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# Giving Power to the Powerless: Elizabeth Gaskell's Presentation of Women in an Age of Change

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GIVING POWER TO THE POWERLESS:  
ELIZABETH GASKELL'S PRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN AN AGE OF CHANGE

by

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## **Abstract**

Elizabeth Gaskell takes advantage of the aura of change and ascribes a new vocabulary to Victorian womanhood, one that allows women to be active members of society as well as mothers. The topsy-turvy nature of Victorian society allowed for such changes to be instituted, and Gaskell challenges the female stereotypes of the day. Gaskell's heroines must struggle with their preconceived, powerless notions of womanhood and the expectations placed upon them by society. This struggle often begins when patriarchal structures fail them and they are left to their own devices. Unlike in other Victorian novels, when women do become powerful, they are not satirized or demonized, but instead, they are praised for creating new roles for themselves. A primary way in which the women in Gaskell's novels exert their power is through family settings. They remain relatable, even while conveying some discreetly radical ideas.

Giving Power to the Powerless:  
Elizabeth Gaskell's Presentation of Women in an Age of Change

## **Introduction**

Because of the Industrial Revolution, the rote power structures of Victorian England were in flux. Elizabeth Gaskell takes advantage of the aura of change and ascribes a new vocabulary to Victorian womanhood, one that allows women to be active members of society as well as mothers. She challenges the female stereotypes: “the Angel of the House, the Fallen Woman, the Madwoman, the Siren, the Criminal” (Gilmour 189). These roles undermined any power women held, and most Victorian texts portray marriage, in particular, as a woman’s abdication of power. Gaskell’s texts, instead, give power to the mother, the sister, and the daughter. Though several of Gaskell’s heroines do find love, their ultimate goal is not necessarily to get married. Instead, they live primarily as mothers and daughters, integral parts of the family unit, both literally and figuratively. Gaskell’s heroines exert their power through family roles. They are not confined to their domesticity; they travel, they interact, and they make their own decisions. In this way, Gaskell’s novels show a new and different view of Victorian womanhood. Not just necessities for the continuation of the species, Gaskell’s textual mothers instead develop many diverse qualities and goals—they are protective, influential, and powerful. The Gaskell heroine may take on a project of reconciliation between classes; she may try to do anything necessary to keep the people she loves safe; she may try to atone for past sins by being the best person she can be for the sake of her child; she may simply strive for harmony in a family that extends beyond blood.

In the Victorian era, women had few legal rights, and even with the slow advancement of the women’s rights movement, most men resisted women’s equality out of fear because “the

association of domestic virtue with passivity made the active woman threatening” (Gilmour 193). In reaction to the low expectations afforded to women of the Victorian age came a new brand of women entirely: “‘the new woman’ was a familiar figure in social commentary... She sought equal moral standards, to replace such anomalies as the legal assumption that adultery was a worse offense for a woman than for a man....she could make her own living in an increasing number of occupations” (Altick 59). This “new woman” was the subject of satire and slander: popular Victorian thought “was ready to blame women for the deterioration of men under the hardening influence of business. [The women] have themselves succumbed to mean desires for money and family position; or they have been seduced by the ridiculous phantom of woman’s rights when their true power, the birthright they would sell for a mess of pottage is the ‘power to love, to serve, to save’” (Houghton 351). Gaskell’s heroines possess this “power to love, to serve, to save,” but in expressing it, they expand it and create a new definition of womanhood. Ruth, a woman with an illegitimate child, who would traditionally be resigned to life of shame and condemnation, is not cursed, but redeemed. Margaret, who becomes an heiress and saves Mr. Thornton from losing Marlborough Mills, is not demonized for stepping outside of her assigned domestic role, but is presented as a complex woman and daughter. Gaskell created women who seem logical and real, who are just as comfortable in society as in family settings. Women like Margaret Hale, Mary Barton, and Ruth Hilton, by virtue of not pursuing marriage and instead being active in society, would likely have been seen as threats by those in power: as the social activist or the righteous “whore.” Gaskell’s portrayal of these women, though, is not one of judgment or condemnation. Instead, Margaret is praised for her strength and bravery, Mary saves the life of Jem without incriminating her guilty father, and Ruth comes to be respected by the community for her goodness, generosity, and selflessness.

Gaskell, thus, refutes the general opinion of women in the Victorian age: “the argument went, that women’s strengths were emotional rather than logical, sympathetic and domestic rather than rational and worldly; and that for them to enter the public domain of political debate was to risk losing their countervailing power, which could best be exercised in the home” (Gilmour 191). Gaskell does portray women in the home, but she also portrays women who take on the strife between the masters and workers in a northern industrial town, and those who stand up in court for those they love. Attempting to explain Gaskell’s knack for creating relatable female characters, Jenni Calder aligns Gaskell with her texts, saying, “[she] was not a spectacular woman, not a Florence Nightingale who, in the face of fantastic odds, did and got what she wanted, but it was perhaps this view from her own experience of what a woman could do that led her to be so sensitive, so central, in her handling of young women who wanted more than tradition suggested they should even think of” (77). Gaskell’s heroines are not heroines who go on epic adventures or feminist rants. Instead, they are everyday women making roles for themselves outside of societal convention. They are mothers, daughters, and social crusaders, demonstrating the power to change their own world and the lives around them.

In the rest of Victorian society, Utilitarianism, a prominent Victorian philosophy, advocated “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Altick 117). This, along with the general sense of *laissez-faire*, which essentially “sanctioned the policy of benign neglect” (131), caused a lack of compassion among the masters and workers. This loss of humanity was reflected in the new industrial landscape. As Richard Altick points out,

The smoky blight from its chimneys was cast not merely across the contiguous landscape but across all English society. By 1884 Ruskin had transformed it from fact into metaphor, ‘The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’ becoming a capacious symbol

for the whole state of modern man, poisoned, choked, and blackened as he was, body and soul, by the industrial system. (39)

Though industrialism brought about incredible new technologies and human advancements, there are side effects to progress. The dehumanization of the working class and the lack of breathable air were two of the most prominent symptoms. The divide between masters and their workers was a product of that dehumanization and of the glorification of the self-made man.

Despite this, Gaskell writes novels where women are the ones who embrace the changing world, who attempt to bridge the divide between what is known and what is new, who make sense of the unknown, and who show compassion. Those who seem to be without power—the women, children, and disabled—are the only ones who can see clearly and have the logic and fortitude to confront the pre-conceived notions of the powerful. The powerless have always had to deal with condescension and prejudice, and they do not have the same narrow worldviews that those in wealthy, powerful positions have. This insight gives power to the powerless in a world where the ability to adapt and deal with strife are necessary for survival. The women's ability to change and adapt makes it easier for them to embrace the changing world and work to make it better for themselves. This propensity for self-improvement reflects the Victorian exultation of hard work, but the self-improvement Gaskell shows in her heroines is tempered by a fundamental sense of compassion and wisdom.

## Gaskell's Geography of Gender

The massive changes occurring in society during the Industrial Revolution present a parallel to the changing ideas surrounding Victorian motherhood and womanhood in general. Krueger succinctly relates the geography of the Industrial Revolution to gender, saying that in *North and South*,

Margaret represents the south of England, but the south in turn represents not the gentry, but Gaskell's conception of the feminine, in its inculcation of the 'seeing-beauty spirit,' in the necessary social interdependence of a rural economy, as well as in the severe demands of its natural duties. Thornton's north is the world of men's power, individualism, technological triumphs over nature, and material wealth. (206)

This geography of gender in the stark contrast of north and south shows the dramatic change that swept Great Britain. The small hamlet of Helstone is a nostalgic and idyllic representation of the recent past; Henry Lennox astutely points out that "it really sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life" (13). The past becomes something of a fantasy, an idyll that cannot be fully recognized or useful in a progressive age. This fantasy relates to the false notions Victorian men held about Victorian women. They had idealized them, put them on pedestals, and consigned them to a stereotypical, idyllic past. With industry, though, a shifting view of true womanhood occurs, and Gaskell quietly presents realistic, complex women who cannot be controlled by stereotypes.

