

Truth Telling: Testimony and Evidence in the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell

Rebecca Parker Fedewa
Marquette University

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TRUTH TELLING: TESTIMONY AND EVIDENCE
IN THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

by

Rebecca J. Parker Fedewa

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ABSTRACT
TRUTH TELLING: TESTIMONY AND EVIDENCE
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Rebecca J. Parker Fedewa

Marquette University, 2012

This dissertation argues that Elizabeth Gaskell's novels (*Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, *Cranford*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Wives and Daughters*) challenge nineteenth-century notions of what constitutes reliable, credible, and admissible truth claims. Gaskell challenges the protocols for judging truth that are emerging in the mid-nineteenth century in response to new epistemic conditions and protocols that threaten to silence female speakers, whether they are advocating on their own behalf (as defendants) or on behalf of others (as witnesses). By using the decidedly male legal system in the form of courtroom trials and interrogation-like scenarios for her female characters in their everyday lives, Gaskell shows her reading "jury" that judgments are too quickly dispensed and verdicts erroneously assumed, and she thus promotes sympathetic judgments of others, women specifically. In her fiction, she seeks temporal justice for her heroines, and, when that is unachievable, she has them seek divine justice instead. To establish the credibility of her heroines, Gaskell uses a rich array of narrative devices to critique women's discursive abilities and to re-authorize their representations of reality. This dissertation focuses on examples of trials, evidence, and testimony as they play out via plot, character, and narration. In plot, she arranges events in order to provide her heroines with opportunities to speak and act. To establish character, she develops her heroines through description, actions, interiority, and dialogue, all of which prepare the reader to take as credible the speech of the heroine in her climactic utterance of a powerful truth. Through narrative voice, she advocates for credible judgments by incorporating moral discourse, personal disclosures, and intrusive narrators. Gaskell's novels strive to promote sympathy, reasonable judgments, and more measured perceptions in her readers. In her fiction, she not only proclaims that women are credible truth-tellers but, by constructing her stories in ways that give female characters agency, she leads her readers to this same conclusion.

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Chapter 1

Introducing Elizabeth Gaskell's Credible Female Witnesses

Who has the right to speak to society? Where should such a person stand in addressing the larger community? And most important, what form must a speaker's words assume in order to assert their validity for author and audience? Only if these questions are answered can an author undertake the kind of work Elizabeth Gaskell desired to do in addressing Victorian England. (48)

– Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work*

Largely known as a writer of social problem novels, Elizabeth Gaskell also engaged legal concerns of her time. This dissertation argues that Gaskell's novels challenge nineteenth-century notions of what constitutes reliable, credible, and even admissible truth claims. She reflects the public's – and the legal community's – anxiety regarding truth claims and the evidence that was permitted to be used to ascertain the truth. Gaskell's novels address this anxiety through narrative techniques that incorporate different forms of evidence to open a discussion among her readers regarding gender and credibility. By using the decidedly male legal system in the form of courtroom trials and interrogation-like scenarios for her female characters in their everyday lives, she shows her reading “jury” that judgments are too quickly dispensed and verdicts erroneously assumed based on gender bias. She encourages readers to apply all their God-given faculties to the task of judgment and to

use each judiciously to critique abuses of any one. Gaskell uses the basic elements of fiction – plot, character, and narration – to engage Victorian crises of truth-telling, which arose from a variety of epistemological developments, notably in law and theology, and that have particularly crucial implications for women. Gaskell has been credited for innovations in realistic narrative, and her sense of an ethical literary vocation has been acknowledged.

Building on the work of Jan-Melissa Schramm, who treats Gaskell as one example of literary interventions in Victorian crises of truth-telling at the intersection of law and theology, I offer an analysis of Gaskell's narrative innovations that are aimed at providing new authoritative bases on which to authorize women's speech. Gaskell's fiction presents a rich array of narrative devices to critique women's discursive disabilities and to re-authorize their representations of reality.

To illustrate this argument, I focus on examples of trials, evidence, and testimony in Gaskell's novels as they play out via plot, character, and narration. In instances of legal and quasi-legal incidents in these works of fiction, Gaskell challenges the protocols for judging truth that are emerging in the mid-nineteenth century in response to new epistemic conditions and protocols that threaten to silence female speakers, whether they are advocating on their own behalf (as defendants) or on behalf of others (as witnesses). She seeks to create a body of jurors – her readers – who more nearly represent a jury of women's peers, readers who have been converted to an inclusive view of reality, in distinction to the masculinist and often exclusionary view represented by the law. She uses fiction – the novel specifically – because it provides different ways of authenticating female characters as truth-tellers.

In plot, she is able to arrange events in order to provide her heroines with opportunities to speak and act. By characterizing her heroines as rational and, therefore, credible, she makes their utterances persuasive. Through narrative voice, she advocates for credible judgments from her reader. In this dissertation, plot, character, and narration have been deliberately separated in order to analyze Gaskell's strategy in persuading her readers of judging others, women specifically, more sympathetically. In fiction, these elements of course are combined, and their interdependence underscores the significance of Gaskell using each one to forward her agenda.

Much of Gaskell criticism has overlooked the subtle contributions that she made to the Victorian novel, specifically the ways that she gave her female characters voice and credibility – a daunting task in the nineteenth century. Pam Morris notes the “prevalingly patronizing attitude taken to Gaskell by many critics from the time of her death until well into the first part of this [the twentieth] century” (xiii). Well-known gibes from Henry James and David Cecil contributed to a culture of criticism that did not entertain the possibility that Gaskell might be up to something of true and lasting value in her body of work.¹ The impression that she presented ““a minimum of head””² predominated until the 1950s when interest in social problem novels returned attention to Gaskell's work. More recent discussions of women writers who previously had been dismissed as “lady novelists” do include Gaskell, but, as Morris points out, Elaine Showalter mentions Gaskell only in passing

¹ Henry James “describes[s] Gaskell's qualities as ‘the offspring of her affections, her feelings . . . [and] so little of an intellectual matter . . . we should say that in her literary career as a whole she displayed, considering her success, *a minimum of head*” (qtd. in Morris xiii, emphasis added). See Henry James, an unsigned review of *Wives and Daughters*, *Nation* (February 22, 1866) 464. Reprinted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Angus Easson (London: Routledge, 1991) 463. Similarly, David Cecil writes, “[S]he was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction” (qtd. in Morris xiii). See David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* (London: Constable, 1934) 198.

² See James, *Nation*, 464. See also the previous footnote.

in *A Literature of Their Own* while Gaskell is entirely omitted by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (xiii, xxxiv).³ There is, however, a current shift in criticism, as scholars take Gaskell's social problem *and* domestic novels seriously. Critics such as Deirdre d'Albertis, Josie Billington, Christine L. Krueger, Hilary M. Schor, Patsy Stoneman, and Jenny Uglow contribute to a body of work that deals with Gaskell as *Elizabeth* Gaskell instead of *Mrs.* Gaskell – a telling distinction.⁴

This distinction gives credit to Elizabeth Gaskell as an author who was aware of her narrative choices (argued primarily by female critics) rather than the Mrs. Gaskell who merely felt compassion for the suffering and used fiction as a way to work it out (argued primarily by male critics). Acknowledging the lack of credibility that readers would assign female characters, she shapes her narratives by enhancing the *ethos* of her heroines. First, by ordering her plots so that they allow opportunities for speech and action, she allows her characters to exercise agency. Second, due to the context of credibility that her characterization supplies readers, Gaskell casts her heroines as truth-tellers. The nineteenth-century reader would find the heroines' utterances credible *because* they are complemented by character description and knowledge of interiority. Isolated, the speech acts would not have carried authority, and they would have seemed like inappropriate female behavior. Thus, Gaskell closes the gap between how the reader would take these utterances in isolation versus in the context of full characterization. Lastly, with the narrative voice functioning as

³ See Showalter. See also Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴ See Deirdre d'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Josie Billington, *Faithful Realism: Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy, A Comparative Study* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002); Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Krueger, *Reading for the Law: British Literary History and Gender Advocacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Schor; Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); and Uglow.

an advocate, her heroines have authoritative representation. This especially affects her heroines from the working class because they are doubly-suspect as women *and* of the lower class. Gaskell's strategy of marshaling the three basic elements of fiction to convert her readers reflects her sense of literary vocation as well as the urgency of her message.

Gaskell's vocation was significantly influenced by her Unitarian faith, which insists on the integration of sympathy, reason, and perception (or empiricism, eye-witnessing). According to this faith, if the three are operating in concert, as the Creator intended, just judgment and ethical action will result.⁵ Uglow observes, "From her earliest years she absorbed a set of teachings and beliefs: in tolerance, in justice, in the equal worth of all people rich and poor, in the force of conscience and in the importance of searching for the truth and bearing witness to what she found" (23-24). Approaching what bordered on taboo subject matter was unavoidable for a social problem novelist who "believed that the witness to truth should be taken, if needs be, to the point of martyrdom" (7). Gaskell saw the urgency of the social crises of her time and the disparity between the way that individuals should be treated and the way that they were treated – on the streets and by the law. She turned to publishing to address this disparity. Her novels strive to promote sympathy, reasonable judgments, and more measured perceptions.

Working within her Unitarian mandate to pursue reason and equality, Gaskell seeks what she views as truth by writing a hybrid of documentary- and sympathy-driven prose. For example, while she melodramatically martyrs the titular heroine of *Ruth*, she also labored to gather details (or bits of evidence) that would make her fiction believable. She is noteworthy for her graphic representations of poverty that bring its realities into view for

⁵ Unitarians "believed in freedom of thought and stressed the role of reason in the quest for truth" (Uglow 6).

sheltered middle-class readers. Uglow notes, “She became a superb social reporter and collector of oral history, traditions and customs. She quizzed everyone she met and sometimes she kept journals or made notes” (48). Gaskell gathered bits of social history and carefully disseminated it throughout her fiction. Her “documentary accuracy” is apparent from her characters’ diction and tone to the places they live (198).

However, much of Gaskell’s fiction is filled with sentimentality. Uglow explains, “She used melodrama to express concepts of innocence, guilt and justice in ways which realism – or cool economic analysis – could not encompass” (199). By combining a heavily descriptive and documentary *ethos* with sometimes overly sentimental story lines, Gaskell utilizes realism and sentiment to persuade her readers that women can bear witness to credible truths, yet society often judges them too quickly as well as too harshly. She thought that “fiction and poetry could be both more accurate and more powerful than argument because they dealt in the complexities of feeling as well as with ideas and facts” (210-11). Gaskell’s pursuit of truth claims and of how truth is ascertained emphasizes emotion alongside documentary accuracy in an effort to effect a sympathetic reaction from her reading jury. Gaskell urges her readers to seek a truth that includes a person’s whole experience and not merely the cold (and legalistic) facts pertaining to her case. Facts alone do not contain the whole truth. She believed “in feeling as a guide to truth” and that “priority be given to ‘feminine’ sympathy as opposed to ‘masculine’ judgement” (466).

As a Unitarian, Gaskell was expertly equipped to represent women as credible bearers of truth – a mission that was particularly important given the fact that women were denied credibility as a result of their non-person status in society. Unitarians were “one of the most tolerant of the nineteenth-century nonconformist sects, notably progressive in their

attitudes to women” (Morris xii). Nevertheless, judging women harshly, or thinking of them as “non-existent,” would have been a regular part of Gaskell’s audience’s assumptions about gender. Legally, women were ruled completely by their husbands, physically and financially. Because men and women become one in marriage *and* because women were seen as inferior, women lost their rights not only upon marrying but upon engagement. They could not initiate legal action nor could they own property.⁶ When accused of infidelity, women were not allowed to defend themselves or call witnesses in their own defense. Husbands also had complete control over their children. Small yet significant improvements in women’s legal status occurred throughout the nineteenth century. A reform in 1839 allowed separated mothers the opportunity to petition the court for custody of children under seven and to hope for the possibility of visitation for the older children. However, to even *petition* the court, women had to prove their innocence. The burden of proving innocence (not guilt) was imposed on the woman.

More significant, however, was the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, which improved (though not entirely) the legal standing of women filing for divorce (Basch 16-19, 21-24).⁷ In this environment, Gaskell publishes in order to represent women as credible members of society, worthy of being given the benefit of the doubt and worthy of being recognized as whole persons. Surrounded by these legal barriers that authoritatively defined gender, Gaskell constructs narratives that are in line with Unitarianism’s emphasis on reason and equality. Having a Victorian heroine is radical in itself since most women were barred from significant action in day-to-day British life. The fact that Gaskell created female characters

⁶ Baker explains, “[T]he very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband” (484).

⁷ For a useful overview on the legal position of women during the nineteenth century, see Basch Ch. 2.

who speak and act is significant because she attempts to normalize female speech and action. She revered, and gained inspiration from, real-life women she knew personally, such as Florence Nightingale, a woman of action who started to normalize women in medicine *and* who had a Unitarian background.⁸ By normalizing women's authentic voice in her fiction, Gaskell lobbies for and anticipates a more equitable legal system and, more broadly, society.

Though Gaskell was suspicious of the decidedly male legal system, she herself was not exempt from nineteenth century ideas of appropriate female behavior in her own life. Nineteenth-century moralists assigned duties to women inside and outside the home, further complicating what was expected of women. In addition to caring for all things domestic, middle-class women were expected to engage in philanthropic activities outside the house. Woman was an "active kernel of Christian ethics" (Basch 7). Gaskell spent her adult life hectically juggling her duties to family and profession. Clearly, she felt a divided duty between her affinity for attending to friends and family as well as her belief that she had worthy literary work to do. As Françoise Basch writes, "Elizabeth Gaskell always gave priority to duty towards human beings, 'real persons', whom she opposed to the fictional persons that totally absorb the writer during literary creation" (46). However, her insistence on seeing her literary pursuits as a vocation is striking.

Gaskell's writing was both profession and service, in essence the definition of vocation. In contrast, the treatises of Hannah More and Sarah Ellis framed writing as a selfish ambition in opposition to the work that women allegedly should set about to do, i.e., service for others (Showalter 22). Most famously captured in an 1850 letter to Tottie Fox,

⁸ See Uglow 7, 313-14, 343, 362-65. See also Shuttleworth xxxii-xxxiii.

Gaskell's close friend and fellow artist, is evidence of Gaskell's conviction that her writing was a calling. She wrote:

If Self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy, there is no doubt of *that* – and that is part of the danger in cultivating the Individual Life; but I do believe we have all some appointed work to do, whh [what] no one else can do so well; Wh. [that] is *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God; and that first we must find out what we are sent into the world to do, and define it and make it clear to ourselves, (that's *the* hard part) and then forget ourselves in our work, and our work in the End we ought to strive to bring about. (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 107)

Viewing her writing as vocation was crucial for Gaskell because it set her work apart from other demands in life and marked it as a mission, despite society's disapproval of not only her writing but also her subject matter. Storytelling itself was seen as a sin in the evangelical world. Showalter notes, "In strict evangelical circles, all imaginative literature was suspect, and children were taught that storytelling could lead to untruth and transgressions. The extraordinary number of women writers who were daughters, sisters, or wives of clergymen suggests that women writers would have been especially sensitive to these arguments" (54). Though Gaskell would have been aware of and sensitive to this mindset, she cannot be categorized as a mainstream evangelical Christian, and Unitarianism provided more tolerance regarding both storytelling and the sex of the storyteller. However, because the guilt from this evangelical mindset was prevalent in England more broadly, she had to navigate the suspicion and stigma attached to her as a female writer. Instead of viewing storytelling as falsehood, she used it for her own purpose: as a mechanism for truth-telling.

Her conviction to create female characters who bear witness to others regarding their own stories and the stories of others is closely linked to Gaskell's sense that humanity exists as part of a divine plan and that, within that plan, (wo)man must speak truth, even regarding taboo topics, such as society's double-standard regarding sexuality. For example, in *Ruth*, because the titular heroine bears the mark of pregnancy, she must repeatedly pay for her sin while the father of her child abandons her and remains unmarked. In *Wives and Daughters*, the heroine, Molly, is seen by chance with a man to whom she is not betrothed. Though Molly's encounter with him is merely a conversation in which she is serving as a representative for another woman in the narrative, her town is eager to assume the worst, and it takes the advocacy of an aristocratic woman as well as Molly's own sickness to clear her name. By depicting scenarios that were played out on the real streets of Gaskell's home in Manchester, and in England more generally, Gaskell put a mirror in front of her readers so that they could see the hypocritical and often savage ways that they dealt with their fellow man, or, more specifically, their fellow woman. Writing with this act of persuasion in mind was Gaskell's mandate. She was spurred by her faith, by her belief in her vocation, and by an awareness of being accountable for her role in a divine plan and for a transcendent purpose.

Even as she sees stories as serving an otherworldly purpose, Gaskell seeks temporal justice for her characters, and, thus, her work addresses the ethical complications of the perceived injustices of man's law. She participates in a tradition of realist fiction that gives voice to those who might otherwise remain silent. Writers of realist fiction sought to access the type of personal testimony and evidence that was not allowed in the courtroom, presenting inadmissible but authentic narrative evidence to readers of novels: the aptly

labeled “court of public opinion.” Schramm observes, “In nineteenth-century narrative, characters are rarely subject to judgement without the reader being offered their testimony of guilt or innocence, and thus realist fiction represents itself as capable of reaching the truths of human behaviour to which the bench was . . . denied access” (7).⁹

The competence of those allowed to testify and the reliability of physical evidence were significant topics of debate, and, for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the law erred on the side of excluding the voices of and for the accused. All sorts of parties were banned from sworn testimony, ranging from persons who were seen as having vested interests in a trial’s outcome to those with questionable pasts or even questionable religious beliefs. Nineteenth-century writers of realist fiction found the law exclusionary in its failure to account for human emotion and experience in favor of the more scientific language of the Enlightenment. Legislative reforms throughout the nineteenth century did eventually allow more types of persons to be viable witnesses under oath, and, as a result, the law became less exclusionary (Schramm 15, 64-66).¹⁰

While Gaskell wrote as these reforms were starting, woman’s voice was still not seen as credible in the courtroom, so she addresses this inequity by creating credible female characters with credible voices. The broader cultural logic of nineteenth-century England was informed by the type of gender bias that excluded women’s voices from the law. Krueger writes that only men rendered verdicts in the courtroom (as they comprised judge and jury), so women were not being judged by their peers (453). Women were judged by men who, “having legislated women’s inferior status, were thereby incompetent to judge

⁹ See also Schramm 10.

¹⁰ See Schramm 49-50 and 54-55 for helpful context on questions of witness reliability and evidence admissibility in England from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. See also 64-66 for more on legal reform in testimony.

them” (453). To circumvent this legislated inferiority, Gaskell sought to change hearts and minds, for a recurring philosophy in her fiction and in her personal letters is that “law could not prevail against custom” (Gaskell, “Accursed Race” 251). Shaping culture, for Gaskell, starts with the individual, specifically the reader.

In order to persuade her reader of woman’s credibility, Gaskell shapes her writing so that it is best suited to both her readers and her mission. In *North and South*, she reveals her attention to the rhetorical needs of her readers through the words of Nicholas Higgins, a working-class man whom the heroine’s family befriends. He discusses how information and truth should be delivered, and he states that one must know one’s audience and make the necessary adjustments to one’s message. In an animated discussion between Higgins and the heroine’s father, Higgins recalls being given a book regarding labor and capital and not being able to digest it well enough to make sense out of it. He states:

“But suppose it [the book] was truth double strong, it were no truth to me if I couldna take it in. I daresay there’s truth in yon Latin book on your shelves; but it’s gibberish and not truth to me, unless I know the meaning o’ the words. If yo’, sir, or any other knowledgable, patient man come to me, and says he’ll larn me what the words mean, and not blow me up if I’m a bit stupid, or forget how one thing hangs on another – why, in time I may get to see the truth of it; or I may not. I’ll not be bound to say I shall end in thinking the same as any man. And I’m not one who think truth can be shaped out in words, all neat and clean, as th’ men at th’ foundry cut out sheet-iron. Same bones won’t go down wi’ every one. It’ll stick here i’ this man’s throat, and there i’ t’other’s. Let alone that, when down, it may be too

strong for this one, too weak for that. Folk who sets up to doctor th' world wi' their truth, mun suit different for different minds; and be a bit tender in th' way of giving it too, or th' poor sick fools may spit it out i' their faces.”
(*N&S* 230)

In this passage, Gaskell uses Higgins' frustration to explain how she delivers truth to her readers. Her knowledge of her middle-class reading audience, their level of education, and the religious and cultural norms that guided them informs the way she approaches her subject matter. Without this framing of her stories for particular readers with particular assumptions, her stories could not effect social change. Interestingly, she communicates her method through a male character because, for her, such rhetorical common sense should be genderless.

Seeing that there was work to be done in reshaping the way readers imagined women, Gaskell wrote stories that contain authoritative and credible women. By choosing fiction over essay or pamphlet, she selected a genre of writing that was likely to have a wider readership, primarily female, and that would allow her to venture into territory that would have been even more difficult if written about openly in essay form. By drawing readers into her stories, Gaskell had access to their imaginations rather than the type of reasoning they might employ when assessing and judging others in their real lives. Appealing to the sympathies of her readers once they were within the boundaries of her stories gave Gaskell a greater ability to draw full women in full contexts. By getting to know her heroines in the fullness of their authority, readers would be able to reflect on what types of evidence actually should be used for or against someone when evaluating character, and they were able to do this in ways they likely would not have bothered to do in real life.

Gaskell lays out what she sees as social truth in ways that were digestible for her readers. Sometimes truth is made plain in words, and other times it is evident in actions. Gaskell uses words to instruct her readers to judge others, specifically women, less rashly and less harshly; however, she also goes beyond words to evoke emotion as her heroines struggle to be judged fairly. She knew that not everyone would be receptive to her message, and indeed not everyone was. However, she molded her message for the readers of her time and delivered it via a variety of narrative strategies.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2: Providential Plotting

Gaskell arranges plots to establish her heroines' credibility. Using fiction as a way to show readers the possibility for equality between the sexes, Gaskell presents plots for which many of her readers would have been skeptical at the outset. By designing stories that allow her heroines the chance to speak and act, as the novel progresses, she instills them with the authority of truth-tellers. They shape important events and demonstrate to readers that credibility is not gendered. This chapter analyzes the plots of *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*. In each of these novels, the heroine serves as a model for the real women for whom Gaskell lobbies. The actions of these heroines are extraordinary, and the reader is provided ample evidence of their credibility. Gaskell charges her reader with the responsibility of treating others sympathetically because, to her, all persons are part of God's masterplot. Using fiction as a way to demonstrate this truth, Gaskell employs providential

plotting to authorize female characters so that her reader will see them as credible. Importantly, this prepares the reader to accept their utterances as credible as well.

Chapter 3: Credible Characterization

Gaskell develops her heroines through a variety of modes in order to convince readers of their credible behavior and speech. She uses description, actions, interiority, and speech to build a case for their credibility at a time when women were not seen as reliable bearers of truth. By establishing the reliability and trustworthiness of her heroines through credible characterization, Gaskell converts her reader from skepticism to belief in woman's ability to represent reality accurately. This chapter analyzes the ways that Gaskell characterizes the heroines of *North and South*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Wives and Daughters*. The respective heroines of *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters* are credible throughout their stories while the titular heroine of *Sylvia's Lovers* transforms *into* a credible character during her story. With both of these approaches to demonstrating credibility, inherent and evolving, the modes of characterization work together to develop heroines who are not only believable but authoritative. They speak truth, often with righteous indignation, and the female reader in particular is prepared to assign them credibility because Gaskell has steadily prepared her to accept them as truth-tellers.

Ch 4: Narrative Voice as Advocacy

In this chapter, Gaskell's mission of advocacy is fully realized. Through several narrational strategies, Gaskell steers her readers toward sympathetic judgments. By learning to judge fictional characters less harshly, readers, arguably, will treat their neighbors more

charitably. Because converting readers to belief and then to action was fundamental to Gaskell's mission, she is especially attentive to adapting her voice to reach her middle-class readers. Focusing on *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Wives and Daughters*, this chapter argues that she strategically employs three techniques in order to accomplish this: moral discourse, personal disclosures, and catalyst narrators. Though she is often criticized for these techniques, they, in fact, help her to build a relationship and, thus, credibility with readers. Because she has presented her *heroines* as truth-tellers, her readers are ready to view *her* as an equally credible speaker of truth.

In her fiction, Gaskell not only proclaims that women are credible truth-tellers but, by constructing her stories in ways that give female characters agency, she leads her readers to this same conclusion. By publishing, she gives voice to those her society had silenced and engenders sympathy in her female readers for their sister woman. She models female characters who violate social dictates and speak out for truth, specifically in defense of other women. Beautifully modeled in *Ruth*, for example, Gaskell's brand of female advocacy occurs in the character of Jemima, the young woman to whom Ruth is governess. When Ruth's fallen status is made public, Jemima initially scorns her. However, after more measured contemplation of the evidence of Ruth's lived experience, Jemima defends her: "I will speak. I will not keep silence. I will bear witness to Ruth" (R 338). She later continues, "[Ruth's experience] made me think of myself, and what I am. With a father and mother, and home and careful friends, I am not likely to be tempted like Ruth; but oh! . . . I might just have been like Ruth, or rather, worse than she ever was" (R 365). In the character of Jemima, Gaskell shows her readers that they *must* bear witness to truth and determine it in

thoughtful and sympathetic ways. She uses fiction as a way for readers to imagine themselves in the positions of others and fashioned herself as a witness to her own times. She felt compelled to offer her own testimony, or version of the truth. Nonetheless, Gaskell often sends her heroines directly to God in their confessions and in their appeals for justice, for she knew that not all her readers were ready for her claims. Skipping man's judgment entirely reminds readers of the smallness of their claims to truth and the hubris of their attempts at judgment because, for Gaskell, the only true justice was divine. *Mary Barton's* Jem Wilson supplies the best – and most lasting – comfort that Gaskell gives her readers: “God does not judge as hardly as man, that's one comfort for all of us!” (MB 375).

Chapter 2

Providential Plotting

Narrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the large categories in which we think. Plot is its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives. (323)

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the*

Plot

Elizabeth Gaskell was a talented storyteller, as critics have noted, and those who knew her spoke of her knack for telling tales aloud to friends and family.¹ Her storytelling ability was partially due to her outgoing personality and her penchant for detailed observations of human beings. In her tales to family and friends (as in her more formal writing), truth mixed with fiction. Many characters and scenarios in her fiction are derived from real persons and events that Gaskell observed or heard about. Whether Gaskell had adapted a real-life scenario or invented it, she used real-life inspirations to represent larger social realities – or truths – to her reading audience. She often defended her writing by saying that she had to tell the truth – to represent life as she knew it – despite the social repercussions. Her truth-telling approach to fiction was mandated by her Unitarian faith and led her to craft the kinds of plots that allow for characters to engage in evidence gathering. These plots are constructed not only to resolve readers' questions but also to provide readers

¹ See Uglow 237-39, 244, 423. See also Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 62, 75, 77, 123, 184.

with various proofs of character reliability. Peter Brooks provides a foundation for exploring the ways in which Gaskell arranged events in her novels and also for a guide to readers' interpretations. Even though critical theory encourages readers to be suspicious of plot, we remain reliant on the types of understanding that plot provides. Understanding life as a sequence of events in time is a particularly human way of making sense and finding meaning, and Gaskell taps into this cognitive desire through her novels.

For Gaskell, who might be said to have had a "stubborn insistence on making meaning," the organization of events through plot is crucial to the obligation she had as an author of fiction to make meaning for her readers. As Brooks notes, "Meaning is . . . born of the relationship between tellers and listeners" (260). Gaskell uses plot to forge a relationship of trust with readers who would be skeptical of the truth-telling capacities of women, be they her female characters' or her own as author. In order to do this, she arranges her plots in ways that underscore the double-standard that governed rules of evidence and fueled anxiety regarding female testimony. By arranging events in ways that allow her heroines the space and opportunity to speak and to act, she not only confers authority on women to tell their stories and the stories of others but also to shape (or plot) the way these stories play out. If indeed "[p]lot itself is working-through," as Brooks asserts, then Gaskell at once implicates her readers in and charges them to reject the exclusion of female truth-tellers as they make their way through her plots (140).

The greatest challenge to creating plots that could contribute to Gaskell's project of authorizing female truth-tellers is the Victorian stricture against female agency. If women were barred from self-directed action, it is difficult to imagine plausible plots in which female characters could engage in any action, much less action that might authorize them to

challenge readers' views of how causes and consequences should be interpreted or given new meaning. In laws of coverture barring married women from legal and economic agency, religious dicta regarding feminine selflessness, conduct literature promoting female pliancy, modesty, and silence, in addition to conventions of romance and sentimental novel plotting, Gaskell met obstacles to constructing plots that rendered female action probable, much less desirable or meritorious. Paradoxically, plotting authoritative female speech – as opposed to being the objects of conventional male heroic action – proved more appropriate to reconstructing female readers' narrative desires and, thereby, their social actions.

Various Gaskell heroines engage in extraordinary actions that move the plot along. In *Mary Barton*, the titular heroine travels alone to Liverpool to fetch the witness crucial to proving her lover's innocence in a murder trial. She launches her own investigation of the murder and secures the witness just in time for him to provide a life-saving alibi. In *Ruth* after the titular heroine gives birth, she lives a life of service, teaching others through her example of a life righteously lived. She even nurses back to health the lover who abandoned their child. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale throws herself in front of the millowner, Mr. Thornton, in the midst of a workers' riot, and is hit by the rock meant for him. She uses her body throughout the narrative to protect others, as she physically intercedes to save them from themselves or others. In each of these novels, the extraordinary actions of the heroines build a case for their (intellectual) credibility. Once the audience is given evidence of their usurpation of the male hero's role, it is even less of a leap for readers to endorse the heroines' climactic speech acts when they emerge in each plot, for these speech acts are those plotted for the role of hero.

However, unlike the plots of novels with male protagonists, the plots of Gaskell's novels constitute effective advocacy on behalf of women, more broadly, as truth-tellers. Still, the closures of *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South* recapture the heroines' actions within conventional formulae of the male-centered novel. In the first and third works, the novels close with the heroines' marriages. In *Ruth*, the heroine dies a saintly death. As Hilary M. Schor has noted, these endings seem so contrived and formulaic that the reader is moved to look back in the plot for the moment of climax, which, in each case, I will argue, is an event of powerful, truthful, and transformative female speech.² Gaskell overlays a master providential plot on top of the conventions of sentimental, romance, and melodramatic plotting. This is a strategy she shares with other religiously-inclined female social problem writers of the period, such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (e.g., in *Aurora Leigh*), to authorize female agency as part of God's plan – if not man's.³

Let me turn briefly to *Ruth* to illustrate my overall argument. Despite the conventional closures of Gaskell's plots, most of Gaskell's heroines follow a sequence of events that leads them to a degree of equality with men that likely would not have been attainable in the real world. *Ruth* is unusual in that its eponymous heroine suffers severe consequences for her truth-telling from the position of a "fallen woman."⁴ In some sense, then, this novel is a limit case for Gaskell's project of plotting female credibility. *Ruth* is a martyr to the truth; death alone, it would seem, could wipe her clean in the eyes of the

² See Schor 15, 20-21, 47, 67, 73, 145, 149-50.

³ See Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance*. See also Joseph Kestner, *Protest & Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴ For a helpful overview of the "fallen woman" in nineteenth-century society, see Basch Ch. 11.

typical nineteenth-century reader.⁵ Significantly, not only Ruth, but the reader is punished, both for requiring so harsh a closure (that Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning both wrote to Gaskell to lament it)⁶ and for colluding in the condemnation of real-life women, whom Ruth represents.⁷ If the reader desires a more satisfying climax to a plot in which Ruth has been developed as an exemplary Victorian woman in every respect – apart from having been seduced, impregnated, and abandoned – she must turn to the moment when the plot orchestrates a confrontation between Ruth and her seducer in which Ruth speaks eloquently *the truth of her plot*, namely, that Bellingham (not she) is to blame for her suffering, that she is an exemplary mother to their son (despite the persecution she has suffered), that remaining with his mother provides a better life for their son than the social and economic advantages of life with his father, and that she has made meaningful contributions to her community while Bellingham (now a candidate for Parliament) has not. Ruth's saintly death (of the fever she catches from Bellingham while she nurses him), as melodramatic and unprepared by the plot as it may be, can be read then as divine endorsement of her climactic speech.⁸ Of course, though employed to different ends, providential plotting is also familiar to readers of Dickens and George Eliot. For Gaskell, providential plotting gave her a way to justify the ways of God to men (*à la* Milton in *Paradise*

⁵ To highlight the lack of credibility that the typical nineteenth-century reader would have assigned to Ruth, the following is a list of the variety of descriptors that were used in the nineteenth century to label (and, thus, discredit) women known to have had affairs: *women of the town*, *women of doubtful reputation*, *nymphs of the pavé*, *prima donna*, *women of pleasure*, and *fallen women*, the last of which has taken hold in current discussions of nineteenth-century terminology (Basch 195).

⁶ Charlotte Brontë exclaimed, "Why should she die? . . . And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration . . . but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters" (qtd. in Schor 72). Elizabeth Barrett Browning questioned, "Was it quite impossible but that . . . Ruth should die?" (qtd. in Schor 73).

⁷ Schor writes, "The martyring of the heroine may be . . . a slap in the face of her readers, shocking readers out of complacency, to remind them of the excessively plotted lives women lead – the ways they are made into characters from the moment they are born" (75).

⁸ Uglow notes that fever is a common Victorian image for sexual pollution (335-36). Gaskell also employs this in *Mary Barton* and *Wives and Daughters*.

Los!) in light of an eternal timeline not a temporal one. She saw the metaphysical world as real and, thus, as humanity's real plot. Fictional plots provided her with a temporal way of working out this truth. Through imagination, Gaskell was trying to get her readers to see the true masterplot.

Subordinating the Patriarchal Trial Plot to the Female Providential Masterplot

The efficacy of Gaskell's careful attention to plotting comports with much nineteenth-century realist fiction with its sweeping storylines carrying characters and readers to a desired end. However, Brooks posits that "[t]he enormous narrative production of the 19th century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world" (6). Gaskell is an exception to Brooks' rule because there *is* a sense of a masterplot throughout her fiction. Each of her plots places a heroine at the center of its tale and, in doing so, imbues her storyline with a kind of urgency that carries the rest of the characters and events to the narrative's conclusion. In a typically Unitarian way, Gaskell privileged "moral justice before legal judgement" (Uglow 7). Fittingly, her heroines often cry out to God for judgment because they have been terribly misjudged by man (and woman). Forced to bypass the plots of man's legal system because of their quickness to judge and their false verdicts, these heroines place themselves directly before God in order to be judged as true and whole persons.

