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Introduction

In the past few decades, Elizabeth Gaskell has become a figure of growing importance in the field of Victorian literary studies. It is now widely recognized that she produced work of great variety and scope in the course of a highly successful writing career that lasted for about twenty years. A gifted storyteller, with a zest for anecdote, legend, and social observation, she was innovative and experimental in her use of genre, particularly in the realm of shorter fiction. She is significant also in the history of biography, where her controversial contribution, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), was instrumental in changing conceptions of that genre. Nurtured by the rich social and religious context of nineteenth-century Unitarianism, Gaskell is typically open-minded in response to social transformation and change. This is evident in her early fiction in the treatment of the problems of working-class life and prostitution as well as in her last novel's magisterial representation of provincial life in the context of changing social structures and gender and class relations. Generations of readers have valued her for her geniality, sympathy, and imaginative expressiveness, but critics are increasingly coming to acknowledge that she is neither artless nor transparent. They are also granting growing recognition to her intellectuality, her familiarity with matters of scientific, economic, and theological inquiry, and her narrative sophistication.

Today, Gaskell commands a wide readership. She is not only a perennial on course lists within academic institutions, but also has a dedicated popular following of the kind that the Brontës and Jane Austen attract. Gaskell's canonical status today is a restoration rather than a continuity of her reputation in her own day. Indeed, Gaskell criticism has been very engaged with debating her rank among the great Victorian novelists, and finding reasons for the slump and subsequent rise in Gaskell's reputation during the twentieth century. In her lifetime she was a well-respected, even lionized author. Like so many women writers of the nineteenth century, however, she fell into relative obscurity after her death, though *Cranford* (1853)

continued to sell extremely well and was reprinted on numerous occasions. When her name cropped up in Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934), it was as a "minor novelist" with "slight talent." Damning her with faint and gendered praise, Cecil set the tone for subsequent critical opinion about "Mrs Gaskell," singling out what he saw as her quintessentially feminine characteristics: "She was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction."[1] In accordance with this characterization of the author, *Cranford* was traditionally considered her finest work, appreciated for its simple charm, warm humanity, and nostalgia in representing provincial village life.

Gaskell criticism entered a new phase in the 1950s when Raymond Williams and other Marxist/sociological critics read with interest her novels of industrial life, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). But even here, though Gaskell garnered praise for focusing on the condition of the working classes, she drew criticism for offering personal rather than systemic solutions to class conflict. More recently, however, critics such as Patsy Stoneman have reread Gaskell's work in the light of feminist theory and revised the assessment of Gaskell as socially conservative, drawing attention rather to her critique of power relations and traditional family structures. Once patronized for her artlessness and the formal untidiness of her work – Elizabeth Barrett Browning thought *Mary Barton* a "slovenly" work – as well as her ideological confusion, she has emerged in the late twentieth century as an author of works richly ambivalent, transgressive, and formally sophisticated.

Gaskell responded energetically and perceptively to the many different realms of experience that came with her position as the mother of four daughters, the wife of a clergyman, and an active member of the Unitarian Manchester community. As a writer, she drew experimentally on a wide range of literary forms and antecedents. Central to this *Companion* is a recognition of Gaskell's diversity and complexity. The volume focuses throughout on her narrative versatility and aesthetics as a response to the social, cultural, and intellectual transformations of the period in which she wrote. The first chapter introduces the reader to Gaskell's life and her marvellously expressive letters. There follow chapters devoted to the individual texts, often paired in order to elicit comparative new readings. Subsequent essays on Gaskell and social transformation, on the family, domesticity and gender, and on the social and religious contexts of Unitarianism offer more general, wide-ranging explorations of key issues in her work. Other perennial and newer areas of interest in Gaskell scholarship

(class relations, the psyche and the supernatural, print culture and the publishing market, consumer culture, empire and emigration), while not the subject of separate chapters, are taken up by many essays in the volume. A final chapter surveys past criticism of Gaskell and offers an assessment of Gaskell studies today.

