

IDEALS AND REALITIES IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S NOVELS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: SEPARATE SPHERES, THE WOMAN

#### QUESTION, AND ELIZABETH GASKELL

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of much change in England. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the living conditions and forms of home life in much of England's population were drastically altered. Because of these changes, many fundamental political, philosophical, and religious attitudes were being reconsidered. Labor laws began to be improved, educating the masses was being viewed more and more as a necessity, and oppressed groups such as slaves and child laborers were beginning to be treated more humanely. In accordance with the changing laws, lower and middle-class men were gaining new freedoms and opportunities associated with political and economic mobility, but women were still being deprived of their rights. The patriarchal ideology which outlined "separate spheres" for men and women was accepted by many. Conventionally, the pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home; "she preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband's conscience, guided her children's training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action" (Mitchell, *Daily* 266). Women were thought to have characteristics such as compassion, gentleness, and tender emotion which made them particularly fit for a domestic role. Conversely, men were thought to be rational and strong and, therefore,



belonged in the public sphere—the workforce, politics, etc. This ideology, therefore, created order by defining the roles of men and women and by giving dominance to men in all decisions pertaining to the central unit of society, the family. To ensure this order many laws including the law of Coventry, among others, were upheld despite the fact that they denied women legal rights. In respects other than politics, upper and middle-class single women enjoyed the same rights as a man. However, few educational opportunities and professional careers were open to women in order to discourage them from seeking unnatural employment, anything outside of the domestic sphere. Lower-class women could work outside the home but had none of the other rights enjoyed by upper and middle-class women. Also, unmarried women were generally regarded as failures, according to society's ideals for Victorian women, and labeled as “old maids” with nothing positive to offer public society. Married women were not treated with much more regard. Although they held socially acceptable positions and supposedly ruled the home, married women were considered by law as the property of their husbands, and they had essentially no rights to any property of their own including their children. In reaction to the unfair treatment of women, many writers began to publish works discussing women's situations, fueling one of the key debates of the nineteenth century, the debate on “The Woman Question.”

The Woman Question debate revolved around the reformation of laws denying married women the right to own property and gain custody over their children in the event of divorce or abandonment. The debate also centered on questions of women's role within society: Should women be allowed to work? To vote? To receive an education equal to a man's education? These issues as well as others concerned both men and

women because they threatened to change the very foundations of English society and, therefore, spurred great propagators as well as adamant opponents who continued to promote patriarchal ideology which insisted that marriage, and separate spheres, were the right and proper conditions for society. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the Woman Question debate acquired a new urgency because, in the mid-nineteenth century, there was “an excess of four or five per cent of females over the males” in England’s population “leaving thirty per cent of women [. . .] who never marr[ied]” (Cobbe, *Old Maids* 85). It was no longer inevitable that women would be supported by husbands. Some women would have to be independent participants in a society which made little allowance for single women. Even with the changing demographic in England, the majority of the population still felt that marriage was the right and proper, as well as the happiest, condition for women. There were, however, many people who recognized women’s natural capacities to achieve success and happiness in areas outside the home. Thus, the focus of the Woman Question debate shifted from primarily discussing issues concerning marriage and property laws to questioning the nature and status of the institution of marriage itself and exploring new possibilities for women who could not obtain that institution.

In accordance with this increased urgency, it became common for both men and women to publish their views on the Woman Question in the mainstream respectable press. The three women who wrote most regularly for the mainstream press about the Woman Question—Frances Power Cobbe, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Margaret Oliphant—were significant in their day and are still recognized as important figures in the women’s movement by modern critics. Cobbe’s work, which champions women’s causes and

demands reform, positions her as one of the most eminent feminists of her day, while Linton's and Oliphant's works place them among the reputed opponents of the women's movement. Whether feminist or not, according to modern standards, by participating in the debate on woman's issues each "contribute[d] to the legitimization of women's participation in public discussion of political issues," thus countering the concept of separate spheres (Hamilton 12). Similarly, male writers such as John Ruskin, who endorses the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres in his article "Of Queen's Gardens," and John Stuart Mill, who opposes the oppression caused by patriarchal ideologies in his book *The Subjection of Women*, not only contributed to the debate but also "continue[d] in the tradition of writing on acceptably feminine topics" (12). As with writers of non-fiction, women novelists, the most prominent being Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, became activists in the public debate over women's nature and capacities by making obvious statements in their personal lives as well as their novels supporting women's social, political, and economic emancipation. The interiority of women's issues within Brontë's female characters and the patriarchal struggles depicted in Eliot's fiction reflect an anger towards the patriarchal system which not only made them important figures of their day but also earned them modern feminist critics' praise for their contribution to the Woman Question debate.

Unlike her contemporaries, Elizabeth Gaskell has occupied a gray area in feminist criticism. Although Gaskell associated personally and/or professionally with Brontë, Eliot, and many of the Victorian periodical and non-fiction writers involved in the Woman Question debate, Gaskell's conservative values and lifestyle set her apart from her contemporaries in the opinions of many modern critics. Gaskell, as most critics note,

seems to have lived happily in a traditionally female role. A superficial glance at Gaskell's life shows the happy wife of a Unitarian minister performing all the duties which this position involved and the devoted mother of four daughters. As made evident by her correspondence, Gaskell also valued her roles as wife and mother above all else and was a great advocate of the state for others. Gaskell's view of marriage may make her seem less able to empathize with the issues raised by the Woman Question debate, but Gaskell actually shared many contemporary authors' public concerns. In fact, Gaskell's life was touched by every major aspect of nineteenth-century women's issues. Being the mother of four and an author, Gaskell was aware of the problems faced by the "superabundant" woman. Also, having unwed daughters brought Gaskell into direct contact with the needs and issues surrounding "redundant" women, and as a working woman often sought out for advice about writing and publishing, Gaskell understood the difficulties women faced while trying to find work. Gaskell's career also makes her difficult for critics to characterize because her ability to sustain both a family and a career suggests that she was able to function outside of the ideological sphere for women, the home.

Despite her familiarity with women's issues, many feminist critics have neglected Gaskell because conservative values are reflected in her novels. Early scholarship of Gaskell ignored the discussion of women's issues altogether and focused on Gaskell as a writer of social fiction. Volumes such as Louis Cazamian's *The Social Novel in England* (London: Routledge, 1973), which was originally published in 1904, place Gaskell in "the tradition of prophetic social criticism" (Schor, *Elizabeth* 350). Following in Cazamian's tradition, Kathleen Tillotson's studies, especially the material in *Novels of*

*the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956), claim that Gaskell played an important role in shaping the novel of social realism. Likewise, Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) recognizes Gaskell's ability to report on social occurrences; however, he criticizes what he calls the sentimental aspects of Gaskell's fiction, the romantic plots of her female characters. Some critics who did not simply ignore the exclusively women's issues in Gaskell's fiction focus on issues in Gaskell's work that repel feminist criticism. Gaskell's harshest critic, David Cecil, provides such commentary:

In an age whose ideal of women emphasized the feminine qualities at the expense of all others, [Gaskell] was all a woman was expected to be: gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction. (184)

Cecil gives Gaskell no credit as a writer of resistance; he views her as disassociated with the Victorian women's movement in England because he sees her as a woman who accepted the ideology of separate spheres. One of the earliest feminist attempts to integrate the social elements of Gaskell's fiction with a feminist reading of Gaskell is Aina Rubenius' book *The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1950). Rubenius rebuts Cecil's assertions about Gaskell and blends historical, biographical, and textual analyses of Gaskell's life and works to show the difficulties Gaskell faced in defining the female roles. Although she does provide a more accurate view of Gaskell as a woman writer, Rubenius falls into more of a social discussion of Gaskell's work than a feminist discussion. Similar to Rubenius, several other critics including, but not limited to, Edgar Wright, Margaret Ganz, Arthur Pollard, and Coral Lansbury published books exclusively on Gaskell with the purpose of

reassessing her career; however, none of their reassessments are marked by any expansion of understanding Gaskell as more than a social novelist.

In the 1970's and 1980's, Gaskell began to receive more notice by feminist critics but was relegated to second place behind authors such as Brontë and Eliot because feminist critics did not view her as resistant enough to patriarchal ideologies. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar give very little commentary on Gaskell and her work in their otherwise comprehensive book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979). Similarly, Judith Lowder Newton dismisses Gaskell in her book *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* because she claims Gaskell “celebrates the ideology of woman’s sphere” and “presents us with a version of woman’s sphere which sees it as a natural and as given” (164). Gilbert and Gubar’s dismissal of Gaskell and Newton’s dissatisfaction with her suggest that Gaskell is a failed feminist prototype. Other feminist critics, however, try to understand Gaskell and depict her as a woman struggling within an unequal and subversive society. Elaine Showalter, for example, in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977) places Gaskell within the category of a female novelist trying to harmoniously balance her personal and professional lives. Francoise Basch’s *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (New York: Schocken, 1974) attempts a similar task by recognizing Gaskell as a woman torn between the demands of work and home. Both Showalter and Basch, however, though they do not write Gaskell off as a pawn of patriarchal society as Gilbert and Gubar do, still seem somewhat puzzled by Gaskell’s allegiance to what they view as the restrictive codes of Victorian society.

Several feminist critics better represent Gaskell in their books which attempt to trace female communities, textual strategies, and Victorian themes including, but not limited, to Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978), Sally Mitchell's *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green UP, 1981), Pauline Nestor's *Female Friendships and Communities* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), Susan Morgan's *Sisters in Time* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), and Shirley Foster's *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom, and the Individual* (London: Croom, 1985). Each of these studies develops Gaskell's importance within the women's movement of the 1850's by depicting her resistance to societal norms and her progressive social views. Patsy Stoneman's book, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, attempts to provide an even stronger case for Gaskell's feminism. Stoneman's strongest claim for Gaskell's feminism is related to the doctrine of separate spheres: "To the Gaskells who saw reason and love as equally necessary for humanity, the doctrine of 'separate spheres' [. . .] was a denial of full humanity to both. This harmful ideology is attacked in all Elizabeth's work" (64). Other feminist critics attempting to rehabilitate Gaskell as a feminist include Margaret Homan and Patricia Meyer Spacks. Homan's book *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) attempts to reevaluate the place of the mother in cultural and feminist criticism by looking at that role in Gaskell's fiction, and Spacks focuses on Gaskell's depiction of marriage in Gaskell's fiction to show Gaskell's awareness that the cost of a happy marriage is an occupation.

The problem with these attempts to rescue Gaskell from feminist obscurity, however, is that "while providing insightful readings of her work that open up new

ground for Gaskell criticism, they also repress some central elements of Gaskell's perspective on women and female roles" (Davis 518). Stoneman, Spacks, and Homan strive to fit Gaskell into a modern feminist prototype by making sweeping generalizations about her work that claim she continually challenges the patriarchy and by ignoring what is disturbing to feminists in Gaskell's work, her idealism. Gaskell believed that marriage and family are important aspects of women's lives which can promote women's happiness. Therefore, Gaskell believed that women should value those roles by being chaste before and after they marry. These beliefs are evident in her novels and cannot be ignored; they show that Gaskell cannot be characterized by modern standards of feminism nor should she be. Gaskell's feminism, however, is revealed in her novels as well and seems to stem from one of the most traditional aspects of her life, her Christianity. Gaskell's religious beliefs certainly led her to value her role as a wife and a mother, to sanction those endeavors in her writing, and to endorse Victorian sexual ideals which had a moral value that was important in her own life. On the other hand, Gaskell's beliefs also helped her develop some of her most progressive ideas. In her novels, Gaskell promotes an equality within marriage that the ideology of separate spheres left no room for. Gaskell's novels also reveal her disapproval of any social structure that inhibited women's ability to find happiness and be successful. Accordingly, Gaskell depicts of the realities of nineteenth-century women's lives in her novels to show that she also understood that certain ideals, such as a happy marriage, are not achievable by all women, and that by not making any exceptions to the strict codes of Victorian ideology, society was hampering its own progression. So, rather than making claims that Gaskell's novels triumph over Victorian ideology and the restrictions it imposed, this thesis will



attempt to show how the balance of ideals and realities presented within Gaskell's fiction portray a society in need of change and to provide an understanding of the progressive ideas Gaskell presents to benefit Victorian women's lives and aid their social equality.

Keeping these ideas in mind, this thesis will attempt a close reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's six major novels, *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *Cranford* (1853), *North and South* (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866). The body of this thesis will focus on Gaskell's presentation of ideals of feminine behavior to show their importance to Victorian society, and it will also develop Gaskell's views on which ideals are no longer acceptable or achievable by examining Gaskell's presentation of the realities of women's lives. Chapter II will explore the feminine ideals Gaskell supports—chastity, domesticity, and Christian service—in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*.

Chapter II will explore how Gaskell supports these ideals while at the same time subverting the idea of separate spheres. This chapter will attempt to show Gaskell's progressive view of womanhood by exploring her suggestion that women are capable of becoming more active participants in the public sphere as well as gaining more equality in marriage. Chapter III will focus on Victorian ideals concerning marriage in an examination of *Sylvia's Lovers*. This chapter will question the Victorian assumption that maintaining separate spheres and gender roles within a marriage relationship ensures happiness; it will examine Gaskell's negative depiction of what were considered marital ideals and provide insight into Gaskell's suggestions for changing those ideals.

Chapter IV will also examine Gaskell's commentary on the institution of marriage. This chapter will consider how the changing demographic in Victorian England, in which single women outnumber single men, effects marriage ideology. Since

the realities of women's lives were changing and not all women were able to marry, Chapter IV will uncover Gaskell's ideas on the subjects of marriage and celibacy. This chapter will compare the lives of single women to the lives of married women in *Ruth* and in *Cranford* to uncover Gaskell's view on the question of whether the state of marriage or of celibacy is more conducive to female happiness and to explore the ever present Victorian question: What shall we do with our old maids? In addition, this chapter will develop Gaskell's disapproval of her society's tendency to value only married or marriageable women—those women who are chaste. And, it will explore the changes Gaskell sees are necessary to accommodate old maids and help support unmarried women. To conclude, Chapter V will concentrate on Gaskell's final novel, *Wives and Daughters*. Chapter V will show the damaging effects of strictly adhering to the patriarchal ideologies and the existing social structure of the mid-nineteenth century; it will show how those structures—the patriarchal and class hierarchies—inhibit not only women's lives but men's lives as well. Chapter V will examine what purpose these structures served and why Gaskell believes they are no longer adequate. This chapter will then culminate in Gaskell's suggestions on how to achieve social progress.

In order to uncover Gaskell's views on the Woman Question, her importance as a participant in the Victorian women's movement, and her role as a writer of progress who recognized the importance of maintaining ideals as well as the importance of being able to change, this thesis will develop a connection between Gaskell's fiction and the non-fiction published in the mid-nineteenth century on that debate. This thesis will use the work of Frances Power Cobbe, Mona Caird, John Stuart Mill, among other to show how

Gaskell includes contemporary issues into her novels. As well as showing the connections between the concerns in Gaskell's writing and those in the writings of nineteenth-century periodical and non-fiction writers. This thesis will make use of the ideas of those Gaskell critics who view Gaskell as both an innovative and an orthodox writer—Shirley Foster, Sally Mitchell, Susan Morgan, Pauline Nestor, and Hilary Schor, among others—to support the claim that Gaskell, as a writer, represents a transitory period in women's history. Gaskell's idealism reveals that she was aware that ideology serves a purpose; it provides people with a sense of identity. However, ideologies can also blind people to their historical situation and this blindness can keep society from progressing. Gaskell seems aware that her historical situation in which more and more women are unable to achieve happy marriages no longer fits with Victorian ideologies; she also seems aware that letting go of one's identity can be difficult. Gaskell, therefore, uses a traditional framework in her novels—she focuses on female characters who achieve marital happiness, on traditional families, and on traditional feminine roles—and she builds off of these traditions to provide innovative ideas about her society. In this way, Gaskell helps her readers to make the transition from a strict adherence to nineteenth-century ideologies to a more lenient acceptance of the differing situations and desires of women.

Most importantly, I intend to show that Gaskell's work focuses on the lives of regular women. Gaskell presents controversial issues in a palatable form so that women who might shy away from the ideas of more extreme feminists might more easily become involved in the issues at hand. Today, as in Victorian England, the word "feminist" seems to illicit cringes of disapproval from those who do not understand what feminism is all

about. Accordingly, many people today think of feminists as extremists when in reality they are women concerned with the equal rights and the fair treatment of both men and women. There are women today who represent the feminist cause without going to extremes just as there were women in the nineteenth century who did the same. Gaskell was one of these women; her novels show that certain Victorian ideologies were inhibiting to both men and women, and therefore, Gaskell deserves to be recognized as a feminist and a positive contributor to the cause of equality.

## CHAPTER II

### ORTHODOXIES AND INNOVATIONS: THEIR ROLE IN

#### *MARY BARTON AND NORTH AND SOUTH*

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command and woman to obey. (Tennyson 437-40)

This regulation, uttered by the king in Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, reflects the traditional Victorian stereotype that portrayed women with a special nature particularly fit for a domestic role. Women were thought to be nurturing and compassionate while being "neither bold in bearing nor masculine in mind" and, therefore, fit for raising children and providing a positive influence in the domestic sphere, the home, but not for rivaling men in the public world (Linton, *Girl* 172). This concept of womanhood is most aptly developed in Coventry Patmore's immensely popular poem, *The Angel in the House*. Patmore's poem idealized women's purity, selflessness, moral uprightness, and submissiveness. According to Patmore, the angel in the house was an object to be worshipped and desired, an idol enshrined and protected within the home, whose role was to create a place of peace and moral-centeredness where the man could take refuge from the degenerate public sphere in which he must daily struggle. Such an exalted conception of the home placed great pressure on the woman who ran it to be "most excellent of all, / the best half of creation's best" (Patmore 28-29). Today, it is easy to

recognize the oppressive aspects of this ideology of separate spheres; however, many Victorian writers, both male and female, endorsed this ideology by implementing traditional narrative orthodoxies in their works.

Much of Victorian fiction develops basic romantic formulations made popular in eighteenth-century sentimental novels such as Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* and Frances Burney's *Evelina*. In novels of sensibility, the heroine, idealized in terms of physical beauty, progresses towards selfless perfection by developing noble feminine spirituality and, ultimately, obtains fulfillment through marriage and domesticity. As with the majority of domestic novels in the Victorian period, these traditional romantic formulations are evident in two of Elizabeth Gaskell's early novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). Both novels center on an ideal female character's development and culminate in the heroines' entrances into acceptable domestic positions through marriage. Within the conventional framework of these novels, Gaskell implements various traditional images of womanhood. Gaskell's heroines are both physically and morally beautiful, they prioritize their domestic roles, and they desire to obtain an ideal marriage, one characterized by love and comfort. Despite this predominating idealism, Gaskell's novels also present innovative and radical ideas similar to those of her contemporaries. Gaskell goes beyond traditional ideas of female development; she explores and develops new concepts of female independence and power, expands traditional ideas of Christian service, and supports equality and individuality in marriage relationships. Although *Mary Barton* and *North and South* do not completely depart from Victorian ideologies, both novels do question Victorian

assumptions about acceptable female behavior and, by so doing, support new possibilities for women.

