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Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell

Deanna L. Davis

UNLIKE HER CONTEMPORARIES Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell has occupied a shadowy position in feminist criticism: neglected by some critics because of her conservative values, uneasily respected by others for achieving literary and financial success. When seeming to warrant study at all, she has often bewildered feminist critics who do not find in her work the kind of protest that makes Brontë and George Eliot seem such modern women. Yet it is too easy to dismiss Gaskell as simply a less powerful and talented writer than her more acclaimed cohorts. The manner in which she has been dismissed suggests that Gaskell's treatment by feminist critics has more to do with the psychology and politics of feminist criticism than with any real lack in Gaskell's fiction. The feminine nurturance on which she grounded her life and work has appeared to many feminist critics as unappealing at best and traitorous at worst. In the eyes of a few recent critics, however, that emphasis on nurturance has become not only the most attractive part of Gaskell's work but also the most potentially subversive. For such reappraisals come at a time when feminists are reevaluating their perceptions of the same "feminine" values that Gaskell endorsed and reconsidering the figure who most completely embodies them: the mother. Thus the root of both the feminist neglect and the feminist celebration of Elizabeth Gaskell is the equivocal status of the mother within feminism and feminist criticism themselves. Both responses unconsciously gesture toward the most troubling issues surrounding mothering, issues that touch the individual psyches of feminist women as much as they affect feminist political and social agendas. For her feminist critics, Gaskell becomes the focus of the daughter's anxieties and dreams: her treatment of mothering provokes both the

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daughter's longing for maternal nurturance and her fears of becoming a mothering woman herself.

Gaskell's own connections to motherhood were complex. Her mother died when she was only an infant, and she never ceased to idealize and long for her lost mother; in her fiction, deprivation of maternal care is especially calamitous for women, and the inadequate mothers who abound in Gaskell's work indicate the emotional scars left by the early death of her mother and her unhappy relationship with her stepmother.¹ Yet in her fiction the daughter's perspective intertwines with the perspective of the mother. Herself the mother of four daughters, Gaskell prized women's actual maternal functions while envisioning a more extended social role for women exercising these functions outside the family. The value she placed upon maternal nurturance was anchored both by a daughter's need for the mother and by a mother's love for her children. Gaskell even gave motherly love as the explanation for the inception of her literary career; it was to distract herself from grief over the death of her young son, Gaskell claimed, that she began *Mary Barton*, her first novel.²

Not surprisingly, then, many critics have isolated motherliness as the key element of Gaskell's femininity. Virginia Woolf noted in 1924 that "Mrs. Gaskell wields a maternal sway over readers of her own sex; wise, witty and very large-minded, her readers are devoted to her as to the most admirable of mothers."³ Even though Aina Rubenius's ostensible subject in her 1950 treatment of Gaskell is the writer's relation to social and political issues, she reaffirms Gaskell as motherly writer, dubbing her "that adoring and adored mother" who "valued family unity and family affection above most other things."⁴ Elaine Showalter contrasts the male Victorian view of motherhood and writing as "incompatible" with a female Victorian vision of "the possibility of a life in which the domestic role enriched the art, and the art kept the domestic role spontaneous and meaningful" and presents Elizabeth Gaskell as her primary example of such a female writer: "Mrs. Gaskell," claims Showalter, "became the heroine of a new school of 'motherly fiction.'"⁵

¹ See Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 14–17, for an account of Gaskell's relationship with her stepmother.

² It was Gaskell's husband who suggested to his wife that writing a novel would help her recover from her son's death. See Gérin, 73–75; and Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 36.

³ Virginia Woolf, "Indiscretions" (1924), reprinted in Michèle Barrett, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 75.

⁴ Aina Rubenius, *The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), 209, 69.

⁵ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 69, 71; hereafter, page numbers cited in parentheses in text. See also Pauline Nestor, *Female Friendships*

While the comments of Woolf and Rubenius contain remnants of the Victorian idealization of motherhood, Showalter's remarks are more characteristic of a feminist viewpoint wary of validating an attitude so convenient to the patriarchy. Motherhood as an institution has been seen by many feminists as one of the insidious forms of patriarchy, though they have held up the mothering that women have performed for centuries as proof of women's contribution to human history and of their capacity for heroism. It has been difficult for feminism to embrace fully the figure of the mother as a role model, though she haunts feminist theory and scholarship much as she haunts the psyches of feminist daughters who carry a vague sense of disappointment that their mothers were not stronger, more supportive role models. Longing for a different kind of mother, such disappointed daughters often turn to the women of the past in a search for appropriate precursors. Women writers then come to play the part of literary mothers for feminist critics, although these quasi-familial connections do not escape the problems of actual mother-daughter relationships. These problems are particularly serious when the literary mother resembles the nonfeminist mother who failed to nurture her daughter in a manner compatible with feminist goals. The widespread feminist view of Gaskell as decisively contained and dominated by Victorian sexual ideology suggests Gaskell's similarity to this kind of mother and begins to explain why Gaskell would not have the same appeal for feminist critics as a Brontë or a George Eliot. Gaskell poses a challenge to feminist critics inasmuch as her emphasis on maternal nurturance recalls and evokes a daughter's memories of and beliefs about the mother; this challenge is further intensified by the vividness with which Gaskell's fiction presents the daughter's needs and desires, inviting the daughterly reader's identification and sympathy. Later in this essay I will examine the treatment of mothering in Gaskell's work. First, however, I will argue that the complicated interrelations of motherhood and daughterhood have shaped the way feminist critics analyze both the mother/daughter relationship and Gaskell's presentation of feminine nurturance.

Many critics have found Harold Bloom's paradigm of literary influence useful in understanding the psychodynamics of writers' relationships to literary tradition, though Bloom is concerned only with the Freudian implications of the father-son relationship. As Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence" makes clear, writers are always readers, and they misread their precursors in an effort to alleviate their anxiety over

and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Nestor stresses that for Gaskell "there is no love more sacred than that of a mother, no notion more totemic than motherhood" (43). Her equal treatment of Brontë, George Eliot, and Gaskell illustrates Gaskell's rising status in feminist criticism.

the originality and artistic greatness of their own work.⁶ Feminist critics have been particularly eager to appropriate the possibilities of Bloom's model of misreading as the mechanism through which writers reread the literary canon, including the work of earlier women writers. The major obstacle, however, to integrating Bloom's model into feminist criticism has been the obvious difference between the relatively clean rebellion of the son against the father and the ambivalent effort of the daughter to separate from the mother. According to critics working within this Freudian framework, the daughter may well misread the mother, but when she does so she seeks not only to differentiate herself from the mother but also to restore the lost primary tie with the mother. The aggressive misreading of the son is not available to the daughter, therefore, because for her separation must not involve the sacrifice of maternal nurturance. While an exploration of the daughter's "misreading" of a literary mother is essential to understanding the daughter's ambivalence toward her, the feminist critic who would use Bloom's paradigm must expand his sense of rebellion to include the contradictory desires of the daughter.⁷

Nancy Chodorow has identified the tendency of women to form their identities through their relationships as the chief characteristic of feminine gender identity.⁸ According to her theory, the daughter builds her identity upon her sense of similarity to the mother; as she matures, her continuing need for maternal nurturance discourages the daughter from seeing the mother as a separate person. This can lead to such intense fusion that daughters must invent ways to teach themselves that they are not and do not have to become their mothers.⁹ When the daughter is a

⁶ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss Bloom's model while constructing their own theoretical frame of the anxiety of female authorship in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). Annette Kolodny suggests that Bloom's paradigm "when applied to women, proves useful only in a negative sense" ("A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" [1980], reprinted in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter [New York: Pantheon, 1985], 46–62). Dianne F. Sadoff applies Bloom's theory to black American women writers in a useful essay that unearths the complexities of matrilineage for the black woman writer ("Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 1 [Autumn 1985]: 4–26).