In *North and South*, for example, Margaret Hale must adapt and re-define her idea of Victorian womanhood when confronted with the dark and desolate city of Milton, a northern



industrial town modeled on Manchester, England, a world apart from the one in which she grew up. She makes a place for herself, in part, by finding human interest in the plight of the cotton mill workers there. She bridges the gap between the workers and Mr. Thornton, the mill owner, bringing him down to a place of understanding and sympathy. This position as mediator, though, does not align with the Victorian idea of what Margaret's life trajectory should look like as a woman. During the course of the novel, she rejects two marriage proposals, defying convention. After her rejection of Henry Lennox, Margaret is perturbed by Henry's apparent indifference. She ponders:

How different men were to women! Here was she disturbed and unhappy, because her instinct had made anything but a refusal impossible; while he, not many minutes after he had met with a rejection of what ought to have been the deepest, holiest proposal of his life, could speak as if briefs, success, and all its superficial consequences of a good house, clever and agreeable society, were the sole avowed objects of his desires.... (31)

Margaret is more disturbed by her own refusal than Henry is. She knows that she is not following social rules, that she is potentially forsaking her supposed natural duties as a woman—being a wife and mother. Margaret knows that she and Henry would not be compatible, and she later finds a new path for herself in the new world that the Industrial Revolution brought.

After her second refusal, of Mr. Thornton, she feels further guilt and confusion about her place as a woman in society. She feels trapped in her societal role. She feels the pressure to be a wife and mother, and yet her instincts and her pride keep her from initially giving into this pressure. She has found a new purpose for living—upholding the rights of the mill workers—and a marriage, or even a friendship, with Mr. Thornton would seem to undermine that goal. As the bulldog-like master of Marlborough Mills, Mr. Thornton exemplifies the lack of compassion and

understanding that Margaret seeks to fix. Subconsciously, she believes, further, that marriage will be an abdication of her ability to work toward justice.

Later, when speaking with her aunt and cousin, Margaret points out that “Only as I have neither husband nor child to give me natural duties, I must make myself some” (378), and the duties she finds for herself in Milton involve helping the factory workers and the masters to communicate in a mutually beneficial manner. As a middle-class daughter of a dissenting clergyman, Margaret has few inhibitions when it comes to associating with people from all walks of life. She is able to see the humanity in workers and masters alike and to look beyond the prejudices that keep them from meaningful communication. With the absence of what she terms as a “natural” role, Margaret channels her energy into a new role—the role of mother to the masses, the bringer of peace—that she creates for herself in the midst of the clash between the old and new, the masters and the workers, the north and the south.

Albeit in a different way, in *Ruth*, the crippled Mr. Benson and his sister Faith demonstrate their ability to defy social convention and adapt when they embrace Ruth and adopt her and Leonard into their home as family, equals. The Bensons have no pretenses and are not hindered by the prejudices of class and wealth to which characters like Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Bellingham are prone. Because the Bensons face ridicule and condescension for their status as religious dissenters and for Mr. Benson’s crippled back, they are able to look past Ruth’s glaring iniquity. They see an unfortunate girl who needs their help, and they help her. Though seemingly powerless, the Benson siblings are able to change the lives of a young woman and her child. That influence is a power in itself, and it aligns with Gaskell’s depiction of Victorian women gaining power in their self-defined roles.

In contrast, Mr. Bellingham, the chief villain of *Ruth*, is concerned with class rank and beauty. He stands as a primary example of a member of the upper class, holding too many pretensions to see the beauty and humanity in an existence different from his own. He discounts Mr. Benson's qualities because of his crooked back. After all, Bellingham points out, "a man's back—his tout ensemble has character enough in it to decide his rank" (58). Gaskell contradicts this statement by presenting Mr. Bellingham as a villain and Mr. Benson as admirable. Later, Gaskell writes: "[Ruth's] beauty was all that Mr. Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognised of her" (61). Even in the woman he apparently has feelings for, he cannot see anything beyond her beauty that is worthwhile. This reflects a common Victorian attitude toward women—an attitude that places women on an unrealistic pedestal, and denies them their humanity.

Ruth, though, has something else to live for apart from Mr. Bellingham's approval—her son Leonard. When Mr. Bellingham comes back into her life as Mr. Donne, she is initially tempted to return to him; she sees a little residual love remaining between them. But she remembers that she has a child to look out for, and that "changed her from the woman into the mother—the stern guardian of her child" (221-22). She has embraced the role of mother apart from the role of wife. She has defined her own natural duties, adapting to the life that she must live. As further proof of her change of heart toward Mr. Bellingham, Ruth remarks that as "he has no love for his child...I will have no love for him" (222). She refuses the opportunity to legitimize Leonard and to bypass the inevitable exposure of her secret past. She has channeled her own pain into overcoming hardship and providing an almost angelic upbringing of Leonard, and she has no need for Mr. Bellingham's interference in the life she has built. Later, Ruth provides more of the reasoning behind her decision when she remarks to him, "The time that has

pressed down my life like brands of hot iron, and scarred me for ever, has been nothing to you” (245). Mr. Bellingham has not grown in character; he has not changed. Ruth’s statement highlights the drastic changes that have taken place in her own life due to her shame. She is no longer a naïve little girl. She has raised their little boy well, and she is loved by many. She is an example of a woman who has forsaken the traditional road to motherhood, but who has embraced the role wholeheartedly. She creates a new role for herself—to be both mother and father to her illegitimate child.

Elizabeth Gaskell is one of the few female Victorian authors who had both a family and a successful writing career. The significance of motherhood in her writing cannot be denied. As Patsy Stoneman points out, “Everywhere in Elizabeth Gaskell’s work the maternal instinct flourishes, inside and outside marriage, with and without biological ties” (50). Few of Gaskell’s heroines become mothers during the course of their stories, but they all display motherly tendencies. Despite many of Gaskell’s female characters not being biological mothers, many of them display the strengths of motherly characteristics. Gaskell takes the Victorian ideal of motherhood and gives it significance and prominence in her writing—whether her heroines are biological mothers or not. In *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*, the heroines are left motherless at early points in their stories. Only Margaret, in *North and South*, is able to fully mature with the influence and guidance of a mother. The phrase “she had no longer a mother” (247) is brief, poignant, and indicative of the void in Margaret’s life left by her mother’s death. Gaskell, herself, wrote in an 1849 letter: “I think no one but one so unfortunate as to be early motherless can enter into the craving one has after the lost mother” (*Portrait in Letters* 1). She lost her mother as a child, and she knew,

firsthand, what it meant to be motherless. This enormous sense of loss and need for a mother figure illustrates Gaskell's view that female guidance is integral to Victorian womanhood.

The situations that Mary, Ruth, and Molly find themselves in are often blamed on the lack of a mother figure in their lives. Ruth "was too young when her mother died to have received any caution or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman's life" (*Ruth* 37). Also in *Ruth*, but demonstrating another way in which a girl can be left motherless, Jemima's mother is weak and ineffective, lording over by Mr. Bradshaw (126). In *Mary Barton*, Mary makes the observation that "mother died before I was thirteen, before I could know right from wrong about some things" (466). In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly is more well-adjusted than Ruth or Mary. Though her mother died when she was an infant, she has a loving father, and finds a loving mother figure in Mrs. Hamley. Nonetheless, her father constantly worries about her motherless state, particularly in relation to the young men she finds herself surrounded by. Her father particularly regrets the fact that he has two male apprentices living in the house: "I don't see what else is to become of [Molly]; [her governess] away and all. It's a very awkward position for a motherless girl like her to be the head of a household with two young men in it" (79). Despite her father's concern, Molly is one of the few Gaskell heroines who is able to find an abundance of female guidance when faced with the drama that comes with growing up. Even apart from Mrs. Hamley, Molly has influential females in her life. Her step-mother, Mrs. Gibson, is a conceited woman who shows little true love for anyone other than herself, but she has the most impact upon Molly after Mrs. Hamley dies. The Misses Browning also try to take on the role of mother and help to guide Molly to make good decisions after her mother dies. They speak up when they believe Molly may be making bad decisions in regard to Mr. Preston: "I wish Cynthia a husband with a good character; but she's got a mother to look after her; you've none,

and when your mother was alive she was a dear friend of mine: so I'm not going to let you throw yourself away upon anyone whose life isn't clear and aboveboard, you may depend upon it!"

