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## **Gaskell, gender, and the family**

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#### **"All else confusion"?gender and social expectations**

- "Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
- Man for the sword and for the needle she:
- Man with the head and woman with the heart:
- Man to command and woman to obey;
- All else confusion."
- - Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847)

When Alfred, Lord Tennyson published *The Princess* in 1847, just as Elizabeth Gaskell was starting her writing career, it was to challenge attitudes like those expressed by the old king in these lines, and Tennyson was not alone in feeling that the doctrine known as "separate spheres" for men and women was ripe for change. Indeed, by 1865, the year of Gaskell's death, John Stuart Mill was able to present the first women's suffrage amendment in parliament. Nevertheless, Mill's speech, published in 1869 as *The Subjection of Women*, confirms that general assumptions about women's role had not changed: "[a]ll the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections."<sup>19</sup>

One book in this tradition, published in 1839, when Gaskell was the mother of two small daughters, was Sarah Lewis's *Woman's Mission*.<sup>(21)</sup> While Christian missionaries find their vocation among the heathen, Lewis argues, "woman's mission" is at home, exerting a beneficial influence on her menfolk. In particular, Lewis stresses the importance of mothers inculcating in their male children values of mutual respect, responsibility, and compassion before they pass beyond their mothers' influence into the public world. In the same year, however, women's lack of actual power under English law was demonstrated by the debate surrounding the first Infant Custody Act, and especially by the real-life story of Caroline Norton, who was denied access to her infant children when she offended her husband.<sup>(20)</sup> Nine years later, Anne Brontë's novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), gives us fictional confirmation that "woman's mission" can be a futile dream. Her heroine, Helen Huntingdon, marries a known profligate with the intention of reforming him through her feminine influence; instead, she is forced to flee the marital home to protect her infant son from her husband. During Gaskell's lifetime "woman's role" and the relation of men and women within their separate worlds were the subjects of endless prescription and debate, and it was among these shifting positions that she formed her opinions and began to write.

## "Mrs." Gaskell dove in the public sphere

"Mrs. Gaskell," the title under which Gaskell's later novels were published, was her usual form of reference until quite recently. By contrast with the Brontës or George Eliot, "Mrs." Gaskell was self-evidently a wife and was also known as the mother of four daughters. For more than a century the title signifying her domestic status has colored readers' responses to her work. Most famously, in 1934 Lord David Cecil found that it "fitly symbolized" the difference between her and "her famous rivals" (Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot), who were "not ordinary women."

Ugly, dynamic, childless, independent, contemptuous of the notion that women should be confined to that small area of family and social interests which was commonly regarded as the only proper province of their sex; fiercely resentful of the conventions that kept them within it - at every turn they flout the standards which were set up before the women of their day. In the placid dove-cotes of Victorian womanhood, they were eagles.

But we only have to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove.

There is no doubt that the childless Brontë sisters felt more acutely than Gaskell the lack of purpose and opportunity in women's lives, and wrote more passionate appeals against it. Since Gaskell is sure that motherhood is one of the "greatest & highest duties" of a woman's life, her plans for unmarried women tend to involve them with other people's children rather than in intellectual or political careers (PV, 53). Gaskell is clear that even exceptional gifts, such as those of Charlotte Brontë, do not absolve a woman from domestic duties. Although "she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents," yet no other person "can take up the quiet regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, ... nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed" (LCB, II, 2:259).

What looks like acquiescence in Gaskell may, however, also be pragmatic negotiation. The well-traveled and urbane Gaskell knew more intimately than either the isolated Brontës or the modern reader the details of social expectation for women. For the modern reader, for instance, it comes as a surprise to find that Charlotte Brontë's first reviewers found her writing "coarse" and unfeminine, but Gaskell understands the small signals that occasioned this interpretation. The main aim of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was to restore Brontë's reputation by explaining this appearance of indelicacy, and her repeated emphasis on Brontë's dutiful attention to domestic and filial duties was motivated by a desire to reinstate Brontë in conventional regard. This emphasis can, however, give modern readers the impression that Gaskell herself is a conventional writer.

