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**DEFYING THE OLD LIMITS OF POSSIBILITY:
UNCONVENTIONAL ASPECTS OF TWO GASKELL NOVELS**

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The emerging critical recognition for a tradition of women writers both rests on and demands a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between conventional and subversive social roles in each author and her works. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*,¹ for instance, have pointed to the subtle and symbolic forms of rebellion in both popular and classic women's literature of the nineteenth century. Critical definitions of "rebellion" or "unconventionality" have matured and expanded during the last decade; George Sand represents, we now recognize, only one form of the unconventional. Those less willing to break openly with social premises masked their resentments in their lives and in their novels, sometimes by "punishing" heroines' transgressions with madness or death, sometimes by merely "curing" their temporary independence with a conversion to convention. Elizabeth Gaskell chose this latter alternative, so that, for example, the realistic depiction of economic issues and a factory strike in *Mary Barton* dissolves into personal penance and Christian conversion in the happy ending. *North and South* and *Sylvia's Lovers* share this shift in focus; they veer from a resolution outside the social structures of religion and marriage. These conventional endings have been thoroughly and rightly criticized;² Barbara Hardy notes of *North and South*, for example, that "the problems of love and industrial failure are solved and dismissed by coincidence and that favorite device of the bourgeois novel, the unexpected legacy."³ Such endings, along with *Cranford*, have engendered a conception of Gaskell as a writer severely limited by conventionality.⁴

The ending, however, is not the whole of the novel. Reader after reader comments on the dissonance between the explicit, standard moral authorial commentary and the implications of Gaskell's plots.⁵ Terry Eagleton observes: "It is in this putting of its own controlling ideology into question that the achievement of *Sylvia's Lovers* lies."⁶ Such discord makes Gaskell's novels second- rather than first-rate, of course; a novel confused about its ideology is an artistic Klein bottle. Conventional endings obscure but should not blind us to courageous originality in other parts of *North and South* and *Sylvia's Lovers*. In a

series of innovative analogies, *North and South* suggests a radical rejection of social repression, a repression which *Sylvia's Lovers* explores primarily in terms of its effect on her heroine's growth into and understanding of her own sexuality.

Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, offended manufacturers who felt that it promoted working-class discontent and offered sympathy to strikers. *North and South* placated these businessmen by showing the factory owners' financial vulnerability and by featuring an owner as its heroine's romantic interest. Ironically, this "conciliatory" novel has as its basis the rejection of the ruling social, religious, political-economic, and military orders.

The critic expecting a conventional, straightforward narrative will be puzzled by *North and South* and think its technique halting. Martin Dodsworth suggests, for example, that "The novel starts three times—in Harley Street, in Helstone, and in Milton—and only really gets under way at the third attempt";⁷ he feels that the first two openings are dismissed, merely to reshape the sentimental readers' expectations. Dodsworth's idea is ingenious, but many incidents in *North and South* would be so completely to that audience's taste (particularly the ending) that warning seems unnecessary. The novel really works with a series of analogies rather than an unbroken narrative line; the "first two beginnings" justify the more extreme rebellions later. Margaret's engaged cousin Edith looks like Titania, "a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls, and gone off into a peaceful little after-dinner nap" (p. 35). Drowsiness verging on enervation pervades the scene, and the description very nearly transforms Edith into a slightly superior sort of cat. In more than one sense she is reminiscent of Titania, since her conventionality leads away from all motion and energy, really from all humanity. Margaret's two rejections of Henry Lennox, who comes from this world, make a deeper kind of sense because of this opening; Margaret's rejection of the social opportunities inherent in this marriage does not come out of bitter feelings of exclusion, like *Jane Eyre's* or *Lucy Snowe's*, but from the knowledge of its superficiality. Though Margaret retains many class prejudices from her Harley Street upbringing, she has begun to break away.