(445). The presence of positive mother figures serves to point the heroines in the right direction socially and morally. The Misses Browning look out for Molly, and though they ultimately make wrong assumptions about her involvement with Mr. Preston, they are doing their best to look out for her reputation, as a mother would do. Molly is not the only one with substitute mothers. All four heroines find other adult women to look to for guidance. Mary has Mrs. Wilson, Alice, and the underlying cautionary tales of women like Mary's Aunt Esther. Margaret has the strong-willed Mrs. Thornton and the lingering presence of her own mother.

Ruth, conversely, is the only female protagonist who initially has no prominent mother figure in her life. As a result, there is no one to warn her against association with Mr. Bellingham, and her naivety allows her to succumb to his seductions. When she finds herself abandoned and pregnant, Ruth quickly realizes how she will be perceived by society, and she is incredibly humbled by the experience. Davis paints Ruth's story in light of Gaskell's maternal sensitivities by showing how Ruth is redeemed by the birth of her son, Leonard. Though he is the product of her fallen state, Davis points out that "Love for [her child] leads [Ruth] to [her] eventual embrace of the feminine ethic of maternal care, even with its negative connotations of self-sacrifice and sometimes self-destruction; it is [her] full surrender to this ethic that finally redeems Ruth...from [her] self-absorption" (526). Once Ruth has accepted that she will be a mother, she humbles herself, forsaking any pre-conceived notions of what her role as a woman should be, and allows Sally to cut off all of her hair to appear as a grieving widow (118), and when Mr. Bradshaw sends her fine fabrics to make dresses for herself, she instead sews baby clothes for Leonard (131). When Ruth becomes a mother to baby Leonard, she finds her

salvation and matures into a woman. It is not until she faces the reality of becoming a mother, herself, though, that Ruth finally gains the motherly guidance of Faith Benson and the strong will of Sally, neither of whom are mothers themselves, to guide her on her path.

For Mary Barton's part, after her mother dies, she takes on the running of the household: "she had more of her own way than is common in any rank with girls of her age...all the money went through her hands, and the household arrangements were guided by her will and pleasure" (*Mary Barton* 32). When faced with the loss of her mother's influence, Mary takes on the role of "mother" in her household and is able to work through her grief and help her father live. She even goes so far as to find herself an apprenticeship at a millinery shop when her father is unable (38). Mary's maturation into a confident young woman after the loss of her primary female role model is in direct contrast to her father, wallowing in despair after the loss of his wife: "One of the good influences over John Barton's life had departed that night. One of the ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth was loosened, and henceforward the neighbours all remarked he was a changed man. His gloom and his sternness became habitual instead of occasional" (32). Similarly to Mr. Hale, when Barton loses his wife, he is brought to his knees, and he never fully recovers. The influence Mrs. Barton had over his life disappears, and Barton must make something of himself apart from the role of husband. Similarly to *North and South's* Margaret Hale, Barton becomes obsessed with the rights of the worker and the disparity between the classes, but where Margaret had the protective qualities of a mother and a middle-class education, "No education had given [Mr. Barton] wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm" (244). Barton lacks the wisdom that the women in his life display, contrary to the popular Victorian belief that women, unlike men, are not logical or rational beings. Gaskell shows that women have a great deal of wisdom and empathy that come

with the familial roles they often find themselves in. This gives them a great deal of influence on the men in their lives, and when that influence is taken away, the men are not able to function well. Gaskell's female characters bring the necessary humanity and love into decisions.

Though Mary is shown to reconcile herself to her motherless state more easily than her father's to his wifeless state, her character does, at first, suffer from the lack of her mother, showing the importance of a mother's influence. With the absence of a positive female role model, Mary becomes intrigued with the notion of becoming a lady, and marrying into a role above her own station. She becomes aware of her own beauty and its use in capturing the attention of Harry Carson (37). She holds her Aunt Esther as an example of marrying into rank, blind to her aunt's likely disgrace, and instead aspires to the idea of furthering her lot and marrying the wealthy Mr. Harry Carson. She does not have a mother's influence to warn her against a relationship with the young man that will likely lead to the ruination of her character. Hidden from view, Mary's disgraced Aunt Esther, though, does her best to keep Mary from making life-altering poor decisions. She goes to Mr. Barton and to Jem trying to warn them about Harry Carson's ill intentions toward Mary. However, because of Esther's fear of becoming a bad influence on Mary's life, Mary must deal with her problems through trial-and-error. By sharing her own life story with Mary, Esther could have bypassed the male intermediaries and more easily influenced Mary's decision about Harry, but Esther is too concerned with the stigma surrounding her status as a prostitute. She has immersed herself too fully in the expectations of her role as a prostitute, and she does not see redemption as possible.

Even without her aunt's influence, though, Mary is able to eventually come to a wise decision concerning her role in Victorian womanhood. After refusing Jem's proposal of



marriage, Mary is stricken with an epiphany: she loves Jem and she cannot survive in a loveless marriage with Harry Carson. She realizes that she does not care about Jem's social status; "if he were poor, she loved him all the better" (189). She sees the value of the individual that Jem is, and forgets the de-humanizing Victorian concern with class. Mary has embraced a new way of thinking—one that does not simply long for a practical and ambitious marriage to an idea, but for an understanding and loving marriage to an individual. By the time Jem confronts Harry, Mary has already rejected Harry. If not for the people in her life that cared for her, particularly Jem, the story of *Mary Barton* could have easily become *Ruth*, and Mary could have followed in the footsteps of her aunt, the "poor crushed Butterfly – the once innocent Esther" (563). Instead, Mary steps into her role as a strong, free-thinking woman.

Ruth, though, must redeem herself from her past mistakes. Some critics see Ruth's redemptive, angelic goodness as anti-feminist, or at least as an unrealistic portrayal of a fallen woman (Kreuger 204-5). Gaskell's contemporaries, were scandalized by the content of her novel, and even Gaskell, herself, banned the book from her daughters (Easson 111). Nonetheless, in *Ruth*, Gaskell depicts a woman who is good and virtuous, despite the way in which the world sees her. Gaskell's status as an outspoken Unitarian and minister's wife leads to her inclusion of religiosity lending itself to the argument for feminine equality in her novels. In *Ruth*, Gaskell treads a dangerous line in Victorian propriety by writing about a fallen woman in a positive light. *Ruth* reads as if religion prompts Ruth's transformation and goodness. Gaskell presents a discreetly radical image of a naïve girl who must be redeemed to herself, God, and society. Gaskell becomes a bit too didactic in her presentation of Ruth as an angelic being, but generally, *Ruth* provides a sense of hope that religion can inspire a better society where justice and mercy reign in gender roles. Mr. Benson attempts to change the mind of Mr. Bradshaw by arguing that

Mary Magdalene was a former prostitute and one of Jesus' closest companions. Mr. Benson does not allow Mr. Bradshaw to argue that Ruth is inherently and unbiblically condemned. As the critic Christine Krueger points out, "the novel gives us two examples, albeit imperfect, of 'conversions' to Gaskell's nonpatriarchal Christianity: Thurston Benson and Jemima Bradshaw. These two readers of Ruth's character dramatize Gaskell's hope that the readers of *Ruth* will likewise repent of patriarchal ideology" (187). Both Jemima and Mr. Benson are Ruth's most adamant defenders when her status as a fallen woman is revealed to Mr. Bradshaw and the general population of the town. They have witnessed her repent of her actions, and they have seen the good life she has led since coming to live in the Bensons' home. Objectively, they are two of the most likeable characters in *Ruth*, and it is easy for the reader to sympathize with their opinions. Gaskell primarily justifies Ruth's redemption using religion as a guide and a cure to the injustice that women face. Earlier in the book, Ruth is warned by her old servant Thomas that Mr. Bellingham does not mean well, and he uses scripture to back up his claims (43). Later, Mr. Benson stands up for Ruth's rights using scripture and the character of Christ to try to elicit forgiveness from Mr. Bradshaw. Though initially unsuccessful, Mr. Benson's words prove to be true when Ruth risks her own health and well-being for all the sick around her, ultimately becoming a Christ-figure and giving up her own life for the sinner, the very man who put her in her compromised position.