Gaskell believed that sympathy demands imagination and that "faith should be of *practical* effect in the world" (Uglow 231). Providential plotting in fiction supplied an

overarching narrative – and a telos – absent from the real-life cases presented in courts of law. Just as Brooks has noted that endings confer meaning retroactively on prior plot events, the telos of the providential plot, ending in God’s judgment of the world, reconfigures a reader’s sense of the high points in Gaskell’s plots. The novels’ endings, then, are not closures in the sense that they confer final meaning on prior events. Rather, the closure of the providential masterplot renders all novelistic closure contingent on the end of the ultimate masterplot, i.e., the end of time. Gaskell instructs readers that they cannot render final judgments (on characters like Ruth *or* on real persons) because final judgment is for God alone on Judgment Day, the ultimate end of the providential masterplot. She calls on her readers to imagine women’s stories in the larger divine plot worked out beyond readers’ direct knowledge. In other words, she believed that humans do not have knowledge of the full plot. This act of imagination, in turn, is what will transform readers’ condemnation into sympathetic judgment.

Another way that Gaskell directs the readers’ imagination is through flashbacks. As a narrative strategy, they cause the reader to experience time differently; she employs them in her novels so that her readers are forced to imagine time in a non-linear way. This pulls the reader into the habit of being mindful of a future she can anticipate but never really know. Without complete knowledge, the reader feels a need to resist judgment. In order to evoke sympathetic judgments of her female truth-tellers from her female readers, Gaskell appealed to their imaginations to draw contrasts with the temporal frame of other truth-telling discourses, such as those represented by law. An actual trial scene is the setting of Mary Barton’s climactic speech, and in other novels Gaskell stages trial-like scenes that showcase her heroine’s discursive heroism. In this way, her plots directly invite comparisons with

judgments of truth in the law. The law is temporal. It has self-contained plotlines of arrest, deliberation, verdict, and consequences. Precedents are set. Closure is a necessity.

Participants in law are temporally bound. However, Gaskell wants to contrast the idea of man's temporal time with her masterplot that is not bound by time. She rejects the law's type of self-contained and temporally-bound plots to show that her courtroom trials (actual and pseudo) are just *moments* within a larger, providential narrative.

Gaskell's use of providential plotting requires a sense of time that contrasts most sharply with Victorian criminal trial practice. In contrast to Dickens's portrayal of the glacial tempo of the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, English criminal trial procedure was marked by extraordinary alacrity, more reminiscent of the trial of the Knave of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. Gaskell's era was just starting to see more careful deliberation in formal trial proceedings. Multiple cases were often rushed through, using the same jurors, and J. H. Baker notes that at mid-century the average criminal trial at Old Bailey was conducted in a few minutes, resulting in countless wrong convictions (510). Rash judgments in the courtroom spilled into the streets, as the common person often did not take the time to consider a person's whole experience that might have led to a particular condition or moral crime, what would later become degrees in the sentencing process.

In short, for Gaskell, justice required attention to a providential plot. As Jenny Uglow characterizes Gaskell's plotting, "The early stages [of each of Gaskell's narratives] establish the milieu, the characters and their way of life until at some central point narrative itself takes over. From that point on 'truth' is displayed not in realism or analysis but in the symbolic workings of the plot" (256). The structure of Gaskell's fiction – the sequencing of events – contributes to the way that she expects her audience to process the authenticity of

the characters and their stories. Gaskell creates storylines that allow readers to sympathize with female characters who, in real life, the courts might have cast aside casually and judged rashly. She asks her readers to place the events of her heroines' lives in a providential time frame.

Gaskell's New Heroine: Mary Barton, Providential Agent

Gaskell's plots frequently depict female characters being ostracized, misjudged, or slandered. These plot complications pave the way for their heroines to bear witness to the truth despite the fact that society would not have entrusted them with that responsibility. Gaskell presents readers with imperfect heroines, and readers do not expect to be persuaded to take these women's sides. However, Gaskell's providential plot pulls readers into becoming their advocates.

Mary Barton, Gaskell's first novel, has been criticized for its melodramatic plot elements.⁹ Much of the plot of this novel about the abuses of the factory system is driven first by a seduction plot and then by a murder mystery culminating in a trial scene. Mary's suitor, Jem Wilson, is on trial for the murder of Harry Carson, her other suitor and the son of a wealthy mill owner. The real murderer is Mary's father, which Mary realizes when the bit of gun wadding she recognizes as her father's comes into her possession. Mary destroys the evidence in order to protect her father and then sets out on a mission to have Jem acquitted.

Unlike what one might expect under the institution of patriarchal law, Mary handles the key evidence and serves as a witness in the trial that dominates the end of the narrative.

⁹ See Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 146-53.

Significantly, Mary is empowered by her possession of the physical evidence, which she alone deems inadmissible. Rather than act as a detective in a conventional murder mystery plot by bringing the key evidence to light, Mary assumes the power to interpret the evidence within a providential scheme in order to achieve a true, just end. Allowing Mary not only to handle but to destroy the evidence in Jem's case lends clear authority to her as a determiner of admissibility and conveyer of truth. She takes on the burden of proving Jem's innocence as well as protecting her father.

Despite the power Gaskell confers on Mary to manage the plot, it must be noted, that the power derives as much from exclusionary rules of evidence governing legal argument and the credibility of witnesses as it does from Gaskell's conviction that Mary's actions result in just and true consequences. Occupying the dramatic climax of the murder plot, Mary's examination as a witness at Jem's trial is a travesty, which further reveals the resistance of legal plotting to truth and justice. The prosecutor's line of questioning not only fails to imagine Mary's knowledge of the truth, but its invasive tack reads like the narration of a rape and reduces Mary to unconsciousness. The knowledge revealed to the readers through the plot, knowledge they share with Mary, encourages the reader to reject the law's plot, endorse Mary's action regarding the evidence against her father, and credit her testimony on Jem's behalf. Mary pays for her role as a deceptive witness through a purging sickness. However, it is left to providence to deal with her father, John Barton, who falls ill and dies, while Mary is ultimately rewarded with marriage to Jem.

Gaskell carefully plotted a story that would provide the necessary opportunities to demonstrate a woman's ability to bear truth, advocate for others, and effect change. The original title of *Mary Barton*, however, was *John Barton*. Gaskell's publisher, Chapman, insisted

on the change (Daly xx). This complicates the way one analyzes plot in *Mary Barton* since the original plotting, in a way, was focused on Mary's father, a discontented working-class man. Once he murders Carson, the plot switches almost entirely to Mary's story, virtually dividing the book in half. MacDonald Daly argues, "Gaskell is looking for a narrative means of dissipating the conflictual nature of the society described in the first half of the novel, but her own ideological commitments preclude plot lines which posit structural social changes. The conflict thus has to be displaced – it is made judicial rather than social – to a realm in which it can permissibly be resolved" (xxi). In other words, Gaskell uses a murder mystery and the failure of the plot probabilities of legal argument to reveal deficiencies in the social narrative that the novel cannot solve realistically without recourse to a providential justice. She situates the murder mystery plot within a providential scheme, which simultaneously discredits legal narrative and shapes readers' desires to achieve plot resolutions by trusting in the providential agency of women. To that end, she plots occasions for Esther and Mary to serve as models of credible, truth-bearing women.

The first challenge to a providential plot reading of *Mary Barton* is that Gaskell proposes that a prostitute can offer truthful, credible testimony. Estranged from the Bartons, Esther (the late Mrs. Barton's sister and Mary's aunt) returns to warn John Barton of the danger Mary is in as long as she is connected to her suitor, Carson. Esther foresees a similar fate to that of herself if Mary continues to entertain Carson's attempts at a relationship. Unlike Ruth, Esther is presented as an experienced reader of the seduction plot and, therefore, a crucial source of truth for other women. Carson would not be seriously interested in Mary because of their class differences, as Esther sees it, so she is convinced of his ill intentions. She attempts to thwart a plot development in Mary's life that would lead to

ruin. When trying to warn John Barton, Esther is drowned out by his condemnations for the grief she has already brought his family (for he blames her absence and social demise for his wife's death). Esther cries out: "“Oh, mercy! John, mercy! listen to me for Mary's sake!”" (*MB* 125). However, Barton's harsh judgment stymies her attempts to protect his daughter. Through his hostile rejection of Esther, Gaskell puts a mirror in front of her readers to show them how unreasonable and damaging to their own futures ostracizing others could be.

Daly's comments on this exchange suggest that Gaskell offers an alternative to the biblical interpretation of "whoredom":

No reader of Esther's account of the circumstances that have led her into a life on the streets can deny that it reveals a degree of sympathy and understanding that was absent in conventional moral thinking of the period. Gaskell is here offering a socio-economic explanation for prostitution, one that runs against the grain of biblical attainders for whoredom, resting as they did on notions of irredeemable spiritual corruption. . . . Esther's "Do you think God will punish me for that?" is a truly radical question, until it is drowned in the noise of her repeated self-condemnations (xiii)

Gaskell rejects a mainstream Christian view of prostitutes and instead offers a different Christian view (or rationale for "whoredom") that is based on economics and rooted in sympathy of circumstance. Esther had to provide for her child, so it was economics and compassion that fueled her fall. Thus, she was not fueled by moral corruption – the sin of which conventional Christianity would have convicted her. Gaskell's sense of a providential plot results in a very different verdict, one that she reinforces with her own plot. Despite Esther's self-loathing and self-condemnation, Gaskell makes clear that society has done her

an injustice in casting her aside. Esther, however, still emerges from the shadows of the streets to try to protect her niece (Mary). Esther's motives are selfless, as she has nothing to gain by briefly re-inserting herself into acceptable society except to save her niece.

Later in the narrative, Esther approaches Jem Wilson, Mary's other suitor, to see if he will listen to her warning regarding the danger that is soon to befall Mary. Unlike John Barton, Jem eventually listens to Esther. She not only warns him of Mary's impending trouble with Carson but she also lends credibility to her words by telling her own story. Before telling him, she implores, "But the story of my life is wanted to give force to my speech . . ." (*MB* 160). That the story of a prostitute could give information credibility is hugely significant and would have given readers pause. Jem gently interrupts Esther, telling her that she need not divulge her story. However, Esther authoritatively replies, "I will have the relief of telling it" (*MB* 161). Just pages earlier in the narrative, Gaskell had posed the question: "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean" (*MB* 159). Both Jem and the reader likely would prefer to remain untainted by Esther's story. However, she by-passes those preferences and tells her story. By revealing her history, Esther becomes master of her own story. Additionally, she commands Jem to protect Mary: "I charge you with the care of her!" – authoritatively commissioning Jem to protect her niece (*MB* 163). Through the actions of telling and commanding, Esther directs the plot. In giving Esther a voice, Gaskell "was making herself the voice of the outcast" (Uglow 202). Just as Gaskell was, in a sense, testifying for the fallen woman, so the fallen woman testifies for her niece, Mary, in an attempt to warn both John Barton and Jem about Mary's potentially compromising relationship with Carson. Even if Esther does not have the power

to save herself, her plot agency consists in charging another to change Mary's plot, to save her niece from a fate similar to her own. Ostracized from a society that refuses to hear her plot – that is, the causes that led her to live on the streets as a prostitute – Esther nonetheless asserts her persistent relevance to the social narrative.

As meaningful for the plot as are Esther's actions, they pale in comparison with the influence Esther and Mary wield together over the murder plot, an influence narratable only in fiction while remaining unrepresented in the law's story of causality and culpability. Gaskell entrusts women – of both good and bad standing – with the key evidence in the murder trial that drives the second half of the narrative. Esther finds the wadding of paper that was used in a gun in the same area in which Carson was murdered. The paper is a valentine from Jem to Mary from years past. The paper bears Mary's name as well as Jem's handwriting. Esther thinks that this incriminates Jem as the murderer and uses the evidence as an excuse to see her estranged niece, Mary. Esther really wants to know how attached Mary was to the ill-intentioned Carson; however, when she sees how affected Mary is at the knowledge that Jem could be proven as the murderer, Esther makes Mary promise to destroy the evidence. Mary agrees. However, once Esther departs, Mary launches her own investigation, for she actually suspects that the evidence of the gun paper incriminates not Jem but, rather, her father. Mary must play the role of detective, for, as Tzvetan Todorov posits, the narrator cannot divulge the truth of the crime in a whodunit plot (Todorov 46). In this type of detective fiction, the crime is the "story of an absence" (46), and it is Mary's job to solve the mystery or fill the absence. On a blank area of the valentine, Mary had copied a poem for her father to enjoy, which meant that it *was* John Barton who had the paper in his possession. As Mary searches through her father's belongings, she finds bullets

and gun powder as well as the matching shreds of the valentine in her father's coat pocket. Mary's suspicions are confirmed. Not only would others think that the gun paper incriminated Jem but, as long as the gun paper existed, Mary would have physical evidence that it, in fact, implicated her father. As a result, Mary assumes an agency in the plot that Todorov recognized as paradigmatic in how plot shapes readers' desires. The detective, as Todorov sees it, stands in for the reader in pursuing truth, which resolves the reader's discomfort with suspense (49).¹⁰

After playing the role of detective, Mary next assumes the role of judge by burning the evidence (thus protecting both Jem and her father) and "acquit[ing] him [Jem] with all her heart and soul" (*MB* 247). For the rest of the narrative, Mary continues her investigation, searching for a way to acquit Jem that does not mean implicating her father. She discovers that Jem was with Will Wilson (Jem's cousin) the night of the murder and hopes that Will will provide a credible alibi for the court. In the meantime, she is subpoenaed to testify in Jem's trial and is overwhelmed at the possibility of having to choose between Jem and her father on the witness stand. Nevertheless, she stands before Gaskell's reading audience as a woman convinced of the truth in what she is doing. A working-class woman, Mary would never be viewed by her fellow characters as someone who could hold such important information – information that could give or take away life – or someone who could handle evidence in such authoritative ways. By destroying the evidence of the gun paper, Mary commits herself to being able to prove Jem's innocence without it, a task that should have seemed impossible to her. However, she is convinced of her ability to do what is seemingly out of reach, especially for someone of her class and sex. Advocating for

¹⁰ For more on detective fiction, see Todorov Ch. 3.

Jem to her friends, Mary claims, “I know it’s the truth [Jem’s innocence], and I mean to try and prove it, come what may. Nothing you can say will daunt me” (*MB* 259). Mary even believes that she carries a sort of divine sanction in what she is doing because she is pursuing truth and justice. She proclaims, “But surely God will help me. When I know I’m doing right, I will have no fear, but put my trust in Him; for I’m acting for the innocent and good, and not for my own self” (*MB* 259).¹¹ Importantly, this turns what might otherwise only be the stuff of a page-turner into a providentially sanctioned mission to manage the truth in order to secure justice, understood as salvation.

Mary’s steadfast assurance that she is on the side of right is made public in the dramatic climax of the trial scene, the true nature of which is concealed from the court but known to the reader who is privy to Mary’s detection and judgment. Because Mary has destroyed the forensic evidence, she puts her trust in the power of her own testimony to redeem Jem’s character. When she must testify during Jem’s trial, she carries with her the same assurance of defending the innocent, even though she is terrified of what the outcome of the trial may be. On the witness stand, she resolves to cast aside her “feminine shame” and speak to Jem’s character as well as her love for him (*MB* 325). When she tells the court of her association with both Harry Carson and Jem Wilson, she professes her love for – and to – Jem so that he may know the truth of her feelings toward him, whether he is acquitted or condemned to the gallows. After she testifies, she stays in the courtroom but begins to feel delirious while she watches the rest of the trial unfold. She mutters, “I must not go

¹¹It is not uncommon for Gaskell’s heroines to have such conviction that they will prevail because they are on the side of right. Like Mary, Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters* reasons with similar conviction: “I am sure we [Cynthia and Molly] have right on our side; and that makes me certain he [Mr. Preston] must and shall give up the letters” (*W&D* 474).

mad. I must not, indeed. They say people tell the truth when they're mad; but I don't. I was always a liar. I was, indeed; but I'm not mad. I must not go mad. I must not, indeed” (MB 328). Mary is startled out of her growing delirium by the arrival of Will Wilson, who arrives at the last minute to provide the alibi that will acquit Jem. Mary cries out, “O Jem! Jem! you're saved; and I *am* mad –” (MB 329). She then collapses and is taken out of the courtroom, for Mary literally descends into madness after she speaks in the public space of the courtroom.

Mary's brave and perhaps unwomanly investigation on behalf of Jem and her subsequent public proclamation of her affection for him result in a purifying sickness that shows readers the consequences for a woman taking such an authoritative role not merely in society but also in the legal system. Controlling evidence and information as well as venturing out on an investigation on her own accord are unorthodox for any character, much less a female character. Speaking in the public space of the courtroom seems to solidify the need to both punish for and cleanse Mary of such unwomanly experiences. Surely Gaskell did not want to punish her heroine; however, it seems she thought it necessary to show her reading audience what happens to a woman who takes charge, advocates for others, and remains credible. In a sense, it *was* madness for Gaskell to even imagine that a real-life version of Mary would be believed by the average reader. However, by using fiction – and, thus, imagination – to get her readers to identify and trust such a woman as Mary, Gaskell teaches her readers that such “madness” might in fact be sanity.

After this lesson, Gaskell delivers a happy ending in which Mary recovers and marries Jem. Interestingly, though, they do not stay in England. They travel to the New World to find a new kind of life. This journey is partially motivated by Jem's

unemployability. Even though he is proven innocent, suspicions linger. However, Gaskell also relocates her heroine to the New World because it is a place that might have been ready (even if only in the reader's imagination) for an assertive female advocate and teller of truth, such as Mary Barton. Perhaps Mary's world is the New Jerusalem.

Another Purged Heroine: Gaskell's Innovative Use of the Sympathetic Penitent in *Ruth*

In *Ruth*, Gaskell keeps the titular heroine pure and capable of bearing witness to truth despite her status as a fallen woman – a status that would have marked her as ruined and incapable of truthful testimony. Ruth becomes embroiled in a romance that remains oddly unrepresented in the plot, for even the mention of its physical realities must stay shielded from the reader as well as Ruth in order to preserve her virtue in the eyes of the reader. Though Ruth's sin is unnamed, she bears the mark of it in her son, and the plot spins out because of the consequences that must befall her. Ruth goes on to live a life of virtue and humility. However, those around her cannot, ultimately, get past her sexual history. In the end, Ruth must suffer a fatal illness to atone for her wrongs. The narrative is designed so that, by this point, the reader is sympathetic toward Ruth and unconcerned with her history. However, Gaskell cannot allow readers to rest in the unreality of a happy ending when, in real life, Ruth would have been ostracized by the same readers who were sympathetic to her fictional counterpart. In Ruth's martyrdom, Gaskell shows the error of discrediting women with untraditional pasts.

In no other book but *Ruth* does Gaskell take such pains to keep her heroine spotless. To Richard Monckton Milnes, she explained, "I tried to make both the story and the writing

as quiet as I could, in order that ‘people’ (my great bugbear) might not say that they could not see what the writer felt to be a very plain and earnest truth, for romantic incidents or exaggerated writing” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 225).¹² It was particularly important for such efforts to be made because Ruth crosses the boundaries of acceptable moral behavior in the nineteenth century by engaging in a physical relationship with her lover, Henry Bellingham. Not until Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is such an attempt made to portray a fallen woman as pure, and, in the case of Tess, the fall is forced or murky at best. Ruth freely enters into a pre-marital relationship with Bellingham; however, the physical aspects of the relationship are merely hinted at and remain largely unspoken. Although Ruth is not physically forced into this relationship, there is a sense that she has nowhere else to turn since she is alone in the world with no prospects. Gaskell carefully insists that Ruth lacks the knowledge to be a meaningful agent in this seduction plot. No agency, no culpability.¹³

From the beginning of the narrative, Gaskell tells the audience of the double-standard between the sexes regarding such relationships. Love, specifically sex, is “*the* subject of a woman’s life” (R 44) – or, we might say, her plot. However, since no one had ever discussed love with Ruth prior to her relationship with Bellingham, she does not know how to read this plot or how to assume agency within it. Few would inquire into a man’s sexual past while a woman’s determined her plotline: in what social circles she was allowed, what type of man would deem her valuable, and sometimes if she would even live a normal life. As Françoise Basch notes, “[T]he law itself had to underline that the woman’s sin was

¹² The letter is dated February 10, 1853.

¹³ See Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) 68, 72. Ch. 6 provides wonderful context.

socially infinitely more serious [than the man's]," even though mainstream Christian belief held both parties equally accountable (25). As far as the law is concerned, this double-standard was rationalized by the illegitimate children who might result from an affair, as they could cause complications in inheritance and, thus, issues of property were at stake (Basch 25). Later in *Ruth*, Richard Bradshaw, son of Mr. Bradshaw who is Ruth's employer, off-handedly remarks to his sister, Jemima: "Oh! many things are right for men which are not for girls" (R 213). Though in its original context, this conversation pertains to a lighter subject than the double-standard between men and women's sexuality, Gaskell sprinkles her story with doubly resonant statements like this to build her case regarding a broader double-standard between the sexes that needed not only sympathy but re-examination. Part of this building case for sympathy and re-examination is the characterization of Ruth as innocent, despite her transgressions, within the context of a providential plot.

The character who sees Ruth's virtue from his first encounter with her is Thurston Benson, a dissenting minister. He is introduced to Ruth in what might literally be called a cliff-hanger: abandoned by Bellingham, Ruth is contemplating suicide by throwing herself into the sea. Benson is concerned for Ruth, even though she is a stranger. Perceiving that his ordinary walk has brought him into contact with an extraordinary plot – whatever it might be – Benson, motivated by Christian concern, follows her, then stumbles and falls as he hurries after her. When he falls, his cry "call[s] her out of herself" (R 97). Literally, this turn of events – Ruth turning back from the cliff's edge to help another – initiates her "turn," which is the literal meaning of repentance. Benson's role in Ruth's plot turn is to ensure that Ruth survives, and he functions as Gaskell's dissenting spokesman. Time after time, Benson emerges in the plot as Ruth's advocate – the character who attests to her purity

and her right place before God as His child. Benson sets Ruth on a new plot trajectory. She comes to live with Benson and his sister, and they support her during her pregnancy and, afterward, as a mother.

Significantly, though Benson intuits Ruth's true story, he chooses to construct a socially acceptable plot for her to facilitate her repentance. When Benson and his sister, Faith, discuss Ruth's pregnancy, they wrangle over how they should handle it. Faith is initially morally shocked by the pregnancy, but Thurston reasons that "[t]he sin [of Ruth's fornication] appears . . . to be quite distinct from its consequences [the baby]" (R 119). The Bensons concur that they will represent Ruth's background as that of a virtuous widow. Clearly reflective of the distinction that Gaskell sought to illustrate to her audience, this moment is one of many didactic moments in the narrative that teaches the audience how to deal with such issues. Alan Shelston construes Gaskell's mission as one of trying to evoke sympathy in her readers:

Her novel is not a plea for sexual permissiveness, but for sympathy on society's part for those who have sinned: its criticisms are against the double standard that would absolve Bellingham and the inflexible moralism that would reject the sinner as does the obdurate Mr. Bradshaw. Seen in this light the projections of Ruth as perfect beyond criticism has a logic of its own. If society can reject a sinner such as she, how will it react to the many less unexceptionable cases that are part of its daily experience? (xvi)

This moral double-standard is not lost on Benson. Shortly after taking in Ruth, he thinks to himself, "Where was her [Ruth's] lover? Could he be easy and happy? Could he grow into perfect health, with these great sins pressing on his conscience with a strong and hard pain?"

Or had he a conscience?" (R 117). Benson goes on to discuss the ungodly way that the world treats mothers and the children they bear out of wedlock, saying that he cannot forgive the fathers who abandon them (R 120). Throughout the narrative, Benson remains Ruth's truest advocate and maintains her credibility before their real judge. He reminds Ruth: "It is to God you [she] must answer, not to men" (R 356). In this manner, Gaskell's unimpeachably virtuous dissenting minister is shown to confer a sympathetic interpretation of Ruth's plot understood in the context of his providential world-view at the same time that he constructs a conventionally sentimental counter-plot for her that is fit for public consumption.

Because Gaskell repeatedly underscores the fact that Ruth maintains her virtue (and, thus, her credibility) before God, the plot contains many instances of sympathy eluding Ruth and of characters engaging in lengthy discussions regarding morality and justice. Each time Ruth fails to receive sympathy, Gaskell positions the good Christian reader to learn a moral lesson through its absence. For instance, early in the narrative when Bellingham's mother extracts Bellingham from his relationship with Ruth, Mrs. Bellingham remarks, "I have no doubt in my own mind she [Ruth] led you [Bellingham] wrong with her artifices" (R 90). This conventional lack of understanding sets off the concatenation of events that eventually lead to Ruth's death. Repeated plot incidents revealing the absence of sympathy for Ruth inspire an over-abundance of sympathy from the reading audience not only toward Ruth but also toward the real-life versions of Ruth in England.

Alternatively, Gaskell teaches other lessons in *Ruth* not via the absence of a positive attribute but rather through explicit debates. Though there are many examples throughout the narrative, the discussions between Bradshaw and other characters illustrate the

viewpoints regarding morality and justice that Gaskell sought to juxtapose. This entails plotting that occasions dialogue relevant to Ruth's situation. For example, when Bradshaw discusses financial dealings with his friend, Mr. Farquhar, Farquhar posits: "And yet charity (in your sense of the word) degrades; justice, tempered with mercy and consideration, elevates," to which Bradshaw responds, "That is not justice – justice is certain and inflexible" (R 240). Clearly, Gaskell wants her readers to identify with Farquhar's sense of justice, i.e., a verdict that is mingled with mercy and consideration. Mercy and consideration, however, are not included in Bradshaw's hasty judgments, much as is the case with most of her readers, Gaskell implies. Through Bradshaw's poor example, readers are to recognize their own inability to assess another person's whole experience and credibility as long as they base their judgments upon insufficient evidence and mere appearances. Gaskell aimed these types of examples at her female readership, specifically, as it was a constant source of disappointment to her throughout her career that her sister women did not judge one another more sympathetically. In an 1853 letter to Anna Jameson, Gaskell laments, "I am surprized to find how very many people – good kind people – and *women* infinitely more than men, really & earnestly disapprove of what I have said [in *Ruth*] & express that disapproval at considerable pain to themselves, rather than allow a 'demoralizing laxity' to go unchecked" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 226).¹⁴

For much of the plot, Ruth (Hilton) poses as Ruth Denbigh, adopting the identity and background provided her by the well-intentioned Benson. Equipped with this conventional background as a virtuous widow, Ruth is able to participate in a new plot, from which she would have been excluded as a fallen woman. She is hired as a governess by the

¹⁴ The letter is dated March 7, 1853.

eminently respectable, wealthy Bradshaw family. This plot enables her to develop a friendship with the young Jemima Bradshaw, who comes to idolize her. Eventually, this background is exposed as a fiction. When Jemima and her father argue over Ruth's exposed lie (in front of Ruth), Bradshaw exclaims, "And I trusted her – I trusted her – I welcomed her . . . I was duped . . ." (R 339). Bradshaw's outrage is provoked more by his revealed ignorance, his misjudging of her character, than by her fallen status. Not only had he accepted Benson's account of Ruth as a plausible plot, he had unknowingly judged her character as virtuous, for he had observed her humble and quiet demeanor. It is when Ruth's real story is exposed that he begins to misjudge her, casting aside his credible and first-hand knowledge of her. He abandons reason and flies into a fit of passion because his lack of knowledge is exposed. While he entertains the possibility that Ruth's behavior could contaminate his family,¹⁵ his greater concern is that his role as omniscient judge has been undermined. He had accepted Ruth into his family and marked her with his own stamp of approval. When her virtue is in question, his discretion is also on trial.¹⁶ Many of *Ruth's* readers would have been more concerned with how the alleged taint of another person's wrongdoing might have affected their own reputations than with the actual fate or well-being of the person who was suffering. This hypocrisy, especially from a middle-class Christian readership, lent urgency to Gaskell's mission of simultaneously indicting her readers and moving them toward understanding. Still, Ruth departs quietly, acknowledging

¹⁵ Bradshaw reasons, "That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated" (R 340). Great concern existed regarding the fallen corrupting the allegedly yet-uncorrupt. In 1857, William Acton described the scene in the theater district of Haymarket: "The prostitutes and their followers are in possession. The corruptible are wedged in with corruption; and youth and virtue are with difficulty extricated from the melée" (qtd. in Basch 197). See William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspect, in London and other large cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Attendant Evil* (London, 1857) 108, 117.

¹⁶ Schor comments on the townspeople more generally: "To the people of the town, the worst of Ruth's sins is that she has lived among them as one of them, that they would not recognize her as fallen" (69).

the justice of Bradshaw's fury at discovering that he has been part of Benson's plot of Christian sympathy.

Just as readers are implicated in Bradshaw's poor example, they are moved toward understanding by Benson's. Even though Benson is the instigator of the lie regarding Ruth's true identity, Shelston asserts that it is still difficult to accuse him of any real wrongdoing, as his lie is a type of "sympathetic morality" (xvii). Much as Gaskell knew that her readership would not be ready to accept a real-life Ruth into their own social circles, Benson knew that his own social circles would not be able to dismiss Ruth's past and judge her only on her observable merits. Though Benson's idea of a disguise is a falsehood, it is a reaction to attitudes toward women at the time. After Ruth's true identity is revealed, Benson and Bradshaw heatedly argue over her virtue, with Benson urging Bradshaw to reconsider Ruth's character in light of the life that they have both seen her live. Bradshaw remains an inflexible judge, to which Benson supplicates:

“[N]ot every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many – how many the Great Judgment Day will reveal to those who have shaken off the poor, sore, penitent hearts on earth – many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue – the help which no man gives to them – help – that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen.” (R 351)

Bradshaw bluntly responds that “[t]he world has decided how such women are to be treated” (R 351). Solidifying his point, Benson retorts, “I take my stand with Christ against the world” (R 351). Benson goes on to say that women like Ruth should be given a chance to redeem themselves. Later, Bradshaw discovers that his own son, Richard (who had, to all appearances, seemed virtuous), is involved in financial lies that harm Benson. Benson

chooses to act mercifully toward Richard by not prosecuting him. Explaining his rationale to Bradshaw, Benson rhetorically asks, ““Have we not all offended Him [God]?”” (R 405). Bradshaw thinks Richard’s character is utterly ruined by this one act (or this series of acts), but Benson models sympathy for Bradshaw and, ultimately, models it for Gaskell’s readers. Benson then advocates acceptance of his own reading of Ruth’s fate in a providential narrative. Above all, his obligation is to save her soul for the last judgment.

Ruth herself serves as a model to Gaskell’s readers of the honorable ways that a woman can speak and act even when she has lived outside society’s dictates. This requires some tolerance of plotting coincidence on the reader’s part. Before Ruth’s true past is discovered by her community, Bellingham re-emerges in the plot. Also under a new assumed name, Bellingham accidentally discovers Ruth and proposes marriage to her and, thus, a lifetime of provision for both her and her son, Leonard. Ruth refuses his offer, with the wisdom that he is still a man of poor and selfish character – the same man who had abandoned her after their brief affair. Ruth’s refusal to marry Bellingham is a challenge to accepted conventions of a respectable marriage plot. Basch comments, “Through her refusal to marry her seducer Ruth denies the presumption which more or less underpinned the conception of sinful women and of females in general. The frivolity and the exclusive aspiration of single women to marry. This refusal, this challenge to the social conventions, which Jane Eyre did not dare make, asserts Ruth’s moral superiority over both the father of her child and over her judges” (248). According to Basch, Gaskell argues that “society must reconsider its judgement on the child’s illegitimacy” (249). Leonard suffers a similar social mark as Ruth, blighting his future prospects – or plot. Ruth knew the struggles that Leonard might face in his life ahead, the prospects for an illegitimate child, but she still rejected the

offer from Bellingham – an offer that would have provided legitimacy in reputation, if not in the law.¹⁷ In Ruth's refusal, Gaskell gives her audience an example of a fallen woman who has authority, for Ruth rejects the type of solution that society would have sanctioned. Ruth assesses the character of the man who offers her legitimacy, decides that he would not be a suitable husband and father, and determines that she and her son carry legitimacy of personhood on their own.

What is most remarkable about this refusal, however, is its heightened rhetorical and dramatic positioning in the plot, which turns a private conversation held on a beach into a climactic and transformational episode in the plot. Gaskell's careful husbanding of Ruth's rhetorical resources (she is quiet, modest, unassuming) prepares the reader to be stunned by her eloquence in what otherwise might be construed as a minor plot point. When Bellingham and Ruth encounter one another during a Bradshaw holiday weekend, he privately takes her aside and offers to provide for both her and Leonard if she will return to him. Ruth indignantly responds, "Listen to me! . . . Whatever may be my doom – God is just – I leave myself in His hands. I will save Leonard from evil. Evil would it be for him if I lived with you. I will let him die first!" (R 299, 301). Refusing to be a kept woman, Ruth also fears for Bellingham's influence on Leonard.¹⁸ Though accepting Bellingham's offer would mean financial stability for the rest of her life as well as acceptance by and protection from a man, Ruth bypasses the approval of Bellingham and appeals directly to God for

¹⁷ In British law, legitimacy could not be conferred retroactively if the parents married. Hence, Leonard's legitimacy would always be a fiction. Baker adds, "Bastardy, or illegitimacy, was a condition imposed upon a child by the Church as a punishment for the sin of parents who conceived it by illicit connection" (489).

