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Historical Consciousness and Gender Awareness in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse selected novels of Elizabeth Gaskell in terms of historical consciousness and gender to extract from her works the patterns of gender distinctive role, class consciousness, and social identity. Although history and theory equally occupy an important place in literary criticism, history contributes to a better understanding of the authors' participant view of some of the important historical events of the time and the reconstruction of history through the medium of their fiction. Gaskell tried to reflect her historical and gender consciousness in her novels to communicate something of her own involvement in the contemporary English history in mid-Victorian era. The present study focuses upon Elizabeth Gaskell's willingness to challenge the assumptions of her culture, particularly in regard to received ideas about the role of women, addressing women's problems in the family and society. A discussion of gender and literary form is dominated by the need to explain women's special relationship with the novel. Most work in this area springs from the sociology of literature or from cultural history. It examines the changes in class structure and in the position of women, and demonstrates a particular interest in the emergence of a leisured female middle class, from whose ranks came not only the women novelists but an extensive female readership.

This study aims to examine Elizabeth Gaskell as part of the mainstream of female literary tradition bringing out the aspects of her work that diverge from and converge with the Victorian literary canon. Throughout her writing career Gaskell extends and expands the scope of her knowledge about history and gender. This historical consciousness and gender awareness is taken as a basis for a more detailed consideration of five of her novels, namely *Mary Barton*, *Cranford*, *Ruth*, *North and South* and *Sylvia's Lovers***,** which are discussed chronologically. Gaskell's last novel

Wives and Daughters is not included in this study due to its bearing thematic similarities with her previous works. In order to get a fuller view and a better understanding of Gaskell's novels, reference will be made to her letters and short fiction.

Victorian literature is important today because it is a battlefield in which new conceptions of text, self and social order are forgeable. An important combination of feminism, ideology, textualism and historicism woven together from traditions of Victorian study has become central to the study of Victorian literature today. Standing formidably for Victorian literature as a whole is the Victorian novel. The Victorian thoughts that invented their fictions contribute to the understanding of history. And indeed the novel seems the prime example of the way Victorian women started to create themselves as social subjects, as a category: women. To study Victorian fiction produced by female writers helps us to get to know these women, and why they have to write the novel, the story of their own domesticity.

What makes Gaskell attractive for this project is that in her novels she focuses on the problems of women in nineteenth century England. She uses industrial novels to criticize the dominant ideology that separates the sexes, to make a feminist statement about women's need for meaningful work and choice, and to affirm their fitness for participation in the public sphere. In these novels Gaskell challenges the Victorian conception of a gender-based division of labour that separated the public and private domains. Thus this study can open up fresh perspectives and fresh dimensions to the role of women in her changing society.

The accession of Queen Victoria was seen by many to mark a new stage in the history of the British nation, and the literature produced from the mid-1830s to the turn of the century has been indelibly stamped with her name. The term "Victorian" functions as a convenient and historically bounded division of the cultural past,

signifying the period between the decline of Romanticism and the beginnings of the cultural renaissance known as modernism. As Jane Thomas asserts in the opening of her "The Construction of Victorianism" in *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature from 1830 – 1900* (1994:1-2), the adjective "Victorian", denoting a variety of styles, manners and cultural forms "typical" of a period which spans almost a century, was coined in 1875, and yet as countless critics have revealed, it is impossible to draw an objective and clear literary and cultural picture of an age that changed so rapidly that traditional certainties and ways of knowing were constantly under threat. In her words the term "Victorian" became associated with confidence, direction, progress and identity, and as such functioned as a comforting amulet to ward off everything that threatened to undermine the security of the middle classes. In reality, the period of Victoria's reign was characterized by change and instability; "the threat of revolution; the discrediting of old traditions; the usurpation of a God who could always be relied upon to sanction the deeds and words of the philanthropic and paternalistic, by an indifferent and mechanical nature process; the loosening of the chains of matrimony and the empowerment of women and the working classes" (3). In the very year of Victoria's accession to the throne Carlyle published his *French Revolution* (1837), "with its dire warning to the upper classes that unless they provided a model of responsibility and sound leadership England would soon have a revolution of its own" (3). In *Chartism* (1840) he drew attention to the pressures on the working classes of poverty, the Corn Law, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, *laissez-faire* economic policies and the cash nexus which, in his view, had resulted in the Chartist Movement, itself a potential catalyst for the "English Revolution". Disraeli in his novel *Sybil* (1845) regarded England as essentially two nations, "Rich and Poor" (4), and, like Carlyle "looked towards an enlightened aristocracy to provide the leadership and direction the nation so badly needed" (4). Dickens lamented in the *Quarterly Review* for June 1839: "The one half of mankind lives without knowledge of how the other

half dies" (4). He believed that middle-class complacency and indifference to the plight of the poor was the result of ignorance. The foundations of society were already badly shaken before Queen Victoria came to the throne. According to Thomas as early as 1831 Macaulay urged the House of Commons to "Reform, that you may preserve, or else persist in a hopeless struggle against the spirit of the age" (qtd.in Thomas,5). In his essay of the same title, John Stuart Mill defines the "Spirit of the Age" as one of transition "in which worldly power must cease to be monopolized by the landed gentry"(5). The balance of power was shifting from the aristocracy to the middle classes and the weight of their economic prosperity fell heavily upon those whose labour helped produce it and who as yet had no parliamentary voice. Social commentators, politicians and intellectuals recognized the need for widespread changes in the status quo - a need that was emphasized by government reports of the 1830s and 1840s and by the Chartist Movement of 1837-48. "Chartism, activated in the year of Victoria's accession to the throne, was largely working class in orientation and campaigned for democratic rights and improved ways and working conditions by means of mass demonstrations and. at time, mob violence" (5). Thomas acknowledges that the reforms in education and the Reform Bills which enfranchised men of the industrial middle class in 1832, the urban working class in 1867 and the agricultural labourers in 1884 were designed to relieve the pressure of an increasingly militant proletariat (the working class who actually perform the labour necessary to extract something valuable from the means of production). As Richard Stine has indicated, "Victorian society was forever subject to tensions which militated against complete spontaneity and singleness of purpose", and the literature of the period, annexed by the term "Victorian" is riven with these tensions (qtd.in Thomas,6). One of the thousand "remediable ills" that is held up for analysis in this period is the economic, social and sexual repression of women. J.S.Mill presented an unsuccessful petition to parliament which demanded the inclusion of women in what was to become the 1867 Reform

Bill. Thomas also asserts, “Many women throughout the period challenged the Victorian feminine ideal and the Women’s Movement of the second half of the nineteenth century was perhaps the most anarchic of all, for it threatened the very foundation of the domestic haven the Victorians constructed as a retreat from the vicissitudes of everyday life” (8).

Gaskell was deeply concerned about the society and the environment she was living in. Her education and Unitarian training gave her the confidence in her own gifts that she needed in order to attempt writing about what was going on around her and were instrumental in shaping Gaskell’s perspective on herself and on her work. In Unitarian sermons and devotional literature, the words “culture” or “cultivation” are used repeatedly. According to Unitarian thought a person is responsible for cultivating his or her own soul (Robinson,1982:10). Unitarianism emphasized the almost limitless capacity of human nature. This emphasis on human potential applied to women in a particularly significant way, affirming for them the possibility of self-knowledge and self-development. Unitarianism freed Gaskell from some of the conventional and limiting views regarding women’s proper activities. Landsbury notes that Unitarian women were normally educated in a manner comparable to men and it was unusual for a Unitarian woman not to be informed about politics and science and not to be proficient in languages (1984:4). Further, she asserts that Unitarianism recommended cultivation of one’s own gifts as a prerequisite to discovering one’s own work. The Unitarian was obliged to pursue his or her own personal truth, and to act out the truth as an active member of society. If a woman discerned writing to be her talent, she viewed it not only as a gift, but a solemn duty as well, sent by God to be put to social use. Such a frame of mind contributed to a woman’s sense that her life was not predetermined, that she was responsible for giving it meaning (4).

Elizabeth Gaskell has long been underestimated. Perceived by Daniel Cecil – one of the most famous critics of ninteenth century English literature - as the "typical Victorian lady," "all a woman was expected to be" (1934:184), Gaskell has not always been taken as seriously as she deserves. Almost as well received in her day as Charles Dickens, Gaskell has not maintained the reputation that Dickens has. Indeed, she has been misrepresented as docile and submissive by critics. Even recent critics see Gaskell as limited by conventionality and by a religious orientation (Colby,1995:1). Colby suggests that she has been represented as a conservative writer who unquestioningly embraces received ideas about the dominant ideology of gender (1). Yet, given the constraints of Victorian culture, Gaskell's novels may in fact be seen as radical because they challenge widely held assumptions about the nature of women, their proper sphere, and their participation in labour. Gaskell's treatment of work, in particular, is revealing, for it can serve as a testing ground for her attitudes and purposes. Gaskell lived in a century that was riddled with change; her fiction is in many ways a response to changes that were occurring in her lifetime and itself is a potential agent of change. "Capitalizing on her respectable status as the wife of a minister and mother of four, Gaskell entered the condition of England debate to make new claims for women. Like many of her contemporaries she was conscious of the painful effects of Victorian social and religious upheaval, but she is almost alone among them in betraying so few signs of personal disequilibrium" (2).

Gaskell invariably appears as one of the group of "social problem novelists", and her non industrial novels are mostly ignored. According to Colby the industrial novel, described over forty years ago by Kathleen Tillotson and Raymond Williams and redefined recently by Catherine Gallagher, is a genre that began to appear in the "hungry forties." The term has been applied to a group of novels that includes *Sybil* (1845) by Disraeli, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854) by Gaskell, *Alton Locke* (1850) by Charles Kingsly, *Hard Times* (1854) by Dickens, and *Felix Holt*

(1866) by George Eliot. Thomas asserts that these works arose out of the social and political upheavals which followed the Reform Bill of 1832. The 1830s and 1840s marked the beginnings of a conscious effort both by Parliament and by social commentators to adress the problems caused by the rapid industrialization of the preceding decades. The first Factory Act and the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 reflected the stirrings of governmental conscience and, from the other side, the rise of Chartism marked the beginnings of concerted working-class demands for reform. The economic depression of the 1840s produced deprivation amongst the industrial workers of the north on a scale which could not be ignored, and Chartist riots and marches on Westminster made poverty and disaffection visibly threatening to the comparatively untouched middle-class southerner. It was Carlyle who first drew attention to the social effects of the industrial revolution in his essay "Sign of the Times" (1829) and who, in coining the phrase the "condition of England question" in *Chartism* (1839), provided a focus for what to many novelists of the early Victorian period seemed to be the centeral matter for fiction (35). The industrial novels all share some common characteristics: the detailed ducumentation of the suffering of the poor, the reproducting of working-class speech through dialect, criticism of the effects of industrialism, the discussion of contemporary reform movements like Chartism and Utilitarianism, and some attemt – usually individual and internal – at a solution to social problems. Frequently the plot is developed around a sensitive protagonist, usually male, whose moral, intellectual, or emotional development spans the course of the novel and whose romantic attachments are troubled and conflicted. The industrial novel, which combined narrative interest with protest, was a response to a particularly dismal period in which bank failures and the scarcity of jobs created conditions that many writers saw as deplorable (Colby,8). Unlike the other industrial novelists, Gaskell is primarily interested in how women fit into new structures of society and in how work fits into a woman's life

Recent criticism of Elizabeth Gaskell has concentrated on two separate aspects of her work: her writing as a social problem novelist, and hence her role in supporting or challenging the dominant ideological positions of her time; and the fact of her being a woman writer. In 1954 Kathleen Tillotson published *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, dealing at length with *Mary Barton*, together with other "novels which are essentially 'of' the forties" (Tillotson,1956:vii). This historical treatment enabled Tillotson to avoid the gender-stereotyped criticism which had by now assigned to Elizabeth Gaskell "an impression of dowdiness" (Collins,1953:60). Tillotson sees *Mary Barton* as "the outstanding example…of a kind of novel which first clearly disengaged itself in the forties: the novel directly concerned with a social problem, and especially with the 'condition-of-England question'" (202). Within four years both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* had been taken up by the Marxist critics Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle, and in "The Industrial Novels" (Williams,1958) and "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel" (Kettle,1958), Gaskell is bracketed with Disraeli, Kingsley and the Dikens of *Hard Times*, as a novelist who "provide[s] some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society" (Williams,99). Some, like Allott (1960:5) and McVeagh (1970:6), see Gaskell as a split personality. Others, like Pollard (1965) and Easson (1991), take each novel on its own merits, giving a wealth of information about composition and reception but attempting no unifying thesis. Most full-scale studies since the mid-1960s have, however, attempted to find some principle of unity. Wright (1965) finds it in a social concern which evolves from the problems of industrial cities to the hierarchical county structures. Ganz (1969) sees humour as the key and Craik (1975) the provincial settings. Duthie (1980) identifies a number of themes (nature, society, industry, the family, the individual) which run

through all the novels. All these writers begin by deploring the industrial / pastoral split in Gaskell criticism, but none of them is able to produce a formula which heals the breach (Stoneman,1987:6). Different critical approches, old and new, have been applied to Gaskell's more ambitious and expansive works discussing them from different points of view but only some of them have directly related their works with gender and historical consciousness. Feminist critics re-reading Gaskell's presentation of gender relations have found her deeply critical of the power structures of her society. Elain Showalter's essays in "Towards a Feminist Poetic" (Jacobus,1979) and "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" (Abel,1989) have been useful in suggesting broad categorization of gender in Gaskell's works. Carol Landsbury's *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Crisis* (1975) is about her treatment of family as a political force interacting with others. Seeing the family as a basic structure of authority, she is able to make links between novels which are otherwise disparate. A socialist rather than a feminist critic, her treatment of the family as a political force interacting with others nevertheless provides an important basis for a feminist reading. Patsy Stoneman's *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1987) is one of the prominent works in the field in which she discusses gender to a great extent. Stoneman connects class and gender in her study, showing that for women, "politics begins with challenging the 'private' acts which forbid them a public voice" (Flint,1995:63). Perhaps in rather an essentialist manner, she believes that there is an 'authentic' woman's voice, which needs to find its expression without adopting masculinist language, rights, and principles: a need which is as strong now, Stoneman argues, as in Gaskell's time. Following psychoanalytic work of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gillingan, Stoneman locates this authenticity in woman's capacity for mothering and in the importance of the maternal bond:

something which goes beyond strictly biological capacities to encompass woman's tendency to establish her identity, as she grows into adulthood, through bonding and identification with other women, rather than according to the Oedipal pattern of separation and differentiation from a paternal figure.

Robyn Warhol, in *Gendered Interventions, Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (1989) confronts something which is too frequently taken for granted in Gaskell criticism: the strong presence of an interventionist narrative commentary in the earlier fiction, and the fading of this voice in the later works. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Nancy Armstrong has studied the influence of working-class unrest on Victorian models of class sexuality. Mary Poovey's *Uneven Development: The Ideological work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988) discusses Poovy's important insights and inserts them into the structure of displacement that characterizes the interplay between class and gender in Victorian writing. In *Some Appointed Work to Do* (1996) Robin B. Colby argues that Gaskell's treatment of women's labour – particularly that of working-class women – has not been properly assessed. According to Colby, Gaskell's particular contribution to the Condition of England debate was to gender it. In *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (1997) Deirdre D'Albertis refers to Gaskell's writing as both equivocal and dissembling; she also deals with Gaskell and new Feminist historiography. Hilary Schor's *Scheherezade in the Marketplace, Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (1992) starts from the assumption that Gaskell sensed a tension between 'art' and 'duty', 'woman' and 'novelist', but goes on to develop her theme by saying that Gaskell's intense interest in publication and in acquiring a public voice, and her initial attempt, in *Mary Barton*, to write the fiction of those denied a voice within Victorian society led to an awareness of her own silencing. What is impressive about Schor's work is its willingness to listen

to and adopt the methodologies of other disciplines, in particular cultural anthroplogy and historiography (64).

Some critical attention seems to have swung back to Gaskell the woman. Felicia Bonapart's in *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs Gaskell's Demon* (1992) argues that "Mrs Gaskell" was a constructed identity behind which the "real" Elizabeth Gaskell, consciously or unconsciously, hid. Bonapart asserts, Gaskell had a powerful inner life in continual conflict with the "respectable" choices which she made not only in her own life, but around which she structured her plots (66). This rebellion against orthodoxy, Bonapart maintains, does not rise to the surface in isolated disruptive moments, but persists as a subtext to her entire oeuvre (66). By contrast, Jenny Uglow's authoritative biography of Elizabeth Gaskell *A Habit of Story* (1993), gives one a great deal of material through which to contexualize Gaskell's writings, and provides just enough literary analysis to demonstrate how both private fears and concerns, and publicly debated issues, continually find their way into Gaskell's fiction, biography, and other writing.

Nonetheless none of the above mentioned authors deal with Gaskell's role as a female author concerned with the gender policies of her time and her contribution in constructing (deconstructing) the contemporary history (herstory) of her age through her historical consciousness and gender awareness.

Because the focus of this dissertation is on Elizabeth Gaskell's historical consciousness and gender awareness as a female writer, relevant historical details and gender policies of the Victorian era are discussed in the first chapter. Important historical events such as the Industrial Revolution, Chartism, Reform Acts, and *laissez-faire* economic policies, which provided the rich background of Gaskell's fiction are discussed and are brought to center stage through her authorial consciousness, to locate Gaskell's position within the mainstream of Victorian ideology. Notions of gender such as gender role and sexuality, the women's sphere,

an ideology of femininity, the Women's Question, and the women's revolution are also very briefly discussed to shed light on Gaskell's personal and professional life as a woman / author living under the dominance of nineteenth century patriarchal ideologies.

Chapters two to five are devoted to the study of selected novels which depict Gaskell's historical consciousness and gender awareness as they are reflected through the medium of fiction, in chronological order. Each novel is discussed in terms of Gaskell's contribution to the construction of contemporary history through her female pen. In order to demonstrate Gaskell's interest in the different directions that women take as they seek to find their work and position in the world, *Mary Barton* is analyzed in the second chapter. This is about how a young factory girl derives maturity from her occupation. At the center of *Mary Barton* stands a bright, capable young woman whose life is all before her. What she makes of her life is the focus of the novel. Chapter three deals with *Cranford,* in which Gaskell presents a community of women who are self-sufficient. In *Cranford,* Gaskell evokes the image of a female community that sustains itself by its own labour. In chapter four participation in and resistance to the social logic of fallenness and the use of Gaskell's new genre, 'the penitential narrative' in *Ruth* are discussed. Affirmation of women's right to participate in public life, where her negotiation and philanthropic work reconciles warring parties and improves working conditions is illustrated through *North and South* in chapter five. In chapter six the representation of large cultural tensions associated with the progress of suffrage and the function of petition in the nineteenth century in Gaskell's historical novel *Sylvia's Lovers* are discussed. The conclusion brings all the above mentioned concepts together to elicit from her novels points maintaining that, due to her historical consciousness and gender awareness, Gaskell obtained a participant's view of some of the most important events in nineteenth century English history.

CHAPTER I

SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

The purpose of this chapter is to present a short account of the most important socio-political events of nineteenth century England. It also considers the nineteenth century idea of gender by focusing on concepts such as gender role and sexuality, women's sphere, the ideology of femininity, and women's revolution. The knowledge provided by this information is recognized by Gaskell and is widly reflected and referred to or dealt with in her fiction.

The political and social history of the nineteenth century may be summed up in two key-words: democracy and reform. Through the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884 political power ceased to be the monopoly of the landed gentry and was passed to most of the people. The Parliament set itself the task of passing legislative measures designed to remove the grievances of the people and improve their social and economic condition. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, and of an established and still expanding Empire, England had become "the workshop of the world". The victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo had made her mistress of the seas, which enabled her to carry on a vast foreign trade. Her machinery and manufactures together with her virtual monopoly made her one of the richest countries of the world. She had also built up large colonies, in New Zealand and South Africa, during the century. Except for the Crimean war in the middle of the century and the Boer War at its end, England had only minor involvements in foreign disputes, and thus enjoyed internal peace and external security for a hundred years after Waterloo till the Great War of 1914-18. Peace and prosperity were important factors that made large scale social and economic reforms possible.

The early years of the nineteenth century were marked by great social unrest as a direct result of the later phase of Industrial Revolution. Trivedi in his book *A Compendious History of English Literature** notes that mass production by factories had led to enormous increase in wealth, but it was concentrated in the hands of the capitalists, who were indifferent to the welfare of the factory labourers. Low wages in return for sixteen hours of work in unhealthy factories, and living in over-crowded slums in horrible filth and squalor, with no leisure or recreation: such was the hideous condition of the wage-earner. Women and even children were employed in mines and factories and mercilessly exploited (1999:315). The condition of the farm labourer was no better. Small or Cottage industries of the village having been destroyed, he was deprived of the only source by which he had supplemented his poor wages. Many of the laborers, both urban and rural, became paupers. The landlords sought to relieve their poverty by devising a system of aid from rates or local taxes. In other words, instead of compelling the factory owners and farmers to increase the wages, the authorities shifted the burden on to the tax-payer (315). In 1815 the Corn Law was passed, which prohibited import of foreign corn in order to protect home agricultural interests during the depression after the end of the Napoleanic War. Factories closed, labourers were thrown out of work and prices of bread soared (316). All this plainly called for reform. Reform, indeed, should have come earlier, but it was postponed, because most of the English people were too pre-occupied with the war with Napoleon to care much about reform at home. Even after the end of that war the Tory Government (under Lord Liverpool,1812-27) was afraid of reform. The Tories thought all reformers were revolutionaries who might repeat in England the horrible things that had been done in. The 'Peterloo massacre' (1819) was the most brutal instance of the

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* In order to keep the unity of the historical data, all the historical references in this chapter are extracted from Trivedi's *A Compendious History of English Literature.*

government's policy of repression. An open air meeting of working men and women at St. Peter's Fields outside Manchester was charged by mounted troops killing about a dozen people and injuring many others. Soon after this in sheer panic the Government passed a series of repressive measures known as the "Six Acts" prohibiting all meetings, demonstrations, seditious speeches and writings" (316). The poor and hideous condition of men and women labourers and the incidents reflecting the government's massacres are reported and reflected in two of Gaskell's industrial novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South* to be discussed in later chapters.

Terivedi acknowledges that the Tory administration of the Duke of Wellington (M.1828-30), under mounting pressure of public opinion, abolished the Test Act (1828) which barred Catholics and non-Conformist Protestants from Government service. In 1829 a more important surrender was made when the Tories passed the Catholic Emancipation Act which removed the restriction against the Catholics sitting in Parliament. Less spectacular but more humanitarian was the reform in the Penal Code (1828) by which the death sentence for theft, felony, and a hundred Petty offences was abolished. It was now reserved only for murder and treason (317). In 1830 the Tories, who had ruled England for nearly 50 years, were replaced by the Whigs. Under the leadership of Lord Erl Grey the Great Reform Bill of 1832 passed, but only after a bitter struggle with the king and Tories. The Bill having passed the Commons had been at first rejected by the Lords. This made the people furious. Ducal castles were burnt down and high officials had to hide themselves to escape mob fury. When the king saw that there was danger of a revolution, he accepted Grey's advice to create enough Whig Peers to secure a majority in the Lords in favour of the Bill (318). This measure at one stroke put an end to the "pocket" boroughs and "rotten" boroughs which had hitherto enabled the aristocracy to fill Parliament with members of their own choice. It extended the franchise to the middle class of manufacturers and merchants, but left out the working class (319). So a new movement, that of the

"chartists" (1838-48) was started which demanded for the working class the same enfranchisement as had been granted to the middle class. "A charter embodying their demands was presented to Parliament but was rejected. It was not until the passing of the Reform Bills of 1867 and 1884 that the working classes got the vote and England became a real democracy" (319). The Reform Bill of 1832 was a turning point in British political history. It marked the close of the old aristocratic order and the beginning of a new order of democracy and social equality. It cleared the way for all kinds of reform which followed in quick succession in the reigns of William IV and Queen Victoria. According to Terivedi the following reforming measures were passed by Grey's Ministry.

(1) The Emancipation Act (1833), abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire .

(2) The Factory Act (1833) which prohibited the employment of very young children and reduced the working hours of women and older children (boys 10 years up and girls 13 years up). Several other Factory Acts were to follow; that of 1847 reduced the working hours of men.

(3) The Education Act (1833) which made an annual grant for the elementary education of the poor (321).

Grey resigned in 1834 and his successor Lord Melbourne (1834-41) continued the work begun by Grey, and carried the following legislation:

(1) The Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) which meant to end the system of "doles" to the paupers .

(2) The Municipal Corporations Act (1835) which created autonomous (self-governing) local bodies with power to heavy taxes for providing all kinds of social services roads, trams, gas, light, sanitation, hospitals, liberties Parks, museums, etc. The Act covered only larger towns.

The numerous reforms carried out in Victoria's reign (1837-1901) are connected with two Parliamentary leaders: Peel and Gladstone. The two other leaders,

Palmerston and Disraeli, distinguished themselves in foreign politics rather than in reforms. At the back of the reforms in the nineteenth century was the Liberal thought of Jeremy Bentham and his disciples James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill. Bentham was the father of Utilitarianism, the doctrine that the criterion of good government as of all legislation is the greatest number because "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (qut. in Turner,1). He and his followers believed in and preached absolute freedom of the individual. This concept of individual liberty had been first preached by Rousseau and was later propagated by Tom Paine, Godwin and others (322). According to Triverdi the philosophical radicals, as Bentham and his disciples came to be called, believed that only by leaving the individual free to think and do as he pleased (subject to similar freedom of others) could the greatest good of the greatest number be promoted. They opposed to all privilege and favoured the abolition of all artificial disabilities and restrictions such, for example, as those imposed upon Non-Conformists, Catholics and Jews (322). The liberals also opposed all interference by the Government in commerce and industry; and Free Trade was the result. They extended this doctrine of *Laissez-Faire* or non-interference even to cases of industrial distress and opposed the Factory Acts. Only John Stuart Mill, though a great champion of the individual, had the good sense to see the limitations of this theory. The weak, he conceded, needed governmental protection from the rapacity of the exploiter as from other evils of unrestricted competition. In the event, extreme individualists came to realize that not less interference but increasing interference by the government was necessary to ensure the greatest good of the greatest number. The result was a spate of social legislation with the avowed purpose of mitigating the hardships and iniquities of a system based on privilege, prejudice and custom, whether this or that law was passed by a Liberal or Conservative government. Mill was also a great believer in the equality of the sexes, and his advocacy of the cause of women led to a better appreciation of

their status in the work of Florence Nightingale and her loyal band of nurses in the Crimean War, which incidentally created a new profession and a new opening for women's entry into public life. The philosophical radicals preached their doctrines through their periodical, the *Westminster Review*, founded by Bentham in 1824 (323).

The spectacular progress in material well-being directly flowing from the Industrial Revolution did not blind serious-minded people to the grave social and economic problems that the revolution had brought in its wake. The appalling contrasts between the rich and the poor led Disraeli to describe England as consisting of "two nations". Though there was considerable improvement in the conditions of the working classes, the social problem had not been solved at the end of the Victorian era. Poverty, even dire poverty, still persisted in many areas, and prompted the steady growth of trade unions embracing all classes of workers, skilled and unskilled; from the emergence of socialism as a powerful force in national life (323).

All these aspects of life in the nineteenth century - political, social, economic, religious, moral - are reflected in literature. In the perspective of the years that have passed, that literature presents a varied picture of optimism and pessimism, realism and idealism. So far as a general assessment of it can be made, it is a literature whose dominant note is high moral purpose (325). The social unrest of the period largely due to the distress caused by the Industrial Revolution was reflected in the growth of journalism. The case of the poor and down-trodden masses was pleaded with great zeal by William Cobbet and by Sidney Smith of the *Rural Rides (1830)* and *Edinburgh Review* (1834), respectively, their spirited attacks on the privileged classes had a large role in swaying public opinion in favour of parliamentary reform (325).

While 'democracy and reform' sum up the social and political history of the period, it is democracy and science that most profoundly affected Victorian life and thought – according to Teriverdi although the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867 and 1884 had democratized Parliament to a great extent and although the multitude of reforms

that were effected had considerably improved the life of the common man, conditions were far from satisfactory. There was still a good deal of poverty, ignorance, and social injustice to overcome (325). It is in prose and most vividly in the novel that social criticism finds its most eloquent utterance. All major changes in the Victorian society and its attitudes were more or less directly reflected in the novel of the period. Social abuses and reforming spirit occupy a large place in the works of Ruskin, and in the novels of Disraeli, Dickens, Reade, Kingsley and Besant. The novel of this period sprang from a society undergoing a more massive upheaval under the influence of industrialization than in any previous era. Not only was the population shifting irrevocably from an agricultural to an urban base, with all the profound changes in social, working and family patterns that this entailed; there were also the dramatic visible changes resulting from technological invention which altered people's perceptions and their world (Thomas,28). Thomas Carlyle's famous definition of this period as "the Mechanical Age" focused the anxieties of many contemporaries about the relationship of the individual to society. Carlyle wrote: "[m]en are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand" (qtd. in Thomas,28), and the development and preservation of individuality within a society dominated by various kind of mechanistic systems (moral, social, political, economic, even historical) formed a major theme of fiction throughout the century (28). However, whereas Carlyle's mechanized individual is tacitly assumed to be a man, the novel of this period belongs in certain crucial respects to women. Not only were women the major consumers of fiction, forming as they did the majority of the readership throughout the century; they were also, to a degree never seen previously, producers as well (28). Women novelists take equal status with men both as generally acknowledged "great Writers" and also as part of the huge array of novel writers who produced everything from minor masterpieces to worthless pot-boilers. Throughout the period, writers like Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Charlotte Yonge, Harriet Martineau, Ouida

and Margaret Oliphant alongside with Elizabeth Gaskell were producing novels ranging from serious social comment to wild sensationalism (28). The subject matter of fiction, moreover, fell characteristically into a woman's sphere: even in novels whose thematic interests lie primarily elsewhere, the standard plot and setting were almost invariably domestic and family-orientated, with courtship and marriage providing a major part of the narrative thrust. According to Thomas: as George Eliot pointed out, the novel form, more than any other, offered opportunities to women in a society which elsewhere constrained their every activity. "The nineteenth-century novel was the first art form in which women could take equal status with men" (28). For a large part of the nineteenth-century the English novel was significantly limited by the necessity to conform to a moral code which aimed to protect a predominantly female readership from exposure to sexual corruption. And in broader terms, too, the novel upheld middle-class morality in matters of sexual conduct. Women were to be pure, and morally superior to men; a marriage was for life; sex was unmentionable. Where a novel depicted deviation from these values, the appropriate moral lesson had to be firmly underlined, so that the "fallen woman" who features in so much fiction of the period was invariably seen to be punished (29). Jedrzejewski believes that the triumph of the novel as the dominant literary genre of the Victorian era was directly related to the economic, social, and political triumph of the middle classes (1996:268). On the whole the Victorians remained not only religious-minded but generally puritanical in their morals. The Victorians believed firmly in the sacredness of family relationship, specially marriage and paternal authority (Triverdi,325).