Gaskell's orthodoxies are first made evident in the descriptions of Mary Barton's and Margaret Hale's physical appearances. Mary's beauty is most stereotypically Victorian. Mary's blue eyes, fair and blushing complexion, and golden curls make an immediate impression on everyone she meets. Mary's beauty is often praised by "the factory people as they [pour] from the mills," and by young men, "in a different rank from her own," who willingly "compliment the pretty weaver's daughter" as they pass her in the streets (Gaskell, *Mary* 26). Both rich and poor recognize Mary's beauty indicating that her physical appearance matches ideal qualities of beauty at the time. Mary is even able to "[engage] herself as apprentice [. . .] to a certain Miss Simmonds, milliner and dressmaker, in a respectable little street" because her beauty "[makes] her desirable as a show-woman" (27). Mary's angelic qualities make her an ideal show piece because Victorian society associated those physical qualities with desirable internal attributes—purity, innocence, and humble grace. Mary, however, does not always exhibit desirable internal qualities. Mary "[knows] she [is] very pretty" and determines "that her beauty should make her a lady" (26). Mary's knowledge of her beauty causes her to depart from stereotypically feminine virtues. Mary is "led astray by vanity," she is "lured by visions of social and material elevation," and she desires to use her beauty to gain a wealthy husband (Foster 145). Desire commonly leads women to their ruin in Victorian fiction because, if unchecked, it can cause a woman to become vain, forget propriety, and lose her virginity. Mary's beautiful Aunt Esther, for example, loses her virtue because she is flattered into an extra-marital relationship with a gentleman. Because Esther is no

longer virtuous, she is no longer marriageable. Therefore, Esther's punishment for her unchecked desire is desperation and prostitution. Unlike Esther, Mary regrets that she departs from feminine virtues and changes her behavior before she is ruined. After realizing her errors in judgment, Mary develops maidenly characteristics through the patience and kindness she exhibits towards Mrs. Wilson, the penitence she expresses at the thought of her own foolishness, and the self-restraint she shows in avoiding further relations with Harry Carson. Mary redeems herself when she develops stereotypically feminine attributes, when she learns to control her desire. Her transformation supports traditional ideologies by endorsing the Victorian assumption that women should be beautiful both morally and physically.

In *North and South*, Gaskell presents Margaret Hale in similar terms of ideal femininity. Like Mary, Margaret has a strong physical presence and leaves a distinct impression on those she meets. Margaret is not as stereotypically beautiful as Mary, she has dark hair instead of golden hair, and she has a more stately presence. However, she does have a "beautiful countenance" and an ivory complexion which set her apart from the ruddy workers at Milton and marks her as one of a higher class (Gaskell, *North* 64). Margaret's exterior beauty also indicates ideal interior characteristics, her piety and her propriety. When Margaret first meets Mr. Thornton, "her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexible throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so slightly as she spoke" caused him to look upon her "with an admiration he could not repress" (64). Mr. Thornton cannot help but desire Margaret because she appears to be a model of feminine virtue and to be perfect for a possible wife. Margaret's dress is also an indication of her ideal feminine virtues. Margaret's dresses are very plain; she wears



“dark silk [gowns], without any trimming or flounce” and simple, tidy bonnets and shawls (62). It is true that when staying with her cousins in London, Margaret often wears more elegant and expensive clothing, but she prefers simplicity. Margaret’s desire for simple dress reflects her modest character and good breeding and indicates that she can control her passion. Unlike Mary who puts much thought into her appearance and is often carried away by fancy, Margaret is more concerned with her actions than with her appearance. Gaskell, therefore, does not center Margaret’s development on the attainment of control over her desires, but on the development of existing moral virtues. Margaret’s stately appearance indicates that although not prone towards vanity, she is often guilty of haughtiness. This haughtiness is evident in Margaret’s dealings with Mr. Thornton. Margaret finds distasteful Mr. Thornton’s materialism and lack of sympathy for the poor and often treats him with contempt. Margaret does not initially seek to understand Mr. Thornton and feels that her ideals and beliefs are superior to his. As the novel progresses, however, Margaret learns to sympathize with Mr. Thornton as she becomes aware of his personal struggles and his kind nature, she repents of her haughtiness, and she even begins to love him. Through Margaret’s development into a beautiful and humble woman, Gaskell once again supports traditional Victorian ideals that emphasize feminine perfection and marriage.

Gaskell’s heroines further uphold traditional Victorian ideologies through their prioritization of their domestic obligations. Mary demonstrates her true sense of duty as a daughter when faced with the truth of her father’s guilt. When Mary realizes that her father is responsible for Harry Carson’s murder, she also realizes that “if her father [is] guilty, Jem [is] innocent” (Gaskell, *Mary* 245). Mary is faced with an awful dilemma.

She has the evidence to save the man she loves, but saving Jem means condemning her father. Finally, Mary decides that her father “never should be [suspected], if by any foresight or any exertions of her own she could prevent it” and seeks an alternate way to prove Jem’s innocence (245). Mary’s loyalty to her father is not altered by his actions even though those actions broke the law and endangered the life of her lover. Mary could easily have placed her own desire for Jem and his love above her filial obligations, but she does not, and, as a result, Mary is able to save both of the men she loves. Because Mary’s actions are rewarded, it becomes clear that Gaskell approves of Mary’s loyalty to her father because it indicates she will be a loyal wife someday as well. To Gaskell, the ideal woman does just as Mary does, she puts all personal inclinations aside in order to support her family and becomes the kind of woman who will make a desirable wife.

Margaret Hale demonstrates a similar sense of domestic responsibility and familial obligation in *North and South*. Margaret places the responsibility of her family’s safety above even her own Christian sense of morality. When “Frederick [is] in danger of being pursued and detected in London, as not only guilty of manslaughter, but as the more unpardonable leader of the mutiny,” Margaret “lie[s] to save him” from a police investigation (Gaskell, *North* 271). Through all other trials Margaret upholds her moral principles, but when it is a matter of protecting her brother, Margaret places her own inclinations aside. Margaret is even willing to submit herself to public shame by confessing her lies if need be, but not until she knows her brother is safe. As a result of her protective actions, Margaret must not only suffer from the guilt of her dishonesty but also from the accusations of others. After hearing her son’s account of Margaret’s proceedings, Mrs. Thornton automatically assumes that Margaret’s chastity has been lost.

This rumored suspicion, however, does not wound Margaret; she merely stands up for her own innocence while maintaining her secrecy about her brother. Because Margaret does not tell Mrs. Thornton that she was with her brother the night of the accident and not with a lover, Mrs. Thornton continues to believe that Margaret is guilty of some indiscretion. Margaret could have cleared her name, but out of loyalty to her family she refuses to do so. By compromising her own social respectability, Margaret, like Mary, selflessly devotes herself to the protection of her family and to her domestic position as daughter and sister. Through these two heroines, Gaskell holds to an ideal form of womanhood in which a woman places her domestic duties above all other concerns.

Gaskell also develops her heroines' ideal domesticity through their experiences with loss. Both Mary Barton and Margaret Hale suffer the loss of their mothers fairly early in their lives. When Mary's mother dies in childbirth, her father "[stands] like one stupefied" (Gaskell, *Mary* 20). The shock of his wife's death and the overwhelming power of his own grief keep John Barton from attending to the necessary arrangements for his wife's body. Mary, on the other hand, "mechanically help[s] the neighbour in all the last attentions to the dead" and "reserve[s] the luxury of a full burst of grief" until after these duties are done (21-22). Unlike her father, Mary is able to maintain strength and continue to work despite her grief. Victorian ideology stipulated that women were responsible for "sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" within the home, and Mary fulfills these expectations by putting her own grief aside and managing the home (Ruskin par. 32). Mary even serves as her father's strength by taking on the household responsibilities that her mother would have performed had she lived. When faced with the realities of taking care of the home, Mary often thinks, "If mother had but lived, she

would have helped me,” but, despite these thoughts, Mary continues to work throughout the novel (Gaskell, *Mary* 28). Taking on the domestic duties of her mother is a stereotypically feminine role, but Mary’s actions do vary slightly from that of the traditional Victorian heroine when she takes responsibility for her family’s livelihood. Mary’s actions do not, however, stem from personal ambition, but from domestic responsibility. Mary’s motivations are not those of a man, but of an ideal woman, which once more supports traditional Victorian ideology.

Like Mary, Margaret displays a traditional domestic capability when she loses her mother. During Mrs. Hale’s illness and after her death Margaret becomes the stronghold of her family: “Margaret went languidly about, assisting Dixon in her task of arranging the house. Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief, she must be working, planning, considering” (Gaskell, *North* 247). Both Frederick and her father are able to give way to their grief, because Margaret fulfills her domestic role of ordering the home. Unlike Mary, Margaret does not have to seek employment in order to support her family, but she does have to undertake responsibilities shirked by others. In addition to controlling the affairs surrounding her mother’s illness and death, Margaret becomes the parent figure by supporting her grief-stricken father and by arranging for Frederick’s safe departure from England. Margaret must remain clear-minded to take care of her family, and she must also intervene in the public male world in arranging Frederick’s affairs. Once more, Gaskell gives her heroine attributes which societal ideology associated with women, the ability to rule and order the family and the home. Gaskell’s depictions of Mary’s and Margaret’s senses of domestic duty follow the

stereotypical assumption that women have a special nature specifically fit for a domestic role.

Without further examination, both Mary and Margaret appear to be what Eliza Lynn Linton described in her essay, “The Girl of the Period,” as the “fair young English girl [. . .] the ideal of womanhood” (172). Both of Gaskell’s heroines have an “innate purity and dignity,” both are “generous, capable, and modest,” and both are domestic, making them fit for the roles of wives and mothers and, therefore, perfect role models for women (172). The “fair young English girl” was the acceptable and traditional role model in Victorian England because she not only represented Victorian ideals but also kept social order. By maintaining the household, these ideal women were establishing “the social status of the family—measured in both class and moral terms” and, thus, women’s domesticity ensured that there was a social hierarchy which was thought to be a necessity of social order (D’Cruze 54). Gaskell’s heroines, however, are more than the “fair young English girl,” and they do more than represent traditional feminine role models. Despite Mary and Margaret’s orthodox characteristics, they also display more progressive aspects of femininity. Traditionally, men and women were thought to be fit for separate spheres:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. (Ruskin par. 32)

In *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, however, the female characters have active, progressive, and defensive power. Mary and Margaret are the doers and defenders of their families, their homes, and their selves, showing that the ideology of separate spheres

is inaccurate and that women have more capabilities to succeed outside of the home than this ideology stipulated.

Gaskell makes it clear that Mary has a stronger sense of self than most girls. Mary has “more of her own way than is common in any rank with girls of her age” partly out of an innate “sense of spirit” within her and partly as a result of the loss of her mother at a young age (Gaskell, *Mary* 58). Being motherless, Mary has to become independent very quickly in order to take care of her father, her home, and herself. Mary first demonstrates her independence when she opposes her father and enters the “dressmaking business” (25). Mary’s ability to find her own employment shows that she is more than compassionate and nurturing; she is assertive and capable of successfully functioning in the public sphere of society. By finding employment and using the money she earns to run the home, Mary proves that she is capable of making decisions without recourse to advice from others, setting her apart from the traditionally subservient Victorian woman. Through Mary, Gaskell portrays “a woman deriving strength and dignity from the ability to earn her own living,” and this strength that Mary obtains further increases her independence (Lansbury, *Novel* 31). After “three years of independence of action,” Mary becomes independent not only of her father’s will but of societal rules as well (Gaskell, *Mary* 26). Mary displays this independence in her pursuit of young Mr. Carson. “Mary [is] ambitious” in her self-vision and, therefore, rejects her father’s attitudes towards the upper class by showing favor towards Mr. Carson “because he [is] rich and a gentleman” (81). Mary believes that if she marries into money she will be able to use the independence that money provides to gain more freedom for herself and for those she loves. Mary’s pursuit of Mr. Carson also indicates her will to control her own body. Mary

will not be told who she will and will not marry; she will choose what to do with her self and not submit to patriarchal domination.

It is true that her independence which leads to the pursuit of Mr. Carson temporarily causes Mary to depart from other ideal feminine virtues, but it is this same spirit which helps Mary to reform. As soon as Mary realizes that she desires to be Jem's wife, she determines to avoid Mr. Carson. Even when Carson persists in his attempts to win Mary's affections, Mary faces his determination with her own:

Mr. Carson! I want to speak to you for once and for all. Since I met you last Monday evening, I have made up my mind to have nothing more to do with you. I know I've been wrong in leading you to think I liked you; but I believe I didn't rightly know my own mind; and I humbly beg your pardon, sir, if I've led you to think too much of me. (Gaskell, *Mary* 136)

Unlike the more docile creatures depicted in Victorian ideology, Mary is not only powerful enough to end her relationship with Mr. Carson but also strong enough to accept responsibility and show repentance. Mary's self-determination and her strength of character then propel her into a nightmare journey to find Will Wilson, the one person who can clear Jem's name. Even though her quest to save Jem is opposed by her friends Job Legh and Margaret, Mary "[cannot] bear the idea of deputing to any one the active measures necessary to be taken in order to save Jem" (280). Although traditional ideology stipulated that men were supposed "to be the thinker, the ruler, the superior" of women, Mary once again defies convention by acting upon her own inclinations and shows that she has more power than is traditionally allotted to women (Ruskin par. 26). Mary's actions also achieve results; Mary has the power to redeem herself and protect those she loves. By allowing Mary to succeed, Gaskell not only shows that women can have active power, but they can also use it effectively. In this novel, however, such

female power cannot last, and Mary collapses with brain fever after accomplishing her mission and must rely on others for strength.

Margaret Hale, however, exemplifies and maintains her independence and power throughout *North and South*. Although her parents are both alive, Margaret learns to be independent, living in an environment far from home. Margaret's independence begins to develop at a very young age. When Margaret is brought to live with her aunt, she "[sheds tears] with such wild passion" at the thought of being separated from her mother and father (Gaskell, *North* 10). However, when her father comes to see her asleep, Margaret "hushe[s] her sobs, and trie[s] to lie quiet as if asleep, for fear of making her father unhappy by her grief" (10). Margaret is aware that she must live with her aunt because her parents feel that it is the best option for their daughter, and Margaret is also aware that crying will not change her situation but only upset her father. Many Victorians felt that women were prone to "feverish impulses" and "hysterical excitement," which would cause them to act irrationally in emotional situations (Linton, *Modern* 177). However, even as a child Margaret shows that she has qualities that are not traditionally feminine because she is able to stop crying and determine the best course of action for herself and her family without reliance on others. Margaret's independence and strength develop as she grows. Although considered part of the Shaw family, Margaret keeps herself somewhat aloof from the household activities. During her time with the Shaw family, "Margaret [is] often left alone" and often "[sinks] rather more into the background" at family functions, playing the part of observer rather than participant (Gaskell, *North* 364, 12). By choosing when to participate and when to observe, Margaret is able to be both part of the family and independent from it. Because she is not actually her aunt's child,



Margaret is not expected to be as involved as Edith and, therefore, has the ability to demonstrate her independence and develop it, a luxury she might not have had living at home. Nonetheless, Margaret's ability and desire to maintain her freedom show that, like Mary, Margaret's assertive behavior set her apart from the typical Victorian heroine.

Moreover, Margaret's non-traditional female independence shows itself in her actions based on "the responses of the heart" (Foster 148). When Mr. Henry Lennox proposes, Margaret rejects him even though he is "the pleasantest man" and "the most sympathizing friend" because her heart does not feel towards him what Margaret believes a wife should feel for her husband—desire (Gaskell, *North* 32). Because of the negative connotations associated with singleness, most Victorian women would not reject such an offer but take it despite lukewarm feelings to ensure a socially acceptable position in society and relative happiness. By rejecting Lennox's proposal without even consulting her parents, Margaret shows that she values her independence above social orthodoxies. Margaret does not need permission to follow her heart, nor does she need societal approval, and because Margaret is able to make her own decisions, she is freer than ideal Victorian women. Margaret's reaction to Mr. Thornton's proposal of marriage further reveals Gaskell's unorthodox portrayal of women and Margaret's independence. Unlike her feelings towards Mr. Lennox, Margaret has no friendly associations with Mr. Thornton, and she views his proposal as an offensive presumption. Not only does Margaret refuse Mr. Thornton because his proposal is offensive to her but also because it is an indication of his desire to "[master] her inner will" (196). After Thornton's proposal, Margaret reflects: "How dared he say that he would love her still even though she shook him off with contempt? [. . .] What did he mean? Had she not the power to

daunt him?" (196). Mr. Thornton's persistent desire to dominate her will and her person with his love threatens Margaret's independence, her power as a virtuous, single woman. Margaret will not allow a man to dominate her and shows this through her indignation and through her faith in her own power to resist such domination. It is only when Thornton accepts Margaret's individuality that Margaret finally accepts his love. Through Margaret's second refusal of marriage, the reader can see, once again, that Gaskell questions traditional ideologies by suggesting that women should be independent of patriarchal society's conventions and should have the right to control their bodies.

As in traditional Victorian ideology, Christian love and service certainly underpin the actions of Gaskell's fictional heroines. Traditional ideology suggested that women should develop a sense of spirituality through Christian service, and that women should render service to the poor, but from a position of patronage. Since "Evangelical religion, law, literature, and the discourses of the emergent social sciences all elaborated women's association with a separate private sphere," women did not typically venture into much philanthropic work or take part in social reform (D'Cruze 54). The extent of their Christian service generally involved short visits to the poor in order to "feed and clothe" them and also to "direct and teach" them when possible (Ruskin par. 76). Giving charity to the poor was often thought to be more of a social ritual vital in establishing and maintaining the status and respectability of the family than a real concern for the lives and interests of the poor. Gaskell, however, expands these traditional ideas by indicating that true Christianity necessitates active involvement in the lives of those being served. Gaskell's heroines do not just bestow food upon or read to the poor, they actually become involved in their social concerns. Both Mary and Margaret show their faith through their

commitment to social involvement and their insistence upon action. Thus, Gaskell creates new possibilities for women to become more than patrons; she shows women that they are capable of eliciting change through social involvement.

