Attacking the Angel: Alternate Forms of Victorian Femininity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, *Cranford*, and *North and South*

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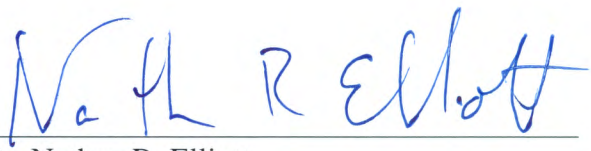

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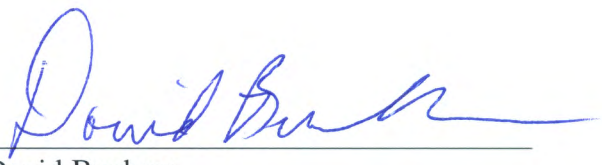

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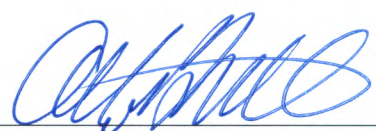

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: HOW TRADITIONAL FEMININITY FALLS FLAT

Although Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell's writing had a large readership in her lifetime, she has been categorized as one of those lesser-known Victorian authors, and has only gained significant critical attention over the past twenty years. Even then, the popular focus has been on what critics deem her "lesser fiction" such as *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*. But in all her works, Gaskell demonstrated concern for the role of women in society and, especially, the role of the mother. She wrote a diary throughout her children's childhood detailing her daily struggles and successes; additionally, she wrote many letters on the subject of rearing her children, attending to the poor, and household management. Because of this, many critics have holed her as a "traditional" Victorian woman, contented with her role, and not radical enough for serious study. However, Gaskell was rather unconventional for her time, especially in her opinions on child-rearing, her politics, and her attention to charity. Her fictions are rich with female characters, representing different versions of womanhood from weak women to strong ones. Modern critics like Deanna Davis in "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell" have attempted to bring Gaskell's literature to a more prominent place by discussing Gaskell's relationship to feminist criticism, but it is important to bring Gaskell to prominence in her own right, by celebrating the very thing that feminist critics have ignored: her embrace of feminine duty by creating women who

prodded the boundaries of acceptable femininity, not weak heroines, but females with requisite strengths.

Susan Morgan in “Gaskell’s Heroines and the Power of Time” notes that Gaskell criticism has not fared well because critics often viewed Gaskell with a gender bias believing that “women novelists…describe their worlds rather than invent them, that their talents lie in their clarity of vision transposed into their fiction” (43-44). However, reporting experience is an adept way of capturing reality and moving it into fiction. Although she has been dismissed as overly domestic, these critics ignore that Gaskell, in “describ[ing]” her world, can directly represent Victorian society. Miriam Allott in her discussion of Gaskell’s life and work in *Elizabeth Gaskell* dismisses Gaskell’s temperament as “uncomplicated,” someone who “remained happy,” and, she even goes as far to claim Gaskell was “not a thinker, or … an ‘intellectual’” (7-8). David Cecil in *Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, saw Gaskell's marital and motherly happiness as embodying the Victorian ideal:

> In an age whose ideal of women emphasized the feminine qualities at the expense of all others, she 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. (Cecil 184)

Cecil's argument, however, reduces Gaskell's relationship with her family and Victorian tradition and Allott too makes unfounded assumptions. In fact, even though Gaskell embodied the rare Victorian woman who felt satisfied and contented in her role as mother and wife, her true attention to these duties as well as her unconventional opinions

separated her from many of her contemporaries. Robert Selig, attempting to rescue Gaskell's reputation in his late 1970s comprehensive study, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference Guide*, remarked that Gaskell had "rapid acceptance during her lifetime as a major novelist, a sharp fall after her death to a prolonged lower status as a charming semi-classic, and a fairly recent return toward major rank" (vii). Unlike Selig's prediction, Gaskell did not gain a "major rank" and is still only emerging over the last forty years or so into a more prominent position because of feminist critic's lack of attention. Selig maintains, "Gaskell ranks . . . with George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Anthony Trollope as a novelist of provincial life who treated large human issues with honesty, insight, and art" (vii). It is this "art" that needs to be celebrated and examined.

Deanna Davis in "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell" provides theories on Gaskell's near expulsion from feminist-literary circles: she claims that it was too reductive to "dismiss" Gaskell as a lesser writer in comparison with "her more acclaimed cohorts" (507). She continues, "The manner in which she has been dismissed suggests that Gaskell's treatment by feminist critics has more to do with the psychology and politics of feminist criticism than with any real lack in Gaskell's fiction" (Davis 507). Here Davis places the blame on the critics themselves. Critics like Gilbert and Gubar, Cecil, Newton, Basch, and Showalter ignored Gaskell's contribution to feminist ideologies. Pivotal feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* only mention Gaskell five times in their work, mostly in reference to other authors (Gilbert and Gubar 70-71, 151, 205, 206, 484). In one flippant mention, Gilbert and Gubar claim that female "factory novels" paint "ostensibly disinterested

examinations of larger public issues," and the other references to Gaskell portray her as unsympathetic (205, 484). Lord David Cecil's depictions are not more favorable; in *Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, he notes what he sees as Gaskell's limitations, "Mrs. Gaskell's sex and circumstances limited her range of subjects as they limited her range of mood. Confined as she was to her Victorian drawing room, there was a great deal of the world that she could not see, a great deal highly characteristic of it; and a great deal that Dickens and Thackeray and the rest of them saw clearly" (Cecil 194). Judith Lowder Newton in *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860,* claims that Gaskell "celebrates the ideology of woman's sphere" and "presents us with a version of woman's sphere which sees it as natural and as given" (Newton 164). Davis comments that Françoise Basch and Elaine Showalter "seem genuinely puzzled by Gaskell's continued allegiance to some of the most restricting codes with which the Victorian women were faced, though they are unwilling to write off this literary woman as a mere pawn of patriarchy" (Davis 517). Showalter felt paying attention to minor writers was vital since they are "links in the chain that bound one generation to the next," creating "the continuities in women's writing" (Showalter 7). All of these assessments of Gaskell are reductive and ignore the strengths her works have—strong female characters who both break from and adhere to traditional femininity.

In recent years, Patsy Stoneman's work in the Key Women Writer's Series, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, was "the first major full-length feminist study of Gaskell." Stoneman reveals what the traditional Victorian woman looked like: "...historical research reveals the typical Victorian women as 'a mental and moral cripple, incapable of informed and independent judgment, timid, deferential...vacuous...a slave to conventional opinion, to

class prejudice, and to a narrow and bigoted morality. Above all she was a slave to the great shibboleth of propriety'" (Trudgill qtd. in Stoneman 21). Stoneman posits that Gaskell's mere act of writing separates her from the rest and separates her from this traditional role: she claims that a Victorian writer "was not a 'typical Victorian woman" and cites Gaskell's letters and how they "give a delightful sense of her lively and energetic life-style. By contemporary standards she was unconventional; she boasts of eating, walking and blowing her nose, all of which *The New Female Instructor* finds 'indelicate'" (Stoneman 21-22). Stoneman notes that Gaskell's letters reveal her awareness of her unconventionality, yet "the 'separate sphere' which could be a prison could also be, within its limits, a field for autonomous action, producing odd contradictions in women's lives" (Stoneman 22). Stoneman discusses a letter of Gaskell's detailing her busy life, but Gaskell remarks how she pities those who are not so busy; it is evident Gaskell valued women's domestic duties and activities above idleness (Stoneman 23). Stoneman claims that Gaskell's Unitarian background accounts for this attitude: both Gaskell's father and husband belonged to this faith, a faith that believed that people were rational and could attain a "'perfect state in this world'" (Stoneman 24). Unitarians placed emphasis "on reason and individual responsibility meaning that no group of people could be regarded as properly under the dominion of another" (Stoneman 24); she continues, "Children, for instance, were educated through games and discussion rather than rote-learning...and Unitarian women were 'released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women'" (Stoneman 24). Already Gaskell's early life rendered her less than ordinary. Gaskell's father was unafraid to express his political feelings and gave up preaching and became a "farmer and later a journalist, writing

articles on education and political economy," all of which left an impression on Gaskell (Stoneman 24). Gaskell also greatly admired Florence Nightingale despite Nightingale's indifference to women's rights (Stoneman 27). Stoneman hypothesizes, "All [Gaskell's] comments assume that girls and women have natural 'home duties'; hers is a rosy version of the life which nearly drove Florence Nightingale mad" (Stoneman 28). Additionally, "All the Gaskell daughters were expected to understand the work of the household . . . and to take charge on occasion" (Stoneman 31). Thus, even though Gaskell did, as early feminist critics pointed out, adhere to *some* traditional conventions of Victorian femininity, her upbringing and ideologies made her distinctive from those women around her. This dissimilarity of views is evident in her works.

Born Elizabeth Stevenson in Chelsea, London on 29 September 1810, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell grew up with and was educated by an aunt, Mrs. Lumb, in the rural town of Knutsford, Cheshire after her mother's death and was later sent to boarding school for five years at Stratford-on-Avon.[1] She was the wife of Reverend William Gaskell, a lecturer, educator, and Unitarian minister of Cross Street Chapel in Manchester. Although she later kept company with many writers, Elizabeth Gaskell did not become a writer until she was thirty-eight. The Gaskell household was frequented by writers such as Ruskin, Dickens, and Carlyle, and she kept correspondence with Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Eliot Norton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Wetmore Story, a sculptor (Allott 13). Carlyle and Charles Kingsley were admirers of her work. Gaskell was surrounded both by educated people and by efforts to bring education to the working classes. Easson remarks that Unitarian education was "highly developed and broadminded" and the educated people Gaskell met were

[1] For more biographical information see Gérin, Rubenius, Easson, Hopkins, and Chapple and Pollard.

highly important and influential to her (18). Gaskell was aware of efforts to bring education to the working class including "individual efforts like that of Sir Benjamin Heywood and Miles Platting … [and] David Winstanley" who opened charity schools, and William Gaskell later taught at the Working Men's College founded in 1858 (Easson 19). The Manchester Literary and Philosophical society, whose focus was advancements in literature and science, had a room in William Gaskell's chapel for their use and Elizabeth Gaskell maintained the reading room there (Easson 19). Gaskell found time to write after her daily chores and duties of motherhood were complete as well as on her holidays, and her husband helped her edit her works (Easson 43-44). Through her experiences, it is evident Gaskell valued education, household duties, and caring for those less fortunate.

Gaskell's re-envisioned femininity creates a role for *all* women in Victorian society by realistically establishing that no one version of femininity exists. Gaskell sympathized with the poverty-stricken plight of Manchester's working-class poor in mid-Victorian England. As a result, she penned several overtly political novels addressing social issues concerning not only the poor but also the middle to upper classes—the hungry forties, industrialization, prostitution, modernization, the place of women, and so forth. However, Gaskell considered her first obligation her family and her second responsibility her writing. Aside from her political agenda—public awareness of often unreported social problems—Gaskell, like many of her contemporaries, hoped to preserve the Victorian family unit, but Gaskell does so by crafting more appropriate models of Victorian femininity—models disparate from those represented in other Victorian literatures. Elizabeth Gaskell in her novels, *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford*

(1851, 1853), and *North and South* (1855) points out the pitfalls and unrealistic expectations of traditional Victorian femininity and refashions her model to create a woman who can serve as an acceptable role model, not only for society but also for her children, a woman who can prepare society for the impending changes brought about by nineteenth century modernization.

To Gaskell, the traditional Angel in the House[2] (the model for ideal Victorian femininity) only served as an imperfect and unattainable model for married women or women in the marriageable class—the middle to upper classes—unrealistically perpetuated by the male ideal. Generally drawn from the middle to upper-classes, the Angel in the House represented and aided many aspects of Victorian life. First of all, she was the doting wife; second, a caretaker to her children; and, third, the model for all future, virtuous women to follow. The Victorians believed that corruption of society's individuals could easily result in the destruction of the integral family unit, and the Angel in the House existed—albeit a theoretical misconception—as the moral compass for the family. All familial actions revolved around her ability to make the family group run smoothly and efficiently, like cogs in a giant, societal clock. However, throughout literary history, the traditional Angel in the House, being fundamentally too weak to withstand societal pressures and to fulfill those three roles assigned to her, deteriorated into a heap of uselessness. Furthermore, women outside of those circles—those who remained unmarried—were considered unnatural; lower-class and working women were excluded

[2] "The Angel in the House" is a term coined by Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Wife's Tragedy," published in 1854. Gaskell published both *Mary Barton* and *Cranford* before this term was applied (Patmore 104).

entirely.[3] But Gaskell had sympathies for *all* women and felt *all* women needed a place in society since women were at the heart of the family, married or not.

By presenting a model for alternative versions of Victorian femininity, a model counter to the unattainable and unrealistic model of femininity, Gaskell does not create a radical new version of femininity or of wifehood, but instead a new look at how women can reconcile all of their roles—role as mother, wife, community member, political activist, and so forth—without sacrificing themselves to oppressive patriarchal rule, and without losing their femininity. Gaskell, moreover, created several representations of female figures that all women could aspire to be, demonstrating the disparate versions of femininity not covered by the Angel in the House model. Just as no single version of masculinity was presented as perfect and right, no single version of femininity, Gaskell argues, fits all women.

Critics discuss how Gaskell approached women differently than other writers in her time period.[4] First of all, she has strong and intelligent heroines[5] who enter into the

[3] See Alexander, Matus, and Poovey. See Matus for discussions of women's place in society, especially lower-class women. Women in the lower-classes, especially, were considered morally deprived and un-motherly for working outside of the home (Matus 59). Alexander discusses the role of the seamstress in industrial fiction and the marginal role of the lower-class woman (29-30). Matus notes how it was a woman's role to regulate and preserve the family; however, the factory system was often blamed for exploiting lower-class women (58-61). Poovey's argument focuses on the working and living conditions of the 1840s and discusses how female novelists felt they were more qualified to write on these topics, but it brought into relief the problem that women were writing about political issues, usually reserved for men (508-509).