The *Companion* begins with Nancy Weyant's concise chronology, packed with information about Gaskell's life, publications, and social context. A chapter on Gaskell's life and times follows, in which Deirdre d'Albertis teases out the often contradictory multiplicity of Gaskell's self-representation in her fiction and letters. Even in her own day, and even to herself, Gaskell was a combination of seemingly opposing attributes. Genial, spontaneous, sympathetic and charming, she nevertheless inspired strong, controversial response – readers burned copies of the scandalous *Ruth* (1853); libel suits threatened after the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Pointing to some of the darker, and perhaps less compromising, parts of her character, d'Albertis deepens the traditional emphasis on Gaskell's geniality and sweet womanliness. Her attention to Gaskell's "many mes" provides an apposite segue to the ensuing chapter on *Mary Barton* and *North and South* in which I explore Gaskell's interest in psychological interiority – the nature of emotions and the destabilizing effect on the self of overpowering emotional experience. As novels of industrial life, *Mary Barton* and *North and South* have often been paired in critical discussions of Gaskell's understanding of capitalist political economy. I extend critical treatments of their relationship as condition-of-England novels by exploring the internal correlatives of external social upheaval. The chapter focuses on the ambivalent representation in *Mary Barton* of powerful and passionate working-class feelings and the stunning jolts to consciousness in *North and South* occasioned by grief, shock, and psychic pain. Calling for a revaluation of the critical commonplace that Gaskell is melodramatic or sentimental in depicting emotion, I argue further that the way Gaskell represents consciousness and its alterations under turbulent social and personal conditions is not an inward turn away from social representation, but an insistence on the interrelationships between inner and outer worlds. Whereas in *Mary Barton* the representation of strong emotion is often revelatory of class stratification, in *North and South* overwhelming emotion is shown to undermine will and control, revealing at times an alarmingly unintegrated self. Rather than responding with denial or anxiety to disruptive emotional and psychic experience, Gaskell explores these moments as opportunities for self-reflection, confrontation, and renewed responsibility for action.

Unlike the two industrial novels, *Cranford* and *Ruth* have not traditionally been discussed in tandem, and at first sight appear to have little in common. The former is Gaskell's most popular novel, the latter her least. Gaskell was writing *Ruth* when *Cranford* was being serialized in *Household Words* (December 1851 to May 1853); it is therefore worth considering how two such different works issued from the same pen at roughly the same time. Resisting the critical tradition of regarding them as, on the one hand, a charming and nostalgic account of rural life, and, on the other, an uncomfortable social-problem novel, Audrey Jaffe argues that both texts are canonical oddities: *Cranford's* generic affiliations are more with the sketch or short story than with the novel and *Ruth* is less an example of mainstream Victorian realism than a moral tale, in which errant female sexuality is disciplined and inevitably punished. Jaffe examines their departures from conventional fictional forms in terms of their representation of female stereotypes – the spinster and the fallen woman, respectively – and their exploration of the idea of feminine community. In each case the text seeks to raise questions about the stereotypic figure on which it focuses and suggests how the male-dominated culture that produces it might be replaced by alternatives built around women or female sensibilities. Jaffe argues that in both novels an awareness of the constructed and indeed artificial nature of social identities sets them outside the realm of conventional realist fiction. Although neither text seems able to free its female characters from fantasy and self-delusion, each offers implicitly a radical critique of both realism and gender roles. Each suggests that an acknowledgment of what Jaffe calls "the artificiality of social structures, including literary ones" may be a way out of the prison-house of gender that constrains both these texts and the larger culture that produced them.

Gaskell's continued engagement with questions of gender, this time in relation to the woman writer and the need to reconcile the relations of literary and domestic life, informs her biography of Charlotte Brontë. Placing this work in the context of biographical writing at the mid-century, Linda Peterson emphasizes the extent of Gaskell's achievement by observing that at this time there were no biographies by women writers equal to the accomplishment of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) or John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (1837–8). There may have been fictional accounts of women artists and writers, such as those by Madame de Staël and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as autobiographies, such as that of Harriet Martineau, but it was Gaskell herself, drawing together aspects of earlier forms of life-writing, who composed the most important nineteenth-century biography of a woman writer. Published in two volumes by Smith, Elder, this controversial