In addition to religion, education also redeems and excuses Ruth. As Mary Wollstonecraft observes in *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing" (21; ch. 2). Though

Gaskell never directly responds to Wollstonecraft's thoughts on women's rights, her work has an undeniable thread that aligns with Wollstonecraft's thoughts. Ruth's indiscretion was primarily a result of her ignorance, and Mr. Bellingham, as the epitome of a sensualist, takes advantage of that naivety. Once Ruth is released from his influence, though, she becomes wiser and more informed about the ways of the world. She takes lessons from Mr. Benson so that she can teach her son, because she wants to be able to positively influence his growth and education in a way that was unavailable to her (145). In her education, Ruth blossoms, is "delighted in the exercise of her intellectual powers, and liked the idea of the infinite amount of what she was ignorant; for it was a grand pleasure to learn—to crave, and be satisfied" (156). Her education shows the importance of intellect while also illustrating the contrast between Ruth, the eager student, and Ruth, the naïve child taken in by a wealthy seducer. She has radically changed her life, and "whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now" (265). Gaskell shows that despite what are considered to be Ruth's moral failings, she has a good heart, and she is redeemable. Her redemption comes through the religion and education that become possible because of her new role as mother, and her ability to pass on wisdom to her innocent child.

In keeping with Victorian notions of motherhood, Gaskell presents the idea that it is the duty of the mother to raise the child to be a tribute to society, but she extends this power beyond mere influence. It is the parent's fault if the child does not turn out well, but Ruth's child also becomes her route to redemption. Mr. Benson argues that "teach her...to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, —will be purification" (97). She is able to do penance for her actions by raising Leonard to be a good man, strengthened to "look to God, rather than to man's opinion" (99). Mr. Bellingham's sin is attributed to his parents' (and in particular his mother's) "unevenness of discipline" (27). In this way, power is again associated with motherhood.

Mothers have the ability to influence their children's lives; they are capable and strong. Faith Benson acts as a pseudo-mother toward her physically disabled brother when they are growing up (90-91). With her "excellent practical sense," she is said to be a "more masculine character than her brother" (167), displaying "some masculine tricks" like whistling (91). Relative to Margaret Hale in *North and South*, Faith seems to gain some masculine traits when she forsakes her natural role as a wife and mother. These masculine traits, though, indicate the strength of Faith's character, her adaptability to create a new role for herself, positively influencing Mr. Benson and Ruth. She is a mother, even if not in the literal sense of the word.

Ruth, too, extends her role as "mother" beyond the biological sense of the word. The Bradshaws hire her as their young daughters' governess, and Jemima looks to Ruth as a pseudo-mother figure when her own mother is weak and ineffectual. Later, Ruth becomes a nurse, sacrificing her time and well-being to make others well and, in a way, to mother them. As Gaskell says through the use of the narrator in *Ruth*, "in the long run, true and simple virtue always has its proportionate reward in the respect and reverence of every one whose esteem is worth having" (84). By the end of *Ruth*, everyone has forgotten about Ruth's past iniquities in light of her present virtues. Her compassion and love, her motherhood, has redeemed her.

According to Davis, it is this embrace and elevation of maternity that prevented the feminists of the last century from lauding Gaskell. Davis comments that "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" (507). Gaskell's attention from feminist critics ranges the spectrum from being ignored to commended. Early feminists do not seem to know what to do with Gaskell's depiction of mothers, and they all but ignore her. Even Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's quintessential

feminist critique, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, barely mentions “Mrs. Gaskell’s” existence. Perhaps this is because Gaskell’s writing does not immediately present itself as a feminist text. Stoneman notes, “Elizabeth Gaskell’s work...offers neither an explicit *critique* of women’s oppression nor fictive situations...which invite symbolic interpretation. Her novels appear to present ‘women’s lot’ either as material for social comedy, as in *Cranford*, or as incidental to class struggle, as in *Mary Barton*, and thus hardly to be ‘about’ women at all” (2). Building off Stoneman’s observation, the very nature of Gaskell’s writing is to present women in roles that are both believable and radical. In the late twentieth-century, feminist critics began to recognize Gaskell’s work as a valuable part of feminist literary canon. Davis’ final verdict on Gaskell is that “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 matter too” (532). Gaskell’s portrayal of women in powerful positions in the home shows a progressive view for the period in which she was writing, but her heroines are still mothers, wives, daughters, sisters—roles that the majority of women can claim.

The women Gaskell depicts are shown to be strong through their motherly qualities, and those qualities are used by Gaskell to define the outstanding strength of women in a time when the vocabulary and thought surrounding society and gender was in flux. In *North and South*, Margaret must give serious thought to what purpose her life may have if she does not marry and become a mother like society traditionally dictated for women. Margaret refuses two marriage proposals. She acts as mother to her parents, and she has motherly qualities toward the workers of Milton, in particular the Higginses and the Bouchers, but because of the choices she has made, she does not see a future for herself that involves actual children. She notes: “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...” (293). And yet, when spending time with Edith’s little boy, Margaret counts the time as her “sweetest moments. They gave her a taste of the feeling that she believed would be denied to her for ever” (368). When reading Edith’s letters in the early chapters of *North and South*, Margaret sometimes finds herself wishing for the life she could have had—an easy life with a providing husband and the prospect of children (62), the life she believes she has given up for good. She “did long for a day of Edith’s life—her freedom from care, her cheerful home, her sunny skies. If a wish could have transported her, she would have gone off; just for one day” (216). Later she loses herself in the letters from Frederick’s wife, Delores (313), but among all these daydreams, she must come back to her hard reality in a cold, hard city where she must bear the mantle of the family leader and display strength and courage. She seems to be a new breed of woman—one who acknowledges social problems and wants to fix them, but who cares for her family and protects them; one who shows emotion only when she does not need to be strong; one who is more concerned with equality than with the distinctions of class. Presenting a concise explanation for the universality of this new woman, Davis makes the observation that “as a metaphor, mothering can be seen as a radical reshaping of human society, a revolutionary act” (513).

Evidence of mothering being revolutionary is seen in Margaret’s protective, motherly streak that manifests itself most strongly in her pursuit of social justice and in her protection of any who face persecution. When Margaret throws her arms around Mr. Thornton to protect him from the mob, she denies the idea that she was expressing her love for him and instead stresses that ““It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. The holiness of womanhood is the only tool she has, and it is a powerfully protective one. We all feel the sanctity

of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger” (176). In this brief statement, Margaret explicitly states the Victorian woman’s relatively powerless position in society. Gaskell’s endorsement of the protectiveness and holiness of womanhood displays just how she has given power to her heroines. They have taken the limited power society gave them and have done as much as they can with it. Margaret’s motherly instincts kicked in, and she felt the need to protect the one whom she had goaded into danger. Her fear of being a coward (159) was proven erroneous in the face of violence and injustice. She insists several times that she only protected him because of her role as woman, but there are few other female characters in *North and South* who would have taken such action. Mrs. Thornton, Fanny, and the female servants stay in the house while Margaret goes out to confront the mob (164). Margaret has created a new role for herself, and has embraced the action-based philosophy of an industrial society.

That said, she retains her love of traditional southern culture while developing newfound responsibilities in the north. Mr. Thornton recognizes this: “He only caught glimpses of her; he did not understand her altogether. At one time she was so brave, and at another so timid; now so tender, and then so haughty and regal-proud...He saw her in every dress, in every mood, and did not know which became her best” (192). Thornton is able to comprehend that she is a woman torn between two ways of life, and two ways of being a woman in society. Margaret’s struggles are not unique. She points out that the “most difficult problem for women, [is] how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working” (377). The conflict is a sign of working toward a compromise, a new way of viewing Victorian womanhood.