In the middle of the eighteenth century the Swiss French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, forcefully articulated some of the most restrictive tenets of what can be called the nineteenth century's ideology of femininity, declaring in *Emile* (1752) that "the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate

them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them from their infancy" (qtd. in Gilbert and gubar,1996:289). As Gilbert and Gubar assert the ideal woman he thus envisioned - a pure, submissive, decorous, and even angelic creature-was only one particularly notable representative of a standard against which every middle-and upper-class woman's conduct was measured, and other writers, females as well as males, elaborated on the virtues of such an ideal (289).

It was during the Victorian era that widespread literacy and the development of large scale publishing began a series of radical changes in the way that culture was expressed and disseminated; and it was during that era that first the "Woman Question" and then wider issues of gender roles and sexuality became to the picks of discourse (Parker,1995:13). Women writers were responding to a new consciousness of women's rights in marriage, in politics and in society generally and men sympathetic to women's rights dared to legislate for their education in the correct mores, for their changing role. Both in the Victorian period itself with the "Woman Question", and in the modern historiography on gender roles, women have become pioneers, partly because they themselves have raised the issue, and men have also become concerned about women's roles as if women were a special or minority problem as far as gender is concerned (13).

The Victorian debates about gender and sexuality owe most of their origin to the "Woman Question". The role of women in society was an issue that produced, in the words of some modern writers, "Prescriptive pronouncements, protests, and imaginative literature" (1). It has been said that Victorian novelists, in particular, "reflected in a peculiarly vivid and urgent way the social anxieties of their time" (Daiches,1976:9), but a host of campaigners, educationists, philosophers and historians also were drawn to the debate. It could be argued that any introduction to the conceptualization of gender roles in the modern period, and especially to the

"Woman Question" in Britain, has to start with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). It is true in a sense that she wrote what is now commonly regarded as the original "manifesto" of feminism (Brody,1992:25). It is also true that her manifesto anticipated most of the issues that later feminists and their opponents debated, including the fundamental one about women's essential character vis-à-vis, men, arguing that the weakness and lack of rights of women in her own society were the result of poor education and prejudicial attitudes (58-9).

In the middle of nineteenth century women had been breaking out from the domestic sphere, to which they had painstakingly been allotted, both "in life and literature." Few men, at least, agreed with John Stuart Mill when he wrote in *The Subjection of Women*(1869): "There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house" (1991:558) Whatever the law might say about a wife's lack of rights, in particular her lack of a separate legal personality or identity, most would have agreed with Ruskin's comment in a passage from "Of Queen's Gardens", published in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), which has become one of the most quoted passages on gender roles in Victorian Britain:

> He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest whenever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is praise…The man in his rough work in open world must encounter all peril and trial: – to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the women from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no causes of error or offence. (73)

This passage is in some ways representative of mid-Victorian middle-class attitudes to the active, public role of men, in the world of work and of national life, and the passive, supportive role of women in the home-attitudes expressed. Davidoff and Hall have suggested that, for some time before this, "the masculine persona" of the middle classes "was organized around a men's determination and skill in manipulating the economic environment" while recognizing that market forces were actually difficult to manipulate and could bite back (1987:229). Patriarchal concepts and patrilineal families cut across the notion of the nuclear family home as woman's realm. Industrialization and urbanization changed working roles and, hence, roles within the family (Parker,113).

Improvement in the status and treatment of women within the family in mid-nineteenth century was at the very heart of social progress; some women, even feminist women, thought that they had to choose between the family and a more public role. Emily Shirreff, the first Mistress of Girton College, went further, despite her pioneering role in higher education for women, writing in The *Contemporary Review* in August 1870 that, whereas men could have "professions and marriage", women had to accept that these were alternatives, and that the choice was seldom theirs alone. She also felt that any rivalry with men would be unwise because they had natural advantages, not least greater physical strength. "Thus women's roles as wives and mothers were deemed to be quite literally sacred, more important than any other possible role and, crucially, incompatible with other roles. The unease about competitive, independent-mind women remained, however" (qtd.in Parker,14). But was the woman supposed to rule her separate domestic sphere? "We assert the unalienable right of woman to preside over her own home, and to promote the welfare of her own family", wrote Charlotte Tonn in 1844; but she was arguing against working-class women being forced into industrial work and being turned into "an army of ferocious, fearless women, inured to hardship, exercised in masculine labours

- drinking, swearing, smoking Amazons" (Hollis,1979:289). However, she did assume that a woman, back in the home, would "preside". Accounts and opinions vary, even within the ideal of the middle-class family which increasingly set the tone for what was regarded as right and proper. For some, the woman ran the domestic economy and raised the children, with young boys tied to their mother's apron string until forced to become men and face the harsh vicissitudes of the wider world with a hitherto absent father or as an apprentice or at boarding school. In Ruskin's ideal the woman does "rule" in the home, but only in the sense of "sweet ordering" and "arrangement", not in a creative or strategic sense; in fact, her "great function is Praise"-of the man, who returned to be soothed and looked after (Parker,15). Davidoff and Hall regard men as the "absent present", there to direct and command but physically occupied elsewhere for most of their time (1987:181).

Also, daughters should not be forgotten. Who controlled them as they grew to womanhood? F.M.L. Thomson suggests a real division of labour and responsibility: fathers were formally asked for their daughters' hands in marriage, "enshrining" male authority over the family as well as relocating aristocratic practice". But women determined the "marrying standards." Fathers concerned themselves with the material prospects of their prospective sons-in-law, but mothers and grand mothers devised chaperoning techniques to control their daughters' behavior and contacts, and, therefore, their marriage prospects (1988:103). This brings up the vexed question of "patriarchy", a concept much debated, refined and developed, often in a highly theoretical way. The modern use of the term is intended to mean the domination of women by men. For some radical feminists it has been so important a concept as to supersede all other concepts of social relationships or structures, notably class, and has been seen as a permanent feature of human society to date. For its critics, its very permanence makes it historical and therefore, suspect-though why it should be seen in such absolute term is not always clear. Then there have been arguments about whether

it is equally applicable to the public and the private spheres, and whether or not it is essentially the same thing when exercised in both spheres.

There was unease about the concept of femininity as a result of the "Woman Question". The domestic ideal, so painfully established in the period between 1780 and 1850, as Davidoff and Hall have shown, was under threat, at one level from industrialism. It was also challenged by that Victorian icon of womanhood, Florence Nightingale, and by the whole experience of the Crimean War, which tested both gendered ideas, the male as well as the female (Parker:18). In 1866 John Stuart Mill presented an unsuccessful petition to Parliament which demanded the inclusion of women in what was to become the 1867 Reform Bill. Many women throughout the period challenged the Victorian feminine ideal and the Women's Movement of the second half of the nineteenth century was perhaps the most anarchic of all, for it thereatened the very foundation of the domestic haven the Victorians constructed as a retreat from the vicissitudes of everyday life. Maria G. Grey writing in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1879 points to the "Woman Question" as an issue which was to create tensions every bit as great as theories of the evolution of human beings and the democratization of the working classes.

Unmarried working-class women may have found plenty of employment out of the home but despite the 1842 Mines Acts that prohibited the work of women and children in mines and Factory Acts, this had little or nothing to do with improving their status. For middle-class women it was altogether different. If they could find the sort of work to which they could dedicate their lives, emulating men, and Christ, that would be a major change in their status. Like many propertied men, they did not need to work, but they could dedicate their lives to good works. Many writers have spoken of the home as a refuge from the harsh world of work; but such upheavals of philanthropic activities could also provide a context for dedicating lives to the sort of

public duty that gave a sense of purpose; for women that could provide both a context and an opportunity (18).

Parker asserts that in the 1860s the rise of the sensation novel, particularly when it was written by a woman, with an active heroine going out to right wrongs and challenging traditional roles - or even an anti-heroine, acting in a socially unacceptable, even scandalous way, like female characters in the works of Mary Baraddon, Mrs Henry Wood, Rhoda Broughton and Wilkie Collins - suggested that the "Woman Question" was being posed with new force. And even if the heroine was rather more on the side of the angels, she could not be an angel in the house, for as *The Times's* reviewer of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) put it, "This is the age of lady novelists who naturally give first place to the heroine" (qtd.in Hilsinger,112). But, if the heroines have first place, it will scarcely do to represent them as passive and quite angelic, or insipid. They have to be pictured as high- strung women, full of passion, purpose, and movement - very liable to error (Parker,19). In short, they were out in Ruskin's man's world, and had to live up to it and take its risks. One of the risks was being unsexed: as the *Saturday Review* put it, two years later (1864), "A strong minded woman is like a pretty man; the merit is unnatural to both, and both are certain to be ridiculously vain of it" (Hilsinger,1983:89).

The legal situation of women before the passing of the 1882 Married Women's Property Act is summed up with characteristic force by Frances Cobbe in the title of a collection of essays at the time, "Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors", these being the classes of people considered unfit for most legal and all political rights at the time" (1868:777-94). Until 1882 a woman's money and property had passed into the control of her husband when she married, unless a prior settlement had been made. The justification was that a woman could have no interest separate from that of her husband; they were, in the words of that legal Bible, Blackstone's *Commentaries,* "One person in law", and "the very being or legal existence of the woman is

suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporate or consolidated into that of her husband (1991:444). Reform in this area was difficult because, as John Stuart Mill and Cobbe saw, it ran into opposition that was all the more powerful for not being entirely rational. So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings (Mallett,1984:262), Mill observed at the start of *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), "it gains rather than loses in stability by having a preponderating weight of argument against it" (1991:262). Cobbe saw that where legislation for marriage was concerned, masculine sentiment would always be more powerful than considerations of justice (1878: 787).

The "Poetical vision" of marriage was encouraged by the endings of thousands of novels, by highly popular books of wifely instruction like Mrs Ellis's *The Women of England* (1838), and by such classic expressions of elevated domesticity as Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House" (1854-63) and the lecture "Of Queen's Gardens" in Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). Underlying most of these works is the assumption that men and women occupy separate but complementary "spheres", which come together in marriage to complete the lack in the other. In Ruskin's words "Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (Ruskin,1907:121). Ruskin's idealised vision of marriage is essentially a modern form of chivalry, in which the husband goes out into the hardening world to do battle with foes and the wife waits at home ready to bind up his wounds. As for education, a woman ought to have only so much to allow her to encourage her children to enter sympathetically into her husband's pursuits; and she must at all costs avoid the "dangerous science" (127) of theology.

The notion of separate spheres also helps to explain the opposition to the extension of women's rights in the nineteenth century. At a time when the right to vote

was related to the voter's presumed ability to exercise it wisely, women were felt to be at the mercy of their biology; menstruation, pregnancy, child bearing, and the menopause were unsettling and put the female in an unreliable position in the polling booth; Victorian science, progressive in matters of religion was less so when it came to gender (Mallett,264). The "advanced" findings of evolutionary anthropologists taught that the differences in cranial shape between men and women showed the inferior capacity of the female mind (Moore,1989:253-84). The argument "that woman'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" (Mallett,264) was held seriously. As more and more middle-class women went out to work, they learned to enjoy something of the independence and camaraderie that working class women had long known in the factory. But leaving the home could also mean loneliness, and pursuing an active career clashed with the passive stereotype of femininity and risked taking a woman, especially a woman not confident of her marriageability, out of the established routines of middle-class match-making (264).

For women, the nineteenth century's startling changes in their situation often triggered considerable unease, such shifts were always significant and frequently beneficial. Indeed despite the new conceptions of human rights in general dramatized by the American and French revolutions and the arguments for women's rights eloquently advanced by Wollstoncraft and earlier by writers such as Hannah More and Anne Finch, almost all women were still confined by law and custom in a secondary, private "sphere" (Gilbert and Gubar,288).

Gilbert and Gubar, in an introduction to the Victorian period, and writers in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* assert that throughout the history of western culture there has always been a notable dissonance between what has been

called the ideology of femininity and the reality of women's lives. Historians have speculated that the egalitarian ideologies with which the era began, along with the impulses toward political reform that accompanied such ideologies were essential to the battle for women's rights and the votes that marked this century (296). The demands of women for higher education and the eagerness to enter trades and professions were fostered by radical ideas about Revolution which forced many working-class women out of the home and into the factory; at the same time making a number of middle-and upper-class women unpleasantly aware of just how unproductive a "lady" of leisure was (296).

It is not surprising that women, and some men as well, should early have understood the feminist implications of the intellectual assumptions that underlay the French Revolution and also, to some extent, the Chartists who assembled at the disastrous St.Peter's Fields meeting near Manchester to demand government attention to their plight. These included not only a number of working-class women but also some men who supported their right to join in political protests. By the early 1830s, French Socialist and utopian thinkers had begun to proselytize in England for causes that included "the emancipation of women". Among the middle classes, too, similar ideas were stirring; in 1831, the *Westminster Rewview* published an anonymous article advocating female sufferage, and in 1832 a Member of Parliament presented a petition to the House of Common, asking that "every unmarried female possessing the necessary pecuniary qualification…be allowed to vote" (296).

In the United States the movement for women's rights was led by many prominent figures. The U.S. movement had a specific transatlantic impact through a story about the first Worcester (Massachusetts) Women's Right convention written in 1851 for the *Westminster Review* by Harriet Taylor, a young English woman, who described the proceeding and stated the case for women's rights (297). In the same year, Taylor married the philosopher John Stuart Mill, a figure whose intensely

feminist *The Subjection of Women,* written in 1861 and published in 1864, was to formulate arguments for female equality that would become central to the British women's movement (297).

Even before Mill had started to draft his feminist treatise, however, a number of Englishwomen had begun to organize committees for women's rights. Foremost among these early pioneers was Barbara Leigh Smith, later Barbara Bodichon; in 1855 she undertook to circulate petitions in support of a Married Women's Property Act; in 1857 she was instrumental in founding a feminist paper called *The English Woman's Journal;* and in 1865, at a meeting of Kensington Ladies' Discussion Society, she adopted a strong position in favour of women's suffrage, a position that led to the formation of England's first women's suffrage Committee. In 1866, a year after John Stuart Mill had been elected to Parliament, this group presented him with several petitions, containing thousands of signatures in support of votes for women, which allowed him to bring about the first parliamentary debate on women's suffrage (297).

Elizabeth Gaskell was not directly a member of any of these movements but as a female novelist she identified herself with a group of women writers and willingly used her own position to help other women. Jenny Uglow describes Gaskell's feminist circle, a circle which included "older mentors" like Harriet Martineau, Mary Howitt, and Anna Jameson, as well as younger activists like Bessie Parkes, Barbara Leigh Smith, Adelaide Proctor, Anna Mary Howitt, and Miranda and Octavia Hill. These were the women who formed the nucleus of the 'Langham Place Group' which organized the *English Woman's Journal* in the late 1850s. Gaskell gave them her qualified support. She signed the petition of the amendment of the married woman's property laws organized by Barbara Leigh Smith in 1854, and approved of their campaigns for education and employment. But she was disturbed as well as attracted by their radicalism (1993:311).

CHAPTER II

MARY BARTON

Mary Barton (1848) is an industrial novel that makes its contribution to the "Condition of England" question, part of a nineteenth-century British trend to understand the enormous cultural, economic and social changes caused by industrialization. In this novel and subsequent novels, Gaskell focuses on the problem of women in nineteenth century England. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell uses the industrial novel to criticize the dominant ideology that separates the sexes, to make a feminist statement about women's need for meaningful work, and to affirm their fitness for participation in the public sphere. In this novel, Gaskell challenges the Victorian conception of a gender-based division of labour that separated the public and private domains. Her focus is also on working-class society, in which young women were free from the conventions governing feminine behavior, since they lived outside the boundaries of gentility. Obviously Gaskell's principal purpose in this novel is to depict the distance between the classes and the pressures under which working-class people lived. In particular, she is concerned with working women in Victorian England whose labour was not fully recognized. Gaskell attempts to express in *Mary Barton* the difficult situation faced by Victorian women within a culture that neither recognized nor rewarded their labour.

In *Mary Barton* Gaskell enters a territory that is new. Françoise Basch asserts that Elizabeth Gaskell is the only one of the major writers of the first half of the Victorian era to have explored in some detail the subject of female labour (1974:180). Gaskell was keenly aware that she was opening up an alien social territory to her readers. Although working-class participation in the reading audience has been documented, regular reading was more typical of the middle class. *Mary Barton* was published anonymously, as part of a series by Chapman and Hall, and came out in two volumes. The novel, Kathleen Tillotson explains, was likely to have taken immediate

buyers, for it was topical and, at eighteen shillings, affordable (1954:23). Clearly, *Mary Barton* would have drawn its readership mostly from the middle class. Therefore, Gaskell must have known that most of her readers would have been unfamiliar with the lives led by common labourers. She acknowledges this early in the novel: "There is a class of men in Manchester, unkown even to many of the inhabitants, and whose existence will probably be doubted by many" (Gaskell,1970:75). She goes on to describe manual labourers, weavers, who manipulate the shuttle while glancing at the open book on the loom, who take a genuine interest in mathematical problems or discussions of natural history. At the end of the passage, Gaskell writes, "Such are the tastes and pursuits of some of the thoughtful, little understood, working men of Manchester" (76). This passage could only have been written in response to the isolation and gap between classes that was so troubling to the industrial novelists. To say that the very existence of a group will be doubted is to document the social stratification that Gaskell is attacking. Within this context, Gaskell's purpose apparantly is twofold: first, to introduce one class to another; second, to present the working class sympathetically. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell gives utterance to the voices of working men and women, normally not heard by the middle-class public – voices silenced by the restrictions of class and in the women's case those of gender too.

Mary Barton is the story of a young girl living in the heart of industrial Manchester with her parents and younger brother who dies very young because of illness. Her father, John Barton, is a weaver at one of the local mills but later he is dismissed by his master and loses his job, and the family becomes poor so they have to sell all their property and furniture. Mary's mother has been in poor health since the disappearance of her sister, Esther, and the strain leads to her early death. Mary's Aunt Esther, who followed a youthful whim and in consequence fell from virtue, plays a significant role in Mary's future. The plot of *Mary Barton* concerns the poverty and

desperation of English industrial workers. Fundamentaly, however, it revolves around Mary's personal conflicts. She is already divided between an affection for an industrialist's son, Henry Carson, and for a man of her own class, Jem Wilson. But Mary's conflict becomes worse when her father, who after losing his job has become a committed trade unionist, is asked to assassinate Henry, who is the son of his unjust employer. The first half of the book follows John's union activities and the industrial Chartist upheavals of 1840s Manchester. In this half, the novel is concerned with documenting social and political issues, presenting not just shocking extremes of poverty, but the dangerous nature of working-class prosperity fading away because of unemployment. The second half of the novel exposes the conflicting Victorian ideals of womanhood.

The early chapters of the novel focus on the Bartons, exploring the reactions of John Barton to the increasing poverty he sees around him at a time when the depression in trade meant lower wages, shorter hours, and fewer mill workers being employed. By contrast:

> Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food, - of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times? (24)

Through a series of scenes, such as her contrast of the Davenports's fetid cellar with the luxuriant atmosphere of the mill-owner Carson's home, Gaskell establishes the context in which a desperate working man might first turn to Chartism, and then let his name go forward in the ballot to determine who should assassinate Carson's son. The pivotal action in *Mary Barton* is the murder of Henry Carson. This echoed a real murder in 1831, when Thomas Ashton, one of the more progressive mill-owners, was

shot during a turn-out (Wright,1987:x). This plus many other references to contemporary social and historical events reflects Gaskell's historical consciousness.

Gaskell provides a participant's view of some of the most important events in recent English history of her time, placing the characters in the particular circumstances of time and place which relate to the period from 1837 to 1842 and the city of Manchester. This was a period of the growth of trade unions, of Chartism, of explosive industrial city expansion, and saw a shift from prosperity to extreme economic depression. Social observers had already noted the changes that were beginning to affect the social structure and social attitudes. Thomas Carlyle, for example, in *Past and Present* (1843) had delivered a severe attack on the growing materialism, class antagonism and general social and cultural ugliness of the time, using Manchester as his example. Carlyle, as Gaskell's novel's motto indicates, was her mentor. He attacked political economy in his works, arguing against the philosophy of *laissez-faire*, against the belief that cash payment for work done was the sole obligation of employers to their workers, and against the very idea that workers' conditions could be understood by reference to wage levels. Writing about workers' demands in *Mary Barton*, Spencer asserts that Gaskell, too, emphasised the need for much more than economic improvement, advocating a transformation in the human relationship between employers and employed. Before this could happen, the middle-class public must be moved into understanding what was happening to the working class. Gaskell, aiming to do just that in her novel, was answering the call Carlyle had made when he attacked public ignorance of the "Condition of England", and claimed that this could not be dispelled by statistics or theory, but only by attending to the human facts (1993:37).

From the point of view presented in *Mary Barton*, as Edgar Wright in his introduction to Gaskell's novel notes, the two major issues were Trade Unionism and Chartism. Trade unions were still relatively new in England. They had been banned by

the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, which were only repealed in 1828 at the repressive effects of the Nepoleonic wars recorded. Various attempts to develop local and national unions were made, the most notable being the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union founded in 1834 by the reformist mill-owner Robert Owen. But the recession of 1837, along with trade and regional rivalries, led to its collapse. Individual unions developed. The next wave of depression, leading to the calamitous year of 1842, saw wages driven down to intolerable levels, unemployment widespread in the great textile center of Lancashire, and a growing hostility between manufacturers and their hands (1984:x). Gaskell retains a hint of the Gothic trappings of secret societies and awful ceremonies that often clung to popular belief about unions: "Then came one of fierce terrible oaths which bind members of Trades' Union to any given purpose" (223).

The point here is her awareness of the brutal acts, such as the throwing of vitriol that blinded the strike-breaker Jonas Higginbothom (221), committed by men pushed to extremes, and her deep understanding of the role played by feelings for and against trade unions in the social fabric of Manchester as an industrial community. The murder of Carson also springs from an employer-union confrontation. The Chartist movement sputtered, though strikers and occasional outbursts, including the "plug-plot riots" in Manchester in 1842, led the authorities to move with severity against offenders. With an improvement in the economy and the shift to Corn Law agitation, Chartism as a political force rapidly declined: a third petition in 1848 attracted little support and proved to be the final effort (Wright,x).

The Chartist movement failed, but for several years the Charter had been for the workers a symbol of hope, a political way out of the sloughs of economic despondency and powerless suffering during the "hungry forties", the years 1837-42. Although *Mary Barton* mentions no dates, it is clearly the convention of 1839 that John Barton attended as a delegate, and the "long period of bodily privation; of daily

hunger after food, it is hard to live on when one can no longer hope" (197). While the novel defends neither trade unions nor Chartism, involvement in these movements is described with sympathetic understanding, and is a formative element in the history of John Barton as an individual caught up in the event, one of those who, we have been told earlier, "have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting forgiving, those who (they believe) have caused all this woe" (24). Such bottled up frustration and resentment is bound sooner or later to find cause for action. In this way Gaskell with her historical consciousness communicates through her characters something of her own involvement in contemporary history.

Men's and Women's voices are of particular interst in the novel. John Barton's project of going to London to talk to the great man foreshadows the 1839 Chartist petition to Parliament, which raises grand hopes in Gaskell's characters later in the novel. When John returns from taking part in presenting that petition, things have not altered, and he is resolved to sew up his mouth: "I'll not speak of it no more" (145). It is a move towards the breakdown of communication between classes that eventually results in the murder of Harry Carson. John Barton claimes proudly, "I'd scorn to speak for myself" (105). Gaskell is selective about which working-class voices she transmits. This is made clear in chapter 16 of the novel, where the decision to murder Harry Carson is taken. John's voice is heard, as always, on behalf of others:

> It makes me more than sad, it makes my heart burn within me, to see that folk can make a jest of earnest men; of chaps, who comed to ask for a bit o' fire for th' old granny, as shivers in the cold; for a bit o' bedding, and some warm clothing to the poor wife as lies in labour on th' damp flags; and for victuals for the childer, whose little voices are getting too faint and weak to cry aloud wi' hunger. (238)

Barton's compassionate nature is further demonstrated when he explains why he missed a worker's meeting earlier in the day: he had been, first, to visit a union member imprisoned for throwing vitriol at a strike-breaker, and then to see the blinded

victim. It is Barton's tender-heatedness that leads him to murder, for it is this scene that has pushed him into shouting for violence against the masters instead of against fellow workers.

Gaskell's attitude to women's voices is somewhat equivocal. A woman's guiding influence on her family is seen as very important, and when John Barton's wife dies he loses "one of the ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth" (58) and is left vulnerable to the influence of the trade union movement, which draws him away from home and family to meetings where no woman's voice is heard, and where ultimately speech gives way to violence. It is one measure of the hardening caused by his wife's death that Barton refuses to listen to Esther's warning about the danger Mary is in from Harry Carson: blaming her disappearance as the shock that caused his wife's death he will have nothing to do with her. Yet if he had listened, Esther's speech would only have given him an additional motive for hating Harry Carson; and when she does succeed in telling her tale, to Jem, all that is achieved is the quarrel with Harry that leads to Jem being suspected after the murder. Esther's voice only becomes helpful when she finally manages to communicate with Mary, whom she avoids at first out of shame. When Esther brings her niece the gun-wadding she found at the scene of the crime, she enables Mary to work out the truth about the murder, to destroy the evidence, and eventually to prove Jem's innocence without revealing her father's guilt. This public action becomes Mary's one occasion for speaking out. Because she will not implicate her father, her evidence in court cannot clear Jem (she achieves that by finding Will Wilson to testify to Jem's alibi), but she uses the occasion to make a public declaration of the love she had earlier denied to him. By telling the truth about her love she offers a kind of unconscious compensation for concealing the truth that might save him. In Esther's and Mary's crucial revelations, taboos governing women's speech are broken: the prostitute communicates with the "unfallen" woman, and a woman makes a public statement of

her love. It is emphasised that neither speaks on her own behalf. Esther speaks to help Mary, and Mary's public speech, like the whole of her efforts in connection with the trial, are to help another.

Gaskell's attitude towards Esther's character is noticeable. Mary's Aunt Esther, not a bad woman really, only a little vain of beauty, is seduced by an army officer. He is not a bad sort himself, taking full responsibility both for her and for their child. Soon, however, he is transferred, and, although it is not clear why he cannot take her with him or send money to support her, Esther finds herself abandoned. Esther is able to work for a time, but when her little boy falls ill, the cost of caring for him is so high that she is forced to walk the streets. This is the beginning of the end. Her child dies, she turns to drink, ends up in prison, and finally dies shortly after she is released (ch.14). There were many women like Esther in Manchester in the nineteenth century, as Friedrich Engels had reported only four years earlier, in "The Condition of the Working Class in England" (56), and Gaskell, in her parish work with the ailing and poor, must have met a great many of them. Gaskell blames Esther to an extent, but she is also sympathetic. Always by desire and a tendency on the side of those in need, Gaskell takes up Esther's cause. "Who will give her help, with compassion" (188), her narrator asks, but she is also implying that Esther could have been saved from prostitution had someone helped her after her fall. This is precisely the kind of help Gaskell is offering in her novel. By making Esther sympathetic, Gaskell wants to stir her readers to extend a helping hand to women in Esther's situation.

One of the other problems addressed by the novel is the separation between classes and genders; Gaskell wants her novel to bridge the boundaries between her characters and her readers and to discourage a middle-class sense of complacent superiority. The novel opens with a scene of working-class life, centering especially upon factory girls, to whom Gaskell attributes both energy and vitality: "Groups of merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to

twenty, came by with a boyant step" (40). Although the narrator says, "their faces were not remarkable for beauty", they posed "an acuteness and intelligence of countenance" (41). When these young women were approached by a group of young men. They "held themselves aloof, not in a shy, but rather in an independent way" (41). From the beginning, Gaskell's intention is to emphasize the strength and vitality of working-class girls, characterizing them as active, bright, and self-sufficient. By presenting working-class life positively, as fostering in women some qualities that would enrich and improve their lives. Gaskell aims at dispelling the notion that work destroys femininity.