foray into the genre of literary biography took Gaskell two years to write and drew on all her powers of research and narrative as she constructed her subject. While Gaskell insisted on speaking out on controversial issues and figures in her biography, she also suppressed information and evidence. In accordance with her representation of Brontë's modesty and propriety and in order to protect her subject from the charges of sensuality or grossness leveled at her novels, Gaskell omitted an account of Brontë's relationship with Monsieur Heger. There were other silences and evasions. The chapter shows how Gaskell shaped her account of Brontë in terms of the dichotomies she experienced in her own life and the patterns already established in her fiction. Brontë became the heroine of a life in which she was called on to play dual roles – the woman Charlotte Brontë and the artist Currer Bell. Peterson argues that Gaskell's engagement with the idea of "genius" suggests that she meant not only to claim this trait for women writers, but also to display her own genius in writing this biography. Patrick Brontë himself judged that it was just "what one Great Woman, should have written of Another, and . . . it ought to stand, and will stand, in the first rank of Biographies, till the end of time" (*CH*, 373–4).

As the opening of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* shows, Gaskell set her subject in the context of Keighley as a town "in process of transformation" without which context it would not be possible to understand her friend correctly (*LCB*, I, 1:11). Attentive to the shaping power of the past and the nature of change, all Gaskell's work is informed by a strong sense of history. Sir Walter Scott's historical fiction, which flourished at the beginning of the century, gave impetus to the Victorian historical novel. William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Charles Reade and George Eliot were publishing important examples of the genre around the time that Gaskell wrote *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). Marion Shaw further contextualizes Gaskell's historical fiction in relation to the new historiographies of the nineteenth century, which emphasized the details of ordinary life, and the Darwinian example of drawing from a mass of detail the laws that governed its organization. The chapter focuses on Gaskell's darkening vision of change and the struggle for existence in three historical fictions. Whereas historical process is celebrated in *My Lady Ludlow* (1858) set during the French Revolution, and society moves toward greater diversity, the ending of *Lois the Witch* (1859), which looks back to the time of the Salem witch trials of 1692, is equivocal. Gaskell imaginatively interpellates a fictional heroine into historical data, and critically explores the way a woman becomes the object of superstitious and hysterical persecution. Lois's death, as her lover insists, is unredeemable, despite the confession and plea for forgiveness of the persecutors. Set in 1793, during Britain's war with

France, *Sylvia's Lovers* is grounded in an actual case of a man hanged for incitement against the press gangs that captured and compelled young men into naval service. Around this incident Gaskell develops a story of how the lives of ordinary people are shaped by events beyond their control. As Shaw shows, she confronts the clash between private and public history. The novel's vision is arguably a dark one; its ultimate movement is toward resignation, and its consolations are beyond the reach of time-bound history.

Shirley Foster does not dispel the version of Gaskell as a writer pre-eminently known for her warm humanity and genial affections, but her analysis of the short narratives also reveals an author drawn to explore violent emotions and powerful psychological forces, the uncanny and otherworldly, the dark and more complex aspects of human relationship, and the jarring elements of human life. In addition to seven novels and four novellas, Gaskell published more than forty shorter works: stories, essays, autobiographical reminiscences and travelogues. Until recently, these have remained relatively obscure – some have not been reprinted since their original publication. This is perhaps because their generic variety and narrative versatility defy easy categorization. The chapter on Gaskell's short fiction and narrative considers her innovations in fictional form and the scope – ghost tale, Gothic, melodrama, mystery story, fantasy, nonfictional narrative – of her oeuvre of shorter works. To some extent the form of her short fiction was determined by the publishing venues it found. She began with pieces in *Howitt's Journal* and *Sartain's Union Magazine* (an American periodical) and by 1850 was contributing to the recently established *Household Words* edited by Dickens. Later she wrote for his *All the Year Round*, as well as for *Fraser's Magazine* and *The Ladies' Companion*, *Cornhill Magazine* and finally the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The short pieces suited her talents and temperament, allowing her to experiment with multiple narrators and multilayered narration. They also allowed her to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. As Foster shows, they foreground the act of creativity itself by suggesting how the imagination can provoke the reinterpretation of history, as memory exhumes the past and recreates it in a new form.