[4] For more information about how Gaskell discussed women differently than other writers see Mann, Poovey (refer to footnote 4), Matus (refer to footnote 2 and 4), Jannson, and Stoneman. Mann discusses Margaret Hale's intelligence and interest in public problems, which was unusual for her time (24). Jannson sees Gaskell as creating "problem heroines" with undefined positions (65-66). Stoneman says that Gaskell embarked on her daughter's educational journey differently than most Victorian mothers (qtd. in Croskery 209).

[5] According to Mann, "Margaret Hale differs from other Victorian heroines in having what I may call 'abstract' or 'objective,' as distinct from 'personal' or 'feminized' intelligence, and both writer and heroine violate traditional expectations by dealing with matters of public interest as well as what Ian Watt has called the sphere of 'private experience.' Other Victorian conventions, however, to which Mrs. Gaskell consciously adhered, make this externally directed intelligence positively incompatible with an equally intelligent self-knowledge" (24). Mann compares Margaret Hale to other heroines such as Amelia Sedley,

public sphere of men while remaining productive in the private sphere of women. [6] Secondly, Gaskell's heroines lie on the periphery of defined femininity. Some critics even claim her heroines are in "undefined" positions as they relate to class, marital status, and occupation.[7] Furthermore, critics suggest that Gaskell creates an "idealized Victorian maiden."[8] Gaskell uses some popular figures in her literature—such as the seamstress—in order to emphasize points and remain in line with the social protest novels of her time[9]; however, Gaskell deals favorably with other figures often marginalized such as the fallen women and lower-class women in general.[10] By combining these theories with philosophies rendered from snippets of Gaskell's life, one can easily imagine Gaskell creating an alternative feminine role model through her novels, a female figure that does not necessarily represent one singly "idealized" womanhood but instead several figures that fall on a gender-spectrum of femininity—not a catch-all model inadequately presented by the Angel in the House. Gaskell sought to alter women's upbringing and treatment in Victorian society—by emphasizing education, awareness, and action—in order to create a productive society. Without over-idealizing, Gaskell's theoretical society of women would allow room for *all* women in the clockwork of the social strata from the often de-humanized and "immoral" lower-class female, to the comfortable and socially ignorant middle-class woman, to the over-idealized and pampered upper-class dame, and

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Esther Summerson, Dora Spenlow, Eleanor Harding and even traditionally "stronger" females like Agnes Wickfield, Glencora Palliser, and even Dorothea Brook (27).

[6] For more on Gaskell and the public sphere/private sphere subject see Colby, Yeazell, Alexander, Langland, Brown, Parker, Matus, and Harman.

[7] See Jansson (66), Yeazell (126), and Harman (369) who all label some of Gaskell's female characters as "undefined."

[8] The term comes from Nancy Mann (38).

[9] See Alexander (29-30) and Matus (57-61) for further discussion.

[10] Innumerable critics discuss the fallen woman topic as it pertains to Gaskell. See Auerbach, Armstrong, Jannson, Alexander, Valverde, Morse, and Matus for more information.

even the oft ignored spinster woman; in Gaskell's world all are needed for their disparate, yet important roles.

In Chapter Two on *North and South,* "Existing in the Grey: An Expanded Role for Victorian Women in *North and South*," I see Gaskell creating her epitome of a model in Margaret Hale, a woman who could experience the full range of Gaskell's femininity due to her privilege. She could be educated, charitable, understanding, strong, and in control of her life—all of the qualities Gaskell valued—and she could even choose her own appropriate husband. I place Gaskell's strongest example of alternative femininity first because as a middle-to-upper-class woman, Margaret Hale observes firsthand the type of women to become the traditional Angels in the House, and Margaret herself falls in this category. In presenting how Gaskell mends the problem of traditional femininity by exposing its pitfalls, she demonstrates the model's inadequacy for those whom the model is intended. In this way the reader can fully realize what the model consisted of, and, with this in mind, how this model will not and does not work for the lower classes and spinster women discussed in later chapters. In *North and South* criticism, Pearl Brown in "From Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Mary Barton' to Her 'North and South': Progress or Decline for Women?" agrees that Margaret Hale has strengths disparate from typical heroines: "Gaskell has created a character with more than enough of the requisite strengths to take control of her life" (347). Brown comments on Margaret's atypical privilege, "[she] has had an unusually wide range of experiences for a young middle-class woman, having known first hand the genteel wealth of London society, the rural poverty of Helstone, and both urban poverty and affluence in Milton Northern" (354). But Margaret's experience and education can serve as a vicarious education for the reader

him or herself; the reader, who in the Victorian era would consist of the middle to upper classes, can learn from Margaret and progress as she does. Several critics see Gaskell placing Margaret outside of the typical feminine sphere and into the world of men; however, Gaskell demonstrates the importance of both spheres for women. She does not simply take women into the world of men to comment that it is not their place; she illustrates that women belong in both worlds. Nancy Mann in "Intelligence and Self-Awareness in 'North and South': A Matter of Sex and Class" suggests that Margaret Hale is "shown as being vitally interested in public questions, and as having and expressing, in equal conversation with men, definite and respect-worthy opinions on these questions" (24). Deanna Davis in "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell" interprets Gaskell's relationship to motherhood and social progress: "Herself the mother of four daughters, Gaskell prized women's actual maternal functions while envisioning a more extended social role for women exercising these functions outside the family" (508). Davis offers that Gaskell took her skills as a mother and applied them to the socially minded aspects of her life. Gaskell felt that women should be engaged in both household management and activity outside the home in order to lead fulfilled lives. Other critics such as Bodenheimer, Elliot, and Hotz also examine Margaret Hale in terms of her mediations between politics in the masculine realm and her typical place in the home.[11] Critics who consult on the Angel in the House such as Elizabeth

[11] For further discussions of public versus private sphere see Rosmarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fictio*n which notes that "Gaskell creates a heroine whose life is responsibly directly entangled with the male world of industrial politics" (53-4). Dorice Williams Elliott in "The Female Visitor and the Marriage of Classes in Gaskell's *North and South*" furthers the debate begun by Bodenheimer and notes that Margaret's active role in the community allows her "access to and…control [of] a whole range of social spaces and practices...[Furthermore,] the novel bases its case for women's mediation between classes on an analogy between marriage and class cooperation" (25). Finally, Mary Elizabeth Hotz in "'Taught by Death What Life Should Be': Elizabeth Gaskell's Representation of Death in *North and South*" notes how during the Victorian period "'women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by

Langland in "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel" admit that the Angel in the House is a constructed, Victorian myth situated mainly in the middle classes (Langland's focus), but she performed a significant social role anyway such as running the home and keeping political and social status (290-291). Critics fail, however, to see Gaskell creating a gender spectrum for Victorian femininity and still focus on one side of the dichotomy depicted in the novel, mainly the fallen woman. Gaskell creates the conflicting character of Margaret Hale in *North and South* in order to carve out a more useful function for the female in Victorian England. She provides an alternative middle-class model to the traditional feminine models present, a model that can exist *both* in the masculine sphere of men, commerce, and political activism and in the feminine sphere of domestic duty, charity, and motherhood throughout the novel, yet still remain feminine and, more importantly to Victorian audiences, marriageable. Gaskell illuminates Margaret by contrasting her with less appropriate versions of femininity. However, Gaskell is only creating and exemplifying *one* model, but certainly not someone to emulate action for action. Ideally, Gaskell hopes to teach women their "proper" duties as women by establishing that women can fulfill many roles, not only the typically prescribed ones.

In Chapter Three, "Mary Barton, The Anti-Angel: Representing Lower-Class Femininity in *Mary Barton*," Gaskell creates the lower-class model of femininity by using the figure of the seamstress and drawing upon the endearing qualities Gaskell herself observed in the lower classes, such as close-knit families. I present the chapter about lower-class femininity second because Gaskell illustrates how the lower classes

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physical, social and psychic partitions.' (169-70). She continues, "Men because of their privileged status could move easily between both realms: women, however, were increasingly confined to the private" (Hotz 170).

have their disparate considerations than the middle to upper classes necessitating their own version of femininity, a femininity better equipped to fix those problems than an unrealistic Angel in the House femininity (or even the femininity exhibited by a character like Margaret Hale); this model is especially unrealistic since the lower classes had unequal material conditions than the middle to upper classes. Lynn Alexander in "Creating a Symbol: The Seamstress in Victorian Literature" notes that Gaskell used the seamstress to gain sympathy from her audience, since society often looked down on female factory and mill workers as not maternal and not feminine: these women "were usually assumed to have abandoned any feeling for their families and to have low moral standards" and reformers "needed to find a unique symbol, a morally pure worker with whom her middle- and upper-class audience could sympathize" in order to generate compassion for the working classes and to go "from female factory worker to seamstress was a logical [step]" (29). She furthers that the seamstress symbol felt "less offensive" to middle-class sensibilities because "Sewing was allied with images of domestic economy, with traditional female roles of wife and mother, with the home rather than the factory" (29). Alexander continues, connections between the working poor and Chartist violence were overlooked because "politics were generally considered to be outside a women's sphere, and the image of a woman employed in such a domestic activity as sewing made any link with Chartist politics seem ludicrous" so reformers then had to prove that the seamstress and "industrial poor" both faced interconnected hardships (30).[12] Although Mary Barton does have an advantage, as Alexander points out, as a seamstress and being thus linked to the domestic sphere. Gaskell also managed to create sympathies for the

[12] For further discussion of needlework and women see Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*.

fallen women and factory women. This task was difficult since, as Jill Matus explains in "The Making of the Moral Mother: Representations of Working-Class Sexuality in *Mary Barton*," in 1840s discourse it was the responsibility of women to regulate the home and women were blamed for everything from immoral households to severed family ties to the inability to provide nutritious foods to their families: she clarifies, women had roles for "the observation of sanitary laws and the inculcation of habits of thrift, providence, and temperance, which would ameliorate the condition of the working classes" (57). Gaskell, of course, knew that it took more than simply regulating the home to solve problems; however, while not blaming the factory and working-class women for their destroyed households, she does note that women in these classes have an important function. Mary Poovey in "Disraeli, Gaskell, and the Condition of England" explains "...first, that the deplorable living and working conditions of the laboring poor were startling revelations to much of the middle-class reading public; and second, that middle-class reformers were as divided about how best to comprehend social problems as about how to cure them" (508-509).[13] Gaskell demonstrates understanding that these women do not have the material advantages of the middle-to-upper-class women but asserts that these women are not helpless; these women can control their lives by helping one another in a communal environment. In the novel, those families who divide often crumble, but those who band together can withstand societal evils as a feasible unit.

In Chapter Four, "Almost Forgotten Women: Spinster Femininity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*," Gaskell models her beloved part-hometown of Knutsford and

[13] Poovey also explains the importance of women entering into this political discourse: "When novelists entered the Condition-of-England debate in the 1840s, then, they were implicitly arguing that a feminized genre was more appropriate to the problems of the poor than were the abstractions of political economy. At the same time, however, when writers addressed social issues in fiction they were also claiming a more directly political role of the novel than feminized activities were generally granted" (509).

favorably recalls the spinsters who lived in the town. Gaskell had two unmarried daughters (and two married ones), and she did not feel that to be unmarried was to be on the outside of society and to be unproductive.[14] These spinsters, like the lower classes, have a tight community of people who ally themselves for the betterment of the whole, a town of women with an "elegant economy." Gaskell creates a model of women who are in a better position than the lower-class women, since they neither have to work nor do they have other added responsibilities, such as a natural-born family. Gaskell shows that these women can do much to improve society too and are an integral part of it. I close with this chapter by presenting Matty Jenkins as the model for spinster femininity because no previous model for femininity incorporates spinsters; Gaskell, who felt spinsters held an integral position in society, shows the place for these often marginalized women. Robin Colby points out that Gaskell "did not wish to produce weak, dependent daughters; on the contrary, her style of mothering seems extremely modern, as it involved giving her young children the freedom to make some of their own choices" (56). Furthermore, the domestic sphere was not the only place for women; although it was important to Gaskell that women excel in the domestic sphere, education was most important: he notes Gaskell educated her daughters but valued experience too since "she encouraged her daughters to participate in social events with their friends, to take advantage of opportunities to travel, and to serve their community by visiting and working with the poor," which "took them out of the confines of the home and exposed them to marginalized segments of society" (Colby 60). Thus, for her daughters and in general, Gaskell shunned "decorative passivity . . . [and encouraged] . . . purposeful activity" (Colby 60). Patsy Stoneman through Margaret Case Croskery's "Mothers

[14] See Colby for discussion of Gaskell's unmarried daughters (64-65).

Without Children, Unity Without Plot: Cranford's Radical Charm" agrees with Colby's assessment of Gaskell's educational philosophy also noting that the way Gaskell educated her daughters "was remarkable for its time" and as Patsy Stoneman explains, "Gaskell's daughters were quite different in character and that Gaskell's diary attests to her interest in these differences as well as to her ability to nurture and direct their different natures through individualized parenting techniques that 'allowed their natures to develop rather than imposing patterns on them'" (Stoneman qtd. in Croskery 209). Again, "purposeful activity" is the key to Gaskell's philosophy. She felt *all* women should live purposefully. She taught her daughters to take role in improving Manchester (Colby 62); Gaskell encouraged her daughters to pursue their goals such as when Meta wanted to be a nurse—then considered "daring" (Colby 63); she also instigated her daughters' charitable pursuits (Colby 64); finally, she noted that women needed work to give meaning to their lives: "Gaskell's acknowledgement of the social realities which meant that a significant proportion of women would never marry led her to the conclusion that women must seek satisfying alternatives, and she consistently upheld women's efforts to do so" (Colby 65). In essence, no matter the marital status, Gaskell wanted women to be productive; just because unmarried women had no "designated" tasks at hand, did not mean their role was invalid or that they were less important than those women who had their own families to run.