The best antidote to such a suspicion is to read Gaskell's letters. Fluent, unguarded, comical, and vivid, they leave us with an impression of a woman who was at the same time deeply involved with every aspect of domestic life and also humorously aware that her negotiations of it were sometimes less than orthodox. Writing to a friend, she explains that " [t]he difference between Miss Brontë and me is that she puts all her naughtiness into her books, and I put all my goodness" (L, 228). Far from feeling oppressed by the patriarchal family, she seems thoroughly to enjoy the challenges of her headlong life. Sometimes, though, she is near to being overwhelmed by its sheer busyness. She finds the balance of "home duties and individual life" a "puzzle," and is "sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women" - an admission suggesting that in general she relied on her own judgment (L, 106, 109). Her life was very varied: as well as the obvious tasks of providing food, clothing, and furnishing for the household, and caring for

and teaching her daughters, there were innumerable duties which blur the boundaries between "private" and "public" existence - whether social work such as teaching in Sunday schools and relief work during the cotton famine, or cultural work such as placing her writing in journals and with publishers, and entertaining visiting artists, scientists, and other intellectuals.<sup>22</sup>

It is evident from Gaskell's letters that under favorable circumstances, Victorian women did have some freedom to act in the public world. Such freedom is not, however, a right; the financial and legal position of most women makes such freedom dependent on the complaisance of husbands and fathers. In this context Gaskell's Unitarian milieu is immensely important. Gaskell's father and husband were both ministers in the Unitarian church, and her social and family life was enmeshed in Unitarian connections. Unitarians were the most radical of the many Dissenting groups in nineteenth-century England. Rejecting the idea of a divine Christ who suffered to redeem humanity from sins incurred by Adam, they adopted a more rational and optimistic position based on the belief that God created human beings with the capacity to govern themselves with both justice and compassion. Unitarians believed that women as well as men needed to be well educated, and Gaskell attended a seminary which provided her with what was, for the time, an excellent education.

"Education," moreover, in Unitarian circles, included far more than the acquisition of knowledge. Educators aimed crucially to establish independence of thought and a self-regulating morality in both men and women. As Coral Lansbury writes, "[t]o be born a woman in the Victorian era was to enter a world of social and cultural deprivation unknown to a man. But to be born a woman and a Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women."<sup>(16)</sup> This meant not only that Unitarian women had more freedom of action than many Victorian women, but also that their traditional role as mothers had a different importance. The family is the place where people are formed into social beings. Given the Unitarian emphasis on self-government based on careful early training, it follows that mothers, and all those who care for children, preside over the foundations of the polity.

Although Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), has a "public" theme - class conflict in the new factories - she was moved to write it by two "private" events. The death of her only son, William, at a year old, gave her a generally sorrowing outlook on the world, and this was reinforced and generalized by the suffering in Manchester caused by bad harvests and unemployment.<sup>(15)</sup> In the novel her treatment of this "public" topic also begins with "private" life, describing a family outing in which the working-class men are careful to relieve their womenfolk of the burden of the children. Almost our first glimpse of John Barton is when he says to his neighbor, "and now, Mrs. Wilson, give me the baby" (*MB*, 1:5).

Cecil, more doctrinaire than the Victorians, could see no connection between "Mrs." Gaskell's domestic vision and her "industrial" theme: "it would have been impossible for her if she had tried, to have found a subject less suited to her talents," he wrote.<sup>(18)</sup> The Marxist critics Raymond Williams, Arnold Kettle, and John Lucas, who revived interest in Gaskell's works in the 1950s and 1960s, also assumed that Gaskell was naive in adopting a "novelistic" approach to her "social theme," using a story of personal relations as its framework.<sup>(17)</sup> More recent critics such as Catherine Gallagher, however, have shown that all the social writings of the period, not merely women's novels, were prominently concerned with the connection between public and private life.<sup>(7)</sup> Indeed, the urgencies of family need motivated some of the most "public" statements of the time; speeches by Chartist leaders such as Joseph Raynor Stephens and Richard Pilling repeatedly "conflated the right to vote with the right to care for self and family," just as, in *Mary Barton*, every radical speech made by John Barton and his friends contains reference to starving children.<sup>(8)</sup> In Barton's mind the death of his son Tom justifies his murder of Carson's son Harry.

