

**LINGERING ‘ON THE BORDERLAND’: THE MEANINGS  
OF HOME IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S FICTION**

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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**SUMMARY**

This thesis explores the meanings of home in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction. I argue that there are five components to Gaskell’s fictional iteration of homes, each of which is explored in the chapters of this thesis. I analyse the ways in which Gaskell challenges the nineteenth-century cultural construct of the home as a domestic sanctuary offering protection from the strains and stresses of the external world. Gaskell’s fictional homes frequently fail to provide a place of safety. Even the architecture militates against a sense of peace and privacy. Doors and windows are ambiguous openings through which death can enter, and are potent signifiers of entrapment as well as protective barriers. The underlying fragility of Gaskell’s concept of home is illustrated by her narratives of homelessness, which for her, is better defined as a psychological, social and emotional separation rather than the literal lack of shelter. Education takes place within the home and is grounded in Gaskell’s Unitarian beliefs and associationist psychology. Gaskell creates challenging paradigms for domestic relationships in her fictional portrayals of feminized men and servants. Her detailed descriptions of domestic interiors provide nuanced and unconventional interpretations of character and behaviour.

I draw on Gaskell’s letters, her non-fiction writing and a range of other contemporary documents for insights into her fictional presentations of home. This methodology provides a creative, holistic interpretative framework within which Gaskell’s achievement can be more adequately measured. I argue that Gaskell’s own experience of home was that of an outsider lingering on the borderland, and her concept of home was therefore unstable, fluid and unconventional. The tensions she experienced in her personal life found their way into her fiction, where her portrayal of home is multi-faceted and complex.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Elizabeth Gaskell would have enjoyed the research journey I undertook for this thesis, combining, as it did, food, drink, laughter, conversation and elements of fairytale with, of course, serious scholarship.

The journey started in my 'home library' at the University of Sussex, where Helen Webb provided the luxury of individual tuition into the wonders of internet searching and the virtual reality of any number of nineteenth century periodicals and documents. The British Library was a constant source of information and an entertaining day spent poring over the Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of 1851 could be rounded off with a trip round the current exhibition at the Library on a wide variety of topics. An unannounced visit to Harris Manchester College library in Oxford, found a warm welcome from the Librarian Sue Killoran who provided tea, cake, and the first Gaskell letter I held in my hand - not all together of course! The archive proved to be a rich source of dissenting and Unitarian material and Sue was indefatigable in her support and help.

Gaining access to Dr Williams's library in Bloomsbury was a bit like breaking into Sleeping Beauty's castle. Once past the prickly bureaucratic barricades however, the Victorian Gothic splendour of the building, now undergoing renovation, was suitably atmospheric. The floor to ceiling bookcases of the Reading Room with its creaking

floorboards provided an appropriate setting for reading William's sermons, overlooked by the marble busts of Dissenting Divines.

Several trips to Manchester were perhaps the highlight of my research journey. Janet Allen, Chair of the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, was supremely generous with her time, support and information and provided my first introduction to the Portico Library as well as a conducted tour of every nook and cranny of the house in Plymouth Grove. The Portico Library offered a joyous combination of tea, books and friendly staff - unlike Elizabeth, I had access to all the current periodicals! The new reading room at the John Rylands library is a worthy addition to the older building and the staff were unfailingly helpful.

Professors Jenny Bourne Taylor and Lindsay Smith - my 'more than' supervisors - have been truly wonderful. It has been a privilege to be supervised by them, and with their help, I have been able to turn a loose and baggy monster into something more appropriately tailored for the occasion.

And finally my own family, who have endured more 'Gaskell moments' than anyone has a right to expect! My husband Roger has patiently proof read my draft thesis and managed not to cackle too much at the howling grammatical errors that I somehow missed - his composure throughout, has been, like William's, remarkable.

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### ABBREVIATIONS

In this thesis, references to Elizabeth Gaskell's works are to the Pickering & Chatto collected edition. In the first instance, the full reference is given. After the first reference, the title of the work, volume number and page are given.

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## INTRODUCTION

### LINGERING 'ON THE BORDERLAND': THE MEANINGS OF HOME IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S FICTION

Elizabeth Gaskell's experience of home was always that of an outsider, lingering on the borderland. She was never totally excluded, but equally, never fully belonged. Her mother's death, when Gaskell was thirteen months old, meant that she was fostered with her mother's sister, her Aunt Lumb, whose own experience of home was disrupted. Aunt Lumb's husband had deserted her, and her adult daughter, Marianne, whom she brought up as a single parent, died the year after she took in Gaskell. There is no doubt that Aunt Lumb provided a secure and loving home for her niece, and she was welcomed into the extensive circle of her Unitarian relations, but it is hard to believe that the difficulties and sadness experienced by her aunt did not affect the, effectively orphaned, Gaskell. Some evidence of this might be gathered from the fact that Gaskell named her first surviving child Marianne, after her dead cousin.

Gaskell's father, as Jenny Uglow asserts, was absent from her early life.<sup>1</sup> He remained in sporadic contact with her, but he was a restless character who frequently changed jobs and location, launching himself with enthusiasm into each new project, but often struggling financially.<sup>2</sup> He re-married in 1814, and although Gaskell visited her father from time to time, her relationship with her step-mother and half-brother and sister was uneasy and distant. She did however form a close bond with her brother John Stevenson, who disappeared either at sea or in India some time in the winter of 1828, and his loss was followed, a year later, by the death of her father who was devastated by John's unexplained disappearance.

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), p 13.

<sup>2</sup> See Winifred Gerin, *Elizabeth Gaskell, A Biography*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), pp 2 – 6.

Marriage to William in 1832 and a move to Manchester gave Gaskell the opportunity to create her own home and family, but the fault lines of death and loss continued to run beneath the apparently conventional surface of her life. Her first child was stillborn, and she was to lose two further children, including her beloved son, Willie, leaving her with a powerful residual anxiety about her remaining four daughters. She lingered on the borderland too, of life as a minister's wife. Whilst she dutifully taught her servants and Sunday School class in her home, and undertook much charitable work, she chafed against the restrictions of domestic life and the expectations placed on her by others. She remained sensitive too about her status as a Unitarian. William was highly regarded by his colleagues in Manchester, but even a visit to the Bishop, although humorously described in a letter to Tottie Fox, reveals her expectation of criticism and her sense of exclusion. The subject of Unitarianism was like a bomb going off among the 'cursing Evangelicals' at the Bishop's reception.<sup>3</sup> She was never entirely comfortable either living in Manchester. Her ambivalence is reflected in her description of the city in 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras (1847), the first of Gaskell's stories to be set in 'ugly, smoky Manchester, dear, busy, earnest, noble-working Manchester.'<sup>4</sup> She was continually torn between her duty to her husband and family, and her own yearning for a more rural environment. Her secret purchase of a large house in Hampshire for William's retirement is astonishing in the degree of planning required as well as the practical difficulties she encountered. (Gerin, pp 294 – 295) It is

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<sup>3</sup> John A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 112.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.1: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writing*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 61. Shattock notes that the original prefatory title was 'Life in Manchester', p 47.

also an illustration of the gulf between her enforced residence in the urbanised north and her preference for life in the south.

In this thesis therefore, I argue that although Gaskell found a stable home with her Aunt Lumb, and had a secure place among a wide circle of relatives with whom she continued to correspond and stay throughout her life, the disturbance, separations and losses of her early years are contained in her fictional representations of homes and in her varied and recurrent exploration of this theme. I argue that Gaskell's own experience of home was always detached and this is illustrated by the title of this thesis taken from a comment made by Mrs Ellis Chadwick who states that 'All through her life, she loved to linger in the borderland.'<sup>5</sup> Ellis Chadwick is referring to Gaskell's love of 'strange customs and weird, uncanny stories' but the phrase also seems to encapsulate Gaskell's experience of home and the ways in which home was represented in her fiction.

I argue that there are five key components to Gaskell's fictional portrayal of homes. The home must provide a physical place of safety. It must offer a concomitant psychologically safe space. It is the crucible within which the self is formed and educated. The home is the forum in which key relationships are negotiated. Finally, the domestic interior provides a showcase for self expression and creativity. Each of these components can of course be aligned with the nineteenth-century cultural construct of the home as a domestic sanctuary offering protection from the strains and stresses of the external world, an enclosed and private space which operated as a microcosm of an ideal society. I argue however that Gaskell's fictional homes challenge this and present

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<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Ellis H Chadwick, *Mrs Gaskell 'Haunts, Homes and Stories'*, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, 1910), pp 126- 127.

a concept of home which is unstable, fluid and unconventional. Her concept of home is multi-faceted, complex, and nuanced, encapsulating issues of class, gender, power, and the need for psychological security and stability, within the physical structure of a building. I explore how Gaskell used each of these components in her fiction in the chapters of this thesis, but I continue here with a fuller definition of each of these aspects of the meaning of home.

The idea of the home as a physical place of shelter and safety is intimately linked to issues of class, wealth and power which are well illustrated by Gaskell's own homes in Manchester. Gaskell moved to 14 Dover Street in the Ardwick district of Manchester in 1832 after her marriage to William. Alexis de Tocqueville's contemporary description of the city sets out some of the geographical features which contributed to the appalling living conditions so graphically described by many campaigners:<sup>6</sup>

'Two streams (the Medlock and the Irk) wind through the uneven ground and after a thousand bends, flow into the river. Three canals made by man unite their tranquil lazy waters at the same point. On this watery land [...] are scattered palaces and hovels. Everything in the exterior appearance of the city attests the individual powers of man; nothing the directing power of society.' <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Four Periods of Public Education as Reviewed in 1832, 1839, 1846, 1862*, intro Norman Morris, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1973), 'First Period' pp 3 – 170, Joseph Adshead, *Distress in Manchester: Evidence (Tabular and Otherwise) of the State of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42*, (London: Henry Hooper, 1842), and *Reports of the Ministry to the Poor in Manchester 1839 – 1842*.

<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, Translated by George Lawrence and K P Mayer, ed J.P. Mayer, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1958), p 105 -106.

It is difficult to imagine a more striking contrast to the small market town of Knutsford in which Gaskell grew up. De Tocqueville describes the six storey factories towering like skyscrapers on top of the hills with the ‘wretched dwellings of the poor [...] scattered haphazard around them.’ It is an alienating landscape in which the homes of the poor are humanised as beggars, surrounding the ‘huge palaces of industry and [clasping] them in their hideous folds’. (De Tocqueville, p 106) De Tocqueville’s graphic description illustrates the inter-dependency of social and human geography: the location of the factories was determined by the need for water for power, and to transport raw materials and finished goods, but the low-lying marshy ground and the effluvia of soot pumped out from the factory chimneys affected the health of rich and poor alike.

Unsurprisingly, Manchester and Liverpool which had early experienced the effects of overcrowding and immigration, particularly from Ireland, had the highest proportion of cellar dwellers. A large settlement of Irish lived in some low swampy ground, liable to flooding beneath the Oxford Road near Gaskell’s first home in Manchester. Manchester, like other cities, developed as a series of concentric circles. When Gaskell arrived in 1832, the centre of the city was inhabited by shop-keepers and the labouring classes who worked in the nearby cotton factories. (Kay-Shuttleworth, p 5) Merchants, superior servants and the most respectable part of the working population lived outside the city centre, although still within walking or riding distance.<sup>8</sup> Gaskell’s three Manchester homes reflect the development of the city and the pattern of settlement of the middle classes, as with each successive move, she edged further from the urban centre towards her rural ideal. In 1842, she moved from Dover

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<sup>8</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815 – 1985*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p 13.

Street near the Oxford Road, to a house in Upper Rumford Street, still in Ardwick, but slightly larger than her previous home and with views over the fields. Kay-Shuttleworth, writing about the Ardwick and Ancoats area in 1832 describes it as almost exclusively inhabited by poor labourers with less than half the streets being paved and nearly three quarters containing 'heaps of refuse, deep ruts, stagnant pools, ordure etc.' (Kay-Shuttleworth, p 13) Clearly there were more pleasant parts of this area since Gaskell describes her home at Dover Street as being very countrified for Manchester, very cheerful and comfortable.<sup>9</sup> Even so, as W Henry Brown points out, in 1842:

'The town authorities spent £5,000 a year on cleansing the streets – those of the first class were cleaned once a week; the second class every fortnight; and the third class once a month, while the courts and alleys were disregarded altogether. [...] Two thousand families, near where Mrs. Gaskell lived in ministerial comfort, were found to have a weekly income of 1s.2½ d. per person.'<sup>10</sup>

Plymouth Grove, to which the Gaskell family moved in 1850, was set in some 1,500 square yards of grounds in Victoria Park on the outskirts of Manchester, yet was only about one and a half miles from the city centre. Despite these pleasant surroundings, Gaskell was very well aware of the dank, unhealthy cellars of the poorest, sunk from sight below street level, but within a short walk of her own large detached villa. A house in Plymouth Grove appeared to offer a safe physical space for the Gaskell family,

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<sup>9</sup> John Chapple and Alan Shelston eds, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p 21.

<sup>10</sup> W. Henry Brown, 'Mrs. Gaskell: A Manchester Influence', *Papers of the Manchester Literary Club*, Vol LVIII, 1932, (Manchester: Sherratt & Hughes, 1932), p 16.

but like other middle class homes, it was constantly threatened by contagion and contamination from the homes of the poor pressing against its protective walls.

I argue therefore that there is a close inter-relationship between the idea of a home as a safe physical space and the psychological need for safety, and that Gaskell was highly attuned to this. It is the walls of a home that give a building its solidity and structure, but this protective façade is broken by the insertion of windows and doors. These are liminal features representing the porous boundary between private and public, personal and shared space. They are both a threat, in that they allow the safety of the home to be invaded, and an opportunity, since they enable the inhabitants of the home to make contact with the wider world outside. In this thesis, I discuss how the physical configuration of Gaskell's house at Plymouth Grove impacted on her need for privacy, and on her psychological well-being, and I examine the ways in which these concerns are reflected in her fiction. The physical environment of the home was also unable to prevent the intrusion of death, a key de-stabilising event in Gaskell's life, and a key theme in her fiction. In this thesis, I focus on the death of her son Willie, aged nine months, from scarlet fever, and the disappearance of her brother John, and the ways in which these events are recreated and reworked in her fictional homes. The underlying fragility of Gaskell's concept of home, balanced on the borderland between the reality of bricks and mortar, and the internalised emotional and spiritual needs of the individual, finds perhaps its most complex and nuanced expression in her fictional representations of the homeless. Homelessness for Gaskell is better defined as a psychological, social, and emotional separation, rather than the literal lack of a physically enclosing space, and I argue that this is rooted in her own experience of home where she was always fostered rather than belonging, by birthright, to a family.

It is within the home that character and personality begin to be formed and children are educated. Gaskell's Unitarian faith emphasized the integral links between the moral and spiritual ambience of the home and the education and development of the individual. This is well illustrated in the diary which Gaskell began in 1835 when her daughters Marianne and Meta were babies. In the first entry, made when Marianne was six months old, Gaskell acknowledges her moral responsibility as a mother to shape and mould Marianne's character, encouraging positive associations in order to promote good behaviour and self discipline. She links this to her spiritual duty to provide a lifelong foundation for her daughter by acting on principles which 'can be carried on through the whole of her education.'<sup>11</sup> Each section of the diary ends with a prayer. The diary is an intimate document, not intended for publication, but written as a memento for Marianne in the event of Gaskell's death. The thread of uncertainty which runs throughout the entries is not just the anxiety of a new mother, but is, I argue, an indirect expression of the loss of Gaskell's own mother. The chain of associations which should have enabled Gaskell to call on her mother for advice and support with Marianne's upbringing has been broken. It is no coincidence that the opening paragraph of the diary is an assertion of the bond between mother and daughter: Gaskell wishes to give her daughter the memorial that she herself never had until thirty eight years after her mother's death when she wrote to George Hope in 1849, thanking him for his

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, 'The Diary' in Joanne Shattock, ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.1: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 7.



‘kindness in sending me my dear mother’s letters, the only relics of her that I have, and of more value to me than I can express, for I have so often longed for some little thing that had once been hers or touched by her.’<sup>12</sup>

She continues in this letter to describe the craving she has for her lost mother and the fact that she has been brought up ‘away from all those who knew my parents’. (Chapple and Pollard, p 797) This is a strange assertion, given that her Aunt Lumb was her mother’s sister, and that she continued to visit her father until his death. Her brother John would also certainly have had some clear memories of his mother as he was thirteen when she died. I speculate that the statement in Gaskell’s letter may indicate something about the way in which her extended family relationships worked. The Unitarian faith encouraged rational, unemotional behaviour which might result in the suppression of discussion about painful events. Gaskell certainly complained to her sister in law, Anne Robson, in 1841, that William would never allow her to talk to him about her anxieties which would have been a relief to her. (Chapple and Pollard, p 45) I argue therefore that the diary is an early example of the way in which Gaskell used her writing as a self-reflexive means of exploring the wounds in her own psyche created by her disrupted experience of home and family relationships, and that her Unitarian faith, with its emphasis on associative education, was an important contribution to the ways in which she tried to resolve these issues.

Gaskell explored the complexity of relationships within a domestic setting in some unusual ways. In this thesis, I concentrate on two key areas of interest: her exploration of masculinity and her presentation of servants. Gaskell was acutely aware

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<sup>12</sup> John A V Chapple, and Arthur Pollard, eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp 796 – 797.

of the complex of traits and emotions that make up character and personality, her own included, as she described in her letter of April 1850 to Tottie Fox:

‘One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – (only people call her a socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, [...]that’s my ‘social’ self I suppose. Then again I’ve another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members?’ (Gaskell to Eliza Fox, [?April 1850],Chapple and Pollard, p 108)

Gaskell was a sensual woman who was as attracted to men as they were to her.

(Chapple and Pollard, p 808) She was intrigued by the ways in which gender affected behaviour and her exploration of sexuality in her novels is both subtle and complex.

Gaskell’s Unitarian faith acknowledged the need for both men and women to receive a similar education so that women could fulfill their critical role in the home of bringing up well-balanced, self-disciplined and integrated families, in accordance with associationist psychology.<sup>13</sup> Her spiritual training therefore made Gaskell both naturally cautious of categories which confined gender too closely, and led to an imbalance of personality, and also tolerant of the wide range of behaviour within which individuals expressed and developed themselves. I argue therefore that gender allocation in her writing is never simple, and that she is unusual among her contemporaries in exploring issues of gender through a range of narrative techniques which challenge and re-interpret sexually allocated roles in contemporary life.

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1769 – 1860*, (London: Longman, 1998), p 8.

An important feature of a stable home life for Gaskell included servants, and the servants in her fiction are often loyal, long-term employees in a quasi-family relationship with their employers, just as Gaskell's own servants were. Julie Nash argues that both Gaskell and Maria Edgeworth used servants to explore the tensions created by social change and conflicting values, particularly those caused by the concept of separate spheres and rigid cultural and social hierarchies.<sup>14</sup> This is a convincing argument, since by foregrounding servants who have a long and stable relationship with their employers Gaskell is able to provide the reassurance of a well-ordered society governed by a benevolent ruling class, and to explore social change from a 'safe' viewpoint. Servants, after all, are there to protect and serve their employers and to see them safely through change and turbulence. Servants therefore have a crucial narrative purpose in that they enable Gaskell to broaden and deepen the range and scope of her thematic explorations of change, often expressed metaphorically in her fiction by situations of physical or emotional danger. I focus on the role and portrayal of servants in Gaskell's shorter fiction since it is here that she often explores and tests controversial ideas and themes including illegitimacy, class conflict, power, and sexual behaviour.

The final aspect of Gaskell's fictional homes which I examine is the way in which domestic interiors are the site of self-expression and creativity. During Gaskell's lifetime, homes were gendered spaces filled with cultural and social signifiers which

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<sup>14</sup> Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), p 2.

could precisely denote their occupants' class, wealth and moral values.<sup>15</sup> James Martineau, the charismatic Unitarian reformer well known to Gaskell, asserts that:

‘where in the presiding genius of a home, taste and sympathy unite (and in their genuine forms they cannot be separated) – the intelligent feeling for moral beauty and the deep heart of domestic love, - with what ease, what mastery, what graceful disposition, do the seeming trivialities of existence fall into order, and drop a blessing as they take their place!’<sup>16</sup>

In this comment, he neatly encapsulates both the intimacy of the private domestic setting and the extraordinary efforts taken by families to create an idealised environment which could be de-coded by external visitors in order to measure the ‘taste’, ‘sympathy’, and spiritual status of the family. Thad Logan, in her detailed examination of the Victorian parlour, argues that within these domestic settings, tensions between binary opposites (male and female, public and private, individuals and society) were symbolically negotiated. (Logan, p xii) Cluttered, highly decorative interiors were therefore a reflection of wider social and cultural debates. Domestic artefacts, fixtures and fittings, together with the rituals that were enacted within the home, could serve as visual statements of opinions which were not able to be verbalised, or as a mute code with which to interpret the complex hierarchy of ideological and social relationships. With these considerations in mind, I therefore argue that Gaskell used her precise descriptions of domestic interiors to fulfil a distinct narrative purpose in that they offer a

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, (London: Harper Collins, 2003), and Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> James Martineau, ‘Great Principles and Small Duties’ in *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, Fourth Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, MDCCCLXVII), p 27.

codified means of exploring themes and situations which could not be discussed openly and explicitly.

Gaskell's fiction is notable for its intense concentration on domestic detail, on the minutiae of day to day living. An anonymous obituarist writing in the *Christian Freeman* four years after Gaskell's death commented that:

Her writings, it is well known, are marked as almost perfect delineations of domestic life; accuracy o[f] detail, with pathos of description and fondness for the heroism that can be found in every social lot'.<sup>17</sup>

The critical history of Gaskell has been deeply affected by this reductive view of her as a charming, but essentially conventional and unchallenging writer, despite the fact that in her lifetime she was highly regarded and acknowledged as an important influence on other major writers including Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, and George Eliot. The lack of an authoritative biography and access to published letters increased both the difficulty of a balanced scholarly assessment of Gaskell's writing, and the temptation to confuse fact with fiction.<sup>18</sup> The centenary of Gaskell's death in 1965 stimulated the production of some important criticism, including the publication of the first collected edition of Gaskell's letters.<sup>19</sup> The emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s also had a significant impact on Gaskell scholarship, as did the establishment of the Gaskell Society in 1985 with its stated aim of promoting and encouraging the study and

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<sup>17</sup> 'Sketches of Remarkable Women' in *The Christian Freeman: A Monthly Unitarian Journal devoted to religious, moral, and social progress*, Vol XIII, (London: Whitfield Strand, 1869), p 59.

<sup>18</sup> See Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Volume 1, Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), pp xiii to xiv for a useful summary.

<sup>19</sup> Robert L Selig, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference Guide*, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1977), p x.

appreciation of Gaskell's work and life. More recently, another important area has been the biographical focus on Gaskell, including Uglow's literary biography on which this thesis draws. The appearance of the Pickering Masters edition of *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, which I use in this thesis, enables scholars to have access to a comprehensive edition of Gaskell's writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

It is this challenging, questioning writer, too long masked by the fluidity of her prose and the apparent conventionality of her private life that I seek to uncover in my analysis of the meanings of home in Gaskell's fiction. I have used all of Gaskell's writing, letters, journalism and fiction, since I argue, with David Masson, that 'She wrote, as the birds sing, because she liked to write.'<sup>20</sup> In each form, she worked on and perfected her craft, and although she described her fictional writing as her 'real writing', I argue that it is through letters, which also play an important part in her fiction, that insight can be gained into the creative process. (Gaskell to Catherine Winkworth, [11 to 14 Oct. 1854], Chapple and Pollard, p 310) Gaskell herself recognised the importance of letters as a source for assessing and shaping the life and work of her friend, Charlotte Bronte, and letters are used in this thesis to illuminate Gaskell's manipulation of narrative themes, her language and her social purpose.<sup>21</sup>

Critics and biographers have often commented on the creative links between Gaskell's life and her fiction, and this has resulted in a spurious and futile guessing game that dominated much criticism until the mid twentieth century, narrowing the interpretation of her writing and reducing the depth and range of her achievement as an

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<sup>20</sup> David Masson, quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 1: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p ix.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Linda H Peterson ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 8: The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), pp viii – xxiv.

author. From the 1990s onwards, feminist critics, in particular, have been attracted to the apparent dichotomy between Gaskell's public life as the wife of a Unitarian minister and mother of four daughters, and the radical nature of her writing, an approach which has generally resulted in a more sophisticated interrogation of her work and a more creative, holistic interpretative framework within which Gaskell's achievement can be more adequately measured.<sup>22</sup>

The approach I have adopted however is not without its difficulties, and in this research I therefore acknowledge that care must be taken when fiction is interpreted in the context of personal and other documents. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, letters and novels are both acts of self-representation which differ markedly in tone, style, structure and the relationship which the writer establishes with the reader.<sup>23</sup> I acknowledge Bodenheimer's reservations about the potentially distorting effect of using excerpts from letters to comment on fiction, by privileging the fictional writing above other primary and secondary sources. I argue that Gaskell remodelled her life experiences in her writing, particularly traumatic events such as the loss of her brother and her son, as a way of exploring and resolving her personal pain, and that consideration of this can add to our understanding of her narrative approach and use of language. In drawing on, and remodelling her own experiences, I argue that she explored and portrayed a complex range of interpretations of the meaning of home, based around the five components outlined earlier in this introduction. The research takes a cross-cutting approach to Gaskell's work in that the themes explored in each of the chapters are considered across a range of her work. This method of analysis is

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<sup>22</sup> See also Anne K Mellor, 'Were Women Writers "Romantics"?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 62:4, (December 2001), pp 393 – 405 for a discussion of the literary 'family', including foremothers on which Gaskell and other nineteenth-century writers drew for inspiration.

<sup>23</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp 5 – 6.

supported by feminist critics who argue for a holistic approach to Gaskell's writing which embraces its inherent contradictions as part of the development of the novel form and the nineteenth-century recognition of the moral role of novelists in society.<sup>24</sup> I also contend that this approach more readily identifies Gaskell's development as a novelist, the consistency of the presentation of home as a fundamental theme in her work and thought, and the coherence of her artistry.

### **Letters and their use in Gaskell's fiction**

Joanne Shattock, together with other critics, notes that the academic study of letter writing has lagged behind that of autobiography and diaries, yet letters often have great significance in Gaskell's fiction as they did in the personal lives of her and her contemporaries since they formed a fundamental part of cultural, personal, and social discourse.<sup>25</sup> Letters freely entered and left the home in the nineteenth century, effortlessly breaching the boundaries and conventions which protected domestic space. A reliable, regular, and comprehensive postal service meant that letters could be conveyed efficiently and economically without fear of interception.<sup>26</sup> Letters however had an ambiguous status, since as well as being personal correspondence between two people, they were also public property in that they were read and shared between a

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<sup>24</sup> Hilary M Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Holly E Pike, *Family and Society in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1995), Deirdre D'Albertis, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Joanne Shattock, 'Elizabeth Gaskell: Journalism and Letters', in Laurel Brake and Marysa Demour eds, *The Lure of Illustration in the Nineteenth Century: Picture and Press*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p 119. See also Bodenheimer, 1994, pp 7 and 16, and David Barton and Nigel Hall eds, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), and Fran Baker, 'Intimate and trusted correspondents: the Gaskells, Greens and Jamisons', *Gaskell Journal*, Vol 24, 2010, p 10.

<sup>26</sup> See James How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's *Clarissa**, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2003), pp 9 – 12 for a discussion of the right to send letters untampered with through the Post Office.



circle of friends and acquaintances, and were therefore, liminal objects, as Bodenheimer notes, ‘*on the boundary of public and private discourse.*’ (Bodenheimer, 1994, p 8).

The fluid cultural nature of letters sometimes resulted in delicate social negotiations. For example, in August 1838, Gaskell tells her sister-in-law, another Elizabeth Gaskell, that her husband looked at her last letter and told her that it was ‘*slip-shod*’ – *and seemed to wish me not to send it,*’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 34) She circumvents his censorship by replying to Elizabeth whilst William is away. She tells her that she was given her letter by her brother-in-law Sam and that she read him selected extracts as she confesses that ‘I am more open with Sam than I dare to be with William’. (Chapple and Pollard, p 34) Gaskell ends her letter by offering to let Elizabeth read William’s letters to her. This is a potent illustration of the way in which even intimate letters were shared, not just to pass on news, but to further develop and deepen existing relationships.

The ubiquity of the letter, and the ease with which it could be dispatched and received, together with its fluid private/public status, meant that it could present a threat to the security of the home and to social relationships. Ellis Chadwick records a story she was told by the daughter of Gaskell’s friend Mary Howitt about the fate of some of her mother’s letters, including some by Gaskell, which combines the Victorian fear of dishonest servants with the kind of elegant economy worthy of *Cranford*. Mary Howitt’s pageboy:

‘surreptitiously disposed of piles of letters [...] which had been deposited in an old chest, selling them as waste-paper to a cheesemonger. The tradesman freely used the manuscripts to wrap up his Dorset butter and double Glos’ter, until,

perceiving the signature of Charles Dickens [...] he very honestly restored the residue to the lady to whom they were addressed. '(Ellis Chadwick, pp 201-202)

Gaskell was acutely aware of the fact that private letters were often, in reality, public property, and was very careful to differentiate between those letters which could be shared and those which were private.<sup>27</sup> She writes to her other sister in law Anne Robson, in 1841, unburdening herself of fears for her own health, and asking her to look after her children if anything should happen to her. She makes it clear to Anne that this letter is to be regarded as private. (Chapple and Pollard, p 46) She constantly warned Marianne in particular to burn her letters, and tells her publisher, George Smith,

'when I write a letter beginning with a star like this on its front [drawing of a star], you may treasure up my letter; otherwise please burn them, & don't send them to the terrible warehouse where the 20000 letters a year are kept. It is like a nightmare to think of it. ' (Chapple and Pollard, p 426)

After her death, her daughter Meta burnt most of her letters and many private papers. Catherine Winkworth, who, with her sisters, was a pupil of William's and became a lifelong friend of the Gaskells, was an important correspondent whose letters to Gaskell have also been destroyed.<sup>28</sup> Her sister Susanna is perhaps even more extreme than Gaskell in the dire warning she issues in the dedication to her sister's memorial:

'To my nephews and nieces

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<sup>27</sup> See Baker, p 3 for a discussion of the way in which family archives are shaped by decisions on which letters should be included.

<sup>28</sup> *Letters and Memorials of Catherine Winkworth, edited by her sister*, Vol 1, (Clifton: E. Austin and Son, Printers, Chronicle Office, 1883), p vii.

I now present this Volume to you under the strict condition that you will keep it to yourself, and not lend or show it to any friend, however intimate; that is, not till after my death, and then only with the consent of your Parents, should they survive. I depend upon your honour to observe this condition. ' (Winkworth, 1883, Dedication)

The horror of her thoughts and feelings becoming public property does not however prevent Gaskell's letters from being a joyous outpouring, often amounting to a stream of consciousness, any more than her knowledge that the subject of her novels would provoke controversy prevented her from writing about the truth as she perceived it. As Angus Easson argues, she is not writing her letters, as did many earlier writers such as Pope and Lamb, with a view to their later publication.<sup>29</sup> The immediacy and detail contained in her letters re-inforces the ubiquity of the form as a means of communication, as well as illustrating the everyday pressures on Gaskell which meant she had to snatch any possible moment to write. She explains to her two eldest daughters that she is writing whilst eating her dinner so her letter may not be very legible, and in August 1860, cheerfully admits to them 'Its after dinner & I am drunk. ' (Chapple and Pollard, p 48 and p 915)

Coral Lansbury notes that Gaskell's facility for writing letters, particularly to close friends, included the posing and answering of questions, in effect modelling a conversation she wanted to have with her correspondent.<sup>30</sup> As Bruce Redford, notes in his critical analysis of eighteenth century letter writing, contemporary conduct books dictated that letters should be written substitutes for conversation, a convention which

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<sup>29</sup> Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p 232.

<sup>30</sup> Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p 209.

extended into the nineteenth century and which led to the development of performative techniques through which the writer could engage the absent listener.<sup>31</sup> I argue that it was in letters that Gaskell began to think through the issues which appeared in her fiction and other writing, and that they are therefore an important source through which to track the creative process. Letters are also the source of autographs which Pamela Corpron Parker argues, were used by Gaskell to create a performance of another kind. Her autograph collection is ‘an epistolary dossier of her literary credentials’ which demonstrates Gaskell’s personal perception of her standing within Victorian literary, social and cultural circles.<sup>32</sup> Any collection is carefully chosen and arranged to express something about its owner. Susanna Winkworth, for example, explicitly acknowledges this in her introduction to her sister’s memorial which is composed of extracts from her letters and journals. She describes the method she used to select and arrange her material, explaining that whilst keeping Catherine as the central figure, she has inserted letters from other members of the family ‘which help to connect the thread of events.’ (Winkworth, 1883, p vii) Although Gaskell gave away and exchanged many of her autographs, Corpron Parker notes that those she chose to keep were carefully selected and arranged, ‘giving precedence to those that testified to her significant contributions to British literary history.’ (Corpron Parker, p 276)

In common with many of her contemporaries, Gaskell loved reading letters as an entertainment ‘Don’t you like reading letters?’ she asks John Forster in a letter of 17 May 1854. ‘I do, so much.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 289) She sends him letters of Charlotte Bronte’s which she has been reading as well as ‘2 clever letters’

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp 1 – 2.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela Corpron Parker, ‘Woman of Letters: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Autograph Collection and Victorian Celebrity’ in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds, *Material Women, 1750 – 1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), p 266.

from Madame Mohl, Gaskell's close Parisian friend whose salons put her at the hub of French social, political and cultural life. (Chapple and Pollard, p 289) Letters were read aloud. Gaskell writes to Catherine Winkworth from Lea Hurst, the Nightingales' home, to tell her that she has been listening to Florence Nightingale's family reading out her letters from Egypt. These letters were obviously written with a view to private publication, and Gaskell tells Catherine that she has been told she will have access to a copy 'only 'not to circulate – not to be talked about''. (Chapple and Pollard, p 307) Gaskell of course, as she was probably intended to, immediately says she intends to send a copy to a friend to read after her confinement. Letters in this context become a means of conferring status, of creating a public persona, and are far removed in purpose and content from Gaskell's gossipy, informal, and often acerbic outpourings. Letters locate their writer in a particular social and historical context, and within families, give a sense of continuity and security. This is particularly poignant when the writers are long dead.

In her fiction, Gaskell uses letters as powerful objects which threaten the security of her characters, act as catalysts for fundamental change or sometimes perform both functions. For example, letters have a critical narrative purpose in two very different works of fiction which were written concurrently. *Ruth* was published in January 1853 and *Cranford* appeared in irregularly spaced instalments in *Household Words* from 13 December 1851 to 21 May 1853. At the end of the second volume of *Ruth*, Ruth is staying at the seaside with the family for whom she works as a governess, leaving behind her son Leonard, whose birth she has kept a secret from his father. A chance remark reveals her secret, and Ruth is convinced that his father will take away her child. Gaskell voices Ruth's internal torment in a passage which, I argue, is both

psychologically consistent within the context of the novel and a re-working of her own grief at the loss of her son, a wound she tells her friend Annie Shaen in a letter of 24 April 1848, that will never heal on earth and which changed her profoundly. (Chapple and Pollard, p 57) The passage is a complex layering of the workings of the conscious and unconscious mind and moves backwards and forwards in time:

‘In her dreams she saw Leonard borne away into some dim land, to which she could not follow. Sometimes he sat in a swiftly-moving carriage, at his father’s side, and smiled on her as he passed by, as if going to some promised pleasure. At another time, he was struggling to return to her; stretching out his little arms, and crying to her for the help she could not give.’<sup>33</sup>

Ruth’s unconscious mind re-works in her dream the loss of Leonard as his death – his journey into a land where she cannot follow. His departure in a carriage at his father’s side is an ironic inversion of her own seduction, in which she was powerless to prevent herself being swept away, not back to Milham as she asked, but to London, and life as Bellingham’s mistress. Leonard’s struggles to return to her in her dream can be seen both as Gaskell’s memory of her son’s death, and of Ruth’s rejection of life as Bellingham’s mistress, a position which has meant her own social death, and her struggles to return to society. Ruth considers writing to Benson to ask for his help, but is paralysed by thinking of the complex and destructive consequences that her letter would unleash. Instead, she receives a letter from Miss Benson, including a few lines from Leonard. Like so many of Gaskell’s own letters, Miss Benson ‘always wrote letters in the manner of a diary’ (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 214), and this letter is no exception,

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Deirdre D’Albertis ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 6: Ruth, (1853)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 214.

being full of descriptions of domestic activities and a minutely detailed account of a meeting between Leonard and his father. Miss Benson, unaware of the relationship, is unable to account for the interest Donne shows in the boy, and the letter therefore becomes the site of a complex interaction between the omniscient reader, who knows the truth, Ruth's anxiety and impotence, and the irony of Miss Benson's revelations. Mr Donne's gift to Leonard of his watch and chain symbolizes his claiming him as his own. Like Squire Hamley's watch, it is passed down the generations, and the implied threat contained in his comment, faithfully reported by Miss Benson, 'I allow no one to interfere with what I choose to do with my own' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 215) is lost neither on Ruth nor the reader.

Ruth then receives a short, unsigned note from Mr Donne summoning her to a meeting, and it is this note which sets in train the final actions of the narrative. The fact that it is unsigned, and therefore unattributable should it fall into the wrong hands, is symptomatic of Donne's moral cowardice, and his anxiety to protect his public position as a parliamentary candidate from any suspicion of scandal. The impersonal post box number to which the reply has to be sent emphasizes Ruth's exclusion from society and her isolation. The note is a curious mixture of cloying emotion – 'my fond heart entreats' - and threat – 'your boy's welfare depends on your acceding to this request.' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 216) Ruth is given no choice as to the time and place of the interview. She is as powerless now as she was when she became an orphan. The note finally crystallizes Ruth's resolve: 'she would know all, the best, the worst. No cowardly dread of herself, or of others, should make her neglect aught that came to her in her child's name.' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 216), and she picks up her pen and replies. The act of replying

underlines one of the key narrative themes of the novel, which is the redemptive power of maternal love, of which Ruth's reply becomes a physical symbol.

'Old Letters' is the title of a complete episode in *Cranford*, indicating the thematic importance of correspondence in what Tim Dolin describes as an 'exploration of stories and their collection in a world without beginning, middles, and ends.'<sup>34</sup> Ellis Chadwick claims that in gathering materials for *Cranford*, Gaskell had access to many old family letters which she used in her stories. (Ellis Chadwick, p 52) The reading of Miss Matty's collection of letters and stories is set in the context of Cranford's 'elegant economy'<sup>35</sup> Like Gaskell herself, Miss Matty is aware of the 'desirableness of looking over all the old family letters, and destroying such as ought not to be allowed to fall into the hands of strangers;' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210) The packet of letters smells of Tonquin beans, evocative of the eighteenth century and snuff. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, n 45, p 350) As Jeanette Eve notes, Gaskell often associates scent and flowers with the passing of time.<sup>36</sup> Yet the opening and reading of the letters is far from being a nostalgic trip into the past, but instead, like the objects in Lady Ludlow's drawers, opens up memory for re-evaluation and the possibility of a happier future.

The letters offer an interesting insight and contrast to the portrait of Miss Matty's parents and family life discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.<sup>37</sup> As such, they offer an oblique commentary on the marriage which turned the Rector from a young man 'full of eager, passionate ardour;' to the angry, rigid father who was unable

<sup>34</sup> Tim Dolin, 'Cranford and the Victorian Collection', *Victorian Studies*, (36, No 2, Winter 1991), p 194.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, in Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.2 : Novellas and Shorter Fiction 1: The Moorland Cottage, Cranford and Related Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 167.

<sup>36</sup> Jeanette Eve, 'The Floral and Horticultural in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels', *Gaskell Society Journal*, (Vol 7, 1993), p 9.

<sup>37</sup> See Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1987), p 89 for the way in which letters are used to comment on Deborah Jenkins' character.



to help and support his son. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 202) Equally, the ‘pretty and delicate-looking’ mother is more concerned with the acquisition of a Paduasoy (thick, corded silk), than with the Rector’s expressions of love. The letters trace the emotional development of Miss Matty’s mother and the way in which ‘girlish vanity was being weeded out of her heart by love for her baby.’ (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 203) The reading of the letters enables Miss Matty to grieve for her dead parents, for her family who were so violently separated and for herself and the loss of her opportunity to marry Mr Holbrook. By sharing her grief with Mary and consigning the letters to the fire, she is simultaneously handing on her memories and putting them to rest. These old letters are followed by the receipt of two very different ones announcing the collapse of Miss Matty’s bank, and the loss of all her money. This crisis motivates Mary to write to Peter and seek his help, and is the only point in the novel at which she steps out of her role as a detached, amused observer and by-stander and takes positive action. The description of the letter she sends to Peter is redolent with associations:

‘It was gone from me like life – never to be recalled. It would get tossed about on the sea, and stained with sea-waves perhaps; and be carried among palm-trees, and scented with all tropical fragrance; - the little piece of paper, but an hour ago so familiar and commonplace, had set out on its race to the strange wild countries beyond the Ganges!’ (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 275)

The letter, in this short passage, may be read as a metaphor for Gaskell’s brother, John Stevenson, who also can never be recalled to life. It is tossed and carried on its journey, as powerless as the sailor in his ship, and acquires stains and scents that record its journey. The route travelled by the letter is the same as that travelled by John,

who sent Gaskell colourful and sometimes gruesome descriptions of his life in India.<sup>38</sup> The letter is an exotic object which draws to itself signs and tokens of the Empire, a world far beyond the narrow confines of Cranford. The letter's journey mirrors the narrative tapestry of *Cranford* which is composed of a warp and weft which create both tension and inner strength. The episodic nature of the stories alternates between centripetal and centrifugal forces, drawing inwards to individual drawing rooms in a small English town, and pulling outwards to the wider world symbolized by Signor Brunoni and his travels. The symbolic importance of the Great Exhibition, which drew together collections of items from all over the Empire under the dome of the Crystal Palace, seems to find an unlikely echo in this most comforting and familiar of Gaskell's novels.

Letters in 'My Lady Ludlow' (1858), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), are used to precipitate a narrative crisis. The letter which Margaret Dawson receives from Lady Ludlow offering her a home changes her life, and the appearance of the letter with its seal and heavy yellow paper is suitably impressive for such a seminal moment - indeed, Margaret Dawson 'sees' the letter in her mind's eye, years later as she recalls its arrival.<sup>39</sup> The physical appearance of the letter provides a great deal of information about the writer and the etiquette associated with letter writing. The coat of arms seal indicates Lady Ludlow's aristocratic position, and it is lozenge shaped, rather than being on a shield, to show that she is a widow. The delicate Italian writing suggests femininity, and anticipates the later scene discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis, in which Lady Ludlow recalls her Grand Tour of Italy. The wide margin indicates someone who

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<sup>38</sup> John Stevenson to Elizabeth Stevenson, (29 November [?1819]), Papers of John Geoffrey Sharps, File 3, Box 30, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, 'My Lady Ludlow', in Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.3: Novellas and Shorter Fiction II: Round the Sofa, and Tales from Household Words (1852-9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 146.

is used to wealth and can afford to be generous in their use of expensive resources, an ironic commentary on Lady Ludlow's actual circumstances which are constrained, although she is generous with what she has. The letter is read aloud and used to instruct Margaret's younger siblings in the virtues and reputation of their dead father. The memory of Margaret's father is contained and passed on in this letter, just as the memory of Lady Ludlow is later recalled and passed on in Margaret's recollection of the same letter. The second letter of significance in 'My Lady Ludlow' is the one concealed in the bunch of flowers, 'written so as to look like a fragment', which is intercepted by the boy Pierre who uses it to betray Virginie. The appearance of the letter, 'all blurred with moisture', ('My Lady Ludlow' Vol 3, p 212) anticipates the tragic ending of the tale within a tale. Like the torn Valentine in *Mary Barton* which is used to wad the gun with which John Barton murders Harry Carson, this scrap of paper is associated with both love and death: what is written down can kill you.

Letters in *Wives and Daughters* are used as the means to conduct relationships. Mrs Kirkpatrick receives regular letters from the London Kirkpatricks which she uses to elevate her own status and social standing, although her relationship with them is of a superficial nature. Cynthia's relationship with her mother is conducted almost entirely through the medium of letters, and in this epistolary space, it is what is not addressed that is as revealing as what is actually written, as she tells Molly:

'you must have seen some of mamma's letters, though; don't you know how she always seems to leave out just the important point of every fact? In this case she descanted largely on the enjoyment she was having, and the kindness she was receiving, and her wish that I could have been with her, and her gladness that I

too was going to have some pleasure, but the only thing that would have been of real use to me she left out, and that was where she was going to be next.’<sup>40</sup>

The tone of Cynthia’s speech reveals her bitterness at the way in which her mother has treated her and her feelings of abandonment are clear. Mrs Kirkpatrick’s letters are like her conversation, skating lightly over the surface and evading any discussion of issues of importance. Letters are an ideal medium for her in the opportunities they provide for evasion, and Mrs Kirkpatrick’s letters to her daughter are a complete contrast to the outpourings of advice and support which Gaskell sent to her own daughter, Marianne, when she was away at school. Mrs Kirkpatrick’s masterly use of the epistolary space leaves Cynthia unprotected, and enables Mr Preston, the Cumnor’s land agent, to fulfill the emotional and practical needs which her mother fails to meet. The letters also illustrate the complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter indicated by their names, Hyacinth and Cynthia. Gaskell was notorious for forgetting the names of her characters, so these unusual choices are significant. In the Victorian language of flowers, Hyacinth means rashness or sorrow and is a flower dedicated to Apollo. Apollo was one of the most complex and powerful of the gods of classical mythology ruling over music, poetry, healing and ill health, oracles and prophecy, light and knowledge. He was also the god of the sun, and twin brother to Artemis, goddess of the moon. Artemis was born on Mount Cynthus, hence Cynthia was another of her names. The names of mother and daughter therefore indicate their similarity and dissimilarity. They are inextricably entwined, twin souls, yet their relationship is often dissonant and jarring, and like the sun and the moon, they are rarely seen together.

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Josie Billington ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 10: Wives and Daughters (1866)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 381.

Mrs Kirkpatrick's abandonment of Cynthia is exploited by Mr Preston, and the story of their relationship with its themes of sexual desire, money, and power, played out in a series of letters, recalls the seduction of Clarissa by Lovelace, and echoes some of the main narrative themes that Gaskell explored in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, both of which deal with the sexual threats to which unprotected young women are exposed. Mary Donaldson, who writes often to Cynthia 'singing the praises of Mr. Preston as enthusiastically as if she had been bribed to do it,' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 383) recalls Sally Leadbitter who physically tried to force Mary Barton to meet with Harry Carson, and the constant threats which Mr Preston makes to Cynthia, although not physical, are nonetheless devastating in terms of her reputation and potential to make a successful marriage which will secure her position financially and socially. His physical appearance recalls Monsieur de la Tourelle in 'The Grey Woman' whose outward effeminate beauty is a masquerade. Mr Preston 'is cruel in his very soul – tigerish with his beautiful striped skin and relentless heart.' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, pp 384 – 385)

Cynthia attempts to disentangle herself from the relationship by writing to Preston, but her letter is intercepted by Madame Lefevre the head of the school Cynthia attends. Madame Lefevre's intervention, in loco parentis, is ironic and is also too late, and Cynthia's situation is further complicated by her informal engagement to Roger Hamley. Mrs Kirkpatrick's neglect of her daughter has exposed herself, as well as her daughter, to Preston's revenge. Cynthia's letters, written when she was not yet sixteen, are, she laments, 'like a mine under my feet, which may blow up any day: and down will come father and mother and all.' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 385) Her ironic reference to the line in the lullaby, 'Down will come baby, cradle and all', emphasises

her youth and vulnerability, as well as the domestic catastrophe which would be the result of the exposure of her relationship with Preston.

In this extremity, it becomes Molly's responsibility to rescue her step-sister, and, by implication, the whole family from scandal. Her encounter with Preston is a key moment in the narrative, and shows Molly to be capable of acting both bravely, and with a new degree of maturity. Gaskell uses the weather and the landscape to set the emotional tone: 'It was a cloudy blustering day, and the noise of the blowing wind among the nearly leafless branches of the great trees filled her ears, as she passed through the park-gates and entered the avenue.' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 389) The bluster and noise filling Molly's ears are like the bluster of Preston's threats which she must overcome. The avenue down which she walks to her meeting is straight, apart from one bend, which is where Molly chooses to wait for the encounter. The bend symbolises Molly's dilemma. It is the corner into which she has been forced. It conceals her from view, and therefore from society, since her task is to protect her family, but it also represents a turning point in her own emotional life, the point at which she takes on a greater degree of responsibility. It is also indicative of the bends and twists with which both Cynthia and her mother negotiate their flexible moral lives. The meeting has been arranged through a note:

In her simplicity she had believed that Cynthia had named that it was she, Molly Gibson, who would meet Mr. Preston [...] but Cynthia had been too worldly-wise for that, and had decoyed him thither by a vaguely worded note, which, while avoiding actual falsehood, had led him to believe that she herself would give him the meeting.' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 389)

The dialogue between Molly and Preston is a duel, during which Molly consistently attempts to defuse the danger posed by the letters. The situation begins to spiral out of her control, with Preston threatening to involve the Hamleys as well as Molly's own family. Molly finally makes her own threat to expose Preston to the Cumnors, putting not only his livelihood, but his pretensions to gentlemanliness at risk. However, although she succeeds in returning the letters to Cynthia, she is tainted by them. She is seen talking to Preston and becomes the subject of gossip.

Letters then are small, portable but potent objects, which can easily overcome the physical barriers of the home and affect the lives of those within. Letters can destabilise relationships by changing perceptions. This can be positive where they reveal unexplored or misunderstood aspects of the correspondent, or negative where letters reveal things which the correspondent would wish to remain hidden. Letters are also objects which are sent out from the home into the wider world where they are equally powerful: indeed, the examples discussed show how letters are literally a matter of life or death. I conclude this introduction by considering a small example, drawn from Gaskell's first published novel, which describes the invasion into a home of an equally small but potent object that also provides a cogent illustration of the richness and complexity with which Gaskell uses a domestic setting in her fiction.

To conclude this chapter, I briefly examine an episode in *Mary Barton* (1848), a novel which contains several highly detailed descriptions of domestic interiors, some aspects of which are considered further in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Here, I explore the comic incident of the scorpion which Job Legh acquires to add to his collection of

insects. Chapter 5 of the novel in which this drama occurs opens with an extended passage of authorial intervention:

‘There is a class of men in Manchester, unknown even to many of the inhabitants, and whose existence will probably be doubted by many, who yet may claim kindred with all the noble names that science recognises.’<sup>41</sup>

Gaskell here is fulfilling her intention stated in the Preface to *Mary Barton*, to give utterance to the dumb people, the working classes of Manchester. In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, she makes some large claims, aligning the working class botanists and entomologists with their aristocratic and more famous counterparts. The apparently effortless prose mirrors the opening sequence of the novel in which Gaskell’s description of a pastoral Whitsunday walk through Green Heys Fields contains hidden allusions to Chartist claims for the land as ‘the people’s farm.’<sup>42</sup> In her exposition of the activities of the many working class botanists and entomologists who are ‘scattered all over the manufacturing districts of Lancashire’, Gaskell asserts the common bonds that hold society together and, by demonstrating this commonality, offers a counterview to the fear of the working classes which was intensified by the Chartist riots. (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 38) The passage moves from the internal to the external, from the factory where copies of Newton’s *Principia* lie open on the loom, to the fields within a day’s walk of home where the workers go to gather their specimens. The veracity of the claims being made is given authority by the intrusion of the authorial voice:

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Wilkes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 5: Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 38.