⁸ See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁹ For discussion of the problematic nature of the daughter's identification with the mother, see Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 171–91, 181, and "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980); and Luise Eichenbaum and Susie

feminist and her mother does not share her beliefs, her ambivalence is charged with special conflicts. The desire to separate from the mother may be even stronger, for her mother's life cannot provide a model for her own life. But this separation is made even more perilous by feminism's ambivalence toward mothers and mothering. With its emphasis on female traditions and the search for female precursors to serve as role models, feminism has pointed to solidarity among women as a possible antidote to patriarchy. The recurrence of the theme of female friendships and communities in feminist scholarship suggests the power of the idea of female relationships not intersected by patriarchal figures or structures.¹⁰ Within this context, the mother-daughter relationship has taken on a new dimension. Cathy Davidson and E. M. Broner's *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* illustrates the value of the mother to daughters in search of an alternative to patriarchy; the editors define their project as reuniting mothers and daughters, who have been separated by patriarchal tradition.¹¹

But an investigation into the conditions of the lives of mothers can just as easily lead a daughter to want to distance herself from mothering, especially if those mothers look more like martyrs than like matriarchs. Since feminism has tended to treat motherhood as an institution, it is not just the mother herself but also the cultural norms leading to her martyrdom that need to be rejected. As Adrienne Rich claims, "Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted."¹² Yet Rich's *Of Woman Born* testifies to the need of the daughter also to understand the mother's oppression, as the book also represents the mother's need for a context for her own ordeal. The daughter is drawn into the dynamics of motherhood in patriarchal society as well as being repelled by them.

Orbach, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach* (New York: Basic, 1983). Though Flax and Eichenbaum and Orbach draw on the same object relations psychology that Chodorow uses, they see a somewhat darker picture than does Chodorow, as Flax explains: "Differentiation is a central issue for women because of the special character of the mother-daughter relationship. My work differs from Nancy Chodorow's on this point, since I believe that the development of women's core identity is threatened and impeded by an inability to differentiate from the mother" (22–23).

¹⁰ In addition to Nestor, see Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Janet Todd, *Women's Friendships in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1–29.

¹¹ Cathy Davidson and E. M. Broner, *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1980).

¹² Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976), 235.

Such ambivalence of daughters toward the mother is apparent in the treatment of motherhood and its attributes elsewhere in the feminist theory and criticism of the last fifteen years.¹³ The attempt to separate from the mother by rejecting her completely is reflected in works such as Nancy Friday's *My Mother, My Self* (1977), which illustrates the rage and sense of loss of the daughter who feels herself to have been limited by her mother's daughter-rearing, and Nina Auerbach's 1978 essay, "Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance." The anger and fear that fuels the daughter's attack on the mother is evident in Auerbach's characterization of motherhood as a "limitation to a common destiny," as opposed to the "more spacious, more adult, more inclusive" freedom and originality of artistic creation.¹⁴ The denigration of mothers and mothering is only one side, however, of this ambivalence. In another voice, feminist critics and psychologists have undertaken the rehabilitation of mothering and traditionally feminine values. Most famously, Chodorow's model of female development has laid the foundation for valuing a feminine relational identity. Carol Gilligan's work, for instance, extrapolates from Chodorow's model the moral power of connection, and other recent feminist theory abstracts from mothering behavior and attitudes a value system

¹³ In "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," Nancy Chodorow performs a review of feminist work on motherhood similar to the one I offer here. While on the whole we agree that the psychology of the daughter has skewed feminist theories of mothering, Chodorow tends to treat the daughter's feelings about the mother as less legitimate than I think they are. Chodorow seems to want feminist theory to distance itself from the "infantile fantasies" (90) of the daughter, implicitly devaluing subjective emotion in favor of a more rational outlook: "Fantasies and feelings inform but do not directly determine our thoughtful, analyzed political decisions and judgments. The feminist accounts of mothering we discussed do not take that step. They do not move beyond seeing personal experience (feeling) and political institution (patriarchy) as absolute" (94). My argument does not ask the daughter to move beyond her infantile fantasies as much as it suggests that those fantasies can actually be tapped in order to humanize the figure of the mother, as long as the daughter can see that the mother is a daughter too. Of course, I am discussing readings of literary texts, not psychological or social theory, and this may account for much of the difference in my emphasis. Chodorow also takes up the question of how feminist theory should view women without a feminist consciousness in "Seventies Questions for Thirties Women: Gender and Generation in a Study of Early Women Psychoanalysts," an admirably self-aware examination of how the researcher's "gender-consciousness" (200) affects the results of her research; see *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 79–96, 199–221. Two essays that deserve attention because they avoid the polarization of mothering are Joan C. Tronto, "Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, ed. Alison M. Jaggard and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 172–87; and Margaret A. Simons, "Motherhood, Feminism and Identity," in *Hypatia Reborn: Essays in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Azizah Y. Al-Hibri and Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 156–74.

¹⁴ Nina Auerbach, "Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance," *Women and Literature* 6 (1978): 3–15, 14; Nancy Friday, *My Mother, My Self* (New York: Delacorte, 1977).

seen as extending far beyond the boundaries of the mother-child relationship, and beyond the private to the public world.¹⁵ Usually the gritty and demanding world of the care of infants and children disappears in such formulations; “mothering” becomes a metaphor for a nurturing attitude toward other people that is not dependent on biological motherhood or even female sex. As a metaphor, mothering can be seen as a radical reshaping of human society, a revolutionary act. Such transformations of mothering are apparent in Sara Ruddick’s definition of “maternal thinking,” Gilligan’s description of an “ethic of care,” and Ruth Perry’s use of “the mothering of infants only as an informative analogy for mothering the mind.”¹⁶ It is my contention that such uses of mothering provide simultaneously an acceptance of mothers and motherhood and a distancing of the daughter from the too-intense identification with mothering as the bearing and nurture of children.¹⁷

The distancing of mothering and mothers by Ruddick and Perry fits the basic pattern of the daughter’s ambivalence. The daughter experiences her need for her mother, coupled with an intense fear of a too-close identification, as a desire to turn mothering into a positive experience of nurturance without the implications of traditional motherhood—what Perry calls the “smothering” devotion of the mother. Similarly, feminist critics express their ambivalence by utilizing a grown-up version of what Helene Deutsch has defined as the “best friend” syndrome of girlhood, through which the daughter attempts to split off the experience of merging, identification, and emotional need from the mother herself so that the girl may continue to be a daughter, but not the daughter of her mother.¹⁸ Like the girl who identifies with and intensely loves her best friend, the feminist critic adopts a literary woman of the past as a mother safely removed from her through the agency of time and death. This mother can do what her own mother may have failed to do: nurture the

¹⁵ See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 342–67, 346; Ruth Perry, “Introduction,” in *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners*, ed. Perry Brownley and Martine Watson Brownley (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984), 9–10, 3.