Chapter II

EXISTING IN THE GREY: AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR VICTORIAN WOMEN IN *NORTH AND SOUTH*

Margaret Hale embodies the type of femininity Gaskell's novel hopes to exemplify. Although the novel does not attempt entirely to alter political and cultural possibilities for women, she does intend to demonstrate the importance of women taking themselves, and their roles, seriously *within* prescribed gender roles, which is possibly why feminist critics have either found Gaskell problematic or ignored her completely.[15] It is in this way that Gaskell shoves away the typical Victorian Angel in the House/Fallen Woman dichotomy and discovers more functions for women, functions that demonstrate, moreover, that no one "catch-all" model for women exists; women fall on a spectrum of femininity rather than a dichotomy.

In the late nineteenth century, British society expected women of the middle to upper classes to epitomize their roles as pure, domestic goddesses in order to symbolize the unrealistic and ineffective Victorian feminine ideal. Elizabeth Gaskell, with her last industrial novel, *North and South,* published in 1855, rendered this ideal more practical to society as a whole, providing a place in which all women could fit. *North and South*, arguably Elizabeth Gaskell's most "polished" industrial novel, depicts variations on Victorian femininity more directly than either *Mary Barton* or *Cranford*. Gaskell's theories evolved through her novels from her early attempts at presenting an alternative

[15] See introduction.

to the Angel in the House in another of her industrial novels, *Mary Barton*, to *Cranford*, a novel that challenged traditional femininity by depicting few societal ideals of femininity. By discussing *North and South* first, I illustrate how Gaskell saw the traditional female model as unacceptable for those women for whom it was intended and provide a direct point of reference when discussing both the lower-class female and the spinster female in the following chapters. All women were expected to embody the *same* femininity despite their material differences. Gaskell's novel suggests how she did not want women to be inactive as their traditional role promoted. The novel guides that women have a duty to provide a strong role model for the next generation.

Demonstrating a lack of authority in the household, Gaskell's ineffectual mothers follow the traditional female model, and often fail to perform their duties as wives and mothers and fall short, moreover, as role models for their daughters. Davis explicates the importance Gaskell placed on effective motherhood:

> Gaskell's own connections to motherhood were complex. Her mother died when she was only an infant, and she never ceased to idealize and long for her lost mother; in her fiction, deprivation of maternal care is especially calamitous for women, and the inadequate mothers who abound in Gaskell's work indicate the emotional scars left by the early death of her mother and her unhappy relationship with her stepmother. (508)[16]

To Gaskell adequate "maternal care" was key to success, and it was women's job to nurture and care for their daughters, especially to provide a role model. *North and South* provides an interesting study of two diametrically opposed mothers—the sisters

[16] See Winifred Gérin for discussions on Gaskell's relationship to her stepmother, Catherine Thomson (14-17).

Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Hale, who are Margaret's aunt and mother—as negative examples of motherhood, wifehood, and household management. Mrs. Shaw is seemingly more able-bodied than her sister, Mrs. Hale, since Mrs. Shaw conducts and manages her daughter Edith's (and Margaret's) affairs in ways that Mrs. Hale does not. Like most traditional women, she complains of ailments (a "nervous cough") in order selfishly to get her own way without appearing to: she convinces the doctor to prescribe trips abroad and complains of the hardship whilst secretly enjoying herself (Gaskell, *N&S* 15).[17] Likewise, the narrator often remarks on Mrs. Hale's "fitful days, when everything was a difficulty and a hardship" (Gaskell, *N&S* 25). Additionally, Mrs. Hale does not take exercise and remains idle: "[Margaret] was sure that her mother had accustomed herself too much to an in-doors life, seldom extending her walks beyond the church, the school, and the neighbouring cottages" (Gaskell, *N&S* 19). Edith, following her mother's example, prefers napping to exercise. Thus, neither Margaret's aunt, mother, nor cousin provide an effective model of femininity for her to follow. When women are prone to idleness, Gaskell's novel asserts, they fail their duties as women. The novel points out how traditional femininity failed past generations by providing inadequate mother-models for their daughters to follow; traditional femininity reproduces redundant traditional femininity which exemplifies weak, useless mothers and wives who rely on their husbands instead of acting alongside them.

[17] Mrs. Shaw's subversive tricks: "She had, however, of late settled upon her own health as a source of apprehension; she had a nervous little cough whenever she thought about it; and some complaisant doctor ordered her just what she desired, — a winter in Italy. Mrs. Shaw had as strong wishes as most people, but she never liked to do anything from the open and acknowledged motive of her own good will and pleasure; she preferred being compelled to gratify herself by some other person's command or desire. She really did persuade herself that she was submitting to some hard external necessity; and thus she was able to moan and complain in her soft manner, all the time she was in reality doing just what she liked" (Gaskell, *N&S* 15).

Although some women do extend duties to society by engaging in charitable acts, *North and South* seemingly disapproves of the traditional female practice of empty charity to the poor if the true reason for doing so is lost.[18] As Langland explains and the novel demonstrates, many wealthier women gave alms to the poor only because of "social imperative"[19] and not from reasons of human kindness; Gaskell's novel encourages women to extend compassion not just perform rote duties. The novel approves of Margaret's well-meaning charitable acts for Higgins, a poor factory worker Margaret encounters on the streets of Milton Northern, because her exchange with him allows for mutual understanding. When Margaret lives with her Aunt Shaw in London, like other women, Margaret also performs empty charity. In Milton Northern, just as in Helstone, Margaret possesses a genuine concern and learns about the poor in her community. Even when Mrs. Hale, Margaret's mother, seems to be fulfilling appropriate feminine duties, she does so inappropriately; thus, constructing an inappropriate model for her daughter to follow. Mrs. Hale does plan to help the poor before she leaves Helstone in chapter five; although, her charity originates from her adherence to her traditional feminine role. Mrs. Hale plans to add "small comforts to the lot of the poorer parishioners" but by grouping the "poor parishioners" into a category, Mrs. Hale's empty charity becomes transparent. Margaret also notes that her father had "always spent the income he derived from his living in the parish" (Gaskell, *N&S* 42). One can assume that Mrs. Hale did not find this pleasing since she laments over her lack of dresses in

[18] Langland discusses the importance of charity for Victorian women: "Yet women's philanthropic work became more than a logical extension of their cultural role as domestic angels; it was another of the significant economic and political functions performed by middle- and upper-class wives. While genuine compassion, religious faith, and concern for the social stability prompted many women into philanthropic activity, it also became a social imperative for those of the upper and middle classes. Along with the elaborate rituals of etiquette, dress, and sociability, participation in philanthropic activities became an important sign of family status" (Langland, "Nobody's Angels" 295).

[19] The term comes from Langland ("Nobody's Angels" 295).

comparison to her wealthier sister, Mrs. Shaw. Margaret, on the other hand, cares little for dress. Prior to embodying the alternate model of femininity, Margaret already differs from her mother (and other women around her). Margaret escapes the effects of ineffectual motherhood because her education—by living in disparate communities, gaining experience, and not living a limited, house-bound life—allows her to see society from a broader perspective. *North and South* provides a pseudo-education for the reader, urging the reader to avoid this type of negative motherhood. By demonstrating how the traditional female serves as an inappropriate female role model, Gaskell's novel creates space for Margaret as an alternative feminine model.

The novel uncovers the injustice of the idle, traditional woman being overlooked in her home, and it hopes to remedy this occurrence. Even though the novel shuns these examples of negative motherhood, it does not lack sympathy for them. The novel exposes how following a traditional feminine path leads women to unhappiness and devaluation. Margaret, as this deviant model, notices her mother being overlooked in this capacity. As in the case of Edith (discussed in depth later), the novel confirms how a woman's lack of interest in her duties leads to a lack of control. Mrs. Hale, who allows her life to be dictated for her instead of acting, finds herself utterly powerless. Perhaps most significantly, Margaret's father consults Margaret and not his wife when he first discusses the family's removal from Helstone, thus demonstrating an unequal and ineffective relationship between husband and wife and a more trustworthy one between father and daughter (Gaskell, *N&S* 45). Because Margaret is identified by those around her as not traditionally feminine, or a "weak" female, she is entrusted with more. When Margaret reveals to her mother that they have to move because Mr. Hale will not reaffirm

the articles, Mrs. Hale incredulously says, "'He would surely have told me before it came to this'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 45). The traditional, complaining, frivolous woman has no control over her own life. Her husband makes all of her decisions for her. Readers may sympathize with Maria Hale for *her* helplessness, but the novel uses this example to prove that if women are able-bodied and intellectually curious like Margaret, women's relationships with men will be improved. Women then would have a say in their own lives. In this case, if Mrs. Hale had been consulted, she may have helped her husband change his mind or decide the best course of action. Margaret reflects on her father's treatment of her mother:

> It came strongly upon Margaret's mind that her mother ought to have been told: that whatever her faults of discontent and repining might have been, it was an error in her father to have left her to learn his change of opinion, and his approaching change of life, from her better-informed child. Margaret sat down by her mother, and took her unresisting head on her breast, bending her own soft cheeks down caressingly to touch her face. 'Dear, darling mamma! we were so afraid of giving you pain. Papa felt so acutely--you know you are not strong, and there must have been such terrible suspense to go through.' (Gaskell, *N&S* 45)

Again, the roles of mother and daughter are seemingly reversed, especially with the traditional woman. Margaret comforts her mother as she would a child. Mrs. Hale, as the traditional female, not only has no say in her own life, but she also has no strength to withstand the changes inflicted upon her. Margaret here learns an important lesson:

marriages must be developed on more equal terms, or at least have open communication. Traditional femininity breeds child-women not household managers.

Aside from negative examples of motherhood, the novel's traditional female examples such as Edith and Fanny provide a direct contrast to Margaret Hale, because, whereas Margaret shows hope for her future as wife and mother, Edith and Fanny only produce anxiety for future generations. Margaret's unhelpful and useless cousin Edith cannot aid in her own wedding preparations, so Margaret takes her place. Edith, though described as "spoiled" behaves in a manner "too careless and idle to have a strong will of her own" (Gaskell, *N&S* 8). Furthermore, even when Edith's mother, Mrs. Shaw, makes arrangements Edith finds disagreeable, Edith does not assert her own will. The narrator says that Edith "gave way" and "contented herself by leaning back in her chair, merely playing with the food on her plate, and looking grave and absent" (Gaskell, *N&S* 8). Edith cannot assert her authority as a woman upon her mother's wishes. The novel questions how Edith will assert herself over her servants, household staff, or even her children. Edith epitomizes inaction. It is this inaction that the novel hopes to ridicule by using Margaret as an example of action.

The novel affirms the limitations of traditional femininity, stemming from self-interest and idleness; concerned for only that which they can comprehend, the novel declares that traditional women limit themselves both mentally and physically. Gaskell establishes a direct contrast to Margaret's demeanor by continually placing this alternative feminine model at the forefront of the reader's mind. Edith's idleness extends into every region of her life, especially when Captain Lennox explains to his future wife what their life in Corfu will entail, but she remains uninterested until he mentions the

difficultly of "keeping a piano in good tune," which she "seemed to consider…formidable," so he diverts her attention by discussing "what gowns she should want in the visits to Scotland" (Gaskell, *N&S* 7). Again, Edith may look like the typical model of feminine perfection, but the novel points out that the traditional model proves to be as ineffectual as a "soft ball of muslin and ribbon" (Gaskell, *N&S* 7). Edith, unlike Margaret, focuses on inconsequential matters, and does not demonstrate that she will make a conscientious future wife: she preoccupies her mind with worries about piano-tuning, travel, and gowns. Furthermore, Captain Lennox tailors the information he tells his future wife; he keeps the subjects light and trivial, subjects of dress and superficial household management, yet he only considers her capable of choosing appropriate dress. He understands that she cannot concentrate on anything more significant, further demonstrating that she will make an ineffectual wife, or in other words follow the traditional feminine pattern.

The novel illustrates what happens when the Angel in the House model attempts to act like a household manager and perform wifely functions: this woman fails because she has not been taught the essential strengths to be an effective wife. Edith makes a show of behaving like a proper wife at the dinner table when she discovers the tea kettle has gone cold and orders a new one: when Edith goes to carry the kettle from the door to the dining table, she finds it "…too heavy for her" and she returns the dining area "pouting," holding out her hand for her husband to notice the indent created by the kettle's handle (Gaskell, *N&S* 16). Her future husband kisses her hand, treating her as if she only has the comprehension and abilities of a small child. Even before she becomes a wife, the novel implies that if Edith manages a household, her lack of attention to detail,

inability to listen, and ability to tire at any arduous task will generate disastrous results. The novel does not blame Edith for her behavior directly; Edith, without children, is both harmless and useless. The novel blames ineffective mothers. The problem with Edith is that when she becomes a mother she will create this same void in *her* children.