This social involvement is initially suggested in *Mary Barton* through the relationship the Barton family shares with the Wilson family. When “Wilson expresse[s] a wish that they were still the near neighbors they once had been” and when he later expresses the desire to meet often with his neighbors, the reader can see that the Wilsons and the Bartons value communion among friends and neighbors (Gaskell, *Mary* 12). The Barton family and the Wilson family do not simply give to each other when there is a need; they share each other’s joys and sorrows at all times. This Christian involvement is also reflected when Wilson and Barton go to relieve the suffering of the Davenports. Not only do these men buy food for the Davenport family, they also comfort the grief stricken wife and care for the home and the children. As a witness to her father’s acts, Mary follows his Christian example in her own actions towards the poor. When Mary is asked for food by a little Italian boy she meets on the street, she responds according to her father’s example:

Mary answered him impatiently, ‘Oh, lad, hunger is nothing—nothing!’ And she rapidly passed on. But her heart upbraided her the next minute with her unrelenting speech, and she hastily entered her door and seized the scanty remnant of food which the cupboard contained, and retraced her steps to the place where the little hopeless stranger had sunk down by his mute companion in loneliness and starvation. (229)

Although Mary’s initial response to the child’s plea suggests her preoccupation with her own problems, Mary puts the thoughts of her own situation aside because she realizes that the child’s hunger is everything to the child. Mary does not merely give the child food; Mary empathizes with his situation and involves herself in his concerns through

this empathy. Throughout the novel, Mary continually gives of what little she has, which sometimes is only the comfort of her own sympathy. Even though Mrs. Wilson does not particularly like Mary or approve of her actions, Mary shows compassion towards the old woman when Jem is imprisoned. By loving Mrs. Wilson without getting anything in return, Mary truly demonstrates her ability to love as Christ loved. Mary also becomes actively involved in Mrs. Wilson's concerns by taking upon herself the responsibility of saving Jem. Mary's Christianity is direct, and, through Mary's direct actions, Gaskell shows that women can and should be more than the stereotypical Christian; they should be involved in social concerns because they can make a difference in the lives of others.

Gaskell displays similar ideas through Margaret Hale, who embodies Christian love and virtue in *North and South*. In Helstone, Margaret's Christian virtues are always expressed in a traditional way. Margaret's initial acts of charity to others are a patronage that includes reading "with slow distinctness to their old people," nursing the parishioners' babies, and carrying "dainty messes to their sick" (Gaskell, *North* 19). Margaret is poor herself, but she is among the genteel poor—she is educated. Therefore, Margaret's charity, though received with gratitude, is somewhat condescending. Margaret's position changes, however, when she moves to Milton. The people in Milton do not feel as kindly about charity from one who is above them in station as the people in Helstone, and Margaret's initial offer of service towards the Higgins family is perceived as an insult. By becoming friends with the Higgins family and engaging in the social reforms with which they are involved, Margaret is allowed to visit the Higgins' home to comfort the dying Bessy and help to support and encourage Higgins in his quest to help the Milton workers. Margaret's religion "changes from an emphasis on charity and good

works to active social reform, and Elizabeth Gaskell implies that she is the better Christian for it” by showing that the relationship is mutually beneficial and not one-sided (Lansbury, *Novel* 104). Margaret also acts as the spiritual center of her own family. When Mr. Hale admits that he has doubts about the authority of the Church and reveals his intentions to abdicate his position, Margaret must not only take the responsibility of breaking the news to her mother, but she must also help her father to hold to his convictions. Because of his own feelings of guilt for displacing his family, Margaret’s father second-guesses his decision to leave the church. Despite her own desire to remain in Helstone, Margaret feels: “It is bad to believe [her father] in error. It would be infinitely worse to have known [him] a hypocrite,” and so she encourages her father’s decision to leave (Gaskell, *North* 56). Margaret’s Christian convictions give her the sense to know what is right and wrong, the strength to act accordingly, and the ability to help others do the same. In so doing, Margaret shows that Christian action is more important than church positions or societal opinions. This insistence on Christian action in Gaskell’s novels was a radical idea in a society which idolized and yet separated the woman from any form of public life. Gaskell, however, confidently provides a new means for women to function in and improve public society through her bold suggestion that women can and should be active Christians.

Although Gaskell questions Victorian ideologies in the portrayal of her heroines’ independence and her ideas of Christian behavior, she seems to uphold tradition in her depiction of marriage relationships in *Mary Barton*. Gaskell develops the ideology, and hardly deviates from it throughout *Mary Barton*, that a woman’s ultimate fulfillment is achieved through matrimony and the acceptance of traditional gender roles. In Mary’s

case, “the supremacy of love is fully acknowledged” as Mary strives to earn Jem’s love (Foster 144). After initially refusing Jem’s proposal, Mary “[sees] how vain, how nothing to her, would be all gaieties and pomps, all joys and pleasures, unless she might share them with Jem” and, therefore, alters her behavior and actions so as to remain chaste and virtuous so she can be Jem’s wife (Gaskell, *Mary* 131-32). Mary’s assertion and actions indicate that without Jem, Mary will find no happiness. Accepting this ideology, Mary commits herself to Jem even before discovering Mr. Carson’s real intentions towards her. This commitment is fully realized when Mary achieves conventional female fulfillment as a wife and mother. Although Mary shows striking independence in her quest to save Jem, she completely supports her husband’s decisions concerning her father and her future life at the end of the novel. When Jem decides it is best not to see her father alone after the trial, Mary does as she is told. When Jem decides to take a job in Canada, Mary does not hesitate to leave her home in order to support her husband. Mary’s eagerness to obey Jem shows that Mary has changed. She no longer has the independent spirit that drove her to save Jem; Mary is now subordinate to a man, but this is her choice. In the final image in which Mary and her baby await the arrival of Jem, Gaskell depicts a vision of Victorian ideologies in an almost Utopian world. Mary and her mother-in-law can now live together in peace, and Mary is able to provide her husband with an heir. Mary has taken upon herself the traditional gender role as wife, and because of this action, Mary finds harmony in life. *Mary Barton*, then, “makes no great claims for a new view of womanhood” because Mary takes on the traditional feminine role and is blessed for it (Foster 147). There seems to be no indication that Jem will assert this authority that he has over Mary, but there also seems to be no more indication that Mary will give him

cause to do so. Mary's high-spirited independence seems to have given way to her willing dependence on her husband.

Gaskell's novel, *North and South*, however, ends with a bolder statement about marriage relationships than *Mary Barton*. As in the end of *Mary Barton*, Gaskell returns to traditional ideologies in *North and South* as Margaret and Mr. Thornton ultimately reconcile their differences and are united in marriage. The narrative is also like *Mary Barton*, in that Margaret must first go through a change of character before gaining a husband. Margaret begins with negative feelings towards Mr. Thornton and refuses his first offer of marriage. When Margaret better understands her own feelings and the character of Mr. Thornton, she commits herself to him. Unlike in *Mary Barton*, however, the change does not only take place within Gaskell's heroine in *North and South*. Through her words and her actions, Margaret is able to help Thornton develop an understanding with his workers and, thus, Margaret learns to be assertive. Mr. Thornton helps Margaret to recognize her emotional needs and, by so doing, he gains a better understanding of her individuality. Both characters must improve their behavior before they deserve each other. This idea, although bold, is not radical but reminiscent of other female authors' ideas. For example, Jane Austen's heroines often achieve this type of marriage relationship. Gaskell is, therefore, building on the ideas of others to show that marriage can be an ideal and desirable state if love and mutual respect are its main components.

Mr. Thornton and Margaret's relationship is also based on mutual respect and understanding. Margaret understands that Mr. Thornton has become a benevolent master, and she has the ability to help him maintain his position. Because Mr. Thornton has an

understanding of Margaret's independence, he is able to allow her to be his benefactress. Even though, in a sense, Margaret's bestowal of her property to Mr. Thornton is an indication of her relinquishment of her public role, Margaret will always hold some power in her marriage because of her initial benevolence. Through Margaret and Thornton's union, Gaskell indicates that "successful matrimony here depends on balance and sympathetic interaction" and not merely on love or dependency, although those qualities play a role (Foster 153). Instead of imagining a marriage characterized by harmonious subservience as in *Mary Barton*, one can envision a continuance of Margaret and Thornton's mutual reliance upon each other and their continued support of the other's development. Without these attributes, marriage would be one-sided, like those traditional Victorian marriages in which the husband dominated, and women would have to settle for inequality. Gaskell's suggestion that marriage be equal presents the possibility of women's true happiness through the achievement of continual individuality.

Gaskell's expansions of traditional views of womanhood do question the Victorian assumption that women cannot function in, and are not meant to function in, both the public and the private spheres of society. Through each heroine's independence and Christian activism, Gaskell shows that women do not need men to direct their actions in the public sphere. Gaskell's depiction of marriage as a more equal union between a man and a woman also stretches beyond the limits of Victorian ideology. However, both Mary's and Margaret's characters develop to the point where matrimonial harmony is achieved and then their stories end. By showing that both Mary and Margaret remain virtuous and ending with marriage, Gaskell seems to support the nineteenth-century ideal that a woman's ultimate happiness and complete fulfillment is achieved through



matrimony. Gaskell supports the notion that it is appropriate and desirable that women be chaste before marriage and provides no other means for finding happiness than traditional domesticity and chastity afterwards. *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are also traditional in that they seem to indicate that successful marriages ought to be “patriarchal [and] companionate” as well as being based on “mutually agreed duties between husbands and wives” (Evans 57). The ending of *Mary Barton* suggests this ideological relationship between husband and wife as Mary stands lovingly in the doorway of her home “watching the return of her husband from his daily work” (Gaskell, *Mary* 393). The ending of *North and South* does the same when Margaret shows her love by offering her money to Mr. Thornton, also indicating her desire to relinquish the burden of providing for herself. As in traditional ideology, the woman is happy to take her place in the private sphere while the husband takes his place in the public sphere. Gaskell goes no further in these novels than suggesting this traditional means of happiness, and she does not examine the realities of married life that existed in many nineteenth-century relationships often led to unhappiness. Thus, although both novels present innovative ideas of womanhood, certain matrimonial ideologies, such as female subservience, that could lead to marital dysfunction are left unquestioned.

### CHAPTER III

#### *SYLVIA'S LOVERS*: A DISSENT FROM MATRIMONIAL IDEOLOGIES

Gaskell's most detailed and uncompromising examination of matrimony is presented in her novel, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell questions the nineteenth-century matrimonial ideologies, that she does not address in either *Mary Barton* or *North and South*, by presenting a more realistic and complete view of marriage relationships. Victorian ideologies held that happiness in marriage could only be obtained if men and women accepted and embraced traditional gender roles:

Women, as mistresses of households, were responsible for the household's orderly and successful management, while their husbands had a duty to provide and care for their family [. . .] Women certainly owed their husbands obedience, but men were also expected to respect and support their wives. (Evans 63)

Much of Victorian fiction urges the acceptance of this ideology by romanticizing the happiness of ideal characters who achieve marital satisfaction in this way. Through her characters' contrasting responses to the idea of marriage and their motivations for getting married, Gaskell shows that, like many people in Victorian society, the characters in *Sylvia's Lovers* share this vision of what marriage ought to be and seek this type of ideal relationship. Although Gaskell's characters desire ideal relationships based on traditional gender roles because they believe this will bring them happiness, their pursuit of ideals actually leads to the subjection of one sex to the other and elicits marital discontent. The only marriages that elicit contentment in *Sylvia's Lovers* are those based on compromise

and pragmatism. Gaskell, however, seems to want more for her main characters than marital contentment; she wants them to find true happiness, through loving and equal marriage. Therefore, through the development of Sylvia and Philip's relationship, Gaskell shows that to achieve true happiness in marriage the couple must relinquish the ideology of maintaining separate spheres and gender roles in marriage and develop a free and equal relationship.

To highlight Sylvia's idealism, Gaskell first presents Sylvia's and Molly's contrasting responses to the idea of marriage. Both Molly and Sylvia come from similar backgrounds; they are from the same social class, live in the same neighborhood, are close in age, and have similar chores. But, they have very different outlooks on life. This difference is illustrated as Molly and Sylvia go about their task of selling eggs and butter. Molly is aware that if she does not sell all she has for a good price, then she will not be able to buy all that she needs for her large family and, thus, receive "a good 'rating' from her mother" upon her return home (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 16). Sylvia, however, is an only child and is more concerned with whether to choose a gray or a scarlet material for the "brand-new duffle cloak" that she is to buy for herself than with the price she gets for her goods (16). Molly's concerns are those of a woman trying to provide the necessities of life for her family and for herself, while Sylvia is able to enjoy "the simple, instinctive passions of a child" who does not have to worry about where her next meal is to come from (Foster 157). Because Sylvia lives in more comfortable circumstances than Molly, Sylvia is unaware of many of the realities of life. Sylvia's naiveté about the world influences her reaction to the suggestion of marriage. When the girls realize that almost everyone in town is watching the return of a whaling ship instead of buying and selling their goods,

Molly and Sylvia decide to leave their eggs and butter with a crippled old man and join in the excitement. Upon their return, the old man exclaims: “Ay, ay! Lasses as has sweethearts a-coming home don’t care much what price they get for butter and eggs!” (24). In response, Sylvia “redden[s], pout[s], tosse[s] back her head, and hardly deign[s] a farewell word of thanks or civility to the lame man” because his comments are an affront to her maidenly sensibilities (24). Molly, on the other hand, “rather like[s] the unfounded idea of her having a sweetheart” and replies to the man’s banter cheerfully (24). The girls’ differing responses to the man’s suggestion indicate that Sylvia, because she has a comfortable life, has no financial need to marry and, therefore, has no intention to marry at this time. Sylvia has the luxury of waiting to find romance before she considers matrimony. In contrast, Molly, who has to compete for what she wants and needs with her siblings, desires financial ease and sees marriage as a means of escaping her present situation. For Molly, marriage is the only way to escape her present reality and claim a more comfortable reality, while to Sylvia marriage is still just a dream.

Sylvia’s romantic view of matrimony is more precisely revealed in her reaction to Molly’s motivation for getting married. The old man’s suggestion that Molly and Sylvia have sweethearts on the ship prompts Molly to suggest that “if perhaps Charley Kinraid behaves hissen, [she] might be brought to listen” (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 25). Molly’s suggestion sparks Sylvia’s interest in what she believes is a grand romance between a heroic specksioneer and her friend. So when Molly later comes to Sylvia’s home to share the news of her engagement, Sylvia assumes she has become engaged to Charley. Molly’s real intention, however, is to marry Mr. Brunton “a canny Newcassel shopkeeper” who is “near upon forty” and has a child (110). Although Molly admits that Mr. Brunton is

“kind” and “good-tempered,” his main attraction to Molly is that he has “two hundred pound every year” and will be able to provide a more comfortable life than the one she has (110). Molly’s unashamedly pragmatic motives for matrimony are distasteful to Sylvia because they are “quite a come down from the romance with the specksioneer for its hero” that she imagined her friend was involved in (110). Once again, Sylvia’s romantic ideals are offended by a realistic view of matrimony, and although Sylvia does defend Molly against Mrs. Robson’s criticism by calling Molly a “good-hearted lass,” in her heart Sylvia “felt [Molly] to be selfish” (110-11). To Sylvia, wanting a comfortable home at the expense of romantic desire is selfishness; to Molly, however, who wants financial ease, this marriage is good sense. Molly’s mother has so many children that she is also “thankful to t’ one that gets off quickest,” and, therefore, Molly’s engagement is considered fortunate. Unlike Molly, Sylvia has the luxury of idealism because she has a comfortable home with parents willing and able to have her stay.

Gaskell further develops Sylvia’s idealism as well as introducing Philip’s idealism by presenting their contrasting responses to the idea of marrying each other. Both Philip and Sylvia have romantic ideas about what qualities their spouse and their relationship must have. Unfortunately, Philip’s and Sylvia’s romantic ideals do not quite match up. Having worked hard his entire life to obtain a partnership in the Foster’s business, Philip envisions “idylls of domestic peace and obedience” in which he obtains a wife who will fill the domestic role while he continues to succeed in business (Cobbe, *Criminals* 114). To Philip, Sylvia is the woman who can fulfill this ideal role. Sylvia has the physical characteristics that qualify her as an ideal woman. The townspeople often praise Sylvia’s beauty, her “bright and charming” expression, and her high-spirited demeanor (Gaskell,

*Sylvia* 29). Since physical beauty is often thought to reflect moral and spiritual beauty, Philip desires Sylvia because he feels that the townspeople assume that her interior goodness is reflected in her looks and, therefore, as her husband, Philip's own goodness will show because he has acquired such a wife. Philip is aware that Sylvia has ideal internal characteristics as well. When faced with any "open, barefaced admiration," Sylvia always responds either by taking offence or by pouting (109). Philip attributes this reaction to Sylvia's maidenly modesty and her desire to remain virtuous which increases his admiration for her as an ideal woman. Philip also feels that Sylvia has the traditionally feminine qualities of nurture and compassion that will make her an ideal wife. When Mrs. Robson becomes ill, Sylvia becomes "entirely absorbed in nursing her" (123). Philip sees Sylvia's devotion to her mother as an indication that she will be as devoted a wife and mother herself someday. Philip's desire for a woman with these ideal characteristics indicates his desire for a traditionally gendered marriage. Philip sees himself as a hard-working provider because he has managed to gain respectability and position within his work, and he sees Sylvia as a domestic angel, a perfect complement to his ideal vision of the future.

Sylvia, however, has ideals of her own that contrast with Philip's visions of the future. As Philip desires a traditionally feminine wife, Sylvia desires a ideal masculine husband. Sylvia's idea of masculinity stems from the relationship she sees between her mother and father. Sylvia's father has a soft spot in his heart for his daughter, and he spoils her. When Sylvia's mother is upset that Sylvia does not take her advice and buy the more practical gray fabric for her cloak, Sylvia's father merely says: "She's a good lass [. . .] and if she liked to wear a yellow-orange cloak she should have it," and the

subject is closed (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 44). Sylvia's parents fulfill their traditional gender roles. Because Mr. Robson "is the natural bread winner" and Mrs. Robson "lives by the bread which [he] has earned," Mrs. Robson gives to her husband the obedience that she believes is his due and allows him to have his way (Cobbe, *Criminals* 112). In turn, Sylvia follows her mother's example in dealing with her father. For example, Sylvia does not see her father's drinking habit as dishonorable, but feels it is part of his manly nature. Thus, Sylvia helps her mother to make sure that her father does not drink too heavily and that he is safely watched over when intoxicated. Sylvia's willingness to follow her mother's example in regards to her father indicates that Sylvia approves of the traditionally gendered relationship that exists between her parents. Sylvia seems to approve of her mother's diligence in the home and her father's work outdoors. For this reason, Sylvia "finds Philip unmanly because he works in a draper's, and is irritated by his persistent attentions" (Foster 157-58). Sylvia associates Philip's work in town—sewing, mending, and dealing with fabrics—with her mother's work in the home and not with the physical labor that her father performs. Sylvia is also so used to Philip's presence that he seems more like a brother than a lover, and she has no passionate feelings towards him. Thus, Sylvia's "ideal husband [is] different from Philip in every point"; her ideal husband is more like her father and, thus, like Charley Kinraid (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 121). Charley is everything Philip is not. Unlike Philip, Charley is handsome, adventurous, has a "good temper and [a] buoyant spirit," and is willing to drink, smoke, and exchange stories with her father (143). Consequently, "Sylvia's love for Charley resembles Philip's love for her" because she desires what she sees as ideal masculine characteristics in a husband (Schor, *Scheherezade* 161). More than this, Charley's

presence ignites strong feelings of love within Sylvia whenever he is near. So when Sylvia envisions her future happiness, she pictures herself married to Charley.