¹⁷ The mothering metaphor is invoked in a much less elaborate way by Dale Spender in the title of her survey of eighteenth-century women novelists who helped pave the way for Austen, *Mothers of the Novel* (New York: Pandora, 1986). Spender quite consciously chooses the term “mother” in opposition to “father,” since she wants to demonstrate a feminine parentage for the novel, but she does not argue that these women novelists are particularly motherly. Yet Spender could only enlist the term as an empowering image in a feminist climate that has at least begun to purge motherhood of its depowering aspects.

¹⁸ Chodorow summarizes Deutsch’s analysis in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 137–38.

daughter while, or rather by, encouraging autonomy. In this way, a literary woman who overcame the restrictions of her own time is reborn as the kind of mother for whom the feminist critic longs.

Most of these women were not themselves mothers because to be successful as writers they had to defy their society's conventions for female life. Auerbach's celebration of Jane Austen and George Eliot as women who created art instead of babies illustrates the daughter's eager substitution of an appropriate maternal figure who nurtures through the example of her life and work for a discomfiting vision of mother as selfless drudge. Virginia Woolf is frequently called into service in this capacity; like Austen and George Eliot, she was not a biological mother, but she continually demonstrated a concern for women and female solidarity. Woolf herself was the daughter of a quintessentially maternal woman, whom she loved but ultimately refused to emulate.

Not all literary women, however, are well suited for the role of literary mother. Only a woman who shows her daughter the path toward new opportunities, while giving her the confidence needed to seize them, can nurture the daughter without inhibiting her autonomy. Women writers whose lives illustrate the limitations of being a woman are much too close in spirit to a restricting mother to be embraced. Such literary mothers present almost as many problems for feminist daughters as their actual mothers may. Though they may not have been biological mothers themselves, such writers may still enthusiastically endorse marriage and motherhood as women's proper choices. These women may be blamed or pitied by contemporary feminists, but these daughters stress the historical conditions that separate the two—even though the same conditions may be seen as irrelevant in the case of the woman writer utilized as a feminist prototype. The mother who fails to nurture her daughter's autonomy remains buried in history, where she cannot threaten her daughter's future, while the other mother is easily transmogrified into a timeless archetype that can be called upon at will by the daughter.

Many nineteenth-century women writers who did not enlarge the world for daughters because they accepted their society's most fundamental ideas about women are passed over when female literary history is written. Gaskell, known until just recently as Mrs. Gaskell, has fallen victim to this predicament.¹⁹ David Cecil's 1935 testimonial points to

¹⁹ Though passed over by feminist critics intent on discovering a female tradition, Gaskell has not been ignored by twentieth-century criticism in general. Among the considerations of her work (besides those mentioned elsewhere in this article) are Edgar Wright, *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (London: Paul Elek, 1975); Monica C. Fryckstedt, *Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton" and "Ruth": A Challenge to Christian England* (Stockholm: Alinquist & Wiksell, 1982). These critics may consider Gaskell's position and interests as a woman, but they do not make female

those very aspects of Gaskell's reputation that have repelled feminist critics: "In an age whose ideal of women emphasized the feminine qualities at the expense of all others, she was all a woman was expected to be: gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction."²⁰ While the terms of Cecil's approval are bound to irritate the modern feminist, she still may be persuaded that Gaskell accepted with "serene satisfaction" the limits imposed on her. These limits are for Cecil the distinguishing mark of Gaskell's femininity, judging by his insistent references to narrowness, confinement, and limitation: "Gladly forgetful of weakness and imperfection, we linger for hours in the lavender-scented atmosphere of her quiet, artless, narrow world. For it is a narrow world. Mrs. Gaskell's sex and circumstances limited her range of subjects as they limited her range of mood. Confined as she was to her Victorian drawing-room, there was a great deal of the world that she could not see, a great deal highly characteristic of it; and a great deal that Dickens and Thackeray and the rest of them saw clearly" (194). Even a "resisting" feminist reader is hard put to avoid seeing in Cecil's description the dreaded face of the constricting mother.

Striking evidence of feminist criticism's inability to incorporate Elizabeth Gaskell into the story it tells about women, submission, and resistance is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's virtual silence in their otherwise encyclopedic *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The critics make four mentions of "Mrs." Gaskell and one brief reference to Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, each only in relation to another woman writer treated more extensively by the book. More explicit is Judith Lowder Newton's 1981 dismissal of Gaskell, whom she claims "celebrates the ideology of woman's sphere" and "presents us with a version of woman's sphere which sees it as natural and as given."²¹ As a feminist critic looking for resistance in women writers, Newton cannot forgive this particular woman writer for her apparent naiveté and contentment, as she shows in this

identity and experience the basis of their analytic frameworks. See Hilary Schor, "Elizabeth Gaskell: A Critical History and a Critical Revision," *Dickens Studies Annual* 19 (1990): 345–69, for an excellent overview of the state of Gaskell criticism. As for Gaskell's being referred to as "Mrs. Gaskell," even two of the most important texts of the "new wave" of feminist criticism that broke in the late 1970s, Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, maintain the longstanding tradition.

²⁰ David Cecil, *Victorian Novelists: Essays in Reevaluation* (1935; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 184; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

²¹ Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 164; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

criticism of *North and South*: “Gaskell gently insists that the domestic sphere is larger than we ever dreamed. It is large enough, in fact, to encompass most of the major currents and difficulties of industrial capitalist society, permitting Gaskell’s heroine to discuss class struggle over tea and to avert a working-class riot while running an errand. And Margaret’s power, even her power over riotous working-class men, is allowed to stand without apology or disguise, for all is done in the name of self-sacrificing influence” (164). Newton characterizes as absurd the contrast between the grand presumptions of Margaret’s aspirations—ending class struggle, calming a mob—and the reputedly insignificant tasks of her life, the domestic angel’s mandate to make tea and run errands. She fails to mention that the errand which brings Margaret to her confrontation with the striking workers is fetching a mattress meant to alleviate her dying mother’s suffering. For Gaskell, Margaret’s impulse to prevent violence grows out of the same compassionate nature that compels her to seek her mother’s relief from pain. Against Gaskell’s claims for the expansiveness of the domestic sphere, however, Newton asserts her own belief in its unbearable littleness. Her tone is worlds apart from Cecil’s, yet they both speak about the same aspect of Gaskell’s fiction: its supposed acceptance of the traditional scope of women’s interests.