<sup>42</sup> See Heather Glen, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell’s resurrection’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 8, 2006, for a more detailed examination of this passage.



‘If you will refer to the preface to Sir J. E. Smith’s Life (I have it not by me, or I would copy you the exact passage), you will find that he names a little circumstance corroborative of what I have said.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 38)

Now that Gaskell has ‘placed’ Job Legh as a man to be respected, and part of a community of working class and knowledgeable scientists, she draws the reader into his home which looks ‘not unlike a wizard’s dwelling’ with wooden frames of impaled insects instead of pictures on the walls, cabalistic books on the table, and a case of mysterious instruments. (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 39) The reader’s expectations are further destabilized by Job’s treatment of his grand-daughter. He caresses her ‘as a mother caresses her first-born; stroking her with tenderness, and almost altering his voice as he spoke to her.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 39) Both gender and class roles are confounded here: a working class man appears to have almost mythical powers and knowledge, and in addition, has assumed the role and characteristics of a mother. Even Mary is confused by her surroundings which are nothing like the interior of her own home, and she is further battered by the technical terms that Job rattles off ‘like hail on a skylight;’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 39) Margaret comes to the rescue with the comic tale of the scorpion, now a prized part of Job’s collection, which nonetheless illustrates some of the main themes of the novel. The purchase of the scorpion from a sailor at Liverpool is an early allusion to the critical role that the sailor Will Wilson plays in securing Jem’s release after Mary’s desperate journey to the docks to find him. Working class naturalists, unlike their aristocratic counterparts, cannot travel to other countries, like Roger Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*, to collect their specimens, so have to rely on sailors importing ‘some queer thing or another from the hot countries

they go to;’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 39). Again, Gaskell alludes to the intimate connections between countries as well as between individuals.

The geography of *Mary Barton* moves constantly from the domestic and intimate homes of the working classes to the public arena of the factories and streets, from the fields surrounding Manchester to the regional manufacturing districts of Lancashire, and from the port of Liverpool to the distant parts of the Empire. This repeated narrowing and broadening of narrative settings re-inforces Gaskell’s primary message about the importance of society, eloquently outlined by William Gaskell in ‘The Duties of the Individual to Society: A Sermon on Occasion of the Death of Sir John Potter M.P. Preached at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1858’:

‘We are every one parts of the community, and bound to do something for its welfare. [...] the world beyond, whenever we come into contact with it, has a full right to our service, for it is the world of our fellow-beings; and our best instincts and feelings require that we should acknowledge them as brethren and treat them as such under all varieties of circumstance and condition.’<sup>43</sup>

This lesson is comically acted out in Job Legh’s parlour when the scorpion, a creature from another country, is brought back to life by the warmth of the fire. Gaskell uses the nature of fire in its dual aspect here, both as a ubiquitous contemporary symbol for domestic security and stability, and as a dangerous elemental force. The scorpion, an intruder into the home from the outside world, is a highly poisonous creature which disrupts the domestic routine of Margaret’s ironing. It is finally contained and rendered

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<sup>43</sup> William Gaskell, *The Duties of the Individual to Society: A Sermon on Occasion of the Death of Sir John Potter M.P. Preached at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1858*, (London: E T Whitfield, 1858), p 4.

harmless, (domesticated), by being boiled in the kettle, and is then added to Job's collection. What Mike Hepworth describes as 'deviant nature' has been disciplined, and integrated into the social and moral world of the novel.<sup>44</sup>

This short extract from Gaskell's first published novel, illustrates all of the themes which this thesis addresses in more detail in subsequent chapters. Job Legh has provided a safe space for the orphan Margaret, whose parents died when she was a baby, and their relationship and the close bond between them, is the emotional reflection of the safe walls that surround them. Yet the outside world is allowed to enter in the form of the scorpion, an exotic addition to Job's collection of insects, which he uses to educate not only himself, but his grand-daughter and anyone else who enters his home. Finally, Job's collection of insects, together with the books and instruments strewn about the room, are an expression of his personality - his home is a safe place within which his creativity and true interests can be displayed.

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<sup>44</sup> Mike Hepworth, 'Privacy, Security and Respectability: The ideal Victorian home', in Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey eds, *Ideal Homes? Social change and domestic life*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p 29.

## CHAPTER 1

### HOME SWEET HOME

Home for both Gaskells was the place where they lived and worked. Gaskell began her writing career in 14 Dover Street with ‘Sketches Among the Poor’ (1837), written jointly with William, ‘Clopton Hall’ (1838), and ‘Notes on Cheshire Customs’ (1839). From their next home at 121 Upper Rumford Street, she delivered ‘Life in Manchester: Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras’ (1847), ‘The Sexton’s Hero’ (1847), ‘Emerson’s Lectures’ (1847), ‘Christmas Storms and Sunshine’ (1848), *Mary Barton*, (1848), ‘Hand and Heart’ (1849), and ‘The Last Generation in England’ (1849). By far the greater part of her writing career was spent at the house in Plymouth Grove to which the Gaskells moved in 1850. Little information now exists about their first two homes since they were located in areas of Manchester which have long since been re-developed. It is the house in Plymouth Grove therefore, which Annette Brown Hopkins rightly claims was a personality that played a leading role in Gaskell’s life, on which this chapter focuses.<sup>1</sup> However, *Figure 1* shows a section of an 1851 Ordnance Survey map of Manchester from which it is possible to make some assessment of Gaskell’s living conditions in Dover Street and Upper Rumford Street.<sup>2</sup> Dover Street contains a row of 8 terraced houses with small front gardens and an alleyway running along the back of the houses giving shared access to the pump for water and the back garden. The map scale is 5’ to 1 mile (1:1056) which equates to approximately 1 square inch to an acre. It is likely therefore that the Dover Street house was modest in size and would not have offered Gaskell much privacy for writing. The

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<sup>1</sup> Annette B Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work*, (London: John Lehmann, 1952), p 297.

<sup>2</sup> Ordnance Survey, Manchester Sheet 44, 1851.

family moved to what seems to have been the second of the two semi-detached houses in Upper Rumford Street, described by Gaskell in a letter to Tottie Fox dated 29 May 1849:

‘our home is a mile and a half from the very middle of Manchester; the last house countrywards of an interminably long street, the other end of which touches the town, while we look into fields from some of our windows; not very pretty or rural fields it must be owned, but in which the children can see cows milked and hay made in summer time.’<sup>3</sup>

The house shown on the map is clearly considerably larger than the one in Dover Street, but it was the move to Plymouth Grove which was a huge change in scale. The house, the location of which is shown in the section of an 1851 map of Manchester in *Figure 2*, was large, grand and expensive, and only William and Meta, Gaskell’s second, most artistic daughter, were unconstrained in their delight.<sup>4</sup> Gaskell herself was deeply uncomfortable at moving to such a luxurious home when, less than a mile away, families were living in the utmost squalor. She uses a letter to Tottie Fox to explore her inner conflict, the quarrel among her divided selves, in which she identifies an intimate connection between her physical surroundings and her psychological well-being. (Chapple and Pollard, p 108) She fully appreciates the beauty of the house but is concerned about its affordability as well as the morality of spending so much on a home for herself and her family. Her solution is to make the house as much of a pleasure to others as possible, a solution which also meant

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<sup>3</sup> John A. V. Chapple, and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 81.

<sup>4</sup> Ordnance Survey, Manchester Sheet 45, 1851.

sacrificing her own time and energy, fitting in her writing whenever and wherever she could. The house was run at times like a hotel, with a constant stream of visitors, destabilizing domestic routine and demanding all of Gaskell's attention. The physical layout of the house could not protect her, and she never lost her awareness of the fragility of the concept of home and the family it contained. Disappearance and death formed part of her experience of home, painful memories which could only be exorcised through writing, and which had to take second place to making her home as pleasurable as possible to as many people as possible.

It seems probable that one of the reasons William was so delighted to move to Plymouth Grove was because he had a study, a self-contained and single purpose sanctuary situated next to the front door, for easy access by students and parishioners, but allowing an equally swift departure to his commitments in the outside world.<sup>5</sup> *Figure 3* shows the internal layout of the house, and *Figure 4* the proposed restoration of William's study.<sup>6</sup> William had bookshelves built to his own design, probably to accommodate reports such as those of the Domestic Missionary Society, and spent so many hours closeted away that Gaskell complained she never knew what made him so busy, and that his family only saw him at mealtimes. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 758 – 759) Gaskell, by contrast, wrote in the dining room at Plymouth Grove, in the heart of the house, with all three doors constantly open to servants, family and friends.<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Haldane and Mrs Ellis Chadwick claim that the interior of Plymouth Grove, built by a rich and eccentric old bachelor, was both

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brill, *William Gaskell: 1805 – 1884, A Portrait*, (Manchester: Manchester Literary and Philosophical Publications, 1984), p 87.

<sup>6</sup> Floorplan kindly provided by Janet Allan, Chair of the Manchester Historic Buildings Society.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), p 260.

unique and ingenious in its layout, with one room leading into another.<sup>8</sup> Recent research however, carried out as part of the restoration of the Plymouth Grove house, indicates that both the Gaskells' house and those on several of the adjoining plots were in fact built as a speculative development, probably between 1838 and 1840, as middle class families increasingly moved out of Manchester and into the suburbs. The houses share several common architectural features.<sup>9</sup>

The dining room, as Judith Flanders notes, was considered to be a masculine space, although it was women who spent most time there, and this extended to the decoration of such rooms in dark, masculine colours.<sup>10</sup> The current restoration of Plymouth Grove has revealed that the walls of the dining room were pale green, with a warm cream cornice and ceiling, and mid oak joinery. The table at which Gaskell wrote was situated at the end of the room under a large central window, with two adjoining windows at the side, and a door into the conservatory. *Figure 5* shows the proposed restoration of the dining room from the drawing room door entrance. The dining room was the most public room in the house and multi-purpose, since it was from here that women organised the running of the house, did their accounts and wrote their letters, so Gaskell's choice of space in which to write was not unusual for the period. The dining room at Plymouth Grove is directly over the kitchen, so may have been both noisy with the sound of food preparation and redolent of the smell of cooking, although the current renovation of the house revealed a layer of sawdust between

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Haldane, *Mrs Gaskell and Her Friends*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1931), p 73, and Mrs. Ellis H Chadwick, *Mrs. Gaskell: Haunts, Homes and Stories*, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, 1910), p 253.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Janet Allan, Chair of the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, for these insights which are contained in the deeds of the Plymouth Grove house.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, (London: Harper Collins, 2003), p 215.

the floorboards of the dining room and the ceiling of the kitchen, a common form of insulation in the nineteenth century. Gaskell escaped whenever she could to more congenial surroundings in order to work without interruption. Hopkins also records a comment of Marianne, Gaskell's eldest daughter, that her mother was a poor sleeper and did a great deal of her writing in her bedroom, early in the morning, when she could have peace and privacy. (Hopkins, p 316)

The evidence uncovered by the restoration work is intriguing as it seems to challenge some assumptions about the ways in which the Gaskells lived and worked in the house. Although William's study was a space dedicated to his personal use, he was not entirely divorced from the activity going on in the rest of the house. Gaskell describes for example, how Julia's shrieks of delight at the arrival of a parcel from George Smith drew him out of his study to see what all the fuss was about. (Chapple and Pollard, p 577) The girls used the morning room opposite William's study as a day nursery - Julia and Florence engraved their names on a pane of glass in the window - and William is known to have breakfasted here. The dining room in which Gaskell wrote was light and pleasant, and she would have been protected from interruptions from visitors by the double doors which shut off the public area of the entrance hall from the private areas behind. Visitors would presumably have been shown into the morning room whilst the servant checked to see if the Gaskells were available. It is also easy to assume that Gaskell wrote with the doors of the dining room open, whereas it is just as possible that they were closed or even ajar, to indicate that she should not be interrupted unless it was essential.



Gaskell's description of the layout of Hanbury Hall in 'My Lady Ludlow' (1858) with its interlocking rooms, most of which have two doors, and some three or four, may be a fictional representation of Plymouth Grove. Lady Ludlow is always accessible to manage either the business of the estate or the running of the house. Gaskell rather wistfully comments: 'I suppose great people do not require what we smaller people value so much, - I mean privacy.'<sup>11</sup> Yet for all her apparent accessibility, Lady Ludlow is fiercely resistant to change, and the doors in Hanbury Hall are a physical manifestation of her intransigence. They allow her to control her household, with her housekeeper and butler always within calling distance. Her chosen route into the garden takes her through the servants' quarters, so that she can constantly monitor what is happening and keep the hierarchical structure of her internally ordered society perfectly preserved and running smoothly. The savage Hanbury wolfhounds, extinct everywhere else, which are rumoured to have eaten a child, are another symbol of her fierce resistance to change. They guard the main, public entrance to the house where only the most powerful are allowed to enter, and a footman guards the terrace door which is used by all other visitors. Symbolically and actually, both are guarding Lady Ludlow's status and authority. The combination of the hounds, the impenetrability of Hanbury Hall, and the footman, have echoes of the fairy tales from which Gaskell drew so much inspiration. Like Sleeping Beauty, Lady Ludlow must be awakened to the real world, and Mr Gray is the unlikely hero who breaks the spell by coming in through the grand main entrance, past the fearsome hounds. His appearance is followed by a noisy altercation in the ante-chamber and the precipitate entrance of Harry

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Volume 3, Novellas and Shorter Fiction II Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words* (1852 -9), (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 169.

Gregson, 'a lithe, wiry lad, with a thick head of hair, standing out in every direction, as if stirred by some electrical current'. (Gaskell, Vol 3, pp 178 - 179) The reference to electricity brings the shock of the modern right into Lady Ludlow's own room which lies at the heart of Hanbury Hall, and the additional revelation that Mr Horner has taught Harry to read and write profoundly disturbs Lady Ludlow. Both Harry and Mr. Gray have effortlessly breached the protective barriers of Hanbury Hall and set in motion fundamental change. Mr Gray's reception by the hounds who normally respect only those who are born a Hanbury, makes it clear that he has a right to insist on change and a more equal and educated society. As Edgar Wright notes, the irony of the narrative rests in the fact that it is Lady Ludlow, rather than Harry Gregson, who is educated by the course of events to a new understanding of rights and duties.<sup>12</sup>

In *Mary Barton* (1848), open and closed doors symbolize deteriorating economic and social conditions as John Barton slides into drug addiction, George Wilson dies, and the workers turn to Chartism and Trade Unionism. In good times, doors are always open for easy communication with friends and neighbours. After Wilson's death, home is no longer a safe or friendly place and the front door of the house is firmly closed. The disembodied hand and arm which appears round the half open door of John Barton's house conceals the identity of those who are beckoning him away from the security of home, and away, ultimately, from the community and society in which he was once a respected figure. The image, which is the more threatening because of its anonymity, is suggestive of similar images on Trade Union banners and suggests the middle-class fear of the invasive and

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<sup>12</sup> Edgar Wright, 'My Lady Ludlow: Forms of Social Change and Forms of Fiction (1)', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 3, 1989, p 33.

destructive power of the emerging unions and the Chartist uprisings. Mary too, is in danger at home. She has closed the house door, a sign that visitors are not welcome, and kept the candle unlit so that it will look as if no-one is at home, but nevertheless, Sally Leadbitter forces her way in to persuade Mary to come with her to meet Harry Carson. She physically prevents Mary from barring the door against Harry who has threatened to 'break the door open but he'd see you.'<sup>13</sup> John Barton, who should be Mary's protector, is away from home leaving her to struggle physically with Sally whilst Harry's threatening footsteps are heard pacing up and down outside the house. The front door of a house was a protective barrier which safeguarded the sanctuary of home from the infection of the streets. Deirdre D'Albertis notes, for example, how Esther is shut out of the domestic space of the home because she is infected with consumption as well as corrupted morally by her status as a prostitute.<sup>14</sup> There is a double irony at work in Sally's invasion of Mary's home. It is Sally, Mary's friend, who is acting as procurer for Harry and not Esther, the prostitute who tries to protect her niece. Sally's forced entry into Mary's home is like that of the domestic visitors, who, as Martin Hewitt points out, consistently invaded the private space of working families without respecting a door as a barrier.<sup>15</sup> Sally's intentions are far from benign. It is only after Esther's visit and warning that Mary is able to fasten the door and put up the shutters to protect herself.

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Wilkes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 5: Mary Barton (1838) and William Gaskell, 'Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect'*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 115.

<sup>14</sup> Deirdre D'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), p 51.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Hewitt, 'District visiting and the constitution of domestic space in the mid-nineteenth century' in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd eds, *Domestic Space: Reading the nineteenth-century interior*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp 123 – 125. See also Anna Clark, 'The politics of seduction in English popular culture 1748 – 1848', in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed Jean Radford, (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp 47 – 70 for a discussion of Gaskell's use of the myth of seduction in *Mary Barton*.

Elsewhere in Gaskell's fiction, it is noticeable how women, in times of crisis, retreat to a secure room in the house where they can lock themselves in. This is often associated with the need to keep a secret of some kind, for example, Miss Matty in *Cranford* (1853), insists that the door is locked to prevent anyone coming into the room while she is telling Mary the story of Peter's expulsion from home. Margaret Hale in *North and South* (1855) similarly locks herself into her father's study after she has been interviewed by the inspector. She is overcome by the strain of having to keep the secret of her brother's presence in the home, and needs a safe space in which to deal with her emotional turmoil. Although her father is away, his study still offers her protection. Gaskell also uses Margaret's choice of sanctuary to reinforce the fact that she has taken on a patriarchal role within the family, and is therefore entitled to a masculine refuge. In contrast, her mother does not have the privilege of a lockable door, but has to use a candlelighter in the keyhole to signify that she is asleep. Mary Kuhlman further notes that after Boucher's suicide, Margaret pays an uninvited visit to his home and locks the door behind her, 'taking control over the house and situation by right of her personal competence and superior social class.'<sup>16</sup> This is some time after the riot at the mill where, as Tim Dolin comments, Margaret's entry through the front door onto the step to protect Thornton is a dramatic transition from domestic to public life, from the female to the male environment.<sup>17</sup> Helen in 'The Half-Brothers' (1856), Bridget in 'The Poor Clare' (1856) and Sylvia (*Sylvia's Lovers*, 1863) all lock themselves in their rooms at times of emotional crisis: Helen, when

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<sup>16</sup> Mary H Kuhlman, 'Education through experience in *North and South*', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 10, 1996, p 20, and Michiel Heyns, 'The Steam-Hammer and the Sugar-Tongs: Sexuality and Power in Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South"', *English Studies in Africa*, 32:2, 1989, p 91.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Dolin, 'Cranford and the Victorian Collection', *Victorian Studies*, 36, No 2, Winter 1991, p 198, and see also Barbara Leah Harman, 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies*, 1988, Vol 31, Pt 3, pp 351 – 374.

she receives a life-changing proposal of marriage, Bridget, to brood over her lost daughter, and Sylvia, when Philip tells her about Kinraid's philanderings.

Doors are also barriers which can be used to comment on gendered space and restrictions placed on women. Alexandra Warwick notes, for example, the Gothic nature of the Brontë's domestic space: 'The novels are full of images of doors and windows, with women inside prevented from leaving and the same women outside, barred from entering.'<sup>18</sup> Although none of Gaskell's characters are physically locked into rooms like Rochester's wife, doors and windows are used to symbolize their entrapment. As soon as Mrs Mason has left the workroom in *Ruth* (1853) for example, Ruth 'sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage.'<sup>19</sup> The verbs suggest her active desperation, her instinctive longing to be free. The imagery of closed doors and windows persists throughout the novel, with doors representing Ruth's exclusion from society, and windows, the wider natural world with which she has an instinctive affinity. In this context, doors and windows are indicative of moral values. The closed door of Bellingham's sickroom, for example, represents the narrow morality of conventional society, whereas the view from the window on the landing outside shows the natural landscape with its sense of timeless, more accepting values.

Angus Easson, in his detailed analysis of the use of domestic and public space in *Ruth* and the ways in which this reflects the themes of the novel, notes how domestic

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<sup>18</sup> Alexandra Warwick, 'Victorian Gothic', in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy eds, *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p 30.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Deirdre D'Albertis ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 6: Ruth*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 7.

settings are critical to Ruth's emotional and spiritual development. This begins with her first meeting with Benson outside in the natural environment rather than inside in the shared public/private space of the local inn.<sup>20</sup> Other critics have also noted how *Ruth* is both a novel written in the Romantic, pastoral tradition and a critique of that same genre. Holly Pike for example, argues that Ruth has been left to grow wild, like the untended tree she sees out of the window, and therefore she does not recognise and accept the boundaries, symbolised by the window, that have been set for her.<sup>21</sup> Hilary Schor argues that Gaskell used the Romantic inheritance to comment on female silencing.<sup>22</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes that *Ruth* is a novel in the pastoral tradition in which the natural world creates 'an alternative interior realm that protects its subject from the conventional language of social judgement.'<sup>23</sup> She notes further that Gaskell's use of the pastoral tradition disappears from *Ruth* when Bellingham vanishes from her life, although her development is still recorded by references to flowers and gardens. The consensus of these interpretations is that the story of Ruth's emotional development is told through her response to the natural environment, setting her seduction apart from conventional social norms and facilitating Gaskell's desire to evoke empathy for this disregarded, discarded young girl.

Margaret Hale is another heroine with similar roots in the pastoral tradition, although Victoria Williams also argues convincingly for the use of fairytale motifs in the

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<sup>20</sup> Angus Easson, 'Noah's Arks and Birds' Nests: Domestic Space in *Ruth*', in Francesco Marroni and Alan Shelston eds, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Text and Context*, (Pescara: Tracce, 1999), p 97.

<sup>21</sup> E Holly Pike, *Family and Society in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1995), p 56.

<sup>22</sup> Hilary M Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 54.

<sup>23</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p 150.

novel, including descriptions of the rural idyll of Helstone where Margaret is free to roam the heathland and forest at will.<sup>24</sup> However, on her final walk on the evening of her departure from Helstone, after the house has been stripped of its familiar furnishings, the external landscape too becomes full of threats. Easson discusses the way in which Gaskell uses colour in this passage so that the gathering dusk blurs familiar objects, adding to the atmosphere of change and disruption.<sup>25</sup> The singing of the robin which Margaret hears is traditionally believed to signify death, and this passage marks the death of Margaret's childhood. The crack of a fallen branch sends her running towards the safety of home: 'she was afraid, she knew not why. She heard Charlotte shutting the windows, and fastening up for the night, unconscious that any one had gone out into the garden,'<sup>26</sup> She is shut out of her home and cannot return until she has completed her journey into adulthood. The concept of home as a secure sanctuary is conspicuously undermined by this episode, but it has always been an unstable concept for Margaret, located jointly between London and Helstone. As Wendy Parkins notes, Margaret's idealised view of Helstone as a home which will provide an assured sense of place is undermined by the disruptions and demands of modern society which make constant change inevitable.<sup>27</sup>

Privacy in the Victorian home was always contested, and indeed, the external urban environment in which Gaskell lived was also hugely congested. Until the 1840s, the merchant, manufacturer, or professional man who needed to be within reach of his

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<sup>24</sup> Victoria Williams, 'Gaskell as Scheherazade': Fairytale themes in *Cousin Phillis* and *North and South*', *Gaskell Journal*, Vol 24, 2010, pp 106 – 107.

<sup>25</sup> Angus Easson, 'The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell (1)', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 4, 1990, p 69.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 7: North and South*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 54.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Parkins, *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels 1850s – 1930s: Women Moving Dangerously*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p 25.

business, had to be able to ride or drive there in a reasonable time.<sup>28</sup> Plymouth Grove was set in some 1,500 square yards of grounds in Victoria Park on the outskirts of Manchester yet was only about one and a half miles from the city centre, and Manchester had no need of a cab stand until 1839 (Burnett, p 108). Yet within these constrained geographical confines, the population exploded. It grew by 40.4% in the decade 1811 – 1821 and by a further 60% between 1831 and 1851 at which point, it stabilized. (Burnett, pp 9 - 10) The middle classes responded to this pressure by retreating to the suburbs and a more private residential style. Outdoor life ceased to be social and disappeared from view behind the garden hedge or yard wall.<sup>29</sup> Inside the home, clear boundaries began to be established to denote the various functions taking place within specified spaces, yet at the same time, the interior of the middle-class home, as Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd note, was never private, but was instead a site of encounter, of private and public interaction and a space which outsiders and strangers could enter.<sup>30</sup>

In many Victorian homes, with their large families and numbers of servants, it must have been very difficult to find private space. Gaskell complains constantly about interruptions to her work from visitors and enforced concentration on the domestic management of the house.<sup>31</sup> Holidays were not always a respite as they were often spent with the extended family. (Gaskell to Marianne Gaskell, [4 May 1852], Chapple and Pollard, p 850) Like many Victorian men, William resorted to going on holiday on his

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<sup>28</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815 – 1985*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p 13.

<sup>29</sup> M.J. Daunt, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing 1850 – 1914*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p 13.

<sup>30</sup> Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd eds, *Domestic Space: Reading the nineteenth-century interior*, (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p 12.

<sup>31</sup> See for example, John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 105, Gaskell to ?Edward Chapman, Saturday [?Early 1850], and Gaskell to Marianne Gaskell, Friday [10 September 1852], p 198.



own or with male friends.<sup>32</sup> Gaskell alternated between complaining that he would not take a holiday, explaining that he did not feel that they should both be away from home together because of the children, and worrying about his lack of replies to her letters. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 386 and 537) She established a pattern very quickly after the publication of each novel of either leaving home or becoming ill. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 222 – 223) Several of her female characters such as Mary Barton, Maragaret Hale and Ruth experience episodes of crisis and renewal which parallel the pattern of Gaskell's writing life, discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this thesis.<sup>33</sup> Home was far from a safe haven.

### **Death and the home**

Death in Victorian times almost always occurred within the home and further contributed to the instability and insecurity of family life. It also provided another link between the sacred and the secular, re-inforcing the spiritual meaning of home. As Mike Hepworth notes, home was 'a secluded place to struggle with those realities such as illness and death which succeeded in breaching the walls.'<sup>34</sup> James Martineau, the charismatic Unitarian preacher, is explicit about the ubiquity with which death affected Victorian homes and the fragility of family ties:

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<sup>32</sup> See David Roberts, 'The Paterfamilias of the Victorian Governing Classes' in, Anthony S Wohl ed, *The Victorian Family Structure and Stresses*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p 60

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Wheeler, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Unitarianism', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 6, 1992, p 38 for a discussion of the parabolic episodes in *Ruth*.

<sup>34</sup> Mike Hepworth, 'Privacy, Security and Respectability: The ideal Victorian home', in Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey eds, *Ideal Homes? Social change and domestic life*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p 18.

'Members of the same home cannot dwell together, without either the memory or the expectation of some mutual and mortal farewell. Families are for ever forming, for ever breaking up; and every stroke of the pendulum carries the parting agony through fifty homes.'<sup>35</sup>

The domesticity and intimacy of a Victorian death is starkly illustrated by a series of articles in Cassell's *Household Guide*, where advice on registering a death is sandwiched between articles on making a pincushion, and the manufacture of boots and shoes.<sup>36</sup> Further articles point out the necessity of holding a funeral as soon as possible after the death as 'in many cases – especially in the summer – the corpse is retained too long and thus becomes injurious to the health of those living in the house.' (Cassell's, p 344) Robert Poole discusses the case of Samuel Bamford, Gaskell's model for John Barton, who kept the body of his daughter Ann at home for so long that the authorities had to intervene.<sup>37</sup>

Death, and its aftermath, was also divided by the allocation of gendered roles and separate spaces. Female relatives should not attend the funeral since 'being unable to restrain their emotions, they interrupt and destroy the solemnity of the ceremony with their sobs, and even by fainting.' (Cassell's, p 344) William Shaen, writing to Catherine Winkworth about Gaskell's death, noted that this separation of genders was to be adhered to at Gaskell's own funeral: 'No one will be asked to attend except Mr. Gaskell's brothers,

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<sup>35</sup> James Martineau, 'The Family in Heaven and Earth' in, *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, Fourth Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, MDCCCLXVII), p 452.

<sup>36</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.*, (London: 1869), Vol II, p 266- 267.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Poole, 'A poor Man I know' – Samuel Bamford and the making of *Mary Barton*, *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, p 105.

Charles Crompton and Thurstan.’<sup>38</sup> Margaret Hale points out that this advice is also related to class:

‘Women of our class don’t go, [to funerals] because they have no power over their emotions, and yet are ashamed of showing them. Poor women go, and don’t care if they are seen over-whelmed with grief.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 244)

It is a measure of her status within her own family, and her acceptance of the lessons she has learned by associating with the Higgins family, that both she and Dixon are allowed to attend Mrs Hale’s funeral. The robust advice in Cassell’s *Household Guide* for mourners to separate and return home as soon as the funeral is over, avoids prolonging grief with any kind of wake and also indicates the cultural need to deal with the fragility of life and frequent death by compartmentalising and containing emotion. Additional advice not to provide the undertaker’s men with alcohol suggests a level of repressed emotion transferred onto those who have to carry out the final tasks associated with putting the body to rest. (Cassell’s, p 344) Like Shakespeare’s clowns, drunken undertakers provide an acceptable form of relief from overpowering emotion which weeping women from a similar social and cultural background would expose too overtly. As the century progressed, death gradually became more detached from the home, and the ever-helpful Cassells Guide informed readers that

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<sup>38</sup> *Letters and Memorials of Catherine Winkworth, edited by her sister*, Vol II, (Clifton: E. Austin and Son, Printers, Chronicle Office, 1886), p 429.

‘some of the cemetery companies have places set apart where, without paying any extra fees, the coffin containing the corpse may be privately conveyed, and kept in safety until the time appointed for the funeral.’ (Cassell’s, p 346)

In her wide-ranging study of the literary representation of death in the nineteenth century, Mary Elizabeth Hotz examines the social and cultural reasons behind this state appropriation of dead bodies.<sup>39</sup> She argues convincingly that Edwin Chadwick, Commissioner for the Board of Health from 1848 to 1852, sought to sanitize death by bureaucratizing it. At the heart of this pre-occupation, she suggests, are Chadwick’s views on the importance of the home as a cultural site which had to be protected from physical and spiritual disease. The home is the centre of a network of sewer and water supplies which protect the physical health of the inhabitants, and this is threatened by the practice of keeping corpses at home before burial:

In Manchester and in several northern districts, it appears that by custom the corpse seldom remains unburied more than three or four days, but during that time it remains in the crowded rooms of the living of the labouring classes. Every day’s retention of the corpse is to be considered an aggravation of the evil; but the evidence is to be borne in mind that the miasma from the dead is more dangerous immediately after death, or during the first and second day, than towards the end of

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Elizabeth Hotz, *Literary Remains: Representations of Death and Burial in Victorian England*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

the week. [...] decomposition often proceeds with excessive rapidity in the crowded rooms, which have then commonly larger fires than usual.’<sup>40</sup>

Chadwick extrapolates from this physical threat of infection the possibility of emotional and spiritual infection, leading to complete moral degeneration:

‘the body is never absent from their sight – eating, drinking, or sleeping, it is still by their side, mixed up with all the ordinary functions of daily life, till it becomes as familiar to them as when it lived and moved in the family circle. [It is] not seldom the hiding-place for the beer- bottle or the gin if any visitor arrives inopportunely. [...] who does not see that when the respect for the dead [...] is gone, the whole mass of social sympathies must be weakened – perhaps blighted and destroyed?’  
(Chadwick, p 46)

Hotz argues that in nineteenth-century England, ‘economic value was related to bodily well-being, but – ironically – articulated in terms of bodily illness, death, and apparent death.’ (Hotz, p 4) By insisting on the removal of the body from the home on health grounds therefore, she asserts that Chadwick was both protecting the national economy and attempting to establish control over the working classes under the guise of health reforms. Hotz notes some important sub-texts to Chadwick’s report. One is the link to the Chartist struggles in Sheffield where the Anglican church forbade meetings in churchyards, and the other is the ‘undercurrent of fear that widows, overcome with grief [...] would be forced to

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<sup>40</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1843), p 41.

abandon the home and work outdoors as prostitutes.’ (Hotz, p 22) Thus, she suggests, burial reform was intimately connected to the fear of social unrest and the need to control and manage the excesses of the working classes in order to ensure the smooth running of the national economy by men and the domestic economy by women. Reform therefore necessitated the building of parallel homes in which to keep corpses prior to burial, watched over not by grieving families, but by cemetery inspectors and medical officers.

In her extensive examination of death in the Victorian family, Pat Jalland examines the cultural rituals which middle and upper class Victorians developed to manage the trauma associated with death especially when dealing with terminal illness and the death of children.<sup>41</sup> Jalland notes how the Evangelical revival and Romanticism allowed the Victorians to give full expression to their grief, whether by keeping diaries of a terminally ill person’s progress towards death, by talking and writing freely about their sorrow as well as their joy and their love, or by indulging in what we might now consider to be excessive displays of emotion. Evangelicalism set out a prescriptive model for a “good” death which was ideally a family event which took place within the home. Deathbed scenes in novels helped to disseminate this model from Evangelical tracts to a wider public and increased the melodrama and emotional temperature. After death, cultural signifiers of status (mourning and half mourning), and prescribed social behaviour further helped to control and manage fear and anxiety until the bereaved could once more be included in society.

The Unitarian attitude to death was however noticeably different. Unitarians did not believe in the doctrine of atonement or everlasting punishment but sought perfectability in

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<sup>41</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

this life.<sup>42</sup> Jalland examined the personal records of three Unitarian families and found that the deaths of family members, when described at all, 'were economical, factual and surprisingly unemotional.' (Jalland, pp 49 – 51) William Gaskell, for example, describes the death of Sir John Potter as 'disturbed by no distressing fears' a phrase he repeats at the address on the interment when he states that 'in the spirit of confiding trust, he sank so calmly and peacefully to his last sleep.'<sup>43</sup> Even when he describes the early and painful death of John Ashton Nicholls, William is insistent that the pain associated with death is that of a new birth and that 'He who has never suffered has not attained to any thing like true moral elevation and maturity of character.'<sup>44</sup> His message is one of hope in which death is part of a spiritual education, and he is careful to point out that Nicholls 'remained, in the midst of acute and wearying pain, calm, patient, and resigned to the last.' (Gaskell, 1859, p 16 – 17). Martineau discusses the blending of earthly and heavenly families, and argues that:

'since the grave can bury no affections now, but only the mortal and familiar shape of their object, death has changed its whole aspect and relation to us; and we may regard it, not with passionate hate, but with quiet reverence.' (Martineau, pp 453 – 454)

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3 of this thesis for a fuller discussion of Unitarian beliefs.

<sup>43</sup> William Gaskell, *The Duties of the Individual to Society: A sermon on Occasion of the Death of Sir John Potter M.P. Preached at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1858, with the address at the Interment on the day preceding*, (London: E.T Whitfield, 1858), pp 16 and 18.

<sup>44</sup> William Gaskell, *A Sermon preached in Cross-Street Chapel, Manchester, September 25<sup>th</sup> 1859, on the occasion of the death of John Ashton Nicholls, Esq., F.R.A.S., with a sketch of his life*, (London: E.T Whitfield, 1859), p 12.

### **Gaskell's experience of death**

Gaskell's first conscious experience of the death of a close family member was that of her aunt and foster mother. Hannah Lumb who suffered a stroke, accompanied by a severe and continuing headache, was eased into death by Gaskell's uncle, the doctor Peter Holland, who prescribed 'an anodyne draught which sent her into a most gentle & easy sleep.' (Chapple and Pollard, p 9) At the time of Lumb's death, she was looking after Marianne whilst Gaskell remained at home awaiting the birth of her second daughter. Lumb's death therefore became the focus of a number of conflicting emotions as Uglow notes: guilt that looking after Marianne may have precipitated the fatal stroke, happiness associated with the birth of a new baby, and concern about managing Marianne's confusion and anxiety. (Uglow, pp 106 -7) This is reflected in Gaskell's account of her final illness which focuses on Lumb's physical suffering and the best way to alleviate this, admiration for her continuing concern for others even when she is in acute pain, and concern about how to fulfil her desire to see Marianne again. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 9 – 10) This is far removed from the good Christian death described in the tracts but does reflect Unitarian practicality and deep concern for the individual.

The death of Gaskell's son Willie was a different matter. Jalland notes the incidence of infant mortality which remained consistently high throughout the nineteenth century, despite improvements in public health, diet, and sanitation. (Jalland, p 120) Infant mortality was particularly high in Manchester as Kay-Shuttleworth noted, especially in the



central districts.<sup>45</sup> This was due mainly to infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, pneumonia, bronchitis, measles, and whooping cough. The mortality rate for scarlet fever, from which Willie Gaskell died in 1845, aged nine months, doubled between 1840 and 1870 after which it diminished, with infants under 12 months suffering the highest mortality rate. (Jalland, p 124) The Victorians had a constant fear of contagion, particularly in the city. The bumping and jostling Margaret Hale experiences in the streets of Milton is symbolic of the porous boundaries between rich and poor and the ways in which disease and contamination moved through the streets, carried on the clothes and breath of men, women, and children.<sup>46</sup> The built environment had a detrimental effect on the health of all who lived there. Disease in the overcrowded, poorly ventilated properties and cellars, lacking any form of piped water, was rife and spread quickly. Gaskell's alarm on hearing in 1854 that scarlet fever was within 50 yards of her home in Plymouth Grove is therefore entirely understandable, as is her reaction in immediately sending the girls to Poulton where there was no known case of the disease at such speed that they went 'clothes-less, for all their clothes were at the wash'. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 109 – 10) Willie died in the arms of his governess in the boarding house in Wales to which the Gaskells had retreated to escape the disease which was rife in Manchester.<sup>47</sup> Gaskell was emotionally completely overwhelmed: 'I don't believe even Heaven itself can obliterate the memory of that

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<sup>45</sup> James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Four Periods of Public Education as Reviewed in 1832, 1839, 1846, 1862*, intro Norman Morris, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1973), 'First Period' pp 3 – 170, Joseph Adshead, *Distress in Manchester: Evidence (Tabular and Otherwise) of the State of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42*, (London: Henry Hooper, 1842) and *Reports of the Ministry to the Poor in Manchester 1839 – 1842*, p 123.

<sup>46</sup> See Tina Young Choi, 'Writing the Victorian City: Discourses of Risk, Connection, and Inevitability', *Victorian Studies*, Summer 2001: 43,4, p 561 – 589.

<sup>47</sup> See Dewi Williams, 'The Death of Willie Gaskell', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 13, 1999, pp 108 – 109 for a description of the boarding house and the family who lived there.

agony'.<sup>48</sup>

Jalland points out that deathbeds were private affairs, usually limited to a relatively small number of members of the immediate family, and that children who had been diagnosed with scarlet fever were isolated, even from their parents, in an attempt to prevent the disease spreading, so Gaskell's account of Willie's death in the arms of a governess is not unusual. (Jalland, p 125) The death of children was regarded as a particular spiritual challenge. The churches recognised this by producing consolation literature explaining the meaning of such deaths in Christian terms and showing mourners how their faith could console them. No doubt William, in his work as a minister, had much experience of consoling grieving parents and his suggestion that Gaskell write a novel as a way of dealing with her own grief, may have been a variation on this literary tradition where the act of writing itself provided a form of therapy. Certainly, both parents remained constantly anxious about their surviving children and this may explain in part, William's reluctance to leave home to go on holiday, particularly when the children were young. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 129 – 130)

### **Death in Gaskell's fiction**

Maria Edgeworth was not alone among contemporary critics of *Mary Barton* to complain about the many deathbed scenes in the novel - 'There are about a dozen too many deaths' - and death remained a constant theme in Gaskell's fiction, but always a

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<sup>48</sup> John Chapple and Alan Shelston eds, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p 36. Gaskell to Fanny Holland, Tuesday [9 March 1847] in which she describes the death of her son Willie from scarlet fever.

theme with a purpose.<sup>49</sup> In *Wives and Daughters* (1866), for example, the death of the first Mrs Gibson has a narrative purpose in that it moves the plot forward and makes Mr Gibson's re-marriage and the resultant consequences for the interlocking circles of families portrayed in the novel inevitable. In *North and South* (1855), the deaths of Margaret's parents mark critical points in the development of her character and her journey to maturity. Deaths which occurred in the past haunt both 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852) and 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863) and contribute to the atmospheric effect in both of these Gothic short stories. Many of these characters are dispatched briskly and their death happens 'off-stage'. Gaskell is primarily concerned with the living: her Unitarian beliefs encouraged practical charity and, as the narrator in *Mary Barton* remarks when Mary learns that her father has murdered Harry Carson, 'some kind of action (bodily or mentally) in times of distress, is a most infinite blessing'. (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 205) Hotz convincingly argues that Gaskell's treatment of death in her fiction, including, for example, her account of working class death and burial in *Mary Barton*, seeks to re-affirm the centrality of the corpse within the domestic environment, as a reaction against the burial reforms which sought to isolate it from its social and political contexts. (Hotz, p 7) This interpretation can be aligned with the Unitarian belief in the importance of the individual in society and the contribution each individual makes to the well-being of the community. Certainly, in the early part of the century, 'the successful death very much depended upon the presence and agency of the living.' (Hotz, p 15)

Ellis Chadwick offers an interesting insight into Gaskell's own death which took place dramatically and unexpectedly in her newly acquired house in Hampshire. She

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<sup>49</sup> Maria Edgeworth to Mary Holland, 27 December 1848, John Rylands, MS 732/52.

claims that: 'A death masque of the face was taken soon after Mrs. Gaskell died, and for a long time it hung in the drawing-room at Plymouth Grove.' (Ellis Chadwick, p 438) This sentence is deleted from the revised edition of the book which appeared in 1913. Her mention of the death masque however, suggests the intimate way in which death invaded the home and was integrated into family relationships, and the removal of the sentence may indicate that this exposed too private a moment in the life of the family. In this section, I consider Gaskell's treatment of death which occurs within the home, and focus particularly on the death of children and young men as I further argue that these two recurring figures haunted Gaskell because of her own life experiences.

Gaskell depicts the death of five children in her fiction: the twins in *Mary Barton* (1848), Nanny in 'Lizzie Leigh' (1850), Sophie's brother, Walter, in 'Mr Harrison's Confessions' (1851) and Owen Griffiths's baby in 'The Doom of the Griffiths' (1858). When Mary Barton enters the Wilson's house, one twin is already dead, the other dying from fever, probably typhus. The twins have always been fragile and in need of special care, and the intensity of Mrs Wilson's love for her children is such that Alice fears she is 'wishing him':

'There's none can die in the arms of those who are wishing them sore to stay on earth. The soul o' them as holds them won't let the dying soul go free; so it has a hard struggle for the quiet of death. We mun get him away fra' his mother, or he'll have a hard death, poor lile fellow.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 68)

Mrs. Wilson is persuaded to relinquish her son to Alice and he dies peacefully. Gaskell's treatment of this scene is interesting, given the close association of the writing of this novel with the death of her own son. There are clear echoes of Willie's death in the actions of the mother relinquishing her child to another in whose arms he dies. Yet there is a detachment in the scene which we see through the eyes of Mary Barton. There is pathos and distress, and grief is clearly expressed, but there is no melodrama and there is a reference to an old superstition rather than any form of Christian comfort. Jem is heartbroken at the death of his brothers, but 'felt a strange leap of joy in his heart' when Mary comforts him and a moment of intense emotion melts into sensuality:

'He did not speak, as though fearing to destroy by sound or motion the happiness of that moment, when her soft hand's touch thrilled through his frame, and her silvery voice was whispering tenderness in his ear. Yes! It might be very wrong: he could almost hate himself for it; with death and woe so surrounding him, it yet was happiness, was bliss, to be so spoken to by Mary.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 70)

There is a curious disjunction of language and tone between this passage and the description of the twins' death and its aftermath. The rituals surrounding the death are rooted in practical domestic action like those described earlier in the novel after the death of Mary's mother. The narrator and the reader are emotionally detached from the event – the sobs of the bereaved mother are heard occasionally, but she is in another room. Jem's entry into the house and his overpowering distress at hearing the news of his brothers' deaths enables Gaskell to move the romantic narrative forward, but it is an uneasy transition. Touch is important throughout the novel as a way of releasing emotion or to

assist the narrative flow. Mary's hand on Jem's arm is associated with his sexual desire for her and his confession of his feelings. Jem's seizure of Mary's hand is unwelcome and is an ironic version of the physical threats made by Harry Carson, but it forces Mary to re-evaluate her relationship with both Jem and Harry.<sup>50</sup>

'Lizzie Leigh' (1850) opens with the death of Lizzie's father after she has disappeared in Manchester, pregnant and disgraced. His death is the catalyst which frees and motivates his wife to find her daughter, despite opposition from her eldest son. As Emily Jane Morris notes, the narrative of 'Lizzie Leigh' is a powerful argument for practical action by women to assist the redemption and recuperation of fallen women.<sup>51</sup> Gaskell was a passionate believer both in practical action as a response to those in need, rather than simply giving money, and in not judging others. (Chapple and Pollard, p 539 and pp 548 - 549) The death of Lizzie's child also enables Gaskell to re-model the conventional narrative in that, as Morris notes, she dies whilst in the care of Susan Palmer, the model of feminine purity. (Morris, p 44) Rather than being the punitive outcome demanded by society therefore, Nanny's death is the means of Lizzie's spiritual redemption and of her re-union with her mother. Deborah Denenholz Morse further explores the bonding between Lizzie, the fallen woman, and Susan, the angel in the house.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Arthur Pollard, 'Faith and Family: Fundamental Values in *Mary Barton*', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 3, 1989 p 4 for a discussion of the way in which Harry Carson's death cuts across class boundaries.

<sup>51</sup> Emily Jane Morris, 'Ready to hear and to help': Female agency and the reclamation of the fallen woman in Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Lizzie Leigh', *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 23, 2009, p 40. Julie Nash also points out that James Leigh has forfeited his right to paternal authority because of his lack of compassion for his disgraced daughter. Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), p 104.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah Denenholz Morse, 'Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion: Seamstresses and Fallen Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction', in Vanessa D Dickerson ed, *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995), p 40.

Lizzie, the shadow in the street, follows Susan and the doctor into the house where her child lies dead. In the passage which follows, Gaskell economically describes Susan's transition from terror at the wild eyed prostitute to an empathetic acceptance and care for the bereaved mother. The narrative describes a complex exchange of roles and challenges conventional assumptions about maternal responsibilities. It is Susan who has left the child, not her mother. Susan takes on a quasi maternal role towards Lizzie: 'Susan took out some of her own clothes, and softly undressed the stiff, powerless, form.'<sup>53</sup> This description of Lizzie, prostrate with grief, suggests that she is a corpse and Susan is carrying out the traditional function of women who wash and dress the body prior to burial. This rite of passage enables Lizzie to make the transition from prostitute to bereaved mother. She takes on the signifying garments of a mother and, once she has regained consciousness, an altered manner:

'Her voice was so strange a contrast to what it had been before she had gone into the fit, that Susan hardly recognised it; it was now so unspeakably soft, so irresistibly pleading, the features too had lost their fierce expression, and were almost as placid as death.' ('Lizzie Leigh', Vol 1, pp 149 – 150)

Prostitute and angel in the house, biological mother and mother-substitute are blended. Lizzie's transformation through a symbolic process of death and resurrection allows Gaskell to re-integrate her into society. Her sins have been washed away by a pure woman, an interesting interpretation of Unitarian Christology, in which Christ, the perfect human

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. I: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 24.

being, is gendered as female. Lizzie's first words after her 're-birth', 'I am not worthy to touch her,' ('Lizzie Leigh', Vol 1, p 149) are ones of contrition which are an echo of the words in the Prayer of Humble Access at an Anglican Holy Communion, 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.' <sup>54</sup> Susan's response, 'my God, have mercy on her, and forgive, and comfort her,' re-inforces the spiritual message. ('Lizzie Leigh', Vol 1, p 150) Lizzie's dead child is laid in her arms and Lizzie sleeps that night in Susan's bed. Gaskell integrates a religious message of compassion and acceptance and a powerful challenge to conventional morality and gendering into the narrative structure of this short story.

The death of Walter from croup in 'Mr Harrison's Confessions' (1851) is described in some detail, and the tone and language is more emotionally engaged than in *Mary Barton*:

'the little fellow was struggling to get his breath, with a look of terror on his face that I have often noticed in young children when smitten by a sudden and violent illness. It seems as if they recognised something infinite and invisible, at whose bidding the pain and the anguish come, from which no love can shield them. It is a very heart-rending look to observe, because it comes on the faces of those who are too young to receive comfort from the words of faith, or the promises of religion.'

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<sup>54</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p 152.



Walter had his arms tight round Sophy's neck, as if she, hitherto his paradise-angel, could save him from the dread shadow of Death.' <sup>55</sup>

Walter's croup has made him incapable of speech, just like Willie, who was pre-lingual when he died, and Gaskell effectively conveys the feeling of helplessness when faced with the inevitability of death. Walter's death sits strangely in this otherwise light-hearted short story, the pre-cursor to *Cranford*. It does not really contribute to the narrative structure as it is clear that Sophy and Doctor Harrison are married at the beginning of the story, and although Walter's death helps to draw them together, it is not a critical factor. It does not assist with the development of Sophy's character as it enhances traits which are already present, rather than contributing new insights. It seems possible therefore that Gaskell was continuing to express in fictional form her constant anxiety about her children and her fears about the possibility of more of them dying, which continued to haunt her. On 30 March 1838 for example, she writes to her sister in law Elizabeth Gaskell describing Marianne's serious bout of croup, which necessitated both William and her brother in law Sam, a doctor, sitting up all night with the child, and Gaskell herself being up until 2 am. (Chapple and Pollard, p 13) The description of Marianne's illness is immediately followed by Gaskell's assertion that she expects to hear at any time of the death of another child who also has croup. Life was indeed fragile and children could not be protected, even within the home.

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, Volume 2, Novellas and Shorter Fiction 1, *The Moorland Cottage*, *Cranford* and Related Writings, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 119.