¹⁸ Shortly after Ruth gives birth to Leonard, she dreams that "instead of the pure and noble being whom she had prayed to present as her child to 'Our Father in heaven,' he was a repetition of his father; and, like him, lured some maiden . . . into sin, and left her there to even a worse fate than that of suicide . . . She saw her son dragged down by the clinging girl into some pit of horrors into which she dared not look, but from whence his father's voice was heard" (R 163).

justice. She accepts that her financial future will be unsteady and her son's future uncertain in order to live according to the divine law that she has learned from the Bensons and, in Ruth's eyes, to save her son's soul. Keeping Leonard away from his father will save him from Bellingham's immoral influence. Out of desperation, Bellingham realizes that offering marriage to Ruth may help his case: "We will try something more, and bid a higher price," he reasons (R 302). Ruth, however, is no mere prize to be won or purchased, for she denies even his offer of marriage. Defending the interests of both her son and herself, she states:

"I cannot . . . I cannot . . . I do not love you . . . I could never love you again. All you have said and done since you came with Mr. Bradshaw to Abermouth first, has only made me wonder how I ever could have loved you . . . You shall have nothing to do with my boy, by my consent, much less by my agency . . . You have heard my mind now, Mr. Bellingham." (R 302-3)

Here Ruth repeatedly tells Bellingham that she cannot accept his offer, her strength building with each refusal. Significantly, at the forefront of her reasoning is her lack of love for him. She goes on to attack his character, verbalizing her wonder at how she ever could have loved such a man. Ruth then commands Bellingham that he will have nothing to do with her son. Notably, she does this by invoking the authority of her consent and her agency. Silent throughout most of the narrative, Ruth still has developed a commanding sense of her own personhood, her own judgment, and her own authority. Despite her position as a fallen woman in society, she defies societal expectations of silence and submission in order to advocate for herself and her child. Though Bellingham offers her a type of legitimacy, Ruth not only declares her lack of love for him but also her disdain for his character and for whatever influence he would have over their child if she were to accept his offer. She judges

him, commands him, and concludes their conversation with finality – “You have heard my mind.” Unlike Margaret Hale in *North and South*, Ruth is not surprised by her advocacy for self and others. Often Margaret’s words of testimony surprise her and almost come from another place. However, for Ruth, there is no mention of the words surprising her or coming almost from outside herself. These words come from Ruth. Her agency in a conventionally heroic plot development, such as might be available to a wronged male character, might not only strain credulity, but impugn the natural virtue that has motivated her actions since Benson turned her away from suicide. However, her verbal defense of virtue, especially respecting her son, turns this episode into a climactic moment in the plot.

At the end of the narrative, Gaskell provides her audience with one last piece of evidence of Ruth’s credibility as a person of honor and as a legitimate and whole person in society. Ruth acts as a nurse in a local epidemic and, of her own will, chooses to return to the sick ward to nurse Bellingham (another coincidence worthy of Dickens). This final act of mercy towards Bellingham seals her fate, for she successfully returns him to health but then dies from the same sickness. This ending is often seen as melodramatic and unnecessary, as Ruth, it seems, has suffered enough for her transgressions. However, this is exactly the point. Her martyrdom *is* unnecessary, and she *has* suffered more than necessary. Gaskell’s heavy-handed approach to plotting in *Ruth* is intended to teach her readers how excessive and unnecessary their reactions to female behavior were. Despite Ruth’s past, she was still able to live in ways that modeled virtue and sympathy for her surrounding characters.

Ruth’s ability to speak truthfully and act credibly would have been surprising to many in Gaskell’s reading audience. In fact, the very plot structure of *Ruth* reinforces why it was

controversial. Ruth speaks truth even amidst the physical evidence of her body having transgressed moral codes. Not only was female sexuality largely unspoken in the nineteenth century but women were, in fact, desexualized. Religious symbolism for the figure of woman was widespread. Woman previously had been viewed as Eve, tempter, but was increasingly seen as Mary, redeemer. With this shift in symbolism, women were desexualized. In William Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1857), women were either nymphomaniacs or totally ignorant of sex (Basch 6, 8-9). No middle ground existed. This polarization informs the climate in which Gaskell wrote *Ruth*, a heroine whose sexuality has clear evidence in her son yet no descriptive evidence in the narrative. The average reader would have had a difficult time reconciling the reality of woman's sexuality with the ideal of the nineteenth-century's notion of the "chaste" wife-mother, and Gaskell knew that this would be the case. In an 1853 letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, Gaskell wrote, "Of course I knew of the great difference of opinion there would be about the book before it was published" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 227).¹⁹

Despite the resistance that Gaskell knew the publication of *Ruth* would meet, she remained committed to exposing the hypocrisy in society's attitudes toward female sexuality as well as showing the legitimate credibility that women who were marked as fallen should receive. As the wife of a Unitarian minister, Gaskell had a particularly high-profile position in her community in Manchester, which made her publication of *Ruth* all the more striking. She was surrounded by the types of middle-class individuals who are depicted in *Ruth* as characters who are too quick to judge since they are unsympathetic to Ruth's plight. Unlike many middle-class women, however, Gaskell came in contact with persons of disparate

¹⁹ The letter is dated April 7, 1853.

backgrounds through her charity work. She gave aid to the poverty-stricken as well as to unmarried women with controversial sexual histories. She had chosen to construe the meaning of those histories in terms of a providential plot.

Public reception to *Ruth* was mixed, as some were quick to condemn the work as inappropriate while others recognized the hypocrisy that Gaskell made it her business to spotlight (Shelston vii-ix). She was hurt by the harsh reception and lamented to Tottie Fox: “I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 223).²⁰ Gaskell was unapologetic, however, seeing herself as a “martyr to the truth” (Uglow 338). She writes:

“An unfit subject for fiction” is *the* thing to say about it; I knew all this before; but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it; only how I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying, though I wd do every jot of it over again to-morrow . . . In short the only comparison I can find for myself is to St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows; but I knew it before so it comes upon me as no surprize,— as what must be endured with as much quiet *seeming*, & as little inward pain as I can. (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 220-21)²¹

Thus, she chose to contextualize her own suffering in terms of a telos governed by divine truth rather than human expediency. Gaskell’s “respectability” allowed her to weather the storm of *Ruth*’s publication. Her “normal” status as a married woman with children gave her greater credibility with her readers than her unmarried and childless counterparts (Showalter 70-71). *Ruth* continues to be criticized even today for its melodramatic depiction of Ruth’s

²⁰ The letter is dated 1853 (exact date unknown).

²¹ The letter is written to Anne Robson and dated sometime before January 27, 1853 (exact date unknown).

innocence.²² However, Gaskell presents her heroine in an unrealistic fiction in order to show her readers their unrealistic plot expectations for women. Conversely, while readers had unattainable expectations of female perfection in mind, they also expected very little from women in terms of credible testimony. Midway through *Ruth*, Bradshaw comments on his wife's ability to tell the truth: "I have trained her to habits of accuracy very unusual in a woman" (R 222). Though seemingly an off-handed comment, Bradshaw hints at his inability to view women as credible witnesses to experience and that his own wife's allegedly amazing ability to repeat experiences truthfully is merely a testament to his good training of her. In *Ruth*, Gaskell carefully builds the case for even a fallen woman to be a credible witness, even without the training and support of a man. She reminds her readers that men cannot faithfully judge one another and that only God is man's true judge. She writes, "And so, unconsciously, her [Ruth's] love for her child led her up to love to God, to the All-knowing, who read her heart" (R 209). Further, Ruth herself sees society's inability to judge her true character and lives in such a way as to be spotless before God – that He may know her true self. To her son, Leonard, Ruth reflects, "Leonard – when I was very young I did very wrong. I think God, who knows all, will judge me more tenderly than men . . ." (R 343).

The Christian Socialism Advocate in *North and South*

In *North and South*, false testimony and misrepresentation are rampant as plot complications, but, amidst this atmosphere, the heroine, Margaret, carries authority and

²² Shelston criticizes Ruth's excessive purity and uses reviews from *Sharpe's London Magazine* and *The Gentleman's Magazine* (both written in 1853) as support (xiii).

credibility. It should be noted that the plot of this social problem novel, returning to the abuses of the factory system, draws significantly on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The misprisions of Austen's characters are recast in terms of ideological misunderstandings, with Margaret representing the Christian socialism of F. D. Maurice and John Thornton, the principles of Political Economy. An odd subplot is required to balance the otherwise privileged position of Margaret Hale. Throughout much of the narrative, the possible trial of Margaret's brother, Frederick, hangs over her family. He has been accused of treason, and discussion arises regarding the lack of credibility of the judges who would be involved in the case, the lack of evidence to support the charges, the abuse of power in the courts that would preside over his case, and the witnesses who would be admissible. This sub-plot lays the foundation for the main plot of Margaret, who falsely testifies to save Frederick from discovery, an act that produces a prodigious crisis of conscience for her. For much of the latter part of the narrative, Thornton (Margaret's love interest and a powerful mill owner) thinks her reputation is tainted by an illicit affair – an affair, which, in fact, never occurred (and which is related to her false testimony). Despite these impressions, Thornton protects Margaret and covers evidence that might have indicted her of a murder. Thornton's act of mercy is later vindicated when he discovers that there was no affair. It was circumstantial evidence that had placed such a misconception in his mind, and the reader is shown not to be reliant on mere appearance when judging character. Gaskell entrusts Margaret with the mantle of being chief advocate for her brother and positions her throughout the narrative as the controller and disseminator of information. With this role comes authority, and Margaret makes no misstep to give the reader doubt of her credibility.

Of all Gaskell's heroines, Margaret is the most complete example of an emboldened female acting and speaking in credible, authoritative ways. The entire narrative weaves together plots that examine the extent to which an individual may defy authority. Gaskell provides several different models of individuals caught in such dilemmas: mill workers who strike and riot in the face of seeming injustice, Margaret's father who leaves his ministry in the Church of England on a matter of conscience, Margaret's brother who lives in exile because of his conscience-driven mutiny, and – finally – Margaret herself who must navigate the role of middle-class woman who cares for her aging parents, her exiled brother, and her suitor, Thornton (Shuttleworth ix). Margaret protects each of these parties by going outside the role laid before her by society. She assumes a mantle of authority atypical of both a woman and a member of the middle-class.

Just as Margaret is different from the type of heroine a typical reader would have expected, the various plots of *North and South* each deliver something new to readers. Schor notes:

North and South is unusually canny about this readerly habit of projection [the ability to anticipate plots], and works to undercut predictions at every turn, altering plots by putting them in unexpected places: Margaret will find romance in industrialism; the village's vicar will move to Manchester; the heroine's brother will enter the plot by leaving town; and so on. The novel is not so much 'new' as it is unexpected. (125)

In each of the unexpected plot twists, Margaret stands firm in the role of protector. Mr. Hale's act of conscience pushes her into the role of caregiver for her parents. His decision to leave his ministry means that the Hales move from the idyllic country town of Helstone

to the industrial city of Milton. Though there is no real need for such a drastic move, especially in the face of Mr. Hale's already-traumatic career change, Mr. Hale insists on a change of scene for the family. In the absence of any real leadership from her father, Margaret must deliver the unfortunate news of the move to her mother as well as orchestrate the family's move to Milton.

Once in this caretaking role, Margaret takes charge as well as controls information in her family. There are numerous instances of Margaret withholding and selectively disseminating information throughout the narrative. When her mother becomes fatally ill, Margaret keeps the information from her father for a period of time because she knows that he is not strong enough to handle it. When Margaret keeps secret the information regarding a suspicious evening at a train station, she alone bears the burden of the truth in an effort to save her brother. Though these instances are the most dramatic examples of her authority over information, many others are scattered throughout the narrative. In this way, Margaret resembles the novelist, managing plot suspense and development by the strategic concealment and disclosure of information. Despite Margaret's considerable power to influence plot development, however, Gaskell withholds from her the power to bring the novel to closure. Instead, that power is distributed among Margaret, Mr. Thornton, and the narrator.

The question of acting on one's own authority when faced with injustice, specifically when society will disapprove, ties together Mr. Hale, Frederick, and Margaret as each negotiates how to deal with matters of conscience. When Margaret laments Frederick's exile yet praises his decision to defy his cruel commander in the navy, she anticipates her own future actions on behalf of others, saying, "Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are

fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used – not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless” (*N&S* 109). Later in the narrative, Margaret’s defense of both Thornton and Frederick proceeds from her principled defiance of power that is ill-used. There is another layer of societal baggage in Margaret’s defense of others, however – that of gender. Considered more prone to emotion than men, women were forced socially to conceal or repress their feelings, until “like a smouldering fire that has at last got vent, her passions, when no longer trammelled by conventional propriety, burst forth in unquenchable violence” (qtd. in Shuttleworth xxvii).²³ When Margaret protects others, especially in the public sphere, she risks attacks regarding not only her decision to advocate for others but also regarding her very identity as a woman. If she is truly at the mercy of feminine emotion, her testimony for others lacks all credibility. Margaret is not a stereotypical nineteenth-century woman, however, nor does she wilt when faced with the consequences of acting faithfully according to her principles. In fact, one would have a difficult time finding her equivalent in Victorian literature. Nicholas Higgins, a working-class man whom Margaret and her father befriend, says to Margaret: “[Y]o’re not a common wench, axing yo’re pardon, nor yet have yo’ common ways about yo’” (*N&S* 308).

However tenuous the logic that removes the Hales from their home to Milton, this plot move enables Gaskell’s aim of representing a female character of significant intelligence, learning, and moral understanding who articulates the argument for Christian charity in debates against the Political Economy espoused by Thornton. Gaskell employs an edgy romance plot between Margaret and Thornton to interest her readers in a political debate that might otherwise seem forced or overtly didactic and to effect a reconciliation of two of

²³ Shuttleworth cites J. G. Millingen, *The Passions, or Mind and Matter* (London, 1848) 157-8.

the principle competing political ideologies of the Victorian period. This familiar romance plot structure also ensures that readers will not balk at the implausibility of a man of business engaging in political debate with the young daughter of a clergyman or dismiss an articulate, outspoken woman as a sexless or shrewish hag who could never be the object of romantic desire. Much of the plot in *Milton* is taken up with scenes of dialogue between Margaret and Thornton, who has come to her father for instruction. In these conversations, Margaret models a femininity capable of rational argument and informed less by sentiment than by a Christian worldview, which insists on seeing workers in their providential roles as God's creatures. What is more, Margaret's principles are enhanced by direct experience of exploited millworkers, gained by her acts of charity. Margaret's Christian principles enjoin her to overcome her prejudice against the rude manners of workers, and the plot takes her into their homes on charity visits and into dialogue with them through which her abstract knowledge is enhanced by experience. Significantly, limited experience of the world was often cited as the reason why women should be denied suffrage as well as why the works of female authors would always be inferior to those of men. Still, the entirely plausible plotting of a Christian woman's charity visits, such as those that Gaskell herself conducted, arms Margaret with authoritative knowledge of working-class life lacked by the millowning Thornton. Equipped with sound principle and direct experience, Margaret moves the plot towards the goal of reconciling the "two Englands," north and south.

In the most dramatic and consequential scene in *North and South*, the workers' riot at Thornton's mill, Margaret simultaneously defends the two groups as well as Thornton himself. Seeing not only the mob but the *individuals* within the mob, Margaret urges Thornton to leave the safety of his house at the mill and reason with them. She commands:

“Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers [the Irish workers Thornton imported to work his mill in the absence of his regular workers], whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don’t let the soldiers come in and cut down these poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one [Boucher, a working-class man Margaret has befriended] there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man.”

(*NeS* 177)

By rising up and outside the conventional role of middle-class femininity, Margaret looks out for the rioting workers as they are about to be attacked by Milton’s soldiers, the Irish workers who are about to be attacked by the rioting workers, and Thornton himself (as well as his family) whose life is endangered by the mob at his door. Putting aside society’s gendered expectations of her, she not only commands Thornton to act and to save others but she intercedes with her voice and her body, acting not only as a truth-teller but as an *agent* of the truths she espouses. She goes to the mob herself and stands beside Thornton, urging the workers to leave in peace. When Margaret sees some workers plotting to strike Thornton down, she uses her own body to protect him. Margaret is exposed not only as a public figure (quite unconventional for the other characters in the scene and the readers), but a figure who *acts* physically in a public space.

Though her protection of Thornton is a selfless act, she has made herself vulnerable to scrutiny. Thornton instructs Margaret: “This is no place for you” (*NeS* 179).

However, Margaret invokes her own authority and credibility by retorting, “It is!” (*NeS* 179). Margaret’s courageous act culminates when she is struck unconscious by a rock

thrown at Thornton. Although Gaskell rescues her heroine's femininity from this decidedly masculine act of courage by rendering her helpless, this scene nonetheless contrasts with Mary Barton's psychic collapse after her testimony in Jem's murder trial. After the riot when Margaret finds out that public opinion has, in fact, judged her public defense of Thornton as evidence of some sort of inappropriate relationship, she reflects, "If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work. Let them insult my maiden pride as they will – I walk pure before God!" (*N&S* 191). Even though she is ashamed of being viewed as impure, she chooses to present herself before God instead of man as a pure and innocent person. She does not regret her protective actions – only that those around her misrepresent her character and judge her poorly. Sally Shuttleworth notes:

Whereas Mr. Hale and Frederick's actions are discussed in terms of conscience, Margaret's one public gesture, when she defends Thornton against the rioting workers, instantly becomes a source of shame to her . . .

The discussions throughout the text of personal and social justice, and of the rights of freedom and authority, are intricately bound with questions of gender. (xiii)

Much as Austen imagines that male desire is piqued by feminine strength (Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth Bennet precisely because she is his intellectual and verbal equal), Gaskell uses Margaret's heroic action to advance the novel's romance plot. Like Darcy's first proposal to Lizzy, however, Thornton's misconstrual of Margaret's action results in a principled rejection. When Thornton confronts Margaret to profess his love, Margaret tries to convince him that her protective act was not one of romantic love but, rather, a womanly

reaction: “‘It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger’” (*N&S* 194). Though Margaret is wrestling with her motivations for saving Thornton from the angry mob, she has a sense that there is injustice done to her by society for imposing seemingly selfish motivations on her. Later in the narrative, Margaret comes to terms with her romantic feelings for Thornton. Gaskell makes it clear, however, that Margaret’s actions in the riot are selfless and appropriate. In throwing herself into the fray, Margaret protects not only Thornton but also the English as well as Irish workers. Gaskell writes, “‘She did it because it was right, and simple, and true to save where she could save; even to try to save’” (*N&S* 198). Indeed, Margaret once again chooses to use her body to save another from harm in a situation devoid of romantic possibilities. When Nicholas Higgins tries to leave his family’s house to drink away his problems, Margaret uses her body in the doorway as a physical barrier. By including this scene, Gaskell shows her readers that Margaret’s intentions in helping others are pure and true, for she could have no ulterior motive with Higgins. Margaret has become more comfortable with her authority and knows that, despite what society may say, she is credible. Gaskell describes, “‘Margaret felt that he [Higgins] acknowledged her power’” (*N&S* 220). When Higgins backs down physically and tries to verbally convince Margaret to allow him to go and drink to excess, Margaret tells him: “‘You shall not’” (*N&S* 221).

Margaret’s authority in the public sphere translates to her domestic authority as well but with consequences embroiling Margaret in a sub-plot impugning her high principles. Upon her mother’s request, Margaret writes to her exiled brother in the hopes that he might return to England to see his dying mother one last time. The threat of discovery looms over

even the possibility of his visit. Margaret not only seeks out her brother for her mother's sake but assures Mrs. Hale of his safety. She literally charges herself with ensuring it: "I will put my arm in the bolt sooner than he should come to the slightest harm. Trust the care of him to me, mamma. I will watch over him like a lioness over her young" (*N&S* 237). Once Frederick has returned, the Hales revisit discussion of his legal case. Shuttleworth observes, "The return of Frederick allows Gaskell to emphasize once more the parallel story-lines of her plots, as they revolve around the central question of how far action in defiance of authority can be justified in the name of a higher cause" (xxx). The Hales hope that, if Frederick were to pursue a trial, there might be a positive outcome, which would clear his name. However, Frederick reminds them that credible witnesses would be virtually impossible to obtain and that his court-martial would be anything but filled with justice: "[A]uthority weighs nine-tenths in the balance, and evidence forms only the other tenth. In such cases, evidence itself can hardly escape being influenced by the prestige of authority" (*N&S* 259). Margaret responds, "You disobeyed authority – that was bad; but to have stood by, without word or act, while the authority was brutally used, would have been infinitely worse. People know what you did; but not the motives that elevate it out of a crime into an heroic protection of the weak" (*N&S* 259). Frederick, however, laments, "I am not sufficiently sure of the purity and justice of those who would be my judges, to give myself up to a court-martial, even if I could bring a whole array of truth-speaking witnesses" (*N&S* 259). Frederick's lack of belief in the credibility of those who would judge him corresponds to both the way that Margaret has been misrepresented and judged in her actions in the riot as well as in her forthcoming defense of Frederick. In Frederick's lament,

Gaskell also shows her readers the danger of unchecked authority and of relying on appearances to judge a person's whole character.

In her protection of Frederick, Margaret once again exposes herself to public scrutiny, largely as a result of appearances instead of actual information. A scuffle between Frederick and Leonards (an old shipmate) occurs at the train station when Margaret is secretly ushering Frederick out of Milton to escape discovery and prosecution. Leonards falls and appears uninjured; however, a drunkard with other internal medical problems, Leonards dies soon after. A stranger at the train station witnesses the incident and identifies Margaret to the police. When the police inspector comes to the Hales' home to question her, Margaret falsely testifies that she was not at the train station on the night in question. At this point in the narrative, Margaret does not know that Frederick is, in fact, off English soil and safely in exile once again. To protect him, Margaret repeatedly lies to the inspector, answering – in her rationale – to a higher truth. Margaret believes that her brother has been unjustifiably labeled a traitor, so her lie to the inspector is in service to the truth. She defies the power that has misjudged Frederick and works to enforce her own kind of justice, justice that is in accord with higher truths.

Still, like Mary Barton's, Margaret's falsehood comes with personal damage. Margaret internalizes the burden of having lied and suffers from the personal shame. The shame increases when she discovers that the inspector answers to Thornton and that Thornton is aware of the situation, though without knowing the real truth behind it. Unbeknownst to Margaret, Thornton is attempting to piece together the evidence from that fateful night at the train station. He decides to save Margaret from public shame and tells the inspector that there is not enough evidence to pursue the investigation. Thornton,

however, thinks that he has saved Margaret from *sexual* shame, as he believes that the man with whom she was seen at the train station was a mysterious lover (as few have knowledge of the existence of the absent Frederick). Margaret tortures herself with the knowledge that Thornton helped to exonerate her from a situation that he believes to be something other than what it is. Margaret thinks, “I wish I were a man, that I could go and force him to express his disapprobation, and tell him honestly that I knew I deserved it” (*N&S* 309). However, with no clear or socially acceptable way to explain herself, Margaret must continue to wrestle internally with the burden of protection that she has assumed. More consequential to her reputation than even her protection of Thornton in the riot, her protection of Frederick leaves her open to scrutiny, specifically from Thornton, that she is not able to counter.

Margaret must bear misrepresentation alone and, thus, places herself before God as the only all-knowing and true judge. Gaskell writes, “[S]he would keep her secret, and bear the burden alone. Alone she would go before God, and cry for His absolution. Alone she would endure her disgraced position in the opinion of Mr. Thornton” (*N&S* 287). What Margaret does not know is that Thornton suspects that there are extenuating circumstances surrounding her seemingly inappropriate encounter at the train station – an encounter that, in a conventional seduction plot, would be telling (and convincing) evidence. Thornton, however, more accurately reads this plot in terms of a more complete narrative of Margaret’s character. That is, he takes Margaret’s whole character into consideration and allows that understanding to temper his judgment of her. He even urges his mother to be more merciful in her assessment of Margaret.

Margaret is convinced of the truth that she enacts by protecting Frederick, even though revealing his visit would clear her name. Furthermore, she is righteously defiant when confronted with misinformed speculation. Mrs. Thornton confronts Margaret regarding her allegedly inappropriate behavior at the train station, primarily because of a promise that Mrs. Thornton made to Margaret's dying mother to watch out for her. Mrs. Thornton's interrogation of Margaret, however, is more accusatory than nurturing. In the face of such misplaced accusations, Margaret advocates for herself *and* for Frederick: "I can give you no explanation' . . . 'I have done wrong, but not in the way you think or know about'" (N&S 316). Margaret then silences Mrs. Thornton (who is above her in class), declines to justify herself, and leaves her: "You can say nothing more, Mrs. Thornton. I decline every attempt to justify myself for anything. You must allow me to leave the room" (N&S 317). This last seeming request is anything but a request, as Margaret leaves Mrs. Thornton's presence directly, not waiting for a response, much less her approval. As Margaret reflects on her encounter with Mrs. Thornton, she thinks, "[H]er words do not touch me; they fall off from me; for I am innocent of all motives she attributes to me. But still, it is hard to think that any one – any woman – can believe all this of another so easily. It is hard and sad" (N&S 322).

Margaret's reflections are significant for two reasons. First, Margaret renders herself immune to the false judgments of others, demonstrating that, when society rushes to judgment, the victim of the false judgments need not be controlled or represented by those who mishandle the case. In fact, the victim may exercise her own agency and wipe herself clean – in her own mind and potentially in the minds of others by supplying as much or as little evidence of her innocence as she chooses. Second, Margaret notes the harsh ways that

women judge one another. That women can easily think ill of other women and condemn them swiftly is not only baffling to Margaret but it is part of the reason for Gaskell's own writing. This didactic moment urges her female readership to use sympathy with one another. Ironically, as confused as Thornton initially is regarding the incident at the train station, he – a man – employs more sympathy with Margaret than Mrs. Thornton, who is not only a woman but has been commissioned to care for Margaret as a mother would. Gaskell no doubt intended this to cause her readers to reflect on how much compassion they would offer a real-life Margaret if circumstantial evidence provided a salacious story.

North and South closes with a twist on the conventional resolution of a romance plot involving two contentious and headstrong characters, types familiar from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Pamela*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. At the end of the narrative, Margaret becomes completely self-sufficient, her name is cleared, and only then can she confess her love for Thornton. She inherits a substantial sum of money from Mr. Bell, an old family friend. After much contemplation and prayer (as well as the financial windfall), she realizes that she is finally in charge of her own life and that she is also accountable for it. Gaskell writes:

But she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult question for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working. (*Ne&S* 416)

With her new wealth, she saves Thornton's mill from financial demise and becomes his landlord. Almost simultaneously, Higgins tells Thornton of Frederick's existence, and Thornton is able to clear Margaret (in his own mind) of any suspicion of wrongdoing.

Margaret stands virtually alone in Victorian literature as a woman who authoritatively leads and protects others. She follows her conscience and is not, ultimately, punished for it. She is rewarded with wealth, love, and the respect of those around her. She is a paradigm for Gaskell's readers of character and credibility. Thornton's tribute indeed may most aptly capture her: "I believe Miss Hale is a guardian to herself" (*Ne&S* 312).

Temporal Play

Meaning is found in viewing events sequentially – in life and in fiction.²⁴ A reader's sense of imagined time is rooted in plot, and an author determines how much of the story to reveal at any given moment in a plot. It is helpful here to remember that *story* and *plot* are not one and the same. Todorov succinctly explains the distinction:

[T]he story is what has happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us. The first notion corresponds to the reality evoked, to events similar to those which take place in our lives; the second, to the book itself, to the narrative, to the literary devices the author employs. In the story, there is no inversion in time, actions follow their natural order; in the plot, the author can present results before their causes, the end before the beginning. (45)

Gaskell sometimes plays with her delivery of plot in order to keep the reader from being certain of complete knowledge of the story at a given moment in the narrative. By discovering events and information at delayed points in the plot, the reader realizes that she did not, in fact, have complete knowledge of the story and that she, therefore, may never

²⁴ See Brooks 7.

have complete knowledge of either the characters or events. This also makes the act of narration much more deliberate, for it reminds the reader that she is reading fiction that is determined and delivered by someone else who has greater knowledge of the story.

In *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell shifts back and forth between characters as she includes their ongoing (and simultaneously occurring) storylines. This is less of a disruption to the reader than a conventional flashback in terms of her imagined sense of time because entire chapters typically contain the same characters and storylines and then cleanly shift to other characters at the beginning of other chapters. Gaskell often initiates such shifts at the beginning of chapters with a signal to the reader. For example, at the beginning of one such shift in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell writes, "I must now go back to an hour or two before [the events with the characters in the last chapter]" (*MB* 201). Almost pulling the reader out of the narrative, she assumes a casual persona and uses it to guide her readers through her plots to better understandings of her stories. Employing this type of "meanwhile" technique, she also clearly reconnects her reader with the previous plot when the alternating plot rejoins it.

Another way that Gaskell plays with sequence is through digressions in which she provides context for events that are about to unfold. Found in *Mary Barton* and *Wives and Daughters*, these digressions are in fact a type of flashback, and she announces them. For example, in *Mary Barton* when Esther returns for the first time to the Bartons' home, Gaskell begins a chapter by saying, "I must go back a little to explain the motives which caused Esther to seek an interview with her niece" (*MB* 232). After providing the necessary context by going back in time to explain how Esther came across the gun wadding, Gaskell returns her reader to the present narrative moment by saying, "You know now how she [Esther]

came to stand by the threshold of Mary's door" (*MB* 237). Similarly, in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell inserts a flashback when the information is relevant to the plot. Starting in the middle of one chapter and continuing through the entirety of the next, the flashback provides helpful background that better develops the characters, thus giving the reader additional insight into the larger story. The chapter following the flashback clearly signals to the reader that the plot has returned to the present narrative moment: "All this had taken place before . . ." (*W&D* 265).²⁵

In *Mary Barton*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell incorporates more abrupt flashbacks that serve to dislocate the reader from the present narrative moment, forcing the reader to piece together the plot (or the *evidence* of the story) to make better sense of the whole. Near the end of *Mary Barton*, a flashback is contained *in* a flash-forward, and a second (more temporally far-reaching) flash-forward precedes and follows the initial flash-forward so that the initial flash-forward does not directly reconnect with the present narrative moment but, rather, gives way to yet another temporal shift.²⁶ When Jem's mother, Mrs. Wilson, makes peace with Mary, it seems a moment of almost pious graciousness on the part of Mrs. Wilson, given the incriminating events that had led up to her son Jem's indictment. Though Mary was not responsible for Jem's indictment, Mrs. Wilson lashed out at her for the role that she had played in his life. (Mrs. Wilson saw her as flirtatious and inconstant.) At this moment of reconciliation between Mrs. Wilson and Mary, the plot briefly skips forward several years. In this flash-forward, the narrator explains that Mary had, in fact, told Mrs. Wilson that her father had killed Carson, thus explaining to Mrs.

²⁵ See *Wives and Daughters* 251-65.

²⁶ The temporal sequence is as follows: present narrative moment – initial flashforward – flashback – second flashforward – initial flashforward – second flashforward – present narrative moment.

Wilson Mary's hardships. In other words, several years after the moment of reconciliation between Mrs. Wilson and Mary, Jem discovers that Mary had confided her father's crime to Mrs. Wilson. In the flash-forward, it explains this by flashing back to just before the start of the flash-forward and revealing to the reader that, during the reconciliation, Mary had shared the information about her father because she had thought that Mrs. Wilson already knew. The flashback then gives way to a second flash-forward that actually goes beyond the initial flash-forward, telling the reader that Mrs. Wilson treats Mary well to the end of her own days. This second flash-forward then gives way to the initial flash-forward that began this sequence, telling the reader of Jem's surprise upon learning that Mary had told his mother about her father. This initial flash-forward very briefly gives way one more time to the second flash-forward, telling the reader of the loving way that Jem treats his mother from that revelatory moment forward.²⁷ This temporal play offers the reader an explanation for Mrs. Wilson's change of heart as well as information regarding how the characters of *Mary Barton* treat one another after the conclusion of the plot. At the end of this entire sequence, the narrator makes clear to the reader that the plot is returning to the present narrative moment: "But I am speaking of the events which have occurred only lately, while I have yet many things to tell you that happened six or seven years ago" (*MB* 379).

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell incorporates flashbacks that are less complex. The first flashback serves an important function as it fills a gap that is left when a major event (the execution of the heroine's father) in the story is omitted from the plot. Just before the flashback, what the reader suspects has happened (the execution) is indirectly confirmed. The narrator then flashes back to a moment in the story that occurred just before the

²⁷ For the entire sequence, see *Mary Barton* 378-79.

execution. This flashback provides insight into the state of mind of the heroine's father as he awaited his execution, and it offers information on one of the novel's main characters. It smoothly reconnects to the present narrative moment, having given the reader at least some satisfaction with the acquisition of additional knowledge since such crucial information (that of the execution and its immediate events) is omitted – a narrative decision in which the reader would no doubt find frustration.²⁸ The second flashback occurs indirectly in dialogue between the two main characters, Sylvia (the heroine) and Philip Hepburn (who becomes her husband), and – like the first flashback – serves to provide at least some satisfaction to a reading audience that was not allowed access to the pivotal moments in the story surrounding the execution. The last time that Sylvia visits her father before he is executed is omitted from the plot. However, in this conversation between Sylvia and Hepburn (which occurs in the present narrative moment), Sylvia briefly – and poignantly – comments on this last visit: ““That last time – feyther’s eyes were starting, wild-like, and as if he couldn’t meet ours, or bear the sight on our weeping”” (*SL* 299). Passing though this comment is, it tightly summarizes what was an important moment in the story, and its delayed incorporation in the plot gives the reader evidence that can be pieced together to form a more complete knowledge of the story. Finally, in *Wives and Daughters*, a flashback occurs simply, and, in this case, it provides the reader with information pertaining to the marriage plot. It is located in the last chapter of this unfinished novel. It begins and ends abruptly (i.e., unannounced by the narrator), and its entirety falls mid-chapter.²⁹

Gaskell’s temporal shifts, digressions, flashbacks, and flash-forwards all serve to destabilize the reader, reminding her that she has only limited knowledge of a story. With

²⁸ See *Sylvia’s Lovers* 285-86.

²⁹ See *Wives and Daughters* 641-44.

this incomplete knowledge, the reader should, according to Gaskell, withhold harsh judgments of characters. Like a detective, the reader can piece together the evidence of the larger story as the plot unfolds, but, at no time, should she feel superior in her verdict.

The Need to Read Gaskell's Denouements within a Providential Time Frame

The traditional conclusions of Gaskell's novels are not particularly memorable. They often give the reader the type of conventional ending she seeks. A careful reader of Gaskell must look at the moments of climax when the heroines speak or act. For Mary, Ruth, and Margaret, each climactic speech act is an act of protection, and two of the three heroines do so in the public sphere. Each heroine is put in a position in which she can have such a moment in the plot, and then some form of collapse follows (fever for Mary, death for Ruth, and shame for Margaret). For Brooks, as plot unfolds, every event has meaning because it exists in anticipation of the ending. He explains:

The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments – in literature and, by extension, in life – as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot. (94)

Gaskell's endings are written in light of an ultimate masterplot, so all plotted events (including the conventional endings) are endowed with meaning with the ultimate end (Judgment Day) in mind. Therefore, we must read "present moments" in Gaskell with an eye on her project of treating one another with compassion – of viewing women as equally

credible tellers of truth as their male counterparts since all are equal in the eyes of God. For this reason, reading these heroines' climactic speech acts as, in fact, the high points of each of these novels is, arguably, the type of sympathetic reading that Gaskell endorses. In *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, she gives her reading jury the endings that they desire. This is not the case in *Ruth*. However, it is the "structuring power" of the ultimate ending that gives each of these novels a transformative message.

