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Mother Jones: A Dichotomy of Feminity

Amanda Viana

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Mary Harris Jones was an important figure in the labor movement in America. Unfortunately, her personal life was forever altered by tragedy. Without her traditional role in life, Jones was forced to confront an uncertain future. It was at this time that Mary Jones created the persona, "Mother" Jones, which made her indispensable to unions. Although the "Mother" Jones character often undermined the ideas Mary Jones held about women, the main focus of Mother Jones's work was always the preservation of family.

Mary Harris claimed she was born on May 1, 1830, in Cork, Ireland. Her parents were tenants on a rich man’s estate. When her father, Robert, participated in a series of strikes against rich landlords, the family immigrated to the United States, then to Canada.

In order to support herself Jones worked as a tutor and then a teacher, eventually settling in Chicago and working as a dressmaker. "My first position was teaching in a convent in Monroe, Michigan. Later, I came to Chicago and opened a dress-making establishment. I preferred sewing to bossing little children" (Gorn 33). When it became clear that she could not make a decent living she
moved to Memphis to become a teacher and met her husband, George Jones. George Jones had been an iron molder, but by the time Mary had given birth to their fourth child, George had left the foundry to become a full time union organizer.

Unfortunately, George Jones and his four children were killed in the summer of 1867 in a yellow fever epidemic. In her own words:

In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic swept Memphis.... Across the street from me, ten persons lay dead from the plague. The dead surrounded us. They were buried at night quickly and without ceremony. All about my house I could hear weeping and the cries of delirium. One by one, my four little children sickened and died. I washed their little bodies and got them ready for burial. My husband caught the fever and died. I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine. All day long, all night lone, I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart (Gorn 40-41).

Alone, Mary moved back to Chicago and became a seamstress for the well-to-do. Although she managed to make a living, Mary was disturbed by the vast differences between the lives of the poor in her neighborhood and her rich clients. The Great Chicago fire, the second great tragedy of Mary’s life, destroyed her entire neighborhood and once again emphasized the discrepancies between the rich and the poor. “I belong to a class,” she later said, “I belong to a class which has been robbed, exploited, and plundered down through many long centuries. And because I belong to that class, I have an impulse to go and help break the chains” (Atkinson 15).

It was after this devastation that Mary became active in unions. She encountered a meeting of the Knights of Labor and became a member. At first she was satisfied with the work the union did, despite the fact that they avoided confrontation with management and disapproved of strikes. Eventually she became tired of their conservative approach. She broke ties with all unions for a while and worked on behalf of workers in any way she saw fit. She became particularly attached to the cause of miners in America, and joined the United Mine Workers of America. She also took up the cause of child laborers.

The loss of her family forced Jones to confront her role as a woman. For a woman who believed women’s primary obligations were to work at home and raise children, this must have been a stunning blow. Perhaps if she had had more time to grieve the loss of her husband and children, she might have remarried and created a new family. She was still young and obviously determined to survive. However, the Chicago Fire took away the new life she tried to create for herself. After being confronted with the injustice facing workers in America every day, she wouldn’t allow herself to dwell on the past. “Pray for the dead,” she would tell miners later, “but fight like hell for the living” (Nies 105). It seems likely that Mary saw the workers of America as a new family to nurture (Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History 1). “Friends said the tragedy of losing her husband and four children to yellow fever gave her to compassion to strive for others in dire straits” (Conlon 1).

These misfortunes gave Mary Jones the freedom to become Mother Jones. “A role that she and her followers made up as they went along” (Gorn 2). She began to exaggerate her age and emphasize her role as matriarch of the working class. She insisted on being called “Mother” and wore only antique black dresses in public.