‘The Doom of the Griffiths’ was first published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1858, but Charlotte Mitchell points out that its composition probably dates from around 1834 – 5 when Gaskell’s oldest daughter was a baby, pre-dating her son Willie’s death in August 1846 by about a decade.<sup>56</sup> Although Gaskell claimed that the story was founded on fact, it is a brutal and violent tale, culminating in the death of both Owen Griffiths’s baby and his father. Dickerson notes that at the possible date of composition Gaskell had suffered a still birth and was, as evidenced by ‘The Diary’, an anxious first time mother, and that these facts may have influenced the choice and handling of the subject matter.<sup>57</sup> The story deals with a number of narrative themes frequently found in Gaskell’s work, including class conflict, divided families and the decline of landed families as well as illustrating, as Uglow notes, how early key figures such as the dead mother, the stubborn father and the dangerous second wife enter her fiction. (Uglow, p 125) Gaskell made some unspecified alterations to the text before its publication but Felicia Bonaparte is probably right to see a connection between the description of the dead baby and Gaskell’s recollection of Willie’s death.<sup>58</sup>

It is noticeable that Gaskell rarely deals with the death of young men and never depicts them dying at home. Harry Carson in *Mary Barton* is murdered in a narrow alley, Bellingham/Donne in *Ruth* dies in a hotel, and Osborne Hamley in *Wives and Daughters* has already died when we follow Molly into the old nursery where the body has been laid.

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 3: Novellas and Shorter Fiction II Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words (1852 -9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 311.

<sup>57</sup> Vanessa D Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p 113.

<sup>58</sup> Felicia Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p 225.

The narrative focus is on the grief of the old squire and the enforced changes that will now occur, for which Osborne's death has been the catalyst. Jalland points out that 'early and mid-Victorian Christians most feared sudden death because it allowed no opportunity for spiritual preparation and repentance, depriving them of the potential consolations of a Christian deathbed.' (Jalland, p 67) I argue that Gaskell was unable to write a deathbed scene for a young man as this would have meant dealing with her own emotions about the loss of her brother, and perhaps, finally acknowledging that he had died with the complete loss of hope that this would entail alongside any spiritual implications.

In another interesting parallel with Gaskell's own life, young women in her fiction rarely die, but are more likely to be purged by illness: for example, Margaret Hale in *North and South*, Sylvia in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Mary Barton in the eponymous novel and Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*. In the case of Margaret Hale, the boundary between illness and death is further blurred by her exchange of 'gifts' with Bessy Higgins, after Bessy's death. Margaret gives Bessy's sister one of her own nightcaps for Bessy to wear in her coffin, and Margaret chooses a small drinking cup of Bessy's as a memento<sup>59</sup>. Bessy is a narrative double for Margaret, a young girl of the same age, but of a very different social background. Her journey towards death mirrors Margaret's journey towards maturity, and it is the link with Bessy and her family that acts as the catalyst for changing Margaret's perceptions, values, and assessment of the world around her. The exchange of these personal items makes psychological and emotional sense in the context of the novel, but can also be seen as symbolic, in that Margaret has to 'die' and be 're-born' in the

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<sup>59</sup> Hotz, p 65, sees this as reminiscent of 'Christ's acceptance of his ultimate mission in the garden at Gethsemane', reminding Margaret of the need for her to step out of her allocated private sphere into the public realm of work.

physical world as Bessy believes she herself will die and be re-born in the spiritual world. I argue that this purging of young women mirrors Gaskell's own ambiguous reaction to being a published author and therefore very visible in the public domain, to which she responded either by becoming ill or by leaving home. All these characters become the object of public scrutiny in one way or another, and illness is their reaction to the stress this causes. On a deeper level, it may also suggest some kind of residual guilt following the disappearance of Gaskell's brother. Jalland points out that psychiatrists agree that mourners may find it difficult to come to terms with their grief and to accept death in the absence of a body and that therefore grief may be abnormally prolonged. (Jalland, p 68) Gaskell may therefore be punishing herself symbolically for the success as a writer which was denied to her brother, and indeed, to her father, by purging these female characters through illness and suffering. I now explore the effect of the loss of Gaskell's brother in a discussion of the rescue compulsion and its influence on Gaskell's fiction.

### **The rescue compulsion**

Critics and biographers have noted the theme of the lost male in Gaskell's fiction but have not explored the links such characters have with home and the fact that for many of them, home is, or becomes, unsafe, either physically, psychologically, or emotionally. Gaskell's relationship with her brother John is acknowledged to be integral to the presentation of these figures, but it has proved very difficult to explore the effect of his disappearance on her other than obliquely through her fiction. John Chapple asserts that the dearth of references to or discussion of her brother 'is almost unbelievable' and suggests that she may have deliberately repressed her memories of him. (Chapple, 1997, p

339) She writes openly, for example, about the loss of her children through illness or miscarriage, but in later life, barely mentioned the brother to whom she had been so close.<sup>60</sup>

John was twelve years older than Gaskell, but she met and corresponded with him regularly until the time of his disappearance when she was 18. Fourteen letters from John to Elizabeth are held at the John Rylands Library, although only four of these exist as manuscript originals, the rest being typed copies of originals which have since disappeared. The letters, which date from 1819 when Elizabeth was nine years old, are all very affectionate in tone, containing colourful, and sometimes gruesome accounts of what John has seen on his voyages to India and the Far East. Nearly all contain references to presents he has bought her and complaints that her letters are too few and too short – a defect she remedied in later life. There is an element of bravado which conceals the fears and anxieties of a young boy. He is told, for example, that nine out of ten who go to the East Indies die there, ‘but I must comfort myself in the same manner the officers of the army and navy [...] did when they drunk as their first toast after dinner “A sickly season and plenty of new rum”’.<sup>61</sup> In a further letter dated 29 November [1820], he reports that nothing occurred during the voyage which would interest his sister, although ‘we lost two men overboard who were both drowned’, and in a voyage to India during January and February 1821, he only avoids a couple of days in the stocks in Burma due to the intervention of his captain. In general, the tone and content of the letters suggest that he enjoyed life on board ship and was intrigued by his experience of other cultures although he constantly asks for news from home, and in particular, for letters from Elizabeth, who, by 1827, he considered

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<sup>60</sup> See for example, Chapple and Shelston, p 36 and p 156 .

<sup>61</sup> Letter from John Stevenson to Elizabeth Stevenson, (27 Dec [1819]), Papers of John Geoffrey Sharps, File 3, Box 30, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

had ‘a talent at letter writing, for truly your epistles are remarkably good.’ (Stevenson, 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1827, File 3, Box 30).

The character that emerges from these letters shows a remarkable similarity to that of his sister: passionate, impulsive, humorous, and with an immediacy that is both attractive and endearing. In John’s penultimate letter to Gaskell of 30 July 1828, he evidently continues a conversation he has been having with her about his future. He wants to become a writer and to leave the Navy, but he cannot afford to do so. Chapple notes that the bankruptcy of Constable and Ballantyne in 1826 had made the publishing world extremely cautious and that this was a probable reason for John’s difficulty in interesting a publisher in his writing.<sup>62</sup> John cannot come and see his sister as he will lose his position and clearly, Elizabeth was upset at this news. His reaction illustrates the close bond between them:

‘Do not for an instant think it is because I do not like it: how could such an idea come into your head – I would give worlds to see you – to walk with you – to enjoy your conversation – [...] seeing you for so short a period – having continually before me the certainty of parting so very soon, of perhaps parting with you for ever – I could not really be happy’. (Stevenson, 30 July [1828], File 3, Box 30).

This is the only time in his letters that he talks about seeing his family for the last time and the tone of the letter continues to darken:

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<sup>62</sup> John A V Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A portrait in letters*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p 4.

'Do you know my spirits have been and are so low that I have not laughed this month and I am getting the name of the Silent man' (Stevenson, File 3, Box 30)

His final letter was written on 15 August 1828 and he fears that Elizabeth is still offended by his not coming to see her as she has not written to him. His ship is due to sail the following day and it seems likely that he will remain in India after that. He tells her that he has bought her some tartan silk, a copy of *Friendship's Offering* (given to him by Smith, Elder & Company) and some seeds. He finishes by telling her that he has just got the final answer from Smith, Elder & Company who have refused to take his book 'to end my hopes of being an author.' He signs off:

'And now my dearest Elisabeth [sic] farewell – Should we never meet again, accept my very best wishes for your welfare throughout life and may every blessing attend you -, with love to all enquiring//Believe me to be//Your ever affectionate brother'  
(Stevenson, 15 August 1828, file 3, Box 30)

This extended valedictory and formal superscription is unlike that in any other of the letters which are simply signed 'your affectionate (or 'most affectionate') brother'.

There are a number of theories about John's eventual fate. Gaskell's grandson said that family legend suggested he had been captured by pirates, Ellis Chadwick reports that he was lost at sea and Chapple speculates that he may simply have gone to India to trade and died there. (Chapple, 1997, p 338) His final two letters clearly indicate that he was both

depressed and desperate to remain at home in England, and Gaskell may have felt an enduring guilt that she never replied to his final letter and parted from him on bad terms, hence the suppression of his memory. Gaskell had a deep desire to nurture, and I argue that male characters such as Frederick Hale, Peter Jenkyns and John Thornton represent her sublimated wish that she had been able to rescue her brother and to provide him with a safe home.

The rescue compulsion, as Kestner points out, was a strong cultural signifier during the Victorian period, both in life, (for example, the ‘rescue’ of Elizabeth Barrett by Robert Browning), and in art, (for example the many depictions of St George and the dragon, Perseus and Andromeda and similar myths).<sup>63</sup> Gaskell was familiar with the Domestic Missions, headed up by men, which focused particularly on rescuing women. Rescue could equally occur in male homosocial situations such as battle, and the concept was therefore common in both homosocial and heterosocial contexts. I argue that Gaskell explored the rescue compulsion in her fiction and that, alongside the cultural convention of the return, it helped her to deal with the traumatic loss of her brother.<sup>64</sup>

Personal tragedy triggered the writing of *Mary Barton* (1848), and although the novel opens at the end of a sunny holiday spent in the fields outside Manchester, it quickly darkens, and the tone, atmosphere and plot remain almost unremittingly tragic. The figure of Will Wilson, the sailor, is pivotal to the plot as it is his testimony which saves Jem and enables the novel’s various tragedies to be recuperated within a traditional marriage

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<sup>63</sup> Joseph A Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p 34.

<sup>64</sup> See John R Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, (Ohio University Press: USA, 1975), Chapter Ten for a discussion of The Return Convention in Victorian literature.



narrative. The fragility of Will's life at sea, and the anxiety and emotional strain felt by his family at home are captured by Gaskell in the character of Alice, Will's foster mother, when she visits the Wilsons. She is 'weary, and sad, and dusty. The weariness and the dust would not have been noticed either by her, or the others, if it had not been for the sadness.' (*Mary Barton*<sup>1</sup>, Vol 5, p 125) Her sister-in-law immediately guesses the reason for this – she has received no letters. The role of letters in Gaskell's fiction has already been discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Here, letters are the tenuous connection between family members which enable them to know the best – or the worst – news about those at sea. Alice voices what Gaskell must have experienced herself: it is the waiting and the uncertainty that are 'very dree work' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 125), and she brings this anxiety into the heart of the home. Domestic rituals are enacted to counteract the dangerous intrusion of the outside world with its potential for tragedy: the kettle is put on, a large loaf is produced and the cheerful sound of rattling teacups is heard instead of the imagined noise of wind and wave. As soon as the domestic space has been made safe, there is a knock at the door and Will, the missing sailor appears. His entrance destabilizes the gathering and facilitates the release of pent up emotions which can now be safely and openly expressed. The description of Will as 'a dashing, bronzed-looking, ringleted sailor, frank, and hearty and affectionate' anticipates that of Frederick Hale in *North and South* (1855), and his personality mirrors that of John Stevenson as it appears in his letters to Elizabeth. The close association between the portrayal of Will Wilson and John Stevenson is further deepened by Gaskell's account of Mary's reaction to his departure on another voyage 'She had always liked Will; but now it seemed as if a sudden spring of sisterly love had gushed up in her heart, so sorry did she feel to hear of his approaching departure.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 161)

Like John, and Charley Kinraid in *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), Will Wilson has a fund of sailor's stories to tell. His tale of the mermaid brings a further breath of fantasy into Job Legh's parlour and fulfills the same comic and narrative purpose as the incident of the scorpion discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Will's lighthearted description of the mermaid and his teasing of his sceptical audience are another version of the siren attractions of female beauty and vanity with which both Mary and Esther have to deal. The blending of truth and falsehood in Will's stories is transparent, but he has a serious role to play in the narrative when Jem's life is at stake. Mary's frenetic dash to Liverpool to speak to Will before he sails away, seems to be a re-working of Gaskell's last parting with her brother as she would have wished it to be, and is also a nuanced interpretation of the rescue compulsion. Kestner discusses the influence of classical mythology on Victorian art and notes how legends depicting the rescue compulsion were used to promote male heroism and superiority. (Kestner, pp 55 – 56) Common subjects included Perseus and Andromeda and Orpheus and Euridice and these tales often ended with men subjugating women in marriage. Gaskell's account of a rescue in *Mary Barton* can be viewed as an inversion of this paradigm in which the active role of the rescuer is taken by a woman who then marries the man she has rescued. This inversion also emphasises the shift which critics have noted in the narrative, as Mary moves from a private, domestic world to take on a public role, speaking in court to defend Jem. The balance of power in the relationship has shifted and equalized. Will too, is 'rescued' in that he marries Margaret Legh and is 'domesticated' in the same way that Job's exotic insects are incorporated within the home.

The rescue of Peter Jenkyns by Mary Smith in *Cranford* (1853) is successful and leads to a happy resolution for him and his sister, Miss Matty, despite their changed circumstances. Like John Stevenson, Peter joins the navy, but his letter home is delayed and his mother never sees him again. In the passage which describes his parents' reaction to his departure, it is possible to see Gaskell's own reaction to her brother's departure: pride when speaking to her father about his chosen career, but 'bitter, bitter crying [...] when she was alone;' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 214) Like John Stevenson, Peter does come home once, having achieved some success and promotion to the rank of Lieutenant, and Miss Matty recalls that 'My father took him into every house in the parish, he was so proud of him. He never walked out without Peter's arm to lean upon.' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 215) The little we know of Gaskell's father suggests that this is an accurate reflection of his relationship with his son. As William Hyde notes, Peter has prospered in India as John was meant to do and indeed as Frederick Hale does in Spain.<sup>65</sup> On his return, he resumes his old relationship with his sister, teasing and protective. *Cranford* was Gaskell's own favourite among her novels, the one to which she always turned when she was ill, and perhaps one of the reasons for this was that here, she successfully rescued her brother and brought him home.

Gaskell returned to the theme of the lost brother in *North and South* (1855). Like Peter Jenkyns and John Stevenson, Frederick Hale is an attractive character with a sparkling sense of humour with whom his sister feels an instant empathy: 'she caught the stealthy look of a pair of remarkably long-cut blue eyes, that suddenly twinkled up with a

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<sup>65</sup> William J Hyde, "'Poor Frederick" and "Poor Peter": Elizabeth Gaskell's Fraternal Deviants', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 9, 1995, pp 21 – 26.

droll consciousness of their mutual purpose of inspecting each other.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, pp 225 – 226) Like Peter, he is no respecter of social conventions. Margaret’s earliest memory of him is of stealing apples. Although the Hales have plenty of their own apple trees, someone tells Frederick that ‘stolen fruit tasted sweetest’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 236) and Margaret remarks that his feelings have not changed much since. Margaret’s reflections on her relationship with her brother and the way in which, during his absence at sea, they ‘had grown nearer to each other in age, as well as in many other things’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 229), is very similar to Gaskell’s relationship with her brother as is apparent from his letters to her. The tone of Frederick’s conversations with Margaret, and his use of language as he calls her ‘little goose’ and telling her ‘what a bungler you are’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 239 and p 227), recalls the way in which John addresses his sister in his letters and Frederick’s maxim:

‘Thinking has, many a time, made me sad, darling; but doing never did in all my life. My theory is a sort of parody on the maxim of “Get money, my son, honestly if you can; but get money.”’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 230)

recalls John’s last letter to Gaskell of 15 August 1828 in which he states:

‘You yourself seem convinced that nothing is to be done in England – thus it seems I must be contented to be a banished man for what use it is returning and having nothing to do – on three pound [sic] a month what can I save – what can I do – It is better to make up my mind to remain abroad.’ (Stevenson, 15 August, 1828, File 3, Box 30)

Both John and Frederick have no choice but to remain in exile abroad. Frederick's visit and its dangers are foreshadowed in Margaret's bizarre dream about Henry Lennox:

‘He was climbing up some tree of fabulous height to reach the branch whereon was slung her bonnet: he was falling, and she was struggling to save him, but held back by some powerful invisible hand. He was dead.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 44)

The dream is a re-working by Margaret's sub-conscious of Lennox's proposal and its implications. His climbing of the tree represents his ambition, and Margaret's bonnet, symbol of Victorian femininity, her apparent suitability for a conventional life as his wife. However, it can also be interpreted as Gaskell's own powerful subconscious emotions about her brother being re-worked in her fiction, in that Lennox dies as she feared her brother had. This interpretation complements Matus's argument that Gaskell understood how profound experiences which appear to have been forgotten by the conscious mind are accessible through dreams.<sup>66</sup> Gaskell's use of dreams is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Margaret is ultimately unable to save Frederick who has to live his life in exile in Spain. Thematically, this seems to represent a compromise between death or complete disappearance, and an enforced separation where at least Margaret knows that her brother is alive and can correspond with him.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p 71.

<sup>67</sup> See Larry K Uffleman, *Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South: the Novel in Progress*, *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 14, 2000, p 8, for a discussion of the epigraphs used as a commentary on Frederick's return home.

Kinraid, in *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) is another variation on the rescue theme.

Geoffrey Sharps sees Kinraid's capture by the press gang as another version of John Stevenson's disappearance and it certainly indicates the longevity of its effect on Gaskell for this theme to be played out in a novel written two years before her death.<sup>68</sup> Kinraid has much in common with Frederick Hale. Like Frederick, he is introduced into the narrative by reputation. As Frederick led the mutiny against his captain, so Kinraid leads the defence against the press gang who board his whaling ship. Both are impetuous and resist legitimate authority. Both exhibit the violence associated with Carlylean ideas of masculinity, a characteristic shared by John Stevenson:

'One [of] the men employed working on board, being extremely saucy, I kicked him, when he immediately went on shore & lodged an information against me & next morning a guard of soldiers was sent off to take me out of the ship. When I got ashore I was taken before the magistrate [...] & had not our Captain been a very good friend of the government I should not have got off without a couple [of] days confinement in the stocks,' (Stevenson, Jan/Feb 1821, File 3, Box 30)

Both men are physically attractive, and their association with lawlessness adds glamour and excitement to their attraction. Sylvia's first meeting with Kinraid is an ironic inversion of her relationship with Philip. They meet at the funeral of the sailor killed by the press gang and Sylvia, along with several other young girls, breaks into uncontrollable crying. As discussed earlier in this chapter, women in the nineteenth century did not attend funerals as

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<sup>68</sup> John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of her Non-biographic Works*, (Fontwell: Linden Press, 1970), p 403.

it was considered that they would become over-emotional. However, *Sylvia's Lovers* is set in a historical past and is also concerned with working class characters for whom cultural norms were different. Gaskell is able to play on these tensions to introduce a nuanced and subtle discussion of the power of sexual attraction whilst appearing to conform to the cultural expectations of her contemporary readers. Sylvia's loss of control 'became so evident that it attracted the attention of many in that inner circle.'<sup>69</sup> Kinraid assumes that she is a sweetheart of the dead man, and his conclusion is immediately followed by the rattle of the gravel on the coffin, completing an association common since medieval times of love, sex and death. This is emphasized by Kinraid's physical appearance 'like a ghost, a-standin' agin a gravestone.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 62) His white and wan face however, unlike Philip's long sallow countenance which repulses Sylvia, marks him out as 'the nearest approach to a hero' Sylvia has seen. (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 62) As the attraction between Sylvia and Kinraid grows, so too do the images associated with them so that, as discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis, fire becomes the symbol for their powerful feelings for each other.

Kinraid, unlike Philip, has no spiritual side, and this lack foredooms the relationship between him and Sylvia and lays the basis for the tragic consequences. His rescue by Philip on the battlefield at Acre makes this explicit. Kinraid is feverish as a result of his wound, but nevertheless recognizes Philip. The sailor he sends in search of him fails to find him as Philip himself has been wounded and tells Kinraid that it must have been a spirit sent to help him. Kinraid swears a great oath, insisting that 'It was no spirit, I tell

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<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 9: Sylvia's Lovers*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 61.

you; and I was in my full senses. It was a man named Philip Hepburn.’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 325) This chapter is entitled ‘The Recognition’ and both the chapter title and narrative are significant in the thematic context of the novel. Kinraid’s statement is critical: it is the first clear acknowledgement in the narrative of Philip’s status. He is a ‘real’ man – a physical presence rather than an incorporeal spirit, and capable therefore of heroic actions, including taking part in the violence of battle and hand to hand combat. Kinraid’s naming of Philip affirms his masculinity and completes and rounds off his character, making him sexually a more equal match for Sylvia. The oath he swears gives his statement a quasi-legal status which mirrors the complex meta-narrative in the novel of legal and illegal power.

Philip’s rescue of Kinraid is an example of the way in which such actions occurred in homosocial as well as heterosexual contexts. It is also linked to ideas of chivalry and the medieval revival that occurred during the Victorian period and which became the focus of intense historical interest. (Kestner, Chapter 3, ‘The Gallant Knight’) Gaskell’s use of this medieval trope allows her to explore a complex range of ideas linking sexuality to the rescue theme. As D’Albertis notes, Philip’s gendering is made unstable: ‘he is alternately described as strangely maternal and improbably virile’. (D’Albertis, p 131) His rescue of Kinraid from the battlefield could therefore be viewed as a continuation of this ambiguity: it is either an act of masculine bonding which finally asserts his gender equality with the explicitly heterosexual Kinraid or a feminine, nurturing desire to rescue Kinraid from danger. The destabilization of gender and identity is a major narrative theme in the novel, closely linked to that of spirituality and deceit.



Gaskell's fiction frequently contains presentations of gender which challenge conventional cultural boundaries and expectations.<sup>70</sup> In the next chapter, I continue my discussion of her exploration of masculinity in more detail.

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<sup>70</sup> For examples of female characters to whom this statement applies, see my discussion of Margaret Hale on pages 44 – 45 of this chapter, and my discussion of Lois's aunt, Grace Hickson on page 246

## CHAPTER 2

### A MAN ABOUT THE HOUSE: MASCULINITY IN GASKELL'S FICTION

In this chapter, I examine texts in which Gaskell explores relationships within a domestic setting, and specifically, relationships which illuminate her interest in the allocation of gender and its influence upon character and behaviour. I focus on the ways in which Gaskell explored the concept of masculinity in her fiction, including the use of cross-dressing, the effect of this in individual works and the extent to which traditional gendered boundaries are challenged.

#### Gaskell and cross dressing

The first evidence that we have of Gaskell's awareness of cross dressing comes in a letter from her brother John, written in 1827 when Gaskell was 17. John describes crossing the equator and tells his sister that Mrs Neptune was 'a handsome young sailor, dressed in a sprig muslin gown & a high French bonnet.'<sup>1</sup> On 22 November 1852, Gaskell wrote to Marianne, her eldest daughter, about a visit from a Mrs Rich. Gaskell was enchanted with her. She had 'never-ending accounts of her life to tell the children; [including] her riding across Asia Minor as a Turkish horseman, turban, pistols & all,''<sup>2</sup> On 17 May 1854, she wrote to John Forster about Rosa Bonheur, the French female animalier whom Gaskell knew and liked: 'She is a spirited woman excessively fond of

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<sup>1</sup> John Stevenson to Elizabeth Stevenson, 16 July 1827, Papers of John Geoffrey Sharps, File 3, Box 30, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

<sup>2</sup> John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 213.

animals & out-door life. [...] to paint this famous horse picture, she dressed herself as a young man, & went & painted it in the greatest livery stables in Paris'.<sup>3</sup> (Chapple and Pollard, p 290) Rosa Bonheur was one of the few nineteenth-century women to obtain official police permission to wear men's clothing, probably, as Gretchen Van Slyke suggests, for ease of movement and protection.<sup>4</sup> However, when she went out on social occasions or attended official gatherings, she always wore women's clothing. Bonheur had two long-lasting relationships with women but none of her contemporaries ever alleged any impropriety against her. Gaskell was clearly quite comfortable in her company and as enchanted with her stories as she was with those of Mrs Rich.

The Gaskells all enjoyed the fun of disguise and masquerade, including theatre going – the actor Macready was a personal friend - and like many Victorian families, entertained themselves at home with the performance of charades. On 28 March 1851, Gaskell described to Marianne with great glee a game of charades at Plymouth Grove which intricately combined religious, personal and gender issues:

'They acted in the outer lobby, under the gas; and we stood on the stair-case,\in the inner hall [,]/and the folding doors were thrown open. The first word word [sic] was Author. Awe – a nun brought before the Inquisition. Tottie (nun) rushed in from the back stair-case door, was caught by Annie and the doors flew open, and

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<sup>3</sup> Gaskell to John Forster, Wednesday night – [17 May 1854]. Rosa Bonheur was an animalier (an animal painter and sculptor) who went to the slaughter house at Roule to study animal anatomy. Delia Gaze ed, Maja Mihajlovic and Leanda Shrimpton picture editors, *Dictionary of Women Artists, Vol 1, Introductory Surveys, Artists A – I*, (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1977), pp 288 – 291.

<sup>4</sup> Gretchen Van Slyke, 'The Sexual and Textual Politics of Dress: Rosa Bonheur and Her Cross-Dressing Permits', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol 26, Nos 3 & 4, Spring-Summer 1998, p 328.

displayed the three judges dressed in black with blk masks on (your 3 sisters).’

(Chapple and Pollard, p 147)

It is possible to over-interpret what was, after all, family entertainment, but it is of interest to note that the first word chosen was ‘author’, particularly given the conspicuous absence of Gaskell the writer from her list of ‘mes’. (Chapple and Pollard, p 108) By March 1851 when the charade was enacted, Gaskell had published her first novel and a number of short stories and pieces of journalism, including regular contributions to Dickens’s *Household Words*. The Gaskells’ aversion to Catholicism is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis: here, it is the non-family member, Tottie, who is allocated the role of the nun, and the Gaskell sisters who take on the masculine role of judges. Tottie’s costume is not described, but the sisters are dressed in black with masks which completely conceal their identity and gender.

In December 1851, Gaskell wrote to Emily Tagart about a repeated bizarre dream she had been having, telling her:

‘I dream and dream again of Robert Darbishire as a Bloomer a daughter of mine with a ‘pig beard under her muffler’, & striding along in his pettiloons: and you can’t think what an uncomfortable dream it is. [.....] I don’t know any other young man at all like him;’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Chapple and Pollard, p 174. See also Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth eds, *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830 – 1890*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998), Chapter 2, pp 106 – 110 for an extract from Henry Holland, *On Sleep, and the relations of dreaming and insanity*, illustrating the Victorian interest in dreaming as the revelation of hidden thoughts and feelings.

Robert Darbishire was the son of Samuel Dukinfield Darbishire, a trustee of Cross Street Chapel. The Gaskells and the Dukinfield Darbishes became good friends and their children played together. Gaskell's dream appears to mix cross-dressing, (Robert is clearly dressed in girl's clothes), with issues of gender (his pig beard). There may also be a sublimated reference to the loss of her beloved son Willie, a death from which she acknowledged she never recovered.

The description of Robert as a 'Bloomer' refers to women who adopted clothing designed by Amelia Bloomer. Bloomer set up a temperance paper called *The Lily* in 1849 and used the journal to promote the causes of woman's suffrage, temperance, marriage law reform, and higher education for women. *The Lily* was a great success and quickly built a circulation of over 4,000. In 1851, Bloomer began to publish articles about women's clothing. Female fashion at the time consisted of tightly laced corsets, layers of petticoats, and floor-length dresses. Bloomer advocated dressing in clothes that had first been worn by women living in the socialist commune, New Harmony, in the 1820s. This included loose bodices, ankle-length pantaloons, and a dress cut to above the knee. Bloomer and other campaigners for women's rights began wearing these clothes and were consistently ridiculed for doing so.<sup>6</sup> Bloomer continued to dress in this way until about 1859 when she said that the crinoline was a sufficient reform, and reverted to conventional female clothing. Gaskell's dream therefore appears to be contemporary with the first emergence of discussion about a more emancipated form of clothing for women and is the more

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Dickens's leading article, 'Sucking Pigs', in *Household Words*, 8 November 1851, pp 145 – 147.

interesting, because there is no further reference to 'bloomers' in her letters, although there are many discussing clothing, new bonnets, the importance of cut in dress, and so on.

In 1863, 'The Cage at Cranford' was published in *All the Year Round*. The iron cage which is intended to support women's skirts, allowing them to walk more freely, arrives in Cranford as the latest fashion from Paris, but Miss Pole, for whom it is intended as a present, misunderstands its purpose and uses it instead as a cage for her parrot. Far from liberating Miss Pole, the cage eventually is cut up to make 'two good comfortable English calashes'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Cross dressing in Gaskell's fiction**

Cross-dressing in nineteenth-century fiction, whether the author adopts the narrative voice of the opposite gender or has characters who cross-dress is rare.<sup>8</sup> Both Gaskell, and her close friend Charlotte Brontë, (and indeed all the Brontë sisters), were unusual in that they used narrative cross-dressing, that is, they used a male narrative voice. Both Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë also had characters who adopted some or all of the signifying clothing of the opposite gender. Brontë's De Hamal in *Villette* (1853) who cross-dresses as a nun, is small but exquisitely formed like a doll: '*So nicely dressed, so nicely curled, so booted and gloved and cravated, he was charming indeed.*'<sup>9</sup> Gaskell used a male narrative voice in a number of short stories including 'The Sexton's Hero' (1850), 'The Heart of John Middleton' (1855), 'Mr. Harrison's Confessions' (1855), 'The Poor Clare' (1859), 'Curious

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, Volume 2, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 313.

<sup>8</sup> Ute Kauer, 'Narrative cross-dressing in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*,' *Brontë Society Transactions*, (26:2, 2001), pp 167-187.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), (London, Edinburgh, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto and New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1952), p 165.

if True' (1860) and 'Cousin Phillis' (1864).<sup>10</sup> Ann Heilmann points out that an assumption of masculinity enabled artists such as Bonheur and novelists such as the Brontës to access professions and environments denied to them as women.<sup>11</sup> It might be assumed therefore that fictional representations of cross-dressing would focus primarily on power. In fact, I argue that Gaskell was more interested in a subtle and wide-ranging exploration of gender assignation, its effect on the emotional and psychological development of the individual, their relationship with their families, and, by implication, on what she felt to be necessary change in wider society.

Cross-dressing first appears in Gaskell's fiction in the third instalment of *Cranford*, published in *Household Words* on 13 March 1852, and involves the rector's son Peter, who is introduced to the reader through the letters he wrote home as a boy from boarding school.<sup>12</sup> His full name, Peter Marmaduke Arley Jenkins, carries the weight of patriarchal authority and expectation – he is named after his godfather, Sir Peter Arley – but he is immediately referred to by Miss Matty as 'poor Peter'. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 206) This diminutive not only makes him accessible to the reader's sympathy, but also suggests that he is not perhaps the stereotypical strong, masculine figure that his gender and education indicate. This impression is reinforced when Mary and Miss Matty read through his 'show-letters' with their required exhibition of learning and progress interrupted by a 'little sentence[...] written in a trembling hurry, after the letter had been inspected'. (*Cranford*,

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<sup>10</sup> Fanny Trollope also memorably uses cross-dressing to effect the escape of Major Allen, dressed as his wife in Frances Trollope, Tamara S Wagner, ed, *The Barnabys in America; or, Adventures of the Widow Wedded* (1843), (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p 318.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Heilmann, '(Un)masking desire: cross-dressing and the crisis of gender in New Woman fiction', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5:1, 2000, pp 83-111.

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Huber notes the astonishing amount of cross-dressing in *Cranford* and the range of 'puzzling transvestite images.' Caroline P Huber, "'Heroic Pioneers': The Ladies of Cranford', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 21, 2007, pp 43 – 44.

Vol 2, p 207) Significantly, Peter's request for cake, (emotional as well as physical nourishment), is addressed to his mother. Mary's caustic comment on Peter's education - 'I do not know much about Latin, certainly, and it is, perhaps, an ornamental language: but not very useful, I think', - is a reflection on the lack of emotional (feminine) education that Peter is receiving. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 207) The implication is that this imbalance leads to a decline in his performance, and he writes apologetic letters to his father which parallel the show-letters in their formality without addressing the underlying issues. His true emotional state is apparent in his letter to his mother which is a 'badly written, badly-sealed, badly-directed, blotted note'. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 207)

Peter deals with his unhappiness by becoming 'captain of the school in the art of practical joking.' His father reacts to this disappointment by 'remedying the matter in a manly way' and reading Latin with his son. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 208) The choice of the adjective 'manly' and the activity chosen by the rector are both significant as they reflect the belief that the role of a father was to prepare his son for adult life and to form his character appropriately. John Tosh comments on the various models of fatherhood common among the Victorian middle classes, and notes that the figure of the distant father was far more common in contemporary memoirs than the tyrannical paterfamilias.<sup>13</sup> He argues that this was a psychological reaction on the part of men who feared that their masculinity might be undermined if they displayed emotional warmth towards their children, and that this was particularly so in the case of a father's attitude towards his son whose masculinity might be compromised by overt displays of affection.

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<sup>13</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p 97.



Peter however, cannot resist playing jokes and cross-dresses as ‘a lady that was passing through the town and wished to see the Rector of Cranford, “who had published that admirable Assize Sermon”.’ (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 209) The Rector is so pleased by the attention that he offers to ‘copy out all his Napoleon Buonaparte sermons for her’. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 209) He allocates this task to Peter, triggering a complex layering of masculine and feminine masquerades. Peter, the male, is asked to copy out sermons for Peter, the female visitor. Peter, the male, wants to go fishing, and curses the female impersonator who has prevented him engaging in this male past-time. His masculine language ironically deeply offends his father, and reveals a side of Peter’s character which he has tried to keep hidden, adding another layer of deception to their already difficult relationship. Peter is very frightened by the ease with which his father is taken in by his impersonation. He did not expect his masquerade to succeed and yet, as Miss Matty points out, if his father had not believed him, the consequences would have been disastrous. His father’s failure to recognize his cross-dressed son is also a comment on his failure to recognize and meet Peter’s emotional needs. David Roberts, who read the memoirs of 168 Victorians born between 1800 and 1850, notes that this was a common problem for Victorian fathers, and was the result of a combination of the delegation of child-rearing to servants, coupled with long absences of sons at boarding school.<sup>14</sup> The development of masculinity, a characteristic so prized by early Victorian fathers, was thereby hindered. The Rector’s failure to acknowledge and meet the emotional needs of his son, as Terence

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<sup>14</sup> David Roberts, ‘The Paterfamilias of the Victorian Governing classes’ in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses*, Anthony S Wohl ed, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p 72.

Wright points out, is destructive both for Peter's family and for the wider society of Cranford as it deprives both of a healthy challenge which produces change and vitality.<sup>15</sup>

Miss Matty is complicit in the tricks her brother plays, and although she is equally terrified of her father's reaction, 'could hardly keep from laughing at the little curtsies Peter kept making, quite slyly, whenever my father spoke of the lady's excellent taste and sound discrimination.' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 209) Her comment highlights the comic thread which binds her to her brother, but also illustrates the high level of risk he is prepared to run, and the desperation of his need to be recognized and acknowledged. Peter seeks to challenge the staidness of the town, saying that 'the old ladies [...] wanted something to talk about;' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 209) Wright recognizes this as an attempt to subvert authority, but it is far from clear which authority is being subverted, the masculine or the feminine. (Wright, p 136) Peter's choice of disguise as a female who admires the Rector's sermons would seem to be a comment on what was considered suitable reading matter for ladies, which was just as limiting as Peter's masculine education.<sup>16</sup> Their closely prescribed education means that the ladies have little of relevance to discuss. The 'clacking noise there always was when some of the ladies got together' suggests a hard, hollow sound which has little meaning beyond making an unpleasant vibration. Peter seeks to educate the gullible ladies of Cranford and to encourage them to think independently.

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<sup>15</sup> Terence R Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell 'We are not angels': Realism, Gender, Values*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995), p 136.

<sup>16</sup> Susan P Casteras, 'Reader, Beware: Images of Victorian Women and Books', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, Issue 3.1, Spring 2007.

His next venture into cross-dressing is very destructive, both for himself and for his family. It is such a terrible tale to tell, that Miss Matty sends the servant out of the house and locks the door after her to ensure that the conversation is not overheard. Peter takes the opportunity, when his father is out visiting the sick and his sister Deborah, is away, to go to her room and dress himself

‘in her old gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a little – you are sure you locked the door, my dear, for I should not like anyone to hear – into – a little baby, with white long clothes.’ (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210)

The broken nature of Miss Matty’s recital of this incident, with the pauses in her speech indicated by dashes in the text, and her insistence on complete privacy, underlines the seriousness of Peter’s challenge to convention years after he has left Cranford. Peter’s relationship with his other sister, the formidable Miss Jenkins, is uneasy and full of friction. His motivation for cross-dressing in Deborah’s clothes is therefore complex. She is her father’s representative, and expects Peter to conform to the standards of masculine behaviour which include a deep seriousness, an application to appropriate study, and ‘proper’ social behaviour. She applies the same rigorous standards of femininity to herself and her sister, whose thought and behaviour she completely dominates. In choosing to dress in Deborah’s clothes therefore, Peter is challenging constructs of both masculinity and femininity. He also blatantly introduces a sexual element into the charade by implying that Deborah Jenkyns has been seduced and given birth. Although he denies that he has any other motive than to give the inhabitants of Cranford something to talk about, the very

public nature of his performance suggests a deep seated anger and a desire to shock society out of its complacency. His performance is a truly theatrical one: 'he went and walked up and down in the Filbert walk – just half hidden by the rails, and half seen; and he cuddled his pillow, just like a baby; and talked to it all the nonsense people do.' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210)

When the Rector returns, he sees a crowd of people peering through the rails of his garden. The rectory, repository of the moral values of the town, has become a place of entertainment, and the role of the rector, to provide spiritual guidance and the underpinning moral values of the community has been superseded by the thrill of illicit sex. The Reverend Jenkyns at first thinks that the crowd is admiring 'a new rhododendron that was in full bloom and that he was very proud of;' (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210) This image underlines the complex sexual and spiritual message of the charade. Deborah, the daughter who is most like him, and who most clearly represents the accepted mores of society, is in full bloom, but in a diametrically opposite way to the one which he would have expected. The rector has considered making a sermon from the 'relation between the rhododendrons and the lilies of the field'. (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210) The lilies of the field 'toil not, neither do they spin; And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'<sup>17</sup> Gaskell conveys layers of irony in this passing reference. The lily was a symbol of purity, much beloved by the pre-Raphaelite painters. Peter is masquerading as Deborah, the pure female, who is apparently not pure at all, but corrupted. Solomon/Peter, the male, is not as pure as the lilies of the field and he certainly is not '*arrayed like one of these*' since he is masquerading in female clothes. There is also

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<sup>17</sup> *King James Bible* Matthew 6, verses 28 -29.

an oblique comment on the role of women who ‘*toil not neither do they spin*’. Peter is struggling to find a role, having disappointed his father in his failure to fulfil traditional masculine expectations of an only son. Deborah, of whom nothing more is expected than that she should be ornamental, nevertheless feels she has the right to criticize her brother on his performance of masculinity. N M Jacobs discusses the use of a female persona as a literary masquerade and links it to the female impersonations of drag artists, noting that despite their ironic consciousness of the artificiality of gender behaviour, the drag queen also expresses profound ambiguity about his own failure to fit into a traditional gender category.’<sup>18</sup> There is also a burlesque element to this performance. It is easy to overlook the robust nature of Gaskell’s humour, described as ‘racy’ by Susanna Winkworth, which, as Rebecca White argues, she uses to test the boundaries of propriety.<sup>19</sup>

The Rector reacts to his deception as a stereotypical Victorian father would have reacted to the seduction of his daughter, with intense anger, and he immediately and dramatically unmasks Peter: ‘[he] tore his clothes off his back – bonnet, shawl, gown, and all – and threw the pillow among the people over the railings: [...] and before all the people he lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter!’ (*Cranford*, Vol 2, p 210) The violence of the Rector’s reaction in the sexualized context of the masquerade, is extreme, amounting almost to symbolic rape, expressed through the actions of stripping and beating with a cane to assert power, authority, and control. It is however ambiguous as to whether this is the symbolic rape of his son or his ‘daughter’. The etymon of ‘Rector’ is the Latin for one who

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<sup>18</sup> N. M. Jacobs, ‘Gender and Layered Narrative in “Wuthering Heights” and “The Tenant of Wildfell Hall”’, *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol 16, No 3, Fall, 1986, p 207.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters and Memorials of Catherine Winkworth, edited by her sister*. Vol 1, (Clifton: E. Austin and Son, Printers, Chronicle Office, 1883), p 127, Rebecca White, ‘A joke spoken in rather a sad tone’: *Cranford*, humour, and Heidi Thomas’s television adaptation, *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, p 155 and Eileen Gillooly, ‘Humor as Daughterly Defense in Cranford’, *ELH*, Vol 59, No 4, Winter 1992, p 901.

rules or governs. Peter has challenged the Rector's spiritual and paternal authority and, (albeit temporarily and under false pretences), has taken away his power, exposing his father to public ridicule. In un-dressing Peter and flogging him in public view, the Rector is unhesitatingly re-asserting his authority. At the same time, he is reclaiming his daughter, re-asserting her true, feminine nature, and expressing his dominant masculinity whilst exposing his son to the people of Cranford as not truly masculine.

It is significant to note that *Cranford* was written co-terminously with *Ruth* (1853) which openly deals with the seduction and pregnancy of a young girl. In January 1850, Gaskell wrote to Dickens about a young girl, Pasley, who was seduced by a doctor called in when she was ill and who turned, in despair, to prostitution. This episode formed the basis of *Ruth*.<sup>20</sup> The outcome of his 'seduction' for Peter is violent male anger and a beating, and he chooses therefore to remove himself from the family and society in which he can find no acceptable role. Although Peter, as a male, has choices and an independence denied to Victorian females, I argue that his experience parallels that of other seduced girls both in Gaskell's fiction and in reality, who encountered anger, rather than understanding, and who were excluded both from their families and from wider society. And, like other female characters in Gaskell's fiction, such as Lizzie Leigh or Esther, Peter's departure destroys relationships in his family. Dickens's reaction to this episode is curiously muted. He wrote to John Forster on 9 March 1852: 'Don't you think Mrs. Gaskell charming? With one ill-

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<sup>20</sup> Gaskell to Charles Dickens, Janry 8. [1850], Chapple and Pollard, p 98. Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts founded Urania Cottage, a Home for Fallen Women in 1846 with the aim of preparing each inmate for emigration to Australia, South Africa or Canada where they could start a new life. Gaskell wanted Pasley to be able to emigrate to Australia. The outcome of Pasley's story is not known.

considered thing that looks like a want of natural perception, I think it masterly.’<sup>21</sup> Judith Flanders points out that ‘taste’, which is what Dickens seems to imply by ‘*natural perception*’, had a moral value for the Victorians, in other words, to be ‘tasteful’, was to adhere to the moral standards set down by society.<sup>22</sup> It is interesting therefore that despite this implied lack of conformity with the moral norm, Dickens allowed the episode to appear unedited in his family magazine.

‘My Lady Ludlow’ was published in *Household Words* in 1858. It is a creative and wide-ranging exploration of social and domestic themes, focusing on change, and its effects on society and individuals. Lady Ludlow provides an intriguing female role model for the orphaned girls she takes into her home. After the death of her husband, she returns to her estate of Hanbury and takes on the management of the farms and the village, with the aim of freeing the property from debt for the benefit of her son. Although she is meticulous in recording information and in checking facts, her approach is old-fashioned and frequently irritates her steward, Mr Horner. His irritation is compounded by Lady Ludlow’s proposal to appoint her own candidate, Miss Galindo, as his assistant, rather than accepting Mr Horner’s proposal to employ Harry Gregson, the son of the local poacher. Lady Ludlow’s apparent motivation in offering Miss Galindo a job is to assist the impoverished spinster financially, but she is also concerned to retain close control of the management of the estate according to her own clearly stated principles, and to avoid change.

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<sup>21</sup> Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis eds, *The letters of Charles Dickens*, Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson General Eds, Vol Six 1850 – 1852, (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1988), p 623.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, (London: Harper Collins, 2003), p xxxiv.

Miss Galindo prepares carefully for her new job, and sits up all night to prepare a selection of quill pens and ‘a pair of brown-holland over-sleeves, very much such as a grocer’s apprentice wears’. (‘My Lady Ludlow’, Vol 3, p 238) She is well aware of her unwelcome intrusion into a masculine role and does her best to modify her gender through her behaviour:

‘I try to make him forget I’m a woman, I do everything as ship-shape as a masculine man-clerk. [...] I have stuck my pen behind my ear, I have made him a bow instead of a curtsy, I have whistled – not a tune, I can’t pipe up that [...] I have said “Confound it!” and “Zounds!” I can’t go any farther.’ (‘My Lady Ludlow’, Vol 3, p 241)

Unlike the episode with Peter, there is no attempt to disguise the fact that Miss Galindo is a woman. Her masculine masquerade amounts to little more than adopting some minor signifying items of dress and a parodic interpretation of masculine behaviour. Miss Galindo’s new role may be viewed as Gaskell’s light-hearted contribution to the serious debate that raged in the 1850s about women gaining access to the public sphere, discussed in greater detail, for example, by Gregory Anderson and Barbara Leah Harman.<sup>23</sup> Her new role however has a number of effects on the society of Hanbury. Firstly, she announces that ‘Mr Gray [is] taking advantage of my absence to seduce Sally!’ (‘My Lady Ludlow’, Vol 3, p 241) Mr Gray, the new young clergyman, is enthusiastic in his pursuit of the establishment of a village school in Hanbury, very much against the wishes of Lady

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), and Barbara Leah Harman, ‘In Promiscuous Company’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol 31, Pt 3, 1988, pp 355 – 356.



Ludlow. His seduction of Sally is spiritual rather than sexual, but is nevertheless an oblique comment on what happens when women undertake the work of men. Illness and injury intervene and force through the changes which Lady Ludlow opposes. Miss Galindo reverts to her more traditional role of nurse, and the death of Mr Horner opens the way for the appointment of an inexperienced naval officer to administer Lady Ludlow's estates and the eventual partnership with the dissenting baker, Mr Brooke. Miss Galindo's masquerade is comic, rather than tragic, and very much in the spirit of *Cranford*, but nevertheless, it plays its part in disrupting the established social pattern and moving forward necessary change.

Gaskell returned to the theme of cross-dressing in 'The Grey Woman', a Gothic tale based on Grimms' *Das Mordschloss*, first published in 1861 in *All the Year Round*.<sup>24</sup>

Anna, a beautiful, but passive young woman, is pressured into marrying a French count, Monsieur de la Tourelle. His appearance is effeminate: 'His hair was powdered, of course, but one could see from his complexion that it was fair in its natural state. His features were as delicate as a girl's, and set off by two little 'munches', as we called patches in those days.'<sup>25</sup> When he speaks to her, Anna is as startled 'as if the angel Gabriel had spoken to me'. ('The Grey Woman', Vol 4, p 135) The reference emphasizes his androgyny. He speaks German with a soft lisp and is far from being a threatening, overtly male figure. Yet, by the end of the evening, Anna becomes 'a little tired of the affected softness and effeminacy of his manners, and the exaggerated compliments he paid me'. ('The Grey

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<sup>24</sup> Rose Lovell-Smith, 'Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard's Female Helper', *Folklore*, 113.2, October 2002, p 203.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Linda Hughes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction III, Cousin Phillis and Other Tales from All the Year Round and the Cornhill Magazine 1859 – 64*, Volume 4, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p 135.

Woman', Vol 4, p 136) Fatigue becomes fright, but Monsieur de la Tourelle is insistent in his courtship of Anna, and she marries him, and travels to his remote castle in France, a country far away from her friends and family. In this Gothic setting, with its dimly lit chambers, winding passages and secret rooms, Anna 'soon found out how little I, or, apparently, anyone else, could bend the terrible will of the man who had on first acquaintance appeared to me too effeminate and languid to exert his will in the slightest particular.' ('The Grey Woman', Vol 4, p 140) This is a challenging interpretation of masculinity and its presentation. Monsieur de la Tourelle appears effeminate, but is actually possessed of a steely will and is the ruthless and bloodthirsty leader of a gang of bandits who do not hesitate to murder anyone who opposes them.

Anna's husband gives her a maid called Amante whose name means 'a lover' or 'beloved' in French. Amante and her mistress are close in social class, and in the loneliness of the chateau, where Anna is frightened of her husband and socially excluded from her neighbours, they form a bond. Amante rescues the pregnant Anna from her husband who plans to kill her after she discovers his true, murderous identity and organizes their escape from the castle. Gaskell's description of Amante's behaviour is sexually ambiguous: 'she took me in her vigorous arms, and bore me to my room, and laid me on my bed.' ('The Grey Woman', Vol 4, p 151) <sup>26</sup> Amante is as active in her rescue of her mistress as Monsieur de la Tourelle has been in marrying her and removing her from her friends and family, and Anna remains a passive participant throughout. Amante finds a suit of man's clothes which she uses to construct a complete disguise which will transform her gender:

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<sup>26</sup> See also my discussion of the rescue compulsion in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

‘she cut her own hair to the shortness of a man’s, made me clip her black eyebrows as close as though they had been shaved, and by cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks, she altered both the shape of her face and her voice to a degree which I should not have believed possible’. (Gaskell, Vol 4, p 157)

The reason for this extreme disguise is the physical danger they are in from Monsieur de la Tourelle and his gang of ‘chauffeurs’, but Anna, who is ‘in an almost idiotic state’, treats Amante’s attempts at disguise with amusement as if it were only a charade. (‘The Grey Woman’, Vol 4, p 157) Amante goes to extreme lengths to disguise her mistress, dying her hair and face, thickening her figure with extra clothes and even breaking one of her teeth. They escape and live together for a number of years as husband and wife, looking after Anna’s daughter, with Amante earning a living by working as a tailor.

Coral Lansbury suggests that the story is an exploration of transgressive lesbian love.<sup>27</sup> Heilmann points out the links made by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1859) between Marian Halcombe’s figure, which is undeformed by wearing a corset, and the growing of her moustache. (Heilmann, p 89) This supports Lansbury’s theory in that Amante’s assumption of masculine clothes allows her underlying gender preference freer expression. An alternative interpretation outlined by Lovell-Smith, is that the novella is a re-working of the Bluebeard story, focusing on the issue of men’s repressive power over women, particularly in marriage. (Lovell-Smith, pp 203 – 204) This is perhaps to miss the

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<sup>27</sup> Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, (London: Paul Elek, 1975), pp 211 – 212.

other key influence on 'The Grey Woman', which is that of the sensation novel which peaked in popularity during the 1860s. Gaskell knew Geraldine Jewsbury, who, as a publisher's reader, had to read much sensation fiction. Gaskell was writing to Jewsbury as early as 1849 and also read, (but did not always admire), Collins's work.<sup>28</sup> Lyn Pykett points out the gender instability inherent in all sensation novels and in particular, analyses Wilkie Collins's exploration of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity.<sup>29</sup> She argues that the reader's perception of Marion Halcombe's 'masculinity' is largely as a result of her presentation through the conventional viewpoint of Walter Hartwright. 'The Grey Woman' is set in a frame story narrated by a visitor of undefined gender to a small town in Germany, but the main narrative purports to be a letter written by the Grey Woman to her daughter, thus the reader is presented with a woman's perception of the gender transformation of another woman. Given the Grey Woman's initial attraction to the feminized Monsieur de la Tourelle, it is plausible to suggest that Gaskell was interested in writing about lesbian relationships, but I would argue that it is the quality of the relationship that is more important to her and the provision of emotional safety and security within the home. Although 'The Grey Woman' can legitimately be viewed as a sensation novella, building on the Gothic foundations of Mrs Radcliffe and Maria Edgeworth, re-working gender stereotypes within a melodramatic setting, it is also a further example of Gaskell's belief that a stable home, however unconventional, is paramount.