Central to this purpose is Gaskell's presentation of Mary, the main character of the novel. The reader's first glimpse of Mary reveals a young woman who is actively engaged, constantly doing. At the same time, Gaskell makes a point of presenting her as attractive and successful when she carries out traditionally feminine duties by helping her mother in participating in household duties and looking after her little brother. Mary first enters the novel as a "bonny lassie of thirteen or so" who "came bounding along to meet and to greet her father" (47). When an "over-grown lad" comes past her, stealing a kiss," more with anger than shame… she slapped his face." When her father holds her infant brother out she "sprang forward to take her father's charge." On the way home, two boys, seeing Mary walking with Jem Wilson, called out "Eh, look! Polly Barton's gotten a Sweetheart," at which point Mary "assumed the air of a young fury, and to his next speech she answered not a word" (49). As a result, throughout the novel Mary is portrayed as acting. She is not a decorative fixture in the home and moves freely in and out, exercising her own judgment as she goes about her daily activities.

In this novel Gaskell is responding to a domestic ideology which forbids activity and recommends decorous passivity or selfless servitude for women. Consequently, from the earliest chapter, she emphasizes affirmative images of women

working. While John Barton and his friend, Wilson, are discussing the fate of Esther, Barton's sister-in-law, whose vanity and love of finery have led her, Barton suspects, into ruin, Barton declares that he'd rather see his daughter "earning her bread by the sweat of her brow, as the Bible tells her she should do…then be like a do-nothing lady, worrying shop men all morning, and screeching at her pianny all afternoon, and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself" (44). Wilson praises his sister, Alice, by noting her readiness to work: "though she have done a hard day's wash, there's not a child ill within the street but Alice goes to offer to sit up, and does sit up too though may be she's to be at her work by six next morning" (46). The novel's depiction of women at their work indicates that Gaskell views acting - not inertia - as appropriate for young women. Moreover, Gaskell represents working-class family life as enacting positive values of cooperation and shared work. Since working-class men and women share in the labour outside the home, they are, Gaskell suggests, more successful at creating equitable arrangement within it. Common participation in the workforce - a public act - impinges on the private domain of the home. In contrast, middle-class society is based on the separation of the sexes; men become producers in the waged economy while women remain at home and function economically as consumers. In her depiction of the working-class households within the novel, Gaskell is recommending an alternative to the gendered organization of labour in the home.

Mary Barton demonstrates the benefits of men and women sharing the workload. While on an outing with their neighbours, John Barton motions his wife and her friend to the ground after spreading his handkerchief and says, "Now, Mrs. Wilson, give me the baby, I may as well as carry him" (42). After issuing an invitation to the Wilsons for tea, the group assembles at the Barton's home, where "Barton vibrated between the fire and the tea-table" while Mary assumed the task of preparing the egg and the ham (53). All the while Mr. Wilson is trying " to quieten the other

[baby] with bread soaked in milk" (53). On another occasion Job Legh, the botanist, acts as "host and hostess too, for by a tacit agreement he… had assumed many of Margaret's little household duties" (195). The men in the novel combine traditionally male qualities of strength with traditionally female qualities of caring; conversely, Mary develops male traits of independence and toughness. The result is an enlargement of identity and an increase in sympathy, on both sides.

Mary operates in both spheres, labouring within and outside the home. She believes and proves herself to be a capable, vital member of the family unit, one whose work is necessary to its functioning. Because she is known to be trustworthy, "Mary ran off like a hare to fulfill what to a girl of thirteen, fond of power, was the more interesting part of her erran - the money - spending part. And well and ably did she perform her business" (52). As she prepares the food, Mary exhibits a "very comfortable portion of confidence in her own culinary powers" (53). After her mother's death "All the mony went through her hands, and the houshold arrangements were guided by her will and pleasure" (59). Taking a managerial role within the home serves as a training ground for Mary as she learns how to plan, execute, and perform business transactions. Scenes like these help Gaskell make her case for integrating women within the public sphere.

In addition to her instrumental role within the home, Mary performs labour outside it as well. In her account of Mary's search for a vocation, Gaskell is acknowledging the significance that work has in women's lives and insisting that they should make their own career decision. John Barton recognizes the necessity of establishing Mary in an occupation: "Mary must do something" (61). Because of his distaste for factory work for women, Barton sees only two possibilities for Mary: going out to service and the dressmaking business, and "against the first of those, Mary set herself with all the forces of her strong will"(61). Believing domestic servitude to be "a species of slavery," Barton is won over to his daughter's choice of

occupation and endeavors to find a promising situation for her. His efforts, however, meet with no success, so the next day Mary takes charge of the situation, setting "out herself…and before night she had engaged herself as apprentice" (63). The conditions of her employment include the provision that she will work for two years without pay, and after this period of training, she is to receive a small quarterly salary. Yet despite the lack of economic benefits, Mary sees this plan as acceptable because it will allow her to maintain the independence to which she had become accustomed: "Mary was satisfied; and seeing this, her father was contented too" (63). The narrative shows Mary taking an active role in the process of securing an occupation for herself, realizing as she does that she can thereby have some control over the shape of her future. After a year passes, the narrator calls Mary a "blooming young work-girl"(65), a description that suggests that Mary is thriving in her chosen work. Although she misses her mother, labour gives her strength to assume an adult role: in fact, the narrator says, "She was far superior in sense and spirit to the mother she mourned" (64). Elizabeth Gaskell represents a woman who take control of her own life and future prospects and in this way she wishes to show work's salutary and empowering effect.

Through various characters in her novel, Gaskell addresses those who have serious reservation about women working. John Barton expresses the fear that work outside the home, especially factory work, can lead a young woman astray, reasoning that the ability to support herself might lead her to become vain and to overvalue finery, like his sister-in law Esther did. He also identifies as another potential hazard the freedom of movement that accompanies working. It is true that for a time Mary Barton accepts the attentions of Harry Carson, the factory owner's son, and entertains a vision of herself someday becoming a lady and "doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood" (121). Yet her social ambitions are justified in part by her concern for her father's comfort; her rise in position would enable her to remove the

cares that continually oppress him. Moreover, she does discover on her own the true state of her feelings - her preference for Jem Wilson - and acts accordingly, setting forth to Mr. Carson her decision to sever the association with him. Wendy Ann Craik comments on Mary's strength of character: "Far from helpless in her normal life, she has been a competent housekeeper, who has coped with sorrow, shortage of money, death, illness, overwork, sleepless nights, and her own personal dilemmas, all over a long period, during which she has also had to act independently without help or confidante"(1975:37).

Gaskell juxtaposes her portrayal of Mary with her portrayal of the Carson sisters, daughters of the factory owner, in order to affirm the positive effects of labour. Mary's life of quiet purpose and usefulness is contrasted sharply with the lives of the Carsons, who, "like many similarly-situated young ladies,… did not exactly know what to do to while away the time until the tea-hour" (254). Gaskell criticizes a life of selfish leisure by presenting the Carsons as listless and sluggish. Their comfortable easy lives are filled with dilettante pursuits. As another case in point, their mother suffers the consequences of inactivity as well. Once a factory girl herself, Mrs. Carson was "as was used with her…very poorly…indulging in the luxury of a head-ache. She was not well certainly" (254). Mrs. Carson has lived an idle life for so long that she is literally robbed of strength and purpose. These examples serve to heighten Mary's appeal to an audience that contained young working women.

Margaret Legh, Mary's friend, is another figure who demonstrates Gaskell's attitude toward women's work. Living with her grandfather, a skilled botanist, Margaret contributes to the family income by her spinning. Although she is gradually losing her vision, Margaret continues in her labour, even bringing sewing home to finish at night. Conscious of responsibility to supplement the household funds, Margaret confides to Mary, "What I earn is a great help" (85). However, sewing is not very rewarding to Margaret; it yields low pay, and, what is worse, her eyes suffer from

the strain. Margaret is victimized by the financial necessity of performing hazardous work.

Aware that "some has one kind o' gifts, and some another", Margaret rightly recognizes that her gift is her voice, and she arranges to acquire some training with Jacob Butterworth, the singing weaver, who had been a "grand singer in his day" (81). Margaret tells Mary about her efforts to develop her talent: "Well, I know'd him a bit, so I went to him, and said how I wished he'd teach me the right way o' singing; and he says I've a rare fine voice, and I go once a week, and take a lesson fra'him" (86). From a practical standpoint, Margaret's action contains the promise of economic rewards: "He says I may gain ever so much money by singing"(86). When the opportunity presents itself, Margaret makes her musical debut, and "the manager said as how there never was a new singer so applauded" (136). Expressing her satisfaction about the situation, Margaret says proudly, "[so] I'm to sing again o; Thursday; and I got a sovereign last night, and am to have a half a sovereign every night tit' lecture is at th' Mechanics''(137). Music gives Margaret a sense of accomplishment and enhances her sense of identity. It also empowers her to assist Mary in her plan to save Jem Wilson from being charged with murder. Taking a sovereign from her saving, Margaret tells Mary: "You must take some of the mint I've got laid by in the old tea-pot" (320). Even after she loses a good deal of her sight, Margaret goes out alone about her business "as steadily as can be" (252). Her grandfather, at first afraid that she would be in danger, watches her make her way around the city; he soon becomes convinced that she knows how to take care of herself. Margaret effectively illustrates Gaskell's view that labour is empowering.

In spite of the independence and strong will she demonstrates in her actions, Margaret for the most part accepts the feminine ideal of passivity, advising her more impetuous friend, "You must just wait and be patient" when Mary regrets refusing Jem Wilson's offer of marriage (190) Mary is inclined to take action, saying, "Now I'd do

anything" and asking "what can I do to bring him back to me? Should I write to him?' (189). Gaskell appears to prefer Mary's energy to Margaret's patience, giving Mary a central role in the plot while Margaret is confined to the periphery of the novel. It seems that Gaskell's central purpose in *Mary Barton* is to show how many problems surrounding work for women are inscribed in the life of a young working-class woman and to affirm the appropriateness of labour for women in a time when the most ideal status for women was being an "Angel in the House". The section of the novel that perhaps best illustrates Mary's competencies deal with the sequence of events leading up to Jem's trial. This section is given a significant amount of space in the novel, spanning several chapters. It can be taken as an evidence that Gaskell viewed these events as a crucial expression of Mary's identity, an identity that has been shaped by her participation in the workforce and society.

Robin B.Colby in *Some Appointed Work to Do* notes that a kind of rescue sequence, often involving a trail, is a convention of the industrial novel. In *Sybil* Disraeli leads the plot to a moment when Sybil discovers that her father is about to be apprehended for his political activities; at this point she goes in search of her father, with every intention of warning him, but instead she arrives too late and collapses at a critical moment. This version of the scene turns on feminine weakness and ineptitude. Women cannot be accorded a place in public life, Desraeli suggests; they are too unreliable (1995:41). Colby also argues that George Eliot's treatment of a similar scene is a little closer to Gaskell's, but it too reveals serious reservations about women's participation in public sphere. When Felix Holt is accused of leading a riot and charged with murder, Esther, aware that she has information that might help clear her lover, comes forward to present her evidence. Unlike Sybil, Esther is able to carry out her plan, but what Eliot stresses is the tremendous effort that it takes for Esther to speak. Despite the effort, Esther's words have relatively little effect on the turn of events; the word of men are necessary to acquit Felix Holt (41). These representations

of women's interventions seem to imply that women are aliens in the public world of men; their attempts to join such a world are either harmful or merely ineffectual. Gaskell comes to this scene with very different assumptions. Unlike her contemporaries, she makes a place for women in the public / political domain. Moreover, she inverts the power relations in the rescue sequence by placing Jem's life in Mary's hands. And she shows that women can be counted on. When Jem Wilson is held for murder, Mary's strength is put to its greatest test. Everything in her background, her early loss of a mother, her assumption of the role of breadwinner, and her support from loving neighbours, prepares her to take a crucial part in the vindication of her future husband. It is she who first devises a scheme to clear Jem: "He was with Will on Thursday night; walking a part of the way with him to Liverpool; now the thing is to lay hold on Will, and get him to prove this" (317). Her intention is met with doubt; even her friend Job Legh tells her not to "build too much on it" (317). Mary responds, "Nothing you can say will daunt me, Job, so don't you go and try. You may help, but you cannot hinder me doing what I'm resolved on"(317). Despite the negative reaction that she perceives from all those around her, Mary eventually proves herself to be correct in her assessment of Jem's innocence and shows herself capable of taking a leading role in his acquittal. The narrator says, "They respected her firmness of determination, and Job almost gave in to her belief, when he saw how steadfastly she was acting upon it" (317).

Throughout the novel Gaskell draws attention to Mary's skill in dealing with crises, the inventiveness and fortitude that allow her to handle calamity with quiet competence. At the end of the novel when Jem is out of work, he asks Mary if she would be unhappy to leave Manchester and suggests Canada as the site of their future home. And even though Mary settles down into a domestic role as wife and mother, the foreign setting suggests freerer, more flexible arrangements that allow for the development of Mary's talents. What emerges at the end is the picture of a marriage in

which the husband acknowledged the intelligence and strength of his wife, qualities that assuredly grew out of her days as a young working girl who was largely left alone to take care of herself.

Mary Barton closes with a quiet family scene, in which letters from England are joyously received. They bring the news of the upcoming marriage of Margaret and Will and of the successful operation that restored Margaret's sight. As Colby notes, the last image of the novel, a woman recovering her vision, is an interesting note to end on, for it is the image of a woman being empowered (45). Early in the novel, Margaret sings a moving song about an Oldham Weaver, and even Mary is amazed at the powerful performance of her friend. Gaskell describes Mary's expression of wonder, her surprise that "the hidden power should not be perceived in the outward appearance" (74). In a way, it seems that this image is an apt one for the entire novel. Mary Barton, a seemingly simple factory girl, represents, despite her disarming looks, a powerful force, for she bears the ideological weight of her class, women who work and who become strong in their labour. In this novel, Mary is a persuasive argument for female vocation.

In *Mary Barton* , Gaskell entered the "Condition of England" debate to make new claims for women. This debate was in part a response to industrialization and its dramatic effect on the organization of labour. In the discourse on labour that formed a part of the "Condition of England" debate, a variety of figures took positions on the issuse of work, especially on working women. Discussions of work during the Victorian period proceeded under the assumption that work was for males. Carlyle linked true work with masculine power as he invokes an image of work-force "heaving, struggling, all shoulders at the wheel; their heart pulsing, every muscle swelling, with man's energy and will... warriors in the one true war" (1899:xII,205). Throughout the period, work was associated with masculinity, aggression, the life force itself and the identification of labour with the masculine failed to acknowledge

the actual participation of women in the labour force. Within the factories, in increasing numbers, were female workers. According to the 1851 Census 140,000 women over twenty were employed in domestic service 125,000 in clothing and shoemaking 11,000 in teaching 9,000 in the silk industry, and the remainder in other branches of manufacture (Alexander,1983:36-7). Because they were held mainly by women, these occupations yielded low wages and little prestige. More hidden was the labour that women performed inside the home. Not surprisingly, the issue of women's work became a topic that sparked much passionate discussion both among the leading feminists of the day and among those who saw the feminization of the labour force as a sign of the nation's degeneration. Thus the "Condition of England" debate raised the "Woman Question". The "Woman Question", with which mid-century Victorians were preoccupied, entered upon woman's proper sphere.

By considering some canonical works of the nineteenth century such as Tennyson's *The Princess* , Ruskin's "Of Queen's Garden", and Patmore's "The Angel in the House" it seems that Victorian society defined "work" very narrowly for women: their task – their true vocation – was to aquire a husband and produce a family. The search for an independent self-definition, so far a masculne preserve, was socially unacceptable for women. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote fiction that wrestled with the issue of women's work. Jenni Calder asserts that unlike other women writers who portray female characters as victims, Gaskell confers upon her characters a measure of control over the circumstances of their lives (1976:78). Colby also remarks that Gaskell is interested in presenting her female characters as powerful; by exploring the process by which they choose a direction for their lives, Gaskell links women's work with their empowerment as reflected in *Mary Barton* (10).

In general *Mary Barton* focuses on the career of a young, vital factory girl who is able to accomplish what she desires. Successful at coordinating domestic duties and career, Mary Barton fits the image of a woman who could merge her public and

private roles. Through the characters of Esther, a prostitute, and Mary, a vain and naive girl who transforms into a capable woman, Gaskell sets up a framework for feminism. Though on the surface an English provincial novel, *Mary Barton* rewards multiple readings by revealing webs of inner conflicts that both affirm convention and whisper rebellion.

Mary Barton is a novel with an author, genre, plot and conclusion marked by tension, opposition and conflict. They exist on the event horizon between the British industrial and agricultural economies, between employers and workers and, finally, between women and men. *Mary Barton* explores the frustration of the British lower classes and the false sense of class mobility in the 1800s. It contains many scenes of violence and the Chartist Movement is shown in a violent but necessary light, causing the readers of the day to question the working conditions of the lower class.

This chapter illustrated how Gaskell made the industrial novel a form that affirmed women's abilities and needs, providing proofs that Gaskell was fully concerned about the dominant ideology of gender and the concept of labour at her time trying to be historically effective. The chapter also dealt with Gaskell's use of contemporary historical events as the background of *Mary Barton* depicting her historical consciousness as a female writer.

CHAPTER III

CRANFORD

Gaskell wrote *Cranford* (1851) between *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. The two industrial novels more or less deal with the same issues, however, the historical chronology of these works is revealing, for it suggests that Gaskell moved easily from an examination of public problems in the market economy to the private problems in a small country village, and back again. Gaskell's ease in moving between these two seemingly disconnected worlds indicates the extent to which they are connected in her own mind and works. *Cranford* is concerned with the struggle of an old-fashioned society against the changes forced upon it by the new industrialism. In *Cranford* there are two main characters who grow and change together: a young woman called Mary Smith, and her older friend Matilda Jenkyns. Through their friendship, these two women symbolize the union of the new England with the old Victorian values. It is apparent that industrialism is making it difficult for the old ways to continue, specially the "code of gentility" which is a major force in the lives of the women and men of Cranford. However, we understand at the end that it is possible for the old to co-exist with the new as Mary Smith merges the values and behaviours of the older generation with her Drumble background. This chapter aims to show that *Cranford* has more in common with the so-called "industrial novel" than has been recognized. Of particular importance in the novel is Gaskell's success in breaking the borders of the public and private spheres, and so tracing the notion of gender in her work is another concern of this chapter. The chapter also tries to bring evidence to prove that *Cranford* is a novel about social changes and reform.

Cranford has been dismissed by many as an old-fashioned piece about life in a small English village. Quite popular throughout the nineteenth century, *Cranford* was well loved and known by readers (Colby,64). *Cranford* does not overtly grapple and

struggle with the social problems which form the subject matter of some of Gaskell's more serious novels. But it is packed with pages full of the realities of romantic disappointment, family estrangement, crime, financial ruin, and death. In this work problems of the public sphere, specially the problems of women, are embedded within private events. However, Gaskell's apparent shift in focus from the industrial mode, which foregrounds social issues, to the domestic mode, signals not an abandonment of the public world, but a more intensive engagement with its problems, which she comes to see as inscribed within the private sphere. The world of *Cranford* is a world of women. The opening lines establish Cranford as a female domain: "In the first place, Cranford is in procession of the Amazons" (Gaskell,1976:1). Men are conspicuously absent: "Whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. What could they do if they were there?" (1). For everything from keeping the gardens to setting questions about literature or politics, the ladies of Cranford are, Gaskell says, "quite sufficient" (2). The opening pages describe what has been described by critics like Lansbury as a kind of female utopia, in which women hold sway and men are kept at bay (1984:86). "Seemingly, however", says Colby "Gaskell was more of a practical reformer than a Utopian thinker. While she believed that society could be improved, she was no dreamy visionary. In *Cranford* Gaskell offers a social model which operates under values that run counter to those of the capitalist patriarchy" (66).

In this novel, Gaskell is slyly presenting ideas about social reform. Although Cranford is not a perfect society, Gaskell concentrates on the ways in which the elderly ladies manage, despite crisis and disappointments, to sustain and support their self-made community. The pattern of women sustaining other women runs through Gaskell's body of fiction. Her first published work, "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras,"(1847) contains this theme of female solidarity, as does "The Well of Pen-Morfa" (1850) and "Half a Life-time ago" (1855). Merryn Williams suggests that

Gaskell is interested in showing that "women can expect more kindness from each other than from men" (1984:109). To make a community is, of course, a political act: it is a way of consolidating power for the uses of its members. By organizing and defining themselves within a community, the Cranford ladies create an environment which serves their needs and interests. By recalling that the first Women's Rights Convention in Senca Falls had been held only three years before *Cranford* was published, as noted by Colby (67), we may read this seemingly harmless novel as Gaskell's contribution to the "Woman Question."

Cranford was the final stage in a process of recollection, gradually transmuted into fiction, which began with "The Last Generation in England" in 1849, and continued with "Mr Harrison's Confessions", in 1851. In "The Last Generation" Gaskell describes the hierarchy of the small town of her youth from the top downwards: the landed gentry; the professional classes; the shopkeepers; the "usual respectable and disrespectable poor"; and "dropping off the pit's brink into crime", attacking the old ladies on their way back from card parties. The social range of "Mr Harrison's Confessions" is almost as broad as that of "The Last Generation", extending from the doctors, the Rector, the well-off farmers and shopkeepers down to the respectable poor. When the town called Duncombe changed to Cranford Gaskell narrowed her focus and moved closer to the heart of her subject, concentrating on one layer, the community of single women, defined in "The Last Generation" as the daughters of aristocratic families, "with their genealogy at their fingers' ends" (Cranford's Honorable Mrs Jamieson), the widows of cadets of these families, "also poor and proud" (Mrs Forrester), and the "single or widow ladies" (Miss Pole, the Misses Jenkyns, Mrs Fitz-Adam). In *Cranford* professional men like the doctor, Mr Hoggins and the Rector, or shopkeepers like Mr Johnson, appear solely in relation to the "ladies", while the dangerous lower orders do not appear at all, except in the women's vivid imaginations.

Actually the novel does not follow a conventional plot line, and made of different episodes. Gaskell's first story, "Our Society at Cranford", describes the narrator's memories of the small town "many years" ago, and tells how the genteel life of the ladies of Cranford, especially that of the middle-aged daughters of the town's late Rector, Deborah and Matty Jenkyns, is disrupted by the arrival of the ex-soldier Captain Brown. The Captain has a position on the new railway, which has been "vehemently petitioned against by the little town". Captain Brown, despite his blindness to the importance of Cranford's trivial ceremonies, and his even worse blindness, in Deborah Jenkyns's eyes, in preferring Dickens to Dr Johnson, wins the ladies's trust by his kindness (and usefulness) and his evident care for his sick elder daughter.

The narrator of the story is a young woman familiar with the town. She is merely a nameless intermediatary with a distant public, but as the episodes progress she gains a name, Mary Smith, and a history of her own, and begins to take a significant part in the action. Not much information is given about Mary exept that she once lived in Cranford but moved to the big neighbouring city of Drumble with her businessman father. It is apparent that Mary has lost her mother although how and when are not stated. Mary spends a good deal of her time in Cranford as her father is busy and is quite content to let his daughter stay with their old acquaintance in the country. When in Cranford, Mary stays mainly with Miss Matty, and this friendship between the old spinster and the younger woman provides a look at the effect their respective ages have on their attitudes and personalities. Mary notes that the town is made up predominantly of women. The society is a highly structured one: there are rules and decorum and order which must be followed, and everyone has a highly-developed sense of the proper model of behaviour. It is mostly "ladies" who rule Cranford and these ladies have a great many social rules. For example, it is very important to visit newcomers to the town, and you must always visit between the

hours twelve and three. When a newcomer pays a visit, it must be for a quarter of an hour only; and people must never talk about anything that matters – because there is not time! Also, you must never talk about money – this is not done by people of good family. Another strange thing about Cranford is that there are not many men about. Most of the ladies in the town are quite old and they are not interested in men – or that is what they say. There are many personalities whose lives are followed in Cranford. The novel follows the ups and downs of the lives of Miss Matty, and of others, and shows how the people of Cranford look after each other, as they always have done. Despite of their poverty, the residents of the town are kind, decent, and thoroughly proper. Nothing really happens in Cranford, but that does not stop the inhabitants from creating intrigues, disapproving of certain minor social accidents, and exaggerating insignificant incidents until they become near catastrophes. For example, in one of the chapters, some of the ladies imagine that the French are invading. This leads to a state of semi-hysteria in most of the household – with a sense of paranoia whenever a new face is seen in the town. France is perceived as a volatile place where they are always having revolutions.

In this society of rural origin the social hierarchy provides the basic pattern. In *Cranford* the standpoint is usually that of the middle-class observer. Just as much is normally seen of the lower orders as would be seen by the ladies of Cranford and their extensive sisterhood. They show "kindness (somewhat dictatorial)" to the respectable poor and manage as a rule to avoid contact with the "disrespectable". Between the lower orders and the gentlefolk comes the intermediate class of shopkeepers. Financially they are frequently better off than the grade above them, but any friendship, or any family connection with them, is considered socially compromising. Miss Jenkyns is horrified when Miss Jesse Brown mentions in her drawing-room that her uncle is a shopkeeper. Yet, when Miss Matty has lost most of her money in the failure of the provincial joint-stock bank, she is persuaded by practical friends from

commercial Drumble to add to her resources by selling tea. It takes Mrs Jamieson, the social oracle of Cranford, several days' consideration to decide whether or not Miss Matty should forfit her right to the privileges of society by her action, though ultimately the decision is in her favour. The gap between trade and gentility is bridged in striking manner. Above trade come those who qualify for immediate admission to the privileges of society. These are the middle classes. For example Mıss Matty Jenkyns, the original leader of Cranford society, is the daughter of a former Rector. The sgnificance of this lady for the community stems from the fact that she is the hereditary guardian of its traditions, its manners and its morals. In any crisis, it is she who takes the initiative. Hilary Schor suggests that *Cranford* "does not, strictly speaking, have a heroine: but Miss Matty represents some kind of moral center for the novel (1992:113).

In her depiction of the Cranfordians, Gaskell presents an alternative to the set of social practices associated with middle-class women. In contrast to the material display which their middle-class counterparts aspire to, the inhabitants of Cranford practice "elegant economy," keeping early hours, serving simple refreshments at entertainments, and dressing simply. Faced with limited incomes, the ladies have learned to be resourceful and to redefine gentility by dissociating it from money. This new way of looking at social success is ultimately liberating, for if money is not a perquisite to manners, the circle widens. Displaying a "Kindly *esprit de corps*," the Cranfordians "overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their poverty" (4). When, for instance, Mrs. Forrester gives a party and her servant asked the guests on the sofa if she could get out the tea tray from underneath, "every one took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world" (4). Modification of social practices and rituals allows the women to support each other as together they face economic necessity with dignity. Again, as she did in *Mary Barton*,

Gaskell is emphasizing feminine cooperation rather than competition between members of the groups.

The inhabitants of Cranford not only face the challenge of poverty, but they also experience the difficulties of living without men. Interestingly, the 1851 Census published the same year, confirmed a social trend that Gaskell represents in *Cranford*. No less than 42 percent of women between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried, and two million, one third of Britain's population, supported themselves (Colby,67). The cultural expectation that women will marry and be supported by men was not being born out by the experience of an increasingly large group of women. In this way, Gaskell implies, women need to develop their own strategies as they try to lead useful, satisfying lives by regarding the ideology of feminine leisure as irrelevant and dangerous.

Gaskell approved female solidarity and made it a major theme in her fiction. In *Cranford*, women have learned to depend on each other, particularly in a crisis. In one such occasion the ladies deal with the possibility of robbery after several thefts break out in their town. It is true that the ladies become frightened; indeed, they bolt themselves up when fear hits them, but when it passes, they "recollected themselves and set out afresh with double valiance" (135). Here the women grouped together to overcome the crisis. Alarmed at strangers passing near her house, Miss Pole hurries over to Miss Matty's house and asks for permission to spend the night: "I am come to throw myself on your hospitality" (138). Her servant Betty likewise seeks the safety of female company as she makes plans to stay with her cousin. And when a more sudden crisis emerges, the discovery that Signor Brunoni is ill and in financial need, the ladies put their fears for their own safety aside and begin to provide assistance to the Brunoni family. Miss Matty takes the lead by sending the sedan-chair for him, Lady Glenmire presides over the medicine, Mrs. Forrester makes some bread-jelly, and Miss Pole comes and goes with her basket at all hours, by way of an unfrequented road. As Carol

Lansbury has pointed out, the ladies of Cranford know how to respond to emergencies, whether they affect the community at large or individual members (86).

One of the concepts Gaskell deals with in *Cranford* is the notion of change which is deeply rooted in her awareness of her time and environment. *Cranford* is a humorous rendering of old fashioned life in a small rural town: mainly set in the 1830s, and glancing back over its characters' histories as far as the 1780s, it re-creates a way of genteel life that at first sight may appear static. However, life in Cranford is subject to social changes: personal losses are often the focus of individual episodes, but the picture emerging from the narrative as a whole is of beneficial changes to the community. *Cranford* focuses on a question that was always of importance to Gaskell evident in her letters and fiction: what role can a woman take in her changing society.