If we look at Jones’s history, it shouldn’t seem odd at all that the cause she took up was that of the workers of America. Her father had been involved in activism as a worker in Ireland and before his death her husband had worked for a union full-time. The meeting with the Knights coincided with her outrage over the inability of the
poor to recover from the fire while the rich depended on their wealth and insurance to rebuild their lives. It also happened to be a time when Mary Jones truly had no ties. She was homeless, jobless and had no family. Many historians focus mainly on the differences Jones made in the lives of workers. She is known as the “Miner’s Angel” and praise is heaped on her memory. “Countless millions of American workers since owe their decent way of life and pay to the slip of a firebrand” (Conlon 1). By focusing only on her good works many historians and biographers neglect to explore Mary Jones’s character, and that of the persona she created, Mother Jones. They instead create a myth, and to a certain extent ignore the dichotomy that existed between Mary Jones and Mother Jones.

Mother Jones was the opposite of everything Mary Jones believed a woman should be. As a union activist and public speaker, she was feisty and outspoken in a time when women, especially elderly women, weren’t supposed to have opinions, and were certainly not expected to express them publicly. She spoke openly and also roughly, communicating with uneducated workers and making them her biggest fans. “The militant,” she said, “not the meek, shall inherit the earth” (Nies 123).

Although Mary Jones disapproved of women working outside the home, she no longer had a home to take care of. “My address is like my shoes. It travels with me wherever I go” (Gorn 2). When asked where she lived, she often replied, “Wherever there is a fight” (Encyclopedia of World Biograp-hy 1). Mother Jones often rallied female workers and joined their strikes. She also pressured women to support their husband’s strikes, and organized “mop and broom” strikes because, she said, “No strike has ever been won that didn’t have the support of women” (Nies 110). Women and often children armed with household tools such as mops and brooms prevented workers from crossing the picket lines. She told the women to, “hammer and howl and be ready to chase the scabs with your mops and brooms....Don’t be afraid of anyone” (Nies 109).

Although Mary Jones and Mother Jones seem to contradict each other, their main focus was the same: families. Mother Jones often stressed the importance of family. She fought on behalf of all workers who had low wages, long hours and dangerous conditions, but she especially worked to abolish child labor. She felt the middle class aimed to force women into the labor force and children into work or daycare. She abhorred rich women who hired maids and nannies to raise their children. “The rich woman who has a maid to raise her child can’t expect to get the right viewpoint of life. If they would raise their own babies, their hearts would open and their feelings would become human” (Kauffman 1). She felt that capitalism was a problem because it undermined the family by requiring women and children to work.

Mother Jones herself had contradictory opinions on suffrage. She sometimes claimed that middle class capitalists were trying to keep their wives busy with less important issues and distract them from the economic problems of America. “The plutocrats have organized their women. They keep them busy with suffrage and prohibition and charity. I don’t belong to the women’s club, I belong to the fighting army of the working class” (Kauffman 2). She believed that suffrage—and other causes like it—distracted women from their main and most consuming responsibility: that of raising children. As a woman without a say in political affairs, Mother Jones had still managed to make quite a difference in the lives of working class Americans. “You don’t need a vote to raise hell! You need convictions and a voice! I have never had a vote
and I have raised hell all over this country!” (Kauffman 2). She believed in the power of women even without a vote. “If the women of the country would only realize what they have in their hands there is no limit to what they could accomplish. The trouble is they let the capitalists make them believe they wouldn’t be ladylike”(Nies 122).

However, later in life she often stated that women would make much better decisions in politics than did men and women who did have the vote often wasted it. “What good is the ballot, if they don’t use it?” (Foner 25). For Jones, suffrage became an issue of family welfare. She didn’t believe women needed a vote to be equal to men, she believed that women were the backbone and voice of families, and that families were being ignored in politics. Women needed a voice in politics because families were suffering from a lack of representation. “…the champions of woman’s suffrage did not feature her statements that with women in government, society would be much improved and war abolished” (Foner 25).

At a time in her life when Mary Jones had nothing, the union gave her a cause to fight for and a reason to carry on. Jones had always held traditional ideas of women, and chosen feminine jobs when she needed to support herself. However in her fight for workers’ rights Jones seemed to give up some of her femininity, even while she created a family out of the workers of America and made herself their mother.

Works Cited