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<sup>28</sup> John Chapple and Alan Shelston, eds, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p 128. Gaskell to Louis Hachette, [c. 17 March 1855]. Gaskell discusses a number of living writers, including Wilkie Collins. 'He takes great pains, and devotes himself to novel-writing, as to a profession. His style is considered very good. I do not much admire his books myself, but many good judges do.'

<sup>29</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The sensation novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone*, (Plymouth : Northcote House in association with the British Council, 1994), pp 20 – 21.

The resolution of this novella, in which Amante is killed and Anna bigamously marries her doctor, is a complex layering of debates around gender as well as an illustration of Gaskell's creative use of the short story format to manipulate older narrative forms. Lovell-Smith rightly claims that the death of Amante at the hands of Anna's husband introduces a new plot element into the Bluebeard story and removes 'a dangerously subversive object', along with the threat posed by the bonding of the two females. (Lovell-Smith, p 199) However, as Catherine Craft-Fairchild notes, Gaskell was also following the tradition of novelists between 1790 and 1835 whose cross-dressed female characters were always either socially ostracized or killed.<sup>30</sup> Attitudes to cross-dressing moved from an easy acceptance and even admiration in the eighteenth-century to a marked aversion in the nineteenth. Craft-Fairchild links this gender demarcation to the debate around women's roles and emerging feminist ideas. Upper-class female education was designed to display women to their best advantage in the marriage market, with an emphasis on display and appearance. In the nineteenth century, this emphasis was replaced with training women for a domestic role in which they would become the moral and spiritual guardians of the family. Cross-dressing was therefore regarded as one of the most flamboyant ways of drawing attention to oneself, and, in that sense, as a refusal to succumb to an appropriately controlled domesticity. In this context, Bonheur's wearing of dresses in a social setting is understandable, particularly if she did not wish to draw attention to her private life. Gaskell's interpretation treads an uneasy boundary between acknowledging the courage and practicality of Amante, without which, Anna would not have survived, and ultimately sacrificing her in the interests of conventional domesticity. Cross-dressing, and the loss of

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<sup>30</sup> Catherine Craft-Fairchild, 'Cross-Dressing and the Novel: Women Warriors and Domestic Femininity', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol 10, Number 2, January 1998, p 178.

chastity, as Craft-Fairchild asserts, are two transgressions that cannot be redeemed by marriage. (Craft-Fairchild, p 178)

In the next section, I examine Gaskell's portrayal of feminized men and explore the social and cultural context of this within the radical Unitarian movement.

### **Feminized men in Gaskell's fiction**

In *Cranford*, Gaskell used the cross-dressing of Peter Jenkyns to explore the construct of masculinity and its impact on relationships within the home. Foucault argues that in the nineteenth-century, sexuality was apparently carefully confined within the home, contained by the family unit for the sole purpose of reproduction.<sup>31</sup> However, what he describes as 'illegitimate sexualities' flourished, and the supposedly self-contained family unit was in fact 'a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities.' (Foucault, p 46) I argue that Gaskell was well aware of this dichotomy between the public and the private, and the complexity of gender allocation, and that she was interested in the interstices where power and sexuality met, and in the negotiations which were carried out on a daily basis within the confines of the home. I suggest that she explored these issues in the context of the group of reforming activists whom Kathryn Gleadle calls the 'radical Unitarians' who were campaigning in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I*, trans. by Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p 3.

<sup>32</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-51*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), p 1.

For a comprehensive discussion of the links between Christian manliness and nineteenth-century society, see Norman Vance, *The sinews of the spirit: The ideal of Christian manliness in Victorian literature and religious thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

The Unitarian movement was tightly knit, consisting of what Jenny Uglow aptly describes as a series of ‘overlapping circles’, and Gaskell knew many of the key activists in the radical Unitarian group based around William Fox’s South Place Chapel.<sup>33</sup> Fox’s daughter, Tottie, was a close friend, as were Harriet Martineau and the Shaen sisters. Charles Dickens, who was also part of Fox’s entourage, published three of the works considered in this chapter in *Household Words*, and William and Mary Howitt, who by the mid 1840s had established themselves at the centre of the radical Unitarian circle, published ‘Clopton Hall’, Gaskell’s first piece of journalism. John Rely Beard, who trained with William Gaskell and was a close friend, shared Fox’s views on education for women and supported the Working Women’s College.<sup>34</sup> As Gleadle has demonstrated, this group of radical Unitarians formed the basis of the women’s rights movement of the 1850s with many of whose activists Gaskell also had strong connections. (Uglow, pp 311 - 312)

However, the aims of the radical Unitarians in the 1830s and 1840s were not simply confined to issues of women’s rights. By the late 1840s, they had developed ‘a powerful social, political and cultural critique of modern society, and women’s role within it.’ (Gleadle, p 6) Whilst they certainly demanded the right to equal treatment with men, they articulated this within a wider concept of radical transformation, seeking a rational social model in which individuals were motivated by mutual concern, and where reform was undertaken in a number of key areas including universal suffrage, national education, and

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<sup>33</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London: New York, Faber and Faber, 1999), p 299 and pp 310 – 313.

<sup>34</sup> Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760 – 1860*, (London and New York: Longman, 1998), pp 190 – 193.

new ways of social organisation. (Gleadle, pp 48 – 49) According to their Unitarian principles, home remained the primary focus for change which would then radiate out across society, and they celebrated the contribution women made to domestic and family life. John James Tayler encapsulated this belief and its grounding in associationist psychology when he stated: ‘home is the source from which the virtue, the religion and the happiness of a community mainly flow.’<sup>35</sup> Radical Unitarians, unlike other contemporary socialist movements such as the Owenites, sought to improve and consolidate monogamous marriage. The novelist Mary Leman Grimstone, a leading figure in the early feminist movement, set out in fiery terms, the cataclysmic consequences to the home of a lack of sympathy between man and wife:

‘There are many homes in which happily, the fiend Discord is unknown; yet to which, from want of intellectual sympathy between the husband and wife, Vapidity finds its way. Discord is an incendiary, who fires the house over one’s head, and Love, if not insured, is burnt out without remedy or redress. Vapidity is an under-miner who saps the foundation; the house falls, and Love, if not dug out in time, is buried alive.’<sup>36</sup>

Grimstone’s dramatic metaphors link the physical and emotional structures of the home and illustrate the way in which the radical Unitarians sought to re-balance family life to achieve a more democratic, egalitarian balance in which both sexes had an equal partnership.

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<sup>35</sup> John James Tayler, *Parental and filial duties: An address delivered in the School Room, Lower Mosley-Street, Manchester. On Sunday evening, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1853*, (Manchester: John Heywood, 1853), p 5.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Leman Grimstone, ‘Men and Women’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 1:2, March 1834, p 102.



Yet as both Watts and Gleadle have shown, the liberal, rational Unitarian movement was as conflicted as the rest of nineteenth-century society, and whilst they publicly campaigned and supported the call for women's rights, both men and women behaved very differently within the privacy of their own homes. Gaskell's letters include a continuing dialogue with her close friends in radical Unitarian circles as she seeks to unravel the dilemma of balancing her life as a practising writer with her other varied domestic duties. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 116, 318, 106 – 107) Her access to reading material was through William's membership of the Portico Library: 'With a struggle and a fight I can see all the Quarterlies three months after they are published: till then they live on the Portico table, for gentlemen to see. I think I will go in for Women's Rights.' (Chapple and Pollard, p 567) She was shocked when two members of the Cross Street Chapel censored their wives' reading by burning their copies of *Ruth*, and a third forbade his wife to read it. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 222 – 223) Yet, despite such internal conflict, Gaskell also had considerable freedom within her marriage and was able to buy The Lawn, a large house in Hampshire as a retirement home, and to keep its purchase a secret from William. John Seed claims that a patriarchal structure was normal within Unitarian families, despite publicly expressed views on the importance of education for both men and women.<sup>37</sup> Education for women after all, was intended to make them better mothers, and, as Seed points out, the only divine being Unitarians recognised was God the father, enabling the role of fathers within families to be appropriately sanctified. (Seed, p 139) Watts links the apparent contradiction between the radical views of Unitarians on the role of women and

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<sup>37</sup> John Seed, 'Theologies of power: Unitarianism and the social relations of religious discourse, 1800 – 50' in R J Morris, ed, *Class, power and social structure in British nineteenth-century towns*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), p 139.

the actual circumscription of their lives to the anathema with which they were viewed by contemporary society, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis:

‘because of their anxious quest for ‘respectability’ in a world which anathematized their religious beliefs, they tended to mind the proprieties which restricted the lives of middle-class women, the class to which many of them belonged.’<sup>38</sup>

One way in which women in particular were able to articulate their views and frustrations at the constraints with which they were surrounded, was to write, and literature, as Gleadle notes, became an important weapon for the radical Unitarians. (Gleadle, pp 54 – 70) George Henry Lewes, another member of Fox’s radical circle, stated firmly that ‘The object of Literature is to instruct, to animate, or to amuse. Any book which does one of these things succeeds; any book which does none of these things fails.’<sup>39</sup> An anonymous reviewer of *Ruth*, writing in the radical *Prospective Review*, claims that ‘literature, while it reflects the character of the age in which it is produced, becomes, in its turn, one of the most powerful agencies by which that character is modified.’<sup>40</sup> However, although the moral and transformative ability of literature was important, as Gleadle argues, it was the power of the written word to reveal the truth beneath the mask of convention that was its vital function. (Gleadle, p 55) The crucial truth which early feminists wanted to expose through literature was the status of women, and the way in which their characters were oppressed and malformed by social conditions. Their work and thought was widely

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Watts, ‘Rational Religion and Feminism: the Challenge of Unitarianism in the Nineteenth Century’ in Sue Morgan ed, *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750 – 1900*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p 41.

<sup>39</sup> George Henry Lewes, ‘The Principles of Success in Literature’, *Fortnightly Review*, May 15, 1865, p 90.

<sup>40</sup> Unattributed, ‘Recent Works of Fiction’, *Prospective Review*, 34, April 1853, p 223.

disseminated, and by the 1840s, as Gleadle asserts, writers including the Howitts, who later received civil-list pensions from the government, were 'no longer perceived as an eccentric minority, but were well-known esteemed figures with a large mainstream audience.' (p 43) I argue that Gaskell, whilst she sympathized with the views of the feminists, supported them to a certain extent and corresponded with them as a way of trying to resolve some of the personal tensions she experienced between her domestic life and her life as a writer, nevertheless remained conflicted and ambivalent, lingering on the borderland between convention and radical transformation. I argue that she continued the dialogue in her letters in her fiction, and that her portrayal of some feminized male figures was her contribution to the feminist debate.

I first consider Gaskell's characterization of Tom Fletcher in 'Hand and Heart', an apparently straightforward moral tale published in the *Sunday School Penny Magazine* in 1849.<sup>41</sup> Tom is the only child of a widowed mother who has to work in order to support both of them. The issue of women's work was contentious, but the feminists insisted that it needed to be addressed, and the short story and the novel were popular ways of exploring such ideas. (Gleadle, p 93) The focus in Gaskell's story is not on Tom's mother, but on the effect of her working on both Tom and her home. The customary view of women working was that it would lead to neglect of the home and children, but Tom's home is spotless and Tom is a boy motivated principally by his desire to do good deeds for others. It is significant that Gaskell has chosen to make the widow's only child a boy, not a girl, and I argue that this enables her to comment on the role of men and boys within the home.

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<sup>41</sup> See more detailed discussion of Travers Madge and the *Sunday School Penny Magazine* in Chapter 3 of this thesis, p 134.

Tom goes to help his neighbour, Ann Jones, who does not work, but is struggling to manage both her domestic chores and her children. Unitarians placed great emphasis on harmony within the home as this would encourage the positive associations needed to develop moral and spiritual character. Tayler addressed the parents and children at Lower Mosley Street school directly on this issue:

‘a bad home, the neglect of domestic duties, the want of harmony and affection in families, the estrangement of parents from their children, and of children from their parents – is the great seat and source and principle of sin – the rank hotbed of misery and crime.’ (Tayler, pp 3 – 4)

Violence was abhorrent, but Ann Jones has not only lost control of her domestic duties, she also hits her children. The contrast in gender roles is made explicit: Ann Jones’s behaviour has made her daughter as inept as she herself is. Her daughter, who should have been helping her mother by looking after the younger children, has failed to stop them getting a knife and cutting themselves, and she then stands by passively, too afraid to help. Ann Jones contrasts her daughter’s behaviour with that of Tom: ‘I wonder how it is your mother has trained you up to be so handy, Tom; you’re as good as a girl; better than many a girl;’<sup>42</sup> The failure however is the mother’s, not the daughter’s. Ann Jones, whose focus is her home and family, has failed to train her daughter and to set her an example by association, whereas Tom’s mother has trained him to undertake a feminine role so that he

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 1: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 104.

can be more useful in a domestic setting. In this sense, I argue that Gaskell was setting out in fictional form, the views of the radical Unitarians such as Grimstone, who stated: 'Till the respective discipline under which male and female children are trained begins to operate, no dissimilarity is discernible.' (Grimstone, p 101) Tom has been feminized, and in the context of 'Hand and Heart', this is viewed as a strength.

Tom's mother dies and he goes to live with his uncle and his family. His uncle, 'a rough kind of man', is critical of Tom's upbringing which has made him 'too nesh for a boy;' ('Hand and Heart', Vol 1, p 108) Tom's aunt is similar to Ann Jones: she is a tall, large woman, who speaks angrily to her children and whose house is dirty and unkempt. Tom's introduction to his uncle's house may be viewed as his transition to adulthood in the sense that the values and training which his mother gave him are now tested in the wider world. John Tosh argues that this transition was difficult for nineteenth-century males, partly because of the emphasis on the importance of maternal nurture, and partly because of the increasing rigidity of codes of manliness which were intolerant of any feminization.<sup>43</sup> Manliness meant that 'boys became men not just by growing up but by acquiring a variety of manly qualities and manly competencies.' (Tosh p 31) Although these qualities included chivalry and the protection of women, manliness was essentially a set of values and behaviour by which men judged each other in a public arena. Tom however has been trained by his mother in an exclusively domestic setting, and has been prepared for

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<sup>43</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: essays on gender, family and empire*, (London: Longman, 2004), pp 48 – 49.

adulthood as a girl would be. His entry into his uncle's house precipitates a clash of gender roles and cultural expectations.

Tom undertakes the feminine role for which his mother has trained him and this begins to have a positive effect on the family. The critical transition point is reached when he accidentally breaks a window in trying to let fresh air into the foetid bedroom. Lack of attention to basic domestic duties and hygiene has poisoned the family who have headaches from breathing in constantly recycled air, a metaphor for the unhealthy habits in which they are trapped. Tom's re-modelling of gender roles offers a new, better model of domestic living. This is not an easy rite of passage. Tom is beaten for breaking the window and prepares himself for this by praying. There is a complex iteration here of gendered roles and an association with martyrdom. Tom has explicitly fulfilled a feminine role in the home and is physically punished as a result. He accepts this with spiritual resignation and continues to seek a feminine, maternal role which will meet his need to nurture, physically and emotionally.

'Hand and Heart', in many respects, is typical of the genre of evangelical children's stories best epitomized by Mrs Sarah Trimmer which, as Claudia Nelson notes, brought their heroes and heroines to spiritual perfection through physical, mental or emotional suffering.<sup>44</sup> I argue that Gaskell departed from this model in her questioning of gender roles in a domestic setting, and that her presentation of gender aligns both with specific Unitarian beliefs and also with the arguments presented by radical Unitarians. Her

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<sup>44</sup> Claudia B Nelson, 'Sex and the Single Boy: Ideals of Manliness and Sexuality in Victorian Literature for Boys', *Victorian Studies*, Vol 32, Number 4, Summer 1989, p 526.

insistence on the importance of men and women working together to create a spiritually and emotionally harmonious home to ensure the proper development of their children is consistent with mainstream Unitarian philosophy: 'The first thing which is sure to mar the proper upbringing of children, is the want of mutual love and courtesy between the husband and the wife.' (Tayler, p 7) Her feminization of Tom enhances rather than detracts from his status in the household. His uncle, the titular head of the family,

'really respected him for the very qualities which are most truly 'manly';  
for the courage with which he dared to do what was right, and the quiet  
firmness with which he bore many kinds of pain.' ('Hand and Heart', p 114)

In 'Hand and Heart' therefore, Gaskell offers a transformative model of domestic behaviour, which, as the radical Unitarians argued, re-educated men and showed how they could embrace domestic values and re-evaluate their role within the home.

Gaskell continued to explore the connections between spirituality and masculinity in her portrayal of three clergymen: Thurstan Benson in *Ruth* (1853), Mr Hale in *North and South* (1855), and Mr Gray in 'My Lady Ludlow' (1858). Historians and critics have increasingly questioned the extent to which the nineteenth-century separation of public and private life, the 'two spheres', was a theoretical concept rather than something that was rigorously applied to everyday living. Tosh, for example, points out that men were able to pass freely between the two settings and that this was integral to the social order. (Tosh, p 19) Clergymen, like William Gaskell, worked from home and in Chapter 1 of this thesis, I discussed the ways in which this impacted on family life. I argue here that in her fictional

representation of these clergymen, Gaskell was continuing to explore the arguments of the radical Unitarians about the need for reform across a wide range of social issues and to analyse how this impacted on the roles and domestic relationships of men and women.

The introduction of Thurstan Benson into the narrative of *Ruth* is de-stabilizing. Ruth is crossing a stream, and Gaskell uses the landscape as a metaphor to comment obliquely on her situation as Bellingham's mistress. The water of the stream runs 'high and rapidly, as busy as life, between the pieces of grey rock.'<sup>45</sup> Ruth's sexuality is at its peak, but in her innocence, she has no fear and does not see the hidden dangers of her situation. The rushing water, like the clacking tongues in *Cranford*, represents the noise of gossip and chatter, and the rocks the hidden dangers for those who diverge from the accepted social model. In the middle of the stream however, is a great gap, and Ruth hesitates, her ears filled with the sound of rushing water and her eyes on the current which would sweep her away. This is the critical moment in the novel when she first becomes aware of how her position as Bellingham's mistress has excluded her from the rest of society. There is a gulf between her and the rest of the world which she will be unable to bridge without help. The landscape in *Ruth* at this point is reminiscent of that in spiritual autobiography such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Ruth must cross the river and go through the woods to reach the pasture land beyond. She is so intent on her dilemma that she neither sees nor hears Benson who startles her by appearing before her on one of the stones and offering his help.

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Deirdre D'Albertis ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 6: Ruth*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 51.



Benson's unexpected entrance into this allegorical landscape gives him a quasi-mythical status, rather similar to the effect produced by Job Legh surrounded by his cabalistic instruments, discussed in more detail in the introduction to this thesis. The effect is enhanced by the description of his physical appearance:

'She looked up and saw a man, who was apparently long past middle life, and of the stature of a dwarf; a second glance accounted for the low height of the speaker, for then she saw he was deformed.' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, pp 51 – 52)

At this point, the narrative almost tips from realist fiction to fairytale, or what could be described as an early example of magic realism. Benson's quotation from Keble's poem, 'St Matthew', from *The Christian Year*, locates the reader in contemporary spirituality, but his reference to a Welsh legend about a foxglove, whilst in keeping with Unitarian belief that everything forms part of a spiritual chain of association, also suggests his links with magic and a pagan past.

Benson's physical appearance and disability can also be related to the sometimes agonized contemporary debate that revolved around issues of masculinity and androgyny.<sup>46</sup> Ruth's attention is captured not just by Benson's stature and deformed back which suggest that he is not sexually active, less of a man, but by his beautiful face with its spiritual light in the eyes. Nelson points out that some religious writers made the case for an

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<sup>46</sup> Carol Christ, 'Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House', in Martha Vicinus ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1977).

androgynous Christ and God, and suggests that this platonic equation of androgyny and divinity was particularly attractive to mid-Victorian moralists. (Nelson, p 525 and p 530) I argue that Gaskell's portrayal of Benson is also a fictionalised account of the changes that were occurring in Unitarian belief during this period. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, James Martineau introduced a more introspective form of the Unitarian faith which encouraged action based on the examination of inner feelings and which was profoundly influenced by German romanticism. (Gleadle, p 16) Benson's 'feminine morbidness of conscience' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 280), pre-disposes him to look inwards and to follow his own personal and ideological convictions, and this is both a strength and a weakness. Benson has strong nurturing instincts which are associated both with a caring God who acts as father to his children, and also with the nineteenth-century adoration of the figure of the mother. As a pastor, Benson views Ruth's pregnancy and motherhood as a way to bring her back to a spiritual life. As a man, his reaction to the news of her seduction is feminized. He blushes at the realisation of her 'profligacy' and is so passionate in his defence of Ruth that 'The tears were full in his eyes: he almost trembled in his earnestness. He was faint with the strong power of his own conviction.' (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 90) Benson has spent the afternoon contemplating the problems Ruth is facing and this more reflective, transcendental approach to spirituality is in line with the radical Unitarian view that God resided within the individual. (Gleadle, pp 16– 18) I argue that this is a feminized form of spirituality, based on emotion and insight rather than the earlier rational form of Unitarianism founded on the harsh necessarianism of Priestley.<sup>47</sup> Benson's passionate

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<sup>47</sup> Priestley was influenced by the writing of David Hartley whose psychology attempted to provide a justification for the theological Doctrine of Necessity. Priestley argued that people always act from a motive rather than arbitrarily. He viewed this as the direct opposite of the Calvinist theory of predestination with which he had been brought up. 'Calvinism, attributing everything to God's Will, made human efforts to

outburst can therefore be viewed as an active portrayal of the new approach to Unitarianism.

However, Benson's feminine, nurturing traits and his emotional reaction to Ruth's pregnancy also make him weak. His decisive assertion of his moral and spiritual authority is affected by his quasi-maternal instinct to protect Ruth's unborn child. His sister Faith persuades him to pass Ruth off as a widow to avoid scandal, and in succumbing to this temptation, Benson offends against the Unitarian belief in the primacy of truth. As William Gaskell was to point out in a sermon of 1862, it is those who 'with brave outspoken sincerity denounce what they believe to be wrong and maintain what they hold to be right, that ever most effectually move and reform the world.'<sup>48</sup> Faith's influence over her brother also raises questions about gendered relationships within the home. Benson is small of stature because of his deformity, and I argue that in some respects, this has infantilized him and given Faith a quasi-maternal role in relationship to him. He lacks the maturity and unquestioned authority within the home to which as the adult male, he would be entitled. As an early reviewer of *Ruth* pointed out, his decision 'was the pivot on which moved the destiny of years, and he turned it wrong.' (Unattributed, *Prospective Review*, p 232) However, I argue that this pivotal moment in the novel is more complex than a decision made by one individual, and at this point of tension between the public and the private, within the privacy of the home, it is internal domestic relationships which most affect

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change things impious or futile; Philosophical Necessity urged men to change circumstances so that they themselves might be formed in more perfect ways.' Joseph Priestley, Jack Lindsay, intro, *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley, Memoirs written by Himself. An account of further Discoveries in Air*. (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1970), p 40.

<sup>48</sup> William Gaskell, *Unitarian Christians called to bear witness to the truth: A Sermon preached before the supporters of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, at their Annual Meeting, in Essex-Street Chapel, London, June 11, 1862*, (London: Edward T Whitfield, 1862), pp 6 – 7.

external public behaviour. It is the feminized Benson who agonises about the spiritually correct way to deal with Ruth's dilemma, and the forthright Faith, guardian of the home, who persuades him to modify his beliefs to supply a more socially acceptable solution.

Mr Hale in *North and South* (1855) also faces a spiritual dilemma which has a direct impact on his family and domestic relationships, and he too, is presented as a feminized male. He is fine boned, and his physical similarity to his daughter Margaret is marked. His weakness is made explicit by his habit of 'half-opening his mouth as if to speak, which constantly unsettled the form of the lips, and gave the face an undecided expression.'<sup>49</sup> He has always been shy and withdrawn and his college friends treat him 'with something of the protecting kindness which they would have shown to a woman.'<sup>50</sup> (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 316) Anxiety is his dominant emotion, antithetical to cultural expectations of his role as a man and as a member of the clergy which would require him to act with authority and decision. Jill Matus notes how powerful emotion is not conventionally gendered in *North and South*.<sup>50</sup> A number of male characters including Frederick Hale, John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins are unafraid to openly express profound emotion in contrast to contemporary codes of masculinity which, as Tosh notes, emphasized a cerebral containment of emotion. (Tosh, p 32) Mr Hale's femininity is not seen as being a weakness in itself, rather, it is his anxiety and his failure to manage it which contributes to his failure to support his family, and the decline and eventual death of both his wife and himself. Mr Hale's unconventional gendering is balanced by that of Margaret who is increasingly forced

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay, ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 7: North and South*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 21.

<sup>50</sup> Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp 63 – 64.

to take on a parental and adult role within the home, and to make authoritative decisions about where and how the family will live. Her journeys around Milton and her visits to the Higgins family may also be viewed as a version of the pastoral role her father undertook in Helstone as well as a comment on the role of the domestic visitor. In her characterization of Mr Hale then, Gaskell seems to be contributing to the arguments of the radical Unitarians in a number of ways. The group supported the views and actions of enlightened manufacturers such as the Greg brothers and others known to Gaskell, who sought to establish new ways of working which would meet the wider needs of their employees and improve labour and class relations. (Gleadle, p 47) This discussion is a key narrative theme in the novel, and Mr Hale plays an important part in assisting the two sides of the debate to be articulated. On a more intimate, domestic level, Gaskell explores the possibility of a balanced harmonious gendering which accepts the unacknowledged feminine within men, and allows a wider, more public role for women. This was part of the argument which the radical Unitarians were making for transformative change for both men and women.

Mr Gray in 'My Lady Ludlow' (1858) is openly campaigning for radical change based on education for the working classes, a key component of Unitarian faith as discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis. He is described as 'A very pretty young man,'<sup>51</sup> His physical appearance is more feminine than masculine; he is small of stature and blushes easily. He is verbally as well as physically awkward, and finds it difficult to speak without choking and coughing. However his radical tendencies are evidenced by his hair, which is frizzy, red and unpowdered. The colour and texture of the hair suggests an

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<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 3: Novellas and Shorter Fiction II 'Round the Sofa' and Tales from 'Household Words' (1852 – 9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 153.

innate energy, and the lack of powder, as the narrator carefully explains, is 'reckoned very revolutionary and Jacobin.' ('My Lady Ludlow', Vol 3, p 159.) He is more sensitive than the young women who live with Lady Ludlow, blushing redder than ever at the sight of them whilst they composedly curtsy to him. Like Mr Hale and Thurston Benson, he is very emotional, and tears of passion are in his eyes when he tries to persuade Lady Ludlow to intervene with the magistrates on behalf of the poacher, Job Gregson. In his anxiety to speak to Lady Ludlow, he is oblivious to social boundaries and bursts out with his request in the public space of the entrance hall, rather than waiting to be conducted to Lady Ludlow's parlour where she would normally conduct the business of the estate.

Mr Gray's transgression can be interpreted in two ways. It illustrates his determination to transform local society by breaking down boundaries of class and hierarchy. He insists that Lady Ludlow listens to his account of the miscarriage of justice against Job Gregson which has occurred because of class and social relationships among the magistracy rather than evidence of guilt. In this sense, he is educating her by making her aware that 'good family' does not automatically imply good judgement, just as he wants to educate the working class people on the estate. A parallel interpretation is to view the incident as a comment on gendered roles in society. Mr Gray may be a feminized man, but he is nonetheless both powerful enough to defy convention, and determined enough to insist on being heard. He confronts Lady Ludlow, the representative of social order and class based hegemony with courage and dignity, drawing himself up to his full height to speak to her: 'Little as was his stature, and awkward and embarrassed as he had been only a few minutes before, I remember thinking he looked almost as grand as my lady when he spoke.' ('My Lady Ludlow', Vol 3, p 162) The physical characteristic most associated with

Mr Gray is the blush and his dominant emotion is tears. Yet despite the continuous allusions to his size and feminized appearance and behaviour, it is Mr Gray who remains absolutely true to his ideals and his moral purpose, and who unswervingly keeps to the goals he has set himself. It is he who is the catalyst for fundamental change in the feudal society run by the benign dictatorship of Lady Ludlow.

In the next chapter, I explore the theme of education as a primary driver for social and cultural change more fully by examining the Unitarian faith and its emphasis on the importance of education for both sexes.

### CHAPTER 3

#### FAITH, HOME, AND EDUCATION: UNITARIANISM IN ITS DOMESTIC CONTEXT

In this chapter, I consider Gaskell's personal beliefs in the context of the emergence of Unitarian Sunday Schools with which she had a lifelong connection. I then analyse Gaskell's fictional portrayals of education within a domestic setting.

Unitarianism emerged as a coherent faith system in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. During Gaskell's lifetime, it rapidly developed as a dynamic and powerful dissenting force, the influence of whose members far outweighed their numbers. Kay Millard notes that many English Presbyterians became Arian and then Unitarian, and that this trend was particularly apparent in Lancashire and Cheshire: 'A circle drawn with a radius of 50 miles from Cross Street Chapel in Manchester will encompass half the Unitarians in England.'<sup>1</sup> Unitarians attracted great opprobrium both for their association with revolutionary views and for their religious doctrines: the Unitarian faith was illegal until the passing of the Trinity Act in 1813. To be born and bred a Unitarian like Gaskell, was therefore to be familiar with controversy, social ostracism, and protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Millard, 'The Religion of Elizabeth Gaskell', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 15, 2001, p 3.



## The development of Unitarianism

The roots of the Unitarian faith are firmly planted in dissent, specifically in Presbyterianism, although this is more nuanced and less simplistic than has been acknowledged until relatively recently.<sup>2</sup> The key role played by Unitarians in the radical reform of Parliament meant that they became a focus for the anxiety and fear which seized English society during the French revolution and the succeeding Napoleonic wars, when it seemed quite possible that the country would undergo either a similar revolution or an invasion.<sup>3</sup> The ransacking and burning of Joseph Priestley's house and laboratory at Fair Hill, Birmingham by a mob on the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, is an example of the targeting of a well known Unitarian minister and scientist.<sup>4</sup> Like all dissenters, Unitarians were denied some fundamental freedoms, such as the right to marry or be buried in their own churches.<sup>5</sup> Yet there were also many points of intersection between Broad Churchmen in the Church of England and Unitarians.<sup>6</sup> The Feathers Tavern petition of 1772 to abolish the Thirty Nine Articles was the catalyst for the

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-5*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), p 9 and John Seed, 'Theologies of power: Unitarianism and the social relations of religious discourse, 1800 – 50', in R J Morris, ed, *Class, power and social structure in British nineteenth-century towns*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), pp 113 – 116.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond V Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1938).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Anderson, "Joseph Priestley: Public Intellectual," *Chemical Heritage Newsmagazine*, 23, Spring 2005, No 1.

<sup>5</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p 19.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis G Wigmore-Beddoes, *Yesterday's Radicals: A Study of the Affinity between Unitarianism and Broad Church Anglicanism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co, 1971).

foundation of Essex Street Chapel in 1774 by Theophilus Lindsey, chief organizer of the petition. This was the first church to be specifically designated 'Unitarian'.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph Priestley elucidated the three core beliefs of Unitarianism: the denial of the Trinity and the Atonement, and the concept of a human Christ who achieved perfection, and who therefore acted as a model for the lives of others who could similarly work towards moral perfection. It was Priestley's denial of the divinity of Christ, coupled with his campaign for civil liberties and the rights of man, and his aversion to an established church and doctrine which, in the melting pot of the Enlightenment, attracted such fierce opposition, and led critics of Unitarians to deny that they were Christians at all. Priestley taught at Warrington Academy, which, in the last half of the eighteenth century attracted some of the finest dissenting tutors and students.<sup>8</sup> Priestley's educational theories were influenced by his study of empiricist rationalist philosophy, particularly the writings of Locke and Hartley.<sup>9</sup> Priestley condensed and re-issued Hartley's *Observations on Man* in which Hartley sets out his theories on associationist psychology and argues that all mental phenomena are built up from impressions left upon the senses. The connection between these different sensations, feelings, and ideas, by virtue of their previous occurrence together, or association, gradually enables complex intellectual concepts to be constructed.

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<sup>7</sup> C. G. Bolam, Jeremy Goring, H. L. Short, Roger Thomas, *The English Presbyterians: From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760 – 1860*, (London and New York: Longman, 1998), chapter 2, 'Unitarianism and Education'.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on history, and general policy: to which is prefixed, an essay on a course of liberal education for civil and active life, and, an additional lecture on the constitution of the United States*, (Dublin: Byrne, 1803).

This thesis had profound implications for learning and conditioning. Educational techniques were based on the principles of paired experience and reinforcement, and teachers would ensure that only good associations were built up. Priestley argued that it was the environment and circumstances to which people had been exposed which formed them morally and intellectually, and that therefore they could achieve perfection not through divine intervention, but through consistently applied education, using associationist psychology. Priestley integrated associationism with Unitarianism by arguing that everything had a cause traceable back to God. People could make conscious choices, but needed the support of the correct education and environment in order to allow the right associations to develop. Such theories were not gender specific: both sexes required the same education from well educated parents and teachers who understood the laws of association. Under Priestley's influence therefore, Unitarianism became a faith which integrated home life with education through example. Education in its more formal sense, included topics such as history, modern languages, and science, with an emphasis on individual enquiry rather than the mere cramming of facts.

### **Gaskell's views on education<sup>10</sup>**

Gaskell's own education would have been seen as an important preparation for her duties as a mother and educator of her children. Unitarians believed that everyone should achieve their full potential which meant educating women as well as men. The radical journal, *Monthly Repository*, ran a number of articles on this subject, commenting that:

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<sup>10</sup> See Alan Shelston, 'Education in the Life and Work of Elizabeth Gaskell', *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, pp 56 – 71 for a general discussion of the personal experiences of the Gaskell family and education.

‘To make ‘well-ordered home man’s best delight,’ mind is necessary, a presiding intellect, without which activity degenerates into a troublesome restlessness, a teasing interference, and even cleanliness and neatness into a tiresome scrupulosity.’<sup>11</sup>

Millard notes that Gaskell’s stay with William Turner, the Unitarian minister in Newcastle, was typical of that practised by many young women of the faith, acting as an experience somewhere between a finishing school and a university. (Millard, p 8) The diary which Gaskell kept when Marianne and Meta were babies gives a number of insights into her views on education and illustrates the practical application of Priestleyian associationist psychology, which greatly influenced nineteenth-century theories of childhood development.<sup>12</sup> Like William, she is acutely aware of her responsibility to educate Marianne into her duties to society which begin in the nursery and

‘enter into all the minutiae of domestic life, and, ever expanding with our powers and extending their range, they have claims upon us to the end of our days.[...] A chain of obligations and responsibilities runs through the whole of our intercourse with the world.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unattributed, ‘On Female Education and Occupations’, *Monthly Repository*, 7:73, January 1833, p 496.

<sup>12</sup> Athena Vrettos, ‘Victorian Psychology’, in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* ed Patrick Brantlinger and William B Thesing, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p 72.

<sup>13</sup> William Gaskell, *The Duties of the Individual to Society: A sermon on Occasion of the Death of Sir John Potter M.P. Preached at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1858, with the address at the Interment on the day preceding*, (London: E.T Whitfield, 1858), p 11.

Gaskell is sensitive to Marianne's developing senses and notes how her intellect and understanding grow through repeated association.<sup>14</sup> Priestley's emphasis on the importance of making education appropriate to both the age and capacity of the student is graphically illustrated in 'The Diary' when, after a difficult session trying to teach Marianne her letters which reduced both her parents to tears, the decision was taken to abandon her lessons until Marianne showed some inclination to resume them. ('The Diary', Vol 1, p 20) Gaskell establishes a clear routine for the baby, which, as well as being in accordance with contemporary views on the management of children, also indicates the importance of establishing a habit of self-discipline in line with Unitarian views on moral education.<sup>15</sup> Unitarians believe that children are born with free will to do either good or evil, and it is therefore the duty of their parents to guide them. The emphasis is on the Unitarian ideal of seeking perfection, like Christ, through continuous self-reflection and self-discipline. Experience therefore, rather than innate pre-disposition, is what profoundly influences individuals. Gaskell's letters to Marianne throughout her life continue to develop the theme of self-control and self-discipline in dress, behaviour, and attitude, since, as William asserts in his sermon on the death of Sir John Potter, duties to society

'begin with the dawn of moral perception, they run through every relation into which we enter, they grow with our growth, and strengthen with our strength. As the boughs of the forest trees interlace, so all the ramifications of family and kindred connect us, more or less, with the great public.' (Gaskell, 1858, p 4)

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol 1: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 5.

<sup>15</sup> John A. V. Chapple and Anita Wilson eds, *Private Voices: The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland*, (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), pp 14 – 20.

Gaskell was determined to develop Marianne's mental character and encourage her to focus and concentrate. She chose a school run by Mrs Lalor, wife of the editor of the Unitarian *Inquirer*, who had a reputation for 'forming conscientious, thoughtful, earnest, independent characters'.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that the establishment was selected more for its atmosphere than for its academic pretensions. R K Webb discusses the choice of Mrs Lalor's school and what it reveals about Gaskell's own faith.<sup>17</sup> He analyses the generation-long upheaval in Unitarianism which co-incided with the married lives of the Gaskells during which Priestley's necessarianism was re-interpreted in the 1830s by James Martineau and his followers who argued for a more charismatic, individual faith. Martineau however continued to adhere to the fundamental Unitarian precept of the importance of education, arguing that 'the ripest knowledge is best qualified to instruct the most complete ignorance.'<sup>18</sup> He insisted on the importance of a partnership between teacher and pupil which could draw out the necessary associations:

'The approximation required between the mind of teacher and of taught is not that of a common ignorance, but of mutual sympathy; not a partnership in narrowness of understanding, but that [...] orderly analysis of the tangled skein of thought, that patient and masterly skill in developing conception after conception with a constant

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<sup>16</sup> John A. V. Chapple, and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 137.

<sup>17</sup> R.K. Webb, 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', in Joanne Shattock ed, *Dickens and other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p 154 and Monica Correa Fryckstedt, *Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and Ruth: A Challenge to Christian England*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1982), p 65.

<sup>18</sup> James Martineau, 'Great Principles and Small Duties' in *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, Fourth Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, MDCCCLXVII), pp 24 – 25.

view to a remote result, which can only belong to comprehensive knowledge and prompt affections.' (Martineau, p 25)

William, who taught a number of pupils in his study at Plymouth Grove, certainly appears to have fulfilled this requirement as Susanna Winkworth enthusiastically reports.<sup>19</sup> Each of Gaskell's four daughters went to different schools appropriate to their individual needs. Although this was in accordance with the Unitarian doctrine of sensitively responding to and drawing out the individual character, Patsy Stoneman claims that the way in which Gaskell allowed her daughters to develop their own natures was remarkable for the time, and claims that there was considerable congruity of her ideas on the education of women and the beliefs of Mary Wollstonecraft. Robin Colby also notes the way in which Gaskell continued to combine education and experience as her daughters developed.<sup>20</sup>

### **Gaskell's faith**

Unitarianism was bred into Gaskell's bones. Her father was, for a brief period, a Unitarian minister, and she was surrounded by a closely interknit society of Unitarian friends and relatives.<sup>21</sup> Her faith was a mixture of nurture and nature. Her insatiable curiosity fitted well with the Unitarian emphasis on seeking the truth, her sense of fun was not repressed, and her energy and desire for social justice could be productively channelled. Her commonplace book, compiled when she was twenty one, illustrates her sense of the

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<sup>19</sup> *Letters and Memorials of Catherine Winkworth, edited by her sister*, Vol 1, (Clifton: E. Austin and Son, Printers, Chronicle Office, 1883), pp 126 – 127. See also p 36 for a description of William's lessons.

<sup>20</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1987), p 33 and pp 43 – 44, and Robin Colby, 'Elizabeth Gaskell: A Model of Motherhood', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 11, 1997, p 56.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Haldane, *Mrs Gaskell and Her Friends*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1931), p 17.

ridiculous, even in spiritual matters with one of the first entries being a humorous prayer for the Devil by an old Presbyterian minister.<sup>22</sup> A sense of humour, which gives balance and perspective, was essential in her relationships.<sup>23</sup> Her Aunt Lumb clearly did not consider her to be natural material for a minister's wife.<sup>24</sup> Gaskell acknowledged that impatience and anger were her besetting sins, and this included spiritual activity.<sup>25</sup> She was not necessarily a regular churchgoer: rain, for example, put her off attending church when staying at the Nightingales' home, Lea Hurst in October 1854.<sup>26</sup> However, she was so inspired by the service at Magdalen Chapel when she visited Oxford in November 1857 that she went to evening service at New College Chapel an hour later.<sup>27</sup>

Gaskell was a sensuous woman who cared about her appearance and was deeply receptive to her surroundings. In May/June 1854, she wrote openly and intimately to her eldest daughter Marianne about her personal beliefs, including her wish that their Puritan ancestors had not stripped out so much of the beauty and dignity of the Church of England services.<sup>28</sup> She acknowledges that she feels more devotional in Church than in Chapel, but has fundamental reservations about the liturgy used by the Church of England. The

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<sup>22</sup> John A.V. Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 451.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton, March 9<sup>th</sup> [1859], where she discusses meeting with a Mr Benjamin and Charles Bosanquet, who were 'two of the most deeply religious young men I ever met with; but somehow – now don't be shocked – I am afraid they had a want to me in their composition, - a want of the sense of humour,' Chapple and Pollard, p 538.

<sup>24</sup> Gaskell to Elizabeth Gaskell, [20 March 1832] records her Aunt Lumb's reaction to news of Elizabeth's engagement to William: 'Why Elizabeth how could this man ever take a fancy to such a little giddy thoughtless thing as you' and many other equally pretty speeches.' Chapple and Pollard, p 1.

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Gaskell, Vol 1, 'The Diary', p 25 and Chapple, p 409.

<sup>26</sup> Gaskell to Parthenope Nightingale, Tuesday [17 October 1854]: 'Sunday I meant to go to Church; but it rained and I did not, so my good intentions went to pave the place where the thermometer stands high.' Chapple and Pollard, p 313.

<sup>27</sup> Gaskell to Lord Hatherton, Novr 13 [1857]: '[...] we went and heard so beautiful a service that we must needs go and attend the evening-service (an hour later) in New College Chapel,' Chapple and Pollard, p 481.

<sup>28</sup> Gaskell to Marianne Gaskell, [May – June 1854]: '[...] I wish our Puritan ancestors had not left out so much that they might have kept in of the beautiful and impressive Church service.' Chapple and Pollard, p 860.



beginning of Morning Prayer in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer asserts ‘That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Substance.’<sup>29</sup> This is antithetical to the Unitarian denial of the Trinity and their belief that Christ, although a perfect human being, was not divine, and that prayers should be addressed to God alone. Her solution, which may be viewed as an example of Unitarian balance and tolerance, is to recommend that Marianne goes ‘to Chapel in the morning, and to Church in the evening, when there is nothing except the Doxology to offend one’s sense of truth.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 860)

Unitarian tolerance was not shared by others. Unitarians were viewed with abhorrence even by other dissenters who regarded their radicalism and free-thought with deep suspicion. (Seed, pp 113 – 114 and pp 131 – 132) A sermon delivered by Henry Green at Hanley on 8 January 1826 seeks to address some typical contemporary views:

‘We are subject to misrepresentations. Prejudice as well as ignorance scatters its calumnies abroad; those who either do not know, or will not know our firm hope in the truth of Christianity, venture to deny us the Christian name, or go so far in the race of uncharitableness as to consign us in a future world to the companionship of accursed spirits.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of the Church of England.*

<sup>30</sup> Henry Green, *Christian Doctrine as generally held by Unitarians*, (John Rylands Library: Jamison Family Archive, Box 4/5), p 3 - 4.

Such views, particularly the accusation that Unitarians were not Christians, illustrate how excluded Gaskell and others often felt, and how sensitive and reluctant she was to discuss her beliefs outside the safe circle of other Unitarians. Gaskell's religious views did not however preclude her from forming a close friendship with Charlotte Brontë, although Brontë always refused to attend the service at Cross Street Chapel. (Haldane, p 114) Their relationship is an interesting example of Gaskell's charm overcoming prejudice. Both were strong minded women, and Gaskell was certainly not afraid to voice her opinions:

‘She and I quarrelled & differed about almost everything, - she calls me a democrat, & can not bear Tennyson- but we like each other heartily\I think/& I hope we shall ripen into friends.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 129)

However, Arthur Nicolls, Brontë's husband, was vehemently opposed to dissenters, and when Gaskell writes to John Forster to tell him of Brontë's engagement, she says ‘I am terribly afraid he won't let her go on being as intimate with us, heretics. I see she is, too, a little.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 280) Nine months later, after Brontë's marriage, she tells Catherine Winkworth that ‘Last time I wrote, it was a sort of explanation of my way of looking at her Church (the Establishment) and religion; intended for her husband's benefit. She has never answered it.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 327) After Brontë's death, she negotiated an uneasy truce with Nicolls, even declaring to Marianne ‘I like Mr Nicholls.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 364) Neither of the Gaskells had any tolerance for Catholics. (Chapple and Pollard, p 687) During the winter of 1861-2, Marianne Gaskell went to stay

with Oxford friends in Rome and became the target of a conversion attempt.<sup>31</sup> Both Gaskells were united in their horror of Marianne's possible conversion and took immediate steps to cleanse 'that evil influence.' (Chapple and Pollard, p 682)

Ugnow notes that Unitarians kept the dissenting habit of self-scrutiny. (Ugnow, p 96)

In both the diary Gaskell kept when Marianne was a baby, and the letters, there is a consistent thread of self-questioning and repentance – mostly over her impulsiveness and short temper. (Chapple and Pollard, p 175 and p 188) Yet nothing deterred her from telling the truth: a fundamental Unitarian trait, even when, as Cunningham points out, this could hurt both friends and family as well as causing Gaskell herself considerable emotional pain. (Cunningham, p 134) Many of her friends were deeply hurt by the portrayal of manufacturers in *Mary Barton*, and *Ruth*, that most unsuitable subject for fiction, was published when William was still an Assistant Minister at Cross Street. She knew full well that the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* would cause immense controversy, but she regarded truth telling, however painful, as a sacred duty. (Chapple and Pollard, pp 448 – 449) William was of the same mind. In his sermon given in November 1857 on the death of John Curtis, master of the Lower Mosely Street schools, he notes that: 'He has no wish to hurt or offend others – it pains him to do so; but he must speak what in his heart he believes to be God's truth.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jenny Ugnow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London: Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), p 422 et seq, and John Chapple, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Roman Catholicism', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 20, 2006, pp 14 – 27.

<sup>32</sup> William Gaskell, *A Sermon on Occasion of the Death of John Ogle Curtis, late Master of the Lower Mosely Street Schools, Manchester*, preached in Cross Street Chapel, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1857, (Manchester: Johnson and Rawson, 1857), p 4.

Gaskell's Unitarianism was heartfelt, but not unquestioning. She was clearly drawn to the drama of the Church of England liturgy with its colourful clergy vestments and ritual, in contrast to the Nonconformist simplicity of the Unitarian church. Whilst toleration, balance, and fairness were an integral part of her nature, she cried out 'for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines, - about whh I am more & more certain we can never be certain in this world.' (Chapple and Pollard, p 537)

Millard argues convincingly that she was drawn towards the renewed interest in personal spirituality preached by Martineau, and the American Transcendentalism of which her close friend, Charles Eliot Norton, was a leading exponent. (Millard, p 9) This strand of Unitarianism drew on Romanticism and preferred individual insight to the dry intellectualism of the Presbyterians. Martineau's grounding of the spiritual in the everyday, his argument that 'a soul occupied with great ideas best performs small duties;' and his contention that even the highest intellects benefit from carrying out minor domestic tasks, appealed to Gaskell's own insistence on the importance of practical charity, a characteristic which found a natural outlet in her lifelong work with Sunday Schools.<sup>33</sup>

### **Unitarian Sunday Schools**

The revival of Unitarianism in the nineteenth century was characterized by the foundation in 1800 of the Unitarian Fund which enabled missionary work to be undertaken, particularly amongst the poor. A number of local book and tract societies were also established with similar aims. The Sunday School movement was part of this evangelical drive by both dissenters and the Church of England to change society through the education

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<sup>33</sup> Martineau, p 24. See also Chapple and Pollard, pp 548 – 549 for Gaskell's views on practical charity.

and development of individuals, although it started slightly earlier in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Holt points out that there were two kinds of Sunday School: one devoted simply to religious instruction, and the other which taught children to read so that they could read the Bible. (Holt, p 249) Lady Ludlow's aversion to any kind of school summarises the contention they aroused:

'Up to this time there was no Sunday-school in Hanbury. Mr. Gray's desires were bounded by that object. Mr. Horner looked farther on; he hoped for a day-school at some future time, to train up intelligent labourers for working on the estate. My lady would hear of neither one nor the other: '<sup>35</sup>

Unitarians were among the first to establish Sunday Schools, and never ones to shrink from controversy, included instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.<sup>36</sup>

Gaskell taught at the Sunday School attached to Brook Street Chapel in Knutsford from a relatively early age. Haldane claims that she was less than fourteen, and Chapple confirms that although the precise age at which she taught is uncertain, it is likely that she was between fourteen and fifteen years old.<sup>37</sup> On her marriage to William, her continued

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<sup>34</sup> See James Kay-Shuttleworth, ed Norman Morris, *Four Periods of Public Education as Reviewed in 1832, 1839, 1846, 1862 'Progress of Manchester since 1832'*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1973), pp 111 - 117 for a description of the Manchester and Salford City Mission.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Vol. 3, Novellas and Shorter Fiction II Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words (1852 -9)*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 176. See also Kay-Shuttleworth, p 441 for discussion of the ways in which the establishment of Sunday Schools led to the foundation of day schools.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Wade, *A Sketch of the Origin and History of the Lower Mosely Street Day and Sunday Schools*, (Manchester: Wood, Smith & Shaw, 1898), pp 3 - 4.