Cousin Phillis (1864) and the all-but-completed novel *Wives and Daughters* (1866) are Gaskell's most mature work. Both engage closely with the question of change and social transformation. In the pastoral idyll of Hope Farm, the technology of the railroad and transatlantic travel interrupt a static, edenic life; that impossible and therefore disrupted stasis is mirrored in the way the daughter's denied sexuality disrupts the position of child in which Phillis's parents wish to keep her. Similarly, in *Wives and*

Daughters, which has also been praised as an excursion to a faraway world, a small community registers the impact of outside shifts in values and the relationship between parent and child is scrutinized in terms of the daughter's growing sexuality and socialization into femininity. Indeed, Linda K. Hughes argues that Gaskell's pastoralism in *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters* is inseparable from her representation of modernity and its effects. What is further distinctive in her later fiction is that Gaskell no longer needs to rely on oppositions such as worker and owner, or north and south, but shows a growing sophistication in creating a social world whose complexity and subtle movements of change are more fully realized. Hughes sees *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* as a turning point in that Gaskell had to ground her subject's life and works in a world shaped and influenced by myriad factors. Her delineation of agricultural and historical change in *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters* underscores her modernity and the importance of these late works as precedents for later fiction such as Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels.

Gaskell's representation of nineteenth-century gender roles, family dynamics, and domestic ideology is the subject of Patsy Stoneman's chapter. Stoneman sees in Gaskell's busy life a blurring of private and public roles: in addition to running a busy household, and caring for and teaching her daughters, there were countless duties that can be understood as social work (teaching in Sunday schools and helping out in times of economic privation) or cultural work (finding publishers for her work, and socializing with prominent cultural thinkers who visited Manchester). Gaskell's fiction shows the family as the place where people become social beings – all those who raise and care for children influence the foundations of the polity. Offering a correction to Marxist criticism that has seen her emphasis on relationship and sympathy as sentimental, Stoneman puts Gaskell in the context of the emerging liberal project of the nineteenth century and draws on the work of Susan Johnston to show that the much-vaunted distinction between public and private is illusory, since as Johnston has argued, "the household [is] the originary space in which the liberal self comes to be."[2] In the light of contemporary concerns about the formation of the liberal individual, Gaskell's novels appear not only canny and insightful but in the vanguard of Victorian concerns about social responsibility.

The coexistence of revolutionary and evolutionary change in Gaskell's writing has raised questions for readers about the nature and consistency of her political sympathies. Alongside an abiding fear of revolution so ingrained in nineteenth-century English society, we find a staunch commitment to liberal reform. Nancy Henry's chapter considers both the conservative and radical aspects of her fiction. Henry suggests that Gaskell

was well aware of how fiction might play an important role in the transformations of a society. Not only could it memorialize the past, it could interpret the reasons for and effects of change and initiate further change by drawing attention to social problems and enlisting sympathy for those whose lives lay beyond the experience of most readers. The complexity of Gaskell's attitudes to change may be seen in the different ways in which in *Mary Barton* and "The Moorland Cottage" she views the question of emigration to the British colonies as a solution to poverty, disgrace, or discontent with society at home. Similarly, Gaskell aims to change society's attitudes toward "fallen women" at home in *Ruth*, and yet she encouraged emigration for an actual seduced woman as her only hope of salvation. Gaskell's ability to represent both sides of an argument, considered in conjunction with her complaint that she did not know where she stood on the political spectrum, has led readers and critics to suppose that she was inconsistent. But guided by Unitarian and humanitarian principles, Gaskell valued open-mindedness and the ability to explore a problem from different points of view. Her apparently inconsistent attitudes reveal, on closer inspection, a grasp of the complexities of any situation rather than confusion about the issues involved. So, for example, Gaskell is consistent in her distaste for violence, but she will at times, as Henry shows, praise military heroism when the cause seems just. The American Civil War and the Crimean War provoked Gaskell to think about violent change but she is perhaps even more attuned to slow, gradual social transformations evident in changing habits of mind and ways of living as England moved from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy. Gaskell engages repeatedly with the changes wrought by industrialization, with developments in trade relations and financial matters, scientific advancements and technology, all the while observing closely the shifting social and gender roles that such changes occasion.