Women's community of Cranford is not stagnant and insular if we take into account the changes which occur in the town throughout the novel. Thus the initial characterization of Cranford society as excessively inflexible and excessively preoccupied with decorum seems to be completely inaccurate, for Miss Matty exercises a liberating influence on her community, leading them as they gradually adopt freer attitudes toward men and class distinctions. As Matty depicts these changes, Gaskell is suggesting that the leadership of women will lead to more flexible and humane social arrangements. Cranford does alter in the course of the story and Gaskell shows that change, although painful for some characters, is not necessarily bad. Thus, when Miss Matty receives an invitation to dine with her old beau, Mr Holbrook, she is at first reluctant to go, feeling that it would be improper. Yet she overcomes her misgivings and accepts the invitation. The occasion proves harmless and even enjoyable: with still a trace of guilt, Miss Matty says afterwards, "It is very pleasant dining with a bachelor... I only hope it is not improper; so many pleasent things are!" (50). After this encounter with her old love, Miss Matty amends her previous stance in which she forbade her servant Martha to receive callers, saying

"God forbid that I should grieve any young hearts" (60). Equally important, Miss Matty serves as a social mediator when the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson's behavior strains social relations in Cranford by accepting an invitation from Betty Barker, a retired milliner whose elder sister had been her own maid, and she persuades her neighbours to accept the socially unequal marriage of Lady Glenmire, Mrs Jamieson's sister, who happily drops her title to marry the local doctor Mr Hoggins. Miss Matty thus functions as a progressive leader of her community, calling for changes which will enhance the lives of the inhabitants of Cranford. Uglow asserts that the patriarchal certainties and strict laws of precedence of the eighteenth century that Deborah Jenkyns invokes – those of "my father, the Rector" and "the Great Doctor", Samuel Johnson – have been of value in giving the women dignity and providing rules to control their lives (1993:286). After Deborah's death these start to give way to the more flexible ethos of the nineteenth century, embodied in her kindly younger sister, Matty (who takes after her mother), and in Captain Brown, who starts the shocking process of change by being courteous to all, regardless of class and gender. The Captain, who at first makes the women moan over the "invasion of their territories by a man", turns out to have a tenderness equal to that of any woman. His death is due to his instinctive act of jumping on the railway line to save a small girl, throwing her into her mother's arms. Deborah nurses his dying elder daughter and accompanies Jessie, the younger, to his funeral. Deborah not only allows Jessie to "weep her passionate fill" at the graveside, but welcomes Jessie's returned lover, Major Gordon.

In order to illustrate the precarious situation of women who are not trained to be self-supporting, Gaskell allows economic realities to enter the plot of *Cranford.* In this novel Gaskell is drawing attention to the plight of unskilled women who cannot rely on either husbands or families for financial support. At the same time, she apparently wants to confer on her characters a kind of resilience which will help them to improvise to create space for themselves within the working world.One of the most

significant events in the novel occurs when the Town and Country Bank fails, causing Miss Matty to exhibit remarkable courage and strength when faced with the possibility of financial ruin (187-8). The narrator says, "We took to our work," indicating that in this case, as in others, the Cranford ladies work together to handle difficulties (193). The young narrator, Mary Smith, says, "It was an example to me… to see how immediately Miss Matty set about the retrenchment which she knew to be right under her altered circumstances" (195). Hilary Schor notes Mary Smith's development in the novel, suggesting that "she moves from anonymous reporter to amused reader and finally to manipulator/ and fairy godmother" (1992:88). Robin B. Colby suggests that Miss Matty deserves some of the credit for Mary Smith's development as she teaches the young girl how to marshal limited resources and how to respond to a crisis (69). First Miss Matty asks Mary Smith to write to her father and ask him to come for a consultation, and then she decides to fit herself in a single room and to sell the rest of her furniture. Both actions require fortitude, for, based on the unspoken code of Cranford, money matters should not be discussed with friends, much less with outsiders; furthermore, Miss Matty is fondly attracted to her home, and to part with her few possessions grieves her deeply (69). In this story of a society of older women that is punctuated only here and there by the appearance of a young woman or a man of any age, there is a gradual mixing of the old-fashiond value of cooperation with the modern emphasis on individualism. As Mary Smith brings her knowledge of the Drumble ways to the country town, she is in turn educated in the ways of Victorian England so that she becomes the embodiment of both sets of values, the capitalistic, and the communalistic (Rosental,1994:84). Miss Matty's community also assists her as she takes steps toward active employment. Gaskell's letters reveal repeated instances in which she herself intervened on behalf of a woman who was in some kind of need. Similarly, Miss Matty's loyal servant, Martha, hastens her own wedding plans in order to offer her mistress a room as a lodger in her new home. Through these

scenes, Gaskell emphasizes the communal values which sustain the women in Cranford and demonstrates how they work together to survive all sorts of crisis.

Cranford dramatizes the dilemma faced by women who are compelled to find work but who have not had the chance to develop the skills that are rewarded in the marketplace. At the same time, it affirms the resourcefulness and creativity that women can discover in themselves when given the opportunity. Mary Smith displays this resourcefulness when she comes up with the idea that Miss Matty could support herself by selling tea. Mary Smith "thought of all the things by which a woman, past middle age; and with the education common to ladies fifty years ago, could learn or add to a living without materially losing caste" (198-9). Teaching was "of course, the first thing that suggested itself" (199). But after a mental survey of Miss Matty's accomplishments, Mary realizes that her friend lacks the skills which would be necessary to a teacher: music, drawing, sewing, reading, writing and arithmetic - in all of these Miss Matty was deficient. What she excelled at, making candle lights and decorating playing cards, was of no real value in the marketplace. Mary Smith is forced to conclude that "there was nothing that she could teach to the rising generation of Cranford" (201). This situation tests Mary Smith's ingenuity; urgently seeking a possible solution to Miss Matty's problem, the narrator says that when the tea was brought in an idea came into her head: "Why should not Miss Matty sell tea - be an agent to the East India Tea Company?" (202). In this episode Gaskell displays an awareness of the economic realities which make it necessary for women to find work. At the same time, Gaskell demonstrates that they can be self-supporting. By suggesting that in this case it is Miss Matty's experience with household management which prepares her to run a successful business, Gaskell is pointing out to women that their domestic work skills can be mobilized in more public work settings. Despite the odds against her, Miss Matty proves herself equal to the challenge before her. Her initial reaction to the plan, however, is to express self-doubt:

> It was rather a shock to her; not on account of any personal loss of gentility involved, but only because she distrusted her own powers of action in a new line of life, and would timidly have preferred a little more privation to any exertion for which she feared she was unfitted. (217)

This lack of confidence is the result of a social ideology that officially segregates women out of the public, productive sector of the economy. Yet with the encouragement of Mary Smith and her father, who heartily approves of his daughter's schemes, Miss Matty agrees to the preparations for the new business venture. Seemingly it is not true, as Martin Dodsworth has claimed, that only Miss Matty's "patience and her acceptance of straitened circumstances" are required in this situation (1963:143). Against her upbringing, Miss Matty has to accept the idea of participating in trade, and, perhaps more difficult than that, she has to allow her home to be rearranged to serve as a site for business. Miss Matty is flexible enough to accommodate herself to her new situation. After the room has been cleaned and arranged, she and Mary Smith actually feel proud as they look around on the evening before the shop is to be opened. In this scene Gaskell conveys her approval of her character's bravery in taking on such a project in her advanced age and social conditioning.

Miss Matty's business, as Colby puts it, not only provides an example of female enterprise, but also provides a new paradigm for the commercial ethos (71). When newly empowered merchants like Miss Matty enter the workplace, Gaskell implies that the strictly competitive structure of business will be infused with the womanly values of cooperation and mutual support. For instance, Miss Matty is reluctant to sell tea while Mr. Johnson, a neighbour, includes the item in his shop; consequently, she confides to him her plans and inquires whether they are likely to injure his business. Although Mary Smith's father calls this idea of hers "great nonsense," questioning how tradespeople "were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each others' interests," her action ultimately serves her own interests, for Mr. Johnson subsequently sends customers to her, claiming that Miss Jenkyns had the

really choice teas (220). As Elizabeth Langland has noted, Miss Matty actually "establishes an edge over her competitor by telling him that she will not compete" (1992:299). Likewise, Miss Matty's way of dealing with unfair practice is effective and constructive. When the man who brings her coal shortchanges her, she says quietly, "I am sure you would be sorry to bring me wrong weight," therefore putting a stop to his dishonest treatment of her (221). Thus chided by a trusting old woman, the man is ashamed to cheat her again. In contrast, Mary's father, who is skeptical of Miss Matty's methods, admits that he lost more than a thousand pounds the previous year, despite all his precautions. The more Miss Matty gives away, the more she is rewarded: gifts of a few eggs, fresh ripe fruit, a bunch of flowers regularly appear on her counter. Gaskell seems hopeful about the possibility of women imbuing the capitalist system with a feminine ethos, or, as Nina Auerbach puts it, of investing "laissez-faire reality with their communality" (1978:86). Miss Matty is successful in her business; the first year she makes more than twenty pounds, and she actually comes to enjoy the employment, "which brought her into kindly intercourse with many of the people around her" (226).

Genderwise nowhere in all of Gaskell's fiction women are embodied as fully as in *Cranford*. Generally, Gaskell does not, for instance, physically isolate what she sees as the male and female worlds. Most of her settings mix the two. But in *Cranford* she creates a place that is entirely female. There is, as well, a male place in the neighbouring town of Drumble, but neither she nor we go there. We only hear of it now and then. Drumble is important in the novel to the extent that events in that place have an effect on events in Cranford and it is also important as a guide to the genders Gaskell assigns to a variety of actions since she considers males exclusively responsible for all the activities of Drumble. Drumble is a large manufacturing town, concerned with business and with money, both of which are here defined as exclusively male domains. Drumble is the place of masculine, public, commercial

values, understood by no one in Cranford but close to it and linked by the nineteenth-century symbol of technological progress and the quickening pace of life, the railway. The Cranford ladies know nothing of money, they never mention it, in fact (3). They know nothing of business either. The "most earnest and serious business" for the ladies of Cranford are card games, of which they are, in fact, very fond (80). Whenever a woman attempts to deal with money or business in Cranford, she fails - thus, the heroine, Miss Matty, loses her inherited money because her sister, rejecting advice from a Drumble businessman, has invested their inheritance herself and the bank she chose for their investment goes bankrupt.

Mary Smith, the narrator of the story, is a Drumble resident. Every so often, however, she feels the need to get away to Cranford. Felicia Bonaparte notes that "since Drumble is male, it is the place in which, for Gaskell, the demon lives"(1992:156). There, she must always face confrontation, an endless struggle against herself. Therefore, she needs every so often to escape. She needs to get away from her demon to a completely female world.

Miss Matty, however, has all her life been under the domination of males. First, she had been oppressed by her father, who had ruled with an iron hand. Then she had been oppressed by her sister, who, when he died, had assumed his place, insisting, in fact, that things be done just as they had been "in my father, the Rector's house" (31). To Gaskell, Deborah is a male character. Her clothing is always described in male terms. The first time we see her, for example, she is wearing "a cravet" and a "bonnet like a jockeying cap"(4). Another covering for her head is a hat that looks like a "helmet"(21). She has, moreover, a manner so military, that it makes her look "like a dragoon" (24-143). And, to confirm her masculinity, she prefers Dr. Johnson to Dickens, *Rasselas* to *The Pickwick Papers* (10-11). For Gaskell, writers are metaphors too. As Margaret Ganz has said, Johnson embodies order, reason. Dickens embodies imagination, spontaneity, and feeling (1969:143). According to Bonapart, they are the

male and female worlds (1992:158). Captain Brown, a female character as Deborah Jenkyns is male, is an ardent admirer of Dickens. When he expresses his admiration for The *Pickwick* Papers to her, Deborah replies "I must say, I don't think they are by any means equal to Dr. Johnson. Still, perhaps, the author is young. Let him preserve, and who knows what he may become if he will take the great Doctor for his model" (10). Being "the more decided character"(145). Deborah tyrannizes over Matty. It is "astonishing," says the narrator, "how such people carry the world before them by the mere force of will" (145). Even her memory, after she dies, continues to intimidate Matty, But slowly she beings to free herself. Slowly she begins to act. Her acts of independence are small but significant to Gaskell. Deborah held smoking in abhorrence. Miss Matty, however, when she is asked, agrees to fill Mr. Holbrook's pipe, taking his request, in fact, as a compliment to herself (40). She summons the courage to pick out the silk for a new gown she is to have made, and this is the first time in her life she has ever chosen "anything of consequence for herself"(145). And she begins to read Charles Dickens (27). In many ways Miss Matty proves, subservient though she had always been more independent than her sister. Unlike Deborah, who diligently copied her father's words, Matty lets them go, and drops all his letters in to the fire and watches their blaze (86). She is not tied to convention as much.

In Gaskell, singleness is a state that must be tolerated and made the best of: Miss Matty never marries and has no children. Gaskell through her narrator thought "an unmarried life may be to the full as happy, in process of time but I think there is a time of trial to be gone through with women, who naturally yearn after children" (598); for Miss Matty, children are a source of regret.

Cranford also explores the effects of the split in society between private and public, rational and emotional, expressed in the notion of "separate spheres" for men and women. Matty is a victim of the split, and *Cranford* addresses the split as a

problem and offers a fundamentally optimistic view of the possibilities of healing, through the extension of "feminine" concern into "masculine" areas of life. Patsy Stoneman believes that in *Cranford* the Victorian idea of separate spheres has been taken to extremes (1987:93). This is established in the first few sentences, which create the sense of an almost mythical world of feminine separatism, and also suggest its fragile basis.

> In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women. If a married couple come to settle in this town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty mils on a railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford.(39)

Financially dependent though the ladies of Cranford may be on the income from their small investments in the commercial world, they continue to live as if it did not exist. Debora Jenkyns clings to the social status once accorded her as the rector's daughter, though the affluence that once went with her position has vanished since her father's death. Other Cranford ladies in similarly reduced circumstances also rely for self-respect on an exaggerated sense of rank and the importance of gentility, and do their best to ignore the fact that the nineteenth century is leaving them financially and socially behind. The humorous designation of the Cranford ladies as female warriers, and the mock-sinister reference to men being frightened to death, establish an undercurrent of hostility to men; but in the very first sentence, the phrase "above a certain rent" alerts us to the fact that the disappearance of men is an illusion. In the lower classes, from which the ladies see themselves as quite distinct, there are, as the servant Martha later confirms, "such lots of young fellows' that the town is a particularly good place for finding a husband (79). The Cranford ladies' separation from commercial life, from present-day society and from men is a kind of collective fantasy.

Because the Cranford ladies live so exclusively in the home, shopping and frequent visits to each others' houses being their main excursions, and because they do not share their homes with men, in their lives the woman's sphere seems to have expanded into an entire "community of women". Certainly Cranford's co-operative social ethos is cherished. Miss Matty, as a shareholder in the Town and Country Bank, is right (though she goes against all commercial sense) to take on responsibility for the farm's banknote when the bank fails; and her friends' subsequent rallying round to support her, and the local grocer's uncompetetive attitude, which helps ensure the success of her tea business, further vindicate Cranford in its opposition to Drumble. However, kindness and mutual help make up only one of the two sets of values associated with Cranford. The other, associated with Miss Deborah rather than Miss Matty, is the "strict code of gentility" (109), which dictates the preservation of outmoded social distinctions. Both value systems can be associated with femininity. The Cranford ladies are responsible for the idea that gentility is feminine: they almost believe, reports Mary Smith, that "to be a man is to be 'vulgar'(45). As Spencer puts it: It is Victorian ideology that identifies kindly cooperation as a part of womanliness, opposed to masculine aggression. Gaskell is gently mocking the Cranford ladies 'gentility', seeing it as the result not of femininity but the peculiar social situation of this group of women (1993:81). Their kindness she whole heartedly endorses, but does not attribute it to women alone. It appears that her aim is to show the "separate spheres" of Cranford to be illusory, and to suggest that "womanly" values can and should be shared by men and women (81). She neither sees Cranford as a separatist "community of women" to be celebrated, nor, as Martin Dodsworth has suggested, as a world of sterile gentility that needs masculinisation (132-45). Rather her vision is of a world of inevitable social change in which she hopes to preserve the best and discard the worst aspects of an earlier way of life.

Gaskell's attitude to the collective fantasies of Cranford combines amused indulgence and gentle, but telling criticism. It is well conveyed through her choice of narrator, Mary Smith: younger than the other ladies and spending some of her time in Drumble, she both includes herself in the Cranford "we" and distances herself from it, seeing through "our" self-deceptions even as she celebrates them. The principal one of these is their refusal to acknowledge their own poverty, which indicates both their economic difficulties as women without men, and the decline of a social system in which aristocratic connections counted for more than commercial success. Thus Mrs. Forrester who is from a "good" family but is now a poor widow, perhaps with her friends' disapproving help, is considerd to be the leisured mistress of a household of servants, who does not know "what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge cakes" (41). The tone here is indulgent because approval of the "kindly *esprit de crops*" shown by the Cranford ladies by breaking any mockery of their fantasy of gentility. But when the code of gentility discourages kindness and co-operation, it is criticized. As Miss Matty's past is gradually revealed, we realize that her father's and sister's standards of gentility denied her the chance to marry Mr holbrook, the farmer she loved; while in Cranford's present, Mrs. Jamieson tries to exclude Mrs. Fitz-Adam from the ladies' society because she was born a farmers' daughter. In fact, the social barriers so jealously preserved by Miss Deborah Jenkyns, and after her death by Mrs. Jamieson, are already broken. The example is Mrs. Jamieson when her own sister-in-law who is the only titled lady in the book, Lady Glenmire, marries Mrs. Fitz -Adam's brother, doctor Mr. Hoggins. The second half of *Cranford* is very different from the first; Lady Glenmir's marriage to Mr Hoggins is only one of the ways in which social rules are broken, boundaries crossed and romance joyfully overturns reality. The ending, in which Mr. Peter enchants the naïve Cranford ladies with his tall tales of India, and uses the

authority thus gained in the community to reconcile Mrs. Jamieson and the Hogginses, Spencer notes, it expresses a hope that Cranford atractiveness can somehow survive even as a new social order is accepted (83).

The change which initially seems foreign to the ladies of Cranford is soon absorbed and its threat is defused by revelation. This is particularly evident in the treatment of a kind of sex war between the Cranford ladies and a series of "invading" men. Military associations and metaphors suggest the war between masculine and feminine as Jane Spencer puts it (83). Captain Brown, Major Jenkyns and Major Gordon all visit Cranford after a lifetime in the army, and Captain Brown's arrival is seen by the Cranford ladies as "the invasion of their territories by a man and a gentleman"(42). Major Jenkyn's "Hindoo body-servant" who makes Miss Matty think of the legendary wife-killer Bluebeard (68), and the comparison of the visiting magician, Signor Brunoni, to the "Grand Turk" (135), a figure in the European imagination for polygamy and male domination, demonstrate that fear of men is replaced with the fear of foreigners. Captain Brown shatters Cranford fantasy by his "vulgar" talk of poverty, but still he shares poverty with them; he does take up a "man's place" in the service. At a Cranford card-party:

> He immediately and quietly assumed the man's place in the room; attended to every one's wants, lessened the party maid-servant's labour by waiting on empty cups, and bread-and-butterless ladies; and yet did it all in so easy and dignified a manner, and so much as if it were a matter of course for the strong to attend to the weak, that he was a true man throughout. (46)

His manliness is defined in terms of service to family and community. He is devoted to his daughters, helps his neighbours and as has already been mentioned, dies on the railway saving a little girl. Although he is employed by the hated new railway, he is the victim, not the representative, of technological and commercial progress. Thus he shares with the Cranford ladies the best of their values and their apparently "feminine" vulnerability.

When Gaskell decided to add episodes and eventually to develop *Cranford* into a full narrative, she created new masculine figures. The name of the most important one echoes captain Brown's: Signor Brunoni, alias Samuel Brown. The apparent threat of masculinity is even stronger here: Signor Brunoni, it appears, is a foreigner, and has magical powers (it is Miss Pole, the Cranfordian most openly hostile to men and marriage, who insists he has merely learnt some easy conjuring tricks); and his arrival coincides with a series of robberies, some real and some imagined, which place Cranford in a state of panic. The Cranford ladies begin to blame this exotic man for their problems, Mrs. Forrester claims that:

> We must believe that the robbers were strangers if strangers why not foreigners?-if foreigners, who so likely as the French? Signor Brunoni spoken English like a French man, and, though he wore a turban like Turk, Mrs. Forrester has seen a print of Madame de Stael with a turban on, and another of Mr. Denon in just such a dress as that in which the conjurer had made his appearance; showing clearly that the French, as well as the Turk, wore Turbans: there could be no doubt Signor Brunoni was a Frenchman-a French spy, come to discover the weak and undefended places of England. (139)

Again, all fears are illusory. The robbery at Mr. Hoggins's is reduced to a cat's theft of meat; the ladies' homes are quite safe, and there are no ghosts in Darkness-lane, which they so feared to enter at night. Signor Brunoni is mere Samuel Brown, once in the army in India, now a conjurer, and a poor, ill man with a wife and daughter. Miss Pole was right to doubt his power but wrong to be hostile towards him. Like the other men in Cranford, he is as vulnerable as the women: "pale and feeble, and with his heavy filmy eyes, that only brightened a very little when they fell upon the countenance of his beautiful wife, or their pale and sorrowful little girl" (155). India loses its foreignness as Mrs. Brown tells her tale of walking through the country with her baby girl; and receiving kind assistance from Hindus like the one who had so frightened Miss Matty. She is also helped by "Aga Jenkyns", who turns out to be Miss Matty's long-lost brother, so that the friendship with the apparently threatening Signor Brunoni becomes a means of effecting the final reunion of brother and sister.

Through the episodes of her novel, Gaskell sharply criticises masculine authority. She tries to show that stern pride and rigid rules are not positive strengths but barren weaknesses. Snobbish pride in the Jenkynses' family prevents Matty's marriage to Mr Holbrook, leaving her with a child she holds only in her dreams, not in her arms as Uglow asserts (288). The rector's sense of dignity leads him to punish his son, Peter, when he crosses the border of decorum and gender by publicly dressing up as Deborah carrying a baby; when Peter runs away to sea, his mother's heart is broken. After her death Deborah takes her place in caring for their father. Her slavish devotion to her father replaces the thoughts of marriage. Gaskell tries to show that paternal authority, taken to exess, damages rather than encourages life. She asks looking elsewhere for male strength and the reader finds it first in the combination of skill and courage with an underrated "feminine" capacity to care, a quality which saves lives – as the doctor, Mr Hoggins, despite his vulgar bread and cheese suppers and creaking boots, saves Signor Brunoni, as Captain Brown saves Lord Mauleverer in the wars, nurses his daughter and saves the child at Cranford station, as Peter Jenkyns cures the chief of a Burmese tribe and little Phoebe Brunoni in India. And men have other strengths which the women of Cranford, with their poor education and sheltered lives, sadly lack.They have a wider knowledge of the world and a familiarity with learning and literature (the Rector's classics, Mr Holbrook's love of poetry). They bring into the women's enclosed lives a hint of transgressive magic (in Signor Brunoni's tricks, in Peter Jenkyns's traveller's tales). The men who actually enter Cranford's life - from Captain Brown onwards – have a beneficial effect in persuading the women to modify those rules which have bound as well as support them.

The ending of the story includes all kinds of reconciliation and the merging of differences. Peter Jenkyns, whose boyish tricks, involving impersonating women, can be read as half hidden protests against the sharp divisions between men and women, returns to live with his sister, a reunion that symbolizes Cranford's recognition of the

kinship between the sexes. Matty also gains a family in Martha and Jem Hearn and their baby daughter, her godchild. Social divisions are being blurred and broken here, as Martha, Matty's servant, is now her landlady although Martha still has the devoted-servant mentality and her husband Jem shows his deference by keeping out of Miss Matty's way. This will make us believe that Gaskell is aiming to soften and undermine, class distinction. Beneficial change is depicted in all aspects of Cranford society: different classes and sexes have been reconciled, and the "womanly" values of caring have proved themselves central to women's and man's experience.

Gaskell has had to leave certain things out to present an optimistic vision of gradual and beneficent social change. While *Mary Barton* and *North and South,* as examined later, deal with confrontation between workers and capital, Cranford concentrates on healing the divisions between the "aristocratic" and merely "respectable" ends of the middle class. As she deals with the division between men and women by implying that "womanly" values are shared by all, she expels from Cranford any hint of the male violence and the fear of their attacks that are in fact never going to happen. The women's covert antagonism towards men is quite unnecessary: men, when known, are as kind and vulnerable as women. In "The Last Generation in England", the essay that contained the original germ of Cranford, and which Gaskell claimed to be a truthful account of country town life a generation earler, she presented a different story:

> Hanging on the outskirts of society were a set of young men, ready for mischief and brutality, and every now and then dropping off the pit's brink into crime… they would stop ladies returning from the card-parties, which were the staple gaiety of the place, and who were only attended by a maidservant carring a lantern, and whip them; literally whip them as you whip a little child; until administering such chastisement to a good, precise old lady of high family, "my brother, the magistrate", came forward and put down such proceeding with a high hand. (320)

This is an exemplary instance of male violence being used for social control of women, who are clearly being punished for having a social life independent of men;

and of men expressing class antagonism through victimization of women of a higher class, forcing them, in their turn, to rely on the class power wielded by their men for protection. It would have badly damaged the tone of *Cranford* to include anything like this; instead, baseless fears of ghosts in Darkness-lane are presented. By representing the acknowledgement of threats to her female community, Gaskell is able to present in *Cranford* a kind of story in which men and women, and different classes, do not really have conflicting interests, and only need to know each other to be reconciled.

Feminist critics emphasise Cranford's supportive female relationships, and especially Miss Matty, who in many ways epitomizes what Nel Noddings calls a "feminine ethic" (1984:123). She opposes the competitive commercialism of Drumble, for instance. When the bank fails, her response is not self-interest but "common honesty" towards the holders of bank-notes (177) and "sympathy" for the bank directors, to whom, in accordance with Nodding's ethic, she attributes the best of motives (195). Gaskell's vision of a community of women transcends individual self-sufficiency. Patricia A. Wolfe has observed that Gaskell's portrayal of the women of Cranford concentrates on "feminine strength" (1968:161-76). As a minister's wife in the urban district of Manchester, Gaskell's eyes were opened to social problems; hence, her novels regularly contain implications about the future of society as a whole. As a female novelist, she knew the value of community, identifying herself with a group of women writers and willingly using her own position to help other women. In this novel Gaskell reveals how a group of elderly women can sustain and sensitize their community and, furthermore, how a nurturing community can bring out the latent strengths of its individual members. Pauline Nestor has said that *Cranford* shows that it is "possible to imagine a community of women without men, in which marriage is not regarded…as the sole…destiny of any woman and which has value and honour" (1985:56). While charting the lives of leading feminists in Victorian England, Philippa Levina has noted that feminists sought to "reconstitute a positive image of singleness

as an issue of personal choice rather than an uninvited catastrophe" (1990:45). In her presentation of the elderly ladies of Cranford, Gaskell joins the feminist enterprise of raising the status of single women by pointing out their current predicaments and by affirming their choices about their own destinies.

In *Cranford* Gaskell presents a community of women who are self sufficient. These women have chosen by their own will to lead single lives and are happy in their choice. Although the inhabitants of Cranford are not wealthy, they do control property. In spite of their limited financial resources, the ladies of Cranford manage to create rituals and ceremonies that allow them to function comfortably, even on wafer bread and butter and sponge-biscuits. Furthermore, when disaster arises, they are able to find solutions and even to embark on new projects in old age. When the bank that serves Miss Matty fails, she faces the prospect of penury. Yet after a conference with her friends, she decides to support herself by selling tea, a scheme that flourishes due to the backing of her community. Gaskell claimed this novel as her favorite, the one that gave her most pleasure: it is her most complete representation of a community of women who are content – and able – to persue their own enterprise. *Cranford* is an argument for preserving the independence and the precious qualities of this female community. The model of society which it asks us to consider is one where men and women live together side by side and benefit from both 'masculine' and 'feminine' virtues.

CHAPTER IV

RUTH

As Gaskell's third novel, *Ruth* was published in 1853. From the tale of the effects of the new industrial values on life in a small town named Cranford, Gaskell turns to a novel which embraces a different issue of concern to the general Victorian public. *Ruth* is a book about sexual morality – an unmentionable subject at the time – and it drew attention to the different standards expected from men and from women. This was a fact of Victorian life which most of the other novel writers kept sternly suppressed. Though values were changing, as seen in *Cranford,* the taboo against sex and motherhood out of wedlock remained strict, and though Gaskell certainly does not condone unwed motherhood, neither does she damn the unfortunate fallen women. Instead, by her novels and short stories she shows one way in which a fallen woman might be led to that state, and insists that the woman is not, and should not be treated as, unequivocally evil because of a moral slip. Elizabeth Gaskell was interested in the fallen woman as both a social problem and a literary subject. In an earliers short story, "Lizzie Leigh" (1850), Gaskell treats the rescue of a fallen woman as secured through maternal resistance to the social law. Gaskell's central contribution to the contemporary debate on reforming the fallen, however, is her novel *Ruth*, which argues for the possibilities of redemption in a community free of prejudice. As Amanda Anderson has demonstrated in her analysis of the rhetoric of fallenness, "depictions of prostitutes and fallen women in Victorian culture typically dramatize predicaments of agency and uncertainties about the nature of selfhood, character, and society" (1993:1).

In spite of acknowledgement of the problem in reports and other writings, the idea of an impure heroine was unutterably shocking in mid-Victorian times. Fathers burned the book lest it should fall into the hands of their innocent daughters. Gaskell was shunned by some of her own friends and aquaintances. As she wrote in a letter of the time: " The only comparison I can find for myself is to St.Sebastian, tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows... But I have spoken out my mind as best I can , I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good" (L.220). Gaskell herself would not let her daughters read it until they were 18. " 'Deep regret' is what my friends here feel and express" (L.220). "I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it; I do so manage to shock people", wrote Gaskell to Eliza Fox early in 1853. She knew two men who had "burnt the 1st vol. of *Ruth* as so very bad… and a third has forbidden his wife to read it, they sit next to us in chapel and you can't think how "improper" I feel under their eyes" (L.223). Her anxious remark reveals a lot about the treatment of female sexuality and female knowledge in a patriarchal culture.