<sup>37</sup> Haldane, p 18 and Chapple, p 201.

interest in Sunday School teaching was one of the few areas in which she fulfilled William Turner's instructions as to the duties of a minister's wife.<sup>38</sup>

The Sunday School and day schools associated with Cross Street Chapel were located at Lower Mosely Street in Manchester. Travers Madge, a Manchester philanthropist and Unitarian Mission Visitor, was the driving force behind both schools. (Fryckstedt, p 70) He not only recruited Gaskell and the Winkworth sisters as teachers, but also edited the *Sunday School Penny Magazine* in which Gaskell's short stories, 'Hand and Heart' (1849) and 'Bessy's Troubles at Home' (1852) appeared. The Annual Conference of the Manchester District Sunday-School Association held in 1851 noted

'the continued publication and increased success of the "Sunday-school Penny Magazine", edited by Mr. Madge, the average monthly circulation of which had increased, during the past year, from 5,000 to 7,000; and it was gratifying to know that a part of this sale was among parties who differ in theological opinion from the editor and the great body of his supporters.'<sup>39</sup>

The work of the Sunday Schools was reported on regularly in the *Manchester Times*. The schools formed themselves into an association - the Manchester Sunday-school Union - and held regular meetings. On Friday 22 July 1853, the Rev W Traill, M.A. addressed the annual meeting on *The Model Sunday-school* which Gaskell may have attended although she was about to leave for France. (Chapple and Pollard, p 240) Traill

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<sup>38</sup> Chapple, p 384.

<sup>39</sup> *Manchester Times*, Saturday April 19th, 1851, Issue 257.

based his lecture on his personal experience of visiting Sunday schools throughout England and it is clear that the Pestalozzian methods advocated by Gaskell's associate Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth when he became the first secretary to the embryonic Ministry of Education in 1839, were by now well embedded into teaching practice, and, it is reasonable to assume, therefore were used by Gaskell herself. (Kay-Shuttleworth, p 298) Traill's thorough account starts with the school buildings which should be 'open and detached', 'light and cheerful' with efficient ventilation.<sup>40</sup> Children attending the schools should be examined to ensure that they were placed in the appropriate class. Regular examinations should be carried out to check progress and revision was encouraged. Traill discusses how teachers can use their eyes, hands and voices to support their educational aims: the eyes give the impression of ceaseless watchfulness and the hand should be used, not theatrically, but naturally, for emphasis. He stresses the importance of using appropriate language:

'Great simplicity of thought and speech should be studied. Be natural. Try to think as a child and to speak as a child. Be specific and not abstract; always put a case, and put before the children rather persons than principles, and illustrative anecdotes rather than vague remarks which they do not well apprehend.' (*Manchester Times*, Issue 493)

The Biblical allusion is clear, and sensitively and practically applied: 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child.'<sup>41</sup> Traill rather tentatively re-inforces his argument for simplicity of thought and language by suggesting that 'Perhaps

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<sup>40</sup> *Manchester Times*, Saturday July 23 1853, Issue 493.

<sup>41</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Authorized Version, I Corinthians, xiii, v 2.

the walls of all Sunday-schools should be hung with pictures.' (*Manchester Times*, Issue, 493) This suggests that the use of visual aids in teaching was perhaps not common, although Watts points out Priestley's encouragement to teachers to use illustrations. (Watts, p 37) Teachers are encouraged to involve the students in other ways, by giving them specific roles and responsibilities such as collecting the weekly subscriptions. Finally, Traill tells the teachers that they should hold a meeting after the school closes to discuss any issues or concerns. Traill focuses almost exclusively in his lecture on teaching methods and what might be described as institutional organisation. However, he is clear that 'the conversion of the scholars should be the great object of the Sunday-school teachers' efforts', although a prayer should never be longer than five minutes. (*Manchester Times*, Issue 493)

The regular reports in the weekly *Manchester Times*, published every Saturday, record the growth of the Sunday schools. In April 1847, for example, there were 20 schools belonging to the Manchester District Sunday School Association with a total of 4,301 scholars and 661 teachers, rising in 1851 to a total of 36 schools with 987 teachers educating 6,021 students.<sup>42</sup> The table below summarizes the available information for Lower Mosley Street and New Bridge Street Sunday Schools:

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<sup>42</sup> *Manchester Times and Gazette*, Saturday April 10<sup>th</sup> 1847, Issue 66, and *Manchester Times*, April 9, 1851, Issue 257.



<b>Manchester Times</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Total No. of scholars</b>	<b>Male Teachers</b>	<b>Female Teachers</b>	<b>Total No. of teachers</b>	<b>Total No. of schools</b>
June 14 1851, Issue 273			600 <sup>43</sup>			75	1 (Lower Mosley Street)
June 2, 1855, Issue 687	368	396	764	49	52	101	2
May 17, 1856, Issue 739			500			50	1 (Lower Mosley Street)
May 21, 1864, Issue 3437	295	353	648			53	1 (Lower Mosley Street)

Among the points of interest to note are the almost equal number of boys and girls who attended the Sunday-schools, and the equal gender balance of the teachers. The teacher/pupil ratio would be considered generous by today's standards: one teacher to ten pupils for example in 1856. Even in 1864, when the number of teachers at Lower Mosley Street had reduced by about one third from 1851, the teacher/pupil ratio was still one to twelve. Since the average attendance at Lower Mosley Street Sunday school in 1864 was 439 (boys 240, girls, 199) out of a possible 648 students, this would reduce the ratio further to one teacher to eight students.<sup>44</sup> The statistics reinforce the size and professionalism of the Sunday School movement, the seriousness of the endeavour both in terms of spiritual and general education, and the scope of the resources that were dedicated to its delivery. The Special Correspondent of the *Morning Chronicle* acknowledged this in an article on

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<sup>43</sup> When joined by scholars from the associated Unitarian Sunday-schools at Strangeways and Miles Platting, the numbers 'could not have amounted to less than one thousand.' *Manchester Examiner and Times*, Saturday June 14, 1851, Issue 273.

<sup>44</sup> *Manchester Times*, Saturday May 21, 1864, Issue 337.

Manchester Sunday Schools: ‘“Were it not for the Sunday schools,” I have been over and over again assured, “Lancashire would have been a hell upon earth.”’ and their absence ‘would assuredly have resulted in the rush and clatter with which a vast manufacturing populace came surging up upon the land.’<sup>45</sup> His views mirror those of Kay-Shuttleworth who argued for the provision of education as a means of social control to combat working-class indolence, immorality, and radicalism, and to protect and maintain the hegemony of the gentry and the aristocracy. (Kay-Shuttleworth, pp 63 – 66 and pp 187 – 206)

The Sunday Schools with their associated day schools provided not just an education, but a sustainable way of life, and potential employment for their students. The *Manchester Times and Gazette* for 1847 reports on a specially convened meeting of the subscribers and supporters of the Lower Mosley-Street Schools who agreed to put forward six boys for assessment as pupil teachers.<sup>46</sup> Kay-Shuttleworth had set up a comprehensive training programme for pupil teachers which was closely linked to a government-sponsored expansion of the normal schools created by the religious societies. The training programme included free accommodation as well as scholarships to the training colleges and a salaried post.<sup>47</sup> The maintenance of this level of enthusiasm and activity was not without its difficulties. William Gaskell was present at the Annual Conference of the Manchester District Sunday-School Association in 1851 at which the committee reported back on the issues they had to contend with, principally financial concerns.<sup>48</sup> The Treasurer reported a

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<sup>45</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, November 17, 1849, Issue 6050.

<sup>46</sup> *Manchester Times and Gazette* Friday April 2, 1847, Issue 963. For a discussion of the training and role of pupil-teachers, see Kay-Shuttleworth, pp 483-486.

<sup>47</sup> Kay-Shuttleworth, pp 471 – 493, and Trygve R Tholfsen ed, *Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth on Popular Education*, (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1974), p 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Manchester Times*, Saturday April 9, 1851, Issue 257.

balance in hand of £14.6s.5d, which was not a great deal when spread among the 600 registered scholars.

Lack of funds however does not seem to have precluded the scholars from undertaking educational visits and having access to other perhaps less educational entertainments. An advertisement in the *Manchester Times* for Christmas Eve, 1858 offers an irresistible opportunity:

'Dr. MARK AND HIS LITTLE MEN will entertain the Children of the National, Public and Sunday Schools of Manchester and Salford, at the Corn Exchange, from January 10<sup>th</sup> to January 14<sup>th</sup>, inclusive'<sup>49</sup>

All the Sunday Schools took part in the annual Whitsuntide Procession through Manchester. Reports in the *Manchester Times* give an indication of the scale of this annual holiday, described in the opening to *Mary Barton*. The table below summarizes information for the Lower Mosley Street schools and indicates, where possible, Gaskell's movements:

<b>Manchester Times</b>	<b>Activities/places visited</b>	<b>Gaskell's whereabouts</b>
June 14, 1851, Issue 273	Service at Cross Street Chapel: service conducted by Revs. J.G. Robberds and W. Gaskell	May have attended. Letter mentions William at chapel in the afternoon. (Chapple and Pollard, p 156)
June 2, 1855, Issue 687	Ramble at Cheetham Hill Trip to Dunham Park Natural History Society Museum Visit to Wortley	Plymouth Grove, so may have attended
May 17, 1856, Issue 739	Service at Cross Street	London

<sup>49</sup> *Manchester Times*, Friday December 24, 1858, Issue 54.

	Chapel: address given by Rev. W. Gaskell Visit to the Park (High Sheriff's residence) Trip to Dunham Park Trip to the Botanical Gardens Trip to Frodsham	
May 21, 1864, Issue 337	Service at Cross Street Chapel Trip to Mr Ashton's, Didsbury Trip to Worsley Trip to Victoria Park Trip to Mr R. D. Darbyshire's Teacher's trip to Llangollen	Plymouth Grove, so may have attended

All Gaskell's daughters were involved in teaching at the Sunday School and day schools, and Meta and Julia contributed £50 towards the refurbishment of the school building in 1886. (Wade, p 17) Gaskell did not teach at the Sunday School but taught a class of adult girls and her servants at her house in Plymouth Grove on a weekday evening. Mrs Ellis Chadwick notes that the subjects she taught included literature and geography.<sup>50</sup> Gaskell's letters describe Meta learning to whip-a-top to show the boys at the Ragged School, and some of the girls were taught calisthenic exercises on the pragmatic basis that it would be good exercise for them as they worked so much in factories. (Chapple and Pollard, p 57 and p 89) The experience of teaching was not always so good humoured however. She writes to Catherine Winkworth in November 1848 that she had the Sunday School girls at home with Catherine's sister, Susanna to help her:

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<sup>50</sup> Mrs H Ellis Chadwick, *Mrs. Gaskell: Haunts, Homes and Stories*, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, 1910), p 255.

'I named an accidental five minutes conversation with one or two of the girls about Sir Walter Scott's novels [...] and Mrs J. J. Taylor is shocked at such a subject of conversation on a Sunday, - so there I am in a scrape,' (Chapple and Pollard, pp 63-64)

The Rev. John Taylor was the Unitarian Minister at Brook Street Chapel and became the principal of Manchester New College on its removal to London. Perhaps Mrs Taylor felt she had a position to maintain. Seed points out that Unitarians did not share the devout Sabbatarianism of most other dissenters which precluded any work or pleasure of any kind, which suggests that her reaction was unusual (Seed, p 138). At any rate, Gaskell's response is typical: 'I am myself and nobody else, and can't be bound by another's rules.' (Chapple and Pollard, p 64) Gaskell provides a comical fictional vignette of Sunday school teaching in *Ruth* where the very different teaching styles of Thurstan Benson and his sister are "assisted" by comments from Sally, working in the kitchen.<sup>51</sup>

### **A domestic faith**

There are a number of examples in Gaskell's fiction where characters receive some form of education in the environment of the home. As Webb points out, Gaskell does not directly proselytise. Unitarians were not evangelical in their faith, believing that everyone should find their individual truth, and she never uses the word 'Unitarian' in her novels.

Rather, she comments obliquely through the dynamics of the plot and the fate of her

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<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Deirdre D'Albertis ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 6: Ruth, (1853)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 114. 'Sally, too, put in her word of instruction from the kitchen, helping, as she fancied, though her assistance was often rather mal-apropos.'

characters. (Webb, p 161) She is more interested in Christian behaviour than in portraying Dissenters, in practice rather than doctrine.<sup>52</sup> In this way, her novels may be viewed as an exemplar of the Unitarian belief that education and spirituality should be integrated into everyday life, and that self-enlightenment and moral progress comes through constant reflection and analysis.

Thematically, *Ruth* (1853) describes the moral and spiritual journey of a young and innocent girl who is seduced. Gaskell was faced with two dilemmas in writing the novel: firstly, the choice of subject which she knew would be controversial, and secondly, how to portray Ruth's spiritual journey and redemption from a tolerant, Unitarian viewpoint. Gaskell attempts to portray in Ruth, a character who lives out a Unitarian Christology, that is, she seeks moral perfection, and hence redemption, through her own continuous struggle. She acknowledges her sense of sin but Gaskell makes it clear that she can atone for this through the actions of her daily life. The emphasis on practical service is a fundamental aspect of the Unitarian faith, summed up eloquently by William in his sermon on the death of Sir John Potter in 1858:

'To Society, therefore, from which we have derived advantages past telling, our duties cannot be either few or small. [...] We are every one parts of the community, and bound to do something for its welfare [...] the world beyond, whenever we come into contact with it, has a full right to our service, for it is the world of our fellow-beings; and our best instincts and feelings require that we should

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<sup>52</sup> Hilary Fraser, 'The Victorian Novel and Religion' in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Patrick Brantlinger and William B Thesing eds, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p 109.

acknowledge them as brethren, and treat them as such under all varieties of circumstance and condition. Every one, therefore, who disregards these claims, is unfaithful to society, to his country, to his race; and does violence to his own nature. ' (Gaskell, 1858, p 4)

He emphasizes the passion with which these beliefs are held by describing the neglect of duty to others as 'a kind of moral suicide.' (Gaskell, 1858, p 6) This puts Ruth's insistence on nursing Bellingham when he is delirious with the fever, which might otherwise appear as the ultimate act of self-negation, into a rather different context. As part of her journey towards spiritual redemption, Ruth has taken up nursing, a form of practical charity which Gaskell viewed as being the most effective, and she has exhausted herself, just as Gaskell and her daughters did during the famine in Lancashire caused by the American Civil War.<sup>53</sup> Ruth views her decision to put her own life at risk by nursing Bellingham/Donne as a duty she owes to the father of her child. Faced with this choice, she tries to explain the motivation for her action to the doctor, Mr Davis in a speech in which her confusion is reflected in a series of disconnected phrases broken up by dashes which represent her pauses for thought as she tries to work through her feelings. Her conclusion that she must go, makes it clear that the moral imperative of duty over-rides any other consideration. As William Gaskell asserts, her best instincts and feelings have over-ridden the anger and shame she has felt at her treatment. It is not an easy decision – Ruth talks 'heavily', and 'with dull persistency', but it is clear that for her to do otherwise would be to do violence to her own nature. (*Ruth*, Vol 6, p 326)

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<sup>53</sup> See Chapple and Pollard, p 707 and *Ruth*, Vol 6, p 318.

Ruth is supported by the Bensons, who are Dissenters, and by Sally, the servant, who is a fervent member of the Church of England. The novel therefore contains a number of over-lapping doctrinal ideas as Gaskell tries to make her passionately felt case for Ruth with what she knew would be a hostile reading public. In this sense, *Ruth* may be viewed as a microcosm both of Gaskell's own faith, and of the way in which Unitarianism was perceived by other dissenters and by the established Church. Webb convincingly challenges the view that Thurstan Benson is based on William Turner. (Webb. p 160-161)

Doctrinally, Benson lacks clarity and in particular, he fails to provide the clear chain of support and moral guidance that would place Ruth's redemption into a necessarian context, although this is exactly the path that is followed by the narrative. The motive for Ruth's self-education is her son: she educates herself in order to pass on her knowledge to Leonard in accordance with Unitarian beliefs. As Angus Easson notes, Ruth also receives daily lessons in practical morality in the Benson household and, like Sylvia's Bible readings with Alice in *Sylvia's Lovers*, these domestic experiences gradually waken her to a deeper understanding of her social and moral responsibilities.<sup>54</sup>

Latin is one of the subjects in which John Thornton in *North and South* (1855) receives tutoring from Mr. Hale. Priestley valued Greek and Latin, but believed that they should only be part of learning. (Watts, p 43) Gaskell's father, William Stevenson, who was the classics tutor at Manchester Academy wrote a pamphlet in 1795 called *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning*. Stevenson, who was probably the model for Mr Hale, gave up his positions as a clergyman at Dob Lane Chapel and classics tutor

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<sup>54</sup> Angus Easson, 'Noah's Arks and Birds' Nests: Domestic Space in *Ruth*', in *Elizabeth Gaskell: Text and Context*, ed Francesco Marroni and Alan Shelston, (Pescara: Tracce, 1999), pp 97 – 98.



because of his doubts about religion and about the value of a classical education. A generation later, the *Monthly Repository* was still arguing for parents to give their children a general, rather than a classical education, stating that:

‘Valuable as are the compositions which they offer, considered as models of style, there are good writers in the modern languages who may serve both to form the taste and increase the judgment, perhaps as well as the classical authors; while they present information on almost all the topics which have a bearing on real life, immeasurably superior to any thing that can be found even in Aristotle or Cicero.’

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Both sides of the debate about the educative value of the classics in which Unitarians engaged are illustrated in *North and South*, a debate which formed part of a wider social and cultural discourse about the tension between a contemplative scholarly life based on the Hellenic values espoused by Arnold, for example, and the dynamic commercialism of the new industrial age.<sup>56</sup> Thornton ‘was [...] considered a pretty fair classic [...] though my Latin and Greek have slipt away from me since.’<sup>57</sup> The implication is that, at least early in his life before his father died, he received the sort of education that would have been expected of a middle-class gentleman. In this sense, therefore, he is a fit partner for Margaret. However, he and his mother both express robust doubts about the value of a dead language in the utilitarian struggle for existence: ‘Classics may do very well

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<sup>55</sup> Unattributed, ‘Thoughts on Education’, *Monthly Repository and Review of Theology and General Literature*, 3:25, January 1829, p 45.

<sup>56</sup> Alan Shelston, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell and the Sense of the New’, in Francesco Marroni and Alan Shelston ed, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Text and Context*, (Pescara: Tracce, 1999), p 31.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Vol. 7, North and South*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 82.

for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of today.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, pp 107 - 108)

Wendy Parkins notes that Mrs Thornton's robust dismissal of the classics identifies her with a masculine, urbanised culture and with an industrialised future, rather than the scholarly, unproductive past represented by both Mr Hale and Mr Bell, and Hilary Schor asserts that the novel's discussion of language, including Latin, is in the context of power.<sup>58</sup> Mr Hale however, is delighted to share his love of the classics. He subtly makes the point that they do have direct relevance to contemporary life when he intervenes in the increasingly heated discussion between Thornton and Margaret about how employees should be treated, with the assertion that they will study Plato's *The Republic* after finishing Homer. (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 113) In this, he has something in common with William Gaskell:

'In Mr. Gaskell's classes in Grecian history, the questions bore chiefly on the constitutions of Athens and Sparta; the peculiarities of the Ionian and Dorian races; [...] Homer, the origin of his poems, their characteristics, and the state of society which they reveal;'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Wendy Parkins, *Mobility and Modernity in Women's Novels 1850s – 1930s: Woman Moving Dangerously*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p 24, and Hilary M Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 139. Schor makes the same point about the education of Sylvia Robson, p 163.

<sup>59</sup> *Manchester Times*, Saturday January 24, 1857, Issue 775.

This suggests that William too, may have used the study of the classics to point out lessons which could be learned and applied to contemporary society.<sup>60</sup> This supposition is reinforced by the teaching Mr Hale undertakes, like William, at the Lyceum School which was set up for working men and their children.<sup>61</sup> Mr Hale takes the place of Thornton's dead father in the sense that he is providing him with an education. This is more than just 'book-learning.' Mr Hale quietly and consistently challenges Thornton's beliefs and acts as an intermediary to facilitate the relationship between Thornton and Margaret.<sup>62</sup> The relationship is reciprocal: Thornton educates Mr Hale in the mechanics of the engineering inventions which power the Milton economy.<sup>63</sup> In accordance with Unitarian belief, the Hales' home also provides Thornton with an alternative environment which offers a marked contrast to his own sterile, strictly utilitarian one where books are used to convey a veneer of gentility, but never opened, and where Fanny's inadequate acquisition of pianistic skills is valued over Margaret's lack of accomplishment. (*North and South*, Vol 7, pp 74, 106- 7 and p 133) The holistic Unitarian faith demanded that moral and spiritual values be reflected in the home environment to reinforce religious principles through association, hence the consistent emphasis in Gaskell's work on clean, bright, well-kept interiors.

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<sup>60</sup> See Philip Rogers, 'The Education of Cousin Phillis', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol 50, No 1, June 1995, p 37 for a similar defence of the classics used in daily life.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Shelston, 'Education in the Life and Work of Elizabeth Gaskell', *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, pp 62 – 63.

<sup>62</sup> See Tatsuhiko Ohno, 'Statistical Analysis of the Structure of *North and South* in the Quest for Standard Interpretation', *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, p 121 – 122 for a statistical analysis of Mr Hale's role as a mediator in the plot of *North and South*.

<sup>63</sup> *North and South*, Vol 7, p 78. See also Rogers p 29 for a discussion of a similar relationship between Pastor Holman and the inventor, Manning.

Sylvia Robson's home in *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) is comfortable, clean and warm.<sup>64</sup> Sylvia however is wilful and spoilt, particularly by her father. She is uneducated, academically, morally and emotionally, and completely resistant to change.<sup>65</sup> Like Marianne Gaskell, she is intellectually lazy and disinclined to apply herself to mental, rather than physical activity. (Chapple and Pollard, p 544) When her cousin Philip Hepburn offers to tutor her, her antipathy to the intellectual challenge of the lessons is strengthened and complicated by her instinctive aversion to him and his sexual desire for her. The oral histories of her father and Kinraid have more effect on Sylvia than Philip's attempts at teaching, as though actions, rather than books, are truly authored and authoritative. The only instruction she will accept is in geography because it enables her to think about Charley Kinraid, the specksioneer. Philip finally gets her attention when he draws a map in charcoal on top of his aunt's immaculate dresser. The use of a visual aid, just as Traill and Priestley suggest, make the teaching method appropriate to the aptitude of the pupil and Sylvia is 'in her best mood towards him; neither mutinous nor saucy;' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 89) The destruction of the clean dresser top is, however, symbolic.

Although the Robsons home is clean and well maintained, it is not associated with any spiritual or moral integrity. Daniel's life continues to be guided by memories of his whaling days with their physical excitement and adventure. Bel manages her domestic tasks competently, but is ineffectual in the management of her daughter and has little influence over her headstrong personality. Neither of the Robsons appear to have any kind

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<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Vol. 9, Sylvia's Lovers*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p 36.

<sup>65</sup> See John Beer, *Romanticism, Revolution and Language: The Fate of the Word from Samuel Johnson to George Eliot*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p 187 for a discussion of the Wordsworthian influences on Gaskell's presentation of Sylvia's character.

of faith: indeed, the local vicar is shown as a moral coward who is unable to find any appropriate words about the death of the sailor who is killed by the press gang. (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 59) Even the Foster brothers, upright Quakers, take part in smuggling. It is Alice, also a Quaker, who, by teaching Sylvia to read using the Bible, enables her to overcome her literal and spiritual illiteracy to control and channel her passionate nature. Duthie notes that whilst the importance of education for all Gaskell's heroines is never in doubt, its purpose is to educate them for living and that it is the associative moral influence of character and example in family life that matters most. This is well illustrated by Alice's intervention, which provides the instruction which Sylvia did not receive from her own parents.<sup>66</sup>

Phillis Holman's character and home environment in 'Cousin Phillis' (1864) offer a complete contrast to that of Sylvia. Spirituality and an awareness of faith are integrated into daily family life, and Phillis is receiving as broad an education as possible, given the isolated location of the farm. Her study of Italian is consistent with the Unitarian recognition of the importance for both sexes of modern foreign languages and her academic work is fitted in alongside her domestic duties: like Emily Brontë, Phillis prepares food and reads at the same time.<sup>67</sup> Yet throughout the novella, there is constant tension between Phillis's almost visceral need for education, and her relegation to a more confined, domestic role which runs counter to the Unitarian doctrine of equal access to educational opportunity for both sexes. Claire Pettitt, who is interested in the ways in which Gaskell

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<sup>66</sup> Enid L Duthie, *The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell*, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980), p 120.

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Linda Hughes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Vol. 4, Novellas and Shorter Fiction III: Cousin Phillis and Other Tales from All the Year Round and the Cornhill Magazine 1859 - 64*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p 391, and Linda H Peterson ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Vol. 8, The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p 89.

explored versions of scientific progress in an attempt to find a scientific paradigm which could encapsulate her desire for social change, convincingly argues that where the paradigm breaks down, failure is always projected onto a female character.<sup>68</sup> Phillis's exclusion from the masculine, scientific discussions between her father, Manning and Holdsworth denies her thirst for knowledge, and the constant repression of her real nature and intellectual needs contributes to her feverish illness at the disclosure of the news about Holdsworth's marriage. Pettitt argues that the somatic figuring of Phillis which persists throughout the narrative, symbolizes the pressure Victorian women experienced from the dominant paradigm of separate spheres, but 'Cousin Phillis' also demonstrates Gaskell's ambivalence about the rise of feminist argument concerning the social position and education of women which was being conducted during the late 1850s and 1860s.

Gaskell's friend, Harriet Martineau, for example, wrote an article on girls' education in the *Cornhill Magazine* of November 1864 in which the fourth episode of *Wives and Daughters* also appeared.<sup>69</sup> However, whilst Gaskell knew and admired several of the most prominent 'Langham Place' campaigners, including Barbara Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes who were both Unitarians, her support of their campaign was at best tentative and hedged about with personal reservations.<sup>70</sup> In 'Cousin Phillis', Phillis is allocated the feminine role of fetching the book on dynamics which will help the men in their conversation about the design of the turnip cutter. Yet the description of her involvement

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<sup>68</sup> Claire Pettitt, "'Cousin Holman's Dresser': Science, Social Change, and the Pathologized Female in Gaskell's 'Cousin Phillis'", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol 52, No 4, March 1998, pp 471 – 489.

<sup>69</sup> Harriet Martineau, 'Middle-class Education in England', *Cornhill Magazine*, X, November 1864, pp 549 – 568.

<sup>70</sup> Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton, April 5<sup>th</sup>. [1860] sets out Gaskell's ambivalence: Barbara Bodichon '[...] is illegitimate-cousin of Hilary Carter, F Nightingale, - & has their nature in her; though some of the legitimate don't acknowledge her. She is - I think in consequence of her birth, a strong fighter against the established opinions of the world, - which always goes against my - what shall I call it? - *taste* - (that is not the word,) but I can't help admiring her noble bravery, and respecting - while I don't personally *like* her.' Chapple and Pollard, pp 606 – 607.

in their discussion is telling: 'leaning over and listening greedily, with her hand on his shoulder, sucking in information like her father's own daughter.' ('Cousin Phillis', Vol 4, p 396)

Phillis is physically linked to her father by her hand on his shoulder, of which he is almost unconscious. Knowledge is as necessary and life-giving to her as milk is to a baby, and she clings to her father as her link to the intellectual pursuits from which she is excluded. The underlying tensions around education and gender are further complicated in that it is Phillis's father, rather than her mother, who is responsible for the range and choice of subjects for her education. As Rogers observes in his compelling discussion of 'Cousin Phillis', Holman has made Phillis a surrogate son in place of her brother who died when he was a baby and given her a masculine education. (Rogers, p 29) His wife is practical and domestic and resents, rather than admires the time her husband and Phillis devote to intellectual pursuits. Her desire to expunge Manning's design from her dresser represents her underlying frustrations and feelings of exclusion as well as her personal limitations. In one sense, she is as excluded as her daughter. Her cousin, Paul's father, is similarly dismissive of Phillis's acquisition of Greek and Latin, which Paul clearly views as an indicator of gender:

'You see she's so clever – she's more like a man than a woman – she knows Latin and Greek.'

'She'd forget 'em, if she'd a houseful of children, ' was my father's comment on this.' ('Cousin Phillis', Vol 4, p 398)

Education, therefore, is regarded as belonging to men. The exchange of knowledge forms the basis of male social interaction: knowledge is power, and Phillis's acquisition of knowledge, and thus power, is carefully controlled and even censored. Pastor Holman, like Peter's father in *Cranford*, is emotionally unaware and Gaskell consistently views this as a damaging and potentially fatal weakness. Both Rogers and Pettitt note how science fails in 'Cousin Phillis', and Rogers further explores how the myrtle bog not only illustrates the men's physical failure to understand and manage the geographical environment through which they must lay the railroad, but also symbolizes their failure to understand Phillis. (Rogers, pp 33- 34) Pastor Holman's emotional detachment illustrates a common criticism of Unitarians that they were cold and unfeeling. Like Gaskell herself, he has by nature a

'prodigious big appetite' for learning. And he had a good appetite of his own for the more material victual before him. But I saw [...] that he had some rule for himself in the matter both of food and drink.' ('Cousin Phillis', Vol 4, p 388)

Like his daughter, who closely resembles him physically, and it can be inferred, emotionally, he is subject to a constant tension between his dual roles as pastor and farmer. (Rogers, pp 35 – 37) Uglow suggests that he could be modelled on Gaskell's father who was a Unitarian minister, a classical tutor at the Manchester Academy and an unsuccessful scientific farmer. (Uglow, pp 9 – 11) Phillis's experiences may therefore reflect something of Gaskell's own tensions and frustrations. When Paul's engineer father enthusiastically and unthinkingly draws his new model of a turnip-cutting machine on Mrs Holman's immaculate dresser, it is as symbolic of catastrophic change as Philip's depiction of the



map of the world is for Sylvia. It is also an assertion of masculine power within the feminine confines of the home. According to John Geoffrey Sharps, the character of Manning is based on the inventor Nasmyth whom Gaskell visited with Catherine Winkworth in March 1856. Winkworth reports that:

‘Mr Nasmyth showed us his room and models, and gave us a lesson in geology, illustrated by impromptu diagrams drawn on the wall, alternately with a piece of white chalk and a sooty fore-finger.’<sup>71</sup>

Gaskell however makes some significant changes in the transposition of observed reality to fiction. Nasmyth takes his visitors into his own room and writes on the wall in chalk and soot which can be easily cleaned off or painted over. Manning on the other hand, is in the feminised house-place, the kitchen-parlour at the heart of the farmhouse and takes a still burning stick from the fire, that most potent cultural symbol of domesticity. He waits for it to cool and then moves to the hardwood dresser upon which he proceeds to draw a model of his new turnip cutter ‘for his pocket-book pencil was not strong or bold enough for his purpose.’ (‘Cousin Phillis’, Vol 4, p 396) Although Gaskell turns the moment into domestic comedy by contrasting the absorption of the men in their discussion with Cousin Holman’s anxious and covert attempts to remove the marks on her dresser, the incident is nevertheless indicative of a masculine assumption of power and control and, as Pettitt notes, of the way in which change and scientific progress invades even the sanctuary of the home. (Pettitt, pp 474 – 475)

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<sup>71</sup> John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell’s Observation and invention: A Study of her Non-biographic Works*, (Fontwell: Linden Press, 1970), pp 429 – 430.

Phillis's emotional and sexual education has been unwittingly neglected, her blossoming into maturity is unacknowledged and unrecognized by her parents and this leaves her vulnerable to Holdsworth.<sup>72</sup> Holdsworth's careless help with Phillis's Italian translation is not underpinned by any moral stability, and the trauma of her enforced journey to maturity is ironically hinted at by his choice of *I Promessi Sposi* as better reading material than Dante for her study of Italian. ('Cousin Phillis', Vol 4, p 46)

In the next chapter, I explore Gaskell's presentation of servants, including the figure of the children's nurse, who offered an alternative model of parenting within the home.

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<sup>72</sup> See Rogers, pp 27 – 50, for a discussion of the sexual associations of the name Phillis in the classical texts Gaskell refers to.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE INVISIBLE HAND: SERVANTS IN GASKELL'S SHORTER FICTION

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Gaskell uses the unique position of servants within the Victorian home to comment on a range of social relationships and a changing society. Gaskell's fiction is almost exclusively concerned with the portrayal of working and middle class lives. In this context, it is servants who straddle the cultural and social divide between the classes, sharing domestic space and tasks in an often uneasy relationship which negotiates a tenuous path between the vulnerability and intimacy of both employers and employed.

The nineteenth-century saw an expansion in the demand for domestic servants to meet the needs of the emerging middle classes who viewed the employment of servants as an essential mark of their newly acquired social status.<sup>1</sup> Service was the largest occupational category after agricultural work, and more people were employed in domestic work than in factories or in any other sector of the economy.<sup>2</sup> Census returns for 1851 show that large numbers of employers were small tradesmen who mostly employed a maid-of-all-work, and by 1871, almost two thirds of the 1.2 million female servants, (nearly 13% of the female population of England and Wales), were classed as 'general'. (Horn, p 18) The majority of these servants were employed as maids-of-all-work, whose solitary working environment was very different to the experience of

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, New York: St Martin's Press, 1975), p 22, and Frank E Huggett, *Life Below Stairs*, (London: John Murray, 1977), p 13.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Higgs, *Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale 1851 – 1871*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1986), p 1, and Moira Donald, 'Tranquil havens? Critiquing the idea of home as the middle-class sanctuary', in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd eds, *Domestic Space: Reading the nineteenth-century interior*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p 104.

working in a large, hierarchically ordered establishment.<sup>3</sup> Isabella Beeton recognised their isolation and drudgery: 'The general servant, or maid-of-all-work, is perhaps the only one of her class deserving commiseration: her life is a solitary one, and, in some places, her work is never done.'<sup>4</sup> Such servants played a crucial role in the Victorian home, protecting the occupants both from the war against dirt, which was relentless, unremitting and physically gruelling, and from the intrusion of the outside world. (Higgs, p 3) Culturally therefore, servants may be viewed as occupying an ambiguous interstitial space between the internal and the external, the seen and the unseen. Most servants lived with middle class families and were necessarily an intimate part of family life, yet were expected to be 'socially invisible.'<sup>5</sup> As Margaret Hale observes in *North and South* (1855):

'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 start into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them.'<sup>6</sup>

Karen Chase and Michael Levenson point out that this ambiguity expressed a discourse of tension associated with servants. They were drawn from the working classes, who, en masse, posed an uncontrolled and apparently uncontrollable social, political and economic threat. Yet as servants, they infiltrated into the heart of the domestic refuge, acting as 'a disciplined squad [...] whose role was to protect home life

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class families in England, 1850 – 1910*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp 56 - 59, and Higgs, p 53.

<sup>4</sup> Isabella Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, (London: Ward Lock, 1863), p 1001.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008), p 11.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay ed, *North and South* (1855), Volume 7, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 338.

from the very disruptions which they exemplified.’<sup>7</sup> In larger, more aristocratic homes, this tension was managed by rendering servants anonymous. Employers thought nothing of changing servants’ names arbitrarily, or of giving the same name to successive holders of a position, whatever their real names might be. Servants were also marked out by their uniforms. Maids were put into uniform for the first time in the nineteenth-century as a means of differentiating them from their mistresses, particularly those in the aspiring middle classes who had newly entered the servant keeping classes. Leigh Hunt’s light-hearted account of a common complaint about servants’ dress and appearance perhaps masks a more complex discourse about the effects of exposing young working class girls to the social and cultural expectations of the middle-classes:

‘In her manners, the maid-servant sometimes imitates her young mistress; she puts her hair in papers, cultivates a shape, and occasionally contrives to be out of spirits.’<sup>8</sup>

Maids were often given their mistress’s cast off clothes as well as lengths of cloth to make their uniforms, initiating a series of confused and conflicting tensions around power and control versus individual freedom.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, cast offs must have been preferable to the painful clash of cultures and taste at which Gaskell, probably among the more liberal of employers, visibly winced - ‘Caroline has on an atrocious print today, great stripes of crimson, blue & brown’.<sup>10</sup> In general, nineteenth-century

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, ‘On the Parapets of Privacy’, in Herbert F Tucker ed, *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), p 429.

<sup>8</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The Old Lady and The Maid-Servant*, (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd), 1929, p 22.

<sup>9</sup> See Mariana Valverde, ‘The Love of Finery: Fashion and The Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol 32, Pt 2, 1989, p 182 for a detailed discussion of conflicts around class and power triggered by servants’ dress.

<sup>10</sup> John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 546.

employers sought to control every aspect of their servant's identity and appearance, including their religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Increasingly, even fairly modest homes attempted to physically separate servants from their employers, and this paradigm was incorporated into theories of design such as those of the architect Robert Kerr:

‘Let the family have free passageway without encountering the servants unexpectedly; and let the servants have access to all their duties without coming unexpectedly upon the family and visitors.’<sup>12</sup>

In Gaskell's own house in Plymouth Grove, the dining room has three doors, one of which leads into the kitchen and servants' quarters. There are back stairs and a separate entrance for the delivery of goods so that the servants can indeed perform their tasks invisibly. The differentiation of the door in the dining room which leads into the servants' quarters is very subtle. Like the other two doors in the room, it is four-panelled, but the panels have no moulding. The ceilings in the kitchen and servants' quarters are also lower than those in the rest of the house.

It was the servant who negotiated and facilitated the social interactions of the family and who had to become familiar with the often complex codes of visiting,

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<sup>11</sup> Liz Stanley ed, *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p 32 and John Seed, 'Theologies of power: Unitarianism and the social relations of religious discourse, 1800 – 50', in R J Morris, ed, *Class, power and social structure in British nineteenth-century towns*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), p 137.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kerr, 'On the Problem of Providing Dwellings for the Poor' *RIBA Proceedings*, 1871, *The English Gentleman's House*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., (London: John Murray, 1871), p 68.

including the elaborate etiquette associated with visiting cards.<sup>13</sup> They were often present, even in middle-class homes, at key events in the lives of the families they served. Julie Nash describes, for example, the way in which a team of servants gently and tactfully informed Maria Edgeworth about the death of her friend, the Duchess of Wellington, and Gaskell's son Willie, as described in Chapter 1 of this thesis, died in a servant's arms. (Nash, p 116) Yet at the same time, many employers like the Gaskells, particularly those in smaller, middle-class homes, were not comfortable with the intrusion of a live-in servant, even when they offered exceptional skills and experience. In a letter to her daughter Marianne of 22 November 1852, Gaskell remarks:

‘We did think of a very first rate German governess, [...] who could teach music & singing, German, French Italian & what not, - but we dislike having a governess in the house to break our privacy as a family,’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 212)

Gaskell's comment illustrates the daily tensions which had to be negotiated in the contract between servant and employer. As Elizabeth Langland points out in her re-assessment of the cultural discourse around Victorian politics and economics, the presence of servants in the home meant that women, far from being protected within the domestic sphere, were in fact dealing with the complex issues of labour management which were part of a wider debate in the nineteenth-century as society grappled with the emergence of a capitalist economy.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the majority of middle-class employers, this would have meant a woman having to undertake face to face negotiations with her employee. The continuing dialogue throughout *North and South*

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House*, (London: Harper Collins, 2003), p 278.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p 14.

about the supply and demand of labour, the management of conflict, and the proper treatment of employees therefore finds a direct counterpart within the confines of the home. The employment of even one servant was an essential mark of social acceptability and Gaskell's light-hearted fictional accounts of the familiar relationship between single women and their sometime far from competent maids recognises this.<sup>15</sup> Yet this did not preclude mistresses from having to undertake some domestic work themselves, since most households only employed one servant, and the work was too much for one person. Mrs Ellis was no doubt making a virtue of a necessity when she stated that if a woman

‘wishes to stand at the head of her household, to be respected by her own servants, and to feel herself the mistress of her own affairs, [...] she must be acquainted with the best method of doing everything upon which domestic comfort depends.’<sup>16</sup>

Thea Holme discusses the continual problems Jane Carlyle had with servants, and the necessity of her and her mother undertaking many of the domestic chores themselves, and Nash refers to Florence Nightingale's comments in *Notes on Nursing* (1860) in which she advises middle-class women to demonstrate the proper way to clean to their

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<sup>15</sup> Nash, p 20. See also Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction I* *The Moorland Cottage, Cranford and Related Writings*, Volume 2, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), pp 221 - 222 for a description of the multi-tasking shared of necessity between Miss Betty Barker and her maid, and Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction II, Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words* (1852 – 9), Volume 3, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), pp 230 - 231 for Miss Galindo's preference for a servant with some infirmity who was incapable of carrying out 'a single duty usually required of a servant', but whose employment nevertheless enabled Miss Galindo to keep up the appearance of social respectability.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: their position in society, character & responsibilities*, (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1842), p 61.



servants.<sup>17</sup> Gaskell's letters contain a constant thread of commentary on the domestic chaos caused by the absence of servants on holiday, (she decides to try to do without fires to save work), new servants arriving, (pots and pans have to be scoured before the new cook comes), or the washerwoman not turning up, keys being lost and having to manage a stream of visitors. (Chapple and Pollard, p 154, p 603, and pp 635 – 636) It is hardly a picture of domestic calm.<sup>18</sup>

It was not only the management of servants that was a potential cause of tension. Contemporary writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis recognised the importance of focused activity as a means of warding off affective depression triggered by domestic confinement and social and cultural expectations:

‘I have strongly recommended exercise as the first rule for preserving health; but there is an exercise in domestic usefulness, which, without superseding that in the open air, is highly beneficial to the health, both of mind and body,’ (Ellis, p 204)

Ellis is alluding to the dangers inherent in employing servants which could create what Frank Huggett describes as an excessive dependence of women on both servants and others in general, resulting in the atrophy of emotional, intellectual, and physical powers.<sup>19</sup> Ellis is firm in her advice:

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<sup>17</sup> Thea Holme, *The Carlyles at Home*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p 18 and Nash, p 26.

<sup>18</sup> See also Donald, pp 110 – 111 for a discussion of the amount of work involved in being the mistress of a middle-class establishment.

<sup>19</sup> Frank E Huggett, *Life Below Stairs*, (London: John Murray, 1977), p 12.

‘I am aware that I incur the risk of being considered amongst young ladies as too homely in my notions [...] when I so often recommend good old-fashioned household duties; yet, I believe them, nevertheless, to be a wholesome medicine to both body and mind’. (Ellis, pp 325 – 326)

This advice is echoed by Mrs Loftie, whose reliably robust views link practicality with the familiar trope of domesticity as an enhancement of feminine beauty and attractiveness. The lady of the house, she asserts:

‘must not be ashamed of being seen in a cooking apron or even with a duster in her hand. Mr. Ruskin thinks every young lady should take charge of a corner of the dining-room, and keep it as bright as a bit of a Dutch picture for her own sake as well as for an example to the housemaid. Certainly the best way to have good servants is to show them we care enough about order and cleanliness to take the trouble to secure it with our own hands if necessary.’<sup>20</sup>

Gaskell is clearly of the same mind, for example, in her depiction of Mrs Carson in *Mary Barton* (1848):

‘Mrs Carson was (as was usual with her, [...]) sitting up-stairs in her dressing-room, indulging in the luxury of a head-ache.[...] Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both. It would have done her more good than all the ether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of swallowing, if she might have taken the

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<sup>20</sup> Mrs Loftie, *The Dining Room*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878), p 128.

work of one of her own housemaids for a week; made beds, rubbed tables, shaken carpets, and gone out into the fresh morning air without all the paraphernalia of shawl, cloak, boa, fur boots, bonnet, and veil, in which she was equipped before setting out for an 'airing,' in the closely shut-up carriage.'<sup>21</sup>

The passage encapsulates a number of the issues discussed in this chapter. There is little difference in class, education, and upbringing between Mrs Carson and her servants. Her new found wealth is an inhibiting factor rather than acting as a release to enable her to develop a richer and more fulfilling life. She uses self-medication both to dull her feelings and to cope with the boredom of her daily life. The smothering layers of clothes she puts on before entering the enclosed world of the carriage, further prevent her from engaging in any real contact with the external world. Her life is the epitome of the gilded cage in which so many Victorian women were trapped, and Gaskell's robust comments indicate her own impatience with the paradigm. The passive act of swallowing numbing medicine is contrasted with the vigorous actions of shaking and rubbing, and throwing off the restrictive clothing which prevents ease of movement and vision.

Gaskell's own relationship with her servants and her management of her home was both warmer and more active, and in this sense, as Nash notes, more typical of the eighteenth than the nineteenth century. (Nash, p 98) Like many of her contemporaries, she tended to recruit servants who were already known to her through personal

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Wilkes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton; A Tale of Manchester Life and William Gaskell Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect*, Volume 5, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 170.

contacts.<sup>22</sup> She formed a warm and close bond with many of them and took a personal interest in their lives. By the time the Gaskells were established in Plymouth Grove, they had acquired ‘five women-servants, and an out-of-doors-man, or gardener’ including the invaluable Hearn, the governess ‘as much one of the family as any one of us’ who stayed with the Gaskells for over fifty years, long after Gaskell herself died, and who became the backbone of the family, providing practical care and support and continuity during Gaskell’s increasingly frequent absences from Manchester. (Chapple and Pollard, p 618 and p 745) Hearn was present when Gaskell died and it is her name that appears on the death certificate as the informant of her death.<sup>23</sup>

Critics and historians have recognised that the feudal ideal of paternalism on which the hierarchical social structure of previous centuries was based, metamorphosed in the nineteenth century into a form of social paternalism in which wives, children and servants could all be described as dependent upon the figure of the pater familias.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Gaskell was a passionate advocate of an inclusive relationship between social classes in line with her Unitarian principles, but at the same time, she displays an interesting ambivalence in her essay ‘French Life’. She approves of the Parisian style of families and servants living in a large apartment on one level, which not only means saving the cost of at least one servant, but also has the moral advantage of mistresses and their servants living more like a family.<sup>25</sup> However, she moves on to recall a young married lady who came to live in London from the country, bringing with her, two of

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<sup>22</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp 263 - 264, and Chapple and Pollard, pp 11 - 12 and p 59.

<sup>23</sup> See Christine Lingard, ‘A Dear Good Valuable Friend’ in *The Gaskell Society Newsletter*, Autumn 2011, Number 52, pp 20 – 23 for an account of Hearn’s life.

<sup>24</sup> See for example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English middle class 1780 – 1850*, (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p 21 and Nash, pp 11 - 29.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, Volume 1, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 362.

her Sunday school scholars as servants. She is unhappy with their living conditions ‘in the depths of a London kitchen’ and prefers to keep them ‘under her own eye without any appearance of watching them; and besides this she could hear of their joys and sorrows, and by taking an interest in their interests induce them to care for hers.’ (‘French Life’, Vol 1, p 362)

There is an ambivalence in this passage with its suggestion that servants are essentially untrustworthy and therefore need watching, and the artificial creation of a relationship based on need rather than mutual regard. The tension lies in the fact that the employer/servant relationship is essentially a contractual one, masked here by a layer of paternalistic concern. Whilst there is no doubting Gaskell’s personal and genuine interest in her servants, equally, she could be ruthless when necessary in terminating their employment when they no longer met her needs. Thus she ensures that Hearn has the doctor when she is ill, tells Marianne that she must write home to ensure that the servants make the new housemaid welcome, and sends the maid off immediately to see her fiancé whose leg is crushed in an industrial accident. (Chapple and Pollard, p 162, p 164, and pp 633 – 634) But she has no hesitation in dismissing her governess, Ferguson, when she feels that her teaching of her daughters is inadequate, even though it was in Ferguson’s arms that her son Willie died. (Uglow, p 157)

In this chapter, I focus on Gaskell’s short stories and examine two aspects of her presentation of servants: firstly, the role of the children’s nurse and secondly her treatment of contemporary concerns about the honesty of servants.

### The children's nurse

The children's nurse is an important figure in both nineteenth-century fiction and society. Davidoff asserts that in households with young children, even when only one servant was employed, most of that servant's time would be taken up with caring for the children.<sup>26</sup> In many cases, the nurse would be a young girl, from a different background to that of her employers, but who nevertheless exercised an immense influence over the children in her care. This could lead to tension. Gaskell says that William tells her she is 'not of a jealous disposition' but notes, rather ruefully, that her eldest daughter, Marianne, 'shows a marked preference for Betsy; who has always been as far as I can judge a kind, judicious, and tender nurse.' ('The Diary', Vol 1, p 11) As with her earlier comments in 'French Life', the phrase 'as far as I can judge', displays a certain ambiguity and doubt as to how Betsy behaves when Gaskell is not with her. In a sense, the issues of power, conflict, and trust which underlie the employer/servant relationship could be said to coalesce around the figure of the children's nurse, since it is she, more than any other servant, who mirrors her employer, being, as Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy describes, 'half-parent, half-servant.'<sup>27</sup>

This duality is found in the figure of Nancy, the old servant in 'The Moorland Cottage' (1850). Critics have identified the Wordsworthian influences in the isolated setting and the importance of the landscape in the emotional lives and development of the characters, and Gaskell herself acknowledges her debt to 'German forest-tales'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, (Cambridge: Policy Press, 1995), p 109.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nanny*, (London: Weidenfeld, 1993), p 77.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 2: Novellas and Shorter Fiction I, The Moorland Cottage, Cranford and Related Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p ix and p 5.

The story opens in the idyllic setting of the Browne's isolated farm as the family make their way to church. Nancy is introduced to the reader as 'Old Nanny' and although she walks behind Mrs Browne and Edward, 'they were all one party and all talked together in a subdued and quiet tone, as beseemed the day.' ('The Moorland Cottage', Vol 2, p 5) These few sentences set the tone and narrative themes of the story. Mrs Browne and her son are the powerful figures in the family and lead the way. The grouping together of Nancy and Maggie, although a realistic reflection of their relationship, (Nancy, as Old Nanny, looks after Maggie), also suggests that child and servant hold a similarly powerless position within the hierarchy of the family. They walk behind Mrs Browne, the titular head of the household, and her son, who, as the only male, will assume proprietorial rights over both the property and its inhabitants. Gaskell underlines this quietly in the next sentence, by confirming that Mrs Browne is a widow. The opening paragraphs, which seem to present a calm, pastoral paradise, in fact contain an unconventional family grouping already holding within itself the seeds of the elemental catastrophe with which the story concludes. In terms of the social paternalistic paradigm, there is no pater familias, and it is Mrs Brown and Nancy therefore who must provide moral and spiritual guidance for the children.