Gilbert and Gubar’s indifference and Newton’s dissatisfaction both point to Gaskell’s failure to be the kind of mother that a feminist critic could love. Françoise Basch and Elaine Showalter, however, offer analyses of Gaskell that demonstrate an attempt by the daughter to understand the mother. Although Basch does see some of Gaskell’s characters illustrating “the worship of the wife-mother,” she sees Gaskell herself as a type of the Victorian woman of letters continually torn by the competing demands of home and art.²² Gaskell’s literary ambitions make her more than a household drudge to Basch, who asks rhetorically, “Can anyone conceive people of the calibre of Sarah Austin, Elizabeth Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell and Mary Howitt being wives and mothers only?” (45). While Basch concedes that Gaskell’s entire life “denied the incompatibility between the life of the artist and that of a mother of a family” (45), her tone above suggests a clear ranking: Gaskell’s “calibre” marks her as more than a wife and mother “only.” Showalter similarly emphasizes Gaskell’s melding of the two aspects of her lives, placing Gaskell within her category of feminine novelists who “felt a sincere wish to integrate and harmonize the responsibilities of their personal and professional lives” (61). Yet Showalter’s analysis is preoccupied with the strategies women developed to soothe male alarm and outrage at the new

²² Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 66; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

professionalism and financial success of this generation of women writers (57). Though she acknowledges that most feminine novelists “genuinely enjoyed” their domesticity, she also emphasizes the ways that they “flaunted” domesticity for the benefit of male and female eyes (66). Showalter’s analysis is persuasive, yet it reveals an unease with the domestic concerns of the feminine novelists that suggests Showalter’s own desire to credit these women with more power (albeit covert) than they themselves would have acknowledged. Both Basch and Showalter seem genuinely puzzled by Gaskell’s continued allegiance to some of the most restricting codes with which Victorian women were faced, though they are unwilling to write off this literary woman as a mere pawn of patriarchy.

Patricia Meyer Spacks’s 1972 essay, “Taking Care: Some Women Novelists,” foreshadows more recent attempts by feminist critics to rescue Gaskell’s fiction. Though Spacks sees Gaskell as subscribing to the Victorian view of marriage as woman’s occupation, she also attributes to Gaskell’s work a “distinct feminine consciousness of the cost of happy marriage with its focus on ‘taking care.’”²³ Her reading of *Wives and Daughters* remains fairly well balanced between these two positions until it draws conclusions about the degree of Gaskell’s resistance to her society’s norms; then she shows her eagerness to bring Gaskell into the modern feminist fold. On Molly’s eventual marriage to Roger Hamley, Spacks writes that “it is perhaps the triumph of the novel that one wonders about this marriage as the reward for Molly’s virtue” (40). The pronoun is deliberately impersonal; Spacks wants to suggest that somehow Gaskell is skeptical of this marriage, but there is little or no evidence in the novel that Gaskell is consciously undercutting her “happy ending”; Spacks’s own belief about this marriage is couched in words that try to suggest that Spacks (as the feminist reader) and Gaskell are of one mind. Her final paragraph on the novel also hints at a feminist skepticism on Gaskell’s part: “Despite the romanticism of her plot, Mrs. Gaskell has managed to pursue a searching investigation of the feminine situation. It is not at all apparent what the answers are to the dilemmas she reveals. Her model young woman, like the model young women in other novels, occupies herself by ‘taking care’ of others and wishes only for something of her own to take care of; but we are enabled to ask whether this must be all there is, whether it is in any sense enough” (41). The pressure to redeem Gaskell as a feminist pushes Spacks into the use of language which obscures agency and responsibility. All she can say of the novel is that because of it “we are enabled to ask whether this must be all there

²³ Patricia Meyer Spacks, “Taking Care: Some Women Novelists,” *Novel 6* (1972): 36–51, 36; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

is"; the novel does not necessarily ask this question, nor does it even direct us to ask it. Certainly, Spacks makes no claim that Gaskell herself asked it. Although Spacks accurately identifies "taking care" as an important female consideration for Gaskell, her claim that Gaskell pursues "a searching investigation of the feminine situation" overstates Gaskell's transcendence of Victorian gender problems.

Two recent treatments of Gaskell, Margaret Homans's *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* and Patsy Stoneman's *Elizabeth Gaskell*, have gone even further by trying to rehabilitate Elizabeth Gaskell as a new kind of mother. "Writing as a mother" would be an entirely appropriate subtitle for either study. Despite their strikingly different critical orientations and readings of Gaskell's fiction, both critics call attention to motherhood as the secret spring of Gaskell's work. It is clear from what Homans and Stoneman directly acknowledge, and from what they inadvertently give away, that their interest in Gaskell arises as much from a desire to re-evaluate the place of the mother in culture and feminist criticism as from an appreciation of Elizabeth Gaskell the writer. While both of these studies give Gaskell the serious attention she deserves by trying to elucidate the delicate balance between resistance and restriction that seems to characterize her life and fiction, they are also skewed by the pressure to rescue Gaskell's work from feminist oblivion, which they assume can only be done by demonstrating that Gaskell is indeed a feminist prototype. While providing insightful readings of her work that open up new ground for Gaskell criticism, they also repress some central elements of Gaskell's perspective on women and feminine roles.

Homans claims that "to look at development and the acquisition of language and culture, if not from the daughter's perspective, at least from the child's, is the bias of almost all psychological and psycholinguistic writing"; she tries to correct this bias by asking the question, "What if the writer is herself a mother?"²⁴ The woman who receives the prominence of the book's ending chapters is none other than Elizabeth Gaskell, because in Homans's view she "comes the closest (to risk a melioristic phrasing) to Woolf's sense of the possibility and desirability of articulating a nonsymbolic mother-daughter language" (21). Homans sees the daughter's attachment to the mother as a positive alternative to the daughter's entrance into the symbolic order, the world of her father. Although Homans suggests that the initial turn to the father results from the daughter's need to escape closeness with the mother, once she has set up the opposition of male and female modes of language, this mother-

²⁴ Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

daughter bond is idealized as resistant to the imperatives of masculine culture and language—an idealization as shrewdly political as it is personally nostalgic for the perfect unity of infancy. To Homans, mothers and daughters are natural allies because they are similarly suppressed and silenced by the symbolic order. But like other feminist theorists attempting to reclaim motherhood as a positive experience for women, Homans is less interested in actual mother-child relations than in motherhood as the ideological grounding for an attack on patriarchy. Homans tells a version of the story of women's resistance to masculine culture that has so preoccupied feminist criticism, except that her tale is fleshed out by attention to the mother's perspective. Indeed, it is only by foregrounding this perspective that Homans can fit Gaskell into the plot at all. Ultimately, however, Homans cannot sustain the integrity of her analysis because the daughter's perspective keeps reasserting itself against the perspective of the mother. The needs of the daughter, in this case the disappointed feminist critic herself, impinge upon the analysis. Homans concludes that Gaskell fails to achieve true "motherly" writing and thus "is prevented from writing a myth of the writer as mother" (38).