Through a close reading of Gaskell's *Ruth*, this chapter studies the novel's participation in, as well as resistance to, the social logic of fallenness. The chapter also aims to illustrate Gaskell's use of penitential narrative, as foundational in the development of a feminist sexual politics from the 1860s onwards, to criticize the treatment of female sexuality in patriarchal culture.

Ruth is the story of Ruth Hamilton, an orphan who "was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice" (Gaskell,1985:44) about life and the situations with which she would be presented. Ruth was innocent and naive and while this led to her downfall, her good nature also helped save her. Ruth's father died soon after her mother and left the girl alone eccept for an uncaring guardian who aquired an apprenticeship for the child to a dressmaker, Mrs Mason. Ruth met Mr Bellingham, the man who would lead her astray, in connection with this work. Her friendship with the rich gentleman discovered, Ruth was turned out of the

dressmaker's establishment to look after herself. Though Ruth was not motivated by dreams of wealth and status, Gaskell asks readers to "remember how young, innocent, and motherless she was" (56) and so having no one else to turn to, and no one to tell her right from wrong, Ruth turns to Bellingham as a protector, someone to provide for her and decide her future. She is easily influenced by this gentleman and her naivety prevents her from knowing that she is sinning by living with him. Even when Ruth is made aware that she is considered a "naughty woman" by the remark of a little boy, she is still too naive to realize the magnitude of people's opinions of a young woman living with a man to whom she is not married. In fact, she even assumes that Bellingham would be shocked at the idea of its being improper and does not tell him what she has heard in order that she will not change his opinion of her. Actually woman's impropriety was of major importance to Gaskell and somehow it is the centeral focus of *Ruth*. In this novel she deals with impropritey as sexual irregularity. Gaskell's defense is that the accused, Ruth, did not know she was being improper: therefore she remained innocent.

Ruth is ultimately abandoned by Bellingham and left pregnant and alone. On the verge of suicide, she is saved from that end by the timely fall of an old crooked Unitarian minister called Mr Benson whom Ruth has met during her time with Bellingham. Ruth turns back from her flight to help the man, as she has never been able to ignore the suffering of a fellow creature: by helping him and accompanying him back to his lodgings, Ruth enters into one of the most fortuitous circumstances of her life. Benson is an exceedingly kind man and he takes Ruth under his wing. Ruth was again in a position in which she has no one to turn to, no family, and it is a blessing that she is taken in by Benson, his sister, Faith, and Sally their housekeeper. These three, each in their own way, nurse Ruth's body and mind, and strengthen the faith that will help heal her tortured soul. From Benson, Ruth learns not to mind what men say but what God thinks, and to leave her life in God's hand. Miss Benson

inspires Ruth to read, to educate herself, as well as to keep her mind from returning to the sad subjects to the past. The time and effort that Ruth devotes to improving her mind is an important step in her growth process, while also being symbolic of her change from a naive girl to a wise woman. *Ruth* was written out of a moral impulse similar to the one that generated *Mary Barton*: to make the middle-class reading public aware of responsibilities that they preferred to ignore.

Unlike many unwed mothers at the time, Ruth is given a second chance at a decent life, thanks to the Bensons' open minds, open hearts and true Christian charity. The lessons she learns from the humble Benson houshold do much to strengthen Ruth so that when the inevitable happens and she and her son must face the world as open sinners, they have the knowledge that there are at least three people who truly love them, sinner or not, and that they are worthy in God's eyes. When Ruth was taken in by the Bensons, they thought it best that her real identity be disguised. They told everyone that she was a distant relation, Mrs Denbigh, who had recently been widowed. Ruth lives peacefully under this false identity for some time, even contracting a job as governess / companion to the children of a local industrialist, Mr Bradshaw, a man who prides himself on his moral character. When the townspeople do discover Ruth's true past through a series of coincidental circumstances, and she re-encounters her former lover, Bellingham (now Mr Donne), as the new local MP, the industrialist's favoured candidate, Ruth's temporarily peaceful world is turned into chaos once again and she is thrown out of Bradshow's home. Miss Benson reflects that "Ruth has had some years of peace, in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first" (361). This seems an unlikely incident of ill-fortune, but has similarities to an actual case about which Gaskell wrote about to Dickens in 1850, involving a woman called Pasley, who had herself been a dressmaker's apprentice, was seduced by her own doctor, forced to

turn to a career of petty crime, and, in prison, was confronted by her seducer, now the prison surgeon. This can be taken as an evidence of Gaskell's historical consciousness.

Ruth's 'fall', or rather people's knowledge of it, is used as a catalyst through which others can learn moral lessons. Faith learns to suppress her initial moral doubts through the example of Ruth's goodness and humanity. Jemima Bradshaw is forced to confront a thorny set of questions in relation to Ruth. She is initially quick to condemn her when she learns what her past has been, partly because she fears the influence Ruth may have on her younger sister, partly because her own comfortable sense that she lives in a secure world has been shattered. But Jemima soon recognizes that in fact she had never observed the slightest glimpse of a stain on Ruth's character. This has far-reaching, unsettling implications, which the reader is implicitly invited to share: "Who was true? Who was not? Who was good and pure? Who was not ? The very foundations of Jemima's belief in her mind were shaken" (323) – or rather, she is learning that it is important not to judge according to preconceptions and stereotypes. Thus she arrives at the conclusion: "whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now" (327). Ruth may, in many ways, be an implausibly sweet heroine, but Gaskell exaggerates in order to make what were, for the time, a set of fictionally daring points. Moreover, the reader is left to draw the final conclusions.

As Ruth learns to accept the consequences of her immoral act meekly, she passes on her quiet strength to her son, and succeeds in "leading him up to God" (384). Her true work, the ultimate penance for her sin, is to be a sick-nurse for the townspeople with the fever. When no one else is willing, Ruth volunteers for the job and worked long and hard to comfort the sick and dying. She obtains employment as a private nurse, as Flint asserts, "a career for women in which Gaskell was interested even before Florence Nightingale's efforts made it a respectable job for a middle-class woman" (1995:21). Typhoid fever spreads from the Irish lodging houses in the town to all areas and classes: Ruth becomes a local heroine in her indefatigable caring for

others. Her ultimate gesture comes in nursing Bellingham through the fever: he survives, but she succumbs herself. Mr Benson, is too overcome to preach a sermon at her funeral: he reads, instead, the promise of peacful redemption from *Revelation* 7. Her son, Leonard, is left to mourn over her simple grave, where he is joined by Mr Bradshaw, his eyes filled with tears, moved by the innate goodness of the woman he had earlier been too quick to condemn by conventional social standards. Benson's planned funeral sermon remains unpreached; the headstone to her grave uninscribed and Leonard's blank statement of grief to Bradshaw when he says: "My mother is dead, sir" (458), demands the internalization of the emotion behind according to the pattern established by the inadequate articulations of loss. To some extent, Ruth's funeral sermon had already been preached by Benson to Bradshaw, when the latter attacked him for passing Ruth off as a widow, as someone who was not fit to be a companion to his daughters. Benson asks:

> Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this – that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption – and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ. (351)

Benson is led into self-questioning as a result of having told those necessary white lies which ensured that Ruth could have some form of social rehabilitation, and, perhaps even more importantly, regain her self-respect

Ruth's death at the end of the story is a point of controversy among both contemporary and modern readers. It may be read as a surrender to the orthodoxy that in at least middle-class mid-Victorian fiction, and nonfictional narratives, the 'fallen woman' is better off – ultimately – dead. According to Flint: that a fallen woman would inevitably end in river or gutter was a potent myth, suggesting that once she had strayed, a woman was almost inevitably severed from her original community (26), so seemingly little distinction was actually made between the woman once seduced, and the career of a prostitute: one, in popular assumption, led to the other. In the novel,

such a myth informs Bellingham's thinking when he arrives at Bradshaw's seaside holiday house, and notes the remarkable resemblance of the governess to Ruth. He does not believe that it could be Ruth herself, although he wonders "what had become of her; though, of course, there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable" (278). However, Gaskell herself acknowledges that the controversy which *Ruth* provoked meant that the topic of the "fallen woman" was, at least temporarily, not brushed aside with the ease with which Bellingham had tried to banish it. The book had made people "talk and think a little on a subject which is so painful that requires all one's bravery not to hide one's head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists" (L.227).

Yet Gaskell is more subtle than at first appears in the effects she achieves by killing off Ruth. First, her death, however unmerited in some respects, is the logical fulfilment of certain narrative strands within the novel. It may be taken as having symbolic value, and not only because it seems to be taking her into a happier world than that which she has known, but also as a reward for which she has born her mental suffering, as well as for her more tangible efforts within the community. Moreover, this death is a triumphal rather than a miserable one, and hence functions as a celebration first of Ruth's life, and then of the major force for which she comes to stand in the novel, the spritual and redemtive power of motherhood. Believing in the value of this is the gamble taken by the Unitarian minister, Mr Benson, when he first proposes that Ruth should come and live with him and his sister. Faith regards the coming fruit of Ruth's pregnancy in conventional terms: "the badge of her shame" (119). He, on the other hand, draws a clear distinction: "The sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences" (119), a division which Gaskell herself upholds, whilst showing that many within the community damagingly do not. Moreover,

continues Benson, the baby will, through the responsibilities of motherhood, bring a benefit with it:

> If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtfull for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, - and will be purification. (119)

Ruth's death at the end of the novel seems less of a sop to the conventional notion that female sexual transgression must lead to death, than a result of Gaskell's fundamental ambivalence about the intense maternal devotion that, in Ruth's life, has absorbed all her sexual feelings. She tries not to bother Leonard with protective love as he grows older, but it is hard for her; hard to leave him for any length of time, hard to agree to the doctor's suggestion of taking the adolescent boy as an apprentice. Ruth's devotion to little Leonard might have proved to be damaging to the growing boy, but this problem is, in a sense, avoided by Ruth's death, and with his being taken on, having inherited an aptitude for compassionate caring, as a doctor's apprentice. The doctor is himself an illegitimate child; Gaskell thus provides a reminder that one's birth need not function as a disabling stigma. Unmistakably, though, it is Ruth's motherhood, and concern for her son, which gives not just strength but purpose and continuity to her life. Elizabet Barrett Browning, found the ending unduly sacrificial on Gaskell's part (Flint,27). Charlotte Bronte, called Gaskell a "stern priestess" for "command[ing] the slaying of the victim" (qtd. in Gaskell,1975:475). Yet despite the symbolic force of Ruth's "good death", the regret that Ruth should have to be sacrificed is, in fact a response which may carry with it an effective didactic purpose. At least, for the Victorian reader, it may have called in to question the desire that the narrative of the "fallen woman" should necesarily have such a predictable ending. By this ending, Gaskell uses the reader's response to challenge the assumptions which lie behind such conventions.

The use of penitential narrative by Gaskell in writing *Ruth* is another noticeable concept or narrative device through which she sharply criticizes the contemporary common patriarchal ideologies. Penitential narrative is a distinctly "feminine" philanthropic vision, based on a pattern of rescue redemption, and ultimately, emigration. It opposed social sciences in that it exalted the work of women reformers and aspired to place male-authored texts and theories about female experience at a disadvantage in public debates about prostitution and chastity. Bristow claims that, along with the rise of woman's charity work, came a wave of activity in organizing purity campaigns and missions during the 1850s and 1860s that derived rhetorical energy and gained public notice from the same kinds of arguments, literary and social, first presented in Gaskell's *Ruth* (1977:70). It is important to recognize that Gaskell's novel represents a concerted, collective effort to assert a definition of woman's sexual role in society counter to the one enshrined in the short-lived Contagious Diseases Acts in which Victorian women were considered as either "innately pure, physically insensate, and passive, or naturally "vicious," voraciously animalistic, and aggressively acquisitive" (D'Albertis,1997:76).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one of the practitioners of women's right of the time, articulated the paradox of women's rescue work when she wrote to Gaskell shortly after the publication of *Ruth*, praising the novelist's fictional handling of the problem of fallenness: "[*Ruth*] contains truths purifying and purely put, yet treats of a subject scarcely ever boldly treated of except when taken up by unclean hands. I am grateful to you as a woman for having so treated such a subject" (qtd. in Easson,1991:316). "As a woman," Browning condones another woman's solution to the problem of speaking about the unspeakable. (In fact, Browning actively followed Gaskell's example by publishing "Aurora Leigh" (1856), an epic novel in verse with a strong penitential sub-plot, three years after the publication of *Ruth*). Gaskell's novel contained "truth purifying and purely put," meaning it addressed the issue of

fallenness not only with accurate content, "purifying" truths, but also with apt style or form, truths "purely put." Gaskell's decision to place the fallen woman at the center of *Ruth*, as opposed to Browning's relegation of falleness to a dependent subplot, marked her penitential narrative as a unique and uncompromising contribution to mid-Victorian social discourse on chastity and prostitution.

As mentioned before *Ruth* is one of the many stories Gaskell wrote about fallen women. A fallen woman need not be a prostitute, but Gaskell often blends the two concepts of fallenness and prostitution and writes about them in similar ways. There might have been some external reason for this. Basch suggests that prostitutes fared far better in life than in fiction, some of them marrying and becoming typical angels in the house (1974:ch.3), but often it was hard for a woman who had fallen to obtain a place in "respectable" society, and, unable to find work, she did sometimes become a prostitute. With Esther, the aunt of the title character, Gaskell had told just such a story in her novel *Mary Barton*. On its surface, *Ruth* appears to be a novel written for the same purpose. In *Mary Barton* Gaskell shows how a woman becomes a prostitute if there is no one there to help her, and in *Ruth* she tries to show how a woman can be saved. The name Gaskell chooses for her heroine is itself a plea for mercy. Gaskell makes certain in the novel that we remember the biblical Ruth, who was given the help she needed (276-77), and undoubtedly she intends us to recall that Ruth means "pity". Gaskell's protest is not limited to the fallen woman, however, she wants to make some related points. She wants to protest the double standard that brands the woman but not the man. "Where was her lover?" asked Mr. Benson, "Could he be easy and happy? Could he grow into perfect health, with these great sins pressing on his conscience with strong and hard pain? Or had he a conscience?' Into whole labyrinths of social ethics Mr. Benson's thoughts wandered" (116). And, with the compassion Gaskell felt always for children who are made to pay for the sins of

their parents, she pleads for the illegitimate child, who was, in Victorian society, very much an outcast still.

The task of the novel is apparently to submit Ruth to a process of moral education - a specifically "penitential" course of instruction - which in turn is meant to influence the observant reader. Through the instrument of the social problem novel, or penitential narrative, Gaskell both criticizes the existing moral code as an artificial social construct and proposes to revise it with an alternative philanthropic discourse "written by a woman for women with the direct intention to do good for women" (Mitchell,1981:32). The disadvantage of overlapping Ruth's virtues is, however, that by giving us such a pure and unselfish character, and by giving such "faultless" reasons for her lapse from chastity, Ruth had no representative status, as W. R. Greg pointed out in "The False Morality of Lady Novelists"(*National Review,1859*): she could not be considered as one of "the ordinary class of betrayed and deserted Magdalens" (qtd. in Flint,25). She hardly seems in need of "self-redemption", even to the Victorian reader. After her seduction and subsequent desertion by her lover, Bellingham, Gaskell's heroine Ruth feels "no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence; no knowledge of any circumstances but that he was gone" (94). The ruined seamstress has yet to learn that she has done something "sinful" in the eyes of society: Gaskell stresses the fact that the codes are not instinctive. Assuming one's proper sexual role evidently requires severe training, "she was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice" (44), and Ruth has been offered only the most superficial or oblique instruction in the duties of her class and gender. Old Thomas, the caretaker of her family's former cottage, feebly warns Ruth against Bellingham's advances in the language of Biblical allegory: "My dear, remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, remember that, Ruth" (51), while Ruth's employer, Mrs Mason, is indifferent to the moral welfare of the young woman in her charge, caring only for the appearance of

respectability at her establishment. Old Thomas and Mrs Mason represent the failed embodiment of either paternal or maternal authority to instruct Ruth in her life.

The publication of *Ruth* made a great impact on Gaskell's contemporaries. Whilst the novel was disapproved for a variety of reasons, its didactic effect specially on her contemporary social activists should be noted - notably on Josephine Butler, whose subsequent work with prostitutes culminated in the spread of the discriminatory Contagious Disease Act in 1886. Butler's lifelong career combating the state regulation of prostitution began with her reading of *Ruth* at Oxford a decade before she entered public life in 1860s:

> A book was published at that time by Mrs Gaskell, and was much discussed. This led to expressions of judgment, which seemed to me false-fatally false. A moral lapse in a woman was spoken of as an immensely worse thing than in a man;there was no comparison to be formed between them.A pure woman, it was reiterated, in the world, albeit those evils bore with murderous cruelty on other woman. One young man seriously declared that he would not allow his own mother to read such a book as that under discussion - a book which seemed to me to have a very wholesome tendency, though dealing with a painful subject. Silence was though to be the great duty of all on such subjects. (Butler,1892:95-96)

Butler rebelled, as Gaskell shows Jemima to rebel against the delimitation of male and female provinces of knowledge and language. Women like Butler began to clamour to hear and speak openly about any "class of evils" that bore directly upon themselves. As Judith Walkowitz has demonstrated, "the fiction of the mid-Victorian period articulated a new constellation of feeling and identification with the fallen woman's plight that found expression in feminist politics in the decades to come" (1992:87-93).

Rebecca Jarrett, Butter's account of one prostitute's story, was published in 1886, more than thirty years after *Ruth*, yet the text clearly bears the imprint of Butler's early reading of Gaskell. The continuity between these two life stories-one fictional, the other documentary - indicates the cultural power of the penitential narratives as a form of proto-feminist discourse. Jarrett and women like her convinced Butler of "The Moral Reclaimability of Prostitutes," the title of a tract she published in

1870. Barbara Kanner singles out this particular pamphlet as the one in which the activist openly came to oppose "the rescue work done by individual men" and to accuse "men of being responsible for the women who "fell". Butler believed that women alone could perform adequate reforming work since they could gain the trust of their condemned sisters" (1886-90:487). Opposing the labeling of vice as a form of cynical profiteering, Butler attacked the Contagious Diseases Acts as an inappropriate application of *laissez-faire* economic doctrine to the sphere of moral or ethical decision making: "henceforth they are to be no longer women, but only bits of numbered, inspected, and ticketed human flesh, flung by Government into the public market!" (1870:7). Butler and like-minded reformers refused to describe the condition of prostitutes as "irreclaimable" or akin to damaged goods: in her late-nineteenth-century report on "Rescue Work by Women Among Women", for instance, Mary H. Steer approvingly quoted a fellow female philanthropist who "once said to me" call them *knocked-down* women, if you will, but not fallen" (1895:157). In her campaign against government regulation of prostitution, Josephine Butler declared that "Economics lie at the very root of practical morality" (qtd. in Caine,1992:179). Female rescue workers struggled to create a society in which the equation of sexuality and commerce no longer prevailed. Like Butler, Gaskell situated her penitential narrative in opposition to what she perceived as an alienating masculine perspective on the "Great Social Evil," setting out to disprove the influential medical or sociological view of experts such as William Acton, who wrote that "prostitution is a transitory state, through which an untold number of women are ever on their passage until they can trade their way into marriage and social stability" (1870:79). D'Albertis maintains, despite their best attempts to severe women's rescue work from the discourse of scientists, statisticians, Members of Parliament, which were all understood to be male in theory, if not in practice, women reformers ran up against many of the same obstacles that undid their male colleagues. Gaskell fought against the particular "tissue

of lies" she associated with dominant "masculine" accounts of women's sexuality. *Ruth* thus represented a manifesto – both for women activists and women writers, for shaping and even directing the course of social debate about women's sexuality in the nineteenth century (101).

In sum, the heroine, Ruth, is a woman who sinned but who did not suffer the usual fate of fallen women – early death or shipment to the colonies. Instead, she was allowed to work out her own redemption. Gaskell accomplishes this by making Ruth into a devoted mother and Christian and portraying her as a saint. *Ruth*, in relation to the constricting worlds of sin, stigma and social cruelty, allowed Gaskell to explore the causes of exclusion, the fragility of identity, and the meaning of a gentelman and lady in relation to shame and illness. Gaskell uses Ruth's predicament as a means to investigate what she called in *Ruth* the "labyrinth of social ethics" (116) in mid-nineteen-century English society. Although Gaskell may have overstated her case in making Ruth so penitent and pious, this novel is important as the first major piece of Victorian fiction to treat the theme of the "fallen woman" not just with full compassion and sympathy, but through suggesting that she may be integrated into an English community, may indeed be "respectable." Ruth both rises above her own weaknesses, gaining self-reliance - in the early part of the novel, she repeatedly gives way to "passionate sorrow" and sinks into inaction - and she also rises above those members of the community who wish to condemn her. And it is not just Ruth's endeavours that are seen to be important, but the fact that she is helped by people round her: Benson, his sister Faith, and their practical servant Sally, provide the necessary examples of compassion and Christian charity. Thy are surrogate parents, unlike Ruth's first employer, Mrs Mason, who failed to exercise maternal care over her young charges. The story was controversial in its time not simply because it was a story of seduction: that was an old common theme, but because of the way Gaskell treated it. The seduced woman is no mere minor figure but the heroine, and Gaskell

avoids treating seduction as a focus for easy pathos. In Gaskell's view, it is not a "fall" after which a woman can only sink lower or die of shame, but a mistake that given the chance she can outgrow.

Through the use of penitential narrative Gaskell had enthusiastically tried to challenge the common Victorian social logic of notions such as fallenness, prostitution, women's philanthropic activities, nursing and the life of working women in general. As discussed, a reference to Gaskell's women writer contemporaries such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and specifically Josephin Butler whose works and radical social actions have been greatly influenced by *Ruth* shows Gaskell's effective impact on the mid-Victorian culture. It could be taken as a sign of Gaskell's concern for paving the way for later great notable changes and improvements in the lives of the women in England and her participation in constructing the English history through her historical consciousness and gender awareness.

CHAPTER V

NORTH AND SOUTH

This chapter tends to follow Gaskell's attempt at discussing labour problems and social reform, the role of gender in social and economic changes and female philanthropy and social power in her second important industrial novel *North and South*. In *North and South,* serialized in Dickens's *Household Words* and subsequently published in book form in 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell returned to the industrial scene. The Milton-Northern of the novel is evidently suggested by Manchester. Yet the climate is not identical to that of the first novel, *Mary Barton.* There had been some amelioration in the condition of the working classes and a more cautious attitude towards philanthropic interventionism by the early fifties in Victorian England. *North and South* is concerned with the condition of England, like *Mary Barton,* but whereas *Mary Barton* was criticized for beeing too one-sided in favour of the working classes, in *North and South* Gaskell concentrates on representing both sides of the unrest between masters and workers. To faciliate this, the main character is a member of the same class as the mill masters. The parson's daughter Margaret Hale (the heroine of the novel) is from the south, and for her mill-owners and workers belong equally to an unknown world. She learns the point of view of the masters through her family's friendship with John Thornton. She learns the other side of the story from a frienship with a poor working man's family. Unfamiliar with the strife between the classes in the north, Margaret makes an unbiased mediator and attempts to bring about some kind of understanding between them by working on the smaller scale of her friends, Mr. Thornton and Nicholas Higgins. In addition to affecting change for the better in the struggle between the classes, Margaret is at all times working to change and better herself.

Margaret Hale is raised in fashionable Harley street along with her cousin Edith; Margaret returnes to Hampshire in the south of England to live with her mother

and her father, a county clergyman. The pastoral life she has imagined is quickly disrupted by her father's confession that he is no longer able to remain true to the church of England and will leave his position to become a tutor of adult learners in the northern manufacturing town of Milton. The traumatic relocation is aggravated by Mrs. Hale's diagnosis with a "deadly disease" soon after the move.

Margaret takes charge of most of the practical aspects of the move and then assumes charge of her mother's illness, acting as an intermediary between the doctor and her parents. As well as learning more about her own family's servant, Dixon, who has been with her mother since her girlhood, Margaret becomes friendly with a textile worker Nicholas Higgins and his daughter Bessy, who is dying of consumption (tuberculosis) from inhaling textile dust. The Milton worker's activism and independence appeal to Margaret; she rethinks both class and labour relations as a result, including charitable relationship. Her strong opinions and actions bring her into conflict with the family of John Thornton, a factory owner and self-made man who is also one of her father's students.

When Margaret shields John from a stone thrown by a striking worker, however, he avows his love for her . A series of obstacles to the relationship includes Margaret's initial rebuff of John and her dishonesty about her exiled brother's secret return to his mother's deathbed. In the end, Margaret's future becomes a great deal less bleak when an unexpected bank account arrives and she can finally realize her dreams. Before the ending brings John and Margert back together – as well as calming the tension between workers and factory owners – Margaret experiences not only the death of almost everyone she loves, but also the suicide of one of the striking workers.

Elizabeth Gaskell's intention in her second industrial novel is to examine labour problems from the other side, this time, opposite to *Mary Barton*, from the perspective of the managers and, more important, from the perspective of middle-class women. Hence she begins with a privileged young woman, whose life has sheltered her from

the realities of earning a living. Initially an outsider, Margaret Hale moves in the course of the novel between the two classes, serving as an effective intermediary who promotes communication and understanding. Margaret comes to see herself as involved in the public sphere and abandons the position of participant. For Margaret, as Colby believes, this involvement "means compromise and even pain, but at the same time an enlargement of identity" (47). As she did in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell continues in *North and South* to collapse the distinction between the public and the private, revealing how they inevitably impinge on one another.

Gaskell in *North and South* originally chose Margaret Hale, fully conscious from the start that her main interest lay in a female character. Foster calls *North and South* a "bolder and more accomplished version of *Mary Barton*" (1985:147). Again, as in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell allows her female protagonist to act; by doing so, she defines herself and has an effect on the world around her.

The novel traces the maturation of Margaret, whose comfortable life of privilege and freedom is replaced by the rigors of urban life in straitened circumstances. An overriding theme is Margaret's efforts to define her own work and to carry it out. The expectation of Victorian culture was that a middle-class woman had all of the work she would need within the context of her private familial roles. In the process of discerning her proper work, Margaret rejects the notion that only domesticity is fitting to a lady and comes to understand that "she herself must one day answer for her own life and what she had done with it" (Gaskell,1970:416).

Perhaps because of this quality, Margaret is given to reflection and some critics have responded favorably to her. For example, Showalter describes Margaret Hale as "intellectual" and "self-defining" (1985:122). Calder believes that Margaret is the least confined of Gaskell's heroines and that she is also the most self-aware (1976:79). Calder also regards Gaskell's portrayal of Margaret as belonging to a general pattern in her fiction, which often deals with "women who learn, women who change through

experience and crisis" (80). Basch views Margaret as worthy of her vocation of bringing about a reconciliation between the agricultural South and the industrial North "by virtue of her intelligence and her high humanitarian and religious consciousness" (1974:64).

Gaskell represents her heroine as contrasting with conventional young women. The opening chapter, "Haste to the Wedding," contrasts Margaret and her cousin Edith, establishing Margaret as deviating from the Victorian norms of feminine behaviour in several important ways. The first scene is highly suggestive, beginning with Margaret's discovery that Edith is fast asleep on the sofa: Margaret's immediate reaction is to awaken her. Lying "curled up" in the drawing room, "looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons," Edith is remarkable only for her decorative value. In her somnolence, Edith resembles the Carson sisters in *Mary Barton,* whose days are largely spent dressing for, going to, and recovering from balls. Gaskell often links daytime drowsiness in her women characters with an indolent, luxurious existence. Likewise, an inability to sleep at night suggests a lack of activity. Later in the novel, when Margaret is asked by her mother if she finds the beds comfortable, Margaret answers, "I've never thought about my bed at all…I'm so sleepy at night, that if I only lie down anywhere, I nap off directly" (261). In confirmation of the impression Edith immediately invites, the narrator mentions her objection to some arrangement regarding her wedding, but goes on to say that "although she was a spoiled child she was too careless and idle to have a strong will of her own, and gave way" (36). Edith appears infantile, taking a nap in midday, like a child, and leaving the planning of her own wedding to her mother. Throughout the novel, Margaret is played off against Edith, who embodies the Victorian norm for femininity. In contrast, Margaret seeks a realm of action that will challenge her and make use of her talents. Victorian society does not offer her many opportunities for fulfilling labour; throughout the novel she must search for and claim her own work.

Gaskell makes it clear that Margaret is not content with the prospect of marriage as the primary end of her existence. Schor asserts that instead of moving toward a resolution in romance "*North and South* in fact moves in the opposite direction: from the "romance" in the heroine's life and her progress toward marriage into the density of industrial England and its economic and sexual politics" (1992: 120).The first thing we see her do is stand in for Edith, modeling the regal shawls that "would have half-smothered Edith" (39). Smiling when she sees herself in such splendor, Margaret views the finery merely as a costume, not as a true expression of her selfhood. "Trying on" Edith's identity, she rejects her cousin's set of values, complaining to Henrry Lennox about the complexities of wedding preparations. Margaret defines herself against the Victorian standard that would require women to be continuously on display as candidates in the marriage market and conceives of new possibilities for herself and other women. Bodenheimer notes that "matrimonial calculation and fusses about wedding, dress, and status are staples of the female realm in *North and South*; Margaret is drawn away from them, into dialogues with men and social activity" (1988:63).