Explaining and mitigating his actions for her middle-class readers, Gaskell compares such working-class reaction with that of Frankenstein's monster, "created" (as factory "hands" were "created" by factory owners) by a "father" whose obligation to his creature ends with the act of creation. Gaskell here appeals to the middle class to recognize its obligations to the workers, many of whom have been uprooted from a rural environment where the feudal assumptions of noblesse oblige still operate. Instead, the urban employers ignore the suffering of their workforce and punish them when they revolt, as if making "domestic rules for the pretty behaviour of children without caring to know that those children had been kept for days without food" (MB, 8:96). Modern readers are offended by the "paternalism" of such analogies which, by casting the workers as children, deny them adult agency. Gaskell's concept of parental responsibility, however, was not derived from the feudal model seen in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), but from a more liberal ideal, based on her Unitarian beliefs.

### **"Appealing to reasonable men" control and sympathy in public affairs**

Unitarians were particularly strong in the north of England where William Gaskell had his congregation; their energetic, self-reliant, and ambitious outlook made them particularly suited to the industrial opportunities of the north, and by the mid-nineteenth century, some of the most powerful figures in this newly industrial society were Unitarians. The danger Gaskell perceived was that a purely rational reliance on market mechanisms led the industrial entrepreneurs to ignore their human costs, and in her industrial novels her main aim was to evoke sympathy for the victims of the market. This approach has been seen as sentimental by Marxist critics who believe class struggle to be necessary; it was, however, central to the emerging liberal project of the nineteenth century.

Susan Johnston, in *Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction* (2001), argues that the liberal state (based on the idea of contracts between individuals, rather than despotic power) depends on individuals being able to balance their own rights against those of others. In *North and South* (1855) the employer Mr. Thornton stands on the principle that the only connection between him and each of his workers is "that he has labour to sell and I capital to buy" (NS, I, 15:122). In this he is like Mr. Bradshaw in *Ruth* (1853), who feels that "all hope of there ever being any good men of business was ended" if "feelings, instead of maxims, were to be the guide" (R, 23:198). Thornton and Bradshaw invoke the idea of a contract governing their relations with employees, suppliers, and customers, and this in turn depends on the idea of the liberal individual as a "bearer of rights." Thornton resists the idea that he should intervene in the workers' welfare precisely on these grounds: "[b]ecause they labour ten hours a-day for us, I do not see that we have any right to impose leading-strings upon them for the rest of their time" (NS, I, 15:121). This recognition of workers as independent individuals logically requires recognition of each worker's implicit claim, that "I, too, am a man." This claim, however, is not meaningful in the abstract; it requires what Johnston calls "the exegesis of the other in terms of psychological depth." Her argument is that "[t]he profoundly political gesture made in Victorian fictions consists in precisely such exegesis." The domestic focus of Gaskell's industrial fiction thus appears as neither embarrassing nor irrelevant: "this explication of the other's claims to rights necessarily occurs in the context of the household, because the intimate space of the household is the domain of emotion, evaluation, and interior qualities - that is, the domain of the ends of life." (5)

In *Mary Barton* the worker George Wilson, on an errand of mercy for the starving Davenports, is contrasted with the Carsons, the mill owner's family, who are selfishly thoughtless, incapable of imaginative sympathy. While Carson speaks of an abstract "retrenchment," John Barton's argument is specific: "Han they ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?" (MB, 6:74). Neither of these positions is inevitable or innate; Gaskell shows us each man in his home environment in order to

suggest that the qualities which characterize them are produced within the family. Barton learned his habits of sympathy in imitation of "his mother's bravery," when, as "a little child," he had seen her "hide her daily morsel to share it among her children" (MB, 10:131). Harry Carson, on the other hand, has learned to be "proud of himself" for being handsome, well dressed, and gentlemanly: "his sisters were proud of him; his father and mother were proud of him: he could not set up his judgement against theirs" (MB, 6:77). The novel is mostly set within the Barton household, but the scenes in the Carson house are sufficient to suggest that the attitudes which animate the public clashes between workers and owners are grounded in domestic experience. Indeed, Johnston argues that the famous split in Victorian life between public and private values is an illusion, since "the household [is] the originary space in which the liberal self comes to be."**(6)**

If we accept this view, the notion of feminine influence takes a different complexion. So long as we perceive the "spheres" of men and women as separate, and founded on the different priorities of nurturance and competition, then the notion of influence is likely to be a weak one. A feminine influence that works by exerting pressure on an already established, and opposite, system of values is likely to be disregarded, since it carries no force but moral righteousness. If, however, we conceive the family as the space in which the character of boys as well as girls is formed, then the potential power of the woman, especially as mother, appears greater. Mothers - and all those who have the primary care of children - have a unique opportunity to shape future men and women. For this reason Gaskell's "industrial" novels, which move between private and public life, are not naive experiments with irrelevant or inappropriate sections; instead, they offer a radical critique of the ways in which separate spheres are created and maintained.