The idea of the “new woman,” and Gaskell’s presentation of her, brought into conflict many ideas surrounding marriage as well as motherhood. Gaskell’s presentation of marriage is from an entirely different perspective than is often shown in Victorian writing. As Calder points out, “Mrs. Gaskell is one of the few major Victorian writers who shows us marriage from a woman’s point of view as something other than an escape, a reinforcement of social status, or a utilitarian contract” (81). Margaret Hale, Mary Barton, and assumedly Molly Gibson, marry for love and a sense of equal companionship. Margaret and Ruth Hilton reject perfectly utilitarian matches in favor of the advancement of their individuality. Perhaps Gaskell’s most poignant picture of women wrestling with the difficult issue of marriage comes in *Ruth* in the contrasting marriages of a mother and her daughter—Mrs. Bradshaw and Jemima. Mrs. Bradshaw is depicted as “sweet and gentle-looking, but as if she was thoroughly broken into submission” (126). She is weak-willed and is never shown to stand up to her domineering husband. In direct contrast, Jemima is stubborn, and thoroughly her father’s daughter. She expresses despair that “many things are right for men which are not for girls” (174), giving words to the Victorian gender inequality. Jemima’s natural vitality is sometimes stifled by the boundaries put upon her sex, but she refuses to be cowed. She refuses to change herself to gain the love of Mr. Farquhar: “Unless he could take her with all her faults, she would not care for his regard...Besides, there was something degrading, Jemima thought, in trying to alter herself to gain the love of any human creature” (179). Jemima is not willing to give into the idea that a woman should go to any measure to secure for herself a beneficial marriage.

Unbeknownst to Jemima, though, Mr. Farquhar is enchanted by her stubbornness and vivacity, despite his conviction that he should have a serious wife:



He had gone on reasoning through all the days of his manhood on the idea of a staid, noble-minded wife, grave and sedate, the fit companion in experience of her husband...he had not been allowing himself unconsciously to fall in love with a wild-hearted, impetuous girl, who knew nothing of life beyond her father's house, and who chafed under the strict discipline enforced there. (175)

When Mr. Farquhar and Jemima finally declare their love for one another, Mr. Farquhar asks Jemima, "how much of your goodness to me, this last happy hour, has been owing to the desire of having more freedom as a wife than as a daughter?" (303). He knows that Jemima has chafed under her father's iron thumb, and though he is, in part, joking, he knows that marriage will be an escape and a rise in power for Jemima. She is escaping the corset of her childhood, but escape is just a side benefit for Jemima. She has made the decision to be her own person and to become a wife who is fundamentally different from her submissive mother.

Likewise, in *North and South*, marriage presents itself to Margaret Hale as a positive option, allowing her to maintain her equality with Mr. Thornton. Calder points out that "[Margaret] accepts Thornton not so much because her parents have died and she no longer has a home, but because her parents' death has set her free. She needs to become free first, and then to marry" (Calder 79). She has become an independent person, and when she decides to marry Mr. Thornton, she has already offered to save Marlborough Mills with her inheritance money, establishing herself as the provider in the relationship. Even in marriage, Margaret retains her progressive notion of Victorian womanhood that she has developed over the course of her stay in Milton.

In *Mary Barton*, Mary stands strong in the face of stress and adversity in order to save the man she loves from murder charges: “I must not go mad whatever comes - at least not yet. No!...something may yet be done, and I must do it” (411). Mary does not let her on-coming breakdown affect what she must do to save Jem. She exhibits power that she did not know she had in traveling to Liverpool; hiring a boat to try and catch Jem’s witness, Will, before he sails out to sea; and in standing before the court to announce her love for Jem as a character witness. In Jemima’s, Margaret’s, and Mary’s cases, Gaskell presents examples of worthy marriages that can be made when there is love, respect, and equality involved in the equation.

As mothers and wives, Gaskell’s characters nonetheless show unusual strength when standing up for what they know to be right. As Jem is exonerated by Mary’s actions, Mr. Thornton, too, is saved by Margaret several times—first, she physically throws herself between him and the rioting mill workers, and finally, she saves him from fiscal ruin. Such physical and fiscal acts are traditionally located in the male world, yet Margaret’s acts are presented as evidence of her motherly qualities. The role of mother is transformed into a position of power, of change, and of well-balanced thought. Even Mr. Thornton, the epitome of the powerful self-made man, desires to take on motherly qualities and comfort Margaret when she grieves, in “much the same kind of passionate pleasure which comes stinging through a mother’s heart, when her drooping infant nestles close to her, and is dependent on her for everything” (244). His desire to be close to Margaret, physically and emotionally, is described in motherly terms.

Mr. Thornton’s mother, though, is not possessive of traditionally motherly qualities. Mrs. Thornton has been a hard-working single mother for years, raising her children after her husband committed suicide because of his massive debt. She has brought them out of poverty and has

raised the self-made man that is Mr. Thornton. She has all but forgotten anything apart from work, and her industrial work ethic has impacted the relationship she has with her children. She does not respect Fanny because of her vapid, simpering qualities, but she holds a great deal of pride and protectiveness for her son, who has become a self-made man. She has a close, but strange relationship with Mr. Thornton. She describes him as “her son, her pride, her property” (193), and they typically converse in an emotionless, technical way. Yet, when he breaks down after Margaret refuses his love, Mrs. Thornton hates Margaret for his sake, telling him, “I am the mother that bore you, and your sorrow is my agony; and if you don’t hate her, I do” (194-95). Their relationship is not one built on sentiment, though, and after a moment of emotion, “they fell back into their usual mode of talk—about facts, not opinions, far less feelings” (195). This lack of emotion seems to be a result of the hard life that Hannah Thornton has led. She has taken on too many traditionally masculine attributes, and has lost much of her sense of motherhood. When she visits the Hales, though, “a sudden remembrance, suggested by something in the arrangement of the room,—of a little daughter—dead in infancy—long years ago—... like a sudden sunbeam, melted the icy crust, behind which there was a real tender woman” (221). Motherhood dissolves Mrs. Thornton’s cynicism and leads to a better understanding of Margaret. The hardness of industrial life has jaded Mrs. Thornton, and she has lost much of the compassion that Margaret frequently demonstrates. Mrs. Thornton forgoes traditional femininity and fully embraces the industrial, masculine world.

Victorians draw an unmistakable line between the domestic and vapid pastimes of women and the technical and productive pastimes of men. At the very beginning of *North and South*, Henry Lennox condescendingly remarks to Margaret that “Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements” (12). Gaskell’s novels constantly compare the worlds

of women and men. A parallel is also drawn between the traditional feminine pursuits of the pastoral south and the new, productive masculine pursuits of the industrial north. The lines of this comparison, though, are blurred with Gaskell's presentation of men and women who display characteristics from genders and locales to which they do not belong.

After moving to Milton, Margaret grows into a self-assured young woman, taking on the traditionally male trait as the logical head of household in order to keep her home life stable and sane. In doing this, the vocabulary surrounding femininity is expanded to encompass the traits Margaret shows. She is a strong and well-respected woman. She is the confidante of both her parents, helping her father to communicate uncomfortable topics to his wife and her mother to keep her fatal illness from her husband. Margaret's embracing of masculine qualities is a reflection of her embracing her strength and role as a woman in Victorian society. As Mrs. Thornton warns Margaret, "If you live in Milton, you must learn to have a brave heart, Miss Hale" (107). Margaret must be brave in order to step away from the traditional role of a woman. Even strangers recognize her strength. Dr. Donaldson remarks to himself, "'That's what I call a fine girl!...Who would have thought that little hand could have given such a squeeze? But the bones were well put together, that gives immense power. What a queen she is!'" (116). Similarly, as a strong woman who has raised her family up from poverty singlehandedly, Mrs. Thornton shows a grudging respect for Margaret. She points out that "I never knew Fanny have weighty reasons for anything. Other people must guard her. I believe Miss Hale is a guardian to herself" (284). Margaret does not share the vapid, self-centered qualities of Fanny and Edith. Instead, she shows her strength and desire to help society, and Mrs. Thornton respects this. In fact, no one but Margaret's aunt back in London finds fault in Margaret's ambition. Despite Margaret's newfound masculine qualities, Gaskell does not present her as monstrous, or even

something less than feminine. Instead, Margaret's role is profoundly sympathetic, adding to the definition of "woman," rather than subverting it.