If Margaret is unlike her cousin Edith, she is also unlike her Aunt Shaw. Aunt Shaw did not marry for love and this has been the deciding factor in her life as a "victim" (15). As a victim, she chooses not to run her life herself but to influence other people's thinking in order to get the things she wants. For example, she affects a cough when she wants sympathy and a doctor-ordered vacation in Italy. Her sister, Margaret's mother, had married for love but she has not obtained the happiness that Mrs.Shaw imagines results from such a union. Instead, Mrs. Hale wishes for all the superficial things that her sister could have, "a silver gray glace silk, a white chip bonnet ... and hundreds of things for the house" (17). Neither woman is much concerned with anything that does not immediately affect her comfort or happiness, or intrude upon her private world. While these two women are in a position to be guiding

influences on Margaret, she is not following either of their paths. Margaret appears to observe the behaviour of everyone she is in contact with, process it, and adopt the parts that will serve to improve her own character. She also uses every uncomfortable or difficult moment to improve her character, both consciously and unconsciously.

Margaret's dissatisfaction grows out of a stifling environment that fails to summon her to action or use. Although Margaret displays more depth of character and intellect than her cousin, she lives a similarly privileged life in a country parsonage, taking her holidays at her Aunt Shaw's house. At Helstone her days are filled with visits to the rural folk-taking them food, reading to them, nursing their children-and frequent long walks in appreciation of the natural world. In her visits Margaret does perform useful social work, but her position in relation to her neighbours is that of a gracious patroness. She plays the part of a Lady Bountiful, conferring her benevolence on her father's parishioners. As such she is merely filling a role that falls to her by virtue of being the daughter of a minister.

It takes several crises to extricate Margaret from this narrow field of action in a static environment and transfer her into a setting where she can find her own work. The first is her father's announcement that he can no longer be a minister. Her father's decision to confide in Margaret about his intentions throws more adult responsibility on his daughter. A process of individuation and distancing begins when Margaret is forced to evaluate her father's actions and sees weakness in his failure to tell his own wife about his spiritual crisis. After breaking the news to her mother, Margaret takes a leading role in the planning involved in the move to Milton. Reflecting on her former life, she realizes the irreversible change that has occurred. Within the patriarchal family, Margaret has been sheltered and protected from difficult decisions; the rearrangement of the family power structure is necessary before Margaret can begin to see her vocation in life. In the absence of strong paternal models, Margaret assumes the task of making decisions, as well carrying them out. It becomes Margaret's

responsibility to arrange the transition to Milton in such a way as to cause the least inconvenience to her mother; in an effort to spare her fatigue, Margaret suggests leaving her mother and Dixon, her maid, at Helston, a quiet bathing place, while she and her father go to look at houses. Her father agrees to her plan, allowing Margaret to decide that Dixon would remain in the household. This step taken , "now Margaret could work, and act, and plan in good earnest" (86). When the day of the move arrives, it is Margaret, "calm and collected," with "her large grave eyes observing everything," who supervises the men who had come to help (89). When decisions had to be made concerning lodgings, it is again Margaret who makes them, telling her father, "I have planned it all" and excitingly, "I am overpowered by the discovery of my own genius for managment" (97-8). Not only does she select the house, but she also determines how each room will be occupied, taking into account individual needs and preferences. For the first time in her life, Margaret takes a leading role in directing the shape of events as they relate to her family.

Margaret's newfound authority begins to extend outward, as she interacts with those outside her family. Margaret's "straight, fearless, dignified presence" helps her command respect and wield authority, even over men (99). Foster contends that Gaskell's works often examine "the possibilities of female self-assertion, with their heroines revealing surprisingly "unfeminine" energies" (1985:143). Upon arriving at the hotel where the Hales are staying temporarily, John Thornton, is rather taken aback when he meets Margaret for the first time: "Mr. Thornton was in habit of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once" (99). Thornton immediately realizes that Margaret is no ordinary woman and responds to her powerful presence. Similarly, when the doctor comes to see her mother, Margaret quickly takes over, ushering him in "with an air of command" and extracting from him the truth about her mother's illness (173). Margaret's successful management of the workload that falls to her contributes to her aura of competence, an aura that other

people acknowledge. Her mother's terminal illness is another major crisis that requires Margaret's energies and shows her what she is capable of. After revealing to her father that she knows about Mrs. Hale's condition, Margaret requests permission to act as a nurse. Margaret needs strength to be an effective nurse, and she develops into an even stronger woman as a result of the experience.

Faced with the necessity of performing physical work, Margaret comes to believe that labour is not incompatible with being a lady. She even begins to be ashamed of the image of herself as an idle lady that she presents to society. After a dinner at the Thorntons, she tells her father that she "felt like a great hypocritical to-night, sitting there in my white silk gown, with my idle hands before me, when I remembered all the good, thorough, house-work they had done to-day. They took me for a fine lady, I'm sure" (221-2). Living in Milton-Northern gradually leads Margaret to view herself as a woman who works. Moreover, her friendship with a working-class woman, Bessy Higgins, supports Margaret as she gradually moves toward her chosen work. With her rural background, Margaret is at first somewhat shocked at the manners of the urban working class. As she goes out on the street of Milton on her errands, she repeatedly falls in with the factory workers, who "came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests" (110). For the first time, Margaret is exposed to casual comments about her appearance, and her first response is indignation. Yet her friendship with one workman, Nicholas Higgins, and his daughter Bessy helps her shed her prim aloofness and strengthens her as she faces difficulties. Harman explains that Margaret's willingness to strike up an acquaintance with one of the men is "a sign of [her] increasing willingness to mix with the world and to accommodate herself to the complicated class relations that… life in the public realm seems to entail" (1988:366). In order for Margaret to be effective in her new environment, she must learn to accommodate herself to the working-class mores, which are new to her. The first step in this process is to form a close bond with an

individual working-class family. Through Bessy Higgins, Margaret discovers the value of female friendship based on shared experience, which involves for both women sacrifice and work. Bessy's work in the mill has resulted in her ill health, as the fluff from the cotton gradually filled her lungs. From Bessy's point of view, the situation was inevitable. After asking Bessy her age and discovering that they are both nineteen, Margaret reflects on the contrast between them. Yet Margaret is able to empathize with Bessy's pain, for she has her own sorrows, and it is the obligation to work for their families that forms the basis of their friendship. Gaskell describes in positive terms this friendship to which both persons contribute; female solidarity - across and within classes - is a theme that recurs in her fiction as has been shown in previos chapters especially in *Cranford*. Such solidarity is often crucial as it empowers each character to do her own particular work.

The longer Margaret lives in Milton, the more she adapts to the industrial setting, her attitudes and her behaviour change as she earns a right to speak for the workers. Evidence of such a shift involves her use of language. Margaret's appreciation and appropriation of the language of the working class demonstrates her willingness to assume their point of view. Along with the speech of the workers, Margaret comes to accept their customs. When she learns that her friend Bessy has died, Margaret is asked if she would like to see the body. Her first reaction is "But she's dead!…I never saw a dead person. No! I would rather not" (278). However, after she learns that Bessy had requested to be buried in something of hers and that Bessy would have "thought it a great compliment" for her to come and see her in death, Margaret relents: "Yes, perhaps I may. Yes, I will, I'll come before tea" (278). When a new situation arises, Margaret questions her own middle-class notions about appropriateness and demonstrates a willingness to adopt the values of her friends. At the same time, she does not accept their actions unquestioningly, but reserves the right to make judgments for herself. In a conversation about the strike, Margaret asks

probing questions about the Union. Nicolas Higgins reluctantly discloses the methods used to pressure workers into joining the organization. In reaction to him, Margaret exclaims, "Why!… what tyranny this is… And you belong to the Union! And you talk of the tyranny of the masters!" (296). Later, when Margaret acts as a mediator between the masters and the workers, her effectiveness stems in part from this readiness to articulate the flaws in the reasoning of both sides.

Margaret's confrontation with injustice on behalf of her brother likewise propels her into the public sphere as she works to vindicate him. When Frederick comes home to be with his dying mother, it is Margaret who initiates a plan to acquit her brother. Arguing that he might "show how [his] disobedience to authority was because that authority was unworthily exercised," Margaret rouses Frederick to action (325). Margaret suggests different possibilities, finally that he consult a lawyer concerning his chances of exculpation and names Henry Lennox. Indeed Margaret guides the entire family discussion regarding Frederick's welfare. Margaret's assessment of Frederick's chances proves to be correct, and when it becomes too dangerous for Frederick to stay any longer in England, Margaret, at considerable risk, accompanies him to the station.

In these scenes Gaskell proves to be careful not to present Margaret as immune to the complexities and dangers of operating in the public sphere. Nor does she create an easy solution to Frederick's problem. In an effort to protect Frederick, Margaret lies, and this lie follows her, for a while damaging her relationship with John Thornton. Moreover, the witnesses who are needed to acquit her brother are never found, and he is forced to be a permanent exile. Colby believes that "By emphasizing the painful choices and misunderstanding that are concomitant with acting in the public domain, Gaskell departs from domestic ideology, which holds that women can magically purify and feminize the public sphere" (55).

Margaret's private relationship with her brother has public consequences: Margaret lies to a public officer, a representative of the state, thereby alienating her admirer, John Thornton, who sees her behavior as confirming some kind of illicit relationship. Feeling degraded by her capitulation to falsehood, Margaret feels tormented, but she does lie to protect a family member, not to protect herself. This experience with Frederick is Margaret's initiation into public life; given the Victorian expectation of women, shame and self-reproach are plausible responses on her part. Despite her sense of mortification, Margaret does not retreat from participation in the world of men.

Margaret's most important work in the novel involves her efforts to settle a stand-off between the owner of the mill and its hands. Apparently it is because of her new friendship with a working-class family that Margaret develops an interest in labour relations and attempts to understand the positions represented by both sides when a dispute breaks out. Realizing that she has a part to play in this situation, she takes up the issue with John Thornton, forcing him to examine and justify his own actions. In this scene and others, Margaret demonstrates her ability to reason, to think carefully through a complicated issue. In a discussion over an impending strike, she inquires why he does not inform his workers about the reasons for current trade problems. He, on the other hand, defends his right to withhold explanation from his employees, asking Margaret, "Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money?" (164). In this interchange - and others that follow - Margaret views the workers as adults to be treated fairly and respectfully. When the strike breaks out, Margaret urges Thornton to face them "like a man" and encourages him to "speak to [his] workmen as if they were human beings" (232). Thornton's very terminology for his workers whom he calls "hands" suggests separation and compartmentalization. John Thornton's tendency to view the issue

from a business point of view - regarding the workforce as a purely economic unit - is corrected by Margaret, who brings the values of private life into the discussion.

Yet realizing that the private sphere cannot remain inviolate from the conflicts in the public sphere, Margaret undertakes the task of representing the interests of the workers, using her influence with Thornton to try to improve their working conditions. As she argues with Thornton, she expresses her disapproval of the masters' desire that their hands "be merely tall, large children - living in the present moment - with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience" (166). Making a case for the necessity of recognizing the workers as adult equals, Margaret tells the story of a rich man in Nuremberg who attempted to shied his only son from evil but who "had made the blunder of bringing him up in ignorance and taking it for innocence" (168). She employs this analogy to point out the consequences of keeping the workers ignorant of decisions made by the management. Bodenheimer credits Gaskell with exploding the metaphor of social paternalism, which sees the employer as a parent and the workers as children (1988:54-5). Supporting more equal relations between workers and employers, Margaret sympathizes with the plight of the workers, who are powerless to negotiate with the management. Believing that "loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used," Margaret nevertheless views the strike as defeating the purposes of the oppressed (154). Instead, she proposes communication between both sides as the more promising solution to their problems.

As Margaret labours on behalf of her brother and on behalf of the workers, she enters the territory considered by Victorian society to be off limits to women. Bodenheimer discerns that Margaret Hale is a heroine "whose life is responsibly and directly entangled with the male world of industrial politics" (53-4). Margaret finds the areas that are socially defined as appropriate to women both trivial and confining.

After the dinner party given by the Thorntons, Margaret tells her father her impressions of the evening:

> I was very much interested by what the gentlemen were talking about, although I did not understand half of it. I was quite sorry when Miss Thornton came to take me to the other end of the room, saying she was sure I was uncomfortable at being the only lady among so many gentlemen. I had never thought about it, I was so busy listening; and the ladies were so dull, papa-oh, so dull. Yet I think it was clever too. It reminded me of our old game of having each so many nouns to introduce into a sentence… Why, they took nouns that were signs of things which gave evidence of wealth, -housekeepers, under-gardeners, extent of glass, valuable lace, diamonds, and all such things; and each one formed her speech so as to bring them all in, in the prettiest accidental manner possible. (221)

Margaret's words echo Gaskell's, who said in a letter that she found men to be very interesting and who once called women who did not take advantage of the space made available for them at a public lecture "stupid creatures" (Ls.633,279). Like Gaskell, Margaret finds the company of men congenial and stimulating, and, like her author, she gets impatient at the ladies for their lack of interest in topics that engage her. Through Margaret, Gaskell makes a case for the right of women to participate in discussion on topics thought to be "masculine," suggesting that women can make important contributions to such debates. In this respect Spencer suggests that Margaret "acts most successfully by bringing out the womanliness within men" (1993: 95).

Conversely, Gaskell supports the movement of men into the woman's arena, the work of home. When Frederik comes home, Margaret discovers that shared work can create a profound bond between the sexes. The relationship between brother and sister involves a kind of alternation of support; after their mother dies. Frederick breaks down, and it is again Margaret who must hold the family together. As Lansbury notes, "Elizabeth Gaskell was aware that women, like men, shared common human responsibilities" (1984:112). It is up to Margaret to persuade John Thornton to accept help from herself, a woman; in so doing, Margaret teaches him about new social

possibilities. Gallagher asserts that the moral influence women exert to men is the force connecting public and private life in the novel (1985:168). In this way, Gaskell is inverting conventional notions of gender by showing a woman instructing a man, Thornton at first resists Margaret's attempts to involve herself in the struggle between workers and employers (216). Yet Thornton's own mother precedes Margaret in the demonstration of women's abilities. A stern, tough-minded woman, Mrs. Thornton informs Margaret of the possibility of a strike, without minimizing the dangers of such an occurrence: "Milton is not the place for cowards. I have known the time when I have had to thread my way through a crowd of white angry men, all swearing they would have Makinson's blood as soon as he ventured to show his nose out of his factory; and he, knowing nothing of it, some one had to go and tell him, or he was a dead man; and it needed to be a woman,- so I went" (162). When an ominous crowd gathers outside the Thorntons' house, threatening the lives of the wealthy family inside, Mrs Thornton refuses her son's suggestion to go into the backrooms, insisting "where you are, there I stay" (230). Her steadiness and resolution in the face of personal danger attest to the fitness of women to perform in a crisis. Mrs. Thornton is described by Gaskell as "strong and masive ... [a] firm, severe, dignified woman" (77). Before she had even met Margaret, Mrs.Thornton disliked her. She is extremely protective of her son and is deeply offended that "a renegade clergyman's daughter" had dared to treat her son "with a haughty civility which had a strong flavour of contempt in it" (78). After meeting Margeret, Mrs. Thornton still does not like her, but does appreciate Margaret's occasional frankness and vitality. Mrs. Thornton represents old-fashioned values and is challenged by Margaret who is the embodiment of the new and independent woman. Seemingly, part of the reason that Mrs. Thornton dislikes Margaret is that the pair have similar characters: both are strong, proud, and devoted. However Margaret has the youth and vitality that are necessary to be a powerful force in the changing age.

Following the maternal example, Margaret chooses to make a public appearance before the mob. Relying on a woman's presumed inviolability to shield Thornton, she steps between him and his enemies. When the men are on the brink of violence, she throw her arms around Thornton to shelter him. Harman's reading of this scene is interesting, claiming that it makes visible the rivalry between Margaret and John Thornton and prompts some unresolved questions: "Who shall take command? Who shall protect whom? Who shall speak? Who shall act? Who shall really 'appear'?" (1988:367). When he tells her, "Go away… this is no place for you, "she counters, "It is. You did not see what I saw" (Gaskell,234). A pebble grazes Margaret's head, knocking her down, and she suffers the humiliation of being misunderstood for her effort to defend Thornton, but, in retrospect, she expresses scorn for conventional standards for femininity: "I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me. If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work" (247).

In this way Margaret takes the powerful position of public mediator. She relinquishes her immunity from the scrutiny of many eyes and makes herself the subject of all kind of disturbing speculations. Gaskell is explicit on this point: "If she thought her sex would be a protection, - if, with shrinking eyes she had turned away from the terrible anger of these men, in any hope that ere she was looking again they would have pushed and reflected, and slunk away, and vanished, - she was wrong" (234). In her treatment of John Thornton's response to Margaret's act, Gaskell indicates the interpentration of the public and private. Margaret asserts the public nature of her behavior while Thornton wishes to see her behavior as only an expression of private feeling. When he declares his love to her, she immediately resists, denying that her conduct "was a personal act" and insisting that "any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield… a man in danger" (253). He, on the other hand, "claims the right of expressing [his] feelings" (253). In

this scene it seems that gender distinctions have turned completely upside down as the woman takes a public stand on behalf of a man, and a man speaks for romance, the center of private world.

Although Thornton like many other Victorian men resists the idea that women have a public function, he is more willing to make an exception for an exceptional woman like Margaret, who comes to see herself as an agent of reconciliation and change. Margaret suggests that Nicholas Higgins go to John Thornton to seek work at his factory recognizing that if they meet face to face, the men would respect each other and be able to work out their differences. Because Higgins has been a leader in the Union, Thornton at first sends him away, instructing Higgins to tell the woman who sent him to "mind [her] own business" and declaring that "women are at the bottom of every plague in the world" (403,398). Dismayed to learn that Margaret was the woman who sent him and that his words had been repeated to her, Thornton changes his mind, and follows Higgins to his own home, asking, "Will you take work with me?" (405). Thornton accepts Margaret's assessment of the public situation and moves toward a possible solution by offering work to Higgins, initiating a system in which managers and workers will form personal relationships.

Clearly Gaskell sets in motion a series of events that invert conventional expectations involving both class and gender, she represents a woman - rather than a man - initiating a change in the way public affairs are conducted; then she represents a manager seeking to placate and calm a worker - rather than the other way around. Most probably Gaskell tries showing how change breeds more change and how a shift in the power structure can lead to more equitable social arrangements. As a result of Margaret's intervention, a personal truce between two former antagonists leads to change: after a later visit to Higgins, Thornton is made aware of the lack of food and schooling that is common among his workers and decides to educate some children in whom Higgins takes an interest and to create a system in his factory whereby the men

are fed adequately and cheaply. In both these acts, Margaret's influence is present, for they are both caring, nurturing gestures towards meeting the needs of workers. The workers respond in turn by inviting Thornton to share a meal with them, and the formerly aloof master says," I am getting really to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me" (446). When a period of bad trade leads to significant losses for Thornton, the workers rally to his support, staying overtime, unknown to anyone, to get the work done. Thornton recognizes the value of this new set of relations with his workers, telling a member of Parliament, "my only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'… I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institution, however wise, … can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions brings the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact" (525). In both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* Gaskell represents a strike as harmful to both sides, causing great hardship and much ill-feeling. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell emphasized the near-unbridgeable gulf between employers and employees, and their inability to communicate with each other. A great contrast is provided in the latter part of *North and South* in her portrayal of the intercourse which develops between Thornton and his men, and the acknowledgement of their mutual dependence.

The resolution of the novel continues the pattern of inversion and points to the inextricable union of the public and private through the marriage of the central characters. In the final chapters Margaret finds herself with a legacy and this sudden possession of ample funds of money puts her to a moral test. At this point, Margaret occupies a position of power: she has money just when it is needed by Thornton. As a result of the strike and a period of bad trade that caused the value of stocks to fall, Thornton is forced to prepare himself for the wreck of his fortunes and the loss of his factory. At the risk of rejection, Margaret steps in, and offers to make her money available to Thornton so that he can continue to run Marlborough Mills and, more

important, continue in the work toward the reform she instigated. Margaret's gesture is a sincere effort to continue the public work that she has been involved with in Milton; nevertheless Margaret harbours deep feelings for Thornton. Within this context, Margaret takes an action that may be taken as simultaneously political and personal. Gaskell puts the future for the couple in Margaret's hands; it is she who enables Thornton to make a declaration. In this novel, Colby asserts, "Gaskell implies that marriage between Margaret and John Thornton will be a partnership in which both will work together, in the private and the public sphere, and that this work will be fraught with difficulties" (63). Bodenheimer argues that Gaskell negotiates the political and private realm in her romantic solution by defining it as "an economic and social partnership as well as a domestic settlement" (63). Foster also sees the same connection between the personal and the public realm and affirms that female power, "centered in the responses of the heart, is the real revolutionary force" uncovered by the novel (1985:148).

As we could observe in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* Gaskell's treatment of philanthropy in *North and South* is also apparent. In chapter 15 Margaret and Thornton have a heated conversation about "masters and men". Margaret's parting words are ironic: "When I see men violent and obstinate in pursuit of their rights, I may safely infer that the master is the same; that he is a little ignorant of that spirit which suffereth long, and is kind, and seeketh not her own". The submerged reference is to St Paul's comments on charity: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil" (qtd. in Guy,1996:163). It was precisely this view of charity which informed nineteenth-century philanthropic work, and in mid-Victorian Britain philanthropy was one of the main paths through which Christian benevolence was expressed. Moreover, philanthropy also formed the basis of a strong opposition to the hegemony of political economy. D'Albertis asserts that "The

unfortunate irony of women's philanthropic social work in the nineteenth century was that in order for women to escape from the confinement of the domestic sphere, they had to prosecute with redoubled energy the institutionalization of thes poor, the redundant, and the outcast of Victorian society" (1997:69).

The awaking conscience of philanthropy in Margaret can be traced through Gaskell's narrative. A pronounced shift of narrative focus from *Mary Barton's* working-class setting to a far more affluent segment of the urban population in *North and South* is accompanied by a concentration of narrative interest in the consciousness of Margaret Hale. By objectively realizing the function of "visiting" - or more accurately, social investigation - through the modeling of her protagonist, Gaskell also arrived at a more ambivalent vision of female agency in the public sphere.

Margaret begins her residence in Milton-Northern ill-equipped to deal with the class structure, social attitudes, the physical dimensions of the city. Having been raised at Helstone, Margaret is unprepared for the democratic behaviour of the industrial working classes in the new city. Margaret little by little finds her license to roam Milton-Northern disconcerting. Once settled in the smoky; confusing streets of the great northern metropolis, Margaret misses the ease with which she wandered the countryside surrounding Helstone. The first step, in transforming Margaret Hale from a young lady bountiful she had imagined herself to be in the South to the informed social observer in the industrial North she will become is taken on the streets of Milton-Northorn. Margaret must learn to read romance in the lives of those who elbow her in the busy streets of the town, sympathy and imaginative projection, however, involve an unmistakable challenge to the integrity of the female observer's sexual status. Whenever she ventures into the city, Gaskell's heroine is reminded of her vulnerability:

> Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in

> rank or station. The tone of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first…She did not mind meeting any number of girls, loud spoken and boisterous though they might be.But she alternately dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open, fearless manner. (110)

This passage can be taken as an indication of Gaskell's doubts about the urban environment, where the middle-class woman is subject to what Harman describes as "verbal and physical invasions" that erode "the separation of private from public life" (1988:365). At first, Margaret dreads public scrutiny as a compromise to her dignity or virtue. The effect of her walks in the streets, however, are for most part positive: she is introduced on the street to the working-class world of the Higgins family, making Milton "a brighter place to her…[because] in it she had found a human interest" (113). Margaret is equally aggressive in invading the privacy of Milton's workers as they are in taking unasked - for liberties with her.

The riot at Thornton's mill places the indeterminacy of woman's public action at the interpretive heart of the novel. Margaret becomes painfully aware of the sexual motives assigned to her action in protecting the industrials, not by the workers themselves, but by Thornton's sister, Fanny, and her maidservant. Yet she broods less over the harsh words of the two women than over an imagined "cloud of faces," provoking "a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard… she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes" (248-49). The workers take a different view of the event from the one Thornton holds, just as Margaret's own subjective viewpoint is challenged by the perspective of Fanny. Margaret's shame, although at first motivated by sexual humiliation, takes on the more general character of resistance to public notice, the very kind of invasive attention that she herself in the past had trained upon the workers she decides to "visit". Awareness of her vulnerability to the interpretive powers of others reinforces an earlier instance in the novel of Margaret's instruction in equality. Rebuked by Nicolas Higgins for her

unthinking class presumption in treating him and his daughter as poor pensioners, "she suddenly felt rather shy of offering the visit, without any reason to give for her wish to make it, beyond a kindly interest in a stranger. It seemed all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on her part. She read this meaning too clearly in the man's eyes" (113). But when Margaret discontinues the traditional practice of home visiting and invites Nicolas Higgins into her house, she both humanizes her relations with him and changes the terms of her interaction with him.

In the aftermath of the strike, Margaret is forced to reevaluate her public conduct. Having been reduced to a mere type of her "sex" in the eyes of others, she now becomes more aware of her own tendency to categorize others in a similar fashion. Margaret begins to see her "visiting" in a new light and reverses the accepted power dynamic in class relations by inviting Higgins into her own home after the death of his daughter, Bessy. Her growing authority to advise the poor is based on a more deeply personal investment in her social work, which Margaret gradually comes to think of as a career.

Radicalized by her Milton-Northern experience, Margaret is shocked to discover that the middle-class life for which she was raised conceals and depends upon a hidden realm of labour. After her return to Mrs. Shaw's establishment, Margaret perceives that "there might be toilers and moilers there in London, but she never saw them; the very servants lived in an underground world of their own, of which she knew neither the hopes nor the fears; they only seemed to part into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them" (458). Margaret misses "the busy life out of which her own had been taken" with her removal from Milton, and she begins seriously to attempt "to put…in their right places, as to origin and significance, both as regards her past life and her future" (506) everything that has happened to her in the north. Having come into a comfortable inheritance, Margaret resolves that since "she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she

had done with it", "she will set out to address "that most difficult problem for women" of "how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working" (508). Gaskell's heroine discovers her vocation in much the same context and terms as did female philanthropists of the 1850s and 1860s: one contemporary memoir of such a reformer, Lucy F. March Philip, entitled *My Life and What Shall I do With It?* "by an Old Maid" (1860), precisely echoes the language of self-appraisal used by the fictional social worker of *North and South*.

Margaret Hale turns to productive use what her cousin Edith calls her "rambling habits," first in London and later in Milton-Northern after her marriage to Thornton. Edith bemoans Margaret's "ideas about duty," which lead her into the slums of the city: "Only to please me, darling, don't go and have a strong mind; it's the only thing I ask" (509). Margaret is saved, as Deirder D'Albertis puts it "the stigma of feminist "strong-mindedness" by matrimony" (68) although as chief contributor of the capital to refinance her husband's business and joint formulator of his new industrial politics, it seems unlikely that she will abandon her "visiting" once she is settled as a matron in Milton-Northern. As Rosemarie Bodenheirmer suggests, *North and South* is a romance of female paternalism, a romance informed by the historical development in Gaskell's life time of professional female philanthropy" (53-68). Gaskell's investigating revision in *North and South* seems to offer a criticism of liberal ideology in mid-Victorian fiction while retaining an essential belief in the moral and political responsibility of women to take an active part in the struggle for social progress in the streets and slums of industrial England.

Coming from a genteel family background, Margaret Hale in *North and South* undergoes the process of defining her proper work, firmly rejecting the notion that idleness is fitting to a lady and coming to understand that she is responsible for her own life. She moves with her family to industrial Lancashire, where her former

comfortable life of privilege and freedom is replaced by the rigores of urban life in straitened circumstances. It is in such an atmosphere that Margaret grows in perception and power, willingly accepting the task of mediating between the agricultural South and the industrial North. Through her negotiations, the warring parties become reconciled and working conditions improve. Margaret is strong from the start though she considers herself a coward, and she is always testing herself so that she will grow braver. Early on she takes control of situations for others out of necessity, but as she gains more knowledge from her visiting and philanthropic experiences with the dispute between masters and workers, and from the people around her, she becomes strong for others and for herself, by choice, breaking gender boundaries. *North and South* affirms women's right to participate in public life.

CHAPTER VI

SYLVIA'S LOVERS

Sylvia's Lovers (1864) is Elizabeth Gaskell's least-known novel, and its obscurity is usually accounted for by its having moved away from the "social-problem" material on which her reputation mainly depends. Lansbury sees *Sylvia's Lovers* as "a necessary preface to *Marry Barton* and *North and South,*" since the "penal laws" of the Napoleonic period, which "made revolt seem an Englishman's natural right and duty" (1975:160), set the tone for industrial conflict forty years on. Gaskell's historical fiction examines the effects of a defunct state policy, impressment or the enforced enlistment of men in the Royal Navy, during the period 1796-1800. The first half of the novel chronicles the infliction of this brutal policy on the inhabitants of the whaling port of Monkshaven and, in particular, on one local family. Daniel Robson, a farmer, smuggler, and former sailor, lives with his wife, Bell, and daughter, Sylvia, on the outskirts of the town at Haytersbank Farm. Sylvia Robson, having come into young womanhood, must choose between two suitors: the handsome, fearless, and mercurial harpooner or "specksioneer" Charley Kinraid, or her awkwardly doting, the industrious, pious, and somewhat smug shopkeeper, Philip Hepburn. Kinraid's exploits and caprices dominate the beginning of the novel; it is only when the sailor is secretly captured by a press-gang lurking in the neighbourhood that the plot seemingly abandons the political implications of the impressment issue to focus on the unhappy marriage of Sylvia to Philip, who capitalizes on his rival's removal and secures his cousin's half-hearted consent to wed. Thus the book sustains two separate narrative movements linked only by the figure of Hepburn, who conceals the fate of Kinraid and attempts to take his place with the disconsolate heroine. A second plot revolving around marriage consequently proceeds from assumptions stated in the impressment plot. Sylvia's domestic unhappiness reflects dissatisfaction with family law in Gaskell's society, a concern that found expression in the movement of

early feminists to win the rhetoric of liberalism and make its language their own property, even as they struggled to gain legal recognition for themselves as property holders. In this story the impressment and fraudulent marriage both function to deny the contractual rights and self-determining status of individuals taken against their will into custody by the state or an unscrupulous spouse. *Sylvia's Lovers* vividly depicts the insurgency of the individual only to re-contain his or her rebellion within the fictional structures of the text. The dialectic of this double-plot yields an increasingly internalized subjection, moving from physical discipline (impressment) to half-willing consent (coercive marriage) to an oath of self-denial (enlistment); this movement toward more intensive subjectivity can be constituted only through negation of the self, an act that was seemingly understood by Gaskell as an explicit renunciation of proprietary interest.