In middle-class homes the power of mothers is constrained by gender polarization. Most Victorian middle-class men were brought up to assume an extreme form of individualism which denied connection with other people except through the "cash nexus" - the monetary link between employer and employed - or through the hierarchical arrangement of the middle-class family. Their wives, following the prescription of separate spheres, tend to be affectionate but weak; Mrs. Carson, Mrs. Bradshaw, and Mrs. Hamley cosset and indulge their sons, but leave their education to their fathers. Several of Gaskell's short stories show in sensational terms the devastating effects of fathers who try to control their sons without cultivating personal bonds.

In *Ruth* Mr. Benson is nearly impoverished by embezzlement carried out by Richard Bradshaw, the son of a high-principled Dissenting manufacturer who is proud of his handling of his children. "If another's son turned out wild or bad, Mr. Bradshaw had little sympathy; it might have been prevented by a stricter rule...Richard was an only son, and yet Mr. Bradshaw might venture to say, he had never had his own way in his life" (R, 19:211). The novel suggests that sons who are given neither responsibility for their own actions nor encouragement to imagine the feelings of others will act properly only when "strict rule" is in evidence. Richard uses the freedom outside his father's control to cheat his old friend, and in *Mary Barton* Harry Carson's fatal cartoon of the starving workmen is also the product of a mind in which freedom has not been shaped by responsibility.

By contrast, most of Gaskell's working-class men assume responsibility out of sympathy for those weaker than themselves. In *Mary Barton* it is John Barton and George Wilson who relieve the desperate Davenport family, performing small menial tasks "with the useful skill of a working-man" (MB, 6:69). Again, the link between private and public motivation is clear. Nicholas Higgins, in *North and South*, sees the strike as a responsible action because every striker has those who depend on him for nourishment and life. In this sense these men are feminized, and work together with their womenfolk rather than seeing the care of children as a "separate sphere." Within the existing channels of political communication, however, these feminized perceptions carry little weight. The Chartist

petition in *Mary Barton* and the strike in *North and South* both fail to impress those who operate through control rather than sympathy.

*North and South* includes a whole chapter of debate on "Masters and Men," in which Thornton's mechanistic view of capital and labor is challenged by Margaret and her "feminine" father. Instead, they offer a "paternal" model which assumes temporary guidance rather than permanent authoritarian control. But Thornton's position is not changed by intellectual conviction. Rather, he needs to be motivated by personal contact with people about whom he has so far generalized; it is only when he sees one of his workers in his own home, with the orphan children he has adopted, that he realizes both the necessities and the generous qualities of the poor, and it is this which forces him to recognize the workers as independent and responsible people.

This rapprochement, however, would not have happened spontaneously; it needs the intervention of a woman who, belonging to a class which aligns her with neither masters nor men, could urge their contact from a position which was simply "feminine." Unlike Mrs. Bradshaw or Mrs. Hamley, Margaret's notion of the feminine role is energetic and self-reliant. Forced by necessity to take control within her own family, she is also forced to emerge from its protection, walking the streets and speaking directly to people of different classes. In her conversations with Thornton and Higgins, she might still seem to be exercising "influence" in a traditional way, but her intervention in the riot constitutes a startling excursion into the public sphere.

Barbara Leah Harman sees the riot scene as "a defining moment in the history of women's participation in public/political life," and clarifies this assertion by comparing it with the riot scene in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849).<sup>(3)</sup> Brontë's heroines watch, invisibly, from a distance, knowing that "they would do no good by rushing down into the *mêlée*"; Margaret, however, risks social opprobrium by appearing in public in response to a complex motivation which includes a desire to protect the man she is coming to love, and a desire to prevent the workers from committing violence they will regret.<sup>(4)</sup> Interestingly, the mill-owner in *Shirley*, though temporarily exposed to feminine influence during an illness, reverts to his authoritarian ways on recovery, his wife taking upon herself the duty to act as his social conscience.<sup>(1)</sup> Thornton, on the other hand, is personally changed by his contact with Margaret and with Higgins.