In *Mary Barton*, the heroine increases her ability to speak and act as she becomes more involved in the public investigation of a murder. She covers up the truth (by destroying the forensic evidence that incriminates her father) in favor of bringing about a greater good for her loved ones – acquitting Jem and keeping her father alive so that he can repent. In her climactic speech act, Mary publicly professes her love for Jem in the witness stand and suffers the consequences as she spirals into madness and, thus, verbal incoherence. Mary heals and marries the man she loves, thus providing a tidier and seemingly more satisfactory resolution to the plot than convicting and hanging John Barton would have done. Though the narrator gives Mary no real cause to exercise her agency at the novel's conclusion, the reader gets the sense that her agency will largely be replaced by her more silent role as Jem's wife. In *Ruth*, the heroine gains agency through redemptive living as the plot builds toward her climactic speech act on the beach when she dismisses Bellingham from her life. Though this is a private interaction, it happens in a public space. Ruth loses all agency when she dies. Significantly, though, this loss of agency exists only in *Ruth's* realist plot, for Ruth gains agency in the providential plot upon her death. Gaskell sends her to God for vindication. It is the providential plot (over the realist plot) that Gaskell privileges to her readers. Ruth's martyrdom is not the conclusion that the readers

desired, but – to Gaskell – it is the one they needed. In *North and South*, the narrative builds with descriptions of Margaret's credible character and cases of her logical reasoning in discussions with Thornton. Her climactic moment is when she physically and verbally protects Thornton in the riot. She exercises agency in public, which shocks those around her. The rest of the narrative is her working out her own moral responsibility in protecting others. At the conclusion, she gets material agency when she receives Bell's inheritance. However, her voice is silenced, not in any sort of remarkable way, as there is no commentary from the narrator regarding it, nor does her silence ultimately hamper the working out of the plot. Her voice simply disappears from the narrative, resulting in uneven development given the boldness of testimony that she possesses. In order to keep her readership engaged, Gaskell pulls back to allow for a more traditional conclusion. Margaret and Thornton maintain their repartee even in the novel's closing statements; however, the emphasis is on the happy ending of the marriage plot. The readers get what they came for and, as a result, might be more open to accepting the new type of heroine that Gaskell offers in Margaret – a heroine who not only looks like a truth-teller but who has sophisticated interiority and boldness in both actions and testimony.

Chapter 3

Credible Characterization

Character development is fundamental to Gaskell's successful presentation of women as authentic truth-tellers. If the reader does not find a character appealing and honest, the reader is not likely to believe the character when she says something that may violate feminine decorum. Therefore, Gaskell needed to convince her readers that her heroines were credible truth-tellers – a challenging task at a time in which women were seen as changeable, deceptive, and unsuited to truth-telling. Only a virtuous character is a credible one. Gaskell harkened back to an early modern understanding of character – based in law and religion – in that she looked to the appearance, words, and actions of a character to establish her credibility. Whether this was Gaskell's own formula in understanding character is difficult to determine; however, I argue that this was what she thought necessary in order to persuade her audience of the reliability of her heroines. Along with developing heroines through description of physical traits, dialogue, and virtuous actions, however, Gaskell develops heroines' interiority, responding to the growing legal interest in motive as a feature of credibility. Together, these modes of character development steadily build a case for each of her heroines as capable bearers of truth. Description, actions, interiority, and dialogue prepare the reader to take as credible the speech of the heroine in her climactic utterance of a powerful truth. Even when the utterance *precedes* description and interiority, these modes of character development retroactively make the speech credible. In these types of cases, the moment of the utterance itself is transformative for the heroine *and* for the way that the reader views her.

This chapter focuses on three of Gaskell's heroines, one of whom begins her story at the opposite end of the spectrum of credibility from the other two. *North and South's* Margaret Hale is a heroine who is Gaskell's most credible female witness to her own experience and that of others. From Margaret's telling physical features to her thoughts and speech, she is a credible female character with a voice. She exercises agency in running her family's household, and she verbally as well as physically intercedes for other characters who are in danger – either from themselves or others. From the beginning, Gaskell builds a case for Margaret through favorable descriptions and interiority that authenticates her as virtuous and reliable. Thus, when her climactic utterance at the riot occurs, the reader is ready to accept her surprisingly public actions and speech as right ways of behaving. Afterwards, the rest of Margaret's speech is in private. However, her interiority explodes with paragraph upon paragraph of considerations of moral responsibility. The depth of these considerations further authorizes Margaret's bold public act as one of appropriateness and honor.

Alternatively, *Sylvia's Lovers* presents Gaskell's most initially unreliable but ultimately transformed heroine. At the beginning, Sylvia Robson is described as inconstant and flighty and is given little interiority. However, she is transformed during the course of the narrative – first overly confident, then silenced when she is abandoned and deceived by the men in her life, and finally credibly able to defend herself and her husband with her own voice. It is her testimony itself that leads her to forgive her husband – an act of compassion that escapes her until the final moments of the novel. For Sylvia, her climactic utterance of speaking out to Philip Hepburn and Charley Kinraid transforms her. After this utterance, Gaskell builds a case of credibility for her through favorable descriptions and increased interiority.

Lastly, *Wives and Daughters*' Molly Gibson inherits Margaret Hale's consistent credibility. She is wise and discerning throughout the narrative and is given great depth of interiority. Gaskell places Molly in circumstances in which she must filter through moral complexities, discern what is right, and advocate for her fellow characters. Molly often wrestles with how best to hold those around her to a high standard of truth while maintaining a peaceful dynamic in her home. Sometimes this results in self-determined silence on Molly's part, and other times it results in her testifying on behalf of those who are being misrepresented. In either scenario, Molly's decisions come from her fundamental belief that she has reasoned well and judged aptly. This certainty marks her as a credible truth-teller for Gaskell's readers. She is even described as truth itself by other characters. Molly's physical appearance, her interiority, and her utterances work together to produce a heroine who speaks and acts credibly in everyday life, as opposed to the larger-than-life circumstances that surround Margaret and Sylvia. Regardless of the order of the modes of characterization in Gaskell's novels, each mode significantly contributes to the reader's ability to assign credibility – and, therefore, the authority to speak truth – to the heroines.

I am interpreting literary character via legal and religious understandings of character. The concept of ascertaining the truth of a person's character has roots in the medieval period and continues through the early modern period. This concept of character is evident in the rationale for jury selection prior to the nineteenth century. Whereas modern jurors' credibility is ensured by their lack of personal knowledge of a case and the accused, this was not the case with jurors in earlier periods. Medieval jurors were deemed credible judges of a case if they were familiar with the alleged crime and the character of the accused before the

trial started.¹ They were even encouraged to investigate the truth on their own. Their knowledge of the accused helped them determine if the person had been acting out of character. Through the early modern period, jury trials continued to rely on jurors' knowledge of the character of the accused rather than circumstantial (i.e., narrative) evidence.

Jury trial practice also relied on a fundamentally religious view of character, with the understanding that a person's actions stemmed from the state of her soul. The soul was thought to be reflected in outside characteristics. Victorian trial practice abandoned this understanding of jury trials, in large measure because increased population made it unlikely that jurors could be found who had intimate knowledge of the accused. Hence, new rules of evidence to guide jurors' judgments came into being. However, character was still a significant element in determining the credibility of the accused. Though the law had moved away from such reliance on religious understandings of character, they were still part of culture. Gaskell plays with this in the formal trial in *Mary Barton*. When Jem gives his plea of not guilty, two spectators in the gallery discuss the extent to which he *looks* guilty:

“Criminals always interest me. I try to trace in the features common to humanity some expression of the crimes by which they have distinguished themselves from their kind. I have seen a good number of murderers in my day, but I have seldom seen one with such marks of Cain on his countenance as the man [Jem] at the bar.”

¹ Baker notes, “The jurors’ oath to say the truth is not greatly different from that of a witness, or even from that of a compurgator who swears to his belief in the truth of an oath. Certainly, like witnesses and compurgators, their chief qualification was that they were supposed to know somewhat of the truth before they came to court; hence the rules requiring them to be drawn from the vicinity where the facts were alleged (the ‘venue’)” (75).

“Well, I am no physiognomist, but I don’t think his face strikes me as bad. It certainly is gloomy and depressed, and not unnaturally so, considering his situation.”

“Only look at his low, resolute brow, his downcast eye, his white compressed lips. He never looks up, – just watch him.”

“His forehead is not so low if he had that mass of black hair removed, and is very square, which some people say is a good sign. If others are to be influenced by such trifles as you are, it would have been much better if the prison barber had cut his hair a little previous to the trial; and as for downcast eye, and compressed lip, it is all part and parcel of his inward agitation just now; nothing to do with character, my good fellow.” (*MB* 320)

While one spectator is convinced that Jem is a person of bad character because of his appearance, the other challenges these old notions, hoping that such judgments of character are not shared by others. Here Gaskell demonstrates how devastatingly wrong such outdated assumptions are, yet she acknowledges the extent to which character still resonated with her readers by describing most of her heroines as beautiful and innocent in order to bolster their credibility. Thus, she develops her truth-telling heroines by reverting to this earlier, religiously-based view of human nature but also expanding it beyond its own frequently sexist limitations.

For Gaskell, the Bible would have provided clear precedents of women through whom God revealed truth. The Old and New Testaments, respectively, have examples not only of women who are credible bearers of truth but also of women who are prophetesses, speaking Truth directly from God. For example, in the Old Testament, Rahab, Deborah,

Jephthah's daughter, Samson's mother, and Huldah are just a few examples of women who are credible truth-tellers. Rahab, Jephthah's daughter, and Samson's mother proclaim truth when others around them do not. In the case of Rahab, she is a fallen woman who serves as the defender of her family and of Israel (which becomes her adopted people). She proclaims that the god of Israel is in fact *the* God, and she has knowledge that God would hand over Jericho to the Israelites.² Jephthah's daughter commands her father to follow a vow that she knows will result in her death. However, she keeps him true to his word.³ Samson's mother has a clear understanding that her unborn son will help deliver Israel from the Philistines, whereas Samson's father fears that God might kill them. She explains the prophecy to her husband.⁴ Deborah and Huldah speak directly for God as prophetesses. Deborah leads Israel, settling disputes and supporting its commander, Barak, when he will not go into battle without her. She accompanies him to battle and commands him to attack.⁵ At the time of the discovery of the Book of the Covenant during King Josiah's reign, Huldah tells Israel of its coming demise.⁶ In the New Testament, the Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed, Anna, the women on Easter Sunday, and Priscilla are again just a few examples of women who are credible truth-tellers. In the case of the Canaanite woman, she advocates for her possessed daughter, asking Christ to heal her amidst the disciples' dismissal and Christ's testing.⁷ Divine Truth is revealed to the women who visit Christ's tomb on Easter Sunday, and – in response – they testify to this Truth to the disciples, even though the

² See Joshua 2:1-21.

³ See Judges 11:29-40.

⁴ See Judges 13:2-25.

⁵ See Judges 4:4-14.

⁶ See 2 Chronicles 34:14-28 and 2 Kings 22.

⁷ See Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.

disciples are not ready to believe.⁸ A church leader, Priscilla explains God's Word to Apollos.⁹ Finally, Anna, a prophetess, proclaims Truth to all she meets after she meets Christ in His childhood.¹⁰ Much like the testimonies of the women on Easter Sunday and of Priscilla, Anna's speech is not only truthful but it serves as the ultimate act of protection – it testifies to salvation. In building on these Biblical precedents of credible women truth-tellers, Gaskell offers an alternative to a tradition that ties women to deceit and unreliability. In order to do this effectively, she must build a case for the credibility of each of her heroines.¹¹

Establishing credibility is paramount in getting readers to the point of accepting the words and actions of a character. Otherwise, the behavior of the character will be dismissed as inconsequential – as merely a device that forwards the plot – or, worse, rejected as unsound *instead of* behavior that actually serves as a model for other characters in the text as well as the actual readers of the text. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell slips in her approach to character in a moment of *double-voiced discourse*, to use M. M. Bakhtin's helpful terminology.¹² John and Jeremiah Foster, who are the standard-bearers of morality and truth in Sylvia's town of Monkshaven, take character as a substitute for a down payment when Hepburn (Sylvia's future husband) and his business partner wish to purchase the Fosters' store.

⁸ See Luke 24:1-12.

⁹ See Acts 18:2-3, 18-26 and Romans 16:3.

¹⁰ See Luke 2:36-38.

¹¹ I am indebted to the insight of the following colleagues regarding truth-telling women in Scripture: Mark Braun, Charles Cortright, Paul Lehninger, Jerralyn Moudry, Greg Schulz, and Glen Thompson. Special thanks are extended to the invaluable advice of Braun and Cortright.

¹² M. M. Bakhtin writes, "Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel . . . is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voice discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions" (324). See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

(Though Hepburn's character is exposed as corrupt later in the narrative, at this early point in the story Hepburn is a model citizen and inspires confidence and trust from the Foster brothers.) Hepburn and his partner have insufficient funds for a down payment and no collateral. However, Jeremiah Foster places value on their integrity: "Then, I suppose, I mun do as thee dost, John, and take the security of *character*. And it's a great security too . . . t' best o' all, and one that I couldn't ha' done without" (*SL* 156, emphasis added). Though Hepburn sacrifices integrity as the narrative continues, the Fosters' emphasis on character is indicative of its value in Gaskell's stories. Through characterization, Gaskell builds the case for credibility for each of her heroines as she authorizes them during a time when women were not seen as credible or reliable bearers of truth.

In nineteenth-century England, women had limited opportunities open to them, and this limited range of experience contributed to the belief that they lacked solid judgment and were, therefore, unsuited to truth-telling. Their opinions often were viewed as biased because they did not have access to the type of education or familiarity with the world that men did. Perceived as being susceptible to the passions, women were also seen as having a changeable character. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson's father perhaps best represents the pervasive attitude of the time. He remarks, "I don't see why women are to have a monopoly of changeableness" (*W&D* 397). This attitude extended to questioning woman's very ability to reason and discern. In *Woman, in Her Social and Domestic Character*, Mrs. John Sandford writes, "Want of judgment, is, indeed, one of the most common defects in female character, and it is in discernment, rather than in capacity, that the inferiority of woman consists" (92). This marginalizing of woman's capacity to reason was coupled with the fact

that, in the eyes of the law, woman was non-existent.¹³ Gaskell's creation of credible female characters thus stands in strong contrast to the cultural and legal climate of her time. For example, *North and South's* Margaret is authoritative in her public act of speech and protection, and *Wives and Daughters's* Molly is a model of discernment and truth. Jenny Uglow notes that "Gaskell writes of women who find that in the end they must rely on their own strength, not the illusory strength of father or husband. They have to learn to step out from the shadow and speak and act for themselves . . ." (25). Strength, speech, and action are antithetical to the characteristics that a proper Victorian female was to possess. However, Gaskell not only empowers her female characters with these elements but also presents these female characters as appropriate models of credible behavior.

Gaskell's use of description, actions, interiority, and speech (dialogue and individual utterances) guides her readers toward ways of thinking that counter the nineteenth century's dominant assumptions about gender. Description includes elements such as physical attributes, background, class, and age, all of which Gaskell uses to show her heroines' judgment, pattern of growth, and claims on readers' sympathy and assent. Collectively, these descriptors work toward credentialing the heroines for readers. Like description, actions are publicly observable phenomena that indicate a person's credibility, and Gaskell uses the actions of her heroines to endorse them as truth-tellers. Interiority, or the thoughts and motives of a character, is developed through a variety of narrative techniques, including indirect discourse, direct discourse, and free indirect discourse. In indirect discourse, a third-person omniscient narrator paraphrases a character's thoughts while, in direct discourse, a third-person omniscient narrator directly relates a character's thoughts via quotation. In free

¹³ For a useful overview of the legal position of women, see Basch Ch. 2.

indirect discourse, a third-person omniscient narrator moves in and out of a character's thoughts and speech patterns, simultaneously showing the interiority of the character *and* lending (or not lending) her authority to the character's thought processes. Using this strategy, Gaskell authorizes the intentions and rationales of her heroines and, thus, eases her readers into accepting not only the narrator's endorsement of them but also believing the heroines themselves. Like many narrators of nineteenth-century fiction, Gaskell's narrators speak with the voice of the bourgeoisie. This is key not only to Gaskell's use of free indirect discourse to credential bourgeois heroines, like Margaret Hale and Molly Gibson, but even more strikingly, a lower-class heroine, like Sylvia Robson.

In the cases of Ruth Hilton in *Ruth* (when the narrator allows her interiority, or speech for that matter), Margaret Hale in *North and South*, and Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, the diction of the narrator does not vary from that of the heroines. Margaret and Molly are middle-class female characters whose speech patterns fall in line with Gaskell's narrators. Ruth is not middle-class, but her diction reflects a character who is; therefore, her speech also falls in line with the narrator. Gaskell was highly conscious of the stigma that Ruth would have as a fallen woman. By giving Ruth middle-class speech, Gaskell gave her instant credibility with readers and also allowed them to more easily relate to and – most importantly – sympathize with her. Alternatively, in the cases of Mary Barton in *Mary Barton* and Sylvia Robson in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the diction of the narrator does vary from that of the heroines. Mary and Sylvia are both lower-class female characters whose speech patterns vary greatly from Gaskell's narrators. When the narrators share the interiority of these heroines via direct discourse, the discrepancy is significant. The thoughts of these heroines – when directly quoted – expose the gap in class and education between these female characters and

not only their respective narrators but also their middle-class readers. Sylvia has the added differences (beyond class and education) of dialect (Yorkshire) and time (1790s). When the narrators share the interiority of these heroines via indirect discourse and free indirect discourse, the narrators' middle-class diction lends both credibility and familiarity to heroines who, otherwise, might be automatically discredited by a bourgeois reading audience. The narrators lapse into the heroine's own tone or pattern of reasoning but retain their own middle-class diction, thus authenticating the heroine, her point of view, and her values. This gets the reader into the heroine's mindset – much as it does even if the diction of the character and the narrator is the same – and moves the reader toward sympathy and endorsement of the heroine. Once Gaskell has made her case for the credibility of a heroine, she can offer the heroine's own voice, unchanged, in thoughts *and* utterances. In the case of all Gaskell's heroines, indirect discourse and free indirect discourse allow Gaskell to present the motives and desires of her heroines with a type of seeming objectivity that gets the reader to sympathize with and endorse them because the narrator's rationale is mingled with the thoughts of the heroines as the narrator moves from one mode of interiority to another.

Lastly, Gaskell uses speech (dialogue and individual utterances) as a way of authorizing her heroines in ways that were atypical for nineteenth-century females. Whether debating privately or testifying publicly, these heroines step outside the gendered boundaries that were drawn for them by society and assert their right to speak for themselves and others.¹⁴ Sometimes the heroines possess authority to speak (and defend) from the

¹⁴ Bakhtin's discussion of a "living utterance" bears upon my discussion: "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object

narrative's beginning, as is the case with Margaret in *North and South*. Other times, heroines grow into such authority as the narrative unfolds, as is the case with Sylvia in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Margaret speaks with middle-class diction that immediately commands authority, whereas Sylvia speaks with lower-class diction that does not immediately command authority. This is why Gaskell has Margaret speak from the beginning while Sylvia must wait until she has built credibility with readers before delivering her major utterance. By the time Sylvia delivers her climactic utterance (the confrontation with Hepburn and Kinraid), Gaskell has prepared the audience to accept Sylvia as a credible bearer of truth. Though Sylvia is not a righteous heroine, *per se*, she has been dealt with dishonestly, and she speaks out with righteous indignation to Hepburn and Kinraid as well as to the women around her. Though Sylvia is in private during her culminating speech act, she speaks truth on behalf of her entire sex. She strongly proclaims that she is a woman who has been wronged, a proclamation that escaped Ruth earlier in Gaskell's career. Sylvia's authoritative statement is an answer to Ruth's death. Gaskell has Sylvia speak out in ways that she would have been hesitant to have Ruth do at the early stage of her career that *Ruth* was published. Sylvia's testimony demonstrates a progression in Gaskell's own ability to speak truth.

The Conventional Heroine: Establishing Margaret Hale's Authority in *North and South*

In *North and South*, Margaret Hale is a heroine who defies social dictates and defends herself and others. An advocate and protector, she embraces these roles and defines them as

of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an *active participant in social dialogue*. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines” (276-77, emphasis added).

woman's work. From the beginning of the narrative, Margaret speaks and acts for those who are too weak to act responsibly or credibly on their own. Faced with an ill-defined doctrinal crisis, her father leaves his post as a minister in the Church of England and resolves to move from their beloved small town of Helstone to the industrial Milton. He leaves Margaret not only to break the news to her mother but also to orchestrate the family's move, the first of many instances of Margaret stepping in to help others. Additionally, Mr. Hale's dissent prepares the reader for the disobedience to authority that continues in the respective plots of Margaret's brother, Frederick, and of Margaret herself. Once in Milton, Margaret becomes friends with some in the working-class who eventually strike against millowner John Thornton, Margaret's suitor. During a riot of striking workers at Thornton's mill, Margaret uses her body and her voice to defend Thornton from the mob. He wrongly construes her behavior as romantic, which makes Margaret indignant. While Margaret sorts through her reasons for defending Thornton, she must continue her role as protector, this time for her brother. Wrongly accused of treason, Frederick has been living in exile but has returned to see their dying mother. Margaret must then get him safely out of England. In order to do so, she falsely testifies to ensure his escape. For virtually the rest of the narrative, Margaret is weighed down by her false testimony, even though she feels justified and reasons that she answers to a higher authority. She also is distressed that Thornton thinks she is a liar and is having a scandalous affair. The reader knows that no such affair exists, but Thornton is left with this impression because of her appearance with a mysterious man (her brother) at a train station. Despite this false impression, Thornton protects Margaret by covering evidence that might have indicted her of a murder. After much reflection, Margaret comes to terms with her advocacy for Frederick, her feelings for

Thornton, and her role as a servant protector, more broadly. She inherits a fortune, becoming a woman of independent means, and Thornton discovers that she was involved in neither an affair nor a murder. The marriage plot concludes the narrative, with Margaret and Thornton embracing. Throughout the narrative, Margaret's authority in her words and actions lends her credibility – whether she is managing her family's affairs, helping the less fortunate in Milton, protecting Thornton from an angry mob, or saving her brother from the authorities.

The Unconventional Heroine: How Gaskell Fashions Sylvia Robson's Credibility

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell presents her readers with the heroine who has the most room for growth of any of Gaskell's heroines. Sylvia Robson begins the narrative as a self-absorbed and inconstant woman and, through hardship, becomes a credible advocate for herself and others. Sylvia and her parents live in the small Yorkshire whaling town of Monkshaven. Admired by many for her beauty, Sylvia falls in love with and becomes engaged to sailor Charley Kinraid. During Sylvia and Kinraid's courtship, Sylvia's cousin, Philip Hepburn, grows jealous because he has loved her for years while she has dismissed him. As Kinraid heads off to sea, the press-gang captures him while Hepburn watches from afar. Kinraid is able to speak to Hepburn before his captors take him away, and he asks Hepburn to tell Sylvia what has happened and that he will come back to marry her. Though Hepburn wrestles with his conscience, he decides to conceal Kinraid's captivity from Sylvia. Kinraid's hat is later found on the beach, so the Robsons conclude that Kinraid has drowned. Sylvia goes into mourning for Kinraid, and Hepburn begins more actively courting her. Meanwhile, Sylvia's father, Daniel Robson, leads a mob in Monkshaven to

rescue men from the press-gang. Shortly afterwards, he is convicted of treason and executed. Sylvia and her mother cannot sustain their family's farm in the wake of Robson's death, so Hepburn takes them in. This helps Sylvia to see Hepburn in a different light, though she still does not love him. However, she feels beholden to him and, thus, agrees to marry him. They have a daughter, Bella, who partly revives Sylvia's spirits. However, Sylvia is a changed woman – silent and obedient to Hepburn – for she is mourning her father and Kinraid. The marriage is an unhappy one, as her heart still belongs to the sailor. Eventually, Kinraid returns to Monkshaven, to Sylvia's violent shock. It immediately becomes clear to Sylvia and Kinraid that Hepburn has wronged them both. Sylvia's voice at last returns, and it is strong and refined as she speaks on behalf of not only herself but all women. She refuses both men, for she sees no moral way to pick either Kinraid (to whom she was engaged) or Hepburn (to whom she is married, but their union hardly seems valid to her). A shamed Hepburn leaves Monkshaven and joins the military. He saves Kinraid's life on the battlefield (in a rather contrived set-up), suffers disfigurement, and returns to Monkshaven as a beggar. He is reunited with Sylvia after saving their daughter from drowning. By this time, Sylvia has forgiven Hepburn and is seeking forgiveness for herself. Fatally injured from the rescue, Hepburn dies in Sylvia's arms. Sylvia lives out the rest of her life with her daughter and, as the narrator informs the reader, is forgotten by history.

Gaskell's Apotheosis: Why Molly Gibson Is Her Ideal Heroine

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson is a heroine who is not only credible but whom Gaskell seems to go out of her way to laud as wise and discerning. Surrounded by family members who are rash and often unreasonable, Molly stands almost alone in her discretion.

Her father, a widower, stumbles through a quick courtship, leaving Molly to pick up the pieces of what remains of her family. Molly also must tend to an inconstant step-sister, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, who casts aside Molly's love interest, Roger Hamley, as if he is just another silly conquest. In tending to Cynthia, Molly makes herself vulnerable to public speculation when she meets one of Cynthia's connections (Mr. Preston) in order to advocate on Cynthia's behalf. During this meeting, Molly persuades Preston to return Cynthia's incriminating letters, the physical evidence of Cynthia's inconstancy and harshness toward her own family. Because of the way the exchange appears to a passer-by, Molly is implicated in an illicit affair. This circumstantial evidence indicts Molly in the eyes of the town, and it is not until an aristocratic woman (Lady Harriet) takes it upon herself to advocate for her that Molly's reputation starts to recover. It is not only this aristocrat's advocacy that clears Molly's name, however. Molly must undergo a physical sickness that cleanses her in the eyes of the town. Only then is she fully acquitted of their suspicion of wrongdoing. Throughout this ordeal, the reader is given the opportunity to condemn those characters who misjudge Molly. Gaskell underscores Molly's credibility in an effort to remind readers that they should consider an individual's whole character before rushing quickly to judgment. *Wives and Daughters* is unfinished because Gaskell passed away with one remaining chapter to complete. As the last published chapter concludes, Hamley has realized his love for Molly but not yet declared it to her. The reader can safely assume that Molly, who has treasured Hamley's friendship throughout the narrative, will return his love. Based on Gaskell's notes of her unfinished story, Molly indeed marries Hamley.¹⁵

¹⁵ See *Wives and Daughters* 648-50 (*Cornhill* editor's note).

Laying the Groundwork for Reader Sympathy: Character Description

Consistent with traditional religious and legal understandings of character, physical descriptions of heroines are reliable guides to the state of their souls and minds, and, therefore, their credibility. In *North and South*, description of Margaret's features reveals a woman who has a voice: "Her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no,' and 'an't please you, sir'" (*N&S* 17). Margaret is a stark contrast to Ruth. Described as a child of nature, Ruth is a woman whose utterances are limited (as is her interiority), and her appearance in no way indicates a woman with a voice. The reader must rely almost exclusively on the narrator's descriptions of her. The narrator describes Ruth as "innocent and snow-pure" (R 44) as well as "obedient and docile" (R 61), words that are fitting for a woman who has been ostracized from society. Margaret, however, has not been rejected and, therefore, has agency from the beginning of the narrative. Gaskell introduces her readers to Margaret as a female character who will not fit the expectations of middle-class femininity. The narrator describes Margaret as "fearless," "dignified," and with the "habits of society" about her (*N&S* 61). The narrator goes on to say that the way Margaret carries herself is "full of a soft feminine defiance" (*N&S* 62). Upon her first meeting with Thornton, he finds her to be "a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing" (*N&S* 61). Though dressed plainly, she wears an Indian shawl "as an empress wears her drapery" (*N&S* 62).

Margaret exudes confidence in demure and assertive ways, depending on the situation. When Mrs. Thornton visits Margaret to chastise her for what she thinks is inappropriate behavior (Margaret's walking at night at a train station with a mysterious man, who the reader knows is Margaret's brother), she is disarmed by Margaret's gentle demeanor.

Gaskell writes, “She [Margaret] was so gentle and ladylike in her mode of reception that her visitor was somewhat daunted; and it became impossible to utter the speech . . . Mrs. Thornton was fairly discomfited. Her sharp Damascus blade seemed out of place, and useless among rose-leaves. She was silent, because she was trying to task herself up to her duty” (*N&S* 314). Margaret softens even those who are quick to judge her, and it takes Mrs. Thornton time and determination in the conversation to chastise her for her unwomanly behavior at the train station. Once Margaret realizes that her character is at stake, her eyes contain “fire” and a “battle-spirit,” and she defends herself boldly to Mrs. Thornton (*N&S* 315). The only one of Gaskell’s novelistic heroines who comes near to – or even exceeds – Margaret’s ability to lead others to better and more truthful behavior through her manner is Molly. Lady Harriet calls Molly a “truth-teller” (*W&D* 293) and ““truth itself”” (*W&D* 526). Cynthia tells Molly that her demeanor indicates whether she is bearing true or false testimony: “[Y]our manner shows when you speak truth and when you speak falsehood, without troubling yourself to use words” (*W&D* 221). There is virtually no separation between truth and Molly herself. Molly is relentlessly confident in her true judgment of fellow characters; however, she lacks Margaret’s overall confident manner as well as the extensive interiority that Gaskell gives to the reader on Margaret’s behalf. This window into her thoughts allows the reader to understand how she reconciles each decision and each event.

As Margaret wrestles with and comes to a greater understanding of the person she has come to be, she is physically transformed. Gaskell describes the outward change: “Those hours [of reflection] by the sea-side were not lost, as any one might have seen who had had the perception to read, or the care to understand, the look that Margaret’s face was

gradually acquiring” (*N&S* 415). In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Sylvia also physically changes as her inner-self changes and develops. Her beauty is constant throughout the narrative, but Gaskell initially describes her as “thoughtless” (*SL* 111) and inconstant: “Sylvia was always as penitent as she could be for the time being” (*SL* 111). She resists learning, which, though not a physical descriptor, gives the reader insight into her character. While Margaret’s beauty is indicative of her rich inner-life, Sylvia’s beauty is not. Gaskell writes Sylvia as a much more flippant character than any of her novelistic heroines, and this is shown in the way that she is described as well as by the fact that her interiority is largely absent until she undergoes hardship. Even then, it is limited when compared with Margaret’s. Despite Sylvia’s enduring physical beauty, her appearance hinges on what happens in the plot. When Kinraid is presumed dead, Sylvia’s appearance reflects her loss. Her demeanor has a “quiet slowness quite unlike her former self” (*SL* 212), and her face is “wan and white” (*SL* 212). Similarly, when she realizes that her father will be executed, she “los[es] all her early youth” (*SL* 272). This premature aging continues in her unhappy marriage with Hepburn. Once when he yells at her regarding her continuing love for Kinraid, Sylvia is unable to respond. She is “speechless,” virtually “motionless,” and “quivering” (*SL* 319). This numbness continues even when she recovers. She is unable to defend her own interests to Hepburn, and she submissively obeys him in all things.

Strengthening the Reader-Character Bond: Character Development through Actions

Like physical description, actions are publicly observable phenomena that are consistent with traditional understandings of character. The character of each of Gaskell’s heroines is developed through her actions, and the actions of these heroines serve as

endorsements of their credibility. In *North and South*, Margaret is a woman of action who leads by example, finds purpose in looking outside herself and serving others, and gains strength as well as agency from these acts of service. Her most significant action is, of course, her defense of Thornton in the riot. Long before the riot, though, the narrator has condoned Margaret as a woman of action in suggesting that she must act because no one else will. Thus, her unwomanly public display is legitimized. Even with this stamp of approval, Margaret spends much of the narrative after the riot contemplating her protection of Thornton from the mob. She realizes that onlookers must have found her actions startling and untoward. Sally Shuttleworth notes that “[p]ublic performance of any kind for a woman was held at this time to be undignified and sexually tainted” (xxix) and that, when she tears off her bonnet and flings herself around Thornton to protect him during the riot, it is “a sure sign in the Victorian novel of female abandonment” (xxviii). Despite Margaret’s abandoning the societal expectations for appropriate female behavior yet internally wrestling with her decision, she maintains her innocence before God as well as her womanly right to act on behalf of others.

With empress-like confidence, Margaret leads by example in her home and in Milton, more generally. She is known to the workers of Milton as a woman of charity and as the Higgins’ friend, and many in Milton come to look to her as an exemplar of appropriate behavior (even amidst the talk of her public display at the riot). Her actions build her credibility as a female character whose words and actions carry weight. When John Boucher, a worker, commits suicide, his body is roughly displayed in the center of his neighborhood. Following her instincts, Margaret covers his face, and “the eyes that saw her do this followed

her” (*N&S* 295). Though this is meant literally here, it symbolically indicates that she serves as a model to those around her.

Not only does Margaret provide an example of appropriate behavior, but she embodies a new type of heroine – one who looks outside herself and finds purpose in meaningful work. She finally has the opportunity to reflect on her life – and her future – near the end of the narrative when she has the house to herself while her father visits Mr. Bell. After reading and contemplating, she realizes that she must look outside herself in order to have purpose. She, therefore, takes a greater interest in one of their servants, tutors the Boucher children, and visits the Higgins family. In other words, once Margaret escapes the vicious cycle of her own thoughts and gets back to the work of helping others, she begins to recover the type of vigor with which she began the narrative and discovers more about herself than when the narrative began. Gaskell writes, “Plans which had lately appeared to her in the guise of tasks, now appeared like pleasures. The morbid scales had fallen from her eyes, and she saw her position and her work more truly” (*N&S* 348). As Hilary M. Schor notes, Margaret’s understanding of vocation is in fact a “new sense of heroineship [that] reflects the novel’s attention to Margaret’s social placement *and* inner transformations” (149). Margaret’s “public usefulness” (149) is a direct response from Gaskell to the “failure of English society to present its women with meaningful work” (149). Gaskell provides Margaret with meaningful work, thus legitimizing her position in the public sphere and endorsing a new kind of heroine.

Finally, Margaret gains strength and agency from acts of service. When caring for others, she considers what is best for them before her own reputation. For example, when Mr. Bell falls fatally ill, Margaret resolves to visit him in Oxford regardless of whether

anyone accompanies her. Those around her fret about the propriety of her trip; however, she dispenses with social dictates and asserts her agency to do what is right. Her agency surprises her and, thus, is almost outside herself. Gaskell writes, “[S]he was surprised herself at the firmness with which she asserted something of her right to independence of action” (*Ne&S* 411). Margaret’s authority is sometimes self-endorsed, as is the case when she confidently commands others to do right (e.g., Thornton in the riot). At other times, it comes from outside herself and carries with it divine endorsement. Both stamps of approval provide readers with good reason to endorse Margaret’s words and actions.