Both Sylvia and Philip desire traditional relationships based on their ideals of gender norms because they believe that those ideals will bring them happiness. Philip is so entirely absorbed in worshipping Sylvia because of her ideal beauty and femininity that he believes, as did many Victorian men, her “whole life and being, her soul, body, time, property, thought, and care, ought to be given to [him]” (Cobbe, *Criminals* 121). Sylvia, on the other hand, views Philip as unmanly and instead turns to Charley because with Charley she feels “a new strange state of happiness not to be reasoned about, or accounted for” (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 140). Charley’s presence elicits this feeling because he fits Sylvia’s ideas of love and normalcy. Therefore, although they do not agree upon their choice of spouse, Sylvia’s desires and Philip’s desires are similar in that they both want to have a loving relationship in which the man earns the bread and has ultimate authority in the home, and the woman lives off of the man’s earnings, serves in the home, and offers the man her obedience. This type of relationship was highly valued by many Victorians, but led others to ask: “How can [two] walk together except one of them have it all his own way?” (Cobbe, *Criminals* 112). Those who upheld traditional ideology felt that “if somebody is to rule it can only be the husband, who is wiser, stronger, knows more of the world, and in any case has not the slightest intention of yielding his natural predominance” (112). Others, such as Victorian feminists Frances Power Cobbe and John Stuart Mill, however, felt that giving one sex the dominant position in a relationship only leads to the subjugation of the other and the unhappiness of both. This result is certainly presented in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Philip’s obsession with Sylvia causes him to ignore their



unsuitability and relinquish his principles, and it leads him to subjugate Sylvia to win her hand in marriage. Sylvia's romantic ideals cause her to misrepresent both Philip and Charley and, eventually, cause her to accept her own subjugation. As a result, both characters are unhappy. Philip and Sylvia's relationship, therefore, shows that the "subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and [. . .] one of the chief hindrances to human improvement" because their unequal relationship leads to domestic strife and individual unhappiness (Mill 1).

Philip's worship of Sylvia as an ideal woman blinds him to the unsuitability of the match between them: "It was the one subject on which he dared not consider, for fear that both conscience and judgment should decide against him, and that he should be convinced against his will that she was an unfit mate for him" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 121). Even though he does not want to believe it, Philip knows that Sylvia does not want the same things from life that he does. Sylvia does not value education and social position as Philip does, she does not want to live in town, and she does not hold his modest religious values. Philip also seems to be aware that Sylvia does not love him, but will not admit it as truth. When Mrs. Robson tells Philip: "Thou'rt too old-fashioned like for her; ye would na' suit," Philip wonders "what ground she had for speaking as if she had now given up all thought of Sylvia and him ever being married and in what way he was too 'old-fashioned'" (118-19). Mrs. Robson knows her daughter and what her daughter wants in a husband, even though Mrs. Robson might not agree with her, and she knows that Sylvia regards Philip as merely a friend and a relation and not a lover. Philip, however, instead of accepting the truth from a credible source, chooses to believe that because Sylvia is comfortable around him and is polite towards him, he has a chance to win her

love. Philip's assertions are based on insubstantial evidence and, therefore, his hopes are "delusions of his own creating" with no basis in reality (120).

Because Philip continues to believe in his delusions, he also "betrays a typical masculine myopia with regard to women" in that he cannot see beyond the idol he has created out of Sylvia (Foster 160). This myopia causes Philip to remain oblivious to Hester who loves him and seems to be a more appropriate match for him. Unlike Sylvia, Hester "had watched [Philip] daily for all the years since he had first come as an errand-boy into Foster's shop" and "had seen how devoted he was to his master's interests, had known of his careful and punctual ministration to his absent mother's comforts, as long as she was living to benefit by his silent, frugal self-denial" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 113). Hester not only sees Philip's qualities as quite masculine, she also values his noble efforts at the shop, his quiet goodness, and his sense of propriety, and she loves him. Hester is similarly good. Although not ideally beautiful as Sylvia, Hester has an inner beauty which stems from her Christianity. Sylvia recognizes Hester's goodness when she comes upon her on the way home from the funeral. When Sylvia hears that Hester had "been sitting with Betsy Darley—her that is bed-ridden," Sylvia recognizes "how good she is" for her admirable service (72). Although Philip agrees that Hester is good and claims that "no one knows how good but us, who live in the same house wi' her," he still does not consider her a suitable wife for him because she does not fit into his ideal picture of the future (73). To Philip, Hester is an ideal Christian, but not an ideal wife because his worship of Sylvia has blinded him to the truth of what Hester could be to him.

As well as blinding him to the possibility of a more suitable marriage, Philip's obsession with Sylvia blinds him to the true character of Charley Kinraid and causes him

to act against his own principles. When Philip sees Charley ambushed by the press-gang, he does nothing. Although Philip's conscience urges him to aid Charley, his "amorous designs on Sylvia motivate his complicity in the seizure," an act which is not in keeping with his character (D'Albertis 123). Philip also hears Charley's farewell message to Sylvia, but does not give the message to Sylvia. Philip reasons:

She might treasure up her lover's words like grains of gold, while they were lighter than dust in their meaning [. . .] words which such as the specksioneer used as counters to beguile and lead astray silly women. It was for him to prove his constancy by action; and the chances of his giving such proof were infinitesimal. (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 207)

Philip sees Charley not as a person, but as a type, a specksioneer; and, therefore, Philip "[leaps] from the stories he has heard of Charley's other betrayals to a notion of character" (Schor, *Scheherezade* 160). Philip prides himself for his honesty and does not approve of Sylvia's unquestioning acceptance of Charley's and Mr. Robson's stories. Philip's obsession with Sylvia, however, causes him to do the very thing he disdains, use stories as a basis for truth. Philip's obsession also causes him to lie. Because Charley does not express constancy by action as Philip thinks he should, Philip chooses to tell Sylvia and her family that Charley is dead when he is not. For someone who "piqued himself on his truthfulness," this action does not seem to keep with Philip's character (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 40). What is worse, although Philip claims his actions will benefit Sylvia, those actions are mostly based on what Charley's absence would mean to him. Philip's desperate attempt to achieve his ideal wife blinds him to Charley's nature, causes him to relinquish his Christian principles and, thus, hinders his ability to improve his own character.

Philip's designs, however dishonest they may be, do help him to achieve his desired wife, but they do not help him to achieve happiness. Although Philip's visions of the future indicate that he wishes for a traditional matrimonial relationship with Sylvia, Philip does not seem to want to dominate or control Sylvia. In fact, Philip seems to love Sylvia because she is resistant. Philip's lie, however, gives Philip power over Sylvia. Because of Philip's lie, Sylvia sees no other option, after she loses her father and cannot run the farm, but to accept Philip's offer of marriage to provide a home for herself and her mother. Philip presents no other option to Sylvia because that would give her the authority to decide her future independently of him and "any independence of his authority [would] interfere with his individual preferences" (Mill 11). Philip, therefore, forces Sylvia into marriage by giving her only one option for alleviating her own lot, and, by so doing, Philip subjugates Sylvia through his dishonesty. When Philip finally marries Sylvia, he realizes "he would have given not a little for some of the old bursts of impatience, the old pettishness, which, naughty as they were, had gone to form his idea of the former Sylvia"; Philip wants Sylvia to have "a will of her own" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 312). Philip has a subjugated wife when he says that he wants a willful and spirited wife. Philip, however, does not seem to realize that what he has is what he wanted in the past. Philip wanted a wife to fill a traditional gender role, a wife who would be a domestic angel, and Sylvia could not have filled that role unless she became the obedient, passive woman that she now is. Philip's desire to have Sylvia for his own at any cost has allowed him to achieve his idol, but the long desired happiness is "not so delicious and perfect as he had anticipated" because Philip's lies have reduced Sylvia to a mere shell of what she once was (313).

Because Sylvia's desire to marry Charley is reciprocated, Sylvia's idealization of Charley seems to be more conducive to happiness than Philip's idealization of Sylvia. As Sylvia is smitten with Charley's good looks and adventurous spirit, Charley idealizes Sylvia for her beauty and charm. Their mutual admiration is revealed during their courtship. Charley and Sylvia flirt and banter with each other; in their relationship with each other "they were like two children defying each other; each determined to conquer" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 171). Both Charley and Sylvia love each other, but, although both want to gain the other's love, neither wants to admit their love first. This courtship is playful and spirited in keeping with both Sylvia's and Charley's personalities. Unlike Philip's love for Sylvia, Charley's love "takes place equally in terms of desire and possession" and seems, therefore, to be a healthier practice (Schor, *Scheherezade* 159). However, Sylvia and Charley's love, though mutual, does not bring happiness. Although Charley's words declare that he loves Sylvia and will have her for his wife, it is unclear whether Charley loves Sylvia as an individual or simply as an ideal. At the Corney's party when Charley enjoys Sylvia's company, Charley is "quite far enough gone in love of [Sylvia's] beauty, and pretty modest ways, not to care much whether she talk[s] or no, so long as she show[s] herself so pleasingly conscious of his close neighbourhood" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 134). Charley does not care whether or not Sylvia speaks; he does not care about her individuality. All Charley is concerned with is that he is near the prettiest girl in the room. In this way, Charley is similar to Philip. Neither character values Sylvia's individuality because each "entertains more or less vaguely the notion that [she] is his *thing*," and therefore, neither character is worthy of her love (Cobbe, *Wife-Torture* 138). Charley also seems to have little thought of Sylvia when she is not present. As soon as

Sylvia leaves the Corney's party, Charley "[finds] it easy to turn his attention to the next prettiest girl in the room" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 143). Charley's desire to be near the prettiest girl, and his desire to wed Sylvia who is the prettiest girl he knows, indicates that he wants a wife that will mirror himself. Just as Philip wants Sylvia as a wife because he thinks she will look well as the wife of a business man, Charley wants to marry Sylvia because her beauty will complement his own. Because of her hero-worship of Charley, Sylvia rejects Philip despite his constancy because he is not her ideal, and she cannot see Charley's faults and his changeability. Thus, Sylvia's ideals—her desire to have a marriage based on love and the observance of gender roles—cause her to misunderstand both Philip and Charley's intentions and characters.

Sylvia's rejection of Philip and complete idealization of Charley not only causes her to misrepresent each of her suitors' characters but also leads her to her ultimate unhappiness in marriage. Sylvia's desire for her ideals leaves no room for adaptability. Because Sylvia cannot think of marrying anyone but Charley, learning of his death completely shatters her visions of the future. Sylvia's shattered dreams are then followed by the imprisonment and execution of her father, her mother's sickness, and the possibility of losing her family's farm. Due to emotional exhaustion and financial difficulties, Sylvia decides that she needs masculine support which she receives from Philip. Because Philip is "very kind to [Sylvia's family]," Sylvia gives up her own will in an attempt to repay the debt she feels she owes Philip and resolves to "try t' make him happy" despite her own lukewarm feelings towards him (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 298). Sylvia's acceptance of Philip destroys hope of her future happiness because by accepting him she subjugates herself. For example, despite her father's death, Sylvia still longs to live in the

country and on a farm. Kester offers a solution in which he helps her to do the farm work, but Sylvia has already given power of attorney to Philip who makes the decision to give up her family's farm. Sylvia's action leads Kester to the conclusion that Sylvia has some sort of mercenary motives in marrying Philip: "There's a deal in a well-filled purse in a wench's eye" (296). Sylvia, however, consents to marry Philip not for wealth but for security. Sylvia's helplessness and her sense of duty motivate her to obey "[Philip's] expressed wishes with a gentle indifference, as if she had no preferences of her own" and "[meet] him quietly in all the arrangements for the time of their marriage, which she looked upon more as a change of home [. . .] than in any more directly personal way" (301, 305). Out of necessity, Sylvia subjugates herself to a life as "a bondservant of her husband" because "she vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar" and gives up her own will (Mill 32). Because she has given up her will for the sake of necessity and accepted Philip's subjection of her, Sylvia is unable to achieve marital satisfaction.

Sylvia's unhappiness is further caused by her continued self-denial and subjugation after marriage. Sylvia comes to hate her cloistered life and the oppressive emotional demands of a husband who repels her. Sylvia does not like the demands Philip's position places on her to make public appearances and to invite people she does not care for into her home for entertainment. She is also oppressed by the petty demands of running a home, planning for meals, and being home to serve her husband when he arrives from work. Instead, Sylvia longs to return to the "solitude and open air and the sight and sound of the sea" which not only represent the freedom she once had but also the love she lost (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 350). Sylvia's decision to marry at the expense of her will has led her to deny her individuality by repressing her desire to commune with

nature. Sylvia also must repress her desire to think of Charley, although she still holds on to thoughts of the ideal husband she feels she lost and the ideal life she feels she is missing. Sylvia's self-subjugation is further established due to her mother's, Alice's, and Hester's constant reminders that her duty as a wife is to obey and serve her husband. Because of the pressure she receives from those she lives with, Sylvia finally promises "never to leave the house without asking her husband's permission, though in making this promise she felt as if she were sacrificing her last pleasure" (340). Sylvia's promise "nearly [extinguishes] her selfhood" because it denies her the only pleasure, freedom, and sense of individuality she has left (D'Albertis 126). This self-denial does not quite extinguish Sylvia's being, for she still exists in her refusal to love her husband, but it does complete her acceptance of her own subjugation and cause her marital dissatisfaction.

Because neither Philip nor Sylvia can accept less than what they believe is an ideal marriage, neither is able to submit to compromise in marriage relationships and both act in extremes. Philip compromises his integrity to win his idol, and Sylvia forfeits her will and marries Philip when she believes that her ideal is unobtainable. As a result of their extreme behavior, both Philip and Sylvia must suffer in an unhappy marriage. Philip subjugates Sylvia by obtaining power over her will, and Sylvia subjugates herself by choosing to abandon her will and commit to obeying Philip. Through their unhappy marriage, Gaskell reveals her disapproval of this subjugation. If losing one's individuality for the sake of obeying one's husband were a good sacrifice, and if giving up one's morals to achieve an ideal were a good act, then Gaskell would have ended the novel in marital bliss, but she did not. The only marriages that are presented in which the couples seem to achieve some degree of satisfaction are those based on compromise and



pragmatism. Although Sylvia and her mother do not approve of Molly's union with Mr. Brunton, there is no indication in the novel that they are unhappy. At the Corneys' New Year's Eve party, Molly speaks highly of her husband and shows her contentment with her situation: "It is a great thing to have got such a merry man for a husband" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 128). Molly wanted a kind man who could offer her a comfortable home; she did not set her sights on some unreachable ideal but sought for a practical marriage with an honest man, and because she did not dwell on ideals, Molly finds marital satisfaction.

William Coulson also finds marital satisfaction because he is able to let go of his idealism. Coulson initially intends to marry Hester Rose. To Coulson, Hester is the ideal woman. She is selfless, modest, kind-hearted, and has all the ideal feminine qualities that Coulson believes will make her the ideal wife. However, when Hester rejects Coulson because she is in love with Philip, Coulson is able to turn to another woman. Coulson marries a nice woman who allows him to work while she takes care of their home. Although Gaskell does not spend much time expounding upon their relationship, she never shows Coulson complaining about his situation or dwelling on his inability to obtain Hester for his wife. Coulson seems to be satisfied with the life he has and does not allow himself to dwell on unobtainable ideals as Sylvia does. Sylvia is unhappy because she will not let go of her ideal vision of her future with Charley. Charley, however, does not suffer Sylvia's fate. Charley is another example Gaskell presents of finding marital satisfaction through compromise and pragmatism. When Charley finds out that Sylvia is married, he rages and repeats the promise that he had made before, to love her forever and be true to her. Charley even goes so far as to deny the authenticity of Sylvia's marriage saying: "Sylvia [. . .] your marriage is no marriage. You were tricked into it.

You are my wife, not his. I am your husband” (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 347). Charley seems, at first, to uphold his ideal vision of the future by making this highly romanticized declaration. Soon after making this declaration, however, Charley marries a “rich, beautiful, sheltered girl who has none of the qualities he swore would make him love only Sylvia forever,” and he does not even seem to remember the love he once shared with Sylvia (Schor, *Scheherezade* 156). Like Molly Corney and William Coulson, Charley takes a realistic approach to marriage. Instead of dwelling on unachievable ideals, Charley marries for practical reasons and, thus, finds marital satisfaction.

By contrasting the unhappy situation of Philip and Sylvia’s union to the other marriages that achieve satisfaction, Gaskell shows the discrepancy between the anticipation of ideal marriages and the actuality of the “long-desired marital happiness” both Philip and Sylvia expect (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 313). Neither achieves this happiness because, unlike Molly, William, and Charley, Sylvia and Philip cannot relinquish their ideals and accept the realities of their lives. Gaskell, however, does not seem to just want her characters to relinquish their ideals and be content, but to develop a new ideal and be truly happy. This new ideal reflects the ideas of a contemporary of Gaskell’s, Mona Caird. Caird suggests in her essay, *Marriage*, that “the ideal marriage [. . .] should be free” (282). Caird also suggests that “there must be a full understanding and acknowledgement of the obvious right of the woman to *possess herself* body and soul, to give or withhold herself body and soul exactly as she wills”; a woman should not be subject to the will of a man (282). Similar to Caird’s ideas, John Stuart Mill suggested that marriage ought to be based on “a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (1). According to Caird and Mill,

marriages that are based on the subjection of women will not lead to happiness but marriages based on freedom and equality will; only two whole and equal individuals can create a happy marriage. Gaskell seems to agree with both Caird and Mill because it is only through their separation that Philip and Sylvia are able to redeem themselves and their relationship by giving up their unrealistic expectations and learning to love and respect each other as equals.

Philip is unable to achieve happiness in his relationship with Sylvia until he learns to become a whole person without Sylvia and recognize her as an equal. After his disastrous confrontation with Charley, Philip is no longer able to avoid the reality of his situation with Sylvia. Philip knows that he has been a “damned scoundrel” in his manipulation of Sylvia, and he knows that he will never achieve marital satisfaction unless he pays penance for what he has done (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 346). Philip, therefore, leaves his home and his career to start a new life as an unknown in the naval service. In the service, Philip comes face to face with his rival, Charley, one final time. Charley is endangered and Philip must choose whether to save him or not. Faced with this decision, Philip decides to “[leave] his fellows, and [come] running forwards, forwards in among the enemy’s wounded, within range of their guns” and carry Charley from danger “not without many shots being aimed at [him]” as he heads to safety (391). Philip has reason to hate Charley and could have easily let him die out of spite and revenge; however, Philip saves Charley’s life. Through this act of fellowship, Philip shows that he recognizes how wrong he was to judge Charley and to prevent his marriage to Sylvia. Philip’s action also serves as an act of personal redemption. Philip gives up his integrity when he decides to lie to Sylvia, but he earns it back and becomes a complete individual

through his selfless charity towards his enemy. Not only does this act restore his honest and upright character in the eyes of the reader but also in Sylvia's eyes. When Sylvia hears word of Philip's bravery she begins to question the assumptions that she made about Philip and his manliness. Sylvia begins to realize that she misjudged Philip and undervalued him as a husband. Philip's act, therefore, brings him closer to the marital satisfaction that he once longed for. Philip, however, does not achieve this satisfaction until he completely relinquishes his idealization of Sylvia and accepts her as an equal. On his deathbed Philip confesses to Sylvia: "I ha' made thee my idol; and if I could live my life o'er again I would love my God more, and thee less; and then I shouldn't ha' sinned this sin against thee" (448). Philip no longer holds Sylvia up as an ideal but sees her as a person, an equal, with weaknesses and needs. Once he acknowledges her as his equal, Sylvia forgives Philip and bestows her love, showing that to achieve marital happiness equality and love must exist between husband and wife.