The death of Mr Browne also has financial consequences for the family. They can only afford to keep one servant, the minimum necessary for social respectability, and this has practical implications:

'The cow, the pig, and the poultry took up much of Nancy's time. Mrs. Browne and Maggie had to do a great deal of the house-work; and when the beds were

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made, and the rooms swept and dusted, and the preparations for dinner ready, then, if there was any time, Maggie sat down to her lessons.’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p 7)

As a Unitarian, Gaskell would be concerned at the low priority given to Maggie’s education. It would be the responsibility of Mrs Browne to give Maggie her lessons as part of preparing her for adult life, and she is clearly neglecting this as Mrs Buxton notices later, and takes steps to remedy. Edward (Ned), on the other hand, ‘who prided himself considerably on his sex, had been sitting all the morning, in his father’s arm-chair in the little book-room, ‘studying,’ as he chose to call it.’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p 7) The theme of Maggie’s inappropriate treatment and exclusion from her proper place in the family which is both hierarchical and gender based is further developed when Maggie spills the water she is carrying:

‘Perhaps I am clumsy. Mama says I am; and Ned says I am. Nancy never says so, and papa never said so. I wish I could help being clumsy and stupid. Ned says all women are so. I wish I was not a woman. It must be a fine thing to be a man. Oh dear! I must go up the field again with this heavy pitcher, and my arms do so ache!’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p 7)

Nancy is aligned with Maggie’s dead father as a source of kindness and emotional support. She recognises and acknowledges Maggie’s innate qualities and characteristics. Yet as a servant, she does not have the authority to alter the balance of power within the family, although she does challenge Mrs Browne’s assumption that she does not know how to deal appropriately with visitors. Neither does she have the



formal education to meet Maggie's needs. Maggie's internal dialogue therefore expresses a complex pattern of unmet need and the paradox of her situation: she is clumsy and stupid because she has not been educated, not because of her gender or because of innate inability. She has not been educated because she has to carry out the hard and heavy work of a servant. Of the two people who could help her, one is dead and the other, a servant, has limited power and authority.

The arrival of Mr Buxton marks a significant change in Maggie's life and his entrance into the house weaves together and further develops the narrative themes. Mrs Browne and Edward have disappeared to make themselves presentable for the visit, leaving Maggie and Nancy bustling in and out of the dairy and kitchen. Mr Buxton, finding the front door open, makes his way past the public space of the parlour, which is empty, through to the working area of the kitchen. Although Gaskell points out that an open front door is customary in country places, it is nevertheless the job of the servant to mediate the entrance of visitors into the family. Mr Buxton's uninvited presence in the home has echoes therefore of the fairytale romance, pre-figuring the role his family will have in 'rescuing' and re-habilitating Maggie. He is a large male presence in this family of women and children, and his well nourished appearance indicates his power, status and authority. The working kitchen, into which Mr Buxton squeezes his large frame, is physically demarcated from the public areas of the farmhouse by a low lintel, and it is significant that Mr Buxton is able to make the transition with pleasure, if with a little physical discomfort:

‘he stood there, stooping a little under the low-browed lintels of the kitchen door, and looking large, and red, and warm, but with a pleased and almost amused expression of face.’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p 10)

His treatment of Maggie may be interpreted as a continuation of the fairy tale theme. Like Cinderella, she is ‘disguised’ as a servant when he first sees her, but he recognises her true self: ‘And so, you are a notable little woman, are you?’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p10) Mrs Browne re-enters at this key moment, having not only changed her cap, but also her gown, leaving Maggie to retreat to the kitchen, re-asserting their respective roles. Nancy immediately re-balances the power by smoothing Maggie’s hair: ‘it was all that was needed to make her look delicately neat.’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p10) This is of course precisely the maternal role which Mrs Browne should have fulfilled and re-inforces the themes of disguise, jealousy, and resentment which constitute the dynamics of relationships within the family. Gaskell’s choice of adjectives, ‘delicately neat,’ subtly indicate that Maggie’s true nature and status cannot be concealed or buried, however harsh her treatment and this is borne out as the narrative develops.

The pivotal role Mr Buxton is to play in Maggie’s life is indicated in his next conversation with her where her two roles, as maid-of-all-work and daughter of the family are elided, and the transition from the one to the other suggested:

‘Suppose you come to my house, and teach us how to make [gingerbread.] And we have got a pony for you to ride on, and a peacock and guinea fowls, and I don’t know what all.’ (‘The Moorland Cottage’, Vol 2, p 11)

She will gain entry to his house through her practical skills, but once there, will take on her true role as the equal to his own children. Mr Buxton's visit precipitates a family conference which includes Nancy. She has an important role in the discussion and also in the narrative as she is able to provide additional information for the family and for the reader about the Buxton family.

Nancy's role as surrogate mother continues during Maggie's visits to the Buxton household, easing her transition from quasi-servant to young lady. It is Nancy who persuades Mrs Browne to allow Maggie to take her rides with Frank Buxton, and Gaskell is disingenuous in her authorial assertion that 'I don't know why Mrs Browne should have denied it for the circle they went was always within sight of the knoll in front of the house, if any one cared enough about the matter to mount it, and look after them'. ('The Moorland Cottage'. Vol 2, p 22) There is a scarcely concealed criticism implicit in the phrase 'if anyone cared enough about the matter' that strikes at the heart of Mrs Browne's self-indulgent and careless mothering. Mrs Buxton mirrors Nancy in providing an alternative mother figure for Maggie, but one who is more appropriate to her social status and who can supply the gaps in her education which Nancy cannot. Nancy's parallel role as pseudo-mother is illustrated by her full participation in the discussions about Maggie's engagement to Frank Buxton. It is significant that she is the person who has embroidered the linen and, like Mrs Thornton when she thinks her son will marry Margaret Hale, will be the one to alter the initials embroidered in red cotton. It is Nancy who tells Maggie the truth about her brother and his excessive spending, as a result of which, Maggie, like Margaret Hale, is forced to take on parental responsibility, and write to Edward to remonstrate with him. Nancy and Maggie work together to

reduce the household expenditure and to deal with the crisis brought about by Edward's eventual prosecution. Nancy's role in the family and her dual position as both servant and surrogate mother is recognised and respected by the Buxtons. Erminia, acting as their representative says: 'I've come to take care of your mother. My uncle says she and Nancy must come to us for a long, long visit.' ('The Moorland Cottage', Vol 2, p 78) Nancy and Mrs Browne are accorded equal status in the linking of 'mother' with 'she and Nancy'.

In 'The Moorland Cottage', Gaskell explores the intricately entwined figures of servant and parent, their roles and responsibilities and the effect of this on children. Whilst the focus of this discussion has been on Nancy's influence on Maggie, the parallel theme within the story is the disastrous effect of Mrs Browne's weak parenting of her son. Throughout the story, Gaskell weaves a thread of implicit and continuing criticism of Mrs Browne as a mother, expressed indirectly through the actions and responsibilities undertaken by Nancy, the faithful servant who has been with Mrs Browne since her marriage.

Parental authority and control are also a central theme in 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852). The narrator is once again, a faithful old servant, a children's nurse who is telling her charges about their family history. The opening sentence is reassuring:

‘You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I dare say you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman up in Westmoreland, where I come from;’<sup>29</sup>

The story will be a comfortable re-telling of things the children already know, by the familiar, secure adult of the title: the old nurse. Only the passing mention of the fact that their mother was an orphan, with its suggestion of isolation and sadness, and that their grandfather comes from a county unknown to them, hints at darker themes.

Hester, the narrator, looks back to when she was ‘just a girl in the village school.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 3) It was common for girls to begin work as young as 7 or 8, usually with simple cleaning jobs, and by the early 1880s, Horn asserts that approximately one third of girls between the ages of 15 and 20, most of them country born and bred, were employed as domestic servants. (Horn, p 48) In *North and South*, for example,

‘Dixon’s ideas of helpful girls were founded on the recollection of tidy elder scholars at Helstone school, who were only too proud to be allowed to come to the parsonage on a busy day,’<sup>30</sup>

Dixon’s preference for a literate young servant, like the choice of Hester as nursemaid, is, as Fernandez notes, ‘teasingly ambiguous’.<sup>31</sup> The professionalization of domestic management supported by innumerable advice manuals meant that by mid-

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction II, Round the Sofa, and Tales from Household Words (1852 – 9)*, Volume 3, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 3.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay ed, *North and South* (1855), Volume 7, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p 67.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Fernandez, *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy*, (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p 81.

century, literacy was a desirable qualification for a servant. Yet as Fernandez asserts, literacy needed to be domesticated and controlled:

‘The cult of domesticity that established the home as a spiritual and cultural sanctuary suggested a possible space where a wholesome literacy could be acquired and practiced by the working classes, transforming them into an amenable citizenry.’ (Fernandez, p 3)

Hester’s proudly acquired scholastic skills therefore are juxtaposed against a much older oral tradition in which she fulfils a traditional and accepted role as a benign quasi-maternal narrator of bedtime tales. This already compromised trope is further unsettled by the transformation of a family history into a horrific supernatural tale of feudal violence. Fernandez further notes the complex inversion of a number of narrative expectations: it is the aristocrat rather than the servant who is seduced and gives birth secretly, hiding the child in a farmhouse, and the father of the child who is an employee of the family:

‘Hester’s proficiency in uncovering such a narrative intimates to the Victorian reader the sinister side to class relations within the domestic sphere, and its consequences for the reworking of conventional plots, when the household employees exceed their masters in knowledge, skills, and social grace.’  
(Fernandez, pp 81 – 82)

The unsettled nature of the narrative is suggested from the beginning of the story.

Hester’s job initially is a happy one. She and her mistress form a close bond and when

both of her employers die suddenly, little Miss Rosamond, now aged four or five, is left in her care, even though Hester herself is not eighteen. Gaskell moves the story, in its opening paragraphs, from life to death, from a stable, happy home environment for both employers and servants, to the isolation of a young girl, left alone with a small child.

The unfolding narrative illustrates Hester's powerlessness to influence events, since, 'before we had well stilled our sobs, [...] somehow it was settled' that she and Miss Rosamond would go to Furnivall Manor House in Northumberland. ('The Old Nurse's Story', Vol 3, p 4) However, Hester's own status is considerably enhanced by this move: she will be a 'young lady's maid', one of the most coveted of positions in a household and she is 'well pleased that all the folks in the Dale should stare and admire,' ('The Old Nurse's Story', Vol 3, p 4) At the end of the second paragraph of the story therefore, another of the major narrative themes is introduced: that of pride linked to social status. The narrative is further de-stabilized by Hester's discovery that they are not to live in the house in which Rosamond's mother grew up, but are to be sent instead to the unknown Furnivall Manor House. Hester obtains this information from Lord Furnivall's manservant, who does his best to re-assure her by describing the Manor House as 'a very grand place' and 'very healthy.' ('The Old Nurse's Story', Vol 3, p 4) This appeals both to Hester's personal ambition and to her anxiety for Rosamond. The family's lack of care for Rosamond, or indeed for the young servant in whose care she is left, is re-inforced by what Hester leaves unsaid as much as by what she does tell the reader. There is no discussion of Rosamond's education or of any provision being made for her beyond that of her entertaining old Miss Furnivall. Lord Furnivall himself never speaks more than is necessary. He leaves his manservant to escort Hester and Rosamond to the Manor House telling him to be back at Newcastle

that same evening ‘so there was no great length of time for him to make us known to all the strangers before he, too, shook us off;’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 4) The themes of pride and isolation are drawn together in a telling sentence:

‘We had left our own dear parsonage very early, and we had both cried as if our hearts would break, though we were travelling in my lord’s carriage, which I thought so much of once.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 4)

The servant and her young employer are two lonely, grieving, frightened children on their way from a secure, stable home to an unknown destination among strangers. Hester’s powerlessness is emphasised when the manservant tells her to wake up Rosamond who has fallen into an exhausted sleep as they drive up to the Manor House, so that she can see the park and house. She is forced to comply ‘for fear he should complain of me to my lord.’<sup>32</sup>

The use of the word ‘fear’ in this sentence is significant. It is the first time Hester has explicitly voiced feelings of anxiety about their change of home, and it is immediately followed by a description of the wild and lonely setting of the Manor House where nature itself seems to be closing in to destroy the building: ‘we saw a great and stately house, with many trees close around it, so close that in some places their branches dragged against the walls when the wind blew.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 5) The house is only clear at the front, suggesting the importance of appearance and status: ‘The great oval drive was without a weed; and neither tree nor creeper was

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<sup>32</sup> ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 5. Davidoff points out that ‘the majority of girls moved from parental control, in their parents’ home, into service and then into their husband’s home – thus experiencing a lifetime of personal subordination in private homes.’ (Davidoff, p 21).



allowed to grow over the long, many-windowed front; [...] for the house, although it was so desolate, was even grander than I expected.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 5) The tone of the narrative continues to darken as Hester and Rosamond enter the hall of the house which alone is so large Hester thinks they will be lost. The scale of the furnishings and fittings inside the Manor is huge and heavy, emphasising by contrast the emotional and physical vulnerability of the two young girls. The house is dark, without a fire, which contemporary readers would easily decode as meaning a home without warmth and security, and it contains many mysterious doors. An old servant leads them further into the complex internal layout of the manor to meet Miss Furnivall and her companion, the aptly named Mrs Stark, who appears the more formidable of the two:

‘She had lived with Miss Furnivall ever since they were both young, and now she seemed more like a friend than a servant; she looked so cold and grey, and stony, as is she had never loved or cared for any one; and I don’t suppose she did care for any one, except her mistress; and, owing to the great deafness of the latter, Mrs. Stark treated her very much as if she were a child.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 6)

This passage sets up the pattern of doubles and links which are entwined throughout ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’. The relationship between Miss Furnivall and Mrs Stark mirrors that of Hester and Rosamond. Miss Furnivall’s deafness is a metaphor for her pride, selfishness, and lack of care for her sister and her child. In an ironic reversal of roles, her deafness and age have now made her as helpless as a child and dependent upon her companion. The social and hierarchical distinctions between servant and employer have disappeared, and Hester and Rosamond are left ‘standing there, being

looked at by the two old ladies through their spectacles.’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 6) After the carefully placed Gothic references, (death, travel to a remote and unknown place, the old and decrepit manor house with its mysterious doors and passages), this is anticlimactic to the point of bathos. However, it is also a very necessary pacing of the narrative so that the climax of the story with its horrific exposure of cruelty and abuse of power within the Furnivall family retains its full impact. The reader, as well as Hester and Rosamond, needs some respite, and this is found in the sanctuary of the old nursery ‘with a pleasant fire burning in the grate, and the kettle boiling on the hob, and tea things spread out on the table;’ (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 6) Further re-assurance comes from the community of servants: Dorothy and Hester both come from Westmoreland, and Rosamond is soon ‘sitting on Dorothy’s knee, and chattering away as fast as her little tongue could go’. (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 6) Hester’s experience reverses the trope of the children’s nurse suggested by Gathorne-Hardy, that is, that the Nanny was suspended in an uneasy social and cultural limbo between the mother and the rest of the staff, not fully engaging with either. (Gathorne-Hardy, p 77) For Hester, the rest of the servants become a quasi-family for both her and Rosamond and provide links to a happier past. The relationship with the servants appears to release Rosamond, who acts as a catalyst to bring the house to life and to forge links between all the inhabitants: ‘Kitchen and drawing-room, it was all the same. The hard, sad Miss Furnivall, and the cold Mrs. Stark, looked pleased when she came fluttering in like a bird’. (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 7)

It is the servant Dorothy who begins to reveal the secret of the Furnivall family. Hester and Dorothy together turn round the picture of Miss Furnivall’s sister ‘that leaned with its face towards the wall, and was not hung up as the others were.’ (‘The

Old Nurse's Story', Vol 3, pp 7 – 8) It is at this point in the story that the organ is heard for the first time, as if the servants' talk and actions have unlocked the secrets that the family has tried so hard to contain. Fear dominates the narrative and Hester, once again, has to overcome her pride, and talk to Agnes, the kitchen-maid, 'though I had always held my head rather above her, as I was evened to James and Dorothy and she was little better than their servant', since Dorothy is too frightened to tell her any more. ('The Old Nurse's Story', Vol 3, p 8), The Gothic elements of the story now predominate as the guilty past is no longer able to be repressed, and Gaskell has to find a narrative form that will allow her to tell a brutal tale of male patriarchal tyranny and violence, female cruelty, class antagonism and gender inequality.

Hester, as narrator, now takes a more distanced stance, simply re-counting events as she experiences them as a spectator. It is Rosamond, the living child who sees and communicates with the ghost-child, who now takes an active role in the story as it moves towards its denouement. This transfer of narrative power from servant to child is precipitated when Hester loses Rosamond and searches for her frantically throughout the house. In an ironic and complex interplay of symbolic and actual roles in the real world and in the spirit world, Hester, Rosamond's surrogate mother, loses her in the house which belongs to her dead mother's family, who seek both to reclaim her and to destroy her. Rosamond becomes the focus of the power struggle between the Furnivall sisters, one living and one dead, and the means by which their original contest is re-enacted and finally resolved. In this elemental struggle, it is Hester who saves her. It is notable that Miss Furnivall, once again, ignores the claims of the child, linked to her by family ties, and Hester who, although Rosamond is almost convulsed by her efforts to join the spirit child, holds her 'tighter and tighter, till I feared I should do her a hurt;'

(‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 18)<sup>33</sup> The structural narrative pattern of repetition and return, is, as Matus argues in her consideration of Dickens’s ‘The Signalman’, a signifier of unassimilated experience and strong emotion – what would now be described as trauma.<sup>34</sup> Gaskell’s concluding sentence, ‘What is done in youth can never be undone in age!’ underlines the importance of a proper upbringing with the appropriate moral education. (‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, Vol 3, p 19) It neatly joins the narrative circle with the opening of the story which suggests that Hester’s actions have ensured that Rosamond has a happy and fulfilling life. Fernandez also notes the continuing ambiguity expressed in the conclusion, in that Miss Furnivall’s words could refer equally to the betrayal of her sister and the subsequent death of both her and her child, or to her own desire for the music master, but comments that Gaskell both raises anxieties and soothes them as the servant’s narrative is domesticated as family reading within the confines of *Household Words*. (Fernandez, p 84)

‘The Old Nurse’s Tale’ concludes apocalyptically with the disintegration of the Furnivall family and the breakdown of class structures. ‘Morton Hall’ (1853) explores this theme further in that it portrays the breakdown of traditional social and cultural values as seen by two old retainers. The story opens at a point of radical change when the old Morton Hall is going to be demolished. This local event, of seemingly minor importance, is aligned with the Repeal of the Corn Laws, setting the tone for the story

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of Dickens’s views on the end of the story, see Annette B Hopkins, ‘Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell’, *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 9, 1946, pp 354 – 355.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p 100.

which consistently uses turbulent times of national unrest, such as the Civil War, as a metaphor for decline and renewal of both society and individual families.<sup>35</sup>

The narrators of this story, the Sidebotham sisters, are not, strictly speaking, servants, but tenant farmers on the Morton estate. Although they are in a feudal relationship with the Morton family, they are proud of the fact that their farmhouse is about a century older than the Hall. Socially, they are on a par with the high status housekeeper who comes to drink tea with the family. The account of the Sidebotham sisters frames the main part of the narrative, which deals with the violent religious disputes of the Civil War. The Mortons, far from deserving the almost mythological status accorded to them by the Sidebothams, are revealed, in this palimpsest, to be cruel and abusive, particularly to women. The lives of the Sidebothams are so dominated by this misplaced feudal devotion, that although their mother says that they cannot afford mourning dresses when their little brother dies, when the housekeeper at the Hall dies, 'it became a sort of duty we owed to the Squire's family to go into black, and very proud and pleased Ethelinda and I were with our new frocks.' ('Morton Hall', Vol 3, p 32) The Mortons' fortune is finally squandered by the young squire, and he and Miss Phillis, the last descendants of the family, live in squalor and starvation. Eventually, social conventions break down. Gaskell describes in 'The Last Generation in England' (1849) the way in which aristocratic ladies

'refused to meet in general society the ci-devant housekeepers, or widows of stewards, who had been employed by their fathers and brothers, they would occasionally condescend to ask, 'Mason,' or 'that good Bentley,' to a private

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<sup>35</sup> Louise Henson also discusses the Darwinian resonances of this story. Louise Henson, 'History, Science and social change: Elizabeth Gaskell's 'evolutionary' narratives', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 17, 2003, pp 16 – 18.

tea-drinking, [...] but that was patronage;’ (‘The Last Generation in England’, Vol 2, p 92)

Miss Phillis’s obvious hunger gives Bridget Sidebotham the courage to offer her tea and Miss Phillis admits that she and her cousin are indeed starving.<sup>36</sup> The change in attitude and behaviour however comes too late and Miss Phillis dies a few days later, followed by her cousin. A new generation comes to Morton Hall and the Sidebothams find out about the family from the maid, newly promoted from a maid-of-all-work, with whom they begin to socialise. Changing times are indicated by their entry through the front door of the Hall and the Sidebothams growing confidence in their status: ‘going, however humbly, to pay our respects and offer our reverential welcome to the Miss Mortons, we took rank as their visitors, and should go to the front door.’ (‘Morton Hall, Vol 3, p 43) Eventually, they are given the key of the Hall whenever the Mortons leave home and the old feuds begun in the Civil War are resolved when the Mortons’ niece marries a descendant of the Puritan Alice Carr who inhabited Morton Hall during the inter-regnum.

### **The good and faithful servant**

The honesty of servants was a common anxiety in the nineteenth century and fuelled what Chase and Levenson describe as ‘a discourse of suspicion’. (Chase and Levenson, p 428) Huggett points out that thefts by servants accounted for the largest total loss of property in the Metropolitan Police area in 1837 (Huggett, p 65) and Gaskell ironically comments, ‘I am sure that if I were a servant, & suspected and things

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<sup>36</sup> See Raphael Ingelbien, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘The Poor Clare’ and the Irish Famine, *Irish University Review*, Vol 40, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2010, pp 1 – 19 for a discussion of the ways in which this short story reflects on the Irish Famine.

locked up from me &, I should not only be dishonest, but a very clever thief.’ (Chapple and Pollard, p 488) She explores this pre-occupation in three of her short stories, starting with ‘Right at Last’ and ‘The Manchester Marriage’ both published in 1858, in which servants are wrongly accused of stealing.<sup>37</sup>

‘Right at Last’ was originally published as ‘The Sin of a Father’ in *Household Words*, 27 November 1858. The change of title, which occurred when ‘Right at Last’ became the opening piece in a collection of Gaskell’s short stories published in 1860, indicates the real focus of the narrative which is on the servant-employer relationship. The story opens with the marriage of Margaret Frazer to a young doctor. The marriage is opposed by Margaret’s guardians on the grounds that the blandly named Dr James Brown is unknown to them and therefore cannot be ‘placed’. Margaret’s insistence on marrying him despite this, isolates her from her guardians and creates the necessary tension and narrative interest to engage the reader. Money becomes an important issue. There were significant cultural and social pressures on Victorian men who had to establish themselves in a career before they could afford to provide properly for their wives and families. Contemporary readers would therefore immediately understand the implications of the newly-weds setting up home with two servants, including a man-servant. Employers were heavily taxed for the privilege of employing servants, and male servants were taxed more heavily than females. (Horn, p 9) Margaret, who is ‘a prudent and sensible girl [...] questioned the wisdom of starting in life with a man-servant; but had yielded to Doctor Brown’s arguments on the necessity of keeping up a respectable appearance’ (‘Right at Last’, Vol 3, p 94), and Gaskell subtly conveys

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<sup>37</sup> See Avarind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), for a modern interpretation of this theme.

unease about this paragon of a servant who is both an excellent practical handyman and carpenter, and domestically accomplished.

Financial pressures, linked to Doctor Brown's insecurity about the status and appearance of the home he is able to provide for his wife, affect the happiness of the newly married couple. These tensions are mirrored by a feud between Crawford and Christie, the old female servant who has long been connected to Margaret's family. This domestic power struggle would have been common in Victorian households, and Margaret attributes Christie's vague accusations, which she is unable to substantiate, to jealousy. Although money continues to be an issue, the popular, successful Doctor Brown begins to make good progress in his career. He remains however 'the most anxious person in his family', although he is strangely unconcerned by their household bills which 'amounted to more than even the prudent Margaret had expected,' ('Right at Last', Vol 3, p 96) The climax of the narrative is anticipated by the entry of Crawford bringing tea into the consulting room in which the Browns are sitting 'for the better economy of fire.' ('Right at Last', Vol 3, p 97) He earns a sharp reprimand from Margaret, who is concerned at the size of their debts, for the puffs of smoke coming from the chimney. The scene explicitly ties together the narrative's themes of money, the trustworthiness or otherwise of servants, and domestic happiness. It is the first time that Crawford has neglected his duties, and the admittedly unsubtle connection Gaskell makes between the servant and the smoking fire, provides a dual metaphor with diabolic as well as domestic associations.

The following morning however, the fire burns brightly, the sun is shining and all appears to be well, until Doctor Brown discovers that the money he has locked in his



bureau overnight to pay their bills has vanished. Suspicion immediately falls upon the servants. The charwoman is quickly eliminated from suspicion, as is the chimney sweep. It is Crawford who is arrested for theft, causing very different reactions in Doctor Brown and his wife. Margaret is more concerned to retrieve the money which has been stolen and thinks she must be very hard hearted not to suffer as her husband is evidently doing. The truth, it transpires, is that Crawford is not only a thief, but a blackmailer who has discovered that Doctor Brown's father is a convicted criminal. The tension Doctor Brown has experienced is a combination of the social stigma of being the son of a convicted criminal, and of the necessity of concealing this relationship which, if revealed, would make it impossible for him to earn a living. In addition, he lives with the fear that crime is hereditary. In this relatively simple short story therefore, Gaskell explores a number of complex contemporary themes. She uses doubles throughout the narrative to contrast and point up these themes. Crawford, the apparently competent, but dishonest manservant is mirrored by Christie, the less worldly, but loyal female servant. Crawford's origins, like Doctor Brown's, are unknown. Crawford, outwardly honest and above reproach, is a thief and blackmailer. Doctor Brown, tainted with his father's criminality, is both honest and honourable. Margaret untangles the dilemma by writing to Crawford, telling him that 'No threats can deter your master from doing his duty.' ('Right at Last', Vol 3, p 105) Her signature, Margaret Brown, clearly aligns her with her husband, and the Browns, aided by the faithful Christie, make a new start and finally forge a successful life together. The story, as Mitchell notes, is authenticated by the narrator's comment that 'last time I was in London, I saw a brass-plate with Doctor James Brown upon it, on the door of a handsome house in a handsome square.' ('Right at Last', Vol 3, p xiii and p 105)

The main plot of 'The Manchester Marriage', published in *Household Words* a month later (7 December 1858), anticipates Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* (1864) and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Like several of Gaskell's stories written during this period, it opens with a frame story which outlines the circumstances of Mrs Openshaw's first marriage, starting with the arrival of the Openshaws in London and moving backwards in time. The opening paragraph shows Gaskell confidently manipulating the tone of the narrative and the perceptions of the reader. Mr Openshaw is presented as a typical Manchester business man whose northern sense of hospitality means that 'he could hardly suffer a visitor to leave the house without forcing meat and drink upon him.' ('The Manchester Marriage', Vol 3, p 109) Although Gaskell is gently poking fun at provincial values, the paragraph concludes with the statement that 'Every servant in the house was well warmed, well fed, and kindly treated;' ('The Manchester Marriage', Vol 3, p 109), a social paternalism of which Gaskell clearly approves.

Norah is the loyal servant who stays with Alice Openshaw all through the difficulties of her first marriage when her husband disappears at sea, forcing Alice and her mother-in-law to take in lodgers, one of whom is Mr Openshaw. Norah's circumstances are as precarious as those of her mistress: she is forced to leave Alice briefly when Alice returns to live with her mother-in-law, but is re-employed when Alice discovers she is pregnant. The vulnerability of a servant's life, as well as the tenaciousness of the relationship between Norah and her mistress is clearly illustrated in this short episode. When Alice marries Mr Openshaw, further tensions arise: 'Norah and Mr. Openshaw were not on the most thoroughly cordial terms; neither of them fully

recognizing or appreciating the other's best qualities.' ('The Manchester Marriage', Vol 3, p 117)

When Alice's first husband, Frank, returns, having been presumed dead, he comes to the house at night when the Openshaws are out. The servants are no defence, and the housemaid is unable to protect the home and family. Frank easily invades the private areas of the household, and Norah, who initially fails to recognise him, thinks that he is a burglar. When she realises who he is, she is forced to tell him that he has a daughter and also that his wife has re-married. Frank is desperate, and Norah fearing both for her own safety and for that of her mistress, can only calm him by showing him his sleeping daughter. She then forcibly turns him out of the house and bolts the door behind him 'as if by bolts to keep out facts.' ('The Manchester Marriage', Vol 3, p121) The encounter shows Norah overcoming her own considerable fear and dealing competently with a half-deranged man she had believed to be dead, who has forced his way into the family home and threatens the stability and safety of her mistress. She has to keep the secret of Frank's return in order to protect her mistress, and is heard speaking harshly to Frank's daughter, who has seen her father, earning her a rebuke from Mr Openshaw. It is at this moment in the narrative that the point of view shifts from that of an omniscient author relating events, to a closer focus on Norah, and the effect on her of keeping her dreadful secret.

Norah's actions and decisions, and her enforced silence about events, lead to a twist in the narrative when she is accused of stealing a valuable brooch belonging to some guests of the Openshaws. The Openshaws think that the mysterious visitor of the previous night was Norah's follower, and that he is implicated in the theft. Gaskell here

is reflecting some common contemporary fears about servants, not without reason, since, as Horn points out, court records show legal action being taken by employers against servants for the theft of a wide variety of objects. (Horn, p 139) Followers were discouraged not only because they would distract a servant from her duties, but because the female servant was often used as a decoy to gain entrance into a home which the male accomplice would then burgle.<sup>38</sup> Norah's situation deteriorates with frightening speed from being a long-standing, trusted servant, to being accused of theft and threatened with prosecution and dismissal. Old rifts are re-opened with Mr Openshaw, misunderstandings increase, and the narrator is forced to intervene:

‘I do not think he had ever really intended to send for the police to this old servant of his wife’s; for he had never for a moment doubted her perfect honesty. But he had intended to compel her to tell him who the man was, and in this he was baffled.’ (‘The Manchester Marriage’, Vol 3, p 125)

Rather than reveal the fact of the return of Alice's first husband, Norah leaves home, and is only vindicated when the brooch is found by the Openshaw's visitors and Frank commits suicide. It is Mr Openshaw, the unlikely hero of this tale, who comes to find Norah and apologise to her and with whom Norah then shares the secret she has been keeping.

‘The Manchester Marriage’ is interesting in several respects, in that it challenges a number of common pre-conceptions about marriage, servants, class, and gender. Mr Openshaw, who appears to be the archetypal northern male, is shown to be thoughtful

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<sup>38</sup> See for example, Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, IV, (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861), pp 234–235.

and protective of his family and his servants, ensuring that both their emotional and physical needs are met. He shares the burden of carrying the secret of his wife's unknowing bigamy with a servant, and in doing so, learns to modify his behaviour, opinions, and prejudices. Mitchell further notes the significance of his business success and his decision to settle half of his fortune on his wife. The Openshaw's marriage remains invalid, despite the suicide of Frank and therefore Alice has no legal status as his wife. Mitchell comments that Gaskell's

‘apparent endorsement of his silence is interesting as a reflection of her views on the sacredness of the marriage tie. There are few mainstream mid-Victorian fictions which permit unwed couples to live together unpunished. It is conceivable that for some readers the implications of Openshaw's new ‘reverence’ for his wife could have included abstinence from sexual intercourse.’ (‘The Manchester Marriage’, Vol 3, p 454, n18)

Much of the narrative action and the moral argument of the story is carried by Norah, the servant, who becomes the focal point of interest and also mediates between the various members of the family. She is as strong a character as Mr Openshaw, so that, at the end of the story, they are able to take an equal share in bearing the burden of the secret.

The theme of the loyal servant who conceals a secret on behalf of his employers is taken to its extreme in ‘A Dark Night's Work’ (1863). Linda Hughes and other critics have noted the darkening in several of Gaskell's short stories which appeared around this time and an emphasis on love and betrayal, possibly motivated by the

breaking off of Gaskell's second daughter Meta's engagement to Captain James Hill, whose financial position was somewhat ambiguous.<sup>39</sup> 'A Dark Night's Work' appears to be a fairly conventional romantic tale which abruptly swerves into sensation fiction when Ellinor Wilkins's previously respectable father murders his partner in an alcohol induced rage. Ellinor helps her father and the faithful manservant Dixon to conceal the body, until years later, excavations for the railway uncover the body, and Dixon is charged with murder.

The relationship between Mr Wilkins and Dixon illustrates the tensions caused by the emergence of the middle classes and their struggle to carve out a clear social position. Gaskell uses the short first chapter of 'A Dark Night's Work', to succinctly outline this preoccupation of Victorian society and to suggest the negative impact of restrictive social codes and expectations upon individuals. She charts the progress of the Wilkins family across three generations, from the grandfather, who is a respected attorney, but who probably has no university education, to Mr Wilkins' father, who consolidates the business and becomes the principal lawyer in the county town, 'confidential friend to many of the surrounding families of distinction' but one who 'knew his place', to the education and future career of his son. It is at this point, that the smooth social and financial progress of the family is checked. Mr Wilkins recognises that his business is too successful to be placed in the hands of a stranger and so does not allow his son to receive the university education which would enable him to become a barrister, and thus achieve a higher social status. However, he has already been educated at Eton and it is

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Linda Hughes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction III, Cousin Phillis and Other Tales from All the Year Round and the Cornhill Magazine 1859 - 64*, Volume 4, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p viii.

‘a very severe mortification to him to find that his destiny was changed, and that he had to return to Hamley to be articled to his father, and to assume the hereditary subservient position to lads whom he had licked in the playground, and beaten at learning.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 210)

Mr Wilkins senior compensates for this disappointment by providing him with material indulgences, including making the Grand Tour, an experience usually enjoyed by aristocrats, and he returns ‘rather too refined for the society he was likely to be thrown into.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 210) Edward Wilkins is in effect a hybrid: over-educated for his station in life, but cleverer and more refined than those to whom he is socially subservient and whom he will have to serve in his role as local attorney. The potentially damaging effects of this are concealed by his education and natural abilities, but Gaskell’s analysis, which distinguishes between outward appearance and inward emotions, reflects the social and cultural dichotomy in which Edward finds himself and hints at the complex codification of behaviour and manners by which the Victorians attempted to define and control the concept of a gentleman. In narrative terms, it also provides motivation for his repressed anger which will ultimately end in murder.

The narrative continues with the story of Mr Wilkins’s marriage, the death of his wife shortly after the birth of his daughter, and the gradual decline of both the business and Mr Wilkins as he increasingly indulges in ‘aping the mode of life and amusements of the landed gentry.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 220) Mr Wilkins decides to employ a clerk to undertake the routine business and with the introduction of Mr

Dunster, the successful applicant, the point of view of the narrative shifts to Ellinor, and Dixon, the servant, is introduced to the reader. Dixon

‘had been her father’s playfellow as a boy, and with all his respect and admiration for his master, the freedom of intercourse that had been established between them had never been quite lost. [...] he was a great favourite, and could say many a thing which might have been taken as impertinent from another servant.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 222)

Their boyhood friendship has elided the class difference between them and has placed Dixon in a quasi family relationship with both Ellinor and her father. Dunster, the clerk on the other hand, who is introduced to the narrative at the same time as Dixon, is a ‘quiet, respectable-looking man; you could not call him a gentleman in manner, and yet no one could say he was vulgar.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 221) The two men are an interesting contrast and a comment on the complex codes of gentility. Mr Wilkins finds Dunster offensive. He speaks with ‘a provincial twang which grated on his employer’s sensitive ear’ and he wears a green coat which is an ‘obnoxious colour’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, pp 221 - 222) Yet Dunster is a conscientious and careful employee. Dixon, on the other hand, although ‘out of a completely different class’ is also ‘as loyal and true and kind as any nobleman.’ (‘A Dark Night’s Work’, Vol 4, p 222) As the narrative point of view shifts from that of Mr Wilkins to Ellinor, so too the focus sharpens on Ellinor’s relationship with Dixon and to a lesser extent with Miss Monro, her governess, who both become surrogate parents to her. The doll’s furniture Dixon makes for Ellinor for example, recalls William Gaskell’s manufacture of a toy kitchen and kites for his daughter. (Chapple and Pollard, p 58 and p 826) The



loyalty and love Ellinor and Dixon have for each other is contrasted with Ellinor's relationship with Ralph Corbett, who disapproves of her closeness to the old servant. It is Corbett however, who turns out to be faithless, and Dixon, in the crisis of the murder, who takes practical charge of events and acts to protect his master.

The murder of Dunster takes a physical and emotional toll on all three and alters the dynamic of their relationship. The sensational elements of the narrative come to the fore. Mr Wilkins ages overnight, his 'hollow sunken eye seemed [...] to have the vision of the dead man before it.' ('A Dark Night's Work', Vol 4, p 256) Ellinor becomes ill and Dixon grieves for the loss of his intimate relationship with his master who 'cuts through the stable-yard, and past me, wi'out a word, as if I was poison, or a stinking fougart.' ('A Dark Night's Work', Vol 4, p 260) What was once a healthy bond between all three, giving balance to Mr Wilkins's excesses and offering an alternative model of parenthood for Ellinor, has become warped by the secret all three unwillingly share. In this crisis, it is Ellinor and Dixon who become closer, and Mr Wilkins who becomes increasingly isolated from both of them:

'There was a strong bond between Ellinor and Dixon, although they scarcely ever exchanged a word save on the most common-place subjects; but their silence was based on different feelings from that which separated Ellinor from her father. Ellinor and Dixon could not speak freely, because their hearts were full of pity for the faulty man whom they both loved so well, and tried so hard to respect.' ('A Dark Night's Work', Vol 4, p 273)

Ellinor and Dixon become increasingly responsible for protecting Mr Wilkins and covering up his actions. After her father's death, Ellinor moves to East Chester, but Dixon refuses her offer of a home in order to continue to watch over Dunster's grave to ensure that the body is not dug up: 'I could never rest a-nights if I didn't feel as if I kept the secret in my hand, and held it tight day and night, so as I could open my hand at any minute and see as it was there.' ('A Dark Night's Work', Vol 4, p 300) This graphic image articulates the tight control which Ellinor and Dixon have to exercise over their emotions, speech and actions. The secret they share prevents Ellinor from marrying and Dixon from enjoying a secure old age and retirement. The intimate connection between them is expressed in Ellinor's cry when she hears of Dixon's arrest for murder: 'if he dies, I must die too.' ('A Dark Night's Work', Vol 4, p 311) When Ellinor visits Dixon in prison, we learn his Christian name, adding pathos to the picture of the frail old man, condemned to death for a murder he did not commit. The ironic resolution of the narrative, when Ellinor confesses the truth to her faithless lover, who is now the judge in charge of the case, unlocks the dilemma for both Dixon and herself, enables her to make a happy marriage and to offer a home to the faithful Dixon.

In the next chapter, I consider the ways in which Gaskell's detailed descriptions of interiors contain secrets of another kind – codified messages which offer an alternative interpretation of events and character.

## CHAPTER 5

### SEX, SECRETS AND STABILITY: DOMESTIC ARTEFACTS AND RITUALS

In this chapter, I explore the variety of ways in which Gaskell uses descriptions of domestic interiors in her fiction. Her draft letter to Herbert Gray about his recently published novel *The Three Paths*, outlined in a letter to her daughter Marianne in March 1859, makes clear her own emphasis on the importance of detail to substantiate a plot, and to ensure that character and narrative are so internalised by the author that they achieve a convincing reality, even when they are far removed from personal experience.<sup>1</sup> Monica Fryckstedt has convincingly demonstrated Gaskell's debt in *Mary Barton* to the *Reports of the Ministry of the Poor* which she used as a source to describe the worst kinds of cellar dwellings to which she almost certainly would not have had direct access.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Gaskell used this source material in *Mary Barton* creatively to support her narrative themes, internalising the details in the reports so that the objects themselves carry a value and meaning which is both integral to and separate from their setting. This was the pattern which she followed throughout her writing career. Thematically, some objects or settings recur in Gaskell's fiction, for example, the use of fire and windows as symbolic representations of morality and repression. Gaskell also uses domestic objects to comment obliquely on sexuality, or to indicate intimacy. The history of domestic objects mirrors that of their owners: for example, inherited artefacts such as Squire Hamley's watch represent stability, a link with the past and the security of continuity, whereas the loss of the Bartons' possessions as their

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<sup>1</sup> John A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp 541 – 542.

<sup>2</sup> Monica C Fryckstedt, *Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and Ruth: a challenge to Christian England*, (Stockholm : Almqvist, 1982), pp 90 – 97.

economic fortunes decline, is a stark symbol of the social and emotional displacement of poor families. I begin with the codified messages contained in the detailed descriptions of domestic interiors in *North and South* (1855).

In *North and South*, Gaskell uses descriptions of domestic interiors to ‘place’ Margaret Hale and to chart her journey from a limited and sheltered childhood to an adult appreciation of a wider social and cultural environment. Margaret’s progress towards maturity mirrors Gaskell’s own move from the sheltered middle-class comfort of Knutsford to her first home in Dover Street, Manchester, on the edge of the working class district of Ardwick. When Henry Lennox visits Margaret in Helstone to assess her suitability as his possible wife, he makes a careful appraisal of the drawing room into which he is shown:

‘The little drawing-room was looking its best in the streaming light of the morning sun. The middle window in the bow was opened, and clustering roses and the scarlet honeysuckle came peeping round the corner; the small lawn was gorgeous with verbenas and geraniums of all bright colours.’<sup>3</sup>

The open window, with the sun streaming in reflects the simplicity and honesty of the Hales, and the colour and vibrancy of the plants suggest Margaret’s exotic sensuality and fecundity, emphasised by the way in which the plants intrude into the house through the open window. This, together with Margaret’s nostalgic attachment to Helstone as a pastoral idyll, leads Lennox to mis-read her character as that of a conventional ‘angel in

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Jay ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 7: North and South*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 27.

the house', just as Thornton will later similarly mis-read her. But the bright light also illuminates the intrinsic financial poverty of the Hales:

'The carpet was far from new; the chintz had been often washed; the whole apartment was smaller and shabbier than he had expected, as the background for Margaret, herself so queenly.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 27)

The drawing room was simultaneously one of the most public rooms in the house and yet the most intimate in terms of its decoration. It was the space into which visitors were shown, and was therefore an important showcase for objects such as furniture and paintings which indicated the wealth and social status of the family. It was also an essentially feminine and intimate space, used as a private retreat by family members, in which tasteful artefacts made by women could be displayed as signifiers of their skill and ability to create an appropriate domestic environment. A whole industry developed around the production of these objects. A single volume of *Cassell's Household Guide* includes a plethora of articles on leather work, diaphanie (the art of imitating stained glass), imitating marble busts and statuettes in wax, paper flower making, feather screens and clay modelling.<sup>4</sup> The Hales' drawing room is clean: the upholstery is faded but washed, and the sunlight does not show up any dust or marks. Gaskell was typical of her contemporaries in persistently and explicitly associating cleanliness with high moral standards.<sup>5</sup> It is clear therefore, that the Hales, although poor, have high standards. Yet there is no indication of the drawing room as a setting

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<sup>4</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.* (London: 1869), Vol I, index.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, 'Lizzie Leigh', in Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Shattock ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. I: Journalism, Early Fiction and Personal Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 137, and Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*, (London: Harper Collins, 2003), p 77- 78.

for Margaret's decorative needlework, artwork, flower arrangements or any of the expected ornamentation. It is simple, uncluttered and old-fashioned, a comfortable domestic setting for the family. It becomes clear later in the novel, when Margaret visits the Thorntons that she has remarkably little in the way of traditional feminine accomplishments, her only apparent talent being for sketching.<sup>6</sup> Gaskell thus subtly indicates from the start of the novel that this is no conventional heroine, taught, like her cousin Edith, to display herself to her best advantage in the marriage market by the acquisition of suitable, decorative skills. In Gaskell's detailed description of the Hales' drawing room, it is the absence of objects, rather than their presence, that is telling.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, like Phillis Holman, Margaret is more interested in educating herself and in the rigours of debate, since, like Gaskell herself, she loves a good argument. Gaskell discusses the presence of books in a room in 'Company Manners', arguing that books should be part of the indispensable furniture of a successful salon, not something artificially chosen and displayed simply when visitors are expected. ('Company Manners, Vol 1, p 309) Dante's *Paradiso* is naturally integrated into the domestic furnishings of the Hale's drawing room, lying next to a dictionary and some vocabulary which Margaret has copied out. This simple collection of objects however contains a number of subliminal messages. Helstone appears to be a rural paradise, and Margaret's reading of the *Paradiso* is therefore an apparently apt choice.<sup>8</sup> The edition is an old one, 'in the proper old Italian binding of white vellum and gold'. (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 27) The binding indicates serious scholarship and authenticity, an

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<sup>6</sup> See Mary H Kuhlman, 'Education through experience in *North and South*', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 10, 1996, pp 14 – 26 for an alternative assessment of Margaret's skills.

<sup>7</sup> See Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850-1910*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp 86-87 for a discussion of the way in which Victorian handicrafts can be considered as a statement of feminine control of the domestic interior.

<sup>8</sup> See Francesco Marroni, 'The Shadow of Dante: Elizabeth Gaskell and 'The Divine Comedy'', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 10, 1996, pp 1 – 13 for Gaskell's use of Dante in this novel.

impression which is confirmed by the list of vocabulary lying alongside it which Margaret has copied out for further study. Lennox thinks the list dull, an indication both of his own superficiality, and of his mis-reading of Margaret, who is willing to apply herself to understand the text at more than a superficial level. Margaret's willingness to engage with the *Paradiso*, and the linking of the text with her immediate surroundings, prefigures the way in which she will engage with her new home in Milton, which appears at first to be socially and culturally alienating, and where she also has to learn a new industrial language. Finally, the appearance of the book suggests an association with the past and 'old money' for as Lennox remarks to himself, 'the Beresfords belong to a good family.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 27)

Lennox's cold-blooded scrutiny of the Hale's circumstances is the reaction of a worldly London lawyer. Margaret's powerful sexuality is indicated by the fact that he 'has been carried out of his usual habits by the force of a passion.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 32) This is contrasted with John Thornton's first visit to the Hales at their new home in Milton, where the detailed description of the drawing room into which he is shown consolidates and deepens the developing narrative themes. Coral Lansbury notes that Froude recognised the Hale's drawing room as a mirror image of his own, and asserts that Froude gave his employees in Manchester the same traditional scholarship that Thornton receives from Mr Hale:<sup>9</sup>

Here were no mirrors, not even a scrap of glass to reflect the night [...] a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz-curains and chair covers. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the

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<sup>9</sup> Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, (London: Elek Paul Books Ltd, 1975), p 107.

door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which dropped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places; and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white tablecloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 76)

Mirrors were considered to be an essential feature of Victorian drawing and dining rooms, usually being incorporated into an overmantle placed above the fireplace which then became the dominant decorative feature. (Flanders, p 156) Mirrors and gilding were intended to provide a decorative effect, particularly at night when the glow of gas and candle light would be reflected off the surfaces. Here, Thornton is aware only of softness, and a lamp which 'threw a pretty light into the centre of the dusky room, from which with country habits, they did not exclude the night-skies and the outer darkness of air.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 76) Unlike Lennox, who saw the drawing room at Helstone in the full glare of afternoon sunlight, Thornton enters a seductive nest, similar to the drawing room in Harley Street, where Margaret finds her cousin curled up asleep on the sofa in a tumble of muslin and blue ribbons. The shift from early afternoon to early evening suggests that Margaret has already progressed into a more adult role, as indeed she has, by taking on the full responsibility for finding and moving the family into their new home.<sup>10</sup> It is she who has taken the decision to light the lamp, indicating her position of authority in the household. The shabby, much washed covers have become 'the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers',

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<sup>10</sup> See Terence R Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell, "We are not angels": realism, gender, values*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p 107 for a discussion of the importance of time in *North and South*.



and the sober colouring suggests the moral seriousness and social status of the Hales in contrast to the ‘vulgarity and commonness’ of the wallpaper that was previously in the room – ‘Pink and blue roses, with yellow leaves!’<sup>11</sup>

Margaret’s reaction to the floral wallpaper reflects contemporary discourse about colour and pattern as wallpapers and carpets began to be mass-produced and took over from stencilling, which had virtually disappeared by the mid 1870s. Helen Smith notes the proliferation of publications from mid-century onwards offering advice on interior design which ranged from articles in professional magazines such as *The British Architect*, to guidance in manuals like *Cassell’s Household Guide*.<sup>12</sup> This was a response to the Great Exhibition of 1851, after which issues of taste and design began to be widely discussed.<sup>13</sup> Charles Eastlake and Owen Jones were two influential writers who inveighed against the way in which fashion dictated taste, and Jones was instrumental in founding the Department of Practical Art in 1852 which sought to improve the design and production of domestic objects.<sup>14</sup> Together with the formidable Mrs Loftie, who thought that Mrs Gaskell’s remarks on dining (in ‘Company Manners’) were ‘so good we must quote a little piece’<sup>15</sup>, they outlined the basic tenets of good design, which, for wallpaper and carpets, insisted on a flat design for a flat surface:

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<sup>11</sup> *North and South*, Vol 7, p 63. See Marjorie Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, (Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), for a discussion of taste in *North and South*.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Smith, *Decorative Painting in the Domestic Interior in England and Wales c1850 – 1890*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), p 228.

<sup>13</sup> Nadine Rottau, ‘Everyone to his taste’ or ‘truth to material?’: the role of materials in collections of applied arts’ in John Potvin and Alla Myzelev eds, *Material Cultures, 1740 – 1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), p 71.

<sup>14</sup> Charles L Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details*, (Boston: James R Osgood and Company, 1872), p 11 and Owen Jones, *On the True and the False in the Decorative Arts: Lectures delivered at Marlborough House June 1852*, (London: 1863), pp 17 -18.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs Loftie, *The Dining-Room*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878), p 104.

‘commonsense points to the fact, that as a wall represents the flat surface of a solid material, which forms part of the construction of a house, it should be decorated after a manner which will belie neither its flatness nor solidity. For this reason all shaded ornament and patterns, which by their arrangement of color give an appearance of relief, should be strictly avoided. Where natural forms are introduced, they should be treated in a conventional manner, i.e. drawn in pure outline, and filled in with flat color, never rounded.’ (Eastlake, p 116)

Owen Jones gives a vivid picture of the sort of wallpapers Margaret found so offensive, complaining about the difficulty of finding a wallpaper that was not both three dimensional and luridly un-naturalistic:

‘Either we have large masses of conventional foliage, in high apparent relief, surrounding masses of unbroken colour, or representations of flowers, fruits, and ribbons twisted into the most unwarrantable of positions: nothing is more common than to find strawberries and cherries, or other equally impossible combinations, growing on the same stalk; and although great pains are taken to make the fruits and flowers as much like nature as the paper-stainer’s art can make them, this imitative skill only increases the inconsistency.’ (Jones, p 78)

Wallpaper should act as a background, ‘and nothing on it should be obtrusive or advancing to the eye.’ he stated, advice that was re-iterated in *Cassell’s Household Guide* which informed its readers that although wallpapers were generally provided by

landlords for their tenants, 'a landlord's tastes in art matters are by no means to be implicitly relied upon', and

'it is not improbable that this gratuitous decorative feature will be one which it would be unwise to regard as the key-note, [...] By far the wiser plan, therefore, if the paper be of an unsatisfactory design, [...] is to have it immediately replaced with one which is in every respect, agreeable, and based on the sound principles already explained.'<sup>16</sup>

The seasonal display of leaves in the drawing room signifies a tasteful response to nature, illustrating not only Margaret's personal nostalgia for the lost paradise of Helstone, but also a wider need within Victorian society to maintain connections with the natural world that were threatened by the industrial revolution, and the concomitant loss of a rural past.