Yet the criterion with which Homans judges Gaskell's writing is itself the standard of the daughter who defines herself against the mother: Homans prefers a Romantic ethos over what she interprets as a traditionally feminine, selfless, literary methodology. She argues that women writers were relegated to "passive, womanly transmission," while "original symbolic creation," which was most often the product of a strong ego defining itself by separation, remained the province of male writers. According to Homans, women such as Gaskell accepted these gender boundaries because the pressures of masculine culture made it "incumbent upon women writers to convert the writing that they nevertheless felt driven to do into a version of these female duties of selfless transmission" (31). Homans herself clearly favors the more self-absorbed tendency of Romantic literature over Gaskell's "selfless" literary method, asserting that because she allows "her text to be a conduit for maxims, laws, and biblical quotations, Gaskell at once yields to the paternal order's requirements and finds a strategy for reconciling motherhood and writing, albeit a minimal sort of writing" (169). The notion that the use of other people's ideas and expressions is a "minimal sort of writing" is surely a Romantic assumption. Homans betrays this bias while analyzing a Gaskell letter that contains the image of the writer as electric telegraph and closes "with the suggestion that she is trying to recall a tag phrase or quotation." "Even in her advice," Homans claims, "she is passing on or reporting someone else's idea, not speaking her own heartfelt feeling" (172). The structure of the sentence sets up the conclusion that to pass on or report is not to speak one's own feeling. Homans's literary preference

places her in a difficult position because it devalues the relational psychology that Chodorow's work points to as a distinctive strength in women's psychology and upon which Homans's own emphasis on mother-daughter bonding depends. The critic ultimately appears to want Gaskell to present her celebration of the "literal" (and therefore, according to Homans, "feminine") in a more masculine way.

Patsy Stoneman's feminist revision of Elizabeth Gaskell begins by invoking Jean Bethke Elshtain's call for "a feminist commitment to a mode of public discourse imbedded within the values and ways of seeing that comprise what Sara Ruddick has called 'maternal thinking.'"²⁵ Positioning her book as part of that feminist commitment, Stoneman argues that "Elizabeth Gaskell wrote as a wife and mother" (19). A major part of Stoneman's agenda, in fact, consists of proving that writing as a wife and mother can be the act of a good feminist. The reader is alerted to her personal interest in this agenda by an aside in the first chapter: "If accommodation to patriarchal structures always and only signalled acquiescence in one's own oppression, I should not be writing this book in the house where I live, happily, with my mother and father, my husband and my daughters" (19). This vision of almost unbelievable family harmony across generational lines, set against the backdrop of feminist commitment, is Stoneman's introduction of sorts to her argument that "everywhere in Elizabeth Gaskell's work the maternal instinct flourishes, inside and outside marriage, with and without biological ties" (49). Like Homans, however, Stoneman wants to put Gaskell's maternal instinct within a context of resistance; she speaks of Gaskell's "dissent from the institutions of patriarchy—the law in society and the father in the family" (14).

Stoneman's strongest claim for Gaskell's supposed radicalism is related to the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres: "To the Gaskells, who saw reason and love as equally necessary for humanity, the doctrine of 'separate spheres,' which assigned reason to men and love to women, was a denial of full humanity to both. This harmful ideology is attacked in all Elizabeth's work" (64). Thus Gaskell the good wife is hereby allowed to coexist with Gaskell the good feminist, because William Gaskell is seen not as a vile patriarch but as a co-conspirator with his feminist wife. This approach allows Stoneman to vindicate Gaskell's loyalty to husband and family without disqualifying her from feminist consideration. It is a fruitful approach, insofar as Stoneman generally does do justice to both Gaskell's conservatism—her unyielding allegiance to the "feminine" values of compassion and caring, especially as they are practiced in the

²⁵ Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 20; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

family—and her progressivism—her challenges to hierarchical systems that betray the spirit of caring. But like Spacks and Homans, she has to strain too hard to make Gaskell a feminist prototype. This is particularly the case in her assertion that all of Gaskell's work attacks the doctrine of separate spheres and that "Gaskell returns so often to the abuse of authority that her work as a whole does constitute a challenge to patriarchy itself, which confers on one set of people the right to command, and on another the duty to obey" (57). Such sweeping claims, while identifying aspects of Gaskell's work that are amenable to a modern feminist point of view, also cover over a great deal of what is disturbing in her fiction.

Uncovering what is disturbing for feminists in Gaskell's work means articulating its tension between an idealization of mothering behavior and a poignant, albeit muted, awareness of the high costs to women of such behavior. I propose to do this in what follows by reading Gaskell through the double perspectives of the daughter's and mother's needs. My reading, like those of Spacks, Homans, and Stoneman, is the reading of a daughter, and hence motivated by the same needs and desires; like them, I seek reconciliation with the mother and with a whole history of mothering. But the reading of a daughter need not impose on the mother idealized expectations for nurturance, if the daughter can separate far enough from the mother to perceive the mother's own daughterly needs for nurturance. Rather than making claims for Gaskell's triumph over Victorian sexual ideology and the social restrictions it imposed, I want to sound the depths of Gaskell's dependence on traditional notions of maternal femininity in order to mark the point at which the need for nurturance overwhelms even the most conscientious and loving mother—in other words, when the mother needs to become a daughter again. I do not wish to mythologize the figure of the mother into a heroic or sacrificial type, for that strategy simply leads back to the daughter's inability to make sense of the mother's life and to bestow on her mother the same subjectivity that she grants herself.

Avoiding such mythologizing is especially crucial when trying to understand Elizabeth Gaskell precisely because motherhood is such an important concept in her fiction. Gaskell viewed the maternal as a social rather than biological category; although her typical heroine is not yet a wife or mother, she practices caring for a wide social range of neighbors, friends, suitors. The few who do become biological mothers must still cultivate the qualities that define the "mother." Gaskell's social and literary context seems to have influenced her depiction of motherhood as much as did her own experience as a mother. Like many middle-class British women, she grounded the solution to the suffering wrought by industrial capitalism in an ideal of personal relationships rather than in political or economic programs. According to the Victorians, women

were central to this ideal because they possessed the interpersonal skills and emotional orientation necessary to transform a capitalist society into a humane community. Not coincidentally, these were the same “feminine” qualities considered vital to motherhood: self-sacrifice, compassion for the weak and powerless, a tireless attention to the needs of others. While such a view often led to the romanticization of women, as in Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” and John Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens,” Gaskell (in common with George Eliot and other Victorian novelists) practiced literary realism, writing social problem novels (*Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Ruth*) and domestic novels (*Cranford*, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, *Wives and Daughters*) that aimed at accurate depictions of social reality. Thus even if she had wanted to create “Angel in the House” madonnas who never resent the demands on them, she could not have done so without breaking her own literary codes. Yet the species of realism that Gaskell practiced repressed the inner suffering of the mothering woman nearly as much as did the romantic mode, because it located reality in the social world and situated women in that world as mothers and nurturers. We might say that Gaskell was caught between the realist mode she adopted and her own impulses to present the inner reality of the mothering woman, a project that could only come to fruition in the twentieth-century psychological novel.²⁶

There is, however, a subtle movement in her career toward a fuller portrayal of the nurturing woman’s feelings and emotional vulnerabilities. We can see this progression in the shading of the heroines’ crises in *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*; these novels focus on heroines who suffer serious illnesses resulting from the intense strain of shouldering the burden of mothering. Significantly, their own mothers—dead, focused on sons, or dangerously inadequate—are not available to share this burden. The mothering performed in the novels by these unmarried young women consists of subordinating their own needs while trying to bring into harmony the competing claims of different people and relationships. In *Mary Barton*, this means the heroine’s trying to clear her lover, Jem, from murder charges without casting suspicion on the real murderer, her father. This practical and moral dilemma nearly overwhelms her, but as everything seems to depend upon her staying strong, she “resolutely made up her mind to husband her physical

²⁶ For excellent studies that explore Gaskell’s role as a social novelist and her use of the social novel form, see Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Rosemarie Bodenheimer, “Private Grievances and Public Acts in *Mary Barton*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 9 (1981): 195–216, and *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, *Felix Holt*,” *Novel* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 126–44.

strength.”²⁷ The narrator continually asserts the importance of Mary’s physical strength, though the sources of Mary’s anxiety and fatigue are mainly emotional: the fear for Jem’s life, the worry that her father might have to be implicated in order to free Jem, her own feeling of partial responsibility. It is typical of Gaskell that the emotional turmoil of her female characters expresses itself through their bodies.