Sylvia is also provided with a means of achieving personal redemption and marital happiness through her separation from Philip and her maternity. Although initially Sylvia's maternity further estranges her from Philip and increases the strain within their relationship, it later saves her and allows her to regain her individuality. While Philip is still living with her, Sylvia uses their child as a means of distraction from her marital dissatisfaction and as a means for escape. Unlike Philip, who must deal with the concerns of running a business and, thus, can escape the thoughts of troubles at home, Sylvia has no real distraction from her unhappiness because she is confined to her home. When her child is born, Sylvia finds the escape she needs; she can drown out the thoughts of Charley by caring for her child, and she can take the baby out with her on walks to

escape the confines of her domesticity. Although it provides a welcome distraction, Sylvia's maternity does not solve her marital dilemmas because she only uses it as a means of escape and not of redemption. Sylvia's maternity does become a means of saving her marriage when Charley returns. Upon his return Charley asks Sylvia to "come away" and "leave [Philip] to repent of the trick he played" and seems to succeed until Sylvia hears her baby's cries (374). Sylvia's maternity saves her from entering an unlawful relationship with Charley and helps her to realize that her reality includes responsibility to others and not just selfish desires. Sylvia's maternity further saves her because it is through her maternity that she is able to relinquish the support of a man and obtain her individuality. When Philip leaves, Sylvia must stand on her own and be both father and mother to her child. Sylvia's marriage to Philip, because it was based on adherence to gender roles, subjugates Sylvia, but her maternity and separation from Philip sets her free. Sylvia's separation from Philip also helps her to realize Philip's value. As both mother and father to her child, Sylvia must manage finances and take part in Philip's work. When Sylvia takes on Philip's responsibilities, she realizes that she undervalued and misjudged Philip's character, and she begins to respect him as a person instead of rejecting him as a failed ideal. When Sylvia gains this respect and sees Philip as an equal, she is able to reciprocate his love and find happiness in marriage.

Despite their initial failure to obtain a happy marriage because of their acceptance of traditional gender roles, Philip and Sylvia do find happiness, though brief. Both Sylvia and Philip realize that it is a mistake to hold on to unrealistic ideals and demand strict adherence to gender roles when their marriage fails, and both learn to see each other as equals. This equality in marriage mends their relationship. Once Sylvia achieves this new

understanding, she even wonders: "If I live very long, and try hard to be very good all that time, do yo' think, Hester, that God will let me to him where he is?" (Gaskell, *Sylvia* 454). Sylvia's query suggests a desire to continue her relationship with Philip beyond the grave because she longs for the happiness and love that she finally found. Gaskell allows her characters to find this happiness through their experiences apart to show readers that the subjection of women in marriage is wrong and to present a happier alternative to the traditionally gendered relationship idealized in Victorian society. The ending of the novel, however, seems to be a return to traditional ideologies in that, although it is difficult to achieve and ends quickly, Sylvia and Philip do find marital bliss. Gaskell seems to be upholding the idea that marital satisfaction is a possibility and that it is a natural desire; but here, though the couple is temporarily united in love, the marriage does not last and the woman is the survivor. Sylvia's widowhood is not fully developed, but the fact that she survives to live without her husband instead of her husband surviving without her suggests a new pattern of sexual roles. In Victorian society, men were generally considered the stronger sex and were the sex more capable of living single, due to more prevalent job opportunities, while women were thought to be less capable of self-reliance. Perhaps what Gaskell is implying through Sylvia's widowhood is that women, although they can and even should seek to obtain happiness in marriage, are perfectly capable of living on their own.

## CHAPTER IV

### MARRIAGE, CELIBACY, AND OLD MAIDS: AN

### EXAMINATION OF RUTH AND CRANFORD

Despite the unpleasant realities of matrimony in the nineteenth century, such as those depicted in *Sylvia's Lovers*, marriage and family were considered "vital for the maintenance of social order and the promotion of national prosperity and expansion," and, thus, marriage was thought to be the most beneficial condition for men and women (Evans 57). However, because of the Law of Coventry which stipulated that when a woman wed, all of her property was no longer hers but her husband's, many women found themselves in damaging and unequal relationships. Married women had few legal rights; they could not even use the law to protect themselves from the violence, neglect, or criminality of their husbands. Despite these injustices, many people, including Victorian feminist Frances Power Cobbe, still felt that "for the mass of mankind, marriage is the right condition, the happiest, and the most conducive to virtue" (*Old Maids* 86). This assertion, however, begs the question of what type of marriage leads to happiness and virtue, certainly not those based on unrealistic ideals as in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Do marriages for wealth, position, rank, support, or convenience lead to happiness or just those based on love and respect? And, if only marriages based on love and respect are happy, is it better, then, for women who do not find those qualities to remain single?

These questions concerned many members of Victorian society because if celibacy were a better choice than marriage, then the social order would be disrupted and society might suffer morally and economically. To keep this anticipated dissipation from happening, prescriptive literature, the law, and much of Victorian society derogatively labeled single women “deviants” and “old maids.” The lack of educational and employment opportunities for women as well as the social stigma associated with having employment, middle and upper-class women could not work for a living without reducing their social status, also served as deterrents to any woman considering celibacy. Women had to marry, and they had to marry into money because they could not earn it. Therefore, girls were raised with the expectation of marriage and were not prepared to move outside the domestic sphere. However, because of an imbalanced population, “four or five percent of females over males,” thirty percent of English women in the mid-nineteenth century never married (85). These statistics led Victorians to the unavoidable truth that, even if they wanted to, women were not always able to wed and society would have to make some accommodation for its old maids.

In her appropriately titled essay, “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?”, Frances Power Cobbe suggests two possible courses of action:

1<sup>st</sup>, We must frankly accept this new state of things, and educate women and modify trade in accordance therewith, so as to make condition of celibacy as little injurious as possible; or—2<sup>nd</sup>, We must set ourselves vigorously to stop the current which is leading men and women away from the natural order of Providence. We must do nothing whatever to render celibacy easy or attractive; and we must make the utmost efforts to promote marriage by emigration of women to the colonies, and all other means in our power. (86)

Being a progressive feminist, it was easy for Cobbe to agree with and support the first course of action, but the question of what to do about single women was not so easily



answered by all Victorians. Many Victorians felt that making celibacy unattractive was the best choice for women and for society. For this reason, little allowance was made for unmarried women. Unmarried women who remained marriageable, those who remained chaste, had to rely on the male members of their families to care for them in order to avoid the stigma of employment. Unmarried women who did not remain marriageable, those who were unchaste or became unwedded mothers, found themselves at the mercy of a society that viewed them as worthless and made no attempt to help them earn their living. Thus, many single women in the nineteenth century turned to prostitution to earn their living.

In her novels *Ruth* (1853) and *Cranford* (1853), Gaskell puts forth an examination of singleness to address these contemporary issues surrounding marriage and celibacy. Like many Victorians, Gaskell knew that society could no longer ignore or completely reject the possibility of celibacy nor could it ignore the problems caused by socially ostracizing unmarriageable women. At the same time, Gaskell believed that society should not reject the importance of marriage and chastity. Gaskell's novels, therefore, reveal a certain amount of ambivalence on the subject of singleness. On the one hand, Gaskell makes a case for celibacy by showing that single women have value and are often better able to succeed in life and find happiness without male support than with it. Gaskell also supports single women by arguing against social standards that make life difficult for them—the social ostracism of unwedded mothers, the negative stigma associated with employment, and the rearing of young girls to look forward to marriage as their only life choice. On the other hand, Gaskell's novels make it clear that marriage is an important and desirable institution by presenting some of the positive aspects of

married life that are unobtainable for single women. Therefore, through her examination of the questions surrounding marriage and celibacy in *Ruth* and *Cranford*, Gaskell shows that although marriage may be the right condition for most women, all women, whether married or not, still have value and should be given the opportunities necessary for living happy, successful, and productive single lives.

In *Ruth*, Gaskell suggests that celibacy is a better option for some women than marriage by showing the inadequacies of her male characters. The most obviously deficient character in the novel is Ruth's seducer, Mr. Henry Bellingham. As well as being "spoilt, self-centered, and shallow," Bellingham is also "emblematic of masculine insensitivity and represents a creature of a lower order than that symbolized by Ruth's womanhood" (Foster 154). When Bellingham first sees Ruth, he is attracted by her quiet beauty and feels a "new, passionate, hearty-feeling" whenever he thinks of her thereafter or is with her (Gaskell, *Ruth* 31). This feeling causes Bellingham to act like a greedy child pursuing a desired object, and Bellingham, although he knows his actions are misleading and improper, preys upon Ruth's natural desire to please and be loved. Ruth is unaware of her own feelings and of Bellingham's feelings, she mistakes his intentions for those of a brother or kind benefactor, and she begins to love him because he seems to fill the role left vacant by her deceased father and uncaring guardian. As their relationship builds, Ruth begins to wonder why something which she believes to be so innocent feels "not exactly wrong, but yet as if it were not right" (37). Because she is young and does not have parental guidance, Ruth is seduced by Bellingham whom she trusts. Bellingham is, however, perfectly aware that his conduct is improper, but his nature makes him more concerned with satisfying his own desires than protecting Ruth. For Bellingham, the

seduction of Ruth “is merely the acquisitive desire to possess a remarkably pretty young girl who offers none of the prospective dangers and expenses of a prostitute” (Lansbury, *Novel* 59). Ruth’s qualities, although misplaced, are those of a loving and obedient woman, while Bellingham’s qualities are deplorable. By presenting Bellingham as a callous and degenerate man, Gaskell makes it clear that Ruth is a victim of her inexperience with the world and not of her own sexual passion; Bellingham is most responsible for her victimization. By showing Bellingham’s inadequacies, Gaskell indicates that men are not always superior to women and that women need to take care not to completely trust or rely on men for their support because men are not always capable of giving it.

Gaskell further develops Bellingham’s inadequacies to show that Ruth is better able to succeed in life without male support than with it. Before Ruth meets Bellingham, she has little resolution and determination. While at work, Ruth spends her days taking orders from Mrs. Mason and dreaming that she is back at home. Ruth does not have the determination to follow her desires, and so she remains in a job that makes her unhappy instead of going back to her old friends and her childhood home. Ruth even yields to the opinions of others on her free time. When Mrs. Mason gives the girls a break from their work one winter’s night, Ruth desires to have “one run—one blow of the fresh air” because she feels that it will do her good (Gaskell, *Ruth* 8). Ruth, however, hears the suggestion of her friend who thinks it is too cold outside and stays inside languidly dreaming of her past. Ruth has little will of her own and, therefore, takes on the identity of others or escapes to the past to avoid her reality. Because Ruth lacks a sense of

identity, she does not make much progress towards success or happiness at the beginning of the novel.

Bellingham provides an identity for Ruth. Victorian ideology held that women ought to be domestic; they ought to be wives and mothers. Bellingham seems to offer this identity to Ruth by giving her what she views as the promise of domesticity—he gives her someone to love and to serve. With Bellingham, however, Ruth does not gain an identity, and she even loses what little she has. Under Bellingham's influence in Wales, Ruth becomes little more than “a toy that is beginning to bore Bellingham” while she only regrets that she “lacks the gift of being amusing” (Lansbury, *Novel* 60, Gaskell, *Ruth* 57). For Bellingham, Ruth is not a person, but an object which, if it can no longer please, is of no use. And, Ruth cannot please because her purity and innocence, which initially attracted Bellingham, are gone. Now that her virginity, the one possession that she had as a poor woman which was of some value in society, is gone, Ruth is left without identity and without worth. Gaskell develops Ruth's loss of identity and worth to show women that they should not rely on men to give them purpose or bring them happiness. Gaskell also develops Ruth's losses to depict the hypocrisy of a society which insists upon female chastity but also on female subservience and then does not excuse or forgive women who fall victim to patriarchal dominancy.

As well as losing her identity with Bellingham, Ruth loses many opportunities for success. Bellingham's insistence that Ruth go with him to visit her home, causes Ruth to be dismissed from her position in Mrs. Mason's shop. Instead of using his influence to clear Ruth's name and restore her position, however, Bellingham takes advantage of Ruth for his own satisfaction. Similarly, in Wales, Bellingham has the opportunity to help Ruth

find a new place in life after he recovers from his illness, but instead, he feels an “inward and increasing annoyance, of which [he] considered Ruth the cause” and leaves her with only fifty pounds to her name (Gaskell, *Ruth* 77). Bellingham’s treatment of Ruth shows women that men cannot always be relied upon for support and, thus, celibacy may be a valid option. Bellingham’s inadequacies, however, are not merely a result of his poor character, but the result of a society which does not value unmarried women. Because Ruth has not remained chaste, Victorian society would feel no obligation to help support her physically or morally. Therefore, Bellingham, as a product of his culture, feels no obligation to provide Ruth with a situation in which she can support herself. Gaskell, therefore, is not only negatively commenting on the inadequacies of male support but also on Victorian society’s inability to follow Christian principles, forgive even fallen women, and help them to become productive members of society.

One could argue, however, that Gaskell’s case for celibacy, if based on the relationship between Ruth and Bellingham alone, is not strong because most Victorians would agree that remaining single is better than becoming involved in an illicit affair. One could also argue that society does provide means of restoring a fallen woman to a place of social respectability—marriage. Gaskell, however, shows the reader that Ruth is at more of an advantage single than married to Bellingham. When Ruth and Bellingham meet after years of separation, Bellingham proposes marriage to Ruth. Victorian society “would say that [Bellingham] was offering to make her an honest woman,” but Ruth, acting wholly on her own, behaves “contrary to social expectation” (Mitchell, *Fallen* 37). Ruth’s decision has several implications. First, Ruth’s decision to refuse Bellingham without consulting anyone shows that during her time apart from Bellingham, her time as

a single woman, Ruth has gained a sense of identity and a desire to control her own body. Ruth's decision also indicates that she knows remaining celibate is a better choice for her than getting married. If Ruth had chosen to accept Bellingham's proposal, then Leonard would no longer be considered illegitimate. However, Ruth claims: "If there were no other reason to prevent our marriage but the one fact that it would bring Leonard into contact with [Bellingham] [. . .] that would be enough" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 249). Ruth knows that if she were to expose Leonard to Bellingham, she would run the risk of his becoming like his father, and if she were to marry Bellingham and become his subordinate, she would lose her legal right to protect her son and raise him her way. Ruth shows that she is "prepared to submit to social ostracism and personal hardship as penance for her 'sin'" because as a single woman she can be a better mother to her child than as a married woman (Foster 155). Thus, Gaskell indicates that if, for Ruth, celibacy is a wise life decision, then it may be for others as well. Gaskell also indicates that forcing women to choose between marriage or social ostracism and prostitution is unjust because both options may be equally damaging.

Gaskell further develops an argument for celibacy through her portrayal of different family units in the novel. The two main family units discussed in *Ruth* are the Benson and the Bradshaw families. The Bensons are the more unconventional of the two families, consisting of a brother and a sister, an unmarried servant, and a young woman and her son. Although non-traditional, the Benson household abounds with a love and warm companionship that stems from their Christianity. Benson's sister, Faith, devotedly cares for him and manages his home, and, in return, Benson loves her dearly and relies on her to help him make household decisions. Sally, the maid, loves both Faith and her

brother so much that she has chosen to remain single so she can stay in the service of their family. Similarly, Ruth and Leonard are so close that they only leave each others' company when absolutely necessary, and the whole household participates in Leonard's upbringing, showing him and Ruth their love and support despite "the cloud of [social] shame and disgrace" that hangs over the two (Gaskell, *Ruth* 135).

The Bradshaw family, on the other hand, is a traditional family consisting of three daughters, one son, and a wedded mother and father. Although they seem, from all outward appearances, to be the ideal of Victorian society, the Bradshaw family is really "a model of hypocrisy, neurosis, and crime" (Lansbury, *Novel* 65). Mrs. Bradshaw, for one, acts differently when her husband is absent than she does in his presence. When Mr. Bradshaw is not around, Mrs. Bradshaw speaks in a "quiet tone," but "when he [is] there, a sort of constant terror of displeasing him made her voice sharp and nervous" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 191). Similarly, "the children [know] that many a thing passed over by their mother when their father [is] away, [is] sure to be noticed by her when he [is] present," and they alter their behavior accordingly (191). Jemima, the Bradshaws' eldest daughter, often openly rebels against her father's will, and Jemima's brother lies and steals money from their father's company in his absence. The family is driven to these extremes because Mr. Bradshaw runs his household on "strictly authoritarian principles" and "allows no one to be right but himself" (Pike 65). Bradshaw's personality and his actions are typical of the Victorian standards of masculinity; he is strong and domineering. As a result, his family is dysfunctional. This home is quite the opposite of the Bensons' home, where freedom of expression, respect, and love are some of the most outstanding characteristics. Gaskell contrasts these two households to show readers that the traditional ideology which

stipulates that married life is the most conducive to happiness is not always true. By showing readers that although all in the Benson household are single, they are still happy. Gaskell promotes celibacy as an acceptable, if not more beneficial, alternative to marriage.

Gaskell also develops this contrasting depiction of the Benson and Bradshaw families to form an argument against the social standards which oppress unmarried women. When Mr. Benson and Faith first learn that Ruth is pregnant, they realize that they face a dilemma. They feel that if Ruth did not have a child, then they “might have taken her home” and “called her by her right name—Miss Hilton” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 104-5). However, Ruth has a child, a sign of her promiscuity, and the Bensons feel they cannot honestly help her to find a living because their society would reject such a woman. Faith is especially concerned with what Mr. Bradshaw would think if they tried to help Ruth: “Think of Mr. Bradshaw. Oh! I tremble at the thought of his grim displeasure” (105). Both Faith and Mr. Benson are aware that Mr. Bradshaw “is so severe and inflexible” in his ideas of proper behavior that he would reject Ruth if he knew of her past as well as the Bensons for trying to help her (105). Mr. Bradshaw, then, represents those members of Victorian society who not only value chastity in women but also believe that social ostracism is the punishment unmarried women deserve and the punishment necessary to elicit fear in other women who might be tempted to become involved in premarital relationships. The Bensons, however, choose to “think of [one] higher than Mr. Bradshaw,” they choose to think of what Christ would have them do. Thus, the Bensons bring Ruth home under the pretence that she is a widow to give her a chance to redeem herself and to earn a living for herself and her child.