With Fanny Thornton, Mr. Thornton's sister, the novel exposes that the uselessness of the traditional feminine model does not just permeate Southern England—this problem is endemic and needs to be examined; in Milton Northern, Fanny provides an intriguing contrast to Margaret's version of femininity. Even though Fanny has a strong mother figure (possibly the strongest figure in these three novels by Gaskell) as a potential model to follow, she epitomizes inaction and constantly complains of headaches like the traditional female. Fanny does not embody strength like her mother; she does not follow in her footsteps. She remains weak throughout. When Thornton jokes how Fanny is "seldom without an ailment," she haughtily denies it, yet declines Thornton's invitation to go out because of her "headache" (Gaskell, *N&S* 96). Furthermore, in another comparison of the two girls, Thornton insults his sister's intelligence. He remarks, "'I never knew Fanny have weighty reasons for anything. Other people must guard her. I believe Miss Hale is a guardian to herself'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 305). Here he acknowledges the weaknesses of traditional femininity in which she not only needs constant supervision and protection, but she also lacks the mental capacity to think on the level of others. Additionally, when the ladies first meet, Thornton observes the two women talking side by side: Thornton scrutinizes "his sister's restless way of continually arranging some part of her gown, her wandering eyes, now glancing here, now there, but without any purpose in her observation" versus Margaret's "large soft eyes that looked forth steadily at one

object, as if from out their light beamed some gentle influence of repose" (Gaskell, *N&S* 160). The traditional female physically lacks the concentration and attention span to be useful whereas Margaret, in contrast, purposefully observes life. In contrast again, Margaret, with her alternative form of femininity, can both protect and think for herself. It is in these simple comparisons the novel presents how women *should* behave versus how they do. The novel promotes women focusing on their tasks and taking them seriously.

In the novel's gender spectrum sits Mrs. Thornton who does provide, like Margaret, a deviant model of traditional femininity, but one who lacks maternal tenderness that Gaskell felt was important to familial success; therefore, Mrs. Thornton does not provide an appropriate alternative model. Although few critics discuss Mrs. Thornton, one, in particular, notes that "[Mrs. Thornton's] character serves as a paradigm for the misuse of those female strengths than abide in exceptional women regardless of class or age" (Brown 354). To Brown (and the novel) Mrs. Thornton misuses her talents. When Mrs. Hale, on her deathbed, asks Mrs. Thornton to look after Margaret, Mrs. Hale does not plan to behave tenderly toward Margaret as her mother would have wanted. She will not help Margaret through a trying loss; she will act as a harsh model of reality for her. Mrs. Thornton says reluctantly, "'I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it Not a tender friend. That I cannot be,'--('to her,' she was on the point of adding, but she relented at the sight of that poor, anxious face.)--'It is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it, nor do I volunteer advice in general'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 237). Again, the operative word is "tender." Gaskell felt that tenderness was a key aspect of motherhood. Expressing concerns over her hypothetical death, Gaskell writes a letter to

her sister-in-law worrying that her husband will not be affectionate enough towards her daughters or that he may marry an unkind woman: "'Now you know,' she wrote to Anne Robson in December 1841, 'that dear William feeling most kindly towards his children, is yet most reserved in *expressions* of either affection or sympathy--& in case of my death . . . would you promise, dearest Anne to remember MA's [Marianne's] peculiarity of character, and as much as circumstances would permit, watch over her & cherish her' (*Letters* 16: 46)" (Gaskell qtd. in Surridge 339).[20] Even though Mrs. Thornton may embody strong femininity, she lacks the maternal instinct Gaskell held dearly; she may be wise, but she is neither tolerant nor nurturing. To Gaskell, women without maternal instincts cannot provide good role models for their daughters either; they may prove useful as housekeepers, but they miss vital qualities to maintain family and this thought pervades throughout the novel.

After establishing why traditional femininity fails, the novel shows how Margaret takes control of her life, acts, and chooses an appropriate husband to provide hope for her future and the future of women in general. First, in showing how Margaret provides an alternative model to traditional femininity, the novel compares Margaret's more unconventional beauty to Edith's light colors, curls, and ribbons. The word choice alone expressed in the passage and the juxtaposition of the *perfect* ideal in the text alongside the reality of Margaret (lips…no rosebud…skin…not white and fair, and so forth), the *un*-ideal, guides the reader to be partial to Margaret (Gaskell, *N&S* 18). Furthermore, even in the description of Margaret's lips it seems Gaskell's novel is playing with traditional conventions of beauty. The perfect female's lips are like a "'rosebud that could

[20] For the original source see Works Cited: *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. Ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard.

only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no' and 'an't please you, sir'" but Margaret's are different, more outspoken, stronger (Gaskell, *N&S* 18); in essence, the traditional female submits and does *whatever* her husband wants. Margaret's lips, in contrast, are "wide," wide enough for her to assert her authority in the household, and wide enough for her to have a voice and alter the dynamic between man and wife (Gaskell, *N&S* 18).

Second, Gaskell exemplifies Margaret as a deviant model of traditional femininity by showing her conversing openly with men, taking action in the home, and expecting a more equal marriage based on communication and respect. If women fall on the more active side of the novel's gender spectrum, they will have more to do and not fall into idleness. At the engagement party for Edith, Margaret and Henry engage in free flowing discourse, a friendship that would not have been conventional at the time. The novel remarks how she "received him with a smile which had not a tinge of shyness or self-consciousness in it" (Gaskell, *N&S* 12). Shyness and self-consciousness are signs of the chaste lady, and Margaret does not express such qualities around the men she encounters in the opening of the novel. However, Margaret simply establishes her ability to converse openly and easily with anyone—including men—and she also demonstrates her interest in topics outside of frivolity. The novel indicates women need to possess the ability to converse on a wide range of subject since they must not sit idly by as the world does tasks for them. Margaret demonstrates her ability to act out of the prescribed role Edith follows. Her early meetings with Henry allow her later on to handle the business aspect of her future inheritance.

Gaskell's alternative female can withstand any task for the sake of family, keeping the family intact even under pressure Since the novel depicts Margaret working

in her own home, already Margaret manages the household like a traditional Victorian woman, but since she does not crumble under the pressures of change like a traditional female, she accepts some aspects of the role while modifying others. In Helstone, Margaret's mother managed the household, but it was merely a household of two—herself and her husband—since Margaret, her child who was also part of her duty, was sent away to live with her aunt. Once more, in Milton Northern, Mrs. Hale cannot adjust to her altered class status, and Margaret has to take over. With their diminished income, the Hales have to rid themselves of most of their servants; thus, Margaret has to work in her own home alongside their servant, Dixon, fulfilling domestic duties like an upper servant.[21] This act of working denotes her altered status. Where she was once firmly part of the upper-middle class, and still considers herself so, in Milton Northern, where the landscape and rules have changed, she has no immediate power. Despite her participation in the domestic duties of the household, the traditional female, like Edith, does not work in the home. Margaret's ability to move from upper-middle-class lifestyle into one beneath her own denotes how she can take action in her life and face material hardship, a necessity for any good household manager.

The novel confirms how choosing a marriage partner wisely promotes future success and happiness for women. The novel reveals that women who do not choose properly are left unfulfilled. Just as Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Hale provide an interesting study for negative female mother role-models, they provide a study look at the importance of choosing an appropriate husband. Both sister-models of traditional marriage and femininity create disparate and unresolved unhappiness; the traditional roles for women,

[21] See chapters seven and eight for more detail of The Hale family arrival in Milton Northern and the material changes they face.

where women marry for station (or even for love), leave women dissatisfied in their lives in and out of the home. Mrs. Shaw married, unlike her sister, not for love, but for money. Similarly, Mrs. Shaw laments her life too: "In this she was but her mother's child; who, after deliberately marrying General Shaw with no warmer feeling than respect for his character and establishment, was constantly, though quietly, bemoaning her hard lot in being united to one whom she could not love" (Gaskell, *N&S* 9). In contrast, even though Mrs. Hale married for love, she and Mr. Hale cannot make an effective couple because their interests do not overlap. Mr. Hale loves reading and intellectual discussions, but the narrator notes his wife does not: "Mrs. Hale had never cared much for books, and had discouraged her husband, very early in their married life, in his desire of reading aloud to her, while she worked" (Gaskell, *N&S* 21). Additionally, Maria Hale wishes she had the gowns and comforts of her sister. The novel ridicules Mrs. Hale's lack of desire for education. Gaskell considered education paramount for women.[22] Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Shaw are thus a cautionary tale of ineffective marriage, and the novel cautions traditional women against marrying for convenience and/or stability alone; it also warns against marrying for love if there is no other foundation. The novel demonstrates that even love matches fall apart when the wife cannot aptly perform her role, and in order to perform her role well, a woman needs to be intelligent, but the novel provides hope with her alternative model of femininity.

The novel displays that traditional marriage, in general, needs reform. The novel, through the Henry/Margaret proposal, confirms that deviant models of traditional femininity need alternative models of masculinity, ones that are accepting of women who fall outside what is expected. Since women fall on a gender spectrum, the novel exhibits

[22] See Easson for discussions of Gaskell and education.

women must choose husbands carefully, finding a model that fits their brand of femininity. Even though Henry seems like a good match for Margaret—there is nothing fundamentally wrong with him—Gaskell reveals that he is not. Even though Margaret considers Henry her friend, some qualities in him "repel" her. Margaret must find a suitor with whom she feels a connection and not just in the form of an "understanding" friend. Henry "underst[ands] her best in Harley Street" but that does not mean he understands her best if she could choose elsewhere. Through the example of Henry Lennox, the novel posits that men who treat able-bodied women as subordinates are not designed for this alternative version of femininity embodied in Margaret. While he may seem an appropriate husband for Margaret, Henry loves Margaret for her difference, but Margaret does not love Henry for his lack of awareness for her independence and autonomy. Prior to Henry's proposal, he and Margaret discuss how unnecessary Margaret finds the "whirlwind" of wedding preparations. When Henry chances to ask her how she would arrange her wedding, she admits that even though she had not thought of it, she would be resolved to avoid any of the problems she had with Edith's wedding (Gaskell, *N&S* 13). Henry speaks for her when he says, "'No, I don't think you are [resolved]. The idea of stately simplicity accords well with your character'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 13). Undoubtedly, Henry attempts to give Margaret a compliment; however, Henry in speaking for her demonstrates masculine control over her, which Margaret abhors. The narrator describes Margaret's reaction, "Margaret did not quite like this speech; she winced away from it more, from remembering former occasions on which he had tried to lead her into a discussion (in which he took the complimentary part) about her own character and ways of going on" (Gaskell, *N&S* 13). Even though Henry compliments Margaret, she wants

praise for the actions she chooses, not mindless praise for a character she has not yet proven to him. Her refusal of him allows her to take control of her life. Margaret defies traditional femininity in that instead of reveling in compliments that would please the traditional woman, she sidles away from them. Additionally, she boldly rejects a marriage prospect, a risk many women would not take, especially women in Margaret's precarious financial position. Again, the novel cautions that marriage is not a light agreement and that her alternative model of femininity can control her life's outcome by making (or refusing to make) choices.

Aside from ruling the domestic sphere, the novel uncovers that women can also enact the changes they want in the masculine sphere if they take action. The novel emphasizes that women present solely in the domestic field would potentially waste their talents as ambassadors to the outside world. Although Margaret's riot "involvement" is extreme, the novel provides a hyperbolic example so she can show the impact women can have in the masculine sphere not by becoming a man but by simply being a woman in a traditionally male realm. Thus, Margaret strays from traditional femininity, as a person who cannot only speak face to face with a man, but also have that man listen and act on her suggestions and coaxing when she enters into the political world of men. Through her relationship with members of the lower class, Margaret has gained an appreciation for the lower-class plight expressed by the stubborn, yet practical Higgins. When the on-strike workers gather because Thornton hired Irish workers in their place, Margaret feels that, instead of a horde of policemen threatening to quell them, Thornton should listen to their grievances, standing before the men, facing them as a man talking to men: Margaret says, "'If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to

man'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 175). Her words attack his masculinity and drive Thornton to action. The traditional female only takes orders from men, but Margaret creates space for women to take action, allowing women to participate equally in discourse with their husbands. The other women on the scene, Fanny and Mrs. Thornton, do not act on Thornton's behalf. Fanny screams hysterically,[23] while Mrs. Thornton, fearing for her son's safety, trembles as she barricades the house (Gaskell, *N&S* 172-173). When Margaret feels "Thornton's life would be unsafe," she acts (Gaskell, *N&S* 176); again, she creates an alternative to the traditional female role by taking on the usual duties of the man, the protector, and by lifting "the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force" (Gaskell, *N&S* 176). Again, Margaret uses strength and *action* to stand up to social injustice, and, in the speech that follows, when she appeals to the mass of workers, she acts as an intermediary between the classes. Thornton does not take Margaret's actions easily. The narrator notes, "Mr. Thornton stood a little on one side; he had moved away from behind her, as if jealous of anything that should come between him and danger" (Gaskell, *N&S* 176-177). Margaret's actions violate Thornton's code of masculinity. He should protect her, not the other way around. Thornton shuns Margaret's version of femininity at first even though he has feelings for her. When Margaret throws her body over Thornton in order to protect him, he bellows, "'Go away… [t]his is no place for you'" and Margaret replies, "'It is!'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 177). Although, her actions fail to deliver the intended results, the door of negotiation stands open. Furthermore, the novel

[23] A description of the action: "Fanny had returned, screaming up-stairs as if pursued at every step, and had thrown herself in hysterical sobbing on the sofa. Mrs. Thornton watched for her son, who was still in the mill. He came out, looked up at them--the pale cluster of faces--and smiled good courage to them, before he locked the factory-door. Then he called to one of the women to come down and undo his own door, which Fanny had fastened behind her in her mad flight. Mrs. Thornton herself went. And the sound of his well-known and commanding voice, seemed to have been like the taste of blood to the infuriated multitude outside" (Gaskell, *N&S*172-173).

emphasizes—through Margaret's assertion that "it [the public sphere] is" her place—that women can rightfully put themselves in any place they desire.

Further, the novel uncovers that only a woman breaking from the tradition, a woman concerned for more than idle frivolity, can enact such understandings between men. Although in the riot example Margaret rushes out to protect Thornton in an attempt at bravery, she really provides no physical match for the angry mob before her. She chooses, instead, to embrace Thornton in her role as defender, a feminine embrace, instead of facing the crowd in a masculine manner. Her attempt at gallant bravery lands her in a position that mirrors Edith in the novel's opening—curled up on a settee. In essence, Margaret's actions open "negotiation" in her future marriage; she proves herself as an active woman in her own life, as capable and strong, a woman who can manage the household better than the traditional woman, while still retaining important qualities of her essential femininity. This alternative female does not wish to have to act alone nor does she wish to adopt a masculine role, but she can adopt any role she chooses if necessary; the re-envisioned female is hardy, which is exactly what is needed in the *perfect* wife and mother.