As Thornton learns the value of "private" knowledge, so Margaret gains access to the public world as the owner of capital. She has not, however, been a popular heroine. It was easier for the feminist critics of the 1970s to endorse the rebellious but generalized assertions of *Jane Eyre*, that women "need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do," than to consider the practicalities of where exactly that field of action might lie, within the existing state of society.<sup>(2)</sup> At the end of *North and South*, we are told that Margaret, left an orphan and an heiress, "took her life into her own hands." She does not, however, either immediately rejoice in her freedom or settle herself comfortably in the domestic sphere. Instead, she takes time to try "to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working" (NS, II, 24:416). This cautious, negotiating spirit is, perhaps, the characteristic position not of a rebellious daughter but of an anxious mother who, while keen to enlarge the daughter's sphere of action, at the same time recognizes the need to work within existing social patterns. It is an attitude of compromise, which is now beginning to be recognized as valuable for its realistic assessment of possibilities.

### **"A law unto herself" protection or independence for girls?**

Gaskell took very seriously her own responsibility for the education of her daughters, and the touching anxiety with which she approached this task can be seen in the diary she kept to record the early progress of her eldest daughter, Marianne. In particular, we see the tension arising from her Unitarian desire to leave Marianne to make her own mistakes, and the recognition that in order to become a properly socialized being, the child must also learn to obey authority. Gaskell writes that at three years old, "[h]er little conscience ... is becoming very acute and well-judging" (PV, 65). The judicious balancing of freedom and guidance is intended to produce a child who is "a law unto herself," always a term of praise in Gaskell's work (L, 160). A very similar attitude can be seen in Leonard's early education in *Ruth* - a similarity that suggests that ideally there should be little difference in the treatment of boys and girls.

In her representations of existing society, however, Gaskell shows that boys and girls are liable to different faults, arising from their different education: boys have too much freedom, which leads to errors of judgment, aggression, and selfishness, while girls have too much protection, leading to ignorance, timidity, and abrogation of responsibility. In most matters Gaskell works to minimize these differences, aiming not only for more responsible men but also for more independent women. She implicitly deplores the conventional, infantilized women who, even when amiable, tend to be enfeebled or ineffective. Mrs. Hamley, in *Wives and Daughters* (1866), had "sunk into the condition of a chronic invalid" through sheer inactivity (WD, 4:41); Mrs. Bradshaw, in *Ruth*, "murmured faintly at her husband when his back was turned; but if his voice was heard ... she was mute" (R, 19:211). Such a mother does not provide a good role model for her daughters, and Jemima Bradshaw is scornful of her mother's "manner of proceeding, which savoured to her a little of deceit" (R, 19:211).

Jemima is emboldened by her observation of *Ruth*, with her self-governing morality, and when *Ruth* is accused, it is Jemima who springs to her defence: "I will not keep silence. I will bear witness to *Ruth*" (R, 26:338). In one story after another we see women summoning courage to act on their convictions. Mary Barton, *Ruth* Hilton, and Margaret Hale assert themselves in sensational circumstances - a sea chase, a cholera epidemic, and a riot, but even timid women like Mrs. Bradshaw in *Ruth* speak out in defense of their children.

In the area of sexuality, however, Gaskell remains tangled in the more general ideology of her time, struggling to reconcile on the one hand her rational wish to produce self-regulating adult women, and on the other an anxiety about a female "purity" which is conceived as so vulnerable that knowledge itself can damage it. The result is an inconsistent desire to educate girls to exercise independent judgment, while at the same time denying them information that would enable them to become "a law unto themselves" in sexual matters. This is an area where Unitarian principles seem under pressure from more widespread prescriptions.

"Conduct books" for women, recommending how they could best fulfill their domestic responsibilities, were common throughout the eighteenth century, consolidating an idea of the family as an essential unit of society with the wife as its moral center. In the nineteenth century the number of books directed at women and their conduct in the home greatly increased, while their direction subtly changed. In addition to moral rectitude came social propriety, giving rise to superficial patterns of behavior, particularly in the middle class, which assumed enormous importance as indicators of class status and social acceptability. By the 1840s middle-class women's lives were shaped by a mesh of social expectations which ranged from the duty to submit to husbands' sexual demands to the ability to interpret the social significance of minute differences of clothing.<sup>10</sup>

In some ways the ability to negotiate this complex system of appearances, which signalled acceptance or exclusion, was a source of power for Victorian women, and some feminist critics have argued that



ladies like those in *Cranford* (1853) acquired significant "social capital" or status.<sup>(11)</sup> On the other hand, to live safely in this atmosphere of constant surveillance required an exhausting vigilance. In particular, mothers were responsible for the social education of daughters, whose virtue and marriageability would be judged by their conformity to these rules. Being too talkative or too reserved; walking alone, with a young man, or without a bonnet could be interpreted as a sign of dubious virtue, and once a girl's "character," or reputation, was questioned it was difficult to recover.