As a result of their kind actions towards Ruth, their forgiveness, and their love, the Bensons are depicted more positively than Mr. Bradshaw. Because of the Bensons, Ruth obtains the position of governess in the Bradshaw family, a position she would never have received had her secret been known, and is able to develop her knowledge, virtue, and independence. Gaskell, therefore, presents the Bensons as truly Christian and as models of what social behavior should be. Despite Ruth's moral behavior, when Mr. Bradshaw finds out that Ruth is not a widow, he releases Ruth from her position as governess and publicly shames her. Although it has been years since Ruth was involved with Bellingham, Mr. Bradshaw feels that she deserves to be punished. In contrast with the Bensons, Mr. Bradshaw appears hard-hearted and unchristian. It is true that the Bensons did lie to him and the community about Ruth, but if Mr. Bradshaw, and the society he represents, were more forgiving and tolerant, then they would not have had to lie. Through her negative depiction of Mr. Bradshaw's reaction to Ruth, Gaskell shows that it is wrong for society to condemn unmarried women. Ruth, and women like Ruth, should be treated as the Bensons treat her. Gaskell, therefore, shows that society needs to change, become more forgiving, and give unmarried women the opportunity to become useful members of society even if they remain single.

As in *Ruth*, Gaskell develops an argument for celibacy in her novel *Cranford*. In much of Victorian literature, a single woman who was considered an old maid was often portrayed as ridiculous in her attempts to achieve matrimony. For example, in his publications "Dickens provided a gallery of old maids and widows, each more ferociously bent on matrimony than the next, and each more hilarious in her determined charge to the altar" (Lansbury, *Novel* 87). As well as signaling society's disrespect for

unmarried women, these portrayals also signify that society thought being single meant a woman had failed in her duty to become a wife and a mother and, therefore, was valueless. Gaskell, however, dispels these ideas by presenting a positive depiction of single women who choose to be single and who never cease to rejoice in their decision. Miss Jenkyns and Miss Pole are the strongest examples of women who choose to be celibate in *Cranford*. Both women embrace their separateness and become spokeswomen for the single lifestyle. Miss Jenkyns, for example, “would have despised the modern idea of women being equal to men. Equal indeed! she knew they were superior” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 18). Miss Jenkyns’ sense of superiority causes her to rejoice in her singleness because she feels that she is better able to succeed in her society alone than with male support, and, indeed, she is correct. Miss Jenkyns becomes a leader in Cranford because of her determined single-mindedness. Miss Jenkyns’ determination is what drives her to enforce the social code in Cranford and greatly influences the other women in Cranford to feel “that to be a man was to be ‘vulgar’” (11). Miss Jenkyns has this influence because she is single, and, as a single woman, she is free to follow her own inclinations and enforce her own views instead of submitting to the inclinations of a man.

Similarly, Miss Pole rejoices in her celibacy because it gives her the freedom to think and act according to her own will. Miss Pole shows her contentedness by constantly ranting against marriage and men. Miss Pole, “sitting down with the decision of a person who has made up her mind as to the nature of life and the world,” proclaims:

Well, Miss Matty! Men will be men. Every mother’s son of them wishes to be considered Samson and Solomon rolled into one—too strong ever to be beaten or discomfited—too wise ever to be outwitted. If you will notice, they have always foreseen events, though they never tell one for one’s warning before the events happen; my father was a man, and I know the sex pretty well. (114-15)

Miss Pole, like Miss Jenkyns, feels superior to men, and because she thinks she knows them and what they represent, she feels she does not need them. By presenting these strong-minded female characters instead ridiculous women obsessed with matrimony, Gaskell suggests that rather than being “a grim affliction to be remedied where possible,” singleness is a choice that can lead to a free and happy lifestyle (Nestor 51). There is, however, a certain amount of the ridiculous in both Miss Jenkyns and Miss Pole. Their boisterous exclamations denouncing the male sex are comic and seem to be a way of coping with their situations as single women. Gaskell, however, presents a more striking challenge to the idea of old maids’ absurdity through the narrator, Mary Smith. Mary does not fit into any stereotype of what a single woman should be; she travels, decides how to spend her time and who to spend her time with, and she chooses her own lifestyle. There is also no indication in the novel that Mary resigns herself to life at Cranford; Mary chooses that life because Cranford is where she feels comfortable. Yet, Mary is always able to transition back and forth from Drumble—the male-oriented commercial world—to Cranford. Mary’s ability to transition suggests that she represents a new, young old maid, one that is “more outward-looking and less self-conscious” than the single women at Cranford (172). Mary’s life is not absurd, but fulfilling, and, through her example, Gaskell shows the potential in living single.

Gaskell also promotes singleness as a positive lifestyle by dispelling the negative connotations surrounding the terms “spinster” and “old maid.” As well as being viewed as ridiculously bent on matrimony, spinsters and old maids were thought to be absurd because they supposedly had nothing to contribute to society, and so they were thought to fret over trivialities. This absurdity can be seen in the opening chapter of *Cranford*:

For keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them; for frightening away young boys who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; for rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture into the gardens if the gates are left open; for deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments; for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the parish; for keeping their neat maid-servants in admirable order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient. (Gaskell 5)

The concerns of the Cranford ladies seem trivial to the outsider, but inside Cranford the women are quite self-sufficient and even more capable of managing crises than men.

When the Town and Country Bank fails and Miss Matty is left ruined by its failure, it is these “absurd” women who come to her aid. Mary, first, devises a means whereby Miss Matty can set up a tea shop to support herself, and then, Miss Pole gathers Miss Matty's friends together and quietly comes up with the initial funding to open the shop. The women in Cranford proceed in a way that takes Miss Matty's “feelings of delicate independence” into consideration (161). They help her to work from home so she does not have to run a shop in town. Thus, they manage to spare Matty the humiliation of admitting her circumstances and seeking help, and they also help her to become self-sufficient without lowering her social status (161). Mr. Smith, however, then gets involved, and his business-like attitude confuses and crushes Miss Matty's spirits. So, while the women at Cranford may seem ridiculous to some, they are also “effective and commendable” because they are better able to meet the needs of their community than men are (Foster 170).

Gaskell further develops the value of the women at Cranford by depicting their high moral standards. For example, when the Town and Country Bank fails, Miss Matty witnesses its effects on a man trying to purchase cloth. Because the man's bank note is no

longer valid, the shopkeeper will not accept it or sell the man his cloth. Miss Matty, however, gives the man five-pounds, and when the shopkeeper voices his disapproval, she admits: "I don't pretend to understand business; I only know, that if it is going to fail, and if honest people are to lose their money because they have taken our notes [. . .] then it will only have been common honesty in me, as a shareholder, to have given this good man the money" (146). Miss Matty feels responsible for the injury caused by the bank's failure and acts according to her own conscience even though the men at Cranford think her action is foolish. Through Miss Matty, then, Gaskell shows readers that even a society of spinsters can act more humanely than most in the male-oriented world.

Cranfordian morality shows itself to be superior to masculine ideas of commerce once more when Miss Matty sets up her tea shop. Although Mr. Smith calls her idea a "great nonsense," Miss Matty, who has some scruples of conscience selling tea "when there was already Mr. Johnson in the town," asks Mr. Johnson if her shop will damage his business (169). To Mr. Smith, this action seems like the foolish whim of an old woman. However, Miss Matty's action "answered very well; for not only did Mr. Johnson kindly put at rest all Miss Matty's scruples," he also "repeatedly sent customers to her saying that the teas he kept were of a common kind, but that Miss Jenkyns had all the choice sorts" (170).

The sense of integrity and kindness that prevails in Cranford causes Miss Matty to act, and, although viewed scornfully by Mary's father, Miss Matty's "female 'simplicity' [. . .] succeeds where male efficiency fails" (Foster 168). By illustrating the high moral values of the Cranford women, Gaskell shows readers that single women are of worth and should not be derogatorily labeled or rejected as failures by society.

Finally, as in *Ruth*, Gaskell shows that single women can live joyfully outside of patriarchal homes to help readers understand that celibacy is a happy alternative to marriage. The women in Cranford, although they have no husbands or children, find happiness through female friendships which serve as non-traditional family units. Miss Matty, Mary, and Martha create such a unit which provides them with a strong sense of comfort and security despite the lack of masculine involvement in their lives. When rumors of thieves abroad reach the Cranford ladies, there is a bit of a panic. Mary admits that because the rumors made them afraid of being robbed “for a long time at Miss Matty’s [. . .] we used to make a regular expedition all round the kitchens and cellars every night, Miss Matty leading the way, armed with the poker, I following with the hearth-brush, and Martha carrying the shovel and fire-iron with which to sound the alarm” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 107). Even though to the reader their behavior is comical, these women find strength and comfort in each others’ company. Together they are able to face their fears and, finally, discover the truth about the rumors. For the women at Cranford, their odd families are enough to help them feel secure, maybe more so than in a patriarchal unit because there is no one to mock them. The real family life in Cranford, however, does not lie within any specific home, but is created by a sort of commonality and comfort among all its members. Family relationships are “found at the parties and morning calls, when the old ladies trip from one house to the next as though entering different rooms of their own homes” (Lansbury, *Novel* 88). By showing these single women’s reliance on each other and their fulfillment in friendship, Gaskell suggests that single women need not fear loneliness because celibacy has its sources of fulfillment.

Gaskell also uses her depiction of family units to show the negative consequences of a society that values marriage above all else and, thus, rejects the possibility of singleness. At the novel's end, Miss Matty's family unit grows to contain her brother Peter and Martha's husband as well as including Mary and Martha. Though there are two male figures in the family, neither takes the traditional male role of authority over the women. Martha's husband submits to Martha's desire to continue living with Miss Matty after they are married, and Peter is absorbed into the family upon his return as an equal and not a superior. Despite the family's non-traditional appearance, love and comfort abounds. After the birth of her child, Martha shows her love of Miss Matty by naming the baby after her. Miss Matty and Mary find comfort in each others' company as do Miss Matty and Peter.

This love and comfort in the Jenkyns' home is a welcome change from their life when Miss Matty's father was alive. Miss Matty's father, Mr. Jenkyns, is similar to Mr. Bradshaw in that he demanded a strict adherence to acceptable social standards. He demanded, for example, that his daughters, Matty and Deborah, appear virtuous according to society's standards. Therefore, when Peter goes into Deborah's room and "dress[es] himself in her old gown and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a [. . .] little baby [. . .] and walked up and down in the Filbert walk—just half hidden by the rails and half seen; and he cuddled his pillow, just like a baby," Mr. Jenkyns is furious and gives Peter a public scolding and beating (Gaskell, *Cranford* 65). Although just a practical joke, Mr. Jenkyns feels that Peter's actions have jeopardized Deborah's and even Matty's reputations by suggesting that they are not chaste and, thus, not

marriageable. Mr. Jenkyns is merely acting under the influence of his society which insists that women be moral and marriageable. However, as a result of Mr. Jenkyns' authoritarian influence, Peter runs away from home leaving Matty distraught and causing contention within the Jenkyns' home. By showing that Mr. Jenkyns' actions pull his family apart, Gaskell suggests that these social standards can cause more pain to a person than good.

Gaskell also shows that Mr. Jenkyns' insistence on patriarchal social standards cause him to negatively affect Miss Matty's adult life. As a child Miss Matty is raised in an environment that promoted separate spheres—Matty's mother served in a domestic role and her father held his office as head of the home and provider. As the head of the home, Mr. Jenkyns' required that his girls be raised to fill a domestic role as wife and mother and nothing more. Accordingly, Miss Matty learned to write letters, sew a little, play cards, and participate in small talk, all the skills necessary to obtain a husband. Mr. Jenkyns also follows social standards by demanding that his daughters value their social status and marry well. For this reason, Mr. Jenkyns and Deborah convince Matty to refuse Mr. Holbrook, who is socially inferior to their family, when he offers marriage. Unfortunately, this is Miss Matty's only offer of marriage, and, although she has been raised to expect and desire marriage, she does not achieve traditional domesticity. Because of her upbringing and because she lives in a larger society that does not support celibacy, sweet, good Miss Matty is unprepared to function outside the domestic sphere—a problem when her bank fails. Although she has done everything right according to the social standards of her day, Matty's circumstances force her to be the one thing she is not prepared to be, independent. Thus, when Miss Matty becomes



penniless, she cannot take care of herself economically because she does not have the skills and because society will not allow her to both gain employment and maintain the social status which she has been raised to believe is so important. Through the tragic example of Miss Matty, Gaskell shows her reader that social standards regarding marriage need to change because rearing girls to expect matrimony and not preparing them for the alternative is absolutely damaging to women.

Through her depiction of single women in both *Ruth* and *Cranford*, Gaskell celebrates women who choose to remain single. Ruth faces the pain and hardships of living a life as a social outcast when she rejects Bellingham's proposal of marriage, and yet her decision to remain single is wise because, as a single woman, she is better able to care for her son. Although Ruth's decision does temporarily mark her as an outcast, she is ultimately received as an honorable woman by the community because of her selfless nursing of the sick. Ruth's self-reliance is also rewarded when her son becomes apprenticed to a surgeon. Ruth's decision to remain single does benefit her son because it provides him with an opportunity to live a successful and virtuous life. By rewarding Ruth for her courage to remain single, Gaskell supports Ruth's choice.

Gaskell also celebrates single women in *Cranford*. The Cranford ladies are able to create a strong society based on their own standards of integrity and to form family units based on female friendships which bring them happiness. Through her depiction of the ladies at Cranford, Gaskell gives a positive portrayal of female celibacy to show readers that remaining single is not necessarily a future to be avoided. Gaskell also makes it clear in *Ruth* and *Cranford* that she does not support any social standard which makes life difficult for single women. Gaskell shows through Ruth's story that she believes society

should practice Christian forgiveness and allow unmarried women to become productive members of society. And, Gaskell shows through Miss Matty's experiences that women should be provided with the education and opportunities necessary to function outside of the domestic sphere as single women without having to jeopardize their social status.

Gaskell, however, does not celebrate the lives of single women without questioning the nature of their choice. Nor does she reject the idea that chastity and marriage are important. In *Ruth*, Gaskell develops Jemima's story to present an alternative view to her argument for celibacy. For Jemima, marriage is a positive choice through which she is able to obtain a level of self-fulfillment that Ruth is denied. Gaskell also makes it clear that Jemima has this option because she remains chaste. By presenting Jemima's situation in this way, Gaskell shows her support of Jemima's decision to marry just as she shows her support of Ruth's decision to remain single. As well as positively portraying marriage in *Ruth*, through Miss Matty's regrets in *Cranford*, Gaskell shows some of the negative aspects of a celibate life to emphasize the importance and desirability of marriage. By presenting an example of a successful marriage and by showing some of the negative aspects of celibacy, Gaskell makes it clear that although choosing celibacy is a good option for some women, marriage may well be the most conducive state for female happiness.

Gaskell presents Jemima's story as a contrast to Ruth's experience to show that, through remaining chaste, Jemima has the opportunity to achieve fulfillment in a way that Ruth cannot. Although Gaskell gives several depictions of inadequate male characters to show that Ruth is wise in choosing to remain single, Gaskell also includes a positive male

figure, Mr. Farquhar. Farquhar represents the typical Victorian hero. Farquhar is a gentleman, an honest and successful businessman, and he has a kind heart. Because of his virtuous nature, Farquhar is the only character in the novel worthy of a wife, and it is Jemima who first wins his admiration. Although Jemima is the antithesis of what Farquhar has decided his wife should be, her independent spirit and strong sense of morality attracts his attention. Because of Mr. Bradshaw's intervention, however, Jemima believes that Farquhar only wants to marry her because it would be the most economically sound decision, and Jemima refuses. Despite her decision, Jemima's feelings are complicated because she does love Farquhar: "She would so fain have let herself love Mr. Farquhar; but this constant maneuvering, in which she did not feel clear that he did not take a passive part, made her sick at heart" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 198). Like Ruth, Jemima refuses to give herself to a man whom she believes will take away her individuality despite the feelings she has for him. Mr. Bellingham would take away Ruth's rights as a mother, and Jemima believes Mr. Farquhar would treat her as little more than material property. To complicate matters even more, Farquhar, after being shunned by Jemima, begins to fall in love with Ruth. Farquhar admires Ruth's dignity, quiet ways, and her devotion to Leonard. However, when Ruth's past becomes known, Farquhar changes his intentions to marry Ruth. Although he does not reject her in the same way that Mr. Bradshaw does, Farquhar no longer considers Ruth marriageable and eventually focuses his attention back on Jemima. Mr. Farquhar's behavior may seem hypocritical by modern standards; however, it actually is a reflection of his Christianity. Farquhar forgives Ruth and recognizes her good qualities, but he expects a certain standard in his wife that only Jemima can now provide.

Jemima, then, is finally “schooled into normality by her marriage to Farquhar,” but not without “considerable inner questioning” (Foster 155). Before she is willing to marry Farquhar, Jemima makes sure that he does not view marriage as business merger. Jemima also makes sure that Farquhar is the type of man that would make a desirable husband and only then does she agree to marry him. As a result, Jemima achieves the traditional female fulfillment through marriage which Ruth is denied. One may argue that Ruth still has her freedom which is lost to Jemima. Jemima, however, makes it clear before her marriage to Farquhar that he is not going to be able to control her as her father tried to do: “You won’t forbid my going to see Ruth, will you? because if you do, I give you notice I shall disobey you” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 307). Because Farquhar agrees, Jemima gains “more freedom as a wife than as a daughter” and, therefore, is able to keep her individuality and be truly happy in her relationship with Farquhar (307). Through Jemima’s marriage, Gaskell implies that celibacy is not always the best choice, and that since Christianity values chastity, women should value it as well. Gaskell shows the reader that through matrimony Jemima is able to find fulfillment in a way that Ruth is not, and she is still able to keep her freedom and her individuality because of her wise choice of husband. Marriage is, therefore, presented as a positive institution as well as a good life decision for women.

In *Cranford*, Gaskell presents her most serious challenge to women’s choice of celibacy over marriage by presenting Miss Matty’s unfulfilled life. Miss Matty’s life is unfulfilled because when she was young, she had a suitor, Mr. Holbrook, with whom she was very much in love. However, due to the pressure of her father and sister who felt that Holbrook was socially beneath them, Miss Matty refuse his offer of marriage. Because of

her refusal, the rest of Miss Matty's life is overshadowed with sadness and a sense of regret for her wasted opportunity. Miss Matty is brought to face her decision later in life when she is invited to dine with Mr. Holbrook. Throughout the evening Miss Matty gets a sense of what her life could have been like had she married. This awareness later causes her to admit her regrets to Mary:

My father once made us [. . .] keep a diary, in two columns; on the one side we were to put down in the morning what we thought would be the course and events of the coming day, and at night we were to put down on the other side what really happened. It would be to some people rather a sad way of telling their lives. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 127)

For Miss Matty, it is a sad way for telling her life because she expected and wanted to be married and is now resigned never to achieve her desire. Miss Matty's sense of remorse is strongly brought about when Mr. Holbrook dies. Miss Matty goes into mourning as a wife would. She also hopes that Holbrook did not take her rejection "too much to heart" and regrets that "he never knew how it all came about that [she] said 'no'" (127). Miss Matty's suffering is also revealed through her recurring dream of having a child. Because she refuses Holbrook and never marries, Miss Matty loses her opportunity for motherhood. When recounting her dreams, Miss Matty "seems more regretful at the loss of maternal, rather than marital fulfillment" indicating that motherhood is one of the most serious sacrifices that women who remain single make (Nestor 54).