The novel proves that even though women can implement their feminine duties a number of ways, and fall on the gender spectrum from idle and useless to active and capable, through experience, women can perfect and hone their skills as mothers and household managers in the feminine sphere as well as members of society in the masculine sphere. Margaret's combined experiences in Milton Northern, Helstone, and London allow her to grow individually into the alternative version of the feminine, a stronger woman that Victorian readers can emulate. Margaret transforms herself from the

judgmental, classist woman who more closely resembled her ball-of-muslin-and-ribbons cousin to the powerful, yet domesticated woman she becomes at the end. Ultimately, having a powerful, aware woman in the domestic sphere allows for peace. Flippant traditional females break under pressure and render themselves useless.

Gaskell's alternative model of femininity functions by supporting her husband in an equal partnership and vice versa, evincing her point that the traditional role of marriage—where women sit by idly and succumb to their husband's will—only creates an absence. Since the novel's negative examples of marriage fail because they were constructed on faulty foundations, the novel shows that marriages based on equality, understanding, and mutual respect are best not only for future happiness but also for the family unit overall—in this way, both parents can be good models for their future generations. Margaret's marriage to Thornton promises to be non-traditional and, thus, fulfilling. In Gaskell's new ideal, women have a place in the household besides observing their husbands's rule; women should help their husbands just as Margaret helps Thornton at the end of the novel as they make a business decision together. The novel's other marital examples fail to meet this ideal. Furthermore, the novel discloses that the new feminine alternative can act of her own accord; she can exist in the confines of marriage, but she can act on her own behalf in the interests of herself, her future children, and her husband if necessary. Because Margaret acts in feminine ways and does not deviate entirely from traditional feminine forms as to be unrecognizable (she is still viewed as domestically able), she remains marriageable. In fact, this altered form of traditional femininity is *more* marriageable. Gaskell's alternative female is active, she can manage a household, she can take care of her affairs, she can be a good mother, and she will not

complain of headaches nor will she be a burden to her husband. Margaret's acceptance of Thornton's proposal brings her from the masculine, dominant role exhibited by Thornton in the beginning back to the domestic circle from which she came. Both Margaret and Thornton have learned from their interactions with one another. Margaret has become less proud and Thornton less stubborn. When the two come together at the novel's close to conduct business, Margaret loses her boldness with him. She blushes and covers her face—thus becoming the closest approximation to the traditional female she has been—and declares, "'Oh, Mr. Thornton, I am not good enough!'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 425). To which Thornton replies, "'Not good enough! Don't mock my own deep feeling of unworthiness'" (Gaskell, *N&S* 425). They have both seen each other's capabilities and can make a match based on mutual comprehension. Thornton, not being a traditional "gentleman," or not possessing the traditional form of masculinity that is distasteful to Margaret—i.e., men like Henry or Captain Lennox—can provide a perfect match for a woman who exerts more power than the traditional, idle female.

Again and again, the novel provides models of negative femininity—Fanny, Edith, Mrs. Shaw, and Mrs. Hale—to force women to reevaluate where they fall on this spectrum of feminine gender examples. In the riot example, Margaret takes direct action against the rioters, and Fanny, again, proves useless at everything. When rioters accidently gash Margaret's forehead with a rogue stone, Fanny panics at the thought of nursing Margaret; she feels afraid to have a "dead" looking person in her presence (Gaskell, *N&S* 182). Mrs. Thornton even notes that Fanny is "giddy, and not bold" and lacks "courage" (Gaskell, *N&S* 310). She cannot think for herself, protect herself, nor can she take care of anyone outside of herself. Margaret can do all of these things. By

simple comparisons, Margaret possesses the skills necessary to be a better wife, mother, and community member. The novel asks women to question if they are helpless like Fanny, Edith, or Mrs. Hale or do they render themselves useful, but largely unhappy like Mrs. Shaw and Mrs. Thornton. The novel reveals how, in a woman such as Margaret, femininity does not have to be sacrificed to gain power in both the world of men and in the household; additionally, women like Margaret accomplish their traditional female tasks in a way that is more practical. Margaret deviates from traditional Victorian femininity by typifying *ideal* Victorian femininity in surprising ways.

Chapter III

MARY BARTON, THE ANTI-ANGEL: REPRESENTING LOWER-CLASS FEMININITY IN *MARY BARTON*

Mary Barton reads like an 1840s political pamphlet, relaying the drastic social and economic changes the era faced which included the campaign against the Corn Laws, alterations to the Poor Law, Chartism, and factory and electoral reforms. Elizabeth Gaskell combines her accurate experience working with the lower classes with her political opinions (some unpopular), and places it in a novel with a political plot that slides into melodrama at the halfway point. Many readers were unaware of the conditions of the working and lower classes, and Gaskell brought much-needed attention to their struggles, but she also brought controversy as her novel was often banned and was also prefaced with a note saying that the story was not intended to cause a revolution or uprising. Middle-class opinion held that the lower classes were morally debased, yet the lower classes—often factory workers—claimed "the exploitation of female labour was responsible for the destruction of their domestic life and social organisation" (Matus 59). Gaskell, in her fiction, has the task of proving the lower-class women have morals, yet showing that they cannot encapsulate the same, traditional femininity of the middle classes because their material conditions are different.

Loving and virtuous wife, doting and caring mother, household manager, and impeccable role model describes Mary Barton at the end of Gaskell's novel, published in

1848 and set between 1839 and 1842. These same adjectives can be applied to any and all ideal Victorian women; although the pathway trodden by the traditional female and *Mary Barton*'s protagonist are vastly different. Gaskell, through her novel, attacks middle-class femininity by using working-class femininity to point out the absurdity of the model. Matus claims that Gaskell perpetuates this middle-class prejudice in that "narrator often hastens to anticipate the arguments and prejudices of her middle-class readers, either modifying or conceding them, but then at once mounting an impassioned defense of her working-class subjects" that render the working classes "needy, child-like, uneducated, precipitous, dangerous" (Matus 61). Although, I see the characters in *Mary Barton* as far from helpless, Gaskell makes a strong case for the plight of the working classes. Elizabeth Gaskell through Mary Barton in *Mary Barton* demonstrates the impracticality of a catch-all model of femininity, especially amongst the lower classes because the typically upper-class feminine model provides an ineffective model for the lower classes.

Gaskell, in *Mary Barton*, through the novel's titular character not only creates a realistic role model for lower-class women to follow by drawing on lower-class values in order to elicit emotional sympathy in middle-class readers, but she also notes the absurdity of following the intended role model for Victorian women, the Angel in the House, by using these lower-class models to expose the pitfalls of the traditional woman. What we see in *Mary Barton* is a reply in her own right to the class-bound Angel in the House. Mary Barton becomes a good model of feminine virtue for lower-class women to follow and provides a better and more reasonable feminine model for her children, but she lacks the ability, monetary backing, and power to enact greater social change. Whereas traditional Victorian women subsisted inside the home, managing the household

affairs, Gaskell's heroines and anti-heroines (in the form of the prostitute) ventured mainly outside the home; thus they did not command the basic requirements to follow such a model except that many were married with children. Unlike traditional female models, they endeavored to go both inside and outside the home: these women worked as anything from seamstresses to shop assistants to factory workers. These women did not have the privilege to be mere wives, mothers, and household managers, or in performing other traditional female roles; they had to work and to provide outside of the home just like their husbands. Unmarried lower-class women too were unrealistically held to this traditional feminine standard. They may have imagined the traditional upper to middle-class female's lifestyle, but for most it was not possible, and these reasons made the traditional model equally impossible and improbable to follow.

Strong distinctions existed between the public and private spheres for women. Women usually went out accompanied by a guardian or in groups of women to venture in the public sphere and, even then, occupying the public realm may only have meant traveling to a shop via carriage. Lower-class women did not have such luxuries and often went about unaccompanied; although, neither lower-class women nor upper-class women could be seen with an unrelated male escort. The novel creates relatable parallels for its readership, attempting to break down the middle-class prejudice against the poor. Gaskell, whose husband allowed her freedoms, often performed tasks outside the home, and as Gaskell's novel attacks traditional femininity, it promotes women moving outside the home. Since most traditional females lived almost exclusively in the domestic realm, in order to encourage moving beyond that the novel's heroine, Mary Barton, moves effectively in the public sphere of men. Mary exerts bravery and courage by embarking

on a journey sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of strangers—male strangers—in order to save her lover, Jem Wilson. This lower-class heroine and model for alternative femininity can do whatever necessary to protect her family unit (or future family unit) unlike the idle, traditional female. When Mary later finds herself alone on a Liverpudlian pier, Ben Sturgis, a sailor who discovers her notes, "'pier-head's no place for a young woman to be standing'" (Gaskell, *MB* 352). Even though she needs rescuing, here Mary functions in the public sphere of men. Additionally, Mary stands trial as a witness, even though this means exposing "embarrassing" information about herself such as admitting her love for a man publically, which to a traditional woman would be deemed inappropriate.[24] Then again, the novel does not ask women to be extreme (the public sphere is a dangerous place after all), but it does require that women become more robust and able to withstand some trials without falling apart entirely. The traditional female like Mrs. Carson (discussed later) can barely step outside into the fresh air; *chasing* down an individual to secure an alibi would be unheard of for anyone but this lower-class alternative female. The novel endorses women functioning in either sphere—the masculine or feminine world—even unaccompanied.

The novel addresses the material comparisons of the lower-class model versus the traditional model in order to support women managing their incomes more efficiently. The novel presents Mary Barton as exemplary lower-class model of household management given her means. As a seamstress,[25] Mary provides for her family when her

[24] Mary reveals "I loved James Wilson…above all else on earth put together…though he has never known a word of it till this minute" (Gaskell, *MB* 383).

[25] See Deborah Deneholz Morse for more on Gaskell's relationship to the Victorian seamstress: "No Victorian novelist focuses more centrally on the figure of the seamstress—and on the fallen woman—than Elizabeth Gaskell" (qtd. in Weyant 278). Morse continues, "Gaskell's narrative—and moral—strategy consciously aligns the seamstress outside the Victorian home with the mother within it, and the fallen woman on the streets with the angel in the house" (qtd. in Weyant 279). In other words, Gaskell sets up

father loses employment. In fact, even though lower-class families are bound by strong familial ties and often take care of one another, they are less reliant on the masculine figure in the family than upper-class families in that each typically works and supports oneself; whereas in upper-class families, if the husband does not provide for the family, there is no one else on which to rely. Again, in lower-class families, typically the mother and father both work and often the children too; thus providing a supportive web. The limitations Mary has as far as income stem from the destitute conditions of Manchester and not from her ability to provide a useful model. In traditional femininity, the middle-class woman has to rely on the male figure alone as Elizabeth Langland notes in "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel" that the figure of the traditional femininity (in this case labeled the Angel in the House) "served as a significant adjunct to a man's business endeavors" and "whereas husbands earned the money, wives had the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status" (Langland, "Nobody's Angels" 291). Langland argues that lower-class women were not well versed in these practices as she remarks, "a lower-class wife, a working girl, would not be sufficiently conversant with the signifiers of middle-class life to guarantee her husband's place in society" (Langland, "Nobody's Angels" 291). Although Langland's point is valid, the lower-class female does not function to provide her husband a place on the social ladder. In lower-class families, money, since they have little, factors less than in middle-class households, so the lower-class wife must simply make sure her family has enough to eat, and, perhaps, enough to

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Mary as the non-traditional future Angel in the House and appropriate woman for future motherhood. The traditional Angel in the House, like the fallen woman, too, cannot benefit society. Although, since Gaskell is sympathetic to the fallen woman and her reasons for falling, she understands her plight more than that of the Angel in the House.

save in times of hardship and unemployment. Since Mary has endured poverty, and, at times, starvation, she has learned household management (or, at least, lower-class household management). Furthermore, by controlling her own finances, she has learned the value of wages. Whereas the traditional female cannot function on a diminished income, Mary knows how to survive on little, and fluctuations in her household income will not faze her in the future. The traditional female may fail at limited economy since she does not share these lessons that Mary has learned so well. Furthermore, the novel uses Mary Barton's struggle to poke holes in the Angel in the House ideal; it only works if conditions are perfectly set. The novel shows how the model of traditional femininity falls flat, especially during the hungry forties, a decade of famine, when a lower-class woman's main task was providing basic sustenance for the family—food and shelter—and the concerns of the traditional female—dress, piano tuning, and so forth—were certainly not part of their reality. Additionally, as most of Gaskell's readership consisted of middle-class women, she invites the reader to learn from the plight of the lower-class woman and from her methods of economy and perhaps to consider the relative wealth of the middle classes. Gaskell endorses "elegant economy" (as Gaskell coins it in *Cranford*) for her middle-class readers.

The novel displays how Mary Barton gains her sense of economy, nurturance, and generosity from the lower-class values she observes. The novel illustrates the intricate familial structure built by the lower classes in order to present it as a model for her middle to upper-class readers. The novel demonstrates the compassion the poor have for one another, how they unite in times of need. The novel provides several examples where this lower-class unification is evident, such as in chapter six when Mr. Davenport is on

his deathbed, and Barton gives Davenport his leftover food—food that would have been his evening meal (Gaskell, *MB* 65). Next, Wilson goes to Mr. Carson to ask for an order to go the hospital, which Carson does not spare, but instead gives an outpatient order (for the following Monday, which will be too little too late) and his young son presents five shillings and utters a "'poor fellow'" (Gaskell, *MB* 74, 78-79). However, just moments before, Carson gives his daughter half a guinea for the extravagance of new roses (Gaskell, *MB* 77-78). Davenport dies and the working-class community members help in Davenport's funeral arrangements. Mary donates one of her mourning dresses to Mrs. Davenport, and spends all night sewing it for the widow. In other examples, Barton, in desperate times, sells what he has in order to provide for the starving Wilson family. The lower-class model seeks help from those around her. The traditional female would seem weak in this sphere because she preoccupies much of her time with selfish desires and only gives to charity what it is not painful to give, yet Mary gives her possessions and time, which requires more sacrifice.