Like Margaret, Sylvia in *Sylvia’s Lovers* gains credibility through using her body to protect a man. In the climactic confrontation between Sylvia, Hepburn, and Kinraid, Kinraid attempts to strike Hepburn. However, Sylvia intercedes on Hepburn’s behalf, standing between Kinraid and him. She proclaims, “‘Charley, thou shan’t strike him . . . He is a damned scoundrel . . . but he is my husband’” (*SL* 342). Sylvia makes her hatred for Hepburn clear, but she does not allow physical harm to come to him, as she commands Kinraid not to strike him. Despite – and even because of – the hardships that Sylvia has endured, she is able to speak simultaneously for herself and advocate for a sympathetic negotiation of this scene of interrogation.

Lastly, *Wives and Daughters’* Molly sometimes earns credibility through her actions and other times through her *lack* of action. Gaskell takes a slightly different tack in this novel by focusing on her heroine’s ability to discern when action is needed and when, by contrast, the interests of others are better served by not interceding. Molly internally wrestles with each scenario that requires such a decision. However, her confidence in her right judgments – between action and inaction as well as between speech and silence – instills credibility in the

eyes of readers that this female character is a reliable truth-teller. Furthermore, Gaskell has each of her heroines defend herself as well as others through courageous *speech* acts.

From Reader to Confidant: Gaskell's Use of Narrating Interiority

Gaskell builds a case for credibility for each of her heroines by the use of omniscient narration. Ruth is not afforded a rich inner-life. Though she spends the majority of the novel living an overtly repentant life, the narrator states that not even Ruth is aware of any inner change: “[I]n Ruth herself there was the greatest external change; for of the change which had gone on in her heart, and mind, and soul, or if there had been any, neither she nor anyone around her was conscious” (R 208). The narrator goes on to describe Ruth’s growing physical beauty, which indicates that a deep internal change has occurred. Whether or not the narrator has access to Ruth’s interiority and chooses not to share it or is herself not privy to Ruth’s inner-thoughts, they are not shared with the reader. Gaskell presents Ruth to her reader in overtly delicate ways because of her status as a fallen woman. She was aware of her reader’s reluctance to grant credibility to such a heroine. Even the fact that a fallen woman was a *heroine* placed Gaskell in difficult territory. Until the moment of her utterance as well as after it, Ruth is largely represented by the narrator so that the reader will begin to look beyond the lack of credibility that society has assigned to her. The narrator represents Ruth in sympathetic terms and explains and re-explains what a virtuous (and, therefore, credible) female character Ruth is, thus endorsing her. In stark contrast to Ruth is Margaret, who is allowed to speak for herself and is afforded a rich inner-life that is shared with the reader. Margaret does not have as much ground to make up, so to speak, because she is not a fallen woman. However, the level of agency that she has throughout the

narrative is still impressive because, even though she does not have to overcome what Ruth does, she is still a female character, subject to the same preconceptions. Through Margaret's inner-thoughts and the narrator's endorsements, Gaskell builds a case for Margaret as a woman of action and a credible truth-teller.

Through indirect discourse, direct discourse, and free indirect discourse, Gaskell gives the reader access to the thoughts of characters and the narrator. Because free indirect discourse allows the thoughts of the character to blend with the narrator's act of narrating, the character's thoughts can be construed as the narrator's own positive representation of the character. For example, in the beginning of *North and South*, as the narrator discusses the day of the Hales' move, various characters are described as wondering how Margaret remains calm, and they come to the conclusion that her years of living in London (with her extended family) have made her departure from the provincial town of Helstone a rather welcome venture. This is intermixed with Margaret's own reflections on her pain regarding the move. In the midst of these competing perspectives on Margaret's emotional state, the narrator abruptly inserts, "[I]f she gave way [to the emotion], who was to act?" (*N&S* 53). Whether this is Margaret's inner-thought or the narrator's observation, it shows the reader that Margaret chooses to act when faced with turmoil. Instead of waiting for her father to regain his footing, she steps forward and acts in the best interests of her family – organizing their lives during the transition from Helstone to Milton. If it is Margaret's own thought, it demonstrates her knowledge, even at the story's beginning, that certain times require decisive and strong action and that, in the absence of others acting responsibly, she will do so on her own in the best interests of all involved. If the question of "who was to act" is the narrator's own observation, it is a clear endorsement of Margaret's filling the void not only

in the instance of her family's move but throughout the narrative whenever a situation calls for action.

Despite – or even *because* of – her unorthodox public display at the riot, Margaret's purity – and credibility – is impressed upon the reader through the rather contrived subplot of Frederick's escape from England, which provides Gaskell with another opportunity to characterize Margaret as pure as well as an authentic truth-teller. Shuttleworth notes, "Since we as readers are aware . . . of the utter sexual purity of her motives this time [Margaret's lie to protect Frederick], the question of the possible sexuality of those open arms at the riot is defused. Margaret's lie, in displacing attention away from the riot, becomes a form of testimony to her purity" (xxxix). In a way, Margaret remains truthful despite her lie to the police, for she is following a higher justice to protect her brother. In Margaret's eyes, Frederick is guilty only of defying misused power and protecting others. Thus, her dealings with the police must sacrifice temporal truth in favor of providential truth. The structure of Frederick's plot also provides a window into Margaret's conscience, and that interiority helps to build a case for Margaret's sense of moral responsibility that develops over the rest of the narrative. Margaret's understanding of moral responsibility is established in her internal monologues in the Frederick plot arc, and this understanding prepares her to open herself to Thornton. Thus, the Frederick plot provides an ethical crisis for Margaret to work through her views on moral responsibility, and, as she does so, the reader is privy to her authentic and credible rationale.

Though her false testimony on Frederick's behalf takes a tremendous toll on Margaret physically, mentally, and emotionally, she resolves to uphold her lie until she knows that her brother is safely off English soil. Once Frederick's safety is assured, Margaret

resolves to expose her lie and face the consequences. The narrator describes Margaret's thoughts:

There was one comfort; her lie had saved him, if only by gaining some additional time. If the inspector came again to-morrow, after she had received the letter she longed for to assure her of her brother's safety, she would brave shame, and stand in her bitter penance – she, the lofty Margaret – acknowledging [her lie] before a crowded justice-room . . . if he came before she heard from Frederick . . . she would tell that lie again . . . (*N&S* 277)

Even before such measures are needed, Margaret plots to defend Frederick as she knows herself to be his surest advocate. Though Margaret's thoughts are relayed by the narrator, it is clear that her self-knowledge about her pride comes from her rather than the narrator. Here Margaret begins to see herself a bit more objectively (as “the lofty Margaret”), and this growth sets the stage for her acceptance of her own fallibility and for the possibility of love for Thornton. Previously, she had been too proud to see how Thornton could possibly have misunderstood her public display at the riot: “I took no trouble to conceal my indifference. . . so my manners must have shown the truth” (*N&S* 196). For all the sympathy she shows to other characters, she has been unable (or perhaps unwilling) to see from Thornton's perspective. This new-found self-knowledge is a major development in Margaret's character. When Margaret learns that Thornton had a hand in ending the inquest, she is mortified that he therefore knows of her false testimony and thinks her wayward. However, she rejects penitence because she is convinced of the moral uprightness of her choice to advocate for Frederick.

Because Frederick had defended others against misused authority, Margaret is convinced of his innocence in the larger scheme of divine justice. Though she knows herself to be vindicated before God, she feels shame for breaking man's laws. Describing Margaret's thoughts, the narrator observes, "She stood as a liar in his [Thornton's] eyes. She was a liar. But she had no thought of penitence before God . . . what was really false and wrong was known to him [Thornton], and he had a right to judge her" (*NeS* 283). In other words, though she sees God as her ultimate judge, she acknowledges that, based on the evidence before Thornton, he is a legitimate temporal judge of her character. Her frustration regarding Thornton's misinformation about the night that she was at the train station dominates her interiority for most of the rest of the narrative. The fact that false evidence has come to inform Thornton's opinion of her character is almost too much for Margaret to bear. Through this internal struggle, however, Margaret is better able to see her own pride as well as incrementally identify her true feelings for Thornton. In a passage of free indirect discourse, the narrator observes:

Oh! had any one such just cause to feel contempt for her? Mr. Thornton, above all people, on whom she had looked down from her imaginary heights till now! She suddenly found herself at his feet, and was strangely distressed at her fall. She shrank from following out the premises to their conclusion, and so acknowledging to herself how much she valued his respect and good opinion. Whenever this idea presented itself to her at the end of a long avenue of thoughts, she turned away from following that path – she would not believe in it. (*NeS* 284)

Pushed into a moral crisis, Margaret is forced to see the imagined superiority that she had felt over Thornton but, at this early point of her moral turmoil, has much to consider before she is able to admit her respect and love for Thornton. Margaret likens Thornton's judgment to God's and finds Thornton's worse because it is based on false evidence:

[S]he [was] classing his [Thornton's] low opinion of her alongside with the displeasure of God. How was it that he [Thornton] haunted her imagination so persistently? . . . She believed that she could have borne the sense of Almighty displeasure, because He knew all, and could read her penitence, and hear her cries for help in time to come. But Mr. Thornton . . . What strong feeling had overtaken her at last? (*NeS* 285-86)

Margaret must refine her character further and learn to examine herself honestly before she is ready to confront any "strong feeling" for Thornton. After her verbal confrontation with Mrs. Thornton, she reflects on the womanly injustice that Mrs. Thornton does to her and refuses to allow the accusation to indict her. In those same moments of reflection, Margaret laments the hardships that her family has endured, and she briefly indulges in a moment of weakness: "I am weary of this continual call upon me for strength . . . I must give way sometimes. No, I will not, though . . . I will not – I *will* not think of myself and my own position. I won't examine into my own feelings. It would be of no use now" (*NeS* 322). The moment that Margaret starts to give herself permission to indulge in weakness, she rallies and wills herself out of it. Once again, she puts others before herself, denying her own weakness because she plans to be strong for those she loves. She still, however, is unable to examine her feelings. This is partly due to her instinct that a future with Thornton is out of the question because he thinks that she has had a relationship with

someone else. However, part of her refusal to examine her feelings also should be attributed to her inability to be honest with herself. Her strong conviction of truth *to* and *for* others has not yet turned to herself.

It is Margaret's conviction to place others before herself that helps her eventually to examine herself more truly. When Mr. Hale is visiting Mr. Bell at Oxford, Margaret has the necessary time away from caretaking to examine her feelings, for, until this point, Margaret has been distressed over Thornton's opinion of her and fatigued by continually being her father's source of strength as they mourn her mother's death. Reading one of her father's books, she comes across a passage regarding the need to seek God's mercy. Margaret thinks: "The way of humility. Ah . . . that is what I have missed! But courage, little heart. We will turn back, and by God's help we may find the lost path" (*N&S* 345). She immediately pursues work that will "take her out of herself" (*N&S* 345). Her actions at this point in the narrative help to develop her character. For Gaskell, looking outward is a way of helping the inward.

When visiting her beloved home of Helstone with Mr. Bell, Margaret comes to terms with the necessity of change as well as the need to look outward. As she nostalgically looks into the night sky, she reflects:

"I am so tired – so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place . . . After all [though] it is right . . . If the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt . . . Looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress all around me is right and necessary. I must not think

so much of how circumstances affect me myself, but how they affect others, if I wish to have a right judgment, or a hopeful trustful heart.” (*N&S* 400)

In a year’s time, Margaret has faced a painful move, the social upheaval of an industrial city, her guilt-ridden defense of Frederick, and the death of both her parents. Change has been the enemy. However, when she forces herself to look outward instead of inward, she moves from selfishness to service. Throughout the narrative, Margaret *is* a service-oriented character, not characterized by selfishness. However, her continual selflessness takes its toll because she becomes aware of the sacrifices she has made. The weight of the moral compromises she has had to negotiate in service of others and in light of a higher moral law causes her to focus on her own guilt. The gap between temporal justice and divine justice is clear to her, but her humanity prevents her from fully acquitting herself. By focusing on others, she sets herself back on a path by which she can render “right judgment[s]” of others and of herself.

Margaret always considers “right judgments” and moral responsibility. However, the depth of her considerations of such ethical dilemmas is refined over the course of the narrative, primarily through development of her interiority. As she grieves Mr. Bell’s death, she reflects on her first inklings of moral responsibility as a child turning into a young woman – “when the feelings and conscience had been first awakened into full activity” (*N&S* 411). In her youth, she had decided to set her life aside as one that would be heroic and noble. Her youthful and proud self-awareness matures into a more weathered humility that acknowledges the need for providence in order to tap into the heroic. The narrator states:

[S]he remembered promising to herself to live as brave and noble a life as any heroine she ever read or heard of in romance, a life sans peur et sans reproche; it had seemed to her then that she had only to will, and such a life would be accomplished. And now she had learnt that not only to will, but also to pray, was a necessary condition in the truly heroic. Trusting to herself, she had fallen. It was a just consequence of her sin, that all excuses for it, all temptation to it, should remain for ever unknown to the person in whose opinion it had sunk her lowest. She stood face to face at last with her sin. She knew it for what it was; Mr. Bell's kindly sophistry . . . that the motive ennobled the evil, had never had much real weight with her . . . [H]er anxiety to have her character for truth partially excused in Mr. Thornton's eyes . . . was a very small and petty consideration, now that she was afresh taught by death what life should be . . . if no one should ever know of her truth or her falsehood to measure out their honour or contempt for her by, straight alone where she stood, in the presence of God, she prayed that she might have strength to speak and act the truth for evermore. (*N&S* 411-12)

After what might seem to the reader as excessive self-loathing for roughly the last quarter of the narrative, Margaret faces her falsehood one final time and discerns that one must appeal to God to live a heroic and noble life. Margaret grows from being a religious character who is reliant more on her strength of will than on God to a religious character who humbly acknowledges her own weaknesses yet who still resolves to pursue telling the truth. Even if others never know the truth of what happened at the train station, Margaret finds peace with God not only as her true judge but as the ultimate enabler of truth-telling. Importantly, all

this ethical inner-turmoil, key to establishing Margaret as a reliable truth-teller, could be represented only in fiction. Unlike the qualities of character traditionally associated with credibility (the publicly observable phenomena of physical appearance and acts that so severely handicapped women), the inner-life of characters could be brought into representation only through the fictional device of omniscient narration. Gaskell's vocation as a novelist, then, can be understood as the best means of demonstrating the ethical credentials of female speakers. What Gaskell achieved with her middle-class heroine, Margaret Hale, would enable her to authorize the much more radical challenge that Sylvia Robson's speech would pose to standards of female decorum.

Sylvia finds a much more tenuous peace than Margaret, but, in achieving it, she reaches a level of credibility by the end of the narrative that retroactively endorses her climactic utterance in her confrontation with Hepburn and Kinraid. Without refining her character, Gaskell understood that Sylvia and her courageous speech act might have been dismissed as the tantrum of a volatile lower-class woman. For most of the story, Sylvia's interiority is nowhere near Margaret's level of deep introspection. Sylvia's character is unreflective and changeable, much in line with the way that Gaskell's typical reader would have expected a female character to be. As she undergoes hardship, however, Sylvia's inner-life is developed. She becomes concerned with spiritual matters, especially for the well-being of her daughter. As Sylvia works through her anger toward Hepburn for his lie and deals with her disappointed love for Kinraid, she begins to reflect on the type of peace that Jeremiah Foster had hoped she would attain in her marriage and wonders if "her sin [of not forgiving] [was] to be visited on that soft, sweet, innocent darling [daughter]" (*SL* 376). Prone to hasty oath swearing (specifically her promises to withhold forgiveness), Sylvia starts

to reconsider her quickness to judge and her stubbornness to forgive, and she wonders if her words will have eternal consequences for her daughter.

It becomes clear to Sylvia that education is the key to her beginning to understand God's will for her life. In her youth, she resisted learning and was almost proud of her illiteracy. Her pride has been broken down by the hardships that she has weathered, and she desires to learn to read in order to learn about God's will for Bella's sake. In a passage of free indirect discourse, the narrator observes:

If any one would teach her to read! If any one would explain to her the hard words she heard in church or chapel, so that she might find out the meaning of sin and godliness! – words that had only passed over the surface of her mind till now! For her child's sake she should like to do the will of God, if she only knew what that was, and how to be worked out in her daily life. (*SL* 376)

Here the narrator cries out in sympathy with Sylvia, lamenting the very thing that Sylvia laments and endorsing Sylvia's desire to change. She uses Sylvia's diction ("hard words") and tone (exclamation marks) to bring her readers into the inner-life of the sort of woman with whom they were unlikely to have intimate acquaintance. Sylvia finds someone (Alice Rose, the live-in mother of Hester – a Quaker who lives with Sylvia and her family) to teach her and approaches the tutoring without the pride that she previously possessed. Broken down and refined – much like Margaret – Sylvia has lost the pride with which she started the narrative. Though Sylvia is clearly the greater victim, both heroines gain credibility with the reader by shedding their pride due to the hardships they have endured. This pride is

exchanged for a God-fearing humility, which nineteenth-century readers largely would have expected and embraced.

As Sylvia learns to read and becomes devout, she develops into someone who can return to preconceived notions, reassess them, and come to different conclusions – a much more credible characteristic than her previous hasty stubbornness. She begins to see Hepburn in a more favorable light even after the way that he has wronged her. When she learns that Kinraid has quickly moved on to marry another woman, she reflects to herself that Hepburn never would have been as inconstant¹⁶ and even later decides that Hepburn had her best interests in mind when he lied to her.¹⁷ However, even with this new conclusion about her husband, she is still unable to forgive him, often “strengthen[ing] herself with the reutterance of unforgiving words” (*SL* 440). Not until her own defense of him – her own testimony on his behalf – does she fully soften toward him to the point of forgiveness.

Unlike Sylvia, Molly’s depth of interiority is constant throughout the narrative, and Molly’s credibility – much like Margaret’s – is constant. Often wrestling with the best way to represent others and keep the peace, Molly sometimes keeps silent when she would rather speak up and defend others. This discretion helps to give her complete belief that she is on the side of right, and, because Gaskell shares Molly’s inner-thoughts, the reader is led to believe that Molly is indeed a credible truth-teller. Of all the characters in *Wives and*

¹⁶ Gaskell writes, “The idea was irresistibly forced upon her that Philip would not have acted so; it would have taken long years before he could have been induced to put another on the throne she had once occupied. For the first time in her life she seemed to recognize the real nature of Philip’s love” (*SL* 392-93). This is the first time that Sylvia looks at Hepburn’s love in a favorable light *and* the first time that she looks critically at Kinraid. Previous to this, Kinraid could do no wrong in Sylvia’s eyes. However, as her character develops, she is better able to reassess her impressions.

¹⁷ Gaskell writes that Sylvia “thought that he [Hepburn] had judged rightly in what he had given as the excuse for his double dealing . . . and she began to learn the value of such enduring love as Philip’s had been” (*SL* 439).

Daughters, Molly is written as the most reasonable and virtuous. She advocates for others and judges when and how she can do so. For example, when her step-mother is dismissive of Roger Hamley, Molly defers to Cynthia to defend him because “Cynthia’s ready wit” is just what the situation calls for (*W&D* 315). Determining that Cynthia’s voice would wage a better defense in this situation than her own, Molly keeps silent so that the most suitable advocate may speak.

Molly’s discretion and commitment to truth are challenged persistently, as she is surrounded by Cynthia’s inconstancy and her step-mother’s white lies. Cynthia’s nature is adapted to the role that society expects her to play, and she is aware of her performance as the changeable female (Morris xxiii). Conversely, Molly’s step-mother embodies the changeable female that society expects, except she is unaware of her complicity in this role playing. Molly is left to negotiate between these women – as well as her seemingly oblivious father – while she herself develops her own agency and her voice as a truth-teller. Once again, the result is sometimes her silence, and it is calculated. The narrator describes Molly’s reasoning:

At first she made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings – the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household ever since her father’s second marriage. She knew that very often she longed to protest, but did not do it, from the desire of sparing her father any discord . . . It was a wonder to Molly if this silence was right or wrong. (*W&D* 362)

The narrator’s summary of the failings of the Gibson household serves to confirm that Molly is the last line of defense for truth in her home. Attributed to the narrator, these lines

confirm the reader's likely suspicion that Molly is indeed the most reasonable and truthful character in her family. Attributed to Molly, these lines follow the good discretion that the reader knows Molly to have. Molly wrestles internally with her silence, but her actions show that she has determined that sometimes silence, though not preferable because it does not confront falsehoods directly, is the best choice when dealing with the nuanced situations that her family presents. Nonetheless, Molly continues to turn this moral predicament over and over in her head. The narrator later adds:

Something or other had happened just before she left home that made her begin wondering how far it was right for the sake of domestic peace to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with. Or, whether, as they are placed in families for distinct purposes, not by chance merely, there are not duties involved in this aspect of their lot in life, – whether by continually passing over failings, their own standard is not lowered. (*W&D* 371)

As the narrator follows Molly's meandering thoughts regarding moral responsibility, it seems clear that, although Molly is questioning *if* it is her duty to bear the standard in her home, she has all-but-determined that it *is*. Born into her family for a purpose, she reasons that it is her moral obligation to bear witness to the truth in her family as well as to maintain her own high standard of credibility. She reasons that living with others who constantly choose wrongly (and, thus, degrade their credibility) and not commenting on it will take its inevitable toll on her own character. Molly is single-handedly trying to maintain the peace and push her family toward truer discourse. However, she does not always choose silence.

Transforming Readers into Advocates: Gaskell's Character Speech Acts

The final mode of characterization through which Gaskell develops her heroines as credible truth-tellers is speech. Ruth is the least developed heroine in any of Gaskell's novels. With little interiority or speech from Ruth, the reader must depend on descriptions of her. She is characterized by naïveté that readers usually find aggravating. Her child-like innocence and inability to testify for herself throughout most of the narrative is aimed at an audience that itself was faced with the Victorian ideal of a silent and pure wife-mother (*à la* Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, which was published the year after *Ruth*). Ruth is a mother who chooses not to be a wife. Gaskell knew that Ruth would not be considered pure in the eyes of her readers, so she had to find other ways to garner sympathy from them so that they eventually would be led to see Ruth as not only pure but as a credible truth-teller. Otherwise, her climactic utterance on the beach with Bellingham would not carry the weight that it does. Emphasizing her child-like innocence, keeping her silent for most of the narrative, and having her mostly represented by the narrator are strategies that Gaskell uses to build the credibility needed to overcome Ruth's fallen status. The cost of these strategies is that Ruth comes across as two-dimensional. This consequence is unsurprising, given the considerations that Gaskell had when creating a heroine whom she knew her readers would likely reject. The very creation of a fallen woman who is a flat character is a statement to readers that this is all they expect from women, especially women who break social codes. *Ruth's* plot, however, hinges on Ruth's ability to testify (however briefly and suddenly) for herself and her son. Her testimony on the beach with Bellingham seems to emerge from nowhere but carries strength and credibility. "Listen to me," Ruth commands him, and she invokes words such as "consent" and "agency" to establish her authority. Ruth's marked

departure from the character whom the reader has come to know until this point in the narrative is a call – even a demand – for credibility. Margaret is not faced with such a difficult task in establishing her credibility, and, consequently, her voice is heard more consistently throughout the narrative, though most significantly in her climactic utterance in the riot.

Margaret comes to know herself better as the story unfolds, and she stands out as Gaskell's most outspoken novelistic heroine. Early in the development of Margaret's character, Bessy Higgins, Nicholas Higgins' dying daughter, tells her: "Yo're not like no one I ever seed. I dunno what to make of yo'" – to which Margaret replies, "Nor I of myself" (*N&S* 138). Margaret's understanding of herself grows as she becomes an advocate for herself and others. In fact, her ability to testify contributes to her understanding of moral responsibility, and her understanding of moral responsibility gives her a sense of identity that, at the narrative's beginning, is only vague.

In debating Thornton, Margaret stands up for the lower class, refines her ideas on social responsibility, and edges closer to learning how to compromise with opposing viewpoints – a skill that later allows her to be united with Thornton. Margaret and Thornton repeatedly discuss the differences between the industrial north and the rural south as well as the struggle between masters and men. Margaret represents the principles of Christian socialism and Thornton those of Political Economy. During one such exchange when Thornton criticizes the south, Margaret retorts, "Now, in the South we have our poor, but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr. Thornton" (*N&S* 81). Proudful, Margaret is not only confident in her knowledge of the south but she tells Thornton what he

does *not* know. Correct as she may be, Margaret does not leave room for the possibility that she does not yet know the north and that together their combined perspectives might do more good. She, however, *has* come to know the Higgins, a working-class family that prompts her to see the subtleties of the working man (specifically in the north) and, thus, to see the working class as a group comprised of individuals. She believes that the mill owners should explain themselves to the workers and that dialogue between the two groups would benefit the workers.

Margaret advocates not only for Higgins but for the entire working class when she argues with Thornton. Concealing Higgins' identity, she states, “[H]e – that is, my informant – spoke as if the masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children – living in the present moment – with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience” (*N&S* 119). Mingled with her accusation that the masters act condescendingly toward their workers, Margaret also argues that the masters have a moral responsibility toward the workers and that, though human law does not enforce charitable use of money, the Bible promotes ethical stewardship.¹⁸ Alternatively, Thornton believes that the current system rewards those who strive to better themselves and that those who do not make such efforts do not deserve a better life or an explanation regarding the economics of trade. Thornton states, “It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour . . . on the side of authority and order” (*N&S* 84). He adds that men who do not take advantage of what society can offer are “their own enemies” (*N&S* 84) and that the suffering of the working class “is but the

¹⁸ Margaret states, “[T]here is no human law to prevent the employers from utterly wasting or throwing away all their money, if they choose; but that there are passages in the Bible which would rather imply – to me at least – that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so” (*N&S* 118).

natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives” (N&S 85). In short, Thornton blames their suffering on the “poorness of [their] character” (N&S 85).¹⁹ Thornton’s theory on what constitutes good, credible character is based on his own experience because he rose from the lower class. By the end of the narrative, Margaret has convinced Thornton that it is not the *character* of the working class that is culpable but rather an economic system that is in need of repair. Such repair, Margaret reasons, is brought about by dialogue and compassion – both of which Thornton is persuaded to in the end.

Margaret is persuasive because she is credible, and her credibility is bolstered by her ability to command when needed and through Gaskell’s linking of her to Christ. In the riot scene, Margaret commands Thornton to take action – to “go,” “save,” and “speak” (N&S 177). Not only is Margaret able to do all three of these things herself (as evidenced in her actions in the riot) but she assigns these actions to Thornton – a man and a powerful one, no less. She simultaneously gives Thornton an ultimatum. He is to go and talk to the workers or else he is not acting like a man: “[G]o down this instant, if you [Thornton] are not a coward. . . . Go down and face them like a man . . . If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man” (N&S 177). Then when Thornton tells her that she is out of place in the fray, she immediately rejects his judgment and stays right where she is. She commands the rioting workers to stop their actions because they are hurting their own cause. Echoing Christ’s words on the cross, Margaret becomes Christ-like in her speech: “For God’s sake! do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not

¹⁹ In response to Margaret’s asking Thornton why he does not explain his decisions to his workers, Thornton replies, “Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it” (N&S 117).

know what you are doing” (*N&S* 179). With the best interests of the workers and Thornton in mind, Margaret tries to calm the angry mob and does so by commanding them to stop, invoking a Christ-like authority with her diction.²⁰ Significantly, Gaskell patterns Margaret’s words after Christ – Truth itself. Linking Margaret to Christ assigns her a divine stamp of authority and almost unquestionable credibility as a truth-teller.

Sometimes Margaret’s authority seems to come almost from outside herself, as if it is endorsed by a divine authority. Further, as she helps others, she herself gains strength. When her mother dies, Margaret once again leads her family, this time to comfort them. Her voice is almost separate from her, as it seems to come from nowhere, even surprising her. Gaskell writes, “[W]ithout a word of preparation, Margaret’s voice broke upon the stillness of the room, with a clearness of sound that startled even herself: ‘Let not your heart be troubled,’ *it* said; and she went steadily on through all that chapter of unspeakable consolation” (*N&S* 251, emphasis added).²¹ Using Christ’s words to comfort her family, Margaret once again speaks to effect a positive change in those around her. Gaskell disembodies Margaret’s voice, which momentarily seems to separate it from Margaret’s agency. “It” – her voice – comes up from inside her, almost as if Margaret were merely a vessel for its message. Significantly, the message that Margaret bears is one of divine Truth. She bears this truth to her father throughout this time of crisis. When Mr. Hale later asks her to pray for him, she physically supports him as he leans against her, and she once again recites Scripture to him. Gaskell writes, “Her voice never faltered; and she herself gained strength by doing this” (*N&S* 269). Margaret gains strength from supporting others,

²⁰ See Luke 23:34.

²¹ See John 14.

specifically through testimony of divine Truth, and this strength bolsters her to acts of service.

A woman of words and actions, Margaret advocates for others and defends her right to do so, specifically her right as a *woman* to do so. As she embraces her role as advocate, she still must work through her pride and her inability to see other viewpoints. At one point in an argument between Thornton and Margaret in which he tries to thank her for helping during the riot, Margaret becomes exasperated and sarcastically responds to him: “[A]ny woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her *reverenced* helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers” (*N&S* 195, emphasis added). Invoking her right as a woman to protect others, she also mocks society’s view of women as helpless and, simultaneously, criticizes the extent to which society venerates this learned helplessness. In this scene, Margaret rejects not only Thornton’s thanks but also his marriage proposal. She is incensed at his love for her because she feels that it is partially motivated by her actions at the riot and because she has not addressed her feelings for him. She views Thornton’s sentiments as “impertinent” and devastates him by telling him so (*N&S* 196). At this point, she is too proud to allow for the possibility of loving Thornton or to see their relationship from his point of view. She must first be humbled by her lie to the police before allowing for any sort of personal vulnerability. When Margaret develops vulnerability, she becomes a more believable, credible character.

Margaret’s pride starts to chip away when she is faced with the moral quandary of whether or not to lie to the police inspector when he interrogates her regarding her presence at the train station on the night that she helped Frederick escape. Prior to this, Margaret has not faced a situation in which she has had to compromise any law for what she thought was

right. Because she is faced with the interrogation, she gains a more complex sense of moral responsibility, for she is forced to sift through the complexities of defying temporal laws in favor of higher ones (i.e., protecting the innocent). As she wrestles with having to act in a way that is contrary to her truthful nature, her primary concern remains protecting Frederick. When the police inspector interrogates Margaret, she blurts out a response before he even finishes his question. “I was not there,” Margaret interrupts (*N&S* 273). Eager to protect Frederick, she anticipates her need to disassociate herself (and thus him) from the events at the train station. In the same conversation when the inspector fully asks Margaret about her presence at the train station, she mechanically repeats the denial with the exact same words. Because Margaret’s demeanor is calm and restrained, the inspector is inclined to believe her, even though he suspects that something is off.

After the traumatizing interrogation by the police inspector, Margaret is prepared for Thornton’s interrogation when he fishes for information regarding what occurred at the train station. Thornton, however, is mild in his inquiries, and Margaret is firm and cold in reply. Initially, they discuss Thornton’s recent hiring of Higgins. However, they quickly move to a discussion of truth because Margaret stumbles over her use of the word *truth* when addressing something that Higgins had said. Thornton picks up on her guilt and uses it as a springboard to request an explanation regarding her claim that she was not at the train station. At first Margaret refuses to respond, but then she emphatically defends herself: “I am aware of what I must appear to you, but the secret is another person’s, and I cannot explain it without doing him harm” (*N&S* 328). Margaret knows that her reputation with Thornton is compromised by her inability to explain the night in question or disclose the identity of the mysterious man. However, she remains Frederick’s true advocate and

maintains her silence. Margaret's empress-like pride suffers as she reaps the consequences of her silence – a shift in Thornton's perception of her as well as her own guilt and confusion over her false testimony.

As Margaret confronts her guilt, she finds a voice that rejects thoughtless pride and embraces humility and thoughtful confidence. When she reads about God's mercy in one of her father's books, she realizes that she must temper her willfulness with humility. She apologizes to Mrs. Thornton for their disagreement over her behavior. In response, Mrs. Thornton thanks Margaret by saying that Margaret shows her justice in apologizing. Trying to negotiate knowledge of her own innocence with this new-found humility, Margaret responds, “[W]ill you do *me* justice, and believe that though I cannot – I do not *choose* – to give explanations of my conduct, I have not acted in the unbecoming way you apprehended?” (*N&S* 368, emphasis added). First, Margaret makes clear that her innocence is not merely her own perception but, rather, a just way of reading the incident at the train station. Second, she amends her first word choice of “cannot” by inserting “choose” to underscore her agency in dealing with the situation. Third, Margaret reiterates that her actions were appropriate and different from what Mrs. Thornton suspects them to be. Thus, Margaret requests justice, acknowledgment of agency, and more thoughtful judgment from her sister woman.

Despite the fact that Margaret finds her false testimony justified and has rationalized it to herself exhaustively, she still struggles with guilt and seeks temporal absolution. Unlike Mary Barton, who descends briefly into sickness and madness after testifying in public, Margaret is not physically punished for her defense of others. Margaret's consequences are internal, and, significantly, they are self-inflicted. She receives absolution from Mr. Bell

when he takes her to visit her childhood home. There she confesses her lie, and Bell assures her that she did the right thing in protecting Frederick.²² Margaret, however, is not comforted by Bell's acquittal. Because she knows by this point in the narrative that Frederick had left England at the time of her lie (news that came to her after the false testimony), she would prefer to rewrite the scene of her interrogation with the police inspector. With hindsight, the moral complexities of the situation are resolved. Margaret laments: "It [the lie] was not [necessary]. I know it now. I bitterly repent it" (*N&S* 398). She forgets, though, the burden of advocacy that she had assumed with Frederick. She alone was his defender, and his escape was owing to her. She could not have known his exact time of departure from England and, thus, the exact moment that she would not have to protect him anymore. Margaret cannot escape her pious impulse, however, to speak truth at all times – even when she herself has thoughtfully determined that sometimes temporal truth and divine truth are not the same and that temporal laws must, at times, be sacrificed.