The Helstone incident broadens the attack on social institutions and also enlarges the notion of the rebel. When Margaret's father, Mr. Hale, reveals that he can no longer make a declaration of conformity to the Liturgy of the Church of England, he emphatically denies that

he has religious doubts. He has, therefore, developed a personal definition of religious truth which he cannot reconcile with the institutional definition. His crisis of conscience has intensified with his bishop's offer of another living: if he accepts, he must affirm the Liturgy. An analogy to Lennox's offer to Margaret, this opportunity for advancement crystallizes a rejection already fundamentally decided. Though Margaret and her father can exist within the confines of conventional social roles, an explicit acceptance of those roles would violate their integrity. Vitality and imagination characterize both the young and the middle-aged rebel. The bookish Mr. Hale does not adapt perfectly to his new life in industrial Milton, but he has enough flexibility to make friends there and find himself employment. A Titania deprived of her milieu, in frail health, with no intensity of personality or will, Mrs. Hale effectively curses God and dies by refusing to look for any source of employment or companionship beyond her servant Dixon, the remnant of the old life.

The third rebel, Frederick, faces more serious consequences than the others, since he confronts military rather than drawing-room or religious authority. Even the conservative Mrs. Hale thinks her son's behavior right, though her support is based on maternal love rather than any real philosophic position. Ironically, she voices the Romantic objection against system when she tells Margaret of the events leading up to the mutiny in which Frederick participates: "Is that the letter in which he speaks of Captain Reid's impatience with the men, for not going through the ship's manoeuvres as quickly as the Avenger? You see, he says that they had many new hands on board the Russell, while the Avenger had been nearly three years on the station, with nothing to do but to keep slavers off, and work her men, till they ran up and down the rigging like rats or monkeys" (p. 52). In the interest of show, worthless competition, the captain wishes to reduce his men to animals (as the simile notes) since his system uses only their animal traits. In the mutiny which follows a crewman's death caused by the captain's harshness, the captain and his adherents are left in a small boat and later rescued. The conventional mind's inherent limitations in comprehending and reacting to individual assertion find expression in the newspaper account of the mutiny: the paper assumes that despite their avoidance of bloodshed, the mutineers have become pirates, an assumption that a rejection of conventional authority always amounts to anarchical selfishness. When the state captures some of the mutineers, it hangs them, so that

authority has killed twice, while individual conscience remains pure.

The strikers' revolt against the political and economic system profitable for the mill owners receives far more qualified approval than the individual rebellions. First, Gaskell simply does not see the system as morally bankrupt. Though limited, for instance, in artistic appreciation, the owners talk much more energetically than their Harley Street counterparts; they misdirect this energy, but its very presence bespeaks a potential for change absent in Henry Lennox. In addition, the love between the industrialist John Thornton and his mother runs far deeper than the affection of Mrs. Shaw for her daughter Edith (an affection rather confused with spinets and Indian shawls) or for Margaret, whom the family politely inquires about and then politely forgets when the Hales move to Milton. Second, the issues of this struggle are more complex, simply because the number of people directly involved is much greater than in the other, more individual choices. *Mary Barton* shows a strike that cannot possibly hurt the owners, but that will starve the workers. *North and South* shows the owners, already hard-pressed, driven to the brink of bankruptcy.

This vulnerability, which pacified the real-life manufacturers who had castigated *Mary Barton*, inverts the earlier novel's premises: trusting that increased tolerance and a desire to change social conditions would proceed from education, *Mary Barton* presents working-class life to the middle class; *North and South* really presents middle-class reasoning to all others. The middle-class ignorance in *Mary Barton* receives John Barton's famous attack: "Don't think to come over me with th' old talk, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor; I say, if they don't know, they ought to know. We're their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows, and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf between us." The manufacturers' ignorance here is self-serving; the middle class seeks to isolate itself, limits its knowledge, in order to avoid its obligations. The workers' oversimplified idea of their employers' lives and powers in *North and South* does nearly as much harm as its inverse in *Mary Barton*, but the mollified industrialists seem to have overlooked Gaskell's quiet assignment of responsibility, for the middle class must again accept the blame. An exaggerated bluster consisting of never having to justify or discuss one's intentions constitutes Thornton's original conception of independence. This designed isolation has a fancied superiority as its basis: "I agree