The disjunction between the two plots of the novel is further illuminated by the uncertain priority Gaskell assigned to characters and events, as evinced in the three working titles she considered overtime: *The Spocksioneer*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Philip's Idol*. In setting on *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell rejected a focus on either male figure, choosing instead to emphasize their relations with her heroine.

What will be examined in this chapter is the relative weight these conflicting impulses are accorded in Gaskell's narrative, reassessing in turn the text's representation through its fractured organization of larger cultural tensions associated with the progress of suffrage in the nineteenth century. In moving from the text of *Sylvia's Lovers* to the historical discourses that helped to constitute each of these plots, this chapter will also pay close attention to the function of petition in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries in articulating the demands of the disenfranchised for social change to observe that if historical romance underlies the story of male political right, then Gaskell's social protest writing reflects the petitionary language of reform movements on behalf of the disefranchised in mid-

Victorian England. Kestner suggests that Gaskell's historical novel represents the final phase of women's social protest writing in the Victorian period (1985:193). Tracing the role of gender in relation to its involvement in private and public spheres is another concern of this chapter.

Gaskell's novels of contemporary or near contemporary life are committed to an optimistic assessment of how an individual's action can affect social developments. *North and South* especially, assigns a crucial importance to the heroine's role as mediator in the class war. In *Sylvia's Lovers* she adopts the more pessimistic view of human agency typical of the nineteenth-century historical novel pioneered by Scott, whose heroes are typically caught up in large historical events on which they can have little or no impact. Gaskell was not alone in attempting to measure her own achievement against Scott's - nearly every major Victorian novelist felt duty-bound to try his or her strength against the monolithic example of his invention. Ian Duncan analyzed the tremendous impact of Scott's historical narrative on the Victorian imagination: "The Waverley novels represent the historical formation of the modern imperial nation state in relation to the sentimental formation of the private individual: a homology, a synecdochic equivalence, is asserted between these processes. At the same time a tension, a contradiction, a violence occupied the narrative site of their conjunction, as it is one of disjunction, of dialectical contest" (1992:15). The modern individual undergoes a chastening development, as does the nation-state in the Waverly novels. Yet, as Duncan astutely remarks, this process of formation inevitably creates a conflict or dialectical contest between the protagonist's private interests and the good of the nation. Victorians dwelled upon the rift created by narrative privileging of the individual subject in opposition to the nation-state; Scott's work resonated with their own anxieties about the rights and duties of middle-class as opposed to working-class Britons, or men as opposed to women. "If Scott powerfully reinvented romance, as the narrative of individual lives in a collective experience of

history," as Duncan has proposed (181), then Scott's inheritors - and Gaskell more than any other - identified gender as a means of sorting, classifying, and evaluating the significance of individual lives within that collective and increasingly nationalistic experience (D'Albertis,1997:108).

Gaskell had always been fascinated by history, and during the 1850s had written stories based on historical events, including "Lois the Witch" (1858) about the Salem witch trials, and "My Lady Ludlow" with its inset narrative about victims of the guillotine during the French Revolution. With *Sylvia's Lovers* she returned to the full-length historical novel, she turned to the events of the 1790s. Gaskell is concerned not with the events that make up official history, the actions of Kings and generals - but the everyday life of ordinary era: the story of the powerless. She emphasizes throughout how fundamentally the obscure lives of her characters are determined by political decisions they know practically nothing about. Gaskell presents the England of the 1790s as in the grip of a despotic government that has passed an "oppressive act against seditious meetings" in a bid to wipe out support for radical politics (Gaskell, 1982:167). The law is obedient to government policy instead of to justice, and people like the shopkeepers John and Jeremiah Foster, who as Dissenters are probably on the side of those few pioneers arguing for Parliamentary reform, have to be very careful how they talk about politics (168). The novel's dramatic embodiment of government tyranny is the press-gang.

The press-gang's activities dominate *Sylvia's Lovers*. The Admiralty's impressment during the war with France is described in the chapter, and the crucial determining action of the narrative turns on its operations. According to A.W.Ward, the press-gang's attack on a returning whaler, which leads to Darley's death and Kinraid's wounding; Kinraid's own impressment; the freeing of the impressed prisoners, and the burning of the Randyvowse, which leads to Daniel Robson's execution - these events are all based on historical records of similar incidents on the

north-eastern coast of England in the 1790s (1920:xxii-xxvi). They are tied together in the narrative by theır significance in Sylvia Robson's life. The early description of the attack on the whaling-ship establishes her closeness in feeling to the outraged Monkshaven community. The wounded Kinraid first attracts her as a local hero; with his impressment she loses her lover, with Daniel's execution she loses her father. Affected to an unusual degree by measures that affect all in her community, and exceptionally noticeable because of her beauty and liveliness, her importance as a heroine is that she is a particularly vivid representative of Monkshaven life. Being "of that impressible nature that takes the tone of feeling from those surrounding her" (18), she can be made to typify the Monkshaven community feeling: mutually supportive, passionate and violent in defense of its own. Her fate is a particularly intense version of all Monkshaven people's: helpless against government power and unable to gain more than a glimpse of understanding of the historical and political forces shaping their lives.

Gaskell interweaves Sylvia's individual story with that of the Monkshaven community. The first few chapters mingle her trip to the market and to Foster's clothing shop, her familiarity with the drama of the press-gang's attack on the returning whaling-ship. As these two narrative strands emerge there are indications of how closely Sylvia's individual emotional history is to mirror the general fate of the Monkshaven people. Sylvia and Molly Crony enter the town at a time of mounting excitement as the first whaling ship of the season is expected in harbour, and while Sylvia is in shop buying her cloak, the press-gang arrest some of the returning sailors. The focus is on women waiting for their menfolk and suddenly robbed of them. As the press-gang, surrounded by a hostile crowd, pushes through the town with its captives, men's voices are drowned by a preponderance of:

> Women crying aloud, throwing up their arms in imprecation, showering down abuse as hearty and rapid as if they had been a Greek chorus. Their wild, famished eyes strained on faces they

> might not kiss, their cheeks were flushed to purple with anger or else livid with impotent craving for revenge. (29)

Sylvia, sympathizing with their emotions as a few minutes earlier she had shared their delight, pushes to the door of the shop longing to help. Her later relationship with the shopman Philip is prefigured in his reaction to her behaviour here: scolding her for shaking hands with "Newcastle Bess", one of "the lowest class of seaport inhabitants" (27), and trying to keep her indoors with the argument that "it's the law, and no one can do ought against it, least of all women and lasses" (28), he represents the masculine upholder of law trying to control unruly feminine behaviour by keeping "his" woman separated and secluded. The interlocking of Sylvia's emotional state with the public event is made complete at the climax of this scene. The focus is on what the watchers outside Foster's shop witness, and it narrows from the crowd of angry women to the cry of one particular woman, who comes rushing from the bridge after being told,

> By a score of busy, sympathizing voices, that her husband was kidnapped for the service of the Government. She had need pause in the market-place, the outlet of which was crammed up. Then she gave tongue for the first time in such a fearful shriek, you could hardly catch the words she said. "Jamie! Jamie! Will they not let you to me?" Those were the last words Sylvia heard before her own hysterical burst of tears called everyone's attention to her.(29-30)

Sylvia's outburst expresses the emotional turmoil of all the women in the crowd, helping establish her as the representative voice of Monkshaven womanhood, while Jamie's wife's loss prefigures Sylvia's own loss of a lover when Kinraid is captured.

Public and private oppressions combine to make Kinrad's capture tragic to Sylvia. The press-gang, operating illegally in imprisoning a protected whaler (216), are the instruments of an oppressive government. Philip, who, witnessing the capture but failing to report it, and responsible for Sylvia's belief in Kinraid's death, acts from a possessive love that is equally oppressive in its manifestations. Again, while her parents' tragedies, her father's execution and her mother's subsequent witlessness, are the result of government policy, it is Philip who compounds these disasters for Sylvia

by the way he "rescues" her. Believing her lover dead and wanting only to provide her mother with a home, Sylvia marries Philip, and the once-lively young woman becomes a listless wife in the parlour behind the shop. For all Philip's outward gentleness and his genuine concern for her and her family, he press-gangs Sylvia into marriage. Even to make the division between public and private tyranny would be to distort Gaskell's vision here. All kinds of social institutions ─ the military, the law and marriage, are criticized. Gaskell makes her clearest attack on forms of institutionalized authority, whether of admirals, judges or husbands. The rescue of the press-gang's victims from the Randyvowse, led by Daniel Robson, is presented as wholly admirable in itself, but taken too far when the men go on to burn down the inn. Sylvia's implacable hatred of the man who betrayed her father, and her later vow to repudiate her marriage, are her version of this violent spirit, and her behaviour is equally seen as an understandable reaction, taken too far. The emphasis throughout is on the immense provocation that all these rebels have had. The actions of the admiralty are roundly called "tyranny"(6). Defense of government action comes in reported speech, clearly distanced from the narrative voice:

> Government took up the attack on the Rendezvous with a high and heavy hand. It was necessary to brave authority which had been of late too often braved. An example must be made, to strike dismay into those who opposed and defied the press-gang; and all the minor authorities who held their powers from Government were in a similar manner severe and relentless in the execution of their duty. So the attorney, who went over to see the prisoner in York Castle, told Philip. (307)

Spencer notes that the writer who, in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, seemed only hesitantly in favour of the rights of workers to form unions and to strike, and who unequivocally condemned any violence on their part, comes in *Sylvia's Lovers* to support resistance to the government and to accept the rebels' violence as regrettable but inevitable. The novelist whose writing become tangled as she acknowledged the existence of female sexual desire in *Ruth*, here casually allows

Sylvia, married to Philip, to betray how much she longs for another man: this is no source of shame for Sylvia or embarrassment for her creator (1993:101). The much more radical questioning of conventions and institutions in *Sylvia's Lovers* belies the claim that Gaskell had turned to "non-political" writing (McVeagh,1970:45). What she had done, though, seemingly was to turn away from the topical issues of capitalist industrial relations and unmarried motherhood, which drew attention to the political project of her earlier novels, to less obviously immediate social questions and a historical narrative form that would not be interpreted as political. Adopting the historian's perspective freed her to criticise the values of her class and time by moving the contest onto safer ground. She ensured both that she could express more rebellion and that she would not be read as rebellious.

Sylvia's Lovers is not framed as a purely private story but deals explicitly with the interaction of public and private events. In particular, like *North and South*, it investigates the relation between aggression on a public scale and ideologies of masculinity as manifested in courtship and the family. Woolf asserts that, Elizabeth Gaskell perceives " that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other (1977:162). Where *Sylvia's Lovers* differs from the earlier novels is in giving a historical dimension to these questions; it is charged with a sense of the historical relativity of values, manners, even psychological processes (68,98,240,283,502), and this too applies at both public and private levels. Just as the Napoleonic Wars lie behind and structure the industrial world of the 1840s, so an earlier version of masculinity underlies Victorian gender relations. *Sylvia's Lovers* deals with "a primitive set of country-folk, who recognize the wild passion in life, as it exists untamed by the trammels of reason and self-restraint" (386). *Mary Barton* and *North and South* assume the basic goodness of human nature, which allowed Gaskell to see aggression as a perversion, a "fall", and to distinguish the "human"qualities of

nurturance and reason from "bestial" violence. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, aggression is seen as characteristic of a "primitive" stage of humanity, where the "passion" of love easily passes into the "passion" for revenge. The influences which converged to produce this change of thought between *North and South* (1854) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) may lie in Elizabeth Gaskell's research of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*" (1857) and the growing impact of evolutionary theory.

Sylvia's Lovers, unlike all the previous novels, begins with an exposition of setting, here "Monkshaven" life in 1797 – history, geography, class structure, whaling industry and Napoleonic Wars – the point of which seems to be to explain the characteristic aggression of its people. *Sylvia's Lovers* hinges round the ethic of revenge, which in Monkshaven was "considered…wild justice" (283).

The industrial novels traced working-class violence to frustrated parental love, and in *Sylvia's Lovers* this process is ritually enacted. In chapter 2 a crowd, mostly of women, tense with expectant love, awaits the return of sons, brothers, lovers and husbands from the first whaling-ship of the season; "everybody relied on every one else's sympathy in that hour of great joy" (17). In chapter 3 the press-gang seize the returning sailors and love turns to bestial rage. Sylvia Robson, uninvolved, demonstrates the contagion of feeling. "when folk are glad I can't help being glad too", she says (27), but the "low, deep growl" of the frustrated women provokes "her own hysterical burst of tears" (29-30). At the funeral of the sailor shot by the press-gang she weeps so that people think him her sweetheart (70-1), and at the sight of wounded Kinraid she feels a vehement "hatred and desire of revenge on the press-gang"(76).

The law which ought to "weed out" revenge is instead its provocation. The press-gang invoke the king's name…with rough, triumphant jeers" (215), knowing that their victims will have no opportunity to invoke the laws which should protect them (6,216), and in Chapter 23 they trap victims by a shameful trick (256). The press-

gang, moreover, epitomises a general oppression. Like Mary Wollstoncraft (1972: 161), Gaskell argues that insupportable taxes "demoralise the popular sense of rectitude" (99), while "the law authorities forget to be impartial… and thus destroyed the popular confidence in what should have been considered the supreme tribunal of justice" (168). Far from "weeding out" revenge, the law seems" mad for vengeance" (272); Sylvia sees the judge as "trying to hang" her father (333). The "solemn antique procession" of York Minister which begins the assizes, implicates the Church with the other authorities (309), and Dr Wilson's funeral sermon leaves unresolved" the discord between the laws of man and the laws of Christ" (67). "Now all this tyranny… is marvelous to us" (6-7), says Elizabeth Gaskell, with deliberate irony, for the alliance of the law with the armed forces in *Sylvia's Lovers* is the same as in *North and South*. Magistrates and soldiers combine to protect the capitalist against workers. In Monkshaven at the time of French or "bourgeois" revolution the capitalist is at first ambiguously placed between landowner and workers (8), and Philip Hepborn the shop-keeper aligns himself with popular feeling in defying the laws in smuggling. As he emerges as the "new man" in historical terms, however, he aligns himself more and more with law and order. In chapter 4 there is a formal debate about the press-gang between Philip Hepburn, who is one of Sylvia's lovers, and her father Daniel Robson, which defines their different attitudes to legal tyranny - "legalism" versus "authentic democracy" (Eagleton,1976:22). According to Raymond Holt, "all Unitarians of whom there is any record were in warm sympathy with the French Revolution" and welcomed Paine's Rights of Man (1938:106,110). It was a sermon by a Unitarian minister, Richard Price, welcoming the Revolution, which provoked Burk's conservative Reflections (106-7); at Bolton in 1791 an effigy of a Unitarian minister was burned together with one of Tom Pain (110), and in 1792, the year when Elizabeth Gaskell's father became a Unitarian minister, "Church and king mobs attacked Cross street Chapel, Manchester (114), where William Gaskell, Elizabeth's

husband, was later minister. From 1792, Uniterians were "singled out as special objects of attack" (116) in what Holt calls "the English Reign of Terror" (115) associated with the sedition trials arising from Tom Paine's writing. All this suggests that Elizabeth Gaskell was likely to support "democracy" rather than "legalism".

Monkshaven democracy, however, is merely an animal like reflex to institutional force. The "growl" of the frustrated women goes up "as a lion's growl goes up, into a shriek of rage" (29); cornered by the gang, Kinraid Watches with eyes vivid, fierce as those of a wild cat brought to bay" (217) and the mob which burns the Randyvowse makes a noise "as of some raging ravening beasts growling over his prey" (261). Although Daniel Robson and Charley Kinraid, Sylvia's other lover, seem to represent a primitive kind of populism, while Philip Hepburn represents capitalism, the competition between Sylvia's lovers mirrors a historical conflict in which neither side is wholly admirable, because both rely on force. The "love story" apparently follows the historical process whereby "wild passion" gives way to "reason and self-restraint" (386), but the "Wild Cat" Kinraid and the "prudential, shopkeeping, Hepborn" (Rance,1975:144) share the same basic aggression, structured in different ideologies of masculinity.

Sylvia Robson, seems a child of nature, she resists formal education, is at home in the cowshed, walks barefoot and is linked with landscape and the sea (342). The development of Sylvia's character depends on the gender polarisation of her parents. Daniel Robson's masculinity derives from a decided separation of gender roles. As a harpooner in the dangerous whaling trade, he lives a life never entered by women. Bell Robson, on the other hand, though skilful and energetic, is engaged in the exclusively feminine activities of spinning and dairy work. As a farmer, Robson maintains this separation, "a kind of domestic Jupiter" (51), "to whom…none but masculine company would be acceptable" (88). Although Daniel is childish and impulsive, his wife allows him to think "that he ruled with a wise and absolute sway" (247,281), and

in chapter 5, when Daniel derogates woman's company (49) and welcomes even the tailor, because "t'ninth part [of man]'s summit to be thankful for, after nought but women" (50), it is Sylvia who has contrived the tailor's visit. Sylvia has learnt the trick of "managing her father" (49) because she "hated the discomfort of having her father displeased" (39), but Bell genuinely believes that "the masculine gender" confers "superior intellect" (125), and that virtue, in a woman, consists in going "through life in the shadow of obscurity, - never named except in connection with good housewifery, husband, or children" (122). With Daniel's death, her own intellect collapses, "deprived of its raison d'etre" (321). Extreme gender polarization creates an atmosphere in which each sex admires in the other the qualities from which it is excluded, and, like the knights and heroes of old, Daniel uses tales of courageous exploits "t'way of winnin t'women"(105). Charley Kinraid uses his Greenland tales to recreate in Sylvia the excited, awe-struck atmosphere of her parents' courtship (Ch.9).

Philip Hapburn's occupation does not distinguish him from women. He serves alongside Hester in the shop and, in contrast to Kinraid, he is pale and stony, but although Philip shows the beginning of a change which J.S.Mill notes, "the association of men with women in daily life [becoming] much closer…than it ever was before" (1922:310), he is not therefore less masculine than Kinraid. Philip is distinguished from Hester because it is to him, as a man, that the Foster brothers bequeath their capital and the management of the shop, a process ritualized by lengthy stock taking and accounting (Chs.14,16). The link between written texts, property and patriarchal ideology is emphasized as Jeremiah Foster "unconsciously employed for the present enumeration of pounds, shillings, and pence" the "peculiar tone" normally reserved for reading the Bible (172). Philip as an older male relative assumes the right to control Sylvia's indignation against the press-gang. He also control her education. Although he offers to teach Sylvia, he is satisfied when she resists (Chs.8,10). Rousseau saw the reluctance of girls to read and write as a sign of their inherent incapacity, but Sylvia

rightly sees learning as irrelevant to the sort of role defined by her mother's life. When, in a now familiar bit of symbolism, Sylvia falls asleep while Philip reads (95), her father invokes a country custom which gives any man a right to kiss a sleeping girl; Sylvia is thus established not as a speaking subject but as a sexual object, appropriately pictured as "little Red Riding Hood" (87). Sylvia's lovers, however, have very different sexual attitudes. Whereas Kinraid is spontaneous in making physical contact, takes advantage of a kissing game (Ch.12) and, when Sylvia is upset, "lulled and soothed her in his arms, as if she had been a weeping child and he her mother" (195), Philip in a similar situation represses the maternal impulse (328), and at the New Year's party his physical confinement, "wedged against the wall" (148), "pent up in places" (150), mirrors the sexual repression of the puritan ethic, in which sexual indulgence is a distraction from righteous labour. Philip allows himself to think of Sylvia only as a reward for industry and thrift.

Sylvia's Lovers is the third of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels to hinge around a lie, the other two being *Ruth* and *North and South*. When Philip allows Sylvia to believe that Kinraid is dead, he not only makes it more likely that she will marry him but he also defines her femininity in a way which is acceptable to him. Sylvia's passion for Kinraid confirms her as a sexual being, whereas Philip wants her to be a "pretty, soft little dove" (335). When he assumes the rights of a brother to "watch o'er ye and see what company yo'kept" (210) he is authorized by Sylvia's mother, who sees her as a child" to be warned off forbidden things by threats of danger (186). Thus, in persisting in his lie, "he felt like a mother withholding something injurious from the foolish wish of her planning child" (235), perpetuating the "protective" parental stance which deprives women of adult status. The more Philip is convinced of the strength of Sylvia's love for Kinraid, the more anxious he becomes "To convince her that he was dead…repeating… the lie that long ere this Kinraid was in all probability dead…that, even if not, he was as good as dead to her; so that the word "dead" might be used in all

honest certainty, as in one of its meanings Kinraid was dead for sure" (229). For Philip, Kinraid symbolizes Sylvia's sexual autonomy, and he exerts his authority over her to assert that her independent sexuality is and must be dead if she is to be his wife. Their marriage is appropriately like a funeral; Philip "wedded his long sought bride in mourning raiment, and…the first sound which greeted them as they approached their home were those of weeping and wailing" (340,335-6). He regrets what he has done, and wants "the old Sylvia back", but "Alas! That Sylvia was gone for ever"(330).

Sylvia's sexuality, however, is not dead but repressed, and Philip's unconscious desire evokes the figure of Kinraid, who is its visible sign: "all this time Philip was troubled by a dream… a convention of Kinraid's living presence some where near him in the darkness" (343). When Sylvia speaks of her own dream of Kinraid, however, he finds it intolerable, "what kind of a woman are yo' to go dreaming of another man…when yo're a wedded wife?" (345). Before long Philip is jealous of anyone who receives her love-Hester (349), the baby (356) and even "the inanimate ocean" (360). Sylvia, meanwhile, "was glad occasionally to escape from the comfortable imprisonment of her "parlour" into "solitude and open air, and the sight and sound of the mother-like sea"(350). Both 'sea" and "mother" are ambiguous terms in *Sylvia's Lovers,* her mother's surveillance, perpetuated by Philip, denies to Sylvia both Kinraid and sexual maturity, but her mother's impulse to succor the needy (484), manifested in Sylvia's effort to save the sinking ship, brings back Kinraid and a crisis of adult autonomy. Like the mother, the sea is the site both of love and death, both of Kinraid's parting pledge and of his disappearance and Philip's denial, and provokes in Sylvia a complication involving physical and ideological 'death": Kinraid" was dead; he must be dead; for was she not Philip's wife?" recalling what Philip said about her dream, she shuddered "as if cold steel had been plunged into her warm, living body" (360) and when she sees Kinraid again, "her heart leaps up and fell again dead within her, as if she had been shot" (377). Sylvia's "death" takes the feminine form of

silence. After Philip's "coldsleel" speech "she lay down, motionless and silent" (354-5), "her lips compressed (353). "Nothing stirred her from her fortress of reserve" (356), but though "she said no word", she "constantly rebelled in thought and deed" (359). Quiet as a Quaker (362), her stillness is the result of "unnatural restraint" (363). Eventually, feeling that she "cannot stay in t'house to be chocked up wi[her] tears"(368), she runs out into a storm and like Ruth, is "quieted by this tempest of the elements" (369). As in Chapter 3, her emotion is shaped by communal feeling, and as part of a crowd she unwittingly helps save the ship on which Kinraid is returning.

Kinraid's return is the Freudian return of the repressed, initially "unutterable" (heading to Ch.35) and, madness threatens: she speaks "with incessant low incontinence of words" (383), and understands that Philip "kept something from me as would ha'made me a different woman" (409). However, Sylvia never connived at the lie denying her sexuality. She was "no prude, and had been brought up in simple, straightforward country ways" (146). The historical setting releases Elizabeth Gaskell from the disabling Victorian concept of innocence which entangles *Ruth* and *North and South*, and allows her to present Philip's Puritan ethic as an imposed ideology. Sylvia's response to Kinraid's return is not shame but indignation, expressed in the crude terms of her father's "wild justice". She "assume[s] to herself the right of speech" (380), and, "with her cheeks and eyes aflame" (381), makes a vow of implacable enmity to Philip(383).

Nicholas Rance notes that "Gaskell's audience would have been shocked by the sympathy extended to a heroine renouncing her marital vows" (1975:139), but several of the short stories following Caroline Norton's 'English Laws for Women' (1854) and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) show her worried preoccupation with the indissolubility of marriage. Elizabeth Gaskell's approved response to injustice was to "speak out", but the historical perspective of *Sylvia's Lovers* allows her to see that what seems to be "the voice of conscience" may be only "sublimated maxims" (Abel,

1982:49). When Sylvia throws off wifely duty and vows eternal enmity to her husband, she is simply adopting her father's attitude, exchanging one masculine code for another. Sylvia shares the "settled and unrelenting indignation" (52) which her father felt for the press-gang, and the vow she makes against the witness who hangs her father - "I'll niver forgive-niver!" (319) - is the same as she makes to Philip: "I'll never forgive you man, nor live with him as his wife again" (383).

Kinraid's marriage, however, makes her reassess the "eternal" vow of love and hate which structures the revenge ethic. Her disillusionment with both her lovers makes Hester say that she is "speaking like a silly child" but she insists, "No, I'm speaking like a woman: like a woman as finds out she's been cheated by men as she trusted, and as has no help for it" (443-4). The law in other words, is not for women. Philip's pathetic response to Kinraid's return is to "kill" his "prudential shopkeeping" self. As Coulson says, "them that's dead is alive, and as for poor Philip, though he was alive, he looked fitter to be dead" (399). Philip's letter instructs them all to "look on[him] as one dead" (405). He enlists, reverting to the older pattern of masculinity, the "man of peace becoming a man of war" (450). The fable of Sir Guy of Warwick, the soldier turned-monk who reveres his faithful wife from a distance (465-6), is based on the outmoded chivalry which J.S. Mill describes in *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill presents chivalry as "a remarkable … moral ideal" in its time, but argues that "the changes in the general state of the species rendered inevitable the substitution of a totally different ideal of morality…without reliance on the chivalrous feeling of those who are in a position to tyrannies" (1991:301-2). Chivalry was always a forlorn hope for Philip; the day after his enlistment "he found in the dark recess of his mind the dead body of his fancy…that he might come home, handsome and glorious, to win the love that had never been his" (392).

Gaskell does not present a traditional marriage plot in *Sylvia's Lovers* but continues the critical investigation of infidelity and maritial discord begun in an early

story such as “A Manchester Marriage” and continued later in “Cousin Phillis.” Truly happy marriages are rare in Gaskell’s work: many readers have commented on her attraction to communities of single women (as in *Cranford*) that rely upon the marginal dividends of a masculine commercial economy for sustenance (Auerbach, 1978). In *Sylvia’s Lovers* , however, marriage is presented as the only option available to the heroine at precisely the point where the plot of masculine political identity becomes submerged. Sylvia enters into a contract of marriage with her cousin Philip Hepburn under dubious, even fraudulent conditions, transferring the burden of the debate about social contract in the novel to yet another legal institution, marriage. Unlike the demands made upon the individual by state policy in times of war, marriage required the internalization of arrangements of consent by both parties with the sanction of a religious state authority. Yet marriage, like military enlistment, could encompass a wide range of voluntary and semivoluntary forms of participation. Finally, unlike enlistment or impressment, marriage summoned a powerful rational for voluntary initiation grounded in culturally shared notions of the self based upon secular or affectionate bonds and religious or spiritual obligations to another. Sylvia’s subjugation depends only slightly upon the form of external control that have been already examined in the case of her lover Kinraid’s impressment and in the arrest and execution of her father, Daniel. Willingly taking on the guilt associated with her father’s rebellion against impressment, Sylvia compulsively reproduces Daniel’s muting and imprisonment through the destruction of her own will in marriage to Philip Hepburn. “It is not accident that the exploration of the victimized status of women is examined in legislation of the late fifties,” writes Joseph Kestner, “if Sylvia Robson had been able to divorce, or had sufficient education to remain independent after separation, there might have been alternatives to her condition” (1985:194). Rather than openly commenting on the restrictive family law in the 1850s and 1860s, Gaskell

turned to a displaced crisis located in a historically remote past in order to dramatize a present-day claim of women for legal subject status.

The claim of different groups of individuals in the nineteenth century to recognition as subjects under the law and the troubles they encountered in doing so have shaped the account of Gaskell's novel and its political/ historical plot. The special case of impressment involved temporary abduction of the male subject into the category of the nonsubject. What Kinraid experiences when his individual liberties are canceled and he submits to naval discipline is, in certain respects, analogous to what Sylvia suffers after she loses the liberty associated with her unmarried status by entering into matrimony. Both suffer, as do the good men of Monkshaven roused by the fire alarm, through the betrayal and deceit Gaskell associates with calculated trickery. Kinraid and Sylvia do not undergo an identical experience of subjection. Each confronts different "choices" in the process of relinquishing self-determination. Kinraid's abduction is violent and thus he chooses to cooperate with the Navy rather than become a victim of deadly force. Sylvia's "seduction," if we can call it such, occurs during a time of severe emotional distress. Her "choice" appears freer than Kinraid's and nearly voluntary in nature. Even so, it would be a mistake to equate the violent bondage of impressment with the domestic imprisonment accompanying an unhappy Victorian marriage. So too, the impressment plot and the marriage plot do not fall into clearly equivalent halves of the same question in the novel, nor are they mirror images of one another. Rather the marriage plot proceeds from assumptions put forward in the impressment plot, subtly reworking and gendering its definition of the individual, and extending the investigation of this more particular individual's powers and limitations.