Margaret next seeks to clear her name with Thornton, asking Bell to explain to him the truth behind her false testimony. She stipulates, "But it is not to clear myself of any suspicion of improper conduct that I wish to have him told . . . it is that he may learn how I was tempted, and how I fell into the snare; why I told that falsehood" (*N&S* 398). This is significant because Margaret wishes to be exonerated in Thornton's eyes not to clear her womanly character but, rather, to admit that she had fallen more generally to the sin of a falsehood. Thus, Margaret rejects the sexual double-standard that condemned her for being alone with a man and instead wants to focus on her genderless sin of lying. As bold as this distinction is, Margaret cannot escape caring about how she is perceived, even if she reserves

²² Mr. Bell states, "I say it was right. I should have done the same. You forgot yourself in thought for another. I hope I should have done the same" (*N&S* 397).

such worries for her own reflections. To Bell, though, she states, ““What other people may think of the rightness or wrongness is nothing in comparison to my own deep knowledge, my innate conviction that it was wrong”” (*Ne&S* 399). Moments later, her thoughts are consumed with Thornton’s loss of respect for her.²³ Margaret eventually arrives at her own inner-peace, but, notably, she is far less vocal as the narrative closes. Her power of speech is largely replaced by her increased social status. Margaret gains material agency through Bell’s inheritance, and she achieves a type of independence that would, otherwise, have been inaccessible to her. Significantly, her agency no longer catches her off-guard or seems separate from herself, as the narrative closes. She dictates conditions to the Shaws, her extended family, regarding living arrangements, making clear that she will provide for herself and make her own decisions. Margaret proclaims, “[N]o one can please me but myself” (*Ne&S* 417).

The radical resonance of Margaret’s proclamation is largely subsumed into the closure of *North and South*, with her silent acceptance of Thornton’s marriage proposal. However, its radical assertion of female authority to act and speak is realized in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Sylvia is the heroine whose character changes the most of all of Gaskell’s novelistic heroines, and she is the greatest foil to Margaret. Margaret’s statement that she cannot be pleased by anyone but herself is the result of much soul searching and represents the progressive thinking of a female character who will determine her own fate while simultaneously serving others. That same statement of “No one can please me but myself” represents Sylvia at the outset of *Sylvia’s Lovers*; however, it lacks all the depth of Margaret’s

²³ Gaskell writes, “She kept choking and swallowing all the time that she thought about it. She tried to comfort herself with the idea, that what he imagined her to be, did not alter the fact of what she was. But it was a truism, a phantom, and broke down under the weight of her regret” (*Ne&S* 399).

convictions, for Sylvia starts the narrative as a character who is only concerned with herself. As the narrative unfolds, she undergoes hardship, and her character is broken and refined. She is able to forgive her husband who has wronged her, and this is made possible because of her very act of testifying on his behalf to those around her. Testifying – telling the truth – improves Sylvia’s character, much as it does for Mary Barton. Mary believes that her defense of Jem is sanctioned by God, and she draws strength from that knowledge. As a result of her ongoing testimony to Jem’s innocence (her speech acts as well as physical actions to get him acquitted), her character is refined. Mary’s friend and neighbor, Margaret, notices that Mary possesses increased “dignity, self-reliance, and purpose” (*MB* 260). For Mary, truth-telling improves her character just as testifying on behalf of others improves Sylvia’s character.

From the beginning, Sylvia has a strong sense of the power of words, and she wields this power to condemn those who have wronged her. The whimsical nature with which Sylvia begins the story is replaced with somberness when Kinraid is presumed dead and then turns to resentfulness after her father’s execution. She employs finality and condemnation in her speech. To her family’s farmhand, she states, “‘Them as was friends o’ father’s I’ll love for iver and iver; them as helped for t’ hang him . . . I’ll niver forgive – niver!” (*SL* 288). The farmhand gently responds, “‘Niver’s a long word”” (*SL* 288). Sylvia is referring to a man named Dick Simpson, who testified in her father’s trial that her father had been the ringleader of the treasonous riot. When Simpson becomes mortally ill later in the narrative, Hepburn asks Sylvia to visit the dying Simpson and forgive him. Sylvia adamantly rejects Hepburn’s request:

“It’s not in me to forgive, – I sometimes think it’s not in me to forget.”

...

[Hepburn replies] “It’s said in t’ Bible, Sylvie, that we’re to forgive . . . yo’ pray to be forgiven your trespasses, as you forgive them as trespass against you.”

“Well, if I’m to be taken at my word, I’ll noane pray at all, that’s all . . . I tell thee my flesh and blood wasn’t made for forgiving and forgetting. Once for all, thou must take my word. When I love I love, and when I hate I hate, and him as has done harm to me, or to mine, I may keep fra’ striking or murdering, but I’ll niver forgive. I should be just a monster, fit to be shown at a fair, if I could forgive him [Simpson] as got feyther hanged.” (SL 300)

Sylvia’s refusal is not extraordinary in light of the trauma that she has suffered. However, it *is* characteristic of her inability to reflect on her decisions and consider showing mercy to others. She feels the power and finality of her utterances, as she repeatedly commands Hepburn to “take my [her] *word*” (emphasis added). Sylvia even offers to stop praying when she realizes that Hepburn is implicitly accusing her of being a hypocrite. She attributes her inability to forgive (and, thus, show mercy) to her ancestry – her literal “flesh and blood.” In a sense, this removes accountability from Sylvia, at least in her own rationale, and she reasons that it would be inhuman of her to forgive someone who has wronged her loved one (“I should be just a monster”). Sylvia’s short-fused and selfish defiance contrasts with Margaret’s more measured and selfless defiance. Though Sylvia’s humility and self-awareness improve as the narrative unfolds, at this point in the narrative, she is yet to discern that the ability to show mercy, in fact, makes one human.

Before Sylvia discovers the type of mercy that she needs in order to forgive others, she completely loses her will and her voice. When she marries Hepburn, she loses interest in daily life. She cares little for the material things that he gives her because she has been sobered by hardship:

It is possible that Philip was right at one time when he had thought to win her by material advantages; but the old vanities had been burnt out of her by the hot iron of acute suffering. A great deal of passionate feeling still existed, concealed and latent . . . She was stunned into a sort of temporary numbness . . . [and] was quiet even to passiveness in all her dealings with Philip . . . he wanted her so much to have a will of her own. (*SL* 308)

The fiery spirit that once characterized Sylvia is smothered by loss – first of Kinraid, then of her father. Her marriage to Hepburn is one of obligation because he provides for her family, but the outcome is passivity and a lack of agency in Sylvia’s character. Her voice is gone. When she speaks, her words are merely to facilitate the obligations of everyday life, or they are dictated by Hepburn. At the wedding feast that the Foster brothers host for Sylvia and Hepburn, Sylvia “utter[s] the formal words which Philip had told her were appropriate . . . [and] she left but one unanimous impression on the company . . . that she was the prettiest and *best-behaved* woman they had ever seen” (*SL* 314, emphasis added). Here the company at the feast stands in for the reader who would have expected a female character to indeed be demure and silent. For Sylvia this behavior is deadening, and Gaskell uses the reader’s knowledge of this as preparation for her future testimony.

Incrementally, Sylvia begins to rally. In the beginning of her marriage, she lacks the power to talk. She then weakens further during the illness that follows her pregnancy. Little

by little, however, Sylvia's agency and voice return, and they are more sophisticated than in her youth. The first instance of this occurs when Hepburn expresses frustration about Sylvia in front of her mother. Sylvia is protective of her mother who is physically and emotionally frail and is disturbed that Hepburn would voice a grievance in front of her. Though Sylvia approaches Hepburn "resolved not to speak, for fear of showing too much passion, too much emotion," she commands, "Philip, mother hasn't many more years to live; dunnot grieve her, and set her again' me by finding fault wi' me afore her. Our being wed were a great mistake; but before t' poor old widow woman let us make as if we were happy" (*SL* 330). There are two significant developments here. First, Sylvia is "resolved not to speak." This demonstrates that she has progressed from quivering in fear of Hepburn to *resolving* to withhold speech from him – an important development in her achieving agency. Her rationale for this withholding is that she may be overly passionate or emotional. This is fascinating because her concern regarding how she is perceived may stem from her own self-awareness that she does not yet have command over her speech enough to restrain her emotion effectively, or it may be due to the influence of those around her who reinforce her quiet submission to Hepburn (e.g., the guests at the Fosters' feast who silently applaud her behavior, her mother who wishes her to quietly follow Hepburn, and Hester – who thinks that Sylvia is finally treating Hepburn correctly). In the case of her logic stemming from self-awareness, this shows significant character development. If, rather, the logic stems from traditional expectations of womanly behavior, this shows that she has learned her lessons well, as she started the narrative as a head-strong young girl and has developed into a silent and resentful young woman. Sylvia will unlearn these lessons, however, when she is faced with what might be the most significant betrayal in any of Gaskell's novels – Hepburn's lie

to her regarding Kinraid's supposed death. The second significant development is that Sylvia not only speaks up to Hepburn but she *instructs* him. Angered by his lack of tact in complaining about her in front of her mother, Sylvia instructs Hepburn not to upset her mother or turn her against Sylvia. Furthermore, she adds that their marriage was a mistake. This utterance prepares Sylvia to defend herself even more boldly later.

Directly before her voice returns, Sylvia reaches her ultimate low point when she discovers that Kinraid is alive. She quickly pulls herself up from this, however, and gives herself permission to speak, and her voice returns with power. When Sylvia encounters Kinraid, she is first struck silent – this time not from any level of self-awareness but instead from shock: “[H]er heart leaped up and fell again dead within her, as if she had been shot . . . Twice she opened her stiff lips to speak, and twice the words were overwhelmed by the surges of her misery, which bore them back into the depths of her heart” (*SL* 339). She runs from Kinraid, briefly considering suicide. She instead goes home to Hepburn, with Kinraid in pursuit. When Kinraid arrives at her house and tells her that he had been captured, that Hepburn had witnessed it, and that Hepburn was supposed to have explained all this to her years ago, Sylvia's voice not only returns to her but it returns with strength and purpose that it has never before carried. She screams out Hepburn's name in a “shrill and fierce” tone (*SL* 341).

Once Hepburn, Kinraid, and she are together, Sylvia fully breaks from her quiet, womanly submission and gives herself agency and self-advocacy: “Sylvia laid her hand on Kinraid's arm, and assumed to herself the right of speech. Philip did not know her voice, it was so changed” (*SL* 342). Sylvia literally gives herself the right of speech and the right to utter a defense of herself. She does not wait for society to give its approval of her outburst

or for someone else to defend her. Her voice has been refined by hardship, and it sounds different (to Hepburn) from the willful voice of her youth. She commands Hepburn to explain himself, to “[s]peak” (*SL* 342). She becomes the interrogator of the man who has ruled her life and ruled it falsely. Strikingly, she also becomes his physical protector in shielding him from Kinraid’s aggression.

At once, Sylvia takes charge of the scene, and her utterances are aimed at protecting the interests of her daughter and herself. Gaskell took special care in constructing this scene in which Sylvia regains her voice. In fact, Uglow notes, “The manuscript shows that Gaskell worked on her draft with unusual care, heightening the speeches and rewriting the scene to insert virtual stage directions – when read aloud, the text, like a play-script, almost compels particular gestures, looks, actions, intonations” (523). Sylvia explains to Kinraid the events of the last three years. He begs her to allow him to arrange an official dissolving of her marriage since it occurred under false pretenses and then asks her to marry him. On the edge of agreeing, Sylvia is called back to her duty as a mother when Bella cries. Sylvia quickly swears an oath so that she is bound to what she sees as the only moral solution – that is, staying with Hepburn. Early in the narrative, Sylvia demonstrates a pattern of speaking hastily. This is tempered incrementally as she undergoes hardships. Even during her hardships, however, she continues to tie herself to a lack of forgiveness (e.g., her refusal to forgive Simpson for his wrongs against her father and then Hepburn for his wrongs against her) as well as to hasty oath-making (e.g., she promises her mother that she will obtain Hepburn’s permission before leaving the house – a promise that she makes in order to make her mother happy and one that she makes quickly so that she is bound to it before

she has the chance to consider not making it²⁴). Though Sylvia has come into her own with the striking power of her speech, her impulse to hasty oath-making lingers. In this case, though, it is the first step in her journey toward later forgiving Hepburn (though she is unable to see such an outcome at this point in the narrative). Sylvia proclaims:

“I’ll make my vow now, lest I lose mysel’ again. I’ll never forgive yon man [Hepburn], nor live with him as his wife again. All that’s done and ended. He’s spoilt my life – he’s spoilt it for as long as iver I live on this earth; but neither yo’ [Kinraid] nor him shall spoil my soul . . . I’ll niver see yo’ again on this side heaven, so help me God! I’m bound and tied, but I’ve sworn my oath to him as well as yo’: there’s things I will do, and there’s things I won’t.”
(*SL* 344)

Feeling bound to two men with no morally acceptable solution, Sylvia swears that she will not interact ever again with Kinraid, nor will she live as Hepburn’s lawful wife. Her commitment to the power of words ties her to this promise, and this is exactly what she wants because she refuses to allow men to stand between her and God in a situation that would, in her view, compromise her eternal welfare.

As Sylvia learns to read and becomes devout in the wake of Hepburn’s disappearance, her heart begins to soften toward him as she questions the conclusions that she previously had reached regarding both Hepburn and Kinraid. She starts to find

²⁴ Gaskell writes, “Sylvia, to soothe her [mother], took her hand, and promised never to leave the house without asking her husband’s permission, though in making this promise, she felt as if she were sacrificing her last pleasure to her mother’s wish; for she knew well enough that Philip would always raise objections to the rambles which reminded her of her old free open-air life. But to comfort and cherish her mother she would have done anything; yet this very morning . . . she must go and ask his permission for a simple errand, or break her word” (*SL* 336). Sylvia sacrifices her own happiness in order to appease her mother and promises to give up the last vestige of her own freedom in order to comfort her. Convinced of the power and importance of oath-making, Sylvia is bound to her word and, thus, becomes even more of a prisoner in her own home.

Kinraid's character to be inconstant and Hepburn's to be dependable and true. Even as her opinion of Hepburn softens, however, she is unable to forgive him. For example, when Sylvia confides in Jeremiah Foster regarding her marital crisis, he tries to promote peace in her relationship with Hepburn. Sylvia replies, "I were too deeply wronged to be [merely] "put about" [quoting an earlier statement from Foster] . . . I'm not sorry for what I said [her not forgiving Hepburn] . . . I'm sick o' men and their cruel, deceitful ways" (*SL* 370). It is striking that Sylvia broadens her complaint from just Hepburn to *men*, plural. She has been abandoned by all the major men in her life: her father, Kinraid, and Hepburn. Thus, she is weary of all men and labels their ways as "cruel" and "deceitful." She is saying exactly what she thinks and doing so unapologetically. Her eventual forgiveness of Hepburn, however, is facilitated by her testimony on his behalf as well as on her own (though her defense of Hepburn is far more prominent than of herself). The words themselves hold the power.

Little by little, Sylvia builds her case for Hepburn's good character, and Gaskell, thus, gives both the reader and her heroine the time to believe these utterances. The first development of this occurs when Sylvia is having an awkward conversation with an old friend, Alice (her tutor), and Hester (Alice's daughter). Most of the conversation is passive-aggressive, as there's clear tension between these women. When the conversation turns to judgment of Hepburn, a "fire-eyed" Sylvia indignantly retorts, "Noane can tell – noane know. No one shall speak a judgment 'twixt Philip and me. He acted cruel and wrong by me. But I've said my words to him hissel', and I'm noane going to make any plaint to others; only them as knows should judge. And it's not fitting, it's not . . . to go on wi' talk like this afore me" (*SL* 396-97). Here Sylvia boldly states that no one has the right to judge Hepburn or her and, more broadly, that no one has the right to judge others. She also states

that his actions toward her were wrong but withholds all details of what happened from her fellow characters.

When her friend goads her further, Sylvia once again responds strongly, this time in her own defense because she has gained momentum by first defending her husband. Flushed and with eyes still ablaze, Sylvia defiantly responds, “It’s for noane to say whether I’m vixen or not [as her friend accuses her], as doesn’t know th’ past things as is buried in my heart . . . What he [Hepburn] was, I know; and what I am, I reckon he knows” (*SL* 397). Once again, Sylvia declares that no one is to judge her, for only she and – perhaps – Hepburn are the only credible judges of their own lives. Further, she goes on to tell the women that, even if Hepburn came home, they “could niver come together again” (*SL* 398). When Alice reprimands her, Sylvia again speaks on her own behalf, but, this time, Sylvia speaks on behalf of *all* women. She responds, “No. I’m speaking like a *woman*; like a *woman* as finds out she’s been cheated by men as she trusted, and as has no help for it. I’m noane going to say any more about it. It’s me as has been wronged, and as has to bear it” (*SL* 398, emphasis added). Sylvia simultaneously advocates for herself as well as all women and draws attention to the helpless position in which many women found themselves. She begins this discussion, and she ends it by adding that she will say no more on it. Sylvia has not only the first word but also the last.

Sylvia’s defense of Hepburn becomes more blatant as time passes, but, the closer she gets to forgiving him, the less she believes in herself being forgiven. Initially, she chastises others for daring to judge either Hepburn or her since they have no way of knowing their true stories or their hearts. Her testimony on her husband’s behalf becomes far more intentional when she talks to Kester, the Robsons’ old farmhand. Sylvia repeatedly testifies

to her husband's goodness despite Kester's skepticism.²⁵ Her acts of testimony on Hepburn's behalf lead her closer and closer to forgiveness until she is reunited with Hepburn when he saves their drowning daughter. It is at this point that she turns her personal judgment of Hepburn on herself, wondering if God will ever forgive *her*. Hepburn, who is fatally injured, begs for her forgiveness, and, in response, Sylvia herself apologizes. She cries, "Them were wicked, wicked words, as I said; and a wicked vow as I vowed; and Lord God Almighty has ta'en me at my word. I'm sorely punished, Philip, I am indeed . . . Will He [God] iver forgive me, think yo'?" (SL 445). Sylvia knows the power of words – oath-making, specifically – and finally accepts responsibility for her relentless condemnations of her husband (justified as they might seem to Gaskell's reader). Her concern shifts from how she has been wronged to how she has wronged others. Hepburn repeatedly reassures her that God forgives all. Even when he is on the verge of death, Sylvia and he are asking for forgiveness from one another, with Hepburn explaining God's mercy to her.²⁶ After Hepburn dies, Sylvia remains unconvinced regarding the extent to which God has forgiven her, for she asks Hester, "If I live very long, and try hard to be very good all that time, do yo' think, Hester, as God will let me to him where he is?" (SL 450).

Sylvia's Lovers concludes with the type of moralizing that a reader of Gaskell expects. Sylvia is an exception to Gaskell's other heroines, however, because she remains unconvinced of God's love for her as well as of her own worth – despite her previous boldness in testimony. This serves as a useful – and perhaps more realistic – contrast to Gaskell's other truth-telling heroines, especially Margaret who ends *North and South* with a

²⁵ Sylvia states, "Philip had a deal o' good in him" (SL 425) and later adds that "he were a kind, good man" (SL 426). These are explicit endorsements of his character, not just chastisements of her fellow characters' inappropriate judging of her husband.

²⁶ See *Sylvia's Lovers* 449.

strong sense of her own worth (and, thus, her credibility) in the eyes of God and society. Even though Sylvia musters the strength to boldly protest the wrongs that have been done to her, she does not necessarily see the virtue in her testimony nor does history reward or even remember her.

Gaskell uses Sylvia as an example of a forgotten yet credible female character who should be remembered and not discarded. Significantly, she represents this character's dialect, providing a verbatim record of the speech of a doubly marginalized speaker, excluded from official discourse – law, politics, and even religion. As the story closes, the narrator makes clear that history has forgotten Sylvia. Consequently, the historical record will not include her voice or the virtuous and credible life that the reader can only assume that she went on to live. It is part of Gaskell's vocation as a novelist to bring into representation the truths that otherwise would go unrecorded. Uglow rightly argues that this novel is a retrieval of individual lives that have been lost in history's official record. This retrieval occurs through the narrator's telling of their stories and the precise dialects used for the characters' own words (506, 514). In essence, Gaskell seeks to retrieve the lost *truths* of time – to piece together individuals' experiences, to mark them as credible, and to make better sense of history as a whole. In building sympathy for the individual, Gaskell guides her reader to less hasty judgments of characters, and, by using the characters' own dialects, Gaskell builds credibility for characters such as Sylvia with readers who might otherwise have discredited such individuals as unreliable.²⁷ Nancy Henry points out that, in addition to a separation in language from the readers, the characters also are separated from them by

²⁷ See Uglow 513-15.

time, distance, and class. Characters like Sylvia (poor, rural, and functionally illiterate) traditionally were seen as obscure and irrelevant to English history (xxvi).

Gaskell, however, brings attention not only to the individual stories of various characters on the Yorkshire coast but, primarily, to the story of a wronged female character. By significantly distancing her readers from the heroine, she is able to create a safer space for sympathy and indignation – sympathy for Sylvia’s plight and indignation for the men in her life wronging her. By viewing the events of this narrative as removed from their own experience, readers could scrutinize society in ways that might otherwise have been unthinkable, as Sylvia – a lower-class female character – proclaims the wrongs that have been done to her. Just as Henry notes that “Gaskell represents their [Yorkshire characters] experiences as central to English history,” I argue that Gaskell uses Sylvia as an example of a marginalized female who has been badly abused in life and forgotten by history (xxvi). Gaskell portrays Sylvia as a credible bearer of truth – a character with whom readers should sympathize and to whom they should assign credibility. Gaskell’s message is that even seemingly marginal persons could be considered credible truth-tellers.

Finally, Molly, in *Wives and Daughters*, provides perhaps the greatest contrast to all the aforementioned heroines because of the certainty with which she embodies truth and testifies for others. As the embodiment of truth, Molly not only discerns the truth in the various situations that confront her but she filters through the moral complexities that her fellow characters present to her, arriving at viewpoints that she knows to be on the side of right. On one occasion, when her step-mother scolds her for having an opinion, Molly responds, “I don’t know how to help it” (*W&D* 294). Molly’s character is naturally inclined toward carefully observing the characters and events around her and evaluating

them in sophisticated and discerning ways, and she makes no apology. This straightforwardness translates directly to her utterances. Molly defends Roger Hamley and Cynthia to fellow characters and, most significantly, Cynthia to Preston. When Molly confronts Preston on Cynthia's behalf, Gaskell describes, "[H]e [Preston] perceived that Molly was as unconscious that he was a young man, and she a young woman, as if she had been a pure angel of heaven" (*W&D* 483). Molly wages a genderless defense for Cynthia as she lobbies for Preston to return incriminating letters. Molly's persuasive strategies (which include the threat of exposing Preston to the aristocratic Cumnors, who employ him) are so savvy that Preston does indeed return the letters.

Gaskell returns gender to the equation, however, by inserting a passer-by to witness Molly's meeting with Preston. The passer-by has a "sudden look of intelligence" as he sees what appears to be the tell-tale sign of an illicit affair (*W&D* 483). This begins gossip regarding Molly's behavior. Circumstantial evidence at best, their meeting creates a version of a story that the townspeople want to believe even though it flies in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the rest of Molly's life, which should provide ample proof (and precedent) of Molly's innocence. When this is brought to Molly's attention, she stands by her testimony on Cynthia's behalf. Molly states, "[W]hat I did, I did of my ownself. It was not suggested to me. And I'm sure it was not wrong in morals, whatever it might be in judgment" (*W&D* 518). Molly stands by her decision because it was on the side of the right – of *truth* – even though it temporarily damages her reputation.

Much like Molly's willingness to stand by what she sees as truth even when it negatively affects what others think of her, Gaskell similarly sought to persuade her readers of what *she* saw as truth (sometimes social truths and other times divine Truth) even when it

resulted in negative criticism of her work. Steadily building credible character for each of her heroines, she prepares her reader to accept their authority and their powers of persuasion. Margaret's debates with Thornton, for example, are a prime instance of a credible female character marshaling her courage, knowledge, and rhetorical savvy to persuade. Though Thornton does not reject the system of Political Economy for which he lobbies, he does soften toward Christian charity because of Margaret's influence. When she encourages Higgins to seek employment with Thornton, Thornton initially brushes him off. Higgins waits five hours for Thornton, which prompts Thornton to look into Higgins' character and take him seriously. He collects evidence as to his character and finds him to be a true and honorable man. Dismissing his prior impressions of him, Thornton decides to give him work, "forget[ting] entirely the mere reasonings of justice, and overleap[ing] them by a diviner instinct" (*N&S* 325). Because of Margaret's influence, Thornton is moved to pursue a moral path not merely for the sake of economics but because it is the sympathetic and right thing to do. He forges a relationship with Higgins and the other workers at the mill in an effort to promote understanding. Significantly, even with Margaret's persuasive powers, Thornton must confirm that Higgins possesses credible character. Without such character, an alliance between men of such different classes would have been unthinkable. *With* credible character, Gaskell suggests, gaps between classes can be bridged and trust gained. The ability of Gaskell's heroines to be truth-tellers is mirrored in Gaskell's own ability to speak truth – through her work as an author in the public sphere and through the narrators she creates.

Chapter 4

Narrative Voice as Advocacy

So Molly began an account of their sayings and doings, which she could have made far more interesting to Miss Browning and Miss Phoebe if she had not been conscious of her stepmother's critical listening. She had to tell it all with a *mental squint*; the surest way to spoil a narration. She was also subject to Mrs. Gibson's perpetual corrections of little statements which she knew to be facts. (*W&D* 623-24, emphasis added)

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson knows that she has a multi-layered audience who possess multiple expectations regarding her account of the visit to the aristocratic Cumnor family – the Miss Brownings are one audience and her stepmother is another. Her friends the Miss Brownings are interested in all the fascinating details of her visit to the wealthy Cumnors, while her stepmother is threatened by Molly's close relationship with them. Molly must tailor her story to be truthful, entertain the Miss Brownings, and appease her stepmother, and her hyper-awareness regarding her duties as a storyteller is analogous to Gaskell's sensitivity as a writer. Gaskell had tremendous anxiety over the reception of her work. However, instead of allowing this anxiety to silence her voice, she employed narrational strategies that allowed her to use her talents as a writer to help the less fortunate. Through such devices as direct address, she speaks to her readers, bringing her mission directly to them. In crafting her prose, she had to address a series of questions: How best to reach her middle-class readers? How best to convert them to sympathetic ways of reading

her stories and their fellow man? How best to tell the truth even with a *mental squint*? Jenny Uglow best describes Gaskell's "mental squint" when she writes, "Truth, she implies, is often revealed indirectly when we least expect it; understanding is a matter of interpreting clues and we often misread these because we are so busy with our own stories" (585). Gaskell encourages her readers to pay attention to the stories of others and seek truth in unlikely places or, rather, from unlikely persons.

In the character of Molly Gibson, Gaskell anticipates critics of her own writing. Molly's awareness of the multiple audiences she is addressing causes her to adjust her content and delivery accordingly. These adjustments do not mean that Molly panders to each of her audiences, for she is described as the figure of "truth itself" (*W&D* 526). Rather, she must determine the information that her listeners want and need to hear – as well as how to deliver it – while giving them few reasons to question her authority as storyteller. She knows that her stepmother is ready to correct her, even when correcting is not needed, so Molly's *mental squint* is all that stands between her message and its listeners. If Molly is savvy about the way she delivers her message, then it will reach its listeners.

Correspondingly, Gaskell knew the information that her readers needed to hear and knew that its controversial nature as well as her position as female writer would render it suspect. She foregrounds the cultural viability of being a *female* truth-teller, and, consequently, her voice registers this controversial status. Her narrative voice is often anxiety-ridden, which is not surprising since she is a female novelist creating arguably feminine narrators telling stories about outspoken female characters. However, her voice can also be playful and familiar. Whether anxious or playful, though, Gaskell's voice retains

authority, for she diligently pays mind to the *mental squint* needed to reach her readers credibly.

Gaskell simultaneously knew that she had to consider how her writing would affect her readers as well as how to put aside her anxiety regarding reception in order to write what she saw as truth. In an 1858 letter to Charles Norton, she wrote, “I *can* not (it is not *will* not) write at all if I ever think of my readers, & what impression I am making on them. ‘If they don’t like me, they must *lump* me’ to use a Lancashire proverb. It is from not despising my readers. I am sure I don’t do that, but if I ever let the thought or consciousness of them come between me & my subject I *could* not write at all” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 503).¹ In this oft-cited quotation, Gaskell presents anxiety about her readers as a crippling barrier to writing. While Gaskell excelled at oral storytelling to audiences of intimates,² the prospect of advocating to potentially hostile anonymous readers through publishing could be overcome only by adhering to a view of novel-writing as a moral and spiritual vocation. The crucial part of Gaskell’s message to Norton is at the end of the excerpt: “the thought or consciousness of them com[ing] *between* me & my subject” (emphasis added). It is not that Gaskell failed (or refused) to consider her readers but rather that her conviction to address her subject superseded even her anxiety regarding them.

When her subject matter was controversial, she had to put reader reception – and, significantly, her own reputation – out of her mind in order to do justice to the plight of the fallen woman, the poverty of the lower class, and the silencing of women, more generally.

¹ The letter is dated May 10, 1858, and May 14th of the same year.

² Uglow notes, “Because her conversation vanished with her, critics tend to ignore the links between Gaskell’s spontaneous stories and her written work. Yet she herself often refers to this context. She saw social storytelling as an art and in her view one of the great qualities of . . . her circle [of friends] . . . was that ‘they knew how to narrate’” (239).

Her own experience is evident in her description of Molly Gibson's anxieties about audience in the passage at the head of this chapter. Gaskell wrote *for* her readers *to* convert them and used various strategies of narration to do so. Hilary M. Schor writes, "Gaskell demands an audience for her own kind of truth, for a novel that embraces different voices, dialects, kinds of storytelling, and in turn makes different demands of her readers: to be present as a 'you' out there, to make a novel 'true' by asking a reader to change with it . . . Gaskell expects of the novel a conversion" (42). To do this effectively, Gaskell had to overcome concerns of reception as well as reputation and write boldly so that these constraints did not wedge themselves between her and her subject matter, and, thus, her mission.

Significant to the authority of Gaskell's narrative voice is the fact that her own sense of her status as a truth-teller grew as her career unfolded. As she gained experience and confidence in her craft, she assumed a greater level of credibility with her personal writing persona and her public writing *ethos*. Her knowledge of the publishing world increased, and she gained a sense of her status as a writer. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund note that Gaskell was fundamentally concerned with authority: "Who has the right to speak to society? Where should such a person stand in addressing the larger community? And most important, what form must a speaker's words assume in order to assert their validity for author and audience?" (48). These questions concerned Gaskell not only in relation to the authority she gives her heroines but also in relation to the authority she gives herself as a writer. Did *she* have the right to speak to society? Where should *she* stand in addressing the larger community? How could *she* assert the validity of her message? She was anxious in credentialing her career early on, but, as her career continued, her experience and confidence enabled her to see herself as a credible bearer of truth.

Despite Gaskell's assurance of her status as a writer, she had tremendous anxiety throughout her career upon the publication of her work, often leaving town when her books were published. She acquired a growing view of herself as a credible truth-teller but was still well aware of the realities of publication (expectations of publishers, the stress of rewrites, and complications with payment) and reception (harsh reviews from critics and criticism from the public). Upon *Mary Barton's* publication, she traveled to Wales. Even though it was published anonymously, many knew that she was the author, and the subject matter struck close to home with her Manchester friends (Uglow 187-88, 191). She was nervous about *Ruth* long before it was published and confided to her daughter, Marianne, about her anxiety: "I hate publishing because of the talk people make, which I always feel a great impertinence, *if they address their remarks to me* in any way" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 209). Though opinion quickly shifted favorably, the initial reception to *Ruth* was harsh. However, Gaskell was unapologetic regarding her novel, depicting herself as "a martyr to the truth" (Uglow 338). By the time *North and South* was published, Gaskell clearly had a sense that her reputation (and her truth) could survive the reviews; however, she still fled England, going to Paris to visit friends (387). To her friend, Tottie Fox, Gaskell comments on the timing of her trip abroad: "I think we [Gaskell and her daughter, Meta] shall go and escape the reviews, hang 'em" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 326)³. Uglow observes that, as Gaskell's career matured, so did her confidence in publishing: "[S]he had grown more professional, more canny about contracts, more wary of publishers" (443). Even so, after the publication of *Sylvia's Lovers*, reviews were mixed, so she once again went abroad, this time to Paris with

³ The letter is dated December 24 [or 25], 1854.

her daughter, Julia, to meet friends and then on to Italy with her other daughters, Florence and Meta, joining her (530).

With *Wives and Daughters*, however, Gaskell knew her work was good, and readers indeed embraced it. She traveled during its run in the *Cornhill*, once again going abroad to Paris (Uglow 601, 607). It is impossible to know if her pattern of skittishness-upon-publication would have continued with the volume publication of *Wives and Daughters* because she passed away a chapter short of its completion; however, based on her confidence in her craft by this point in her career and the positive reception that the serialized version of *Wives and Daughters* had, it seems unlikely that she would have fled town as usual, or, if she had, it would not have been because of publication anxiety. She often traveled to visit friends, cure fatigue and illness, and simply out of a love for travel. Her intense distaste for the “talk people make” is indicative of her personality, passionate about truth-telling yet sensitive to her peers criticizing her. With increased experience, she was able to become more dismissive of critical opinion, though she was still affected by it.⁴

Gaskell’s narrative voice guides her readers through her stories and helps point them toward accurate and sympathetic conclusions that are meant to translate to the way they deal with others in real life. She asserted her voice in not only a male-dominated literary market but also in a man’s world. She used her role as a woman writing predominantly for women readers to establish credibility for women in a way that a man could not. Her stories are illustrations of real nineteenth-century life so that her readers could rehearse merciful judgments of others – be they women or the suffering, more generally. Because Gaskell

⁴ Though not dealt with in this dissertation, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* resulted in a similar flight for Gaskell after its publication. She left quickly for Rome and wished to know nothing of the reviews. In this case, Gaskell’s fears were well founded, as she returned to England to find that law suits had been threatened regarding the veracity of the biography (Uglow 415, 426-27).

could not effect social change by being a lawyer or judge, she wrote. She was attempting to achieve her vocation as a writer talking to readers, as she understood that narrative can move persons to ethical behavior. She arranges plots in such a way that her heroines are given the opportunities to impact important events in her novels and, thus, creates credible heroines who court not only the sympathy but the respect of her readers. Plot and character function together as a means of making her a credible writer for her time, as she uses them to aggrandize her voice. Thus, her presentation of her heroines as truth-tellers prepares her readers to view her as a similar and equally credible speaker of truth. Narrative voice is, in fact, the culmination of Gaskell's arrangement of her narratives to portray women as credible truth-tellers.