Although unwed, Ruth is able to be a mother but only at the loss of her social standing, which is something Miss Matty would never risk. Miss Matty's social sphere is what gives her the strength to overcome her disappointment. The single women at Cranford reassure Miss Matty in her decision to remain celibate and keep Miss Matty from thinking that she has wasted her life. Miss Matty, however, still shows that she

regrets her decision when she sanctions the marriage of Martha and Jem. Gaskell uses Miss Matty's life to show readers that women who choose to remain single lose some of the opportunities that married women have, which may not be a sacrifice worth making. Through Miss Matty's regret, the reader can see that matrimony is most conducive to the happiness of some women, and, therefore, the decision to remain single should be weighed heavily with its alternative.

Gaskell's inclusions of both the positive and negative aspects of celibacy and marriage in *Ruth* and *Cranford* reveal a certain amount of ambivalence as to which state is most conducive to the happiness of women. Singleness offers women fulfillment through female friendships, non-traditional family units, and the freedom to live as one pleases without having to consult spouses, while marriage offers women traditional female fulfillment through wifedom and motherhood. Gaskell portrays both sides of the argument surrounding marriage and celibacy to encourage women to think about their choices and decide which state would be most conducive to their individual happiness. For Gaskell, the decision to marry or stay single is a personal choice. Victorian society as a whole, however, felt the need to be involved in this decision making process because marriage was the basis of the nineteenth-century social structure. If women were to stay single, then what would happen to society, and what would society do with its old maids?

In the nineteenth century, job opportunities, especially for middle and upper-class women, were scarce. If a woman had little or no financial security and no husband, then where would she receive support? In *Ruth* and *Cranford*, Gaskell's single heroines are able to support themselves through traditionally feminine employment. Ruth, first, works as a seamstress, then, a governess and, finally, as a nurse. Miss Matty is able to work out

of her home selling tea. Both Ruth's and Miss Matty's employments are acceptable for women in their respective social positions. Gaskell, therefore, does not seem to offer any strikingly new solutions to the question: "What shall we do with our old maids?" Gaskell does, however, show her support of a society that accepts working and single women by providing her single characters with opportunities to succeed economically and to positively contribute to society through their employment. There is no doubt that Gaskell's novels are indicative of the changing status of women in the nineteenth century and that they encourage readers to welcome these changes, although in *Ruth* and *Cranford* there is still room to question what the future holds for women.

## CHAPTER V

### *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS*: BREAKING AWAY FROM INHIBITING IDEOLOGIES

As well as being considered her greatest artistic achievement, *Wives and Daughters* (1866) is generally considered Gaskell's most orthodox treatment of womanhood. Unlike Gaskell's previous novels, *Wives and Daughters* is not predominately concerned with questioning the ideological traditions that governed women's lives in the nineteenth century. *Wives and Daughters* "incorporates many of the themes which Gaskell has already treated such as disharmonious marriage, romantic delusions, spinsterhood, and female individuality," but these themes are less obvious here than in her previous novels (Foster 176). Instead, this novel more closely resembles the tradition of Jane Austen's fiction. The novel focuses on the lives of upper and middle-class women in their traditional roles as mothers and daughters, and although the novel is not complete, there is no question but that it will culminate in matrimony and conventional female fulfillment. Furthermore, in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's female characters do not function outside the domestic sphere as Gaskell's other heroines do; they are kept safe at home to develop their finer instincts—"sensitivity, self-sacrifice, [and] innate purity"—and they never challenge their domestic roles (Mitchell, *Daily* 266). Because the men and women characters seem to function in separate spheres, *Wives and Daughters* seems to have no innovative ideas about the lives of women. However, this seeming orthodoxy is merely a framework Gaskell uses to depict how traditional



structures, particularly the aristocratic system, or class hierarchy, and the patriarchal system, inhibit women's lives. These traditional structures restrict women's mobility within society and within their homes by creating socially acceptable rules and behaviors that must be followed to keep order in society. In *Wives and Daughters*, however, Gaskell does not merely examine the negative affect traditional structures have on women, but she presents their negative affects on men as well. By examining how these structures limit the lives of both men and women to maintain order, Gaskell offers socially progressive ideas in *Wives and Daughters*.

In the nineteenth century, the aristocratic system was upheld as the dominant social structure because it created order in a community by delineating the role each individual in society would fulfill. This system outlined who would govern, who would control the land, who would provide commercial necessities, who would work the land, and who would serve the governing classes. In addition, "each class had its own standards; and people were expected to conform to the rules for their class" (Mitchell, *Daily* 17). To maintain this order, the aristocratic system relied upon strict guidelines governing the level of interaction between classes. Limiting social interactions between the classes created a recognizable distinction between them and promoted lower-class, those people who must earn a living, acceptance of upper-class authority, thus maintaining social order. Marriage alliances were also controlled to ensure the survival of the aristocratic system. A person could raise or lower his or her respectability by marrying a person of a different class and, thus, disturb his or her family's social status. The patriarchal system, therefore, functioned as a way to promote societal order because the patriarchal structure gave parents the right to control marriage alliances, by

controlling inheritance, and ensure that their children's "marriage partners were strictly limited to those of a suitable class and income" (Gleadle 79). These structures are in place within *Wives and Daughters*. Each facet of the social structure within Hollingford is represented by a family: The Cumnors represent the aristocracy; the Hamleys, the squirearchy; the Gibsons, the professional middle class; and the Miss Brownings, town society. Gaskell does not focus her novel on the lower classes because for the lower classes marriage could not lower an individual's respectability. Within each of these families and their respective social positions, there are individuals, mostly belonging to the older generation, who maintain the aristocratic and patriarchal systems because of the order which they provide. However, by depicting these characters in a negative way, Gaskell shows that although these traditional systems may provide order, they promote neither the well-being of Hollingford society nor its individuals. What does promote happiness is a new system of order that Gaskell develops through the actions of the more progressive characters in Hollingford. These characters reject aristocratic and patriarchal control; break down social barriers to create relationships based on similar interests, intellectual pursuits, and emotional connections; and, thus, create better communities and better lives. Therefore, by contrasting the traditionally-minded characters' views and actions with those of the progressive characters, Gaskell shows that relinquishing inhibiting traditional structures will improve the lives of both men and women.

Gaskell depicts the way in which the existing social structure in Hollingford, the aristocratic system, orders society by presenting the traditional relationship between the Hollingford aristocracy and the townspeople. Those who reside in Cumnor Towers—

Lord and Lady Cumnor, Lady Harriet, and Lord Hollingford—make up the aristocracy and uphold social delineations:

It was well for a place where the powerful family, who thus overshadowed it, were of so respectable a character as the Cumnors. They expected to be submitted to, and obeyed; the simple worship of the townspeople was accepted by the earl and countess as a right; and they would have stood still in amazement [. . .] had any inhabitant of Hollingford ventured to set his will or opinions in opposition to those of the earl. But, yielded all that obeisance, they did a good deal for the town, and were generally condescending, and often thoughtful and kind in their treatment of their vassals. (Gaskell, *Wives* 7)

The Cumnors' good treatment of their vassals includes a charity school established by Lady Cumnor which is opened to the public once a year so that the townspeople can acknowledge the Cumnors' patronage. The school, however, is nothing progressive. It is merely a training school for domestic servants "where girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and above all, to dress neatly," and, although established by the Cumnors, the school is overseen by others (7). The Cumnors' school helps maintain societal order by reinforcing traditional social barriers. The Cumnors are training lower-class women to fit into an assigned station and to accept their patronization as just and proper. The Cumnors' manner of condescension also allows them to have control over their vassals' affairs without being so closely involved as to compromise their superiority. By inviting the townspeople into their school and home once a year, the Cumnors are able "to maintain friendships with the locals without ever permitting familiarity" which would lower their elite position (Lansbury, *Elizabeth* 109). By maintaining several degrees of separation between themselves and those they patronize, the Cumnors are reinforcing their role as governing body within the aristocratic system.

Although setting themselves apart from the rest of Hollingford may make the Cumnors seem snobbish and dictatorial, their actions are not questioned by the townspeople but are accepted. The Miss Brownings, Mrs. Goodenough, and the rest of Hollingford's locals maintain the social structure enforced by the Cumnors by dropping a curtsy to show their homage whenever they see the noble family. This homage shows that the locals "[see] themselves as occupying a 'place' and [offer] deference to those 'above'" and, thus, maintain the social hierarchy (Mitchell, *Daily* 25). The townspeople also show their support of the aristocratic system by allowing the Cumnors to influence their actions. When the Cumnors decide to use Mr. Gibson as their family doctor, the town favors him as well:

For the good doctor's business grew upon him. He thought that this increase was owing to his greater skill and experience, and he would probably have been mortified if he could have known how many of his patients were solely biased in sending for him, by the fact that he was employed at the Towers. (Gaskell, *Wives* 321)

Because the Cumnors are "the pinnacle of country society confirmed by rank and wealth," their patronage of Mr. Gibson allows them to "bestow prestige" upon him and increase his business (Lansbury, *Novel* 188). The Cumnors' ability to influence the town in this way shows the control the aristocratic system holds over Hollingford society. The Hollingford locals also allow the social system to govern their opinions of others. When Molly becomes involved in Cynthia's damaging relationship with Mr. Preston, Molly, although innocent, is tarnished by rumors of her romantic involvement with the man. When the town gossip, Mrs. Goodenough, hears rumors of Molly's interactions with Mr. Preston, she immediately turns against her: "Women should mind what they're about, and never be talked of; and if a woman's talked of, the less her friends have to do with her till

the talk has died away, the better” (Gaskell, *Wives* 507). In the nineteenth century, “the custom of chaperonage dictated that an unmarried young woman of a good family could not go anywhere alone” especially to meet an unrelated, single man because being alone with a man indicated that sexual purity might be lost (Mitchell, *Daily* 151). Because she believes Molly is courting without a chaperone, Mrs. Goodenough distances herself from what is defined by society as morally and socially unacceptable behavior. By so doing, Mrs. Goodenough is avoiding an association that could bring her social status down. Mrs. Goodenough’s behavior is a reflection of a society which commodifies women to the extent that someone who has had sex before marriage is unmarriageable, a society that, although based on Christian principles which endorse repentance and forgiveness, ostracizes unchaste women and makes no effort to employ or redeem them. Despite this standard of behavior, Lady Harriet continues to believe in Molly’s innocence, and, once she confirms her belief by asking Mr. Preston about the rumors, Lady Harriet takes Molly for a walk “so contrived that they twice passed through all the length of the principal street of the town” (532). Lady Harriet knows that her patronage will be recognized by the town: “Hollingford is not the place I take it to be, if it doesn’t veer round in Miss Gibson’s favour after my today’s trotting of that child about” (533). In this system, Molly’s good character is not measured by her personal qualifications but by the opinions of the elite and upon her adherence to social norms. Lady Harriet knows the power that she holds over the townspeople is based on her social status, and because the townspeople are so easily influenced by her actions and opinions and those of her family, there is no doubt that those who are ruled over recognize and accept this system of social order.

Gaskell, however, makes those who follow the aristocratic system look ridiculous to show that it is not a positive system of order. Mrs. Gibson strictly follows the aristocratic system maintained by the Cumnors. After she is wed, Mrs. Gibson insists upon changing the Gibson's dinner hour to a more aristocratic hour. This new hour is not only an inconvenience to the Gibsons but also to their friends because it interferes with the usual hour for paying calls in Hollingford. In Victorian England, to pay a call "was a means of seeking further contacts, and returning calls signaled that an acquaintance could continue" (Mitchell, *Daily* 15). By changing her dinner hour, Mrs. Gibson implies that she wishes to break off or at least limit the family's interactions with the townspeople. Mrs. Gibson also demands a particular behavior from the servants which fits more with the aristocratic lifestyle than the town life to which the Gibsons belong. As a result, Mrs. Gibson dismisses Betty, the Gibson's housekeeper of sixteen years, and the Gibson's cook so she can employ more fashionable servants. Mrs. Gibson is trying to act like an aristocrat "it was wrong, people thought, to behave like someone from a class above—or below—one's own" (17). The townspeople see both of these acts as affronts and set Mrs. Gibson apart from their community because of her pretentious attempts to be aristocratic.

Mrs. Gibson's actions also cause contention within her home. Molly must deal with the whims of a selfish woman, and Mr. Gibson must deal with the annoyances and expenses Mrs. Gibson creates when she adopts aristocratic habits as well as learn "to satisfy his healthy English appetite on badly made omelettes, rissoles, vol-au-vents, croquets, and timbales" (Gaskell, *Wives* 178). By placing her desire to be aristocratic above the needs and desires of her family, Mrs. Gibson's absurdity is revealed as is the family's unhappiness. Mrs. Gibson's adherence to the aristocratic way of life even causes

her own unhappiness. At the Easter Ball, Mrs. Gibson's obsession keeps her "a little aloof from [. . .] those of her acquaintance who would willingly have entered into conversation with her" so that she can "attach herself to the skirts of the Towers' party" when they arrive (286). Because the Cumnors come so late, Mrs. Gibson spends most of the evening sitting alone and unhappy or forcing Molly to sit with her instead of dancing. Mrs. Gibson is made to look absurd and pathetic in her decision to remain bored rather than miss an opportunity for social advancement. The most striking example of the unhappiness caused by Mrs. Gibson's social climbing, however, is revealed through her relationship with Cynthia. Cynthia feels that she can never really love her mother because she was neglected as a child: "I was sent to school at four years old [. . .] and in the holidays, mamma went to stay at grand houses, and I was generally left with the schoolmistresses" (220). Because Mrs. Gibson's love of the aristocratic system usurps her love for her daughter, Cynthia is denied the love a child should receive from her mother. By presenting Mrs. Gibson as a failed mother, Gaskell reveals that the existing social system cannot provide an individual's happiness because it separates individuals instead of bringing them together.

The Miss Brownings are also portrayed negatively in their attempts to maintain the class hierarchy. Although not as obsessed with the aristocracy as Mrs. Gibson, the Miss Brownings' lives "revolve around tidbits of gossip that drop from Cumnor Towers" (Lansbury, *Elizabeth* 107). The Brownings' desire for Towers' gossip not only make them appear to be silly spinster women with nothing better to do with their lives than chit-chat, but it also leads them to mistakenly believe that "Molly Gibson has lost her character" (Gaskell, *Wives* 509). Although the Brownings have known Molly since

childhood, they do not trust her when she declares her innocence. Instead, the Brownings rely on gossip that stems from Mr. Sheepshanks and the Towers for truth. It is not until Lady Harriet gets involved that Molly's name is finally cleared of any negative implications. Like the other town gossips, the Brownings do reclaim their good opinion of Molly, but this change of feeling does not reflect well on the Brownings' characters because it shows that they allow their Christianity to be usurped by the values of an oppressive society. The Brownings' actions reflect the faults of the hierarchical system—because social position is based on rank and adherence to social norms, so is character. Both women also appear to be fair-weather friends because of their reliance on the opinions of the aristocrats to influence their judgments of others. Lady Harriet's opinion of the Brownings further reveals that their adherence to the aristocratic system makes them ridiculous. Lady Harriet refers to the Miss Brownings as "Pecksy and Flapsy" because they are so "unnatural in their exaggerated respect and admiration when they come to the Towers, and put on so much pretence by way of fine manners" (162). The names "Pecksy and Flapsy" reference a couple of silly female robins from Victorian children's literature and are meant to connote the absurd behavior of the spinsters while making caricatures of them as well (Trimmer). Harriet's nicknaming of the Brownings in such a belittling way indicates that the Brownings' only make themselves "objects of ridicule" by so strictly adhering to the aristocratic system (162). Their actions are based on no knowledge of the Cumnors' personal merit but merely on the knowledge that the Cumnors are socially superior. Through the Brownings' errors of judgment and their ridiculous behavior as well as through Mrs. Gibson's poor behavior, Gaskell shows that the existing social system does not provide an adequate standard by which to act.



There are characters in *Wives and Daughters*, however, who recognize the flaws of the aristocratic system and, through their actions, suggest a better system, one that is based on personal merit instead of social rank. Unlike his wife, Mr. Gibson bases his associations and opinions on personal merit instead of social rank. However, because Mr. Gibson's choice of friends in the community are Lord Hollingford and Squire Hamley, both upper-class members of society, Mr. Gibson appears to be using the aristocratic system to advance himself socially as his wife does. Because they observe that Mr. Gibson is always "with Lord Hollingford, when [he] can get at him," and because Mr. Gibson asks Squire Hamley to care for Molly while Miss Eyre is away, the Miss Brownings accuse him of social climbing: "You might have asked us before you asked Madam Hamley [. . .] We are your old friends; and we were her mother's friends, too; though we are not country folk" (Gaskell, *Wives* 145). Based on appearances, the Brownings believe that Mr. Gibson is socially ambitious and that he seeks the company of country gentlemen to raise his own social position. Mr. Gibson, however, defends himself saying, "I seek Lord Hollingford [and, we can assume, Squire Hamley] as I should seek such a man, whatever his rank or position might be [. . .] if it were possible for them to have had a similar character of mind developed by similar advantages" (145). Mr. Gibson is friends with Lord Hollingford because they share scientific interests, and Mr. Gibson is friends with Squire Hamley because he admires the squire's natural wisdom; his relationships are mutually fulfilling. And, because Mr. Gibson does not seek social advantages through his relationships, he is always respected in town while his wife, who seeks social advantages based on rank, is not.

Similarly, Molly bases her opinions of others on their personal merit and not their rank. When she first visits the Towers, Molly learns that the aristocratic system does not provide an ideal method of judging the worth of others. Although initially excited by the prospect of mingling with such highly ranked people as the Cumnors, Molly's visit to the Towers "soon becomes a dreary trudge through overheated glasshouses filled with exotic flowers and unceasing paeans of praise from lady visitors" (Lansbury, *Elizabeth* 108). Molly's dream becomes even more shattered when she falls asleep and finds herself left to the Cumnors' care. During her time with the family, Molly learns realities about the aristocrats that change her perception of them: "Clare is a liar, Lord Cumnor an ineffable and boisterous bore, and the family, with the exception of Lady Harriet, a very dull group indeed" (108). Because of her early experiences with the Cumnors, Molly is not awestruck by their patronage nor is she inhibited by the social structures which suggest she owes the Cumnors complete subservience. Molly chooses, therefore, to dislike Lady Cumnor because she is snobbish and cold but attaches herself to Lady Harriet in whom she finds a kindred spirit. Lady Harriet, in turn, makes Molly her protégée because Molly does not act like the other members of Hollingford who are "so unnatural in their exaggerated respect and admiration when they come up to the Towers"; Molly is "simple and truthful," so Lady Harriet speaks to her "as [she] would to [her] equal—in rank" (Gaskell, *Wives* 162). Lady Harriet rejects class barriers outlined by the aristocratic system when she befriends Molly because she sees Molly's worth and not just her rank. Molly also rejects the aristocratic system when Lady Harriet refers to Molly's friends, the Miss Brownings, as "Pecksy and Flapsy" (161). Lady Harriet's nicknames for the sisters are not flattering, and Molly takes offence and tells Lady Harriet that she thinks her "a

little impertinent” (161). Molly’s actions show that she is not intimidated by Lady Harriet’s rank nor does she value Lady Harriet’s friendship more than her friendship with the Miss Brownings. Molly is able to see the worth of an individual based on that individual’s merit and not that individual’s class. The Miss Brownings have always been kind to her, so she insists they be respected. Lady Harriet then promises “to be respectful to them in word and deed—and in very thought” showing that she also understands that individual merit is more important than rank (164).