By the time Mary faces a true physical crisis, she is so worn out with fatigue and worry that she barely is able to flag down the ship that carries the crucial witness out of England. Once his return is assured, she becomes nearly catatonic, following the boatman who takes charge of her “with the unquestioning docility of a little child” (362). Mary rouses herself only long enough to testify for Jem, but her testimony does him little good, and she retreats into “the ghastly spectral world of delirium” (401) once the essential witness appears in court. Her physical recovery is repeatedly described by the narrator as a literal rebirth, a reenactment of infancy: “Her mind was in the tender state of a lately-born infant’s” (415). Even her physical resemblance to a baby is stressed: “She smiled gently, as a baby does when it sees its mother tending its little cot” (416). And later, when her father dies, Mary again regresses to complete dependency: “She did not ask or care to know what arrangements they were making in whispered tones with regard to the funeral. She put herself into their hands with the trust of a little child; glad to be undisturbed in the reveries and remembrances which filled her eyes with tears, and caused them to fall quietly down her pale cheeks” (443). Once Mary recovers, however, she resumes her motherly duties, which increase rather than diminish with the birth of a son and the move to Canada with Jem and his mother. The “little child” Mary had reverted into disappears, replaced by a real baby and an elderly (and cranky) mother-in-law.

Margaret Hale, the heroine of *North and South*, is also tried by the necessity of filling disparate needs. First Margaret has to tend to her dying mother, whom she tries to please by sending for her outlaw brother; in trying to protect this brother, she is forced to break her own ethical code—a bitter sacrifice she must make in the name of family love. After her mother’s death, Margaret cares for her despairing father and continues to protect her brother; her father’s death precipitates the complete collapse which she has been fighting throughout the novel. Margaret ignores her own health and emotional well-being despite a yearning to (in her own words) “give way.” When she realizes that the man she loves thinks she has a lover, for instance, she sees her whole life pass

²⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 302; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

before her as one long series of “cares and sorrows” without any of the personal fulfillment she expects that marriage would provide:

“Oh, how unhappy this last year has been! I have passed out of childhood into old age. I have had no youth—no womanhood; the hopes of womanhood have closed for me—for I shall never marry; and I anticipate cares and sorrows just as if I were an old woman, and with the same fearful spirit. I am weary of this continual call upon me for strength. I could bear up for papa; because that is a natural, pious duty. . . . What has happened to make me so morbid to-day? I do not know. I only know I cannot help it. I must give way sometimes. No, I will not though,” said she, springing to her feet. “I will not—I *will* not think of myself and my own position.”²⁸

True to her vow, Margaret does not give way. Later, when her father leaves to visit a friend at Oxford, Margaret suddenly feels freed to think of herself:

When her father had driven off on his way to the railroad, Margaret felt how great and long had been the pressure on her time and her spirits. It was astonishing, almost stunning, to feel herself so much at liberty; no one depending on her for cheering care, if not for positive happiness; no invalid to plan and think for; she might be idle, and silent, and forgetful,—and what seemed worth more than all the other privileges—she might be unhappy if she liked. For months past all her own personal cares and troubles had had to be stuffed away into a dark cupboard. [425]

The narration of Margaret’s thought process is more complex and sophisticated than that of Mary Barton’s and so too are the reasons given for Margaret’s eventual breakdown. While Mary’s trials are focused sharply on Jem’s predicament and the physical steps she must take to save him, Margaret’s decline is summed up in the horrifying image of her personal life “stuffed away in a dark cupboard.” The pressure that weighs on her most is the necessity of being cheerful, and her most poignant desire is the wish to “be unhappy if she liked.” Still, Margaret’s breakdown is expressed in physical terms; when her father dies, Margaret falls into “a state of prostration”; her father’s friend Mr. Bell dares not even ask her to return to Oxford with him because “her physical exhaustion was evidently too complete for her to undertake any such fatigue” (436).

²⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 401; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

Retreating into a passive, childlike state heals Margaret as it had healed Mary, and Margaret also returns to her motherly role renewed. What is new in *North and South* is that Margaret seems to have developed an appreciation for solitude and self-absorption as necessary for the maintenance of her strength. She is still the caring woman at the novel's end that she has been throughout, but now she knows what she needs to sustain her own resources. This realization comes so late in the novel, however, that we do not know how (or if) she will put this newfound wisdom into practice.

In Gaskell's last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, the portrayal of Molly Gibson's breakdown suggests that Gaskell had moved away from preoccupation with motherly heroines who feel constantly under stress and toward a heroine whose breakdown is more strategic than emotional. Molly is at once more capable and more self-protective than either Mary or Margaret. She finds herself just as torn by divergent needs and just as crucial to the peace and emotional health of her community, but Molly is protected by a certain inwardness that provides the restorative solitude Gaskell's other heroines crave. She serves as a kind of guardian angel to the Hamley family while also managing to save her stepsister from scandal and serving as a nurse for her doctor father. Molly, however, rarely experiences the fatigue and anguish of the earlier Gaskell heroines. Her breakdown is used by the novel as an implicit criticism of all those who have benefited from Molly's caring without giving her sufficient credit, especially Mr. Hamley and her father, who tells his wife, "She will need much care. She has been overworked, and I've been a fool"; the title of the chapter in which Molly gets sick, "Molly Gibson's Worth is Discovered," suggests that Molly has previously been unappreciated.²⁹ But Gaskell's acumen in using Molly's illness to critique the exploitation of mothering women is undermined by Gaskell's own exploitation of Molly's breakdown for formal purposes and for its positive function in the world of the novel. The process of breakdown in all three novels is especially troubling in that it proves so fortuitous for the women and their communities, as well as for the novelist herself, who relies on the breakdowns to speed the resolutions of these novels. Of course, the impulse to relieve the heroines of their responsibilities by removing them from the ongoing workings of the plot might be seen as a motherly act; in this scenario, the author mothers the heroine by letting her have the rest and solitude the characters of the novel will not grant her. But if the mother's only power to nurture her daughter lies in rendering her feeble or delirious, then her resources must be small indeed. Furthermore, if

²⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 637; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

women end by benefiting from their breakdowns, there is little motive for anyone to give women the rest and solitude they need to prevent them.

The pattern of these three novels does not, however, hold true for *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell's novels about women who actually become biological mothers in the course of the fiction.³⁰ In these novels, biological motherhood is not presented as simply an expansion of nurturant femininity; the heroines become mothers outside the context of a happy marriage. Ruth and Sylvia do suffer breakdowns, not because they exhaust themselves in caring for others while repressing their own needs but because of the trauma of disappointed love, before either young woman has learned to be a nurturing mother to her social world. Because Ruth and Sylvia have not previously taken on nurturing roles, their depressions are not presented as rejuvenating lapses into childlike dependency but as even deeper immersions in self-absorption. Motherhood is shown to bring them out of themselves and into the unselfish duties of maternal care; a reader might see it as punishment except that the women treat their babies as newfound reasons to live, not as additional burdens. Ruth discovers her pregnancy as she begins to recover from the illness brought on by her despair, and she and her protectors agree that her illegitimate child will be her emotional and religious salvation. Motherhood reconciles Sylvia to her unhappy marriage to her cousin; the joy she feels in her child compensates her for a loveless marriage, the novel claims.