Gaskell's blurring of gender roles is shown not only in women, but also in men. The critic Patricia Ingham notices that while Margaret seems to take on certain masculine qualities when attempting to promote change, Mr. Higgins takes on the traditionally feminine qualities of nurturing Boucher's children and feeding the hungry mill workers, coming to a point where he asks Mr. Thornton "for th' childer. Measter, do yo' think we can e'er get on together" (*North and South* 315). Boucher is willing to put aside his pride and ambition in order to provide a stable home for Boucher's children, victims of the strike. In *Mary Barton*, Mr. Barton and Mr. Wilson take on the role of caretakers to a sick working family: "The two men, rough, tender nurses as they were, lighted the fire...[Barton] began, with the useful skill of a working-man, to make some gruel; and...forced one or two drops between her clenched teeth...Wilson...had soothed, and covered the man many a time; he had fed and hushed the little child, and spoken tenderly to the woman" (87). These two men take on a motherly role, nurturing, comforting, and tending to the family. The men's sense of duty and loyalty to their fellow members of the working class does not allow them to consider any other option. Gaskell's blurring of the gender lines is closely aligned with human connection, and this connection is only possible when there is also an eradication of the class barriers. Class disparity, the de-humanization of an entire subset of humanity, is what drives *Mary Barton* and, to a certain extent, *North and South*. Gaskell points out that "class distrusted class, and their want of mutual confidence wrought sorrow to both" (*North and South* 247). Gaskell shows that society changes for the better when the powerless are able to influence those in power with a deeper sense of humanity.

In *Mary Barton*, the destitute workers parallel with the women and dissenters in Gaskell's other novels. They share a sense of community. Gaskell states: "the very closest bonds of nature were snapt in that time of trial and distress. There was Faith such as the rich can never imagine on earth; there was 'Love strong as death'; and self-denial...The vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree" (83). The degree of emotion ascribed to the poor and working class is astounding and opposite of what those in power are shown to feel for their peers. The powerless have depth of humanity, and they care deeply for those in their community. This clearly illustrates Mary and John Barton's relationship: when confronted with inequality and grief, Mr. Barton is reduced to an opium addiction, violence against Molly, and murder for the cause of worker rights. Yet Molly still loves him dearly and risks much to save him from suspicion in the court. In the end, John is able to redeem himself by confessing to Mr. Carson. Gaskell makes the point that wealth and rank do not denote the worth of a person. The ability for those without power to adapt for survival influences their ability to live in a changing world.

Despite Mr. Carson's saintly forgiveness of Mr. Barton for his son's death, the women in Gaskell's novels are typically more equipped to handle grief and social situations than the men in their lives. Both Mr. Hale and Mr. Higgins look to Margaret to inform Mrs. Boucher of her husband's suicide, although Margaret had no connection with the woman. Logically, the minister or a family friend should have taken on the burden of the sad news, but Margaret is the only one capable (269). The double standard here is made clear when Margaret has to question her right to attend her own mother's funeral as "women of [her] class don't go, because they have no power over their emotions" (244). This further illustrates the breakdown of supposed gender roles, because Margaret is the only member of her family who can contain her emotions. She remains

strong to support her father and brother in their grief. This is “thereby subverting the notion that ideally men and women are necessarily complementary to each other in all respects. It is only when that idea is broken down that the corset of class begins to disintegrate” (Ingham 75).

Ingham believes that Gaskell’s breakdown of gender roles implies an end to class disparity and prejudice, and in this way, Ingham combines the ideas of feminism and social justice in

Gaskell’s novels. There is an interdependent relationship between gender, class, and society.

Gaskell has written a story where the breakdown of the distinct gender roles leads to improvement in society.

However, in *North and South*, Gaskell presents the idea that the barrier between people is not confined to gender and class, but also formed by the over-arching sense of change and transition in the Victorian era. Both those immersed completely in the old ways of life and those who hold firm to the new have trouble adapting to the changes in societal norms, causing a lack of understanding and dehumanization between classes and genders. Mr. Thornton and Mr. Hale dramatically mark the difference between the new and the old ways, making a statement about changing gender roles at the same time. Aligned with the stereotypical feminine nature of the south, Mr. Hale is described as having lines on his face that are “soft and waving...showing every fluctuating emotion,” and eyelids that are “large and arched, giving to the eyes a peculiar beauty which was almost feminine” (74). This almost feminine beauty directly contrasts with the northern Mr. Thornton, who has “straight brows,” “earnest eyes...intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core what he was looking at,” lines on his face that are as if “carved in marble,” and a “severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything” (74-75). He is an example of a modern Victorian man, dedicated to his work and there is nothing traditionally feminine about his appearance. In fact, “He was regarded by [his fellow

manufacturers] as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. There was no need to struggle for their respect. He had it, and he knew it; and the security of this gave a fine grand quietness to his voice and ways” (149). Mr. Thornton is a self-made man, a Victorian ideal. He has worked his way up to the top of industrial society, and he has gained the awe and respect of his peers and subordinates. Margaret comes to respect and love Mr. Thornton and the new ways that are prevalent in an industrial city like Milton. In doing so, she notices what seem to be the weak, emotional values found in the South represented by her feckless father. Though he had already put a certain value in the past, evident in his lessons with Mr. Hale, Mr. Thornton, influenced in part by conversations with Margaret, also gains a more nuanced view of industrial society, eventually becoming “two chaps,” as Higgins puts: “One chap I knowed of old as were measter all o’er. T’other chap hasn’t an ounce of measter’s flesh about him” (308). Mr. Thornton retains the power he has over his workers, but it is tempered by the motherly quality of compassion to which he has been exposed by Margaret.

Mr. Thornton has the best qualities of both the old ways and the new ways. He takes lessons from Mr. Hale and values literature, but he is also the fundamental self-made man of the Victorian age: ““He has led a practical life from a very early age; has been called upon to exercise judgment and self-control. All that develops one part of the intellect. To be sure, he needs some of the knowledge of the past, which gives the truest basis for conjecture as to the future; but he knows this need,—he perceives it, and that is something” (152). He draws from the past while looking to the future, and he does not see how he could function in the life of relative ease that he associates with the south of England. He tells Margaret, “I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and unsuccessful—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old



worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease” (75).

His mother also has his strength of character, but she finds the world of the past completely unnecessary for the present and future. This is first shown when Margaret visits Mrs. Thornton’s home and notices that “there was not a book in the room” (71). Later, Mrs. Thornton makes known her disapproval of her son’s tutoring sessions. She remarks that “Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day” (104). She cannot see the necessity of philosophy and book knowledge in the actual living of life and the building of business. Mr. Hale, on the other hand, is a relic of the past. He is an Oxfordian, and his dedication to the world of academia is shown to be his downfall. With too much thought, he is stricken with doubt, and he gives up his livelihood with little regard for his family’s well-being. Margaret notes that “It is not every one who can sit comfortably in a set of college rooms, and let his riches grow without any exertion of his own” (300). Mr. Hale and the people like him do not align with the Victorian sensibility of hard work, but while Mr. Hale is not looked to as a role model for the present time, neither is Mrs. Thornton. They are extremes of a previous time. It is their children that carry on their positive characteristics, moderate them to be suitable for a new way of life, and recognize that “the future must be met, however stern and iron it be” (55). The new generation is able to adapt to the changes in society, including the perception of gender roles; the young have not yet become one-minded.

The people of the new world of Milton and the people of the old world, of Oxford and Helstone, are jaded by their pre-conceived notions of how the respective other lives. Mr. Hale,

and particularly Mr. Bell, are dumbfounded by, if not resistant to, the changes that have come with the Industrial Revolution. Mr. Bell defends his way of life to Mr. Thornton, saying, “I should like to be the representative of Oxford, with its beauty and its learning, and its proud old history” (303). Mr. Thornton offers the opposing view that “our glory and beauty arise out of our inward strength, which makes us victorious over material resistance” (304). He maintains the view that “it is fine when the study of the past leads to a prophecy of the future” (304). Some aspects of Gaskell’s vocabulary of womanhood are drawn directly from history, pointing toward a new way of looking at gender. Twice, Margaret is compared to women with outspoken and powerful roles. In one circumstance, “the latent Vashti in Margaret was roused, and she could hardly keep herself from expressing her feelings” (339), in reference to the wife of King Xerxes in the book of Esther who refused to leave her dinner party when the King ordered her presence. Later, Henry Lennox remarks that “She has the making of a Cleopatra in her, if only she were a little more pagan” (375). These comparisons show that Margaret is not demonized for displaying strength. Instead, she is revered. History is proof that women haven’t always been regarded as the weak creatures Victorians saw them as. In this way, the past is good, and should influence the present and future.