Each of Gaskell's narrators lobbies for the social good, and her creation of storytellers who maneuver around the social dictates that constrained these tales is an essential element in exploring her project of converting her readers through credible plots, characters, and narrators. The narrative voice of her novels is intimate, as each of her narrators establishes familiarity with the reader. However, it is also a moral voice that conveys a sense of storytelling as vocation. This chapter argues that Gaskell strategically employed a variety of narrational techniques to accomplish her mission. Accused of heavy-handed didacticism, quaintness, and a dearth of solutions, she used moral discourse to convert readers, seemingly quaint personal disclosures to advocate for characters and their real-life counterparts, and narrators to effect social change. She authoritatively presents her case before readers as jurors with the hope – even the *expectation* – that they will change their propensity for snap judgments of others by reading her fiction. As Uglow notes, “She believed vehemently that ‘the power of sympathy depended on the power of the

imagination” (602). Before analyzing these narrational strategies, let me first examine the evolution of narrative voice in Gaskell’s novels.

From Authority to Confidence

Gaskell’s narrators reveal striking degrees of authority. Significantly, the narrative voice shifts in tone depending on the subject matter and also evolves over the course of her novels as Gaskell employs various narrational strategies to convert her readers. In *Mary Barton*, the narrative voice is tentative from the start. Despite this, she establishes authority. In the Preface, she writes, “I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional” (*MB* 4). Here she is anxious about her credibility in contrast to the ease and confidence of the narrative voice in *Wives and Daughters*. However, MacDonald Daly cautions against putting “too much store by the Preface” (xviii) since Gaskell’s publisher, Edward Chapman, required her adding one and she resisted (xviii). In an 1848 letter to Chapman, Gaskell wrote:

I hardly know what you mean by an “explanatory preface”. The only thing I should like to make clear is that it is no catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the Employers, & their work-people. If you think the book requires such a preface I will try to concoct it; but at present, I have no idea what to say. (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 58)⁵

⁵ The letter is dated July 10, 1848.

Even though Gaskell eschews expert knowledge, she asserts her authority on issues of labor and insists that her novel was no “catch-penny” statement. In fact, she seems indignant that Chapman required what appeared to her as a qualification of her story – of her truth. After all, in addition to her first-hand knowledge of Manchester factory workers, she had read such experts as Adam Smith.⁶ Gaskell’s Preface, then, can be read as an instance of the time-honored trope of *humilitas*, designed to solicit her reader’s good will.

The Preface also prepares the reader for the sympathetic authority of the narrative voice of not only *Mary Barton* but all her novels. Schor explains:

This is the plea to which critics have responded: that the novel offers no solutions, no sophistication, only the truth of the heart. But this self-denigration is what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called a “cover-story,” a story about authorship that in fact allows the woman novelist more authority than she would be granted if she claimed to “know” anything. In Gaskell’s disavowal of authorial aggression, we can see her carving out for herself other territory (that of earnestness and truth) and reinserting herself – as a sympathetic authority – into the story. (21-22)⁷

Gaskell indeed positions herself as an authority and, by doing so, implicitly rejects the need for her ideas to be credentialed by – for example – an expert in economics or, more specifically, by a *male* economist.

Despite the authority that Gaskell establishes, she dreaded her reader’s reaction to *Mary Barton*. Correspondingly, her narrator is initially uncomfortable reporting on and participating in its plot (Hughes and Lund 45). However, Hughes and Lund write, “The

⁶ See Schor 22.

⁷ See Gilbert and Gubar 153-55.

novel's narrator gains strength as the tale's heroine, Mary Barton, moves from passive participant in the crisis of her community to being someone who first wants to know what has happened, then learns the truth, and finally takes action to affect future events" (37). They continue, "The strengthened narrative stance of the second volume couples doubt about absolute knowledge with universally acknowledged human limits" (45). For instance, the narrator writes, "But think of Mary and what she was enduring! Picture to yourself (for I cannot tell you) the armies of thoughts that met and clashed in her brain; and then imagine the effort it cost her to be calm, and quiet" (*MB* 270). Here the narrator readily admits what she does and does not know (with confidence) and even commands the reader. In this passage, the narrator first admits that she cannot convey (nor does she know) the extent of anguish that her heroine is experiencing. She also implies that neither she nor her audience can know Mary's true state of mind. Second the narrator gives commands to the reader. Hughes and Lund write, "By this point in the novel, the narrator is confident in asking the reader to first 'picture' (as if their shared subject were real), then 'imagine' (go beyond what is tangible to recognize undisputable feelings)" (45). Asking the reader to picture something as if it is real strengthens the narrator's claim that the events that she is chronicling are true, and her commands to the reader demonstrate her growing authority in her own story – "think," "[p]icture," "imagine." Gaskell demands that her readers contemplate her heroine's plight, acknowledge her suffering, and sympathize with her as well as – by extension – others like her. As her career continued, Gaskell was becoming a writer of social problem novels in her own right and relied less on strained didacticism. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, there is a marked increase in narrative authority, which critics have noted, with less reliance on such devices as

qualification.⁸ The narrator renders judgments with more savvy than in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. For example, when telling the reader that Philip Hepburn participates in religion as performance, the narrator strongly and coyly implies it by describing his spiritually hollow habits, stating that his sincerity “may be questioned” (SL 322) – not, of course, that *she* is questioning it. She then appears to back off by stating, “With this, however, we have nothing to do” (SL 322). However, the narrator here has *everything* to do with the spiritual judgment being rendered, for she has presented evidence before her reader, indicting Philip.

A decided shift in narrative voice occurs in *Cranford*, Gaskell’s favorite novel,⁹ and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell’s final novel. The voice of both these texts is one of ease and confidence. While it would be easy to conclude that her apparent confidence in these novels is due to their being near and at the end of her career, it is more likely that this is only part of the reason. Rather, the subject matter helps to determine the tone of the narration. Though *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* address issues of consequence, they are not filled with the social indignation (nor the authorial intrusions) of her social problem novels. Instead, she uses insider status to entertain her readers and instill moral lessons. She exhibits a similarly confident tone in *My Lady Ludlow* (a novella) and in her documented history pieces, such as “An Accursed Race.” Thus, the confidence that she demonstrates in *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* was not merely an anomaly.

In both these novels, she is in a setting that was familiar to her, rural and middle-class. The social critique of *Cranford* long eluded critical attention; however, *Cranford* fuses the entertaining to the political with seeming effortlessness via the narrative voice of

⁸ See Hughes and Lund 48.

⁹ To John Ruskin, Gaskell wrote, “It is the only one of my own books that I can read again; – but whenever I am ailing or ill, I take ‘Cranford’ and – I was going to say, *enjoy* it! . . . laugh over it afresh!” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 747). The letter is dated February 1865 (exact date unknown).

narrator-heroine, Mary Smith. Smith details her extended visits to the small town of Cranford, which is comprised primarily of older single women. Smith's voice resembles the voice of Gaskell's own letters – charming and familiar. Much as Gaskell details humorous slices of life in her letters, Smith delightfully chronicles Cranford's trivia. She shares the flawed yet endearing choices that these women make. For instance, one of the women dons treasured lace that her cat had consumed and vomited back up. Having cleaned the lace, this woman tells others about it as if it were the most normal thing in the world.¹⁰ In another instance, Smith tells of a woman who, amidst panic in Cranford over a wave of burglary, hires a boy to stay overnight in her home to protect her from intruders. This boy is such a sound sleeper that she doubts he would awaken unless shaken, but this does not take away from her newly-found sense of security in having him on guard.¹¹ Despite Smith's amusing anecdotes and tone, Gaskell still pursues her project of converting her readers.

Writing of the humorous everyday happenings of the women of Cranford, Gaskell addresses topics of consequence. She fills *Cranford* with what amounts to the cast-off characters from other contemporary novels, drawing attention to the social ills that afflict their lives. For example, Dickens' Miss Flite in *Bleak House* would have fit in seamlessly with the women of *Cranford*. Scattered in personality and marginalized by society, Miss Flite could have been one of *Cranford*'s "Amazons" (C 5). The fact that Gaskell focuses an entire novel on women who would have been considered "surplus" or "redundant" (due to the population imbalance between the sexes in mid-century England) is a small coup in itself.¹² The humorous choices that these female characters make become increasingly endearing

¹⁰ See *Cranford* 94-95.

¹¹ See *Cranford* 117-18.

¹² See Schor 112.

when considering that their choices stem from the consequences of sexism. For example, the woman who dons the vomited lace cannot afford to buy new lace because she has no means to do so. As the narrative unfolds, Smith shares instance after instance of *Cranford's* female characters addressing their financial and emotional needs by helping one another, even though they have meager finances themselves. In one such instance, Miss Matty's friends anonymously provide for her when she goes bankrupt, thus caring for her financial needs as well as her emotional needs. Uglow aptly observes that Gaskell is arguing that women have value on their own and that they should be bound in sympathetic solidarity to one another (287).¹³

While promoting this agenda of solidarity, *Cranford's* narrator leverages her position as both insider and outsider to establish a confident narrative voice that relates to the reader with endearing familiarity. Schor aptly explains:

Gaskell needed a narrator who could do several things at once. Because she is telling a story of people already outdated, she needs a narrator who can move from one world to another, without the implied superiority of an omniscient narrator. She needs a narrator detached enough not to take Cranford's "elegant economies" too seriously, but enough of an insider to translate such customs for the uninitiate. Her narrator must understand the business, masculine world of Drumble but have a sense of what Cranford holds that that bustling town lack. But clearly, no narrator except an

¹³ Furthermore, while forwarding this agenda, Gaskell develops characters differently in *Cranford* than in her other novels. There is a broader distribution of authority to tell the truth, as this novel does not have one heroine for whom the narrator advocates. Rather, Miss Jenkyns, Miss Matty, and other female characters are given textual space and, thus, legitimacy despite their flaws. In Gaskell's project of converting her readers to sympathy, the marginalized receive attention and understanding. If such attitudes were not realistic for her time, Gaskell was committed to carrying them out at least in fiction.

omniscient one can move between these worlds – past and present, masculine and feminine, town and village – without tension, and so Gaskell must create a narrator who feels the differences but can mediate between them for a reader. (114)

When presenting entertaining scenarios to her readers, the narrator often steps outside the story to pose rhetorical questions in order to underscore the charm of Cranford and to build familiarity with readers who are worldly enough to find the habits of Cranford quaint. On one such occasion, a Miss Betty Barker misunderstands some advice given to her regarding her cow and dresses it in flannel. The narrator responds, “Do you ever see cows dressed in grey flannel in London?” (C 10). Knowing full well that readers would never find flannel-wearing cows in their more urban (and sophisticated) communities, the narrator nonetheless dryly poses this rhetorical question to encourage them to find nonjudgmental humor in *Cranford’s* colorful cast of characters. Schor writes that “the narrator becomes a kind of anthropologist, an ethnographer visiting an alien culture and watching it ‘make meaning’” (86). By striking a dry tone, the narrator is simultaneously able to present this alien culture to her audience yet do so lovingly.

On another such occasion, the narrator describes moving bits of newspaper around a new carpet at the house of Miss Deborah and Miss Matty Jenkyns in order to avoid having sunlight and footprints soil it. Even an eccentric and compulsive habit like this takes on an air of charm as the narrator describes the women fussing about. Ending the episode, the narrator directly addresses her reader, “Do you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London?” (C 20). Thus, the narrator simultaneously embraces the quaintness of the

episode as both participant and commentator. Rural and urban.¹⁴ Mary Smith is “a spectator viewing Cranford from outside, but since in every chapter she is involved in events there and uses the inclusive ‘we’ when describing them, she becomes a participant and also part of the object of her own irony” (Ingham xix). Smith finds using newspaper to protect carpeting to be good sport, yet she is also a participant in this act of protection. Because the narrator capitalizes on her dual identity, readers are brought into an inner circle of female characters who resemble the kinds of real life women who were equally as deserving of respect.

In *Wives and Daughters*, the narrative voice is similarly confident and authoritative because of Gaskell’s familiarity with the subject matter and insider status with the readers. Lacking the indignation of the social problem novels, *Wives and Daughters* – like *Cranford* – situates her in a setting where she was very much at home. Comfortable with both the subject matter and with the way it would be received, she writes of her own culture with confidence, thus capitalizing on her shared experience with her readers. Pam Morris writes, “The confident tone of the narrator comes, then, not from an assertion of omniscient moral authority, but from a sense of shared assumptions with implied readers. The narrator’s voice constructs a sense of close understanding, of an intimate connection between speaker and listeners as in oral storytelling” (xvi).

The very first sentence of the narrative establishes shared experience between the storyteller and the reader (Morris xvi). The narrator begins, “To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood” (*W&D* 5). Schor notes that this opening reminds the reader of the inescapable conventions of fiction, as it invites the reader to come along on a fairy tale, of

¹⁴ As Ingham writes, the narrator has a “double role as a commentator and communal autobiographer” (xx). See also xiii-xxx.

sorts, as the narrative follows a young, unprivileged girl from childhood through what the reader hopes will be a “happy” ending – marriage, wealth, and happiness (182). Schor elaborates, “Critics who speak of this as Gaskell’s most confident novel, her finest achievement, must have this in mind: the novel’s voice is self-consciously fictional, and it announces its place in the tradition of bourgeois realism” (182). Gaskell was confident by this point in her career. However, as Schor notes, the voice that she establishes for the narrator of *Wives and Daughters* is consciously established and is not merely the outcome of Gaskell’s increased confidence. It is a voice that relates to her middle-class readers and builds a bond with them, for the narrator need not burdensomely relate the experiences of the lower class to them as in the social problem novels. Rather, the narrator embraces her place with members of her own class and writes with the familiarity of one amongst her own.

In weathering the storms of her earlier social problem fiction, Gaskell increasingly learned how to employ various strategies. Schor writes, “[By the time of *Wives and Daughters*] Gaskell has learned, through attempting ‘unfit subjects for fiction,’ what the rules of fiction are – and how readers are shaped” (182). Though not put in the stark relief of her social problem novels, *Wives and Daughters* follows her conviction to write truth. Uglow explains:

Although in her last work she writes about drawing-rooms rather than tenements, her insistence on clear vision and on the duty to assert “truth”, however uncomfortable, makes *Wives and Daughters* as political, in a broad sense, as *Mary Barton* . . . she never ceased to speak for the outcast, or to defy the internalized ideologies, including those of religion, that were used to justify oppression. (602)

With this in mind, let me now turn to the first of the three narrational strategies that this chapter addresses: Gaskell's use of moral discourse.

Challenging Allegations of Embarrassing Didacticism

Gaskell is often criticized for her moral discourse. For instance, Alan Shelston argues that, in *Ruth*, her prose has an “awkwardness of narrative contrivance” as well as an “embarrassing religiosity” (xix). This point of view, however, fails to acknowledge the diversity of narrational strategies that she employs in order to persuade her readers to practice sympathetic judgments of not only her characters but, more importantly, of their neighbors. Furthermore, the task that was before her was a challenging one, especially for a woman writer in the nineteenth century. To face this challenge, she uses a variety of intrusive strategies. She employs moral discourse to guide her readers, reminding them of providence and of right values, and she uses historical context to instigate reflection. She also uses substitution of speech as well as chastisement of characters to convert her readers. The narrative voice of her early novels is strained as she protests the wrongs against the working class and women, but her later novels generally lack the same type of indignation; however, they still pursue her mission. In order to reach readers, Gaskell uses intrusive narrators to teach them, which, to use Gérard Genette's helpful terminology, serves as the *ideological function*.¹⁵ This term helps to inform a reading of Gaskell that views her narrative moves as deliberate strategies instead of the lapses of an inexperienced or anxiety-ridden writer.

¹⁵ Genette writes, “[T]he narrator's interventions, direct or indirect, with regard to the story can also take the more didactic form of an authorized commentary on the action” (256).

Gaskell infuses her writing with moral discourse that allows her to direct her readers toward sympathetic judgments. Specifically, through the use of direct address, she inserts moments of didactic commentary from intrusive narrators. Daly posits, “What often mediates them [reactionary pressures from Gaskell’s middle-class audience] is a judgmental narrative voice which uses this or that event in the novel as a launching pad for a brief, usually trite, typically pious, moral discourse” (xiii). This “trite” discourse affords Gaskell the chance to engender sympathy in her readers – to help them see that others are not as fortunate as they. For instance, in *Mary Barton*, she writes:

[Y]ou cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by on the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under? . . . Errands of mercy – errands of sin – did you ever think where all the thousands of people you daily meet are bound? (*MB* 63)

Pious? Yes. More significant, though, is that, in the rest of this passage, Gaskell forces her reader to consider the plight of strangers – saints or criminals, the forgotten and the lost. In another instance, the narrator gets her reader to identify with the heroine by interrupting her own narrative to comment on man’s sinful nature: “Such is the contrariness of the human heart, from Eve downwards, that we all, in our old Adam state, fancy things forbidden sweetest” (*MB* 81). Pious and initially distracting as this intrusion is, the narrator inserts it to advocate for sympathetic judgment from her readers, for this particular instance deals with Mary’s desire for material possessions, and, if the reader can identify *with* Mary, the reader is less likely to judge her harshly. *Mary Barton*’s narrator simultaneously gains and maintains credibility with the same readers she instructs by linking herself *with* them. She writes,

“Judge, then, with something of the mercy of the Holy One, whom we all love” (*MB* 173).¹⁶ Literally commanding her readers to judge mercifully because it is their Christian duty, Gaskell continues to build a common bond with them by including herself in the community of Christian believers – “the Holy One, whom *we* all love.”

Gaskell extends this moral discourse well into her early novels, intruding into her own narration with reminders of God’s providence and of the value that readers should assign her characters. Early in *Ruth*, the narrator reminds the reader, “But God works in His own way” (*R* 101), and later she echoes this sentiment, “The scroll of Fate was closed, and they [the Bensons] could not foresee the Future; and yet, if they could have seen it, though they might have shrunk fearfully at first, they would have smiled and thanked God when all was done and said” (*R* 200). At this later point in the narrative, this seemingly trite moralizing may not strike the reader as significant. However, Gaskell is suggesting that the Bensons – and her readers – accept mortality with a faithful and trusting spirit, for the “scroll of Fate” holds Ruth’s martyrdom. There is to be no happy ending for Ruth, yet Gaskell demands trust in God’s providence from her characters *and* her readers. Her moralizing also includes influencing the way her readers view characters. For example, when introducing Mr. Benson, the humble dissenter who saves Ruth, the narrator directly addresses the audience:

People may talk as they will about the little respect that is paid to virtue, unaccompanied by the outward accidents of wealth of station; but I rather think it will be found that, in the long run, true and simple virtue always has

¹⁶ For similar instances of Gaskell’s pious insertions that still function as ways of advocating for her characters, see *Mary Barton* 98, 99, 113, 131, 169, 170, 174, 178, 181.

its proportionate reward in the respect and reverence of every one whose esteem is worth having. (R 103)

Pious as this may sound, the narrative voice carries authority in its redirection of the reader's values from privileging status to privileging virtue. Moreover, the narrator adds that anyone who refuses to see the value of virtue is someone whose regard is worthless. These are strong words for a narrator of any kind, much less a narrator who is advocating for a dissenting minister and a fallen woman.

Gaskell's narrators often intrude in order to provide historical context that is offered as an explanation for a plot point or character motivation. This type of intrusion forces readers to pause and evaluate not only how they view previous times but, more importantly, how they react to those in need in their own time. *Mary Barton's* narrator actually seems to be writing to *future* readers. She writes, "[Y]et I think again that surely, in a Christian land, it was not known even so feebly as words could tell it, or the more happy and fortunate would have thronged with their sympathy and their aid" (*MB* 85). Gentle and qualifying as this commentary may sound, Gaskell is aiming it at her contemporary readers not as an excuse for them but as an indictment. She says that, surely, her fellow Christians of England could not have known the full extent of the sufferings of the working class, for, if they had, they would have shown greater charity. In true Gaskell fashion, she simultaneously identifies with her readers while convicting them.¹⁷

Similarly, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell sets the novel in the past so that she can contextualize her story and describe the actions of her characters with the protection of hindsight. This retrospective approach allows her to provide historical perspective on the

¹⁷ For an additional instance of inserting context, see *Mary Barton* 158.

events of the narrative without directly indicting her readers as sinning in the same way as some of her characters (though the inference is strong). The narrator directly addresses readers:

In looking back to the last century, it appears curious to see how little our ancestors had the power of putting two things together, and perceiving either the discord or harmony thus produced. Is it because we are farther off from those times, and have, consequently, a greater range of vision? Will our descendants have a wonder about us, such as we have about the inconsistency of our forefathers, or a surprise at our blindness that we do not perceive that, holding such and such opinions, our course of action must be so and so, or that the logical consequence of particular opinions must be convictions which at present we hold in abhorrence? . . . It is well for us that we live at the present time, when everybody is logical and consistent. (*SL* 63)

The narrator seamlessly goes through three rhetorical moves here. First, she appears to look back with condescending hindsight on the bygone age of *Sylvia's Lovers*, for these folks cannot put two and two together. Then, however, she backs away from this myopic view by pointing out that the power of hindsight (and, therefore, clarity) comes only with time and that, one day, similar hindsight will be used to judge the reader's own time. This second move of historical perspective is key in building patience and sympathy in the reader as she judges the characters. By putting her readers in an understanding frame of mind, the narrator manipulates them so that they might give the story's characters the sympathy that they themselves might hope to receive from future generations. Third, the narrator coyly backpedals to appear as though she is judging the previous age harshly, saying how lucky the

reader is to live in present times “when everybody is logical and consistent.” The undercurrent here is ironic, and it simultaneously appears to build familiarity with the reader while indicting her if she is arrogant enough to think herself more enlightened than those in previous times. In this moment, Gaskell instructs her readers to be cautious in judgment but frames it with a wink so that the *ideological function* in *Sylvia’s Lovers* is not as preachy as in *Ruth* or *Mary Barton*.¹⁸

Despite the different tack of the narrator of *Sylvia’s Lovers*, her intrusion is the most dramatic of any of Gaskell’s narrators. She actually *substitutes* her own material when one of her characters is not providing substantive enough insight for his fellow characters *or* for her readers. In the aforementioned direct address in which the narrator discusses how future times will see the reader’s present time, the narrator makes no apology for admitting that this tangential discussion is substituting for a vicar’s poor funeral sermon. She writes, “This little discussion [of the narrator’s] must be taken in place of Dr Wilson’s sermon, of which no one could remember more than the text half an hour after it was delivered” (*SL* 63). The narrator privileges her own words above those of her character, and, in doing this, she becomes more than just an objective observer. She exerts a power greater than that of mere observer and makes no apologies for what she chooses to include, comment on, or omit.

Lastly, Gaskell uses intrusive narrators to instruct readers and characters simultaneously. The narrator of *Wives and Daughters* sometimes interrupts the narrative to

¹⁸ For a similar moment, see *Sylvia’s Lovers* 90-91. There is far less sarcasm, and the narrator contrasts the improvements of her current age with the practices of *Sylvia’s Lovers*’ time. In another instance, the narrator contextualizes the politics of “those days” for the reader. See 152-53. In another political instance, the narrator, though sympathetic with the Robsons, states that the authorities were justified in dealing with the mob that rioted against the press gang. See 256. In another instance, the narrator comments that the diction of those in *Sylvia’s Lovers*’ era was more complex than that of the audience. See 154. Addressing bygone practices, politics, and diction, the narrator builds her case for readers to provide the same type of sympathy for the story’s characters as they themselves would hope to receive.

chastise characters. However, she resists doing this in the heavy-handed way of Gaskell's earlier fiction. When Miss Phoebe Browning (one of the Gibson's family friends) starts to daydream regarding something that will never actually happen, the narrator abruptly breaks into a paragraph of free indirect discourse to command her to stop: "Attend, Phoebe, to the present moment, and listen to what is being said before you distress yourself with a perplexity which will never arise" (*W&D* 144). The character of course cannot hear the narrator's reprimand, so the true audience is the reader who benefits from the narrator's assessment of this character and, really, from the narrator's assessment of character in general. From this reprimand of Miss Phoebe, the reader learns a lesson: Focus on reality.¹⁹

It is significant to note that there is a similar instance of chastisement that occurs earlier in Gaskell's work. In *North and South*, when Margaret chastises Higgins for influencing Boucher about joining the labor union, she closes with the line, "You [Higgins] have made him [Boucher] what he is!" (*N&S* 294). The narrator responds, "Made him what he is! What was he?" (*N&S* 294). This is a seemingly strange moment in the text because the narrator's comment is abrupt, disjointed, and aimed at Margaret. However, it forces the reader to pause and reflect on the pressures under which men like John Boucher lived, and this forced pause is just paragraphs before Boucher's suicide – the end product of such pressures. Just as the narrator of *Wives and Daughters* instructs readers by chastising Miss Phoebe, *North and South's* narrator chastises Margaret and her readers for responding hastily and unsympathetically to the working class.

¹⁹ Uglow points out that Gaskell dutifully reprimands her characters to bring them back to reality when they invent their own stories through speculation, gossip, or fantasy (581).

Challenging Perceptions of Quaintness

Particularly characteristic of Gaskell's writing are her personal disclosures, which contribute to accusations of the "awkwardness" of her writing and its "embarrassing religiosity."²⁰ Upon first consideration, they may seem distracting or perhaps even quaint. However, via this narrative strategy, Gaskell advocates not only for her fictional characters but also for those who suffer in real life. These personal disclosures are not merely the result of a mismanaged narrative voice. Rather, they are guided by her careful hand. These disclosures occur in *Mary Barton* and *Wives and Daughters*, and they employ both Genette's *testimonial* and *ideological functions*, respectively. They are intrusions of "authorized commentary" (*ideological*) and intrusions in which the narrator signals "the feelings which one or another episode awakens in him [her]" (*testimonial*) (256).²¹ Describing her feelings that are evoked by episodes in the plot, Gaskell uses personal disclosures to simultaneously advocate for her characters and instruct her readers.

As the narrator of *Mary Barton* sympathizes with its titular heroine in her discovery of her father as a murderer, Gaskell's voice takes over for a few sentences and uses this sentiment to advocate for Mary by invoking her own experience as author. A modern reader familiar with the losses that Gaskell experienced with her own children recognizes the empathy and defensiveness that suddenly break into the narrative. Gaskell writes:

²⁰ See Shelston xix.

²¹ In his *testimonial function* of narrative, Genette also includes instances "when the narrator indicates the source of his information, or the degree of precision of his own memories" (256). Gaskell's narrators claim varying degrees of first-hand knowledge of their characters, and, whether their information comes first-hand or second-hand, they use the method of delivery as a way to gain the reader's trust. By admitting to limited knowledge (i.e., receiving information second-hand and often relying on their own sometimes imprecise memories), these narrators build common ground with readers. For example, the respective narrators of *Mary Barton*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Cranford* admit to hearing plot points from other characters. *Cranford's* narrator admits that what she shares with readers largely depends on her own fallible memory. These narrators carve out their own space as storytellers who admit to gaps in knowledge and simultaneously build familiarity with their readers because of it.

Of all trite, worn-out, hollow mockeries of comfort that were ever uttered by people who will not take the trouble of sympathizing with others, the one I dislike the most is the exhortation not to grieve over an event, ‘for it cannot be helped.’ Do you think if I could help it, I would sit still with folded hands, content to mourn? . . . I mourn because what has occurred cannot be helped. The reason you give me for not grieving is the very and sole reason of my grief. Give me nobler and higher reasons, for enduring meekly what my Father sees fit to send, and I will try earnestly and faithfully to be patient; but mock me not, or any other mourner. (*MB* 244-45)

In Gaskell’s direct address with her conspicuous personal opinion, there is advocacy for her heroine, for, as Gaskell defends her own emotions concerning the way others often react to mourning, she also builds sympathy for Mary. This personal disclosure does not contribute to the plot, *per se*, but evokes *pathos* for her heroine. A protest statement that – in some ways – is directed at those in Gaskell’s own life who have offended her, it cries out to the reader to show compassion.²²

In *Wives and Daughters*, a similar disclosure serves to advocate for characters and for those who suffer in real life. When the narrator describes the Hamley household grieving for the late Mrs. Hamley, she interrupts her own narration and inserts broad commentary regarding the injustice involved in the way that those who mourn are often judged by others: “[T]he judgments so constantly passed upon the way people bear the loss of those whom they have deeply loved, appear to be even more cruel, and wrongly meted out, than human judgments generally are” (*W&D* 247). The narrator then returns to her description of the

²² See also *Mary Barton* 268, 373.

Hamleys, having engaged in commentary both specific and general, for she has advanced the plot while simultaneously including commentary on how this specific instance relates to more general experience. A clear instance of Gaskell's own voice coming through, this example again resonates with the modern reader who knows of her deep grief for two lost children. Surely, she would have been sensitive to mourning, and she applies this sensitivity to her commentary on characters. Using the death of Mrs. Hamley as an instructive moment for her readers, she urges them to withhold harsh judgments especially from those who are mourning. Uniquely positioned to protest such judgments because of the empathy she would have felt, Gaskell discloses her sensitivity toward others who have experienced the trauma of loss and, thus, advocates in a dual capacity for characters and readers.

Challenging Claims of Idealistic Simplification

Gaskell is often criticized for not offering solutions, for only bringing her reader's attention to social problems rather than suggesting explicit step-by-step solutions. For example, Bernard Sharratt writes that Gaskell's "reader has been manipulated into trying to solve Mrs. Gaskell's original problem *in her place*" (51-52). Gaskell, however, never promised to offer economic or legislative solutions. Her action plan is for the *individual* – that her reader may learn the complexities of societal ills and be persuaded to act with compassion toward others, especially toward the marginalized and the suffering. She presents the urgency of the downtrodden via a narrative voice that employs a variety of strategies. In order to establish common ground with her readers, she claims limited knowledge and employs the first person singular and plural. Because of this earned trust, she is able to advocate for the working class and indict the middle class for its lack of charity and

understanding. She also actively engages her readers via laments and use of the second person to create a sense of shared experience between the reader and her characters. Let me first turn to Gaskell's own words regarding her knowledge of the social problems that instigated her writing.

Gaskell did not claim to offer a solution to the problems endemic in the manufacturing system. Nonetheless, she tackles them in both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, claiming to be a truth-teller. She does this by portraying the truth of the matter as she knows it and by denying complete knowledge of her subjects. In an 1848 letter to Mary Ewart, Gaskell wrote, "I wanted to represent the subject [of *Mary Barton*] in the light in which some of the workmen certainly consider it to be *true*, not that I dare to say it is the abstract absolute truth" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 67). She goes on to say that, even though much yet remained to be understood regarding how to remedy the manufacturing system, it was perfectly acceptable for her to bring attention to it without offering a solution, *per se*.²³ In her writing, she was not necessarily seeking a solution, for, as she said, the system was not fully understood. Her conviction was to bring the plight of the working class to the light of day, exposing the moral dilemmas of the issues of masters and men with the tools of fiction.

Correspondingly, *Mary Barton's* narrator exposes her own ignorance of particular aspects of the working class, especially its language, and she exposes this ignorance not through poor usage but, rather, by explicitly telling her readers about her knowledge gap. For instance, when about to discuss the clash of classes in Manchester, she begins, "I am not

²³ In the same letter to Mary Ewart, Gaskell wrote, "I do think that we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not see how; but surely there is no harm in directing the attention to the existence of such evils" (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 67).

sure if I can express myself in the technical terms of either masters or workmen, but I will try simply to state the case on which the latter deliberated" (*MB* 171). She goes out of her way to show that she is not a resident of Manchester or any industrial city, for that matter. On an occasion when she is describing the distress in which Mary finds herself, she describes the unrelenting hardship of the city compared to the rural setting where she herself resides.²⁴ Despite these protests, the narrator compellingly describes the hardships of the working class as well as their political position in society.²⁵ In a letter to Tottie Fox, Gaskell wrote:

I told the story [of *Mary Barton*] according to a fancy of my own; to really SEE the scenes I tried to describe, (and they WERE as real as my own life at the time) and then to tell them as nearly as I could, as if I were speaking to a friend over the fire on a winter's night and describing real occurrences. (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 82)²⁶

She took her storytelling acumen and used it to bring attention to injustices that she felt deserved consideration. She pursued truth as she knew it (knowledge gaps and all), and, despite the fact that she admitted that the "system [was] not fully understood as yet,"²⁷ she believed that the conversation needed to *start*.

Just as Gaskell does not claim complete knowledge of her subjects in order to infuse her stories with veracity and – thus – urgency, her narrators follow suit. Not only does she expose knowledge gaps about the working class but she has her narrators admit to limited

²⁴ See *Mary Barton* 246.

²⁵ Similarly, Gaskell acknowledges ignorance of sailor jargon, and, instead of attempting to write it poorly, she uses her ignorance as a point of honesty with her readers. She writes, "Charley made known to him his wish in slang, which to Mary was almost inaudible, and quite unintelligible, and which I am too much of a land-lubber to repeat correctly" (*MB* 291).

²⁶ The letter is dated May 29, 1849.

²⁷ See footnote 23.

knowledge of their stories. Her narrators come across as sympathetic and credible storytellers because they establish the common ground of incomplete knowledge with their readers. She uses this relationship to persuade readers of the urgency of the problems that she addresses. At times, the narrators are so anxious about telling the truth that they either backpedal on information or simply point out their knowledge gaps – both narrative strategies that enhance their reliability. Hughes and Lund point out that, when the narrator backpedals on knowing exactly what a character thinks or says, it is a case of “narrative precision rather than doubt” (46).

Gaskell employs *narrative precision* when dealing with character, setting, and plot. For example, *Mary Barton*'s narrator says that she “believe[s]” that Mary would not have done something (*MB* 254). Would the narrator not *know* Mary's character?²⁸ Similar lapses in knowledge regarding character occur in *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, and *Wives and Daughters*.²⁹ Strikingly, this includes the narrator of *Sylvia's Lovers* not knowing why Sylvia resists committing suicide – information that would significantly help the reader to understand the heroine.³⁰ *Mary Barton*'s narrator makes similar moves when describing setting. When describing the Barton's home, she says that a cupboard is “*apparently* full of plates” (*MB* 15, emphasis added). Would the narrator not know every inch of her setting and simply be able to write that the cupboard is “full of plates”? *North and South*'s narrator claims limited knowledge on key plot points. At the conclusion of the narrative, Margaret and Thornton are set to meet with Henry Lennox (Margaret's suitor) to iron out details of a financial arrangement in which Margaret will save Thornton's factory and livelihood. Lennox does

²⁸ See also *Mary Barton* 43, 154, 316, 347, 368.

²⁹ See *Ruth* 111, *Sylvia's Lovers* 14, and *Wives and Daughters* 49.