with Miss Hale so far as to consider our people in the condition of children, while I deny that we, the masters, have anything to do with making or keeping them so...I will use my best discretion...to make laws and come to just decisions in the conduct of my business—laws and decisions which work for my own good in the first instance—for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have once declared to be my resolution” (p. 167). Thornton’s arrogance probably arises from his steady climb from factory boy to mill owner; financial ruin, as well as Margaret’s asseverations, finally convinces him of his fallibility.

Within this context of revolt against tyrannous social authority, Thornton and Margaret’s love story shows Gaskell’s awareness of what revolt entails: Margaret must slough off the class prejudices she acquired in Harley Street, learn to accept as well as tolerate the less formal manners of Milton, above all, recognize and embrace her own capacity for passion. In short, she must construct for herself moral rules and develop the potential which justified her rejection of convention. Some critics assume that Margaret’s feelings simply represent another of Gaskell’s limitations—Ganz remarks, for instance, that “in Margaret a Brontëan spirit of self-assertion is weakened by a rather meretricious coyness and reticence in deference to Victorian prudery.”⁸ The first description of Margaret’s reticence shows that assumption to be too simple: “Margaret felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage” (p. 65). Gaskell’s language is too strong to denote coyness: Margaret here retreats from her own sexuality, though she cannot quite deny its existence. When she attends the Thornton dinner party, Margaret rejoices when the men rejoin the women after dinner, because “She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. It might be rather rampant in its display, and savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication...” (p. 217). “Rampant,” “intoxication”—this is the language of sexual attraction. Margaret consciously enjoys the men’s display of power, and she associates it with new areas of experience, in a kind of subconscious code for sexuality. Later, when she considers her behavior in physically shielding Thornton from the rioters, she bitterly regrets this new area of experience and attempts to deny it: “I, who have despised people for showing emotion—who have thought them wanting in self-control—I went down and must needs throw myself into the melee, like a Romantic fool!...it is no wonder

those people thought I was in love with him, after disgracing myself in that way. I in love—and with him too!” (p. 247).⁹ Clearly Margaret reacts against the whole idea of love, and yet she does not seem coy or merely bashful—the strength of revulsion is too great. Margaret’s feelings show distaste for the conventionally melodramatic with “Romantic fool” and a strong, perhaps unhealthy, concern with power. Just as Thornton accepts the vulnerability brought by his economic position, so Margaret must learn to accept the risk that accompanies sexual love in order to “defy the old limits of possibility.”

This reading may be more persuasive if *North and South* is placed not with the antiseptic *Ruth*, which has special reasons for avoiding sexuality, but with *Sylvia’s Lovers*, in which Gaskell herself defies the old limits of sexual frankness. Contemporary critics had scorned Charlotte Brontë’s novels as coarse and indelicate for indicating the presence of sexuality in their heroines, and Gaskell’s biography acquiesces in the judgment and offers by way of excuse an explanation of its origin in Branwell’s influence. Despite this apparent yielding to the popular standard, Gaskell’s practice intensifies Brontë’s tendencies. Expressed indirectly or symbolically, sexuality provides the major motivation for the characters’ action in *Sylvia’s Lovers*.

Kinraid’s first extended speech in *Sylvia’s* hearing establishes his sexual interests, by way of a sea yarn:

