



*“The End of the Commune—Execution of a Pétroleuse”*

# PALACE-BURNER

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*The Selected Poetry of  
Sarah Piatt*



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"North—South—wash out your hatred-stains,  
Ere Hope's God-lifted face is pale,  
For tyrants laugh and forge new chains  
If Freedom's miracle should fail."

The winds on every hallowed spot  
Take up the warning with a wail,  
And ask the Powers of Darkness *what*  
*"If Freedom's miracle should fail!"*

Ingrates or madmen—ye who keep  
A hideous Fear loose in the land  
Does not the question strike your sleep?  
Do ye not hear and understand?

Tho' I have sung a powerless rhyme  
Here in a land where Hope is pale,  
God help the [land?] the world, and time  
["If Freedom's miracle should fail!"]

*Louisville Journal*  
March 20, 1861

## NOTES

1. Originally published in 1860, this poem anticipates some of the most distinctive features of Piatt's mature writing, in particular, her sophisticated and witty ironization of gender issues in polite society, and her pictorial approach to social behaviors such as the sex game.

2. The date in the title is the date of the battle, not the date of composition. The first battle of Bull Run (to the South, "First Manassas") was the Civil War's first major engagement and the North's first major defeat. The battle was fought so close to the Capital that civilians could ride out to observe it. Some brought picnic baskets. Given J. J.'s egregious romanticization of this proximity in "The First Fire," his celebration of the cozy comforts of home (*NWa* 29), Hanawalt's assumption that Sarah's irony in the last stanza is "unintended" (133) seems off the mark. It is true, however, that nineteenth-century reviewers read the poem straight. Years later, a *New York Times* reviewer would extol "Hearing" as "never surpassed in tenderness and simplicity" (July 15, 1886, 3), making it a striking example of Piatt's "either you will read or you will not read" dictum.

3. Piatt's love of the theatrical, presumably repudiated in this poem, remained central to her writing; and so did her sense that social behaviors were, effectively, roles men and women "played." This sense of artificiality made the "fancy ball" a key metaphor for her, reemerging again and again in poems that either reference dramas (Shakespeare's, in particular) or are in themselves mini-dramas. Variants: line 6: by] through; line 7: mock] match, and the moon] and moon; line 14: soft] cold; stanza 5 missing (*Galaxy* [1866]).

4. In 1864, Arlington National Cemetery was established on the site of General Robert E. Lee's former estate. In September 1866 the mass grave holding the remains of 2,111 unknown soldiers was sealed, an event Piatt's poem, first published in August 1866, appears to commemorate. Piatt's description of the Potomac in stanza 3 deftly echoes Spenser's famous refrain in "Prothalamion" (1596), "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song," and lines from Milton's "Lycidas" (1637) on the "perilous flood." The final stanza places blame for the dead squarely on General Lee's shoulders. Variants: title: Arlington Heights (*HW*); subtitle: [At Arlington, Va., 1866.]; line 15: Sing tenderly; O river's haunted flood!] Sing tenderly, O river's haunted flood! (*WP*).

5. The popular song "Hear me, Norma" (stanza 4) was based on Vincenzo Bellini's opera *Norma* (1832). Piatt may be suggesting that like the opera's Druidic heroine, secretly involved in a liaison with the Roman proconsul of Britain, the speaker took a lover from among the enemy. This same man figures in a number of Piatt poems; typ-

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