Because Molly, Mr. Gibson, and Lady Harriet each realize the class hierarchy is not capable of determining the worth of an individual, they each venture outside class barriers and make associations based on common interests and individual compatibility. Lady Harriet befriends the Brownings and truly fulfills her promise to Molly by respecting them and seeking out their good qualities. And, by acting on Molly’s opinion, Lady Harriet becomes a more sympathetic and respectable character in the reader’s view. Molly’s relinquishment of social boundaries also helps her to create a more honest and fulfilling relationship with Lady Harriet than Lady Harriet and Mrs. Gibson share despite the fact that Molly has not known Lady Harriet for nearly as long. Gaskell contrasts these relationships to show that breaking through social boundaries leads to more fulfilling interpersonal relationships than adhering to them. Lady Harriet and Molly are also able to establish a sisterhood which is based on the notion of personal worth. “As a middle-class woman, Molly has no right to expect help from an aristocrat,” but when she needs an ally against Mr. Preston, Molly’s knowledge of Lady Harriet’s character makes her certain Lady Harriet will fulfill that role (Pike 153). Similarly, as an aristocrat, Lady Harriet is not obliged to help Molly, but “from personal liking and respect” she does (153). Because

Molly and Lady Harriet's relationship is depicted as mutually beneficial, Gaskell shows that breaking down social barriers will positively benefit the individuals in a society. Accordingly, unlike Mrs. Gibson whose adherence to the aristocratic system sets her apart from her community, Mr. Gibson, who makes friendships based on personal merit, builds his respectability within his community. While Mrs. Gibson is viewed with contempt by her neighbors, Mr. Gibson's tendency to treat others with decency despite their social position adds to his respectable character. By contrasting the situations of those who follow the aristocratic system and those who do not, Gaskell shows that the social system needs to change. The aristocratic system merely inhibits the characters that follow it from creating fulfilling friendships and building a positive community, and therefore, a system based on personal merit should be adopted.

Gaskell not only shows that class barriers should be discarded to create better relationships within communities, but she also suggests that they be rejected as a means of arranging marriage. In the nineteenth century, the survival of the aristocratic system not only depended upon the strict demarcation between the classes and the acceptance of the aristocracy's authority, but it also relied on "the infusion of mercantile wealth into the aristocracy through marriage alliances" (Gleadle 80). It was necessary for the child of an upper-class family to make a "good match," a marriage based on compatible social status and on financial capabilities, because good matches "brought vitality and flexibility to the landed classes" (80). In other words, the choice of a child's spouse was vital to the continuation of a family's wealth and social position. Because the landholding families in *Wives and Daughters*, the Cumnors and the Hamleys, want to maintain this vitality, the older generation attempts to claim the authority over their children which the patriarchal

family system entitles them, to secure their current social situations. Thus, for the Cumnors and the Hamleys, marriage is the equivalent of “an exchange of commodities” for the purpose of self-promotion (Pike 137). Similarly, the middle-class family in *Wives and Daughters* adheres to the aristocratic and the patriarchal social structures in regards to marriage. Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick recognize their need to marry because they are both in the awkward position of being single parents. Both individuals are, therefore, looking for a partner who will assume certain roles within the family. By marrying each other, Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick not only support the aristocratic view that marriage is an exchange of commodities, but they also support the patriarchal system which outlines separate spheres for men and women. After the Gibsons marry, Mrs. Gibson attempts to control her daughters’ relationships and secure connections that will promote the family’s social status. Gaskell, therefore, shows that the older generation in the novel follows the aristocratic system by attempting to assume patriarchal control over their children’s marriages as well as their friendships. If, however, a personal merit system should be adopted to replace the aristocratic system for defining one’s social status, it follows then that marriages should be based on personal preference rather than social and financial compatibility. Gaskell, therefore, shows the negative consequences of basing one’s marriage on a mercantile foundation and promotes a new ideal, basing one’s marriage on personal affection and compatibility.

To secure their family’s existing social position, Lord and Lady Cumnor attempt to arrange the marriages of their children. The Cumnors’ two single children are Lord Hollingford and Lady Harriet. Since Lord Hollingford is widowed and already has children by which to carry on their family’s respectable name, the Cumnors focus their

match-making attention on Lady Harriet. Lord and Lady Cumnor desire to “strengthen family ties by marrying [their] youngest daughter, Harriet, with a first cousin,” but Harriet refuses to marry him (Pike 139-40). Because this arrangement would guarantee social and financial comfort for both Harriet and her parents, the Cumnors can “see no objection to the gentlemen in question” and hold Harriet in disgrace for her refusal (Gaskell, *Wives* 93). Lord and Lady Cumnor clearly feel that they have the right to influence their daughter’s choice of spouse because that choice, according to the aristocratic system which they wish to uphold, affects their social respectability and ensures that their property remains within the family. Similarly, Squire Hamley attempts to control Osborne’s choice of wife because, as the oldest son, Osborne will inherit the family estate. The squire wants “to hoist the old family up again” through Osborne’s marriage (433); he insists that Osborne marry well: “I’m not particular as to beauty, or as to cleverness, and piano-playing, and that sort of thing [. . .] but she must be well-born, and the more money she brings the better for the old place” (432). Squire Hamley “knows only one way of safeguarding the estate,” and therefore, he “[regards] marriage as a transaction in which rank and capital comfortably [change] hands” and insists upon his patriarchal authority in deciding whom Osborne will wed (Lansbury, *Novel* 186).

According to the patriarchal system which he upholds, the squire’s position as head of the family gives him this right: “If I am not to be the father in this matter, [Osborne] shan’t be the son” (432). For Squire Hamley, as for the Cumnors, marriage is a means of promoting a family dynasty and should, therefore, be controlled by the patriarch of that dynasty.

Just as the upper-class families view marriage as a means for securing social order and financial comfort, the Gibsons, who represent the middle classes, also view marriage in these terms. At the onset of the novel, both Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick find themselves in the awkward position of raising children alone. Because Molly is coming of age for courtship and marriage, Mr. Gibson believes that he needs a wife who will serve as a female companion and who will guide Molly when the time arrives for her to “come out,” to make her “formal entrance into fashionable society” (Mitchell, *Daily* 153). Mr. Gibson finds Mrs. Kirkpatrick to be a fitting match because “she’s a very suitable age,” “she’s highly respected by Lord and Lady Cumnor,” “she has been accustomed to housekeeping—economical housekeeping too,” and more than all of this she will do “[Molly] good” (Gaskell, *Wives* 112). Mrs. Kirkpatrick, although she does claim that she wants a father for Cynthia, is mostly concerned with her own comfort. After losing her first husband, Mrs. Kirkpatrick has to continue “toiling and moiling for money” which seems to her unnatural: “Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and his wife sits in the drawing-room like a lady” (98). Mrs. Kirkpatrick desires separate spheres; she believes comfort means freedom from economic concerns. For these reasons, Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick wed; both expect a service from the other which will make their own lives more comfortable. Although Mr. Gibson is of a more modern mind and desires Molly and Cynthia to marry based on personal preference, Mrs. Gibson, like the Cumnors and Squire Hamley, desires her daughters to adopt similar motives to her own; she wants them to marry men “of suitable class and income” (Gleadle 79). Thus, Mrs. Gibson encourages both Molly and Cynthia to favor gentlemen of title over working-class men as dance partners at the

Easter Ball as well as for companions in life. Mrs. Gibson is mainly focused on arranging Cynthia's marriage; she first wishes Cynthia to marry Osborne Hamley because she believes he will inherit his father's estate. Then, when she finds out Roger will most likely inherit the estate, she encourages Cynthia's attachment to him, and finally, when neither relationship works out, she desires Cynthia to marry Mr. Henderson, who is also a well-established gentleman. Each of these matches are good matches to Mrs. Gibson because she believes they will not only achieve Cynthia's happiness, by providing her with a husband who has money and an acceptable social status, but also because they will do credit to the Gibson family's status.

Although Lord and Lady Cumnor's, Squire Hamley's, and Mr. and Mrs. Gibson's actions are all meant to benefit their children, Gaskell shows that the systems under which they are acting are flawed and do not promote individual or community well-being. Lord and Lady Cumnor wish their children to inherit the family title and property, but their attempts to arrange a dynastic marriage for Lady Harriet fail. Harriet's rejection of her parents' proposed match is significant because it symbolizes her rejection of their authority and, thus, patriarchal authority. For Lady Harriet, the patriarchal system which dictates that she owes obedience to her parents is passé; her own desires are more important than her parents' plans. Through Lady Harriet's refusal Gaskell also shows that society is changing; no longer are the children from great families content with marriages based on income and rank, they seem to realize that those arrangements will not make them happy. When Lady Cumnor is discussing the family's high rank, Harriet also implicitly asserts her belief in the inferiority of the aristocratic system's standards for choosing a spouse:



Papa was saying that the Hamleys have been on their land since before the Conquest; while we only came into the country a century ago; and there is a tale that the first Cumnor began his fortune through selling tobacco in King James's reign. (Gaskell, *Wives* 607)

The Cumnors feel that they are of a superior rank than the Hamleys and others, based on the amount of wealth they have and on their title, and they feel that only those of equal social standing would make acceptable matches for their child. Harriet, however, realizes that neither her family's title nor their wealth make them better or more noble than the others because they were once equal, even socially inferior, to those people they now feel are beneath them. Harriet realizes that her mother's ideals are simply preventing community and marriage relationships that may be emotionally fulfilling. There is also hints at the end of the novel that suggest Harriet believes her suitor would be a good match for Molly, and not because of financial and social compatibility but based on character. When Molly is staying with the Cumnors during Cynthia's wedding, Harriet asks her cousin, Sir Charles, to entertain Molly with hopes of them forming and attachment. This attempt at match-making reveals that Harriet finds liking and common interests a better base on which to build a marriage relationship than money and rank..

Similarly, Squire Hamley's demands that his children marry for rank and wealth cause his family's unhappiness. Squire Hamley bases his right to choose his children's spouses on his patriarchal authority. However, Squire Hamley's consistent demands make him appear to be "one of those standard backward fathers, one of those traditionally primitive male authority figures [. . .] who loves the past as deeply as he loves the trees on his estate" (Morgan 103). The squire's backward behavior not only makes him appear to be an inadequate father, but it is also the main cause of contention within the Hamley household. Because Squire Hamley is so insistent that his sons marry women of rank and

wealth, Osborne is afraid he will be disinherited if he tells his father that he is married to a French governess. This fear creates a wedge between father and son. Osborne continually asserts his right to choose his own wife: "Once and for all, I claim the right of choosing my wife for myself, subject to no man's interference," and Squire Hamley continually asserts his right to disinherit Osborne if he marries beneath him (Gaskell, *Wives* 432). Gaskell portrays this strife to reveal the inadequacies of the aristocratic system. Osborne is not happy because he marries for wealth, he is happy because he marries for love, but because his father insists upon aristocratic ideals and patriarchal control, that happiness is destroyed. The failures of Squire Hamley and the Cumnors to arrange marriages for their children are "part of the changing society that Gaskell recognizes and depicts in *Wives and Daughters*"; marriages based on an exchange of commodities do not bring happiness to families or individuals (Pike 141).

Gaskell also shows the inadequacies of basing marriage on an exchange of commodities by showing the conflicts which arise as a result of the Gibson's marriage. Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick marry because they are socially compatible and because they believe their marriage will relieve their social and financial needs. Although their marriage is viewed by the Cumnors and many of the townspeople as being a positive and beneficial match, it is not. Mr. Gibson does provide a chaperone for Molly, but he also "[increases] his own and Molly's problems by making them responsible for the happiness of a querulous, selfish woman" (Pike 136). Molly must constantly make up for her stepmother's rudeness to their acquaintances and is often inhibited by her stepmother in doing good to others. When Squire Hamley comes to fetch Molly at the request of his ailing wife and with Mr. Gibson's permission, Mrs. Gibson refuses:

“Stop a minute, darling,” said Mrs. Gibson to Molly—a slight cloud over her countenance, in spite of her caressing word. “I am sure dear papa quite forgot that you were to go out with me to-night, to visit people,” continued she, addressing herself to the squire, “with whom I am quite unacquainted—and it is very uncertain if Mr. Gibson can return in time to go with me—so, you see, I cannot allow Molly to go with you.” (Gaskell, *Wives* 186).

Mrs. Gibson’s reasons for Molly to remain at home are blatantly superficial, and cause both Molly and Squire Hamley to respond with disgust. Mrs. Gibson’s behavior negatively affects the Gibsons’ community relationships, and Gaskell develops this negativity to show that Mr. Gibson made a poor choice when he decided treat marriage as an exchange of commodities. Mrs. Gibson also becomes a source of friction in Mr. Gibson’s life. Mrs. Gibson is constantly complaining of Mr. Gibson’s late hours, she demands money for imprudent expenses, and she even breaches the confidentiality between patient and doctor which Mr. Gibson honors when she eavesdrops on his conversation with a fellow surgeon to learn about Osborne’s health. Gaskell’s depiction of Mrs. Gibson’s relationship with Molly and with Mr. Gibson shows that “when Dr. Gibson tries to create [a traditional family] he brings endless dissatisfaction into his own life and a great measure of grief into his daughter’s” (Lansbury, *Novel* 199). This traditional family unit also fails to provide guidance for Cynthia, who has no home until she comes to live with the Gibsons. At school, Cynthia does not get the moral guidance she needs from her mother. For this reason, Cynthia becomes involved in a damaging relationship with Mr. Preston from which her mother provides no way out. Once in the Gibsons’ home, Cynthia does receive help and moral guidance, but not from either Mr. or Mrs. Gibson. Cynthia receives all her guidance from Molly, whom she respects and loves because Molly truly loves her in return. Thus, although Mr. Gibson intends his marriage

to provide a family structure that would guide and protect the girls, he fails to do so. Because Mr. Gibson bases his marriage on an exchange of commodities instead of on the personal merit of his spouse, he and his family are unhappy. Gaskell presents this reversal of expectations to show that the traditional reasons for marriage are no longer adequate.

Unlike their parents who view marriage as an exchange of commodities, the younger generation in *Wives and Daughters* believes that marriage should be based on love. Osborne marries for love when he is in France; his wife has no connections, but she is sweet and loves Osborne passionately. Although their marriage is disturbed by Osborne's failure to fully denounce the aristocratic system and tell his father that he is wed, Osborne and his wife are truly happy for a time. Cynthia also regards marriage as the result of passionate feelings. When Mrs. Gibson learns of Mr. Henderson's proposal she says, "And you accept him? Say 'yes', Cynthia, and make me happy!" (Gaskell, *Wives* 598) Cynthia, however, does not intend to marry for anyone's happiness but her own: "I shan't say 'yes' to make anyone happy except myself" (598). Cynthia insists upon marrying based on personal choice and love, and she insists on marrying for her own happiness and not to marry for mercenary reasons. Cynthia's rejects Mr. Preston and Roger because, as she says herself, "One was as much too bad for me, as the other is too good" (601). Cynthia chooses Mr. Henderson as a husband because she believes he "is the *juste milieu*," and because he likes Cynthia just as she is (601). Cynthia chooses Mr. Henderson because she sees him as a balance between Mr. Preston and Roger, and she thinks of this balance as love. Although Mrs. Gibson does not seem to understand the concept of marrying purely for love, Mr. Gibson does. Mr. Gibson does not want either Molly or Cynthia to marry unless they love someone very dearly. Gaskell contrasts Mr.

Gibson's view of marriage to Mrs. Gibson's to show that after his own poor match, Mr. Gibson has learned that marrying for personal reasons will lead to more happiness than marrying for social or financial reasons. Molly also recognizes the importance of marrying for love. When Molly and Roger finally come together, it is because both realize the worth of the other and both begin to foster passionate feelings about each other as a result of this knowledge. Although the novel is incomplete and the reader does not get the privilege of experiencing the full satisfaction of the couple's union, Gaskell makes it clear that Molly and Roger choose each other because they truly love one another and that their marriage will be a happy one because of their love.

Because Gaskell depicts the happiness of the characters, in *Wives and Daughters*, who choose their friends and their spouses based on merit and mutual affection rather than rank and wealth, Gaskell promotes changing the traditional structures of society. The aristocratic system may have been ideal at one time because it provided a beneficial order and structure to society, but Gaskell depicts that system's present inadequacies to show that it needs to be replaced with a more modern system. No longer should individuals be defined by their social position nor confined by class barriers, but they should be judged based on their personal accomplishments and allowed to create relationships based on personal preference and love. Mr. Gibson, Molly, Roger, Cynthia, Lord Hollingford, and Lady Harriet are presented in a positive way and create happy marriages and a closer community because they chose to accept the merit system. By depicting these changes as beneficial to the individuals in her novel, Gaskell shows that letting go of the traditional aristocratic structure and the patriarchal structure which supports it will not only benefit individuals but also society. Although the novel's ending supports the traditional

ideologies of society in that Molly and Roger gain happiness through marriage, their relationship does present a new ideal:

Molly's new self-reliance will make her a respected companion, not a down-trodden slave, and her husband, moving in a progressive world of exploration and changing values will, we feel, be less blinkered than his father and brother by restricting notions about female behaviour. (Foster 181)

Roger and Molly do not settle for a marriage that is socially and financially prudent, they marry for love and achieve a new, more successful relationship than their parents. Thus, Gaskell does not completely let go of traditional values, she only relinquishes those that inhibit happiness and progress. For Gaskell, relinquishing aristocratic and patriarchal order means positive progress; men and women will benefit from this new system which bases individual worth and personal relationships on real merit, love, and virtue.

Gaskell's idealism—her belief that marriage can be happy and equal—is the reason that modern feminists have avoided including her among the more radical female authors of the nineteenth century who focused their work on subverting these ideas. Because Gaskell promotes the idea that happiness in marriage is real and good and possibly the best condition for women in *Wives and Daughters* as well as her other novels, Gaskell is often viewed as non-feminist by many critics. Gaskell's convictions do stem from her personal experience as a wife and a mother, but Gaskell's feminism, although not defined as such in modern terms, becomes clear in her rejection of the oppressive social structures and gender stereotypes that inhibited women's lives. Gaskell's final depiction of female existence through her portrayal of Molly, Cynthia, and even Lady Harriet as they face a society that judges them based on their rank and their ability to appear virtuous shows that she does not approve of a society that only values women if they are marriageable. Gaskell desires that women be respected and given the

opportunity to be happy whether that means marrying, as Cynthia and Molly do, or remaining single, as Lady Harriet. Gaskell's final novel, as well as her previous novels, indicates that Gaskell is concerned with women's well-being. Although she is not as radical in her ideas and lifestyle as George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell is a feminist because, as her novels reveal, she strove to influence her society accept and respect single and married women and to allow them the opportunities necessary to find happiness.

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