“And says our captain—as were a daredevil, if ever a man were—
‘There’ll be an opening in yon dark grey wall, and into that opening I’ll sail, if I coast along it till th’ day of judgment.’ ...All at once, th’ man as were on watch gave a cry: he saw a break in the ice, as we’d begun to think were everlasting; and we all gathered towards the bows, and the captain called to th’ man at the helm to keep her course, and cocked his head, and began to walk the quarter-deck jaunty again. And we came to a great cleft in th’ long weary rock of ice: and the sides o’ th’ cleft were not jagged, but went straight sharp down into the foaming waters. But we took one look at what lay inside, for our captain, with a loud cry to God, bade the helmsman steer nor’ards away fra’ th’ mouth o’ Hell. We all saw wi’ our own eyes, inside that fearsome wall o’ ice—seventy mile long, as we could swear to—inside that grey, cold ice, came leaping flames, all red and yellow wi’ heat o’ some unearthly kind, out o’ th’ very waters o’ the sea’ making our eyes dazzle wi’ their scarlet blaze that shot up as high, nay, higher than the ice around, yet never so much as a shred on ’t was melted. They did say that some beside our captain saw the black devils dart hither and thither, quicker than the very flames themselves; anyhow, *he* saw them.”¹⁰

The ship's voyage into the glacier, the foaming waters, the hot geyser—these clearly represent intercourse and the frightening discovery of passion. Sylvia appears to understand Kinraid's message subconsciously: "All night long Sylvia dreamed of burning volcanoes springing out of icy seas. But, as in the specioneer's tale, the flames were peopled with demons, there was no human interest for her in the wondrous scene in which she was no actor, only a spectator" (p. 91). At seventeen, Sylvia has only just met a man capable of awakening her sexuality, though Gaskell has suggested Sylvia's potential—her insistence on a scarlet rather than a grey cloak, her inclusion of a rose to set off a dish sent to Kinraid indicate a sensuous if not yet sensual nature.

Philip's love cannot engender a return from Sylvia because he cannot express his sexual nature. Gaskell notes, though without a specifically sexual application, that "The whole atmosphere of life among the Friends at this date partook of this character of self-repression, and both Coulson and Hepburn shared in it" (p. 111). One detail takes on particular significance from its proximity to the fire-passion equation in Kinraid's story. While trying to educate Sylvia, Philip forces her to copy the single word "Abednego" for a whole page, and she rebels. The name remains a name to both of them, even in each other's presence; associations with the fiery furnace do not occur to them. Philip can comprehend only the *form* of sexual passion, not its essence. Sylvia laughingly says that if she ever writes Philip a letter, it will consist of nothing but "Abednego"; later when he has left to look after her imprisoned father's interest, he begs her to write. Though Gaskell does not reveal if Sylvia replies, her letter really could be nothing but "Abednego," the hollow form, which is all that Philip receives from their marriage. This concern with sexuality evaporates when Sylvia refuses to break her marriage vows and leave Philip, and the rest of the novel is quite flat, much like *Wuthering Heights* after Heathcliff's death.

Except in *Sylvia's Lovers* (and there the pessimism comes as much from the unchangeable natures of individuals as from social oppression), Gaskell's appreciation of individuality and her Unitarian optimism determine her vision of communities embracing rather than crushing individuals. A workman in *North and South* explicitly states the necessity of considering individuality when attempting any social change: "And I'm not one who thinks truth can be shaped out in words, all neat and clean, as th' men at th' foundry cut out sheet-iron. Same bones won't go down wi' every one. It'll stick here i' this man's

throat, and there i' t' others. Let alone that, when down, it may be too strong for this one, too weak for that. Folk who sets up to doctor th' world wi' their truth, mun suit different for different minds; and be a bit tender in th' way of giving it too, or the poor sick fool may spit it out i' their faces" (p. 293). Geoffrey Tillotson rightly calls kindness the ultimate virtue in Gaskell's vision,¹¹ and for Gaskell, kindness requires clear-sightedness in recognizing, as well as gentleness in dealing with, individual eccentricities. Her constant recurrence to the catch-phrase, "We have all one common heart,"¹² accents the unity of mankind without denying its diversity, as do all the novels. At the conclusion of a bereaved workman's visit to the Hales, for instance, "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm" (p. 297). The image is fine, though the authorial gloss coarsens it. This harmonious blend has a later analogue in Thornton's factory dining room (pp. 445-447), about which a speaker comments: "'Nothing like the act of eating for equalising men. Dying is nothing to it. The philosopher dies sententiously—the pharisee ostentatiously—the simple-hearted humbly—the poor idiot blindly, as the sparrow falls to the ground; but philosopher, and idiot, publick and pharisee, all eat after the same fashion—given an equally good digestion. There's theory for you!'" (p. 446). Mankind apparently has, in addition to a common heart, a communal stomach.