In this context the impulse to educate girls to be "a law unto themselves" is severely checked by the fear that such girls would be seen as "unmaidenly" (a favorite word of Gaskell's, very irritating to modern readers, which derives from this anxiety). Gaskell's dilemma is particularly evident in *Ruth*, where the heroine "was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice, respecting the subject of a woman's life" (R, 3:44). The implication here is that if Ruth had had the necessary information, she would have been able to protect herself against Bellingham's seduction. The narrator, however, immediately recoils from the idea that such information should be given, doubting whether "wise parents ever directly speak" of this awesome topic (R, 3:44). Protection, rather than independence, is advocated.

In theory, Gaskell's position is that of Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, who argues for moderation: "I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path: nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will to watch and guard herself."<sup>(25)</sup> In practice, however, she is always uneasy about how long protection should last. When Ruth in turn becomes a mother, we are told that "she fondly imagined" that she could guard her little boy "from every touch of corrupting sin by ever watchful and most tender care. And her mother had thought the same, most probably" (R, 15:161). Given Ruth's history, there is poignant irony in her reliance on protection whose continuance cannot be guaranteed. Yet Gaskell is very reluctant to end the necessary period of protection for girls where the dangers are sexual. Although she was sure of her moral rightness in writing the story of Ruth's seduction and unmarried motherhood, and upset that some of her readers thought it "an unfit subject for fiction," she nevertheless accepts that "[o]f course it is a prohibited book in this, as in many other households; not a book for young people, unless read with someone older (I mean to read it with MA some quiet time or other;)" (L, 220-1). At this time her daughter Marianne ("MA") was nineteen.

In *North and South* Margaret Hale is more mature than Ruth when she is left an orphan. Despite her strength of character, however, and her steady growth in maturity, the issue of sexuality is never satisfactorily confronted. When Fanny and the servants assume that Margaret has embraced Thornton because she is in love with him, it oppresses her as "an ugly dream of insolent words" (NS, I, 22:185). Despite appearances being against her, she finds it "insulting" when Mrs. Thornton assumes that the young man with whom she is seen walking at dusk is her lover, and even after this warning, she continues to deny any consciousness even of the appearance of impropriety (NS, II, 13:315). It seems, in fact, to be consciousness of sexuality itself which makes Margaret uncomfortable, rather than impropriety. When Mr. Lennox proposes to her at the beginning of the novel, Margaret "felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage," and at the end, despite all the growing up she has done, she is still overcome "with beautiful shame" on coming to an understanding with Thornton (NS, I, 4:32-3; II, 27:436).

Interestingly, the problem of sexual knowledge seems to be one peculiar to middle-class girls. In *Mary Barton* Mary's Aunt Esther becomes a prostitute after being seduced in circumstances very like Ruth's, and although her story is told with harrowing appeals to sympathy, there is no suggestion that she did not know what she was agreeing to when she went off with her young soldier. Moreover,



although Esther is desperate to save Mary from a similar fate, Mary seems to have assessed the threat from Harry Carson without help from her elders: "if I had loved you before, I don't think I should have loved you now you have told me you meant to ruin me; for that's the plain English of not meaning to marry me" (MB, 11:160). In *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) the heroine is a country girl, and described as "no prude"; she accepts stolen kisses as a harmless pleasure and feels no shame at avowing her love for Charley Kinraid. *Sylvia's Lovers* is Gaskell's only extended and serious exploration of marriage in terms of passion and prudence. When Sylvia is tricked into a marriage with her cousin Philip Hepburn from which she cannot then escape, she is first choked with indignation at being kept from her lover, and then disillusioned by Kinraid's rapid consolation with another woman. Her life seems ruined: she has been "cheated by men as she trusted, and...has no help for it" (SL, 39:444). The story fades out in varieties of regret and remorse, leaving the reader disturbed and uncomfortable, but its focus is on interpersonal responsibility rather than "unmaidenly" shame.