In responding to contemporary debates over marriage law, Gaskell discarded the happy courtship plot in fashioning *Sylvia's Lovers*. Old Alice Rose, a casualty of a brutal marriage in her own youth, appears to speak a general truth when she mutters:

"I'd liefer by far be i'that world where ther's neither marrying nor giving in marriage, for it's all moithering mess here" (244). All the young people in Monkshaven select inappropriate love objects and persist in adoring their indifferent idols in spite of every impediment. Only Sylvia Robson and Charly Kinraid enjoy a reciprocal attraction, a vulnerable bond that is severed by the violent arrival of the press-gang and the self-interested silence of Philip Hepburn. Problems of marriage assume centrality as the problem of impressment recedes in *Sylvia's Lovers*. The novel's two halves share not only contiguity and causality - for Hepburn's amorous designs on Sylvia motivate his complicity in the seizure of Kinraid by the press-gang - but also a deeper connection in terms of the progressive internalization of subjection marked by the movement of the narrative itself. In keeping the cause of Kinraid's disappearance secret and allowing Sylvia and her family to conclude that the "specksioneer" is dead, Philip implicates himself with the extremely upset and anxious girl and encourages her increasing dependence upon him during the days of her father's trial. After the execution of Daniel Robson and the mental collapse of Sylvia's mother, Philip arrogates paternal power of decision and control over the young woman's affairs, which leads gradually to her benumbed acceptance of his proposal of marriage. Even though "her ideal husband was different from Philip in every point" and "the two images never for an instant merged into one" (128), having accepted the fact of Kinraid's death, Sylvia apathetically agrees to enter into the marriage in order to care better for her mother.

Sylvia's consciousness puts her in great pain and transforms, Sylvia marries her stooping and industrious cousin not for wealth but for emotional security; she prefers "a crust of bread and liberty" to "plenty of creature comforts and many restraints" (359). Sylvia's "Shrine," a well-appointed town house, is "associated in her mind with…time of discomfort and misery" (336). Her only relief from the constraints of middle-class gentility is to take lonely walks along the sea cliffs, walks Philip begrudges his wife because they may remind her of her lover "lost at sea." In

obtaining Sylvia's promise of marriage, Philip determines to "have her for his own he must, at any cost" (328). The cost of his obsession is reckoned in tears and falsehoods. Philip equivocates and claims that he has acted for the best in preventing "a girl choosing the wrong lover…was she not saved from it by the event of the impressment, and by the course of silence he himself had resolved upon?" (240). The deceitful husband imagines himself to be "like a mother withholding something injurious from the foolish wish of her plaining child" (235). Philip admits the causal link between Kinraid's capture and Sylvia's acceptance of the bonds of marriage. His transmogrified paternalism manifests itself in the language of maternity, echoing a rhetorical blurring of identity within power configurations examined in the wording of the Married Women's Property Act Petition (Kucich,1994:124-5).

In counterpoint to Philip's discovery that "the long-desired happiness was not so delicious and perfect as he had anticipated" (Gaskell,343), Sylvia comes to hate her monastery life and the oppressive emotional demands of a husband who repels her. A female husband chorus of domestic ideologues, Bell Robson, and Alic and Hester Rose, continually evaluate Sylvia's performance as a wife, proffering unwanted critical advice. Serving as a form of in-house surveillance unit, Hester and Alice most approve of her when young Mrs Hepburn seems obedient and "to have no will of her own" (362). Nonetheless, Sylvia begins to rebel against the "very dull work" (366) of pleasing Philip, realizing with growing clarity that "the decision was made" and "its irrevocableness…weighed much upon her with a sense of dull hopelessness" (350-51). The contract she has entered into with her spouse is "pledged…as strong as words can make it" (326). Her pledge entails only the duties and chains of matrimony" (374); as the mother of a helpless, newly born infant, Sylvia's dependency upon Philip is complete. She had hoped at first to find the "chains of matrimony" light enough to beat, yet they grow increasingly "heavy", returning us as a reader to the trace or specter of physical constraint elaborated in the impressment plot. Sylvia is bullied into

total physical subservience to her "master" by her mother's querulous lectures. She promises at last "never to leave the house without asking her husband's permission though in making this promise, she felt as if she were sacrificing her last pleasure to her mother's wish" (374).

The final promise, which replicates the conditions of her original contact and fully integrates the discourse of physical discipline introduced by the bondage of Kinraid with the ideology of self-restraint implicit in the understanding of marriage from the late eighteenth century onward, is extracted by subtle coercion. Gaskell's narrative of marital discontent reaches an unbearable point of pressure when the feminine subject, through her own volition, has nearly extinguished her selfhood. Sylvia exist only insofar as she refuses to return the love of her husband. At this point the plot turns again and Kinraid returns to Monkshaven after an absence of three years, revealing to Sylvia the false pretext for her legal commitment: "[y]our marriage is no marriage. You were tricked into it. You are my wife, not his" (382).

The description of Philip's actions as "trickery" recalls the press-gang's highly effective ploy of the fire-bell decoy: both the Royal Navy and Philip Hepburn entrap others through deception. Although he insists earlier on in the novel that "I niver telled a lie i'my life (210), the link between Philip's rationale in deceiving Sylvia and his apologies for the activities of the press-gang is revealing: "[I]f sailors cannot pay in taxes, and will not pay in person, why they must be made to pay; and that's what th' press-gang is for. I reckon" (40). After reasoning that his own ends in love justify unethical means, the equation of persons and payment comes back to haunt Philip when Kinraid claims prior contract: "No lies can break the oath we swore to each other. I can get your pretence of a marriage set aside" (382). Sylvia, as the contested party is incapable of establishing precedence between the two (particularly since Hepburn is the father of her child) and ends the dispute by rejecting both: "I'm bound and tied, but o,ve sworn my oath to him as well as you" (383). A veritable "double-

bind" cancels out Sylvia's obligation to either man, effectively reinstating her autonomous power as a single woman beyond marital conventions or laws.

Finding herself "bewildered and uncertain as to what was to be done next, how she should meet the husband to whom she had described all allegiance" (392-93). Sylvia discovers that Philip has secretly left Monhshaven, his thriving business and home, in shame after his exposure by Kinraid. Crucially then, Gaskell's investigation of individual subjection passes from Sylvia to her husband in his self imposed exile. Philip leaves his property and assets in Sylvia's management. Even as this information sinks in, Bell Robson dies, leaving Sylvia on her own once again. The community of Monkshaven questions Sylvia's solitary status, and thus she learns "to fear observation as a deserted wife" (477). Rarely does she speak of her quarrel with her husband except to assert that she is "a woman as find out she's been cheated by men as she trusted, and as has no help for it" (443-44). Jeremia Foster, one of the trustees who takes "a complete dislike" to her resolute bitterness, uses the laws of custody in lieu of her husband's "power of correctness" to intimidate Sylvia into remaining in Hepburn's household. Digusted by her "strong, relentless language," Foster deems sinful Sylvia's bitter declaration: "I'm sick o'men, and their cruel, deceitful ways" (412). The abandoned wife remains suspended between her former single state and the condition of coverture, a woman without the man who lends her a legal (and social) identity. Caught between the romantic claim of Kinraid and the bond of shared parentage with Philip Hepburn, Gaskell's heroine is consigned to the no-man's- land of the failed Victorian marriage without power to direct or control her own future, much less that of her spouse or family.

In articulating the discontinuity between male and female subject, Barbara Leigh Smith's question, " why does marriage make so little legal difference to men, and such a mighty legal difference to women?" (1854:15) reveals the stakes for Gaskell in mediating between historical romance and women's fictions of petition. By

the mid-1860s, prominent male political theorists such as J.S.Mill had taken up the cause of property reform for women. Absolute public authority within marriage was beginning to be interrogated in public and political discourse. In the world of Gaskell's novel, as in Smith's legal analysis, Sylvia dryly remarks that "men takes a deal more nor women to spoil their lives" (475). Charley Kinraid marries a young heiress shortly after Sylvia rejects his claim to her own hand and goes on to distinguish himself in various military exploits in the Napoleonic Wars. Sylvia by contrast, struggles long and hard to earn what little comfort is to be have as a deserted and suspect wife with a steady private income. The fate of her husband, Philip, however, is far more extraordinary. The conclusion Gaskell fixed on long before she designed the overarching structure of the novel demanded Philip's martyrdom and Sylvia's admission of his innocence. The third and abandoned title of the narrative, *Philip's Idol*, indicates the importance of this final section of *Sylvia's Lovers*. Creating a third category of subjection, Gaskell explores Christian self sacrifice, nationalistic sentiment, and feminized masculinity seemingly in an attempt to bridge the formal gap between historical romance and the novel of petition, between the rights of men and the duties of women, and between external force and resistant internalization of subordination.

In the final section of the novel, Philip disguised as an outcast and a shabby "hungry-man," he saves his own daughter, Bella, from drowning in a final suicidal gesture of expiation. Only then is Philip finally granted a lengthy death bed scene and a kiss from his wife on the charred remains of his lips, the only voluntary matrimonial gesture attributed to Sylvia in the entire novel. It is at this moment of physical extermination that Philip achieves the emotional surrender of his rebellious wife. He triumphs in the end, outdoing her previous renunciation of will. Here the marriage plot and historical novel collide to produce concord between the two with Sylvia's kiss and her care for his hurt body. Philip at last usurps the position of both father and lover-

hitherto occupied by Robson and Kinraid in Sylvia's consciousness-through complete immersion in the realm of subjugation. Subsuming the symbolic function of the oppressed male subject, the impressed, enlisted, or criminalized man who is banished from civil society, as well as the repressed female subject, the invisible or legally nonexistent married woman, Philip represents an apotheosis – specifically religious in nature – of the female speaker of the Married Woman's Property Act petition. Philip's gendering is made unstable, even occluded; he is described alternately as strangely maternal and improbably virile. D'Albertis believes that Philip foregrounding at the close of *Sylvia's Lovers* demonstrates a radical questioning of both male and female individual claims to certain rights and liberties, displacing the discourse of liberalism with the language of Christian self-sacrifice (131).

The contradictory structure of *Sylvia's Lovers* may depend on conventions of the historical novel Gaskell borrowed from Scott. In displacing a current debate – the rights of women – onto a historically inflected one - the rights of man - Gaskell availed herself of representational material that was dramatic and violent, yet entirely separable from the subject of her covert investigation. The marriage plot displaces the historical impressment plot, which could reemerge in domesticated form only through the story of Philip's spectacular self-destruction. Gaskell's narrator insists on the difference of the historical past, wryly celebrating the Age of Reason in which she and her readers presumably live. Yet she also allows that history often functions as a maker not of progress or linear development but of ambiguous change. In Gaskell's fiction, history tends to reflect or project contemporary anxieties, potentially leading nowhere. History plays a duplicitous role in demonstrating one thing while intimating another in *Sylvia's Lovers.*

Gaskell's feminist contemporary, Ann Jamson, wrote that "any conventional law binding the one party and absolving the other as regards the most sacred of all the obligations incurred by such a contract – mutual truth, in words and act – must of

necessity place both parties in a false position and render the whole contract of marriage a standing lie" (qtd.in Thomas,1967:209). For Gaskell, impressment and inequitable marriage laws represented the failure of the state to recognize the individual as a subject and to recognize his or her reasonable claim to redress such wrongs. Yet time and time again, individual resistance to injustice is shown merely to compound the problems being addressed in Gaskell's social fiction.

A close reading of *Sylvia's Lovers* illustrates that, the novel is the gloomiest of all Gaskell's long fictions: she herself called it "the saddest story I ever wrote" (qtd. in Duthie,1990:31). With her customary insight into characters and fascination with domestic details – and taste for rather sensational plots – Gaskell writes in *Sylvia's Lovers* about the impact of the war on simple people and about the evils of the unscrupulous activities of press-gangs, the problem of enlistment and disastrous ends of forced marriages. Sylvia is a heroine loved by two men of completely different types. The novel follows her development from a wilful, imaginative, but not especially clever girl, to an alert woman who has been matured by her suffering. *Sylvia's Lovers* is a dark exploration of the immersion of self in structures of hierarchy and domination, subject to powers of the state and law, which function most effectively by eliciting the consent of the individual in his or her own subjection. As a historically conscious writer, Elizabeth Gaskell puts some of the laws of her contemporary government and society under acute criticism by using a historical theme to avoid any further claims of radicality.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to explore Gaskell's historical consciousness and gender awareness in her novels to show how she communicates through her characters something of her own involvement in contemporary history. What is remarkable about Gaskell is that she managed to maintain both a respectable public image as a devoted Victorian wife and mother and to create a surprisingly modern household in which it was possible for her to pursue her chosen vocation of writing. She was a woman of considerable intellectual sophistication who was familiar with and involved in the important issues of her day. More importantly, she dared to suggest fulfilling possibilities for women that her culture had not imagined. Successful at coordinating domestic duties and a career, Gaskell acted as a woman who could effortlessly merge her public and private roles. Gaskell managed simultaneously to attend to her responsibilities as a minister's wife, to bring up four daughters, and to secure a solid literary reputation for herself. Gaskell sensed that she was living in a period of transition, and she looked to the future for the resolution of some of the issues and dilemmas confronting women. As she wrote novels that address the issue of work for women, she took a hopeful view of the possibilities that would be available to women in later years, while remaining aware of the present difficulties. Unlike most of her contemporaries Gaskell presents the process of finding one's vocation as central to a woman's life.

The idea running through the preceding chapters of this study was to show how Gaskell reflected her historical consciousness and gender awareness through the medium of her fiction. As discussed in the first chapter, important historical events provided the rich background of Gaskell's novels. Notions on gender were also of great interest to Gaskell. As a Victorian, she was well informed on the Industrial Revolution and its impact on people and society and through her encounter with many

important scholars and politicioas such as Carlyle and Disraeli she knew a lot about the effect of the Corn Laws, the Poor Law Amendment Act, *laissez-faire* economic policies and the Cash nexus which had resulted in the Chartist Movement. Being in close relation with men and women of working class and because of her philanthropic activities she had a good knowledge about working conditions, Trade-Unions and their relation with workers. Gaskell's free education and Unitarian training provided her with an opportunity to take part in a good number of literary and scientific circles which made it possible for her to get information in various areas.

Seeking possible answers for the "Woman Question" of her time seemed to be of great concern for Gaskell. A woman herself, she had a good knowledge about the situation of women in her surrounding society. Gaskell was seemingly aware that according to the current rules of her society woman's place was to be in the home, and domesticity and motherhood were portrayed as a sufficient emotional fulfilment. For Gaskell, however, the ideal woman at this time was not the weak, passive creature of romantic fiction. Rather she was a busy, able and upright figure who drew strength from her moral superiority and whose virtue was manifested in the service to others. Gaskell alongside with other middle-class women of the Victorian era did leave her home and not just to socialise but to visit the homes of the poor. These women used their position of privilege to export expertise in domestic affairs to those regarded as in need of advice, so that they might attain the same high standards of household management. The power that middle-class women had achieved in the home was now used by them in order to gain access to another world characterised by, as they saw it, poverty, drink, vice and ignorance. Female charitable activity was informed by religious commitment as well as a sense of moral superiority. Many of the feminists were active in the philanthropic movement and it was from this feminine public sphere that demands for improvements in the position of women began to be made. The aim of first-wave feminists was to gain better educations and employment opportunities for

middle-class women, better working conditions and wages for working-class women, and eventually the vote so that women might have some influence over their fate. Gaskell was an unofficial member of this circle.

From the very beginning of her career, when she explores the industrial novel, Gaskell foregrounds the world of labour, bringing new concerns into the world of the novel. Moreover, throughout her entire career, she makes a plea for change, especially in the way that her culture views women. Gaskell's primary intention as an author is not to shock or to alienate her audience, but to persuade them. Therefore, to get her words out, Gaskell chooses to displace her feminist criticisms and assertions, as she experiments with several literary genres such as industrial, social-problem, historical, romantic and pastoral. The first of these genres is the congenial form of the industrial novel. For a Victorian writer who wished to explore social problems, this genre offered perhaps the most direct means of getting out a social message.

In her industrial novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Gaskell uses the characters of Mary Barton and Margaret Hale to make questions of femininity inseparable from issues of class identity. Mary Barton's position as household provider enables Gaskell to integrate paid labour with the fulfilment of womanly duty, while in *North and South,* Margaret Hale's sympathetic relations with Manchester's industrial poor reconciles perceived contradictions between female propriety and political activism. Gaskell's industrial novels can be seen as an elaborate meditation on women's vocation. Detailed explorations of Mary Barton's sweated labour, and Margaret Hale's struggles to help the working poor all combine to portray the difficulties of work for Victorian women, its capacity to stain their character at the same time as it could help them to discover a sense of autonomy and personal worth.

Gaskell's historical consciousness is openly reflected through the first part of *Mary Barton* where the life of John Barton is scrutinized through his involvement in the Chartist movement and Trade-Union's activities. While the novel defends neither

of these movements, involvement in them is described with sympathetic understanding, and is a formative element in the history of John Barton as an individual caught up in the events in which frustration and resentment find cause for action. The second part of the novel concentrates on the developing character of Mary. Her involvement with life's difficulties and free choice of labour gives Mary the chance of exercising her abilities in facing problems that a young working-class girl may encounter in a big industrial city. Gaskell's gender awareness gives her character the opportunity of breaking the gender boundaries in controling her own life by choosing her own vocation, love, and way of life. The benefits of men and women sharing the workload, and Gaskell's attitude towards prostitution which is embodied in the character of Mary's Aunt Esther who influences Mary's life greatly in the course of novel is also illustrated.

In *Cranford* Gaskell criticises separate sphere ideology by showing how the "masculine" world of commerce intrudes on women's private lives. This criticism in turn becomes a means of imagining an alternative model of womanhood, one that emphasizes independence and self-sufficiency. In the figure of Mıss Matty, the bankrupt spinster-merchant, Gaskell envisions how a retiring femininity might be absolutely consistent with economic enterprise.

Ruth was written out of moral impulse similar to the one that generated *Mary Barton* to make the middle-class reading public aware of responsibilities that they preferred to ignore. The story was controversial not because it was a story of seduction, but because of the way Gaskell treated it. The seduced woman is no mere minor figure but the heroine, and Gaskell deliberately avoids treating seduction as a focus for easy pathos. It is not a "fall" after which a woman can only sink lower or die of shame, but a mistake that, given the chance, she can outgrow. Gaskell focuses on the chance. Gaskell wrote *Ruth* precisely in order to counteract categorical descriptions of prostitution or female sexual conduct. Gaskell's decision to place the

fallen woman at the center of *Ruth* marked her penitential narrative as a unique and uncompromising cotribution to mid-Victorian social discourse on chastity and prostitution. Penitential narrative opposed social science in that it exalted the work of women refomers and aspired to place male-authored texts and theories about female experience at a disadvantage in public debates about prostitution and chastity.

In *North and South* Gaskell returns to the form of the industrial novel again. The novel is concerned with the condition of England, with Gaskell's concentration on representing the unrest between masters and workers. In *North and South* the center of interest is the relationship between two middle-class characters, Margaret and John, and the conflict between masters and men, with the strike and the violent mob reaction which accompanies it. This can be taken as a reference to the Chartist movement and the activities of the Trade-Unions. The novel traces the maturation of Margaret, through her gender awareness, into a strong and powerful woman who gradually learns how to conduct her own life and philanthropic activities through her personal will. *North and South* also explores the effects of the split in society between private and public, rational and emotional, expressed in the notion of "Separate Spheres" for men and women. It addresses the split as a problem and offers a fundamentally optimistic view of the possibilities of healing. *North and South* is concerned with the reconciliation of wary sections of society within the theme of industrial relations in the manufacturing districts, hoping to make it clear that its aim is to unite, not antagonize classes.

Cranford and *North and South* in many ways represent opposite poles of Gaskell's achivement. Yet for all the differences in pace, both works are concerned with social change. Life in Cranford is in fact subject to change: personal losses are often the focus of individual episodes, but the picture emerging from the narrative as a whole is of beneficial changes to the community. They differ from the changes in *North and South* mainly by coming about more gently and gradually. Both works

focus on a question that was always of importance to Gaskell: what role can a woman take in her changing society. Both *Cranford* and *North and South* explore the effects of the split in society between private and public, rational and emotional, expressed in the notion of "separate spheres" for men and women. Although their respective heroines are so different – Matty being a victim of the split, Margaret having the potential to begin healing it – both works adress the split as a problem and both offer a fundamentally optimistic view of the possibilities of healing, through the extension of "feminine" concern with nurturance into "masculine" areas of life. In *Cranford* the Victorian idea of separate spheres has been taken to extremes. Gaskell consistently attacked Victorian separate spheres ideology for fostering a reductive polarity between the "female" domestic and "male" industrial novel, frequently combining, and thus indelibly altering, the two in her own work.

In *Sylvia's Lovers* Gaskell deals with a historical theme. It examines the effects of a defunct state policy, impressment or the enforced enlistment of men in the Royal Navy. Gaskell's impressment plot centrally established for the first time in her work the question of male political identity. A second plot revolving around marriage consequently proceeded from the assumptions stated in the impressment plot. Sylvia's domestic unhappiness reflected dissatisfaction with family law in Gaskell's society, a concern that found expression in the movement of early feminists. Gaskell's penultimate work could be taken as a politicaly engaged one. Sylvia's strenuous resistance to marital deception and inequality bears as much resemblance to Kinraid's courageous battle with the press-gang as it does to Philip's "unmanly" mendacity. The greatest achievement of Gaskell's historical hybrid is that it situates the domestic and the private as family in the realm of history as it does the military and the public. Like her earlier discussion of prostitution and women's work in *Ruth,* Gaskell's only full-length treatment of the theme of matrimony poses complicated questions about the social and political institutions that govern women's lives.

In all the novels considered in this study, Gaskell has put young girls at center stage as her heroines who develop gradually. Each coming from a different background, apart from Sylvia, the other four are left motherless at some point in their youth. In these novels, Gaskell's motherless heroines begin with some good qualities and some weaknesses: Mary Barton is loving, but superficial; Mary Smith is concerned, but critical; Ruth Hilton is trusting, but naive; Margaret Hale is strong, but proud. Each undergoes a proess of maturation and education which enhances her good qualities and decreases her weaknesses so that she can become a strong woman who stands up for things she believes in, but who is also caring, and loving: the embodiment of Victorian feminine virtue. The growth of Gaskell's early heroines happens to them without their knowledge and understanding, by the words and action of others which are heard, seen, and slowly processed. This is true in *Mary Barton,* in which Mary eventually learns to value what is inside people, including herself, rather than their appearance, and to trust herself to overcome the problems that life brings by facing them and not seeking ways to escape. It is also the case in *Cranford*, in which Mary Smith gradually moves away from the self-serving attitude of Drumble, and becomes absorbed into the kinder and more cooperation-based world of the Cranfordian. In *Ruth*, Ruth actively embraces the examples shown to her by the Bensons as a way of cleansing herself of the sin into which her naivety led her, and she seeks out a position as a sick-nurse: the occupation that would make best use of the caring character she has cultivated. Margaret, in *North and South*, is the most mature of any of the girls at the beginnings of their stories: she is strong from the start though she considers herself a coward, and we see her always testing herself so that she will grow braver. Early on Margaret takes control of the situation for others out of necessity, but as she gains more knowledge from her experiences with the dispute between masters and workers, and from the people around her, she becomes strong for others and for herself, by choice. These four women alongside with Sylvia, who

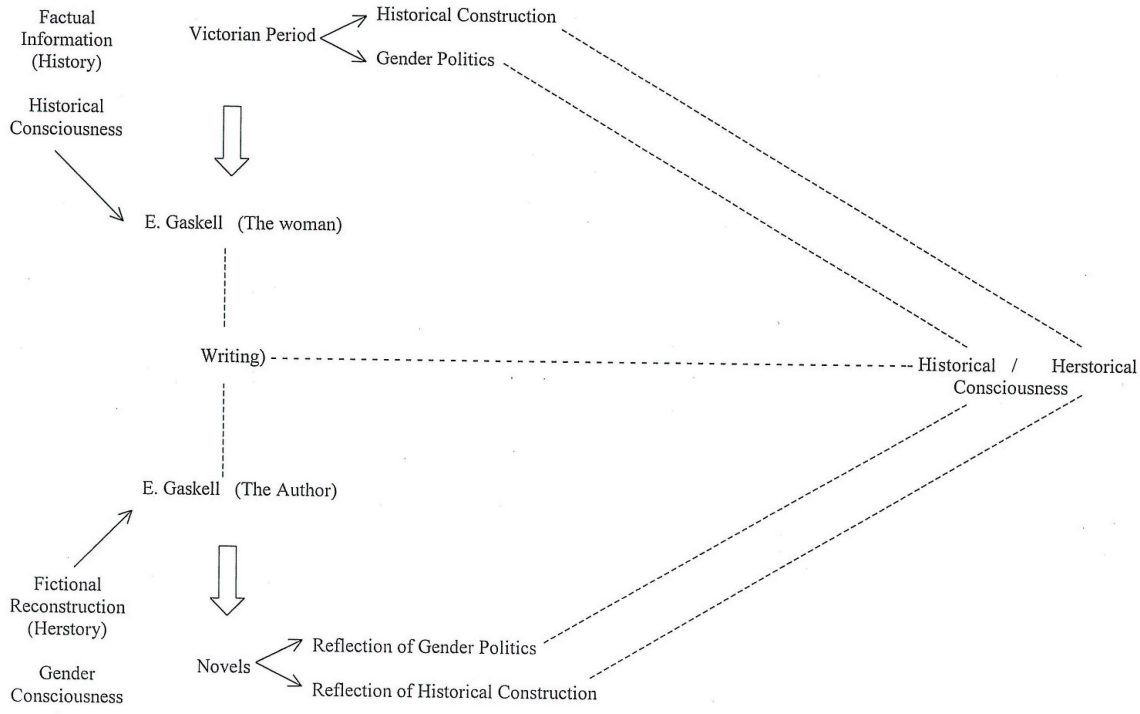
experinces maturity in other ways, prove that Gaskell had more faith in her sex than just the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house" and was determined to show that her heroines would not pale in the face of adversity but change and adapt and become stronger for the challenge, for without challenge or change comes stagnation.

Society, as Elizabeth Gaskell carefully observed it, expressed itself through a number of competing discourses: discourses both in the theoretical sense of systems and language of classification and explanation, and in the more everyday sense of conversation. Gaskell's novels demonstrate the danger and restrictions of being trapped within social conventions and ways of thinking. Whether she is dealing with the theme of the seduced young girl, as in *Ruth*, or a lack of comprehension that is frequently shown as damaging to the important goal of human understanding and sympathy as in *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Sylvi's Lovers*, generally, her novels are concerned with the breaking down of barriers: between individuals, between classes, between genders, between intellectual disciplines. Simultaneously, however, her fiction derives much of its power from her dramatization of the tension created by the barriers themselves.

The plots of Gaskell's fiction show a strong drive toward resolution, towards the achievement of authoritative positions: yet they always leave the reader with unanswered, perhaps unanswerable questions about the nature of desire, of power, of the direction in which society will develop. The strength of Gaskell's fiction lies in her capacity through historical consciousness and gender awareness to dramatize, investigate, and exploit the forces of social change, the effects of which continued to resonate long after her death.

Gaskell's historical consciousness and gender awareness as a nineteenth century woman is best and foremost reflected through her novels. These works are the fictional reconstruction of some factual historical events witnessed by a female writer who aimed to communicate something of her own involvement in the contemporary

English history. As illustrated in the following diagram, which stands as the schematic summary of this study, Gaskell attempted to produce her feminine vision of some of the most important historical events of her time by constructing a herstory and / or deconstructing history.



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ABSTRACT

The present study intended to analyze the presence of historical consciousness and gender awareness in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction by focusing on five of her novels which have been dealt with chronologically namely, *Mary Barton*, *Cranford*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, and *Sylvia's Lovers*. This study is confined to the functions and significances of the historical awareness and gender role in the aforementioned works. The study attempts to trace Elizabeth Gaskell's historical consciousness and gender awareness in her effort to provide a participant view of some of the most important events in nineteenth century English history to communicate her feminine vision of life. This study argues that Gaskell progresses to become a prominent female writer to produce her version of history.

Chapter one provides a brief account of the most important incidents of the nineteenth-century England and deals with the politics of gender by shedding some light on gender role and sexuality, woman's sphere and ideology of femininity. Chapter two and five focus on Gaskell's "Condition-of-England" novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South* in which a shift happens from the narrative of social investigation embodied in the first text to the consolidation and legitimating of that agency in the figure of an apprentice female social worker, of the second text. Chapter three deals with *Cranford* which traces how Gaskell evokes the image of a female community that sustains itself by its own labour. Chapter four deals with the use of penitential narrative to support the situation of a fallen women and redemptive profession in *Ruth* with the moral implications of women's public work first raised with reference to Gaskell's industrial novels. In chapter six insurgent individualism, historical romance and the novel of petition are discussed in *Sylvia's Lovers*. The conclusion drives attention on the fact that how historical consciousness and gender awareness enables a female author to communicate her vision of reality, life, sex and gender which in turn is reflected in the conscience of her nation.