Only communication can preserve this harmony in diversity. Though *Mary Barton* and *North and South* assert the necessity of communication, *Sylvia's Lovers* has a much more personal sense of its primacy, since Gaskell is no longer self-consciously depicting economic classes in conflict and feels no obligation to include broadly representative characters. Nearly every page of *Sylvia's Lovers* contains a melancholy sense of how often people mistake one another, even when they honestly try to communicate. Emotional withdrawal and secrecy guarantee even more pain, since they produce ignorance and more misunderstanding. Thus, to mention only two examples, Philip wounds Hester Rose continually because he remains unaware of her love for him, and the Robsons' concealment of Sylvia's engagement leads to Philip's disastrous lie that his rival is dead. Gaskell suggests no origin for the problems in communication; their very ubiquity and the novel's resignation to suffering show her despair of finding a cure.

In chapter one, which describes the setting in detail, Gaskell

observes that "The cattle in the pasture fields belonging to these farms looked half-starved; but somehow there was an odd, intelligent expression in their faces...which is seldom seen in the placidly stupid countenances of well-fed animals" (p. 3). This comment sounds very like the bitter consolation of *Villette*—suffering brings knowledge—and later Gaskell withdraws even that pittance. Though Bell's and Daniel Robson's different temperaments frequently make their marriage painful to Bell, she loves him and often enjoys his company. Though she despairs of teaching him, she has learned the means of managing him, a certain sad knowledge. His hanging, however, brings no sort of compensating enlightenment—only unbearable pain leading to senility. Likewise, Sylvia's loss of Kinraid (when she thinks him drowned) causes a kind of suspended animation; although she marries Philip, her spirit has withdrawn so completely that she never expresses any wish and seldom any definite reaction.

The last quarter of *Sylvia's Lovers* changes this circumstance, of course, and even the most credulous reader will reject it as bogus. The novel's frustrating ending reminds me somewhat of an author's wistful comment that "Great Expectations" is a title that every writer wishes were still available: probably every critic yearns after F. R. Leavis' original *ex cathedra* pronouncement that the Gwendolen Harleth portion of *Daniel Deronda* should be separated from what he considered its damaging context. As this possibility of a literary caesarian has been eliminated, one can only state that if Gaskell had stopped writing when she tired of the work,¹³ if she had not resorted to recounting a parable of a crusader and his wife and then twisted her characters to fit that parable, *Sylvia's Lovers* would be a much better and a much better-known novel.

Even weakened by its ending, the work powerfully presents communication as the central necessity for tolerable, let alone enjoyable, lives. Lies, of course, subvert communication, and in *Sylvia's Lovers* Philip's lie ruins his life and Sylvia's too. As many critics note, lying is a leit-motif in Gaskell's novels—John Barton lies by omission when he allows Jem Wilson to be tried for Carson's murder; Margaret Hale lies directly to protect her brother; the Reverend Benson and his sister Faith lie to set up a socially acceptable identity for Ruth; Osborne Hamley hides his marriage; and of course, Hyacinth's entire emotional life consists of fabrication. Gaskell's treatment of this issue in *Ruth* assumes her audience's endorsement of the Unitarian belief that lies blur and deny God's design,¹⁴ and *North and South* does only a little better with the issue.