### **Women as Mothers and Leaders**

Often, in Gaskell’s novels, women are prompted into making roles for themselves when the patriarchy of society fails them. When Mrs. Thornton’s husband commits suicide and leaves behind massive amounts of debt, she is forced to become a self-made woman in order to provide a life for her children. Margaret, too, is failed by the men in her life. Her father is feckless, unable to be a provider for his family, and is often described in childish terms. At one point, “he

began to cry and wail like a child” (225), and he admits freely: “I cannot bear it. I cannot bear to see the sufferings of others” (52); he shuts down when faced with pain and hardship. Margaret, though, is the strong one in her family, and she is described in motherly terms. The roles of parent and child are reversed in the Hale family, and Margaret feels an inordinate amount of pressure to take charge. When Mrs. Hale succumbs to her illness, “Margaret rose from her trembling and despondency, and became as a strong angel of comfort to her father and brother” (229). She cuts off her own grieving process in order to comfort her male relatives and to make the funeral arrangements that Mr. Hale will be incapable of making (230). She is the caregiver, the provider for the family. In the absence of a mother figure, Margaret has stepped into the position, taking care of the family she has left in a more capable manner than even her mother would have. Gaskell presents this powerful sense of motherhood as Margaret’s primary strength, a strength that allows her to make wise decisions, protect the men in her life, and to stand alongside the workers in their plight.

Mr. Hale gives up his role as provider when he gives up his occupation on a technicality and moves his family to Milton where they know no one and have no definite prospects. They scrape by on the pittance he earns as a tutor. From the very beginning of the novel, the roles of men and women in Margaret’s life are shaken. When Mr. Hale first reveals that they will be moving to Milton, Margaret feels that “The one staid foundation of her home, of her idea of her beloved father, seemed reeling and rocking” (33). The father who should be the strong head-of-household has thrown her family’s world into chaos and uprooted them all to a place none of them have ever been. When Edith writes to Margaret, she seems to regard Mr. Hale as “in the corner, like a naughty child, for having given up his living” (216). When Margaret’s father induces her to tell his wife about the move, “It came strongly upon Margaret’s mind that her

mother ought to have been told: that whatever her faults of discontent and repining might have been, it was an error in her father to have left her to learn his change of opinion, and his approaching change of life, from her better-informed child” (42). Margaret sees how the roles of parent and child are quickly being flipped, and because of her father’s cowardice, she feels “a great weight suddenly thrown upon her shoulders” (48). She is suddenly saddled with a great deal of responsibility. Even before the Hales physically move to Milton, Margaret’s world is already changing, and the roles of men and women, parents and children, begin to shift, making way for the development of Margaret’s character in a new world. Later, she is once again called upon to become both of her parents’ confidante, offering another example of an undesirable marriage. When Margaret discovers her mother’s illness, she promises, “I will not tell Papa. He could not bear it as I can” (119). She then bursts into tears, demonstrating that the responsibility she feels weighs heavily upon her.

Margaret’s role as the head of her family is shown when she is the first of her family whom Mr. Thornton meets. He notes that “Instead of a quiet, middle-aged clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity,—a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing” (57-58). From the very beginning, he recognizes her strength, and where he expected to see her father, he saw her instead, symbolically showing her place in the family. Later, when Frederick returns to England to see his mother for the last time, “[Margaret] knew then how much responsibility she had had to bear, from the exquisite sensation of relief which she felt in Frederick’s presence” (227). Suddenly, when her brother comes home, Margaret’s burden is lessened. The children of the household seem to carry all the responsibility and must make provisions for their parents. In one instance, Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell forebodingly claim that “we’ll have her to nurse us ten years hence, when we shall be two cross old invalids” (307). Even

though they are joking, there is an underlying admittance of the men's need for the younger generation to look out for them in the changing world. However, even the appearance of Frederick does not ease Margaret's burden for long. He is on the run from the law, and he, too, needs Margaret's protection.

Not until Mr. Hale makes plans to visit Oxford with Mr. Bell, is Margaret finally relieved of the burden of mothering her parent. She finally feels free: "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" (313). After two years, with her father's departure, Margaret is finally able to grieve her mother. She has escaped the bonds of duty and no longer must play mother to her father. She is free to revert back to the way she once was in Helstone, innocent and free of the burdens Milton has laid on her. Yet she has fundamentally changed over the two years, and she can longer be just as she was. When she revisits Helstone with Mr. Bell after her father dies, she is sad that her nostalgia for the south has misled her. Helstone has changed and she has changed (351-2).

Margaret's status as a woman in Victorian society has given her a sense of humanity that those caught up in the laissez-faire nature of industrialism tend to lack. Despite the dirty, depressing impression Margaret has of Milton, at some point during her stay there, the city eventually "became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest" (69). She becomes friends with Bessy, Mr. Higgins, and other members

of the working class. She sees their plight, and she has the desire to make life better for them. She sees the human side of Milton underneath the grime. Mr. Thornton points out this oppression that she feels in her action to protect him in the face of the angry mob: “I now believe that it was only your innate sense of oppression...that made you act so nobly as you did” (178). She is so overwhelmed by her protective nature and her support of the oppressed, she is moved to save Mr. Thornton when he is in danger from the mob. Her dedication to equality gives her the courage to stand up for what she believes in, defying social conventions placed upon women at the time.

Gaskell uses the character of Margaret to question what matters for a Victorian woman, especially in the industrial north. When she is invited to the Thorntons’ party, Margaret laments: “how am I to dress up in my finery, and go off and away to smart parties, after the sorrow I have seen to-day?” (144). She has a difficult time reconciling herself to an ability to participate in entitled activities while there is hardship all around in the lower orders of society. At the party, she finds herself drawn to the serious and substantial conversation of the men, rather than to that of the women:

She was glad when the gentlemen came...because she could listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about. She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had...they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility...caused by the recollection of what had been achieved, and what yet should be. (149)

Margaret is fascinated by the wonders of the new industrial way of life, and it is the world of men that gives her glimpses of it. This fascination with defying the “old limits of possibility” is evidence of Margaret embodying the idea of “new womanhood,” of defying so-called “natural duties” in order to make her own path. Margaret notices further that “they talked in desperate

earnest,—not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties” (149). Though she has previously only seen the negative aspects of Milton, Margaret starts to see that she can relate more to the earnestness of the mill owners than to the women that remind her of her previous London circle, because she wants to be involved in peoples’ lives. She wants to make a difference in the very real lives she sees around her in the working class. Gaskell presents this quality as a natural tendency for women who have the protective instincts of motherhood. Margaret’s sympathy is one of the qualities that gives women power in Gaskell’s novels, because it is the quality that allows her heart to change and to impact the lives of those around her for the better.

On the other hand, to Mr. Thornton’s utilitarian views of masters and workers, Margaret brings a more biblical and historically thoughtful view. She concedes that “there is no human law to prevent employers from utterly wasting or throwing away all their money...but,” she continues, “they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so” (108). Margaret has the strong view that those in power have the obligation to manage their money, resources, and subordinates fairly and benevolently. As an outsider and a woman, though, she is able to discern the fundamental motivations behind the conflict between masters and workers. She points out that “[she sees] two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own” (109). Her sympathy toward humanity does not align with Mr. Thornton’s logically-based reasoning; “[her] whole soul rose up against him while he reasoned in this way—as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing” (140). She condemns his *laissez-faire* attitude. Her view of the power struggle is morally motivated, whereas Mr. Thornton’s is politically and economically motivated.

Not only do Margaret's thoughts on social justice and hard work change and grow, but class prejudice is all but erased from her thoughts. At the beginning of *North and South*, she states: "I don't like shabby people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretense" (19). Margaret's prejudice is not against those of a lower social class, but against those who embrace a life of pretense. She claims several times throughout *North and South* that Mr. Thornton is no true gentleman, and she does not like the idea that he might pretend to be one. Apart from her antagonistic reaction to pretension, though, the Hales in general do not seem to hold prejudices toward social class: "Mr. Hale treated all his fellow-creatures alike: it never entered into his head to make any difference because of their rank" (207). Nonetheless, after moving to Milton, Margaret develops true sympathy with the Higginses, the Bouchers, and the other workers in Milton. She even starts to pick up some of the local slang, much to her mother's chagrin (218), symbolizing her acceptance of, and integration into, the local culture.