³⁰ See *Sylvia's Lovers* 340.

not show up at the appointment, and it is at this appointment that Margaret and Thornton confess their mutual love. Regarding Lennox's failure to show up, the narrator merely explains, "No one ever knew why Mr. Lennox did not keep to his appointment" (*NE&S* 434). Was Lennox stepping aside in favor of Thornton? Did Lennox propose to Margaret a second time and receive another rejection? There is simply no way for the reader to know, and the narrator offers no explanation. Whether Gaskell's narrators are admitting to limited knowledge of character, setting, or plot, *narrative precision* allows them to establish common ground with readers, and this narrative truth-telling strategy serves to establish their trust because readers may assume that any lack of information is due to the narrator's faithfulness to the facts that she knows.

While establishing common ground with her readers, Gaskell simultaneously lobbies for the working class in order to effect social change, even if the change is merely in her readers' hearts and not an action plan for the manufacturing system itself. For her, action on the part of the individual was the most reliable type of change. The narrative voice of her novels is decidedly bourgeois, and use of the first person helps her to make her case. "[A]dmitting what she shares with her readers [middle-class values]," Schor notes, "also gives her the stronger 'I' to convince them of the essential accuracy of her case . . . Her 'I' is present as strongly in passages where a reader aware of the drama of Gaskell's own life may find specific echoes in the text" (41).

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell articulates the position of masters and men for her readers. She explains the disparity the jobless man observes when he sees the employer who laid him off continuing to live lavishly. She then writes:

I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight. But there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting or forgiving those whom (they believe) have caused all this woe. Among these was John Barton. (*MB* 24)

There is a clear sense that she is conveying to her readers that, despite her sympathy for the working-class man, she understands the economic realities – or “the truth” – of labor issues, and, by making this knowledge plain, she builds common ground with her middle-class reader. Calling workers “child-like” and forgetful, the narrator further separates herself and her readers from the subjects of her story, or “these people.”³¹ These moves are strategic, though, because, by ingratiating herself with the reader, she enhances her credibility and, thus, her reader’s likelihood of listening to her when she advocates for the working class. The narrator also gives voice to the feelings and thoughts of workers. Because she carefully articulates that she is expressing what they themselves think, she affords herself greater space for advocacy, for she may be more radical in the opinion that she voices. Because she has already built trust with the reader, her message of sympathy has a greater chance of being taken seriously. In true Gaskell style, the narrator also urges her reader not to take the working class solely as an aggregate but, rather, to evaluate members of this class as *individuals*, as she illustrates that there are good men in this class who have been abused.

³¹ As Schor notes, “Often she [the narrator] seems to be making concessions to her middle-class readers” (41).

Gaskell also uses the first person plural not only to identify with her readers but also simultaneously distance herself from the same working class for which she is advocating. Daly comments that, in *Mary Barton*, this is a “discursive maneuver which implicates the reader in a collective opposition and hostility to that [working] class . . . It is not just her own hands Gaskell is washing. She is inviting her reader to testify that ours are clean too, and offering us various inducements to ensure that they are, such as self-identification with the creative, wise and articulate” (xxvi-xxvii). For example, the narrator writes, “The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies” (*MB* 170). Binding herself to the reader, she underscores that there is shared irritation and fear and that they are shared enemies of the working class. However, it is important to note that, in this same section, she indicts this same middle-class reader (and herself, by association). She writes:

No education had given him [John Barton] wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. He acted to the best of his judgment . . . The actions of the uneducated seem to be typified in those of Frankenstein . . . ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil . . . Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster; yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?
(*MB* 170)

Despite the condescending manner in which she addresses the working class (assigning them inhuman status), the culpability is on the middle-class for it has not tended to the education of the working class and, thus, neglected the nurturing of their souls.³²

³² In a similar instance, Gaskell parenthetically inserts a rhetorical question for her audience: “(Well, who might have made them different?)” (*MB* 182). “[W]ho” refers to the middle-class reader, and “them” is of course the

Mary Barton's narrator supplies first-hand testimony from John Barton to confirm society's neglect of him and others like him. On his deathbed, Barton laments:

“I’ve so often been hankering after the right way; and it’s a hard one for a poor man to find. At least it’s been so to me. No one learned me, and no one telled me. When I was a little chap they taught me to read, and then they never gave no books; only I heard say the Bible was a good book. So when I grew thoughtful, and puzzled, I took to it. But you’d never believe black was black, or night was night, when you saw all about you acting as if black was white, and night was day . . . I would fain have gone after the Bible rules if I’d seen folk credit it; they all spoke up for it, and went and did clean contrary . . . so I grew to think it must be a sham put upon poor ignorant folk, women, and such like.” (*MB* 370-71)

Right living, as Barton contends, is more difficult for the poor than the rich, for the life of the poor man is paved with struggles *and* he lacks the guidance of education in ethics, broadly, and the Gospel, specifically. Not only, though, does Barton indict society for withholding proper education from him but he also indicts the middle class for living as hypocrites who further misguided him. Reasoning that the Bible must be a set of rules to dupe the working class into submission, Barton rejects its principles and elects to defend the ignorant and the poor by fighting (with whatever means possible) for their rights. Though Barton painfully regrets his decisions, their consequences have already played out in the narrative, and the middle-class reader is meant to feel the shame of it. The narrator explicitly links herself to her reader in shared blame for the problems of not only the working class

working class. Once again, culpability is assigned to *Mary Barton's* readers. For an even more sweeping indictment to not only her readers but everyone, see *Mary Barton* 213.

but suffering, more generally: “[Y]ou and I, and almost everyone, I think, may send up our individual cry of self-reproach that we have not done all that we could for the stray and wandering ones of our brethren” (*MB* 269).³³

Gaskell’s narrators also cry out for their characters in order to further build shared sentiment with readers. These laments infuse Gaskell’s novels with *pathos* that engages and indicts the narrator and readers, and this strategy is employed in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*. Most dramatically employed in *Mary Barton*, lamenting is used by the narrator to address the sad societal position of Esther (Mary’s destitute aunt, a fallen woman). The narrator speaks as if Esther can hear her and gain strength from her sentiment. She cries out, “Poor, diseased mind! And there were none to minister to thee!” (*MB* 235). Esther obviously cannot hear her, but her lament builds shared emotion with her readers who are simultaneously being indicted by the narrator for not ministering to the suffering. The narrator brings the reader’s attention to their shared guilt in Esther’s state, for no one would help this fallen woman. Neither the narrator nor the reader, presumably, has shown enough mercy to others. Similarly in *Ruth*, when it is clear that Ruth is dying from fever, the narrator cries out, “Poor, poor Ruth!” (*R* 447). It is not just for Ruth’s death that the narrator laments but rather the way that society has treated her as a fallen woman.³⁴

³³ In *North and South*, the narrator breaks in to remind readers of their responsibility to care for others. Through two rhetorical questions, she summarily issues a charge: “The question always is, has everything been done to make the sufferings of these exceptions as small as possible? Or, in the triumph of the crowded procession, have the helpless been trampled on, instead of being gently lifted aside out of the roadway of the conqueror, whom they have no power to accompany on his march?” (*N&S* 69). No explicit answer is given, but the charge for sympathy and greater consideration is strong.

³⁴ The respective narrators of *Mary Barton* and *North and South* lament for their characters and work to persuade their readers toward sympathy. In *Mary Barton*, the narrator writes, “And Jem Wilson! O Jem, Jem, why did you not come to receive some of the modest looks and words of love which Mary longed to give you” (*MB* 157). Though Jem cannot hear her, her lament builds a shared feeling with her audience who, presumably, is cheering for Jem and Mary to get together. Correspondingly, in *North and South*, the narrator cries out for her heroine. In the middle of free-indirect discourse detailing Mrs. Thornton’s erroneous assumptions about

Not all of Gaskell's narrative strategies that are aimed at effecting social change involve engaging her readers through indictment. In *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, and *Sylvia's Lovers*, the narrators often shift into second person to engage their readers and help them relate to the experiences of the heroines, prompting them to imagine themselves in similar settings and situations. By directly engaging readers this way, Gaskell uses the sympathy that comes from shared experience as a way to advocate for her heroines. The respective narrators of *Mary Barton* and *Sylvia's Lovers* pay particular attention to the way in which their readers consume fiction. By engaging them via the second person, these narrators appeal to their imaginations, relating the settings of their stories to the experiences of the readers. In *Mary Barton*, the narrator writes, "[Y]ou might see here and there . . ." (*MB* 269), virtually putting the reader into the scene. Directly addressing the reader's act of imagining the story, she writes, "[I]f you can picture all this . . . you can form some idea of . . ." (*MB* 15).³⁵ Likewise, the narrator of *Sylvia's Lovers* speaks directly to the reader's act of imagining. When describing a scene, she writes, "I can best make you understand the appearance of the place by bidding you think of . . . [and] fill . . . up in your imagination with . . ." (*SL* 22). The narrator is literally telling the reader what is happening during the act of reading – the reader's imagination is being filled with the story. In a charming instance, the narrator describes a scene by starting with "as you entered the door . . ." (*SL* 53). This not only helps to fill the reader's imagination with the setting but it positions the narrator as a virtual character in the story because of the familiarity the narrator exhibits in the

Margaret, the narrator breaks in with "Poor Margaret!" and then goes on to remind the reader what is in fact true about the heroine (*Ne&S* 315). Gaskell's message is clear: withhold harsh judgments and consider provable facts.

³⁵ For additional examples, see *Mary Barton* 60, 148, 168, 173, 191, 198, 201, 213, 214, 232, 234, 237, 242, 267, 269, 301, 320-321, 339, 347, 354, 373, 378, 379, 380.

descriptions. Additionally, engaging the reader through the use of the second person makes the reader a more active participant in the story and strengthens the story's credibility. In one instance when describing a scene, the narrator writes, "You could see the church stair . . ." (SL 60). In doing so, Gaskell dynamically engages the reader in the story so that she may more readily sympathize with the struggles of the heroine later in the story. In a final instance, this time describing then-modern day Monkshaven, the narrator writes, "[Y]ou may hear the waves come lapping up the shelving shore with the same ceaseless, ever recurrent sound as that which Philip listened to in the pauses between life and death" (SL 450). Telling the reader that the setting of her story is the same today as it was at the time in which her story was set *and* that the reader could experience the same sights and sounds that her characters did appeals to the very *ethos* of her tale.³⁶

Gaskell's most daunting undertaking in using narrative voice to effect social change occurs in *Ruth*. As *Ruth's* narrator lobbies for the purity of a fallen woman, Gaskell understands that her heroine's credibility would be under fire and that she must construct circumstances that will shield Ruth (as much as possible) from rash and unmerciful judgments. Thus, she endows *Ruth's* narrator with the highest level of authority of all the narrators in her novels. *Ruth's* narrator presents Ruth in ways that would have run contrary to readers' expectations. She presents Ruth as innocent, underscoring her lack of worldly experience or guidance, and indicts other characters and the readers themselves instead of Ruth herself. She boldly builds a case of credibility for Ruth that encompasses her *entire* character, not simply her violation of social dictates on sexuality, and she does so by sometimes speaking *for* Ruth. This protects the heroine from the reader second-guessing

³⁶ See also *Mary Barton* 217, 259, 373; *Ruth* 66, 201, 284, 286, 315, 405; and *North and South* 198, 203, 255, 394.

anything from basic plot points to the murkier areas of motivation, for the narrator (the more credible voice) tells the reader what to think. The narrator glosses over Ruth's fall and instead emphasizes her innocence. She explores the tension between embracing nature and embracing God's law, showing readers the complexity of morality and goodness. Finally, the narrator anticipates Ruth's inner change for readers so that they are ready to accept it when Ruth repents. Though all of Gaskell's narrators advocate for their respective heroines to greater or lesser extents, *Ruth's* narrator's advocacy is the most stunning.

First, to build her case, *Ruth's* narrator tells the audience of Ruth's lack of worldly experience, lack of guidance, and consequent need for love. The narrator commands the reader to "Remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was!" (R 56). How motherless can someone be, though? One either has a mother or one does not. As Shelston quips, "[It is] as if in some way there could be degrees of motherlessness" (xv). However, Gaskell is emphatic in drawing the reader's attention to the lack of good guidance in Ruth's life. The narrator criticizes characters who fail in their Christian duty to guide Ruth, from her employer Mrs. Mason³⁷ to Ruth's own father. Gaskell wants her readers to learn that "anyone can sin; that sin is not an absolute; that knowledge itself may be circumstantial" (Schor 70). From her perspective, the supporting characters sinned by deserting Ruth, Ruth's sin was an outcome of this desertion, and the outside world that judges Ruth has no knowledge of these circumstances. Gaskell knew that the culpability of these other characters needed attention because her readers would still assign blame to her heroine. Uglow writes:

³⁷ See *Ruth* 54.

Gaskell attacks those who have contributed to Ruth's fall, denying her "tender vigilance and maternal care" – her careless father, her neglectful guardian, her employer Mrs Mason, her lover Bellingham – and those who condemn her without thought, like Mrs Bellingham and Mr Bradshaw . . . [Gaskell] knew, however, that in most readers' opinions the blame would lie with Ruth herself. For this reason she stresses her heroine's purity. (325)

Before Ruth's fall, the narrator describes Ruth as "innocent and snow-pure" (R 44), and – strikingly – after Ruth's fall, the narrator strives for a similar portrayal of her heroine, as an innocent child of nature. Explaining and defending Ruth's natural desire to be loved, the narrator writes:

It [love] was one of the faults of her nature to be ready to make any sacrifices for those who loved her, and to value affection almost above its price . . . and lonely as the impressible years of her youth had been – without parents, without brother or sister – it was, perhaps, no wonder that she clung tenaciously to every symptom of regard, and could not relinquish the love of anyone without a pang. (R 248)

Gaskell argues that, without experience or guidance, Ruth could not be expected to make calculated or socially acceptable decisions. Until the Bensons, no one took responsibility for Ruth, and it should be no surprise that she sought love in whatever ways it was shown to her.

Second, the narrator herself often takes responsibility for Ruth, absenting Ruth's voice from the narrative and speaking for her. When Ruth engages in sexual activity for the first time, the narrator takes over, leaving Ruth silent. Because the narrator includes no

direct discourse from Ruth regarding her sexuality, Ruth is not given the option to represent her own experience. Thus, if the reader questions the reliability of a narrator who omits information that is relevant to the most important turning point of the narrative (Ruth's fall), the reader's scorn is directed toward the narrator and not Ruth herself. Ruth's ability to bear witness to the events of her life is not questioned as readily because the reader is focused on the narrator's decision to – invoking Genette's helpful terminology – *sidestep* Ruth's fall.³⁸ Ruth is not the one to omit it from the narrative. It is Gaskell. Gaskell narrates in order to move the focus away from Ruth's act and, rather, toward her overall innocent nature. If Ruth is not allowed to narrate her experience, the narrator has greater control over the information that is shared with the reader and the way that it is framed.

Third, Gaskell shifts the reader's focus away from Ruth's fall by having very little actually mark it. The narrator includes it mid-chapter, and, in fact, it is included by *omission*. This way, Ruth need not be unnecessarily exposed in front of the reader. The less socially unacceptable behavior exposed, the less credibility lost for the heroine. The narrator merely remarks, "In this manner they settled down to a week's enjoyment of that Alpine country" (R 65). No "manner" is described. The reader is simply told that Ruth and Bellingham have checked in at an inn. No life-altering decision on the part of Ruth is described, nor is it apparent that Ruth is in any way aware of the line that she has crossed and the way that society will see her. Instead, the narrator immediately lobbies for Ruth's innocence as a child of nature: "It was most true enjoyment to Ruth. It was opening a new sense; vast ideas of beauty and grandeur filled her mind at the sight of the mountains . . . [and] the grandeur of this beautiful earth absorbed all idea of separate and individual existence" (R 65). No

³⁸ A *sidestep* is an omission of an essential part. See Genette 52.

reaction from Ruth regarding her sexual relationship with Bellingham is given. If Ruth were such an innocent child of nature, would she not be at all surprised by the reality of sleeping with Bellingham? Uglow points out that Ruth's innocence threatens her credibility because her actions do not line up with a persona of purity. The reader is forced into believing that either Ruth never heard about sex from her coworkers or that her initial happiness in her fall is not problematic, both unlikely for the typical nineteenth-century reader to believe. Not until Ruth is confronted with the public shame of her actions does she feel shame (325).

Fourth, and to complicate matters, Gaskell focuses on Ruth's need for repentance, even amidst her ongoing advocacy for her purity, and never resolves this tension (Uglow 325). Perhaps this is the very point, though. As Schor notes, Gaskell demonstrates the consequences of Ruth's passive nature: the ideal Victorian woman makes easy prey (63). Instead of directly speaking to the obvious paradox that is presented before the reader, Gaskell purposely conflates Ruth's fall with nature itself. Ruth is beautiful, nature is beautiful, and Ruth embracing nature (i.e., *her* nature) is a sympathetic course of events. By glossing over Ruth's illicit experiences, Gaskell sought to decrease damage to her heroine's character in the eyes of her readers. On one of her jaunts in nature, she interacts with a little boy who exclaims to his nurse that "She's not a lady! . . . She's a bad naughty girl – mamma said so . . . Go away, naughty woman" (R 71-72). Gaskell had given Ruth no natural sense of shame for her actions; rather, it takes society marking Ruth as "bad" *and* ostracizing her to give her reason for pause. The narrator describes Ruth's reaction: "She could not put into words the sense she was just beginning to entertain of the estimation in which she was henceforward to be held" (R 72-73). Ruth is shocked that her acceptance of what she saw as natural love is reviled by society, even by children.

Lastly, the narrator prepares the reader for Ruth's repentance so that, when it happens, the reader is ready to accept it as believable and, thus, credible. As the narrative progresses, Ruth has a new-found awareness that she has stepped outside society's boundaries. The narrator writes, "And then she remembered, that she was once white and sinless . . . and she knew that she had gone astray" (R 151). Gaskell emphasizes Ruth's previous state of purity (*à la* Unitarianism's belief that babies were without sin) and her acknowledgment that she has done wrong. This acknowledgment is key because, earlier in the narrative, the narrator writes, "She had no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence; no knowledge of any one circumstance but that he [Bellingham] was gone" (R 94).

Instead of having Ruth be first to declare her penitence, the narrator quietly describes her internal realization. By testifying to Ruth's experience *in* Ruth's place, the narrator serves as her advocate, quietly presenting her before the reader as repentant sinner – a repentant sinner who once was "white and sinless" and presumably close to being so again with just a bit of understanding and sympathy from her fellow characters and from the readers whom Gaskell hoped would relate to her heroine. After all, as Schor notes, "[A]s a Christian heroine, she is already fallen . . . her sexual sin is only an acting out of the sin of *all* men" (66, emphasis added). Just a few moments later in the narrative, Ruth's heart is convicted, and she kneels publicly in church, quietly saying to herself, "Father! I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy child!" (R 154). The reader already has had a few moments to get used to Ruth's contrition and, therefore, is more prepared to accept it as credible when she verbalizes it.

As Ruth lives with the Bensons, she finds significance in living a good life, though even she herself cannot quite articulate the change. The narrator observes: "But the strange

change was in Ruth herself. She was conscious of it though she could not define it, and did not dwell upon it. Life had become significant and full of duty to her” (R 191). The narrator is left to articulate Ruth’s inner-change by describing her goodness. As Ruth nurses the sick, the narrator describes her as almost a crusader, imbuing her words with the power to ferry others to Heaven. She writes, “She did not talk much about religion; but those who noticed her knew that it was the unseen banner which she was following. The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God” (R 391). Uttering words that guide others to eternal life is no small feat and is the most power given to any of Gaskell’s heroines. Ruth’s goodness works to a literal fever pitch, for she is so good that she nurses Bellingham, contracts his fever, and literally dies of her goodness. For Gaskell, Ruth will be judged mercifully by God, but her temporal status as a fallen woman unjustly marks her for death.

By imbuing *Ruth*’s narrator with so much authority that she speaks for the heroine and boldly describes this fallen woman as innocent, Gaskell stunningly adapts the narrative voice of this novel to advocate in ways that were not only unorthodox for the nineteenth century but that initially shocked readers. In social problem novels such as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Gaskell sought to start a conversation between social classes – to bridge the gap between ways of thinking and ways of living. Offering a strategic solution to the manufacturing system was not the point. In *Ruth*, issues of labor are put aside for an even more direct conversation about how individuals treat one another, how individuals *should* treat one another. No massive societal shift is demanded. Rather, the most significant change for which Gaskell lobbies is internal conversion in her readers that they may look at one another as she believed God looks at them – lovingly. Persuading readers, one at a time,

of the need to show sympathy to one another is precisely the type of incremental social change that Gaskell sought.

Conclusion

For Gaskell, storytelling was a pastime, and it was often how she passed her most enjoyable times with friends and family. *Writing*, however, was an imperative, and it was the way that she communicated her project of sympathy to the reading public. For her, writing had ethical responsibilities, and these responsibilities shaped the way she plotted her stories, characterized her heroines, and narrated her tales. Providing credible female truth-tellers made demands on plotting and characterization, which might have, at times, impeded her narrative technique. However, to assume that she would not have noticed this is to dismiss the evidence of the wit and subtlety that she demonstrated amongst her friends and in her letters. Shortly after her death, *Cornhill* editor Frederick Greenwood wrote that she was “one of the kindest and wisest [women] of her time” (qtd. in Gaskell, *W&D* 650).¹ Though she of course gained experience and confidence as she wrote each novel, Gaskell would have had an awareness of the sometimes stilted moments in her early novels. She sought, however, to achieve a different kind of literary good, which did not always allow for the ease of the kind of prose that, for example, *Wives and Daughters* contains.

In her social problem novels, the issues that Gaskell tackles were awkward – and often unspoken – social sins. For instance, how does one address the injustice done to the fallen woman when even opening such a discussion reflects poorly on one’s character? How does one tell a story that is off limits? Such constraints resulted in Gaskell’s crafting her own kinds of stories – stories that allow female characters to speak and act credibly, to challenge authority, and to garner understanding. Jenny Uglow writes, “There are, however, routes to survival – of the spirit if not of the body: the support of other women, servants, friends,

¹ Greenwood makes this comment in an extended Note at the end of *Wives and Daughters*. Because Gaskell died before she wrote the last chapter (or column), the *Cornhill* editor wrote a summary on how the novel likely would have concluded (based on Gaskell’s notes) as well as a tribute to Gaskell herself.

mothers, and the shelter of nurturing men. Speech can be regained, authority challenged Defiance, as well as sympathy, is a central message of Gaskell's writing" (475). In Gaskell's fiction, she presents models (both good and bad) of women supporting other women as well as of women judging one another quickly and harshly. She allows space for female speech and challenges the authority of socially accepted norms. Her writing is marked by defiance as it allows female characters pivotal roles, credibility as speakers of truth, and advocacy from narrators.

The characters who live truthfully and show mercy to others are those whom Gaskell uses as models for her readers so that they may see others the way that she imagines God sees them. Thus, by showing compassion, the readers experience lasting change that is internal and that, potentially, has eternal ramifications. In her fiction, she sought to create exemplars of careful judgments, executed with compassion and an eye toward God. She writes *of* redeemable characters and *for* redeemable readers. Greenwood comments specifically on her later fiction:

While you read any one of the last three books we have named [*Wives and Daughters*, *Cousin Phillis*, and *Sylvia's Lovers*], you feel yourself caught out of an abominable wicked world, crawling with selfishness and reeking with base passions, into one where there is much weakness, many mistakes, sufferings long and bitter, but where it is possible for people to live calm and wholesome lives; and, what is more, you feel that this is at least as real a world as the other . . . [W]hile we read them [Gaskell's pages], we breathe the purer intelligence which prefers to deal with emotions and passions which

have a living root in minds within the pale of salvation, and not with those which rot without it. (qtd. in Gaskell, *W&D* 650)

While her vision extends beyond the temporal limits of earthly experience, her writing faces the mortal world head on. Her stories are of characters in circumstances both dire and familiar yet all “within the pale of salvation,” for she never loses sight of the redemption of her heroines in the eyes of their fellow characters and their readers.

Encouraging sympathy in her readers and motivating them to pause before rushing to judgment not only in reading fiction but more importantly in their real lives were moral imperatives for Gaskell. Using *Wives and Daughters* as a case study, we see her creation of Molly as a heroine who embodies truth and demonstrates to her female readership, especially, the foolishness of destroying their sister women when the chance for gossip and judgment arises. Molly represents a more normal case of female experience than, say, Ruth or Sylvia, so she is familiar to her middle-class readers. In this novel, characters often conceal the truth from those around them in an effort to selflessly protect them or to selfishly further their own ends. From hidden characteristics of characters to secret relationships, the narrative forces the characters and the readers to piece together evidence of the truth. The suspense often depends on how much information any given character has or seeks out at various points. Thus, lies abound and are passed between town gossips, as the townspeople are often satisfied with simply hearsay evidence. Believing information that is freely passed around instead of using their own discernment or investigating the context, the townspeople are more interested with their own stories, or versions, of reality. These characters stand in for Gaskell’s readers. By showing them how devastating such hearsay and quick judgments can be, Gaskell sought to inspire greater discernment in them. If even

Molly, who is described *as* truth, can be brought down by seemingly idle talk, surely the average real-life woman could fall prey to the appearance of wrongdoing as well as vicious tongues.

Even though *Wives and Daughters* is often seen as a departure from Gaskell's other novels, it continues her project of advocacy. Instead of lobbying for heroines with extreme hardships, she advocates for bourgeois women (young women, specifically) who are struggling to find their voice in everyday conversation, and their parents are her audience – her jurors. While the townspeople and Cynthia specifically are scheming, Molly and Lady Harriet serve as models of the sympathetic and measured way that persons should be treated as well as judged, and, thus, Gaskell incorporates her agenda of promoting female advocacy and, more broadly, exploring the complex role of women in society.

From Gaskell's viewpoint, women should treat others, particularly other women, with understanding. Molly and Lady Harriet investigate the truth of the various situations they encounter and use gentle judgments with others, Molly toward Cynthia and Lady Harriet toward Molly. Both women willingly act as credible advocates and truth-tellers, representing other women. Because of Molly's advocacy for Cynthia with Preston (a middle-class man on the make), gossip ignites with the townspeople of Hollingford that Molly is having an affair with him. As Lady Harriet describes, “[T]he busy tongues of the Hollingford ladies have been speaking of my friend, Miss [Molly] Gibson, in the most unwarrantable manner; drawing unjustifiable inferences from the facts of that intercourse with Mr. Preston . . .” (*W&D* 532). Even before Lady Harriet launches her own investigation into the matter, she chooses to have faith in Molly, giving her the benefit of the doubt (something that many in the town did not care to give her). Lady Harriet states, “But

I choose to have faith in Molly Gibson” (*W&D* 520). By interrogating Preston to confirm what she already suspects, Lady Harriet has assurance of no wrongdoing on Molly’s part and, rather, of caddish behavior on the part of Preston. It takes the intervention of this aristocratic lady to salvage Molly’s reputation.

Lady Harriet uses her own reputation as well as her body to publicly vouch for Molly. Casually stopping by Molly’s home, Lady Harriet asks her to spend part of the day with her. Unaware of the public advocacy from which she was about to benefit, Molly accompanies Lady Harriet around town. Lady Harriet knows that having Molly at her side will help to clear her name of any suspicion of wrongdoing. Lady Harriet purposefully walks around the town twice, loitering at popular locations, so that all can see Molly’s respectability. Lady Harriet then goes one step further and invites Molly’s step-mother to the Cumnor’s manor to erase any doubt that might remain in the minds of the townspeople.

Gaskell is especially targeting her female readers and charging them to follow Lady Harriet’s example, for she takes the time to be a truth-teller instead of merely a conveyer of falsehoods. She uses discretion, uncovers the truth, and advocates for her sister woman. In short, her beliefs lead to *action*. Interestingly, despite Lady Harriet’s advocacy, Molly must endure one more cleansing of her reputation – sickness. Near the end of the narrative, Molly weathers a sickness, after which the town has nothing but affection for her. As strong and credible as female advocacy was for Gaskell, the reality of real-life skepticism in female testimony made her turn once again to a physical trial to cleanse her heroine fully.

Cynthia is the type of character who might have confirmed a nineteenth-century reader’s skepticism in women’s speech and credibility. This, though, is only the outer shell of Cynthia’s character. Gaskell infuses her with complexity, with her own type of discretion.

Cynthia usually fulfills her role as the fickle step-sister of Molly, who must often attend to her whims and help Cynthia escape from the consequences of situations that she creates. However, Cynthia has figured out the performative aspects of gender and uses this knowledge to navigate the difficult financial and familial circumstances in which she finds herself. She chooses (and this awareness is key) when to model behavior that society deems masculine (e.g., being inconstant in love) and when to model behavior that society deems feminine (e.g., playing the part of the heroine for whomever is courting her). Her awareness that she is playing a role (rather than faithfully and perhaps unknowingly living out what society *expects*) causes her to live less truthfully than Molly (Morris xxiii). *Cornhill* editor Frederick Greenwood asserts, “Cynthia is one of the most difficult characters which have ever been attempted in our time” (qtd. in Gaskell, *W&D* 650).

Cynthia’s place in the narrative is complex because Molly is shown to be her clear moral superior, as Molly’s wisdom and discretion are constantly remarked upon while Cynthia is depicted as flighty. However, Gaskell slips in moments in which readers are forced to re-evaluate both Cynthia’s character and their assumptions about gender and credibility. To her step-father, Mr. Gibson (Molly’s father), Cynthia remarks, “Yes I do [want her future husband to think her faultless] . . . I couldn’t bear to have to tell him I’m sorry, and stand before him like a chidden child to be admonished and forgiven” (*W&D* 548). Pam Morris notes, “[N]o nineteenth-century novel contains a more devastating rejection than this of the Victorian male assumption of moral authority” (xxiv). Gaskell thus has Cynthia advocate for *all* women – that they may be seen as man’s equal, not children “to be admonished and forgiven.”

Though Cynthia navigates society in less conventionally truthful ways than Molly, she does so in order to survive in society the way it actually *is*. This is the realistic truth to which Cynthia's character is molded. In fact, Cynthia delivers Gaskell's own mission statement. When confessing to Molly why she is indebted financially to Preston, Cynthia wisely remarks, "How easy it is to judge rightly after one sees what evil comes from judging wrongly" (*W&D* 468). This is perhaps the most concise statement of the governing principle in Gaskell's writing, and Gaskell has one of her most seemingly flawed female characters declare it. Cynthia is a model of the type of cliché behavior that Gaskell would have advised her female readers to avoid. However, Cynthia embodies the complexities of a real person who is confronting her place in society. Though her character is flawed, she reflects humanity's fallibility, and this underscores that even persons with flawed character can speak truth, which was essential to Gaskell's mission as a writer.

For Gaskell, following her vocation meant convincing her readers that sympathetic and unbiased judgments of her characters must be translatable to their neighbors. Individual conversion was essential. Social change, she reasoned, would come from individuals thinking and then acting with compassion toward one another, and – for her – this began at home with her own daughters. She sought understanding (and a sisterhood) among women, and this understanding was to be based on well-informed viewpoints. Her promotion of such characteristics in women is evident in her creation of a character such as Molly Gibson as well as in her personal interactions with her daughters.

Gaskell encouraged her daughters to have discretion and well-informed opinions on important matters. In one of her letters to her daughter, Marianne, she wrote: "I like you to take an interest in politics because I like you to have many & wide interests but I want you to

give *good* reasons for all your opinions or else you become a mere partizan” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 832).² The letter charmingly skips from subject to subject (as is the case with most of her letters), and the advice to become informed is wedged between entertaining anecdotes and everyday minutia. However, her message to her daughter is clear. Just weeks later, Gaskell disapproved of opinions that Marianne was forming, so she lectured her to become informed on issues by reading various tracts and books, namely Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.³ Further, she wrote:

Seriously, dear, you must not become a *partizan* in politics or in anything else, – you must have a “reason for the faith that is in you”, – and not in three weeks suppose you can know enough to form an opinion about measures of state. That is one reason why so many people dislike that women should meddle with politics; they say it is a subject requiring long patient study of many branches of science; and a logical training which few women have had, – that women are apt to take up a thing without being even able to state their reasons clearly, and yet on that insufficient knowledge they take a more violent and bigoted stand than thoughtful *men* dare to do. Have as many and as large and varied interests as you can; but do not again give a decided opinion on a subject on which you can at present know nothing. About yr bonnet get it *large*, and trimmed (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 148)⁴

² The letter is dated March 10, 1851. See also Chapple and Pollard 148.

³ In a letter dated April 7, 1851, Gaskell wrote to Marianne: “Pray *why* do you wish a Protectionist Ministry not to come in? Papa and I want terribly to know. Before you fully make up your mind, read a paper in the Quarterly on the subject of Free Trade, (written by Mr George Taylor) in (I think) the year 1839; and then when you come home I will read with you Mr Cobden’s speeches[.] But first I think we should read together Adam Smith on the Wealth of Nations” (qtd. in Chapple and Pollard 147-48).

⁴ The letter is dated April 7, 1851.

Two important issues surface in this letter: Gaskell's lack of patience for ill-informed women and her nurturing affection for her daughter(s). First, Gaskell clearly has little patience for women who voice ignorant opinions, either from lack of experience or from lack of good reading. Judgments must come from a profound understanding, and, according to her, women do their entire sex a disservice by spouting uninformed yet vehement views. Second, her affection for Marianne (and all her daughters) is evident in her desire for her to be thoughtful as well as industrious in forming her beliefs. Gaskell wants Marianne to represent herself with respectability and credibility, and, more broadly, she wants her to represent her entire sex credibly – to resist submitting to the mold of female ignorance that Gaskell decries. In true Gaskell form, she (without skipping a beat) jumps from talking about the abstract to the practical, giving Marianne advice about her bonnet (an endearingly motherly move as she provides for her daughter's well-being on multiple fronts). Her letter to her daughter is a snapshot of the nurturing way that Gaskell approaches her readers. Instructing and even admonishing when necessary, Gaskell maintains an endearing familiarity with her readers that allows her to get away with convicting them one moment and entertaining them the next.

In each of her novels, Gaskell presents evidence of the credibility of truth-telling female characters, and she charges her reading jury with the responsibility of using Christian charity when judging one another. Therefore, it is fitting to conclude with the verse from Zachariah that she cites in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Philip Hepburn attends the trial of Sylvia's father and writes to her of its proceedings. In one such letter, he describes the sermon that was preached before the trial. The sermon text is Zachariah 7:9: "Execute true judgment and show mercy" (*SL* 280). Though in the story this message is intended for Daniel Robson's

judge, it undoubtedly doubles as a charge to Gaskell's readers. Using the words of *the* Judge, she quotes Scripture to invoke the ultimate authority.

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