Although critics have been scathing about Gaskell's reliance on a romance plot, in fact only three of her seven most developed tales end in marriage (*Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*); the others (*Cranford*, *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Cousin Phillis*) have less usual plots, and three of these describe less conventional households. Ruth lives with a bachelor Dissenting minister, his sister, and a female servant; *Cranford* is populated by single ladies; and Sylvia is happiest with a small community of women - her mother, her daughter, and her former rival, Hester Rose. There are many examples in Gaskell's shorter fiction of people, often women, grouping together into unorthodox "families," often for the protection of children.(24) These unorthodox families demonstrate that Gaskell's concern with the raising of children does not depend on a conventional concept of the heterosexual family, but rather on functional cooperation.

Many of these unconventional groupings include a female servant, who is often highly valued for her practical skills and nurturing attitudes, and in *Cousin Phillis* (1864) it is Betty, the servant, who counteracts the infantilization of the young heroine in a story which gives us Gaskell's most detailed and subtle exploration of the harm done by overprotective parents.(23) Phillis Holman, though clever and well-grown, is kept a child by parents who believe they are treating her in the best possible way by instructing her in all kinds of knowledge from Greek poetry to making pastry, while ignoring the fact that she is growing into a woman - "a stately, gracious young woman, in the dress and with the simplicity of a child" (CP, I, 228). This means that when her affections are aroused by a young man, who subsequently deserts her, she has no relief from her suffering. Her parents first ignore the cause of her distress, and then blame the young man. It takes her courageous declaration "I loved him, father!" to announce her independent existence; it is, however, Betty who insists that instead of weakly languishing, she must "do something for [her]self" (CP, IV, 308, 316).

In *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's last novel, the uncomfortable tension between independence and protection for girls seems to relax, and yet this is the first full-length novel in which the education of daughters becomes the focus of attention. Part of its plot does, indeed, give us another example of the dangers of too little protection for girls. Cynthia Kirkpatrick, left to her own devices at an early age by a mother whose attention is engrossed by the need to earn her living, becomes enmeshed in obligations which threaten her "character" and from which she can envisage no escape. Perhaps more important, it becomes evident in her conversation that her education has given her no settled convictions or sense of morality to guide her decisions. Motivated by expediency, she is not fit to be "a law unto herself," and her salvation lies in recognizing who, among her friends, will be a reliable guide to right action.

Mr. Preston, who puts Cynthia in such a difficult position, is one of a number of young men in Gaskell's novels who fascinate by their physical presence and tales of daring exploits. Will Wilson in

Mary Barton, Charley Kinraid in *Sylvia's Lovers*, and Mr. Preston in *Wives and Daughters* offer a glamorous kind of masculinity which attracts young women because of its adventurous distance from their own lives. Wilson and Kinraid battle with the sea and its monsters; Preston subdues a spirited horse. *Wives and Daughters* offers a semi-comic commentary on such derring-do in the way in which Cynthia is rescued from her difficulties. Although the novel begins with an invocation of fairytales, this distressed damsel is rescued not by Prince Charming, but by her stepsister Molly, abetted by a strong-minded aristocrat (Lady Harriet) and a timid old maid (Miss Phoebe Browning), who are whimsically compared with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.<sup>(13)</sup> Although the novel ends with Molly's marriage to Roger Hamley, its "hero" is Molly herself.

Like Mary Barton and Ruth Hilton, Molly Gibson loses her mother at an early age; unlike them, however, she is carefully looked after by a female servant and has a lively and humorous relationship with her father. Although Mr. Gibson shares Reverend Holman's wish to keep his daughter a child, is "startled to find that his little one was growing fast into a woman," and reacts to a young man's infatuation with alarm, the situation is treated with some humor (WD, 3:32; 5:55). From what we learn of Molly we as readers are ready to believe that his exaggerated protection of her - rushing her away to stay with neighbors, and remarrying in haste to provide her with a chaperone - is unnecessary, since his generally sensible treatment of Molly has already led her to become "a law unto herself," easily capable of dealing with a lovestruck apprentice.