Love for their children leads both women to their eventual embrace of the feminine ethic of maternal care, even with its negative connotations of self-sacrifice and sometimes self-destruction; it is their full surrender to this ethic that finally redeems Ruth and Sylvia from their self-absorption. The narrator of *Ruth* asserts that Ruth's love for her son was constantly leading her to God (and his Law), and Sylvia's child is the means of bringing her to forgive her husband, who saves the child from drowning. Their pure love for their innocent children reconciles these mothers to the harsher demands of feminine nurturance. Children therefore serve both as blessings and as instruments to enforce the standard of maternal vigilance. For whenever mothers of children in Gaskell's fiction long to "give way," they are called back to their maternal responsibilities either by their own consciences or by maternal love. While the childless heroines are allowed to break down, the biological mothers are forced back to consciousness and duty.

This is illustrated by similar scenes that occur in both *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Wives and Daughters*: the doctor's use of the baby to revive the

³⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

fading mother. In *Sylvia's Lovers* the doctor attending Sylvia's dying mother worries about Sylvia's lack of a response. In desperation he cries out to the nursemaid to bring the baby: "He watched the mother's eye, it followed her child, and he was rejoiced. He gave a little pinch to the baby's soft flesh, and she cried out piteously; again the same action, the same result. Sylvia laid her mother down, and stretched out her arms for her child, hushing it, and moaning over it. 'So far so good!' said Dr. Morgan to himself."³¹ The doctor's satisfaction comes from seeing that Sylvia responds "correctly" to her baby's pain; she must therefore be in her right mind. Though he means well, the doctor's strategy is in fact cruel; the daughter is not allowed to grieve for the dying mother who lies in her arms before patriarchal authority pushes her own child into those arms, insisting that the love of a mother never waver. The author's attitude toward the doctor's method is not clear. Gaskell certainly would have agreed that a mother, even in the depths of grief and despair, must always be ready to give to her child, but as usual Gaskell seems to have some feeling for the daughter too. Like Margaret Hale, Sylvia might well protest that she wants only the privilege of being unhappy for a while. In *Wives and Daughters*, the grieving widow of Osborne Hamley is similarly brought round (though she later falls ill) by the doctor who purposely provokes her baby to cry: "His eyes were on the figure upon the bed, which at that sound quivered all through; and when her child was laid at her back, and began caressingly to scramble yet closer, Aimée turned round, and took him in her arms, and lulled him and soothed him with the soft wont of mother's love" (632). Aimée's quiver, the sign of a mother's love, may also be a shudder. Since she cannot refuse her child, the rest she needs so badly must be postponed.

Though Gaskell does not openly undercut the idealization of "the soft wont of mother's love," she knows that a mother's energy is not infinite and that children may sometimes be felt as a burden. When Aimée tells her servant that "a woman is never tired with carrying her own child," the narrator comments that this "was not true; but there was sufficient truth in it to make it believed by both mistress and servant" (625). The narrative voice here wants to acknowledge Aimée's heroism in carrying the child herself, but without making it seem an unpleasant duty for the mother. But a few pages later, the Hamleys' butler announces Aimée's arrival, saying, "She looks but a weakly thing, and has carried a big baby." The narrator's description similarly emphasizes both Aimée's slightness and her child's bulk: "Right into the midst of them came the little figure in grey, looking ready to fall with the weight of her child" (627). In this statement we can hear the muted voice of the mother

³¹ Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers*, 394.

weighted down with the cares of mothering but unwilling or unable to refuse them. Gaskell's poignant images of crying babies nuzzling up to their weary mothers vividly demonstrate the inability of the biological mother to separate herself from her child and suggest one possible explanation for Gaskell's choice, in three of her novels, of childless heroines for whom mothering can be a moral and social act of will. Although Gaskell accepts the Victorian idealization of motherhood, in her fiction the women who are not biological mothers can more easily let go of their mothering duties in order to get the rest and nurturance they need themselves. The sanctification of the mother-child bond in the novels requires sacrifices and responsibilities which the childless heroines experience as oppressive but about which the mothers of children cannot even complain.

This distinction between biological and social mothering is given its strongest expression in *Cranford*, Gaskell's vision of a community of social mothers who do not become depleted because their lack of family and marital obligations allows them to mother each other. Children and husbands are conspicuously absent from Cranford. Marriage is dreaded by the women, though the fear of marriage is presented comically and men are welcome as long as they provide support rather than require it; as Miss Matty says, "a man has a sort of knowledge of what should be done in difficulties, that it is very pleasant to have one at hand ready to lean upon."³² For the most part, however, the women of Cranford rely upon each other rather than upon men, and the smoothness of their small world is testimony to their mutual caring. The heroic mothering woman does appear briefly in the guise of Miss Jessie, who patiently nurses her terminally ill sister. At their father's death, Miss Jessie almost breaks down: "She longed, poor thing! I have no doubt, to cry alone over the grave of the dear father to whom she had been all in all: and to give way, for one little half-hour, uninterrupted by sympathy, and unobserved by friendship. But it was not to be" (57). Her sister's death frees her to marry and bear a child to the former suitor whom she had earlier rejected so she could care for her ailing sister, but her marriage takes her out of Cranford and the story. There is a child born during the novel, the offspring of Miss Matty's maid, Martha, but the narrative interest lies not in Martha's predicament as a mother but rather in the consequences to Miss Matty and the narrator herself, who must stay in Cranford to care for the elderly Miss Matty while Martha recovers from childbirth. The light, witty tone of the story and the characterization of Cranford as an insular, static circle of elderly spinsters and childless widows help to

³² Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (1851–53; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 180; page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses in text.

distance our interest in the predicaments of other wives and mothers who occasionally stray into the story, like the truly tragic wife of Samuel Brown. Although some readers and critics have called *Cranford* Gaskell's finest work, many others have been bothered by the radical differences in tone, mood, and focus between *Cranford* and most of Gaskell's full-length novels. Her reluctance to disturb the smooth texture of *Cranford*'s social life with the demanding realities of mothering is one of these significant differences, though this avoidance may be a product of Gaskell's attempt to accentuate the positive effects of mothering as a social ethic.

Gaskell never wrote a novel that would have represented her own life, one that embraced biological mothering as the natural complement of a mothering ethic. Yet her letters shed light on her attitudes toward her own mothering and on her preoccupation with "strength." In response to the letter of an aspiring woman writer, Gaskell gives household hints that will help the woman conserve her physical and emotional strength, so that she will have the energy both to write and to care for her family.³³ In letter after letter Gaskell recounts her own efforts to rejuvenate herself from bouts of illness and fatigue. Occasionally, she breaks down: "I broke down in Paris, & for the last fortnight could not leave the house till the day I came here. I am not strong and not able to see any one."³⁴ When Gaskell actually speaks of the sources of her fatigue, she emphasizes not physical burdens but rather the social and emotional work of the mothering heroine, which she performed in her roles as the wife of a minister and the mother of four girls. She frequently complains of the social duties that take much of her time and attention: "I know so well what it is to have a great many people coming *en masse*, dependent on you for a certain amount of amusement and help, and coming in & going out, and talking, and requiring an amount of civility and exertion that almost breaks you down" (*Letters*, 714).