John Chapple's chapter on Unitarianism places Gaskell solidly within a tradition of Unitarian belief, which took the search for truth as its greatest value, and was consistent with free-thinking Enlightenment principles. While Gaskell does not write about Unitarianism specifically in her fiction, Chapple argues that its values inform all her work. Her stories consistently explore social problems, promote compassion for suffering, and return to the importance of trust in divine providence. The chapter gives a nuanced account of the many ways in which Unitarianism shaped Gaskell's life: her father's background; her mother's Cheshire family and aunts at Knutsford; William Gaskell's varieties of Unitarianism; and the extensive range of Unitarian social connections in both England and America that had an influence on her. After the repeal of disqualifications in the late 1820s,

Unitarians could stand for parliament and began to occupy positions in government and thrive as doctors, lawyers, and businessmen as well as publishers and booksellers. Yet Gaskell was never, as Chapple points out, narrowly confined to Unitarian society and, especially after the publication of *Mary Barton*, developed many sustaining non-Unitarian connections. If Gaskell demonstrates a range of qualities attributable to Unitarian principles and beliefs, she departs, Chapple suggests, from "the enlightenment lucidity of her Unitarian inheritance" in her love of terror and the supernatural. But as Gaskell herself once declared, "I am not (*Unitarianly*) orthodox" (*L*, 784–5).

In the final chapter, "Gaskell then and now," Susan Hamilton explores the place of Gaskell within the academy and outside it, tracing the history of Gaskell's critical reputation and analyzing recent developments in criticism. The critical heritage is particularly relevant in assessing the effects of gender biases in criticism and the influence of recent theory on critical practice. Hamilton's analysis of the construction of many Gaskells in the history of Gaskell criticism helps to explain why at this juncture Gaskell seems to have been liberated from past constraining versions and to elicit more complex and comprehensive assessments of her achievements. Hamilton's explanation of Gaskell's importance in Lancashire tourism and her part in British heritage drama as a response to continuing class division and growing globalization prompts an awareness of how, in diverse ways, Gaskell is enlisted in contemporary negotiations of nationhood, as well as gender and class identities.

The critical emphasis throughout these essays on a more diverse and complex Gaskell than was previously acknowledged is in no small measure attributable to the valuable biographical and bibliographic work in Gaskell studies over the past few decades, which has provided the materials for further scholarship and interpretation. It is hoped that this *Companion*, the beneficiary of those studies, will in turn enhance readerly enjoyment and sharpen understanding of Gaskell's rich and varied range.

Notes

1 Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), 198.
2 Susan Johnston, *Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 10.

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DEIRDRE D'ALBERTIS

The life and letters of E. C. Gaskell

> "I have always felt deeply annoyed at anyone, or any set of people who chose to consider that I had manifested the whole truth; I do not think it is possible to do this in any *one* work of fiction."
>
> – Elizabeth Gaskell to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth (?1850)

Elizabeth Gaskell is a writer for whom generations of readers, critics, and scholars have felt an undisguised tenderness. "She will be herself remembered with affectionate regret by all who knew her," stated Richard Monckton Milnes shortly after her death, "as a most genial and delightful lady, who gave light and comfort to her home and pleasure to every society she entered" (*CH*, 506). An unfeigned capacity for spontaneity, for sympathy, and for pleasure endeared her to her contemporaries; these same qualities have also powerfully influenced the tenor of historical reception of her work. Yet, for such a well-loved figure, Gaskell has also managed to excite an inordinate amount of controversy. We know that "Mrs. Gaskell" offended, even outraged critics with not one but several politically engaged works of fiction. She was threatened with libel suits by individuals angered over her handling of sensitive material in her role as biographer. Parishioners of her husband's congregation at Manchester's Cross Street Chapel actually burnt their copies of *Ruth* (1853), protesting against the perceived immorality of Gaskell's sympathetic portrayal of a "fallen woman." And a small but determined band of reviewers took her to task at various points in her career for "the recklessness with which she has seized on a subject . . . which she has so misrepresented," whether it be the condition of the working classes in Manchester or the causes of "the great social evil," prostitution (*CH*, 124).

"She could be stubborn, prejudiced, over-whelming, and erratic," admits Gaskell's biographer Jenny Uglow, "but people forgave her because she was so clearly *involved*."[1] This capacity for involvement could lead to strife. The careful reader of Gaskell's letters learns of private disagreements – fallings-out, indiscretions, hasty judgments – as well as unpredictable