Just as in *North and South, Mary Barton* also mocks women following the traditional feminine model, and in *Mary Barton*, the novel demonstrates specifically how the traditional model does not provide adequate examples for the lower classes. The examples become more relevant to middle-class readers in *North and South*, but one can observe Gaskell's early through processes in *Mary Barton*. The novel mocks traditional femininity by providing traditional upper-class examples of femininity as evinced by Mrs. Carson, the Miss Carsons, and Mrs. Hunter, but, unlike in *North and South*, the reader rarely views their lives from their perspective (except in rare glimpses where the narrator contrast familial material conditions between the upper and lower classes). Early

on, readers see why John Barton is against "do nothing" ladies.[26] When employment rates declined in the 1840s many mill hands were "turned back, one Tuesday morning, with the news that Mr. Hunter had stopped, Barton had only a few shillings to rely on" (Gaskell, *MB* 24-25). Barton thought he would be hired easily, but due to economic downturn, he remains unemployed. Since Barton has no money, he cannot afford to feed his family well, and, as a result of improper nourishment, his small son dies of scarlet fever. While his son is starving, Barton sees Mrs. Hunter, his former employer's wife, exiting a lavish food's shop followed by a shop man laden "with purchases for a party" (Gaskell, *MB* 25). The upper-class world is far removed from the impoverished hollow in which Barton lives, and Barton resents this lack of concern for other sectors of humanity. Therefore, when Esther, Mary's aunt and Barton's sister-in-law, tries to plant ideas in Mary's head of social advancement, John Barton is adamant that Mary will not become an un-conscientious "lady" or any sort of lady at that. This shop scene functions in the novel in at least two ways: first, for Gaskell's readers, it allows them to question entertaining in economic downturns, and lavish behaviors. Second, it illicit sympathy for the poor and encourages the reader into more charitable efforts.

In later examples, the novel's narrator continues her attacks on the traditional feminine models, Mrs. Carson and the Miss Carsons; Gaskell presents these depictions of traditional femininity in order to show how insufficient a model these ladies provide for the lower classes (and for the middle-upper-class readers too). The narrator calls for Mrs. Carson to take action with her life, to stop idly wasting away with feigned headaches and continual rest. This lack of action, lack of doing anything—not even taking care of basic

[26] Barton mocks "do nothing" ladies when Esther asks Mary if she would like to become a lady and Barton says that his daughter will never be a lady; she should earn her living honestly (Gaskell, *MB* 8).

domestic duties—accounts for the problems with the middle to upper classes. When bored, Mrs. Carson often had the "luxury" of a headache (because, presumably, the lower classes cannot have such "luxury"), the narrator remarks:

> But it was but the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed. Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both. It would have done her more good than all the ether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of swallowing, if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week; made beds, rubbed tables, shaken carpets, and gone out into the fresh morning air, without all the paraphernalia of shawl, cloak, boa, fur boots, bonnet, and veil in which she was equipped before setting out for an 'airing,' in the closely shut-up carriage. (Gaskell, *MB* 237)

The novel's narrator blatantly points out that all these women need is work and action (even education). The novel sees these traditional females as so far removed from actual society that it does them no good. Even worse, neither Mrs. Carson nor her daughters are there to help Mr. Carson through the grief of his son's death. All three of them are ineffectual and idle. By contrast amongst the lower classes, when the Wilson twins die of malnutrition, the lower-class families band together in grief to help one another through the trials of loss. The novel advocates that *true* women should *do something*, even if it is only the daily chores of life, but, most of all, they should by sympathetic to human suffering. Gaskell promotes these bonds and values she observes in the lower-class families for her readership (even if the observations are over idealized). Granted, lower-

class families are torn apart through material hardship, yet, in the novel's landscape, they remain stronger than those upper-class families connected only in name. Their world reality is one of death and diminishment but those who remain stay strong.

Like in *North and South, Mary Barton* has ineffectual mothers who follow the tenants of traditional femininity; however, the novel exhibits the absurdity of lower-class women, especially, imitating the values and practices of the upper classes in the examples of Esther and Mrs. Barton. Gaskell's later attempts at this critique occur in *North and South*, where the idea functions more effectively, but Gaskell's early sketch is early expressed in *Mary Barton*. The lower-class mothers in *Mary Barton*, who attempt to follow a traditional (and thus ineffective) feminine role, fail at their duties necessitating that their daughters to take over. For the middle-to-upper-class readers, the pattern may be familiar. In an opening scene, the Barton family is complete and surviving on a patriarchal income; Mary's mother has an impromptu tea party, and she acts like a 'lady' by pouring tea for her guests while Mary goes out to fetch and cook supplies, which Barton lavishly provides since more supplies are ordered than needed (Gaskell, *MB* 16). Mary here is the one who *acts* in the home, performing essential household duties while her mother idly entertains. Returning again to the opening scenes of the novel, John Barton and George Wilson enter carrying children (Gaskell, *MB* 3-4). The mothers—Jane Wilson, limping due to a factory accident that occurred in her youth, and Mary's mother, heavily pregnant—do not take active roles in caring for their children; the fathers do. These fathers both provide for (monetarily) and care for (physically) their offspring. Thus, the family daughter, in this case, Mary, does not have a good female model to follow. Mary's parents's relationship is unequal; her father does everything while his

wife does nothing. The novel's other females are Jane Wilson, Mary's lover's mother, who is physically incapable and crippled and relies heavily on her son and husband; Mary's Aunt Ester, who becomes a fallen woman after running away from the Barton household; and Alice, a spinster, family friend, and slightly elderly neighbor, who is virtuous but cannot provide a model for motherhood since she has no children for which to provide her natural duties. Early on, Mary's mother performs the duties of a mother for her sister, Esther, and does "everything" for her like a "mother" would but she does not do this for her own child (Gaskell, *MB* 6). Mrs. Barton *spoils* Esther. The novel points out that if women do not have to perform their own tasks, they may spoil, and entitlement and privilege are not positive traits.

Unusually, just as Mary *acts* in the home in place of her mother, Mary has financial power in her household, and since the novel values appropriate household management, it notes that, if learned young, even lower-class women can learn appropriate femininity instead of the idle versions of the femininity. The novel remarks that with her father, Mary "had more of her own way than is common in any rank with girls of her age. . . . for, of course all the money went through her hands, and the household arrangements were guided by her will and pleasure" (Gaskell, *MB* 23). Langland in her book *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* discusses that in the traditional family structure there was only "*one* manager" in the household, "thus daughters were often raised in idleness because they were deemed too fine to perform the functions of upper servants" (Langland, *Nobody's Angels* 116-117). In Gaskell's life, she actively participated in the running of her household and so did her daughters. Gaskell felt that active participation in household

duties—participating, one might say, like "upper servants" or lower-class individuals—was pivotal to a successful home and a successful life.[27] In her novel, Gaskell seemingly promotes the same, and, Mary, in this way, learns the skills necessary that will allow her to become an appropriate model of lower-class femininity.

Gaskell's later novel, *North and South*, encourages Margaret's search for an appropriate husband, and *Mary Barton* advocates women making the appropriate choice of whom they marry. *Mary Barton* imparts the importance of lower-class women choosing *respectable* (especially class-appropriate) men to marry to provide for their future happiness. Jem Wilson is a reputable and hard-working man, a man who wishes to give Mary all the comforts he can provide. In contrast, the young and rich Mr. Harry Carson is not an upright man, and hopes only to simply corrupt Mary without marrying her. While Mr. Carson flirts with her, Mary hopes to marry him for selfish[28] and unselfish reasons—she can do "elegant nothings" but she also wants to help her family—family being an all-important tie for the lower classes. The novel ponders, "she would surround [her father] with every comfort she could devise. . . . [and] Every one who had shown her kindness in her low estate should then be repaid a hundred-fold" (Gaskell, *MB* 92). So, here, again, Mary hopes to help the lower-class families and raise them up to be free from poverty, which will free them from corrupting society from the bottom up. The novel's end uses Job's, Mary's friend's, Margaret's, grandfather's, speech to Carson, young Harry Caron's father, to demonstrate the duty of the rich to help ease the burden of the

[27] Gaskell enumerates the various household tasks she and her daughters completed in various correspondences. See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Chapple and Pollard 487-490).

[28] Mary does have some selfish reasons, however, for wishing to become a lady: "Mr Carson…was rich and a gentleman. The old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther, fermented in her little bosom, and perhaps all the more, for her father's aversion to the rich and the gentle. … So Mary dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of some day becoming a lady and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood" (Gaskell 91-2).

poor, Mary's mind articulates this duty without connecting these ideas to any political alignment—Mary's ideas originate from the lower-class value of helping those in need. It appears that, unlike Esther, Mary's infatuation for the wealthy, handsome Harry Carson does not originate from sexual desire, but from the desire to alleviate the conditions for the poor. Mary has an obvious advantage over Esther, though; she *worked* above her station as a seamstress, which allows her the economic freedom to support herself.[29] Poverty only tears family apart, but wealth—and not necessarily the opulence Mary hopes for—allows family to remain as one. Gaskell's novel treads lightly on these subjects. By exposing Harry Carson's actions as impure, she drives her lower-class model to an appropriate lover. Gaskell's novel seems not to want to upset its readers with social climbing; it only promotes sympathy for the poor. Thus, the novel also exposes the folly in falling for charming young men and the problems with social climbing. Moreover, if Mary gains wealth, then she must become the traditional female model, and, as Gaskell's novel observes over and over, the traditional female cannot "mend" society and "fix" the problems she is intended to mend. Therefore, when Mary abandons up the notion of becoming a "lady," she takes the first step to take *action* in her life, which opposes the *idle*, "do nothing" lady. After being forced to publically admit her love, Jem sees a change in Mary. The narrator notes that Mary was "softer and gentler than she had ever been in her gentlest mood….her glances, her voice were all tender in their languor"

[29] Lynn Alexander in "Creating a Symbol: The Seamstress in Victorian Literature" begins her article by discussing how in Victorian "social protest fiction…most protagonists are women" (29); however, she takes the argument a step further by noting that Victorian middle-class readers needed a protagonist to whom they could relate. Since readers could not relate to the female factory worker, who in popular, public opinion had no feeling for the domestic realm since she could abandon her family for work, readers needed to identify with a "unique symbol, a morally pure worker" such as a seamstress (Alexander 29). In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell represents both classes of seamstress argues Alexander: a milliner, Mary, who arrives in her position because of her beauty and Margaret, a lower-class woman whose failing sight is evident of the deplorable conditions for female workers (34).

(Gaskell, *MB* 412). Mary begins to revert to the more traditional female model here, but the distinction comes in her initial action; she still breaks the mold. Mary, however, although a good model for the lower classes, is not the strong model that Gaskell demonstrates with Margaret Hale in *North and South.* After Mary takes action, she figuratively falls apart, becoming doll-like and helpless. She spends several days in bed recovering from her fatigue. When she awakes, she has Jem to make her his wife, taking some of the decision-making and freedom from her.

Although Mary ends up looking much like a traditional female at the novel's close—a wife and mother with a home—Mary's actions distinguish her from the Mrs. Carsons and Mrs. Hunters of the novel. Mary does not reduce the strength of her family unit like the traditional female; she can do whatever necessary to bolster her family. By drawing from lower-class examples and values, Gaskell's novel creates a model for women in which they actively take part in their own lives. Even though Gaskell's readers will mostly likely not endure the hardships of poverty as Mary does, nor will her readers directly have to acquit a lover, nor will they have to chase down ships, or any of the numerous adventures experienced in the novel, the novel proposes that instead of sitting idly by (uselessly) these women can take charge and control of their lives. Gaskell demonstrates that the new version of femininity can endure housework, household management, taking care of one's children, and functioning outside of the home—like lower-class women.

Chapter IV

ALMOST FORGOTTEN WOMEN: SPINSTER FEMININITY IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S C*RANFORD*

In the opening scene of *Cranford*, Gaskell presents the town and its inhabitant as quaint and idiosyncratic, a quiet community of women who—amongst many other hobbies—spend much of their time gardening, busy bodying, chasing little boys away from their flowers, micromanaging their maidservants, administering "dictatorial" kindness to the poor, and providing "real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress" (Gaskell, *C* 1). The narrator asserts, "the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient" (Gaskell, *C* 1). Of course, the novel's tone adopts a note of gentle mockery; however, the novel's tone does not suggest spinsterhood in and of itself is a laughing matter. The novel, instead, chronicles the existence of these ladies, claiming that their lives are not obsolete. These women may have unusual practices, but this community is close-knit and caring. In fact, the women take care of each other in times of need (much like the lower-class examples as seen in *Mary Barton*), except these women belong to various classes—the upper classes, the middle classes, and some lower-class examples—but all have one thing in common: they are each unmarried. In fact, in *Cranford* too, despite featuring almost exclusively women, the novel presents examples of traditional femininity that fail to provide adequate models to follow; instead, through the character of Matty Jenkyns, a woman casting off the shroud of antiquity and embracing modernity,

the novel offers a productive version of spinster womanhood, not a useless idle woman, marginalized for her place on the periphery of society, but a woman who proves useful as an integral piece of a fully functioning society. The novel, more importantly, illuminates the vital role spinster women often play in Victorian circles. *North and South* creates an ideal model of femininity; *Mary Barton* illustrates a lower-class version of femininity as an extended critique of middle-to-upper-class femininity; and, finally, *Cranford* finds a place for women who fall outside of either category, painting a complete and non-exclusive picture of Victorian femininity. These novels reveal that Victorian femininity does not simply exist in the angel/whore dichotomy, and *Cranford* reveals that the spinster woman can still perform—and does perform—feminine duties that benefit society outside of the traditional ones.