'If you live in the country, or can get into the country, and have your eyes opened and your wits about you, your house need not be condemned to absolute bareness. Not so long as the woods are full of beautiful ferns and mosses, while every swamp shakes and nods with tremulous grasses, need you feel yourself an utterly disinherited child of nature, and deprived of its artistic use.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.*, (London: 1869), Vol II, p 200.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine E Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, (New York: J B Ford: 1869), p 94.

Eve argues that Gaskell was familiar with *The Language of Flowers*, originally published in France in 1818, which spawned over 150 similar dictionaries.<sup>18</sup> In the language of flowers, ivy represents fidelity and friendship, suggesting the positive benefits of a connection between Margaret and Thornton.

The Hales' drawing room is an essentially feminine space, typical of the period with its scatter of small tables and workbaskets. The open davenport and books, clearly being used and read, indicate a family actively engaged in literary activities:

In a parlour, books ought to have an honoured place. It is where the family work and play; and instead of being allowed to appear untidy and neglected, it should represent that culture and refinement which is now happily within the reach of almost every one however poor.' (Mrs Loftie, p 76)

However, the choice of food on the table is interestingly exotic. The piles of fruit on leaves echo Lennox's visit when Margaret 'made a plate for the pears out of a beetroot leaf, which threw up their brown colour admirably', (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 30), a stylistic presentation admired by Mrs Loftie who asserted that 'if fresh leaves of the fruit can be had as garnishing they are a great addition.' (Mrs Loftie, p 126) Oranges and coconuts are visual evocations of far-flung destinations in the Empire, and in this context, can also be seen as an early hint of Frederick's return from exile.

The Thornton's home, where Mrs Thornton sits in a 'grim handsomely-furnished dining-room' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 73), is in sharp contrast to that of the

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<sup>18</sup> Jeanette Eve, 'The Floral and Horticultural in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 7, 1993, p 2.

Hales.<sup>19</sup> There are no books ‘with the exception of Matthew Henry’s Bible Commentaries, six volumes of which lay in the centre of the massive side-board, flanked by a tea-urn on one side and a lamp on the other.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 74) Valentine Cunningham notes that the reference to Henry, an authoritative non-conformist theologian, may have hinted at the modelling of Thornton on Samuel Greg, the Gaskell’s industrialist friend, who was a distant relative of Henry.<sup>20</sup> The choice of spiritually improving reading matter, God, the water of life and the light of the world ironically positioned, as Wendy Craik notes, between mundane domestic objects, raises questions about the uses of traditional literacy in a mercantile world.<sup>21</sup> The biblical commentaries also emphasize the rigid conventionality of the Thorntons and are perhaps in addition, a comment on what was considered suitable reading material for women.<sup>22</sup> The solidity of the furnishings and the harsh functionality of the room suggest a masculine environment in which Mrs Thornton, with her large-boned frame, is competently at ease. Her prosperity is indicated by her ‘stout black silk, of which not a thread was worn or discoloured.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 74) Yet the fine needlework in which she is engaged, which requires a delicate and sensitive touch, hints at a more empathetic side to the character of the firm, dignified woman whose face and character are apparently equally impassive and unyielding.

Gaskell, like Mrs Loftie, is acutely aware of the way in which domestic objects, such as table linen, are imbued with memory and history: ‘In old times a lady took pride

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<sup>19</sup> See Lorna Huett, ‘Commodity and collectivity: *Cranford* in the context of *Household Words*’, *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 17, 2003, p 47 for a discussion of the similar use of domestic objects to illustrate contrasting moral and social attitudes.

<sup>20</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p 133 and p 137.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Craik, ‘Lore, Learning and Wisdom: Workers and Education in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*’, *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 2, 1988, p 23.

<sup>22</sup> Susan P Casteras, ‘Reader, Beware: Images of Victorian Women and Books’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, Issue 3.1, Spring 2007.

in her linen closet, and knew every table-cloth by name. Each piece had its story.’ (Mrs Loftie, p 85) Mrs Thornton’s table cloth is of the finest texture and requires ‘her delicate care.’ (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 74) Gaskell indicates in this detail that the Thorntons too have a long and proud history. She would be aware, just as Mrs Loftie was, that:

‘Home-grown, hand-spun, hand-woven, sun-bleached flax wore for so many years that with the care it received it descended through many generations. The mending of precious damask was not left to servants, but attended to by the lady of the house, whose deft fingers could weave the ravellings she kept for the purpose into the exact pattern of the worn piece.’ (Mrs. Loftie, p 87)

Angus Easson notes how in Gaskell’s writing, objects are often used to project and focus emotion which might otherwise have to be conveyed more self-consciously in a way which would compromise dramatic integrity and the carefully constructed realism of her settings.<sup>23</sup> He notes the poignancy of the similar scene, later in the novel, when Mrs Thornton unpicks the initials on her table linen in preparation, as she thinks, for the marriage of her son to Margaret. It is the only point at which Thornton’s father is given a name, and as Easson notes, a whole subtext of their lives together is alluded to. The forward narrative, he notes, is suspended and the narrative is enriched and deepened in a manner which is psychologically and emotionally apt.

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<sup>23</sup> Angus Easson, ‘The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell (1)’, *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 4, 1990, p 68.

Thornton's experience of the Hales' drawing room seduces him, and, as Patricia Ingham notes, causes him to re-interpret the style and presentation of his own home.<sup>24</sup> However, it has the opposite effect on his mother. On her first visit to the Hales, Margaret is embroidering some cambric for a dress for Edith's baby which Mrs Thornton despises as non functional, preferring Mrs Hale's practical double knitting. She notes that: 'The room altogether was full of knick-knacks, which must take a long time to dust; and time to people of limited income was money.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 91)

Thad Logan quotes a domestic manual of 1889 which estimates that a thorough daily cleaning of the drawing room would take about three hours, since "all the ornaments have to be removed to another room or packed on a central table and covered with a clean dust sheet."<sup>25</sup> Since *Cassell's Household Guide* suggests allocating approximately half of a household's annual income to housekeeping, including laundry, this puts Mrs Thornton's disdain into pragmatic focus.<sup>26</sup> The appearance of the room and its contents re-inforces misunderstandings and highlights the clash of cultures. Unfavourable first impressions continue with Margaret's visit to Mrs Thornton's drawing room:

'The walls were pink and gold: the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting, or knitting. Great alabaster groups

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Ingham, *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p 58.

<sup>25</sup> Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.*, (London: 1869), Vol I, p 2.

occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. In the middle of the room, right under the bagged-up chandelier, was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface, like gaily-coloured spokes of a wheel. Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, pp 106 – 107)

Logan notes how domestic manuals give conflicting advice about the use of the parlour or drawing room. One for example states that 'Many families breakfast in the dining room, and remain there till after dinner, only using the drawing-room in the evening.' (Logan, p 30) Lindsay Lawrence states that the dining room was a multi-functional room for most middle-class families, and notes that Gaskell herself wrote in the dining-room at Plymouth Grove.<sup>27</sup> Mrs Loftie declares confidently that:

In the same way that in small houses the drawing-room cannot be spared for the exclusive use of afternoon callers, so the room designed by the architect for feeding is generally too good to be set apart and only inhabited for about three hours of the twenty-four. It thus arises that the eating room, perhaps the best in the house, must in large families often serve either as parlour, study or schoolroom.' (Mrs Loftie, p 3)

Mrs Thornton clearly is of the same opinion, and the spending of her days in this cold, uncomfortable room reflects the iron control she has had to take over her life. Easson notes that its purpose is to be a public reflection of her moral rectitude. (Easson, p 74)

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<sup>27</sup> Lindsay Lawrence, 'Gender Play "At our social table": The New Domesticity in the *Cornhill* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*', *The Gaskell Journal*, Vol 22, 2008, p 31.



Mrs Thornton's economical and practical approach to domestic chores ensures that the whole room has been bagged up both to protect the furniture and ornaments from the constant dust and grime of central Milton and the adjoining factory, and to save time and money on un-necessary cleaning, following the advice of the redoubtable Mrs Loftie:

It is provoking to find how much money it costs [...] to prevent rooms from assuming that dingy tone which robs all delicate fabrics of their charm. Smuts and fogs are dreadful enemies to cope with, unless a long purse and plenty of servants can be brought into the field. Much however may be done to fight this dragon of dirt by providing plenty of clean dust-covers to throw over the furniture at night, and to remain on until the rooms have been thoroughly cleaned in the morning.' (Mrs Loftie, p 74)

In his article on *Cranford* and its similarities to Victorian female collections, Dolin notes the need the Victorians had to encapsulate and contain objects and information through the use of categories, lists and buildings such as the public museum.<sup>28</sup> He argues that the Crystal Palace under its glass dome, was perhaps the crowning expression of this 'concern with congregation'. (Dolin, p179) As the tone of the preface to the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* (1851) makes clear, there was also a fundamental underlying anxiety to control disorder and chaos through classification and

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<sup>28</sup> Tim Dolin, 'Cranford and the Victorian Collection', *Victorian Studies*, 36, No 2, Winter 1991, p 179.

explanation.<sup>29</sup> The alabaster groups under their glass domes in the Thornton's dining room are a miniature version of the Crystal Palace, and also reflect the hard industrial focus of the family. The catalogue of the Great Exhibition records a display of various specimens of stone, including alabaster from Derbyshire, so their choice of ornament is appropriately local, (*Catalogue, Great Exhibition*, p 763), particularly since during the 1840s and 1850s, wax flowers, which would also have been displayed under glass, were the height of fashion.<sup>30</sup> As *Cassell's Household Guide* points out, there were also good practical reasons for keeping ornaments under glass. In the case of alabaster, they would need cleaning about twice a year with a solution of aqua fortis and water if they were not kept under a shade.<sup>31</sup>

The room is also resonant with a number of other coded messages. By the mid-nineteenth century, technological advances made mass production of consumer goods possible on a hitherto unrealised scale. This was accompanied by a plethora of domestic manuals providing advice on a range of issues associated with the rituals of daily life, often illustrated by advertisements which, as Lori Anne Loeb notes, preyed on consumer fears.<sup>32</sup> The Thorntons have acquired the appropriate fixtures and fittings to showcase their wealth and status. However, they do not feel able to enjoy their home, unlike the Hales, whose comfortably worn furnishings suggest confidence in their social position. When the covers are removed for the Thornton's dinner party,

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Ellis, Preface to the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue: Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, 1851, (London: William Clowes and Sons, MDCCLI), p v.

<sup>30</sup> Ann B Shteir, "'Fac-Similes of Nature': Victorian Wax Flower Modelling", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2007, Vol 35, p 649.

<sup>31</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.* (London: 1869), Vol III, p 19.

<sup>32</sup> Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women*, (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p 13. See also Judith Flanders, *'Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain'*, (London: Harper Collins, 2006), p 26.

‘the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament, until it became a weariness to the eye, and presented a strange contrast to the bald ugliness of the look-out into the great mill-yard’. (*North and South*, Vol 7, pp 149 – 150)

Gaskell’s description of the Thornton’s dining room and the social occasion of the dinner party neatly captures the period’s social mobility and the discourse around the nature of gentility.<sup>33</sup> The well-known photograph of Mrs Gaskell’s drawing room at Plymouth Grove shows an interior which, although cluttered to modern eyes, is more akin to the Hales’ parlour in terms of ornamentation and comfort.

‘Over the years it had become more cluttered. During Elizabeth’s time the crinoline was fashionable so furniture needed more space between pieces. [...] the paintwork was a shade of cream with gold leaf on the cornice and door panel [...] Elizabeth possessed several Paisley shawls where the colours used tended to be warm [...] several of these colours occur in the wallpaper. [...] The chintz she mentions had rosebuds and carnations, presumably pink.’<sup>34</sup>

Gaskell is clearly making a value judgement about the Thornton’s decorative style which has followed the dictates of contemporary fashion rather than personal taste. The fixtures and fabrics are of the highest quality, bought to demonstrate their wealth, but the effect is sterile as well as garish. The knowledge contained in the books is not

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<sup>33</sup> See for example, Ruskin’s comments on Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* in John Ruskin, ‘Arrows of the Chase’, Vol. I, *Letters on Art*, part III, ‘Pre-Raphaelitism, (Orpington: George Allen, 1880).

<sup>34</sup> Chris Owen, *The Gaskells’ House, 84 Plymouth Grove, Ardwick, Manchester, Period Rooms, Report of research and proposals by Chris Owen with specialist consultant Peter Brears. Information and reference works provided by Janet Allen.* (Unpublished report: Museum Casts 2011), p 22.

valued: they are for ornament only. The physical environment of the room has shut down all debate and any possibility of contentious conversation. It is a carefully set stage that reflects the aspirations of its owners rather than their character, a safe context, within which the very rigidity of accepted rules and rituals offers protection to those who are socially uncertain.

Gaskell also uses domestic objects in *North and South* to comment obliquely on sexuality or to indicate intimacy. As Hilary Schor observes, perhaps the most interesting innovation in *North and South* is the way in which Gaskell eroticises economic and social issues.<sup>35</sup> The focus of Margaret's sexuality for Thornton is her hands and arms, and Gaskell uses the single ornament of the bracelet, continually slipping down Margaret's arm, to draw the reader into Thornton's fascination and to create a moment of intimacy:

Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening – the fall. He could almost have exclaimed – “There it goes, again!”” (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 77)

The slipping bracelet suggests the tightening and loosening of corseted clothing and enables Gaskell to subtly indicate a moment of considerable eroticism. Thornton then watches Margaret's father, 'who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs.' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 77) Their byplay acts

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<sup>35</sup> Hilary M Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, (New York: Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), p 128.

as a substitute for Thornton's desire to capture Margaret as her father captures her fingers, thus eliding the closeness of Margaret's relationship with her father and his innocent unawareness of her maturity with her sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

Sylvia Robson's father in *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) uses her 'little finger as a stopper to ram down the tobacco – a habit of his to which she was so accustomed that she laid her hand on the table by him,'<sup>37</sup> Sylvia and her father are both passionate and headstrong, and this moment of domestic interplay with its easy intimacy enables Gaskell economically to illustrate their strong bond at the same time as enhancing the credibility of her characters' setting and behaviour. She also hints at Philip's lack of masculinity. He does not smoke, and unlike Thornton, has no sexualized reaction to Daniel's use of Sylvia's finger to tamp his pipe. He would prefer to continue the debate about the French, and knows that he will not get a chance to speak unless Daniel has his pipe in his mouth.

Such interactions take place within a domestic setting in which physical features also contain coded messages. On her return to her former home at Helstone, Margaret sees that the parsonage is altered. New windows have been added to open up the view:

'From it the wandering sheep of her husband's flock might be seen, who struggled to the tempting beer-house [...] his parishioners [...] had need of quick legs if they could take refuge in the 'Jolly Forester' before the teetotal Vicar had arrested them'. (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 356)

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<sup>36</sup> See Jill Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp 77 – 78 for a discussion of how Thornton's attraction to Margaret destabilises his emotional responses.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 9: Sylvia's Lovers*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 39.

The opening up of the building reflects the way in which the new Vicar is keen to actively enter his parishioners' lives and provide for their spiritual care. His muscular Christianity, 'brisk, loud-talking, kind-hearted, and not troubled with much delicacy of perception' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 356), is not subject to the scruples that tormented Mr. Hale. When the Hales lived at Helstone, the character of the family was reflected in their home where even a stray rose-leaf on the lawn 'seemed like a fleck on its exquisite arrangement and propriety'. (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 356) Elegance and sensitivity is replaced 'with signs of merry, healthy, rough childhood' (*North and South*, Vol 7, p 356). Gaskell uses her descriptions of the parsonage to comment obliquely on the scruples and sensitivities of the Hales. Neither Mr nor Mrs Hale are able to make the transition successfully to Milton: they belong to a gentler, more stable, more romanticised past in which a rose-leaf out of place is of more concern than the villagers Margaret sketches living in an uninhabitable cottage. Margaret, who starts her journey with arrogance and prejudice, exacerbated by her enforced expulsion from the paradise of Helstone, learns to tolerate difference and to accept change.

Windows fulfil a dual role in that they enable people to look out as well as in. They can therefore represent both a desire for change, and repression and confinement. The fireplace, the central feature of any nineteenth-century room, symbolises the core of the domestic ethos and Gaskell fully exploits this contemporary metaphor. Logan notes that

‘The hearth had for Victorians a practical and symbolic centrality in the home and thus was a site at which both functional and ornamental objects were concentrated.’ (Logan, p 113),

and Philippa Tristram comments that ‘One might with only slight exaggeration claim that firelight illuminates virtually every positive page in Victorian novels.’<sup>38</sup>

Alexander Boyd’s pamphlet is an example of how advertisement was blended with practical advice on the best type of fire and fuel for each room of the house, and the Stowes devote two entire chapters to ‘Scientific Domestic Ventilation’ and ‘Stoves, Furnaces and Chimneys.’<sup>39</sup> A well-kept fire and clean hearth conveyed a range of messages about the morality of the house’s inhabitants, a woman’s domestic competence, and the wealth and physical security of the family. In *Mary Barton* (1848), for example, the damped down fire keeps a perpetual form of life in the house, a Lares and Penates, which represents the health of the family and its relationships, whereas Alice Wilson’s ‘damp coals, and half-green sticks’ are an economic shorthand for her constant struggle to keep alive despite her poverty and deprivation.<sup>40</sup> When the elder son in ‘The Half-Brothers’ (1856) is dying from exposure on the moors in a snowstorm, he thinks about his family ‘sitting round the warm, red, bright fire’.<sup>41</sup> This is the only spot of colour in a bleak, monochrome story of family estrangement and jealousy. The fire represents the brother’s realisation of the importance of his family and his desire to return home and re-build his relationship with them. The image associates fire as a

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<sup>38</sup> Philippa Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p 103.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Boyd and Son, *The English Fireplace: Its Advantages, its Objections and its rivals. Considered with a view to utility and economy*, (London: John Bumpus, 1874), and Catherine E Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, (New York: J B Ford: 1869).

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Wilkes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 5: Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 18 and p 21.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘The Half-Brothers’ in Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.3 : Novellas and Shorter Fiction II: Round the Sofa, and Tales from Household Works (1852-9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 436.

source of heat at the centre of the house, and the heart, which circulates heat around the body and is traditionally associated with emotion.

Gaskell's personal preference was for a wood fire, which she saw as a living companion:

'A wood-fire has a kind of spiritual, dancing, glancing life about it. It is an elvish companion, crackling, hissing, bubbling: throwing out beautiful jets of vivid many-coloured flame.' ('Company Manners', Vol 1, p 304)

She loved the intimacy of firelight, the atmospheric possibilities it offered for telling stories and the fun and informality of cooking over a fire, even when this had unexpected consequences: 'We set the fat on fire & had to run out of doors out of the window blazing pan in hand, amidst screams of children'. (Chapple and Pollard, p 857) Fire was often the most economical way to light as well as heat a room, and Gaskell understood how the exchange of confidences was easier in the warmth and soft glow of firelight. In 'The Moorland Cottage' (1850) for example, Maggie and Frank are unable to talk about the death of Frank's mother:

'Maggie shut the casement, and put a log of wood on the fire. She sat down with her back to the window; but as the flame sprang up, and blazed at the touch of the dry wood, Frank saw that her face was wet with quiet tears.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 2: Novellas and Shorter Fiction I, The Moorland Cottage, Cranford and Related Writings*. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 31.



Maggie shuts the window, just as Miss Matty shuts and locks the door in *Cranford* to exclude the outside world and ensure privacy. She throws the wood onto the fire knowing that the light will reveal her emotions because she is willing to share her grief with Frank, and understands his need to hear about his mother's final illness. Fire is a living thing, and its fluctuations can represent the ebb and flow of emotion. In 'Martha Preston' (1850), when the doctor confirms that her brother is mentally affected, Martha sits all night in front of her dying fire. The 'gray embers among which the sparks ran to and fro' represent both her internal struggle as she decides whether or not to marry Will Hawkshaw, and the final extinguishing of her hope of marriage and fulfilment as she accepts that her duty is to care for her brother. ('Martha Preston', Vol 1, p 123) More subtly, Gaskell uses fire in *Sylvia's Lovers* to suggest sexual attraction.<sup>43</sup> Kinraid entering the room was

'like that which you may effect any winter's night, when you come into a room where a great lump of coal lies hot and slumbering on the fire; just break it up with a judicious blow from the poker, and the room, late so dark, and dusk, and lone, is full of life, and light, and warmth.'<sup>44</sup>

The fire imagery is continued, and interwoven with the theme of the sea, when Sylvia dreams all night 'of burning volcanoes springing out of icy southern seas.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 87) The opposite metaphor of the dying fire and the guttering candle is an oblique commentary on Philip and Sylvia's marriage:

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<sup>43</sup> See Felicia Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp 150 – 151 for a further discussion of fire as a metaphor for sexual passion in Gaskell's fiction.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 9: Sylvia's Lovers*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 81.

‘The wick of the candle grew long and black, and fell, and sputtered, and guttered; he sate on, unheeding either it or the pale gray fire that was dying out – dead at last.’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 281)

Fire then, as a living thing, can symbolise death as well as life. *Sylvia’s Lovers* begins with a funeral and her marriage is a living death. In ‘Morton Hall’ (1853), Miss Phillis lies dead in front of a cold hearth: ‘No fire. Grey wood ashes lay on the hearth.’ (‘Morton Hall’, Vol 3, p 38) The ashes indicate that she is too poor for coal and has had to rely on gathering wood. The fire would provide heat for cooking, so the dead fire also indicates that she has starved to death. The story is a harsh fore-runner to ‘My Lady Ludlow’ (1858), in which the constraints of a hierarchical class system inhibit the lower class sisters offering a gesture of common humanity to Miss Phillis, and prevent Miss Phillis asking for help until it is too late. The death of Squire Hamley’s wife in *Wives and Daughters* (1866) not only deprives the household of effective domestic management, but exposes the flaws in the relationship between the Squire and his sons. The cold, hungry Squire enters the drawing-room where the clock has stopped because no-one has wound it up and the fire, also neglected,

‘was now piled up with half-dried wood, which sputtered and smoked instead of doing its duty in blazing and warming the room, through which the keen wind was cutting its way in all directions.’<sup>45</sup>

The clock and the fire are potent physical reminders to the Squire of the loss of his wife. The inefficiently made fire is unable to protect him from the draughts, just as his wife is

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Josie Billington ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 10: Wives and Daughters* (1866), (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 204.

no longer there to act as a buffer between him and his sons, smoothing out the 'state of feeling between the squire and his eldest son, which, if it could not be called active discord, showed at least passive estrangement.' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p203)

Domestic objects and personal possessions also carry coded messages and help to strengthen character and narrative theme. Much of Gaskell's writing focuses on change and the tension between past and present. Personal possessions, including books and letters, can act as a link to the past, integrating their owners into their settings and suggesting longevity and stability. They provide a sense of time and continuity which can act as a counterbalance to the pressure for social and cultural change which Gaskell recognizes as necessary for the creation of a healthy society. Equally, they can show the destructive effect of the passage of time.

In *Mary Barton* the Wilsons and the Bartons have few possessions but use these to bring order and structure into their insecure lives. The Bartons have a cupboard

'full of plates and dishes, cups and saucers, and some more nondescript articles, for which one would have fancied their possessors could find no use – such as triangular pieces of glass to save carving knives and forks from dirtying table-cloths.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 19)

As we have found, keeping a house clean cost a great deal of time and effort, so Mrs Barton's glass stands are a practical necessity as well as being a pragmatic copy of the more luxurious knife stands used in wealthier homes. Gaskell was intensely practical herself, describing for example, how she and Mrs Barton taught Marianne 'the

decencies of civilized life, how to use her napkin at dinner; to make a piece of bread serve for fork &c'. (Chapple and Pollard, p 39) The amount of furniture crammed into the room illustrates that the Bartons are relatively prosperous and that work is plentiful. Some objects are highly decorative as well as functional such as the gaily coloured oil-cloth on the floor and the 'bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle.' and the 'crimson tea-caddy, also of japan ware.' (Mary Barton, Vol 5, p 19) Japanning is a method and style of decoration which started in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century to imitate Japanese laquerware. Tin or papier-mâché bases were the most frequently used, although some items were made of wood, and although colours originally followed the Japanese gold and black, reds, greens and blues were all introduced as variations. It is unclear what base is used for the Bartons' japan ware.

The catalogue of the Great Exhibition shows that items made from papier-mâché, including tea trays, tea caddys and even large items of furniture such as pianos, were ubiquitous and the range suggests that many of them might have been accessible to factory workers when work was good.<sup>46</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide* has an item on re-japanning old metal tea trays.<sup>47</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon describes a similar set of iron-based japanned tea trays in a working class parlour in *Lady Audley's Secret* which may, suggest that this is the likeliest material for the Bartons' tea tray and caddy.<sup>48</sup> Angus Reach also mentions the frequency with which 'a glaringly painted and highly glazed tea-tray upon which the firelight glints cheerily' is found in the homes of

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<sup>46</sup> See *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the great exhibition: 1851*, (London: William Clowes and Sons, MDCCCLI), Vol 2, p 748 for an exhibitor showing a papier-mâché piano and piano stool, an upholstered easy chair and a variety of tea trays, tea chest and tea caddys.

<sup>47</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide: being a complete encyclopaedia of domestic and social economy etc.*, (London: 1869), Vol III, p 179.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), ed. David Skilton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p 232.

workers in Manchester.<sup>49</sup> Certainly the ready availability and range of such objects would have enabled people to assert their own sense of style and taste.

The presence of the tea tray, the tea caddy and the oilcloth also illustrates the way in which domestic interiors had become commodities in their own right, opening up entrepreneurial opportunities which were richly exploited by retailers. Carolyn Steedman for example, points out that an oilcloth on the floor indicates both prosperity and modernity.<sup>50</sup> The Bartons' choice of japanware is also significant in the visual message it conveys. Its exotic colour and subject matter suggests a family who are interested in and capable of moving outside the limited geographical sphere of their enclosed court, and in that sense, fulfils a similar function to Job Legh's collection of insects. It also provides a narrative link to the east where Gaskell's brother John disappeared, and to the sailor, Will Wilson, who is to play such a critical role in uniting the lovers, Mary Barton and Jem Wilson, whose relationship is hinted at the by lovers represented stylistically on the tea tray.

Domestic objects become personalised. In *Mary Barton*, for example, the Bartons move to their home just after their son has died and the home is associated with hope and a fresh start. John Barton has therefore

'taken more interest in the details of the proceeding than he otherwise would

have done, in the hope of calling her forth to action again. So he seemed to

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<sup>49</sup> Angus Bethune Reach, 'Manchester' in *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849 – 1851: The Letters to the Morning Chronicle from the Correspondents in the Manufacturing and Mining Districts, the Towns of Liverpool and Birmingham, and the Rural Districts, Vol: Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire*, J Ginswick ed, (London: Frank Cass, 1983), p 37.

<sup>50</sup> Carolyn Steedman, 'What a rag rug means' in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd eds, *Domestic Space: Reading the nineteenth-century interior*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p 34.

know every brass-headed nail driven up for her convenience.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p99)

The stripping away of his possessions as the economic climate worsens and Barton declines into opium addiction, further fuels his anger and violence, and is a stark symbol of the social and emotional displacement of poor families. The Bartons’ possessions, as Mary Elizabeth Hotz notes, which have such rich associations, become mere commodities after the death of Mrs Barton, sold to fuel John Barton’s opium addiction as they no longer sustain him emotionally.<sup>51</sup>

Lady Ludlow, by contrast, is surrounded by possessions which link her not only to previous generations of her own family but to the distant past. As Edgar Wright notes, change is observed from the central perspective of Lady Ludlow.<sup>52</sup> The drawers of her bureau are like memory boxes filled with broken objects, torn scraps of letters and shards of marble. The narrator, Margaret Dawson, is ‘puzzled to know why some were kept at all;’ (*My Lady Ludlow*, Vol 3, p 170) As the drawers are emptied and the contents revealed, it becomes apparent that Lady Ludlow is taking Margaret on a journey back through her life. The scraps of notes and the broken riding whip are mementoes of her youth, and perhaps of her first love affair. Alongside these in the drawer are pieces of Roman tesserae brought back from her Grand Tour. Lady Ludlow had intended to make these into a table, giving them a new use and setting in which to appreciate their decorative qualities. They lie however in the drawer, still covered with the soil of the onion field from which she collected them, symbolic of fading hope and

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Elizabeth Hotz, *Literary Remains: Representations of Death and Burial in Victorian England*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp 49-50.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Wright, *Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Re-assessment*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p 213.

dreams. This is made more poignant by the next revelation of the ‘locks of hair carefully ticketed, which my lady looked at very sadly; and locketts and bracelets with miniatures in them,’ (‘My Lady Ludlow’, Vol 3, p 170) which belong to her dead children. Lady Ludlow, for all her apparent status and privilege, is a lonely, isolated woman, trapped in the past, ‘looking ever onward to her death.’ (‘My Lady Ludlow, Vol 3, p 173).

Squire Hamley is another character in a position of power who is apparently frozen in time. His nature and status are represented by his ‘old steady, turnip-shaped watch.’<sup>53</sup> The watch has been given to him by his father, and ‘had given the law to house-clocks, stable-clocks, kitchen-clocks – nay, even to Hamley Church clock in its day;’ (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 204) The watch is worn near the Squire’s heart, beating in time with it. The symbolic act of pulling out the watch to check the time, enables the Squire visually to assert his authority and power over his home and estate. The weight of his responsibilities is suggested by the size of the watch and the effort he has to make to extract it from his waistband. The Squire’s word and his time-keeping are law in the world over which he has control. It is his responsibility to wind up his watch, unlike the clock over the mantelpiece in his drawing-room, which no-one had remembered to wind up. Time in this feminine space since his wife died, is out of control. The Squire’s watch, like himself, is ‘plain, but steady-going’, unlike Osborne’s dainty little French watch. (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p205) Time-keeping becomes the focus for the Squire’s discontent with his eldest son. Osborne ‘always moved slowly’ which the Squire interprets as his lack of commitment to his inheritance, but which in fact is due to the heart defect which ultimately kills him. The Squire is

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Josie Billington ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 10: Wives and Daughters*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 204.

already irritated by this tardiness, and reacts to Osborne's innocent questioning of the accuracy of his father's watch as an attack on his personal power, and, by extension, on his quasi-legal jurisdiction of his home, since the Squire's watch is value-laden with the weight of inherited authority:

'Poor Osborne might have known better than to cast this slur on his father's flesh and blood; for so dear did he hold his watch!' (*Wives and Daughters*, Vol 10, p 205)

The fact that Osborne's watch is French enhances the impression of his effeminacy and frivolous attitude to responsibility. Squire Hamley's opinion of the French is coloured by his memory of the French Revolution and by his violent antipathy to Catholicism, and these feelings are transferred to Osborne's French watch. The physical appearance of the two watches points up the contrast between the two men and indicates Osborne's underlying frailty. The dainty little watch will simply not have the stamina to be passed down to Osborne's son, unlike the robust turnip-shaped watch. The choice of adjectives also underlines the difference in character and interest between father and son.

Osborne's dainty French watch is decorative and reflects his interest in poetry, literature and the arts. The Squire's turnip-shaped watch on the other hand, is in harmony with its environment, the estate and lands which the Squire loves so much, its very nomenclature redolent of soil and produce.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I examine the ways in which Gaskell presented characters who were homeless.



## CHAPTER 6

### THE DISCOURSE OF DIFFERENCE: HOMELESSNESS IN GASKELL'S FICTION

There are very few characters in Gaskell's fiction who are literally without a home or some sort of shelter, however poor or tenuous this may be. A downturn in the economy for example, means that Davenport in *Mary Barton* (1848) is out of work, and he and his family are living in the utmost squalor. Gregson, in 'My Lady Ludlow' (1858), lives in extreme poverty on the edge of the common, existing as best he can by poaching. However both the Davenports and the Gregsons are known to their communities, and are visited and helped. Gregson's son Harry finds a way out of poverty through education and employment. Other potentially homeless children are rescued and find loving homes, for example, Leonard with the Bensons in *Ruth* (1853) and the Boucher children with Nicholas Higgins in *North and South* (1855). The only truly homeless characters in Gaskell's fiction are Esther in *Mary Barton*, and Lizzie Leigh and even Esther retains strong ties with her family and neighbours. It might appear then that Gaskell is unwilling to address the issue of homelessness which exercised and threatened her contemporaries.

To be homeless is to be rootless, detached from family relationships, and excluded from society. Homelessness necessitates constant movement, precisely because a homeless person has no fixed abode, no secure sanctuary in which to feel safe from physical, psychological, or emotional attack. Contemporary social commentators, such as Henry Mayhew and George Godwin reflected on the homeless state of the millions of poor who poured into the newly created urban areas, and who could not, or

would not be incorporated and contained by physical enclosures.<sup>1</sup> The 1851 Census stated that: ‘It is so much in the order of nature that a family should live in a separate house, that ‘house’ is often used for family in many languages;’<sup>2</sup> This alignment of the concept of ‘home’, a physically contained space, with ‘family’ a domestic unit, was an attempt to deal with the physical and psychological pressures experienced in an increasingly urbanized environment. The need for privacy in this over-crowded society became paramount, for rich and poor alike. As the century progressed, the courts in which the working classes lived were opened up, and the external space became something to be used for access, rather than a leisure or domestic amenity. The middle classes retreated into a more private residential style, and outdoor life ceased to have a social purpose and disappeared behind walls and hedges.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the concepts of ‘homes’ and ‘homelessness’ therefore acquire a psychological, emotional and spiritual dimension rooted in the difficult transition between the agrarian, romantic age of the eighteenth-century, and the industrialised, urban centered dynamic of the nineteenth-century.

In this chapter, I argue that Gaskell recognized the distinction between a physical, and a psychological and social space in her fictional representations of homes, and that her exploration of what constitutes homelessness is nuanced and compassionate. She is interested in those who are excluded and cut adrift from society, and in her letters and her non-fiction as well as in her fiction, argues for tolerance and acceptance. For Gaskell, homelessness is better defined as a psychological, social, and

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol 1, (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861), p 43 and George Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the “Homes” of the Thousands*, (London: G Routledge & Col, 1854), p 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Census of Great Britain, 1851*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1854), p xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> M.J. Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing 1850 – 1914*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), pp 11- 13.

emotional separation, rather than the literal lack of a physically enclosing space, and in this sense, it is linked to her own contested and ambiguous experience of home discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. By foregrounding characters such as the Davenports and the Gregsons, Gaskell makes them visible as individuals and places them in a wider cultural, spiritual, and social discourse. Homelessness, for both William and Elizabeth, was linked to their Unitarian beliefs, the principles of associationist psychology, and the importance of individual and social responsibility clearly articulated by William in his sermons:

‘For the joys and solace of friendship, for the pleasures and endearments of home, for the thrill of our souls when sharing the enthusiasm of a multitude, for the inspiring themes of our country’s history, for the rich treasures which the world’s struggles have accumulated for our use, for all that distinguishes us from the poor shrivelled victim of isolation, we must acknowledge ourselves under deep obligation to Society.’<sup>4</sup>

The expansion and contraction of the focus of this sentence between the intimate relationships of home, and wider social experiences, makes clear the critical importance of the ties between the individual and society. Those who are isolated become ‘shrivelled’: engagement with society is vital for individual health and well-being as well as for the creation of a morally balanced society. William’s sermon continues with a vivid metaphor describing the way in which associationist psychology affects growth and development:

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<sup>4</sup> William Gaskell, *The Duties of the Individual to Society: A Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of Sir John Potter M.P.*, (London: E T Whitfield, 1858), p 3.

‘As the boughs of the forest trees interlace, so all the ramifications of family and kindred connect us, more or less, with the great public. We can none of us move in the world without making a larger or a smaller current there.’ (Gaskell, 1858, p 4)

Gaskell addressed the question of tolerance and the danger of prejudice in her non-fiction essay ‘An Accursed Race.’<sup>5</sup> This essay originally appeared in 1855 in *Household Words* and Gaskell chose to include it in the collected edition of stories entitled *Round the Sofa* (1859). The topic, and its inclusion in a volume of fiction, makes it of interest in a consideration of homelessness, defined as ‘exclusion from society’.<sup>6</sup> *Round the Sofa*, as the title suggests, consists of six stories told by a group of acquaintances during long winter evenings in Edinburgh. By including ‘An Accursed Race’ in this intimate domestic setting, Gaskell is bringing the theme of an oppressed, de-humanized race into the heart of the Victorian home. In addition, as Julian Wolfreys notes, although each of the stories is appropriate to the teller, there is a minimal attempt to define their individual characters, enabling Gaskell to focus more effectively on her wider social message.<sup>7</sup> All the narrators speak an accented English, suggesting the possibility of an integrated community which both respects and celebrates difference. (Wolfreys, p 84) There are many parallels between the Cagots, who are the subject of this essay, and the dispossessed Victorian poor. Contemporary descriptions of the homes of the working class poor, including Gaskell’s own, portray them living in conditions which bear little resemblance to human habitations; for example, James Kay-

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘An Accursed Race’ in Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol.3 : Novellas and Shorter Fiction II: Round the Sofa, and Tales from Household Words (1852-9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), pp 296 – 309.

<sup>6</sup> See Louise Henson, ‘History, Science and social change: Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘evolutionary’ narratives’, *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 17, 2003, p 19 for a discussion of the debate between monogenists and polygenists which was current at the time of writing ‘An Accursed Race’.

<sup>7</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Being English: Narrative Idioms and Performances of National Identity from Coleridge to Trollope*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p 83.

Shuttleworth comments: 'Home has little other relation to him than that of shelter. [...] it chiefly presents to him a scene of physical exhaustion from which he is glad to escape.'<sup>8</sup> The Cagots are associated with infection and 'bad blood', a theme to which Gaskell would return in 'Lois the Witch'.<sup>9</sup> They are stigmatized by bearing the mark of a duck or goose foot stitched prominently to the front of their clothing, and are excluded from taking a full part in the mass, and are therefore barred from the spiritual life of the community. Ironically, it is the French Revolution which 'brought some good out of the fermentation of the people: the more intelligent among them tried to overcome the prejudice against the Cagots.' ('An Accursed Race', Vol 3, p 307) Gaskell brings her message of tolerance and compassion firmly, if somewhat heavy handedly, home with an epitaph from a gravestone in Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>10</sup>

Gaskell believed in the importance of family and, by extension, the integration of individuals into a home and wider society. A clear thread of concern runs through her letters, particularly about the fate of children who are homeless. She writes to an unknown correspondent on April 14 1852 (or 1863) about her concern for some children who, like the Boucher children in *North and South*, have no alternative but to go to the workhouse after the drowning, (possibly suicide), of their father unless some relatives can be persuaded to give them a home.<sup>11</sup> A letter of 4 March 1854 to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth illustrates the way in which her views reflected her Unitarianism,

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<sup>8</sup> James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Four periods of Public Education as Reviewed in 1832, 1839, 1846, 1862*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1973), p 10.

<sup>9</sup> Felicia Bonaparte claims that Gaskell associates the French with her demonic other: Felicia Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p 70.

<sup>10</sup> See Wolfreys, p 88 for a discussion of the ambiguity of this epitaph and Mrs Ellis H Chadwick, *Mrs. Gaskell: Haunts, Homes and Stories*, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, 1910), pp 312 – 313 who notes the importance of the epitaph to Gaskell who quoted it 28 years after leaving Stratford as a schoolgirl, never having revisited the town.

<sup>11</sup> John A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 183.

placing particular emphasis on the importance of association and the moral and spiritual education which can be provided within a secure home:

‘It seems to me so very desirable to surround an orphan with something of the love & duties of a home, to place her as nearly as possible in the relation of a daughter, and to secure for her the nearest approach to the domestic relationships of which she has been deprived, that I think I should consider this education of the affections, and the domestic duties that arise out of them, as more than an equivalent for the accomplishments & languages which she would learn by the other plan, and the superior station in society which a governess may assume.’  
(Chapple and Pollard, p 268)

The girl in question, who appears to be about 15, had intended to be a dress-maker, and it is possible that Gaskell, following the publication of *Ruth* in 1853, was particularly sensitive to the implications of her vulnerability and lack of protection. Every approximation ‘to God’s ordinance of a ‘family’ is surely to be desired’ she tells Mary Robberds in a letter of June 1861.<sup>12</sup>

Gaskell also believed passionately, again in line with her Unitarian faith, in the importance of individuals and in an individual’s power to transform society. She had ‘a grand quarrel’ with Florence Nightingale over the question of sending children to be brought up in crèches rather than by their mothers, asserting to Emily Shaen in a letter of 27 October 1854 that Nightingale was ‘too much for institutions, sisterhoods and associations’ and rather unconvincingly following this with the comment that ‘this

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<sup>12</sup> John Chapple and Alan Shelston eds, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p 225.

want of love for individuals becomes a gift and a very rare one, if one takes it in conjunction with her intense love for the race;' (Chapple and Pollard, p 320) It is therefore unsurprising that her portrayals of homelessness focus on individuals, and on the individual's dissociation from society and its consequences.

Chapter 1 of this thesis considered issues of privacy within the home and the contestation of domestic space. I argue further, that the need for psychological and emotional space within the home led to a type of homelessness, a detached, albeit temporary, wandering from the constraints of domestic ties. The opening pages of *Mary Barton* describe the way in which Victorians flooded out of the cities into the countryside on public holidays, where 'the artisan, deafened with noise of tongues and engines, may come to listen awhile to the delicious sounds of rural life;' <sup>13</sup> Once she became a successful writer, Gaskell seized every opportunity to escape from Manchester, where, as she told Tottie Fox in a letter of April 1850, 'we have no great external beauty either of nature or art the contemplation of which can put calm into one; and take one out of one's little self – and shame the demon (I beg its pardon) Conscience away; or to sleep.' (Chapple and Pollard, pp 109 – 110) There are two parts to Gaskell's comment: one half of her sentence refers to her attachment to the past, her happy upbringing in Knutsford and nostalgia for a rural idyll common to many of her contemporaries. The other, perhaps more interesting half, refers to the psychological pressures of home and family, and what became an increasingly urgent need to escape from their constraints, to wander and to travel about. Whilst Gaskell of course was never homeless in the strict sense of the word, she was certainly aware of her own need

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Joanne Wilkes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 5: Mary Barton*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 11.

for psychological space to reconcile the 'warring members' of her multiple 'mes' described in the same letter to Tottie Fox.

This chapter explores three presentations of homelessness in Gaskell's fiction in *Mary Barton* (1848), 'Lois the Witch' (1860) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). I focus on the emotional and psychological impact of homelessness, the breaking of social and cultural ties, and the ways in which enforced or elective homelessness impacts on the development of character and narrative flow.

### **Esther (*Mary Barton*, 1848)**

Esther in *Mary Barton* (1848) is one of two homeless characters in Gaskell's fiction. Esther, the pretty girl who is seduced, gives birth and then is forced to live on the streets as a prostitute, represents an awful warning for Mary Barton, and despite her homelessness and apparent lack of power, plays a pivotal role in the plot. The opening of *Mary Barton*, as Heather Glen asserts, is deceptive in its pastoral simplicity, but the language, from the outset, inscribes a sense of conflict and division.<sup>14</sup> The first words spoken in the novel are a question from Wilson to Barton about Esther, spoken in a low voice which indicates that she is a cause of dissent in the family. (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 13) Esther's story is a common one, told economically by Barton, that encapsulates contemporary fears about the dangers of factory work for girls with its exposure to sexual temptation, freedom from domestic constraint, and financial independence. Esther's beauty and her spirit have not been moderated, and her presence in Barton's home has been the cause of tension between him and his wife. Gaskell tacitly suggests

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<sup>14</sup> Heather Glen, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Resurrection', *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 8 2006.



that Esther's position in the family is tenuous. She has no parents, we never learn her full name, and she does not appear to have a role in the domestic unit. Barton warns her that she will end as a 'street-walker' and Esther, in a reversal of the conventional plotline, chooses to leave home and Barton who is wrongly accused of casting her out. In these opening pages, Gaskell uses the story of Esther to establish the main narrative themes of poverty, temptation, class struggles and death within the domestic setting of the Bartons' home, and the traits of character that will drive the plot.

Esther's disappearance from the Barton's lives is swift and dramatic and from Barton's point of view, precipitates the crisis of his wife's death, his own decline into radicalism and opium addiction, and his daughter's exposure to the same temptations that attracted Esther. Jill Matus notes how the death of Barton's wife, the maternal centre of the home, marks the loss of moral direction for both Barton and his daughter.<sup>15</sup> In a later essay, she develops this point further, setting out the connection between John Barton's lack of self-discipline and the pathology of his physical and psychological disintegration, arguing that Gaskell was using a common contemporary trope which associated this with class difference.<sup>16</sup> Esther and Barton share a common pathology, and the crisis point in their relationship is marked by Barton tearing the old nail on which Esther used to hang her bonnet out of the wall and throwing it into the street. This is both a symbolic eviction of Esther from her home and family and a metaphor for the loss of Mrs Barton, the 'peg' on which the whole family depended, and without whom the physical, emotional and spiritual environment of the home rapidly disintegrates. The nail acts as a substitute for Esther who, by leaving home

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<sup>15</sup> Jill Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p 73.

<sup>16</sup> Jill Matus, 'Mary Barton and North and South' in Jill Matus ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p 31.

voluntarily, has deprived Barton of the traditional male role of driving her from home like so many disgraced Victorian girls. Esther has taken the power which would normally reside with a man. Since Barton also blames Esther for the death of his wife, tearing out the nail is the only way he has of expressing his violent anger and resentment.

Esther's next appearance marks the depth of her decline, and is the first time she appears in person in the novel, speaking directly to Barton instead of having her actions and words reported. She is bedraggled, soaking wet and ill, but persists in trying to warn Barton about Mary's relationship with Harry Carson. Their meeting at night not only emphasizes the truth of Barton's prediction that Esther will become a street walker, but also illustrates his own decline. Barton has no work and no motivation to get out of bed in the morning. He faces a choice between eating or opium, and chooses the latter to which he is addicted. When he meets Esther, he is returning from an illegal Trade Union meeting. The night time meeting between two desperate people, one excluded from society and the other a member of a quasi secret society, begins with their inability to communicate and ends violently in a foreshadowing of the failed negotiations of the Chartists and the murder of Harry Carson. Matus rightly argues that the decline of each arises from strong feelings unmitigated and undisciplined by education or wisdom, that is the moral guidance provided by a mother/wife. (Matus, 1995, p 75) Barton's later reaction to their meeting however is an inversion of the conventional plot in that he regrets his anger, and recalls Esther's humility and 'her tacit acknowledgment of her lost character.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 109) He remembers his wife who has acted as a mother to Esther, and, in a reversal of conventional gender roles, sets out, like Lizzie Leigh's mother, to search for Esther.

Although as Deborah Ann Logan notes, the narrative illustrates the ways in which poverty and misfortune shape character as much as moral choice, Gaskell does not pursue this possibility for the redemption of both Barton and Esther.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Barton repeats the pattern of his behaviour towards Esther with his daughter: ‘he upbraided her with the loss of Jem Wilson till she had to bite her lips till the blood came, in order to keep down the angry words that would rise in her heart.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 110) As Barton becomes increasingly powerless and voiceless, Esther turns to Jem Wilson in an attempt to protect Mary. As she did with John Barton, Esther places a restraining hand on Jem’s arm. This is not simply a gesture to attract his attention, her ‘firm and unusual grasp’ also symbolizes Esther’s desperate desire to prevent Mary from pursuing a relationship which will detach her from friends and family.

Amanda Anderson argues that this gesture illustrates Esther’s entrapment within the romance genre, noting the allusion to Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and his compulsive story-telling.<sup>18</sup> Whilst *Mary Barton* is at times an uneasy blend of romance, melodrama and social reform, I argue that Esther plays a much more active part in the narrative than that of a stock figure. When she lived with the Bartons, her presence in the home created tension, in that she and Barton competed for the attention of his wife – Esther’s substitute mother. In the novels, and particularly the short stories which followed *Mary Barton*, Gaskell repeatedly portrayed unconventional family structures in which children were given a home by strangers or single women and a successful and

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<sup>17</sup> Deborah Anna Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women’s Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die or Do Worse*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p 84.

<sup>18</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p 118.

integrated unit was created, described by Patsy Stoneman as 'functional cooperation.'

<sup>19</sup> In her first novel, she is still finding her narrative voice and exploring the most effective way in which to evoke her readers' sympathy for the social issues with which she is concerned, and she therefore adopts a conventional trope to portray Esther's fall.

Nevertheless, her interest in alternative patterns of mothering is illustrated by Esther's social interactions. Esther is only able to speak to Barton, the patriarchal figure, in a whisper. Her relationship with Jem is different, poised somewhere between that of an authoritative substitute mother figure and that of an older sister. In speaking to Jem, Esther is able to tell her own story in full for the first time, a story which Gaskell was to re-visit in *Ruth*, where an alternative family structure is portrayed as a compassionate and viable alternative to a life on the streets. Esther describes her night wanderings in which she becomes a shadowy protector for Mary. Her position on the outside of the family is symbolized by her peering into the house through a chink in the window shutters. At the end of her confession, Jem offers her a home, but Esther refuses, telling him that she uses drink, as Barton uses opium, because, 'If we did not drink, we could not stand the memory of what we have been, and the thought of what we are, for a day.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 139) Esther's poignant description of her night time visions of the dead shades from delirium tremens to the effects of a morbid consciousness of her failures:

'There they go round and round my bed the whole night through. My mother, carrying little Annie (I wonder how they got together) and Mary – and all looking at me with their sad, stony eyes; oh Jem! It is so terrible! They don't

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<sup>19</sup> Patsy Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family' in Jill Matus ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p 143.

turn back either, but pass behind the head of the bed, and I feel their eyes on me everywhere. If I creep under the clothes I still see them; and what is worse,' hissing out her words with fright, 'they see me.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 139)

The boundary between dreaming and waking, memory and reality are blurred. As Matus notes in her discussion of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Gaskell's account here does not accord with contemporary views of drunkenness which suggested that 'there are two states of consciousness, which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken.' (Matus, 2009, p 117) Instead, Esther's traumatized mind is no longer able to distinguish accurately between past and present, the conscious and the unconscious, memory and reality.