Later in the novel, we see how Molly not only becomes the receptacle of other people's secrets, each with a sexual element (Osborne Hamley's secret marriage and Cynthia's secret engagement), but also deals with the threatening Preston entirely alone and on her own initiative, refusing to divulge the situation to her father and taking responsibility for whatever mistakes she may have made. The chapter title, "Molly Gibson to the Rescue" (chapter forty-four), may have a comical flavor, but her courageous actions, speaking the truth and refusing to be diverted from her intentions, make her a heroine fit for Unitarian principles. The implication of her heroism is that parents who provide rational and affective security during childhood are still likely to underestimate the independent potential of their daughters. The novel suggests that Molly would have been much better left to her own devices than "protected" by the second Mrs. Gibson.

## Conclusion

Elizabeth Gaskell is not an obvious feminist, but gender issues prove central to her social vision. Her novels offer a thorough critique of the kind of masculine autonomy that deprives powerful middle-class men of the capacity to relate to other people - either their employees or their families. The corollary of this is the induced weakness of the "do-nothing lady" who, in John Barton's words, goes to bed "without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself" (MB, 1:8).

In her industrial novels Gaskell admires the warmth and sympathy of working-class life in which men as well as women adopt nurturing roles. In both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, the heroines are forced by circumstances to take responsibility not only for themselves but also for the lives of others, and this is shown to strengthen and improve their characters. In *Mary Barton*, however, the burden of the nurturing role is left to the men; Mary sinks into a private sphere when her task is done, whereas Margaret thinks seriously about how to pursue her actions in the public sphere.

Although Gaskell's later novels appear to abandon "social" themes, in fact we can see a steady sharpening of focus on the upbringing of the young, especially girls, and the importance of the family (including "families" of unorthodox kinds) in shaping future citizens who will be both "a law unto

themselves" and sympathetic to others. This change of focus has been seen as a diversion from social to merely domestic issues, but in the light of contemporary concerns about the formation of the liberal individual, Gaskell's novels appear not only shrewd, observant, and sympathetic, but as in the forefront of Victorian investigations into the nature of social responsibilities.<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, perhaps, the novels still have much to teach us about the dangers of gender polarization. The feminist perception that "the personal is political" has largely been understood in terms of women's oppression; domestic power structures have been redefined as "political" in the cause of women's emancipation. Gaskell's apparently more conservative approach shows us, however, that the personal is political in a more expanded sense, since it is in our infancy that we acquire the values which determine actions in the public world. Those who have the care of children need to produce sympathetic and responsible adults. If they do not, we shall continue to find in the "private" sphere what Virginia Woolf called "the egg of the very same worm" which, in the public world, hatches into a damaging autocracy.<sup>(9)</sup>

## NOTES

(1) See Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "Romance and the Self-Made Man: Gaskell Rewrites Brontë," *Victorian Newsletter* 91 (1997), 10-16.

(2) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847], ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: World's Classics, 2000), I, 12:109.

(3) Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), ix.

(4) Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* [1849], ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: World's Classics, 1998), 19:345. Harman makes a striking comparison of the two scenes in *The Feminine Political Novel*, 63.

(5) Susan Johnston, *Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 132.

(6) *Ibid.*, 10.

(7) Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

(8) Lisa SurrIDGE, "Working-Class Masculinities in *Mary Barton*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (2000), 331-43, 334.

(9) Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* [1938] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 61.

10 See Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), ch. 2.

11 Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 121.

- 12** For an argument about the diversion from social themes in the late novels, see, for instance, Ruth B. Yeazell, "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: Sybil, Mary Barton and Felix Holt," *Novel* 18 (1985), 126-44.
- 13** See WD, 49:557.
- 14** Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), 97-8.
- 15** Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 153, 181.
- 16** Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 11.
- 17** Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958); Arnold Kettle, "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel," in Boris Ford, ed., *From Dickens to Hardy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 169-87; John Lucas, "Mrs Gaskell and Brotherhood," in David Howard et al., eds., *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 141-205.
- 18** Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, 235.
- 19** John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* [1869], in Mill, *On Liberty and other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988), 486.
- 20** See Lyn Pykett, "Women Writing Woman: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Gender and Sexuality," in Joanne Shattock, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78-98, 84-5.
- 21** Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (London: J. W. Parker, 1839).
- 22** See Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).
- 23** Examples of these unconventional groupings include "The Old Nurse's Story," "The Manchester Marriage," "The Grey Woman" and "A Dark Night's Work"; Sally is also important in *Ruth*.
- 24** See "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras," "Lizzie Leigh," "The Well of Pen-Morfa," "Half a Lifetime Ago," and "My Lady Ludlow."
- 25** Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848], ed. Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: World's Classics, 1993), I, 3:31.

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