Published in sporadic serial form in Charles Dickens's weekly magazine, *Household Words*,[30] and later re-issued in 1853, *Cranford*, a compilation of loosely related short stories, is perhaps Elizabeth Gaskell's most well-known work, still resonating with audiences today as much as it did in her time; however, despite its popularity, critics wonder just how *Cranford* relates to Gaskell's other works. Consequently, specific critical trends have not emerged as concretely as they have for her other works. In fact, *Cranford* has inspired many disparate threads of interpretation over the last one hundred and fifty years, but, mostly, it has been disregarded as a work too trivial in comparison with Gaskell's more overtly political novels.[31] However, subsequent

[30] *Household Words* was published from September 28, 1850 to March 22, 1851. In 1853, after making revisions, Gaskell published *Cranford* as a novel (Mitchell vii-ix).

[31] Nina Auerbach explains a prevalent opinion of the novel: "[Cranford] is usually dismissed as too charming for its own good" (276). Hilary M. Schor further indicates that the novel has been seen as "potpourri, a bouquet of impressions, an elegiac tribute to passing ways in a dying English village" (288). Patricia A. Wolfe remarks on another critical preoccupation, the novel's lack of a clearly defined plot: "[c]ritics generally believed that [Cranford] consisted of a number of loosely-connected incidents with no

inspections of *Cranford* present modern critics with new challenges: *Cranford* is, in this way, for all critical intents, literally an "open book."

Although critics have not *specifically* explored how the novel's details illustrate reconciliation between the emerging nineteenth century and the departing eighteenth century by presenting an alternative model of traditional femininity, critics such as Andrew H. Miller, Hillary M. Schor, and Nina Auerbach bring up this point indirectly. In "The Discourse of Liability in the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 and Gaskell's *Cranford*" Miller outlines one of many problems with modernization: women are likely to be deceived and threatened by the "sequestration of private experience" and "unlimited liability" (141). With modernization comes mass production, and, by extent, mass production of gender definitions and identities, so as modernization in the nineteenth century emerged, moving away from eighteenth century ideas, so did the definitions of gender. In *Cranford*, gender identity becomes muddled further because spinster ladies lie outside of the age-old dichotomy, which necessitates an allowance outside of the established model. Schor in "Affairs of the Alphabet: Reading, Writing and Narrating in 'Cranford'" sees literature itself as "shaping ideology," not only in the context of the

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underlying progression lending direction to the plot" (161). J.R. Watson agrees that Cranford "is unusual in both form and length" (89). Critics like Natalie Kapetanios Meir acknowledge that there was even question if Cranford could be classified as a novel in the first place and, instead, aligned it more with "the social instruction handbook" genre (1). Martin Dodsworth in "Women without Men at Cranford," an important article in the field that revived Cranford, discovered a "'pattern of guilt and expiation'" in the plot, which led to a "central unity in Cranford" (Dodsworth qtd. in Wolfe 161). Dodsworth's work appropriated critics to excuse simple concerns with plot structure and invited a deeper look into the text, including paving the way for psychological readings of the text (Wolfe 162). Margaret Case Croskery addresses Dodsworth aim in "seeking to emphasize the novel's narrative strength and to defend it from charges of 'plotlessness' or, even worse, lack of unity" (200). She continues, "recent appraisals have focused on the intriguing means by which the force of this novel actually does lie in its plot" (Croskery 200). More modern critics analyze the novel's "radical" approach such as Caroline Jackson-Houlston in "Cranford: Elizabeth Gaskell's Most Radical Novel?" Critics like Anna Koustinoudi still discuss narrative techniques and gender in "Narrative Voice and Gender in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*." More recently, critics such as Alyson Kiesel in "Meaning and Misinterpretation in *Cranford*" see the novel in terms of misinterpretation and its sociopsychological approach.

novel itself but outside of it (289). Schor outlines the stagnation that holds fast in Cranford without modernization's influence—"[the women] have turned their practical liability (single, older women, no longer wealthy or important in a masculine, modern, money-minded world) into its own kind of advantage" (290). Although, opposite to Schor, I would argue that the novel does not want the reader to see spinsters as unimportant in a modern world. Lastly, in "Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Sly Javelins' Governing Women in Cranford and Haworth" Auerbach deliberates the gender politics of *Cranford* and Cranford by discussing instances in which the ladies of Cranford operate in a manner disparate from that of the modern, masculine world.[32] Auerbach explains that "…in its nineteenth century connotation, 'generation' means also 'procreation,' suggesting perhaps the power of a new and unexpected national birth out of women whom many dismiss as 'self-deceiving, frustrated spinsters'" (Auerbach 280). Importantly, the novel fights to create a place for the spinster women of Cranford and asks its readers to expand their definitions of acceptable femininity; appropriate femininity, to the novel, should be malleable and situational—adhering to defined social codes is not always appropriate. *Cranford* attacks traditional, Victorian femininity by demonstrating that characters adhering to conventional, antiquated versions of femininity—manifested in the novel's eighteenth century versus nineteenth century debate—quite literally staves off progress in Cranford; furthermore, when Matty realizes her alternative version of femininity, Cranford's advancement recommences.

In order to function as a society of women, the novel demonstrates how the spinsters of Cranford need to abandon adherence to old feminine decorum; Matty

[32] Auerbach also draws parallels between *Cranford*'s characters and people and events that took place in Charlotte Bronte's life, noting that Gaskell wrote *Cranford* around the time she began to meet with Bronte.

represents a more open, accepting, and appropriate femininity for spinsters. The other spinster ladies follow the traditional feminine model—keeping up with social decorum, class standing, and attention to dress—and just as the lower classes find the traditional feminine model impractical, spinsters lack "natural duties," rendering this model equally absurd for them. These women do have communal duties, but being a perfect wife-mother model does not aid in carrying out those duties. However, just because they do not function as mothers and wives does not render them unimportant. The novel displays the vital role of spinsters in the community in raising the daughters of others, keeping the town operational, and guiding those less fortunate.

In the first few chapters, the novel pinpoints this misguided Cranfordian preoccupation with social standing and class rank. Social standing in the world of traditional femininity has its function; women had to ensure their husbands behaved in keeping with their rank, which often meant little to no association with townspeople outside of that perceived rank. *Cranford* presents several examples of ladies behaving like traditional females in regards to rank, commenting on the illogicality of excluding any women in a close-quartered town. Spinsters take the rank of their fathers, and widows adopt the rank of their late husband, exposing rank as a constructed and as passed down notion. The novel points to the unnecessary peculiarity of perceiving rank amongst spinsters as important. When Miss Betty Barker, who retired from her milliner business after her sister's death, plans a party, she invites guests based on rank order: first invited is the Honorable Mrs. Jamieson because, as sister-in-law to the late Earl of Glenmire, she "ranks" highest in the town. Next is Miss Matty, a rector's daughter, and then Miss Pole and so forth (Gaskell, *C* 60-61). However, when Matty asks if Mrs. Fitz-Adam, the

widowed sister of the town doctor, Mr. Hoggins (whose surname the town's ladies agree sounds vulgar on the tongue), will attend, Miss Barker replies, "I must draw a line somewhere. . . . I have the greatest respect for Mrs. Fitz-Adam—but I cannot think her fit society for such ladies as Mrs. Jamieson and Miss Matilda Jenkyns" (Gaskell, *C* 62). Two reasons surface to make this statement absurd. First of all, when Mrs. Fitz-Adam enters the town everyone visits her—as is tradition—excepting Mrs. Jamieson, which means that although Mrs. Jamieson does not consider Mrs. Fitz-Adam "fit society," Matty already does and Miss Barker does not dislike the lady for whom she has "the greatest respect" (Gaskell, *C* 64). Deborah Jenkyns, Matty's sister, who the town regarded as the town "lead," "yielded" to Mrs. Jamieson too and gave her the "post of honour," but the novel notes that the "Honourable" Mrs. Jamieson "was fat and inert, and very much at the mercy of her old servants" (Gaskell, *C* 23). The language alone suggests mockery. Gaskell's novels place value on action, and Mrs. Jamieson cannot do anything but snub ladies in her limited society. Additionally, the novel shows that the ladies award undue importance to Mrs. Jamieson's opinions who provides no greater good for the community. Additionally, Miss Barker's social assessments are misplaced because she herself originates from the servant class; her sister was Mrs. Jamieson's servant, and it was only through their combined income that the sisters opened a milliner's shop, a low-ranking profession, ironically, only allowing patrons of high-enough rank to purchase their wares. The novel exemplifies that an elevated sense of self is laughable.

The novel (like many of its contemporaries) links high fashion and attention to dress with an inappropriate sense of rank; Matty Jenkins as the novel's model for spinster femininity does not care for dress, but the other ladies of the town do. In respect to dress,

Miss Barker and Mrs. Fitz-Adam relate. Mrs. Fitz-Adam lived in Cranford before she wed Mr. Fitz-Adam, but the ladies did not know her because "she did not move in a sphere in Cranford society sufficiently high to make any of us care to know what Mr. Fitz-Adam was," and when she returns, "'as bold as a lion'" as a wealthy widow, the ladies deliberate as to if she should be accepted into their circle. Mrs. Fitz-Adam is part of the *noveaux riche*, "dressed in rustling black silk, so soon after her husband's death that poor Miss Jenkyns was justified in the remark she made, that 'bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss'" (Gaskell, *C* 63-64). Deborah Jenkyns judges Mrs. Fitz-Adam's ostentatious fabric choice. Deborah observes social customs readily, and it seems she would not have approved of Miss Barker either. Even though in the opening of the novel, the narrator notes that the ladies dress "independent of fashion" in "good and plain" clothes (Gaskell, *C* 2), Miss Barker dresses in the finery that remained from her closed shop (Gaskell, *C* 62). When Deborah Jenkins dies, the narrator notes, "with her, something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility went out too" (Gaskell, *C* 64-65). Again, the language points to the absurdity in the social customs. The novel notes (through Miss Pole), "'As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we should have no society at all'" (Gaskell, *C* 64-65). The social standings of Cranford's ladies seem to be muddled and misguided, and the novel's examples prove this point.

The novel makes evident how Matty inadvertently relaxes the town's social standings. Matty's diminished income (from failed stocks) forces her to open a tea shop, thus being a "shoppy" person herself (a pejorative term), despite the fact that opening

such a shop will place her securely amongst unfashionable people in a town that cares greatly for appearances, eventually, though, the novel's narrator notes, "Even Mrs. Jamieson's approval of her selling tea had been gained" (Gaskell, *C* 143). Prior to this point, the townspeople greatly respect Matty for being the former clergyman's kind, charitable daughter, but if she becomes a tradeswoman, she jeopardizes her social standing. The narrator declares, "'Why should not Miss Matty sell tea -- be an agent to the East India Tea Company which then existed? I could see no objections to this plan, while the advantages were many -- always supposing that Miss Matty could get over the degradation of condescending to anything like trade" (Gaskell, *C* 133). Facing the prospect of lowered social position, Matty decides to go into business anyway. The language of the passage suggests that the problem with selling tea lies with Matty herself and not with the townspeople. Her friends decide—rather bravely for them—that they would rather keep their friend than lose her.

The novel also evinces that these alternatives to spinster femininity should act outside of established capitalistic practices; just as social decorum and class standing are unnecessary with spinster lifestyle, capitalism is incongruous in a society of women who need to rely on one another. When Matty decides to sell tea, she first asks Mr. Johnson, who sells tea in the town, if his business will be injured by *her* selling tea: "before she could quite reconcile herself to the adoption of her new business, she had trotted down to his shop . . . to tell him of the project that was entertained, and to inquire if it was likely to injure his business" (Gaskell, *C* 144). Additionally, the ladies hold a conference with the narrator, Mary Smith, a young, unmarried woman and daughter of a Drumble (Manchester) lawyer, to help Matty financially (Gaskell, *C* 135-141). Their discussion of

money matters and of poverty now is not seen as vulgar, unlike in the episode with Captain Brown where his talk of poverty is seen as crude. Already, the women are beginning to reevaluate their traditional, feminine views. They realize that their own feelings and opinions have more value than adhering to a rule-book-like-code of outmoded ideas in a society wrought with change. Only when one of their favorites (Matty) and higher ranking individuals jeopardizes her social position do the ladies realize their class adherence is unfounded.