The legal relationship between Esther and the Bartons is underpinned throughout the novel by the more subtle ties of shared character traits and physical appearance. Mary Barton the mother, Esther, and Mary's daughter all share the same striking beauty, and Esther and her niece are both spirited and independent. Deborah Denholz Morse comments on the significance of the three names, arguing that their Biblical allusions, together with the blending of the identities of the three women, allows Gaskell to blur the sharp distinctions between mother, falling and fallen woman.<sup>20</sup> As the narrative progresses, and the focus moves from John Barton to Mary, Gaskell becomes increasingly interested in the psychic links between the family and in the effects of emotional shock and trauma. Matus appropriately places Mary's collapse after her defence of Jem Wilson in open court in the borderland between bodily and psychic disorders. (Matus, 2009, p 5) However, Gaskell begins to explore the effects of

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Denholz Morse, 'Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion: Seamstresses and Fallen Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction', in Vanessa D Dickerson ed, *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995), p 47.

shock and trauma on Mary earlier in the novel when Mary realizes after Jem's arrest for murder that she loves him. Her agony and confusion are expressed in a passage of indirect speech, a tumble of questions and reflections. Like Gwendolen Grandcourt after the drowning of her husband, shock has affected Mary's memory. Her mental turmoil, in which she veers wildly between revulsion at the murder, passionate love for Jem and self-blame for her behaviour which she believes has driven him to commit murder, is only partly relieved by tears. The passage concludes by specifically linking the physical and the psychological: 'Oh! She was going mad; and for awhile she lay outwardly still, but with the pulses careering through her head with wild vehemence.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 194) Mary retreats into memories of the past, and falls asleep remembering happier times.

As Matus notes in her discussion of *North and South*, Gaskell's use of dream is revelatory of psychological states. (Matus, 2009, p 71) Here, Gaskell recognises the healing power of sleep in times of emotional crisis:

'And then Heaven blessed her unaware, and she sank from remembering, to wandering, unconnected thought, and thence to sleep. [...] and she dreamt of the happy times of long ago, and her mother came to her, and kissed her as she lay, and once more the dead were alive again in that happy world of dreams.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 194)

Gaskell describes with sensitivity and precision the gradual relaxation of Mary's physical and emotional tension, but the passage also elides dreams and reality, so that there appears to be continuity between the mind when fully awake and the unconscious

mind. This blurring of the dreaming and waking worlds continues when Mary wakes suddenly from her dream, her hair and face still wet with tears. The physical, external world is also curiously poised between night and day. It is after midnight, the time traditionally associated with ghosts and spirits, ‘but the moon shone clearly in at the unshuttered window, making the room almost as light as day, in its cold ghastly radiance.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 194) The emotional turmoil Mary has just experienced is reflected in the narrative style and tone, which slides from a story firmly rooted in contemporary realism to the unreality of a ghost story:

‘There was a low knock at the door! A strange feeling crept over Mary’s heart, as if something spiritual were near; as if the dead, so lately present in her dreams, were yet gliding and hovering round her, with their dim, dread forms. And yet, why dread? Had they not loved her? – and who loved her now?’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 194)

This change of narrative form, if taken out of context, might seem bizarre, but I argue that Gaskell is using the trope of the ghost story as the most effective way to portray Mary’s trauma, vulnerability and isolation. This is emphasized when the knock at the door is followed by a call:

‘‘Mary! Mary! Open the door!’ as a little movement on her part seemed to tell the being outside of her wakeful, watchful state. They were the accents of her mother’s voice; the very south-country pronunciation, that Mary so well remembered; and which she had sometimes tried to imitate when alone, with the fond mimicry of affection.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 195)

The ambiguity as to whether the voice calling to Mary is human or spirit derives from the reference to Mary's dead mother, but the passage is also psychologically consistent. In her grief for her mother, in the extreme crisis she has just passed through, lacking the protection and understanding of her father, Mary has tried to recall the sound of her mother's voice in an attempt to recapture the emotional stability and security of which she has been deprived.

The boundary between the real and the unreal, the physical and the spiritual, ghost story and realist narrative collide and are blended as Mary throws herself into her aunt's arms. Esther, the homeless outcast, is the character who is able to reconcile and heal misunderstandings and emotional pain, and who can bring Mary and Jem together in a way which offers a positive future. As Stoneman notes, at this point in the narrative the parental impulse is more important than parental identity. (Stonemen, p 79) Whereas John Barton shakes off her restraining arm, Jem shakes Esther's hand when he recognises her, and Mary embraces her. This physical contact symbolizes not only their acceptance of Esther's moral message, but also their more tolerant and compassionate attitude to her homeless state which echoes the views of the Unitarian preacher James Martineau that 'even wandering guilt must be sought for and brought home; and penitence that sits upon the steps must be asked to come within the door.'<sup>21</sup>

Esther also gives Mary the physical evidence which would convict her father of murder. This transient domestic object, a scrap of paper torn from a Valentine given to Mary by Jem Wilson, has been used by Barton to prime the gun with which he shot

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<sup>21</sup> James Martineau, 'The Family in Heaven and Earth' in *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, Fourth Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, MDCCCLXVII), p 461.



Harry Carson. The shock which Mary receives on recognizing the paper and the realization of what it implies dislocates her thoughts and disrupts her growing interest in Esther and the possibility of re-establishing links with her aunt.

‘As if, according to the believers in mesmerism, the intenseness of her wish gave her power over another, although the wish was unexpressed, Esther felt herself unwelcome, and that her absence was desired.’ (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 202)

Gaskell uses the language and rhetoric of contemporary psychology to explore the connections between the conscious and the unconscious, and the ways in which shock affects action and behaviour. By linking this to an apparently trivial physical object, she suggests the ways in which the physical and psychological are intimately linked.

At a superficial level, the torn scrap of paper, an expression of love, becomes the link between Mary’s family, who fail to protect her, her lover who seeks her as a passing amusement, and her disregarded admirer Jem, who has the courage and stability the others lack. It is also a metaphor for damaged relationships between individuals. As Esther’s bonnet nail has been torn from the wall and thrown into the street, so a piece of the Valentine from Jem, whom Mary does not value, has been torn off and used to destroy another human life. In this sense, it also becomes symbolic of wider relationships and the destructiveness of a society where class divisions and intolerance are rife.

The homeless Esther therefore performs a critical role in the novel. At a simple narrative level, her appearances act as a continual warning to point out the dangers of a family life without a clear moral focus. As the locus of dissent and tension within the Barton family, Esther is viewed by John Barton as the catalyst for the series of disasters which strike his family and lead to its dissolution. John Barton's subsequent radicalism, and substance misuse put Mary at risk by his failure to protect her and to provide her with a clear moral framework. Mary herself, like Esther, is almost destroyed by her wilful independence and lack of responsibility. Despite her anti-domestic lifestyle however, it is Esther's persistence in keeping hold of her family ties and her continuing sense of responsibility for Mary that eventually lead to redemption and resolution for Mary and Jem. The rapid deterioration of Esther's physical appearance enables Gaskell to use her interventions to explore the effects of shock and grief on Mary's psyche. Esther's physical insubstantiality, her invisibility as a homeless prostitute, mean that she inhabits a shadowy borderland between the world of the real and the supernatural: 'They rushed outside; and, fallen into what appeared simply a heap of white or light-coloured clothes, fainting or dead, lay the poor crushed Butterfly – the once innocent Esther [...] naught but skin and bone, with a cough to tear her in two.' (*Mary Barton*, Vol 5, p 323) Her dying words, 'Has it been a dream, then?' emphasize her role as the means by which Gaskell can explore Mary's psychology and the effects of shock and extreme emotion. Like John Barton's guilt, Esther's homelessness can only be resolved by death, but as in *Ruth*, her story is not without hope in that she has enabled the next generation to establish itself in a more congenial environment.

### Lois ('Lois the Witch', 1860)

Death is also the resolution for the homeless Lois in 'Lois the Witch' (1860). Gaskell's choice of witchcraft as a narrative subject is not unusual in the period.<sup>22</sup> Maureen Moran notes the ubiquity of the Victorian interest in witchcraft and sorcery, including the fashion for spiritualism and mesmerism, used as a means to explore cultural and social issues of class, gender and power.<sup>23</sup> Gaskell had already used the cat-roasting incident in *North and South* (1855) to highlight the need for education as a means of counteracting superstition. In 'Lois the Witch', she uses the landscape and society of seventeenth-century America to explore an isolated, inturned and hostile community in which Lois, the homeless orphan daughter of a Warwickshire parson, finds not sanctuary with her aunt and uncle, but vilification and hanging as a witch.<sup>24</sup> Instability is one of the key themes of this novella and the tone is set from the opening sentences. Lois steadies herself on the stable land after weeks of being on the rocking ship that has carried her from the Old World to the New. Yet 'It seemed as strange now to be on solid earth as it had been, not long ago, to be rocked by the sea'.<sup>25</sup> She has no point of reference in the strange landscape she sees before her and she shivers in the 'piercing wind, which seemed to follow those whom it had tyrannized over at sea with a dogged wish of still tormenting them on land.' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 5) She is destabilized physically and emotionally. Like Margaret Hale after the death of her parents, Lois is at a 'breathing-time of her life', but unlike Margaret who has matured and is able

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<sup>22</sup> See Bernard Rosenthal, 'Tituba's Story', *The New England Quarterly*, Vol 71, No 2, June 1998, pp 192 – 194 for Gaskell's use of sources for this story.

<sup>23</sup> Maureen F Moran, "'Light no Smithfield fires': Some Victorian Attitudes to Witchcraft", *Journal of Popular Culture*, Spring 2000, 33, 4, p 123.

<sup>24</sup> Bonaparte sees in 'Lois the Witch' a sub-textual account of Gaskell's own life: Bonaparte, pp 109 – 114.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, 'Lois the Witch' in Linda Hughes ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Novellas and Shorter Fiction III, Cousin Phillis and Other Tales from All the Year Round and the Cornhill Magazine 1859 - 64*, Volume 4, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p 5.

to plan for her future independent life, Lois recalls the past, her home in the peaceful Warwickshire countryside and her childhood as the vicar's daughter.

As in the opening of *Mary Barton*, Gaskell subtly destabilizes the apparently idyllic setting of the rose covered parsonage and the security of Lois's home. She is the only child of elderly parents. Her parents and her old nurse are all dead; 'they slept, calm and still, in Barford churchyard, careless of what became of their orphan child, as far as earthly manifestations of care or love went.' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 6) Lois is isolated and vulnerable. Love and death are inextricably associated with her in these opening pages of the novella, and are presented in an extreme and violent form. Her lover, Hugh Lucy, swears 'a great oath unto the Lord' that he will find Lois 'sooner or later, if she was still upon the earth' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 6), a telling phrase which hints that Lois may not survive long. Lois's mother wishes that Lois was dying with her; 'Such was the selfishness of conjugal love: she thought little of Lois's desolation in comparison with her rejoicing over her speedy reunion with her dead husband!' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 6) Later, when Lois is living in Salem, her cousin Manasseh insists that 'If I wed not Lois, both she and I die within the year. I care not for life: before this, as you know, I have sought for death.' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 37)

Dissent, distrust and conflict have split Lois's family: one uncle was killed in the Civil War, another was a schismatic who quarrelled with his brother, Lois's father, and left with the Puritans for America. Barriers of class and social status, coupled with extreme passion also mark Lois's relationship with Hugh Lacey, a relationship which similarly threatens to divide his family and to further isolate Lois:

‘[He] told her, in one great burst of love, of his passionate attachment, his vehement struggles with his father, his impotence at present, his hopes and resolves for the future. And, intermingled with all this, came such outrageous threats and expressions of uncontrolled vehemence, that Lois felt that in Barford she must not linger to be a cause of desperate quarrel between father and son,’  
(‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 7)

Lois, as she will be later in Salem, is the unwilling focus of this maelstrom of violent emotion. The dominant tone of the novella therefore, even in what appears to be the romantically imagined pastoral past of rural England, is of florid and extreme emotions, often associated with anger and violent death.

Blood is used as a metaphor for wider social ills and to illustrate disease and decay in both individual families and the wider community. ‘Blood is thicker than water’, says Lois’s dying mother, but the uncle to whom she proposes to send her orphan daughter, has separated himself from his family both spiritually and geographically. When Lois arrives in Salem, her uncle is bed-ridden and powerless, and her aunt’s reception of her is hostile. The first words spoken by her aunt are a denial of any knowledge of Lois’s existence, by implication, a denial of any blood relationship.<sup>26</sup> Her next speech asserts her complete control of the household and is also an active attack on Lois’s father, re-igniting the religious dissent caused by the Act of Uniformity which led both to the schism within Lois’s family and to the Puritans being ejected from England. Lois’s forthright response to the implied insult to her dead father means that her first words to her aunt are angry and challenging:

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<sup>26</sup> Bonaparte views the character of Lois’s aunt as a version of Gaskell’s stepmother: Bonaparte, p 25.

‘Lois and her aunt gazed into each other’s eyes unflinchingly for a minute or two of silence; but the girl felt her colour coming and going, while the elder woman’s never varied.’ (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 16)

Here, blood, which causes Lois to change colour, is a metaphor for the differing characters of the two women. Grace Hickson is not related by blood to Lois and is unmoved by her homeless plight, rigid and unbending. Lois’s eyes fill with tears, whereas her aunt maintains an almost inhuman stare, ‘dry and unwavering.’ (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 16) Together with her tall, large stature, her voice which is almost as masculine as her son’s, and her dominance over the household, this suggests an unnatural gendering which in turn can be seen as indicative of a degenerative inheritance and diseased blood. The language used to describe Lois’s uncle, and his relationship with her, is similarly grounded in anatomically precise metaphor. Gaskell comments that ‘Lois’s heart often bled at the continual flow of contemptuous reproof which Grace constantly addressed to her husband’, and that his ‘first flow of action towards Lois was soon exhausted;’, a phrase which suggests an ineffectual pumping of the heart. (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, pp 19 – 20) Indeed, it is a stroke which finally kills him.

Blood is also associated with religion and superstitious beliefs. Lois’s account of the drowning of the witch which she witnessed as a child and which immediately precedes her arrival in Salem, describes old Hannah’s face as ‘bloody and black with the stones and the mud they had been throwing at her.’ (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 13) Captain Holderness describes the attack on Marblehead by French Papist pirates and the murder of a woman prisoner when ‘the blood of all who heard the [dying] cry ran

cold with terror', and Nattee's wild stories have a similar effect on Lois. ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 11) The Indian who attacks the settlers under cover of darkness, is shot, and leaves 'a long stream of blood lying on the grass.' ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 11) Violent death and religious and civil conflict are inextricably intertwined, impacting on both individuals and the wider community, within a narrative blend which combines realism with gothic fantasy.

Religious belief, like other emotions, is also taken to extremes in the enclosed world of Salem, and presents a more direct threat to Lois in the disturbing presence of her cousin Manasseh, whose behaviour, fuelled by his prophetic visions, spirals increasingly out of control. Early indications of Manasseh's limitations are given when Lois arrives at her new home and no gleam of intelligence enters his face at her unexpected entrance. The book which is always open on his knee becomes a symbol for his disrupted consciousness, as he increasingly retreats from the world around him and enters a fantasy world of dreams and visions. Eventually, as his monomania increasingly displaces his rationality, he does not even see the printed letters on the page. In an ironic inversion, his hermeneutic study of 'godly books', instead of providing spiritual insight, merely feeds his obsession: 'I saw no letters of printers' ink marked on the page, but I saw a gold and ruddy type of some unknown language, the meaning whereof was whispered into my soul; it was, "Marry Lois!" ('Lois the Witch', Vol 4, p 29) Manasseh's physical appearance, described fully after his first proposal of marriage to Lois, suggests his burgeoning insanity:

‘He might be good and pious – [...] but his dark fixed eyes, moving so slowly and heavily, his lank black hair, his grey coarse skin, all made her dislike him now ‘ (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 27)

Gaskell’s use of physiognomy is a common novelistic device and her description of Manasseh and of his behaviour calls to mind Alexander Morison’s thesis:

‘The appearance of the face is intimately connected with and dependant upon the state of the mind; the repetition of the same ideas and emotions, and the consequent repetition of the same movements of the muscles of the eyes and of the face give a peculiar expression, which in the insane state, is a combination of wildness, abstraction, or vacancy, and of those ideas and emotions characterising different varieties of mental disorder;’<sup>27</sup>

Religion is the trigger which destabilises Manasseh’s mind, and Gaskell clearly associates his mental illness with his excessive spirituality, his ‘sick soul’.

Manasseh’s descent into madness, and the concomitant threat to Lois, is paralleled by increasing hysteria in the enclosed community of Salem as accusations of witchcraft burgeon. The plot operates as a series of miscommunications, misunderstandings and misreadings, all of which embroil Lois further in a morass of false accusations as the community turns on itself, seeking victims in outsiders such as Lois, and Nattee and Hota, the American Indians. The only characters who maintain a sense of balance, rationality and perspective are the Widow Smith and Captain

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander Morison, *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (1838), 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (London: Longman and Co, 1840), 1, pp 83 – 85 quoted in Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth eds, *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830 – 1890*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p 262.



Holderness, both of whom live outside the settlement. After her initial challenge to her aunt, Lois tries to form a bond with her cousins, but her innocent stories of Halloween only serve to increase their paranoia and suspicion. Lois, like the American Indians, is a cultural 'other' who cannot be trusted.

Vanessa Dickerson reads the narrative as a commentary on paternalism and female helplessness, noting that Old Hannah, the witch of Lois's childhood, is only the first in a series of women in the story whose unsatisfactory relationships with men are transferred into negative emotions and actions against another woman - that is, Lois. The drama, she notes, is a quintessentially female one: Manasseh, the only male who can 'save' Lois, offers her a choice between death or an unacceptable marriage.<sup>28</sup> However, whilst the accusation and hanging of an American Indian woman as the first witch in Salem is historically accurate, Gaskell enriches the blend of themes in her novella by allowing Lois, a white English woman, to share equally the Indian women's experience of persecution and their ultimate fate. The Hicksons, in their narrow view of religion, are as intolerant of Lois's beliefs as they are of the beliefs of the American Indians. Whilst undoubtedly 'Lois the Witch' displays characteristic elements of sensation fiction in that Lois's new home is the site of terror and madness, it is Gaskell's interest in socio-cultural issues which is of primary importance. The narrative form is simply a convenient way of presenting serious concerns in an entertaining manner, given the cloak of authenticity because it is, in large part, a rendering of real events. Time and historical events are manipulated by the characters in the novella allowing Gaskell to further critique sectarianism and intolerance. The past is never allowed to lie forgotten, but becomes elided with the present. Grace Hickson accuses

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<sup>28</sup> Vanessa D Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*, (Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1996), pp 125 – 128.

Lois by implication of being ungodly; her inheritance is the sin of her father who took the oath of allegiance to Charles Stuart. Lois's innocent glance back at the toddler who falls over as Lois is driving into Salem, becomes in retrospect, an instance of her casting the evil eye on the child.

Gaskell uses the landscape, as she does in 'Cousin Phillis', as a metaphor for a range of cultural and individual instabilities.<sup>29</sup> Her description of American roads, with the stumps of trees blocking the most direct route, logs of wood laid across boggy ground and the deep green forest which continually threatens to overwhelm the track, is factually accurate, compared for example to Fanny Trollope's account of her travels in America, but also suggests the difficulties the settlers have in controlling both the environment and the Indians, who represent a physical and a spiritual threat. The Indians are always 'lurking' but never seen, the distant cries of strange birds may be the war-whoops of their 'deadly painted enemies', and their invisibility adds to the atmosphere of terror and blends the physical and spiritual worlds until they are indistinguishable, just as they are in Manasseh's disordered mind. Manasseh's own wanderings in the surrounding forests are a challenge to the Indians and their spiritual beliefs which are intimately connected to the natural world around them, and also illustrate his recklessness and lack of contact with reality. Whilst his mother publicly boasts of his courage and disregard of danger, in private she warns and reproves him. As in 'Cousin Phillis' where the failure of the engineers to lay a railway track across the boggy myrtle represents a wider failure of men to understand women, so the failure of the settlers to respect and work with the landscape and indigenous inhabitants is used by

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<sup>29</sup> See Philip Rogers, 'The Education of Cousin Phillis', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol 50, No 1 (June 1995), pp 27 – 50.

Gaskell to critique colonialism and to argue for the tolerance of difference. In a rare narratorial intervention, she insists:

‘We can afford to smile at them now; but our English ancestors entertained superstitions of much the same character at the same period, and with less excuse, as the circumstances surrounding them were better known, and consequently more explicable by common sense than the real mysteries of the deep untrodden forests of New England.’ (‘Lois the Witch’, Vol 4, p 22)

The tone and language here has echoes of the opening of ‘An Accursed Race’:

‘We have our prejudices in England. [...] We have tortured Jews: we have burnt Catholics and Protestants, to say nothing of a few witches and wizards. [...] To be sure, our insular position has kept us free [...] from the inroads of alien races; who, driven from one land of refuge, steal into another equally unwilling to receive them: and where, [...] their presence is barely endured, and no pains is taken [sic] to conceal the repugnance which the natives of ‘pure blood’ experience towards them.’ (‘An Accursed Race’, Vol 3, p 297)

Gaskell, as Wolfreys notes, feels compelled to narrate against the emergence in the 1700s and 1800s of ‘racist, religious and biologically determinist forms of brutality’. (Wolfreys, p 85) It is notable that there are occasions in ‘Lois the Witch’ as in ‘An Accursed Race’, when the narrator intervenes directly to comment on intolerance. The argument in both texts is the same: resistance to oppression, an implied criticism of the inability of the English, (or in the case of ‘Lois the Witch’, the community of Salem), to

open itself to self-enquiry and internal criticism. The metaphor of bad blood is used in both texts to symbolize what Gaskell views as the inevitable outcome of intolerance, the death of both individuals and society.<sup>30</sup>

‘Lois the Witch’ is a highly internalized exploration of homelessness and its concomitant effects on a vulnerable young girl. Lois’s home in England is superficially stable, but proves to be fragile and the exploration of various forms of instability becomes a key theme in the narrative. Gaskell uses the tropes of sensation fiction to examine the ways in which the unstable and disordered minds of individuals threaten not only the domestic environment, but spill out into the wider community in a destructive and violent vortex. Positive emotions associated with home such as the love and protection of a family and blood relatives become poisoned and degenerate, and spiritual beliefs, which should bind civil society together, become instead a source of hysteria leading to violent death, a perverse inversion of martyrdom. The landscape, time and historical events are all used to create a toxic blend through which Gaskell can explore the psychology of collective and individual hysteria in this unremittingly dark novella.

### **Philip Hepburn (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, 1863)**

Philip Hepburn in *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) makes himself homeless, driven from Monkshaven by the realization that his marriage to Sylvia, which was based on a lie, has failed. Homelessness is the punishment he inflicts on himself for deceiving his wife

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<sup>30</sup> See Rebecca Styler, ‘Lois the Witch: A Unitarian Tale’, *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 21, 2007, pp 73 – 85 for a discussion of the Unitarian influence on this short story.

about the fate of Charley Kinraid, the man she loves. Philip is not an attractive character. His physical appearance is a complete contrast to Charley, the specksioneer:

‘The sight he saw in the mirror was his own long, sad, pale face, made plainer and grayer by the heavy pressure of the morning’s events. He saw his stooping figure, his rounded shoulders, with something like a feeling of disgust at his personal appearance as he remembered the square, upright build of Kinraid; his fine uniform, with epaulette and sword-belt; his handsome brown face; his dark eyes, splendid with the fire of passion and indignation; his white teeth, gleaming out with the terrible smile of scorn.’<sup>31</sup>

*Sylvia’s Lovers* however, is not a simple tale of opposites although Philip’s physical weakness certainly reflects the narrowness of his moral and spiritual outlook.<sup>32</sup> Sylvia, like Charley Kinraid, is lively and passionate, and her desire for a red, rather than a gray cloak, suggests her visible sexuality which Philip tries vainly to control and hide under what he considers to be a more sober and suitable colour.<sup>33</sup> The tone of their relationship is immediately set as one of conflict in which Sylvia ‘would not have yielded to Philip in anything that she could help.’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 30) Her recklessness, defiance and uncontrolled emotions make her dangerously unstable, and Philip physically holds her back from joining the crowd going to protest against the press gangs, telling her that it is the law and she can do nothing against it. Philip’s forcible removal of Sylvia from the public arena and public debate, his persistent

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 9: Sylvia’s Lovers*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 290.

<sup>32</sup> See Shirley Foster, ‘*Sylvia’s Lovers*: Gender Construction and Deconstruction’ in Francesco Marroni and Alan Shelston eds, *Elizabeth Gaskell Text and Context*, (Pescara: Tracce, 1999), pp 147 – 167 for a discussion of the portrayal of masculinity in the novel.

<sup>33</sup> See Morse, p 67 n 30 for the way in which Gaskell uses the image of the scarlet cloak to identify Sylvia with the sailor’s prostitute, Newcastle Bess.

attempts to contain her within the safe confines of the home and to give her a suitable education are however as futile as trying to control the elemental power of the sea with which Sylvia has such a strong bond. Philip continues in his courtship of Sylvia 'with the patient perseverance that was the one remarkable feature in his character', despite her clear aversion to him, because he believes that he can teach and guide her to behave in a more appropriate, conventional way. (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 259) The futility of his obsession is underlined by the vignettes and old tales of doomed lovers that are scattered throughout the narrative: Alice Rose's unhappy marriage, mad Nancy and Guy of Warwick all emphasise Phillip's tenuous grasp on the reality of his desires.<sup>34</sup> Like Manasseh, Philip's desire for possession of Sylvia, which can be described as monomania, in that it is 'exclusive, fixed and permanent', is confused and elided with his spiritual beliefs.<sup>35</sup> Philip, a Quaker, whose religion insists on plainness of dress and worship, confesses on his death bed that he has made Sylvia his idol. Not only that, as Shaw asserts, the lie which finally brings about his marriage 'is motivated by a desire for possession so strong that it cancels the promptings of conscience in an otherwise virtuous young man.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p xv)

Philip's marriage to Sylvia does not bring him the happiness he expects. The omniscient narrator asks:

'Did it enter into Philip's heart to perceive that he had wedded his long-sought bride in mourning raiment, and that the first sounds which greeted them as they

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<sup>34</sup> See Elizabeth Leaver, 'The Sender Both of Sunshine & of Storm: The Christian Dimension in *Sylvia's Lovers*', in Francesco Marroni and Alan Shelston ed, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Text and Context*, (Pescara: Tracce, 1999), pp 193 – 196 for a discussion of Gaskell's use of fable and Christian parable in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Etienne Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity*, trans. E.K. Hunt, (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), pp 200 – 201, quoted in Taylor and Shuttlesworth, p 256.

approached their home were those of weeping and wailing?’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 257)

Philip’s guilt at the lie he has told breaks through in dreams, and Sylvia too dreams that Kinraid is alive. Dreams and reality, and the physical and mental health of both Philip and Sylvia become interwoven in an increasing downward spiral of mutual unhappiness. The birth of their daughter, which immediately precedes the crisis in their marriage, at first seems to offer hope. Sylvia learns to love Philip as well as to like and respect him, and Philip ‘reached the zenith of his life’s happiness.’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 266) However, Sylvia’s health declines after the birth of her baby, and she develops a fever in which she loses her grasp on reality. She calls out for Charley Kinraid, and her distressed exclamation, ‘Oh, who’s there?’, as Philip enters the room, leaves the reader in doubt as to whether she mistakes her husband for her former lover or imagines she sees Kinraid. (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 267) Her explanation that she imagines she has seen Charley Kinraid and that he is still alive triggers an angry response in her husband which inflicts what Matus describes as a ‘psychic wound’ on Sylvia. (Matus, 2009, p 14) The power of Philip’s turbulent emotions

‘made his heart beat so wildly, and almost took him out of himself. Indeed, he must have been quite beside himself for the time, or he could never have gone on to utter the unwise, cruel words he did.’ (*Sylvia’s Lovers*, Vol 9, p 267)

Gaskell here recognizes that an altered state of consciousness, an ‘out of body’ experience, can cause people to act in ways which would be described as ‘out of character’ with their normal or accepted behaviour. Philip’s unconscious has overcome

the restraint of his conscious mind. Sylvia's reaction is immediate: she lies down 'motionless and silent', exhaustion and depletion, as Matus notes in her analysis of *North and South*, being the after affects of extreme shock. (Matus, 2009, p 64) Again, as in *North and South*, Sylvia's reaction to Philip's speech is associated with dream and trance: 'her steady, dilated eyes had kept him dumb and motionless as if by a spell.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 267) Gaskell uses the language of mesmerism to describe Sylvia's suspended consciousness following the shock she has received, but equally, it can also be seen to re-inforce the unconscious and certainly unwilling spell she has cast over Philip: the fatal attraction which has led to this critical point in their relationship.<sup>36</sup> The title of this chapter, 'Evil Omens', and the quasi-spiritual language threaded throughout, also emphasise Philip's misplaced adoration. Philip is 'stung with remorse', he implores forgiveness on his knees and must have Sylvia's pardon, 'even if they both died in the act of reconciliation.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, pp 267 - 268) The psychic wound Philip has inflicted is constantly replayed in Sylvia's mind:

'She used to shudder as if cold steel had been plunged into her warm, living body as she remembered these words; cruel words, harmlessly provoked. They were too much associated with physical pains to be dwelt upon; only their memory was always there.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 271)

The physical and mental, conscious and unconscious are inextricably linked, and the marriage of Sylvia and Philip, founded on a lie on one side and desperation on the other, finally becomes intolerable. It is at this point, that Philip too, begins to suffer from dreams and visions:

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of Gaskell's tolerant attitude towards but scant knowledge of mesmerism, see Matus, 2009, p 207, n 18.



'Philip used to wonder if the dream that preceded her illness was the suggestive cause that drew her so often to the shore. Her illness consequent upon that dream had filled his mind, so that for many months he himself had had no haunting vision of Kinraid to disturb his slumbers. But now the old dream of Kinraid's actual presence by Philip's bedside began to return with fearful vividness. Night after night it recurred; each time with some new touch of reality, and close approach; till it was as if the fate that overtakes all men were then, even then, knocking at his door.' (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p 272)

The sea, which is such a powerful and continuing symbol throughout the narrative, becomes Sylvia's refuge. She can retreat into the past and lift her depression by remembering happier times. Equally the sea offers her the freedom and solitude which she cannot find in the dark, oppressive confinement of her home. The sea also represents her growing spirituality, recalling a passage from one of James Martineau's discourses:

'We must go in contemplation out of life, ere we can see how its troubles subside and are lost, like evanescent waves, in the deeps of eternity and the immensity of God.'<sup>37</sup>

But for Philip, the nightly recurrence of his dream of Kinraid, seems to put the same remorseless pressure on his conscious mind as the waves breaking on the shore. This theme is continued into the next chapter, with its title 'Rescued from the Waves' when

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<sup>37</sup> James Martineau, 'Great Principles and Small Duties' in *Endeavours after the Christian Life*, Fourth Edition, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, MDCCCLXVII), p 30.

Philip's dream becomes reality and Kinraid returns.<sup>38</sup> Whilst as Shaw notes, the return of one who is supposed dead was a popular theme in mid-century fiction, Gaskell combines this with the idea of dreams acting as premonitions of events to come. (*Sylvia's Lovers*, Vol 9, p ix) By further aligning dreams with Philip's disrupted conscience, she seems to imply that he has somehow willed Kinraid's re-appearance. In the dramatic confrontation between the three protagonists, it is only the remembrance of her child which stops Sylvia from leaving with Kinraid.

In despair, Philip chooses to make himself homeless and leaves home in an act of self punishment which turns into a pilgrimage. Critics have commented both on the topographical specificity of *Sylvia's Lovers* and the curious disjunction of the enclosed world of Monkshaven with Philip's experiences in the Holy Land.<sup>39</sup> Patsy Stoneman, for example, links Philip's journey and his stay at St Sepulchre's with the wider narrative theme in the novel of power, in particular, controlling masculinity and subservient femininity.<sup>40</sup> I argue that if Philip's wanderings are viewed as an Odyssean continuum of internalised experience and personal growth, and as part of a narrative which includes the telling of personal stories and fables of adventures far away from Monkshaven, then this episode is consistent both with the psychology of the characters and with the narrative structure. Although the story opens with a description of the small town of Monkshaven, bounded by the moors on three sides and the sea on the other, the links to the whaling community suggest an active, exploratory, adventurous life beyond that prescribed by the narrow physical, emotional, and spiritual confines of

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<sup>38</sup> Sharps sees Kinraid's disappearance as another version of John Stevenson. John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works*, (Fontwell: Linden Press, 1970), p 403.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, Frances Twinn, 'Navigational pitfalls and topographical constraints in *Sylvia's Lovers*', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 15, 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1987), pp154 – 155.

Monkshaven. In part therefore, Philip's elective homelessness arises out of his need for psychological and emotional space, and is a way of dealing with his obsession with Sylvia, his guilt at the secret he has kept for so long, and his grief at the collapse of his marriage. Bonaparte discusses the way in which Philip is imprisoned in a daemonic doubling with Kinraid and argues that he needs to die as Philip Hepburn in order to be reborn 'in his full daemonic character.' (Bonaparte, pp 205 – 206) She links this to Gaskell's own internal daemon, the divided self which both rejoiced in freedom from domestic constraints and acutely missed her children, the 'many me's' which did not include Gaskell the writer. This challenging interpretation is certainly consistent with Philip's literal and metaphorical journey, but his flight also fits the pattern outlined by Jean Esquirol in his description of the effects of erotic monomania:

'Like all monomaniacs, those suffering from erotomania, are pursued both night and day, by the same thoughts and affections, which are the more disordered as they are concentrated or exasperated by opposition. Fear, hope, jealousy, joy and fury seem unitedly to concur, or in turn, to render more cruel the torment of these wretched beings. They neglect, abandon, and then fly both their relatives and friends. They disdain fortune, and despising social customs, are capable of the most extraordinary, difficult, painful and strange actions.' (Esquirol in Taylor and Shuttleworth, pp 258 – 259)

I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, that whilst Gaskell was tolerant of a wide range of behaviour, she also sought balance and harmony. Philip's extreme passion cannot be reconciled either with accepted codes of social behaviour or within the confines of his own home, and death therefore is the only acceptable resolution.

Homelessness in *Sylvia's Lovers* and in 'Lois the Witch' is considered within the dynamic of an obsessive passion which de-stabilizes behaviour and conscience. In both works, it can be argued that this occurs within a society which is equally de-stabilised. In Salem, this is the result of spiritual conflict leading to mass hysteria. In Monkshaven, the community lives under the constant threat of press gangs which descend unannounced to snatch male breadwinners from their families in an ironic inversion of law and order. Gaskell's use of dreams and visions in *Sylvia's Lovers* enables her to explore psychic states beyond the ordinary, and adds richness and depth to her interest in the unconscious mind and its connection with the physical body.

## THE MEANINGS OF HOME: CONCLUSION

As we have found, the meaning of home for Elizabeth Gaskell was always contested and ambiguous. The tensions in her own life influenced her fiction in a number of ways, but principally, I argue, in her depiction of home. Gaskell passionately believed that a stable, secure home was paramount, even if this was not necessarily one which conformed to the expectations of society. Her fiction is replete with constructed families, brought together from pragmatic need, rather than bound by ties of blood or relationship. In this thesis, I have focused on the varied and powerful meanings of home which Gaskell used in her fiction, and now draw some conclusions.

I have considered the ways in which Gaskell's fiction presents a concept of home that often fails to provide a physical place of safety, and where even the architecture of a building militates against a sense of peace and privacy. Doors and windows are potent signifiers of entrapment as well as protective barriers. They are ambiguous openings through which disease, death, and those who wish to harm the occupants can enter. Gaskell's treatment of the death of children in particular varies in tone and narrative importance, but as her technique develops, these deaths are used to elide the transition between narrative forms and to give greater impact to her thematic concerns. In a similar way, the figure of the returning or rescued sailor is a recurrent and important character in her fiction, critical to the plot, but on the edge of the narrative action. These characters are linked to the passing of time and often to some kind of destabilization within the home, including the threat of death. Critical events occur during their absence from home which their re-entry into a domestic setting helps to resolve. Whilst other characters change and develop, these returning sailors remain

essentially the same: optimistic, life-enhancing and full of practical good sense. They represent the wider world, and in some respects, Gaskell's own sense of confinement, her thirst for travel and adventure.

The breadth of Gaskell's curiosity about human nature is illustrated by her portrayal of sexuality, in particular, male sexuality. The presentation of men in her fiction is often very far removed from the paterfamilias of contemporary cultural expectations and provides a view of masculinity which is embedded in the domestic and embraces aspects of feminine sensitivity. She is unusual in the way in which she used cross-dressing to explore the interpretation of character and the potential for change offered by a more ambiguous and flexible allocation of gender. Gaskell used feminized men in her fiction to explore the issues raised by the radical Unitarians in their campaign for a transformed society. Her Unitarian faith was integrated into her concept of home, and in her fiction, she illustrated the ways in which formal lessons were reinforced by the example of daily living. Nature and innate characteristics would, in this way, be guided and shaped by careful nurturing to achieve spiritual perfection in accordance with associationist psychology.

Servants were key actors within nineteenth-century homes and Gaskell is fascinated by this ambiguous relationship that combined enforced intimacy with contractual obligations. Most of the homes described by Gaskell in her fiction employ no more than two servants, with servant and employer often working alongside each other, sharing domestic tasks. Servants are therefore able to provide an intimate commentary on the action and motives of characters precisely because they are located

inside the home.<sup>1</sup> The practical role servants fulfilled in Victorian life of protecting the home by mediating social contact and preserving social status, blends in Gaskell's shorter fiction into an examination of wider domestic and family relationships. The older, feudal model of loyal retainers serving an established aristocratic family develops into a newer concept of social paternalism in which employers are seen to be responsible for the holistic care of their servants, that is, their physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing. At its worst, this led to an abuse of power and status as employers sought to control every aspect of their servant's lives. At its best, Gaskell suggests, it is a quasi-family relationship in which strong bonds of affection and loyalty are developed, and the differences between social classes are increasingly blurred.

Gaskell's fictional homes are replete with detail. In the nineteenth century, a range of creative arts represented and expressed reality through the accretion of decoration and the elaborately realistic portrayal of the world around them. As Angus Easson notes, this representational tradition derived from Dutch genre painting and was given further impetus by the development of photography.<sup>2</sup> However, detail for a novelist must always have a function, rather than being purely decorative. Gaskell's strength lies in the way in which she uses the contents of domestic interiors and small personal possessions to explore areas of thematic interest in her novels, as paradigms for subjects which were surrounded by cultural taboos and therefore precluded from open discussion, and as a means of introducing stability into contested or difficult situations. In this way, she was able to extend her creative range whilst still apparently writing within culturally safe boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England 1660-1857*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p 26, for example, for a case study based discussion of the difficulty of conducting a clandestine love affair without the collusion of servants.

<sup>2</sup> Angus Easson, 'The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell (1)', *Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol 4, 1990, p 66.

As we have found, Gaskell's portrayal of homelessness in her fiction is explored through the state of mind of individuals as part of their personal emotional and psychological journeys and is often linked to some kind of destabilization. It is notable that for Gaskell's homeless characters, the outcome is death. It is as if once an individual has been destabilized beyond a certain critical point, they cannot be re-absorbed into society, and death, therefore, is the only acceptable resolution.

Inevitably, the work undertaken for this thesis has identified issues related to the concept of home on which further research could be carried out. The setting of houses in the landscape is often illuminating and consistently underpins narrative themes. Much of Gaskell's writing begins with a description of a landscape and works into the narrative from the outside.

In *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), landscape is intimately integrated with character. Sylvia is a child of nature, her wild and temperamental character with its inflexible core reflects the landscape where she lives, the wild bleak moors that shut in Monkshaven on one side with the sea on the other.<sup>3</sup> Similarly Charlotte Brontë's character was forged in the isolation and wild freedom of the Haworth moors.<sup>4</sup> Jenny Uglow notes how the opening of *Ruth* with its description of the old assize town, leads us metaphorically through time and society, and the journey through the landscapes surrounding Monkshaven and Haworth has the same effect, drawing the reader back into a society which operated under different laws and

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Marion Shaw ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 9: Sylvia's Lovers*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 11.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Linda H Peterson ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 8: The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p 12.



customs.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the opening of 'Half a Life-Time Ago' (1855) suggests not just Susan Dixon's isolation on the wild fells, but her competence and power. The farmyard is well-organized to support her livestock and herself, and the ancient yew suggests a long-standing settlement in complete harmony with the landscape.<sup>6</sup> The opening of 'The Moorland Cottage' (1850) describes a similarly isolated farm which, as Alan Shelston notes, 'is as much a story of its setting as it is of its characters.'<sup>7</sup> Maggie, like Owen Griffiths in 'The Doom of the Griffiths' (1858) and Sylvia in *Sylvia's Lovers*, has a focal point in the landscape which both grounds her and offers a private space in which to reflect.

Gardens are an important extension of houses. One of Gaskell's great joys in the move to Plymouth Grove was the extensive garden where she could grow vegetables and even keep livestock. Even before the move, she spoke of the garden as the 'great delight in our new house', a refuge where she could walk about without a bonnet on. (Chapple and Pollard, p 111, p 170 and p 831) In her fiction, gardens are used to underpin themes and comment on character and plot. Gardens are often a riot of climbing plants suggesting fecundity, abundance, and sensuality, for example, when Margaret walks with Henry Lennox among the pears and climbing roses. As with the interiors of Gaskell's homes, colour is important. The garden at Helstone has 'scarlet honeysuckle [...] the small lawn was gorgeous with verbenas and geraniums of all

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<sup>5</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), p 327.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Mitchell ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 3: Novellas and Shorter Fiction II Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words (1852 -9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 345.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Alan Shelston ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 2: Novellas and Shorter Fiction I, The Moorland Cottage, Cranford and Related Writings*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p ix.

bright colours’<sup>8</sup> In ‘Mr Harrison’s Confessions’ (1851) the garden suggests Sophie’s fertility, innate openness of character and domestic capability.

The garden of Mrs Mason’s house in *Ruth* (1853) not only records the cumulative re-development of the old town where plots have been sub-divided to make a townscape of increasing squalor, but also reflects the way in which Ruth feels trapped by her current circumstances. The larch tree which remains in the garden is confined like Ruth herself. Similarly, the approach to Lady Ludlow’s house is a journey back through time as well as through the landscape. Margaret Dawson’s difficult journey becomes a metaphor for Lady Ludlow’s rigid attitudes and values which are challenged by the younger generation. It is necessary to ‘quarter’ the lane which approaches the house. Charlotte Mitchell explains that this means locking the wheels of the cart into the quarters of the road with a rut between.<sup>9</sup> The ruts are symbolic therefore of Lady Ludlow’s inflexibility. The house is approached through a tunnel of elms and a long flight of steps, emphasizing its inaccessibility. Margaret’s journey mirrors the fairy tale opening of ‘Curious if True’ (1860) in which Richard Whittingham is similarly guided irresistibly down a lane, bordered with poplars, only to lose his way in an overgrown wood. Both homes bear a resemblance to Sleeping Beauty’s Castle, an example of Gaskell’s consistent use of fairytales in her fiction.

The subject of this thesis has provided a rich and diverse way in which to approach and analyse Gaskell’s fiction. All her life, she did indeed linger on the

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Elisabeth Jay ed, *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 7: North and South*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 27.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, Charlotte, ed, ‘My Lady Ludlow’ in *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Vol. 3: Novellas and Shorter Fiction II Round the Sofa and Tales from Household Words (1852 -9)*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), p 456.

borderland, and her writing provided her with a way to manage her own anxieties, contradictions and inconsistencies. The concept of home, however tenuous and contested, was fundamental to her psychological wellbeing, and close textual analysis reveals the subtle and nuanced way in which she explored its varied meanings.

Figure 1: Ordnance Survey, Manchester Sheet 44, 1851

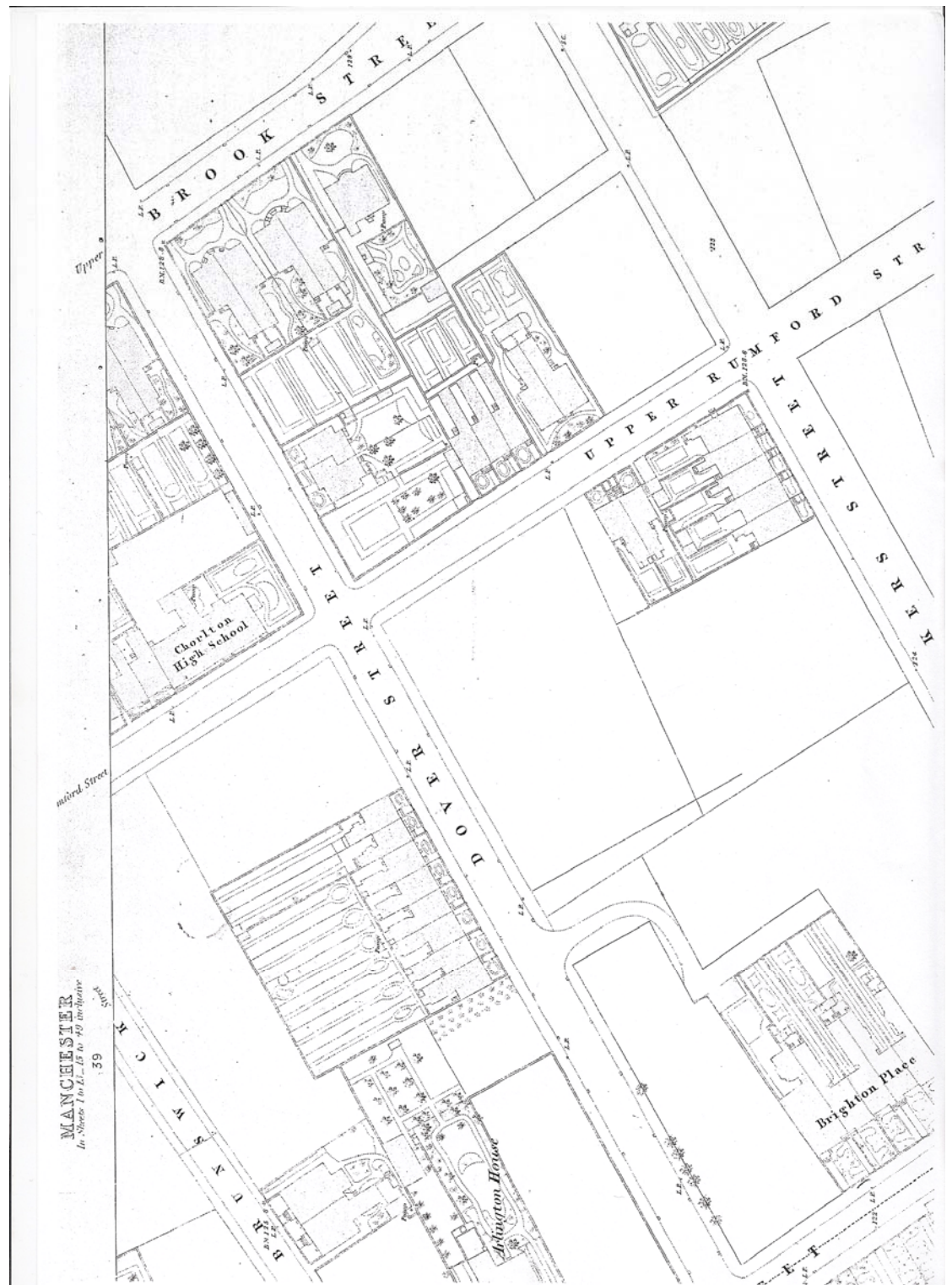


Figure 2: Ordnance Survey, Manchester Sheet 45, 1851





Architects:  
Bernard Taylor Partnership Ltd.  
Architects  
Planners  
Interior Designers

**Bernard Taylor Partnership Ltd.**

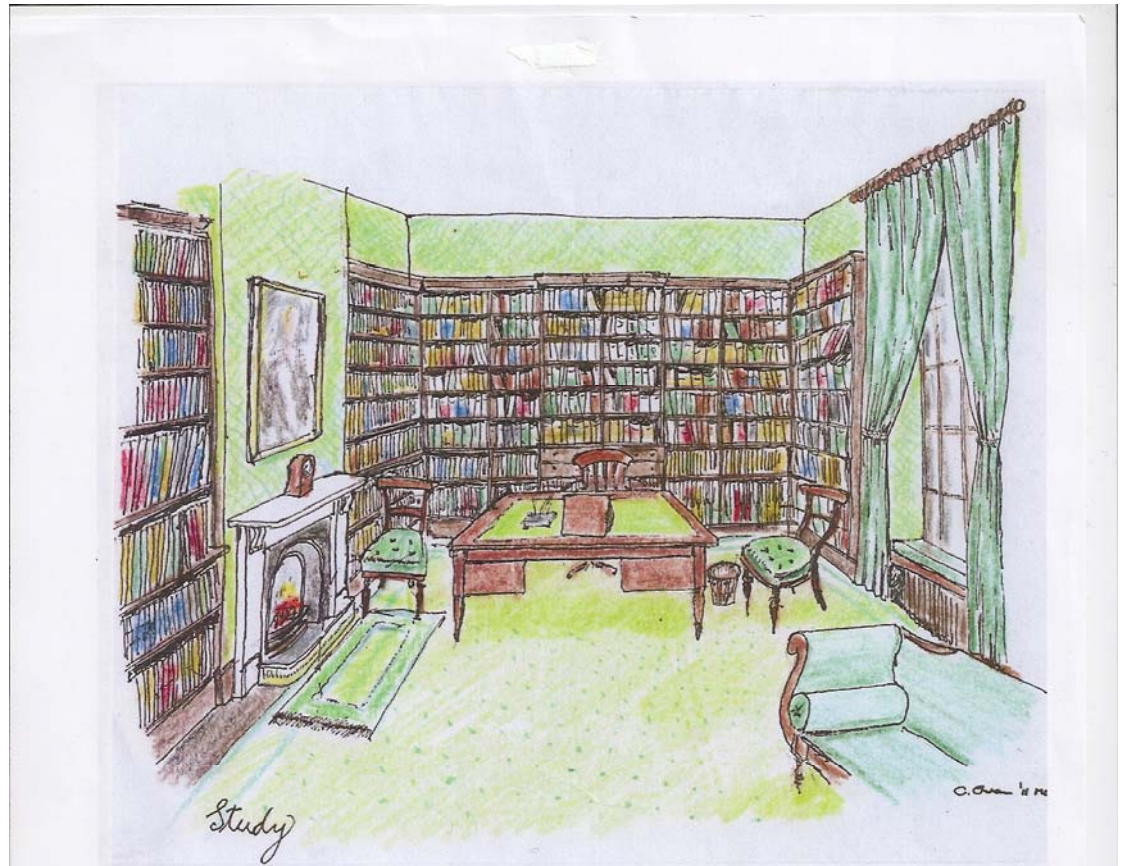
**GASKELL HOUSE, MANCHESTER**  
Upper Ground Floor as Proposed 1:100 A

Trust activities: educational, conference and community use  
Elizabeth Gaskell's Rooms restored  
Staff Only Accommodation  
Storage  
WC facilities  
Kitchen/Catering facilities  
Circulation

**Bernard Taylor Partnership Ltd.**  
ARCHITECTS  
Structural  
Consultants  
Quantity Surveyors  
Urban Designers

**GASKELL HOUSE, MANCHESTER**  
Upper Ground Floor as Proposed 1:100 A

Figure 4: Proposed restoration of William Gaskell's study



Sketch of the Study as proposed



A sample of wallpaper from the Study, suggested replica to be used

Figure 5: Proposed restoration of dining room at Plymouth Grove



Sketch of Dining Room as proposed



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