Sylvia's Lovers shows a tremendous increase of insight into a lie's effect on the liar; it shows, for instance, the renewed consciousness of the lie every time an external circumstance forces Philip to hear Kinraid's name, and thus demonstrates the remorse claimed but not made convincing in *Ruth*. We do not know how much direct experience with lies Gaskell had had when she wrote *North and South* and *Ruth*; we do know, however, that she lied in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by suppressing Charlotte's love for M. Héger and by both exaggerating the effect of and changing the dates of Branwell's decline to explain Charlotte's depression on leaving Brussels. Gaskell wanted to present Brontë as a supremely admirable woman rather than a great artist, and in order to do so, she felt impelled to falsify one of Brontë's most important, formative experiences. Perhaps that experience led to the more complex and satisfying analysis of lying in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Sylvia's Lovers includes an almost impersonal deceit directly linked to the oppressive social system. When the people have grown so wary of the press gang's illegal seizures that the men barely venture outside their homes, the gang rings the fire bell at night, separating and securing its prey in the resulting confusion. Though of course they have been irritated by the gang's previous activities, the townspeople particularly resent the use of the bell: "Then the fire-bell had been a decoy; a sort of seething the kid in its mother's milk, leading men into a snare through their kindest feelings" (p. 221). The means of communication, which construct a community capable of protecting its individuals, have been abused for narrower interests. *Sylvia's Lovers* has the most dramatic and fully developed sense of how an oppressive system perverts communication, but the earlier novels have prototypes. Margaret Hale considers a lie necessary to guarantee her brother's safety from an unjust legal system, for instance, and that lie damages her communication with Thornton. The Bensons likewise feel that a lie is their only refuge from rigid public opinion. Thus, overly authoritarian political or social systems erode the only basis for the individual's happiness, unrestrained communication.

A novelist, particularly a pre-Jamesian novelist, cannot be judged solely on the basis of his or her novels' finales. We would not hesitate to call Gaskell revolutionary if she ended her novels as their premises demand; we ought not to forget those premises and dismiss her as conventional. Gaskell only ended her novels in the usual way; *North and South* and *Sylvia's Lovers* stand as her defiance of the old limits.

NOTES

¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, 1977); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London, 1979).

² See especially John Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," *Tradition and Tolerance in 19th-Century Fiction: Critical Essays on Some English and American Novels*, eds. David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode (London, 1966), pp. 141-205; and John Pikoulis, "North and South: Varieties of Love and Power," *YES*, 6(1975), 176-193.

³ Barbara Hardy, "Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot," *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard, *History of Literature in the English Language* (London, 1970), 6: 177.

⁴ For examples from critics with widely differing premises, see Yvonne Ffrench, *Mrs. Gaskell* (Denver, 1949), p. 47; Arnold Kettle, "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel," *From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore, 1958-68 [printed with revisions]), pp. 182-183; and Brian Crick, "Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*: A Reconsideration," *Mosaic*, 9(1975), 85-104.

⁵ Margaret Ganz sensitively explores this problem in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict* (New York, 1969). Coral Lansbury in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (New York, 1975) suggests, rather unconvincingly, that Gaskell deliberately created a middle-class narrator whose judgments the reader would reject. The suggestion would seem more likely if it concerned a post-Jamesian author or if the idea were buttressed with examples of the narrative voice's judgments diverging from Mrs. Gaskell's stated opinions.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, "Sylvia's Lovers and Legality," *EIC*, 26(1976), 26-27.

⁷ Martin Dodsworth, *Introd., North and South* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 12. All references to this novel will come from this edition and will be placed in the text.

⁸ Ganz, p. 102.

⁹ Lansbury takes this and following speeches at face value, thus implying that Margaret correctly condemns the onlookers for sexist assumptions of her love for Thornton. Margaret, however, *is* in love with Thornton (though she might protect another man in the same way) and is determinedly ignorant of that fact.

¹⁰ *Sylvia's Lovers* (New York, 1964), p. 88. All further references to this work will come from this edition and will be placed in the text.

¹¹ Geoffrey Tillotson, *A View of Victorian Literature* (Oxford, 1978), p. 253.

¹² See Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford, 1976).

¹³ Gérin reports Gaskell's fatigue, pp. 202-230.

¹⁴ See Lansbury, pp. 11-14, for Gaskell's Unitarianism, particularly its effect on her conception of marriage.