Gaskell will not repudiate the work of a hostess but writhes under the obligations it imposes: "I am *very* fond of all the people who are coming; but so worn-out that it is hard word [*sic*] to lash myself up into properly hospitable feelings. Marianne said yesterday, 'Oh! are not you tired of being agreeable! I do so want leisure to sulk and be silent in'; and really after long hard hot days . . . one *does* want 'to sulk & be silent' in the evenings" (*Letters*, 476). Gaskell also feels deprived by the time and energy that her own daughters require: "I find it difficult to get even an

³³ Gaskell (1862), published as "A Letter of Advice," in *London Magazine* 1 (1954): 73–75.

³⁴ "To George Smith" (1865), *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 751; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

uninterrupted 5 minutes, now we have all four daughters at home; for I like to keep myself in readiness to give them sympathy or advice at any moment; and consequently I do not do as I am often tempted to do, shut myself up secure from interruption in any room" (*Letters*, 640). Frustration at being continually interrupted emerges as an important source of Gaskell's "fatigue." When she has occasion to experience complete solitude, Gaskell appreciates its value: "I am so much better for Knutsford—partly air, partly quiet and partly being by myself a good piece of every day which is I am sure so essential to my health that I am going to persevere and enforce it here. . . . She—Susanna—has sent over to-day to ask if she may sit with me, but I, possessed with my love of solitude—or rather, my sense of its *necessity*, savagely declined" (*Letters*, 168). On one level, of course, Gaskell's association of solitude with "health" is appropriate, since we know that mental health can well influence physical health. But Gaskell is also using her physical health to justify her own pleasure in solitude.³⁵ As long as she sees solitude as making her stronger, she can use mothering as the reason she needs to be allowed a temporary release from it. In the terms of Gilligan's theory of feminine morality, Gaskell is acknowledging how her own needs (for restorative solitude) and the needs of others (her family) are interdependent. The problem here is that the mothering woman feels she has to formulate her needs so that they fit the mothering ethic, which itself allows of little compromise or alteration.

Yet Gaskell's unexpected death at the age of fifty-five, of heart failure, forces us at least to entertain the possibility that her worries about her health were not simply excuses for her to secure the solitude she desired. Gaskell's biographer Winifred Gérin describes her death as Gaskell's family portrayed it, the quiet, gentle death of a woman at peace, but behind the quiet of her death lay, as Gérin admits, "a year of stress and illness and worry."³⁶ And behind that lay years of frantically trying to balance her needs with those of others, of refusing to give up the search

³⁵ Arlie Hochschild's recent study of working parents has suggested that women who embrace traditional ideas of femininity but are frustrated by their inability to fulfill domestic roles and assume some economic responsibility may use sickness as a way of getting their husbands to help: "Traditional women . . . seem to get sick more often than egalitarian women. And when they are sick, it follows a certain pattern. Insisting that every task on the second shift is *theirs*, they work heroically until they finally fall ill with exhaustion. *They* don't stop; their illness stops them. Sometimes it's pneumonia, sometimes migraines, a bad back, arthritis. Then their husbands, primed all along to help out in an emergency, 'lend a hand.' Upon recovering, the woman returns to her double load, plunges full steam ahead, and eventually becomes sick again. Getting sick can have something in common with 'getting' incompetent: both are ways of receiving through an indirect strategy (of renegotiating roles) what many egalitarian women receive through a direct strategy—man's labor in the second shift" (*The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* [New York: Viking, 1989], 71–72).

³⁶ Gérin (n. 1 above), 302.

for a solution to the “puzzle” of the conflict between “home duties and individual life” (*Letters*, 106). In a letter to her friend Eliza Fox, Gaskell once expressed the desirability of “a blending” of the lives of artist and wife/mother; “the difficulty,” she wrote, “is where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other” (*Letters*, 106). Contemporary feminists who also strive to blend professional with domestic lives are still struggling to define “where and when” to give priority to one kind of life over the other. Seeing any parallels between women’s situation today and the breakdowns of Gaskell’s mothering heroines is made difficult, however, by the way that Gaskell codes her fears and resentments in melodramatic images of feminine frailty. These illnesses may seem to reinforce Victorian patriarchal notions of women’s weakness and need for the protection of men, but if we look at them more clinically, they are legitimate breakdowns, the results of overtaxed physical and emotional resources. Whether we view these breakdowns as the encoding of women’s needs to “sulk and be silent,” or as the realistic index of the strains and stresses of mothering behavior, they indicate Gaskell’s dilemma: loyal to an ideology of mothering born out of women’s exclusive role as the caretakers of children, she tried to broaden this role so as to provide women with a sense of their social importance and to persuade society that women could play a vital role in the public domain. In expanding the range for women’s feminine nurturance, however, she added to women’s responsibilities while making those responsibilities harder to forsake, as they also came to carry the resonance of the mother’s loving duty to her child.

As daughters reading Gaskell as a literary mother and as a creator of mothering heroines, we can learn from her the power and beauty of a mothering ethic while still acknowledging the extent to which she was constrained by her allegiance to an ideal of feminine nurturance. The only way Gaskell can imagine women coping with the stress of living up to such an ideal is by reverting to the most passive and needy phase of daughterhood: many of her heroines break down completely and must be cared for as if they were infants. They relive the experience of being mothered in order to replenish the energies needed for their motherly roles and, I think, to reaffirm the value of such mothering, which they can testify to firsthand. Beneficial as these reprieves from the duties of caring are, they are only reprieves; Gaskell does not fundamentally alter either the cultural standard against which women are measured or the general expectations for what mothering women can be expected to accomplish over time. She is not completely at peace with the disjunction she sets up between what women need to do and what they can do; the signal of her unease is the process of breakdown in her heroines, which registers, without necessarily alleviating, frustration and anxiety.

Yet Gaskell's willingness to let her heroines turn back into needy daughters suggests that as much as she believed in an ideal of feminine nurturance, she did not turn women into icons of feminine self-sacrifice. The current feminist revival of concepts similar to the Victorian idealization of motherhood has, it seems to me, foundered on just this question of self-care versus self-sacrifice. Gaskell cannot be relied on to break the impasse for us, but her work does point us back in the direction of needing to acknowledge women as individual selves with needs that sometimes conflict with the goals of nurturance. We can arrive at a fuller understanding of Gaskell's fiction if we see her in her full complexity: not as either a mouthpiece for Victorian patriarchy or a rebel against the cult of womanhood but, rather, as one of her own heroines—a nurturing woman who eventually comes to realize that her needs must matter too. We may then be able not only to return to the issue of feminine nurturance with a fresher perspective but also to strip away much of the mythology of the nurturing mother that has prevented us from acknowledging her human needs and, therefore, our own resemblances to her.

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