me beside the still waters”—suggests that the interlocutor will get what he wants (an “Angel” wife) only when she dies. Variants: line 3: For] At; line 21: viler] darker (*WP, P1*).

7. Like Norma, Cleopatra also chose a lover, the Roman general Marc Antony, from among the enemy. After Octavius Caesar defeated their combined forces in the naval battle at Actium (31 B.C.E.), Antony committed suicide by falling on his sword, and Cleopatra committed suicide not long thereafter. Piatt’s view of the tragic pair reflects the influence of Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), a drama that strongly appealed to many nineteenth-century women writers, Dickinson included. Variants: line 4: The blossoms you brought me to-day] The vase with the flowers which you gather’d to-day; line 21: broken into two half lines (*WP, SP, P1*).

8. Most of the key components of Piatt’s emerging poetic of dramatic realism are at work in this poem: her use of words actually heard in conversation, her rootedness in experience, her individualized metrics, and her tendency to build her poems as dramatic situations rather than rely on apostrophe or dramatic monologue. Variants: title: The Little Puzzler (*H&H*); subtitle: Marian, 6 years old (*PCC, P2*); line 12: clear] clean (*P2*); line 16: Who does He pray to—when He has to pray?] Who does he pray to, and what does he say? line 17: drops are in] drops are there in (*H&H*).

9. An Irish reviewer praising this poem in the pro-Parnell *The Nation* (December 5, 1885) says it exhibits a “sarcasm to rival Swift’s.” The stereotypic “Jew” in stanza 3 may be meant to indicate one more way in which the children are corrupted by their society or, closer at hand, by the prejudices of their parents, or it may be evidence of Piatt’s own anti-Semitism. If Piatt was anti-Semitic, it is the only negative social attitude she possessed that she never interrogates, suggesting that it was either very superficial or very deeply entrenched. In the last days of the war, Grant ordered the siege of Richmond, blocking all avenues of access into the Confederate capital. General Lee ordered the evacuation of the city on April 3, 1865. As they left, Confederate forces set fire to the city. Nine hundred buildings were burnt out and hundreds more were damaged. The poem exploits the children’s confusion in order to blame Grant, against whom Piatt harbored a lifelong dislike, for the devastation of Richmond.

10. Variants: line 35: my own?] my own!; line 37: If such dark Fancies can play in despair like tragedy queens] And my dark fancies but play’d in despair like tragedy queens (*WP*).

11. Piatt summarizes 1869’s major political events (all of them written up in *HW*): the opening of the Suez Canal; the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the United States; Spain’s brief experiment with elective monarchy; the First Vatican Council, called to ratify the doctrine of papal infallibility; and—representing women’s on-

going struggle for the franchise—the 1869 woman’s rights convention in Saratoga, New York. The “Other” in stanza 10 is 1870; Louis Napoleon (1808–73) was emperor of France, 1852–70, and Sultan Abd-al-Aziz ruled the Ottoman empire, 1861–76. “[E]arth’s beautiful Oppressed” (line 40) received gallant support from two influential male figures. George Francis Train (1829–1904), ardent advocate of Irish home rule, financier, eccentric, and racist, “chivalrously” floated the first issue of *The Revolution*, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s woman’s rights newspaper, in 1868, and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), British philosopher-economist, published one of the century’s strongest feminist tracts, *On the Subjection of Women*, in 1869. Despite this, Piatt is not especially sanguine that 1870 would bring much improvement in women’s situation.

12. On January 28, 1871, after months of siege and famine, Paris fell to Prussian forces, bringing the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71) to an end. Piatt’s passionate response to Paris’s fall may have been conditioned by her response to the fall of Richmond (1865).

13. Grant is Piatt’s primary target in this otherwise very cryptic poem. However, along with Grant, a formidable number of other West Pointers also served as generals in the Civil War, on both sides: Robert E. Lee (1807–70), William Tecumseh Sherman (1820–91), Pierre G. T. Beauregard (1818–93), George Brinton McClellan (1826–85), and James (Jeb) Stuart (1833–64). Jefferson Davis (1808–89), president of the Confederacy, also graduated from West Point. Piatt seems to have had a consistent distaste for book-generals.

14. Variants: line 2: And] But; line 22: will] shall (*Cap, VFI*).

15. This is among Piatt’s most complex poems, turning on a quadruple reference to “Beatrice Cenci”: (1) Beatrice Cenci (1577–99), the historical personage, daughter of Francesco Cenci (1549–98). She, her brothers, and possibly a lover murdered her father after he imprisoned her and her stepmother in a tower. Although it was widely believed that Francesco committed incest with his daughter, she and her fellow conspirators were put to death; (2) the famed portrait, attributed to Guido Reni, said to be of Beatrice Cenci, which hangs in the Barberini Palace and was much copied in the nineteenth century. It is one of these copies that the speaker presumably views in the store window; (3) Beatrice Cenci, the heroine of Shelley’s verse drama *The Cenci* (1819); and (4) an imagined actress who plays Beatrice Cenci’s role in the drama. The speaker identifies so strongly with the latter that she begins hallucinating her own presence on the stage. Only her child’s question recalls her to “reality.” Variants: subtitle added: [Seen in a City Shop-Window]; line 19: a] her; line 20 is not split (*VFI, P2*).

16. This poem provides stunning evidence of Piatt’s sometimes uncanny ability to capture the visual effects of bourgeois emotional life, as the accompanying illustration demonstrates.

17. Unsigned. This is a companion piece to “A Lily of the Nile.” Both exhibit Piatt’s tendency to locate sites of romance (and self-destruction) in the south, suggesting they can be read allegorically. In Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, the beset queen uses an asp or horned North African adder to poison herself.

18. By 1860, Daniel Boone’s grave in Frankfort, Kentucky, was already a tourist site