Margaret holds on to her prejudice against the manufacturers themselves for a bit longer. She is naturally more inclined to find sympathy with those who have little to no power before she can find sympathy with those with an excess of power that seems, to her, undeserved. Before meeting Mr. Thornton, she is skeptical of what a manufacturer could want with "literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman" (37). She associates education and history with the gentlemen of the south, and she is prejudiced against industrial people who seem to discredit tradition. Margaret does not yet see the possibility of goodness in the new manufacturing class; she is still enmeshed with the traditional values she grew up with. Soon, though, Margaret recognizes the "resolution and power" that Mr. Thornton has that cannot possibly be "vulgar or common" (57). Through his sheer effort, Mr. Thornton has made himself into a successful manufacturer. He is



not merely the pretentious man putting on airs that Margaret assumed him to be. She sees that there can be true value in making your own path, despite convention and pre-established society. Margaret comes to realize that the prejudice she holds for industrial society and the self-made man is not indicative of Mr. Thornton's quality. With her change of heart toward Mr. Thornton comes further acceptance of her own abandonment of her natural duty.

It is the woman of the story, Margaret, who is able to embrace a new role and bring about communication between the masters and workers with her outsider's view of the situation. Margaret voices her opinion that "if Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master's ears—" (281), then she believes that honest communication and personal interaction is the only thing standing in the way of peace between master and worker. Early on, Mr. Thornton vocalizes the ideas of the age and tells Margaret and Mr. Hale:

It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but ... one on the side of authority and order. (78)

Mr. Thornton is somewhat prejudiced himself, seeing his workers as too lazy to escape poverty. He cannot see that sometimes it is simply impossible to raise one's self up to a higher social class. He sees their lack of movement as evidence of "poorness of character" (79). Though this prejudice may be unjustified, the thought process behind Mr. Thornton's reasoning is quintessentially Victorian. Margaret's ability to put aside her natural role and to make a new path

for herself as socially relevant aligns with Mr. Thornton's idea of hard work, and Margaret's sympathy toward the working class begins to influence him.

A turning point concerning class comes in *North and South* when "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm" (215). Gaskell constantly advocates the importance of communication and the empathy that comes with human connection. Stigmas surrounding sex, class, and religion do not play a part in this beautiful scene. Here are three people of radically different points of views who are able to communicate freely and have a good human relationship. It is Margaret who acts as a mediator to make this possible, encouraging her father to speak with Higgins (205). Gaskell presents the idea that when people of differing religious backgrounds can get along, so can those of different classes. In the end, peace through honest communication turns out to be the case in the relationship of Mr. Thornton and Mr. Higgins. There is an act of communion in the sharing of a meal, and the two are able to make amends and work together. Mr. Bell philosophizes: "Nothing like the act of eating for equalising men...The philosopher does sententiously—the pharisee ostentatiously—the simple-hearted humbly—the poor idiot blindly, as the sparrow falls to the ground...all eat after the same fashion—given an equally good digestion..." (330). As Mr. Bell points out, the act of eating is a fundamentally human act, and when Mr. Thornton shares a meal with his employees, he is equalizing himself with them. And they accept him. A true reconciliation has occurred between the master and his workers, and this is due largely to the mediating influence of Margaret, the middle-class daughter of a dissenting clergyman. In an era of change, the seemingly powerless are able to see the humanity in an inhumane situation and to provide wise counsel on behalf of reconciliation. Margaret, and women like her, influence others

with their compassion and femininity. Their motherly natures treat society just as a family—a broken, misunderstood family, with an underlying beauty, that just needs reconciliation.

In contrast with *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, in particular, *Wives and Daughters* is not inundated with social problems, but it is a perfect glimpse of a family. And though the family is not entirely a blood-related family, it is perhaps the most complete picture of family life that Gaskell provides. Because of Gaskell's death just before the completion of *Wives and Daughters*, the plot is not wrapped up as nicely as in her other novels. Instead, it ends with a commonplace scene between Mr. and Mrs. Gibson just after Molly has left the room. It ends with a mother figure; yes, vain and silly Mrs. Gibson, but a mother all the same. She and Molly have gotten used to each other, and the maternal, familial emphasis in the final chapter of all of Gaskell's writing encapsulates the idea of completeness. It is not an issue of social justice, nor is it a culmination of romance. It is a simple, peaceful, domestic scene. If mothering can be read as "a radical reshaping of society" (Davis 513), then the family as a whole in *Wives and Daughters* is a perfect example of a society that has been shaped, and is being shaped.

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## Integration of Faith and Learning

I grew up in the Wesleyan tradition, in a small denomination called Churches of God. My dad has been a pastor for the majority of my life, and for most of my childhood church was one of my few and favorite social activities: Church, Sunday School, Youth Group, and Bible Quizzing were my life. Though my background is Wesleyan, the world around me was very Evangelical—the books I read, the music I listened to, the dance school, and homeschool groups I attended. However, my familial experience was more ecumenical than a lot of other kids in my friend group. My uncle and his family are Orthodox, my aunt and her family are Calvinist, some of my second cousins are Messianic Jews, and I had several Catholic friends. I knew kids who had never looked outside their little Baptist or Pentecostal bubbles. I am profoundly thankful for the diversity of faith I find in my family and friends. My outlook on life and faith has been fundamentally impacted by it.

I was largely homeschooled and grew up as a Pastor's kid, a Pastor's granddaughter, a missionary's granddaughter, and an Orthodox priest's niece. I listened to Steven Curtis Chapman, Newsboys, Phil Keaggy, Wayne Watson, Keith Green, and WOW in the car with my dad. There were many things about the world that I did not know or understand until embarrassingly recently, and there will always be an aspect of popular culture that was absent in my formational childhood. At one point in my life, I would have been ashamed to show my ignorance, but at this point in my life, I am more likely to jokingly relate these stories to someone. I see it less as ignorance, and more as what provided the foundations that I stand on today.

One of the chief aspects of any Tobias or Yost family gathering is long, theological discussion. This is unavoidable in a family that has two Protestant pastors, an Orthodox priest, and a pair of missionaries. I have vivid memories of driving to Youth Group with my dad and asking simple questions that would end up warranting a sermon in response. I never thought this was odd, and even now, knowing that most kids do not grow up like this, I cannot imagine it any differently. Perhaps because of the prevalence of church and theological discussion in my childhood, I have always had a healthy appreciation for theology. My time at Seattle Pacific University has helped me to gain a more scholarly and nuanced view of my faith and of the church as a whole, and I typically find myself agreeing the most with Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox ways of thought.

Despite the rural location and the stereotypical Evangelical nature of my environment, education was nonetheless valued in my community; most of the people I encountered went to college. My family environment was and is definitely in favor of higher education. Both of my parents have Masters Degrees, and all of my grandparents have college educations (two of them have doctorates). Growing up, though it was never explicitly stated, I knew that I would attend college. It was never a question in my mind. Despite my ambition to be a bride-ballerina-cowgirl as a child, I never saw myself getting married straight out of high school. My parents instilled in me, from a very young age, that I should wait until after I graduated from college to get married. Education was always the priority.

As an English major, I have been able to indulge my love of the English language, and to read the beautiful words that people with incredible minds wrote long before I was born. I have a particular love of Victorian literature, and it has had a profound impact on me. Reading *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell in my Victorian literature class was ultimately the inspiration for

the selection of my Honors Project topic. The culture fascinates me—the rapid change, the contrasts of horror and wonder, the diverse but distinct perceptions of gender and class. As Gaskell’s Unitarian theology unquestionably impacted her writing, my own personal theology has undoubtedly influenced my own reading of Gaskell’s texts. I have been told by a professor that I have a decidedly Methodist approach to life, and this does not surprise me in the least. Though I like to think that I am very ecumenical in my thought processes, I cannot dismiss my Wesleyan upbringing.

No matter what I end up doing with my life—whether I become the librarian that I have hoped to become or if I follow a different path—I know that I will never stop wanting to learn and grow. The acquisition of knowledge of all kinds—from theology, to literature, to Doctor Who, to pop music—is incredibly important to me, and I know that I will never be able to stop pursuing it.