The novel validates that the traditional feminine adherence to class standings does not work in this community when it depicts characters altering their relationships not only with one another, but also with the lower classes; the novel's version of spinster femininity, Matty, does not see class as a marker of character. As in the example of Mrs. Fitz-Adam, Matty does not ostracize Lady Glenmire from society for marrying the town doctor like others in the community do. Lady Glenmire, a poor widow of high social standing, turns out to be less of an observer of class custom—a down to earth and genial lady—than her sister-in-law, Mrs. Jamieson. When Lady Glenmire enters Cranford, The Honourable Mrs. Jamieson is ashamed of her Cranford connections and claims that she only visits country families, therefore, excluding all of the women in the town from seeing the "superior" Lady (Gaskell, *C* 70). However, when Lady Glenmire tires of Mrs. Jamieson's "country" society, Mrs. Jamieson invites the Cranford women to a party (Gaskell, *C* 73). At first, they consider snubbing Mrs. Jamieson for her ill treatment of them; however, they attend the party and delight in the unpretentious manners of Lady Glenmire. Additionally, when the ladies of Cranford learn of Lady Glenmire's impending marriage to Dr. Hoggins, they are surprised that she will marry below her class: "Mrs

Forrester's surprise was equal to ours; and her sense of injury rather greater, because she had to feel for her Order, and saw more fully than we could do how such conduct brought stains on the aristocracy" (Gaskell, *C* 116). In the 1830s, doctors were seen more as servants and are decidedly in the middle class. Lady Glenmire, in marrying Dr. Hoggins, and renouncing her title, furthers the social progression happening in the novel. A potentially lowered class standing agitates Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Jamieson, but the other ladies admit their plans to visit Lady Glenmire in the future: "But would they be visited? Would Mrs. Jamieson let us? Or must we choose between the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson and the degraded Lady Glenmire?" they ask, but assert, "We all liked Lady Glenmire the best. She was bright, and kind, and sociable, and agreeable; and Mrs Jamieson was dull, and inert, and pompous, and tiresome" (Gaskell, *C* 115-116). The ladies begin to extend the concessions they made for Matty to others. If Lady Glenmire has dropped in social position, but was still "bright," "kind," and "agreeable," her social standing no longer matters. As the novel's model for spinster femininity, Matty demonstrates the importance of class acceptance for more unified communities.

Even though examples of traditional feminine models are few in Cranford, examples of faulty and inappropriate motherhood abound in *Cranford* too, and, even though spinster women will not become mothers themselves, they must learn to be appropriate female models for the lives of those children they do encounter. Mrs. Molly Jenkyns, Matty and Deborah's mother, appears to be a model mother: she makes cowslip wine with her daughters, she is supportive, and she loves her husband. Likewise, the Jenkyns began their courtship traditionally, and their love seemed as if it would sustain the traditional family unit. Their love letters are evidence of this unity but it is also

confirmations of her beginnings of the traditional Angel in the House. An early exchange between Rev. John Jenkyns and his future bride, Molly, has her begging him to write to her parents about the dresses she wants, while he writes long love letters and often branches off into Latin phraseology (Gaskell, *C* 43). Mrs. Jenkyns, like the traditional female, concerns herself with the trivialities of dress—like Edith in *North and South*—but it also highlights their difference of education. Mrs. Jenkyns has little education and often writes with grammatical and spelling errors in addition to penning short letters to her husband's long, flowery, Johnsonian ones (Gaskell, *C* 45). Furthermore, Reverend Jenkins sees dress as unimportant: "[Molly] was always lovely enough for him, as he took pains to assure her, when she begged him to express in his answers a predilection for particular pieces of finery, in order that she might show what he said to her parents." The narrator continues, "But at length he seemed to find out that she would not be married till she had a 'trousseau' to her mind; and then he sent her a letter, which had evidently accompanied a whole box full of finery, and in which he requested that she might be dressed in everything her heart desired" (Gaskell, *C* 43). Again, the novel perceives "finery" as a folly for women, a folly that originates in traditional femininity.

But Molly Jenkyns's early preoccupation with dress does not destroy the family, since she redeems herself somewhat because she *acts;* in Gaskell's novels other versions of femininity, the novels value action, and in spinster femininity the novel values the same. Even though Mrs. Jenkyns has little education, she does not begin as the idle Angel in the House. The novel, as evinced in the previous chapter, admires women who work in the home and one of the early scenes of her is a picture of her and Matty making cowslip wine (Gaskell, *C* 53). The breaking point for the family, however, occurs when Reverend

Jenkyns flogs Peter Jenkyns, Matty and Deborah's trickster brother, for his practical joking—after he saunters through the town dressed up like Deborah carrying a fake child, denoting false fallenness (Gaskell, *C* 53). Mrs. Jenkyns clearly has no control or partnership in the marriage—the traditional role of the female—the Reverend makes decisions and thus destroys the family unit.[33] Like Mary's mother in *Mary Barton*, when her family unit falls apart (Esther leaves and her son dies), she ceases to function and the remaining family she has crumbles. Mrs. Jenkyns, now ineffectual, cannot keep the family together. She cannot dictate with her husband how the children should be treated, and the father acts alone. Peter then leaves for the Navy, destroying his mother in the process, and she becomes almost comatose for the remaining family members too. After Peter comes to the kitchen to say goodbye to his mother, and she learns later that night he has left home because he had been disrespected and undervalued, Matty notes, "'I remember, a few days after, I saw the poor, withered cowslip flowers thrown out to the leaf heap, to decay and die there. There was no making of cowslip wine that year at the rectory -- nor, indeed, ever after'" (Gaskell, *C* 53). The lack of wine-making is symbolic of stagnation in the home. No longer is this wife an *acting* member of the family, but she is now the epitome of the idle traditional female. She cannot withstand the trials for which she is unprepared to deal. Now the Reverend has to act alone without the support of his wife. Gaskell over and over again attacks this form of traditional femininity for its weakness. But spinster women, especially in the example of Matty, see how traditional femininity falls short, and, thus, she can create hope for the future by being a stronger feminine example.

[33] On the change in sentiment in the letters exchanged by the Reverend and his wife: "And then his wife had changed her mode of her endorsement. It was no longer from, 'My dearest John;'it was from 'My Honoured Husband'" (Gaskell, *C* 45).

Spinster women often befriended and influenced children in their communities, and thus they needed to be good female figures themselves (like Matty) to set an example. The novel demonstrates the importance, even for spinster women, to have good female models to imitate. With the mother gone as a functional part of the household, Mrs. Jenkyns's daughters do not have an exemplary model to follow. Deborah follows the staunch advice of her traditionalist father. Deborah does not try to be a traditional female, but her masculine femininity does not allow her to function in Cranford and brings stagnation to the town. Deborah attaches herself to the masculine ideals of her father, Reverend John Jenkyns, and reads his literature, existing merely as a shadow of her father and not as her own person. Deborah, after her brother's self-imposed exile, seeks her father's approval and attempts to replace Peter Jenkyns, the son who did not measure up to his father's expectations. Deborah says she will never marry and leave her father (Gaskell, *C* 58). Deborah does not realize that her views have fallen out of favor and are now inappropriate for the new world in which she lives. Adhering to these old views means that she never marries and fulfils her traditional feminine ideal; she will never be a wife or a mother and can only pass her views onto the ladies of Cranford instead of her children. Deborah imposes spinsterhood on herself. Even later in the novel when she attempts to get Miss Jessie Brown's daughter, Flora, to read Johnson, the child gravitates towards the modern language of Dickens. The novel here affectionately notes the days have passed for Deborah's version of femininity; her femininity is not only rooted in the past, but it is also modeled on a masculine ideal.

In the example of the Jenkyns's girls, the novel witnesses how lacking an appropriate female figure alters the course of a woman's life, but Matty, as the model

female spinster, vows that she will not allow this to happen to those women she influences. Matty, without a supportive mother and brother who both exhibit the "tenderness" Gaskell's novel's endorse as important, does not marry Holbrook upon her sister's recommendation. Deborah sees Holbrook, Miss Pole's cousin, as below her and Matty's station and ungenteel. He is a simple country farmer, not a gentleman; therefore, when he proposes marriage to Matty, Deborah disapproves. Holbrook is Matty's opportunity to create life in Cranford, and Deborah thwarts it. Miss Pole in relating the story to Miss Smith, the narrator, says, "…they did not like Miss Matty to marry below her rank. You know she was the rector's daughter, and somehow they are related to Sir Peter Arley: Miss Jenkyns [Deborah] thought a deal of that" (Gaskell, *C* 29). Peter, on the other hand, un-phased by the class issue expected that Matty would marry Holbrook, whom Peter greatly respected: "'Do you know, little Matty, I could have sworn you were on the high road to matrimony when I left England that last time! If anybody had told me you would have lived and died an old maid then, I should have laughed in their faces…Poor Deborah!'" Peter continues, "'What a lecture she read me on having asked him home to lunch one day, when she had seen the Arley carriage in the town, and thought that my lady might call.'" (Gaskell, *C* 155). Mitchell notes "To [Matty] the reminder of the lost opportunity of marriage and motherhood, represented by the idyllic, fruitful farm, brings a sense of loss which issues in the decision not to play the same role as her father and sister [who stopped Cranford's progeny]" (xiii). Mitchell sees it as praising self-sacrifice and self-restraint; nonetheless, it can be interpreted as Matty taking control *not* to stop Cranford's progress in the future, even if that progeny occurs in the lower classes as with Martha and Jem. In chapter four, "A Visit to An Old Bachelor,"

Martha, the servant, says that she wishes to have a "follower," and the narrator notes how she knew "the horror with which both the Miss Jenkynses looked upon 'followers'; and in Miss Matty's present nervous state this dread was not likely to be lessened" (Gaskell, *C* 37-38). At first, it is important to note that Matty was reluctant to change and adhered to Deborah's established social order; however, after visiting Holbrook at his home, she tells Martha she can have followers (Gaskell, *C* 40). She adds, "'God forbid!' said she in a low voice, 'that I should grieve any young hearts'" (Gaskell, *C* 40). Finally, Matty begins to see that she must carve a new role for herself, one separate from Deborah's antiquated role, even if that role is outside of wifehood and motherhood. Furthermore, even though Matty may be confined to the world of Cranford, the novel praises Matty's self-sacrificing, helpful, spinster femininity; Matty remains open to modernity unlike Deborah and creates hope for the future of Cranford.

The novel exemplifies Matty's femininity, and, by the close of *Cranford,* even the novel's other spinsters wish to imitate her kindness and goodness, a sign of her altered femininity. Once she can no longer have the "traditional" marriage she wants, Matty gains control of her own life, and, in the end, she can live with whomever she wants—Jem and Martha, the narrator, and later the addition of Peter, which, though not traditional, does not seem in the least diminished. When the long lost Aga Jenkyns, who is revealed as Matty's younger brother, Peter, returns from India, they form a household, an updated version of a traditional one. Peter sweeps in and removes her from her tea shop and restores her to the head of her household, where she now has the funds to manage her house as she wishes (Gaskell, *C* 156). The women note that Peter's social manners are unusual, yet everyone adores him (Gaskell, *C* 154). The spinster female may

seem unusual, but characters accept her and may potentially follow her as a model. The only problematic character left at the novel's close is Mrs. Jamieson, and it is Peter who can finally "fix" the last eighteenth century adherent, which brings "Peace to Cranford" in the concluding chapter. When Peter proposes a plan to distract Mrs. Jamieson to create peace—by telling her of his grand adventures—he declares, "'I want everybody to be friends,' … 'for it harasses Matty so much to hear of these quarrels'" (Gaskell, *C* 160). Auerbach eloquently establishes Matty's role as the new kind of nineteenth century female, the novel's new version of femininity:

> Destitute of the relationships of daughter, mother, wife, which were the props and dimensions of the Victorian women's life, Matty is restored as she presides over an organic community rooted in the past and containing the future. If its triumph is aligned with the female error of perpetual duplicity, its sustained existence celebrates the sacrilegious accomplishment of shooting a cherub with elegant economy. (Auerbach 285-286)

In the end, Matty Jenkyns creates peace in Cranford through her actions, and Peter perpetuates them. Even in Gaskell's less earnest writings (she did not intend on writing about Cranford for more than two episodes), her philosophies surface; Gaskell's novel cannot hide her preference for non-traditional forms of femininity, and no form is more outside of societal norms than the spinster.

Chapter V:

CONCLUSION

Gaskell's novels ask for women to be free of the oppressive Angel in the House ideal, to have a choice about how they wanted to exhibit *their* femininity. In moving away from the Angel in the House/Fallen woman dichotomy, these novels reveal a spectrum of femininity, away from prescribed roles. Without the added pressure to fulfill an ideal, Victorian women could be free to make choices, to act in their lives, and to reconcile their roles. This spectrum of femininity too creates space for *all* of society's women from the marginalized lower-class, working-class, and spinster women to generating, finally, a more realistic and attainable model for the middle-classes and upper-class women for whom the Angel in the House model was intended.

North and South epitomizes Gaskell's ideal model through Margaret Hale. *Mary Barton* exposes both an incipient form of Margaret Hale and the lower-class feminine example of Mary Barton, and the workings of an early critique on traditional femininity and its failures. And *Cranford*, by means of Matty Jenkins, constructs a role for the spinster woman, revealing her important place in society. These three novels bring to life a plethora of disparate female characters all representations of womanhood existing in the Victorian era; the novels render some of these women as examples of negative femininity and some as models to follow, but most importantly, they reassert that for women to act

in their lives and to manage their families adeptly—be it their "natural" duty or not—a traditional feminine model proved inadequate.

For Gaskell criticism, the notion of Gaskell creating a gender spectrum of femininity leaves room for linking Gaskell's political and social opinions with her philosophies on wifehood, motherhood, and community activism. Since many feminist critics[34] have seen Gaskell as not radical enough for serious study, perhaps, a closer look at just what an unconventional Victorian Gaskell was might push them to reconsider. Modern critics like Davis[35] attempt to bring Gaskell's literature to a more prominent place by discussing Gaskell's relationship to feminist criticism, but it is important to bring Gaskell to prominence in her own right, by celebrating the very thing that feminist critics have ignored, her embrace of feminine duty by creating a complete picture of Victorian femininity outside of the traditional dichotomy. Gaskell should be celebrated for her ability to create space for women in her time. Gaskell's opinions on femininity were unique, and her alternative feminine models, especially Margaret Hale, nudged the boundaries of acceptable femininity while keeping firmly in them.

[34]See introduction, pages 3-6, for more information.
[35] Deanna Davis's article "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell Author" is mentioned throughout. Davis notes, "Gaskell viewed the maternal as a social rather than a biological category" and "although her typical heroine is not yet a wife or a mother, she practices caring for a wide range of neighbors, friends, suitors" (521).

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